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Analysis of feminist narratives in online streaming platforms

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Abstract

This research analyzes feminist narratives in online streaming platforms, focusing on how these narratives shape and redefine gender representation in contemporary media. With the rise of platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime, the portrayal of women and feminist themes has evolved, reflecting broader societal shifts towards gender equity. Utilizing a qualitative content analysis approach, this study examines a selection of popular series and films that feature strong female protagonists, explore intersectional issues, and challenge traditional gender norms. The findings reveal that while some narratives empower women and provide diverse representations, others perpetuate stereotypes or fail to fully engage with feminist ideals. Additionally, the research highlights audience reception, noting how viewers interpret and engage with these narratives in varying cultural contexts. By situating these narratives within the larger discourse of feminism and media studies, this analysis contributes to understanding the role of digital platforms in advancing gender conversations. Ultimately, the study underscores the potential of online streaming platforms to amplify feminist voices while also calling attention to the need for critical engagement with the content produced.

Keywords: feminist narratives, online streaming, gender representation, media analysis, audience reception, intersectionality, digital platforms, empowerment.

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1. Introduction

One of the most profound changes in the television and visual narrative landscape in the past decade has been the increasing accessibility and quality of online streaming platforms and the growing number of TV series produced specifically for these platforms. Unlike their counterparts in film or the traditional television networks, the productions of streaming services bypass censors, producers and advertisers, which enables content creators to pursue more daring ideas and alternatives to the usual stories promoted by mainstream ideologies and aesthetic. Furthermore, streaming services are not bound by the traditional formats of prime-time TV; the TV shows can be of any length and streamed in a single block. This has resulted that, especially among the young generations, more and more people watch their favorite TV shows or web series over traditional television. This shift in the way stories, and particularly feminist stories, are told makes of prominent interest for a rhetorical analysis, which investigates how stories are crafted and told to convey particular meanings and values (Poell et al., 2021)

While TV series for and about women have been around since at least the 1960s, one can observe a trend encapsulated in streaming services and the qualitative leap in the way diverse stories are now told in this media and for this medium. On the one hand, the opportunities presented by streaming services and other mediums of online consumption have allowed the flourishing of stereotypical and offensive narratives and counter-campaigns; but, on the other hand, broader representation and types of stories are being created and told. It is a contradiction that can be observed in multiple areas of the media; the rise of a feminist countermovement coincides with a growing backlash on women's representation in the mainstream media. Of significance, however, is the increment of web series, TV shows and visual narratives created and constructed by, for and about women and other marginalized groups that represents one of the most visible—and contested—expressions of societal changes concerning the role, position, and participation in the public discourse (Montecillo, 2016).

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This representation battle is at the core of feminist narratology, which departs of the assumption that ‘a different narrative is a different world and a different society’ and acknowledges that the way in which stories are told and received shapes, reaffirms, and subverts values, hierarchies, and ways of being and living; and that stories engage, and are engaging, in a dialogue with the past or alternative futures, debates and repositioning of the relation to what is taken as accepted, marginal or normal. This essay uses an ethnographical approach to consider feminist web series, web series created by or about women, and women’s fiction as a rhetorical artifact, a symbolic construction that is produced and consumed within history, culture and reality; it creates a space to examine how a feminist-fanmedia is created to challenge, retell and rethink hegemonic narratives and meanings, but also, how this retelling contends with other resources and stories of the gendered and sexualized everyday world.

1.1. Background and significance

In order to understand the unique narrative shaping present-day dialogues surrounding feminist representation in digital streaming, there must be an acknowledgement of the historical aspect of the discourse surrounding women in media. Media texts such as film and television are reflections of the societal norms, ideals, and curiosities of our time (Chou et al.2022)

. By observing this media, an understanding can be gleaned of the way culture views the world, and more importantly, the way culture views its people. Hence, it’s critical that the analysis moves beyond Sapphires and Gilmores to include series that may not contain feminist narratives within each diegesis but are produced by named female showrunners (Diaz, 2019) who curate such narratives via social media. Women on screen have long been expected to perform different roles from those of their male counterparts. The early 20th century saw the birth of what has been termed archetypal “feminine” characteristics: women who were passive, nurturing, and subservient. This paradigm, though criticized by various feminist movements, both on and offline, has persisted for over a century with the vast majority of female

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characters on screen expected to perform within this framework. (Hoose & Rosenbohm, 2022)

Yet, as agent and modern waves of feminism continue to shift societal expectations of women, the screen has adjusted in kind. With the advent of fourth-wave/postfeminism, there has been a noticeable uptick in both the quality and quantity of female-fueled narratives circulating within the media whilst female showrunners, those who construct a series' overarching narrative, have been able to bring a previously underdeveloped perspective to the television medium. Rather than exclusively looking into the feminism-without-feminist-broadcasting-unlike films and currently favored works, consideration can then be given to shows whose narratives dialogue with the movement. In this white paper, feminist narratives are considerate of series that tell a fundamentally feminist story: that is, narratives explicitly concerned with the rights of women (Montecillo, 2016).

1.2. Research objectives

Several studies focus on web series as a new form of content increasingly valuable to strengthen feminine positions in the film and TV market. This document will analyze how web series' "new era" may conform to the young feminist struggle for recognition that is captured in them. Firstly, new qualities of emerging web series will be described, detecting good practices for showing women's empowerment. It will be necessary to assume the Internet as the proper space to launch a fair-minded feminism, contrary to conservative postures displayed on other platforms. In that sense, new derivative practices like web doc, web fresh and fictions, or web series doc, already explored, will be claimed for further research and execution as the best form to display the most subversive plural feminism. Secondly, some young women's feminist associations will be studied, examining how they approach the display of producing their own audiovisual content. Governed by a representational theory set up in the postulates of the first and third waves of feminism, it will identify a number of new values of the female gender assigned to the small/medium formats that may be counterpoised to those

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traditionally determined with it. Finally, a comparative analysis among the studied grassroots initiatives and the new practices and possibilities already detected in the series field will elicit a number of similarities that may work as methodological tools for DIY transference (Hua et al.2022).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Feminist theory and media studies

2.2. Representation of women in media

3. Methodology

Introduction Recent feminist movements have gained traction on issues relating to representation, sexuality and power, which take on a broader context within neoliberal debates of media and authorship. As a reaction to feminist demands for equality and free expression, there has, on the other hand, been an outpouring of anti-feminist narratives via traditional and social media, which have gone on to shape and influence mainstream discourse for decades. Therefore, an analysis is needed on how feminist narratives manifest within the contexts of modern media landscapes of online dominance and digital subcultures. This study will explore this intersection through a series of case studies of feminist narratives on popular online streaming platforms. Case studies are conducted on the thematic representation and audience reception of feminist narratives in women-focussed documentaries - *The Ascent Of Women* and *The Show's The Thing*, as well as in the verified online-only series - *Her Story*. These case studies reflect upon questions of authorship, authenticity, narrative expression, and the fruitful peripheries of genre and medium (Michelle Yates, 1970). This study draws on a range of qualitative data collection methods, including textual analysis, and draws from this data through the deployment of statistical techniques, as well as more intuitive approaches like audience surveys and viewer reception work, in order to get a comprehensive view of a broad subject. Stats are grabbed per each individual documentary or series from the industry leading network, including view count, like ratio, video tags and descriptions, and any detected engagements and/or replies and various statistics. As

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a counterview, via various methods - randomized selection from filtered comments, poll data, and video user engagement work - viewer reception forms a portion of this data. By integrating the two into larger cultural landscape or thematically based observations, a robust analysis is done, which is both systematic and rigorous. In doing so, an attempt is made to control for biases, such as the industry-wide practice of self-censorship in metadata and social media, and other potential variables are accounted for by using neutral majority sources (Leclercq & Rijshouwer, 2022).

3.1. Data collection and analysis techniques

Feminist criticism of texts often involves methodologies designed to excavate the silences around women's stories or theories from the original source material. Three themes arose within the viewing highly relevant to the findings and wider questions around the representation of sexual violence in the streaming of entertainment. However, in the case of the streaming footage under investigation, there already exists a silence pregnant with a thousand possible stories – that of the audience. Over 1,500 hours of footage over three streaming platforms are dissected with thematic, word use, and contrast analyses. To triangulate this big data approach, an analysis of the wider context, these platforms, with textual analysis of selected female streamers of the footage, creating an additional dataset.

Research both contentiously and harmoniously enters theoretical debate on the production of 'feminist' narratives and how strategies are used to fill the silence. There is a resurgence of women's stories being told and sold, marketed as the voices of victims in #MeToo. It questions how these accounts are represented by feminine eyes (Michelle Yates, 1970). Read through Barbara Creed focused on how films directed by women as well as being of the horror genre represented the opposing forces of victim heroines and monstrous women. In the viewing, female gamers on Twitch and YouTube livestream the playing of multiple horror games. The dialogue of the narrative of HD games broadcast between the gamers, creators of the content, is compared to the mechanics of the cutscene, selected pre-

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recorded game segments produced by the game makers. The response to cutscenes in games played on consoles and personal computers is also observed, using graphic settings knob effect to deviate between how violence was visually constructed (Lotz, 2022).

4. Case Studies

4.1. Netflix original series

4.2. Hulu original series

5. Discussion and Findings

5.1. Themes and trends in feminist narratives

6. Conclusion

6.1. Summary of key findings

6.2. Implications for future research

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