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'In the Presence of English' Informal English Language Learning in Italy

edited by

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WHAT DRIVES L2 VIEWERS' INFORMAL ACCESS TO ENGLISH?

A case study on audiovisual input

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Abstract – In recent years, several dubbing countries have experienced a change in the way audiovisual (AV) products and other media are accessed in terms of preferred languages and supports. A similar trend appears to be underway in Italy, where younger audiences increasingly access subtitled telecinematic materials and a variety of online media in English. While much research to date has focused on informal second language (L2) practices and the potential of media input for language learning, only a few studies have extensively examined participants' underlying reasons for exposure. To address this under-researched area, the present study investigates Italian university students' informal experience with various AV genres and the reasons behind their habits. The data form part of a larger-scale investigation (the PRIN project “The Informalisation of English Language Learning Through the Media”) and were collected through a questionnaire administered to 1,091 students from various disciplines at a medium-sized Italian university. Viewers' reasons for accessing English-language audiovisuals are examined from both an etic and an emic perspective, based on multiple-choice and open-ended questions, and are complemented by data on the frequency and intensity of access, preferred genres, and viewing modalities. The findings reveal a desire to improve one's L2 skills and seek knowledge, but also a desire for entertainment and a growing appreciation of English, which enhances viewers' engagement with AV products. Additionally, accessibility affects viewers' choices, which differ across AV genres. The study prompts further reflection on the growing media affordances and evolving L2 learning environments in contemporary Italy.

Keywords: AV input; informal learning; reasons for exposure; etic and emic perspective; questionnaire-based research.

1. Introduction: Research and recent trends in informal second language practices

In recent years, informal language learning has become a prominent topic in applied linguistics and second language acquisition (SLA) research. The term typically refers to spontaneous, unguided and largely incidental learning (Toffoli, Sockett 2010; Sockett 2014; De Wilde *et al.* 2020; Kussyk 2020; Pavesi, Ghia 2020; Azzolini *et al.* 2022; Krüger 2023). This renewed interest reflects the media saturation and proliferation of today's world and aligns

with a spatial perspective on SLA, which “shine[s] the spotlight on the where of language learning” (Benson 2021, p. 1) – a crucial aspect in a world where globalization and mobility have expanded language affordances and the variety of settings in which languages can be accessed and experienced. Even in a dubbing country like Italy, notable changes appear to be occurring in young people’s language behaviours (Cravidi 2016; Casiraghi 2016; Pavesi, Ghia 2020; De Riso 2021, 2023; Special Eurobarometer 2024). This trend calls for further investigation, especially as Italian youth increasingly access a wide range of media in foreign languages – primarily English – predominantly in the form of audiovisual (AV) input from films and television series on large subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) platforms (Pavesi, Ghia 2020). Despite Italy’s generally low proficiency in L2 English (ISTAT 2018; EF EPI 2023¹), younger generations are shifting their attitudes towards English and Englishes (Aiello 2018), with exposure to the language driven by hedonic and social factors rather than purely instrumental ones (Pavesi, Ghia 2020; Ghia, Pavesi 2021).

Recent studies across Europe have explored informal exposure to English in relation to language learning and have focused on the strategies users employ to decode and retain L2 vocabulary and structures (Sockett 2014; Kusyk 2020; Muñoz 2020). While various factors may influence learners’ behaviours, most research has concentrated on general informal L2 practices and English as a foreign language (EFL) proficiency, with less attention given to the specific reasons behind informal access to English (Sundqvist, Sylvén 2016; Trinder 2017; Kusyk 2020; Pavesi, Ghia 2020).

Building on a series of surveys conducted at the University of Pavia, the current study explores data from a more recent investigation carried out in 2022 as part of the national PRIN project “The Informalisation of English Language Learning Through the Media”, which focuses on informal second language practices (ISLPs) among Italian university students. The study zooms in on AV input and examines viewers’ main reasons for exposure from both an etic and an emic perspective, while framing the data within broader patterns of exposure, such as frequency and intensity of contact with English-language AV media, preferred genres, and viewing modalities. The analysis draws on data collected at the University of Pavia, a historic medium-sized institution in northern Italy, through a questionnaire administered to 1,091 undergraduate and postgraduate students (the Informal English Contact and Learning questionnaire, IECoL; Pavesi *et al.* 2023).

In detail, Section 2 introduces key terminology and illustrates typical exposure mechanisms, hinting at how various drivers of informal access come into play; subsection 2.1 provides an overview of prior research on

¹ EF English Proficiency Index. www.ef.com/epi, <https://www.ef.com/tr/epi/regions/europe/>

participants' motivations for engaging in ISLPs. Section 3 outlines the study's structure, methodology and findings, presenting them from both etic and emic perspectives based on multiple-choice and open-ended questionnaire items, respectively. Finally, Sections 4 and 5 contextualise the results within the changing L2 learning landscape and the increasing media affordances in contemporary Italy.

2. Reasons for informal contact with English and cognitive processes

Studies on ISLPs focus primarily on Internet-based input, as the web is now one of the primary environments where non-native speakers encounter English and other foreign languages outside traditional instructional settings. This has led to the adoption of terms like online informal learning of English (OILE, Sockett 2014) and more recently informal digital learning of English (IDLE, Lee, Dressman 2018). Online settings offer users opportunities for both receptive and productive language use, with the latter often involving mediated interaction in synchronous and asynchronous modes. The typically multimodal and multisemiotic nature of online input stimulates various forms of contact with English, driven by a wide array of motives. These motives may be intrinsic – originating from users' desires and interests – or extrinsic, arising from such factors as professional or educational requirements, or the influence of instructors or peers. Research on the drivers of informal contact with English has identified several categories of reasons (see Section 2.1; Pavesi, Ghia 2020; Kusyk 2020). Users may engage with English input informally due to hedonic factors, which refer to the pursuit of immediate gratification and sensory pleasure through the activity (Mariotti 2024). Hedonic motives are typically intrinsic, and may range from an appreciation of the language in itself to an affinity for a narrative, original-language dialogue and its authenticity. This is closely related to entertainment, another important reason behind informal access to English, which drives users to engage with English-language media across various contexts because they enjoy the activity and derive long-term fulfillment from it (Vorderer *et al.* 2006). Interpersonal factors may also come into play, stemming from social motivations such as the desire to share experiences and information with others. An orientation to language learning is another trigger to informal exposure, and involves the desire to learn the L2 or to improve one's knowledge of the language at various levels. These motivations can stem from both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. An additional relevant factor is knowledge-seeking, i.e. access to English-language resources to acquire information or learn other content, such as by using informational websites or

wikis on specific topics or disciplinary content. Finally, availability can play a significant role in a media context, where certain affordances such as audiovisual products and video games are exclusively accessible in English.

Given the diversity of motives, English assumes multiple functions in users' personal universes. As Hasebrink *et al.* (2007) put it,

[d]ifferent opportunities to have contact with English are linked with different sociolinguistic functions. With each additional opportunity to use English its functionality increases: the language develops from a rather uni-dimensional tool – for example, to take part in international pop music or to solve classical tasks in English lessons at school – to a multi-dimensional means of expression and communication which is linked to the professional sphere as well as the private sphere, to globalized mass media entertainment as well as private communication (Hasebrink *et al.* 2007, p. 114).

These exposure scenarios serve as contexts for incidental L2 learning, where potential learning processes may occur as a by-product of a main meaning-oriented activity (Hulstijn 2003), such as searching for information or being entertained, and distance themselves from intentional learning and an explicit focus on the L2. While an orientation to meaning is evident when users typically undertake an activity for enjoyment, hedonic pleasure or knowledge seeking, it may also develop occasionally when access to English input is driven by a desire to learn or improve language skills, especially when the experience is long-lasting and immersive (Pavesi, Ghia 2020). Immersion refers to the deep absorption in a story world and emotional engagement with it and is often facilitated by aesthetic media and multimodal input types, such as videos, video games and virtual reality environments (Green *et al.* 2004; Moreno, Mayer 2007; Wissmath *et al.* 2009; Wilken, Kruger 2016). It is particularly likely to occur when users have sufficient proficiency in the L2 to prevent language barriers, or when some support to comprehension is provided, such as through subtitles in video content. From a neurological perspective, immersion is linked to the activation of mirror neurons, which are stimulated both when an action is performed and when it is observed. Mirror neurons play a role in understanding actions, fostering empathy, and facilitating learning through imitation (Rizzolatti *et al.* 2002). These processes are closely tied to involvement and identification, especially in audiovisual and multimodal settings like video watching and gaming, where attention may shift away from language form and towards the content of the activity.

When engaging informally with L2 input, users' intents may change over time, and a gap often exists between learners' intentions and their actual behaviour (Sheeran, Webb 2016). As Alm (2023, p. 380) notes, informal learners who begin with the intention of improving L2 proficiency by watching TV-series may “get so involved in the plot that they forget to look

up words and binge-watch a few episodes". Typical intentional learning strategies, such as looking up unfamiliar words, may diminish as immersion deepens, as these actions disrupt the flow of the activity (Kusyk 2017). Thus, incidental learning processes can occur regardless of the initial motivation for engaging in ISLPs, as "informal language learning [and exposure] is self-initiated, self-regulated and dynamic, shifting in degrees of intent to learn and in degrees of intensity" (Alm 2023, p. 380).

2.1. Research on reasons for informal second language practices

While empirical studies on ISLPs have flourished in recent years, thorough and systematic research on the factors that drive people's engagement with English outside the classroom remains relatively limited. Most studies tend to focus on the frequency and intensity of exposure to different types of input, proficiency in English, and attitudes towards the language. However, exploring users' motivations for engaging with English can provide valuable insights into how learners interact with L2 input in informal settings and help outline viewers' profiles, by connecting individual exposure patterns with variables such as English proficiency, social and linguistic background, and specific reasons for accessing the language informally.

In their pioneering study on informal contact with English, Berns *et al.* (2007) administered a comprehensive questionnaire to 2,248 school pupils in Belgium, the Netherlands, France and Germany. While the primary focus was on the different contexts in which English was accessed, one section addressed the advantages associated with L2 English proficiency, presenting respondents with a set of predetermined options and allowing for open comments. The preset options covered social benefits (*With English I can make myself better understood abroad; With English I can more comfortably carry on a conversation*), educational and professional advantages (*You need English for further education; With English I have a better chance to get a good job*), the efficacy and appreciation of the language for communicative purposes (*A lot of things sound better in English; For a lot of things there's no equivalent expression*) and the functionality of English as a tool for accessing various media (*With English I can understand English TV programs without subtitles; With English I can understand music texts better*). Overall, students viewed English as a valuable resource across multiple social and personal domains. Yet, while the study touched on issues related to motivation and gathered both etic and emic data, it did not specifically address participants' reasons for engaging with different forms of English-language media; rather, it focused on general attitudes towards English and the broader motivations for using the language, irrespective of privileged settings or input types.

A more targeted exploration of input-specific motivations in ISLPs is found in Trinder (2017), where the author investigates Austrian Economics students' access to English-language media and technologies and collects their views on the impact of these resources on language learning. The study examines various "reasons behind technology choices" (Trinder 2017, p. 403) through open-ended questionnaire items. While most respondents reported accessing English-language media online primarily to improve their L2 skills, entertainment also emerged as a significant factor. Students engaged not only with news websites and journals, but also with TV-series, films and videos, in what the author describes as "dual purpose engagement" (Trinder 2017, p. 407). The respondents highlighted the enjoyment and almost effortless nature of L2 learning while participating in these activities (Trinder 2017, pp. 407-408). Other key factors included personal and peer-group interests; access to social, cultural and pragmatic aspects of the L2; a more accessible input, ensuing from familiarity with both characters and recurrent situations; exposure to idiomatic, colloquial and sociolinguistically varied speech, with visual cues aiding comprehension (Trinder 2017, p. 408).

The impact of social factors and availability is also touched upon in other studies on informal contact with English or on viewers' perception of AV input, including both large-scale research (Arnbjörnsdóttir, Ingvarsdóttir 2018) and case studies focused on specific input environments (Orrego-Carmona 2014). Key interpersonal factors include users' willingness to interact with other speakers in both online and offline settings, such as chats, forums and in-person contact (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2018), as well as recognition from peers within a group or fan community (Orrego-Carmona 2014; Tuominen 2018). Another major factor influencing viewers' habits and decisions to watch English-language AV products in their original version is the earlier availability of subtitled over dubbed TV-series (Orrego-Carmona 2014; Ghia, Pavesi 2021).

Recently, Pavesi and Ghia (2020) explored reasons for informal access to English through various media in their large-scale survey of postgraduate Italian students, marking the first significant study of informal contact with English in Italy. This questionnaire-based study covered a range of media and input types (e.g. films, TV series, YouTube, blogs, forums, video games, web pages, emails, personal contact), with particular attention to AV input. The study also examined the factors influencing viewers' decisions to watch AV content in English. The most common reasons cited by respondents were an orientation to language learning and a hedonic component, which involved an appreciation for original-language telecinematic products and a desire for naturalness and authenticity. These factors also influenced preferences for different subtitling options, where additional variables like accessibility and social alignment (e.g. peer-group preferences) played a role.

In her large-scale study on OILE among French and German university students, Kusyk (2020) used a detailed questionnaire and longitudinal case studies, with the questionnaire also including items on participants' reasons for accessing different media in English. An appreciation of original-language products, entertainment, language improvement or maintenance, and availability were the primary motivations. However, the emphasis shifted towards one factor depending on the type of input and activity involved: while the desire to improve one's L2 skills was only mentioned as a reason for accessing AV content in English, availability and a more diversified choice were what led students to play games and listen to English-language music. The participants engaged instead in online reading activities for academic purposes or to acquire specific knowledge.

Following a similar methodology, De Riso (2023) administered a questionnaire on the type and extent of informal experience with English to Italian university students and complemented it with longitudinal case studies on individual L2 development. Like Pavesi and Ghia (2020), this study paid special attention to AVs and participants' reasons for watching them in English versus their L1. The findings supported previous research, showing a predominant focus on authenticity, followed by an interest in English and an orientation towards L2 learning. Social factors played a relatively minor role in influencing viewers' choice to watch content in English.

Recently, Arndt (2023a, 2023b) explored learner-users' engagement with L2 input in informal settings and developed an instrument to assess it, i.e. the Informal Second Language Engagement (ISLE) questionnaire, which she administered to 506 German adolescents. In educational research, the term engagement refers to learners' involvement, interest and participation in the learning process (Arndt 2023a, p. 2) and is far from a linear and static construct: it encompasses behavioural, cognitive, and affective dimensions. Behavioural engagement refers to the actual activities learners undertake, assessed from an external, etic perspective. Cognitive engagement involves the attentional effort and potential learning strategies learner-users apply during ISLPs. Affective engagement refers to users' emotional states and reactions to informal input sources, such as enjoyment, enthusiasm, frustration, or dislike (Arndt 2023a, p. 3). Individual engagement with different media and input types may change over time and is closely linked to learners' motivation and reasons for participating in ISLPs. In Arndt's studies, the primary motivators for students to engage in informal contact with English were enjoyment and interest in the activity itself, independent of any L2-learning intents. This is reflected in a participant's comment:

Jennifer: I mean, the content is interesting to you and also the people. If you watch a video, then you like the person or what they do. But that it's in English ...

That doesn't matter if it's easy [enough]. It's not like you want to learn English and then you watch it, or something like that. (Arndt 2023b, p. 520).

In such contexts, the decision to engage with English input is not linked to learning or to a primary learning orientation, but rather derives from users' general interest in an activity and a desire to be involved in it.²

The factors affecting and regulating informal access to English are a valuable area for further research that can provide deeper insights into ISLPs across different participant populations. The current study aims to build on this research by investigating learner-users' reasons for engaging with various media in English, with a particular focus on AV input – one of the most popular *loci* of informal contact with English (see e.g. Muñoz 2020; Dressman, Sadler 2020; Vanderplank 2020; Caruana 2021) and one that, thus far, allows for greater comparability with existing research.

The reasons discussed here are input-specific and transient, bound to vary in relation to not only different media, but also sub-genres and settings. In this, they distance themselves from motivation, which is a more complex construct specifically pertaining to L2 learning (cf. Dörnyei 1998; Mariotti this volume). Given their contextual grounds, reasons can be more aptly described as situated reasons, since they depend on users' interest in a specific activity at a given moment (Arndt 2023b, p. 529), and are not necessarily associated with a learning intent. On the contrary, they often stem from factors like availability, accessibility, social interaction, enjoyment and entertainment.

In what follows, the first part of data analysis examines participants' access to audiovisuals in English to provide a general overview of the sample's behaviour. The second part focuses on the factors driving viewers' choice to watch AVs in English, incorporating both etic and emic perspectives. The study and its findings are detailed in the following sections.

3. The study

3.1. Research questions, sample and questionnaire

This study is part of a broader national project on informal access to English through different input sources and media among undergraduate and postgraduate students at four Italian universities varying in size and geographical location (Pavesi this volume). The present investigation specifically focuses on exposure to English-language audiovisuals at the

² In the current paper, the term “engagement” is used and interpreted in this more general sense, as access to and involvement with English-language input.

University of Pavia – a medium-sized, historical university in northern Italy – and is based on data collected through a questionnaire. The final sample includes 1,091 undergraduate and postgraduate students from various disciplines. Audiovisual input is the focus of the study, as it has been shown to be the type of input learner-users most frequently engage with, regardless of whether they come from dubbing or subtitling regions and given the spread of SVOD platforms worldwide (Sockett 2014; Arnbjörnsdóttir, Ingvarsdóttir 2018; Ghia, Pavesi 2021). Additionally, AV input allows for greater comparability with similar research conducted in Italy (Pavesi, Ghia 2020; De Riso 2023).

The study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: What is the extent and type of informal exposure to AVs in the sample?
- RQ2: Why do participants watch different genres of AVs in English? In other words, what are the reasons for participants' access to English-language AV content?

While RQ1 provides general data on exposure to English-language AVs in the sample and is addressed quantitatively, RQ2 is approached from both quantitative (etic) and qualitative (emic) perspectives. Respondents' answers to multiple-choice questions provide quantitative insights, while an optional open-ended question offers further qualitative depth – with the two dimensions complementing one another.

Data were collected via the IECoL questionnaire, administered to university students from various disciplines at the University of Pavia. Study programmes were grouped into three macroareas: Macroarea A, Arts and Humanities (330 students from Arts, History, Modern Languages, Psychology); Macroarea B, Economics/Law/Political and Social Science (356 students); Macroarea C, Science and Technology (405 students). The questionnaire investigates the frequency and intensity of access to English through several media, along with sociodemographic data, participants' EFL experiences, and attitudes towards English (Pavesi *et al.* 2023). The questionnaire was completed online during lectures in the presence of two researchers, to avoid the self-selection bias ensuing from administration on an exclusively voluntary basis (Dörnyei, Dewaele 2023). On average, it took participants approximately 20 minutes to complete. Given the focus on AVs, the study focuses on sections dealing with exposure to English-language films, TV-series, other programmes, and YouTube videos. Specifically, the items examine overall exposure (frequency and intensity of access to AVs in English; viewing/subtitling modalities; preferred subgenres; viewing supports) and participants' reasons for watching AVs in English – and are detailed in the Appendix.

3.2. Methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative data analyses were conducted. Multiple-choice questions and questionnaire items on the frequency and intensity of exposure to AVs are analyzed quantitatively, and descriptive statistics illustrate exposure trends. In parallel, open-ended questions are explored through qualitative analysis, more specifically thematic analysis (TA; Braun, Clarke 2022).

TA is a qualitative method that involves examining data in stages to identify categories and behavioural patterns. In the present study we apply reflexive TA, which involves prolonged reflection on the dataset through several phases. After reviewing participants' responses to open-ended questions, the author coded and grouped the data into categories that were subsequently merged into broader, recurrent patterns of meaning (Braun, Clarke 2022). These trends were then contextualized by comparing them to the patterns emerging from the quantitative analysis of multiple-choice questions. TA is inductive, semantic and critical (Dawadi 2020). Categories and behavioural patterns are derived from the data themselves (inductive analysis) and reflect the explicit content of participants' responses (semantic TA). In the final phase, the categories and patterns are interpreted critically against the backdrop of viewers' overall responses and the factors driving their behaviours.

3.3. Exposure to audiovisuals in English

3.3.1. RQ1: Overview and contextualisation

This section addresses RQ1 and briefly illustrates general exposure trends, including frequency and intensity of exposure, preferred sub-genres, viewing modalities and supports.

75% of the sample reported accessing AVs in English. Participants indicated that they watch films less frequently than TV-series and other programme types, while TV-series emerged as the most popular telecinematic genre accessed in English (with 45.5% of participants who engage with English-language AVs watching them daily or two to three times a week, Figure 1).

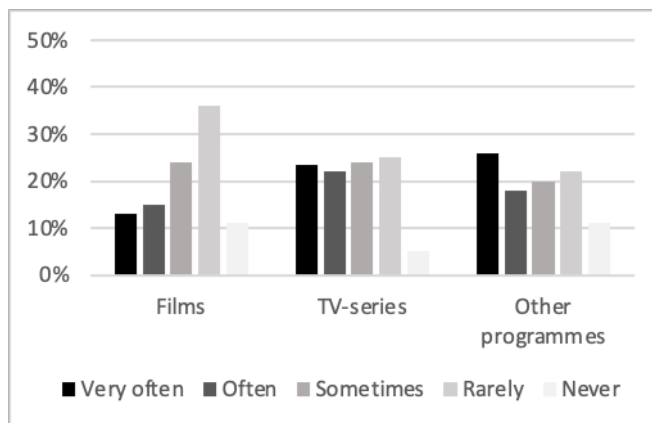


Figure 1
Frequency of exposure to audiovisuals in English.

When participants watch films in English, the activity typically lasts between one and two hours, roughly corresponding to the average duration of a full-length film (Figure 2). Similarly, viewing TV-series often involves longer exposure times, indicating a tendency to binge watch. In contrast, the length of exposure to other programmes varies more widely, as these encompass a range of AV genres.

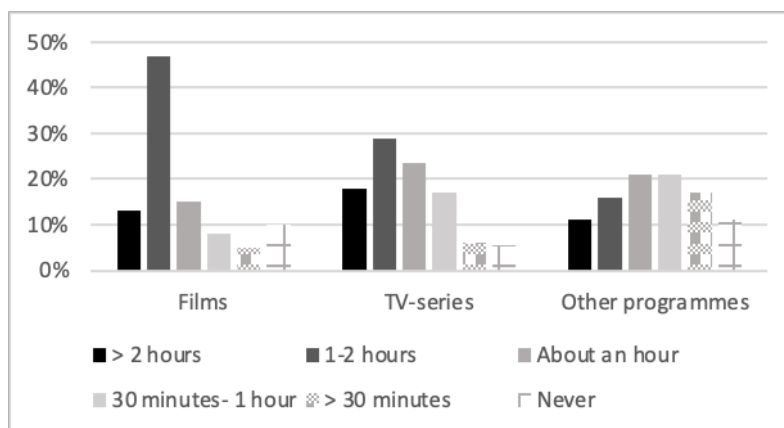


Figure 2
Length of exposure to audiovisuals in English.

Among the additional AV genres included within the category “other programmes” we find products such as documentaries, talk shows and stand-up comedy. Participants expressed a preference for watching talk shows, stand-up comedy, concerts, news programmes and documentaries in English (Figure 3). With a few exceptions (e.g. concerts), the preferred genres primarily consist of highly verbal AV content, offering viewers substantial amounts of oral, fast-paced L2 input.

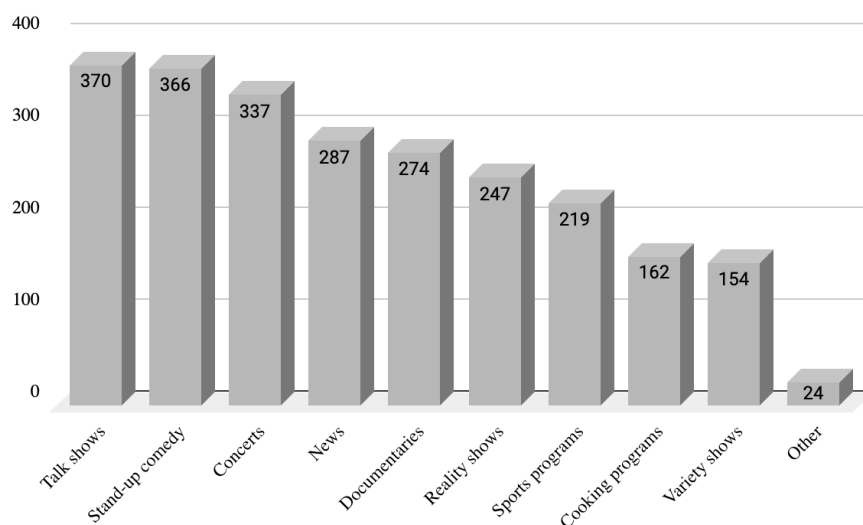


Figure 3

Preferred programmes that participants watch in English (in raw numbers).

Due to the multiplicity of contents it offers, YouTube also triggers different behavioural patterns. The vast majority of students reports accessing YouTube in English (70%), with most doing so on a regular basis (every day or two to three times a week). However, they tend to spend shorter time on the platform, typically between 30 minutes and one hour, or even less than 30 minutes (Figure 4).

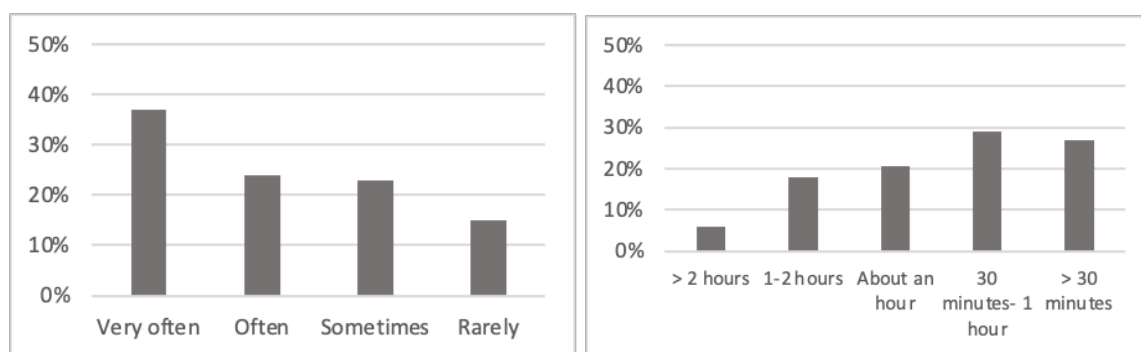


Figure 4

Frequency and length of exposure to YouTube videos in English.

The YouTube video genres that the respondents primarily watch in English include interviews, music videos, tutorials, film trailers, scenes from films and TV-series and YouTubers' videos (Figure 5). These genres typically feature short video content, and lend themselves to quick and flexible exposure sessions.

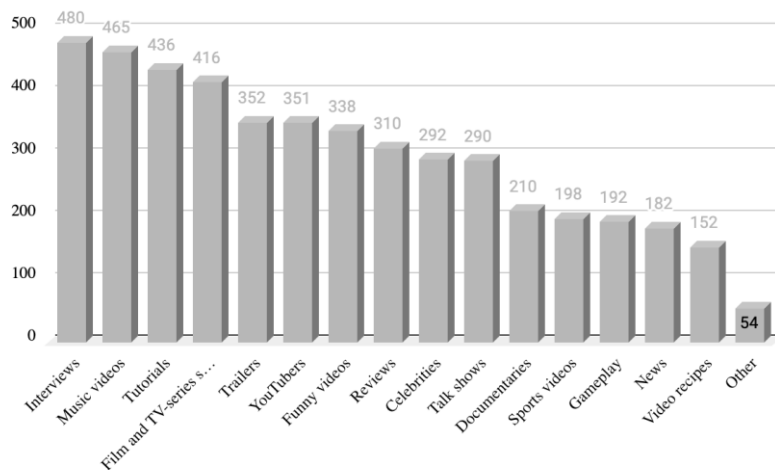


Figure 5

Preferred YouTube genres that participants watch in English (in raw numbers).

When watching films and TV-series in English, most participants report adding English subtitles (respectively 58% and 49%). A lower percentage of students opts for Italian subtitles when watching films and TV-series (28%), while only very few prefer not to use them at all (only 13%). Slightly more respondents watch other programme types without subtitles (23%), a trend that is likely related to their unavailability. Similarly, subtitles are less popular on YouTube, where they are not always an option: among students who access YouTube in English, 45% report using English subtitles, while 42% watch English-language videos without any subtitles, and only 13% add Italian subtitles.

When it comes to supports for watching films and TV-series, about three quarters of the students who overall enjoy telecinematic products in English choose computers (72%), followed by TV and smartphones, while only a minority uses tablets (Figure 6).

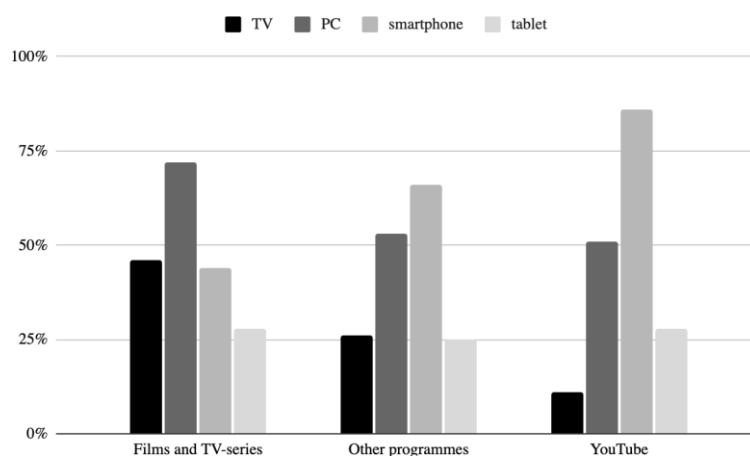


Figure 6

Preferred supports for watching different audiovisuals in English.

In contrast, different trends emerge for other programmes, which are preferably accessed through smaller and portable devices like smartphones (66%), followed by computers (53%), and with only small percentages of participants using tablets and TV. Unsurprisingly, the preference for smartphones is particularly evident when watching YouTube videos (86%). Overall, supports vary by AV genre and consequently video duration, although media convergence allows access to the same contents across multiple digital devices connected to the Internet, including smartphones, laptops, and smart TVs.

3.3.2. RQ2: Reasons for watching English-language audiovisuals

Following the overview of access to AV input in the sample, the analysis will now move onto its main focus: identifying the factors driving informal exposure to audiovisual content in English (RQ2). Initial quantitative data are derived from multiple-choice questionnaire items, which presented the respondents with a set of options (see Appendix) and enabled researchers to collect substantial amounts of behavioural data from an etic perspective. Figure 7 shows the main reasons reported by respondents for watching films, TV-series and other programmes in English, expressed as percentages out of the students who indicated they watch AVs in English.

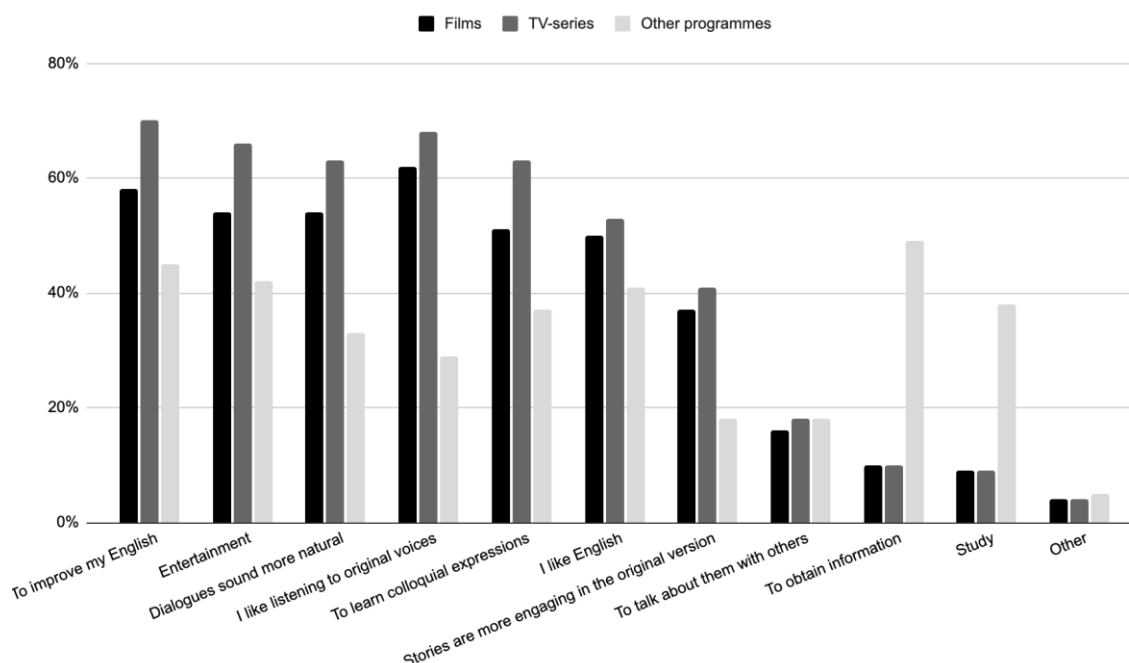


Figure 7
Participants' reasons for watching audiovisuals in English.

The primary motives for watching films in English within the sample include hedonic reasons, such as a search for naturalness in dialogue and actors' voices and an appreciation of the language; a desire to improve L2 skills – encompassing both a general focus on the language and a willingness to learn colloquial expressions; entertainment. Users' expressed intents are more pronounced for TV-series and show a slightly different distribution. An orientation to L2 learning is the primary reason why viewers say they watch series in their original English-language version, as they also serve as tools to develop competence in colloquial registers. The search for naturalness and language appreciation remain highly significant, while entertainment becomes a noticeably stronger factor compared to films. Involvement in the story is cited as an important reason, whereas sociality plays a minor role when users decide to watch TV-series in English.

Conversely, respondents indicate accessing other AV programmes in English for different reasons, primarily knowledge seeking and study. While interest in L2 improvement still affects viewers' decisions, it is to a lesser extent, alongside entertainment, an appreciation of English and other hedonic factors. Due to the lower narrative intent of this genre, involvement is less relevant compared to films and TV-series; similarly, sociality is recorded but remains a minor issue, showing a consistent distribution across all three genres.

When examining the main reasons learner-users access YouTube content in English, the following trends emerge (Figure 8).

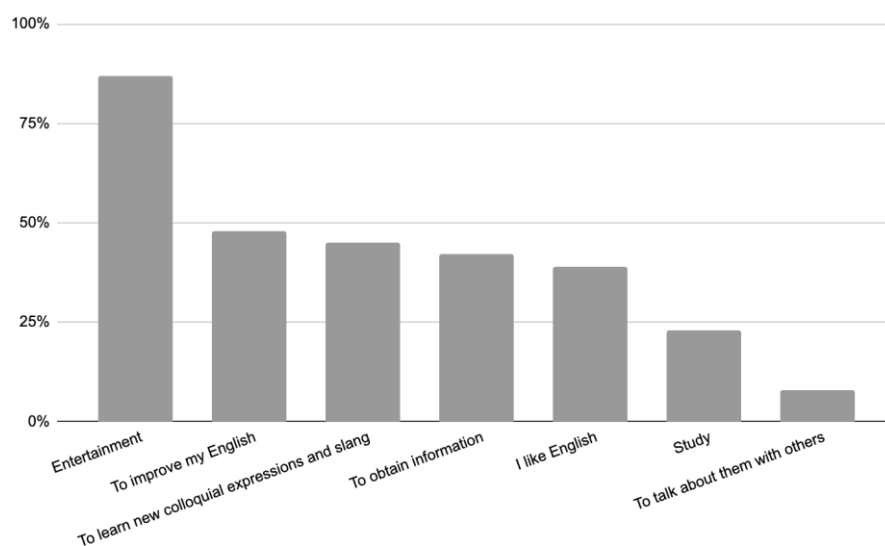


Figure 8

Main reasons for watching YouTube content in English (percentages out of the students who reported watching YouTube content in English).

The participants are drawn to English-language content on YouTube primarily for entertainment (87%). Although respondents' orientation towards L2 development is a relevant factor, it is not the main one; 48% of those who access YouTube in English report doing so to improve their English, and 45% do so specifically to learn colloquial language and slang. Knowledge-seeking also has a considerable impact (42%), as does language appreciation (39%). Only 23% of the respondents are driven by study.

3.3.2.1 Reasons for exposure across different disciplinary areas

In a subsequent phase of analysis, participants were grouped by disciplinary areas. Since Humanities students also include language specialists, a fourth, smaller group consisting of Modern Language students was isolated from the other respondents in the Humanities field. Methodologically, this choice is based on the assumption that language specialists may have different attitudes towards foreign languages and may exhibit different behaviours from their peers. The final groups included 86 Modern Language students (ML), 244 Humanities students (Hum), 356 Social and Political Science, Law, and Economics students (SPLE), and 405 Science and Technology students (SciTech).

The vast majority of students from all disciplinary areas access English-language AVs. Among the respondents majoring in Modern Languages, 93% report watching films, TV-series and/or other programmes in English. In comparison, 80% of other Humanities students, 72% of social scientists, and 70% of Science and Technology students report watching AVs in English (Figure 9).

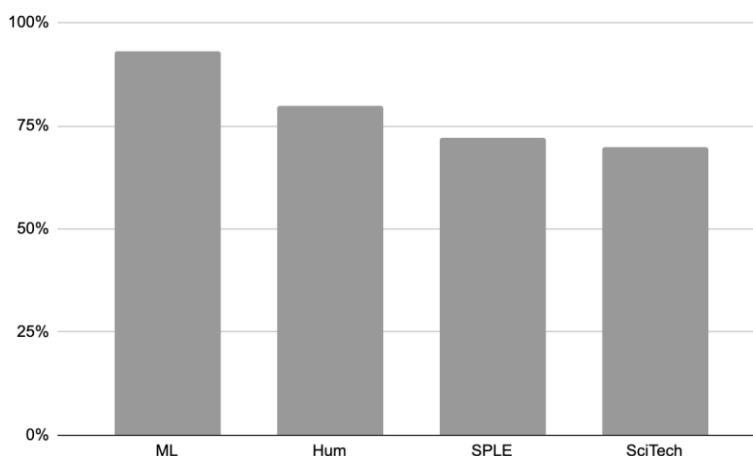


Figure 9
Access to English-language AVs by disciplinary area.

Examining these different disciplinary areas reveals the following patterns (Table 1; percentages are calculated based on the total number of students from each disciplinary area who reported watching AVs in English).

	Films				TV-series				Other programmes			
	Hum	SPLE	SciTech	ML	Hum	SPLE	SciTech	ML	Hum	SPLE	SciTech	ML
I like listening to original voices	75%	57%	53%	76%	78%	61%	64%	83%	33%	28%	25%	38%
To improve my English	61%	60%	49%	71%	70%	72%	63%	83%	47%	46%	41%	51%
To learn colloquial expressions	52%	50%	46%	73%	62%	60%	60%	84%	34%	39%	34%	50%
Entertainment	58%	48%	52%	71%	68%	60%	66%	81%	44%	37%	45%	46%
Dialogue sounds more natural	61%	52%	49%	58%	69%	59%	60%	66%	34%	32%	32%	43%
I like English	53%	49%	43%	68%	59%	52%	47%	71%	42%	39%	36%	61%
Study	10%	8%	5%	20%	6%	12%	5%	18%	38%	32%	39%	54%
To obtain information	12%	11%	8%	14%	12%	11%	8%	11%	52%	41%	50%	64%
Stories are more engaging in the original version	40%	38%	34%	41%	43%	41%	37%	50%	20%	23%	14%	15%
To talk about them with others	15%	15%	12%	30%	22%	16%	13%	31%	18%	19%	17%	23%
Other	3%	5%	4%	0%	2%	6%	4%	0%	5%	5%	6%	1%

Table 1

Participants' main reasons for watching audiovisuals in English by disciplinary area. Unsurprisingly, language specialist students engage the most in ISLPs based on AVs. These students demonstrate a stronger orientation towards L2 learning, particularly for films and TV-series (respectively 71% and 83% of students), especially due to a desire to be exposed to colloquial registers (73% and 84%). TV-series are particularly popular, with students often watching them in English also for entertainment (81%), language appreciation (71%) and naturalness (66%). Knowledge seeking (64%) and language appreciation (61%) are the primary motivations for these students when accessing other programmes in English followed by study (54%) and a desire to improve language skills (51%).

Students from other Humanities disciplines access AVs less frequently and intensely than language specialists but more than Social Science and Science and Technology students. Among those who access AVs in English, an appreciation of language and product authenticity prevails when watching films and TV-series in the foreign language, followed by an orientation towards L2 learning. In contrast, knowledge-seeking takes precedence when accessing other programmes, consistent with the overall sample.

Despite their lower engagement with AVs in English, Social Science students show a stronger inclination towards language learning compared to more hedonic and entertainment-related factors when watching all AV genres in the foreign language.

Although they overall access AVs in English to a lesser extent, Science and Technology students align with the main trends observed in the total sample, with entertainment serving as a slightly stronger reason for watching films and TV-series in the L2. Information-seeking remains the primary factor leading these students to access other programmes in English.

87% of language specialists and 73% of other Humanities students declare they access YouTube in English, compared to 67% of social scientists and Science and Technology students (Figure 10). The students' main reasons for watching YouTube content in English are distributed by disciplinary area as illustrated in Table 2.

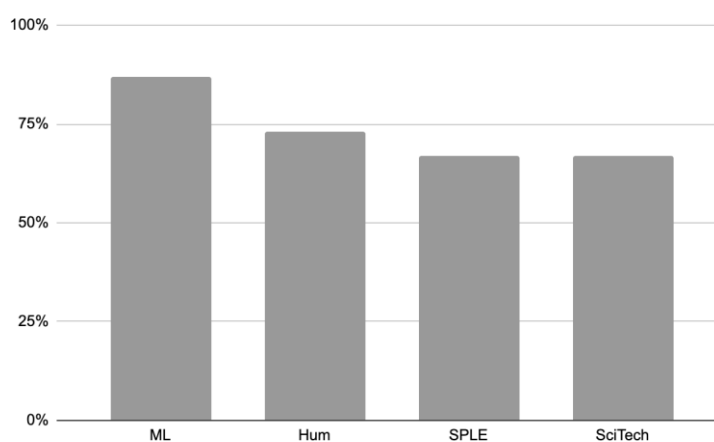


Figure 10

Access to YouTube content in English by disciplinary area.

	Hum.	SPLE	SciTech	ML
Entertainment	89%	82%	88%	96%
To improve my English	50%	45%	45%	64%
To learn new colloquial expressions and slang	47%	43%	40%	67%
To obtain information	44%	36%	46%	35%
I like English	38%	38%	34%	60%
Study	21%	17%	26%	32%
To talk about them with others	7%	9%	7%	11%

Table 2

Participants' main reasons for watching YouTube content in English by macroarea.

Overall, the percentages align with the trends observed in the whole sample. Entertainment ranks first across all disciplinary areas, with Modern Language students still reporting higher engagement than the other groups. An orientation towards L2 learning comes next, serving both as a general motivator and as an opportunity to learn colloquial English. This factor is equally relevant for Science and Technology students as knowledge-seeking.

Language appreciation ranks next; however, with the exception of language specialists, relatively few students in the other areas mention it.

3.3.3. *An emic perspective*

Further data analysis was conducted on the “Other” option in multiple-choice questionnaire items, where respondents had the opportunity to provide additional feedback beyond the preset answers. This option was included to gain a deeper emic perspective on the data. Although these responses represent only a minority of the total answers (3%, 33 responses), they offer valuable insights into participants' behaviour and enable to observe data from a user-internal dimension.

Through thematic analysis, all responses to the open-ended questions were carefully examined and subsequently coded by similarity, by grouping together answers that addressed similar topics. Based on semantics, different macrocategories were then generated. The reported intents of participants in the free-answer option related to telecinematic texts can be grouped into the following main categories³: *availability*, *immersive experience*, *orientation to language learning*, *study*, *habit* and *reference to other AV genres*.

Availability was frequently cited as a relevant factor leading viewers to watch films, TV-series and other programmes in English. Respondents noted that certain AVs are only available in English, leaving viewers with no alternative (example 1). When specified, many of the “English-only” programmes mentioned include sports matches and comedy shows (example 2).

[1] *Alcuni dei programmi o film che guardo non sono mai stati doppiati in italiano* [some of the programmes or films I watch have never been dubbed into Italian]

[2] *Perchè alcuni programmi non sono tradotti, ma sono disponibili solo in lingua originale (ad esempio "Impractical [sic] Jokers")* [because some programmes have not been translated, but are only available in the original language (for example, *Impractical Jokers*)]

In other cases, users do have a choice but prefer watching AVs in English because this triggers greater immersion, allowing the product to be fully enjoyed (see 3 and 4, in which L2 competence is also mentioned). This aspect is often linked to a dislike of Italian dubbing (example 4), creating an interplay between entertainment and hedonic gratification.

[3] *Perché guardando film /serie TV in italiano si perde praticamente metà del prodotto che si sta guardando. Sembra di guardare un altro programma* [because when watching films/TV-series in Italian one

³ These factors are not always distinct from the ones provided as preset options, but allowed participants to verbalize their thoughts and views more freely.

misses basically half the product they are watching. It's as if you are watching a different programme]

[4] *Generalmente i doppiatori italiani sono bravi, ma ascoltare i film e serie TV o qualsiasi video in lingua originale permette di avere un'immersione maggiore e anche di espandere le proprie conoscenze e abilità linguistiche, importanti più che mai nel mondo odierno* [generally Italian dubbing actors are good, but listening to films and TV-series or any other programme in the original language leads to better immersion and allows to expand one's knowledge and language skills, which is increasingly important in today's world]

[5] *Spesso, le traduzioni e i doppiaggi non mi soddisfano* [oftentimes, I am not fully satisfied with the translation and dubbing]

As mentioned in example 4, an awareness of the language learning potential is further highlighted as a driver to English-language AVs (6), along with study (7) and habit (8):

[6] *Perché so l'inglese e se non lo faccio lo disimparo* [because I know English and if I don't (watch AVs in English) I unlearn]

[7] *Studio* [study]

[8] *Abitudine* [habit]

In some cases, respondents provided answers related to genres other than films, TV-series and other programmes, most typically YouTube (investigated in the following questionnaire section; example 9), or simply mentioned an AV genre without providing any specific details on their reasons for watching it in English (10):

[9] *Video in inglese su YouTube per spiegazioni di matematica* [English-language videos on YouTube with math's explanations]

[10] *Talk shows*

Partially different topics emerge regarding YouTube content in English, which include *availability, language appreciation, variety and appreciation of content and sociality*.

The lack of equivalent content in Italian is mentioned in most free responses (11 and 12). A related aspect is the wider range of content offered in English (13):

[11] *Perché sono interessata a particolari canali fruibili solo in inglese* [because I'm interested in specific channels that are only available in English]

[12] *Perché alcuni contenuti esistono solo in inglese* [because some contents only exist in English]

[13] *Perché la scelta contenutistica è molto più varia di quella italiana* [because the content choice is much more varied than in Italian]

Some viewers reported accessing YouTube in English because of language appreciation and a desire to listen to the language. Example 14 concurrently hints at how practical reasons also affect the respondent's choice:

[14] *Perché la comprendo completamente e mi pare dunque la scelta più immediata* [because I fully understand it [English] and this seems like the most immediate choice]

Lastly, one student mentioned sociality as a trigger for watching YouTube in English, probably in relation to specific video content (15):

[15] *Per rendere contento mio fratello che mi vuole [sic] che guardi questi video* [to make my brother happy as he wants me to watch these videos]

4. Summary and discussion

The quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data gathered in the current study show a considerable consumption of English-language audiovisuals among Italian university students (RQ1). Trends vary by AV genre, with users preferring TV-series and YouTube content and accessing them on a regular basis. According to their reports, respondents often watch TV series and YouTube videos in English daily or two to three times a week and engage in longer (or binge) watching sessions with TV-series. The data also indicate a wide variety of AV content accessed in English through the media, ranging from more “traditional” films and series to talk shows, stand-up comedy, variety shows and interviews. This aligns with recent research showing that, despite its status as a dubbing country on national television and media channels, Italy is experiencing an increase in media affordances in English, with university students and in general younger generations being the key target audience (Ghia, Pavesi 2021). Subtitles are a valuable support when accessing English-language AVs, but the students in the sample predominantly choose bimodal ones, suggesting a desire for a “fully-L2” experience. English subtitles are preferred across all AV genres, even when they may be automatically generated, as is often the case on YouTube. The changing landscape of AV exposure is also evident in the preferred supports for watching, where TV is being replaced by laptops and smartphones, reflecting a tendency to access English-language input on the move. Unsurprisingly, supports vary by genre and video length: the shorter the video, the more likely the viewers are to use smartphones and portable devices.

In response to RQ2, students are drawn to English-language AVs for a variety of reasons, which often intertwine and differ slightly across i) AV genres, ii) participants' areas of study, and iii) students' language-specialist versus non-specialist status. Overall, students report accessing films and TV-series in English as a means to fully appreciate the language and the naturalness of AV products; to improve or maintain their proficiency in English, particularly in colloquial registers; to be entertained; and to feel more involved in the story. The respondents are primarily drawn to L2 TV-

series, where language improvement, the search for greater naturalness and entertainment serve as the strongest motivators, suggesting a multi-purpose intent (cf. Trinder 2017, p. 407). Other AV programmes are accessed in English to a lesser extent and for different reasons, primarily knowledge seeking, although students' awareness of their learning impact still plays a role, along with hedonic factors and the overall enjoyment of the experience.

When examining different user groups, language specialist students engage considerably more with English-language AVs compared to students from other disciplines. Students from other Humanities disciplines also tend to watch AVs in English more frequently and intensely than social scientists and Science and Technology students. Humanities students primarily access AV products to fully appreciate the language and seek an authentic experience, although the orientation to L2 learning is also a relevant factor. Students from the socio-political/economic/legal and science/technology areas watch AVs in English less frequently. When they do, the former show a primary orientation towards learning, while the latter aim for entertainment and enjoyment of the language, although they are aware of the L2 learning potential. For language specialists, the orientation towards L2 learning is stronger, especially when it comes to TV-series. This goes hand-in-hand with entertainment, suggesting that an interest in language improvement coexists with enjoyment, particularly among learner-users who specialize in English.

Entertainment is the primary factor influencing participants when they access YouTube content in English, and this trend is generalised across all groups. While, at a considerable distance, the second most frequent driver is the improvement of L2 skills, it is concurrently L2 development and knowledge seeking for Science and Technology students, again indicating the wider variety of factors that affect informal exposure in this group – and suggesting that language-related aspects have a lower relevance among these students.

The overall results align with trends recorded in recent research in Italy (Pavesi, Ghia 2020; De Riso 2023) and abroad (Trinder 2017). In particular, a search for authenticity and an appreciation of the language emerge as strong motivators in the sample, suggesting that the target audience largely likes English in itself before (or alongside) viewing it as a means to achieve other goals. This is especially true for students who are potentially more “sensitive” to language issues, such as those majoring in modern languages and humanities. More instrumental aims, i.e., accessing AVs in English as a means to improve L2 competence or to reach specific content, characterise students from other disciplinary areas, although in general they seek contact with English-language AVs to a much lower extent.

Even though improving one's skills in the L2 is a pervasive goal, the greater immersion that original-language AVs can provide is explicitly

acknowledged by the participants, who also mention it spontaneously in response to open-ended items. Despite its relevance in other studies (Orrego-Carmona 2014), sociality appears to be a minor factor when users decide to watch AVs in English. However, its variable impact across genres and majors suggests that it does play a role in learner-users' experiences.

Further instrumental factors emerge from the emic insights gained through the questionnaires, primarily availability. Learner-users decide to watch AVs in English, particularly YouTube content and TV-series, because they are mainly interested in accessing products that are only available in that language. When availability is not an issue, hedonic aspects come into play, as some students report choosing English due to a dislike of Italian dubbing.

5. Conclusive remarks

ISLPs are nowadays an important dimension of individuals' L2 learning experiences. The media represent the primary affordance for learner-users, and audiovisuals play a key role due to their wide accessibility, the flourishing of subgenres, and the multiplicity of viewing modes. Access to English-language AVs is also facilitated through different supports, creating a contact experience that is becoming increasingly flexible, dynamic and self-directed (Dressman, Sadler 2020; Benson 2021).

In line with previous research (e.g. Trinder 2017; Pavesi, Ghia 2020; De Riso 2023), the current study shows that when watching AVs in English the target Italian university learner-users do so for a variety of reasons, suggesting a multi-purpose approach to access. While an orientation to L2 learning is relevant, so are language appreciation, entertainment, involvement and knowledge-seeking – which are especially evident when some genres are concerned, e.g. YouTube and other programme types. Reasons for access are therefore dynamic, situated constructs that change across contexts, media types and students' disciplinary interests. Overall, the wide variety of factors mentioned by the participants hints at an extensive orientation to meaning and content during the activities and at a generally immersive experience. Within an environment characterised by high dynamism and growing L2 affordances, the target audience can therefore be described as well aware of the learning potential of such affordances, while at the same time eager to be entertained when accessing the L2 outside the classroom and to enjoy a fully authentic viewing experience. An orientation towards language improvement, hedonic or enjoyment factors and more contingent variables (e.g. availability) often merge and overlap in a mutually-feeding, virtuous circle, and recreate a second language learning environment even in a traditionally foreign language learning context like Italy.

By addressing only a single portion of the total project sample and relying exclusively on questionnaire data, the current study paves the way for larger-scale research and further qualitative, emic investigations. Such research may help shed more light on individual motivators for accessing AV input and combine with a deeper understanding of learner-users' engagement, attitudes and beliefs towards English and Englishes (cf. Aiello 2018) within an ever-changing scenario of L2 use and learning.

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Annexes

Target questionnaire items:

1. Guardi film, serie TV o altri programmi in lingua inglese? Sì/No

[Do you watch films, TV-series or other programmes in English? Yes/No]

1.1 Quanto spesso guardi in lingua inglese...?

[How often do you watch in English...?]

	Molto spesso (tutti i giorni o quasi) [<i>very often: every day or almost every day</i>]	Spesso (due o tre volte la settimana) [<i>often: two or three times a week</i>]	Qualche volta (una volta alla settimana) [<i>sometimes : once a week</i>]	Raramente (una o due volte al mese) [<i>rarely: once or twice per month</i>]	Mai [<i>never</i>]
Film [films]					
Serie TV [TV-series]					
Altri programmi (documentari, talk show, news, ecc.) [other programmes (documentaries, talk shows, news, etc.)]					

1.2. Per quanto tempo guardi film, serie TV e/o altri programmi in lingua inglese complessivamente il giorno in cui lo fai?

[For how long do you watch films, TV-series or other programmes in English on the whole on the day you do it?]

	Più di due ore [More than 2 hours]	Da una a due ore [1 to 2 hours]	Circa un'ora [About an hour]	Da 30 minuti a un'ora [30 minutes to one hour]	Meno di 30 minuti [Less than 30 minutes]	Mai [Never]
Film [films]						
Serie TV [TV-series]						
Altri programmi [other programmes]						

1.3. Se guardi film e serie TV in lingua inglese, li preferisci:
 [If you watch films and TV-series in English, you prefer them:]

In lingua originale senza sottotitoli [in the original language without subtitles]
 Con sottotitoli in inglese [with English subtitles]
 Con sottotitoli in italiano [with Italian subtitles]

1.4 Se guardi altri programmi (documentari, talk show, news, ecc.) in lingua inglese, li preferisci:
 [If you watch other programmes (documentaries, talk shows, news, etc.) in English, you prefer them:]

In lingua originale senza sottotitoli [in the original language without subtitles]
 Con sottotitoli in inglese [with English subtitles]
 Con sottotitoli in italiano [with Italian subtitles]

1.5. A parte film e serie TV, quali altri generi audiovisivi/ televisivi ti piace guardare in lingua inglese?
 [Apart from films and TV-series, which other audiovisual/TV genres do you like watching in English?]

- News
- Sport
- Talk shows [talk shows]
- Reality shows
- Concerti [concerts]
- Varietà [variety shows]
- Documentari [documentaries]
- Programmi di cucina [cooking shows]
- Stand-up comedy
- Altro [other]

1.6 Quale supporto utilizzi in genere?
 [Which support do you usually use?]

	TV	Computer	Smartphone	Tablet
Film [films]				
Serie TV [TV-series]				
Altri programmi [other programmes]				

1.7. Per quali ragioni guardi programmi in lingua inglese originale?
 [Why do you watch AV programmes in English?]
 È possibile indicare più di una opzione. [You can select more than one option]

	Film [films]	Serie TV [TV-series]	Altri programmi [other programmes]
Per migliorare l'inglese [To learn / improve my English]			
Per svago/intrattenimento [Entertainment]			
Per studio universitario [University study]			

Perché i dialoghi sono più naturali [Dialogue sounds more natural]			
Per accedere a informazioni [To obtain information]			
Perché mi piace ascoltare le voci originali [I like listening to original voices]			
Perché ne posso parlare con altre persone [To talk about them with others]			
Perché mi piace la lingua inglese [I like English]			
Perché nella versione originale le storie sono più avvincenti [Stories are more engaging in the original version]			
Per imparare espressioni colloquiali [To learn colloquial expressions]			
Altro _____ [Other]			

1.7.1 Se hai scelto Altro, puoi specificare:
[If you have selected Other, you can specify:]

2. Guardi YouTube in lingua inglese? Sì/No
[Do you watch YouTube in English? Yes/No]

2.1 Quanto spesso guardi YouTube in lingua inglese?
[How often do you watch YouTube in English?]
Molto spesso (tutti i giorni o quasi) [*very often: every day or almost every day*]
Spesso (due o tre volte la settimana) [*often: two or three times a week*]
Qualche volta (una volta alla settimana) [*sometimes: once a week*]
Raramente (una o due volte al mese) [*rarely: once or twice per month*]

2.2. Per quanto tempo guardi YouTube in lingua inglese complessivamente il giorno in cui lo fai?
[For how long do you watch YouTube in English on the whole on the day you do it?]
Più di due ore [More than 2 hours]
Da una a due ore [1 to 2 hours]
Circa un'ora [About an hour]
Da 30 minuti a un'ora [30 minutes to one hour]
Meno di 30 minuti [Less than 30 minutes]

2.3 Se guardi video su YouTube in lingua inglese, li preferisci:
[If you watch YouTube videos in English, you prefer them:]

In lingua originale senza sottotitoli [in the original language without subtitles]
Con sottotitoli in inglese [with English subtitles]
Con sottotitoli in italiano [with Italian subtitles]

2.4. Quali tipi di video guardi su YouTube in inglese? [*What types of videos do you watch on YouTube in English?*]
 Video musicali [*music videos*]
 Tutorial [*tutorials*]

- Recensioni [reviews]
- Scene di film e serie TV [scenes from films and TV-series]
- Sport
- Video comici [funny videos]
- Documentari [documentaries]
- Ricette di cucina [recipes]
- Talk show [talk shows]
- Gameplay
- News
- Trailer [trailers]
- Interviste [interviews]
- Celebrità [celebrities]
- YouTubers
- Altro [other]

2.5 Se guardi video su YouTube in inglese, quale supporto utilizzi?
 [If you watch YouTube videos in English, which support do you usually use?]
 TV / Computer / Smartphone / Tablet

2.6. Per quali ragioni guardi video su YouTube in lingua inglese?
 [Why do you watch YouTube videos in English?]
 È possibile indicare più di una opzione. [You can select more than one option]

- Per svago/intrattenimento [Entertainment]
- Per studio [study]
- Per migliorare l'inglese [To improve my English]
- Per parlarne con altre persone [To talk about them with others]
- Per accedere a informazioni [To obtain information]
- Per imparare nuove parole ed espressioni di uso corrente e slang [To learn new words and everyday/slang expressions]
- Perché mi piace la lingua inglese [I like English]
- Altro _____ [Other]