

# Public service media and entertainment

The challenge of engaging younger audiences

ALESSANDRO D'ARMA,<sup>i</sup> ANDREA ESSER,<sup>ii</sup>  
MATTHEW HILBORN,<sup>iii</sup> & JEANETTE STEEMERS<sup>ii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> WESTMINSTER SCHOOL OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION, UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER, UK

<sup>ii</sup> DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, MEDIA AND CREATIVE INDUSTRIES, KING'S COLLEGE LONDON, UK

<sup>iii</sup> SCHOOL OF LANGUAGES, CULTURES AND LINGUISTICS, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN, IRELAND

## ABSTRACT

In a world dominated by digital platforms, this chapter examines the ongoing role of legacy public service media (PSM), originally designed to promote the common good and societal cohesion through information, education, and entertainment. Focusing on younger audiences and PSM's contribution to screen entertainment, we highlight clear shifts among younger audiences in Europe regarding favoured platforms (global streaming services), genres (scripted over non-scripted), country-of-origin preferences (US rather than domestic shows), language settings (watching more in English), and discovery methods (platform algorithms and social media). These shifts render PSM content less visible, as global streamers increasingly become the default gateway to screen content. When encountered, domestic content is often perceived by young people as less relevant and of lower quality. Such perceptions circulate and tend to become self-reinforcing. Understanding young audience perceptions of domestic shortcomings offers insights into how PSM might better engage younger audiences despite platformisation, so that entertainment and fiction continue to serve as “a central reference point of knowledge and shared emotions in a fragmented society” (Biltereyst, 2004: 343).

**KEYWORDS:** cultural proximity, public service media, social media, video streaming, video-on-demand

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## Introduction

In this chapter, we examine public service media (PSM) as an intervention designed in the twentieth century to promote the common good, societal cohesion, and democracy. Yet PSM now struggles as audiences, particularly younger ones, shift their allegiances to video-on-demand (VoD) and social media experiences (Channel 4, 2025). PSM face significant financial, competitive, and political challenges in fulfilling their democratic function to inform and educate (Ranaivosen et al., 2023). These challenges also extend to a third, often overlooked pillar of their mission: to entertain.

The chapter focuses on young audience experiences with screen entertainment and the implications of global VoD and social media platforms on PSM's ability to connect with younger audiences. Our premise is that if we are to consider PSM's contribution to the common good, we cannot ignore entertainment as a contributor to social cohesion and national identity. PSM refers to a distinctive set of media institutions with a mandate to contribute to democratic life and citizenship through information, education, and entertainment. We emphasise the crucial role of entertainment in securing young audience engagement and fulfilling PSM's universal mission, and we reflect on the provision of PSM entertainment and how this forms an intrinsic part of both their contributions to contemporary digital societies and their responses to digital challenges.

First, we ask how and to what extent young people's viewing of screen entertainment is shifting in terms of favoured platforms, genres, country-of-origin, language, and discovery. Second, we explore the extent to which these shifts impact PSM, with potential implications for PSM's normative contribution to the common good founded on democratic values.

The chapter presents new research data from a larger research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council that explores how transnational VoD services like Netflix and YouTube affect the nature and extent of young audiences' digital encounters with British screen content in Denmark, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. First, drawing on literature about PSM, we consider why entertainment is still important for PSM, before outlining our comparative and mixed-method approach. Next, through the lens of engagement with British screen entertainment, we highlight screen content shifts in media platform, genre, country-of-origin, and language-setting preferences among audiences aged 16–34 in the four countries, before paying special attention to the role of social media as a source of entertainment discovery. Finally, we explore young people's attitudes towards domestic and public service entertainment. In the concluding section, we draw together findings to tentatively address what might be missing in public service entertainment and why this still matters in fragmenting digital societies. While this chapter presents empirical findings from an *audience* study, our analysis is informed by theories of platform and global streaming power (Chalaby,

2022; Jin, 2015; Poell et al., 2022). These frameworks help elucidate how structural conditions, including the economic, cultural, and infrastructural power of transnational corporations – not merely audience choice in a vacuum – are reconfiguring media ecosystems to the detriment of national and public service providers.

## **Why entertainment still matters for public service media**

“Long-form” screen content (> 20 min.) is still an important source of entertainment for young people aged 16–34. Three quarters of our survey respondents in Denmark, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands watch either daily or 3–5 times a week for relaxation, comfort, and repeat viewing of their favourite shows (Esser et al., 2025: 6). Entertainment, interpreted broadly, is also core to the public service remit, underpinning a wider definition of universality, that encompasses a range of content as well as geographical and technical reach (Born & Prosser, 2001; BRU, 1986; Collins et al., 2001; Garnham, 1990), thereby contributing to “enhancing, developing and serving social, political and cultural citizenship” (Born & Prosser, 2001: 671). As Biltereyst (2004: 342) has argued, entertainment should not be considered the “odd man out in theories underpinning PSB” or a sign of levelling down, but essential for underpinning PSM legitimacy, because it allows PSM to appeal to all, including underserved sections of the audience, such as younger audiences, with popular screen content functioning as “a central reference point of knowledge and shared emotions in a fragmented society with changing symbolic powers” (Biltereyst, 2004: 343). More instrumentally, entertainment aligns with strategies to maintain PSM prominence and its ability to connect with audiences, especially younger audiences who use legacy (and news) media increasingly less.

In practice, however, while news remains central to the PSM remit, driving high levels of trust (Cushion, 2012; Newman et al., 2020), the role of entertainment is more complex, often seen as an awkward fit within the Enlightenment traditions underlying its ethos (Palokangas, 2007), a “necessary evil” critically undervalued in comparison to the other Reithian pillars of information and education. Early scholarship was disapproving of entertainment (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947/1997; Thompson & Leavis, 1933), and even more recent studies have deemed it negative and diversionary (Postman, 1985; Putnam, 2000).

However, this disparaging view has been critiqued by the cultural citizenship tradition, which identifies the social and affective dimensions of engagement with popular culture (Askanius, 2017; Hermes, 2005; Van Zoonen, 2005) that stimulate civic belonging. This school of thought, supported by a long tradition of cultural studies research, argues that engagement with popular

fiction and entertainment plays a crucial role in shaping identities, developing critical awareness, fostering community belonging, and facilitating a critical understanding of the complexities of the world (Ang, 1991; Ellis, 2000; Liebes & Katz, 1994; Naerland, 2019; Street et al., 2013).

As far as the nation is concerned, domestic entertainment makes a vital contribution to the creation and maintenance of national identity, and to making people feel part of the wider national community. According to Anderson (1991), the mass media were critical in “imagining” the national community by standardising national languages, addressing audiences as citizens, and providing national, local, and regional news. Importantly, the media also contribute to “banal nationalism” with visualisations of national symbols (flags, iconic buildings, politicians, etc.) and other reminders of the nation and one’s place in it (Billig, 1995). Even popular entertainment shows like *The Voice of Holland* (RTL4, 2010–2022) can be effective reminders of the nation by providing shared experiences. As Sunstein (2001) argued, the mass media allow people who do not know each other personally to regard one another as fellow citizens with shared hopes and goals. Ongoing media fragmentation, he warned, endangers this achievement. It also makes European PSM’s remit of supporting national identity and social cohesion more difficult to fulfil.

## **PSM’s youth challenge in the age of global streamer dominance**

Recent studies have revealed a profound “generation rift” (Rotermund, 2017) as PSM organisations rapidly lose relevance for younger audiences (Horowitz & Lowe, 2019; Sehl, 2020; Schulz et al., 2019), whose changing media habits, including a preference for social media platforms, pose a significant challenge (Andersen & Sundet, 2019). In respect of entertainment, European PSM are increasingly struggling to attract and maintain younger audiences against transnational US-owned VoD platforms like Netflix, Disney+, and Prime Video, which benefit from larger budgets and larger catalogues dominated by US content (see Bengesser et al., 2025; Esser & Steemers, 2023; Iordache, 2022). Global streamers’ perceived ubiquity is a direct function of the structural advantages underpinning what Jin (2015) termed “platform imperialism”. Unlike nationally bound PSM, global streamers operate on a logic of radical scalability, leveraging vast capital, global data harvesting, and vertically integrated operations (Chalaby, 2022). This creates a self-reinforcing cycle, thereby marginalising domestic platforms not through competition on content alone, but through an overwhelming asymmetry of economic and technological power (Davis, 2021). As discussed below, our audience study provides strong support for political economy analyses highlighting the power asymmetries between global platforms and national

providers, even if only indirectly, reflected in young European's viewing preferences and consumption patterns.

PSM responses include running their own VoD platforms (Bruun, 2021), moves towards online-only or digital-first production (Kelly, 2021; Michalis, 2022), and greater emphasis on online branding and personalisation (Hildén, 2022; Sørensen & Van den Bulck, 2020) to enhance discovery and prominence (D'Arma et al., 2021, 2024). However, despite these strategies and the home and language advantages they can leverage, our research shows that Danish, German, Italian, and Dutch PSM struggle to attract younger viewers in competition with global platforms that predominantly feature English-language content. As we show later, the strong appeal to young people of both US content and the English language is an important factor in reducing the appeal of domestic entertainment and domestic platforms (see Mast et al., 2017). In short, our findings show that younger audiences are increasingly preferring English-language productions on global streaming platforms over domestic entertainment because they are perceived as omnipresent, numerous, easy to find, and more relevant.

## **A note on methodology**

In this chapter, we analyse engagement with PSM entertainment in four countries through the lens of young audience encounters with British films and television shows in Denmark, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. While all these countries have a long history of public service provision, they also exhibit significant differences. Denmark and the Netherlands are smaller countries that have long imported considerable amounts of English-language content from the UK and the US (see Bengesser et al., 2025), and audiences in both countries are used to watching English-language entertainment with English or local-language subtitles. Germany and Italy, by contrast, are larger countries whose broadcasters have traditionally produced and scheduled mostly domestic content and dubbed US fiction (Esser, 2007).

Findings are based on an online survey with audiences aged 16–34, translated and adapted for each country, and carried out between August 2022 and April 2024 in Denmark (2022,  $n = 423$ ); Germany (2023,  $n = 426$ ); Italy (2024,  $n = 555$ ); and the Netherlands (2023,  $n = 409$ ). Exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling was employed in different regions and weighted for age and self-identified gender to reflect national demographic breakdowns. A screener survey in each country was then used to recruit 102 participants (20–28 per country), balanced for age, gender, education, occupation, frequency of long-form screen consumption, and degree of interest in the UK, who participated in digital activities over five days after the survey. The diaries were used to recruit twelve interviewees per country, balanced in the same way (48 in total), supplemented with focus groups (3–4

per country,  $n = 38$ ) for hard-to-reach 16–19-year-olds (see Bengesser et al., 2022, 2023 for a more detailed discussion of methodology).

Industry analysis of viewing trends in each country was compared with our survey findings but revealed only limited and selective industry-sourced statistical data on younger audiences, often focused on monthly or annual “reach” rather than time spent viewing, “market share”, or more revealing shorter “reach” periods. Additionally, detailed catalogue research was undertaken to identify what British content was available on key VoD services in each country (see Bengesser et al., 2025). Landing-page research of three platforms, including Netflix, the local PSM platform, and one domestic commercial platform, was used to pinpoint where shows specified by interview respondents appeared (Bengesser et al., 2025). The social media accounts of at least six platforms in each country were examined to establish which British content VoD services had promoted during the survey. The research also included interviews with 56 cultural intermediaries (sales executives, programme buyers, festival organisers, influencers, and teachers), providing further insights into the cultural and market specificities of each country. As with all self-selecting surveys, some caution is necessary to account for respondents who overstate their preferences. This was counterbalanced by diaries (of what had been watched) and interviews, which largely confirmed survey findings.

## **Shifts in viewing preferences – platform, genre, country of origin, and language**

Our survey research shows that younger audiences are generally watching little public service content (channels or VoD) and little linear content, favouring global VoD streamers instead (see Table 7.1). Linear television channels are used by 13–26 per cent of survey respondents across age groups in Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands, and significantly less in Denmark (2–10%), the most digitalised television market of all. PSM VoD platforms (DRTV in Denmark, the ARD and ZDF Mediatheken in Germany, RaiPlay in Italy, and NPO Start/Plus in the Netherlands) rank higher than their domestic commercial counterparts (TV 2 Play in Denmark, RTL+ in Germany, Mediaset Infinity in Italy, and Videoland in the Netherlands). However, use of PSM VoD platforms is weighted more heavily towards older 30–34-year-olds, except in Italy. Across all four countries, Netflix, YouTube, and Disney+ are consistently the top streamers, with some variations: (Amazon) Prime Video is more popular in Italy (second) and Germany (third) than in the Netherlands (fourth) or Denmark (tenth).

**Table 7.1** Platforms used by survey respondents by country and age group (per cent)

Country	Platform	16–19	20–24	25–29	30–34
Denmark (n = 422)	Netflix	90	91	87	89
	HBO MAX	43	69	75	67
	Disney+	53	59	55	63
	DRTV	26	59	53	74
	YouTube	61	46	40	23
	TV 2 PLAY	42	48	33	47
	Viaplay	43	37	35	33
	Cinema	19	18	42	35
	TV Channels	10	10	4	2
	Prime Video	1	5	7	10
Germany (n = 421)	Netflix	87	87	94	84
	YouTube	74	83	69	61
	Prime Video	60	66	69	67
	Disney+	51	52	53	35
	Cinema	40	45	46	36
	ZDF Mediathek	17	34	37	41
	ARD Mediathek	13	31	31	43
	TV Channels	17	13	20	26
	RTL+	4	13	15	10
	Joyn	7	6	6	11
Italy (n = 546)	Netflix	83	84	79	82
	Prime Video	71	68	77	71
	YouTube	61	60	47	40
	Disney+	37	39	44	51
	RaiPlay	35	31	47	34
	Cinema	34	35	43	31
	TV Channels	17	21	18	15
	Sky Go	13	14	16	11
	Mediaset Infinity	11	16	9	5
Netherlands (n = 408)	Netflix	90	88	86	76
	YouTube	65	79	64	42
	Disney+	43	48	47	37
	HBO Max	28	39	36	39
	Prime Video	30	34	33	37
	NPO Plus/Start	8	17	44	46
	Cinema	21	35	33	16
	TV Channels	20	16	15	23
	Videoland	12	12	18	20
	RTL XL	3	1	3	7

**Comments:** Refers to use of “long-form content”, defined as content > 20 minutes. Survey question: “Where do you usually go when you want to watch long-form content? (pick all that apply)”. The top 10 platforms in each country are listed.

**Source:** see Esser et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b

Interviews confirmed the dominance of global streamers in all countries, with domestic television channels, including PSM channels, barely appearing on the radar of most young viewers. For example, Mads (DK, 27) stated that “Danish television just isn’t really on the menu”, while Lotte (DE, 19) claimed to watch “Not really any live broadcast television”, and Piero (IT, 17) only watched linear television “when I visit my grandma”.

With domestic channel consumption in decline and domestic streaming services often disregarded, most interviewees look first at their favourite global streaming service (usually Netflix) when deciding what to view. Younger viewers are getting out of the habit of turning to PSM unless there is a specific reason. For Gabriele (IT, 23), Italian PSM platform RaiPlay was viewed “always knowing that a [specific] programme I wanted to watch was on there”, but it was not the first place to go to. Equally for Didier (DE, 29): “I would first look at Netflix, Amazon, Disney and then afterwards ZDF or ARD [...] because I don’t even see it [ZDF] as a competitor for my attention, because the others are so omnipresent”.

Survey, digital diary, and interview data revealed limited desire among younger audiences to engage with domestic television in any form, whether public service or commercial, linear or on-demand. As a result, young people are habitually less exposed to domestic entertainment as a group, except for some 16–19-year-olds who might watch with family, often at mealtimes or for major entertainment or sports events. This is more prevalent in Italy, where 15 of our 22 interviewees lived with their parents, in keeping with official statistics indicating that almost 70 per cent of 18–34-year-olds were still living with parents in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024).

PSM platforms and/or television channels remain relevant for some, primarily as sources of news, for domestically focused documentaries, and for a limited selection of the country’s most popular light entertainment shows. For Martijn (NL, 27), Dutch PSM VoD platform NPO Start/Plus was a destination for “more documentary-style things” rather than fiction. Helle (DK, 17), while expressing a dislike for “the Danish stuff”, conceded that linear television was still the place to go for lifestyle shows in Danish “like *Buying Houses Blind* or decorating shows and baking shows”. In Italy, young people reported using PSM platforms occasionally for Italian films, but less for domestic serialised drama.

Genre preferences for fiction reinforce predilections for English-language entertainment, usually from the US, over domestic content. Favoured genres include Fantasy/Sci-fi, Comedy/Comedy-Drama, and Action/Adventure (see Table 7.2), precisely those where US platforms have larger catalogues. For example, Netflix has 6,000–7,000 titles on offer at any one time in each case study market compared to its public service counterparts: DRTV (849), ZDF (215), RaiPlay (2,542), and NPO Start (621) (JustWatch, as cited in Bengesser et al., 2025: 1522). By contrast, reality-TV and talent shows – domestically produced entertainment often promoted as appointment-to-view by domestic

outlets including PSM – are no longer as popular as they were in the 2000s and early 2010s (see Table 7.2). Survey results were replicated in project digital diaries, which showed that scripted episodes comprised 80 per cent of episodes viewed, compared to 20 per cent for non-scripted shows.

**Table 7.2** Genre preferences (per cent)

Genre	Denmark (n = 422)	Germany (n = 426)	Italy (n = 555)	Netherlands (n = 408)
Fantasy/Sci-fi	47	47	41	45
Comedy/Comedy-drama	52	44	41	37
Action/Adventure	46	43	43	48
Drama	52	38	38	24
Crime/Thriller	40	42	35	33
Sitcoms	32	35	45	33
Animation	26	30	37	32
Historical drama	30	30	19	33
Romance/Romantic comedy	26	28	29	30
Documentaries	36	28	19	31
Stand-up comedy	13	12	23	15
Reality-TV	15	12	7	14
Talk shows	9	11	10	12
Talent competitions	9	7	17	4
Lifestyle & factual entertainment	19	6	3	7
Other	3	6	3	8

Comments: Percentages refer to respondents aged 16–34. Survey question: “What type of screen content do you like best?” Up to five responses were allowed, percentages hence add up to more than 100 per cent.

Source: see Esser et al., 2025: 19

Interviews and digital diaries in all four countries confirmed genre preferences for fiction, including a shift away from domestic light entertainment formats. Interviews suggested that younger viewers have outgrown non-scripted formats, that they watch them less with family members, and that appointment-to-view shows no longer fit lifestyles more attuned to on-demand viewing. For Kenny (NL, 18), “we’re just not the age of that [*The Voice of Holland*] anymore”.

Lifestyle and factual entertainment, valued in Denmark (19%) as a favourite genre, and talent competitions (17%) and stand-up comedy (23%), favoured in Italy, provide pointers about why *some* local entertainment shows appeal. Usually, this relates to familiarity because these genres are transmitted in the local language, reflect local culture, feature recognisable local celebrities, and crucially generate connections among friend groups. According to Helle (DK, 17), Danish reality formats allow you to “talk to almost all your friends about it”, creating a sense of community. Similarly,

Ellen (NL, 33) referred to the shared experience of Dutch reality shows “because sometimes they become trending in the Netherlands, and then friends and colleagues are talking about it, and then I’m, like, triggered to also watch it”.

However, preferences for fiction genres are much stronger, and this partly explains audience preferences for US content. Survey respondents placed the US in pole position in all four countries as a favoured top 3 country-of-origin (see Table 7.3). Looking at first choices only (see Table 7.4), the US ranks first by some distance, with Italian (20%) and Danish (24%) domestic shares falling some way behind the US, while still outranking German (8%) and Dutch domestic shares (13%), which ranked third. Preferences for US programming were also reflected in digital diaries, with the US achieving a 58 per cent share of viewed episodes over five days compared with 15 per cent for domestic entertainment.

**Table 7.3** Country-of-origin preferences (per cent)

Country	Denmark (n = 413)	Germany (n = 380)	Italy (n = 530)	Netherlands (n = 386)
US	91	88	91	90
Domestic	80	51	75	52
UK	78	63	58	79
Japan	5	14	15	17
France	8	11	9	2
Spain	4	6	14	3
South Korea	4	7	7	7
Germany	5	n/a	2	4
Italy	2	3	n/a	2
Nordics	2	3	0	3
Sweden	3	5	0	1
Norway	3	1	1	1
Canada	1	2	1	3
Australia	1	2	1	2
Asia	1	0	1	0
Belgium	0	0	0	2
Europe	1	1	3	0

**Comments:** Percentages refer to respondents aged 16–34. Survey question: “Which countries (national or international) are your favourite sources when it comes to screen content? Please write your answers starting with your most favourite”. Three fields for ranked responses were provided. First, second, and third ranked choices are combined in this table. Countries with 1 per cent or less across all four countries are not listed.

**Source:** see Esser et al., 2025: 25

**Table 7.4** No. 1 country-of-origin choices (per cent)

Country	Country of origin for content	Age group				All (16–34)
		16–19	20–24	25–29	30–34	
Denmark (n = 413)	US	71	43	59	45	55
	Denmark	18	30	16	40	24
	UK	6	25	21	13	18
Germany (n = 380)	US	62	61	58	47	57
	Germany	8	8	5	11	8
	UK	12	17	24	23	20
Italy (n = 530)	US	62	62	61	61	61
	Italy	19	27	20	14	20
	UK	5	4	12	15	9
Netherlands (n = 386)	US	64	49	52	43	52
	Netherlands	10	8	16	17	13
	UK	21	27	22	31	24

**Comments:** Survey question: “Which countries (national or international) are your favourite sources when it comes to screen content?” The table shows the share of respondents placing the US as their first country-of-origin choice.

**Source:** see Esser et al., 2025: 24

As shown in Tables 7.3 and 7.4, the UK fares well in survey rankings as a country of origin, either second before domestic content (Germany and the Netherlands) or third (Denmark and Italy). It should, however, be noted that interviews revealed that its more recent success among young people (16–34) in Germany and Italy, and among the youngest (16–19) in all four countries, is based mostly on a small number of heavily promoted “transnational” youth-oriented shows that appear largely on Netflix (*Sex Education*, 2019–2023; *Heartstopper*, 2022–2024; *Peaky Blinders*, 2013–2022), or occasionally on (Amazon) Prime (the BBC’s *Fleabag*, 2016–2019). Some British comedy shows (e.g., *Cunk on Earth*, BBC/Netflix, 2022; *Derry Girls*, Channel 4, 2018–2022) defy the odds because of their status as memes on social media (see below). Some older film franchises (*Harry Potter*, various, 2001–2011) and older films such as *Notting Hill* (Roger Mitchell, 1999) are favoured as classics that are frequently shown and therefore remembered.

Watching in English represents another shift in viewing preferences, driven by the language options available on VoD platforms. High and rising levels of English language proficiency (EF EPI, 2023) boost the global trend for watching in English. This is particularly evident in countries like Denmark and the Netherlands, where viewers have long viewed content in English, but also in traditionally dubbing-oriented markets like Germany and Italy, where, as our research suggests (Esser et al., 2025: 81), watching in English is becoming increasingly common.

The reasons why viewers in these countries choose US over domestic content are complex. A key factor is the greater quantity and variety offered by

transnational streamers, particularly in the fiction genres most sought after by young audiences. However, other factors relating to promotion and discovery, as well as perceptions about domestic content, also play a role, as outlined below.

## **Social media and streaming services as sources of discovery**

The dominance of English-language content is sustained by its promotion on global streaming platforms (Iordache, 2022; Johnson, 2020; Lobato, 2020; Lotz, 2022). Interface designs on all VoD platforms constrain, limit, and direct the flow of content through personalised recommender algorithms and by prioritising certain content over others. However, individual platforms differ in how they manage content discovery, and these differences tend to be linked to their business models and service types (Chalaby, 2022; McKelvey & Hunt, 2019; Park, 2019). For PSM VoD services, remits such as content universality or the focus on national culture and society are not always easy to align with trends towards content personalisation (see D’Arma et al., 2024; Kelly & Sørensen, 2021; Sørensen, 2020). This challenge, combined with smaller catalogues and concerns over data collection, makes it harder for PSM to compete with global VoD services.

The sheer quantity and availability of appealing English-language content on transnational VoD platforms raise issues around prominence and discovery (Bengesser et al., 2025; D’Arma et al., 2024), as well as broader concerns about media and platform power (Jin, 2015). These dynamics manifest in a variety of industrial practices, including vertical integration within proprietary platforms, rapid transnational scaling up of production, and corporate practices that disregard regulation (Davis, 2021). Consequently, analysis of how young audiences discover and access screen entertainment provides clues about why PSM may feature less in younger audiences’ consciousness. Our survey data shows that recommendations from streaming services, friends and family, and social media clips are the most important ways of finding out about British and other screen content (see Table 7.5). The importance of recommendations from streaming services confirms what many interviewees stated about going straight to their favourite global streaming platforms to check what they want to watch.

Clips and trailers on social media, chiefly Instagram and TikTok, are also key in raising attention for shows, particularly among 16–19-year-olds. For this age group, they are the top route to discovery in Italy (77%) and the Netherlands (66%), the second most important in Germany (62%), and the third in Denmark (47%). Social media platforms are important for determining viewing, but mostly for shows on transnational platforms like Netflix and (Amazon) Prime Video. PSM lacks the capability to deliver timely personalised social media recommendations (D’Arma et al., 2024). Finding content by looking at what is offered on television channels, including PSM linear channels, comes much lower down on the list of discovery sources (11–19%).

**Table 7.5** Content-discovery drivers (per cent)

Country	Discovery driver	Age group				
		16-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	Total (16-34)
Denmark (n = 374)	Recommendations from the streaming services I use	57	76	64	51	64
	Recommendations from friends or family	50	63	70	72	64
	Clips and trailers on social media like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, etc.	47	53	39	29	44
	From film and TV reviews in podcasts, blogs, news outlets, etc.	18	37	50	48	39
	I look at what is offered on TV channels	12	17	12	19	14
	Other	8	4	6	10	6
	Influencers	9	1	1	0	2
	Recommendations on fan websites or groups	3	0	2	6	2
Germany (n = 349)	Recommendations from the streaming services I use	68	75	72	75	73
	Recommendations from friends or family	55	47	62	73	61
	Clips and trailers on social media like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, etc.	62	52	50	32	48
	From film and TV reviews in podcasts, blogs, news outlets, etc.	14	22	27	41	27
	I look at what is offered on TV channels	16	6	9	14	11
	Other	6	9	2	6	5
	Influencers	2	1	2	0	1
	Recommendations on fan websites or groups	2	2	5	3	3
Italy (n = 423)	Recommendations from the streaming services I use	51	43	58	71	56
	Recommendations from friends or family	51	38	38	54	44
	Clips and trailers on social media like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, etc.	77	71	62	37	61
	From film and TV reviews in podcasts, blogs, news outlets, etc.	26	39	35	30	33
	I look at what is offered on TV channels	8	15	14	11	12
	Other	1	4	1	2	2
	Influencers	6	3	3	0	3
	Recommendations on fan websites or groups	2	0	6	4	3
Netherlands (n = 378)	Recommendations from the streaming services I use	41	69	70	73	65
	Recommendations from friends or family	54	52	63	47	55
	Clips and trailers on social media like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, etc.	66	68	47	35	55
	From film and TV reviews in podcasts, blogs, news outlets, etc.	16	18	23	27	21
	I look at what is offered on TV channels	28	16	13	28	19
	Other	5	8	7	14	8
	Influencers	4	3	1	0	2
	Recommendations on fan websites or groups	12	6	6	7	7

Comments: Survey question: "How do you usually find out about the British screen content you watch? [pick max. 3 options]".

Source: see Esser et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b

Interviews conducted after the survey confirmed that Netflix is the most heavily used source of recommendations, with few interviewees browsing television channels or PSM platforms. Barbara (IT, 31) was fairly typical in heading for Netflix first because “there is a vast catalogue, or perhaps because it offers more things that fit my taste”. When interviewees head straight for their favourite streaming service, usually Netflix, this reinforces the visibility of non-domestic shows. Interviewees were aware that some shows were more heavily promoted by Netflix, which often sparked conversations among friends and increased visibility on social media platforms. This, in turn, reinforced the desire to watch those shows, creating a sense of community. For example, Emilia (DE, 24) noted that shows recommended to her were “also shows that are kind of talked about a lot”. When British historical drama *Peaky Blinders* (BBC, 2013–2022) was recommended to her, she watched it because “everyone was talking about it” online. Similarly, Kris (NL, 26), was drawn to British teen comedy-drama series *Everything Now* (2023) on Netflix after seeing a trailer for it on Instagram.

The more frequently younger viewers use global services to locate what they want to watch, the less likely they are to encounter domestic content. VoD recommendation algorithms play a central role in shaping viewing choices and cultural circulation. As several scholars have noted, these systems tend to privilege content from their own, often US-affiliated catalogues, which can limit the visibility of non-Anglophone and domestic productions (Davis, 2021; Sørensen, 2020). Interviewees confirmed that young audiences rarely encountered domestic shows because there were fewer of them, or, if they did, it was not the type of content that appealed to them. In this respect, Eduard’s (NL, 21) behaviour was fairly typical:

On Netflix, I really only see American or other types of content. And nothing Dutch really gets recommended to me either, so then I don’t really go out of my way to search for Dutch content.

Interviewees agreed that TikTok and Instagram are the most influential social media for discovering entertainment. For Elisa (IT, 26), TikTok worked “better” than other social networks because “it shows me things that maybe I haven’t watched, but which are very much in line with other series I watch, or other films, and so I start from there”. The viewing choices of 16–24-year-olds are also significantly influenced by online comments from friends, which, according to Elodie (NL, 26), added “trust on the recommendations that the algorithm gives me”. TikTok was a key influence on what Lena (DK, 17) watched on streaming platforms. She commented, “I didn’t know about *Ginny & Georgia* [US–Canadian comedy drama series on Netflix, 2021–2025] until I went on TikTok and saw the premiere. That’s when I thought that I really would like to watch that”. Paolo (IT, 17) saw UK drama *Peaky Blinders* on Netflix’s landing page but decided to watch the series only after seeing “some scenes on Instagram Reels”.

Social media and viral user-generated memes can also bring shows into the limelight that might be deemed less likely to succeed transnationally. This was clear for British comedy shows *Cunk on Earth* – a mockumentary parodying history documentaries through absurd interviews and questions – and *Derry Girls* – a sitcom about a group of teenagers navigating adolescence against the backdrop of Northern Ireland’s Troubles. Featuring distinctive humour and strong British accents, from Lancashire and Northern Ireland respectively (see Esser et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b), neither show was heavily promoted on Netflix. Yet both became surprisingly popular through humorous and memorable user-generated clips that increased viewer interest. Anders (DK, 28) found *Derry Girls* through “a funny clip” on Instagram. Emilia (DE, 24) saw “bits and pieces [of *Cunk on Earth*] on social media” and found it “so funny” that it prompted her to watch it. Gabriele (IT, 24) also discovered *Cunk on Earth* “thanks to social media” and “the popularity at some point was such that I almost certainly came across unofficial clips as well”. This spurred him to watch with friends.

## Where does this leave public service media?

Since many young viewers neither seek out PSM content nor encounter it on global streaming platforms, where US entertainment and popular fiction are abundant, it is not surprising that they perceive PSM content as less relevant. Ignorance of domestic productions and lack of interest persists despite efforts by some PSM to harness digital platforms and social media for distribution, as well as attempts to create innovative and interactive formats tailored for young audiences on youth-oriented platforms like the ZDF Neo channel and Funk VoD platform in Germany (see Stollfuß, 2021). Perceived lack of PSM relevance for younger audiences was evident in low agreement rates for the survey statement “Danish/Dutch/German/Italian content feels more relevant than British content”. In Italy, 31 per cent agreed, followed by Denmark with 20 per cent. In the Netherlands and Germany, this was even lower, at 15 and 7 per cent, respectively.

Interviewees tended to perceive US content as being more entertaining with higher production budgets, better acting talent and scripts, and an approach that “gets you hooked” (Margherita, IT, 27). With low appreciation of local entertainment offerings, there was also little appreciation of PSM’s wider offer. In Denmark and Italy, there was recognition of excellence in some areas. Danes (especially older interviewees) highlighted the quality of Danish crime drama; Italians highlighted Italian feature films and some statement drama series. This may be reflected in higher survey rankings for domestic content in Denmark and Italy compared to Germany and the Netherlands (see Tables 7.3 and 7.4).

What emerged strongly throughout the study was not just ignorance about domestic entertainment but outright dislike of domestic fiction, criticised for lower-quality acting and storytelling than US productions. Entrenched perceptions about the superiority of US (and, to a lesser degree, British) fiction occur in a “self-perpetuating cycle of English-language dominance” which works against domestic productions (Esser & Steemers, 2026: 19; Mast et al., 2017: 2579).

Except for Italy, domestic fiction was often described, without any prompting, with the same English-origin word – “cringe” or “cringy” – used particularly by the under-25-year-olds. Reasons for this were grounded on a lack of authenticity, exacerbated by perceptions of “bad” acting and scriptwriting that was not “always as fleshed out” (Floor, NL, 20) as English-language productions. Further examination reveals that respondents like Max (DE, 17) are also influenced by an everyday discourse about domestic content being “bad across the board”, reinforcing “this very bad stigma against German entertainment”. In Italy, except for Rai’s *Mare Fuori* [*The Sea Beyond*] (2020–2023), a series set in a youth detention centre in Naples, interviewees did not mention any domestic youth-oriented shows. This suggests a deficit, borne out in interview responses across all four countries that highlighted the lack of acting quality, often linked to a “lack of authenticity”. For example, Anders (DK, 28) watched “very little Danish TV” because the writing was “very stiff” and the actors seemed like “theatre actors”, which made it seem “not realistic, the way they talk”. Max (DE, 17) disliked German films because they were “a bit *cringy*, but also not really interesting, and the humour doesn’t really fit”. These views were shared by his circle of friends (“I don’t really know any of my friends who really like German television or German shows”). For Karl (NL, 18), Dutch television programmes were “not really well-made productions, so you see that there’s not a big budget. And the acting most of the time is just wooden”. For Elisa (IT, 26), acting in Italian series was also perceived as being of “a low standard and I can sense it much more, compared to when I watch shows that are non-Italian”.

The effect of these sustained low expectations is the continued perception that domestic fiction is lower in quality. As Didier (DE, 29), talking about the German series *Babylon Berlin* (Sky/ARD, 2017–2022), which at the time had the highest production budget of any German television series ever (Schneider, 2017), recalled:

I’ve heard from people that it isn’t bad at all, but I still haven’t [watched it]. That’s like for me – maybe it’s prejudice, I’m not sure – but there’s, like, again a little barrier to watch something like this, to giving something like this a chance. It’s maybe also because I don’t have it on my mind. I’m not really aware of it, that it might be a competitor for my attention...

While our analysis acknowledges the structural disadvantages faced by PSM, insights into the appeal of British content, the primary focus of our study, may offer guidance on how PSM, within their limited means, could enhance the attractiveness of domestic fiction for young audiences (Esser et al., 2025: 48). Humour, as well as characters and stories, seem to be a major draw for watching British content. While the surveys do not provide strong quantitative evidence for the higher quality of British stories, corresponding interview statements around successful British “coming-of-age” narratives on Netflix (*Sex Education*; *Derry Girls*; *Heartstopper*) suggest that a focus on relationships, sexual identity, and humour are relevant and seen as notably lacking in domestic fiction, which does not spark the same emotional engagement. For Lene (DK, 17), Danish series “don’t really trigger your emotions” in the same way as “coming-of-age stories” like *Heartstopper* on Netflix. Kris (NL, 26) was drawn to youth-oriented shows “based around romance and sex”, such as *Heartstopper* and *Sex Education* on Netflix, but “I don’t find that in Dutch shows or movies”.

Humour was identified as a notable characteristic of British shows, spanning both fiction and non-fiction, because it featured even in more serious genres, something interviewees did not perceive in domestic productions. For Max (DE, 17), the focus on humour in British content was,

a contrast to German television, where if you watch a normal show – like, for example, crime drama or something like that – it’s very serious. There are no jokes in it. [...] I think it’s more enjoyable if you can sometimes laugh about it.

Finally, the low appreciation or growing disinterest in domestic programmes, both fiction and entertainment generally, can reinforce prejudices against domestic programming. The issue is exacerbated by the deluge of English-language recommendations on social media. This creates a vicious circle that perpetuates the low ranking and appreciation of native-language entertainment (see Mast et al., 2017) and affects other genres within PSM offerings, such as information and news, which were previously embedded and promoted between more popular offerings to attract viewers.

## Conclusion

The structural advantages of global streamers, including their vast budgets and sophisticated recommender systems (Chalaby, 2022; Jin, 2015), often mean domestic content is simply not on young people’s radar. When encountered, it is often perceived as of comparatively lower quality and less relatable. Such perceptions circulate discursively and become self-reinforcing. This dynamic, combined with growing preferences for English-language screen fiction viewed in English, has serious implications for national legacy media because it

signals and reinforces reduced engagement with domestically produced media over time. As part of the justification for PSM, the entertainment remit may seem, at times, secondary to the news-led information and education remit. Yet fiction does play an essential role in reflecting society, serving not only as a space for social and political discourse but also as a means of creating and fostering national identity, community belonging, social cohesion, and legitimacy for PSM. Our research suggests that among younger audiences, “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991) are moving from a sense of “national community” to a more complex, multifaceted set of identities that often transcend national and local imaginings, particularly around coming-of-age themes in fiction that are clearly important for younger audiences. Global streamers, with their vast offer of popular entertainment, unmatched marketing budgets, and promotional power, are driving this trend, with the English language becoming “second nature” for a growing number of young people through global media and social networks. The challenge for PSM of connecting with younger audiences through domestic entertainment and fiction is very difficult. To address it, PSM must develop a deeper understanding of the preferences and behaviour of younger audiences, informing strategies that offer appealing entertainment while also reflecting the cultural diversity and social pluralism that connect communities.

The empirical findings presented in this chapter provide insights into the entertainment experiences of young people across different parts of Europe and the importance of providing entertaining experiences as part of PSM. Clues about what may be lacking domestically give some pointers about how PSM might engage younger audiences more effectively, notwithstanding the difficult financial and political pressures they face. Solutions that some PSM are already following include establishing a stronger and more engaging presence on social media platforms; making more targeted investments in (youth-oriented) audience research and data analytics; prioritising youth issues and humour in fiction; and acknowledging the essential role of entertainment as well as news and information in maintaining the relevance and effectiveness of PSM in the digital age. These difficult but essential adjustments are necessary if PSM is to survive generational shifts in screen consumption and continue serving as a vital safeguard for democratic values – doing so in inclusive ways that recognise the role of entertainment in shaping public opinion.

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