

Broadcast Television to Streaming Platforms:

How the *Heartbreak High* reboot adapted to reflect contemporary audiences.

Introduction

Over the past three decades, television has transformed significantly from the rigid schedules of broadcast programming to the flexible, personalised experience that streaming services offer. This shift has not only affected how audiences consume media, but also how TV content is structured and received. As a result, both storytelling techniques and audience expectation have evolved significantly. One area in which these evolutions are especially visible is in the rise of reboots and remakes, where these changes are evident. This essay explores the transition from broadcast television to streaming platforms, how this shift has impacted viewing habit and the motivations behind reboots. Using *Heartbreak High* as a case study, it will examine how the 2022 reboot adapts the original 1990s series to better reflect the realities, values, and viewing preferences of today's audiences.

Broadcast to Streaming

Over the past three decades, the transformation of television has reshaped the viewing habits of audiences. In the 1990s, we had 'broadcast television', which refers to the conventional

approach to broadcasting television content to a large audience.¹ One of the key features of traditional broadcast television is its scheduled programming where ‘Television networks develop schedules that specify the air dates for particular programmes, films, newscasts, and other types of content.’² If viewers want to watch a certain show they must tune in at the designated time. In the introduction to David Morley’s *Family Television*, Stuart Hall notes that the medium of television ‘has become integrated into the everyday processes and codes of family interaction.’³ Broadcast television had become central to everyday life with the TV schedule woven into their daily habits and routines, as no one wanted to miss the next episode of their favourite show.

Niemeyer and Daniela Wentz argue that serial television creates the sensation of longing amongst their audience. Stating that the act of watching television can induce a ‘homely feeling’ and that a ‘component of serials themselves is the necessity of habitual viewing, and this seems to strengthen the feeling of longing on the part of the audience.’⁴ Sitting down at the same time every week to watch your favourite show, with characters you’ve grown to know and care for, is a ritual within itself. A ritual that becomes so woven into the lives of the audience, that with the eventual ending of a long-watched and beloved series it leaves a void and sense of loss for those familiar characters and their stories. Serialised storytelling, a ‘type of storytelling in which each episode builds upon the previous one, creating a continuous and ongoing story’⁵, is what keeps

¹ Oluwawapelumi Iyinoluwa Ola, ‘Impact of Streaming Services on Traditional Broadcast Television’, *Sapientia Foundation Journal of Education, Sciences and Gender Studies*, 5.3 (2023), p. 185.

² Ola, p.185.

³ Stuart Hall, ‘Introduction’ to *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*, by David Morley (London: Comedia, 1986), p. ix.

⁴ Katharina Niemeyer and Daniela Wentz, ‘Nostalgia Is Not What It Used to Be: Serial Nostalgia and Nostalgic Television Series’, in *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future*, ed. By Katharina Niemeyer (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p.132.

⁵ Petro Katerynych, Vita Goian, Oles Goian, ‘Exploring the Evolution of Storytelling in the Streaming Era: A Study of Narrative Trends in Netflix Original Content’, *Communication Today*, 14.2 (2023), p. 33.

viewers engaged and constantly longing for more. This longing ‘which pertains to the logic of seriality’⁶ is a key element that can be leveraged when exploiting nostalgia.

Niemeyer mentions that television takes advantage of the longing for show ‘by endless reruns and by remakes.’⁷ This constant airing of reruns enables audiences to revisit and re-engage with familiar programmes, constantly keeping them alive and relevant in viewers’ minds. Amy Holdsworth noted in 2007 that the ‘recirculation of past television has noticeably increased with the emergence of multichannel and digital television’⁸. Since then, consumers have been introduced to streaming services where they can watch movies and TV shows, both new and old, at the touch of a button. ‘Streaming allows the user to watch programs according to their own timeframe and schedule’,⁹ no longer limited by scheduled television results in viewers watching what they want when they choose to. The freedom that streaming services offer have also caused changes in audiences viewing habits, introducing the new trend of ‘binge watching’, where ‘they consume several episodes of a television show at one go’.¹⁰ Viewers having access to all the episodes of multiple shows gives them the ability to rewatch shows from their past, or the opportunity to watch shows that they didn’t get to before. As a result, an influx of fan edits has emerged online about shows from years ago online, generating new conversations and people asking about reboots as they are longing to know what happened to the characters since the show ended.

⁶ Niemeyer and Wentz, p. 134

⁷ Niemeyer and Wentz, p. 134.

⁸ Amy Holdsworth, “‘Television Resurrections’: Television and Memory’, *Cinema Journal*, 47.3 (2007), p. 139.

⁹ Benjamin Edward Burroughs, ‘Streaming Media: Audience and Industry Shifts in a Networked Society’ (University of Iowa, 2015), p.82.

¹⁰ Anirban Mahanti, “The Evolving Streaming Media Landscape,” *IEEE Internet Computing*, 18.1 (2014), pp. 4–6.

Reboots and Remakes

Niemeyer has stated that the beginning of the 21st century marked an ‘increase in expressions of nostalgia, nostalgic objects, media content styles’, calling it the ‘nostalgic boom’ which has infiltrated various aspects of our lives.¹¹ One of the various aspects that this ‘nostalgic boom’ has infiltrated its way into is films and TV. In 2014 Carlen Lavigne observed that ‘remakes are pervasive in today’s popular culture, whether they take the form of reboots, “re-imaginings,” or overtly familiar sequels,’¹² and this still applies to today. From films on the big screen to television series on our screens at home, audiences have been increasingly greeted with shows and films from their past. Todd Gitlin, in 1983 used the term ‘recombinant’ to describe the selecting elements of recent popular hits to be ‘spliced together to make a eugenic success’,¹³ highlighting that networks are trying to ‘capitalise on and mobilise demonstrable tastes.’¹⁴ Similarly, we can apply this to how producers and networks of today are rebooting or re-imaging television shows to capitalise on their pre-existing popularity and the nostalgic attachments audiences have with the original.

Many reboots are targeted at both those who ‘knew and loved the original texts’ and those who were ‘possibly too young to know the original’ but potentially sparking an interest to see the original which is easier to do with streaming services.¹⁵ Shows like *Fuller House* (2016-2020), *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (2016) and *Will & Grace* (2017-2020) prioritise the original fan base, exploiting their nostalgia by giving them more of the characters they are so

¹¹ Katharina Niemeyer, ‘Introduction: Media and Nostalgia’, in *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past Present and Future*, ed. By Katharina Niemeyer (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 7-8.

¹² *Remake Television: Reboot, Re-Use, Recycle*, ed. by Carlen LaVigne (Lexington Books, 2014), p. 6.

¹³ Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (Routledge, 1994), p. 55.

¹⁴ Gitlin, p.67.

¹⁵ Ryan Lizardi, *Mediated Nostalgia: Individual Memory and Contemporary Mass Media* (Lexington Books, 2016), p. 116.

fond of. However, some remakes focus on adapting the show to fit with contemporary audiences. Michael Arnzen states that a remake's marketing strategy 'reduces text to title, packing a narrative body into a refined 'brand name''¹⁶. Producers can pack a new narrative, characters and updated themes to suit a contemporary audience into a pre-existing 'brand name' of an established show. An example of a taking a known show from the past and revitalising it for a modern audience is the teen series *Heartbreak High* (HBH).

Case Study: Heartbreak High

The original *Heartbreak High*¹⁷ aired in Australia on the 27th of February 1994 on Network 10. The first season aired weekly on Sundays at 6.30pm, comprising of 38 episodes, each about 40 minutes long.¹⁸ The show initially stemmed from the film *Heartbreak Kid*, which tells the story of a high school student having an affair his teacher. However, when adapting it into a TV series the creators moved the focus to show the 'problems of inner city living, the racial tension that involves, and the journey of discovery embarked upon by a group of kids eager to prove themselves in a hostile world.'¹⁹ The main ensemble of the cast were second-generation non Anglo-Australian of varying nationalities such as; Greek, Italian, and Lebanese. This TV series was considered 'ahead of its time' due to its multicultural representation and tackling of social issues.²⁰ Pieter Aquila states that while the TV series was produced by a white

¹⁶ Michael A. Arnzen, *The Same and the New: "Cape Fear" and the Hollywood Remake as Metanarrative Discourse, Narrative*, (1996) 4.2 p.175.

¹⁷ *Heartbreak High*, created by Ben Gannon, Southern Star Entertainment, 1994–1999

¹⁸ Wikipedia contributors, 'Heartbreak High', *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, 2025
<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Heartbreak_High&oldid=1277996915>

¹⁹ *Heart-Throbs of Heartbreak High*, ed. by Mark Wallace (The Canberra Times TV Guide, 1994).
[<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/134303447?searchTerm=heartbreak%20high>]

²⁰ 'Netflix Is Making a Heartbreak High Reboot — Will It Do the Original Justice?', *GQ Australia*, 7 December 2021, <https://www.gq.com.au/culture/entertainment/netflix-is-making-a-heartbreak-high-reboot-will-it-do-the->

Anglo-Australian team they still present non Anglo-Australians as their protagonists and their bicultural conflicts.²¹

The first season of the rebooted *Heartbreak High*²², made for Netflix, was released on the 14th September 2022. The season contains eight episodes with 40 minutes duration time that was released all at once for instant viewing for audiences. Set in the same high school as the original series, Hartley High, the show centres a group of teenagers that are diverse in multiple ways. Much like the 1990s version this cast also represents multicultural teens, as well as representation of members of LGBTQ+ community and mental disability. Executive Producer Heaton is quoted saying '[Heartbreak High] was groundbreaking for its time, so the team sat down and thought 'What are the things that need to be discussed now?''²³ The essence of the original was focused on teenagers navigating the world around them, so it only makes sense for the reboot to adapt to focus on the issues relevant for today's young people.

Changes in Storytelling

The original was designed for broadcast television that followed a weekly airing schedule and while a serialised show it relied heavily on episodic storytelling, which focuses on individual, self-contained stories that usually ties together at the end of each episode.²⁴ This

[original-justice/news-story/133b357f8d4c6bc549dfdbbc438af46b?utm_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/story/133b357f8d4c6bc549dfdbbc438af46b?utm_source=chatgpt.com) [accessed 28 February 2025].

²¹ Pieter Aquilia, 'Wog Drama and "White Multiculturalists": The Role of Non Anglo-Australian Film and Television Drama in Shaping a National Identity', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 25.67 (2001), p. 104.

²² *Heartbreak High*, created by Hannah Carroll Chapman, Fremantle Australia and NewBe, Netflix, 2022–present.

²³ Clem Bastow, 'Heartbreak High Gets a Gen-Z Makeover: "We'Re Giving This Generation Their Own Show"', *The Guardian* (The Guardian, 9 September 2022) <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2022/sep/10/heartbreak-high-gets-a-gen-z-makeover-were-giving-this-generation-their-own-show>> [accessed 6 January 2025].

²⁴ Katerynych, Goian, Goian, p. 33.

combination meant that while characters and some of their storylines carried on through the series, often each episode centred a plot of its own that began and ended in the forty-minute screen time that contained a message to the young viewers.

For example, in Season 1 Episode 13²⁵ while there are storylines that have been building up over the last few episodes such as Rose's developing feelings for Mr. North, Jodie's disaster living situation with her sister, and references to Chaka and Rivers potential relationship, the threat of the music programme getting shut down began and ended within the same episode. Jodie organises a publicity stunt during an inspection of the school to demonstrate the importance of the creative arts for students, while the events of the serialised storylines also unfolds. The episode finishes with the inspector impressed with the kids saying it is a shame that arts programmes often get less priority than other programmes. The message in this storyline is encouraging teenagers to stand up for themselves and fight for their passions in a world where decisions are made for them. The episodic plot all ties up together at the end, allowing for a brand-new story to be told the following week. Meanwhile, the Jodie's living situation is still an ongoing story as well as Chaka and Rivers' budding romance to get people tuned in for next week's episode.

The reboot, however, is designed for Netflix where the eight-episode season is released all at once, aware of the bingeing habits of its viewers. It has a much more condensed storytelling style, abandoning the episodic style of isolated plotlines in favour of a season long narrative, utilising interconnected storytelling, involving 'multiple characters and storylines that intersect and overlap, thus creating a larger and more complex narrative'²⁶ and flashback storytelling,

²⁵ *Heartbreak High*, series 1, episode 13, 22nd May 1994, Network 10, 1994.

²⁶ Katerynych, Goian, Goian, p. 33.

which is ‘the use of flashbacks to provide background information or reveal past events’.²⁷ At the beginning of the series, we learn that once two best friends Amerie and Harper, had a falling out but Amerie doesn’t know why. Throughout the season that follows the interconnecting lives of these students, there are flashbacks to the night of the festival as Amerie tries to decipher what happened that night to have Harper be so mad at her, it is not until the season finale that Amerie and the audience finally figure out what happened that night. This use of flashback and interconnecting storytelling than spans across the season keeps audiences engaged as they become invested in the characters and want to experience the revelation of what happened that night.

The shift in viewing habits from the 1990s to today has caused adaptations to the structure and storytelling in order to cater these new habits. In a study on the Narrative Trends in Netflix Original Content it was found that by 2020-2022 the most common types of storytelling they used were non-linear, flashback and interconnected storytelling which shows a demand for unique and innovative content from audiences.²⁸ By replacing episodic storylines with a season-long narrative and adopting innovative storytelling techniques, the producers have enticed viewers to continue watching episode after episode, helping to ensure the remake’s success with contemporary audiences.

²⁷ Katerynych, Goian, Goian, p. 33.

²⁸ Katerynych, Goian, Goian, p. 38.

Personalised Viewing

Streaming services have curated a more ‘more personalised, on-demand, and flexible viewing experience’²⁹ than what broadcast television can. These streaming services are not only available of televisions, but also laptops, tablets, and phones, resulting in people not having to fight for control of the remote. Where broadcast television was catering to the mass, streaming services like Netflix focuses on the individual, personalised experience, using ‘algorithms to customise recommendations for individual users, thereby creating a personalised viewing experience’³⁰. The introduction of Netflix Original series in 2013 adds to this personalised viewing, striving to ‘design a mass-market service by compiling multiple niche programs with distinct target demographics.’³¹ Netflix Originals can target specific demographics and recommend the series directly to the user. This personalised viewing experience can cause changes in the role of adult characters in teen shows, such as the noticeable absence of the personal lives of the adults in the reboot.

While the original was aimed at teens, the teachers in the school had a prominent role in the show with their own personal lives. Whether its Southgate’s troubling marriage or Milano’s and Fatoush’s dating lives, the audience gets to see them outside of the classroom and view them as more than just teachers. As well as Nick’s father, who audiences learn of his football career in his youth, how he deals with the death of his wife, and then his budding romance with the house keeper. The inclusion of the adult’s own storylines shows that it was catered to a wider audience,

²⁹ Ola, p. 181.

³⁰ Katerynych, Goian, Goian, p. 32.

³¹ Romil Sharma, ‘The Netflix Effect: Impacts of the Streaming Model on Television Storytelling’ (Wesleyan University, Connecticut, 2016), p. 25.

enabling parents of the teens watching to show on the family television to find some interest in the show.

Compared to the rebooted version of the show, while the teachers are very dedicated to their students' lives and wellbeing, they lack their own personal storylines. The parents are rarely present other than to discipline or provide deeper understanding of the teens' home environment. The adults are mainly seen through the teens' perspectives and serve specific narrative functions such as Ms. Jojo Obah serves as supportive mentor to the students and Principal Woodsy as well-meaning authority figure trying to maintain control of the school, and the parents of Darren navigating how to support their non-binary child. Since the reboot is made by Netflix for their site, it is heavily targeted at the teenage demographic and is more sexually explicit and contains more use of alcohol and drugs than the original. Due to this and the flexibility the site offers, teenagers are likely to watch the show without their parents present, further reducing the need for adult storylines.

Representation

As mentioned previously, the original *HBH* was created for showing representation of non Anglo-Australian teens. The casting of Alex Dimitriades who plays Nick Polous in both the film *Heartbreak Kid* and the TV series *HBH*, which 'bestowed mainstream acceptability of non-Anglo protagonists since the early 90s. The representation of second-generation immigrant families of Australia on prime TV 'contribute to the development of cultural diversity and its representation on Australian screens in a cinematic and TV world where ethnic characters and

stories are still somewhat limited.’³² While the show represented characters from various cultural backgrounds, overt ‘ethnic’ stories were mostly avoided.³³ Since the show production crew were mostly white, they possibly lacked the ability to accurately portray stories of multicultural Australians and instead focused on trying to incorporate a more integrated cultural identity.

While representing multiple second-generation immigrant teens, there was a lack of queer representation in the show. Of the 38 episodes in season 1, only one featured a queer story. In season 1 episode 13, Mr Graham Brown set up the story for the next episode when discussing the inappropriate relationship that Mr. North had with a student at his last school. ‘I’ve never even consider crossing the line with a student, but the vast majority of parents would insist that I be dismissed if they knew that I was gay.’³⁴ In episode 14³⁵, a parent tries to get him fired for exactly painting him as a predator, calling him a ‘perverted specimen’.³⁶ This results a lot of the students skipping his class and calling him slurs, his car getting vandalised, and even him getting beat up on his way home from the club. The episode ended with him being cleared and Rivers, who vandalised his car, apologising and offering to fix the car. Since this was an episodic plot the series with its ‘happy ending’, the series goes on as if this never happened. This episode served more as a teaching tool for the audience on homophobia rather than representation of the LGBTQ+ community.

³² Aquilia, p. 106.

³³ Harvey May, ‘Australian Multicultural Policy and Television Drama in Comparative Texts’ (Queensland University of Technology, 2003), p. 183.

³⁴ *Heartbreak High*, series 1, episode 13, first broadcast 22nd May 1994, Network 10, 1994, [29:12]

³⁵ *Heartbreak High*, series 1, episode 14, first broadcast 29th May 1994, Network 10, 1994.

³⁶ *Heartbreak High*, series 1, episode 14, first broadcast 29th May 1994, Network 10, 1994, [3:50]

In comparison, the cast of the reboot celebrates diversity with representation of race and ethnicity, LGBTQ+ community and neurodivergent people. The young people of today are much more aware of social injustices and advocate for more accurate representations that serve as more than just stereotypes. Daren Rivers, who is South African Australian and identifies as non-binary and queer. They get romantically involved with Ca\$h who is from an economically disadvantaged background that resulted in him getting involved in criminal activity. Quinni Jones-Gallagher is on the autistic spectrum and is queer, who has a massive crush on Sasha So, a lesbian who is Asian Australian. There is also three First Nations representation, Malakai, Missy and Zoe. The show gives a realistic portrayal of the multicultural teens navigating the world around them without using stereotypes or making it their whole personality or character arc. They are all teenagers with teenager problems, such dating, sex, friendship and school life, while still portraying the real problems that they face. Such as Darran's dad warning them about harbouring stolen goods for Ca\$h 'who do you think is going to take the fall? Not the white guy'³⁷, Malakai experiencing police brutality³⁸, and showing an accurate depiction of Quinni navigating the dating life with someone who doesn't understand her needs³⁹. The team involved in the creation of the show are also diverse, ensuring that stories will be told with authenticity.⁴⁰

Young people online have praised the show for its diverse representation, allowing for so many young people to see themselves and their stories being portrayed on the screens.⁴¹ By providing more authentic, layered representations and incorporating them naturally into the

³⁷ *Heartbreak High*, 'Eetsway', series 1, episode 3, first broadcast 14 September 2022, Netflix, [39:31].

³⁸ *Heartbreak High*, 'Rack Off', series 1, episode 4, first broadcast 14 September 2022, Netflix, [40:20].

³⁹ *Heartbreak High*, 'Angeline', series 1, episode 6, first broadcast 14 September 2022, Netflix, [34:40].

⁴⁰ Bastow, 'Heartbreak High Gets a Gen-Z Makeover'.

⁴¹ Jessica Riga "Heartbreak High Is a Global Success. Its Authentic Representation Is What Other Reboots Are Lacking," *ABC News* (ABC News, 6 October 2022) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-10-07/heartbreak-high-netflix-is-a-global-success-with-its-diversity/101491818>

characters' lives, the reboots connects with today's audience in a way that feels authentic and genuine.

Conclusion

The evolution from broadcast television to streaming has significantly transformed not just how audiences consume media but also how stories are structured and delivered. As viewers demand more flexibility and personalisation, the rise of binge-watching and on-demand access has changed the way narratives unfold. The *Heartbreak High* reboot shows how these changes are built into the very fabric of the show, from the shift from episodic plotlines to season-long arcs caters to modern bingeing habits enabled by streaming services. The format the reboot took wasn't just an artistic choice but a response to the technological advancements and expectation of contemporary audience. The reboot adapts to modern cultural values, showcasing diversity and representation which are central to today's media landscape. The alterations the reboot took demonstrates how the form and content of media are shaped by the platform and the era in which it exists.

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