Non-professional Subtitling Reception: Latest Trends and Future Prospects[1]

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Abstract

Translation studies has explored the complex and nuanced aspects of professional translation. In the early 1990s, a new paradigm emerged in cultural studies, characterized by a burgeoning interest in the intersection between fan culture and media production, which later became a source of inspiration for translation scholars, who extensively documented the mechanism of fan translation. Recent scholarship on fan translation has expanded its scope to encompass not only the process of translation performed by fans but also the reception and interpretation of their work by audiences. The aim of this paper is to offer a cutting-edge survey of current scholarship in non-professional subtitling reception by discussing key issues of non-professional subtitling and examining theoretical frameworks that explain reception and audience in audiovisual translation.

Keywords: Audience, Future Prospects, Non-professional Subtitling, Reception, Trends

1. Introduction

The surge in audiovisual content production facilitated by the abundance of television channels, online streaming platforms, and social media platforms has led to a huge weight of research into audiovisual translation (AVT) (Zanotti, 2022). Thanks to the prevalence of digital culture and the ability for audiovisual content to reach global audiences quickly, traditional markets around specific AVT modalities within individual countries are no longer as dominant as they have been. As a

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result, there is a pressing need for AVT research to adapt and respond to these changes in the industry (Pérez-González, 2019). One eye-catching area of AVT scholarship which has now reached a significant level of maturity is reception studies (Greco & Romero Fresco, 2023; Valdeón, 2022), which is concerned with understanding how audiences engage with various forms of multimodal media (Di Giovanni & Gambier, 2018). Indeed, Gambier (2023) links reception studies to accessibility studies perhaps because "a knowledge of the needs and traits of the primary audience (deaf/hard of hearing, blind/partially sighted) has always been tantamount" (Di Giovanni, 2022, p. 400).

One promising research strand that has gained momentum in AVT is the study of non-professional subtitling reception (Orrego-Carmona, 2018, 2019). This area of study has garnered significant attention due to its potential implications for improving subtitling practices and enhancing audience experiences, thereby contributing to the advancement of AVT as an academic discipline. This paper surveys the extant literature on non-professional subtitling reception and begins with a definition of non-professional subtitling and challenges of defining it. Moving forward, it offers an overview of the research methodologies and theoretical frameworks, as well as the research findings that have been documented in this domain. Finally, it sketches out future prospects.

2. Non-professional Subtitling/Fansubbing

2.1. State of the Art

As a dynamic and evolving field of inquiry, fan studies emerged in the early 20th century to explore the practices, behaviors, and identities of fans of popular culture (Click & Scott, 2018). Fandom, broadly speaking, "celebrates and appropriates popular culture texts but reworks them to suit their own needs and pleasures" (Petersen, 2022, p. 2). Fan audiovisual translation has been in existence since the early 1980s, when fansubbing emerged as its precursor (Pérez-González,

2020). The prevailing assumptions around fansubbing is that it is a non-professional and amateur activity, which is typically performed by groups of people who are not formally trained in translation or subtitling and do not receive any financial compensation for their translation (Antonini, 2021; Massidda, 2020). In fact, "volunteering is seen as a choice and a morally rewarding practice, and is, by definition, not remunerated" (Buts, 2023, p. 273).

The influence behind the rise of fansubbing worldwide could be ascribed to the availability of pirated films and TV series on the internet as well as the growing popularity of international audiovisual content but also "sophisticated subtitling software applications readily available" to all people (Guillot, 2019, p. 32). Academic inquiry into fandom studies and AVT traces its origins to the mid-2000s with two seminal research articles (Diaz Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006; Pérez-González, 2007). It is important to note that the scholarly investigation of fandom in relation to AVT was first established by non-AVT scholars, such as Nornes (1999). The booming of fansubbing studies can be seen in collected volumes (Orrego-Carmona & Lee, 2017) and encyclopedic entries (Dwyer, 2019; Evans, 2020; Massidda, 2020).

2.2. Characteristics

The breadth and depth of non-professional translation activities suggests that translation is not solely the domain of professionals, but rather a broader cultural and social phenomenon (Borodo, 2022). Due to the complex nature of amateur subtitles, numerous scholars have endeavored to come up with a generic term from "fansubbing, amateur translation, fan translation, user-generated translation" to "collaborative translation, community translation, volunteer translation and social subtitling" (Beseghi, 2021, p. 103). Broadly, non-professional subtitlers "are of little formal training but equipped with some bilingual competence, and more importantly, enthusiasm for foreign cultures" and they "have engaged in voluntary

translation of audiovisual materials with subtitles in their mother tongue" (Mao et al., 2023, pp. 6–7). In fact, they are driven by their desire to create an effective form of mediation to enhance the entertainment experience for the viewers and rely on their intuition and prior experiences as users to find solutions that work best for the specific circumstances they are working with (Neves, 2019). Additionally, they tend to challenge the conventions and norms of the subtitling industry (Gambier & Kasperė, 2021) and produce subtitles for no cost and they possess the necessary asset to produce and circulate these subtitles online (Lee, 2018). Therefore, the lack of credentials and remuneration appears to be the core feature of non-professional subtitling (Pérez-González & Susam-Saraeva, 2012; Yu, 2022).

While the assessment of professionalism in translation may often be a subjective matter without a clear answer, Yu (2022) argues that "both 'expert' and 'non-expert' translators, with varying levels of expertise in translation and the subject matter, care about the quality of the translated products" (p. 123). Therefore, the focus of the translation process is ensuring that the final product is produced professionally, with input from individuals who possess relevant knowledge and experience, which can be seen as a means of exchanging knowledge between parties involved in the translation process (Yu, 2022). Recent studies, as Borodo (2022) maintains, have shifted their focus towards the "socio-cultural positioning" of these translators rather than solely concentrating on the perceived low quality of their output. Among the various research avenues in AVT, the study of the reception of non-professional subtitling has emerged as a novel area of inquiry.

3. Non-professional Subtitling Reception
3.1. State of the Art

Through its shifting of research trends towards more audience-based studies, AVT has contributed to the growing body of reception/perception studies. This

newfound interest is driven by the increasing use of technologies like eye-tracking, EEG, and galvanic skin response to measure behavioral and psychological responses, as well as the growing sophistication of traditional tools like questionnaires and interviews (Di Giovanni, 2022). A couple of factors influence how individual perceive and experience AVT, including "the viewer's reading speed, individual differences (e.g. personality and Need for Cognition), knowledge (e.g. cultural assumptions they share) as well as expectations and viewing motivation" (Deckert & Bogucki, 2022, p. 67).

The existing research on non-professional subtitling reception has incorporated both quantitative and qualitative paradigms, as well as mixed-methods, utilizing diverse methodological approaches such as experiments, surveys, and phenomenology (see Greco et al., 2022). As to the tools, both offline and online measures have been used by researchers. Offline measures such as self-report questionnaires and interviews gather attitudinal (e.g., individual's likes, dislikes and preferences) or performance data (e.g., how well individual performed on a given task). On the other hand, online measures such as eye tracking and heart rate measures are collected during the experimental task in real-time (Liao & Kruger, 2023; López & Martín, 2022). The existing literature can be classified into experimental and non-experimental (Figure 1).
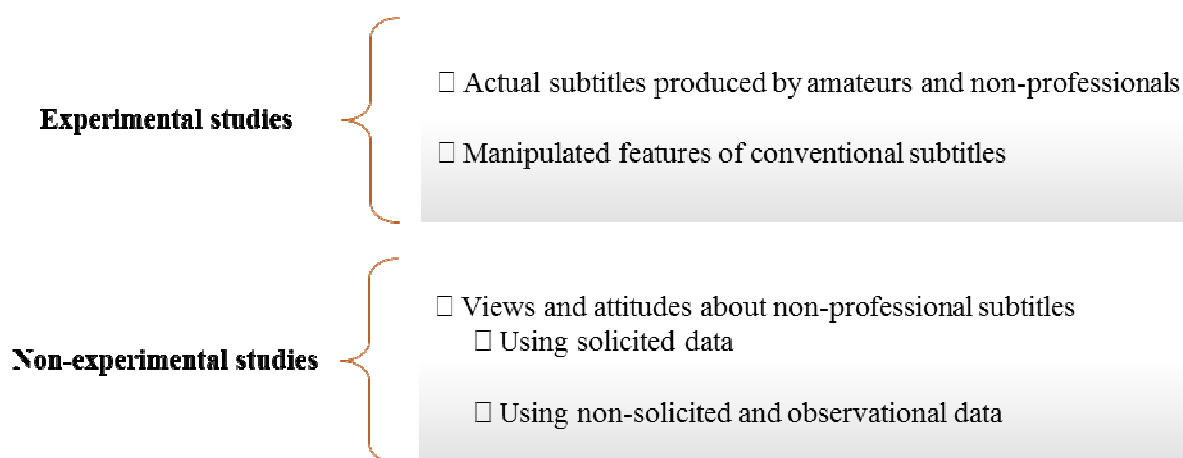

Experimental studies
☐ Actual subtitles produced by amateurs and non-professionals
☐ Manipulated features of conventional subtitles

Non-experimental studies
☐ Views and attitudes about non-professional subtitles
  ☐ Using solicited data
☐ Using non-solicited and observational data

Figure 1. *Types of Research*

3.2. Experimental Studies: Group One

Studies in this group refrained from any manipulation of the research stimuli (Figure 2). Instead, they used subtitles that were already created by non-professionals or professionals.
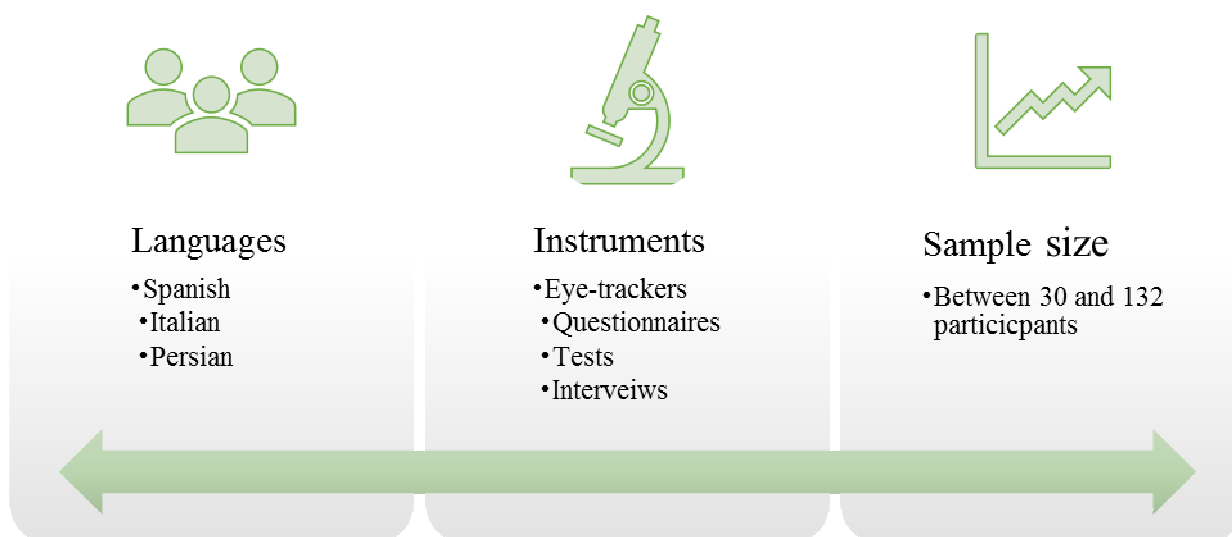
Languages	Instruments	Sample size
•Spanish •Italian •Persian	•Eye-trackers •Questionnaires •Tests •Interveiws	•Between 30 and 132 particicpants

Figure 2. *A Summary of Studies*

In his study, Orrego-Carmona (2016) found that Spanish viewers did not observe any significant difference between professional and non-professional subtitling in terms of viewing and understanding the program plot. However, it is noteworthy that professional subtitling demonstrated a higher degree of consistency in audience reading behavior (Orrego-Carmona, 2016). In another investigation comparing subtitles generated by Netflix and an Italian fansubbing group, Di Giovanni (2018b) discovered that there was significant variance in viewers' attitudes towards the subtitles, indicating that neither Netflix nor the Italian fansubbing can claim the top spot in terms of reception. These studies relied on "pro-am [professional-amateur]" subtitlers who act in accordance with professional subtitling guidelines, so, their quality is comparable to professional subtitling (Orrego-Carmona & Lee, 2017). Also, Ameri and Khoshsaligheh (2021) more and less corroborated these findings as Persian amateur subtitling did not have a

negative effect on viewers' immersion. However, viewers' comprehension and reception of the subtitles were affected by factors such as subtitling reading difficulty, duration, and subtitling overall quality. In fact, these viewers also had better comprehension and reception when watching the TV show with professionally crafted subtitles. In another experiment with one group, Ameri and Khoshsaligheh (2022) concluded that Persian subtitles created by amateurs can be considerably effective and the viewers had positive attitudes towards them. These studies help us understand "the spectatorial experience that fan audiovisual translation delivers" (Pérez-González, 2020, p. 175).

3.3. Experimental Studies: Group Two

The second group of studies has analyzed certain features, commonplace in amateur subtitling, from a reception-based perspective. These studies have examined various topics and languages (Figures 3 & 4) and comprised a cohort of no fewer than 16 and up to 74 participants and collected the data through diverse instruments (Figure 5). These studies did not explicitly frame their work in terms of non-professional subtitling reception.

Figure 3. *Types of Manipulations*

3.3.1. Special Subtitles

Caffrey (2009), Künzli and Ehrensberger-Dow (2011), and Zheng and Xie (2018) respectively investigated the effectiveness of "pop-up glosses", "surtitles" and "explanatory captions" in enhancing viewers' comprehension and appreciation of cultural elements within the film. The overall results of these studies suggest that such subtitles increase viewers' cognitive effort, resulting in more visual loss and distractions even though they have a positive effect on their comprehension and appreciation. Similarly, Sasamoto et al. (2021) examined the reception of "impact captions"— which capture viewers' attention and include sound effects and other audio cues to enhance the viewing experience. They concluded that impact captions contributed positively to the understanding and enjoyment of the program, and

helped to retain the Japanese audience's attention. The authors also highlighted the importance of individual differences in watching TV programs.
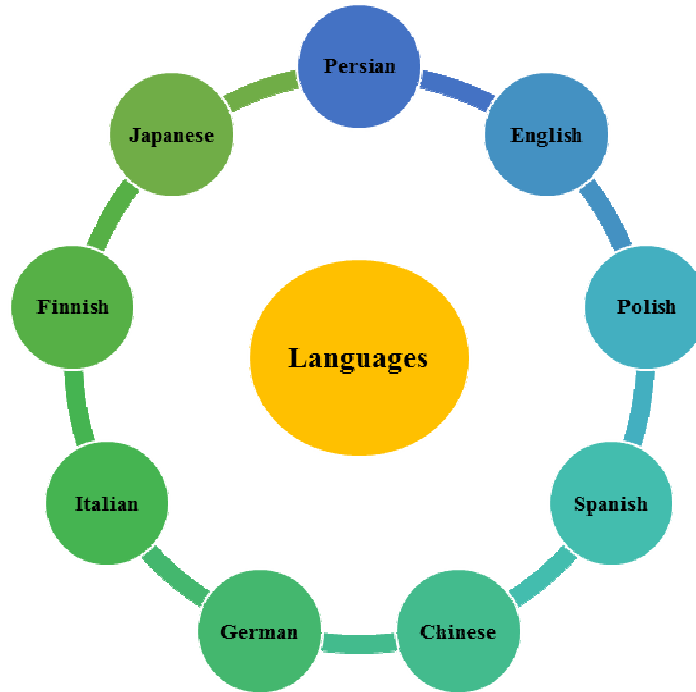

Figure 4. *Participants' Mother Tongue*

German scholar Wendy Fox conducted research on "integrated titles"—a non-conventional subtitling form where subtitles are introduced into the shot composition and placed to the right or left of the speaking character (Fox, 2016). She found that integrated titles were positively received, and eye-tracking data indicated that viewers spent more time on the image. Kruger et al. (2018) advanced research in this area by testing and measuring viewers' cognitive load while watching programs with integrated titles using electroencephalography, eye-tracking, and post-hoc subjective measures. Surprisingly, no significant difference was found between the three conditions, indicating that no condition had a special effect on viewers. Black (2022) studied children's reception of integrated and conventional subtitles and found that when they watched clips with integrated subtitles, they paid more attention to the visual content as shown by Fox (2016). In

addition, integrated subtitles did not negatively affect children's comprehension of video clips or image processing.

3.3.2. Segmentation

Perego et al. (2010), Di Giovanni (2016), Gerber-Morón et al. (2018) and Gerber-Morón and Szarkowska (2018) conducted studies on the impact of poorly-segmented subtitles on viewers. There were disparities between the findings of these studies. While Perego et al. (2010) found that poor segmentations did not negatively affect viewers' perception and processing of subtitles, Di Giovanni (2016) mustered evidence to suggest that they negatively contributed to viewers' understanding and overall reception. Gerber-Morón et al. (2018) and Gerber-Morón and Szarkowska (2018) used English subtitles while the viewers were not native speakers of English but had a good command of it. In the first study, viewers were exposed to screenshots with English subtitles, while in the second study they watched short video clips. While the participants in the first study preferred correct segmentations where subtitles were broken according to correct semantic and syntactic phrase structures, the viewers of the second study experienced higher cognitive load for poorly-segmented subtitles (but the difference was not statistically significant). Overall, correctly-segmented subtitles facilitated more efficient processing of subtitles.

3.3.3. Synchronization

Lång et al. (2013) conducted a study on well-synchronized and poorly-synchronized subtitles in Finland. The comparison revealed that viewers perceived the quality of subtitles similarly, indicating that they were not aware of synchronization errors. However, eye-tracking data showed that poor synchronization negatively affected viewers' viewing behavior.

3.3.4. Shot Changes and Line Numbers

Krejtz et al. (2013) conducted an eye-tracking study to test the subtitling industry's "golden rule" that a subtitle should not be maintained over a cut/shot to avoid re-reading (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021). The study found that most viewers did not re-read subtitles made over a shot, rejecting this recommendation. Szarkowska and Gerber-Morón (2019) explored the effects of three-line and two-line subtitles on cognitive load, comprehension, enjoyment, and preferences of individuals with diverse linguistic backgrounds. Three-line subtitles were found to increase cognitive load and the participants preferred two lines over three lines. Also, the number of lines did not have an adverse effect on comprehension. Focusing on one-line and two-line subtitles and length of subtitles on viewers' attention allocation, Zahedi and Khoshsaligheh (2021) found that Iranian viewers paid more attention to one-line subtitles than two-line subtitles, even when the length of the subtitles was the same. Additionally, the study found that viewers allocated more attention to longer subtitles compared to shorter ones. The findings suggest that the number of lines and length of subtitles can impact viewers' attention allocation, and shorter subtitles are preferred by viewers.

3.3.5. Reading Speeds

The eye-tracking study of Szarkowska and Gerber-Morón (2018) showed that viewers can handle subtitles with speeds up to 20 character per second (cps) with no negative effect on their viewing. Kruger et al. (2022) also examined subtitles with a reading speed of 12, 20, and 28 cps. They found that viewers' comprehension sharply decreased as the reading speed increased, and viewers struggled to keep up with the information presented on screen, leading to incomplete reading of subtitles.
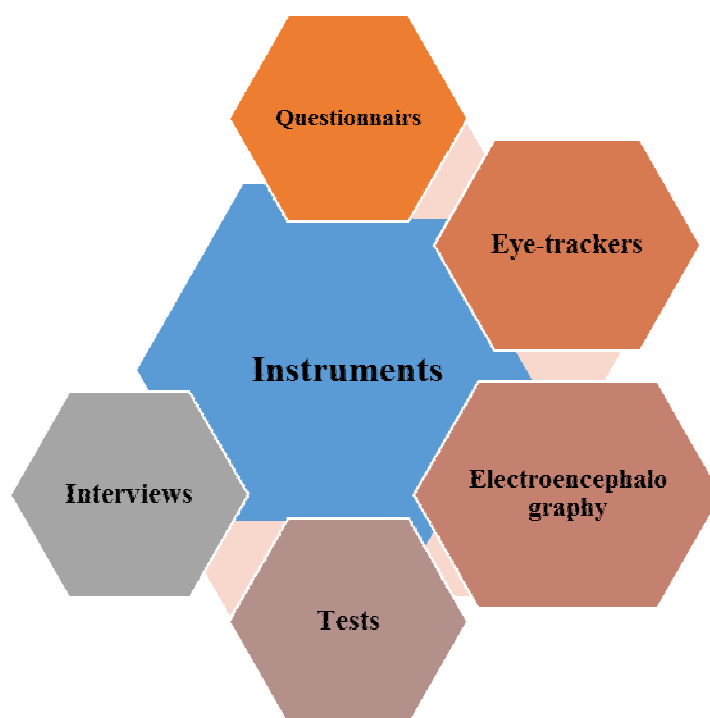
Figure 5. *Instruments*

3.4. Non-Experimental Studies: Group One

Unlike the studies discussed in previous sections, this block of research focuses on non-experimental studies. They collect solicited data through instruments, such as questionnaires and interviews and mainly addressed Iranian, Spanish, Turkish and Chinses viewers with a sample size of no fewer than 45 and up to 483 participants.

Orrego-Carmona (2014) investigated the attitudes of Spanish university students towards watching films and TV series and found that a significant number of them watched content online. Despite being accustomed to dubbed programs, over one-third also watched subtitled content, highlighting its popularity in a dubbing country. The speed of subtitle release was a significant factor in choosing subtitling over dubbing. The study also found a correlation between the type of the program and AVT modality, with participants preferring dubbed films and subtitled TV series. Wu (2017) conducted a survey of 375 Chinese viewers to understand

their perceptions of unauthorized subtitling communities and found that Chinese viewers download foreign programs when subtitles are available and free of charge due to their limited familiarity with English and reluctance to pay for online content. Subtitle availability and being free of charge were ranked as the most important factors, while subtitle quality received less attention. It is known that audiences generally prefer early and immediate releases of subtitles (Orrego-Carmona, 2018, 2019). Duraner et al. (2017) conducted a study in the Turkish context and found that many Turkish viewers of Korean fansubbing are female, as are many of the fansubbers themselves. The study reported two major findings: viewers' motivations for watching Korean drama programs and their attitudes towards fansubbers' activities. Viewers were also largely positive and appreciative of fansubbers' activities. Khoshsaligheh et al. (2019) surveyed Iranian audiences and found mixed opinions on Persian amateur subtitling. While respondents enjoyed uncensored subtitled programs, they criticized the quality of fansubbing, citing mistranslations and technical issues.

3.5. Non-Experimental Studies: Group Two

These studies draw on natural, real-life data from viewers using observational methods to examine audience reception. To study user-generated comments on subtitles of YouTube Channels, for example, Wu and Chen (2022) used a corpus-driven approach. The authors found that viewers requested subtitles more frequently than they acknowledged their presence. The audience's responses were grouped into ten themes, including comprehension, emotional reactions, and subtitle presentation. Orrego-Carmona and Richter (2018) used web scraping—an automated process of extracting data from websites—to monitor user actions, including language usage, subtitle creation time, online posting time, download rates, and demand trends over time.

4. Future Prospects

The current state of non-professional subtitling is experiencing swift transformation, especially with the expansion of social network platforms (Instagram and YouTube) and emergence of artificial intelligence. This would demand theoretical interdisciplinarity, critical theorizing and re-theorizing current concepts, which could facilitate our understanding of the complex nuances of this phenomenon in terms of reception. In fact, conceptual frameworks are useful tools for empirical research because they help researchers define, interpret, measure and analyze the variables more coherently. However, there has been little theorization on the reception of non-professional subtitling, which opens up more directions for research. Further research is required and continued research is necessary to build upon our current knowledge base so that a more robust understanding of the underlying mechanisms of non-professional subtitling reception is obtained. This section elaborates on research issues that warrant further investigation:

- Fansubbing/non-professional subtitling is a worldwide activity, and we do not know how it is perceived in other countries, and how users react to non-professional subtitles or how the subtitles are understood or enjoyed by viewers.
- Previous research has primarily concentrated on fictional products. Future experiments should incorporate non-fictional products (e.g., documentaries) into their scope.
- Despite some limited attention given to the concept of "immersion", further conceptualization, theorization, and empirical evidence are required.
- New theories in empirical studies is essential for advancing the conceptual frameworks of reception studies. They can refine existing models and improve current methodologies, ultimately leading to more accurate and reliable results (see Kruger & Liao, 2022).
- A novel area of research is the comparison of fansubbing with fandubbing to examine differences in audience perception.
- The examination of non-professional subtitling reception through qualitative approaches has yet to be thoroughly done. For example, Szarkowska et al. (2021) examined viewers' take on subtitling quality.

- There is limited evidence regarding the relationship between binge-watching and viewers' trust in a particular amateur subtitling (Orrego-Carmona, 2018).
- The present scholarship on audience is synchronic (focusing on contemporary viewers). Further effort is however required to advance diachronic research (Di Giovanni, 2022; Zanotti, 2018).
- Studying the reception of emotion-eliciting subtitles can offer "additional evidence of the wide range of affective factors that can influence the translation process and its resulting product" (Hubscher-Davidson, 2021, p. 56).

I hope new interdisciplinary studies can bring together researchers from AVT, media psychology and fan studies.

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