

# EXPLORING THE EVOLUTION OF STORYTELLING IN THE STREAMING ERA: A STUDY OF NARRATIVE TRENDS IN NETFLIX ORIGINAL CONTENT

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## ABSTRACT:

In this longitudinal study, we examine the changing landscape of storytelling in the streaming era, with a specific focus on *Netflix's* original content from 2016 to 2022. Our primary goal is to understand the evolving patterns of storytelling techniques employed by *Netflix* during this period. We reviewed 150 original *Netflix* productions, consisting of 100 series and 50 movies, representing approximately one-third of *Netflix's* original releases during the specified time period. Our analysis includes ten different storytelling criteria, including nonlinear, serialised, character-driven, documentary, anthology, flashback, episodic, interconnected, immersive, and real-time storytelling techniques, across both English and non-English content. The analysis revealed dynamic trends in the use of these storytelling techniques. Nonlinear storytelling, flashback storytelling, documentary-style and interconnected storytelling have shown positive correlations over time, indicating their increasing popularity. In contrast, serialised, anthology, and real-time storytelling have negative correlations, suggesting fluctuations or declining use. The analysis supports the alternative hypothesis (H1) that there is a significant shift, with an increasing emphasis on nonlinear storytelling, flashback storytelling, and interconnected storytelling. These findings underscore the ever-changing nature of *Netflix's* storytelling methods, shedding light on the importance of adapting to audience preferences and evolving trends in the streaming industry.

## KEY WORDS:

movies, narrative trends, *Netflix original series*, *Netflix*, storytelling techniques, storytelling, TV series

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## 1 Introduction

*Netflix* is a leading global streaming entertainment service that offers subscribers a wide range of movies, TV series, and games. *Netflix* has 231 million paid members in 190 countries. The Q4 2022 financial results for *Netflix* exceeded expectations with higher revenue, operating profit, and membership growth. In 2022, *Netflix* boasted 231 million paid memberships and achieved impressive financials, including 32 billion USD



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in revenue, 5.6 billion in operating income, 2.0 billion in net cash from operations, and 1.6 billion in free cash flow.<sup>1</sup> The company's content performed well in popular series, documentaries, and films.

The evolution of storytelling in the streaming era has greatly impacted the entertainment industry and revolutionised the way people consume content. The rise of digital streaming platforms such as *Netflix* has changed the traditional broadcast model and provides access to a wide range of content from different countries, cultures and genres. One of the most significant changes in storytelling brought about by the streaming era is the shift from linear to nonlinear storytelling.<sup>2</sup> In 'traditional' television shows, viewers are usually limited to watching episodes in a linear order. However, with streaming platforms, viewers can choose to watch episodes out of order, skip to specific scenes, or even watch multiple episodes back-to-back. This has allowed for more complex and multilayered stories that cater to a more sophisticated audience. *Netflix* is known for experimenting with unconventional narrative structures. For example, the series *Stranger Things* (2016 – present) employs a nonlinear storytelling approach, blending elements of horror, science fiction, and the 1980s nostalgia. This allows for a more immersive and engaging viewing experience.<sup>3</sup>

Another impact of the streaming era on storytelling has been an increase in international content.<sup>4</sup> Streaming platforms, such as *Netflix*, have given rise to a global distribution network that provides access to a wider range of stories and perspectives.<sup>5</sup> This has allowed for a greater representation of diverse cultures, promoting inclusivity and cultural exchange.<sup>6</sup> The rise of streaming services has created new opportunities for storytellers to experiment with new narrative structures and styles. This has led to the creation of innovative and unique content that challenges the traditional Hollywood formula.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, viewers are now exposed to a wider range of stories, including those that may not have had the chance been told in the traditional broadcast model.

*Netflix's* storytelling approach also extends to its international expansion strategy. The platform includes fiction from different territories in its portfolio, which has helped widen the geo-cultural spectrum of narratives available to viewers.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, *Netflix's* content strategies reflect their negotiation of global and local concepts. The platform's branding of diversity and inclusion is evident in their content, which demonstrates their particular strategies for navigating these concepts.<sup>9</sup>

## 2 The Art and Science of Storytelling

The art of storytelling is a creative endeavour that requires skill in constructing a compelling narrative to capture the audience's imagination. This process involves several important components, including characters, setting, plot, theme, and tone, collectively known as the CSPTT.<sup>10</sup> Interactive storytelling takes a

visual approach, incorporates character perspectives, and follows dramatic patterns. However, it differs from traditional storytelling in that it gives the viewer the distinctive power to influence and reshape the story.<sup>11</sup>

Storytelling has four essential elements: perspective, narrative, interactivity, and medium. Perspective allows for a subjective view of a story, including cognition, emotion, representation, and presentation. Narrative is the core content and includes mimesis, time, space, cause and effect, and plot. Interactivity, which is critical in the digital age, includes engagement and user interaction, while the medium includes technology, mediation, channels, digital content, and various forms of expression. In essence, narrative combines story content and form as a fundamental way in which humans make sense of the world.<sup>12</sup>

Stories have been an integral part of human civilisation for thousands of years. They serve as a means of entertainment, communication, and cultural preservation. McKee argued that a story should have a clear and compelling structure, well-defined characters, and a theme that resonates with the audience. It is important to use specific techniques such as foreshadowing and rising actions to keep your audience engaged and excited.<sup>13</sup> However, the art of storytelling has evolved over time and has become a complex field of study that encompasses not only the creative aspects of storytelling, but also the scientific principles underlying its effectiveness.

Conversely, narrative science is concerned with the study of the psychological and cognitive mechanisms involved in the creation, comprehension, and dissemination of narratives.<sup>14</sup> This includes understanding how the brain processes and responds to different elements of a story, such as how music or visual cues can affect emotions and how narratives can be used to influence people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. In recent years, advances in the field of cognitive psychology have led to a greater understanding of storytelling.<sup>15</sup> Researchers have discovered that stories have a unique ability to engage the human brain and elicit strong emotions. For example, studies have shown that the brain responds differently to stories than to other forms of communication, such as lists of facts or data.<sup>16</sup> There are studies that highlight the brain networks involved in storytelling and show how it is used in various forms of communication, including education, making the scientific profession more inclusive.<sup>17</sup> It can be argued that storytelling is important for scientists who want to authentically connect with their audiences and to better understand the brain processes involved in this form of communication. The hippocampus, along with the medial prefrontal cortex, supports the integration of partially overlapping events and the reorganisation of memories to form coherent narratives.<sup>18</sup> This suggests that storytelling involves the consolidation and integration of different experiences into a meaningful narrative.

The art and science of storytelling have been widely studied by various disciplines, including folklorists, anthropologists, communication theorists, sociologists, philosophers, and critical theorists. It is well established that humans have an innate connection to narratives, and that these narratives shape our understanding of reality. However, it is also important to note that narratives have the power to empower and suppress, broaden our perspectives, and reinforce stereotypes.<sup>19</sup> Maggio delineated three primary areas of focus within the anthropology of storytelling: "the relational dynamics between those involved in storytelling, the content of the story, and storytelling techniques".<sup>20</sup> It is argued that the anthropology of narrative is a prerequisite for contemporary anthropologists to answer the call for narrative in their work.<sup>21</sup> Storr argues that storytelling is an essential part of being human and shaping who we are.<sup>22</sup>

1 *Netflix Releases Fourth-Quarter 2022 Financial Results*. Released on 19<sup>th</sup> April 2022. [online]. [2023-07-02]. Available at: <<https://ir.netflix.net/investor-news-and-events/financial-releases/press-release-details/2022/Netflix-Releases-First-Quarter-2022-Financial-Results/default.aspx>>.

2 McDOWELL, A.: Storytelling Shapes the Future. In *Journal of Futures Studies*, 2019, Vol. 23, No. 3, p. 105-106.

3 See: BAKER, D., BALANZATEGUI, J., SANDARS, D.: *Netflix, Dark Fantastic Genres and Intergenerational Viewing: Family Watch Together TV*. Abingdon, Oxon : Routledge, 2023.

4 SPANGLER, T.: *Netflix to Expand Audio Descriptions, Subtitling in More Languages*. Released on 19<sup>th</sup> May 2022. [online]. [2023-09-21]. Available at: <<https://variety.com/2022/digital/news/netflix-expand-audio-descriptions-subtitling-languages-1235271343/>>.

5 LIMOV, B.: Click It, Binge It, Get Hooked: Netflix and the Growing US Audience for Foreign Content. In *International Journal of Communication*, 2020, Vol. 14, p. 6306.

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7 HADIDA, A. L. et al.: Hollywood Studio Filmmaking in the Age of Netflix: A Tale of Two Institutional Logics. In *Journal of Cultural Economics*, 2021, Vol. 45, p. 213.

8 BUONANNO, M.: Widening Landscapes of TV Storytelling in the Digital Media Environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In *Analisi*, 2018, Vol. 1, No. 58, p. 6.

9 ASMAR, A., RAATS, T., AUDENHOVE, L. V.: Streaming Difference(s): Netflix and the Branding of Diversity. In *Critical Studies in Television*, 2022, Vol. 18, No. 1, p. 26.

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11 See: MEADOWS, M.: *Pause and Effect. The Art of Interactive Narrative*. Indianapolis : New Riders, 2003.

12 Compare to: MEADOWS, M.: *Pause and Effect. The Art of Interactive Narrative*. Indianapolis : New Riders, 2003.

13 See: McKEE, R.: *Story: Style, Structure, Substance, and the Principles of Screenwriting*. New York : Regan Books, 1997.

14 HERMAN, D.: Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind: Cognitive Narratology, Discursive Psychology, and Narratives in Face-to-Face Interaction. In *Narrative*, 2007, Vol. 15, No. 3, p. 306-307.

15 See also: STORR, W.: *The Science of Storytelling: Why Stories Make Us Human and How to Tell Them Better*. New York : Abrams Press, 2021.

16 ZAK, P. J.: Why Your Brain Loves Good Storytelling. In *Harvard Business Review*, 2014, Vol. 28, p. 1-5.

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20 MAGGIO, R.: The Anthropology of Storytelling and the Storytelling of Anthropology. In *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology*, 2014, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 92.

21 MAGGIO, R.: The Anthropology of Storytelling and the Storytelling of Anthropology. In *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology*, 2014, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 93.

22 Compare to: STORR, W.: *The Science of Storytelling: Why Stories Make Us Human and How to Tell Them Better*. New York : Abrams Press, 2021.

Researchers have sought innovative methods to delve into storytelling, with Hu et al. introducing a fresh perspective known as ReCo-RL for visual storytelling. This approach focuses on optimising story quality based on three human-eye-friendly dimensions: “*relevance, coherence, and expressiveness*”.<sup>23</sup> The authors developed reward functions to measure these quality criteria and conducted experiments on the *Visual Storytelling Dataset*, demonstrating that ReCo-RL surpasses existing methods in performance, as evidenced by traditional automatic metrics and the newly proposed quality criteria.

*Netflix* offers a unique platform for creators to utilise their storytelling tools, such as nonlinear storytelling, interactive storytelling, and personalised recommendations.<sup>24</sup> The platform has produced numerous original series that have redefined the traditional television experience, many of which have become cultural phenomena.<sup>25</sup> The *Netflix* recommender system is a crucial component of the platform’s success and user experience. It utilises a collection of proprietary algorithms to recommend content to users and personalise their experience.<sup>26</sup>

The underlying problem of audience fragmentation, although not unique to Internet-distributed television, must be taken into account when considering the cultural power of streaming services.<sup>27</sup> Initially, *Netflix* positioned itself as a subscription service similar to *HBO*, utilising a language that conveyed exclusivity and cultural distinction.<sup>28</sup> Audiences interpret popular culture messages through the lens of their individual cultural backgrounds. Popular culture often conveys important ideological messages that are central to understanding how it reinforces certain ideals and stereotypes.<sup>29</sup>

*Netflix*’s storytelling approach extends to its international expansion strategy. The platform includes fiction from different territories in its portfolio, which has helped widen the geo-cultural spectrum of narratives available to viewers.<sup>30</sup> *Netflix* aggregates audience interests across regions, allowing it to categorise subscribers into transnational clusters of tastes and sensibilities.<sup>31</sup> This approach enables *Netflix* to target subscribers based on their individual preferences rather than aiming for a national mass audience.<sup>32</sup> *Netflix*’s success can be attributed to its data-driven approach to content creation and marketing. The platform uses algorithms to customise recommendations for individual users, thereby creating a personalised viewing experience.<sup>33</sup> This data-driven approach also extends *Netflix*’s marketing strategy, which has contributed to its substantial growth in subscribers.<sup>34</sup> Amid the global pandemic, the importance of home entertainment has skyrocketed, and *Netflix* has cleverly seized this opportunity by providing a diverse range of content for viewers to enjoy.<sup>35</sup>

The post-television era has seen the growth of “brandcasting”, which refers to the merging of media content and promotional material.<sup>36</sup> According to a *Netflix* survey, 73% of respondents described binge-

watching as watching between 2 and 6 episodes in a single sitting.<sup>37</sup> The results of a survey with 797 participants revealed that binge watching is largely driven by established habits, anticipation and suspense, and the desire to regulate emotions. On the other hand, appointment viewing is influenced more by viewing efficacy and age.<sup>38</sup>

### 3 Types of Storytelling Techniques in Netflix Original Content

*Netflix*’s original content is known for its diverse and innovative storytelling techniques.<sup>39</sup> The company’s original programming strategies have also contributed to the evolution of storytelling in the digital age. By producing and distributing its own original content, *Netflix* has challenged ‘traditional’ television networks and disrupted the ‘traditional’ television landscape. This shift has allowed for more diverse and innovative approaches to storytelling, as *Netflix* has the freedom to experiment with different genres, formats, and narrative structures. Some of the most common types and techniques used in *Netflix*’s original content include the following:

1. Nonlinear storytelling. In this technique, the story is told out of sequence and jumps back and forth in time. Shows such as *Dark* (2017 – 2020) and *Stranger Things* (2016 – present) use nonlinear storytelling to keep viewers engaged and provide a more complex narrative. Nonlinear storytelling can also be used to provide a more complete picture of a character or event, showing how their past experiences shape their present and future.
2. Serialised storytelling. This is a type of storytelling in which each episode builds upon the previous one, creating a continuous and ongoing story. Shows such as *The Haunting* anthology 2018 – 2020 (*The Haunting of Hill House*, *The Haunting of Bly Manor*), *The Witcher* (2019 – present) use serialised storytelling to keep viewers invested in the characters and the story’s progression. Another example is the series *House of Cards* (2013 – 2018), a political drama that explores the Machiavellian machinations of a ruthless and cunning politician.
3. Character-driven storytelling. This type of storytelling focuses on the development of characters and their personal journeys. Shows such as *Orange is the New Black* (2013 – 2019), *BoJack Horseman* (2014 – 2020), *The Queen’s Gambit* (2020) use character-driven stories to explore complex themes and relationships.
4. Documentary-style storytelling. This technique combines elements of storytelling with real-life events and facts. Shows such as *Making a Murderer* (2015 – 2018), *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* (2019), and *Wild Wild Country* (2018) use documentary-style storytelling to provide a factual and in-depth exploration of real-life events.
5. Anthology storytelling. This is a type of storytelling in which each season or episode features a different story, setting, and cast of characters. Shows such as *Love, Death & Robots* (2019 – present), *American Horror Story* (2011 – present), and *The Umbrella Academy* (2019 – present) use anthology storytelling to provide a wide range of stories and themes within a single series.
6. Flashback storytelling. This technique involves the use of flashbacks to provide background information or reveal past events. Shows such as *Narcos* (2015 – 2017), *The Crown* (2016 – present), and *13 Reasons Why* (2017 – 2020) use flashbacks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the characters and the story.
7. Episodic storytelling. This type of storytelling focuses on individual stories or episodes that are self-

23 HU, J. et al.: What Makes a Good Story? Designing Composite Rewards for Visual Storytelling. In *Proceedings of the AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence*, 2020, Vol. 34, No. 5, p. 7969-7976.

24 LOBATO, R.: Rethinking International TV Flows Research in the Age of Netflix. In *Television & New Media*, 2018, Vol. 19, No. 3, p. 242.

25 See: LOTZ, A. D., RAMON L.: *Streaming Video: Storytelling Across Borders*. New York: New York University Press, 2023.

26 KHOO, O.: Picturing Diversity: Netflix’s Inclusion Strategy and the Netflix Recommender Algorithm (NRA). In *Television & New Media*, 2022, Vol. 24, No. 3, p. 283.

27 LOTZ, A. D.: Unpopularity and Cultural Power in the Age of Netflix: New Questions for Cultural Studies’ Approaches to Television Texts. In *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2021, Vol. 24, No. 4, p. 889.

28 TRYON, C.: TV Got Better: Netflix’s Original Programming Strategies and the On-Demand Television Transition. In *Media Industries Journal*, 2015, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 104-105.

29 Compare to: JONES, F., EKHOLM, F.: *Färgstark monark, en normbrytande avspark? En semiotisk analys av Young Royals*. [Dissertation Thesis]. Umeå: Faculty of Arts Umeå University, 2022, p. 43.

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31 BRADFIELD, S.: Queen Sono: Netflix Original as Postfeminist South African Spy Thriller. In *Critical Studies in Television*, 2023, Vol. 18, No. 2, p. 165.

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33 HILLS, M.: Netflix, Transfandom and ‘Trans TV’: Where Data-Driven Fandom Meets Fan Reflexivity. In *Critical Studies in Television*, 2018, Vol. 13, No. 4, p. 496.

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37 WEST, K.: *Unsurprising: Netflix Survey Indicates People Like to Binge-Watch TV*. Released on 13<sup>th</sup> December 2013. [online]. [2023-09-20]. Available at: <<https://www.cinemablend.com/television/Unsurprising-Netflix-Survey-Indicates-People-Like-Binge-Watch-TV-61045.html>>.

38 RUBENKING, B., BRACKEN, C. C.: Binge-Watching: A Suspenseful, Emotional, Habit. In *Communication Research Reports*, 2018, Vol. 35, No. 5, p. 381-391.

39 See: SMITH, A. N.: *Storytelling Industries: Narrative Production in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Cham: Springer, 2018.

contained, with each episode having its own beginning, middle, or end. Shows such as *Black Mirror* (Channel 4 (2011–2014), Netflix 2016–present), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015–2019, interactive special – 2020) use episodic storytelling to provide a light-hearted and entertaining viewing experience that challenges viewers' assumptions and morals.

8. Interconnected storytelling. This type of storytelling involves multiple characters and storylines that intersect and overlap, thus creating a larger and more complex narrative. Shows such as *Sense8* (2015–2018), *Bloodline* (2015–2017), use interconnected storytelling to create a rich and detailed world. For example, *Sense8* uses interconnected storytelling to explore themes of identity, diversity, and connection, as well as the social and political issues that affect each character. The show features multiple locations, languages, cultures, and genres, creating a global and diverse narrative.
9. Immersive storytelling. This type of storytelling aims to fully engage the viewer, blurring the line between the real and imagined. Shows such as *Mindhunter* (2017–2019) and *Maniac* (2018) use immersive storytelling to create a captivating and surreal viewing experience. *Mindhunter* uses immersive storytelling to take viewers inside the minds of the killers and the agents who question them. The show features realistic dialogue, meticulous research and chilling performances by actors who resemble the real-life killers.
10. Real-time storytelling involves presenting events in a narrative as they occur in the story world, mirroring the duration of the story itself. For instance, if a story unfolds over one hour, the corresponding movie or show will also last one hour. This technique enhances the sense of urgency and authenticity for the audience. Netflix's original series *Russian Doll* (2019–present) offers an example of real-time storytelling. The series revolves around Nadia, who repeatedly experiences the same night in an ongoing time loop. Each episode lasts roughly 25 minutes, paralleling Nadia's lifespan within the narrative. In *Bandersnatch* (2018), an interactive film within the *Black Mirror* anthology series, viewers' choices affect the plot and outcomes, resulting in multiple endings and branching narratives that evolve in real time based on the audience decisions.

## 4 Objectives and Methods

This study aims to understand how the storytelling techniques used in Netflix's original series and movies released between 2016 and 2022 have evolved. The study was conducted as a longitudinal study, analysing 100 original series and 50 movies released by Netflix between 2016 and 2022. Comprehensive data was collected on each production, including its title, release date, genre, language, and specific storytelling techniques used. A longitudinal approach was used, which allowed us to track changes in storytelling techniques over time. Observations were made at regular intervals (each year) to establish temporal patterns. Ten different storytelling technique criteria were developed and applied to each production, assigning binary values (1 for presence, 0 for absence) based on technique identification.

All screenings were conducted in a controlled environment, specifically the Media Lab of the Educational and Scientific Institute of Journalism. This laboratory provided the setting for our research, equipped with state-of-the-art audiovisual equipment that ensured an immersive and high-quality viewing experience. Each production was viewed in its entirety, following a structured viewing approach. This involved watching all episodes of the series or the entire film, as appropriate, without skipping or fast-forwarding in order to capture the nuances of the storytelling. We recorded the presence or absence of each technique during viewing. Detailed records were kept of each production, including its title, release date, genre, language, and specific storytelling techniques identified during the viewing process. These records formed the basis of the subsequent analysis.

The study allowed us to monitor changes in the use of storytelling techniques over time and to make observations about longer-term trends and patterns in this evolution. Observing the same variables repeatedly over a short or long period of time is the basis of a longitudinal study. It often takes the form of observational

research, but it can also take the form of an experiment.<sup>40</sup> This study can provide insightful information about how the narrative of Netflix's offerings is changing, as well as details about how future material will be produced and distributed.

The analysis was performed based on 10 criteria for storytelling techniques: nonlinear storytelling, serialised storytelling, character-driven storytelling, documentary-style storytelling, anthology storytelling, flashback storytelling, episodic storytelling, interconnected storytelling, immersive storytelling, and real-time storytelling. The analysis included both English-language content and content in other languages. To ensure the representativeness of our sample, we employed the following strategies:

- Genre structure: we determined the genre structure of Netflix movies and series based on the descriptions provided directly on the streaming platform. The number of movies and TV series analysed for each genre corresponded to the proportion of these genres in all Netflix original products available on the platform in each year under consideration.
- Language diversity: we included both English-language content and content in other languages to capture a broad spectrum of narratives. This approach allowed us to examine storytelling trends across different linguistic and cultural contexts.
- Availability considerations: it is important to note that, due to copyright and distribution policies, some of the content we analysed may not have been available for viewing in certain regions or may not have been accessible in the country where the analysis was conducted, which was Ukraine. This potential limitation was taken into account in our analysis.

To help accomplish the main study goal, the following research questions were established:

RQ1: What are the most prevalent storytelling techniques used in Netflix's original series and movies released between 2016 and 2022?

RQ2: How has the distribution of storytelling styles changed over time in Netflix's original series and movies?

The null and alternate hypotheses were formulated as follows:

H<sub>0</sub>: There is no significant change in the use of storytelling techniques in Netflix's original series and movies over time.

H<sub>1</sub>: There is a significant change in the use of storytelling techniques in Netflix's original series and movies over time, with an increased focus on nonlinear storytelling, flashback storytelling, and interconnected storytelling.

## 5 Results

Our content analysis included both original English-language content (n=116) as well as content in other languages, including Spanish (n=7), Turkish (n=4), German (n=4), Danish (n=3), French (n=3), Korean (n=2), Hindi (n=2), Norwegian (n=2), Swedish (n=2), Polish (n=2), Ukrainian (n=2), and Japanese (n=1). It is important to note that due to copyright and distribution policies, the products we analysed may not have been available for viewing in other countries or may not have been available in the country where the analysis was performed, Ukraine.

The predominant genres of the analysed films and series were teen (n=20), crime (n=15), psychological (n=12), mystical (n=11), sci-fi dramas (n=6), coming-of-age dramas (n=6)/ all types of drama (n=75); satirical (n=9), romantic comedies (n=21) and sitcoms (n=18), coming-of-age comedies (n=11)/all types of comedies (n=59); other genres, including biopics, thrillers, and horror (n=16). Our analysis included both completed

<sup>40</sup> Compare to: COOK, T. D., CAMPBELL, D. T., SHADISH, W.: *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Generalized Causal Inference*. Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

production (n=90) and ongoing projects (n=60). The total duration of the *Netflix* original series we analysed (n=100) was 776.67 hours, and the movies (n=50) were 100 hours (total of 876.67 hours).

To ensure the representativeness of our sample, the genre structure of *Netflix* movies and series was determined based on the descriptions of the series and movies directly available on the streaming platform. In addition, the number of movies and TV series analysed according to genre distribution corresponded to the proportion of these genres in all *Netflix* original products available on the streaming platform in the current year. The number of movies and TV series (n=150) according to genre structure for each of the analysed years (2016-2022) is graphically presented in Figure 1.

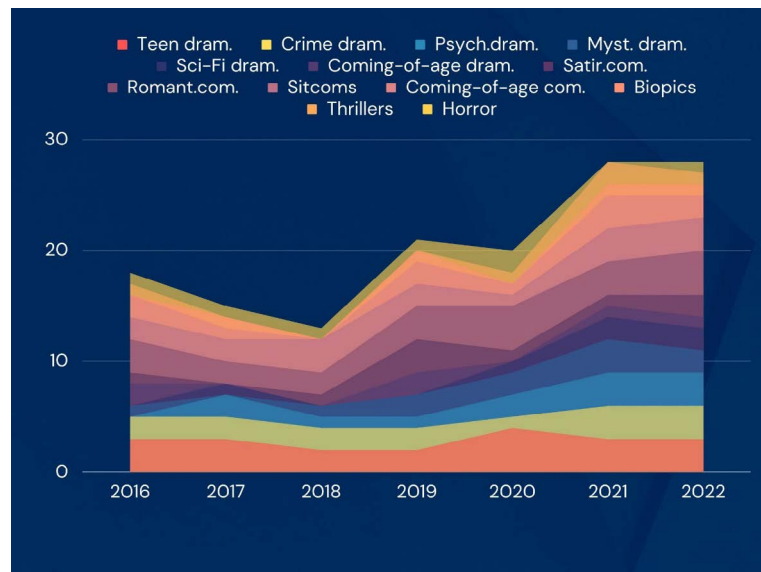


Figure 1: The number of movies and TV series (n=150) according to the genre structure  
Source: Own processing

Figure 2 shows a graphical representation of the results of the analysis by type of storytelling, by year (2016 – 2022).

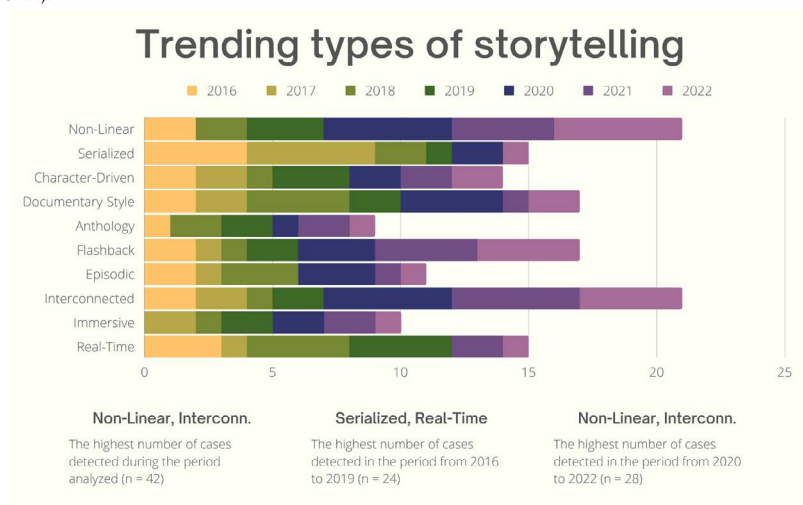


Figure 2: Types of storytelling revealed (n = 150)  
Source: Own processing

- Nonlinear storytelling (n=21): the usage of nonlinear storytelling showed a gradual increase over the years, peaking at five instances in 2020 and maintaining high levels in 2021 and 2022. This indicates a positive trend in the adoption of nonlinear storytelling techniques on *Netflix*.
- Serialised storytelling (n=15): serialised storytelling experienced fluctuations over the years, with the highest usage observed in 2017 (five instances). However, it has gradually declined, reaching its lowest point in 2021. This suggests a negative correlation between time and the utilisation of serialised storytelling.
- Character-driven storytelling (n=14): character-driven storytelling remained relatively consistent over the years, with a total of two instances each year. This indicates the consistent and stable presence of character-driven narratives on the platform.
- Documentary-style storytelling (n=18): documentary-style storytelling demonstrated a gradual increase in usage, reaching its highest point in 2018 in four instances. Although it fluctuated slightly, it has maintained a consistent presence in recent years, suggesting a positive correlation with time.
- Anthology storytelling (n=9): anthology storytelling varied over the years, with its highest usage in 2016-2018. It will gradually decline, reaching its lowest point in 2022. This suggests a negative correlation between time and the prevalence of anthology storytelling.
- Flashback storytelling (n=17): flashback storytelling has consistently gained popularity over the years, peaking at four instances in 2021 and 2022. This indicates a positive trend in the adoption of flashback storytelling techniques by *Netflix*.
- Episodic storytelling (n=13): episodic storytelling remained relatively stable with 1 – 2 instances each year, indicating a consistent presence on the platform.
- Interconnected storytelling (n=18): interconnected storytelling exhibited a positive trend, with an increase from two instances in 2016 to five instances in 2020 and 2021. However, it showed a slight decline in 2022, indicating a positive correlation with time, followed by potential stabilisation.
- Immersive storytelling (n=10): immersive storytelling remained relatively stable, with slight variations, but no clear upward or downward trend.
- Real-time storytelling (n=16): real-time storytelling experienced fluctuations, with its highest usage in 2018-2019 with eight instances. It showed a gradual decline in subsequent years, suggesting a negative correlation between time and the adoption of real-time storytelling.

The analysis revealed varied trends in the utilisation of different storytelling techniques in *Netflix*. Interconnected, nonlinear, flashback, and documentary-style storytelling showed positive correlations with time, indicating their increasing popularity. Conversely, serialised, anthology, and real-time storytelling have shown negative correlations, suggesting fluctuations or declining usage over the years. Character-driven, episodic, and immersive storytelling techniques have remained relatively stable in their presence on platforms, with no clear trends. Figure 3 displays a word cloud consisting of the titles of *Netflix* movies and TV shows analysed in our study, covering the period from 2016 to 2022. In this representation, the size of each title corresponds to its frequency within the content examined.





Figure 3: A word cloud consisting of the titles of the Netflix movies and TV shows we analysed  
Source: Own processing

## 6 Discussion and Conclusion

In 2016 – 2018, the most common types of storytelling found in *Netflix* original content were serialised storytelling and real-time storytelling. However, by 2020 – 2022, the trend had shifted towards flashback storytelling, nonlinear storytelling, and interconnected storytelling. This shift towards more complex and unconventional storytelling techniques can be seen as a response to the growing demand for unique and innovative content from audiences. *Netflix* is actively challenging ‘traditional’ television networks and positioning itself as a distinct and innovative player in the industry.<sup>41</sup> Lotz further supports this claim by discussing the rise of Internet-distributed television and the role of platforms such as *Netflix* in shaping the future of storytelling. She argues that *Netflix*’s success can be attributed to its ability to provide a wide range of content that appeals to diverse audiences, as well as its commitment to producing high-quality and original programming.<sup>42</sup>

Starting in 2020, *Netflix* has placed strong emphasis on the diversity of representation within its content offerings. This shift towards greater inclusivity became particularly apparent with the release of the platform’s diversity report. Through this report, *Netflix* positioned itself as a catalyst for inclusion, actively working to empower and support underrepresented communities in the film and television industries.<sup>43</sup>

To analyse the hypothesis regarding the change in the use of storytelling techniques in *Netflix* original series and movies over time, a statistical test was performed using the data collected from the sample of *Netflix* original series and movies released between 2016 and 2022. The results of the test provide evidence to support H1, the alternative hypothesis, which states that there is a significant change in the use of storytelling techniques over time, with an increased focus on nonlinear storytelling, flashback storytelling, and interconnected storytelling. Specifically, there is a notable increase in the prevalence of nonlinear storytelling, flashback storytelling, and interconnected storytelling in the later years of the sample. This supports the idea that *Netflix* has increasingly incorporated more complex and interwoven storytelling styles into its original content over time.

41 WAYNE, M.: Netflix, Amazon, and Branded Television Content in Subscription Video On-Demand Portals. In *Media, Culture & Society*, 2017, Vol. 40, No. 5, p. 726.

42 LOTZ, A. D.: Evolution or Revolution? Television in Transformation. In *Critical Studies in Television*, 2018, Vol. 13, No. 4, p. 493.

43 ASMAR, A., RAATS, T., AUDENHOVE, L. V.: Streaming Difference(s): Netflix and the Branding of Diversity. In *Critical Studies in Television*, 2022, Vol. 18, No. 1, p. 30.

Overall, these findings contribute to the larger conversation surrounding the use of storytelling techniques in media and the impact of streaming services on the production and distribution of the original content. Further research could expand on this study by including a larger sample size, exploring the reasons behind the shift towards nonlinear storytelling, flashback storytelling, and interconnected storytelling, and examining the effect of these techniques on the audience’s engagement and enjoyment of *Netflix* original series and movies.

The results of the study on storytelling techniques in *Netflix* original series and movies released between 2016 and 2022 indicate that nonlinear and interconnected storytelling were the most prevalent storytelling techniques used in the selected content. The study also found that there was a significant change in the use of storytelling techniques over time, with an increased focus on nonlinear storytelling, flashback storytelling, and interconnected storytelling. This shift in storytelling techniques highlights the changing trends in television and film production. Additionally, the analysis examined various storytelling techniques and their correlation with time:

- Nonlinear storytelling exhibited a positive trend with increasing usage over the years.
- Serialised storytelling displays fluctuations with a negative correlation.
- Character-driven storytelling has remained stable and consistent.
- Documentary-style storytelling has demonstrated a gradual increase.
- Anthology storytelling has experienced variations and negative correlations.
- Flashback storytelling showed a positive trend.
- Episodic storytelling remained relatively stable.
- Interconnected storytelling displays a positive correlation with fluctuations.
- Immersive storytelling remained stable.
- Real-time storytelling showed fluctuations and a negative correlation.

The results of this study contribute to a broader understanding of storytelling techniques in the media industry and provide insights into the current trends and future directions of television and film production. The results suggest that nonlinear storytelling and flashback storytelling are becoming increasingly popular, and that interconnected storytelling is emerging as a new trend. In conclusion, *Netflix*’s approach to storytelling is characterised by adaptability and commitment to both popular and niche genres. The platform’s continuous effort to deliver a mix of engaging narratives aligns with its goal of catering to a broad and diverse global audience, ensuring a compelling streaming experience for years to come.

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