6. The Genre and the Nation

Italian Medical TV Series and the Geography of their Consumption

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◀ ABSTRACT

This study examines the geographies of audiovisual consumption in Italy, with a specific focus on medical TV series and their consumption patterns across the country. The research aims to investigate the extent of geographical heterogeneity in television viewing within Italy, thus exploring the existence of a shared national audiovisual culture. The analysis utilizes viewing data from free-to-air broadcasters, Rai and Mediaset, which provide valuable and reliable insights into consumption patterns. The study reveals that although there is typically some variation in the popularity of TV series across different regions of Italy, medical drama series demonstrate a relatively high level of consumption homogeneity. The popularity of medical series is evenly distributed throughout the country, which is unusual compared to other genres and the typical geographic heterogeneity of TV series viewing in Italy. This can be attributed to the genre's ability to engage a nationwide audience by using neutral settings and delocalized narratives, which effectively appeal to viewers across different regions. Most importantly, the study suggests that the exceptional geographical homogeneity in the consumption of medical series indicates the vitality and effectiveness of that genre, which – for its part – contributes to the resilience of a shared national audiovisual culture in Italy.

KEYWORDS

Geography of consumption; TV Series; Italian TV; medical drama series; media geography.

Introduction
Mapping Consumption
and National Media Culture

A study on the geographies of audiovisual consumption in Italy serves, among other purposes, to explore the degree of geographical heterogeneity in film and television viewing within the country, thereby verifying the presence of a genuinely shared national audiovisual culture. While it may be intuitively assumed, empirical research based on viewing data across the entire Italian territory is essential to confirm its concrete existence.

A national audiovisual culture can only be claimed when there is real homogeneity in consumption patterns across the country (see Higson 1989, Sorlin 1996). This doesn't seem to exist, for example, when it comes to cinema consumption in theaters in the first two decades of the new millennium, at least. Indeed, an extensive analysis of several hundred films has revealed that the regional popularity of domestic cinema varies greatly, even among the most successful titles, regardless of how the films are distributed across different regions of Italy – the distribution pattern, for that matter, doesn't vary substantially from one title to another (Avezzù 2022). A comparable heterogeneity in consumption applies to all scripted content, encompassing not only the performance of domestic cinema in theaters, but also the consumption of original TV series on free-to-air broadcasters, namely Rai and Mediaset. These operators, given the large audiences they attract, provide valuable data that is both relevant and reliable for understanding consumption patterns. In contrast, original series on pay TV, such as those aired on Sky channels, exhibit significantly lower audience ratings, with audience data holding limited significance for the subscription-based business model. Free-to-air television audience data, especially for the most successful channels, are more valuable and trustworthy, even from a statistical standpoint.

Focusing on the most-watched content in the country also allows us to verify whether a higher level of success corresponds to greater viewing

homogeneity across different regions of the country, as one might expect. However, on closer inspection, this is not always the case for cinema or television, as consumption homogeneity is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for success. When discussing domestically produced free-to-air TV series in Italy, we are referring to a type of audiovisual content that has achieved remarkable fortune and has become a genuinely popular phenomenon. Italian free-to-air series have a notably higher penetration in Italy compared to cable TV in the United States, which is expected, but they also outperform series aired by American networks, if this comparison in meaningful. However, despite the immense success of domestic television series in Italy, it cannot be assumed that every title, even the most widely watched ones, achieves equal success throughout the country, from Lombardy to Sicily.

It is true that the level of regional fragmentation in television consumption is lower than that observed in theatrical cinema consumption. This is primarily because television is a more widely embraced medium than cinema, with a larger viewership, and thus its success tends to be better diluted across the territory. Nevertheless, there are still significant differences in the popularity of individual titles across the North, Center, and South of Italy, as well as in different regions. These differences are also influenced by the presence of certain factors in each series capable of attracting local consumption. These factors are identical to those that appeal to local audiences when they watch films in theaters or when they are broadcasted on television. Primarily, they revolve around textual elements that relate to audiovisual content, such as setting, location, or the presence of specific actors. One of the most intriguing aspects to explore in research is precisely attempting to link the variances in consumption to content factors that can either attract or deter audiences. Depending on their geographical location, people exhibit preferences for specific content over others.

Given that this is the general framework of the issue, I would like to focus specifically on the role that free-to-air medical drama series play in this scenario and gain a deeper understanding of it. Medical drama series seem to be particularly interesting content because, in their own way, they are distinctive, for the reasons we will examine more closely. In fact, they appear to differ from other series in terms of how they are viewed across the national territory. And their distinctiveness in viewing patterns is likely due to *the way they function* – that is, how effectively they engage with the audience – which is influenced by their unique textual and morphological characteristics.

Popularity: The Metrics

Any reflection on the geographical heterogeneity of television consumption necessitates a preliminary elucidation of the metrics involved. To put it simply, when discussing theatrical cinema, the metrics are straightforward and quite self-evident. We refer to box office or attendance figures, which ultimately measure the number of individuals who pay for a ticket to watch a film from start to finish. However, when analyzing TV audience, the metrics become more complex and less immediately clear, as small screen consumption involves a substantial amount of viewer traffic in and out of a single TV program. The standard metric of "average minute rating" or AMR (which is more prevalent in the Italian context and referred to as *ascolto medio*) might give the impression that we are dealing with data similar to that of theatrical cinema. For example, a successful series like *Màkari* (Rai 1, 2021) may have 6.3 million viewers (see Table 1). However, this actually indicates the average number of viewers present in front of the television set during each minute of the program's duration. It is worth noting that this metric combines and obscures two distinct aspects of TV consumption: a quantitative aspect, which pertains to the number of unique viewers who watched the program for at least one minute (referred to as the "reach"), and a qualitative aspect, which relates to the average time that each viewer spent watching the program (referred to as the "loyalty index", or ATS%) (Casetti and di Chio 1997). Building upon previous research, one thing we know is that certain textual factors, such as the setting, possess the power to attract local audiences (thus influencing the reach in a specific region) and engage viewers (impacting the loyalty index in the same region). For instance, *Màkari*, a series set in Sicily, attracts a larger number of Sicilian viewers and keeps them engaged in front of the TV screen for longer durations than usual.

Territory	AMR (x1000)	ATS %	Share %	Popularity Index
ITALY	6,308	57.69	26.72	1
Lombardy	844	54.98	21.19	0.79
Sicily	879	64.15	41.86	1.57

TABLE 1

Màkari (Rai 1, 2021).

Average minute rating, average time spent, share data (Auditel) and popularity index (derived by the author) throughout Italy, in Lombardy and Sicily of a series taken as an example.

Another commonly used metric in the Italian television context is the "share" figure, which measures the average audience over the entire TV viewership, known as the "TV total", within the same time interval. The share figure, as is well known, serves to normalize consumption in relation to fluctuations in the television audience, which can be influenced by factors such as the season, day of the week, or time of day. Also when looking at the share data, similar to the case with average minute rating from which it derives, we are actually considering and thus conflating both the quantitative (attraction) and qualitative (engagement) aspects of consumption – yet, at the same time, we are normalizing the consumption based on the TV total of the given time interval. It is the share metric that will be particularly relevant for our subsequent analysis. Audience attraction and engagement are, ultimately, distinct aspects of television consumption. However, since it is impracticable to systematically separate one from the other, when discussing the local popularity of a specific content broadcast, we will address them together.

In the following analysis, all first-run domestically produced TV series broadcasted in prime time on Rai and Mediaset between 2016 and the first half of 2022 were considered, comprising a total of 181 titles (seasons).[1] There is no point in going very far back in time because the share figure of the free-to-air channels was significantly higher in the years before the advent of multichannel and digital transmission, potentially confounding the analysis. Digital terrestrial television broadcasting, in fact, spread the viewership across a larger number of channels. On the other hand, the time period under consideration exhibits a relatively stable audience in terms of numerical measures (including share, total audience, and average minute rating).

For each title, the share figures, both at the national and regional levels, were taken into account, and a "regional popularity" index was calculated by dividing the share of each region by the national share. This allows for the comparison of titles regardless of their level of success. For instance, in the case of *Màkari*, Sicily has a share 1.57 times higher than the national average (or +57%) (see Table 1). This figure reflects a combination of high

reach and loyalty index. To devise this metric, I took inspiration from those used by John Sedgwick to measure box office success and local popularity in movie consumption (especially RelPOP) (see Sedgwick, Miskell and Nicoli 2019, Sedgwick 2022).

However, in order to obtain a more accurate understanding of the true values of regional popularity for each title, additional variables need to be considered. For instance, it is important to take into account that, in general, television and TV series tend to have a wider viewership as you travel further south in Italy. Thus, it is true that Sicily consistently shows a higher share compared to the national average. To account for regional differences in TV consumption habits, regional popularity data have been normalized in the following analyses. By normalizing this popularity value with z-scores, it was possible to create a chart illustrating the overall heterogeneity of consumption for all the series considered.
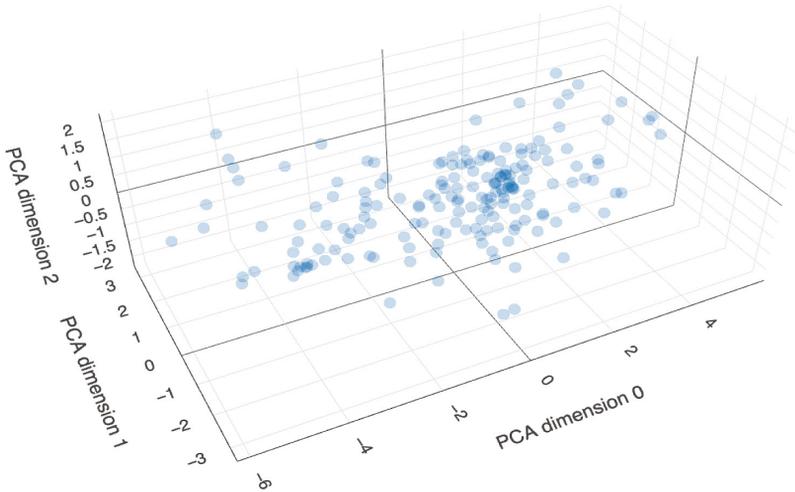
Geographical Heterogeneity of Italian Series Consumption: An Overview

To visualize and explore the consumption patterns of the 181 TV series, a dimensionality reduction technique called Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was employed. PCA transformed the nine dimensions that correspond to the popularity of each title in the nine major Italian regions (Lombardy, Lazio, Campania, Veneto, Sicily, Emilia-Romagna, Piedmont, Apulia, Tuscany) into three dimensions that summarize them to some degree. Specifically, PCA 0 accounts for 59 percent of the total variance, PCA 1 for 12 percent, and PCA 2 for 7 percent (the latter is visible in the three-dimensional graph, Figure 1B). Each dot on the resulting scatter plot represents a TV series, and broadly speaking, the closer two dots are to each other, the more similar those two TV series are in terms of their geographic distribution of audiences across the country. Conversely, the further a TV series is from the core of the cloud of dots, the more its consumption has been dislocated somewhere in Italy (Figure 1A).

Most of the variance in consumption patterns is captured by the horizontal axis, as previously mentioned. When examining the "correlation circle", which visualizes the degree of correlation between the original variables and the principal components, it becomes evident that this horizontal dimension represents the disparity in viewership between the North and South of
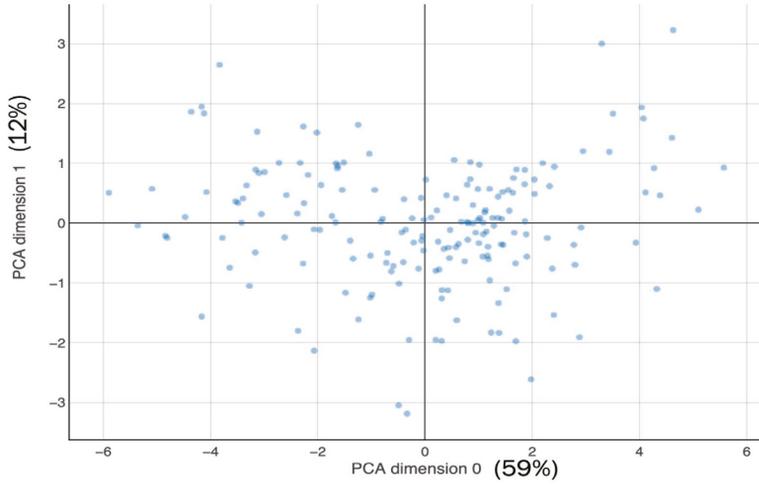
A

B

Figure 1a/b

Geographical heterogeneity of the popularity of Italian free-to-air TV series (2016-2022).

Principal Component Analysis refers to the popularity index data of the series that are part of the sample, in each of the nine major regions of Italy.

Italy (Figure 2). In fact, the disparity in affinity and divergence in tastes for Italian fiction between the North and South seems to be very pronounced, and incidentally, it appears to be even more pronounced than the difference observed in theatrical film viewing preferences. This can be clearly observed in the correlation matrix as well (Figure 3).

This very fact prompts further investigation to highlight the relevance of an important variable that we have not yet considered, namely the broadcasting channel. As it turns out, one of the challenges when analyzing the heterogeneity of Italian television consumption is precisely the impact of regional affinity for specific broadcasters. In fact, regional preferences for particular channels strongly influence consumption patterns, consistently shaping them, irrespective of the characteristics of each individual title taken separately. When we color the dots in the scatter plot based on the broadcasting channel, we can observe that Rai 1 and Canale 5 tend to form almost perfectly distinct "clusters" (Figures 4A-B). While there may be variations between different titles, the series broadcasted on Canale 5 consistently appeal to a significantly less northern viewership compared to those aired on Rai 1. On the other hand, the series on Rai 2 and Rai 3 tend to attract a demographic that is predominantly concentrated in northern Italy, except for a few titles that are clearly associated with the South, such
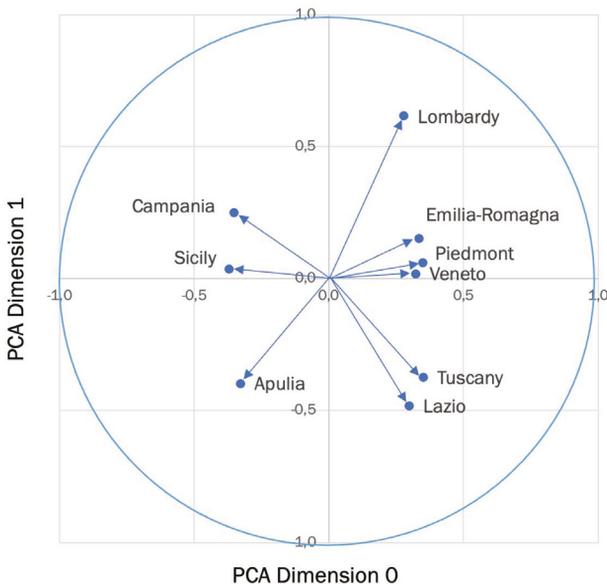

FIGURE 2

Principal Component Analysis "correlation circle".

The graph displays the degree of correlation between the principal components and the original variables (i.e., the popularity index data of the sample series in each of the nine major regions of Italy).
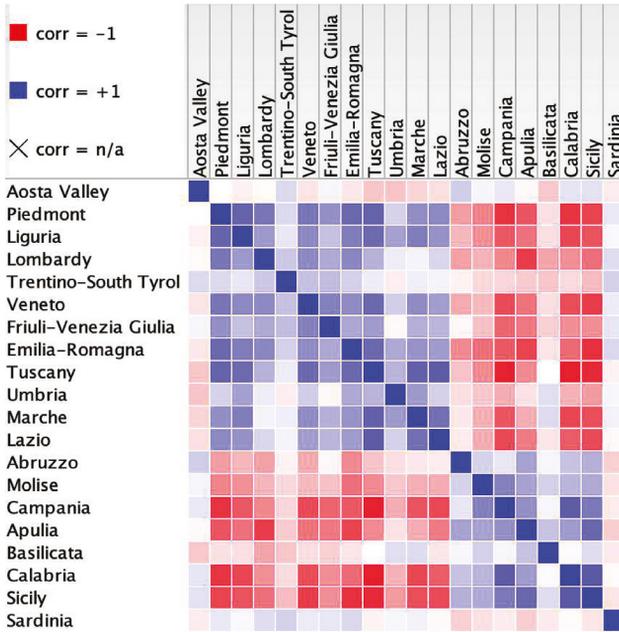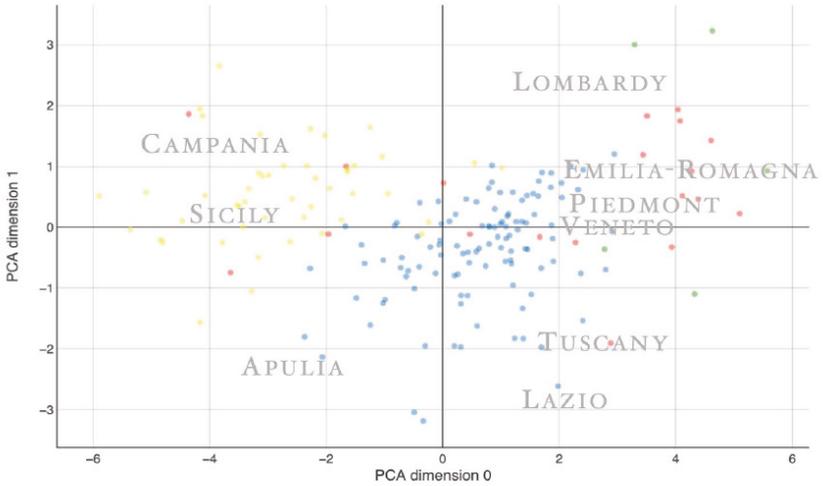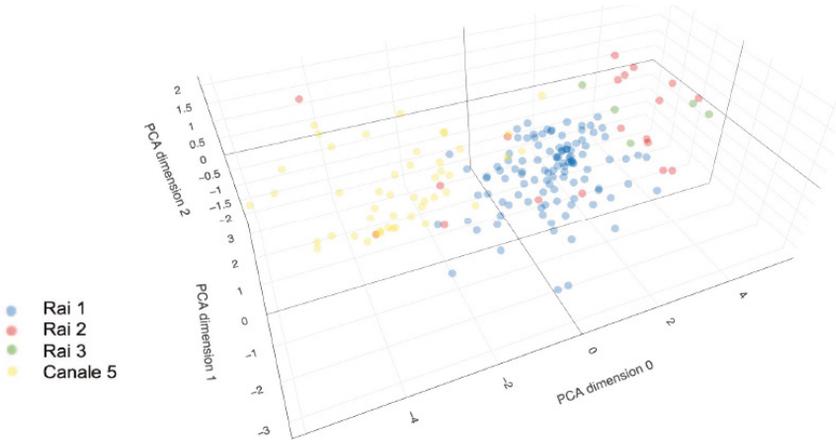
FIGURE 3
Correlation matrix of regional tastes (popularity index data) for Italian free-to-air TV series (2016-2022).

as *Mare fuori* (2020-), set in Naples, and *Il cacciatore* (2018-2021), set in Sicily, in the case of Rai 2. Incidentally, the regional variation in preferences for different broadcasting networks is precisely one of those elements that, when observed over an excessively wide time frame, is prone to altering its relevance and thus complicating the analysis. For instance, just ten years ago, Canale 5's primetime had a much higher share figure in Lombardy than it does now, and a much lower share figure in Campania. However, from 2016 onwards, as clearly seen from the graph, its original TV series (as indeed its entire schedule) have become more popular in the Southern and Insular regions of Italy.

The imbalance in the popularity of each title must therefore be related to the imbalance in viewership that traditionally characterizes the channel that broadcasts it, or else we risk attributing variations in popularity to content features, while they are actually due to the broadcasting itself. When taking this factor into account, we can quickly confirm that the textual factors that attract consumption are consistently the same as those previously mentioned, such as the setting or location, and the cast – aside from the local inertia of viewing habits for each channel (Figure 5). The most appreciated

A

B

FIGURE 4A/B
Geographical heterogeneity of the popularity of Italian free-to-air TV series (2016-2022), with broadcasting channel. The labels (regions) of the "correlation circle" vectors have been added.
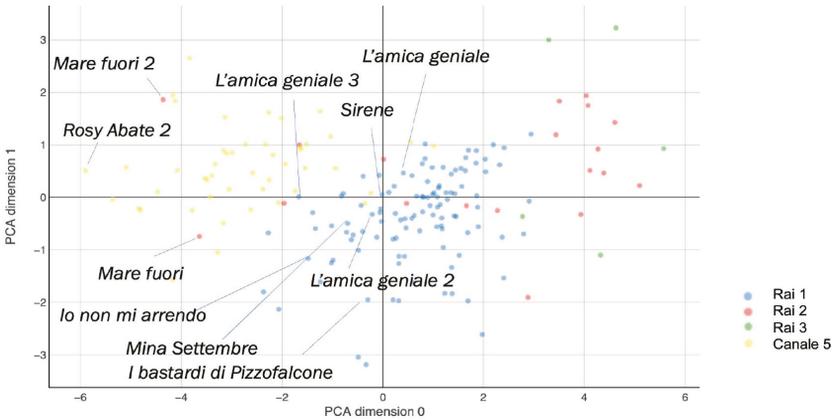
Geographic heterogeneity of the consumption of some series set in Campania.

titles in the South among those broadcasted by Canale 5 are positioned on the leftmost side of the graph because they are also the ones that in absolute terms are the most successful in the southern regions of Italy. On the other hand, the most popular titles in the South among those aired by Rai 1 – which are all set in the southern regions – are positioned roughly in the middle of the graph, but they actually belong to the leftmost part of the cloud of points representing Rai 1 series.

Medical Series and their Regional Popularity

Now, we must establish where medical drama series fit into this larger picture. There are 12 of them among the 181 series in the sample we are considering. Rai 1 has aired three seasons of *L'allieva* (2016, 2018, 2020), two of *Doc – Nelle tue mani* (2020, 2022), one of *Braccialetti rossi* (2016, the third season), *Cuori* (2021), *Fino all'ultimo battito* (2021), and *Lea* (2022). Canale 5 has aired *Dottoressa Giò* (2019) and *Oltre la soglia* (2019). Rai 3 aired *La linea verticale* (2018). We can leave aside the latter, *La linea verticale*, as it is a title that was not broadcasted by a flagship channel and therefore had an audience not comparable in size to the others. Thus, we are left with 11 titles broadcasted by Rai 1 and Canale 5. Although the sample is not large enough to draw indisputable conclusions, it appears that these titles have a relatively *low level of geographic heterogeneity* in terms of their popu-
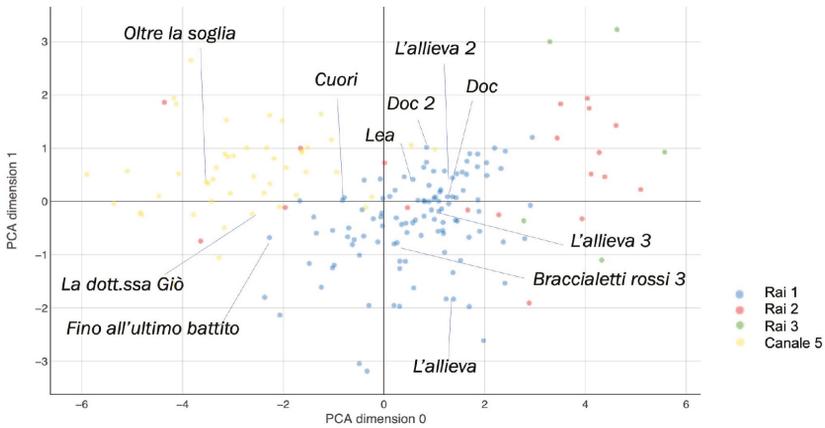
FIGURE 6

Geographic heterogeneity of consumption of medical drama series.

larity. In fact, the points representing the medical series usually do not seem to be located in the most peripheral areas of the graph (Figure 6).

However, it is true that while our chart is useful for visually mapping the geographical heterogeneity of consumption patterns of Italian series, it does not effectively describe the imbalances in viewership based on channels and their "typical" target audiences. To account for the geographic dissimilarity of the typical audience for each channel, considering the different regional viewing habits across networks, I normalized the popularity value of each title, which I derived in the way I described earlier (not yet normalized with z-scores), to the median value of each region *for each channel*. This approach allows us to assess the popularity imbalances resulting from content – their textual factors – while canceling out the influence of the channel-related noise. I calculated the coefficient of variation for this data, focusing solely on the nine major regions of Italy. This coefficient describes the extent to which the popularity of each title varies across different regions, or conversely, if it is uniform (in which case, a title would have a coefficient of 0). Interestingly, the majority of the 11 medical series show a relatively low degree of variation. Additionally, I calculated a "maximum popularity coefficient", which measures how pronounced the deviation of each title's popularity is, in the region where that title is most popular, compared to its average popularity in all the nine regions considered. This coefficient, too, for the medical se-
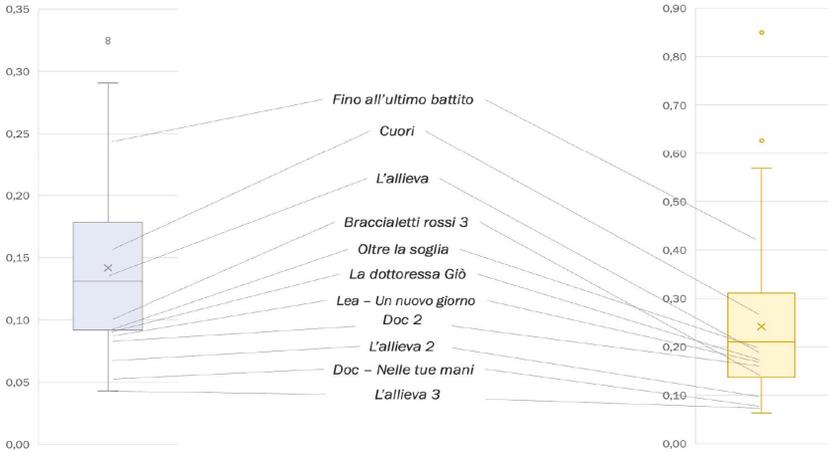
FIGURE 7

Variation and concentration of regional popularity of medical TV series.
The box plot on the left indicates the coefficient of variation (among the 9 major Italian regions), while the one on the right visualizes the "coefficient of maximum deviation" (i.e., the positive deviation in popularity in the region of maximum popularity compared to the average popularity of each title among the 9 magior regions).

ries, appears to be relatively low. Eight series out of eleven rank below, even far below, the average values according to these two indicators (Figure 7).

Two series alone stand out noticeably above "normal" values: *Cuori* and *Fino all'ultimo battito*. In the case of *Cuori*, the deviation is not really that significant, and more importantly, it does not appear to be related to the setting, which is the factor from which we would expect such deviations. *Cuori* is set in Turin, reconstructing the Molinette Hospital in the late 1960s, while the popularity deviation occurs in Campania. On the other hand, Piedmont's popularity aligns perfectly with what is expected from that region. The only notable popularity imbalance for a medical series is observed in the case of *Fino all'ultimo battito*. Interestingly, this imbalance occurs precisely in Apulia, the region where the series is set. In all other cases, medical genre series seem to have a popularity that is evenly distributed across the various regions of Italy, apart from the differences in popularity attributed to Rai 1 and Canale 5 between Northern and Southern Italy.

Another graphical representation effectively captures the same phenomenon, providing a comparison of the regional popularity (normalized as described above) of all series in the sample across the nine major regions
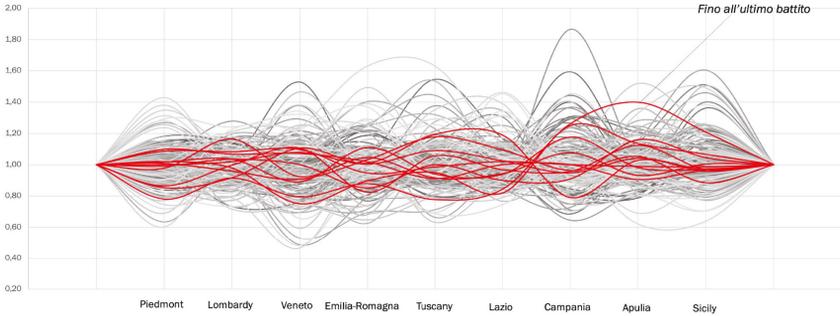
FIGURE 8
Regional popularity of Italian free-to-air TV series (2016-2022). Medical drama series in red.

(Figure 8). As clearly depicted, the local popularity of medical series (in red) usually does not exhibit significant peaks or very low points of unpopularity: the trajectories of the red lines remain fairly centered on the chart, with the sole exception of *Fino all'ultimo battuto*.

Homogeneous Consumption as a Sign of a Healthy Genre

Comparing the medical genre with other genres could be insightful, but it may be challenging to find other genres with a similar number of titles. Detective titles, for instance, are much more numerous and, as one might expect, their distribution across the country in terms of setting and consumption is quite varied. The historical-period genre may be a better point of comparison, as it has a similar number of series. However, it exhibits considerably more heterogeneous consumption patterns than the medical genre. On the other hand, within the historical-period genre, which is itself difficult to define due to the wide range of storylines it covers, there are several titles that have a clear local connotation. For example, *L'amica geniale* (Rai 1, HBO, 2018-) set in Campania or *Di padre in figlia* (Rai 1, 2017) set in Veneto. Such a marked local connotation weakens the iconographic coherence, so to speak, of this genre, and consequently leads to a significant regional imbalance in consumption.

The exceptional homogeneity in the geographical distribution of consumption of original medical series by Italian broadcasters can be attribut-

ed, in part, to the absence of local connotations of this kind, and to the neutral, "aseptic", and uncharacterized settings often portrayed in the genre. The interiors of hospitals are typically depicted in a modern and anonymous style, while exterior shots, even when featuring specific hospitals, do not usually display universally recognizable landmarks. As a result, medical series attract a nationwide audience without alienating viewers who may perceive the story as culturally distant (on media consumption and cultural proximity, see Straubhaar 1991).

This is in contrast to the geographical heterogeneity of consumption that is typical of other audiovisual content distributed in Italy, where some content is usually highly viewed in certain regions but much less viewed in others. Medical series manage to level out consumption, making it similar across the country. As we mentioned before, this is partly due to the fact that the genre focuses on a large number of indoor scenes and doesn't give great visibility to specific settings, landscapes, or locations, unlike many other series in different genres. In recent years, for example, Rai has pursued an editorial strategy aimed at mapping the entire Italian territory with its own original productions, significantly expanding the geographical "field of visibility" on the small screen (Rai Fiction 2014). However, there is likely something more to it than just that. It is also probably a sign of the power of a genre, which has to operate a process of anonymization, or delocalization (alocalization) of its stories, and it succeeds in doing this very well, even when admittedly there is *no absence* of local references. It is true that in our sample there are titles such as *Oltre la soglia* of Canale 5, set in Rome, which hardly ever represents the capital city in any recognizable way, at least in the first episodes. But other series cannot be said to hide the places where they are set to the same degree. Take, for instance, *Doc – Nelle tue mani*, which unequivocally reveals its significant filming in Milan and prominently features many well-known monuments, locations, and typical views of the Lombard capital. The protagonist's amnesia, which causes him to forget the past twelve years of his life, offers an opportunity to showcase his wanderings through the city, where he marvels, albeit somewhat disoriented, at the recent urban and architectural developments, including the Bosco Verticale, Piazza Gae Aulenti with the UniCredit Tower, and the Three Towers of the CityLife complex.

While providing good visibility to the city of Milan, *Doc* does not seem to attract or engage the Lombard audience any more than the rest of the country; in fact, it manages to be one of the most homogeneously viewed

titles of all 181 in our sample. This significant geographic homogeneity in the consumption of domestic medical series should be interpreted as a proof of the genre's vitality and its ability to counter – thanks to its typical plots, characters and iconography – the "monstrative" and attractional force that characterizes the use of settings and locations of most Italian TV fiction production, which is usually followed by a geographic imbalance in consumption. I intend the term "monstration" in the sense of Gaudreault 2009, as something that has to do with the pre-narrative and mere exhibition power of images. In other words, titles belonging to this genre usually enjoy widespread popularity across the country because the genre itself *works effectively*, and each individual title is not reduced to being merely a vehicle for locally connoted images. The weakening of the location's attraction power towards local consumption is indeed a testimony to the efficacy and health of the genre. It is not coincidental that it is difficult to identify other genres that are as well-defined narratively, in terms of storytelling and its spaces, as well as iconographically.

To be clear, the fact that the corpus of medical titles shows a certain coherence, and that the medical genre can possibly be considered "more of a genre" than others, does not mean that all the titles in our sample are purely medical – if one can ever speak of "pure" genres (see Staiger 2012). Some titles are likely "less" medical than others, more hybridized with other genres, or place greater emphasis on outdoor filming. The only real exception in our sample, *Fino all'ultimo battito*, which exhibits a significant regional imbalance in popularity, is certainly a somewhat anomalous medical title. It is heavily intertwined with the crime genre and, even on cursory analysis, clearly features fewer indoor scenes and a considerable amount of outdoor filming, with lots of Apulian landscapes. The regional imbalance in viewership for that title can be explained by the fact that Apulia, where the series is set, is not an ordinary region. Among the nine major regions, Apulia stands out as the most avid consumer of original domestic prime-time seriality, both in general and specifically for Rai 1 series. Interestingly, Apulia is not a region with significant television visibility in recent times; on the contrary, it can be said that it is underrepresented during the period covered by our sample, with only a few titles set there. The combination of Apulia's fascination with TV fiction and its relatively limited representation has likely played a role in the popularity of *Fino all'ultimo battito* among its audience. In this case, the series has become more about Apulia itself than a typical medical drama series for that specific audience. This phenomenon

appears to be consistent with what occurs in many series produced in Italy during this period: they are not so much series of this or that genre, but rather series that represent or thematize a specific region. This is why they are usually so heterogeneously watched, geographically.

But apart from this single case, which also shows how the same content can be considered differently in relation to, so to speak, contextual factors, it seems to be safe to say that in general the medical genre succeeds in the operation of *unifying the country's audiences*, which is very rare in the Italian audiovisual scene, and perhaps indicative of a vitality, as mentioned above, and an exceptionality of this genre itself, at least in contemporary Italy. Genre, as is well known, derives from the encounter between the instances of those who produce and distribute a cultural (audiovisual) product – following a certain production formula, adopting a certain textual structure, labeling it accordingly (Altman 1999) – and the expectations of those who have to consume it and must first of all recognize its distinctive features and the specific promises of entertainment it embodies. The "contract" between production instances and viewers, also mediated by the textual characteristics of the content itself, can be more or less successful, and more or less solid. The geographic transversality of the audiences of Italian medical drama series can perhaps tell us something precisely about the effectiveness of this contract and about the "good functioning" of that genre – which, although it should not be understood in a static and monolithic way (see Rocchi 2019, Pescatore and Rocchi 2019, 2022), is still a genre with several well-codified characteristics – just insofar as it manages to counteract the power of audience attraction and engagement that is typical of local settings and actors. In a sense, such effectiveness of the medical drama genre can be seen as a testimony – one of the few – to the existence of a shared national audiovisual culture in Italy. Which may be paradoxical because, at the same time, such a homogeneous reception in the country might also testify to the fundamentally "exogenous" nature of this genre.

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