

Netflix and The Globalization of Difference

Abstract

Since 2020, Netflix has regularly emphasized the diversity of representation (racial, sexual, gender, etc.) the platform provides through its content. This emphasis on diversity emerged in a context of increasing social, political, and economic turmoil: at a political level, a surge of conservative policies and governments around the world has targeted civil liberties and democratic values; at the social level, the COVID-19 global pandemic in 2020 has put a spotlight on and exacerbated longstanding injustices; at the cultural level, worldwide protests against all forms of violence (e.g., gender, sexual, racial) and the lack of representation in the global entertainment industry (e.g., #OscarsSoWhite) have reaffirmed the deep-seated inequalities that still mark our societies. But it was also a period of massive changes for the television industry. The growing uptake of internet-distributed television, or streaming, signified the emergence of a new business model that no longer focused on delivering the attention of target audiences to advertisers, but instead built direct relationships with paying consumers. As new players entered the streaming business, competition for original programming became crucial to securing subscriptions.

The central problem driving this thesis is that, despite extensive research on Netflix, ranging from production and distribution (Castro & Cascajosa, 2020; Lotz & Havens, 2016), to audiences (Limov, 2020; Turner, 2019), and policy (Chalaby, 2025; Idiz et al., 2021), few—if any—studies explore how the emphasis on representation and inclusion—hereafter diversity—functions as a key mechanism of transnational expansion, and *what role* diversity plays in Netflix's transnational strategy. To this end, this thesis proposes Netflix's diversity strategy—or the streamer's emphasis on diversity—as a critical concept through which to theorize how Netflix mobilizes the concept of diversity as an instrument of transnational expansion, legitimacy, and influence; in other words, diversity for Netflix is not merely an aesthetic or ethical commitment, but a strategic instrument of power. This study brings together different schools of thought and theoretical frameworks to provide the first systematic conceptualization of Netflix's diversity strategy. Throughout this thesis, we argue that Netflix redefines and rearticulates the global-local nexus by positioning diversity as the mechanism through which it adapts to national conditions (e.g., regulations, audience preferences), rationalizes its local and regional strategies (e.g., commissioning, licensing), while establishing a distinctive global presence.

This thesis draws on multiple qualitative research traditions—including critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013), textual analysis (Creeber, 2006), and film studies (Benshoff, 2015) to examine how Netflix mobilizes diversity discursively, textually, and institutionally. In doing so, the PhD contributes to a more nuanced and critical understanding of how key democratic values such as inclusion, representation, and diversity can be subordinated to strategic and commercial imperatives. This project helps to unravel how Netflix's immense popularity and cultural authority have increasingly positioned the streamer as the benchmark for contemporary media, a role traditionally held by legacy media. Netflix's global reach and influence over both viewing habits and cultural conversations mean that its corporate branding, transnational programming, and production practices have broad societal implications that affect key debates and cultural policies on representation and inclusion. Therefore, examining Netflix's diversity strategy is about critically interrogating how global media shape collective understandings of identity and belonging.