Viewers' Attribution of Criminal Acts in La Casa De Papel Series Presented on Netflix Digital Entertainment Platform

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Abstract

In the last two years, there has been a huge investment in entertainment by the Saudi Government. In 2018, Netflix was launched in Saudi Arabia and soon become popular. This study examines Saudi viewers' perceptions of the Netflix Spanish series La Casa de Papel because this series went viral. The study focuses on Saudi viewers' motivation for watching the series and their justification of criminal behaviors. A sample of 400 Saudi students from the age range 18–35 answered the survey. The results indicated a significant correlation between viewing time, empathy with characters, and external attribution of criminal behaviors. The Robin Hood pattern of robbery implied in the series was acceptable to 62% of the sample. The role of the Professor as the mastermind of the operation was attributed to the necessity of having an outsider to assist the gang members by 85% of the respondents.

Keywords: Binge-Watching, La Casa De Papel, Saudi Arabia, Attribution, Netflix, Crime



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Introduction

Netflix is an American entertainment company founded by Reed Hastings and Marc Randolph in 1997, originally specializing in the sale and rental of integrated DVDs (Jenner 2014). In 2013, the company became a producer of movies and TV programs, beginning with the first series of *House of Cards*. In 2014, Netflix offered a huge online library of films and TV shows, including original content produced by Netflix, in many countries including the United Kingdom, Denmark, Finland, North and South America, the Netherlands, and the Caribbean (Jenner, 2014). Netflix was introduced in Spain in 2015 and become the second most viewed online streaming platform within a year (Fernández-Gómez & Quevedo 2018).

The original programs produced by Netflix now include movies, series, documentaries, and stand-up comedy shows (Wikipedia). In 2018, the number of subscribers worldwide had increased to 137 million. Netflix was introduced in Saudi Arabia in 2018. A number of motives for watching Netflix series were identified. For new viewers, these included relaxation, hedonism, and engagement. Binge viewers were motivated by aesthetics (program quality), the communal aspect, relaxation, and hedonism (Pittman & Sheehan 2015).

La Casa de Papel is a Spanish police series broadcast by Netflix. It is the story of a heist that begins with the kidnapping of students who are kept as hostages in the Spanish Royal Mint by eight criminals: Tokyo, Berlin, Moscow, Oslo, Nairobi, Rio, Denver, and Helsinki. The main character, known as the Professor, directs the operation remotely. The team printed about €2400m in banknotes. The La Casa de Papel was very popular with Spanish and international audiences, as 34.438 viewers rated the series at 8.8 out of 10 (Rosero, 2019). The series is also known as Money Heist and The Professor. This current study attempts to explore these two research questions (1) What attracted Saudi viewers to the La Casa de Papel Spanish series? (2) How do Saudi viewers explain/justify criminal behaviors and acts? The following section will explore studies of Netflix series, studies on binge-watching behaviors, and an illustration of attribution theory.

Studies on Netflix series

Netflix series have been the focus of research in the area of media, film, cultural studies, and technology. For instance, Bridge et al. (2020) researched suicide rates after the release of the Netflix series 13 Reasons Why. Rosero's (2019) Spanish study presented a discourse analysis of La Casa de Papel. Smith's study (2015) focused on the Netflix series. Orange is the New Black. Cano (2015) conducted an audience study on the Netflix original series Narcos. Bates's thesis (2019) studied the Netflix series You. Darwish and Ab-Ain (2020) analyzed Jinn, the first original Jordanian Arabic-language supernatural Netflix.

Rosero (2019) conducted a discourse analysis in Spanish of *La Casa de Papel*. This study noted that the series represented a non-functional society and an oppressive state and legal system. In addition, throughout the dialog, the series made associations between a series of conceptual metaphors about crime and legal activities. These metaphors include: "crime is business, crime is work, and robbery is war." The message is that robbery is a legitimate way to make money. The author also pointed to how the

choice of music, the masks, the appearance, and the names of characters had significant meanings. The music, *Bella ciao*, was popular during the student protests of the late 1960s. This signifies a perception of robbers as revolutionaries acting against an oppressive system. Furthermore, the masks played a role in the deception of authority; robbers and hostages used the same masks resulting in the shooting of a hostage by the police. In short, the analysis of the study supports the idea that *La Casa de Papel* presented robbery from the state as a socially understandable action.

Also, a recent study reported a significant increase in the suicide rate in the 10 to 17 age group in the United States in the months following the release of the Netflix series 13 Reasons Why (Bridge et al 2020). The series is about a young girl who committed suicide after enduring thirteen incidents. The character left 13 audiotapes for the individuals blamed for her suicide. Unfortunately, the release of the first season of 13 Reasons Why was associated with 195 suicides in 2017

Narcos is a series released in 2015 that narrates the story of Columbia's powerful and violent cartels. Cano's (2015) study, which compared Colombian and American audiences' perceptions of the *Narcos* series, revealed that Colombian viewers tended to refer to the national history and drug trafficking that affected their country.

Netflix and binge-watching

Binge-watching is one of the main concerns addressed by specialists due to its consequences and health effects (Jenner 2014; Davis 2016; Fernández-Manzano et al 2016). Binge-watching has been identified as the viewing of two to six episodes of the same show in a single sitting. Studies have outlined health and social effects resulting from binge-watching of online TV streaming services like Netflix (Davis 2016). The Netflix strategy of releasing the whole season instead of releasing episodes over time (Izquierdo-Castillo 2015) has succeeded in increasing the popularity of Netflix and, this policy has encouraged binge-watching (Fernández-Manzano et al 2016; Jenner 2014).

According to Pittman and Sheehan (2015), Netflix viewers can watch all their favorite series and shows in just one session. They define "the voracious viewer" as a person who watches two or more episodes of the same series in one session. About 25% of participants watched a full 13-hour season in two days. Furthermore, Davis's (2016) study, which focused on the effects of binge-watching, reported that high television use was found to be associated with a number of issues, including poor cognitive function, disrupted circadian rhythm, and elevated risk of serious illness. The study found that there were social effects of binge-watching on family relationships, feelings of isolation, loneliness, and sleep patterns.

Methods

Sample

The study sample consisted of 400 participants. As illustrated in Table 1, the sample was 18.4% male and 12.9% female. The proportion of those aged 20 to 25 was 56.8%, and 16.3% of those aged 25 to 30 were between the ages of 25 and 30. Those over the age of 35 were 4.5%. In terms of employment status, 60.5% were students, of whom 65.1% were male, and 57.7% were female. The proportion of employees in the private

sector was 11%, while workers in the public sector made up 14.5%. Those who were unemployed formed 9.3% of the sample.

Participants Information		Fen	nale	Ma	Male		otal
		%	N	%	N	%	N
G	ender	62	248	38	152	100	400
	15–20	12.9	32	18.4	28	15	60
	20–25	58.9	146	53.3	81	56.8	227
Age	25–30	13.7	34	20.4	31	16.3	65
	30–35	7.7	19	7.2	11	7.5	30
	Above 35	6.9	17	0.7	1	4.5	18
	total	62	248	38	152	100	400
	student	57.7	143	65.1	99	60.5	242
Employment	Private sector employee	12.5	31	8.6	13	11	44
status	Public sector employee	8.9	22	23.7	36	14.5	58
	House wife	7.7	19	0	0	4.8	19
	Unemployed	13.3	33	2.6	4	9.3	37
	Total	62	248	38	152	100	400

Table 1. Demographics of sample

Measure

The study used electronic surveys as a data collection tool. The researcher designed a questionnaire through which she made sure to achieve all the objectives of the study.

The validity of the questionnaire was tested by conducting honesty and consistency tests.

The researcher applied a stability test to a sample representing 10% of the original sample after analyzing the questionnaire and then reapplied the test to a sample of 5% of the participants two weeks after the first test, resulting in 86.4% stability thereby confirming the stability of the form and its powers for the application and generalization of results.

Results

The outcomes of the data are summarized in four main sections: frequency of viewing the series, motives for watching the series, external attributions, and significant correlations. The motives section answers the first research question, "What attracted Saudi viewers to the *La Casa de Papel* Spanish series?" The second research question, "How do Saudi viewers explain/justify criminal behaviors and acts?" is explored in the sections on external attributions and significant correlations.

1- The frequency of viewing La Casa de Papel series

The data revealed that a total of 93.4% of participants watched the online streaming series of *La Casa de Papel*, while only 3.6% of respondents said they were not familiar with the series. Among the viewers, 244 were female, and 142 were male.

The collected data indicated that a total of 333 participants had watched all three seasons (see Table 2), while 96 participants had watched season one. Season two was watched by 75 participants, while only 37 participants watched season three. All three seasons were watched by 88.2% of males and 80.2% of females. The proportion of males who watched the first season of the series was 28.9%, compared to 20.6% of females. For the second season, the proportion of viewers was male 28.3% and female 12.9%. The third season was the least-watched season. It was viewed by 9.1% of the male and 3.2% of the female participants.

Seasons watched	Fer	Female		Male		T
	%	N	%	N	%	N
All three seasons	80.2	199	88.2	134	83.3	333
Season 1	20.6	51	28.9	44	23.8	95
Season 2	12.9	32	28.3	43	18.8	75
Season 3	3.2	8	19.1	29	9.3	37
Total	2	48	1:	52		400

Table 2. The seasons of the *Casa* series watched in the study sample.

2- <u>Motives for viewing La Casa de Papel</u>

The data indicated that Saudi viewers watched the *La Casa de Papel* series for the following motives: entertainment, to gain information about security, to learn about crime in Spain, curiosity, to become aware of crimes involving robbery (See Table 3). Entertainment as a motive was identified by 78.9% of males and 76.2% of females. Entertainment was the main motive for watching the online series for 77.3% of the sample. Gaining information about security was the reason given by 7% of the respondents. Curiosity as a motive was in third place, with only 5.8% of respondents reporting that they were motivated by curiosity. Only 4% of the participants indicated that they watched the series to learn about criminal incidents in Spain. The motive "to raise awareness and to avoid the dangers of crimes and robberies" was indicated by 1.8% of the respondents.

Motives	Female		Male		T	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Entertainment	76.2	189	78.9	120	77.3	309
Gaining information about security	5.2	13	9.9	15	7	28
Curiosity	5.6	14	5.9	9	5.8	23
Other motives	4.8	12	3.3	5	4.3	17
To learn about criminal incidents in Spain	5.6	14	1.3	2	4	16
Awareness of criminal risks and acts	2.4	6	0.7	1	1.8	7
Total	100	248	100	152	100	400

Table 3. Motives for watching La Casa de Papel by the participants in the study

3- <u>External attributions</u>

Participants assigned criminal actions to external attributions as reported in a number of explanations: empathizing with the characters, identifying the influential character, justifying the first crime, feeling joyful when the aims of the robbery are achieved, justifying the absence of the Professor from the location of the heist, perceiving the criminal figures as heroes, and accepting the Robin Hood pattern of the robbery.

3.1. Empathy with characters

The data reported that participants felt sympathetic to the characters in the series. When asked, "have you felt sympathy for one of the gang characters in *La Casa de Papel*?" 24.8% of the participants said "always," while 24.5% replied "mostly." The number of respondents who said that they "sometimes" felt sympathetic was 38.8%. Only 4.3% of the respondents said they "never" felt sympathetic, while 7.8% selected "neutral" for this question.

Not only did the viewers feel empathy for the gang members, but they also hoped that the gangs would not be arrested by the authorities. About two-thirds of the viewers (68.8%), 275 participants, revealed that "they did not wish the gangs to be caught." Conversely, 16.5% agreed that they "wished they were arrested." Another 14.8% said they wished "that only particular characters were arrested."

3.2. The most influential characters in the series

The data indicated that the Professor was the most influential characters in the series from the point of view of 36.3% of the sample, as illustrated in Figure 1. Berlin was the second most influential character according to 27.5% of the participants, followed by Tokyo with 17.8%, then Nairobi with 10.5%. Rio was ranked fifth at 3%. Denver was placed in sixth position by 2.3% of the participants, although he was the most influential character. Lisbon, Stockholm, and Helsinki were the least influential characters. Only 2% thought that Lisbon was an influential character, and less than 0.5% said Stockholm and Helsinki were influential characters.

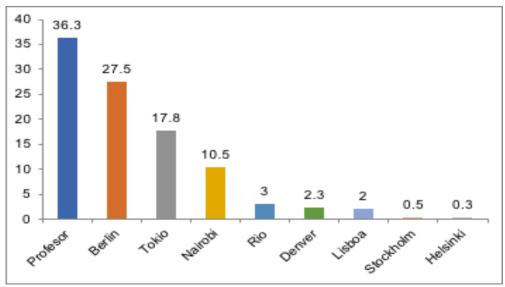


Figure 1: The most influential character

When asked why the Professor was seen as the most influential character, more than half of the participants, 57.3%, referred to the character's creativity in acting and performing the role. "The ability to accomplish the mission" was placed second, as 31% of participants mentioned this reason. The character was liked by 19.8% of the participants because the character "was able to control his emotions." Lastly, 8% of the participants referred to the most influential charter in relation to "masterminding the robbery."

3.3. Happiness when the mission was accomplished

The result assessing participants' feelings when the robbery was successful indicated that 206 participants (51.5%) felt "overwhelming happiness for their victory," and 104 participants (26%) said they felt a "kind of joy." Interestingly, 124 participants (31%) responded that they felt "worried about the possibility of the gang members being arrested." Only 42 participants, 10.5% of the sample said they felt "angry for not getting justice."

3.4. Justifying the first crime

The first crime in season one in the series consists of printing money rather than robbing money that was previously printed. Therefore, the participants were asked to what extent, if any, this crime was justifiable. As shown in Table 4, a total of 45 participants reported that they "totally agree" that the robbery was justified, and female participants exceeded the percentage of male participants for this option. Seventy-six participants consisting of 49 females and 27 males, reported they "agreed" that it was a justified crime. One hundred forty participants hold a neutral opinion on this matter. Sixty-one participants, mostly female, "disagreed" with justifying the robbery, and 78 participants "totally disagreed."

The extent to which the first	Total		Female		Male	
crime can be justified	%	N	%	N	%	N
Totally agree	11.3	45	12.1	30	9.9	15
Agree	19	76	19.8	49	17.8	27
Neutral	35	140	30.2	75	42.8	65
Disagree	15.3	61	18.5	46	9.9	15
Totally disagree	19.5	78	19.4	48	19.7	30
Total	100	400	100	248	100	152
chi-square: 9.498 degrees of freedom: 4 significance level:						el:

0.050

contingency coefficient: 0.152

Table 4. Participants' perception of the robbery in season one.

This finding is consistent with the statistical indicators shown in Table 4, indicating differences, according to gender, between the participants in their opinions regarding justifying the first crime, with a chi-square value of 9.498, a significance level of 0.050, and a compatibility coefficient (0.152).

3.5. Justifying the Professor in La Casa de Papel

In all the robbery attempts, the main character, the Professor, was not at the scene of the crimes. He communicated remotely with the gang members during the operation. Accordingly, participants were asked their opinion about that. A high percentage (85.5%) of the participants reported that the Professor "needed to run the operation from the outside and warn the gangs about possible risks." Only 8.5% thought that it was because "his personality and nature are not violent or criminal." Only 6% thought that "the Professor is a weak and coward character." This finding highlights the fact that the majority of the participants assigned the actions of the most influential character, the Professor, to external attribution rather than internal attribution.

3.6. Representing the criminals as heroes

Table 5 below illustrates how participants perceived the role of the gang characters. About half of the sample, 47.8%, reported that the gang members are "victims of social conditions." Male participants who agreed with this were 102 in number, while 89 female participants thought of them as victims. A total of 75 participants (18.8%) thought of the characters as heroes. In contrast, 16.3% thought that the robbers were portrayed as role models. However, 40.3% of the sample thought the gang members were "criminals." The percentage of those who referred to the gang members as "criminals" were males, 33.6%, and females 44.4%.

Participants' descriptions of the	Female		Male		Total	
gang members' characters	%	N	%	N	%	N
Victims of social conditions	35.9	89	67.1	102	47.8	191
Criminals	44.4	110	33.6	51	40.3	161
Heroes	13.7	34	27	41	18.8	75
Role models	10.5	26	25.7	39	16.3	65
Total	248		152		40	00

Table 5. perception of the gang members' characters.

3.7. The Robin Hood robbery model

The data attempted to assess the extent to which the researchers agreed with the criminals' behavior in stealing money from the rich and giving it to the poor, as in the scene where money was scattered from an airship, and people helped themselves to the money. Surprisingly, the data reported that more than two-thirds of the sample found this an acceptable idea. As shown in Table 6, it was reported that 30.8% of the sample answered "very acceptable," and 31% said it was "acceptable." Conversely, only 9.8% found it "unacceptable" to steal from the rich, and 5.9% found it "totally unacceptable." The percentage of those who answered "neutral" was 22.8%. This finding was supported by Rosero's (2019) analysis of the series which referred to Robin Hood form of robbery implied in *La Casa de Papel* series.

Perceptions on robbing	Female		Male		Total	
from the rich to give the	%	N	%	N	%	N
poor						
Acceptable	34.3	85	25.7	39	31	124
Very acceptable	25.8	64	38.8	59	30.8	123
Neutral	23.4	58	21.7	33	22.8	91
Not acceptable	10.9	27	7.9	12	9.8	39
Not acceptable at all	5.6	14	5.9	9	5.8	23
Total	100	248	100	152	100	400

Table 6. Participants' opinions on robbing from the rich and giving to the poor.

Not only did 62% of the respondents find the Robin Hood pattern of robbery acceptable, but they also predicted that it is possible for viewers to imitate the crimes presented in the series. When participants were asked "Do you expect teenagers to imitate crimes or the behaviour of kidnappers after watching the series?", 30 % of the sample answered "yes" while 51% said "no".

Significant Associations

The data revealed that there are significant associations between the following variables. As displayed in Table 7, there is a statistically significant relationship between the frequency of viewing of the series and the acceptance of criminal behaviors presented in the series.

The frequency of	The frequency of viewing the series		
viewing the series	Pearson's		
	correlation	P-value	
The acceptance of	coefficient		
criminal behaviors			
The acceptance of criminal behaviors	**0.789	0.000	

Table 7. Correlation between the frequency of viewing and the acceptance of criminal acts

This correlation highlights the role of online streaming content in accepting negative thoughts and behaviours. Indeed, when participants were asked "Have you ever changed one of your principles in terms of theft, crime, and violence after watching the series?", 14% of the sample answered "yes" while 76% of the sample disagreed and 11% answered "neutral". Although 14% of the sample is a low percentage, viewing the series by viewers who are younger than 18 years old may result in higher risks as their values about right and wrong are being constructed and influenced by internet contents. At the gender level, the proportion of males who expressed a change in their principles after watching the series was 21.7%, compared to 8.9%. of females. The proportion of males who reported no change (70.4%), compared to 78.6 percent Of females. For neutrals, their proportion was male (7.9%) and female (12.5%).

Secondly, the data revealed a statistically significant relationship between the empathy with the gang members' characters and the attribution of criminal behaviors and acts to external attributions, as indicated in Table 8.

Empathy with gang members'	Empathy and identification with		
characters	characters		
	Pearson's		
External attribution	correlation	P-value	
of criminal behaviors	coefficient		
External attribution of criminal behaviors	**0.698		
	0.070	0.000	

Table 8. Correlation between empathy with character and external attribution.

Thirdly, the data revealed a statistically significant relationship between the scenario of the series and the favorable perception of criminal acts, as indicated in Table 9.

The scenario of the online series	The scenario of the online series		
	Pearson's		
Perceiving criminal	correlation	P-value	
behaviors favorably	coefficient		
Perceiving criminal behaviors favorably	**0.885	0.000	

Table 9. Associations between the scenario representing and audience's favorable perceptions of crime.

Discussion

The results of the current study indicate a number of important findings that are related to previous studies and scientific theories. In line with Rosero's (2019) research, which reported that the discourse in *La Casa de Papel* characterized the robbers as heroes, the current study confirmed that 35% of the participants agree that the series represents the criminals as heroes and role models. The research also confirmed that the series supports the idea that the Spanish democratic system is unfair, and that it prevents true citizen empowerment. This finding explains the fact that 48% of the participants in the current study held the view that the robbers were victims of their social conditions.

The current study is consistent with a study (Raney & Janicke 2012), which emphasized the tendency of the viewer to follow the complex ethics of "morally complex characters," combinations of good and evil that have become increasingly evident in contemporary series such like *Dexter* and some police series. From this psychological viewpoint, it is clear that the majority of the participants in the study admire the characters of the Professor and Berlin. It is noteworthy that the Professor and Berlin both planned criminal operations. However, in the first season, only Berlin sacrificed his own life to ensure that the gang escaped.

The results indicated that the Professor is the most influential character. Also, almost 86% of the respondents justified the Professor being in a remote location "because he needed to direct the operation from a distance." However, some conversations between characters in the series indicated that the Professor was cowardly and weak. Lisbon said as much in season three, and Tokyo did likewise in season four. The participants' in the present research attributed the Professor's absence from the scene of the heist to external circumstances. This is in line with Rosero's (2019) psychological analysis of the character. Rosero points out that the Professor was portrayed in the series as a guardian angel, a father figure, and a teacher. The first two representations indicate that he would protect his team from evil, and he would never fail them, as he repeatedly did throughout the operations. At the same time, the teacher figure positions him as the master who knows everything, and thus, his role is to guide and direct his pupils rather than participate in their work with them.

It is also clear that the participants' attraction to the characters made them justify crimes and robberies as the result of bad external and social conditions and not blame the gang members. This is consistent with attribution theory, which suggests that individuals assign events to either internal or external personal circumstances (Mr. & McAfee 2014). Although the first series involved several serious crimes, such as kidnapping innocent school staff and students, trespassing on government property, and shooting at police officers, the majority of the sample considered the first robbery to be justified,

"just printing money, not stealing money from a person." The current study highlights that 30% of the sample fond the first crime justifiable, while 35% disagreed, and 35% held neutral opinions. This attribution to external circumstances rather than to the gang members was evident in more than one result, with many participants viewing the absence of the main character, the Professor, from the scene of the heist as remote management rather than cowardice.

The results were unanimous for the participants' view of the gang members and the crimes carried out from a positive and justified perspective. They did not wish the criminals to be arrested. These results show the success of the series, which aimed to entertain by attracting the viewer to the characters. The aim was also the blurring of values and concepts like right and wrong. Viewers need to decide on what can be considered a legal crime and what is considered acceptable behavior. This is especially true of young viewers who may form values while watching the series, which is popular in Saudi Arabia, and imitate what they see.

The significant association between variables could be explained in light of attribution theory. The association between the frequency of viewing the series and the acceptance of criminal behaviors presented in the series could be explained by a build-up of familiarity and attachment with the characters. The familiarity leads to acceptance and justification of criminal behavior. This leads to the second correlation between empathy with the characters and external attributions. This can be explained by the tendency of viewers to overestimate situational factors when judging others, arising from the concept of selective exposure. The notion of favorably presenting characters who commit a series of crimes (Table 9) was also supported by Rosero (2019). The correlations presented in Table 9 have also been confirmed by another finding in the survey, which revealed participants' opinions of the characters as heroes, role models, and victims of social circumstances.

Conclusion

The study produced a number of important results, most notably justifying the characters' criminal behavior and considering the perpetrators as heroes and role models. This indicates the ability of modern television series to reshape the value system of Saudi viewers. Participants tended to refer to external attributions like social pressures when judging the criminal characters. Indeed, the criminals were seen as heroes, role models, and victims of social circumstances by the majority of participants in the sample. The Professor character was positioned as the most influential character, followed by Berlin. Surprisingly, two-thirds of the sample agreed that it is acceptable to steal from the rich and give to the poor. Considering the popularity of Netflix's production in the MENA region, it is recommended that future studies focus on assessing online streaming production from a cultural and critical standpoint.

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