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Towards an understanding of children's screen genres in the streaming video era: Reflecting on shifting intersections between digital media and screen studies

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Abstract

On-demand streaming video services, including the video-sharing platform YouTube and the subscription-video-on-demand (SVOD) service Netflix, have replaced television to become the most popular means of accessing video content amongst children in a number of countries. These streaming video platforms have introduced new generic paradigms into the domain of children's media, and children's genres form, circulate, and are consumed on these platforms in ways that differ from legacy media (film and television). The streaming video ecology thus poses new challenges for studies of children's screen genres and media consumption. This article offers a methodological provocation, contending that this context calls for the integration of traditions in screen studies – namely audience research and genre analysis – with approaches to platform analysis drawn from digital media studies. Such an interdisciplinary methodology promises to illuminate how new children's genres have formed in the streaming video ecology, and how these genres circulate culturally, including how children engage with these content types.

Keywords: audience research, children's media, digital media studies, genre, platform analysis, screen studies, streaming video platforms, textual analysis

On-demand streaming video services, including the video-sharing platform YouTube and the subscription-video-on-demand (SVOD) service Netflix, have replaced television to become the most popular means of accessing video content amongst children in a number of countries.[1] These streaming video platforms have introduced new generic paradigms into the domain of children's media. Notably, user consumption data is a key influence on content production, acquisition, and algorithmic distribution strategies on these streaming video platforms. As a result, the viewing habits and practices of children may play an increasingly central role in the formation of globally popular new children's content trends and genre formations. In response to these significant shifts, since 2017 major controversies have erupted around video genres on YouTube that are seemingly very popular with young children but are inappropriate for child viewers according to a number of media commentators.[2]

This contentious landscape poses new challenges for studies of children's screen genres and media consumption. The on-demand streaming video ecology subverts assumed power hierarchies between child viewers, children's media industries, and parental mediation strategies, in part because children themselves – and the specific ways that they use and choose content on streaming platforms – contribute to content trends that form outside of traditional film and television production settlements. Yet there remains little scholarly research on streaming video consumption, particularly in relation to children. This knowledge gap has contributed to the current situation in which policy-makers, parents, scholars, and industry professionals have been caught off guard by the rise of strange streaming video genres seemingly popular with children.

This article offers a methodological provocation, contending that this context calls for the integration of traditions in screen studies – namely audience research and genre analysis – with approaches to platform analysis drawn from digital media studies. Such an interdisciplinary methodology promises to illuminate how new children's genres have formed in the streaming video ecology and how these genres circulate culturally, including how children engage with these content types. The article canvasses key trends and gaps in the extant research on children's media on streaming video platforms and advocates for new lines of inquiry that work across disciplinary borders. The proposed combination of methods operates in parallel with and builds on a valuable body of media industries work that addresses

changing production settlements and distribution practices in children's media with the rise of the streaming video ecology.[3] Unlike this extant work, the approach suggested in this article concentrates on the textual features of children's genres on streaming video platforms and addresses how these genres and the distribution architectures that deliver them are received, interpreted, and understood by their child audiences.

Children's media in the streaming video ecology

Since 2017, YouTube has attracted significant criticism across journalistic, advocacy, and regulatory spaces for its use of children's data and the wealth of supposedly inappropriate child-oriented content on the platform.[4] The controversy culminated in a historic US \$170 million fine in September 2019 imposed on YouTube by the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC). In response, in January 2020 YouTube changed its internal policies and mechanisms to ensure child-oriented content is clearly identified on the platform.[5] Yet while YouTube has been central to some major shifts in children's media content types and consumption habits, aside from insightful work on unboxing videos[6] (videos of people unwrapping various products) and 'fake' Peppa Pig videos[7] there remains little scholarly research about children's genres on YouTube. Existing work has found that new child-oriented genres native to YouTube tend to be 'poorly defined and understood'[8], have received 'little critical attention',[9] and that 'questions of genre offer avenues for further research'.[10]

Such digital media studies considerations of children's YouTube genres tend not to directly engage with the qualitative textual analysis traditions of screen studies, which understand genre through critical paradigms that categorise video content according to its shared aesthetics, narrative structures, and thematic preoccupations.[11] As Moine puts it in her synthesis of film genre theory, genre in this tradition is 'defined as an empirical category that serves to name, differentiate, and classify works on the basis of the recurring configurations of formal and thematic elements they share'.[12] I propose in this article that it would prove valuable to work towards an understanding of children's content types in the streaming video ecology that speaks to well-established screen studies conceptualisations of genre. Such screen studies methods could productively work in tandem with insights from digital plat-

form analysis, which are attentive to the role of platform interfaces, architectures, and algorithmic distribution processes in streaming video content categorisation. The interaction of these two fields would address how, in the streaming video ecology, genre operates as both a computational, algorithmic process influenced by user consumption data and delivered via platform interfaces *and* as a constellation of texts with shared semantic, syntactic, and aesthetic features that both continue and differ from genre trends of legacy screen media.

Furthermore, while scholars including Lange[13] and Abidin[14] have examined children and young people's involvement in *producing* video content for YouTube, there has been little scholarly examination of children's *viewing practices* on YouTube and other streaming video services. Valuable extant work such as Marsh's study of how children engage with unboxing videos on YouTube has had a close ethnographic focus on particular users, with the aim of identifying their digital literacies across public and domestic environments.[15] However, further research is needed on how children as an influential audience group select and engage with streaming video content and navigate streaming platforms. As Livingstone and Local point out this gap 'matters for understanding, descriptively, how children engage with television content',[16] a gap that applies for film content in the streaming video ecology as well. Livingstone and Local assert that current viewing measuring tools used in industry and policy research tend to be tied to devices, meaning little is known about how children interpret and relate to *content* on streaming services.[17]

There is also a related lack of knowledge about how children use and engage with specific streaming video *platforms*. To understand how these media forms have impacted children's content trends and consumption practices, it is important to gather an understanding of children's fluency with various streaming video platforms in different age groups, and to illuminate how children select and gravitate towards certain content types. As Livingstone and Local conclude, 'to understand children's engagement with television content in a changing media landscape' new approaches and measures should be introduced 'that capture content viewed across devices, platforms and services – ideally, broken down by demographic categories'.[18] A lack of understanding of children's streaming video use also diminishes the currency of children's media-use guidelines, which Huber et al assert are built around 'non-interactive' video and do not account for streaming apps.[19]

This is a significant research gap when considering the wealth of new children's genre formations on not just YouTube – which features a vast variety of child-oriented content produced by amateurs and semi-professionals, often monetised through multichannel networks[20] – but also SVOD services that distribute professionally-produced content. YouTube and SVOD services like Netflix, Disney+, and Amazon Prime Video have increasingly pivoted to children's content in recent years in an effort to capitalise on what has become one of their most lucrative demographics.[21] These services operate outside of or adjacent to national policy frameworks that undergird the production, distribution, and classification of children's film and television. In addition, their content acquisition and production strategies are grounded in user data and the solidification of a brand identity that differentiates each platform in this increasingly competitive market.

These content strategies are distinctive from those of legacy media (broadcast and cable television and film) in key ways. For instance, as Baker & Balanzategui & Sandars have shown, rather than producing children's content in alignment with traditional viewer demographics and age-based classifications, Netflix has popularised a contentious new 'micro-genre' called 'Family Watch Together TV', which 'encompasses family-oriented science fiction, horror and fantasy'.[22] This content does not neatly map onto the classification frameworks of legacy media, a strategy emulated by family-oriented SVOD platform Disney+ through its flagship *Star Wars* series *The Mandalorian* (2019-present), which targets family audiences despite being violent and with dark themes. As Baker & Balanzategui & Sandars argue, 'through these key texts and genres, Netflix and Disney+ are consolidating a new dark family terrain in the streaming sector that unsettles traditional paradigms of family viewing'.[23]

Furthermore, Johnson has demonstrated how children's programming has been a core pillar of the Amazon Prime Video original content strategy.[24] Johnson argues that prioritising children's content has become a 'norm' for SVOD services, due 'in part from perception of children as major influencers over household SVOD subscriptions in a competitive environment where service could be cancelled and restarted at any time'.[25] Baker & Balanzategui & Sandars similarly identify the carefully-calibrated way that Netflix targets child and family audiences not through content 'unambiguously positioned as suitable for children', but through original content that invites 'affective connections between nostalgic older viewers and their chil-

dren or grandchildren’ in ways that solicit ‘a specific intergenerational dynamic between older *fans* and younger *viewers* as future subscribers’.[26] In her political economy analysis of industry practices in children’s streaming media, Potter has also highlighted how the business strategies of SVODs privilege children’s content types like reboots of older series, a strategy that harnesses parental nostalgia to minimise risk ‘while attracting contemporary children to their services’.[27]

In similar ways, Johnson highlights how the Amazon Prime Video children’s content acquisition and production strategies align with the specific identities and interests of Amazon brands. Johnson illustrates how Amazon Prime Video extends strategies used for its retail brands, reinforcing ‘Amazon’s interest in building appeals to parents’ through what he calls a ‘prosocial brand’ for its children’s content. This brand is carefully positioned ‘as “different” from and more discerning than its competitors while strengthening its allegiance to the values and sensibilities of parent consumers’.[28] While such research has highlighted how YouTube and SVOD services have initiated new industry and production approaches to children’s content, it is not yet understood how child viewers engage with, interpret, and understand these content types and their modes of delivery.

The architectures of streaming video platforms

The case of YouTube also makes clear the importance of understanding not just how child audiences engage with new types of *content* on streaming video platforms, but how they interact with the architectures and interfaces of the *platforms* through which this content is delivered. As previously highlighted, YouTube has faced regular accusations of hosting child-oriented but child inappropriate content – even on YouTube Kids, the child-friendly version of the platform that launched in 2015.[29] Elsewhere I have addressed how the journalistic discourse around supposedly ‘disturbing’ children’s content on YouTube tends to dwell on how children’s viewing practices on the platform have contributed to new children’s genres that are unfamiliar to adult guardians and commentators.[30] Children’s consumption preferences and habits are thus seen to work alongside what Burgess calls the ‘ambivalent’[31] platform logics of YouTube to generate new types of content that do not align with existing cultural expectations around child-appropriate content.

The need to understand the intersection between child viewers and streaming video platform architectures and interfaces is further highlighted by YouTube's response to these controversies, which focused on adjustments to the way the platform demarcates and organises content. As well as being accused of hosting disturbing child-oriented content, YouTube was found to be in violation of the US Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) in 2019, for tracking children's viewing practices in order to deliver targeted advertising without parental consent. This finding culminated in the aforementioned \$170 million in September 2019: the largest fine to date for violations of children's online privacy laws.[32]

In response, YouTube made a range of changes to the way content is uploaded, categorised, and distributed on the platform. These include having creators identify if their content is made for children and using machine-learning to find videos that target young viewers, such as content featuring 'kids characters, themes, toys, or games'.[33] Once content is determined 'for' children, the platform will display the video differently from adult-oriented content: for instance, features such as auto-play queues, comments, personalised advertising, and live chat are turned off. Thus, YouTube's response to these complex issues has been to tweak the platform's architecture so that content designated as intended for children is delivered differently.

Yet this categorisation process has already proven to be fraught, because distinguishing between child-oriented content and content that deploys childlike aesthetics and themes for comedic or unsettling effect can be difficult on YouTube.[34] Seemingly child-oriented content that is, by legacy media standards, inappropriate for young children has long been a popular form of amateur content on YouTube, being a key contribution to the vaguely defined mode commonly described as 'the weird part of YouTube'[35]. Seminal, widely known examples of such content include 'Funny Horsie' (Chriddof 2011) and David Lewandowski's 'Man Going to the Store' (2011). The 'weird part' of YouTube operates as 'a chaotic archive of weird, wonderful, and trashy vernacular video',[36] performatively contrasting with more polished, professionally produced content on the platform. In their influential study of these 'two YouTubes', Burgess and Green describe this professional sphere of content as 'branded and Big Media entertainment'.[37] In her dissertation on 'weird' YouTube content, Loy characterises intentionally bizarre, amateurish content in terms of a 'weird vernacular' which revels in a chaotic performance of idiocy.[38] Similarly, Douglas identifies a 'definable aesthetic'

he designates ‘internet ugly’ running through internet meme culture generally (including vernacular YouTube content), an aesthetic which harnesses ‘the sloppy and amateurish’.[39]

As Douglas suggests, this aesthetic is made possible by, and celebrates, the lack of traditional media gatekeeping unique to the internet as a medium. This reduced media gatekeeping is a key appeal of streaming video platforms, particularly video-sharing platforms like YouTube that feature user-generated content. In its performative display of absurd amateurism, the ‘weird’ mode on YouTube often deploys childlike aesthetics to subversively play with traditional media gatekeeping – an ironic defiance of legacy media conventions and content categorisation frameworks that often extends to an intentional dismantling of the boundaries between content intended for adults and that intended for children.

For instance, the aforementioned ‘Funny Horsie’ is an unsettlingly absurd, crudely produced animation series featuring an ungainly horse, described on the website TVTropes as

one of Britain’s most well-loved, yet obscure children’s programmes. The programme takes a rather surreal, and downright bizarre approach to being informational.[40]

The videos, created by enigmatic outsider video artist Chriddof, simulate children’s television for uncanny and comedic effect. An infamous, more polished version of such ‘weird’ YouTube content that co-opts the style of children’s television to shock and amuse is ‘Don’t Hug Me I’m Scared’ (Sloan and Pelling, 2011-2016), a hybrid of puppetry and animation which parodies iconic children’s shows like *Sesame Street* in intentionally horrifying ways.

As YouTube becomes a more visible and widely acknowledged contributor to global children’s media trends, such disruptive play with expectations around intended audiences has become a major site of cultural tension. As Burgess articulates, ‘commercial children’s media is converging with the platform logics of the “ambivalent internet”’.[41] Despite the adjustments made to the YouTube content categorisation architecture, it remains unclear how such processes account for children’s genres native to the platform that do not resemble those common in legacy media. Because both SVOD platforms and YouTube have introduced new ambiguities and means of distinguishing between child and adult-oriented content, understanding the consumption practices of child audiences is important to considerations of how child-oriented genres operate in the streaming video ecology. This is especially the

case on YouTube, in which content popular with children may not be clearly or explicitly child-oriented according to legacy media definitions or cultural expectations.

Analysing children's streaming video genres

An interdisciplinary methodology that integrates screen and digital media studies approaches would offer a welcome attentiveness to this nexus of streaming video content, child viewers, and digital platforms. Generic categorisation and textual analysis strategies drawn from screen studies could be used to identify clusters of streaming video content with shared aesthetic, formal, and thematic features, and thus be deployed to map new and emerging generic clusters. In tandem, audience research methodologies capable of illuminating children's platform navigation strategies on streaming video platforms could be used to discover children's levels of fluency with platforms and navigation of catalogues in different age groups. Furthermore, platform analysis strategies integrating screen and digital media studies frameworks could fruitfully articulate how children's viewing and platform navigation practices relate to not just the content, but to the interfaces and architectures of the platforms that deliver it.

Notably, the aim of such an interdisciplinary methodology is not to understand the specific and mutable algorithmic distribution processes of platforms like YouTube and Netflix. The aim is instead to illuminate the composition and cultural circulation of children's genres in the streaming video ecology. This includes addressing how children's genres are organised and categorised in platform interfaces, how this organisation of content intersects with children's own viewing practices (including the mediation and policing of these practices by adult guardians), and articulating how the textual features of the content relate to these methods of distribution and reception cultures.

Genres on SVOD platforms

While I believe that screen studies lenses would offer much to a consideration of how children's genres operate on streaming video platforms, they must be attuned to how the approaches of YouTube and SVODs to genre differ from

legacy media, in relation to children's media specifically but also more broadly. As I intimated earlier, Netflix famously has a multitude of micro-genre tags that categorise content in highly specific ways that foreground alignments with individual user tastes. Frey describes this big data and algorithmically-driven distribution model as 'the culmination of a consumerist fantasy: personalization', which for many commentators represents 'a fundamentally new way of connecting cultural objects and human beings'.^[42] This personalisation strategy built on viewer consumption data is a key distinguishing feature of the content distribution and categorisation techniques of SVODs. Netflix's VP of Original Content, Cindy Holland, has been explicit about how this content categorisation process goes 'several layers deeper' than genre. Instead, Netflix organises content based on 'taste communities' distinct from the demographics-based approaches of legacy media: Holland suggests that Netflix has found that demographics are 'not a good indicator of what people like to watch'.^[43]

Netflix's rejection of a demographics-based approach has substantial implications for the formation and cultural circulation of genre, and also more specifically for the types of content made, acquired, and marketed for younger viewers on this SVOD platform. Notably, Frey's quantitative research with SVOD users has found that audiences tend not to trust nor perhaps even primarily rely on a SVOD platform's 'personalised' content suggestions to drive their consumption choices.^[44] Frey's research focused on users above the age of 18, finding that sources like reviews and recommendations from friends remained important to users' content selections. Young children, however, represent a distinctive audience group who are likely less reliant on sources like reviews and more guided by a platform's recommender system – in tandem with the mediation strategies of their adult guardians – when selecting content. As they have a more limited experience with screen consumption, child viewers are also likely to be less fluent than older viewers with the language and semiotics of well-established film and television genres. As a result, children's content selection practices on streaming video platforms may not be heavily influenced by preferences for the genre categories common to and familiar in legacy media.

Notably, screen audience research has rarely tried to ascertain how child viewers relate to genre, even with regards to legacy media.^[45] Child audience research has tended to be grounded on media effects approaches^[46] and on understanding broader patterns of children's media consumption within the

domestic environment, often from ethnographic approaches.[47] Child audience studies that are attentive to issues of genre typically do not adopt methodologies or frame data analysis in ways that engage with screen genre theory: for instance, Götz, Lemish, and Holler's illuminating study of children's fear responses to film and television identifies 'seven elements of fear' experienced by children in response to a wide variety of examples.[48] However, this analysis of children's affectual responses is not framed via theories of genre or textual analysis methods focused on identifying the generic characteristics of the content that provoked such responses. The current knowledge gap around how children relate to genre on streaming video platforms illuminates a wider, more long-standing lack of consideration of the intersections between screen genres and children's viewing.

To understand how children's screen genres operate in the streaming video ecology, comparative textual analysis of each genre's characteristics ideally would be combined with consideration of how these genres are constructed by and positioned on the platforms. Elements of influential textual analysis frameworks, such as Altman's 'semantics/syntactics' approach, remain important in this context.[49] However, they do not take into account how genres form and are organised on streaming video platforms in accordance with platform affordances and architectures. Analysis of children's genres on streaming video platforms should thus be informed by what Lobato and Ryan describe as the 'distributive logics' that influence the cultural formation and circulation of generic categories. Lobato and Ryan argue for the 'utility of distribution research within the textualist tradition of film studies' in order to foreground and illuminate 'some of the thoroughly material constraints that enable and constrain generic change'.[50] While streaming services are not the focus of Lobato and Ryan's article (which addresses the horror genre's international distribution circuits), understanding genre on streaming video platforms demands this kind of attentiveness to the impact of distribution strategies on genre.

In the case of children's genres on SVOD platforms, identifying distributive logics necessitates a form of theoretically-informed catalogue analysis integrated with digital platform analysis to identify how content for younger viewers is categorised and demarcated. For instance, the 'Kids' section of Netflix's platform displays a diverse array of genre categories, some of which intersect with established genres and some of which do not. These include 'Spooky Stuff', 'From Books', 'Girl Power', 'Talking Animals', 'Superheroes', and 'Adventures'. Content for younger viewers is categorised differently on

the main part of the platform: in addition to the aforementioned ‘Family Watch Together TV’ micro-tag, one can navigate to ‘Kids’ as a macro-genre, finding more specific genre categories like ‘Witty Animation’, ‘Watch Together for Older Kids’, and ‘Casual Viewing’. To understand with precision how such categories operate as, or in relation to, genres, an analysis of how content is grouped together, labelled, and displayed on the platform needs to be combined with a comparative textual analysis of the content itself. Such analysis promises to expose how the platform’s distributive logics relate to the content’s shared aesthetic, thematic, and formal features.

In this way, analysing each platform’s distributive logics would involve the integration of textual, catalogue, and digital platform analysis to articulate how the distribution of content is underpinned by each service’s ‘platform vernacular’[51]: a set of narrative patterns, visual, and linguistic styles that shape how distributed content is distributed, framed, consumed, and understood. While Gibbs et al devised this term in relation to ‘genres’ of communication on social media platforms, such a framework could also prove illuminating when considering how children’s interactions with genre on streaming platforms relate to ‘the specificities of the platform, its material architecture, and the collective cultural practices that operate on and through it’ (with the ‘collective cultural practices’ in this case being children’s platform navigation practices as they relate to genre and the selection of content).[52] Also writing in the context of social media research, Pearce et al have proposed that platform vernaculars can be effectively analysed through multi-modal cross-platform analysis.[53] This approach prioritises comparative analysis of different platforms and underscores the importance of the *visual* to platform affordances, vernaculars, and patterns of use.

The visual ‘vernacular’ of streaming video platforms is likely to play a particularly significant role in children’s content selection, because younger child viewers would generally not rely on text-based information to the same extent as adults. This type of comparative analysis emphasising how the aesthetics of each platform function as a vernacular would enrich examination of the categorisation processes of each platform, and also help to elucidate how different streaming video platforms have managed the division between child/adult content. This attentiveness to distributive logics – integrating lenses from screen and digital platform studies – would thus facilitate investigation of how children’s ‘digital playgrounds’[54] are created through child-oriented platform sections (like Netflix’s ‘Kids’ section) and aesthetics such as

content banners. Such an approach recognises the 'importance of each platform's distinct affordances and structures'[55] to the organisation and cultural circulation of genre in ways that are attuned to the ways each platform structures and manages children's navigation.

The case of YouTube

On YouTube, identifying distributive logics is much more challenging, and requires consideration of how content producers work with perceived algorithmic distribution processes to target child audiences. Under the new YouTube mechanisms, this includes identifying content tagged as 'for children', but as outlined above the boundaries between child-oriented and adult content on YouTube have long been and remain murky. It would thus likely be productive to adopt an approach to children's genre on YouTube led by audience research which aims to understand which types of content children prefer and select on the platform, including surveys of parents and their children, semi-structured interviews with children to understand how and why they select and enjoy certain types of content, and observation of children's platform use (as will be further detailed in the following section). Such audience research would need to take into account how parental mediation of children's use of the platform factors into their choices, particularly in younger age categories. From this audience research data, analysis could then focus on identifying popular types of content amongst child audiences, and subsequently placing this content into generic clusters using comparative textual analysis methods.

This approach reverses established methods combining screen genre analysis and audience research, which tend to focus on a recognised genre and conduct interviews and surveys with audiences to illuminate how they define, understand, and relate to this generic category.[56] Screen studies approaches are not often applied to YouTube content, which has been analysed most influentially through digital media studies frameworks, including digital ethnographic or anthropological analyses of the formation of internet celebrity,[57] and examinations of how content operates as a participatory media form.[58] Yet audience and textual analysis of child-oriented YouTube content promises to illuminate how children's genres form along with the participatory and 'ambivalent'[59] distributive logics of the platform, as well as in collaboration with children's own viewing choices and practices.

To understand genres on YouTube in this way, I suggest an approach to genre analysis informed by Mittell's call that we conceive of genre as not just text-based but shaped through discursive cultural practices. Indeed, Mittell identifies how genre analysis, developed in relation to film, has long fit awkwardly with television studies, identifying problems with genre scholars' tendencies to use generic labels 'that are culturally commonplace without giving much consideration to the meanings or usefulness of those labels'.^[60] Mittell's model is an alternative approach that critically reflects on how generic categories operate in relation to television as both an industry and a set of reception cultures, in so doing seeking to account for 'the cultural operations of television genre'.^[61] This approach moves beyond what Mittell calls the 'textualist assumption' inherent to traditional screen genre studies and instead proposes that genres should be understood as, drawing from Foucault, 'discursive practices'. Such an approach takes into account 'the contextualised generic practices that circulate around and through texts', including the 'terms and definitions' that underpin groupings of screen texts and how 'specific cultural concepts are linked to particular genres'.^[62]

Mittell proposes that this mode of analysis entails focus on 'the specificities of the medium'.^[63] An approach that understands genre as a discursive cultural category formed at the interface of audience and medium is important to a robust understanding of YouTube genres, because content types on YouTube do not tend to be officially recognised through marketing and industrial distribution strategies. While Altman influentially asserts that genres are in part 'defined by the industry' and are 'always industrially certified',^[64] this is certainly not the case when it comes to YouTube genres. As opposed to being clearly identified and defined through paratextual materials like trailers, posters, reviews, and interviews, genres on YouTube form through ongoing negotiation between viewers, producers, the platform's algorithmic distribution and categorisation mechanisms.

For instance, consider the popular genre of the 'family entertainment character mash-up' video^[65] formed over a number of years through a set of popular video tags, character combinations, and titles, with videos in this category typically having what Bridle calls 'word salad' titles^[66] that aim to attract child viewers, like 'Elsa vs Marvel heroes: Frozen Elsa vs Scream vs Spidegirl vs Joker vs Hulk & Spiderman Real Life Superhero Movie!' Certain channels, like the now defunct Webs and Tiaras, became very popular sources of this type of content: Webs and Tiaras had 5.6 billion views as of June 2017, and was at one stage the third most-viewed YouTube channel in

the world.[67] The type of content produced by such channels crystallised into a generic cluster with a precise and recognisable set of characteristics, which include: adults dressing up in mass produced or crudely-made superhero costumes to play well-known characters like Elsa from Disney's *Frozen* or Spiderman, graphics and speech bubbles in place of spoken dialogue, and scatological themes and content including toilet humour.

While little is known about how child viewers interpret and understand this type of content (or even if they enjoy it), adult commentators contributed to the definition of this genre through news articles and think-pieces describing its key characteristics. For instance, Di Placido writes that videos in this category are

extremely low-budget, low-effort, and populated with unlicensed Disney characters behaving oddly, to the tune of nursery rhymes. Some are live-action, some are animated. The vast majority seem to feature Spiderman and Elsa together, with Elsa often depicted as being pregnant for some reason. Most are a mess of garbled dialogue and nonsensical activity.[68]

This type of commentary is an example of what Mittell calls the 'definition' process amongst the set of practices that constitute screen genres. These are examples of 'discursive utterances' that 'are themselves constitutive of that genre, they are practices that define genres, delimit their meanings, and posit their cultural value'.[69] Ultimately, these 'discursive enunciations' sculpt genres as cultural categories: they serve to 'name, differentiate, and classify works on the basis of the recurring configurations of formal and thematic elements they share', to return to Moine's articulation of genre.[70] In the case of YouTube, incorporating audience research with children into the approach to genre analysis advocated by Mittell promises to illuminate how children's genres are collaboratively defined by the platform's distribution architectures and their child audience.

Audience studies

The methodological approach I am proposing does not represent an attempt to illuminate the technical mechanics of a platform's algorithmic distribution process, but instead to understand how children's genres are delivered to their audiences and how child audiences negotiate such distributive logics. This inquiry parallels in different disciplinary terrain Meese and Hurcombe's

analysis of how news professionals have navigated Facebook's changing algorithms in relation to the distribution of news content. This research relied on interviews with news professionals to understand their responses to changing algorithmic processes, illuminating how 'news media organisations, social media platforms and algorithms interact'[71] on a cultural and institutional level. Similarly, the types of generic analysis proposed above would be most illuminating if paired with audience research which takes into account how children respond to algorithmic distribution processes when selecting content types.

In their early consideration of how video-on-demand services have driven new audience relationships with screen content, Van den Broeck, Pierson and Lievens point out how VOD promotes a particular type of viewing practice that should be understood as a 'routinised type of behaviour'. [72] They assert that to understand this practice, one should not assume an 'essential use' derived from the affordances of the technological artefact itself, since such platforms should be understood 'in their context of use and users' and 'be seen as co-constructed'. [73] Beyond using audience research to identify generic clusters, as I proposed above in relation to YouTube, in line with Van den Broeck, Pierson and Lievens' points, audience research could illuminate children's streaming video platform practices as 'routinised' types of behaviours. Especially when dealing with child viewers, it is important not to make assumptive connections between the affordances of a platform and the way that they will be co-opted by users, just as assumptions should not be made that content that seems child-oriented appeals to child viewers, particularly on a platform like YouTube on which content is not cohesively curated.

As scholars including Jenner [74] and Matrix [75] have demonstrated, streaming platforms have popularised new forms of viewing, most (in)famously the practice known as 'binge-watching' – the consumption of large amounts of content, such as an entire television series, within a short window of time. To date there has been little audience research on binge-watching from a screen and media studies perspectives: extant studies have consisted of exploratory focus groups in attempts to define the phenomenon, [76] often from psychological [77] or marketing perspectives. [78] Binge-watching is solicited by the affordances of streaming video platforms and marketed as a key asset for the way it distinguishes SVOD services from legacy media. Matrix analysed young people's social media discourse about binge-watching in tandem with analysis of the SVOD industry's promotion of binge-watching practices. She suggests that binge-watching is a key part of children's and

teenagers' streaming video consumption, with 'the binge-watching habit [beginning] for many viewers when they are as young as toddlers'.[79] As Matrix points out, SVOD services have helped to make binge-watching a mainstream cultural practice through their marketing campaigns and release strategies. In different ways, the affordances of YouTube – including autoplay and suggested 'watch next' queues – similarly promote binge-watching behaviour. Yet as Matrix concludes, understanding the nuances of this behaviour requires 'new conceptualizations of engagement' that are 'sufficiently attuned to the different preferences and practices among and between television audience cohorts'.[80]

To understand children's viewing practices on streaming platforms in a way that is 'sufficiently attuned' to this cohort necessitates the integration of screen studies approaches to audience research – such as surveys and interviews focused on content types and viewing contexts[81] – with modes of ethnographic observation common to studies of digital media use.[82] Semi-structured interviews with children across various age groups, along with their parents, would prove illuminating when paired with the kinds of generic analysis suggested in the previous section. In addition to such audience analysis aimed at identifying how children interpret the textual characteristics of key genres, observation of children's platform use would reveal their level of fluency with and navigation processes across various platforms.

In his analysis of social media discourse about infants' use of digital devices, Nansen has identified a 'repertoire' of infant gestures on touchscreens.[83] In my own pilot research with children under 8 using various apps on touchscreen devices, we deployed screen recording software and video-recorded observation to ascertain children's fluencies and gestural repertoires on touchscreens, pairing this observation with semi-structured interviews with parents and children which took into account how parental mediation impacts children's platform navigation and digital play.[84] Such an approach combining observation with interviews would reveal how children in different age groups gravitate towards and select certain types of content. These methods, when combined with study of the distributive logics and textual features of the genres, would shed light on how key elements of each platform's interface, content categorisation architecture, and algorithmic distribution methods interact with and influence children's content selection practices.

Conclusion

The rise of streaming video platforms in children's media production settlements and children's media consumption practices necessitates a move beyond disciplinary silos. Scholars and journalistic commentators have pointed to tectonic shifts in the way children's media is produced, distributed, and consumed in the streaming video era, yet understanding remains limited of how these significant changes relate to children's engagements with and understandings of new forms of video content. Extant digital media studies lenses promise to illuminate elements of children's habits on and relationships to devices and platforms. However, these perspectives are not as attuned to the textual qualities of the content and how children relate to content types, which could productively be examined via robust traditions of genre and audience analysis in screen studies.

Similarly, while screen studies approaches would likely uncover much about how children's genres operate as textual clusters on streaming video platforms, they do not fully account for how platform interfaces and content distribution and categorisation strategies shape these genres and influence children's relationships with them. In the cases of both YouTube and SVOD platforms, children's use and the shared characteristics of child-oriented genres should ultimately be understood in relation to the distinctive architectures and vernaculars of the platforms themselves.

Author

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Notes

- [1] Ofcom 2020; Australian Communications and Media Authority 2017, pp 20-22; Common Sense Media 2019.
- [2] Bridle 2017; Popper, 2017.
- [3] Steemers & Potter 2017; Potter 2018.
- [4] Bridle 2017.
- [5] YouTube 2019.
- [6] Nicoll & Nansen 2018; Marsh 2016; Craig & Cunningham 2017; Mowlabocus 2020.
- [7] Burgess 2018.
- [8] Craig & Cunningham 2017, p. 78.

- [9] Mowlabocus 2020, p. 565.
- [10] Nicoll & Nansen 2018, p. 8.
- [11] A notable exception is Mowlabacus' (2020) analysis of the unboxing genre, which does not directly incorporate theoretical frameworks of screen genre theory but does articulate the various narrative structures and 'cinematic' aesthetic conventions of the genre.
- [12] Moine 2008, p. 3.
- [13] Lange 2014.
- [14] Abidin 2017.
- [15] Marsh 2016.
- [16] Livingstone & Local 2017, p. 68.
- [17] Ibid., p. 71.
- [18] Ibid., p. 75.
- [19] Huber et al 2018, p. 73.
- [20] Lobato 2017; Cunningham & Craig & Silver 2016.
- [21] Burroughs 2017, pp. 1-3; Baker & Balanzategui & Sandars 2020; Johnson 2018.
- [22] Baker & Balanzategui & Sandars 2020.
- [23] Ibid.
- [24] Johnson 2018.
- [25] Ibid.
- [26] Baker & Balanzategui & Sanders 2020.
- [27] Potter 2017, p. 111.
- [28] Johnson 2018.
- [29] Golin & Chester 2015.
- [30] Balanzategui in-press; see for example Bridle 2017.
- [31] Burgess 2018.
- [32] Simons cited in Kelly 2019.
- [33] YouTube 2019.
- [34] See Parker 2020.
- [35] See Garcia 2019.
- [36] Burgess & Green 2018, p. 91.
- [37] Ibid.
- [38] Loy 2014, p. 24.
- [39] Douglas 2014, p. 314.
- [40] TVTropes 2019.
- [41] Burgess 2018.
- [42] Frey 2020, p. 165.
- [43] Holland cited in Lynch 2018.

- [44] Frey 2020, pp. 167-168.
- [45] The work of David Buckingham (1996) is a notable exception which relates child audience research to considerations of film/television genres and their textual characteristics.
- [46] Gunter & McAleer 1990.
- [47] Morley 1988; Lull 1990; Marsh 2016.
- [48] Götz & Lemish, & Holler 2019, p. xviii.
- [49] Altman 1984. Notably, Altman did update his influential approach to take into account 'pragmatics' – surrounding contexts like marketing and reception cultures – as he was cognizant of the limitations of a purely text-based approach.
- [50] Lobato & Ryan 2011, p. 189.
- [51] Gibbs & Meese & Arnold & Nansen & Carter 2015.
- [52] *Ibid.*, p. 258.
- [53] Pearce et al 2018.
- [54] Smith & Shade 2018.
- [55] Pearce et al 2018, p. 4.
- [56] Burke 2015; Barker & Mathijs 2008; Austin 2002; Jancovich 2000.
- [57] Abidin 2019.
- [58] Burgess & Green 2018.
- [59] Burgess 2018.
- [60] Mittell 2001, p. 4.
- [61] *Ibid.*
- [62] *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- [63] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- [64] Altman 1999, p. 16.
- [65] Balanzategui forthcoming.
- [66] Bridle 2017.
- [67] Cohen 2016.
- [68] Di Placido 2017.
- [69] Mittell 2001, p. 8.
- [70] Moine 2008, p. 3.
- [71] Meese & Hurcombe 2020, p. 11.
- [72] Van den Broeck & Piersen & Lievens 2007, p. 25.
- [73] *Ibid.*
- [74] Jenner 2015.
- [75] Matrix 2014.
- [76] Rubenking et al. 2018.
- [77] Flayell & Mauraeg & Billeiux 2017; Walton-Pattison & Dombrowski & Pressau 2018.

- [78] Panda & Pandey 2017.
- [79] Matrix 2014, p. 121.
- [80] Ibid., p. 133.
- [81] Gray 1992; Austin 2002; Barker & Mathijs 2008.
- [82] Marsh 2016.
- [83] Nansen 2014.
- [84] Balanzategui & Guy & Kaufman 2018; Guy et al 2019.