

Shows like 'Succession' tap into our deepest desires for escapism, says researcher

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Though the finale of "Succession" aired on May 28, the conversation about our collective cultural obsession with the show still has fans rapt. What is it about this Emmy Award-winning Max series that fascinates people so intensely? And why is the psychological chatter about the narrative gripping the minds of millions of viewers?

"There's a process called escapism, which is trying to escape from your immediate reality and immersing yourself in a different universe through [media](#)," said Celeste Wagner, Ph.D., an assistant professor of journalism at the University of Florida (UF). "People tune in to consume things that let them escape from their daily routines, exhausting jobs, and their own material and personal struggles. This show can offer that experience to the majority of the audience, statistically speaking."

Since June 2018, "Succession" has given audiences four seasons and 39 episodes of dark comedic drama about money, power, politics, and the inner workings of an extremely dysfunctional dynasty. The escapist TV plot centers on a media mogul who is figuring out which one of his four children will inherit his billion-dollar empire. The end of the fourth season follows the sale of media conglomerate Waystar Royco to tech visionary Lukas Matsson, which leads to all kinds of familial turmoil.

The dialogue around this storyline has given rise to headlines such as CNBC's "Can you feel bad for billionaires? 'Succession' fans and 'empathy scholars' weigh in." Fans have been engaging in in-depth discussions about why they connect to the Roy family and its characters, and why they feel strangely invested in fictional individuals who commit sinister acts like blackmail, murder and sexual assault. This empathetic phenomenon around escapism may seem bizarre, but it taps into universally relatable parts of the human psyche.

"While class is the major structural theme in this show, in the end it's also a show about a [dysfunctional family](#) and an aging patriarch, whose

kids are constantly trying to seek his approval, make him proud, and overall, just trying to feel some affection from their dad," Wagner said. "This is also something that many people in the audience might identify with, especially during a time in which we are seeing a lot of generational shifts around masculinity, forms of leadership, emotional availability, and different ways to express love."

Wagner explores themes like these in her scholarly research, with pieces like "Affect, Curiosity, and Positionality in Context: Watching Television Entertainment in Argentina and the United States" and "Watching Turkish television dramas in Argentina: entangled proximities and resigned agency in global media flows" in the *International Journal of Communication*.

"People might consume content that represents a [society](#) or a [lifestyle](#) that they aspire to have, exemplified by the many plots surrounding the American dream experience. However, I believe that upward social mobility and aspiration are not why so many people love 'Succession,'" Wagner said. "There's something pleasing about consuming stories about the powerful and wealthy that show them as slightly rotten, morally corrupt, loveless, greedy, and also overall very unhappy despite their [wealth](#)."

The vicarious thrill that comes with watching power fall through escapist TV is, in its own way, even more powerful than watching it thrive.

"Sometimes, it's easier, as an audience member, to feel better about your own life after watching the show—and appreciate more things about it—instead of trying to aspire to how those at the top live," Wagner said.

More information: María Celeste Wagner et al, Affect, Curiosity, and Positionality in Context: Watching Television Entertainment in Argentina and the United States, *International Journal of Communication*

(2021). [ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/14191/3343](https://www.ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/14191/3343)

María Celeste Wagner et al, Watching Turkish television dramas in Argentina: entangled proximities and resigned agency in global media flows, *Journal of Communication* (2023). DOI: [10.1093/joc/jqad001](https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqad001)

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