

Comunicación y género

ISSNe: 2605-1982

<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/cgen.88328>EDICIONES
COMPLUTENSE

Between fiction and reality. a netnographic study on female viewers of the tv series *The handmaid's tale*

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Recibido: 23/04/2023 / Evaluado: 27/04/2023 / Aceptado: 14/06/2023

Abstract. The essay studies the Italian fan page dedicated to the TV series *The Handmaid's Tale*, analysing female users' dynamics of usage. Female viewers' interpretations have been retraced through a netnographic analysis, which has had as object the conversations of the online community. On this public fan page users show at the same time a sense of identification and conflictual spirit. Two emotional levels in online interactions are identified: the community is profoundly compact when the events refer to the fictional story; it then transforms into a space of conflict when it makes reference to the impact on reality of the metaphors arising from a political interpretation.

Key words: Audience; Tv series; Fandom; Ideology; Netnography

[es] Entre ficción y realidad. un estudio netnográfico de las espectadoras de la serie tv *El cuento de la criada*

Resumen. El ensayo estudia la fan page italiana dedicada a la serie televisiva *El cuento de la criada*, analizando las dinámicas de disfrute de las usuarias. Las interpretaciones de las espectadoras han sido reconstruidas a través de un análisis netnográfico, que tuvo como objeto las conversaciones online de la comunidad. En esta fan page pública las usuarias muestran al mismo tiempo sentimiento de identificación y espíritu de conflictualidad. Se identifican dos planes emocionales en las interacciones online: la community es profundamente coesionada cuando la lectura de los acontecimientos se refiere a la historia de ficción; se transforma en un espacio de enfrentamiento cuando se pasa al impacto sobre la realidad de las metáforas que nacen de una lectura política.

Palabras clave: Audiencia; Serie Tv; Fandom; Ideología; Netnografía.

Sumario: 1. Introduction. Studies on female audience. 2. Online audiences of Handmaid's Tale: research object and instruments. 3. Passionate, expert, activists, dreamers: data analysis. 4. Concluding remarks. 5. References.

Cómo citar: Cava, A.; Penna, A. (2023). Between fiction and reality. a netnographic study on female viewers of the tv series *The handmaid's tale*, en *Comunicación y Género*, 6(1) 2, pp. 59-66.

1. Introduction. Studies on female audience

The story of studies on audience can be read as a set of "fluctuations" between perspectives underlining the power that the text or media message exercises on the audience (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1980) and perspectives which have instead highlighted a sort of "defensive capacity" shown by spectators to get protection from potential effects of the message (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1974). Research in mass communication, in relation to female audience, retraces the hypothesis of strong effects, according to which every *medium* has an

enormous power of influence; this phase will be followed by another, definitely more attentive to textual mechanisms. During the 80's, in fact, an actual area of studies on female audience has consolidated, aimed at revealing uses and delights of female spectators' television viewing. All these works highlight how genre profoundly influences the ways in which people enjoy Tv.

Studies on women and media on one hand have focused on the construction of a female "simulacrum", on the other hand they have investigated real spectators' actual answer.

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Defining female audience as a category presupposes, as this paper will show, a specific discursive construction, which determines a particular relation between gender identity, ways to perceive reality and, in the specific case we are dealing with, media reality.

Women, it is known, from the 70's onward, have become object of study in the field of great communications. The first feminist pieces of research have traced over the hypodermic theory of media effects in fashion during the 40s, according to which every medium had an enormous power of influence over masses, considered as clusters of individuals who are isolated among them and totally malleable.

Media were then entrusted with the undisputed power to reproduce patriarchal sexual relations. A real indictment to media, guilty of not reflecting female reality, and of not providing adequate image of diversity in women's life. Media texts were considered instruments able to negatively influence women and their social participation. The representation of reality proposed by the different genres offered by media, through the human profiles outlined in them, did not but reinforce disvalues and deny values (Friedan, 1963; Tuchman, Daniels & Benet, 1978; Butler & Paisley, 1980). The stereotyping women were object of took on the forms of numeric under-representation and of the limited number of roles which women played. For sure these stances evoke the strength of media texts, instruments able to create images intruding into social life. It is indisputable, in fact, the crucial role played by media in representing society, influencing the processes of definition and perception of the symbolic universe and of feminine and masculine, in designing images of social subjects. In the substantial tradition of studies on stereotypes, and in particular on those about female roles, the analysis on media productions has focused both on the type of proposed stereotype, and on the role that media can play in consolidating or modifying them (Gunter, 1986). Precisely investigations on female audience have, mostly, generalized results connectable to restricted communities of female viewers. Female audience was supposed to be a group of individuals already pre-set, believing these subjects could activate, in the interpretation of a media text, elements related to their pre-existing femininity. Therefore, research does not prioritize the elements that could differentiate real female viewers, but the variables that could join them, using stereotyped images of female gender.

In the 80's a new line of research developed, interested in analyzing female viewers' uses and enjoyment in watching television (Brown, 1990; Hobson, 1982; Ang, 1985; Press, 1991).

As it is known, the assumption according to which it is actually possible to identify the way in which female audience perceives goes through a crisis at the end of the 80's.

A new conception of media takes root, as space of construction of all social categories, putting feminine

close to class, ethnicity etc... a general reassessment of popular cultural texts combines with feminist scholars' specific interest in analyzing situated female audiences using ethnographic methods (Capecchi, 2015).

Media contribute to creating a collective imaginary spreading social representations of men and women with accurate models and lifestyles. A wide range of images which could be drawn on to build a "tailored imaginary". The communication process, then, goes towards the direction of a not necessary correspondence between the meanings proposed by media texts and the ones the audience gives to them. Audiences exist and find enjoyment independently from the specific content they choose: among texts and audiences there are more or less wide spaces of negotiation of meanings (Cava, 2008). According to social class, age, level of education, cultural capital, apart from the historical and socio-cultural context in which they find themselves, every user offers different interpretations of the same text.

The contemporary scenario, with the growing central role of digital technologies, makes the study of popular uses of media texts even more complex. In this convergent and transmedia scenario, in fact, practices and possibilities of negotiation of meanings are multiplied (Couldry, 2020; Ciofalo, 2021; Azurmendi, 2018). Chances of debate and update criss-cross and chase after one another. They are transformations that lead to different usages, to new media experiences by female viewers who have become over the last years loyal users of online networks and platforms (Dusi, 2019).

The studies so far briefly mentioned represent the scientific framework of the empirical investigation carried out on the target we have chosen. This essay will analyse the Facebook Italian fan page dedicated to the TV series *The Handmaid's Tale*, analyzing usage dynamics through online users' comments. The episodes of the series will prove to be a polysemic space, in which gender identity will arise as an important key to interpret decoding dynamics. An audience is considered a "gender audience" not in relation to the sexual percentage of its composition, but to the extent to which a particular meaning is attributed in terms of feminine or masculine experience to the moment of vision, trying not to reproduce rigid dividing lines between what belongs to a female culture and what belongs to a male one (Van Zoonen, 1994). This is carried out using a series talking about gender as totally correspondent to biological sex, as a text analyzed in its interaction with the audience.

2. Online audiences of *Handmaid's Tale*: research object and instruments

The narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* develops in different media spaces: the novel by Margaret Atwood (1985), the film dated 1990 directed by Volker Schlöndorff, the Tv series distributed by Hulu in

2017, the literary sequel (2019); here the focus of interest is the tale in the way it takes shape in seriality, analyzing in particular how Italian audiences of a specific fan page regain property of it, rewriting it to their taste, through online performative actions. Studying audiences today, in fact, requires the observation of the relation of growing synergy of social network platforms with the television system as a whole. This interaction between television and social media has rewritten the dynamics of producing, accessing and using contents (Carelli, 2017).

Let us now be introduced to the dystopic world of the story. It is set in Gilead, a totalitarian regime of biblical inspiration which has as main object the promotion of procreation. The ruling elite obliges the few fertile women, the Handmaids, to intercourses with the Commanders in charge of this dictatorial regime in the presence of their wives, in order to generate new sons for the nation. The ritual is carried out in the same way by all households involved and takes place once a month, in coincidence with the period of ovulation of the Handmaid, up to the long-awaited pregnancy. The Handmaids change their names, acquiring the one of the Commander to which they are allocated. Surveillance and arbitrary use of violence beat the time during the rigid daily routine in which every female figure is differently victim of patriarchy: the very same Handmaids, the Aunts, whose task is putting into practice the rules established in Gilead, the Marthas, who carry out housework, the same Wives who remain in a condition of subordination (they can't read, they can't write, they can't take part in public assemblies, they can't vote etc.), lastly the Econowives, fertile women of low social level married to commanders' employees, and Un-women, sinners and betrayers of the Government sent to dig toxic substances, going towards inexorable death.

It is a political and biological submission (Alotai-bi, 2018); the bodies of people who are biologically women are disciplined (Foucault, 1976), submitted to men's will: they are the only one legitimized to the exercise of power.

Over the time many have been the academic studies dedicated to *The Handmaid's Tale* for the density of meanings of this cultural product (Bloom, 2004; Dillon, 2017; Tirino, 2020; Mascio, 2020; Giménez Mateu, 2021). This essay investigates how fans of the series who are active in an online Italian community respond to the tale of this sexist society, funded on the "biological and divine" duty of maternity.

This female repression, it is important to take into consideration, sees the very same women as responsible, the Commanders' Wives, in fact, participate and support the rapes against the Handmaids, claiming the son these last ones have delivered as theirs through the enactment of a simulated childbirth (Miceli, 2018); and also the Aunts, older women not anymore fertile, teach the Handmaids

about their role without any compassion through violent trainings (Mascio, 2020).

The present piece of research is based on digital ethnography which is a qualitative research approach adapting ethnographic techniques to the study of online social spaces of discussion (Punziano & Delli Paoli, 2021). It has been decided to select as digital field the Facebook fan page *The Handmaid's Tale-Italia*, a large Italian online community (5.024 users) for the fans of this Tv series. In the preliminary phases of the "fieldwork" we used the netnographic approach for mapping the context in which participants were situated (Kozinets, 2010; Caliandro, 2017; Hine, 2015).

What characterizes this kind of ethnographic analysis is the interconnection of three fundamental dimensions: the first dimension is the one that identifies the real and the digital as a continuum, and not any more as two realities clearly separated; the second dimension considers the real and the digital as two dimensions in mutual dependence one on the other; the third and last dimension defines ethnography of digital media as a "digital native" method of study, therefore it does not represent a methodology migrated towards the virtual world, but rather as a method born right within the digital (Sumiala & Tikka, 2020). The decision has been made to observe the community without revealing our presence to avoid possible distortions and study female users' interactions in their "natural" development (Langer & Beckman, 2005). The piece of research presented is aimed at highlighting the mix of individual practices, perspectives and perceptions guiding the relation of loyalty between this on line community and the series.

The community has been selected for its easy access and for the users' high number and level of activity. In the period when research took place, the fan community was particularly active and lively as the last season of the series had just been released.

As explained in the introduction, female viewers' strategies to deconstruct the ideological power of Gilead have been studied through the observation of the practices developed on the fan page *The Handmaid's Tale-Italia* from 15th September to 10th November 2022, period in which the fifth season was broadcasted in Italy exclusively on Tim Vision.

The monitoring of the posts was structured to gather information on the forms of interactions within the community: topics covered in the fan speeches, most popular posts, language and rhetorics used.

This exploratory analysis has had as object 28 posts in the reference period; the text corpus includes also 638 comments animating the interactions on the public fan page [Table 1].

The data set includes text of messages, date of publication, engagement values disaggregated by type of interaction (shares, comments, likes and reactions) and other information such as the type of content shared (photo, video, link).

Table 1. Text corpus extracted on 6th February 2023

Post	Comments	Shares	Reactions	
28	638	145	3.623	
Users 5.024			Likes	2.786
			Love	305
			Smile	348
			Wow	92
			Sorry	71
			Support	15
			Anger	6

Source: Own elaboration

Selection criteria were necessary to filter through large amounts of data which were then manually stored. A purposeful approach was used for sampling message threads (Patton, 2014; Delli Paoli & Masullo, 2022). All comments in the examined period were downloaded, finally we qualitatively analysed the relevant ones (they received a high number of comments, reactions, shares). The extracted comments were analysed using an inductive approach based on the *Grounded Theory* method (Glaser & Strauss, 1999) to identify the most recurring topics. The posts were then classified on the basis of four topics:

1. Information about the episodes and the characters
2. Information about the actresses and actors' lives outside the set
3. Impact of the episodes on private life
4. References to current events and politics in Italy

Before describing the communicative dynamics characterizing the relation between the online community of the Italian fan page and the Tv series *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is important to underline how one of the characteristics of contemporary serial shows (Mittel, 2015) is the intense dynamism with which the communities of fans welcome the contents proposed by media companies (Riva & Boato, 2020; Brembilla, 2018; Andò & Leonzi, 2013). In particular, online environments where serial shows take place, become spaces where not only audiences exchange information and impressions, but they gain ownership of narrative fragments of media texts, re-interpreting them and generating forms of alternative entertainment nourishing the original narrative ecosystem of the series (Muñiz-Velázquez & Lozano Delmar, 2021). This happens also in the case object of this study. The narrative complexity of *The Handmaid's Tale* allows an interesting analysis of performativity (Hills, 2002) of the audiences connected (Boccia Artieri, 2009) who, as next paragraph will show, create added value around this cultural product. They transform the experience of watching a Tv

series into a complex participatory culture (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013).

Which meanings do audiences' online discourses start and spread about this media text?

3. Passionate, expert, activists, dreamers: data analysis

The community *The Handmaid's Tale-Italia* has been chosen as object of observation as made up by numerous participants (5.024) and because in the research period it has shown regular interactions among female users (according to online profiles)³.

The Italian fan page is first of all a space where to share information about the episodes, the characters and actresses and actors' lives outside the set.

Characters are assessed for their characteristics, judging them and also imagining further development of the plot [Topic 1].

For me it's sufficient that Luke and June end up together and that Janine is set free. Gilead people Nick included, (who is in love with June but who has been part of Gilead since the beginning), and all commanders, aunts and wives, end up in jail, dying is too easy, it would be good to see those who for years have enjoyed that sick power, end up in jail. For them punishment is worse than death (D.G.).

All female users of the fan page appear to know accurately the text, commenting interpreters and events, almost challenging themselves in the effort of giving a contribution to enrich "collective knowledge". They offer opinions, more or less technical, on different aspects: from editing to screenplay, from soundtrack to make up.

er I know well 😊, I'm passionate for photography and make-up, unfortunately some things immediately catch my eye in the case of Serena I think they wanted to prioritize natural appearance, the "make-up free" effect,

³ The number of men who actively interacted is irrelevant.

but all the more so they should have used a basis that would perfectly match Yvonne's face and neck (G.D.M.)

Some criticisms often arise about a narrative rhythm which female spectators feel as slower than the tight and involving time-spans characterizing the series in the previous seasons. A more emotional than technical glance, if we consider the fact that criticism refers above all to very popular characters, but who according to users appear to get impoverished over the episodes. All of them, in any case, after the airing in Italy of the last episode of the season, show great regret for the end of weekly appointments, both those who were more critical against an ending that leaves everything too pending, and the enthusiastic ones who found the last scene, the meeting between June and Serena on the refugees' train, exciting.

The most active users show a profound sense of intimacy and emotional proximity towards the story that unfolds from episode to episode. Views are shared starting from events of the narration, which become excuses to talk about themselves [Topic 3].

Decisions... I prefer to decide to move on and not to bring my past back home with me, but only to be able to travel lighter, which does not mean forgetting, if I forget I'm afraid I might increase the chances this might happen again, but if those who hurt me will have to suffer, I wouldn't like it to be for my responsibility ... otherwise I can't see any end to this pain, and this makes me feel worse. Pure selfishness. (V.D)

Some of the observations made by the first female scholars about extra-textual uses of Tv programmes, that have been mentioned in the introductory part of this paper, are in this case still valid. Talking about television viewing is an instrument through which

talking about private aspects of one's life. Talking among women about the Tv text creates a female-shared space in which the heroines' affairs are taken as a hint to debate about multiple aspects of their own lives, developing a solidarity among women potentially of resistance against the dominating patriarchal order (Hobson,1990). The topics of fertility, terminations of unintended or unexpected pregnancies and maternity allow female viewers to constantly move between what they have seen and what they have lived.

Often posts share images of the backstage where female and male protagonists are portrayed in moments of fun and complicity [Topic 2]; these strategies to ease tension in comparison to the climate of hate and violence in the dystopic world of Gilead seem to relieve users, strongly involved by the nightmare atmosphere that generates the series of episodes. Often, in fact, in commenting the episodes just aired they exchange views on the brutality and anguish generated by watching the story.

The most interesting part, in our opinion, is the one related to online debate about ideological contents of the episodic text [Topic 4]. Opinions, in this case, abandon the imaginary of the series and have impacts on Italian current affairs, which users initially comment ironically in a climax of growing tension which results in harsh conflicts on political stances.

The post that in the period examined has reached the highest number of comments, shares and reactions has been a photo of Giorgia Meloni on the eve of election (in Italy on 25th September 2022 political elections to renovate the Parliament took place; the results saw the centre-right coalition led by Giorgia Meloni establish itself as the most voted one).

Fig. 1 Post on 26.09.2022



An intentionally ironical call to vote, but which has boosted criticism and controversies in Italy and in the observed community. Giorgia Meloni is labelled by some users as a woman who goes against women and who recalls the “female villain” of the series, Serena. A strong polarization arises among users who praise the future Prime Minister and those who show some fear for a Gilead that could be established in Italy with the new government.

In Italy from tomorrow with that beast who is going to win #weddeservemeloni #populationofbeasts (A.D.F.)

I see that I am not the only one associating this dystopic series to the scenario that is arising today...let's hope for the best (M.M.)

Gilead is coming to Italy too (F.P.)

An extremely more vulgar version of Serena is going to the government. Blessed be the day! (F.M.)

Go f**k yourselves! Have you seen the series? Women in the handmaid's tale couldn't even read or write and you leftists don't know any more what to say just to throw sh*t! (S.D.V.)

I understand between fratelli d'Italia and gilead there is a huge gap, but this conservatism and populism have the same roots our june is fighting against! (R.G.)

This clash shows another one between those who would like comments to stick to assessments, opinions, emotions strictly linked to the episodes of the series and those who believe that *The Handmaid's Tale* must necessarily be interpreted through a political glance. The match between the atmosphere connected to the electoral victory of radical right-wing party (with the consequent rise of a populist leader) and the airing of the fifth season of the series in Italy has determined a sort of short circuit between fiction and reality.

Giorgia Meloni represents an example of woman leading a traditionally male organization, using topics typical of populist organizations even with gender-oriented stances. Her speeches have as favourite target a catholic, traditionalist and conservatory electorate (Cammara & Meo, 2021). It is possible, in particular, to identify three recurrent topic areas: “The first is connected to feminine identity, which appears very blurred and at times denied in its own representation. The second recomposes specific gender issues around the more traditional concepts of nation, homeland and family. The third area instrumentally uses gender issues to mark a difference between us, white, higher-level and Western and the others, having views represented as impossible to integrate” (Meo, 2021: 65).

The topics at the core of the Tv series are therefore tainted with issues of current affairs, gaining political meaning and therefore splitting up the community born from the cult of this product of cultural industry. The overlap is favoured by the profoundly gendered ideological frame in which the Italian Prime Minister works: a representation of the woman calling back to a hierarchical structure of power in which the roles of men and women are clearly defined (Baritono, 2018).

The conflict continues after a post in which the image of the protagonist Jude, dressed up as a handmaid, is accompanied by the words “nothing changes instantly”, taken from Atwood's novel. In this case the clash is about the debate over denied rights during lockdown because of Covid-19. Users' stances on the vaccination policy introduced in Italy repropose the polarization “pro-vax” versus “no-vax” (Gobo & Sena, 2019). Users puzzled about vaccination interpret it as a violation of personal liberty: the Government does not have the right to dominate and they mention Gilead's authoritarian theocracy criticizing the paternalistic approach underlying this obligation. Opposite is the position of those who believe obligatory vaccination is essential.

4. Concluding Remarks

The present piece of research identified the keys of interpretation that “connected audiences” used during the broadcasting of the fifth season of *The Handmaid's Tale* in Italy, with the aim of understanding how it short-circuited their daily lives.

The exploration carried out online leads us to identify some orientations outlined in online interactions, although the quantity of reported data is not statistically representative and the results of the investigation cannot be generalized. A not necessarily representative population as female users of the Facebook Italian fan page can, in any case, send us back some universes of meaning deserving careful attention.

The studied community is a space where users show at the same time sense of identification and spirit of conflict, arising from their shared passion for *The Handmaid's Tale*.

A passion often defined in terms of real cult, pushing fans to attend the community in the search for people equally “addicted” to the series. In this perspective, loyalty is built around the desire to know everything about the background of the set and in the will to possess the gadgets created around the series (many are the posts in which users show and comment the merchandising inspired to the imaginary of Gilead). Female viewers show admiration for the strength of the interpretations of female protagonists: be they good or villains, the emotional involvement is intense.

The fan page analyzed, however, is also a space of conflict: as we have seen, the dystopic future of Gilead is often associated by users to current political contents: the series has for many of the women following it meanings that are other than fantasy ones.

Two emotional levels expressed by female viewers in their online conversations are identified: the community is profoundly compact and it is presented as an “emotional tribe” (Maffesoli, 2004) when the interpretation of the events is about the fictional story; when it then goes to the impact on reality of metaphors that can arise from a political interpretation,

the community is transformed into a space of conflict. Real and possible are tangled and female spectators' interpretation lines, according to "the world they live", offer unexpected analysis. Reference is made here to the "world they live" to highlight one of the limits of our investigation. The interpretations so far analyzed remain on the surface, as what has been examined are the opinions expressed online through posts, images and comments, without knowing the contexts of use. It will be interesting – in a second phase of research – through interviews, to take into consideration different demographic groups, detecting how women of different ages and with different cultural backgrounds relate to this cultural product. As pointed out in the introduction, it is important to be aware that in the analysis of the texts as contexts of use, the gender variable is not sufficient, as building and adhering to an identity is never set once and for all. This does not mean to deny the existence of gender differences and of practices linked to them,

but it is important to underline how the meanings underlying these differences are always related to particular constructions and specific contexts (De Maria, 2003).

Our explorative study gives back, in any case, a quite accurate image about the meanings that female users of this Italian community give to *The Handmaid's Tale*. It is a two-dimensional image. On the one hand there are the typical fandom actions, showing acclamation towards the series considered in its aspects linked to the genre fiction. This is clearly shown in the comments we have categorised in topics 1, 2, 3. From this point of view female spectators show sense of belonging to the group and mutual acknowledgement. On the other, when it comes to a reflection on the possible effects of the contents of the Tv series on reality (as shown in topic 4), value positioning collides.

This double level of interpretation seems to us an expected effect of the "realistic dystopia" of the series.

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Financiación: Esta investigación no recibió financiación externa.

Declaración de conflicto de intereses: La/s persona/s firmante/s del artículo declaran no estar incursas en ningún tipo de conflicto de intereses respecto a la investigación, a su autoría ni/o a la publicación del presente artículo.