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# Minority representation in the streaming era: An analysis of Jewish identity in competing subscription video on-demand platforms

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## Abstract

This article considers how three competing subscription video on-demand services (SVODs) – Jewzy, ChaiFlicks, and IZZY – attract American Jewish subscribers via content selection, platform design, and marketing rhetoric. Although these three SVODs offer similar catalogs, they nonetheless foreground distinct elements of Jewish life, history, and practice. This process of commercial framing, the paper argues, creates unique brand identities for the three services that align with three different approaches to the construction of American Jewish identity. The article goes on to show that these SVODs offer an opportunity to revisit core assumptions embedded within Jewish screen studies and minority screen representation studies more broadly. Minority identity on screen is most often studied through the interpretation of key instances of minority representation. These SVODs instead emphasize the dynamics of interpellation, as they hail viewers by appealing to limited, pre-constructed concepts of cultural identity while offering entire platforms worth of representations.

## Keywords

cultural identity, global media, Jewish studies, minority representation, streaming video

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In 2020, three distinct but similar subscription video on-demand services (SVODs) – Jewzy, ChaiFlicks, and IZZY – launched during a six-month period. Each was aimed overwhelmingly, but not quite exclusively, at American Jewish viewers. As Hoberman and Shandler (2003) note, there is a long-standing, intimate connection between American Jews and screen entertainment, with Jewish creators and consumers playing a central role in the history of popular media in the United States. Although this association has been nefariously distorted by antisemites (Brackman, 2000), a Jewish connection to the world of media nonetheless also remains a commonly expressed element of cultural identity for many American Jews. In addition to the high-profile presence of countless Jews in American film and television, the disproportionate volume and popularity of Jewish Film Festivals serves as tangible evidence for this phenomenon (Sienkiewicz and McIntosh, 2014). There is thus a certain logic to marketing a dedicated SVOD to the Jewish community as the affordances of streaming distribution create opportunities for services to curate content libraries intended to appeal to specific taste cultures or narrowly defined demographic groups.

At the same time, the American Jewish world is quite small, rather diverse in cultural practice, and not necessarily underserved. Pew Research counts only 8 million “Jewish connected” people in the United States (Pew Research, 2021). Furthermore, there is ample content featuring Jewish themes and characters available on most established SVOD services. In 2019, Netflix paid \$500 million for the rights to *Seinfeld*, television’s most studied and celebrated Jewish program (Brook, 2010; Gillota, 2010; Krieger, 2003; Tanny, 2016). Netflix also produces a range of its own Jewish content, from *Unorthodox* and *My Unorthodox Life* to *GLOW*, *Russian Doll*, and *Orange is the New Black*, which have all been noted by scholars for offering unique, modern, and diverse portrayals of Jewish life (Fields, 2020; Kessler, 2019; Miller, 2020). Additionally, Netflix offers a robust catalog of Israeli content, including high-profile shows such as *Shtisel*, *Fauda*, and *Tehran*, alongside up to twenty other Israeli titles at a given moment (Wayne, 2018). Although the Jewish press was quick to dub Jewzy, ChaiFlicks, and IZZY each as a “Jewish Netflix” upon their respective releases, the real Netflix is in fact quite dedicated to offering extensive, notable, and diverse Jewish content (*Cleveland Jewish News*, 2020; Friedman, 2020; Silver, 2020).

This article argues that Jewzy, ChaiFlicks, and IZZY are thus not best understood as simple purveyors of Jewish media content, given the relatively small market of individuals both interested in Jewish content and looking for more than is found on mainstream services. Instead, we analyze these SVODs as what Papaoikonomou et al. (2016) describe as “consumption communities,” in which “the construction and communication of identity” is aided by values-driven consumer choices (2016: 211). Jewzy, ChaiFlicks, and IZZY invite Jewish users to participate in specific understandings of Jewish identity through acts of paid subscription. Engaging in distinct practices of curation and promotion, each SVOD draws on specific aspects of Jewish life and media history in order to direct attention to particular aspects of Jewish self-understanding.

The resulting analysis, we argue, provides insight into the evolving relationship between screen media and minority cultural representation. Jewish screen studies, alongside much research on minority media images, has for most of its history been largely concerned with a combination of silencing and stereotyping. Scholars tend to focus on

the absence of thoughtful Jewish representation found in popular culture, or, alternatively, patterns of essentializing imagery that result when Jews and Jewishness are marketed to general audiences (Brook, 2010; Fields, 2020; Krieger, 2003). The study of media and Jewish identity has thus focused on creative interpretative acts aimed at finding meaningful moments in the silences and stereotypes (Bial, 2005; Grinberg, 2021; Pickette, 2022; Stratton, 2000).

Jewzy, ChaiFlicks, and IZZY, we argue, are important markers of two emerging dynamics in minority representation, as streaming libraries become a dominant mode of screen media consumption. First, whereas the history of Jewish screen media has often focused on scarcity of representation, these services, with their large catalogs of Jewish material, emphasize plentitude, with a concurrent lowering of representational weight for each specific representation. Second, these SVODs de-emphasize the requirement to interpret Jewish identity in media representation by seeking out subtle moments embedded in mainstream texts. Taking on a proactive approach to identity as a means of marketing media products, these SVODs eschew interpretation for interpellation, as they recruit Jewish audiences through the marketing of specific notions of Jewish identity.

Although the three SVODs examined here feature rather similar content libraries, each hails its audience quite differently. Jewzy, with its mainstream sensibility, emphasizes Jewishness as a sub-category of American identity, asking viewers to subscribe in order to emphasize the fixed bond represented by the hyphen in “Jewish-American.” ChaiFlicks, alternatively, markets an explicitly multilingual, cosmopolitan picture of Jewish identity, whereby Jewishness is defined by universalist impulses and the consumption of intellectually celebrated global screen arts. IZZY offers yet a third, entirely Israel-focused, version of Jewish identity. Steeped in Israeli nation-branding and uninterested in political critique, the site appeals to the vitality and currency of the Jewish state as a means of attracting American Jewish subscribers. Certainly, audiences remain free to interpret the texts they consume in a variety of ways. This explicit hailing of Jewish media consumers, however, nonetheless represents an important shift in the relationship between commercial media practice and cultural identity in the broader context of increasing audience fragmentation.

## **Method: studying streaming video platforms**

Even a single Jewish SVOD would represent a significant departure from the apparent logic of the current media industries. As Major (2021) argues, contemporary dynamics discourage the existence of niche services “as conglomerates continue pursuing mass-market platforms” and subsume specialized content into their catalogs (2021: 74). Netflix’s core of Jewish and Israeli content represents just such a situation. However, insofar as notable exceptions to the rule exist, they come in the forms of niche services aimed at providing a specific sense of group identity and connection to a broader community via subscription. As Miller (2017) argues in the case of the successful anime-focused SVOD Crunchyroll, a sense of communal connection drives consumers to the service as much as exclusive access to particular content. Similarly, and in more direct parallel to Jewish niche SVOD platforms, the West African cinema SVOD IROKOTv thrives, according to Ebelebe (2019), because it “helps the African diaspora reconnect

with their cultural identity” as well as providing access to hard-to-find media content (2019: 475). Jewzy, ChaiFlicks, and IZZY attempt to do just this, but with the additional burden of competing with one another for a smaller potential audience.

Having established the aims of these three SVODs, the question of studying the vast reserves of content they offer emerges as a significant consideration. Broadly speaking, studies of minorities in popular media have aimed to identify overarching trends in representation either through comprehensive accounting or the identification of centrally important texts. For example, on the subject of Muslim representation, works such as Jack Shaheen’s *Reel Bad Arabs* (2009) aims to detail every Hollywood representation of Islam, while Evelyn Alsultany’s *Arabs and Muslims in the Media* (2012) points to highly visible popular examples that consolidate and further popularize hegemonic discourses. Similarly, the history of Jewish screen studies has been one dominated by systematic textual analysis and the identification of representational trends. Foundational works, such as Zurawik’s (2000) *Jews of Prime-time*, Antler’s (1998) *Talking Back*, and Brook’s (2003) *Something Ain’t Kosher Here*, take for granted access to an essentially comprehensive view of Jews in American television. Abrams’ (2012) *The New Jew and Film* and Meyers’ (2021) *Movie-made Jews* take a similar approach to cinema, albeit by limiting their focus to mainstream film content. With platforms such as Jewzy, ChaiFlicks, and IZZY, however, such completism is impossible and, more importantly, beside the point. The range of films and television series on these platforms is broad enough to include a dizzying array of representations that may be formed into a similar infinitude of discursive framings of Jewishness. To catalog and categorize them would be interesting but not particularly instructive. To identify the most important moments would be exceedingly difficult, given the diffusion of audience attention and the lack of reliable viewing data.

In order to confront this methodological difficulty, we turn to Havens et al.’s (2009) notion of “critical media industry studies,” taking a multi-perspectival approach to consider media industry “power as a form of leadership constructed through discourse that privileges specific ways of understanding the media and their place in people’s lives” (2009: 237). To do this we began by engaging in long-form interviews with key personnel at Jewzy, ChaiFlicks, and IZZY. We approached these discussions both as informational and as texts for interpretation, paying close attention to the titles that personnel chose to emphasize and the ways in which they framed this content in relation to their overall products. Importantly, we acknowledge, following Caldwell (2016), that executives inevitably shape descriptions of their products in strategic ways and always to their own advantage. It is crucial for scholars to recognize this tendency and to think critically about the reliability of such information. We argue, however, that in the context of this study, producer “spin, hype, and dissembling” is in fact particularly useful data as long as it is understood as such. Our aim is to analyze the specific notions of Jewish identity that these executives wish to sell to consumers (Caldwell, 2016: 45). This may, or perhaps certainly does, involve a selective and celebratory framing of content that could be presented to the buying public in myriad ways. Exactly these modes of selection and celebration, we argue, provide insight into the work of cultural commodification of Jewishness at play for each SVOD.

We also took note of Van Esler’s (2021) attention to the ways in which SVODs hope to construct and direct user experience, systematically noting which titles were

highlighted by platform design throughout 2022. Like the relationships between heavily marketed flagship programming and the brand identities of linear cable networks (Wayne, 2016), the promotion of specific titles in an SVOD interface reflects executive efforts to cultivate loyal relationships with subscribers. Additionally, we analyzed the near-daily marketing emails that each service sends to subscribers, considering how the SVODs frame their content in order to construct a simultaneous sense of brand identity and Jewish identity. Last, we engaged in textual analysis for a select number of specific programs that emerged as centrally important in the construction of each SVOD's brand identity via our other avenues of research. This approach, we contend, allows us to identify the key ways in which the SVODs invoke and sell distinct notions of Jewish identity despite all three featuring titles with similar themes, places of origin, and aesthetic sensibilities.

In order to manage the vastness of the content and contextual elements under consideration, we offer our analysis through three thematic discussions of each of the three SVODs. First, we describe the platform history and brand identity for each SVOD, noting the background of its founders and the general approach the platform takes to framing Jewish identity as a commodity. Next, we analyze each service's approach to Jewish demography, considering what sorts of people and actions are presented as centrally Jewish for each SVOD. We then consider the role that Israel plays in each service's intermingling of brand identity, audience appeal, and Jewish identity. In conclusion, we consider the implications of these services on the study of minority media broadly and Jewish media specifically. We argue that Jewzy, ChaiFlicks, and IZZY highlight an important trend in the commodification of minority identities while also speaking to a specific, Jewish relationship to screen media. Although we do not aim to supersede *interpretation* as the primary mode of studying media representations, we do maintain that the emerging on-demand nature of commercial media will only increase the importance of *interpellation* in minority media studies, as SVOD's hail audiences via appeals to cultural identity.

## **Jewzy**

### ***Platform history and branding strategy***

Jewzy, though London-based, is available exclusively in the United States, charging \$5.99 per month for access to a catalog that is somewhat smaller, and more skewed towards English-language content than those found on ChaiFlicks and IZZY. The site's founder, Jeremy Wootliff, was educated in the United States before returning home to the United Kingdom where he worked as producer for a number of mainstream broadcasting outlets. His media perspective is, accordingly, very much steeped in the notions of wide audience appeal. Over time, Wootliff began bringing his broadcast sensibilities into Jewish community spaces, producing films for Jewish charities and other institutions. This experience brought him to pursue a Jewish broadcast network in the UK, but after conducting market research he determined that the British Jewish audience was too small and the broadcasting medium too limited to be economically viable. He thus pivoted, creating Jewzy as an SVOD aimed at the far more robust American Jewish audience.

Wootliff now embraces and celebrates this American focus, claiming that his SVOD platform is fully “American-Jewish” while at the same time offering “something for everyone.” This spin, of course, seems evidently contradictory, as Jews comprise 2% of the total population in the United States and about 0.1% of the world. Wootliff, however, has built his brand on the notion that Jewishness and popular culture, particularly in the United States, are fundamentally, and unproblematically, inseparable. Notably, Wootliff’s equation of Jewish specificity with a sense of universal populism is reflected in both deep cultural theory and the basic history of American media. Jacques Derrida (Derrida and Weber, 2004), for example, posits universalism as the very definition of contemporary Jewishness, stating that “to say ‘I am Jewish’” is to say that “I am testifying to the humanity of human beings, to universality, to responsibility for universality” (2004: 41). More concretely, Gabler (1988) argues that the Hollywood approach to cinematic storytelling emerged as entrepreneurial Jewish immigrants tried to attract audiences by appealing to ostensibly universal norms and fantasies. “American values,” he writes, “came to be *defined* largely by movies Jews made despite the fact the overt references to Jewishness tended to be obscured” (1988: 7).

Jewzy and Wootliff aim to sell the association of the Jewish with the popular to American Jews who are positively disposed to this connection. As Wootliff puts it, Jewzy “provides a way for people to understand what Jewishness is [...] and that includes a lot of show-biz.” Wootliff thus takes on the counterintuitive strategy of conflating his specifically Jewish platform with the world of mainstream content in rather unobvious ways. “We want the people who like the dumb sitcoms, the dumb rom-coms [...] the traditional [U.S.] broadcast viewer,” Wootliff asserts, noting that Jewzy’s content “has to work for a mass audience,” while nonetheless making good on its tagline of “Shaping the Jewish Future.”

This connection to the mainstream is perhaps most overt in Jewzy’s approach to visual branding. As Hessler (2018) notes, niche SVODs tend to strive for “anti-Netflix” branding to emphasize distance from mainstream content and thus create a rationale for subscribing to both a major and a niche service. Jewzy, however, takes a polar opposite approach, employing a visual design unmistakably copied from Netflix. Its logo features white, arched writing with a black drop shadow placed against a bright red backdrop. The resemblance, and its implications, are nearly impossible to miss. Jewzy does not wish for Jewish content, or Jewish identity, to be understood as an alternative to normative American culture. It instead presents itself as mainstream fare, only differentiated by the ways in which it takes the often *sub rosa* Jewishness of American film and television and brings it up to the surface on the platform.

### *Jewish demography*

Jewzy’s landing page declares the SVOD to be “American Jew-ish!” Accordingly, the site emphasizes famous American Jews, with featured titles in the summer of 2022 including appearances from Jerry Seinfeld, Sarah Silverman, and Jesse Eisenberg. When stars are not available, films that place Jewish characters in paradigmatic American genre stories are often celebrated. The first film on the featured content scroll during the summer of 2022 was *Finding Joy*, an obscure romantic comedy

nonetheless identifiable in generic terms in its Jewzy summary: “A struggling writer rediscovers himself, his offbeat family, and what it means to be happy when he meets Joy.”

*Finding Joy* is further framed through a simple but very intentional invocation of Yiddish, another important element of Jewzy’s approach of Jewish identity. The summary goes on to say that “[Joy is] a spirited, possibly-dying young woman who asks him to write her obituary. Oy Vey!” Jewzy is dotted with these quick, breezy Yiddishisms. The SVOD’s official trailer refers to comedy with “chutzpah.” Featured film *The Pickle Recipe* is described as a comedy about a man who steals “Bubbe’s secret pickle recipe! Oy!” Pride month is celebrated with tweets promoting *Oy Vey, My Son is Gay*, an LGBTQ+ romantic comedy. *Oy to World* celebrates Chanukah. These invocations represent what Shandler (2005) describes as “post-vernacular” language that embodies “a reification of heritage, wherein the language is perceived as both threatened and valued” (2005: 20). The heritage being valued and thus commodified in this case, however, is not simply Jewish. It is, more specifically, Ashkenazi, a Jewish ethnicity forged in Europe and from which the Yiddish language emerged.

This emphasis on Ashkenazi Jewish tradition as part of American culture fits neatly into Jewzy’s brand identity. The vast majority of American Jews, in contrast to Israeli Jews, are of Ashkenazi heritage. Furthermore, Seinfeld, Silverman, Eisenberg, and nearly every major Jewish-American media figure identify as Ashkenazi. As Nathan Abrams (2014) notes, popular notions of Jewishness in the English-speaking world can easily conflate “Jewish” with “elderly Ashkenazi male Americans.” Jewzy’s catalog is too diverse to truly fall into this exclusionary trap, but the platform does often emphasize the strains of Jewish identity that Abrams identifies. For example, the SVOD’s most voluminous series is “Old Jews Telling Jokes.” Promoted by Mel Brooks, perhaps the elderly Ashkenazi male American *par excellence*, the series comprises 25 short videos in which a Jew tells a joke. Of the 25, 22 of the jokes are told by men, almost all of whom present as Ashkenazi. This demographic group is, of course, a large and important piece of the American Jewish community. Its emphasis, however, represents a way in which Jewzy frames Jewishness in a fashion congruent with the assumptions of mainstream American culture.

Jewzy’s marketing materials, and particularly its approach to holidays, further emphasizes the SVOD’s intertwining of Jewishness and mainstream American cultural practice. A marketing email sent out in the fall of 2021, for example, celebrates the proximity of Thanksgiving to Chanukah via an image that places the branches of a menorah directly onto a roasted turkey, literally fusing the Jewish with the American. Even Christmas fits snugly into Jewzy’s merger of Jewish identity and mainstream American culture. A follow-up email to the Thanksgiving/Chanukah promotion features a Santa-evoking man with a white beard, wearing a red and white striped shirt, looking exasperated. After eating so many latkes, the promotion reads, it’s exhausting to have to also “do Christmas.” On 23 December, a marketing email concisely merges Jewish media with Christian holiday practice: “JEWZY makes the PERFECT last minute Xmas gift [to go along with] with an egg roll, sesame or a General Tso’s Chicken.” As Plaut (2012) notes, some “Jews in the United States,” have a history of “coopt[ing] the Christmas season by reshaping it to reflect uniquely Jewish ideas, concerns, and practices,” including the traditional 25 December Chinese dinner referenced in the ad. There is thus nothing



inauthentic about engaging Christmas in Jewish terms. Nonetheless, doing so frames Jewzy and Jewishness in a way that emphasizes acculturation and mainstream American cultural practice, as opposed to highlighting Jewish separation and distinction.

### *Israel and Jewish identity*

Every Jewzy email features a picture of a crowd simultaneously waving American and Israeli flags. On Jewzy, Jewish-Americanness folds naturally into identification with the state of Israel, aligning with what Michael Oren (2015: 113) describes as a “no daylight” approach to American-Israeli relations that emphasizes the closeness of the two nations. In part, this derives from Jewzy’s need to find sufficient content that can be assimilated into its brand. There are also, however, basic commercial and cultural components to this branding decision. While there is certainly no single Jewish perspective on the matter, numerous surveys still find that Israel plays a major, largely positive role in the construction of American Jewish identity (Abrams, 2014).

In its marketing materials, Jewzy is at pains both to articulate and justify its emphasis on Israel. In a marketing email entitled “THAT USA-ISRAEL-JEWISH QUESTION” Jewzy asks and answers the inquiry “Why does Jewzy celebrate Israel’s Independence Day [... if ...] Jewzy is American-Jewish not Israeli???” The answer provided in the email notes that “while we are exclusively American [...] Israel’s where our forefathers came from and we are so happy to have a Jewish State.” The Jewzy viewer, the email concludes, should engage in a dual celebration of both 4 July and Israeli Independence day by watching a “handpicked selection of the best ISRAELI films AND American titles” offered by the service.

Jewzy’s first foray into original programming, *Funny Monday*, marks a creative attempt to reconcile the Israeli and the American. Subtitled “Stand Up from Israel in English,” the show stars the Israeli comic Shahar Hason, alongside a range of other comedians. And while the talent is perhaps unfamiliar, the format of the show immediately resonates with viewers versed in American culture. *Funny Monday* places performers in front of a brick wall as they offer observational humor into a handheld microphone in a style clearly evocative of the iconic American series *An Evening at the Improv* (Sienkiewicz and Marx, 2022). The content then rushes back and forth from specific Israeli references to observations aimed at Americans in Israel. Hason opens the show with a joke about a small Israeli city before transitioning to material on the quaint politeness of Canadians, a common trope in American comedy. Another Israeli comic, Yohay Spondor, begins with broad-appeal jokes about Jewish pride and stereotypes, before transitioning into an ironic bit about Israel’s Iron Dome defense system. Benji Lovitt follows Spondor’s Iron Dome routine with jokes about his experience moving from the U.S. to a place where incoming rocket fire is a frequent concern. All of this takes place in English, with light doses of Hebrew mixing into all of the acts.

*Funny Monday* encapsulates Jewzy’s branding strategy and concomitant approach to Israel as a key part of Jewish identity. It is steeped in the tropes of American mainstream culture, drawing upon what Zoglin (2008: 7) describes as the “distinctly American art form” of stand-up comedy. It plays off the success of countless Jewish stand-up comics, catering to the 42% of American Jews who, according to Pew Research,

believe that a “good sense of humor” is “essential to being Jewish.” The same survey notes, in a near coincidence, that 43% consider “caring about Israel” to be essential (Lipka, 2016). *Funny Monday* melds these two key identity markers together, presenting a seamless, indeed translation-less, junction between mainstream, media-oriented Jewish-American identity and Israeli culture.

## ChaiFlicks

### *Platform history and branding strategy*

In contrast to Jewzy, ChaiFlicks’ name itself implies a level of insider knowledge. It would be easy for someone unfamiliar with Hebrew to mistake the SVOD for a platform devoted to spiced tea. Of course “Chai,” in this case, is pronounced gutturally, making it a reference to the Hebrew word for “life” and connecting it to a variety of idiosyncratic Jewish practices. Though potentially alienating, this multilingual, shibbolethic nomenclature is precisely on-brand for ChaiFlicks. It lends the SVOD a sense of specificity and, yes, exclusion, that combines nicely with its emphasis on international, intellectual media content and cosmopolitan Jewish identity.

ChaiFlicks aims to merge the cultural capital embedded in the world of contemporary film festivals with concepts of Jewish identity centered around intellectualism and polyphony. The service first emerged as a streaming companion to the film distribution company Menemsha films, the most powerful supplier of movies to Jewish film festivals across the globe. Vice President Heidi Oshin estimates that currently roughly 70% of all Jewish film festival content comes from the Menemsha catalog. As De Valck and Soeteman (2010) argue, film festivals operate as “networks of cultural capital” whereby festival inclusion serves as a mark of “distinction” that bestows “value addition” to selected films. Menemsha has come to define the intersection of Jewish identity and cinematic quality, putting it in a unique place to elevate a film’s value through the process of curation.

With major streaming sources no longer in play and in-person events canceled in March 2020, Menemsha developed ChaiFlicks as its own proprietary streaming service. Also priced at \$5.99 per month, the service first launched exclusively in North America, while later adding the smaller markets of Australia and New Zealand (Wayne and Sienkiewicz, 2022: 3). The original August 2020 launch of ChaiFlicks garnered considerable attention from the Jewish press. The *Detroit Jewish News* emphasized the high-culture credentials of the service, noting that its most popular film at launch was the 1998 Berlinale winner *Left Luggage* and expressing surprise that Netflix had passed on the celebrated Menemsha film *1945*, despite its 97% fresh score on Rotten Tomatoes (Weiss, 2020). These launch stories also emphasized the service’s partnership with the Jewish Women’s Theater of Santa Monica, reinforcing the brand’s association with high-cultural fare (Silver, 2020).

According to Bill Weiner, ChaiFlicks’ only co-founder not directly involved with Menemsha, the service has “the best programming in the world because I have the two best curators of Jewish and Israeli programming in the world. And that’s Neil [Friedman] and Heidi [Bogin Oshin].” Friedman and Bogin Oshin, he continues, are

“the premier curators of this programming. Their taste is unsurpassed by anybody. And, having worked 20 years at Menemsha, they know where the best films are, what the best films are.” Overall, this approach plays directly into long-standing associations of American Jewish identity with intellectual and cultural success. As Hartman and Hartman (2011: 136) show, American Jewish identity is rooted significantly in secular Jewish achievement, particularly in the realm of educational attainment. The disproportionate Jewish presence in a variety of intellectual and artistic movements throughout the 20th century further establishes the approach to Jewish identity on which ChaiFlicks is attempting to establish its brand and audience (Cooney, 1991).

### *Jewish demography*

In his consideration of the roots of contemporary Jewish literary culture, the critic Harshav (2007: 39) points to the centrality of “polyphony” in Jewish life. He refers to the consistent presence of an “exuberant multilingualism” in Jewish societies across the globe. As Rubin and Kahn (2020) argue, this polyphony becomes a part of how Jewish communities deploy even individual languages. They identify 42 currently spoken languages, including English, with commonly found Jewish variants that disproportionately incorporate foreign words, phrases, and grammars. This consistent linguistic variety both coincides with traditional notions of Jewish cosmopolitanism (Miller and Ury, 2010) and, according to Harshav, is central to the association of Jews with contemporary intellectual life in the West. As he notes, Emile Durkheim, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Sigmund Freud, Noam Chomsky, George Lakoff, Jacques Derrida, and numerous other leading Jewish intellectuals were “born on the boundaries of languages” and incorporated linguistic plurality into their thinking.

For a monthly subscription fee, ChaiFlicks can make a subscriber neither multilingual nor famously intellectual. It can, however, allow one to associate with globalized, polyphonic, and high-cultural elements of Jewish identity. Aiming largely at an American, English-speaking audience, ChaiFlicks’ streaming catalog, marketing materials, and public statements emphasize an understanding of Jewishness that is proudly global if also touristic. “Travel the World with Jewish Movies,” one Covid-era ChaiFlicks campaign suggests, offering a virtual European vacation via the SVOD’s catalog, including *A Day in Rome*, *My Polish Honeymoon*, *Paris-Manhattan*, and *Crescendo*, a film that follows an Israeli-Palestinian orchestra through Germany. Another marketing message emphasizes the SVOD’s linguistic breadth, boasting that their viewers the previous week “traveled from Bnei Brak to Brooklyn, from French, to Hebrew to Yiddish.”

In discussing ChaiFlicks’ ambitions, platform founder Oshin is particularly insistent on acquiring and promoting Jewish films from countries with small Jewish populations. “I talk to Amsterdam all the time,” she notes, alongside describing similar efforts to acquire content from Denmark, Poland and beyond. In addition to expanding the range of titles offered by the SVOD, the reach of ChaiFlicks’ Jewish geography transforms what might be perceived as a particularistic or even provincial service into one defined by diversity. Of the 32 films given featured attention on the ChaiFlicks’ homepage in the summer of 2022, only 5 were primarily English language, with the other films and series being in Hebrew, Yiddish, French, German, Polish, Norwegian, Arabic, Amharic, Timingya, and Swahili.

For ChaiFlicks, the question “Who is a Jew?” is answered as a rebuttal to the picture painted by Jewzy and the Ashkenazi-exclusive understanding that has traditionally proliferated in American popular culture (Brook, 2010). The site’s marketing approach to holidays provides an instructive example. ChaiFlicks acknowledges, but rarely emphasizes secular holidays such as Thanksgiving. The Ethiopian Jewish holiday of Sigad, however, is treated with relative depth and direct engagement. In addition to text explaining the holiday’s meaning, a promotional email timed to coincide with Sigad also features a curated program of ChaiFlicks titles that illustrate that “the diversity of the Jewish community is what makes us a unique, truly universal people.” Forging an identity that connects American Jewish viewers with notions of engagement and multicultural, multilingual global society, ChaiFlicks invites its subscribers to express their Jewishness, cosmopolitanism, and intellectual curiosity through a single subscription.

### *Israel and Jewish identity*

Attention to Israel among Jewish Americans is often forged around political and religious concerns. For ChaiFlicks, however, Israel represents a different opportunity: a chance to incorporate an entire nation’s art cinema and television into its catalog of prestige content. Menemsha films and ChaiFlicks have both concentrated on acquiring films from nations such as the Netherlands and Germany, which have storied histories of national cinema success on the global stage but very few living Jews. However, as Galt and Schoonover (2010) note, during the 21st century, Israel has emerged as a key new space “garnering international acclaim and finding enthusiastic audiences at festivals” (2010: 5).

For ChaiFlicks, this offers an important opportunity. Israeli cinema allows the SVOD to offer critically acclaimed films that are Jewish but not fixated on overt Jewish topics. The featured title *Asia*, for example, won three awards at the Tribeca Film Festival, and the Israeli Ophir prize for best picture. Upon acquiring the film, ChaiFlicks advertised these attributes alongside a number of glowing reviews describing the mother–daughter drama as “flawless,” “sexy,” and “a great film.” Its Jewishness was, according to this marketing, only implicit and clearly secondary to the film’s artistic virtues.

Israeli television, also ascendant in the past decade, offers a similar opportunity. Additionally, Israeli television, with its diverse Jewish demography, reinforces ChaiFlicks’ presentation of diversity as the heart of Jewish identity. Importantly, those Israeli shows that challenge American perceptions of Jewish identity are the ones most likely to be available for the smaller SVODs such as ChaiFlicks. One key example is *Checkout*, an Israeli sitcom whose humor emerges from an interplay of cross-cultural misunderstandings specific to Israel. The cast of characters moves across the Israeli demographic spectrum, featuring an Ethiopian Jew, a Russian Jewish immigrant, a Palestinian citizen of Israel, and a variety of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews – in steep contrast to the homogeneous demography of Jewzy. This diverse, complicated picture of Israeli society and Jewish demography may explain why the show was not acquired by a major SVOD despite its overwhelming success in Israel. For ChaiFlicks, however, the diversity, multiculturalism, and high level of required background knowledge is precisely on-brand as it offers its subscribers the chance to participate in Jewish cosmopolitanism via connection with Israel.

## IZZY

### *Platform history and branding strategy*

On 10 May 2021, the Gaza Strip and Israel engaged in a bout of deadly violence, starting a two-week war of bombardment that killed hundreds of Palestinians and over a dozen Israelis. On 12 May, two days into the war, IZZY sent a message promoting its series *Under the Iron Dome*, a three-part documentary on the defensive anti-rocket technology that emerged as a key strategic, and public relations, element in the conflict. “Israel versus the Gaza Strip. That’s one side of the story,” the message read, “The other is a miraculous, never-before-seen technology [...] that is saving literally millions of civilian lives [...]!” Produced by IZZY CEO and co-founder Nati Dinar, *Under the Iron Dome* became the site’s most popular title throughout the hostilities, driving interest and subscriber numbers. Months later, IZZY sent another marketing message, this time promoting an event co-sponsored by the World Zionist Organization. In the online invitation sent to IZZY subscribers, both the program *Under the Iron Dome* and the SVOD itself are framed in entrepreneurial, tech industry terms. The series is described as a “little startup” of a media production. IZZY itself is a “real startup,” in the language of the email.

This mixing and matching of military, hi-tech start-up, and media vocabulary is precisely where IZZY’s brand identity is formed. Dinar, a veteran of the Israeli television industry, is best known for producing a number of projects, including *Under the Iron Dome*, which focus on Israel’s evolving response to security threats. Josh Hoffman, the SVOD’s other co-founder, inhabits the persona of a celebrity tech figure who offers, on the side, masterclasses on merging Jewish tradition with modern business innovation with titles such as *The Art of Chutzpah* and *The Future of Jewish*.

This interplay of martial and entrepreneurial elements is by no means original to IZZY’s branding. They are reflective of, and perhaps directly lifted from, a modern framing of Israel popularized in the 2009 best-seller *Start-up Nation* (Senior and Singer, 2009). Focusing largely on the pipeline between Israeli military units and the country’s success in cybersecurity, big data, and high-speed computing, *Start-up Nation* brought to American audiences a new notion of Israeli identity in which conflict is the forebear of triumph. Follow-up books such as *Thou Shalt Innovate: How Israeli Ingenuity Repairs the World* (Jorisch, 2018), *Chutzpah: Why Israel is a Hub of Innovation and Entrepreneurship* (Arieli, 2019), and *The Unstoppable Startup* (Adoni, 2020), have kept the start-up nation discourse a key part of contemporary Israeli projection and self-understanding.

Critics of Israel have certainly taken issue with the start-up nation framework. Getzoff (2020), for example, argues that the narrative foregrounds a “neoliberal” understanding of the Israeli state that requires celebratory militarism and the projection of “a Zionist past sanitized of conflict with Palestinians” (2020: 811). IZZY, however, is not concerned with such critiques. Also priced at \$5.99 per month, IZZY is available everywhere other than Israel itself, and, as Hoffman happily admits, courts people who “believe in the concept” of the Israeli state. The term “concept” in Hoffman’s remark is rather telling, as it positions Israel, and by extension IZZY, as an idea to be marketed, as opposed to a reality to be lived. With its tagline “Stream Israel,” IZZY aims to position its catalog of otherwise unselected Israeli content as a contemporary window into a

vibrant nation. Also tellingly, the SVOD self-describes as a “platform,” as opposed to a channel or curated content space. Comparing the SVOD to contemporary tech brands “Facebook, Twitter, or TikTok,” Hoffman notes that he will accept almost anything that is Israeli and on offer. “Assuming that it’s TV quality and it is not blatantly offensive to any group of people,” he notes, “then it’s fair game to go on IZZY.” Whereas Jewzy connects to a bygone era of mass culture and ChaiFlicks associates with a sense of globality, IZZY’s notion of brand and Jewishness is tied to the right-now, right-here elements of contemporary Israeli culture.

### *Jewish demography*

Overt considerations of Jewishness are somewhat less present in IZZY’s marketing materials when compared to Jewzy and ChaiFlicks. The SVOD’s content, however, evokes a rather complex and seemingly paradoxical picture of Jewish identity. On the one hand, there is something obviously reductive about IZZY’s marketing strategy. The SVOD assumes that its patrons are overwhelmingly Jewish and that Israel is a key part of their respective self-understandings as Jews. As Hoffman puts it, the service is, above all, for “Israel Lovers.” At the same time, this simplistic approach to Israel combines with the site’s omnivorous approach to content curation to present an extremely expansive and hyper-contemporary view of Jewish demography.

By accepting such a broad range of Jewish content, IZZY comes to represent communities of Jews that are rarely considered in American media. This is most forcefully seen in the oft-featured comedy series *Where Do You Live?* The show, voted best comedy on the platform by its users, features a family of Bukharan Jews who have immigrated from Uzbekistan to Israel. A story of assimilation, resistance, and generational struggle, the series offers a robust picture of a Jewish culture mostly unseen by IZZY subscribers.

IZZY’s vast and varied selection of tv series, independent films, documentaries, comedy shorts, and more feature countless other portrayals of such non-hegemonic and oft-ignored Jewishness. The film *Mekonen*, for example, focuses on African Jewry, while *I’m From The Jews*, tells stories about the Iraqi Jewish community. There is also a wide range of religious perspectives seen throughout the catalog, ranging from documentaries about Haredi Jews to *Srugim*, a show about Modern Orthodox Jewish singles, to a highly promoted, IZZY-produced documentary about the Israeli Reform Judaism movement. There is much less representation, it must be noted, of non-Jewish Israelis, with almost all Palestinian representation coming in the form of Jewish-produced documentaries and film dramas with intermarriage storylines. IZZY’s tagline may be “Stream Israel,” but “Stream Jewish Israel” would be a more accurate reflection of its content.

Much effort is made by IZZY, via ancillary marketing, to associate the ancient entities of Jewishness and Judaism with the SVOD’s “start-up nation” branding. Hoffman, in standard serial-entrepreneur fashion, consistently rolls out new online content ideas aimed at IZZY subscribers. *The Art of Chutzpah* is a sort of Jewish self-help course drawing directly on *Start-up Nation*’s celebration of Israel brazenness. Then there is *The Future of Jewish*, a Substack series which offers pithy Jewish content aimed at inspiring innovators with articles such as “I read all 613 [Jewish] commandments. Here’s my takeaway,” and “7 Surprising Stories about the Torah.” Marketed alongside IZZY, such

materials aim to uplift the SVOD's content, associating the mostly low-cost, if rather diverse, Jewish materials with both Judaism and Israel's high-tech branding.

### *Israel and Jewish identity*

Using characteristic marketing terminology, Hoffman describes the nation of Israel as a collection of "brand attributes" waiting to be packaged and sold. The easiest sales, and the ones that mainstream SVODs such as Netflix gravitate towards, are the attributes of "violence and extreme religion," as seen in hit shows such as *Fauda*, *Tehran*, and *Shtisel* – all shows beyond IZZY's reach. IZZY's opportunity, which doubles as a chance to offer a more attractive side of Israel to the world, is to be an "anti-Netflix," according to Hoffman. IZZY thus promotes content that features Israeli attributes – "culinary, fashion, art, music" – that are underappreciated by mainstream services that license Israeli content.

This approach emerges clearly in IZZY's original content, which comes mostly in the form of reality and documentary style programming. For example, the IZZY-produced series *This Israeli Life*, features glossy profiles of Israelis connected to major institutions throughout the country. In one episode American-Israeli celebrity chef Jamie Geller describes work with the Orthodox Jewish outreach organization Aish, while outlining the virtues of life in the country. In another episode, Michal Shiloah Galnoor, an Israeli business leader, tours the Western Galilee, a region of Israel featuring a number of cities with mixed Arab and Jewish populations. Hugging a number of Palestinian citizens of Israel as she goes, Galnoor introduces, in English and with attractive close-ups, the multicultural culinary, musical, and artistic efforts of the region. The series is, unabashedly, the commodification of *hasbara* – Israel's approach to smoothing over complex political and ethical issues and, particularly, the question of military occupation in the Palestinian territories (Schleifer, 2003).

IZZY's content, particularly its television series, tends to depict Israel through an emphasis on conventional generic television. Unable to acquire the high-profile Israeli fare found on Netflix and uninterested in competing with ChaiFlicks for prestige Israeli content such as *Checkout*, IZZY instead offers a number of crime procedurals and formatted sitcoms. Popular featured series *Red Lines*, *Allenby*, and *Street Justice* are conventional dramas, set in Tel Aviv, while *My Life in 60 Seconds* is an Israeli take on *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. A number of other dramas and comedies that were popular in Israel but unable to create previous international interest make up much of the IZZY library. Certainly, there is much diversity within the plethora of content available on the SVOD. However, IZZY's brand identity is largely driven by a paradox in which conventional Israeli content and public diplomacy is marketed in terms of technological innovation. The result is a depiction of Israel as a largely unproblematic space, safe to make a central pillar of American Jewish identity.

### **Conclusion: from scarcity to plenty, from interpretation to interpellation**

These case studies fundamentally disrupt two ideas embedded both within the general study of minority media representation and the specific history of Jewish media

studies. First, the idea that minority representations are relatively scarce and embedded within majority cultural environments. And, second, that the meaningful study of minority identity in popular texts begins with close reading and creative interpretation. Regarding the first assumption, Stuart Hall (2006) writes that “popular culture,” is a “theatre of popular desires, a theatre of popular fantasies” that is often “commodified and stereotyped” (2006: 477). Popular portrayals of black identity, the specific focus of Hall’s essay, thus take place in a “mythic arena” forged in hegemony but capable of activating the imaginations of people both within and without minority identity groups in specific, unusual moments.

This has certainly been the structuring assumption of Jewish media studies. The classic texts in the field note, quite accurately, that portrayals of Jewish identity have been historically infrequent and rife with stereotypes. For Prell (2000), Pickette (2022), and others, this is a seemingly inevitable consequence of packaging Jews, Jewishness, and Judaism to an overwhelmingly Christian and post-Christian audience. Numerous other scholars note that when Jewishness is not stereotyped, it tends to be obscured. As Fields (2020) argues, there is perhaps no more central concept in American Jewish screen studies than that of the “crypto-Jew.” Introduced by Fiedler (1965: 91) as a critique of American theater and literature, the concept presumes that American creators, often Jewish, feel the need to universalize, generalize, and otherwise obfuscate any Jewish elements in products aimed at a general American audience. Marc (1997: 36) finds this tendency in early figures such as Jack Benny, while Fields (2020) identifies it as central to the contemporary streaming hit *Orange in the New Black*. For Jewish screen studies, understanding Jewish identity on screen has thus been an effort of searching out needles in haystacks, some of which have themselves been carefully disguised to look just like hay.

This leads to the second assumption embedded within traditional minority representation studies: the centrality of esoteric interpretation. For Hall (2006: 477), this idea emanates from the possibility of counter-hegemonic textual interpretations that allow viewers to “play with the identifications” offered by popular culture. In Jewish screen studies, this sometimes involves close looks at texts produced by the rare Jewish creators willing to make their cultural or religious identities key narrative and visual elements of their work. Just as often, however, scholars have pointed to the need for Jewish audiences to aggressively and creatively probe into texts where Jewishness is trying to remain unfound. Stratton (2000), discussing *Seinfeld*, describes this as the hunt for “Jewish moments,” in which “Jewishness is a variable textual attribute not necessarily tied to characters identified as Jews” but available to those with “knowledge of Jewish/Yiddish religion and culture” (2000: 300). Bial (2005) offers a somewhat similar approach in identifying the relationship between screen and identity. Jews, according to Bial, make meaning of film and television by “reading Jewish” – the act of finding the intentionally obscure ways in which mainstream texts make meaningful elements of Jewishness available to interested audiences.

Jewzy, ChaiFlicks, and IZZY demand an important addition to this program of study by trading scarcity for plentitude, interpretation for interpellation. As opposed to offering discreet Jewish elements primed for deep reading by a small audience segment, these SVODs offer a deluge of Jewish representation, aimed almost entirely at identity



in-group members. Jewish symbols and ideas, ranging from the religious to the secular, the overt to the covert, are to be found at every click. Jewish identity, we argue, therefore shifts in such a context from an object to be found and excavated to a product packaged for consumers interested in both watching media content and exercising their cultural identity. As Emaeyak Sylvanus (2020) argues, the purchase of diasporic material within a majority cultural context becomes a sign of ongoing “*commitment*” to one’s minority identity. Jewzy, ChaiFlicks, and IZZY operate on similar terms. To study minority representation in this context is to consider the terms, both commercial and cultural, in which this commitment takes place.

Jewzy, ChaiFlicks, and IZZY aim to tame a wilderness of Jewish texts, shaping their piece of the terrain in a fashion that is legible and attractive to a specific subset of potential Jewish consumers. The results are limited and, indeed, exclusionary pictures of Jewish identity pulled from reservoirs of Jewish media that feature countless alternative versions within them. There will always be, of course, an important role for deep textual reading in minority and Jewish screen studies. These three SVODs, however, emphasize the important role that marketing and framing now play in the realm of cultural representation and identity. As linear tv ceases to be the industry norm, scholars must attend to the ways in which cultural identity is increasingly assimilated into the consumer appeals of streaming services, both niche and otherwise.


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