

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

UNDERGROUND NETFLIX IN LEBANON

by  
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# ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Since its first operations and launching of its services, Netflix aimed to create its digital community to become the ultimate, largest and global subscription video-on-demand service (SVOD). In fact, Netflix once through DVD-email shipping, nowadays distributed through streaming softwares, had its way through formal and informal models into different communities and cultures since 2016, particularly the Lebanese market. In this very familiar digital entertainment spectacle, and across media distribution and cultural technology theories, this thesis examine and intertwines Netflix distribution with an in-depth media analysis in tracing the extended history of Netflix underground circulation through the evolving practices and cultural understandings of streaming laborers and users with the notions of infrastructure, access and globalization within the Lebanese informal distribution context.

In fact, this study argues why and how Lebanon's informal circulation of Netflix mediates users' relationship to movie culture and their practices of Netflix access, while remaining bound to the predominance and influence of informal Netflix distribution over other formal and informal streaming services. In other words, it explores how informal distribution practices have irrevocably created unlimited paths to the flow of Netflix media content within the Lebanese spectrum under what we call "underground Netflix". By extension, this thesis focuses on writing the story of underground Netflix's arrival to Lebanon while foregrounding how a global video portal interacts with national users, markets, and other competitive streaming services, and why this correlates with the public's cultural ideology of global media access and informal distribution in this digital era.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Finding Ahmed's untraceable movie shop in Beirut is like searching for freedom where there is none. The fact that even Google maps couldn't track and identify his location—not to mention that everyone in and outside of the area referred to him as "Red Hacker"—made it seem as if I was in the darkness, searching within the shadows of the underground of Beirut. When I arrived at the shop with a large sign that read Onlife Movie Shop, Ahmed stood behind his messy desk in a small office listening to a client nag about the economic situation and the lagging internet, which has been a tremendous challenge to their ability to access film and other entertainment media. A former computer engineer who had been unable to pursue his passion in the film industry, Ahmed now labors to distribute premium Netflix accounts. On the day I arrived, he waited patiently for the software he was using to re-launch, update, and generate the algorithmic codes that only he understands. These codes will allow him to sell his customers Netflix streaming services, thereby fulfilling their desire for entertainment and Netflix access.

Ahmed's underground world of algorithms, codes, and hacked Netflix accounts raises questions about the technical and cultural processes that informal Netflix distribution far from the company's surveillance. In my many conversations with Ahmed, he emphasized his own priorities as quality, access, and technical assurances. However, he also acknowledged that his customers desired belonging in an economy of global entertainment from which they had been excluded. Yet Ahmad's commitments to

technicality and his customers' desires are not entirely new. In his shop, the old and the new intermingled, as both DVD copies and streaming accounts figured into his work. Indeed, Ahmed's labor as a Netflix distributor started seven years ago, and during this time he has built an intimate relationship with his customers—one marked by the entanglement of distribution, labor, technology, infrastructure, and culture.

Ahmed's shop reveals a very different version of Netflix than the one that has been touted by the company and its founder Reeve Hastings. If the company promotes itself as the global king of subscriptions, then Ahmed's work as an informal distributor—which is unsanctioned by and even unknown to the company—reminds us of multitude of other ways that global audiences access the streaming service and its content. This thesis studies one instance of Netflix distribution and access, namely the practices of underground Netflix in Lebanon. I build on a rich body of scholarship on informality, distribution, and media industries to understand how underground Netflix practices in Lebanon work and how they developed. I also ask how underground Netflix practices have shaped Lebanese users' understanding of the platform as the ultimate access to global entertainment media, especially when many other formal and informal circulation methods promise a seemingly unlimited flow of content and culture.

In this thesis, I focus on the informal distribution of Netflix in Lebanon to argue that the distribution, infrastructure and politics of underground Netflix mediates users' understandings of cultural access and globalization. By extension, this underground model—marked by its predominance over other formal and informal streaming platforms—shape users' informal practices that still remains bound to Netflix's distributional streaming influence.

Throughout this thesis, I have termed the various informal strategies that people use to access Netflix streaming services and content as *underground Netflix*. In doing so, I expand discussions of informal media distribution to account for Netflix in Lebanon. The concept of underground Netflix describes an informal modality that operates in the shadows of Lebanese media, entertainment, and distribution frameworks. I understand underground Netflix distribution to be the combination of the informal circulation of Netflix streaming services and content through underground infrastructures, technologies, and models that do not fall within Netflix formal operations or surveillance. Examples include hacked accounts, subscription sharing, the use of VPNs and proxies, and the sale of Netflix original content on DVDs and other digital formats. As a concept, underground Netflix unlocks a history of Netflix in Lebanon that accounts for before and after its formal arrival to the country; maps the geographies of Netflix's distribution and penetration in the Lebanese streaming market, and the political and cultural stakes of informal strategies for accessing global media content.

In order to study underground Netflix in Lebanon, one must imagine its key players. Accordingly, I have developed two separate—but interconnected terms—to discuss some of the key players in Lebanon's underground Netflix: users and audiences. Throughout the thesis, I use the term *user* when describing people as they engage with and gain access to Netflix streaming services and its platform. In contrast, I use *audiences* to refer to underground Netflix viewers as they perform interpretive acts, making sense of the content they watch and the distribution modes that have provided them with access. This distinction allows me to understand how users of platforms

become audiences—or, in other words, how modes of circulation produce meaning-making practices.

As I study the practices and cultures of underground Netflix in Lebanon, I weave together two different methods: qualitative interviews and discourse analysis. Qualitative interviews were conducted both in person and virtually to decode the detailed practices of underground Netflix laborers and users and their cultural understandings of the streaming service. In fact, a total of 20 interviews were divided into 5 interviews with Netflix laborers, 14 others with Netflix users and a single interview with a Netflix reviewer and researcher. Those interviewees, were selected based on specific criteria, one of which being part of formal and Underground Netflix nation, and were located through research and snow bowling strategies. By extension, these interviews, opened up hours of in depth conversations and observations between myself as a research and Netflix user, with Netflix distributors and hackers within their work space, as well as embarked my critical analysis into exploring the perceptions and positioning of Netflix users, audiences and reviewers within this underground phenomenon.

Meanwhile, I used discourse analysis to understand the cultural status of Netflix in Lebanon. I drew on TV reports, online sources, industry statistics, and popular representations to clarify the timeline of Netflix's arrival to Lebanon before and after it was formally introduced; the perceptions of Netflix cultural dominance over users' practices and audiences' understandings; and the competition between Netflix with other formal and informal streaming players within the Lebanese market.

Together, these two methods—qualitative interviews and discourse analysis—yield a robust portrait and in depth analysis of underground Netflix distribution in Lebanon, one in which informal distribution and access provide users with a cosmopolitan identity that exceeds the technical, infrastructural and financial limitations that restrain them from participating in the company’s formal and global subscription services.

### **A. MAKING SPACE FOR UNDERGROUND NETFLIX STUDIES**

The large and growing scholarship on Netflix has covered considerable ground, exploring the platform as “a business, a distribution model, a disrupter, an Internet interface, a content aggregator, an archive, a technology,” a transnational broadcaster for the flow of entertainment and film industry (Murphy, 2011, p. 6), and also “the world’s largest subscription video-on-demand platform and service” (Lobato, 2019, p. 20). My focus in this study extends the scope and context of this work by looking at Netflix as a foreign invader of cultural production and a catalyst for the practices of underground distribution in Lebanon. Specifically, I use the particularities of Netflix distribution in Lebanon to theorize the practices of what I call underground Netflix. These aspects of Netflix—its informal distribution and its presence in Lebanon—have not yet been highlighted nor studied in the existing scholarship.

One major trend in the scholarship of Netflix is the attention to its unique affordances as an on-demand streaming platform. Building on this line of scholarship, Lobato’s (2019) work on Netflix generates a unique analysis on the company’s transformative work within film distribution. The author argues that studying this subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) service requires that scholars go beyond

technicalities its platform and also take into account the social, cultural, economic, and political forces that shape it in particular contexts. Murphy (2011) similarly studies Netflix not only as a service, but also its multi-layers as a distributional service, a business, a technology and a content aggregator. In a similar vein, Riekkinen (2018) builds a theoretical analysis of SVODs with users' decision-making and attitude. By focusing on the cultural dimensions of streaming services, the author represents the different levels of practices and satisfactions that users attend between formal and informal consumptions. Such scholarly perspectives are useful to the present discussion of underground Netflix because they remind us as media scholars that SVODs like Netflix are not just neutral platforms but rather implicated in a larger set of political, economic, cultural, and social forces.

In addition to focusing on the uniqueness of Netflix as a SVOD, scholars have also called into question whether all audiences have equal access to the streaming service, and which economies and markets have been left out of the global circulation of Netflix. For example, Venter (2021) demonstrates that the impulse for companies like Netflix, to geoblock and limitedly distribute their content, is a reaction to the anxiety that national streaming borders have become too malleable with digital technologies. Building on this idea, Elkins (2019) has argued that geoblocking has maintained a global hierarchy of media distribution that has long marked the cultural industries. Lobato (2019) applies this idea to Netflix by explaining how the company strategically overlooked the use of proxies to sidestep its geoblocking features. According to Lobato, by allowing global users to access Netflix, the current thesis builds on this line of inquiry by thinking of how

Netflix users in Lebanon—when shut out of formal access—use informal means such as VPNs and create their own underground practices.

A large portion of Netflix scholarship is devoted to analyzing binge watching and other social trends that result from streaming platforms. For example, Jenner (2018), has argued that the qualities of the Netflix platform, particularly the *view-next* feature and personalization of digital profiles, has encouraged unique users' practices and given significant control to the viewers. Matrix (2014) extends Jenner synthesis into analyzing how, with the extensive inventory of movies and TV series, commercial-free viewing and high quality experience, and “post play” content delivery, Netflix is still changing viewers' expectations and users practices concerning what, how, and when they stream towards enabling long binges and digital community attachment. In contrast, Walter (2010) pushes back against the idea of Netflix long-tail content library trend, by examining how informal methods, such as file sharing, became a normalized and socially acceptable form of convenient access within users dealing with a limited Netflix inventory compared to what other pirated platforms are offering. Although this thesis does not focus on audiences' behaviors, this is a relevant area of research as it signals the need to think critically about users' practices and audiences' perceptions that develop through Netflix than other forms of n-demand streaming platforms.

A great deal of scholarship devoted to Netflix original production. Indeed, this is the only area in which scholars have considered Lebanon in the context of Netflix. Mouranieh (2018) examined the motives of Lebanese youth viewers of Netflix behind viewing local and Western series and programs as a way to acquire foreign cultures, information and ideologies of different lifestyles and communities. Similarly, Haddad

and Dhoest (2021) address the challenges Netflix faced when creating Arabic and Lebanese series, and how Arab media industries are recalibrating to Netflix’s “transnational co-production context” (p. 261), specifically in terms of screenplays and story lines. While this branch of scholarship is significant in how it locates Netflix in Lebanon and the Arab world, it does not take into account the different distribution practices and access modes that are prominent in Lebanon. In other words, what people watch in Lebanon is important, but so too is *how* they gain access to that content.

As this literature reveals, scholars of Netflix have primarily focused on the platform as a formal entity—whether as a business, a digital streaming service, or producer of original content. Less studied—and yet equally as important—are the informal practices that ordinary people use to gain access to the world of Netflix-curated content. By pulling forward the case of underground Netflix in Lebanon, I fill this important gap and examine the infrastructural, political, and cultural forces that shape the work of the laborers who provide access and the users who find entertainment within that access. In doing so, I expand the global story of Netflix and challenge media scholars to rethink the United States as the only site through which to theorize media distribution and reflect on the ordinary—if not illegal and unsanctioned—practices that sustain media access for most people around the world.

## **B. THESIS STRUCTURE**

In order to fill the gap in the existing Netflix scholarship, I stretch my discussion across three body chapters. In this thesis, playing on the idea of Netflix, I call chapters seasons. In the first season of this study, I examine the development of Netflix as a global service and trace the different stages of Netflix’s arrival to Lebanon. While Netflix

formally arrived to Lebanon in 2016 (as part of the platform's massive global launch), it existed through VPNs and DVDs long before. In this chapter, I chart out the three. As this season argues, it is crucial to identify the full historical presence of Netflix in Lebanon, including the technological changes that occurred to the platform distributional model and how Netflix started to formally circulate in 2016 while emphasizing on its prior informal distribution and underground practices within the Lebanese market. Through interviews, this season also offers an in depth, technical description of the multiple underground distributional models adopted in this national market.

In Season 2, I shift my focus from Netflix distribution practices to users and audiences. I study how they understand their engagement. In this season, I study the perspectives and practices of underground distributors and subscribers to understand how users become part of the system of underground Netflix. I describe several features of underground Netflix users' practices, including a) a continuous demand for entertainment media; b) understanding access; c) brand attachment; and d) the normalization of underground practices as ordinary means of access for many users left out of globalizing economy.

In the last season, I end up my synthesis by playing the devil advocate against the test the popular perception of Netflix as the pinnacle of unlimited access to films and television shows. Within this season, I begin by studying the other "formal" competitors that Netflix faces in Lebanon, including HBO Max, Disney + and Shahed. Next, I offer a detailed comparison of Netflix and EGY.BEST, a typical informal streaming platform and one of Netflix's biggest rivals in Lebanon. I study EGY.BEST from a technical and cultural vantage

point to question whether Netflix really does offer Lebanese users the most comprehensive library of global entertainment media. Ultimately, by juxtaposing the formal and informal competitors to Netflix in the small Lebanese market, I demonstrate how Netflix is part of a larger, constantly evolving distribution ecosystem.

Together, these three seasons builds the full picture of Netflix as it arrived, flourished, and crisscrossed formal and informal practices. By analyzing the infrastructures, practices, cultures, and politics that constitute underground Netflix, I offer a view of the platform that has until now been out of sight to both scholars and company executives.

## CHAPTER II

### SEASON I: BEHIND THE HISTORY AND INFRASTRUCTURE OF UNDERGROUND NETFLIX IN LEBANON

*“Never halt your streaming, recharge your Netflix account, starting 125,000LL, through Alfa, MTC or even by texting us on Whatsapp. Enjoy a full month of unlimited access”*

My journey in discovering underground Netflix was initiated when encountering advertisements of companies claiming to provide Netflix accounts, via invisible distributional models that, I, as a normal user, wouldn't directly understand. However, my intellectual and academic curiosity, as well as being fascinated to further explore what's behind such a service, pushed me towards digging deeper into the full story of Netflix distribution in Lebanon that was yet uncovered nor examined.

Approaching streaming movies/series services is understanding the significant implications that platforms, like Netflix, has on the cultures of media entertainment locally and internationally. One of which is taking part and uncovering the conversation about its historical and transnational flow and distributional power, that has only just begun.

In often cases in tracing the history of a media pattern, is thinking about its technological innovation, evolution, capabilities and protocols of another similar medium that came before. The best example falls within comparing how Television carried a larger and detailed visual feature from the radio while bring audio and video all together. Yet, internet-distributed streaming services both are and aren't comparable to previous media technologies that the world witness during the twentieth and twenty

first centuries. In fact, streaming platforms as Netflix operates under different and varied distributional aspects than any other internet-distributed video platforms as Youtube, TikTok, etc...

Even though Netflix constitute of a technological and infrastructural complexity in its systems and servers, yet each of the 190 countries around the globe – having nowadays access to Netflix - holds different stories, histories and distributional frameworks of such a global streaming platform (Lobato, 2019). By extension, Lebanon falls within one category of these countries, having various ways to distribute, subscribe and access Netflix, within a huge business spectrum and cultural frameworks that I was intrigued to further explore.

Within that context, studying and breaking the history and geography of Netflix distribution falls within examining both the informal and formal practices within two aspects and understandings: First, by identifying the spatial patterns and infrastructural dimension of when and how this internet distributed television started circulating, and second, by examining the cultural dynamics of Netflix when analyzing where, how and why it does not and/or partially circulate.

Therefore, witnessing the daily massive distribution Netflix over all other media entertaining platforms and the blurriness of its historical timeline in the Middle East, I foreground this study over Netflix distribution within the Lebanese spectrum, by questioning Netflix positioning and distribution in Lebanon and detailing its multiple cultural, historical and infrastructural patterns that are yet to be uncovered: was there Netflix before 2016 in Lebanon? How, with the absence of the formal platforms and systems, Netflix did circulate practically between audiences before and after it was

officially introduced to the world? What are the infrastructural bases of Netflix distribution in Lebanon after the Lebanese economic crisis in 2019?

By extension, in this chapter I argue that the arrival of underground Netflix to Lebanon shows how Netflix has always operated at the nexus of formal informal modalities within the Lebanese setting.

### **A. Episode 1: Historical Landscape of Netflix Arrival to Lebanon and The World**

Let's go around Netflix historical distribution and expansion around the world to trace its arrival to the Middle East. "Today", said Hastings, "I'm delighted to announce that while we have been here on stage at CES, we switched Netflix *on* in Azerbaijan, in Vietnam, India, Nigeria, Poland, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Lebanon, South Korea, Turkey, and in 130 new countries... Today, right now, you are witnessing the birth of a global TV network". (Hastings, 2016). Hearing his speech in a forty-eight-minute showcase, Reed Hastings, the CEO of Netflix, explained how this "incredible event" would globalize Netflix reaching the farthest countries around the world, aiming to introduce a new era of digital entertainment that communities has yet to experience.

Yet, after twenty five years of constant movie circulation through DVD-emails and DVDs services, the strategy of #Netflixeverywhere hasn't covered everywhere, in fact it completely skipped China, Syria, North Korea and Crimea for political agendas, specifically the illegality of Netflix to trade any kind of Intellectual Properties and/or media services with these latter three countries due to US sanctions, while partially providing their services of "unlimited access" to other countries in the Middle East, Australia and Europe.

Across this context, the examination of the story and timeline of Netflix global distribution carries with it a multiplicity of analyses and factors that are worth being understood. And to critically locate the historical timeline of Netflix in the Lebanese context requires sustaining two contradictory realities in balance: Netflix is and isn't the single company that has direct and indirect consumer subscription relationships with more than 150 million users worldwide.

However, to validate any claim about Netflix distribution requires locating it in a particular catalog to understand the different systems happening, underground; specifically, in Lebanon with its particular technological infrastructure, competing and alternative services, its markets characteristics by different audience expectations, preferences, and cultural norms.

To begin with, the historical timeline of Netflix company is well known: starting in the US in 1997, the company launched DVD rental services via emails to provide audiences with widely popular American movies and series. And with the technological developments that the world started witnessing and occurred after 2000, Netflix unveiled its digital streaming circulation services towards freeing and expanding their content circulation specifically within Canada and Latin America.

From rental services, to the online streaming subscription introduced in 2006, Netflix circulated digitally, that mostly implied endless buffering, crude quality and limited content, allowing its audiences for instant access to watch a diversity of movie genre and series with a click from their desktops. And from one country to the other, Netflix outspread and compelled its global exposure reaching 190 countries (including Lebanon) in 21 different languages in 2016, making its way towards being one of the

top distributional platforms for the film industry. And marking its twenty-five-year anniversary in the 29<sup>th</sup> of August, Netflix due to internet servers and distribution was brought to TVs, phones, tablets, Ipads and entered as well the world of video games.

However, Netflix never had one single pattern nor specific story of its arrival, representations, infrastructures and distribution in Lebanon. Being a child obsessed with movies and series, I remember hearing about Netflix even before its formal globalization in 2016, yet never had the opportunity to understand the hidden structures of the underground practices happening simultaneously.

“The history and distribution of Netflix hasn’t been the same in Lebanon as in other countries...”. In a very direct yet challenging conversation, Ali, an internet and Netflix provider, expressed how, as an underground laborer himself, was part within the creation of Netflix circulation and historical landscape in Lebanon.

Looking at the historical and cultural milestones of Netflix in Lebanon requires a further exploration of the underground distribution of such a platform that has been all along, even before Netflix’s formal arrival to the Lebanese communities. Far beyond the Netflix’s visible structure and storyline, I became more interested in drawing attention to the unspoken history of underground Netflix in Lebanon, through rethinking the invisibility and infrastructural basis of such a model and questioning the idea of entertaining media globalization and cultural change.

In fact, it goes more deeply into focusing and sharing the stories of Ahmed, Antonio and Ali as underground distribution laborers in Lebanon, to represent the evolvment occurring within the storyline and phenomenon of what I call Underground Netflix.

Meeting Antonio, a Twenty-four-year-old graduate in marketing and social media and a Netflix provider since 2021, the idea of when and how underground Netflix started circulating helped in building the following timeline that can portray the emergence of Netflix little by little within the Lebanese market from a practical and academic perspectives:

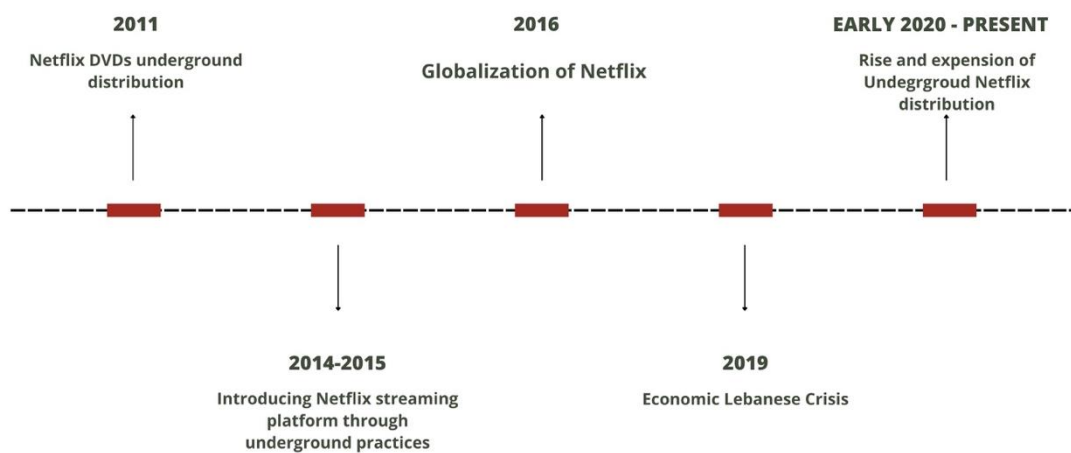


Figure 1: The historical timeline of Netflix arrival and its Underground practices in Lebanon.

The examination of the historical Landscape of Underground Netflix is uncovering when, how and why this circulation took place within entertaining media. In fact, this distribution model isn't a self-sustaining phenomenon, rather it consisted of a fusion of formal and informal circulation of content with constant audiences' engagement and practices for years.

“Netflix was dependent on informal physical DVD commodities before taking off with the internet world” said Ali. More specifically, underground Netflix started in 1997, in times where mailing still dominated as a primary distribution method for the flow of information and services. the idea of Netflix, at the beginning, build upon such a distributional method to represented a continuous circulation model of entertainment through the movie rental service (Hasting, 2018).

Despite the fact that Netflix already switched to online streaming during late 2006, DVD distribution remained part of Netflix distribution in Lebanon until early 2014, whereby the culture of DVD copies of movies and series from Netflix dominated over the practices of the Lebanese movies community to be part of the concept of “global Netflix community” (Lobato, 2020). Users and film fan bases in Lebanon had to order and receive their choices of DVD films through mailing distribution before shifting to internet-based services and online streaming.

Systematically, the upgrade from mailing based Netflix to internet-based Netflix, shifted the platform’s infrastructural and historical framework, specifically towards becoming a more diversified business within the film industry distribution and the practices of its underground laborers.

But how so? Across this context and framework, drawing and analyzing the historical lines of underground Netflix before and after the company’s official arrival to Lebanon, requires some solid evidence. In these stances, my oral histories, interviews and archival analysis frames the historical landmarks of Netflix.

*1. Before and after Netflix's formal arrival to Lebanon: the invisible start on Underground Netflix*

While Netflix already formally expanded its circulation in Latin America and Europe between 2011 and 2016, Underground online practices in Lebanon started to appear, yet invisibly, within the provision of such services to the users who didn't acknowledge this streaming platform due to the lack of Netflix brand marketing within the Middle East.

Within these paradoxes, Antonio, Ahmed and Ali stories and labor work fills the timeline gap into portraying and offering how Netflix circulated within the underground. According to Lobato, it is significant to understand both the technical, cultural aspects of Netflix distribution to draw its historical timeline, yet I expand on his interpretation by adding the data records of the underground Netflix laborers early and after 2015 (before Netflix arrival to Lebanon).

In a direct yet friendly discussions into discovering the hidden nation of the underground, both Ali and Ahmed pushed me to explore Netflix's invisible presence in Lebanon before all its formal globalization and media spectacles. As the "Netflix Dealer" and the "Red Hacker", Ali and Ahmed are popular Netflix providers who have been in the business of entertaining media distribution for eight years. Being the first to be part of this shadowy institution within the global Netflix portray a sense of originality in what they offer and how they work through the internet.

During this interesting exploration and analysis with a Netflix provider under the name of "the Red hacker", Ahmed explained how such a distributional method changed from being personal skills acquired by a computer literate user, to an actual professional business that relies on specific techniques and softwares. In fact, Facebook

groups started to be created back in 2015, encouraging audiences to join underground Netflix privately: “Closed and private Facebook groups helped us to distribute such an access to audiences without being exposed through online transactions...”

Following the fandom pages, several LinkedIn accounts started appearing to provide a better representation of such practices when researching Netflix provider companies in Lebanon and the middle east, whereby, some of which are still actively working within the underground streaming distribution until present days. One fascinating private account under the name “*InterNetflix*” *Netflix Provider*, presented its Netflix distribution services since 2010 while mentioning in its bio that:

“LinkedIn account of InterNetFlix. We're not associated, affiliated with or endorsed and moderated by Netflix™ Inc in any way. We are providing Netflix News, Movies, and Releases around the globe. You can visit us <https://internetflix.org/>.”

This tangible proof and the actual live experience with Ali and Ahmed as a Netflix laborers/ providers themselves, doesn't just reflect on the claim that this section aims to unpack and validate, yet portray one aspect of how Underground Netflix distribution gave an early, minor yet free branding visibility to Netflix in Lebanon before its plan to emerge within the Lebanese market space.

The following information presented the first phase if underground Netflix between 2011 and 2015. However, In January 2016, LBCI news broadcast posted a report welcoming Netflix within the Lebanese market place. Through engaging with the hashtag #NetflixEverywhere and explaining the functions of such a platform, the report focused on Netflix's globality and how it might reshape the boundaries of mainstream

broadcasting media, particularly television (Jenner,2018). In addition, it reflected how the internet, made it possible for Netflix to be distributed on the Lebanese sphere.

Two years later, Reed Hastings, Netflix's CEO and co-founders, appeared in a live interview with Chris Anderson, discussing several key factors reading Netflix: the company's bold internal culture, the powerful algorithmic system that fuels their recommendations and objectives, the value worth of content they're investing during the years, and the philosophic ideology of Netflix and its relation towards its audiences. As I pause at the very middle of such an interesting discussion, Hastings stated that Netflix main objective in "to make more people want to join formally" specifically being a curated network of its own (Hastings, 2018).

After the globalization event that Netflix launched in 2016, the formal and informal users/subscribers of Netflix in Lebanon increased: "It is significant to mention that Lebanon back in 2016 until 2019 was economically stable, which allowed the users to easily have formal access to Netflix through the usual subscription procedures that the company offered to the world" Antonio Said.

However, the plot twist of the story of Netflix in Lebanon appeared late 2019. With the deterioration of the economy due to the currency inflation, Netflix premium subscription which remains approximately 12\$, increased from being equivalent to 18,000LL on the previous Lebanese market rate of 1,507LL per one dollar, to 400,000LL (Premium Plan) upon the black market rate of an average of 33,000LL per one dollar.

In addition, the Lebanese Netflix fan base community lost all formal access to such a platform particularly within the absence of bank external transaction services that used to facilitate the subscription for such a streaming platform. According to Antonio,

this economic situation opened the floor for underground practices to provide access to Pre-paid streaming platforms, particularly Netflix: “ It was part of each Netflix provider’s job, in every region around Lebanon, to start thinking of different distributional methods to offer Netflix access to the community who were eager to remain within the Netflix global spectrum and conversation starting early 2020 until present days”.

## **B. Episode 2: The Infrastructures of Underground Netflix in Lebanon: A Multidimensional Phenomenon**

To understand the full history of Netflix, it is crucial to uncover Netflix underlying infrastructures and systems: In fact, Lobato’s work invites us to explore internet television and SVOD systems as Netflix, offering an instant access to entertaining media content at the touch of a screen or through one click. Yet, behind this apparent simplicity lies a full technical and technological complexity that constitute of both interlocking and backend systems that are “essential to the experience of digital media but are hidden from view in everyday usage” (Lobato, 2019).

Let’s consider the technical scenario that is required to deliver Netflix content and streaming to a random user in the US. In fact, an inventory of networks, systems and devices are connected to each other: From screening apparatuses, WIFI routers, hardware, banking online transactions and other modems that connects the audiences to this internet streaming service (and all the algorithms and programming associated to this interconnected network). By extension, this internet television services never works by itself, and yet must be *made to work*, through a vast combination of infrastructures.

But what is so significant in studying the infrastructures of Netflix? in fact, infrastructures, as addressed by Paul Edwards, is “the invisible background, the substrate or support, the technocultural and natural environment, of modernity” (Edwards, 2003, 191). By extension, to understand the hidden parts of every digital systems, particularly Netflix, infrastructures are the go-to place. Therefore, both the formal and informal forms of Netflix circulation lie under the laborers and systems that create such a distributional model from scratch until it reaches the users.

However, the case of underground Netflix carries a totally different overview of its infrastructural bases. In fact, the infrastructural scenario in Lebanon is a multidimensional phenomenon that needs in depth exploration. And by looking into this chapter at the comprehensive figures of media entertainment distribution, I provide the different inventories and systems of Netflix that can be found in Lebanon and constitutes the informal Netflix, while posing on a number of conceptual questions: How does these underground systematic systems work? What might this invisible distributional method add to our understanding of Netflix globality and dominance in Lebanon?

Across this context, underground Netflix as a video streaming services and an institution, marked its place within the Lebanese entertaining media history over the past two years. Through digital subscriptions and platform sharing, Netflix became part of the audience’s media entertainment spectrum. In fact, archival and analytical studies positioned the presence and development of such a platform as a significant medium and model, carrying important social, infrastructural and cultural aspects that I aim to further details technically and ideologically.

## 1. Netflix formal Distributional Model

### NETFLIX SUBSCRIPTION AND DISTRIBUTION

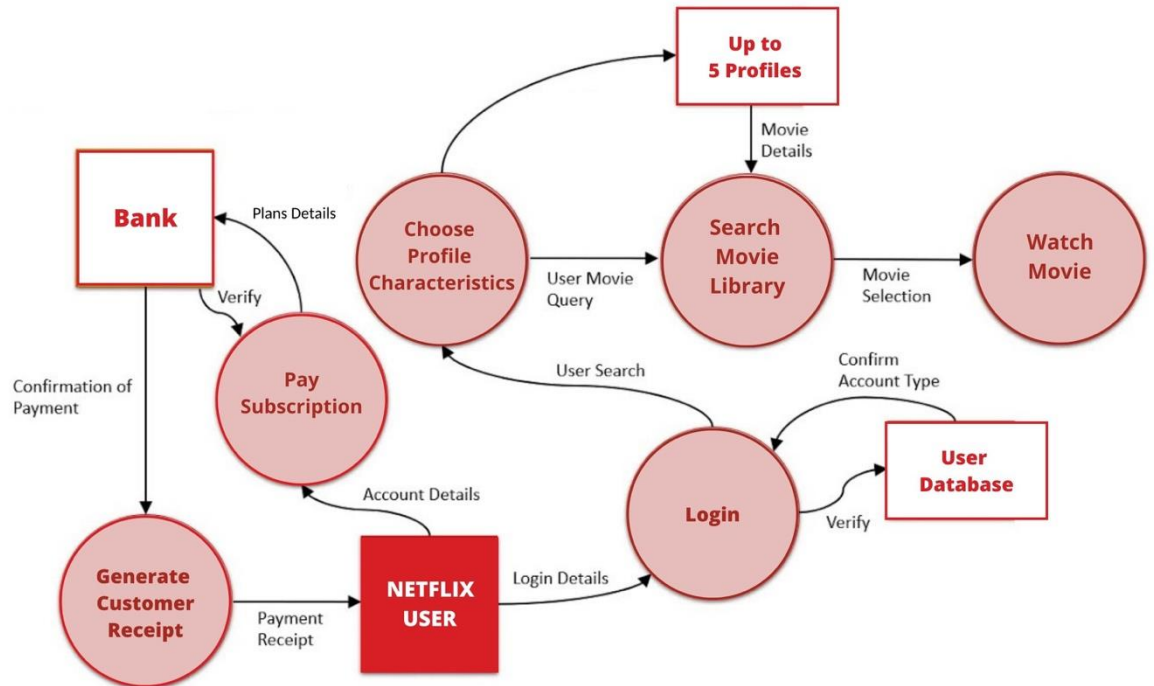


Figure 2: Netflix subscription and distribution process chart as per Netflix Company

As a Netflix user herself, Laura has been a subscriber and a “loyal” Netflix user for many years now. In fact, she is one of the streaming users who is still paying, through her bank account, the required Netflix subscription every month. From our conversation, I drew technically and academically how the infrastructure of Netflix works: As a user, it is important to acquire a clear and active email address that will help the user to sign in, choose the streaming plan, pay the subscription through bank payment transaction (which is verified) before confirming on the payment and starting the user’s login experience.

Entering the world of Netflix, the streaming platform provide its users with different number of profiles and streaming characteristics based on the plan chosen (1 profile in the basic plan with normal streaming quality, 2 profiles in the standard plan with HD streaming quality and 5 profile when choosing the premium plan with Full HD and 4K streaming quality).

	Basic	Standard	Premium
Monthly cost* (United States Dollar)	<b>\$7.99</b>	<b>\$9.99</b>	<b>\$11.99</b>
Number of screens you can watch on at the same time	1	2	4
Number of phones or tablets you can have <b>downloads</b> on	1	2	4
Unlimited movies, TV shows and mobile games	✓	✓	✓
Watch on your laptop, TV, phone or tablet	✓	✓	✓
HD available		✓	✓
Ultra HD available			✓

Table 1: Netflix subscription monthly plans characteristics and offers

By extension, the process of having formal Netflix access is a straight forward procedure based on internet access, digital device availability, online payment confirmation and full users' control over his/her account, movies' query, privacy, taste and selection.

## ***2. Netflix Underground Distributional Models***

Rethinking digital streaming entertainment in Lebanon, is thinking beyond the visible aspects of its infrastructures, into the hidden features of its underground

practices happening in a rapid and professional pace without digital parameters that only the Netflix provider knows and have the right and skills to access it.

To begin with and before decoding the labor work of Netflix providers, Underground Netflix is an internet-based phenomenon circulating through WIFI Lebanese telecommunication services. In fact, Mackenzie draws of the bigger picture of the technical and cultural development of WIFI infrastructure, while Lobato's introduction provide the best narrowed yet detailed example that explains internet distribution as phenomenon within Netflix as an entertaining online platform (Mackenzie, 2022). Referring to the concept of internet-distributed television, Lobato's interpretation of space, distribution and technology explain how the internet added new complexities to existing geography of the Netflix's distribution and content circulation. (Lobato, 2019)

In fact, this extensive online proliferation of content can be understood as part of this digital transformation occurring to streaming platforms as a medium. (Lobato, 2019). And by being the masters of underground practices within the media entertaining industry, Antonio and Ahmed's labor work categories such a change to be part of this luxurious yet informal businesses and technological work, particularly Netflix distribution, in their usage and creativity within circulating Netflix and offering such access since 2015 and even when it became inaccessible, through internet services and technologies.

However, some critical differences stand between the culture behind Netflix distribution and their practice of underground Netflix in how they distribute access of such a platform using different techniques, piracy forms and technologies. In fact,

Netflix as an internet-distributed streaming service, and to understand the infrastructural bases of such the underground phenomenon, it is crucial to unpack the multiple factors, aspects and techniques, that interferes in the creation of such underground circulation models.

In my exploration of their daily underground practices as a Netflix provider, Antonio and Ahmed pointed out on two different underground distributional phenomenon that are occurring within the Lebanese spectrum:

**UNDERGROUND NETFLIX SUBSCRIPTION AND DISTRIBUTION: Offshore Accounts**

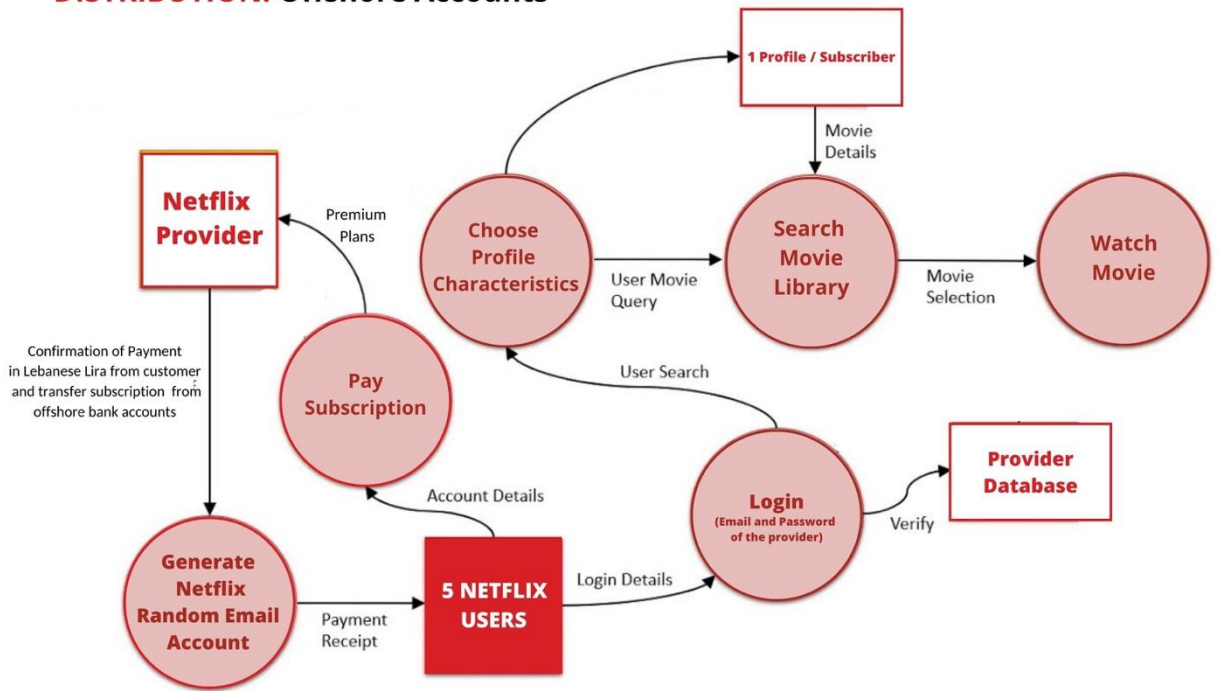


Figure 3: Netflix underground distributional model based on Offshore transactions and accounts

According to Antonio, this represent the most prominent model that Netflix providers adopt when providing Netflix streaming access. To begin, it is a must for the provider himself to possess an offshoar bank account in third world countries. But why

so? In simpler words, paying the Netflix subscription from Argentina, the premium plan would cost 429 ARS equivalent to 3.06 dollars (meaning less than 70% of its price) rather than 11.99\$ from any European country.

This process starts by generating random active emails that will automatically provide a premium plan account to the users seeking Netflix access. However, according to Antonio's in depth explanation, the netflix provider will have to guarantee and take full payment and confirmation from 5 netflix buyers. By extension, each profile of the five already offered within one account will be sold to 5 different users. This way, rather than having one user with 5 profiles, each user will have his/her own netflix login profile under the email of the provider who has full control over the accounts database, expiration date and payment procedure.

As from an economic perspective, this underground model increase profit rate per account and user: "It's simple math, we usual offer each profile within one account for 100,000LL Lebanese Lira. And when selling the 5 given profiles instantly, we can ensure up to 500,000LL per account. If the email generated comes from a second or first level country as France, the account would cost 11.99\$ equivalent to 420,000LL Lebanese lira as per the adopted black market rate. However, paying from offshore accounts from countries with low currency competition, will help each Netflix laborer to secure 80% of net profit from each Netflix email generated per every 5 users or one account."

Antonio simplified this underground Netflix distributional model by adding that specific *confidential* softwares are always in use to track each subscriber digital activity, to ensure a smooth and professional process of the public's usage of this

underground Netflix services, while providing a matching branding services as the one offered by Netflix company itself.

### UNDERGROUND NETFLIX SUBSCRIPTION AND DISTRIBUTION: Cracked Accounts

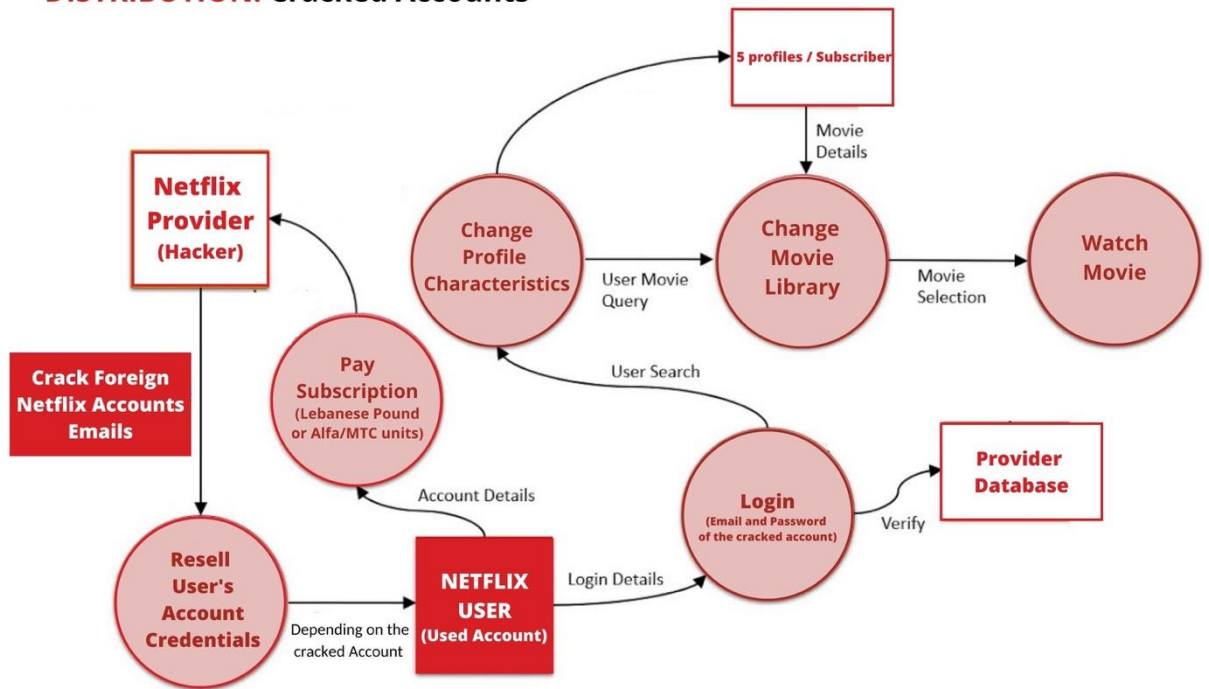


Figure 4: Netflix underground distributional model based on Piracy and hacking techniques.

This interesting exploration of underground Netflix with Antonio ended up by himself framing other underground techniques in being *illegal* practices to what this phenomenon really aims on providing in the ways and means. Yet, Ahmed, the “Red hacker”, seemed to have a different perspective of his daily labor.

Watching Ahmed selling Netflix accounts was a breath-taking experience. In fact, this infrastructural and technical scenario circulates around Netflix hacking and piracy. In other words, Ahmed’s Netflix distribution requires a complicated

technological algorithm and computing literacy. For him, it is an easy process using secret digital processes that required patience and accuracy, yet from my observatory vision, it was a complex strategy that constituted of email and account cracking software's and a greater dive into the space of the Deep and Dark Web. Across this distributional model, Ahmed's technique of "email/account phishing" is based on tracking active Netflix accounts around the world, one of which has long expiration dates, completion of required payment, and luckily the premium characteristics as a selected plan.

This flashed back to one interesting scholarship explaining Ahmed's distributional model and aim. According to Verma in her essay, "Email phishing: Text classification using natural language processing", the author defines email and account phishing as a "networked theft in which the main motive of phishers is to steal any person's private information, its financial details like account number, credit card details, login information, payment mode information by creating and developing a fake page or a fake web site, which look completely authentic and genuine" (Verma, 2020).

Through sending a spamming email to random users around the world, Ahmed provides within these emails free Netflix access giveaways to people who has or aiming to have Netflix accounts. In fact, the "Red Hacker" further uncovered how these emails pushes the users to click on the provided links that are a very similar yet different from the IP address of the verified Netflix company websites. The difference remains in one letter, an added dot or dash or even a different directory to a different IP or VPN address. By extension, between clicking on [www.Net.flix.com](http://www.Net.flix.com) or [www.Netflix.com](http://www.Netflix.com), a winning account for Ahmed and its users.

Therefore, Netflix distributional phenomenon starts after cracking one user's account and then re-sell it to up to ten different subscribers. However, at that stage of this distributional model, different ways in paying the subscription are available according to Ahmed: either through paying with the Lebanese currency based on the black market rate directly to the hacker himself, or even through telecommunication units transactions: Rather than paying in cash, Ali, as a "Netflix dealer", plays as a third party between the user and the Netflix provider. His main role lies in communicating with hackers around his community to provide him with lists of premium active accounts to be sold to different users.

By extension, through marketing strategies and based on each user's financial status quo, every individual has the option of transferring Alfa and MTC unit dollars (which represents the two main Lebanese private telecommunication institutions) directly from their cellphones, as a payment method towards having the Netflix access that they seek. According to Ali, this was created by Netflix dealers themselves to facilitate subscription processes, as well as encourage all audiences to be part of this digital entertainment spectacle at any second and under any circumstances.

I rely on the second episode title "Underground Netflix: A multidimensional Phenomenon" to finish with an ending note on the significance of distribution as a primary aspect in academic, historical and infrastructural analyses of any medium. This roundup over the diverse underground Netflix distributional models represented distribution as the core for Netflix presence and demand in global and local markets, which brings back Jeremy M. Evans, statement saying: It's not nearly enough to create

a good piece of content. You have to understand how content spreads across the web.”  
(Evans, 2019)

### **C. Episode 3: Content is King, but Distribution is Queen**

Beyond the technicalities of underground Netflix, an ideological spectrum lies beneath underground laborers practices. From the cultural perspective, both laborers share similar objectives and intertwine ideologically in providing Netflix access, services and networks unconditionally to their customers. Yet, taking part into this distribution model, cultural gatekeeper, and/or professional ritual had to be informal specifically that Lebanon has been part of third world and geo-blocked countries, considered outside of Netflix’s targeted market.

In other words, both underground laborers aimed to introduce a new form of distribution to this digital entertainment to the public: Unrestricted from international media capitalism, economic challenges and any broadcasting schedules and policies, that politicize what is being streamed, both Netflix providers wanted to make the people part of what Lobato referred to as “the world leading internet subscription service for enjoying tv shows and movies” more than ever (Lobato, 2019).

More precisely, transforming online streaming into a tangible (DVD copies) and intangible (online accounts) valued commodity within a specific community and under different policies unpack how the underground practices shifted Netflix services from being a *private* process (self-activation of an account) to a *public* partnership (sharing profiles within one account) through multiple informal technological cycles.

From the labor perspective, understanding the expansion of underground distribution of Netflix before and during Netflix formal arrival and circulation in

Lebanon, is examining the activity underground Netflix labor work that went from being invisible and illegal to becoming visible and legitimate to and by the users: giving the example within the Lebanese community, from one area to the other, Antonio, Ali and Ahmed expanded their underground distribution of Netflix around Lebanon through promoting their Netflix services on both digital and mainstream media, offering the public the entertainment that they need and ask for.

Such an approach pushed audiences, little by little, to be more engaged within what the underground can provide, and formalized pirated Netflix to position it as an identical, yet more effective and cost-efficient clone for Netflix access. In fact, Burkart validate this normalization of underground Netflix in his essay “Piracy and social change, revisiting piracy culture” by stating how audiences cultural change pushes users and scholars to revisit their interpretations and understanding of underground practices from rejecting towards normalization and standardization of such a phenomenon.

Furthermore, Land further expanded in her scholarship on the culture of piracy and underground models towards representing such practices as a disruption to” contemporary regimes of accumulation both through the practices of digital piracy and through anti-capitalist digital protests.” (Land, 2007). In fact, underground Netflix practices weren’t as voluntarily nor a personal act. However, informal Netflix came as a counteract to the critical economic crisis that Lebanon witnessed and as a revolution against the hegemony of western film distribution over the Middle east who is still behind in following up with the recent Netflix movies distribution and access.

As a result, to the Lebanese economic and cultural historical timeline, the underground Netflix phenomenon became more demanded than ever and an alternative to access foreign entertaining production and culture. In simpler words, Netflix

providers eased the process through offering full entertaining streaming access that the public desires without being questioned upon how they are bringing Netflix to life within the Lebanese community.

Overviewing this historical and technical exploration of Netflix timeline and operations, it is important to understand that the presence of excessive informal circulation and ruptures of formal infrastructural distribution created what it is known today as underground Netflix. Similar synthesis correlate with Atwood's examination of videocassettes in Iran and the need for informal distribution: extending on such a scholarship and the idea of cultural distribution through videocassettes as a medium, one can understand how the presence of underground Netflix as an active motif in Lebanon, led to the early spread of such a distributional model, channels of communication and cultural nexus between Netflix underground streaming platforms, audiences and laborers.

In this first season of underground Netflix, this chapter focused on informal circulation as a creative profession carrying a diversity of technical and infrastructural dimensions. Yet, examining the underground as an expertise beyond being perceived as an illegal activity, shapes underground Netflix as an alternative form of entertaining media circulation for audiences' access and connectivity. In fact, underground Netflix's chronological events uphold how such a platform operated at the nexus of formal and informal to ensure the continuity of film industry and entertainment circulation in Lebanon and delivery of access to what is inaccessible (Atwood, 2021).

Therefore, the study launches next, season two of underground Netflix, to switch the lens of focus from infrastructures and technology, to audiences and users. By

extension, the next chapter holds a deeper representation and analysis of this multidimensional phenomenon, yet through the examination of Netflix cultural predominance, specifically when analyzing audience's perceptions and users' engagement with Netflix and their understandings around the concept of content access and becoming part of the bigger politics and community of Netflix's nation.

## CHAPTER III

### SEASON II: UNDERGROUND NETFLIX: AN OPPORUTNITY FOR FREEDOM, ACCESS AND GLOBALIZATION

In the previous chapter, the stories of the underground Netflix laborers carry multiple hidden social and cultural aspects that illustrated part of the predominance of underground Netflix over other content as well as platforms. In fact, season one provokes the hidden technical aspects of underground Netflix, through its diverse historical checkpoints and technological models. However, Netflix's pre and current distribution within Lebanon has a major transformation to the media ecosystem in the country.

As I visited and observed the shops and pace of work of the Netflix providers physically and virtually, the number of customers calling or physically asking for Netflix accounts was uncountable: If having to compare it tangibly and visually, it is equal to the number of cars passing by the second at any highway around Beirut.

Yet, these users hold different digital and social characteristics: Some are newcomers, seeking to have Netflix access for the first time. While others demand technical assistance with their purchases of multiple cracked or generated Netflix accounts. In fact, this scenario of back and forth to Netflix services between users and labors sets up the urgency of theorizing audiences' practices and their understandings of how they perceive Netflix as the ultimate and unique form of media access. Yet as a scholar myself, I question such a cultural and technological predominance in asking: How do users attend extensively the entertaining access of Netflix? What is their

definition of “having a Netflix streaming subscription”? Why such an access is so important to them, practically and culturally? What is the correlation between users’ globalization and Netflix’s access?

As a subscription of video-on-demand (SVOD) according to Haddad in his essay, “Netflix speaks Arabic, Arabs speak Netflix: How SVOD is transforming Arabic series screenwriting”, Netflix streaming, curated and modelled services “proliferated, promising to challenge the existing Arabic series’ (musalsalat) routines in content and form.” (Haddad, 2021). Yet, this chapter expands on the author’s analyses of the linguistic and film production dominance, to address that underground Netflix circulation in Lebanon culturally altered the idea of unlimited media access towards Netflix through the public’s excessive eagerness, usage and visibility given to such a streaming platform. In other words, I aim to present how without the practices and participation of users within this global nation, nothing would have made sense, not even Netflix.

Examining the users/viewers of underground Netflix, this chapter analyzes users’ engagement, practices, and understandings of underground Netflix distribution. I intend to address and claim that Netflix predominates users’ practices and perceptions of entertaining media and meanings of access.

#### **A. Episode 1: Passivity and Activity of Users within Underground Netflix Access.**

The constant distribution of on-demand underground streaming platforms via technological and online systems, as Netflix, recalibrated and revolutionized the distributional infrastructures in Lebanon. However, with the presence of Underground Netflix and the eagerness to access, I claim here how this extensive streaming system

redirected users' consumptions, behavior and practices with digital entertaining media. Therefore, rather than assuming that the users of Netflix are passive consumers, I focus in this episode significantly to further explore underground Netflix users as active interchangers and producers of access and culture.

Any analysis of audience's practices of underground Netflix must start with repositioning users as "passive consumers" and/or "active producers." In fact, going back to Roman Lobato's analysis in *Netflix Nations*, the authors refer to Video-On-Demand distribution as "a data base form" in that users' consumptions are no longer passive yet "characterized by interactive, à la carte selection from algorithmically curated catalogs of content" (Lobato, 2018, p. 241). Taking into account Lobato's interpretation of today's Netflix audiences, it was significant to perceive both extreme representations and practices of the users I encountered during my discovery of underground Netflix.

### ***1. Users and Underground Netflix***

Zahraa, a young female media professional, had always an interesting controversial conversations and ideas when it comes to her usage of Netflix: As we were discussing her satisfaction when watching Netflix, Zahraa pointed out that she had two different active accounts on such a platform. The first account that she barely uses is a Canadian generated and subscribed account, where she passively enjoys watching some of the series like "Gray's Anatomy", which cannot be found on her second and most frequently used underground Netflix account in Lebanon, that she is sharing with ten other Netflix users simultaneously.

In addition, another geo-blocking experience of formal Netflix subscription appeared to fall within Netflix content restrictions. In fact, living in France, and as a Netflix user, Chloe had to rely on her friend's shared Lebanese account, that allowed her to watch *Sully*, the movie that she selected yet couldn't access it within the European Netflix territories indicating: "This title isn't currently available in your country. You'll find lots to explore on the home page."

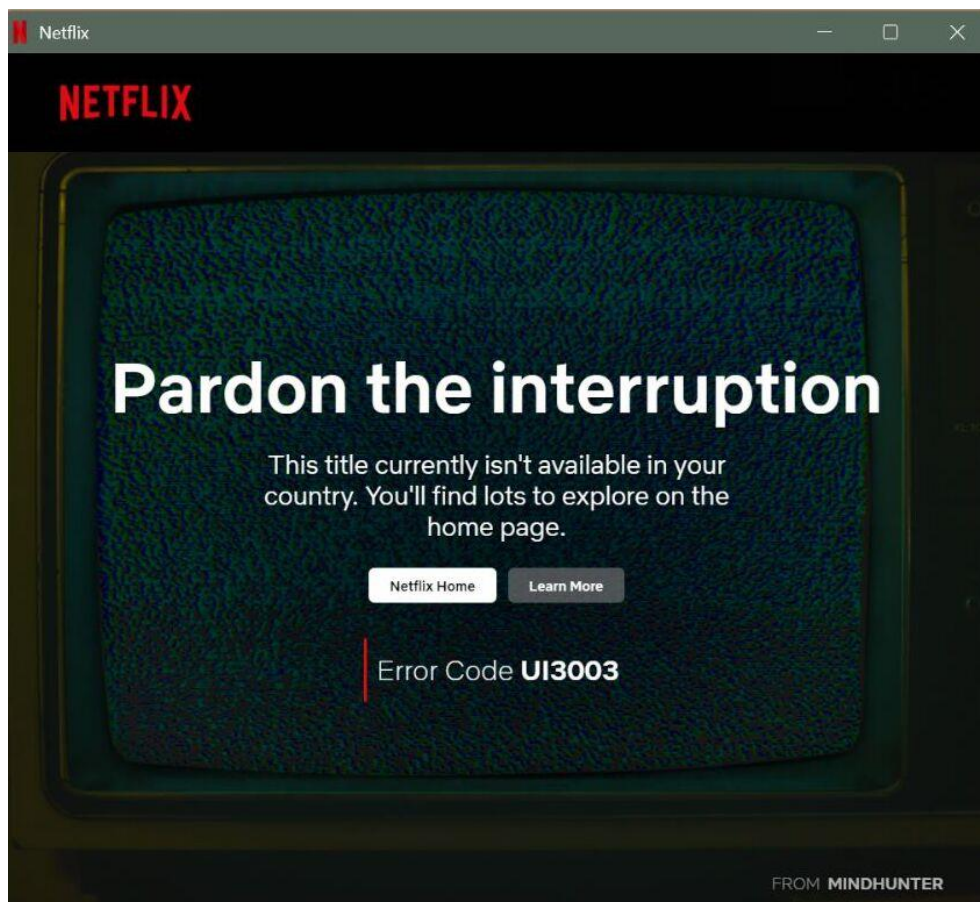


Figure 5: Netflix instant notification: Search for Sully movie using French Netflix account.

In this deeper exploration of Netflix users' access through these two cases, this discovery lied within uncovering the most prominent underground Netflix distribution method via users' practices that had no correlation with any Netflix provider, hacker or

even dealer. In other words, disconnected from any business, infrastructural and technological phenomena: Netflix Account and password sharing.

Within that context, it was no longer possible nor easy to think of underground Netflix in geographically bounded terms particularly with users being active producers and providers of their own Netflix accounts to others. Yet, analyzing Netflix algorithmic services, it is noticeable to identify the differences between Netflix as a formal and informal commodity in functions, usage, and services. In fact, according to Benjamin Kweskin, Netflix subscription details and criminalize within its policies any sort of underground Netflix practices, in specific unauthorized sharing and transferable accounts:

“Netflix grants you (which, for purposes of this License Agreement, shall include members of your immediate household for whom you will be responsible hereunder and users of the Netflix ready device with which you are accessing the Netflix service and for whom you will be responsible hereunder) a . . . non-transferable license.” (p.3)

By extension, it is significant to understand that while other formal Netflix accounts circulate within the company’s surveillance, underground Netflix through password sharing and users’ unsupervised practices bypass Netflix policies for traditional modes of multinational video distribution in favor of niche Lebanese communities aiming to remain within the global users of this streaming platform. and by relying on Lotz and her analyses of Netflix mapping, one can understand how through Netflix account sharing, as users are changing the dynamics of SVODs to partake into the globalization of Netflix via providing free, uncontrolled access. (Lotz, 2021)

By extension, to better understand this correlation of understandings and practices, it was crucial to go back to another discussion that occurred between Ahmed and one of his customers: In fact, While Netflix dealers and hackers perform considerable labor as producers of underground Netflix, Netflix subscribers (as users and viewers) also play a role in creating and sustaining such a phenomenon. For example, one of the users entering Ahmed’s shop described how, after owning a Netflix account, he was able to jailbreak it and share it with eight of his family members and friends, which technically and practically exceeds the maximum numbers of logged in users allowed by the Netflix company per each account.

Yet, what is still hindered and can be discovered within audiences’ cultural understandings when practicing underground Netflix? Answering the proposed claim that I mentioned earlier in this section and paper, I triangulate this synthesis on audiences with underground Netflix by providing an extensive version of Janne Riekkinen theoretical framework on Subscription Video on Demand (SVOD). The author provided a chain representing the different stages in audiences’ perceptions and practices within SVODs’ piracy and the development of the cultural production aspect.

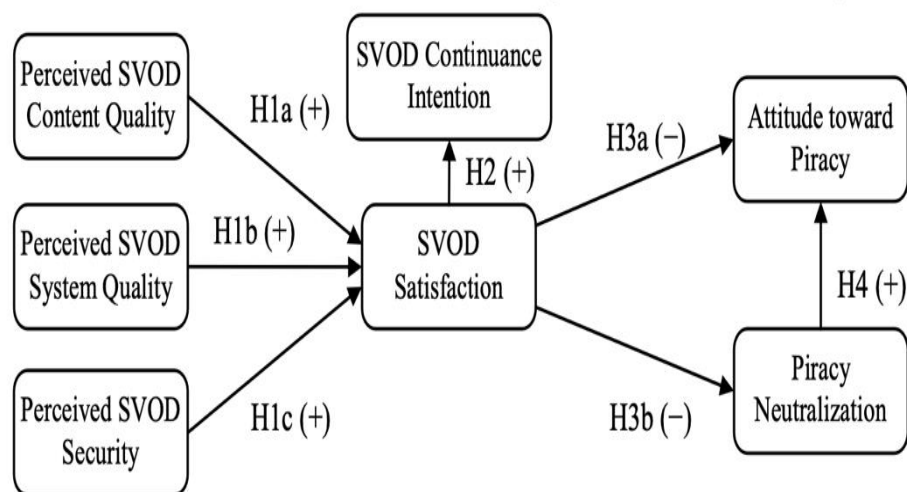


Figure 6: Riekkinen's theoretical model of SVOD perceptions as antecedents of Piracy perceptions.

In the previous examination of audiences with underground Netflix in Lebanon, it was important to understand that both affordability and the Netflix effect play an intensive role in how Netflix is perceived and engaged with. However, Riekkinen theoretical model (as indicated in figure 5) seems to be incomplete within this study's analysis: positioning the research within the Lebanese context, it is crucial to explain audiences' agency within their practices of underground Netflix and how they shape their perception of such a platform. In fact, this falls within reviewing not just the quality of security and content, but also both aspects of SVODs affordability and aesthetics of underground Netflix.

Moving forward, audiences' level of satisfaction and continuity in using underground Netflix depend on the users' evaluation of their experiences with such a distributional model. According to the Netflix Hacker, as a daily witness to users' practices with underground Netflix access, when SVOD satisfaction is met, Riekkinen elaborates how users' attitude change towards further engaging and becoming attached to this phenomenon (Riekkinen, 2018). In the Lebanese context, this behavioral switch can be explained through users' normalizing this form of informal practices and highlighting Netflix access within communities as the vertex in providing the best, and most updated entertaining media library of movies and TV shows.

Academically, this underground episode correlate with several media scholarships circulating around Netflix predominance over users' piracy practices. The synthesis on the concept password/email sharing and account multiuse within accessing Netflix represent how users' Netflix underground practices reshapes the phenomenon of

entertaining media access and the culture of global digital restrictions and capitalism resilience.

To delve deeper, this control of liberating users' underground practices of Netflix and free sharing, portray different forms of entertaining media and cultural exchange within the public. In fact, the switch of audiences from passive subscribers to active distributors, position Netflix "in the global unlimited cloud instead of in actual computers at a centralized location" (Kweskin.2017). In other words, users' creative piracy activity shape Netflix's predominant world to connect access and the people in a multiple sphere of content, cultures and powers (Cunningham & Craig, 2016).

As such, the challenge between the formal and informal users' practices with Netflix is not as complicated as it might at first appear. In fact, most of Netflix Lebanese community are outside of the formal globalization processes due to the viewers needs of "media diversity, choice, and access" to be addressed and applied (Lobato, 2018). By extension, the whole analysis falls within the interplay between the underground distributional methods provided by Netflix laborers, the affordances of underground Netflix accessibility, and cultural rapport for Netflix access that arise through users' informal distributional methods and behavioral needs for access, binge-watch and being part of the globality that this platform created and still expanding.

## **B. Episode 2: The Multidimensionality of Netflix's Access**

By looking at the distributional model and the culture of Netflix underground access behind such a phenomenon, it is significant to examine beyond what Netflix *offers* into what it *changes*: In fact, underground Netflix carry this assembly of power

dynamics exerting cultural influences within audiences' engagement with informal distribution into becoming part of their everyday practices, economies and markets. (Lobato, 2019 & Neiborg, 2018).

Linking these syntheses to the claim proposed, one major aspect that this episode aims on validating is how Netflix has become a coherent and prominent platform, representing what it means to have unlimited access to entertaining media. Digging deeper physically and intellectually within underground practices, several examples and scholarly work clarify this correlation between Netflix access and the users.

During the discussions and illustrations of how users perceive Netflix, Ali emphasized on two major key concepts that affects how users understand and engage with underground Netflix. Built around the socio, economic and cultural factors, these two main notions addressed by Makin, Bowers and McDonald within this distributional cycle of this streaming services, reframe the access characteristics that viewers seek: *affordability* and *the Netflix effect*.

### ***1. Affordability of Underground distribution***

Based on Ali customers' data, more than 75% of Netflix users in Lebanon depend on informal means to have such an access. Similarly, 95% of the public in general search and demand Netflix access, positioning such a platform as the top one for streaming entertaining media. By extension, this culture of underground creativity and unlimited informal circulation demand within users and laborers shape

constructively the idea of Netflix as a leading distributional network, yet within underground operations.

First, it was significant to revise the affordability factor within Netflix distribution. According to Ali's experience on a daily basis as a "Netflix dealer", users seek the best quality and if possible, for the least price. While taking into consideration that hacked and offshore generated accounts appear to be more cost efficient than the official subscription paid by any user worldwide, Lebanese viewers rely on what underground Netflix distributors provides instead: Paying between 100,000LL and 150,000 Lebanese pounds instead of 11.98\$ on a premium account with the same digital specifications, profile characteristics and access services is a "no brainer" for users.

Marken and Bowers (2020) provide a closer look to this picture of underground Netflix affordability. In fact, their scholarship "Netflix as a Piracy Disruptor? A Cross-Sectional Test of Accessibility and Affordability on Interest in Piracy" position both affordability and access as prior factors affecting interest in underground Netflix distribution (Marken & Bowers, 2020). More specifically, both authors explain how the digital markets drive either legitimate content distribution and/or to the creation of underground content. By extension, between Netflix legitimate content library and its distributional model, underground Netflix came to offer alternative and affordable modes of distribution to fill the gaps monitored within the formal circulation of such a platform within the Lebanese market, which pushed users to prioritize underground Netflix as the "place to go" for access and entertainment satisfaction.

## 2. *The Netflix Effect*

Yet, while the monetization of such a commodity reflect some sort of relevance to users' engagement with underground Netflix, it is crucial to look beyond the idea of materiality towards ideology and representation. By extension, the Netflix effect that McDonald and Smith-Rowsey argued appear to dominate over users' understandings of what it means to have Netflix and viewers reception and experience of such an access.

To begin with, Netflix, from its arrival, branded itself to the audiences and users as a medium for both entertainment access and globalization. "It's all about watching and hearing the Netflix graphics appearing at the beginning of every show, film or even series" Hastings claimed in his Ted talk interview. Expanding on Hastings reflection, this statement focuses on the aesthetical factor promoting Netflix as a glamorous *platform* that provide unique forms of access: the graphics, categorization of movies and series by genre and ranking, the colors used and the personalization of film taste create a technological body offering a distinctive form of entertainment.

In fact, It is important to decode this interesting correlation that further highlight the idealization of Netflix access that relies on brand identity, accessibility and globality all together. Discussing the importance and nowadays portrayal of Netflix by its users, Nadim pointed out how Netflix, through formal and informal means of distribution, became the baseline of all subscription services, which user needs to have. As a Netflix addict and reviewer since 2011, with more than two hundred thousand engaging Netflix users on his TikTok and Instagram accounts, *Nad's reviews* explained how users connect with the aesthetics of Netflix and the ambiance it produces before the content library that it distributes. This in return, divert and attach users' meaning of entertaining access to having a Netflix account.

According to Nadim, within Lobato's interpretation of Netflix intel, content access and evaluation is an important factor that needs to be addressed when examining Netflix as an ideology, culture and practice within its users. First, interpreting the content and its distribution constantly within the Lebanese and MENA region markets requires an in-depth examination in how and when users have access to when using Netflix. Even with the extensive demand and usage of Netflix access, a significant delay lies within the circulation of foreign series and movies production to the middle east: "As a Netflix reviewer, I always had numerous Lebanese users complaining on Netflix distribution policies to the middle east" Nadim stated. By extension, Netflix distributional strategies is based on market prioritization whereby multiple series took a long time to be streamed within the Lebanese market even after being formally released in other European and American regions.

This market-centric approach is conceptualized to assist Netflix in adopting distributional strategies to control media consumption cannibalization. As addressed by the author in her synthesis over media content distribution, this corelate Netflix distribution to the idea of how this streaming service identifies "the demographics to consume substitutive television content, while uses, gratifications, media habits, and consumption values are collaboratively used to re-segment the audiences based on platform selection motivators." (Shay, 2015). As such, Netflix approach of delaying and categorizing content diffusion explain their objective is prolonging the popularity and circulation of a specific streaming product, therefore extending the users' subscription duration and entertaining consumption association to having Netflix access.

From diffusion to proxies, it is crucial to pause and examine Netflix proxies in relation to users' cultural engagement with such a platform within the formal and

informal Netflix access. Based on Netflix geographic algorithms, the company indirectly clarifies their policies of geo-distribution:

Netflix is available in over 190 countries around the world. Each country has its own catalog of original and licensed TV shows and movies. The country on your account can't be changed unless you move to a new one. If you have moved recently, see [Traveling or moving with Netflix](#) for details.

However, how can geo-blocking affect audiences' access to Netflix? Lobato approaches proxies as the multiple software allowing users to "access content unavailable in their geographic locale" (Lobato, 2019). In fact, the concept of geo-blocking circulates within the parameters of "Hollywood-style content protection", as Netflix became a television, series and film distributor and producer with its own intellectual property (Lobato, 2019). However, these conservative stances create the ongoing battle within users choosing between formal and informal Netflix access. By extension, Netflix global services, copyright, legal restrictions and accessibility disbalance between countries appears within users' access to Netflix content in Lebanon, whereby the proxies applied restrict the Lebanese market from having the full and timely content package that formal Netflix offers internationally.

Despite the legal challenges surrounding the formal distribution of Netflix content from one hand, and the technical difficulties within informal practices and operations, users' access to Netflix remains a precedence over other forms of digital entertaining streaming services. Giving his own testimony as a Netflix provider, Ahmed explained the importance and solidity of this informal and invisible relationship between users and Netflix: "No matter what happens infrastructurally or technically, and regardless of the limitations that Netflix drew within its distributional flow, as

underground laborers and users we always find ways to Netflix, because what really matters is having this form of access to this platform in particular”, while acknowledging the diversity and presence of other streaming services and dangerousness of this informal acts.

Another concrete example validates practically the presented claim. In addition to users’ eagerness to have Netflix’s access through underground distribution while bypassing any form of geo-blocking and content flow restrictions, Antonio declared having more than 1500 subscribers within his offshore distributional model, benefiting from an unlimited access to Netflix international movie library, while being located digitally and physically in Lebanon: “ Through our latest technological means and cultural visions, as Netflix providers we are maintaining access equality when providing users with the access that they search for when subscribing to such a huge streaming platform”.

I end this episode by extending and correlating the concept of users’ access to Netflix Nation. As Lobato addressed in his book Netflix’s “transnational” nature and how it accommodates international and local cultural necessities, the following section offers a representation of how users’ demand to Netflix access, either formally and/or informally, bridge scholarships into larger trends in “convergence, globalization, and cultural imperialism” (p. 12), and to tap on Netflix as an important technical yet cultural exodus within its global community. (Foxman, 2020)

### C. Episode 3: Underground Netflix and The Global Conversation

Far from looking at the micro aspect of underground Netflix distribution and users' practices of Netflix informal access, it was important to decrypt the macro concept of globality within the reasons that pushed towards implementing underground mechanisms. In fact, to provide this form of digital access to the Lebanese Public, the concept and discourses of individual and community globalization appeared to be the one answer when asked *why you choose Netflix*.

Within the continuous observations of Netflix ideological portrayal, Nadim explained how part of extensive Netflix's reviewing focus on the popularity and universality that each Netflix production, movie and series acquire after being released. However, this overall analysis falls within assessing the full performance of Netflix as a streaming platform with its community worldwide, and the discourses circulating around its users.

In these stances, it is important to assess Netflix distributional and movie production journey. "Netflix had a head start, culturally, from its DVD distributional model till its digital streaming services." Systematically, I continue and expand Nadim's overview to highlight that examining the globalization of Netflix is understanding that this upgrade from mailing based Netflix to internet-based Netflix, shifted the platforms portray towards being perceived as a cultural deck for access, power and freedom within users' engagement from the beginning of its operations. By extension, the collection of history, labor work, and culture within this infrastructural distributional system, labelled Netflix to be the gateway of the Lebanese viewers to the world.

In fact, a deeper understanding of the globalization of Netflix both before and after digitalization is navigating within how Netflix “disrupted the system to create its own globally enclosed system.” (Venter, 2021). More specifically, the transnationality and inclusiveness of Netflix and its global expansion represent how Netflix globality affected its users’ and viewers dramatically: “If you don’t have access to Netflix formally or informally, or even if the users are not satisfied by what Netflix is offering, unsubscribing from this platform or switching to another streaming arena is not an option anymore”. Within this context, this section expands on Lobato’s scholarship through validating how audiences don’t want to be left out of the community that Netflix has been creating for years (Lobato, 2019).

Adding on this analysis, it is crucial to explore Netflix switch from service to foreign movie content into a *portal* to global culture. In fact, recognizing the hybrid nature of Netflix as a bridge to communities from offline to online entertainment, and a *gateway* to international film content distribution both through formal and/or informal means, unpack how such a model offers users the sense of being part of this greater, luxurious and global community: “this globality of Netflix create an entertaining nation that everyone wants to be part of it. It encourages users to join and be committed to the latest entertaining and knowledgeable media spectacles that Netflix distribute” Ahmed affirmed.

Furthermore, one very significant factor about Netflix globality and being part of this community lies within partaking into the global conversation that circulated around Netflix. In simpler words, Netflix movies and series took part in multiple global events. When *Squid Game* was released on Netflix, the public was able to track and monitor by the second, millions of footages and/or songs related to that series. Yet, to engage with

such a digital and physical viral conversation that circulated within multiple discourses, being part and having access to Netflix (the distributor streaming platform of *Squid Game*) was fundamental.

### 1. Netflix Highlights Within the Lebanese Revolution

Additional example circulates around the media spectacles that flashed back to my memory during my analysis of Netflix ideological globality. In 2019, Lebanon witnessed a massive revolution due to the political corruption and economic crises. Influenced by La Casa de Papel series, the Lebanese revolution took its directions towards adopting the TV drama as the main theme of the uprising. the Lebanese protesters and fan community illustrated the same story.



Figure 7: Tweets on La Casa De Papel shared during Lebanese October uprising 2019.

As *la Casa de Papel* casts portrayed an anti-governmental movement in the series and created their own identity by wearing masks and red clothing, the Lebanese protestors portrayed the same approach during the revolution by wearing the characters costumes, protesting on the *Bella Ciao* song and raising banners that included similar statements from the series within the Lebanese political context. Such Lebanese movements shaped a new identity of *la Casa De Papel* in a different political context, however, within similar cultural ideologies: revolting as an anti-governmental uprising against corruption and abuse of freedom.

By extension, such a Lebanese fandom engagement went viral to an extent where, *Money Heist* producers featured the Lebanese revolution into their Netflix sequel *the phenomenon*. As a result, this cultural interaction between both Netflix and the Lebanese audiences creates a combination of both concepts mentioned by Al Hayek and Berg on fandoms and cultural proximity with Lobato's notion on Netflix globality: in fact, this event represented how the Lebanese fan base recognized similar cultures with such series through their continuous access to such a streaming platform.

Further real-life testimonies come to validate how audiences' eagerness to access correlates to their need to be part of this global Netflix's sphere. As an alumnus AUB student, Nadim described how, while he was still studying in Lebanon, his obsession with Netflix and in being part of this worldwide community, pushed him to get access through underground practices, particularly back when Netflix DVDs still dominated the entertaining distribution spectrum.

Across all analyses of globalization, connecting the world in access, content, emotions, information and practices enables Netflix influence on users' cultural

belongings and understandings within entertaining media access. Theoretically, this synthesis links to Göran Bolin theory on cultural technology. Supporting the argument and claims at hand, this meta-theory validates how Netflix, as a technological and algorithmic portal, pushes towards a multiplicity in cultural production within users' understandings of Netflix as a gateway to unlimited access and global expansion.

With that being said, this assembly of key factors, concepts and understandings round off the most significant part of the research question proposed: Why does Netflix represent the pinnacle for global media access to Lebanese audiences? This subsection of analyses purposely reflects Netflix as “an opportunity for freedom access, and globalization”, giving the fact that this platform and its underground practices expanded the meanings of access towards cultural understandings of globality.

By extension, I bridge globality's concept to cultural liberation through Netflix distribution. In fact, during the endless conversation with Antonio and Ahmed, one can recognize how both underground laborers didn't care much about money as much as liberating users: “As laborers, Netflix was and still is the absolute and primary source of continuity to our work and to sophisticated entertainment in Lebanon. Yet for audiences, having Netflix is having the freedom to watch things that they don't have formal access to, to be part of this extensive conversation”. In other words, to belong to this elite entertaining community that revolutionized the digital streaming.

This observation of users' multiple activities and attitude to possess Netflix access, via underground or formal means of distribution, direct the claim's synthesis around one main pattern: global citizenship. In other words, Netflix algorithmic systems combined with the underground power dynamics join Lebanese users within the Netflix

nation of unlimited and free access to global media. Therefore, representing the pinnacle of media access, underground Netflix liberates Lebanese citizens from a) geo-blocking, b) economic restrictions and c) from all TV linear schedules. Simply, Netflix provide audiences with the freedom to access entertaining media content and to connect to it culturally *whenever they want, however they want* as global citizens and users.

In a nutshell, season two of underground Netflix gives a 3D shape to the core relationship between Netflix and its users: In fact, this section firstly examined the agency and power of the users in being recipients, portrayers and producers of Netflix content and cultural distribution. Furthermore, It unveiled Netflix's multi patterns, far from being an entity as addressed in the first chapter, but more as an ideology and an industry for global culture within the publics' social and political modalities.

From these syntheses moving forward, this season of users' understanding and ideologies within their Netflix formal and informal experiences ends to engage academically with the IP wars happening in the bigger media landscape. By extension, the last season of this underground Netflix series will divert and expand the attention towards exploring the multiple formal and informal competitors partaking within the streaming spectrum, whereby It compares and analyzes the battles happening towards brand affinity, Intellectual property and global streaming domination.

## CHAPTER IV

### SEASON III: THE SVOD WARS: THE BATTLE TO STREAMING DISTRIBUTION

In this study's analysis of Underground Netflix distribution, the combination of season one and two unpacked the multiple facets of Netflix circulation and understandings in Lebanon without looking deeper into the other players and the competition surrounding Netflix popularity within this digital streaming phenomena. In fact, as Nadim discussed how Netflix as a platform, was always a content quota streaming services based on movie production and audience's categorization, it was important to quote his words when stating the gap that audiences always look for in every streaming platform: "Until present days, audiences don't have one single source that has everything,...".

Within that context, and as previously claimed, the Lebanese Netflix, marked by formal and informal distribution, predominated all meanings of access in entertaining media culturally and practically. Yet, this dominance only exists with audiences crystalizing Netflix through their practices and perceptions as the only platform offering globalization and a wider range of movie library access and cultural change.

By extension, it is crucial return to the study's main focus while questioning the vertex of Netflix access and its streaming services: What about the competition over Intellectual property and its effect on Netflix hegemony? Why does Netflix dominate Lebanese audience's understanding of access to entertainment media at a time when multitude of formal and informal circulation methods promise a seemingly unlimited flow of content and culture? In fact, this section will examine underground Netflix

from the devil advocate perspective in questioning and analyzing its distribution with other formal and underground streaming models by claiming how the different informal and formal streaming brands does offer the same or even a better flow of entertaining media around Lebanon and the world.

Across this context, and with the presence of a diversification of streaming platforms circulating in Lebanon simultaneously, it is a must to focus and divide the analysis of the Lebanese market into its formal and informal streaming competition scope to better represent the powers, domination and targeting of such services, each in its rightful competitive arena.

#### **A. Episode 1: IP Distribution and Market Competition**

The competition between top formal and informal streaming platforms appear to be a fierce battle over intellectual property, each aiming to conquer audiences and the rights to distinguishable and viral content. In fact, this episode take off with Havard's analysis of "Disney, Netflix, and Amazon Oh My! An Analysis of Streaming Brand Competition and the Impact on the Future of Consumer Entertainme", to how this streaming competition led to resources being dedicated to existing content, as well as pushed streaming platforms into escalating bidding wars: "In many instances, companies compete to feature content for a pre-determined amount of time (i.e., not indefinitely), all in an effort to attract consumers" (Katz, 2020).

Yet, why is it important to explore intellectual property sustainability and Netflix as a streaming platform? Within this conversational context, Nadim pointed out on the changes that are happening recently and invisibly within the streaming spectrum. In fact, companies as HBO, Disney+, Shahid and amazon prime used to rely on Netflix

distribution to attract audiences to their content and movie production: “All users, underground and formal ones, had access to movies that didn’t belong to Netflix yet gave it the visibility that it needed.” In other words, such practices made a brand like Netflix a household name for film and series streaming globally.

Basing the observational analysis on content distribution, the circulation of underground Netflix in Lebanon as well as in the world gave such a platform the pinnacle to entertaining media that was addressed earlier in season two, and when reaching the top of “chosen streaming service”, the main global streaming companies started trying to hold onto original content for their own streaming services rather than license to other companies, Netflix in particular.

From a business and economic perspective, streaming companies payed large amounts for their IP and existing content upfront to control their profits specifically that revenue sharing model is different from an owning and streaming original production from the original source (Katz, 2020). A recent example circulates around marvel production, whereby after watching *Spider-Man* movies on Netflix during their distributional deal with Sony Pictures in April, 2020, Disney+, as a rival brand, broke its merge with other entertainment companies to personally feature content from acquired properties such as Pixar, Marvel, LucasFilm, and Fox, in 2021.

And from content library stocking to original production, the battle between streaming services shifted towards featuring originally produced programming that is only available on their platform. In other words, the competition changed from IP owning to IP production and distribution. In fact, after Netflix dropping their first original program in 2013 (Littleton & Roettgers, 2018), other streaming services have been forced to

produce original movies and series if they want to stay as main players within this global distributional phenomenon to attract a big audience and public sphere.

That means in addition to extensive spending and capitalism on existing content, streaming companies also will have to invest into “the production and promotion of original content that will be available exclusively on their platform to keep consumers engaged for prolonged periods of time” (Prince & Greenstein, 2018).

But what is the correlation between streaming competitions over intellectual property and Netflix distribution? And can the Lebanese market be framed within this competition’s context. According to another scholarship of Lobato, “Beyond streaming wars: Rethinking competition in video services”, the ability for global streaming companies to have more control and surveillance over distribution as a phenomenon will allow more services options and models to engage *the direct-to-consumer space*. In other words, distribution and streaming services defines what the market wants and which platform can be positioned a top demanded service over others.

Across this analysis, I develop and explain the streaming services market in Lebanon and the different SVOD partaking within this interplay of content distribution, access and digital tv entertainment.

## **B. Episode 2: Framing Formal Market Competition: SVOD in Lebanon**

Elaborating on the concept of IP ownership and production, it is important to take Havard and Katz notions of into the Lebanese context, while correlating such a phenomenon to the idea of underground practices and how it intertwines with the reason why Netflix is perceived as pinnacle of media streaming.

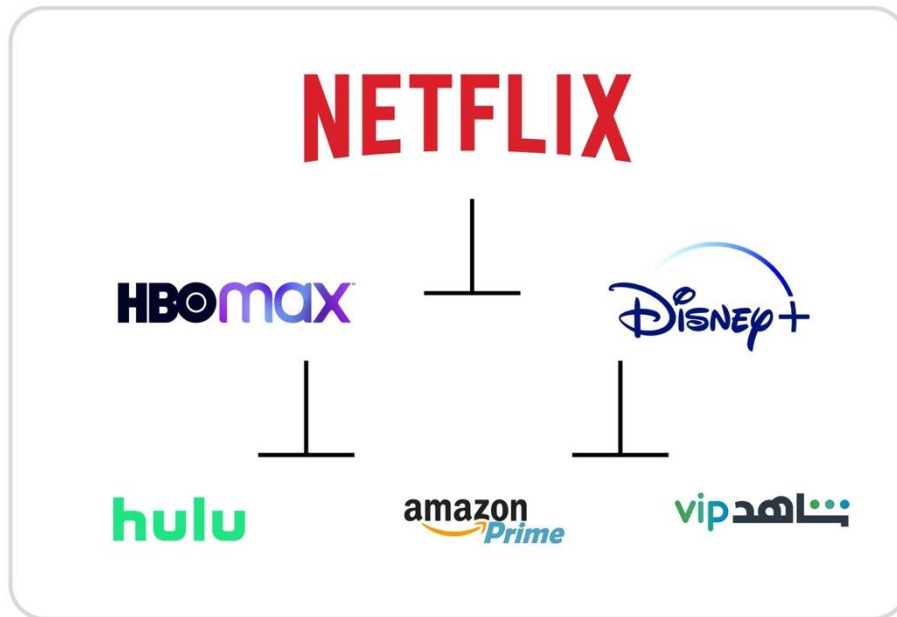


Figure 8: SVOD market and distribution in Lebanon

For illustrative purposes and to understand how the competition between services pushed further towards Netflix popularity, it is crucial to consider a specific local market and the different services available. Figure 8 represent the eight most familiar and popular internet-distributed video services dominating the Lebanese audiences and public sphere in 2022, according to the 2023 Flixpatrol data analysis.

In fact, and according to the data and study provided over the streaming market in Lebanon, Hulu, amazon prime and Shahid are mainly used fandom bases who already have accounts to track and watch very specific shows. However, both Disney+ and HBO Max expanded their reach to audiences and started getting a higher number of subscribers after starting redistributing and producing their original content which have good community engagement.

For example, HBO Max released in September 2022 the sequel and continuation of the story and series of the Game of thrones which has an extensive fan base community all over the world, including Lebanon. Part of its local audiences are still formally subscribed to the streaming services, others rely on informal websites such as 123movies.com and Fmovies.to, while the rest search for another series that is part of the Netflix platform, taking into account the easier access through underground distribution, explained in previous chapters.

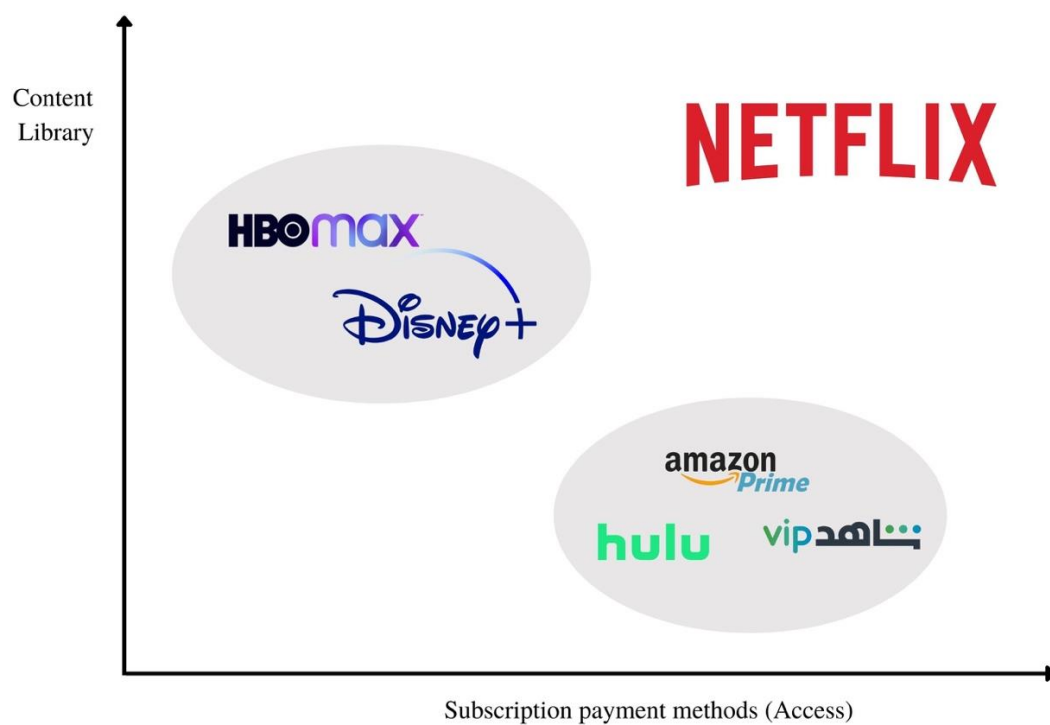


Figure 9: Internet-distributed video services in Lebanon organized by services distribution characteristics: Content Library and access methods.

As this breakdown of streaming services suggests, it is important to understand that the categorization of SVOD is in fact the mixture of multiplicity of the different

histories, content library and subscription strategies that occur within that market, and help place each platform accordingly. Relying on Lobato and Lotz analysis of the intersection between payed SVOD and the services they provide, the Lebanese market exhibit a varied range of payment propositions and content library that upfront the level of audiences' satisfaction that in fact position each platform within the high-distribution/demand and low-distribution/demand locus.

During an observational analysis over the users' choices of their entertaining content and the platforms subscribed to, Netflix appeared at the top of the list of the most prominent streaming services that circulate excessively within the Lebanese digital parameters, providing a movie/shows library that is satisfying to the audiences' cultural needs and expectations. In fact, analyzing Netflix libraries can add to our understanding of how transnational streamers blend local and global features, specifically that in 2020, Netflix started promoting Lebanese film productions as part of its content distribution, and which expand its transnational and local reach. (Lotz, 2022).

However, why is still Netflix at the top of this list even after competitive companies retrieving their Ips ownership and distributional rights? In fact, underground Netflix interfered within the platform's branding, compared to other platform that are still behind in adapting to the Lebanese current context and situation: "While Disney+, HBO max didn't provide alternative payment methods to Lebanese audiences, underground practices helped in sustaining the brands affinity and popularity through meeting audiences' needs, financial and infrastructural gaps" Nadim stated. By extension, Lobato's concept of "*who is competing with whom?*" falls in understanding the substitution of distributional methods which offer fundamentally "the same product

distributed using a different technology” keeping the metric of the streaming services, as Netflix in Lebanon, in the competition map with other platforms who started appearing as strong competitors, holding original and demanded IPs (popular movies and series). (Lobato, 2021). Therefore, underground Netflix offering lower priced device subscription addresses Netflix to the users as a high-standard service offering relative and demanded libraries within a feasible and accessible distributional strategy. (Lotz, 2022).

In addition, and according to Flixpatrol data streaming analysis, even though HBO Max and Disney+ are tied within a secured and formal payment method, only accessible by few of the local community, however, they maintained their legacy in audiences and access through their original IPs that they always offered. In simpler words, Nadim described how *Marvel studios* and *Game of thrones* in specific has their elite users that are part of such a global streaming community in Lebanon.

From another perspective, while Shahid, Amazon prime and Hulu has a limited movie library and IP production (e.g. Lord of the rings distributed by amazon prime), however being placed in the top seven of the most relied on platforms for media entertainment comes with the better and easier distributional methods to the audiences in terms of payment methods and its compatibility with the internet infrastructure and status quo in Lebanon.

Yet, the main competition between HBO and Disney+ with Netflix isn't an accidental phenomenon. According to Tryon and his analysis of Netflix and HBO's Original Programming Strategies, regardless of HBO's success in promoting itself “as a subscription television service capable of providing quality entertainment”, however, what seems notable and significant is the fact that Lebanese audiences Netflix

engagement and prioritization has a long history, interrelated with the evolution of Netflix as a distribution platform, the co-presence of underground practices, and its ownership and provision of multiple popular shows as *Friends*, *Breaking bad*, *Prison Break*, *Al Hayba*, *The Vikings*, etc... This in return portray how Netflix and underground Netflix distribution recasts itself as a brand that uses multiple technologies, quality services and cultural intersharing to fulfill the unmet needs of media consumers that are always searching for “a single space that has everything”.

Adding to the synthesis at hand, all formal video streaming platforms are interchangeable, and consequently, these multiple services do not compete directly yet differs in the criterion of their distribution methods, As Kevin Sanson and Gregory Steirer have argued in their analysis that “industrial logics of streaming video are not uniform”. (Sanson & Steirer, 2019). Furthermore, viewers’ choice, regardless of these different services, derives from an overall value and reviewing proposition that includes type of content, user’s experience (e.g. ability to find desired content, ease of use, interface), and whether they pay through a direct or indirect fee, which position the following Internet-distributed video services as highly differentiated by these measures.

Across this context, despite the proactive battle occurring between the formal global streaming platforms and the current media streaming landscape in Lebanon, this episode redirects the synthesis around the study’s main claim in questioning why Netflix is that global and curated while multiple informal spaces are competing on diverse vectors particularly content characteristics, distribution and the geographic scale of their underground circulation.

### C. Episode 3: Framing Informal Market Competition with Underground Netflix



Figure 10: EgyBest Facebook group reviews on the websites underground and pirated practices and movie distribution.

Beside the exploration of Netflix formal race towards being and remaining as the chosen streaming space by audiences’, another fierce and informal competitor operates in the shadows yet very visibly to most of the public we know. With almost 520K followers and members in its official Facebook group, one can detect the most prominent and pirated streaming websites in Lebanon within an ironic and questionable Facebook post saying: “Production companies vary, however the thief remains one” and then the quote continues “are you really enjoying your poor life? subscribe and stop being a slave to Netflix capitalism”.

To further examine this informal presence of other underground competitors to Netflix, it’s significant to analyze this competition under the same spectrum of

characteristics and practices previously examined on Netflix itself. As this study claimed earlier, the Lebanese Netflix, marked by formal and informal distribution, predominated all meanings of access in entertaining media culturally and practically. Yet, this dominance only exists with audiences crystalizing Netflix through their practices and perceptions as the only platform offering globalization and a wider range of movie library access and cultural change.

By extension, this episode goes back to answer the study's research question: Why does Netflix dominate Lebanese audience's understanding of access to entertainment media at a time when multitude informal circulation methods promise a seemingly unlimited flow of content and culture? In fact, it will examine and focus on underground Netflix from the devil advocate perspective in analyzing another underground distributional model: What happened to the different informal platforms that does offer the same or even a better flow of entertaining media around Lebanon? Particularly, how can EGY.BEST, as a case study and model distribution, be compared to the infrastructural experience of accessing underground Netflix in Lebanon? Acknowledging Netflix as a curated system, I assert that the presence of other informal platforms as EGY.BEST critically compete technically and culturally with underground Netflix within their distribution of access.

Across this context, it is significant to look at the similarities and differences of both platforms circulating within the underground from their cultural, practical, and infrastructural facets. In a deep discussion about audiences and their commitment to be part of Netflix, it was interesting to know Ali personal subscription on Netflix. However, Ali, as a Netflix dealer himself, have a Netflix account for prestigious

reasons. On the contrary, he also belongs to the *free community* using EGY.BEST as a source for entertaining media access.

Similarly, to Netflix, EGY.BEST is an online website and streaming service that offers free access to entertainment media, providing a diverse spectrum and genre of global movies and series. According to Ali, this platform has witnessed an increase in users since early 2019: “audiences started spreading and using such a website extensively during and after the economic crisis. In fact, EGY.BEST came as the perfect underground platform to offer audiences free ownership over an unlimited selection of entertaining media”.

In addition, Nadim’s point of view towards EGY.BEST circulate around the concept of anti-capitalism, illegal practices and access balance in one single conversation. “For many years, viewers demanded to have one full developed aggregator providing the ultimate access that they will always try to find. EGY.BEST came as an underground platform, despite its illegality, to provide a worldwide inventory of pirated movies and series without any cost nor subscription”

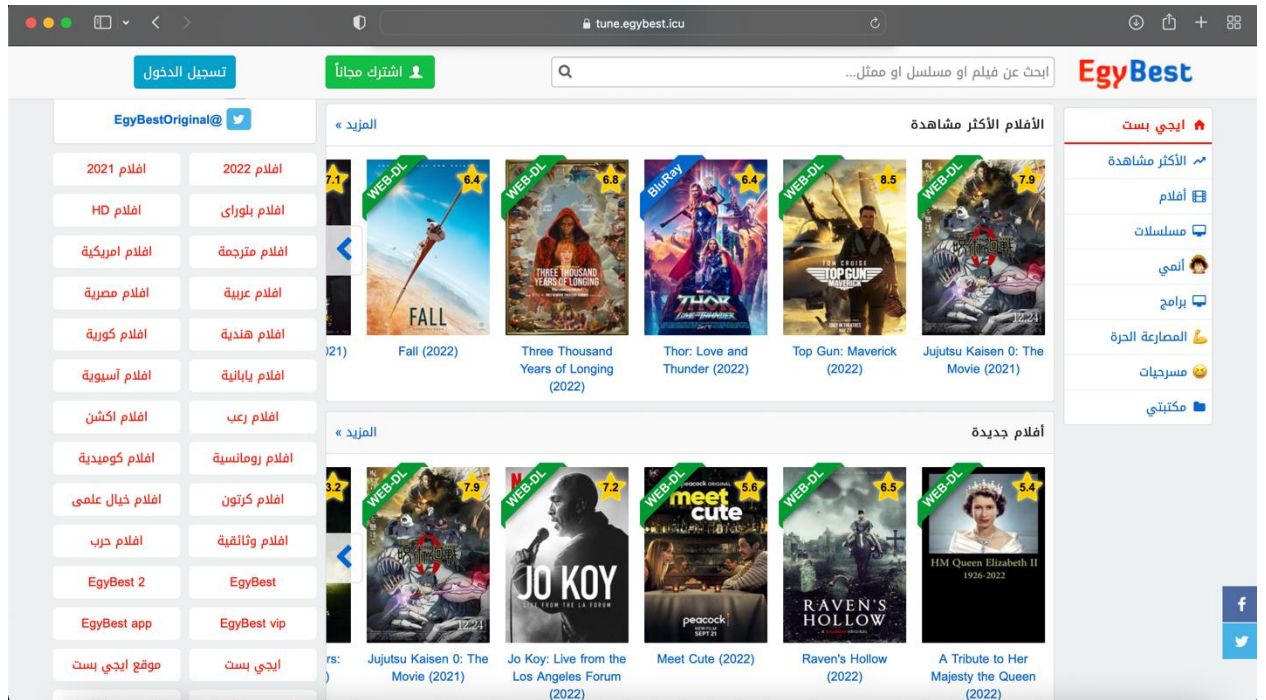


Figure 11: EGYBest home page: underground and pirated practices and movie distribution.

In fact, EGY.BEST, according to Nadim and Antonio, has, as any pirated content, its harmful effects on intellectual property and streaming companies' revenue and brand identity. However, looking from the audiences' lens, such a platform (with its anonymous developers), undergoes a complex procedure of tracking and providing top watched series and movies within its services with no subscription fees nor email registration.

Looking at the main home page of this digital space, any movie addict can find Netflix, HBO, Disney+, apple TV, Amzaon prime series along with a list of Bollywood, Korean, Japanese, Asian and Arab pan catalog, offering thousands of content in low, standard and high quality resolution with the possibility of binge-watching online or through direct download. This activity, falls within questioning if EGY.BEST is a crime-wave, or a or source for social and cultural construction. (Yar, 2005)

However, it is crucial to correlate underground Netflix and EGY.BEST concepts of underground practices and access. In fact, to understand the differences in characteristics and patterns of both distributional models, the following table represents and compares EGY.BEST infrastructurally, systematically and culturally with underground Netflix in the Lebanese spectrum, using specific themes that require further analysis.

	<b>EGY.BEST</b>	<b>Underground Netflix</b>
<b>Affordability</b>	Free subscription	Hacked/Prepaid accounts: up to 50 thousand Lebanese pounds
<b>Internet consumption</b>	Low Data Usage	High Data Usage
<b>Services</b>	-Available across the globe -Diverse Genre of Film and serialized drama -Distribution of multiple film industries: Hollywood, Turkish, Indian, Korean, etc...	-Available across the globe -Diverse Genre of Film and serialized drama -limited distribution of film production industries
<b>Aesthetics</b>	Poorly represented and labelled	Highly represented and labelled
<b>System</b>	Include Spam websites and pop up advertising	Buffering and website crashes

Table 2: Comparative analysis between EGY.BEST and Netflix as entertaining media networks

The table's data shows each medium's functionalities and operations. Nevertheless, to fit this analysis into the overall aim of this study, it is of the essence to look at the technology and the cultures it produces, based on the theoretical framework

of cultural technology addressed by Bolin (2012). In fact, the assemblage of the technical and power dynamics of EGY.BEST versus Netflix portray the different cultural patterns influencing and shaping audiences' understandings of access and underground practices (Bolin, 2012).

Taking EGY.BEST as a comparative case study alongside underground Netflix, it is possible to examine each theme from an infrastructural perspective in Lebanon. In fact, EGY.BEST popularity in entertainment media distribution is based on its wider circulation, free services and provision of an extensive range of film production industries. In addition, this platform is limitless from any form of censorship or subscription due to its use of VPNs, proxies, and torrent software.

On the other hand, hacked and/or prepaid Netflix account in the Lebanese market requires prior subscription fees that allows its users to access the services that formal users of Netflix have. What users browse, find and watch on underground Netflix, isn't fully the same when accessing EGY.BEST specifically that formal and informal Netflix are tied to economic and market policies adapted by the Netflix company (Aguiar & Waldfogel, 2018).

From an infrastructural perspective, the usage of underground Netflix isn't as perfect, practically, as audiences expect. In fact, with the lack in internet services and absence of fiber optic infrastructures in Lebanon, the use of Netflix with its high quality resolution and graphics requirements, face serious systematic and uploading challenges: Buffering, low movie upload, lagging, etc.... Whereas, examining the technical vectors of EGY.BEST, this platform doesn't rely on top quality streaming particularly when offering multiple resolution options to meet the internet speed compatibility (e.g. 140,

360 , 720 , 1080 , full HD qualities). This in return reduce the users' necessity for high speed internet consumption, making it a good match with what Lebanese internet services and telecommunication can provide.

Furthermore, as mentioned previously, high labeling and branding is one major characteristic within audiences' underground media practices that should be highlighted. "The cultural aspect is as important as the services of the medium. In fact, Netflix's graphical representation and self-marketing as the "top notch" space for media entertaining is undeniable, and this is one main reason why users are highly demanding access to such a medium and can never unsubscribe even if they are not satisfied by the services their getting" Nadim stated. In fact, underground Netflix promote itself as a clone and typical representation of formal Netflix through its usage of logo branding, graphics and categorization of movie genres by attracting the audiences emotionally and intellectually.

From a contradictory perspective, Antonio as a web developer himself, explained how EGY.BEST website development constitute of poor digital labelling, degraded graphics and uncountable spamming ads popping out every second. By extension, relying on Jackson analysis of end user's perceived quality. , I accommodate his synthesis to explain how viewers determine an objective Quality of Experience (QoE) that changes their streaming practices, and in the case of EGY.BEST, interruption of the distribution process can and will affect audience's engagement with this medium (Jackson, 2015).

Accordingly, it is significant to understand that not just underground Netflix, but many informal distributional models, with their systematic operation and cultural impact, do connect the world by generating a continuous flow of inaccessible content

and culture. Yet, the sense of global citizenship, previously examined, can only be portrayed in audiences who want to be part of the formal or informal Netflix luxurious body, rather than the rural digital communities of EGY.BEST.

Our point here in this season is a basic but an important one: the streaming wars happening visibly and invisibly in full swing with Netflix formal competitors, Amazon prime, Hulu, and joined by HBO Max and Disney+, does shape the current Lebanese market and distributional skeleton. Yet, the crucial part of streaming globality lies even further with the informal rivals of underground Netflix as EGY.BEST, and the pressure upon Netflix to cope with its own shrinking library and restrictive policies, as former licensing partners and underground/pirated distributors become streaming competitors, aiming to take the spot lights out of Netflix.

All these seasons connects multiple conversations into a single story: In fact, it builds thoroughly the constitution of Netflix in Lebanon, its shadowy infrastructures, distributional models, main partakers and engagers, its visible effects as well as how it is shaping the digital entertaining and cultural streaming into one community. Herein, I end and offer this analysis opening the floor to stretch the Underground Netflix for future discoveries in other countries in the middle east and the world.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

“We have candy and a lot of Broccoli” (Hastings, 2018). With this quote, Reed Hastings concluded his discussion during his interview in a Ted Talk on how Netflix algorithms help audiences when experiencing Netflix, and how it changed and presided over the entertaining media throne. However, I take Hastings reflection, from a political and cultural perspective to understand the connotations and anecdotes of such a statement in relation to this study’s academic examination of underground Netflix as a phenomenon of its own. In fact, I end by decoding the *candies* and *broccoli* into correlating it to this thesis’s analysis of the predominance of underground Netflix practically and culturally on users’ understanding of entertaining access.

The first section stepped into uncovering *the candies* behind the phenomenon of underground Netflix distribution with its laborers. In short, within the syntheses of this research and the claims proposed, I examined Netflix distribution within its historical and archival landscape since 2011 till its official arrival to Lebanon in 2016 and after its formal circulation between its practitioners and users. Particularly, this study examine and feature the stories of Ahmed, Antonio and Ali’s labor facets in underground practices of Netflix distribution: Across this context, this section dig deeper into understanding how such an activity developed systematically into an a technical and infrastructural labor, as it explains the multiple approaches and differences within the informal operations and activity of Netflix distribution and how what this model is offering to the targeted community.

Browsing from the historical to the cultural context behind such practices, it was significant to shift towards users' engagement, practices and understandings of underground Netflix as a distributional and a cultural streaming model. With regard to the mutual relationship between Netflix laborers (from providers, hackers and dealers) and the public (from active users to passive viewers), the changing in cultures and meanings opened up the opportunity to examine the *how* and *why* public sphere tend to eagerly join the Netflix nation. More particularly, this chapter focus on the shifts in users' attitude and acknowledgements of Netflix in relation to their normalization of such an underground practice towards access, power and globality.

From the sociocultural to the current framework and politics happening between global and top streaming platforms, the last chapter provide a critical analysis of the formal and informal intellectual property battles within the film industry and distribution. In fact, the formal IP ownership and redistribution appeared to challenge Netflix hegemony and caliber within the streaming business. And between two of the most popular informal platforms circulating in Lebanon, advances the synthesis towards discovering the multidimensionalities and differences of underground modes of entertaining media circulation: Through comparing underground Netflix and EGY.BEST distribution and performance, the study recognizes how both networks share similarities yet opposing and competitive aspects when uncovering their infrastructural basis, from both the cultural and operational perspectives. In fact, the last section aims on shedding the light on *the candies* that other services are providing while questioning *the broccoli* within the curated Netflix system and which is still poorly recognized by its global community.

Therefore, rethinking beyond the visible and algorithmic facets of Netflix, from content to textual representation, uncovers invisible pathways towards examining the shadowy patterns of underground Netflix: By candies, we refer to what underground Netflix nailed in doing within its circulation: from liberating communication, connecting and gathering users and viewers within one global spectacle of entertaining media and culture, rotting its users minds as well as producing a strong and sustainable *distributional on demand* model. However, the broccoli represents every aspect, rupture and radical views as well as the fierce competitions that position Netflix far from being the only leading platform towards ultimate access and freedom of entertainment.

Finally, this study goes back by questioning Hastings statement and his ideology of candies and broccoli: Doesn't Netflix algorithm and global business objectives push the public's ideologies away from broccoli towards candies? In fact, between users' practices, their perceptions of Netflix's curation yet dominance as well as the presence of numerous forms and models of formal and informal entertaining media, underground distribution stands and remains in the shakeout between what is basically *needed* and what is favorably *desired*.

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