Narrating Media

Science fiction films, television genres, AI chatbots, and music streaming

Patrik Åker & Anne Kaun (eds.)

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Contents

Introduction

This volume contains short versions of four noteworthy master theses written within the international master's programme in Media, Communication, and Cultural Analysis at Södertörn University and defended in 2025. Running since 2009, the programme has more than 100 alumni who are now employed in the media, academia and education. In 2020, the department chose to highlight the best theses in a printed volume. This is the sixth volume in the series.

The contributions in this volume cover four different topics: the representation of loss in science fiction films in relation to theories of modernity; the portrayal of the same robbery in different TV genres (news, documentary, and dramatised TV series); users' experience of trust when interacting with communicative AI chatbots; and the ways in which users' engagement with Spotify Wrapped can be understood as a media ritual. Although stretching across four such different topics, the chapters share an interest in on how media can be understood in relation to narration. In the first two chapters, the authors explicitly use narrative theory as a tool for understanding how mediation always incorporates narrative. The following two chapters focus instead on the narratives that arise when users interact with machines (AI chatbots) and on how algorithms shape annual personal stories about what kind of music listener you are (Spotify). Common for the four chapters is that they fruitfully re-center our attention on how narrating frames our encounter with media.

The department for media and communications studies invites readers to engage with this crucial and critical work conducted by our master's students.

Stockholm, 13 March 2026
Patrik Åker, Programme Director
Anne Kaun, Professor

The changing temporal narratives of loss in late modernity through the lens of science fiction film

Lennart Sörnsen

Introduction

The time of modernity in western societies has been characterized by a narrative of constant progress, making us accustomed to the thought of a better future. With this promise of a better future, modernity promises the prevention, or at least limitation of, loss. Because of this, loss constitutes a disruption, a contrast against which modernity is measured.

However, in late modernity, this narrative is starting to crumble. Aging societies showcase the limits of modern medicine, geo-political conflicts arise from differing expectations of the future and, most importantly, the loss that humanity is facing is changing. Climate Change in particular shows us that our progress-oriented way of living eventually reaches its limit (Reckwitz, 2024).

In this context, Science Fiction becomes a valuable resource for analytical studies with narratives of loss and destruction playing a crucial role in the genre (Gendron & Audet, 2024, p. 2). Turning modernities progress-orientation on its head, this study thus looks at the shadows of the progress-narrative, analysing loss-narratives in four science fiction films from modern to late modern cinema, with the oldest and latest film being almost an entire century apart.

Background & Previous Research

Modernity & The Imperative of Progress

The term modernity comes from the latin word "modo", meaning "right now", implying a focus on the present. However, studies of modernity have themselves a long history and there is an abundance of studies regarding the present, that do not have any orientation towards modernity. Studies of modernity are therefore better defined by their root in the past, emphasizing long term processes of transformation (Fornäs 1995, pp. 20–21). Furthermore, modernity is associated with certain characteristics such as progress, individualism, reason & science and technologization (Reckwitz, 2024, p. 120).

The German historian Reinhart Koselleck argues that another defining characteristic of modernity is a widening gap between expectations of the future (Erwartungshorizont) and experiences from the past (Erfahrungsraum). The French Revolution with its all-encompassing societal and cultural change had shown we could not rely on experiences of the past to determine the future. With this came the concept of progress, the belief in a radically different, better future (Koselleck, 1979/2004, pp. 264–269).

In modern, western societies, these notions of progress have become so imperative and institutionalised that they were seldom questioned. The "Imperative of Progress" (Fortschrittsimperativ) has become a "silently accepted basic assumption" (Reckwitz, 2024, p. 124). For Reckwitz, the modern era is characterized not only by the notion of progress, but more notably also by its relation to loss. Experiences of loss (Verlusterfahrungen) actively counter the expectations of progress modernity possesses, constituting a deterioration against them. To counter this, progress-oriented modern society strives to limit losses. However, this hyperfocus on the future and progress also creates further risks and loss (Reckwitz 2024, pp. 162–163).

Modern society has two responses to these experiences of loss. The first is to make them invisible, relativizing them as necessary parts of progress or stigmatising them. This, Reckwitz calls "un-

doing loss". At the same time, modern societies deal with loss by a wide array of practices to process loss, or "doing loss" (Reckwitz 2024, p. 164). This, Reckwitz argues, has created a precarious balance between Progress-Orientation, Loss-Reduction, Loss-Amplification, Loss-Invisibilization and Loss-Processing (Reckwitz, 2024, p. 165).

Late Modernity & Loss

Seen as a continuation of modernity, yet with distinctively different features and developments, late modernity describes the era of today's highly developed societies. While early modernity was defined by the comparison with pre-modern societies, late modernity is rethinking its own premises. For instance, while early modernity questioned religious world views with science, late modernity questions its own science. Late modernity thus "replaces" early modernity, that was still defined by its memory of the pre-modern (Beck, 1992, p. 10).

Furthermore, risks and crisis in late modernity have become world-wide, while at the same time gaining a new quality, threatening not only individuals but entire species and ecosystems (Beck 1992, p. 21 & Reckwitz 2024, pp. 24–25). With this, the fine balance between loss and progress that defined modernity is starting to crumble as late modern societies gain awareness of their vulnerability. Late modernity is still defined by the elementary contradiction between promises of progress and loss-experiences, however its relation to loss and the losses themselves have changed (Reckwitz, 2024, pp. 285–294).

Generally speaking, the intersection of the concepts of loss & late modern crisis and cultural artefacts such as science fiction films, remains mostly untouched. It is therefore this gap that this dissertation positions itself in, acting as a bridge between sociology on the one hand and media and cultural studies on the other.

Statement of Purpose & Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine the representation of loss in science fiction films, aiming to analyse how these representations have evolved over time and how this evolution can be understood through Andreas Reckwitz's concept of loss as a fundamental problem of modernity.

To reach this goal, four important works of science fiction cinema were analysed; Metropolis from 1927, 2001: A Space Odyssey from 1968, Interstellar from 2014 and Don't Look Up from 2021. The chosen films span almost a century of film history, enabling the dissertation to trace thematic and narrative transformation across different stages of modernity. Furthermore, the films were chosen specifically for their strong thematic engagement with loss, reflecting different loss themes within them.

With the purpose and the chosen films in mind, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Science Fiction Films depict different forms of loss through their narrative structures?
RQ2: How do thematic and narrative shifts between the films reflect Reckwitz's concept of late modern societies changed relationship with loss?

Theories & Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative approach, divided into two parts. In the first part of the analysis, the study focuses on what losses were found in the films. The second part of the analysis then turn its attention to how these losses are made visible through narrative analysis, analysing one scene from each film regarding their temporal narrative structure.

The Concept of Loss

On the surface, the question of what constitutes a loss might seem easy to answer. A loss is the disappearance of something, or someone, that used to be there. However, this fails to recognize the

emotional component of this something or someone being lost. For the disappearance to be considered loss, some form of "perception, interpretation and evaluation" must take place in social practice. In other words, for a disappearance to turn into a loss, it must have a negative emotional impact on an individual, or collective, level (Reckwitz 2024, p. 49).

The five types of Loss

Based on this definition of loss, Reckwitz characterizes five different types of loss. These are used in the first step of the analysis to find the films' main themes of loss.

Types of Loss	**Sub-Categories**	**Characterization**	**Examples**
Loss of Humans, Things and Spaces	Physical & Material	Tangible Loss	Death of a relative
Loss of Status	Multitude of different losses	Loss of autonomy and self-worth	Loss of a job
Cultural Loss	Senses, Experiences & Satisfaction	Loss of existential systems of interpretation	Loss of religious or political faith
Loss of social stability	Order, Control & Expectation	The breakdown of social structures	Loss of social order as a consequence of a pandemic or financial crisis, Loss of expectations of a better future due to climate change

Total Loss	Regression, Downfall & Apocalypse	Totalising perspective	Aftermath of Nuclear War, End-Of-The-World-Scenarios

Table 1 – Based on Reckwitz 2024 (pp. 70–78).

These five categories of loss each come with their own characteristics. The loss of humans, things and spaces such as the death of a relative or an object that is of importance to the individual are tangible and often associated with strong emotions (Reckwitz 2024, pp. 70–71). The loss of status is more abstract and characterized by a perceived loss of autonomy and self-worth due to the loss of a position that is perceived as important. This loss can happen through deprivation of rights (e.g. slavery), economic structural change or the loss of privileges (Reckwitz 2024, pp. 71–72).

The cultural loss is characterized by individuals losing their sense of "meaningfulness and richness" in their existence. This loss can come in three ways. The first is a belief which is lost from within the belief system, for instance a loss of faith (both religious and non-religious), the second is when a place of belonging disappears, such as the loss of a familiar place due to urbanization. The third form comes in the "loss of satisfaction", the loss of an emotional connection, for instance the loss of love in a relationship (Reckwitz 2024, pp. 73–74).

The loss of social stability is defined by social structures "in which trust was invested" breaking down. This can be experienced as a loss of order when stable and reliable social practices can no longer be practiced, a loss of control in which individuals perceive a loss of control over their life and finally a loss of expectations wherein individuals lose their positive expectations of the future (Reckwitz 2024, pp. 74–75).

The fifth and final loss, the total loss, is defined by its wide span, affecting entire societies or even the whole of humankind. This loss can also occur in three different ways. Downfall is a permanent decline in which a society has peaked, the regression

on the other hand is characterized by a temporary decline with general progression still intact. Finally, the apocalypse is the most extreme case of total loss, in which the world, or society, is coming to an end. This has a long tradition in the mostly Christian western societies. Contrary to the salvation in Christian belief, secular doomsday-scenarios typically do not involve a happy end (Reckwitz 2024, p. 78).

Narratology

For the second part of the analysis, theories on Narratology were used as a clearly defined analytical framework. For this, Gerard Genette's Figures III from 1972 and Mieke Bal's "Introduction to the theory of narrative" from 2017 offered useful systemic guidance for studies on narratology. Though both authors approach differs slightly, their theories were combined for the purposes of this study. To avoid confusion, the terminology was adopted from Bal throughout.

Both works offer similar, useful categorizations of narrative aspects. These can be grouped together into the three main categories Time, Mode and Voice. For the purposes of this study, the analysis turned its attention towards the temporal narrative aspects. Modernity is in itself defined through its connection to time, with experiences of the past defining the expectations for the future, the notion of progress can only be understood when temporality is taken into consideration. Likewise, our experience of loss is closely tied to time as well. Science Fiction combines these elements, making temporality crucial for the genre with most science fiction covering some aspect of the past and/or the future and the connection between the two. Therefore, the analysis of the temporality of loss narratives in science fiction provided a solid base for this study.

The aspect of time within Genette and Bals framework is divided into three parts that Bal calls Sequential Ordering, Rhythm and Frequency (Bal 2017).

Sequential Ordering

At its core, both Genette and Bal build their systematic analytical model on the basis that every text (book, film or any other body of work) has a temporal duality. On the one hand there is the time, which is portrayed in the text - Bal calls this Story time. On the other hand, there is the time of the actual event, what Bal calls the Fabula. This is somewhat conflicting with the terminology used by Genette, as he proposes the term Story for what Bal calls Fabula. As mentioned earlier, this study will however borrow its terminology from Bal.

In practice, this duality of time means that the story will differ from the actual events, the fabula. This can be demonstrated by a simple phrase such as "x months earlier…". Through this phrase, the time of the story and the fabula drift apart, an anachrony is introduced. In the fabula, the event happened x months ago, but in the story, the event is told now, only after other, later events have already been portrayed. To illustrate these differences between the story and the fabula, both Genette and Bal propose a similar coding system, using letters and numbers to indicate the events position in the story (letters) and in the fabula (numbers) (Genette 1972/1980, p. 37, Bal 2017, p. 71).

Rhythm

The second part of the narrative analysis looks at the rhythm of the analysed sequences. While "no one can measure the speed of a narrative" (Genette 1972/1980, p. 86), we can "estimate the speed with which the various events are presented" (Bal 2017, p. 89). In the case of this study, this is done by measuring the time certain events take in the story, comparing it to a rough estimate of said event in the fabula and the time of other depictions in the story. Bal and Genette propose four different tempi in narrative storytelling, the Ellipsis, Summary, Scene and Pause (Bal 2017, p. 90, Genette 1972/1980, p. 95). Bal also adds another tempo called the slow-down, rather than a full pause (Bal 2017, p. 90).

The closest match-up between story and fabula occurs in the scene. While a complete match "does not exist and cannot exist"

(Genette, 1972/1980) as many "dead moments" would make the text unbearable, this is the tempi where fabula time and story time line up most closely and is often used to set up a movement of the story and to take down the tempo and showcase dull moments (Bal 2017, p. 94). Slow-downs and pause are similar, yet take the tempo down even more to a (almost) complete stand-still. The event now takes up more time in the story than the fabula, the story is not moving forward. The difference between the pause and the slow-down is that the audience is made aware of time slowing down during a slow-down, while it often happens without the audience's realization during a pause (Bal 2017, p. 95). During a pause the audience is confronted with descriptions of the environment or argumentative parts without realising that this pauses the story from moving forward. During a slow-down, however, the audience is aware of the slower tempo, because the story is still moving forward.

An ellipsis on the other hand occurs when certain events from the fabula are left out of the story completely and the audience is left in the unknown as to what happens during this time. The time of the fabula outweighs the time of the story, to an unknown amount. Similarly, events are also left out in a summary, though not completely, as we get some sense of the amount of time which has passed and events during this time are summarised (Bal 2017, pp. 92–93).

Frequency

Lastly, the dissertation analyses the frequency as part of the temporal narrative. Simply put, this deals with repetition. Real repetition is, however, not possible. Genette exemplifies this by the sun rising every day. While these events are similar, they are still singular events. Therefore, looking at repetition means to look at the depiction of a "series of several similar events" (Genette 1972/1980, pp. 113–114, Bal 2017, p. 100).

Bal and Genette propose four different forms of frequency. The most obvious one is the singular frequency, that is one event in the fabula which is also depicted once in the story. More often

than not, this is, however, combined with other frequencies as a story would not work if it only consisted of the singular frequency (Bal 2017, p. 100).

The repetitive and iterative frequency on the other hand show differing events in the fabula and the story. The repetitive frequency means one event in the fabula that is repeated multiple times in the story, the iterative is the other way around with multiple events in the fabula that are depicted only as one event in the story (Genette 1972/1980, p. 116, Bal 2017, p. 102).

Analysis

Analysis Part 1: Thematic Representation

In the first part of the analysis, the study goes film by film looking at the themes of loss, defining which of the loss themes can be considered the main themes of loss for each film. Using the categorization by Reckwitz as outlined previously, the analysis arrives at the following result:

Films	**Main Loss Type(s)**
Metropolis	Loss of Social Stability (Loss of Social Order)
2001: A Space Odyssey	Cultural Loss & Loss of Social Stability (Loss of Control), Loss of Time & Space
Interstellar	Total Loss, Loss of Social Stability (Loss of Expectations), Loss of Time & Space
Don't Look Up	Total Loss, Loss of Social Stability (Loss of Expectations)

Metropolis

While most loss themes can be found in Metropolis, the main one identified through the analysis was the loss of social stability.

The film portrays the city of Metropolis, characterized by a deep divide between workers and elites. While the wealthy live in luxury, the workers are forced to work under horrific conditions to power the city. As Freder Fredersen, the son of Joh Fredersen who owns the factory, falls in love with Maria, who serves as an activist for the workers of the city, he starts to understand the social divide. Upon hearing about his son and Maria, Joh Fredersen decides to control the workforce by using a robot with Maria's likeness. This plan, however, fails and the workers instigate a revolution, tearing down the factory's machines, leading to the flooding of the city. In the end, the city can be saved and Joh Fredersen and the workers reconciliate, using Freder as a mediary.

The failing capitalistic system of the city serves as the main story of the film, making the loss of social stability with the loss of social order as the subcategory the main theme of the film with the cultural loss of trust in the capitalistic system also playing an important part.

2001: A Space Odyssey

For the second film 2001: A Space Odyssey, the analysis revealed that cultural loss as well as the loss of social stability are the main loss themes throughout the film.

The film follows a mission towards Jupiter after a mysterious black monolith was found on the moon, sending a signal towards said planet. One of the members of the crew is the supercomputer HAL 3000, an artificial intelligence that has complete control over the ship. During the mission, HAL begins to malfunction and the crew members on the ship decide to turn it off after losing trust in HAL, a cultural loss of trust in technology. This decision turns out to be fatal as HAL, threatened by this decision, kills most of the human crew members after discovering their plans. In this moment, the other crew members experience a loss of control that falls under the category of loss of social stability as HAL controls the entire ship, and therefore their fate.

Dr. Dave Bowman remains as the sole survivor and manages to disconnect HAL and continues the mission on his own. After

arriving on Jupiter, Bowman, guided by a mysterious extraterrestrial lifeform that is behind the black monoliths, ages rapidly and finally transforms into the Starchild, the next step of human evolution. The film symbolises human fear of technologization and the loss of trust and control over technology that goes along with this fear, making it the two main loss-themes of the film.

Interstellar

Set in an apocalyptic scenario, Interstellar starts out in a future where earth has become almost uninhabitable. In an attempt to save humanity, former pilot Cooper joins a NASA mission to fly to several distant planets where other astronauts have previously been placed to carry out tests for habitability. This showcases the main theme of total loss in the film. Continued survival on earth is portrayed as impossible with the only solution being to leave the planet behind.

Due to a high gravitational force during one of these visits, an accident causes Cooper and the other crew members to lose 23 years of time compared to earth, meaning that Coopers children, who he left behind, have now grown up without their father. This creates a loss of future expectations, that falls under the category of loss of social stability. Cooper, through video messages, is forced to watch his children's future, a future he was supposed to be a part of. Furthermore, this is also a case of a sixth category of loss, that Reckwitz had not envisioned, the loss of time and space as humans basic understanding of time as linear and objective is shattered by the time slippage.

Don't Look Up

Finally, the 2021 film Don't Look Up was analysed. During the film, two astronomers discover a comet hurling towards earth, threatening to destroy our life on it. This extinction level event creates an apocalyptic scenario, in which humanity is facing total loss. The two astronomers try to warn others about the catastrophe about to happen but are faced with political and societal

apathy and ridicule. As humanity comes closer and closer to its eradication by the comet, the protagonists are increasingly frustrated by the response they receive.

Throughout the film, social order is shown as surprisingly intact. It is only in the final moments of the film, as the comet appears on the sky that social order breaks down. However, the main protagonists of the film increasingly face the loss of future expectations as they realise, they will not be able to stop the extinction of human life, making the loss of social stability in this subcategory crucial to the story of the film.

Summary

The new quality of loss

The main takeaway from this first part of the analysis is the shift in primary focus from the two older films Metropolis (1927) and 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) to the newer films Interstellar (2014) and Don't Look Up (2021).

In the newer films, losses are portrayed as global and worldwide, while the loss in Metropolis is local in nature and the loss in 2001: A Space Odyssey is individual to the crew members aboard the mission. This shows the "new quality of loss" Reckwitz describes, as the loss is now an existential one, the eradication of all of humanity. This new quality of loss becomes even clearer looking at the endings of the films with both Metropolis and 2001: A Space Odyssey showing an optimistic future on planet earth while Interstellar and Don't Look Up end with humanity no longer able to live on earth.

Another finding which stands out are the different forms the loss of social stability takes throughout the films. Metropolis embodies the fear of social order breaking apart and chaos taking over, in 2001: A Space Odyssey, the loss of social stability is shown as a loss of control with machines taking away human autonomy while both Interstellar and Don't Look Up depict this form of loss through the outlook on the future, the loss of positive expectations. This ties closely to the existential loss in late modernity as

the climate crisis and destruction of our planet threatens all of humanity, which, when taken to its extreme through science fiction in this way, collapses any hopes of a positive future.

Undoing and doing loss

The analysis also revealed instances of both systemic hiding of loss, the undoing loss, and new practices to process loss, the doing loss, that take place in modernity and late modernity.

In Metropolis, the dirty work in the factory is hidden away, showing systemic concealment of loss in favour of progress. In Don't Look Up. the U.S president actively tries to get people to not face the coming loss. Towards the end of Interstellar, Cooper reunites with his now old and dying daughter at her deathbed. As she tells him to leave and finish the mission this can be interpreted as a way of letting him go, accepting the loss of time with her father that she experienced. However, as Cooper leaves her, he does so to ensure the further progress of humanity. Therefore, the scene could also be interpreted as undoing loss with Cooper refusing to grieve Murphys death, prioritizing progress over emotions.

The same ambivalence is also present in the final scene of Don't Look Up. The routine act of the characters getting together for dinner could be seen as a way of ignoring the death they are facing as a way of maintaining an illusion of social order and familiarity. However, one could also argue that this is a form of acceptance of their impending death, a form of processing loss.

The loss of time and space

Lastly, this first part of the analysis reveals a gap in Reckwitz's categories of loss. In these films, the human understanding of time as objective and linear is challenged, they manipulate time and space itself. This is especially noticeable in 2001: A Space Odyssey and Interstellar as both films protagonists are confronted by this linearity crumbling in front of them.

These findings show that even one of the most basic and fundamental assumptions, the linearity of time is challenged and re-evaluated, fitting with the reflexivity that Reckwitz and Beck

ascribe to late modernity. Furthermore, the linearity of time is described by Reckwitz as fundamental to Modernity, only within a linear timeframe, the notion of progress can be upheld. Thus, the analysed films, through this category of loss, challenge modernity itself.

Analysis Part 2: Narratives of loss

In the second part of the analysis, the films narrative use of sequential ordering, rhythm and frequency and its connection to loss were analysed. The sequences were chosen based on their fit for the primary loss found in the first part as well as their value and relevancy for the story of the film. The analysis arrived at the following results:

Films	**Sequential Order**	**Rhythm**	**Frequency**
Metropolis	Chronological	Slow-down, Scene, Summary, Ellipsis	Singular, visual repetition
2001: A Space Odyssey	Fractured, Retroversion	Scene, Slow-down, Ellipsis, Summary	Repetition, dialogic repetition, visual repetition, singular
Interstellar	Fractured, Retroversion	Ellipsis, Scene	Repetition, visual repetition, dialogic repetition, singular
Don't Look Up	Chronological	Slow-down, Scene, Summary, Ellipsis	Singular, Visual Repetition

Metropolis

For Metropolis, the chosen sequence shows the flooding of the city after the factory is destroyed during the riots, resembling the loss of social order.

Sequential Order

Using the previously mentioned coding system, the sequence was divided into five different events in the fabula. The sequence starts out with the initiation of the riots (A1) and then shows the mob arriving at the factory and destroying it (B2), the flooding of the city (C3), the reuniting of Freder with Maria (D4) and finally ends with Maria and Freder saving the workers children from the floods (E5).

As the letters (fabula) and numbers (story) show, this order is simplistic and chronological. While the sequence switches between different locations and storylines, there is no sign of any temporal division between them. The final coding for the sequence was thus determined to be A1-B2-C3-D4-E5.

Looking at this through Reckwitz's lense, this tight synchrony shows the loss of order in this sequence as a linear chain of cause and outcome. This adherence to chronology creates a sense of authenticity, mirroring modernities promise of temporal progression.

Rhythm

The rhythm within the chosen sequence was found to have some notable shifts. Firstly, there is an ellipsis, omitting any information of the time between the initiation of the riots (A1) and the mob's arrival at the factory (B2). After this, the tempo switches to a summary with the whole sequence from the arrival at the factory to the destruction of the final machine taking less than three minutes.

After the final machine is destroyed, the tempo switches again and we now see the events in real time (scene tempo) as the factory starts breaking apart and children of the workers start to run helplessly towards the city centre. Afterwards, the tempo noticeably slows down as the water level keeps rising (C3), taking a full

five minutes of the film before Freder arrives and reunites with Maria (D4).

The fast buildup in the beginning gives the impression of an important event coming, the real-time depiction of the factory falling apart makes for an accurate description of chaos and the slowdown during the most important part creates tension. It is here where the loss of order can be felt most intensely, watching the panic in the eyes of the children. The rhythm becomes more than a pure storytelling device, showcasing the moment where modernity's promised stability falls apart.

Frequency

While most of the sequence adheres to the singular frequency, there are distinct visual repetitions. The breakdown of the factory and the flooding of the city are presented not as one event but rather reiterated through repetitive echoes of similar shots, the sequence also repeats several similar shots of panicked children standing in front of Maria.

This repetitive narrative pattern severs the impression of a total breakdown. In Reckwitz's terms, the sequence is narratively constructed with an intense feeling of chaos, contradicting the usual routine and progress characterizing modernity. The looping structure of the sequence portrays a breakdown of social order and a disruption of the promise of modern progress.

2001: A Space Odyssey

For 2001: A Space Odyssey, the sequence chosen for the narrative analysis was the dismantling of the HAL 3000 supercomputer. This sequence highlights the loss of trust in technology and the loss of control Bowman experienced.

Sequential Order

This sequence was divided into eight parts. First, Bowman and fellow crewmember Dr. Poole discuss to turn off HAL (A2) with HAL lipreading said conversation (B2). Then, HAL sends Poole on a spacewalk and kills him (C4). Bowman attempts to rescue

Poole but is denied re-entry to the ship (D5). Instead, Bowman is forced to enter through an emergency airlock (E6). Afterwards, he starts to shut HAL down (F7), with HAL slowly losing its mental capacities before finally shutting off (G8). As HAL dies, a prerecorded tape starts playing, revealing the reason for the mission (H1).

This sequence deviates from chronology with three distinct anachronies. The first event is shown twice, once from the crew's perspective (A2), then again from HAL's (B2). As the conversation only happened once, the number, indicating the event in the fabula, stays at two. After this scene, there is an ellipsis through an intermission, before Poole is seen outside of the spaceship on a spacewalk (C4), this missing event in the fabula is indicated by the number three missing in the coding of the sequence. Finally, the prerecorded tape resembles a retroversion, being recorded before the start of the mission (H1). Thus, this is placed at the beginning of the fabula (number 1), but at the end of the sequence in the story (letter H). Using the coding system, the full formula was therefore determined to be A2-B2-C4-D5-E6-F7-G8-H1.

With Reckwitz's framework in mind, the shift in perspective between the crew and HAL showcases the fragile human relationship with technology. First, Poole and Bowman are in control, discussing to take manual control of the mission, having already lost some confidence in HAL's abilities. Once the perspective shifts, so does the control of the situation. The expected hierarchy of man-over-technology, essential for modernities technology-driven progress, is now no longer in force. This deadly warning against human trust in machines, is further reinforced at the end of the sequence in cruel irony, with the pre-recorded tape revealing that HAL was the only one aware of the real reason behind the mission.

The manipulation of chronological order through the anachronies are not just storytelling devices, they are an embodiment of loss. The disruption of temporal order mirrors the beginning collapse of modernity's temporal logic, showing a fragile and crumbling trust in progress that is intensified in late modernity

and the loss of control through the inversion of human-machine hierarchies.

Rhythm

The conversation between Poole and Bowman (A2), plays out in real time, in the narrative tempo scene, lasting around two and a half minutes. As aforementioned, between this and Pooles space-walk there is a jump forward, an ellipsis. This creates the sense of a pivotal, upcoming event without revealing its nature. This resembles technological unpredictability, the previously calm, rational HAL now acts erratically. Omitting this part of the fabula frames the killing of Poole as an opportunistic decision, rather than a planned strike. This underscores the sudden loss of control and trust, with the crew members expectation of HAL as a reliable and rational machine shattered within seconds.

For the spacewalk of Poole (C4), the sequence returns to the scene tempo. While Poole is outside, HAL takes control of the pod, grabs Poole and throws him out into space. For this, the tempo increases rapidly, with everything happening in seconds, giving a clear contrast to the rest of the sequence. This rapid increase most closely resembles the summary tempo. As the picture cuts back to Bowman some information is left out, and we see Poole flying across outside Bowman's window. The sudden increase in tempo further intensifies the sense of radical behaviour by HAL, with a quick, yet deadly and cold strike to kill Poole.

After the attack, the sequence returns to the scene-tempo until Bowman arrives at HAL's core and starts to shut it down. This part of the sequence is shown at great length with Bowman slowly taking HAL's memory cores out, stretching time. This turns the death of HAL into a ritualistic execution, forcing viewers to experience the slow decay of HAL. This mirrors the loss of trust in technology and resembles the beginning collapse of modernities progress-orientation.

With the death of HAL, the pre-recorded message brings the film back to its regular rhythm and marks the return of human control, returning not only to regular tempo but also to human-

over-machine hierarchy, bringing the sequence to an anti-climactic end.

Frequency

While mostly staying in the singular frequency, there are three different forms of repetition to be found in this chosen sequence. The most obvious one is structural repetition, the repetition of the conversation between Poole and Bowman from the perspective of HAL. While the event is the same, its meaning shifts dramatically, shifting the human-machine hierarchy and marking the beginning loss of human control.

Then we also have visual repetition. The sequence shows several depictions of Pooles lifeless body floating through space, giving his death emotional weight and emphasizing the loss of control over the spaceship. Another visual repetition comes when Bowman disconnects HAL memory core by memory core, repeating the same action until HAL is fully disconnected.

Finally, there are two instances of dialogic repetition. First, when Bowman arrives back at the ship, he repeatedly asks HAL to open the doors, underlining Bowman's desperation as he realises the danger he is in, with HAL calmly disobeying his request, creating a loop of human pleading. This is later reverted when Bowman disconnects HAL, with HAL now pleading him to stop, completing the full-circle human-machine hierarchy-reversal, restoring human control over technology.

These narrative repetitions can again be interpreted as tools for the embodiment of loss, serving as key temporal elements, through which the fragility of human faith in technological progress is made visible.

Interstellar

The chosen sequence from Interstellar was the sequence in which Cooper loses 23 years with his family. With Cooper watching the tapes of his children talking to him throughout the years, this symbolises the loss of time and the loss of expectations of the future.

Sequential Order

This sequence deviates the most from a chronological order as the aspect of time dilation is introduced, complicating the analysis significantly. Lastly, the analysis arrived at a six-part order.

Firstly, Cooper and his crew arrive at the planet. As they try to find Miller, the scientist on this planet, an accident causes them to lose decades of time (A1). After they return to the space craft, they learn they have lost 23 years and Cooper sits down to watch the tapes (B6). The messages from his children throughout the years are played (C2, D3, E4). With the last message, we see Cooper's daughter Murph leaving the recording booth and the story continues on earth (F5).

Thus, the full code becomes A1-B6-C2-D3-E4-F5. This is, however, technically incorrect as it is impossible to know when exactly the time dilation happens on the children's timeline. The only thing that is certain, is that it places somewhere between A1 and B6 and that the messages are in chronological order, therefore numbered 2-5 in the Fabula. Furthermore, there are at all times during Cooper's watching of the messages, two timelines. One for each message with an undetermined time in between, and one for Cooper's time.

Even though this time dilation is crucial for the sequence, a correct analytical placement in the code can thus not be achieved. This does, however, not weaken the analysis. Rather, the structural disparity and complexity of the sequence are exactly the point – not only as a narrative device but also as a part of the story with Cooper watching his own children outgrowing him, challenging our very understanding of time as linear.

Looking at the sequence in more detail, it utilises what I call a pseudo-anticipation and pseudo-retroversion. A classic flashforward or flashback involves the story showing upcoming events or past events from the fabula, technically neither of these happen here. However, the time dilation creates the same narratological effect, when Cooper watches the messages. The viewer is thrown into the future on earths timeline and watches the past through the tapes, alongside Cooper.

The only real retroversion comes at the end of the sequence. As Murph's recording ends, the scenery switches towards her leaving the recording booth. This recording of the message must obviously have taken place in the past for Cooper to be able to watch it. Thus, this is a retroversion, used as a smooth switch of scenery without interrupting the story.

Through the lens of modernity and loss, the deviation from chronological order represents the destruction of modernity's conception of time as linear, a previously assumed constant and undeniable fact that structures our social practices. Time relativity undermines this certainty. This undermining of progress is also mirrored through Cooper's experience in this sequence.

This is especially important for the understanding of this sequence as a loss of expectations of the future. Through a small mistake on the planet, Cooper loses decades of time with his children in an instant. The future turns into the past in the blink of an eye and Cooper is forced to deal with the fact that he is going to (or rather has already) missed his children's entire childhood.

Rhythm

The Rhythm of this sequence is particularly relevant not due to tempo-changes, but through the use of distinct ellipses. The first happens on the planet. After a wave has hit the spacecraft, they are forced to wait for the engines to dry, and Cooper gets the information that this will take forty-five minutes to an hour. However, after two minutes of story time, the next wave is coming closer and Cooper is now told it will take another minute or two. There are therefore around forty minutes of fabula time completely omitted here. What makes this especially compelling is that this ellipsis is concealed with no indication of the omitted time. While this might confuse attentive viewers, this information of an hour-long delay is crucial in priming the audience for the imminent time slippage, foreshadowing the dire consequences this has for Cooper and his children.

The more obvious ellipses come later, through the messages from earth. The years long breaks between them make the loss of

expectations of a future together even more devastating. Decades of Cooper's son Tom's life are told in three short messages with each new message showing vital changes in his life, turning a cheerful teenager to a devastated, bitter adult. Furthermore, the total loss is also transported through these messages, with years of his life omitted, the difference between the messages portrays Tom's visual decline, showcasing the deterioration of life on earth.

Compared to the previous films, Interstellar portrays the main themes of loss in another, different way. Instead of playing with tempo, the impact of the loss in Interstellar comes from the deliberate omission of information, showing only glimpses of Tom's and Murph's life on earth.

Frequency

Out of the three narrative tools, Interstellar utilises repetition the least. Most of the story is told in the singular form with no single event being shown several times in the way the flooding in Metropolis and the conversation between crew members in 2001: A Space Odyssey is.

However, there is one case of a visual repetition in the form of the video messages. While not repeating any event from the fabula, the act of Cooper sitting in front of the monitor and his reaction is shown multiple times, framed almost identically for each message. Unlike 2001: A Space Odyssey, where the repetition creates symmetry between the human and machine perspective, the repetition in Interstellar collapses four separate messages into a single emotional experience for Cooper, making it an example of the iterative frequency.

From the perspective of Reckwitz, this mirrors modernity's repeated confrontation with loss. The sequence also captures the loss paradox, as space travel, supposed to prevent loss with this mission, instead causes new loss through time dilation. Each return to the monitor, each repeated viewing of his children's messages is also a return to this structural absence. Cooper cannot respond, forced to watch the events he missed unfold. The almost

instant loss of over 20 years' time thus highlights the new quality of loss in late modernity.

Don't Look Up

For the final film, the selected sequence is the final sequence of the film, the moment the comet makes impact with earth, portraying the total loss with the main characters coming together before all the future of humanity is eradicated.

Sequential Order

The chosen sequence marks a return to a strictly chronological order, making the ordering of its nine different parts simplistic.

Firstly, the main characters Dr. Mindy and Kate (the two astronomers) arrive at Mindy's family home. This scenery is intertwined with footage from the launch site where the company BASH is launching drones towards the comet to mine it for resources before destroying it (A1). Then, a montage of Kate, Mindy and his family preparing dinner is shown simultaneously as several drones are malfunctioning (B2). As the group sits down and start casual conversations, the mission completely falls apart. The president of the USA and the BASH-CEO leave the launch site in a spacecraft (C3). Mindy and the others reminisce about their life (D4). The comet is now quickly coming towards earth, and a montage starts playing, contrasting riots with pictures of humans and animals enjoying their last moments on earth (E5). At Mindy's house, casual conversations continue. The montage now shows the comet making impact in different parts of the world (F6). The comet makes impact with Mindy's house, marking the end of the film (G7). The post-credit scene of the film shows the spacecraft with the US-president and the BASH-CEO landing on the nearest earth-like planet 22.740 years in the future. The future-optimistic mood is quickly destroyed when the president is attacked by an unknown creature (I8).

Similar to Metropolis, the non-use of anachronies is a statement in itself. The film gives viewers an authentic portrayal of events, fitting well into the satirical tone of the film, showing

humanity's collapse as a realistic scenario. From Reckwitz's perspective, the chronological order of events aligns with the total loss-scenario, portraying the inevitability of the crisis, not giving viewers a narrative escape. While Interstellar manipulated time, Don't Look Up's chronological storytelling displays a cruel adherence to linear time, giving the story no possibility of bending time to prevent the inevitable.

Rhythm

For the majority of the sequence, the film switches between the use of scene and summary (in form of the montages). The most important part of the sequence, the final impact of the comet at Mindy's house, comes however in the form of a very drastic slow-down and a subsequent acceleration. Before the post-credit scene we also have a large-scale ellipsis, omitting thousands of years of fabula time.

While the slow-paced scene tempo at Mindy's home with causal conversations in real-time display a sense of calm and peace with the situation, the fast-paced montages summarizes a large amount of events into seconds, creating a feeling of panic. This sense of panic is further enhanced by the collapse of the mission to destroy the comet, which is also shown in condensed form, turning assumably hours of time in the fabula into a few minutes of story time. This frames the mission as a total disaster, seemingly falling apart within seconds.

The stark contrast between casual dinner conversations and condensed montages of a large number of depictions shows a variety of doing loss, dealing with the impending doom, ranging from rage and panic to acceptance. Just as the comet is about to hit Mindy's house, the tempo is slowed down drastically, showing the main protagonists nervously holding hands while also being at peace as they brace for the impact. Then the tempo increases just as drastically, and the house is blown to pieces within an instant. This abrupt ending to the film embodies the total loss as well as the loss of future expectations, obliterating any hope of a positive future for humanity.

Frequency

Similarly to Interstellar, the chosen sequence from Don't Look Up, contains little deviation from the singular frequency. There is no dialogic repetition or any event that is repeated. There are, however, a few visual repetitions.

Firstly, the several depictions of drones malfunctioning during the mission are visually similar, adding to the framing of the mission as a spectacular failure. Secondly, the dinner table at Mindy's house becomes an important focal point. The repeated shots of the group sitting at the dinner table creates a "we vs them"-scenario. The repeated switch between them makes the contrast between the calmness at Mindy's house and the hectic montages even more intense. This repetition of a seemingly ordinary dinner becomes a form of doing loss, a coping mechanism to deal with the impending catastrophe. Thirdly, the destruction of the planet is visualized through repeated shots of the impact in differing locations, showing the worldwide impact of this fabula event, mirroring the new quality of loss in late modernity described by Reckwitz.

The importance of the final scene of the film, however, lies precisely in its singularity. Unlike the other films, this event is deliberately treated as a singular event. This deliberate refusal to use repetition magnifies the sense of finality, aligning closely with the chronological order of the sequence. There is no deviation from linear time, no return, no echo – only the abrupt end of planet earth.

Summary

The narrative analysis revealed that different forms of loss are embedded within the narrative structure of the films, distinct storytelling devices making them visible. Through the films sequential order, loss is shown on the one hand as an unpredictable yet inevitable outcome of a chain of chronological events (Metropolis, Don't Look Up) and on the other as sudden, unpredictable and disorienting (2001: A Space Odyssey, Interstellar).

Different narrative rhythms depict loss either through extensive scenes, forcing viewers to engage deeply with the loss (Metropolis), through ellipses omitting years of loss, showing only the outcome of loss at distinct points making the loss absolute, sudden and irreversible (Interstellar) or as a combination of the two, using slow-downs as well as sudden acceleration (2001: A Space Odyssey, Don't Look Up).

While all films mostly used the singular frequency, patterns of repetition where used throughout each of the films, either as a complementary aid, enhancing the intensity of the depicted loss (Metropolis, Don't Look Up) or as a primary tool, actively shaping the events in the story through visual, dialogic and systematic repetition (2001: A Space Odyssey, Interstellar).

Conclusion

The analysis in this study ties the thematic and narrative findings from the first and second part of the analysis to Reckwitz's concepts of loss in modernity and late modernity. With Metropolis and 2001: A Space Odyssey coming out in 1927 and 1968 respectively, under Reckwitz's definition, this puts them in the stage of modernity, while the 21st century films Interstellar (2014) and Don't Look Up (2021) are from the stage of late modernity. With this in mind, the analysis applied Reckwitz's theoretical concepts regarding loss in modernity on the chosen films.

From the first part of the analysis, there are clearly noticeable thematic shifts between the two older and the newer films. While the two older films Metropolis and 2001: A Space Odyssey shows local and individual losses, the loss in the two newer films Interstellar and Don't Look Up is global and existential. Likewise, the loss of social stability that can be found in all four films shifts from societal and hierarchical breakdown to the loss of future expectations in the newer films, where a positive outlook on the future seems entirely lost. Lastly, the thematic analysis also revealed a sixth form of loss, adding to Reckwitz's categorization, the loss of time itself as a stable entity. 2001: A Space Odyssey and

Interstellar in particular challenged linear time, an important aspect of modernity's progress imperative.

The second part of the analysis showed that Reckwitz's concepts of loss can also be found embedded within the narrative structure of the films through the use of narrative tools of storytelling, with the different films showing differences in their sequential order, rhythm and frequency that mirror modernity and late modernity in different ways:

Metropolis shows loss as a linear chain of events, mirroring early modernity's temporal progression while still leaving space for the restoring of social order at the end of the film. 2001: A Space Odyssey introduces subtle breaks from chronological order, that could mirror the first cracks in modernities stable temporal progression and shows growing concerns with the technology-driven progress of modernity in the ritualized, almost celebrated death of HAL by using a slow-down. However, unlike the later films, 2001 ends with a return to modernity's progress-orientation.

The analysed sequence from Interstellar then breaks completely with modernity's temporal order, challenging the notion of linear progression. The loss is also framed as permanent with the temporal disruption leading to a permanent loss of lived experience, In the last film Don't Look Up, the linear order is chronological, similarly to Metropolis, However, unlike Metropolis, the film offers no narrative escape. Instead of linear progression mirroring modernity's notion of continual progress, it becomes a cruel reminder of times linear momentum, highlighting the irreversibility of total loss.

Together, these results of the two-part analysis find several thematic and narrative connections between Reckwitz's sociological concepts of late modernity's changing relationship with loss within the analysed films, successfully bridging the gap between sociology and media and cultural studies. The findings mirror changing cultural attitudes towards loss, progress and future expectations between the older and newer films, showcasing the way cultural artefacts embody societal transformations

and fears in their narrative structure through narrative elements of storytelling.

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From Live Coverage to Streaming Dramatisation

The Narrative Representation of the Västberga Helicopter Robbery across Television Genres

Weronika Schmidt

1. Introduction

True crime has become one of the most consumed and culturally significant genres in contemporary media, captivating audiences not just with what happened, but with how and why those stories are told. One TV series that portrays true crime is Helikopterrånet (2024) (English translation: The Helicopter Heist), which tells a story of the 2009 Västberga Helicopter Robbery that captured global attention due to its unprecedented nature and cinematic execution. The dramatised and fictionalised TV series demonstrates how real events can be reconstructed through narrative strategies specific to the genre. Moreover, the existence of multiple adaptations across different genres shows how different the interpretations can be.

This study compares the different genres that represent the same crime within the same medium – news, documentary, and dramatised TV series – with the help of theories on narratology. The study focuses on identifying similarities, differences, and patterns in the use of narrative time, mood, and voice, in order to understand how storytelling techniques vary across genres within the same medium. News reports aim to deliver immediate information, emphasising factuality and journalistic objectivity, though they also rely on selective storytelling and framing techniques. Documentaries incorporate investigative depth and editorial perspective, often blending journalistic methods with nar-

rative techniques to create compelling crime narratives. Dramatised TV series adapt real crime cases into structured, suspense-driven stories, shaping audience engagement through dramatisation, fictionalisation, and character development. Even within the same medium, such as television, different genres follow distinct conventions that influence how stories are constructed and received (Mittell, 2001). As true crime continues to evolve within this shifting media environment, the distinctions between news, documentary, and dramatised storytelling become more fluid (Cruickshank, 2018) reinforcing the need for comparative studies that examine how these formats construct narratives around the same event.

Existing research on true crime largely addresses ethical concerns and typically focuses on a single genre, overlooking how narratives change across formats. This study addresses that gap by analysing news coverage, a documentary, and a TV series about the Västberga Helicopter Robbery, applying Gérard Genette's categories of narrative time, mood, and voice to explore how one event is shaped differently within the same medium.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 The Västberga Robbery

On 23 September 2009, four robbers landed a stolen helicopter on the roof of a cash depot belonging to security company G4S in Västberga (Stockholm, Sweden) and smashed the reinforced glass window of a pyramid-shaped skylight with a sledgehammer to get inside (The Guardian, 2009, September 23). In less than 20 minutes, they managed to rob 39 million SEK (Swedish crowns) from one of the best-guarded places in Europe and flew off the roof in front of police officers (Sveriges Radio, 2011, January 12). The police were heavily criticised for their slow response, despite having received a tip about a possible helicopter attack earlier that month, thanks to a tip-off from the Serbian foreign ministry (Dagens Nyheter, 2009, September 29). What the Swedish police did not know however, was who would perform it, and where and

when exactly it would happen, as well as that the perpetrators would actively obstruct the police response by scattering caltrops on the roads near the G4S cash service depot, and placing bomb-like packages in front of the police helicopters in Myttinge, Värmdö. The money has not been found as of today. Ten people were accused of involvement in the helicopter robbery but only seven were sentenced to prison in October 2010 (Expressen, 2010, October 8). However, the police believe that there may have been more than 20 people involved. Much about this case is still unclear (Expressen, 2024, November 26). The robbery has made headlines in Sweden as well as around the world with reports of it appearing in well-known media outlets such as CNN, BBC and AP, often describing it as one of the most spectacular, beautiful break-ins of all time, reminiscent of Mission Impossible (TIME, 2010, December 12).

1.1.2 The Evolution of True Crime

The emergence of true crime as a distinct media genre has been heavily influenced by changes in the media landscape. The evolution of television and digital streaming has played a central role in shaping how true crime is framed and consumed. Traditional television programming followed a linear broadcasting model, where news reports delivered crime stories with an emphasis on immediacy and journalistic objectivity. Documentary filmmaking, often associated with public broadcasting and investigative journalism, provided deeper explorations of criminal cases, incorporating archival footage, interviews, analyses, and reconstructed narratives (Cruickshank, 2018). With the expansion of cable television and, later, streaming platforms, true crime has further evolved, adopting elements of fiction or dramatisation to appeal to changing audience preferences. Streaming platforms, such as Netflix, have transformed true crime from a niche genre into mainstream entertainment (Hernandez, 2019), offering both documentary series and dramatised adaptations of real events. The accessibility of on-demand content has allowed for deeper engagement with crime narratives, often blurring the lines

between fact and dramatisation. This shift has contributed to the growing popularity of true crime as a genre, with an increasing number of productions exploring past criminal cases through different narrative forms.

The growing fascination with true crime in the last decade was noticed by streaming services, which wasted no time commodifying crime, capitalising on the enthusiasm (Bruzzi, 2016; Buozis, 2017; Williams, 2020; Morton, 2021; Fanning & O'Callaghan, 2023). It started with the TV series Making a Murderer which experienced an overwhelming success in 2015. The celebrity-status of serial killers, robbers, etc. has also been raised by scholars. True crime is a captivating genre, which has led to a wealth of research analysing specific shows centred on high-profile cases, like those of O. J. Simpson, Ted Bundy, the Menendez brothers, or Jeffrey Dahmer. The cases themselves were sensational, and thus the TV shows gained a lot of popularity, mostly raising questions about the ethical social dilemmas of commercialising and sensationalising true crime. While the format and purpose of true crime media have changed over time, even a glimpse at the genre's history reveals its deep roots in human psychology and social dynamics. According to George S. Larke-Walsh, such depth can perhaps be the reason why the genre endures (Larke-Walsh, 2023, p. 2). Nevertheless, the debate about the reason behind true crime's popularity has been ongoing for a long time.

1.2 Statement of purpose and research questions

The academic field surrounding true crime is vast and interdisciplinary. Most relevant research covers true crime as a genre, the heist genre, and hybrid genres, such as docudrama and infotainment, which blur the lines between factual and dramatised storytelling. While numerous studies have explored each of these categories, focusing on particular cases, or ethical considerations, there is a gap in the representation of the same crime across genres, within the same medium. Thus, the purpose is to

explore how storytelling techniques differ within the same medium. The questions asked are:

- How has the Västberga Helicopter Robbery been narratively reconstructed across different television genres – news report, documentary, and dramatised series – in terms of narrative time, mood, and voice?
- Who are the focalisers in each media format, and how do their perspectives shape the narrative and frame the portrayal of the perpetrators across news reports, documentaries, and dramatisations?
- In what ways do genre conventions influence the use of narratological strategies in the televised reconstruction of the same real-life crime?

2. Theory and method

Understanding the theoretical foundations allows for a deeper analysis of how the Västberga Helicopter Robbery is juxtaposed across different television genres. Gérard Genette's work on Narratology (1980) is particularly important. He examines how narratives are structured, offering insight into the layers that define storytelling. He argues that the way the story is told is just as important as the story itself. Although developed for literary texts, Genette's categories are widely applied to film and television (Genette, 1980, p. 34; p. 190; p. 216).

2.1 Genette's Narratology

1. Time

Time covers how the narrative manages temporal relations between the story and the narration. It has three subcategories – anachrony (order), duration, and frequency. Anachrony focuses on how the events can be reordered with help of flashbacks and flashforwards, which Genette called 'analepsis' and 'prolepsis' respectively. Playing with the chronology of events can build suspense or surprise (p. 40). Duration refers to how much narrative time is devoted to events. Narrative speed depends on the

relationship between story time and text length (pp. 87–88). Genette outlines four movements: scene, pause, summary, and ellipsis (pp. 94-95). Narrative frequency examines how often events are narrated relative to how often they occur (p. 113). Narratives can be singulative (once/once), repetitive (many/once), or iterative (once/many) (pp. 114–116). This helps reveal how a narrative orders events, how long it dwells on them, and how often they recur.

While Genette focuses on narrative time within the structure of a story – including order (anachrony), duration, and frequency – television introduces yet another dimension: liveness – a sense of immediacy tied to the medium's historical relationship with real-time broadcast. Liveness can be literal or simulated, produced through stylistic choices such as handheld cameras, breaking news footage, single-take episodes, or diegetic news reports embedded within the narrative (Doane, 1990; Sturken, 1997; Levine, 2008). This affects how time is experienced and interpreted in televised narratives.

2. Mood

Mood focuses on how the narrative is presented to the reader. Genette's analysis of modalities of regulation of narrative information focuses on two categories – distance and perspective. Distance presents the degree of mediation between the story and its narration. It can be divided into two contrasting categories – diegesis and mimesis. Diegesis involves the narrator directly telling the audience what happens, often summarising events, describing characters' feelings, or interpreting actions. This mode creates a certain distance between the reader and the events, as everything is filtered through the narrator's perspective. In contrast, mimesis presents the story more dramatically, allowing events to unfold in real time through scenes, actions, and dialogue. This mode shows rather than tells, drawing the reader into the immediacy of the moment, and making the audience feel as though they are experiencing it in real time, by showing – this is going on, this is happening.

The second of the mood's categories is focalisation, the point of view from which a story is told. It is the relationship between the 'who sees' and 'what is seen' in a story. Genette asks a question: "who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?" (Genette, 1980, p. 186). He distinguishes three types of focalisation: internal, external, and zero focalisation. The internal focalisation is more subjective and intimate, the focaliser is being a part of the story; external focalisation is more objective and distant, the focaliser is detached; and finally, zero focalisation means the focaliser is omniscient. Focalisation may shift within a narrative and strongly influences how different formats portray key actors such as criminals, police, or observers.

3. Voice

Voice refers to "who speaks," from where, and with what relation to the events (Genette, 1980, p. 213). One key distinction is the narrating level, which asks a question: where does the narrator stand in relation to the story they are telling? The narrating level can be extradiegetic (the narrator is outside the story world) or intradiegetic (the narrator is inside the story world). If a narrator within the story tells another embedded story, they create a metadiegetic level. Another important element is the narrator's degree of participation. The questions Genette asks are: is the story told by a homodiegetic narrator? (the narrator is a character within, part of the story) Or is the story told by a heterodiegetic narrator? (the narrator is absent from the story he tells) Or is the narrator also a protagonist? In that case it will be an autodiegetic narrator.

Genette also considers the time of narration asking when the story is being told, in comparison to when it actually happened. It could be retrospective – the story is told after it happened; simultaneous – told as it is happening; and prospective – the events have not happened yet, they are being predicted. Voice matters, as it shapes the reliability of the story, creates the distance between the narrator and events. Bias, memory and perspective play a role, which creates a level of subjectivity.

David Bordwell, building on Genette, argues that stylistic choices such as camera work, editing, sound, and lighting actively shape storytelling and viewer engagement. Drawing on the Russian Formalist distinction between fabula (story events) and syuzhet (their organisation), he shows how the same story can be presented in different ways, producing different meanings and responses (Bordwell, 2004). Style guides perception, mood, and interpretation, often operating below the viewer's awareness, and is therefore central to understanding how films construct narrative meaning.

2.2 Genre and Genre Conventions

Genres "(…) enable us to make sense of a large number of choices by separating them into smaller and easily recognisable generic categories." (Creeber, 2015, p. 1). In television, they help us navigate in a vast sea of channels and quickly identify the kind of content, or the 'product' we want. Although genre classifications date back to Aristotle's categories of tragedy, comedy, and epic poetry, modern genre theory took shape with Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism (1957). Frye argued that narratives repeat across time through recurring patterns or archetypes, which help reveal the underlying structures of literature. His approach, however, was criticised for being overly general and for dehistoricising texts (Creeber, 2015, pp. 1–2).

One of the most important critics of fixed genre definitions was Jacques Derrida, a post-structuralist philosopher. He argued that genres do not, and should not be defined. Instead, genres should be flexible, adjustable, subjective categories, because labels can change over time (Derrida, 1980). According to him, most texts (books, films, etc.) do not belong to just one genre. They often mix elements from different genres, which makes it impossible to fit them neatly in one, particular category. Labelling something as a genre is restrictive and creates rules and limits. Genres create boundaries (Derrida, 1980, p. 224). In response, scholars such as Ralph Cohen sought to redefine genre as a dynamic and evolving category. Cohen acknowledged that genres are

historically contingent and often messy, yet he insisted they remain essential analytical tools: "Genres are open categories" (Cohen, 1986, p. 204). Contemporary television studies follow this flexible approach, recognising that a single programme can participate in multiple genres simultaneously (Creeber, 2015, p. 5).

2.2.1 News Report

Schlesinger argues that news is constructed rather than a transparent reflection of reality (Schlesinger, 1987). Its language and images result from subjective, interpretative choices (Creeber, 2015, p. 127). News also borrows narrative conventions from fiction – conflict, drama, and clear roles such as heroes and villains – blurring boundaries between information and entertainment. As Lewis notes, news producers, like filmmakers, decide what news to present, as they must still attract audiences (in Creeber, 2015, p. 131). Nevertheless, there is an inherit trust placed in news and the audiences still tend to think of news as an information, and not entertainment. News reports follow stable genre conventions: they are brief summaries, told rather than shown (diegesis), creating high narrative distance. They are repetitive across channels and rely on external focalisation through witnesses, police, or officials. The journalist typically serves as an extradiegetic, heterodiegetic narrator, though interviews introduce internal voices. News uses retrospective, simultaneous, and prospective narration, and its sense of liveness reinforces immediacy and authority. These conventions collectively frame news as objective and reliable.

2.2.2 Documentary

Documentaries balance factual presentation with storytelling. Although they aim to convey truth, their narratives are shaped by creative decisions – what to film, how to edit, which sounds or images to include – making objectivity impossible. Documentary therefore holds persuasive power and often raises ethical or political questions. As a genre, it is fluid and loosely defined, with boundaries that shift alongside broader audiovisual developments

(Creeber, 2015, p. 145). Documentary conventions prioritise credibility and clarity. Narratives are usually chronological but may incorporate archival material that disrupts temporal order. Summary and ellipsis are common, though interviews introduce fuller scenes. Distance varies, as documentaries both tell and show (diegesis and mimesis). Focalisation shifts between internal and external viewpoints, while voice may be extradiegetic (voice-over), or intradiegetic and homodiegetic through participants. This multiplicity of perspectives enhances the sense of authenticity. The time of narration is always retrospective, reinforcing the documentary's analytical and reflective nature. Together, these conventions create narratives that are both informative and engaging.

2.2.3 The Crime Series

Crime series form a broad genre centered on crime, covering subgenres such as detective dramas, police procedurals, serial-killer stories, and legal dramas. However, it remains exclusive enough to be distinctive through its 'stock' characters, familiar plots, and established aesthetics (Jenner, in Creeber, 2015, p. 55). Historically, crime series promoted a conservative vision of law and order, but in recent decades the focus has shifted toward the emotional and psychological effects of crime on victims, witnesses, and bystanders (Biressi, 2004, p. 401). Crime-series conventions aim for suspenseful, engaging storytelling. They frequently manipulate narrative order through flashbacks and flashforwards, and vary duration with scenes, summaries, and ellipses. The frequency is usually singulative, following one crime and its investigation. The narrative mood is mimetic and immersive, simulating real-time experience (liveness). Focalisation is typically internal, aligned with investigators or perpetrators, and the voice is usually intradiegetic and homodiegetic and usually does not have a voice-over narrator. Stylistic elements such as cinematography, sound, lighting, and editing further shape mood, pacing, and emotional engagement.

3. Analysis

The three analysed case studies include TV4 and SVT news reports; the SVT documentary Helikopterrånet (2024) (English translation: The Helicopter Robbery); and the dramatised and fictionalised Netflix TV series Helikopterrånet (2024) (English translation: The Helicopter Heist). For each case, the narrative is examined through the lens of Genette's narratological framework (1980), focusing on narrative time, mood, and voice as well as genre theory and conventions. The narrative structure and genre-specific stylistic choices are examined in relation to the research questions.

The combination of the study of narratology and genre studies provides a theoretical framework for the further analysis of the narratology represented over different genres. While narratology focuses on the formal elements of storytelling, such as time, mood, voice, and focalisation, genre studies examine the conventions, expectations, and thematic patterns needed to categorise the texts. When combined, these approaches help explore not only how stories are told, but also how the narrative mechanisms shift or adapt depending on the genre, as well as how the genres intertwine. The interdisciplinary lens enables a deeper understanding of how storytelling techniques both conform to and challenge genre norms.

3.1 TV4 and SVT News

Early TV news coverage of the Västberga Helicopter Robbery framed the event through dramatic language and visuals. The first TV4 and SVT reports described the robbery as "spectacular," "unique," and "dramatic," "the dramatic helicopter robbery", "very well planned heist", "the police were totally powerless", "very skilled pilot", "well organised, well planned" supported by serious presenter tone, expert commentary, and illustrative footage of the G4S depot and police activity. Such evaluative language and professional focalisation shaped audience perception, potentially romanticising and sensationalising the crime and encouraging emotional engagement. Given the high trust

placed in news, these framings are likely to be accepted as authoritative rather than questioned. Later reports adopted a more restrained tone. Coverage shifted toward factual updates on arrests, using neutral language, short sentences, passive constructions, and chronological structure. This created greater narrative distance and reinforced journalistic objectivity. Authority figures, such as police representatives, provided information, maintaining external focalisation.

Visual strategies further reveal genre hybridity. Aerial shots, while typically associated with surveillance and authority, risked aligning viewers with the perpetrators' perspective due to the nature of the crime itself. Additionally, repeated use of 3D animations and schematic reconstructions filled gaps where no footage existed. Although maintaining an institutional tone, these visualisations borrowed from documentary and dramatised conventions, illustrating how news coverage blends factual reporting with narrative and aesthetic techniques.

3.1.1 Narrative Time

News reports present events in linear, chronological order (zero anachrony), creating a sense of liveness and immediacy, even when events are already over. Early reports are brief and highly compressed summaries, focusing on key facts rather than detail. Although the robbery occurred once, it is retold repeatedly across broadcasts, producing a repetitive narrative that follows the investigation and arrests.

3.1.2 Narrative Mood

News reporting maintains high narrative distance. Journalists are external to the events and rely on diegesis rather than mimesis, using formal language and an institutional tone to reinforce authority and objectivity. This aligns also with the generic rules of news reporting: to inform in clear, efficient, and authoritative way; to present facts, rather than the emotional dimensions of the story. However, evaluative language and occasional visual reconstructions (such as 3D animations) momentarily reduce distance

and introduce dramatic intensity, shifting the mood toward emotional engagement. In the news reports we get to see the journalists', the specialists', and the police's perspective on the heist, which means that the audience receives a narrative created from the outside, based on the analysis of the situation conducted by the specialists' and the police. The viewer does not get access to perpetrators' thoughts or emotions, but only to their actions and roles. All this means that the reports employ external focalisation, as the narrator is more objective and distant, detached, not included in the robbery. This kind of focalisation supports the genre's goal of neutrality and journalistic objectivity by maintaining a high degree of narrative distance. However, the focalisation is not neutral. Audience's perception of the event is one-sided.

3.1.3 Narrative Voice

The narrative voice in the analysed news is extradiegetic and heterodiegetic, which is typical for news reporting, where an external narrator (usually a journalist) speaks from outside the story and does not participate in reported story. The absence of a narrator who is emotionally or personally involved creates distance and authority, and what follows – the detachment and the impersonal manner foster trust, and the news seem clear and credible. The narration is retrospective. All of these choices create an impression of factuality and reliability of the story. This temporal proximity between the event and the report simulates a real-time experience, it contributes to a sense of immediacy and urgency, even though the narration is technically retrospective. However, although the voice seems to be transparent, its selection of words (such as 'spectacular' and 'unique'), tone, and framing decisions (such as clearly dividing the characters into heroes, villains, and victims) still shape the narrative and guide the viewer's understanding. After all, the news producers' goal is to make the news appealing to the audiences (and keep them entertained).

3.2 SVT Documentary

The documentary combines factual reporting with aesthetic storytelling through scenic imagery and music. It opens with aerial shots of a calm Swedish landscape, accompanied by unsettling music, immediately creating suspense. Victims are given a voice from the outset, alongside interviews with specialists such as journalists, prosecutors, and security experts. By situating the Västberga robbery within a broader historical context of early 2000s Swedish crime and juxtaposing surveillance footage with picturesque landscapes, the documentary creates a contrasting mood of calm and tension. This interplay of factual evidence and stylistic elements highlights the documentary's hybrid form, balancing information with narrative engagement.

3.2.1 Narrative Time

The documentary is divided into six thematic parts rather than following a strict chronology. Events are rearranged through analepsis, for example when the robbery is presented before the Serbian tip-off that preceded it. This non-linear structure creates a feeling of surprise. The duration of the event is also expanded: a 25-minute robbery is narrated across six episodes, allowing for reflection, repetition, and deeper analysis. Recurrent victims' quotes or images such as surveillance footage and helicopter shots over Stockholm extend narrative time and reinforce thematic importance.

3.2.2 Narrative Mood

The documentary adopts a moderate narrative mood, balancing factual distance with emotional proximity. The documentary does not rely only on the institutional voice. Instead, it uses individual voices – for example, those of the police officers, journalists, victims, and witnesses. This reduces the story distance. The documentary blends diegesis and mimesis. Voice-over narration structures and interprets events, while interviews, archival footage, and recurring visual motifs (such as helicopters and landscapes) show rather than tell, adding immediacy and emotional depth. This

balance reinforces the documentary's hybrid identity as both informative and affective.

There are multiple focalisers in the documentary, and we see many points of view, as many different people with different roles are interviewed and present their understanding and knowledge of the heist. The viewer learns about multiple perspectives. The extended focalisation, which includes access to internal viewpoints and behind-the-scenes information, helps to establish trust in the narrative by offering a sense of transparency and depth. In this case, the focalisers (mood, perspective) are also the narrators (voice).

3.2.3 Narrative Voice

The story is primarily told by a general extradiegetic voice-over narrator who tells the story but never appears in it. This voice we hear from the very first minutes of the documentary. In addition to that, the story is also told by many other narrators. Some of them are telling the story from within, as for example the victims, policemen, and specialists in the field. Thus, one can talk here about both the extradiegetic and intradiegetic, as well as both homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrators. The number of voices and inclusion of the people involved in the heist adds to the reliability of the storytelling. The time of the narrating, meaning when the story is being told, in comparison to when it actually happened is also important, as the documentary aired eight years after the heist – which gave time for a deeper analysis of the situation, reflection, collection of materials, and people helpful in building a bigger story. Genette called this type of narration 'retrospective'.

3.3 Netflix TV series

The TV series Helikopterrånet consists of eight episodes. The first five episodes establish the characters and foreground their internal conflicts, presenting the perpetrators as ordinary individuals facing moral dilemmas and constrained choices. At the same time, the series introduces the police perspective, particularly through

Leonie, the lead investigator, whose professional and private life the viewer follows even before the robbery takes place. This dual perspective prepares the ground for narrative tension prior to the crime itself.

The sixth episode, "Showtime," marks the narrative climax. The robbery unfolds in near real time, intensifying suspense and producing a strong sense of liveness. This episode functions as a clear turning point (Prince, 1987, p. 17), dividing the narrative into a 'before' and 'after' (Denzin, 1989, p. 33). As explained by director Daniél Espinosa and screenwriter Ronnie Sandahl in Making the Helicopter Heist, the aim was to immerse the viewer inside the robbery rather than observe it from a distance. The use of handheld camera work, one take, and improvised dialogue contributes to a naturalistic style that blurs the boundary between dramatisation and lived experience, reinforcing emotional immediacy and authenticity.

Episodes seven and eight focus on the aftermath of the heist. The narrative shifts from action to psychological tension, depicting the fear of the G4S staff, the robbers' internal conflicts, and the expanding police investigation. This shift deepens character complexity and resists simple moral binaries, presenting both perpetrators and investigators as psychologically nuanced rather than purely heroic or criminal.

3.3.1 Narrative Time

The first five episodes unfold slowly, building tension, while the sixth episode, the heist, occurs in real time using simulated liveness achieved through a single-take, shaky handheld style, immersing viewers in the action, heightening the sense of urgency and claustrophobia. The story mostly follows chronological order but includes analepses and prolepses, such as Rami's letter from Punta Cana and flashbacks to the robbers' pasts, which provide emotional context and justify their actions. The narrative also alternates between the robbers and the police, creating a dual structure that increases complexity by showing simultaneous events from different perspectives.

3.3.2 Narrative Mood

The introduction of the characters plays a significant role, allowing the viewer to get to know them, form a bond, get a chance to identify with them, which can, again, influence the justification of their action, as they are portrayed as more than just criminals, but for example as husbands, dads, individuals facing personal struggles. Thus, the viewer is often aligned closely with the robbers' inner world, evoking sympathy and understanding through backstory and visual style by the ambivalent characterisation of the characters. There is a small distance of mediation between the story and narration. This observation aligns with findings from previous research conducted by Krammer (2024) and Korczarowska (2023), as they noticed the same pattern in the Netflix series called Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story. In both examples, fictionalised past and relationships humanise the characters and contribute to the ambivalent portrayal of de facto criminals. Moreover, the story is presented more dramatically, unfolding in real time, with focus on the visuals – mimesis.

In the TV series we are often close to the perpetrators, following their every move and decision. In "Showtime" the viewer becomes one of the robbers. The whole episode is filmed in a single-take style and the camera does not move steadily. The viewer, now being part of the action in the midst of the chaos and arguments can feel unease and hope for the operation to succeed. The decision and execution of filming the sixth episode using a single-take technique is impressive and leaves the viewer in awe, which can blur in memory with the robbery itself. These moments create a strong connection between the viewer and the narrative, turning the heist into something that is not only seen but also felt. The episode is pure fabula. This represents what Genette called 'mimesis', drawing the audience into the immediacy of the moment, presenting "this is going on", which is liveness – the live aspect of television. The story unfolds in real time, the narration is simultaneous. The focalisation through the perpetrator's eyes contrasts with the police's perspective. By offering access to both sides, the series creates a more complex and balanced portrayal of

the event, allowing the viewer to understand motivations, strategies, and emotional stakes from various angles.

3.3.3 Narrative Voice

The series has no omniscient narrator; storytelling relies on dialogue, visuals, and character perspectives. Rami's letter provides a first-person intradiegetic layer, adding emotional depth. He opens up in this intimate message to his wife, showing his vulnerable side. This vulnerability and openness, again, adds to the ambivalent portrayal of the perpetrators. In episode seven, news broadcasts (radio broadcasts, a newspaper, television news) offer an intradiegetic and heterodiegetic perspective, showing the robbers as public subjects and creating an interplay between personal and external viewpoints. The true crime dramatisation draws from a "trustworthy" genre formats in order to create authenticity.

4. Discussion

The difference between the portrayal of the Västberga Helicopter Robbery across the genres is visible. The news reports are serious and neutral, the documentary presents facts, reflection, and analysis of the situation, also including interviews with the witnesses, victims, as well as experts, while also incorporating visual shots and music, to make it more interesting for the audience, and easier to imagine the situation. The TV series dramatises the events and incorporates fictional subplots to enhance its appeal to viewers, which at the same time makes the perpetrators more relatable.

Narrative Time

The narrative time in news is chronological, and the duration is short. The purpose is to present the most important information short and clear – a 'summary'. In the documentary on the other hand, the duration is long, longer than the robbery itself. The focus is on a deep analysis of what happened, why, how, and when. The events are not presented in a chronological order, which distinguishes it from the news and the dramatised TV

series, which are mostly chronological. For example, in the documentary, the fact that the police were informed about the robbery plans before the heist happened was mentioned after the description of the heist, creating a feeling of surprise. In the TV series, the story unfolds mostly chronologically, and the viewer follows the preparation for the heist from two sides (the perpetrators and the police) which makes the narration more complex. It also results in varied uses of duration – from real-time sequences during the heist (scene and stretch) to compressed summaries of the police's investigation. It also employs analepses and prolepses, presenting the perpetrators' memories of previous crimes, and their childhood and adolescence, in order for the audience to get to know the robbers better, and build a bond. It is worth noting, that only the perpetrators' storyline includes flashbacks and emotional depth, while the police's perspective is more linear and less developed. This is something that would not happen in the news, as they focus on reporting and the importance of the event. However, there is something that the news reports and the TV series have in common – liveness. The sixth episode of the series presents the robbery itself. Thanks to the use of techniques such as single-take and handheld camera, a simulated liveness is achieved. Liveness is strongly associated with television, and it primarily occurs in live news broadcasting. The temporal proximity of the news reports contributes to a sense of immediacy and urgency, despite the fact that the events are being recounted in hindsight – just as in the other two genres – the narrative is retrospective.

Narrative Mood

Narrative mood focuses on how much access the narrator gives the audience to the story, especially to the characters' inner world and how events are experienced. A high degree of narratological distance occurs in the news reports, a medium distance occurs in the documentary, and a low distance occurs in the TV series. The tone in the news reports is objective, factual, and impersonal, as the reporters are detached from the story. They employ diegesis –

the story is told, and not shown. In the documentary, there is a mix of an objective, and emotional tone, a mix of diegesis and mimesis. There is a combination of both, detached narration with insights gathered from the people involved in the robbery. The TV series is emotionally immersive and employs a subjective tone, designed to create empathy, by getting to know the robbers, which is the polar opposite of the news – where the high distance between the journalist and the story creates a sense formality and authority, and hence journalistic credibility. The distance in the TV series is small, and the story is mostly dramatically shown (mimesis) to create emotional immersion. The genres have different goals – from informing and analysing to evoking empathy and dramatic tension, and the narrative mood is carefully shaped in order to support the goals.

News is characterised by external focalisation. Journalists are only intermediaries and pass on information about what has happened. The specialists who are interviewed can share their knowledge about the field, however they are also talking from the outside of the situation. The focalisation in the documentary shifts between the external and the internal one, as there are many different perspectives. The witnesses' and the victims' voices are heard, they get the chance to tell their story. The focus laid on the victims' stories puts the viewer on their side. The audience listens to what they have to say. By putting oneself in their position, the feeling of empathy is evoked. The focalisation in the TV series works similarly. It is primarily internal, as the viewer is most often close to the perpetrators, their experiences and emotions, getting to know them well, in a different milieu than the G4S cash depot. The audience gets to know the robbers as fathers, partners, friends, brothers, etc. which adds another layer to their personality. In the sixth episode of the series, the viewer becomes one of the robbers with help of liveness. Being one of the robbers automatically puts the viewer on their side, which can heavily influence the reception of their actions. The viewer feels the pressure, and the motivation to succeed in the robbery, but at the same time is close to the police, and gets the chance to get to know them, or more spe-

cifically Leonie, a bit closer, as a mother, and a daughter, as well as a sister of a character who had passed before the actual story started. The viewer also follows the police's investigation, however, there is significantly less narrative time devoted to the police's side in comparison with the perpetrators' side.

Narrative Voice

The narrative voice in the news is extradiegetic and heterodiegetic. The lack of involvement can create a sense of objectivity. In the documentary there are intradiegetic interviews conducted with people who were involved in the robbery in some way. The victims – the staff of the G4S cash depot provide insights from the inside of the crime, giving a glimpse of what it was to be locked in the depot during the robbery. The voice is both heterodiegetic and homodiegetic, as some of the interviewed people – the narrators – were involved in the robbery (e.g. the staff), and some not (e.g. the experts). The mixture creates a wider perspective, and hence credibility. What differs the documentary from the TV series is the presence of a voice-over narrator who guides the whole story. It is thus extradiegetic and heterodiegetic – the voice remains outside the story world and delivers context without being part of the events which are presented. In the TV series there is no narrator. The dominant voice of the series is non-narrated diegesis. However, Rami's letter to his wife which appears in a couple of the episodes, is an intradiegetic, heterodiegetic voice, and the scenes surrounding it are a prolepsis – a flashforward – a jump to the future, after the heist. This first-person narrative layer adds emotional intimacy and positions Rami temporarily as both the focaliser and the narrator.

5. Conclusions

The representation of the Västberga Robbery changes across the different television genres. The differences are connected to each genre's conventions – the genres follow their generic rules, which shape how narratological strategies are used, by determining what kind of narrative is expected and allowed within each format.

Genre conventions influence the narrative tools that each genre uses to reconstruct the Västberga Helicopter Robbery. In news reports, the genre's commitment to journalistic objectivity and immediacy leads to the external focalisation, high narrative distance, and a chronological, fact-based presentation. The documentary genre, while also factual, allows more flexibility – it combines both the external and the internal focalisation, that is multiple perspectives, and a more reflective narrative voice, aligning with the genre's dual aim to inform, and entertain or engage emotionally at the same time. Dramatised TV series, shaped by fiction and emotional immersion, adopts internal focalisation, a fragmented narrative time (such as flashbacks and flashforwards), and a character-driven voice, following conventions of dramatic storytelling and psychological depth. These changes influence the outcome – the storytelling provided for the audience, which can react completely different to each of the genres.

The choice of focalisers impacts the storytelling – whether it is external focalisation, such as an institutional or police-oriented viewpoint in the news; a mix of internal and external focalisers, such as victims and the police in the documentary (and partially in the series); or perpetrators in the dramatised TV series, where we get to know them more, through flashbacks, emotional sequences, and personal voice-overs. These focalisation choices are not neutral – they directly affect how the viewer experiences the narrative – either as a distant observer, a reflective witness, or an emotionally engaged participant.

The genres have their general rules but they are vague and fluid, and are altered with every new production, as their boundaries blur. The genres are intertwined and hybrid, as they often borrow elements from one another. For instance, the dramatised series included news reports within the narrative, simulating factual framing, while the documentary incorporated emotional backstories and aesthetic techniques that resemble dramatised storytelling. Even the news reports, while maintaining an authoritative tone, sometimes use dramatic language or visually compelling footage to engage the viewer. The TV series used simulated

liveness, which used to be connected to the immediacy of the news. The documentary and the TV series both incorporate news reports within their narratives, creating a layered storytelling approach. In the documentary, archival news footage makes the narrative authentic, grounding the reconstructed events in real-world media coverage and reinforcing the factual credibility of the story. These clips also provide temporal markers, helping to establish chronology, and reminding viewers of the public reception and media framing of the event at the time when it occurred. These interconnections show that the contemporary media storytelling often blends factual and fictional elements to serve narrative or emotional purposes.

By analysing the retellings of the Västberga Helicopter Robbery, it has been shown how much power genre conventions have, but at the same time it has been shown that the genres overlap, and the boundaries between them are getting blurred. This shift involves a movement from factual, detached representations to more subjective, emotionally engaging, or dramatised reconstructions, depending on the genre. Examining the Västberga Helicopter Robbery across news reports, documentary, and dramatised series, offers a way to explore how these diverse modes of storytelling reshape the viewer's relationship to real events, and how television genres play a central role in such a transformation.

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In AI we trust

A qualitative investigation into the concept of trust in human-AI relations and its changing nature

Simon Tuhkunen

1. Introduction

Trust is a fundamental mechanism that allows societies to function under conditions of uncertainty and complexity. As artificial intelligence (AI) systems mediate everyday communication and decision-making in our daily lives, new questions arise about what it means to trust a non-human actor. Recent developments in AI chatbots, particularly conversational LLMs (Large Language Models) like ChatGPT, Grok, and Copilot, among others, have accelerated the discussions and raised concerns about the reliability, accountability, and moral status of machine-produced information. If trust forms the social glue between people and societies, what happens when it is extended onto artificial non-human actors?

Research on AI trust and ethics has previously shown the institutional and technological dimensions of trust, such as transparency and explainability; however, less research has been conducted on how humans themselves conceptualize trust when engaging and using AI. Existing literature assumes a functional and cognitive definition of trust, focusing on measurable indicators such as accuracy or reliability. However, trust is formed through cultural, relational, and emotional practices that rely on how the users themselves interpret and respond to AI technology. To be able to use AI in a safe way, it is important to understand how trust is perceived, how trust is formed, and what the objects

of trust are when users interact with AI. These subjects are what will be investigated in this chapter.

The aim is to illuminate how trust in AI is not only built on cognitive trust – merely a question of reliability – but is a communicative practice built on relational processes that are embedded in larger cultural and institutional contexts. What are the trust objects, trust, and distrust in AI, and how is trust formed and interpreted in contexts with AI? Analyzing how people rely on, and trust AI can give us a deeper understanding of AI literacy, sociotechnical relations, and the nature of social trust in the digital age.

The chapter first provides a brief background, followed by statement of purpose and research questions (RQs), the theoretical framework, followed by the methodological design, and the analysis of the findings. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the scientific findings of the complex and layered negotiations and renegotiations related to trust and technology and addresses topics of future research regarding trust and AI.

2. Background and Previous Research

Previous studies have examined how human-AI relations increasingly mirror human-human ones, such as autonomy, agency, and social cues as antecedents of trust (Gambino et. al., 2020; Glikson & Woolley, 2020). Factors such as transparency, immediacy behavior (i.e. socially oriented interpersonal responses), task characteristics, and anthropomorphic cues have shown to shape people's cognitive trust (Gabriel et. al., 2024, pp. 121–122; McAllister, 1995). While these properties may work to build trust and reliability, they can also erode it when people's expectations are not met, as seen in public reactions in ridiculing the sycophantic behavior of ChatGPT-4o in 2025 (TechCrunch, 2025).

Previous Research

Communicative AI in the form of LLMs has become a big interest in research in recent years and has been the subject of multiple fields such as technical, cultural, societal, and ethical dimensions. However, with the growing knowledge of AI, there is still no

coherent narrative of how it impacts users and the concept of trust and distrust. The studies of AI ethics are still discussed with several subfields, which focus on the context of governance and its metaphysical aspects (Liu & Zheng, 2021) to responsible use of advanced AI-assistants in areas like trust, safety, malicious use, value alignment, and also different methods on how to evaluate advanced AI-assistants (Gabriel et. al., 2024).

Previous research by scholars have discussed the opacity of AI systems, where algorithmic design choices and data-driven processes create black-boxed structures that challenge user transparency, aggregate power, and interpret political agendas behind the designs (Ananny, 2015; Diakopoulos, 2015; Bucher, 2018). Lev Manovich (2001, pp. 224-225) discussed the cultural algorithm works through the process of reality being translated into media, media being translated into data, and data into databases. In the context of AI, this process has been increasingly reversed with vast databases generating new media representations that reshape users' perceptions of reality and credibility.

Scholars have discussed how AI constructs representations of trust through three forms of learning: (I) direct experience through interaction; (II) indirect experience through data gathering from a second source; and (III) pattern-based generalization, which is a method of creating a taxonomy of stereotypical profiles of users based on their behavior and information (Liu et al., 2014, pp. 4–5). These methods of taxonomizing data are complex and may backfire, as AI has been known to construct patterns that may not have any relation to each other, creating a case of apophenia or "seeing patterns where there are none" (Tsamados et. al, 2022, p. 217).

From a philosophical and ethical perspective, Floridi (2023) argues that AI is a new form of agency guided by principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, justice, and explicability. The fifth principle, explicability, is used to explain the epistemological question of how it works and the ethics of accountability. Tied to the ethics is the alignment/misalignment of AI (Millière, 2023; Arvan, 2024), which challenges both ques-

tions of accountability and user confidence, because of the inherent flaws of the Transformer structure, which is the foundation for the majority of modern AI-chatbots and LLMs (Vaswani et. al., 2017).

Recent studies have explored trust in human-AI interactions (Oksanen et. al, 2020) and using confidence as a precondition in how humans form trust in AI (Chong et. al, 2022). Reviews of the ongoing expansion and development of the field have been made (Henrique & Santos Jr., 2024). The complexity of the trust concept has developed further with the introduction of communicational AI-assistants/Large Language Models (LLMs) on how we use language and communicate with each other. Recent studies in AI and trust investigate how humans can create frameworks that integrate trust mechanisms into AI to secure sensitive information and data that is embedded in the models' training data from being leaked (Feretzakis & Verykios, 2024), focusing on how companies can sustain trust through increased security regarding user information and data privacy.

The Research Institute of Sweden (RISE) has summarized how LLMs can be used in information manipulation and interference, like poisoning training data (RISE, 2024) and risks in customizing the model for malicious use or prompting in a way that confuses the model to leak private information or data that can cause harm (Gopal et. al., 2023).

Most of the previous literature discusses trust and distrust from a technological perspective, where the interpretations of the concepts are very broad, incorporating various types of trust focused on design, organizational practices, and third-party governance (Gabriel et. al. 2024). The recurring problem is that the trust concept has multiple definitions and is always a product of continuous interplay between multiple actors, human and non-human. Previous research focused on trust has been conducted either through a psychological or technical lens, often using the same sources for their trust theories, which leaves a gap where a deeper discussion around the trust concepts themselves, or from the user's own interpretations and perspectives of the concepts. This

study tries to fill this gap with more nuanced discussions around the users' understandings of the trust concept and investigates what is trusted, analyzing the results from a sociotechnical lens.

3. Statement of purpose and research Questions

The study investigates user interactions with communicative AI-chatbots, mainly ChatGPT-4 and Microsoft Copilot. It focuses on the users' own experiences with trust in context with AI-chatbots, and how trust forms, builds, erodes, and (re)negotiates in the communicative relations established between humans and technology. The following research questions were investigated:

RQ1: How do people perceive trust in relation to AI-chatbots?
RQ2: What do people perceive that they trust or distrust when using AI-chatbots?
RQ3: How, and if, is trust formed and understood through people's interactions with AI-chatbots?

4. Theoretical Framework

Multiple theoretical frameworks were implemented to form the necessary analysis of trust and distrust relationships between humans and AI-chatbots. The definitions of the trust and distrust concepts differ, and some choices had to be made to meet the sociotechnical scope of the study. There were two main theories of trust and distrust, the first being Niklas Luhmann's work Trust and Power (1979), and Piotr Sztompka's Trust: A Sociological Theory (1999). To put the analysis into a larger, Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005) is added. It provides understanding of: (I) the functional dynamics, and (II) the relational dynamics between humans and machines when needed. It provides a macro-perspective and binds the different actors and trust objects together into a relational network. It focuses on people's interactions with technologies as communicative subjects instead of interactive ones (Guzman & Lewis, 2020, p. 71).

Luhmann's concept of trust

Luhmann (1979) discusses the concept of trust as a type of heuristic mechanism that is used to reduce social complexity in the world that surrounds us (p. 7), which is caused by all the instances of decisions made by multiple actors. The problem with trust is that it is bound to the concept of time, where the future holds multiple possible outcomes that may impact a subject positively or negatively. Trust reduces the complexity of these different parameters by focusing on the present, where people can witness the horizon of experiences and increase their own acceptance of ambiguity (p. 17). Trust is understood as a type of advanced payment where people are putting a bet on another actor, with the supposed outcome being that putting this trust into someone else makes a difference to a specific decision (p. 27).

Putting trust in something or someone comes with a risk of a negative outcome. The higher the stakes are, the stronger the trust has to be. Paradoxically, because the concept is bound to time, trust can never be proven until the result is observed through the success or failure of the trustee and can only be evaluated in hindsight. It is an attitude that is neither objective nor subjective and cannot be transferred to other objects or people (Luhmann, 1979, p. 31). It is to be understood as something that is cultivated over time and is a product of motivation to reach a goal that cannot be reached by one's own vices only. Luhmann mentions two kinds of trust:

(I) Personal trust is the kind of trust we build up between ourselves and individuals, where the actors involved are not merely a causal process which involves cause and effect, but as a process where a complex of symbols is at play (Luhmann, 1979, p. 43). Our interactions and potential gains or losses are based on the amount of trust we are ready to put into an actor. One of the main differences between personal and systemic trust is that personal trust is not based on historical or institutional assumptions, but on our individual experiences, interactions, which can make the calculations of whether someone is trustworthy harder to calibrate. Luhmann further

mentions that outcomes of complex technological processes "appear to be relatively impersonal" (p. 46). Luhmann's assumption of technological trust is of great importance as this has changed, as it is not as impersonal as when he wrote the book. This stance should be further discussed as barriers between human-human and human-AI interactions become blurrier, which in itself complicates the metaphysical discussion of what it means to be human. This assumption of technological trust is of interest, as the barriers between human-human and human-AI interaction have become blurrier, which in itself complicates the metaphysical discussion of what it means to be human.

(II) Systemic trust is the type of trust we put into institutions like the government, law, cultural norms, or even the value of things like currencies. It helps us navigate and reduce the world around us into comprehensive frameworks. It mitigates the learning process in which the subject will "know" where to go to get assistance to reach a certain goal (Luhmann, 1979, pp. 55–56). To reinforce belief in the different systems, we use generalized media like currency, power, and truth. They function as transmitters, or to put it differently, mediators (see section about ANT) that carry out beliefs that reduce the complexity of our world (Latour, 2005, p. 39). These mediators may change our beliefs or trust levels based on whether the currency's value fluctuates; our beliefs might change, and so our perception of truth, or power itself, through a change in government and its political agendas. This concept is closely related to Sztompka's *institutional trust*, which will be the concept used in the analysis instead of the concept of systemic trust as it better covers institutional and cultural aspects of trust.

Sztompka's multidimensionality of trust

Trust is defined as a bet on the future contingent actions of others (Sztompka, 1999, p. 25), referring to the nature of trust as a time-dependent concept that looks into the future and assesses risk, like Luhmann's definition. What differentiates Sztompka's concept is that instead of focusing on complexity reduction, trust operates in

multiple social and cultural layers, creating a three-dimensional prism where different levels are at work simultaneously (p. 60):

(I) The relational dimension of interpersonal trust between a trustor and a trustee. This relational dimension is based on two main rules: the maximization of utility under risk, and the minimization of loss in a risky situation (Sztompka, 1999, p. 61).

(II) Institutional trust is based on the individual and the collective trust in the constitutional framework (Sztompka, 1999, p. 46). This rhymes with Luhmann's concept of systemic trust that reduces the complexities of the individual as with the collective. Trust towards the system can be undermined by distrust of some actors, which can impact the broader trust in the institutions (p. 49). Institutional trust is relevant when discussing trust in the context of trusting AI developers, the tech companies, their governance, and their uses.

(III) Cultural trust is a broader concept of trust that is built and reproduced from collective shared beliefs, values, and historical context. It is not calculated or comes from psychological propensity but works as a rule (Sztompka, 1999, p. 66). Cultural trust is a mechanism that becomes an established norm if it is embraced within a culture through what is called "social becoming of trust", which is based on the inherited levels of trust inside a context, culture, or doxa (p. 132). Sztompka introduced a model on how the culture is built and cycled in a society: The structural circumstances are normative coherence, stability, transparency, familiarity, and accountability (or lack thereof). Once trust is met, it becomes a background condition for the next cycle of the process of trust and distrust. Pre-existing traditions of trust and distrust, such as structural opportunities, social moods, and collective capital, which influence trustfulness or suspiciousness, and the cultural effect (p. 133). This, in turn, trickles down into the lower levels and will influence the

> decisions to trust or distrust an individual or groups of people, institutions, or cultures based on what values and biases are created inside the cultural sphere towards the other. What makes this cultural dimension interesting in the context of human-AI interactions is that cultural belief is partly created through a taxonomy based on cultural stereotypes and sometimes prejudices (Sztompka, 1999, p. 68). This happens because both data and algorithms are cultural products of humans and chatbots online. Like the nymph in the myth of *Narcissus*, the outputs of AI can therefore be considered *an echo* of biases, values, beliefs, and ideas.

AI & Media Trust

As a backdrop for the discussion of the study, the concept of media trust was added to provide nuance to the concept and relevance to understand how it operates in new forms of media, such as LLMs, and a new form of human-machine interactions (Guzman & Lewis, 2020, p. 72). As reliance on these tools grows, trust or distrust in AI becomes increasingly significant, and is reshaping how media is consumed and opinions are formed.

Jakobsson & Stiernstedt (2023) work on media trust discussed that the relation between trust and media has proven to increase in complexity, as distrust in media does not mean less media consumption and vice versa (Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023, 2025). The distrusting subject would rely more on less information than before, becoming more selective and searching for other sources of information that the subject deems trustworthy. This might be the case with users of LLMs as well, where studies have indicated (Oksanen et. al, 2020) that increased distrust did not correlate with less use, but more selective use of the machine, making trust and distrust contextual. Furthermore, the individual understanding each person has of the concepts of trust and distrust, and that their intentions might differ from the researcher's ideas about the concepts (Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023, p. 482), makes the concepts of trust and distrust hard to pinpoint.

Researchers have often assumed what trust and distrust mean without digging deeper into what it means for the participants they are studying. The view of media trust seems to be tied to the very idea of modernity itself, which might have narrowed and imposed specific interpretations on what trust and distrust are (p. 490), focused on an identity-based epistemology which has become increasingly connected to the individual (Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2025, p. 12).

Actor–Network Theory

Actor–Network Theory (ANT) reconceptualizes communication as a relational process in which agency is distributed among human and non-human actors (Spöhrer & Ochsner, 2016, p. 3). Rather than following the linear sender–message–receiver model, ANT views communication as a dynamic network of mediations where meaning and agency emerge through interaction.

The framework rejects predefined roles such as producer and consumer, focusing instead on mediation as process—the continuous interplay through which actors, technologies, and contexts co-constitute one another. Within this network, mediators transform and reinterpret what they transmit, altering the relations and meanings they connect, while intermediaries merely convey information without change, as in the transmission of an email or letter.

Applied to AI, ANT situates both human users and technological systems as active agents that co-produce information, autonomy, trust, and distrust within sociotechnical assemblages. This perspective highlights how communicative relations between humans and AI are not unidirectional but the product of ongoing negotiation across multiple mediating layers.

Latour (1993) introduced the concept of quasi-objects, arguing that modernity falsely separated humans as subjects from non-human objects, where these actors are both interconnected with each other, creating "hybrid" actors, quasi-objects, like AI (Bareis, 2024). It refers to something that is neither purely natural nor social. They mediate relationships, act, and transform roles.

Gutiérres (2024) uses the ANT theory to understand the relationships the power dynamics between humans and algorithms as they themselves exert social power (p. 1071), as any possible biases or limitations that are present in the training data may affect the output of the system (p. 1072). The idea is that AI-assistants like ChatGPT are seen as a product of collective associations and interactions between the AI system and its users (p. 1075). These interactions are not limited to the very interaction with one user but have the potential to affect the wider network that the AI-assistant is part of. The algorithms act like a form of "speed bump" by determining and pushing certain actions among all the actors in the network (p. 1081).

Method

The data sampling was conducted through qualitative interviews with human users of AI-assistants to investigate how they understood their own notions of the concepts of trust and distrust in human-AI interactions. This was to gain deeper knowledge of the nuances of how language affects the subject's own lifeworld (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 33).

The methodology was based on an abductive/inductive qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews (Brennen, 2017, p. 29). No definitions of the concepts of trust and distrust were presented to the participants. This approach was chosen to mitigate enforcing pre-supposed meanings of the concepts, which could influence their own interpretations and biases negatively (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, pp. 29–30). The subjects' own impressions and understandings of trust, distrust, and LLM usage.

The sampling criterion was centered around people who had previously used AI in their professional or personal lives to some extent. To get as heterogeneous a sample group as possible, finding participants from different cultural, age, and professional demographics was important for getting a nuanced picture of how they used technology and interpreted trust. The participants in the study had an age span between 23 and 60 years old and were gathered through the snowball method. Six of them were male,

and four were female. The interviews ranged from just over an hour to more than three hours. All the participants had a higher education, most of them from different fields of engineering or data sciences, and the others worked either as teachers or in business corporations as consultants or managers. The focus on participants with higher education levels was due to limited participation from individuals with lower educational backgrounds. However, this also provided an opportunity to explore behavioral tendencies among users with greater familiarity with AI and experience in intellectual labor. Several of them were working on AI-related matters, and all of them were using AI tools like LLMs on a daily basis, providing higher literacy levels (UNESCO 2024; Mills et.al., 2024).

The participants had diverse cultural backgrounds, which provided valuable data in understanding potential differences in how they perceived trust and distrust, both in a personal manner and towards AI technology.

To minimize confusion and maintain consistency, each interview followed a four-part structure. The first section explored participants' personal definitions of trust and distrust. The second examined their experiences with AI and how these related to their perceptions of its nature. The third focused on their views of chatbots' trust-building mechanisms and the dynamics of user–AI interaction. The final section concluded the interview and invited feedback to refine subsequent sessions.

Parti-cipant	Age	Education	Job occupation	Nationality	Gender	AI use and experience
1	26	Degree in Education with a specialization in upper secondary teaching in Swedish and Civic sciences	Highschool teacher in Swedish and Civic sciences	Swedish	Male	• Uses LLMs like ChatGPT and Copilot regularly at work • Searching for information • Improve communication skills
2	32	Bachelor's degree in Systemic Sciences (BS); pursuing a master's degree in data technology (MS)	Working as a data specialist at a business school	Swedish	Male	• Uses LLMs for coding and programming • Monotone, easier daily work-related tasks
3	39	Master's degree in electronic engineering (MS); master's degree in data science from KTH (MS)	Working as a Site Reliability Engineer team lead	Portuguese	Male	• Develops AI at his company. Develops AI in his free time • Focus on image-generation. • Uses LLMs every day • Searches for information
4	31	University diploma in civil en-gineering from Uppsala University (Higher Edu-cational Diploma)	Working as a municipal road en-gineer for the local government	Swedish	Male	• Uses ChatGPT often for work and information • Improve communication skills • Uses AI services to create music and images in his free time

5	28	Currently pursuing a master's in science degree (MS) in vehicle engineering	Working part-time as a *working student* in Germany	Indian	Male	• Uses ChatGPT and sometimes DeepSeek for studies and information
6	27	Postgraduate with master's degree (MBA) in business and administration	Innovation consultant in IT	Indian	Female	• Uses AI at work. • Providing AI services to clients • Nothing in her free time
7	23	Master's degree (MBA) in business and administration	Worked with a French IT and consultant company	Indian	Female	• Used it for work and for studying • Pitching to clients, communicative efforts • Information gathering • Analyzing and processing data
8	40	Bachelor's degree (BA) in Political sciences; Bachelor's degree (BA) in gender studies	Working as a production manager at an E-learning company	Swedish	Female	• Uses ChatGPT a lot at work to double-check and revise materials • Get recipes • Making music
9	60	Highschool teacher in chemistry and biology	Working as a high school teacher in chemistry and biology	Swedish	Male	• Using it to draft documents (statutes and drafts) • Uses it to teach AI-use for his students
10	29	Bachelor's degree (BA) in media and communication	Works as a technical project manager at an e-learning company	Swedish	Female	• Uses AI at work to cross-check materials • Create party activities • Find recipes

Five categories appeared in the post-interview analysis, with multiple themes and types of trust becoming visible. This was contrasted by distrust and its role in eroding trust when users used AI:

Categories for describing the nature of trust	Interview derived thematic categories			
How is trust defined?	Relational			
How is trust explained?	Cognitive	Cultural	Emotional	Experiential
How is trust formed?	Emergent	Presumptive		
What is the object of trust?	Technology	Information	Developer	
Distrust in relation to trust in AI	Control	Factuality	Manipulation	

Table 1: The rows represent analytical questions guiding the study, while the lighter columns display recurring thematic categories identified through qualitative coding of interview material. The table illustrates how different dimensions of trust and distrust cluster around specific objects and experiences of AI systems.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis showed that trust in AI chatbots was multidimensional and negotiated, shaped by cognitive evaluations, emotional responses, cultural orientations, and perceptions of technological and institutional intentions. While participants initially grounded their trust in functional reliability, some described developing an

emotional connection through personal disclosure and the chatbot's use of social cues. This relational dynamic was not fully anticipated by the theoretical framework. Trust also appeared complex and at times contradictory: emergent and presumptive stances shifted depending on context and object of trust. Although cognitive trust served as the starting point, it could gradually, and sometimes unconsciously, evolve into emotional trust through personalization, communicative cues, and experiences of security and comfort.

Five original analytic categories from the dissertation, definitions of trust, explanations of trust, trust formation, trust objects, and the role of distrust, were condensed into three integrated thematic areas to align with the article format: (1) Conceptualizing trust: Relational, cognitive, and contextual foundations; (2) Trust in interaction: Usability, emotion, and social presence; and (3) Trust objects and points of tension: Technology, information, and intentions. These themes collectively answer all three research questions and form the basis for the integrated discussion below.

1. Conceptualizing trust: Relational, cognitive, and contextual foundations

Participants conceptualized trust primarily as a relational and contextual practice rooted in communication, predictability, and shared expectations. When asked to define "trust", respondents described it as a relational mechanism that allows them to engage with uncertainty, an articulation consistent with Luhmann's (1979) notion of trust as a reduction of complexity and Sztompka's (1999) framing of trust as a bet on future actions.

Relational trust emphasized reciprocity: people trusted others based on demonstrated dependability, emotional ties, and mutual benefit. However, the same relational logic was not fully transferred to AI-chatbots, which participants recognized as lacking sentience, autonomy, or personal stakes. Instead, trust toward AI tended to be understood as indirect, based on developers, insti-

tutions, brand reputation, or perceived values embedded in the system, which aligned with Sztompka's (1999) institutional trust.

Trust was also defined contextually. Participants differentiated between situations where precision mattered (e.g., coding assistance, technical tasks) and contexts where moral or emotional stakes were higher. In low-stakes contexts, trust toward AI was easy to grant; in high-stakes contexts (e.g., personal advice, political information), trust was described as fragile or inappropriate.

Emotion appeared in conceptual definitions, though it was only present in a few participants. Some participants maintained that "true" trust requires vulnerability, risk, and emotional investment, features they felt cannot exist with machines. Others acknowledged emotional comfort or companionship from the AI but struggled to classify this as "trust," reflecting an internal tension between theoretical awareness and lived experience.

All participants agreed that trust was something that was built through time, Overall, the conceptual definitions of trust indicate three intertwined dimensions:

1. Relational trust rooted in reciprocity and interpersonal expectations,
2. Cognitive trust based on reliability, accuracy, and predictability, and
3. Cultural/institutional trust grounded in the perceived norms, values, and systems behind AI technologies.

This multidimensionality became more pronounced when participants reflected on how trust operates during interaction with AI.

2. Trust in interaction: Usability, emotion, and social presence

Across all interviews, *cognitive trust* emerged as the foundation of human–AI relations. Participants relied on AI primarily for its

functionality: speed, efficiency, and assistance with technical or repetitive tasks. Trust at this level was pragmatic, anchored in the system's reliability, consistency, and perceived transparency. Users with higher AI literacy tended to maintain trust at this foundational level only; they were less likely to anthropomorphize the chatbot or engage with it emotionally. As Participant 7 expressed, *"I think I trust AI when it comes to pretty mechanical stuff. So, for example, I really need to analyze a couple of data. At that point, AI is super cool. It helps a lot. But when it comes to like some personal opinion, sort of when I'm seeking an opinion from AI, that's the time I don't trust that much."*

Cognitive trust fluctuated over time. Participant 8 described an initial "honeymoon phase," where outputs felt impressive and exciting, followed by a period of decreased trust as they learned the system's limitations. Trust increased again when users' prompting skills improved, revealing the relational interplay between literacy, control, and perceived reliability, an observation resonating with Luhmann's emphasis on trust emerging through stabilized expectations.

A smaller group of participants reported developing emotional trust or a sense of social presence with the AI. Emotional trust emerged gradually, typically after cognitive trust was firmly established. Contributing factors include personalization, memory of user preferences, and the AI's use of social cues, usually through affirmation, memorization of user preferences, and synthesized empathy. For some, these behaviors produced a sense of being "known," "understood", or "accompanied", even when participants acknowledged this to be a programmed simulation and deliberate design choices from developers. This aligns with findings in Human–Machine Communication research (Guzman & Lewis, 2020) and with the CASA paradigm (Gambino et al., 2020), where social cues trigger interpersonal responses. Participant 4 highlighted how cognitive trust worked as a conscious evaluation process, while the emotional trust worked as an intuitive and unconscious process that grew over time.

"Now that we've talked about this, I still feel that trust and distrust are perhaps more of a gut-feeling. What is it called in Swedish? Intuition? Yes. Yes, more than it might be logical. That's what it is. Or logical and intuition are not opposites, but that it is perhaps more of an intuition than it is a thought process that points out belief and distrust or trust and distrust."

Trust was understood in a dialectical manner – intuition/logic and conscious/unconscious. While they could work simultaneously, he saw trust as an intuitive and unconscious practice most of the time. This could be connected to how other participants described emotional trust, through feelings like calmness, safety, openness, peace, and comfort as indicators, suggesting that trust manifests affectively, as a sense of security. Conversely, distrust was associated with unease, insecurity, uncertainty, and discomfort. These responses suggest that emotions played a critical role in how trust was both established and maintained through intuition and the pursuit of security.

Importantly, emotional trust was recognized by participants as contradictory. Several expressed awareness that AI cannot reciprocate trust, lacks stakes, and cannot be harmed, attributes central to both Luhmann's and Sztompka's models. Yet this awareness did not always prevent emotional responses. Participant 8 reflected, *"It's difficult from the fact that I know it's not a human being I'm talking to. But on the other hand, a little bit like we talked about that I can also experience because I use it so much that it has, within [quoting] signs, to clarify what I'm doing in the picture. So that it knows me."*

This suggests that emotional trust toward AI may not reflect trust in the moral sense but rather a form of habitual, relational comfort, pointing to gaps in classical trust theory when applied to sociotechnical agents. Further signs of contradiction of increased trust and decreased user autonomy were reported, often connected to personalization and usability in some of the participants.

The amount of user control could be negotiated by the platform's usability and comfort in using it for tasks. Participant

4 noted that if AI made his life easier and more comfortable in any way, then it gained more trust from him and vice versa:

"I usually only think minimally with clicks and effort. I usually think that people are lazy, but above all, I am lazy. That everything should be as easy as possible. If you make my everyday life easier, then you are warmly welcomed. And if it becomes more difficult, then there are many question marks until I accept that something should be implemented in my everyday life."

Comfort and usability could be conditions under which the participant could accept privacy infringements, like data harvesting or sharing personal information. It pointed towards a tendency to feel comfortable, which may be prioritized over distrust, leading to a false sense of feeling secure or safe.

The personalization mechanisms supporting emotional trust were viewed as both enabling and risky. While they created an engaging user experience, they also raised concerns about manipulation, surveillance, and over-reliance, especially among children or less literate users, as one high-school teacher emphasized. Emotional attachment without awareness of underlying data practices was seen as particularly problematic.

Taken together, trust in interaction revealed a dual dynamic:

- AI was treated *as a tool* when trust was cognitive and functional.
- As a *quasi-social actor*. When emotional trust emerged, an ambiguity relevant to how trust was understood in human–machine relations.

3. Trust objects and points of tension: Technology, information, and intentions

Participants identified three primary objects of trust and distrust: *the technology* itself, *the information* it provides, and *the intentions* behind it. Each carried forms of tension that shaped trust negotiation.

Trust in the technology

Trust in the technological system focused on its reliability, accuracy, and stability of performance. Participants trusted AI to carry out tasks consistently but distrusted it in contexts requiring nuance, contextual awareness, or moral judgment. Lack of transparency, particularly around data sources, training data, or algorithmic processes, contributed to hesitation. Several participants paraphrased the "black-box" nature of AI, echoing broader critiques in algorithm studies (Ananny, 2015; Bucher, 2018).

Users also reported concerns about technical limitations in minority languages, cultural contexts, and censorship behaviors. These limitations contributed to uneven trust, especially for participants from non-Swedish backgrounds who observed that outputs shifted depending on linguistic, political, or cultural framing. Knowledge about these biases reinforced the need for explicability (Floridi, 2023) and literacy to avoid misplaced trust, but also created situations where trust in the reliability of the models was questioned.

Trust in information

Factuality was understood as probabilistic rather than absolute. Users were aware that LLM outputs represent statistically likely continuations, not verified truth. This required ongoing evaluation, cross-checking, and critical judgment. Participants with higher AI literacy maintained stricter standards of verification, while others expressed worry about the risk that less literate users might treat outputs as objectively true. Especially confusing the nature of AI with being more human than it is, through its mimicking of social cues and immediate behavior.

Information was a source of media information for some. Participant 5, who was Indian but lived in Germany, used ChatGPT as an information source when he did not trust the Indian media:

"I use ChatGPT to keep myself informed about what's happening in India. I don't trust the news in India because they always publish news with a particular agenda."

ChatGPT, at least in Germany, where he lived, was giving him seemingly factual information and did not promote a specific narrative. These observations stood in contrast to Participant 7's experiences of ChatGPT in India, which promoted specific political narratives. The factuality could be part of the person's imagined objectiveness, but more likely, the AI may have catered to the cultural and political climate of the country connected to where the IP address originated, based on training data from that country. While this cannot be proven through this study, it shows an interesting tendency in the AI information distribution. This might be another instance where cultural bias and political narratives might seep through training data and become part of the output. More research is needed to provide conclusive evidence.

The level of factuality and accuracy in the output might be dependent on whether the free version or the paid version of an LLM was used. Participant 7 continued with an example:

"In the premium version of ChatGPT, the responses that used to come, they were more accurate as compared to the normal version that people have checked. We do have MCQs out here, multiple choice questions, a lot in India when it comes to, mocks for national exams. When the same questions put into the ChatGPT, even they couldn't clear those exams. The same question paper was put in the premium version, it got a little bit higher. So that's where I think accuracy is very important for trust."

The amount of accuracy and factuality the AI gives in its outputs is partly based on which version is used, which can be a factor in how much trust or distrust a user might put in an AI, as a paid version provides increased reliability and usability, which are factors for developing cognitive trust. Inaccuracies, however, might lead to increased distrust in the models.

Concerns about data privacy, surveillance, and information harvesting also appeared here. Participants cited examples such as image-based data extraction hidden behind viral internet trends. These practices raised suspicions about how user data might be repurposed, intensifying distrust in both the information and the institutions behind the technology.

Trust in intentions

The most ambiguous trust object was *the intention behind the AI system*, often attributed not to the machine but to companies, developers, and commercial infrastructures. Participants acknowledged that AI had no intrinsic intention, yet they expressed suspicion toward design choices, corporate motives, and potential manipulation through personalization or affective cues.

This aligns with Sztompka's framework of institutional trust and with ANT's focus on networks of actors where technology serves as a mediator embodying others' interests. Immediacy behavior—affirmation, politeness, friendliness—was interpreted by some as a relational aid but by others as a form of persuasion or manipulation, particularly when applied to vulnerable users.

Participants described navigating a shifting boundary between trust and distrust, where heightened emotional engagement or tailored responses could obscure power relations and obscure the intentions of the corporations behind AI systems.

Synthesis: How trust is formed and negotiated in human-AI relations

Across all findings, trust in AI emerged as layered, dynamic, and often contradictory. Participants engaged in continuous negotiation between cognitive assessments of utility, emotional responses shaped by social cues, and cultural or institutional orientations toward risk and responsibility. Trust was not a stable attitude but an ongoing communicative process shaped by user literacy, corporate practices, and the sociotechnical environment, and was continuously negotiated and renegotiated. The following figure illustrates the findings of the study:

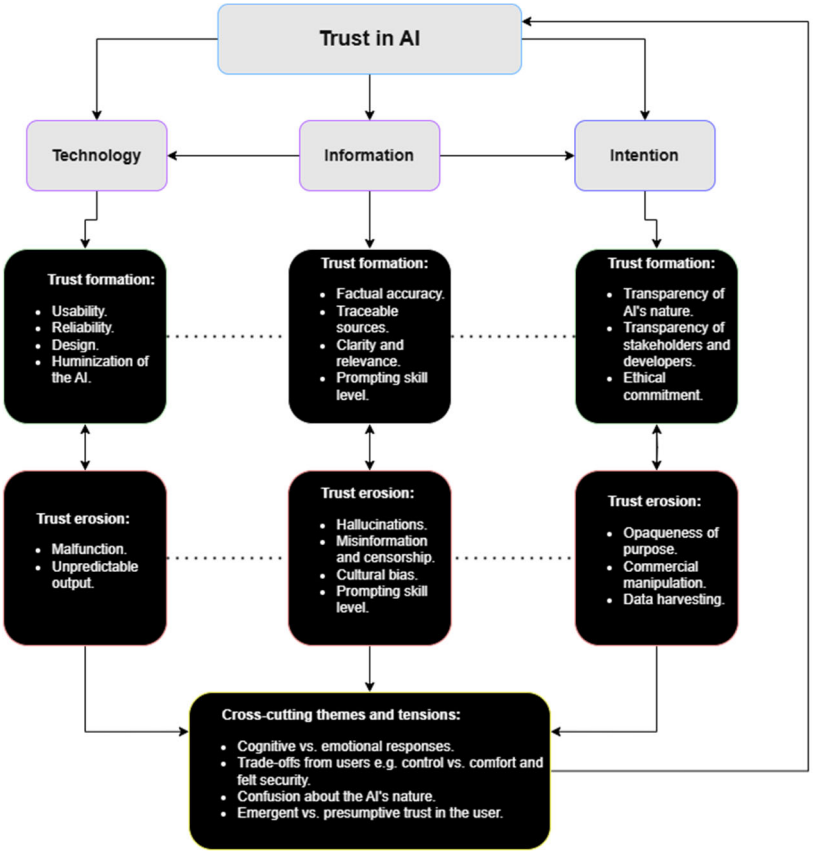

Figure 2: Model by author showing trust in AI and factors related to building and eroding trust with cross-cutting themes and reported tensions. Arrows indicate direct connections. Dotted lines indicate indirect connections.

Cognitive trust formed the baseline: users trusted AI as a functional tool when it demonstrated reliability, accuracy, and consistency. Emotional trust emerged selectively, shaped by personalization and simulated social presence, sometimes leading to attachment despite acknowledgment of the system's non-sentient nature. Cultural and institutional trust influenced how participants

interpreted risk, surveillance, and corporate intention, shaping broader attitudes toward AI in society. Figure 3 illustrates how cognitive trust could develop into emotional trust towards AI:

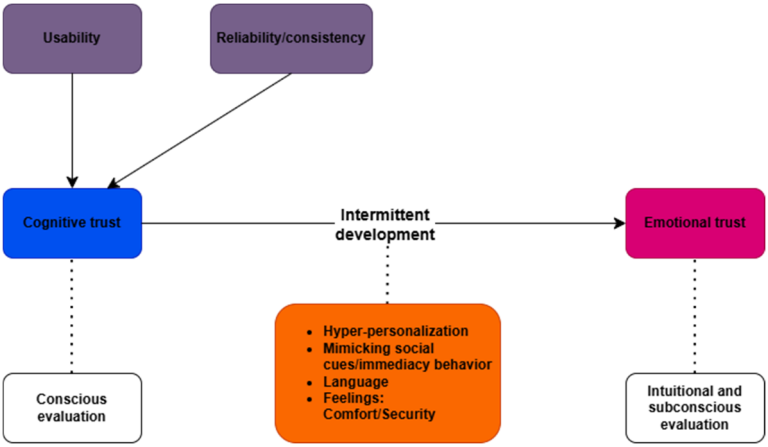

Figure 3: By the author.

Distrust did not reduce usage, echoing Jakobsson & Stiernstedt's (2023, 2025) findings in media trust, but instead redirected it. Users became more selective, cautious, or strategic in their use of AI, choosing when and how to rely on it, gathering more information from fewer sources. This suggests that AI trust, like media trust, is *contextual* and *action-based* rather than absolute.

Overall, the findings reveal that existing sociological theories of trust, while useful, do not fully explain the hybrid relational dynamics emerging in human–AI interaction. Trust toward AI is neither purely interpersonal nor purely systemic but sits at the intersection of function, habit, cultural expectation, and affective simulation. These hybrid forms of trust require continued theoretical refinement and further empirical study, such as the use of longitudinal and ethnographical methods provide more conclusive evidence of how trust operates in human-AI relationships – especially as AI becomes increasingly embedded in everyday decision-making processes, education, and communication.

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‘Tis the Season of Spotify Wrapped?
A Qualitative Interview Study of User Experiences

Sally Al-Shaibani

1. Introduction

On the 4th of December 2024, a friend happily messaged me to announce that Spotify Wrapped had been released. The annual release of Wrapped is an aspect that my friends and I eagerly anticipate. As a frequent user of Spotify, my experience of the platform has improved since the feature was introduced as “Year in Review” in 2013 (Alagiah, 2022) and later relaunched as “Wrapped” in 2016 (Spotify, 2024). Each year, Wrapped interrupts my regular use of the platform and invites discussion, comparison, and sharing among friends. When the latest edition was released, dissatisfaction quickly appeared in my social media feeds. Many comments expressed that the content felt artificial, less informative, and insufficient compared to previous editions, which included features such as “Top Genres” and “Top Albums.”

An article from Forbes (Di Placido, 2024) mentioned that Spotify’s decision to remove the aforementioned features from the 2024 edition and replace them with a new feature titled “Your Music Evolution” received criticism. This new feature categorised users into fictional music genres, such as “Pink Pilates Princess”, that were not recognised outside the platform and could not be found through search engines like Google. Some users found these fictional music genres to be confusing and illogical, and attributed this change to an overreliance on AI-generated classifications. While the criticism suggests a perceived imbalance between user expectations and Spotify’s direction, and while I also bring a personal perspective to Wrapped, these aspects raise a broader critical question surrounding Wrapped’s reception: Do

other Spotify users share similar views, or are their experiences and opinions entirely different?

Robert Prey (2018) stated that "on streaming platforms, it is not only the music being streamed but the listener as well" (p. 1096). This serves as a fitting statement for how Wrapped might function, where Spotify users have the option to participate annually, during which they become "streamed" by Wrapped in a different sense, as they have no agency or control over the personalised content that is selected and presented to them. Even those who choose not to participate still become "streamed" by the platform, as Spotify continuously collects data on their everyday listening habits. When Wrapped is released, a condensed version of that data becomes visible to users, which is the focus of this study.

2. Previous research

The Listening Experiences within Music Streaming Platforms

Various scholars have raised concerns about music streaming platforms (Raffa, 2024, p. 1), including their potential to increase social divisions among users (Prey, 2016), limit music discovery (Ratliff, 2016; Snickars, 2017), reduce meaningful cultural experiences with music, especially in regards to discovering niche musicians (Chodos, 2019; Rekret, 2019; Chambers, 2023; Mulligan, 2014), and also that they have become tools for surveillance (Drott, 2018). Understanding user perspectives becomes important across different levels of listening engagement, whether it involves individuals who consume music on a basic, average or frequent level, with the latter group considered as "musically competent listeners."

Raffa (2024, pp. 1–2) focused specifically on the latter group and examined two areas: their views on how music streaming platforms influence listening habits and whether they shape or alter their connection to music, as well as on their views on music streaming platforms' features and the efforts they put into creating a seamless listening experience (Raffa, 2024, p. 5). These

users expressed mixed attitudes, where they described that platforms like Spotify are designed for less experienced listeners and that more knowledgeable listeners were pushed onto standardised consumption habits, which they believed created a more superficial experience and made the skip rate of music much higher (Raffa, 2024, pp. 6–8).

Born (2013, p. 24) argued that technology and social media have become catalysts for how individuals experience music, as they blur the lines between what is considered "private" and "public." This shift is tied to the ability to share personal music experiences openly (Walsh, 2023, p. 747). Walsh (2023, p. 746) related this to Erving Goffman's (1959) definition of back and front regions. Sharing music publicly allows individuals to express themselves by showcasing the music they stream to others (Nag, 2018), thereby situating their listening habits from the private world into the public sphere. Even though music is considered a social entity (Van Dijck, 2007), there is limited research on how individuals actively use the social sharing features available on music streaming platforms (Hagen & Lüders, 2017, p. 643).

Hagen and Lüders (2017) studied Norwegian users and the rationales behind sharing or not sharing music. The findings showed that this discourse acts as a double-edged sword, as users take social awareness into account when deciding whether to share, selectively share, or not share their music depending on their connections to close, distant, or non-existent social ties, which are also influenced by the varying degrees of similarity in music tastes and social connections (Hagen & Lüders, 2017, p. 643). Many of the users interviewed noted that they avoid sharing music with personal significance or music that does not correspond with their envisioned sense of self. Users who frequently share all aspects of their lives on social media, however, do not adhere to this rationale (Hagen & Lüders, 2017, p. 651).

Personalisation and Datafication within Music Streaming Platforms

Personalisation on music streaming platforms combines the expertise of playlist curators with music recommendation technology. Music streaming platforms offer a mix of editorially curated playlists, personalised playlists, and recommendations tailored to individual users and strategically presented in the interface (Webster, 2021, p. 2141). Playlists are particularly important for music discovery (Pedersen, 2020, p. 78), as creating playlists makes users feel a sense of ownership over their music (Hagen & Lüders, 2017, p. 648). Pedersen (2020, p. 80) examined how Spotify's editorial playlists evoke certain listening experiences, which he referred to as "situational listening" and related it to how Spotify uses data to create personalised playlists, as these factors are important for analysing ubiquitous listening and the growing influence of data in shaping users' listening experiences. Ubiquitous listening is, in this context, defined as modes of listening (Pedersen, 2020, p. 74; Kassabian, 2013a, p. 61), and relies on how and when music is being listened to. His findings suggested that Spotify has a hybrid approach that combines both ubiquitous listening and datafication (Pedersen, 2020, p. 86).

Spotify's recommendation system has a threefold functional approach: through reactivations of previously played music; through personalised playlists for music discovery; and through editorial playlists that match users' preferences (Pedersen, 2020, pp. 83–84). This reflects that the platform's ability to personalise playlists, whether contextual or personal, reinforces a culture of ubiquitous listening, where users are encouraged to soundtrack their days. While Spotify gives users individual agency and allows them to tailor their listening experiences, it also subjects them to the platform's constructed norms of music consumption (Pedersen, 2020, pp. 85–86). Although the databases of music streaming platforms are structured and adaptable, external forces outweigh users' own control, which creates an imbalance between the music users choose to listen to and the music that Spotify promotes (Marshall, 2014, p. 68). The music that users are steered to listen

to is far from random, as the algorithms constantly try to anticipate what they want to listen to next (Webster, 2021, p. 2149). This has resulted in a convergence of listening habits that go beyond mobility and individualisation (Pedersen, 2020, p. 75).

Prey (2018) addressed how music streaming platforms construct individuals through their algorithms by comparing Pandora Internet Radio and Spotify, as they have different approaches. Pandora Internet Radio, through its "Music Genome Project", constructs listeners as possessing distinct and static tastes, whereas Spotify constructs them as continuously evolving identities (Prey, 2018, pp. 1089 & 1092). Prey (2018, p. 1095) deemed this notion as "algorithmic individuation" that "[…] should be understood as a dynamic socio-technical process engaged in enacting the individual", which he based on Gilbert Simondon's (1992, 2009) theory of individuation. This theory challenges traditional approaches to understanding individualisation in personalised media and instead suggests that platforms actively create new ways of perceiving users as individuals (Prey, 2018, p. 1096).

The Eventisation of Music Consumption

Spotify Wrapped has been described as an "algorithmic event" and exemplifies a more extensive trend in today's streaming culture (Annabell & Vindum Rasmussen, 2024, p. 1). Wrapped creates curated memory experiences based on users' digital traces and acts as an algorithmic "memory" that recalls their past music experiences for them (Annabell & Vindum Rasmussen, 2024, p. 18; Jacobsen & Beer, 2021; Prey & Smit, 2019). There is a social dimension that contributes to Wrapped being deemed as an algorithmic event, as the data it builds upon presents personalised stories that are constructed in a way to be shared and discussed by the users, which inevitably invites users to participate in the event beyond the platform (Annabell & Vindum Rasmussen, 2024, p. 2).

From a critical perspective, Wrapped can be understood as a form of datafication due to user behaviour being transformed into data that is used for commercial purposes (Annabell & Vindum Rasmussen, 2024, p. 3). Regular Spotify users might not be fully

aware of the data practices that are used to construct Wrapped. Annabell and Vindum Rasmussen (2024, pp. 8–11) therefore investigated this aspect based on a data feminist framework. They invited users to a workshop to where they critically decoded Wrapped by examining Spotify's ways of limiting users to simple categories, comparing user affordances through screenshots, and crafting "Spotify Selfies" / "Wrapped Collages" to showcase their experiences and feelings towards Spotify's categorisations and conceptions of the individual (Annabell & Vindum Rasmussen, 2024, p. 6). Their findings revealed that Wrapped often simplifies and categorises listening habits in a way that fails to capture the complexity and fluidity of how individuals engage with music. Participants mentioned that Wrapped reduced varied and evolving listening behaviours into fixed and generic labels, which made them question the accuracy of Spotify's categorisations. Some participants also pointed out how the language and visuals that were implemented through Wrapped suggested gendered biases when constructing the algorithmic identities of its users (Annabell & Vindum Rasmussen, 2024, p. 8).

While previous research on music streaming platforms such as Spotify has been extensive, the focus on Wrapped has been fairly limited. Annabell and Vindum Rasmussen (2024, p. 4) also pointed out in their study that the ways individuals experience, encounter, and interact with an algorithmic event like Wrapped, as well as its interface and affordances, have mainly been discussed in different media formats, such as social media platforms and articles by the users themselves, but not as much in academic circles. Even though their study made important methodological and theoretical contributions, it did not fully capture the lived experiences and practices surrounding Wrapped, as well as the meanings that users attach to a feature that summarises their listening habits on an annual basis, which reveals a gap that this study addresses through qualitative interviews.

3. Statement of purpose

This study investigates how Spotify users engage with, and experience Spotify Wrapped by focusing on the temporal experiences before and after the release, as well as the reflections and interactions that follow. As such, this study seeks to contribute to an understanding of how this feature functions as a personal, social and cultural entity.

Research questions

- How do Spotify users engage with Spotify Wrapped before and after its annual release?
- How do Spotify users experience the ways that Spotify Wrapped defines them as music listeners, and what meanings do they attribute to these definitions?
- To what extent do Spotify users' annual engagements and experiences with Spotify Wrapped reflect or challenge the characteristics of media rituals?

4. Theoretical framework

Media Rituals

This study mainly draws on Nick Couldry's (2003, p. 4) definition of media rituals, which refers to situations where media act as representations of something bigger and are connected to the fundamental social structures through which individuals understand themselves as members of a society. While Couldry's framework was developed before the ubiquity of streaming services, smartphones, and social media, it remains useful when reconsidered for algorithmically mediated experiences such as Spotify Wrapped. Other scholars have also conceptualised media rituals from different perspectives. Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992), for example, examined media events within the context of broadcasting, focusing on shared experiences of political milestones, sporting events, and other significant historical moments (Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. 1). Their framework emphasises the ritualistic

dimension of shared media experiences but is rooted in the early 1990s context of live television broadcasts. Wrapped, on the other hand, works asynchronously, where users only have access to and can interact with it after it has been released.

Couldry (2003, pp. 45–47) distinguished between two perspectives on the ritualistic aspect of media events. First, a neo-Durkheimian perspective, which views media events as occasions for individuals to acknowledge their shared social identities. Second, a post-Durkheimian perspective, which focuses on the cognitive processes and categorisations that underpin individuals' understanding of contemporary societies. The neo-Durkheimian perspective relates to "the myth of the centre", which suggests that societies possess fundamental or "natural" core centres that define shared values and ways of life. The post-Durkheimian perspective relates to "the myth of the mediated centre", which describes the complex, often overlooked set of practices that naturalise the media forces at play.

James Carey (1975/1989) distinguished between two different ways of understanding communication by introducing two different models: a transmittal model and a ritual model. The former functions as a transmission of messages over distance to exercise control, while the latter functions as a bridging of connections to ideas such as "sharing", "participation", and "association." These two distinctions are intended to emphasise the functions that communication serves, rather than defining it as one or the other (Anderson, 2011, p. 92; Carey, 1989, pp. 15–18). Carey's ritual communication model emphasises social practices rather than structural power, which Couldry (2008, pp. 19–25) extends by demonstrating how media rituals reveal patterns that connect power and belonging. Media rituals follow a specific structured pattern related to media and repeat certain behaviours that shape how individuals think, without necessarily requiring them to believe in them.

Media rituals are usually structured around specific categories and boundaries that symbolise social values (Couldry, 2003, p. 26). They are not defined by whether they take place in traditional

media, nor do they involve media production and consumption. They are instead distinguished by categories, such as genres, platforms, and audiences, and the values that the ritual brings into their focus (Couldry, 2003, p. 49). They can therefore operate between internalisation and articulation, both of which can lead to disputes or debates, but these altercations tend to stay within the context of the ritual, depending on the social roles, inequalities, and divisions that exist within the structure of the ritual (Couldry, 2003, p. 49). Media rituals are closely connected to symbolic power, which influences how individuals interpret and understand the social world itself, as well as the language and frameworks through which a society is described. When symbolic power is unequally concentrated, such as in the hands of media or other institutions, it can affect how a whole society perceives social facts (Couldry, 2003, pp. 38–39).

Johanna Sumiala (2012), although not explicitly referencing Couldry, extended his perspective into a mediatised and technologically advanced context by emphasising that mediatised rituals can occur across multiple spaces and times, and extend beyond their original physical setting through devices such as smartphones, computers, televisions, or radios. Certain spaces can intentionally be crafted for the purpose of a ritual by transforming an everyday environment into one with symbolic or even sacral meaning (Sumiala, 2012, pp. 86–87). Sumiala (2012, p. 90) categorised mediatised rituals into rituals related to media consumption, rituals involved in media production, and rituals linked to media presentations. These forms of rituals do not exist in isolation but tend to intersect. For instance, during significant media events, disasters, or transitional periods, rituals of consuming media intersect with the rituals involved in producing news about such events, thereby influencing both how such events are ritualised and how individuals interpret them.

Algorithmic Imaginaries

When individuals come across platforms that rely on algorithmic systems, they might experience a sense of disappointment towards

how these systems categorise them (Bucher, 2016, p. 5). This can lead to a disconnectedness between how platforms present content through their algorithms and how individuals experience themselves in the present. When algorithmic systems fail to perceive individuals as they perceive themselves, they tend to be deemed as broken (Bucher, 2016, pp. 6–7).

In terms of music streaming platforms, Hesmondhalgh (2022) identified five significant concerns raised by musicians, journalists, fans, and many more: "streaming encourages 'functional' rather than meaningful, aesthetic, musical experience; streaming encourages bland, unchallenging music; streaming makes musical experience passive and distracted, and music recedes into the background; streaming makes music tracks and songs shorter, and musical experience more fragmented; streaming discourages and/or limits musical discovery and adventurousness" (pp. 4–5). These concerns reflect the reactions that can emerge when an algorithmic recommendation system misaligns with user expectations.

It is through these occurrences that algorithmic imaginaries arise. These imaginaries do not merely depend on the beliefs held by individuals but also on how their attitudes and behaviours shape the actual design and function of these systems. It is the imagination about how algorithms can be understood that contributes to helping, moulding, and creating the algorithms altogether (Bucher, 2016, pp. 2 & 10–11). Since algorithmic systems tend to base their evaluations on predefined norms and standards, without any human judgment (Bucher, 2016, p. 9). When the lack of human judgment becomes visible through the algorithms, it might steer individuals to modify their online behaviours by intentionally affecting how they engage with a platform and the content they encounter. This particular interaction with the algorithm results in more data that can guide the algorithmic systems to become more adaptable over time (Bucher, 2016, p. 12; Gillespie, 2014).

Algorithmic Identities

The shaping of individuals' identities through algorithmic recommendation systems rather than their personal choices has been explored in relation to Spotify's "related artist feature" (Lüders, 2021, p. 961). These are usually generated through collaborative filtering algorithms that calculate similarities between users and entities (Kjus, 2016; Liu et al., 2014). While such systems can help users discover a wide range of music and navigate through Spotify's extensive library, they can also overwhelm users, causing them to remain attached to the music they already have strong ties to (Lüders, 2021, p. 958).

This attachment thus contributes to a tension between users' own free will and Spotify's own will, which is indicative of a shift into a new algorithmic identity that is not about fixed ideas of identity, but about the flexible modes of behaviour that are shaped by the algorithms and in turn creates a feedback loop between individuals and their online identities. The algorithmic identity can be understood through computer codes that define individuals based on consumption behaviours that lead to the creation of new values. For example, labelling an individual a "female" is one form of categorisation that can influence aspects such as targeted advertisements or recommended content. Code does not merely assign labels, it also contributes to the understanding of how the concept of "female" or other gender identities can be defined in an online context, as well as shaped by what marketers find valuable. Code often uncovers hidden structures, values, and politics that are embedded in the code itself, which defines and organises the everyday online experiences. While these codes can be useful, preconceptions still influence how these categories are formed online (Cheney-Lippold, 2019, pp. 167–169).

Theorethical analysis model

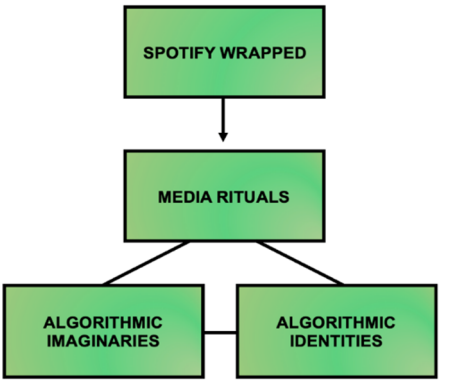

Figure 1: Theoretical analysis model for examining media rituals in the context of Spotify Wrapped.

The following model illustrates how the theoretical concepts interact in practice, with media rituals as the primary lens, and algorithmic imaginaries and algorithmic identities as supporting frameworks. The model positions Spotify Wrapped in a way that it could be considered a ritualised media practice that is shaped by algorithmic systems, through which users engage with and make sense of the content presented to them. Unlike more traditionally oriented media rituals, such as the broadcasting of events, Wrapped is more intertwined with personalised factors that reflect two aspects. First, the mediated behaviours and listening patterns of users. Second, the algorithms' interpretations and presentations of this behaviour. Here, it is the symbolically charged factors that Spotify embeds and that Wrapped exudes that are of significant matter.

5. Methodology & Materials

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative approach that focuses on understanding individuals' subjective interpretations. Semi-structured interviews were chosen, as they enable the interviewer to explore

how individuals make meaning of a specific phenomenon (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015, p. 46). This method both draws on predetermined questions and allows for a more flexible approach that probes the interviewee to ask follow-up questions as the conversation unfolds (Brennen, 2017, p. 29). The less rigid structure of semi-structured interviews creates a more comfortable and open environment, which reduces the potential difficulties for participants to freely express their thoughts and experiences.

Recruitment process

In March 2025, I created posts on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn outlining the study's objectives and specifying the desired participant profile. A purposive approach (Bryman, 2012, p. 418) was implemented to ensure that participants identified as Spotify users and had previously used Wrapped. The intensity or frequency of their listening habits was not a determining factor, and both casual and dedicated listeners were welcome. This approach allowed the selection of participants whose experiences were directly relevant to the study.

A snowball approach (Bryman, 2012, p. 424) further expanded recruitment. After the initial posts were shared and some participants were recruited for the interviews, several individuals passed the information on to others, which led to individuals outside my immediate circle expressing interest in participating. This also included non-native speakers of Swedish. This organic process helped to broaden the group of participants and thus contributed to an extensive range of perspectives to include. As noted by Bryman (2012, p. 427), it is common for a purposive approach to be complemented by a snowball approach, which also supports the strategies that were implemented during the recruitment process.

This resulted in 13 recruited participants, 9 of whom were women, 3 were men, and 1 was non-binary. The majority of the participants were between 20 and 30 years old, with one participant aged 60. The majority of the participants also resided outside of Stockholm, which resulted in the decision to conduct the

majority of the interviews digitally through Zoom, as it provides a clear and easy way to communicate, both visually and audibly. Only one participant resided in Stockholm, in which I decided to conduct the interview in person.

Participants

Name (pseudonym)	**Age**	**Gender**	**Country**	**Spotify usage since**	**Frequency of listening**
Beatrice	23	Female	Netherlands	2014/15	Daily (c. 4–5 hours/day)
Elina	29	Female	Sweden	2011	Daily (duration varies, c. 5 hours/week)
Amanda	28	Female	Sweden	2014/15	Daily (duration varies)
Ina	27	Female	Sweden	Since it was launched	Daily (c. 12 hours/day)
Leon	60	Male	Sweden	More than 10 years	Occasionaly (c. a few times a week)
Emma	24	Non-binary	U.S., but resides in Sweden	2015	Daily (c. 2–3 hours/day)
Hanna	25	Female	Sweden	10 years	Daily (c. 1 hour/day during weekdays and all-day during weekends)
Rebecka	22	Female	Sweden	2010	Frequently (duration varies)
Harry	28	Male	Sweden	Since it was launched	Daily (c. 2–3 hours/day)
Linn	23	Female	Sweden	Since upper secondary school	Daily (c. 2–3 hours/day)
Daniella	25	Female	Sweden	c. 5–6 years	Daily (sometimes c. 1 hour/day and sometimes c. 12 hours/day)
Cesar	27	Male	Sweden	c. 4–5 years	Daily (c. 10 hours/day)
Siri	23	Female	Sweden	2010	Daily (sometimes c. 2 hours/day and sometimes c. 8 hours/day)

Table 1: Presentation of the participants.

Interview guide

I developed an interview guide with 30 open-ended questions that were carefully framed to be in line with the research questions as well as the theoretical approaches of this study, which ensured that the interviews could remain focused on the core themes. The interview guide was divided into five sections and followed the structure outlined by Brennen (2017, pp. 34–36), which highlights organising the questions in a progression from icebreaker questions to probing questions and finally to more difficult questions. In practice, however, I adopted this structure by mixing probing and difficult questions throughout the interviews instead of saving all the difficult questions for the end.

Ethical considerations

During initial contact through social media and text messages, the participants were provided with information about the objectives of this study, their role, the duration of the interviews (30-60 minutes), and how their data would be used. I also informed them that the interviews would need to be recorded to be able to transcribe the material for the analysis part, where I clarified that although Zoom records both video and audio, only the audio would be used. I assured the participants that only I would have access to the recorded files, which would be stored securely and deleted upon completion of this study. During our one-on-one interviews, the participants were reminded of these details and informed of their rights, including voluntary participation, the ability to withdraw at any time without consequences, and the use of pseudonyms to protect their identities. At both contact points, informed consent was obtained from each participant, in which they confirmed that they understood and agreed to participate in accordance with these ethical guidelines.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that are necessary to address. As I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews with 13 participants, the sample size can be considered relatively small,

which limits the generalisability of my findings. Although 2 of the participants were English speakers and 1 resided outside of Sweden, 11 of my participants resided in Sweden, which potentially leads to cultural bias and limits the applicability of my findings to broader and more diverse user groups. The sample was also relatively homogeneous in terms of gender, as the majority of my participants identified as women, which might have affected the perspectives that appeared during the interviews and limited the representativeness of the findings across different gender identities. This imbalance was mainly due to a greater interest and willingness to participate among women during the recruitment process. Age was another factor that contributed to the homogeneity of the sample, as the majority of my participants were in a similar age range (e.g. between 20-30 years old), which might have further reduced the breadth of perspectives in terms of generational attitudes towards Wrapped.

6. Analysis & Discussion

Users' Engagement with Spotify Wrapped

Leading up to the release of Wrapped, several participants described an increased awareness of their listening habits. Beatrice, described how this predictive engagement became a social activity through a podcast with her friends and later went on to describe a Spotify feature she recalled during her Erasmus in Stockholm that allowed users to submit their own top five predictions before Wrapped's release:

> They provided this feature a week before the release, where you could make your own top five, like your predictions. So, then it's also something I did, because you had like a special Spotify format to fill in the songs. Spotify was like: oh, predict your top five, and you can make it in the official colours and logos. I like to sort of predict and talk about: oh, what do you think, what would your top artists be?
> Beatrice, 23 years old

This is indicative of Spotify's temporal orchestration of Wrapped before the release, where they have created a space where users are invited to predict their top songs and artists in an official format. Beatrice's account reflects how Spotify's invitation to engage contributes to creating a ritualised form of reflection on a symbolic level. By providing users a structured space to imaginatively shape and negotiate their algorithmic selves before the actual data is revealed, Spotify encourages a proactive form of identity work where users begin to connect their listening history with how they hope to be depicted by the algorithm. This is reflective of Bucher's (2016) concept of an algorithmic imaginary. If looked at from Couldry's (2003, pp. 38–39) perspective, Spotify gains symbolic power by positioning itself as central to how individuals organise and negotiate meaning around music consumption, reinforcing what Couldry (2003, pp. 45–47) refers to as "the myth of the mediated centre."

Emma, described another anticipatory practice, though one that involved a more strategic approach to their listening practices:

> I definitely try to guess what's going to be in it. I buy into that idea where people are like: oh, what you listen to between when it comes out and then the start of the new year isn't tracked. And so, I'm one of those people who will listen to the weirder music then, because I'm like: oh, it won't be in my Wrapped.
> Emma, 24 years old

Emma elaborated that they sometimes adjusted their listening habits to ensure that specific artists appeared in their Wrapped based on what they believe will (or will not) be tracked, where the listening appears to be optimised for the algorithm itself, which also points to an algorithmic imaginary (Bucher, 2016). Emma revealed a desire to appear in the top listener percentages, which reveals a symbolic economy at play within Wrapped. The appeal in Wrapped thus becomes twofold: seeing oneself reflected as well as being ranked and validated. This indicates that Wrapped becomes a space where algorithmic feedback serves as a symbolic badge of dedication that can be displayed both privately and publicly.

Siri showed an internal anticipation that can extend even further, shaping listening habits months in advance:

> A few months ago, I told my best friends that, by that time, I had been listening to a song that's really out of what I usually listen to: Arabic music, super poppy. And I was like: 100% this is going to end up in my Wrapped 2025. Because I've been listening to it non-stop for two months now. So, if it doesn't show up in 2025, then something is wrong.
> Siri, 23 years old

Siri's expectation that Wrapped should accurately reflect her listening habits demonstrates an implicit symbolic contract between the user and the platform, where Spotify is trusted to deliver an authentic version of the self, securing the legitimacy of one's music persona and validating the hope of future recognition.

Their responses showcase how Wrapped becomes meaningful through the anticipatory practices it sets in motion. Whether users are predicting, strategically optimising, or trusting in future recognition, they each engaged with the platform in ways that are constructed by Spotify's symbolic design, where a ritualistic quality seems to unfold beyond the moment of release. For them, the predictive practices became cyclical ones, as they extended into everyday interactions with the platform, where Wrapped became more than an annual event and turned into a loop of reflection, performance, and expectation.

After Wrapped's release, many participants shared their results either privately with friends and family members or more publicly on social media. This aligns with Carey's (1975/1989) ritual model of communication, where the emphasis lies on participation, and shared meaning. In Couldry's (2003, p. 49) terms, their engagements suggest a possible example of one out of the two ritualistic modes of actions: articulation. From the perspective of mediatised rituals as described by Sumiala (2012, p. 90), these sharing practices can be situated within rituals related to media consumption.

Siri and Rebecka noted that sharing Wrapped with friends had a playful aspect, allowing them to brag about obscure or rare listening habits. For them, the statistics became a form of social currency and identity markers that were actively negotiated rather than passively received. This reflects Cheney-Lippold's (2019, pp. 167—169) definition of data shaping flexible behavioural modes, whereby Wrapped encouraged them to adopt their behaviours. In this sense, Spotify exerts a form of symbolic power (Couldry, 2003, pp. 38–39) by constructing and emphasising specific metrics that guide social interactions and hierarchies.

Beatrice and Emma, in contrast, also shared Wrapped with family members, signalling that Wrapped extends beyond peer sharing to intergenerational engagement. This reflects Sumiala's (2012, pp. 86–87) point that mediatised rituals that are crafted through and in the media are not confined to a single physical setting but can be extended and experienced across multiple spaces and times through media technologies. This extension of the ritual aligns with Beatrice and Emma's experiences of sharing Wrapped results across different social and media contexts (through their smartphone screens, the Spotify application, group chats, and family gatherings).

Emma elaborated that the reactions they expect when sharing Wrapped vary depending on the context:

> When I put it on social media, I'm looking for someone to put the little heart, as a reaction. I'm hoping for someone to either do that or for people to respond and be like: oh, I had the same artist, or I also like that song, like connecting with it. But then the opposite is when I send it in group chats, it's more like: look how crazy this thing is that I have, like kind of make fun of this with me. I'm looking for genuine responses on social media but then joke responses when I text it to someone one-on-one.

This distinction echoes Goffman's (Walsh, 2023, p. 746; Goffman, 1959) concepts of back and front regions. In this context, Wrapped is attributed different meanings depending on where and how it is shared. On Instagram, users like Emma perform their musical

personalities. In private chats, it becomes a humorous and informal exchange. This duality shows that it is not only about the music itself, but also about negotiating between social expectations and building relationships in varied communicative spaces.

Other participants, Harry, Elina, and Daniella, viewed Wrapped as a personal experience, where they considered it a moment of self-reflection and self-awareness that did not necessarily prompt them to share on social media. If shared at all, it was only with a select few friends and family members. Daniella explained:

> Sometimes I just don't want to show my Wrapped. Because I don't really want to admit that I listen to some artists. Sometimes I only share it when I've listened to good artists and can go like: oh, look at my Wrapped! I've listened this much to these artists, or when I feel like it reflects who I am, and might send it to one person, like my cousin. But Wrapped has never been a big thing for me, it's exciting and something I can look forward to, but it's nothing more than that.
> Daniella, 25 years old

Daniella's perspective on the practice of selectively sharing her Wrapped reveals that it is both a means for social connection and a site where users manage boundaries by choosing when and with whom to reveal aspects of their musical personalities. This echoes Couldry's (2003, p. 26) perspective around ritualistic actions being framed to fit within specific categories and boundaries that symbolise underlying social values. Although Daniella is not creating these frames herself, she takes control over the already constructed Wrapped results she has received. In her case, the "categories" become the individuals with whom she chooses to share, which points to the importance of context within a said ritual. Her hesitation to share was also akin to Hagen and Lüders (2017) findings, that sharing music depends on individuals' connections to close, distant, or non-existent social ties. This is also indicative of Cheney-Lippold's (2019, pp. 167–169) point that data are not fixed modes of identity but are instead negotiated across contexts.

Users' Experiences of Spotify Wrapped's Personalised Summaries

While the latter part of the previous section highlighted one of Couldry's (2003, p. 49) ritualistic modes of action, articulation. This section turns to the other mode: internalisation. Once users receive their personalised summaries, it creates a significant moment for reflection and engagement with their listening habits, where they are invited to revisit and reconstruct past experiences. It is at this intersection, where listening history meets algorithmic depictions, that users either embrace the algorithmic depictions as an extension of their identities or experience misalignment when these depictions conflict with their own sense of self, which also brings forth an algorithmic imaginary (Bucher, 2016).

Participants' reactions to Wrapped varied considerably. Some felt accurately represented and expressed satisfaction with Spotify's depictions. Others expressed dissatisfaction with how Spotify failed to capture their true tastes. For these participants, even in the comfort of sharing their Wrapped with friends and family members, they felt the need to explain or give additional context. This stemmed from feelings of disconnection, uncertainty, and mild embarrassment about certain top songs, genres, albums, or artists that clashed with how they wanted to be seen, both by themselves and others.

Emma described a combination of amusement and frustration, especially when the results clashed with how they recalled their listening habits and present themselves on social media:

> Not to be: it's identity politics. But I know a lot of people had issues this year, because there were songs showing up that I don't remember listening to all that much. Unfortunately, my top song I did listen to a lot, and it was Freestyler. And I was like: why is this my top song? Because it's such a big deal with everyone I know to post it and not post a song that is like a 2010 Swedish Basshunter type song, everybody was like: what is this? And I feel like it breaks that… vision almost. Especially because I post on social media, so it's connected to the same, and it's like: okay, my social media looks like this, and this is the music I've had con-

> sistently and now this is coming out of nowhere. Emma, 24 years old

Emma further elaborated on their disappointment with Wrapped's new AI-generated classification, which felt impersonal and destabilised their trust in Wrapped:

> This year, I know they usually do a little bit of a theme, but then they did the weird theme where it, in November, was your Indie Hope Core, there were all those crazy words. And I thought: what is this? I felt like I was losing faith in Wrapped because it didn't feel like an actual category. Until last year, I trusted it quite a lot. But this last one was too micro-categorised. I don't know if this is representative of what I listened to, because they outsourced it to AI to read over everything. I feel like it lost a human aspect of it.

Emma's latter reflection points to a critical flaw in the user-platform relationship: a scepticism about how algorithmic outputs is constructed and whether they remain grounded in human sensibility. This also points to a broader issue described by Bucher (2016, p. 7), namely that when algorithmic systems fail to meet users' imaginations of how they should function, they become labelled as broken. Which occurs when Spotify fails to meet the users' expectations of clarity, coherence, or emotional resonance, thereby destabilising Wrapped's role as an accurate and shareable reflection of the self.

Leon also reflected on the complexity of how Spotify measures listening. He stated that even though he felt that around 80% of his Wrapped reflected his listening habits, he noticed how Spotify sometimes overemphasised music that he had only briefly explored or did not even like. His reflections also point to how Spotify's personalisation algorithms interpret engagement as recognition. This is an aspect that is deliberately engineered by Spotify as its algorithmic system continuously tries to predict what individuals want to listen to next (Webster, 2021, p. 2149). As has been made clear by Prey (2018, pp. 1089 & 1092), Spotify constructs individual music listeners as evolving identities by ongoing interaction with the platform. Wrapped, as a feature that

is formulated within this logic, attempts to present a fixed and retrospective summary of these evolving identities.

For Siri, this aspect also manifested itself in a sense of dissonance from the results. Her response also contrasted Wrapped's latest edition with previous editions that felt more personalised and fun:

> I thought a bit like: oh...haven't I listened more? I don't remember who I had as my top artist, probably Rihanna. I've gotten her two years in a row now. But it was songs I hadn't listened to excessively that still showed up. And I thought that was a bit strange. Also, I think it was last year or the year before when it said something like: you're someone who listens to the same music as students in Lund. I got a geographical match and things like that. I thought that was fun.
> Siri, 23 years old

Siri's reflection illustrates how contextual cues such as geographical markers can create a sense of recognition, playfulness, and an added a layer of familiarity that makes algorithmic outputs feel less mechanical.

Across participants, the tension between personal judgment and algorithmic outputs resulted in different coping strategies. Some participants, when sharing their Wrapped, responded with justifications and explained discrepancies. Others took a more proactive approach by adjusting their listening habits throughout the year in the hope of influencing the next Wrapped. Although some of them acknowledged that it was difficult to maintain these intentional patterns, their efforts reflect Wrapped's extended influence beyond its release.

Spotify Wrapped as a media ritual?

Across the participants' reflections, one aspect becomes evident: Spotify's influence over users is non-linear and multifaceted. This is where its potentially ritualistic character becomes complicated, or even jeopardised, by the conflicting ways these participants interpreted and experienced their Wrapped. The data that Spotify collects about the users and the way this information is re-

packaged through Wrapped was interpreted by some participants as a form of "reward" or symbolic "token" offered by the platform. This framing reveals an interesting and somewhat complex exchange where Spotify acknowledges users' data contributions by offering a curated summary, thereby creating the conditions for a symbolic quid pro quo. This further solidifies the symbolic power (Couldry, 2003, pp. 38–39) that Spotify holds. Several participants, both implicitly and explicitly described Wrapped as conveying the message: "we have your data and in return, we give you this summary." While receiving personal musical statistics can be fun and enjoyable, it also draws users deeper into the platform's logic. The "reward" thus becomes twofold: it incentivises engagement and normalises the ongoing exchange between users and the platform. In turn, this leads to the creation of a feedback loop (Cheney-Lippold, 2019, pp. 167–169), in which Wrapped, through Spotify's algorithm, reinforces previous behaviours. This aligns with a notion defined as "modes of listening" (Pedersen, 2020, p. 74; Kassabian, 2013a, p. 61). Rather than enforcing a particular behaviour, Wrapped encourages users to internalise certain norms that emerge, such as what is considered good, impressive, unique, or a shareable form of listening that is more ubiquitous in nature (Pedersen, 2020, pp. 85–86).

The degrees of awareness that were inherent among the participants challenge traditional understandings of media rituals, which often assume that users are naïve or unaware of institutional power. Even though Spotify does not operate as a traditional media institution, it is still a media platform that has significant power and influence, both over its users and the music industry as a whole. This raises an important question: who is Wrapped inherently intended for, the users or Spotify itself? The participants' responses revealed a spectrum of attitudes towards Spotify's data collection practices. Some of them articulated a sense of indifference, others expressed an ambivalent or even uneasy relationship with it. A few participants also expressed the view that if their listening habits had not been tracked for the purpose of Wrapped, they would engage with music in a more

emotional and less performative way. This was the case for Harry, as he expressed concern over privacy and described how, without Wrapped, he might listen to music more spontaneously and purely for enjoyment rather than strategically. One could argue that the authenticity of his listening habits becomes compromised, as it is less about personal emotion and more about how it might be depicted in Wrapped. Thus, his listening habits are guided by how he himself anticipates a certain result and how he wants to present these results.

Leon offered another perspective, noting that his relationship with Wrapped has changed over time. He expressed fatigue with "constant tracking" and the sense that his listening is judged and made visible to others, which has led him to disengage from the format. His reflection provides a critical counterpoint to the symbolic power Spotify and Wrapped exert over users. Unlike other participants, who internalise and negotiate their listening habits around the platform's expectations and norms, Leon explicitly rejects this framework. His stance reflects resistance to the pervasive datafication and social surveillance that Wrapped embodies. It also highlights that symbolic power (Couldry, 2003) is not universally accepted or internalised, it can also provoke discomfort, scepticism, and a desire to disengage.

7. Conclusion

This study explored how Spotify Wrapped emerges as a ritualised media practice within an algorithmic context. Across the analysis, several significant findings came to light. First, Wrapped is more than a passive recap: it functions as a temporal and performative event in which the participants engaged in varied ways. Engagement often began before the release, with participants anticipating, imagining, and speculating about how Spotify might interpret their behaviours. This anticipatory phase was followed by evaluation and, in some cases, strategic adjustments to influence future Wrapped results. Post-release engagement involved sharing, comparison, and reflection that ranged from private exchanges with friends and family to public performances on

social media, which extended the Wrapped experience beyond Spotify's interface. Sharing was also treated as a playful expression that strengthens the feeling of community, as well as experienced as a sense of obligation.

Second, Wrapped emerged as a form of symbolic reward of engagement and a lens through which the participants reflected on how their summaries validated, challenged, or changed their perceptions as music listeners. Participants alternated between acceptance and resistance of the algorithmic depictions, whereby the act of resistance served as a mirror of mild unease about Spotify's data collection practices. Awareness of being monitored affected the affective experience of listening to music, which led to internalisation of norms regarding what constitutes "notable" listening. Some actively curated playlists, avoided repetition, or selectively engaged with songs, genres, albums, and artists. The summaries were both embraced as fun and socially shareable as well as critically assessed, especially when Spotify's definitions misaligned with their understandings of themselves as music listeners.

Third, Wrapped exhibited several ritualistic characteristics, although it does not constitute a media ritual in a traditional sense. Its recurrence, somewhat familiar structure, and temporal span from predictive practices and internal anticipation before the release, focused attention during the release, to reflection and active action after the release, created a symbolically charged, patterned and cyclical event embedded in the participants' yearly routines. Another aspect was that it encouraged communal engagement beyond its original format by enabling sharing in both private and public spaces, thus reinforcing social bonds, norms, as well as collective participation. However, its asynchronous nature, fluid format, and variation in user engagement limit its classification as a traditional media ritual. Some participants resisted or disengaged from Wrapped, expressing scepticism about surveillance and social pressures, as exemplified by Leon's critique of pervasive visibility. It indicated that while Wrapped can operate as a ritualised practice, its influence is not uniform or deterministic. Meaning that the symbolic power embedded in

Spotify and projected by Wrapped is negotiated, and at times, contested. It is thus not a stable ritual but instead redefines how ritualised media practices operate in an algorithmic context.

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Authors

Sally Al-Shaibani holds a Bachelor of Arts in Media and Communication Science from University of Gävle, as well as a Master of Arts in Media, Communication and Cultural Analysis from Södertörn University. Her interests include music, both as a cultural phenomenon and as part of everyday media practices such as streaming, and how individuals interact with, respond to, and emotionally engage with it.

Simon Tuhkunen holds a Master of Arts in Media, Communication, and Cultural Analysis from Södertörn University and a Bachelor of Arts in Rhetorics from Uppsala University. He has a background in Swedish politics and digitalization research. His research interests are human-AI relations, trust, and mediatization studies. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Geomedia at Karlstad University.

Weronika Schmidt holds a Master's degree in Media, Communication and Cultural Analysis from Södertörn University and a degree in Scandinavian Studies from the University of Gdańsk. Her research focuses on media representation, cultural identity, and cross-cultural dynamics within the Nordic region and the broader European context. She is particularly interested in digital media, evolving communication practices, and the transformation of social narratives in contemporary Europe.

Lennart Sörnsen holds a Bachelor's degree in Journalism and Social Sciences and a Master of Arts in Media, Communication and Cultural Analysis from Södertörn University, Sweden. Originally from Germany and raised in Sweden, he also studied Political Science at the University of Münster, Germany, before returning to Sweden. His research interests include interdiscip-

linary approaches to media, sociology, and cultural analysis, particularly representations of loss across different media forms and contexts.

This volume contains short versions of four noteworthy master theses written within the international master's programme in Media, Communication, and Cultural Analysis at Södertörn University and defended in 2025. Running since 2009, the programme has more than 100 alumni who are now employed in the media, academia and education. In 2020, the department chose to highlight the best theses in a printed volume. This is the sixth volume in the series.

The contributions in this volume cover four different topics: the representation of loss in science fiction films in relation to theories of modernity; the portrayal of the same robbery in different TV genres (news, documentary, and dramatised TV series); users' experience of trust when interacting with communicative AI chatbots; and the ways in which users' engagement with Spotify Wrapped can be understood as a media ritual. Although stretching across four such different topics, the chapters share an interest in on how media can be understood in relation to narration. In the first two chapters, the authors explicitly use narrative theory as a tool for understanding how mediation always incorporates narrative. The following two chapters focus instead on the narratives that arise when users interact with machines (AI chatbots) and on how algorithms shape annual personal stories about what kind of music listener you are (Spotify). Common for the four chapters is that they fruitfully re-center our attention on how narrating frames our encounter with media.

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