

**Transnational Identity in Online Discourse – Netflix’s *Sense8* and accompanying  
Twitter communication**

**Transnationale Identität im Online Diskurs – Netflix’s *Sense8* und  
Anschlusskommunikation auf Twitter**

by

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Mannheim, 10.08.2020

## Abstract

Digital media has become ubiquitous and immensely shapes communitarisation, and thus identity construction. As media does not rely on physical border crossing to bring us in contact with different subject positions, traditional forms of mobility are not necessary to include people in transnational discourse and narratives of transnational identification. However, scholarly attention has been focused on discourses of transnational identities tied to traditional transgressions of national space. To bridge this gap the question of how digital transnational identity is constructed in a fictional narrative and through accompanying non-fictional communication is answered. The method employed for this examination is digital discourse analysis. Objects of investigation are the Netflix Original sci-fi production *Sense8*, that tells a story about transnational community formation, and accompanying communication on Twitter. I argue that narratives of *Sense8* are taken up in tweets featuring #*Sense8* and #*Sense8*NetflixRewatch to construct transnational identities. Five discursive strategies are present in fictional and non-fictional environments, which are constitutive for digital transnational identities: emphasizing connectivity, foregrounding shared values in the identity negotiation, displaying network aesthetics, communicating in transnational spaces, and replacing nationality through the interplay of local and global. Transnational challenges (e.g. the refugee crisis or the Covid19- pandemic) show how interconnected the world is, but simultaneously increasing national isolation tendencies and negative identity politics illustrate that it is crucial to look at what connects people beyond nationality. Developing an understanding of how people place themselves in global connections can aid facilitating worldwide cooperation, migration policies and help managing otherness.

*Keywords.* transnationalism, digital discourse analysis, identity, Twitter, *Sense8*

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## Table of Contents

<b>LIST OF FIGURES .....</b>	<b>VII</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES .....</b>	<b>VIII</b>
<b>LIST OF TWEETS .....</b>	<b>IX</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Overview of existing research .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>GLOBALIZATION, SPACE, MEDIA, AND IDENTIFICATION POTENTIALS.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Identity .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Identity and nationality .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Identity and transnationalism.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>RESEARCH METHOD .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Discourse .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Digital Discourse Analysis .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Data selection.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>ANALYSIS .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>How is transnational identity constructed in Netflix’s <i>Sense8</i>?.....</b>	<b>23</b>
Netflix as medium	23
Architecture of content creation	25
Production context of Sense8	27
‘What’s going on’ - Sense8	31
<b>How is transnational identity constructed on Twitter? .....</b>	<b>51</b>
Twitter as medium	51
Architecture of participation	52
Metadata	58

‘What’s happening’ - Tweets	60
<b>What overarching discursive strategies emerge in the construction of digital transnational identity? .....</b>	<b>81</b>
Emphasizing connectivity	81
Foregrounding shared values in identity creation	82
Network aesthetics	83
Communicating in transnational spaces	84
Replacing nationality through interplay of local and global	85
Discussion	87
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>APPENDIX.....</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>Tables.....</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>Figures.....</b>	<b>113</b>
<b>Tweets.....</b>	<b>124</b>
<b>Additional Data.....</b>	<b>132</b>

## List of figures

<b>Figure_Appendix 1</b>	Number of posts containing #Sense8, users, engagement, and reach..	113
<b>Figure_Appendix 2</b>	Percentage of population not using the internet in 2019.....	114
<b>Figure_Appendix 3</b>	Gender gap in internet usage in 2019 .....	115
<b>Figure_Appendix 4</b>	Screenshot of NetflixParty browser extension in use .....	116
<b>Figure_Appendix 5</b>	Screenshot of NetflixParty browser extension in use – zoomed in on NetflixParty.....	117
<b>Figure_Appendix 6</b>	Main characters and their cities .....	118
<b>Figure_Appendix 7</b>	Location of Hashtag-activity.....	119
<b>Figure_Appendix 8</b>	Types of tweets containing #Sense8 according to Keyhole.....	120
<b>Figure_Appendix 9</b>	Types of tweets containing #Sense8 according to Tweetbinder.....	121
<b>Figure_Appendix 10</b>	Contributor ranking.....	122
<b>Figure_Appendix 11</b>	The first mention of #Sense8NetflixRewatch.....	123

## **List of tables**

<b>Table 1</b> Action types in participant engagement .....	57
<b>Table 2</b> Discourse type drawn on in the analyzed accompanying communication .....	86
<b>Table_Appendix 1</b> Discourses surrounding globalization .....	107
<b>Table_Appendix 2</b> Character constellation .....	108
<b>Table_Appendix 3</b> Development of a shared storyline .....	110
<b>Table_Appendix 4</b> Nationality of Twitter users of the analyzed tweets as indicated in their profiles .....	112



## List of tweets

<b>Tweet 1</b> Ani Kotevvit [@AnikoTevvit], 2020 .....	61
<b>Tweet 2</b> Sandrine Marquis [@wildtiger23], 2020.....	62
<b>Tweet 3</b> Lorraine Wilson [@LothariNosliw], 2020 .....	63
<b>Tweet 4</b> sense8 out of context [@Sense8OoC], 2020 .....	66
<b>Tweet 5</b> R O Y [@estomata_roy], 2020.....	68
<b>Tweet 6</b> COURTNEY [@EarthGlows], 2020.....	69
<b>Tweet 7</b> Matteo Sisti [@MadHatter094], 2020 .....	72
<b>Tweet 8</b> Sara Rodrigues [@SaraRtweet], 2018.....	76
<b>Tweet 9</b> Amanda Corbie [@AmarCrow], 2018 .....	78
<b>Tweet_Appendix 1</b> Lesley ❤️ Amor Vincit Omnia ❤️ [@LesleyOliverA], 2018 .....	124
<b>Tweet_Appendix 2</b> J. Michael Straczynski [@straczynski], 2020.....	125
<b>Tweet_Appendix 3</b> Maximilienne Ewalt[@MaximilienneEw1], 2020.....	126
<b>Tweet_Appendix 4</b> La tour Eiffel [@LaTourEiffel], 2020 .....	127
<b>Tweet_Appendix 5</b> Sonya Blade [@Blade Sonya], 2020 .....	128
<b>Tweet_Appendix 6</b> Marto Erhardt [@martoerhardt], 2020.....	129
<b>Tweet_Appendix 7</b> Eli Brodare [@Eli_Brodare], 2020.....	130
<b>Tweet_Appendix 8</b> Gizem C [@colorfulvenus], 2020.....	131

## **Introduction**

Digital transnational social spaces and their reciprocal relation with identity formation are of increasing importance in our mediatized realities. I have lived two years out of the last five in nations of which I am not an official citizen. By now, I have friends and family all around the world with whom I stay in touch, I also have access to shared transnational discourses through media objects. These experiences coin my social realities and make them neither fully German nor fully international. The Covid19-pandemic illustrates that globalization interconnects our societies in many ways besides mobility, that decreased due to travel restrictions. Nevertheless, we encounter perspectives beyond our national borders in digital communication. Experiences of mobility and migration are not unique in our globalized world, neither is consuming most of your news and entertainment online.

The global use of mobile devices, social media, and digital news consumption has constantly increased during the last years and the trend goes towards online streaming (Global Web Index, 2019), even though linear TV is still being watched. Digital Media has become ubiquitous, so much so that it is hard to imagine life without it. As media negotiates our realities by bringing us in contact with multifaceted ways of life and thus potential subject positions, it immensely shapes identity creation and communitarisation (Chiluwa & Ayodele, 2019; Hipfl, 2004; Schlachter, 2014).

A mediatized reality in the “age of identity” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p.608) makes it expedient to analyze the role digital media plays for the negotiation of identities in a globalized world. As demonstrated above, border crossing is not necessary to include people in transnational discourse and narratives of transnational identification. However, scholarly attention has been focused on traditional mobility and biographical disruptions as experienced (online) by migrants, refugees, or diasporic groups or narratives of European belonging (An-

droutsopoulos & Juffermans, 2014). Therefore, I decided to examine digital transnational identity that does not rely on physical mobility and instead foregrounds the relation to online discourse and points of contact in the consumption of fictional narratives. Transnational fictional narratives are still sparse and so is research in fan studies concerning (implicitly) transnational fandoms (Jenner, 2018, p.254). Furthermore, digital *accompanying communication*, also called *participant engagement*, e.g. in Twitter discourse, also remains relatively unexplored (Androutsopoulos & Weidenhöffer, 2015; Chiluya & Ayodele, 2019; Schlachter, 2014).

To bridge the presented gap between transnational identities tied to non-fictional, traditional mobility and other forms of transnational identity, I will look at how digital transnational identity is constructed in a fictional narrative and through accompanying non-fictional communication. My research contributes to research about fictional transnationality, digital transnational identities, and accompanying conversation online, by answering the following research questions:

- a) How is digital transnational identity constructed in a fictional narrative?
- b) How is digital transnational identity constructed in accompanying conversation?
- c) What overarching discursive strategies emerge in the construction of digital transnational identity?

For research concerning globalization and digital identity phenomena, many scholars plead for mixed-methods, interdisciplinary approaches (Androutsopoulos & Weidenhöffer, 2015; Gredel & Mell, 2018; Kytölä, 2016). The discourse analytical method *digital discourse analysis* [DDA] is per definition interdisciplinary, which allows dealing with fictional and non-fictional material and overcoming artificial distinctions between high and popular culture. It also bridges national boundaries between scientific fields that need to be reconceptualized

when dealing with questions about globalized, mediatized realities (Gredel, 2018; Reichardt, 2012).

Objects of investigation are the Netflix series *Sense8* (Wachowski et al., 2015-2018)<sup>1</sup> and the accompanying Twitter communication, whose selection will be explained later. As transnational identity on Twitter and *Sense8* emerges in front of the backdrop of globalization, I first detail what implications globalization has for identity construction and how transnationalism fits into this discourse. The thesis addresses what identity is, how it is constructed and what transnationalism means in this context, followed by outlining the method of investigation. My focus lays on analyzing what identification potentials *Sense8* makes available and how Twitter-users take those up. *Sense8*'s production context, narratives and aesthetics center around transnationalism. On Twitter the media fandom orients to this and thereby negotiates transnational identities. It will become evident that narratives offer identity positions that people actively draw on and accompanying communication online to invoke a transnational identification. Following the structure of the research questions, the last part brings these aspects together to draw a conclusion about which overarching themes discursively manifest that can be used to define transnational identity practices. Uptake of these themes provides insight into what people evaluate as essential for the construction of digital transnational identity. Five discursive strategies shape digital transnational identities in fictional and non-fictional environments alike: emphasizing connectivity, foregrounding shared values in the identity negotiation, displaying network aesthetics, communicating in transnational spaces, and replacing nationality through the interplay of local and global.

In times of populist, national isolation tendencies of “America First”, Brexit, the ongoing refugee crisis, and the Covid19- pandemic it is crucial to look at what people feel connects them to others beyond nationality. This thesis aims to develop an understanding of how

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<sup>1</sup> In the following text this material is referred to as just *Sense8*.

people place themselves in global connections, which consequentially can aid facilitating worldwide cooperation, improve international relations, migration politics and help managing otherness.

### **Overview of existing research**

Recently, “there has been a surge of interdisciplinary interest in the investigation of social transformations captured by the term transnationalism” (Zappetini, 2016, p.84). The growing academic interest in transnational identity has led to research output, mostly in sociolinguistics and political science. A. De Fina (2016) looked at how transnational identity can be investigated with sociolinguistic methods. In the same vein, F. Zappetini (2016) identified thematic and linguistic strategies through discourse analysis. However, his findings come from interviews with members of a European organization, so his data set yields results already oriented to European identity. The chapter written by I. Chilwa and O. Ayodele (2019) employs discourse analysis as well and looks specifically at transnational identities on Twitter connected to the hashtag #EndFGM. This hashtag is not part of accompanying communication, but the practices particular to the environment of Twitter apply to my research nevertheless. J. Androutsopolous’ and J. Weidenhöffer’s (2015) analysis of participant engagement on Twitter is helpful to talk about this aspect. Their structural perspective is supplemented with K. Weiser-Zurmühlen’s (fc. 2020) qualitative approach, assessing three components in the face-to-face creation of the Turkish cultural identity through accompanying conversation. Both studies leave out the content of reception in their analysis, which is included in my research. Only a handful of scientific articles have been written about *Sense8* (Mincheva, 2018; Parsemain, 2019; Zilonka & Job, 2017), which are all taken into consideration. All the presented research stresses that identity and globalization are inseparably intertwined and shape each other, hence this study addresses these concepts and their role for the negotiation of digital transnational identities.

## **Globalization, space, media, and identification potentials**

Decentralized media transcends geographic boundaries and furthers identification in imagined, translocal geographies, despite serious differences in its accessibility. Globalization phenomena are by no means new; humans have migrated to other continents, spread world religions, displaced millions in the transatlantic slave trade and colonized whole continents. Technological inventions brought about by the industrialization, like ships or the telegraph, sparked a new speed and volume of these developments. Airplanes, film and especially the internet accelerated worldwide communication, trade, and travel, leading to the unprecedented intensity of globalization (Reichardt, 2010). Today, globalization denotes the increased mobility, flow of information, goods and services around the globe, and concomitant interdependences. Growing interconnectedness is often summarized under Harvey's term *time-space-compression* (Reichardt, 2010, p.12). A prerequisite and simultaneously an outcome of this pattern is that conceptions of space and time change drastically, e.g. through technological advancements that make real-time conversations around the globe possible. M. De Certeau's popular distinction between stable place and flexible, relational space as practiced place (1984, p.117) is introduced in this regard. It illuminates that space is a social construct, heavily influenced by power structures, that created geographies of stratification (Baynham, 2003; De Certeau, 1984; Reichardt, 2010). We deal „mit einer gleichzeitigen Vielfalt an Räumen [...], die in unterschiedlicher Beziehung zueinander stehen, sich überschneiden oder zusammenschießen, oder sich in einer antagonistischen Beziehung zueinander befinden“ (Hipfl, 2004, p.29). Spatial-temporal constructions are imperative when talking about globalization phenomena as any narrative about ourselves and others is organized with space and time as backdrop (Baynham, 2003; Blommaert, 2005).

Media are fundamental for the degree of time-space-compression we experience today and are central meaning-making agents that coin discourses of space, termed *imaginary geog-*

*raphies* (Hipfl, 2004, p. 16). The enormous discursive entanglement between technology and societal practices is captured by the German term *Mediatisierung* (Androutsopoulos, 2016, p.343; Hepp, 2014, p.12), meaning mediated communication practices lead to changes in identities and ways of organizing society. The famous media theorist M. McLuhan (1968) described this new, digital form of communitarisation as *global village*. In cyberspace, time zones are transcended, and place is mostly detached from the physical realm, so bridging distances and experiencing new degrees of intercultural contact is possible. "Digital communication [...] is thus by definition always translocal" (Kytölä, 2016, "Critical issues and topics", para. 2).

Mediatization is often described as "happy heterogeneity" (Androutsopoulos & Juffermans, 2014, p.4). However, people still communicate from a geographical location that is limited by borders and discriminatory discourses. The term *digital divide* expresses that there are still considerable socio-spatial differences and asymmetries in accessibility of digital space (Hepp, 2014; Hipfl, 2004; Lobato, 2019; Reichardt, 2010). A divide occurs along multiple lines of demarcation. By now, hardware to participate in online activities is available globally but availability of internet infrastructure still varies largely between industrialized and developing nations (see Figure\_Appendix 2; International Telecommunication Union [ITU], 2020a). Rural regions often have less internet infrastructure compared to urban regions, but for streaming services large bandwidths are required no matter where you are. In some states, like China, certain applications might be blocked or taxes on software companies and prices of internet providers differ (Hühn et al., 2010). Furthermore, there are state-specific regulations, like Netflix lowering the required bandwidth for Europe at the beginning of the pandemic (Gold, 2020). Besides geography, there are also social components limiting access, like gender (see Figure\_Appendix 3; ITU, 2020b), language (Young, H., n.d.), or education (Hepp, 2014). In this regard, the "digital native-metaphor" (Spilioti, 2016) is fre-

quently brought up. The assumption that there are natives, characterized by their natural ability to use technology is oversimplifying. The digital divide underscores that “virtual spaces are no more neutral than the appropriation of social or geographical spaces” (Page & Thomas, 2011, p.5).

Transformation of spatial references of belonging through mediatization and globalization opens new identification potentials, among them transnational identity.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> While Appadurai’s dimensions of imagined worlds are important reference points that can be seen as a prerequisite for transnationalism, they relate to an understanding of globalization based on migration. I agree with Androutsopoulos and Juffermans argument, “that the important difference from Appadurai to Jaquemet to present-day digital media is not in the mere devices, but in the changing qualities of whatever is being mediated and its place in everyday cultural practice [...] capacity to store cultural productions is complemented by its capacity to facilitate deterritorialised interactions, individualized self-presentation, and large-scale participation in cultural and political discourses” (2014, p.2).



## **Transnational identity**

To establish what understanding of transnational identity this thesis is based on, I explain the object of investigation in three parts: what identity refers to, the adjective national and the interrelation with the prefix trans.

### **Identity**

As will be reiterated later, identity negotiation is situated in discourses. It can be seen as a “function or an ‘effect’ of discourses” (Baxter, 2016, p.39), which leaves the individual with little agency in constructing and ascribing identity. Other discourse analytical approaches to identity, like the one utilized in this thesis, attribute more agency to individuals. M. Bucholtz’s and K. Halls (2005) five principles - positionality, indexicality, emergence, partialness, and relationality - are the prevalent theoretical framework for a holistic approach to identity construction. Therefore, the train of thought in this chapter builds on that foundation.

The uptake of subject positions, which are emblematic for certain identities, is a conscious or unconscious choice (Baxter, 2016; Blommaert & Varis, 2013; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). This choice is reciprocally related to larger indexical patterns of stratification. Viewing identity as a series of choices also highlights that we do not just have an identity, but that “identity categories have to be enacted and performed in order to be socially salient” (Blommaert, 2005, p.205). This “recognition work” (Gee, 2014, p.150) is reflexively related to historically specific discourse and influenced by time, space and (online or offline) setting. I agree with A. Hepp, when he states that „[e]s macht dabei Sinn, von *Medienidentitäten* zu sprechen, weil in heutigen mediatisierten Gesellschaften und Kulturen ein erheblicher Teil der Ressourcen dieser Identitätsartikulation medienvermittelt kommuniziert werden” (2014, p.235). So, when I speak of identity, I speak of media identity.

The scientific consensus is that identity has a processual character and emerges in interaction or narration through linguistic expression, and use of other semiotic resources (Bax-

ter, 2016; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Chilwa & Ayodele, 2019; De Cillia et al., 1999; De Fina, 2016; Gee, 2014; Liebscher & Dailey-O'Cain, 2007; Taylor, 2013). There is a danger of assuming the omnipresence of identity in interaction, when it does not have to be at the forefront of conversation (Weiser-Zurmühlen, fc.2020, p.197). Instead, identity work can also take place through implicitly through the reception of fictional material online as well as offline, as the analysis of accompanying communication will show.

Identity should not be understood as singular but as a plural, fragmented, multilayered accomplishment. That describes the concept of *micro-hegemonies* (Blommaert & Varis, 2013, p.145) and Blommaert (2005) exemplifies how people orient to different discursive affordances within the same fragment. Because of the interactional nature of identity, scholars agree that identities can not be considered pre-determined, stable, homogeneous, essentialist entities (Baxter, 2016; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; De Cillia et al., 1999; Kneidinger, 2013; Weiser-Zurmühlen, fc.2020). Rather, identity is fluid, situated, heterogenous, partial and dynamically shifting with everchanging discourses. It is impossible for anybody to have a finished, complete, one-dimensional transnational identity.

Identity can be segmented into three different types (Liebscher & Dailey-O'Cain, 2007). *Discursive identity* concerns the structural role participants gave in the interaction. In the context of media reception, classifying discursive identity is difficult. De Certeau (1984) states that in everyday practices of consumption, like watching television, we actively appropriate mass media and other products and make them part of our lives. In online communication, the audience-presenter-dichotomy is even more clearly void as the higher participatory potential leads to diverse self-generated content or accompanying communication. That reception can be active creation is captured through describing participants as *producers* or *prosumers* (Androutsopoulos & Juffermans, 2014; Chilwa & Ayodele, 2019; De Cillia et al., 1999; Schlachter, 2014). Secondly, there is *individual or personal identity*, which relates to

biographical information. According to Straub, differentiation to oneself through reflection is necessary to identify this layer of identity, which is constructed as continuous, coherent, and consistent in narration (Straub, 2004). The last kind of identity is *social identity*, that ties to social categories circulated in discourse, like nationality. De Fina sums up the difference between individual and social identity as follows: “While personal identities capture characteristics and attributes that the individual regards as defining her/himself as a particular and unique kind of person, social identities refer to membership into social groupings“ (2016, p.163). Some works adopt the term *collective identity*, which is said to go along with a “depersonalization of both perception and behavior” in favor of the collective (Weller, 1997, p.32). I prefer the term social identity as it underlines that social and individual identity as they merge and can dialectically cause each other in social interaction, so they cannot be separated strictly (Chiluwa & Ayodele, 2019; Kneidinger, 2013; Straub, 2004). For example, the social identity labeled German is the knowledge-based differentiation of group-belonging made by an individual, that in turn influences that individual’s self-concept. Consequently, when talking about national or transnational identity, we are talking about a prosumer identity that is equally individual and social, and intersecting with many other aspects.

What all identities, whether personal or collective and national or transnational, have in common is that they are ascribed or constructed in relation to other identities that are socially available in discourse. This relation is titled strangeness. Strangeness is often misunderstood as characteristic for something but is actually the result of a processes called *othering* (Blommaert, 2005, p.205); *doing difference* (Weiser-Zurmühlen, fc.2020, p.198); *identity politics* (Straub, 2004, pp.296ff.) or “demarcation of one's own group from those who do not belong to it” (Weller, 1997, p.5). The construction of in-and outgroups is often dichotomous, which does not mean that it is static. Unfortunately, otherness is not neutral, but sometimes used evaluatively in negative identity politics, excluding the outgroup by labeling them as

less and thus legitimizing violence (Kneidinger, 2013; Straub, 2004). Negative identity politics have been the reason for many wars between nations over the last centuries and for the distinction between nationals and foreigners. In consequence, national and transnational movements can influence each other as contrast-foils, so to understand one concept, we must understand the other.

### **Identity and nationality**

The power of nations is replaced by another one – the one of supranational communities, that place the subject into a new relation with nations. People have organized communities and emotional attachments in the pre-national era in various forms such as tribes, families, states, and empires. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century industrialization and capitalist expansion demanded a standardisation in multiple aspects of life that led to the foundation of nations. Nations as phenomena of modernity are relatively new cultural concepts, yet they are the main actors in the global stage, define the world and most states as we know them today, and as a result are important identity potentials people can choose to make relevant (Reichardt, 2010; Weller, 1997).

Nation states are founded on two artificial principles, called nation-states (*Staatsnation*) and cultural nation (*Kulturnation*), that have been thought of as distinct for a long time. The nation-state concept puts its focus on territories and political structures, like France during the French Revolution, while the cultural nation constitutes itself through shared language, traditions, and history, like the goals of German Romanticism (De Cillia et al., 1999). When cultural boundaries do not align with official borders, e.g. in Basque country or stateless nations like Kurdistan, citizens become unhappy. State and culture ideals are equally important, which becomes evident in instances of multilingual and multicultural states, like Canada or Switzerland. This alone proves that nationality is not a fixed, natural entity, but a binary, imaginary construct like any identity category (you have or do not have a nationality).

In addition, one can never know all their fellow nationals. Thus, researchers agree that nations are best understood as B. Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (De Cillia et al., 1999; Weller, 1997). Membership in nations relies on discourses about "narratives of collective belonging and otherness, and on the perceived spatial and social homogeneity of the in-group and its differentiation from out-groups" (Zappetini, 2016, p.85). Mass media, like newspapers, radio or television are integral parts of circulating these discourses in a shared space for the construction of media identity that is influential for people's practices in imagined communities (De Cillia et al., 1999; Hipfl, 2004; Jenner, 2018; Kneidinger, 2013).<sup>3</sup>

Through the growing use of translocal digital media, the concept of nationality has undergone modifications and the strict binaries dissolve. A practical example is that some citizens hold multiple passports nowadays. Which factors contribute to the blurring of national boundaries will now be discussed. National sovereignty is undermined by transnational organizations that influence decisions on the state level, like the EU or UN. Territories lose importance in cyberspace, and digital practices are not determined by traditional boundary markers but memberships in "social movements where individuals lend their voices towards achieving a common goal through mutual embeddedness of online space and identity" (Chilwa & Ayodele, 2019, p.105). Strangeness is also always present within nations. This results in the nation, formerly thought of as homogenous, already being to a degree transnational and integrating a plurality of cultures and nationalities.<sup>4</sup> There are no strictly national discourses, as they are always permeated by notions from different societies. Imagined national communities do not yield enough flexible and pluralistic potential to describe the new communities adequately (Hipfl, 2004). Hence, an implication is that of the decreasing importance of na-

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<sup>3</sup> Nations are also tied to behavioral norms, as collectives are expressed through a certain habitus. Another option for investigating (trans)national communities is, in consequence, through Bourdieu's notion of habitus (1997).

<sup>4</sup> Vertovec (2007) introduced the term superdiversity to denote today's increased complexity and diversity. Originally it referred to migration flow, which is why I do not make use of this concept, although it has since been expanded to include digital superdiversity (Androutsopoulos & Juffermans, 2014; Kytölä, 2016).

tionality and increase of other axis of identification (Blommaert, 2005; Hühn et al., 2010; Reichardt, 2010; Welsch, 2012; Zappetini, 2016). „[D]eterritoriale Vergemeinschaftung“ (Hepp, 2014, p.226) becomes the norm. Non-territorial, supranational communitarisation employs other community forming mechanisms, like shared ethnicity, pop cultural interests, shared political views, e.g. in social movements, or religious beliefs, are pivotal. In this vein, U. Beck (1998) speaks of a World Society but warns that this does not automatically go along with cosmopolitan awareness, more tolerance, less xenophobia, and less nationalism. It can also aid in the creation of outgroups through doing difference between the world society and others still oriented to the traditional system of order. A transnational World Society is one of the multiple outcomes of supranational subject positions.

### **Identity and transnationalism**

Besides transnationalism there are multiple terms to describe the recent variation in identity potential, among them multi- or pluricultural, international, translocal and cosmopolitan. I utilize transnationalism within the course of this work as it aligns with my view of globalization as transcultural flows and is better suited to talk about identity work in digital distribution channels than the other terms.

All of the terminology emerged in processes of globalization and presupposes a certain view of it. Discourses surrounding globalization discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the process. Hypothesizing cultural imperialism that results in worldwide Americanization and the suppression of the local forgets that a total homogeneous society will never exist. Oppositional scholars predict heterogenization (“Multiple-Welten-Gesellschaft“, Beck, 1998, p.7) or view global connectedness as opportunity for diversification, some also point to the reinforcing effect that globalization has on the local in forms of nationalist uprisings. Understanding globalization and its effects as binary, mutually exclusive options is too simplistic to encompass the interplay between local and global, so metaphors like *global*

*flows* (Pennycook, 2007), *network* (Castells, 2000) and *glocalization* (Robertson, 1998) developed. An overview is provided in Table\_Appendix1. Based on those new ways of describing communities and thus identification, categories were named. Multi- and pluricultural refer to the co-existence of several, separate cultural units within a society (Hühn et al., 2010; Reichardt, 2010; Welsch, 2012). The prime example defining this is Canadas Multiculturalism Act. Interculturality or internationality conversely talk about processes of exchange or a space between several separate cultural units (Hepp, 2014; Hühn et al., 2010; Welsch, 2012). So far, they all imply that cultures can be thought of as separate with clear boundaries, which tends to overemphasize differences or the effort that must be made for co-existence or communication. However, as explained before, cultures and nations as cultural ideas already encompass plurality and hybridization within them. The other extreme is cosmopolitanism. The first important texts dealing with the notion of cosmopolitanism were written by Kant. Cosmopolitanism describes a specific form of political awareness aiming at creating a peaceful world society, that is not bound to nations at all (Reichardt, 2010). It can be criticized that abandoning the concept of nation and local connections in place of complete globalization is not appropriate either. That is where the trans-prefix comes in.

‘Trans’ denotes a mutual transition of borders, that resolves them and instead creates something new, that is more than the sum of its parts. It simultaneously stems from and transcends the local, while not being purely global either (Hühn et al., 2010). A key term here is *transculturalism*, which surmises many aspects of culture: Just like there are no strict cultural boundaries between nations, there are no clearly separable speech communities anymore between which code-switching, or crossing can occur. Hybrid language practices in globalization are captured under the term *translanguaging*, defined as “practices where speakers of more than two languages [...], use all semiotic resources within their disposal to communicate in a multilingual setting“ (Chiluwa & Ayodele, 2019, p.118). Translanguaging can be

extremely useful to express transnational identity. However, transnational identity can be constructed in different ways without a problem, hence the focus of this thesis will not be put on translanguaging practices. *Translocality* (Kytölä, 2016) emphasizes spatial aspects of transgressions, which works very well in the context of computer-mediated communication in which "participants have (and display) access to not only local but also global discourses, points of identification, or means of meaning-making" ("Current contributions and research", para.17). Translocal space does not rely on physical migration to transgress the national comfort zone, but this does not mean that they stop being organized according to the more and more outdated nation principles as seen in the explanation of the digital divide. For this reason, another trans-term is employed.

Transnational identity is a specific form of cultural identity, that originated in migration studies (De Fina, 2016; Hühn et al., 2010) and has been used broadly in other disciplines. W. Welsch (2012) introduced transnationality into the German debate about globalization in a narrower meaning. He stresses that there are experiences that are neither captured by national nor international ideas but bridge them in translocal space and global discourse, therefore creating a new sense of collective belonging. The digital environment makes occupying the same place while being part of transnational practices and transnational objects for identity negotiation possible. A critique is that transnationality submerges differences and nationalities that still inform our social realities (Hühn et al., 2010, p.30), hence transnationalism would be no feasible alternative to talk about supranational communitarisation in globalized social realities. The counterargument is that it does not denounce differences but talks about a new kind of difference that encompass national and de-territorialized concerns (Welsch, 2012), which is the view I adopt in my research. Now I turn to what constitutes the terms and what they in turn reflect (Baxter, 2016, p.37).



## Research method

The method selected to examine the everyday practices of media use and engagement with narratives is DDA. This first begs the question of what can be understood as *discourse*, which was already mentioned as formative factor for identity positions.

### Discourse

Fictional media objects and all the narratives, spaces, and characters they create, are reflections of discourse. Discourse analysis and the term discourse as theoretical construct are informed by the French philosopher M. Foucault, whose poststructuralist influence persists until today. Departing from a genealogist tradition,<sup>5</sup> Foucault develops a dynamic concept of discourse in *Sexualität und Wahrheit* (1987), that sees them as influenced by power structures that determine the trajectory of society. He states that there is no power relation without corresponding knowledge that perpetuates power and vice versa. Knowledge is mediated through discourse, a time sensitive, all-encompassing societal logic. Foucault argues that in principle, everything can be expressed and thought, but not from anyone and at every time.<sup>6</sup> By dismantling the repression hypothesis, he illustrates the universal, multidimensional nature of power and the ever-changing multiplicity of discourses and spaces it produces. Discourse and power are unescapable; they penetrate fictional and non-fictional communication, text and non-linear hypertext, alike. The groundbreaking aspect of this theory is that it challenges the notion of the autonomous subject because our world views are subject to processes of power and as such are dependent on contemporary knowledge disseminated by discourses. Following Foucault, the schemata that organize our social world and that we consider natural, are historically mediated. His arguments lead to the conclusion that objective science does

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<sup>5</sup> His research “was primarily historical in the sense that he attempted to unravel the foundations of contemporary knowledge by tracking connections between ideas back” (Taylor, 2013, p.9).

<sup>6</sup> Counter-discourse can also have stabilizing effects of creating a threat to what is believed right or by being part of a larger power-structure as “discourses are often competing, offering alternative versions of reality and serving different and conflicting power interests. [...] [A] range of institutional discourses provide the network by which dominant forms of social knowledge are produced, reinforced, contested or resisted” (Baxter, 2016, p.37).

not exist; instead, it is part of inherently ideological, polymorph discourses. In consequence, any scientific endeavor including this thesis can only be described as investigating underlying mechanisms of power and “the versions of knowledge which have become accepted as truth” (Taylor, 2013, p.19). A discursive bias is furthered by the object and language of investigation, as the majority of media productions on Netflix come from the United States and the online environment and its language in general is often anglophone (Jenner, 2018).

Foucault’s discourse definition is broad and has led to terminological diversity across disciplines. Colloquially, discourse often stands for aggregated discursive knowledge, e.g. the discourse of globalization, but it can also refer to the patterns that organize social realities as explained. While some scholars see discourse as confined to language, others include non-linguistic elements as well because both are integral parts in the creation of patterns of stratification (Baxter, 2016; Blommaert, 2005; Gee, 2014; Taylor, 2013). J. Gee formulates this distinction as the difference between micro-level interaction and macro-level, capital ‘D’ Discourse “for ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity” (2014, p.143).<sup>7</sup> The Twitter-data will illustrate the interplay of this capital ‘D’ Discourse with micro-level discourse. Discourse as used in this thesis includes all semiotic features and is seen as socially embedded in connection to a cultural space-time- frame.

### **Digital Discourse Analysis**

When doing DDA, moving between macro- and micro-level practices and considering their interplay is crucial. Many methodologies under the umbrella term discourse analysis<sup>8</sup> relate to Foucault’s research. The heterogeneous field contains diverse methods. What differ-

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<sup>7</sup> For the sake of readability, discourse, spelled with a little d will refer to capital ‘D’ discourse, which encompass little ‘d’ discourse, unless stated otherwise.

<sup>8</sup> Because discourse is per definition interdisciplinary, I use terms like discourse studies or discourse analysis rather than discourse linguistics.

entiate DDA is that its object of study is the digital environment. Because of the “Newspaper Bias” (Gredel et al., 2018, p. 3; Gredel, 2018, p.97), research with this approach is sparse. Instead of focusing on historical aspects, critiquing discourses, or their sociological consequences, DDA looks at how discourses are mediated in cyberspace. The framework of DDA is concerned with the construction of social realities in transnational societies through transtextually and transculturally organized units, which are to some part digitally mediated (Gredel et al., 2018). Discourses are constituted through practices, so when the World Wide Web was accessible at the end of the 1980s new forms of mediatized practices, discourses, came into being.

Communicative, mediatized practices are influenced by constraints and affordances of the digital environment and “interplay with the micro-level stylistic, textual and interactional practices of everyday users” (Spilioti, 2016, p.133). Only operating from a macro-perspective can lead to very abstract findings, lacking practical relevance, whereas only employing a micro-perspective makes it easy to lose sight of the macrosocial significance. This means combining sociolinguistic approaches, like *positioning*, with terminology from media studies, like *narratives*.

Narratives are components of discourse and at the same time exceed it as they are trans-textual patterns that get adopted across different (digital) discourses (Gredel & Mell, 2018). There have been two approaches to investigating narratives, one interested in structural dimensions of storytelling in literary texts and one interested in ethnographical data and small stories in interaction (Bamberg, 2005, pp. 221-223). The normative line of demarcation that has been drawn between the objects of study is artificial and gets continuously blurrier in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where the web makes new forms of expression available. Social media contributes to written talk, also named “secondary orality” (Page & Thomas, 2011, p.4). Furthermore, participant engagement makes fixed stories negotiable. Consequently, it does not

make a difference if narratives are fictional or non-fictional as they are reality constituting forces either way. Looking at fictional stories, their uptake on a social media application and how they construct transnational identity is right at the intersection of narratives and positioning. This is because “in order to produce some form of consistency and coherence between our multiple subject positions, we tell ourselves and others stories” that locate us in in- or out-groups (Baxter, 2016, p.42), so positioning practices are “genuinely narrative practices” (Deppermann, 2013, p.79).

Positioning, as recognition work, makes a certain identity visible. It integrates discourse theoretic and socio-psychological elements – the Foucauldian notion of subjects sees them as being positioned by discourse and is complemented by subject positions as collaboratively accomplished in interaction by individuals as explained in the chapter “Identity”. Individuals select resources, e.g. narratives, from competing discourses in simultaneous positioning of the self and other (Harré & Langenhoven, 1991). Bamberg enriches this observation by introducing three levels of positioning, taking narrative resources into account. While the first two levels describe positioning in the story and interactional world, Level 3, refers to “positioning with respect to master narratives or dominant discourses, i.e. locating the self with respect to larger social structures” (Deppermann, 2013, p.64f). Level 3 is the bridge between micro- and macro- order and acknowledges that certain building blocks for identity that participants draw upon are not a locally emergent expression of discourse, but enregistered membership categories (De Fina, 2013, p. 43).<sup>9</sup> Identity can be constructed through explicit and implicit references to larger societal discourses, thus knowledge about ideologies and other interpretative resources is crucial to infer what displays of identity have recourse to. To gain this knowledge both De Fina (2013) and A. Deppermann (2013) suggest not to rely on

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<sup>9</sup> Membership Categorization Analysis [MCA] is an alternative to Level 3-positioning, that “deals with how members categorize persons and how this is used as a resource of ascribing properties, explaining and evaluating actions, attributing responsibility and engendering inferences and expectations” (Deppermann, 2013, p.65). However, biographical narratives and the use of narrative resources transcend it, which is why I stick with Bamberg’s model.

assumptions but to collect ethnographic data. The reasoning behind the choice of material for the analysis is given in continuation.

### **Data selection**

For Foucault and many others, discourses stay confined to places; however, online discourses do not remain bound to physical locations, as they facilitate transgression between different spaces through playfulness, generating multilingual, transnational discourses (Gredel et al., 2018). Over the last years, Netflix and its media productions have become influential worldwide. This goes as far as the emergence of new practices, i.e. using Netflix as a verb or in idiomatic terms like *Netflix & Chill*. Studying the streaming portal and its content has a large macrosocial relevance for understanding narratives about everyday life and how we imagine human collaboration on a global scale (Lobato, 2019). *Sense8* is one of the very few audiovisual, online media objects that explicitly deal with digital transnational identity, which is why I selected it to be the object of this thesis. The show has also been critically acclaimed with the *GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Drama Series* and the *Location Manager Guild Award for Outstanding Locations in a Contemporary Television Series* (*Sense8* Wiki, n.d.). For the investigation of *Sense8* both seasons, including the movie-length Christmas special and the post-produced finale, are taken into consideration. Season 1, episode 4 titled “What’s going on”,<sup>10</sup> provides most examples for the analysis as this is the first episode where all eight characters have a shared experience. In addition, various examples from other episodes are used, with a special focus on the randomly selected storyline of Kala. Due to the scope of the thesis only a few out of a multitude of examples can be mentioned. Discourse is investigated in terms of how the series is positioned relating to production, cast, locations, and budget; as well as how the series positions itself in terms of narratives, genre

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<sup>10</sup> In the rest of the thesis episodes are going to be referred to with season and episode number in the pattern S1, E1. Timestamps are in the same format Netflix uses on the right hand side of the screen (not the time shown over the cursor), meaning it is not shown how much time has passed but how much time is left in the episode, e.g. S1, E1, 01:30:31 indicates there is still over an hour and a half left to watch in season 1, episode 1.

and aesthetics showcased. Extra-diegetic information is provided by the Making-of documentary “*Sense8: Creating the World.*” (Wachowski & Oreck, 2015), which is also available on Netflix.

Another factor for selecting this show is its unique history of fan interaction, presented in the chapter “Production context of *Sense8*”, that offered plenty examples of accompanying communication. A study on participant engagement found that 88% of participants are motivated to watch content to be able to talk about it to others afterwards (Weiser-Zurmühlen, 2017, p.36), which is a practice that extends to cyberspace. For the second part of my analysis I use data publicly available on Twitter.<sup>11</sup> Twitter is the platform where the *Sense8* fan-community is most active. This is demonstrated by social media statistics, that state that in only one month 15,133 people intentionally interacted with posts containing #*Sense8* and the reach of these posts goes up to 1,028,247 users (see Figure\_Appendix 1; Keyhole, n.d.). The Twitter-based participant engagement provides meaningful information about practices of transnational identity creation.

Posts on Twitter and Metadata can be deleted anytime, so screenshots are included to secure the data collection. Hashtags help to narrow the myriad of contributions down to a collection of original tweets, excluding retweets and replies. I identified three different hashtag-contents related to *Sense8*: hashtags linking to the series itself (#*Sense8*), promoting events connected to it (#*Sense8*DayRewatch, #*Sense8*Anniversary5) or activist hashtags aimed at getting the series continued (#Renew*Sense8*, #*Sense8*NetflixRewatch, #*Sense8*Season3, #*Sense8*Revolution). To not exceed the scope of this thesis, I only collected data from #*Sense8* and #*Sense8*NetflixRewatch. Looking at more than one hashtag generates data that can be considered somewhat representative for the larger discourse and allows for balanced insights, as certain aspects are more prominent in some types of hashtags, which

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<sup>11</sup> Privacy concerns must be raised. Using public profile information is not without ethical concerns and should always be weighted critically.

will be revisited later. An overlap between the two hashtags exists, as tweets often contain multiple, related hashtags, but does not cause significant distortions in the data. Key characteristics of the hashtags (employment-frequency, date of origin) as well as the different periods under review are stated in the corresponding part of the analysis. Information about discursive knowledge is provided through the inclusion of production context of the series, and hashtags as organizing principle for data, that mark at least one membership category the participants orient to explicitly. To further account for the importance of background knowledge, metadata is gathered for the most popular hashtag from two social media management sites, Keyhole and Tweetbinder. Both offer different data, so their results were combined to get a full picture.<sup>12</sup>

Digital discourses are highly dynamic, fleeting, and rapidly diversifying. In addition, media technology is constantly evolving, what now seems to be a new practice is outdated in increasingly shorter periods of time. Rapid change of online environment and discourses poses a challenge for research and drawing lasting conclusions. To combat this, the media analyzed here are described with the affordances they offer at the time of this work.

The subsequent part of the thesis answers the research questions and outlines what idea of transnational identity is conveyed in the selected material.

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<sup>12</sup> Keyhole is geared towards companies that want to track their social media marketing campaigns on multiple platforms. It thus informs about the user demographic, while Tweetbinder focuses on the economic value of certain tweets, top tweeters, and activities. Keyholes free trial period offers metadata for the period of four weeks. Tweetbinder goes back further but restricts the volume to 500 Tweets in total. More historical metadata is unfortunately not available for free, but the data received is more than enough for my purpose.

## Analysis

### **How is transnational identity constructed in Netflix's *Sense8*?**

Before diving deeper into examples, structural affordances are investigated. They negotiate issues of power allocation between participants and the entertainment industry. Following the understanding of discourse there is no “‘neutral’ distributor of content, because the nature, design, and business model of the platform will always have an effect on what passes through it” (Lobato, 2019, p. 38).

### ***Netflix as medium***

Through new technology and services like Netflix, viewers can engage with material on the move and depart from linear-scheduling and programs available on a global scale in multiple languages, which increases choices for reception conditions. Netflix was founded by Marc Randolph and Reed Hastings as a DVD mailing service in 1997. In 2007 the company switched its business model to subscription-video-on-demand [SVOD]. Since then it developed into the “world’s largest SVOD service” (Lobato, 2019, p.15). At the time of writing, the entertainment service states on its company profile (Netflix, n.d.), that it has “183 million paid memberships in over 190 countries”. Anyone with access to broadband internet and a viewing device can create a Netflix account, which explains its massive reach. However, Netflix requires high technological affordances and has globally uniform subscription-pricing, which puts a proportionally bigger strain on low-income subscribers in poorer nations (Jenner, 2018; Lobato, 2019). In addition, it is still unsolved what Netflix is as it “–like many disruptive media phenomena before it, [...] – is a boundary object that exists between, and inevitably problematizes, the conceptual categories used to think about media” (Lobato,



2019, p.20).<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to discuss discursive framings that determine how people, the economy and the law interact with the extremely popular medium.

Some see Netflix as tied to social media, because it is computer-mediated and works with algorithmic recommendations systems. Netflix's interface is designed to be "as tablet-friendly as possible", with dark-background and horizontal organization (Lobato, 2019, p. 42). Another argument for viewing Netflix as social media platforms is the NetflixParty browser extension, a recently introduced feature that makes participatory engagement on the platform itself possible through integrating a chat (see Figure\_Appendix 4 & 5). Yet, interaction on Netflix is still rare, so "the Netflix audience seems more closely linked to the television audience" (Jenner, 2018, p.248), the product is closer to cinematic movies and the company firmly positions itself against YouTube's user-created content, keeping all the power over production (Jenner, 2018, Lobato, 2019). Although Netflix's delivery via streaming technology differs from traditional television, it is understood by other scholars as discursively tied to the re-organization of the media industry in the next stage of television development - TV IV (Jenner, 2018, Lobato, 2019). TV IV is set apart from TV I-III<sup>14</sup> through the extraordinary level of customization. Netflix describes the empowered fan as someone, who "can watch as much as they want, anytime, anywhere, on any internet-connected screen. Members can play, pause and resume watching, all without commercials or commitments" (Netflix, n.d.). Crucially, binge-watching is largely facilitated by TV IV.<sup>15</sup> Two features that foster binge-watching on Netflix are *entrance flow* and *insulated flow*. Entrance flow is responsible

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<sup>13</sup> Possible discursive frameworks see Netflix as "a video platform, a distributor, a television network, a global media corporation, a technology company, a software system, a big-data business, a cultural gatekeeper, a lifestyle brand, a mode of spectatorship, or a ritual" (Lobato, 2019, p.21).

<sup>14</sup> "TV I is marked by the (increasingly) affordable television set itself, TV II by more affordable and accurate remote controls, cable and satellite technology as well as the VCR, [fast forwarding and flexible schedules through recording become possible] and TV III by DVD and the DVR and digital broadcasting technologies" (Jenner, 2018, p. 13). The internet offers more choices, control, and convenience, but also increased audience fragmentation.

<sup>15</sup> "Defining binge-watching can be difficult. This is often due to the importance assigned to the number of episodes that need to be watched to establish 'a binge'. [...] What all these definitions have in common, though, is an implicit assumption that serialised programs are the object of binge-watching. [...] Another implicit assumption is that the medium this is watched on is not linear television" (Jenner, 2018, p.111f.).

for keeping viewers on site through an algorithm recommending new material. The algorithm “constructs an individualized experience for viewers. [...] The choice of genre as structuring feature stands out” (Jenner, 2018, p. 134f.). Insulated flow is responsible for keeping viewers engaged with a series through “post-play function, which automatically starts the next episode after one is ended, and the skip intro function” (Jenner, 2018, p.126).

Data-driven individualized recommendations segment the participants into smaller niche audiences. M. Jenner (2018) discusses the consequences of individualized advertising as follows:

This control over programming does not equal social power. In fact, it often means that politically or socially subversive programming is only consumed by audience segments that already agree with the views purported in the text, often limiting social impact. (p.103)

The few assumptions that can be made about the transnational account-holders is that they are “zu etwa gleichen Teilen Mann oder Frau [...] zwischen 19 und 35 Jahren alt [...], formal gut gebildet und berufstätig oder studiert. Neben guten Englischsprachkenntnissen [zeichnen sie sich durch] Onlineaffinität aus“ (Bock, 2017, p.156). So, while the viewers have more control, Netflix creates discourses that nudges them towards certain choices, filtered through discursive imaginations of genre. Control is reclaimed in proxy wars relating to the usage of VPN-clients to bypass geo-blocking or password-sharing practices undermining Netflix’s business model (Jenner, 2018; Lobato, 2019). Beyond its structures, Netflix also negotiates power through the content published.

### ***Architecture of content creation***

That Netflix combines domestic and global aspects at the same time on its platform speaks for considering it a transnational broadcaster. In addition to publishing licensed content, Netflix has been producing Netflix Originals and in-house productions published by

other broadcasters since 2012. They expanded internationally (meaning they are not geoblocked) and challenged powerful media conglomerates like the global player CNN (Jenner, 2018). Dominating global broadcasting markets means creating a cosmopolitan consumption experience where content is released on the same date around the globe, which can be viewed as “direct reaction to the challenges television faces in light of Twitter and other social media” (Jenner, 2018, p.224f.).

In contrast to that, national laws concerning censorship, taxes, big data, and regulations apply to the global SVOD service, like the EU-policy that 30% of content must be European (Jenkins, 2020). Moreover, the catalogue apart from Netflix Originals differs from country to country and Netflix is making efforts to appeal to local (and global) customers through national in-house productions (Jenkins, 2020).

The interplay between supranational and national influences on content production make Netflix a transnational broadcaster. Transnational broadcasters try to address transnational participants from the outset, employing a *grammar of transnationalism* through “genre, a version of history that relies heavily on postmodernism, aesthetics, a commitment to liberal humanism [e.g. transnational values like human rights] or a negotiation of translation languages that takes diversity in skill levels and cultural preferences into account” (Jenner, 2018, p.231). Another strategy Netflix commits to in order to expand its transnational reach is diversity. Diversity is expressed through the inclusion of non-white, non-heteronormative perspectives, and narratives in the notion of *Quality TV*.<sup>16</sup> Netflix has received praise for that, but the understanding of diversity and subsequently representation is influenced by what American discourse considers as ‘other’, which does not include all kinds of diversity (Jenner, 2018). A Netflix Original that decidedly announces its diversity is *Sense8*.

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<sup>16</sup> Increasingly complex and inventive narratology, multidimensional characters, and high budget productions are talked about as “Quality TV” (Allrath et al., 2005; Mittell, 2005; Weiser-Zurmühlen, 2017). I won’t use Quality TV even though Parsemain (2019) classifies *Sense8* as such, as it only refers to television technology and has evaluative connotations when talking about a broader change in aesthetics, that is subsequently often neglected in discussions surrounding this term.

### *Production context of Sense8*

Netflix's vice president of original content C. Holland proclaimed about *Sense8* that “[n]ever has there been a more truly global show with an equally diverse and international cast and crew, which is mirrored by the connected community of deeply passionate fans all around the world” (Koblin, 2017). *Sense8* was written and produced by Lana und Lilly Wachowski, known for *Matrix*, *Jupiter Ascending* and *Cloud Atlas*, and J. Michael Straczynski, who created *Babylon5*. In an interview Straczynski described their vision for the show:

We started out at one point talking about how evolution involves creating even greater circles of empathy: You belong to your family, then you belong to your tribe, then two tribes link up and now you have empathy for your people on this side of the river [...] and on through villages, cities, states and nations. So what if a more literal form of empathy could be triggered in eight individuals around the planet [...] It would give us a perfect platform to do a show that was loaded with action, big ideas, some amazing stunts that no one's done before, and play to a planetary audience. (Arrant, 2013)

Catering to a global audience and the idea of a trajectory of greater circles of empathy beyond nations, roots the show in a globalized, transnational tradition of thought. Straczynski and the Wachowskis made their vision a reality. The plot, which is discussed more in depth in the next sub-chapter, can be summed up as follows: Eight strangers from eight different cities around the globe find out they are mentally connected (see Figure\_Appendix 6 and Table\_Appendix2). They can share knowledge, abilities, communicate with and ‘visit’ each other while physically remaining in the same place. As the eight share experiences and relate more to each other over the course of the episodes, they start identifying and acting as one. While they become a transnational community, a powerful organisation called BPO, short for Biologic Preservation Organization, has their representative Whispers hunt them.

Holland's and Straczynski's statements strongly point to Netflix as transnational broadcaster designing the show for a global audience and the creators also honing in on that in creating a transnational story world.

"*Sense8: Creating the World*" reveals that the series was filmed in the places where the characters are at home (Wachowski & Oreck, 2015), instead of a Hollywood coulisse or a green screen. While the USA was the center for post-production, filming took place in over 13 countries (*Sense8 Filming Locations*, n.d.). The title-sequence of the first season includes 108 scenes from all the locations. There is no notable imbalance in the depiction of the nations, which is representative for the whole series. However, nations in which more of the plot takes place are shown slightly more. Shooting locations were Berlin, Chicago, San Francisco, London, Reykjavik, Mexico City, Mumbai, Nairobi, Seoul and in the second season São Paulo, Amsterdam, Positano, Los Angeles, Malta, and Paris. U. Reichardt (2010) notes that cities are spaces of heterogenization and globalization, making the urban environment the perfect backdrop for the series. Cities also hold cultural significance. Special shooting locations incorporate the Eiffel Tower in Paris, an Indian temple, the Museo Diego Rivera Anahuacalli in Mexico City, the Holocaust-Mahnmal in Berlin, or an airplane in flight, just to name a few. Connecting monuments from different cultures creates an authentic transcultural space. Furthermore, all the events of cultural importance the characters attend, like Pride Parades in San Francisco and São Paulo, DJ-concerts, the Ganesh Festival or the Lucha Libre, were not staged for the filming of the series but filmed during these events adding to authenticity as recounted various times in the documentary (Wachowski & Oreck, 2015). Scenes were shot multiple times in all places and only in post-production the footage was selected (Wachowski & Oreck, 2015; 00:13:10-00:11:57). Therefore, the order of locations in title-sequence and series seems random and not tied to notions about places, generating transnational discourses. However, the selected locations in general are predominantly western. The

US and Europe are being represented multiple times, while Eastern countries or the African continent are underrepresented. Nations like China or Russia are probably not pictured, because of their geo-blocking regulations. In the end, Netflix is a company with a target audience, that they cater to and that influences production more than representing proportional to population distribution. Nevertheless, the goal of the showrunners to appeal to a global audience becomes recognizable not only in the various locations, but also in the casting.

Non-white, diverse casts representing marginalized audiences is not new for Netflix productions (see shows like *Dear White People* or *To all the boys I've loved before*). So far, they focused on one minority group at a time, while *Sense8* includes several underrepresented groups (BIPOC, LGBTQ+ community) in half of the main characters and the talents hired to portray them, to provide as much diverse identification potential as possible. Reasons for othering are pictured as intersectional issues, e.g. the transgender character is also homosexual. Actors from the characters nation of origin with similar experiences to the characters were cast. An example is the transgender actress J. Clayton, portraying a transgender character, who also does not know how to drive (Wachowski & Oreck, 2015, 00:20:17). The large supporting cast is also local and changes with the city. In the documentary the actors state that they are like family to each other and got excited showing each other their hometowns (Wachowski & Oreck, 2015, 00:05:39 & 00:05:08), reaffirming the authentic shooting experience.

Unfortunately, the extraordinary commitment to present authentic diversity drives up production cost immensely. The story is told over a first season (12 episodes), a Christmas special in movie length and a second season (10 episodes). On June 01, 2017 Netflix issued a statement saying that they would cancel the sci-fi-drama after two seasons. The shows high production costs, estimated to be around \$9 million per episode in the second season (*Sense8* Wiki, n.d.), could not be outweighed because the audience, although very passionate, was too

small. But the fans started to campaign to get the show renewed for another season. They set up online petitions, tweeted and called Netflix repeatedly, not stopping despite Netflix reiterating the cancellation.<sup>17</sup> The resilience of the transnational fan community shows how strongly the message of *Sense8* resonates with them. Ultimately, the fans were successful as Netflix announced the production of the series finale within one month of the cancellation. The 151-minute long finale aired June 08, 2018.

*Sense8* is a series in which fans played a crucial role in the production process, as Holland mentioned. The extent to which viewers influenced production illustrates the power recipients have today as the digitalization of television and presence of digital fan communities allow for viewers to interact with content and its production in ways going beyond the traditional TV-experience. This results in narratives never being finished as fans can continue them and productions being part of a larger network of content (Allrath et al., 2005; Lusin & Haekel, 2019; Mittell, 2012; Weber & Junklewitz, 2008; Weiser-Zurmühlen, 2017). The finale has a unique feature, an afterword that is titled 'For our fans' (S2, E12, 00:04:52), that thanks the fans for their support by showing behind-the-scenes-content and illuminating how intertwined transnational production and transnational fan community are. Lana Wachowski took to Twitter after getting the greenlight to produce a finale:

In this world it is easy to believe that you cannot make a difference; that when a government or an institution or corporation makes a decision, there is something irrevocable about the decision; that love is always less important than the bottom line. [...] [W]hile it is often true those decisions are irreversible, it is not *always* true. Improbably, unforeseeably, your love has brought *Sense8* back to life. (Sense8 [@Sense8], 2017)

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<sup>17</sup> An interesting video (*Sense8 Revolution*, 2018) made for the campaign sums up why people believe in the series. It also showcases the immense participant engagement.

The letter employs a similar rhetoric as Straczynski did in his interview, highlighting the role of love and empathy as counter-discourses to nationalism and perpetuating supranational communitarianism in the fandom. How those messages and the transnational orientation are transmitted in the story world is subject of the following chapter.

### ***‘What’s going on’ - Sense8***

Apart from production context, Weiser-Zurmühlen (fc.2020) identified two other categories that are important for viewers in recognizing certain cultural identities attributed to media objects – content and aesthetics. Therefore, I will examine these two to establish what makes *Sense8* transnational.

**Content.** Parallel to what Weiser-Zurmühlen details as components of those categories, I split content up in genre discussion and narratives. Genre-decisions that further continuity and connectedness underline non-territorial communitarianism and the narratives of transnational belonging influence the character’s global actions just as much as the individual, local storylines. All aspects of life become transnational through the sensates’ ability to experience them in a transnational space where they are in multiple places at once, feeling connections to multiple things.

**Genre.** *Sense8* is conceptualized as a science fiction series and labeled as such on Netflix. As mentioned before, the streaming platform’s genre-conventions rely on contemporary American definitions.

Weber and Junklewitz (2008) name four main criteria for an media object to be considered a series,<sup>18</sup> out of which ongoing narratives and having multiple parts are obligatory for viewers as Weiser-Zurmühlen discovered in an ethnographical study (2017, p.42). A minimal definition is derived: “Eine Serie besteht aus zwei oder mehr Teilen, die durch eine gemeinsame Idee, ein Thema oder ein Konzept zusammengehalten werden und in allen Medien

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<sup>18</sup> Fictional character is often assumed but is not constitutive as many Reality-TV-shows also fit the minimal definition.



vorkommen können“ (Weber & Junklewitz, 2008, p.18). Best suited for talking about different kinds of series is the series-serial-continuum (Allrath et al., 2005; Weber & Junklewitz, 2008) as it allows investigating complex hybrid forms,<sup>19</sup> not just the binary of series (*Episodenserie*) and serial (*Fortsetzungsserie*). According to the presented criteria, *Sense8* can be considered a serial as it features a big tableau of consistent main and minor characters and the plot spans the complete duration of the series. Most shows are hybrid forms, so it is remarkable that in *Sense8* almost no plotline is finished within one episode, as is shown later. *Sense8*'s focus on continuity is on the one hand a tool to encourage binge-watching, on the other hand it already projects infinite transnational connectedness, which is a repeated theme of the serial.

Selecting the genre of a serial is always ideological as genres are discourse traditions that come with expectations for the reception (Charlton & Klemm, 1998). Labeling something science fiction tells the prosumer to expect stories about “alternative temporal and spatial settings, speculative technology, science and political systems [...], paranormal abilities and [...] enhanced humans. Examining familiar elements from a new perspective, it explores scientific technological and societal possibilities” (Parsemain, 2019, p.226). Being able to share knowledge or communicate with people even though they are at the other side of the world is a familiar element for us today. Through technology like Skype or Zoom, we can have those real-time conversations and Wikipedia and other websites provide knowledge from strangers. The show often alludes to the parallels between the concept of eight strangers being connected and media identities. Connection is described as “Facetime without a phone” (S1, E8, 00:16:10), “networked and file-sharing” (S2, E4, 00:44:43) or compared to Google (S2, E6,

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<sup>19</sup> On the one side of the series-serial continuum are series without a re-occurring cast and anthology series with disconnected episodes. Next are series with consistent main cast but storylines that finish within an episode. Then series with episode-overarching storylines follow. Soap operas and telenovelas are subcategories. At the far-right end is the serial, with arcs spanning the whole, or even multiple, seasons and a consistent cast. This results in extensive opportunities for character development, more complex ongoing story-arcs, and lengthy action scenes to keep the audience engaged and interested over long periods of time (Allrath et al., 2005; Mittell, 2012).

00:07:15) and the Internet in general (S2, E7, 00:13:25). What is very much fiction though is that characters in *Sense8* can not only communicate and receive knowledge from each other, but also are aware of each other's past experiences, and share sense perceptions and skills. That is why Jonas, the main source of information on this new ability, explains, "visiting is not calling or texting someone" (S1, E4, 00:19:33). There is a distinction between sharing, which is only possible between the eight, and visiting, which is possible with anybody once you have seen them that has those abilities in common with them like Jonas himself. The enhanced state of being is explained through science and a whole discourse with its own vocabulary on the 'little d' discourse -level. *Sensates*, short for homo sensorium, represent a different strand of human evolution. Biologically they differ from homo sapiens through a frontal lobe syndrome (S1, E2, 00:41:26). It is insinuated that homo sensorium is the original human race. Homo sapiens developed through an isolation of genes, allowing them to feel less and therefore, keep secrets, and kill (S1, E10, 00:45:57 -00:44:46; 00:41:40 -00:40:28; 00:39:48). Sensates are 'born' (equals an awakening) by sensate parents (not their biological parents) and connected through what is called *psycellium*. The eight people with such a connection are a *cluster*. They also share their physical birthday, which is celebrated by the main characters together (S2, E1, 01:25:23-01:17:07). Of course, anthropologists, doctors and professors know about sensates and study them in secret. Because the discourse sticks close to reality and has no magical elements, these are signs for the series belonging into the genre of science fiction, not fantasy.

The fiction of enhanced humans is generating alternative temporal and spatial settings. Sensates can be in two places at once, their own physical location and wherever other cluster members are, making them translocal beings. They also participate in the same presence around the globe at different times. This is explicitly discussed when a character asks another what time it is in their city and comments on it being late in London, while also being

in Chicago in the early evening (S1, E6, 00:46:15). The serial portrays a whole new level of time-space-compression. These features confirm that *Sense8* is science fiction, but there are other features that suggest that additional, other classifications are possible.

Different characters are tied to different genre-styles. A big Bollywood dance scene (S1, E2, 00:37:31-00:35:02) and a wedding (S1, E5, 00:08:36) occur in Kala's storyline. Lito, the Mexican character, is a movie star. The series shows clips of his very dramatic, telenovela-style movies and how they are filmed (S1, E1, 00:54:30; S1, E3, 00:24:29; S1, E5, 00:40:05; S1, E8, 00:09:27). There is also a scene where he enters a bar, the winged doors open, we only see his shadow on the floor, then the camera turns upwards, showing him entering like the hero in a western (S1, E10, 00:28:32). The American characters, Nomi, her girlfriend Amanita [Neets], and Will, are the characters mainly trying to figure out who is behind the BPO, so their narratives often show parallels to detective stories or police procedurals.<sup>20</sup> Wolfgang is a criminal, so his plot follows genre-conventions of gangster movies with dark alleys, a rich dynasty and violence. Capheus is often naming his own genre-reference – the action movies of Jean Claude van Damme, after which he also named his business in Nairobi. Sun, the Korean character, is responsible for executing the action scenes as she is trained in kickboxing. Her own subplot resembles a family drama. Wolfgang's, Capheus' and Sun's subplots have the most action elements, like car chases through Seoul (S2, E11, 00:45:52-00:41:40), big explosions (S1, E10, 00:33:08) and gun and fist fights, some of them described later on. Towards the end of the series, as more and more storylines come to an end, the action elements dominate and the finale resembles an action movie, with lengthy fight scenes. However, this does not mean that the series is geared towards action alone. There are also several romance plots and deep personal conversations. Genres, not prevalent in western reception patterns and thus less valuable for Netflix, are outnumbered by

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<sup>20</sup> Will has to leave the force in S1, E8 and police work is only brought back from S2, E7-E11, when Riley flies to Chicago and collaborates with Will's partner Diego.

the fight scenes of blockbuster movie caliber and sex- and romance scenes. Those genres include Bollywood musical, Telenovelas and Martial-Arts-Films, that all have strong ties to nationalities.

On the one hand, cultural bias could be the reason for submerging these. The documentary mentions how difficult filming the Bollywood scene was (Wachowski & Oreck, 2015, 00:02:45), while meticulously choreographed fight scenes remain uncommented. On the other hand, all national genre-conventions appear to illustrate local differences that are overcome through the creation of a new genre-mix based on a science fiction plot merging different styles together. This mixing is described as “special type of intramediality or intermediality [...], ‘genre crossing’” (Allrath et al., 2005, p.36).<sup>21</sup> I argue that genre-crossing reflects the connectedness of sensates that come together as a harmonious cluster despite having differences, making genre-crossing a tool to construct a transnational space.

*Narratives.* The showrunners developed the individual eight subplots, designed to highlight each character, with much care. Letting personal storylines play out with the help of the cluster takes up most of the time.<sup>22</sup> Almost all characters are in all of the 24 episodes (Lito and Wolfgang each miss in one) underscoring that they are imperative to the creation of a shared plot and the other storylines. No nationality is overpowering the others, as they all share their perceptions and are often co-present, again reinforcing a transnational discourse. Narration stays mostly chronological, but we see memories of the characters, e.g. from their childhoods, as explanation for their behavior and feelings in the present. Those “embedded narratives” (Allrath et al., 2005, p. 19) continue to exist and matter, parallel to distinct national or cultural identities embedded in a transnational society, but reciprocally lead to new paths for the whole cluster and are changed by them.

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<sup>21</sup> I employ Allrath et al.’s (2005) notion of intra- and intermediality as they are specific to the media environment, instead of Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality.

<sup>22</sup> Through the detailed backstories, the villains working for BPO, Whispers and Dr. Metzger, do not have much screen time in the first season. This is also a stylistic device to illustrate how powerful the transnational organization is - a hint towards the power that lies within such transnational bonds.

While the individual storyline takes place in one city, it is not a national one, as the characters are also present in other places. It cannot be considered purely international either, as the characters remain in their cities. In a transnational space, the connection goes both ways. Kala's character arc serves as an example (see Additional Data in Appendix). Her private storyline spans the whole two seasons, demonstrating the connectedness inherent to serials. Kala shares a special bond with fellow sensate from Germany, Wolfgang, from episode one on (S1, E1, 00:49:51-00:48:48). She faints during her wedding, when he appears naked (nudity warning, S1, E5, 00:04:04), illustrating how her life is influenced by transnational interaction. Kala is torn in a love-triangle between him and her Indian fiancé, and later husband, Rajan. She kisses Wolfgang (S1, E12, 00:33:10), but marries Rajan and goes on her honeymoon soon after (S2, E1). However, she sleeps with Wolfgang (S2, E6, 00:55:43-00:55:34; 00:53:30-00:49:52, intercut with Capheus having intercourse with Zakia). Rajan represents local tradition in comparison to Wolfgang personifying international experience. In the end, they have a polyamorous relationship (S2, E12, 01:14:51). The cluster supports her in making that difficult decision and help her through her personal struggles. This is interwoven with her struggling with her religion, and the political situation in her country, in which Rajan is also involved (for an example see S2, E4, 00:38:16-00:35:45). National and international orientations are replaced by a sense of transnational belonging as part of a cluster and having two partners at once. This is only the plot for one character, so it becomes obvious how complex the interplay between the different storylines is. During the series, the separate storylines of the eight characters meet and get more and more entangled as they all help each other out transgressing national borders, cumulating in the finale dominated by a shared plot, the fight against the BPO. For example, Kala contributes to that with her pharmaceutical knowledge (S2, E2, 00:33:02; S2, E8, 00:43:33; S2, E11, 00:16:05). The development of a shared plot (see Table\_Appendix 3) climaxes in the last episodes of the seasons

and finale, that have a storyline that encompasses the whole cluster. Merging different storylines in the finale is a powerful narrative special effect (Mittell, 2012). What keeps the storylines related in episodes not featuring a shared plot are narrative motives they all have in common.

The most important thing the characters share are their feelings. In the beginning, the sensates do not know how they are connected and why, which the first season is dedicated to finding out. Characters often happen to visit each other or share abilities when they are at similar points in their lives or have similar experiences, which frequently lead to transitions between the storylines. S1, E4, which will also be used as the example in the subchapter “Aesthetics”, provides some context. At this point in the plot, the characters just start to understand what is going on with them and not all of them know each other yet as an entanglement happens between Will and Sun (00:29:35-00:27:53). Sun is looking for her brother, who is having fun at an exclusive strip club with a men-only-policy. They will not let her in, so she knocks out the bouncer and enters. Parallel to her walking into the club, Will is being walked through a prison facility, where he is trying to covertly talk to Jonas using a favor. Sun and Will both should not be where they are, which puts them on high alert. When someone in Seoul comes up behind Sun and pulls out a gun, Will is able to instantly disable the attacker through his police training. As Will is not physically there, but shares his abilities with Sun, he is a little thrown off in Chicago by what is going on. The characters’ togetherness in a difficult situation helps them to bond throughout the series and support each other through personal struggles. Fighting for each other and sharing knowledge and abilities in situations where emotions are not involved is possible, just as connecting only emotionally. Another example from S1, E4 (00:14:23) shows how sense perceptions interlink them. Kala wakes up in the middle of the night because she hears people having intercourse. Of course, there is nobody in her room in Mumbai. Cut to Riley, who is staying on a friend’s couch.

Said friend is currently having sex, which keeps her from going to sleep. The psycellium not only allows them to hear but also feel what others feel and see themselves as them. Wolfgang is out for dinner with Felix (S1, E4, 00:31:13). He suddenly feels his arm being restrained and sees it tied to the chair. The showrunners cut to Nomi being restricted to her hospital bed in San Francisco to get a lobotomy she does not want. Just as quickly as the feeling came, it goes away, Wolfgang can move his hand again and does not see the restraints anymore.

Those transitions extend the narratives of sameness and shared subjectivity. The cluster's commonalities are used for group formation, which increases when the characters have conversations with each other. This is transnational because boundaries of place and bodies are transgressed, forming a connected community that can be anywhere.

In addition to shared sentiments, the show connects characters through illustrating commonalities between people that could be assumed to be fundamentally different, raised in different nationalities and cultures, of different genders and sexual orientations with different interests and life circumstances. Those shared qualities often concern human universals and how they are coined by culture, like food or religion. In the title-theme, multiple close-ups showcase cultural practices common in more than one nation. Tokens of the world religions like the small Jesus-statues filmed in Mexico could also be sold in Spain, South America or Italy. Neither nation nor cultural practice alone are point of departure for the series, but both interlinked in a network of transnational connection. Food, for example is used to negotiate the question of cultural difference or unity. Again, an example is taken from Kala's storyline (and others inevitably attached to her). In S1, E6 (00:31:15), Rajan notes how amazing it is that something as simple as a recipe or complex as DNA can span generations while eating Kala's father's Patra Ni Machhi. Her father owns a restaurant and provides the food for Kala's and Rajan's rehearsal dinner. In contrast, Rajan's father has no appreciation for traditional Indian cuisine and announces he will hire chefs from Europe and Asia for the wedding (S1,

E2, 00:31:32). In another episode, religious extremists make a comment regarding Rajan's father's politics saying he would strip away traditions and destroy "our India and turn it into America" (S1, E4, 00:36:19). This showcases the influence of globalization, personified in the fathers, who respectively stand for tradition and cultural imperialism. At the time of the dinner, Wolfgang in Berlin is suddenly craving traditional Indian food (S1, E2, 00:31:50), experiencing Kala's longing for her father's food. Nomi has a similar experience telling Neets how her coffee suddenly tastes like dessert while Kala has Shahi Tukda (S1, E5, 00:28:12) in Mumbai. Transnational characters demonstrate that seeing only tradition or homogenization is limiting what a transcultural reality has to offer. Sharing joy over each others' heritages across continents exemplifies transculturalism. That this also overlaps with transnationalism is evident when looking at ways food evokes national stereotypes, e.g. when Capheus visits Riley for the first time he gets excited to have English tea while talking about the Queen and Harry Potter (S1, E5, 00:43:17). This goes as far as Riley letting her father smuggle typical Icelandic groceries to Amsterdam, so that Whispers thinks they are still there (S2, E2, 00:17:00).

Not only food but also mobility is used to construct a narrative about transnational belonging. Every character has points of contact with migration and mobility, some positive others negative. Wolfgang's family moved to West Berlin, where he was bullied for coming from the East, which led to him bonding with Felix (S1, E8, 00:38:04). Capheus has a similar story. He and his mother left their village, where they were excluded because of his heritage. Capheus brings up his migration experience when running for political office, declaring that different ethnicities can peacefully co-exist like he does with his close friends now (S2, E10, 00:18:46-00:16:30). Riley was not displaced but chose to leave Iceland to escape her trauma. Her storyline starts out in London, moves to Iceland, Amsterdam, Paris, and Italy, making her the most mobile character. Due to her job as DJane she has friends in many European cities



that help in the fight against BPO. The characters experiencing migration first-hand teach positive lessons about community building. Mobility across borders is not only inherent to the sensate nature, but also to their lives before, proving that transnationalism is not tied to a fictional species, but to their human core. It also shows that being mobile is not always the same as being transnational, as they only experience transnational acceptance once they form a cluster. The extent to which this is possible only comes with being a homo sensorium - Riley and Will summarize “[Will:]You know, you never think how ubiquitous immigrant food like General Tso’s chicken and pepperoni pizza has become. [Riley:] Until you realize you’re a different species” (S2, E6, 00:18:07).

While food and mobility are aspects that aid the character development but do not drive the plot forward, emotions are used to make a connection and reform the clusters identities. Not only their individual identities are transnationalized, but also their social ones. The cluster starts out as a group of individuals, but through their connection they become a community with an identity that is not singular anymore (not in the sense of identity parts but in people creating an identity). One person becomes many and has multiple backgrounds as “you are no longer just a you” (S1, E4, 00:23:51). *Sense8* portrays the formation of a collective not based on ethnicity, nationality, or other aspects, but based on empathy and love for each other. This narrative is summed up by the line uttered by Nomi: “I’m not just a me. I’m also a we” (S1, E2, 00:46:01). When Lito and Capheus are both interviewed and confronted with the question who they are, the cluster replies:

Who am I? Do you mean where I’m from? Who I one day might be become?

What I do or have done? What I dream? What you see or what I've seen?

What I fear? Who I love? What I have lost? [...] [W]ho I am is exactly the same as you are, not better or less than, because there is no one who has been

or will ever be exactly the same as either you or me. (S2, E2, 00:44:33-00:42:33)

This shows that they are not individuals anymore and by showing that they refuse labels, they avoid creating evaluations or differences, but generate a new community, that exists transnationally. The statement is conceptualized as a montage, underlining this point visually. Labels and stereotypes in terms of nationality, race, gender, sexuality, or social class are generally avoided (for another example see S2, E1, 01:39:27-01:37:43).

In this vein, queerness becomes important for transnationalism, which explains the huge impact the show has on the LGBTQ+ community. *Sense8* frames itself in terms of queer representation. It is telling that the only flag featured in the title-sequence is the rainbow flag and the show features the pride parade twice, where characters give meaningful speeches (S1, E2, 00:46:18-00:45:20; S2, E6, 00:32:52-00:27:22). As mentioned before, the show has a transgender character, Nomi, portrayed by a transgender talent, and was written by transgender directors. However, the storyline does not revolve around this aspect of identity, which is praised by Parsemain (2019). Lito's homosexual relationship with Hernando becomes a narrative problem, but is used to send a message about acceptance a) in the film industry as he gets rejected by his agency and typecast after his coming out before getting a role in a Hollywood production and b) in society in general about fetishizing gay love. Alternative ways of life, like Kala's polyamorous relationship, Lito and Hernando living with Dani, and a white transgender woman marrying a black woman, are represented and normalized. An even bigger aspect are the transnational couples within the cluster– Will and Riley, and Kala and Wolfgang. Transnational partnership is the epitome of socially acceptable alternative, transnational family models. The examples demonstrate that Parsemain's argument that *Sense8* "disrupts the heteronormative model of family since the sensates' filiation system challenges notions of biological reproduction and linear temporality" (2019, p.230) is valid.

Queerness and the cluster as an innovative form of family not based on biological reproduction opens up the potential for a transnational family that people can choose. It transgresses boundaries and generates a discourse celebrating that. All the sensates with their partners have a ‘family dinner’ (S2, E12, 01:11:50) and support each other in their diversity and connectedness.

Despite all that collective unity, some aspects of difference are still upheld, mainly through national stereotypes. There are references to Germans and their preference for nudity (S1, E6, 00:34:18), the good coffee in Kenia (S2, E6, 00:48:25), the behavior of married men in India (S1, E4, 00:49:37) or differences between Italians and Neapolitans (S2, E3, 00:26:53), all highlighting national pride or awareness of national cultures. The interplay of those stereotypes with transnational identification is used to enter a secured building disguised as tourists (S2, E12, 00:53:41). This exemplifies that doing difference can be a tool to work together towards a common goal. The character Bug demonstrates how sapiens fit into this transnational unity through his micro-level language use. Bug speaks Spanish to Lito (S2, E5, 00:24:28) and French in Paris (S2, E12, 01:58:33), always referring to the languages as ‘language of love’. Neets confronts him about this contradiction, when he adds a third language, Italian, to which he replies: “For the Bug love has no nationality” (S2, E12, 01:05:33). Acknowledging differences and speaking the languages but keeping them connected in the enveloping feeling of admiration reflects a transnational capital ‘D’ Discourse. The discourse around sensate identity celebrates multiplicity and transnational belonging to a community of choice. In sum, the narrative “tries to appeal to a global audience by privileging the universal [food, mobility, love] over the local and the regional” (Parsemain, 2019, p.216). Universal becomes a synonym for transnational in this case.

The cluster as a family spanning the world has its own identity formation as just explained. Identity, which is always individual and social- especially in the case of sensates -,

goes along with comparison to otherness. The cluster in the center of the plot manages to form a community through finding what they have in common, more than through what makes them different from others, but other parties in the narrative do not follow the same principles. Other clusters collaborate with the BPO to have some power themselves, so being a sensate does not equal a new form of identity formation within the sensate community. This extends to transnational organizations. Negative identity politics is what lead to the “identity crisis” in the BPO between the old and new vision of it, as Jonas describes (S2, E3, 00:12:06). The cluster learns from an independent sensate that the original vision of the BPO was to protect sensates from humans, not to hunt them:

We all know sapiens. I mean some of my best friends are sapiens. When sapiens feel safe, they are the nicest people you could meet. However, feed their inner demons, frighten them. Find reasons for them to divide themselves from otherness, and then watch those same sapiens drop bombs on whole cities, drive planes into buildings and happily herd millions of their own kind into gas chambers. (S2, E6, 00:10:03)

The differences between homo sapiens and homo sensorium later got turned from sensates needing protection to them being a threat. A collaborator within the BPO adds that the vision of mutual obligatism with sapiens was abandoned because the existence of sensates is a “threat to secrecy and sovereignty” (S2, E3, 00:05:54) and not tolerable after 9/11 (this again reveals the American-centric view of the series). BPO can thus be an example for an international organization dedicated to keep existing power constellations between nations and species.

No matter which side of the matter characters are on, they use negative identity politics. Jonas speaks of “our kind” and “their species” (S1, E10, 00:41:40-00:40:28), illustrating the hardened fronts. Whispers uses the same strong us-vs-them rhetoric to defend his actions,

legitimizing violence against sensates and humans in the name of the greater good of protecting their species. “Sapiens live in a world designed by their worst fears and nothing terrifies them like difference” (S2, E5, 00:32:31). One could argue that the exclusion the eight were subject to before they were even connected is proof of that. However, the show frames this as opportunity to accept diversity. Through being different, they learn to realize that “the real violence, the violence that I knew would be unforgivable, is the violence we do to our selves” (S1, E9, 00:21:55). In the personal storylines, not one of the partners or friends that learns about people close to them being a different species has a problem with that and the other way around. BPO’s evaluation of sensates and humans being fundamentally different is refuted by the series. The narratives of food, mobility, in-cluster identity, and queerness take a stance against othering as they underline commonalities among all humans, not just sensates. In addition, whenever differences are used for negative identity politics, it escalates in violence, like in the example of Kala’s father-in law allegedly trying to destroy India and getting stabbed (S1, E8, 00:04:38). Negative identity politics are portrayed as misguided and pointless as they lead to the BPO-foundation or violence. The multinational organization or nationalism must be exchanged for a transnational awareness to ensure the safety of all. Ultimately, the discourse and narratives created speak for non-violent loving community formation and acceptance. The ideology for a new sense of transnational community is not subtle in the series, but clearly formulated in discourses about radical love, acceptance, and empathy. After the original BPO is refuted, their new chairwoman says, “for all the differences and all the forces that try to divide us, they will never exceed the power of love to unite us” (S2, E12, 00:20:25). Capheus has the same message in his speech: “Nothing good ever happens when people care more about their differences than the things they share. They all hope for a future where the children do not think of love as a wall, but only as a bridge” (S2, E10,

00:16:45). In the following part, I discuss how this is implemented not only in the narrative but also in the aesthetics of the show.

**Aesthetics.** The fragmented storylines, genre-crossing and mixing and meshing of styles can be de-scribed as "hyperlink cinema" (Parsemain, 2019, p.223) that links multifaceted parts through a network aesthetic close to the reception experience in cyberspace and the constituting principle of transnationalism.

*Sense8* is tailored to the binge-watching format through the insulated flow, placing less emphasis on suspense and more on continuity. Instead of being thought as a series with separate units, the vertical dramaturgy is conceptualized as a movie, resulting in a coherent and intertwined arc of suspense. This can be read as metaphor for the formation of transnational units, which is the vision the series is committed to. Parts that were formally thought of as separate form an innovative series structure relying overarchingly on unity.

Due to the many different genres *Sense8* combines, the show exhibits a colorful mixture of styles. Big explosions in action scenes are, for example, typically shown in long shots or through point-of-view [POV]-shots without a steady camera (for an example see S1, E8, 00:11:17). Telenovela cinematography often features reaction shots, zoomed in on eyelevel as can be seen in Lito's scenes mentioned above. *Sense8* addresses uncomfortable realities and taboo topics more graphic and explicit throughout all styles than most shows. There is a birthing montage, nudity, intercourse, violence, drug abuse, police brutality, suicide, and more. Extreme unrealistic action scenes, highly aestheticized sex scenes in slow motion or moments of togetherness of the sensates contrast with each other and the realistic depiction of taboo topics. These are distributed over all the storylines. *Sense8* narrates in multiple presents by intercutting several locations, resembling time in transnational networks of the online world. The innovation is that multiple presents are shown as such, allowing for plurality, while simultaneously depicting a shared transnational reality all can inhabit. This network

aesthetic mirrors a mediatized reality. However, while not all characters celebrate Thanksgiving or Christmas, those very American holidays are used to give an idea of time passing in the Christmas special. Putting them in the center of attention is a reminder of Netflix's main audience. Through the eight storylines watching the series could be a confusing experience for the viewer. Considering the series' message, the aesthetics focus on tying all these fragments together to form a cohesive serial that embraces diversity.

Language plays a big part in that. *Sense8* features several languages besides English throughout the plot – German, Korean, Spanish, Italian, Swahili, Hindi, and French. The cluster shares knowledge, including language abilities. In S1, E4 Will has just shared with Sun and is approached by family friend Officer Duncan. The officer greets him and says he hopes Will did not have to wait long. Will replies in Korean. Subtitles translate his answer: “No, no, it's good to see you” (00:26:48). Incorporating multiple languages underlines the diversity of the show and global audience the show wants to reach. However, communication is still mainly in English, which demonstrates how capital 'D' Discourses about language are reflected in microlevel interaction. Will switching to Korean is a sign of diversity, whereas Sun speaking English the whole time and not Korean can be read as discourse perpetuating English as world language and diminishing lingual diversity. A lack of the latter kind of exchange discloses the America-centrism of *Sense8* once more.

Music is a vital part to show the emotional connection and gently prepare the viewer for sequences where multiple environments and characters are interwoven in a fast pace. Music is already used in this capacity in the title-sequence where the theme song, composed by J. Klimek and T. Tykwer, backs the visual material. The speed in which different frames follow each other accelerates with the tempo of the music. The previously described scene where Will helps Sun serves as another example. After Sun knocks out the bouncer and walks into the club the song *Get some* by Lykke Li starts playing. This extra-diegetic music also plays

during the next frame when Will is brought to the waiting area, connecting them even though they are not already visiting or sharing. Diegetic sounds are not audible anymore. This spreads the same atmosphere over multiple places, merging them into the same emotional space. When Will has disabled the attacker the music still dominates but fades and becomes faint as the guard audibly asks if he is alright. Once Will is seated in the empty waiting area, the music dominates again and editing cuts back to Sun. “Audiovisual porosity” (Parsemain, 2019, p. 227) is used for transitions and transference of mood multiple times and is the strongest method to do so, as images always stay different from each other while music stays the same. The connecting qualities of music are even made subject in S1, E4 when all senses in the cluster listen to a song together for the first time (00:12:03-00:08:45). Wolfgang and Sun are disappointed and angry at their families, while Riley is disappointed in herself. Riley puts on the song *What’s up*.<sup>23</sup> Lito, Capheus and Wolfgang, who coincidentally sings the song in a karaoke bar, Sun, Kala, Will and Nomi hear the same song. They all start to sing, hum, or nod along. Kala and Wolfgang visit each other during this, but the different characters are interwoven as they experience the song together. This time the music is extradiegetic and diegetic at the same time, as two of them listen to it in their storylines, while the others do not but we can hear them sing along. Connectivity is strengthened through a sliding shot, making it seem like the frames all belong into one movement, despite showing different things.

Sliding camera movement is only one way to do that. The documentary reveals that most of the effects that make it seem like the different characters inhabiting one are done in-camera, not in post-production (Wachowski & Oreck, 2015, 00:19:10-00:18:30). This is achieved through highly choreographed movements that allow actors to move in and out of the frame. When two clusters fight against each other a medium close-up allows actors to

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<sup>23</sup> It has become the unofficial anthem of the show and is featured again as a remix in season 2 (E5, 00:08:23; 00:06:20).



hide out of frame and then pop-up (S2, E8, 00:06:42). The same scene also features synchronized movement and the actors forming a line to move as one. During the fight there is no transition between the different actors, they are just there. By placing different images seamlessly behind each other in a fast pace they paradoxically become connected. When smart camera angles were not enough, the same scene was filmed multiple times with synchronized movements as explained in the chapter about the production context. Distinguishing the person sharing from the person in need of the skill, is realized through editing. The sharing character performs an action and is shown in another place right after or the receiving character is shown standing by. The frames get intercut rapidly to make it seem like multiple characters enact one movement. Will and Sun's brief cooperation is only 102 seconds long but features over ten jumps between the two characters. Each of them starts out with longer parts, setting the scene, and then the editing picks up speed. It cumulates in the quick fight, where the characters share abilities and change setting per frame instead of per second. Rapid intercutting lasts from S1, E4 00:28:31 until 00:28:10, making it impossible to keep the storylines separate, thus it forces the viewer to consume them as one at that point.

Keeping the local parts distinct while they are linked is important for providing orientation for the viewer about who is where, especially in scenes that use intercutting. Character-focalization can be done through POV-shots, like in the previously mentioned example of Wolfgang seeing his arm being restrained. That the shot shows his arm restraint illustrates to the viewer that an alternative reality exists where it is simultaneously not only his arm but also Nomi's. Character-focalization through POV-shots in *Sense8*, unlike in other series, only indicates the character whose eye we are looking through, not that what they see is what is happening. The same POV-shot a few seconds later is different. Showing the same frame with different characters and conditions present allows the participant to differentiate between psychic and physical realms.

How orientation can be achieved through lights and colors is explained at the example of the scene between Will and Sun again. Will is wearing a light grey sweater and walking in front of light grey, concrete walls with clear lines. In contrast, Sun wears a black dress, and her environment is dark, with colorful neon-lights flashing. When both characters are intercut doing the same motions the light-dark, plain, and clear vs colorful and fussy contrast helps to keep track of who is where and whose experience we are following. The trick here is that the characters are shown separately in their environments before getting mixed, as that establishes expectations of the participants through their discursive knowledge. When the same person, who we expect to keep walking calmly in a prison suddenly is shown in a dark corridor, we know something has changed. The longer the show goes on the more intricate those transitions become as the viewer internalizes discursive knowledge about the conditions of the series, in which everything seems possible.

The series itself can be described as very colorful. Colors of costumes and sets are mostly rich and saturated, stressing the kaleidoscope of diversity. While the series is colorful, it is by no means always cheerful. Many scenes are shot during the night or in a dark environment, symbolizing danger, or secrecy. Usually day-and-night contrasts are used to signal that time is passing in TV-series, but daylight in Chicago means nighttime in Seoul. So the passing of time must either be verbally indicated, through daily routines like eating breakfast or waking up, or on a larger scale through cultural events as mentioned before or through plotlines moving forward, where it is secondary when it happens as long as there is a progression. Orientation in places is achieved similarly through showing aerial shots, cultural landmarks, characters naming where they are, or inserted captions. The inserted captions are used in the first two episodes only to give an idea of all the places in case the viewers could not deduct them from the theme sequence, that relies mostly on cultural monuments of the cities, e.g. the Chicago Bean, a cable car or the lights of the Gangnam district. Aerial shots in time

lapses are screened at the beginning of the title-sequence and sometimes also in the beginning of episodes to set the place. They show crowds and the flow of traffic, supporting globalization metaphors of global connectivity employed in the series as a whole and depicting time-space compression. The monuments, e.g. the Oberbaumbrücke in Berlin (S1, E4, 00:53:11), follow and allow quick spatial orientation. They blur the line between fiction and reality, as they are real landmarks, creating a space that links global flows and national landmarks for the viewer able to identify them.

Another stylistic device that references the audience's extra-diegetic knowledge is the intra- and intermediality already mentioned in the context of genre-crossing, that *Sense8* employs frequently. Through Lito's job as movie star and Hernando's teaching position, they are responsible for most of the meta-commentary about the value of movies and art (for an example see S2, E1, 01:50:55-01:48:48). Other characters also utter meta-commentary, e.g. Will through describing the function of one of the supporting characters as "male narrative" (S2, E11, 00:22:23) or Jela and Capheus when talking about Capheus' different appearance, considering a new actor for the role was brought in after the first season (S2, E1, 01:52:28-01:51:33). There is also plenty of intermediality, for example Bug calling Nomi and Neets "Angels" drawing on *Charlie's Angels* (S1, E11, 00:41:25). Some of these references also underline the transnational character of media objects and their message, like Capheus and his consumption of the Jean Claude van Damme.

The transnational aesthetics and key message of *Sense8* merit the detailed analysis of fan culture tied to it, that goes along with the creation of transnational fan identity.

## How is transnational identity constructed on Twitter?

As no medium is neutral, the platform Twitter must be investigated as well before looking at the content published there.

### *Twitter as medium*

The prompt for tweets “What’s happening?” underlines the medium’s orientation towards circulating discourses in a microblogging style and away from communication between friends. Founded in 2006 by Jack Dorsey and Evan Williams in San Francisco, Twitter grew to be one of the most popular and widely used Social Media sites around the world.<sup>24</sup> The platform spread globally and addresses some concerns raised through the digital divide “as even the most basic mobile phone can be used, the technology is potentially accessible even in impoverished countries” (Murthy, 2018, p. 3) and Twitter is free of cost unlike Netflix. This makes it easier accessible and allows discourse on Twitter to permeate society better. Key characteristics of social media are social components and increased networking capabilities to different degrees. Twitter is a social media platform rather than a social network<sup>25</sup> as it deemphasizes networking in favor of “interactive multicasting (i.e., the broadcasting of many to many)” (Murthy, 2018, p.7). The platform allows users to share self-generated content, called *tweets*, with the global Twitterverse. Tweets can be seen by the public per default setting, so they can be assumed to be public information. It is not necessary to know people in person to see their tweets or bond over a common interest, which helps facilitate global community building. There are four major user groups that make use of this with differing communicative goals and various discourses connected to them: celebrities, journalists, corporations, and ordinary users (Squires, 2016; Zhu, 2016). Corporations and celebrities

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<sup>24</sup> Social media differs from websites in their declared community-building function encoded in their infrastructure. You need an account or profile to get access to some content and become a regular user. Furthermore, social media is accessible not only through URLs but also through icons and apps and is most often accessed from mobile devices.

<sup>25</sup> Social networks are made for keeping up with friends or business partners and therefore have different network capacities. Examples for social networks are Facebook or LinkedIn.

employ Twitter for self-branding and activism, like Trump, who regularly causes controversies. Recently, this had Twitter equip content with warnings (Roth & Pickles, 2020). For ordinary users tweeting serves as “an important vehicle for self-affirmation” as well through participating in practices of self-branding (Murthy, 2018, p.32). Your individualized Twitter-homepage is “a stream, which is composed of a polyphony of voices” (Murthy, 2018, p.4), displaying your own tweets and the ones from profiles you follow from newest to oldest. Another feature is the suggestion of trending hashtags, to look through and discover new content, that has been preselected by evaluation of others, marginalizing niche-contents.

Registered users not only post, but also reply to, like, bookmark, save, retweet, and send posts via E-Mail in sometimes synchronous communication. Evaluative components and functions that mimic having a conversation make positioning on the web possible. Today interactivity is “repeatedly cited as the feature of digital media that most clearly distinguishes it from older, non-digital genres” (Page & Thomas, 2011, p. 12). Sharing tweets disseminates discourse and “highlights the fact that tweets are, by design, especially portable bits of text [...] that makes them particularly amenable to de- and re-contextualization” (Squires, 2016, p.244). Due to its brief, text-focused, public content Twitter is used for the quick, mass-scale spread of opinions and news with a high frequency. Summed up, Twitter is best described as a microblogging-site,<sup>26</sup> celebrating opinions and personal experiences as well as reports about events (Murthy, 2018, p.10f.).

### ***Architecture of participation***

The digital environment with its own communicative affordances, like hashtags, is host to plenty of innovative positioning and narrative strategies in the context of enhanced

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<sup>26</sup> Microblogging means “(1) users have a public profile where they broadcast short public messages/updates whether they are directed to specific user(s) or not; (2) messages become publicly aggregated together across users; and (3) users can decide whose messages they wish to receive, but not necessarily who can receive their messages ; this is in distinction from most social networks where following each other is bidirectional (i.e., mutual)” (Murthy, 2018, p.11).

user-engagement, that will be investigated in terms of accompanying communication. Interactivity and collaboration in communities of users that extend beyond national borders ignite discussions about digital sociality ranging from portrayals as “impoverished forms of social interaction” (Spilioti, 2016, p. 136) based on technological deterministic presuppositions to enthusiastic descriptions as communication of the future. Twitter is trying to make global participation possible by increasing the interface’s language options through the community lead Twitter Translation Center, a sign of “increased language representation and acceptance of linguistic diversity in digital environments” (Spilioti, 2016, p.140).

In contrast to this policy, Twitter limits the opportunity of some prosumers to partake in Twitter discourse. The microblogging site’s unique feature is the 280-character limit. Many were skeptical about limiting communication to a certain amount of characters, so in 2017 Twitter increased the constraint from 140 characters to 280 characters, but not for the languages Chinese, Japanese and Korean. The brand claims this is because those languages are not affected by cramming and can convey the same amount of information in 140-characters (Rosen & Ihara, 2017). Nevertheless, this rule prevents people speaking those languages from expressing themselves more and is to be viewed critically.

Apart from the character limit, pivotal markers common for digital language are creativity and the critical play with resources (Androutsopoulos & Weidenhöffer, 2015; Kytölä, 2016; Spilioti, 2016). Typical for this is multimodality – tweets, for example, are text-based but can contain pictures, memes, GIFs, videos, emoji, hyperlinks, and hashtags. A resource that should receive special attention is born-digital data, like hyperlinks and hashtags, as they explicitly organize and categorize knowledge in discourse (Gredel & Mell, 2018). The result of hyperlinks is hypermediality (Bock, 2017), meaning that there is no particular order of consumption. Hyperlinks include URLs to Twitter-external media outlets or @mentions that stay within Twitter, linking the user profiles. @mentions establish “addressivity for a tweet

[and] conditions for threading multiple tweets together as a ‘conversation’” (Squires, 2016, p.242). Like hyperlinks, hashtags embed tweets into large, non-linear conversations but in comparison to hyperlinks “they are based on topics or ideas” (Squires, 2016, p.243). Hashtags are constantly emerging metadata tags with organizing qualities that classify them as “searchable talk” (Zappavigna, 2011, 2012, as cited in Zhu, 2016, p.87). Hashtags group tweets together and thus amplify collective expressions of opinions. They are community-forming mechanisms that create an ad-hoc audience (Androutsopoulos, 2016; Androutsopoulos, & Weidenhöffer, 2015; Chilwa & Ayodele, 2019). For these reasons, hashtags are frequently used in transnational online activism, a prominent example being the #BLM of the *BlackLivesMatter* movement that had so much support that it harmed the cause (Willingham, 2020). Zhu presents a categorization model for hashtags (2016, pp.90-93), which I employ in my analysis. Category 1 consists of hashtags in their bare form as standalone or tweets talking about the hashtag itself. Category 2 covers informative tweets, where hashtags were accompanied by text or recontextualized to have a derivative meaning. Lastly, Category 3 incorporates further resemiotization through hyperlinks and images.

Besides being connected through formal means of a hashtag, the data under review is also connected through being a form of participation labeled participant engagement or accompanying communication, which is communication that is accompanying or referring to a specific media reception. Television reception is understood as a complex, context-dependent, social process, for which communication plays a key role (Charlton & Klemm, 1998; Klemm, 2000). This extends to online practices, like they occur on Twitter regarding *Sense8*. Audiences are called prosumers for a reason, they are no longer seen as passive, but as interpreters that co-create the content and want to share their experiences with various goals (Charlton & Klemm, 1998; Klemm, 2000). Especially functions like self-expression, community-building, and identity work (Schlachter, 2014) make accompanying communica-

tion relevant in the context of transnational identity creation. In addition to Twitter-specific affordances, digital participant engagement is influenced by *temporality* and *transcontextuality* (Androutsopoulos, 2016). Netflix changes temporal aspects of reception as rewatching and watching whenever you want is possible, so participant communication relate to many screenings, not a single one. Transcontextuality describes that the online communication is always happening in front of the screen as well as in the digital space and that those physical conditions repeatedly show up online (Androutsopoulos, 2016). As utterances revolve around the reception, (long) pauses and brevity are typical for accompanying communication, which is why it can be classified as “Häppchenkommunikation” (Charlton & Klemm, 1998, p.719). The brevity might be exactly why this type of communication is compatible with Twitter.

Klemm (2000) introduced activities performed by accompanying communication, which have been developed further by Androutsopoulos and Weidenhöffer (2015, pp.36-50) to fit the study context of the digital environment. I utilize their seven categories, as summarized below, because they are tailored to Twitter-communication and their reasoning is convincing.



1. Framing the reception experience: Announcing the beginning, end or even exact time of the reception and expectations tied to it; technical aspects, like the mode of reception, or the physical environment of the reception, like co-participants, foods etc.
2. Local commentary: Commenting on a particular scene, often through quotes, and capturing an immediate reaction to it.
3. Global commentary: Commenting on a larger part, potentially the whole program, detached from the specific moment.
4. Anticipating the plot: Speculating about future directions and developments of the material.
5. Comparing aspects of the program to own experience: Transferring or contrasting aspects of the show with the everyday life and other media experiences.
6. Asking questions: Asking an unspecific audience to clarify situations, fill in gaps, find mistakes and Easter eggs or inviting others to share their opinion.
7. Parasocial interaction: Addressing producers, actors or fictional characters from a show or mimicking their voice.

I introduce an additional activity that emerged from the data:

8. Creative interaction with aspects of the program: Relating non-fictional elements to the program or the other way around through creative alteration of original content. Because of the higher level of reflection and effort involved in the post, it is produced after, not during the reception in the data under review. Depending on the kind of resemiotization, the creative interaction with aspects of the program can be build dialogical or monological.

When users compare aspects of the program to their own experience, they recontextualize but do not resemiotize them. Activity 8 deals with the playful uptake of content or structures from a show that is altered to evoke additional associations exceeding the scope of the origi-

nal material. In contrast to the other activities, this one is not a linear but an integrative recontextualization (Androutsopoulos, 2016) as it has no direct predecessor in face-to-face- interaction and is not integrated in a pre-existing form of accompanying communication. It is connected to cyberspace as different temporalities allow for reflection and the various kinds of affordances allow for creatively transforming, not just circulating discourse (Murthy, 2018; Schlachter, 2014).

The introduction of a new category results in this new overview of action types presented in Table 1, developed following Androutsopoulos' and Weidenhöffer's table (2015, p.35).

**Table 1**

*Action types in participant engagement*

Action	Diegetic reference	Time	Interactional orientation	Resemiotization
Framing the reception experience	Extra-diegetic	During reception	Both	No
Local commentary	Intra-diegetic	During reception	Monological	No
Global commentary	Both	Both	Monological	No
Anticipating the plot	Both	Both	Both	No
Comparing aspects of the program to own experience	Both	Both	Both	Yes
Asking questions	Both	Both	Dialogical	No
Parasocial interaction	Both	Both	Dialogical	Possible, but rare
Creative interaction with aspects of the program	Both	After reception	Both	Yes

As with any concept, the boundaries between hashtag and activity categories are not always clean-cut as reality is more complex, but they can help to gain a sense for how the tweet is operating to create transnational identity.

## *Metadata*

Metadata gathered over Tweetbinder and Keyhole for #Sense8 reveals that transnational identity is not only generated through the tweets themselves, but also through transnational characteristics of the collaborative community of users that people can refer to in their Level 3 positioning, i.e. the fandom.

Tweets are geotagged, which allows the sites to read the location tweets are posted from. Even though the participant engagement in question takes place online, it is not without meaning where the users post from as the notion of transcontextuality demonstrates. Keyhole makes the distribution of countries in a graphic visible (see Figure\_Appendix 7; n.d.). The US, Argentina and Brazil are top contributors. Other countries in Europe, South-, North- and Central America, as well as Australia, Japan, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, India, South Africa, Namibia, Algeria, and Kenia also have fan communities using the hashtag. East Asian countries and the majority of Africa have no activity for this hashtag at all. It becomes evident how important filming locations are; nations bordering on Kenia show no activity, yet Kenia is part of the discourse surrounding *Sense8*, presumably because the country is explicitly integrated into the narrative. The same reasoning can be applied to India. Interestingly, the discourse also spread to territories that are not part of the narrative at all. Overall, there is a tendency for the discourse on Twitter regarding *Sense8* to be predominantly western. This is reaffirmed by the national distribution of the analyzed tweets, which can be found in Table\_Appendix4.

Although the majority of contributions come from western countries, the outliers illustrate that *Sense8* and Twitter-discussions concerning it have to be understood as global phenomena. Numerous accounts addressing participants worldwide support this

(ForTheLoveOfSense8  [@Sense8World], n.d.; Sense8 Worldwide

[@Sense8Worldwide], n.d.; THE GLOBAL CLUSTER [@Global\_Cluster], n.d.). A nation that is

excluded from most western media experiences is China, but a fan conversation proves that the fandom is represented there as well, stating “so glad to know we have FANmily in China” (see Tweet\_Appendix 1; Lesley ❤️ Amor Vincit Omnia ❤️ [@LesleyOliverA], 2018). The global scope of the *Sense8* fandom is celebrated by the fans themselves as it aligns with the *Sense8*-narrative of worldwide connectedness. While metadata proves that the fan community is to be understood as global, global does not equal transnational. However, the neologism “FANmily” emphasizes that the fandom sees itself as a world spanning family in which nationality (“in China”) and global fan identity co-exists, as promoted in the series’ ideology.

When speaking about the extent of hashtag use, investigating the user groups producing the tweets should not be forgotten. From the four groups mentioned earlier three are represented in the data. Celebrities, such as producers like Straczynski or the actress M. Ewalt, who played Neet’s mom, use the hashtags and interact with fans (see Tweet\_Appendix 2 & 3; J. Michael Straczynski [@straczynski], 2020; Maximilienne Ewalt [@MaximilienneEw1], 2020). Journalistic contributions are missing, which could be related to the fact that the show is discontinued and not ‘news’. The engagement of brands is small but exists. An example is the Eiffel Tower that tries to capitalize on its connection to the series (see Tweet\_Appendix 4; La tour Eiffel [@LaTourEiffel], 2020). Ordinary users are by far the biggest group of tweeters.

Not just the where or the who, but also what is produced is telling. The metadata underscores that the majorities of posts are original posts, not retweets and replies (see Figure\_Appendix 8 & 9; Keyhole, n.d.; Tweetbinder, n.d.). This is congruent with Androussopoulos’ and Weidenhöffer’s data (2015), but the tweets here have a bigger fraction of interactive replies indicating more active engagement. Original tweets in my data consist to equal parts of text-only and of text with multimodal elements. Interestingly, the type of participant engagement is linked to this. "Framing the reception experience", "Anticipating the plot" and

"Asking questions" are more likely to appear without pictures or hyperlinks. There is a general tendency for tweets of other categories to be more complex.

Many tweets are written in English, which is, despite some diversification, still the predominantly used language online (Young, H., n.d.). Adhering to these unspoken rules of little 'd' discourse on the Internet is interpreted as putting a transnational orientation of the medium above orienting to people of one's own speech community. Tailoring little'd' discourse in that way means that the Level 3-position of a *Sense8*-Fan can be indicated by choosing inclusive internet language. Only two out of approx. 1528 tweets (both hashtags taken together) voice critique or display a negative sentiment towards the series, all the others were fans. Their accompanying communication is now analyzed.

### ***'What's happening' - Tweets***

**#Sense8.** The first hashtag I am going to investigate is #Sense8. Unlike the other hashtags, #Sense8 has been around since November of 2014, the publishing date of the official Twitter account (Sense8 [@sense8], n.d.). Every year, there is a spike of activity in June as June is pride month and the material has been enthusiastically taken up in the LGBTQ+ community. Another explanation for this is that fans celebrate the series' premier on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015 or the finale premier on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018, that is referred to in one of the analyzed tweets. Based on this, the observation period lasts from May 20<sup>th</sup> to June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Because #Sense8 is associated with the series in general and not a specific activity or date, the hashtag can be employed in a broad range of tweets, that all allude to fan identity. I will discuss how this identity is painted as transnational. The examples taken from the 858 tweets containing #Sense8 (Keyhole, n.d.) are classified as type of accompanying communication and ordered in increasing frequency of occurrence.

### ***Anticipating the plot.***

There were no examples in this category. Because the period of investigation is set almost two years after the last episode has been released, it is plausible that most people have seen the entirety of the series and therefore do not speculate about the plot anymore.

*Asking questions.* In the same vein, almost no question concerning the understanding of scenes or circumstances of the series were asked. In one of the few examples, where that did happen, @AnikoTevvit enquires about the specifics of visiting people from other clusters as described in the series, thereby opening a space for non-evaluative conversation about the rules of the story world and knowledge sharing. The tweet does not explicitly refer to a transnational identity, but to the discursive position of fan identity that is based on transnationalism.

#### **Tweet 1**



**Ani Kotevvit** @AnikoTevvit · May 27

Can anyone explain to me why, of their cluster, only Will (Brian J. Smith) could see and hear Jonas (Neveen Andrews)??? Where did I miss that explanation?

[#Sense8](#)

*Note.* Source: Ani Kotevvit [@AnikoTevvit], 2020.

@AnikoTevvit addresses “anyone”. However, this anyone is not supposed to refer to the whole Twitter-public but is limited by the hashtag. The hashtag is used as standalone at the end of the post, placing the series as common denominator of potential participants, not just alluding to the series but the community behind it. Knowledge about the show is the qualification needed to reply. Through that the marker of identity that is foregrounded is being a *Sense8* aficionada. The tweet contains specific vocabulary like cluster, hence displaying the user’s level of knowledge and referencing the transnational narrative around clusters, now transferred to the microblogging environment. @AnikoTevvit positions themselves as a

genuinely interested fan using emphatic three question marks, including information about the characters and their actors, and implying that they independently tried to find an answer.

*Framing the reception experience.* The content of *Sense8* is secondary here, while reception and activism are foregrounded, relating to the membership category of activist fans.

## Tweet 2



**Sandrine Marquis** @wildtiger23 · May 20

It's May 20, 2020 at 12:00PM... eat your lunch while listening to #Sense8 ;) #Sense8Season3

*Note.* Source: Sandrine Marquis [@wildtiger23], 2020.

@wildtiger23 frames their reception by stating the date and time of their post and then the activity performed: listening to *Sense8*. This connects the reception to everyday life and highlights that Netflix can be integrated into individualized schedules. It is interesting that the user does not use the first-person singular pronoun, even though lunchtime is not the same for everyone, and they thus must be describing behavior specific to them. Transferring their behavior to others seems to be the goal as the three dots portray the reception as logical consequence of a certain time. “[Y]our” refers to the broad public. The place where someone is, e.g. school, the office etc., is irrelevant, rather the equation lunchtime equals *Sense8*-receptions is presented as universal. The role rituals surrounding food has similar translocal connective powers as the food-narratives in the serial. Ending the tweet with characters forming a winking smiley loosens this rule formation. The Category 2-hashtag is integrated in the utterance that is concluded with an emoji, this time not referring to the community or content, but the whole series as media object. If the hashtag were not there, it would be detrimental to understanding the tweet. The series is placed as essential in syntactic and pragmatic function. There is a second hashtag, this time standalone, marking the purpose of the tweet, getting the series renewed for a third season. Comparing the two hashtags demonstrates how the use of #*Sense8* differs from other, activist hashtag campaigns.

Supranational communitarisation through hashtag campaigns provides identification potential that is taken up by several participants in later examples. In addition, @wildtiger23 is a ‘serial tweeter’, often posting tweets with a similar structure framing the reception (see Figure\_Appendix 10; Tweetbinder, n.d.). They posted frequently during the period of observation. A discourse about desirable reception behavior is created and linked to the much broader discursive knowledge about lunch.

**Parasocial interaction.** Tweets in this category are more complex than the ones before, containing emoji, and more references to tweet-external material and challenges. Discursive knowledge about the message of the Netflix original connects to current transnational discourses, illustrating the user’s engagement in the transnational sphere.

### Tweet 3



**Lorraine Wilson** @LothariNosliw · Jun 13

Thank you, @lilly\_wachowski, Lana and @straczynski, and everyone else involved in creating #Sense8 - it was great the first time I saw it, but it’s proving to be exactly what I need in these crazy, crazy times. Such loveable main and supporting characters with hearts of gold ❤️

*Note.* Source: Lorraine Wilson [@LothariNosliw], 2020.

The primary activity performed by this post is expressing gratitude to producers, who are connected to the tweet via @mentions, which invites them to participate in the conversation. The #Sense8 has the same characteristics as the one in @wildtiger23’s tweet but is classified as Category 3 through the hyperlinks that put the media object in the context of its production led by the addressed creatives. This recontextualization takes away from the image of the series as daily lunch ritual that transcends space and makes its artificiality obvious. Reasoning for the parasocial interaction is given afterwards. Why the current time is crazy is being left unsaid, yet the doubling of crazy lets on that it is not just the normal amount of craziness. The description of the time as extraordinary can be defined closer when looking at societal discourse around June 13<sup>th</sup> when it was tweeted. Two transnational challenges presented itself



– the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and the global civil rights movement against police brutality and racism sparked by the death of George Floyd. They were very prominent around this date, which is why it can be assumed that the user refers to those when describing the “crazy times”. Both transnational challenges have worldwide consequences, which is why nationality or place is secondary compared to time. The narrative about transnational kindness is exactly what inspires @LothariNosliw to tweet. Implicitly linking the message of *Sense8* to discourse of transnational challenges indicates that human empathy across nationalities, ethnicities, gender identity, and sexual orientations is what they perceive as needed in times of crisis. Combined with thanking the producers for creating the narrative, this demonstrates the user’s position as believer in the transnational values the series lays out. Heart emoji conclude the elliptical statement at the end of @LothariNosliw’s tweet, expressing love for the characters.

Other fans tweeting to open dialogic spaces of parasocial interaction argue more explicit, drawing on the series’ motto for identity creation in relation to the state of the world as “people need to be reminded that they are not just a ‘me’ but also a ‘WE’ ” (see Tweet\_Appendix 5; Sonya Blade [@Blade Sonya], 2020). Once mutually exclusive categories, like being one and being multiple, merge in transnational identity connected to *Sense8* for participants. @LothariNosliw’s remarks about the desirable qualities of the characters that are needed right now, imply that there is a lack of those qualities in others in the user’s eyes. @Blade Sonya goes a step further by explicitly dividing the Twittersverse into “people” that need to be reminded of and the transnational fan community already aligned with transnational values. Thereby both prosumers reinforce *Sense8*-fans as separate group, whose criterion of differentiation is agreeance with the key claim of the series. Transferring the discursive practices suggested by the series over to capital ‘D’ Discourse is crucial for overcoming

today's challenges as stressed through the capitalization of "WE" and efforts to thank the creators for putting the message out into the world.

*Creative interaction with aspects of the program.* This activity ranges in the data from fanfictions, blog entries or journalistic articles (if written by the person tweeting) over the digital display of fan art to ideas for spin-offs to how characters would behave in alternate universes. The most common aspect to be creatively altered is the 4 Non-Blondes song *What's up* for both hashtags analyzed. Fans recreate the scene it played in (see Tweet\_Appendix 6; Marto Erhardt [@martoerhardt], 2020), translate or cover it for more audiences (see Tweet\_Appendix 7; Eli Brodare [@Eli\_Brodare], 2020), make own music videos and much more. All those cases resemiotize through utilizing personal ideas and contexts. An analysis of one of those cases can be found under #Sense8NetflixRewatch. There is a second subtype of this activity that draws on online discourse, like the following tweet. The innovative aspect about it is that it is open to responses of a broader audience that is not familiar with *Sense8*, which is possible through combining *Sense8*-related with meme-related material.

## Tweet 4



sense8 out of context  
@Sense8OoC



Which Hernando are you today? #Sense8



5:13 PM · May 23, 2020 · Twitter Web App

*Note.* Source: sense8 out of context [@Sense8OoC], 2020.

In this case @Sense8OoC produced a creative spin on the ‘Which one are you today’ - meme.<sup>27</sup> Most of those memes have a grid of either four or nine tiles, showcasing different facial expressions from the same person. This person can be a non-fictional celebrity or politician, e.g. Kris Jenner or Angela Merkel, a character from a TV-show, e.g. Michael Scott or Hernando, or be made of other memes. All the versions have in common that they ask, ‘Which one/ [insert name of person] are you today?’ as the heading. People are offered blueprints for expressing their feelings in a certain moment by selecting one of the options.

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<sup>27</sup> This kind of meme exists since 2017 and gained considerable popularity after an altered version of it was retweeted by PewDiePie (he is the individual with the most subscribers on YouTube – around 105 million) on April 2<sup>nd</sup> of 2018. According to the website *KnowYourMeme* “within 14 days, the tweet gained over 36,000 likes and 3,700 retweets” (Don, 2018). Since then multiple alterations of the meme have been in circulation.

“[T]oday” trumps locality in the internet context, where people communicate at the same time in the same space but not in the same place. Facial expressions do not need an explanation to be readable for many users. Therefore, they can spread very well online through several language communities. As supporting character, Hernando’s facial expressions are often shown in the sci-fi production to offer possible reactions to viewers. There is no extra knowledge required to read Hernando’s facial expressions, although participants, who have seen the show, may have a better understanding of the context those expressions of emotions emerged in. A space that links the scenes from the Netflix Original to the digital setting and the live world of user is created. Associated content from Netflix is resemiotized in the meme-culture on Twitter and bound to the person sitting in front of the computer. The request to express one’s feelings through someone else’s body language implies a certain degree of identification with the person in the meme on the side of the partaking prosumer, just like the cluster has multiple transnational bodies.

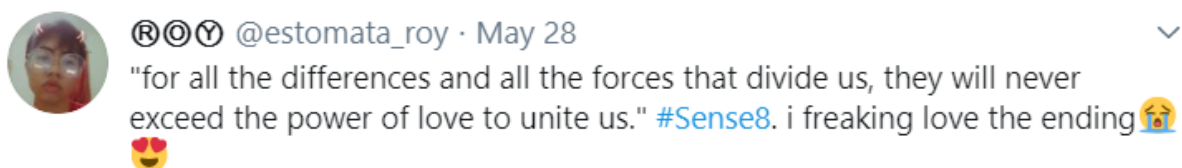
@Sense8Ooc put time and effort in to select nine and arrange them in meme-form, suggesting they fit in the macro-social category fan, knowing the supporting characters of the serial by heart. Moreover, they also position themselves at Level 3 as internet expert with the knowledge necessary to produce this type of meme. The hashtag (Category 3) in this informative tweet is designed to get the attention of all fans monitoring #Sense8. Like the first analyzed tweet, the hashtags do not allude to a specific aspect of the series and could be omitted without changing the meaning of the tweet. Instead of current political discourse, internet discourse is connected to *Sense8*.

Accessibility is reduced because of the barriers to Twitter use and the prerequisite of being acquainted with exclusively digital discourse. Furthermore, being a fan is not enough to understand the full implications of the tweet, as the trend has its own discursive knowledge attached to it. Yet, in contrast to other forms of participant engagement, “Creative interaction

with aspects of the program” allows the user to exercise a great amount of control through altering the materials and in consequence change discourses. This is insofar transnational as the trends used for resemiotization emerge in transnational environments. Editing discursive affordances positions participants as involved in the digital space. In combination with associations to *Sense8* it shows identification with transnational community building and mimics narrative effects of the series in connecting multiple individual stories in a shared practice and transitions them through emotions.

**Local commentary.** Local commentary occurs relatively sparse, but when it does it is in chains of tweets, authored by the same person and tweeted shortly after another accompanying the reception process directly. An example for such a ‘serial tweeter’ is @Kween, who Tweetbinder (see Figure\_Appendix 10; n.d.) lists as the most active poster with 36 tweets in the observation period. While most tweets of this activity are under complex one-liners, there is also more complex local commentary. The following tweet marks the user as carrier of transnational discourse and part of a bigger community of like-minded *Sense8*-fans.

#### Tweet 5



*Note.* Source: R O Y [@estomata\_roy], 2020.

Through including a quote, @estomata\_roy evokes associations to the scene it stems from while displaying their knowledge of the series. Although it is not the ending of the final episode like the user implies, it sums up the key message of *Sense8* identified earlier where the quote was already used. Strangeness can be bridged by being empathetic and loving to each other. The hashtag surrounded by text has an informative function relating to the series in the broader sense and is simultaneously a citation. Referring to the quote alone would already

indicate that the user is a fan, but they go a step further and make it clear that their personal values align with the ones of the show. Including the first-person singular pronoun, empathetic replacement for a curse word and two emoji, one that cries and one with heart-eyes, make their emotional attachment obvious. @estomata\_roy positions themselves as not only a fan of the narrative but also continues and spreads the discourse encoded in it further on their social media platform, relating the language in interaction with the bigger categories of transnational identity.

*Global commentary.* A similar pattern of perpetuating narratives of the series online can be found in commentary relating to bigger stretches of material or the whole series too. @EarthGlows spreads and create discourse evaluating *Sense8*'s narratives and aesthetics positively.

#### Tweet 6



**courtney** @EarthGlows · Jun 7

Sense8 will always be the best Netflix original and one of the best, most beautiful & diverse series every made. #netflix #sense8



*Note.* Source: COURTNEY [@EarthGlows], 2020.

This tweet evaluates the whole series as the best production ever made by Netflix. The superlative is intensified by the prediction that *Sense8* will always keep that status. In a third step,

@EarthGlows extends this assertion beyond the world of digital TV retracting from the strong statement before by saying ‘one of the best’. This mitigation is resolved in the last part of the tweet stating it is one of the best series ever produced (the tweet has a typo here). The global commentary includes all past and future Netflix-productions as frame of reference *Sense8* is compared against, implying the user has seen all of them, which is not possible. Hyperbolic speech like that is typical for fans. Besides best, two other adjectives are used that can be read as explanatory for why the Netflix Original is considered excellent. “Beautiful” is a compliment referring to the series’ network aesthetics. “Diverse” indicates the narratives and production context. The hashtags at the end of the post stand separate of the tweet and make it findable for the community. Here #*Sense8* gains no added meaning and solely describes the media object in general. The tweet is accompanied by a GIF. Increased complexity is typical for global commentary as they can be more reflexive. The GIF stems from a scene in the series (S2, E3, 00:44:23-00:43:10), where Will goes out for the first time and sees that he is in Amsterdam after being hunted by Whispers. Place is important as they tried to hide where they are, and as a sensate Whispers can see what Will sees when visiting. Standing outside and looking at the architecture is a manifestation of the cluster’s victory and their values over the ‘others’. The diverse characters are unified and enjoy their moment outside, comforting each other. Fans possess this knowledge that underscores their statement by declaring the beauty and superiority of diverse, transnational identities in the story world. Twitter helps create a space where the scene in Amsterdam is just as real as any other picture and where the message the space carries is more important than place the transnational fan community receives it in. Just like the local commentary before, overcoming strangeness through accepting diversity is praised. What is not said is that media identities that might differ from these values are excluded from being part of the transnational *Sense8* fan community. Mes-

sages like this appear in many cases and can be considered typical for the implicit Level 3-positioning as a fan.

*Comparing aspects of the program to own experience.* The majority of tweets with #Sense8 fall under this activity. They tend to make a general claim for the series' continuous importance and orient to the reasons for posting, which overlaps with the reasons for the increased activity in June previously named. Many of those celebrate pride and reinforce the connection between the series and LGBTQ+ community (see Tweet\_Appendix 8; Gizem C [@colorfulvenus], 2020). Characters going to the pride parade is often quoted or referred to with pictures. In addition, there is a second kind of transference that is especially interesting for transnational identity creation and the main stage for explicitly declaring such an identity. It deals with recent issues of global importance, like the Coronavirus outbreak and *Black-LivesMatter*-protests, which were mentioned above and are the most prominent examples in this regard. The discourse created by *Sense8* lends itself to these discussions as the next tweet also illustrates. @MadHatter094 is another key contributor according to Tweetbinder (see Figure\_Appendix 10; n.d.). They transfer multiple aspects of *Sense8* over to their everyday life – experiencing a transnational identity, connections to other fans, promoting narratives, using symbols of promotional material, and celebrating production aspects of *Sense8*.



## Tweet 7



**Matteo Sisti** @MadHatter094 · Jun 5

🌟🌟🌟 Thank you @SensateHeaven for your Art! From Italy 🇮🇹 all my blessings ~ we must stay together. Stay safe and take care #Sense8 is for life! Share Freedom, Equality and Justice for everyone! @netflix #RenewSense8 after 5 years we are still here! #Sense8Anniversary5 🌟🌟🌟❤️



Sense8 Pins, Patches & Stickers 🌟 and 2 others

*Note.* Source: Matteo Sisti [@MadHatter094], 2020.

In the first part of their tweet, @MadHatter094 speaks from a personal perspective to another user. First, they thank this twitter user, linked per @mention, for their art, alluding to the global fan community. By art they mean the mask, which is addressed more in-depth in a later part. The explosion-emoji right at the beginning and the exclamation mark at the end of this sentence underline @MadHatter094's excitement.

Then they go on to give their location, Italy. As seen from examples before, talking about locations is rare on Twitter but here we can even see them in their kitchen. The inversion and possessive pronoun 'my' prove that they are in the geographic territory of Italy and send blessings from there and not a general Italian public sending blessings. Italy is not just referred to as place but also as nation through the inclusion of the Italian flag-emoji after the word. @MadHatter094 tells us where they are and additionally their nationality. Their bless-

ings are sent to no one in specific; it could be assumed they still orient to @SensateHeaven were it not for the sentence following the tilde. Tilde is usually not used as hyphen in English, yet it has meaning in mathematics, Spanish, and Portuguese (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). When assuming the mathematical meaning the blessings roughly equal @MadHatter094's contribution to a group staying together, in which they include themselves by using "we". Consequentially, they speak as part of a collective. This collective could be humanity in general, all Twitter users or *Sense8* fans, the last being the most likely from how the tweet develops. By placing the nationality and space next to the orientation to global space and role in global fandom, nationality becomes recontextualized and the distance between them in Italy and people across the globe is bridged through the common interest. The created spatial difference is productively overcome. In the picture they are also alone, so it is not a call to literally stay in the same place together but rather to stay united in the shared values and support each other. "Stay safe and take care" are more wishes from @MadHatter094 to the global fan community, implicitly drawing on the discourse in a global health crisis, which is supported through the mask in the picture. Like in the tweet of @LothariNosliw, the reason why this is expedient now is not given explicitly. Immediately after this follows the #*Sense8*, referring to the media object. This hashtag is Category 3 as the tweet is linked to the production of art around the series and narratives from it, not only the content. That the message of human collaboration is important, even if times are hard, is expressed by the statement after the hashtag. Especially Italy has had a tough time dealing with the crisis and borders were closed all over the world. In that societal discourse, being considerate and wearing a mask is important, which @MadHatter094 equates with the *Sense8*-fan lifestyle they align themselves with. While most of the tweet refers to the pandemic, the next sentence can be read as geared more towards the civil rights movement gaining traction around the time of the post. The conviction in both points is voiced through an exclamation mark.

The third part of the tweet turns to Netflix through @mention, now moving from reminding the transnational fan community of their values to othering through saying Netflix needs to be reminded of the ongoing importance the show holds. Here the hashtag included is part of the utterance and cannot be omitted as its formulating the direct appeal to renew the series. This is supplemented by underlining the continuing engagement of the fan collective of which the user is a part. “We” indicates again that they firmly and explicitly position themselves as fan. Their celebration of *Sense8*’s anniversary illustrates the status the series has in their life. The following explosion-, shooting star- and heart- emoji express their sentiments and celebratory aspect of anniversaries.

Lastly, a picture is part of this tweet. Aspects like where it was taken and who is in it were already subject of discussion. Depicting themselves as a considerate citizen, wearing a mask, shows their contribution to living *Sense8*’s philosophy in their everyday life. The mask itself is special as well, as it is fan art gifted to @MadHatter094 from another fan account. The number eight on the mask is associated with the series as there are eight members in a cluster and the symbol for infinite connectedness is also the profile picture for the official *Sense8*-account (Sense8 [@sense8], n.d.). Painting it in rainbow colors references the series’ LGBTQ+ friendliness and colorful aesthetic. Having to wear a mask or stay home is a common situation for most at the moment, so dealing with this and connecting activism to it, offers identification potential for the broad public and fans alike. @MadHatter094 relates to macrosocial categories, while invoking the ‘morally superior’ position of a *Sense8*fan.

In a nutshell, the first part of the tweet and picture show @MadHatter094’s personal contribution and engagement with the matter, the second part and the last part is reminding people to do the same and continue or renew their commitment to it. Interrelating local aspects of nationality with the transnational fan community is mimicking the series in how it makes formerly national spaces transnational. Nationality is transcended in space where peo-

ple stay together through the ideals of the fandom that overcome differences.

@MadHatter094 negotiates their transnational identity in the interplay of nationality and global community. This media identity does not just combine both but lets the local and global co-exist in symbiosis. People are simultaneously reminded of spatial differences and invited into transnational spaces through participating in activities like the rewatch or behavior of a responsible citizen in times of crisis. The uptake of structures used to bridge strangeness from the series is what “Creative interaction with aspects of the program” and “Comparing aspects of the program to own experience” have in common. The interplay of individual and collective perspective only supports this. Tweets comparing aspects of the program to own experiences appear frequently, while creative interaction with aspects of the program is rarer, probably due to the level of online discourse knowledge needed that is not as widespread.

It has been established that a form of transnational identity is negotiated in every type of participant engagement to various degrees, which will be discussed further when comparing the overarching discursive construction strategies. Therefore, I will not look at every activity for the second hashtag, just the two that proved most fruitful for my topic – “Creative interaction with aspects of the program” and “Comparing aspects of the program to own experience”.


**#Sense8NetflixRewatch.** The second hashtag under review appeared first on November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018 in a tweet from @imvaleriaa (see Figure\_Appendix 11; Who tweeted it first, n.d.), and got taken up by a more active fan only half an hour later and spread from there.

#Sense8NetflixRewatch is continued until today. As we know from the production history the fandom has been successful with a campaign like this before and some people are not ready to give up. The hashtag does not refer to the general fandom or series; neither does it relate to a rewatch-event that ends after a certain time. It was created as a hashtag campaign with the purpose of putting as much pressure on Netflix as possible to continue the series, so it is more

specific in what it is trying to achieve and what kind of ad-hoc audience it creates. That is why Netflix is mentioned explicitly in the hashtag and it is frequently related to a petition (The Sense8 fandom, n.d.). Activist fans branded December 2018 as rewatch month, which is when the hashtag use peaked. Thus, December 2018 is selected as the period under review. As it does not have the same universal applicability as #Sense8, there were only around 670 tweets. The majority of tweets with #Sense8NetflixRewatch address how important the show is to the fans, which people express in creative ways.

*Creative interaction with aspects of the program.* One of those cases is the tweet by @SaraRtweet, which takes a seemingly unrelated object of their personal environment and integrates it into the narrative of the series, thereby adding to its original breadth. The unique aspect of this tweet is the mixing of fictional and non-fictional realities.

### Tweet 8

 **Sara Rodrigues** @SaraRtweet · Dec 19, 2018 ✓  
Sensies! Today AT MY HOUSE (under construction..) I found traces of BPO!!!  
Do you think I'm in danger? Or our cluster? 😬😬😬  
[pic.twitter.com/a626INtoXE](https://pic.twitter.com/a626INtoXE)  
#Sense8NetflixRewatch #Sense8Revolution



Note. Source: Sara Rodrigues [@SaraRtweet], 2018.

While renovating their house, @SaraRtweet come across a hardener titled hardener BPO. They edited a big arrow into their picture to make the focal point obvious. In the narrative of the series, BPO stands for the organization trying to eliminate sensates. The user carries this narrative of BPO over to their non-fictional lives, implying there is a threat coming from BPO linked to hardeners and thereby changing the implications of BPO that never had anything to do with construction. @SaraRtweet's excitement about their discovery is visible as the tweet starts with an exclamation. "Sensies" is the diminutive of sensates, which can be used as a pet name for the community. Only sensies are addressed, which excludes regular Twitter-users and builds a dichotomy between fans and others. Series-specific vernacular and the use of a different BPO with the same indications as BPO in the series showcase their knowledge about the series and disclose the user as fan.

The tweet contains specifics about time and place. Unlike most tweets before, place has a bigger impact here, being spelled in capitals. Proximity of BPO to the user is emphasized by this and the use of double exclamation marks. In combination with saying that they were the person finding BPO the experience is rooted in the world of the individual. Space is foregrounded, not nationality. The description of the house as theirs is amended by saying that it is under construction, which explains how this person came into possession of the hardener. Discovering BPO leads @SaraRtweet to ask the collective of fans if they think they are in danger. At first this danger only relates to the user but is expanded to include their cluster in a second question. Firstly, this positions them as member in a cluster, another part of the narrative that is transferred to the everyday world of fans. Instead of saying my cluster, they say "our", which leads to the second point. *Sense8*-Fans understand themselves as part of a global cluster, which other hashtags like #wearetheglobalcluster symbolize. Including all potential readers in this fan-cluster opens the personal experience up to more people, just like the sensate nature. The tweet ends with three emoji: an embarrassed one, a smiling one, and a

laughing one. They can be read as classifying the tweet as a joke and not as a serious thought about being in danger, also defying negative identity politics excluding BPO but welcoming change to the nature of it. Hashtags stand at the end of the tweet, not integrated into sentences. They are Category 3- hashtags, recontextualizing the rewatch and *Sense8*Revolution (as proclaimed by the fans) as the contents of the tweet and picture refer to neither of them. To generate publicity of those hashtags in an activist context it can be useful to employ them in any context related to *Sense8*, not just in the ones that fit their description.

Once more local experience is closely linked with the transnational collective by bracketing the finding of BPO with addresses to the fandom in the same tweet. @SaraRtweet also preserves the local space of their house while allowing a public to share her experience, not just through reading the tweet but by being a part of what is happening. This orientation is proof of a transnational identity and them positioning themselves as part of the transnational fan community, including activism through the hashtags and their sensitive stance against negative identity politics adds to that.

*Comparing aspects of the program to own experience.* The experience of a very limited group of listeners of the radio in Trinidad is connected to the bigger fan experience in other countries, evoking a transnational space in the next tweet.

### **Tweet 9**



**Amanda Corbie** @AmarCrow · Dec 28, 2018

The awe, glee and elation you get when you hear 4-Blondes What's Going On over the local radio in Trinidad. It's like the gods saying yes you must rewatch @sense8. Forget how many times you have watched it already lol. #Sense8NetflixRewatch #RenewSense8 #Sense8Community

*Note.* Source: Amanda Corbie [@AmarCrow], 2018.

In this last analyzed tweet, an everyday occurrence is linked to the series. The tweet starts with a pleonasm and is elliptical exemplifying the extraordinary feelings experienced when the song (misspelled), which is important in fan-identity formation, comes on. Although,

@AmarCrow does not write about themselves but about a generic you, it is reasonable that they are sharing their experience in participant engagement to connect with other fans. Repeated slips of the pen in this tweet contribute to the impression of genuine excitement. Using the popular song positions, them as part of the fandom. “[Y]ou” would also have to be a fan of *Sense8* or otherwise they would not have the same associations. On the other hand, the location the user gives is quite specific, which would exclude most fans. Describing the radio as local allows conclusions about the place of residence of @AmarCrow. Trinidad is not a nation but one of the islands in the nation state of Trinidad and Tobago, which signifies that this user puts place over nationality as identity-constituting aspect. The next sentence is comparing the occurrence of hearing the song on the local radio to a sign by a higher power, creating a narrative of *Sense8* as a niche that fans normally do not encounter in their everyday lives. When this does happen, the logical conclusion is to rewatch the series. The user links to the *Sense8*-Twitter-profile instead of hash-tagging the series. As the profile is not what is supposed to be rewatched this could be a mistake, which is evident in the accompanying hashtags as well. The divine intervention gets reformulated as an imperative request to “Forget how many times you have have [the second have is considered a spelling mistake] watched it already lol”. This line is the most personal one in the tweet as “lol” illustrates a personal reaction in the language of microblogging, which can be interpreted as admission of having seen the Netflix Original far too many times already. Besides, by addressing possible contingencies the user positions themselves as invested in getting people to rewatch the show. Nevertheless, the generic you helps to avoid explicitly integrating themselves into the “we” of the fandom or emerging as individual. It blends individual identity with group identity and strengthens the orientation to a global community and audience. The three unconnected hashtags at the end all correlate with activist attempts to renew *Sense8*. At this point, Zhu’s categories fail to describe what is done through the hashtag, because this hashtag is technical-



ly classified as Category 3 through the hyperlink. However, when reading the hyperlink as a mistake, looking at the placement of the hashtags and whether they are recontextualized or not, it would make more sense to classify it as a Category 2 hashtag.

In sum, a transnational attitude is displayed through the repeated use of the generic you. Reversely, this means that @AmarCrow is taking their experience and transferring it over to the collective they are part of. This duality is present in the last four posts and characteristic for transnational identities that go beyond fan identity in their construction. More commonalities and interrelations with the discourses created in *Sense8* are outlined in the next chapter. The overarching discursive strategies reveal what discourses of the online environment are pivotal for the construction of transnational identity.

## **What overarching discursive strategies emerge in the construction of digital transnational identity?**

Considering how transnational identity is constructed on Twitter and in *Sense8*, five overarching themes were identified that shape the discourse about transnationalism in this context. Twitter and Netflix both attempt to provide translocal, transcultural imagery and simultaneously represent and replicate the conditions of hypermodern globality.

### ***Emphasizing connectivity***

In *Sense8*, individual and collective identity are so forcefully connected that the cluster can feel and act as one, while also remaining singular entities. Connectivity is the production theme of the serial, reflected in the multiple, season-overarching storylines and in narratives emphasizing shared human experiences, that show the individuals in relation to expanded communities of relevance. When the cast or cluster is described as family, this reinforces the bond between humans beyond biology or difference. The series embraces and celebrates differences and tolerance and has geared its narratives to teach “that love is the best pedagogy to know the Other” (Parsemain, 2019, p.234). The metaphor of a stained glass-mosaic window is fitting here to imagine how the cluster builds a new unit incorporating individual pieces. This metaphor also gives a good idea of what transnational identity means in general.

A tight-knit community also emerges on Twitter, where personal and social identity categories merge. While being individual users they all relate to the membership category *Sense8*-fan and make unique contributions to the discourse surrounding the series on Twitter. This is done on a micro-level through using hashtags referencing the show. Hashtags align users with transnational values of the series, thus negotiating a transnational self-representation. Informative hashtags of Category 2 and 3 were prevalent, which means that fans prioritised community-building and highlighting the relevance of those for non-fictional realities through resemiotization. The use of a *Sense8*-related hashtag connects “people with

the same goals, aspirations, values and norms, and in this case also the same discursive practices” (Chiluwa & Ayodele, 2019, p.124). For participants in Weiser-Zurmühlens study (fc.2020, p.212) production conditions in terms of casting and locations were most important in eliciting transnational identifications. In my study the diverse production context of the series is also important as most tweets highlight the message of diversity and empathy as key reason for continuing the series. The discontinuation of the production is equally powerful for the transnational identification as it turned fans activists that voice their beliefs in transnational narratives of the series as shared value. Another micro-level strategy is the use of *Sense8*-specific vocabulary, like cluster or BPO. To underline their we-ness, some Twitter users incorporated the collective pronoun we into their tweets, which is a common strategy for expressing connectedness (Chiluwa & Ayodele, 2019; De Cillia et al.,1999).

### ***Foregrounding shared values in identity creation***

Related to that are the mechanisms that help bridge ‘otherness’. Unity within the cluster is promoted through collective empathy, which enables them to form meaningful relations and support each other in their struggles. Instead of negative identity politics in differentiation to an outgroup, the sensates rely primarily on their relations. This starts with the vision for the series and the production aiming at worldwide inclusiveness, despite dominant discourses of difference and global divisiveness. The message of acceptance extends not only to transnational discourse but also heteronormative discourse, that is overcome by portraying queerness in a positive light, and including out-groups, like black, poor bus drivers or strong, independent Asian women. Of course, there is still an outgroup, the BPO, who does not share the values of connectivity. That the fight against BPO only emerges later in the serial signals that distancing oneself from the BPO is not the community forming mechanism that fosters identification with the social category sensate.

On Twitter, similar patterns emerge. Not only do fans perceive themselves as a community, they also recreate *Sense8*'s ideology of love and acceptance. They ask each other for support, share their experiences about the reception and 'protect' each other of imaginary threats. The feeling of belonging in a self-declared inclusive, diverse transnational fandom, which can be supported through the metadata, helps bridge differences within the group. Zappetini also finds this tendency in his data, describing it as "transformation of the meaning of communities of relevance" (2016, p.90) through "'scaling up' solidarity", "[s]patial and temporal representations of 'connection' and 'expansion'" and "transportability of civic engagement" (2016, p.92f.). Circulating values of the Netflix Original, behavior connected to it, and referring to knowledge from the series alludes to the fandom as community of relevance on a macro-level. This common culture of activism brings together individuals through continuous activity. Just like the cluster must fight for its survival against the BPO, the fans fight for the survival of their community against Netflix, thereby often excluding Netflix and anyone else, who is not a fan of *Sense8*. In parallel to clusters the fandom is not founded on that activism as the series had two successful seasons before it was cancelled, but it perpetuates collective behavior until today.

### ***Network aesthetics***

Aesthetic strategies that transcend distances overlap between Netflix and Twitter as well. Sensate-connection is being compared to facetimeing and other internet analogies and depicted with almost the same affordances, so on the story-level network aesthetics are incorporated. The interplay of genres within one format forms a network of distinct visual styles. In addition, innovative cinematography displays connections and links the storylines together. Music acts in a similar way. The multiple storylines and jumping between them without a regular pattern, only linked by content, mimics the browsing or reading a Twitter-stream. Mincheva says that "in Twitter-trending style" the title-sequence alone "aims to depict a

queer, global, multi-gender, post-national community which is [...] deeply immersed in the internet world of visual cultures and tactile interfaces” (2018, p.32). That the content is specifically created for online-streaming facilitates this aesthetic. The premise of the series distributes culturally diverse, colorful images in public discourse, making its networking qualities obvious. One other aspect is the interconnectedness of fans and production, that is also made explicit in some creative choices and the inclusion of a tribute to the fans.

The fans on Twitter also create content for the digital environment, working with networking resources like hyperlinks and hashtags to make connections. Predominantly used hashtag-categories 2 and 3 also stress the focus on network creation. Netflix’s network aesthetic and genre-crossing are continued on Twitter through intermediality, like quotes from the series or pictures. Being on Twitter alone means being part of a global network and the tweets as participant engagement expands that network from one online platform, Netflix, to the other.

### *Communicating in transnational spaces*

Both Netflix and Twitter are part of cyberspace, which is inherently transnational and a space for border-crossing content flow (Gredel, 2018; Lobato, 2019). Netflix as a transnational broadcaster locates itself within a transnational rhetoric and distributes content globally. The production context of *Sense8* is a transnational one, featuring places from around the world in a series that is globally available and representing a transnational community through actors from all over the world. The intention of this series is decidedly to be transnational. *Sense8* as transnational beings are always communicating and acting from within transnational entanglements. Due to the fictional affordances of people being in two places at once in *Sense8*, time and space appear to be relative

The structure of the global fandom mimics that as on Twitter clusters can become realities. The micro-blogging service allows people across national borders to form meaningful

connections. Time-space compression is clearly depicted in the series through mind linked individuals with diverse backgrounds. It is not addressed explicitly on Twitter, as the medium is already part of these tendencies. On Twitter, time is a more important tool than space to locate yourself in patterns. Moreover, accompanying communication that relates to a transnational media object on a translocal microblogging platform, already generate a transnational space by combining multiple reception realities in cyberspace as mentioned before. The transnational references and transnational communication environment take precedent over nationality and place in indicating identity.

### ***Replacing nationality through interplay of local and global***

Nationality as categorization is still used, but not at the forefront of the conversation. Explicitly dismantling nationhood to make transnational identity possible is not necessary in the transnationally oriented online environment. This is characteristic for digital communication and refers to the change of power structures, away from national belonging to transnational structures, like transnational (fan) community. Netflix and the series have a global outlook, while staying connected to the local. This is also reflected in the narratives about being part of a cluster, where it can matter where you are from, but it does not have to as senses share transnational experiences while being connected back to their local circumstances. Foregrounding commonalities in the differences is the core of the transnational community in *Sense8*.

Transnational experiences are also shared in the non-fictional space of Twitter. It is interesting that the categories that proved to be most complex are also the ones discussing matters of identity the most explicitly. An overview of what discursive orientations participants display in tweets to reflect transnational identity is shown in Table 2 below.

**Table 2**

*Discourse type drawn on in the analyzed accompanying communication.*

Participant engagement	Aspect made relevant in the creation of transnational identity				
Anticipating the plot					
Asking questions	fan community	<i>Sense8</i> -discourse			
Framing the reception experience	fan community		activism		
Parasocial interaction	fan community		activism	global discourse	
Creative interaction with aspects of the program	fan community	<i>Sense8</i> -discourse	activism	local discourse	online discourse
Local commentary	fan community	<i>Sense8</i> -discourse			
Global commentary	fan community	<i>Sense8</i> -discourse			
Comparing aspects of the program to own experience	fan community	<i>Sense8</i> -discourse	activism	global & local discourse	

The participants simultaneously refer to local and global discourses, including the one about *Sense8*. Hence, they do not have to refer to transnationalism explicitly to draw on transnational media objects and practices in global interaction. Identifying as members of the *Sense8*-fandom alone indicates a transnational identity and “narratives of transformation of nationhood and can be instantiated in forms of grassroots social agency and ‘active citizenship’ oriented towards cosmopolitan imaginaries” (Zappetini 2016, p.87). Transnational discourse of the series, fan community and activism (both concerning *Sense8* and transnational challenges) is circulated and reflected in participants behaviour. The macro-category fan has been prevalent, but there are also activists fighting for a renewal, individuals concerned about the state of the world or individuals relating their local or online discourse to the narratives of

*Sense8*. Especially contributions to the more complex categories also repeatedly place one's own local experience in Italy, Trinidad, or their home within a bigger picture, keeping both separate but linked in one tweet and of equal importance for the message. Putting translocal discourses in relation to local discourses and possibly integrating them in the process of meaning-making is typical for media appropriation (Hepp, 2014). This openness of Twitter users and sensates to enact activities perpetuating values of a transnational community is partly due to online affordances that allow to transgress physical distances and create a feeling of closeness. In addition, strangeness and differences between local and global are easy to productively integrate into the transnational identity shaped by common goals and affection. Structural elements display traits of transgression of local spaces and discourses towards a more global, comprehensive vision, which becomes most evident in the narratives the series circulates. Many scholars describe transnational practices with their simultaneity of various aspects that merge to form something new instead of excluding each other and are open to the constant integration of otherness in terms of H.K: Bhabha's and E. Soja's *third spaces* (De Fina, 2016; Hipfl, 2004; Zappetini, 2016). However, the notion of transnational identity as one that is open and welcoming to everyone must be viewed critically as well.

### ***Discussion***

As outlined before the cyberspace is subject to the digital divide. In addition, Netflix has high access barriers through the subscription costs and high bandwidth required. Netflix itself also has a lot of control over what the algorithm suggests to the subscribers and can thus influence the consumption of transnational content. While Twitter is more easily accessible, the micro-blogging service is also biased in its architecture of participation. Even while displaying transnational identities and welcoming global values, the spread of contributors shows that accompanying communication about *Sense8* is predominantly western. It becomes questionable if the formation of transnational identity is as easy as the narratives of the series



suggest. The BPO as example of a transnational organization demonstrates that the intention is not enough to overcome differences and striving for power is inevitable.<sup>28</sup> Through the science discourse the series naturalizes harmony between sensates and differences between them and non-empathic humans, which creates a new division. This proves that it is not possible to avoid the formation of in-and out groups. Furthermore, *Sense8* oversimplifies many aspects in overcoming differences. An example is Nomi's mom suddenly coming to terms with her daughter's gender identity after having edibles (S2, E12, 00:12:40). Another problematic point is that two characters with darker skin colors, Kala and Capheus, are missing in the first orgy scene (S1, E6, 00:16:38), so a predominantly white sexuality is presented. Parsemain (2019) notes that the series also leaves out disabled people. This underlines the already addressed American perspective of what kind of diversity needs to be embraced, despite claiming universal diversity. Uncomfortable questions about unequal distribution of wealth are avoided as much as possible. Capheus' life poses those questions, e.g. when Kala asks why he has a big TV but lives in a slum (S1, E10, 00:43:55) or finds out that her husband's company delivers expired medicine to African countries (S2, E7, 00:56:09-00:54:45), but for the most part global socioeconomical inequality remains unaddressed. Sentences like "as long as we're together, there's nothing we can't do" (S2, E5, 00:06:26) do not reflect the heavily stratified realities that cannot be overcome by radical love. On Twitter a similar optimistic, if not naïve, picture emerges. Most participant communication uncritically repeats the belief that all challenges can be resolved through more transnational empathy. Watching a diverse show and getting it renewed is not going to change how society at large deals with out-groups and how living conditions limit opportunities for many people. Moreover, the Twitter users construct an outgroup of non-empathic individuals not addressed through the tweets, keeping a different kind of 'otherness' out. It has been remarked that "we tend to

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<sup>28</sup> Here I disagree with Zilonka and Job (2017), who state power is detrimental to human cohabitation. Power does not have to be a power of exclusion.

choose a safe type of diversity [...] we, like the main protagonists, choose to navigate inside a bubble of already well-calculated empathetic bonds” (Mincheva, 2018, p.37). Subjectivity is the main problem of any conceptions of inclusive norms (Reichardt, 2010).

Nevertheless, utopian discourses of transnational communities’ appeal to viewers. C. Lusin and R. Haekel explain that “contemporary television series tend to approach community through what it is lacking [...] emblematic of the state of the nation” (2019, p.12) and Weiser-Zurmühlen agrees that cultural identifications “might be triggered by TV series, but they are [...] dependent on the broader context” (fc.2020, p.212). The first season was shot during the refugee crisis, while the second season shows stronger political motivations (Capheus runs for office in Nairobi) in the wake of the Trump administration, and S2, E12 in Paris makes reference to terror attacks (01:29:40-01:29:01). Tweets referring to the Corona-crisis also stress that in times of division the series serves as reminder of what people on the other side of the world have in common with you. Dealing with injustice, violence in various forms and transnational challenges is common and needs to be overcome through love. This message gives hope to many Twitter users in the same vein Lana Wachoswki described it in her letter<sup>29</sup> and it becomes easy to see why the discourse *Sense8* distributes is so powerful, despite the critique.

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<sup>29</sup> A different way of interpreting the impact of *Sense8* is reading its message as counter-discourse to neoliberal ideology (Zilonka & Job, 2017).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis makes contributions to the research about digital transnational identities in fictional and non-fictional environments by analyzing the digital discourses that people draw on when constructing transnational identities online.

Transnationality occurs before the backdrop of globalization, that puts more polyphone, multinational voices in contact with each other. Media is one of the key driving forces behind these processes that makes exchanging information with a world public and forming global communities possible. Thus, the online environment transcends place and has a different relation to time, which changes our perception of time-space-configurations, reflected in the construction of translocal spaces. Destabilizing the notion of nationality goes along with this. Formerly static constructs with harsh lines of demarcation become permeable, already including 'otherness' it traditionally excludes. Decreasing importance of nationality for virtual identities gives rise to new forms of supranational communitarisation, like transnationalism. An important marker all transnational identities have in common is that they, in contrast to national or cosmopolitan identities, emphasize the bidirectional interplay between local and global. When localizing oneself or being localized in a transnational community this reflects on one's identity. Identity is understood as a discursive choice between semiotic resources, that just like discourse, is never complete, multidimensional, and influenced by power. For community, and thus identity building, any form of us-vs-them can be employed, depending on what the community considers their marker of distinctiveness. What these markers are is not random but influences by discourse. Discourse is omnipresent and organizes patterns of thinking and doing in fiction and non-fiction alike. Hence, to study digital transnational identity the interdisciplinary perspective of DDA is useful. Narratives, that are part of discourses but also transcend them, and subject positions generated by them, help to examine the construction and expression of digital transnational identity. People do not occupy the

same places and do not have the same opportunities online. Nevertheless, they cooperatively construct spaces of international encounters through artifacts that speak to an understanding of global citizenship.

a) How is digital transnational identity constructed in a fictional narrative?

One of those cultural objects is the Netflix Original series *Sense8*, that was produced specifically with a global audience in mind. Netflix as transnational broadcaster distributes in a transnational environment, thus being uniquely suited for creating a discourse around transnationalism. *Sense8* puts much effort in hiring local actors and filming in authentic locations to follow their transnational vision. Not only the production reflects transnational values, also the plot. The concept of people being connected across boundaries and bridging any differences through their commonalities and empathy for each other expresses an idea of a utopian transnational community of relevance or global family. Transnational characters overcome traditional categories of othering, like queerness, ethnicities, or nationality. Through integrating multiple storylines leading up to a shared plot, structurally emphasizing connection and aesthetically transgressing boundaries, *Sense8* creates a transnational discourse with its own 'scientific' and emotional knowledge tied to it. The characters all retain their personal identities, that change through their bond, while they become one cluster. *Sense8* underscores that the sensates are strongest when working together and supporting each other, which can be transferred to a transnational ideology. As the series showcases multidimensional points of reference for identity presentation online, individuals can contrast themselves and others against them to negotiate their identity.

b) How is digital transnational identity constructed in accompanying conversation?

These new discursive subject positions are taken up by Twitter-users in participant engagement, that is inherently linked to the narratives consumed.<sup>30</sup> The web is a social space for the (de)construction of (national) discourses through transcultural narratives. Transnationality does not have to be mentioned as identity category, however prosumers rely on transnational experiences, like the *Sense8* reception, to construct their inherently transnational media identities. Fans of *Sense8* reveal themselves as such by employing hashtags relating to the series and participating in specific practices. One of these practices is activist actions to get the series renewed. The examples of accompanying communication illustrate “that online activist movements negotiate transnational identities through personal narratives that describe their selves in terms of local and transnational space” (Chiluwa & Ayodele, 2019, p.124). Moreover, through perpetuating the understanding of a transnational community portrayed in the series and interlinking it with global, local, and online discourses they construct transnational belonging. The activities of participant engagement align them with transnational values and point to the influential connection of accompanying communication for our digital identities.

c) What overarching discursive strategies emerge in the construction of digital transnational identity?

The transnational identities constructed in the series and on Twitter have in common that they pave the way for imagining new ways of being in third spaces. Distance and otherness are spanned through various tools, the most important one is emphasizing connectedness, which is reflected on an aesthetic level through the formation of a network style as well. Space coined by connectivity, transnational production conditions, and aesthetics facilitates

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<sup>30</sup> The extraordinary accompanying communication to the science fiction production receives more and more attention. A research paper by Dr. Sven Stollfuß dealing with accompanying communication to *Sense8* is being published sometime later this year, unfortunately I could not get a pre-print copy to take it into account for this thesis.

diverse communities formed by commonalities more than exclusion of others. These communities are built in transnational social spaces and decrease the importance of nationalism, as they are based on shared values, not discursive binaries of the nation-construct. Simultaneously participating in national and global discourses and staying connected to both is what constructs a transnational identity for most of the Twitter users and the characters in *Sense8*. Narratives presented in the series were taken up by Twitter users to associate themselves with transnational identity, so they are integral elements of the discourse connected to transnational identity. In sum, values are more important than physical conditions of space and time for the formation of digital transnational identity. This is due to the online environment that allows to put visible markers of identity in the background. It is also a privileged position, because access to the cyberspace of *Sense8* and Twitter is restricted through the SVOD-pricing, national policies, and the digital divide. Nevertheless, inclusion and exclusion, and respectively stratification, occur along new lines as communities, especially nations, become reconstructed in the wake of globalization and deterritorialization of the internet. Digital communication through communication accompanying *Sense8*-reception can redefine national values and serve as retreat for individuals living in more and more diverse societies and during times of transnational crisis.

For further research, multiple areas of study worth exploring present themselves. *Sense8*-fans have compiled their own Wiki (*Sense8* Wiki, n.d.), a study of this would certainly be worthwhile to understand the specific discourse better, just as focusing on translanguaged tweets would. In a similar vein, more hashtags could be evaluated as Chiluba's and Ayodele's study about transnational hashtag use on Twitter demonstrates that examining online activism is fruitful for the construction of transnational identities. Moreover, a possible avenue for future research is to look at other narratives of transnationalism not only on Netflix and Twitter, but also on various other social media platforms and SVOD-

competitors like Amazon Prime or Disney+. How discourses of transnationalism influence the perception of the other and practices of othering is also a relevant research topic. Taking a different direction, fan communities and their online practices in relation to participant engagement generate new insights since there is not much research done in that field. In addition, they can also provide insights on language learning, literacies, and practices in transnational communities, which is a useful application. Research regarding this should be expanded.

While the diversity of discourses and their implications for our social world advance, new forms of identity will emerge. In this paradigm shift from conformity to more diversity, it will be more and more important to govern heterogeneous groups. The Corona pandemic, *BlackLivesMatter* movement or nationalist tendencies are by far not the only examples of transnational challenges. In the future, those issues will only expand with the advancements of technology and globalization and there is still a lot left to be explored. Studies about transnational identity construction can support this by providing transferable knowledge for policy makers in how to deal with migration and issues of exclusion in society. Furthermore, comparing mechanisms of national identity to transnational identities can yield valuable lessons for intercultural training and community building in general. Our increasingly transnational, mediated realities require a new relation with our own identities and communities of relevance. Learning more about the digital discourses shaping those meaningful relations and identity politics should be encouraged as understanding social media as a tool for cultural change in our mediatized world is and will increasingly be imperative.

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## Appendix

### Tables.

#### Table Appendix 1

*Discourses surrounding globalization.*

	Focus	Relation between local & global
Heterogenization or homogenization	Asymmetrical relation between local & global	Separate entities, tension
Flows	Processes of borrowing & blending	Exchanges across localities
Networks	Structural aspects of connection along knots	Connection in Internet Galaxy
Glocalization	Interplay between local & global	Local as complementary part of global

## Table\_Appendix 2

### *Character constellation.*

Friendly sensates from other clusters	Yrsa, Puck, Mr. Hoy	
Cluster 'parents'	†Jonas and †Angelica	
Antagonists to the whole cluster	†Whisper (aka Milton Brandt), employed by the BPO	
	Lila Faccini's cluster, collaborates with Whispers	
Cluster	Will Gorski	Riley (girlfriend) †Father Diego (police partner & best friend)
	Riley Blue	Will (boyfriend) Father †Magnus and Luna (husband and daughter) Nxy (drug dealer, antagonist)
	Wolfgang Bogdanow	Kala (girlfriend) †Mother=stepsister Felix (best friend, described as brother) Gangster families (employer/antagonists) †Father, uncle & cousin (family, antagonists)
	Kala Dandekar	Wolfgang (boyfriend) Rajan (husband) Rajan's parents (in-laws) Father, mother, aunt and niece Violent believers & corrupt politicians (antagonists)
	Sun Bak	Detective Mun (boyfriend) †Sun's parents Jindo (dog, that she describes as her family) Trainer Friends from prison Joong-Ki (brother, antagonist)
	Lito Rodriguez	Hernando (boyfriend) Mom Daniela (close friend & 'beard') Lito's agents and production crew Joaquín (Ex-boyfriend of Daniela, antagonist)

Nomi Marks	Amanita (wife) Amanitas Mom and three fathers (in-laws) Nomi's parents and sister Teegan Bug (close friend from Nomi's hacker-past) Agent Bendix, †Dr. Metzger (antagonists)
Capheus Onyango	Zakia (girlfriend) Mom Jela (best friend & business partner) Mr. Kabaka (employer & later in romantic relationship with Capheus's mom) Amondi (Kabakas daughter) Gang & corrupt politician (antagonists)

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### Table\_Appendix 3

#### *Development of a shared storyline.*

When	Connection Milestones	Shared Plot
S1, E1	Birth into the cluster	The cluster beings experiencing their connection. While the audience gets to know them and their personal struggles, they start to be hunted. Nomi gets hospitalized.
S1, E2		
S1, E3	First time that abilities get shared	
S1, E4	First time all eight are connected through something	Nomi is rescued with Wills help, and both separately start investigating who hunts them.
S1, E5	Sensates start to have longer conversations with each other	
S1, E6		
S1, E7		
S1, E8		Nomi and Will connect their knowledge and start collaborating.
S1, E9		Riley and Will can piece information about the BPO together.
S1, E10		
S1, E11		The cluster works together to save Riley from the BPO.
S1, E12	First time all eight are visiting at once	
S2, E1		The cluster is hiding from Whispers but celebrates holidays and their birthdays together.
S2, E2		Will wants to turn the situation around and starts spying on Whispers. They extort him for a meeting with his boss and Jonas (in BPO-captivity since S1, E4), which provides new information.
S2, E3		
S2, E4		
S2, E5		The cluster emerges from hiding to find more sensates they could team up with in their fight against the BPO.
S2, E6		They earn the trust of some other sensates and

When	Connection Milestones	Shared Plot
		get more information from them.
S2, E7		The cluster finds out Whispers real name and address and goes there, but he can flee.
S2, E8		
S2, E9		
S2, E10		
S2, E11		Wolfgang is captured by the BPO, so the cluster takes Whispers hostage.
S2, E12 (Finale)	First time all eight meet physically	Wolfgang is exchanged back for Whispers, and the evil powers within the BPO are eliminated. All personal storylines find their happy end and they celebrate together.



**Table\_Appendix 4**

*Nationality of Twitter users of the analyzed tweets as indicated in their profiles.*

	<i>#Sense8</i>	<i>#Sense8NetflixRewatch</i>	Total
Canada	1		1
Italy	1		1
Trinidad		1	1
South Korea	1		1
United Kingdom	1		1
United States	2		2
Unknown	1	1	2
Total	7	2	9

**Figures.**

**Figure\_Appendix 1**

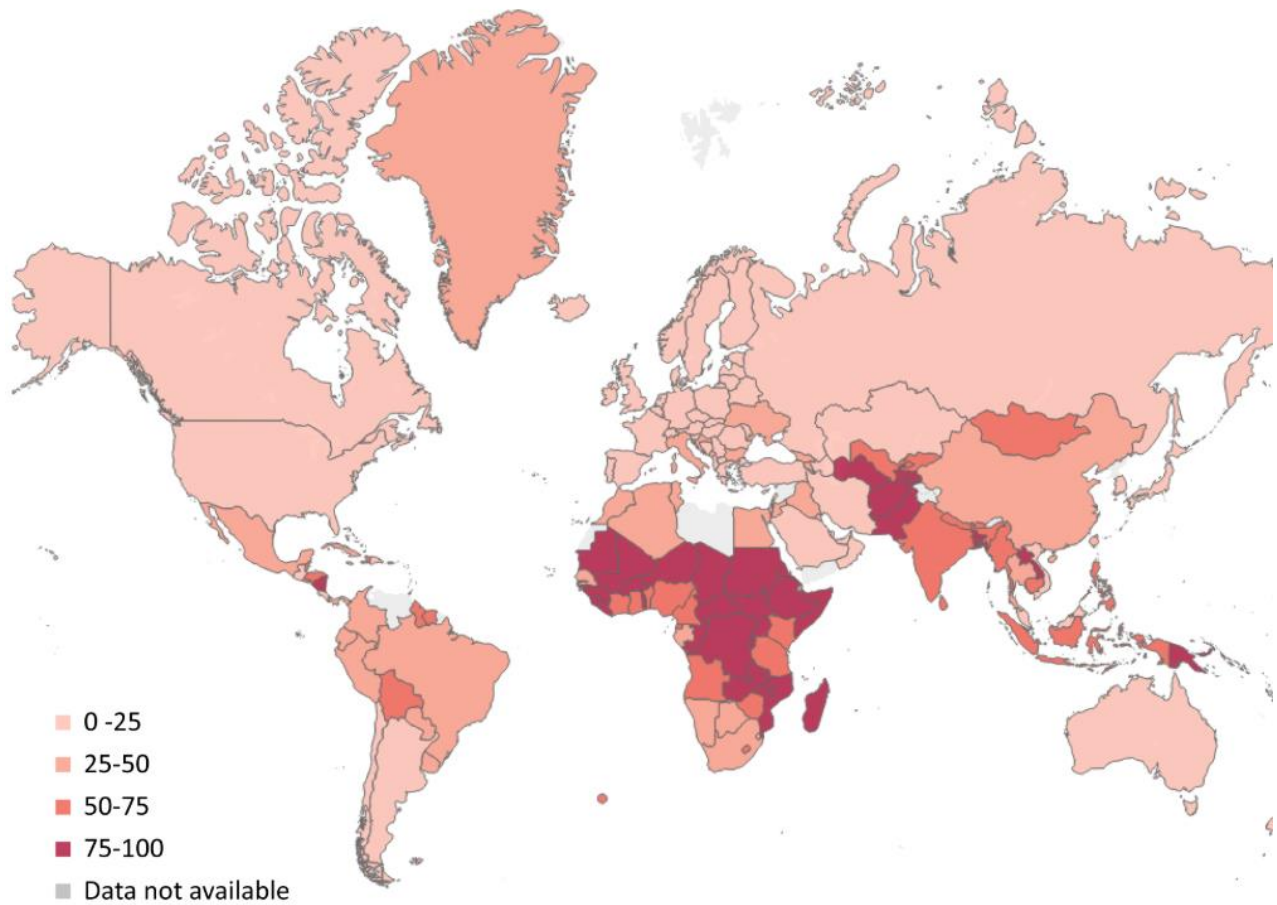
*Number of posts containing #Sense8, users, engagement, and reach.*



*Note.* Source: Keyhole, n.d.

## Figure\_Appendix 2

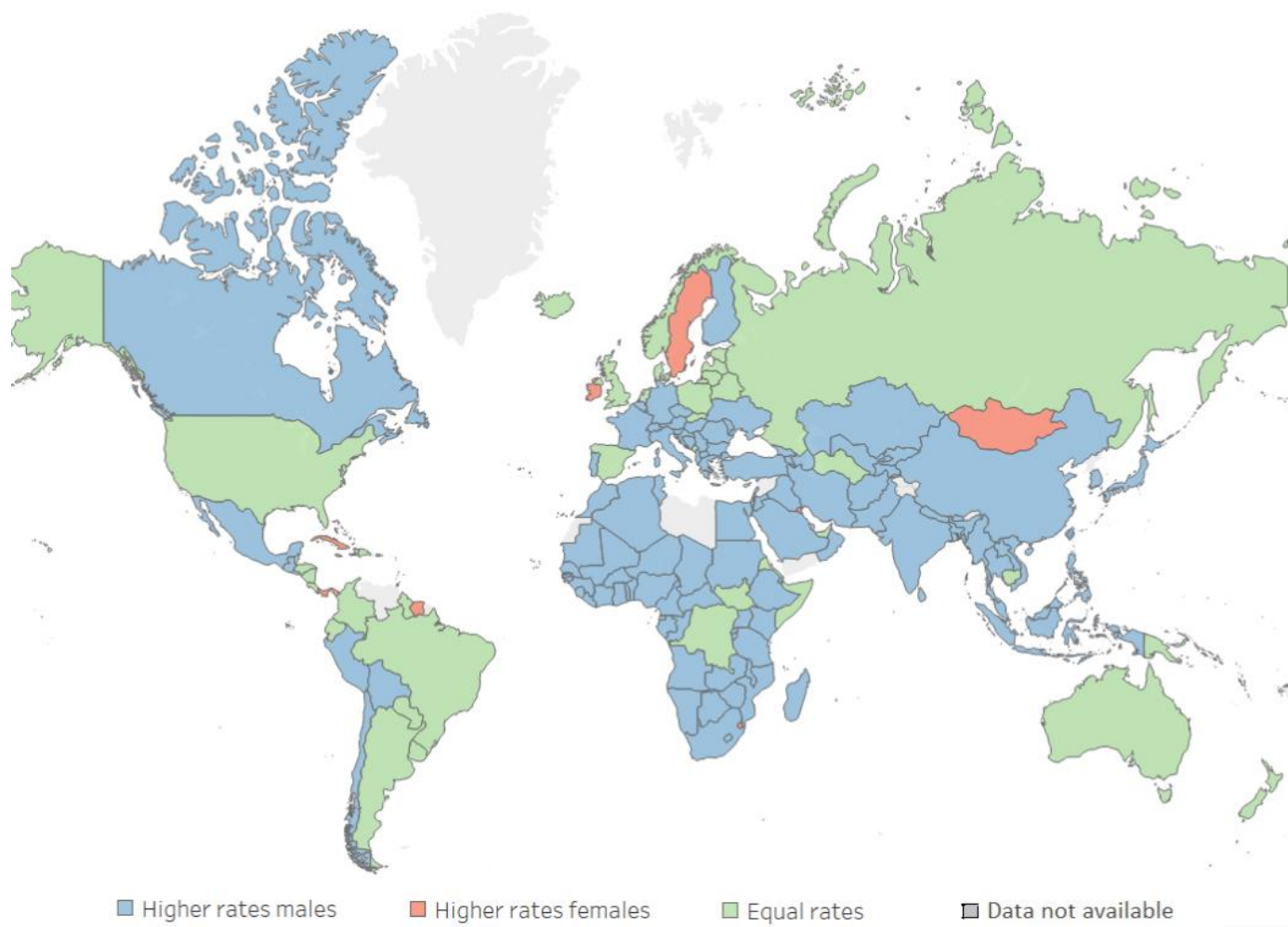
„Percentage of population not using the internet in 2019“



Note. Source: ITU, 2020a.

### Figure\_Appendix 3

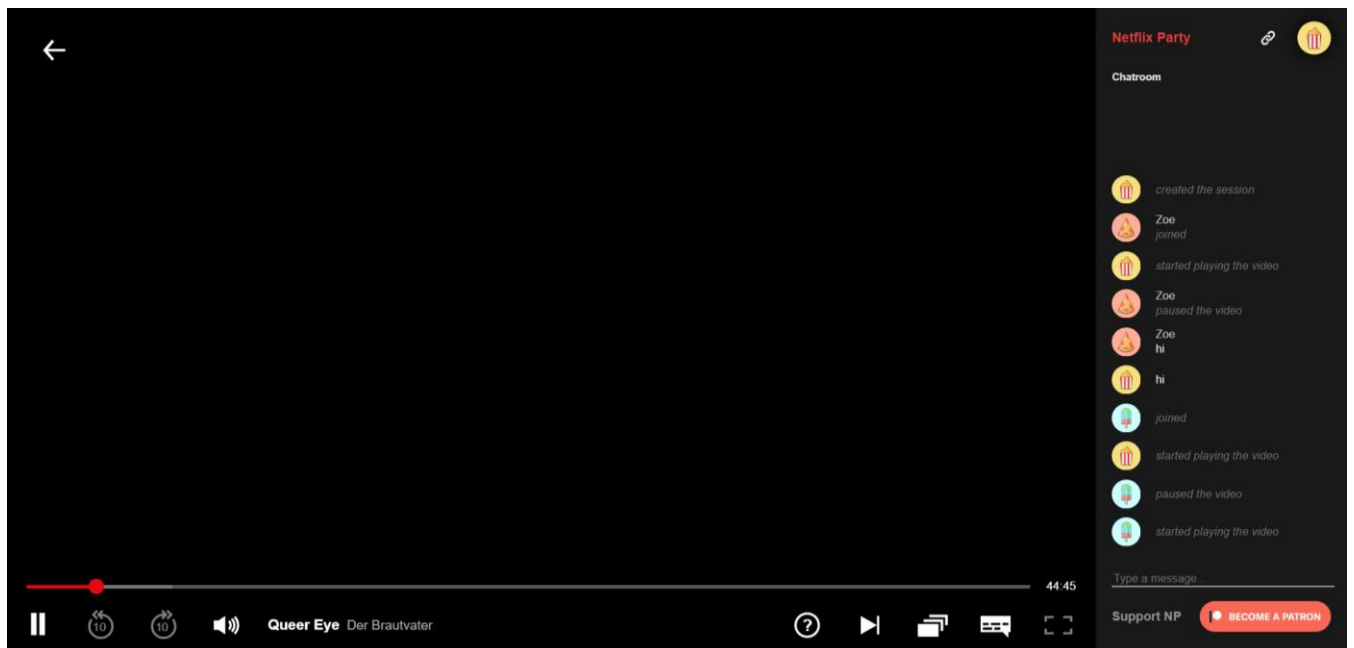
*Gender gap in internet usage in 2019.*



*Note.* Source: ITU, 2020b.

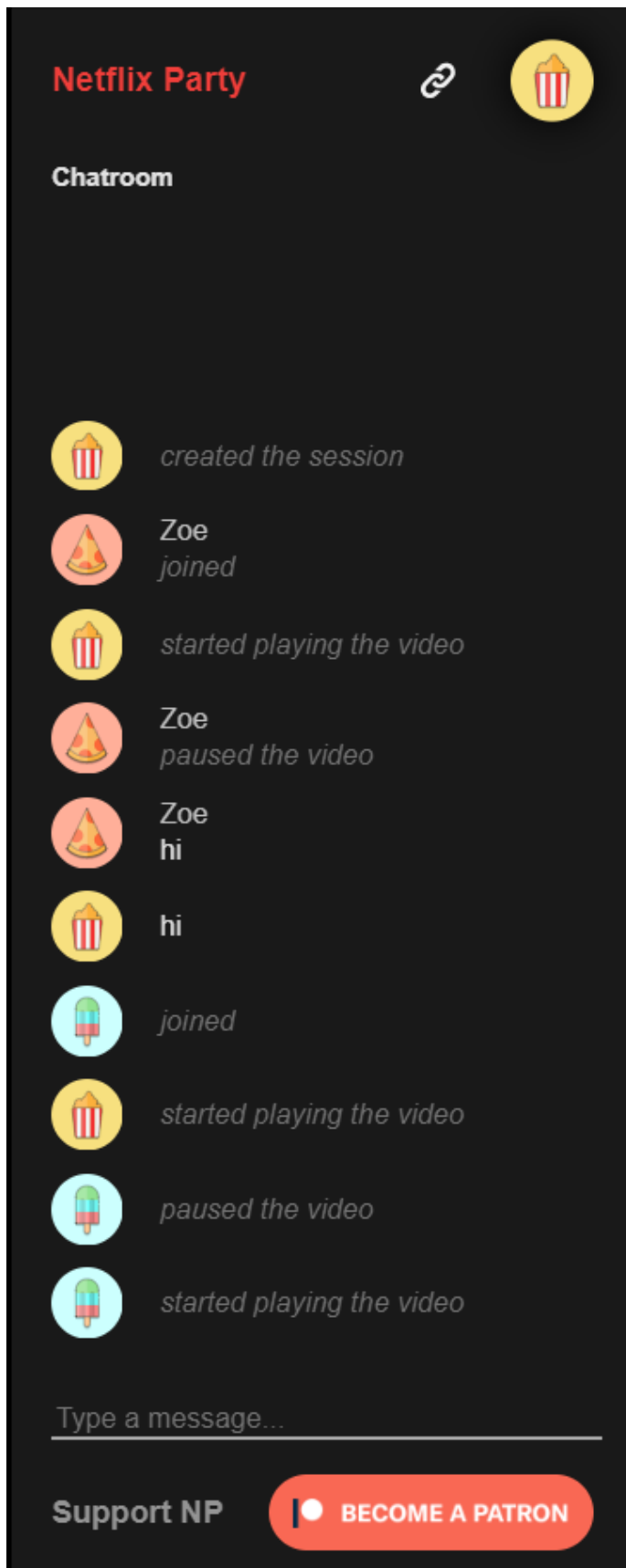
## Figure\_Appendix 4

*Screenshot of NetflixParty browser extension in use.*



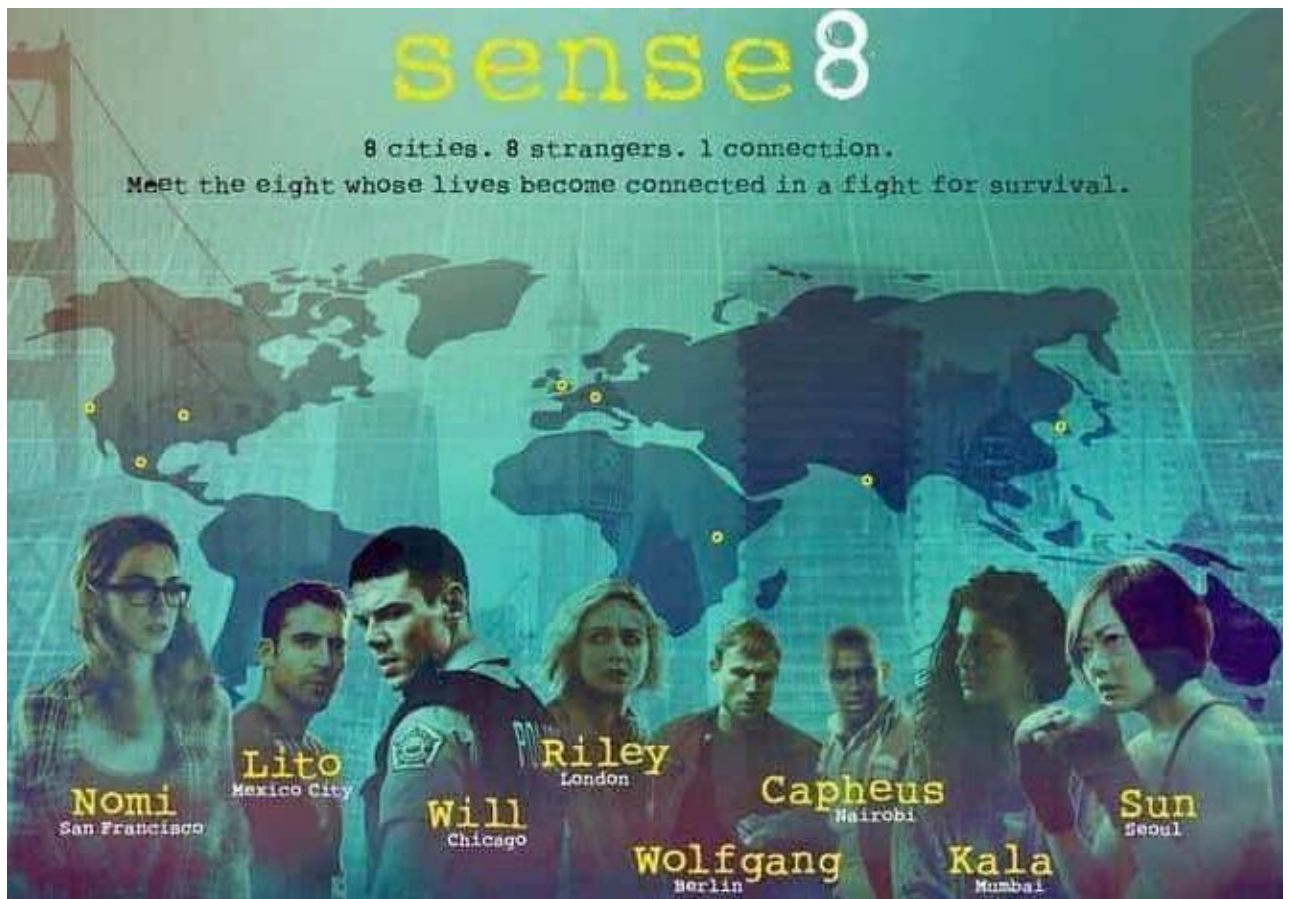
## Figure\_Appendix 5

Screenshot of NetflixParty browser extension in use – zoomed in on NetflixParty.



## Figure\_Appendix 6

*Main characters and their cities.*



*Note.* Source: Orley, 2015.

**Figure\_Appendix 7**

*Location of Hashtag-activity.*

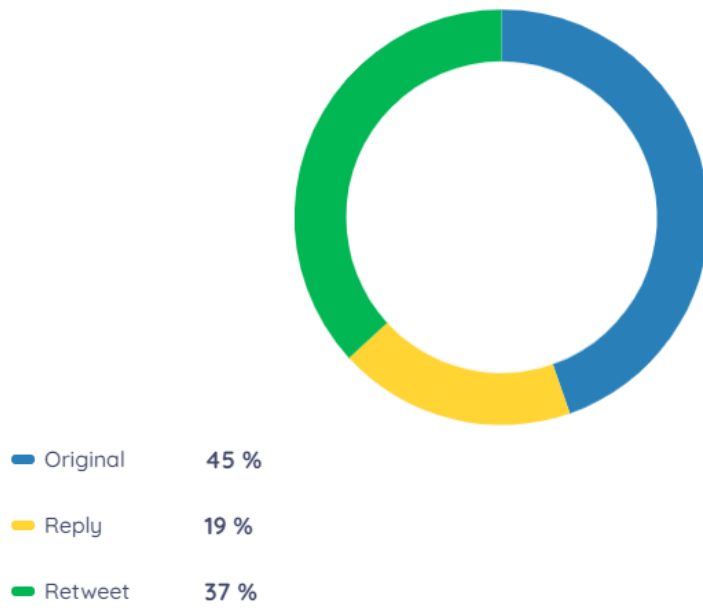


*Note.* Source: Keyhole, n.d. The darker the region, the more active were the users.



**Figure\_Appendix 8**

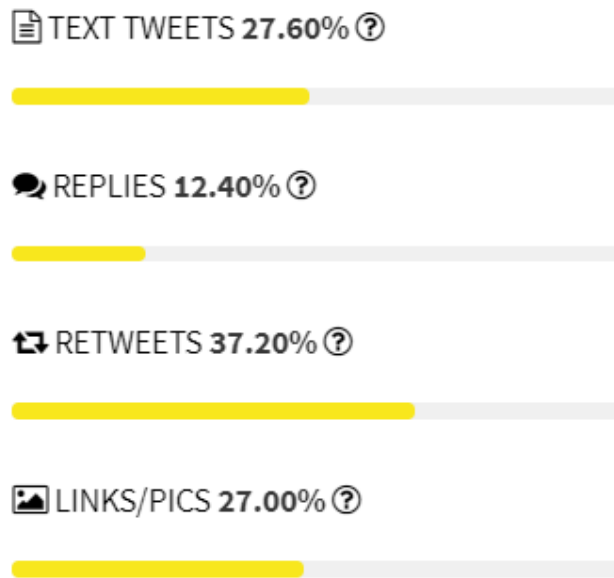
*Types of tweets containing #Sense8 according to Keyhole.*



*Note.* Source: Keyhole, n.d.

## Figure\_Appendix 9







*Types of tweets containing #Sense8 according to Tweetbinder.*



*Note.* Source: Tweetbinder, n.d.

## Figure\_Appendix 10

*Contributor ranking.*

MOST ACTIVE ?		Total tweets
	<b>@Minyawn</b> Kween	<b>36</b>
	<b>@wildtiger23</b> Sandrine Marquis	<b>11</b>
	<b>@PeterAarons</b> Peter Aarons #Sense8Revo...	<b>10</b>
	<b>@MadHatter094</b> Matteo Sisti	<b>10</b>
	<b>@ureliiie</b> 	<b>7</b>



*Note.* Source: Tweetbinder, n.d.

## Figure\_Appendix 11


The first mention of #Sense8NetflixRewatch.



THE FIRST MENTION OF  
**#SENSE8NETFLIXREWATCH** ON TWITTER  
WAS MADE BY WHO



Share This Tweet      Search #FirstTweets



 **valeria**  
@imvaleriaaa 

#Sense8 #Sense8NetflixRewatch  
Netflix: Sense8 Season 3 is Written..  
NETFLIX Renew It Already! - ¡Firma la  
petición! [chn.ge/2OA4hYt](http://chn.ge/2OA4hYt) vía  
[@ChangeorgLatino](https://twitter.com/ChangeorgLatino)


2:18 PM · Nov 8, 2018 

 2  See valeria's other Tweets

 **GK**  
@obsen8 

  
Is it Sense8Friday?  
 [@NXOnNetflix](https://twitter.com/NXOnNetflix) [@netflix](https://twitter.com/netflix)  
[#Sense8NetflixRewatch](https://twitter.com/hashtag/Sense8NetflixRewatch)

[youtu.be/oJdE\\_p8mRqk](http://youtu.be/oJdE_p8mRqk)

2:41 PM · Nov 8, 2018 

Note. Source: Who tweeted it first, n.d.

## Tweets.

### Tweet\_Appendix 1

 **Lesley**  **Amor Vincit Omnia**  @LesleyOliverA · Dec 5, 2018 ▼

Replying to @Momodaiyan and @obsen8

That's Awesome!!! Have you shared the petition?  
so glad to know we have FANmily in China 🇨🇳 ❤️



**GIF**

2 1 2

 **Matteo Sisti** @MadHatter094 · Dec 6, 2018 ▼

Yes! 我知道! 😊 #超感8人組  
#Sense8 is global! @netflix  
#Sense8NetflixRewatch 🌟🤘🇨🇳



32 minuti fa

Matteo 🤘马语翔🍀

Matteo 🤘马语翔🍀: Yes! 😊👍😄  
SENSE8 REVOLUTION! Keep sharing 🌟❤️

啊哈哈哈哈🤘  
老师说  
你们还有三周就要考研了, 咋们抓紧时间  
把期末考试考完吧。  
笑着活下去...😄

Good luck for the 考! 🍀🍀🍀

09:36

hhhhh

anyway.i can rewatch it anytime i want 😊

feel our power!

yeeees! a big success

Share to all the people you know!

but....china doesnt have netflix show 😊

2

Note. Source: Lesley  Amor Vincit Omnia  [@LesleyOliverA], 2018.

## Tweet\_Appendix 2



**J. Michael Straczynski**  @straczynski · May 22

In just 3 weeks, patrons have received 2 never-seen behind the scenes videos and an internal creative doc from #sense8; a never released script for a produced audio drama; an essay on how to beat writer's block; and we've had our first live chat [patreon.com/syntheticworlds](https://patreon.com/syntheticworlds) --



J. Michael Straczynski is creating Movies, TV series, Videos and Audio dr...  
Become a patron of J. Michael Straczynski today: Read 26 posts by J. Michael Straczynski and get access to exclusive content and experiences...  
[patreon.com](https://patreon.com)

*Note.* Source: J. Michael Straczynski [@straczynski], 2020.

### Tweet\_Appendix 3



**Maximilienne Ewalt** @MaximilienneEw1 · Mar 25



No matter the boundaries, no matter the obstacles, Love Conquers All  
#Sense8 is a reminder of the power of universal connection. Let's celebrate a  
Worldwide #Sense8DayRewatch March 28th, 2020.



#Sense8DayRewatch March 28th 2020 | Netflix World...

No matter the boundaries, no matter the obstacles,  
Love Conquers All! #Sense8 is a reminder of the pow...

[youtube.com](https://youtube.com)




*Note.* Source: Maximilienne Ewalt[@MaximilienneEw1], 2020.



## Tweet\_Appendix 4



**La tour Eiffel**  @LaTourEiffel · Jun 8

 [#OnThisDay](#) in 2018, I was the star of [#Sense8](#) season finale! [#Throwback](#) to this memorable shooting with lovely actors and a magical fireworks! Amor vincit omnia    
[#EiffelTower](#) [@sense8](#) [@netflix](#)

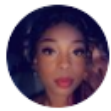


La tour Eiffel and 9 others

*Note.* Source: La tour Eiffel [[@LaTourEiffel](#)], 2020.



## Tweet\_Appendix 5



**Sonya Blade** @BladeSonya · Jun 12

[@netflix](#) once again I am asking for [@sense8](#) renewal. The world is in shambles and people need to be reminded that they are not just a "me" but also a "WE". Renew [#sense8](#)

*Note.* Source: Sonya Blade [@Blade Sonya], 2020.

**Tweet\_Appendix 6**



**Marto Erhardt**  
@martoerhardt



Replying to @Sense8Netflix @NetflixIndia and 4 others

 For a destination...

#Sense8DayRewatch #Sense8



 THE GLOBAL CLUSTER and 9 others

10:42 PM · Mar 28, 2020 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

*Note.* Source: Marto Erhardt [@martoerhardt], 2020.

## Tweet\_Appendix 7



**Eli Brodare** @Eli\_Brodare · Jun 9

Tem gente que lembra do [#sense8](#), tem gente que lembra dessa música em novelas, eu só sei que "What's Up" traduz exatamente o que tenho sentido.



*Note.* Source: Eli Brodare [@Eli\_Brodare], 2020.

**Tweet\_Appendix 8**



**Gizem** 🌙  
@colorfulvenus



We march with pride 🌈 #PrideMonth #pride #Sense8  
#PRIDE2020



12:33 AM · Jun 1, 2020 · [Twitter for Android](#)

*Note.* Source: Gizem C [@colorfulvenus], 2020.

## **Additional Data.**

### *Kala's storyline.*

- S1, E1: Kala is born into the cluster. She hears rain, although the weather is fine in Mumbai (the viewer knows that the rain comes from Berlin). Kala prays in the temple to Ganesha for clarity as she is unsure whether she wants to marry Rajan.
- S1, E2: Kala gets wooed at her reception dinner with a Bollywood dance from Rajan. When she is walking home, Wolfgang sees her walking in Berlin, and she sees him on her roof.
- S1, E3: Kala jokes about nerves before her wedding (“I’m getting married, not getting a lobotomy”) as Nomi is prepared for her lobotomy.
- S1, E4: Kala, Rajan and their families meet with wedding planners to go over the final details. She goes to temple again and is confronted about her in-laws by some believers. During the night she wakes up, because she hears people have in intercourse (the viewer knows Riley originally hears that). In consequences, Kala goes up to her roof, where she sings together with Wolfgang, while also visiting him in a Karaoke bar in Berlin.
- S1, E5: Kala is getting more nervous about the wedding and talks to her family, that plays down the issue. When she gets ready for bed she hears noises and complains to the voice she is hearing (the viewer knows its Wolfgang). Kala gets interrupted by her family. The next day the wedding starts, but Wolfgang appears naked and Kala faints.
- S1, E6: Kala must talk to Rajan about her wedding. While getting ready she visits Wolfgang in Berlin and tells him to leave her alone. It turns out Rajan is not mad and still wants to get married.

- S1, E7: Kala prays to Ganesha again about why he is sending her visions of Wolfgang. Wolfgang appears and they have a long talk about their lives and religion on Kala's roof and simultaneously a coffeeshop in Berlin.
- S1, E8: Kala is at the cinema with her family but feels like crying because she feels what Wolfgang is feeling. She excuses herself to go to the bathroom and visits Wolfgang, who is at Felix's hospital bed as he got shot. Wolfgang tells her about his relationship to his friend. On the next day, Rajan, Kala and their families meet with the wedding planners again. After that, Kala goes to pray as her father-in-law shows up and suggests she refuses the marriage. He gets stabbed in front of her at the temple by religious extremists, who do not like his policies
- S1, E9: Kala and Rajan talk to the police about what happened, and Kala helps her mother in-law pray for her husband in the hospital.
- S1, E10: Kala walks through the Holocaust Mahnmahl in Berlin. She consults her father whether she should tell Rajan that his father wanted her to cancel the marriage. Capheus and she have a talk about violence in his house and listens to Riley's father's concert.
- S1, E11: Kala confesses to Rajan in private that his father had reconsidered their marriage, but he remains unimpressed. She goes to the temple to pray again but extremist there make her so uncomfortable, that Will has to step in to help her.
- S1, E12: Wolfgang visits to say goodbye to her as he is about to kill his uncle. She shares her knowledge about chemicals with him as his revenge puts him in a dire situation and they kiss. Kala watches Wolfgang kill his uncles and he insists she should marry Rajan. In Iceland, a heartbroken Kala helps by sharing her pharmaceutical knowledge with Will, who is trying to wake the drugged Riley up.

- S2, E1 (Christmas special): Kala is on her honeymoon in Positano, but has not had sex with Rajan yet, which puts her under pressure. She visits Sun to talk about that. When Kala tries to sleep with Rajan she just ends up visiting Wolfgang. As she jumps up in shock, she ends up hurting Rajan, who has a serious talk with her that resolves the issues. Kala celebrates birthday with the cluster through visiting, feeling more relaxed. Back in Mumbai, Rajan and Kala look for an apartment. Around Christmas, Kala enjoys the snow in Berlin as she visits Wolfgang again. This leads to her wanting to through a fancy dinner on Christmas. When asked for the cause by her Hindu family, she says she felt like celebrating. The cluster visits and celebrates New Year's Eve together.
- S2, E2: Kala and Rajan have family over at the apartment and their fathers fight about politics. She shares her pharmaceutical knowledge with Riley to take care of Will in Amsterdam, who is drugged so that Whispers cannot find them.
- S2, E3: When Will meets Jonas, Kala visits and asks a few questions to understand the sensate connection better.
- S2, E4: Kala visits Wolfgang in Berlin. When going to the temple to pray, she gets caught up in demonstrations. She gets home exhausted and is greeted by an armed bodyguard as Rajan's family has received death threats.
- S2, E5: Kala talks to her father about why she is not fully happy when she should be. The newlyweds have another family dinner that ends in a discussion between their parents' political orientation. On another day, Kala confronts Rajan about reports of their medical company that do not add up.
- S2, E6: Kala wakes up in the middle of the night and has sex with Wolfgang. The next day she visits him to talk and says an affair does not align with her morals.
- S2, E7: Kala confronts Rajan about reports again. Sun visits her to talk about her rela-

tionship problems, when Rajan apologizes and promises to right this wrong.

- S2, E8: Kala shares her skills with Will, who is struggling with withdrawal. She asks him if he thinks she should just tell Rajan about everything that is going on. That night, Rajan comes home bloody but insists that everything is alright. Lito visits and conforms that Rajan is acting and not telling her the truth either.
- S2, E9: Kala's mother talks to her about if Kala and Rajan will start a family soon, which makes Kala uncomfortable.
- S2, E10: Kala grieves the death of Wills father with the others. She has almost figured out how to manufacture pills called blockers, so that Whispers cannot visit anymore. Kala visits Wolfgang and says that she will tell Rajan everything. They discuss how to meet in person.
- S2, E11: Kala tries to talk to Rajan, but he tells her he is involved in an investigation about political corruption in India and wants her to go to his apartment in Paris immediately for her own safety. While packing, Kala visits Wolfgang and they agree to meet in Paris. They tell each other that they love each other as Lila shows up. Kala alarms the others, but it is too late, and Wolfgang gets abducted by the BPO. Kala flies to Paris to help take Whispers into their custody.
- S2, E12 (Finale): The cluster works on a plan to destroy the BPO when Rajan shows up in his Paris apartment. They tell him about sensates. He is very understanding and helps them to exchange Whispers for Wolfgang. Thing go wrong and Whispers is taken to Italy by Lila. When the cluster tries to get him back, Kala is shot. Wolfgang and Rajan save her together and bond over that. After the BPO is eliminated, they all attend Nomi and Neets wedding, but Kala still has not decided between Wolfgang and Rajan. Both agree to a polyamorous relationship.