

## FULL PAPER

### **Legal series and legal careers: Investigating relationships between watching the legal drama *Suits* and law school enrollment**

**Rechtswissenschaft in Serie und Karriere: Eine Untersuchung des Zusammenhangs zwischen dem Konsum der Dramaserie *Suits* und der Immatrikulation in einen juristischen Studiengang**

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## Rechtswissenschaft in Serie und Karriere: Eine Untersuchung des Zusammenhangs zwischen dem Konsum der Dramaserie *Suits* und der Immatrikulation in einen juristischen Studiengang

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**Abstract:** The paper investigates whether watching legal series leads to law school enrollment. First, the study analyses if series consumption is related to enrolling at law school. This is achieved by analyzing data of 1,353 students from Münster, Germany. Hence, logistic regressions are conducted. Thereafter, the odds ratios of studying law are compared for the periods before and after the first broadcasting of the series *Suits*. Results suggest that watching legal series is highly significantly related to studying law. Moreover, findings indicate that the broadcasting of *Suits* is followed by a rise in application and enrollment numbers at Münster Law School.

**Keywords:** Media effects, cultivation theory, series, streaming, suits.

**Zusammenfassung:** In der vorliegenden Studie wird untersucht, ob das Schauen von juristischen Unterhaltungsserien zur Aufnahme eines rechtswissenschaftlichen Studiums führt. Zunächst wird analysiert, ob der Konsum von juristischen Serien grundsätzlich mit der Immatrikulation in einen juristischen Studiengang zusammenhängt. Dazu werden die Daten von 1.353 Studierenden mit Hilfe von logistischen Regressionsmodellen analysiert. Anschließend werden die Odds Ratios für die Aufnahme eines Jurastudiums für die Zeiträume vor und nach der Erstausstrahlung der Serie *Suits* verglichen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass der Juraserienkonsum in einem hochsignifikanten Zusammenhang mit der Aufnahme eines Jurastudiums steht. Darüber hinaus deuten die Ergebnisse darauf hin, dass auf die Erstausstrahlung von juristischen Unterhaltungsserien ein Anstieg an Bewerbungs- und Immatrikulationszahlen an juristischen Fakultäten folgt.

**Schlagwörter:** Medieneffekte, Kultivierungshypothese, Serien, Streaming, *Suits*.

### 1. Introduction

Economies of the European Union face enormous skill shortages in multiple professional fields. Shortages of skilled labor occur if the demand for trained professionals is permanently higher than the supply of such (Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung, n.d.). Lack of skilled labor is indicated by long reemployment periods, unbalanced applicant-vacancy ratios and the need of economies to hire professionals from abroad (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2021).

Skill shortages are especially present across professional fields essential for the economies' welfare and security. This includes the sectors of law enforcement, justice and health care (Beck-Aktuell, 2022; Ernst, 2021; Gewerkschaft der Polizei Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2020). Germany is a representative example for the problem. During the last five years, the German Police Union has stressed the lack of 4,000 police officers per year and thus demands an increase in recruitment numbers by 33% (Deutsche Polizei, 2017, 2022). Moreover, the German justice sector is currently short of 1,500 judges and prosecutors (Beck-Aktuell, 2022). This results in the release of suspects from pre-trail detention since the justice system is not able to process the number of criminal cases (Beck-Aktuell, 2022; Deutscher Richterbund, 2020). Reasons for the outlined skill shortages are the retirement of older generations from the work force and the public sector's unattractive working conditions, when compared with careers in the private industry (Beck-Aktuell, 2022; PWC, 2022).

While the outlined sectors struggle to attract new generations towards careers in their lines, entertainment series depicting work in law and law enforcement are highly popular among potential recruits. A study by Feierabend et al. (2021) found out that half of the German teenagers watch alone *Netflix* on a daily basis to at least several times a week. Especially popular are fictional series portraying the professional fields of law, law enforcement and medicine (Gehrau, 2014; Kinast, 2022). This includes series like *Suits*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* or *Grey's Anatomy* (Kinast, 2022).

A small number of studies in communication research has analyzed the potential of such 'vocational series' to inspire career aspirations. Even though, only less than 40 studies have been published in the last 30 years, almost all publications reveal media effect indicators of series consumption on career development in the form of significant relationships (Gehrau et al., 2016; Hoffner et al., 2008; Kinast, 2022; Signorielli, 1993). A study additionally offering a hypothesis in regard to causality was published by Van den Bluck and Beullens (2007). The authors suggest that broadcasting of documentary soaps on para-commandos, veterinarians and midwives is followed by an increase in student numbers in the corresponding study programs (Van den Bluck & Beullens, 2007). Communication research in this field is critical for tackling the skill shortage crisis in the EU as it offers great potential for understanding how entertainment content can be used to attract young adults towards careers vital for society.

Own previous work in the field has shown that in recent years the legal drama *Suits* has been especially popular among young adults (Kinast, 2022). Even though, work life in entertainment series is generally presented more thrilling when compared to social reality (Signorielli, 1993; Wright et al., 1995), work in the legal profession is depicted especially glamorous (Torry, 1996, as cited in Hoffner et al., 2006). In most legal dramas, American top class law firm lawyers win almost every case effortlessly by briefly observing the case file for five seconds just before returning to their skyscraper office by helicopter. Thus, the European audience is not only exposed to work in a whole different justice system but also witnesses a depiction of the legal profession which is heavily deviating from social reality. Series like *Suits* are therefore most promising when analyzing potential

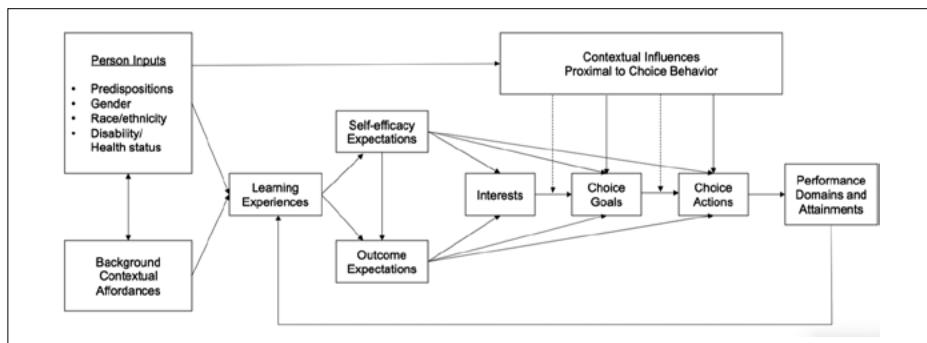
cultivation effects. Against this backdrop, the paper will revisit the work of Van den Bluck and Beullens (2007) to shed some additional light on the relationships between (legal) entertainment series and career aspirations.

At this point it is important to state that the study at hand seeks to provide basic research in the field of media effects. Thus, it does not draw ultimate conclusions on causal structures. Nevertheless, the study provides innovations in the fields of media effects and career development. First, it offers a chance for theory enhancement by assessing the empiric applicability of theoretic learning pathways triggered by media experiences. Second, the present study allows to compare the impact of such media learning experiences with other significant influences on career development such as gender, social influences, parental professions and practical experience. Finally, the results allow to give initial empiric-based implications for the development of potential employer branding campaigns in the justice sector.

## **2. An interdisciplinary approach to series-career relationships**

Even though Van den Bluck and Beullens (2007) do not provide a concrete theoretical framework for their research, previous work in the field has shown that series-career relationships are best approached from an interdisciplinary perspective.

The first perspective is career choice research. The discipline analyses how and under which influences career decision processes of individuals develop. These processes reach from early childhood ambitions to retirement decisions. The development of the field has begun in the United States at the beginning of the 20th century (Leung, 2008). Ever since, based on its theoretical and empirical work the field has evolved into a mature field of research (Leung, 2008). The most suitable theoretical approach to explain series-career relationships is the social cognitive career theory (SCCT) by Lent and Brown (2019). The theory is a career focused take on Bandura's (1979) general social cognitive theory (SCT). SCCT seeks to "explain and predict the conditions under which people develop career and academic interests, make career and academic choices, and achieve various levels of success in work and school" (Brown & Lent, 2019, p. 147). Five SCCT models have been developed by Brown and Lent (2019). In the context of this research the interest and choice model is the best fit. It centers around the constructs of learning experiences, self-efficacy expectations and outcome expectations which are all imbedded into a set of exogenous and endogenous variables. For this study, the constructs learning experiences, outcome expectations and choice actions are of relevance. Nevertheless, Figure 1 below illustrates the Interest and Choice Model in its entirety to outline how the investigated constructs are embedded in the decision process as a whole.

**Figure 1. Interest and Choice Model**

*Note.* Own illustration based on Brown and Lent (2019, p. 153). Dashed lines represent moderator effects. (Kinast, 2022).

The authors identify four sources of learning experiences which lead to outcome expectations and self-efficacy expectations (Brown & Lent, 2019). In the context of this research, the most relevant source is vicarious learning from media (Brown & Lent, 2019). A law student who acquired income expectations from watching *Suits* is a possible example (Lent, 2013). These ideas regarding the future income can affect his or her outcome expectations. Outcome expectations are the expected consequences of career choices and can be positive, negative or neutral in nature (Brown & Lent, 2019). A high school graduate for instances asks him- or herself: Which consequences await me if I enroll at law school (Brown & Lent, 2019)? According to Brown and Lent (2019) outcome expectations can be intrinsic (ensuring justice in society), extrinsic (income) and social (occupational image). These outcome expectations can indirectly or directly result in choice actions (e.g. enrolling at law school).

The empirical applicability of the theory is supported by the vast majority of current meta-studies (Lent & Brown, 2019). However, so far, no study has explicitly analyzed the theory's proclaimed learning experiences gained from entertainment mass media. Thus, this study initially investigates whether relationships are observable between (media) learning experiences and choice actions. To analyze this pathway the following two hypotheses are tested:

*H1: Series exposure is related to choice actions of first-semester students.*

*H2: Series exposure is related to choice actions of degree candidates.*

The second theoretical perspective on series-career relationships is provided by cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Cultivation theory follows the main hypothesis of heavy viewers having distorted perceptions of the real world when compared with light viewers (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). The authors state that heavy viewers see "the real world in ways that reflect the most common recurrent messages of the televised world" (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 69). Since its very development, the theory has been utilized to explain the television's influence on

professional perceptions. In its initial publication, the theory was for instance used to analyze whether heavy viewers of police series overestimated the number of people working in the police force (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). In the context of legal series, a suitable example is the hypothesis that heavy viewers of *Suits* overestimate the prestige of lawyers in society. Cultivation theory is considered a classic in media effects research. “If the field of mass media effects has any paradigms at all, cultivation must be one of them” (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 349).

Cultivation theory is thus applied to analyze whether observable relationships can also be interpreted as plausible indicators for causations. Therefore, the study at hand tests the following final hypothesis:

*H3: Legal student numbers rise after the availability of a new popular legal series.*

As in the publication by Van den Bluck and Beullens (2007), the study at hand makes use of two quantitative data sets. *H1* and *H2* will be answered based on data derived from the author’s dissertation. The sample includes 1,353 datasets of students studying in different study courses in Münster, Germany. To search for potential relationships between series exposure and studying law, binomial logistic regression models are applied. *H3* is answered on the basis of student-enrollment data provided by the Administrative Department of Münster University. To assess whether student numbers change after the release of a new legal show, odds ratios are analyzed.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1 Research design

To investigate the developed research hypotheses, two methodological approaches are applied.

#### *H1/H2*

To analyze how entertainment series and young adults’ study choices are related, 1,353 students were surveyed in a cohort study. The first cohort consists of first-semester students studying law, law enforcement, medicine, political science and business administration in Münster, Germany. The second cohort consists of degree candidates of the same study program. Surveying students at the very beginning and at the end of their university career offers several advantages. First, students in the first weeks of their studies can still give precise answers on initial study choice decisions whereas degree candidates can give more adequate responses on future career expectations after university education. Second, enrollment and graduation can be considered the most important career transitions of students (Knauf & Rosowski, 2009). Thus, all relevant career transitions of the student life cycle are taken into account (Budde & Doeberl, 2017).

### *H3*

For analyzing whether the airing of *Suits* is followed by a rise in student numbers at law school, the development of student numbers before and after the availability of the series is analyzed.

### **3.2 Samples**

#### *H1/H2*

To investigate the first research question, a purposive data sample is analyzed. Sampling of the first cohort took place between October 2018 to February 2019. Sampling of the second cohort took place between October 2019 and February 2020. The data was collected with the help of quantitative pencil-paper questionnaires which were handed out the students before their lectures. Participation was voluntarily and was not compensated. In total 1,353 students were surveyed. Male and female students are equally represented, as 49% of the participants are female. Participants study law, law enforcement, medicine, political science and business administration. Non-legal students were surveyed to act as a base line (not-studying law) in the regression analyses. All students study at universities in Münster, Germany. Average age of the 815 first-semester students is 20 years (SD = 2.6). Average age of the 538 degree candidates is 24 years (SD = 3.0).

### *H3*

To answer the second research question, student numbers of Münster Law School are analyzed. The necessary data is provided by the Administrative Department of Münster University. The provided dataset includes the overall enrollment numbers across study courses at the University of Münster and the enrollment numbers for the study course law. In addition, the provided data includes the application numbers for the study course law.

### **3.3 Research instrument and data setup**

#### *H1/H2*

The following paragraph introduces the variables necessary to investigate the relationships between series exposure and studying law. To answer the first two hypotheses, study choice, derived from the construct of choice actions, is mapped as dependent variable (DV). The first independent variable (IV) measured is social influences. Thus, the social influences on the participants' study choices are recorded with the help of a multiple response set based on the pre-study of the author's dissertation. See Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Items for social influences**

Question	Item
Which persons have influenced your study choice? (Multiple answers possible)	Parents
	Siblings
	Friends
	Partner
	Teacher
	Lecturer
	Media role model
	Professionals
	No influence

*Note.* Source: Kinast (2022, Appendix B.4).

Additionally, the number of personal contacts to professionals from the desired occupational field is recorded. For the degree candidates, personal experience in the field is tracked in addition by recording the students' practical experience in month. "How many months of practical work experience have you been able to gain in the field of law so far" (Kinast, 2022, Appendix B.5)? Finally, their theoretical experience in university semesters is recorded: "In which semester of the current degree program are you studying?" (Kinast, 2022, Appendix B.4). Social influences for degree students are recorded with the following questions: "Does your father (used to) work in a profession in the field of law?" (Kinast, 2022, Appendix B.5), "Does your mother (used to) work in a profession in the field of law?" (Kinast, 2022, Appendix B.5), "How many fully trained lawyers are there in your family (Without parents or yourself)?" (Kinast, 2022, Appendix B.5).

The main IV is the students' favorite series type. Therefore, an open question records the participants' two most liked vocational series: "What are your favorite series in which characters are depicted at work? For example, politicians in *House of Cards*" (Kinast, 2022, Appendix B.4). A non-legal series is provided to prevent possible priming effects. All responses are categorized into series types by each series' portrayed professional field (Friedmann & Wilke, 2009, as cited in Eschke & Bohne, 2018). For a consistent categorization of all productions, the research consults the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). IMDb is favored since it offers brief summaries of all recorded productions. In the categorization process, each series summary is scanned for keywords revealing the production's depicted profession and/or setting. Examples for profession are 'lawyer' or 'judge'. Examples for setting are 'court' or 'legal firm'. However, in the genre of legal series, not every production can be put into a single category. This for instance accounts for productions like *Law and Order*. In this case the production includes the identifiers 'prosecution in court' and 'police investigation' (IMDb, n.d.-a). As a result, in a limited number of cases, the categorization of series is a matter of interpretation. After categorization, series entries are coded into the following dummy variables: law, police, medicine, politics, business and no series. For the degree candidates, series consumption intensity is tracked in addition by recording the overall viewing time "How many minutes per week do you watch series" (Kinast, 2022,

Appendix B.5) and the viewing time of the favorite vocational series “How many minutes of those are series that would fit thematically with your studies?” (Kinnast, 2022, Appendix B.5).

### *H3*

Applicant and enrollment numbers for each semester are recorded by the Administrative Department of Münster University. The data reaches from summer semester 2012 to winter semester 2021/22. To account for a straightforward analysis of the data, the numbers of each summer and winter semester are summed. Therefore, it is possible to work with yearly enrollment and application numbers.

#### **3.4 Data analysis**

##### *H1/H2*

To investigate the first research question, relationships between series exposure and the choice to study law are analyzed. This is achieved with binomial logistic regression models. However, statistical assumption testing is not considered necessary as the data analysis is based on a purposive sample which does not allow for a generalization of the findings in the first place. Moreover, regression models of first-semester students and degree candidates differ slightly. This is due to adjustments made to include preliminary findings of the analysis of first-semester students. Hence, the results of the two regression analyses cannot be directly compared.

Two logistic binomial regression analyses are run to predict studying law. The model for the first-semester students includes three blocks of IVs. First, the demographic variables gender and age are included into the equation. Block 2 entails the social influences. Block 3 includes the type of favorite series.

The model for the degree candidates consists of five blocks of IVs. Like in the model for first-semester students, demographic variables are included first. Block 2 enters the social influences in form of parental profession and number of relatives in the desired profession into the regression equation. Block 3 includes the previous personal experience. Block 4 adds the favorite series type into the model. The final block entails the series consumption intensity.

### *H3*

To answer the second research question, the paper adapts the data analysis method of Van den Bluck and Beullens (2007). First, enrollment numbers are used to calculate the odds of studying law vs. any other course (Van den Bluck & Beullens, 2007). Second, changes in odds are analyzed by calculating the odds ratios (Van den Bluck & Beullens, 2007). To do so, the analysis compares the odds of enrolling at Münster Law School before and after the broadcasting of the first season of *Suits* on German free-TV in February of 2014 (IMDb, n.d.-b).

In their analysis, Van den Bluck and Beullens (2007) use the student numbers of one year before and one year after the broadcasting of the docu soaps’ first

season. However, to account for potential outliers in enrollment numbers and the fact that not everyone started following the series right from the first episodes, it is considered more thoughtful to use the data of two years before and after the initial broadcasting. Hence, for this research, the average enrollment numbers for the years 2012 to 2013 and 2014 to 2015 are analyzed.

## 4. Results

Results are presented in three steps. First, the descriptive figures of the participants' series consumption are introduced. Thereafter, the regression results analyzing the relationships between series exposure and studying law are presented. Finally, the change in odds of studying law before and after the premier of *Suits* are presented.

### 4.1 Vocational series highly popular among students

To provide an initial overview, this chapter begins by reporting the descriptive findings of the participants' series consumption.

Among all surveyed first-semester students, 67% of the participants have a favorite series portraying work in a specific occupational field. 31% have a favorite series matching their own study field (e.g., a legal student watching a legal series). The top-three most popular vocational series are *Suits* (24%), *House of Cards* (10%) and *Grey's Anatomy* (6%). First-semester students on average watch 5.7 ( $SD = 3.1$ ) seasons of their favorite series.

In the group of degree candidates, 63% of the students have a favorite series depicting work in a specific professional field. 38% have a favorite series matching their own study field. Again, the most popular vocational series are *Suits* (17%), *Grey's Anatomy* (5%) and *House of Cards* (4%). On average degree candidates have been following their favorite vocational series for 5.4 ( $SD = 2.9$ ) seasons.

### 4.2 Exposure to legal series related to law school enrollment

To analyze whether series exposure is related to studying law and to test  $H1$  and  $H2$ , binomial logistic regressions are conducted.

#### *First-semester students*

The model for first-semester students (see Table 2) is able to explain 27% of the variance in studying Law (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ). The regression can classify 80% of the cases correctly. Sensitivity is 25%, specificity 95%, positive predictive value 57% and negative predictive value 18%. The block containing the demographic variables explains 11% of variance. Social influence variables in Block 2 account for 5%. The final block, containing the series exposure, explains additional 11%. Naming a legal series as favorite series is the strongest highly significant predictor for enrolling at law school,  $Exp(B) = 2.53$ . Compared to the group of non-viewers, odds of law school enrollment are 3 times higher for viewers of legal series. Therefore,  $H1$  can be confirmed. It is noteworthy that the social factors actually

expected to have a major influence on study choice do not seem to play a significant role. Only the variable professional contacts has a significant influence on studying law,  $Exp(B) = 0.93$ . However, the effect strength is only a small one when compared to the effect size of legal series exposure.

**Table 2. Regression analysis for study choice law: First-semester students**

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Gender <sup>a</sup>	-0.28	0.21	1.66	1	.198	0.76	0.5	1.16
Age	-0.41	0.07	31.26	1	.000	0.66	0.58	0.77
Influence parents <sup>b</sup>	-0.17	0.24	0.50	1	.478	0.84	0.53	1.35
Influence siblings <sup>b</sup>	-0.64	0.33	3.82	1	.051	0.53	0.28	1.00
Influence friends <sup>b</sup>	0.19	0.24	0.67	1	.411	1.21	0.76	1.93
Influence partner <sup>b</sup>	-0.31	0.48	0.42	1	.517	0.73	0.29	1.87
Influence teacher <sup>b</sup>	-0.15	0.30	0.25	1	.617	0.86	0.48	1.55
Influence lecturer <sup>b</sup>	0.46	0.89	0.27	1	.604	1.58	0.28	8.98
Influence media role model <sup>b</sup>	0.48	0.28	2.98	1	.084	1.61	0.94	2.77
Influence professionals <sup>b</sup>	0.00	0.24	0.00	1	.995	1.00	0.63	1.59
No influence <sup>b</sup>	-0.04	0.38	0.01	1	.923	0.96	0.45	2.05
Professional contacts	-0.07	0.02	9.82	1	.002	0.93	0.89	0.97
Law series <sup>b</sup>	0.93	0.25	13.69	1	.000	2.53	1.55	4.13
Business series <sup>b</sup>	-0.65	0.84	0.60	1	.438	0.52	0.10	2.70
Medical series <sup>b</sup>	-1.23	0.45	7.62	1	.006	0.29	0.12	0.70
Political series <sup>b</sup>	0.76	0.33	5.35	1	.021	2.13	1.12	4.06
Police series <sup>b</sup>	-1.83	0.75	5.94	1	.015	0.16	0.04	0.70
Other series <sup>b</sup>	-0.40	0.53	0.59	1	.444	0.67	0.24	1.88
Constant	7.07	1.45	23.92	1	.000	1,173.48		

*Note.* Baseline for type of series: No series. N = 701. <sup>a</sup>Female = 0, male = 1. <sup>b</sup>No = 0, yes = 1. Source: Künast (2022, p. 132).

### Degree candidates

The logistic regression for degree candidates (see Table 3) achieves to explain 58% of variance (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ). Percentage of correctly classified cases is 85. Sensitivity is 68%, specificity 91%, positive predictive value 76% and negative predictive value 12%. Block 1 explains 2% of variance. Social influences in Block

2 account for additional 2%. Block 3 explains 35% of the variance. Block 4, entailing the favorite series type, explains additional 18% of variance. Block 5, introducing the viewing time into the equation, accounts for a final percent. Like for first-semester students, watching legal series is the strongest highly significant predictor for enrolling at law school,  $Exp(B) = 6.16$ . Hence, when compared to non-viewers, the odds of enrolling at law school are 6 times higher for viewers of legal series. Thus,  $H2$  can be confirmed. Like for first semester students, the naturally expected social influences (parental profession and relatives' professions) do not play a significant role in the decision to study law.

Conclusive, it can be stated that the two regression models clearly suggest that exposure to legal series is highly significantly related to the decision to enrolling at and making it through law school.

**Table 3. Regression analysis for study choice law: Degree candidates**

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Gender <sup>a</sup>	-0.01	0.29	0.00	1	.986	1.00	0.56	1.76
Age	-0.27	0.07	14.62	1	.000	0.76	0.67	0.88
Parental profession <sup>b</sup>	-0.41	0.39	1.12	1	.290	0.66	0.31	1.42
Relatives	-0.09	0.14	0.41	1	.522	0.92	0.70	1.20
Experience	-0.04	0.02	5.12	1	.024	0.96	0.93	1.00
Semester	0.60	0.06	94.97	1	.000	1.82	1.61	2.05
Law series <sup>b</sup>	1.82	0.40	20.92	1	.000	6.16	2.83	13.41
Business series <sup>b</sup>	1.63	0.79	4.33	1	.038	5.11	1.10	23.81
Medical series <sup>b</sup>	-2.68	0.57	21.86	1	.000	0.07	0.02	0.21
Political series <sup>b</sup>	1.57	0.61	6.61	1	.010	4.81	1.45	15.94
Police series <sup>b</sup>	-0.42	0.46	0.82	1	.365	0.66	0.27	1.62
Other series <sup>b</sup>	0.28	0.51	0.31	1	.576	1.33	0.49	3.58
Viewing time 1	0.00	0.00	0.11	1	.741	1.00	1.00	1.00
Viewing time 2	0.00	0.00	3.48	1	.062	1.00	0.99	1.00
Constant	1.83	1.53	1.44	1	.231	6.25		

Note. Baseline for type of series: No series.  $N = 483$ . <sup>a</sup>Female = 0, male = 1. <sup>b</sup>No = 0, yes = 1.  
Source: Kinast (2022, p. 163).

#### 4.3 Broadcasting of *Suits* followed by rise in law student numbers

The previous chapter provides evidence of a relationship between watching legal series and the choice to study law. Nevertheless, the data does not allow to make a statement on whether students study what they watch or watch what they study. To develop a plausible idea for the direction of the relationship, it is now ana-

lyzed whether the broadcasting of a highly popular legal series is followed by a rise in law students (*H3*). To allow for comparable results, the research follows the analytic approach of Van den Bluck and Beullens (2007).

The presented analysis uses the legal series *Suits* to predict the direction of the observed relationships. This is due to the series' high popularity among young adults. Even though streaming services like *Netflix Germany* do not provide viewer metrics of specific series on a regular basis (Business Insider, 2021), the production's enormous popularity and high reach in the relevant group is reflected in our own data. The descriptive analysis shows that among the 815 first semester students, 24% name *Suits* as favorite vocational series, making it the most viewed series (Kinast, 2022). In the group of degree candidates, *Suits* is also the most popular vocational series, named as favorite series by 17% of the participants (Kinast, 2022). In Germany, *Suits* was first exclusively aired on the pay-TV channel *FOX Channel* in January 2013 (Schmitt, 2012). Broadcasting on German free-TV premiered a year later in February 2014 (IMDb, n.d.-b). In the same year, the series was available to stream on German *Netflix* (Netflix, n.d.). As the free-TV premier of *Suits* made the series available to a broad German audience for the first time, February 2014 is used as supposed starting point of media exposure. Accordingly, student numbers are compared for the periods before and after the premier of *Suits* on German free-TV.

**Table 4. Student numbers at the University of Münster**

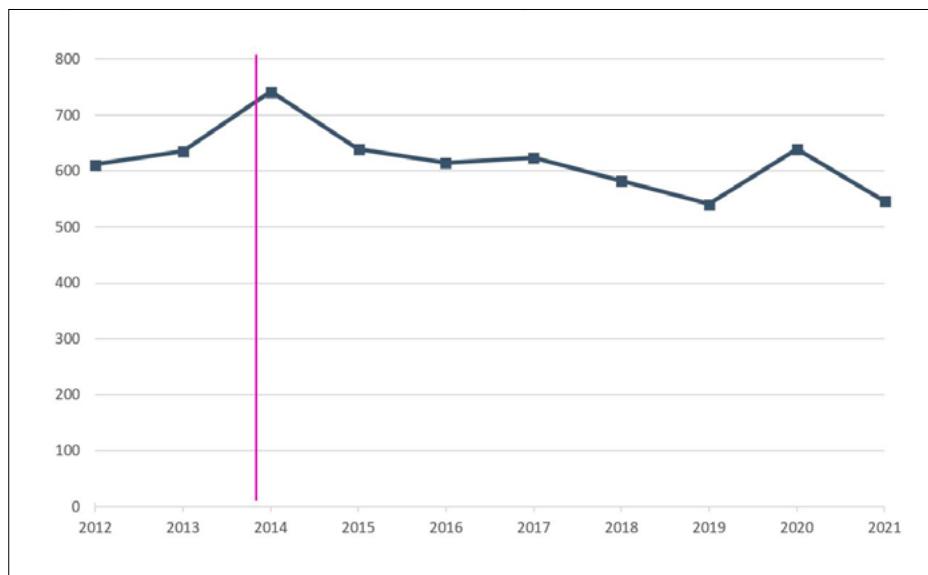
	2012	2013 <sup>a</sup>	2014 <sup>b,c</sup>	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total enrollment	7.299	8.397	7.791	7.689	8.112	8.125	8.026	7.844	7.898	7.066
Law applicants	5.929	7.215	8.370	8.457	7.859	7.293	5.218	5.583	4.868	4.640
Evolution in law applicants		+21.7	+16.0	+1.0	-7.1	-7.1	-28.5	+7.0	-12.8	-4.7
Law enrollment	612	636	742	639	615	624	582	541	639	547
Evolution in law students		+3,9%	+16,7%	-13,9%	-3,8%	+1,5%	-6,7%	-7,0%	+18,1%	-14,4%

*Note.* Table design in accordance with Van den Bluck and Beullens (2007). <sup>a</sup> Broadcasting of the first season of *Suits* on German pay-TV (Schmitt, 2012). <sup>b</sup> Broadcasting of the first season of *Suits* on German free-TV (IMDb, n.d.-b). <sup>c</sup> Availability of the first season of *Suits* on Netflix (Netflix, n.d.). Source: University of Münster (2022).

Table 4 outlines enrollment and application numbers at the University of Münster in the relevant period. A chi-square test reveals that the odds of enrolling in law significantly rose by 23% in the two-year period after the broadcasting of *Suits*

(OR: 1.231; 95% CI: 1.10–1.37,  $p = .0046$ ). This development is also illustrated in Figure 2 below.

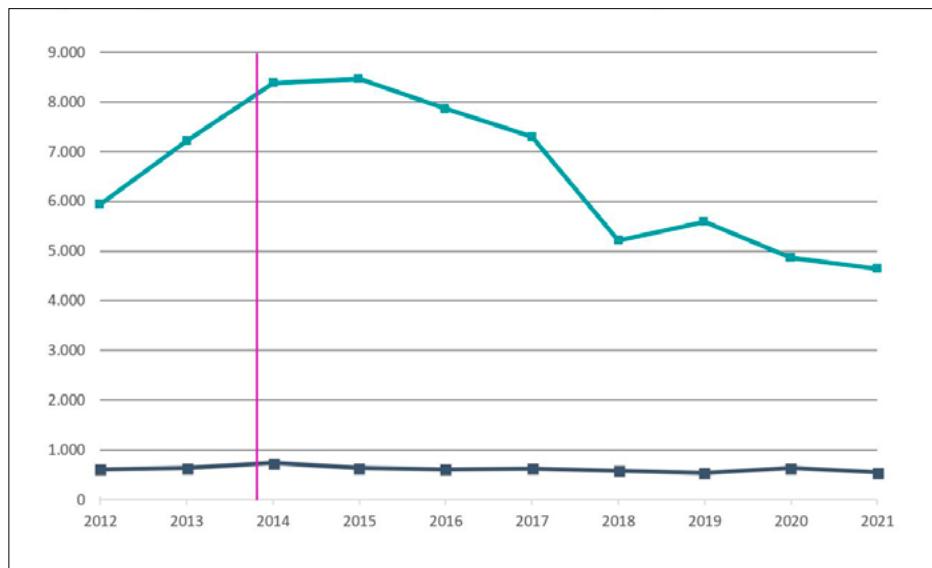
**Figure 2. Enrollment numbers for Law at the University of Münster**



*Note.* Years represent academic years, starting in April. Pink vertical line illustrates broadcasting of the first season of *Suits* on German free-TV (IMDb, n.d.-b).

Next to a rise in enrollment numbers, the broadcasting of the first season of *Suits* is followed by a steep rise in application numbers for the study course of law (see Figure 3). After the free-TV premier, law applicant figures rose for two years. Thereafter, the numbers steadily decreased until reaching a new low in 2021. Since the University of Münster does not record overall applicant numbers across study courses, it is not possible to calculate odds and odds ratios for applicant numbers. Hence, no precise statistical evidence can be provided in this regard.

**Figure 3. Application and enrollment numbers for Law at the University of Münster**



*Note.* Years represent academic years, starting in April. Pink line illustrates broadcasting of the first season of *Suits* on German free-TV (IMDb, n.d.-b). Green graph represents application numbers. Black graph represents enrollment numbers.

## 5. Discussion

Study choice processes of individuals are influenced by a countless number of small and large factors (McMahon & Patton, 2019). Nevertheless, most career theories focus on the role of family, friends, teachers and social persuasion (Brown & Lent, 2019; Gottfredson, 2005). The presented results thus provide new and rare insights into the role of entertainment media exposure in career decision processes. The discussion of the findings is structured as follows: First, key findings and limitations of the research are discussed. Thereafter, implications are given for theory enhancement and future research. Finally, the potential of legal series in recruitment is discussed.

### *Legal series as career guide*

The descriptive findings of the participants' series consumption offer an interesting starting point for the discussion of the results. First, the results suggest, that series set in specific occupational fields are highly popular among young adults. This is reflected by the fact that almost two thirds of all participants have a favorite series depicting work in a certain professional field. Second, about a third of

all participants favors a series depicting their own desired professional field. Nevertheless, consumption of *Suits* is not specific to legal students. Across all study courses, the legal drama is the most popular production. Almost a fourth of all first-semester students and 17% of all degree candidates name the series as favorite series, highlighting the potential impact of *Suits*. These findings align with a previous qualitative interview study, revealing that watching *Suits* has motivational effects especially on students of business administration (Kinast, 2022).

Both binomial logistic regression analyses suggest highly significant relationships between watching legal series and studying law. This accounts for the initial choice action of enrolling at law school (first-semester students) and for the ambitions to graduate (degree candidates). As a result, *H1* and *H2* can be accepted. As legal series commonly depict the work life of lawyers as very glamourous and highly prestigious (Torry, 1996, as cited in Hoffner et al., 2006), it is plausible to argue that viewers in turn strive towards the seemingly amazing careers they follow on screen (Brown & Lent, 2019; Gottfredson, 2002). This argument is supported by the fact that legal students explicitly do not watch series depicting professions which are not connected to the legal profession. For instance, among first-semester students, having a medical or police series as favorite show is significantly negatively related to studying law. The finding that series exposure is related to corresponding career aspirations aligns with previous cultivation studies by Gehrau (2014), Pollock et al. (2021) and Signorielli (1993) as well as studies arguing with SCT by Gehrau et al. (2016) and Hoffner et al. (2008).

At the same time no influences from family, peers and teachers are observable. This is highly surprising as these factors are most commonly highlighted in study choice research (Brown & Lent, 2019; Gottfredson, 2005). However, within the drawn sample, these factors do not have a significant influence on the choice of enrolling at law school. One possible explanation for the absence of usual influences is the social desirability bias. The research instruments recorded social influences directly with the outlined multiple response sets (see Table 1). Participants might have felt it is unfavorable to directly admit having followed someone else's advice (e.g., teacher) in such a significant decision. Nevertheless, the absence of social influences in combination with strong series-career relationships highlights the significance of entertainment media in career development processes.

Even though the revealed relationships are a strong indicator for media effects, the conducted analyses do not allow to determine causality structures. To offer an initial idea of the direction, *H3* suggests that the availability of a new and popular legal series is followed by a rise in student numbers. Like for *H1* and *H2*, the hypothesis can be accepted. The study at hand is able to replicate the findings of Van den Bluck and Beullens (2007). The analysis suggests that in the two years following the free-TV premier of the first season of *Suits*, the odds of enrolling at law school rose significantly (23%). In addition, after this period, enrollment numbers started to drop continuously. These findings perfectly align with the results of Van den Bluck and Beullens (2007) showing a short rise in student numbers after the first broadcasting of docusoaps in the fields of midwifery, veterinary medicine and military. The study at hand can moreover reveal the same trend for

applicant numbers. Descriptive data shows a steep rise after the airing of the first season and a constant decline in the following years.

### *Limitations*

The first part of the research explores the relationships between series and study choice. First, it needs to be addressed that the sample only includes the 'happy ones'. Due to the purposive sampling approach, the sample of first-semester students only includes participants who got accepted at law school. As a result, students who got rejected in the application process are not represented. Moreover, the sample of degree candidates only contains students who managed to qualify themselves for the state exam preparation. Thus, the third of all students who dropped law school before this point are unrepresented (Heublein et al., 2020). Additional limitations are caused by the basic research design. As the initial study providing the data basis for this paper was designed to provide a broad overview of media effects across professional fields, it was out of the scope of the research to record the series' degree of realism. This can be considered a main limitation of this research since cultivation theory is based on the hypothesis that media effects occur if the reality represented on media significantly deviates from social reality (Gehrau, 2014). Hence, if there is no evidence that series depict legal work unrealistically, it is problematic to argue that such series lead to a perception of the profession which is distorted from reality. Moreover, it needs to be highlighted that study choices are influenced by a countless number of factors (McMahon & Patton, 2019). Thus, not all surveyed influencing factors can be tested with own hypotheses within the scope of this paper.

The second part of the study also deserves a critical reflection. First, it is important to once more highlight that the analyzed data does not allow to and does not intend to provide evidence for a causal relationship. It should thus rather be seen as an attempt to offer a plausible research hypothesis for future studies. This is because the data at hand does not allow to link the broadcasting of *Suits* to the rise of student numbers with certainty since the analysis for instance does not statistically control for other potential factors which might explain the rising interest in studying law.

Nevertheless, as the current findings direct align with the previous work of Van den Bluck and Beullens (2007), the results offer a plausible research direction. In addition, no large justice scandals or recruitment campaigns offering a concrete explanation for the rise of interest in studying law took place in the period of interest. It is however worth noting that the federal state of North Rhein-Westphalia had a double cohort of high school graduates in 2013 (Die Landesregierung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2013). Nevertheless, this cannot be considered a plausible explanation for the rise in enrollment figures as law student enrollment rose significantly in comparison to enrollment into other study subjects. Finally, the Office of Student Affairs at the University of Münster confirmed that there were no changes in the admission procedure in the relevant period (L.S. Pino, personal communication, May 11, 2023).

### *Theory implications*

In the context of the SCCT, the findings at hand provide first evidence that entertainment media are a significant source for learning experiences in the Interest and Choice Model by Brown and Lent (2019). Furthermore, the results suggest that the vicarious learning from media exposure follows the same pathways as other learning experiences (see Figure 1). While the presented results show relationships between learning experiences from entertainment media and the constructs of interests and choice actions, previous research was already able to establish links between vicarious learning from media and outcome expectations (Kinast, 2022). Concluding, it can be stated that this initial application of SCCT in a communication science implies that the career theory is also a feasible tool for analyzing media effects in detail. Even though, SCCT is still most applied in career focused research, it should be considered to add media exposure as self-contained source of learning experiences next to the constructs of person inputs and background contextual affordances.

In terms of cultivation theory, the study once more shows the empiric applicability of the classic. Even though the intensity of media exposure was not integrated into the models as a metric or ordinal variable, the theory allowed for a solid argumentation of the career choice differences between viewers and non-viewers. It is noteworthy that cultivation theory was applied in vocational contexts since its very beginning (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). The study at hand shows that after more than 50 years the theory is still able to explain media-induced beliefs about specific professions.

### *Research implications*

The research at hand offers initial groundwork on the role media effects play in career choice processes. The uncovered strong relationships between entertainment series exposure and studying law imply that especially the legal profession is worth further media effects research. Two aspects in particular highlight the field as promising for future in-depth research. First, the genre of legal series is highly popular. Many young adults seem to enjoy exposing themselves to successful lawyers on screen. Second, legal series tend to draw an especially positive image of the professional field. This offers huge potential for affecting adolescents' career aspirations.

However, it is out of the scope of this study to determine the precise underlying media effect processes which lead to series-career relationships. As a result, it remains unclear whether the relationships are the result of general series exposure (cultivation theory), the admiration of single series protagonists (social learning theory) or a combination of both. Recent research in this regard suggests, that the underlying effect paths differ between professional fields (Kinast, 2022). Follow up research should thus take different types of media effects into account to allow for precise analysis of potential effect paths. However, it is also implied to explore one effect path at a time to prevent the blurring of cultivation and social learning effects.

Next to the necessity of analyzing which exact paths underly series-career relationships, it is up for future research to determine the direction of the revealed

links. By investigating *H3*, the research at hand offers a first indicator for the direction of series-career relationships. Nevertheless, like the study by Van den Bluck and Beullens (2007), the analyzed data set does not allow to make substantial claims of causality. To finally answer whether students study what they watch or watch what they study, future research needs to apply longitudinal research approaches. A possible quantitative long-term research design could survey individuals in their final year at school, their first semester at university and after their choice of study specification to determine the direction of series-career relationships with more certainty.

This longitudinal research approach should in addition be extended by qualitative research. Especially in the presented field of investigation, an additional qualitative research component has the ability to generate a better understanding of the causal structures behind the uncovered relationships. Own previous qualitative studies for example show that especially guided interviews offer the chance to reveal entertainment media exposure as motive of study choices and source of career expectations (Kinast, 2022).

### *Recruitment implications*

The beginning of the paper highlights the problem of skill shortages in the German justice sector, posing a significant threat to the security and welfare of the German state. In the last decade, recent German governments have therefore tried to utilize entertainment series to inspire high school graduates towards a career in health care, law enforcement and the military. These campaigns however led to highly ambivalent outcomes (Ernst, 2021; Krei, 2017). The present paper thus concludes by giving implications for possible recruitment campaigns in the justice sector.

The presented findings clearly suggest that legal series are highly popular among young adults and especially among legal students. Moreover, the availability of new legal series is followed by rising law enrollment figures. Hence, on a basic level, series depicting legal work seem to have the potential to inspire adolescents to study Law. Seemingly, the problem is not winning school graduates to enroll at law school. It rather is inspiring legal degree candidates to work as judges or prosecutors after their graduation. Common legal series like *Suits* or *L.A. Law* are however limited to the depiction of the glamorous work life of successful and charismatic lawyers. Judges are moreover not seldom depicted as the protagonists' antagonist. Hence, potential media campaigns should thus focus on depicting the work of judges and prosecutors. When doing so, it seems crucial to highlight the protagonists' charisma, occupational success and high level of professionalism. Legal series often stage lawyers as rich and hungry for power. Series focusing on professions in judiciary should exchange these attributes for a strong sense of justice and the relevance of the work for society. As potential productions should target experienced degree candidates, it is moreover important to depict the work life and professional culture in the field as authentic as possible. Without a doubt it will be challenging to portray a thrilling and impactful work life while remaining authentic and realistic.

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