Researching transnational audiences in the streaming era: Designing, piloting and refining a mixed methods approach

Cathrin Bengesser,
Aarhus University, Denmark

Andrea Esser,
King's College London, United Kingdom

Jeanette Steemers,
King's College London, United Kingdom

Abstract:
Shifts towards on-demand viewing and the advance of global streaming services are dramatically changing screen content consumption, generating new research questions and reinforcing the need for methodological revisions within audience research. Based on a pilot study in Denmark conducted in 2020, this article offers critical reflections and solutions by outlining how a methodology was designed to collect data on the transnational consumption and reception of British screen content, and how it was subsequently tested and refined. The methodology was developed for the AHRC-funded research project 'Screen Encounters with Britain: What do Young Europeans Make of Britain and its Digital Screen Culture' (SEB), which seeks to identify young European viewers (16-34) of British screen content, how they find and access it, what they watch, why they choose to watch, what they think about British content, and how it impacts their attitudes towards Britain. The article first outlines the methodological challenges transnational audience researchers face today, before introducing five 'integrated research steps' (Bryman, 2006) that address these challenges and were tested in the pilot. It concludes with critical reflections on lessons learned and necessary revisions.

Key Words: Methodology, Netflix, Screen Content, Screen Encounters, Transnational Audiences,Video-on-Demand, YouTube.

Researching transnational audiences in the streaming era

The recent and ongoing transformation from broadcasting to video-on-demand (VoD) viewing is causing dramatic changes to the consumption of screen content. As content offers have multiplied, in the EU alone, there are now nearly 800 different VoD catalogues available across 340 services (Grece, 2021: 15, 34).[1] Based on a sample of 22 EU countries listed on justwatch.com (December 2021), on average Europeans can access a minimum of 50,000 titles per country at any one moment. Neither domestic producers, nor Anglo-American centres of content production can maintain content supply at this level. As a result, programme flows have become more multi-directional and the consumption of screen content from a variety of countries is becoming an everyday practice; at least among the sufficiently affluent. Fictional programmes from South Korea, Scandinavia, Spain and Turkey, amongst others, have been met with increasing openness and enthusiasm by viewers across the world (Bengesser et al., forthcoming; Bondebjerg et al., 2017; Jensen and Jacobsen, 2020a; Khan and Rohn, 2020; Sundet, 2020). As a result, calls to revisit long-standing theoretical paradigms of cultural discount (Hoskins and Mirus, 1988) and cultural proximities (Sola Pool, 1979; Straubhaar, 1991, 2007) have been made (Esser, 2017; Jensen and Jacobsen, 2020b). Equally, audience research, a 'child of the broadcasting era' (Schrøder, 2019: 155), needs methodological revision.

This is a challenging task. Streaming and on-demand viewing complicate methodological choices in various ways. First it complicates the relationship between the national and the transnational. Whilst transnational dimensions across production and distribution keep growing, institutional broadcast history has left persistent national footprints. Research is further complicated by the sheer scale of content offerings, their ephemerality and mutability, as well as the personalisation of content offers through recommender systems. How can we study the consumption and reception of content that is increasingly elusive, and shared by ever fragmenting audiences within any given market? Yet another challenge relates

---

[1] The figures reported by Grece (2021) refer to subscription video-on-demand (SVoD) and transactional-video-on-demand (TVoD) services only. In addition to these services there are Video sharing platforms (e.g. YouTube) and a number of free or advertising funded VoD services available to audience. However, the latter categories are often not geo-localised, i.e. not constituting separate catalogues for different territories.

to quantitative data. While content providers generate 'big data' from their users to gain knowledge about audiences, academic researchers and producers have limited access to this data. For audience studies spanning several markets, this expansion in both scale and complexity exacerbates concerns about feasibility, comparability, and the careful balancing of scope and depth. In addition to these media-specific challenges, in-person audience research has recently been impeded by Covid-19, making it necessary to explore alternative methods.

This article represents a response to these challenges. It seeks to offer critical reflections and solutions by outlining how a methodology was designed to collect data about the consumption and reception of British screen content in Europe, how it was then tested and refined. It was developed as a pilot study for the AHRC-funded research project 'Screen Encounters with Britain' (SEB) (Steemers 2022-2024), which seeks to identify young European viewers (aged 16-34) who watch British screen content, how they find and access it, what they watch, why they choose to watch it, what they think about British content, and how its consumption impacts their opinions and attitudes towards Britain. The pilot study was conducted between April and June 2020 in Denmark to generate initial insights, and to develop and refine a methodological approach that would allow quantitative and qualitative methods to be used in four case study markets: Denmark and the Netherlands, two small markets, with comparatively small offerings of domestic screen content, a tradition of subtitling, and high English-language proficiency; and Italy and Germany, two larger markets, with a corresponding greater choice of domestic content, a tradition of dubbing, and comparatively lower English-language proficiency.

We begin by outlining contemporary challenges for audience research, and how we responded from a methodological point of view. After this, the five 'integrated research steps' (Bryman, 2006), developed to address the above challenges and tested in the pilot, are discussed. The article concludes with critical reflections on lessons learned and necessary revisions.

Methodological considerations

Several challenges, caused by market transformations and contextual factors, force today's audience researchers to critically reflect on and revise their methodological toolkit. The first challenge involves the complex relationship between the national and the transnational. Institutional broadcast history is foremost national, and local media systems and TV cultures continue to pre-structure audience encounters, including with non-domestic content (Athique, 2014: 14). Consequently, in-depth knowledge of individual, usually national markets and TV cultures continues to matter. At the same time, streaming means that viewers in distant locations increasingly access audiovisual content through the same 'portals' (Lotz, 2017); and because transnational streamers like Netflix commission and acquire much of their content for a perceived 'transnational audience' and push that content through interfaces

and trailers, audiences across the globe now view more of the same shows. Other transnational dimensions are also growing in scope and scale. They include a developing appetite for non-domestic, non-US content, often watched in the original language, with or without subtitles (Chaume, 2016; Robison, 2020; Schmidt, 2016; Youngs, 2021), the simultaneous release of content worldwide, attendant discussions on (borderless) social media, as well as the sharing and consumption of reviews, trailers and other para-texts across national borders (Jenkins et al., 2013; Jenner, 2018). Meanwhile national markets continue to fragment because of the increase and diversification of services, making it imperative not to generalise about national or other presumed large audience groups. To ensure that these changes are adequately taken into account, a 'transnational research approach' is required, which acknowledges and pays attention to national borders where appropriate, but gives equal consideration to those forces that operate at supra-national, trans-regional and trans-local levels (Athique, 2014; Khagram and Levitt, 2008).

The second methodological challenge concerns the ephemerality, multiplicity and mutability of content offerings, as it becomes harder to establish what content and media brands are available to whom. The catalogues of VoD services are vast and constantly changing. Establishing what VoD content is available to audiences has become difficult (Lobato, 2018), compounded by streamers' ever-changing interfaces and sorting logics (Kelly and Sørensen, 2021: 70) which exist in multiple forms across devices (Matthew, 2020: 69). Ongoing advances in personalised viewing recommendations targeting algorithmically constructed global 'taste communities' add further complexity, and are likely to gain in significance as competition amongst streamers intensifies and video-on-demand becomes the dominant mode of screen consumption (Pajkovic, 2022). Pajkovic's (2022) experimental study of the Netflix recommender system (NRS), deemed to be the most advanced, shows how after a few weeks of using Netflix, the personalisation algorithms for each user start to differentiate between content categories, the order of titles within categories, and even artwork thumbnails used to represent each video. However, algorithmically driven recommender systems have not yet made traditional scheduling and curation practices obsolete (Johnson, 2019). The companies currently active in the streaming market (including entertainment services like Netflix, legacy broadcasters, telecoms and energy providers) pursue many different business models, which favour different forms of content prioritisation. For example, a comprehensive quantitative study of DR's VoD strategy and interface (Lassen and Sørensen, 2021), shows that the public service broadcaster's VoD content presentation is governed much more by online curation in line with public service principles (for example, foregrounding Danish content) than the algorithmic personalisation strategies pursued by Netflix. Moreover, forty percent of DR users decline to accept the cookies necessary to implement personalisation. So, while Netflix's model of complex algorithmic personalisation is significant across Europe, it is important not to discount the high market penetration of domestic VoD services in more mature markets like Denmark. Emerging from legacy media companies (Grece 2021: 19), including national

public service institutions, they are not all driven by the same commercial priorities that shape Netflix's model of algorithmic personalisation, as the DR example shows.

Other methodological challenges involve the availability and perceived value of quantitative data. In practice it is difficult for academics to get hold of proprietary 'big data' because while content providers generate 'big data' from users to gain knowledge about their audiences, they tend to not share this data. Withholding data offers greater control in sales negotiations with third parties (for example, advertisers) and over marketing narratives, which is the key reason why data-driven VoD companies like Netflix do not publicise audience data (Kelly, 2019: 117). The value of quantitative data, on the other hand, is a recurrent topic of debate amongst media scholars. Some scholars have argued that quantitative studies can be reductionist and simplistic; and are not suited to illuminating the complexities of consumption and reception (Deacon and Keightley, 2011: 314; Ørmen, 2020: 255). Some have criticised the constructed nature of surveys, arguing that surveys often only reveal what researchers have asked for, and may even produce misunderstandings and inaccurate responses (Bryman, 2008: 159). Similar critical debates are now taking place about the value of 'big data'. Whilst digital methods, such as social media scraping, offer exciting new sources of quantitative evidence for industry, academic researchers and funding bodies, and an unprecedented ability to monitor and trace audience behaviour, some audience researchers warn against the pull of the 'big data paradigm'. They call for qualitative methods to be 'revitalized' (Schrøder, 2019: 160), and for researchers not to lose sight of audiences' everyday media experiences and practices (Ytre-Arne and Das, 2018: 286). These arguments have influenced our pragmatic mixed approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods: Quantitative market data from third parties provides our research with important background information about the reach of both VoD services and programmes as well as viewing trends. A survey, which is mostly quantitative, offers invaluable opportunities for scale and comparability; and qualitative methods in interviews and digital diaries and tasks, provide important contextual detail about individual media consumers and rich explanations that quantitative methods cannot deliver.

For audience studies spanning several markets, an increase in scale and complexity exacerbates matters of feasibility and comparability, and also the need to balance scope against depth. For example, the audience work packages of three recent projects, 'Mediating Cultural Encounters through European Screens' (MeCETES, 2013-2017), 'What Makes Danish TV Drama Travel?' (2014-2018), and 'Detecting Transcultural Identity in European Popular Crime Narratives' (DETECt, 2018-2021), revealed problems in acquiring comparable quantitative data sets for all markets included in each study. Even qualitative research was hampered at times, for example, by the fact that Japanese or Brazilian audiences of Danish TV drama are much smaller than European audiences, which made recruiting focus group participants in Japan and Brazil quite difficult (Jensen and Jacobsen, 2020c). In particular, these projects highlight the resource and time-intensive nature of audience research in

multiple markets, and their experiences made us carefully consider the feasibility of methods designed for comparability across markets.

Finally, Covid-19 which put a halt to in-person research in 2020 forced us to abandon face-to-face interviews and focus groups. The timing of the pilot from April to June 2020 obliged us to trial online, off-site methods, but this brought benefits in response rates and engagement. Younger audiences were generally comfortable using online tools, and with no travel it was easier to offer early evening slots, which interviewees found convenient. We will discuss these benefits and the difficulties that we encountered in our discussion of step five, the one-to-one online interviews, and also in our critical assessment at the end.

Designing and piloting an integrated five-step approach

Reflecting on these methodological challenges and the exploratory nature of the SEB project, we opted for a mixed, multi-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data gathering. Moreover, given the need for feasibility and comparability, and conscious that the depth gained through the multi-method approach needs to be carefully weighed against geographical breadth, we opted for four case study countries, each to be explored through five integrated (Creswell, 2009: 209–211) research steps, whereby the first two are preparatory. These steps progress from predominantly quantitative to qualitative methods and cover three of Bryman's dimensions, derived from his motivational typology for methods integration (Bryman, 2006: 105–107): *instrument development* (one method builds on and influences the other); *enhancement* (different methods augment findings with additional data); and *explanation* (different methods are used to explain the findings of the other). This approach, which we applied to the Danish pilot, enabled us to develop an increasingly detailed picture about Danish viewers of British-produced screen content. After describing its application to the Danish pilot, we conclude with a critical reflection on lessons learned and the subsequent refinement of the methodology for the full four-country study.

Step 1: *Building market knowledge*

The first, preparatory step aimed to illuminate the media system(s) within which audiences make their consumption choices. As noted above, the territoriality of rights (Steemers, 2016), continues to determine which content is readily and legally available to 'national' audiences on different platforms. Global streaming services compete with local broadcasters and streamers for content and audiences; and they command varying positions in different media markets. To establish such important background knowledge, it is useful to draw on existing reports. Basic data about the reach of broadcast and on-demand services is regularly published by domestic market research companies and public institutions, such as DR's annual Media Development Survey (2021, 2022). On a broader, but less detailed scale, the European Audiovisual Observatory supplies free and paid for data about the availability of broadcast and on-demand services in European countries (EAO Yearbook, Mavise Database).

These sources help to establish which linear and/or VoD services are the most relevant in terms of market penetration and reach. Using such third-party data can result in problems with comparability across years and/or sources, and sometimes lack of transparency about categorisations and research methods used. These problems are characteristic of both national and transnational industry research. Large-scale studies with reliable comparable data over multiple years, and/or multiple countries are rare because of high costs and the difficulty of tracking constantly changing markets. However, for top-level market characterisations, as required by our study, existing third-party data is sufficient. For Denmark these sources allowed us to establish that in 2020, video-on-demand accounted for the majority of 12-39 year-olds' viewing across traditionally distributed television and streaming services (Kantar, 2021: 19), and that YouTube, Netflix, DRTV, Viaplay and TV2 Play were the top five streaming services with the highest weekly reach (DR Audience Research Department, 2021: 8), especially among those aged 12-39 (Kantar, 2020: 24). For the next step involving catalogue research, we focused on Netflix, DRTV, TV2 Play and HBO Nordic to make the pilot workload manageable, to cover an indicative spectrum of transnational (Netflix, HBO Nordic), public service (DRTV) and national commercial services (TV2 Play) and to ascertain which curated VoD platforms might be important as sources of British content.

Step 2: *Catalogue research*

Step two aimed to establish what British content was discoverable and promoted on the most prominent broadcast and streaming services in order to prepare relevant examples for the survey (step three), tasks included in the digital diaries (step four) and contextual knowledge for the analysis of the audience responses gained during steps three to five. In contrast to broadcast schedules, the catalogues of VoD services, defined as 'the corpus of licensed or owned content distributed by a particular platform at a given time' (Lobato, 2018: 242), are not published or archived. Existing databases like the EAO's Lumiere VoD directory of European works (film and TV content), aggregator sites, like UNOGS or Justwatch.com, and (free or paid-for) Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) offer only a rough quantitative overview of catalogues, for instance, to enable researchers to establish and compare catalogue sizes across countries (Lobato, 2018). APIs also allow researchers to examine fluctuations and trends within catalogues, or the labels and sorting structures platforms use to present content to users on their service's interface (Kelly and Sørensen, 2021).

Drawing up a full list of all available programmes and content categories is near impossible and can only be momentary. Moreover, not all 'viewables' (Lobato, 2018: 246) in a catalogue have the same likelihood of being found and watched. As our goal was to compile a list of British titles that young Danish viewers were likely to have come in to contact with around the time of our audience research (as preparation for subsequent steps), we opted for a non-comprehensive, exploratory approach. In the case of VoD services, users' access to content is pre-structured by an interface of browse-able decks with tiles (Bruun and Bille, 2022).

Searches for particular titles or categories are possible but, as Matthews (2020) has found, content displayed on landing pages is the most likely to be engaged with. Hence, manual browsing by a researcher leads to a fair impression of which content features prominently; at least in the case of services that do not heavily personalise content offers. We adopted the same approach as Bruun and Bille (2022), who took daily screenshots of the landing pages of the VoD services of the two Danish public service broadcasters, DRTV and TV2 Play, over two separate weeks to establish the types of documentaries prominently displayed. Both services were also key to our pilot with the addition of Netflix and HBO Nordic. With Netflix this approach is less suitable because of personalisation algorithms that draw on past viewing choices to structure and populate landing pages (Pajkovic 2022). However, various scholars have noted that although VoDs cultivate a narrative of personalisation, user agency, and limitless choice (Tryon, 2015), they also 'exert control over users by prioritizing specific content in their interfaces' (Johnson, 2019: 114) and by encouraging certain choices and viewing behaviours through 'soft conditioning' (Markham et al., 2019: 35). Even on Netflix, which operates the most sophisticated recommender system, there are limits to personalisation stemming from a business model built around exclusive content and a constant stream of new releases aimed at attracting and retaining subscribers. This results in the prioritisation of the 'Netflix Originals' category that persists across the prime landing space of all users. For the pilot we worked with the hypothesis that while their position and appearance might change, the Netflix titles appearing in the top line recommendations, 'Top 10 in Denmark', 'Trending Now' and 'New Releases' are not personalised to the same degree as other categories and would give us a good impression of what was being pushed at Danish audiences by Netflix at the time of our audience research.

We visited four VoD platforms (Netflix, DRTV, TV2 Play, HBO Nordic) on three days, scanning their landing pages for British content by navigating through the top rows of the different services. In the case of DR – which offers a vast catalogue of titles on its VoD service (Bruun and Bille, 2022) – this also involved checking the sub-categories fiction, documentary and lifestyle. In addition, we carried out spot searches to establish how easy it is to discover British content when explicitly looking for it across all platforms tested. We also carried out a spot search of the Viaplay and Viafree streaming services, owned by the Nordic Entertainment Group (NENT), which is an important supplier to young audiences of reality TV shows, which were used in survey and diary tasks. Overall, this exploratory and preparatory catalogue search led to a list of 200 British titles (across four platforms) that could be classed as readily available to young Danish users at the time of the pilot. The catalogue search also revealed which other programmes were promoted alongside British content, giving us an indication of the kinds of programmes British productions are competing with.

Step 3: *Online survey*

Step three aimed to identify audiences of British content, their use of platforms available to them, the British titles familiar to them, the motivational factors that guide them in actively seeking and/or watching British content, and the views they have of British screen content and of Britain as a country. In contrast to the DETECt project, which had started with a small number of one-to-one interviews about crime drama in three countries and then used localised online surveys in twelve markets to test how viewing patterns and attitudes identified through these interviews scale across broader populations (Bengesser et al., forthcoming), we opted to start with the survey to garner initial insights from a broader range of viewers before using semi-structured interviews to shed more light on diverse individual viewing experiences, the contexts in which British content is consumed, and viewers' reasons for choosing British content.

The survey was anonymous and carried out using Qualtrics. The pilot survey with 249 respondents had twenty-three questions (plus twelve about the respondents' demographic details at the end), progressing from respondents' general platform and genre preferences, their consumption and views of British screen content, to their knowledge and views of Britain as a country. Throughout the survey different techniques were used to mitigate the risks of frustration about choice limitations or questions that respondents might find difficult to relate to. To avoid dropouts and distortions through forced random answers, respondents were allowed to skip questions, and all multiple-choice questions offered the option of 'other' with a free-text line for participants to mention their choice that had not been offered. Moreover, to mitigate the risks of confusion and misunderstanding, we used concrete terms and locally familiar examples in part derived from step two. For instance, questions on consumption behaviour were localised by asking respondents to assess their use of Denmark's dominant VoD, broadcast and video-sharing platforms—based on the knowledge we had gained during step one. Genre-related questions (informed by step two) were illustrated with programme examples (domestic, British and US) that would be known to audiences based on their recent experiences of platforms in Denmark (see fig. 1).

Figure 1: Initial question about general genre preferences, later repeated for UK content and exemplified with only British programmes
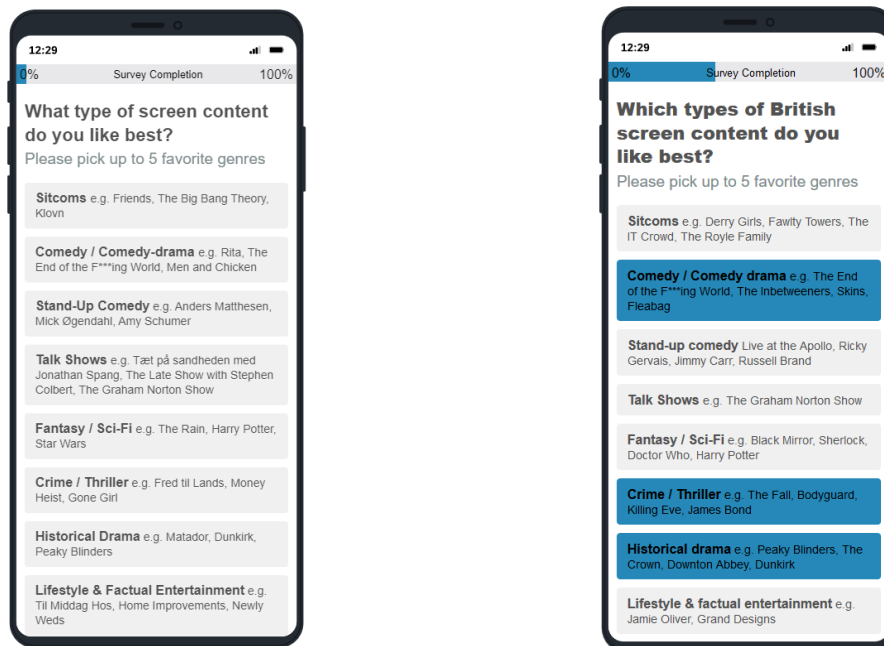

After the first, 'general consumption' section, survey respondents were asked to write down as many British film and TV titles as they could remember (fig. 2) to a) establish which and how many British programmes survey respondents viewed and b) reveal which programmes they identify as British. Another important function of this open question was to c) prepare respondents in a non-leading way for the consumption and attitudinal questions on British programmes, something that was further enhanced by a follow-up question asking respondents what they associate with the titles listed (fig. 2). A total of nearly 400 unique titles were mentioned, which showed that young Danish viewers are familiar with a wide range of British content that also goes far beyond what was readily available at the time. The fact that over 200 titles were listed just once, suggested that the consumption of British screen content amongst Danish youth can be quite diverse and individualised. These insights, together with the word cloud (fig. 3) generated from a list of nearly 1,000 association terms, informed our in-depth explorations during the final qualitative research phase (steps four and five).

Figure 2: Open question used to identify titles that respondents think of when asked about British content, followed by a question about associations. The responses provided in the picture are taken from an actual survey response.

Figure 3: Word cloud of associations with British titles. The associations provided by the respondents have been clustered to reveal patterns of shared terms.

Following the two preparatory questions about British content, and mirroring the general consumption behaviour questions at the start of the survey, respondents were then asked about their consumption habits (access, favourite genres, frequency of viewing) for British programmes specifically. This duplication was deliberate to achieve a better understanding and evaluation of the survey responses pertaining to British content. Consumption questions in turn were followed with attitudinal questions about British screen content and the UK as a country, asked through a combination of multiple-choice questions and Likert-scale statements. The statements, which invited respondents to express levels of agreement/disagreement and their intensity of feelings, were formulated based on earlier findings from the three transnational research projects mentioned above. For instance, the DETECt study had established the importance of the English language in Danish audiences' preference for UK crime content (Bengesser et al., forthcoming). This was translated into the survey statement 'English language content is easier to follow than content from other

languages'. Esser's (2020) findings about the appeal of 'authenticity' in non-domestic (Danish) TV drama, was translated into the survey statement 'fictional content from Britain feels very realistic or authentic'.

Aspects that might be deemed difficult to pinpoint because of their abstract nature or because they relate to subconscious feelings (Bryman, 2008: 147) were tested through multiple simple statements. For instance, to test the notion of universal appeal, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement/disagreement with the statements '[British content] feels relatable because the stories told could take place anywhere in the world' and '[i]t feels possible that the stories [in British content] could be told in Denmark'. Figure 4 shows how we presented some statements as opinions about UK content expressed by other viewers. Such vignette-style questions facilitate responses about opinions or preferences people might be disinclined to admit (*Vignette Question*, 2008).

Figure 4: Attitudinal vignette question concerning opinions on British content, measured using a Likert scale
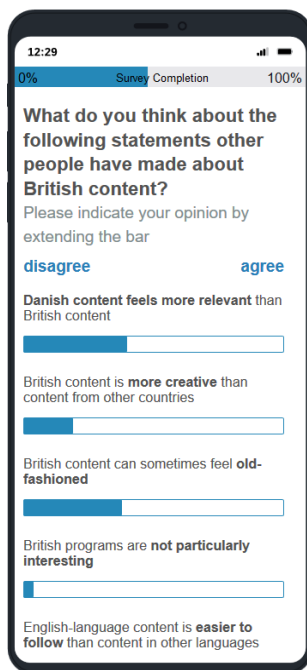
Building on the insights gained from the survey, the final two steps, aimed at adding contextual depth and explanations to the survey findings through qualitative methods. To recruit participants for step four and step five, a screener survey was attached as a voluntary follow-on to the online survey. This screener asked for additional demographic data about respondents' (self-reported) interest in British content and the contexts in which they consume British content, including life stages (teenage, young-adult, young professional, parent), living situations (alone, with friends, partners or family) and current activity (student,

working, not working). From this, six participants (three male, three female) were recruited to reflect the diverse contexts in which Danish viewers consume UK screen content.

Step 4: *Digital media diary and activities*

Step four used media diaries and small digital tasks over five days to take snapshots of concrete media encounters and to generate stimulus material for the one-to-one interviews (step five). For the diary, we used a simple Qualtrics-based daily survey form sent to participants' email or text-message inboxes, adapting the media diaries structure developed by Hasebrink and Domeyer (2012: 765) for their study of university students' media repertoires. Media diaries place individual media use within the contexts of everyday lives (Hasebrink and Domeyer, 2012; Hasebrink and Hepp, 2017), and are particularly useful in fragmented markets (Miller et al., 2017: 171). Today, diary tasks are significantly enhanced by digital and mobile technology including interactive features (Miller et al., 2017), which afford easy access and submission as well as daily prompting by the researcher. The diary task requested participants to note any title of screen content (longer than 20 minutes) watched and when, the platforms and devices used, and how many episodes they had watched (fig. 5). They were also asked to record the social context in which they viewed: alone or in the company of friends, partners or family, and whether they were engaging in any other activity while watching. As we did not seek to generate primary data to analyse media use patterns, but only sought to get a snapshot of content viewed from each of our respondents to prepare for the interview stage, we decided that five diary days would suffice.

Importantly, we added digital tasks and stimulus material to prepare participants for the interviews and give them time and opportunity to reflect on their engagement with British screen content. The use of 'creative methods' (Awan and Gauntlett, 2011; Buckingham, 2009) has become common in qualitative audience research, because it allows for eliciting opinions or attitudes in alternative ways to verbalising them. The first Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, however, rendered any face-to-face research impossible including the creative group workshops we had planned in Denmark. As group work online is technically challenging, and video-conferencing software is less well suited for creative tasks, we opted for individual video-call interviews, preceded by straightforward digital creative activities integrated into the diaries.

To limit calls on participants' time and goodwill we opted for a range of sorting tasks and exposure to trailers that invited responses. The purpose of the digital tasks was two-fold: to test participants' preferences for different genres and content origins in a different setup than the survey, and secondly to prepare concrete topics to talk about in the follow-on interviews, which would explore the reasons behind choices and preferences. The digital tasks covered film as well as television and addressed all genres identified as relevant for young audiences during the survey: comedy drama, sitcom and stand-up; historical and youth drama; reality and entertainment shows; Sci-Fi and documentary. To create variety, each day tasks were set

up differently. For instance, one task asked participants to indicate which type of TV entertainment or reality programme they prefer (dating, cooking, adventure, talent shows) and to then pick one preferred programme amongst a choice of similar programmes from Denmark, the USA or the UK (fig. 6). Another task asked them to tick the drama films and series they had already seen (selected from those prominently available on VoD platforms and TV in Denmark) and then rate how likely they were to watch the ones they had not seen. The tasks for the last two days focused on what they associated with Britain. Each of the five days finished with a trailer for a British show that was not available in Denmark at the time, and participants were asked to rate the likelihood of watching the show after having seen the trailer (fig. 7).
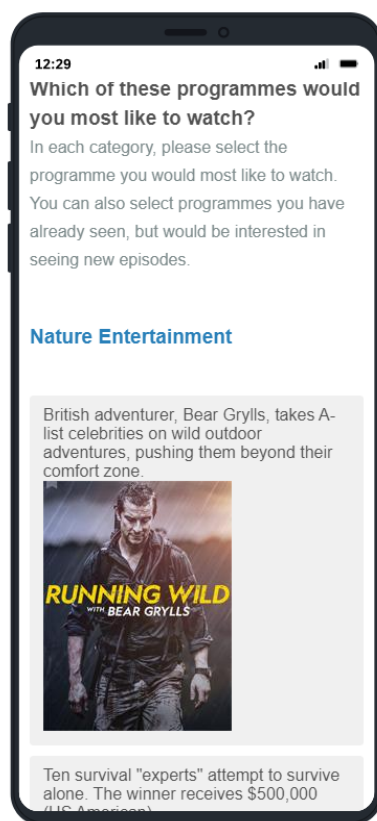

Figure 5: Diary start-page

Figure 6: Example of an activity testing preferences in the reality & entertainment category
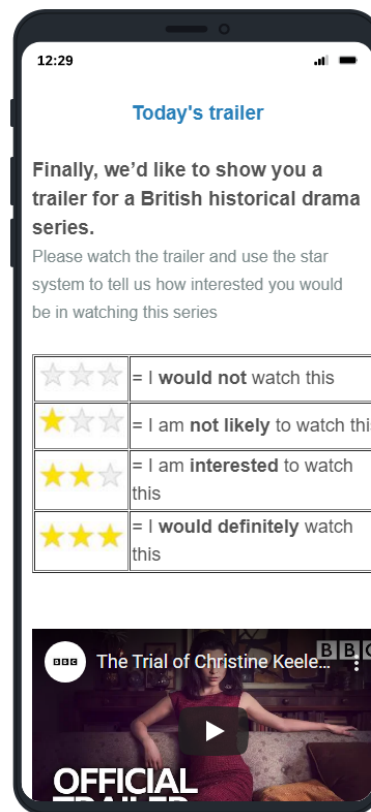

**Figure 7:** Example of the daily trailer for a British show not yet available in Denmark

As expected, the digital diaries yielded a diverse picture of media consumption patterns. However, the activities also revealed shared preferences for specific genres and countries of origin, and some level of agreement on the appeal of shows they had not yet seen. As creative activities, like surveys, are research artefacts that cannot speak for themselves (Buckingham, 2009) in-depth interviews, the final step, illuminated the reasons behind the choices and preferences revealed through the digital diaries and tasks.

Step 5: *One-to-one online interviews*

Interview-based research excels in providing researchers with insights into media users' motivations, attitudes and interpretations of the content they engage with, and the contexts in which they do so. Also, the interactions and openness of the interview process allow researchers to uncover matters and opinions they did not know about previously. Online interviews, as demonstrated, for example, by the work of Salmons (2015; 2016), have come into their own as an alternative to face-to-face meetings, particularly since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In line with this study's sequential explanatory strategy, the interview phase helped to explain findings from the previous four phases. Like the survey, the semi-structured interviews progressed from questions about general viewing behaviour, to consumption of British content, and lastly attitudes towards Britain and British culture. The interview guides and visual stimuli used during the interviews were tailored to each participant's recent media experiences as documented in their diary and attitudes reflected in task responses. The (re-) showing of stimulus material through screen-sharing made it easy for participants to recall tasks and talk us through the reasons for their choices (fig. 8).

Figure 8: Example of stimulus material used during the interview, and the question it generated
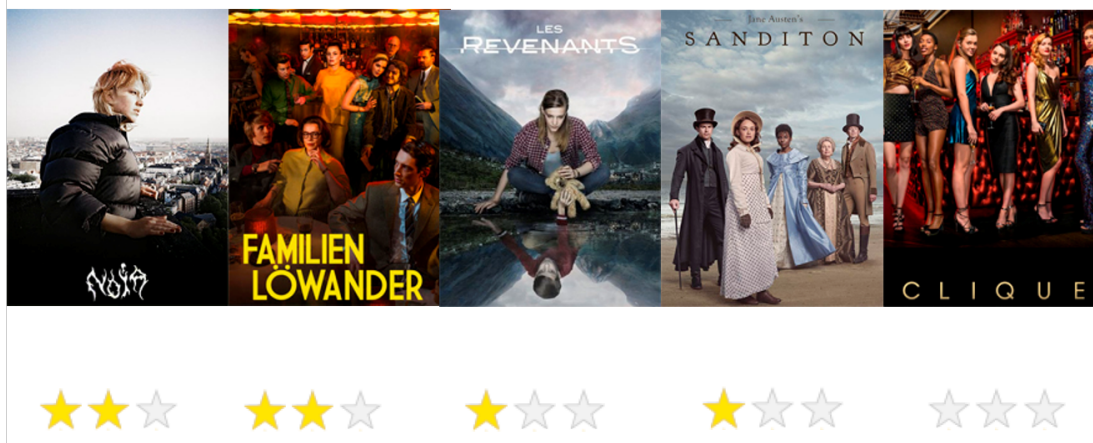
Question to female participant (32): 'I'm showing you the ratings that you gave to these dramas we were showing you. We are interested to hear why *Noia* and *Familien Löwander* looked interesting to you?'

Unsurprisingly, the interviews revealed how individual circumstances impact viewing choices in general as well as viewers' affinity towards British content; and how this, at least in parts, explains differences in consumption, including preferences for certain genres and countries of origin. Among shared attitudes was a scepticism towards Danish TV; drama programmes, for example, were perceived to be too dark and dull, and the humour of Danish comedy was

seen as too infantile. British programmes, in these cases offered more appealing alternatives. Several respondents actively sought out British stand-up comedians and entertainment shows on YouTube (something not offered by broadcasters or streamers at the time). When three male interviewees mentioned following British YouTubers ('WhatCulture') and cultural intermediaries (Mark Kermode on YouTube and old episodes of the Adam and Joe show on BBC Radio 6 Music) we realised that we needed to adjust our methodology to take greater account of YouTube as a platform for content consumption and recommendations (see section on 'critical assessment and refinement' below).

Methodologically, online interviews proved to be a good replacement for face-to-face interviews. Recording was easier with only minor technical issues around audio quality and disruptions. They created a dialogue, allowed for immediate interaction and offered a richness of verbal and non-verbal cues that approaches face-to-face situations (Salmons 2015: 81-82). All interviews were conducted by two interviewers with alternating roles to adequately cover questioning and technical issues. This enabled us to focus on responses and adapt the semi-structured interview guide according to the flow of conversation, while ensuring that the right stimulus material was shown and technical issues were dealt with. Although the participant was 'outnumbered' in this setup, it facilitated a smoother and more efficient conversation focused on the experiences of the preceding digital preparatory tasks.

Critical assessment and refinement

The rationale of the Danish pilot study had been to develop, trial and assess our methodology and each individual method of data collection and, where necessary, make adjustments for the AHRC-funded Screen Encounters with Britain project. As part of this critical assessment, we asked our six participants at the end of each interview to help us improve the research design by telling us about their experiences with the survey, the screener, the digital diary, activities and interview. They told us the survey length was acceptable and the questions and tasks were clear. Rather than experiencing the diary, activities and interview as additional labour, our six final respondents perceived them as straightforward and satisfying. Two participants said the last two stages, made them feel as though they had a stake in the research process; a sense of knowledge co-creation. However, one drawback of this sense of importance is the influence that it can have on participants' viewing behaviour. One acknowledged that he made a 'conscious decision' to not 'just turn on *Friends*' during the diary and activities week because he felt he should 'experience something [worthy of the research]' and 'check out something new.' This common research problem underlines the importance of always using dialogue to probe and contextualise responses, and of asking and testing the same questions repeatedly and in different ways.

Experiences and critical reflections on the pilot led to adjustments. Overall, the methodology worked well. The findings showed that a transnational research approach is imperative in an era of streaming, internet and borderless social media. Young Danish audiences' engagement

with British screen content was characterised by both astonishing breadth and depth, confirming that its consumption is as casual and natural as that of domestic and US-American content. English-language content, watched with or without subtitles, is a fixed and substantial component of their media consumption. Screen content originating from the US was the clear favourite, and British screen content was as popular as Danish content. This prevalence of English-language, including British content is nothing new. Danish viewers have been exposed to British content on linear television for decades, and its consumption is neither niche nor a taste that global streaming services have created. Of course, today there is much more content to choose from, and the role that transnational SVoDs and algorithms play in amplifying and with this further diversifying viewers' tastes will grow (Pajovic, 2022). Nonetheless, as our qualitative research on content choices and perceptions of Britishness also reveals, there are many real-life contextual factors, including social settings and recommendations from friends and family, cosmopolitan aspirations, perceptions of cultural proximity, and first-hand experiences of other countries, that are and continue to be important for shaping personal viewing tastes in the first place (Bengesser et. al, forthcoming). Researching audiences' everyday media experiences and practices (Ytre-Arne and Das, 2018: 286) through qualitative research hence continues to be vital.

The sequential interconnection between the five steps proved to be well suited for addressing both the complexity of today's media markets and increasingly individualised patterns of consumption. In terms of the preparatory phase of research, the pilot suggested that we should expand and take a more nuanced approach to the catalogue research (Step two): Not only to help generate relevant survey examples and stimulus material for each of the project's four case study markets, but to allow for sound comparison between possibly quite differing positions that British content occupies in each market and each market's major streaming catalogues. To gain a better understanding of which genres and programmes are being promoted in each market at the time of research, the monitoring of titles and prominence of British content in schedules and catalogues, will be supplemented by the monitoring of social media marketing campaigns of the broadcasters and VoDs most relevant for 16-34-year olds. One research approach not tested during the pilot because of time constraints, involves elite interviews with UK sales executives, content buyers, and other local cultural intermediaries such as teachers and social media influencers. These will add further context to analysis of content availability, as well as expert/industry perspectives on young audiences, and the factors deemed likely to influence content consumption among this age group.

Another important adjustment that came out of the pilot is that more attention needs to be paid to YouTube, as this platform is clearly used by many young Danes to discover and consume British content that is unavailable on broadcast or VoD platforms. Although known to be a key platform for young viewers, our original focus was on the closed and curated VoD catalogues of streaming services like Netflix. YouTube, as a non-curated video-sharing platform (Johnson, 2019), had not featured in our pilot catalogue research. However, with the survey revealing that YouTube is the third most important source for British content

among young Danes, it became essential for us to find ways to investigate YouTube: to identify the most important YouTube channels distributing UK content, as well as the most prominent and widely watched UK shows. Thus, to find out how audiences get to know about, find and access UK screen content on a variety of platforms, including YouTube, we will add survey questions about participants' YouTube genre preferences and their search behaviour relating to British content. The knowledge generated from the survey will then inform an exploratory scraping of search results on YouTube with the help of the YouTube data tool (Rieder et al., 2018), which allows researchers to extract lists of search results, viewing statistics and content categories.

To ensure comparable representation of all demographic groups we will use young local 'ambassadors' to reach out to these groups via social media and conduct some interviews in school/college settings. Finally, whilst the pilot survey was conducted in English for reasons of feasibility (we deemed this acceptable for the pilot because Denmark is second in English language proficiency in Europe[2]), the surveys for the funded SEB project will all use local languages to further limit any self-selection bias.

As far as the challenges of Covid-19 are concerned, the *Screen Encounters with Britain* pilot showed that it is possible to rely on online tools not only for quantitative but also qualitative research. We found that younger audiences are well versed in everyday communication using online tools, and that the data generated was reliable. Also, as no travel was involved and early evening slots were easier to offer, people seemed more willing to participate in interviews. Importantly, online audience research can also significantly reduce costs and time. This is especially beneficial for scholars with access to fewer resources who are not part of large-scale funded projects and/or affluent research systems, and those wanting to limit travel due to environmental concerns. One final consideration is that, as traveling and in-person research become more difficult both for financial and environmental reasons, transnational cooperation is becoming more important. To achieve the goal of understanding global audiences within their local contexts, local partnerships are crucial and for this reason the SEB project is working with research partners at the universities of Aarhus (Denmark), Bologna (Italy), Groningen (Netherlands) and Babelsberg (Germany), for whose intellectual input and practical support we are very grateful.

Biographical notes:

Cathrin Bengesser is Assistant Professor for Digital Media Industries at Aarhus University. Her research focuses on European media systems, European media policy and transnational audiences. She is PI on the AUFF-funded project EUVoD (2021-2023), which investigates the

---

[2] Reported in the English proficiency Index published by Education First (Education First, 2020: 7). The score builds on the proficiency levels of those who take the company's English placement tests and is hence not representative of the population. But this sample's age structure also heavily skews towards those under 35, the target group of our study.

development of European Video-on-Demand industries. As a Post-Doc at King's College London she co-designed and carried out the Danish pilot study for the Screen Encounters with Britain project. She has also been a Post-Doc in the Horizon2020 project DETECt (2018-2021), working on audience, industries and policy research. Contact email: cbengesser@cc.au.dk.

Andrea Esser is Professor of Media & Globalization at King's College London. Her research centres on all aspects of media globalization and transnationalisation, including the consumption and reception of screen media, screen production and distribution, European media policy and television history. She is the Co-Investigator of the AHRC-funded project, 'Screen Encounters with Britain: What do Young Europeans Make of Britain and its Digital Screen Culture' (2022-2024). Contact Email: andrea.esser@kcl.ac.uk.

Jeanette Steemers is Professor of Culture, Media and Creative Industries at the Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries at King's College London. She has published widely on policy and industry issues relating to international distribution, public service media and the children's media industry. She was PI for the King's College London Danish pilot study 'Screen Encounters with Britain' (2020) and is PI of the AHRC-funded project 'Screen Encounters with Britain' (2022-2024). Email: Jeanette.Steemers@kcl.ac.uk.

References:

Athique A (2014) Transnational audiences: geocultural approaches. *Continuum* 28(1): 4–17.

Awan F and Gauntlett D (2011) Creative and Visual Methods in Audience Research. In: Nightingale V (ed.) *The handbook of media audiences:* Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Bengesser C, Jensen PM and De Rosa, Paola, Spalletta, Marica (forthcoming) Audiences of popular European television crime drama: A nine-country study on consumption patterns, attitudes and drivers of transcultural connection. *European Journal of Communication*.

Bondebjerg I, Redvall EN, Helles R, et al. (2017) *Transnational European Television Drama Production, Genres and Audiences*. Cham: Springer International Publishing AG.

Bruun H and Bille BK (2022) Television documentaries as spearheads in public service television: Comparing scheduling practices on the linear channels and video-on-demand services of Danish TV 2 and DR. *Nordicom Review*, 43(1), 79-93.

Bryman A (2006) Integrating quantitative and qualitative research: how is it done? *Qualitative Research* 6(1): 97–113.

Bryman A (2008) *Social research methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Buckingham D (2009) 'Creative' visual methods in media research: possibilities, problems and proposals. *Media, Culture & Society* 31(4): 633–652.

Chaume F (2016) Audiovisual translation trends: Growing diversity, choice, and enhanced localization. In: Esser A, Smith IR and Bernal-Merino MÁ (eds.) *Media across borders: Localising TV, film and video games*. London: Routledge, pp. 68–84.

Creswell JW (2009) *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Los Angeles, London: SAGE.

Deacon D and Keightley E (2011) Quantitative Audience Research: Embracing the Poor Relation. In: Nightingale V (ed.) *The handbook of media audiences:* Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 302–319.

DR Audience Research Department (2021) *Media Development 2020*. Available online at: https://www.dr.dk/om-dr/fakta-om-dr/medieforskning/medieudviklingen/2020

DR Audience Research Department (2022) *Media Development 2021*. Available online at: https://www.dr.dk/om-dr/fakta-om-dr/medieforskning/medieudviklingen/2021

Education First (2020) EF English Proficiency Index: A Ranking of 100 Countries and Regions by English Skills. Available at: https://www.ef-danmark.dk/assetscdn/WIBIwq6RdJvcD9bc8RMd/cefcom-epi-site/reports/2020/ef-epi-2020-english.pdf.

Esser A (2017) Form, platform and the formation of transnational audiences. *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* 12(4): 411–429.

Esser, A. (2020) The appeal of "authenticity": Danish television series and their British audiences. In: Jensen PM and Jacobsen UC (eds.) *The global audiences of Danish television drama:* Göteborg: Nordicom, pp. 39–56.

Grece C (2021) *Trends in the VOD market in EU28*. Available online at: https://rm.coe.int/trends-in-the-vod-market-in-eu28-final-version/1680a1511a.

Hasebrink U and Domeyer H (2012) Media repertoires as patterns of behaviour and as meaningful practices: A multimethod approach to media use in converging media environments. *Participations* 9(2): 757–779.

Hasebrink U and Hepp A (2017) How to research cross-media practices? Investigating media repertoires and media ensembles. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 23(4): 362–377.

Hoskins C and Mirus R (1988) Reasons for the US dominance of the international trade in television programmes. *Media, Culture & Society* 10(4): 499–515.

Jenkins H, Ford S and Green J (2013) *Spreadable media: Creating value and meaning in a networked culture*. New York, London: New York University Press.

Jenner M (2018) *Netflix and the re-invention of television*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jensen PM and Jacobsen UC (eds.) (2020a) *The global audiences of Danish television drama*. Göteborg: Nordicom.

Jensen PM and Jacobsen UC (2020b) Augmenting proximities theory: Including other proximities in the transnational travel of Danish television drama. In: Waade AM, Redvall EN and Jensen PM (eds) *Danish television drama: Global lessons from a small nation*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 169–186.

Jensen PM and Jacobsen UC (2020c) Unfolding the global travel of Danish television drama series. In: Jensen PM and Jacobsen UC (eds.) *The global audiences of Danish television drama:* Göteborg: Nordicom, pp. 9–21.

Johnson C (2019) *Online television*. London: Routledge.

Kantar (2020) *Markedet for tv og streamingtjenster i Danmark: Seer-Undersøgelsens Establishment Survey Helår 2019*. Available online at: https://webtest.kantargallup.dk/storage/seer/Establishment%20Survey%20Hel%C3%A5r%202019%20%20-%20tv%20og%20streaming%20markedet.pdf.

Kantar (2021) *Markedet for tv og streamingtjenester i Danmark: Seer-Undersøgelsens Establishment Survey*. Available online at:
https://webtest.kantargallup.dk/storage/seer/Establishment%20Survey%202.%20halv%C3%A5r%20 2020%20%20-%20tv%20og%20streaming%20markedet.pdf.

Kelly JP (2019) Television by the numbers: The challenges of audience measurement in the age of Big Data. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 25(1): 113–132.

Kelly JP (2022) "This Title Is No Longer Available": Preserving Television in the Streaming Age. *Television & New Media* 23(1): 3–21.

Kelly JP and Sørensen JK (2021) "What's on the Interface Tonight?". *MedieKultur: Journal of media and communication research* 37(70): 66–90.

Khagram S and Levitt P (2008) *The transnational studies reader: Intersections and innovations*. New York, London: Routledge.

Khan M and Rohn U (2020) Transnationalization, exportation, and capitalization of Turkish television and its impact on the audience of Egypt and Pakistan. *European Journal of Social Sciences* 59(2): 123–137.

Lassen JM and Sørensen JK (2021) Curation of a Personalized Video on Demand Service: A Longitudinal Study of the Danish Public Service Broadcaster DR. *Iluminace* 33(1): 5-33.

Lobato R (2018) Rethinking International TV Flows Research in the Age of Netflix. *Television & New Media* 19(3): 241–256.

Lotz AD (2017) *Portals: A treatise on internet-distributed television*. Ann Arbor: Maize Books.

Markham A, Stavrova S and Schlüter M (2019) Netflix, Imagined Affordances, and the Illusion of Control. In: Buck AM and Plothe T (eds). *Netflix at the nexus: Content, practice, and production in the age of streaming television*. New York: Peter Lang, pp. 29–46.

Matthew JR (2020) Netflix and the design of the audience. *MedieKultur: Journal of media and communication research* 36(69): 52–70.

Miller AN, Kinnally W, Montano E, et al. (2017) A Comparison of Three Approaches to Electronic Media Diaries. *Communication Research Reports* 34(2): 171–179.

Pajkovic N (2022) Algorithms and taste-making: Exposing the Netflix Recommender System's operational logics. *Convergence*. 28(1): 214-235.

Rieder B, Matamoros-Fernández A and Coromina Ò (2018) From ranking algorithms to 'ranking cultures'. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 24(1): 50–68.

Robison K (2020) Player Control Test. About Netflix. Available at:
https://about.netflix.com/en/news/player-control-tests (accessed 1 March 2022).

Salmons, J (2015) *Qualitative online interviews. Strategies, design, and skills.* Los Angeles: SAGE.

Salmons, J (2016) *Doing qualitative research online.* Los Angeles: SAGE.

Schmidt M (2016) Jeder vierte junge Erwachsene schaut TV-Serien auf Englisch. Available at:
https://yougov.de/news/2016/01/14/jeder-vierte-junge-erwachsene-schaut-tv-serien-auf/ (accessed 1 March 2022).

Schrøder KC (2019) Audience Reception Research in a Post-broadcasting Digital Age. *Television & New Media* 20(2): 155–169.

Sola Pool I de (1979) Direct broadcast satellites and the integrity of national cultures. In: Nordenstreng K and Schiller H (eds.) *National sovereignty and international communication:* Norwood: Ablex, pp. 120–153.

Steemers J (2016) International Sales of U.K. Television Content. *Television & New Media* 17(8): 734–753.

Straubhaar JD (1991) Beyond media imperialism: Asymmetrical interdependence and cultural proximity. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8(1): 39–59.

Straubhaar JD (2007) *World television: From global to local*. London: Sage.

Sundet VS (2020) From 'secret' online teen drama to international cult phenomenon: The global expansion of SKAM and its public service mission. *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* 15(1): 69–90.

Tryon C (2015) TV Got Better: Netflix's Original Programming Strategies and the On-Demand Television Transition. *Media Industries Journal* 2(2).

Vignette Question (2008). In: Lavrakas P (ed) *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods:* Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Youngs I (2021) Young viewers prefer TV subtitles, research suggests. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-59259964 (accessed 1 March 2022).

Ytre-Arne B and Das R (2018) In the Interest of Audiences: An Agenda. In: Das R and Ytre-Arne B (eds.) *The future of audiences:* New York NY: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, pp. 275–292.

Ørmen J (2020) Quantitative approaches to media and communication research. In: Jensen KB (ed.) *A handbook of media and communication research: Qualitative and quantitative methodologies*. London: Routledge, pp. 255–285.