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Young Danish audiences and British screen content

A critical reflection on transnational consumption, geo-linguistic regions, and cultural proximity

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on survey and interview data from a pilot study undertaken online in Denmark (March–July 2020), this article provides exploratory insights about how young audiences in Denmark (aged 16–34, with a background in higher education) engage with British television and film as viewing shifts from broadcast television to online on-demand services. First, drawing on survey data, we concentrate on consumption habits and genre preferences regarding British content and compare it to Danish, Nordic, and American content. Second, drawing on interviews, we address the significance of cultural and particularly linguistic proximity in determining the consumption and reception of British content. Revealing that young Danes in the pilot study feel greater linguistic proximity to English than to other Scandinavian languages, the research suggests the need for more nuanced theorisations of cultural and linguistic proximity, along with the revision of cultural distance and geo-linguistic regions theory.

KEYWORDS: British screen content, young Danish audiences, streaming, cultural and linguistic proximity, geo-linguistic regions

Introduction

Historically, screen encounters across borders were limited and tightly curated by a handful of national broadcasters. Today, screen consumption is transformed by the proliferation of transnational subscriber-funded video-on-demand (SVoD) services, including Netflix and Amazon Prime, and growing numbers of (local)

broadcaster-funded (BVoD) and advertising-funded (AVoD) streaming services. As viewing patterns change, they also impact the nature and extent of encounters with non-domestic screen cultures. Yet, we know little about how and where people find such content, how they experience and interpret it, and what it is that they value in foreign screen narratives. These gaps in our understanding coincide with calls for a careful revision of longstanding theorisations of transnational programme flows to understand shifts in audience behaviour and consumption more accurately and in greater depth.

This article represents a further attempt to advance our understanding of the transnational consumption and reception of non-domestic content by illuminating how young audiences in Denmark (aged 16–34) engage with British content. The research is based on findings from a pilot study (April–June 2020) for the project “Screen Encounters with Britain”. One objective of the 2020 Danish pilot was to generate explorative findings to inform a larger project in four European markets (Denmark, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands), which is funded by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council (for more about the project, see Steemers, 2022–2024). The other objective was to develop and test the project’s methodology for studying audiences of British screen content in these markets through a multi-method approach mixing quantitative and qualitative research.

We begin the article by outlining the research context and the theoretical and methodological framework underpinning the pilot. Focusing on the pilot survey findings, the next section illuminates young Danish audiences’ consumption habits and genre preferences of British content, including comparisons with Danish, Nordic, and American screen content. Comparisons are particularly useful to help illustrate the status of screen content from different countries, how it is used and perceived in a particular market, and why and when audiences might prefer one or the other. Findings from interviews that built on the survey findings are then used to critically explore indicative notions of cultural and linguistic proximity within the geo-linguistic Scandinavian region, language preferences, and attitudes towards British dialects and sociolects. We conclude, that while the pilot is not representative of all Danes aged 16–34, it seems likely that young Danes feel greater linguistic proximity to English than to other Scandinavian languages, suggesting the need for more nuanced theorisations of cultural and linguistic proximity (Collins, 1989; Straubhaar, 1991, 2007; Straubhaar et al., 2021). The article therefore proposes a revision of conceptualisations of cultural distance (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988) and geo-linguistic regions (Sinclair et al., 1996), theorisations which have shaped studies of international programme flows for decades.

British screen production, global distribution, and transnational audiences

The UK is acknowledged as the world’s second largest exporter of productions for the small screen, and Europe is its largest market after the US for both volume and value of sales (Steemers, 2004, 2014, 2016). On European SVoD services, British content accounts for 7 per cent of film titles and 17 per

cent of television series (Grece & Jiménez Pumares, 2021). Export successes to Europe include television dramas like *Sherlock*, documentaries like *David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet*, and films like *Paddington*. The UK also accounts for 30 per cent of European Netflix Originals (Afilipoaie et al., 2021), such as *The Crown* and *Sex Education*. Changing international distribution of British content illustrates how cultural flows across borders accelerate as viewing shifts from national broadcast schedules to globally active video-on-demand (VoD) services. This creates opportunities to discover more shows from around the world, particularly among young viewers who are early adopters of VoD services. However, streaming services rarely divulge audience data, and so our knowledge and understanding of how more viewing of VoD and YouTube alter engagement with non-domestic content are still limited.

Recent years have spawned considerable academic work on transformative shifts in distribution, including monographs (Jenner, 2018; Johnson, 2019; Landau, 2016; Lobato, 2019; Lotz, 2017; Sundet, 2021), edited collections (Curtin et al., 2014; McDonald & Smith-Rowsey, 2016), and special journal issues (*Media Industries*, Vol. 5, Iss. 2, 2018; *Flow*, Vol. 26, Iss. 5, 2020). Research on British content in this global market has looked at how new modes of distribution and heightened competition affect British screen production, sales, and public service broadcasting (D'Arma et al., 2021; McElroy & Noonan, 2019; McElroy et al., 2018; Pearson, 2019; Steemers, 2014, 2016). What has not been studied is how and why non-British audiences engage with British content, and how they make sense of it. The Danish pilot conducted by the authors in 2020 during Covid-19 restrictions is the first to empirically investigate this.

Changes in audience behaviour have also precipitated a renewed interest in empirical audience research. Johnson, Dempsey, and Hills (2020) have studied how audiences discover content online and decide what to watch, and Esser (2017, 2020) and Hills (2017) have studied how British audiences consume and interpret subtitled television drama. Across Europe, there have been large projects on how audiences engage with diverse media experiences (Hill, 2018), how European screen content is consumed and interpreted across borders (Bengesser et al., 2022a; Bondebjerg et al., 2017; Jensen & Jacobsen, 2020a), and on how changes in distribution impact the media consumption of children and teenagers (Jensen et al., 2021; Potter & Steemers, 2022; Sakr & Steemers, 2019, 2021; Sundet, 2020). Many of these studies have produced findings that suggest the need for careful revision of longstanding theorisations of international programme flows, notably around “cultural discount” (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988), “cultural proximity” (Straubhaar, 1991, 2007; Straubhaar et al., 2021), and the closely related concepts of “linguistic proximity” (Collins, 1989) and “geolinguistic regions” (Sinclair et al., 1996).

Cultural proximity and cultural discount theories, although stemming from oppositional academic perspectives (audience agency versus market power, respectively), in essence promote the same argument: When offered similar programming, audiences prefer screen content that originates from and reflects their own national cultural background. Conversely, the appeal of foreign content

is believed to be diminished because of cultural distance. The undeniable global dominance of American screen content was theorised as the result of market and structural advantages (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988) and of textual features – American programming’s supposed polysemy and transparency (Olson, 1999). As a consequence of decades-long American cultural penetration, Todd Gitlin (1998) concluded that American culture became many people’s second culture globally.

To explain the foundations of non-American programme flows, Sinclair and colleagues (1996) argued for the importance of linguistic and geo-cultural proximity; with Straubhaar (2007: 26) proposing that, “the clearest line of demarcation in cultural proximity is language”. Richard Collins (1989), looking at industry attempts to create a pan-European market in the late 1980s, also noted how language is a key determinant for programme flows. He suggested a two-tiered system of linguistic proximity, whereby the most popular screen productions are those in local, national, or regional languages, followed by English language productions. As English is widely spoken as a second and foreign language, Collins argued that English-language productions would always be preferred to content in other foreign languages. For Europe, with its linguistic diversity, his two-tiered model seemed pertinent. Denmark, which is the focus of this article, is particularly interesting because it belongs to the geo-linguistic region of Scandinavia (along with Norway and Sweden), but also exhibits high levels of English language proficiency (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2021).

Screen fiction in Denmark: Patterns of distribution and consumption

As a small country, Denmark has always been dependent on foreign programme imports. In 2013, only 2 per cent of the hours dedicated to fiction broadcast on the main six television channels were of national origin, reaching 6 per cent on public service channels. On average, non-European content accounted for 81 per cent of fiction broadcast hours; leaving 11 per cent to other European content and 6 per cent to mixed co-productions that involved European and non-European partners (Kevin & Ene, 2015). British content (often co-produced with the US) accounted for 81 per cent of non-domestic European content on Danish broadcast channels, according to Bondebjerg and colleagues’ (2017) assessment of TNS Gallup data between 2005 and 2014. Historically, public service channels in Denmark (DR, TV 2), have acquired most British and European content, whilst commercial channels have focused on American content (Bondebjerg et al., 2017; Steemers, 2004; TRP Research, 2017). In the streaming era, British fiction holds its attraction for public service broadcaster DR because European public service content, including shows originally aired on the BBC, ITV, and Channel 4, has been exempt from the 8-day restriction on foreign fiction content’s availability on DR’s VoD platform (Kulturministeriet, 2018). The restriction was lifted on 1 November 2022.

Both the UK and more recently Denmark are known for high quality fiction, but neither have the size or capacity to match volumes from the US (Parrot

Analytics, 2022; TRP Research, 2017). In 2019, 24 fiction titles were produced for television and VoD in Denmark, compared with 156 titles produced in the UK (EAO Yearbook, 2020) and 532 in the US (Holloway, 2021). Though British series maintain a strong SVoD position in Europe, accounting for 17 per cent of television seasons in SVoD catalogues (Grece & Jiménez Pumares, 2021), American content accounts for 44 per cent of films and television seasons offered on SVoD services in Europe (Grece & Jiménez Pumares, 2021).

As for popularity, Bondebjerg and colleagues' (2017) broadcast ratings analysis of television fiction in Danish prime time between 2013 and 2014 reveals that Danish series achieved the highest ratings among Danish audiences generally, followed by Swedish and then American series; and their qualitative audience research findings suggest that familiarity with the Swedish language, political system, and culture make it easy for Danish audiences to empathise with Swedish characters and settings (Bondebjerg et al., 2017). Norwegian series came fourth, closely followed by British series. The more recent DETECT project's (www.detect-project.eu) study on European audiences for crime series that focused more on on-demand viewing, showed that audiences in Denmark and Sweden have a stronger preference for domestic crime content than audiences in other European regions. The domestic series were, however, surpassed in popularity by British crime drama, which was also much preferred to American and non-domestic European crime series (Bengesser et al., 2022a). However, research among Danish children (aged 8–17) shows a pronounced preference for American content (Jensen et al., 2021). When asked about their favourite series, Danish children almost exclusively mentioned American content (e.g., *Stranger Things* and *Friends*) on SVoD services like Netflix and Disney+ rather than domestic or European content on Danish channels or on-demand services (Jensen et al., 2021). What is not yet clear is whether these generational differences and preferences for American content, persist as audiences become older.

With American content accounting for 52 per cent of films and series on subscription and transaction VoD services combined (Grece & Jiménez Pumares, 2021), English-language output is dominant in VoD libraries in Europe. In Netflix's content libraries in its biggest global markets, American content reaches 40.8 per cent and English-language content rises to 48.8 per cent if British (5.5%) and Canadian (2.5%) content is added (Lotz et al., 2022). We might therefore expect English-language content to occupy – and to continue to occupy – a prominent place in the media diets of young Danes, especially since English-language proficiency in Denmark is high. A survey by the Nordic Council of Ministers (2021) found that 96 per cent of 16–25-year-olds had encountered English-language media in the previous two months. The English language emerged as a major factor in young Danes' consumption of British content in our pilot study. These findings and their implications for future research on cultural and linguistic proximity are examined in more detail below.

Pilot study methodology

The Danish pilot study sought to develop and test both the methodology and a set of exploratory research questions:

- Who are the young European audiences who watch British content, and what do they watch?
- How do they get to know about, find, and access British content, and how do they watch?
- What motivates them to watch British content?
- What do they recognise as British and how does this content influence their perceptions of the UK?
- How has Brexit changed their attitudes to the UK and its screen culture?

This article covers the first three questions, with a particular focus on the role of linguistic and cultural proximity as a motivational factor. On the basis of these questions, we developed and tested a mixed, multi-method approach in Denmark (Bengesser et al., 2022b) to explore its value for future case studies (Germany, Italy, the Netherlands) and pinpoint limitations.

First, we established which linear and VoD services are most relevant in Denmark among younger audiences (Grece, 2021; Kulturministeriet, 2021). YouTube, Netflix, TV2 Play, Viaplay, and DRTV were the VoD services with the broadest reach among 12–39-year-old Danes (Kantar, 2020, 2021). Over 70 per cent had access to Netflix, while streaming services Viaplay, DRTV, and TV 2 Play reached around 40–45 per cent of this audience (Kantar, 2021). Next, we set out to determine what British “longform” content (programmes longer than 25 minutes) was findable on channels and streaming services. Research of landing pages across three days and cross-referencing with aggregator sites (e.g., justwatch.com) identified over 200 British titles between May and July 2020 on Netflix, Viaplay, TV 2 Play, and DRTV, including British Netflix Originals (e.g., *Sex Education* and *The End of the F***ing World*); licensed content (e.g., *Sanditon* and *World on Fire*); documentaries (e.g., *Blue Planet* and *Harry & Meghan a Love Story* on DRTV); and reality talent shows (e.g., *Britain’s Got Talent* and *The X Factor UK*, available on TV 2 Play).

Following this, we conducted an online survey aimed at identifying young Danish audiences of British content, the platforms they use to access content, the British programme types they are familiar with, the motivational factors that guide them in actively seeking or watching British content, and the views they have of British screen content and Britain as a country.

The online survey was carried out in English. To avoid self-selection bias and addressing the survey only to avid viewers or fans of British content, the survey title asked: “What do young Danes like to watch?” Further, the survey opened with more general questions about habits and preferences before focusing on attitudes towards British content. The survey generated 239 responses from a convenience sample. Snowball sampling via social media and contacts affiliated

with Aarhus University and the University of Copenhagen during the first Covid-19 lockdown resulted in over-representation of participants in their 20s and respondents who classified themselves as students (64%, compared with the 38% of 16–34-year-olds in Denmark who were in education in October 2019, according to Danmarks Statistik, 2019). 80 per cent of participants reported having a higher education qualification (participants were asked “What is your highest education?” The options were given in English and Danish to make it easier for participants to choose: Folkeskole eller tilsvarende [primary education]; Ungdomsuddannelse [secondary education]; Videregående Uddannelse [higher education]).

One of the lessons learned from the pilot is that for the “Screen Encounters with Britain” project across four countries, we need to use young “ambassadors” to help recruit under-represented groups including 16–19-year-olds, those working, those not in higher education, and those living in smaller towns and settlements. For the larger project, which began in April 2022, we have translated the survey into Danish to lower language barriers. Nevertheless, in spite of the limitations, the pilot findings are indicative for young, educated Danes’ encounters with British screen content. The pilot, conducted online during the Covid-19 pandemic, revealed where we needed to strengthen our approach to improve representativeness.

A screener survey added to the online survey (completed by 39 participants) was used to recruit six participants representing different genders, age groups (among 16–34-year-olds), occupations, and self-reported levels of engagement with British screen content and British culture (see Table 1). The qualitative sample was deliberately small, because we were testing the methodology, but beyond the pilot, a larger sample will be used to explore the project’s six research questions more comprehensively. Respondents completed online diaries and digital tasks over five consecutive days. In the diaries, they listed their daily viewing and responded to a daily task. The tasks included indicating preferences for content of different national origin (UK, US, Scandinavian, and the rest of Europe) based on thumbnail images, titles, or descriptions of programmes, as well as giving their evaluation of British programme trailers for specific genres each day (drama, comedy, factual, and entertainment). The diaries gave us snapshots of concrete media encounters to be followed up on in one-to-one interviews using stimulus material from the diaries, for example, their reaction to a clip from the British mockumentary *People Just Do Nothing* (see below). Although the sample was limited, the interviews did afford insights into the diversity of Danish experiences and the contexts in which British content is consumed, raising thought-provoking questions about cultural and linguistic proximities.

Table 1 Digital diary and interview participants

Pseudo-nym	Gender	Age	Occupation	Living situation	Self-reported frequency of watching British content	Self-reported interest in British culture (0–100)
Chitra	F	21	Gap year	With parents	3–5 times a week	74
Lina	F	24	Student (Media Studies)	Flat share	Several times a month	33
Petra	F	32	Self-employed editor	With partner and 2 children	Several times a month	83
Mads	M	25	Student (Language & Media)	With partner	Several times a month	100
Tomas	M	27	Student (History)	Flat share	1–2 times a week	68
Jens	M	30	Executive assistant in public relations company	With partner	1–2 times a week	76

Comments: The interviews were conducted and video-recorded online. Each interview lasted approximately an hour and was scheduled to take place shortly after the participants had completed the five days of diary activities.

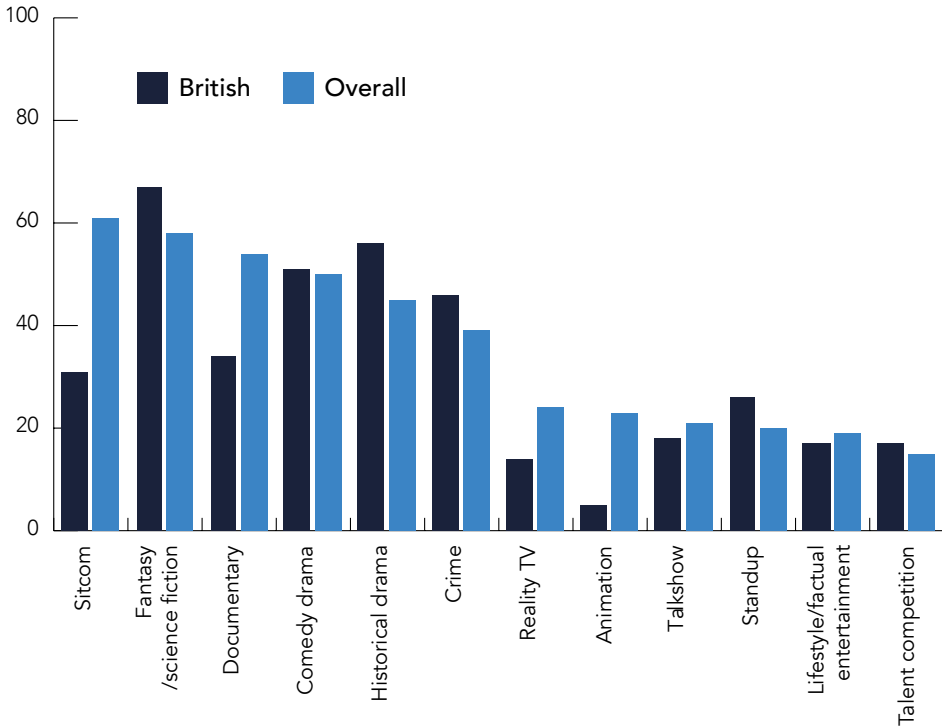
Combining findings from all the research steps, the following discussion focuses on consumption habits and genre preferences for British content among young audiences in Denmark, how this compares to domestic and American screen content, and finally the role of the English language in determining consumption of British content as opposed to Denmark’s geo-cultural proximity to the Nordic countries and geo-linguistic proximity to Sweden and Norway.

Survey findings on consumption habits and genre and language preferences

British content appeared to be a steady presence in the lives of those with a background primarily in higher education. Although British shows did not feature heavily in daily viewing, they were watched at least several times a month by 35 per cent of respondents, and by 27 per cent who watched them once or twice a week.

There was a preference for certain British genres (see Figure 1), including a notably higher interest in British fantasy and science fiction, historical drama, crime, and stand-up comedy – and a slight preference for British comedy drama. “British humour” was a key reason for choosing and liking British content, but British sitcoms were less favoured, possibly because of their scarcity and the ready availability and popularity of long-running American sitcoms (*Friends*, *Modern Family*, *Community*).

Figure 1 Genre preferences in British content and in general (per cent)



Comments: Percentages shown based on the online survey (N = 239). To clarify the genres, survey respondents were provided examples of Danish, British, and American films and series.

The survey showed that the major SVoD services are the most important access points for longform content, both generally as well as for British content, followed by domestic BVoD services, and then YouTube. This pattern suggests that British content is something young Danes encounter on the platforms they regularly frequent. However, there are exceptions: the media diaries and interviews later revealed that respondents who were fans of British stand-up comedians and panel shows could not find enough of these on SVoD and BVoD services, and they therefore turned to YouTube to satiate their interests.

When asked to list as many British film and television titles as they could remember, respondents altogether mentioned 392 different titles, proving our hypothesis that young Danish viewers aged 16–34 are familiar with a wide range of British content. Over 200 titles were listed only once, suggesting that British screen content consumption is quite individualised and diverse. 44 titles were listed more than ten times, including *Sherlock* (81), *Peaky Blinders* (56), *Harry Potter* (54), *Sex Education* (53), *Black Mirror* (45), *The Crown* (43), *The Great British Bake Off* (41), *Downton Abbey* (41), and *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* (39). Some of the top titles, including *Sex Education* (Netflix) and *Normal People* (DRTV, a co-production between Ireland, the UK, and the US), were being

pushed heavily by streaming services at the time. Others, including *Doctor Who* (41), *The Great British Bake Off* (41), and *QI* (32), were not available on any Danish VoD platforms during this period. Most survey respondents indicated that they usually follow recommendations from either streaming services (73%) or friends and family (53%). This was later confirmed during the one-to-one interviews, showing the importance of word-of-mouth recommendations (Jensen & Jacobsen, 2020b) as well as platform recommender systems (Pajkovic, 2022) in transnational taste-making.

Contrary to theorisations of cultural discount (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988) and cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991, 2007; Straubhaar et al., 2021), when respondents were asked to select their three favourite sources of screen content, including Denmark and other Nordic countries, the category ticked most often was not Danish (59%), but American (76%), followed by British content (62%). Running counter to Sinclair and colleagues' (1996) conceptualisation of geo-linguistic regions and Bondebjerg and colleagues' (2017) ratings analysis, there was no indication of a preference for "other Nordic" content (15%). Our findings suggest that young Danish audiences in the streaming era exhibit different preferences than previous (general) adult audiences of linear television, who preferred Danish and Swedish prime-time content over American content, and Norwegian content over British content (Bondebjerg et al., 2017). The preference for American content was most notable among our younger survey respondents. While 82 per cent of those aged 20–24 named American content amongst their top three country-of-origin choices, only 11 per cent chose Nordic content. Preferences for American content fell to 60 per cent for those aged 30–34, more of whom included other Nordic content (23%) in their top three. This raises questions about whether preferences change with advancing age and education, away from American content towards a broader range, and whether they change more permanently, away from geo-linguistic Scandinavian programmes towards English-language programmes. The findings also raise questions about the reasons for these changes.

Future research will hopefully be able to shed light on the first question. As to the reasons for these changes, the findings from the 2020 pilot suggest that the preference of younger audiences for American content can partly be explained by greater availability of American content, especially on SVoD services, and partly possibly by early familiarity with American content by the young, as evidenced by Jensen and colleagues (2021). An additional, likely, and important explanation, we would argue, are developments associated with language proficiencies. According to the Nordic Council of Ministers (2021), only 40 per cent of Danes between 16 and 25 find it easy to understand Swedish. The understanding of Norwegian in this age group is higher (67%). In contrast, across the Nordic region, 95 per cent of this study's respondents agreed that English is easy to understand. Astonishingly, nearly two-thirds of the young Scandinavians surveyed agreed that it was sometimes even easier to express oneself in English than in their first language (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2021). In our survey, 93 per cent of respondents (who are more highly educated than the Danish norm)

assessed their English language competency somewhere between “conversational” and “fluent in any situation”. This intimates that today’s young Danes feel more proximate linguistically to English than to Norwegian and Swedish.

To test the significance of the English language for choosing content, the pilot survey put forward two statements which asked respondents to indicate their agreement or disagreement on a sliding 5-point Likert scale. The statement “English language content is easier to follow than content from other languages” achieved the strongest acceptance with 60 per cent clearly agreeing with it (18% mildly agreed and only 13% disagreed; 8% did not respond). This also explains why 60 per cent of respondents rejected the statement “It helps me learn English” as a key reason for watching British content, and why they proved very good at telling British and American content apart. When asked to name British films and series they had seen or heard of, only very few American or Australian productions were listed (e.g., *Game of Thrones*, *The Man in the High Castle*, *Please Like Me*). Only 7 per cent of respondents said they struggled with identifying British content, while 87 per cent said that the accent was the main factor that helped them identify a British show. Danish survey respondents seemed to have a strong preference for English-language content over that from Denmark’s more linguistically and culturally proximate neighbours, Norway and Sweden, in spite of earlier theorisations about audiences, which postulate that audiences prefer first their own national programmes, then regional ones, and then those from the US and other regions (Straubhaar, 2007). The next sections, which deal with the qualitative findings that illuminate how young Danes view Danish, British, and American screen content, reveal further reasons why this pattern of preferences might no longer apply to younger audiences in today’s Denmark.

Qualitative findings on how British screen content compares to Danish and American content

Given our survey findings and the longevity of the cultural discount (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988), cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991, 2007; Straubhaar et al., 2021), and geo-linguistic regions (Sinclair et al., 1996) paradigm, one of our interests in the interviews was to gauge why American content had fared significantly better in popularity than domestic, Danish content in the survey. Furthermore, we wanted to explore why British content had fared significantly better than Nordic content and obtained even more ticks in the top three origin choices than domestic content.

The digital diaries and six interviews, although limited in scope, revealed some textual and production-related reasons for why British and American content is so popular with our young Danish respondents. Comparisons of drama and comedy suggested that Danish drama can be perceived as too dark and humourless, and Danish comedy as less creative or less intelligent than British comedy. Focusing on Danish content, Petra, a 32-year-old copy writer, living with her partner and two children, said: “Danish TV lately just doesn’t really interest me. I don’t really like a lot of the shows that DR has been making the past few years”.

Mads, a 25-year-old language and media student, expressed similar misgivings:

Sometimes I get annoyed at Danish content because it's so devoid of joy. It's just very Danish and you can really see it. And I watch it because I'm a Dane and I have the nationalist feeling, but [...] it's grey and it's all conflict and there's no humour whatsoever.

Dislike of domestic drama has been identified as a major contributory factor to the viewing of non-domestic content in Denmark (Jensen & McCutcheon, 2020) and across Denmark and Sweden (Bengesser et al., 2022a). Humour, mentioned in the above quote, came up repeatedly during the interviews and was pinpointed as a particular British strength by some respondents. Mads explained how he had “enjoyed *Stormester*”, the Danish adaptation of Channel 4's *Taskmaster* “a lot”, but on discovering it was a British format on YouTube, “it ruined the Danish one for me because the British one was just better”. From comparisons with the British version, Mads concluded: “The creativity is bigger in the English versions. [...] Also, the banter is sometimes better”. Jens, a 30-year-old male working as an executive assistant in a public relations company, expressed similar views about the differences between Danish and British stand-up comedians:

I liked a lot of Danish stand-ups when I was younger [...]. I just think that it generally doesn't have the kind of bite or edge that I get out of the British comedians. [...] There are some exceptions. For instance, I really like Anders Matthesen [...], he's a bit more ambitious than some regular person who is just out there to make dick jokes and so on. I'm sorry, that sounds so pretentious, but I think that's why.

Some respondents also explicitly compared British with American stand-up comedy. Lina, a 24-year-old female student, said she favoured British over American stand-up comedians because of their “mode of performance”. What she meant was that for her, American stand-up comedy comprised “one part jokes and nine parts just standing around and being awkward, or people laughing at nothing”, whereas British comedians exhibited better delivery of their material and made her laugh more. Mads echoed her preference, explaining that American comedians' “lack of freedom” to speak their minds made them less interesting and funny than British (and Danish) comedians. Even so, as their media diaries revealed, Lina had watched American comedian John Mulaney and Mads had watched Danish stand-up Christian Fuhlendorf in the week preceding their interviews. This discrepancy between what respondents claimed in interviews and what they actually watched underlines the importance of checking responses against different data collection methods.

Some interview respondents classified themselves as Anglophiles (see also Table 1) and expressed views about British content being more culturally valuable than American content. 21-year-old gap-year student Chitra, with an ethnic minority background and who acknowledged that she may have grown up in quite an anti-American household, believed that British and European entertainment shows are “less trashy” than American shows. Tomas, a 27-year-old student, justified his

choice of British content with the reason of “supporting” something that is not Hollywood. 25-year-old student Mads was the most explicit in linking his liking of British content to a belief in its superiority over American content, but he also demonstrated how aspirations and actual consumption habits may diverge:

I would like to believe that I enjoy British culture more than, for example, American culture because it’s more “high society”. I don’t know if that’s the word, but it seems cooler. But I would like to enjoy more British content.

In his diary, eight of the eleven titles Mads watched were from the US; none were British. However, in the interview, Mads revealed a broad knowledge of British content.

Others were not fans of British content and clearly articulated why, drawing negative comparisons with Danish content, which was also viewed unfavourably. Lina, who self-reported the least interest in British content and culture in the screener survey, whilst very appreciative of British stand-up comedy, was critical of British fiction overall, describing it as just as “unpolished” and “gloomy” as Danish drama:

In Scandinavia we have Nordic Noir. That sort of aesthetic is something that I also sometimes see with British television [...]. It’s like a little more gloomy and unpolished, I guess. [...] But I also don’t necessarily really like the Danish aesthetics.

She added that her preference for American content went as far as choosing American adaptations over British originals of comedy dramas *Shameless* and *The Office*. She was adamant that she “only wanted to watch the American version”.

Thirty-year-old professional Jens was also less enthused about British content, indicating his preference for American content unprompted. Reminiscent of Gitlin’s (1998) claim that the long history of American cultural penetration has resulted in American culture becoming many people’s second culture, Jens described how familiarity underpinned his preference for American content as follows:

I think I’ve watched more American productions, more than anything else. I think most of us do. I think it’s because the American culture has filled up our entertainment space for so long. It feels more homely to watch an American film, or an American television show.

Similarly, Chitra attributed her tendency to opt for English-language content, whether British or American, over other foreign content “because it’s just known”. This finding could be applied to much of Europe. But let us look more closely into what the interviews have revealed about perceptions of cultural and linguistic proximity, and with this, possible explanations for the notably low number of respondents (15%) choosing “other Nordic” content over British content (62%).

Qualitative findings about geo-cultural and linguistic proximity

There is close cultural proximity between the four large Nordic countries, and further close linguistic proximity between the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden). It is because of these proximities that the Nordics also have a long tradition of co-production and programme exchange. Bondebjerg and colleagues (2017) have pointed out how Danish audiences are brought up with Swedish children's fiction. As noted above, their ratings analysis from 2013–2014 reveals that domestic series on linear television achieved by far the highest audience ratings, followed by Swedish and only then American series. Norwegian series were in fourth place, closely followed by British series. From their qualitative audience research, Bondebjerg and colleagues (2017: 140) concluded,

that cultural proximity is of vital importance when Danish audiences are asked to review different series. Hence, not only were the interviewees used to listening to the Swedish language in national, Swedish and co-produced fiction, but also the Swedish political system, culture and values resemble the Danish, which made it easy to sympathize with Swedish characters in Swedish settings.

Today, on domestic VoD services offered by broadcasters (DR TV, TV 2 Play) and regional services (Viaplay), young Danes still encounter content from Sweden and Norway. DR promotes new drama from the region, particularly for young people (e.g., *Benzin i blodet* [*Gasoline in the blood*] and *Eagles*). Norwegian and Swedish content is also available on global streaming services, for example, as HBO originals (e.g., *Beforeigners*, *Gösta*), and is promoted on Netflix to those who have watched these shows. However, there is not enough fiction output from across the Nordic region to offer substantial choices, and it is surpassed in volume by British as well as American content on both Danish linear television and in VoD catalogues (see above).

Over the period of the diary survey, none of the six participants had watched content from Sweden or Norway. In the interviews, only Petra, aged 32, explicitly mentioned her interest in Scandinavian content, citing language and cultural proximity to other Nordic countries as the main draws:

The sound of language, both the Swedish and Norwegian languages, I just love to listen to them and try to imitate them. So, that's actually the main reason why I watch these shows. I don't know, I guess it's also just a culture that seems very similar to my own.

For her, Norway and Sweden felt closer culturally than France, where she had lived and studied for a while. But the appeal that cultural and linguistic proximity to Denmark's Scandinavian neighbours had for her was not shared by other young Danes. The comparative lack of programme availability from the Nordic countries might provide some explanation about why Nordic and Scandinavian

content was not mentioned by other interviewees. But could changes in perceived linguistic proximity and cultural familiarity with English-language content maybe also have affected young Danes' content preferences?

The interviews revealed a sense of familiarity with British screen content and (comparative) cultural closeness with Britain. This was particularly interesting in relation to discussions around comedy, a genre generally believed to travel less well because of cultural specificity. Mads remarked that he likes British comedy because it is familiar and still “close to home”, but not close enough that he could predict where the jokes were going. The quote reveals three things: British comedy is something familiar; British jokes feel “close to home” (i.e., culturally familiar); and that it is the mix of familiarity and difference that lends appeal to British comedy. Perceptions of cultural difference, and with this, something novel, are an important aspect of appeal, too. As Jens explained, he felt that he has come to enjoy what he perceives as the British ability of being able to laugh at oneself, which he believes does not exist in Denmark.

We also saw instances of social distance getting in the way of a sense of cultural proximity. When asked about their rating of a clip in the digital diaries from the mockumentary *People Just Do Nothing*, in which the protagonist Chabuddy G (played by Asim Chaudry) presents multi-ethnic Hounslow, a district of London, as a place worth visiting, interview respondents expanded on their initial reactions in the diary and registered their perceived distance to both the character and the setting. Mads, for example, argued that he probably could not relate to the character because “his growing up and my growing up were very far apart”. Despite the general sense of closeness to British comedy and humour, the multi-ethnic, working-class reality of (sub-)urban Britain satirised in this clip did not resonate with the experiences of our six young Danish respondents with their middle-class, higher education background.

Concerning linguistic proximity, in line with findings from our survey and those of the Nordic Council of Ministers (2021), the interviews suggest that changes in perceptions of what is linguistically proximate are a major factor in explaining the appeal and frequent consumption of British (and American) screen content.

In the first instance, this seemed to come down to more familiarity with English and a general dislike of subtitled shows in languages one cannot understand. Lina found it more difficult to connect with non-English subtitled content, because she had “difficulty concentrating”, and the shows had to be especially engaging to attract her attention. Distracted by her phone, “watching something that I don't understand [...] requires me to be really invested in whatever I'm watching”. For Chitra, too, English was preferable to non-English shows with subtitles, because of the familiarity of English and “the laziness of [not being] willing to go into a culturally different place, whereabouts [sic] UK, US we've grown up to know that side of it”.

For Mads, too, familiarity with the language was a key factor in selecting shows: “I have an easier time identifying with people who speak English or Danish or some language I can understand without having to read the subtitles”. Elaborating on identification through language, subtitling, for Mads, was seen as

an impediment to enjoying a show: “I can’t get the feel. I can’t hear the words and the tone in which they’re said in the same way, so I find it harder to connect to the characters”.

While the survey did not test differences about the appeal of British versus American English, the interviews revealed that understanding English, and British English in particular, can be a draw towards a show, which is thought to be culturally proximate. Petra revealed that she prefers the British family sitcom *Breeders* to its American counterpart, *Working Mums*, because “I just love the British language”, which feels both “more familiar” and “like a culture that’s closer to my own”. For Chitra, this perceived superiority was because “British English is the proper English. It’s the Queen, it’s tea and biscuits”.

Preferences for British English included drilling down into perceptions and impact of different regional accents and sociolects. For some, particular expressions of the English language were linked to favoured performers. For Tomas, the actor Stephen Fry was deemed “very articulate” and “well-spoken”, two attributes that he “associate[d]” with “Britain and British culture” even though Fry is not representative of the UK as a whole, who “are not the same people, they don’t even have the same dialect”. Similarly, Petra was attracted to viewing the plain-speaking, controversial celebrity yet higher class accented chef, Gordon Ramsey, “because I love the way he talks”.

For others, clear distinctions were drawn around class, and also location, within the UK, which suggests young, educated Danes’ familiarity and comfortableness with placing a range of different British accents and dialects. For example, Lina identified what she perceived as the “less polished” and “rough accents” of reality show *Geordie Shore* from Northeast England and London-based teen drama *Skins*, which seemed “very real”, compared with the “super British old... high class British” accents of other British shows. For Chitra, the “amount of dialects and accents” in the UK was “fascinating” and she “love[d] the diversity in such a small geographical part” (i.e., the UK), allowing her “in one split second” to “hear where people are from”. Nevertheless, she preferred “proper London, British” accents over “Geordie” accents, because they sounded more “professional” and because the accents of “Geordies” she had seen on screen or met during her travels seemed “less intelligent” and were difficult to understand because of “their slang”. Tentatively, this suggests that some young Danish viewers feel well versed in viewing programmes in English, even if accents and dialects vary quite substantially. The statements on perceptions of different variations of English also suggest that accents and sociolects can affect viewers’ content preferences. When audiences associate certain accents with different cultural status, and therefore appeal to them, linguistic, social, and cultural proximity or distance interact. Associations with specific accents can both raise and lessen appeal, and experienced social or cultural proximity (or distance) impacts linguistic perception and appeal.

The role of the British accent in the content choices of those with high English-language capacities, as well as their awareness of different dialects and sociolects, suggests an acquired familiarity with British content. This familiarity does not

necessarily substitute, but perhaps competes with, the geo-linguistic proximity to other Scandinavian content. The ubiquity of English-language content compared with the scarcer availability of Scandinavian content in Denmark, may give British content a competitive edge. This is clearly a topic worth investigating further. Not least, researchers should consider the role of language, different types of (perceived) cultural and other proximities, key structural factors (both historical and current), and of course the momentous changes triggered by streaming and its effect on content availability and individual choices.

Conclusions

In seeking to further understand the transnational consumption and reception of non-domestic content, the survey and interviews in this exploratory pilot revealed a wide range of highly discerning evaluations about how young Danes find, access, define, and evaluate British screen content. This includes how their perceptions of British content relate to the still hegemonic position of American content, Denmark's place within the geo-cultural Nordic and geo-linguistic Scandinavian regions, as well as perceived degrees of proximity with the UK – cultural and linguistic.

Core lines of inquiry around cultural and linguistic proximity theory reveal that more young Danes chose (longform) American content than domestic content amongst their top three choices of content origin, and slightly more chose British than Danish content. Content from “other Nordic” countries was low on the list of preferred countries of origin. This challenges older arguments about the significance of cultural and linguistic proximity and of geo-linguistic regions as the most important determinants of transnational programme flows, and it lends further support to Straubhaar and colleagues' (2021: 243) recent conclusion:

One implication of these findings for cultural proximity theory is that it may have to be seen as less broad, covering all national production, and perhaps more as a continuing, but changing factor that may vary considerably by genre over time.

In Denmark, the preference for American and British content amongst young (aged 16–34) audiences can, at least in part, be attributed to the more limited availability of both Danish domestic and Nordic content. At the same time, our findings show that the prevalence of American and British screen content, especially on SVoD services, means that the pilot's young Danish respondents have become highly familiar with English-language content; to the point where it feels, to use Gitlin's (1998) words, like their second culture. It is too early to say whether the generational differences found in our pilot study, as well as by comparison with other scholars' research (Bondebjerg et al., 2017; Jensen et al., 2021), represent a more lasting shift. It may also be possible that, as viewers age, their genre preferences and content-origin preferences shift. Most likely, it is a combination of both. In any case, this is a fascinating question that should be investigated further.

Alongside structural determinants, including the longstanding historical presence of British and American content on Danish screens, this pilot study supports claims that “global flows of television cannot be understood without looking at the role of language” (Mast et al., 2017: 2562). English proficiency was pinpointed as one explanatory factor for the appeal of both British and American content amongst young Danes, particularly over Scandinavian content. Amongst young Danes with higher education, English competency levels are high, while conversing with Scandinavian neighbours appears more cumbersome (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2021). This suggests that to them, English feels more linguistically proximate than Swedish and Norwegian. Regarding screen content, the English language constitutes no barrier to consumption, while exposure to a broad choice of American and British content, as opposed to a scarcer Nordic offering, has created a sense of linguistic and cultural familiarity with British and American screen productions. Together, these processes contribute to a sense of proximity, which translates into content preferences which young audiences can pursue using on-demand services. This means that Sinclair and colleagues’ (1996) theorisation of the geo-linguistic region is losing ground in the region, whilst Collins’s (1989) two-tiered system of linguistic proximity seems to be reversing: The most popular screen productions are those in English, followed by local, national, and regional languages. Or at least this is the case for young, educated Danes.

The pilot finding that younger Danish audiences appear to prefer English-language content over content from other Scandinavian countries aligns with recent empirical research in Latin America (Straubhaar et al., 2021). Straubhaar and colleagues found that their respondents were more interested in American programmes and films (52%) than content from other culturally and linguistically proximate Latin American neighbouring countries (31%).

While the quantitative and qualitative findings from this exploratory pilot study offer useful future avenues for exploring how we can better understand the changing parameters of cultural and linguistic proximity, the pilot had limitations in scope, time, and the language it was conducted in (Bengesser et al., 2022b). There are limits to using a small qualitative sample of six respondents, although it was balanced across gender, age, social background, and self-attested interest in the UK. The combined constraints of Covid-19 and resources (time, finance, and lack of travel opportunities) limited the scope to a small online sample, but this did allow us to test our methodology, and the four-country study funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which started in 2022, will use larger and more representative samples for both the survey and interviews to explain cultural proximity.

Nevertheless, the Danish pilot gives clear pointers that exploring, unpacking, and complexifying cultural and linguistic proximities is a worthwhile endeavour if we want to understand the appeal of screen content across borders. Building on the pilot study, the “Screen Encounters with Britain” project will test these (and other questions) across four countries (Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, and Italy) using a refined methodology to ascertain how and why young Europeans engage with British screen content. Aiming for a holistic approach, it will take

account of a range of (perceived) cultural and linguistic proximities, actual language proficiencies, shifts and continuities in dubbing and subtitling, alongside structural factors such as content availability, historical trade relations, and the maturity of the streaming market, as well as research respondents' personal encounters with and attitudes towards Britain.

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