

Gender Representation in Serial Dramas

A Reproducible Classroom Methodology for Critical Analysis

Greta Iapalucci

is PhD student at the Department of Arts at the University of Bologna. Her research interests include social discourses, reception studies and gender imbalance in relation to TV seriality using data-driven and machine learning methods.

Abstract

Audiovisual media shape audience perceptions and beliefs, particularly among young adults, influencing societal views on gender equality. This study aims to propose a reproducible teaching methodology for high school classrooms to enhance students' ability to critically assess gender representation in serial dramas. Using a multimedia annotation software, the methodology involves two hands-on activities: (i) quantifying women's on-screen presence by tagging their speaking time to compare it with that of men and (ii) documenting observations based on four common stereotypes in the portrayal of women on TV — physical appearance (often sexualized), parenting role (as caregiving mothers), sentimental relationship (as fiancées or wives) and occupational status (as homemakers or in low-status positions). Following the analysis, students share their findings in guided class discussions, which allow them to make meaning of the representations they observe and to challenge preconceived notions. This methodology encourages students to reflect on the media they consume, fostering awareness of how gender stereotypes shape social behavior.

Keywords: Serial dramas, young adults, gender representation, media literacy, education.

Introduction

Video content has long shaped societal beliefs and perceptions. Since Gerbner's (1977) claim that television functions as "the new state religion," audiovisual media have remained a powerful cultural force. Though the digital revolution and streaming platforms have transformed television into a more fragmented medium (Lotz 2014), it continues to influence attitudes, reinforce stereotypes and shape social norms — especially among young viewers (e.g., Kinast et al. 2023, Morgan 2017).

Media's impact on young adults' perceptions, particularly concerning gender, is explored drawing on *Cultivation Theory*, which suggests that long-term exposure to screen media shapes views of reality (Gerbner 1972), and on *Social Cognitive Theory*, which explains how viewers model behaviors and attitudes seen on screen (Bandura 2001). In particular, serial dramas, with their extended storytelling structure and deep character development (Mittell 2015, Pearson 2009), play a key role in shaping societal issues like gender identities.

Research consistently shows that women remain underrepresented in audiovisual serial narrations, and when present, are often portrayed in stereotypical or marginalized roles (e.g., Rivadeneyra 2011, Sink & Mastro 2017, Ward & Grower 2020). In Europe, regulatory initiatives have sought to promote more balanced representations, with education identified as a key tool to foster awareness of gender stereotypes (European Commission 2020).

Building on these insights, this paper proposes a hands-on media education activity aimed at increasing awareness of gender representation in serial dramas. By using a multimedia annotation tool, the methodology encourages students to critically engage with episodic screen narratives and reflect on how gender roles are constructed and internalized.

1. Influencing Screens, Influenced Young Adults

Decades have passed since Gerbner (1977) defined television as "the new state religion". Since then, television has become a difficult object to define, due to the recent digital revolution it has

undergone (Lotz 2014). What has not changed, however, is the power to influence audience perceptions and beliefs that this medium holds (Morgan et al. 2015). Originally developed in relation to television, *Cultivation Theory* argues that audiovisual media represent a consistent yet unreal world and long-term exposure shapes heavy viewers to cultivate perceptions of reality and social attitudes that align with the mediated world (Gerbner 1972). This theory has gained significant recognition in media effects research, though it has also faced substantial criticism, particularly for its alleged lack of empirical support (Potter 2014, 1026-1030). In addition to empirical criticisms, scholars from the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies (e.g., Hall 1980) have challenged the foundational assumptions of media effects theories like *Cultivation*, arguing instead that media texts are polysemic and subject to diverse interpretations depending on the viewer's cultural and social context.

Furthermore, *Cultivation Theory*, as theorized by Gerbner, focused on the effects of television programs independently of their characteristics, without considering narrative genres (Morgan & Shanahan 2010). While this one-size-fits-all approach has been critiqued (e.g., by Hall 1980, Potter 2014), many reinterpretations and updates of the theory have been proposed over time, with an increasing emphasis on narrative specificities. Researchers have observed that different types of programs present different world views and cultivate distinct conceptions of social reality (e.g., Cohen & Weimann 2000, Grabe & Drew 2007). While cultivation scholars refer to this phenomenon as "genre-specific cultivation" (Morgan & Shanahan 2010, 340) to differentiate it from the original one, Potter (2014, 1030–1032) argues that *Cultivation Theory* must adapt to the increasingly fragmented and diverse nature of contemporary media production. Additionally, given its initial focus on linear television, the theory now requires expansion to include streaming platforms — a shift supported by recent research (e.g., Krongard & Tsay-Vogel 2020, Prince 2018).

Despite these necessary updates, *Cultivation Theory* remains a valuable framework for understanding both linear and non-linear television's influence on audiences. Moreover, it is not only passive exposure to video content that influences viewers: what *Social Cognitive Theory* (Bandura 2001) argues is that, similarly to how we learn in real-world, we can adopt models of behavior, attitudes and

emotions proposed on screen media that we find realistic or attractive, through observational learning. *Social Cognitive Theory* stemmed from *Social Learning Theory* (Bandura 1969), which states that people learn by observing and imitating attractive role models. Amongst the existing categories of people, some of the most affected by social learning are young adults (Lonergan 1983).

Gerbner et al. (1980) had already conducted research on different types of audiences and, particularly, on children and young adults, due to their heavy exposure to television content. Like many other studies (e.g., Arnett 1995, Liebert & Sprafkin 1988), their research demonstrated that screen media play a highly educational and influential role, particularly for young adults — an influence confirmed even in the streaming era (Kinast et al. 2023, Morgan 2017). *Super-Peer Theory* (Strasburger 1995) explains this effect by claiming that, while peer pressure among adolescents is widely acknowledged, media act as a super-peer, with their portrayals setting normative behavior.

By examining both genre-specific and audience-specific media influences, some studies have shown, for instance, that young adolescents' exposure to soap operas reinforces gender stereotypes, in the realm of sexual relationships and traditional motherhood practice among other things (e.g., Ex et al. 2002, Ward 2002). The recent increased complexity of audiovisual production, however, makes it difficult to mark firm boundaries between genres (Mittell 2015, 233-260). Considering screen media in terms of macro-genres, instead, can be highly valuable for studying their influence on audiences. In particular, long-form fictional programs like TV series that belong to the drama macro-genre may be effective in reflecting societal issues and influencing societal norms, thanks to their extended narrative structure and deeper character development (e.g., Mittell 2015, 132-142, Pearson 2009).

What's more, young adults rarely consume audiovisual content from a single genre (Weber & Mitchell 2008, 43-44) and, even if they did, genre preference alone is not a sufficient factor in determining media influence (Morgan et al. 2015, 690). Research has also found that "the amount of viewing may not be a sufficient indicator when analyzing television effects" (Biltereyst 1995, 255), but it is rather the type of consumption that plays a crucial role. As part of the *Uses and Gratifications Theory*, viewers who adopt a ritualized or habitual

pattern of audiovisual consumption may be more likely to absorb media ideologies than those with other patterns, regardless of the volume of consumption of audiovisual material in general or the specific genres they prefer (Rubin 1983).

These theoretical frameworks collectively highlight how audiovisual media shape social perceptions — especially among young adults — through recurring narratives and role models. Among the many social constructs reinforced in this way, gender roles deserve particular attention, with the representation of women offering a concrete entry point for examining how media contributes to the reinforcement of gender norms.

2. Gender Inclusion and Stereotypes in Serialized Audiovisual Content and Regulatory Efforts in Europe

Discussions on women's on-screen presence center on recognition and respect (Ward & Grower 2020, 179) or, in other words, quantity and quality of the representation. On the one hand, women's under-representation in scripted video content has been widely acknowledged within academia, both in terms of presence (e.g., Sink & Mastro 2017, Smith et al. 2013) and in speaking time (Cattani & Innocenti 2024). While depiction in audiovisual narratives signifies social existence, absence or under-representation implies *symbolic annihilation* (Gerbner 1972), reinforcing the notion that only represented groups deserve respect and status.

On the other hand, sheer presence does not avoid symbolic annihilation *per se* and portrayals of women risk being trivialized as opposed to men (Tuchman 1978). Gender stereotypes are defined as "beliefs about certain attributes that differentiate how women and men are (*descriptive beliefs*) or should be (*prescriptive or proscriptive beliefs*)" (Ward & Grower 2020, 178). Several content analyses have been conducted to investigate the quality of women's representation in scripted serial narratives and three main formulaic patterns have been identified (Rivadeneyra 2011, 212, Sink & Mastro 2017, 7-9, Ward & Grower 2020, 179-180):

- 1 *Physical appearance*: women's bodies are more likely to be sexualized or to be portrayed with somehow attractive attire (Smith et al. 2013, Ward et al. 2006), less likely to show signs of age or to be

portrayed as old (Markov & Yoon 2020) and more likely to have underweight or ultra-thin bodies (Levine & Harrison 2009).

- 2 *Parental and sentimental relationships*: based on the stereotypical feminine attitudes of caring and nurturing, women are more likely to be depicted as (i) parent or more frequently with their children, and as (ii) wives, fiancées or girlfriends (González-de-Garay et al. 2020, Lauzen et al. 2008).
- 3 *Occupation*: women are likely to be portrayed as unemployed, homemaker or, if employed, in less prestigious positions (González-de-Garay et al. 2020, Smith et al. 2013).

Serialized audiovisual storytelling perpetuates stereotypical representations not only of women but also of men (e.g., Scharrer & Blackburn 2018). However, the portrayal of women often emphasizes bodily appearance and positions them as subordinate to men in both domestic and professional settings. These portrayals have particularly significant effects on audiences — especially women — by shaping perceptions of gender roles and expectations (e.g., Ward 2002, Ward & Grower 2020). Moreover, although research has noted an increase in the complexity and diversity of women's roles (Hohenstein & Thalmann 2019), even recent original productions on subscription video-on-demand services (SVODs) continue to reproduce stereotypes (Marcos-Ramos & González-De-Garay 2021).

Since these patterns arise from research mainly conducted in the United States and Western and Northern Europe on local audiovisual narratives, they best reflect media and sociocultural contexts of these regions. Restricting the focus to Europe, interventions aimed at promoting gender equality within the media have mostly pivoted around production (Byerly and Padovani 2017, 13-30). To promote more equitable gender audiovisual representation, instead, the European Council issued a Recommendation to member states (Committee of Ministers 2013) and a Parliament Resolution (European Parliament 2013). Similarly, broadcasters have adopted their own tools and Netflix, for instance, released guidelines in 2020 recommending not only the achievement of pre-established targets in production but also improvements in the representation of minorities in speaking roles (Ofcom 2020). More recently, the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 was released, aimed at promoting balance in media productions and narrations, among other sectors,

with education and training for equality as key tools (European Commission 2020).

These persistent patterns of gender bias highlight how media not only reflect but also reinforce unequal social norms. While policy and industry efforts are important, media literacy, especially in schools, offers a crucial way to help young people critically engage with and challenge these representations. One possible educational approach involves using case studies in the classroom like scenes from serialized dramas. These offer familiar and relatable content through which students can begin to recognize gender stereotypes and reflect critically on the media's influence — a strategy explored in more detail in the next section.

3. Hands-On Media Education to Enhance Gender Awareness

Media education is aimed at developing critical and creative abilities to analyze and engage with media responsibly. Livingstone (2004, 3) identified four components of a skill-based approach to media literacy: *access*, *analysis*, *evaluation* and *content creation* — though the last is considered optional.

As for the *access* component, integrating multimedia activities in primary, middle or upper secondary schools in Europe can represent a challenge for two main reasons: (i) the availability of audiovisual aids — given that learners could only possess smartphones, which are increasingly restricted in schools and may not be adequate to work at home autonomously, and schools seldom own technological devices such as computers or laptops for a whole class — and (ii) the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) literacy required for teachers (Anderson 2019). If limitations related to *access* are resolved, the *analysis* phase can begin. This phase involves engaging in a detailed description of the audiovisual text, rather than passively consuming it, with the goal of making “the familiar [become] strange” (Buckingham 2003, 71). In media education, case study analysis is a valuable pedagogical tool that enables students to undertake independent and critical inquiry into specific media texts while engaging with broader social and representational concerns (Buckingham 2003, 75-77). For example, scenes from serial dramas can serve as effective case studies, providing familiar content through which students can analyze nar-

rative structure and character development to identify and deconstruct gender stereotypes. The *analysis* process can be supported by practical hands-on activities, which are particularly suitable for pedagogic purposes because they provide a more realistic and engaging experience (e.g., Nott & Wellington 1996), especially when students' interest is stimulated (Krapp 2005). Once such practical analysis has taken place, students recognize the internalized social and political messages embedded in media, such as unfair gender representation (Sharda 2014), and deconstruct them, in the *evaluation* stage.

Building on these premises, I propose a reproducible teaching methodology for high school classrooms to enhance students' ability to individually assess how serial dramas address gender representation.

4. Activity Design and Implementation

All students carry out the activity on the same serial drama episode. Rather than selecting the episode autonomously, the instructor offers a few suggestions and lets the students make the final choice to enhance their engagement. Based on the research reviewed above and the regulatory interventions proposed by the European Union, the activity is intended for Northern and Western European classes. The instructor limits the selection to serial dramas produced in Europe, recognizing that these works provide a richer exploration of gender representation within specific European sociocultural contexts. These contexts are shaped by regional attitudes toward gender roles, equality and diversity, providing students with a contrast to U.S.-produced content that, while familiar from their viewing habits, may not align with their own cultural realities.

The activity aims to achieve two key goals. First, it fosters strong learning outcomes based on the adoption of a project-based active instructional methodology which has been shown to promote higher results than passive lecturing (Tutal & Yazar 2023). Second, recognizing that audiovisual content can be interpreted in diverse ways (e.g., Hall 1980), this approach emphasizes a high level of objective description to allow for comparable observations between students. To accomplish these objectives, the methodology employs *a priori coding* (Elliott 2018), an approach that involves assigning categories, i.e., *coding*, based on predetermined codes that are estab-

lished before the analysis begins¹. Segmentations are based on characters' speaking time, as this better represents their on-screen existence relative to visual time, since it is rarer for a character to be framed without speaking. Coding is carried out for all characters, to enable comparisons between different gender representations.

The work is conducted via *ELAN* (<https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/elan>), a free multimedia annotation software widely used in media studies that does not require high technological skills compared to other tools (Estrada et al. 2017). This tool allows the audiovisual stream to be divided into multiple segments, organized into categories named *tiers*. These tiers are displayed in vertical rows on the left side of the screen and differentiated by different colors, while segments are distributed horizontally over time and appear in the center and right sections. *ELAN* requires users to mark segments manually, defining their start and end times and assigning values in the tiers accordingly. The software offers five work modes: annotation, synchronization, transcription, segmentation and inter-linearization. Instructors become familiar with it through the documentation available on the website and use a few preliminary classes to explain its functionality to students, paired with live examples.

The codebook used by learners to assess serial drama's attentiveness to gender representation is based on patterns identified in the studies mentioned above (Rivadeneyra 2011, 212, Sink & Mastro 2017, 7-9, Ward & Grower 2020, 179-180). It involves two levels for annotating the respective codes: gender identity and gender stereotypes. Prior to the activity, students receive dedicated training on the use of the codebook, including examples and guided exercises, to ensure they are familiar with the coding criteria and can apply them consistently. The respective codes are:

- 1 **Gender identity:** based on personal pronouns and physical appearance, a speaking character is coded either as *man*, *woman* or *non-binary*. Both cisgender and transgender characters are annotated as part of these three gender identities.
- 2 **Gender stereotypes:** four gendered formulaic narrative patterns and relative codes are identified:
 - 2.1. **Clothing:** *nudity*, *seductive*, *neutral*.
 - 2.2. **Parental role:** *mostly caregiving parent*, *not caregiving parent*, *not a parent*, *unknown*.

- 2.3. **Relationship status:** *single, dating or married, divorced or widowed, unknown.*
- 2.4. **Occupation:** *employed: high status, employed: low status, unemployed, student, homemaker, unknown.* The difference between high status and low status in employment is determined by the level of education: occupations for which a degree is required are considered high status.

For each of these levels or sub-levels of the codebook, a relative tier is created through *ELAN annotation mode*, amounting to five (i.e., *gender identity, clothing, parental role, relationship status, occupation*). A sixth tier named *comments* is created and may include optional observations and opinions of the students on that segment to enrich follow-up discussions. This tier is suitable for other indications of gender stereotypes, such as considerations on the length of the speaking turns, the themes of the narration, the expression of emotions, characters' paradoxical actions with respect to their gender identity or the transcription of a salient line. The start and end times of every segment are adjusted using *ELAN segmentation mode*.

To illustrate the practical application of the proposed methodology, an excerpt from Season 1, Episode 1 of *Un passo dal cielo* (*One Step from Heaven*, 2011–) was analyzed in a pilot session (see Fig.1). In the final minutes, the protagonist Pietro (played by Terence Hill) solves the case as Mario (played by Rosario Coppolino) confesses to having murdered Lucia (played by Tatiana Luter). The confession is paired with a flashback showing him assaulting her. Lucia is coded as “woman” in the gender identity tier, wears neutral clothing and has minimal backstory beyond being a former drug addict who tried to save a wolf from underground fights. Similarly, Rosario's background is limited, though he is identified as a probation officer and therefore coded as “employed: high status.” The scene reveals several key dynamics: the woman has significantly less screen time, plays a less complex and autonomous role and is both verbally and physically abused — ultimately killed for being compassionate. These insights could prompt class examination of representational fairness, gender stereotypes in serial dramas and their potential impact on viewers' perceptions of gender roles.

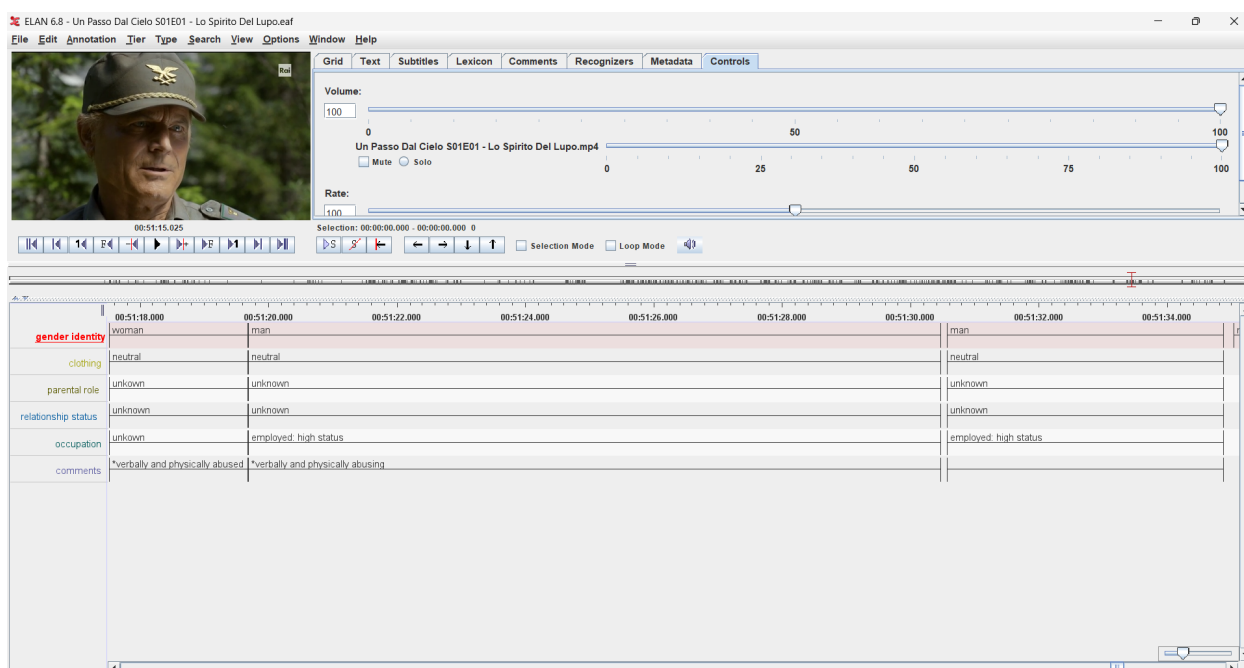


Figure 1: Application of the Codebook to an Excerpt of Season 1, Episode 1 of *Un passo dal cielo* (Rai 1, 2011-).

The goal of the activity is not to make learners agree on gendered representations in a serial drama, but to help them develop skills to deconstruct their cultivated ideologies as part of the *evaluation* stage described in media education theory (Livingstone 2004). *Discussion* enables students to unpack their educational experience, learn from the knowledge that others have acquired and bring to light tacit assumptions issued from the analysis (Brookfield & Preskill 2012). The instructor breaks the class into small groups to promote a follow-up debate in which students share their findings and interpret the representations emerged from coding, making sure that the characteristics of an effective discussion are respected (see Hess 2004, 154). To initiate the debate, each group is provided with few bullet points, namely: (i) the fairness of the representation in terms of quantity and quality, (ii) the match or mismatch between their expectations and the observed representation, (iii) the origins and purposes of these stereotypes and if they feel these stereotypes influence their socialization and (iv) their opinions on the efficiency of the assignment to enhance sensitivity to gender representation and its impact on their future viewing habits. Each group presents their collective considerations to the class. After each presentation, other

groups expose their viewpoints by highlighting similarities or discrepancies between the groups' findings, given that students' viewing experiences differ and media content does not yield singular, predictable effects (Buckingham 2003, 159). The instructor guides the debate and, at the end, summarizes key remarks, emphasizing the activity's significance by reminding students of the media's power to shape ideologies (e.g., Gerbner 1972).

5. Conclusions, Limitations and Directions for Future Research

In this article, I have proposed a framework for critically engaging students in evaluating serial dramas' recognition and respect for gender representation by *coding* with a multimedia annotation software and through in-class *discussions*. The two macro-activities reflect the main steps identified in media education theories — *analysis* and *evaluation* (Livingstone 2004) — which are elsewhere referred to as *description*, *meaning-making* and *judgment* (Buckingham 2003).

Raising young adults' awareness about women's media depictions plants the seeds for a more equitable society. Building on the power of observational learning, which shapes behaviors and attitudes (Bandura 2001), and the impact that audiovisual consumption has on adolescents (Lonergan 1983), introducing students to activities that foster critical media examination equips them with the tools to navigate and interpret messages autonomously, potentially leading to a negotiated or even oppositional decoding position (Hall 1980). Beyond recognizing inequitable representations, the insights garnered from learners' analyses and debates may encourage them to advocate for fairer narrations in accordance with the two phases of *reflection* and *action* encompassed in the pedagogic theory of *conscientization* (Freire 1970).

This approach presents limitations. Beyond the previously mentioned limitations — the need for IT tools and ICT literacy among instructors — another challenge is the time constraints of upper secondary school curricula, which may not accommodate an assignment of this length. In the European educational context, mother-tongue literature and culture classes as well as foreign languages courses may be the most suitable subjects for this activity, given educators' familiarity with gender studies and narratology. Teachers, who are familiar with their students, could assign part of the

coding work as homework — provided that all learners have access to adequate equipment — to avoid disrupting the syllabus schedule. Contrarily, the whole assignment should be conducted in classrooms and, if only a few computers or laptops are available, students could take turns, partially resolving the first limitation as well. Given the goals of the EU Gender Equality Strategy for 2020-2025, which emphasizes education and training (European Commission, 2020), resources could also be allocated, upon request, to provide IT tools that support these efforts.

The proposed methodology serves as a foundation upon which many other elements can be built. Specifically, further research could expand the proposed activity in terms of (i) genre, (ii) codebook and (iii) social inequality addressed. As for the first, while this methodology was initially proposed for TV series that belong to the drama macro-genre — due to their rich social themes and popularity among young adults — it could also be applied to comedies. However, the complexity of humor, especially in the forms of parody and satire (Lieberman et al. 2009), would require deeper interpretation and adjustments to the activity. As for the second, many other formulaic patterns in terms of gender representation could be addressed, including age, body shape and emotional expression. As for the third, gender issues do not exist in isolation and an intersectional approach ought to be adopted to address discrimination intertwined with factors like sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability and more². Furthermore, while the methodology outlined in this study is theoretically robust, it has not been yet directly tested or implemented. Future studies could therefore collect follow-up feedback from learners who have participated in the activity to shed light on its potentialities and challenges.

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Notes

- 1 While prior familiarity with *a priori coding* is helpful, it is not required. Teachers interested in understanding the basic principles of *coding* may refer to Elliott (2018).
- 2 See Jones & Wijeyesinghe (2011) for a framework about applying intersectionality in education.