

Watching TV Series in Distance Education during the Periods of Pandemic and Martial Law

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to hypothesize that the viewing of TV series by students, future creators of TV series, during the period of distance learning in conditions of restrictions and prohibitions, namely during the pandemic (2020-2021) and martial law (Russian-Ukrainian war, 2022) can become a segment of the professional educational model and one of the algorithms of crisis educational management in TV series production. The study is based on survey, comparison and content analysis methods. The target audience of the study are professional artists and media people, as well as students, i.e. future directors, screenwriters, cameramen, actors, editors, journalists, producers and advertisers. It allowed us to determine the motivation of the target audience regarding the frequency of watching TV series for the period under study, their professional interest and the choice of thematic, stylistic and genre aspects of the creation of TV series in Ukraine. The authors of the article claim that the research data represent essential empirical material that can be used in the period of distance learning as practical cases within the disciplines of the specialty for educational institutions that train specialists in "audiovisual arts and production" and "journalism", namely, future creators of TV series.

Keywords: TV series, distance learning, educational management, pandemic, martial law

1. Introduction

People love TV series due to their human nature. Someone was lucky enough to meet them for the first time when their parents told fairy tales at night, someone stopped reading blockbusters to watch them via smartphone, someone planned their day according to Netflix premieres, and someone wanted to create TV series because it's their business or future profession. More than 30 years have passed since the release of the first Ukrainian-language TV series in Ukraine ("The right time always comes" ("Chas zbyraty kaminnia"), "Trap" ("Pastka"), "Garden of Hethsemane" ("Sad Hetsymans'kyi"), "Love Island" ("Ostriv liubovi"), "Roksolana"), and mass production of TV series, which were broadcast exclusively in Ukrainian, has begun since October 2018, when the Law ("On Amendments to Some Laws of Ukraine on Language of audiovisual (electronic) mass media") came into force. It referred to the provision of video products on Ukrainian national TV channels, which would contain at least 75% of Ukrainian-language content. The study of this law is also included in the curricula of various Ukrainian schools of journalism, film and television, as they prepare future directors and screenwriters, cameramen and actors, editors, journalists, producers, advertisers, and ultimately those who will create and promote Ukrainian TV series all over the world in the future. The Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war have radically changed people's perceptions of leisure and work, private life, distance in communication, opportunities for education and self-perception during quarantine, forced restrictions, prohibitions, "red zones", refugee flows, evacuation, occupation, air raids and hostilities. For many Ukrainians, it

became possible to maintain their own comfort zone during this period by watching TV series, including those that contained stories about the pandemic (Karimi, 2021), or were just becoming a story about the Russian-Ukrainian war (Tyler, 2022).

This situation was also applicable to those who tried to find their own model of confronting the circumstances, given the professional interests of TV series. We mean those who create TV series in Ukraine, i.e. both professional artists and media people, and those who will replace them, namely, the students of top universities, who entered ten most popular universities in 2021, particularly future directors and screenwriters, cameramen and actors, editors, journalists, producers, advertisers, who formed the target audience of this study at large. Therefore, the authors were interested primarily in how such audience see themselves and their professional tasks in these times, which TV series attracted most of their attention, what the motivation of respondents to choose TV series to watch during quarantine and martial law was like, and most importantly, how noticeable the changes in their perception of future TV series creation in Ukraine are after the end of the pandemic and martial law.

2. Literature Review

TV series occupy a significant place in the works of humanitarians from various scientific schools who try to understand the role of TV series culture as a segment of screen culture, communication and industry. There are a lot of works and they are all different because the inquiries of scientists are aimed at their professional interests - art history, cultural studies, linguistics, psychology, social communications, political science, etc. While preparing the material about TV series during the pandemic and Russian-Ukrainian war, the authors of the article worked on a number of not only scientific sources, but also professional reviews, political reviews, etc. in numerous authoritative publications. The source base is full of a variety of opinions and conclusions: from comedic grotesques, hypothetical hints of coincidence with reality, now quite obvious, on the example of more than 700 series of American sitcom "The Simpsons", which premiered in December 1989 (Brown & Logan, 2006), or more than the 50-episode Ukrainian TV series "Servant of the People", which aired in November 2015 (Walker & Roth, 2020) to the topical issues of ecology through the prism of history and thoughts about the future: the documentary trilogy "Chornobyl. Two colors of time" (Muzhuk, 2020), TV series "Chornobyl" (Mills, 2021).

Ukrainian researchers consider TV series in the context of linguistic and communicative aspects of interlingual communication (Sehol, 2010), as a self-sufficient socio-cultural phenomenon (Hulevskyi, 2021), given the functional specifics of audiovisual media and arts (Korobko, 2018), aesthetic meanings and ideas (Rohova, 2019), etc.

Screen stereotypes and canons created by mass culture, in particular, TV series, form the viewers' values. TV series as a cultural project of today unite the audience by interests, and this virtual amusement park is becoming increasingly popular for more viewers participating in such entertainment, which was especially noticeable during the restrictions and prohibitions due to Covid-19 and martial law. However, the TV series culture, saturated with entertaining content, contains even a small share of the product, which gives impetus to reflection and discussion. TV series gather the audience on the principle of interests (Goian, 2011) in certain topics. And as in the good old days of the first radio series, which are skillfully described by Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa in the novel "La tia Julia y el escribidor" ("Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter"), when listeners subordinated the rhythm of life to the schedule of radio series, contemporary viewers in Kyiv, London or Madrid gathered in front of TV screens to plunge into a whirlpool of TV series emotions during the premieres of "Game of Thrones", "Downton Abbey" or "The Crown". And if the scripts of radio productions, according to Llosa's version, were bought by local radio station owners literally in kilograms, weighing folders like beef or butter (a really strange way to verify the "weight" of the air word), then current series producers, in particular TV ones, care about the reputation of their TV channels and profits, "weighing" the demands of the audience and the state of the media market (Verhelis, 2021). And although the production of TV series in Ukraine is still gaining momentum, students and graduates of art and journalism schools are already undergoing internships in production studios engaged in film production, looking for themselves in this field and achieving success. For example, Zakhar Shadrin, the graduate of the Department of Film and Television Arts of the Institute of Journalism of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, who has been actively involved in TV series as an actor since 2019, said that he watches TV series in the original, repeating remarks to refine pronunciation and intonation (Exclusive..., 2021).

The research expands the range of scientific research and, in particular, shows how much the Covid-crisis has affected the media sphere, specialized training, and educational management in general. In fact, online learning technologies and optimization of training methods for specialists in various fields are the top research topics of 2020-2022, as discussed in the research of colleagues from different universities around the world. Nuria Recuero Virto and Maria Francisca Blasco López emphasize that the search for different approaches to the use of e-learning tools, such as Google Jamboard (an interactive smartboard), during the pandemic, provided more opportunities and helped engage students. The authors note that the data processed by them need to be supplemented and tested by other universities: "As future

research lines, scholars are prompted to consider the limitations of this study. Precisely, the small sample of students could have led to bias. Researchers are encouraged to replicate this study in other universities or even other employee contexts" (Virto & Blasco Lopez, 2020). More effective interaction between teachers and students of higher art schools is possible through the use of convergent media platforms in the educational process. Zhiyuan Ma, Jingjing Guan and Rita Yi Man Li argue that converged media provide wider access to cultural knowledge: "It can have the advantages of both - through a process of deep integration of systems, and the use of special communication methods and communication skills to teach, for instance, art education in colleges" (Ma, Guan & Man Li, 2021).

At the same time, colleagues raise new questions about the ability to quickly adapt additional resources, like the social networks, for the organization of distance learning in conditions of insufficient or absent Internet coverage, which is quite expected in times of crises (pandemic or war). Luhung Achmad Perguna, Netty Apriyanti and Dedeh Kurniasih discuss methods of using social media to check and monitor students' assignments (the authors also used social media platforms, including Telegram, Facebook, Messenger, etc. for quick individual consultations and homework monitoring) and argue that this way of organizing a studying process can also be effective: "Accessibility in areas with different geographical typologies as well lecturers and students' mindset is a challenge that must be faced. If social media is familiar and accepted in times of crisis, further research is needed to see the effectiveness of its use in teaching and learning activities" (Perguna, Apriyanti & Kurniasih, 2021). The problem was also relevant for Ukrainian universities, as high-quality Internet coverage is virtually absent in remote mountainous areas of Ukraine, in rural areas or in regions where the infrastructure was destroyed as a result of hostilities. Therefore, distance learning students had unequal opportunities to use popular and corporate online platforms.

TV series, similar to movies and/or literature, can make us forget about time, get interested in the plot and characters, and sometimes even shift the emphasis, increase vigilance or blunt instincts. Researchers emphasize that this aspect is perhaps the most vulnerable because the indistinguishability of the audience, which of the popular characters is "native" and which is "foreign" against the background of spectacularly veiled political technologies, leads to social disorientation, the consequences of which can be unpredictable. Concerns about the educational management and the quality of distance learning were also expressed in the study "Management Priorities of Audiovisual Student Projects During the COVID-Crisis", where it is noted that "Regardless of circumstances such as quarantine or forced self-isolation, practical distance learning for students who are professionally focused on the production of audio and video content becomes an additional creative and managerial incentive" (Goian, Goian & Biletska, 2021).

Pandemics and wars change the value priorities of humanity and radically affect people's attitudes to life itself. And since TV series form the choice and structure the viewers' time, which is also proved by contemporary researchers, wizard Gandalf from "The Lord of the Rings" by R. Tolkien expresses his opinion, which remains still relevant nowadays, about time and choice - incomprehensibly simple in its perfection - which slipped from the book, later appeared in the screen world, and firmly entrenched in the world of the new pandemic and war reality: "All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given, us".

3. Methods

During 2020-2022, the authors of the study conducted the surveys of the target audience: students - in practical classes, lectures, seminars, colloquia; professional screenwriters, cameramen, directors, journalists, editors, producers - during personal meetings. The basic purpose of the surveys was to determine the motivation of the target audience for viewing TV series during the pandemic and martial law, introduced during the Russian-Ukrainian war, as well as the specifics of the professional interest and selectivity of the professional audience regarding the creation of TV series in Ukraine. The peculiarity of the choice of research methods was that, due to quarantine restrictions and the martial law situation in Ukraine, the surveys were conducted remotely using Google tools and online platforms. Between March and May, 2021, 420 respondents were interviewed

(https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScQujsHBHRz-kbKgVzDVg_p14jnTjPY7baffMTR7zbayPT2Vg/viewform), the questions related to watching TV series during the pandemic. From March to May, 2022, the same respondents were interviewed again, though only 352 answers were received due to the active phase of Russian invasion, the questions related to watching TV series during martial law (<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeZEvj-8LDDL1yVBtImk61ZSqFs3qmj7v70VXCqZRcLL7fVvA/viewform>). Based on quantitative indicators of two surveys, a rating of TV series was compiled, which can be considered a probable genre model of Ukrainian TV series in the next 10 years.

The content analysis method and the survey method optimized the research processes, as they allowed to obtain representative results for Ukrainian schools of film, television and journalism, that can also be recommended for a similar target audience of other countries, which not only consumes TV series as an opportunity to have fun, relax, spend time, but also gains professional knowledge and experience in the production of national TV series and thus

supports national TV production. These methods also helped the authors obtain data on the trends that await the production of TV series in Ukraine after the end of pandemic and war, as surveys and content analysis were conducted among those respondents who are already involved in the production of TV series or are just preparing to enter the Ukrainian market of sketchbooks, blockbusters and soap operas.

Ten questions were selected for the survey method, that formed a typical model of perception of TV series during the pandemic and martial law for the average audience, which only consumes the product without the need to professionally imitate or professionally analyze it. This approach to the choice of questions allowed us to avoid artificial and biased answers, which is typical of the audience that knows the main purpose of the survey and tries to look better, more informed and more meaningful in the end. One way or another, the audience that has professional interests in the creation of TV series, will subconsciously react in their responses to those blocks, types, genres and models which they will try to professionally embody now and in the future.

Content analysis allowed us to create a rating of the frequency of watched TV series by the target audience during 2020-2022, and determine the professional motivation that influenced this frequency. Thus, the authors of the study tried to outline priorities for watching TV series and, accordingly, the "comfort zone" of the target audience, as well as bring to a professional educational model to study algorithms for using crisis media management in TV series production under restrictions and prohibitions caused by Covid-19 pandemic and martial law in Ukraine during the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The results obtained during the study are also subject to the comparison method, i.e. the data obtained during the pandemic and the data obtained during the martial law are compared. Based on this comparison, partial and general conclusions are offered.

4. Results

84% of women and 16% of men took part in two surveys in 2021 and 2022, respectively, which generally corresponds to the gender ratio among students in Ukrainian journalism schools that specialize in training TV journalists, directors, screenwriters, cameramen, editors, producers, after all, those specialists who are focused on the production of TV series. Targeted surveys conducted in many countries over the last decade, or information obtained from TV series producers, also record a predominantly female TV series audience, for example, *The Hollywood Reporter and Morning Consult*: "Netflix has a fairly even split when it comes to male and female viewers. 48% of Netflix subscribers are male. And 52% are female" (Dean, 2021).

If in terms of gender, this study is quite natural, then in terms of watching TV series before and during the pandemic, as well as during the martial law, we got the following results. Despite the fact that during the quarantine restrictions 2020-2021, the pandemic delayed the production of at least 60% of TV scripts worldwide (Wikipedia. Impact ...), the number of viewers watching TV products (including TV series) during this period increased from 24% to 45% according to Global Web Index for different age groups (Jones, 2020). However, in our study, the percentage of respondents watching TV series before and during the pandemic is almost the same which is due to the fact that watching TV series is in professional interest of our target audience and is almost equal to one hundred percent of viewings. The same audience continues to watch TV series even during martial law, and this is 70.4% of the respondents.

The data concerning the platforms and the way of watching TV series (online services or terrestrial TV channels) have changed significantly. 97% refer to online viewings (YouTube, Netflix, Smart TV, other video-on-demand services) and only 3% to terrestrial television (TV programs). These are our data, which are explained not only by the socio-demographic status of respondents, i.e. the vast majority of the surveyed are the students on distance learning with quarantine restrictions and the situation of martial law during the Russian-Ukrainian war, but also by general trends in the global redistribution of video content consumption (Christenson, 2020; Crisp, 2020; Grigoriev, 2020), where, given the different types of audience (generation Z: 8-23 years old; millennials: 25-39 years old, generation X: 40-54 years old, boomers: 55-75 years old), there is not such a sharp and categorical imbalance between online and offline consumption of video products.

The first significant difference between watching TV series during the pandemic and martial law is the data regarding the choice of viewing between multi- and mini-series. If during the pandemic preference is given to multi-series, then during the martial law it goes to mini-series, which fully corresponds to the situational time features, accessibility and the psychology of reality perception.

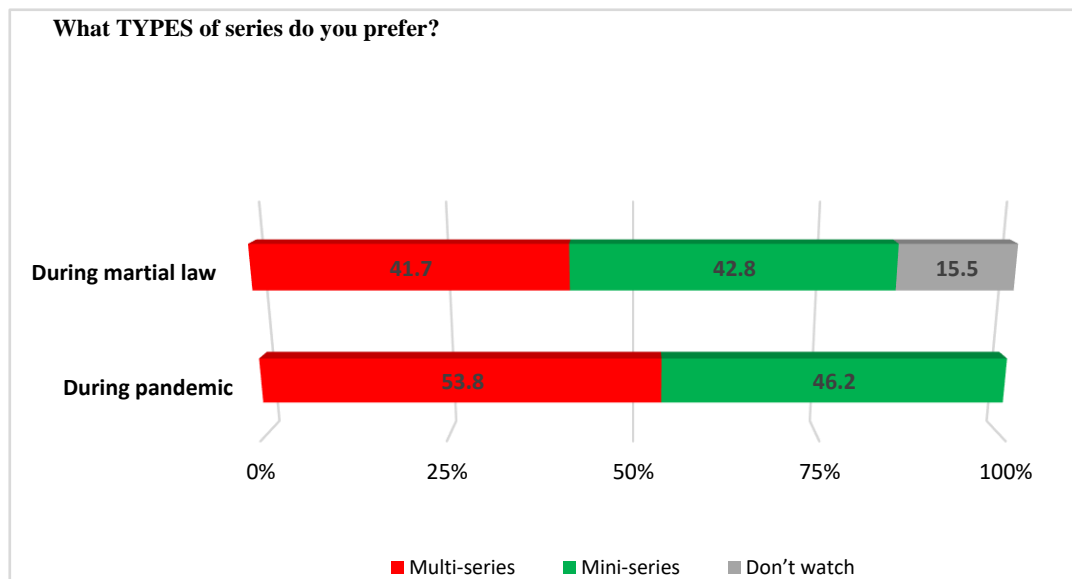


Figure 1. Preferences in types of series

The results of viewing foreign and Ukrainian TV series also differ. If during the pandemic foreign TV series were preferred (92%) over Ukrainian production (8%), then during the martial law the share of viewing Ukrainian-produced series increased to 17%, which is explained by the following comments of the interviewees: "I started watching a Ukrainian-produced series about the history of Ukraine for a better understanding of the situation in the war", "to raise the spirit, to understand our history", "to rethink the identity of our people, Ukrainian values and authenticity", "I was attracted by the screen products that rely on Ukrainian culture, show how rich it is and how actively it is developing" etc. Therefore, war and martial law modelled a situation where the attitude of the audience towards the country producing the TV series changes according to the events that take place at the front, in the perception of military events in the world.

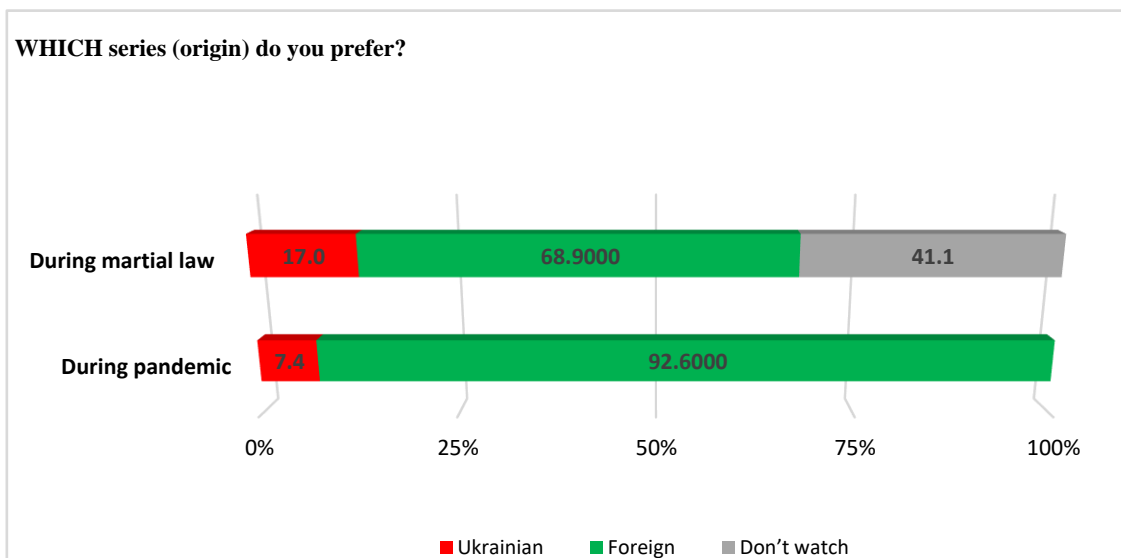


Figure 2. The origin of TV series watched by Ukrainian students

On the other hand, there are also similarities between watching TV series during the pandemic and during martial law. First, the genres: detective, comedy, drama, adventure, and fantasy were among the top five most popular TV series genres during the research period. The fact is that the history of creating TV series in Ukraine is a story in which "Ukrainian series will have to wait as long as the destruction of the oligarchic TV market system" (Illienko, 2018). The point is that TV series in Ukraine are "Ukrainian not in meaning, but in place of production" (Wikipedia. Ukrainian...), as TV series were mostly shot in Russian, usually counting on the wider market of post-Soviet countries. Since 1990, when the first Ukrainian-language TV series "Time to Collect Stones" was created, which consisted of 10 episodes, and up to now, only 50 exclusively Ukrainian-language TV series have been shot (without the presence of Russian and / or

its Ukrainian dialect (Wikipedia. Surzhyk...). Most of these TV series have been created since 2018, and they are mostly dramas and comedies. Thus, when in the first places of our survey we also have detective story, adventure and fantasy (see Figure 3), we realize that there is a professional interest in such popular genres and we are to expect changes in the genre model of national TV series, which will bring Ukrainian-language TV series to the top of the international market TV products.

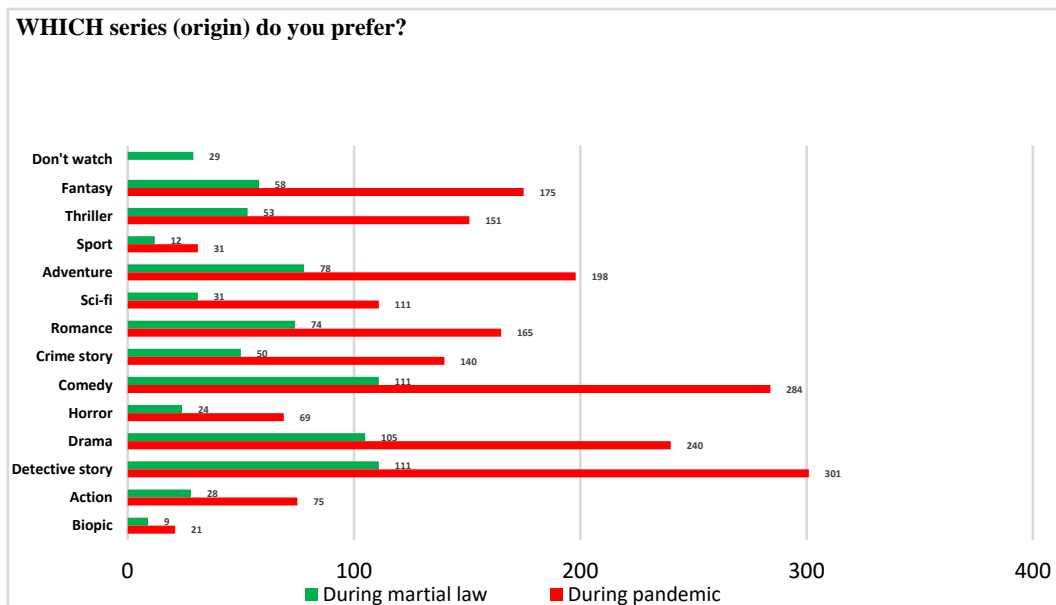


Figure 3. The proportion of TV series genres watched by Ukrainian students

The next aspect is the priorities of the target audience regarding those specialties and professions that students chose during the pandemic and martial law.

The work on the script received most votes, i.e. the importance of the screenwriter during the creation of the TV series is significant. Next in the ranking there are the professions of director, actor and composer, i.e. the director's role, cast and music and sound formed an almost complete picture of the professional interests of respondents. Among the answer options, the authors of the study deliberately did not add a cameraman and a producer, as such a survey also contains a test option - how fully the target audience imagines the full range of professional work on creating a TV series. And if in the version "your answer" the respondents noted the work of the operator quite often, then the status of the producer, as evidenced by the answers, was hardly mentioned, and this may be a topic for making adjustments to the curriculum. It was also nice to see that the target audience revealed the already acquired knowledge of creating TV series, as they drew attention to the importance of building the logic of the storyline, the professional approach of the artist and costume designer, make-up artist, decorator, creating atmosphere on the scene, editing quality. and work with light (gaffer), the presence of special effects (if necessary), the colour of the frame, etc.

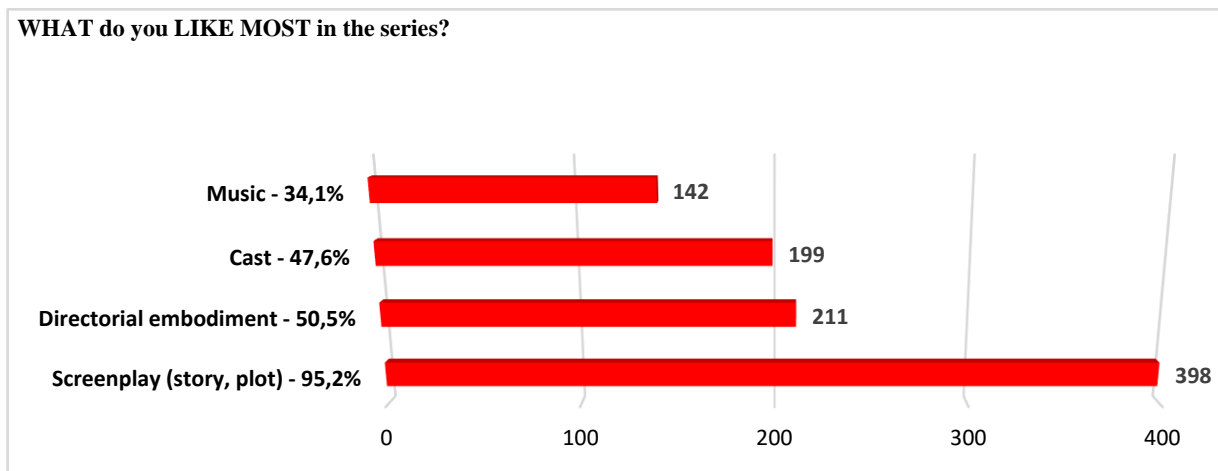


Figure 4. Preferences in types of series

Regarding the purpose of watching TV series during the pandemic and during martial law and regardless of the situational motivation of the audience, the time and the place of the survey, all the proposed options were mentioned by the target audience. It is to be expected that during wartime the desire to escape from the harsh mundanity prevails over all other purposes. We also have a higher desire of the target audience to grow professionally and the motivation to create TV series. Moreover, the goal to increase the level of foreign language proficiency remains also stable.

Table 1. The purpose of watching TV series

Purpose of watching TV series	During pandemic (%)	During martial law (%)
Professional interest	20	37
Relaxation	78	55
Cheering up	60	65
Distraction from the routine	69	95
Professional motivation	20	43
Studying a foreign language	42	44

Using the method of content analysis, the authors of the article compiled a rating of TV series that were watched by the target audience during the pandemic and martial law. TV series ratings are one of the standard tools of advertising and promotion. They are everywhere, from popular magazines (Sepinwall, 2021; Nicholson, Ovenden & Martin, 2021) to one-day sites. Their importance is rising in such times of crisis in the world media markets, as it happened during 2020-2022.

5. Discussion

The development of TV series industry in each country has its own history and traditions, which are characterized by different stages - from formation, success, innovation, profitability, competitiveness to falling ratings and crises. The Covid-19 pandemic equaled all countries during the crisis of TV series production, and made this crisis global. But the biggest problem was caused to the countries that have just started mass production of TV series, in particular, Ukraine, where the tradition of creating TV series has been formed under the pressure of the oligarchic media market, and the term "Ukrainian TV series", i.e. TV series in Ukrainian, were often confused with the term "TV series made in Ukraine", where the basic language of dialogue was the foreign language.

In addition, the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022 affected significantly the ambitions of Ukraine for the creation and production of TV series, as film studios, cinemas, film production infrastructure were destroyed, and there was a migration of Ukrainian citizens both within the country and to other countries, in particular, the ones who are directly involved in the creation and production of national TV serial production. Therefore, the authors of the article investigated that watching TV series by students, future creators of TV series, during distance learning in the conditions of pandemic and martial law can become a segment of the professional educational model and one of the algorithms of the crisis educational management in the TV series production.

Watching TV series during extreme events in the country is one of the forms of distance learning and it urges the creation of the idea that the production of TV series is the kind of business that can adapt to global shocks such as pandemics like COVID-19, or armed conflicts and/or wars, such as the Russian-Ukrainian war of 2022. Even in such conditions, the TV series industry applies elements of crisis management in order to respond in time to social changes and upheavals, find effective application of new technologies, change aesthetics in order to be profitable or subsidized. In the times of crisis, the TV audience grows, and the viewers devote more time to TV series. The term "binge-watch", which originated in the 90s and gained popularity in 2013-15, is back in the mainstream. The creators of TV series produce a stream of multi-genre screen series since the audience needs new stories that can distract from the real problems.

Watching TV series as an element of a professional educational model during the pandemic and martial law is, on the one hand, a situational similarity in the context of restrictions, prohibitions, lack of access to distance learning tools, concern for one's life and the lives of other people; on the other hand, it is the opposite in the perception of reality, since the educational process in the conditions of war, in contrast to the conditions of the pandemic, sharpens the feeling of safety, immediacy, time space, responsibility, expectation and anxiety. If during the pandemic, distance learning takes place in conditions of relative technological and material stability, then the educational process during martial law is a search for balance between the possible and the real, an effort to maintain access to viewing media content (TV series).

The peculiarities of conducting distance learning during the pandemic and martial law with the help of popular online services and online platforms made it possible to adapt classes to individual situations. Watching TV series as a flexible

educational module of professional disciplines helped understand the on-screen aesthetics of TV series, practise the necessary skills in "live air", including, for example, working with sound, setting the frame, working with the camera and light, using make-up, choosing hairstyles and costumes for various scenes and episodes.

According to the results of the study, women are much more emotional than men in watching TV series during the pandemic and martial law. Nevertheless, in recent years women have confidently, like in "The Queen's Gambit", conquered the "male territory" of men. They become directors of TV series, write scripts, work with film cameras and sound control consoles, produce and promote content, modifying the thematic landscape and the screen aesthetics of TV series in various media markets. Since the audience of TV series around the world is mainly female, this will have a positive impact on the business model of TV series in many countries, because in this case "the series will speak to the audience in the same language."

Even in the conditions of the pandemic and martial law, more and more young people, including the future producers of TV series in Ukraine, began to watch foreign TV series in the original language, namely English, German, Polish, Turkish. This contributes to increasing the level of knowledge of foreign languages, the development of language culture, professional competence, and the knowledge of languages helps them be more aware of the innovations of the global TV series market and the current requirements of the recognized business models.

Historical drama, romance and comedy are the top three genres that are the most popular among Ukrainian-language TV series produced during the 2020-2021 pandemic. Among them, for example, the six-episode action "Volunteer" about the adaptation of soldiers after returning from the war in Donbas, the 40-episode sitcom-comedy "Lyusia intern" about a 50-year-old woman trying to find herself after divorcing her husband, the 12-episode TV series "Slavs", which is based on ancient Slavic mythology, the detective comedy "The Best Detective", the family comedy "The Child Guard" and others. A special place was occupied by the documentary TV series: the 9-episode "Our 30" and the 7-episode "Collapse: how Ukrainians destroyed the empire of evil", dedicated to the 30th anniversary of Ukraine's independence. In general, during the pandemic, in 2021, more than 70 TV series that were produced in Ukraine premiered. This once again confirms our thesis that both in Ukraine and in other countries, although the mass production of TV series has decreased, it has not stopped completely.

During the extreme events, like the pandemic or war, daily informational messages in TV news or video podcasts also become to some extent a TV series that interests the audience. This aspect should also be taken into account when it comes to the formation of a professional educational model for training future creators of TV series (directors, screenwriters, sound engineers, cameramen, news presenters, editors, journalists, producers and advertisers) and the development of crisis educational management in TV series production.

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