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“Have the writers actually read abortion law?”: using YouTube comments to explore audience responses to entertainment TV abortion plotlines

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Introduction: Comment sections on social media websites such as YouTube provide a unique venue to observe contemporaneous audience interpretation and discussion of entertainment television content. While entertainment-education research has largely examined whether and how exposure to television content influences viewer knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs, analyzing comment sections provides an opportunity to observe how audiences interpret and discuss these plotlines in an organic setting.

Methods: We examined comments posted to YouTube clips of entertainment television abortion plotlines to document how these comments explicitly discussed the plotlines depicted and what themes emerged in these discussions. We identified 15 YouTube clips of abortion plotlines posted between 2018 and 2023 on official network accounts. We used thematic analysis techniques to qualitatively assess the top 20 comments and replies for each video ($n = 162$).

Results: Twenty-six percent of all comments referenced the content of the clip. Overarching themes included (1) evaluating the perceived authenticity of abortion portrayals, (2) interpreting characters’ motivations and emotional experiences, and (3) comparing the quality and impact of abortion storylines across various television shows. We found that audiences engaged in sophisticated meaning-making around abortion storylines.

These comment sections illustrate the kinds of reflective engagement that contemporary theories of meaningful (eudaimonic) entertainment propose are central to narrative influence.

KEYWORDS

abortion, media studies, reception studies, TV studies, YouTube

Introduction

Media effects research, audience studies, and reception studies are grounded in different theories that attempt to explain and analyze how audiences interpret the content they view on screen. The literature in these fields documents the many challenges in endeavoring to uncover causal or correlational relationships between television viewing and audience knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and actions, particularly in our modern era of seemingly unlimited television streaming options (Kelly, 2019). Nevertheless, research has found significant differences by television exposure in knowledge and beliefs about health information (Hoffman et al., 2023). Some research in particular has focused on

entertainment media's ability to influence audience perceptions of stigmatized health issues, such as mental illness (Ritterfeld and Jin, 2006) and sexuality (Ward et al., 2014). Abortion is uniquely stigmatized, not only because it is a medical procedure subject to intense political regulation and cultural scrutiny but also because it is prism through which we can understand views about motherhood, gender, and power (Luker, 1984).

Stigma has myriad documented negative health consequences, including psychological distress and social isolation (Hanschmidt et al., 2016). Entertainment content with accurate abortion plotlines may be one way address this stigma and promote acceptance of bodily autonomy and access to abortion care. Though contemporary television depictions of abortion have increased in the past decade, this has not corresponded with an increase in accuracy in these depictions (Herold, 2024). These depictions often portray abortion as easy to access, obscuring the onerous political, logistical, and financial barriers to abortion care in the United States (Herold, 2024). Characters who obtain abortions are most often white, wealthy, and not parenting (Herold and Sisson, 2020), unlike the majority of contemporary abortion patients, who are women of color, struggling to make ends meet, and raising children (Jones and Chiu, 2023).

There is limited literature on the impact of abortion plotlines on audience knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. The available research indicates that exposure to abortion plotlines may increase knowledge about abortion compared to lack of exposure (Herold et al., 2024a, 2024b; Sisson et al., 2021; Watts et al., 2025). Other research has found that when entertainment plotlines depict the character who has undergone an abortion in an unsympathetic way, audiences respond negatively, often judging that character harshly for her decision to have an abortion (Brooks et al., 2022; Herold and Sisson, 2024). However, exploratory research indicates that exposure to accurate, emotionally sympathetic abortion plotlines may increase feelings of support among people who have undergone abortions (Herold and Woodruff, 2026).

Because audiences now access television content not only through broadcast television or screening channels but also via clips on social media, there are more opportunities for exposure to abortion content, but little research has used social media as a way to investigate responses to abortion plotlines. This study begins to fill this gap by analyzing comments on YouTube clips of abortion plotlines.

Literature review

YouTube is the most widely used online social media platform across all age groups in the United States (Gottfried and Park, 2025). Among the many ways that people use YouTube, one of the most popular is to watch whole episodes or clips of television; YouTube is the most popular streaming service, outranking Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+ (Grant and Koblin, 2024). Unlike its streaming competitors, YouTube has an interactive component—viewers can like, share, and comment on videos—that makes the viewing experience “distinctly social” instead of passive (Haridakis and Hanson, 2009). Analyzing the content of YouTube video comments is one method of analyzing a video's impact (Lewis et al., 2012). Television clips posted to YouTube, particularly entertainment television clips, tend to have a higher volume of

comments than other types of videos (i.e., activism-related videos, videos by non-profits, and stand-up comedy videos) (Möller et al., 2019; Thelwall et al., 2012). These comments, in turn, influence how viewers interpret the content within the video clips, providing a guide or framework for understanding the video content (Krämer et al., 2021; Möller et al., 2019).

There is rich literature on quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods analyses of YouTube comments, particularly those related to health issues. Most relevant to this study are qualitative analyses of comments on health-related videos, which often use thematic analysis techniques to explore understandings of and responses to YouTube video content. These studies document themes in the comments, including awareness of a specific eating disorder in documentary clips about eating disorders (Ferrey et al., 2023), expressions of personal connection in videos of a person with borderline personality disorder (King and McCashin, 2022), and relaying health misinformation in e-cigarette documentary clips (Hoffman et al., 2025).

Although there is a wealth of literature about many health issues on YouTube, there is a noticeable gap in scholarship on abortion content. The available published literature focuses on analyzing non-fiction abortion videos and their respective comment sections (Divrami, 2020; Döring, 2023; Venkata et al., 2024). One study provided a quantitative analysis of YouTube comments on abortion plotline clips, finding that these comments expressed mixed sentiment and served as unique public forums for exploring nuanced abortion discourse (Herold et al., 2025). The current study builds on this analysis, using a qualitative, thematic approach to analyze comments posted under YouTube clips of entertainment television abortion plotlines.

Theoretical approach

We draw on audience reception studies to conceptualize YouTube comments as a form of public audience reception through which viewers publicly and informally debate the meanings of these clips. Reception studies conceptualize audiences as active participants in media meaning-making rather than passive recipients of messaging (Hall, 1980). Building from this, YouTube comments provide a record of ongoing viewer interpretation, and exposure to comments may be more influential on viewer interpretations of online content than the video itself (Möller and Boukes, 2022).

Traditionally, theories that seek to explain the influence of entertainment programming have focused only on the content itself, exploring the unique ability of entertainment narratives to overcome audience resistance to persuasion. The Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model (E-ELM) and Entertainment Overcoming Resistance Model (EORM) posit that transportation into the narrative and character involvement—including character identification, perceived similarity, and parasocial interaction—reduce counterarguing, perceived invulnerability, and reactance among viewers, thus facilitating viewers adopting behaviors and attitudes consistent with those in the narrative (Moyer-Gusé and Nabi, 2010). More recently, scholars have theorized that meaningful entertainment narratives that are “eudaimonic”—meaning they evoke appreciation, are deeply touching, and are associated with mixed affect (i.e., feelings of

both joy and sorrow)—can lead to narrative-consistent attitudes and behaviors through mechanisms such as self-reflection, motivation for personal growth, and interconnectedness with others (Moyer-Gusé and Wilson, 2024). Research on social media and wellbeing indicates that positive commenting experiences may also elicit feelings of “eudaimonic well-being,” particularly when viewing content perceived as heartwarming or inspiring (Meir and Reinecke, 2023; Oliver, 2022).

Given that a sizable majority of television viewers consume media through the internet (Eichner and Mikos, 2025), we weave together these theories of eudaimonic responses to analyze audience interpretations of entertainment content via comment sections. In particular, this study aims to answer the following research question: How do YouTube commenters interpret, analyze, and discuss abortion plotlines from fictional, entertainment television programs?

Methods

Ethical considerations

This study was deemed non-human subjects research by the University of Pittsburgh Human Research Protection Office. Researchers slightly modified direct quotes to prevent identification of users.

Sample

Data collection occurred between January and June 2024. The first author identified television shows with abortion plotlines that aired between 2018 and 2023 using the public database AbortionOnscreen.org. This generated a potential sample of 275 plotlines. Undergraduate research assistants (RAs) searched for clips of these episodes on YouTube.com using search terms including the title of the show, the title of the episode, and the word “abortion.” We only included video clips from official network channels (e.g., ABC, NBC), and the clips had to reference or directly portray the abortion plotline. We defined “abortion plotline” as one that includes characters that discuss abortion, disclose a past abortion, consider having an abortion, or obtain an abortion onscreen. Two RAs searched for each potential plotline to reduce the chances of not finding a potential clip. This resulted in a sample of 21 plotlines, with three plotlines that had two unique clips posted on YouTube, for a total of 25 clips. This included six clips posted within our sample timeline, but from episodes that aired prior to our timeline.

We downloaded all comments for each video into an Excel spreadsheet using a Python script with an API key. Comments were sorted by “top comments” (i.e., most liked). If the comments had any replies, we included them in our sample.

Coding procedures and analysis

Consistent with previous analyses of YouTube video comments, we coded the top 20 comments and associated replies for each video (Gaus et al., 2021; Striewski et al., 2022).

RAs read each comment and coded it as “relevant” or “not relevant,” where “relevant” meant that the comment was about abortion and “not relevant” meant that it was not about abortion. We then reviewed all comments coded as “relevant” ($n = 583$) and created a subsample of comments that included any mention of the abortion plotline in the video clip. This left us with 162 comments from 15 video clips, which formed the dataset for the qualitative analysis. See Table 1 for more details about the video clip content.

To identify and interpret patterns across our dataset, we used inductive thematic analysis techniques (Braun and Clarke, 2022a) on the subsample of 162 comments. Recognizing that “thematic analysis” is a category of methods rather than a specific method in and of itself, we selected this mode of analysis because of its ability to generate deep understanding across themes and descriptive interpretations of exploratory datasets (Braun and Clarke, 2022b). We broadly followed the key phases of thematic analysis: Initially, the first author became familiar with the data, inputting all comments in the subsample into an Excel spreadsheet, reading these three times, and taking notes of emerging themes. Then, the first author generated initial codes from these notes and discussed them with the third author to codify definitions of each code. Consistent with thematic analysis, the first author then generated themes by grouping codes into related ideas (Braun and Clarke, 2022b). The first and third authors discussed these emerging themes, refining and naming them. The first author then went back through the subsample a fourth time to analyze comments by theme and document examples of each theme. Finally, the first author used Excel to calculate descriptive statistics for each theme to assess thematic saturation.

Results

Three overarching themes emerged: (1) negotiating the meaning of abortion representations, (2) engaging emotionally with abortion storylines, and (3) contextualizing abortion storylines across various media representations. These themes, along with example codes that compose each theme, are discussed in detail below.

Negotiating the meaning of abortion representations

These comments elaborated on the meaning of abortion portrayals, with many commenters evaluating the perceived realism or morality of the storylines and the characters within them. Codes associated with this theme included “realistic – policy” or “unrealistic – policy,” and “anti-abortion representation” or “gratitude for abortion representation.” Approximately 50% ($n = 81$) of comments included these types of discussions, particularly related to the accuracy of the portrayal. Although several critiques of the clip content argued that television should not depict abortion at all, most focused on the substance of the abortion portrayal itself, such as arguing that the abortion plotline was not reflective of the reality of the abortion access landscape. For example, one comment on the *Grey’s Anatomy* “Pick Yourself Up” clip noted the following:

TABLE 1 Sample of YouTube clips.

Show	Episode	Date posted	Clip description
Grey's Anatomy	Gunpowder and Lead	20 April 2023	Dr. Miranda Bailey has been receiving harassing calls from anti-abortion advocates who are upset at her new abortion-provider training practice. Her hospital colleagues spend their day calling the protestors back and explaining why they support Dr. Bailey
Grey's Anatomy	Pick Yourself Up	31 March 2023	Dr. Addison Montgomery is advised to take a break from traveling across the country to provide abortion care so that her arm can heal. She explains to a colleague that she cannot stop because so many clinics have closed, and she is the only option many people have for reproductive healthcare
Grey's Anatomy	Training Day	24 March 2023	As a team of doctors exits the hospital, a car speeds toward them and hits both a resident and Dr. Montgomery. From the way it's shot, it's assumed that the driver is an anti-abortion protestor from outside the hospital. The doctors lay motionless on the street
New Amsterdam	Maybe Tomorrow	2 November 2022	Dr. Max Goodwin tries to convince his ex-military colleague to open an abortion clinic on a military base
Grey's Anatomy	When I Get to the Border	4 November 2022	Dr. Bailey and Dr. Addison return to their own hospital and discuss how they can help women access abortion services in states where it is restricted
Law & Order SVU	The Burden of Our Choices	20 October 2019	Lawyer Dominick Carisi explains to the anti-abortion attorney that his mother, a religious Catholic, had an abortion because of a fetal anomaly
Sex Education	Three	5 July 2019	Maeve, a young white teenager, is in a clinic, holding hands with the other abortion patients. Doctors prepare her for an abortion, and she later wakes up in the recovery room, where she overhears a nurse being cruel to another patient. Maeve's friend Otis picks her up from the clinic, bringing her flowers
Scandal	That's My Girl	13 May 2016	President Fitz Grant and Olivia Pope talk in the Oval Office, where he expresses support for her choice. He apologizes, and they share a meaningful look
House	Fetal Position	24 November 2018	Dr. House tells a patient that she must terminate her pregnancy or she will die in 2 days. She refuses, insisting that she will not have an abortion. Dr. Cuddy, Dr. House's boss, suggests that they perform a risky fetal surgery, and in the midst of it, the fetus grabs Dr. House's hand. The patient almost dies during surgery, but both she and the pregnancy survive
Law & Order	Life Choice	8 July 2019	Two police officers drive up to an abortion clinic where a loud group of protestors chant, "Don't kill your babies! Abortion is a sin!" The police officers receive a page about a bomb threat at the clinic and evacuate the patients. Moments later, the clinic explodes. Two of the detectives visit anti-abortion organizations, and interview a staff member, Rose, who says she does n't condone violence but she understands it. The detectives argue about abortion while walking down the street, and one shares that one of his ex-girlfriends had an abortion, and is now married with two kids
Law & Order	Life Choice	8 August 2019	A litigator is prosecuting anti-abortion advocate Rose for murder in connection with the bomb at the abortion clinic. The lawyers try to convince her to accept a plea, but she insists that people who have abortions deserve to die. She admits to bombing seven abortion clinics
Law & Order	Dignity	16 March 2022	An usher greets people outside a church. After he sits down, a gunshot rings out, killing him. The pastor confirms to the police that the deceased was Dr. Benning, an abortion provider. The investigators talk to his current and former patients and discover that a member of an anti-abortion organization called Mission for Life is the killer
Law & Order	Progeny	13 June 2020	An anti-abortion advocate testifies that he tried everything to stop abortions, claiming he is a servant of God and killing a doctor was the only thing left for him to do to stop abortions
Law & Order	Progeny	11 June 2020	Detectives interview several different anti-abortion advocates and leaders to try and discover who killed Dr. Reed, an abortion provider
Shameless	O Captain, My Captain	5 January 2020	Fiona is on the phone and is interrupted by Debbie, visibly pregnant and holding hands with many children. They berate each other, and Debbie asks Fiona to support her choices. Fiona replies she supports her, but not her choice to continue her pregnancy

"The more I think about it the less sense it makes that in all of the United States [Dr.] Addison is apparently the only person qualified or willing to do the work she does...I mean I know it's a tv show but that's incredibly far fetched."

Another example pertained to a clip from the opening of a *New Amsterdam* episode, featuring characters reacting to the Supreme Court decision that overturned *Roe v. Wade*. Comments critiqued the emotionality and accuracy of the

portrayal. One comment stated, “I don’t agree with the SCOTUS decision, but that scene was just so cheesy and unrealistic about how people reacted.” Another echoed this sentiment: “LMAO. Soooo over the top. Plus doesn’t this take place in NYC? They still have literally the most liberal abortion laws in the world... When I first saw the trailer I honestly thought it was a show about 9/11.” Another comment doubted the intelligence of the writers themselves: “These writers have no idea what the implications of the Dobbs decision was.” Overall, these commenters questioned the effectiveness of this storyline in depicting a post-*Dobbs* reality, particularly noting how exaggerated emotionality undermines the seriousness of the subject matter.

While those comments questioned the veracity of the abortion-related claims in the clips or the overall effect of the clip, others challenged the representation of anti-abortion activists in these fictional programs. They elaborated on the underlying themes of these clips as distinctly derogatory portrayals of anti-abortion individuals. Some sought to distance themselves from what they perceived to be negative and unrepresentative behavior of these characters. In one clip from a *Grey’s Anatomy* episode, “Gunpowder & Lead,” Dr. Miranda Bailey receives hundreds of harassing calls from anti-abortion activists because of her abortion provision training program. Many comments objected to this portrayal of anti-abortion people: “I don’t like how the show portrays christans. Im unapologetically pro-life, but I’m not going to shame someone if they do get an abortion... Not all of us are like that.” In another clip, Dr. Addison Montgomery’s patient dies because of not being able to obtain an abortion in her home state. Many comments objected to the way Dr. Montgomery characterized anti-abortion advocates:

“Listen I hate this episode. It’s basically says that all of us pro-life people don’t get it. In this case, the child was not going to live and the mother’s life was in jeopardy then yes save the mother if that is what she chooses. All we want is babies to be able to be born. If the baby is dead already we don’t expect a woman to risk her own life by carrying it.” (*Greys Anatomy*, “When I Get to the Border”)

Overall, these comments claimed that these resoundingly negative portrayals of anti-abortion advocates were neither representative of anti-abortion people as a whole nor reflective of their Christian sensibilities. Others suggested that the writers had a particular motive for portraying anti-abortion advocates in this way:

“I am a pro-lifer and a Christian and I would never call someone like that. I would never hurt someone like that or be cruel. They portray Christians and pro-lifers like that to get more people to agree with abortion.” (*Grey’s Anatomy*, *Gunpowder & Lead*)

“The irony is, today there is much more violence and harassment towards those and pro-life work in general than what is depicted here. But *Grey’s* only shows one side as

usual and that is that all pro-life people are hypocrites and horrible people.” (*Grey’s Anatomy*, “Pick Yourself Up”)

Of the comments offering positive feedback about the abortion plotline clip, many articulated an appreciation for television depictions of abortion generally. On a *Law & Order* clip from an episode that aired in 1995 and was posted to YouTube in 2020, one comment reads, “This episode is almost 30 years old and the hypocrisy of pro-lifers is still so relevant” (*Law & Order*, “Progeny”). Relatedly, other comments affirmed the veracity of the portrayals, particularly related to showing the harassment of abortion providers by anti-abortion advocates. Some commented directly on the regularity of these occurrences: “Most terrorist attacks in the US are at abortion clinics and are domestic” (*Law & Order*, “Life Choice”). “This happens fairly often to various degrees. From shootings to bombings. Pro-lifers have also been known to write down license plates of people visiting clinics and stalk them” (*Law & Order*, “Dignity”). Others defended the plotlines as showing the reality of the hostility that abortion providers face in their daily work, and placed these depictions in the context of how the show depicts other reproductive decisions, adoption in particular:

“Right now doctors who provide abortions...are actually being doxxed and threatened....Also, *Grey’s* has shown adoption, in multiple forms. We’ve seen Meredith & Derek adopt after having fertility issues, seen them deal with interracial adoption. We saw Maggie reconnect with biological family after being raised by loving adoptive parents. Even with Bailey, she has 2 adopted kids...*Grey’s* isn’t against adoption, or promoting abortion—*Grey’s* is supporting choice, and the medical professionals who make those choices possible.” (*Grey’s Anatomy*, “Gunpowder & Lead”)

Many comments expressed gratitude for the show tackling abortion. One comment referenced being “over” the show, yet reinforced the importance of abortion plotlines:

“Yes I am over *Greys* too but this is something happening right now and I’m in the medical field...Florida just passed the stupid law here.... I am too tired to look up the abortion law that asshole governor DeSantis made sure went through but you can be arrested for an abortion, miscarriage, etc.” (*Grey’s Anatomy*, “When I Get to the Border”)

Another comment specifically thanked the showrunner for the clip, and mentioned her own experiences with Planned Parenthood: “Ty shonda [thank you Shonda Rhimes] for speaking out on this issue. When I was young planned Parenthood was my only recourse for women’s healthcare” (*Grey’s Anatomy*, “Gunpowder & Lead”). These comments both connect the plotline to contemporary political events not directly depicted in the episode and draw on commenters’ own experiences as medical professionals and patients.

Engaging emotionally with abortion storylines

Approximately 32.1% ($n = 52$) of comments included language indicating that the commenter was engaging emotionally with the fictional narrative of the clip. Examples of codes in this theme included “imagined abortion context,” “defending character,” and “distancing from character.”

Unsurprisingly, clips that included depictions of a character having an abortion or disclosing a past abortion (*Sex Education*, *Scandal*, and *Shameless*) elicited in-depth discussions in their respective comments sections. These comments discussed the merits of that decision, elaborating on the details of these characters’ abortions based on context both directly provided and only subtly implied in the clips. Some comments indicated engagement with the emotional states of the characters, adopting their perspectives and extrapolating additional details to better understand their actions.

For example, one commenter on a *Sex Education* clip justified the character’s decision to have an abortion by discussing her circumstances beyond that shown in the clip: “She has no money she would be tired all the time has to deal with everything on her own, can’t really study when pregnant, needs to go to school.” One comment hypothesized about why a character on *Sex Education* has had multiple abortions, adding additional context not provided in the clip: “she could be in an abusive relationship, it would not be the first woman whose partner refuses to use contraceptives and forces her to get abortions. She could be an addict and it’s getting raped by her dealer, she could be being forced into prostitution with not enough security measures etc.” Though a *Scandal* clip provided very little detail about a character’s past abortion, several comments imagined in great detail their perception of a character’s emotional experience:

“It is not about that Olivia never would abort the baby or throw all the blame on Fitz. You had to understand that it was her choice, however painful despite that she wasn’t ashamed of it all. Fitz knew about that, that’s why he supported her no matter why. She didn’t blame anything on him, in fact, it was all opposite of that. She fought for him and loved him. The choice she made, it doesn’t neglect love and respect they had for each other. In fact, it only got stronger.” (*Scandal*, “That’s My Girl”)

Other comments focused on analyzing the responses of doctors to their patients and whether those responses were justified or not. These comments took on the point of view of these characters, defending their emotional reactions or decision-making related to a patient’s abortion, even when politically disagreeing with them. Two clips in particular, one from *House* and the other from *Grey’s Anatomy*, “When I Get to the Border,” elicited many comments defending the actions of the various clinicians in these clips, including Dr. Montgomery (“A patient died simply because she didn’t have access to pre-natal care...That’s why Addison is upset.”), Dr. Cuddy (“Cuddy was doing her job. Without consent that’s all she could do.”), and Dr. House (“im very pro life and even i

liked it house wanted to abort because it was killing the mother not for the bs reasoning of its just a clump of cells.”).

Involvement with the character was not limited to comments agreeing with or supporting a character’s actions. Some comments fervently disparaged a character’s approach to abortion, while others reflected on how the abortion seemed to have impacted a character they knew and loved:

“This Olivia don’t deserves him it’s true. But this Olivia it’s not the Olivia of season 1&2. Olivia Pope never would abort Fitz’s baby and never would throw all the blame on him. She seems to hate him. She cannot either look him in the eyes or call his name. I really don’t recognize this Olivia.” (*Scandal*, “That’s My Girl”)

Contextualizing abortion storylines across media representations

A small but meaningful number of comments in our sample ($n = 23$, 14%) made connections between the clip content and other television depictions of abortion. Codes in this theme included “comparisons to other shows,” “imagined impact,” and “patterns across seasons.” In the comments of a clip from *Sex Education*, for example, several viewers engaged in a comparison of abortion depictions across teen dramas, mentioning *Euphoria* and *13 Reasons Why* (“13rw”):

“That is the best representation of abortion for young girls on tv I’ve seen so far; better than what 13rw and euphoria did.”

“I love Euphoria but the abortion storyline doesn’t have a very strong impact like this one.”

“I love the fact that this series shows the process not as something ‘bad,’ or ‘scary’... they showed as it is: something that if you do in the right place and at the right moment should not be dangerous or bad, in my country this still being illegal and see that in other countries you have the option for a well planned abortion gives me hope.”

Other comments recalled earlier episodes of the same television show with similar themes, particularly related to anti-abortion violence. One comment on a *Law & Order* clip from the “Progeny” episode connected depictions of anti-abortion advocates on two different episodes: “There was a *Law & Order* SVU episode where a woman threw a bomb into an abortion clinic, which killed a pregnant woman... Didn’t the anti-abortionist from Season 1 represent herself for the closing statement? Seems to me these people have a pattern on this show.” Another comment on a different *Law & Order* clip (“Burden of our Choices”) also referenced similarities in character depictions: “The guy who led the anti-abortion movement in the Season 5 episode must’ve learned from this woman’s crushing defeat in court as he was a more formidable foe then she was.” These comments tracked patterns related to characters involved in abortion depictions across time,

suggesting a broader interpretive framework that goes beyond one clip.

Discussion

In this study, we conducted an in-depth, qualitative analysis on a sample of comments posted in response to YouTube clips of abortion plotlines that discussed the content of the storyline. These comments provide an insightful avenue into understanding how some audiences make meaning of abortion plotlines, particularly in the ways that these comments engage in evaluating the accuracy of abortion-related content, excavating the emotional interiority of the characters in the clip, and comparing abortion depictions across multiple television programs. We found evidence of reflective audience engagement with these narratives, particularly elaboration and active interpretation rather than cursory approvals or critiques. While these data cannot measure any causal relationship between plotline exposure and subsequent attitudes or emotions, the comments provide a naturally occurring record of the interpretive processes through which abortion plotlines might influence public discourse.

Our sample of YouTube comments revealed three broad themes: (1) negotiating the meaning of abortion representations, (2) engaging emotionally with abortion storylines, and (3) contextualizing abortion storylines across various media representations. These findings extend recent theorizing on meaningful entertainment, illustrating how viewers publicly elaborate on and negotiate the meanings of abortion storylines beyond the immediate viewing experience.

About half of the comments in our sample included in-depth discussions about the representation of abortion, evaluating its accuracy in depicting the abortion policy landscape or the actions of anti-abortion activists. When a viewer has a eudaimonic response to entertainment, this is often characterized by elaborating on the storyline and viewer self-reflection. We observed both of these responses in our sample. Rather than commenting simply on the morality or legality of abortion, commenters made claims, however limited, about the meaning of the abortion portrayals themselves. In particular, we observed that when pro-choice commenters felt the abortion plotlines were inconsistent with their perception of reality, they tended to focus on those inaccuracies instead of on the broader abortion content of the episode. Likewise, comments about depictions of anti-abortion activists across various clips suggest that these portrayals provided distractions from the characters undergoing abortions. For instance, comments related to depictions of anti-abortion activists as bullies (“Gunpowder & Lead”), enforcers of laws that cause pregnant women to die (“When I Get to the Border”), or instigators of violence (“Pick Yourself Up”) suggest that these portrayals may activate reactance in some anti-abortion viewers. These responses are consistent with research suggesting that narrative persuasion is impeded if the story is perceived to be manipulative or inaccurate (Appel, 2022). Future research could examine the prevalence of this response with larger samples of anti-abortion viewers to better understand how anti-abortion audiences generally make

meaning of abortion plotlines. If content creators aim to increase empathy for characters who have undergone abortions, as some research indicates (Herold and Sisson, 2023), it may be worthwhile to center storylines on those characters as opposed to the actions of anti-abortion activists.

Although much of the literature on audience reception evaluates whether media contributes to changes in attitudes or behaviors, our findings illustrate that audiences have complex ways of interpreting and negotiating the meanings of these narratives, particularly in public contexts such as social media comment sections. The comments in our sample illustrate several forms of reflective engagement proposed by theories on eudaimonic responses to entertainment, such as elaborating on the underlying themes of a narrative, adopting the perspective of the characters, and continued exploration of meanings beyond what is presented in the plotline (Moyer-Gusé and Wilson, 2024). For example, comments that fell under the theme of engaging emotionally with abortion storylines demonstrated emotional investment in analyzing character dynamics. These commenters offered in-depth consideration of a character’s motivation or emotional interiority instead of broader commentary connected to politics or culture.

Based on our findings, we propose that viewers have internal frameworks for meaning-making regarding abortion representations. These frameworks evaluate variables such as authenticity, emotional resonance, and narrative consistency. Rather than simply expressing approval or disapproval of abortion, commenters frequently demonstrated involvement in the narrative by reconstructing a character’s perspective, motivations, emotional experiences, or off-screen circumstances. Some commenters also elaborated beyond the immediate narratives, reflecting on underlying themes across the media landscape and referencing other abortion plotlines in a manner that suggested appreciation of the emotional significance, realism, and meaningful depictions of abortion beyond the entertainment value of the storylines.

These findings suggest that the potential of abortion plotlines to impact audience knowledge, attitudes, and behavior depends on how much audiences perceive them as authentic to lived experiences, emotionally resonant, and consistent with the character.

Limitations

Our study has several limitations, most of which stem from conducting research using social media platforms. Because we analyzed publicly available comments on YouTube video clips, we did not have any demographic data to understand who is writing these comments. Research on YouTube commenters suggest that they are overwhelmingly male (Dubovi and Tabak, 2020; Wotanis and McMillan, 2014), and future research might uncover ways to explore if the comments on abortion-related entertainment clips are meaningfully different from the broader patterns of YouTube comments. Further, although these clips have view counts ranging from the thousands to the millions, only a select number of viewers elected to comment on the clips. Our sample, therefore, only includes an analysis of the limited number of viewers who left a comment on the clip,

which may not be representative of the responses of viewers as a whole. Relatedly, while we comment on implications for reception studies, our study was observational and not designed as an experiment to measure the impact of abortion plotlines on audience attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge. Nevertheless, we captured the responses of a segment of organic audiences of these clips, which can inform the development of future research into the study of the impact of these plotlines. Finally, our sample of comments did not include every comment under the selected clips; instead, we focused on the “top” comments and replies, consistent with common practice in social media research that does not use machine learning for data analysis. As a result, we may have missed other relevant themes and discussions from other comments not included in our sample.

Conclusion

Rather than functioning as passive consumers of entertainment, our sample of YouTube comments indicates that viewers actively negotiate the meanings of abortion narratives by evaluating their realism, interpreting and elaborating on character motivations, and comparing them with broader patterns of media representation of abortion. Contemporary theories of eudaimonic entertainment propose that certain narratives invite meaning-making and reflection extending beyond the immediate viewing experience. Our findings suggest that YouTube comment sections constitute one observable venue in which such reflective engagement becomes publicly articulated. This can assist scholars in refining these theoretical frameworks and also assist content creators develop plotlines that best leverage the power of entertainment narratives to destigmatize abortion and promote access to abortion care.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

SH: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. PN: Data curation, Formal analysis,

Project administration, Writing – original draft. BH: Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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The author(s) declared that generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

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