Analysis of the Narrative Strategies of TV Series in the Era of Streaming Media: A Case Study of Netflix on Never Have I Ever

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Abstract: The rapid development of streaming media has brought great changes to the traditional television industry. In order to meet the constantly updated consumer demand of the public, streaming media platforms began to adjust the narrative strategy of TV series. As exemplified by Netflix, streaming media platforms have started to produce their own TV dramas, which are more flexible in broadcasting mode, breaking the restrictions of traditional TV channels in broadcasting time, period, and single episode length; on the other hand, through more active online participation of fans, the TV series works of streaming media platforms have organized effective fan community discussions on many social media platforms, and adjusted the narrative strategies according to the suggestions of fans; In terms of themes, in order to expand the influence and market of streaming platforms and attract more audiences worldwide, more diversified themes have been incorporated into the creation of TV series, providing more narrative options and significantly contributing to the success of streaming platforms.

Keywords: Streaming media, TV series, Netflix, Narrative strategies

1. Introduction

In the past decades, the entertainment industry has witnessed a dramatic shift in the ways TV series are consumed by the rise of streaming platforms. Netflix, as the prominent force, offers viewers the freedom to watch movies on demand, expand the reach of movies, and provide opportunities for unique television storytelling.

Traditional cinema projection limited the length of films, while traditional film production delayed the time it took for filmmakers to obtain feedback from audiences. Moreover, traditional TV series are often subject to strict subject matter and duration limitations, which makes many of them follow fixed formats and unable to bring interest to the audience.

In the era of streaming media, however, the advent of streaming platforms has introduced new possibilities. Omnipresent screens, mobile phones, computers, and even billboards on the side of the road may all be used to watch movies. As the viewing time has fractured and screen sizes have varied, streaming video producers have begun to experiment with new storytelling formats in order to fulfill

the needs of the rapidly growing streaming media audience. Netflix, in particular, with entire seasons released at once, viewers are able to consume the TV series at their own pace, engaging in immersive and uninterrupted storytelling experiences.

The development of streaming platforms has had a significant impact on the traditional TV drama industry. The characteristics of streaming media have forced traditional TV dramas to make adjustments in narrative strategies in order to adapt to the new broadcast mode, including single episode duration, broadcast mode, episode number, theme, etc. [1]. Since 2019, various adolescent sex education-related streaming dramas, such as Netflix's *Sex Education* (2019), *Never Have I Ever* (2020), ABEMA TV's *17.3 About a Sex*, and *HBO's Euphoria* (2019), have rapidly gained global popularity. The success of these plays reflects the changes in the narrative mode of film and television dramas on streaming media platforms, with more diverse themes being incorporated into the perspectives of audiences and film creators, such as sex and sex education, adolescent physical and mental health, ethnic and racial equality, women's issues, and the LGBT group's affirmative action movement. Through these TV Series, the streaming platform showcases a broad focus on topics such as gender, race, sex education, and cultural globalization [2]. By adopting different narrative strategies, focusing on different cultural identities and new ways of interacting with audiences [3], these TV series present different characteristics from traditional TV series. This article will take Netflix's *Never Have I Ever* (2020) as an example to analyze the innovation of streaming media on traditional TV series in three directions: the narrative strategy of the TV series, the cultural topics, and the interaction mode with the audience.

2.   Evolving forms of TV series in the era of streaming media

In the era of streaming media, the traditional structure of television series has undergone significant transformations, paving the way for a new era of narrative possibilities. The elimination of fixed episode lengths is one of the most significant changes brought about by streaming platforms such as Netflix. In contrast to traditional broadcast TV series, in which episodes adhere to rigid time slots, the Netflix platform allows creators to experiment with varying episode lengths, providing them with a platform to adopt more flexible storytelling methods, enhanced character development, and deeper plot exploration. In this regard, Netflix adheres to less rigorous release formats, which benefits the creative process [4]. By adopting a more flexible approach to episode lengths, Netflix enables a variety of previously restricted narrative techniques. The acclaimed coming-of-age series *Never Have I Ever* is a prominent example of the creative freedom that varying episode lengths afford. With varying episode lengths, the series can explore numerous character arcs and interpersonal interactions without feeling hurried or constrained. This allows for a more natural depiction of the characters' experiences, resulting in a stronger emotional impact on the audience.

In addition, streaming media platforms have ushered in a trend toward using serialized narratives in television programming. Rather than self-contained episodes, the typical format for a storyline in a television series unfolds gradually over multiple episodes or seasons. This technique ensures that audience members are engaged by creators and encourages them to immerse themselves for an extended period of time in the fictional universe created by creators. Novel-like narratives allow for deeper character development and more complex character relationships in addition to extended storylines [5]. The serialized nature of *Never Have I Ever* narrative further exemplifies this trend. The series weaves a compelling narrative that examines themes including cultural conflict, adolescence, sexual orientation, and identity. The serialization of the story provides the opportunity for the characters to undergo more in-depth development and growth. As a result, the audience develops a deeper emotional connection to the characters and becomes more invested in their journeys. This heightened investment and emotional connection produce a potent viewing experience that lingers long after the episodes conclude.

The ability to disseminate an entire season at once is a transformative factor that distinguishes television series produced in the streaming era from their traditional counterparts. In stark contrast to the days of traditional broadcast television, when viewers eagerly anticipated new episodes every week, streaming platforms such as Netflix "broke with all the conventions of traditional serial distribution" by publishing the entire season at once [6]. By employing this innovative model, *Never Have I Ever* capitalizes on binge-watching culture to sustain the momentum of its narrative and actively engage viewers in a continuous and immersive narrative experience. This transition in distribution provides viewers with unprecedented control over their viewing experience, as they can determine their own viewing cadence and consumption of the series. Freed from the constraints of scheduled broadcasts, audiences are able to fully immerse themselves in the captivating world of *Never Have I Ever* at their leisure, resulting in a more personally satisfying viewing experience.

3. Interactive strategies for audience engagement

Due to the implementation of interactive strategies, the era of streaming media has seen significant changes in the relationship between television series and their audiences. The consumption of media has evolved into a collaborative process by which virtual communities interpret content. Fan forums are a typical illustration of this [7]. Streaming platforms such as Instagram and Twitter have been instrumental in facilitating direct engagement between creators, actors, and admirers. In the case of *Never Have I Ever*," a thriving online community has emerged on these platforms, allowing viewers to engage in in-depth discussions about the series and communicate their emotive reactions to it. Notably, the actors and personnel of the series actively engage in these discussions, interacting with viewers, acknowledging their contributions, and responding to their queries and comments. This dynamic exchange fosters a sense of connection with the audience, as they feel truly heard and valued by the creators of the series.

Moreover, streaming platforms actively promote the creation of fan-generated content and fan-driven activities, which serve to increase audience engagement even further. According to media scholar Jenkins, "relationships between producers and consumers are deteriorating as consumers respond to invitations to participate in the franchises' lives [8]". This phenomenon is exemplified by *Never have I ever* fans, who have created fan fiction novels and fan films in reverence to the series' characters' inclusiveness and self-reliance. These fan-created works serve as a collaborative narrative technique that expands the fictional universe beyond the original content. This type of fan-generated creativity not only strengthens the connection between the audience and the series but also enriches the overall viewing experience by inviting viewers to actively contribute to and shape the narrative landscape.

The interactive strategies employed by streaming platforms and the ardent response of the audience have fundamentally transformed the traditional passive viewership model. Through online platforms and fan-driven activities, viewers have become active participants in the ongoing conversation surrounding the series. This new level of engagement not only strengthens the bond between creators, actors, and admirers but also fosters a vibrant and dynamic community centered on their shared appreciation for *Never have I ever*. As the boundaries between producers and consumers continue to merge, these interactive strategies pave the way for a more inclusive and participatory approach to storytelling, in which audiences are no longer merely passive observers but rather vital contributors to the ongoing life of the series.

4. Diverse thematic and narrative elements

Binge-Watching, as a core business strategy of Netflix, has driven the narrative of Netflix's original series to be more in line with the needs of niche markets and corresponding fan communities [9]. As

of 2016, Netflix has developed a global market except for China, Crimea, North Korea, and Syria [10], so in order to increase the impact of the TV series and attract users to watch the series more intensively, Netflix has also focused on localization and diversification of narrative elements. Race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and other diverse cultural topics have become the foundation for Netflix to build a target market. The more diverse and richer niche markets have given rise to a more targeted narrative strategy for Netflix. No longer limited by traditional TV channels, airtime, and the ambiguity of audience groups, some topics that were marginalized in the past due to ratings or audience demand considerations, such as sexual minorities, people of color, school violence, and teen sex education, have gradually become the main subjects of Netflix TV drama creation in recent years due to a more clearly defined product audience. For example, *The Glory* (2022), a drama series featuring school bullying in Korea, and *Sex Education* (2019), which focuses on teenage sexual relationships.

Never Have I Ever (2020), released by Netflix, follows the life of Devi, a first-generation young Indian American girl which deals with the cultural prejudice and potential for Asian encounters in the U.S. The interaction between Devi and the other character in the series is precisely the collision and exchange of different cultural consciousnesses, as well as a concrete presentation of different topics in the lives of American high school students and sex education. In fact, not only Netflix but also other streaming platforms around the world are paying more attention to the important niche market of teenagers, such as HBO's TV series *Euphoria* released in 2019, which gives attention to the transgender community while addressing many concerns of Gen Z youth in terms of sexual orientation and gender [11]. In addition to the fact that teens are more receptive to the Binge-Watching model of TV series consumption than past TV series viewers, their extensive participation on online social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, has greatly increased public discussion on TV series-related topics [12], and producers can receive more positive and effective feedback. This makes the teenage group more attractive to streaming platforms, and the issues they are concerned about, such as sex education and affective relationships, become the focus of the narrative strategy of TV series produced on streaming platforms. *Never Have I Ever*, on the one hand, focuses on the living situation of Indian immigrants in the U.S., which enhances the diversity of the narrative strategy on the topic of race. On the other hand, cultural conflicts, teenage education issues, and sexual relationships are given different representations through the personal growth of the female characters.

The increase of narrative themes and narrative elements, on the one hand, allows TV dramas to accommodate more diversified characters, which in turn increases the possibility of plot development; on the other hand, diversified narrative elements can attract more audience who pay attention to other elements while catering to the niche market. With the active interaction and participation of the fans, the writers can also adjust the plot development according to the market feedback and incorporate more audience concerns into the production.

5. Conclusion

In summary, taking Netflix as an example, the features of streaming platforms, such as freer broadcasting time, clearer target audiences, and more open spaces for communication, have pushed traditional TV series to adjust their narrative strategies to adapt to the needs of a constantly updating audience and an expanding global market. Streaming platforms have changed the broadcasting mode of traditional TV series, sparking the cultural phenomenon of "binge-watching," in which the broadcasting period and duration of episodes are more flexible, and the narrative rhythm of TV series is no longer restricted by the broadcasting time of traditional TV stations. Through open and diversified communication platforms, streaming media also provides audiences with diversified fan communities and online participation channels, which on the one hand, increases the stickiness of fans to the TV series and encourages them to enhance their enthusiasm for the series through

discussion and re-creation, and on the other hand, the topics of concern and suggestions of the fans can be learned by the producers more quickly, so that the producers can make timely adjustments to the narrative strategy according to the market demand. In terms of themes, the expansion of the streaming media global market and the demand for specialized niche markets have brought more and more themes into the field of view of TV drama producers. In order to realize the localization of the works in different regions, more diversified races, religions, nationalities, sexual orientations, and ages of the characters can be the core of the narratives, which greatly enriches the creation of TV drama themes.

Since Netflix is not a mainstream streaming platform in some countries and regions, the analysis of it is still insufficient for our understanding of the global market for streaming, especially in East Asia. In addition to this, there are still many emerging TV series productions that have not been included in the discussion, which means that this paper may have overlooked some new narrative strategies and changes in TV series creation.

Acknowledgement

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