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Genre and Narrative in Adaptation: Romance in *Heartstopper* from comic to live-action series

By

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DECLARATION

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the impact of romance genre conventions on a comic narrative through utilising *Heartstopper* by Alice Oseman as an instrumental bound case study. This will be done by utilising the five-step "Transmedial Analysis Framework", as set out by Bruhn and Schirrmacher in "Transmediation". Through analysing how the narrative of the source media object, the webcomic *Heartstopper*, was transmediated and changed into the version in the target source media object, the *Heartstopper* Netflix show, we can see how various romance genre conventions have shifted and remained consistent. Due to Oseman's strong presence within both versions of *Heartstopper*, it is easier to understand her contributions. In the second step, we see how the transmedial shifts were done in a way that increases the presence of the side characters within the narrative by utilising Thomas Leitch's adjustment strategies. By contextualising what changes and similarities between both versions of *Heartstopper* are present due to medium-specific necessity, the larger presence of side characters in the Netflix show can be understood through the necessity of television storytelling. Even with medium-specific changes, we see how those changes work to take advantage of romance conventions, particular teen romance conventions, when expanding on the narrative. Genres are also understood by an audience through a perceived sense of expectations, meaning the ways in which a media object is marketed plays a large role in how it will be understood. As *Heartstopper* is a queer romance narrative, it is important to take into account how the teen romance tropes reflect on its existence as a queer story and how the Netflix show increases the presence of other side characters that also have queer identities.

Chapter 1

Introduction

This dissertation aims to examine the impact of adaptation and remediation on the relationship between genre and narrative in Romance comics through an analysis of Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper* as it moved from a digital comic (*Heartstopper* 2016) to a Netflix live-action series (*Heartstopper* 2022)[1]. Both genre positioning and adaptation are powerful strategies to increase the visibility and marketability of creative works and content creators should therefore be aware of the complexities surrounding them. This bounded case study aims to explore the relationship between genre and narrative conventions in the adaptation of *Heartstopper*. While it would not arrive at generalisable findings, it would contribute to the literature on adaptation, genre, and narrative by examining a recent and relevant instance.

In the current oversaturated market, one way for creators to reach a target audience and gain exposure is by defining their work under a specific genre (Labarre, 2020). Intermedial work and remediation are also sound contemporary marketing strategies, as shifting media can expose work to a larger audience (Hutcheon & O'Flynn, 2013). In the field of comics, adaptation from comic to animation or live-action film is common (Lefèvre, 2007). Therefore, an understanding of how adaptation and remediation impact narrative genre distinctions in comics is valuable for allowing both established and emerging artists to place themselves in the industry. By leveraging how their body of work is situated in the enormous scope of genre, creators can effectively maximise the impact of their intellectual property.

1.As the title for both works is simply *Heartstopper*, the date serves as a differentiator. When referring to *Heartstopper* alone, I am speaking of the narrative complex - both the comic and the live action series together.

Genres are dynamic; they are ever-shifting and emerging categorisation of text, which allows creators malleability when utilising genre conventions (Chandler, 1977; Neale, 1980). The inherent flexibility of genre categories makes it a useful mode to understand, as it allows variations in the way a creator will interact and utilise its existing conventions in a body of work. This research focuses on the Romance genre, which is often considered to be easily accessible to wider audiences (Fuchs 2004; Fryre 1974). Its prominence means there is an inherently large source pool to look at. Remembering the importance of a creator's ability to define their work for marketability easily, I feel that looking at how creators can notably situate their work within the Romance genre is valuable in understanding creative positioning in the industry.

I will focus my analysis of adaptation in Romance comics by investigating the relationship between two versions of Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper*, as it was adapted from a serialised digital comic (2016) to a live-action Netflix series (2022). The analysis will explore the results of the remediation and adaptation and how it impacts the narrative and genre conventions of the work. Through this bounded case study, I hope to better understand the broader phenomenon and the impacts of remediation and adaptation on narrative and genre positioning.

In the internet age, artists, authors and other creators can reach wider audiences, and conversely, audiences have access to a wider range of work. This abundance has created an environment where creators need to be able to brand and succinctly define their work for them to be noticed (Labarre, 2020). Situating their work in a genre and allowing for future

adaptations of the work are ways for creators to do this (Hutcheon & O'Flynn, 2013; Labarre, 2020; Lefèvre, 2007).

Genres are considered fluctuating terms to group texts together; each new addition to the genre evolves how we understand and identify it (Chandler 1977, 2). Over time, the ways we define genres separately from each other become more blurred with an increase in hybrid genres (Chandler 1977, 2). The malleable nature of genre categorising allows creators flexibility in situating their work in the market. Considering this, we need to be aware of the overt and instinctive changes or adaptations to a story a creator may make to adhere to genre conventions. This awareness is especially significant to creators classifying their work, as it pertains to both reaching the desired target audience as well as the resulting impact of the audience's reaction to that work.

As the prominence of social media and internet usage has increased, there have been more avenues for creators to market themselves independently. The Digital Marketing Institute argues that by creating stimulating content and engagement, average users can build their own brand (2021). Patreon is a membership platform that provides content creators with tools to run a subscription service and gain income. Within the last three years, over half of the 6 million patrons on its website have joined, totalling over 6 million active supporters each month (ThinkImpact, 2022). When you initially sign up for Patreon online, the website automatically redirects to the "Find Creators," menu, where you can either search for keywords or creators' handles. Below that are clickable icons categorised by medium-specific types: Art, Games, Podcasts, music, photography, and writing, respectively. When one is clicked, you get a series of creators who have one-sentence headers describing their work, specifying their medium of choice and genre focus. While

this is only one metric, it gives an indication of creators being able to find support from crowdfunding systems. Online platforms allow for spaces for creates to self- promote their works; they can take advantage of the systems of genre developed by cultural industries while retaining control of their intellectual property.

One way to investigate the effects of genre conventions on narrative construction is by a close reading of adaptations and remediations, as analysing the same narrative in different media can help to discern which adaptational changes came from medium necessity and which were to conform to how the genre is signified in that medium. Remediations or adaptations of narratives, especially those done with the explicit intent to keep to the genre conventions, provide interesting case studies to aid in gaining a greater understanding of the relationship between media, narrative, and genre shifts. The case study selected for this research is *Heartstopper* by Alice Oseman. *Heartstopper* (2016) is a queer romance digital comic that initially debuted on Tumblr and Tapas in 2016. Since its publication, it has also been added to Webtoon in 2019, a webcomic media site, and received a physical release that same year. *Heartstopper* (2022), is a Netflix Series adaptation of this digital comic that was released in 2022 with a total of 8 episodes. By investigating the ways in which the story has been transmediated, we could develop a deeper understanding of the dynamic relationship between the nature of genre conventions regarding how it impacts the depiction of a narrative when applied to a new media format.

Research Method

When a creator can define their work within a category, they are able to market that work to the intended audience and cater to the audience's expectations. I aim to analyse and gain

further understanding of the relationship between genre and narrative in romance comics through the remediation process. Furthermore, I want to understand how the remediation of comic narrative texts impacts their depiction of the romance genre.

I am doing an instrumental bounded case study, looking at a specific case to gain a broader appreciation of a phenomenon. My study will examine the phenomenon of the impact of remediation on the genre in the bounded context of the case selected. As an instrumental bounded case study, *Heartstopper* (2016) and *Heartstopper* (2022) were selected as their relationship allows an examination of the phenomenon of how Romance genre conventions are able to exist and change through adaptation and the effect this has on the perception of the narrative. The works selected will be examined through close reading, relating them to each other through the theoretical frameworks.

I will be utilising the five-step "Transmedial Analysis Framework", as set out by Bruhn and Schirrmacher in "Transmediation" (2021). This framework was developed to explain and unwind the key specifics of the process of transmediation (Bruhn & Schirrmacher, 2021). Transmediation, in this instance, refers to the way in which elements from existing media objects are transferred into another media object form (Bruhn & Schirrmacher, 2021).

The first step is to set out a working hypothesis that scopes the overall analysis into a specific context (Bruhn & Schirrmacher, 2021). The point of this step is to set out parameters and an objective of what the analysis will discuss. I will be doing a close reading to allow me to compare and contrast the genre tropes and narrative structure as they appear in the media texts to better understand the impact of adaptation and transmediation. The second step is a comparative close reading of the source and the media product (Bruhn & Schirrmacher,

2021). This step involves utilising concepts of adjustment strategies set out by Thomas Leitch as a way to address adaptational changes without centralising the source product (2007). This comprises Compression, Expansion, Correction, Updating and Superimposition (Leitch 2007, p. 98-100). To this end, I will use a modified Framework approach (Smith and Firth, 2011). Framework analysis is a practical approach comprising five stages: familiarisation, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, and mapping and interpretation (Smith and Firth, 2011). Through this process, I will identify the thematic framework through the literature review and then index the instances of the phenomenon as they appear in the media texts. Thirdly, we focus on identifying the transmedial and medium-specific traits in regard to what has changed and what remains consistent (Bruhn & Schirrmacher, 2021). To identify the transmedial elements, we need to outline what stayed the same or what is similar. To identify the medium-specific elements, we need to outline which changes can be attributed to a technical necessity. In the fourth step, we identify which changes exist based on applying the necessary conventions and context of the media objects (Bruhn & Schirrmacher, 2021). This focuses on the broader context for the changes identified in the previous step, outside of just the medium. This is where changes to the narrative and genre conventions will become evident. Finally, there is a discussion regarding how the new existing target recontextualises the existence of the original (Bruhn & Schirrmacher, 2021). This step allows us to understand the source media object from a different perspective.

By applying the above framework to my chosen case studies (*Heartstopper* 2016; *Heartstopper* 20222), I hope to gain an understanding of how the genre conventions impact the depiction of the narrative based on the medium changes. By identifying how the narrative is adjusted, we are then able to identify key genre conventions. Understanding how genre conventions of Romance are showcased in comics and film allows us to differentiate changes

made for technical necessity. Looking at interviews with directors, screenplay writers, actors, and other crew members will provide further insight into medium-specific changes regarding *Heartstopper* (2022). Understanding how the narrative of *Heartstopper* (2022) is adapted and understood opens space for *Heartstopper* (2016) to be recontextualised in hindsight of its target medium.

Contributions

As is the nature of instrumental bound case studies, I will be looking at the specific phenomenon of remediation and its ability to impact the display of genre conventions within the context of *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022) specifically, as a result, I will not be able to arrive at generalisable conclusions. That being said, I hope to present a deep discussion of the impact of remediation on the genre in the case of *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022). That in itself will allow a greater understanding of the phenomenon of the impact of remediation of a single narrative.

Regarding the utilisation of the Transmedial Analysis Framework as defined by Jørgen Bruhn and Beate Schirrmacher, this dissertation will be a contribution within the context of being an example of how the framework can be utilised.

Synopsis

The first chapter after this introductory chapter is the literature review. As *Heartstopper* (2016;2022) is positioned as an instrumental case study, It is important to first consider the areas previously that *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022) has been a focal topic of other academic works, by briefly covering any necessary academic articles, books, and papers surrounding either the webcomic or the Netflix live-action show as part of it's focal point. By highlighting any key additions, I will be able to further position the relevance of my work with this specific context. Within this section, I have broken up the areas of interest. It is necessary to introduce key theoretical approaches and concepts related to these main five areas of focus within the literature review: genre, romance, intermediality and adaptations, narrative, and comics. By consolidating these components, I can begin to develop a framework to apply to the analysis in later chapters.

In the next chapter, Chapter 3, the analysis segment of this dissertation will start. By utilising the first two steps of Bruhn & Schirrmacher's Transmedial Analysis Framework (2021) within this section, we can begin to contextualise the changes present in the Netflix show *Heartstopper* (2022), that does not prioritise the importance of the webcomic *Heartstopper* (2016). By considering theories of intermediality, we can consider *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022) in its position within Oseman's overall body of work as an aspect of Transmedia storytelling. Organising the changes and similarities between the webcomic and the Netflix show, by utilising the transmedial adjustment strategies, will provide space to lay the groundwork for being able to comprehend the presence of romance genre conventions in later chapters.

Then, in Chapter 4, we conduct the next two steps in the framework. To contextualise the changes within both media objects that are due to adhering to medium-specific necessity, we

must first understand how the respective media types communicate meaning: comics, specifically webcomics, and television series, specifically Netflix series. Both these media types function differently in comparison to their larger category of medium, comics and television series, either due to the nature of their compositional elements shifting as they integrate with the capabilities of online platforms or because of their production house's function as publishing on online sites means that media objects produced under them need to be developed in a way that best suits the platform. By understanding the shifts in the depiction of the narrative that were established in Chapter 3, we can recontextualise what shifts were due to the nature of these respective mediums. Within the next section of this chapter, the broader contexts of the changes outside medium necessity will be applied, and this is when the genre conventions that apply to *Heartstopper* will be taken into account. I will also look at other conventions and behind-the-scenes intentions by utilising open online sources such as interviews, as is required within this section of the analysis framework.

Finally, Chapter 5 provides the concluding aspects of this dissertation, both in regard to the final step of the analysis framework and the summarizations of the findings of this dissertation overall. By analysing the ways the presence of romance genre conventions has shifted within the adaptation of the webcomic to the Netflix series, we can understand how the new form of this narrative can be recontextualised by its heavier prominence of the side characters.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this chapter, the various areas of interest within this topic will be further addressed. By contextualising the theory behind the concept of genre, we are able to understand how a constantly shifting form of categorising text and media objects as a whole can be situated in relation to historical, cultural and social context. Moving from that, we are then able to position the specific genre, Romance. Looking at the history of Romance as a whole and navigating the existing contemporary definition will in contextualising audience responses, both of the audience that consumes the text and the public perception. From there, we are able to identify the most prominent elements that define contemporary romance and apply how it would impact the discourse surrounding queer romance. Consolidating the theoretical approaches surrounding Intermedial Studies and Adaptation Studies will allow us a better understanding of contextualising and interrogating the presence of genre present in a larger context: understanding the socio-political influences, as well as the media industry standards and goals. By looking at Narrative and Comic Studies, we can establish a way of understanding and analysing *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022), as well as understand the intricate ways they function either as part of or as an entire form of media objects. Looking at Comic's specifically, we can understand how it exists as a form of multimodal media.

This chapter aims to generate a combined theoretical framework that will be applicable across the coming chapters interrogating *Heartstopper* (2016), the comic and *Heartstopper* (2022), the Netflix show, utilising the Transmedial Analysis Framework as the foundational structure (Bruhn & Schirrmacher, 2021).

2.1 Genre

Within this section, the theoretical history and discourse surrounding the term genre will be outlined. By doing this, it is possible to then organize a definition of genre that can be consolidated based on existing theoretical approaches. Moving forward from there, outlining the key concepts around articulating the nature of genre within texts and how it operates as a whole will be beneficial when understanding how to apply approaches to genre in later chapters.

The concept of genre has been addressed across multiple fields and can be loosely defined as "a category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterised by a particular style, form, or content" (Merriam-Webster, 2022). To properly address genre, a thorough discussion of its parameters must be done. Genre as a mode of classification is useful for the various ways it can be applied in the process of a text, from the creator to the audience. It is important to understand that genre is a dynamic form of categorisation, with each new body of work furthering how we understand it.

Daniel Chandler's *Introduction to Genre Theory* (1977) provides a succinct outline. Literary, media, and linguistic theory each have had their own discourse surrounding this term as a form of classification (Chandler, 1977). Genres are not a stagnant form of classification, and each new addition of text (as defined as any type of media object) further develops the genre itself. In Stephen Neale's *Genre*, he declares that "genres are instances of repetition and difference" (Neale, 1980, p. 48), adding that "difference is absolutely essential to the

economy of genre" (Neale, 1980, p. 50). The differences found within each text are crucial to maintaining the state of the genre, as the differences found play a part in how it attracts an audience. Ultimately, each genre's core comprises the total sum of the texts that inhabit it. The problem with difference is that not all genres are equally stringent in their conventions (Chandler, 1977). The genre classifications of texts can be uncertain. What is classified as part of a genre can be determined by multiple factors: what is included as part of the plot, the plot's focus, the setting (both in location and time period), the medium that the story is told, etc. Some factors won't apply to all genres or may result from hybrid genres as the conventions shift and change over time. Therefore, Chandler argues that our definition of genre is dictated by our purpose (Chandler, 1977). Even the ways we determine what is signified based on the idea of *category* itself- in the context of genre- can be called into question, as according to Jason Mittell, "...category itself emerges from the relationship between the elements it groups and the cultural context in which it operates" (2001, p. 5-6). This quote works to highlight how the elements within a text that are declared significant enough to be singled out are determined by additional external factors. Ultimately it is important to establish that the notion of genre conventions are elements within a text that are culturally decided and agreed upon as relevant to take note of. In this research, I approach genre by focusing on narrative elements and motifs, the plot's focal point, and visual signifiers within the media to understand how genre is expressed within those media objects.

In his book *Language and Cinema* (1975), French film theorist Christian Metz posits that genres evolve cyclically in stages throughout their existence. Metz defines these stages as the Experimental Stage, the Classical Stage, the Parody Stage and the Deconstruction Stage (Metz, 1975). These stages provide a tool that allows me to frame the existence and overall influence of a media object within a genre. The ability to place my case studies within this

cycle will allow me to understand how genre conventions exist and operate within them.

Metz outlines the Experimental stage as one of the first stages of genre development, wherein the texts produced set up the building blocks for the genre that will become a standard (Metz, 1975). This is the stage where genre conventions and generic codes are formed. The Classical stage is where the conventions that were formed in the experimental stage are continued and replicated in various other texts of that time (Metz, 1975). Rather than new conventions being formed, they are repeated constantly, denoting the genre's popularity at that specific time period. The Parody stage is when texts that can be categorised within a genre begin to mock or critique the genre itself; the conventions established in the Classical stage are presented with a comedic tone meant to poke fun at those same conventions (Metz, 1975). This stage within a genre can only be successful once the conventions of that genre are well-known and easily recognisable to the audience with little effort (Metz, 1975). The Deconstruction stage is where the genre evolves and then merges with other genres (Metz, 1975). At this stage, the conventions and generic codes become less concrete as the intersection of genres creates hybrid genres, renewing the cycle.

An area of contention can be determining a methodology or criteria for positioning the state of a genre within a text based on Metz's theory. Especially regarding the hybrid-genre state, breaking up the various genres present, interrogating how the text in question could be placed based on the trends of the genre and public perception at that moment in time, for each genre present. It would be fundamentally unsound to apply Metz so directly. Despite this, the Genre Evolution theory (Metz, 1975) is useful in the sense that it is one of many theories that highlight the importance of positioning the socio-political context.

A common thread between Metz and Neale is that genre is not constant. It goes through a continuous process of change dependent on the time period and the text produced in relation to that genre. It is not enough to understand what elements of the text adhere to a specific genre; investigating the social climate and perception of the genre around the specific time period in which it was created is also essential (Metz, 1975). By doing this, it is possible to understand the context of specific narrative elements integrated into the genre. By allowing for a reflection of the metatextual elements present, its allows us to better understand the expression of genre conventions, and what it reveals both about the percieved understanding and general associations of a genre in that moment in time. By doing this, we can further explore the dynamic nature of genre. In the context of my topic, this allows a space to further consider what elements in the adaptation are present as a form of authorial intent. It is also important to look at the intention of the text within the genre (Chandler, 1977; Neale, 1980). The message of the text can set the tone for how other narrative elements apply and how different audiences understand it.

In *Understanding Genres in Comics* (2020), Labarre highlights how creators can utilise genres by understanding the reproducible narrative patterns identified within a specific genre as a tool to predict and guide the audience's experience with the text. Labarre goes further with this notion in Chapter 6, focusing on the role of the creator. He argues that there is an appeal to the regularity and familiarity within genres from the creators' perspective as it easily translates into an economic guarantee (Labarre, 2020). Because a media object within a genre refers to and emulates previous works, genre acts as a way to replicate or invoke that previous success (Labarre, 2020).

In *Comic and Genre*, Catharine Abell defines genre as sets of conventions that "have

developed as means of addressing particular interpretative and/or evaluative problems" (2012, 77). An important aspect to consider regarding this definition is that genres must also have a history of co-instantiation within a community, which means that when a body of work is part of the genre, the community can build a set of expectations regarding that work in accordance with the conventions (Abell, 2012). Additionally, the work needs to contain the conventions intentionally. The creator, in this case, must have purposefully added those elements to their work so that the conventions would apply (Abell, 2012). Referring back to Metz and the Evolution of Genre, when trying to define when a hybrid genre becomes an official genre is emphasised in points Abell makes. According to Abell, age-related becomes a coined genre, regardless of its status as a hybrid genre, when an audience starts to recognize the genre and directly refer to it or define. Regardless of the presence of multiple works that influenced the development of a hybrid and eventually created a new genre, unless that genre existed and was specifically acknowledged as its own genre by an audience.

Both Labarre and Abell present a position in understanding the function of genres that highlights the creator's intention. By a creator purposefully incorporating genre conventions, they continue the genre's existence and anticipate the community that engages with the genre to also engage with their work as a result (Abell, 2012). Situating their work in a genre allows creators an avenue to streamline the creation process via shared expectations, allowing the audience to develop expectations in return (Labarre, 2020). In regards to my topic, this is important to keep in mind when comprehending the specific adaptational changes made within *Heartstopper* (2022), from *Heartstopper* (2016). The ability to discern what changes are present and why based on authorial intent (superimposition) is necessary to develop a framework of contextualisation of choices before we can discern what genre contains apply in those instances. This is especially crucial for the case studies in question; Alice Oseman

both is the writer, panellist, and artist for the *Heartstopper* comics (2016) and the screenwriter for the show, showing that her intents and creative direction are strong components present within both version of the story. By looking at how Alice Oseman has been able to present genre conventions in the comic, as well as in the show with an intrinsically collaborative effort due to the nature of the film and television industry genre, we can observe an example of how genre conventions can be beneficial.

In *A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory*, Jason Mittell also posits the paradigm of genre being understood in relation to its status in a cultural context, rather than attempting to establish a fixed definition (2001). The ways in which texts are linked to create a category - a genre - is based both on the audience reception and the intention of prominent figures within the larger industries; thereby, indicating that much of how we come to comprehend a genre is based on utilising concepts of intertextuality (Mittell, 2001). Mittell thus argues that the media objects cannot intrinsically link themselves without this intervention, genre cannot be an "inherently textual component" (2001, p. 6.). The intervention of industry to solidify a genre aids in providing an additional caveat when defining a new genre as posed by Abell (2012). This highlights how industry intervention plays a part in genre categorising as well; Linking back to Labarre (2012),

Mittell also posits the Five Principles of Cultural Genre Analysis, as an approach to interrogating genre (2001). These principles were established in response to a concern issued by Mittell: much of genre theory when integrated by academics is focused on concepts, ideas, and observation based on genre theory specific to the literary and film medium, assuming that those concepts can be utilised universally (Mittell 2001). Mittell further states that, “The goal of studying media genres is not to make broad assertions about the genre as a whole but to

understand how genres work within specific instances and how they fit into larger systems of cultural power" (Mittell 2001, p. 16). His approach to comprehending genre is not to come to a set definition of the genre, but to evaluate the overall way in which genre is understood in a cultural approach (Mittell 2001, p. 9).

The principles listed are as follows: "Genre analyses should account for the particular attributes of the medium... Genre studies should negotiate between specificity and generality...Genre histories should be written using discursive genealogies...Genres should be understood in cultural practice...Genres should be situated within larger systems of cultural hierarchies and power relations" (Mittell 2001, p. 16-18).

Taking into account the medium of the text when analysing the presence of genre is necessary, as the elements that categorize a body of work within a genre will present themselves differently concerning the nuances of the capabilities of the medium. The second principal aims to highlight how the ability to navigate handling genre as a category that exists in a larger context socially, acknowledging not being able to be understood completely while not being too reliant on generalisations, and also being able to broach the specific contexts of genre and how it exists within a moment in time on a multifaceted level is crucial (Mittell, 2001). Fundamentally, this principle prioritises the ability to scope the extent of a genre analysis appropriately. The third principle positions the importance of critically applying the historical context to the state of a genre based on multiple approaches (Mittell, 2001). It is not enough to examine the historical and social contexts behind trends in a genre, critically analysing the reasons behind those contexts is necessary. The fourth principle is meant to emphasise looking at the historical contexts, but this time with the cultural power dynamics taken into consideration (Mittell, 2001). Understanding how larger power dynamics of a

moment in time can alter the contextual history of a genre and its intention, can reveal much about how a genre can be utilized. The fifth principle challenges the assumptions made by previous scholars who traditionally regarded genre as a component of text (Mittell, 2001).

While Mittell, Like Labarre (2020) and Abell (2012), makes an effort to highlight the importance of the creators' intent when understanding the formation of genres, he goes further than just the creators of the text, aiming to interrogate the influence of power relations as well. Drawing from Foucault's systems of power, being able to make connections betweens trends in genre (both in what within a genre is relevant and what genres are relevant) creates a space to look deeper into the influences of cultural power (Mittell, 2001). This takes into account the varying external elements that unilaterally work together to decide how genres operate and find relevancy.

By combining both Metz's Evolution of Genre Theory and Mittell's *Five Principles of Cultural Genre Analysis*, we are able to position the presence of genre within two major levels. The first level focuses on the state of media objects that are categorised within a genre. By focusing on a specified text, we can then gauge the state of the text by looking at previous texts and contextualize its influence by observing the texts that were created afterwards. On the other level, rather than focusing on the development of the depiction of genre within texts themselves, focuses on exploring further context concerning the state of power relations in a wider cultural scope to critically analyse the relevant power structures.

2.2 Romance

This section aims to discuss the history of the romance genre and how it is understood and perceived today. We have covered how socially and culturally there are perceived hierarchies regarding medium specific works, due to the prioritising of profit over the value of art for art's sake. Contemporary Romance is an interesting case, as many multiple media objects that are mainly categorised within this genre face heavy scrutiny.

As a genre, Romance has long faced scrutiny regarding how it is categorised. Romance has many definitions, ranging from linguistically based to literary-based (Fuchs 2004,4). In *The Meanings of Romance: Rethinking Early Modern Fiction*, Christine S. Lee outlines the earlier perceptions of *Romanz* being understood as both a signifier of romance languages and the story that was told in those languages by the latter half of the twelfth century (2014). In the introduction of *Romance (The New Critical Idiom)*, Barbara Fuchs posits that there are critical disagreements regarding Romance status as a genre or mode, its origins and history, and what it encompasses (2004). In contemporary critique, the signifier range identified as Romance the genre (capital R) most often signifies a romance (lowercase r) or love affair (Fuchs 2004, 4). For my case studies, I draw on this definition, and when looking at genre conventions, there will be a focus on the romantic relationship and how it is depicted. This outline of the Romance genre is in contrast to Northrop Fryre, who focuses on Romance as an archetype that acts as a universal paradigm of all fiction (Fuchs 2004, 6).

In Fryre's *The Secular Scripture*, Romance is represented as unchanging and stable, and Fryre states that this genre is "the structural core of all fiction" (1974, 15). However, Romance has a history of being generally disparaged by scholars (Fryre, 1974). This is a result of Romance's close links to popularity throughout the history of literature, as popular literature

is viewed as entertainment, carrying little intellectual weight (Fryre, 1974). Within the context of Fryre's work, the low opinion of romance as present in wider popular culture can be better understood when considering Fryre's posited definition of pop culture as an area of culture in society that is widely accessible (in contrast to the traditionally limited exposure of highbrow art), while also requiring a minimal level of expertise and prior education to enjoy the experience of engaging with various media objects within this realm (1974). Ultimately, these combined factors result in its appeal to the widest estimated audience (Fryre, 1974). Fryre, does not comment on a personal preference between high and low art, framing both aspects as part of a whole in the various needs of expression humans can create (Fryre).

Another aspect of the Romance genre's low regard in academic circles is its status as mainly consumed and created by women. Additionally, it is sensationalised due to the stimulating nature of romantic stories, resulting in wider audiences misconstruing "erotic" to "pornographic" (Fryre 1974, p. 24). This conflation detracts from the complexity of Romance; as Fryre states, "...the function of pornography to stun and numb the reader, and the function of erotic writing to wake him up" (1974, p. 24). This research follows Fuchs in constraining Romance as a love affair; however, looking at Fryre's works helps contextualise the history and evolution of Romance as a category and challenges what Romance is. While this larger concept is too overreaching in scope for my objectives, being able to understand why Romance as a genre has been looked down upon for being seen as mainly consumed by women while still being a highly prominent genre within the media sphere is important when looking at the audience engagement of my chosen case studies.

In Rethinking the Romance Genre, Emily Davis argues that while the Romance genre's content is more unstable than scholars like Fryre would acknowledge, its iterability has been

a consistent genre characteristic across time and space (2013). Fuchs states that Romance is useful when it retains its historical extensiveness and is conceptualised as a set of literary strategies that can be adopted by different forms (2004). Literary strategies in this context would mean literary devices, which are techniques used in writing to convey meaning. When we focus on what Romance does and enables within a narrative, we reveal its structure and display how it appears within various genres (Fuchs, 2004). This means that by focusing on Romance as a literary device, we can understand how it functions to highlight aspects within a narrative while showcasing how it evolves when other genre conventions are present. In the context of the case studies I plan to discuss, the main romance is a queer relationship. By looking at the literary devices of Romance, we can see how the story uses this relationship to elevate its coming-of-age themes.

The Romance Publishing Industry and Its Reputation is a paper that aims to examine the negative perception and regard for the romance publishing industry (Cameron, 2020). As Lauren Cameron notes, while this [romance literature publishing] industry is worth around a billion dollars, specifically in the United States and the United Kingdom, marking it as one of the most popular fictional genres within this region, it continues to be perceived as a low art form with minimal substance by critics and wider audiences (2020). Cameron points to the perception of the genre as by-women-for-women being the root of the general disdain, which leads to an induced collective shame felt by the community built around consuming and generating this genre (2020). Though, other genres have the same sense of formulaic narrative as a necessary facet within their bodies of work, Cameron highlights crime fictional works, this genre does not suffer from the same level of backlash due to it being perceived as a male-dominated genre (2020). The importance of Cameron's work with regard to my topic comes in tis ability to situate the discourse surrounding the nature and overall comprehension

of the romance genre. Looking at this paper helps in gaining an additional understanding of the negative opinion of Romance that was established earlier in this section.

Having established a sense of the general discourse surrounding how the romance genre is perceived but a wider public overall within a modern context, it is important to get a sense of how the romance genre creation and consumer community interact with the contemporary incarnation this genre as well. The *Core Collections in Genre Studies: Romance Fiction 101*, is an Article from the Alert Collector, wherein five librarians, Neal Wyatt, Georgine Olson, Kristin Ramsdell, Joyce Saricks, and Lynne Welch, were invited as guest columnists to write an introduction to a chosen romance subgenre and then summarise five titles that they feel best exemplify those subgenres (2007). The article proceeds to give a definition of romance novels, stating that they are developed around "the relationship between hero and heroine and the conflicts within that relationship" (‘Core Collections in Genre Studies: Romance Fiction 101’, 2007), going further to include the point that they are written to include the reader on an emotional level, usually being positive and optimistic (‘Core Collections in Genre Studies: Romance Fiction 101’, 2007). Fundamentally, this article highlights the contemporary understanding of the romance genre, specifically in the written medium, as well as reflecting the current audience's perception. An interesting topic to note is that when listing the chosen romance subgenres (regency, contemporary, historical, suspense, and paranormal romance). The fact that the article makes a point to highlight subgenre can potentially be evidence indicating that the romance community is more interested in approaching romances with the added nuances of other genres to create interesting developments; relating back to Metz’s Evolution of genre theory (1975).

Overall, most of the article reflects aspects of negotiating genre that were discussed in the Genre section earlier. Especially in the context of audience comprehension and participation. A critique of this article when defining the romance novel, its inherent heteronormative definition. The definition specifically highlights the term hero and heroine, and ultimately it leaves little space for romance protagonists and pairings that are not perceived as heterosexual. This can be seen as a reflection of queer romance being categorised as it's own subgenre. I bring this point up mainly with respect to *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022), analysing how queer romances are perceived and how it is situated within the romance genre as a whole is important in order to contextualise the linking power relations (Mittell, 2001; Metz, 1975).

In her paper, *The politics of happily-ever-after: romance genre fiction as aesthetic public sphere*, Anna Michelson aims to examine how romance fiction acts as a space to explore socio-political issues and ultimately impacts the audience that engages with it (2021). For the purposes of my research, one of the key aspects addressed is the function of the "Happily-Ever-After (HEA)" (Michelson 2021, p. 177) ending and the ability of romance fiction to promote hope (Michelson, 2021). According to Michelson, within the contemporary romance genre the concept of the "Happily-Ever-After (HEA)" (2021, p. 184) or the closely related "Happy-For-Now (HFN)" (2021, p. 185) storyline is a fundamental aspect within the American romance fiction stories as a whole (2021). Though it is viewed as formulaic by wider critics, for the audiences engaging with the romance genre, it is this familiarity that provides a form of comfort when exploring stories that fall into this specific category (2021). This appeal of familiarity aids in highlighting one of the strengths of being able to define a body of work under a genre. An aspect highlighted is that the prominence of the HEA and HFN endings in romance novels help to further instil the audience engaging with the media in this genre a sense of hope (Michelson, 2021). As stated by Michelson, hope is a term that is

present frequently within the discourse of the romance genre (2021). When unpacking the relevancy of hope, Michelson goes further to conclude that readers' comprehension of the romance genre with various real-life socio-political concerns, is based on the principle notion of hope (2021). She analyses multiple case studies of romance novels and finds that rather than romance being the ultimate prize, it is an instrument that eventually leads the protagonists in this genre to achieving a "well-rounded, fulfilling life" (2021, p. 186). When looking at *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022), being able to understand the ways in which the construction of the narrative provides the feeling of comfort will aid in identifying the conventions of the romance genre present within the narrative. The ways in which the HEA are developed can also give an indicator of the position of *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022) within the genre as of now. Based on how *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022) is able to present the presence of hope, analysing the construction of this feeling within both the source media object and target source media object, we are able to look further in investigating whether this facet plays a part in the level of success both bodies of work were able to experience.
While it is not possible to account for how *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022) will be regarded in later years, especially considering that both the Netflix live-action show and the comic are currently ongoing, we are able to understand both *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022) and their place within the romance genre at this moment in time.

Looking at how Michelson's work highlights the socio-political power of contemporary romance genre, we can see a display of the kinds of ways we can begin to interrogate the power relations that influence categorising genre, as stated by Mittell. Michelson's articulation regarding the concept of the contemporary romance genre's reception relying on the prominence of HEA, especially in the context of instilling hope within the engaging

audience, is of particular note when comprehending the existing state of BL[1] and queer romance.

It is important to note the point of contention regarding the signifier queer. In the The National Archives article, *'Queer' history: A history of Queer'* (2021) it mentions the discourse within the LGBTQIA+ community regarding the term queer as an umbrella term for the whole community. The term in past decades has been used as derogatory against the community, however in recent years the term has become more commonly used within the community as a form of reclamation (The National Archives, 2021). Though the term queer will be utilised a shorthand for the community within this paper, it is important to acknowledge the history attached to the word.

In the journal article *Bury Your Gays: History, Usage, and Context*, Haley Hulan discusses the historical influences of the infamous trope Bury-Your-Gays and how it has evolved in the current years (2017). Circling back to the depiction of queer persons and relationships, there is an existing fraught history concerning the depiction and representation of queer people and romances, within the history of media during the 20th century (Hulan, 2017). Hulan cites the legal laws and acts that were passed in order to criminalise expressions of homosexuality: The Criminal Amendment Act of 1885, for example, that made any acts of homosexual expression illegal, a multitiude of other laws passed in the United States and United Kingdom of varying degrees, and medical professionals on varying levels promoting the idea of any forms of homosexuality being seen as an illness (2007). Overall, this worked to create a hostile environment for any expressions of homosexuality and queerness in general.

[1] BL is used to refer to the Boys Love genre or Yaoi, which is a subcateggory of queer romance that focuses on the love pairing between male-identifying characters.

One of the policies that greatly effected any expressions of queerness during the 20th century was the Motion Picture Production Code, more commonly known as the Hays code (Hulan, 2017; Juda, 2018). Rather than a legal law or act, this was in fact a censorship code placed that was developed and imposed on by the movie industry itself, as a response to a fear of an eventual federally mandated censorship being placed on the industry (Hulan, 2017; Juda, 2018). The aim of the code was to place restrictions upon what kinds of stories could be widely released, as well as the kinds of stories: this meant that unless homosexuality was framed negatively, any queerness was not allowed to be explicitly depicted, or it would not be publicly released (Hulan 2017). This meant creators had to create and utilise a subtextual iconography and signifiers for queerness, from the appearance of a character, their body language and speaking style, as well as visual props without ever explicitly expressing their sexual identity; ultimately developing queer coding (Hulan, 2017). Due to the Hays Code, if queerness was present it had to be punished narratively and framed as an ultimately negative concept to the audience; also impacting and influencing the growing forms of iconography and signifiers to represent queer people in media objects: eclectic villains or tragic figures destined to an unhappy ending (Hulan, 2017).

The Hays Code ended, but this tendency to depict homosexual identities as such outlasted the code (Hulan, 2017). While it does not mean that every story of queer persons as the subject of interest that have a sad ending only exist due to the Hays Code, it can explain at times the prominence of unhappy queer stories in the Western sphere, especially within narratives where the queer characters played minor roles. This trend of tragedy is antithetical to the understanding and perception of contemporary romance genre, which can explain another aspect of queer romance being labelled as a subgenre. The Bury-Your-Gays trope developed under fortunate circumstances, and while it still persists in the modern social climate of

media, Hulan counters that the ability of queer creators and creators in general to be more explicit in the depiction of homosexual identities, has developed an environment wherein the trope can be recontextualised to represent queer grief as an act of, “Bury Your Gays as Catharsis” (2017, p. 22).

Taking all of this into account, and considering Michelson’s statements regarding the socio-political relevancy of contemporary romance to promote hope to its audience, We can begin to understand how the power relations regarding the categorising and influence of queer romance, and its relationship in accordance with the larger romance category in general. If the HEA ending can become a relevant aspect of queer romance stories, thus allowing for LGBTQ+ people who engage in those media objects to develop a sense of hope, in the same way that readers of contemporary romance utilise the traditionally guaranteed HEA, can be seen as a form of cultural radicalism against heteronormative standards?

Despite the negative connotations surrounding contemporary romance, it ultimately stands as evidence to how a genre that is able to main a strong sense of consensus regarding how works are categorised and how an audience who is well determined will support works in the genre, despite the overhanging pressure of shame due to public scorn, can maintain a strong presence and be financially viable. The strong sense of community and identity can lead to an environment wherein the people engaging with the genre will develop optimistic, productive attitudes towards what can be seen as many bleak areas of life. When considering the situation of marginalised identities that are able to find community, this optimism can evolve into a kind of personal activism, which highlights another axis to consider when contextualising conventions of romance genre present. Given an idea of the environment within current contemporary romance genre, and how queer romance represented in this

contemporary state of this genre can influence attitudes of people outside positively, as readers are able to empathise with queer people seeing a fictional HEA. The audience members and people within the target community who are queer can also experience a kind of specific joy due to the level of media objects, wherein the opposite is commonly shown due to past regulations and biases.

Relating this back to *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022), understanding the current sphere of contemporary romance genre and the subgenre of queer romance, we can begin to place the presence of Oseman's work as a whole, and start to interrogate the layers to the level of success *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022) is able to achieve, as well as understand its potential influence moving forward in a broader sense, creating a more generalised perspective before we delve more deeply into BL tropes specifically in later chapters during the analysis sections.

2.3 Intermediality, Remediation, Transmediation, and Adaptation

This section aims to break down the necessary theories and concepts that make up Intermedial and Adaptational studies. By going over the necessary concepts of, we are then able to contextualise their importance regarding the context of how narratives can exhibit genre conventions.

This dissertation draws on the fields of Intermedial Studies and its subset, Adaptation Studies, as a theoretical framework. In these fields, the terms mediation, intermedia, remediation, transmediation, and adaptation are commonly used to indicate interrelated

concepts, with each being a subset of the other. Intermediality is defined as “the system of relations between different media objects” (Soetaert & Vandermeersche 2011, p. 2). In other words, it is the relationship between the material realities and concepts present within the media object itself, as well as the relationship from medium to medium, and how the influence of a medium is present within other media objects. A fundamental point of intermediality is that a text does not exist in a vacuum (Oduro, 2021), and even intertextuality relies on an intermedial relationship as a type of intermediation due to its referential nature (Soetaert and Vandermeersche, 2011). Drawing from Bruhn and Schirrmacher (2021), the related terms can be simplified and summarised as follows: Mediation is the construction of a text as a media complex. Remediation is the reconstitution of a text in a different media complex. Transmediation refers to the process of translation and transference of a text between media products. Adaptation is a subset of transmediation, which studies the resultant changes to the text from the translation and transference between media products.

Within Juergen E. Mueller’s work, *Intermediality in the Age of Global Media Networks – Including Eleven Theses on its Provocative Power for the Concepts of “Convergence,” “Transmedia Storytelling” and “Actor Network Theory”*, the aim is to hone in on specific areas regarding the history of the idea of intermediality, comprehending its importance and usefulness for media studies "in the era of global network" (2015, p. 19). With each new understanding of the connection within intermediality, the ways in which we understand media can shift dramatically, as “...media are seen and comprehended as processes in which continuing cross-effects between various concepts occur” (Mueller 2015, p. 20-21). The resulting environment is that every intermedia approach thus far had to make an effort both to clarify the term [intermedia] to readers, as well as what media could be defined as. When

looking at the processes, there is a grey connecting space that defines intermediality as we understand it today. Mueller proposes looking at media history under the lens of various networks that include regarding the extents and limitations of technology, and how that is impacted by the socio-political climate, in order to position specific developments (Mueller 2015). It is this notion that defines intermedia networks, the process of how multiple media forms (medium) interacting and influence each other in a way that takes in account the various cultural, social and historical contexts that can apply (Mueller 2015).

Mueller contradicts various media theorists on the notion of how the digital media and digital age will impact the understanding of intermediality and intermedia processes, making the field redundant due to the transfer into the digital space (2015). Mueller posits that digital media cannot be removed from its material aspects, noting that intermedial do not disappear, but rather take on a new form that also needs to be understood (2015, p. 31). Mueller states that for any medium to become prevalent enough that it begins to contribute to the pre-existing networks of various social and cultural industries, the medium need to undergo a process of "differentiation and institutionalization and has to recycle and reshape traditional genres and format" (2015, p. 30). The concept of a network has been utilised across multiple fields of study and in recent years has become so used it may be at risk of becoming a redundant term (Mueller, 2015). Despite this concern, Mueller argues that the term network is a useful term for its stark reminder that much of human communication, a socio-cultural notion relies on the complex interlinking between various modes of communication to create meaning (Mueller, 2015). The term in this context also reflects the growing prominence of the digital space and the need for integration between the older and newer intermedia networks to occur. Overall Mueller's work is relevant to my study regarding how it outlines the systems that interlink to create intermedial networks. Especially in the context of digital

media being refined; the notion of the process needed for newer mediums to obtain legitimacy emphasises the existence of codes of other mediums finding ways to be present.

This relates to my study when looking at the webcomic *Heartstopper* (2016) and the Netflix show (2022). Both exits not as a new medium, but a new format which allows the utilisations of existing storytelling devices to be reimagined within the context of the affordances of their respective platforms. Any signs present that are percieved to be referential traits would need to be contextualisd when attempting to interrogate the influence of genre.

In *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Jay David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin posit a dual nature of remediation (1999). On one hand, the cultures we exist in want to multiply the existing media, thus allowing for different ways to experience them, while on the other, we don't want those experiences to feel mediated; we want those experiences to feel authentic (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). Utilising Bolter and Grusin's (1999) concepts, we can describe remediation as how a newer media object remoulds older existing media objects, as well as those preexisting media objects remoulding to exist amongst those new media objects. The actual content of the media doesn't change, but how we experience it does (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). Being able to understand how a remediated media object can strike the balance between familiarity and authenticity is crucial in understanding how it can appeal to a wider audience.

At the beginning of their book, The *Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O'Flynn state quite plainly that "[a]daptations are everywhere today" (2013, 2). They argue that adaptations are so prominent as they harken to the human instinct to find comfort in familiarity (Hutcheon & O'Flynn, 2013). When engaging in stories across various media, an

audience will gravitate towards familiar structures, seeking a sense of ease in those moments of recognition. This is intensified when they experience changes within those structures, creating new experiences to engage with while still maintaining familiarity (Hutcheon & O'Flynn, 2013). Additionally, Hutcheon and O'Flynn address the financial motivation behind the continued creation of adapted media objects (2013). Adaptations, like genres, are efficient as forms of marketing; their inherent familiarity allows an audience to have base expectations.

Pre-existing media objects would have a large audience interested in experiencing the newly adapted media object while also attracting a newer audience; thus, for the original creator, this could mean new and potentially larger sources of income (Hutcheon & O'Flynn, 2013). From the perspective of the industry, maintaining an environment wherein familiar stories an narrative patterns is necessary, as it can be assumed that a story that was able to generate a large profit and cultural relevancy can again generate a similar level of success (Hutcheon & O'Flynn, 2013).

Within the comic industry, multiple comics have received adaptations either in film or in television. The *Marvel Cinematic Universe* or MCU is a media franchise whose premise surrounds exploring the superhero characters of Marvel Comics within a shared universe. The franchise has extended outside of films, growing to include various television shows, literature, and short films. Created by Marvel Studios and owned by Walt Disney Productions, the MCU has been able to garner huge levels of success within its existence since being introduced in 2008 with the release of *Iron Man* (2008), being listed as one of the highest-grossing film franchises of all time, with its overall worldwide box office numbers reaching an estimated $29.55 billion as of July 2023 (The Numbers, 2023). The success of the MCU has resulted in multiple attempts by other production companies to create their own

shared universe franchises, including the DC Extended Universe, under DC Entertainment and Warner Bros. Pictures. Netflix has produced and released several live-action and animated show adaptations based on comics on their streaming platform, which have garnered varying degrees of success and critical acclaim. The *Umbrella Academy* (2019), was created by Gerard Way and originally published under Dark Horse comics. The third season, released in the latter half of June 2022, was watched for an estimated 124.5 million hours during its five days after release, placing first in Netflix's Top 10 chart in its first week (Hailu, 2022). Shows like *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018), *Warrior Nun* (2020), and *The Sandman* (2022) have found notable success and viewership. There have also been shows based on Marvel characters, like *Daredevil* (2015), *Jessica Jones* (2015), *Luke Cage* (2016), *Iron Fist* (2017), and *The Punisher* (2017). It is important to note that Netflix does not publicly release the methodology behind their calculations for the viewership numbers, though they do indicate that a significant portion of subscribers engage with these shows.

There is a long body of theory to draw from concerning the topic of adaptations from comics to film. In *Incompatible Visual Ontologies? The Problematic Adaptation of Drawn Images*, Pascal Lefèvree outlines the various forms of success that comic film adaptations receive, specifically live-action adaptations, and addresses the reasons for contention (2007). Lefèvre also discusses the discourse surrounding the nature of these adaptations and its focus on the struggle for live-action comic films to capture the authentic feeling of the comics (2007). One element he raises is the challenge of perspective, as drawn images in comics inherently capture the creator's view in an intrinsic way that can be difficult to translate to live-action. Perspective in this instance is used to refer to the representational strategies that a comic book artist employs to render the narrative visually, and ultimately the aesthetic style in which it is done. The presence of live actors and inherently realistic imagery make it difficult to capture

a comic's specific aesthetic, as the comic artist's intrinsic understanding and utilisation of compositional and design theory, along with their specific art style is what comprises what readers would call the initial comic book's visual aesthetic (Lefèvre, 2007). This challenge of perspective is relevant to my topic as part of my focus is understanding how the perspective of the comic creator can be adapted. By interpreting the ways the target source product is able to produce a visual style within the new media, in this instance looking at the live-action adaptation, we are to interrogate the influences to this style. Which of the style choices are meant to translate an aspect present within the source? Which style choices were meant to adjust the narrative to the new medium? By establishing these facets, we are then able to interrogate how these choices ultimately fit into and potentially evolve the ideas of existing genre conventions, respective to their medium.

Drawing from Intermedial Studies, I will approach my case studies as a form of extra compositional intermediality (ECI), as my main focus is analysing these stories because the narrative itself is a transmedial entity. Wolf defines Extracompositional Intermediality as any breach of boundaries between specific media of communication (2002). Wolf states: "such transgressions cannot only occur within one work or semiotic complex but also as a consequence of relations or comparisons between different works or semiotic complexes." (2002, p. 17). Transmediality is a form of Extracompositional Intermediality which focuses on devices in media which are not specific to a single medium or appear across various forms of media (Wolf, 2002). The ability to separate the narrative from the form it is delivered in is important, as it allows a pathway to understanding how the influence of genre conventions shifts depending on the medium in usage. Transmediation studies the relationship between a

source and target media products (Bruhn and Schirrmacher, 2021). By understanding the narrative as a transmedial entity, we are able to study the relationship it displays regarding genre, as genre elements would be able to exist separately to it.

Within Elleström's essay, *Adaptation and Intermediality*, the main aim of her work is to interrogate the borders of adaptation studies that are too removed from Intermedial Studies to be fitted within its numerous paradigms (2017). The main argument stems from the notion that intermediality and adaptation can be considered overlapping, but ultimately separate aspects, stating, "...adaptation concerns the transfer of media traits from one medium to another..." (p. 513). The inherent focus of the transfer automatically categorises adaptation studies as a focus that could be labelled under the broader Transmediation and Intermediality Studies, though there are a case with which it is capable that the areas of concern are less focused on the intermedial issues, choosing to discuss extending circumstances that are not directly linked to the intermedial (Elleström, 2017). This is crucial as being able to accurately place my analysis under the specifc focus studies is beneficial when determining data collection process, especially regarding which aspect of the target source product and source product. The dilemma comes in determining the scope of adaptational studies (2017). Elleström outlines 10 Base assumptions that tend to be made when researchers are approaching intermedial and adpatational studies (2017). The list is not meant to contradict these assumptions rather than scope down the areas of concern that tend to be in the grey areas when addressing the extents of adaptational studies (Elleström, 2017). The list is thus as follows:

> "1. Adaptation is a transfer of media characteristics among media products, not qualified media.
>
> 2. Adaptation is a transfer of media characteristics among self-reliant media, not assisting media.

3. Adaptation is a transfer of media characteristics among artistic media, not non-artistic media.

4. Adaptation is a transfer of media characteristics among premeditated media, not casual media.

5. Adaptation is a transfer of media characteristics from literature or theater to film, not among other qualified media.

6. Adaptation is a transfer of narrative traits, not other media characteristics.

7. Adaptation is a transfer of media characteristics from one medium to another, not from several media.

8. Adaptation is a transfer of media characteristics among complete media, not parts of media.

9. Adaptation is a direct, not an indirect, transfer of media characteristics among media.

10. Adaptation is a transfer of media characteristics in one direction only, not two." (Elleström 2017, p. 514-521).

By looking at this list, it is easy to understand the general areas of concern within the focus of Adaptational studies. It is important to note that while these are the perceived general assumptions, there are still spaces within adaptation studies where this is not the case, focused instead on interrogating the extent of the assumed borders between adaptation and intermedial studies as a whole (Elleström, 2017). Taking this into account, this works to build a clearer theoretical approach when addressing the areas of concern within my research.

Ellestrom also reaffirms the necessity within intermedia and adaptation studies to not to treat the source media target as the superior and definitive version of that existing narrative in comparison to the target source media product (2017). This is not to assume that the target media product is an overall better final product, but for theorists and academics to be mindful of any existing biases when interrogating the adaptation process (2017).

In *Narrative Across Media* (2004), Marie-Laure Ryan argues that the "narrative potential" (p. 1) of a media object comes to fruition differently when it is depicted in a new medium. It is

important to acknowledge the impact of the medium; what can be conveyed in a story ultimately depends on the utilisation of the medium, and certain media can communicate specific information or experiences more poignantly than others (Ryan, 2004). When examining how a narrative is adapted, it is important to consider how the medium would impact any changes made; thus making it a necessity to consider the execution of narrative potential, regardless of bias towards or against the other. In the case study, the narrative potential of a body of work (the story of *Heartstopper*) was transferred from an earlier form or source media product (the digital comic *Heartstopper* 2016) and was adapted into the target medium later (the live-action series *Heartstopper* 2022). The case study will, therefore, explore the relationship between the source and the target, and the impact of the media transference and adaptation on the narrative itself.

If the main objective of a media object is to contain some form of a narrative, idea, or abstract concept to be communicated to a wider audience in a way that appeals to our emotional experience of being, and our personal aesthetic sensibilities; while medium is the vehicle that communicates with us and determines the form of audience interaction; then genre, and thus its conventions, are present to act as one of the connecting elements to make the narrative more comprehensible to that receiving audience by utilising existing signs to streamline what is being communicated, while potentially contributing to the prominence and complexity of the signs in a genre. The complexity in this instance comes from the variety of artists that utilised those signs for the purpose of signifying the genre, and the sum total of the specific ways they were utilised in those individual media objects.

2.4 Narrative

In this section, the relevant theoretical concepts and ideas are explored as pertaining to narrative. The key concepts relating to narrative that are linked with intermediality and adaptational studies are outlined with regard to how it relates to discerning genre elements.

In The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative by H. Porter Abbott, narrative is defined as "the representation of an event or a series of events" (2008, p. 13). Within most narrative frameworks, it is assumed that the structures and content within stories are independent (Boyd, Blackburn & Pennebaker, 2020). Two stories with different settings and characters can still have similar plot dynamics (Boyd, Blackburn & Pennebaker, 2020). Narratives are much more than affective experiences; they are presented in such a way as to support information about the characters, conflict and resolution, and various other history-specific features. This ‘transportability’ of narrative contributes to its intermedial potential (Ryan, 2003). This separation of structure and content is important to establish for the purposes of this research, as it will allow for engagement with the genre as well, specifically how its influence can be understood and how it adapts to the medium.

In On *Defining Narrative Media*, Ryan discusses how the overall message and delivery of a narrative are impacted by the medium the narrative is showcased through (2003). Using the visualised comparison based on Walter Ong's work, Ryan states that "...the shape imposed on the message by the configuration of the pipeline affects in a crucial way the construction of the receiver's mental image" (2003, p. 3). Ryan argues that this impacts how intertextuality can present itself within a text. Intertextuality, in this sense, is how signs that are present within a body of work can be linked to previously existing referential conventions and linguistics. In *Comics as a Test Case for Transmedial Narratology*, Kukkonen links the nature of the comic medium explicitly to intertextuality (2011). As a visual medium, comics can

represent pre-existing visual media seamlessly that provides a context without being overt (Kukkonen, 2011). Comics are able to utilise the subtlety of visual representation within the panel page layout to flesh out the world of the narrative (Kukkonen, 2011).

Narratives extend throughout human life (Boyd, Blackburn & Pennebaker, 2020). By constructing stories, we create meaning out of previous events while also creating new worlds and possibilities to experience (Boyd, Blackburn & Pennebaker, 2020). Lefèvre defines narrative in *Narration in Comics*, emphasising the focus on what he feels are essential narration characteristics (2000). By his account, a narrative is a set of elements that the reader interprets as a specific representation of a logical and chronicled series of events; these events are caused and/or experienced by actors (Lefèvre, 2000).

Abbott argues that all narratives are understood from the schemata of a pre-existing narrative, a representation or re-presentation understood as an already present experience that is signified again in a linguistic language format (2008). He introduces three fundamental ways in which to interpret narratives: intentional, symptomatic and adaptive (Abbott, 2008). He states that while various forms of narrative interpretation exist, they can be categorised under one of the three approaches (Abbott, 2008).

Intentional interpretations base themselves on the assumption that the media object in question has a single sensibility behind its narrative (Abbott, 2008). This means any interpretation in this approach goes off the baseline that any meaning found is intentional and purposeful. In this case, we end up looking at narrative as a whole, thereby grounding the reading based on what is repeated (Abbott, 2008). In Symptomatic interpretations, we don't look at the whole work but focus on what appears to be repeated and unacknowledged

(Abbott, 2008). Whereas the base assumption in intentional interpretations is that the author's intent and thus the narrative is whole, symptomatic focuses on the author's intent as fractured; there is friction between what was intended and what is unconsciously revealed in the narrative (Abbott, 2008). Adaptive interpretations are denoted by interpretations that go so far as attempting to validate a specific interpretation of a media object that, rather than relying on evidence in the narrative, becomes its own adaptation of the narrative (Abbott, 2008).

These three approaches are important to look at when analysing the narratives within the chosen case studies. Looking at how the *Heartstopper* (2016) comic can be interpreted and how the nuances of that interpretation shift within the *Heartstopper* (2022) live-action series is important in understanding the impact of genre and medium. These can be traced through the inevitable changes made in adapting comics into a live-action film or television format that Lefèvre outlines (2007). While both are visual media, live-action films tend to situate the audience from the characters' point of view due to the nature of having real actors present on screen (Lefèvre, 2007). Comics, on the other hand, utilise exaggeration and stylisation to depict their narrative (Lefèvre, 2007). This fundamental difference highlights how an audience's perception of the narrative can shift based on how it is presented to them. This also impacts how a genre functions based on the medium used.

When looking at the narrative structure of *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022), it is important to interrogate the idea of transmedia storytelling and understand the ways in which it may and may not apply in this instance. Transmedia storytelling exists as one of the major ways we see intermediality intersect with narrative in a way that largely shifts how an audience perceives a body of work. Henry Jenkins, a well established academic in this field of study, defines transmedia storytelling as representing a "process where integral elements of a fiction

get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story" (2007).

As Marie-Laure Ryan explains in *Transmedia Storytelling: Industry Buzzword or New Narrative Experience?* (2015) The term acts as a misnomer, an inaccurate usage of a signifier, for the entire concept. Transmedia storytelling as a term implies that bodies of work that can be categrorised under this concept tell a singular narrative throughout the multiple bodies of works and instalments within the franchise (Ryan, 2015). Ryan thus argues that a more accurate term to define this phenomenon is “transmedia worldbuilding” (2015, p.), as it highlights that it is a series of stories and narratives told within a shared fictional universe, that exist adjacent of the other (2015). This is in contrast to what the misnomer implies, wherein a narrative is essentially fractured and told in part across a variety of media types.

Melanie Schiller addresses within her work, *Transmedia Storytelling: New Practices and Audiences*, the wider context of transmedia storytelling and a consideration regarding the kinds of stories told through transmedia storytelling (2018). Extending the definition of transmedia storytelling, Schiller states that the term incorporates multiple additional factors, “...including new forms of storytelling and complex narratives; a new cultural context in which social media, connectivity, fan cultures, and online-information exchange play a big role, as do the use of marketing strategies and appropriate business models to address audiences in the world of digital connectivity” (2018, p. 99). Her assessment works to highlight the intermedial networks present when considering the mode of storytelling as a communicative and community-building tool.

Even taking all of this into account, it is important to acknowledge that there are specific types of stories and narrative structures that work best with transmedia storytelling, working to enhance the experience (Schiller, 2018). As an expression of a narrative form, It is able to sustain a multitude of perspectives throughout different interconnected bodies of work across multiple media types (Schiller, 2018). Transmedia storytelling encourages, and in certain respects, relies on audience participation, as in order for the full world narrative to be experienced, despite the installments mostly acting as whole separate stories, the audience needs to actively participate with engaging with the other smaller narratives present. This requires the audience members to be moved enough by the experience of engaging with the initial media object. Fans of previously niche media products were once seen as odd are being recontextualised in the mainstream as loyal fans and consumers, as larger businesses and media production companies are fully realising the potential profits (Schiller 2018, p. 103). Referring back to the examples listed in the Intermediality section, considering the success of the MCU, it is easy to process the media industry's push towards more narratives within this mode.

Within her chapter in the book '*Narrative and Media*', titled *Introduction: the power of narrative*, Helen Fulton outlines the prominent nature of narrative within our lives, as well as highlighting the function narrative serves in an economical context, not just in the value for individual creators, but within the wider media industries as a whole (2005). Fulton highlights that narratives and narrative media do not only contain an aesthetic merit, but in fact have a fundamental economic function, which is to act as a product that can be both generated and distributed to a wide market, thereby generating a profit (Fulton, 2005).

In this case, we can see how various narrative media can utilise genre categories for marketing benefits. Since a major aspect of any genre being categorised is that an audience is able to recognise the specific traits and elements within a media object that links it to other existing media objects (Fulton, 2005), having an audience interested in engaging with media objects within a genre can translate to a guaranteed profit from an economic perspective. Though for all the potential profit that can be achieved, when looking at a media type, it is important to note that based on societal and cultural contents, mediums can have a perceived reputation in the sense that they are regarded as deserving of critical acclaim or scorn (Fulton, 2005). This is heavily based on the discourse surrounding low-art and high-art, with mediums in the stage of prioritizing mass mainstream success and profit being scorned.

As the concepts of transmedia storytelling are outlined, the major focus on prioritising marketing and profit starts to come to light. As the influence of profit is stressed to various creators, we can begin to analyse an intersection of power in the presence of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is a term that is used to refer to a specific ideology within economic liberalism that endorses the push towards an entirely free market, which would result in every aspect of daily life being seen as having a potential value within the market (Mould, 2018). Free market in this context refers to an economic system wherein the value of trading goods is determined by consumers and private owners, with minimal influence by the state (Mould, 2018). One of the major effects of neoliberalism is the push for individuals to view themselves as entrepreneurs, and to navigate the market by representing themselves as a brand (Mould, 2018). This means that there are more tools present for creatives' within various fields to self-brand as a way of not having to navigate the standardised, institutionalised routes. The growing prominence of these tools speaks to the ideas mentioned

in the previous section regarding the internet and social media platforms acting as new routes for various creators to potentially find success, as intermedia networks become solidified in the digital space (Mould, 2018). However, it has evolved to a point where creators are expected to develop additional skills, external to honing their craft, such as business skills and social media management (Mould, 2018). Within this environment, many creators have to adopt self-branding methods when sharing their work online, as a focus on personality-based platforms increases (Gershon, 2016). In the paper *"I'm not a businessman, I'm a business, man":Typing the neoliberal self into a branded existence*, Ilana Gershon defines self-branding, or in her terms personal branding, as a social form of performance genre wherein an individual selects a set of behavioural and personality traits, then makes effort throughout interactions both in person and online to display those traits consistently (2016). Gershon defines this term in the context of a potential employee portraying themselves in the best form to attract potential employers (2016).

In the paper *Artists as Entrepreneurs, Fans as Workers*, Jeremy Wade Morris highlights how the growing presence of social media puts artist in a position wherein they feel pressure to be fully independent artists (2014). While Morris is looking at this phenomenon in the context of musicians, the push for creators as a whole to adopt more entrepreneurial mindsets is prominent (2014). If it has not been noticeable, up until this point I have referred to artists in their varying forms as a singular creator or a grouped creative. Rather than a body of work, the term content has replaced the aforementioned signifier. As the frequency of referring to the media industry and the various forms of artists that operate within this sphere with growing depersonalization, it is important to take into account how the process and value of art for art have been distilled to emphasise economic value.

This is important to note; when understanding why genre can benefit creators, it is important to understand that the notion of being able to aptly classify a body of work within a series of genre is pushed as a necessity rather than choice. This section is intended to draw attention to how the existing power relations impact the state of the industry in way that puts more pressure on creators in order to make connections to a wider audience (Fulton, 2005; Mould, 2018; Mueller, 2015). Ultimately, these aspects are important to remember when understanding genre conventions: The profitability of a body of work may lead to conventions that are out of potential economic necessity.

I also felt it necessary to mention this as we begin to delve into the case studies, *Heartstopper*, and Alice Oseman as a creative. As someone whose career trajectory falls into an archetype of success within the creative industry: finding success at a relatively young age, she was able to navigate self-branding to a point where it allowed access for her to reach success acknowledgement from already established institutions. When discussing the intricacies surrounding her, it is necessary to be mindful of the framing of Oseman's career from media outlets and the media industry as a whole; as these established institutions can gain much by pushing examples of successful neoliberalism strategies in the creative fields.

In his paper, *Stories and Storytelling in the Era of Graphic Narrative*, Jan Baetens states that the differences between how stories are understood and regarded - by a wider audience, critics, and academics - is dependent on the chosen medium utilised to communicate the story and the discourses surrounding medium specificity (Baetens, 2018). This relates to Fulton's (2005) observations surrounding the impact a chosen media can have on the overall reflection of narrative, as well as to Ryan's (2004) concepts regarding media potential. Regarding the evolving viewpoint of comics and graphic novels as a medium, in recent decades they have

both become commercially successful and regarded as a valid vehicle for storytelling and narrative representation, a complete shift of perception from when comics first became more viable (Baetens, 2018). He outlines the definition of graphic narrative, based on narrative and comics studies, stating that it acts as an overarching term to denote a form of narrative wherein multiple image sources are sequentially organised to create a narrative, adding that they are "…often supported or enhanced by captions, speech bubbles, and other verbal elements" (Baetens, 2018, p. 29).

Baeten's paper is relevant to my research, as it acts as one of the connecting agents that links the concepts of narrative and highlights how it is able to present itself across a multimodal media type such as comics (2018). By understanding graphic narratives on a base level, we can begin to unpack the ways in which comics as a media type can construct meaning in a way that relates to generating signs of genre elements.

2.5 Comics

Similar to Romance, Comics have been met by critics with ire as it is a term that carries a negative connotation due to its association with 'low' art (McCloud, 1993). In *Why Comics Studies?* by Angela Ndalianis, she outlines that part of the stigma can come both from the initially perceived audience being children and propaganda pushing comics as a tool for encouraging what was considered degenerate and violent behaviour in children at the time (2011). Two foundational texts in Anglo-American comic studies are Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993), as well as Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (1990), which are important in establishing how the medium is used to convey narrative and

meaning, as well as analysing its strength due to the usage of both written text and image.

Both the very definition and, subsequently the history of comics are contested. In Understanding Comics, Scott McCloud follows Will Eisner using the term “sequential art” when describing comics (1993, 5). Comics, as a medium, acts as a vessel in which many ideas and images can be encompassed (Eisner, 1990). They are sequential in a way that is spatially juxtaposed; each frame of a comic must occupy a different space (Eisner, 1990).

While arguments have been made for when precisely the earliest conceptions of comics began, Rodolphe Topffer’s satiric pictures are considered the founding of modern comics due to his usage of cartooning and panel borders while featuring interdependent combinations of words and pictures (McCloud, 1993). Eisner states that sequential art is the "act of weaving fabric" in the sense that the visual and written functions are deeply connected (1990, p. 122). The existence of both relies on each other to create a unified meaning. Eisner adds that the purest form of sequential art seeks to use the combination of images and letters as a language in dealing with narration (1990, 128). In *Comics as a Test Case for Transmedial Narratology*, Karin Kukkonen states, "Comics prove that such categorical distinctions between the functions of images and the functions of words, between the arts of time and the arts of space, are as much a cultural construction as an actual constraint on storytelling practices" (2011, 37). By having both text and images present, both modes can take advantages inherent to their mode as well as the advantages of the other mode equally.

Comics manage to maintain a specific style that can be translated across media despite constant remediation (Ndalianis, 2011). The longer the comic medium is recognised, the more the specific formatting and features can be transferred into other media (Kukkonen,

2011). Highlighting Kress and van Leeuwen, these are a "medium-specific mode" (1996, p. 22). This refers to the specific format and features such as speech bubbles, panels, impact frames, emanata, and other consistent elements utilised in comics.

Will Eisner states that the accumulation of modern comic book artists has successfully created the interplay between "illustration and prose" (Eisner 1990, p. 8). The unique elements used within the comic book become reminiscent of an independent language (Eisner, 1990). Essentially, it is a cumulative semiotic framework. Comics communicate their messages in this language that relies on the shared visual experience of both the audience and the creator. Lefèvre reaffirms this stance when he states that the reader must see the panels on the page and their order as a deliberate choice to comprehend any meaning (2000).

Neil Cohn, an American cognitive scientist and comics theorist, has extensive research on comic comprehension. In his book, *Who Understands Comics? Questioning the Universality of Visual Language Comprehension*, Cohn explains Visual Language Theory, a framework that argues "...creating and understanding graphic images, particularly those in sequence, taps into analogous and/or overlapping structures and cognition as language" (Cohn 2020, p. 4). Similar to how language is created by a series of patterns in the brain, which are taught and understood similarly by a group of people, when graphic images are put in sequential format, they can be taught and understood in a similar form of cognition (Cohn, 2020). In this instance, both verbal and visual modes use the same abstract concepts to structure information (Cohn, 2020). It is important to note that comics do not exist as a visual language itself, but rather exist as a medium wherein sophisticated visual languages are utilised (Cohn, 2020). The form of this visual language varies from region to region (Cohn, 2020). Overall, Visual Language Theory is important to consider as while it establishes the commonality of

specific features within the medium, it also allows space for enough variation to create recognisable distinctions from region to region and creator to creator.

This is important as it makes it possible to identify genre influences within the source case study, *Heartstopper* (2016). Referring back to Labarre, he positions genres in comics as a form of intertextual construction that depends on an audience recognising and remembering, with every recognition it enhances the comics its present in and in turn, the comics evolve its understanding (2020). Regarding *Heartstopper*, by recognising the genre signifiers present we can then understand how they enhance the story, and how *Heartstopper*'s reiteration of it evolves how it is understood in turn.

In *Narration In Comics* (2000), Lefèvre states that when readers engage with comics, they come to the reading with a set idea of conventions that they expect the comic will follow. These expectations form a schemata - a mental structure representing generic knowledge that becomes more established with each specific comic they read (Sternberg, 1996). Lefèvre (2000) further explains that as a reader reads a comic, a set of expectations is created as they read and engage with that specific comic. Depending on how the creator of the comic decides to structure their story, the reader will develop schemata in accordance. Comics as a medium are interesting to look at regarding artistic intention and instinct. As a form of sequential art, the overall impact is viewed in the visual whole of the comic (Eisner, 1990).

When discussing the difference between genre and medium, Catharine Abell mentions that while medium, like genres, are created to solve interpretative and/or evaluative problems, it produces tools and techniques primarily rather than conventions (2012). It also does not produce interpretative and/or evaluative expectations in an audience or community. (Abell,

2012). Marie-Laure Ryan also distinguishes between genre and medium, focusing on how a person has to work around the restrictions of the medium in order to take advantage of their possibilities/affordances (2003). When considering what is addressed by Abell, Ryan, and Lefèvre, it must be noted that in this research, when we talk about the expectations set up in comics, we are addressing the story being conveyed through the medium of comics rather than the comic medium itself.

Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle highlights in his work how readers of comic books are able to understand comic pages in two ways: linear and tabular (2014). Linear in this instance refers to how a reader follows the panels on a page within an order, being guided through the grid lines made up of panels and gutters to create the progression of the narrative linearly (Fresnault-Deruelle, 2014). Tabular refers to the idea that the page itself exists as a whole single image (Fresnault-Deruelle, 2014), the panels within the page acting as an organised entity with which to communicate information to the reader page-to-page (Fresnault-Deruelle, 2014). How the panels are organised can determine what information the reader is able to comprehend; in the instances when the panel construction within a page or series of pages does not conform to what readers can traditionally expect, the fundamental information communicated may not be on narrative plot points but highlight the perspective character's emotional state (Fresnault-Deruelle, 2014). The ability to break down the construction of comic books (page-to-page and panel-to-panel) is important to establish when analysing the case study, *Heartstopper* (2016). Looking at Fresnault-Deruelle allows for an established terminology that will make the process of analysing the comic easier to achieve in later chapters, as well as provide insight into the construction of the pages outside medium-necessity.

Traditionally, there is an assumed way a reader navigates the reading of a comic page, page-to-page. Within a Western hemisphere context, the panels can be read left to right, starting from the top of the page and moving to the bottom, following what is called the "Z-Path" (Bouissac and Cohn 2013, p. 91). This is in the same way a literature body of work is read. In comparison, the standard for Japanese manga is to read right to left, starting from the top area to the bottom area of the page. Cohn and Bouissac cover the External Compositional Structure (ECS), which is a term denoting the compositional space outside the panels: the gutter (2013). The gutters are an interesting aspect to consider, as they are what aid in forming the spatial awareness within the page. This ultimately is what aids in creating space and pacing from panel to panel, guiding the reader's comprehension of the page.

In *Navigating Comics II: Constraints on the Reading Order of Comic Page Layouts*, Neil Cohn and Hannah Campbell conduct an experiment wherin they got 72 participants made up of comic readers, gave them a pack of single pages with separate experiment page layouts, and instructed them to number them in an order that the individual participants would read them in (2015). This experiment stands as a testament to the ways the comic form is able to create even the vaguest sense of narrative, even with the most base elements of the comic medium present. For this experiment, the experimental pages that were a part of the pack were only blocked out panels and the gutter space that separated them (Cohn and Campbell, 2015). While the "Z-Path" (Bouissac and Cohn 2013, p. 91), is understood as the most common form of reading a page, if the spatial arrangement of a page pushes the standards enough, the reader will be pushed to find a path to navigate through.

Baetens covers the narrative form of abstract comics, their growing prominence, and what their presence in the comic industry reveals regarding traditional comic storytelling within his study, *Abstraction in Comics* (2011). Baetens argues that narrative is the conceptual antonym of abstraction in the comic media sphere, as any forms of abstraction seem to be directly utilised to both challenge the conception of and creates a lack of narrative potential (2011). Taking inspiration from Wiesing's study regarding abstraction photography (2005), Baetens is able to outline abstraction within comics as an intentional tendency of challenging the dominant elements of comic construction as a process (2011). One interesting facet revealed in this is the tendency of reader, and humans a whole, to seek any form of narrative within media, even when the media object has no intention to depict one (Baetens, 2011). As regardless of how abstract a comic aims to be, when panels are sequentially organised, the process of transitioning from panel to panel can create a visual pattern to follow. This transition also relates to a shown action or event that can be interpreted in a narrative form (Baetens, 2011).

It is very easy to anticipate and assume the presence of a narrative within a comic where there are sequential images placed near and next to each other in a sequential conception, marking a pattern of logic (Baetens, 2011). Taking into account the ways in which comic reading develop within a reader, a schemata of how to intrinsically read comics (Lefèvre, 2000), creates an environment wherein consumers subconsciously seek a narrative of some kind (Baetens, 2011). This tendency is also revealed when we consider the findings of the experiment conducted by Cohn and Campbell (2015).

Mats Arvidson, Mikael Askander, Lea Wierød Borc ˇak, Signe Kjær Jensen and Nafiseh Mousavi look at the integration of semiotic systems in *Intermedial Combinations* (2021).

Defining intermedial combinations as “Media combinations of different basic media types are always, literally, intermedial combinations that involve intermedial relations between different forms of communication” (Arvidson et al. 2021, p. 106), different intermedial combinations are examined to evaluate how these different media type systems integrate to create meaning (Arvidson et al., 2021). Looking at comics, their ability to represent other systems of media through either utilising imagery, text or a combination of both works to showcase how comics themselves can exemplify the concept of intermedial networks. An argument is also raised: in order for any analysis within intermdial forms of communication and integration to occur, the scholar in question must become proficient in all media type systems present (Arvidson et al. 2021, p. 106).

In his work. *Four Conceptions of the Page From Case, planche, récit: lire la bande dessinée*, Benoît Peeters explores four general modes of page and panel, which is meant to outline what Peeters perceives as the general forms of utilization that present themselves in the composition of comic pages. It is important to note that the specified modes - Conventional, Decorative, Rhetorical, and Productive Conceptions - are meant to focus on "operations" (Peeters 1998, p. 42), denoting the general kinds of arrangements that present themselves, rather than being intended as a catalogue of historical or author specific trends (Peeters, 1998).

The conventional utilizations of the comic pages' compositional elements, represent the most base form of utilizing the comic’s media components within a page, the panels usually being uniformly placed next to each other; it does not take away from the narrative potential of the page, however, unless the comic artist actively works to utilise the standardisation of this

format to the narrative's advantage, it will not directly enhance the narrative depicted (Peeters, 1998). Within decorative utilization, the comic pages are conceptualised in a way that can overwhelm the expression of narrative within the page, opting to prioritze the visual impression and aesthetic (Peeters, 1998). As a conception that is "one is fascinated by painting." (Peeters 1998, p. 47), a quote utilised to express the ways in which the format and spatial conceptualised of the page is meant to highlight and emphasise the visual impact, It creates a directly opposite impression from the first listed conception (Peeters, 1998). As an additional contrast to both the decorative and conventional conceptions intrinsically minimal regard for narrative, within *rhetorical utilization* both the page and the panels work to best depict and bring about the full narrative potential within the page (Peeters, 1998). The organisation of the media elements, in accordance to what the best suits representing the narrative (Peeters, 1998). Finally looking at Productive Utilization, rather than the intended narrative leading the compositional elements of the comic page, it is the composition of the page itself that impacts the narrative potential (Peeters, 1998). Pages within this organization tend to be more experimental (Peeters, 1998)

Peeters' observations are interesting in the theoretical sense, adding to the understanding of the many ways we can categorise forms of composition and communication within pages. When looking at his work in combination with Baetens concepts regarding abstraction in comics, we get a better sense of how to comprehend narrative in a way that is relevant to understanding *Heartstopper (2016)* concerning how genre is present. There is a clear focus in comprehending the tension that exists between narrative potential/expresssion and style. Peeters looks at the page in relation to the balance struck between the two, while Baetens argues how the constant interplay between abstractive elements and narrative function can work together to enhance the overall comic.

2.6 Introducing Heartstopper

My case study will be Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper*, specifically the relationship between the original webcomic (2016) and the live-action series (2022). *Heartstopper* (2016) is a Young Adult (YA) coming-of-age queer romance webcomic that focuses on Charlie Spring, a high-school student, as he meets and falls in love with Nick Nelson, the popular jock.

Since its release, *Heartstopper* has attained great level of popularity. It was first published on Tumblr and Tapas, respectively in 2016. In 2019, it was released on the Webtoon platform, another webcomic publishing site. It has also received a print version, kick-started in 2018, which currently consists of four volumes. A fifth and final volume is set to be released in 2024, wherein the 8th Arc will be published. This will also coincide with pages of the eighth arc being released weekly on Webtoon and Tapas respectively in anticipation. Directed by Euros Lyn, The live-action show was released as a Netflix Original in April 2022, with a total of 8 episodes, directed by Euros Lyn. In May 2022, Season 2 and a third season of the show was green lit. As a serialised webcomic, the format transitioned well to a live-action series. Within the original digital comic, each chapter was released on a week-by-week basis. The storyline can be broken up into mini-arcs focusing on the progression of Nick and Charlie's relationship: for example, Part 1 is titled 'Meet' and Part 2 is titled 'Crush'. In the Netflix series, these arcs span the duration of a minimum of 1 episode: Episode 1 is 'Meet', and Episode 2 is 'Crush', though the entire arc as seen in the comic is depicted in Episode two and Three.

As a narrative, *Heartstopper* has a simple premise of following two boys falling in love. Both

the comic and the live-action show have received praise from critics and gained a high level of pop culture relevancy. It has high potential as a series that can heavily impact how queer stories are told involving queer characters moving forward and the teen romance genre overall. As a queer story, it exists outside what can be considered the Romance genre's heteronormative conventions, wherein most popular stories are centred around heterosexual romances. However, while the work will be positioned as a queer story, the proposed analysis will focus on adaptation as it relates to the narrative structure and genre conventions.

The author of the comic, Alice Oseman, is also the main screenwriter for the show and has been very upfront regarding giving insight into their reasons for making changes to the story to fit a live-action series format. This case study has easily accessible evidence as a result. Her heavy contributions to the live-action series screenplay could allow for a more whole expression of *Heartstopper*'s "narrative potential" (Ryan 2004, p. 1) in live-action series format. Understanding this contextualisation will make it easier to discern which adaptational changes were made due to medium-specific and which were genre-specific.

Heartstopper has already been the subject of and mentioned in a few academic articles and other existing scholastic works. In "Queer and Mainstream: Tracing *Heartstopper*'s Reception via Digital Tools", Marta Boni depicts how open-source data tools can be utilised to contextualise and visualise the general impact the show had based on what can be gathered online (2022). As an analysis of online data tools, it could be useful when attempting to contextualise the audience's reception of the show for the purposes of my dissertation. In *"The Genre of the Middle-Grade Graphic Problem Novel"*, Shai Rudin utilises the *Heartstopper* comic (2016) as one of three case studies (2022). Most recently, *"'In a*

Romantic Way, Not Just a Friend Way!': Exploring the Developmental Implications of Positive Depictions of Bisexuality in Alice Oseman's Heartstopper", Melissa Allen focuses on how the character arc of Nick Nelson, the main love interest, acts as one of the few depictions of bisexuality that does not fall prey to harmful stereotypes (2023). There is a focus on the potential educational nature of graphic novels and the developmental perspective for learners (Allen, 2023). Hearstopper was also the subject of focus within a Masters Thesis: Marta Revilla Rivas' "*Heartstopper: Using Young Adult LGBTQ+ Literature in the EFL Classroom"* (2021). Rivas utilises *Heartstopper* as a case study for exploring literature as a tool for teaching high school students language, specifically English First Language (EFL) (2021).

Heartstopper has been utilised in multiple instances as a case study in the context of an educational tool when reflecting on either the experiences of queer bodies or as a way to build empathy and understanding for the queer/LGBTQ+ community (Allen, 2022; Rivas 2021). When looking at both the webcomic and the Netflix show, it makes sense. While Oseman makes a point of depicting serious subject within the book such as eating disorders, sexual assault, various forms of homophobia, etc., the overall tone of the story works in a way to highlight the joyous, light-hearted moments the characters experience and centre the experiences of the main characters, Nick and Charlie, along with their friends, most of whom are also queer.

To conclude:

Genres are a dynamic form of categorising texts and media objects due to the many ways with which they can exist within those texts (Chandler, 1977; Neale, 1980). As a result of this, genres are not confined to a single form. Due to its dynamic nature, it is not enough to

only examine a text to determine the state of a genre within any given moment; it must be corroborated by looking into other external factors that potentially add to the understanding of the ways genre is present and impacts the story, thus impacting the perception of the story; as a result, there are many ways to approach comprehending genre via a multitude of theoretical approaches and frameworks (Mets, 1975; Mueller, 2015; Mittell, 2001). Many of the focuses within these approaches have a common trend, in grounding the understanding of genre within a specified in relation to social-political, economic, or cultural trends (Mittell, 2001; Fulton, 2005). Much of what decides the existence of genre and how it presents itself within a media object is the intent of the art (Abell, 2012; Labarre, 2020). A big part of a genres existence is in the reliance of the audience to recognise the patterns within the body of work and actively categorise it as well (Abell, 2012). Due to this, the interplay between the intention of a creator and reception by the audience is important to consider, as how a genre is present within a media object can be dependent on audience perception.

Within this regard, Romance as a genre is an interesting case to examine. It's perception as being mainly written by and read by women has lead the genre to receive varying degrees of disparagement from critics and wider audiences (Cameron, 2020; Fryre, 1974). As a genre, its ability to retain a high level of iterability across media objects is notable, as the inherently large source pool media makes it easier to identify trends in genre. One of the common tropes found within the contemporary romance genre is the Happily Ever After ending, which can act as a source of socio-political power by influencing readers to adopt a hopeful mindset (Michelson, 2021). In the context of Heart-stopper, a queer love story, this can hint to a further understanding of its success, when taken in context to the existing history of queer stories focused on tragedy due to previous laws of censorship (Hulan, 2017).

When looking at theories of intermediality and transmediation, we can comprehend the factors that play into the prevalence of adaptations. Adaptations of media objects have always been a part of society; it partly plays into the economic factors for larger media industries and into fulfilling a sense of familiarity within an audience (Bolter & Grusin, 1999; Hutcheon & O'Flynn, 2013). In this, we see a link between adaptations and genre: they exist as a component of repeated pattern or structure within media, but whereas adaptations focus on the repeated narrative of a specific media object, genre aims to link multiple media objects based on a repeated concept or element present that the audience recognises, and the creator deliberately placed there. Lefèvre's outline of the difficulties regarding the transmediation process when adapting comic to film work provides a starting point of areas to consider during the analysis regarding whether the Netflix show (*Heartstopper* 2022) managed to capture the aesthetic qualities of the webcomic (*Heartstopper* 2016), and the ways the medium was utilised for those purposes. Regarding the narrative potential, recognising that certain mediums suit certain storytelling structures makes it easier to establish changes made regarding adhering to the medium's advantages and limits (Ryan, 2004). A major factor regarding a narrative and its ability to be understood by a wider audience is determined by the choice of medium, which in turn impacts the reception and success of a narrative (Fulton, 2005; Schiller, 2018). When looking at media objects that have managed to achieve success it is crucial to note: while it is necessary to contextualise industry influence behind the achievement (facets like marketing and advertising, for example) and consider its place in mass media industries, considering the form of storytelling and the medium it is communicated through is beneficial to understanding how the presence of genre conventions aids in the readability of the media object. When communicating a narrative that can be placed within a genre, utilising signifiers of that genre with respect to the medium type can make aspects of the narrative familiar to the audience, aiding in the ability to understand the

narrative. This also means the opposite has the potential to occur: applying signifiers in a way that can confuse the audience. When considering *Heartstopper*, it is important to consider its place as an artefact of Transmedia storytelling, as it counts as an extended story that takes place within Alice Oseman's preexisting novel, *Solitaire (2014)*, which focuses on Charlie's older sister, Tori Spring.

Due to *Heartstopper*'s (2016) existence as a digital comic, it is crucial to establish a way of analysing comics. In doing so, it allows for further interrogation regarding how genre exists within comics, concerning its existence as a multimodal medium: it incorporates both written and visual modes of communication (McCloud, 1993). The comic medium's ability to utilise both within a page results in the development of its formatting style that has become easily recognisable and easy to reference: panels, speech bubbles, and gutters that are organised sequentially in order to create a narrative (Eisner, 1990; Kukkonen, 2011; Ndalianis, 2011). Comic theorists like Cohn provide crucial terminology and frameworks for understanding how comics function, such as the Visual Theory Framework (2020). Regarding comics in general, they have a way of teaching a reader to understand the comics form of communication, which will translate when reading other comics (Lefèvre, 2000). Genres in comics function as intertextual building blocks, which enhance the comics when present and in turn are evolved by new contexts provided by it's presence within the comic (Labarre, 2020). When consolidating multiple theorists together, it becomes clear that there are many ways to understand how a comic communicates itself and that much of it is dependent on the intentions of the artist. When looking at the digital comic (*Heartstopper* 2016) it is important to consider this when noticing any trends within the composition of their pages.

Moving forward, these theories and frameworks will be crucial when beginning the Transmedial Analysis Framework (Bruhn & Schirrmacher, 2021).

Chapter 3: Beginning the Analysis

This chapter aims to begin the analysis process of *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022), by utilising the first and second steps of the Transmedial Analysis Framework (Bruhn & Schirrmacher, 2021). The first step of the framework is to set out a working hypothesis that underlines the main objective of the analysis. This will include a focus on concepts such as intermediality and genre and how it will relate to *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022).

One main thing to keep in mind is the rationale behind choosing *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022) to interrogate the underlying research question. *Heartstopper* (2016) is solely created, written, and drawn out by Alice Oseman; her artistic and authorial intent comes across quite clearly. It is important to note that there are instances of collaboration within the webcomic in the form of Mini-Comics: non-linear plot lines that are not directly related to the main story arcs that are occurring during the time of release. Many of the mini-comics are collaborations with other webcomic creators, and they follow a formula: Oseman writes out a short story, and the collaborator artist panels and draws the mini in their style. The fact that these tend to exist outside of Oseman's main story, and she still a major contributor within these instances. Looking at the live-action Netflix Show in comparison, the nature of the filming industry - for both the shorter-form content like films and the long-form content like television - means that there are more areas of collaborative effort present as an inherent trait. These areas include producers, directors, screenwriters, and actors. There are also behind-the-scenes positions such as editors whose job is to the shots together, incorporating various cuts, transitions, colour grading, and audioscaping in order to appropriately frame the story in a way that effectively communicates itself to a wider audience. With this in mind, multiple

elements of collective collaboration need to be considered. Despite this, *Heartstopper* (2022) is one of the few instances wherein the creator of the source media object, the comic, maintains a significant presence throughout the process of producing the show. Alice Oseman was the main screenwriter for all the episodes of *Heartstopper*. They were a main presence throughout the process from casting to the mandatory promotions to advertise the show facilitated by Netflix, which can be seen in promotional videos uploaded on YouTube and various interviews.

It stands as one of the adaptations that works to highlight the importance of the original creators' intentions and vision for the show. This allows a frame to contextualise the changes later in the analysis: if we go by the assumption that Oseman's vision was considered greatly and was respected throughout the production process, then by looking at her interviews to contextualise certain changes, we can evaluate a logic in the ways that genre conventions are able to be present and highlight the creators ability to adjust how certain aspects of genre are conveyed, medium to medium.

While it is well established how the mode of the content will impact the overall impression, understanding, and reception the work will get, due to how mediums can generate specific audience targets, the aim is to attempt to look at this effect more closely with relation to genre. As Oseman was the screenwriter, this means that any interpretation of genre present were made intentionally, or as a reflection of how embedded genre conventions are when considering changes.

Step 1: The Hypothesis

The working hypothesis that will work as a through line for providing a sense of direction and intent for the analysis going forward is thus: By interrogating the transmediation process of how the Target source media object, *Heartstopper* (2022), was developed from the source media object, *Heartstopper* (2016), I hope to gain an understanding of how the genre conventions impact the depiction of the narrative based on the medium changes.

As discussed within the Literature Review, how genre can be defined can vary based on intention (Chandler, 1977); this means that for genre to be utilised efficiently within this narrative, it must first be defined. The working definition for the genre to be considered is the following: a reoccurring set of patterns that can be discerned within a media object and can be present within that media object on various levels (narratively medium specific). These patterns can be observed in other existing media objects within a specific moment in time. In this sense, these recurring patterns can be termed as genre conventions. A large part of how genre conventions can be expressed, and thus understood and processed by an audience, is based on medium-specificity (Abell, 2012). This is taking into account that within the genre as a whole, romance specifically in question, the various narrative signifiers that is understood to mark the presence of a genre will have an overall similarity based on the wider category of genre, but will have specifics based on prominent works, medium to medium.

The transmedial analysis will focus on the first four arcs of *Heartstopper* (2022) and how they were adapted within Season 2. When looking at the show, we can see the comic was adapted in a way to account for the minimal presence of the side characters within the show. Most of the characters with increased screen time were also either in relationships, or developed a relationship within the webcomic.

Both television and comics are considered visual mediums. Television's utilisation of film techniques and comics utilisation of Visual Language Theory (Cohn, 2020) means that one of the easiest ways for the genre to be present is through visual representation, Or at the very least what is shown. When looking at how genre conventions are present, I will be analysing genre as a type of intertextuality, meaning that we can trace similar iconography and narrative devices within other pre-existing media.

Step 2: A Comparative Close Reading

Within the fifth chapter of *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ*, Thomas Leitch attempts to develop specified jargon categories to identify the many ways in which the transmediation process can occur, stating that the aim is "...not seek to ground my categories in adaptations of a single work but in a series of logical relations that refer to a wide range of adaptations in an attempt to be as comprehensive as possible" (2007, p. 95). Though Leitch acknowledges that the categories are harder to define definitely, due to the trend of multiple adjustment strategies utilized in most referenced case studies and ultimately concludes his efforts to be a failure, outlining the adjustment strategies, succeeded in developing a jargon that is useful to the process of understanding the process of a source in being adapted to a target source (2007). Though there are more strategy types listed within Leitch's chapter, Bruhn and Schirrmacher list 5 that are important within this stage of the analysis process: Compression, Expansion, Correction, Updating, and Superimposition (Bruhn & Schirrmacher, 2021; Leitch, 2007). When discussing the strategies that apply to *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022) it may be necessary to critically analyse how Leitch defines the boundaries of his adjustment strategies, as there are changes due to the transmediation process that are necessary to talk about; in those instances, these shifts would

relate to the expressions of genre within *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022) overall, but they do not count exclusively under the parameters of the specific ones listed as the only strategies to include.

To summarise the main plot synopsis: Charlie Spring, a Year 10, meets Nick Nelson, Year 11, at the beginning of a new Term when they are seated next to each other in class. Nick is fairly popular being the captain of the Rugby Team, while Charlie plays drums and is known as one of the gay kids. They begin talking and become fast friends, with Nick convincing Charlie to join Rugby. As their relationship deepens, they begin to develop mutual crushes on each other, thus leading Nick to begin questioning his sexuality. After a shared kiss during a party, they begin dating in secret, as Nick starts to understand his sexual identity.

Compression:

Compression can be explained by condensing the plot or content within the source media object to be able to fit the constraints of the target media source object (Leitch, 2007). This displays itself within the transmedial process regarding the case studies of *Heartstopper (2016; 2022)* in a number of ways: The process of condensing the hundreds of pages into a two-season, eight-episode formats, and the compression of specific plot points, and omitting specific characters.

Compression via release format

This section is mostly focusing on the technical way the webcomic arcs and episodes were adapted into the show. To first explain the form compression present within the transmediation process, let us first look at the source object, the webcomic, and how it was released. Due to Tapas, the webcomic app, having a more structured archive of the release

timeline, their timeline will be the one looked at. The introduction page of the comic was released on August 13, 2016, with the first episode released on September 1, 2016. From there, two episodes of the first arc were published twice a month, on the 1st and 15th days of those months respectively. There are twelve episodes within the first arc, “Meet”, with the last episode published on the 11th of February, rather than then 15th. From the start of the second arc, Crush, to the last arc that is currently published, the seventh arc “Together”, every new episode is released around 10 days later starting from February 21, 2016, resulting in 3 updates per month. This excludes filler episodes that are meant to update readers on news and events surrounding the webcomic and author, as well as guest episodes where another artist/writer collaborates with Alice Oseman to produce short filler episodes.

Heartstopper (2016) has a total of 717 episodes available on both Tapas and Webcomics, which are both respectively apps developed to house and generate digital comics or webcomics and have them easily accessible to a wider audience. Within these digital platforms, only 7 arcs are currently available. Whereas within *Heartstopper* (2022), Season One and Season Two both have 8 episodes respectively, coming to a total of 16 episodes overall. Within The first Season, the first three arcs of *Heartstopper* (2016) are compressed into eight episodes, and within Season 2, only Arc Four is compressed into the next eight episodes.

Within the webcomic the first 3 arcs - titled *Meet, Crush*, and *Kiss*, respectively - consist of a total of 68 episodes. A minority number of episodes are fillers, consisting of mini guest short comics, or update notices. The fourth arc - titled *Out* - has a total of 48 episodes, with this making up one of the longer arcs within the webcomic. A small minority of those episodes

consists of filler in a similar fashion to what was established when contextualising the first three arcs, As seen in **Table 3.1**.

Looking at **Table 3.2**, we see that the entirety of the first arc of the comic is depicted in the first episode of Season 1, both sharing the tile, “Meet”. The first arc is the shortest one within the entire run of the comic, only having 12 episodes. The second and third episodes focus on adapting the second arc, *Kiss*, In contrast to the three arcs, the third arc is depicted throughout the rest of the season, from episode 3 up to the eighth and final night here. In Season 2, the fourth arc takes up the most episodes to depict, utilising 6 of the 8 episodes, with the remaining two episodes covering the fifth arc.

Number	Name	Episode Count	First Episode Publish Date	Last Episode Publish Date	Total Page Num.	Page Start	Page End	Filler	Updates	Mini Comics	Main Plot Summary
1	Meet	12	Sept. 1, 2016	Feb. 11, 2017	94	p. 1	p. 94	2	2	0	Charlie Spring, a Year 10, is in a secret relationship with Ben Hope. Charlie meets Nick Nelson, a Year 11 rugby player, at the beginning of a new school year. As Charlie and Nick grow close, Charlie joins the rugby team. Ben ends up sexually assaulting Charlie after he breaks up with Ben, and Nick ends up intervening. This arc is the setup for the beginning of Charlie and Nick's eventual relationship.
2	Crush	20	Feb. 21, 2017	Aug. 26, 2017	168	p. 95	p. 263	2	0	2	Nick's feelings steadily develop as they continue to spend time together. After a day of hanging out with Charlie at home, Nick begins to actively question his feelings towards Charlie and as a result, his sexuality. This comes to a head during Harry's party, where Nick's friends group tries to set him up with Tara Strong, who we discover is lesbian and dating Dara Olsson. Nick and Charlie end up kissing, and Nick ends up leaving Charlie when he is shocked out of the moment by his friends outside. He eventually goes back to the room, however, Charlie has already gone home.
3	Kiss	36	Sept. 1, 2017	Sept. 11, 2018	294	p. 264	p. 558	6	2	4	Nick talks to Charlie the day after the kiss, and they both decides to date secretly as Nick comes to terms with understanding his sexuality. Nick attends Charlie's birthday bowling party, where Tao Xu and Charlie end up arguing about Nick's trustworthiness; Nick overhears them, but the rest of the outing goes well. Charlie also goes to a movie hangout with Nick and his friends, where Harry and Nick end up fist-fighting, due to Harry's casual homophobic comments towards Charlie. During an orchestra practice between Truham Boys'and Higgs Girls' schools, Nick ends up spending time with Darcy and Tara, where he reveals that he is dating Charlie. The arc ends with Nick coming out to his mother as bisexual, and his mother being supportive.
4	Out	42	Oct. 1, 2018	Jan. 21, 2020	350	p. 559	p. 909	14	7	7	Charlie tells his parents that he is dating Nick. As exam season starts, Nick has to deal with his confrontational and bigoted brother, David, as he comes back from university. During a talk, Charlie reveals that his eating habits got worse after the bullying, getting so bad that he started to self-harm. Nick, Charlie, and the friend group end up participating in the Paris trip, spending a few days there. Aled tells Charlie not to tell Tao about dating Nick yet, as he suspects Tao being too loud after Charlie came out to them both the year before may have been the reason Charlie was outed and thus bullied. This sends Charlie spiralling, and we see his anxiety increase throughout the arc. During the trip, Elle and Tao Xu end up dating each other, Charlie faints in the Louvre from lack of eating and Nick reveals he is dating Charlie during Tara's birthday party. As the arc closes, we see Nick researching eating disorders, as he notices Charlie's eating habits throughout the arc.

Table 3.1: The following table depicts a condensed summary of the details regarding the *Heartstopper (2016)* webcomic, which includes arc names, webcomic episodes release dates, page number details, and arc summaries. These details were acquired by the version of the webcomic uploaded of the Tapas app.

Season 1	Episode								
	Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	Name	Meet	Crush	Kiss	Secret	Friend	Girls	Bully	Boyfriend
	Length	00:27:49	00:32:22	00:30:07	00:29:36	00:27:05	00:30:04	00:26:49	00:33:23
	Arc Adapted	1: Meet	Crush	Crush/ Kiss	Kiss	Kiss	Kiss	KIss	Kiss
	WebC. Ep.	ep. 1 - 12	ep. 1 - 12	ep. 2:2-12 - ep. 3:3-2	ep. 2 - 12	ep. 13 -18	ep. 19 - 24	ep. 25 - 31	ep. 31 - 36
Season 2	Episode								
	Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	Name	Out	Family	Promise	Challenge	Heat	Truth/Dare	Sorry	Perfect
	Length	00:32:51	00:34:58	00:31:47	00:36:30	00:35:04	00:35:50	00:34:16	00:40:35
	Arc Adapted	Out	Out	Out	Out	Out	Out	Out	Out
	WebC. Ep.	ep. 1- 9	ep. 10 - 13	ep. 7 (bonfire)	ep. 14 - 21	ep. 22 - 29	ep. 30 - 42	Ep. in Arc 5	aspects of ep. 10

Table 3.2: The following table depicts details regarding the *Heartstopper* (2022) Netflix series and the relationship between how episodes within the source media object, *Heartstopper* (2016), were narratively adapted in the show.

This is not in line with how Leitch (2007), as well as Bruhn and Schirrmacher (2021), define the idea of compression. This focuses more on compression within the sense that the distribution and consumption of the webcomic were compressed within how many years it took a reader to read the entire comic arcs up until the fourth, in comparison to the Netflix show's one eight-episode seasons per year, for two years. In *Comics and Film*, Craig Fischer outlines the perceived and technical differences and similarities between the film medium and comics (2016). One of the listed divergences is the expected level of engagement the

reader/viewer has to exert when consuming these media types (Fischer, 2016). When reading a comic, the reader is expected to fill the narrative gaps depicted from panel to panel as signified by the gutter spaces between them, from page to page (Fischer, 2016). Whereas within film and cinema, the shots of a film are shown sequentially at an automated pace that allows those gaps to be perceived as non-existent by its viewer (Fischer, 2016). Fischer cites his definition of closure within comics from Chapter 3 of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993). The speed with which a reader consumes the pages of a comic (physical and/or digital) is self-determined. The pages are accessible in that the reader is able to control the pace of reading, the story has no fixed timeline. A comic storyline that is 200 pages can potentially be consumed within a few hours, or even weeks. When looking at the film medium, there is a fixed time of consumption as determined by the run length. Depending on the location of the film's access, the viewer may be able to pause, fast-forward and go back to certain moments, this does not change the nature of filmed media having a set pacing to their narratives.

In this sense, television has the ability to combine both. Within a single episode, there is a fixed pacing that can be altered depending on accessible apparatus, is not an inherent aspect of the medium. When we look at an entire season of a show, how a viewer consumes the whole season varies. In traditional network broadcasting schedules, a new episode would be released weekly, with the potential for other slots throughout the week to be utilised as replays. As physical copies of entire seasons became available, Cassettes, VHS', and DVD's for example, the consumption of multiple episodes becomes more similar to a comic, the viewer dictating the pace; this becomes more emphasised as online spaces and digital streaming services become the norm and will be explored further within chapter 3 (Mittel, 2015).

Omitted and Less Featured Characters

Another form of compression that is present is the omitted characters from the narrative. Oliver Spring is Charlie and Tori's youngest brother, who is introduced within the second arc, *Crush*, usually present when the setting of a scene is within Charlie's home due to his younger age, and his presence is completely removed from *Heartstopper* (2022), the target source media object.

Aled Last is also a character who is absent from the Netflix Show. Part of Charlie's friend group, he tends to contrast Tao Xu's disposition, where Tao is blunt in his honesty and concerns, Aled is more gentle and empathetic with expressing his worries, even when they both share the same reasons. He is also introduced within the second arc within the comic. The context of his absence is explored further within the Expansion section.

Christian, Sai, and Otis are part of Nick's initial friend group and are members of the rugby team. Within the webcomic, we meet them during the second arc as they observe Nick and Charlie's behaviour and interactions towards one another as they continue to grow closer. Their bluntness in being able to appropriately understand the situation as spectators makes them function as a form of humorous 4th wall break. They are one of the first people to guess that Nick is developing a crush on Charlie, and tend to narratively act as an oppositional force to Tao's concerns that Nick is heterosexual. While they are present within the target source media object, we only interact with them in the second season, And their scene presence is greatly diminished.

Expansion

Leitch defines the expansion strategy as the opposite form of compression; rather than condensing, the target source media object expands on the plot and/or narrative of the source media object (2007). When outlining this strategy, short stories that were adapted to full feature-length movies and musicals were examples listed (2007). It may seem contradictory to list both compression and expansion as narrative strategies, however, it makes sense when the additional elements within *Heartstopper (2022)*, the target source media object, are taken into account.

When understanding the utilisation of expansion strategies, we can see it present within the context of extending the narrative length or experience. This means that while the actual empirical length was condensed, the content of the story itself and how it is explored in the space of the medium is expanded. Referring back to Episode 1 of Season One in comparison to the first arc of the comic, for example, it manages to both showcase the setup of Charlie and Nick's growing relationship while setting up and introducing most of the characters, arcs, and conflicts that the show will follow for the rest of the season and Season Two. While this step won't go into the full context behind the additions present, it will briefly list what the expanded elements are. Forms of expansion within *Heartstopper (2022)* are present within a few ways: The addition of plot elements - both in plot event settings and the character arcs, and the addition of new original characters.

Additional Plot Beats: New Places To Be

Firstly, Within *Heartstopper* (2016), the arcs are written in a way wherein there is an average of one big plot beat per arc. In the first arc, Ben and Charlie's confrontation would work as

the major plot beats. In the second arc, it would be Harry Greene's party. Within the third arc, there are two plot beats; Charlie's birthday bowling party, the Movie Outing with Charlie's initial friend group, the rugby team, and Nick coming out to his mother. The Paris Trip for the Year 11's and 10's would be the major plot beat of the fourth arc. This event covers most of the episodes in this arc, starting from the 14th updated episode until the last episode in the arc, episode 42. Regarding *Heartstopper* (2022), the number of plot beats increases significantly. Within the first season, there is an additional rugby sports match, the day of the school orchestra showcase, Tao Xu and Harry Greene's fight at school, and the sports day. Within Season two, there is a heavier focus on the exam season, an additional end of year bonfire party, Elle and Tao's date on the day of the bonfire, the Lambert School for Arts exhibition, as well as prom dance.

Additional Characters: Who's The New Kid?

There are new side characters present within the show: Imogen Heaney and Isaac Henderson. Imogen Heaney is a new character created for *Heartstopper* (2022). Played by Rhea Norwood, she is one of Nick's best friends in his initial friend group. She is introduced within the second episode of Season 1 and remains a constant presence throughout the live-action show, only absent in less than half of the episodes.

Isaac Henderson is an addition to Charlie Spring's friend group as one of his best friends and is played by Tobie Donovan. While he is a new character in the story, his presence within the narrative is meant to replace another character, Aled Last, who was mentioned in the Compression section. While he is a constant presence in Season One, he exists as a flat character, experiencing no growth or development until the Second Season. Here we see him struggle with not feeling any desire for romantic or sexual relationships, and his friends

finding romance only aggravates his emotions until he has an outburst in episode 7. He ends the season dealing with the implications of being aromantic and asexual when talking to another student during the Lambert School of Art exhibition.

Expanded Side Character Arcs

Another aspect that has expanded is most of the character arcs. Within the show, The side characters' prominence is elevated to having their personal character arcs depicted throughout Seasons One and Two, thereby creating a more fleshed-out ensemble cast the audience can follow. While Charlie and Nick are still the main focus of the narrative, the other characters get more time for their arcs to be depicted within the first and second seasons. Some characters, Like Tao, Elle, Tara and Darcy, were in relationships with each other in the webcomic, but were not fully explored within the first Two arcs. Transmedial expansion is present in that the Netflix series shows them together or developing their relationship as more active present within the episodes.

Ben Hope is one of the antagonists in *Heartstopper* (2016). He is one of the first characters we meet In the first episode of the webcomic, kissing Charlie before the first class of school. He is mainly present within the first and second arc of the webcomic, acting as a source of antagonism and stress towards Charlie. After Harry's party at the end of Arc 2, he is not shown again. Within the show, Ben's presence throughout the narrative overall is more prominent. He is considered part of Harry's friend group, which Nick is also a part of, and is present during the events of the Movie hangout that goes wrong. He is more actively condescending towards Charlie, provoking moments where he belittles Charlie in little moments when in public with other characters to the point of bullying him. In season 2, he

begins to include Nick as a source of taking out his feelings, goading and taunting him about his secret relationship with Charlie. This includes drawing similarities that Ben perceives between the two of them. He starts to date Imogen and is seated next to Nick during Study Hall for the GSCEs. He also participates in the Paris trip, when initially Ben was not present in the digital comic. During this trip, he is again paired up with Nick to do a language translation assignment and later that day, Imogen breaks up with him. We see him last in the seventh episode of Season 2, when he tries to make amends to Charlie after isolating himself from his previous friends due to his continuing behaviour.

Elle Argent is a character that is mentioned early in the webcomic, but is only shown in Arc 2, *Crush*, during the bowling alley group hangout for Charlie's birthday. She is shown to have a slight connection to Nick from when she still used to attend their school, Truman Boy's Grammar School. She is mainly presented as a love interest to Tao Xu and is shown as one of the few people who can successfully fluster him. Within *Heartstopper* (2022), she is established from the first episode, with larger importance on her personal conflicts as she assimilates/adjusts to her new school. She is shown to develop more meaningful relationships outside of Tao Xu and the rest of her initial friend group, Charlie and Isaac, by developing a close friendship with Tara Jones and Darcy Olsson. In Season 2, as we see her prep for the next stage in her schooling, when she applies to Lambert School of Arts, and is accepted. We also see her make friends with another transgender teenager named Naomi, and the audience watches as they find an intrinsic bond with each other due to their backgrounds. Her and Tao also end up dating, getting together during the Paris Trip while in the Lourve, which happens similarly in the webcomic. What is added to this is foreshadowing to their growing feelings for each other in the first season, and tension when they try to date each other earlier in Season 2 before the trip, but the date goes wrong and ends with Elle and Tao fighting.

Tao Xu is introduced in the fourth episode of the first arc of *Heartstopper* (2016). He is one of Charlie's best friends and part of the friend group along with Aled and Elle within the webcomic. He is one of the more prominent characters in the webcomic. In the first arc, he is one of the first people to notice and point out Charlie's crush on Nick in the First arc, Meet, being a voice of logical reason and realism for Charlie. In the third arc, Crush, the narrative highlights his crush towards Elle during Charlie's bowling alley party. Elle and Tao kiss and start dating in the fourth arc, with the pair reaching an amicable status quo for the rest of the digital comic. He also is one of the first characters outside the main pairing, Nick and Charlie, to have major plot beat, as it is revealed to Charlie in Arc 4 of the comic that Tao Xu feels guilt for Charlie's bullying as he may have been a factor behind Charlie being outed. Within the show, Tao Xu's concerns for Charlie's situation are a constant concern depicted throughout the entirety of Season 1, with this point further explored as a crucial point of his character development in Season 1. The show goes further to explore the roots of Tao Xu's constant fear, actively linking his overprotectiveness regarding Charlie to his feelings of guilt about Charlie's bullying. Tao Xu's relationship with Elle is also showcased more within season 2. The series goes out of its way to depict their insecurity and hesitancy to pursue a romantic relationship, with Elle going as far as trying to get over him after a bad date before they end up together during the Paris Trip.

Tara Jones is first mentioned and shown within Arc 2 of the webcomic. She is mentioned by Nick's original friend group as someone they believe Nick is interested in. When we first see her, during Harry's party, she tells Nick that she is lesbian and currently in a relationship with Darcy Olsson, keeping it a secret for now. Tara is one of the first queer people we see Nick interact with outside of Charlie, as well as one of the first people he confesses to regarding

his romantic relationship with Charlie, along with Darcy. Within the Netflix show, Tara is introduced in the second episode as one of Elle's new friendships in her new school. She is established as being an accomplished student, popular, ambitious, and extroverted as she is the one who first approaches Elle and continues to invite her to spend time with Darcy and herself. Her queerness and subsequent relationship with Darcy is revealed in the story much sooner, with Elle being the first one to bring it up after she notices moments where Tara and Darcy hold hands, along with sly comments during a French-speaking exercise in class. Within Season One, her story arcs revolve around becoming more comfortable being 'out' as a lesbian and with her girlfriend Darcy. We see her and Darcy finally kiss publicly in Episode 3, during Harry's party, and share an Instagram post where she actively declares Darcy her girlfriend in Episode 5. The rest of the season is spent displaying her deal with the public reaction to her queerness and facing lesphobic comments directed towards her by her peers, which ends up resolved as she finds community with her new friends as Elle, Charlie, Isaac, Darcy, Tao, and Nick become a new friend group. In Season Two, we see her face a more internal source of conflict as we see tension build around Darcy and herself when she continues to feel unsatisfied and confused by Darcy's inability to be straightforward with her feelings. As the truth of Darcy's toxic homelike is revealed, Tara and Darcy are emotionally vulnerable with one another.

Darcy is introduced within the same scene as Tara during Harry's party in the comics. She is established as a light-hearted spirit being the jester between Tara and her, and is quick to tease and make jokes. In Arc 4 we see more of this habit during the Paris Trip, wherein on Tara's birthday, she throws a birthday party for her in their room, sneaks vodka for everyone to drink, and subsequently gets so drunk that she has to be taken to the school trip chaperones, Mr Ajayi and Mr Farouk, where she vomits on one of their beds. Within the

show, she is more significantly present within the episodes, also appearing in episode 2. She is established as already being out as lesbian within both the webcomics and Netflix show, and within Season One she does not have character development, being more a source of support for Tara. It is in Season Two where she gets a character arc. The focus is on exploring her character's disposition and background, as we see her actively deflect Tara's attempts at sincere communication. Foreshadowing regarding Darcy's difficult home life due to her bigoted mother is established in episode 3 of Season Two when she only informs Tara of her inability to come to the bonfire party due to her mother refusing to drive her. This comes to a head in Episode 7 as towards the end of the episode we see her run out of the house at night and sleep in the park the day before prom.

Additions to Nick and Charlie's Storyline Progressions

Overall, the previously listed additions mean that there are more major plot beats that are either added or extended within the Netflix show. While this will be gone into more depth within Step 3 of the next chapter, one of the major plot beat expansions revolves around Nick's character arc around discovering his bisexuality and becoming comfortable being out, while Charlie's is centered around exploring the long-term effects that being bullied caused him as well as the toxic relationship he had with Ben and its contribution.

To summarise, the addition of Imogen's character to the plot works to create a source of external and internal conflict with Nick regarding his sexuality and trying to situate this newness with the habits, friendships, and public perception he maintained previously. Throughout the first half of Season One, we see Imogen harbour a crush on Nick; this reaches a climax at the end of Episode 4 when she asks him on a date and Nick, who has started secretly dating Charlie, panics and agrees as she asks when he was surrounded by his rugby

team. We see him struggle in the next episode as he struggles to cancel the date as he learns her dog died. He eventually cancels and explains to her that he is not interested in her. In Season Two, we see Nick come out to Imogen, and she is supportive, but tension grows between them as she begins to date Ben. Nick struggles with warning her against him, as he cannot reveal the full context behind his contempt towards Ben. The bonfire party also develops the depiction of Nick's struggle with coming out, as he tries and fails to come out to Christian, Sai, and Otis in Episode 3.

Regarding Charlie's progression, due to his secret relationship with Ben at the beginning of the season and the mistreatment he experienced, has developed a low self-esteem towards himself which is significantly worse due to prior bullying. Ben's continued antagonism and bullying towards him after their relationship ends only pushes him further into his insecurities, which end up affecting his relationship with Nick. Nick officially declaring them boyfriends at the end of Season One helps to soothe this insecurity. We begin to understand the full complexities of Charlie's insecurities and struggling mental health as we see Nick become more attuned to his eating habits. Rather than revealing his previous self-harming earlier like in the comic, we see it revealed to Nick during Season Two's season finale after the prom.

Superimposition

Superimposition is described by Leitch as an occurrence within the adaptation process of a source when a medium that requires multiple forms of collaboration influences the authorial intent in order to produce a target source (2007). When adapting from literature to film, for example, there is the screenwriter, the director, the actors, the producers, and the costume designers, along with various other behind-the-scenes staff. These varying roles converge

together, throughout the creation of the target source, in order to create a final product. These voices of authority are especially influential when the audience is seeking further contextual information in order to fully understand the intentions of the target source. Leitch further points out that industry censors, production house style formatting to fit studio conventions, budgetary constraints, as well as medium generic conventions, are forms of superimposition that can occur during the adaptation process (2007).

Within *Heartstopper* (2022), there are multiple forms of imposition present due to the nature of filming a television show. One of the ways is seeing the depiction of the character's personality. Due to the nature of filming, many stages within the production process can influence the depiction of characters, from editing decisions to acting decisions and performances. Looking at Nick, for example, is a sincere and extroverted person within the webcomics, with his natural expressiveness creating multiple comedic moments due to his exaggerated reactions that are rendered within panels. This creates an interesting dynamic when juxtaposed against Charlie's more subdued nature. Within the show, most of his personality is well portrayed, however, scenes wherein he was overtly comedic are shown as sincere, with a flirting undertone rather than humorous.

To conclude, this chapter has covered the first and second step of the Transmedial Analysis Framework. By focusing the analysis on the presence of romance genre and how it impacts a narrative by looking at how the presence of its conventions and depictions shift, we notice the increased presence of the side characters, their arcs and their relationships - both platonic and romantic - within the target source media object. Even taking into account the additional plot beats, we can see the added plot beats are events which allows more chances for the cast of characters to interact with one another.

With the addition of new characters, namely Imogen and Isaac, we can begin to see the trend of the focus on highlighting a core group of characters. By focusing on decisions behind their depiction via framing devices, we can begin to contextualise the influence of romance genre conventions in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Introduction

Within this chapter, the Transmedial Analysis Framework continues by conducting the next two steps. As a result, this chapter is broken up into two major sections, The first section will conduct the third step of the framework, which is to recontextualise the general findings from the previous chapter with regard to medium-specific changes.

Within the second section, we conduct Step 4 of the Transmedial Analysis Framework by applying other contexts to the shifts found in Step 2, based on the hypothesis laid out earlier, wherein the changes made to *Heartstopper* (2016) in the adaptation were categorised and contexualised by utilising Leitch's adjustment strategies. In this case, by understanding in what ways the changes from the source media object to the target source media object can be seen from medium necessity, we are then able to look at how the nature of those changes relate to genre conventions.

Step 3: Transmediality and Medium-Specificty

The purpose of this step is to analyse the shifts regarding the transmedial strategies applied to the target source media object (*Heartstopper* 2022) established in the previous step and chapter by contextualizing in concern to what can be attributed to medium changes. Based on *Bruhn & Schirrmacher,* to eventually examine and determine the narrative transmedial traits of *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022) in relation to the romance genre conventions that can be applied, we must first establish what has shifted due to the necessities of medium-specifics,

and what similarities between the source media object and target source media object have been maintained concerning the shifts established in the last chapter.

One of the points of interest within this step of the analysis is examining whether the narrative potential of *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022) was reached, by first establishing how the webcomic effectively communicates the narrative, then analyse how the Netflix series managed to convey the narrative, whether it was effective, and how much of the effectiveness Is due to the shifts made in the narrative due to medium-specific reasons.

By examining how the webcomic and the Netflix series can utilise their respective Media type formats - comics and television primarily accesses through online platforms - to represent the narrative of *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022), and taking into mind which significant choices were taken to achieve the narrative potential of the narrative, we can begin to further reinterpret the changes and similarities with regard to the presence of genre signifiers in Step 4. Understanding the ways in which medium impacts the depiction of the *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022) narrative is crucial when contextualising the potential elements of the contemporary romance genre later. How a genre is present within a media object is largely dependent on the medium it is communicated through, as common signifiers of the genre may shift depending on the constraints of the media.

The adjustment strategies of compression, expansion, and superimposition utilised within the transmediation process result, in the target source media object (*Heartstopper* 2022) displaying an increased number of plot beats and side characters with an overall increased presence within the storyline in comparison to the source media object (*Heartstopper* 2016). As a result, this step will be done with the intention of understanding ‘narrative potential’ that

was realised within both versions. This means that much of what will determine how both the ability to represent the narrative themes will be by investigating how they incorporate the visual elements as afforded by both their constraints, with regard to the narrative.

Understanding Narratives Within Comics

It is crucial to understand how the drawn image is crucial to conveying a narrative within the comic medium. Jared Gardner provides an interesting perspective on the value of the drawn line in graphic narratives. Gardner explains the value of the line in his paper, '*Storylines'*, by first comparing it to prose in writing in literature, stating that "Like prose style, the line in a graphic narrative is precisely what is lost in a paraphrase" (2011, p. 58). The line exists as a sign, belying multiple conceptualisations (2011). Unlike other media types, it is harder for the audience to distance the story being conveyed through a graphic narrative from the way it is conveyed and the presence of the artist who drew it due to the presence of the line, which acts as a subconscious reminder to the efforts of the artist who drew the comic (Gardner, 2011). Within another paper by Pascal Lefèvre, titled *'Some Medium-Specific Qualities of Graphic Sequences'*, he breaks down a way of understanding how narrative is conveyed through comics by honing in on these three axis points: "drawing styles, the temporal dimensions of individual panels, and the interpretation of sequences of panels" (2011, p. 14). Referring to Russian Formalists, by being able to interpret and understand the style, we understand how it dictates understanding the sequence of events shown to create narrative as well as the arrangement of those events that establish a timeline within the fictional world space (Lefèvre, 2011).

Drawing Style refers to the recurring pattern of lines, shapes and colour that when looked at in combination create images and words (Lefèvre, 2011). Lines are a consistent presence within comics, and the base unit of creating style (Lefèvre, 2011). The image in a comic being drawn means that the artist has control over what the reader perceives and how they perceive it; they may not accurately represent reality, but they are able to capture the essence of the emotions and characters in an effective way, and creates an interpretation of the world for the reader (Lefèvre, 2011). This links to a point in *'Narration In Comics'* (Lefèvre, 2007), in the sense that the reader, who has a schemata of knowledge developed from reading other comics in different and similar styles, is able to interpret the comic. We can also see links to Gardner's notion of the line, in the importance put on the artist's perspective (2011). The Temporal Dimensions regarding Individual Panels is concerned about ways in which time is expressed is crucial within the creation of a comic, as it impacts the narrative elements (Lefèvre, 2007). Panels can only display a fragment of time, and what is incorporated within the panel and around the panel, in relation to other panels, will dictate how time is interpreted by the reader; as a result this fragment of time can be any time-period length, and even distort the perception of time (Lefèvre, 2007). The placement of panels and various visual elements part of comics, and their interactions with one another, is what creates a narrative that the reader can understand (Lefèvre, 2007). In this step, there are noticeable links regarding Baetens *'Abstraction In Comics'* (2011); in the observation that when panels are next to each other, readers automatically seek out any form of relation between them in order to organise a narrative. Comics as a medium, that utilises the fragmented imagery of panels, plays on human's natural instinct to seek a narrative. For the purposes of this analysis moving forward, while other terminology as established in the Literature Review will be utilised throughout the chapter, when understanding how chosen pages within *Heartstopper* convey narrative, Lefèvre's concepts will be the main framework utilised.

Webcomics: Comics Past the Borders Of the Page

To understand the changes within the Netflix series *Heartstopper* (2022) and how they relate to medium specificity, it is imperative to discuss how the webcomic *Heartstopper* (2016) functions within its medium format. Before understanding how *Heartstopper* (2016) is able to communicate and establish its themes and narrative, it is important to establish a basis for webcomics. Webcomic is another term to refer to digital comics and webtoons. The term digital comics can signify multiple forms of comics in online spaces. Books that already have physical publications can get a digital version of the comic made, such as an e-book, which could be scanned pages of the physical version (Aggleton, 2022). The act of creating a comic can be done using online software, with the final product being intended for digital or physical release (Aggleton, 2019). In many ways, both of these qualify as forms of digital comics. However, for my purposes, I will outline a definition of digital comics and webcomics that works to position *Heartstopper* (2016) within the wider sphere of this medium-specific genre.

In '*Defining digital comics: a British Library perspective',* Jen Aggleton posits a working definition of digital comics to catalogue digital comics for the British Library, with the parameters of this definition set out to highlight general trends and characteristics of digital comics, rather than aiming for understanding the specifics (2019). According to Aggleton, a digital comic is a comic that is intended to be and is initially published on a digital platform; It also needs to self-identify as a digital comic (2019). One of the big factors in identifying digital comics is how it utilises the space when published on online platforms. The major unit of a digital comic is understood by its panels rather than its pages, as the edges of the screen on a smartphone and other kinds of digital device screens work as a frame around the panels

(Aggleton, 2019). Jakob F. Dittmar also focuses on the technological device as part of the media-type of digital comics; in '*Digital Comics'* (2012), he states that due to being made for consumption on online platforms, the nature of the format is dependent on the comic itself and the platform it's on. The ways in which the reader consumes the digital comic are different in comparison to traditional comics, as digital comics can be read on internet-linked devices like smartphones (Aggleton, 2019; Dittmar, 2012). Their presence on online platforms means the means of accessing them shift to a device, rather than a page, which impacts the concept of the page space of a comic, as the borders have the potential shift depending on the device used to access webcomics. Scott McCloud introduces the term infinite canvas, the idea of potentially borderless comics as a result of existing on digital platforms and utilizing limitless space in his book *'Reinventing Comics'* (2000). On his website he follows up on the idea of the infinite canvas, years later, focusing on how it can be utilised for narrative elements with minimal constraints. Within printed comics, or comics that are created to be published, the ways in which a narrative is conveyed is through the medium; with all its constraints to keep in mind, which would be the page space in this context (McCloud, 2009). This idea is important to take note of as it speaks to the boundless forms of comic formatting that can exist within digital comics.

When looking at webcomics, we can view a version of a comic compositional formatting that has become popular: the vertical scroll-down format. Clip Studio Paint (or CSP) is a graphic software application that was developed by *Celsys* for digitally creating comics, illustrations, 2D animation, and also allows users to create and sell their specialized assets for the software within their online store. It is utilised as a program that allows for people users with various skill levels (hobbyists to professionals) to advance their skills by producing forums and articles. One of these articles, *Tips for creating vertical scrolling webtoons* (2019), lists that

one of the major characteristics of a webtoon (a form of digital comic that originated in South Korea, gained popularity within other East Asian countries as well as Western countries, as we have seen with the rise of popular western webcomics such as Rachel Smythe's *Lore Olympus* (2018), a reimagining of the myth of Persephone and Hades in a modern fictional space) is its vertical formatting. The panels tend to have more gutter space between them, with the panels themselves being typically larger to accommodate for the expected smaller display screen of the smartphone (*Tips for creating vertical scrolling webtoons*, 2019). Instead of flipping the page horizontally, based on online platforms, the reader usually has to swipe up to vertically change the page, and this change of page is perceived as seamless. Only being able to take in a few panels at a time works to emphasise the impact of each panel as well as creating a sense of emotional weight dependent on the mood of the digital comic (Aggleton, 2019). Rather than being primarily narratively driven, it works to create a way of conveying other elements of the instance of the narrative depicted. Due to the variation in details like screen size and resolution, it is necessary that the sizing of panels be bigger in order to make the story comprehensible to a reader (Dittmar, 2012). According to Dittmar, this means that the pacing and development of the story has to slow in order to make concessions for these constraints (Dittmar, 2012). Being accessible on digital devices also increases the scope regarding incorporating additional media elements, such as audio or animated panels and effects within the webcomic (Aggleton, 2019; Dittmar, 2012; McCloud, 2000).

When reading webtoons (web comics whose composition is structured vertically to account) the same effect to space and closure is experienced when taking into account gutter space and panel sizes within a page, page-to-page is experienced differently. The vertical scroll-down creates an implied infinite space, thus making the space the reader has to scroll down to feel

more inherently expansive. Taking the experience of physical comics, and the physical books itself, it is a media form that gives the reader an inherent sense of finite consumption (Fischer, 2016; Lefevre, 2007). Even if we are not aware of the exact number of pages within a comic issue or a graphic novel, by being able to physically hold the book, we can immediately gauge how long the narrative will be to experience. In contrast, webcomics do not give the reader any way of gauging the page number of an episode. The lengths of a webcomic episode will vary, from creator to creator. This unknown information, as well as the larger gutter spaces between panels, creates a kind of anticipation within the reader that is experienced in fragments as each panel is revealed. Regarding the Extra Compositional Structure (ECS) as outlined by Bouissac and Cohn, (2013), the ECS of webcomics creates a negative space that, with the incorporation of comic elements outside the page, lead the reader to scroll-down to fill the negative space. This creates a reading experience similar to how shots within a film are shown sequentially one after the other; though the reader still controls the pace of reading the comic, the lack of awareness of the immediate next panel makes it harder for the reader to actively engage with the narrative within the page as a whole. While not in contrast to Lefevre and Fischer's examination of the differences between traditional comics and cinema, it reveals one of the ways webcomics can capture a cinematic experience.

The above paragraph links to Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle’s notion of comprehending comic pages in linear and tabular ways (2014). Looking at webcomic apps like *Tapas* and *Webtoons*, there are minimal markers of changing pages unless the creator of the comic intentionally includes it. This means that the reader only perceives a change from one comic component to the next - this could be panels, speech bubbles, or comic symbols. A comic arc is usually divided into episodes that work as the digital equivalent of a physical issue that is released on

a schedule When looking at an episode, the reader views tabularly (Fresnault-Deruelle, 2014), meaning that rather than a singular page within the episode being viewed as a whole image, all the pages within the episode and the panels within them create the single image. To illustrate this, *Lore Olympus (2018)*, is a good example to display this effect. It was originally released on Webtoons and later got a physical publishing deal. Looking at the following images we can see the difference in formatting based on the reading device, the smartphone (**Figure 4.1a**) and the physical page (**Figure 4.1.b**). Within the context of the story, these pages show Hades's reaction to seeing Persephone for the first time. Looking at the vertical formatting, we can see how space is used to convey Hades emotional reaction of shock and awe. The vertical format encourages the reader to study each panel as it focuses on the details in the expression of Hades face, which is emphasises by the larger panel sizes. The large spaces between each panel are only broken by the placement of speech bubbles and text, as well as the pink splash motifs placed in the gutter space. As we scroll down to the final panel, The ECS ends as the panel takes up the entire space, and the tabular composition works to mimic the sensation of falling in love. Looking at the physical page, The page composition follows the kind of "Z-path" (Bouissac and Cohn, 2013), we start at the top left focusing on Hades eyes as he stares, then at the end are brought to the perspective of what he sees as Persephone is framed right in the middle of the panel, in-between Hades eyes. Even with the vertical scroll-down formatting of digital comics, there are multiple forms of webcomics do not follow this established convention. When comparing professional webcomic creators to individual or indie webcomic creators, there is a gap in how much they follow standard formatting within webcomic platforms. Professional webcomic creators in this instance refers to creators who are contracted, commissioned, or employed by digital comic publishing companies to develop a webcomic, usually on their platform.

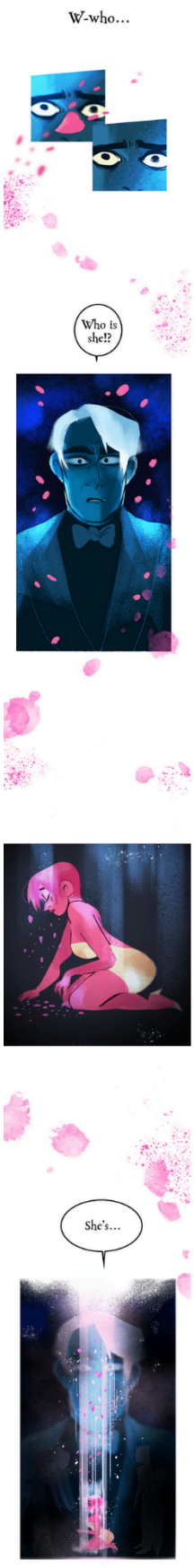


Figure 4.1a : ‘Hades sees Persephone’ taken from *Lore Olympus* Webcomic, Episode 2 (Smythe, R, (2018) *Lore Olympus*, Ep, 2. Webtoons. Accessed February 25. https://www.webtoons.com/en/romance/lore-olympus/episode-2/viewer?title_no=1320&episode_no=2

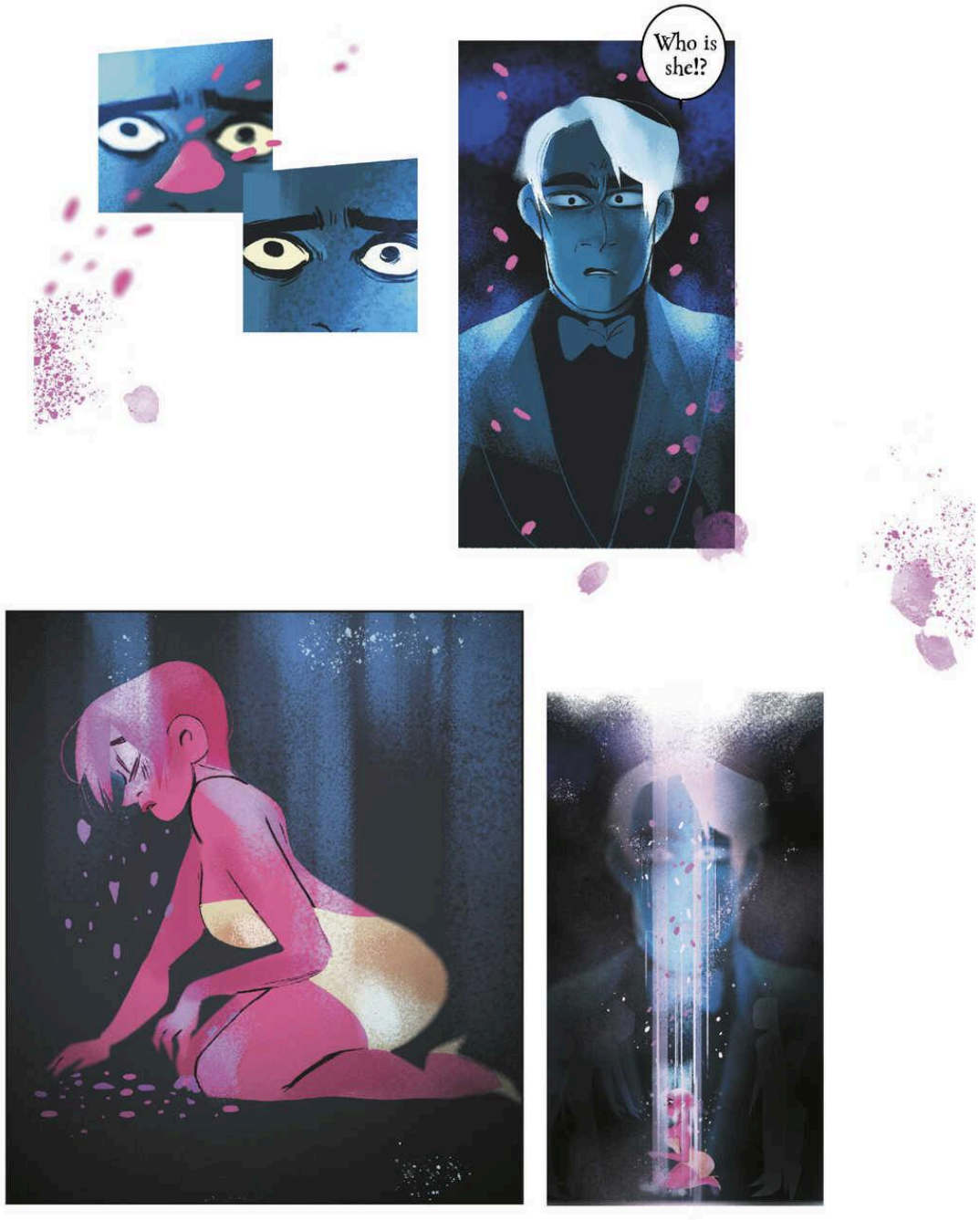


Figure 4.1b: ‘Hades sees Persephone’ Page taken from *Lore Olympus: Volume 1*, p 20. (Smythe, R. (2021) *Lore Olympus: Volume 1*. Random House Worlds. p. 20).

When talking about indie webcomic creators, I am referring directly to independent webcomics that are in no way contracted by a larger publishing company, meaning that the

creators are not directly working for them. It is important to note that these distinctions are not meant to be strict; depending on the pre-existing conditions behind the creation of the webcomic, a professional artist who decides to publish an independent webcomic would be considered indie in that context and vice versa. If an indie creator is interested in eventually, physically, publishing their webcomic, they may find it more economical to format their pages' composition within more traditional comic formats. The “Z-Path”, for example, explains a kind of reading flows commonly created: the reader starts in the top left corner of a page, reads the panels left to right, then when a row on a page is read, reads the immediate most-left panel below what was just read (Bouissac and Cohn, 2013). In the webcomic *Charity Case* (2018), by Mal Marwood (under the name Malacandrax), we see an example of how a webcomic still follows the traditional conventions of comic page paneling composition strategies. To give context, we see Julien, an aspiring guitarist, get prepared to pretend to be sick to leave work early and go to a performing gig he got contacted for that was shown within a previous page. This was initially released on Tumblr, then on Tapas 2 years later. Rather than releasing multiple pages per episode a week, Marwood instead released a page a week. *Charity Case* (2018) is one on many cases of webcomics that are not concerned with utilising this compositional formatting.

The *Heartstopper* webcomic (2016) is interesting to consider the vertical composition that can be favoured by webcomic artists. Firstly, one of the ways *Heartstopper* (2016) breaks webcomic conventions is by utilising page numbering. Within each page, there is a corresponding page number written where it best suits the page composition. This is in contrast with the vertical scroll down, as the effect of this format is viewing the episode as a single, seamless unit. Reading the source media object on platforms, such as Tapas and Webtoons, makes the break within flow more obvious. These breaks make sense when

understood with regard to the platforms the webcomic was released on initially, primarily Tapas and Tumblr. Online sites and apps like Tapas are designed with User Interface elements that take into mind the purpose of publishing and reading webcomics. When looking at how Tumblr functions, while it is capable of allowing users to post multiple images within a blog post, it is not inherently designed to publish webcomics. When looking at the limit of this feature, it only allows 10 images, as the maximum limit, per blog post. This can explain a technical reason outside of efficiency for Oseman's usual maximum page number count to be around 10 pages per episode. Another one can be the intention to publish a physical version of the book. At this point Oseman was already a published author, having released a *Solitaire* (2014), so it makes sense that she would account for each of the episodes' need to be easily translatable to physical print. Referring back to Figure 4.1a and Figure 4.1b, we can see the ways a vertically formatted comic would need to be adjusted to be print-ready. This also explains the small gutter space. Many pages follow a vertical scroll-down format, but within the limits of a page (See Figure 4.2a.)

Television

One of the big aspects to look at when understanding the changes concerning medium-specificity is the nature of both comics and film as a medium. Changes to the content of the source target media object are an inevitability in the adaptational process. Looking at academics like Marie-Laure Ryan (2020) and Labarre (2020), we can see that changes are necessary to take advantage of the media type. Mediums act as a vessel for narratives, ideas, or concepts to be communicated through. This means that the mode of communication can impact the perception of what is intended to be perceived by the receiving audience. Comics and film have a long history regarding adaptations between the

two mediums. Even in the modern age, with the rise of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and other prolific adaptations from a superhero comic source to television, we can see successes like *The Boys* (2019) and *Invincible* (2021), who both define their take superhero narratives by the prevalence of excess violence, grotesque imagery, and commentary on the genre as a whole. When looking at the trend of adapting comics into the film genre, we find a large source pool, and thus an expansive quantity when understanding the points of tension between comic and film (and television).

The main reading used to start to lay a further understanding that will be utilised later within the analysis is Lefèvre's *'Incompatible Visual Ontologies? The Problematic Adaptation of Drawn Images'* (2007), which was mentioned earlier within Chapter 2.
One of the main ideas stated is that changes made when adapting comic to film are a need due to the necessity to utilise the strengths of both mediums; what will translate within the structure of a comic may have the same impact if depicted in a similar way within film context, thus how far the changes go depends on adaptation to adaptation (Lefèvre, 2007). He also brings up issues regarding capturing the 'aura' of the original work in the adaptation (Lefèvre, 2007). Aura in this sense refers to Walter Benjamin's definition in '*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (2008),* which refers to the unique presence a body of work or media object maintains within a larger cultural context; regarding adaptations, multiple target source media objects being created puts the aura of the source media object at risk, as what maintains aura is limitations to accessing a media object. Just because a director/screenwriter makes a decision that they feel will help to capture the spirit of the comic in film form, does not ensure that the decisions will work. Comics communicate their stories through words and image, whereas film and television rely on image and audio.

Television is a form of visual medium. Like comics, they have similarities in how they utilise sequential imagery to convey meaning and storytelling. Whereas television, like film, utilises the power of moving images and sound; traditional comics rely on the page and what can be conveyed through utilising text and image; where one relies on an inherent dynamic nature, the other appears static and relies on implying motion through dynamic posing within its constraints (Lefèvre, 2007). There are many industrial and technical needs and parameters that are needed in the process of producing television shows, and one of its most vital requirements is that of the camera. This utilisation means that many of the cinematic codes and conventions can be applied when analysing *Heartstopper* (2022), such as cinematography and mis-en-scene. Cinematography refers to the aspects of expression in filming regarding the way the camera is being used - which includes framing, camera angles, camera movements, the scale of the shot and the depth of field and focus (Spiedel, 2011). Mis-en-scene refers to all the elements that are shown within the frame of the camera and also include any effects added onto the shot while filming - such as colour grading and visual effects (Spiedel, 2011).

Jason Mittell is an important scholar in the realm of television studies. In his book, '*Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling'*, Mittell defines Complex TV, or rather narrative complexity, as a form of storytelling displayed within television that redefines the traditional episodic format through the influence of serial narration (Mittell 2015, p. 4-5). Serial narration in this case defines a form of plot structure within television wherein a single story plot is separated into different episodes. Mittell argues that rather than a new form of storytelling within television, it is instead a trend in television that has existed

for decades, with the increased branding critical praise of 'prestige tv', proving its prominence (Mittell, 2015). His book is important in establishing many aspects of complex TV.

In '*Re (de) fining Narrative Events Examining Television Narrative Structure'*, M. J. Porter, D. L. Larson, Allison Harthcock, and K. B. Nellis examine the structure television narratives to understand how they convey meaning to an audience by using the Scene Function Model (2002). This model intends to undertstand the ways with which Television develops its narrative (Porter *et al.*, 2002). When discussing, they emphasize the importance of the character; due to the traditional serial format of television, one of the most important functions within its narrative is the characters (Porter *et al.*, 2002). The regularity with which an audience is exposed to characters means that bonds are formed by viewers (Porter *et al.*, 2002). The longer a television show runs, the more the characters are able to develop complex characterisation over time, and the story and characters become intertwined (Porter *et al.*, 2002). As a result, characterisation is a crucial element to television narratives.

How Netflix Functions:

Within her thesis, *'The Netflix Effect: Impacts of the Streaming Model on Television Storytelling'*, Romil Sharma examines the effects of the Netflix streaming model regarding how it impacts the story-making process, based on shows produced by the Netflix company (2016). She argues that rather than alter the "face" of television, it as simply expanded on the definition of television and exists as a format for more expressions of Complex TV (Mittell, 2014) to take place (Sharma, 2016). She posits Netflix as a form of Complex TV, arguing that rather that they offer a new form of storytelling in television due to being an online platform

(Sharma, 2016). In a way, this new format of storytelling due to the intervention of online spaces and digital devices reflects a similar effect to webcomics.

Netflix shows are released on their streaming platform; over time one of the one things that Netflix become popular for, that has become a signature trait of the site is its Netflix Original Shows. Netflix Originals Shows has become a branding term for a media content shows that are produced, contracted, or commissioned by the Netflix company to be released as original content on the platform (Jenner, 2021).

Netflix Originals can follow the same storytelling codes of traditional television shows that are released on network broadcasting channels, it is when we look at the ways the streaming site distributes its shows that we can begin to see the areas of divergence; one of the major forms of releasing the Netflix original shows is by releasing all the episodes of a season at once. In doing this, they break the traditional code of a weekly release schedule, fundamentally impacting the standardised episodic storytelling structures necessary. Instead, the focus is on establishing the ways that Netflix encourages the creators they contract to develop their shows are not inherently obligated to follow traditional conventions of television (Sharma, 2016). As stated by Sharma, this lack of necessity affords these creators the chance to experiment with how they construct their shows (2016). Within the ways an audience can consume and engage with Netflix Original shows based on how they are released within the streaming site we can observe similarities regarding how comics are engaged with the comic medium. Traditionally, within traditional television's systems of releasing a show weekly, a difference in engagement can be found with the comics' industry's physical distribution method of releasing a new issue of a running storyline weekly or

monthly. This is in the sense that while is that there's a schedule of when a consumer can access a new installment within the show or comic, there were limitations with how a viewer will be able to consume it. In contrast with how a television could acquire a physical release of an entire season, as with DVDs or VHS, however those could be considered in the same vein as a compiled comic volume issue, wherein multiple issues within a comic run are compiled together by the publishing company and released as a volume. Regarding Netflix, their straight-to-series orders means that they employ a strategy wherein an entire season is released at once, which does not inherently mark the similarity, but becomes more clear when put into context of how Netflix as an online streaming site is developed. The immediate release of an entire season means that it is available for the viewer to watch, episode by episode, at their own pace. Binge-watching is an audience engagement style wherein multiple episodes of television from the same show are watched chronologically at once. The concept of binge-watching started with the release of television shows and programs on DVDs and VHS tapes (Brundson, 2010). Mittell explains further, stating that though television had been released on physical media for decades at this point DVDs made the process of collecting and cataloguing television more streamlined for consumers (2015), and having multiple seasons of a show readily available meant that a watcher could consume as many episodes at once, without worry (Mittell, 2015). Binge-watching is defined by Hemingway as the habit of watching multiple episodes of a show sequentially within a shorter time frame (2021). However Netflix as a streaming site is available online and can be watched through various devices, which includes smart TVs, laptops, smartphones, and anywhere where there's a screen that can access the internet and log on to Netflix.

As Sherryl Vint states in ‘Adaptation and Seriality: Comic Book to Television Series Adaptations’, both television and comics find similarities within their mode of traditional

serial storytelling (2019). The scheduled release format determined by the industries of these mediums resulted in the forms of storytelling being developed to be effective.

One of the areas of tension between adaptations regarding comics and television is the difference between their respective audiences and the ways both forms of medium find ways to stimulate their audiences to maintain consistent engagement (Vint, 2019). Vint argues that the issue comes with maintaining the overall aesthetic and tone of the comic in a television format, as she uses the failure of the television adaptation of *Power (2015)*, a comic series, as an example when explaining her point. To summarise, its ability to adapt the show to a television format but its inability to capture the humorous and metatextual tone of the comic series, which depicts the lives of cops living in a superhero world, marked it for failure (Vint, 2019). Taking this in mind, when looking at the narrative of the Netflix Original, it is important to take into consideration its ability to capture the tone and aesthetic of Hearststopper (2016).

Similarities and differences

Looking at *Heartstopper* (2016), when examining how the narrative is conveyed, it is first important to establish the visual style. The first noticeable thing to point out is that the colour scheme is in a monochromatic tone, meaning that shades of white, grey and black are used in place of colour. Excluding the Mini-Comics - where comic episodes that would be released outside the schedule that were not directly connected to the ongoing narrative arc - there is no colour within the pages of the webcomic. Reasons for this can be discovered when examining this from a technical efficiency standpoint. Alice Oseman is the main writer and artist when producing pages for *Heartstopper* (2016), which means she has to handle all the aspects of

developing the webcomic. Employing a monochrome colour scheme aids with streamlining the panelling and inking of the webcomic, as they do not have to consider how the additional element of colour will impact the composition of a page.

The concept of efficiency and affordability dictating formatting elements within certain contexts of comic making can be seen as well in the Japanese ‘manga’ industry. ‘Manga’ is the Japanese term for comics. One of the most identifiable markers of a ‘manga’ is the black and white colour schemes. Historically, after World War II due to the struggle to rebuild economically and culturally, Japan had greatly limited resources, which included ink. Due to the scarcity and expensive cost of coloured ink, publishers had to opt for black and white ink (Bains, 2023). The long-term result of this was in ‘manga’ artists developed a codified style of representing a world space - through inking, screen tones, panel layouts and character design - to the point that even after coloured ink became more popular, the practice was kept to due to a developed tradition (Bains, 2023).

When using black and white in replacement of colour within comics, the subtextual aspects of the narrative that could be signified through colour - which can include thematic elements and consistencies, the mood of a particular fragmented moment - will need to be indicated by other means, either using other consistent visual signifiers and contrast building techniques in order to create subtextual elements and thematic motifs and communicate important information that is shown, rather than told. Using compositional techniques like contrast and negative space to heighten the emotional beats of the story regarding character and relationship development.

One of the ways the webcomic does is by using visual indicators, the most prominent one being the Nature Particle Motifs. Within the webcomic, we see multiple forms of nature particles as part of the ECS (Bouissac and Cohn, 2013) of the comic pages. Nature Particle motifs are used to refer to the falling natural elements that are present in some pages. Within the comics, there are three prominent ones: the Leaf Particle motifs, Snow Particle motif, and the Flower Particle motif.

The Leaf Particle motif first appears within the first episode of the webcomic, when we see Charlie with Ben. Throughout the webcomic they appear in multiple instances throughout the entirety. The nature particle motifs are important as they communicate a shift in emotional state for the characters. Usually, they do not directly interact with what is depicted within the panels, though they can be present within the page to elevate the composition of the panels. While the leaf motif and snow motif vary in what emotions they are meant to indicate, the flower motif tends to represent romantic emotions or the state of that emotion as the strength it grows within a character. Looking at **Figure 4.2a,** we can see an instance of how it is used.

This figure depicts the first time Charlie sees Nick Spring, the main love interest. The leaves come up again, being utilised in a way that suggests an emotional shift in Charlie at this moment. Looking at the last panel in **Figure 4.2a,** it seems as if it is framed to showcase Nick from the viewpoint of Charlie in that moment, bathed in light. The leaves on this page work as a decorative element in the overall composition of the page, highlighting the idyllic fragment. Looking at this, we can also get a sense for the rest of the style. When regarding the line in the webcomic, we can see a line that resembles pencil or ink within a sketchbook. The webcomic was drawn using digital programmes, and one of the functions of it is its ability to create brush-presets that have a specific texture and drawing feel. When looking at

the type of line used, we can see that the line has small speckles that surround the fade-off points, which resemble the texture of physical drawing tools, like the graphite of a pencil. When looking at the overall style, the sketchbook feel gives it an everyday aesthetic that reflects the tone of the narrative: the focus on the mundane lives of Nick and Charlie as they fall in love.

The webcomic also uses the fragmentary aspects of the comic to establish daydreams and imaginings that the characters have, in a way that make is similar to cut-off gags in film, an instance of this is seen in **Figure 4.2b**. This page depicts the moment before Nick asks Charlie to join rugby, but before Charlie hears the question, we see him daydream about Nick professing his love. In it, we see utlisations of the thought bubble, which is a common technique in comics, to show his thoughts, the bubbles' path leading down to the next panel mimicking Charlie’s spiralling thoughts. Looking at this, we can see the ways in which *Heartstopper* (2016) conveys meaning through its visual narrative.



Figure 4.2a: 'Charlie's first sighting of Nick' p. 8 of *Heartstopper* by Alice Oseman, taken from Tapas. (Oseman, A., 2016) Ep. 1-1. Accessed January 05, 2024. https://tapas.io/episode/444220



Figure 4.2b: 'Charlie daydreams about Nick confessing', p. 40 of *Heartstopper* by Alice Oseman, taken from Tapas. (Oseman, A., 2016) Ep. 1-6. Accessed January 05, 2024 https://tapas.io/episode/495039

In the same ways media objects can be categorised into multiple genres (Chandler, 1977), *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022) is also characterised by this trait. When looking at various articles, promotional posts, and online sources, one of the genres that the webcomic can be listed under is slice-of-life comic. Slice-of-life is characterised by its narrative focus on the characters' day to day lives, revelling in the mundaneness found within lower stake conflict and depicting interpersonal relationships; rather than focusing on high stakes, high risk, and fast-pace plot lines (blautoothdmand, 2017; Kench, 2022). Within various media objects, this genre of storytelling is commonly found within comedies (especially sitcoms, an abbreviated term for situational comedy, as they focus on the humour found within the day-to-day-life of its characters) as well as coming-of-age storylines (Kench, 2022).

Character And Plot

Where the character designs and looks themselves stay consistent, it is within their character arcs and their presence within the narrative that you see shifts, and it is here where I observe where the transmission element start to come into play a bit more. Nick Nelson and Charlie Spring are the main characters within both the webcomics and the Netflix serial and, thus, maintaining their presence as the focal point within the source media object and target source media object. Within the narrative of *Heartstopper* (2016) they are the most rounded out characters regarding the first four Arcs. As their relationship progresses throughout the narrative, we also get more insight into their personal struggles.

Most of the visual styling and physical characteristics of the characters managed to stay the same. Looking at the comic, its stylised art style manages to emphasise the physical traits and differences between Nick and Charlie, as well as the other characters. Most of the physical appearances of the characters managed to be translated into the Netflix series due to well-executed casting. Within the show, Charlie (played by Joe Locke) and Nick (played by

Kit Connor) manage to maintain key physical traits; Nick is more physically built than Charlie as a result of playing rugby and Charlie is a brunette while Nick has lighter hair. Other characters, such as Elle (Yasmin Finney), Tao (William Gao), Tara (Corinna Brown), Darcy (Kizzy Edgell), and Mr. Ajayi (Fisayo Akinade). While the casting isn't exactly the same, it manages to reflect the important markers for the specific characters. When looking at the character designs within the webcomic (*Heartstopper* 2022), we can see that while, many characters have specific physical markers - such as racial or ethnic specifics - much of what denotes the characters is focused on styling. Within film and television, the role of the actor that plays a character is to give them a level of nuance that the audience can perceive as a reflection of reality (Spiedel, 2011).

Nick's character development and personal arcs hone in on his discovery regarding his sexuality as he starts to recognise that his feelings towards Charlie are more than platonic. As they start dating, and he comes to terms with it, we watch as it changes his pre existing relationships, particularly his rugby team group with Harry Green, who is used as a mouthpiece for bigoted rhetoric, which culminates with him distancing himself from the group, only staying friends with a few. We also see him integrate into Charlie's friend group. Charlie, in contrast to Nick, is quiet and timid, and most of his character arcs and development deal with exploring the long-term affects of bullying and its potential to leave long-standing consequences.

Within the source target media object (*Heartstopper* 2016), as the main characters, Nick and Charlie (and their relationship progression) are the focal of the narrative in a way that means for most of the first four arcs of the webcomic - Meet, Crush, Kiss and Out - whenever the side characters are present, for the majority of it their purpose as a device of the narrative, is

to function to support Charlie and Nick's story lines rather than have their own. When they do get developments, the medium of the webcomic opts to tell the reader. In many ways, the side characters are flat characters within the webcomic, which are characters on which there is no hidden complexity (Abbott, 2008). They begin the story in one way and end it that same way, having no internal changes of experiences. In contrast, round characters are characters that do experience changes and develop (Abbott, 2008). In the words of E. M. Forster, they are not able "to be summed up in a single phrase" (1927, p. 69). When looking at the Netflix series in comparison, most of the side characters have been developed to become round characters

Regarding medium-specificity, Netflix original shows being able to release its episodes all at once rather than just weekly means that per episode the creators, directors, and producers have more control over the construction of the narrative for an entire season (Sharma, 2016). Sharma expands more on this, relating it to Netflix's policy of straight-to-series orders, where Netflix will order an entire season to be developed to be released onto their streaming site; this is in contrast to the traditional television network broadcasting structure, where a pilot (the first episode of a series) was ordered as proof of concept, then the entire season was worked on if the project was green-lit (2016). This could result in massive shifts in tone or characters from the first episode to the rest of the season, as the time gap between the production meant that staff and actors could change, or a thematic element was added or removed from the series.

The straight-to-series orders also impacts Netflix’s expectation of quality regarding the end product of an entire season; as a full ordered season means a higher quality product is expected by Netflix, both visually and narratively (Sharma, 2016). The ways a television narrative is structured can determine how prominently each character is shown. As a result of

this, the prominence of the side character's presence within the story from Episode 1 makes more sense when you take into account that the entire season's episodes were developed all at once, rather than in the ways traditional television shows were developed when series were mainly broadcasted on channels. The ability to develop a series as a whole means the creators can be more intentional and decisive about the structure of their narratives, so they can be more thematically cohesive (Sharma, 2016). The bigger presence of the characters can also be afforded to this when regarding the medium-specific level.

One of the ways the Netflix show maintains the importance of Nick and Charlie's development and function as the emotional centre of the narrative, while still incorporating character development for the side characters is by using important plot events in the original webcomic for Nick and Charlie and shifting it to be an important moment for other characters as well. This also explains the additional plot events in both seasons, due to the bigger importance of the side characters, and televisions importance regarding characterisation, adding more plot events allows characters to further develop as well as give more spaces to interact in varied circumstances, which allows the viewer to see them in that variation and bond with them. Charlie and Nick's first kiss is a good example to display how interwoven the characters have become within the narrative.

Within the webcomic, one of the major inciting events that change the status quo of the narrative thus far is when Charlie and Nick kiss during Harry Greene's party at the end of Arc 2. This is what leads to Nick and Charlie getting together and brings in the next conflict: Charlie and Nick dealing with dating in secret and the situations they end up in. Within the show, this plot beat happens in Episode 3, and we can see the ways they have translated this

event to be the point where the conflicts the main pairings - Nick and Charlie, Tara and Darcy, and Elle and Tao - will face start to become established.

Radha o'Meara posits three key forms of character action that can be seen in television narratives, implying an internal change (2015). Experiencing important life events, experiencing intense emotions, and contrast in behaviours can be seen as one of the ways of organising the type of character changes (O'Meara, 2015). In the case of Tara, we have a character experiencing a major life event, which is being able to be public with her girlfriend. In the case of Tao, we have a character experiencing intense emotions, which is seen as we see Tao get more confrontational throughout the season, until it culminates to fighting Harry and yelling at Charlie. Regarding Nick, his discovery of his bisexuality can also be seen as experiencing a major life event, which results in him making different decisions in the later half of the season as he comes to accept his feelings.

In Episode 3, we see Nick invite Charlie as his plus one to Harry Greene's party, who is also on the Rugby Team, and Charlie agrees. Within the webcomic this plot beat is the same but what is changed in the Netflix serial is the additional presence of Tao, Elle, and Isaac in relation to this. Unlike the webcomic, within the target source media object, Charlie agreeing to go means he can't go to the movie night with Tao, Elle, and Isaac. Isaac also ends up cancelling, which leaves Tao and Elle to do a movie night together. When watching the show, The events of the movie night are cut in between scenes of the events of Harry's party, which creates an interesting duality, between the loud, multicolour scenes intercut between the quiet and more intimate location of Tao's room. During these scenes, Tao expresses concern for Charlie regarding his feelings towards Nick and Elle acts as a support to him within these moments, both reassuring and contradicting him. As we continue we see Tao ask Elle to

promise him that whatever will happen in the future, that they remain friends and prioritise their friendship firstly. Regarding the progression of the narrative, it is important as it establishes Tao's fear and resistance to change and how this resistance is a part of an insecurity he bears; he is afraid of being left behind and abandoned by his friends. Within this season, we never get context behind why it's there but it is developed further in the second season. This scene helps to inform the audience of behaviour and choices. Harry is a bully character and starts to bother Charlie more, as he joins the rugby team and spends time with Nick. Tao, in response, starts to verbally fight Harry back. This also gives way for his angry reaction when he finds out Charlie didn't tell him that he was dating Nick. For Elle, this scene is the beginning of establishing an internal conflict she faces throughout the rest of the season: her growing romantic feelings towards Tao. Throughout the rest of the season, the narrative makes a point of leaving visual indicators of her feelings, by using 2D effects of mini fireworks and lighting Bolts.

While the party sequence remains the same, the key difference is in the bigger presence of Tara and Darcy. Within the previous episode, the audience learns that Tara and Darcy are dating when Elle confronts them. Within this episode, we see as Tara and Darcy share their first kiss in public while in the middle of the dance floor. Regarding framing, the addition of multiple colour via the strobe lights emphasises the intense and giddy moment for them, which is emphasised by a rainbow VFX effect layered on the scene while they kiss and dance. Their coming out as a couple is what establishes the main point of narrative conflict that they face, which is dealing with their peers' reactions. This is especially the case for Tara, as Darcy had already been known as lesbian, and throughout the rest of the season, we see her struggle with the homophobic comments and teasing. On a thematic level, this moment also is one of the many instances wherein the narrative draws narrative parallels between Tara

and Darcy and Nick and Charlie. Throughout both seasons, the narrative draws comparisons between the two couples and the struggles they face within and regarding their relationship. Both their shared kisses mark the rest of their developments: Tara and Darcy's public kiss leads to them dealing with the ramifications of being together publicly., while Nick and Charlie's private kiss leads to them dealing with the ramifications of being together in secret.

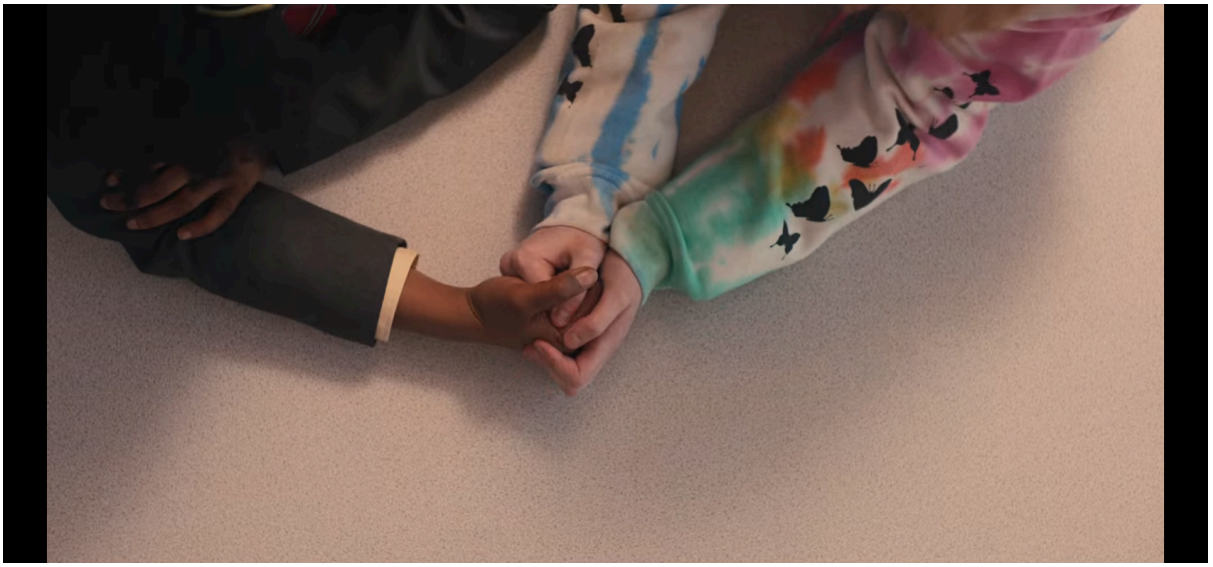
Visually, we also see this paralleling of the two pairings throughout the show by using similar shot visuals in context of the two. As seen in Figure 4.3a, we see a page from Arc 2 of the webcomic. This page is taken from when Charlie is teaching Nick to play the drums while at Charlie's home, and we see as they end up holding hands. Narratively, this is the same day after Nick goes home, he starts to question his feelings towards Charlie and starts to question his sexuality. The panel on this frame is important, as it is when Nick starts to consider that he likes Charlie romantically.

Now it is important to look at the next two figures, **Figure 4.3b** and **Figure 4.3c**. In **Figure 4.3c**, we can see how the target source media was able to recreate this shot in the same context of the narrative, using the contrast of the strong shadows against a warm light to create a sense of intimacy. What is important to consider is **Figure 4.3b**, which shows Tara and Darcy holding hands while alone in class and is shot in the same framing, except rather than a warm yellow light, we see pinks in the lighting and colour grading of this shot. This show is shown in the same episode, prior to seeing **Figure 4.3c**, and is shown before Elle comes into the room and asks if they're dating. Looking at this, we can see the ways the narrative elements and visuals as established within the source target have been translated in a way where they maintain their narrative significance, but also have evolved the narrative

themes to incorporate more characters. This is also one of the ways we see how the visual motifs have been maintained and shifted by being utilised more specifically.



Figure 4.3a: ‘Charlie teaches Nick the drums’, p. 165 of *Heartstopper* by Alice Oseman, taken from Tapas (Oseman, A., 2017) Ep. 2-9. Accessed January 05, 2024. https://tapas.io/episode/677491.





(from top to bottom)
Figure 4. 3b: ‘Tara and Darcy Hold Hands’, screenshot taken from *Heartstopper* Season One, Episode 2, *“Crush,”* directed by Euros Lyn, accessed January 05, 2024, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81425011?trackId=14277283
Figure 4. 3c: ‘Nick holds Charlie’s hands’ screenshot taken from *Heartstopper* Season One. Episode 2, *“Crush,”* directed by Euros Lyn, accessed January 05, 2024, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81425011?trackId=14277283

Visual Motifs

The Netflix series (*Heartstopper* 2022) also maintains the presence of the nature particle motif. Within the show, they are added to the shots in scenes as 2Dimensional animated effects, as a series of leaves that, instead of falling, are blown by an invisible wind. While they are not elements that the characters can directly interact with, these motifs tend to circle throughout what is shown in the frame of the camera, weaving around characters and circling them within the shot.

Regarding the leaves and additional motifs within the series (*Heartstopper* 2022): with the understanding that elements present within the mise-en-scène and cinematography are there to develop the characterisation, plot, and themes within the shot shown concerning its previous and next shot, we can observe the ways with which the Leaf motif has become more specified to represent the love themes present within the narrative.

Within the context of the narrative as depicted within the target source media object, the leaves are both signifiers of the characters' mental state and visual indicators to the audience of the evolving feelings of the characters' in those moments, in specific context to romantic developments. The main visual motif is the 2D leaves blowing in an invisible wind. They are mainly present in Charlie Spring and Nick Nelson focused plots, though they eventually become present in the other relationship dynamics: Tara and Darcy, as well as Tao Xu and Elle Argent. There are various visual motifs present that are still consistent within the source and target source media objects.

Regarding Isaac, his instance of the blowing leaves is the most interesting. Isaac's character remains flat throughout Season One. Within the context of the other character developments, remains adjacent to many of the emotional struggles they face, usually represented reading a book. It is in Season Two when we see more development for his character regarding his discovery of his asexuality and aromanticism. In this Season, we see Isaac become closer with another character James, who is the only other openly gay person in school, excluding Charlie. As we see them get closer, Isaac asks Charlie when he knew he liked Nick romantically during the bus trip to Paris. As Charlie explains his feelings, he emphasises how much he wanted to kiss Nick, and Isaac is not as receptive to that. During Tara's birthday party, Isaac and James ends up kissing. Isaac recognises that he is not feeling the same feelings that Charlie expressed, and what is explained in fictional books, and makes his way out of the hallway. As he is leaving, the shot lingers on James as we see a lone 2D leaf blow around him and away. This is one of the first instances where the presence of the leaf motif is used in a negative context, in the sense that James' feelings are not returned by Isaac. In this, we can see how the show utilises the Leitmotif and evolves it through the benefits of the medium in being able to incorporate motion. The ability of movement allows for the blowing leaves to display a character through personification and embody the feelings of the characters through movement and size.

Step 4: What's in a genre?

When looking at the expansion strategies taken to translate the narrative of the source media object (*Heartstopper* 2022) in a way that will utilise the narrative potential of the medium regarding the target source media object, especially in relation to the development of side characters, we understand that the Netflix show format allows the narrative to express the realities of each characters in a way that that allows the audience to fully experience their specific narratives. The utilisation of 2D effects also manages to capture the additional abstracted elements from the source media object (*Heartstopper* 2016). The additional plot beats provides opportunities for the characters to interact with different situations and develop their characterisations.

It is when looking at the specifics of the changes, the kinds of additional events, the tropes that can be found within character arcs, and the romance plots that we begin to see how romance, particularly the teen romance genre, maintains an influence in the narrative decisions made in the target source media object.

Within the Literature Review is a discussion of what aspects within media objects define their place or position within a genre. The positioning of a media object within a genre can be understood by looking at few things: the elements and components that were intentionally incorporated into the work by the creator, and the wider media industry regarding how they categorize it, which involves its place with other media objects. When looking at how romance is depicted in *Heartstopper* (2022), it is necessary to look not just at romance, but romance within the teen genre, as it is an established genre of media within television and film.

The Teen Genre

While the romance elements are a strong focal point within *Heartstopper* (2022), it is important to look at the romance within the context of the other major genre that both the webcomic and Netflix show fall under: the teen genre. As stated by E. H. Nelson, the teen genre focuses on the trials and events that are experienced by teenage characters depicted, as a general definition (2017). In *'Genre and Hollywood'*, Steve Neale explains that the teen genre, also known as the teen pic, was officially established in the 1950's as the Hollywood media industry realised the potential profit that could be found by developing more media targeted towards the teenage market (2000). As the teen pic began to develop as a newer type of genre film within Hollywood, two aspects were influential in codifying what would become key traits of this category: The first would be the rise in independent production houses and a rise in depicting 'exploitation' - used to denote a category of the film wherein the main subject centred on controversial, non-standard topics, as well as an industry strategy to use sensationalized marketing to promote a media object (Neale, 2000). According to Neale's recount, a big part of censorship is what developed the teen genre. In her book '*Teen film: A Critical Introduction',* Catherine Driscoll challenges the notion of the 1950's being the moment when the teen genre came into fruition, expressing further that the ability to define teen genres is a modern ability achievable through specific historical moments (2011).

The romance genre has the ability to act a magnifier for emphasising the thematic elements within a media object. Referring back to Fryre's notions regarding Romance genre and how it acts as a form of "waking up" (1974, p. 74) the reader, I want to relate it to how romance functions and shifts in relation to other genres. Frye's point is that within Romance the reader is put in a state of tension as they perceive the events of the story and what those events reveal about the character's experience (Fryre, 1974). In many ways, it works to reveal or

explore dynamics outside of Romance. A well-known example of this is Jane Austen's *'Pride and Prejudice'* (1813), with its focal point being the elusive and wealthy Mr. Darcy and the less wealthy Elizabeth Bennet, it is also able to express and explore the power and social dynamics in Regency-era England. This example is an expression of Fuchs's assessment of the ability of romance within romance, whether main genre or sub-genre, can highlight key themes (2004). It is with this perspective that I will examine the romance elements present within *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022)

Looking at *Heartstopper* (2022), we can see how the existing characters feel further emphasised within the context of romance aspects. It is interesting to note that most of the characters, whose presence within the narrative was significantly elevated within the target source media object, also had a significant romance shown. When looking at the source media object, most of the relationships explored within the Netflix Original already existed within it. The inclusion of specific settings to expand the already existing plot beats and events is what creates a space for the expression of romance genre conventions of teen romance or teen flicks to be more noticeable within *Heartstopper* (2022), as can be seen with the modified kiss scene mentioned earlier. In an article with *Buzzfeed*, Alice Oseman states that the expanded presence of the side characters within the show is due both to their popularity amongst the fan base and utilising the television series media format to its benefit (Cleal, 2022). Going more in-depth, she states: "...in comics there isn't a lot of space because it's drawings and not prose, so you really can't put a lot of story in there. In the show, however, we had a lot more room to do what we wanted to" (Cleal, 2022). Oseman's statements regarding telling Nick and Charlie's story in the comic medium, rather than in a written novel, displays an important aspect of the importance of medium for creators when attempting to decide how best to communicate a story (Knight, 2022). In an interview for an

article with *The Guardian*, she mentions that she could not write Charlie and Nicks relationship progression under the constraints of the common three or five act structure; by communicating Nick and Charlie's relationship through comics, the multimodal nature of comics allowed Oseman to focus on snapshot moments within their story, without depicted a too organised overall plot narrative (Knight 2022). The narrative in this sense is somewhat abstracted. This fragmentation links to the webcomic being categorised under slice-of-life, as storytelling where the focus is on the mundane aspects makes is easier to extend the smaller moments within the narrative.

Within the teen genre, one of the most important aspects depicted is the relationship and dynamics that are present between teenagers themselves (Driscoll, 2011; Jenner, 2021). In this sense looking at the increased inclusion also makes sense, by having a bigger presence, the viewer gets the chance to watch the characters interact with both the story world and each other. When looking at the webcomic (*Heartstopper* 2022), we can see that one of its strengths is in its ability to showcase a fragmented world that emphasises the emotional shifts within Nick and Charlie, however, this makes it harder to experience the stories of the other characters. As a result, the audience is able to experience more romantic relationships and the differing dynamics means that there is a higher chance of viewers being able to relate to it. In an interview for Directors UK, the director of the Netflix serial, Euros Lyn, goes more in depth explaining the main thematic elements of both Season One and Two, stating that, "We wanted to do something new with it and move the narrative forward, not give audiences a rehashed version of season 1. Alice was really clear that she wanted season 2 to follow these characters as they explored the next stage of their maturity, and for it to be bolder and deal with new issues. The first season was about the simplicity of falling in love for the first time, but that honeymoon period can never last long because real life catches up with you. That's

what we wanted to explore in season 2" (Directors, 2023). When looking at this quote, we can see how though the bigger emphasis of the Netflix series centres around giving the side character's more on-screen development, the main core of the show still focuses on the romance aspects of the narrative.

There has also been a shift in the teen demographic desiring less romantic relationships and desiring to see more varied relationship types explored as discovered in the Teens & Screens report from UCLA's Center for Scholars & Storytellers (CSS) (2023). According to the report, this finding was found from a survey groups of 1500 participants from the ages of 10 to 24, with exactly 100 participants from each year group (Neuroscience News, 2023).

Transnationalism, Netflix, and *Heartstopper*

Netflix as a media house and distributor, makes a point to market their media to both local and international markets (Stolz, 2021). This is important to take into account when looking at how genre categories are utilised within its online streaming site and its Netflix originals. In '*Transnationalising Genre: Netflix, Teen Drama and Textual Dimensions in Netflix Transnationalism'*, Jenner explains how Netflix utilises genre to "generate transnationalism in communication across their originally produced media objects" (2021, p. 186).
The areas of expansion within *Heartstopper* (2022) show more indication of incorporating genre conventions that can signify active actions towards transforming the Netflix show to be included amongst media objects that contain elements of a transnationalised teen genre that is specific to Netflix originals. Netflix first developed a teen genre audience by first hosting popular licensed media objects, and then later on started to develop and codify their own version of teen genre. One of the signifiers of their teen genre is its focus on gender, racial, and queer diversity within their Netflix Originals, due to the success of their earlier originals

in the ways it tackled and displayed diversity in various facets (Jenner, 2021). The narrative structures are designed to promote binge-watching (Jenner, 2021). The nature of genre as a tool for transnationalisation within Netflix means that there needs to be a constant negotiation between the signifiers of genre present that speak more to a local context and signifiers of genre that can be more widely recognised by an international audience; this means that the large prominence of US teen genre markers are present, not because they are a standard, but more so because of the US's more exported media objects across multiple countries means that their markers of genre are more recognisable and familiar (Jenner, 2023). Netflix's categorising algorithm utilises genre distinction, meaning that works produced need to be easily categories into various genres and sub-genres (192). As a result of this, any regional markers that make the location too obvious are usually mitigated to using the most worldwide recognisable tropes (Jenner, 2023)

In contrast to expectation, *Heartstopper* (2022) manages to maintain markers of place and locality within how the teen genre is expressed. There is a direct reference to the Year system within secondary schooling in Britain, a big narrative event in the first few episodes of the second season is the GSCE's that characters like Nick, Elle, Ben, Darcy, and Tara have to take. GSCE's are at the beginning of the second episode that starts with a parent-teacher conference, where we see teachers go into more detail about the characters' work ethic and expectations, which reveals a lot about the system of education organised in Britain to viewers who are unfamiliar with them. Nick being a rugby player and Charlie joining the team also shows signs of maintaining locality within the show. Within the UK, rugby is one of the most consumed sports in the region. When observing these areas of local markers being present, it is important to acknowledge that many of these instances were also part of the webcomic. Especially when we take into account Oseman's strong involvement in

developing the Netflix series, it makes sense that stronger threads of the local market of the genre are present.

Taking all this into account, it would be remiss not to mention aspects of the target source media object that show elements of genre conventions present due to transnationalism. One way to examine this is in the context of tropes.

Tropes in Teen Genre

In order to understand the ways that romance genre conventions exist, operate within, and effect the depiction of the narrative of *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022) As a whole, we must understand it in relation to the narrative tropes as they exist within both iterations. To understand why tropes are relevant, let us look at the Cambridge Dictionary definition:

> *"something such as an idea, phrase, or image that is often used in a particular artist's work, in a particular type of art, in the media, etc. :"* (Trope, 2024).

Tropes are another term denoting the repetition of a familiar narrative and storytelling devices, that have been utilised in a similar enough fashion to be recognised by a wider audience. Like Genre, they rely on specific narrative and visual motifs to be adopted and utilised by creators in multiple instances, and for the audience to engage with enough media objects containing the motif, to recognise its relevance.

TvTropes is an important example of an expression of standardising and organising a community to categorise media within a genre as outlined by Abell. The processes of the

Launch Pad (TLP) function exhibit traits of cohabitation and co-instantiation, though in this case it is with genres and tropes as a collective, with moderators having a detailed understanding of tropes within genre. *TvTropes* is a website that was launched in 2004 and is currently still active. The website, developed and created by Chris Richmond and Drew Schoentrup, was designed as a 'wiki' to list and document tropes found within various media types within the mainstream culture, across varying distinctions of genre category. Wiki is defined by the online Merriam-Webster Dictionary as "a website that allows visitors to make changes, contributions, or corrections" (Definition of WIKI, 2024). One of its main functions is in how a new trope can be added: via the Trope Launch Pad, an area dedicated to moderators and veterans for the cite to meticulously curate, critique, validate, or reject any proposed new tropes to include via submitting a TLP draft. When going to the section detailing the process of getting the TLP draft approved, you see a detailed and strict process of intense collaboration and debate that is a standard. TvTropes as a wiki-trope-cataloguing-website exists as an interesting artifact in general and a crucial example within the context of the aims of this dissertation. Ultimately, it acts as an illustration of the intricate and organised process of trope categorising and highlighting common tropes. One of its abilities is creating pages for specific media objects and listing the perceived general qualities; which includes both *Heartstopper*'s (2016; 2022). While I am not saying that they are all accurate, I think that they work as a starting off point when looking at the characters and plot events within *Heartstopper* (2022). By assigning tropes to these aspects, we can understand how *Heartstopper* (2022) has positioned itself within the teen romance genre.

Within Season One we see Elle going to a new school, Charlie and Nick hanging out at home, Harry Greene's party, the rugby match, Imogen asking Nick out, Charlie's birthday bowling

party, a movie hangout with Nick's friend group, Nick and Harry fight, the school fight between Harry Greene and Tao Xu, and Sports Day. Within Season 2 there is a sleepover at Charlie's home in Episode 1, the Parent-Teacher conference that starts the bonfire party, The Paris Trip, another group date, Elle's Lambert exhibition open day, The prom, and Nick's family dinner where he comes out to his father. Of the ones listed, only the Paris Trip and Group date are present in *Heartstopper* (2016). When looking at these plot events, it is easy to how *Heartstopper* (2022) falls more in line with tropes seen in teen-focused and teen-targeted media. Many of these locations and events speak to tropes that have been common standards within the teen genre. One thing to note is the increased events that focus on bringing as many characters into a single location, where we are then able to see their dynamics and characterisation.

Despite *Heartstopper*'s (2022) ability to keep markers of local genre, especially regarding educational terminology and structure, there are still instances present of a more transnational genre markers that speak to traditions and tropes not inherent of the region. One of the big instances of this is with the 'prom' as the major Season Two finale plot event and was teased in the first episode of the season as both the school's - Higgs Girls and Truham Boys - first prom event. The term prom is associated as a United States term defining a dance event held mainly to students in their final year of high schooling, that takes place towards the end of the school year. On further consideration, we can see that the United Kingdom does have a history of hosting dances for students in secondary school at the end of the year period, the term prom became popular during the 2000s as the influence of US TV teen shows grew due to the level of exported teen genre media objects (Williams, 2004; Williams *et al.*, 2012). This popularity is seen with a similar level of grandeur taken by students in preparing for the night (Williams *et al.*, 2012). According to an archived article from The Independent, a part

of this popularity was encouraged by UK government officials as a way to motivate students in their studies (Williams, 2004). This is an interesting intersection regarding a popular concept or event that is central to the teenage experience in another country becoming so popular in other countries - due to the exposure of customs from another country - that the custom becomes adopted in other countries. In this case, I am specifically speaking to the term 'prom' being used and the level of importance placed on it. This speaks to Jenner's assessment that while the teen genre tropes of the United States aren't the defining tropes internationally, because of the level of exposure, it is easier to use terms based on the United States specific tropes as a larger audience will understand it without needing further exposition. In this we can see the ways of genre as described by Labarre, as building blocks of ideas based on a cultural knowledge (2020).

Another aspect that plays into the teen genre trope is the presence of Imogen Dawson. When looking at character tropes within the teen genre, we can see how she falls into the nice popular girl, or the Class Princess as TvTropes has decided to look at it (*Class princess* , 2023). To explain this trope further, this means that she is commonly known by most of her peers, but rather than being a mean girl like the infamous character Regina George from *Mean Girls* (2004), who is both admired and hated by her peers, Imogen is generally held in a higher regard. It is established in Season One of *Heartstopper* (2022) that she is part of the popular group, as we see her as a part of Nick's initial friend group when they han together outside of their schools before the school day starts. Characters like Harry Greene also makes comments on her attractiveness and desirability, along with Tara Strong. Her interest in Nick Nelson plays into another trope found within the teen genre which is the popular girl liking the popular boy. In her scenes, we see she has a ditzy, charming quality about her, exemplified in the way she perfunctorily states, 'I'm not, like, homophobic. I'm an ally'

(*Heartstopper* Episode 4, 2022, 00:14:12), after making sure that Tara and Nick were definitely not dating. Her storylines also play into her likeability that comes across other characters and the audience watching her. In the first Season, she reveals to Nick thats she has a crush on him, but rather than being scorned by him when he rejects her after cancelling a date, she is understanding and works to maintain their preexisting relationship. She even maintains their friendship when Nick starts to distance himself from their initial friendgroup after he fights Harry and she becomes one of the first people Nick comes out to as bisexual in the beginning of the second season. While she is in confict with Nick for a few episodes of Season Four due to her romantic relationship with Ben Hope - who is of the major antagonists of the series - the shows makes an effort to incorporate multiple shots where her focus is on Nick, Charlie, and their friends, as she stares at them with a sense of longing. This culminates with her finally breaking up with Ben during the Paris trip and re-integrating herself with Nick, Charlie, Tao, Elle, Tara, Darcy, and Isaac. Her status as Class Princess is emphasised further in the breakup aftermath, as Harry Greene defends her against Ben's rude comments, ultimately ending up with Ben isolating himself from the popular friend group. This sympathetic framing of her character, along with her constant comedic lines, enables her to be well liked by the audience as well and emphasises how Imogen's presence exemplifies many tropes found within the teen genre packed into a single character.

To conclude, In Step 3 of the Transmedial Analysis Framework, we were able to contextualise the increased prescence of the side characters as an aspect of adhering to the television and Netflix series medium. As a webcomic, *Heartstopper* (2016) can depict its narrative in a closed perspective, due to the nature of the drawn image, comic panels and sequential formatting allowing for a focused view of Nick and Charlie. In contrast, Television requires a more expanded world space, both in characters and setting, due to the physical

frame of the camera making an empty world more noticeable, as well as the nature of Complex TV (Mittell, 2015) wherein we can see multiple characters develop and exist within the space of the fictional world, allowing the audience ways to bond with them. This aligns with the expanded prescence of the side characters in *Heartstopper* (2022). In Step 4, we were able to establish how these changes also work to expand the presence of signifiers denoting the romance teen genre, in regards to television and film. The teen genre is marked by characters in their teenage years, commonly experiencing coming-of-age storyline, while existing in locations and settings attributed to that age group, such as a school and school events, as a way of connecting with that target audience. When looking at the prominence of character storylines and increased plot events, we can see how they fall into tropes commonly associated with the teen genre. By referring to Jenner, we see how *Heartstopper* (2022) utilises Netflix's signifiers of genre to appeal to both international and UK-based local audiences, by having more prominent UK locations and depictions of living, while still keeping genre conventions that are universally recognised (2021). By understanding that the characters play a more prominent role in *Heartstopper* (2022) are also the ones that had a romantic relationship within the original webcomic (*Heartstopper* 2016) and existed within a friendgroup, we see how these shifts allow the narrative to stay romance based, while adhering to the current trends of teen genre with a focus on platonic relationships (Neuroscience News, 2023).

Chapter 5: Concluding Points

In this chapter, the concluding arguments and observations will be covered. Starting with the final 5th Step of the Transmedial Analysis Framework, we can begin to recontextualise observations found within the last chapter. Within the final step as defined by *Bruhn & Schirrmacher* (2021) having considered the ways in which changes made to the target source media (*Heartstopper* 2016) result in an increased presence of side characters within the Netflix series (*Heartstopper* 2022), and considered those changes with regards to medium-specificity and teen romance genre conventions, we can begin to discuss how this shifts the perception of the narrative of *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022) as a whole.

Step 5: *Understanding how the narrative of Heartstopper (2022) opens space for Heartstopper (2016) to be recontextualised*

Looking at the findings in Step 3 and 4 from the previous chapter, we can see how the transmediation process bolsters the presence of the side characters, their developments and their romances by interweaving them within the narrative from the first episode of the target source media object (*Heartstopper* 2022). In doing so, this makes the story world feel more fleshed out. In terms of considering the teen romance genre, showing more of the character's romances allows for a more diversified representation of teenage romance, as well as the teenage experience.

When looking at Tao and Elle's relationship progression, the resistance to change which halts them from evolving their relationship in Season 1 can speak to a general anxiety that marks

this stage of adolescence (Driscoll, 2011). However, it is when looking at their grown prominence within the narrative from the focus on queer identities that we start to see ways in which the Netflix serial recontextualises the webcomic.

In the introduction of his book, *Turning The Page: Storytelling As Activism In Queer Film And Media* (2018), David R, Coon examines the many ways in which storytelling in media is an important aspect within the movement regarding the LGBTQ+ community striving for social equality. He spotlights Freedom To Marry - a now-defunct political organisation dedicated to changing laws and policies related to mitigating and undermining same-sex marriages (2018). It stood as one of many existing organisations that favoured narratives and storytelling as important to the goals of their existence; the various stories and anecdotes of same-sexed couples, lived experiences of multiple racial, gender, religious, and other social identities, were collected by various campaign leaders of the organisation and were then systematically distributed throughout various social media platforms, websites, printed media, campaign ads, and news coverage sources (Coon, 2018). In doing this, Freedom To Marry made sure to mitigate the impact of stories that demonised and sensationalised the everyday existence of people within the queer community. Depicting queer identities in media that is distributed to a mass audience can do two things: It allows for members within the community a space to consume stories that speak to their experiences and desires and also provides the larger heteronormative society the ability to normalise the presence of the LGBTQ+ community in their day-to-day lives, by showing characters that the audience can empathise with (Coon, 2018). Understanding how storytelling and narratives were used as a form of successful social activism works to showcase the effect that stories can have on a public, especially stories that work to showcase marginalised identities.

This is why it is even more important to take heed to the kinds of stories that are being chosen to be distributed to wider audiences. Within the chapter, *Introduction: Popular Culture, Queer Culture* of the book, *Queer popular culture: literature, media, film, and television (2008),* Thomas Peele states that queer representation within media objects that are part of a wider pop culture tends to veer towards overtly positioning the ability of a wider heteronormative society to display tolerance towards the queer community, in a way that ultimately undermines the value that could be provided within the queer community (2008). There is a big focus within the narrative of tackling the issue of obtaining tolerance, that there is a risk that the messaging centres tolerance only as a goal, rather than highlighting any of the queer experiences (Peele, 2008). In *'The Three Phases of Ellen: From Queer to Gay to Postgay'*, Reed states when exploring the representational politics of two Ellen Degeneres' sitcoms, Reed concludes that due to the nature of network broadcasting, television acts as a social teacher, teacher the wider audience the ways to behave and how to interact with neighbouring citizens (2008).

In Edward Sewell's Queer *Characters in Comic Strips*, he interrogates the position of queer bodies within comics and their presentation of their identity, stating that "while coming out is an event with major personal implications, being queer is primarily a performative function defining how the queer acts once s/he has decided to live their queerness is a straight world" (2006, p.252). He continues further, arguing that the performance of queerness is a heteronormative society is one of the biggest showcases of queer in mass media objects (Sewell, 2006). While focusing on queer characters in comic strips, his position is in line with most of the academics mentioned within this section - such as Coon, Peele, and Reed - in the affirmation that within multiple media objects queer characters purposefully assimilate themselves into the standards and behaviours expected within a heteronormative society, with

an emphasis on being tolerated instead of being themselves authentically (Sewell, 2006; Peele, 2008). When looking at queer creators, Sewell makes a point to note that within those media objects, queer creators tend to focus on building or creating a more diverse, fleshed out queer community within their comic depictions (Sewell, 2006). In many ways, Oseman's body of work acts as a testament to the notion of queer creators focusing on showcasing a queer community. While a big part of Nick Nelson's arc revolves around accepting his queer identity and 'coming out', a major aspect of this arc includes him finding more community and friends from others that identify as part of the queer community. This can be seen in both the webcomic and Netflix serial, as Nick becomes more integrated within Charlie's friend group, where most of them are queer. In the context of coming out, a large aspect is centred on being out in order to be publicly affectionate to his boyfriend Charlie, rather than wanting to find tolerance from the dominant heteronormative society.

When looking at the characters who have an elevated presence within *Heartstopper* (2022), we notice a common trend. Looking at Elle, Tao, Isaac, Tara, Darcy, and Ben, we see that they can be considered as being a part of the queer community, with four out of the six characters being in romantic relationships by the end of the second season. Tao and Elle end up dating, with Tara and Darcy already being in a romantic relationship by the time the series starts. Even an identified heterosexual character, like Imogen, claims herself as an ally to the community.

By the act of the Netflix show increasing the importance and presence of the chosen side characters from the webcomic, it allows for a more varied display of queer identities and experiences. When taking into account the level of success and access Netflix has to its audience, having a show wherein queer characters and romances are at the forefront, and that

those relationships are depicted in a non-sensationalist way, we see how it offers its viewers a chance to engage in the coming-of-age themes in the context of queer identities.
The show still manages to maintain a mostly positive experience of a queer romance, and by extending that to other romantic couples depicted on the show, it leads to an environment where the audience can fully experience all the forms of a love story. This relates back to Michelson's observation of the HEA and the socio-political impact it has on reader. In this sense, especially taking into account how a show allows its viewers' to bond with its characters, a queer community being able to consume and easily access this narrative allows for another avenue to experience the same emotional impact of the HEA. In terms of contextualising, this is focused on the idea of media being able to show showcase people of varying identities and the impact it can have. Both socially and culturally, taking into account the power relations present. The release of a third season for *Heartstopper* (2022), was announced in May 2022, at the same time of the second season release announcement (McNab and Delgado, 2022).

This is not to say that *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022) is a complete form of escapism for its queer consumers. Even within its loose narrative, there are instances when we see the characters deal with forms of bigotry, intolerance, and homophobia. Characters like Harry Green and David Nelson, whom are one of Nick's rugby team-mates and his brother respectively, are presences within the narrative that act as mouthpieces of bigoted rhetoric towards the main character. Even in the Netflix show, we see instances where Elle mentions the transphobia she experienced before moving to her new school, and a main factor of Tara's struggle in Season One is dealing with lesphobia from her peers due to her coming out. This is to say that with all of this, the Netflix show manages to be one of multiple cases wherein there is a lesser focus on achieving tolerance, with a much larger emphasis on prioritising community. When

coupled with the emphasis the teen genre inherently places on depicted the nuances of relationships within the peer group, we can see how elements of the teen genre work to highlight queer relationships and expressions, both romantically and platonically.

In terms of teen pics and teen shows, it fills a gap for teen queer romance, as well as teen romance stories that highlight a softer and calm framing, in comparison to the existing shows that highlight sensationalism and intensely plot-driven shows. This is not to say that *Heartstopper* (2022) is the only show of its kind in recent years. While not a series, the film adaptation of *Love, Simon (2018)*, based on a pre-existing YA novel, was also successful in its year, eventually leading to a show adaptation of the next instance in the series, *Love, Viktor* (2020) hosted on Hulu rather than Netflix and ran for two seasons until 2022. *Love, Simon* follows Simon Spier as he deals with being closeted while pursuing an online relationship. There has also been the film *Red, White, and Royal Blue* (2023), based on the novel by Casey McQuiston. While both the protagonists in the main romantic pairing are older than the characters in the *Heartstopper* and *Love, Simon* franchises, being 21 and 23 respectively, the original novel was targeted to a YA demographic similarly to the previously mentioned bodies of work, so there is an inherent overlap in the target demographic.

By increasing the prominence of the side characters, especially the ones with queer identities, *Heartstopper* can present a more fully realised depiction of the queer community, in the context of high school teenagers.

Conclusion

By utilising the Transmedial Analysis Framework, we were able to contextualize the impact of romance genre and teen romance genre conventions, by using *Heartstopper* (2016) and *Heartstopper* (2022) as the chosen instrumental bound case study for analysis.

By covering key points and theorists within the Literature Review Section, we were able to set up a theoretical familiarity with understanding and utilising concepts within genre, romance, intermediality, narrative, and comic studies to be utilised throughout the rest of the dissertation. *Heartstopper* (2016; 2022) has shown to be a successful body of work by Oseman, and the simple storyline focusing on the lives of the characters, marking it as part of the slice-of life-genre, makes it easier to discern the aspects of the romance genre present in a medium-specific context. With this in mind, we were able to continue forward with a comparative analysis of both media objects, utilising Leitch's adjustment strategies to determine the instances of three of the form present; compression, expansion, and superimposition. By being able to contextualise key changes, there was a clear trajectory through the changes made and the ways in which the target source media object displayed a larger presence of the side characters - to the point of creating new characters for the Netflix serial- and the addition of more plot beats. In Step 3, understanding how the respective hybrid formats - webcomics and the Netflix streaming platform - utilise their formats to communicate narratives within the mediums of comics and television, allows the ability to examine the changes and similarities between the source media object and target source media object. Under this framing, we can contextualise that the side characters increased within the narrative of *Heartstopper* (2022) could be understood through the existence of Netflix as creating Complex TV (as defined by Jason Mittell), meaning that serial television adaptation would need to incorporate the side characters more, as a crucial aspect within the

television medium is the characters. We can also see the ways in which the Netflix show managed to capture elements of the webcomic visual aesthetic by utilising television's ability to add VFX effects and motion to apply 2D animated motifs as a major component within the Netflix Show. In Step 4, we were able to contextualise changes under the frame of looking at genre tropes of romance and teen genre conventions. While many changes can be attributed to medium-specificity, the execution of those changes reveals the ways in which genre conventions are utilised to maintain a 'teen' that has become popularised under the growth of the teen genre. When applying contextual information of Netflix's utilisation of transnationalised genre's, we can see how many of the added or emphasised elements work to represent the genre, and that the stronger character presence could also be to fulfil a trend in the demographic for more complex depictions of various relationship types. In the final step, we can see how the emphasis of relationships and character developments of queer identities allows for a more diversified expression of the queer experience for teenagers, as well as seeing varied queer romantic relationships. The mundane tone of the series allows for an exploration of queerness that is not sensationalised.

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