

A Pre- and Post-2020 Analysis of Diversity in TV

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Abstract

This study will analyze diversity and representation in scripted series from 2017-2022 both on-screen and off-screen to determine shifts over the course of that time period, specifically pre- and post-2020. We anticipated that the cultural shifts throughout this period were likely reflected in the media, specifically in terms of representation in scripted series. We made this assumption based on popular socio political movements that occurred during that time frame, specifically MeToo and Black Lives Matter. Given recent trends of critiquing diverse representation in the media, we analyzed 18 pilots from Amazon Prime, Hulu and Netflix to evaluate the impact of audience engagement and critical acclaim based on diversity percentages of named characters and decision making roles (ie., producers, writers, directors). On average, we found that shows with more on-screen diversity received higher ratings and reviews, reached broader audiences (especially globally), and typically achieved longer run times. Further, our research suggests that representation behind the scenes leads to more authentic narratives and representation on screen. Our research suggested a strong positive relationship between representation and audience reception through such measures as ratings, run times, reach, and more.

Introduction

The world of media production is constantly changing and for television specifically, the content of scripted series has evolved, specifically from 2017-2022 . This time period is significant due to the different social and political events that occurred, largely in and around the year 2020. Social movements like MeToo and Black Lives Matter became prominent, and the shutdown due to COVID-19 caused a major industrial shift from

network television to original content on streaming services. In those five years, streaming platforms such as Netflix, Hulu and Amazon prime have taken over. Netflix alone spent over \$17 billion on original content in 2020 (Asmar et al., 2022). Both the audience and entertainment industry have shifted to focus on more diverse stories and perspectives both on and off camera. Platforms like Netflix have made efforts to promote inclusivity (Inclusion in Netflix original U.S. scripted series & films. (n.d.)), however there is still consideration for how accurate these representations are and it has branded itself as a champion of diversity (Asmar, Raats, & Van Audenhove, 2022). The consideration of shows being greenlit raises questions about the different types of content being distributed to both audiences and networks.

This study explores how the content of scripted series has evolved from 2017-2022, what narratives have been successful, and whether or not they reflect diverse perspectives. Through analyzing the most successful series from those five years, diversity and show success will be analyzed to show longevity and cultural/societal impact. Understanding these trends and patterns not only offers insight into scripted series today but the broader spectrum of how diversity relates to audience engagement, critical acclaim and show longevity.

Existing research studies the extent that it takes to greenlight a script and the success of television series, but leaves gaps in the factors that contribute to its longevity, audience engagement, critical acclaim and global appeal. This study aims to fill that gap by researching the factors that lead to continuous audience engagement and the success of diverse perspectives both in front of and behind the camera. This research will contribute to conversations on diversity and representation in today's industry.

The transformation of scripted television from 2017 to 2022 is evident through a variety of series that have redefined storytelling by incorporating innovative and unique narratives that engage a wide range of viewers. A prime example is Issa Rae's *Insecure*, which truly played a creative role in broadening the scope of representation of Black stories on screen, particularly in how Black women are portrayed (Hunt, Ramón & Tran, 2020). Series like this have brought to light the stories of underrepresented and stereotyped communities, presenting a different kind of narrative that have often been overlooked by traditional television shows and networks.

Streaming services like Netflix are at the forefront of showcasing diverse period dramas, with *Bridgerton* being a popular example that displays diversity during a time period when it was historically uncommon (*Inclusion in the Netflix Original U.S. Scripted Series & Films, (n.d.)*). The success of these shows create important conversations about what makes a series appealing over time and its role in today's culture. It is clear that shows with multiple seasons, highlighting a variety of perspectives both on-screen and behind the scenes, are making a deep and lasting mark on pop culture and sustaining audience interest (Kohnen, 2015).

Diverse storytelling is becoming increasingly important, influencing both the entertainment industry and society's values. As we see more inclusive and varied content, it is intriguing to consider whether the future of television depends on its ability to tell the stories of a wide range of human experiences and identities. Research on shows that showcase diversity and their longevity will be thoroughly examined throughout this paper.

Literature Review

Overview

In recent years, media and diversity conversations have expanded and there has been an articulation in the need for frameworks that can analyze and measure diversity in media content. This literature review examines various approaches to media diversity analysis, critiquing existing methodologies and proposing new frameworks that can focus on qualitative and quantitative measures.

Diversity and Representation in Media

Hunt et al. (2020) examine the ways in which Hollywood has made strides in increased representation of people of color on screen, while there is still a large gap in representation behind the scenes. This study explores the “two Hollywoods” phenomenon, which indicates increasing opportunities for actors of color, but little representation in key decision-making roles, limiting narrative authenticity; “While actors of color made up 27.6% of film leads, their representation in directing and writing roles remains significantly lower, reflecting an ongoing inequity.” (Hunt et al.)

Building on this, Hunt’s study from the same year on race in the writers room reflects this same trend. The study outlines how the exclusion of people of color from writer’s rooms leads to the perpetuation of stereotypes of marginalized groups in media, further limiting authentic storytelling; “By excluding writers of color, Hollywood reinforces narratives that uphold white supremacy, and its stories remain limited in scope and diversity.” (Hunt) This lack of diversity in the creative process results in misrepresentation and underrepresentation of ethnic minorities, diminishing the cultural value of the media.

In addition to the lack of diversity behind the scenes, Dixon et al. (2019) explore the construction of race and ethnicity through the media and how it plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions, largely relying on harmful stereotypes; “The overrepresentation of minorities in crime news contributes to the public’s perception of certain racial groups as inherently criminal.” (Dixon et al.) These media representations of race work to reinforce existing biases and prejudices, further contributing to the harmful social construction of race.

Moreover, López (2020) uses critical media approaches to examine the structures of media production and distribution and how deeply embedded racial narratives are in these systems; “Media has the power to both challenge and perpetuate racial hierarchies; however, the latter often prevails due to the dominance of white-owned media conglomerates.” (López) This study finds that the power structures within the media industry work to reinforce racial inequality through both production and media ownership, ultimately limiting the occurrences of complex, nuanced portrayals of race and ethnicity.

Specifically, Negrón-Muntaner et al. (2017) examine the exclusion of Latino narratives in entertainment media. This study finds that despite their growth as a demographic, Latinos remain largely underrepresented in the mainstream media in terms of representation and narrative authenticity; “Latinos make up nearly 18% of the U.S. population, but are present in only 5% of leading roles in Hollywood films.” (Negrón-Muntaner et al.) This research concludes that this underrepresentation of Latinos speaks to a broader issue of cultural erasure, specifically with media conglomerates prioritizing profit over authentic storytelling.

Żerebecki et al. (2021) analyze the potential of media to drive social change. Specifically, this study finds that television shows have the potential to foster greater acceptance of ethnic and sexual minorities based on the portrayal of these groups; “When TV shows provide positive, complex portrayals of minorities, they can challenge viewers' biases and contribute to greater social inclusion.” Ultimately, this research concludes that the media has the capacity to promote acceptance of minority groups by challenging stereotypes and representing diverse characters with complexity and depth.

Media Diversity Analysis and Frameworks

For a broader perspective, Deacon and Stanyer's 2021 study shows that diversity in media should be a type of qualitative research over quantitative to show the difference in perspectives and voices present in those narratives. While quantitative data can be useful, it does not capture the broader essence which is that of diversity in media.

Loecherbach et al. (2020) literature review that proposes a way to understand media diversity and it addresses the gaps in other research by assessing each part of diversity as content, sources and audience perceptions. These studies that are preexisting give Loecherbach and the other authors a different perspective on how media diversity is assessed and the way it affects different contexts. This will guide our research in representation and the specific impact on the audience.

In television programming, Pujadas and Oliva (2007) evaluate the diversity of content in broadcasting services in Spain. They introduce the concept of "vertical diversity," which is the depth and variety of programming that is offered- for this research specifically in Spain. Their findings show that there is an increase in the overall diversity within each television system, but also highlight that while there is an increase in diversity, the airtime

for the diverse stories is unequal to the white ones. This disparity shows the importance of increasing diversity in content and also ensuring not just equal but equitable representation in the broadcast schedules.

Moreover, Smith, Choueiti and Pieper (2019) study diversity in director roles in comparison to the actual success of the film. It analyzes the data from 1,200 top films between 2007 and 2018 and the findings show the relation between director diversity film success and the direct correlation between the two. This framework shows how the diversity of individuals both in front of and behind the camera influence the narratives that are presented on the screen.

Streaming Platforms & Media Branding - Glory

Diversity is employed to showcase brand strategy within different streaming platforms. Research on leveraging cultural diversity is widely shown in Asmar, Raats, and Van Audenhove (2022) as a tool to genuinely cater to diverse audiences and promote investments in producing content that helps build an intentional brand focused on featuring diversity in its stories. This article leans more on Netflix's contribution to promoting diversity rather than praising itself for the services they have provided as a Subscription-Video-On-Demand (hereafter SVOD) service by using Netflix as a case study. Netflix is leading the global entertainment industry in terms of representing and including underrepresented groups and uses this to its advantage by building its diversity branding early on. Now, when the Netflix brand is discussed, its commitment to inclusivity and diversity is also highlighted, as the article states. As the media industry evolves, Netflix continues to leverage its diversity strategies to appeal to both global and local audiences.

Similarly, Kohnen (2015) examines how cable television networks leverage cultural diversity as a branding strategy, which can be shown in close relation to appear as an socially enlightened network. For instance, the article references “The Fosters” on ABC Family (now known as Freeform) that showcases the inclusion of LGBTQ characters and representation of a lesbian couple that challenges typical LGBTQ tropes. This diverse TV show displayed ABC Family's branding strategy to appeal to diverse audiences. As a result, the network’s emphasis on “diversity, passion, humor, and heart” demonstrates how cultural diversity is used not only as a social issue but also as a core brand identity. This approach provides insight into how traditional networks and now streaming platforms use diversity to stay up-to-date and relevant in a changing media society.

In Fassetta, Pietka-Nykaza, and Smyth (2014), the use of cultural diversity and relevance is included in UK TV dramas to attract more viewers. They found that diversity not only reflects society but also helps sell the shows by aligning with social movements for representation. For example, the British TV drama “Waterloo Road,” which started in 2006, is set in a fictional school and deals with issues like immigration and bullying. It features characters like Lula Tsibi, a Black African student, to show diverse identities. This makes the show more appealing to viewers who care about social issues. Both streaming platforms and traditional networks use diversity to build stronger brand identities.

This strategy is similar to how Netflix uses its original content to shape its brand. According to the Inclusion in Netflix Original U.S. Scripted Series & Films report, Netflix has worked hard to include more diverse casts and storylines, making it a key part of their brand. The report shows that in 2021, 61% of the stories were led by girls and women, which is higher than the proportion of females in the U.S. population. Additionally, 64.6%

of Netflix films and 56.6% of Netflix series had female leads or co-leads, showing a big increase in female representation over time. By investing in diverse programming and including underrepresented voices, Netflix and other streaming platforms use diversity to build a global brand.

Furthermore, Cunningham and Craig (2019) explore authenticity, community, and brand culture in relation to social media platforms, particularly YouTube, which have created a new form of media branding by blending Silicon Valley's technological culture with Hollywood's entertainment values. In regard to streaming and networking platforms, these connections can relate to how creators challenge traditional media in the same way networking platforms do to promote diversity. The article mentions social media entertainment (SME) as the interdependent clash of industrial cultures and one key point is that SME stands as a relationship between authenticity and community, which becomes intertwined with brand culture. Brands are created by building a two-way relationship with their audience. They market this connection, while creators show their authenticity to their communities. Over time, proving their authenticity affects how brands work with smaller creators and audiences.

Conclusion

In light of the findings from this literature review, several possible research questions present themselves. One key question is: How does the lack of diversity in decision-making roles—like directors and writers—affect the authenticity of the stories told in media, and what barriers are keeping marginalized groups from these positions? Another area worth exploring is: How can we move beyond simply counting representation and instead focus on how diverse perspectives actually impact the depth and quality of media narratives?

Further, does having more diversity behind the camera lead to both better audience reception and greater commercial success? This could shed light on whether diverse creators bring new strengths to media that resonate more deeply with audiences. Additionally, research into how media ownership influences which stories get produced and distributed could uncover the unseen forces shaping representation in film and TV.

Despite the progress made in studying media diversity, there are still gaps in how diversity is implemented. For instance, how can media companies ensure they are meeting certain standards of authenticity and proportionate representation? Furthermore, entertainment media needs to display a deeper understanding of how different identities intersect, such as race, gender, sexuality, and disability, in shaping media portrayals.

Lastly, while platforms like Netflix and YouTube have leaned into diversity as part of their branding, there's little research on the lasting impact of these efforts. Do they bring about real change in how stories are told, or are they more about marketing? Filling these gaps will help create a fuller picture of how media can evolve to better reflect and include diverse voices in a meaningful way.

Methods

Sample

Our research will take samples of six scripted series on Netflix, Amazon Prime and Hulu from 2017-2022. Shows are chosen based on popularity and critical acclaim. The message population is the scripted series, diversity within them, and reception and longevity.

By utilizing AI, we ensured our sample accurately reflected the most popular scripted series of each year for each streaming platform.

Procedure

We will be reviewing 18 pilots and reviewing aspects such as on-screen and off-screen diversity and the roles of each, the show, the year that it was created, demos and the rating. Our information will be gathered from the pilots themselves and industry information to find background on those involved. On-screen (OS) diversity will be based on the representation of race, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation of the main cast and supporting characters (all named characters). Off-screen (OS), or behind-the-scenes (BTS) diversity will be based on the writers, directors, producers and other crew members.

This data will come from each pilot, or first episode of the series with information from supporting secondary sources such as industry reports and show-specific websites (ex. IMDb) and diversity reports from each network.

Measures

The success of each series will be based on the viewer ratings, longevity and critical acclaim. Viewer ratings will be determined by audience reception and using platforms such as IMDb. Longevity is the number of seasons that each show has completed since the pilot. Critical acclaim will be the analysis of professional awards and nominations. Diversity will be measured by OS diversity, BTS diversity, the target audience demographic (Demos). These diversity percentages are created by taken the number of named characters from the pilot episode of each series and dividing it by the number of characters that fit our diversity

requirements. We chose to not include unnamed characters as they typically are not recurring and our focus is on intentional representation.

The approach that we are taking is both qualitative and quantitative. We will be answering the questions of how are diverse perspectives and populations represented in these series between 2017-2022, the relation of the diversity levels of the show in comparison to the longevity, audience engagement based upon that, the role that each streaming platform plays, and the trends that we notice based off of the previous data.

As we aim to explore the relationship between diversity and longevity of newly scripted shows we will focus on analyzing seven key categories of the person. on-screen or behind the screen, role, year, show, demos, and rating. Person is the diversity of the cast regarding race, ethnicity, and gender. On screen/behind the screen are the different kinds of roles behind the scenes, featuring writing, directing, and production positions. Role identifies the primary characters in the show, including lead and supporting roles, to evaluate the variety within these roles. Year is the year the show first aired. Show is the series in which all is being analyzed. Demos is code for the audience demographics that the program aims at or reflects, connected to its ratings and longevity. Rating is the audience ranking or popularity classification for every series. By analyzing the person, on screen or off screen, role diversity, and other metrics, we aim to identify patterns, trends, and relationships that show how character diversity affects the popularity and longevity of shows on streaming platforms. A sample table is provided below.

SHOW	YEAR	OS Diversity	BTS Diversity	ROLE	PERSON (Gender, Race, Ethnicity of	DEMOS (Target audience, Demographics)	RATING
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Analysis

The analysis of our results is determined by different quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative measure in the analysis includes on-screen and off-screen diversity, and success based on secondary sources (IMDb). The qualitative analysis includes the narratives themselves in the series and how the creative team may have influenced some of the narratives. We compared diversity measures across the three different platforms through the six different series from each.

Results

These results analyze the top six shows on Amazon Prime, Hulu and Netflix from 2017-2022.

Amazon Prime

Based on show popularity and critic reviews, the top six scripted series each year from Amazon Prime are: *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017), *Jack Ryan* (2018), *The Boys* (2019), *The Boys Season 2* (2020), *Invincible* (2021), and *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* (2022).

Table 1: Amazon Prime Top Shows from 2017-2022

SHOW	YEAR	OS Diversity	BTS Diversity	ROLE	PERSON (Gender, Race,	DEMOS (Target audience,	RATING
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					Ethnicity of Leads)	Demographics)	
<i>The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel</i>	2017	~15% (Harriet, one recurring Black character)	~10% Predominantly white writers and showrunner (Amy Sherman-Palladino)	Lead: Miriam Maisel (Jewish Woman)	Lead: Rachel Brosnahan (Jewish Woman)	Adult women, upper-middle class, historical setting	8.6/10 (IMDb)
<i>Jack Ryan</i>	2018	~30-40% (International cast with Middle Eastern & Latin Characters)	~15% Predominantly white male showrunners (Carlton Cuse, Graham Rolan)	Lead: Jack Ryan (White male American)	Lead: John Krasinski (White male American)	(Young) Adults, Global audience, action/thriller	8/10 (IMDb)
<i>The Boys</i>	2019	~45% (Diverse characters: Frenchie, Kimiko)	~25% Some diversity in writers/directors	Lead: Hughie Campbell (White man), Queen Maeve (LGBTQ+)	Lead: Karl Urban (White male man), various diverse leads	Young adults, action/superhero	8.7/10 (IMDb)
<i>The Boys Season Two</i>	2020	Same as season one	~25% Mixed (Showrunners: Eric Kripke, diverse team)	Lead: Billy Butcher (White man)	Lead: Karl Urban (White man), diverse supporting cast	Young adults, action/superhero	8.7/10 (IMDb)
<i>Invincible</i>	2021	~60% (Protagonist is half-Asian, other diverse characters)	~40% More diversity BTS in writers (BIPOC and women)	Lead: Mark Grayson (Half-Asian, half-White)	Lead: Steven Yeun (Asian-American), racial representation	Teens, animated series fans	8.7/10 (IMDb)
<i>The Lord of</i>	2022	~50%	~20%	Lead:	Lead: Morfydd	Fantasy, global,	6.8/10

<i>the Rings: The Rings of Power</i>		(Diverse cast including Black Elf and Dwarven characters)	Limited diversity in creative team	Galadriel (Female Elf), Arondir (Black Elf)	Clark (White woman), Isamel Cruz Córdova (Black man)	wide age range	(IMDb)
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The first hypothesis predicted that scripted series with higher numbers of diversity on-screen would show more audience engagement and longevity in run time in comparison to scripted series with lower diversity levels. This analysis reveals that there is an increase in the representation of diverse characters in Amazon Prime's top scripted series from 2017-2022.

The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel featured a predominantly white cast, showing 15% of diversity on screen with an audience rating at an average of 8.6/10. The scripted series lasted for five seasons. By contrast, *The Boys* (2019), had an on-screen diversity of 45%, gained a similar rating of 8.7/10 (IMDb), and continues to run on Amazon Prime. *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* (2022), had a 50% diverse cast including the representation of women and Black, Indigenous and Persons of Color (BIPOC) for key roles. This scripted series, though polarizing in audience reception (gaining a rating of 7.1/10 (IMDb)), achieved greater reach globally due to its appeal in diversity and marketing.

The primary research question asked how diversity in creative roles (such as writers, directors, those behind the screen) may influence narrative and critical acclaim. The findings showed that scripted series with more diversity behind the camera tended to introduce more depth in storytelling. *Invincible* (2021), an animated series had a racially diverse writers' room (60% representation from women and BIPOC (IMDb)), received critical acclaim for

its portrayal of race and gender in a superhero series (IMDb), earning a rating of 8.7/10. Meanwhile, *Jack Ryan* (2018), had minimal diversity in the creative team and was critiqued for perpetuating stereotypes in its storytelling despite keeping an audience acclaim of 8.1/10 (IMDb).

The second hypothesis proposed that greater on-screen diversity directly correlates with a stronger global appeal. This hypothesis is supported by the analysis of *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, which gained attention in international markets because of the more inclusive casting. Similarly, *The Boys* (2019), and *The Boys Season 2* (2020) kept global popularity, attributed partly to the diverse cast and contemporary issues.

These results from Amazon Prime demonstrate a positive correlation between diversity both on and off the screen with audience engagement, complexity in storytelling and global reach. These findings align with the hypothesis that diverse representation is a positive addition to the longevity and cultural impact of Amazon Prime's scripted series.

Hulu

Based on show popularity and critic reviews, the top six scripted shows from each year on Hulu are: *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017), *Castle Rock* (2018), *PEN15* (2019), *The Great* (2020), *Only Murders in the Building* (2021), and *The Bear* (2022).

Table 2: Hulu Top Shows from 2017-2022

SHOW	YEAR	OS Diversity	BTS Diversity	ROLE	PERSON	DEMOS	RATING
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<i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>	2017	~93% of named cast, (13/14 women and/or POC), ~43% POC, 28.5% WOC	~71% of decision making roles (15/21 women and/or POC)	Lead: June Osborne (Offred) (White Woman)	Lead: Elisabeth Moss (White Woman)	Adults (particularly women), dystopian/social commentary	8.4 (IMDb)
<i>Castle Rock</i>	2018	~43% of named cast (6/14 women or POC), ~7% POC (1/14 named characters)	~37% of decision making roles (7/19 women and/or POC), ~5% POC (1/19)	Lead: Henry Deaver (Black Man)	Lead: Andre Holland (Black Man), lack of diversity in supporting cast	Adults, Stephen King Fans, horror/thriller	7.4 (IMDb)
<i>PEN15</i>	2019	~61% of named cast (11/18 women and/or POC), ~22% POC (4/18)	50% of decision making roles (12/24 women, POC, and/or LGBTQ+) ~4% LGBTQ+ (1/24)	Lead and Creator: Maya Erskine (Asian Woman) Lead and Creator: Anna Konkle (White Woman)	Lead and Creator: Maya Erskine (Asian Woman) Lead and Creator: Anna Konkle (White Woman)	Millennials/Gen Z, Women, Asian Americans, coming of age, comedy/satire	8.1 (IMDb)
<i>The Great</i>	2020	~67% of named cast women and/or POC) ~33% POC (5/15)	~33% of decision making roles (5/15 women, no POC)	Lead: Catherine the Great (White Woman)	Lead: Elle Fanning (White Woman), some diversity in supporting cast	Young Adults and Adults, Women, Period Drama, historical satire, dark comedy	8.1 (IMDb)

<i>Only Murders in the Building</i>	2021	~44% women (4/9 women) ~33% POC (3/9 POC) ~22% (2/9 LGBTQ)	25% (2/8 women) ~13% (1/8 POC)	Lead: Mabel Mora (Latina woman)	Lead and Executive Producer: Selena Gomez (Latina Woman)	(Young) Adults, Comedy, Mystery	8.1 (IMDb)
<i>The Bear</i>	2022	~37.5% (3/8 women) 50% (4/8 POC)	4/10 women 1/10 POC	Main Supporting Cast: Sydney Adamu (Black Woman)	Supporting: Ayo Edebiri (Black Woman)	(Young) Adults, Working Class, Dramedy	8.6 (IMDb)

The data strongly supports the first hypothesis that scripted series with higher levels of on-screen diversity tend to exhibit more audience engagement and longer runtimes. For example, *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrates remarkable on-screen diversity, with 93% of its named cast being women or POC, with 28.5% of the named cast being women of color. This diversity aligns with the series' themes of gender and societal power structures, resonating particularly with adult viewers, especially women. Its IMDb score of 8.4 and multiple seasons of critical acclaim highlight how inclusive casting can enhance audience engagement.

Similarly, *PEN15* boasts 61% diversity within its named cast, reflecting a relatable and authentic portrayal of adolescence that appeals to millennials and Gen Z viewers. The show's focus on female friendship and Asian-American representation, led by co-creator and actor Maya Erskine, has earned it an IMDb rating of 8.1 and a loyal fan base over multiple seasons. By contrast, *Castle Rock*, which has lower on-screen diversity at 43%,

received an IMDb score of 7.4. This disparity suggests a connection between higher diversity levels and sustained audience interest.

The second hypothesis, which posits that greater on-screen diversity correlates with stronger global appeal, is also supported by the data. *Only Murders in the Building* exemplifies this, featuring 33% POC and 22% LGBTQ+ representation among its characters. With Selena Gomez as a Latina lead and executive producer, the show appeals to a diverse audience that spans generations and cultural backgrounds. Its combination of mystery and comedy, coupled with its inclusive cast, has achieved widespread recognition and an IMDb score of 8.1, demonstrating its ability to resonate with viewers across different demographics.

Similarly, *The Bear* highlights the impact of diverse representation on global appeal, with 50% of its main cast being POC and Sydney Adamu, a Black woman, in a central role. The show's raw and relatable depiction of workplace dynamics, combined with its diverse storytelling, has garnered an IMDb rating of 8.6 and attracted audiences across various cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The primary research question—how diversity in creative roles such as writers, directors, and producers influences narrative and critical acclaim—finds mixed support in this analysis. Shows like *The Handmaid's Tale* and *PEN15* demonstrate how diverse behind-the-scenes representation can enrich storytelling and yield critical success. For example, *The Handmaid's Tale* has 71% diversity in its decision-making roles, reflecting its commitment to inclusive narratives that deeply resonate with viewers. Similarly, *PEN15*

benefits from having Maya Erskine and Anna Konkle as co-creators and writers, ensuring authentic representation of Asian-American and female experiences.

However, *The Great* and *Castle Rock* reveal gaps between on-screen and behind-the-scenes diversity. Despite 67% on-screen diversity, *The Great* features no POC in decision-making roles, which may limit the scope of its narratives despite its overall acclaim. This contrast suggests that while on-screen diversity contributes to audience engagement, behind-the-scenes diversity is essential for creating authentic and multidimensional storytelling.

Further evidence supporting these hypotheses is found in *The Bear*. While its on-screen diversity (50% POC representation) and relatable narratives have earned critical acclaim and global appeal, its behind-the-scenes diversity remains relatively low, with only 10% POC among decision-makers. This raises questions about the broader impact of behind-the-scenes inclusion on narrative depth and cultural authenticity. Meanwhile, *Castle Rock*, with limited behind-the-scenes diversity (37% women or POC, 5% POC), struggled to achieve the same critical acclaim or longevity, reinforcing the importance of creative roles in shaping a series' success.

In summary, the data reveals that shows with higher levels of both on-screen and behind-the-scenes diversity tend to foster stronger audience engagement, enjoy longer runtimes, and achieve greater critical acclaim. While on-screen representation significantly drives audience connection and global appeal, diversity in creative roles appears equally vital for shaping inclusive and resonant narratives, underscoring its importance in the evolving television landscape.

Netflix

Netflix's most popular shows from 2017 to 2022, *13 Reasons Why*, *You*, *The Umbrella Academy*, *Bridgerton*, *Squid Game*, and *Wednesday*, reveal how diversity plays a nuanced role in audience engagement, global appeal, and critical acclaim. The data from these shows both supports and challenges the initial hypotheses regarding the influence of on-screen and behind-the-scenes diversity. An important thing to note is that without the addition of gender diversity, the percentages would have been lower than shown in the table below (Table 3).

SHOW	YEAR	OS Diversity	BTS Diversity	ROLE	PERSON (Gender, Race, Ethnicity of Leads)	DEMOS (Target audience, Demographics)	RATING
<i>13 Reasons Why</i> (Yorkey, 2017)	2017	~62% (7 POC and 3 White women)	~58.8% (3 POC and 7 White woman)	Lead: Clay Jensen (White male American)	Lead: Dylan Minnette (White male American)	Gen Z, Teens, teen drama	7.5/10 (IMDb)
<i>You</i> (Berlanti & Gamble, 2018)	2018	~50% (4 POC and 2 White woman)	~56.5% (3 POC and 6 White women)	Lead: Joe Goldberg (White Man)	Lead: Penn Badgley (White Man)	Millennials Gen Z, thriller	7.7/10 (IMDb)
<i>The Umbrella Academy</i> (Blackman, 2019)	2019	~35.7% (2 POC and 7 White woman)	~30.77% (3 POC and 5 White women)	Leads: Vanya Hargreeces (White Woman)	Lead: Elliot Page previously Ellen Page (White Woman during this episode)	Millennials, Gen Z, action, comedy, drama	7.8/10 (IMDb)
<i>Bridgerton</i> (Dusen, 2020)	2020	~60% (4 POC and 5	~58.8% (4 POC	Leads: Daphne	Lead: Phoebe Dynevor	Millennials Gen Z international,	7.4/10 (IMDb)

2020)		White woman)	and 10 White women)	Bridgerton (White Woman) and Simon Basset (Black Man)	(White Woman) and Simon Basset (Black Man)	drama, romance	
<i>Squid Game (Dong-hyuk, 2021)</i>	2021	~89.13% (All-Asian cast, but lacks gender and ethnic diversity only 6 women and 5 ethnic diverse)	~100% Asian directors, producers, and writers, but lacks ethnic diversity	Lead: Seon Gi-hun (South Korean Man)	Lead: Lee Jung-jae (South Korean Man)	Diverse international audience, Young adults, men, women, thriller, horror,	8/10 (IMDb)
<i>Wednesday (Gough & Millar, 2022)</i>	2022	~53% (9 POC and 6 White woman)	~40% (3 POC and 4 White women)	Lead: Wednesday Addams (Latina Woman)	Lead: Jenna Ortega (Latina Woman)	Millennials, Genz, Adults gothic, mystery	8.1/10 (IMDb)

Table 3: Netflix Top Six Shows from 2017-2022

The first hypothesis suggests that scripted series with higher on-screen diversity would show greater audience engagement and longer run times compared to those with lower diversity levels. This hypothesis is strongly supported by shows like *Squid Game* (89.13% diverse cast) and *Bridgerton* (60% on-screen diversity), which have notable audience engagement, proven by IMDb ratings of 8/10 and 7.4/10 (*Squid Game*, 2021, *Bridgerton*, 2020). Both *Bridgerton* and *Squid Game* showcase diverse representation, with *Bridgerton* featuring a variety of races and ethnic backgrounds, and *Squid Game* prominently highlighting Asian representation. Diversity seems to positively impact audience engagement by broadening relatability and appeal.

13 Reasons Why (58.8%) also suggests diversity plays a role, however, reflects moderate diversity, but its popularity was also driven by its powerful narrative addressing societal issues (*13 Reasons Why*, 2017). Similarly, exceptions like *You* (~50% diversity) and *The Umbrella Academy* (~35.7%) demonstrate that other factors also play major roles in determining audience appeal and longevity (*The Umbrella Academy*, 2019).

The second hypothesis poses that greater on-screen diversity directly enhances the global appeal. This hypothesis holds true for *Squid Game*, which achieved massive international success with its all-Asian cast and culturally specific narrative. Similarly, *Bridgerton* effectively used diverse leads to appeal to a broader, global audience. These shows demonstrate that diversity can attract viewers from varied cultural backgrounds, adding to the show's overall appeal.

On the other hand, shows like *The Umbrella Academy* and *You*, which had moderate on-screen diversity, gained worldwide popularity thanks to factors such as its likened trope and the extensive global distribution network of Netflix. These findings indicate that although diversity plays a crucial role in increasing global appeal and success, it is most impactful when paired with strong storytelling and Netflix's broad international reach.

Furthermore, shows with strong audience targeting (ex. *Squid Game* for thrillers, *Wednesday* for gothic mystery) and popular storylines seem to achieve higher ratings regardless of how much diversity is present (*Wednesday*, 2022). However, a diverse on-screen cast (ex. *Squid Game* and *Bridgerton*) may increase popular viewership and expand audience demographics.

In terms of behind-the-scenes (BTS) diversity, higher BTS diversity does not appear to correlate strongly with IMDb ratings. For example, *Squid Game* has 100% BTS diversity but a slightly lower IMDb rating than *Wednesday*, which has 40% BTS diversity: *Bridgerton* and *13 Reasons Why* both have around 58% BTS diversity but vary in IMDb ratings. Beyond diversity, storytelling and relatability are also key.

Answering the primary research question of how diversity can affect narrative and critical acclaim is quite nuanced in this case. In the case of *Squid Game*, with a team of writers, directors, and producers that was almost entirely Asian, the show achieved remarkable success and received high praise worldwide. This suggests that the show's culturally authentic narrative, deeply resonated with audiences across the globe, especially seeing such Asian representation on a platform such as Netflix.

Another example is *Bridgerton*, which featured a BTS team that was moderately diverse, with around 58.8% representation. As well as *Wednesday* which gained popularity worldwide. These shows received significant critical acclaim and praise from audiences for its popular storytelling.

Yet, shows like *13 Reasons Why* and *You* also had diverse BTS teams, with approximately 58.8% and 56.5% representation (You, 2018). However, these shows received only moderate critical acclaim, with IMDb ratings of 7.5/10 and 7.7/10, respectively. They did not achieve the same level of cultural impact or narrative influence as the previous examples. This suggests that while BTS diversity can influence storytelling, other factors lean towards personal interest when determining critical acclaim.

All in all, the data reveals that diversity is an important factor in the success of Netflix shows but not always the sole reason a show runs to success. The data does imply that the presence of diversity in creative BTS roles results in narratives that are more genuine and compelling. As a result, this improves the overall critical acclaim, particularly when combined with captivating themes and popular/appealing storytelling. On-screen diversity promotes inclusive and authentic representation and can truly help attract global audiences, with the help of captivating storytelling and popular stories. Diversity holds significance in terms of global appeal, regardless of whether the ratings are high or not. When both ratings and diversity (the result of true representation and diversity of thought) combined are high, it results in a show of success.

Discussion

Hypothesis 1 and 2 (Amazon Prime, Hulu, Netflix)

Across the three platforms, shows like *The Boys*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Squid Game* (featuring diverse casts and behind-the-scenes teams) demonstrate both strong audience engagement and critical acclaim (IMDb ratings of 8.7, 8.4, and 8.0). Their ongoing success, including global appeal, supports both hypotheses. These shows highlight how on-screen and off-screen diversity can enhance a series' global reach and critical reception. For instance, *Squid Game's* all-Asian cast achieved massive international success, showcasing how culturally specific representation can resonate globally. The success of such shows underlines the importance of diverse casts in achieving global reach.

However, this is not universally true. For example, Amazon Prime's *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, despite a 50% on-screen diversity rate, has the lowest critical

reception among the researched shows (IMDb rating of 6.8). This suggests that diversity alone doesn't guarantee success. Other factors, such as strong narrative quality and fan engagement, are equally crucial in determining a show's success.

Representation Gaps

Beyond the hypotheses, significant gaps in representation for certain marginalized groups emerge. Differently abled and LGBTQ+ characters are particularly underrepresented. For example, while *Only Murders in the Building* includes some LGBTQ+ representation (22%), other shows, like *Castle Rock*, have very low diversity, especially among LGBTQ+ characters. Additionally, differently abled representation is notably lacking, despite increased industry advocacy for inclusive casting.

Gender diversity has shown progress, however, the representation of women of color, especially in leading roles, remains lacking. This is obvious by the fact that white women often skew diversity results upward, for instance, in *13 Reasons Why*, while the cast features a higher percentage of women (approximately 60%), many of these women are white, failing to fully reflect diversity in terms of race and ethnicity. These gaps warrant further exploration to address how media continues to underrepresent certain identities.

Netflix's Global Appeal

An important factor influencing this research is Netflix's status as a globally dominant platform, which impacts the second hypothesis (Asmar, Raats, & Van Audenhove, 2022). The success of Netflix shows can be partially attributed to its international appeal.

Unlike Amazon Prime or Hulu, which cater to more niche American audiences, Netflix's mainstream and global reach likely contributes to the success of its diverse shows.

From 2017 to 2022, the most popular Netflix shows consistently attracted a worldwide audience. For example, the ratings for *Squid Game* reflect input from countries with the highest IMDb engagement, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, India, Turkey, and Germany. Among the three platforms, Netflix has the highest number of shows with strong on-screen and behind-the-scenes diversity. This success is likely tied to Netflix's ability to attract diverse audiences from various countries, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds, making it uniquely positioned to amplify diverse storytelling on a global scale.

The Effects of Black Lives Matter & The Me Too Movement

The Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements heavily influenced media diversity and representation, showing an increase in diversity on and off-screen specifically pre- and post-2020. Pre-2020, these two movements raised awareness about systemic inequalities, and the response of streaming platforms was often limited to token diversity in cast and crew. The events of 2020, such as the surge in the two movements (including protests for racial justice, acknowledgement of workplace harassment, etc.), lead to a global call for changes in the entertainment industry. Streaming platforms (in addition to companies around the world unrelated to entertainment) were called out to increase the representation of diversity on-screen and to address the inequities behind the scenes, which proves true in the data of increased representation.

The United States vs. International Representation

Representation in scripted series varies between the United States and other countries, specifically in how BIPOC identities are shown. This is mainly due to cultural differences, historical contexts and industry practices. In the United States, diversity is often represented by racial and ethnic groups and casting in American productions following 2020 aim to address historical underrepresentation with efforts to include BIPOC characters in lead and supporting roles. This again brings up our discussion of tokenism, where characters of color are included but lack depth or may have been created by non-BIPOC writers.

Media outside of the US shows BIPOC identities in more of a sense of cultural integration. For example, in the United Kingdom, representation may sometimes emphasize Afro-Caribbean and South Asian communities which reflects the country's post-colonial history of immigrants. Canada and Australia often focus on Indigenous representation, whereas in Latin America or East Asia diversity is often limited and BIPOC characters are often not portrayed. There is an connection between local cultural dynamics as well as global trends, and the United States media is typically used as an example for what is considered to be inclusive representation, though it is not always correct (USC Annenberg, UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report, Asmar et al., Fassetta et al.).

The War on Diversity and the Removal of DEI in Entertainment

The backlash against Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in entertainment is sometimes referred to as the “War on Diversity” and shows the growing tensions in the cultural and political landscape of the United States. Critics of DEI claim that DEI initiatives push biased agendas onto the audiences which has left some media companies to lessen their funding for projects including diverse roles or crew and the limitation of inclusive programming (Simone Foxman).

This shift may continue to grow due to the political climate of the United States with changes in Presidency such as Donald Trump's return to office in 2025. The prioritization of DEI in industries like entertainment is expected to change. We expect to see media platforms changing their approach to diversity which raises the ultimate question of how to balance inclusive and representative storytelling with different expectations of the audiences.

Limitations

This study offers valuable information to the relationships between diversity and the longevity of scripted series across three streaming platforms, though several limitations should be noted. This study took six series from three streaming services to make up the sample size, which may not represent the wide variety of content available across different genres and years. Scripted series with less popularity may be underrepresented in the analysis. Selecting scripted series based off of popularity and critical acclaim introduces a bias to mainstream productions, which may not represent the diversity trends in less popular scripted series.

An additional limitation is the measure of “diversity.” The measure of diversity used in this study uses both qualitative and quantitative measures of visible characteristics such as race, gender and sexual orientation, but it may not fully capture the intersectionality or the complex representations of certain marginalized communities. Additionally the study does not consider the possible differences in how different audiences perceive or interpret diverse characters and stories, which may affect how audience engagement and ratings are determined.

The representation of white women in this study provides for an additional limitation. When calculating diversity, we accounted for white women in measures of gender diversity. The prominence of white women in our data skews the accounted number of women of color, LGBTQ+ women and other intersecting identities. This is a biased data point that can conceal more significant differences in representation while appearing as though a series is inclusive. For example, the number of scripted series in this study have white female leads, but no significant roles for people of color or other marginalized groups.

For procedural limitations, ratings and review results may be biased because of secondary data sources such as IMDb. Platforms such as IMDb may not fully represent the spectrum of audiences, particularly audiences that are from marginalized groups. Ratings on secondary platforms may be influenced by factors unrelated to diversity, such as marketing or genre preferences. The analysis of diversity used in this study regarding off-screen or behind-the-scenes crew members is also limited by the availability of public data on the demographics of writers, directors and producers which is not always listed in full or is always transparent.

Future Research

This study allows for many different directions of future research. Examining the ways in which diversity within a scripted series changes over the course of its seasons is crucial in future research. Monitoring these changes would offer a better understanding of how integrated diversity is over time and why some scripted series may become more inclusive while others may reduce an emphasis on diversity. A study that covers a longer period of time may also better show trends in the way that audience reception and

engagement reacts to these shifts, which may provide a better understanding of the elements that affect the longevity and success of diverse content.

Future research could expand the sample size beyond the 18 scripted series that were analyzed in this study. This study is limited to a small subset of popular series from just Amazon Prime, Netflix and Hulu. Including a broader range of series from various genres, platforms and regions would enable a better understanding of diversity in scripted television. Exploring content from less-popular series emphasizing a more diverse representation of cast and crew will help understand diversity trends that may not be reflected in these mainstream productions. A comparison of diversity across cultures in scripted series across different countries or regions may also highlight the implications of diverse storytelling globally.

Further studies may also focus on what “diversity” in story-telling actually means and how it is applied in modern media. This study focused primarily on visible diversity, but future research could examine the development of different characters and the complexity of each portrayal meaning the intersectionality of identity. This study may investigate how diverse characters are developed and how the character contributes to each story beyond representing diversity. Furthermore, examining the OS or BTS diversity in greater depth would also contribute to the understanding of how systematic inequalities in the entertainment industry influence the creation of diverse content.

An additional research topic based on the findings of this study would be the way that platform branding impacts diversity. Streaming services such as Netflix have emphasized diversity into their corporate identity which may have an impact on the shows

created as well as how different audiences react to different types of programming (USC Annenberg). Future studies may also examine how diversity efforts of streaming platforms are different than those of traditional broadcast networks and how this may impact the ratings of scripted series. Researching how marketing plays a role in audience demographics would also provide valuable insight to interactions between media production and audience consumption.

Lastly, this study could be completed again to have a larger sample size to show more results about the connection between longevity and diversity in scripted series. Recreating this study across different time periods or focusing on one set genre (comedy, drama, documentary, horror, action, etc.) could show further trends in diversity across different streaming platforms. These future research directions may expand on the current understanding of diversity in scripted series or in television as a whole and give more insight into how narratives influence audience engagement, cultural impact and the longevity of each series.

Conclusion

From 2017-2022, there were notable improvements with diversity in scripted television series, particularly with the rise of inclusive narratives and cast both on and off screen. Through this study, we found that series with more diversity received more audience engagement, global appeal and critical acclaim. Amazon Prime, Hulu and Netflix increased their diversity to not only gain more audience attention, but also used it to build strong brand identities. Our findings also showed gaps in certain diverse representations such as people of LGBTQ+ identities, people with disabilities and certain ethnic groups. Diversity

off the screen still remains a challenge and the limitation of inclusion in key decision making roles has led to scripted series missing the mark on authentic narratives as well as storytelling.

The data we analyzed showed the importance of intentional steps towards diversity and that representation should go beyond just visible identities and characteristics to reflect the intersectionality of the cast and crew, and the audience that will be watching each series. Diversity in these creative roles is necessary for inclusive storytelling. As the television industry continues to grow, we will continue seeing strides taken in diversity that will reflect positively to audiences, popularity and acclaim. Addressing these gaps in inclusivity and representation will let the industry go towards more equitable storytelling.

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