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# The War on Drugs: An Audience Study of the Netflix Original Series Narcos

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The War on Drugs

The War on Drugs:

An Audience Study of The Netflix Original Series *Narcos*

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### Abstract

Netflix has adopted an emerging subgenre known as narcodrama in the production of their new original series, *Narcos*. What motivates Colombian and American audiences to watch *Narcos*? What are the differences in uses and gratifications between American and Colombian audiences when it comes to violence in television shows? This survey among Colombian and American audiences attempted to better understand the motivations that push them to watch *Narcos*. The results show that Colombian and American audiences differ on almost all four variables, which is supported by open-ended responses where Colombians were more likely to refer to national history and how drug trafficking has affected the country.

## Introduction

In the last decade, a new subgenre of soap operas focusing on drug trafficking has emerged in Colombia, and has garnered an international audience (Cabañas, 2012). These soap operas, also known as *narconovelas*, focus on the lives of drug lords and their involvement in Colombian society. Some of these shows base their narratives on real-life events and others completely fictionalize the world of drug trafficking. To capitalize on this trend, the online streaming service *Netflix* released *Narcos* on August 28, 2015. The description on *Netflix*'s official website of reads: "The true story of Colombia's infamously violent and powerful drug cartels fuels this gritty new gangster drama series," (Netflix, 2015). In only ten episodes, director José Padilha attempted to recreate the involvement of the Drug Enforcement Agency in the pursuit of the Colombian drug lord, Pablo Escobar, bringing an American perspective to a conflict that tainted Colombian history. The show has already been renewed for a second season that will be released in 2016.

The show garnered a lot of attention in the first few months following its release. With nine out of ten stars on the Internet Movie Database website and a 76% rating on Rotten Tomatoes, *Narcos* was able to capture the attention of critics and audiences alike. Mackenzie Dawson (2015) in his review in the *New York Post* commented about the reality-based drama: "You cannot make this up. People say that all the time, but in this case, you simply cannot. While some dramatic liberties have been taken in this show, particularly with the timeline, all of the major events actually happened, and you can Google them after each episode to read up on them." Matthew Gilbert (2015) compared the show to the *Wire* in his review in the *Boston Globe*, "As entertaining as it is to watch "Narcos," a period drama with artfully filmed cat-and-

mouse games between the cartel and law enforcement, there is a relevant — and very “Wire”-like — truth at its core.”

On the other hand, David Sims (2015) called *Narcos* “a worthy effort, to be sure, but worthy doesn’t always equal entertaining,” in his review in *The Atlantic*. Eric Deggans (2015) acknowledged the differences *Narcos* might represent for the audience in his review in *NPR*, “For some, *Narcos* will revive the most troubling TV depictions of Latinos as criminals and drug traffickers, despite the show's heroic efforts to humanize everyone involved. But it's also a compelling and complex story, especially for fans of classic crime stories (like *The Godfather*) who might be curious about how cartels came to dominate the modern cocaine trade.” Despite some of the negative reviews, the show was nominated for two Golden Globe Awards in the categories of Best TV Drama and Best Actor in a TV Drama.

This study will explore the motivations behind audience viewing of *Narcos*. Considering *Narcos* draws from real life events that took place during the 1980’s in Colombia, the narrative of the show may resonate with those living in Colombian who experienced the age of terror as it was taking place. For people in the United States, their experience with the conflict is more distant. Using a uses and gratifications approach, this study will use a survey of audiences in both countries to better understand the reasons why people actively seek out *Narcos* and what needs are satisfied by its viewing.

## Literature Review

### *Narconovela as an Emerging Subgenre*

Soap operas have dominated prime time television slots, occupying the top ratings in multiple countries in Central and South America over the past 50 years (Havens, 2004). These *telenovelas* are well known for melodrama, the “over dramatization, emphasis on emotion rather

than logic, use of music to mark key relationships, and characters as symbols of ethical values,” (Benavides, 2008, p.10). These Latin American soap operas which started in the 1960’s have had an impact on people’s lives by dramatically portraying controversial issues like “illegitimate children, misplaced identity, the burden of social conventions, amorous rejection, and forbidden desires” (Benavides, 2008, p. 2)

In addition to these issues, the narratives of *telenovelas* are also filled with characters that seem to fight their way through challenging obstacles in order to find their true love—often someone belonging to a different economic/social class. This allows the audience an opportunity to relate to the characters and believe in the possibility of these unlikely situations. It is easy for multiple audiences to relate to the main characters because they aren’t overly developed and their motivations are often driven by their feelings (Medina & Barron, 2010).

For the Latin American audience, *telenovelas* play an important role in the representation of local values (Martin-Barbero, 1995), they became an escape for society from their own lives, allowing them to live vicariously through the “humble heroes and heroines” who break class barriers and overcome adversity. These shows enable audiences to fulfill “their own fantasies of social recognition,” (Morgan, 2013, p. 55). This need to step out from the shadow of the middle class and the elites is evidenced in the narratives of the *telenovelas*, where it is common to see a character fighting for the same ideals of the working class.

Even though the popularity of the *telenovelas* is unparalleled in South American countries, international audiences were not as interested in the over-simplistic narratives. Jesus Martin-Barbero (as cited in Pobutsky, 2010), believed that Colombia’s *telenovela* production could garner a bigger audience by getting closer to national and local references. Shows like *El Capo* and *El Cartel*, both aired between 2008 and 2009, fictionalize Colombia’s drug cartel

history, they blur “place names to fanciful references to generic locations,” (Morgan, 2013, p.59) media outlets were able to make the connection between the *narconovela*’s plot and history. On the other hand, the production team behind *Narcos* is not shy about using real names, real footage, and real facts about Colombia’s most well known drug trafficker.

The *telenovela* continues to be a highly popular genre, but in recent years Colombia has been responsible for popularizing a new subgenre, *narconovela* or *narcotelenovela*. The term *narconovela* is often used to refer to the *novela sicairesca*, a literary genre characterized by a plot centering on drug trafficking in Colombia. The history of Colombia is known for drug lords like Pablo Escobar and the drug cartels. The cocaine trade, the war on drugs, and the involvement of the United States in this fight are elements that have been introduced into Colombian television in this new *telenovela* subgenre. Unlike the hopeful, melodramatic *telenovelas*, *narconovelas*’ narratives use “the backdrop of Colombia’s cocaine trade to tell violent stories of poverty, crime, and corruption in high places” (Morgan, 2013, p. 54).

The first of these *narconovelas* was released in 2006. Based on the book of the same name by Gustavo Bolivar, *Sin Tetas no Hay Paraiso* became a well-known *narconovela*. It depicted the life of young girls who wanted to get breast augmentations in order to attract the attention of drug traffickers as a way to overcome poverty. The popularity of *Sin Tetas no Hay Paraiso* has been noted by scholars for several reasons: first, the narrative mirroring that allowed the Colombian audience to relive their personal national history; second, the sex appeal of the main female characters; and third, the continued global interest in narco-related themes (Pobutsky, 2010).

Even though *Sin Tetas no Hay Paraiso* is the place of origin for the *narconovela*, it is the subtle departure from the *telenovela* genre that allowed for its success (Morgan, 2013). In

addition to the commonly seen *telenovela* elements such as betrayal, revenge, triumph, and humiliation, the *narcovela* presents the journey of its characters as one of a fight for social success “that ends up at best in failure, at worst in death,” (Morgan, 2013, p. 60). It also portrays tensions that arose in Colombian society from the conflict with the drug trade, poverty, and modernization (Pobutsky, 2010).

Worldwide, Colombian *narconovelas* are known for highlighting “local political issues such as kidnapping and violent crime,” (When Telenovelas Travel Abroad: Globalization and Generic Transformation, 2005, para. 5). Since the success of *Sin Tetas no Hay Paraiso*, multiple *narconovela* productions have garnered international success. Some of the most well-known are: *El Capo*, *La Viuda de la Mafia* (Cabañas 2012), *Las Muñecas de la Mafia*, *Rosario Tijeras*, *El Cartel*, and one of the most recent, *Pablo Escobar, The Drug Lord*. This last focuses on the well-known capo from the Medellin cartel, Pablo Escobar. Despite the amount of harm he caused the country, Escobar continues to be a subject of morbid curiosity for the Colombian audience and for audiences around the globe (Pobutsky, 2013).

More often than not, these *narconovelas* end up skimping on history, and celebrating the extravagant lifestyle that drug trafficking allowed (Pobutsky, 2013). Netflix’s *Narcos* seems to fall under this new subgenre, where the lives of famous drug lords such as Escobar are depicted under the impression of an accurate historical framework, but in the end, glorify the “achievements” that drugs enabled them.

### *Uses and Gratification in Television*

In an attempt to better understand the relationship between the audience and media, academics have identified theories that explore the possible effects media can have on the audience. Uses and gratifications looks at why audience members consume certain forms of

media. It is an attempt to better understand the relationship between audience members and their interest in specific elements, such as violence. According to this theory, audiences actively seek media in order to satisfy the gratifications for which they are longing (Brown, Lauricella, Douai, & Zaidi, 2012). They are making conscious and motivated “choices among channels and content on offer” (McQuail, 1987, p. 234).

Kathryn Greene and Marina Krcmar (2005) connect uses of media to particular personality traits in an attempt to explain the connection between the audience and their television consumption. In their study, Greene and Krcmar (2005) examine the link “between relevant personality factors, media use and enjoyment, and negative behavioral outcomes” (p.72). By identifying relevant personality traits, Greene and Krcmar (2005) try to understand the audiences’ media consumption. They found that sensation seeking audiences and risk takers are more likely to like violent movies (Greene and Krcmar, 2005). This shows that multiple things affect a person’s media exposure. Conway and Rubin (1991) found that a person’s media exposure is affected by their values, beliefs, needs, and motives. This would explain why the relationship between media and the audience is particular to each person.

McQuail (1987), identifies four causes for media use: (1) information seeking, (2) social contact (3) diversion, and (4) social learning and development. He suggests the use of media originates in the attempt to meet the needs in these categories by actively seeking media to satisfy personal needs.

Building upon McQuail’s findings, other researchers have established that audience members select certain media according to their expectations of needs gratifications (Conway & Rubin, 1991). Studies that use this approach would explain the motivations behind a person consuming specific types of media instead of others. In some cases, researchers have shown a

connection between a person's needs and media they are consuming. For example, based on McQuail's four categories, Brown et al. (2012) developed a study to better understand why people watch crime dramas. They were able to establish that for the audience, it is important to have a combination of McQuail's four gratifications to fulfill audience needs. They named this combination *full gratification*. It was also important for the audience to satisfy their sense of curiosity; crime dramas exposed a world they weren't familiar with and they wanted to find out more (Brown et al., 2012).

In addition, Brown et al. (2012) were able to find that social interaction, having something to talk about with other people, is also a primary motivation for people and drives them to watch shows that can become topics of conversation. Stevens Aubrey et al. (2012) found that college-aged viewers are attracted to reality programming to satisfy instrumental needs. These needs include the ability to use media as conversation fodder, allowing them to further interact with viewers their own age who are also attracted to reality programming. Previous studies argued that current events and news programming were more likely to satisfy these needs (Rubin, 1983).

The uses and gratifications for a particular show or subgenre can change as media changes. In recent years, reality television has become more specialized and now appeals to a more specific group of people. This has caused a new gratification identified as "personal utility" (Barton, 2009). In previous research, social utility, watching with others or talking with them about the show, used to be the reason why people would watch reality shows, but now they seem to want to "obtain gratifications on an individual or specialized level" (p.474).

*The Appeal of Violence in the Media*

For a very long time, violence has been a common subject of media and media scholars. From novels, poems, short films, and movies, to television shows, violent content has always been considered as having an allure for the audience (Shaw, 2004). For example, movie producers often use violence in their trailers to attract larger audiences. What really appeals to the audience, however, is not the violence itself, but what the violence might represent (Bartsch & Mares, 2014).

Previous research of violence on television has arisen out of the concern for its possible effects on the audience, especially children. Others have focused on the effects of violent media content on adult audience members. For example, Unz, Schwab, and Winterhoff-Spurk (2008), study “how violence in TV news influences emotional responses of viewers” (p.151), including emotional-facial expressions. But, what motivates audience members to watch violent media content?

Weaver (2011) shows that violence plays a role in selective exposure, why a person decides to watch something in particular, but violence also diminishes the enjoyment a person might get out of a particular media product (as cited in Bartsch & Mares, 2014). If a person’s enjoyment decreases with the presence of violence, why is he/she still more inclined to watch violent content?

One of the reasons that could help explain the appeal of violent media is other desirable content characteristics and viewing experiences (as cited in Bartsch & Mares, 2014). Some people might be looking for suspense, and violence in a movie trailer could be taken as an indicator the film will contain suspenseful moments. In their study, Villanueva, Castro, Fernandez, and Maneiro (2013), compared the appeal of real violence and fictional violence.

They were able to conclude that audiences find violence appealing and interesting, but the appeal goes beyond the simple presence of violent material. They concluded that people are particularly interested in violence they can understand and that relates to their own lives.

Furthermore, individual in contemporary society seem to be attracted to narrative forms as an important element of the television they consume (Shaw, 2004), which would explain the audiences' attraction to film and television. Audiences have shown an interest in violence that plays an important role in the narrative of a film or a television show. They are more likely to be tolerant and accepting of violence that has a logical connection between the argument the television show is trying to make and reality (Villanueva et al., 2013). When violence is found in this context, it is easier for the audience to find a meaning behind it. In other words, it is necessary for the audience to make use of the narrative to better understand the role the violence is playing (Shaw 2004).

Villanueva et al. (2013) found that people are not interested "in what is disconnected from reality, what is too surreal, or what has been shown repeatedly" (p.591). Scholars, in effect, reached a consensus that the audience needs to feel there is some purpose to the violence in media in order for them to be attracted to it.

In Bartsch and Mares study (2014), they used the gore in movie trailers to anticipate the likelihood of the audience to be interested in watching a particular movie. They found that the audience was likely to be interested in the film, even though there were high levels of violence in the trailer, if they "thought that the depiction of violence in the movie would be meaningful, moving, and thought-provoking" (p. 970). Audiences are not interested in violence for the sole purpose of violence. As long as the audience seems to be able to find some meaning behind the

violence, the violent media content present in various forms such as movies and television programs, will appeal to them and motivate them to consume it.

Villanueva et al. (2013) also found that real violence is always more interesting and appealing to audiences than fictional violence. This could explain why TV series that are based on real-life events, like *Narcos*, are highly appealing to the audience.

Audiences also enjoy forming “reflections on violent issues,” by watching other people’s perspectives on current violent issues (Bartsch & Mares, 2014). When violence is used within a logical narrative, it is to reflect on bigger issues like domestic violence, national and international terrorism, and bigger concerns that could be intriguing to the audience. In their study, Bartsch and Mares (2014), theorize that “individuals may choose to watch violent, gory material if they anticipate that the depiction is a meaningful and valuable reflection of reality” (p. 957).

Current research shows there’s a process that takes place leads audience members to select media they want to consume. The relationship between the audience and media is not the same for everyone as each audience member has a unique life experience and media is composed of different narratives. Not everyone selects the same movies to watch or favors the same television shows. Each person actively seeks media in order to satisfy certain needs. The same is true for violent media content. Once a person identifies what needs are to be satisfied they are able to actively seek media that will meet their needs. In essence, this is a form of problem resolution (McQuail, 1987).

### Research Question

The existing literature on uses and gratifications and narconovelas viewed within an audience-centered framework is limited. Therefore, this study examines the motivations behind Colombian audiences viewing of the Netflix show *Narcos* and how these differ from the uses

and gratifications of audiences from the United States of America. By using qualitative and quantitative data, this study will consider whether the country with which the audience identifies will be a predictor of the uses and gratifications they find in *Narcos*.

This study will be significant in the field of communication because it will present a starting point for future research on the uses and gratifications of contemporary violent media such as the Netflix show *Narcos*. It will also be important in Ibero-American studies since *Narcos* attracts audience from both countries and can be studied within an audience-centered framework for both populations.

### Research Methods

An online survey was developed to investigate the uses and gratifications of U.S. and Colombian viewers of the Netflix narconovela, *Narcos*. The online survey was chosen because it provided several advantages: language, time-efficiency, user-friendly interface, facilitation of data recollection, and the possibility to include different types of questions (Gregori & Baltar, 2013). It was necessary for the sake of the study that the survey be available in both English and Spanish versions. Considering the desire to reach audiences from Colombia it was necessary to use a platform that overcame geographic distance as well.

A convenience snowball sample of participants was reached through the social networking site, Facebook. The lead researcher sent the link individually to everyone in her Facebook “friends list.” Also, colleagues from Colombia, Brazil, and the United States posted the link to the online survey on their personal timelines. The link directed the participants to an anonymous, online survey that could be completed by those over 18 years-old.

All participants were directed to a survey that contained basic demographics questions and both qualitative and quantitative questions that fit the uses and gratifications approach.

Demographic questions focused on the geographic location of the respondents. For the purposes of the study, it was important to take into account the cultural background of the respondent.

After the demographics questions, the respondents were directed to three questions that looked to explore their overall consumption of television with violent media content. For the purposes of the survey, the definition of violence was retrieved from Google.com on October 20, 2015. This definition is the first one that comes up in Google.com when looking for violence, making it one of the most universally accessed definitions. Violence was defined as “behavior involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something.” The definition was included at the beginning of the survey, allowing the respondents to begin the survey with the same baseline information.

The first question, “How often do you watch television shows that depict violent acts such as physical aggression, murder, torture, etc...?” provided examples of the types of violence that were being considered for the purposes of the survey. The second question, “How often do you watch television shows that contain drug references?” was geared more towards the specific content that characterizes *Narcos*. Lastly, the third question was “What percentage of the television shows you watch contain violence?”

Respondents that had seen some of *Narcos* and had watched some percentage of television that contained violent media content, were directed to a seven-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. First, the questions, “I watch *Narcos* to satisfy my curiosity and interest in violence,” and “I watch *Narcos* to get information about violence, police enforcement, and victims,” were used to measure the first variable, information seeking. Secondly, the questions, “I watch *Narcos* because I identify with the survivors,” and “I watch *Narcos* because I identify with the people committing the crimes,” were used to measure the

second variable, social learning and development. Third, “I watch *Narcos* because it allows me the opportunity to talk to other people about the show,” and “I watch *Narcos* because no one is around and it makes me feel less lonely,” were used for the third variable, social contact. Fourth, “I watch *Narcos* because it allows me the opportunity to escape from my problems,” “I watch *Narcos* because it helps me relax,” and “I watch *Narcos* because I am just filling time and have nothing else to do,” were used for the final variable, diversion.

The last question was an open-ended question that asked participants, “Do you have any additional thoughts regarding violence on the television show *Narcos*?” This open-ended question looked to explore audience uses and gratifications about *Narcos* viewing in their own words.

The survey yielded 358 responses. Of these, 182 had watched *Narcos*. Of these there were 84 respondents from Colombia and 71 respondents from the United States of America (n = 155).

### Findings

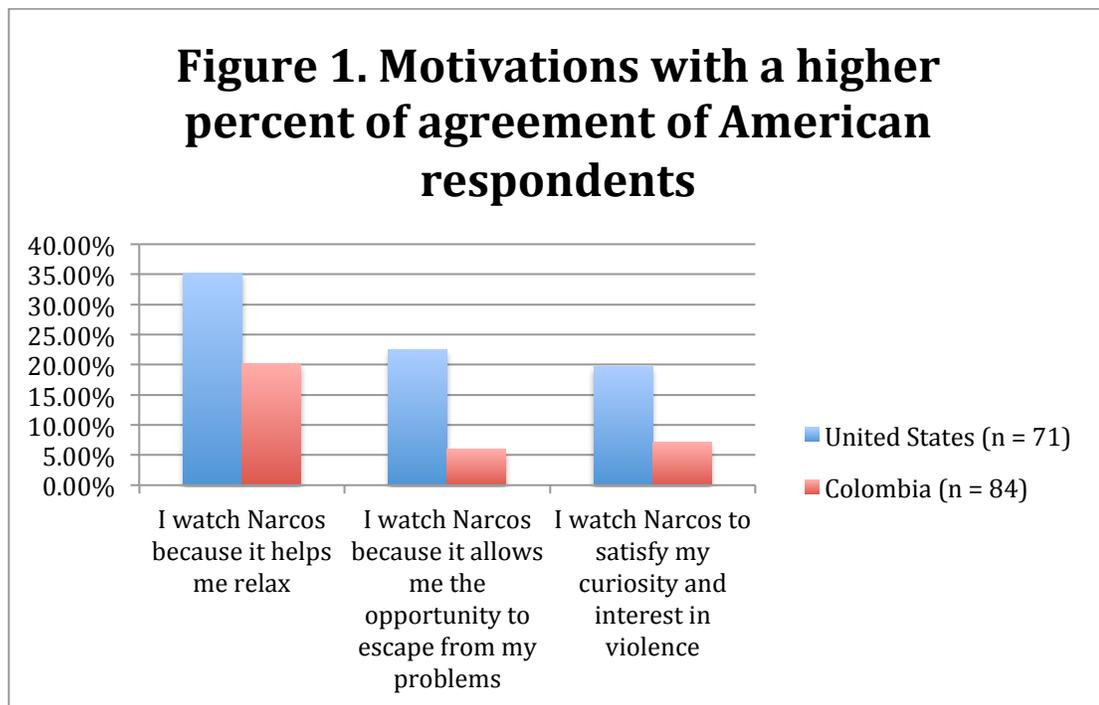
The majority of this study will be based on the responses of the 155 (n=155) respondents who have watched *Narcos*. When referring to a percentage it will from the respective country and not from the total responses of the survey.

### *Uses and Gratifications*

American respondents agreed more with the statements used to test the uses and gratifications of the audience. Of the four variables: information seeking, social learning and development, social contact, and diversion, American respondents had higher percentage of agreement in all statements for the information seeking and diversion variables. The Colombian respondents only had higher percentage of agreement than Americans in the social development

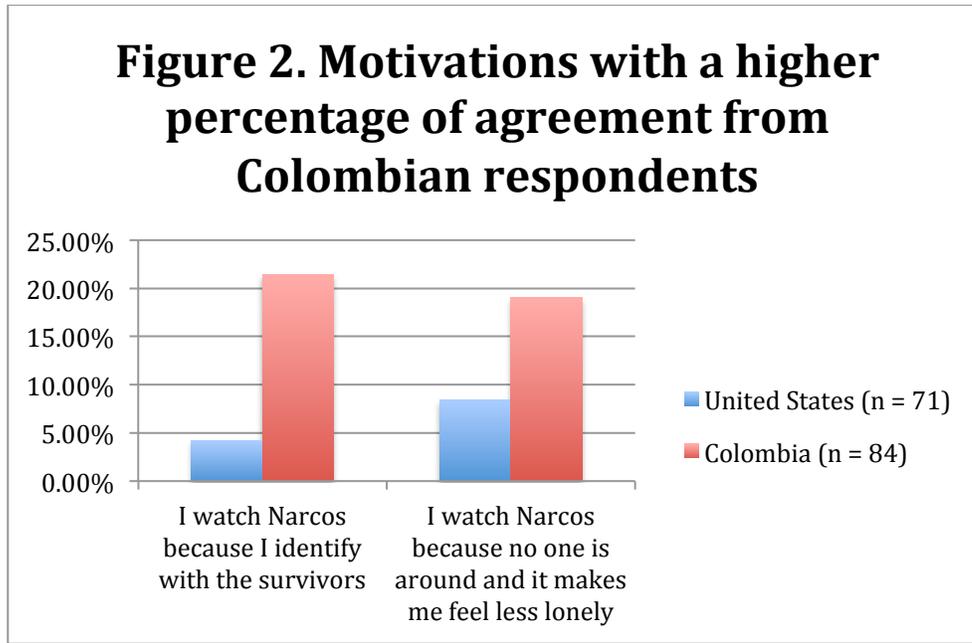
and learning variable. The results for the social contact variable were split; each country had a higher percentage of agreement for one of the two statements.

Half of American respondents, 54.93% (39, n = 71), and half of Colombian respondents, 52.38% (44, n = 84), agreed that *Narcos* was only a way to fill time because there was nothing else to do. On the other hand, 35.21% (25, n = 71) of Americans indicated that *Narcos* helped them relax, compared to the 20.24% (17, n = 84) of Colombian respondents. There was also a substantial difference between American and Colombian audiences regarding the use of *Narcos* as a form of escape, 22.54% (16, n = 71) of Americans and 5.95% (5, n = 84) of Colombians that indicated that *Narcos* gave them the opportunity to escape from their problems.



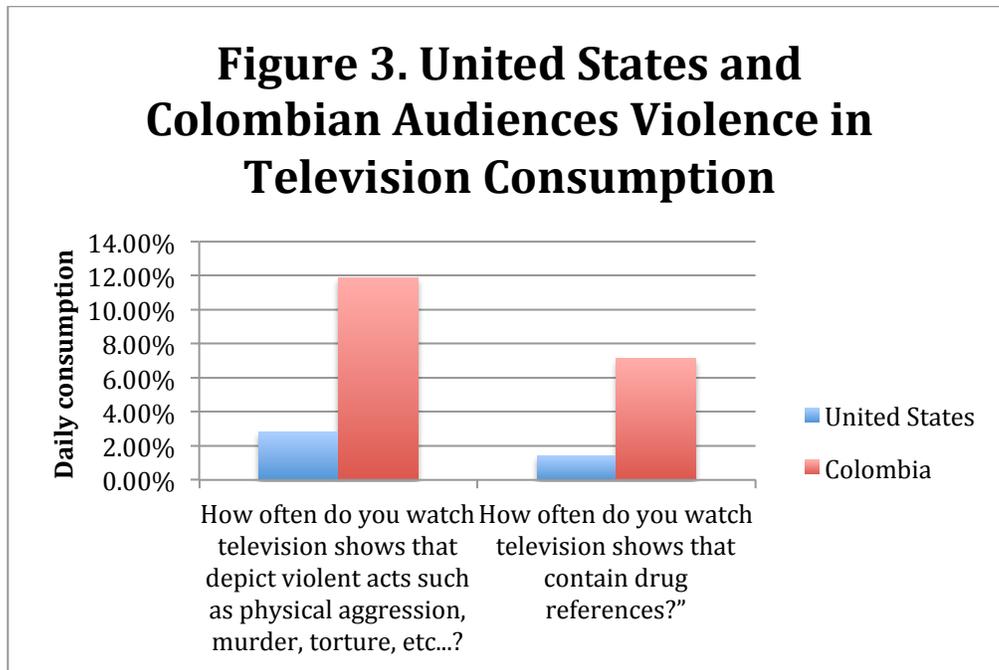
In addition, 19.72% (14, n = 71) of Americans agreed that they watched *Narcos* in order to satisfy their curiosity and interest in violence compared to 7.14% (6, n = 84) of Colombians. On the other hand, the results for wanting to get information about violence, police enforcement, and victims, were very similar. The study found that 32.14% (27, n = 84) of Colombian

respondents and 35.21% (25, n = 71) of Americans agreed with that statement. Also, a higher percent of Colombians agreed that they identified with the survivors, 21.43% (18, n = 84) compared to 4.23% (3 n = 71) of Americans.



### *Violence in Television Consumption Behavior*

Interesting findings arose from the three questions that looked to explore audiences' overall consumption of television with violent media content. From the Colombian audience members, 46.43% (39, n = 84) claimed to watch television shows that depict violent acts such as physical aggression, murder, torture, etc. at least once a week and 11.9% (10, n = 84) said they watched them on a daily basis. On the other hand, while 45.07% (32, n = 71) of American respondents said they watched television shows that depict violent acts such as physical aggression, murder, torture, etc. at least once a week, only 2.82% (2, n = 71) said they watched them on a daily basis.



For the second question, “How often do you watch television shows that contain drug references?” the results were similar. From the Colombian respondents, 23.81% (20, n = 84) indicated in the survey they watch shows with drug references at least once a week, 9.52% (8, n = 84) two to three times a week, and 7.14% (6, n = 84) daily. The results for the American viewers were very similar with 23.94% (17, n = 71) reporting once a week and 16.9% (12, n = 71) two to three times a week. But unlike the Colombian audience, only 1.41% (1, n = 71) said they watched television shows with drug references on a daily basis.

Despite similar results for the first two questions, the last question shows the biggest difference between the Colombian and the American audiences. To the question, “What percentage of the television shows you watch contain violence?” only 27.38% (23, n = 84) of the Colombian audience answered more than half of the television shows they watched contained violence, compared to 45.07% (32, n = 71) of the American audience.

## Discussion

The findings reveal that Colombian and American audiences differ in almost all the four variables.

### *Information Seeking*

In the information seeking variable, the discrepancies between the two audiences were found in the first question, “I watch *Narcos* to satisfy my curiosity and interest in violence,” where Americans were more likely to agree with that statement (19.72%: 14, n = 71). Audiences from both countries presented similar percentages for the second question that tested for information seeking, “I watch *Narcos* to get information about violence, police enforcement, and victims.” In the case of *Narcos*, it wasn’t the violence that appealed to them, but the historical relevancy. This supports Martin-Barbero’s (as cited in Pobutsky, 2010), argument that by getting closer to the real subject, audiences were going to be more interested.

In the case of *Narcos*, violence is part of the narrative, it allows for the story to develop as it happened in real life. Consistent with previous research, the audience seems to place value on narrative forms as an important element of media they are consuming (Shaw, 2004), the importance of violence for the purpose of the narrative is something that came up in multiple responses of people from both countries. A male between the ages of 22 and 34 from Colombia said, “They show violence as part of Colombia’s history, in order to understand the fact and the context in which Colombia was living at the time. I don’t think that violence is one of the show’s central themes, and it’s also not a way to attract more viewers. Violence is just another element within the story that it’s being told.” An American male viewer within the same age range agreed, “it was pretty violent at times but it was necessary in order to depict the reality of what really happened.” A female American viewer between the ages of 18 and 21 said, “The violence

is part of the point of the story and part of explaining how awful what Pablo Escobar did was. So I think it's also a crucial part of telling the story.”

Others were motivated to watch the show to find out more about Colombia's political history and the impact Escobar had in Colombia. A female American respondent between the age of 35 and 44 said, “I watched on two occasions with my husband who was interested in the political aspects of the show. The violence was too much for me and I couldn't relate to the characters. I stopped watching.” An American male respondent between the age of 22 and 34 said, “Prior to the show, I had little knowledge of Pablo Escobar and the massive amount of money he made by drug trafficking and the amount of influence he had in his country.”

#### *Social Contact*

In the social contact variable, American audiences were more likely to agree to watching *Narcos* because it provided them with the opportunity to talk to others about the show (63.38%: 45, n = 71), even though Colombian audiences didn't fall too far behind, with 44.05% (37, n = 84). Both audiences were more likely to disagree that they watched *Narcos* because it made them feel less lonely (USA 80.28%: 57, n = 71; COL 83.33%: 70, n=84). This supports Brown et al. (2012) who identified social interaction as a primary motivation for people viewing violent television. This finding also supports Barton's study (2009) on reality television where this gratification was labeled personal utility, but still reflects the idea that audiences consume media in order to be able to connect with others.

#### *Social Learning and Development*

A higher percentage of Colombians (21.43%: 18, n = 84) agreed that they were able to identify with the survivors than American audiences (4.23%: 3, n = 71), and this is also evident in some of the open-ended responses. For Colombians, the show seems to be a reminder of

recent national history. A female respondent between the age of 22 and 34 said, “The violence shown in *Narcos* is very close to the reality that was lived in Colombia about 20 or 30 years ago. In some cases, the violence has even been toned down. Nothing compares to the culture of violence that drug trafficking developed and that still impregnates Colombians’ day to day.” Another respondent agreed that *Narcos* is a historical reference to a violent time in Colombia “that shows the aberrations of uncontrolled economic power” (Male, 55-64, Colombia).

Because of the cultural background, the Colombian audience has grown accustomed to *telenovelas* and *narconovelas*. This study shows how the audience’s thoughts towards the show reflect what Pobutsky said (2013) in his study of the subgenre, where he claims these skimp on history and celebrate the lifestyle of drug traffickers.

#### *Diversion*

In the diversion variable, a higher percentage of Americans (22.54%, 16, n = 71) agreed to using *Narcos* as an escape from their problems. This could be because the show deals with issues that are alien to an American audience who didn’t have to live through the violent reign of Pablo Escobar. From the Colombian respondents, 84.52% (71, n = 84) disagreed with that statement. A male respondent between the age of 45 and 54 from Colombia said acknowledged the importance of knowing one’s history, but felt that the show was a little too much. He called it “an abuse.” Colombian respondents might feel differently about the conflict because of their cultural background and history.

#### *Violence in Television Consumption Behavior*

Despite the fact that Colombian audiences claimed to watch violent television more often, as it is shown in Figure 3, American audiences (45.07%: 32, n = 71) said that a higher percentage of violence filled their television consumption, meaning that even though they don’t

watch television shows containing violence as often as the Colombian audience (27.38%: 23, n = 84), from the television shows they do watch, most of them contain some form of violent material. This goes alongside Shaw's study (2004) which established that violent content has always been considered as having an allure for the audience.

### Conclusion

This study sought to better understand the differences in uses and gratifications of Colombian and American audiences of the Netflix original series *Narcos*. This study used a survey that included a motivations table containing seven variables; two for information seeking; two for social learning and development; two for social contact; and three for diversion. The survey also included an open-ended question inviting respondents to share their thought on the violence of the show *Narcos*.

This study shows that the motivation to watch *Narcos* is different for people who identify as a Colombian from people who identify as American. The highest percentage of agreement for the Colombian audience was found in the diversion variable, where 52.38% (n=44) agreed that *Narcos* was just a way to fill time when there was nothing else to do. On the other hand, Americans highest percentage of agreement was in the social contact variable, where 63.38% (n=45) agreed that *Narcos* gave them the opportunity to talk to other people.

Their consumption of violent television is also different. While Colombian respondents claimed to watch television with violent content more often, the American responses showed that even though they consume it less often, most of their television consumption is composed of violent television shows.

Even though the results don't show substantial differences between the audiences' of both countries, this could be considered the first study in a line of additional research where

elements of both cultures are studied and taken into account as part of what shapes their uses and gratifications of *Narcos*.

Future researchers should consider employing focus groups to allow for a more conversational interview with the audience, and follow-up questions would have allowed for a more in-depth study of what motivates the audience to watch a show. Answering questions about violence on television is not an easy subject. People are hesitant to admitting they actively seek violence on television because it would be frowned upon in society.

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## Appendix 1

Thank you for taking time to complete this survey! I am conducting research for my senior Communication Capstone project on the Netflix show, Narcos. This 5-7min survey will ask questions regarding television viewing behaviors, television content, and personal statements regarding television show preferences. Results and findings will be available online around the end of December. All responses will be anonymous and confidential. No names, email addresses, or other identifying information will be used in the study. If there are any questions, comments, or concerns please contact the course professor, Dr. Jennifer Henderson at [jennifer.henderson@trinity.edu](mailto:jennifer.henderson@trinity.edu).

For the purposes of this survey, Violence will be defined as "behavior involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something."

Are you 18 years or older?

- Yes
- No

Are you familiar with the show Narcos?

- Yes
- No

From which country did you first access the show?

- None
- Colombia
- United States of America
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

With which country do you most closely identify in terms of cultural upbringing?

- Colombia
- United States of America
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

What is your primary language?

- English
- Spanish
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

What is your age?

- 18-21
- 22-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65 and Over

How did you find out about Narcos? (Check all that apply)

- Friend
- On Netflix
- Advertisement on other websites (i.e. Facebook)
- Advertisement on television
- News Story
- Article on the web
- Article in newspaper
- Article in magazine
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

How many episodes of Narcos have you watched?

- None
- 1-3 episodes
- 4-6 episodes
- 7-9 episodes
- The entire first season (10 episodes)

What shows similar to Narcos (i.e. based on real-life events, about drug lords, drug trafficking) are you watching or have you watched in the past?

How often do you watch television shows that depict violent acts such as physical aggression, murder, torture, etc...?

- Never
- Less than Once a Month
- Once a Month
- 2-3 Times a Month
- Once a Week
- 2-3 Times a Week
- Daily

How often do you watch television shows that contain drug references?

- Never
- Less than Once a Month
- Once a Month
- 2-3 Times a Month
- Once a Week
- 2-3 Times a Week
- Daily

What percentage of the television shows you watch contain violence?

- Never
- 1-25%
- 26-50%
- 51-75%
- 76-100%



lonely							
I watch Narcos because it allows me the opportunity to escape from my problems	<input type="radio"/>						
I watch Narcos because it helps me relax	<input type="radio"/>						
I watch Narcos because I am just filling time and have nothing else to do	<input type="radio"/>						

Do you have any additional thoughts regarding violence on the television show Narcos?

Thank you for completing this survey! If you have any questions, concerns, or would like more information on my research, please contact me at [mcano@trinity.edu](mailto:mcano@trinity.edu)