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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Analyzing Anti-Religious Symbols in Popular Netflix Shows

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction:

In the contemporary media landscape, the representation of religious concepts in visual media has acquired critical significance, as cinematic and serialized content possesses the semiotic and narrative capacity to either reinforce or subvert established religious symbols. Netflix, as one of the world's largest digital streaming platforms, exercises considerable influence over global cultural and religious discourses through its extensive production and distribution of cinematic and episodic content. Cinema, functioning as a transnational medium, not only furnishes entertainment but also actively shapes societal attitudes, behavioral patterns, and cultural norms. From its earliest iterations to contemporary productions, cinema has continuously evolved, operating as a potent vehicle for cultural and social expression that mediates human perception and fosters significant transformations in collective consciousness.

Concurrently, religious institutions have historically deployed diverse media and communicative tools to propagate their ideological frameworks. Consequently, films constitute both a cultural and

industrial force within societies, serving as reflective surfaces for the cultural and religious values endemic to their contexts of production. In the wake of the internet revolution, cinematic dissemination has expanded beyond traditional theaters to include digital platforms, among which Netflix has emerged as a preeminent force. Undoubtedly a defining media entity of the twenty-first century, Netflix was among the pioneers in transforming internet technologies into a sustainable business model, fundamentally altering audience access to film and television content. Presently, the company ranks as a leading provider of digital media content, consistently broadening its subscriber base across diverse platforms and mobile devices. Through its seamless streaming infrastructure, Netflix has become a major supplier of televisual content - ranging from fictional series to realist programming - coincident with the surge in digital viewership. Importantly, Netflix not only distributes content but also engages in original production, thereby occupying an institutional position comparable to traditional broadcasters and establishing itself as a direct competitor to the television industry.

Given its expansive global reach, Netflix's treatment of religious symbols warrants scholarly scrutiny, as the platform possesses the potential to inculcate either religious or anti-religious ideologies among heterogeneous audiences. The present study undertakes a semiotic analysis of these representations, aiming to uncover both explicit and implicit strategies employed in Netflix productions and to assess their potential effects on viewers' religious orientations and belief systems.

Methodology:

Given the research objectives, a qualitative semiotic approach was adopted as the most appropriate analytical framework. The study examines the codes and symbols embedded in two Netflix series: *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* and *Midnight Mass*. The analytical procedure draws upon John Fiske's typology of semiotic codes, with particular emphasis on anti-religious symbols and thematic elements relevant to the research question. Accordingly, the study is descriptive-analytical in nature and employs a library-based method for data collection, relying on secondary sources, textual analysis, and scholarly literature pertinent to semiotics and religious representation in media.

Result:

The analysis reveals that Netflix, leveraging its substantial media influence, systematically engages with anti-religious motifs across its cinematic productions. Recurrent themes include Satanism, witchcraft, the glorification of evil, anti-Islamic sentiment, radical feminist ideology, and the normalization of homosexuality—each of which is addressed in the present study as a distinct category of symbolic representation.

Conclusions:

The semiotic examination of **Chilling Adventures of Sabrina** and **Midnight Mass** demonstrates that Netflix actively redefines sacred concepts within a secularized framework through the deliberate deployment of religious and anti-religious symbols. The findings indicate that the recurrent use of symbols such as the inverted pentagram in pivotal scenes, the positive portrayal of witches, and the distorted depiction of religious rituals collectively serve to naturalize anti-religious discourse. By interweaving Christian iconography with magical practices, the series construct a deliberate conflation of the sacred and the profane, gradually acclimating audiences to this ideological synthesis. This strategy is particularly evident in the depiction of the Black Mass,

which is rendered with warm lighting and an aesthetically pleasing atmosphere, thereby subtly neutralizing its transgressive connotations.

Furthermore, the representation of religious institutions as dogmatic and coercive structures - contrasted with the liberal and humanistic portrayal of the witch community - establishes a binary opposition that predisposes audiences toward the anti-religious position. This framing is especially pronounced in the characterization of clergy members, who are consistently depicted as repressive figures. A further key finding pertains to the strategic alignment of contemporary values - such as individual liberty and women's rights - with anti-religious inclinations. By idealizing the witch community as a bastion of progressive values, the series implicitly advances the notion that social advancement necessitates a rupture from religious tradition.

Netflix effectively blurs the boundaries between the sacred and the profane through productions such as **Chilling Adventures of Sabrina** and **Midnight Mass**. Employing advanced narrative techniques and semiotic devices, the platform recontextualizes religious concepts within appealing and innovative formats, such that audiences become gradually and often unconsciously habituated to anti-religious value systems. The analysis of these works underscores how the entertainment industry can function as a formidable instrument for reshaping societal beliefs and values.

In response to this cultural challenge, the imperative for heightened media literacy among audiences becomes increasingly apparent. A critical awareness of the underlying mechanisms and persuasive strategies embedded in such content can serve as a form of cognitive inoculation against their subtle ideological effects. This research confirms that Netflix, as a key actor in the contemporary media landscape, plays a decisive role in shaping cultural discourses. Productions such as **Sabrina** do not merely represent religious concepts; they actively reconstruct them through nuanced visual and narrative cues. By systematically normalizing anti-religious symbols and distorting religious traditions, such works exert a significant influence on the formation of contemporary cultural and ideological paradigms.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the authors.

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Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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