

# ITALIAN FICTION AS VIEWED FROM A DISTANCE. ANOMALIES IN THE CORRELATION BETWEEN NATIONAL AND REGIONAL SUCCESS

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## KEYWORDS

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## ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the regional consumption of mainstream Italian TV series, covering the four-year period from 2016–2019. It underlines the great heterogeneity of television fiction consumption across Italy, and it demonstrates how the correlation between

national and regional success is often subject to the influence of factors that can produce anomalies. The most important factors responsible for anomalies appear to be the regions where the series are set, and the broadcasting channels. The article also compares and quantifies such phenomena to understand how the national success of Italian series can benefit from the polarization of consumption happening in the various regions of the country. As a matter of fact, the popularity of Italian mainstream TV series appears to be the result of the mutual entanglement of different regional patterns of taste and consumption. Moreover, audience consumption behaviors, while being interesting from an economic point of view, can also be good indicators of the level of socio-cultural fragmentation of a country.

This paper is aimed at contributing to the study of those factors that determine the success of Italian fiction. The term “fiction” indicates here mainstream TV series, and more in general televisual storytelling of national production, following an Italian tradition started about thirty years ago and that continues to thrive. The term “fiction”, initially surrounded by an aura of positive connotations, used to allude to a breath of fresh international air for the original production of the country after the collapse of the public monopoly. Nowadays, the meaning of the term has almost been reversed, and it has come to indicate, rightly or wrongly, the hardly-developed aesthetic and narrative character of national mainstream scripted contents.<sup>1</sup>

This paper ought to be included in the domain of *entertainment science* (Hennig-Thurau and Huston 2019). Oftentimes, we have believed that the success of audiovisual contents (and in general, of entertainment) is in fact fortuitous and unpredictable, and that the reasons behind it are pretty much impossible to know – *nobody knows anything*, as William Goldman famously said. Here, the attempt is made to go in the opposite direction, in the conviction that we actually *do know something*, and that by using data and analyzing phenomena from a certain perspective and with some strong hypotheses in mind, we might be able to understand and predict some (though not all) of the reasons underlying the success of audiovisual products in Italy.

The focus will be on the regional success of original productions in mainstream TV series, a subject to which the author already dedicated a previous article (Avezzi 2019). This article was the result of an initial investigation aimed at verifying whether TV series set in given Italian regions have greater audience success in those precise regions. This new paper shall tackle the same issue in a more systematic way, by proposing a solution that allows to visualize the different types of “success” of the products taken into account, in order to determine their relevance, and to obtain an overview of how consumers in each region relate to TV series. Italian free TV series are a hugely popular phenomenon, attracting millions of viewers every night, and few other products are comparable to them in terms of national audience engagement in the history of national – but also international – entertainment. In order to better understand the specificities

1 As proof, we may note how the series *Il processo* – an above-average quality TV series – was added to Netflix’s catalogue (“in 4K and without ads”) after it was broadcast on Canale 5 without success, only to be commented upon on Instagram by director Stefano Lodovichi with the hashtag *#serienonfiction* [*#seriesnotfiction*].

of their success, we shall now look at them from a distance, as Franco Moretti suggested doing with literature (and cinema).<sup>2</sup>

The outcomes of the mentioned initial study were that different tastes exist across different regions, and that TV series audiences are heterogeneous. This made it difficult to systematically analyze the phenomenon. For this reason, the decision was taken to look into various indicators: the absolute value of national audience share and regional audience share, the difference between these values, the difference between regional audience share and regional average audience share for all the audiovisual products considered, etc. These indicators had different values across different regions (according to the popularity of TV series in general in certain regions), and they had to be discussed one by one, also considering one TV series at a time. In this article, such indicators will be tentatively analyzed all together, and they will be applied to all series titles at the same time, region by region. The aim is to demonstrate as precisely as possible whether and how the setting of Italian mainstream TV series is relevant to their regional – and national – success, and whether the setting of a certain audiovisual product is to be considered the only factor – or the main factor – able to shape regional audiences’ preferences, or whether additional factors need to be taken into account in this regard.

The specific attention paid to the regional characteristics of TV series is motivated by the fact that it has recently become increasingly important in the Italian production to set the storyline in a precise location. This aspect, which, of course, is to be partly attributed to regional film commissions, has oftentimes been acknowledged as well by TV commissioners themselves.<sup>3</sup> Rai seems to be justifying said

2 See Moretti 2005. Moretti’s attempt to apply this way of looking at cinema is in Moretti 2001. Among others, Marta Boni has tried to look at the social discourses on TV series “from afar”, most recently in Boni 2018, yet focusing on different forms than those that will be analyzed here, and (consequently) on very different forms of audience success. However, it is in no way claimed here that a *distant reading* is superior compared to other approaches to the study of TV series, and to more traditional textual approaches. The title of this article should not be considered to be in controversy with approaches that take a “closer” look at the subject, e.g. Cardini 2017.

3 The situation has changed considerably since the 2000s. For example, in the 2005-2006 season (therefore ten years before the beginning of the period on which this analysis is focused), Italian TV series were much more Rome-centric, and 40% of the total series were set in Lazio; see Gelato 2007: 121. The percentage of series set in Lazio today, in the sample considered in this article (2016-2019), is instead considerably lower (slightly higher than 20%). Lazio still remains the region with the largest percentage of filmed series, but the settings seem overall better distributed throughout Italy: in 2005-2006, the second region for number of filmed series was Lombardy (10%), while in the last four years it has been Sicily (14%, only 2% in 2005-2006).

importance by highlighting its social mission as public service broadcaster: extending filming locations of TV series to various settings across the country responds to the actual need of giving visibility to all regions (Guarnaccia and Barra 2018: 8). As a matter of fact, as it can be noted by looking at an advertisement from *Tivù*, a business-to-business magazine [Figure 1], while choosing various settings with the aim of differentiating its products, Rai Fiction declares to be following a strategy aimed at valorizing the country as a whole.

The scenographic and – to some extent – the geographic aspects play a more prominent role within the new mainstream production, probably also due to the competitiveness of quality pay TV production and SVOD platforms.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, a product whose geographical features are more highlighted is often thought to be richer in production value and in quality. Even if we consider them to actually have an influence on the characteristics of free seriality, the original productions of pay TV have, and will always have, a much narrower audience than free TV. Hence, pay TV and VOD services shall not be taken into consideration in this analysis, as the evaluation would be biased by differences in earnings and technological infrastructure availability across the country.<sup>5</sup>

Recognizing the role played by the setting as a success factor for Italian TV series at a regional level has a strategic relevance mainly in relation to product marketing, as well as editorial and ad schedule marketing. On the one hand, defining the importance of the setting – as well as that of other factors that contribute to directing the success of a certain series towards a specific region – allows scheduling and counterscheduling optimization; on the other hand, it helps to trace an audience profile. Therefore, it becomes

4 Another reason may be that mainstream original productions often appear in the catalogs of AVOD services of the same free TVs (RaiPlay, Mediaset Play), which inevitably have to compete in quality against some of the best known SVOD platforms. On the other hand, mainstream productions often end up in major SVOD platforms, also for regulatory reasons that impose a share of Italian titles in the catalogs: it is not uncommon to find Rai and Mediaset titles on Netflix and on Amazon Prime Video.

5 In a broader sense, the scope of this article is not solely limited to a media sphere often (yet wrongly) perceived as about to disappear. In fact, the Italian mainstream TV series probably replicate in scale consumption dynamics that can be found all over the world, and also those of the video streaming platforms. The importance of the existence of local tastes in audiovisual consumption is a topic of great relevance today, also in the field of studies regarding digital distribution and its global geographies (see Lobato 2019). The fact that it is possible to have reliable and official data on the success of the Italian mainstream TV series – while there are no public or certified data on the audiovisual consumption of streaming platforms – allows to directly verify the scale of a phenomenon, i.e. the “friction” of local taste, that today, in the academic field of digital distribution, can only be indirectly inferred.



FIGURE 1

possible to actually *design* a type of audience, starting from the planning of certain content features, like the setting: the latter is in fact a characteristic that can be shaped at one’s own preference. Clearly, some of the local audiences are more strategic than others, richer than others, more or less exploited or permeable than others. A broadcaster that is aware of both the average geographic segmentation of its audience and the potential of a certain content in a given area shall be able to decide whether to adapt its schedule for the benefit of its most affectionate portion of the audience; this way, most of its scripted contents shall be rooted in that part of the audience. On the contrary, the broadcaster can also try to intercept different audiences from *unusual* regions, in order to try and maximize the audience share or simply to rebrand.

Although most of the academic analyses on the geography of Italian TV series focus on the topic of *movie- or tv-induced tourism*,<sup>6</sup> the heterogeneity of the geographic segmentation related to the consumption of those series leads to understand how the setting is not only linked to territorial marketing, and hence to touristic promotion. The correspondence between setting and local success shows a completely different phenomenon: a sort of socio-anthropologic need of self-representation and mirroring, expressed by an audience that is more interested in watching stories set in locations they are able to recognize, rather than in radically different settings.<sup>7</sup> The viewer apparently prefers to be an *insider* than

6 See Graziano e Nicosia 2017, and Lavarone 2016.

7 See the concept of “cultural proximity” by Straubhaar 2007.

just the *outsider*<sup>8</sup> who is merely looking for the next holiday destination.

The study of the factors that can determine local success, even if the scope here is limited to the Italian context only, can help us remember that TV series of any origin necessarily contain some more or less geographically localized features, and, more particularly, that these features can foster specific and likewise localized patterns of consumption. It can be useful to keep this in mind, especially in the present scenario, characterized by the strong prominence of VOD platforms in social and academic discourses. Indeed, such prominence may induce us to think that most TV series have an international or global appeal, in terms of both aesthetics and consumption. On the contrary, not only can it certainly be said that a national production persists, but it is even possible to identify large or small segments of sub-national and regional audience. On the importance of proximity features different from those discussed here, including their impact on local, regional and (especially) national audiences, and on the possibility that TV series reinforce territorial identities and a sense of belonging, see e.g. Dhoest (2004, 2013), Castelló (2007, 2009), Castelló, Dhoest and O'Donnell (2009), Peris Blanes (2016), Alonso (2018).

## 1. DEPICTING THE REGIONAL SUCCESS OF ITALIAN SERIES

114 complete seasons of Italian TV series were considered, constituting all the first original releases of broadcast channels with more than one episode per year, from January 2016 to the end of December 2019. This is approximately the period from the advent of Netflix in Italy to the shift to the publication of *total audience* data by Auditel – which broadened its outreach also to digital devices, apps and online TVs. The Auditel data considered here (total Live + VOSDAL individuals) were provided by Mediaset, as part of a broader research by the Strategic Marketing Department regarding successful narrative factors in Italian TV series.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, the *average minute rating* expressed in percentage (AMR%) was considered: this is a metrics that is called in Italy *penetration* (of a certain content). Such penetration, which is also com-

monly referred to as TVR (*TV rating*), compares the number of “viewers per average minute” with a pre-defined target – *that is, in our case, with the stable reference universes of the national population and of the single regions according to ISTAT* (the Italian National Institute of Statistics). By doing so, it makes it possible to perform a more reliable comparison and an easier, faster quantification of success compared to a more traditional metric used in Italy, which is the *audience share* (SHR) metric. In the latter, indeed, data continuously change according to the total viewing audience (Casetti and di Chio 1998: 43ss). Two episodes that, on two different nights, have registered the same average minute rating – that is the same number of average viewers per minute – have the same penetration, but not necessarily the same audience share. If, for instance, on one of the two nights considered, a football game had attracted viewers on another channel, the episode on air that same night would have registered a lower audience share compared to the other. The analysis will not parametrize success on the total viewing audience, but rather it will report it in terms of fixed parameters (regional or national ones) that allow a more stable overview on the phenomenon, thus allowing a more balanced comparison.

Arguably, the best way to represent penetration data is by means of scatter plots as illustrated below [Figure 2]. This solution allows to synoptically observe the regional consumption of Italian TV series “from a distance”; to compare it to national consumption data; to highlight any incongruities in the regional distribution of the success of single products; and to identify the factors that underpin said incongruities. Each graph refers to a single region, each dot corresponds to one season of a given TV series.<sup>10</sup> The horizontal axis refers to the national penetration of each series title, while the vertical axis refers to the regional penetration. The graphs are to be interpreted as follows: the closer a title locates itself to the right margin, the more national success it achieved; the closer it is to the upper margin of the graph, the more regional success it achieved. The assumption is to find – if not a complete coincidence – at least a positive correlation, more or less strong, between national and local penetration; each region should theoretically replicate on a local scale the national success achieved by a certain title. For this reason, all titles should generally arrange themselves along the diagonal of the square (in case of a perfect coincidence), or along a straight line just above or below said diagonal, that is along

8 Regarding the distinction between *insider* and *outsider* relevant to this passage, see Cosgrove 1998: 19.

9 The author expresses his gratitude to Federico di Chio, head of the Department, and Stefano Gnasso and Giulia Miotto, working in the section dedicated to *content science*, with whom he has been working since 2015.

10 *L'Aquila – Grandi speranze* has changed channel – from Rai 1 to Rai 3 – and appears twice in the graphs: the dots in each graph are 115.

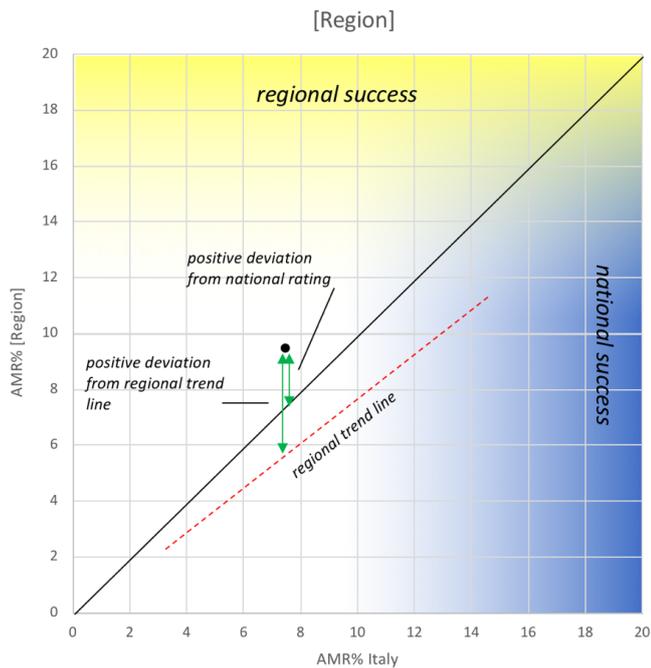


FIGURE 2

the trend line<sup>11</sup> describing the specific regional correlation: the space above the diagonal refers to regions with a higher consumption of TV series, that below the diagonal refers to the rest of the regions.

Nonetheless, what is particularly interesting about these graphs is that *incongruities* clearly stand out in them. More attention will be devoted to outliers than to titles that arrange themselves linearly in the graphs, as the aim is understanding what defines differences between local consumption and average national consumption. In addition to ordinary regional differences in the average TV series consumption, there are some factors that produce huge incongruities between national and regional penetration; said incongruities allow some titles to appear above or below the diagonal in the graphs, and above or below the trend line that describes the specific correlation in each region. Naturally, the higher a title is positioned above the diagonal, the more positive is the deviation of its regional penetration from its national penetration. And the higher a title is positioned above the regional trend line, the more positive is the deviation of its regional penetration from the standard tendency of TV series consumption in the same region.

11 That is the straight line that minimizes the sum of the squares of the deviations of all points with respect to itself.

Once having identified the coordinates for each region that can pinpoint an ideal median series (M) on the graph, that is a dot whose x value is the median national penetration value of all the TV series considered, and whose y value is the median regional penetration of the same titles, values are obtained that can be represented as straight lines dividing the graph between *stronger* and *weaker titles* in the region or the whole country [Figure 3]. Therefore, it will be possible to observe some graph areas representing TV series that in each region perform above or below the national median figure and/or above or below the regional median figure. Each of the four quarters created with the intersection of the two straight lines will be named by using a labelling system composed of pairs of letters: the first letter indicates whether the quarter is occupied by hits (A) or weaker titles (B) on a national level, while the second letter indicates whether the quarter is occupied by hits (A) or weaker titles (B) on a regional level. The top-left quarter – the one dedicated to *regional hits only* – shall hence be labelled BA (hits performing only in the region considered, but not at national level); the bottom-right quarter – the one dedicated to *non-regional hits* – shall be labelled AB (national hits not performing as well in the region considered); the top-right quarter – dedicated to *national and regional hits* – shall be indicated as AA; and lastly, the bottom-left quarter – *weak titles* at both national and regional level – shall receive the label BB.

At the same time, when considering the diagonal (or the regional trend line) it is possible to perfect the partition into quarters by taking into account the regional deviation as considered from *national data of each title*. AA titles can present a positive (AA+) or negative (AA-) deviation in relation to their corresponding national penetration value. Together with BA titles, AA+ titles are the titles to be considered real local hits. AA- titles are regional hits *although* their local penetration is below the national median value, that is, *they are more national than regional hits*. Among the weak BB titles, it is possible to distinguish between *weak titles yet strong on a regional level* (BB+), and *weak titles also weak on a regional level* (BB-). These titles have achieved poor or modest audience success within the region and at national level compared to all the titles considered, and present a positive or negative deviation in relation to their penetration in Italy. As a consequence, BB+ titles are to be considered of interest to value regional success, together with BA and AA+ titles: said titles have in fact been able to penetrate a certain regional audience more than they have penetrated the national audience, albeit more weakly than other products. AA-, AB, and BB- TV

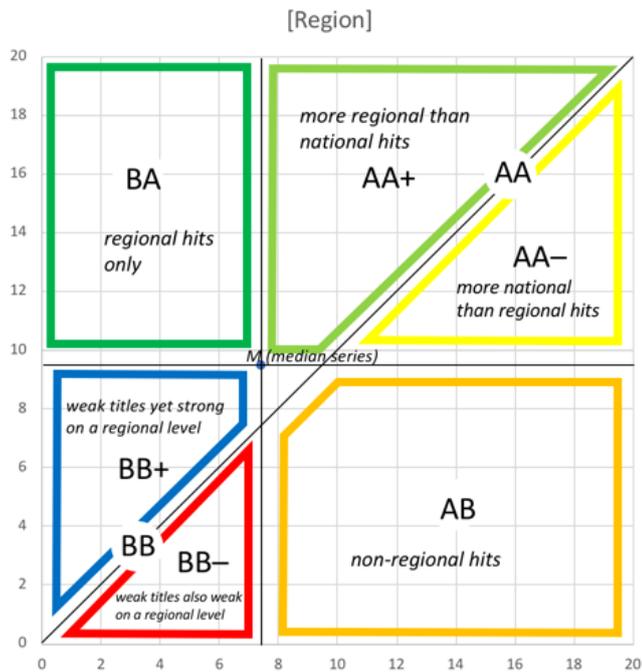


FIGURE 3

series are also interesting because, regardless of the entity of their success, they express a negative local penetration. AB in particular is worth a closer look, because it includes titles that are strong at national level yet disappointing from a regional point of view; at the same time, AA- titles will be considered strong titles at regional level as well, but they will not be considered full hits, as they express a lower penetration value compared to the rest of the country.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. THE SETTING AS AN ANOMALY-PRODUCING FACTOR

After this introduction, useful to understand how to read the graphs, the analysis will start by focusing on some regions. A northern, a central, and a southern region will be considered: Veneto, Umbria, and Sicily. These regions display three different consumption habits [Figures 4-6]. Considering

<sup>12</sup> The diagonal of the graph necessarily intersects also AB (in the case of regions with an above-average TV series consumption), or BA (in the opposite case). However, the small triangular area that is thus formed near the ideal median TV series of the region is – precisely because it is necessarily small and very close to the center of gravity of regional consumption – poorly characterized and not very interesting for the purposes of the analysis. Therefore, it does not appear to deserve a specific label.

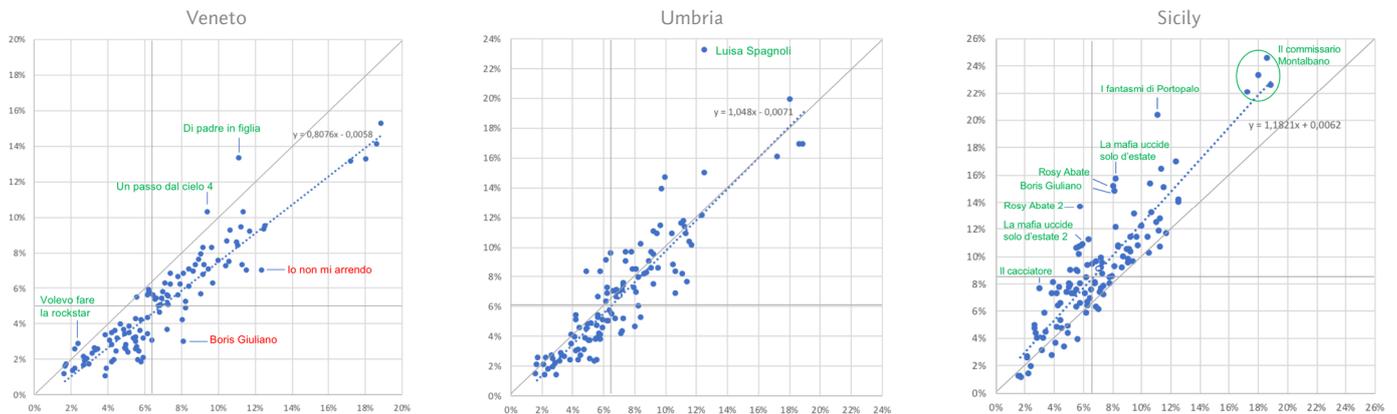
a national median of 6.50%, the median penetration of the 114 titles in Veneto is 5.00%, in Umbria it is 6.03%, and in Sicily it is 8.44%. For this reason, almost all titles find themselves below the diagonal line as far as Veneto is concerned; if considering Sicily, almost all titles are above the diagonal, while Umbria displays an almost average distribution, even if slightly more scattered than in the other regions, which shows how the correlation between national and regional penetration is not as strong as in the two other regions at stake. It can also be noted that these first three regions already display a general phenomenon, which the rest of the graphs will only confirm: the farther south the region, the higher the TV series consumption.

In Veneto, only one TV series can be found that moves away from the regional trend line. This series, *Di padre in figlia*, is set in Veneto. More precisely, it is set around the cities of Vicenza and Padua, and together with *Un passo dal cielo* (season 4) – filmed on the Dolomites between Trentino-Alto Adige and Veneto – it is the only real regional success that exceeds national penetration (AA+ region of the graph). It is also to be noted that the two most negatively shifted titles in Veneto compared to their national success (AA- and AB) are two distinctly southern series: *Io non mi arrendo* (Campania) and *Boris Giuliano* (Sicily).

In Umbria, the most evident positive deviation regards *Luisa Spagnoli* (AA+). This series, set in the regional capital Perugia, expresses a wider variance than *Don Matteo* (season 10), set in the same region, which sparked much analysis on territorial marketing and film-induced tourism. *Don Matteo* has achieved great success in Umbria, but not much more than in Italy as a whole, where it still is one of the most loved TV series.

As in Umbria and in Veneto, in Sicily as well all the major deviations from national penetration and from the regional trend line – *Il commissario Montalbano*, *I fantasmi di Portopalo* and many others – are attributable to the setting. Within the examined period, Sicily is the region where most of the products considered in our analysis were filmed, second only to Lazio.

To distinguish at a glance the titles filmed in the region considered, in the following scatter plots the corresponding dots will be colored orange [Figures 7-26]. In fact, as it can be observed, the outliers that positively deviate from national data or from the regional trend line are often the orange dots. The situation appears to be similar in all regions, from Valle d'Aosta to Calabria. Clearly, in absolute terms each region has a different weight, but viewers everywhere are invariably



FIGURES 4-6 (VENETO, UMBRIA, SICILIA)

attracted by local TV series, which end up becoming more regional than national hits (AA+), regional hits only (BA), or weak titles with a strong regional connotation (BB+).

The analysis will now move to some of the most evident regional hits (and flops), as shown by the graphs.

In the AA+ area, including the titles that have achieved success across Italy as a whole but mainly in the regions considered, it is possible to note a great number of series set in regional environments: *Fabrizio De André* in Liguria, *Provaci ancora prof!* (season 7) and *La strada di casa* (season 2) in Piedmont, *La compagnia del cigno* in Lombardy,<sup>13</sup> *Di padre in figlia* in Veneto, the 2019 season of *Montalbano* set in Friuli-Venezia Giulia (the first episode is partly set near Udine), *I Medici* (seasons 1 and 2) and *Pezzi unici* in Tuscany, *Luisa Spagnoli* and *Don Matteo* (season 10) in Umbria, *Scomparsa* and *Che Dio ci aiuti* (season 4) in Marche, *Una pallottola nel cuore* (seasons 2 and 3) and *L'allieva* in Lazio, *Sotto copertura* (season 2), the two seasons of *I bastardi di Pizzofalcone*, *Sirene*, *Io non mi arrendo* and *L'amica geniale* in Campania, *Il capitano Maria* and *Io non mi arrendo* in Apulia (set in Campania but filmed in Apulia), *Sorelle* and *Imma Tataranni* in Basilicata, *I fantasmi di Portopalo*, *Montalbano*, *La mafia uccide solo d'estate*, *Boris Giuliano*, *Maltese* in Sicily, *L'isola di Pietro* in Sardinia.

Concerning the BA area, dedicated to regional titles only, more products can be found that are set in a regional environment, often showing a surprising variance between

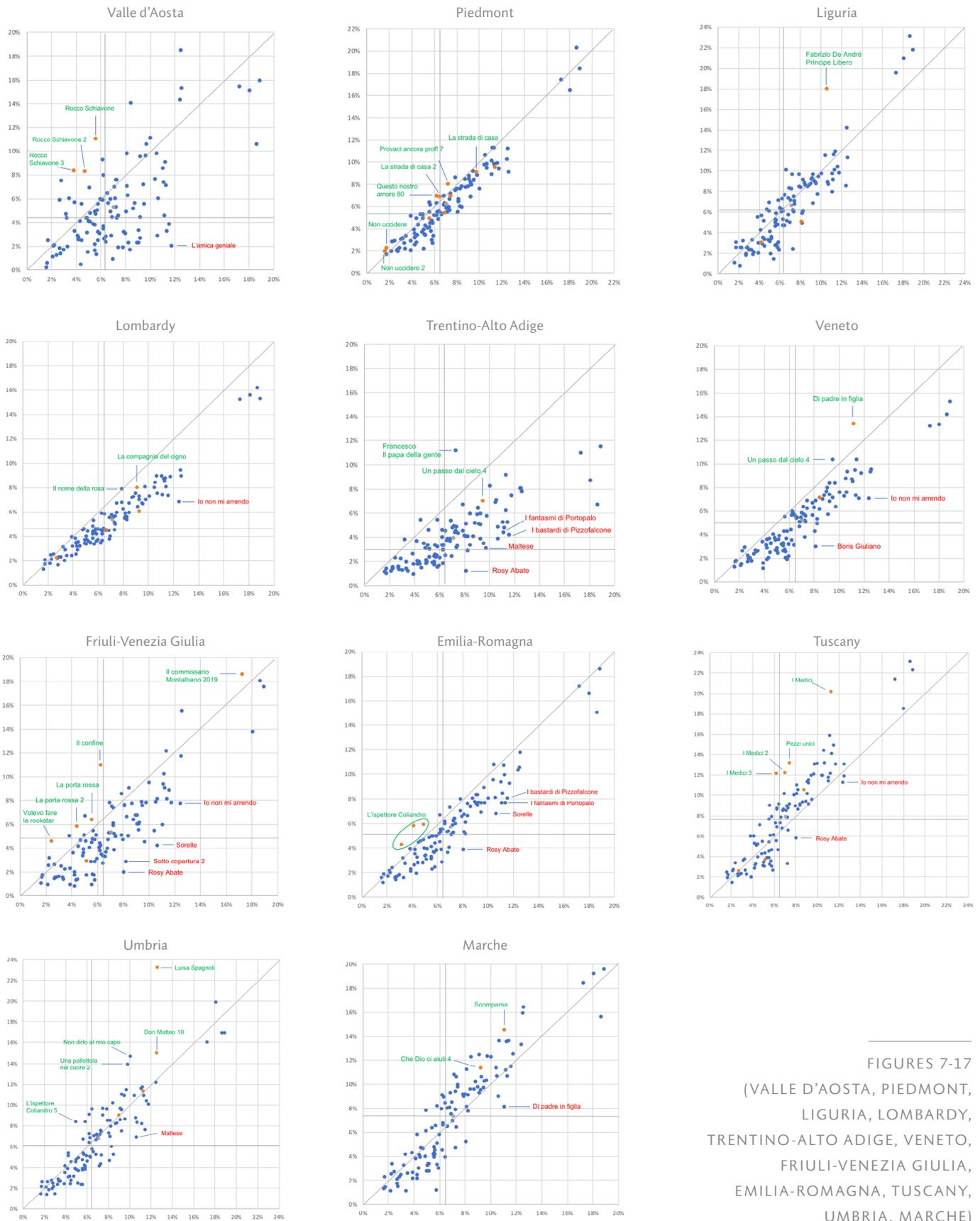
13 As a matter of fact, the national values are almost never exceeded in this region (the only exceptions are *Non uccidere* and *I topi*, while *Il nome della rosa* has achieved an almost perfectly identical success compared to the national average). For this reason, we consider the regional trend line and not the diagonal in order to define the AA+ area in the Lombardy scatter plot.

regional and national success. At stake here are the three seasons of *Rocco Schiavone* set in Valle d'Aosta, *Questo nostro amore 80* in Piedmont, *Il confine* and the two seasons of *La porta rossa* in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, *L'ispettore Coliandro* (seasons 5 and 7) in Emilia-Romagna, *I Medici* (season 3) in Tuscany, *Tutto può succedere* (season 2) in Lazio, *L'Aquila* (part I) in Abruzzo, *Rosy Abate* (season 2) in Campania, *Baciato dal sole* in Apulia, the two seasons of *Solo* in Calabria, *Liberi sognatori*, *Catturandi*, *L'onore e il rispetto* and *La mafia uccide solo d'estate* (season 2) in Sicily, *L'isola di Pietro* (seasons 2 and 3) in Sardinia.

In the BB+ area, which includes weak titles that have achieved greater regional than national success, the TV series that present the most variances are set regionally: the two seasons of *Non uccidere* in Piedmont, *Volevo fare la rockstar* in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, *L'ispettore Coliandro 6* in Emilia-Romagna, *L'Aquila* (part II) in Abruzzo, *Il cacciatore* and *Romanzo siciliano* in Sicily.

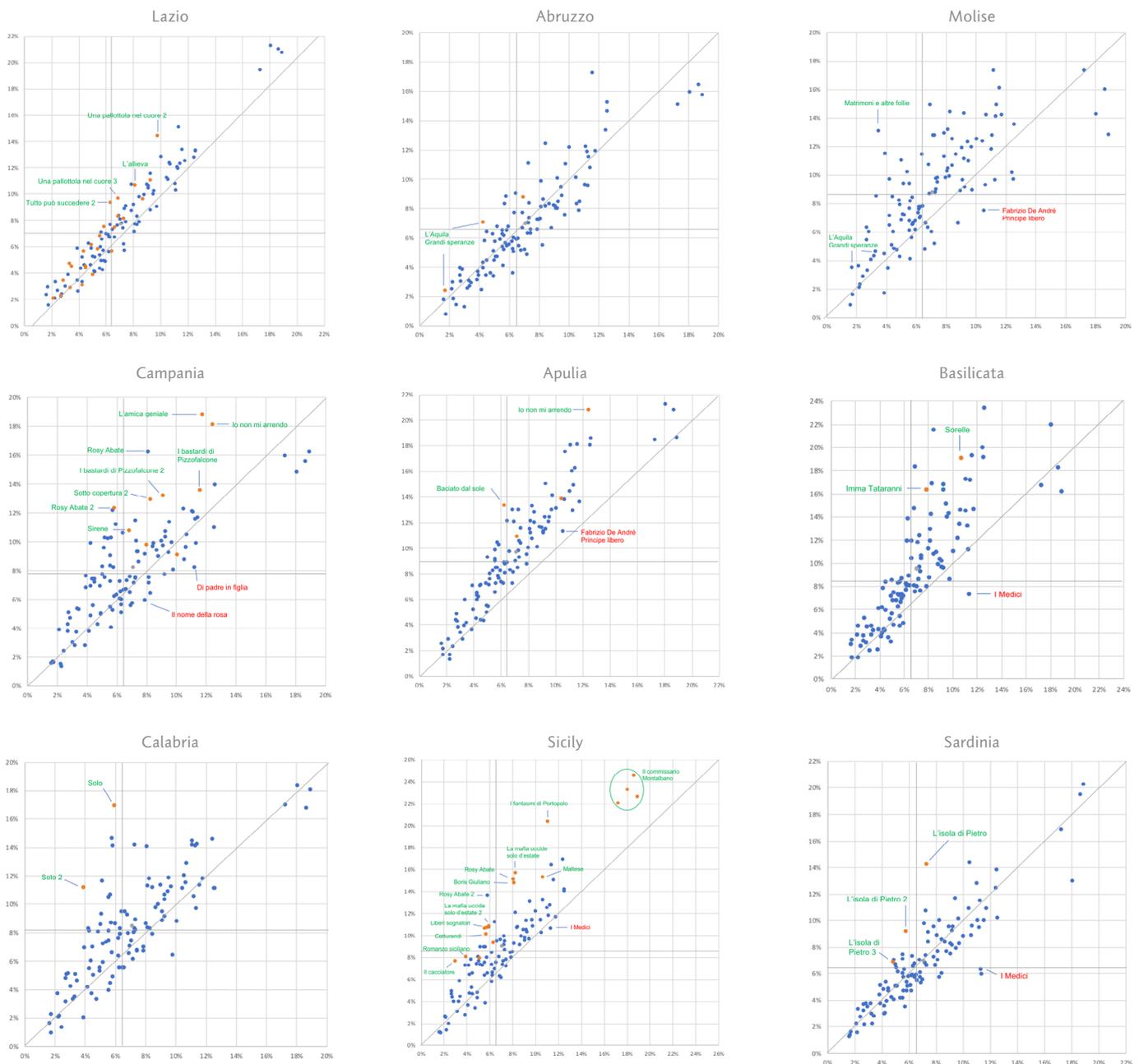
When considering series that have *not* achieved audience success at a local level, it becomes clear that the territorial element continues to play a key role in defining the poor results obtained in a given region. In fact, the setting emerges as a factor that can justify both the positive deviations in the correlation between national and local penetration, *and* the negative deviations. Some strong titles at national level that are set in southern regions do not perform equally well in northern Italy, and vice versa. Within the AB area, the *non-regional* hits, among the products with negative variance are *I Medici* in Sardinia and in Basilicata, *Sorelle* and *Sotto copertura* (season 2) in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, *Boris Giuliano* in Veneto, *L'amica geniale* in Valle d'Aosta, and *Rosy Abate* in several northern regions.

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FIGURES 7-17  
 (VALLE D'AOSTA, PIEDMONT,  
 LIGURIA, LOMBARDY,  
 TRENTO-ALTO ADIGE, VENETO,  
 FRIULI-VENEZIA GIULIA,  
 EMILIA-ROMAGNA, TUSCANY,  
 UMBRIA, MARCHE)

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FIGURES 18-26 (LAZIO, ABRUZZO, MOLISE, CAMPANIA, APULIA, BASILICATA, CALABRIA, SICILY, SARDINIA)

The presence itself of various titles within the AA- area, that is the area of regional hits that have nonetheless performed below the national median, can be justified by the distance separating the region examined and the region where a particular series is set. This is the case of *Io non mi arrendo* in Lombardy, Veneto, Friuli and Tuscany; *Montalbano* and *Bastardi di Pizzofalcone* in Veneto, Trentino

and Emilia-Romagna; *Fantasmì di Portopalo* in Trentino and Emilia-Romagna; *Maltese* in Trentino and in Umbria; *Sorelle* in Emilia-Romagna; *Di padre in figlia* in Campania and in Marche; *Fabrizio De André* in Apulia; *I Medici* in Sicily, etc.

It is now possible to create a recap plot [Figure 27]. The vertical axis now measures penetration in the regions where a certain series is set, while the horizontal axis measures the

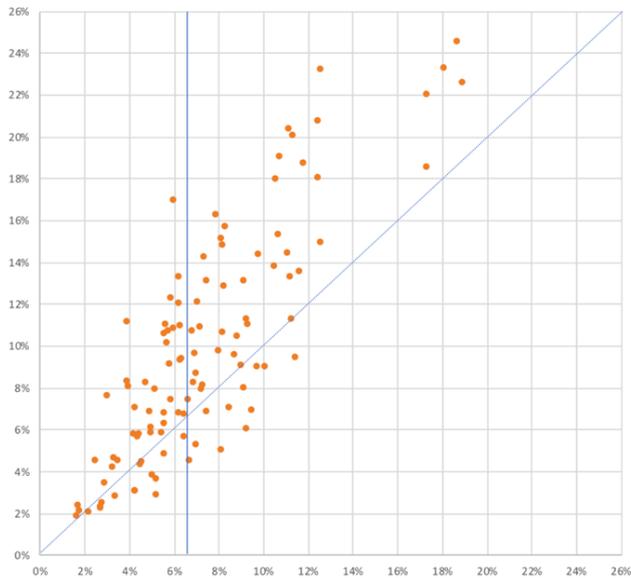


FIGURE 27

national penetration. It becomes clear that, of the two triangles formed by the diagonal line, the lowest one is much less populated – and the right side is completely free. This shows how the setting almost always influences positive variances on the national performance.

### 3. OTHER EXPLANATIONS FOR THE ANOMALIES

Clearly, the setting plays a key role in favoring the regional success of Italian mainstream TV series. However, is this the only conclusion that can be drawn from the presented graphs? It would be appropriate to try and explain the reason why the last one still shows some dots – even if just a few of them – located below the diagonal that divides the titles with positive deviation from those with negative deviation. It is necessary to explain why such deviation is *almost* always positive, and not just *always* positive. Surely, the graph cannot explain everything. As it was already noted, different regions present different habits in terms of TV series consumption, and it is possible to find some titles above the regional trend line (which cannot be represented in the unified recap graph) and below the national trend diagonal at the same time: this is the case of *Mentre ero via* in Veneto. The performance of the series in the graphs can also be subject to the degree

of granularity of the data. If considering *Mentre ero via* and checking the data referring to the penetration in the city of Verona, where the series is set, it emerges that the local success is more marked, even when compared to the success in the other main cities in Veneto. As a matter of fact, local and regional identities do not always match perfectly.

The recap graph does not report about TV series set in an extra-regional environment that have performed better than titles set in regional realities, that is the outliers with a positive deviation in a given region, but with a different setting. Such cases are rare, but sometimes – though not always – it is possible to explain them. The two seasons of *Rosy Abate* have performed well in Sicily (more or less like other series set there) because, even if the series itself is mainly set in Liguria and in Campania, its storyline deals with the Sicilian mafia. *Il nome della rosa* has performed better in Lombardy than in the southern regions because it is perceived as a high-quality title by an audience that is likely more attracted by series with more “evolved” and international traits. The great positive deviations of *Chiamatemi Francesco* in Trentino-Alto Adige – which has had a distribution in cinemas as well, as a film – should be related to Cinetel data that show a degree of complementarity: in cinemas, this title has had a lower penetration in Trentino than in any other Italian region.

Other positive variances that at a first might look inexplicable, might still have to do with the distribution of the regional success, even if not directly. The second main deviation in Umbria, after *Luisa Spagnoli*, concerns *Non dirlo al mio capo*, a series set in Campania (a moderate success in this region). This series might have achieved its success in Umbria thanks to the promotional crossover episode (set in Umbria) of *Don Matteo* (10.26), which has a just slightly higher regional penetration: in the last few minutes of the episode, which is also the last of that season, *Don Matteo* indeed meets the characters of the above-mentioned *Non dirlo al mio capo*. Therefore, it might be stated that when there is a chance to link two different titles – as it can happen by means of a crossover episode – the setting can become useful to shift the regional audience from a stronger and more regionally marked series to a weaker one with a less connoted setting.

To explain titles that have particular extra-local success, one should also consider the positive effects of a given regional setting on regions that are neighbors to that setting. In Umbria, titles like *Coliandro* and *Una pallottola nel cuore* can work almost as well as in Emilia-Romagna and Lazio, where they were filmed respectively; titles from Piedmont can obtain good success in Liguria, and so on. Furthermore, some

titles are set in multiple regional environments, and their success is distributed accordingly. This is the case of *I Medici* in Lazio and in Tuscany, and of anthology series presenting episodes with different locations, for which the success of the individual episodes would be worth considering. For example, the episode of *Purché finisca bene* set in Val d'Aosta (3.02) has had a much greater success in that region than the other ones. Lastly, it is appropriate to acknowledge the inevitable ambiguity surrounding the concept of setting itself. Some series are more regionally marked because the setting is relevant to the storyline, while others are not as clear in this regard – which is why they do not attract as much local public: there is more of Tuscany in *I Medici* than in *Sacrificio d'amore*.

#### 4. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DISPERSION AND POPULATION, AND AN EXCEPTION. THE CHANNEL AS AN INCONGRUITY-PRODUCING FACTOR

This investigation can still be brought some steps further. When looking for factors that produce anomalies in the link between regional and national success, it is possible to try and focus on a particular aspect of the graphs that were analyzed: that is, on their *degree of dispersion*. When looking at the graphs, one might notice that the cloud of dots in some areas is more scattered than in other areas, and hence it is less linear. As already mentioned, the denser and more linear the cloud is, the stronger the correlation between regional and national penetration is; whereas the more scattered and rarefied the cloud, the weaker the correlation. It can be predicted that these diversities depend on the size of population in each region: when a region is more populous, it becomes more representative of the national consumption, and it shows lower variances compared to less populous regions. As a matter of fact, there is more of Italy in Lombardy than in Valle d'Aosta. However, if this kind of relationship between dispersion and population was not constant, it would mean that new factors become involved in producing anomalies in the correlation between regional and national success, and that these other factors have a different effect on different regions. This is precisely what will be checked now. To understand this issue better, it is useful to calculate the correlation strength between regional and national success in each region. The Pearson correlation coefficient (R) is aimed at describing this aspect (since it is the covariance of the two variables divided by the product of their standard deviations)

and it indicates a perfect correlation in case  $R = 1$ . Despite being observed in every region of Italy (the value is always higher than  $R = 0.6$ ), the coefficient shows that the correlation is strongest in the two most populous regions, that is Lombardy and Lazio (with respective values of  $R=0.965$  and  $R=0.964$ ), and it is weakest in the least inhabited regions – Molise and Valle d'Aosta (with values of  $R=0.754$  and  $R=0.635$ , respectively). If the R values in different regions are organized in a graph (vertical axis) together with the respective populations according to ISTAT (horizontal axis), it can be verified that these two variables are correlated. The strength of the

Region	Population	R
Lombardia	9679192	0,965
Lazio	5701518	0,964
Campania	5634106	0,795
Sicilia	4884559	0,896
Veneto	4748660	0,929
Emilia Romagna	4303326	0,947
Piemonte	4258066	0,960
Puglia	3935469	0,927
Toscana	3629729	0,920
Calabria	1899889	0,795
Sardegna	1608646	0,891
Liguria	1523503	0,909
Marche	1490027	0,918
Abruzzo	1281217	0,907
Friuli Venezia Giulia	1182294	0,860
Trentino Alto Adige	1021790	0,802
Umbria	861886	0,886
Basilicata	554149	0,823
Molise	301841	0,754
Valle d'Aosta	122817	0,635

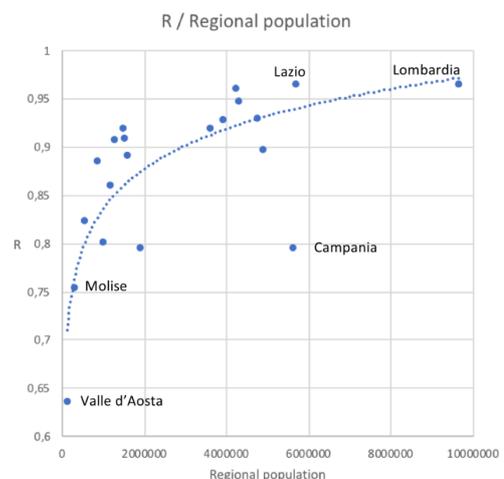


FIGURE 28

correlation between regional and national success (R) has a tendency to increase together with the regional population size, and it does so at a very rapid pace until it stabilizes itself [Figure 28].

However, there is also an exception, which may be useful in order to highlight the presence of what is searched for here: that is, new factors capable of introducing anomalies in the correlation being analyzed. Campania, despite being the third most populous region in Italy and having almost the same population as Lazio (more than 5,6 million inhabitants), has a relatively low correlation coefficient ( $R = 0.795$ ): even lower than Trentino-Alto Adige, Basilicata and Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and higher *only* than Valle d'Aosta and Molise. In short, the consumption of TV series in Campania appears very different from the national one, and very much diversified within the same region.

Based on a simple analysis – in a new graph – of the extent of the penetration deviations compared to the average (and not of the absolute penetration values, which would hide this phenomenon), it is not difficult to isolate the element that determines this anomaly in the region at stake. As it can be seen, the factor that intervenes most powerfully in making the correlation between national and regional success in Campania more scattered, in addition to the setting, seems to be precisely the *broadcasting channel* itself. If the dots are colored differently according to the channel that broadcast the series, the Campania chart immediately takes on a much neater – that is, sensible – appearance than before [Figure 29]. The most viewed titles in Campania are still Rai titles – as for the rest of Italy – but those that present the strongest deviation from the national figure are inevitably Mediaset titles.

The affection of the Campania public for Canale 5 series, despite Mediaset setting only one title there in the 48 months considered, produces a clear divergence between the consumption of Canale 5 and Rai contents. On the other hand, Rai fiction in Campania shows data that appear to be pretty much in line with the national consumption, except for the titles that Rai 1 sets in that region, which are as many as 8. TV series with a local setting are now indicated with triangles in the graph. These series express – 7 times out of 8 – a significantly positive deviation when compared to the national figure and to the trend line of Rai titles, while still remaining below the trend line of Mediaset products. Therefore, Campania constitutes an excellent example of the influence of the two major anomaly-producing factors that were identified at the same time: namely, the region of setting and the broadcasting channel. Being a very populous region, the pen-

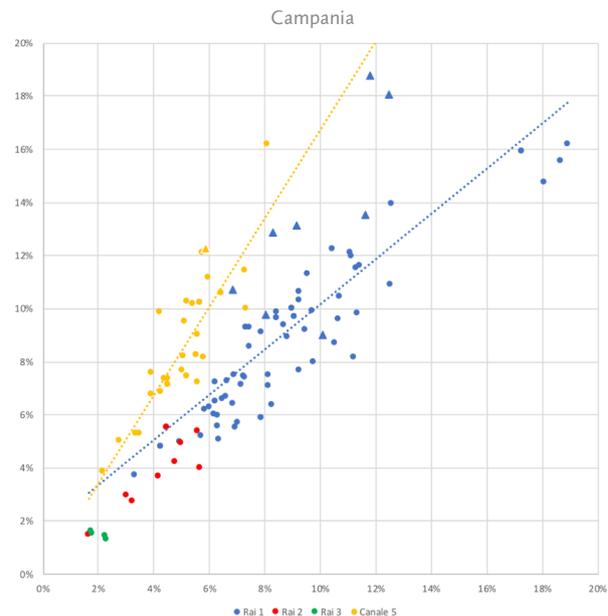


FIGURE 29

etration deviations in this case point at important numbers of viewers. For some years, Campania has been absent from the settings of Mediaset series. As a consequence, one can state that the Lombard broadcaster certainly did well when it finally set the second season of *Rosy Abate* in Naples in 2019 (also due to the Neapolitan origins of the actress Giulia Michelini),<sup>14</sup> given the various positive signs that came from that region – i.e. the huge local success of Mediaset series (and the success of the first season of *Rosy Abate* in particular), and the importance of the local setting as an attractive factor for the public, as shown by many Rai titles.

The case of the Campania is very interesting because it clearly highlights the existence of a divergence of regional audience behavior in relation to the broadcasting channel, even regardless of any content feature. However, to what degree is this phenomenon attributable to a specific region only? In Campania, it certainly takes on exceptional proportions, but on closer inspection it seems to characterize almost every region, even if with different features. It is almost equally highlighted (and showing the same features) in Calabria [Figure 30] – where Mediaset set two seasons of *Solo*, which has achieved

14 Giorgio Grignaffini, editorial director of Taodue, cites this as the motivation behind the choice of the new setting, together with the success of the first season of *Rosy Abate* in the southern regions, the particular scenography of the Neapolitan capital, and its relative logistical convenience for a television production (Personal communication with the author, May 2019).

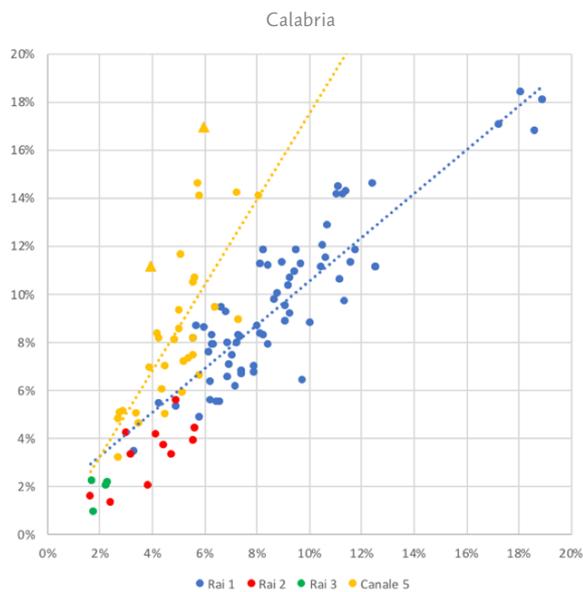


FIGURE 30

great local success. Even in Sicily a divergence of audience behavior of this type can be observed, which favors Mediaset series. A little less in Abruzzo, Sardinia and Apulia, where it seems however still present. Some regions do not really seem to show any significant divergence between Rai and Mediaset consumption trends (e.g. Lazio, Lombardy, Basilicata). Others instead show a divergence opposite to that of Campania, albeit less radical, which favors Rai fiction and penalizes Mediaset. This is the case for several regions in the north-central part of the country, especially Tuscany [Figure 31]. In Tuscany, Rai series attract more public than the national penetration of those same titles. Canale 5 titles, on the other hand, have a significantly lower penetration: a couple of Mediaset series set in that region (even if without too much marked local characters), which otherwise would have appeared rather below the trend of overall regional consumption, actually appear to be perfectly in line with the regional trend of that channel.

If considering the relevance of the broadcasting channel as an additional factor capable of influencing the regional consumption of TV series, it is possible to account for the reason why sometimes the setting alone cannot explain some big deviations from the national average, or for the reason why the setting, in certain regions of Italy and for titles of certain channels, is not able to produce any significant difference. In Campania, for example, the enormous fidelity to Canale 5 series would have risked hiding the great attractive strength

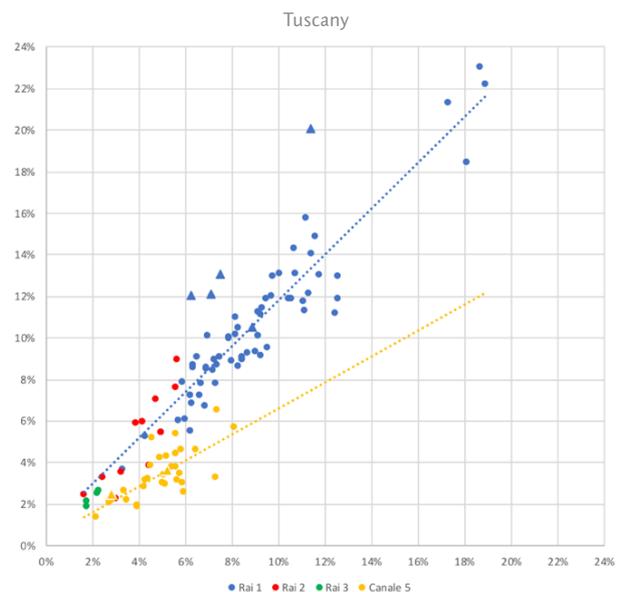


FIGURE 31

of the local settings of the Rai 1 series. Similarly, considering the different trends in the consumption of TV series relating to the different broadcasters allows to understand that sometimes the regional settings, while not producing any positive difference with respect to the national average or the overall regional trend line, are enough to produce a relevant difference compared to the local trend of the TV series of a regionally weaker channel. In Piedmont, for example, *Non mentire* (set in Turin), although below both the national and the regional median value, performs better than one could have expected a Canale 5 title to perform in the same region. One can also notice new anomalies when comparing the data to the channel consumption trends and not to the overall ones: in Tuscany, the Canale 5 title which shows the greatest deviation from the regional trend of the network is *Tutti insieme all'improvviso*, which is not set in that region but stars Giorgio Panariello, clearly considered a local glory. The regionalism of the actors can in fact constitute another factor capable of influencing consumption in the different regions of Italy.

## 5. THE INFLUENCE OF REGIONAL ANOMALIES

The different population size of the Italian regions, in addition to affecting the strength of the correlation between

national and local success, implies as well that the same deviations in penetration in different regions correspond to very different volumes of viewers. Taking a look at a few selected titles can prove this. In Tuscany, the positive deviation of 8.72 penetration points for *I Medici* corresponds to more than 315,000 viewers – a very substantial number when thinking that it does not comprise all Tuscan viewers of that title at all, but it only represents those that have been added in that region to the national figure, attracted by the characteristics of that particular series. A 5.34 point deviation for *Rocco Schiavone* in a very small region like Valle d’Aosta, on the other hand, amounts to just 6,500 viewers. Instead, a much lower difference like that of 2.09 points for *Di padre in figlia* in Veneto is equal to almost 100,000 viewers – in addition to those that in that region correspond to the national penetration figure. However, one could also consider the fact that Veneto consumes less TV series than the rest of Italy, and recalibrate the deviation accordingly: calculating the deviation with respect to the trend of local penetration (and not compared to the national trend), *Di padre in figlia* (since the trend line equation is  $y = 0.8076x - 0.0051$ ) shows a positive anomaly with a much higher value, which corresponds to over 225,000 extra viewers in the average minute.

At this point, one may ask: are anomalies in regional penetration such as those investigated here capable of driving the national success of serial titles, and to what extent? Sticking to *Di padre in figlia*: its positive deviation from the trend of local consumption alone measures 0.38% of national penetration for a title that has an overall AMR% of 11.22%. In terms of audience share, this means that the local setting of Veneto (and Veneto only, not extending the evaluation to neighboring regions) contributed with almost one point more to the success of a TV series that has an audience share of 26.75%. And this is certainly not a title with exceptional regional success: for example, *L’amica geniale*, in Campania, shows a positive deviation from the national figure that corresponds to over 390,000 average viewers, that is more than 0.66% of the national penetration – almost double than the title set in Veneto. This means almost 1.7 points of national audience share (overall *L’amica geniale* registered 29.53% in audience share) produced solely by anomalous success in Campania, which is added to the Campania “average” public.

One should not think that the attractiveness of the regional setting to the local public reaches sensitive dimensions in the most populated regions only or with the best known and most popular titles only. The deviation of almost 11 points of penetration with respect to the national figure

for *Solo* in Calabria is equivalent to 208,000 average viewers. Calabria is by no means one of the major regions of Italy, and yet for that title it is able to add 0.36 points to the overall national penetration figure. And it does so only with that chunk of public that adds to the average value of Italy as a whole – as it was seen, these numbers are close to those registered in a larger region such as Veneto for *Di padre in figlia*, a title that is much stronger at national level.

Though inevitably containing a certain degree of approximation, these calculations are useful for contemplating the scale of the phenomenon. It is not appropriate to dwell further on particular cases with specific calculations, because the graphs proposed above allow to get a clear idea of the volume of viewers more or less mobilized in each region compared to the national penetration. To quantify the number of viewers that correspond to the deviations on the vertical axis, it is necessary to keep in mind the size of the universe of regional reference according to ISTAT. As an example, one can consider Sicily: in this case, different bands were highlighted in order to indicate the volume of viewers who add or subtract from the national figure [Figure 32]. The unit of gradation of the grid is (as for all the graphs that have been built) 2% of penetration, which in Sicily is equivalent to 97,691 viewers. Therefore, each band corresponds to an increase (or a decrease) of viewers of equal size. It was also marked in the graph the number of extra viewers to which

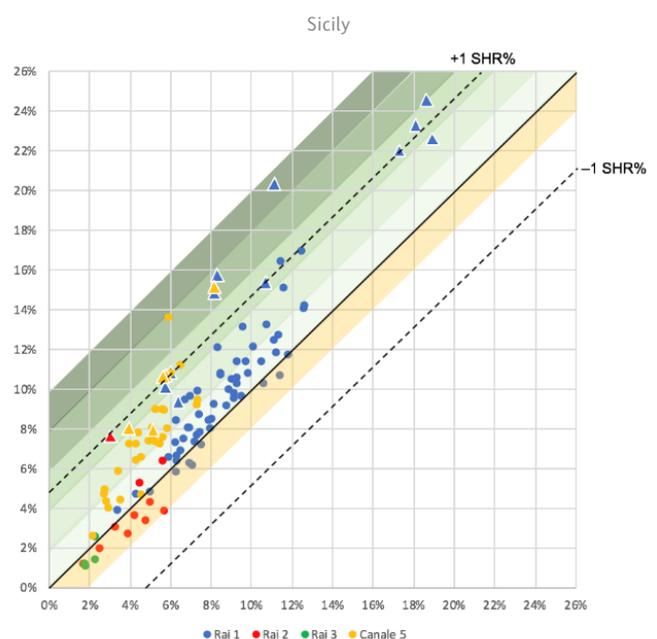


FIGURE 32

corresponds on average (considering the average total viewing audience of the evenings in which all the analyzed titles were issued) the addition of a national audience share point (about 237,000, or 4.85 Sicilian penetration points). From the graph thus highlighted, it is clear how a region like Sicily, with a large number of series set there, contributes promptly to fuel the national success of Italian TV series.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

When looking from a distance at the television production covering a period of four years, this article has focused on the regional consumption of Italian mainstream TV series. It has proceeded to underline its heterogeneity and it has tried to distinguish various types of “success”, by comparing how local and national audiences respond to every single title. It has demonstrated how the correlation between national and regional success is often subject to the influence of factors that can produce anomalies, even significant ones. It has highlighted that the most important – and most predictable – factors responsible for anomalies are the regions where a given series is set and the broadcasting channels, which can influence audience success at various degrees across Italy. Moreover, it has used some features (and metrics) that helped to compare and quantify the phenomena at stake, in order to understand how the national success of Italian TV series can benefit from the polarization of consumption happening in the various regions of the country.

The geography of consumption of Italian TV series is not really homogeneous across the country, as it shows – so to speak – several regional wrinkles. It may be very useful for a broadcaster to take this into account when designing a new series. In fact, similar variances are often largely predictable and controllable, being mostly the effect of a textual element that producers can master, such as setting. As it was observed, a strong regional performance can even reinforce national success. On the other hand, heterogeneity in TV consumption can also point at the presence of a plurality of cultures and identities within state borders. Therefore, audience consumption behaviors, while being interesting from an economic point of view, can also be good indicators of the level of socio-cultural fragmentation of a country.

Italian mainstream TV series have always achieved great popular success. However, their popularity appears to be also the result of the mutual entanglement of different regional patterns of taste and consumption. The case in Campania is

to be taken as an example, and – as demonstrated by other ongoing research on the subject – it finds perfect correspondence in the local form of film consumption. Such diversification of regional consumptions finds its roots in reasons that are very much alike: the need to imagine oneself in a certain setting, to see one’s own landscapes represented on screen, to project local identities into stories set in a regional environment, in the *iconemes* of Italy – as Eugenio Turri<sup>15</sup> would put it. Such a widespread need, in a nation like Italy that presents so many internal differences, cannot but produce similarly different types of consumption.

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15 See Turri 2014. A complete mapping of the local *iconemes* in Italian TV series obviously exceeds the limits of this article, but it would be very useful in order to understand the different degrees of visibility of the national territory.

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