Hatewatching for Profit

How Negative Buzz Fuels the Phenomenon of the *After* Movie Franchise

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ABSTRACT

In the age of algorithm-driven media and participatory digital culture, hatewatching (watching content to critique or mock it) has become a notable audience practice. This thesis explores how online communities engage with and reinforce hatewatching behaviors in discussions surrounding the *After-* film series, a romantic drama franchise adapted from fanfiction. Despite widespread criticism and depictions of a toxic relationship, the series maintains cultural visibility and online relevance.

A qualitative thematic content analysis was conducted on 315 user comments from Reddit and TikTok, guided by grounded theory coding techniques (open, axial, and selective). These platforms were strategically chosen for their complementary communicative affordances: Reddit facilitates in-depth, text-based discussion and reflection, while TikTok emphasizes affective, short-form, and often performative engagement. This contrast enabled a more holistic understanding of how hatewatching manifests across different modes of digital interaction.

The analysis identified four dominant hatewatching patterns: *Ironized Enjoyment*, *Reluctant Persistence*, *Community Bonding*, and *Hatewatching as Meta-Aware Performance*, alongside two counter-patterns: *Genuine Critique* and *Resistance to Hatewatching*. These findings were interpreted through a multidimensional theoretical framework, incorporating concepts from the attention economy (Franck, 2019), affect theory (Ahmed, 2004), fan and anti-fan studies (Gray, 2019), and participatory culture (Jenkins, 2018).

Results show that users engage with the *After* series through irony, self-aware critique, and emotional contradiction. Hatewatching functions not merely as rejection but as a productive, socially embedded form of engagement. Through shared memes, ironic captions, and ritualized viewing habits, users contribute to the franchise's longevity and algorithmic visibility, demonstrating how negative affect can serve as a promotional tool in the digital media landscape.

This study contributes to broader understandings of contemporary audience practices, especially the interplay between cultural critique and platform economies. It also highlights the need for further research into the sociocultural implications of hatewatching, particularly when it involves media that romanticizes harmful relationship dynamics.

KEYWORDS: *Hatewatching, Attention Economy, Participatory Culture, Logics of Engagement, Affect Theory*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Why do individuals continue to engage with media they openly dislike? What motivates audiences to watch sequels to films they describe as disappointing, only to circulate memes, post critiques, and fuel online conversations? Traditional media frameworks, particularly the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) model (McQuail, 1983, p. 82-83), only slightly explain this paradox. As one of the foundational theories in media studies, U&G suggests that audiences are active agents who select media to fulfill specific needs, such as entertainment, escapism, or social connection (McQuail, 1983, p. 82-83). This perspective was later adapted to the dynamics of digital media by Askwith (2007, p. 102-116), who introduced five "logics of engagement" that reflect more interactive and participatory forms of audience behavior. Both frameworks emphasize a functional relationship between consumption and audience behavior. However, this logic becomes insufficient when faced with sustained engagement rooted in dissatisfaction, irony, or critique.

Such behavior points to a growing phenomenon that challenges U&G assumptions: hatewatching. Defined as the act of watching a film, television series, or other media primarily to critique or ridicule it, hatewatching reflects a complex relationship between audiences and entertainment in the digital age (Guha, 2023, p. 872). Rather than turning away from disliked content, audiences may repeatedly return to it, generating commentary, fostering community, and even amplifying its cultural visibility.

The rise of hatewatching as a phenomenon coincides with major shifts in the media landscape. Social media has transformed how audiences interact with entertainment texts, turning viewers into commentators, remixers, and co-creators (Jenkins, 2006, p. 20; Jenkins, 2018, p. 18). As Ang (2007, p. 21) argues, the "ironic viewing position" has become a dominant cultural stance, enabling viewers to distance themselves from melodramatic or low-quality content while still consuming and discussing it, i.e. giving it attention.

Meanwhile, this attention gets easily picked up by digital algorithms. Franck's adapted version (2019, p. 9) of the attention economy (Simon, 1972, p. 40-11), a system in which media success is determined by its ability to capture and sustain public focus, helps explain why even negative discourse can benefit media producers. In online ecosystems where engagement metrics drive visibility and profitability, every comment, parody, or critique adds value. Thus, even ridicule and critique may function as promotion. This algorithmic logic directly intersects with hatewatching, which capitalizes on attention through disapproval. As a mode of engagement that thrives on critique, irony, and parody, hatewatching plays a significant role in shaping contemporary viewing habits, particularly in the era of social media, where audience interaction is no longer solely driven by traditional marketing but also by user-generated discourse. Platforms

such as X, TikTok, and Reddit serve as amplifiers of audience criticism, creating a cycle in which ironic appreciation, parody, and negative commentary reinforce a film's cultural relevance (Guha, 2022, p. 883). Even highly critical discussions inadvertently contribute to a film's visibility, as algorithms prioritize content that generates interaction, regardless of sentiment (Franck, 2019, p. 9).

However, though the phenomenon of hatewatching seems to be rising, academic work on remains fragmented. Existing literature tends to isolate specific platforms, genres, or audience types. It also rarely interrogates the emotional contradictions involved; how viewers can simultaneously reject and enjoy content; how irony can coexist with emotional attachment; how criticism can drive longevity. Furthermore, while fan studies and participatory culture research have illuminated how online communities form around shared media texts (Jenkins, 2006, p. 20; Booth, 2015, p. 3), there has been little examination of how such communities might form around shared dislike. Notably, much of the existing research has focused on reality television, where hatewatching is often a built-in component of the viewing experience (Cohen et al., 2020, p. 145; Guha, 2022, p. 876; Gray, 2019, p. 34-39).

What happens then, when hatewatching emerges in response to narrative-driven franchises which were not designed to provoke ironic enjoyment? This question becomes particularly noteworthy in the case of the *After* franchise (Gage et al., 2019-2023), a five-part romantic drama adapted from Anna Todd's Wattpad Fanfiction. "I didn't like the first movie very much but watched this one anyway. It was worse than I expected" (Aerasinka, 2020). This user review, posted to the film-review platform IMDb, captures the paradoxical engagement that defines much of the discourse surrounding the *After* franchise.

The franchise chronicles the tumultuous relationship between Tessa Young (a studious, reserved college freshman) and Hardin Scott, an emotionally volatile, brooding figure who also happens to be the son of the university's board director. Beginning with *After* (Gage, 2019), the five-part series follows their on-again, off-again romance across the several sequels, each marked by betrayal, emotional manipulation, and melodramatic excess. While rooted in the sentimental conventions of romantic drama, the films have become frequent targets of ridicule. Yet despite receiving overwhelmingly negative reviews and having minimal promotional support, the franchise achieved notable commercial success. *After we collided* (Kumble, 2020), for instance, debuted at number three at the box office during its opening week (Gant, 2020). Collectively, the *After* franchise has grossed approximately $169 million USD worldwide, while the total production budget across all five films remains comparatively low at $70 million (Box Office Mojo, n.d.). These figures suggest that visibility and financial viability were not driven by critical acclaim or fan-driven admiration alone. Rather, the franchise highlights the potential of ironic or critical engagement to

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function as an unsolicited marketing tool.

This contradiction, disapproval and continued audience engagement, makes the *After* franchise a compelling case for understanding how negative reception sustains audience investment in narrative-driven franchises. As a commercially successful but ridiculed series with roots in online fan culture, *After* embodies the tensions that define hatewatching. Unlike reality television, which often invites hatewatching as part of its appeal (Guha, 2022, p.876), *After* was not explicitly constructed for ironic consumption. While its fanfiction origins provided a pre-existing audience, the A*fter* franchise became a site of ironic engagement, where its earnest romantic narrative is recontextualized within digital spaces marked by mockery, parody, and critical detachment. This dynamic positions *After* as a unique lens through which to examine how hatewatching operates beyond conventionally "cringe" genres, raising broader questions about how emotional contradiction, community performance, and algorithmic visibility contribute to the cultural longevity of media texts.

This study aims to contribute to the emerging field of hatewatching studies by analyzing how online communities engage with and reinforce hatewatching behaviors in discussions about the *After-* film series. While *After* serves as the empirical case, the study's broader objective is to theorize hatewatching as a mode of contemporary media engagement. Specifically, it explores the emotional, social, and discursive mechanisms through which audiences sustain attention to media texts they claim to dislike. Drawing on a qualitative thematic content analysis of 315 TikTok and Reddit comments, this study traces how user generated discourse enacts and sustains hatewatching practices across platforms. The research is guided by the following question:

"How do online communities engage with and reinforce hatewatching behaviors in discussions about the *After*-film series?"

The thesis unfolds as follows. Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical framework, drawing on affect theory, participatory culture, attention economy, and media engagement literature to situate hatewatching as a complex cultural practice. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach, explaining the use of grounded thematic content analysis and the rationale for platform selection (Reddit and TikTok). Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings, structured around four major forms of hatewatching behavior. Lastly, the final chapter reflects on the theoretical and societal implications of the study.

Scientific relevance

Understanding why people engage with media they claim to dislike challenges some long-held ideas in media theory. Traditional frameworks such as the Uses and Gratifications model (McQuail, 1983, p. 82-83) emphasize entertainment, escapism, and emotional release as central to audience motivation. While not a new phenomenon, hatewatching does complicate these prevailing theories. Its existence challenges scholars to revisit assumptions about why audiences engage with media. This study builds on existing work by conceptualizing hatewatching as a distinct and emotionally complex form of engagement that operates outside conventional fandom, yet still plays a critical role in sustaining a media object's visibility and cultural relevance.

This study contributes to several theoretical conversations within media and communication studies. It extends the work of Guha (2022), Gray (2019), and Cohen et al. (2020) by offering a grounded categorization of hatewatching behaviors rooted in qualitative analysis of user discourse. Rather than focusing solely on individual viewer psychology or textual analysis, it prioritizes user-generated commentary as the site of meaning-making, thereby incorporating a crucial bottom-up perspective often missing from media reception research.

Moreover, this study brings together theoretical strands (affect theory, the attention economy, and participatory culture) that are rarely integrated in hatewatching scholarship. This perspective on hatewatching offers a richer understanding of it, viewing it not only as a manifestation of ironic detachment but also as a type of emotional labor, a routine form of critique, and a way to engage performatively. By doing so, it helps refine current understandings of online viewership, genre interaction, and the blurred boundaries between fans, anti-fans, and passive audiences.

Importantly, this study also tackles the genre bias that is usually found in hatewatching research, which has mostly focused on reality TV. By focusing on a fictional, narrative-driven media franchise, one not explicitly designed to provoke ironic enjoyment, this study broadens the empirical scope of hatewatching studies.

Finally, the analysis contributes to digital marketing and platform studies by highlighting hatewatching as a form of unsolicited promotion. In an attention economy (Simon, 1972, p. 41-42; Franck, 2019, p. 9-14) where visibility is separated from reception, even ironic or negative engagement can drive a media object's longevity. Understanding this dynamic offers both theoretical and practical insights into how cultural visibility is constructed.

Societal relevance

Understanding hatewatching has important implications for cultural institutions, media producers, educators, and policymakers. Hatewatching exemplifies a paradox of digital engagement: when people critique or mock media content, it does not necessarily push it to the margins, it actually amplifies its presence in popular discussions. As Franck (2019, p. 10-12) notes, digital visibility today is measured through attention rather than approval. This means that all forms of engagement, whether critical or ironic, are valuable within the framework of platform algorithms.

As such, hatewatching is more than just a viewer habit, it serves as a crucial mechanism that supports the circulation and longevity of media contents. This makes it highly relevant to those working in digital media marketing, communications, and media regulation. For instance, Alves et al. (2016, p. 1033) emphasize that user interaction contributes to the consumptions of the targeted (media) products, and engagement rooted in critique or irony may be just as influential as positive fandom. Understanding the dynamics of hatewatching could therefore enhance audience analytics, promotional strategies, and platform policy, particularly as media producers increasingly use eWOM (electronic word of mouth) to create buzz.

Additionally, hatewatching raises important cultural and ethical questions. While this research does not directly evaluate the content of specific media portrayals, it recognizes that visibility achieved through ironic or critical engagement can still normalize problematic ideals, particularly when those portrayals reinforce dominant gender hierarchies or emotional manipulation. As Maas and Biomi (2020, p. 520) note, media representations can shape young viewers' expectations of relationships, agency, and identity. When content circulates drastically, even if it is mocked, its messages can be absorbed by audiences who may not understand irony or critique.

This understanding shows that hatewatching is more than just a cultural trend. It reveals how digital participation, humor, and emotions connect to larger social values and beliefs. Therefore, studying hatewatching contributes to a greater understanding of audience behavior and illuminates the cultural mechanisms through which visibility, taste and critique are negotiated in platform-driven environments.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To investigate how online communities engage with and reinforce hatewatching behaviors in discussions about the *After*-film series, this chapter draws on a range of theoretical perspectives that illuminate the social, emotional, and participatory dimensions of media engagement. Specifically, the framework integrates literature on six key concepts: hatewatching, the attention economy, participatory culture, fanfiction, logics of engagement and affect theory. Together, these interconnected areas of research provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding the complex motivations and dynamics behind ironic, critical, and emotionally ambivalent forms of audience engagement with the *After* franchise in digital spaces.

These frameworks are not isolated but rather interwoven in explaining the layered phenomenon of hatewatching. For instance, affect theory and logics of engagement elucidate the emotional and personal logics that draw audiences into content they claim to dislike (Ahmed, 2004, p. 1-4; Askwith, 2007, p. 102-116). Participatory culture and fanfiction scholarship examine how hatewatching becomes a shared, creative, and discursive activity (Jenkins, 2018, p. 17-23; Reißmann et al., 2017, p. 15), while the attention economy contextualizes how such engagements are sustained and monetized within platform dynamics (Franck, 2019, p. 18). Together, these perspectives trace how ironic or oppositional consumption operates across affective, social, and technological layers.

Hatewatching

The concept of hatewatching was introduced in media studies as a mode of engagement where audiences deliberately consume content they expect to dislike. Rather than disengaging from media that they find problematic, poorly made, or ideologically misaligned, hatewatchers continue to watch, critique, and discuss these texts, often amplifying their reach through digital platforms. Guha (2022, p. 873) explores this phenomenon in the context of Netflix's *Indian Matchmaking*, arguing that hatewatching is not purely oppositional but rather a complex form of audience interaction that can sustain the visibility and economic success of a media product. This challenges the traditional dichotomy between fandom and anti-fandom, as hatewatching allows for a simultaneous rejection and investment in media texts (Guha, 2022, p. 871).

To understand this phenomenon, it is important to lay the groundwork of anti-fandom and how this aligns with the act of hatewatching. Jonathan Gray's (2019, p. 34-39) work on anti-fandom does this by providing a valuable framework for understanding hatewatching as an engaged, rather than passive, form of media consumption. Like Guha (2022), Gray (2019, p. 32) disregards the contrast that traditional audience studies often portray between fans and non-fans. The simultaneous rejection and investment that Guha (2022, p. 871) mentions aligns with Gray's (2019,

p. 32) argument that anti-fans of a media text are just as invested in its cultural presence as fans. Hatewatching, in this sense, represents a performative mode of anti-fandom, where viewers continue consuming a text not despite their dislike but because of it (Gray, 2019, p. 27). Gray's concept of "disappointed anti-fandom" (p. 35) is particularly relevant to the *After* franchise, as many hatewatchers may have initially been intrigued by the series, either due to its Wattpad origins, its romantic drama, or its mainstream visibility, but later became disillusioned with its execution.

> "*We will likely see hopeful hatewatching only in cases in which the premise of a text was enticing, enough to get hopes up, yet ultimately in which the execution of the text is utterly disappointing to a viewer or viewers*"   (Gray, 2019, p. 35)

Rather than disengaging, these viewers sustain their involvement through ironic critique, parody, and social media discourse; behaviors that actively contribute to the film's ongoing visibility within digital culture. While this mirrors aspects of anti-fandom, it is important to distinguish between the two. As Gray (2019, p. 30) explains, anti-fandom is often defined by rejection and critique of a text or its creators, but it does not necessarily require the continued consumption of the media object. Hatewatching, by contrast, involves a sustained and deliberate engagement with disliked content, often driven by emotional contradiction, ironic enjoyment, or a desire to remain culturally literate (Guha, 2022, p. 871; Cohen et al., 2020, p. 145).

In this context, hatewatchers are not merely rejecting the After films, they are repeatedly returning to them, performing critique as a form of cultural participation. Gray (2019, pp. 34–39) outlines four distinct modes of hatewatching: (a) hopeful hatewatching, where viewers return with the expectation that the content might improve; (b) monitorial hatewatching, driven by a compulsion to stay informed; (c) cynical hatewatching, where negative expectations are embraced from the outset; and (d) visceral hatewatching, which involves seeking out emotional discomfort such as frustration or anger.

One defining characteristic of hatewatching is its performative nature on social media, where audiences share reactions, memes, and critiques in real-time. Platforms like TikTok and X amplify this phenomenon, as algorithms prioritize high-engagement content, ensuring that even negative discourse contributes to the franchise's continued visibility (Guha, 2022, p. 874; Franck, 2019, p. 14). Guha (2022, p. 874, 887) highlights how hatewatching is deeply entangled with the participatory nature of digital culture, particularly in the era of algorithm-driven content distribution. Social media platforms facilitate what Guha (2022) calls the "stickiness of cringe" (p. 875), where users repeatedly engage with media they find objectionable or absurd, fueling

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discourse cycles that extend the lifespan of media properties through continued online visibility. This aligns with broader discussions on the attention economy, which argue that media products thrive on any form of engagement, whether positive or negative, since both contribute to online virality (Franck, 2019, p. 14).

Cohen et al. (2020, p. 136- 140) affiliate with this as well, as their study on how hatewatching and character liking are correlated with each other also portrays the performative nature of hatewatching, particularly in the social media era where ironic engagement and public critique contribute to a film's online visibility. Their study on *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (Cohen et al., 2020, p. 145) found that the less viewers like a character, the more likely they are to engage in hatewatching behaviors. This supports Gray's (2019, p. 30) anti-fandom framework by illustrating how dislike does not necessarily lead to disengagement but rather fosters active critique and ironic appreciation. Other notable results of the two studies within Cohen et al.'s (2020) research were that 'enjoyment' did not vary as a function of hatewatching, contrasting the definition of hatewatching, which is "the act of scrutinising or mocking a program for the sake of enjoyment" (p. 145). However, according to Cohen et al. (2020, p. 145), this does not mean that people don not derive pleasure from the act, just that watching a show for its merits or its flaws does not make a difference. A study by Tamir et al. (2017) supports this perspective, stating, "Our investigation suggests that people are happier when they experience emotions they desire, regardless of whether those emotions are pleasant or unpleasant" (p. 1457).

While Guha's (2022) and Cohen et al.'s (2020) work provides valuable insights into hatewatching in reality-television, there remains a critical gap in understanding how this phenomenon functions in film franchises with pre-existing fan bases. Hatewatching in reality-TV is often tied to its inherently unscripted and sensational nature, which invites ironic and oppositional readings. In contrast, film franchises like *After* rely on long-term audience investment, making the sustained engagement of disappointed viewers a particularly interesting case. Unlike reality television, where each season may introduce new content and narratives, film sequels require audiences to return despite previous dissatisfaction.

To address this distinction, it is useful to expand the theoretical lens through which hatewatching is understood. Ien Ang's (2007) conceptualization of the "ironic viewing position" (p. 21) provides a useful framework here. Ang (2007) describes this position as "a socially and culturally powerful stance; one that pokes fun at, and consequently neutralizes, the melodramatic imagination" (p. 21). This aligns closely with hatewatching, where audiences engage with media through irony and detached amusement. Applying this framework, hatewatching can be seen not only as an act of critique but also as a form of negotiated consumption where audiences derive entertainment from subverting or ridiculing media texts.

Recent findings by Obenza et al. (2025, p. 4) support this interpretation by demonstrating how Gen Z and Millennials frequently use digital symbols and modern vocabulary, such as emojis and gibberish in capitals, not to express literal sentiment but to signal irony or downplayed critique. These cues are crucial in online contexts such as TikTok and Reddit, where ironic viewing is not directly stated but instead communicated visually or symbolically. Hatewatching, therefore, functions as a contemporary manifestation of ironic viewing, where audiences perform their discontent in highly visible ways, often reinforcing engagement rather than diminishing it. This aligns with Cohen et al.'s (2020, p. 140-144) findings, as hatewatching is not necessarily linked to enjoyment but is often driven by critical engagement and irony.

To further understand how audiences justify such contradictory engagement, hatewatching can also be interpreted through the lens of moral disengagement (Moore, 2015, p. 199). Moral disengagement refers to the cognitive mechanisms that allow individuals to separate their moral standards from their behaviors, thereby justifying actions they might otherwise find objectionable (Moore, 2015, p. 199). In the context of hatewatching, audiences rationalize their continued engagement with media they claim to dislike by framing it as ironic enjoyment or cultural critique (Ang, 2007, p. 21; Cohen et al., 2020, p. 145; Moore, 2015, p. 199; Guha, 2022, p. 871).

However, while much of the existing literature on hatewatching and anti-fandom focuses on irony, emotional ambivalence, and affective contradiction (Guha, 2022, p. 871; Gray, 2019, p. 34-39), this study also recognizes the importance of accounting for more straightforward, non-ironic expressions of disapproval. Jonathan Gray (2003, p. 70) introduces the concept of anti-fans as individuals who do not merely dislike a media text but actively engage with it in critical ways:

"This is the realm not necessarily of those who are against fandom per se, but of those who strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel. Fan studies have taken us to one end of a spectrum of involvement with a text, but we should also look at the other end to those individuals spinning around a text in its electron cloud, variously bothered, insulted or otherwise assaulted by its presence" (Gray, 2003, p. 70).

These anti-fans represent a form of genuine critique, a mode of audience engagement that is distinct from hatewatching in its lack of ironic detachment or performativity. Therefore, this study will explore how ironic engagement functions in online discussions surrounding the *After*-film series, and what implications this has for marketing and audience behavior in the digital age.

Attention Economy

Understanding hatewatching and its implications requires engaging with the concept of the attention economy (Simon, 1971). Originally coined by cognitive psychologist and economist Herbert A. Simon (1971, p. 40-41), the term highlights that attention, not information, is the

scarcest resource in the digital age.

As Simon (1971, p. 40–41) observed, "a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention," pointing to the challenge of capturing and sustaining focus in an oversaturated media environment. His insight laid the foundation for understanding how attention functions as currency in digital ecosystems, especially as audience behaviors become increasingly fragmented and reactive.

Franck (2019) extends Simon's work into the field of modern media studies. Audience attention has become one of the most valuable commodities in the digital age, shaping the way content is produced, distributed, and consumed. Franck's (2019, p. 9) reinterpretation of the attention economy is that it is a system in which media success is determined not solely by content quality but by its ability to capture and sustain public focus. In this model, engagement, whether positive or negative, translates into economic value, as digital platforms and streaming services prioritize content that generates high levels of interaction. Applying the attention economy to the *After* franchise helps explain why negative buzz surrounding the films does not deter viewership but instead could contribute to their commercial success.

The attention economy provides a framework for understanding *After*'s paradox: engagement itself is the currency of success, regardless of sentiment. Social media platforms like X and TikTok amplify this process, as algorithms favor content that generates discussion, whether through praise or critique (Franck, 2019, p. 14). Hatewatching fuels this engagement cycle as audiences share ironic reviews, memes, and reaction videos, ensuring the franchise remains a topic of conversation. A striking example of this dynamic can be seen in Forster's (2004; as cited in Pyo, 2024, p. 777) study on *Survivor*, where heightened audience hatred actively sustained the show's ratings. Viewers deliberately tuned in to critique and mock the series, and this negative attention ultimately contributed to its popularization and the extension of its season. Similarly, in the case of *After*, anti-fan disgust may not hinder its visibility but rather serve as a mechanism of amplification.

Furthermore, the commodification of attention in the digital age suggests that hatewatching may function as an unintentional marketing tool. Streaming services and film studios increasingly rely on audience engagement metrics to determine content value, with high interaction rates influencing decisions on sequels, licensing deals, and promotional strategies (Rubin et al, 2022, p. 87–89). If a film generates significant online discussion, regardless of whether it is praise or criticism, it remains economically viable within the attention economy model. For example, Guha (2022) highlights how marketing campaigns can deliberately incite "cringe" as a strategy, noting how *Indian Matchmaking* was once tagged by Netflix, within its platform, under "cringe binge" (p. 884). The show's genre identity and exaggerated emotional tone contributed to its "viscerality," making it simultaneously binge-worthy and "unwatchable" (Guha, 2022, p. 884).

This study draws from the attention economy (Simon, 1972, p. 41-42; Franck, 2019, p. 9-10) to explain that this visibility is not in spite of ridicule but precisely because of it. Viewers who hatewatch the series amplify its digital footprint by contributing to cycles of engagement. They rewatch, react, and repost, feeding algorithmic processes that value attention over sentiment. In doing so, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how hatewatching operates within the broader logic of digital capitalism. It highlights that attention is not neutral, but economically and culturally valuable. Hatewatching, once dismissed as fringe behavior, emerges here as a key dynamic in sustaining the life cycle of contested media texts.

Participatory culture

The concept of participatory culture, as developed by Jenkins (2006, p. 20; 2018, p. 18), refers to the shift from passive media consumption to active, networked participation. In this media environment, audiences contribute to meaning-making through commentary, remixing, co-watching, and discourse production. Rather than simply absorbing content, users co-construct its relevance by circulating it within their communities and platforms. Jenkins (2018, p. 18) describes these audiences as "networked publics" who shape cultural value through engagement, transforming media interaction into a participatory process.

While Jenkins' (2006; 2018) framework does not directly address hatewatching, it provides a useful lens for understanding how negative or ironic engagement still constitutes participation. This interpretive move is central to this study: hatewatchers are not excluded from participatory culture but represent a distinct modality within it. Their engagement often takes the form of critique, parody, and affective contradiction, rather than celebration. Though this form of engagement may appear oppositional, it nonetheless reinforces the content's circulation and relevance.

To understand how hatewatching contributes to a franchise's cultural life, it is helpful to also consider frameworks of audience co-creation. While distinct from general participation, brand co-creation, as outlined by Ind et al. (2013, p. 21), highlights how consumers influence the cultural and symbolic value of a product. In this sense, hatewatchers affect how *After* is perceived and discussed through commentary, memes and self-made videos. Their labor, even when critical, becomes part of the media object's evolving identity. However, this form of participation differs from celebratory fandom, as it often seeks to interrogate or ridicule the franchise rather than affirm it.

This convergence of audience activity and media visibility also intersects with affective economics, a concept Jenkins (2006, p. 20) ties to participatory culture. He argues that highly engaged, socially networked audiences are valuable not for their approval, but for their involvement (Jenkins, 2006, p. 20). Hatewatchers fit this model: they may dislike the content, but they are nonetheless emotionally and socially invested in its circulation. Their ironic detachment,

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expressed through memes or criticism, becomes part of the franchise's broader discursive economy. In the case of *After*, hatewatchers amplify their sentiments across social media platforms, effectively extending the series' reach beyond what traditional marketing could achieve.

This dynamic participation challenges the traditional industry notion that creators alone control the narrative and reception of a film or series. Ind et al. (2013) posit that participation reshapes the relationship between creators and viewers, allowing audiences to become "active and equal partners" (p. 21) in shaping the narrative landscape. Hatewatching further exemplifies this partnership, as viewers leverage their critical responses to influence discussions and perceptions of the series. Their creative expression, whether through memes, reviews, or social media commentary, contributes to the series' identity and sustained visibility. As Fuschillo (2020, p. 356) argues, anti-fans themselves may demonstrate a form of *fandom activism*, using their consumption-related skills and digital competencies to make a cultural impact. Hatewatchers of *After* not only voice critique but also participate in shaping how the franchise is received, repurposed, and remembered, making them central players in its cultural afterlife.

Moreover, Gray's (2019, as cited in Harman & Jones, 2013, p. 955) observation that fandom and anti-fandom exist on a Mobius strip, where many fan and anti-fan behaviors resemble each other, reinforces the idea that hatewatchers are deeply embedded in participatory culture. These individuals may use the same discursive tools, platforms, and community spaces as fans, thereby blurring the boundaries between devotion and disdain. In this sense, Bury's (2017) emphasis on the importance of "specific social and cultural interactions, institutions and communities" (p. 124) formed through fan subcultures applies equally to hatewatchers of *After*, who form active online communities bonded by mutual critique, irony, and emotional engagement.

This dynamic also ties closely to the attention economy (Simon, 1972, p. 40-41; Franck, 2019, p. 14; Guha, 2022, p. 887), where visibility is the primary currency, and all engagement, whether positive or negative, feeds into a system of platform monetization. Hatewatchers contribute to the franchise's digital endurance not by promoting it, but by ensuring its continued relevance through repetition. As Miller and Hogg (2023, p. 4) argue, the audience becomes a "commodity," not through their viewing alone, but by being measured, packaged, and sold to advertisers. The idea of a "free lunch" (Miller & Hogg, 2023, p. 4) applies directly here: in exchange for receiving media content at no monetary cost, *After*-viewers, hatewatchers included, perform informal labor by keeping the content circulating through their critical engagement. In doing so, they become *prosumers*, simultaneously producing and consuming content (Miller & Hogg, 2023, p. 4).

Finally, the participatory practices surrounding *After* also resonate with Dean's (2005) idea of "communicative capitalism" (p. 54), where the digital public sphere is shaped less by democratic

ideals and more by market logic. Hatewatching, therefore, is not just an expression of cultural critique but a *productive act* within the broader machinery of digital capitalism, enabling both fans and anti-fans to generate cultural and economic value.

By clarifying these theoretical positions, this study positions hatewatching as a highly active and discursively complex mode of participation. While not motivated by fandom in the traditional sense, hatewatchers perform interpretive labor, emotional investment, and content recirculation, all hallmarks of participatory culture. Their activity contributes to the cultural and economic life of the After franchise, underscoring how negative engagement, far from being marginal, is central to understanding how visibility and value are produced in the current media landscape.

Fanfiction

Fanfiction refers to user-generated stories based on existing characters or universes (Reißmann et al., 2017, p. 15) and it plays a crucial role in understanding how audiences actively engage with media texts. Scholars have examined fanfiction as both a creative and critical practice, one that enables fans to build upon, transform, and even challenge the canon of a given work. As Pugh (2005, p. 25–27) explains, fanfiction communities offer readers a way to critically engage with source material by rewriting or expanding narratives to reflect their own perspectives and values. Reißmann et al. (2017, p. 15) similarly describe fanfiction as a form of "acting on media," where fans create their own communicative and material spaces for stories that may critique or extend the original. This practice questions conventional ideas of authorship and ownership, framing fandom as a discursive arena for both expression and resistance (Reißmann et al., 2017, p. 15).

This framework is especially relevant to the case of *After*, which originated as a self-published One Direction fanfiction on Wattpad (Castillo, 2017). Its transition into a commercially successful film franchise exemplifies how participatory culture (Jenkins, 2018, p. 18) allows audiences to reshape and recontextualize narratives. The fan roots of *After* suggest that its audience is not simply passively consuming, but deeply engaged; emotionally, creatively, and critically. As Meyer and Tucker (2007) argue, fandom is never static: it evolves in dialogue with texts and institutions, always shifting "in relation to the ever-changing balance of power." (p. 105).

Such deep engagement often manifests as both devotion and critique. Disappointed audiences who feel alienated by the films' portrayal of characters or narrative arcs may return to fanfiction as a corrective tool, rewriting problematic elements or reimagining character dynamics. This intersection of critique and creation embodies Jenkins' (1992, as cited in Meyer and Tucker, 2007, p. 103) concept of textual poaching, and aligns with Gray's (2019, as cited in Harman & Jones, 2013, p. 955) Mobius strip of fandom and anti-fandom, in which the lines between admiration and rejection blur. Fanfiction becomes a way to reclaim narrative agency through affective and critical engagement.

This is particularly relevant for *After*, where hatewatching and fanfiction intersect: audiences dissatisfied with the films' portrayals may use fanfiction as a corrective tool, rewriting problematic aspects or reimagining character dynamics. In this way, the fan practices around *After* serve as both affective engagement and a method of reclaiming narrative agency. This participatory dynamic is reinforced by what Nguyen et al. (2023, p. 3-4) describe as parasocial relationships with fictional characters (PSR-Cs), which can be deeply emotional, even if one-sided. Fans may form these attachments through romantic attraction, "identification, or self-expansion" and often maintain them beyond their interaction with the original text (Nguyen et al., 2023, p. 3–4).

Fanfiction also embodies collaborative creativity. Reißmann et al. (2017) argue that writing in fan communities is not only individual but "radically distributed," where "cognition is based on networked relations and processes involving various (human) actors as well as materialities and technologies" (p. 20). Practices like beta-reading, meta-commentary, and group planning reflect this collective mode of authorship. One fan cited in their study reflects, "While writing stories, you are completely free" (p. 20), while another states that weak character arcs or plot holes offer entry points to creatively reimagine narratives (p. 20). This is particularly relevant for *After*, which critics often label as melodramatic or inconsistent, making it an ideal candidate for such fan-driven reworking.

In their study, Nguyen et al. (2023, p. 3-9) also emphasize how fans often engage in character dynamics through fan-generated behaviors like shipping, kinning, and self-inserting into narratives. These practices illustrate the emotional intensity and self-identification that characterize contemporary parasocial engagement. As they explain, "identification with characters is based on personality... or through a desire to be like a character" (Nguyen et al., 2023, p. 2), reflecting both authentic and aspirational forms of engagement. The concept of "kinning," (Nguyen et al., 2023, p. 9) in particular, where fans identify as a character, demonstrates how fanfiction becomes a platform not just for narrative exploration but for personal identity construction.

After's trajectory from fanfiction to box-office success also mirrors broader trends in contemporary media culture. Increasingly, platforms and studios look to popular fan works as indicators of market potential. As Meyer and Tucker (2007, p. 107) point out, this trend reflects a media environment where the boundaries between production and consumption are blurred. Fan contributions, whether celebratory, corrective, or ironic, now feed back into the content economy, shaping what is adapted and how it circulates.

Ultimately, the persistence of After's fandom, despite widespread critique, reflects the complex entanglement of emotional investment, narrative dissatisfaction, and community practice. Whether expressed through hatewatching, parody, or fanfiction, these forms of engagement

illustrate how audience attachment is maintained not just through admiration, but also through critique, reclamation, and reinvention.

Affect Theory

As Brewer and Lichtenstein (1982, p. 482) explain, affect refers to the "degree" of emotion that shapes how audiences engage with stories, framing their emotional responses as essential to narrative reception. In the case of *After*, this understanding helps explain why viewers who find the franchise problematic or disappointing continue to engage with it, not despite their negative feelings, but because of them. Affect theory (Brewer and Lichtenstein, 1982, p. 482; Ahmed, 2004, p. 1-4) provides a valuable framework for analyzing hatewatching as an emotionally charged and socially mediated practice, particularly within the online discourse surrounding the After-film series. Rather than viewing emotions as individual or private, affect theorists argue that they are relational, performative, and circulate across bodies, texts, and communities.

Sara Ahmed (2004, p. 1-4) builds on this by arguing that emotions do things: they create attachments, form collectives, and shape how cultural objects acquire meaning. Emotions, she asserts, "stick" to objects and figures, accumulating affective value through repetition (Ahmed, 2004, p. 11). Within hatewatching communities, *After* becomes an emotionally sticky object, its melodramatic storytelling, controversial romantic tropes, and cringe-worthy moments could generate affective responses that are not only intense but shared across social media platforms. These shared reactions are circulated and amplified, forming a collective affective environment that sustains attention and engagement with the franchise.

This aligns with Gray's (2019) concept of "disappointed anti-fandom" (p. 30), in which viewers who initially held high expectations for a media text become disillusioned yet remain emotionally invested. Affect theory helps to articulate this disillusionment not merely as a rational critique, but as a shared emotional dissonance that is validated through communal discourse. Viewers do not simply consume *After* in isolation; they engage with it socially through memes, ironic reviews, and performative reactions that reproduce the very attention the film seemingly does not deserve. These practices echo Guha's (2022, p. 875) concept of the stickiness of cringe, where users remain hooked through negative affect, contributing to the online virality and extended digital lifespan of media products.

Affect theory also complements Jenkins' (2018, p. 18) concept of participatory culture by providing insight into why audiences choose to engage so actively with texts they claim to dislike. Jenkins (2006, p.20) highlights that ideal consumers in the era of affective economics are emotionally engaged and socially networked, traits that define hatewatchers of *After*.

Their continued interaction with the franchise, even though mockery, contributes to its

visibility and relevance, thereby feeding into the attention economy (Franck, 2019, p. 14). In this way, affect is not only a driving force of engagement but also a commodifiable asset, exploited by streaming platforms and algorithms that reward high interaction, regardless of sentiment.

Finally, the persistence of hatewatching behaviors can also be analyzed through the lens of moral disengagement. Moore (2015, p. 199) defines this as the process by which individuals rationalize behavior that contradicts their moral or critical stance. In the context of After, audiences may justify their engagement by framing it as ironic enjoyment, cultural critique, or social commentary. However, as Ahmed (2004, p. 15) argues, emotional investment is not simply cognitive, rather, it is embodied and performed. Hatewatchers return to *After* not only because of what they think about it, but because of how it makes them feel, and how those feelings are validated within their communities.

In sum, affect theory is essential to understanding how online communities engage with and reinforce hatewatching behaviors in discussions about the *After* franchise. These communities do not merely tolerate emotional dissonance. They thrive on it, transforming negative affect into a social and participatory experience. Hatewatching, then, is not a contradiction, but a productive mode of engagement that is emotionally driven, socially reinforced, and economically valuable.

Logics of Engagement

While much of this framework focuses on collective, emotional, and participatory engagement, Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory (McQuail, 1983, p. 82-83) contributes a valuable perspective on the individual motivations that drive media interaction, including hatewatching. Askwith (2007, p. 102) builds on this theory by outlining five "logics of engagement": entertainment, social connection, mastery, immersion, and identification. These logics, while traditionally applied to fan engagement, are equally applicable to critical or ironic forms of media consumption.

In this way, the logics of engagement (Askwith, 2007, p. 102-116) complements affect theory and participatory culture by providing a structured lens through which to interpret audience intent, bridging internal affective drivers with externally visible online discourse. Incorporating logics of engagement (Askwith, 2007, p. 102-116) into this study not only adds nuance to the conceptualization of hate-watching but also informs the deductive coding framework that follows, ensuring that thematic categories are grounded in established audience theory.

This study draws on six interrelated concepts (hatewatching, participatory culture, fanfiction, affect theory, and the attention economy) to develop a multidimensional understanding of how online communities engage with and reinforce hatewatching behaviors in discussions about the *After* film series.

Building on Gray's (2019, p. 32) anti-fandom framework and Guha's (2022, p. 871) insights on digital cringe and ironic performance, hatewatching is conceptualized as a socially embedded form of sustained engagement rooted in critique, parody, and ironic investment. This aligns with Ang's (2007, p. 21) concept of the "ironic viewing position," in which audiences manage their discontent through detachment and humor, allowing continued interaction with disliked texts.

Participatory culture (Jenkins, 2018, p. 23) helps explain how these behaviors become collective. As users engage through memes, edits, and social media commentary, they participate in what Jenkins (1992, as cited in Meyer and Tucker, 2007, p. 103) calls "textual poaching," repurposing content through critique and humor. These acts unfold within networked communities, transforming negative sentiment into shared discourse and meaning-making.

Affect theory (Ahmed, 2004, p. 1-4; Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982, p. 482) further deepens this analysis by showing how emotions like frustration, irony, and cringe circulate through these communities. Rather than being private responses, such affects are discursively produced and socially reinforced, which is essential for sustaining ironic engagement.

This recurring interaction is economically relevant in the attention economy (Simon, 1971, p. 40-41; Franck, 2019, p. 14), where engagement, regardless of sentiment, generates visibility and commercial value. As Franck (2019, p. 9) argues, content thrives not because it is admired but because it is discussed. In this context, even negative interactions, such as hatewatching, can amplify a franchise's reach. Moral disengagement (Moore, 2015, p. 199) provides a psychological framework for this: audiences justify watching content they critique by framing it as ironic entertainment or cultural commentary.

Fanfiction adds another dimension. As Pugh (2005, p. 25–27) and Reißmann et al. (2017, p. 15) show, fanfiction offers fans creative agency to rewrite, expand, or subvert canonical texts. In the case of After, this practice can act as a form of affective reclamation, particularly for those disappointed in the films' adaptation. This intersects with parasocial relationships (Nguyen et al., 2023, p. 3–9), which explain how viewers may maintain emotional attachments to characters despite critical distance; through identification, romantic fantasy, or personal investment.

Taken together, these theories position hatewatching as a complex spectrum of engagement. While many existing studies (Guha, 2022, p. 871-876; Gray, 2019, p. 34-39) emphasize irony and critique, this study also considers more passive or circumstantial behaviors, such as algorithmic drift, boredom, or habit. As Guha (2022, p. 21) notes, the "stickiness of cringe" can reflect not just ironic mastery but emotional passivity or media fatigue.

3. METHOD

Building on the theoretical foundations outlined in the previous chapter, this study adopted a qualitative approach to examine how online communities perform, negotiate, and reinforce hate-watching behaviors surrounding the *After*-film series (Gage et al., 2019-2023). It investigates how online communities actively engage with and contribute to the reinforcement of hatewatching through social media discourse.

To do this, this study employed a qualitative thematic content analysis. Qualitative research seeks to uncover underlying patterns or meanings through the interpretation of observations, particularly in social and cultural contexts (Babbie, 2017, p. 479-480). Schreier (2013, p. 171) emphasizes that qualitative approaches allow researchers to explore complex layers of meaning within communication, rather than relying solely on numerical representation, enabling deeper engagement with how meaning is created in context. This approach was selected to analyze user discourse surrounding the *After* franchise across TikTok and Reddit, where media engagement is shaped by subtle emotional registers, discursive irony and performative interaction (Medvedev et al., 2019, p. 12; Castellví-Lloveras, 2023, p. 111; Lin et al., 2023, p.1552). Rather than measuring attitudes or behaviors quantitatively, this method enables a deeper exploration of how users articulate and frame their engagement with the franchise in everyday discourse.

Thematic content analysis, in particular, provided the flexibility needed to trace patterns across a large and varied dataset, while remaining open to the nuances of tone, contradiction, and affect. As Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 86-93), Schreier (2013, p. 171), and Elo and Kyngäs (2008, p. 109-111) have shown, thematic analysis is well-suited for studies aiming to identify and interpret repeated meanings, especially in contexts where users may not express their positions explicitly. This made the method particularly appropriate for studying a phenomenon like hatewatching, which often operates through ambiguity and cultural signaling rather than direct statements (Gray, 2019, p. 34-39; Guha, 2022, p. 872; Ang, 2007, p. 21).

This methodological choice is further supported by Sandelowski (1995, p. 373), who argues that effective qualitative analysis requires a balance between description and interpretation and cautions against segmenting text so heavily that context or expressive richness is lost. Following this guidance, the present study maintained a balance between detailed, close reading and systematic coding. Rather than flattening expressions into simplified categories, the analysis sought to preserve the contextual and rhetorical subtleties of user comments, ensuring that the meaning-making processes at play could be adequately interpreted.

Sample and Data Collection

To answer the research question, a thematic content analysis was conducted on user-generated comments and discussions on digital platforms related to the *After*-film series. These interactions consisted of comments collected from two different digital platforms: Reddit and TikTok. These platforms were selected based on their relevance to contemporary media discourse and their differing affordances for user interaction. Reddit offers in-depth textual commentary and collective debate (Medvedev et al., 2019, p. 12), while TikTok offers short-form, affect-driven expression that often relies on humor, irony and visual performance (Castellví-Lloveras, 2023, p. 111; Lin et al., 2023, p. 1552). Together, these platforms provide spaces for people to engage within hatewatching cultures.

A purposive sampling strategy was used (Acharya et al., 2023, p. 332) to assemble a dataset of 315 comments, sourced from 6 Reddit threads and 7 TikTok videos. Using this strategy meant selecting threads and videos that aligned with specific characteristics deemed relevant to the research question (Acharya et al., 2023, p. 332). These, general, characteristics included:

- Available (open-access accounts) and English spoken
- Addressing the *After* franchise with irony, critique and humor or with a review stance
- High volume of engagement (30+ comments)

Reddit content was collected from six threads: five film-specific discussions (one per installment) and one general thread addressing the franchise as a whole. These threads were found through searching for each installment and were located within the subreddits r/Movies and r/YoTroublemakers. These two subreddits provides spaces for general cinematic engagement, ironic commentary and communal mockery. These threads were not used for comparative analysis between films but collectively offered insight into how hatewatching discourse persisted across time, addressing the phenomenon of *disliking yet returning*. The general Reddit thread was added due to not reaching the required volume of comments (30) on *After We Fell* (the third installment), while also offering reflections on the franchise's ongoing cultural presence.

TikTok content was collected from one or two popular videos per film, using TikTok's "Most Liked" filter under relevant hashtags: #TheAfterMovie, #AfterWeCollided, #AfterWeFell, #AfterEverHappy, and #AfterEverything, resulting in 7 relevant TikTok videos. To ensure thematic relevance, additional keyword searches were used, including "Hardin Scott", "Tessa Young", "Bad", "Review", representing the main characters of the franchise and the tone of the videos. All selected videos were created by everyday users without significant followings or verified status, ensuring that the data reflected organic engagement rather than influencer-driven content. These filters

narrowed the dataset to videos with a high likelihood of attracting commentary consistent with hatewatching practices. An additional video covering the franchise as a whole was included based on high engagement and thematic richness.

A purposive sampling strategy (Acharya et al., 2023, p. 332) was applied to deliberately select comments that aligned with this study's objective, namely those that portrayed irony, emotional contradiction, critique, or evidence of continued engagement despite negative sentiment. As said, this strategy is a form of non-probability sampling, and it involves the deliberate selection of data units based on specific characteristics deemed relevant to the research question, rather than relying on randomization (Acharya et al., 2023, p. 332). This strategy allowed for in-depth analysis of behavior, such as contradiction and irony, that could be missed in a randomized approach. It enabled a focus on comments that are rich in thematic relevance. Following established approaches to audience discourse analysis in hatewatching and anti-fandom research (Guha, 2022; Gray, 2019; Cohen et al., 2020), the comments were selected based on communicative indicators such as contradiction, ironic detachment, or performative critique. However, comments that did not explicitly exhibit these indicators were also included when they contributed to the broader conversation. This allows the analysis to remain open-ended, facilitating the identification of what distinguishes hatewatching discourse from other forms of audience engagement. Further general comment requirements were:

- Publicly available, English-language comments
- Relevant to the *After* franchise; discussion of narrative quality, character dynamics, or audience expectations
- Evident emotional contradiction, ironic enjoyment, mockery, critique *or* part of the broader conversation
- Top 30 comments (likes, relevancy); reflecting the highest form of visibility

For TikTok, the top 30 comments, ranked by likes or replies, were collected for each installment, sourced from one or two videos, with the exception of an additional general post that was included due to its thematic richness. This resulted in a total of 175 TikTok comments. For Reddit, the same strategy was applied: from each thread, the 30 most upvoted and actively replied-to comments were extracted, with the addition of a sixth general thread, yielding a total of 150 Reddit comments (see table 1). This meant that the number of TikTok comments slightly exceeded those from Reddit, a strategic choice that reflects qualitative research priorities: relevance, saturation, and theoretical richness rather than statistical symmetry (Saunders et al., 2017, p. 1895). Across both platforms, a final manual screening ensured that the selected content aligned with the study's focus on hatewatching discourse, filtering out comments that reflected purely fan-based engagement or lacked thematic relevance. All comments were then organized into a structured table in Microsoft Word, which facilitated a clear and systematic approach to the initial phases of coding and analysis (see appendix B).

Table 1, data distribution; comments per installment per platform

	After 1	After 2	After 3	After 4	After 5	Franchise as a whole	Total
Amount of comments: Reddit	30	30	13	30	30	17	150
Amount of comments: TikTok	30	30	30	30	30	15	175

Operationalization

Key concepts were operationalized as seen in table, to help provide understanding of the RQ and analysis.

Table 2, Key Concepts Operationalization

Concept	Definition	Features
Hatewatching	Intentional viewing of content perceived as low-quality, frustrating, or objectionable, with engagement motivated by criticism, irony, or community participation.	Contradiction, continued engagement, ironic

		detachment, mocking language
Engagement	Forms of interactive participation with media texts on social platforms. (Jenkins, 2008; Askwith, 2007; Ang, 2007)	Likes, replies, comments, memes, parody, edits
Reinforcement	Sustained or increased visibility of content through online interaction. (Franck, 2019; Guha, 2022)	Sharing, commentary
Genuine critique	Sincere disapproval, with no ironic or community alignment, talking an anti-fan stance. Including this concept, despite its contrast to hatewatching, allows the analysis to better delineate the boundaries of ironic and affective engagement. (Gray, 2003)	Rejection, disappointment, negativity
Ironic viewing position	An audience stance of detached amusement that neutralizes the melodramatic excesses of a media text while still allowing emotional and cultural participation. (Ang, 2007)	Meme-like language, disclaimers, sarcasm, humor, contradiction
Participatory culture	A media environment where users are not passive consumers but active participants. (Jenkins, 2006; 2018)	Memes, parody, collective humor
Moral disengagement	Reframing or justifying problematic media engagement through irony, critique, or humor to resolve inner conflict. (Moore, 2015)	Excuses, self-awareness, reframing of actions
Attention economy	A model where visibility, engagement, and interaction are seen as the key currency in digital culture. (Simon, 1971; Franck, 2019)	Recognition of attention and visibility

Logics of Engagement	Different motivations for audience engagement beyond entertainment. (Askwith, 2007)	Loyalty, belonging, predictability, social interaction
Affect theory	Emotions "sticking" to objects or texts through repetition and collective discourse, gaining power by circulating socially. (Ahmed, 2004)	Emotional language, exaggeration
Fanfiction	User-generated stories based on existing characters or universes. (Reißmann et al., 2017; Pugh 2005)	Wattpad, Book vs. film

Data Analysis

This study employed a qualitative thematic content analysis, informed by grounded theory principles (Charmaz, 2012, p. 4-5) and aligned with the methodological guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 86-93) and Elo and Kyngäs (2008, p. 109-111). According to Elo & Kyngäs (2008), the primary aim of content analysis is "to attain a condensed and broad description of the phenomenon, and the outcome of the analysis is concepts or categories describing the phenomenon" (p. 108). This made it ideal for studying a behavior like hatewatching, which often resides in subtext, emotional tension, or contradiction, rather than in explicit statements. While grounded theory is typically inductive and data-driven (Charmaz, 2012, p. 3), this study employed a hybrid approach that also incorporated deductive elements. The research began with a theoretically informed understanding of hatewatching but allowed emergent themes to shape the final coding structure. This balance enabled conceptual rigor while preserving openness to unanticipated patterns.

Thematic content analysis was chosen for its effectiveness in interpreting patterns of meaning across large corpora of text, especially when addressing nuanced discourses like irony, contradiction, and affective ambivalence. Furthermore, thematic analysis, as Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 78) emphasize, offers flexibility and accessibility for interpreting both semantic and latent content, making it especially useful when participants (in this case, commenters) may not be consciously articulating their media practices.

As Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87–93) outline, thematic analysis involves six phases: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This process was adapted in dialogue with

grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2012, p. 4-5) and content analysis strategies from Elo and Kyngäs (2008, p. 109-111), who similarly advocate for a staged process involving preparation, organization, and reporting.

These overlapping structures provided both clarity and methodological coherence. To illustrate this, the iterative analysis process followed this recursive method:

1. Data familiarization: All comments were read multiple times (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87; Elo and Kyngäs, 2008, p. 109).
2. Open Coding: Descriptive codes were generated freely (e.g. "guilty pleasure", "fanfic origin"), based on Elo and Kyngäs' (2008, p. 109-111) three-phase coding process.
3. Axial coding: Related open codes were grouped into broader behavioral patterns (Charmaz, 2012, p. 12), based on Elo and Kyngäs' (2008, p. 109-111) three-phase coding process.
4. Selective coding: The final themes were refined and organized around six major behavioral patterns, based on Elo and Kyngäs' (2008, p. 109-111) three-phase coding process.
5. Theoretical Integration: Deductive reasoning was applied to position emergent themes within established frameworks as discussed in chapter 2. This phase ensured conceptual alignment while preserving sensitivity to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 110).

To demonstrate how grounded theory and thematic content analysis principles were applied in tandem, this section now walks through the analytical process in greater depth. The analysis began with a phase of deep familiarization, during which all comments were read and re-read to identify their tone and rhetorical strategies. This step, corresponding to Braun and Clarke's first phase (2006, p. 87) and Elo and Kyngäs' preparatory stage (2008, p. 109), was particularly important in identifying irony, sarcasm, and contradiction, which are frequent features of Gen Z digital discourse (Obenza et al., 2025, p. 4).

Following this, open coding was conducted. In line with Elo and Kyngäs' emphasis on unstructured initial coding to foster category emergence (2008, p. 109) and Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 88) phase 2, codes were generated freely from the material based on observable patterns. Examples of open codes included "guilty pleasure," "cringe appeal", "genre inversion", "fanfic fan", "sunk-cost" and "comfort viewing" (Appendix A). This inductive phase prioritized letting the data speak for itself, identifying affective or rhetorical patterns without forcing them into preconceived boxes. This phase prevented the pre-categorization of hatewatching, making it a phenomenon that was genuinely observed rather than sought out. These observations laid the groundwork for more abstract categorization in the next phase.

Axial coding followed as a way of organizing these open codes into broader conceptual categories based on shared features (Charmaz, 2012, p. 10-11). This step aligns with Elo and Kyngäs' organizational phase (2008, p. 110), in which codes are grouped under higher-order headings and subheadings based on conceptual similarity. For instance, comments about feeling compelled to finish the films despite disliking them, or returning out of habit or emotional attachment, were grouped under the axial code "emotional investment despite flaws" (Appendix A). This step allowed for the analytic shift from fragmented codes to broader behavioral patterns, consistent with the goal of thematic analysis to organize meaning across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89).

Drawing on both emergent data and initial theoretical sensitization, selective coding involved refining and naming key themes that captured the core mechanisms of hatewatching. According to Charmaz (2012), selective codes are used "to construct tentative categories in emerging theories" (p. 19). These selective codes included: "Hatewatching as Ironized Enjoyment," "Hatewatching as Reluctant Resistance," "Hatewatching as Community Bonding," "Hatewatching as a meta-Aware performance", "Genuine Critique" and "Resistance to Hatewatching." This refinement drew from the thematic review process described by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 91), wherein themes are assessed for internal coherence, thematic distinctiveness, and relevance to the research question. Some of these themes were anticipated through prior theoretical knowledge, for example, the role of irony in participatory cultures, while others emerged more organically and were then conceptually validated (Charmaz, 2012, p. 19; Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). Simultaneously, this phase matched Elo and Kyngäs' (2008, p. 111) final stage of abstraction and reporting, where findings are interpreted through both empirical categories and theoretical constructs. The selective coding process was first conducted in Excel to allow for thematic grouping and comparison, and subsequently transferred to Word for integration with analytical notes and final theme refinement.

In the final stage, theoretical integration, themes were systematically connected to existing theoretical frameworks. This phase established links between the data and concepts such as Ang's (2007) "ironic viewing position" (p. 21). It also contextualized findings within Franck's (2019, p. 9-10) adaptation of the attention economy (Simon, 1972, p. 41-42), analyzing how user behaviors might reinforce or disrupt media visibility. This process reflected a dual inductive-deductive logic. While early coding remained open to emergent meaning, later stages relied on theoretical frameworks from Guha (2022), Ang (2007), Gray (2019), and others. This hybrid model enabled openness to novel patterns without losing theoretical depth (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 110).

Reflexivity, reliability and ethics

As a researcher with prior familiarity with the *After* franchise, I maintained a reflexive stance throughout the research process to mitigate any personal bias that could arise from my prior familiarity with the material. Instead of striving for complete detachment, I recognized that my previous exposure could provide valuable interpretive insights, while also ensuring transparency in my interpretations.

To ensure methodological rigor and analytical reliability, several strategies were implemented. Peer debriefing was conducted at crucial stages to obtain external feedback, while negative case analysis was utilized to prevent overgeneralization of the findings. I also retained contradictory cases, such as *Genuine Critique* and *Resistance to Hatewatching* to capture the full spectrum of meaning-making, which enriched the analysis

Coding was conducted manually, using both Excel and Word. Open and axial coding were first carried out in Word for ease of sorting and clustering, while selective coding and integration were organized into structured tables in Excel. A codebook was maintained throughout the process (see Appendix B), and representative quotes were documented for each code to ensure traceability. This manual strategy, while labor-intensive, enabled close textual engagement and iterative analysis. Transparency was ensured through clear documentation and methodical structuring of codes and categories, following reliability guidelines outlined by Elo and Kyngäs (2008, p. 112). Furthermore, the detailed description of the analysis process and results section further enhances the trustworthiness of the study, as stated by Elo and Kyngäs (2008); "The analysis process and the results should be described in sufficient detail so that readers have a clear understanding of how the analysis was carried out and its strengths and motivations" (p. 112).

Ethical considerations were embedded throughout the study design, analysis, and reporting. In line with Yadlin-Segal et al. (2020, p. 170), ethical practice in digital research is not confined to data collection but must extend across the entire research process, especially when working with publicly available but user-generated content. All data analyzed consisted of publicly accessible comments; usernames were removed to preserve anonymity, and no personally identifiable information was retained. Care was taken to interpret content in its native context and to respect platform-specific norms, ensuring contextual integrity and minimizing potential harm. The analysis foregrounded the tone and discursive conventions of digital spaces like TikTok and Reddit without misrepresenting user intent or appropriating content out of context.

In sum, thematic content analysis, structured through Braun and Clarke's six-phase model (2006, p. 87-93) and supported by the systematic coding processes outlined by Elo and Kyngäs, (2008, p. 109-11) proved to be an effective method for interpreting the uncertain, ironic, and affectively complex nature of hatewatching behavior.

Its adaptability allowed for an openness to unexpected discursive patterns while firmly anchoring the analysis in theory. This combination ultimately facilitated a layered interpretation of how user discourse surrounding the *After* franchise circulates, evolves, and engages with the broader cultural economy of visibility, irony, and affective labor. Importantly, this dual approach did not compromise analytical rigor; the exploratory nature of the study encouraged flexibility and reflexivity without sacrificing structure. Instead, the process remained anchored in the three-phased model of content analysis defined by Elo and Kyngäs (2008, p. 109-111), encompassing preparation, organizing, and reporting. This structured approach enabled a transparent and iterative methodological process, bolstering the trustworthiness and transferability of the findings.

4. ANALYSIS

This chapter explores how TikTok and Reddit users engage with and reinforce hatewatching behaviors in discussions about the *After* franchise (Gage et al., 2019-2023), addressing the central research question posed in this study. Drawing on thematic content analysis informed by grounded theory principles, the following analysis identifies and interprets key patterns of audience engagement (e.g. hatewatching) as expressed through 315 Reddit and TikTok comments. These platforms, with contrasting affordances, allowed for a diverse, but focused, analysis.

During axial coding, six selective codes emerged which will serve as the key findings of the study and thus structure this chapter as the following:

1. Hatewatching as Ironized Enjoyment
2. Hatewatching as Reluctant Persistence
3. Hatewatching as Community Bonding
4. Hatewatching as Meta-Aware Performance
5. Genuine Critique
6. Resistance to Hatewatching

These selective codes, or categories, map audience engagement that both reflect and reject hatewatching behaviors, while simultaneously reinforcing and challenging the longevity of the franchise. This analysis provides a detailed explanation of each code, supported by quotes from the dataset (see appendix A and B) and related to theoretical anchors discussed in chapter 2.

Hatewatching as Ironized Enjoyment

The most prominent form of hatewatching identified in the dataset is what can be called hatewatching as *ironized enjoyment*. This behavior is defined by viewers who, rather than deriving pleasure from the film's intended narrative or emotional beats, find satisfaction in its perceived failure. This ironized enjoyment is a form of h*umorous engagement* in which users express contradiction through laughter and ironic detachment (Guha, 2022, p. 871-872; Ang, 2007, p. 21).

These findings align with and expand on prior scholarship. Guha (2022) conceptualizes the "stickiness of cringe" (p. 875) as a central mechanism through which audiences continue to engage with content they find absurd or objectionable. Similarly, Ang (2007) introduces the idea of the "ironic viewing position," (p. 21) where audiences adopt a stance of playful ridicule rather than sincere identification. However, while previous studies largely focus on reality television or media self-aware of its cringe-appeal, this research demonstrates that *ironized enjoyment* also applies to sentimental romantic dramas like *After*. This nuance broadens the empirical scope of hatewatching

literature by highlighting how users construct ironic pleasure even in genres not designed for it.

As mentioned, an early observation is that users did not simply criticize the films, they laughed at them with often exaggerated language, taking an ironic viewing position (Ang, 2007, p. 21; Obenza et al., 2025, p. 4). Users referred to the series as "so bad it's food", "a comedy", or a "guilty pleasure", positioning their enjoyment not as a contradiction to their dislike but rather as a result of it (Appendix B). This mode of participation aligns closely with what Guha (2022) calls the "stickiness of cringe" (p. 21).

It is important to note that while there are similarities, ironized enjoyment does not revolve around community belonging, nostalgia or closure. *Humorous engagement* emphasizes the ridiculousness of the films as *the reason for watching*. "NO CUZ ITS SO BAD BUT I HAVE TO WATCH IT" (Appendix B, TikTok 5), one user wrote, signaling both rejection and amused compulsion.

This mode of engagement is not primarily communal but performative. Users often dramatize their internal contradiction, as in "I didn't know if I wanted to cry or laugh 😭😭" (Appendix B, TikTok 2), signaling the tension between critique and entertainment. The viewing becomes a performance of critique disguised as laughter, relating back to what Ahmed (2004, p. 11) said about emotions "sticking" to objects and figures, and accumulating affective value through repetition. Meaning, it seems that viewers discover new levels of irony and humor every time they return to watch a sequel.

A striking example comes from a Reddit user who commented, "This is my favorite comedy franchise. I haven't missed a movie because the plot gets more and more insane with every next movie and it makes less and less sense. I can't stop laughing watching them" (Appendix B, Reddit 5). This response illustrates a pattern: users return to the franchise not in spite of its narrative incoherence, but because of it. The flawed storytelling becomes a source of *ironic enjoyment*.

This is what Gray (2019) might classify as "monitorial" or even "visceral" hatewatching (p. 34-39), where individuals consume content with the intention of feeling anger or frustration. This emotional cycle also supports the logics of engagement (Askwith, 2007, p. 102-116). Viewers may derive entertainment not from narrative satisfaction or character development, but from the sheer audacity of bad storytelling.

Cringe appeal, a recurring pattern, further underscores how failure fuels fascination. As one Reddit user remarked, "I want to see this movie and cringe so bad but it is not in the theatre yet" (Appendix B, Reddit 4). The anticipation of failure becomes a draw. Moreover, users often reframe the genre entirely, labeling the romantic drama as "comedy," a gesture that aligns with Jenkins' (1992, as cited in Meyer & Tucker, 2007, p. 103) concept of textual poaching, where audiences reshape narratives for their own purposes. Examples include: "PLEASE it was a comedyyy" (Appendix B, TikTok 2) and "peak comedy tbh" (Appendix B, TikTok G).

Such reinterpretation, again, exemplifies Ang's (2007, p. 21) ironic viewing position, whereby viewers deliberately detach from the intended emotional tone and repurpose the film as absurd entertainment.

This behavior is analytically significant. While previous studies have noted ironic re-reading of content, this research shows that users actively construct an alternative genre experience, turning a romantic melodrama into a site of comedic enjoyment. In doing so, they create a form of media literacy rooted in mockery and detachment, but also emotional labor. These repeated acts of viewing, reinterpreting, and sharing contribute to the franchise's visibility.

The implications of this pattern become clearer when considered in light of Simon's (1971, p. 40-41) theory of the attention economy, later adapted by Franck (2019, p. 9-10). In algorithmic culture, what matters is not whether viewers like something, but whether they interact with it. A comment such as "it's just so entertaining to watch horrible movies" (Appendix B, TikTok 4) underscores how ironic engagement sustains circulation. Laughter and criticism, when repeated and shared, become a form of unpaid promotional labor.

A notable nuance arises around the phrase "guilty pleasure." According to Cohen et al. (2020, p. 137), guilty pleasures differ from hatewatching in that they involve shame over enjoyment, whereas hatewatching lacks this emotional contradiction. However, in this study, the boundaries blur. Many users invoked "guilty pleasure" in ways that appeared ironic or performative. One comment read: "these are my guilty pleasure they're so bad but so good 😂" (Appendix B, After 5). Rather than expressing shame, the phrase operated as a rhetorical tool to justify their engagement.

This recontextualization supports Moore's (2015, p. 199) theory of moral disengagement, in which individuals downplay or reframe their behavior to avoid cognitive dissonance. By calling *After* a *guilty pleasure*, users signaled *awareness of its flaws* but neutralized the tension through humor. This act of reframing does not dismiss the criticism but does make it easier for people to accept.

Finally, this individualized mode of hatewatching contrasts with more community-oriented behaviors like fandom or anti-fandom (Gray, 2019, p. 34-39). Unlike *hatewatching as community bondi*ng, the laughter present in these comments is less social than performative. While there is some tagging or mutual referencing, the emphasis is on one's own experience of contradiction. As Dean (2005, p. 54) notes in her critique of communicative capitalism, even isolated affective responses become commodified when circulated online. Every sarcastic comment or ironic emoji contributes to the media object's longevity.

Thus, hatewatching as ironized enjoyment reveals a distinct pattern of affective ambivalence, genre inversion, and performative critique. While earlier literature has acknowledged irony and cringe as drivers of engagement (Guha, 2022, p. 875; Ang, 2007, p. 21),

this study adds depth by illustrating how they function in non-ironic genres and by showing how emotional contradiction becomes central to media circulation. Through humor, mockery, and repetition, users transform dislike into sustained interaction, demonstrating that in the digital attention economy (Simon, 1971, p. 40-41; Franck, 2019, p. 14), even ridicule can be a form of reinforcement.

Hatewatching as Reluctant Persistence

Beyond *ironic enjoyment*, another recurring mode of hatewatching observed in the Comments involves a more emotionally saturated and psychologically complex form of engagement: *reluctant persistence*. This form of hatewatching is characterized by sustained engagement with media despite openly expressed disdain or disappointment, representing feelings of irritation, investment and attachment. Drawing on Gray's (2019, p. 34-39) typology of hatewatching, this aligns closely with "monitorial" or "hopeful" hatewatching: watching out of a sense of obligation, habit, or persistent hope for improvement. This section explores how emotionally ambivalent forms of attachment, especially those rooted in origin awareness and narrative compulsion reinforce the longevity of the *After* franchise.

A prominent pattern is users articulating a sense of narrative entrapment, describing that, despite recognizing the film's flaws, they feel compelled to keep watching. One TikTok user states, "That's how it's felt since number 2. But I'm like we are in this deep. I can't stop now" (Appendix B, TikTok 5). Another echoes, "Once you battle through the first you need the closure 😂" (Appendix B, TikTok G). These statements suggest what I will call a *sunk-cost logic*, wherein the act of watching is no longer tied to content satisfaction but to the desire to complete an ongoing story. It signals a felt entrapment within the narrative arc of the series, a need to "see it through". The portrayed feeling of *compelled closure* reflects this logic, based on the fact that the media consumption is driven by narrative continuity rather than enjoyment. This contradicts traditional Uses and Gratifications (U&G) assumptions (McQuail, 1987, p. 82-83) and instead reflects Askwith's (2007, p. 102-116) logics; continued consumption based on emotional or psychological continuity.

Affect theory provides a useful framework for interpreting these dynamics. Ahmed (2004, p. 11) argues that emotions "stick" to objects not just through individual perception, but through social and temporal repetition. The *After* franchise, though widely criticized, continues to evoke strong emotional responses. Viewers return not only for plot progression, but for the emotional rituals embedded in the viewing experience: rituals of frustration, regret or resignation. One user encapsulates this as the following: "they're probably the worst movies ever but they the chokehold that they have on me is unmatched" (Appendix B, TikTok G). The use of "chokehold" signals an *emotional investment despite flaws*, where the long-term engagement has taken a life

on its own.

Another significant element of hatewatching as reluctant persistence is *origin awareness*, the recognition of *After*'s roots in Wattpad fanfiction. One user writes: "Having to watch it bc you used to spend all night reading the books" (Appendix B, TikTok 5). In this case, nostalgia and prior emotional investment act as anchors for current behavior. The films are watched not just as standalone texts but as cultural artifacts tied to earlier fan practices. This reaffirms Nguyen et al.'s (2023, p. 3-9) argument that parasocial connections, though often associated with characters, can extend to media properties or narratives, maintained through fantasy and memory. Another user states: "The books were great, the first movie was okay, and the rest is trash" (Appendix B, TikTok 5), illustrating how disappointment does not always mean disengagement. Instead, the fan identity (*fanfic fan*) developed in earlier phases of the franchise reinforce continued engagement, despite the expressed decline of the franchise.

These expressions of *franchise decline* is a recurring pattern in the comments, often remarked upon with exasperation and disbelief. Reddit users repeatedly expressed frustration with diminishing quality of the films: "I think as the franchise went on they just got worse and worse" (Appendix B, Reddit 1). Despite acknowledging this trajectory, users still express intent to watch the remaining films, encapsulating the contradiction that is *reluctant persistence*. As also expressed by a TikTok user: "After the first one the movies got worse but I will be watching the last one" (Appendix B, TikTok 3). These sentiments reflect Gray's (2019, p. 34-39) notion that hatewatching may arise not from disengagement, but from a desire to monitor the downfall of a once-beloved series.

Moore's (2015, p. 199) concept of moral disengagement is also relevant for developing understanding. Viewers rationalize their behavior by situating it within a discourse of compulsion or ritual. As one user puts it: "I'm literally binging After right now... the toxic chokehold this series has on me is insane" (Appendix B, TikTok 5). The phrase "toxic chokehold" suggests a lack of agency, even as the viewer chooses to engage. This language allows users to distance themselves from responsibility while participating in reinforcement. Discomfort is not resolved but reframed, transformed into a performative narrative that both explains and excuses the act of watching.

Importantly, the reinforcement of longevity occurs not in spite of user frustration, but because of it. The digital footprint of the *After* franchise is continually refreshed by users who critique, rewatch, and comment. The concept of the attention economy, originally coined by Simon (1971, p. 40-41), suggests that in a world of information overload, attention becomes a scarce and valuable resource. Building on this idea, Franck (2019, p. 9-10) emphasizes how online visibility, rather than sentiment, is the core currency in digital environments. In this context, even negative engagement, when made visible and repeated, can sustain a media object's relevance. Viewers watch out of habit, tweet or comment about their regret, and by doing so still contribute

to its algorithmic circulation. Their activity keeps the franchise embedded in platform economies. As one TikTok user summarized, the franchise is "Just so addicting 🤢" (Appendix B, TikTok 5).

This mode of engagement, rooted in emotional fatigue, nostalgic loyalty, and narrative passivity, differs sharply from *community bonding* or *ironic enjoyment*. Where communal watching centers on shared jokes, and meta-awareness on performed detachment, *reluctant persistence* is more private, compulsive, and often regretful. It is shaped less by humor and more by ritual, less by social participation and more by unresolved investment. *Reluctant persistence* reveals how negative engagement does not necessarily lead to abandonment. Instead, it shows how emotional history, *sunk-cost logic*, and narrative continuity can sustain viewer investment. It is precisely this emotional complexity that helps explain the *After* franchise's cultural endurance.

Hatewatching as Community Bonding

While much of hatewatching is often conceptualized as a solitary or internalized practice of ironic media consumption (Guha, 2022, p. 872; Cohen et al., 2020, p. 145), this study suggests that it also thrives as a fundamentally social phenomenon. Across both Reddit and TikTok, users routinely engage with the franchise not in isolation, but in the context of communal discourse marked by humor, irony, and ritualized mockery. In this sense, hatewatching operates as a form of participatory affective labor, a shared cultural practice that not only reflects disapproval but also reinforces communal identity and engagement. This section explores how hatewatching functions as a participatory cultural practice, wherein ridicule and exaggeration foster group bonding and reinforce digital visibility. Drawing on Jenkins' (2018, p. 18) theory of participatory culture, Ahmed's (2004, p. 1-4) concept of affective circulation, and Dean's (2005, p. 54) notion of communicative capitalism, it becomes evident that mockery is not simply a reaction, but a socially embedded mechanism that sustains engagement.

The most consistent pattern observed was *shared ironized suffering*, a performative, collective response to enduring media perceived as flawed but culturally sticky. On TikTok, users frequently tagged others to coordinate *ironic viewings*: "@Riah <3 @bryn @willa when we watching ladies," (Appendix B, TikTok 5), a comment that shifts the meaning of watching from solitary critique to social ritual. Similarly, another user tags a friend: "@Paris Keogh-Williams I just feel obliged." (Appendix B, TikTok 4). These forms of tagging are not just calls to action, they are gestures of mutual recognition, signifying participation in an ongoing cultural, or inside, joke. As Jenkins (2006, p. 20) argues, participatory culture thrives on shared meanings and rituals, and here, hatewatching becomes a site for playful, ironic belonging.

On Reddit, this communal sensibility is often verbalized through group humor and *collective roasting*. A Reddit comment reads: "The whole storyline is just them fighting and then

getting back together over and over again," to which another responds: "And I eat it up every time" (Appendix B, Reddit G). While this exchange superficially appears as critique, it functions more as a call-and-response format of shared amusement. The repetition of flawed storytelling becomes a reliable source of mockery, and mockery itself becomes the medium of social engagement.

Memes and exaggerated expressions of dismay are central to this process. TikTok is particularly suited for this kind of visual-discursive bonding, offering affordances that allow users to turn cringe-worthy scenes into viral comedic content. As Guha (2022, p. 875) notes, "cringe culture" becomes socially sticky in digital spaces because it lends itself to both ridicule and repetition. Comments like "I'm currently watching it and dying of laughter because she dropped her champagne glass and it was all in slow motion lmao" (Appendix B, Reddit 2) exemplify the performative exaggeration typical of meme-based humor. Users co-create these moments with meme language and exaggerated typographic expression: "One of the funniest scenes ever BDJSJRJWK," (Appendix B, TikTok 2). This type of expression, with gibberish and capital letters, signals emotional overload through humor. As Obenza et al. (2025, p. 4) point out, such digital vernacular forms part of Gen Z's ironic communication repertoire, where affective intensity is signaled rather than plainly stated.

This bonding is further enacted through exaggerated speculation and parody. One user joked, "Imagine if the ambulance just stopped randomly while he was running at that speed and just splats against the back door🤣🏃," prompting another to respond, "LMFAOOO OMG I WAS THINKING THE SAMEE THING" (Appendix B, TikTok 2). These exchanges reflect more than shared amusement, they establish a cultural rhythm of interaction. The user who jokes does not merely critique the film, rather, they invite others to join in a ritual of playful disbelief. Here, hatewatching becomes a vehicle for participatory commentary, which aligns with Ahmed's (2004, p. 15) argument that emotions are not personal states but circulate and bind groups.

Crucially, the *comment-driven participation* fosters engagement loops that help explain the franchise's longevity. Unlike *reluctant persistence*, which hinges on individual emotional passivity, or meta-aware performance, which focuses on ironic self-presentation, community bonding is about reinforcing participation through group dynamics. The emotional contradiction, users mocking the franchise but continuing to engage, is sustained through mutual validation. One TikTok video captures this perfectly: "Do you hate the After movies?" "Are you gonna watch the new one?" "And I'll never stop." (Appendix B, TikTok 4). Another TikTok video states that watching every *After* movie is part of girlhood and can be seen as a tradition (Appendix B, TikTok G). These clearly state that the act of hatewatching is often collective, bonding the group.

This idea of ritualized viewing is echoed even more strongly in comments that describe hatewatching as a collective, offline experience. While much of the existing literature focuses on

digital discourse, this study adds the observation that users themselves frame watching as a collective tradition, one that transcends platforms. One Redditor wrote, "My best friend and I do this! We roast the movie the entire time, and it ends up being an overall enjoyable experience lol" (Appendix B, Reddit G). Here, watching the *After* becomes less about narrative content and more about a bonding tradition. These instances reveal that the communal aspect of hatewatching is not limited to online interaction, it extends into physical real-life spaces. As Dean (2005, p. 54) argues in her critique of communicative capitalism, media value is increasingly tied to its shareability. In this context, the comment "I had a marathon on Monday when the new one came out lol" (Appendix B, TikTok G) illustrates not just a viewing act, but a performance of cultural participation. These findings suggest that hatewatching operates across digital and embodied spaces, reinforcing its role as both affective practice and social ritual.

Furthermore, the communal nature of hatewatching blurs the boundary between fandom and anti-fandom, a point repeatedly emphasized by Gray (2019, p. 30-32) and Jenkins (2006, p. 20). Many users acknowledge the contradiction in their relationship to the franchise. One writes "I love them, I can't help it🥰" (Appendix B, TikTok 5). This admission points not to a failure of taste but to a complex affective and cultural positioning. As Ahmed (2004, p. 1-4) argues, emotions do not simply reside in individuals, they are socially constructed and circulated. The act of liking something "ironically" becomes a coded expression within a larger group dynamic, where sincerity and critique are folded into one another.

Moreover, this ambiguity is sustained not just through language, but through digital infrastructures that reward engagement. TikTok and Reddit thrive on visibility, not necessarily affection (Franck, 2019, p. 14). In such an economy, mockery, memes, and ironic commentary are not distractions from serious discourse but primary modes of participation. Commenters who deride the series are, in effect, performing micro-acts of amplification. Even comments that express frustration, like this interaction "They gotta stop. How are they getting the funding for them too?!?!" with another user replying "Us watching 😂" (Appendix B, TikTok 5), function as signals that keep *After* within the algorithmic gaze.

Where other forms of hatewatching, like *reluctant persistence*, revolve around internal tensions between dislike and affective loyalty, community bonding is explicitly externalized. It is played out in public, through likes, tags, and comment chains that draw others into the cycle. Hatewatching, here, becomes a mode of cultural participation that offers users not just a way to critique media, but a means of maintaining social ties. It is not just the badness of the *After* films that fuels their longevity, it is their badness as portrayed through meme, commentary, and shared recognition.

Thus, *hatewatching as community bonding* operates as a form of digital sociality where

mockery becomes the glue of participation. The *After* films serve less as aesthetic objects and more as catalysts for collective commentary, performance, and interaction. Participatory culture in this context is not about building appreciation but about maintaining a cycle of recognition and ridicule. Through shared irony, affective circulation, and ritualized engagement, users ensure that the franchise remains culturally legible and algorithmically visible.

Hatewatching as Meta-Aware Performance

A distinctive form of hatewatching that emerged from the dataset is *meta-aware performance*. Unlike emotionally driven or community-based hatewatching, this mode of engagement is marked by a conscious, performative detachment. Users do not simply dislike the *After* films, they openly acknowledge this disdain while continuing to watch, often dramatizing their contradiction for others. This section examines how self-aware hatewatching operates as both a cultural performance and an engagement mechanism, negotiating the franchise's visibility through irony, repetition, and social signaling.

This behavioral pattern aligns closely with Ang's (2007, p. 21) concept of the "ironic viewing position," where viewers maintain a knowing distance from melodramatic content through parody or commentary. For instance, one TikTok user writes: "omg yes. I can't stand these movies but yet I have to watch them when they come out...", while another echoes: "Listennn yes they are bad. Horrible. I honestly think these movies are the worst of the worst in romance. But. I watch every single one of them" (Appendix B, TikTok G). These examples typify a discursive stance where users embrace contradiction, staging their mockery as both insight and indulgence. Rather than rejecting the films outright, they construct a humorous narrative in which badness becomes not only tolerable but entertaining. As Cohen et al. (202, p. 145) note, such comments suggest that hatewatching is less about true disapproval and more about the pleasure of critique itself.

Importantly, these self-aware commentaries function as social performances. By declaring that they are hatewatching, and doing so publicly, users invite recognition from others who "get the joke." The phrase "it's so bad it's good," for instance, recurs throughout the dataset as a kind of rhetorical shorthand, simultaneously expressing aesthetic judgement and cultural awareness. This reflects what Moore (2015, p. 199) identifies as moral disengagement: users acknowledge the problematic or lowbrow nature of the content, but excuse their engagement by framing it as critical, humorous, or culturally ironic. One TikTok user wrote, "Legit my toxic trait is that I will watch this over and over and NEVER get bored 😅," (Appendix B, TikTok 1), signaling not just complicity in the content's appeal but a deliberate choice to narrate that complicity with affective self-awareness.

This dynamic finds theoretical support in Jenkins' (1992 as cited in Meyer and Tucker, 2007,

p. 103) concept of textual poaching, where audiences reinterpret media for their own purposes. Rather than consume the *After* films sincerely, users remix them into opportunities for commentary, parody, and self-expression. When users post about the most "cringe-worthy" scenes or create edits that parody key moments, they transform the films into raw material for ironic play. As one Reddit user states: "I hate-watch this series from time to time. It's so ridiculous that I find it funny.." (Appendix B, Reddit G). Such comments highlight how viewers transform lowbrow media into raw material for playful critique. In doing so, they engage not as fans but as cultural producers who appropriate and reframe content.

Moreover, this mode of engagement contributes directly to the longevity of the *After* franchise. As Guha (2022, p. 21) argues, the "stickiness of cringe" ensures that bad content continues to circulate, not despite criticism, but because of it. The digital attention economy (Simon, 1972, p. 40-41; Franck, 2019, p. 9-10), in this context Reddit and TikTok, values visibility over sentiment. When users post ironic reactions or call out their own "toxic" commitment to watching the next installment, they produce engagement that keeps the franchise algorithmically relevant. Hatewatching as performance, then, is not merely expressive, it is productive, feeding the media ecosystem that ensures After's continued presence in online culture.

Hatewatching as a meta-aware performance also deepens the paradox of cultural participation. Users often claim detachment from the franchise, "The caption 👀 will definitely still be watching" (Appendix B, TikTok 4), but their repeated return undermines that rejection. One response captures this ambivalence succinctly: "I really do feel you." (Appendix B, TikTok 4). Watching becomes habitual, not because the films are valued, but because they are culturally embedded. This is what Gray (2019, p. 34-39) refers to as monitorial hatewatching: a mode of engagement marked by the compulsion to stay updated, to maintain cultural literacy, or to remain part of the conversation, even if that conversation is centered around shared ridicule.

It is worth emphasizing that *self-aware hatewatching* also functions as an affective filter. Viewers do not merely consume bad content, they process it through humor, irony, and exaggeration, often performing their reactions in comments or videos. One Reddit comment reads: "lmaooo!!! I laughed the hardest when he had a bad dream and basically hummed/moaned 😭😭💀 I went to the theater and laughed so loud other people laughed at me xD" (Appendix B, Reddit 4). This recontextualization of melodramatic sincerity as comedy does more than critique, it establishes an interpretive frame that encourages others to engage with the films in the same mode. In this sense, the ironic stance is not only individual but collective, shaping how content is understood and recirculated.

Interestingly, these users often exhibit a surprising familiarity with the franchise, knowing its tropes and predicting its failures. This affective residue reflects what Ahmed (2004, p. 11)

describes as the way emotions "stick" through repetition and shared discourse. Revealing that even when users claim detachment, their language betrays a certain attachment, if not to the content's quality, then to its ritual presence in their media routines.

Ultimately, this mode of hatewatching complicates binary distinctions between love and hate, sincerity and irony, consumption and critique. The act of watching, commenting, and repeating becomes both an admission of complicity and a gesture of cultural fluency. Through self-aware language, users navigate a moral gray zone where irony becomes a legitimating force. Rather than hiding their engagement they display it loudly.

Non-hatewatching behaviors

While the majority of user engagement with the *After* franchise falls within the spectrum of hatewatching, it is important to acknowledge forms of interaction that resist or fall outside this framework. These include expressions of *genuine critique* and *resistance to hatewatching*. Though less frequent, these modes are analytically significant, as they help define the boundaries of hatewatching and expose the emotional and ideological stakes users attach to their media consumption. Unlike ironic or performative forms of engagement, these behaviors do not reinforce the franchise's visibility through repetition or circulation Instead, they often signal a refusal to partake in its circulation economy, thus subverting or negotiating its visibility.

These critiques are typically blunt and emotionally direct, refusing the rhetorical codes of irony, community, or performance. As Gray (2003, p. 70) argues, not all anti-fandom is ambivalent or performative; some forms express clear disapproval and disconnection. A Reddit user exemplifies this: "please i bet you did 😭 my friends wanted to force me to watch it with them but i locked myself in the room and said i wouldn't come out until the movie was over" (Appendix B, Reddit 3). Here, there is no wink, no reference to community or meme culture, only disengagement. Another user expresses disappointment with the film's failure to even provide "so bad it's good" value: "We thought it'd be funny to watch this, like a 'so bad it's good' kind of thing. Turns out it's just aggressively mediocre and extremely boring. It just kinda sucks. Wouldn't recommend even as a joke" (Appendix B, Reddit 1). While this user initially appears to engage in hopeful hatewatching (Gray, 2019, p. 34-39), their final assessment (stating that they would not recommend), reveals a shift toward straightforward critique rather than *ironic engagement*.

Another prominent observation in the comments, regarding *genuine critique*, is that of adaptation critique. Fans of the books, originally published on Wattpad, are disappointed with how the story is portrayed on screen, often stating it as the reason for disengagement; "They messed up everything in the book! All the details that make it something have been put aside, the movie is completely rushed and does not make any sense .... It's just sad how Anna Todd sells for half a

dozen dollars!" (Appendix B, Reddit 1). Here, emotional attachment to the books becomes a lens for critiquing the films, refusing to support what is perceived as a compromised product.

Moreover, several users across TikTok and Reddit directly question the continued cultural relevance of the *After* films. One Reddit comment reads: "I can't believe they're still making more of these fucking things" (Appendix B, Reddit 1), as well as "The movies are so shit, everybody's too embarrassed to come back😂😂" (Appendix B, TikTok 3). These expressions of exhaustion signal not only a rejection of the films' quality but also a desire to interrupt the cycle of continued visibility. This form of critique may not garner the same traction or algorithmic reward, but it serves an important discursive function.

Within these comments, a recurring thematic concern emerges around the *normalization of toxicity*, which is an observation that deepens the framework of *genuine critique.* These critiques go beyond aesthetic judgements to interrogate ideological content. For example, one TikTok user writes: "I've never shipped them, their relationship is SO toxic. I can't believe that people say that their relationship goals" (Appendix B, TikTok 3). Another adds: "Right that toxic love ain't right😭😭😭" (Appendix B, TikTok3). A reddit user further elaborates; "I think our society has romanticised toxic behaviours ….To them everything is romantic because they like the main guy." (Appendix B, Reddit G). These critiques resonate with Ahmed's (2004, p. 1-4) affect theory, which in the context of this study frames emotions like disgust or anger not simply as internal reactions, but as socially meaningful acts that shape public discourse.

This discourse connects to wider conversations in fan and feminist studies about problematic media representations. As Jenkins (2006, p. 20) reminds us, fans are not blindly loyal, they are active negotiators of meaning. Similarly, Bury (2017, p. 124) and Meyer & Tucker (2007, p. 107) suggest that digital audiences often blend consumption with critique, using their platforms to challenge dominant narratives. In the case of *After*, users who critique the romanticization of toxic dynamics are participating in this tradition of resistance. They use social media not to celebrate or mock the series, but to call attention to its harms.

A related but distinct behavior is resistance to hatewatching, in which users express sincere emotional connection or defend their enjoyment against dominant mocking discourse. These comments push back against the social expectation to ridicule. For instance, one user writes: "Love them and I'll say it proudly. Periodt." (Appendix B, TikTok 4). Another adds: ""Why are you guys hating they're good movies?" (Appendix B, TikTok 3). Such remarks signal emotional authenticity in contrast to ironic detachment. These users participate in discourse but do so from a position of affective sincerity, challenging the normative scripts of ridicule or critique. This type of engagement is observed in two ways*: positive pushback* and *defensive fandom*, which illustrate the ways in which users actively challenge prevailing narratives by voicing support or defending the series

against criticism.

This complexity is further demonstrated through *comfort viewing*, where users return to the franchise as a coping mechanism. One TikTok user noted: "My comfort movie when I'm depressed and don't want to think" (Appendix B, TikTok 1). Although the film's quality is not defended, the emotional reliability it provides is enough to justify rewatching. This supports Askwith's (2007, p. 102-116) argument that media consumption can serve regulatory emotional functions, even when the content itself is critically flawed. In this context, emotional predictability, not narrative strength, becomes the basis for sustained engagement. The predictability itself becomes the hook, portraying the Logic of Immersion (Askwith, 2007), where engagement "satisfies the viewer's imaginative or emotional desires to be surrounded or subsumed" (p. 110). Thus, in the context of this study, surrounded by a feeling of comfort.

Importantly, these sincere expressions are not apolitical. As Moore (2015, p. 199) notes, continued engagement with problematic media often involves moral disengagement, a reframing of discomfort as entertainment. But users who either disengage entirely or express sincere appreciation actively challenge this logic. They refuse to distance themselves from their feelings, whether those are of disapproval or affection.

In regards to media longevity, these two forms of engagement operate differently. *Genuine critique* often functions as an attempt to end engagement altogether, resisting the algorithmic of stimulus visibility. These users exit the conversation, offering no affective labor to sustain the franchise. *Resistance to hatewatching*, on the other hand, maintains engagement but redefines its tone and purpose. Rather than parody or critique, visibility is reinforced through earnestness. These users position themselves in the middle of the fan–anti-fan spectrum (Gray, 2019, p. 32), neither ironic nor indifferent, but sincerely invested and critically aware. Together, genuine critique and resistance to hatewatching illuminate the outer boundaries of hatewatching culture. They underscore that digital engagement is not uniformly ironic or performative, and that sincerity and refusal remain viable, if less visible, modes of media participation.

Summary of findings

This chapter analyzed how users engage with the *After* franchise across TikTok and Reddit, identifying a spectrum of behaviors that range from ironic mockery and emotional entanglement to communal performance, self-aware detachment, and outright rejection or defense. These modes were organized into five overarching categories: *Ironized Enjoyment*, *Reluctant Persistence*, *Community Bonding*, *Meta-Aware Performance*, and a final category combining *Genuine Critique* and *Resistance to Hatewatching*.

Ironized Enjoyment highlighted how users ridicule the films while still returning to them,

deriving pleasure from their flaws. Echoing Guha's (2022, p. 875) "stickiness of cringe" and Ang's (2007, p. 21) ironic viewing position, users engage in mockery that paradoxically sustains the franchise's cultural presence. This demonstrates that ironic viewing is not just critique but works as a promotional mechanism.

Reluctant Persistence showed how continued engagement is often driven by emotional contradiction, narrative compulsion, or nostalgia. Drawing on Gray's (2019, p. 34-39) notion of hopeful hatewatching and affect theory's (Ahmed, 2004, p. 1-4) understanding of emotional contradiction, users return to After not despite dissatisfaction but because of it. This affective repetition reveals how hatewatching can function as both habit and coping mechanism.

Community Bonding emphasized the collective nature of this engagement. Through shared memes, comment chains, and co-watching rituals, users transform ridicule into social participation. Here, hatewatching becomes a form of participatory culture that constructs group identity through mockery, reinforced by the logics of communicative capitalism (Dean, 2005, p. 54).

The section on *Meta-Aware Performance* offered one of the more novel contributions. Users not only hatewatch, but perform their hatewatching with self-conscious flair, openly acknowledging the absurdity of their engagement. This performance of knowingness complicates traditional definitions of ironic detachment. While this behavior fits within Ang's ironic position (2007, p. 21), it also overlaps with meme culture and contemporary digital vernacular. The finding nuances existing theories of hatewatching by showing how irony is not just an interpretive stance but a social performance, reinforcing visibility even while claiming resistance.

Finally, *Genuine Critique* and *Resistance to Hatewatching* introduced important counterpoints. Some users reject *After* without irony, particularly criticizing its romanticization of toxic behavior. Others defend the franchise sincerely, challenging the assumption that all engagement is ironic. These modes disrupt or reframe the cycle of engagement, providing understanding of what is seen as hatewatching and what is not.

Taken together, these findings extend existing theories of hatewatching and media engagement in two key ways: First, they show that hatewatching is not just one thing, but rather a spectrum of affectively and socially differentiated behaviors. Second, they suggest that contemporary logics of engagement (Askwith, 2007, p. 102-116) (particularly in meme-driven, algorithmic environments) are increasingly shaped by performance, not just motivation. This research shows how irony, ambivalence, and critique converge in new configurations, making hatewatching both a cultural practice and an unintended promotional mechanism.

Together, these findings offer a multifaceted view of hatewatching as both a personal and collective practice, shaped by emotional contradiction, digital performance, and platform logics. In the following conclusion, I reflect on what these insights reveal about contemporary media

engagement, discuss the theoretical and methodological contributions of the study, and outline implications for future research.

5. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the dynamics of hatewatching as it manifests within digital communities, using the *After* franchise (Gage et al., 2019-2023) as a case study. As a franchise marked by widespread critical derision (Aerasinka, 2020), ironic fandom (Guha, 2022, p. 872; Ang, 2007, p. 21; Gray, 2019, p. 30-32), and commercial endurance (Box Office Mojo, n.d.), *After* represents a particularly salient object for investigating how audiences engage with content they profess to dislike (Appendix B). The central research question guiding this research was: "How do online communities engage with and reinforce hatewatching behaviors in discussions surrounding the *After*-film series?" Drawing on a dataset of 315 comments from Reddit and TikTok, the study employed thematic content analysis and grounded theory principles to analyze how users articulated and circulated forms of engagement that spanned irony, critique, emotional contradiction, community bonding, and sincere attachment.

The data revealed that hatewatching is not a singular practice but rather a spectrum of discursive behaviors ranging from parody and ironic pleasure to frustrated loyalty and defensive sincerity. Six different practices were observed and were identified as such: *Ironized Enjoyment, Reluctant Persistence, Community Bonding, Meta-Aware Performance*, and Non-Hatewatching Engagement (*Genuine Critique* and *Resistance to Hatewatching*). In line with Gray's (2019, p. 30) framework of disappointed anti-fandom and Guha's (2022, p. 875) notion of the "stickiness of cringe," the analysis found that audiences return repeatedly to the After-films not despite their emotional dissonance, but because of it. As one TikTok user stated, "omg yes. I can't stand these movies but yet I have to watch them when they come out…" (Appendix B, TikTok 5), humorously encapsulating the paradox of negative commitment.

Such responses reveal the complex emotional and cultural feelings that underlie the phenomenon of hatewatching. Utilizing affect theory (Ahmed, 2004, p. 1-4; Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982, p. 482), the study highlights how emotions like cringe, frustration, and irony circulate within communities, creating environments where disapproval is shared, expressed, and even enjoyed. This emotional conflict was particularly evident in the axial code *normalization of toxicity*, which ran beneath *Genuine Critique*. Many users simultaneously critiqued and consumed the films, pointing out problematic portrayals, such as Hardin's emotional manipulation, while still engaging in discussions about the franchise. This multifaceted engagement aligns with Moore's (2015, p. 199) theory of moral disengagement: by framing their interest as ironic or culturally aware, audiences justify behaviors that would typically conflict with their ethical or aesthetic standards.

Interestingly, some users did not participate in hatewatching at all. In the category *genuine critique*, users expressed their disapproval directly, without the use of irony or humor as rhetorical buffers. These comments functioned as a form of disengagement, rejecting the cycle of ironic

rewatching and viral discourse. They provided a sobering counterpoint to the more common dynamics of hatewatching, highlighting how certain viewers intentionally distance themselves from a franchise that others mock, parody, or defend. While these critiques may appear marginal in a media ecosystem dominated by meme-able negativity, their presence is theoretically significant. They affirm that hatewatching is not universal or inevitable; rather, it is context-dependent, shaped by individual preferences, platform cultures, and emotional thresholds.

Not all engagement with the series was rooted in irony. A smaller, yet significant enough, group of users expressed genuine attachment to the franchise, forming a countercurrent to the dominant narratives surrounding hatewatching. These expressions of loyalty, whether stemming from nostalgia for the Wattpad version, attachment to characters, or simple preference for the genre, were categorized under *resistance to hatewatching*. Although often marginalized in online discussions, these comments blurred the line between fandom and anti-fandom (Gray, 2019, p. 30), highlighting that audience engagement can be performative or critical as well as heartfelt and authentic.

Throughout the analysis, the concept of longevity emerged as a central aspect. What sustains the visibility and relevance of the *After* franchise is not critical acclaim or traditional fandom alone, but the continuous cycle of engagement generated by negative attention. Drawing from Franck's (2019, p. 9-10) interpretation of the attention economy, supported by Simon's (1971, p. 40-41) foundational concept, this study demonstrated that digital platforms reward interaction, not sentiment. Whether a viewer mocks a scene, rewatches for closure, or joins a group roast, they contribute to the franchise's algorithmic footprint. Hatewatching thus becomes not just a cultural phenomenon but a marketing mechanism, one that fuels the *After* phenomenon through negative buzz. This raises further questions around the correlation between hatewatching and the economic performance of franchises, a valuable area for future research.

This framework is particularly relevant when viewed through Jenkins' (2018, p. 18) concept of participatory culture, which positions hatewatchers as active co-creators of cultural meaning. Instead of passively consuming media, social media users remix, reinterpret, and amplify content through jokes, edits, and communal discussions. This perspective helps frame hatewatching not as a failure of taste, but as a form of cultural production, even though it consists of contradictions. *Hatewatching as a Meta-Aware Performance* offers a novel contribution here, showing how users publicly perform their self-awareness through disclaimers, humor, and exaggerated commentary. This performance links hatewatching to meme culture, transforming it into a collective and creative mode of engagement.

Societal and Industrial Implications

These findings have important implications for both the entertainment industry and broader digital culture. For producers, studios, and platforms, this research reveals that engagement is no longer synonymous with endorsement. Hatewatchers, despite their critical stance, contribute meaningfully to a film's algorithmic presence. Recognizing this can inform strategic marketing approaches: campaigns that embrace irony, incorporate memes, or acknowledge audience critique can sustain interest and visibility.

More importantly, this study invites cultural stakeholders (educators, critics, and policymakers) to consider how ironic engagement may unintentionally shape cultural values. The phenomenon of memeifying a franchise that portrays toxic romantic dynamics, such as *After*, raises ethical questions. While many users critically acknowledge the franchise's problematic elements, others express aspirational sentiments, stating they "want a relationship like theirs" (Appendix B). This tension underscores the need for future research on how repeated ironic consumption might normalize harmful relational norms, particularly for young or less media-literate audiences. Understanding the psychological impact of such engagement is vital in assessing the broader social consequences of hatewatching.

Limitations

However, the research process was not without limitations. As discussed in the method, the uneven distribution of Reddit comments, particularly the limited number of comments for *After We Fell*, required adaptation in the sampling logic. While a general subreddit post, addressing the franchise as a whole, was included to offset this imbalance, it may have introduced thematic generalizations that differed from film-specific commentary. The number of comments sourced from TikTok (N=175) exceeded those from Reddit (N=150). While this imbalance was methodologically justified (TikTok provided a broader volume of relevant discourse and required more selectivity) it nonetheless introduced a platform-specific weighting that may have influenced which forms of hatewatching discourse appeared more prominently. That said, platform comparison was not the aim of this study, which disarms this limitation.

Another key limitation lies in the inherently interpretive nature of thematic analysis. While systematic coding was used to reduce researcher bias, interpretation of irony, sarcasm, or emotional ambivalence remains subjective. This is especially relevant in the context of hatewatching, where tone can be slippery and affective cues ambiguous. Prior familiarity with the franchise further complicates this dynamic. While it allowed for nuanced readings of character arcs and intertextual references, it also necessitated a high degree of reflexivity to avoid interpretive projection.

Although this study focused primarily on mechanisms of hatewatching, one notable

emergent observation, *normalization of toxicity*, proved especially relevant for broader sociocultural analysis. This theme, though not explored in depth in this study, deserves dedicated attention in future research. Investigating how memefied portrayals of toxic behavior might shape viewer perceptions could uncover how digital circulation normalizes problematic tropes.

Future Research

Future research could build on these findings in several ways. First, it would be valuable to explore hatewatching behaviors across other genres or cultural contexts, such as reality TV, superhero franchises, or prestige dramas, to see whether similar patterns emerge. Even though Guha (2022, p. 876) focused on reality-TV hatewatching, their study did not research social media dynamics. Longitudinal studies could also track how hatewatching evolves over time: do ironic viewers ever become sincere fans? Does repeated critique lead to disengagement or deeper attachment? Additionally, multimodal analysis that incorporates visual content, such as TikTok videos, reaction gifs, or memes, could offer further insight into the affective textures of hatewatching.

Another promising avenue lies in exploring platform-specific cultures more deeply. Reddit and TikTok each host distinct forms of participation, shaped by their affordances, algorithms, and community norms. Comparative research could illuminate how these environments modulate hatewatching behaviors, whether amplifying critique, encouraging irony, or marginalizing sincerity.

Additionally, as previously noted, future research could investigate the effects of memeifying a franchise that portrays toxic relationship dynamics, both on active commenters and on passive social media users who encounter the content through algorithmic exposure. Given that the *After* franchise's visibility is significantly amplified by hatewatching behaviors, this raises important questions about how repeated ironic engagement might inadvertently normalize harmful romantic ideals. While the analysis suggests that many users are critically aware of the franchise's problematic elements, particularly the *normalization of toxicity*, there remains a subset of users who express aspirational sentiments, stating that they "want a relationship like theirs" (see Appendix A and B). This tension highlights the need for further exploration into the psychological effects of consuming and circulating such content, particularly among younger or less media-literate audiences. Understanding how ironic consumption might contribute to the internalization of toxic romantic norms would provide important insight into the broader social consequences of hatewatching culture.

Final Thoughts

In sum, hatewatching is more than a paradox: it is a participatory, affectively charged, and economically significant practice. This study shows that the *After* franchise thrives not in spite of critique, but because of the discursive, emotional, and algorithmic labor. Through this lens, hatewatching emerges as a complex audience behavior that reshapes not only how we engage with media, but how media survives, circulates, and succeeds.

Ultimately, this study underscores a compelling correlation between hatewatching and the economic success of media franchises. While conventional logic might suggest that negative reception harms commercial viability, the findings illustrate the opposite: sustained negative attention can fuel engagement, which in turn drives visibility within the attention economy. Algorithms on platforms like TikTok and Reddit do not differentiate between praise and critique, they amplify whatever content circulates most. Hatewatchers, through repeated commentary, meme creation, and ironic discourse, contribute to this cycle of visibility. This visibility translates into streaming numbers, social media traction, and sustained cultural relevance, which can inform production decisions such as sequels or licensing deals. As such, hatewatching acts as an informal promotional tool, one that studios can no longer afford to ignore when assessing a franchise's performance and long-term value.

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7. APPENDICES

Appendix A:

Table 3, *Selective Coding with examples, based on Elo and Kyngäs (2008, p. 108)*

RQ	How do online communities engage with and reinforce hate-watching behaviors in discussions about the After-film series?		
Selective	**Axial**	**Open code example**	**Quote example**
Hatewatching as Ironized Enjoyment	Humorous Engagement	Guilty pleasure	"These are my guilty pleasure lol. I love cheesy bad movies" (TikTok, 5)
		Cringe Appeal	"I want to see this movie and cringe so bad but it is not in the theatre yet" (Reddit, 4)
		Communal watching	
		Genre inversion	"PLEASE it was a comedyyy" (TikTtok, 2)
Hatewatching as Reluctant Persistence	Emotional investment despite flaws	Sunk-cost	"That's how it's felt since number 2. but I'm like we are in this deep." (TikTok, 5)
	Origin awareness	Compelled closure	"once you battle through the first you need the closure 😂" (Tiktok, G)
	Franchise decline		
		Fanfic fan	"Having to watch it bc you used to spend all night reading the books" (TikTok, 5)
Hatewatching as Community Bonding	Shared Ironized suffering	Group Humor, tagging	"@cassie.fullen SO WHEN ARE WE WATCHUNG THIS" (TikTok, 2)

	Mockery	Collective roasting	"My best friend and I do this! We roast the movie the entire time, and it ends up being an overall enjoyable experience lol" (Reddit, G)
	Comment driven participation		"Can someone tell me how I've NEVER watched a movie so bad that I felt the need to look up a reddit for it?? " (Reddit, 2)
Hatewatching as Meta-Aware Performance	Self-aware consumption	Recognizing hatewatching behavior	"I hate-watch this series from time to time. It's so ridiculous that I find it funny" (Reddit, G)
			"omg yes. I can't stand these movies but yet I have to watch them when they come out…" (TikTok, 4)
		Calling out own toxic traits	"My toxic trait is that I think these films are a masterpiece" (TikTok, 1)
Genuine Critique	Critical Disapproval	Harsh Critique	"Wouldn't recommend even as a joke." (Reddit, 1)
	Disengagement	Narrative complaints	"I have fast forwarded through about half of it and not missed a single piece of the plot lol" (Reddit, 2)
	Normalization of Toxicity	Blunt rejection	"Bro I just gave up on watching all these because …" (TikTok, 3)
	Franchise decline	Adaptation critique	
		Romanticized and repetitive toxicity	"I think our society has romanticised toxic behaviours ….To them everything is romantic

			because they like the main guy." (Reddit, G)
Resistance to Hatewatching	Fandom Defense	Shameless love	"Love them and I'll say it proudly. Periodt." (TikTok, 4)
	Positive Pushback	Taste defense	"Unpopular opinion here but I enjoyed the movie and will watch it again when it's released. I don't think it would be a good movie for someone to watch that hasn't read the books" (Reddit, 1)
		Positive reactions	
		Comfort viewing	"My comfort movie when I'm depressed and don't want to think.." (TikTok, 1)

Appendix C: Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

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Name: Isa van Amrooij
Student ID: 745496
Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000
Supervisor Name: Izabela Derda
Date: 6/6/2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools
I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:
- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- Writing improvements, including grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

☒ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically ChatGPT and Grammarly in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

☐ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: [digital signature]

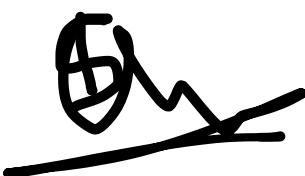Date of Signature: [Date of Submission]

Extent of AI Usage

☒ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity

☒ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature:

Date of Signature: 05/06/2025

Prompts used:

Grammarly
- Spelling/Grammar check

Chat GPT:
- Thesis Title
- "Can you help me find articles on…."
- "Can you provide me with feedback on the structure of…."