

Framing European Youth Gender Attitudes through Serial Dramas

Focus Group Insights from the GEMINI Project

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Abstract

The wide universe of serial drama acts both as mirror and shaper of young adults' perceptions and attitudes towards social issues, also fostering their growing interest in gender-related ones. Drawing from the European project GEMINI-Gender Equality through Media Investigation and New training Insights (CERV-2022-GE), this study provides the insights from the qualitative research phase, consisting of 15 focus groups interviews carried out in 4 countries (Denmark, Italy, Ireland and Romania) with the aim of detecting the interplay between serial narratives, gender issues and European young adults. The main findings show complex dynamics between

media consumption and youth views, revealing how serial dramas can challenge stereotypes and promote conversations around gender topics, though they tend to reinforce existing attitudes rather than change views or behaviours.

Keywords: young adults, serial dramas, gender-related issues, social research, audience studies

Introduction

The dynamic relationship between media texts, audiences, and societal contexts boasts a well-established tradition in Cultural Studies, dating back to the work of Stuart Hall (1973; 1980), who considered media texts as meaningful discourses that audiences decode through *hegemonic*, *oppositional*, or *negotiated* positions. Since the 1990s, several scholars, such as Ien Ang (1991) and Sonia Livingstone (2003), have worked within this theoretical framework, conducting empirical research to understand the evolving consumption patterns and behaviors of increasingly fragmented audiences (Bennet and Iyengar 2008). Finally, the interest of media studies in this relationship becomes even more crucial in the transition from the traditional mediascape to the platform society (Van Dijck et al. 2019), where publics *actively* and *affectively* interpret and negotiate media messages (boyd 2014; Papacharissi 2014).

The way in which audiences are influenced by media products also fits within the broader framework on selectivity theories, which traces back to the classic research of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) and Klapper (1960), and has gained renewed interest in recent years, starting with the work of Bennett and Iyengar (2008) and subsequent studies on filter bubbles (Pariser 2011) and echo chambers (Sunstein 2001; 2007; 2017).

Academic literature has also highlighted that media products, as meaningful discourses, do not simply mirror society and its interactions but actively contribute to shaping the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966), by providing audiences with frameworks that help them understand their own lives through processes of identification with characters, emotional impact, and reflection on social and cultural issues (Couldry 2003; Jenkins et al. 2013).

Among the wide universe of media products, over the last decades, serial dramas have been playing a crucial role as socio-cultural shapers, at least for two different reasons. On the one hand, they perfectly embody the transition from linear television to VOD platforms (Mittell 2015; Lobato 2019; Dunleavy 2017; Bondebjerg et al. 2017; Barra and Scaglioni 2020), to the point of challenging the very label of “TV series”¹, which has become increasingly outdated in capturing consumption habits shaped within the digital landscape. On the other hand, serial dramas tend to increasingly rise publics’ awareness towards social critical issues, including gender-related ones, employing narratives centered both on the storytelling of traditional gender stereotypes and the representation of more gender-inclusive models (Cuklanz and Erol 2021; Re and Spalletta 2023).

Several studies have pointed out that – by dealing with topics like identity, sexuality, relationships (Heim 2020; Sulimma 2020; Dove-Viebahn 2024) – serial narratives exert a great influence especially on young adults (Andò and Hipkins 2022; Farci and Scarcelli 2022), allowing them to deepen their views on critical issues about both identity topics and broad social concerns, as well as to engage with and re-negotiate their understandings of gender norms and roles (Hill 2019; Scarcelli et al. 2021).

Finally, the key role of serial dramas as a tool for raising awareness on gender issues has been the focus of European policies for several years now. Among the latest, the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 (European Commission 2020) clearly highlights the transformative role of audiovisual media in promoting diversity and tackling gender stereotypes, within a European scenario marked by different levels of progress towards gender equality, which – among others – could stand for an additional mediating factor to interpret and engage with gender topics, especially among young publics.

Aims & Methodology

Based on these premises, this study takes shape within the broader framework of the European research-action project GEMINI-*Gender Equality through Media Investigation and New training Insights* (CERV-2022-GE), which aims to understand *whether, to what extent and how* serial dramas influence young adults’ perceptions of gender-related issues across four countries (Denmark, Ireland, Italy, and Romania),

which differ in socio-cultural contexts and levels of gender equality, as measured by the Gender Equality Index (GEI) (EIGE 2023).

The overall GEMINI research design employs a mixed-methods approach (Creswell and Plano Clark 2015), sequentially combining qualitative tools (in-depth interviews with audiovisual professionals, focus group interviews with high school students, and semi-structured interviews with high school teachers and trainers) and quantitative methods (a structured transnational survey).

This study focuses on one component of the first phase of the GEMINI research, specifically presenting and discussing the main findings from the focus group interviews carried out in the four aforementioned countries. It employs a qualitative research approach (Babbie 2013; Corbetta 2014) based on 15 focus groups involving 190 students aged between 15 and 21 years-old, selected to ensure diversity in terms of gender, geographical location, and socio-economic background².

Focus group interviews were conducted following a common protocol developed by all project's partners, based on a preliminary literary review³. Given the heterogeneity of students interviewed across the different countries, the qualitative approach provided flexibility, allowing each partner to adapt the common protocol to specific contexts and target groups. As a result, discussions with high school students varied: some countries adopted a more traditional approach, while others used ice-breaking visual tools (such as images or clips from serial dramas) to introduce or stimulate discussion.

Similarly, each focus group session explored key themes and issues through open-ended questions, encouraging participants to share their perspectives and engage in group discussions that may uncover collective norms or consensus on certain topics (Krueger and Casey 2015).

Data from the focus group discussions were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, to identify relevant patterns in young adults' media consumption, perceptions and behaviours, with the main aim to understand *whether* and *how* different socio-cultural backgrounds would affect young audiences concerning three main key issues: 1) serial dramas and consumption habits; 2) level of interest in and perceived relevance of gender equality and diver-

sity; 3) perceived influence of serial dramas' portrayal of gender-related topics.

Serial dramas and consumption habits: perception of on-screen self-representation

The first part of the focus group interviews aims to investigate the interviewees' opinions concerning serial dramas, both in terms of consumption habits and perceptions of on-screen self-representation. The discussion was guided by questions such as: *How do you choose which serial dramas to watch? Do you happen to comment on serial dramas with other people? Do you feel represented by the serial dramas you watch?*

Overall, the focus group interviews revealed common trends in the consumption habits of serial dramas among the interviewed European young adults, with a notable interest in transmediality (Jenkins 2006; Scolari 2019) emerging as a shared feature across the four countries.

Almost all interviewed students reported watching serial dramas⁴ through streaming services, with Netflix being the most popular choice, but often also resorting to illegal ones, while social media are identified as key sources for deciding what to watch:

"I find new series to watch on social media. I go to Tik Tok, I save them and then maybe I find it there and watch it. On social media you can find clips, or trailers, or even users recommending stories... I see if I like the trailer, and then I go and watch the series" [IT].

Despite this digital-first approach, solitary viewing emerges as a common habit without significant differences across countries, with interviewed students engaging in post-viewing talks, but finding value in discussing topics offline. However, social watching is sometimes appreciated for its added value as a shared experience, particularly in helping to understand complex plots:

"If I know that a friend is watching the same show as me, I would talk to them about it... but never on social media" [IRL].

“I watched *Breaking Bad* two times. The second time, a friend shared his screen, and we were watching together, and we were talking about it at the same time” [RO].

Young interviewees – particularly in Ireland and Denmark – show a strong preference for US-produced dramas over local ones, suggesting a greater affinity for narratives that reflect their personal interests and address broader, more relevant issues rather than content tied to their own countries. This is confirmed by the international appeal of contemporary shows like *Euphoria* and *Sex Education*, as well as long-running US sitcoms, like *Friends*. By contrast, especially among young Danes, local series are more commonly watched with family:

“I watch series with people, it’s actually because it’s with my parents, and then it’s Danish series” [DEN].

Concerning young adults’ views on serial dramas – regardless of gender-related issues – opinions are notably divided regarding how faithfully these shows portray their generation on screen.

Some feel that these series authentically capture their lives, while others believe they are often exaggerated or fail to represent the complexity of their experiences. Nevertheless, there is a shared belief that these narratives add meaningful value to their daily lives, providing entertainment, emotional comfort, and even opportunities for self-reflection.

“When older actors play teens, it can be very annoying [*because*] they’re not actually our age group but we’re being compared to them” [IRL].

“Serial dramas make you think that what you are watching – especially if you can identify with the characters – is something interesting or enjoyable, or perhaps an important focus of your interest at that moment” [IT].

Beyond the varying levels of identification with narratives and their generational portrayals, a common trend observed across the four countries is a sense of detachment from the influence of series. Opin-

ions generally converge, even though to varying extents, on the belief that serial dramas do not have a strong enough impact to change attitudes or behaviors.

“I don’t think I would say that it [*my attitude*] will be changed, but I think that the fact that you have something to reflect on, but I don’t think it changes anything as such” [DEN].

However, despite this common perception, it is noteworthy that the interviewed students frequently emphasize the role of individual predisposition in determining inclination to a series’ influence. In particular, Italian interviewees often mention the person’s level of vulnerability, suggesting that the impact of serial dramas may depend on an individual’s level of resilience or openness to being influenced by the content.

Comparing views about gender-related issues

The second section of the focus group interviews aimed to explore young adults’ perspectives on gender issues, particularly in terms of their relevance and personal interest. The discussion was guided by questions such as: *Are you interested in gender issues? Do you think your generation approaches these topics differently from your parents’ generation? What do diversity and inclusion mean to you?*

Young interviewees display a general interest in gender-related issues, but their knowledge and confidence in discussing these topics vary greatly across countries. On the one hand, Italian and Danish interviewees show more inclusive attitudes toward diversity, often engaging critically with these issues.

“For me at least, the only reason for me to show an interest in it, read about it, devote myself to it, whatever, is more of an intent to not offend someone” [DEN].

“Of course, not everyone embraces inclusiveness, also because there are people who are not inclined to be so inclusive, to let people live as they want to live, as long as they do not restrict the freedom of others” [IT].

On the other hand, a lack of in-depth knowledge emerges among students in Ireland and Romania, which they attribute to limited exposure to formal gender education at school⁵. This gap is only partially compensated by informal exposure to the online debate, with students acknowledging the importance to address these issues in formal educational contexts, at all levels:

“We don’t talk much about gender in school... you see a lot online, but it’s not the same as learning it properly” [IRL].

“It is a problem that should be addressed not only at the educational level, but also in each house, in each family, at political level, in serial dramas and in films. We should think about it more often” [RO].

Danish and Italian students, precisely due their open-minded attitudes, are also the ones who tend to express a greater frustration with traditional stereotypes, especially within their family environments. They also highlight the need to take on a role as “educators” in spreading their more liberal stance to tackle outdated and traditional views:

“In terms of equality between men and women, me and my mother are very much in agreement, but if you start a gender debate and broaden it a bit, so that it also includes nonbinary and transgender people, we start to disagree a lot” [DEN].

“Diversity is perceived as something out of the ordinary, but for me nothing stands for diversity because I am open-minded. What our parents tell us is different isn’t different for me: maybe my father, my grandfather think that a gay person is different, but for me it’s anything but different” [IT].

By contrast, the lacking coverage of gender-related issues in the school *curricula*, as reported by Irish students, also result in their limited vocabulary for discussing these topics, and a reduced inter-

est in engaging with them. A similar attitude is also recorded among Romanian interviewees, where gender equality is not discussed enough, or it is a subject actively avoided by teenagers to prevent controversy. This reluctance also reflects more conservative views on gender roles:

“Personally, it doesn’t affect me... so I don’t think of it as a problem I need to fix” [IRL].

“There are roles in society. It does not mean that women should be in the kitchen, but it is just that men are physically stronger” [RO].

Focusing more closely on the various meanings that the broader concept of gender equality holds for the interviewees, their first association with gender-related issues often revolves around the diversity of gender identity and sexual orientation, which they approach with varying attitudes. Despite structural differences between countries, the interviewed students generally find themselves torn between a positive acceptance of gender and sexual diversity in their daily lives, and resistance to a socio-cultural context that challenges their idea of “normalization” by framing these topics as problematic. However, in the Romanian context, this approach to normalization appears more nuanced, with a general tendency towards acceptance, though accompanied by a call for moderation:

“I’m not interested, but I have a lot of friends and acquaintances who are homophobic. I believe that everyone is born a certain way and that you can’t choose your sexuality and who you like. As long as they are not exaggerated, and they don’t demand too much attention for this matter. I mean, I consider them equal to us” [RO].

Only at a secondary level – and particularly among Italian interviewees – does a more concrete understanding of gender equality emerge. This perspective is primarily concerned with broader social issues, such as women’s unequal access to professional opportunities and the related gender pay gap, which often contributes to a broader perception of unequal rights between women and men:

“Gender equality is both at work, in terms of equal rights and in other areas... If you had to find a synonym for the idea of gender equality? Maybe I would say: unequal pay! [...] Then it’s obvious that it’s not just an economic issue, even if you talk among young people there’s always this habit of saying: “shut up, you’re a woman, you have no rights” [IT].

Serial dramas and gender-related issues: who influences what?

The final section of the focus group interviews explored the interplay between serial dramas and gender-related issues, focusing on their perceived influence. The discussion was guided by questions such as: *Do serial dramas reinforce gender stereotypes? Do they contribute to creating a more inclusive society? Do they influence the way you perceive and approach gender issues?*

On the whole, young interviewees recognize the positive impact of serial dramas’ representations, seeing them as both a source of inspiration and a trendsetter in their daily lives. While emphasizing different aspects, this perspective is shared by both Irish and Romanian interviewees. Irish students, in particular, emphasize the role of series in shaping fashion trends, including the growing popularity of cosplaying, where young adults dress up as characters from popular shows. Conversely, Romanian interviewees focus more on behavioral influence, viewing the imitation of character’s style as a way of expressing one’s identity, especially within peer relationships:

“If a show got insanely popular... people start saying references or they start doing stuff like in their day-to-day lives, with their friends... you might start wearing costumes or cosplay” [IRL].

“When I watch a series, especially those with mobsters, first of all I study their behaviour. I like to see how they communicate with other people, how they handle critical situations” [RO].

Still focusing on positive representations, the emphasis on inspiration shifts towards inclusive and non-stereotypical portrayals, which – particularly among Italians and Irish interviewees – are acknowledged for their role in promoting or enhancing self-acceptance. This impact is felt both in terms of physical appearance and within the broader process of personal growth and maturation in a given social context:

“Some series can help you to feel safer if you think you have something strange. There are people who think they have strange or ugly body parts. And because this show [*Sex Education*] is very forward, there’s a lot of nakedness, it normalizes even those who think they have something different” [IT].

“A lot of [*Anne With An E*] it’s about, you know, growing up, and she’s quite a feminist herself. So she’s trying to challenge those stereotypes” [IRL].

Interestingly, when the analysis shifts from a general assessment of the impact of serial dramas on gender issues to a more personal perspective, opinions become notably more critical.

Although interviewees acknowledge the overall trend towards normalization and inclusion in serial narratives, they are also quick to highlight the main distortions and tensions within these portrayals. In this regard, Danish students emerge as the most critical, expressing a clear preference for series where diversity is *normalized* rather than explicitly *emphasized*. They praise shows like *Euphoria* for its “normal” representation of a transgender character, whose identity is presented without clear commentary. At the same time, they show resistance to dramas that address gender issues in an overtly educational manner, finding them less appealing:

“I would also say that you have to put it [*gender*] in the plot. The reason I like *Euphoria* is because they normalise it. I would say that there’s a difference between being completely confronted with it, “boom”, you have to think about this, or it’s just kind of like we’re doing this, and it’s this universe, it has to be normal” [DEN].

These critical views are echoed by interviewees in other countries, who agree that the “forced” representation in some serial dramas risks over-idealizing social phenomena, portraying diversity as an obligation rather than an organic or natural element. As a result, diversity may sometimes be presented at all costs, even at the expense of authentic storytelling:

“*Heartstopper* has managed to include as many characters as possible, but it can be a stretch. The LGBTQ+ community cannot all be represented in a show, also because it is a very diversified community” [IT].

“It’s like they just put a gay or transgender character in to check a box... it doesn’t feel real” [IRL].

“I find films that are trying to be politically correct irritating” [RO].

Furthermore, and only partially against the previous point, Italian interviewees often highlight the “limited” representation of diverse sexual orientations in serial narratives, which goes as far as the representation of transsexuality but not further than that, as if there were a line that cannot be crossed:

“There are homosexuals, lesbians, bisexuals, and stop. I have never seen a character on TV series saying: “I am queer”. In fact, I think there’s a kind of social ladder. You have the gay people, then you don’t see the lesbians so much... So, first of all male homosexuality, then bisexuality, and then you almost never find anything, at most a transsexual” [IT].

Finally, when we delve deeper into the perceived influence of serial dramas, interviewees point out a general “minimal effect”, which becomes even more evident when considering their impact on gender-related issues. Indeed, rather than inspiring new behaviors or shifting thoughts and attitudes, these series are primarily seen as reinforcing existing opinions, while first-hand experiences are rec-

ognized as playing a far more significant role in shaping attitudes and driving real change:

“They [*serial dramas*] make me meditate on my former ideas” [RO].

“Something has to happen in reality for it to affect me. I can’t be influenced by a series, I can’t [...] I know it’s not real” [DEN].

Conclusions

The exploratory nature of the reported phase of the GEMINI research, carried out through qualitative focus groups, along with the choice to present results without identifying analytical patterns, does not allow for broad generalizations. Nonetheless, this study provides us with key issues, which served as an exploratory basis for the subsequent research phases.

First of all, the focus group interviews highlight the complexity of the interviewed young adults’ engagement with serial dramas, and the nuanced relationship between media portrayals of gender-related issues and societal attitudes. In particular, the analysis reveals an “unsuitable” influence of socio-cultural backgrounds on the interplay between young adults, serial dramas, and gender-related issues across the four countries.

At a general level, and without significant local differences, the cross-national analysis shows that serial dramas are an integral part of the interviewees’ media consumption. They actively engage with content through a logic of transmediality (Jenkins 2006; Scolari 2019), also showing highly personalized tastes and viewing habits – a trend that already emerged in other audience research carried out in recent years (e.g.: Bengesser et al. 2023).

Conversely, greater geographical differences emerge regarding interviewees’ interest in gender issues, though these do not faithfully reflect the different levels of progress in gender equality across the four countries.

On the one hand, Denmark’s high ranking in the GEI is reflected in the progressive attitude of its interviewees, both in terms of their widespread interest in gender issues and their desire to actively seek change in order to tackle stereotypes that still persist in the

social and family environments. Similarly, Romania's lowest GEI score is mirrored in the less pronounced interest of its interviewees in gender issues, where – aside from a few exceptions – traditional views of gender roles still persist.

By contrast, Italy and Ireland seem to deviate from this trend. Although Italy ranks lower than Ireland in the GEI, Italian interviewees' interest and engagement with gender issues appear much closer to those of Danish students. Meanwhile, in many cases Irish students show strong similarities with Romanian ones, particularly in their lower involvement in gender discussion. This lower engagement seems to be significantly influenced by a lack of in-depth knowledge, largely due to limited coverage of gender topics in school curricula. This highlights a structural gap in education, where the absence of comprehensive discussions around gender issues leaves young adults relying on media and informal networks to shape their understanding.

Finally, regarding the perceived influence of serial drama on gender issues, while differing approaches certainly contribute the development of critical thinking on these issues, it is equally noteworthy that the interviewees' opinions across the four countries tend to converge.

On one hand, serial dramas serve as a platform for addressing gender-related issues and promoting inclusivity, as evidenced by the enthusiasm for non-stereotypical portrayals – particularly in shows like *Euphoria* and *Sex Education*. On the other hand, young interviewees also express criticism toward what they perceive as “forced” diversity, arguing that it can compromise the authenticity of storytelling.

This clearly shows that the investigated young audiences, despite their socio-cultural backgrounds, are not passive recipients of serial narratives. Instead, they are active and conscious viewers, critically engaging with the content, and often renegotiating serial representations based on their own experiences and knowledge (Livingstone 2003; boyd 2014).

Additionally, while serial dramas can encourage viewers to question gender stereotypes and explore diverse identities, their overall impact remains nuanced, more often reinforcing pre-existing views rather than driving significant change. This reveals both the *powerful* yet *minimal* effects of media products (Bennet and Iyengar 2008) in shaping perceptions of gender and society.

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Notes

- 1 See: Hansen 2024.
- 2 More detailed information on the number of focus groups conducted in each country, the total number of students involved, and the selection criteria can be found in the official research report submitted to the EU. See: Spalletta 2024.
- 3 See: Hansen 2024.
- 4 The focus groups do not reveal a significant preference among the interviewed students for any particular genre, including teen drama. This trend supports the notion of an ‘omnivorous’ audience, a pattern already observed in previous research conducted, for example, in Italy (see: Coviello *et al.* 2021).
- 5 This issue also emerged during the interviews with teachers and trainers (See: Spalletta 2024).