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Visual strategies of film posters on Spanish main Video On Demand (VOD) platforms

Estrategias visuales de los carteles cinematográficos en las principales plataformas de Video On Demand (VOD) en España

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Abstract

In the cinematographic industry, poster design is an artistic medium, an important promotional vehicle and acts as a synonym of the film's visual identity. Nowadays, technology and the evolution of the Internet have led to the emergence of VOD (Video on Demand) platforms, which have substantially altered film consumption habits; they also appear to have a decisive influence on the araphic desian of these products. In this context, this research seeks to study the features of the digital posters of the films of these services and, in particular, the methods used to adapt the conventional formats (vertical) to horizontal proportions. Using the quantitative content analysis technique, 150 films (original and external productions) from the three major streaming platforms in Spain (Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and HBO Max) are examined through visual manifest variables belonging to three types of signs (iconic, plastic and linguistic). The predominant format of each of these platforms is also analysed. The conclusions reveal the diversity of the formats of these digital posters in these three services; significant differences in the adaptation strategy of the platforms analysed, with two methods predominating, the modification of the graphic concept and cropping, which is frequently combined with a new composition; the role of the typography in communicating the visual identity of the movie; and the low relevance of the type of production (original or licensed) in the graphic treatment of these posters.

Keywords

Graphic design; visual communication; VOD platforms; digital posters; film poster.

Resumen

En la industria cinematográfica, el diseño de la cartelería constituye un medio artístico, un importante vehículo promocional y un sinónimo de la identidad visual de las películas. En la actualidad, la tecnología y la evolución de Internet han propiciado la aparición de las plataformas VOD (Video on Demand), que han modificado los hábitos de consumo cinematográfico y parecen condicionar decisivamente también el diseño gráfico de estos productos. En este contexto, la presente investigación busca estudiar los rasgos de la cartelería digital de las películas de estos servicios y los métodos empleados para adaptar los formatos clásicos (verticales) a las proporciones horizontales, específicamente. Mediante la técnica de análisis de contenido de tipo cuantitativo, se examinan 150 películas (producciones propias y de catálogo) de las tres principales plataformas de streaming de España (Netflix, Amazon Prime Video y HBO Max) mediante variables manifiestas de carácter visual, pertenecientes a tres tipos de signos (icónico, plástico y lingüístico). Se evalúa, asimismo, el formato predominante en cada una de estas plataformas. Las conclusiones apuntan a la diversidad de los formatos de estos carteles digitales en los tres servicios; unas diferencias importantes en la estrategia de adaptación a los formatos horizontales, con un predominio de dos métodos, fundamentalmente (la modificación del concepto gráfico y el recorte, que frecuentemente se acompaña de una nueva composición); el papel de la tipografía para comunicar la identidad visual de la película; y la escasa relevancia del tipo de producción (propia o externa) en el tratamiento gráfico de estos carteles.

Palabras clave

Diseño gráfico; comunicación visual; plataformas VOD; cartelería digital; cartel cinematográfico.

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1. Introduction

As Costa (2022) explains, film posters are part of our culture and have evolved hand in hand with this creative industry. They are as old as popular cinema itself (Sánchez-López, 2015), and this medium's need to be marketed made these posters "one of the most representative and paradigmatic examples of audiovisual expression" (Perales Bazo, 2007: 60). Along these lines, Flores Huelves and Montes Vozmediano assert that:

From 1895 to the present day, posters have adapted to every style and culture in which films have been shown, as well as to the advertising strategies that have evolved due to projection techniques (2017: 128).

Film posters are a vehicle intended to "present various aspects associated with the advertised product: the production companies responsible for the films, the names of the directors and actors participating in the films and the awards and prizes obtained" (Fernández-Mellado, 2014: 12), thereby influencing people's feelings, perceptions, emotions and beliefs (Perales Bazo, 1997, 1999; Öcal and Nasır, 2016). They are a heterogeneous artistic medium and also a means of communication that "cannot and does not wish to be deprived of the immediate reference to which it is linked, that is, the cinematographic spectacle and plot that constitute their basic source of inspiration" (Tabuenca Bengoa, 2011: 94).

Although film posters have their own features (Collado-Alonso, 2015), in some ways they are similar to advertising posters and, ultimately, they are part of the advertising strategy (in which graphic design has a crucial role) and the visual identity features of the audiovisual product (Pérez-Rufí and Pérez-Rufí, 2012). Along these lines, Sánchez de Lucas (2018) states that the commercial usefulness of film posters is derived from their immediacy, effectiveness and speed, since they allow the public to receive a lot of information in a short period of exposure. The second area cited by Pérez-Rufí and Pérez-Rufí (2012) is their link with visual identity. Olins (2009) considered the tangible elements of film posters such as colours, fonts, slogans, tones of voice, styles of expression (look and feel) and the brand logo to be a part of their visual identity (Palacios Ferri and Marín Jordá, 2021).

However, as Gómez Pérez (2002) points out, the appearance of the new Video On Demand (VOD) platforms has increasingly relegated traditional film posters to exhibition halls, while the drastic changes being experienced un the audiovisual entertainment sector—cinema and series, in particular (Soto, 2023)—have meant important innovations in their design. Not in vain, technology decisively affects the methodological, creative and stylistic processes of graphic design (Rico Sesé, 2023) and these mutually condition each other, along with culture (Royo, 2004). Although printed posters—both in the urban environment and in interior spaces—continue to have their place, "we are in a moment of adaptation, migration and constant change of various technologies towards the digital environment" (Badajoz Dávila et al., 2023: 10). In today's world, therefore, "the film poster, although dynamic and playful, screams movement, contingency, transformation and ambiguity in an electrified and modernising world" (Williams, 2016: 4).

Therefore, if posters respond to the changes that are always occurring in the film industry (Costa, 2022), the transformations caused by these streaming services should lead to new ways of approaching the production of film posters. As Pérez-Rufí and Pérez-Rufí state:

The latest and lightest digital screens are a reasonable alternative to cellulose, and advertising of all types, including cinema, is adapting to the new media to take advantage of its undoubted advantages when creating much more attractive audiovisual or interactive content messages that are capable of creating a greater impact on the attention of their recipients (2012: 13).

Therefore, the graphic design of the posters is also part of the strategy of the VOD platforms to increase effectiveness in the selection or visualisation of a certain product. As Chris Jaffe (Netflix's Vice President of Product Innovation) explains, any change affecting the graphic design of the platform (from the nature of the images to the size of the font) is rigorously tested to improve the product metrics. For example, through A/B testing, it is possible to assess whether the hero image should be static or a carousel (O'Reilly, 2016).

Continuing with the relationship between graphic design and technology, even before the popularisation of VOD services, Pérez-Rufí (2010) conducted a study addressing the reality of film posters in the first decade of the 21st century. He predicted that adapting to a digital medium would change the visual language of posters on the basis of criteria such as the limitation of textual content (Perales Bazo, 2015) and the progressive elimination of content (slogans, mentions of the cast or creative staff of the film), discarding superfluous information to give greater weight to images. Palacios Ferri and Marín Jordá (2021) also think that images are the main ingredients of posters and have relegated text

to a secondary role. However, this decrease in the volume of text (in its informative function) is not a detriment to the important role of typography in these posters as a visual stimulus and as a brand (Gómez Pérez, 2002).

The goal of reducing graphic noise in the manner advocated by Pérez-Rufí (2010) is to favour the codification of its meanings and pursue greater sophistication in design (a result, at the same time, of the greater demand for professionalism from the public). In the same text, the author refers to the preeminence of vertical formats over the less common horizontal formats, which would be relegated to products such as billboards, press advertisements or some video reissues. This choice of format, understood as the surface on which the sensitive elements are related, is fundamental, since it conditions the composition of the image, the internal hierarchy and, therefore, the significance of the message (Suárez-Carballo, 2008). The influence of the format is determined by two factors: the size and the proportions of the frame (the relationship between the horizontal and vertical vectors). As a result, the choice of format "accentuates certain vector tendencies that occur within the representation when objects or figures that have a certain structural correspondence with the structure of the format coincide" (Villafañe and Mínguez, 2000: 156). This means that the format decisively affects the composition, which, as White (2014) points out, is the basis for the creation of images, and determines their appearance, the sensations they convey and their meaning.

Moreover, Pérez-Rufí (2010) himself mentions the tendency to reduce the amount of content ("less is more"), due, among other factors, to the larger multimedia campaign in which it is framed, and to a homogenising tendency where the representation of the actors and actresses stands out as the undisputed main claim. The author makes an important distinction between digital posters (which adapt to the nature of the new media and are of particular interest to this study) and merely depicting traditional posters on screens (digitised posters):

At this point, we must draw a distinction as regards the new media for advertising films: what we have dubbed digitised posters are mere on-screen reproductions of printed posters with no difference other than the technological support itself, while digital posters are a form of advertising capable of making use of all the possibilities that multimedia language allows using the common digital code (Pérez-Rufí, 2010: 77).

Starting from the division between iconic, plastic and linguistic signs put forward by Joly (1999), Serrano Mora (2009) proposes a classification of posters based on nine categories, depending on the type of reference (iconic sign) of the poster, namely: one or more scenes from the film; one, two or several main characters on a neutral background or specific background; a composition with a group of objects or a typographic layout. In relation to this typology, Rodríguez Tranche (1994) summarises the design of film posters in two configurative strategies: a first, more daring formula, which avoids direct allusions to its content and resorts to allegorical motifs; and a second formula, of a more predictable nature, which consists of reproducing specific frames or scenes and observes a great influence of the star-system philosophy; that is, the model dictated by American production companies in which "the star becomes the iconic sign with the greatest appeal" (Collado-Alonso, 2015: 71). Along the same lines, Jackson (2023) alludes, in the era of megafranchises, to the repetitive nature of this type of pieces through the visualisation of a superhero or an action star from a film trailer; for his part, in a study on the visual configuration of the posters of the production company Universal Pictures, Sánchez de Lucas (2018) concludes that, despite the variety of plastic resources used by these pieces, there are some common features that point, fundamentally, to the colour and prominence of the characters, achieved through resources such as scale and proportion with respect to the format. However, compared to American film posters, Palacios Ferri and Marín Jordá (2021) maintain that contemporary European film posters would be closer to the first category mentioned by Rodríguez Tranche (1994), as they more frequently use symbolism in the form of allegories and metaphors and, ultimately, rhetorical resources closer to advertising language.

2. Objectives

As Giunti, Contardi and Parada (2012: 117) explain, the study of "the material, physical and visual dimensions, understood as complex cultural products," is relatively recent. But in the case of film posters (as a cultural product), there is a significant scientific literature. This has been confirmed by some of the studies cited in the introductory section, such as those by Pérez-Rufí (2010), Pérez-Rufí and Pérez-Rufí (2012), Perales Bazo (2015), Flores Huelves and Montes Vozmediano (2017) and Sánchez de Lucas (2018), among others. These examples show why film posters "ought to be researched, given the expressive and semantic capacity of visual media, as well as its advertising function" (Palacios Ferri and Marín Jordá, 2021: 81). Works that address signage design on VOD platforms are, however, less common; on this particular topic, the study by Porcel Herrera (2018) is noteworthy, despite the fact that the analysis focuses exclusively on series and, therefore, excludes films.

Compared to the aforementioned studies (which, in one way or another, analyse the visual communication of film posters), this work focuses on describing the treatment of digital advertising posters on VOD platforms. Starting from this main goal, the following secondary goals are pursued:

- Analysing the format used by the posters of the main streaming services on their different devices (computer, mobile phone, tablet and television).

- Studying how the original posters (with vertical proportions) adapt to the most extreme sizes and formats (horizontal), analysing whether there are differences in the methods of the analysed platforms.

- Examining the plastic, iconic and linguistic strategies in this adaptation.

- Evaluating whether there are substantial differences in the previous criteria between the original or exclusive products of these services and third-party productions (or catalogues).

As per the above goals, and based on a preliminary or exploratory analysis of the posters, this research paper puts forward the following working hypotheses:

H1. Most of the film posters on VOD platforms have a horizontal format.

H2. There are important differences in the adaptation strategies developed by the three platforms analysed, with two notable formulas: cropping the image and changing the iconic sign.

H3. Beyond an obvious reduction of information on the posters on these platforms, the typographical changes are limited to the compositional section.

H4. There are no substantial differences in the visual language and adaptation methods between the originals and the productions of these platforms.

3. Methodology

This research's methodology is based on content analysis, a technique that has frequently been used in the scientific literature on visual communication and graphic design: the works of Suárez-Carballo and Pérez-Maíllo (2022); López-Marcos and Vicente-Fernández (2023); Sanz Peralta, Ortiz Ramos and Romero-Rodríguez (2023) or Mata-Santel (2023) are just some of the most recent. This technique allows inferences to be obtained through the systematic and objective description of a set of messages (visual, in this case) from the data collected in them (Bardin, 2002; Puebla-Martínez, 2013). Piñuel Raigada offers the following definition:

Content analysis is usually called the set of interpretative procedures of communicative products (messages, texts or speeches) that come from previously recorded singular communication processes, which, based on measurement techniques, sometimes quantitative (statistics based on the unit count), sometimes qualitative (logical techniques based on the combination of categories), aim to elaborate and process relevant data on the very conditions under which those texts have been produced, or on the conditions that may exist for their subsequent use (2002: 2).

This research proposes a quantitative analysis of the manifest variables, which basically consists of "summarising in a set of statistical figures the result of a thorough and systematic examination of a sample of messages" (Igartua, 2006: 183). To achieve this, a sample of the digital posters of Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and HBO Max films has been selected, which, according to the reports of Hellosafe (n.d.) and FlixPatrol (n.d.), are the most popular OTT (Over The Top) platforms in Spain in 2023, followed by Disney+ and Movistar+. These same platforms are also analysed in the recent study by Fedele, Planellsde-la-Maza and Rey (2021), on the mythanalysis of serial narratives. This study includes a random sample of 150 films, with an equitable distribution between the aforementioned services (50 in each of them). For this reason, series are excluded from this analysis and, to evaluate the fourth hypothesis, an attempt has been made to incorporate both the platforms' original productions and the external ones (foreign or catalogue), although without establishing a strict balance between them. Thus, the total percentage of in-house films amounts to 43% (46% on Netflix, 44% on Prime Video and 38% on HBO). This category of in-house products includes all those original, exclusive, developed, acquired or licenced productsaccording to the classification of Heredia Ruiz (2022)-, which, therefore, the platforms identify as their own through their graphic brand. Therefore, no distinction is made in this sense. It should also be noted that, for the selection of original posters, the IMDB site repository (https://www.imdb.com) is used, a database used in other previous studies, such as that of Canet, Valero and Codina (2016). For data processing, Microsoft Excel (version 16.76) and SPSS (version 28) applications were used.

Concerning the study variables, a sheet is initially established that contains three basic pieces of information about each film: the platform to which it belongs, the title and whether it is a production

owned by the platform or not. Based on this information, as seen in Table 1, there are two initial variables that attempt to respond to hypotheses H1 and H2, respectively: the format of the posters on the different devices (mobile phone, tablet, computer and television) and the main adaptation strategy between the original poster (vertical) and posters of more extreme proportions (horizontal). The initial values proposed by the research in this adaptation are comprehensive redesign (an important change of concept or, as the case may be, of the iconic and/or plastic sign); cropping; reorganisation (a new composition respecting the content) or simply resizing the image.

The rest of the variables seek to delve deeper into the solutions resulting from the previous adaptation methods, and are based on the aforementioned scheme by Joly (1999), which divides the analysis of the image into three types of complementary signs:

- Iconic sign: this involves a study of the extent to which there is a modification of the references of the posters in both versions; if the film's main characters are used; and if elements are added or deleted in the comparison of both models (horizontal and vertical).

- Plastic sign: a study is conducted of any additional visual differences (colour or composition, for example) and if the chosen strategy implies an enlargement of the canvas.

- Linguistic sign: this involves finding out if there are differences in the volume of information and the type of data appearing in the horizontal model; if there are modifications in the basic balance of weights in the text (between two fundamental options: symmetry and asymmetry) and if modifications occur in the typographic treatment, both microtypographic (the type of family chosen, for example) and macrotypographic (the attributes of the paragraph or composition).

As can be seen in the results section, although the scheme shown in Table 1 seeks to simplify the different types of analysis contemplated by the study, in practice it seems difficult to unlink the V2, V3 and V4 variables. For example, if a change in graphic concept occurs between the vertical and horizontal versions, this modification directly affects the iconic sign and, if a cropping strategy is established, the reference is generally respected but plastic (compositional) variations occur. For this reason, the results of these variables are addressed in the same section.

Furthermore, part of the variables included are inspired by the methodological apparatus of Tabuenca Bengoa, González-Díez, and Puebla Martínez (2020) on the analysis of posters: issues such as format, compositional criteria (which are specified here in the presence of the characters), the position and typographic attributes (only partially) and colour (as a plastic attribute) are elements present in the variables.

Table 1: Variables used in the study

Variable	Analysed categories and/or values		
V1. Digital poster format	Vertical, square, rectangular (analysis on various devices: mobile, computer, tablet and television)		
V2. Adaptation strategy	Cropping, design change, new composition, resizing.		
V3. Iconic sign	Change of reference in the vertical and horizontal versions (yes/no)		
	Presence of characters from the film (yes/no)		
	Adding or deleting shapes or elements (yes/no)		
V4. Plastic sign V5. Linguistic sign	Visual modifications (yes/no)		
	Expanding canvas size (yes/no)		
	Differences in the volume of information (important, moderate, no difference)		
	Data types in the horizontal format		
	Typesetting (symmetrical/asymmetrical)		
	Type of typographic modifications (micro and macrotypographic)		

Source: created by the author based on Joly (1999) and Tabuenca Bengoa, González-Díez and Puebla Martínez (2020)

4. Results

4.1. Poster format

If the three platforms analysed are compared, there are notable differences in the UI (User Interface) design, in relation to the format of the digital film posters. In this section, the design is evaluated for four devices: computer, using a Google Chrome browser on a MacBook Air (13 inches); mobile phone (iPhone 6S); tablet (iPad 9th generation), and, lastly, on television, through the Netflix application on the Apple TV 4K (1st generation). It should also be noted that only the posters present in the different categories (thumbnails) are analysed, excluding other elements, such as the hero or the featured banners. Figure 1 shows a fragment of the main computer screens of Prime Video, HBO Max and Netflix, as well as the mobile phone version of the latter (right).

Figure 1: Fragments of the UI design of the main computer screens (Prime Video, HBO Max and Netflix), and the mobile phone (Netflix)



Source: Amazon Prime Video, HBO Max and Netflix

While in Prime Video and HBO Max the treatment is identical on the four platforms analysed, on Netflix, there is substantial variation between its devices. On the Amazon platform, the horizontal format is clearly predominant, only interrupted by original and exclusive products (vertical). HBO Max, for its part, is the service with the richest formats: the vertical one is, undoubtedly, the most common; the horizontal one is limited to two types of sectors (recommendations and searches) and the square one identifies the products selected by the consumer (those whose reproduction has started and those marked as favourites).

On Netflix, the horizontal format is the central element on larger screens (computers and televisions). The vertical ones are limited to those categories requiring an enumeration (the 10 most popular films or series in Spain), which are only included in the computer version (on television, this format disappears). However, on smartphones and tablets, the most common variant is the vertical one. The horizontal formats disappear directly and the square ones are limited exclusively to games (an option ruled out on the other two screens). Table 2 shows a summary of the formats offered by each platform.

Platform	Device	Vertical format	Horizontal format	Square format
Netflix	Computer	Popular films and series	General	Does not exist
	Tablet	General	Does not exist	Games
	Mobile	General	Does not exist	Games
	Television	Does not exist	General	Does not exist
Prime Video	All devices	Amazon Originals and Exclusive Films	General	Does not exist
HBO Max	All devices	General	For you, search	Continue watching, My list

Table 2: Types of formats present on the platforms

Source: created by the author

Finally, it should be noted that the vertices of the cover containers are rounded in Prime Video (very accentuated) and Netflix (very subtly), while HBO Max has opted for straight edges.

4.2. Adaptation strategies, iconic sign and plastic sign

This chapter deals with the methods of adapting posters in two formats, specifically: the vertical one (which uses the original pieces of the films) and the horizontal one, which, as seen in the previous chapter, is the main format from Netflix (on computers and televisions) and Prime Video (on all its devices). Although the variety is greater and the preferred format varies depending on the platform, the research is specifically interested in adaptation in the most extreme formats (the horizontal ones). Moreover, as noted in the variables section, it is difficult to separate the results related to the main adaptation strategy from those that deal with the treatment of iconic and plastic signs, which is why the analysis of all these variables is included under this same heading.

If the strategies developed by the different platforms in the design of the horizontal pieces with respect to the original (vertical) posters are evaluated globally, three main formulas can be seen: respect for the original graphic approach with cropping of the image (implemented in 65 cases, 43% of the total), the change in graphic strategy (47 cases, 31% of the total) and the resizing of the iconic sign (16 cases, 11% of the total). In this last option, the main content is maintained in its entirety although the image's background, be it a texture or a solid colour, is sometimes omitted. Less frequent is the method that uses the same graphic elements with a new composition (reorganisation) of the content, which is used in only six posters (4%). However, 16 other posters can be listed that simultaneously resort to cropping the image and reorganising its content. Figure 2 represents five examples of these methods: from left to right, layout change (Molly's Game, Netflix), resize (Sound of Metal, Prime Video), cropping and recomposition (Shazam, HBO Max), recomposition (The Aeronauts, Prime Video) and cropping (Everest, Prime Video).



Figure 2: Examples of the five adaptation strategy options

Source: IMDB, Netflix, HBO Max, Prime Video and created by the author

However, if these numbers are examined taking into account each of the platforms analysed (Figure 3), the differences are very important and the results are very significant, according to the chi-squared test, which gives a p value <0.001. The clearly dominant formula on HBO (especially) and Prime is image cropping, while respecting the identity of the vertical posters. On the first platform, this alternative is followed in 34 cases (68%, more than two-thirds of the total), and in nine more (18%) it is accompanied by a significant redistribution of the content. In only two posters is a new composition used and, in the remaining five, simple resizing (respecting the integrity of the image). On Prime Video, cropping remains the preferred form of adaptation—25 posters (50%) or 32 (64%), if the visual reorganisation that accompanies cropping in seven other pieces is taken into account—but it shows greater attention to the remaining systems: the resizing of the main image, above all (11 cases), the restructuring of the content and the change of design (4 and 3 examples, respectively).

Using cropping to leave the main image unchanged (with or without a new composition) and resizing (to a far lesser extent than the former) are undoubtedly the most frequently used methods in the two services mentioned above, but the strategy is radically different on Netflix. On this platform, a change in design is imposed emphatically (44 films, which represent 88% of the total platform), while the most popular technique in the previous ones (image cropping) is only observed in the remaining six pieces. The design of the horizontal posters is fundamentally based on frames from the films (41 cases, although five of these are difficult to identify), and only three present a new image designed *ad hoc* using collage. These results are due to the digital posters located on the main page. However, it is interesting to note that Netflix makes different proposals for those located on the Home tab and those obtained through other functionalities (the search engine, for example) and that it also establishes complete design changes between the horizontal versions (computer and television) and the vertical ones (mobile phone and tablet).

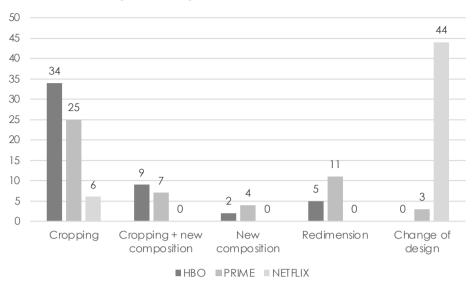


Figure 3: Strategies developed by each platform

Source: created by the author

Furthermore, in relation to the different formulas developed by these platforms, three films present in two of them were intentionally selected to evaluate the adaptation methods in each of these services. In two posters (*Los odiosos ocho*, on Netflix and HBO, and *La gran apuesta*, in the Netflix and Prime catalogues), the strategies are different, while in a third (*Tenet*, on Netflix and HBO) the same visual approach is maintained.

Returning to those cases that resort to cropping as an adaptation method, it is worth noting that this procedure not only occurs in horizontal posters with respect to the vertical model, but it is often the latter where some of its parts are suppressed. We can see this phenomenon in 11 posters. In another 10 films, horizontal and vertical cropping can be seen, that is, in the vertical models, fragments of the width of the poster are hidden and, in the horizontal models, parts of the height (of very variable dimensions). Examples of these two phenomena can be seen in Figure 4, corresponding to the films *En un lugar salvaje* and *The Tender Bar* (both belonging to Prime Video).

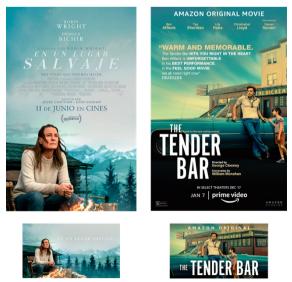


Figure 4: Horizontal and vertical cropping of the image

Source: IMDB, Amazon Prime Video and created by the author

Following this same cropping technique, in twelve cases a very slight, practically imperceptible, suppression took place, which often affects the background of the image or does not affect the substantial elements of the poster (the main characters, in all of them) but instead affects secondary motifs (backgrounds or textures). In some especially subtle cases, one could actually speak of a simple resizing of the content. This alternative (slight or very slight cropping) is noted in nine pieces. It is also worth mentioning that some proposals based on cropping the image add new graphic elements to the horizontal model (three pieces, mainly resources that serve to enlarge the background images) or dispense with nuclear elements (in three other posters).

In those cases in which the same basic graphic approach is maintained in both models (that is, those posters where their iconic sign is not altered in a significant way), one of the most common methods to ensure a judicious distribution of elements (mainly for the relocation of the typographic element) is based on an enlargement of the canvas, almost always its left or right (in horizontal models) and upper or lower (in vertical posters) ends. This resource occurs mainly in the cropping technique (23 posters, more than 16%), but it is also common in those pieces in which the size of the main referent is simply modified (12 cases). On five occasions, this extension is not produced by a homogeneous coloured background but rather uses a repetition of the texture. It is worth asking, in any case, if—especially in these last examples—there is really an enlargement of the canvas and the addition of this plastic element, or if it constitutes a horizontal or vertical cropping. In only one case (HBO's No te preocupes, querida), the white margins of the vertical model are removed.

Lastly, in relation to the iconic sign, an overwhelming majority of the posters opt for showing the main characters of the film in the graphic design of the poster, both in the vertical and horizontal versions (132 pieces, 88%). Only 17 posters (11%) offer alternative solutions to this aforementioned "star-system", and only two pieces (*En la Toscana* and *Sin novedad* en el frente, both from Netflix) replace the human figures in the horizontal models. In this section, it is worth mentioning a significant association between the platform and the presence of main characters (p=0.27), with Netflix as the service that uses a greater number of alternative pieces to the majority scheme. Likewise, more surprising formulas are produced in a residual way, such as the change of background (colour, especially) or the rotation of the piece (in the poster for *Tiempo*, on Prime Video).

Finally, the relationship between the type of production (in-house or external) and adaptation strategy, on the one hand, and the type of poster (with or without main characters), on the other hand, is subjected to the chi-squared test. However, the figures do not offer dependent values, so it does not seem that the type of production conditions the visual configuration of the posters.

4.3. Linguistic sign

Another goal of the study aims to evaluate the behaviour of the text in two different directions: the change in the volume of information between both models and the formal properties it acquires in both.

Almost all of the posters (147) include more elements in the original (vertical) model than in the horizontal version: only two in-house productions (*El ultimo baile de Magic Mike*, from HBO, and *Flight/Risk*, from Prime) and one external (Prime's *Lizzie*) incorporate similar information. Except for these three examples, an attempt has been made to divide the solutions between those in which the change in the amount of information is more moderate—if they limit themselves to including the most notable data (direction, main characters and/or slogan of the film, in essence)—compared to more drastic modifications (if they add to the previous elements more exhaustive information about the creative staff or a more complete list of the cast, for example). This second alternative clearly stands out (109 posters, 73%) compared to the first (38, 26%). In those horizontal posters that include more information than the title (the element present in all of them, with the sole exception of *Mixed by Erry*, from Netflix) or the mention that the film was independently produced, this information refers to the actors or actresses (5 pieces), the director (one) or both profiles (two); two other images allude to the Goya Awards (*En los márgenes*) or introduce more information, in this case practically illegible (the aforementioned *Flight/Risk*).

Based on the above strategies, one of the variables included in the study consists of evaluating whether the change in format leads to a modification of the balance of the weights of the images using two main options: symmetry and asymmetry, exclusively evaluating typographic composition. In 60 pieces (40%), a symmetrical balance is maintained in both and, in 18 (12%), an asymmetrical formula in both models; in 16 pieces (the minority option, with 11%) an evolution of asymmetry (a vertical poster) towards symmetry (horizontal) is observed and 64 (the most widespread formula, with a percentage of 43%) follow the opposite path (vertical symmetry versus horizontal asymmetry). This data shows that, in vertical formats, typographic symmetry is the most predictable (124 cases, representing 83%), while, in pieces with horizontal proportions, the asymmetric alternative is the most recurrent, although not as convincingly (with 82 examples, representing 55%). Figure 5 shows two examples (both from Prime Video) of respect for symmetrical balance (*Dunkerque*, left) and a shift towards a more asymmetrical distribution in the horizontal model (*El caballero verde*, right).

Figure 5: Examples of maintaining and changing the type of balance



Source: IMDB, Prime Video and created by the author

It seems interesting to support the previous data in changes affecting the typographic organisation of the title (the unquestionably preferred element in digital pieces). There is some type of variation along these lines in 30 posters. The vast majority of these changes concern the redistribution of words from one to several lines (especially two) and alignment. In some cases, this new composition affects the rotation (*Tenet*) or the line spacing (*The Wizard of Lies*). While these compositional changes (which could be called macrotypographic) affect a fifth of the strategies (although they are not especially linked to the change in the symmetrical or asymmetrical character of the poster), modifications in the plastic properties of the letter are less common and, when occur, they are almost always minor, mainly affecting the colour (12 cases) or are very subtle formal changes (textures or shading). There are only three surprising cases in which the variation is manifest and affects the font family: *The Tale* (HBO), *Fue la mano de Dios* and *Green Book* (both from Netflix). In *Mamá o Papá* (HBO) and *El muñeco de nieve* (Netflix), the changes consist of more subtle formal reinterpretations. Figure 6 shows two examples of Netflix films in which, despite the change in design, the typographic identity remains unchanged.



Figure 6: Examples of typographic identity in posters with a change in design

Source: IMDB, Netflix and created by the author

5. Discussion

Many insights can be gleened from the research results. Firstly, the diversity of formats on the three platforms analysed stands out: the variety of Netflix (horizontal on the largest screens and vertical on the smallest ones) seems to show an effort to implement adaptive solutions and respond to the needs of each device, at the cost of less unity in the visual solutions of the posters. In the case of HBO Max, the format acquires semantic properties and makes it easier for the user to identify different categories or sections: the square proportions for the previously selected products (Continue Watching and My List) are significant in this sense. Therefore, the format takes on new meanings in these products, not only in the poster itself—as Suárez-Carballo (2008) or White (2014) claim—but in the UI design of the platform itself, and seems essential to optimise the usability of the applications. Finally, on Amazon Prime, the formulas are more stable, but small licences are allowed for in-house products. In any case, compared to the situation in the first decade of the 21st century, new formats began challenging the predominance of vertical proportions in the virtual environment and the so-called digitised poster (Pérez-Rufí, 2010) lost its role.

Secondly, although the study attempts to determine a series of stable categories, it can be observed, in practice, that the adaptation strategy of a multitude of posters cannot be explained by a single formula. This is why a particularly popular option (the addition of cropping and rearranging elements) had to be introduced in the research, since the description using one of these variants alone often seemed imprecise. However, solutions in which two more radically different graphic options are proposed (a "design change"), and not just an adjustment based on the format, are, however, more easily identifiable. On this point, based on the results obtained, it seems possible to conclude that Netflix and HBO Max are more predictable in their adaptation programs (with two totally different directions, respectively: an absolute rethinking of the graphics versus an adjustment policy, fundamentally technical, to new proportions), while in Prime Video the strategy is more flexible and probably pays more individual attention to the details of each poster (although this point is not statistically proven).

Along these lines, two definitions of an iconic sign can be established: in the most rigid sense, all posters that do not strictly respect the original concept would represent a modification of this sign, an option championed mainly by Netflix. If we refer exclusively to the permanence of the main characters in both models, it can be argued that the iconic sign remains unchanged in the majority of vertical and horizontal versions. Precisely, this search for the "star-system" as a claim coincides with the conclusions of Sánchez-López (1997), Pérez-Rufí (2010), Collado-Alonso (2015) and Sánchez de Lucas (2018). However, this study cannot confirm the assertion by Palacios Ferri and Marín Jordá (2021) that the European poster is more innovative than the American one, as data on the film's origin is not included in the previous sheet.

It is also worth asking about the concept of original version, frequently cited in this study. Can an original (or main) poster model currently be established based on the format? It is necessary to investigate the construction methods of these products, both in our in-house productions and in those licenced or from others, the vast majority of which are eventually included in these platforms. The usual deletions of fragments in some vertical pieces (present in the horizontal ones) lead us to think—without having goal data—that there may be new initial versions of photographs, capable of being adapted to several formats simultaneously. In other examples, it is not clear whether vertical cropping or enlargement is established after the fact, with new elements or, above all, through textures. In short, in these new digital solutions, technology, as Royo (2004) or Rico Sesé (2023) have indicated, significantly conditions the design, not only with regard to the final solution but also in the creation process itself.

The most convincing results are seen in the analysis of the linguistic sign. As expected, the platform posters include fewer textual elements, but, at this point, size (and not proportions) seems to be the decisive criterion: the need to adapt the same graphic solution to screen sizes as diverse as those on a computer or mobile phone make it difficult to include more information. Although it may be due to a question of meaning (economy of elements, noise reduction or primacy of the image), as Pérez-Rufí (2010) or Palacios Ferri and Marín Jordá (2021) maintain, the legibility factor is unavoidable.

Continuing with the typographic section, as Villafañe and Mínguez (2000) already pointed out, the format clearly conditions the composition (in this case, of the text). The study avoids talking directly about the symmetry or asymmetry of the poster, globally (as a visual text), given the difficulty of precisely measuring the reading axis of many pieces, but it does mention the location of the text (which, in general, allows us to offer some clues about the composition of the piece). In the most common formula, the centred position of the paragraph in vertical formats is moved to one of the ends of the horizontal poster. The format also frequently affects the number of lines of the title, but there are few microtypographic modifications: beyond a few colour changes, the platforms seem to agree that posters play an essential role in the audiovisual product's visual identity (Pérez-Rufí and Pérez-Rufí, 2012; Porcel Herrera, 2018; Palacios Ferri and Marín Jordá, 2021) and that typography is a basic element of cohesion (Olins, 2009).

6. Conclusions

As noted in the discussion, the results obtained in the study confirm the hypotheses, albeit only partially. The analysis of the three platforms showed that the first prediction (H1) was not fulfilled. Although it is true that the horizontal format clearly dominates on Prime Video and on Netflix's largest screens (computer and television), it completely disappears on the latter's mobile phone and tablet and is used very rarely on HBO Max. Therefore, although it is an obviously relevant alternative, the horizontal format is not the unquestionably preferred option.

However, the second hypothesis (H2) does seem to be confirmed. There are very important differences in the adaptation methods of the three platforms analysed, mainly between Netflix—based on a radical change in graphic design (iconic sign)—and the remaining two (HBO Max and Prime Video), which are committed to the same approach with different technical adjustments, depending on the needs of each case (cropping, resizing, reorganisation of content or a combination of all of the above). As mentioned previously, the Prime Video methods are the most flexible. In the case of Netflix and HBO Max, adaptation policies are more stable.

The third hypothesis (H3), related to the linguistic sign, was also fulfilled: beyond the foreseeable reduction of the text in horizontal formats (which was already clearly noted in a first exploratory analysis), compositional modifications are frequent (the position of the text or distribution of the title in several lines), in the desire to coherently adapt the graphic approach to the needs of the new format of the pieces on the VOD platforms. However, there are hardly any changes in the formal attributes of the text in any of the strategies. This means that typography is the main support of identity, especially in those pieces that opt for a more radical change in design. The occasional chromatic modifications normally seek to ensure the legibility of the message and do not pose a threat to the film's identity.

The last hypothesis (H4) was also confirmed. According to the chi-squared test results, at no time was an association demonstrated between the type of production (original or external) and the visual language of the films or the adaptation strategy followed by these platforms.

Lastly, we want to mention some weaknesses found in the research process. Firstly, the IMDB repository provides an extensive database of araphic resources, but many of the posters belong to international editions or provide several different versions. In some cases, it was essential to resort to more exhaustive searches through search engines to obtain the most reliable original part. The most conflictive cases of this type were replaced by a new film. Likewise, certain licences were taken in the selection of posters in different languages when the plastic and iconic signs unguestionably coincided in the horizontal and vertical models. Concerning this chapter (the original posters), the research continually questions the method of their construction, as there were vertical solutions (the supposedly original ones) that resorted to cropping out some fragments present in the pieces on the streaming platforms. Along these lines, it is worth investigating the design process for cinematographic posters. It would be especially interesting to study whether there is any type of guideline or imposition by the VOD services or film production companies in the development and adaptation of posters, as well as to use new methodological techniques (in-depth interviews with representatives of these three parties, for example) to discover how much creative freedom graphic designers have in this context. Likewise, in the category of in-house productions, the study does not make any distinction between original products that were developed, acquired or licenced, as these were all included in the same category. However, it is worth reflecting on whether this variable in some way conditions the creative treatment of the poster.

Although this research does address the visual language of posters by analysing the presence of main characters on them, it would be interesting, in future studies, to delve deeper into the graphic design (iconic, plastic, linguistic) of film posters, paying greater attention to the variables proposed by Tabuenca Bengoa, González-Díez and Puebla Martínez (2020), in addition to adding new data (year or origin of the productions), to find out if the films present on these platforms—in-house productions, especially—follow a specific strategy according to these criteria. The observed trends should also be confirmed by analysing the adaptation strategies to other formats (square or other vertical versions), since this work focuses only on the most extreme proportions (horizontal). Lastly, the similarities and differences in the visual configuration of films and series—not included in this study—on VOD platforms should be studied and the sample should be expanded with new catalogues (Movistar+, Disney+, Filmin or RTVE Play, for example).

7. Specific contribution of each signatory

Contributions	Authors	
Work conception and design	Author 1	
Documentary search	Author 1, Author 2	
Data collection	Author 1, Author 2	
Critical data analysis and interpretation	Author 1	
Review and approval of versions	Author 1, Author 3	

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12. Annex: list of analysed posters

Netflix

Prime Video

HBO Max

100 metros; 1917; A Sun; Aguas oscuras; Coach Carter; Diecisiete; Dios mío, pero qué te hemos hecho; El ángel de la muerte; El Duque; El guardián invisible: El irlandés: El maauinista: El mayordomo; El muñeco de nieve; Emboscada final; En el corazón del mar; En la Toscana; Érase una vez en Hollywood; Fractura: Fue la mano de dios: Glass onion; Green book; Hacia rutas salvajes; Hambre; Hillbilly; La gran apuesta; La Madre; La vida por delante; Las dos caras de la verdad: Las nadadoras: Los crímenes de la academia; Los odiosos ocho; Los renglones torcidos de dios; Luther; Malditos bastardos; Mixed by Erry; Molly's game; Moneyball; Mudbound; No mires arriba; Noticias del gran mundo; Operation finale; Pozos de ambición; Rey Arturo; Siete años en el Tibet: Silverado: Sin novedad en el frente; Tenet; Triple frontera; Tyler Rake

Agárralo como puedas; Aguas profundas; Argentina 1985; Being the Ricardos; Blow the man down; Border; Canción de Nueva York; Chemical hearts: Dunkerke: El caballero verde: El instante más oscuro: El pacto; El renacido; El rey de Zamunda; El secreto de las abejas; En los márgenes; En un luaar salvaie: Encounter: Envidia sana; Flight/risk; Infiltrada; La casa Gucci; La gran apuesta; La la land; La lista de Schindler; Lady bird; Las fantasías; Lizzie; Lo mejor para ella; Luciérnagas en el jardín; Manchester frente al mar; Medellín; Mi tío Frank; Regreso a Hope gap; Sobre ruedas; Soltera 39; Sound of metal; Stone; The aeronauts; The policeman; The Tender bar; The upside; Tiempo; Time; Top Gun Maverick; Trece vidas; Troop zero; Un amigo para Frank; Una estafa celestial; Uno de nosotros

12 valientes; Ad astra; Aquellos que desean mi muerte; Bernard y Doris; Bessie; Black Adam; Blade Runner 2049; Cry macho; Déjales hablar; Django; Dune; El caso Sloane; El crimen de Laramie; El escándalo; El francotirador; El método Williams; El padre de la novia; El último baile de Magic Mike: Elvis: En realidad, nunca estuviste aquí; En un barrio de Nueva York; Everest; Fahrenheit 451; Focus; Gravity; Iron man; Judas y el mesías negro; Kimi; La solución final; Los odiosos ocho; Mamá o papá; Mortal Kombat; Navalny; No conoces a Jack; No te preocupes querida; Oceans 8; Paterno; Pequeños detalles; Puñales por la espalda; Reminiscencia: Richard Jewell: Santos criminales; Shazam: la furia de los dioses; Sin movimientos bruscos: Tenet: The Fallout; The Tale; The Way Back; The wizard of lies; Venganza bajo cero