

Netflix in Pakistan: Navigating Evolving Screen Modalities Among Young Adults

Amna Ejaz

Abstract

Of the many lasting changes that the COVID-19 pandemic brought across the world, whether destructive or innovative in nature, one major change was that it compelled people to restrict themselves to their homes. During the lockdown period, the cinema experience of young adults in metropolitan centers of Pakistan underwent a stark shift, with their screen time sky-rocketing. It was also a time when young adults began consuming a lot more video content from their subscriptions to Netflix. This article explores the changing screen culture in Pakistan after the coming of Netflix, an American streaming platform, to Pakistan in 2016 and how its arrival affected the content choices that young adults make. I majorly focus on an audience-based study, relying on interviews and surveys, to understand what is common to these Netflix subscribers. What are people watching, and why? What determines these choices? How does the Netflix platform enable binge-watching? With this data as its foundation, this article delves into a detailed discussion on Netflix algorithms, its features such as subtitles, and the user experience to understand how it blurs the “global” and “local” divide in an “online viewing universe” (Evans et al. 409). The recurring reference to the convenience that Netflix brought about for these users is also then analyzed to understand patterns of binge-watching and the illusion of control that the platform invokes in its users. Specifically, for the Pakistani experience, this article discusses issues of piracy, the traction of online streaming websites and what this means for the users as well as for the content creators.

Keywords; Young Adults, Netflix In Pakistan, Netflix, Screen Culture, Online Streaming, Transnational, Globalization, Screen Choices

Introduction

Netflix has become widely popular in Pakistan. Its popularity is evident not just in the widespread use of the Netflix application but also its advertisements which can be seen across social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. The sound that is heard when the Netflix logo appears, followed by a sponsored trailer of content that Netflix knows would interest the viewer, is very familiar for the Pakistani audience nowadays. This American streaming platform made its entry fairly recently into Pakistan. While Netflix came to Pakistan in

2016, it was not until 2018 that “Netflix partnered with PTCL [Pakistan Telecommunication Company Ltd], bringing the global internet television network to Pakistan for the very first time” (Mahmood and Masud 23). On the day of its release, company shares rose by a record breaking “8.5% to \$116.85, their highest one-day gain in more than four months” (“Television giant Netflix comes to Pakistan”).

Fast forward to the end of 2020, Netflix has become a very common phenomenon amongst urban youth and adults alike, who are now increasingly turning to this platform to fulfill their demands of cinema and screen content. Turner writes of similar occurrences in Australia as well where there was a mass migration of domestic audiences from live broadcasting to online streaming services. Spearheading this change, Netflix completely changed the Australian conception of television within 2 years of its release (224). In this vein, this article builds upon the prior research on Netflix, using it to see similar patterns in Pakistan, particularly how content viewership and screen choices have changed for the Pakistani audience with the arrival of Netflix, probing deeper into the reason for these changes. I first start off with discussing who the respondents of this study were and how they represent the demographic with infrastructural access to Netflix, media consumption prior to Netflix, trans-national content viewership and increased globalization due to this platform, and lastly, the patterns of binge-watching in line with Netflix algorithms.

Methodology

In the course of this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with young adults between the ages of 18 and 23. During the covid-19 pandemic, Netflix was a hugely popular entertainment source for young adults in Pakistan. The respondents were students from the following universities in Pakistan: Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Shaheed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Institute of Science and Technology (SZABIST), Habib University, NED University of Engineering and Technology, National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST), and Bahria University. All of these universities are located in major metropolitan areas of Pakistan including Islamabad, Karachi, Rawalpindi, and Lahore. Almost all the respondents belonged to affluent families with an urban lifestyle who self-categorized themselves as “middle-class”.

Because of the pandemic, my research was conducted remotely, and this online modality lent itself well to the study. This, in fact, exponentially increased my virtual connections, which might not have been possible in a pre-COVID-19 world. The sample population was approached through snowballing and in total I conducted 30 in-depth interviews via call where each interview lasted between half an hour to an hour. Before each call, I sent out a brief message to each recipient, introducing myself and the topic of the research. To ensure ethical practice, each interview commenced with a short introduction where I covered the objective of the research, how the data from this interview will be used, where it will be used, how it will be stored, and reiterated the respondents to opt out from the research at any point in time. All this laid the foundation for a rather engaging interview where the respondents and I talked in-depth about their experience with Netflix in Pakistan.

Discussions during these interviews revolved around the users' experience of the platform, such as how they first joined the platform, the modalities of their subscriptions particularly regarding sharing screens with others and whether they were skeptical that someone might see their watch history. Many of them tended to discuss in detail their experience of consuming media before the launch of Netflix, and the way that Netflix has changed not only how they watch, but also what they watch. This entailed a description of their viewing choices on Netflix, and what influences these said choices. Almost all of them mentioned spending the majority of their time in the lockdown, and otherwise, binging on TV series on Netflix. This became a gateway into understanding this phenomenon better because we could delve into the role of the platform in aiding such screen viewing practices. This essay will build on this primary data while also including secondary work done by authors around the world on varying aspects of Netflix within their own particular contexts and about the platform in general. My work will expand these debates to the uniqueness of the Pakistani context, and locate Pakistan in the spectrum of global viewership patterns around Netflix.

This essay will engage with broader, global debates on the Netflix phenomenon and work to connect these practices and trends with the Pakistani context. For instance, Jenner writes a detailed study into the way the platform is organized around viewership patterns, user data, what "prized content" is, and the ways such content is consumed through strategic programming (141). Her work on binge-viewing, and its connection to users navigating their choices and opening gateways to increased trans-national viewership helps connect the data and viewing patterns that I came across in my study. I engage with her work to understand the infrastructural access required to be a Netflix user in Pakistan, the ways in which international screen content engages with the Pakistani audience, and the effect Netflix algorithms have on viewing practices.

On the topic of Netflix algorithms, Hallinan and Triphas write about the "The Netflix Prize"; a competition amongst programmers to come up with the most effective algorithms. This inadvertently led to "incentivized research about movies and television shows but also about people, suggesting new models of cultural identity latent in the dataset and, presumably, the social" (124) which connects to my study by explaining the factors which influence the choices that people make while selecting the title to watch on Netflix. Furthermore, Turner contextualizes the disruption brought about by the Netflix culture in the landscape of Australian media consumption in the way Netflix completely altered the way audiences consumed television. There is a very similar pattern to what the Pakistani middle-class and upper-class are experiencing as well. The paper will also discuss the "Netflix Effect", a term coined by Matrix to explain the social media practices of the youth, binge-watching, and their interactions with media. Following this research, my study also works to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic complicates these media consumption practices.

Finally, my analysis is grounded in Susan Buck-Morss's theory of dreamscapes; phantasmagorical spaces that are basically consumer playgrounds (5). She builds on Walter Benjamin's work and describes the huge Paris arcades of the 19th century as "the original temple of commodity capitalism" where there are aisles after aisles of commodity displays serve as small icons, ready to be consumed. She discusses these physical landscapes "of techno-aesthetic, a dazzling, crowd-pleasing dreamworld that provided total environments to envelop the crowd" (8). The paper analyzes Netflix as a similar dreamscape of the twenty first century, allowing the users to indulge in similar forms of consumerist utopia. The dream world of Netflix is not unique

from those Paris arcades and discussion further delves into how the glamor and convenience of the platform is a façade and an illusion of control for capitalistic means.

The Netflix User

Due to expense as well as infrastructural limitations, not all Pakistanis have equal access to Netflix. In this study, the respondents all belonged to universities located in major urban centers of Pakistan. Respondents were of similar socio-economic backgrounds, mostly self-identifying as middle class. They all had regular access to internet service and good broadband speed, and all had either a personal mobile or laptop device as well as the personal space to watch Netflix content. To be able to subscribe to the streaming service, one needs to make an account by deciding on a username and password. Within this account, Netflix presents multiple options and packages wherein the user can buy up to four screens under every user's own personalized name, all with their separate personalized recommendations options and watch histories. While one needs a password to sign into the account, there is no separate password required to log in to someone's screen. One of the common findings in the interviews was that many of these respondents had subscriptions with four screens and shared these with their friends or family members with each person having their own personal virtual space. This also meant that they needed at least one person who was above eighteen years and had a debit card to be the account holder and pay for the subscription. They may decide to split the cost amongst themselves, or in the case of family, the cardholder alone bears the cost.

Moreover, access to Netflix is further limited by infrastructural facilities. In some cases, this is a set of "restrictions placed on the provision of content by territorial licensing" or "state-based-geoblocking", which are key determinants of who gets to access the content within Netflix (Evans 409). In other cases, it may simply be limited by internet speed and availability. In Pakistan however, having high speed internet may no longer be a requirement to use Netflix. As per PTCL official press release, in 2018 when PTCL paired with Netflix, Netflix became cached in Pakistan. This meant that Netflix was now optimized for slow internet connections with minimal buffering issues, even when connectivity is slower and/or interrupted on all other mobile devices in the house. This optimized performance has been a great advantage for Netflix in Pakistan. This allows viewers with slower internet connections and low bandwidth to watch content available in premium visual quality and range.

The infrastructural availability is not the only factor determining access to the media content. It is also determined by a smaller key demographic within the larger sphere of Netflix subscribers who, as Seiter and Wilson describe, gets to decide what the "quality" is (140). Jenner also describes the same demographic and labels them as those determining what "prized" content is and how this judgment of content quality is defined from a certain aesthetical moral sense. It is this audience who becomes the gatekeeper of what Bourdieu termed as "cultural capital" (142). This audience largely comprises the urban middle and upper classes who have a certain degree of disposable income to spend on technology and leisure.

Another key advantage that Netflix users have is the freedom and ability to personalize their screen as they deem fit. They have a certain level of intimacy with the screen, with the screen

coming into their private space: on their laps or in their hands. This engagement is also enacted in the way that they can now control when to start or stop playback, or even change the speed of playback; a degree of control not available on traditional television or cinema technology. One of the respondents from LUMS commented on how they have a separate screen just to watch reality television and they would not watch this on their main screen since they did not want reality TV related suggestions and recommendations. This shows their ability to demarcate separate spaces for themselves.

Matrix argues that the option to privatize screens grants a great deal of creative customization for the user (121-123). She further highlights how the availability of choice and the exchange of recommendations allows for a conversation to emerge (121). Viewers exchange their recommendations and must-see lists, which is something they might have lost out on if they were consuming scheduled broadcasting television. It is this conversation that then gets to decide what is trending and what is part of one's cultural capital. The modality of choice in Netflix enables these conversations to a greater degree. When asked about how they decide what to watch on Netflix, many mentioned following up on friend's suggestions, or watching closely on what is part of conversations on social media websites like Facebook and Instagram. One mentioned how they usually see memes circulating, often on Facebook, and to be able to understand or relate to those memes they decide to watch that particular title. There are even specific Facebook pages based in Pakistan and worldwide, titled 'Netflix recommendations' where like-minded people keep posting what they liked, what was overrated according to them and what others must see. Youth belonging to the middle and upper classes become part of this key demographic that then dictates what the prized content is, and so this content is then perused by others based on suggestions or is actively pushed by Netflix to other users who have had similar watch histories.

Media Consumption Before Netflix

Before the advent of Netflix most of the interviewees relied on television, popular online pirated streaming websites like 123movies, fmovies etc., video-on-demand options from their local cable provider, original and pirated DVDs, or torrents. With their migration to Netflix, almost all of them described one key word that has come forth with using this platform: convenience.

This convenience that they describe is in contrast to their experiences of media consumption before Netflix. Users describe how they would have to constantly close pop-up ads when they were using online pirated streaming websites, or how they had to spend time finding a compatible and healthy torrent to download and then wait overnight for the file to download. This was usually done at the risk of computer viruses or hard drive corruptions due to such problematic file downloads. Problems of unnecessary buffering and browsing endlessly searching for a good quality high-definition version from multiple unauthorized websites is also something that Netflix has mitigated. Netflix has brought about an endless array of items to be shopped, all available in HD and high-quality sound, with seamless surfing and easy browsing.

When Netflix penetrated the Australian audience, similar patterns of migration were noticed. This was a "relatively sudden migration within domestic spaces of a significant proportion of the Australian television audience from broadcasting to streaming services" (Turner 223). This

migration in Pakistan was felt even more drastically because of the preexisting traction of online streaming. Many of these respondents were already using other pirated streaming websites before Netflix. Most of them also did describe their childhood days spent in front of the television watching scheduled cartoons shows, or as they got older, popular TV series and movies, both local and foreign, on various channels. Some of them mentioned how the television, which in most cases is kept communally in the lounge, was only a device that the elders in the house used to consume broadcasted media, or exclusively controlled what everyone watched. The respondents' media consumption has shifted from the sofa in the lounge to the comfort of their rooms and their laptop. Even if they had to see local television dramas, one respondent mentioned choosing YouTube over the TV if that particular drama had not been released on Netflix, solely because of the greater flexibility and control over playback that streaming websites promise.

Buck-Morss describes a very particular feeling that people would experience in the huge Paris arcades cum shopping malls: a feeling of euphoria (5). With the accessibility that Netflix offers, there is a certain convenience that one feels while consuming media content. While this convenience is comparable to the euphoria of a shopper, it is also a means of monetization for creators and owners of the platform. Buck-Morss describes these arcades as places of magic, places that brought joy to the flock of people visiting them. Many users that I interviewed spoke of the time in which they watched Netflix as their relaxation period, the time that they looked forward to the entire day, as they could lay back and feel content in slowing everything down, only watching the moving characters on a show on Netflix. The magic of the dream world of Netflix is that it brings joy, and this study of joy and convenience ties into the Pakistani audience's experience of Netflix during turbulent times of the pandemic. The phantasmagoria prevailed in such a manner that some also called Netflix a means of trouble-free escape from the traumatic news surrounding them.

Blurring National and International Boundaries

Netflix gained unprecedented significance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the news of fear, disease, and death, there was *La Casa de Papel/Money Heist* (dir. Álex Pina, 2017), which took the internet by a storm. The fourth season became the most popular show in the world within a week of its April 4th, 2020, release date (Katz). The success of this series hinged on the popularity of the platform that aired it. Katz writes, "Netflix has capitalized on this strong demand and leveraged its international platform to catapult the series into a truly global hit". *Money Heist* did not leave Pakistan untouched in its global footprint. Though it is not new for a non-English show to receive such traction in Pakistan, the massive fan-following that this Spanish show received was quite unusual.

The respondents of this study commented that with the increase in accessibility to screen content, the range of choices available has also widened due to Netflix. Many reported viewing more international content than they would have if they had to actively search for the title on PirateBay (a popular torrenting portal) or 123movies (a pirated streaming site). Spanish films and television dramas, such as *Baby* (dirs. Andrea De Sica and Anna Negri, 2018), or *Money Heist*, Turkish serials specifically *Diriliş: Ertugrul/Resurrection: Ertugrul* (dir. Metin Güna, 2014), as well as a

recent wave of Korean and Japanese dramas, have all gained a share of the digital audience in Pakistan. The question of accessibility also led to the popularity of Netflix since it provided access to otherwise restricted content. Given the ban on Indian films in cinemas and Indian TV channels on the national cable, Netflix became a prime spot and the only legal way for the Pakistani audience to consume content made and produced in India. However, very few respondents reported that they viewed Indian content. The ones that did so mentioned having watched recent Indian series, predominantly in English, namely *Indian Matchmaking* (dir. Smriti Mundhra, 2020) and *A Suitable Boy* (dir. Mira Nair, 2020). Both of these featured in Pakistan's top 10 during this year. One of the respondents even gave a small derogatory laugh when asked about whether they watch Indian content, suggesting that this is not something that fits into the cultural capital of the key demographic that determines what prized content is.

While American and British television shows and movies were already highly popular before Netflix, respondents reported increased consumption of this content as well. Pakistani films and dramas on Netflix, particularly dramas by HumTV or documentaries were not so popular amongst them. A few, however, did report having seen Pakistani TV serials like *Humsafar* (dir. Sarmad Khoosat, 2011) and *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (dir. Sultana Siddiqui, 2012) with family on television when they were aired live. The increased proliferation of international content in urban Pakistani homes allows us to see “how tensions between ‘global’ and ‘local’ manifest within an increasingly digitized media landscape” (Evans 409). Expansion of the film and media industry into the online domain has hence allowed for a more “boundary-less media mediascape” (Evans 409) that resists the limitations of geographical space and of time to make content available worldwide. This however also means that US-based corporations like Netflix must compete against local broadcasting channels, and locally produced media content must compete with global productions.

This kind of viewership and consumption is enabled by some of Netflix's inherent features such as the presence of subtitles. In previous viewing modalities, subtitles were not commonly available for films or TV serials in foreign languages. They had to be downloaded separately as an .srt file from torrent portals and then had to be opened on a VLC Media Player. At times, many of these subtitles were incomplete or did not sync with the characters' dialogues on screen. Cinema screenings also hardly ever included subtitles for content in English. Netflix, on the other hand, made subtitles an in-built option for each and every title available on the platform. For young users in Pakistan this gave them the option to consume a lot of international content. Spanish shows like *Money Heist* were quick to reach the Top 10 of Pakistan, as well as *Diriliş: Ertugrul* which, despite some issues with the subtitling, ranked number 1 in Pakistan consistently for many weeks. While *Diriliş: Ertugrul* was also available on YouTube and was dubbed in Urdu and aired on television, a large fan-base also used Netflix to watch the series in its original Turkish language.

To some viewers, the unfamiliar language was an incentive to watch global media, rather than an obstruction. One of the respondents mentioned a preference for watching content in its own original language since it gave them the option to learn a few words of an unfamiliar language and then perhaps use them in daily life. They mentioned how they now frequently use Japanese words they learnt from anime amongst their friends who watch the same content. The new fan-base for Korean dramas and Japanese animations is increasingly growing. These are widely

available on Netflix, showing up in recommendations for people whose algorithmic preferences are similar. These are based on similar watch histories or browsing patterns that the user has.

The availability of subtitles has not only increased the viewership of non-English international content but also that of American and British TV. Despite English's status as an official language of Pakistan, which is rooted in its colonial history, many Pakistanis are not fluent in English and may especially have difficulty understanding diverse and non-standard English accents. Many respondents described watching a great deal of British historical dramas on Netflix that they otherwise would not have seen because of the "thick" accent used by the actors. Not only that, sometimes the dialogue delivery is quite fast for non-native English speakers to be able to comprehend it right away. One of the respondents remarked that the dialogues that Benedict Cumberbatch delivers in *Sherlock* (dir. Paul McGuigan, 2010) are relatively high-paced and they are laden with information that ties into the crime and mystery, which was very hard to decipher without subtitles.

Western popular culture is therefore much more accessible to Pakistani audiences through high quality subtitles on platforms such as Netflix. Masud and Mahmood examine the diffusion of American pop culture in Pakistan and how this soft power is a means of disseminating American ideals and culture into a global audience. "Social media platforms and online subscriptions such as Netflix have made it possible for Pakistanis to stay up to date with what's happening around the world and have access to the most popular movies" (Mahmood and Masud 28). In this regard, Netflix becomes an agent of its own, disseminating American content and with it, American culture, all around the world. At the same time, it also widens the palette for American viewers that can now easily enjoy and absorb content made all around the world. The term "cultural hybridisation" which Masud uses, is used to describe the mixing of different cultural elements (Crothers 25), something that happens when international content is made available to Pakistani audiences. This is not to say however, that local viewership cultures of Pakistan are rendered obsolete, rather that they are altered in order to make space for the new inclusion of American pop culture.

Binge-Thirst, Consumption, and the Black-Hole

Respondents also described the way Netflix allows them to multitask while watching. One of the respondents described how she would first find a title to watch and then eat the food. The priority is finding a nice, or what she describes, a mindless show with loads of drama and romance that would provide background noise to her while eating. Another person described how the new feature of descriptive audio, allows for a person to not even look at the screen in order to consume screen content. They merely have to plug in their earphones and even though they might be traveling, or multi-tasking in a way that prohibits viewing the physical screen, they can continue to consume Netflix content. It is subtle yet powerful ways like this that the true power of Netflix algorithms can be felt.

While torrenting and other pirated online streaming websites required one to know the name of a show in order to search for it, Netflix's powerful algorithms suggest titles for the viewers based on what they enjoyed in the past. Many respondents posited that they usually do not rely on

popular media for recommendations. Rather, they allow Netflix's algorithms to select shows that they might not have even heard of before. The artificial intelligence (AI) behind Netflix aggregates these consumer choices and amplifies them by relying on algorithms that present a precise and calculated "suggested" or "more like this" section which is designed to keep the viewer in front of the screen. This also works to promote Netflix's in-house content. When one opens the Netflix homepage, amongst the neatly organized rows of titles suggested based on similar serials that you have watched, or asking you to continue from where you left off, there is a row of Netflix Originals on the top of the screen. This row has icons and movie/ TV series posters that are greatly bigger than the rest of the icons. Such advertisements do not just take place on Netflix but also on popular social media websites like Facebook and Instagram, where Netflix advertisements pop up after every few videos or posts that you scroll. One of the respondents mentioned how they learned about some shows after they saw a 10 second trailer of it in the start of a YouTube video. This is the content that Netflix algorithms push to viewers, and at many times it becomes unavoidable because there is no other way to bypass these ads except by paying premium charges .

Through the continued use of Netflix by its audience, the platform learns what people value and favours the growth of television in specific directions. Jenner has described the re-invention of television through online streaming, arguing that "as Netflix gains more subscribers and more algorithmic data becomes available, it is hardly surprising that the kind of content Netflix invests in changes" (139). While Netflix does track the viewing patterns, it also carefully monitors the browsing patterns of the users and their likes and dislikes to present a title with a "95% match," a title the user wants to click to see and if not to see then to at least read the description and add to My List. Matrix describes this as "The Netflix Effect," an enveloping algorithm that thrives on your desire to binge, "not just about convenience and customization . . . but also about connection and community" (121). To relate to the community and to the current fads of what's popular, content is pushed by Netflix into the viewers' social circles where Netflix is increasingly becoming more common. It is this need that the user feels in relating to pop-culture that compels them to consume more. Many of these respondents felt a pressuring need to be up-to-date with the most recent shows, to be able to connect with their friends who are discussing scenes or characters. It becomes this way of connection with the community, which one craves to be a part of and is so compelled by these social forces to consume the popular content.

Another factor that aids the binge-watching viewership patterns is the way that Netflix acts as a phantasmagorical space of consumption where one experiences a certain sensory overload and what Buck-Morss describes as a shock (8). Just the design of the platform with a suggested title spanning the landscape view and automatically playing its teaser, the multitude of titles all organized spatially in vibrant small boxes of color, create what Buck-Morss would describe as a feature of the almost dream-like space of Netflix. Features like these compel one to give in to consumerist instincts and be taken away into watching episode after episode. One of the respondents mentioned how Netflix was her daily aid in helping her fall to sleep. She would get into bed a few hours earlier, tune in to a series she was watching and just lays back because the episodes keep rolling without her having to interact with her keyboard at all, until she finally falls asleep and shuts the laptop down.

Change in Screen Content

One of the instrumental ways in which Netflix changed the way screen content is designed, consumed and circulated is the huge shift from “appointment viewing” of watching an episode on TV once every week to “binge viewing”. This “grew out of Netflix’s analysis of viewing data, which showed its streaming customers tended to watch several TV episodes back to back instead of one at a time” (Hallinan and Triphas 130). The way Netflix does not release single episodes at scheduled times, instead releases the entire season at once alters the way the audience engages with the content. From having to wait a week on a particular cliffhanger when one would watch content on television or, how one would have to close the screen of the VLC player when torrenting to open the next title from the downloads folder, or clicking “next episode” on unauthorized online-streaming platforms, triggering an array of multiple advertisement tabs to open up, Netflix has changed the way a viewer goes on to the next title. To describe the 5 second Netflix countdown after every episode before the next one plays automatically as “ease” for the audience, is an understatement of its multi variant functions. The aforementioned engagement and personalization one feels with this platform can be juxtaposed with the lack of engagement of not having to click or press anything and just lay back because Netflix would just play the next title five seconds later. The engagement required now is not to watch more content, but an intervention will be required to actively stop the next title from playing. And even if one decides to leave the show in the middle, the Netflix app remembers what you watched, saves your place, and displays that title at the top of the screen next time you log in to remind you to continue from there. This is so because the model of persuasion that is implied in the engineering of the artificial intelligence behind such a platform, is designed to keep the eyeballs glued to the screen. This is because Netflix revenues depend on this continuous viewership and engagement of the audience’s attention. The “euphoria” that respondents described in now being able to use Netflix while eating, working, or even going to the washroom, all speaks to the way the platform keeps them glued to the screen through effective use of its algorithms.

The shift to binge-viewing also dictates the way screenwriters are making and designing content. Since episodes were primarily aired on television with frequent commercial gaps, episodes were designed around commercial breaks strategically arranged after suspenseful moments in order to ensure audiences would wait for the episode to continue. Moreover, every episode had to have a cliff-hanger at the end in order to pique the curiosity of the audience to make them tune in to the next episode. Finally, another feature of such shows would be lengthy recaps to remind the audience of the episode of last week. Netflix actively promotes binge-watching when it displays an option to skip this recap which becomes unnecessary for the viewer. Shows designed for the Netflix audiences like Netflix Originals eradicates all 3 of these features because the viewers no longer need a recap of what they watched merely 5 seconds ago. An example of this is the recent reality TV show, *Next In Fashion* (pro. Robin Ashbrook, 2020), wherein the two show hosts Tan France and Alexa Chung refer to the Netflix features that enable binge-watching like the 5 second timer. At the end of each episode, both these hosts sit on the sofa and talk about clickbait features for the next episode, and then point to the viewer’s right side of the screen just in time for the timer to appear and urge them to click next. Moreover, there is also no need for frequent cliff-hangers in the middle of the episodes as well (Rose). What matters however, is the cliffhanger at the end of the season because here the audience must be left in anticipation of what might happen next.

The Future of Netflix

While Netflix has gained significant traction in Pakistan, the future foresees many other competing partners as well as threats of digital regulation by the local government. Netflix faces competitive threat after the advent of Hulu, ESPN Plus and Disney Plus with predictions that in the next four years Disney Plus might have more streaming customers (Low). In Pakistan, however, there has been a slow and minimal migration of audiences to Amazon Prime which these respondents mentioned as the prime contender, while local streaming services like Iflix by PTCL or other small-scale services by private cable providers have not gained the same following that Netflix has. There has been news however, that Pakistan is to launch its own version of a streaming service similar to Netflix (“Pakistan to launch own version of Netflix”). If this pans out, and even if it does not, Netflix in Pakistan runs the risk of government regulation and censorship fears, something it had bypassed till now. This is quite similar to the situation in the neighboring country of India (Ellis-Petersen) where controversies have arisen there around the scene in *A Suitable Boy* where a kiss is shown between a Muslim and a Hindu inside a holy temple, which sparked the Hindu nationalist to call for a boycott of Netflix (Toh and Mitra). India has also witnessed similar claims from the Indian air force to withdraw certain scenes of Anil Kapoor depicting foul behavior while wearing the force’s uniform as it “does not conform to the behavioral norms of those in the Armed Forces of India” (qtd. in Som and Bhasin). One of the questions towards the end of the interview was about this possibility, asking the respondents what they would do if Netflix was regulated by the state for Pakistani viewers. While all of them remarked on how this is disappointing and should not happen, only one talked about how this was necessary since sexual content like *Dark Desire* (dir. Pedro Pablo Ibarra, 2020) and *Cuties* (dir. Maïmouna Doucouré, 2020) is against the Islamic norms followed in Pakistan. However, none of the respondents mentioned withdrawing from Netflix even if such regulation was to occur. This claim itself is a strong marker of Netflix’s immersion into the Pakistani landscape and portrays how the audience negotiates and hangs on to the platform’s convenience despite its illusion of control and binge tactics.

This research places itself in a web of scholarship that focuses on the content of the viewing experience and takes that further by including the importance of the platform that audiences are interacting with. The audience’s engagement with the platform heavily influences the way the content is experienced, and this paper maps out the experience of a global streaming platform in Pakistan. Not only has Netflix been a companion in times of physical isolation amidst the global health crises, but it has actively changed the choices that young adults in Pakistan make when selecting what to watch. With the easy accessibility of subtitles, there is a greater immersion of international cinema into the daily lives of the audience. Their range of choices has grown from just watching English language shows to including more Korean, Japanese, Turkish, Spanish and others from global cinema. This also allows for a more immersive experience with English language shows now that audiences can read each dialogue and decipher any accent that they might not have understood previously, making it possible for more pop-culture references to reach the audience and seep into their cultural capital. The way the platform arranges itself is distinct from broadcast television. It gives the audience the illusion of being more in control by holding the power to stop or play whenever needed, or restart where they left off. It also gives them the convenience of not having to search for options since Netflix provides them a selection they would be interested in. However, these algorithms enable an endless cycle of binge-watching where the audience loses control over their urge to keep going on to more episodes and

so it glues the audience's eyes to the screen content for longer hours and maximized monetization. Regardless, audiences in Pakistan risk the fear of government regulation and censorship which could limit their choices on the platform. However, they still intend to keep their memberships despite the wave of newer streaming services like Amazon Prime or the local Iflix.

References

- Buck-Morss, Susan. "The City as Dreamworld and Catastrophe." *October*, vol. 73, 1995, pp. 3–26.
- Crothers, Lane. *Globalization and American Popular Culture*. Rowman & Little Field Publisher, 2010
- Ellis-Petersen, Hannah. "Indian Move to Regulate Digital Media Raises Censorship Fears." *The Guardian*, 12 Nov. 2020, www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/11/india-to-regulate-netflix-and-amazon-streaming-content. Accessed 10 January 2021.
- Ellison, Nick & Hardey, Michael. "Social Media and Local Government: Citizenship, Consumption and Democracy." *Local Government Studies*, vol. 40, no.1, 2014, pp. 21-40
- Evans, Elizabeth, Paul McDonald, Juyeon Bae, Sriparna Ray, and Emanuelle Santos. "Universal Ideals in Local Realities." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2016, pp. 408-425.
- Hallinan, Blake, and Ted Striphas, "Recommended for You: The Netflix Prize and the Production of Algorithmic Culture." *New Media & Society*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2014, pp. 117-137.
- Jenner, Mareike. *Netflix and the Re-invention of Television*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019
- Katz, Brandon. "Why Netflix's 'Money Heist' Is the Most In-Demand Show in the World." *Observer*, 8 Apr. 2020, observer.com/2020/04/netflix-money-heist-la-casa-de-papel-most-watched/. Accessed 10 January 2021.
- Low, Elaine. "Could Upstart Disney Plus Eclipse Netflix in the Streaming Wars?" *Variety*, 16 Dec. 2020, variety.com/2020/streaming/news/netflix-disney-plus-1234854705. Accessed 10 January 2021.
- Mahmood, Sadia, & Marvi Masud, "Understanding the Diffusion and Consumption of American Popular Culture in Pakistan." *Journal of Media Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2019, pp. 19-40
- Matrix, Sidneyeve, "The Netflix Effect: Teens, Binge Watching, and On-Demand Digital Media Trends." *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* vol. 6, no. 1, 2020, pp. 119-138

- Som, Vishnu, and Swati Bhasin. "Anil Kapoor Apologises after Air Force Objects to Netflix Trailer." *NDTV.com*, NDTV, 10 Dec. 2020, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/air-force-objects-to-uniform-language-in-netflixs-anil-kapoor-starrer-ak-vs-ak-2336293>. Accessed 10 January 2021.
- Toh, Michelle and Esha Mitra. "A Suitable Boy: Netflix India Faces Boycott Calls over Kissing Scene." *CNN*, 25 Nov. 2020, edition.cnn.com/2020/11/23/media/a-suitable-boy-netflix-india-intl-hnk/index.html. Accessed 10 January 2021.
- Turner, Graeme. "Netflix and the Reconfiguration of the Australian Television Market." *Media Industries Journal*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.3998/mij.15031809.0005.208>.
- "Pakistan to Launch Own Version of 'Netflix', Says Fawad Chaudhry." *The News International*, 23 Oct. 2020, www.thenews.com.pk/latest/733656-pakistan-to-launch-own-version-of-netflix-says-fawad-chaudhry. Accessed 10 January 2021.
- Rose, Lacey. "Netflix's Ted Sarandos Reveals His 'Phase 2' for Hollywood." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 22 May 2013, www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/netflixs-ted-sarandos-reveals-his-526323. Accessed 10 January 2021.
- "Television Giant Netflix Comes to Pakistan." *The Express Tribune*, 7 Jan. 2016, tribune.com.pk/story/1023298/netflix-in-pakistan. Accessed 10 January 2021
- Webster, James. "User Information Regimes: How Social Media Shape Patterns of Consumption." *Northwestern University Law Review*, vol. 104, no. 2, 2010, pp. 593-612
- Wilson, Mary Jeanne and Ellen Seiter. "Soap Opera Survival Tactic." *Thinking Outside the Box: A Contemporary Television Genre Reader*, edited by Gary R. Edgerton. University Press of Kentucky, 2008, pp. 135-155.

Filmography

- A Suitable Boy* (dir. Mira Nair, 2020)
- Baby* (dirs. Andrea De Sica & Anna Negri, 2018)
- Cuties* (dir. Maïmouna Doucouré, 2020)
- Dark Desire* (dir. Pedro Pablo Ibarra, 2020)
- Diriliş: Ertugrul/Resurrection: Ertugrul* (dir. Metin Günay, 2014)
- Humsafar/Fellow Traveller* (dir. Sarmad Khoosat, 2011)
- Indian Matchmaking* (dir. Smriti Mundhra, 2020)

La casa de papel/Money Heist (dir. Álex Pina, 2017)

Sherlock (dir. Paul McGuigan, 2010)

Zindagi Gulzar Hai/Life Is A Rose Garden (dir. Sultana Siddiqui, 2012)