

Cultural Authenticity as Netflix Televisuality: Streaming Industry Discourse and Globally Commissioned Original Series

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Submitted: 14 October 2024 **Accepted:** 25 November 2024 **Published:** 5 February 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Redefining Televisuality: Programmes, Practices, and Methods” edited by Lothar Mikos (Free University of Berlin) and Susanne Eichner (Film University Babelsberg), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i474>

Abstract

This analysis uses a media industry studies approach in conjunction with Caldwell’s concept of “televisuality” to explore the significance of cultural authenticity within Netflix’s industrial discourses. The authors argue that Netflix’s emphasis on cultural authenticity in its global content strategies mirrors the concept of “televisuality” as a form of corporate behavior and cultural representation in the streaming era. Specifically, the findings demonstrate the ways in which cultural authenticity can be understood as an industrial practice, distinct from the specific textual, narrative, or genre-related elements of its content. In addition, this research finds that executives’ assertions about universal storytelling diminish the significance of cultural differences, enabling them to present this diluted version of cultural authenticity as a catalyst for fostering global empathy and understanding. Yet, the broader utility of conceptualizing cultural authenticity as the overarching industrial logic of contemporary streaming television remains unclear as a result of Netflix’s distinctive position within the industry.

Keywords

cultural authenticity; Netflix; streaming; television industry

1. Introduction

With more than 282 million subscribers in more than 190 countries, Netflix is the largest multinational subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) platform in the world. As the company’s global footprint expanded, previous scholarship has examined how SVOD platforms navigate transnational logics and glocalization strategies (see, for instance, Ataki, 2024; Jenner, 2023; Lobato & Lotz, 2020). Scholars have also observed

that geographically diverse content has become increasingly central to the streamer's brand image (Asmar et al., 2023; Elkins, 2019; Havens & Stoldt, 2022). Since the service's most recent global expansion in 2016, Netflix executives have consistently emphasized the importance of commissioning "local for global" series (Hopewell & Lang, 2018). According to Chief Content Officer Bela Bajaria, local producers working for Netflix are "extraordinarily empowered, local decision makers" who "make the decisions in their own time zone in their own country and in their own language" which results in the export of "local authentic stories and shows [to] everywhere around the world" (Ramachandran, 2021). From an industrial perspective, this emphasis makes sense as local distinctiveness and cultural authenticity are often cited as key factors in explaining the national and international success of contemporary TV drama (Sundet, 2021).

Netflix's emphasis on cultural authenticity, alongside the malleable use of this and related terms in industry discourses, indicates that the discursive functions of cultural authenticity in the context of streaming parallel televisual style during the multichannel transition in significant ways. Although Caldwell's (2020) conceptualization of "televisuality" is simultaneously wide-ranging and granularly specific, we are primarily concerned with his use of the term in reference to "an important historical moment in television's presentational manner" within which "televisuality has become an active and changing form of cultural representation, a mode of operating and a ritual of display that...is less a defining aesthetic than a kind of corporate behavior and succession of guises" (p. 504).

To reflect on the above, this article applies a media industry studies approach (Herbert et al., 2020) to data gathered from publicly available secondary data from sources such as trade press articles, popular press interviews, and Netflix's quarterly earnings call transcripts. This study begins with a brief discussion of scholarship addressing Netflix's content production and branding strategies and a discussion of methods. In the following sections, we examine the use of cultural authenticity in the industrial discourses of Netflix executives before making two related arguments. First, we argue that Netflix's discourses of cultural authenticity are a "stylizing performance" in that they are usefully conceptualized as "an activity rather than a look" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 8) which executives frame as a "structural inversion" (p. 9) of global television's traditional hierarchies. Second, we argue that within the discourses of cultural authenticity, the notion of universal storytelling rhetorically flattens the "particularity and partisanship" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 196) of actual cultural difference thereby allowing Netflix executives to claim the company actively fosters global empathy and understanding. In sum, the debate over whether Netflix's globally commissioned series uphold cultural authenticity helps assess the extent to which the platform challenges the standardization and homogenization commonly associated with traditional international audiovisual flows. Ultimately, however, questions remain regarding the utility of conceptualizing cultural authenticity as the overarching industrial logic of contemporary streaming television or if Netflix's particular attributes necessitate its ongoing characterization as "a zebra among horses" (Lotz, 2021, p. 196).

2. Netflix's Global Brand Identity

Netflix's strategic ambition to establish and consolidate itself across diverse international markets has become a defining feature of its effort for global expansion. This strategy hinges on the production of programming from a wide variety of non-US markets, consisting in collaboration with local production industries through commissions (also known as originals), co-commissions, and acquisitions (cf. Lotz, 2021). Cultural and linguistic diversification of Netflix's library has been celebrated by scholars such as Dunleavy and Weissmann (2023)

who see the purchase of TV dramas such as Welsh heist drama *Dal y Mellt/Catch the Lightning* as evidence of the “increasing cultural diversity and specificity” that the platform offers to international audiences (p. 1). According to these authors, such productions “not only feature non-US settings and stories (some of them also using non-English languages), but also showcase a notable diversity of cultural perspectives and experiences” (Dunleavy & Weissmann, 2023, p. 2).

In a context in which global platforms facilitate access to content produced in different countries coupled with the international success of some of these productions (e.g., the Spanish TV drama *La Casa de Papel/Money Heist*), scholars have begun interrogating some of the traditional assumptions regarding audience preferences, often associated with Straubhaar’s (1991) conception of cultural proximity. Drawing on interview data with corporate financiers, policy-makers, and senior executives at production companies, Doyle et al. (2021) reflect upon how global platforms “encouraged changes in audience tastes and a growing appetite for locally specific material” felt by both international and local audiences (p. 182). Consequently, “contemporary tastes have become more cosmopolitan” as audiences embrace diverse cultural content (Doyle et al., 2021, p. 182). This idea echoes Esser’s (2020) broader argument that, even outside of multinational streaming platforms, transnational viewers often find that the local specificity of foreign content enhances, rather than diminishes, its appeal.

Together with ideas of quality TV, binge-watching, and diversity (Jenner, 2023), cosmopolitanism seems to have become another piece of the ever-evolving Netflix branding strategy. Elkins’ (2019) critical approach to the role that cosmopolitanism plays in Netflix’s brand strategy deserves particular attention. He argues that cosmopolitanism has become a key element in Netflix’s portrayal of its global reach and cultural influence. To be clear, by introducing audiences to audiovisual productions created by creators from different places and production cultures, the platform asserts its role in promoting “a cosmopolitan orientation toward the world” (Elkins, 2019, p. 379). A sense of shared taste that not only can be apparently grasped by Netflix’s sophisticated data analytic systems but, also, has the presumed potential to connect people across different backgrounds. As Elkins (2019) adds:

By claiming that the services help enable cross-cultural global community, they [Netflix] promote a benevolent vision of themselves to new markets while tacitly attempting to soothe anxieties about the platform imperialist dominance of a small handful of automated, algorithmic digital platforms. (p. 377)

Cultural imperialism has been, in fact, discussed by several scholars in the context of multinational streaming services. In this vein, studies conducted in a number of countries have documented the high volume of US content Netflix has offered (and still offers) in its catalogs (see, for example, the study on the Australian market conducted by Lobato & Scarlata, 2019). Netflix’s high penetration rates in countries where English is the main language and the places where Netflix has located production facilities may help explain this dominance (see Lotz, 2021). The dominance of US content has sparked debates about the potential threats to the cultural identities of the countries where Netflix operates (García Leiva et al., 2021). Furthermore, Netflix’s production of content in various countries and languages can be understood, on the one hand, as a response to this criticism and as a way to bolster Netflix’s original production worldwide and, on the other hand, as a way to respond to potential regulatory pressures on its catalog (Albornoz & García Leiva, 2021).

In this context, the study of Netflix's branding strategies becomes crucial in understanding the streamer's production, distribution, and investment strategies. In the past years, various scholars have conducted textual analysis of Netflix's press releases, examining them from different lenses. For instance, Asmar et al. (2023) focused on Netflix's diversity strategy, which they define as the platform's commitment to representing "its audience in all its diversity—ethnic, sexual, or linguistic" (p. 25). The authors explain how this strategy has been central to the streamers' transnational expansion and economic goals, as well as in "influencing prevailing norms and narratives about what it means to live in multicultural societies (Asmar et al., 2023, p. 35). Discussions about Netflix's brand strategy have also been tangentially present in studies focused on textual analysis of streamer's content. Boisvert (2024), for instance, argues that such an approach "offers insights into a platform's content development ethos" (p. 1513).

Despite these contributions, little attention has been given to the role that cultural authenticity plays in Netflix's industrial discourses (see, for example, Wayne & Uribe-Sandoval, 2023). The lack of scholarly work focused on this term could be explained by the highly subjective nature and fluidity of the same. As Esser (2020, p. 23) rightly argues, notions of authenticity are "constructed on the basis of viewers' experiences, aspirations, social milieu, and the wider context in which viewing takes place...it is futile to ask how authentic something is. Instead, we should ask who considers something authentic and why." Aware of this, we argue that in the current streaming era, cultural authenticity has, however, the potential to perform discursive functions similar to that of Caldwell's televisuality. Hence, this article offers a critical discussion on how Netflix's executives use the concept and for what purposes. The next section briefly introduces the study's methodological approach used to reach this objective.

3. Methods and Data

A media industry studies approach (Herbert et al., 2020) has been employed to explore how Netflix's emphasis on cultural authenticity in its global content strategies mirrors the concept of "televisuality" as a form of corporate behavior and cultural representation in the streaming era. The study has analyzed 13 years (2010–2023) of Netflix's quarterly earnings call transcripts ($n = 56$) and letters to shareholders ($n = 56$), as well as trade press articles, press releases, and interviews from both trade and popular press. Given the specificity of the analysis, criteria sampling was applied during data collection. Two researchers independently searched press articles where Netflix executives referred to the concept of authenticity. This resulted in a selection of 52 different articles published between 2016 and 2024 in outlets such as *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*. To analyze the data collected, the study has worked with the so-called trade press analysis, an approach that has been extensively used by media and communication scholars (Corrigan, 2018; Johnson, 2017; Wayne, 2022) due to its potential to offer insights into industry dynamics and rhetoric. However, the focus on these types of secondary data for research purposes is not without limitations. For instance, Perren (2015) has highlighted the importance of recognizing the biases associated with trade press materials and Corrigan (2018) reflected on how factors such as irregular coverage and mystifying language can compromise the analysis. Adopting a critical lens is, thus, pivotal.

The findings have been structured into three sections. The first section discusses the importance that local authenticity has in Netflix's industrial discourses. It also identifies and reflects on the key aspects executives use to communicate such relevance, such as the popularity of a production in its home market. The second section reflects on how cultural authenticity can be understood as an industrial practice, distinct from the

specific textual, narrative, or genre-related elements of its content. The third section highlights how executives' assertions about universal storytelling diminish the significance of cultural differences, enabling them to present this diluted version of cultural authenticity as a catalyst for fostering global empathy and understanding.

4. "Local Authenticity Is Very Important"

In Netflix's industrial discourses, cultural authenticity is broadly understood to be a reflection of the local culture in which a series' narrative is situated. Within these discourses, cultural authenticity is discursively constructed as the result of a series' production, its reception, and its textual characteristics. Regarding production, Netflix global commissions become authentic through the national identity of the series' producers. Bajaria, who was promoted to chief content officer in 2023, asserts that local authenticity is an inherent characteristic of series created by individuals who are "from" the society being depicted. Discussing the company's commissioning strategy, she explains:

We want locally authentic stories from whichever country they come from...and we have a global platform where people can discover those. If you look at *Lupin*, *Money Heist* or *Squid Game*—locally authentic stories told by people from that country, in their own background, have happened to connect with people who discovered them. (Bansal & Jha, 2022)

Minyoung Kim, Netflix's VP of content for Asia, similarly explains, "As we constantly say, 'local authenticity is very important.' And when we talk about local authenticity, it's the culture and the life that those people live that is really in that story" (Analyse Asia, 2024).

Netflix executives also discuss cultural authenticity in relation to a given series' reception. According to co-CEO Ted Sarandos, "The more authentically local the show is, the better it travels, which we've seen with *Kingdom*...fans of K-Drama around the world loved that show and it resonated incredibly well for us in Korea" (Netflix, 2019). However, Netflix is primarily concerned with global commissions' performance in home markets, not the global market as Bajaria explains. She says, "For all of this local content...the focus is always massive local impact, that's the most important thing. And if it travels, that's great, but we really want to make sure we are super serving the local audience" (Ramachandran, 2021). Kim similarly emphasizes the importance of local content in its home market, noting, "Local authenticity is really important" (Campbell, 2023). She continues, "If a show really works in that country but does not travel outside, that's still great for us. What we don't want is a show that does not work in that country but works outside."

Regarding the textual characteristics of global commissions, these series are culturally authentic because they have not been "watered down" for the global market. Discussing Netflix's overall approach, Sarandos explains, "We don't try to make it—water it down or make it travel any better inorganically and have found that the best way to make global stories is to make them incredibly, authentically local" (Netflix, 2019). As this example indicates, when discussing cultural authenticity, Netflix executives say very little about the local/national culture. Sarandos' discussion of *Lupin* is characteristic of this frustrating tendency. He says:

And the great thing about that is those stories that are coming from all over the world, like we saw with *Lupin* this year, this quarter, it was our biggest new series on Netflix in the world was *Lupin* from France. And the show was not like a watered-down French show. It was a very French show. (Netflix, 2021b)

Nothing is said here about what makes *Lupin* a French show other than it was filmed and set in France. As Lotz and Potter (2022) note, *Lupin* is a useful example of a “placed” show. They observe, “We see France, but little of French culture. The intrigue at the center of the story could just as well be placed in Moscow, Berlin, or Taipei with equivalent national signifiers easily exchanged” (Lotz & Potter, 2022, p. 689).

In the context of this analysis, however, evaluating the veracity of executives’ claims regarding the cultural authenticity of Netflix global commissions is beside the point. As Caldwell observes regarding television during the multichannel transition that “self-consciously rejects the monotonous implications of the flow and the conservatism” of network-era content, “whether or not televisual shows actually succeed in providing alternatives to this kind of stasis is not the issue. What is important is that they promote special status and pretend to both difference and change” (2020, p. 29). It is this pretense of difference that marks Netflix’s industrial discourses and it is within these discourses that cultural authenticity begins to appear as “a linchpin of corporate psychology, an organized frame of mind that keeps the industry’s programming machine churning” (Caldwell, 2020, p. 434).

5. “Everything Starts Local”

In this section, we argue that Netflix executives discursively construct cultural authenticity as an industrial activity that exists apart from any particular textual, narrative, or generic feature of its content. This construction relies on two related claims: There is no such thing as a “Netflix” show and Netflix subscribers can be characterized by the breadth of their taste. Framed by the lack of a traditional television network branding (Johnson, 2012) and the supposedly eclectic demands of their audience, executives position cultural authenticity as the trait that links all Netflix-commissioned series regardless of genre. This, in turn, allows executives to claim that the streaming service successfully inverts the historical relationship between Hollywood and global audiences in multiple ways.

In contrast to cable channels like HBO and AMC, Netflix never established a brand identity connecting a particular type of content to a specific audience segment. When directly asked about this in 2016, Sarandos replied:

Our brand is personalization. That’s the key, so I can’t go too far off of that. What I really said at the beginning (was) we didn’t want any show to define Netflix. And we didn’t want Netflix to define any one of our shows. So it really is about what people’s tastes are. (Sepinwall, 2016)

Two years later, Sarandos was even more explicit, telling an interviewer, “There’s no such thing as a ‘Netflix show’” (Adalian, 2018). More recently, Bajaria echoed this idea to an industry audience explaining that it makes little sense to ask, “What makes a Netflix show?” (Littleton, 2024). She continued, “We can’t define ourselves narrowly, even though many of you would always like us to. But we can’t. We have to think much more broadly about who’s watching and what they want.” Indeed, Netflix’s original content includes series and films that span 14 headline genre categories such as Anime, Horror, and Sports (Moore, 2024).

Yet, discursively, Netflix’s no-brand branding exists in a tautological relationship with their claims about the needs of their audience. As Sarandos explains, “People have such different and eclectic tastes that you can’t afford to program for just one sensibility. You have to love it all—prestige dramas, indie films, true crime,

romantic comedies, stand-up, documentaries and reality TV” (Sarandos, 2024). So according to executives, Netflix’s lack of a traditional television brand identity reflects their audience’s broad tastes which are in fact so broad that they could not possibly be contained within one coherent brand identity.

However, it is within this discursive context that cultural authenticity becomes central to Netflix’s industrial activity. According to Sarandos (2024), in the years following Netflix’s international expansion, the company “learned that everything starts local.” Bajaria elaborates, “Television, film starts with being very culturally specific and very authentic. If you try to make a show for everyone, you make a show for no one” (Thomas, 2024). Other executives also reference the supposed futility of creating content specifically for the global market. According to Francisco Ramos, VP of content for Latin America:

We’ve learned that it’s a mistake to try and cater to a “global” audience....If you try to make a film or a series that appeals to everyone, you typically end up with something generic or bland that appeals to no one. (Littleton, 2024)

In repeating these claims of cultural authenticity, Netflix executives are reproducing well-established industry logics. As Caldwell observes of network executives in the 1980s and 1990s, “The primetime television mill imagines that very much of what it makes—or wants to make—is special and distinctive signature programming” (2020, p. 434).

It is here where the stylizing performance of cultural authenticity as Netflix’s central industrial practice begins to incorporate the structural inversion (Caldwell, 2020, p. 9) of global television’s traditional hierarchies. Specifically, Netflix executives frame the processes by which the streaming service commissions and produces local content as one that inverts the historical relationship between Hollywood and the global audience. In some instances, the hierarchies being inverted remain implied. When meeting with Israeli film students, for example, Sarandos says, “We’re looking for local, authentic stories. Language is not a barrier for us, some of our biggest hits are non-English, including *Squid Game*, *La Casa* and *Lupin*” (Brown, 2022). The implication here is that for some unnamed others, language is indeed a barrier. In other instances, the comparison between Netflix and other television studios is explicit. For example, when discussing the company’s relationship with local producers, Larry Tanz, VP of content for Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, says:

It’s a different approach to making content than in the U.S. We really partner with producers on a creative level and we’re not making all of these shows ourselves. We are actually making them with great local producers. It’s a much different relationship from the traditional Hollywood studio model where you sort of do everything yourself. Here, it’s quite the opposite. We’re entirely working with local producers, so we rely on them for the execution but also for help in sourcing and developing great creative ideas. (Lodderhose, 2021)

In this formulation, Netflix is not merely different from a traditional Hollywood studio, but is in fact the “opposite.”

Other executives offer slightly different variations of the same theme. Bajaria frames Netflix production practices as a reversal of traditional global content flows. She says:

We have local offices in 26 countries, and the programming team in each are people who are from that country, speak the language, understand the culture and the sensitivities....We want the world to know their stories. It's Hollywood that has been exporting stories to the world all these years. Now we want the local creative communities to export their stories. (Kalra, 2022)

Yet, even as Netflix executives claim that the streaming service inverts the power imbalances that have historically characterized global television, nothing specific is mentioned about the local producers or the local cultures other than that they are located outside of Hollywood. This shares significant parallels with other public relations efforts like Netflix's Global Top 10 lists which, as Wayne and Ribke (2024) note, create a series of false equivalencies between the popularity of English-language and non-English-language content (p. 1349). As we argue in the next section, this flattening of national difference performs an important rhetorical function within the discourses of cultural authenticity more broadly.

6. "Make the World a Safer Place"

In his analysis of the broadcast premiere of Oliver Stone's *Salvador* (1986), Caldwell (2020) argues that the film, whose main character is a photojournalist covering the Salvadoran Civil War, was marketed to television audiences in relation to the American invasion of Panama which began a few weeks earlier in late-1989. Alongside other programming addressing US-Latin American relations broadcast around the same time, he notes that "national distinctions of the sort that separate the countries of Central America seemed, in this case, to have little value to American television programmers" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 169). Caldwell concludes his case study of *Salvador* by arguing that the erasure of national difference is in fact a significant facet of televisuality. He writes, "Countries, nationalities, leaders, political affiliation—all are apparently interchangeable when it comes to the worldly spectacle 'out there.' By neutering particularity and partisanship, televisuality makes the global spectacle open to infinite appropriation" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 196). In this section, we argue that a similar dynamic characterizes Netflix's discourses of cultural authenticity. But in this context, executives' claims regarding universal storytelling render cultural differences meaningless, which, in turn, allows the company to frame this neutered form of cultural authenticity as a stimulant promoting global empathy and understanding.

Given the centrality of authenticity to Netflix's industrial discourses regarding its global commissions, it is somewhat counterintuitive that the stories produced in the context of local cultures are also universal. Yet, the connection between these concepts is often made explicit. According to Netflix's other co-CEO Greg Peters, "We believe that people have always wanted authentic storytelling that is rooted in local culture and that locality actually illuminates the universal themes of the story" (Jha, 2019). The precise mechanism by which different local cultures illuminate unspecified universal themes remains unclear. Nonetheless, executives continue to reference the importance of culturally authentic and simultaneously universal storytelling. For example, in a blog post touting a five-million-dollar commitment to support women storytellers, Bajaria (2021) writes, "Experience has taught me that great stories are universal: They can come from anywhere, be created by anyone, and be loved by everyone—what matters is that they are told authentically." It is here, in the phrase "come from anywhere," that universality strips cultural difference from cultural authenticity. As a letter to shareholders explains, "Another goal is to create great, locally authentic stories in countries all around the world" (Netflix, 2021a). The letter goes on to claim that the popularity of culturally authentic globally commissioned series "supports our thesis that great stories are

universal: They can come from anywhere and be loved everywhere.” In this universe of Netflix’s industrial discourse, the specific local culture that underpins the cultural authenticity of any series is irrelevant—it can literally come from anywhere. The national differences between local producers are rhetorically flattened as, to paraphrase Caldwell (2020, p. 169), all cultural authenticities appear as one and the same phenomenon in Netflix’s multi-textual streaming soup.

At the same time, any national differences between viewers, be they political or social, are discursively replaced with a global and undifferentiated construction of the Netflix audience (Wayne & Uribe Sandoval, 2021, p. 93). On this blank canvas of its imagined audience, Netflix projects an image of its globally commissioned content as a vehicle for empathy and global understanding. For example, a press release announcing a new slate of “best-in-class” Korean series asserts:

It’s amazing to see how these Korea films and TV resonate with audiences around the world—from Korea to South East Asia and the Americas. By making it easy for people to watch films and shows from other countries, we can help them build empathy and develop a shared understanding of the world. (Ko & Cho, 2020)

Several months after this announcement, nearly identical language appears in a *Hollywood Reporter* story regarding plans for “best-in-class” Nigerian content. According to Ben Amadasun, Netflix’s director of licensing and co-productions in Africa:

It’s amazing to see how Nigerian films and series resonate with audiences around the world. By making it easy for people to watch films and shows from other countries, we can help them build empathy and develop a shared understanding of the world. (Szalai, 2020)

Yet, this is not merely an instance of boilerplate language that includes dubious claims regarding the supposed impact of Netflix content on subscribers.

Although the discursive relationship between locally authentic content and global understanding has only emerged in the last few years, the broader claim that Netflix itself is a force for global good dates back to the service’s 2016 global expansion. At a press event in Paris early that year, for example, Netflix founder Reed Hastings told the audience that “by building a globally available service, sharing content from all parts of the world...we can do our part of increasing global understanding towards a goal of greater peace and empathy” (Bryan, 2016). More recently, executives have been explicit that culturally authentic content generates empathy and increases global understanding. According to Bajaria:

TV creates connections when you are true and authentic to the vision of the creator; the more specific it is, the more universal it feels. Cultural diplomacy happens naturally through authentic storytelling—you build empathy, more understanding and more affinity for another culture while being transported into their story. (Haley, 2021)

Sarandos goes even further. When asked by an interviewer if streaming has been “good for culture,” he replies:

I think it's been great for culture. Not only great for culture; in a strange way, I think it's been great to make the world a safer place. I think you're exposed to cultures around the world in a way that makes you more understanding and empathetic. (García-Navarro, 2024)

Such statements, of course, oversimplify the intricate relationship between audiovisual production and consumption, and the development of empathy and understanding across cultures. Furthermore, these claims suggest an oversimplified understanding of what culture is and the role that media plays in its representation. Yet, the emphasis on culture and authenticity in Netflix's discourse suggests that these values have become an integral part of how Netflix wants its content and brand to be perceived—as socially valuable and committed. Despite its superficiality, the discourses analyzed suggest that cultural authenticity is not merely an addition but an integral part of Netflix's content strategy.

7. Conclusion

This analysis uses a media industry studies approach (Herbert et al., 2020) in conjunction with Caldwell's (2020) concept of televisuality to explore the significance of cultural authenticity within Netflix's industrial discourse. We find that cultural authenticity performs some similar discursive functions for Netflix that televisuality did for executives in the multichannel transition. Netflix's executives use cultural authenticity to describe the overall logic of their global content commissioning strategy which is all the more significant given the streaming service's lack of a traditional, content-based television brand. In addition, the discursive emphasis on cultural authenticity allows executives to differentiate the company from other Hollywood studios and claim that their content inverts the hierarchical power dynamics that have traditionally characterized the relationships between American producers and global audiences. Furthermore, the discourses of cultural authenticity appear to celebrate cultural differences even as they strip such differences of meaning. This, in turn, renders all cultures, whatever their differences, similarly suitable for consumption by Netflix's global and undifferentiated audience.

Yet, the degree to which it is useful for scholars to conceptualize cultural authenticity as a totalizing concept akin to televisuality in the context of streaming remains unclear for two reasons. First, the above analysis is limited by the exclusive consideration of Netflix. As Lotz (2021) notes, among multinational SVOD services, Netflix employs an industrial strategy that is distinctive, leading her to characterize the service as a “zebra among horses” (p. 196). Unlike its competitors including Amazon and Disney, Netflix's primary revenue stream remains limited to providing video content to its subscribers despite recent efforts to introduce an advertising tier (Spangler, 2022). It also remains unclear if other multinational SVODs similarly position cultural authenticity as central to their global commissioning strategy.

Second, as varied and sprawling as television's landscape was during the multichannel transition, television's contemporary landscape is both larger and more complex. Although television remains national in several important ways, it is no longer possible for scholars to conceptualize television in exclusively national terms. As a result, a number of common categories that structure Caldwell's analysis, like audience demographics for example, need significant reconceptualization to become useful across national contexts. In addition, the technological and industrial links that once connected the various segments of American television from local public-access stations to national networks have weakened, many to the point of irrelevance.

Given these circumstances, it remains unclear if a single conceptual framework could do now what televisuality once productively did.

In spite of these concerns, this analysis nonetheless succeeds in demonstrating that Netflix's executives use cultural authenticity as an industrial activity and brand strategy, positioning it as a means to integrate their content within a broader "mission" of fostering empathy and promoting global understanding. In Netflix's industrial discourses, cultural authenticity is a mantra whose invocation attempts to reconcile the irreconcilable by asserting that the value of cultural difference is only realized when it loses its specificity. Moving forward, it appears that directly addressing cultural authenticity would be useful for scholars interrogating Netflix's reliance on diversity in the context of the company's strategic and marketing efforts. It would also be useful to explore these issues within the industrial discourses of other global SVOD platforms in what might be a productive first step in a broader comparative study. Furthermore, the insights generated in this article could inform fieldwork-based studies of writers, producers, and other industry professionals developing content for Netflix.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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