

# Producing Diversity: On the Discourses at the Heart of Netflix's Production Culture

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## Abstract

This article critically explores Netflix's use of diversity as a strategic tool within its global production culture; it focuses on how the streamer increasingly deploys various narratives about diversity and inclusion to legitimate its presence, rationalize its operations, and normalize the industrial changes it generates. Through a critical discourse analysis of Netflix's corporate communication—press releases and diversity reports published between June 2022 and February 2024—the study identifies four central discourses that shape Netflix's approach. These discourses reveal that while Netflix positions itself as a socially responsible actor championing diversity and inclusion, its strategy intertwines cultural values with commercial imperatives. By appealing to local talents worldwide, Netflix's rhetoric not only opens opportunities for underrepresented voices but also risks simplifying complex local identities to fit global market demands. The article concludes that Netflix's approach to diversity, while progressive on the surface, may in practice constrain creative autonomy, subtly reinforcing existing global power structures and shaping diversity through a commercial lens.

## Keywords

diversity; inclusion; media production; Netflix; power; production culture; SVODs; television

## 1. Introduction

Subscription-video-on-demand services (SVODs) have significantly (re)shaped audiovisual cultures and introduced new ways of funding television content (Afilipoaie et al., 2021). The emergence of these new players has stimulated debates about their disruptive impact on production practices and norms (Idiz, 2024; Rasmussen, 2024). Describing itself early on as the “future of television” (Tryon, 2015), Netflix is one of the

most successful SVODs due to, on the one hand, its subscriber base and its near-global availability; on the other hand, Netflix has developed a distinctive production culture or singular norms, values, and practices (Mayer et al., 2009) which inform how its content is produced and distributed. This in turn allows the streamer to gain international recognition while appealing to local audiences and talents.

A central element of this production culture seems to be Netflix's diversity strategy, that is its growing emphasis on the representation and inclusion of categories of differences (i.e., gender, race, etc.) in Netflix's communication and programming (Asmar et al., 2023). After the publication of its first diversity report, the streamer has claimed anew its commitment to diversity and inclusion within the global television industry, notably by assisting and financing (local) talents and industries around the world (Sarandos, 2021). We argue that Netflix's diversity strategy is more than mere corporate tactics to brand the service and retain subscribers; rather, this rhetoric is increasingly used by the streamer as a strategy of distinction to appeal to (young) talents—particularly from marginalized communities—while consolidating its grip on (local) productions. Therefore, this contribution asks: How does Netflix rhetorically use its diversity strategy to appeal to talents and industries worldwide?

The aim of this study is not just to signal the economic power of Netflix as a producer and distributor of content; more importantly, we put an emphasis on the cultural power attached to being the grand weaver of stories. Most analyses of Netflix's power view the streamer from a dichotomous position: either as a “friend” providing new opportunities and financing for struggling industries (Straubhaar et al., 2021); or a “foe” threatening the balance of fragile media ecosystems through its aggressive acquisition and production strategies (Albornoz & Leiva, 2021). This article provides a novel perspective on the interplay between cultural power and production practices. While much of existing research has focused on economic and political mechanisms through which global streamers shape media ecosystems, this contribution examines how SVODs such as Netflix increasingly deploy various narratives about diversity and inclusion to legitimize their presence, rationalize their operations, and normalize the industrial changes they generate.

Hence, adding to current explorations of SVODs, this article provides a textured approach to exploring how the discursive use of cultural diversity and inclusion, particularly at the level of production, illustrates specific mechanisms of power. This article, building on and expanding previous research (Asmar et al., 2023), is based on a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Netflix's press releases and diversity reports published between June 2022 and February 2024. Following Caldwell (2006), we acknowledge that understanding production cultures in the streaming era also requires looking at their corporate texts to explore the variety of registers and paradigms used by SVODs to consolidate their practices. These corporate narratives are central to the economic and cultural power of streamers such as Netflix, working to provide the rhetorical frames through which the streamer validates its transnational position. This investigation, setting itself at the confluence between media industry research (Herbert et al., 2020) and production studies (Mayer et al., 2009), outlines four key discourses strategically used by Netflix in its corporate communication to appeal to talents and industries worldwide.

The following sections are structured as follows: first, we discuss the concept of power and its various conceptualizations (Section 2.1); second, based on these different approaches, we capture the multifaceted ways in which Netflix operates as a transformative force (Section 2.2) to finally consider how Netflix shapes global narratives around diversity (Section 2.3).

## 2. Netflix: A New Imperial Power?

### 2.1. Power: A Contested Concept

Initially founded in the US, Netflix is one of the first SVODs to have internationalized its streaming service (Lobato, 2019). Among the various discussions about Netflix's transnationalisation, the concept of power is a recurring feature. Most common formulations of power make a distinction between:

1. "Power over" which represents a traditional understanding of power as domination, control, and coercion. It is the capacity to impose one's will over another's, which is characteristic of authoritarian and hierarchical relations.
2. "Power to" which refers to empowerment and agency rather than coercion and domination. It is the ability of an individual or group to achieve something and bring about desired outcomes.
3. "Power with" which relates to collaboration whereby power emerges through collective action.

Hence, the concept of power is contested because power is not a single entity; rather, it embodies a cluster of concepts with overlapping characteristics. Many modern theorists have developed conceptualizations that blend these three formulations to show the multifaceted dimensions of such a concept. Michel Foucault (1980, 1993), one of the prime theorists of power, destabilizes the notion that power is only repressive; instead, he argues that power is productive, creating possibilities for action and resistance. Importantly, Foucault's theory places a heavy emphasis on discourses: the ways in which knowledge, language, and practices shape what is considered true, normal, or acceptable. Likewise, rejecting the idea of power as mere coercion, Pierre Bourdieu (2014) introduces the concept of symbolic power to highlight how power operates indirectly and subtly, often through cultural, social, and symbolic forms that seem natural and legitimate. Unlike traditional theories, Bourdieu focuses on how power is reproduced through everyday practices, beliefs, and institutions in ways that are often invisible to those involved. Both conceptualizations are closely linked to what Joseph Nye (1990, 2021) terms soft power or a nation's ability to make certain ideas, values, or practices seem attractive to others, and the capacity to create legitimacy. Creating legitimacy is one of the ways in which culture is seen by modern theorists as a mechanism of power (Clegg & Haugaard, 2013). Focusing both on media, Manuel Castells (2009) and Nick Couldry (2001) for instance engage with the complexities of power in the networked, media-driven world, emphasizing, on the one hand, the role of communication technologies and media conglomerates in shaping public discourses and societal power structures (Castells, 2009), and, on the other hand, the power of media to frame social reality, produce narratives that reinforce power structures, and shape what is seen as legitimate (Couldry, 2001).

Taking the perspective of media industries, Janet Wasko (2019) examines how power is held, exercised, and legitimated. Drawing on the aforementioned insights developed by theorists of power, she outlines three main dimensions of power necessary to understand how media companies "facilitate the material coordination of flows of information, communication and culture" (Wasko, 2019, p. 73). We thus use Wasko's (2019) typology to conceptualize the various aspects of Netflix's power, since this classification (a) is designed to understand media players such as Netflix, and (b) integrates the salient discussions on power which lay the theoretical foundations of this contribution.

## 2.2. Conceptualizing Netflix's Power

Wasko (2019) distinguishes between three dimensions of power:

1. Economic power that is divided between internal levels (the company's ownership of the various factors necessary for the flows of communication) and external levels (the regulatory environment in which a company operates).
2. Political power with corporations that can be seen as aligning with the political actors in power or, in contrast, antagonist to the powers in place.
3. Cultural power which, applied to television, refers to the capacity of media corporations to shape narratives and influence global audiences.

When looking at Netflix through the prism of economic power, most scholarship apply a "power over" frame. These debates stress Netflix's systemic impact on the financially weaker and smaller-scaled competitors; they put an emphasis on the streamer's ability to produce and distribute (local) content globally, often at the expense of local television industries, which reinforces its dominant position (Davis, 2021). In fact, Netflix has adapted its production strategy notably through the production of original content, that is stories commissioned and/or fully financed by the streamer (Afilipoaie et al., 2021). This strategy is emblematic of Netflix's discourses of distinction (Tryon, 2015) aimed at differentiating the streamer from the competition by privileging original productions with critically acclaimed talents. Yet, these series also signal what Gillian Doyle calls "big statement programs" (Doyle, 2016, p. 635): the increasing use of large budgets to establish distinctive market positions and attract new subscribers. A second element of Netflix's production strategy is the production of local original content. To counter the lack of local content in its catalogues, Netflix has bolstered its slate of local originals, becoming in some regions the largest commissioner of scripted content (*CSI Magazine*, 2021). To this end, the streamer has developed strategic partnerships in different countries, establishing collaborations with public broadcasters (D'Arma et al., 2021; Sundet, 2021), local, and/or independent production companies (Kim, 2022; Meimaridis et al., 2020) from South Korea to Brazil, stressing thus the geographic and linguistic diversity of the service. These changes have, at times, positioned Netflix as a force for good since the streamer has been associated with enhancing the visibility and quality of domestic content with strong global appeal (Bouquillion & Ithurbide, 2021; Simon, 2024). However, issues of diversity in Netflix's catalogues have highlighted the sharp inclination toward American content in its programming and the consistent preference for large markets with strong linguistic and/or geographic proximity (Albornoz & Leiva, 2021; lordache, 2022).

Analyses of Netflix through the prism of political power also tend to apply a "power over" frame, applying the concept of soft power (Nye, 2021) to explore the streamer's capacity to leverage its resources to influence political decisions. Within this frame, Netflix is viewed as a political organization engaging in domestic and global struggles over ideological and technological power. Evan Elkins (2021), looking at the North American context, argues that Netflix promotes a broad vision of cultural and economic liberalism geared towards the construction of a cosmopolitan brand with an emphasis on technological disruption and economic deregulation. This, Elkins (2021) argues, encourages imperialist practices while Netflix's cosmopolitan branding paints the streamer as a progressive actor. Likewise in South America, Fernandes and Albornoz (2023) show how Netflix has grown into an influential policy actor capable of pressuring audiovisual policy debates. They particularly highlight the streamer's attempts to legitimize its presence in

the region through (a) its increasing demand for local content, (b) its partnerships with a wide range of public and/or civil institutions, and (c) the promotion of the streamer as a vector of inclusion and diversity for which regulation is unnecessary. This political power is also critically examined in the Middle East and North Africa region where Netflix's power is intertwined with state authority. Bulut (2025) and Khalil and Zayani (2021) stress how Netflix has developed a symbiotic relationship with some states whereby governments implement censorship laws, and the streamer complies to maintain access to lucrative markets. This balancing act often challenges Netflix's commitment to diversity and representation when its commercial interests are concerned.

This emphasis on diversity and inclusion is indeed a core aspect of analyses of Netflix through the lens of cultural power. Within such scholarship the three formulations of power—over, with, to—usually merge as Netflix is perceived as simultaneously dictating the narratives and representations that dominate public discourse (Meimaridis et al., 2024); yet also amplifying diverse voices and perspectives (Treadwell, 2022) while enabling individuals and communities to challenge dominant narratives (del Río & Moran, 2020). Recent research (Asmar et al., 2023, 2024a) shows that, as Netflix balances its global dimension with its local ambitions, diversity—or the emphasis on the representation and inclusion of various categories of differences—becomes a key tool of transnational expansion. It allows the streamer to support the global production and circulation of its texts across cultural boundaries while cementing its presence at the local level by appealing to the distinctive preferences of local television markets.

### 2.3. Diversity Settles in at Netflix

Since the publication of its first diversity report (Sarandos, 2021) and its subsequent update (Myers, 2023), Netflix has increasingly linked its brand to the concept of diversity and inclusion. This emphasis on inclusion is first evident through the streamer's promotion of some of its signature shows. From the multiracial cast of *Orange is the New Black* (Kohan & Herrman, 2013–2019), to the pronounced social commentary of titles such as *Dear White People* (Simien et al., 2017–2021), Netflix has doubled down on the promotion of programming that bypasses mere taste communities (Hallinan & Striphas, 2014) to target communities of conversation (Asmar et al., 2024b). Indeed, the streamer keenly plays on salient cultural conversations—from sexual violence to racism—connecting audiences not necessarily through common tastes, but through shared cultural/identity politics. Second, this diversity strategy is noticeable through Netflix's significant promotion of the service as a home for creative talents and innovative storytelling. To acquire and retain (local) talents, the streamer increasingly positions itself as a creative partner encouraging new and unexpected forms of storytelling (Tryon, 2015). Furthermore, the streamer has also capitalized on partnerships with established talents from marginalized communities—from Ava Duvernay to Ryan Murphy—emphasizing off-screen diversity as a prerequisite for great storytelling and innovation as Netflix grows globally (Myers, 2023).

This use of diversity to further global expansion—which Mareike Jenner (2023) calls grammar of transnationalism—highlights Netflix's particular approach to content production based on a somewhat precarious balance between global appeal and local specificity. Specifically, by emphasizing its diversity strategy in its promotion, production, and distribution, Netflix appeals to a transnational system of values (Jenner, 2023) or the set of experiences and ideals (i.e., feminism, anti-racism, etc.) that define our global culture. This allows Netflix to establish itself as a transnational service, integrating itself into national media industries while remaining a distinctly global service. Delving deeper into the operationalizations of

Jenner's (2023) concept, Asmar et al. (2023) examine Netflix's strategic use of diversity in its branding, highlighting four main strategies:

1. A strategy of differentiation in which diversity and inclusion are used by Netflix to gain competitive advantages and distinguish the service from the competition.
2. A strategy of indigenization which refers to Netflix's emphasis on geographic and linguistic diversity to localize its content and expand its subscriber base.
3. A strategy of representation in which diversity and inclusion become key markers of Netflix's content to increase engagement and loyalty among viewers from various cultural backgrounds, especially young audiences.
4. A strategy of cosmopolitanism which refers to the ways in which Netflix uses the diversity of its content and global audiences to promote itself as a vehicle of tolerance and empathy.

Expanding on these strategies, this study explores the discourses attached to each of them and salient in Netflix's communication about its production culture. We contend that current analyses of production, while yielding valuable results, seldom examine how SVODs such as Netflix narrativize themselves, thus producing and circulating (new) meanings about diversity and inclusion within media industries.

### 3. Methodology

The contribution investigates Netflix's strategic use of cultural diversity as a mechanism of cultural power through a critical examination of the streamer's rhetoric about its production culture. To this end, this article is based on a CDA of Netflix's corporate communication via its press releases and diversity reports publicly available on the Netflix newsroom website. CDA brings the critical tradition of social analysis into language studies and contributes to understanding the relationships between discourse and other social elements such as power relations or ideologies (Fairclough, 2013). Discourse refers to practices of talking or writing which bring objects into being through the production, dissemination, and consumption of texts (i.e., company statements, pictures, etc.). As such CDA seeks to link different levels of analysis: the text (micro) with the underlying power structures (macro) through the discursive practices on which the text is based (meso). In practice, while it is acknowledged that CDA encompasses a range of approaches rather than a unitary methodological framework, some key principles apply. First, Huckin (1997) recommends approaching the text like an undiscerning reader before employing a critical lens. Second, a text should not be deciphered word by word; rather, it should be put in its proper genre (i.e., corporate communication) since its genre has its own identifiable characteristics. Third, the specific perspective or frame through which the text is presented is a key element of analysis. For this article, we use Netflix's four diversity strategies (Asmar et al., 2023) to reveal (a) how certain concepts are given prominence, (b) the strategic use of particular ideas, and (c) the narratives—or strategic representations of events—used to convey specific meanings.

Concretely, we analyze press releases ( $N = 800$ ) and diversity reports ( $N = 2$ ) published between June 2022 and February 2024. Both types of documents outline the most common themes and dimensions (i.e., gender, sexual, and ethnic diversity) the streamer associates with its diversity strategy (Asmar et al., 2023). Unlike the press releases which are published almost daily, the diversity reports are annual publications building and expanding on the insights from Netflix's first diversity study (Sarandos, 2021). We use Instant Data Scraper, an automated data extraction tool, to collect data from the Netflix newsroom. It is important to



note that, while the website uses geo-location to filter the news feed—distinguishing for instance between regional (i.e., Europe) and global news—changes in location do not alter the type of content and/or news articles available. For this research we thus collected both regional and global news, setting Europe as the location and English as the language. Once collected, the data was analyzed using NVIVO and systematized with the development of a codebook combining (a) a deductive approach starting from existing theories in media and television studies, and (b) an inductive approach using the data as basis of the analysis. This dual procedure allowed, following a CDA perspective, a constant interplay between texts (press releases and diversity reports), discourses (the broad systems of meaning), and context (economic, social, etc.) which we detail in the next section.

#### 4. Netflix and the Production of Diversity

To understand how Netflix rhetorically uses its diversity strategy to promote its production culture, we start from the streamer's diversity strategy to outline the dominant discourses noticeable in Netflix's communication about its production culture. Expanding the scope of previous research (Asmar et al., 2023) we label these discourses as follows: (a) Netflix sets local industries to international standards; (b) Netflix invests in and nurtures (new) talents; (c) Netflix sets the local to the global stage; (d) Netflix promotes equity and inclusion in local industries. Rather than focusing on specific regions and/or local production cultures, this article provides a framework that accounts for the cultural dynamics that define Netflix as a transnational service. Hence, while providing country-specific examples for the sake of clarity, our analysis goes beyond local media industries to focus on patterns discernible across national and geographic borders. It is thus important to notice first that each of these discourses is intertwined with and part of Netflix's diversity strategy; hence, they are not disconnected from one another but rhetorically overlap, and in so doing reinforce each other. Second, these discourses intersect: while they may appear to be more pronounced in some regions and/or countries, they are not exclusive to them. Third, these discourses are more than mere corporate vernacular: they are strategic narratives that construct, perpetuate, and embody Netflix's cultural power. Finally, while Netflix focuses on inclusion and representation in its corporate communication, the aim of this study is not to empirically corroborate (or disprove) such strategy; rather, this examination addresses how diversity is used as a rhetorical instrument to promote the streamer's production culture.

The rational tying these four discourses together is summed up in the Netflix Fund for Creative Equity (NFCE). Indeed, alongside the publication of its first diversity report (Sarandos, 2021), Netflix has set up a fund to “help identify, train and provide job placement for the next generation of talents from underrepresented communities around the world” (Netflix, 2023a, p. 4). According to the streamer, this fund, which consists of \$100 million over five years, intends to provide practical and actionable follow-up on Netflix's commitment to diversity with the reasoning that more inclusion behind the camera leads to more representation on screen. In its latest update (Bajaria, 2023), the streamer boasts of having invested more than \$29 million in two years, partnered with 80 organizations over the globe and developed more than 100 programs in 35 countries to (a) upskill below-the-line talents, (b) create opportunities for marginalized voices, (c) provide development deals for new talents, and (d) invest in local industries. Although this fund represents a marginal investment for Netflix with regard to its global earnings, the actions and programs it finances still figure prominently in Netflix's discourses about its production culture.

#### 4.1. Discourse 1: Netflix Sets Local Industries to International Standards.

While Netflix has invested heavily in the production of local originals around the world, access to and competition over local talents and crews is increasing. In the context of this study, our analysis shows how Netflix discursively presents itself as a key (economic) partner for local industries: setting them to global standards of quality through its investment in local originals while cultivating the untapped potential of local talents. This discourse is framed from the vantage point of a broader strategy of indigenization (Asmar et al., 2023) or Netflix's use of categories of differences (i.e., language, age) to assert its cultural legitimacy at the local level.

Two main narratives shape this discourse: Netflix puts an emphasis on (a) upskilling local talents through training, workshops, and mentorships; and (b) the acquisition of the necessary credentials to work for global productions. As such, Netflix rhetorically presents its production culture as a professionalizing pathway to global television, insisting in its communication—the press releases as well as the diversity reports—on elevating production practices, educating local talents, and empowering (burgeoning) local industries. Interestingly, our analysis shows that this narrative, while noticeable in almost all countries in which Netflix operates, is paramount in countries of the Global South such as Brazil or India. This betrays a strategic attempt to expand the streamer's reach in regions where institutional support is traditionally lacking; nonetheless, these regions have well-established film/television industries and Netflix no longer has the prime mover advantage. In a press release announcing Netflix's new slate of content from Thailand, Netflix director of content in Thailand, Yongyoot Thongkongtoon (2022), states:

In the past, creators would have to do the international film circuit to drum up interest. But with Netflix streaming the content to more than 190 countries around the world, it's opened up countless opportunities. This in turn motivates creators to pitch us their best ideas and produce their best work. The top quality of our upcoming line-up bears this out. We've pushed the envelope not only in creativity and production value but also [in] ensuring a supporting production environment for each project.

Hence, Netflix positions its production culture as an incubator widening the range of possibilities for local talents and portraying itself as a daring company with the (financial) ability to take risks where other competitors are unable or unwilling to go to such lengths. This emphasis on financial support also denotes a covert effort to attract talents with the promise of state-of-the-art infrastructures and high budgets. Moreover, Netflix's local productions become a testament to the streamer's commitment to local industries as it discursively positions itself as an integral part of the national landscape. Central to this narrative is the emphasis on partnerships with professional organizations and institutional actors such as film funds “to bring in global best practices...and push the boundaries of creation and innovation” (Rizwan, 2023).

On the other hand, this emphasis on upskilling and professionalizing local talents is also used to highlight the streamer's economic and infrastructural contributions to local industries. In this context, Netflix reiterates its key role as a supporter of local screen industries and insists on the fact that the increased production of local originals has led to the growth of local economies. A press release (Netflix, 2024) documenting the economic impact of the *Bridgerton* universe states that “the *Bridgerton* universe has boosted the UK economy by more than a quarter of a billion pounds, supporting almost 5000 businesses over the past five years.” Similarly,



addressing the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, Greg Peters, Netflix co-CEO highlights that Netflix has invested over \$60 billion in content over five years in Spain, on top of the “\$1.5 billion we will contribute to European cultural levies and investment obligations over the next three years” (Peters, 2023, p. X). Although this discourse stressing Netflix’s legitimacy is ubiquitous in its communication, the rhetoric on its investments at the local level is, we argue, used as leverage to question or circumvent regulation. Indeed, as Fernandes and Albornoz (2023) highlight in the Brazilian context, Netflix promotes a discourse in which its track record at the local level—from investing in local infrastructures to supporting local talents and content—renders regulation unnecessary for a player already committed to the common good. This is expressed by Greg Peters (2023) in Barcelona speaking up against a European proposal to make streaming providers and other online platforms pay for internet service provider’s (ISP) network upgrades:

As more broadcasters shift from linear to streaming, we want a system that encourages more investment in hits like these, whether they’re on Netflix, France Television, Globo, Telecinco, the BBC, Disney+ or Viaplay. Some of our ISP partners have proposed taxing entertainment companies to subsidize their network infrastructure....This tax would have an adverse effect, reducing investment in content—hurting the creative community, hurting the attractiveness of higher-priced broadband packages, and ultimately hurting consumers. ISPs claim that these taxes would only apply to Netflix. But this will inevitably change over time as broadcasters shift from linear to streaming.

#### **4.2. Discourse 2: Netflix Invests in and Nurtures (New) Talents**

The audiovisual sector—television industries in particular—is notoriously precarious and has traditionally been dominated by gatekeepers such as legacy studios or media conglomerates. These players have amassed enormous power and have been criticized for maintaining the status quo in the industry, limiting financial risks by favouring established creatives to the detriment of young and/or inexperienced talents (Curtin & Sanson, 2016, pp. 1–18; Mayer, 2011). In the context of our study, the analysis shows that Netflix discursively presents itself as democratizing access to the (global) television industry, presenting its production culture as an exception against the backdrop of legacy players often perceived as slow to change. Building on a strategy of differentiation (Asmar et al., 2023)—the strategic use of aspects of difference (i.e., gender, age, etc.) to distinguish itself from its competitors—Netflix in its communication, both in the press releases and the diversity reports, develops a rhetoric focused on upcoming and emerging talents, supporting new stories and genres, fostering the creative vision of talents.

Our analysis underscores two facets of this discourse noticeable in Netflix’s communication: (a) levelling the playing field and (b) nurturing talents. First, Netflix narrativizes itself as levelling up the playing field, especially for newcomers in the industry. Indeed, Netflix’s rhetoric highlights the streamer’s support for upcoming creatives, grandly promoting its collaborations with supranational organizations (i.e., UNESCO), regional associations (i.e., European Producers Club), and/or national institutions (i.e., British Academy of Film and Television Arts—BAFTAs). Through these partnerships, Netflix—via the NFCE—provides grants for talents to develop their stories. It develops professional programs with established production companies and arts/film schools to provide opportunities for the new generation of talents and organizes competitions worldwide to discover new talents. In a press release presenting Netflix’s latest collaboration with UNESCO to discover new voices from the African continent, Tendeka Matatu, Netflix Director of Film in Africa declares:

We are excited to finally bring this anthology of short films created by the next generation of African storytellers to Netflix members around the world. This initiative is a testament to our ongoing efforts to strengthen the pipeline of African storytelling and to include voices from underrepresented communities. We're grateful to our partners at UNESCO who walked this journey with us to provide an opportunity for the six emerging African filmmakers to create and showcase their reimagined folktales to the world, in their own languages, so that more people can see their lives reflected on screen. (Seabi, 2023)

The second facet of this discourse rhetorically presents Netflix as nurturing talents—new and established—and supporting their creative vision. In this narrative, Netflix puts forward the financial power of the service, stressing its commitment to creative freedom and high production values. During an event organized in 2023 to present the streamer's latest ratings to advertising companies, Bela Bajaria, Netflix's chief content officer stated:

No other entertainment company aspire to create great movies and shows across so many genres, in so many countries, and for such a broad and diverse audience. We do it by partnering with world-class talent—giving them the freedom and support to tell their best stories. Our partnership with them is the single best reason we're able to bring fresh, original storytelling to our members. (Merkouris, 2023)

In line with the strategy of differentiation (Asmar et al., 2023), Netflix attempts to distinguish itself by discursively creating an image of a service led by and built on creative talents. Moreover, by highlighting its broad audience base, the streamer's rhetoric presents an entertainment company which, unlike others, has the capacity to accommodate a wide range of talents and stories.

#### **4.3. Discourse 3: Netflix Sets Local Industries to the Global Stage**

While Netflix has been vocal about the need to produce stories for local audiences, global reach is still a major dimension of its transnational strategy (Jenner, 2023). In the context of this study, our analysis shows how Netflix discursively positions itself as the open door to the world for local industries and talents. Indeed, building on a strategy of cosmopolitanism (Asmar et al., 2023), or the strategic use of dimensions of cultural diversity such as language to reinforce its transnational reach, Netflix's rhetoric is framed around ideas of international and/or global appeal, the global celebration of local content and cultures, and the global rise of new industries, from India to Taiwan. This discourse relies on two main narratives: on the one hand Netflix's rhetoric presents its production culture as a steppingstone to the global stage, whereby producing for Netflix becomes synonymous with critical acclaim and global recognition. On the other hand, and coupled with a distinct emphasis on geographic diversity, a narrative aimed at local industries which, due to systemic or historical forces, have found themselves at the periphery of the global entertainment industry.

Central to this discourse are the collaborations the streamer has forged at the local level, especially with local production companies. Indeed, as highlighted by Kim (2022) writing about South Korea, Netflix consolidates its position in a market through these collaborations; meanwhile, such partnerships allow foreign producers not only to finance their content but to establish it within the brand identity of "Netflix Originals" which carries powerful meanings in television markets. Our analysis underscores two main forms of collaborations noticeable in Netflix's communication. First, Netflix's corporate discourse puts forward its

(exclusive) partnerships with local production companies and/or talents that have produced successful content for the streamer. These types of collaboration are discursively presented by the streamer as an opportunity for these companies to scale up production values and simultaneously reach an even broader audience. In a press release announcing a strategic partnership with The Seven, the production company behind the successful Japanese original series *Alice in Borderland* (Sakamoto, 2020–present), Nao Azuma and Jeff McBride, content communication officers state:

This collaboration further deepens our relationship with TBS [Tokyo Broadcasting System Holdings, Inc.], whose popular drama series are already being streamed on Netflix. THE SEVEN will also have access to an expansive new studio lot of almost 1000 square meters, slated to be one of the largest and most advanced soundstages of its kind in Japan when completed next year, ensuring best-in-class quality for Netflix productions. THE SEVEN aims to tell stories from Japan in new ways, unbound by traditional creative limitations. Our partnership gives them the scale in production and budget, the creative freedom, and the reach to share their groundbreaking showstoppers with the world. (Azuma & McBride, 2022)

Such partnerships, we surmise, are strategically aimed at building franchises based on already successful intellectual properties and/or at creating new stories from already acclaimed creators on Netflix, which in turn guarantees a ready audience. Second, Netflix's discourse emphasizes partnerships with production companies and/or individual talents who have never collaborated with the streamer but have already a well-established presence at the local level. Such collaborations are presented in the streamer's communication as an opportunity for local creatives to amplify their reach at the global scale. In a press release announcing Netflix's partnership with Yash Raj Films (Netflix, 2023b), one of the biggest film production and distribution companies in India, Monica Shergill, vice-president of content in India states:

We are passionate about serving our broad audiences with series and films that they connect with and love, and we want to do more of this. Yash Raj Films have defined the essence of Indian filmmaking. They are one of the most respected storytellers in the industry. From *Kabhi Kabhie* to *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *War* to *Pathaan*, their signature stories have been part of our lives and continue to fuel the zeitgeist. Together, we are confident that we can entertain the world with quality films and series like never before. (Netflix, 2023b)

These partnerships seem to be deliberately designed to attract audience segments still out of reach for the streamer. This is especially true in a competitive country such as India where Netflix is not the most popular streamer and mostly caters to high-income and cosmopolitan audiences (Shattuc, 2020).

#### **4.4. Discourse 4: Netflix Promotes Equity and Inclusion in Local Industries**

From the #MeToo movement to the #Oscarssowhite boycotts, the global film and television industries have been faced with strong criticisms. Building on a strategy of representation (Asmar et al., 2023)—or the strategic emphasis on categories of difference (i.e., gender, race, etc.) to showcase the streamer's commitment to a more inclusive industry—our analysis shows how Netflix discursively presents its production culture as a catalyst for structural change. Indeed, in this fourth discourse, the streamer positions itself as a haven for all creatives, irrespective of gender, sexuality, or religious creed, with a rhetoric centred

around: amplifying and empowering marginalized voices, providing opportunities for underrepresented communities, leading the industry by example by setting new standards—from inclusive storytelling to building a sustainable service. To this end, Netflix promotes in its communication (i.e., press releases and diversity reports) its various collaborations with and financial support—through the NFCE—to grassroots and non-profit organizations such as Bus Stop Films in Australia to increase the representation of people living with disabilities (Netflix, 2023c). The streamer similarly partners with regional organizations such as the European Producers Club to “help create new opportunities for European women producers” (Rizwan, 2022).

This discourse is built on a narrative that first discursively presents a production culture that empowers marginalized voices by giving them a platform to tell their stories, but also strives to dismantle structural barriers to inclusion. Gender and ethnic diversity are predominant in this narrative, with Netflix putting a strong emphasis in its communication on the active participation of women (on/off screen) as well as the inclusive representation of various ethnic and indigenous communities. In a press release presenting Netflix’s Because She Created platform, designed to “shine a spotlight on the creative, talented, inspirational women in the Arab world” (Kharma, 2022), JoAnn Kharma the communications manager in Europe, Middle East, and Africa writes:

The collection features many other stories that amplify the work of Arab women behind the camera, amplifying underrepresented voices and giving more people a chance to see their lives reflected on screen. We hope these voices provide inspiration for the wider creative community and highlight the importance of equitable representation storytelling, and why it matters. We’re proud to be working towards filling the pipeline of women in entertainment in the region. More women behind the camera also have a ripple effect for women in front of it. (Kharma, 2022)

This emphasis on gender diversity and, more broadly, the use of cultural and identity politics as corporate values is emblematic of Netflix’s play on a global consciousness (Robertson, 1992) or the strategic use of contemporary discussions—from antiracism to sexual violence—that can resonate globally. Indeed, in an ever-competitive global industry, Netflix’s strategic emphasis on representation is, on the one hand, designed to paint its transnational expansion as a humanistic endeavour intent on fostering intercultural connections, rather than one motivated by profits. On the other hand, by highlighting the inclusive character of the service and the company as a whole, Netflix presents itself as an attractive partner, particularly for creators stifled by conservative media policies (Bulut, 2025) or talents whose access to the industry is constrained by systemic injustices such as gender or racial discrimination. Yet, it is interesting to note that, while Netflix has portrayed itself as a game-changer unfettered by (restrictive) national regulations—especially in terms of content and stories—it has given in to censorship, quietly removing titles deemed contentious or obscene from its catalogue (Khalil & Zayani, 2021).

Second, this discourse relies on a narrative presenting a production culture that challenges traditional power structures and redefines how inclusive practices are to be implemented locally. As part of its commitment to more inclusive television industries, Netflix has been vocal about its investing in future talents who can be taught from an early stage about inclusive storytelling and production practices. In a press release presenting the launch of the project Boosting the Next Generation: Promoting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Film Schools in Germany (Peter, 2022), Netflix announces the funding of an independent inclusion and diversity coordinator position for the MaLisa Foundation and six German film schools. This new position, according

to the streamer, is to ensure the inclusion and participation of a broad and diverse group of creatives in the German-speaking world by already equipping film school students with the skills for inclusive storytelling. Sasha Bühler, director film in Europe, Middle East, and Africa adds:

Instead of launching a new initiative, we want to invest in an existing and proven initiative of German film schools. By supporting and expanding existing infrastructures, we can ensure that the important issues of diversity, equal opportunities and inclusion are holistically integrated into film school education in a timely manner. We are very aware of the long road ahead for all of us. That makes us all the more proud to make this commitment to support diversity and inclusion both in front of and behind the camera in a long-term and sustainable way by investing in the education of the next generation of storytellers. (Peter, 2022)

As such, by actively participating in the education and mentoring of a new generation of creatives, Netflix not only sets the agenda as to how cultural diversity is understood and represented, but the streamer also ensures premium access to a reserve of talents.

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

Throughout this contribution, we have articulated how Netflix rhetorically uses its diversity strategy to promote its production culture. Hence, this article adds to current explorations of SVODs first by stressing the added value of cultural power as a distinct analytical lens, one that captures the more subtle but no less significant ways in which global streamers shape media ecosystems. Netflix's rhetoric on diversity contributes to cementing the streamer's global legitimacy, underscoring how Netflix's power is not solely about its capacity to influence economic and regulatory landscapes; instead, it is also about the streamer's ability to transform the symbolic and cultural dimensions of media productions. Second, by linking Netflix's production culture to broader discussions of power, this article provides a nuanced understanding of how cultural power operates in the context of global SVODs. This approach moves beyond mere formulations of power as oppressive or coercive, to highlight the complex ways in which Netflix may both empower *and* control local production culture, capturing thus the interplay between economic, political, and cultural dynamics.

However, examining Netflix's rhetoric exposes the tensions and contradictions at play in the streamer's diversity strategy. First, the selective nature of Netflix's investments complicates its rhetoric on inclusion and diversity. Indeed, research shows that its investments are highly selective, favouring large markets (Iordache, 2022) and prioritizing genres that are likely to have a global appeal (Asmar et al., 2024a). This reveals that, although Netflix promotes itself as an advocate for local content, it risks marginalizing voices that do not neatly fit into its global strategy; such an issue becomes more pressing when considering the streamer's ability to define and elevate certain forms of content over others (Noh, 2024). Hence, this is where the dynamics of cultural power come into play—not through overt force, but through the imposition of norms that reflect the needs of global markets rather than the distinct localities with which the streamer engages.

Second, Netflix's discourse around local talents similarly reveals contradictions. While the streamer frames itself as a democratizing force opening pathways for (emerging) creators, providing financial and professional backing as well as visibility, Netflix also often retains intellectual property rights over the commissioned content, limiting the creative autonomy of local producers. This dynamic echoes broader critiques of how

“power to” can be co-opted by market forces with the tension between autonomy and visibility becoming a significant theme. As a result, Netflix’s rhetoric about investing in the new generation of talents is complicated by its commercial imperatives: its risk-taking is highly selective, favouring established auteurs or proven intellectual properties over creative experimentation (Cuelenaere & Joye, 2024).

More fundamentally, by emphasizing a discourse of equity and inclusion within media industries, Netflix leverages its cultural power to set new standards as to the definition and representation of various forms of differences. As diversity transforms into a corporate asset, it becomes a mechanism of control over the creative process. This is what Herman Gray (2016) terms precarious diversity or the process whereby the rhetoric on inclusion is used to legitimize corporate interests rather than genuinely unsettling hegemonic structures. Hence, Netflix risks homogenizing the very differences it claims to celebrate as the streamer’s control over what stories are told and how they are framed reflects its power to define cultural norms. Ultimately, positioning itself as both a global and local player, Netflix is able to dictate the terms of cultural production in ways that privilege its corporate interests. The streamer’s rhetoric thus deflects attention from the underlying power dynamics of global media production, actively sustaining existing hierarchies and embedding new forms of symbolic dominance under the guise of inclusion. As Stuart Hall (1997) reminds us, representation is always tied to power—who has the power to represent whom, and for what purposes. Netflix’s power lies thus not only in its ability to produce content but in its ability to shape the global narrative around diversity. In doing so, it risks reducing the complexities of cultural differences to a series of marketable identities, detached from the social, political, and historical contexts that give those identities meaning.

Finally, in addition to examining Netflix’s rhetoric, this article concludes that it is essential to also reflect on how Netflix’s discourses influence the ways in which creatives imagine the streamer, what Szczepanik (2024) calls streamer imaginaries and defines as the hopes, fears, and anxieties cultural producers ascribe to their work with global SVODs such as Netflix. Put differently, what imaginaries does Netflix’s rhetoric on diversity and inclusion evoke or create among local cultural producers? By reflecting on this, further research will explore how Netflix’s cultural power is not limited to what the streamer does or to its discourses, but how it is also shaped by the aspirations and possibilities local talents ascribe to Netflix, highlighting thus the various ways in which talents—particularly from marginalized communities—negotiate and respond to Netflix’s rhetoric on diversity.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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