

## **Affect, Curiosity, and Positionality in Context: Watching Television Entertainment in Argentina and the United States**

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Reception studies scholars have recently argued that there is a dearth of evidence on contemporary television audience practices and interpretations. To help fill this void, we ask: How do audiences in the Global South and North choose, experience, interpret, and affectively respond to the entertainment they choose to watch? We draw on semistructured interviews conducted in Argentina ( $N = 30$ ) and the United States ( $N = 30$ ). Our analysis indicates that there are three main dimensions that describe the experience of watching entertainment today: the search for emotional self-preservation, the fulfillment of intellectual curiosity, and an exploration of subjective positionality. Though we show that there is a combination of commonalities between the audiences in both countries in these dimensions, we observe and conclude by highlighting issues of variance—both context and identity based—in the ways in which each one of these dimensions are situationally enacted. We conceptualize the variance in each one of these dimensions as related to objects of escapism, geographic orientation of content selection, and representation and identity, respectively.

*Keywords: audience reception studies, television entertainment, comparative analysis, interviews, Argentina, United States*

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Globalization has transformed the entertainment industry. An intensification of interconnectivity has led to a close-knit global business that produces similar formats and shows (Moran, 1998; Waisbord, 2004). However, globalization does not necessarily mean that contemporary television viewing practices are homogeneous across countries (Lotz, Lobato, & Thomas, 2018). Yet there is limited knowledge about how individuals watch television nowadays (Turner, 2019), a gap that Gray (2017) has called a “quieting of the qualitative audience in critical scholarship” (p. 81). We help fill this void by offering a comparative qualitative account of watching television entertainment in two countries that reflect Global South and Global North dynamics: Argentina and the United States. We ask: How do contemporary audiences in these two cases affectively experience and interpret audiovisual entertainment consumption? How and why do these experiences vary or not? To answer these questions, we develop a center-periphery lens—both to explore power dynamics as the wider context of both country-based and identity-related differences—to examine 60 interviews with viewers in both countries in a way that sheds light on issues of affect and interpretation.

Our analysis shows that practices and interpretations around emotional self-preservation, intellectual curiosity, and positionality of one’s identity are shared by viewers across countries, but their enactment differs contextually. First, viewers resort to audiovisual entertainment for emotional exploration and self-preservation, but the triggers of this process and the objects viewers want to escape from vary situationally depending on life stages, circumstances and country. Second, audience members often fulfill their intellectual curiosity by watching entertainment, but there is cross-country divergence in the geographic orientation of this process. Third, people draw on audiovisual entertainment to relationally negotiate and reflect about their identities, but the universe of comparison and positionality varies based on identities and contexts. We draw on these findings to reflect on the cross-national, context- and identity-based role of audiovisual entertainment for emotional well-being, intellectual curiosity, and exploration of one’s positionality and identity.

### **Conceptual Matters**

Audience reception studies have long examined issues of meaning-making in everyday life through entertainment consumption (Ang, 1985; Press, 1991). There have been recent efforts to better understand contemporary audiences (Bury & Li, 2015; Cavalcante, Press, & Sender, 2017; Wood, 2007). However, some have maintained that there is still scarce qualitative knowledge on current practices (Gray, 2017; Turner, 2019). Livingstone (2019) has argued that it is crucial that in a datafied age scholars continue to include perspectives focused on subjects’ interpretations, including the often-forgotten nonelites. Moreover, Lotz and colleagues (2018) have suggested that it is important to revise theoretical frameworks that were based on past forms of television and to incorporate cross-country comparisons. In this section we review key streams of work in audience studies, particularly those pertaining to issues of meaning-making in everyday life, with a focus on emotional aspects, intercultural experiences, and identity-related issues.

Reception studies have emerged from functionalist and cultural studies approaches (Kraidy, 2005). The first group, which includes the “uses and gratifications” framework, has stressed that audiences choose or use the media to obtain specific affective gratifications (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). For instance, mood management theory has argued that people use the media to regulate different emotional experiences (Wirth & Schramm, 2005) and that it enables people to escape their daily realities (Henning & Vorderer,

2001). Others have shown that people might seek entertainment that generates mixed affect as long as it is experienced in a fulfilling and inspirational way—what has been called elevation (Oliver, Hartmann, & Woolley, 2012). Recent research has also examined contemporary television practices like binge-watching (Walton-Pattison, Dombrowski, & Presseau, 2018) and some of its psychosocial and health-related effects (Granow, Reinecke, & Ziegele, 2018). With an intercultural perspective, others have studied how diasporas consume music for different processes, such as cultural adaptation (Jia & Koku, 2019), or use technological devices, such as the mobile phone, to maintain primary social bonds (Liu & Leung, 2017).

The cultural studies tradition has also attended various issues of affect and identity as related to media practices and interpretations, with specific attention to ideological and structural factors (Brunsdon & Morley, 1978; Hall, 1973). In particular, feminist audience research has stressed the importance of everyday life as a locus of where to find the interconnection of these elements (Ang, 1985; Hobson, 1982). Thus, this stream of work has shed light on the social significance of gendered aspects of popular culture consumption and—together with the role of pleasure within demands of patriarchal everyday life—the importance of class-based viewership differences (Cavalcante et al., 2017; Hobson, 1982; Press, 1991; Radway, 2009). Reception studies in Latin America have also studied issues of ideology and structure in popular culture and everyday life, with attention to the regional popularity of telenovelas (soap operas; La Pastina, Rego, & Straubhaar, 2004; McAnany & La Pastina, 1994). Some of this work has highlighted how telenovela viewership experiences could speak of social conflict, resistance, and the formation of individuality and national identity (Clua, Escosteguy, & Jacks, 2010; Martín-Barbero, 1998). More recently, affective audience responses in relation to the body and sexuality have been explored (Cavalcante, 2018; Sender, 2012; Sender & Sullivan, 2008).

Scholarship influenced by comparative media research has also explored processes of intercultural understandings through media consumption. Some of these efforts were initially driven by the concern about the homogenizing role of multinational capitalism (Schiller, 1971). With a dominant point of media origin in the Global North (Thussu, 2006), early research focused on cross-national interpretations of American content and its effects in intercultural processes (Boyd, 1984; Liebes, 1988). More recently, some argued that globalization led to the production of very similar formats and texts across the world (Moran, 1998; Waisbord, 2004). Other scholars have explored contemporary audience interpretations of global popular productions and argued in favor of minimal cross-country differences in viewership interpretations, favoring a notion that national repertoires of interpretation are sometimes replaced by transnational ones (Kuipers, 2011; Kuipers & De Kloet, 2009). Moreover, van Keulen and Krijnen (2014) have argued that localization attempts of transnational products are overrated as a mechanism to protect local cultures. To understand intercultural experiences of viewership, Straubhaar (1991) proposed the notion of an asymmetrical dependence among nations. He argued that local audiences were drawn to national productions because of cultural proximity, with limitations around national issues of class, race, and cultural geography (La Pastina, Straubhaar, & Sifuentes, 2014). More recently, scholars studied migrants' and diasporas' experiences as a different way of understanding intercultural learning and understandings and showed how the media is used to navigate and construct shared identities and negotiate ideas about representation and belonging (Báez, 2018; Georgiou, 2006; Ong, 2009).

Cavalcante and associates (2017) have argued that the media world that has been traditionally theorized by audience studies has changed pronouncedly, leading to new forms of multisited and ubiquitous

media engagement. Moreover, Tay and Turner (2008) have proposed that “new media are recontextualising television, changing what it is that television can do, for whom it can do it, and under what conditions” (p. 72). Wood (2007) has suggested we need to find ways to “reach beyond researching discrete texts and locate the use of user platforms within the experience of television viewing” (p. 495). Moreover, as Livingstone (2003) argued, it is important to understand “other countries . . . transnational processes across different contexts . . . [and] the local reception of imported cultural forms” (p. 479). Thus, the ethnographic study of cultural and/or international differences in the contemporary transnational media scenario is still relatively underdeveloped. This article contributes to this end by examining how audiences in two different national settings, which reflect Global South and North conditions, experience, affectively respond to, and interpret the audiovisual entertainment they choose to watch.

### **Methodology**

Global communication scholarship has highlighted that our understanding of television viewership, as well as other communication topics, has been mostly based on Global North audiences, and hence more empirical research in the Global South is needed (Rojas & Valenzuela, 2019; Waisbord & Mellado, 2014). To help fill this void, this study draws from two distinct sociocultural contexts in the Americas: Argentina and the United States. Comparing these two cases allows us to interrogate Global North–South dynamics by choosing two countries that, despite stark differences in language, culture, or income share some demographic indicators—such as large economic migration histories, first, mostly from Europe and second, from other Latin American countries—as well as other sociocultural commonalities due to sharing a similar postcolonial institutional history (Saguir, 2007).

Most viewers in Argentina watch televised fiction via cable TV (SInCA, 2017) with multiple channels offering American programming. While Argentina has been a regional media producer and exporter (Straubhaar, 1991), Argentine fiction programming is still heavily influenced by imported U.S. content (Becerra & Mastrini, 2014). Furthermore, access to the Internet is relatively similar in both countries: almost 9 of 10 adults in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2019), compared with 8 of 10 in Argentina (SInCA, 2017). A total of 28% of adults in the United States use streaming platforms as their primary way of watching television (Pew Research Center, 2017), and almost 20% in Argentina frequently use them (SInCA, 2017).

We conducted 30 semistructured interviews with adults in each country, between April and September 2017. The participation requirement was being older than 18 years. After questions about technological access and media routines were asked, interviewers invited participants to reflect on their most recent entertainment consumption; preferred genres; social, time, and space considerations of their watching habits; and issues of representation and identification with characters in fictional television. In the United States, interviews took place in the greater metropolitan areas of Philadelphia, Chicago, and Miami. In Argentina, most of the interviews were conducted in the City and the Province of Buenos Aires—areas that represent approximately 40% of the national population—and a few in Córdoba, the second largest city of the country. Interviewees were selected via a “snowball” sampling method. They verbally consented to their participation in the study and were not compensated. Interviews lasted on average 45 minutes and were conducted in public places by the authors and a team of research assistants. When participants

preferred so, interviews in the United States took place in Spanish. Quotes from Spanish have been translated into English by the authors. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article due to privacy concerns.

In the United States, the average age was 37 years, with a range from 20 to 69 years. In terms of gender, 33% identified as male, 63% as female, and one as transgender. Among those who self-identified their race and/or ethnicity, 50% did so as White, 17% as Black or African American, 17% as Asian or South Asian, 13% as Latino or Hispanic, and one person as Native American. In Argentina, the average age was 47 years, with a range from 20 to 77 years. In terms of gender, 47% identified as male and 53% as female. Participants did not share with interviewers a self-identification of their race or ethnicity, which is consistent with Argentina—as other Latin American nations—having historically built a state-led notion of *mestizaje* (racial mixture; Martínez-Echazábal, 1998). Both samples are diverse in terms of occupations, but the Argentine sample has a lower average level of educational attainment.

Our analysis adopts an exploratory and interpretive approach to the experience of audiovisual entertainment watching, trying to “illuminate how cultural symbol systems are used to attribute meaning to existence and activity” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 11). When referring to “television” or “entertainment” in this article, we do so from the perspective of the subjects. Thus, these terms encompass different types of audiovisual content—film, series, soap operas, reality shows, and so on—and those that participants decided to reference, regardless of the devices used to access to it. All interviews were open-coded following what Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) describe as descriptive, values, and emotional coding, until theoretical saturation was reached (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

### **Emotional Self-Preservation**

Interviewees indicated searching for an array of affective states when choosing what entertainment to watch. First, we show how participants sought experiences of deep introspection, which were associated with mixed affect, but were enjoyable partly due to their inspirational and self-reflexive potential, similarly to what Oliver and colleagues (2012) have called elevation. Second, we add to this work by showing with a diverse and cross-national sample how everyday routines, certain environments, life circumstances, and real-world issues posed limits to the enjoyment of deep introspective content. In those cases, participants chose entertainment that could allow them to escape from these real-world concerns.

### ***Seeking Mediated Experiences of Introspection***

#### *Selection Considerations*

Participants said they choose what to watch based on the kind of emotional experience they sought. They were often highly cognizant of their selection preferences, which depended on either their mood, context, or length of specific content. Martín (20), an engineering undergraduate student in Buenos Aires Province, commented that he can watch drama if it is a show but not a movie: “When you sit there to watch something, you don’t want to start thinking about something very dramatic. If it is shorter, like one episode of a show, maybe. But if it’s a movie . . . you end up feeling too overwhelmed.”

*Inspirational Introspection*

Furthermore, interviewees often referred to choosing to watch stories about resilience, loss, and struggle, in processes that can be described as emotion-driven and almost opposite from escapism practices. In other words, participants would refer to how they sought entertainment that would allow them to explore deep emotions, even when these were associated with feelings of sadness. Mark (20), a student in Illinois, recalling his experience of watching a biographical World War II drama, said, "The story behind it was, I mean . . . I would almost cry just thinking about it right now." Carla (45), a lawyer in the City of Buenos Aires, said that she likes stories about "the beautiful aspects of human beings, personal growth stories, maybe it involves suffering, but they are focused not on the suffering itself but on what's behind that." Similarly, Sandra (48), an interior designer in Buenos Aires, commented, "I like biographical movies that tell the story of some real-life character; I feel motivated by the struggles they had to go through."

*Alternative Lives Exploration*

Immersion in stories that made interviewees reflect on what they would have done if they had had alternative life pathways was often experienced in fulfilling ways. Carla (45) remembered watching *Hidden Figures* (2016), a movie about a group of female African American mathematicians working at NASA in the 1960s, and empathizing with the story due to having experienced sexism in the workplace "despite all the huge differences." She added that "sometimes after watching movies that are too moving . . . I keep thinking about what I would have done if I had been in that situation." Elizabeth (30), a consultant in Philadelphia, was also deeply affected by the same movie and expressed, "When I watch movies that are high drama or true, I can directly feel what the characters are feeling so it can be hard. . . . You think 'that could've been me.'" Similarly, Elsa (66), a retired teacher in a Buenos Aires suburb, remembered watching a Scottish movie and said, "They show you stuff that you haven't been through, you know? But you imagine yourself in the shoes of that person and wonder, how would I have acted?"

*Stickiness of Mediated Affect*

Many interviewees said that some of these sought mediated emotional experiences stuck with them for days or even years, signaling a stickiness of mediated affect. Ishani (47), an educator in Illinois, explained how she was struggling to leave behind the emotional baggage she had been carrying after watching *13 Reasons Why* (2017–19), a show in which a teenage girl dies by suicide. She expressed that it caused her "great depression because I have teenage sons. . . . It took me like a month and a half to process it because I was so saddened by it." Similarly, Elsa (66) expressed that the day after watching something that makes her feel very emotional, "That sticks with me, it's not just a day, sometimes it's such a strong feeling that two or three days go by and one still thinks about it."

While many sought the experience of deep, even saddening emotions through entertainment watching, there were different everyday routines, emotionally charged environments, challenging life situations, or real-world issues that made participants want to avoid deep mediated emotional experiences. In those cases, they aligned with the following escapism practices.

### ***Escaping From Real-Life Emotions Through Mediated Ones***

#### *Everyday Routines*

Participants noted that there were times in which they wanted to “escape” from their daily routines, to “decompress.” They would indicate to do this by watching what many referred to as “mindless” content—this was slightly more salient among participants in the United States. Lauren (34), a senior policy analyst in Chicago, said that “sometimes I just want to deactivate and not think about anything serious or depressing. . . . It’s just mindless TV . . . to relax and to not think too much.” Many referred to watching reality television for this, which they confessed doing with different levels of embarrassment. Kendra (32), a project administrator also in Chicago, noted that “sometimes I do watch, and I hate to admit this, trashy reality TV. It fries my brain, but it’s like, ‘Oh my gosh, my life is not that bad!’ It is how I decompress from the day.” Mike (33), a paralegal worker in the same city, commented that he is a great fan of *Real Housewives*: “We’re talking every city. Atlanta, Potomac—Oh my God, New York, New Jersey, Orange County, Beverly Hills, this is so embarrassing.”

#### *Emotionally Charged Environments*

When participants’ everyday lives were situated in environments that they defined as emotionally challenging, they expressed an interest in avoiding dramatic, heavily charged content. Esteban (45), a clerical employee at a center for the visually impaired in Buenos Aires, said, “I don’t like dramas. . . . I live with a lot of drama in my job . . . the lives of the patients you work with can really affect you, so the last thing I want to do is watch a drama.” Estela (59), a social worker who assists people with different disabilities in the greater Buenos Aires area, shared a similar sentiment: “When I was younger maybe it didn’t affect me that much, but now . . . when one sees certain types of things in their daily life, after all these years. . . . You just want to free your mind a bit.” For these participants, their emotionally charged job routines impeded them from enjoying introspective content, as it was too connected with real-life difficulties.

#### *Challenging Life Situations*

Seeking entertainment as a way of evading from reality was also mentioned as a mechanism to deal with specifically challenging life situations, such as the loss of a loved one. Darlene (45), owner of a small business in Chicago, referred to the experience of going to the movies during a very challenging period in her life: “A friend of mine had just died and I needed to be distracted and a friend took me out. . . . It was about popcorn and distraction for two hours.” Alicia (54), a staff member at a high school in Buenos Aires, said that since her sister passed away, she stopped watching dramas. She said that as the family wanted to get distracted, they planned on watching together the last installment in the *Fast & Furious* (2017) sequel of action films about street racing. She added, “I used to watch thousands of those movies that make you cry . . . but lately I’m trying to escape from all that. . . . It reminds me so much about what happened that it really hurts me, I prefer to avoid it.” When using entertainment to escape from challenging life circumstances, participants would frequently indicate that the practice of watching was conducted with others, in social settings.

*Politics and Crime*

Interviewees in both countries mentioned different real-world objects from which they sought to escape. While in the United States the main object of escapism was politics, in Argentina it was crime. Eric (37), a software developer in Philadelphia, said that he usually has his meals watching a show, but “nothing political. . . . When I’m eating dinner, it’s my time to relax.” Others in the United States indicated that avoiding political content became hard even when watching entertainment. Terrence (35), who lives in Chicago and is a social services worker, noted that “when I watch shows with my grandfather, a lot of times because they’re old films, I kind of forget a little bit about what’s happening,” referring to issues of racism after Trump was elected. Then, he added that

there are a lot of times when we’re watching certain shows, like we watch *Black-ish* [a sitcom about an upper-middle class African American family in the United States] and a lot of current events are tied into the storyline. . . . It’s kind of hard to escape sometimes.

Nadia (23), a graduate student also in Chicago, shared similar feelings about the intertwining of entertainment and politics. However, she said that she watches that show, too, but finds it a good midpoint because “it sorts of hits the good, sweet spot of—it’s not like one of those shows where I have to be really involved but it’s also not like a mindless comedy.”

While through similar arguments, viewers in Argentina indicated to avoid another type of content that talked about contemporary issues: In their case, it was mostly related to crime-related topics. Julieta (36), an attorney in Buenos Aires, said that she does not like watching “something bad that’s real, like films about drug dealers. . . . It’s not only horrific but it’s verisimilar. The only thing you get from that is a feeling of impotence. No, it’s horrible.” Similarly, Carolina (24), a student and full-time worker in Buenos Aires, which witnessed the emergence of the “Ni Una Menos” (Not one woman less) antiviolence feminist movement, said she had an aversion to stories about crime, and commented,

I found out what had happened to this girl [who was murdered] and I’m really not in the mood to continue hearing about it. So, I search for some entertainment show that doesn’t make me feel anything . . . it isolates me.

These findings highlight something that our comparative data can uniquely show: The importance of context in what objects viewers escape from, and thus its consequences in content selection and avoidance.

### **Intellectual Curiosity**

Interviewees in both countries also said to enjoy watching fictional content about stories that they found to be plausible, which was associated to enjoying learning about the world and different life pathways. They tended to interpret and relate to content based on a shared intellectual curiosity, while geographically orienting the fulfilment of such curiosity in different ways.



### ***Historical Realism***

Many interviewees said they liked learning from content that could be believable. Mariano (41), a teacher in the City of Buenos Aires, noted he likes shows that “have certain idea of possibility that they could be true, I need to be convinced that they are showing me something that could be real.” Melissa (59), a part-time educator and yoga instructor in the suburbs of Chicago, shared that she leans “toward something that has historic bent, a real moral conundrum.” Sometimes, when viewers encountered content that claimed historical realism, they wanted to test the veracity of the portrayal. Carla (45), the attorney in Buenos Aires, commented that “even when the movie itself is not historic, I keep thinking about things I’ve seen, and I start doing some research. I go online to find out about what was happening at the time.”

Viewers in both countries explained that one reason they enjoyed watching realistic entertainment or representative of historical times is that they appreciate deriving lessons from different life experiences. Rachel (33), a clerical worker in Chicago, said, “I do love—wow, interrogating the deep questions of what it means to be alive right now, that type of existential stuff . . . like an alternative way of doing and being in the world.” Alan (28), an accountant in Philadelphia, stated that “sometimes it’s good to think about yourself, but it’s also good to hear other perspectives or hear about other people from different walks of life.”

### ***At Home and Abroad***

Interviewees in Argentina repeatedly noted learning from international content, something that was not equally prevalent among participants in the United States. Alberto (62), a consultant in Buenos Aires, said that he likes “learning about other cultures. . . . I remember having seen a few [movies] that were beautiful . . . because of what you learn from them. Some from Eastern cultures, Japanese, Chinese.” Elsa (66), the retired teacher in Buenos Aires, expressed how much she likes to watch international content, “mostly British, French, Spanish, too. The Italian movies are beautiful, because they always show you reality as it is, you identify with that, or you don’t but you learn about how they live.” Carolina (24), the student and full-time worker in Buenos Aires, shared a similar appreciation toward learning even when “sometimes I don’t even like them that much, but I watch them to learn about the idiosyncrasy of other cultures.” Martín (20), the college student in Buenos Aires, reflected on his feelings about watching so much international, and mostly American, content: “I don’t really like it when I realize it’s mostly American content. They do it well. Of course, I would love to have Argentine productions like that, but in general Argentine productions are not like that.”

Martín’s comments highlight the ambivalence that some viewers in Argentina have when it comes to prioritizing good productions, which because of market characteristics are for the most part foreign ones, while also expressing some frustration for not having the opportunity to watch local productions with the same level of quality. Thus, this illustrates how center-periphery market structures can affect viewership experiences in different contexts. It also adds to Straubhaar’s (1991) notions of preference toward cultural proximity when issues of production quality and availability are intertwined. We delve more into these issues related to Global North and South dynamics in the discussion.

### **Positionality**

Interviewees in both countries reflected on issues of the representation of their identities and feelings of empathy with other people's life stories as meaningful aspects of their entertainment viewership experiences. First, they expressed to sometimes use entertainment as a resource to reflect on their social and cultural positionalities, expressing the complex roles of context and relationality in the lived experience of identity. Second, interviewees also referred to experiencing high levels of empathy with characters' social roles, and life experiences, while taking into consideration cultural factors of proximity and distance. These processes showed country- and identity-based differences related to what we call center-periphery dynamics.

### **Representation**

#### *Visibility as Default*

When asked about the role of identification and representation in processes of enjoyment, some participants emphasized that it was only issues of content quality, not representation, what mostly influenced their enjoyment. However, this was especially prevalent among men—and mostly White men—in both countries, who as such are part of dominant groups that are hyper visible in the media. While representation and identification were important to participants in both countries, how they mattered differed. Also, it was mostly participants in the United States who reflected more on the role of race and ethnicity in these processes. For instance, Eric explained:

I'm a White male, I'm represented, I mean, I never feel left out. So, I don't care if like a show has to have some of me in it. Like, I watch *Atlanta* [a comedy-drama about the lives of two African American cousins in the eponymous city's rap scene] and I don't think that there's anyone like me. . . . I just want to be entertained; I don't care who the character is.

Esteban (45), the clerical employee in suburban Buenos Aires, said that for him to like a movie "the story needs to be good; it needs to have a narrative context that has to be catching." Ezequiel (39), a lawyer in the City of Buenos Aires, expressed that "I might not feel identified at all with the protagonist and still really like a movie." These experiences suggest that for members of dominant groups, like men in both countries, representation might be considered a less relevant factor in entertainment experiences because it is probably their circumstance by default.

#### *Visibility as Pleasure*

However, when reflecting about other aspects of one's identity that are often underrepresented, representation was regarded as more consequential. Alan (28), the accountant in Philadelphia, noted that

I'm a straight White male, everything represents me. I mean, that's the truth. It's a problem in Hollywood. [I feel represented] less often as a Jewish person, but sometimes

that, too. . . . Like being straight and White doesn't matter to me, but being Jewish matters to me, so sometimes I do enjoy watching shows with Jewish themes.

In some of these cases, there was also an expressed frustration with misrepresentations, which affected their enjoyment. Germán (27) is a student and part-time worker in the Province of Buenos Aires and has been blind since birth. He said that he does not feel represented by the media because

every time they talk about disabilities, they present it as an isolated case, they take that person out from the collective. . . . I feel identified when very sporadically they mention a story of a person with a disability and cover the topic wisely.

In these cases, content quality was still important, but there was an expression of pleasure and enjoyment when seeing their stories, usually invisibilized, represented. Sam (28), an employee at a non-profit in Philadelphia, expressed,

I identify as a gay transgender man and there are not a lot of gay representations. There was a television show when I was living at home, at Logo, it was the first LGBT-only programming, so I remember feeling represented. . . . I did [feel good about it] and it was the first time I felt that I would go downstairs to watch TV. . . . I actively seek out LGBT media. If I watch movies, that's what I prefer.

Overall, participants' interpretations highlighted the complexity and contextual character of the lived experience of identity in entertainment enjoyment.

### ***Empathy***

#### *Social Roles and Experiences*

In some cases, identification was expressed as a process of high empathy with a character. Miguel (65), owner of a hardware store in Córdoba, said that "if I watch a movie it's not that I become the person, but I experience it very intensively." Sometimes these experiences of empathy came as a consequence of identification with a character's circumstantial social role. Patricia (47), an educator in Argentina, said that she "watched an episode of *The Middle* and it's not that I feel identified with it, but I laugh watching the mother of the family. I think of mothers in general . . . things that happen to us with our kids."

Other times, interviewees felt empathy with characters' meaningful life experiences. Alan (28) remembered watching the 2017 film *The Big Sick*, about the challenges an interracial couple face in the United States, and stated,

I'm not Pakistani, she [his wife] is not Pakistani. . . . How I was able to relate to it personally is I'm Jewish, my wife is not. . . . And some of the conversations that the main characters have in the movie I feel that she and I had those experiences with our families. So, it was very touching.

Similarly, Alberto (62), the consultant in Buenos Aires, remembered his experience watching the 2006 film *The Pursuit of Happyness* and feeling personal empathy with the father in the story, portrayed by Will Smith, as he recalled going through a period of employment instability when his first son was a child.

#### *Proximity and Distance*

Interviewees also often noted experiencing cultural empathy, even when acknowledging cultural distance. This was more prevalent among viewers in Argentina, who frequently referred to watching fictional international content. Martina (37), an employee and student in Buenos Aires, remembered watching *Lion* (2017), “the one of an Indian kid that gets lost and it takes him like 15 years to go back home.” She recalled that “it really left me very shaken, because he had the same age of my daughter. . . . Maybe I don’t feel identified with the character, but I do with their experience.” Alicia (54), the staff member at a high school in the Province of Buenos Aires, recalled watching *The Help* (2011), a drama film about African American domestic workers in the 1960s. She expressed that

it really hit me. I learned so much from the bravery of the maid, the woman of color. . . . With all her suffering, the discrimination, she was able to overcome it. . . . I really learn from that stories, although of course I didn’t feel identified because it [her life] couldn’t be more different [from mine].

### **Discussion**

This study sought to understand the interpretative and affective experiences of contemporary audiences of audiovisual entertainment. It also aimed to make sense of both similarities and differences in two cases that reflect Global South and Global North dynamics: Argentina and the United States. Our analysis shows evidence of a commonality of interpretive and affective predispositions to watching audiovisual entertainment in terms of three elements: (1) emotional self-preservation, (2) intellectual curiosity, and (3) subjective positionality. We find that individuals watch entertainment to experience sometimes long-lasting mediated emotions, both through introspective as well as evading choices; to explore their intellectual curiosity and learn about different ways of life; and to explore their identities by making meaning of their own positionalities—in their immediate situations as well as in alternative imagined ones. Thus, our findings indicate that entertainment is an encompassing affective experience that blends in with a subject’s life in organic and complex ways. The existence of similarities in two culturally different contexts is a significant finding that our comparative data can uniquely show. These findings add to the existent literature on uses and gratification by showing with a diverse cross-national sample how viewership experiences, such as those of elevation and escapism (Hastall, 2017; Oliver et al., 2012) that have been often studied with young, college students, are shaped by factors such as age, cultural context, and life circumstances.

Despite cross-country commonalities, the enactment of these predispositions when watching audiovisual entertainment—emotional self-preservation, intellectual curiosity and subjective positionality—sometimes differed in relation to situational dynamics. These differences partially respond to context- and identity-based center-periphery dynamics. A lens of center periphery helps shed light on dynamics of power that can be found both at the cross-country level (e.g., when comparing experiences of viewership of

mainstream entertainment in a Global South country compared with a Global North one, which are affected by market structures), as well as those related to identity within and across countries (e.g., the perceived universality of the male experience in both countries).

We discuss these differences in the respective order in which they refer to the three before mentioned shared predispositions: (1) objects of escapism, (2) geographic orientation of consumption, and (3) reflections around issues of representation, identity and enjoyment. A focus on difference—both when country or identity based—does not mean to suggest that the observed patterns in this data would extrapolate to all members of those groups, nor that the findings are generalizable to all types of content but instead tries to offer some possible lines of inquiry and interpretation.

### ***Objects of Escapism***

Interviewees expressed to often use television entertainment to escape from their real lives as a strategy of emotional self-preservation. The reasons for this escapism—and thus the type of entertainment sought and avoided—showed cross-country differences. While some interviewees in the United States, like Terrence, relied on television entertainment to escape from political reality—which was frequently connected to ethnically and racially charged issues—viewers in Argentina, such as Carolina, noted doing so to escape crime-related issues. Media psychology and uses and gratifications research have looked into the effects that entertainment has on attitudes and consumption experiences (Bartsch, 2012) and examined escapism as one of the motives individuals invoke to consume media (Hastall, 2017). Feminist audience research has also argued that media consumption can function as a way to escape from everyday patriarchal demands (Radway, 2009). What our comparative data can uniquely highlight is the role that different contexts play on the content individuals want to escape from, and thus on how this affects practices of selection and avoidance. Thus, the ways in which viewers use television to regulate emotionality is not solely connected to psychological individual-level variables, or to structural ones such as gender, but it is also highly associated with context-based social and political factors. Further comparative studies of entertainment consumption experiences are needed to understand the interplay between context and content in diverse entertainment experiences.

### ***Geographic Orientation of Consumption***

That interviewees in the two countries frequently referred to watching mainstream American content raises questions about issues of ideology and power in a context of increasingly globalized audiences. Interviewees in Argentina indicated to have an audiovisual diet that combined local, U.S., and other international content, in contrast to their counterparts, who almost exclusively referred to American productions. Viewers in Argentina, such as Martín, showed ambivalent feelings about watching so many American productions, a selection they explained in terms of the higher quality of productions. However, they reflected on the role of cultural or social distance with the content and lamented not being able to see that quality of production locally. Other authors have shown that language and origin of media content can impact entertainment experiences of transcultural migrants (Jia & Koku, 2019). Our research shows how in globalized contexts transcultural experiences can also happen for nonimmigrants and thus suggests that globalized markets might heighten divergent processes tied to dynamics of center-periphery. Watching

mainstream entertainment in the peripheries of the geographic centers of production seems to entice viewers to learn about different cultures and become curious about what is different from their proximate experience. This adds insights to notions of cultural proximity preferences and its limitations in globalized markets (Straubhaar, 1991). Moreover, feminist scholarship has argued that as a result of multiple structures of dominance and power, subordinated members of society tend to develop a standpoint that can enable the understanding not only of their own experiences but also that of the other (Chodorow, 1989; Collins, 1986). Our study suggests that similar dynamics might be at play regarding center-periphery positionalities in entertainment consumption: Though being in the peripheries of mainstream entertainment production nudges viewers to a more outward-looking attitude, their counterparts in a more central, dominant location tend to develop a more inward-looking stance.

### ***Representation, Identity, and Enjoyment***

Interviewees expressed how watching entertainment afforded reflections on the complexities of their identities, which also signals center-periphery identity-based dynamics. When reflecting about representation, participants in the United States, such as Alan, explicitly referred to identity issues related to religion, gender identity, and race and ethnicity. At the same time, whereas viewers in Argentina, like Martina, reflected on dynamics of empathy and identification with people's pathways, they rarely explicitly mentioned aspects of race and ethnicity. The absence of a critical engagement with issues of race and ethnicity seem to embrace the historically state-led notion of Latin American *mestizaje*—interracial and intercultural mixture (Martínez-Echazábal, 1998), a proposition in which race and ethnicity are presented as devoid of cultural significance while still undoubtedly affecting the experiences of racialized groups. This finding stresses the importance of studying issues of race and ethnicity comparatively, given the role of context in subjects' concept interpretation.

At the same time, men—mostly White—in both countries often downplayed the importance of representation—at least as White and men—in their experiences of enjoyment, such as in the comments of Eric or Ezequiel. Though participants who mentioned aspects of their identity that are oftentimes discriminated against—such as disability for Germán or gender identity for Sam—still cared about quality production, they also vocalized the pleasure of representation, as well as frustrations about misrepresentations. Mayer (2005) has argued that Whiteness has been a “structuring absence” (p. 148) in ethnographic audience research, as it has been often neglected, which risks essentializing it as the default viewpoint. With an intercultural and diverse set of participants, we add to this by showing that for those whose stories are usually silenced or misrepresented the importance of representation was explicitly shared. The fact that members of socially dominant groups did not grant importance to representation might be related to the fact that they are already hyper visible, and hence representation is generally a default of their experience.

A strand of scholarship has focused on media representation of gender, race, ethnicity and, to a lesser extent, class (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005), and on its psychosocial effects (Holbert, Shah, & Kwak, 2003), but less so on its lived experiences. Our findings around representation, identity, and enjoyment evidence how issues of identity positionality—intersecting gender identity, ethnicity, religion, and geographic location—can affect cross-national viewership experiences. Through this, we add to the

understanding of the intersection between identity and enjoyment in times in which it becomes increasingly easier to select and avoid content. These findings also show how cultural and structural factors can cut across national settings—such as cross-country maleness as a dominant interpretive center—and stresses the importance of conducting comparative research with a transcultural and not only a transnational lens (Couldry & Hepp, 2012).

Some have suggested that in intercultural scenarios, like those of migrants, the media is used for identity construction and to navigate national imaginaries (Ong, 2009). We find that not only the media functions as a space to negotiate identity in intercultural real-world scenarios, but that the media is also a place for intercultural experiences. This is because viewers seek socially or culturally distant entertainment to reflect about their own positionality and identity not only in relation to their immediate realities, but also imagined alternative life pathways as an exercise of introspection, cultural learning, and self-understanding. Moreover, current discussions around transnational media content in an increasingly globalized media market have talked about the relevance of national and transnational interpretive repertoires and the limits to localization of globalized content (Kuipers & De Kloet, 2009; van Keulen & Krijnen, 2014). Our comparative study shows how national and transnational repertoires can coexist in reception and suggests that localization of content also happens at the level of the subjects. In other words, viewers interpret entertainment through a dialogical process between their perceptions of their social and cultural positionalities and the imagined world proposed by said content.

In a context in which viewers have to navigate the constraints posed by unequal flows of media production by agentically resorting to their environments, this study shows that, instead of a disengaging mechanism, television entertainment is as an affective resource that viewers from different countries, genders, ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, religions, and walks of life appropriate to connect with their emotions, learn about the world near and far, and make meaning of their identities.

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