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Gender Equality Training through Serial Drama

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Introducing Gender Equality through Media Pedagogy

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This special issue of Academic Quarter responds to the pressing need for the reinforcement of gender equality as a principle in European society, following recent attacks on more liberal policies and attitudes towards gender both in Europe and further afield, especially the US. Media has been central both to the organisation of gender equality initiatives and activities and to the resistance to it, no more evident in the co-optation of social media platforms by well known gender conservative figures like Andrew Tate and Elon Musk, both of whom have driven highly misogynistic discourse which has made its way to Europe (Ging 2019; Haslop et al. 2024). While media is often cited as the cause or agent of anti-gender rhetoric (Cesarino 2023; RESIST 2024), it is also leveraged for the promotion of gender equality as evidenced in the increasing visibility of and attention to gender issues across various media including TV and film, broadcasting, social media and the press (McInroy and Craig 2017; Bell and Keer 2021).

This special issue attends specifically to serial drama as a tool for the promotion of gender equality. Focusing on young people as key stakeholders in gender equality and change agents for an equitable world, the various contributors to this issue identify some of the challenges that educators face in teaching gender equality and proposes several valuable tools and techniques for using serial dramas addressed to or watched by young people as a mechanism for developing their knowledge and understanding of gender issues and topics such as stereotyping and progressive representation.

Serial drama serves as a powerful thinking tool for teaching gender equality to students by leveraging its narrative structure and emotional engagement (Spalletta 2024; Hansen and Jacobsen 2025).

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Through serialized storytelling, these dramas can delve deeply into complex social issues, allowing for sustained exploration and character development. This format provides an engaging opportunity to present diverse perspectives and experiences related to gender, fostering empathy and understanding among viewers. One key aspect of serial drama is its ability to depict the lived experiences of characters over time, highlighting the nuances and challenges of navigating gender roles and identities (Heim 2020; Dove-Viebahn 2024). By portraying characters who confront and challenge gender stereotypes, serial dramas can encourage viewers to reflect on their own beliefs and attitudes (Holtzman and Sharpe 2014). This reflective process is crucial for developing critical thinking skills and promoting gender equality. Moreover, serial dramas often incorporate relatable scenarios and conflicts that resonate with young audiences, making abstract concepts more tangible and accessible (Andò and Hipkins 2022; Farci and Scarcelli 2022). The emotional investment in characters and their journeys can lead to a deeper engagement with the issues presented, facilitating meaningful discussions and learning.

In an educational context, serial dramas can be used to illustrate theoretical concepts and provide real-world examples of gender dynamics. Teachers can leverage these narratives to create interactive and participatory learning experiences, encouraging students to analyze, debate, and apply their understanding of gender equality in various contexts (Arnold and Fox 2025). This approach not only enhances comprehension but also empowers students to become advocates for gender equality in their own lives.

The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-25 (EU 2020) emphasizes the importance of negotiating and dissolving gender stereotypes that contribute to gender inequalities through unconscious biases, a process known as 'gender mainstreaming'. This special issue presents perspectives that address European young adults, particularly those in high schools, offering tools to negotiate and transform gender stereotypes and gender equality issues. By leveraging popular culture, especially serial drama, the issue motivates a common language for creating and comprehending new modes of representation and depiction of worldviews and social relationships. A key aspect of critical media literacy research is its focus on the politics of representation, examining how marginalized and dominant rela-

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tions, including gender, race, class, and sexuality, are portrayed in the media (Kellner and Share 2007, 2019). Contributions in this issue use popular serial drama as an 'awareness tool' or 'thinking tool' for new understandings and pedagogical reflections on social relations between genders and social justice issues regarding gender equality.

Research-action approaches to teaching and learning

This issue represents scholarly perspectives that address how European serial dramas represent gender, gender equality, and gender issues; how we can map European young adults' understanding of gender issues through serial drama; how creatives reveal debates about gender issues in developing serial drama; and how research into these perspectives can be used to develop educational tools for teaching gender equality to European young adults. Contributions to the issue cover two or more of these perspectives, with a focus on educational or pedagogical approaches to teaching gender issues through serial drama.

This special issue is developed in collaboration with the EU research project GEMINI (Gender Equality through Media Investigation and New Training Insights).[1] GEMINI is a research-action project aimed at high school students and their teachers. To encourage behavioral changes, this research project responds to the research questions presented above. In relation to this project, contributions to this issue present their material in a form that serves both as research publications and as contributions that may be integrated into a teaching context. This includes readings of serial drama from different geographical contexts, video essays and other types of video material, and directive material for teaching activities or reflections on how teachers can use serial drama cases to teach gender issues to European upper secondary students.

According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, gender equality training involves providing "relevant knowledge, skills, and values" that equip individuals and societies with the tools to effectively implement the gender-mainstreaming strategy in their field (EIGE 2016). For contributors to this issue, this targets especially students and teachers in European upper secondary education. The elementary theoretical assumption is that it is possible to teach gender equality through popular serial drama, as it involves

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teaching activities guided towards relevant media consumption among young adults. Additionally, this approach has the potential to create young 'gender ambassadors' by utilizing the dramatic potency inherent in serial drama for gender equality training in schools.

In the articles that follow, the various contributors stress the need for and value of gender education across several European contexts. Despite the documented differences in gender education in each national context - Irish secondary schools provide little education specific to gender compared to, for example, Denmark - contributors make the case for engaging young people in gender topics in secondary school. Further, they provide tangible evidence for the successful use of serial drama as a pedagogical tool. A number of contributors adopt the GMN Triangle - a method that teachers can adopt for using serial drama scenes to develop young people's understanding of gender issues, media literacy, and narrative comprehension. Collectively, the contributors provide examples of appropriate serial dramas that provide ample opportunities for engaging young people in education settings on gender issues and topics.

Contributions

In the first article of the issue, **Kim Toft Hansen** and **Louise Brix Jacobsen** introduce the aforementioned pedagogical tool - the GMN Triangle - that has proven useful in developing students' awareness and understanding of 1) Gender Issues; 2) Media Literacy; 3) Serial Drama Narrative Comprehension. They argue that the tool enables teachers and learners to maintain a critical distance from sometimes sensitive issues. Using scenes from series' Euphoria (HBO 2019-) and Rita (TV2 / Netflix 2012-20), they demonstrate how the GMN Triangle can be used to explore issues such as toxic masculinity and gender bending.

Evidencing the variety of attitudes to gender equality and practices of serial drama viewing among European young people, **Marica Spalletta**, **Nicola Ferrigni** and **Paola De Rosa**'s contribution to this issue documents the results of a pan-European focus group study with young people aged between 15 and 21 years old. Findings revealed that European young people tended to favour 'authentic' and non-stereotypical representations, and were put off by seemingly didactic representations of gender issues. The study also

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found common practices of using streaming series by young people and a rejection of the notion that serial dramas can influence opinions, but more varied understandings and attitudes towards gender, reflecting perhaps differences in educational and societal attitudes towards gender.

Izzy Fox and **Sarah Arnold**'s contribution turns attention to the Irish educational system, drawing upon interviews with teachers who detail the various challenges and obstacles to teaching gender education, namely, the limited teacher training on gender, little space in the curriculum for addressing gender, and a growing anti-gender backlash to gender topics in Irish society. Using the GMN Triangle, Arnold and Fox illustrate how serial drama can be used to develop students' media literacy and gender knowledge which can provide an antidote to anti-gender sentiment. They examine sequences of Irish drama Normal People (RTÉ/BBC 2020) through the GMN Triangle to illustrate how gender hierarchies and dynamics are represented within the series.

Turning their attention to Italian serial drama **Valentina Re**, **Arianna Vergari** and **Maria Elena D'Amelio** explore the more liberal and LGBTQ+ positive representations of gender and sexuality on youth-oriented series Prisma (Amazon Prime Video 2022-24). They note how Prisma adopted the SKAM methodology of drama, which develops stories and narratives founded upon deep research on young people. Consequently, Prisma evidences more nuanced and complex representations of youth identity and sexuality and Re, Vergari and D'Amelio demonstrate how key narratives and sequences focusing on the representation of 'coming out' can be examined using the GMN Triangle to engage young people in learning about gender issues via serial drama.

In a companion piece to this article on Prisma's representation of queer characters and storylines, the video essay (edited by Arianna Vergari), along with its accompanying guiding essay (written by **Valentina Re**, **Arianna Vergari** and **Maria Elena D'Amelio**), offers a close analysis of the formal and aesthetic techniques of the drama that contribute towards the development of a sensitive and empathetic portrayal of a coming out story. By first acknowledging the variety of film and TV coming out narratives, the video essay identifies shifting political strategies in the representation of such issues and this helps to contextualize this narrative in Prisma, which

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moves beyond stereotype and defies expectations and norms which typically portray fraught experiences of family rejection.

Greta Iapalucci follows with the introduction of another pedagogical tool aimed at using serial drama to develop students' knowledge and understanding of gender, through case studies of scenes that reinforce or, on the contrary, challenge widely held stereotypes. Deploying multimedia annotation software in the classroom enables students to quantify speaking times of male and female characters on screen and then to qualitatively identify instances of four common stereotypes related to gender identity. By undertaking the systematic coding of gender representations students can initiate and steer discussion on gender topics and reflect upon the meaning and impact of them.

Greta Delpanno's video essay explores how the two series Sex Education (Netflix 2019-23) and Un professore (Rai 1 2021-) serve as both entertainment and educational tools, engaging with themes of pedagogy, representation, and identity formation. It highlights television's role in constructing and challenging social norms, and the series' contributions to informal sex education and philosophical discussions. While critiqued for potentially commodifying diversity, these shows play a crucial role in shaping identity and fostering cultural shifts. Alongside the guiding text, the essay emphasizes the importance of critical engagement with media narratives to understand their impact on viewers and broader cultural discourse, ultimately advocating for a more nuanced appreciation of serialized storytelling.

Conclusion

The intention of this issue is to provide those engaged in education with tools to develop young people's knowledge and understanding of gender representations, gender stereotypes, and gender equality and inequality. To evidence the importance and urgency of this goal, since this journal issue was first proposed in 2023, there have been a range of profoundly impactful and detrimental pushbacks against gender mainstreaming and gender equality initiatives. In Bulgaria, the introduction of legal amendments regarding how gender is integrated in education means that the provision of education or information around non-traditional gender identity is now prohibited (Amnesty International 2024). In Hungary, Viktor

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Orbán's government has introduced a constitutional amendment that recognizes two sexes only, effectively erasing the legal existence of other genders (Kassam 2025). In the US, the Trump administration has issued executive orders affecting federal agencies and specifically targeting their Diversity, Equality and Inclusion programmes, as well as their recognition of gender diversity (Wendling and Epstein 2025). In a political climate that is increasingly marked by anti-gender rhetoric and action, it is therefore crucial that there is resistance to this as well as counter-measures available to educators to ensure a safe and equitable world in which gender is understood and respected.

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Note

Unpacking gender issues through contemporary serial drama
High school pedagogical approaches to gender and media literacy

Kim Toft Hansen is Associate Professor in Media Studies at Aalborg University with broad expertise as PI, WP-leader, and co-investigator in research projects funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark, Horizon 2020, and The North Denmark Region. His main research interests are Nordic TV production, TV crime series, spatial identity construction, young adult dramas, and European difference discourses.

Louise Brix Jacobsen is Associate Professor in Media Studies at Aalborg University. Her main research interests include Scandinavian TV series and identity construction, mediated gender identities, fake news, and media hoaxing. She has extensive experience in knowledge exchange and collaboration with practitioners such as high school students and teachers.

Abstract
This contribution explores the pedagogical potential of using one scene from one serial drama to teach gender issues in a high school context. The contribution is a text-based argument with an overall media literacy approach to teaching gender issues. As pedagogical examples, we present two different series – *Euphoria* (HBO 2019-) and *Rita* (TV2/Netflix 2012-20) – through two individual video excerpts from the series. These scenes have been carefully selected to highlight how specific gender issues may be scrutinised from just one brief sequence. The scene from *Euphoria* provides an opportu-

nity to analyse *toxic masculinity*, while the scene from Rita presents a perspective that we identify as *banal gender bending*. In conclusion, we highlight how this approach not only provides high school teachers with an opportune way to locate usable excerpts as teaching material; this specific approach also provides an occasion for teachers to turn the classroom around and facilitate students' own search for usable excerpts in and creative appropriation of serial drama.

Keywords: Gender issues, serial drama, media literacy, toxic masculinity, banal gender-bending

In this contribution, we approach complex gender issues in serial drama from a didactic perspective. We focus especially on the didactic potential of serial drama in high school teaching, since young adults in the latter years of high school have acquired the required knowledgebase and reached a level of maturity to be able tackle such intricate topics. As results from the EU project GEMINI have shown, there are major local differences across countries in teaching media and gender[1]. In this article we focus primarily on a Danish context where media and gender are taught in the subject *Danish* (the national language subject), and the elective *Media Studies*. However, we suggest that using serial drama as an educational tool to teach complex gender issues can also work well in other subject-specific contexts though local curriculum adaption.

First, we present the fundamental didactic and methodological principles in teaching gender through serial drama. This includes a presentation of the *GMN Triangle,* i.e. an approach to teaching gender issues (G), media literacy (M) and narrative comprehension (N) to students. The GMN Triangle is an elementary and adaptable pedagogical tool developed in the GEMINI research project (cf. Jacobsen and Hansen 2024). We propose that serial drama may give teachers a less-personal, less-biased position from which to teach prickly gender topics that may give rise to constructive, yet opinionated debates. Secondly, we will show how the GMN triangle can be used as a didactic tool to teach different gender-related concepts. We do this by applying the GMN triangle to selected scenes from the series *Euphoria* (HBO 2019-) and *Rita* (TV2/Netflix 2012-20).

In both cases, representative video excerpts have been included. Lastly, we introduce a final stage where teachers may facilitate students' own creative work with similar material. In all, this contribution demonstrates how the teacher may move from teaching the style and narrative in serial dramas, across pedagogical discussions of gender topics, to more functional pedagogical practices for teaching knowledge about gender issues through practical video production.

In this way, this article is one final step in a research-action process that suggest an action perspective from more comprehensive research material. Action research is, according to Koshy, situation-based, participatory, and collaborative education practices that "involves action, evaluation, and reflection and, based on gathered evidence, changes in practice are implemented," hopefully leading to "the improvement of practice" (Kosky, 2010: 3). Although applied elsewhere, e.g. in healthcare research (ibid.: 2), our focus is specifically practice-change in and through a teaching context. In our case, the *situation* is comprised by the fact that gender studies have become a sensitive topic, and although teachers show a wider interest in gender studies as a topic, they may lack sufficient tools to teach it to high school students (see Spalletta 2024). This exhibits a practical problem that we propose to address by linking to concrete material outside teachers' own fields of experience. Based on overall insights from several focus group and teacher interviews (the research part)[2], we propose systematic integration of popular series in a teaching context to produce what we identify as "a common third" (the action part). Using series as a common reference point can create a safer space for both teachers and students to discuss delicate and sometimes personal matters. For Koshy, action may come in parts, i.e. integrated in minor steps to reach larger result. In our case, we also present three steps that teachers can follow to reach a level where not only teachers can produce their own educational material. Here, students may also be integrated into practical exercises by creating new media materials that can inspire further development of participatory learning practices.

1. Serial drama and gender in high school teaching

In a book on *subject-matter didactics* for teaching media studies in high schools, Mimi Olsen utilises Jens Jørgen Hansen's distinction

between *semantic*, *didactic* and *functional* educational tools (Olsen 2018; Hansen 2010). Semantic tools refer to the material under critical scrutiny in teaching, in our case the chosen serial dramas, while didactic tools are the pedagogical system used for teaching the semantic material, in our case the GMN Triangle (see below).[3] Functional tools are the technological equipment supporting learning processes for students, such as a pencil for taking notes or the screen to show video clips. However, in our case we propose that technology may also be a tool for students' increase of knowledge about the teaching subject (gender and serial drama) by using similar productional (functional) tools such as editing software. We return to this final point in the latter part of the article.

In our GMN Triangle (gender, media, narrative), the pedagogical approach is divided into three corners with relevance for teach-
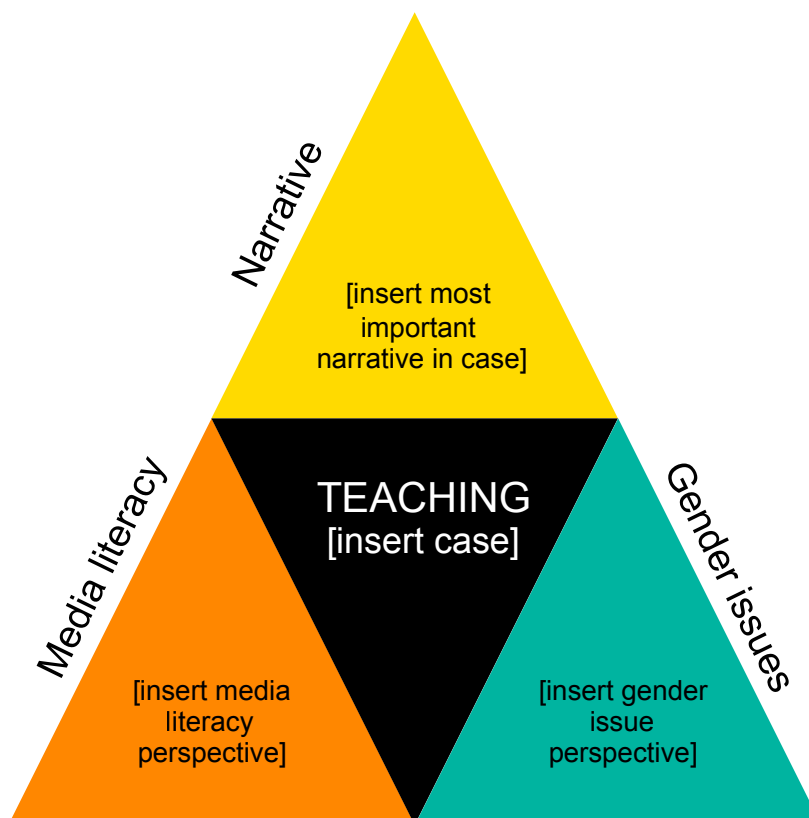

Figure 1: The GMN Triangle with three basic corners: narrative, media, and gender.

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ing gender through serial drama. Before turning to our two examples, we will briefly introduce the three corners and the reflexive principles behind this focus.

Narrative refers to basic knowledge about the contents of the serial drama, which implies that the teacher should have some acquaintance with the overall narrative of the series to be able to facilitate a scholarly dialogue about the contents. In high school teaching textbooks, it is common practice to have excerpts from e.g. novels within a specific theme, and we propose that brief excerpts from serial drama may be utilised in a similar manner. Often school curricula are demanding and time-consuming, which means that teaching material should be easily integrated (Spalletta 2024, 24). Also, students may find it difficult to consume hours of screentime, which yet again may be only available behind a streamer's paywall.

For these reasons, we propose to teach gender topics through serial drama based on a simple *one series, one scene, one issue* dogma. This means using 4-6-minute ready-made excerpts from series and focus on one gender topic for each excerpt. The simplicity of this approach is less time-consuming in students' preparation for class, and using a brief video excerpt (to understand serial drama in general) produces what one of our teacher respondents refers to as a "common third":

> "I find it hard to see any disadvantages in that [using brief excerpts], because I always think it's good to use examples that aren't the students' own experiences when discussing something like this, so it doesn't become personal, so you have that common third to discuss from" (Male high school teacher over 40).

The concept of the "common third" was originally proposed by the philosopher Michael Husen: "The important thing is that there is something external, a common matter, about which they are both concerned and about which they are concerned together" (Husen 1996, 220). As pointed out by McCreadie (2020), the concept has entered the field of social pedagogy, for instance defined as "an activity or an experience they have together which feels unique in a positive way" (Ryyänen and Nivala 2019, 53). The common reference to something external may then produce a situation where

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teachers and students avoid a too close interface between teaching topic (in our case gender issues) and personal experiences. As semantic tools, brief excerpts from series may function as an entry-point for a complete series and, more importantly, a less-biased common third, while the teacher through simple exposure of the overall narrative may open a route to teach both media literacy perspectives and gender issues to the students.

In the triangle, *media* turns the teachers' attention towards specific media literacy issues that may be raised from the excerpt such as a representative understanding of the role of editing or point of view. In doing so, focus shifts more clearly from the semantic to the didactic educational tools. In Danish high schools, students must acquire "knowledge about important issues related to the function of media in social, cultural and historical contexts" (Retsinformation 2024). For Mimi Olsen, teaching such "media competences" connects to "that understanding of Bildung [dannelse] that is necessary for us to be able to navigate and act as citizens in a modern democracy" (Olsen 2018: 36). Using popular serial drama not only provides an opportunity to use cases that may share students' interests in popular culture; serial drama is also a tool that may raise the awareness for students regarding *how* specific topics are framed by the means of audiovisual storytelling. In this way, an excerpt from a serial drama is also what Jens Jørgen Hansen (2010: 74), as a sub-category to *functional tools*, refers to as a *communicative educational tool* that "establishes *contact* between the parties involved in the learning situation". This perspective emphasises an obvious interface between semantic and functional educational tools. Media excerpts, then, produces a pedagogical situation where students may acquire knowledge about how one specific type of media communication (serial drama) frames a specific topic. As an outcome, this may facilitate student insights into how editing, cinematography and other stylistic parameters do not operate as a neutral window but also shape a certain perspective on the series' specific subject matter.

While *narrative* and *media* falls under W. James Potter's lower stages of media literacy, i.e. "narrative acquisition" and "acquiring fundamentals", the *gender* perspective in the GMN triangle is a more developed interpretative issue that falls under "critical appreciation", including "broad and detailed understanding of the historical, economic, political, and artistic context of message systems"

(Potter 2008: 22). Teaching gender as a topic, then, becomes guided by how a certain issue is framed by a serial drama and not by how a specific, sometimes contested concept should be defined and socially understood. In fact, Potter refers to *gender stereotypes* in entertainment as a specific topic that may be challenged by disseminating "the old tried-and-true formulas of storytelling" (ibid.: 196), i.e. disclosing how traditional ways of telling stories may include elementary gender stereotypes, for example famously expounded by Laura Mulvey's analyses of the male gaze in Hollywood cinematography (Mulvey 1975).[4] In this way, gender becomes the specific subject that may be critically analysed through the comprehension of serial dramas' framing of the subject, including an understanding of film stylistic frameworks, narrative comprehension, and thematic readings of serial drama topics and areas of interest.

By using the GMN triangle, we present below two series excerpts that show different ways of framing specific, relevant gender topics. By using short clips, we will show that you can go from 4-6 minutes excerpts to critical dialogue about how gender issues are represented and handled. Based on our interpretation of the scenes, we present potential gender themes that are negotiated in these video clips, but there can certainly be several additional interpretive angles from which the clips can be addressed.

2. Euphoria and toxic masculinity

Euphoria is a popular, edgy American serial drama well-known to Danish high school students[5]. It was originally produced for HBO (now available through Max), and it is characterised by its attention towards various gender identities beyond the binary gender system. It has been referred to as "transgressive TV" and "cool trans aesthetics", since it "appears less interested in debates about the perceived authenticity of trans identities than in employing transness as a marker of transgressive youth culture" (Macintosh 2022, 15). In contrast to Macintosh, our focus group results suggest that it is precisely the perceived authenticity of representing trans identities that aligns well with how Danish high school students seek *unforced narratives* on gender topics. In fact, *Euphoria*'s portrayal of the trans-gendered character Jules was mentioned in several focus group interviews.

Based on our focus group insights, we define unforced narratives as stylistic ways of storytelling that, for a particular audience, appear appropriate and plausible according to their own experience, while avoiding what Torben Weinreich (1994) calls "downward slanting" in children's stories, i.e. telling a specific story with a certain pedagogical audience aim or forcing a certain opinion across through storytelling devices. In many ways, this understanding of what the students refer to as 'unforced' shares similarities with Roland Barthes' classic concept *naturalisation* (Barthes 1964), which refers to how socially constructed narratives appear naturalised and perceived as integrally genuine within a given cultural context. Unforced narratives appear credible within at a specific time and place. They do not necessarily have to represent the viewers' life-world in a 1:1-relationship, but they must appear impartial and unjudgmental to an audience in terms of expressing characters, topics or specific issues.

The chosen sequence takes place in the final episode of the first season when many characters have been established. We know about the main character Rue's drug abuse, her friendship with the transgendered Jules, her relations to friends in school, including the venomous relationship between the couple Maddy and Nate. We have established Nate as the captain of the football team and a dominant male leader, while we have also seen Nate's father Cal's

Figure 2: In this scene from *Euphoria*, the series provides viewers with new information about the abusive character Nate, which may facilitate a broader comprehension of his character traits (HBO 2019).

The image shows the text "akademisk kvarter" in a sans-serif font.

The letters "AAU" in small black capital letters.

A green downward-pointing triangle shape at the bottom of the page.

A green downward-pointing triangle.

The number "30" in large black font, with "Volume" above it.

troublesome and undisclosed interest in sexual relations to youngsters. In this case, we have from the start instituted Cal's abusive affiliation with Jules, a relationship that he videorecords with hidden cameras. Some of these videos now travel around without Cal's knowing, potentially exposing his illegal and amoral exploitation of Jules.[6] In this way, the series thematises different gender identities and sexual orientations, including the meeting point between heterosexual relations and toxic masculinities.

Focusing on the *Narrative* corner of the GMN triangle emphasizes how the sequence provides an opportunity to address gender issues from what many high school students in the Danish focus group interviews consider to be unforced, naturalized narratives about gender. High school students appear to disapprove of forced ways to tell stories about gender relationships and sexuality – and *Euphoria* is one series that appear notably accepted for its portrayal
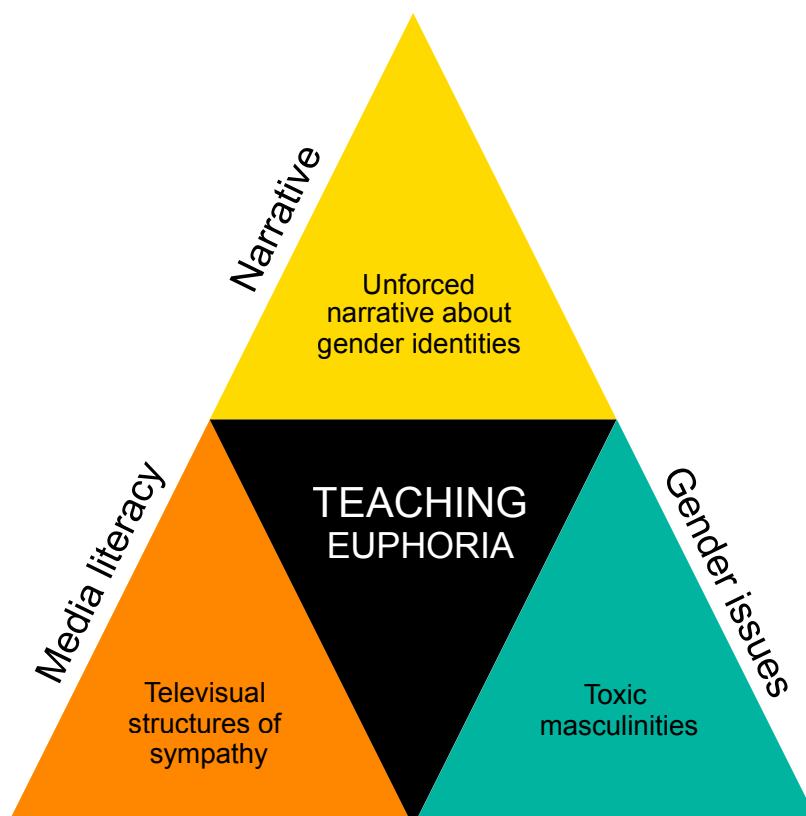

Figure 3: The GMN Triangle applied to *Euphoria*.

of especially the transgendered Jules, since Jules is not directly presented as transgendered, but characterised by other means of expression such as spontaneous, sympathetic and thoughtful. In the end, this opens the narrative for the target audience and presents an opportunity to teach complex seriality in relation to a series that appears 'liked', including specific stylistic access to why Jules is particularly likable.

Turning to the *Media literacy* corner, the specific scene is also a suitable example of how complex seriality may tweak the structures of sympathy during the plot development of a series (Smith 1995). Mostly, the viewers are invited to dislike Nate because he is incredibly controlling and abusive towards his surroundings and especially his girlfriend Maddy. However, when we are exposed to how his father is likewise controlling and vicious – and essentially sadistic – towards Nate, viewers may acquire a more sympathetic understanding of where Nate's nature comes from. Besides showcasing the complexities of narrative storytelling, the series may enhance students' ideas about how characters may develop throughout a long serial narrative. The sequence does not present justifications for Nate's behaviour, but it provides viewers with reasons for his nature.

Finally, a focus on the *Gender issues* corner of the GMN triangle shows how the sequence illustrates understandings of what has been termed 'toxic masculinity'. As noted by Carol Harrington, "toxic masculinity spread from men's movements to wider self-help, academic, and policy literature. This literature posited that emotionally distant father-son relationships produced 'toxically' masculine men, [i.e.] men who lack adequate fathering pursue unrealistic cultural images of masculinity and feel a constant need to prove their manhood" (2021, 347). Harrington's description of the origins of the term is a significantly fitting description of Nate's character development in *Euphoria*, exposing a teaching opportunity to debate and comprehend such conceptualisations in relation to a popular, acknowledged serial drama. This may include perspectives on how Nate pursues his "unrealistic cultural images of masculinity" through his endeavours on the football field.

The image of Nate after the game-winning touchdown, alone on the football field, with a confounded look on his face, is very indicative of the overall situation and his misunderstood comprehension

of leadership and masculinity. A sense of masculine control that, through the narrative development, reverts to the situation around Jules and her gender identity and sexual orientation. Complexly, this five-minute sequence is a condensed account of gender matters and serial comprehension that may be 'unpacked' through dialogues with students in a high school teaching situation.
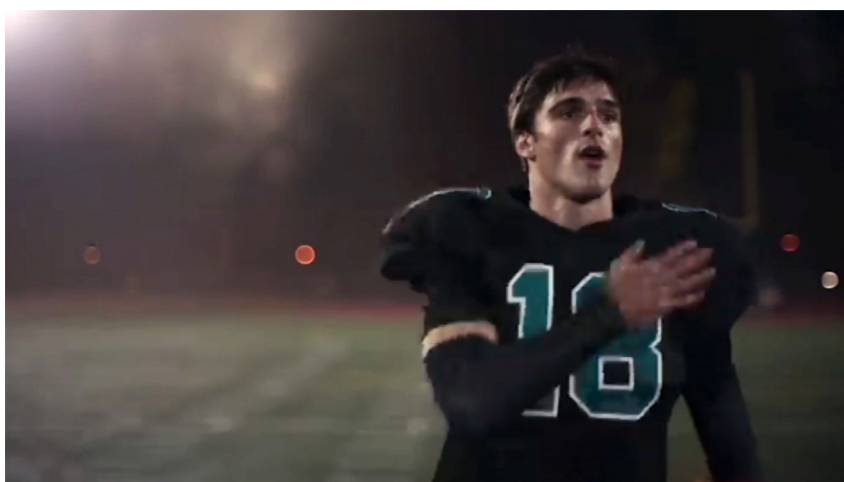

Figure 4: Nate, alone in the football field, jabs his own shoulder in acknowledgement in *Euphoria* (S1:E8). Indicatively, the team which he is supposed to lead is missing around him (HBO 2019).

3. Rita and banal gender-bending

While the attention towards *Euphoria* was expected (the series was in fact used in an 'ice-breaking' que card exercise in all five Danish focus groups),[7] *Rita* to our surprise came up unmotivated in discussions in four out of five focus group interviews. One high school respondent replied: "*Rita* is just a banger. […] I really hope that there is no one in here who hasn't watched *Rita*. That series is just fantastic" (17-year-old female focus group respondent). The series about the controversial elementary school teacher, Rita, was originally produced for the Danish commercial public service broadcaster TV 2, but after the second season of five, Netflix entered as a co-commissioner, extending the series with three additional seasons and the spin-off series *Hjørdis* (2015). Besides the conceded qualities of the series, Netflix's participation as co-commissioner may also explain the attention towards the series from Danish

young adults, as it is now available through young adults' most used streaming platform (Spalletta 2024, 42). This also makes the series internationally available for Netflix users outside the local Danish context.

As an excerpt, we have chosen a central scene from the opening episode in the first season. This scene not only introduces the controversial main character, Rita; it also integrates her contentious traits in an open discussion of her son's homosexuality. Essentially, this introduces what we would term *banal gender-bending* through a character with mixed traditional gender traits, but it may also breach with the *one issue* dogma, since the scene also involves an opportunity to discuss the sexual orientation of another character. However, the two topics are closely knitted together through the actions of Rita.

Figure 5: In this scene from *Rita*, the series provides viewers with the central character traits of the protagonist and introduces the series' subplot about the homosexuality of Rita's son Jeppe (TV 2 Denmark 2012).

According to Christian Thorpe, the creator of *Rita*, this specific scene was controversial for the broadcaster:

> "Of course, we had some discussions [with the broadcaster] on how far she can go. Definitely, a scene like the one where they have dinner in the garden and she says "hey, you're teasing your gay brother" that was a big discus-

sion. They felt that she went too far in that scene. And we felt that, as long as she says I'm sorry afterwards, we understand that it doesn't come from a bad place." (Christian Thorpe, in Série Series 2013)

On the surface, the scene was controversial because it mocks Jeppe's sexuality, but Thorpe underlined that it should be read conversely, since "no one has the faintest problem with Jeppe being gay, except himself" (Daimer & Blegvad 2012). Tightly constructed, the scene communicates Rita's use of cigarettes and alcohol, her ability to expose other people's double standards through witty one-liners, and her light-hearted approach to sexual relationships. At the same time, it introduces Jeppe's coming-out as something internally rather than culturally difficult.

Image 6: Rita lighting up a cigarette during dinner before explicitly addressing her son's sexuality with the guests (S1:E1) (TV 2 Denmark 2012).

Rather than being what Brett Martin (2013) has referred to as a 'difficult man' (hardboiled male characters with softer sensibilities), Rita is exposed as a 'difficult woman' with an explicitly cis-gendered sexual orientation and traditionally attractive female features in combination with stereotypical male traits; the actress Mille Dinesen refers to her own role as Rita as "masculine" (Mille Dinesen, in Série Series 2013). Her complex character traits align well with Isabel Pinedo's inversion of Martin's concept into 'difficult women' which

signals "how dramas construct the female gaze, a structure of looking that centers the narrative from a female perspective and is organised around female empowerment". This provides the female characters with traits from the "antihero", understood as a "morally ambiguous figure, with an uneasy mix of likable and unlikable traits, who commits serious moral transgressions" (Pinedo 2021, 2). *Rita*'s gender portrayal may, then, be used for a constructive dialogue about traditional masculinity / femininity traits, while Jeppe's coming-out narrative and romantic storyline highlights a naturalised acceptance of homosexuality without the need for external character traits indicating his sexual orientation. Although the series addresses cultural predicaments regarding homosexuality, the series' point of view on Jeppe's character presents an unforced narrative about being gay and presents homosexuality from a naturalised, accepted perspective. The series also recognises that discovering and acknowledging your own sexuality is sometimes more challenging than the acceptance of those around you. Therefore, the series gives rise to nuanced discussions about recognition and acceptance and how to deal with coming out in general.

The scene from *Rita* may be especially suitable for pedagogical purposes, since it confronts difficult issues with a sense of humour and a positive approach to conflict. The scene integrates complex notions of gender traits and sexual identity not by confronting relations of power, but rather by narrating a cosy-friendly-cum-sarcastic environment where personal identities may be enjoyed without controlling environments. Following the GMN triangle for teaching gender issues in series, the high school teacher may motivate students' comprehension and negotiation of gender traits through especially the protagonist Rita.

Like *Euphoria,* the scene provides an opportunity to address gender issues through unforced, naturalised gender narratives (the *Narrative* corner of the triangle). The unforced nature of gender issues is closely tied to the series generic quality as a character-based dramady. This presents an occasion for teachers and students to discuss how some of Rita's character traits may be associated with traditional, stereotypical male roles (strong character with agency, chain-smoking, heavy drinking, witty and wisecracking humour, workaholic, casual sexuality). At the same time, Rita is an attractive woman with a caring relationship with her children, soft pedagogi-

cal teaching skills, and a cis-gendered and straight sexual orientation towards men, traits traditionally associated with women. In this way, the Rita character fits well into contemporary trends towards complex characters in serial fiction (Mittell 2015, Dunleavy 2017), while clearly negotiating and blurring stereotypes typically associated with masculinity and femininity, according to the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (Bem 1981, see also Prentice and Carranza 2003 and Matud 2018).
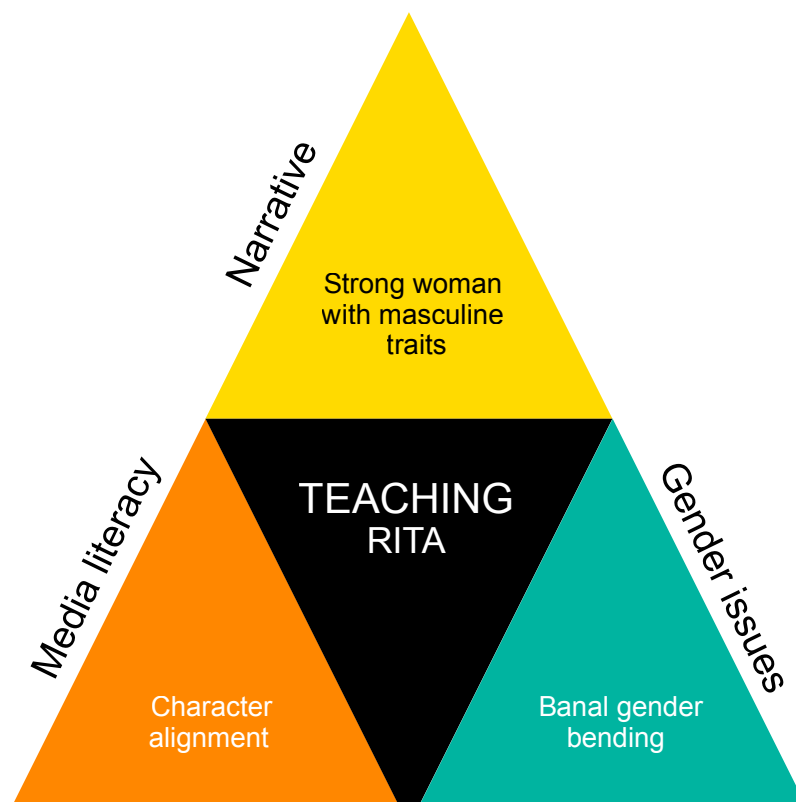
Figure 7: The GMN Triangle applied to *Rita*.

This ties directly into the *Media literacy* perspective that may be taught from the *Rita* case. While Rita is a likable character, she too has a number of flaws and politically incorrect traits. The series was criticised by the Danish Cancer Society for its explicit presentation of smoking, while the sense of humour in the series may stretch the boundaries of what can be said. In the chosen scene, one of the char-

acters says "Cheers. Drink up or be gay", which is an older, controversial, derogative and stereotypical Danish expression that is rarely used today (meaning that if you do not finish your drink in one gulp, you're gay). While the line comes from another character than Rita, it is possible to lift out this line from the scene, and debate what such an expression means, discuss its cultural context, and negotiate why such an idiom appears much more provocative today than only some years ago. In this way, *Rita* presents opportunities to teach how characters and character relations are built into complex serial dramas, and how the series' school context presents an obvious opening for discussions of many different sociocultural contexts, including gender issues. At root, the scene invites viewers to align with Rita (cf. Smith 1995), which presents an opportunity to discuss how viewers may align with 'unperfect' characters with flaws.

Turning to the *Gender issues* corner, the series' gender negotiation could be referred to as what we term *banal gender bending*. Here, we pick up Meridith Heller's exploration of gender-bending as

> "any staged performance that has the intention and takes the steps to cultivate a queer gestus. This includes all acts that centrally portrays identities, bodies, or actions as out of sync with the cultural framework of normal, natural, or ideal. […] the performer must communicate how the presented identity does not align with hegemonic scripts of identity congruence." (Heller 2020, 33)

While *Rita* does not maintain the theatrical and obvious display of different blended gender traits (e.g. like the artist Boy George), it takes traditional male and female gender traits and flips and negotiates them through Rita's character. In this way, gender bending becomes banal (with similarities to how Michael Billig (1995) refers to *banal* nationalism), which is less activistic from a gender-political perspective, but it presents a clear communication of mixed gender traits, negotiating stereotypes through humour, social criticism, and breaks with traditional female and male character traits.

Much may be debated from the *Rita* sequence, and this makes it work very well in a teaching context. Not only does it present Rita as a flawed character to root for; it also highlights several opportunities to integrate gender issues in a classroom discussion about natural-

ised sexualities and gender-mixed character traits. Such complexities may well be unpacked in an open classroom dialogue with high school students. The *Rita* sequence, then, provides ample opportunities to teach gender issues and complex character comprehension.

4. From using teaching material to editing teaching material

The GMN triangle proposes teaching strategies to approach difficult gender issues through serial drama as a common third, i.e. a production of a common safe space for both teachers and students by using an external object as tool and analytical focus. The pedagogical glitch, however, may be that teaching series works best if the students share an interest in the specific series, which may often be contemporary series that enjoy attention for a shorter or longer period. As a second stage practice, pedagogical and practical acquaintance with the GMN triangle for teachers may, therefore, at best lead towards teachers' own development of teaching examples, which may also be chosen in closer collaboration with students in the classroom. As such, the GMN triangle is not only a method used to develop teaching examples in our context; it is also a didactic tool that may expediate teachers' own case studies. It can also serve as a clear visual aid to help students identify which part of the model they are working on. As exposed through the two examples above, this approach may ideally go from 1) top corner and narrative acquaintance to 2) left corner and media style and character point of view to finally 3) analysing how gender issues are framed by narrative and stylistic exposure. However, it does not necessarily have to work in that order, but knowledge about the narrative and style of the series may facilitate a more open dialogue on how certain gender issues are frame by narrative and style. Working with the GMN triangle, then, is a way to open a series by discussing narrative comprehension, stylistic framing, and topical debates about gender issues, but it is likewise a very basic, practical tool that teachers may use to pinpoint new narratives and suitable gender topics to address through specific serial dramas.

With the GMN triangle as a recognised, comprehendible tool for students, it is then achievable to take the shared interest in serial drama into the third, practical stage. This leads directly into what has been referred to as "the leading idea" of media studies where

"the theoretical-analytical and the practical-production oriented [approaches] are part of an interactive interplay" (Olsen 2018, 22). In other words, if students apply practical skills to re-edit audiovisual material, they may acquire increased insights into media exposure, stylistics and narrative comprehension. Essentially, this leading idea is built directly into current Danish curricular plans for teachers of Danish in general high schools where students must "productively work with media expressions in social contexts" (Ministry of Teaching and Education 2024). Essentially, students must acquire practical experience with creating their own media material, which may improve both their technical skills in using screen recording systems and editing software alongside their comprehension of difficult text material. This is often referred to as "hands-on use" (Buckingham 2003, 82) or "learning by doing" (Arlien-Søborg 2018, 154).

As a practical exercise in the context of this teaching topic, we propose that students locate and record own excerpts from serial dramas and edit these scenes through software now easily available through online resources or through editing software already installed on laptops (cf. Jacobsen and Hansen 2024). In his work on media education, David Buckingham refers to several teaching techniques or "classroom strategies" that may be used in teaching media literacy to students and includes "production" as a final strategy to have students develop an understanding of "media language." According to Buckingham, engaging students in creating media output themselves, not only creates a 'safe space' "in which students can explore their emotional investments in the media"; students may also "be encouraged to develop a more thoughtful approach to concepts such as representation" (Buckingham 2003, 82). Engaging students in creating own examples would, in our case, invite students to critically reflect on how series frame specific gender issues, returning attention to Potter's higher levels of media literacy. Creating media material may go from a simple exercise in recording, re-editing and explaining the importance of a specific scene, across more complex ways of comparative examples in mash-up video material with several similar series, to increasingly demanding productions of videoessays about gender issues in serial drama. Essentially, this potential final third stage assignment does not entail setting up a wider media production process as

such. Instead, it allows students to become acquainted with topics and styles of video source material of their own choice from a more practical point of view, nudging them closer towards material within personal taste ranges and towards critical assessment of screen exposure of gender issues.

By applying a simple example of practical media assignment to teaching media and gender, we come full circle and may return to media as "functional tools", which now not only performs as a technology of *teaching*, but also as the technology of students' own *learning*. According to Arlien-Søborg (2018, 155), using practical insights into media becomes "aesthetic ways of learning" that, in the end, should have a positive impact on students' critical reflection on complex and sometimes transgressive debates about gender issues.

6. Conclusion

This article has introduced the GMN triangle as a didactic tool that may facilitate three steps in high school teachers' activities when teaching gender issues. Serial drama functions as a common third because it creates an external or less-biased reference for both teacher and students. Firstly, we have proposed two examples of how to use serial drama in teaching gender issues. Secondly, we suggest that this approach is an open-source model easily used to develop new examples in a joint classroom context. Thirdly, we include a final step where students develop their own video cases that may be shown and debated in a classroom context. In a Danish context, this approach fits well into teaching Danish as a language subject, which – as a teaching field – includes mandatory learning about media literacy and production. The curricular and institutional context is different elsewhere, but in different local situations *the one series, one scene, one issue* dogma may work well to include serial drama in other teaching subjects too. Depending on the teaching subject, teaching gender issues through popular serial drama may facilitate concrete comprehension of stylistic character and topic framing, but in more sociological or philosophical contexts using serial drama still produces a common third from which broader gender topics can be debated with distance to teachers' and students' own experience.

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Notes

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Confer the project reports for more information on local differences across Europe in teaching media, teaching cultures, and approaching gender issues in teaching. See Spalletta (2024) for local teaching contexts in Romania, Ireland, Italy and Denmark.

2 In the research project GEMINI, we conducted a total of 15 focus groups with 15-19-year-old high school students and 42 in-depth teacher interviews in Romania, Ireland, Italy and Denmark. In both cases, both urban and rural high schools were selected to get a wider representation of differences and identities. See Spalletta (2024) for overview of focus group and teacher research. Specifically in Denmark, we interviewed 10 high school teachers from Danish high schools across the whole country. All teachers taught Danish as a subject. The 10 interviews were carried out in Danish between December 2023 and February 2024 through video call.

3 In other contexts, we referred to the model as "the GEMINI pedagogical triangle" (see Jacobsen and Hansen 2024 and the project deliverable 3.1). While the GMN model name holds some resemblance to GEMINI, the intention is to include a more scholarly precise abbreviation for the model name.

4 Mediated stereotypification is a wide field with many perspectives that we do not have the space to enter here. Gender stereotypes were famously explicated by Sandra Bem in her so-called "sex role inventory", which exposed wider cultural stereotypes among male and female traits. Even if the inventory is half a century old, Matud (2018) has highlighted how traditional gender roles and stereotypes are very persistent in contemporary societies. In her work on using TV series to teach topics related to queer TV, Parsemain (2019) also shows how queer identities and different gender identities beyond the binary gender system are often marked by negative stereotypes and prejudice. See Harvey for broader perspectives on the continuation of mediated stereotypes across different media formats (Harvey 2020).

5 In Denmark, we have conducted five focus groups with students from one high school in the capital Copenhagen, one in the second-largest city Aarhus, two in the third-largest city Aalborg (one high school of

commerce and one general high school), and one general high school in a smaller Danish town.

6   Some paragraphs in this article share words, phrases and paragraphs from material published online through GEMINI's research website (gemini.unilink.it). Kim Toft Hansen's teaching material about the two series *Euphoria* and *Rita* have been published as GEMINI SHORTS (Hansen 2024a and 2024b).

7   Students in focus groups were asked to range 10 selected title screens from serial dramas. Some of these included gender-related topics, while others did not explicitly do so. We were not directly interested in the way they ranged the series; rather, we wanted to prime the students into talking specifically about serial drama.

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 background[2].

Focus group interviews were conducted following a common protocol developed by all project's partners, based on a preliminary literary review[3]. 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 dramas[4] 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 school[5]. 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 transexual" [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).

Teaching Gender Equality through Serial Drama

A Case Study of Irish Education

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Abstract

In Ireland, there is increasing and well-founded concern about how media could be negatively shaping young people's attitudes towards gender equality, especially the role of social media in propagating an anti-gender backlash among young males. If today people live 'in' rather than 'with' media, it is important to address gender issues through and in media. This article presents findings from secondary school teacher interviews and student focus groups conducted in Ireland as part of the GEMINI research project to explore the possibilities of teaching gender issues through television serial drama. Teachers report challenges like curriculum limitations, a lack of teacher training, a fear of anti-gender backlash, and poor media literacy development. Furthermore, while some media literacy education was taught, teaching of serial drama is virtually nonexistent in Irish secondary schools. Overall, the student's interest in

serial drama rarely extended to Irish shows, with *Normal People, The Young Offenders* and *Derry Girls* being the exceptions. These three Irish serial dramas provide rich and varied material for teaching issues such as youth sexuality, gender stereotypes and queer representation to students. Finally, drawing from GEMINI's online toolkit of teaching resources, the project's "GMN Triangle" will be used as a visual paradigm to illustrate how key sequences from the series *Normal People* can be analysed by focusing on the three core teaching modes of media literacy, narrative devices, and gender issues.

Keywords: media literacy; serial drama; gender; young people; secondary school.

Introduction

From the "recuperative exercise" undertaken by feminist scholars towards the commonly denigrated soap opera to the under-representation or stereotyping of women and girls in other genres, television serial drama provides rich material for examining gender issues (Hansen et al. 2024a 12-13). Consequently, the GEMINI (Gender Equality through Media Investigation and New Training Insights) research-action project, funded by the EU CERV Programme, engages with European high school students, their teachers, and those involved in creating and developing serial drama to explore the pedagogic value in examining "the representation of gender identities in TV series and how they can contribute to gender equality" (2024). Teacher interviews and student focus groups were held in four European countries (Denmark, Italy, Romania and Ireland) as part of the GEMINI project and this article presents findings from twelve secondary (high) school teacher interviews and three student focus groups conducted in Ireland.

The research findings discussed here highlight that there are many challenges, with some contingent opportunities, to teaching gender equality through serial drama in Irish secondary schools (Hansen et al. 2024b). For instance, Ireland's second-level curriculum has limited space for gender education, while the teaching of serial drama is virtually non-existent. Despite a lack of training on these topics, the teachers interviewed, for the most part, recognised their value, particularly the need to focus more on gender equality, identity, and on-screen representation (Arnold and Fox 2025; Hans-

en et al. 2024b). However, teachers admitted being reticent to broach topics of gender and sexuality due to their perceived lack of knowledge and training, as well as a fear of backlash from students, their parents, and, sometimes, other staff members (Arnold and Fox 2025; Hansen et al. 2024b). In addition, the importance that students place on gender equality issues, including gender representation in serial drama, differed across all three focus groups, with girls awarding more value to these considerations than boys, overall.

There was significant variation in the genres and quantity of serial dramas watched across the student and teacher cohorts. Some consistencies included a general interest in watching serialised drama, as well as a preference for US and UK rather than Irish shows, with the exception of *Normal People* (2020)*, The Young Offenders* (2018-ongoing) and *Derry Girls* (2018-2022). This article draws from case studies, including GEMINI's toolkit of audiovisual resources and some findings taken from the project's final reports (Hansen et al 2024a; 2024b), to illustrate how gender equality issues can be taught through serial drama in the Irish secondary school classroom. In particular, the project's GMN Triangle, which is described by Jacobsen and Hansen (2025) elsewhere in this issue as "an approach to teaching gender issues (G), media literacy (M) and narrative comprehension (N) to students" will be invoked as a visual paradigm to examine these three core themes through a key sequence in the series, *Normal People.*

The Societal and Educational Contexts

The diversification and secularisation of Irish society in recent years, which has seen the decreasing power and privilege awarded to the Catholic Church, has manifested in many ways, including in education (Bourke et. al 2020, 2). For instance, in 2015, Ireland passed the Gender Recognition Act allowing anyone over 18 to self-determine their identity without the need for legal or medical endorsement. In the same year, Ireland became the first country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage by popular plebiscite and a 2018 referendum overturned a constitutional abortion ban. In turn, 2023 saw the number of students in Ireland attending schools with a non- or multi-denominational ethos surpass those attending Catholic schools for the first time, perhaps reflecting the downward trend in the Catholic-identifying population (CSO 2023; McCárt-

haigh 2023). However, the majority of schools in the Republic of Ireland remain single-sex with a Catholic ethos, and have a compulsory uniform policy, reflecting the enduring influence of the Catholic Church and its values of conformity over the Irish education system. The Education Act (1998) states that schools should "promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school". Furthermore, a school's ethos is awarded such privilege in Ireland that it may exempt them from elements of the Equal Status Acts 2000-2018.

Second-level education in Ireland entails six years of schooling, divided into Junior and Senior Cycles, with students generally aged between 12-18 years. The Junior Cycle comprises the first three years of secondary school, while the Senior Cycle entails 16-18 year-old students working towards largely terminal exams in about seven subjects at the end of their sixth and final year. Conversely, fourth year, also known as Transition Year or TY, is a non-examination year, where students try out new subjects, develop non-academic skills, and engage in work experience before entering the Leaving Cert's academic grind. Our focus groups were undertaken with TY students because this year has the space and time to support these kinds of engagements.

Media literacy is taught in both Junior and Senior Cycle and is predominately situated within the mainstream subject of English. This topic is also covered in the compulsory subject of Gaeilge (Irish) and in optional subjects such as Modern Languages, Business and Home Economics. Furthermore, media studies may form whole or part of a TY module, which consists of a term or a half term of classes or activities designed by a teacher or subject department (usually English), such as 'filmmaking', 'scriptwriting', or 'animation'. In the Junior Cycle English curriculum, the focus of media studies is on how messages are communicated through media texts including film, infographics and radio. Senior Cycle English focuses on literary texts, primarily, including studying film as a text. However, serial drama is generally not taught on the curriculum beyond the very limited Leaving Cert Applied programme, undertaken by few schools across Ireland.

At Senior Cycle, depending on the texts chosen by teachers, gender issues can be taught in the core subject, English, whereby these

topics are examined through comparative modes such as 'theme or issue' or 'cultural context', for instance. This approach offers a model of teaching gender through serial drama. Concomitantly, gender and sexuality are mostly taught through Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE), a stand-alone Junior Cycle subject, or Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) modules across both cycles, including in the subject of Religious Education (RE), the focus of which being somewhat at odds with the teaching of gender. Although the SPHE curriculum has recently increased its focus on gender identities, sexualities and consent, as well as its teaching provision, SPHE is still awarded far fewer hours than mainstream examination subjects (Fox 2024a). This stifles the ambitious nature of the SPHE remit (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The four "interconnected strands" of the Junior Cycle SPHE course (2023) and the three "cross-cutting elements", namely, "dialogue"; "reflection & action"; and "awareness".

Furthermore, school policies on wearing uniforms, gendered-only bathrooms, and responses to trans/queerphobic bullying are also crucial to how gender is taught. A report published on the Trans Equality Network of Ireland's website (TENI), based on research conducted at the University of Limerick, highlighted the marginalisation of transgender and gender diverse (TGD) students in Irish secondary schools, citing a lack of both discussions of gender identity and LGBTI+ supportive spaces in schools (McBride et al. 2020). This emphasises the need for Irish schools to become safer, as well as more supportive and inclusive environments for TGD students. The GEMINI project aims to contribute to this goal by developing resources for teachers and students which have been informed by the feedback received following research conducted with key stakeholders.

Methods

The GEMINI project has adopted mixed methodologies, resulting in varied outputs, which are reflective of the different stakeholders involved in both the data-gathering and dissemination phases. For instance, the methodologies comprised conducting focus groups with secondary school students; surveying a larger cohort of students; interviewing secondary school teachers and creative media producers; as well as desk research, including analysing serial drama. Methods of analysis included thematic analysis of the student focus groups and teacher interviews. For both sets of interviews, a rubric, designed by fellow GEMINI team members, was used to sort quotations under deductively coded thematic headings, representing their knowledge and interest in gender issues, media literacy, serial drama and gender representation on screen. Furthermore, intersectional feminist analysis was performed by the Irish team on serial drama texts, particularly the three Irish TV series, *Derry Girls*, *Normal People* and *The Young Offenders*. This analysis highlighted that the main ways in which power and privilege intersect with gender in the Irish context, as represented on screen, is through the issue of social class, more so than sexuality, disability, ethnicity or race.
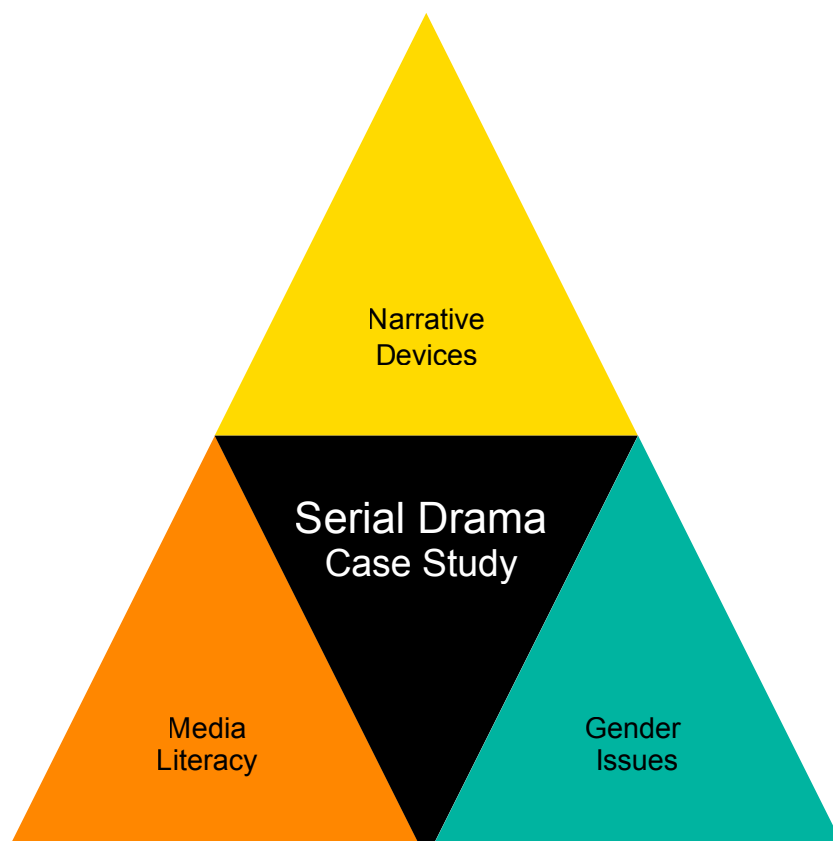
Figure 2: The GMN Triangle: GEMINI's "case-neutral approach" for teaching gender issues through serial drama (Hansen et. al 2024a 3).

GEMINI's GMN Triangle (above) provides teachers with a "case-neutral approach" (Hansen et. al, 2024a 3) to teaching gender issues through serial drama, as it comprises a template which can be adapted to focus on the topics of media literacy, narrative devices and gender issues relevant to any case study of their choice. Consequently, this visual paradigm is instructive, yet dynamic, as the GEMINI toolkit was developed with an awareness of the broad spectrum of gender views held by European school-goers, their varied media consumption habits, as well as the different educational and cultural contexts.

For example, the Irish series *Normal People* explores themes like coming-of-age sexuality, trauma, consent and desire, indicating a shift from more conservative representations of youth sexuality on Irish television in the past (del Río 2022, 78; Fox 2023). This makes it

an especially useful case study for teaching gender issues to Irish secondary school students. Key scenes where misunderstandings, silences and non-sequiturs add tension to the dynamics between the protagonists in *Normal People* can be compared with how non-verbal cues enable or inhibit communication, through focusing on direction and acting, as well as the use of an intimacy coordinator to choreograph the intimate scenes. Furthermore, these sequences can also be used to demonstrate how the series is consistent with a coming-of-age narrative, in terms of the sexual, intellectual and physical maturation of the two protagonists, including an awakening of their class consciousness, throughout the twelve episodes in the series.

Focus Group Findings

Three Irish focus groups, undertaken in 2023 involved 28 Transition Year students (19 girls, 10 boys) from diverse (sub)urban and rural areas. The groups included students from both disadvantaged and affluent school typologies. Despite serial drama being largely absent from the curriculum, students were avid viewers, enjoying genres including sci-fi, crime, drama and especially comedy. US TV series *Friends* (1994-2004) was a surprising favourite, given its age. The most-viewed Irish dramas included *Derry Girls, Young Offenders* and *Normal People.* In addition, the students' knowledge of and interest in gender issues varied but, overall, appeared quite limited. This may be due to the limited focus on these topics in Irish schools. However, social media plays a key role in informing young people of social issues:

> "[I learn about gender issues] mostly on TikTok and Instagram."

> "The more you interact with [online petitions about gender issues], the more you're exposed to it."

This is concerning considering recent research carried out by the Anti-Bullying Centre at Dublin City University, which shows "that boys are exposed to toxic content within twenty-three minutes of social media usage, through algorithmic recommendations, whether or not they have sought it out" (Ging et. al 2024). The dominance of social media platforms amongst young people's viewing habits

is supported by research carried out both in the UK and Ireland which shows that less than 50% of Gen Z in the UK watch traditional TV (Saunders 2024), with similar trends reported in Ireland (Slatery 2023). 15-34-year-olds in Ireland decreased their linear TV viewing by 18.4% in 2023 and now watch only 52 minutes daily compared to 2.5 hours for all adults (Slattery 2023). The UK report notes that 16-24-year-olds spend 93 minutes on platforms like TikTok, with these platforms driving interest in shows such as *Squid Game* (2021-ongoing) (Saunders 2024).

Despite the influence of social media on young people's viewing habits, the GEMINI focus group participants watched serial drama regularly and were conscious of authentic and inauthentic youth and gender representations. *Derry Girls* was praised for having a cast that, at least, looked like teenagers, compared with *Riverdale* (2017-2023), for example. Some also recognised the pedagogical function that TV drama series can play regarding social issues and were adept at identifying and critiquing gender stereotyping in dramas like *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013). The students valued non-stereotypical gender representations, pointing to shows such as *Anne With An E* (2017-2019) as a positive example of gender representation. Students also supported the notion of involving young people in the creation and production of teen dramas to ensure that the content was representative, inclusive and realistic, "especially the dialogue".

Interview Findings

Twelve teacher interviews revealed discordance between what teachers *think* students are watching compared to what they are watching:

> "They're not really consuming the kind of content that we're consuming. They're more and more consuming those live broadcasts, those 5/10 minute YouTube or TikTok content" (M7[1], over 40).

While students certainly watch a lot of short-form content, as the focus group findings indicate, they also enjoy watching serial drama, albeit via streaming platforms rather than linear television. Some teachers acknowledged this and stated that they discuss

shows with their students, while other teachers were uncomfortable making recommendations to students, fearing the shows might be unsuitable. English teachers were more confident in using texts, including audio-visual ones, as a means to teach topics such as gender representation, stereotypes, inequalities and violence. Overall, though, teachers were reticent about broaching gender issues in the classroom, feeling under-resourced and under-prepared.

> "My heart starts to race, because I'm not hugely confident in delivering that [gender equality] message correctly….I suppose I'm very sensitive…that I might say the wrong thing…I wouldn't want to say anything to upset them" (F 6, over 40).

Two teachers expressed more confidence in teaching gender issues than the rest because they had a deep interest in these topics. However, this point highlights that teaching gender issues tends to be ad hoc and dependent upon individual teachers' commitment. In addition, teachers also observed a gender divide in students' attitudes towards gender equality and media representation, with boys often believing that gender inequality has been solved and girls more aware of ongoing gender issues.

Teachers also articulated challenges, such as the threat of a backlash to discussing these topics with their students, particularly from the boys, but also from some parents:

> "We have had parents actually…saying that they're going to take their son or daughter out of SPHE classes whenever relationships or sexuality is mentioned" (F 2, under 40).

All but one teacher cited online influencer Andrew Tate whose misogynistic and queerphobic rhetoric of the manosphere negatively impacts the attitudes of young male students (Fox 2024a; 2024b):

> "Recently in [a TY] module…it's 15 year-old boys…when Andrew Tate entered the conversation, they got very emotional, very defensive, very quickly" (F2, under 40).

Teachers were concerned that students, particularly boys, are primed to be hostile toward gender topics, which heightens teachers' anxieties about teaching these topics in the classroom.

Teachers proposed several solutions to their perceived lack of knowledge and fear of backlash when teaching gender issues. Firstly, they proposed extending gender and sexuality training, currently for SPHE teachers primarily, to all teachers and emphasised the need for clear policies on sensitive topics, particularly gender identity and sexuality (Fox 2024a). One teacher also suggested appointing an "inclusion coordinator" (F 8, under 40) at school level to oversee policy implementation. In addition, teachers are also generally positive about the prospect of the e-learning toolkit of resources developed by GEMINI researchers. What follows is a discussion of how the serial drama *Normal People* can be used to teach gender issues in the Irish secondary school classroom, particularly to TY students using the GMN Triangle.
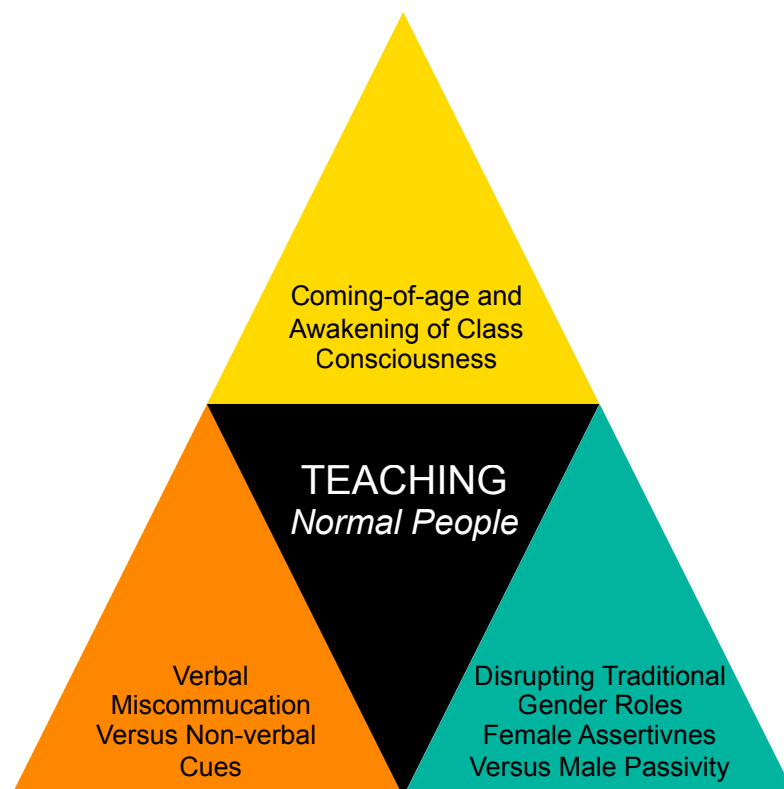
The GMN Triangle: *Normal People*

Figure 3: The GMN Triangle illustrating how to teach *Normal People* (Hansen et al. 2024a 41).

Figure 4. In this scene from *Normal People,* we see the story develop around the growing, yet fraught, romance between Marianne and Connell.

In a sequence from *Normal People's* first episode, the two protagonists, Connell and Marianne, speak to each other alone in a school corridor and share a tense exchange. In the scene, Marianne's intellectual capacity dominates over Connell's shyness and awkwardness. Connell criticises, what he perceives to be, the cruelty that Marianne expressed towards a teacher (Hansen et al. 2024a 40). Marianne retorts by inferring that Connell is having an affair with a teacher, which makes Connell uncomfortable. Although Marianne is the more powerful conversationalist, she capitulates by apologising and acknowledges that Connell has included her where others have excluded her. When Marianne states outright that she likes Connell, he struggles to respond to her candour and quickly removes himself from the conversation.

The scene illustrates Marianne's recalcitrance compared with Connell's obedience (Hansen et al. 2024a 41). Equally, although Marianne comes from privilege, and Connell's family is working class, the scene suggests Marianne's social consciousness and sense of social justice. Marianne's opposition to her teacher results in her receiving an after-school detention, whereas Connell's compliance keeps him free from punishment. The scene visually represents them as opposites, framing them individually and facing each other, giving Marianne prominent time and space within the frame, suggesting her authority. This is at odds with the typical power dy-

namics afforded young people in heteronormative serial romances whereby the male character is the assertive agent of change, and pursuer of the romance, while the female character is subject to the romantic pursuit of the male and holds a largely passive role.

The GEMINI toolkit, including the GMN triangle, is available for teachers via an online multimedia platform of resources and exercises that aim to engage young people in learning about gender issues through accessible and relatable media. Because students typically 'opt in' to viewing content like serial drama or YouTube, they are familiar with the narrative conventions of drama storytelling. Equally, teachers appreciate the ease of use of such online toolkits, which require less training and familiarisation for both teachers and students, and which can be modularised.

Conclusion

In this article, we present findings from a study of secondary school students and teachers in Ireland, conducted as part of the GEMINI project. The results indicate various challenges that teachers face in teaching gender and sexuality issues, particularly due to their lack of training on these topics. Although Irish society has made some advances in gender equality in recent years, the country nonetheless bears the weight of its hyper-conservative Catholic legacy. This legacy is nowhere more apparent than in Irish schools, a great many of which still retain a Catholic ethos and foreground the teaching of Catholic values. It is within this environment that teachers report inadequate resources and training for teaching gender topics, as well as some resistance to the inclusion of gender topics from, at times, school management, other teachers, parents and students. This was also reflected in the student focus groups conducted, with boys more resistant than girls to gender topics more generally.

This suggests that there is a pressing need in Ireland for better education on gender topics for school-goers. However, without sufficient attention to gender topics on the Irish secondary school curriculum, it can be difficult for teachers to design and develop resources to address these issues. The GEMINI toolkit offers one such possibility, and the GMN Triangle is one tool that can be easily adopted by teachers. The toolkit is designed to be adaptable to the teaching context of schools and individual teachers. It uses the

GMN Triangle and serial drama representations as a familiar gateway to discussions of gender representation and facilitates students' learning about concepts such as gender stereotypes and gender equality through relatable storytelling forms. The GEMINI toolkit, at the time of writing, is being rolled out to Irish schools, which is particularly prescient considering the worrying rise of anti-gender rhetoric and its by now well-documented impact on young boys in Ireland (Ging et al. 2024). The GEMINI toolkit is one means through which teachers can integrate gender topics at a very crucial time in students' lives and in the mainstreaming of gender equality in Irish society. The findings outlined in this article would be enhanced by future studies that explore the impact of the GEMINI toolkit on the teachers and students who have piloted it in Ireland and across Europe.

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Note

1   Respondents were numbered and accorded letter M for male, F for female and NB for non-binary. The naming convention is, in this first example M for male, 7 because they are the seventh of all respondents, and over 40 indicating their age group

An infinite spectrum of colours 1
Teaching gender issues through *Prisma*

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Abstract

This article presents the research underpinning the video essay *An Infinite Spectrum of Colours: Teaching Gender Issues through Prisma* (also included in this special issue) and aims to explore the value of serial dramas as tools for discussing gender issues and enhancing media literacy in high school students.

Through interviews with industry professionals, textual analysis and analysis of promotional materials, this work explores *Prisma* (2022-2024), an Italian coming-of-age series co-produced by Amazon Prime Video and Cross Productions. *Prisma* builds on the "SKAM methodology," which includes in-depth research, youth interviews, and consultant advice to engage viewers with authentic narratives around gender, identity, inclusivity, and disability. Its thoughtful and educational approach to gender-related topics makes it a valuable case study. In particular, the article focuses on the "coming out" theme, examining it through three lenses: a) narrative techniques that challenge stereotypes by subverting the viewers' expectations; b) media literacy, comparing coming out scenes from other series; and c) gender insights, exploring how this theme resonates with non-binary and fluid identities.

Keywords: Italian serial dramas, coming out, gender identities, non-binarism, media literacy

Introduction

This article presents the research underpinning the video essay *An Infinite Spectrum of Colours: Teaching Gender Issues through Prisma* (also included in this special issue). Together, the article and the video essay propose an audiovisual pedagogical approach that employs serial dramas as a means to foster critical discussions on gender issues and to strengthen media literacy skills among high school students.

Drawing on interviews with industry professionals—including Ludovico Bessegato (*Prisma*'s screenwriter and director) and Maddalena Rinaldo (Head of Content for Cross Productions)—as well as promotional materials (e.g., pressbooks, press releases), publicly accessible resources from desktop production studies, and textual analysis, this contribution focuses on the Italian coming-of-age drama *Prisma* (Amazon Prime Video, 2022-2024). The article is

structured into four sections. The first situates *Prisma* within the broader landscape of Italian teen dramas, tracing its connections to *SKAM Italia* and examining the production methodology that informed its creation. The second section offers a close reading of a key "coming out" scene, highlighting how the series subverts viewer expectations and challenges gender stereotypes through specific narrative and stylistic choices. The third section expands the analysis by comparing *Prisma*'s coming out narrative to those found in other recent television dramas, thereby situating it within a broader audiovisual context. Finally, the fourth section explores the pedagogical potential of *Prisma* in high school education, discussing how the series can be used to foster critical thinking about gender representation and to enhance media literacy among students.

Prism Generation: From *SKAM Italia* to *Prisma*

Prisma is a coming-of-age serial drama co-produced by Amazon Prime Video with Cross Productions, the production company behind *SKAM Italia* (TIMVision 2018-19, Netflix 2020-2024), the Italian adaptation of the popular Norwegian (Sundet 2020; Antonioni et al. 2021) format, cowritten and codirected by Ludovico Bessegato—who is also the creator of *Prisma*. From season 2, Beta Film handles international sales in all international territories outside Italy—where the show is available exclusively on Amazon Prime Video (Vivarelli 2023).

As stated by Maddalena Rinaldo, *Prisma* adopted the methodology used both by the original *SKAM* and by the Italian adaptation, which means to extract themes, plots and dialogues of the series from research conducted on real teenagers: "we had to conduct thousands of interviews with young people, we had to have consultants, we had to go right into schools and observe" (Rinaldo 2023). The aim of this process is to convey a genuine portrayal of youth experiences and their engagement with gender, identity, inclusivity, and disability. Applying this methodology to original content, *Prisma* is a good example of an Italian production directly addressing gender issues by narrating the lives of a group of adolescents in a provincial town. Bessegato explains:

> I had the opportunity to tell stories about people younger than I am, mentored by Norwegian showrunner [and

Skam creator] Julie Andem. […] After five years on this journey, I felt the need to take everything I learned and try to do something that is completely ours […]. Something that started from our observation of reality; of our context. Something that showed that we weren't just good adapters, but were able to offer our own perspective on that world. A new narrative, which brings together years of study and observation of that world with our personal idea of cinema and our aesthetics. (Vivarelli 2022)

TV series targeted specifically at a young audience are, with some exceptions, a quite recent phenomenon in Italy, mostly introduced in the late 1990s through US imports (Fornasari 2021), but the growth of locally produced young adult/adolescent serial dramas has been boosted in the last five years both by the entry of private SVOD operators into the Italian market and by the response of the public broadcaster Rai through its online portal RaiPlay (Barra 2023). In this context, the new locally produced teen dramas draw many of their tropes from US models and are often compared to the same US models by their viewers: *Prisma* was, in fact, often compared to series like *Transparent* (2014-2019) and *Euphoria* (2019-), despite its close relationship with *SKAM*.

Prisma tells the story of identical teenage twins, Andrea and Marco, and their community of friends, who, in their daily lives, explore gender identities and roles, push the boundaries of sexual orientation, and struggle with discrimination and stereotypes in a small town, Latina, located a few kilometres from the sea and about sixty kilometres from Rome. "Generation Prisma", reads an Italian interview with Bessegato, who talks about a "generation that seems to live and choose the spaces in between in the broadest possible sense":

A generation and a world in which the very concept of diversity seems to no longer suffice to describe reality. […] Only an infinity of unique existences. We borrowed the image of the optical prism, which manages to break down light, only apparently white, into the infinite spectrum of colors that composes it. (Vivarelli 2022)

On September 11, 2024, Ludovico Bessegato emotionally announced on Instagram that Amazon Prime would not renew *Prisma* for a third season.

This cancellation sparked a wave of disappointment on social media, raising concerns about media representation and streaming platforms' shift towards mainstream content. Fans argue that this trend undermines niche, high-quality series and reduces diversity. Criticism also extends to global media companies, accusing them of sidelining their diversity rhetoric for financial gain.

In response, *Prisma*'s fans have launched an online petition[1] urging Amazon to reconsider its decision, stressing the series' role in addressing taboo topics and promoting critical social issues, particularly around the LGBTQ+ community. The petition calls for a third season to ensure the continuation of Prisma's impact in challenging stereotypes and fostering public dialogue. In September 2025, one year later, the public broadcaster RAI announced that it had acquired the free-to-air linear television rights for the first two seasons (Rocco 2024).

How *Prisma* defies expectations and challenges gender stereotypes: The coming out narrative

One of the most compelling aspects of *Prisma* is its ability to challenge gender stereotypes. Through the mise en scene, dialogues, and narrative choices, the show questions perceived social expectations of gender roles and gendered behaviours and encourages us to adopt a different perspective on what it means to be socially constructed in binary terms. The show defies our expectations about social behaviours, surprises us, and encourages us to see things from different perspectives. Breaking down gender stereotypes and defying our expectations is at the core of the drama's main plot. The twins attend the same high school, but while Andrea is self-assured and popular, Marco is shy and gloomy and does not befriend others easily. The narrative reverses viewer expectations since the one who turns out to have a "secret life" and explores gender fluidity is Andrea, who cross-dresses as a woman in the basement and as a woman flirts online with Daniele, a boy from the same school.

In this article, we focus on a specific scene from *Prisma*'s first season[2] to illustrate how TV series can challenge stereotypes and over-

turn viewers' expectations through specific narrative techniques, with particular reference to the theme of "coming out".

As we mentioned, throughout the series Andrea explores their gender identity, and in the penultimate episode, during a night out in Rome, they finally dress as a woman in public. Andrea's gender identity remains fluid until the end of the series. However, in the season 1 finale (S01E08), advised by the volunteer of an LGBTQ+ helpline, they decide to finally come out by telling that they are not the otherwise expected cisgendered, heterosexual boy.[3]

Driving with their father, they openly take out women's clothing and makeup from their backpack. Andrea's father is portrayed as a rather traditional man who has lived his entire life in Latina, a small city near Rome, founded during fascism and still widely associated with far-right ideology. When he asks about the clothes, Andrea asks him to pull over, clearly intending to come out and reveal their fluid gender identity.

The camera briefly tracks the car before stopping, allowing the vehicle to continue on its own into a rural clearing where it eventually comes to a rest. Remaining motionless, the camera holds a long shot of the car, while the accompanying music also fades into silence. The characters remain unseen until the father exits the vehicle to light a cigarette; only at that moment does the camera frame Andrea, still seated inside the car and visibly shaken.

What stands out most in this scene is that Andrea's coming out takes place off-screen—or more precisely, through what Rondolino and Tomasi (2023: 130) define as an "internal off-screen space," that is, the expressive use of a portion of space that, while within the frame, is concealed from the viewer's gaze by an element of mise-en-scène (in this case, the car, whose interior remains hidden). Through this stylistic choice, the moment is not over-dramatised but instead rendered as too intimate and delicate to be visually exposed.

Andrea eventually gets out of the car and joins their father, who offers a cigarette without saying a word. Then, as the music resumes, the father breaks the silence with an ironic line that eases the tension and defies expectations of an angry or repressive response: "Aren't those shoes uncomfortable?". With this single line, the father conveys both the stereotypes of traditional masculinity (such as the inability to comprehend the discomfort of certain female accessories like high heels) and, at the same time, gently distances

himself from them, drawing closer to his son's sensitivity. Andrea finally smiles. The emotional closeness also becomes physical: all the tension dissipates when the father embraces Andrea, who begins to sob.

The coming out narrative beyond *Prisma*

The narrative of coming out in television and cinema evolved into a familiar trope which constructs and simultaneously reveals a recognisable gay subject (Rigoletto 2020, 107). Over time, this "coming out" journey evolved into a familiar trope in cinema and TV. Recently, what could be called the "coming out scene" has become particularly visible in teen drama narratives, not only in the Anglophone productions but also in the Italian ones. Recent examples are Netflix's *Suburra* (2017-2020), HBO's *We Are Who We Are* (2020), and RAI's *Il Professore* (2021-). *Suburra* is a TV drama set in the criminal underbelly of Rome, featuring a queer character named Spadino Anacleti, member of a very traditional Sinti family. Spadino's homosexuality is not accepted in his community nor in the criminal world he lives in, so his coming out is both an act of defiance and rebellion and a form of condemnation. In terms of visual language and narrative, his coming out is depicted with melodramatic tones and a gritty urban nightscape. *We Are Who We Are* is a 2020 teen drama miniseries co-created and directed by Luca Guadagnino for HBO and Sky Atlantic. The miniseries takes place on a fictional U.S. military base in Chioggia, Italy and follows the lives of two American teenagers who live there, exploring their coming of age and their non-binary, fluid sexualities and gender identities. The series does not present a traditional "coming out" moment with a clear-cut scene. Instead, it portrays queer identity as something fluid, constantly evolving and being explored. Finally, *Il Professore* is a Rai serial drama centred on Dante Balestra, a high school teacher, his son Simone and Dante's pupils and Simone's classmates. Simone's coming out to his father takes place in an emotional context—not through a dramatic speech, but rather as a gradual buildup of confrontations with his father. Simone opens up slowly, while his father—a man who tries to be progressive but is also trapped by certain rigidities—goes through his own parallel journey of acceptance.

It became a means to create critical turning points in a plot, often fuelling story arcs about personal growth, especially in coming-of-

age and teen drama genres. In these narratives, the climax often revolves around a poignant, confessional scene, where an LGBTQ+ character reveals a deeply held "secret" to friends, family, or even an entire community. But while these stories usually aim to foster inclusivity, they can also reinforce heteronormative expectations and stereotypes, limiting how gender and sexual identity are represented (De Simone and Guerini Rocco 2020). The very idea of the "confession" implies that the character is revealing a sin or a crime. In *Prisma*, the anticlimactic reversal of the typical coming out narrative, which may involve fights and shouting, aligns with the series' effort to normalise diversity and represent adolescence as a journey towards self-discovery rather than a path of social or professional self-realisation. Moreover, Andrea's gender fluidity motivates discussions about non-binarism and the concept of cis-heteronormativity, which is a cultural situation that makes it necessary to "come out" to others.

This sequence from *Prisma*, vehiculating positive values of self-discovery and productive dialogue with parental figures, seems particularly apt for teachers to use in the classroom.

Pedagogical use of *Prisma* in high school teaching

The "coming out scene" as a motif could be the framework in which to discuss narrative strategies, media literacy and gender representation.

Following the pedagogical triangle (Jacobsen and Hansen 2024) for teaching gender issues through serial dramas (Fig. 1), the teacher may motivate students' comprehension of the narrative by discussing how this particular coming out scene has been orchestrated, and which narrative techniques have been used.

The scene, for example, overturns viewers' expectations first by keeping the coming out moment off-screen and then with the father's reaction, calm and affectionate instead of enraged and violent. In this way, the scene's climax is not the coming out moment but the final hug between the two at the end of the scene, as underlined by the rising extradiegetic music, which is absent in the first part. Teachers may also invite students to imagine other ways in which the coming out scene could be orchestrated on screen, both in the case of these particular characters and in general.
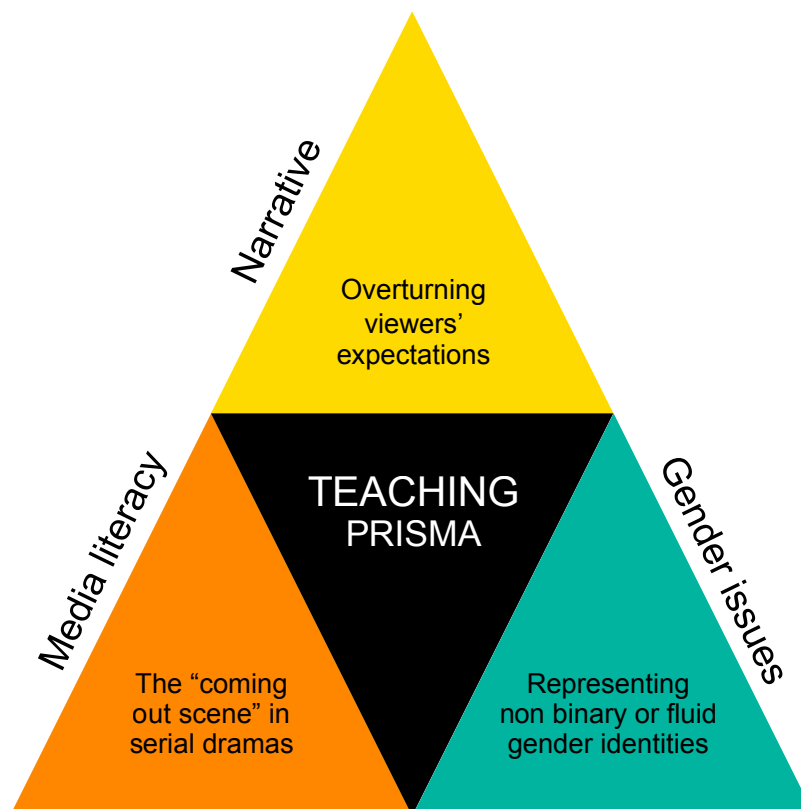
Fig. 1: Pedagogical triangle for teaching gender-related topics through serial dramas.

The discussion about possible alternatives helps shift to a media literacy perspective. First, teachers could introduce the concept of the "coming out" trope in cinema and TV, which is often resolved through a narrative climax involving a dramatic confession in front of an audience.

Following this discussion, the teachers could then compare different coming-out scenes in other TV series and films. Recent serial dramas offer several interesting and nuanced coming-out representations. In *Sex Education*, for instance, several characters' story arcs focus on their progressive acceptance of their LGBTQ+ identities, such as Eric's coming out in church and Adam's acknowledgement of his bisexuality in front of his dad. Moreover, Martino's coming out in *SKAM Italia*'s second season could be seen as a predecessor of an anti-climactic coming-out scene. Martino, who has been grap-

pling with his identity and the difficulty of coming out, decides to confide in Giovanni, his best friend. The scene takes place in Giovanni's room. While they are playing videogames, Martino quietly opens up about his sexuality, Giovanni listens intently, showing quiet acceptance and unwavering support, which helps Martino feel safe and validated. The scene avoids dramatic tones, opting instead for an understated and intimate conversation.

In conclusion, these examples present numerous opportunities to explore the complex representation of gender identities today. In this context, *Prisma* offers a nuanced portrayal of non-binary identities and emphasises the right to adopt an indefinite and fluid gender identity. The series frequently challenges viewers' expectations, particularly in the coming-out scene, which is part of a broader effort to disrupt prejudices and stereotypes. Educators can engage students in discussions about various ways LGBTQ+ identities are represented in media, ranging from comedy to drama, highlighting the freedom that comes from subverting typical expectations.

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Notes

1   The petition is accessible here: https://www.change.org/p/chiediamo-il-rinnovo-della-serie-tv-prisma-per-una-terza-stagione-su-amazon-prime-video. Accessed 28 October 2024.

2   Transgender activist Jessica Senesi, who served as a consultant for *Prisma*, shared on her social media that this scene was inspired by her own personal experience. In this regard, it is worth noting that the screenplay of *Prisma*, coauthored by Bessegato and Alice Urciolo, also draws inspiration from the life of transgender poet Giovanna Cristina Vivinetto, whose poetry collection *Dolore minimo* (2018) is read by characters within the series. Among the show's consultants is also transgender activist Francesco Cicconetti.

3   Nicoletta Marini Maio also focused on this sequence in her presentation titled "Refracting Colors of Prisma: The Therapeutic, Non-Conforming, Desiring Community of a Teen Drama" during the Summer School "Mediating Italy in Global Culture", University of Bologna, Rimini, 19-23 June 2023.

An infinite spectrum of colours 2
Teaching gender issues through *Prisma: The Video Essay*

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Abstract

This text outlines and contextualizes the methodological and stylistic choices underpinning the video essay *An Infinite Spectrum of Colours. Teaching Gender Issues Through Prisma*, whose theoretical implications are further developed in the homonymous essay included in this special issue. Focusing on the representation of coming out in the television series *Prisma* (Amazon Prime Video, 2022-2024), it discusses the montage strategies, aesthetic decisions, and intertextual references employed to construct a critical and pedagogical discourse on non-binary and fluid gender identities. By embracing the video essay as a form of *cinécriture,* the text reflects on its potential as a tool for research, teaching, and media education—capable of combining analytical rigor with emotional engagement.

Keywords: Italian serial dramas, coming out, gender identities, non-binarism, video essay

Introduction: The Video Essay as Critical Inquiry?

The video essay form, conceived as "the possibility of using the camera as a pen, and of producing a fully personal *cinécriture*" (Rascaroli 2017: 4; 2017), offers a powerful medium for critical inquiry, particularly when engaging with complex audiovisual texts such as *Prisma* (Amazon Prime Video, 2022-2024). By blending analytical description with self-reflexive engagement, the video essay is espe-

cially well-suited to pedagogical contexts, where it functions not only as a mode of analysis but also as a tool for active learning and critical thinking.

This article, which serves as a guiding text for the video essay *An Infinite Spectrum of Colours: Teaching Gender Issues through Prisma*, discusses the montage strategies, aesthetic decisions, and intertextual references employed to construct a critical and pedagogical discourse on non-binary and fluid gender identities. The theoretical implications are further developed in the homonymous essay included in this special issue.

The editing structure used in the video essay aims to interrogate the theme of "coming out" by situating it within a pedagogical framework that integrates three interrelated analytical dimensions: first, an exploration of media literacy, achieved through intertextual comparisons with analogous scenes from other serialized dramas; second, a focus on narrative strategies, emphasizing how the series challenges and subverts stereotypical tropes; and third, an examination of gender discourses, with particular attention to the multiple and evolving meanings that the act of coming out assumes in the context of non-binary and fluid identities. In this way, the video essay not only analyses the representational strategies of *Prisma* but also reflects on its broader cultural and educational implications.

Aesthetic Strategies and Analytical Framing

The video essay opens with an evocative condensation of what will emerge as one of the focal points of the analysis of the television series *Prisma*: the delicate moment of coming out. The montage of various coming-out sequences drawn from different television series is characterised by the removal of the original audio, replaced instead with a metallic sound. This stylistic choice serves to emphasize the emotional weight that this moment typically carries within narrative structures. By doing so, as in *Prisma*, the viewer is momentarily distanced from the scene, disrupting their voyeuristic impulse to penetrate another's intimacy. Thus, the opening sequence of the video essay is intended to function not only as a compelling prologue but also as an anticipatory device that replicates, through a form of mise en abyme, the core of the entire analysis.

For the presentation of the series *Prisma*, in addition to the reassembly of selected sequences from the show, supplementary materials were incorporated, such as the Amazon Prime Video interface—evoking the aesthetics of desktop films—and a map of the city of Latina. These elements facilitated the integration of additional details about the series while also alluding to two fundamental aspects that warrant further investigation: the role of location and the impact of streaming platforms.

Before arriving at the analysis of the coming-out sequence in *Prisma*, which constitutes the central focus of the video essay, a deliberate "step back" was taken. This transition was visually underscored through a rapid countdown. The objective was not to provide a comprehensive historical reconstruction but rather to propose a broader analytical framework that considers both sociopolitical discourses on LGBTQ+ identities and the evolving cinematic and televisual portrayals of coming out. This rationale guided the selection of various materials: found footage from 1969 depicting the Stonewall riots as a symbolic moment, covers from the magazines *Come Out!* and *Fuori!*, and coming-out sequences from television series spanning different historical periods.

Following this brief flashback, the narrative returns to the coming out sequence. Andrea is in the car with his father and asks him to pull over. Given the visual and narrative intensity of this moment, the decision was made not to intervene, but rather to present the beginning of the sequence as it is originally shown to the audience. It is only upon reaching the key off-screen moment—at which point one may presume that Andrea shares his inner journey with his father—that the video essay re-engages, replicating this off-screen dynamic through a visual contraction of the frame. This narrowing introduces symbolic black borders, which serve as a visual metaphor for all that remains inaccessible to the viewer's knowledge, including how any label might define a precise articulation of the protagonist's gender identity.

A colour match transition then leads into the final section of the video essay, which is more theoretically oriented and engages with the visual representation of the academic concept of the "pedagogical triangle" (Jacobsen and Hansen 2024). This is realised through the visualisation of a triangle encompassing selected scenes from Prisma. The eventual expansion beyond the boundaries of this

triangle—culminating in an enlargement that allows the embrace scene to fill the entire screen—aims to underscore the intersection of academic research, television seriality, and the lived significance of embodied experiences.

The voice-over was produced using an artificial intelligence program. After an additional attempt to use a human voice, the final choice settled on the synthetic alternative, as it proved surprisingly capable of professionally modulating different tones, thereby contributing to both rhythm and emotional immersion. While the content remains rigorously grounded in scientific research, the "grain" (Barthes 1985)—the texture—of the artificial voice becomes an indispensable element of the video essay, preserving the crucial interplay between aesthetics and scholarship.

Acknowledgement

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Gender Representation in Serial Dramas
A Reproducible Classroom Methodology for Critical Analysis

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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.

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 & Shanan 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 & Shanan 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

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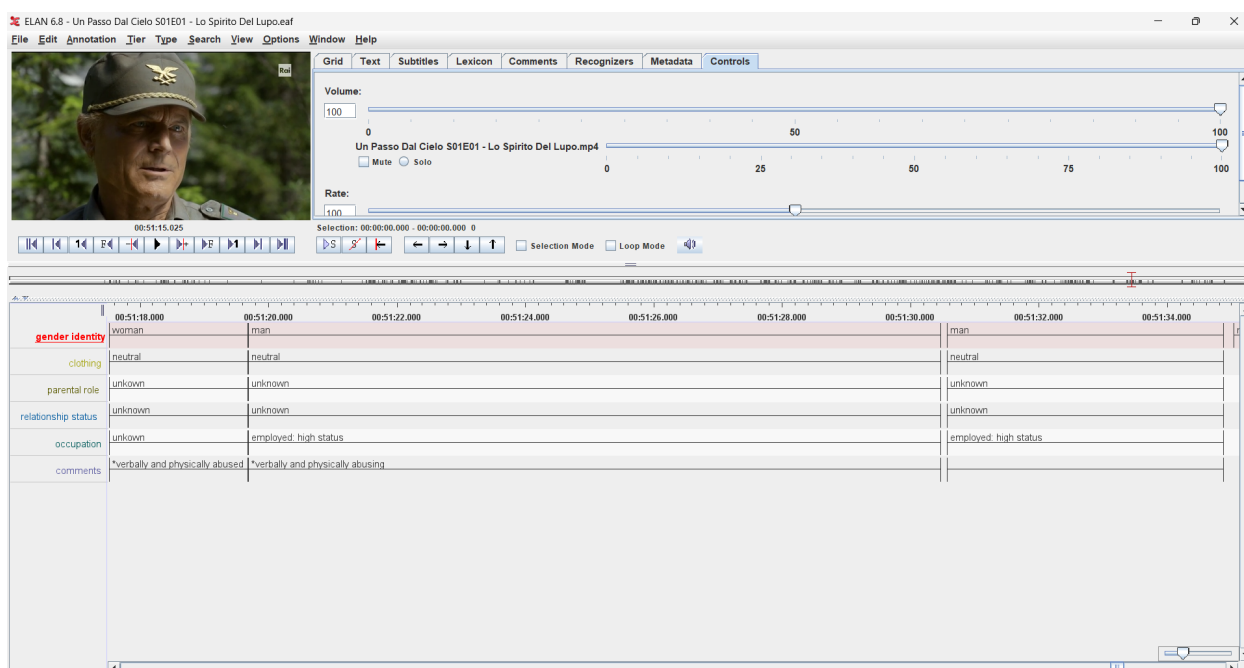
Figure 1: Application of the Codebook to an Excerpt of Season 1, Episode 1 of *Un passo dal cielo* (Rai 1, 2011-).

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

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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 more[2]. 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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TV Series

Un passo dal cielo. Enrico Oldoini. Italy: Rai 1, 2011-

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.

Teaching Sexuality and Gender
What *Sex Education* and *Un Professore* Show Us

Greta Delpanno is a PhD candidate in a joint supervision program at the Université de Montréal and at the University of Bologna. Her research focuses on television seriality and gender studies, examining the representation of the LGBTQIA+ community and alternative forms to heteronormativity in the latest Italian TV series on streaming platforms.

Abstract

Television series have long been recognized not just for entertainment but also for their educational potential. This video essay explores *Sex Education* (Netflix 2019-2023) and *Un professore* (Rai 1 2021-), focusing on their capacity to address gender issues within educational settings. Through an analysis of these series, this study examines how a sex therapist and a teacher engage with students on topics such as sexuality, inclusion, and bullying, utilizing narrative techniques that surpass traditional lecture methods in fostering understanding and dialogue. The video essay features an audio commentary that highlights the significance of these interactions, assessing their potential to serve as real-life educational models. This research underscores how serial dramas can effectively engage European teenagers with complex themes of gender equality, proposing their strategic use in schools to support a constructive dialogue around gender and social issues.

Keywords: Tv Series, Gender, Sexuality, Teaching, Representation

Television has historically served not only as a source of entertainment but also as a vehicle for informal learning and social discourse. This video essay explores how *Sex Education* (Netflix 2019-2023) and *Un professore* (Rai 1 2021-), two contemporary teen dramas, engage with questions of pedagogy, representation, and identity formation. By centering their narratives around high school settings, these series not only depict classroom learning but also position themselves as potential learning tools for audiences, particularly young viewers.

This analysis situates *Sex Education* and *Un professore* within broader discussions on media pedagogy, queer representation, and the evolving role of streaming platforms in shaping cultural discourse. Drawing from scholars such as Lynne Joyrich (2014), Tanya Horeck (2021), Jack Halberstam (2011), and Maria-Jose Masanet and David Buckingham (2014), what emerges is an exploration of how the series contribute to wider discussions surrounding gender, sexuality, and education.

Television as a Pedagogical Tool

A key premise of this analysis is that television operates as a site where dominant ideologies are both produced and refracted, generating tensions and contradictions that can open spaces for negoti-

ating social norms (Joyrich 2014). Serialized television in particular allows for long-term narrative engagement with social issues, providing space for character development and thematic depth. This video essay considers how these series offer a dual approach to teaching: first, by portraying explicit pedagogical practices within their narratives, and second, by themselves serving as affective and educational experiences for viewers.

As Masanet and Buckingham (2014) suggest, entertainment media can function as an informal site of sex education for young people, offering representations that complement or fill gaps left by formal schooling. In this sense, *Sex Education* and *Un professore* engage with themes of sexuality, identity, and personal development in ways that extend beyond traditional classroom environments.

Sex Education
Queer Pedagogy and Media Accountability

Launched in 2019, *Sex Education* presents an explicit and highly resonant depiction of adolescent sexuality, relationships, and the failures of institutionalized sex education. Set in the fictional Moordale Secondary School, the series follows Otis Milburn, a teenager who, inspired by his sex therapist mother, offers informal counseling to his peers. Through humor and emotional depth, the show tackles issues such as sexual orientation, consent, asexuality, and reproductive health.

One of the most compelling aspects of *Sex Education* is its engagement with failure as a productive and generative force, echoing Jack Halberstam's (2011) reflections on how resisting dominant cultural logics of success can open up alternative pedagogical possibilities grounded in equality. By portraying the awkwardness, missteps, and moments of vulnerability experienced by its characters, the series underscores the value of learning through trial and error. This approach aligns with queer pedagogical perspectives that challenge rigid, heteronormative models of identity and instead foster fluidity, uncertainty, and ongoing growth.

This pedagogical potential became central to Netflix's own framing of the series. After the release of the first season, *Sex Education* was criticized by religious and conservative groups in France for its explicit content and open treatment of sexuality. In response, Netflix positioned the series as an educational resource. In January 2020,

alongside the launch of the second season, Netlix released in France *Le Petit Manuel de Sex Education*, a 60-page guide addressing topics such as menstruation, consent, contraception, and homosexuality. Promoted across social media and in schools, the guide reframed the series not as a risk or provocation, but as a tool for raising awareness and fostering dialogue among young audiences. In doing so, Netflix not only reaffirmed its public commitment to social responsibility but also pursued a process of accountability, as described by Boudon and Sonet (2021), leveraging educational content to enhance its cultural legitimacy and market positioning..

Un Professore
Life Lessons Through Philosophy

Unlike *Sex Education*, which is explicitly focused on sexuality, *Un professore* approaches education through the lens of philosophy.

While both *Sex Education* and *Un Professore* engage with themes of adolescence, identity, and education, the differences in their production contexts are crucial to understanding their representational strategies. Netflix, as a global streaming platform, operates within a transnational market logic that prioritizes diversity, bold storytelling, and content that can circulate across multiple cultural contexts. RAI, by contrast, is Italy's national public broadcaster, shaped by specific institutional constraints, editorial guidelines, and a historically more conservative approach to representation. Its programming is oriented towards a domestic audience and often reflects the cultural and social expectations of national television. As a result, *Un Professore* adopts a more subdued and allegorical approach to themes of queerness and pedagogy, relying on the figure of the teacher as a moral and intellectual guide within a recognizably Italian context. These structural differences influence not only tone and aesthetics but also the level of narrative risk each platform is willing—or expected—to take.

The series follows Dante Balestra, an unconventional high school teacher in Rome who uses philosophical discussions to help his students navigate personal and societal challenges. By integrating thinkers such as Kant, Nietzsche, and Foucault into everyday dilemmas, the show presents philosophy as a tool for critical engagement with the world.

Dante's teaching style stands in stark contrast to that of his colleagues, who adhere to traditional, transmissive methods of education (Parsemain 2019). His approach aligns with constructivist pedagogy, which encourages active participation and the development of critical thinking rather than passive absorption of knowledge. In this way, *Un professore* reinforces the idea that education is not confined to the classroom but is an ongoing, interactive process that extends into students' personal lives.

Furthermore, the series addresses questions of gender and sexuality, albeit in a more implicit manner than Sex Education. Issues such as masculinity, power dynamics, and intergenerational conflicts are explored through philosophical debates on everyday concerns related to identity and relationships.

Representation, Intersectionality, and Queer Narratives

Both series navigate the complex landscape of queer representation, balancing between authenticity and the pressures of mainstream marketability. As Joyrich (2014) notes, television has historically been a site of both queer visibility and assimilation. While contemporary series feature a growing number of LGBTQ+ characters, an ongoing debate remains about whether such representation challenges or reinforces dominant ideologies. In the Italian context, a variety of recent serial dramas across platforms have introduced queer characters and themes with differing levels of depth and narrative centrality. Netflix's *Baby* (2018–2020), *Summertime* (2020–2022), *Zero* (2021), and *Adorazione* (2022) explore sexuality and identity within youth-oriented storylines. Prime Video's *Bang Bang Baby* (2022) and *Prisma* (2022–) take on queerness more explicitly, with *Prisma* offering a nuanced portrayal of gender fluidity. RAI's *Un Professore* (2021–) and *Mare Fuori* (2020–) frame LGBTQ+ identities within institutional or carceral settings, while RaiPlay originals like *Nudes* (2021) and *Mental* (2020) address adolescent experience and mental health with space for queer representation.

One critique leveled at both *Sex Education* and *Un professore* is their tendency to follow an "agenda" of inclusivity, where representation risks becoming a checklist rather than an organic narrative development. For instance, the later seasons of *Sex Education* introduce a trans-led student council, while *Un professore* expands its cast to include characters representing diverse racial identities

and physical disabilities. These portrayals, while valuable, also raise questions about the commodification of diversity and the extent to which such representation serves the interests of platforms rather than marginalized communities.

Nonetheless, as Parsemain (2019) argues, media representation plays a crucial role in shaping identity and fostering discussions around gender and sexuality. The presence of queer characters and narratives, even within mainstream contexts, contributes to broader cultural shifts, challenging rigid binaries and offering alternative frameworks for understanding the self.

Conclusion: Reflection, Reality, and the Role of Television

Ultimately, *Sex Education* and *Un Professore* demonstrate how television can serve both as a mirror of contemporary social realities and as a space for engaging with them. By alternating between moments of queer joy and scenes of constraint or marginalization, these series reflect the contradictions many young people navigate in their everyday lives, reinforcing the idea that learning—whether about identity, sexuality, or philosophy—is often non-linear and unfinished. As Joyrich (2014) suggests, television operates as both reflection and refraction: these series don't just represent social issues, they contribute to how such issues are perceived and discussed. At the same time, their pedagogical potential should not be taken for granted. In a media landscape shaped by platform strategies and institutional agendas, it becomes all the more important to approach these narratives critically—to recognize not only what is shown, but how and why. It is through this critical engagement that viewers can begin to discern, contextualize, and respond to the messages embedded in serialized storytelling.

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