

(RE)ASSESSING THE ADAPTATION OF AUDIOVISUAL TABOO CONTENT: THE ROLE OF PARATEXTUAL INFORMATION

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Citation: Bucaria, C. (2024) “(Re)Assessing the Adaptation of Audiovisual Taboo Content: The Role of Paratextual Information”, in C. Bucaria, A.D. Mitzel and A. Sileo (eds) *Taboo in Language, Media, and Audiovisual Translation*, *mediAzioni* 43: A56-A76, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1974-4382/20516>, ISSN 1974-4382.

Abstract: This paper focuses on a recent shift in the adaptation of taboo language and content that has been happening over the last few years in the dubbing and subtitling of audiovisual content for the entertainment industry. While previous research on the cross-cultural adaptation of taboo language and subjects has pointed out that blatant examples of manipulation and censorship often occurred in dubbed and subtitled dialogue, this paper argues that recent changes in the distribution of audiovisual content – such as the global presence of streaming and on-demand platforms and an increased awareness from audiences – now tend to make it less likely for major cases of cross-cultural taboo manipulation to happen without going unnoticed or generating pushback. By looking at the cases of Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, the paper argues that the paratextual information available on the interfaces of streaming platforms – in the form of extra-textual tags and content advisories – reframes taboo content for global audiences in a less invasive way when compared to the heavy-handed, textual manipulation that was common in dubbing and subtitling in the age of (exclusively) linear TV. Examples from the Netflix and Amazon Prime Video English- and Italian-language interfaces are provided to support the idea that in these cases cultural and linguistic localization can play a crucial role in adapting taboo content for global audiences and in affecting their viewing choices.

Keywords: audiovisual translation; paratexts; interfaces; streaming platforms; rating systems; content advisories; trigger warnings.

1. Introduction

Taboo content and language have always been key, yet complicated, multifactorial aspects in the distribution of audiovisual products. While adapted versions of films and TV series are known to have been created for different audiences even intra-culturally – for example by either editing out entire scenes or bleeping swearwords for TV primetime or in-flight entertainment – it is the distribution across national borders that most often tests the boundaries of taboo acceptability from a lingua-cultural perspective. Needless to say, navigating the boundaries between linguistic accuracy and cultural adaptation is particularly challenging when operating between cultural contexts that do not share the same kind of sensitivity towards the same taboos. Indeed, work has been – and continues to be – done in the discipline of audiovisual translation investigating how interlinguistic adaptation processes have negotiated what is perceived as potentially disturbing or less-than-desirable content for audiences in different lingua-cultural contexts (among others, Pavesi and Malinverno 2000; Díaz-Cintas 2012; Díaz-Cintas *et al.* 2016; Valdeón 2020; Ávila-Cabrera 2023; Pavesi and Formentelli 2023). Evidence of manipulation and/or censorship in media texts has been found not only in contexts in which repressive political regimes and religious prescriptiveness predictably tend to thwart freedom of expression (e.g., Vandaele 2002; Alsharhan 2020; Yuan 2023), but also – more surprisingly – in democratic countries in which such freedom should, in theory, be guaranteed (for the Italian context see for example Bianchi 2008; Parini 2014; Zanotti 2016).

However, a recent shift should be acknowledged in the adaptation of taboo language and content as far as non-linear TV distribution is concerned. While traditional, linear distribution might still enforce, to some extent, the downplaying or even the complete omission of taboo words or references to the spheres of sexuality, illness, death, disability, religion, politics, etc. (Allan and Burrige 2006), most streaming platforms have implemented a detailed paratextual apparatus of tags, disclaimers, and content advisories that alert and guide subscribers in their viewing choices. For a number of reasons that will be detailed in the next sections, this system of extra-textual material has provided additional tools in the cross-cultural reframing of taboo content in both fictional and non-fictional programming, and in some cases has arguably replaced the heavy-handed textual manipulation that used to be the norm until a few years or decades ago. In the Italian context, specifically, the situation described above has been undoubtedly facilitated by legislative changes as well, with a gradual shift taking place toward self-regulation in media distribution. While for TV outlets self-regulation had already been in place thanks to 2002's "Codice di autoregolamentazione TV e Minori"¹ (Self-regulation code for TV and minors), preemptive censorship in films was definitively removed as recently as 2021. A new rating system² has replaced the previous system, which was put in place by a 1962 law and required preemptive clearance before a film could be distributed

¹ <https://www.mimit.gov.it/index.php/it/ministero/organismi/area-tutela-minori/codice-di-autoregolamentazione>

² <https://cinema.cultura.gov.it/cosa-facciamo/attivita-amministrative/tutela-dei-minori-classificazione>

in theaters. For territories in which a similar self-regulation system is in place, streaming platforms are therefore held accountable for providing ratings for their own programming that mirror the target country's approved ratings.

It seems particularly relevant to reassess the ways in which taboo language and content are repackaged for global distribution in this historical moment, in which taboo content is ever-present in fictional and non-fictional audiovisual offerings at the production end and in which, at the distribution end, streaming platforms largely subscribe to a policy of not directly altering taboos (see section 2). The landscape of the international distribution of localized content is further complicated by viewers' new demands and expectations as far as sensitive topics are concerned. These seem to sometimes represent possibly competing tensions, with on the one hand groups of vocal viewers keen on denouncing content manipulation or less than adequate translation choices in dubbing and subtitling, and, on the other, audience segments who demand the clear flagging of triggering subjects (such as rape and suicide), especially for the benefit of minors and trauma survivors.

In this context, this paper aims at taking stock of a shift that is in some ways independent of audiovisual localization, as the self-rating systems on streaming platforms are applied to content regardless of global distribution. At the same time, however, paratextual information about content available on such subscription services is an integral part of the user interface that also requires localization for the different territories in which these services are accessible, and its adaptation should therefore be studied as part of audiovisual translation (AVT) at large.

The next few sections will look at some of the ways in which taboo language and content are flagged on two of the most common streaming platforms available in Italy – Netflix and Amazon Prime Video – with the aim of both mapping these different systems and to call attention to how the localization of paratextual information (such as tags indicating genres and sensitive themes) is a key element in providing extra-textual guidance to programs containing depictions of taboo language and/or sensitive subjects meant in the widest possible sense. After describing the evolution of taboo content adaptation in audiovisual products (section 2), the paper will move on to stress the significance of paratextual information on streaming platforms and to provide a few examples of how these paratexts were adapted from English into Italian (section 3). I will argue that, although the situation might be different in countries/territories other than Europe, such paratextual information on streaming platforms is a form of intervention that has in part replaced the hands-on, textual manipulation of content that was much more common in AVT practice until a few years ago. Section 4 will offer some concluding remarks and ideas for future research in this field.

2. The cross-cultural adaptation of audiovisual taboo content: then and now

The cross-cultural manipulation of audiovisual texts – not just in terms of censorship, but, more in general, as a subtler form of cultural domestication –

has been abundantly documented in the literature (see Introduction). In Italy, this phenomenon can be traced back as far as the fascist regime's decision in the 1930s to ban/edit foreign-sounding productions, particularly the ones that were seen as threatening to the ideals of national identity and values supported by the regime (Mereu Keating 2016). Historically, dubbing has been seen as the AVT mode that has been most conducive to this kind of manipulation because of its ability to completely hide the original audio track through revoicing (Chaume 2018), thus providing ample leeway for toning-down strategies such as the use of euphemisms, omission, paraphrase, shifts in register, and standardization.

Television content in the age of linear TV has been particularly subject to this kind of intervention. On traditional TV, content has to fit into predetermined boxes, put in place not just by different cultural sensitivities but also by programming rules and conventions on certain networks, for specific audience segments and time slots. Additionally, in the past manipulation of source-language material was determined not only by the presence of themes or language perceived as disturbing per se, but also, in a number of cases, because of an objective mismatch between the source- and target-culture distribution systems. Famously, in Italy the animated series *The Simpsons* (1989-ongoing) was initially marketed as a children's program, and Italia 1, a terrestrial network part of the privately-owned Mediaset group mainly targeting younger viewers, aired the show in the afternoon, as opposed to the much later time slot offered by FOX in the United States (Barra 2011). A similar mismatch can be found for the series *Six feet Under* (2001-2005), an HBO production offering a surreal, often darkly humorous take on subjects such as death, mental illness, and relationships that was first aired in Italy on Italia 1, with evident consequences on the integrity of its adaptation through dubbing (Bucaria 2010).

Despite the fact that *Six Feet Under* was perhaps one extreme example of manipulation and presumably not all TV content was adapted with the same kind of abandon in the early to mid-2000s, research has shown that other series have undergone a similar fate (Chiaro 2007; Bucaria 2018) and that the manipulation approach was being routinely adopted in AVT practice in Italy, attracting scholarly attention and later even becoming part of "fan lore". For instance, two famous examples of manipulation commented on online blogs involve the popular series *How I met your mother* (2005-2014) and *Friends* (1994-2004), and how their Italian dubbing negotiated two examples of jokes based on political taboos – one mentioning Mussolini's assassination and the other referencing Silvio Berlusconi's morally questionable behavior while holding political office. In both examples, an explicit intent seems evident to purge the original dialogue of "uncomfortable" references to Italy's history or more recent political situation. It should be noted that *Friends* was originally aired on state-owned RAI and *How I met your mother* first found its way on Italian screens on Italia 1, a private network founded and owned by Berlusconi and his family. Similar examples of manipulation involving different kinds of taboos have reportedly been common in the adaptation of more recent audiovisual products as well, and might have been the result of – if not explicit ideological censorship from the commissioners – at least the individual translators' and adapters' self-censorship (e.g., Zaixi 2019).

Further evidence of the extensive manipulation approach in the Italian context – regardless of the presence of taboo elements – is provided by the dubbed version of the TV series *The Nanny* (*La Tata*, 1993-1999), which completely domesticated the premises of the show. Fran Drescher’s character (Fran Fine), a Jewish-American woman from Flushing (Queens, New York) was re-packaged as Francesca Cacace, an Italian immigrant from the Lazio region of Ciociaria (Frosinone). Not only were all references to New-York Jewish culture and language replaced by Italian realia or dialectal turns of phrase, but the familial relationships between the characters were also changed – Fran’s mother Sylvia became her aunt Assunta, while her grandmother Yetta became another aunt (Ferrari 2011). The dubbing adapters for the series decided that Italian viewers would not be able to “get” the culture-specificity of the original show and would therefore not enjoy the sitcom. However, regardless of the success of this domesticating approach – which no doubt contributed to create a huge following for the series over the years – it is undeniable that such an extreme approach, which was also previously adopted for the Roseanne Barr sitcom *Roseanne* (*Pappa e Ciccio*, 1988-1997),³ would probably not be viable in today’s more complex audiovisual distribution landscape.

The recent shift that this paper aims at illuminating is a partial moving away of more recent audiovisual adaptation practice from this kind of systematic and in some ways “anything goes” alteration of audiovisual content towards a more restrained approach to the cross-cultural adaptation of some of these products. While until a few decades ago dubbing dialogue adapters were not only free, but in some cases forced, to improvise target-language dialogue because of missing or inaccurate source-language scripts or because of difficulties in consulting adequate material to support their translation choices, recent changes have made this option no longer viable.⁴ In fact, in the age of streaming and on-demand services the decision to offer only a censored – or even too domesticated – localized version seems to go against the current general trend, which is to not omit taboo words and/or tone down dialogue, and not to arbitrarily cut out “disturbing” scenes completely.

Over recent years, a number of factors have contributed to what appears to be a diminished tolerance for manipulation and censorship in AVT practice, both from distributors and audiences. At the production/distribution end, the global reach of streaming platforms has made it possible for these services to exercise increased vigilance on how their content is adapted in a number of different target languages, arguably even more so as far as their own original productions are concerned (part of what Lobato (2019) calls “long-distance localization”). In the case of Netflix, for example, the company’s centralized localization policies are readily available on their Partner Help Center,⁵ on which Netflix’s localization providers across the globe can find detailed, language-specific

³ In the Italian version, Roseanne become Annarosa from Naples and she speaks with a slight Neapolitan accent.

⁴ “Il doppiaggio tra passato e presente: traduttori e dialoghetti a confronto”, roundtable discussion that took place at the University of Bologna’s Department of Interpreting and Translation, May 6th, 2024.

⁵ <https://partnerhelp.netflixstudios.com/hc/en-us>

guidelines on how to create subtitles, dubs and voice over tracks for the service's products. These guidelines also include specific instructions on what to do in the case of potentially offensive dialogue, stating that "Dialogue must never be censored. Expletives should be rendered as faithfully as possible".⁶ The company's declared zero tolerance for manipulation of the source-language content is also reiterated in the guidelines to AVT providers on how to find solutions to problematic adaptations from their freelance practitioners:

Translations and transcriptions should always be an accurate representation of the intent of the original content language without adding additional vulgarity or censorship.

Always match the tone of the original content, while remaining relevant to the target audience (e.g. replicate the tone, register, class, formality, etc. in the target language in an equivalent way).⁷

Amazon Prime Video has also adopted similar localization guidelines. While previously much more leeway was left to the professionals taking part in the adaptation process, choices on how to render taboo language and content have now been centralized by these corporations, as opposed to being left almost entirely to the national localization teams, like it used to be in the past. While I am not suggesting that this policy is enough to ensure that all products are devoid of manipulation, major cases of censorial intervention on the audiovisual texts themselves are now much more strictly monitored and likely to be flagged during the localization process.

An additional factor typifying the reduced tolerance towards manipulation in AVT practice is to be found at the receiving end of the localization process, i.e., viewers subscribing to these streaming services. The last few years have seen an increase in audience engagement and empowerment in providing feedback for dubbed and subtitled products, which translates into stricter surveillance on the localized versions from certain audience segments through social media and other online outlets, such as blogs and YouTube. Combined with the immediate access to the source-language versions granted by digitally distributed content, this growing empowerment afforded by social media and the Web 2.0 virtually to all users of any service or product has contributed to making the distributors of audiovisual content more accountable for their choices in terms of the manipulation of taboo elements and language (Bucaria 2019), but also, more in general, towards localized versions that are considered problematic on other levels (e.g., Bucaria 2023).

This ever-evolving landscape of audiovisual localization and distribution in the era of streaming services begs the question of what happens when the copious amounts of taboo language and content currently available on these platforms travel cross-culturally. As mentioned in the introduction, this appears to be a particularly relevant question in a market in which competing tensions seem to

⁶ From the "Italian Timed Text Style Guide" for subtitles, available at this link: <https://partnerhelp.netflixstudios.com/hc/en-us/articles/215349898-Italian-Timed-Text-Style-Guide>

⁷ <https://partnerhelp.netflixstudios.com/hc/en-us/articles/360050602953-Translation-Offensive-Translation-Error-Text->

be at play. On the one hand, there are the sheer quantity of taboo content available on streaming platforms across different genres (from comedy and drama to adult animation, stand-up comedy and true crime documentaries) and these providers' self-branding as unequivocal bastions of "edgy" and "unfiltered" content (see anti-censorship guidelines above). At the other end of this balancing act are viewers' expectations and/or demands for said unfiltered content to remain unaltered during the localization process, and, at the same time, to also mediate potentially disturbing content for the benefit of particularly vulnerable audience segments.

This paper argues that an attempt to square this localization circle comes in the form of extra-textual intervention rather than, as it was more often the case in the past, through textual manipulation per se. Since both the commissioners and the end-users of the localized versions are likely to be especially vigilant of major departures from the source-language material, target-language dialogues are likely to be left more "intact", while the flagging of taboo language and sensitive subjects happens extra-textually, to be exact through the paratextual information available as part of a program's description on the user interface. Naturally, the implication here is not that taboos are not any longer downplayed or omitted across all target languages – in fact, some studies (e.g., Alsharhan 2020) suggest that in certain lingua-cultural contexts audiovisual translators still consistently resort to euphemizing as a strategy to render taboo language. However – at least in the European context – what the current landscape of global audiovisual distribution seems to shy away from is the systematic and overt alteration of source-language content, because it would pose too big a risk of repercussions were these instances to be detected and exposed.

The remaining part of the paper will describe the ways in which two streaming platforms – Netflix and Amazon Prime Video (APV) – use paratextual information to guide subscribers in their viewing choices when it comes to taboo language and themes present in their products, and will comment on the importance of considering these paratexts as a key part of the audiovisual localization process.

3. Paratextual elements in audiovisual localization

In recent years, a considerable amount of scholarship on paratexts has come from the discipline of media studies, which has applied the original conceptualization of book paratexts by French literary theorist Gérard Genette (1997) to media texts such as films and TV series. Notably, Gray (2010) introduced the distinction between, on the one hand, industry-created promotional paratexts such as posters, trailers, teasers, merchandise, and other material released by the creators and distributors of media texts, and, on the other hand, fan-created paratexts, such as fanfiction and video mash-ups, which fans create for, among others, affective and community-building reasons.

Similarly to literary paratexts, media paratexts may have a number of different functions, that go from offering a summary of the content of a media product, such as film or TV synopses, to enticing potential viewers to go to the

movie theater or stream online content. For example, titles, posters, trailers, and other visuals all perform such “appellative” function, in Nord’s terminology (2006). Gray labels these “entryway paratexts”, as they often are the first contact that audiences have with the “main text” (for example a film or TV series), and as such are powerful tools in framing and contributing to the decoding of the media text that they anticipate or around which they are placed. More in general, carefully packaged paratexts can prime specific readings and interpretations, and create expectations and associations with other similar or related media products.

Despite the importance of paratexts in intercultural communication, less attention has been devoted to these crucial texts by (audiovisual) translation scholars (Bucaria and Batchelor 2023), with some exceptions including Batchelor’s book-length study of paratexts and translation (2018), studies by Ross (2013) and Bucaria (2021) on the adaptation of film titles, and O’Sullivan’s research on the paratextual use of retranslations on DVD extras and covers (2018). In particular, rarely has attention been paid to the role played by paratextual elements in the cross-cultural adaptation of audiovisual taboo content.

By specifically focusing on the ways in which streaming platforms localize their interfaces for the global consumption of sensitive content, this paper acknowledges the importance of these entryway paratexts, because, as Johnson notes, “online TV interfaces also play a paratextual role in shaping our encounters with media texts” (2019: 111). The ephemeral paratextual material (Grainge 2011; Pesce and Noto 2016) that accompanies the content available on streaming platforms is for all intents and purposes an integral part of the paratextual apparatus that may affect viewers’ choices. These include not only trailers, teasers, cast interviews or specials, but also, significantly, content warnings, advisories, and rating systems that alert viewers about the potentially disturbing elements that some of this content depicts.⁸ Sections 3.1 and 3.2 will focus, respectively, on tags, rating systems, and additional paratexts that are used to reframe taboo or sensitive content.

3.1. Tags and rating systems

In compliance with the self-regulating mechanism by which media outlets have to provide ratings and advisories for their own content (see Introduction), on both Netflix and APV content is categorized both by genre and maturity ratings, and content advisories describing the potentially disturbing elements are also provided. Additionally, both Netflix and APV use tags in the form of keywords, usually describing the product’s tone. The rest of this section will provide more detailed examples for each platform in the English and Italian interfaces. It should be noted that the examples provided here are not meant as a statistically

⁸ It should be noted that on streaming and on-demand platforms, personalized recommendations (e.g., “you may also like” or “more like this”) based on users’ history and specific algorithm-created categories can also be considered as paratextual “settings” that guide viewers’ experience and enjoyment – albeit perhaps more implicitly – however, this is beyond the scope of the present paper.

relevant selection, but merely as an exploratory illustration of the kind of analysis that can be carried out about the adaptation of paratextual information. Further studies might want to include a more representative sample, for example in terms of genres and formats.

Also worth noting is the fact that the concept of “taboo” adopted for the purposes of this paper is as wide as the tags and content advisories provided by the two platforms. In other words, both the type of taboo (e.g., sex, violence, racial stereotypes, rape, suicide) and its various manifestations (for example visual and/or plot-related content, as well as sensitive language in the form of offensive and derogatory terms) were not further categorized by the researcher but simply commented on based on the platforms’ self-identified content labels and advisories.

3.1.1. Netflix

For each of its products, the Netflix interface provides users with a very short description of the plot (sometimes just an endorsement from a critic or entertainment publication), accompanied by information on year of production, cast members, director(s)/creator(s), and in some cases the ranking in the Netflix TOP10 list (for example, “#9 in TV Shows Today”). Genres are used to classify content and can be used to search the platform for similar content by selecting the hyperlinked words. Genre descriptions tend to be quite detailed, not being limited to just “drama”, “comedy”, “thriller”, etc., but offering more nuanced indications, including, for example, the origin of the product and whether it’s a TV show, film, stand-up comedy special, documentary, docuseries, etc.

A maturity rating is always present, usually accompanied by a list of elements that are flagged as potentially problematic, such as “violence”, “sex”, “nudity”, “language”, “sexual violence”, “suicide”, “domestic abuse”. Less commonly, the more generic tags “mature themes” and “suggestive content” are also used. By selecting the maturity rating, users are linked to a detailed description⁹ of the maturity rating system applied for their country. In the case of Italy, the classifications used by Netflix are: ALL, 7+, 10+, 13+, 16+, 18+, with the last two ratings being grouped into the category “Recommended for Adults”. Additional information is also provided on how the content tags might change depending on different seasons of the same TV series. This description also explains that, once the program starts, the age rating and content tags appear on the left-hand top corner of the screen, as well as providing instructions on how to set a maturity rating on a user profile. Information available at the same link further explains that “Netflix sets maturity ratings by the frequency and impact of mature content in a title, such as the amount of violence, sex, adult language, nudity, or substance use that may be present”.

One of the most interesting among Netflix’s paratextual information – and perhaps the most directly relevant aspect in terms of translation per se – is the use of tags (usually one or more adjectives) to position the platform’s content in

⁹ The content appears in the language selected by the user as their display language: <https://help.netflix.com/en/node/2064>

terms of general tone. For example, *Bridgerton* is “swoonworthy, witty, emotional” (“travolgente, arguto, emozionante”), *The Big Bang Theory* is “quirky” (“bizzarro”), and *Black Mirror* is “mind-bending, ominous” (“spiazzante, inquietante”). These items link to recommendations to similar products – for example by selecting “irreverent”, users are shown more content containing this tag.

By way of example and without any pretense of exhaustiveness, Tables 1 and 2 offer the two sets of paratextual information, in English and Italian, provided by Netflix for the series *After Life* and *Big Mouth*, both containing copious amounts of taboo language and content and both rated 16+.

Table 1. Netflix’s paratextual information for *After Life*.

	English	Italian
Description	This darkly comedic series about a widower struggling with the meaning of life was created by and stars Ricky Gervais .	Un giornalista cerca di superare la morte della moglie trasformandosi in un burbero , nel tentativo di tenere lontane le persone che cercano di aiutarlo. ¹⁰
Genres / Generi	TV Dramas, British, TV Comedies	Drammi TV, Britannico, Commedie TV
This show is: / Caratteristiche	Deadpan, Witty, Irreverent	Umorismo inglese, Arguto, Irriverente
Maturity rating / Classificazione per età	16+ language, substances, sexual violence, suicide. Recommended for ages 16 and up.	16+ linguaggio, uso di droga, violenza sessuale, suicidio. Non adatto ai minori di 16 anni.

After Life is a series created by British comedian Ricky Gervais that revolves around the main character’s grief after his wife dies of cancer. Tony, Gervais’ character, is so grief-stricken after his wife’s death that he turns into a particularly unfiltered version of himself, always saying whatever crosses his mind, with little concern for other people’s feelings. In true Gervais style, this attitude generates frequent darkly funny situations, but also gloomy explorations of a person’s reaction to grief, such as suicidal ideation. The series is rated 16+ for the presence of the following elements: language, substances, sexual violence and suicide. The keywords used to describe the show are “deadpan” (“umorismo inglese”), “witty” (“arguto”), and “irreverent” (“irriverente”), and it should be noted that the show is also tagged as “Dark Comedy” (“Commedia cupa”) in the preview box (mobile version), although for some reason not in the program’s description per se. Interestingly, while “witty” and “irreverent” were rendered in Italian with a close equivalent (“arguto” and “irriverente” respectively), the

¹⁰ “A journalist tries to get over his wife’s death by turning into a grouch, in an attempt to keep people away who are trying to help him”.

modifier “deadpan” is adapted in Italian as “umorismo inglese” (“British/English humor”). While it might fit this particular show, this tag is also used on the platform for non-British productions such as, among others, *BoJack Horseman*, *Orange is the New Black*, and the Iliza Schlesinger film *Good on Paper*. One might therefore wonder whether the Italian translation – which is arguably only a partial, quite narrow equivalent for the word “deadpan” – might potentially skew viewers’ expectations and consequently affect their choice whether or not to watch products containing this tag.

Also interesting in terms of translation is the fact that the short description for this series is different in the two languages, with the English one further highlighting the show’s potentially controversial content by means of the phrase “darkly comedic”, which is not present in the Italian version. Moreover, the English version uses Ricky Gervais’ name to create an association with his specific brand of very provocative, no-filter comedy, with which audiences might be familiar from the comedian’s stints as host of the Golden Globe Awards or, more in general, from his social media presence. The Italian version does not mention Gervais’ name, thus failing to prime direct associations with that specific brand of taboo comedy.

Big Mouth is an animated comedy series created by Nick Kroll, Andrew Goldberg, Mark Levin and Jennifer Flackett, and addresses, in quite an explicit way, the disruptive changes brought on by puberty in a group of teenagers under the guidance of their own private “hormone monsters”. The series is described as “raunchy, witty, quirky” and recommended for people 16 and over because of “sex, nudity, language”.

Table 2. Netflix’s paratextual information for *Big Mouth*.

	English	Italian
Description	Powered by wicked humor , a stellar cast and genuine heart, this NSFW coming-of-age comedy earned multiple Emmy nods for Outstanding Animated Program.	Con un umorismo perverso , un cast stellare e uno spirito genuino, questa commedia di formazione per un pubblico adulto ha vinto vari Emmy come Miglior programma animato. ¹¹
Genres / Generi	Sitcoms, TV Comedies, US TV Shows	Sitcom, Commedie TV, Serie TV USA
This show is: / Caratteristiche	Raunchy, Witty, Quirky	Ammiccante, Arguto, Bizarro
Maturity rating / Clasificazione per età	16+ sex, nudity, language. Recommended for ages 16 and up.	16+ sesso, nudità, linguaggio. Non adatto ai minori di 16 anni.

¹¹ “With perverse humor, a stellar cast and a genuine spirit, this coming-of-age comedy for an adult audience won various Emmys as Best Animated Program”.

As in the case of *After Life*, the Italian translation of specific tags and keywords offers interesting observations on the possible associations created in potential viewers. For example, the adjective “raunchy” is localized with the Italian adjective “ammiccante”, meaning “suggestive” or “allusive”, from the verb “ammiccare”, literally “to wink” but also metaphorically “to allude/refer to”. However, “raunchy” – used on Netflix to describe films such as *Bridesmaids*, *Superbad*, and *The Hangover*, series such as *Sex education* and *Shameless*, and several stand-up comedy specials by comedians such as Amy Schumer, Ali Wong and Sarah Silverman – arguably denotes content that is “sexually explicit, vulgar, obscene”, (often in a comedic, exaggerated way), and not just “allusive”, which might be read here as a slightly euphemistic solution.

The description for the show – which, unlike the one for *After Life*, appears to be a translation of the same English text – also provides material for observations on the localization of this paratextual information. While the acronym “NSFW” (Not Safe For Work) is rendered with the acceptable functional equivalent “per un pubblico adulto” (“for an adult audience”), the expression “wicked humor” is adapted as “umorismo perverso”, which literally translates as “perverse (in the sense of morally deviant/twisted) humor”, arguably a more judgmental take on this particular brand of comedy than would have been achieved through different adjectives, such as “audace” or “malizioso” (naughty, mischievous).

A more general look at the 16+ and 18+ offerings on Netflix reveals that other tags and keywords used to flag taboo subjects are, for example, “offbeat” / “anticonformistico” (non-conformist, unconventional), “quirky” / “bizzarro” (strange, bizarre), “witty” / “arguto” (witty, clever), “gritty” / “crudo” (raw, in the sense of realistic), “provocative” / “provocatorio” (provocative), “no filter” / “senza filtri” (without filters), “ominous” / “inquietante” (disturbing, unsettling), and “dark” / “cupo” (dark).

3.1.2 Amazon Prime Video (APV)

APV’s paratextual information includes a synopsis of the product, year of production, genre(s), a maturity rating and, in some cases, additional information on award-winning films or TV series (e.g. “OSCAR® 6X winner” or “GOLDEN GLOBES® 3X winner”). Genre tags appear to be more conventional and broader than the ones used by Netflix (e.g., drama, suspense, horror, thriller, unscripted, kids, young adult audience, comedy, romance), but, similarly to Netflix, users can select them for suggestions on similar content in that genre. APV uses the following maturity ratings: Kids (All), Older Kids (7+), Teens (13+), Young adults (16+), and Adults (18+). As opposed to the Netflix interface, however, it takes much more effort to find this information, which is available in a subsection of the “help” section accessible from the user profile called “Content grievance and complaints”.¹² This subsection lists maturity ratings for some of the countries in which APV is available, but does not include further information on the rationale underlying the platform’s use of these

¹² <https://www.primevideo.com/help?nodeId=GFGQU3WYEG6FSJFJ>

ratings. Overall, APV's approach to communicating their ratings policy appears to be less transparent than Netflix's. However, contrary to Netflix, in the case of TV series APV displays the rating for each episode next to its synopsis and this provides a more differentiated assessment depending on each episode's content and themes.

Tags describing the tone of a product are not used across the board on APV (although they can be found for some of their content),¹³ nor do they link to similar content on the platform. Some of the tags that relate to the presence of potentially taboo subjects partially overlap with Netflix's and are adapted with the same Italian equivalents, such as "dark" ("cupo"), "ominous" ("inquietante"), "frightening" ("spaventoso"), "gritty" ("crudo"). It is worth noting that vulgar content of a sexual nature is usually tagged as "coarse" / "grossolano" (rough, vulgar), instead of "raunchy" / "ammiccante". While the APV tag is arguably a more general description of this kind of content than "raunchy", the Italian adaptation (*grossolano*) seems to be a closer transposition.

A separate "Details" tab contains information on cast members, director(s)/creator(s), audio tracks and subtitles, and content advisories. The latter appear to be less varied than Netflix's, as content tagged as 13+, 16+ and 18+ usually contains combinations of the same 8 advisories: violence, frightening scenes, foul language, nudity, sexual content, smoking, alcohol use, and substance use. APV's content advisories seem to be concerned with the same broad spheres of taboos as Netflix, although APV adds a further category, "smoking", that to the best of my knowledge Netflix does not flag as problematic. Series synopses tend to be longer and more descriptive on APV as opposed to Netflix, perhaps as a way to offset the absence of tone tags for much of the content on this platform.

Table 3. APV's paratextual information for *Fleabag*.

	English	Italian
S1 Description	<i>Fleabag</i> is a hilarious and poignant window into the mind of a dry-witted, sexual, angry, grief-riddled woman, as she hurls herself at modern living in London. Award-winning playwright Phoebe Waller-Bridge writes and stars as <i>Fleabag</i> , an unfiltered woman trying to heal , while rejecting anyone who tries to help her and keeping up her bravado all along.	<i>Fleabag</i> è un'esilarante e intensa finestra nella mente di una londinese sarcastica, sensuale, arrabbiata e straziata dal dolore . La pluripremiata commediografa Phoebe Waller-Bridge ha scritto e recitato nel ruolo di protagonista di <i>Fleabag</i> , una donna priva di filtri inibitori che cerca di superare un lutto , ma si ostina ed allontana chiunque tenti di aiutarla mantenendo un atteggiamento spavaldo. ¹⁴

¹³ It was not possible to immediately identify the rationale for the choice to include tone tags for some products and not others.

¹⁴ "*Fleabag* is a hilarious and intense window into the life of a woman from London who is sarcastic, sensual, angry and grief-riddled. Multiple award-winning playwright Phoebe Waller-

Genres / Generi	S1: Comedy S2: Comedy, Drama	S1: Commedia S2: Commedia, Drammatici
Maturity rating / Clasificazione per età	S1: 18+ nudity, violence, alcohol use, smoking, foul language, sexual content S2: 16+ nudity, violence, alcohol use, smoking, foul language, sexual content	S1: 18+ nudità, violenza, uso di alcol, scene con fumatori, linguaggio volgare, contenuto sessuale S2: 16+ nudità, violenza, uso di alcol, scene con fumatori, linguaggio volgare, contenuto sessuale

Table 3 summarizes some of the paratextual information available for the series *Fleabag*, an internationally successful comedy/drama series created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge – who also stars in the titular role – and focusing on the protagonist’s often disastrous approach to the relationships in her life. In this case, variations are noticeable between the two seasons of the show, with the genre tag “drama” being added to the second season and the maturity rating being lowered from 18+ to 16+ from season 1 to season 2, despite content advisories remaining unchanged. The show’s synopsis also includes useful keywords that offer more context on the series and its tone. The adjectives used to describe *Fleabag* herself seem to be particularly relevant to confirm the content advisories for the series: she is described as “dry-witted” (“sarcastica”), “sexual” (“sensuale”), “angry” (“arrabbiata”), “grief-riddled” (“straziata dal dolore”), and “unfiltered” (“priva di filtri inibitori”). The Italian adaptation is mostly close to the English-language description of *Fleabag*, with the exception of the word “sexual”, rendered instead as “sensuale” (sensual), which arguably euphemizes the explicitly sexual nature of some of the protagonist’s encounters and comments in the form of asides to the audience. Notably, unlike the Ricky Gervais case discussed above, Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s maternity of the show is fully acknowledged in both synopses as paratextually relevant information for viewers. As an additional point of interest, it should be noted that whether or not the use of less adherent, seemingly euphemistic adaptations for some of these adjectives (e.g., “sensuale” instead of “sexual” and “ammiccante” for “raunchy” in examples from Netflix) are the result of a conscious attempt at edulcorating the content or simply a consequence of oversights is difficult to assess without further investigation into the roles and workflow for the adaptation of these paratexts. Indeed, particularly as far as synopses are concerned, further research is needed to understand who the translators are that are tasked with adapting these paratexts – are they human translators? are they the same translators responsible for adapting the series/film/documentary in question? – and whether or not further quality control is provided before the content is made available on the platforms.

Bridge wrote and starred as *Fleabag*, a woman without filters who is trying to get over a person’s death, but is driving everyone away who tries to help her by keeping up her bold attitude”.

Most examples discussed above for both platforms refer to original content, i.e., cases in which Netflix and Amazon Studios are both producers and distributors of their own content. However, streaming platforms also distribute a considerable amount of content that they did not originally produce and that is sometimes simultaneously available on other platforms as well. While some of this content receives similar maturity ratings on both platforms – the series *The Good Doctor* and *Young Sheldon*, for instance, are rated 16+ and 13+ respectively on both Netflix and APV – a cursory look at other examples reveals some discrepancies. The film *Fight Club* is rated 16+ on Netflix (for “violence and self-harm”) but 18+ on APV (for “nudity, violence, substance use, alcohol use, smoking, foul language, sexual content”). The series *The Office* (US version) is recommended for people 13 and over on Netflix (no content advisory) but for people 16 and over on APV (“substance use, foul language, sexual content”); conversely, Netflix assigns “teen” series *Riverdale*¹⁵ a much higher rating (16+) than APV (7+). If we look beyond the two platforms considered here, the picture becomes even more varied. For example, *The Big Bang Theory* is rated 16+ on APV (“violence, alcohol use, foul language, sexual content”), 13+ on Netflix (“sex”) and PT (per tutti – “for all”) on SKY. The film *The Favourite* is 18+ on APV (“Nudity, violence, alcohol use, smoking, foul language, sexual content”), 16+ on Disney+, and 13+ on Netflix (“violence, sex, substances, self-harm, mature themes”). Different maturity ratings in some cases imply a change in the recommended age bracket across different platforms. This means, for example, that *Riverdale* is considered “Recommended for adults” according to Netflix ratings but “safe” for Older Kids (7+) according to APV.¹⁶

While further, more systematic research would be needed to assess whether some platforms are stricter than others in applying their maturity ratings and advisories for similar content, it seems likely that a certain level of subjectivity is at play in how these ratings (re)frame taboo content for the same national audience and potentially impact subscribers’ viewing choices.

3.2. Other disclaimers and trigger warnings

Other forms of paratextual information may be used in order to flag potentially disturbing elements. For particularly sensitive content, platforms sometimes choose to pair their rating system and content advisories with additional materials that function as trigger warnings and disclaimers. As with the paratextual information addressed in the previous section, the underlying idea is that the flagging of taboo subjects is performed extra-textually as opposed to hands-on intervention on the products’ dialogue and/or scenes. For international distribution, platforms with a global reach sometimes localize such paratexts for national audiences.

Recent examples of this strategy on Netflix include additional material provided for the drama series *13 Reasons Why*, which, over four seasons, tells the story of the ways which rape and suicide affect the lives of a group of American

¹⁵ *Riverdale* is available on APV only for seasons 4 through 6.

¹⁶ I am very grateful to Marilinda Malaspina for her help in collecting these examples.

teenagers. In addition to the 16+ rating for “violence, sex, substances, sexual violence, suicide”, and tags describing the show as “dark, suspenseful, emotional”, a “content warning” is also present stating that:

This series contains scenes that viewers may find disturbing, including graphic depictions of sexual assault, substance abuse, and suicide. If you or anyone you know need support or crisis resources, please go to 13ReasonsWhy.info for more information.

When it first appeared in 2017, the series became controversial with some viewers because of its very raw depictions of rape and suicide in a group of teenagers, and especially because viewers felt that Netflix was not offering viewers sufficiently accurate trigger warnings prior to watching the show. As often happens, the warning above was therefore added as a consequence of complaints from viewers. Currently, the first episode of each season also includes another form of content warning: for the first three seasons it’s a brief video presentation – both dubbed and subtitled into Italian – featuring the main cast members. The video addresses the importance of talking about the issues depicted in the show, but also alerts viewers that they might want to watch the series with a “trusted adult”. The actors also provide contact information for the benefit of people who are struggling with similar issues. For season 4, a warning to the same effect is presented as on-screen text with subtitles in Italian. This case serves as a further example of how some distributors of audiovisual content now choose to be more receptive to “grassroot” initiatives of this kind from their subscribers.

The horror anthology series *Them* on APV is rated 18+ for “nudity, violence, frightening scenes, substance use, smoking, foul language, sexual content”. The first season is set in the early 1950s, when a black family – the Emorys – moves into a white neighborhood and faces extreme racism from their neighbors as well as being the victims of supernatural forces that start threatening their lives. Reportedly (Braxton 2021), *Them* spurred mixed reactions from critics and viewers because of its depiction of extreme racial violence, especially in the wake of recurring incidents of real-life brutality toward black Americans in the United States and the subsequent Black Lives Matter movement. In addition to the standard content advisories, APV chose to add the following on-screen warning at the beginning of season 1’s episode 5, which contains a particularly gruesome depiction of violent and traumatic events in the Emorys’ back story. In this case, the warning is not subtitled into Italian.

The following program contains scenes that display graphic content and violence, including sexual violence and violence against a minor. Viewer discretion is advised. / To hear from the creator and the cast, please visit the series page for bonus behind-the-scenes commentary.

Similar warnings have been recently adopted by platforms not only for modern-day productions, but also for older content that contains outdated and problematic depictions or treatment of issues concerning racist stereotypes and the representation of minority identities. Famously, Disney+ has included a

disclaimer for animated films such as *Dumbo* (1941), *Peter Pan* (1953), and *The Aristocats* (1970), in which some problematic depictions are present regarding racial stereotypes, sometimes used for comedic or lighthearted purposes. According to the warning, a similar version of which is also available on the company's website,¹⁷ this choice aims to contextualize such harmful depictions and stereotypes: "rather than remove this content, we want to acknowledge its harmful impact, learn from it, and spark conversation to create a more inclusive future together". The warning is translated in different languages for the localized versions of the Disney+ user interface.

Other outlets have adopted a similar "contextualizing" strategy. HBO Max, for example, made headlines in 2020 (Spangler 2020) when the platform temporarily removed the film *Gone with the Wind* (1939) because of its racist and stereotypical depictions of enslaved black people. The film, however, was made available again two weeks later with the addition of an explanatory video playing before the film. In the video, film and media scholar Jacqueline Stewart offers context on the time period depicted in the film (1860s) and the time during which the film was created and distributed originally. While stating that "the film's treatment of this world through a lens of nostalgia denies the horrors of slavery", Stewart further explains that "it is important that classic Hollywood films are available to us in their original form for viewing and discussion". *Gone with the Wind* is currently available in Italy on SKY on demand and its streaming service NOW with a parental guidance warning ("Bambini accompagnati"). However, no other warning or disclaimer appears before the film. This is especially surprising, considering that the Italian dubbed track for the film contains a much discussed, highly stereotypical rendition of the dialogue performed by the black actors, which is now considered extremely offensive.

This case points to interesting observations about the cross-cultural mediation of taboos in audiovisual content. On the one hand, there is one of the obvious corollaries of the centralized, "long-distance localization" policy (Lobato 2019) adopted by streaming platforms. When it comes to original productions, taboo content seems to be mediated through (mostly) consistent paratextual strategies that are applied to the different user interfaces available in the different territories, as opposed to taboo content distributed as part of services that are not globally available. In the latter case, taboo mediation policies are more likely to be affected by local sensitivities (see racism in the case of *Gone with the Wind*), which might not match the ones according to which taboos were flagged "at home" in the first place. However, the cultural specificity of some taboos and/or sensitive subjects is to be taken into consideration even when global platforms localize their own content. For example, season 4 of the Netflix series *Stranger Things* premiered on the platform just a few days after the 2022 Uvalde, Texas, school shooting, which left 22 people dead. Because of similarities in the first scenes of season 4's first episode, Netflix added a warning stating that "viewers may find the opening scene of episode one distressing" and included an additional warning in the episode description: "Warning: Contains graphic violence involving children". The warning was included only for viewers

¹⁷ www.Disney.com/StoriesMatter

accessing the service from the United States (Cain 2022), which can be seen as confirmation not only of the sliding, culture-specific relevance of taboos but also of the time sensitive nature of certain content warnings.

In the case of the paratextual information described above, it should be noted that platforms implement similar systems because they are legally required to do so and because they provide a sort of additional safety net against bad publicity. While it would be naïve to think that these corporations act exclusively in the interest of their subscribers, this extra-textual guidance system seems to have the benefit of placing more agency onto the viewers, albeit in a partially illusory way (Johnson 2019: 113-115). If the textual manipulation/censorship system in a way infantilizes audiences by preemptively deciding for them what they can or cannot be exposed to, keywords, content advisories and trigger warnings allow subscribers to make informed decisions based on personal preferences and sensitivities or simply on the specific circumstances in which they are using the service (for example in the presence of minors or other vulnerable people).

4. Conclusions

The paper has posited that a shift has been under way in the cross-cultural localization of audiovisual content on streaming platforms, which accomplishes the mediation of taboo or sensitive subjects not necessarily through “traditional” means such as textual manipulation and censorship, but through the use of paratextual information on the platforms’ interfaces, such as maturity ratings, tags, and content advisories. With examples from the two streaming platforms Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, the paper has illustrated the paratextual apparatuses used by each service – a combination of maturity ratings, content and tone tags, and warnings – to highlight how extra-textual information is used as a tool to guide subscribers in their viewing choices in the cases of products containing potentially sensitive subjects. Despite a certain level of subjectivity in the different disclaimers and rating systems used across different platforms, this kind of extra-textual intervention to mediate taboos can be interpreted as a step forward in the localization of audiovisual content when compared to the sometimes severe textual manipulation strategies that had been adopted in the age of exclusively linear TV. Indeed, this extra-textual guidance system may have the advantage of putting some agency back onto the viewers, without infantilizing audiences by choosing for them what kind of content they can be exposed to. As mentioned above, the implication is not that manipulation (for example in the form of self-censorship) no longer happens, but that in the case of streaming services it might happen in a less systematic, all-encompassing way, and that more vigilance may be applied to the individual choices of translators and dialogue adapters. In fact, further research may want to focus on a more systematic analysis of whether or not the streaming platforms’ no-censoring guidelines are indeed heeded in the linguistic and cultural localization process.

The paper has also called attention to the crucial role potentially played by the cross-cultural adaptation of this kind of paratextual information present on

the viewer interface, an area that has been rarely considered by audiovisual translation scholars in a paratextual framework. While the present paper is meant as an exploratory study limited to the English- and Italian-language interfaces, it has posited that the ways in which paratextual information such as tags, keywords and synopses are translated (or not translated) in different languages are likely to have a significant role in the subscribers' viewing choices when it comes to taboo content. In this respect, more extensive scholarship is needed not only to explore different language combinations and the culture-specificity of taboo-flagging keywords, but also to empirically investigate if and how audiences in different territories engage with paratextual information and to what extent it influences their viewing preferences and choices.

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