

Blending Genres, Crossing Generations: Contemporary Teen Dramas and Their Audience*

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Abstract

Over the past decade, the expansion of streaming platforms has reshaped the landscape of teen television, fostering more open, complex, and nuanced representations of adolescence. Series such as *SKAM*, *Sex Education*, *Never Have I Ever...*, *Heartstopper*, as well as the Italian *Baby*, *SKAM Italia*, *Nudes*, *Prisma* have contributed to redefining the genre, addressing themes including mental health, gender identity, and sexuality with increasing depth. At the same time, however, recent industrial shifts suggest a partial retreat from these renewed forms of teen series, as economic pressures and platform strategies favour content with broader, intergenerational appeal. We identify one key manifestation of this transition in the growing hybridisation of teen drama with other genres, often accompanied by more adult-oriented narrative frameworks and intergenerational perspectives. This article examines two interrelated questions: to what extent genre hybridisation contributes to processes of “adultification” in both content and audience, and how teenage viewers – particularly girls – perceive and negotiate these transformations. Drawing on an exploratory qualitative study based on focus groups with high school and university students, the analysis shows that young audiences display a critical awareness of the adult gaze embedded in contemporary teen series and reflect on how such representations may shape broader social understandings of adolescence.

Keywords: teen drama; audience research; adultification; genre hybridisation; SVOD platforms.

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Introduction¹

Over the past decade, the proliferation of streaming platforms has contributed to a significant expansion of teen series, as evidenced by titles like *SKAM* (NRK, 2015-2017), *The End of the F***ing World* (Channel 4, 2017-2019), *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019-2023), *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019-), *Never Have I Ever...* (Netflix, 2020-2023), and *Heartstopper* (Netflix, 2022-), which have fostered a renewed openness and pushed the boundaries of how youth experiences are depicted by addressing themes such as mental health, gender identity, and sexuality with increasing complexity and nuance, while moving away from more stereotypical portrayals (Sundet, 2021). Within this landscape, adolescence emerges as a multifaceted and often contradictory condition, explored through narratives that seek to capture its emotional, cultural, and even social depth.

At the same time, this phase of innovation already shows signs of decline as shifting industrial priorities and economic pressures begin to reshape the landscape (Barra et al., 2026). The cancellation of some titles and the redirection of platform strategies point to a reduced investment in more experimental narratives, in favour of content capable of appealing to broader, intergenerational audiences. This shift can be observed, in part, in the increasing hybridisation of teen drama with other genres, often accompanied by more adult-oriented narrative frameworks and themes, as well as the inclusion of multi-generational perspectives.

This article explores two interrelated issues that are central to the current configuration and possible future of teen drama. First, to what extent does genre hybridisation contribute to a process of “adultification” in both content and audience, potentially leading to a mainstreaming of youth narratives? Second, how do teenage viewers, and particularly girls, who remain a key audience for the genre, perceive and negotiate these transformations, especially in relation to questions of representation and the articulation of adolescent experience?

Rather than offering a straightforward survey of the genre, the article aims to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on youth media by directly linking the macro-strategies of television production to the micro-dynamics of audience reception. In the opening sections of this paper, we argue that the twin phenomena of “adultification” and genre hybridity are not merely aesthetic trends, but deliberate industrial strategies. Transnational SVOD platforms – and, by extension, the national broadcasting networks compelled to compete with them – deploy these strategies to reposition the teen drama from a niche, youth-specific format into a flexible, “neo-generalist” space engineered to capture multi-generational audiences.

To assess the implications of this industrial shift, the second part of the article draws on qualitative data gathered from focus groups with Italian high school and university students, examining how they engage with these adult-oriented texts. Our findings complicate established media paradigms: while the industry adultifies content to broaden its economic reach, young viewers actively negotiate these representations, drawing on an interpretive framework of “experiential proximity” to distance themselves from sensationalised

depictions. We show that young audiences do not primarily evaluate contemporary television through the lens of national or transnational origin, but through the prism of their own lived experience, transforming shared domestic viewing into a reciprocal space of intergenerational companionship. Ultimately, this study suggests that the "adultification" of teen media does not straightforwardly attract and foster younger viewers; rather, it generates a structural tension in which the primary audience must actively negotiate, and at times resist, the industry's adult-centric constructions of youth.

Beyond the Teen

Teen television has long resisted a stable definition, as demonstrated by the extensive scholarly debate surrounding the genre (Davis and Dickinson, 2004; Ross and Stein, 2008; Marghitu, 2021). Its most recognisable feature is, of course, the prominent presence of teenage characters and the narrative focus on adolescent identity, typically explored through the dramatisation of the social, emotional, and sexual challenges associated with youth. However, the adult world is deeply intertwined with teen drama across multiple levels.

First, teen series are created by adults, "with a particular adult agenda" (Davis and Dickinson 2004, 3), meaning that representations of adolescence are inevitably mediated through adult perspectives and cultural assumptions. This is particularly visible in teen dramas of the 1990s and early 2000s, which frequently articulate implicit boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable teen behaviour. These narratives often include storylines that operate in a cautionary-tale mode, ultimately restoring social order through the reaffirmation of more or less conservative moral values. From *Beverly Hills 90210* (Fox, 1990-2000) to *Dawson's Creek* (The WB, 1998-2003), teenagers in highly successful series tend to long for romantic love framed as a pathway to future stability, typically imagined through the horizon of the nuclear family (Birchall 2004, 182-183). At the same time, moments of rebellion are permitted only within a circumscribed range of acceptability, while more radical or antisocial transgressions are narratively contained, corrected, or neutralised.

Second, the teen television audience is not composed exclusively of teenagers: young adults and older viewers constitute a significant portion of teen series audiences, and are often explicitly addressed through a range of strategies, including intertextual references or appeals to nostalgia and generational memory (Hills, 2004; Birchall, 2004), as well as through narrative and aesthetic sophistication, as in *We Are Who We Are* (HBO, 2020), and the engagement with complex or controversial issues in a serious register, as in *Euphoria*, just to mention more contemporary examples.

Third, many teen series feature adult characters in narratively relevant roles, not merely as conflictual counterpoints to younger protagonists, but also as sites of characterisation, emotional complexity, and development in their own right. Several teen series are characterised by intergenerational casts, which may foreground dynamics of parental or educational authority, as well as forms of complicity that coexist with conflict, as seen in

series such as *Gilmore Girls* (The WB, The CW, 2000-2007), *Sex Education*, and *Ginny & Georgia* (Netflix, 2021-).

In the Italian television context, the presence of teenagers alongside adult characters within ensemble casts has long been a common feature of serial storytelling. This configuration often enables multiple parallel storylines capable of attracting both younger and older viewers, particularly on national broadcast channels, and aligns with a reassuring, “family-oriented”, and at times explicitly educational, programming logic (Barra et al. 2026, 11). Examples spanning a long period of time include *Un medico in famiglia* (Rai 1, 1998-2016), *Compagni di scuola* (Rai 2, 2001), *I Cesaroni* (Canale 5, 2006-2014), *I liceali* (Joi, Canale 5, 2008-2011), *Tutto può succedere* (Rai 1, 2015-2018), *La compagnia del cigno* (Rai 1, 2019-2021) and *Un professore* (Rai 1, 2021-), which we will explore in greater depth later.

In recent years, subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) services have been instrumental in dramatically increasing the number of television series available (Lotz & Lobato, 2023), developing strategies aimed at attracting global audiences through a combination of American content and locally produced titles, and betting on transnational circulation. Within this landscape, Netflix has arguably been the most influential player in shaping contemporary serial trends and aesthetics, contributing to what has been described as a broader process of “reinventing” the television industry (Jenner, 2023). In particular, the platform has pushed and popularised certain genres over others, including crime and teen drama, leveraging its global reach to influence both international and domestic productions. The latter, especially, have functioned as a laboratory for Netflix’s signature “diversity business” (Asmar, Raats, Van Audenhove, 2024), as well as a space to experiment with variation in tones and with themes that complicate stereotypes associated with youth narratives. In this context, teen drama’s engagement with underrepresented groups is also reflected in a growing emphasis on the nuanced depiction of young female characters, positioning girlhood as a key site of identity formation in cultural products for adolescents (Driscoll, 2002; Andò & Hipkins, 2026).

These tendencies initially emerged and consolidated within American and British audiovisual industries, characterised by greater financial resources, stronger global market penetration, and wider international visibility. The transnational circulation and cultural prominence of these productions subsequently contributed to shaping expectations, aesthetic models, and thematic agendas in smaller national contexts, including Italy, where local productions adopted similar approaches to youth storytelling, such as a more direct engagement with teenage sexuality and efforts to complicate conventional romantic narratives, while simultaneously rearticulating these elements in response to the specific dynamics of Italian serial production. We observe these traits in series such as *Baby* (Netflix, 2018-2020), *SKAM Italia* (TimVision, Netflix, 2018-), *Nudes* (RaiPlay, 2021-), *5 minuti prima* (RaiPlay, 2022), *Prisma* (Prime Video, 2022-2024), and *Adorazione* (Netflix, 2024). However, the diffusion of these models has not necessarily translated into comparable levels of cultural impact or audience success across all territories: more recent developments suggest a reduction in the production of teen series exhibiting these characteristics, a shift

that may also be related to a changing political and cultural climate marked by more conservative tendencies. The cancellation of LGBTQ+ series and the decrease in LGBTQ+ characters (GLAAD Report, 2024) may reflect this broader contraction, which also appears in the Italian context, where “there has been a marked slowdown in the quantity, variety and ambition of teen drama projects on Italian on-demand digital platforms” (Barra et al. 2026, 14). This retrenchment suggests that as the streaming market matures and consolidates, platforms are increasingly abandoning the more risky, progressive experimentation that defined the early streaming era; instead, they are pivoting toward more conservative, broadly appealing formulas designed to capture multi-generational audiences at the expense of youth-specific targeting.

An example is the cancellation of *Prisma*, whose two seasons were released on Amazon Prime Video. The series’ creator, Ludovico Bessegato, announced that the series would not be renewed in September 2024 through an Instagram video (now deleted), attributing it to broader shifts in the production strategies of streaming platforms. In his opinion, the earlier drive to differentiate SVOD content from traditional broadcast television is increasingly giving way to a return to more conventional and reassuring narratives, as economic pressures and performance metrics incentivise content with broad audience appeal at the expense of more experimental and niche-oriented projects. Bessegato also expressed concern that this process of mainstreaming may limit space for experimenting with storytelling and socially complex issues. This shift highlights a fundamental paradox of the digital distribution model: although global platforms possess the structural capacity to sustain highly specialized, diverse projects, the consolidation of the SVOD market in its mature operational phase appears to be reorienting commissioning strategies toward the pursuit of large, multi-generational audiences. As a result, the initial emphasis on transnational niche audiences is increasingly superseded by more risk-averse, broad-appeal formulas that reproduce the logics of legacy broadcasting strategies.

Far from an isolated complaint, Bessegato’s industry critique accurately reflects a broader reorientation within contemporary Italian (but also global) television, where production strategies are increasingly prioritising intergenerational ensemble structures to maximise audience reach.

A notable example is the major success of *Mare fuori* (Rai 2, 2020-) (Spalletta & De Rosa, 2025; Spalletta et al., 2025), a series centred on a juvenile detention facility in Naples, in which teenage protagonists are positioned alongside adult figures who assume informal pedagogical and mentoring functions, as well as more morally ambiguous positions. This youth-adult ensemble structure recalls the intergenerational configurations discussed earlier in relation to Italian serial traditions. A comparable narrative logic can be observed in another successful production, *Un professore*, where adult characters similarly function as pedagogical and parental counterpoints to teenage protagonists, albeit within the more conventional institutional settings of the school and the family (Barra & Rossi, 2026). These examples suggest a deliberate integration of narrative strategies aimed at pushing the boundaries of the teen drama beyond a strictly adolescent target, reaching instead a wider, potentially intergenerational audience. As shown by the Italian serial tradition, and

more recently by the aforementioned *Mare fuori* and *Un professore*, one such strategy is the use of a broad ensemble cast that includes characters of different ages, allowing the narrative to explore issues connected to multiple stages of life. The challenges associated with adolescence are thus placed alongside storylines about parenthood, while youthful romantic relationships are frequently juxtaposed with those of adults. This structural embedding of adult figures serves an industrial function that extends far beyond the Italian context, anchoring the narrative in shared domestic spaces that facilitate multi-generational co-viewing. *Gilmore Girls* famously employs the mother-daughter relationship, marked by an unusually small age gap, as a central structural and thematic element of the series. Through this dynamic, the show narrates both the daughter's coming-of-age process and the mother's attempt to achieve stability while also, in some respects, continuing her own process of growing up. Their parallel experiences encompass not only school and career trajectories but also the complexities of romantic life. A similar dynamic can be observed in *Ginny & Georgia*, which likewise centres on the relationship between a very young, charismatic single mother and her more insecure teenage daughter. However, the series expands this framework by introducing a darker, crime-inflected undertone: the difficult and mysterious past of the mother, Georgia, is gradually revealed, involving possible fraud and even murder.

Indeed, the “adultification” of themes and content, and the resultant genre hybridisation can be considered two possible strategies for what has been described as a “neo-generalist” aim (Innocenti & Pescatore, 2023), referring to Netflix's and other platforms' shifting library: a programming model that combines the logic of niche targeting with content capable of appealing to wider and more heterogeneous audiences. Within this framework, teen drama increasingly functions not simply as youth-specific programming but as a flexible narrative space through which platforms deploy strategies that expand their appeal beyond strictly adolescent audiences. Essentially, this industrial evolution forces national broadcasting networks to negotiate a complex double-bind: they must actively compete with the hyper-globalised textuality and premium aesthetics of transnational SVOD platforms, while simultaneously fulfilling domestic cultural mandates, public service obligations, and the expectations associated with traditional family-oriented scheduling. An analysis of the contemporary Italian television landscape offers a revealing perspective on this structural tension, illustrating how local media ecosystems seek to adapt global streaming trends within deeply rooted national production contexts that must, however, remain responsive to intense competitive pressures (Antonioni & Checcaglini, 2026).

These pushes toward intergenerational audiences and forms of narrative adaptability should be understood as another facet of (rather than in opposition to) the broader phenomenon of “youthification of television” (Eichner et al., 2021), understood as the effort to attract younger viewers combined with the imperative for television to continuously reinvent itself in order to remain culturally and industrially relevant (Sundet, 2021; Steemers et al., 2026). In this sense, strategies aimed at broadening address and reconfiguring storytelling logics extend and complicate youth-oriented paradigms, ultimately reaffirming the complexity of the contemporary televisual landscape, shaped by an ever-evolving,

multifaceted digital environment and its expanding ramifications across platforms and audiences.

Forms of Hybridity and Adaptability in Teen Drama

Looking at just the past decade, we can observe how a number of productions combine the conventions of teen drama with genres such as crime, noir, or horror. Series such as *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016-2025), *Riverdale* (The CW, 2017-2023), *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Netflix, 2018-2020), *Yellowjackets* (Showtime, Paramount+, 2021-) or *Wednesday* (Netflix, 2022-) illustrate how genre hybridisation can expand the thematic and demographic reach of teen-centred narratives. *Yellowjackets* intensifies this dynamic by combining a survival-thriller narrative with a structure that alternates between the characters' teenage years in the past and their adult lives in the present. *Stranger Things* plays on nostalgic feelings for 1980's culture and intertextual references, while *Sabrina* and *Wednesday* reimagine and renew older popular characters: all three mix teen drama with fantasy-horror tropes. A further common element across these series is the centrality of female characters who defy expectations and fixed gender roles, using thriller and supernatural conventions to explore the tensions and contradictions of girlhood and womanhood. Particularly, the intersection between teen storylines and crime plots has been an enduring form of genre hybridisation for years, as exemplified by series such as *Veronica Mars* (UPN, The CW, Hulu, 2004-2019), and even by more uncategorisable works like *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1991; Showtime, 2017), which, while difficult to classify as teen drama, features notable teen storylines.

Two recent series distributed on Netflix, both novel adaptations, further illustrate the convergence of teen storytelling, crime narratives, and a focus on girlhood within a social context that is uneasy, if not overtly hostile, towards girls and women. The Italian Netflix original *Adorazione* (Netflix, 2024), adapted from a novel by Alice Urciuolo, is set in the provincial town of Sabaudia and revolves around the murder of a sixteen-year-old girl and the subsequent investigation involving her group of friends. The series engages with themes such as gender-based violence, trauma, the objectification of women, and toxic male social dynamics that ultimately have the greatest impact on the girls. In thematic terms, the series intersects with debates recently amplified by the British Netflix production *Adolescence* (Netflix, 2025), particularly regarding the consequences of the cult of possession among young males. Yet the two texts differ significantly in their narrative positioning, as well as in their stylistic and cultural impact. Despite its title, *Adolescence* is more centred on the failure of the adult roles and institutions (family, school, police) than on the troubled thirteen-year-old Jamie. Moreover, whereas *Adolescence* attracted considerable attention for its ambitious aesthetic strategies and performances, *Adorazione* adopts more conventional narrative and visual forms and appears to have generated only a limited presence within Italian public debates on the manosphere and gender-based violence.

A different articulation of the teen-crime hybrid is offered by *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* (BBC Three, 2024-), an adaptation of a popular young-adult novel by Holly Jackson, originally produced by the BBC before reaching a wider transnational audience through Netflix's distribution. The series follows Pip, a geeky and socially marginalised seventeen-year-old who decides to investigate the murder of a schoolmate that took place five years earlier. Set in a small town, the narrative shows limited interest in constructing a grounded representation of everyday teenage life. While *Adorazione* can be described as a teen drama with criminal undertones, *A Good Girl's Guide* operates more clearly as a crime narrative situated within a teen environment. It uses microsocial dynamics typical of teen dramas – such as oppositions between the popular and the unpopular, the privileged and the marginalised – yet it primarily relies on adolescent social life as a narrative device for secrecy, deviance, and transgression, from which the protagonist herself remains largely excluded.

These cases illustrate the “generic elasticity” of contemporary youth television within SVODs' broader programming strategies. Rather than operating as a fixed category, the teen genre functions as a modular narrative framework that platforms can readily hybridise with high-concept formats such as crime or noir. This capacity for cross-genre adaptation allows platforms to maximise their intellectual property, using the emotional stakes of adolescence to anchor catalogues designed to appeal to diverse demographic groups. They also raise a set of open questions regarding the platform's evolving strategies: whether teen series will continue to represent diverse youth experiences, how genre hybridisation may reshape their conventions, whether this signals a shift away from more niche-oriented approaches, and to what extent these developments reflect the consolidation of Netflix's neo-generalist catalogue.

While adultification and genre hybridisation can be understood as industrial strategies aimed at expanding the audiences of teen dramas, these narrative and stylistic choices also have implications for how adolescence itself is represented on screen. If teen dramas increasingly incorporate elements associated with adult life, or address teenage issues through conventions typically linked to more adult-oriented genres – such as complex romantic and sexual relationships, high-stakes dramatic conflict, or morally ambiguous characters and behaviours – the resulting depiction of adolescence may diverge from the everyday experiences of their younger viewers. Specifically, this gap materialises as a displacement of ordinary youth experience – school anxieties, peer relationships, and domestic life – by hyper-stylised, high-stakes realities in which teenagers operate with an implausible degree of emotional autonomy, financial independence, or criminal entanglement. Rather than finding their own lived struggles reflected in these narratives, young audiences are instead confronted with an adult-mediated construct of adolescence that privileges sensationalism over relatability. These themes emerged repeatedly in the focus groups we conducted with high school and university students, whose responses we introduce and examine in the following section.

Methodology

To understand how the primary target audience of young viewers makes sense of contemporary configurations of teen drama, particularly in terms of how adolescent experience is articulated, how these representations enter into dialogue with intergenerational concerns, what projections of adolescence they construct for external perception, and which elements resonate most strongly in teenagers' lived experience and interpretive frameworks, we conducted an exploratory qualitative study to examine these issues in more depth. To this end, we organised seven focus groups with an observational sample composed of students from the Pesaro-Urbino area: five with high school classes and two with university students. In total, 66 students aged 16-23 took part in the discussions: 58 female participants and 8 male participants, according to the way they chose to identify during the research process.²

We chose to focus predominantly on girls as participants, as girlhood emerges as a key site of storytelling and representation in contemporary teen series. Moreover, teen television has historically been addressed to, and predominantly consumed by, female audiences, a trend that persists across both adolescent and adult viewership, as highlighted in audience and television studies scholarship (Feasey, 2006; Feasey, 2009; Lacalle & Pujol, 2017; Gerrard, 2022).

Before conducting the sessions, all participants gave informed consent to be recorded and to be quoted anonymously. The focus group discussions were recorded on-site, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently subjected to thematic qualitative content analysis. The coding process followed a hybrid approach: initial structural codes were derived deductively from our core research questions regarding genre hybridity and adultification, while more granular, experiential sub-codes – such as parental co-viewing anxieties and aesthetic distancing – were allowed to emerge inductively from the participants' own vernacular language. These codes were systematically grouped into broader thematic clusters, which serve as the organisational framework for the empirical findings presented below.

Some of the results have been published elsewhere (Antonioni & Checcaglini, 2025), while in this article we focus on participants' reactions to the tension between adolescence and adulthood as it emerges both in narrative content and in audience reception. Some areas of discussion reveal how participants identified and engaged with processes of adultification in teen series. In particular, the conversations highlighted respondents' reflections on adult-coded behaviours, relationships, and aesthetic conventions. These themes are discussed in the following sections.

Adultification of Teenagers

The first area of discussion revolves around how teenage viewers evaluate the credibility of teen representation. Specifically, many participants express a sense of distance from portrayals of girlhood and teenage life that they perceive as disconnected from their lived reality, depicting behaviours and dramatic situations far removed from those of “average” seventeen- or eighteen-year-olds. This response recurs in relation to series such as *Baby*, *Euphoria*, and other shows that rely on shock value, overly dramatic narrative arcs, and depictions of excessive behaviours. These representations often prompt questions about what is realistic, what is appropriate to depict and what crosses a line.

One respondent mentions that both girls and boys are at times characterised in ways that they feel are exaggerated or unnecessary, and even problematic. Referring to *Euphoria*: “If she doesn’t feel good about herself, or if she doesn’t meet their own standards, she has to sexualise herself because otherwise... I mean, it’s just how it is in the end, but I think it’s really wrong”³ (G3, 17yo). The topic of the oversexualisation of female bodies emerges, and it is perceived as troubling, particularly when associated with low self-esteem or with the pressure to change in order to meet others’ expectations.

Another element of distancing lies in how the girls in *Euphoria* appear and dress. While such comments might initially come across as prudish, they are in fact reactions to representations perceived as unrealistic or unrelatable: “Also, just going to school, wearing clothes like that, if we showed up dressed like that here, we’d probably get kicked out” (G4, 17yo). More broadly, participants also raised concerns about what they described as a dark and often grim depiction of teenage sexuality.

Like, this glorification of teenagers diving straight into this almost dark world of sexuality. I mean, at 18, I don’t think it’s very normal to be doing these things. More than anything, it’s just... it’s sad that this kind of thing is being normalised and even seen as something empowering, at least in my opinion (A2, 17yo).

However, when reflecting on Italian series *Baby*’s ambiguous take on sexuality, another respondent acknowledges that it captures certain inner and psychological dynamics that she considers typical of adolescence. Specifically, she refers to the practice of “keeping secrets” from adults, pointing to secrecy as a defining dimension of adolescent experience within the negotiation between youth and adult authority.

I’m referring to the series *Baby*, which I also liked, but what really stuck with me was the way it focused a lot on sexuality. I mean, it was portrayed in a not positive way, like, no, it was all kind of hidden, so the idea of keeping this side of things secret... Well, we young people actually like this idea of maybe not talking about it openly, like everyone keeping their own secrets, you know? So this theme was sort of re-evaluated. For me, it was a series that, in any case, also showed a positive side to talking about relationships or about the theme itself (V3, 17yo).

Participants also single out *Mare fuori* and its tendency to exacerbate the young protagonists’ storylines, accelerating life stages and attributing to them overly dramatic circumstances and roles that appear non-credible.

Yes, also maybe too many issues that are actually more adult. Marriage, those who get pregnant, problems outside the family, someone who has to take the lead, who has to be in charge, an adolescent, so it's a bit hard for an 18-year-old girl to follow a story like that (M6, 20yo).

I mean, the whole context, not just the kids, everything was really exaggerated, like really. Even the whole outside context was pushed to the extreme. I didn't even watch the last seasons, because I couldn't even really relate to some of the problems anymore, like, it just became too far removed from reality (R1, 20yo).

Even in a series where the premise centres on young characters being forced to grow up quickly and assume responsibility, the gap between the protagonists' age and the highly adult and dramatic challenges they face can produce a distancing effect, making identification more difficult. This form of "resistance" among young viewers complicates conventional audience reception paradigms that treat teen media primarily as a straightforward mirror for adolescent identity formation. When platforms hyper-dramatise or adultify youth-oriented content, they may inadvertently undermine the mechanisms of empathetic identification, transforming these texts into sites of cultural estrangement, or at least critical distance, rather than recognition. Ultimately, these responses suggest that, for the primary audience, the pleasure of watching teen drama lies not in navigating sensationalised, adult-inflected fantasies of transgression, but in engaging with the overlooked, mundane textures of their own lived experience

Generational Concerns

A second thread of discussion revolves around concerns and anxieties about the potential for emulation among younger viewers, particularly early teens who, perceived as lacking the necessary interpretive tools, might be more inclined to imitate what they see on screen simply because it appears "cool" or aspirational. This concern reflects a generational positioning in which participants adopt a protective stance towards younger audiences.

There's this, let's say, idealisation of adolescence – like 13-year-olds who are doing drugs, smoking... and I think it kind of influences young people's ideas, even just a little. Because sometimes, when you watch these shows, you wonder, 'Why isn't it like that for me? Why don't I feel those things?' And I think this can lead to a certain sense of insecurity. (...) It also creates a stigma around these ideas, like at the beginning of high school when some people are already bragging about losing their virginity or doing this or that. In the end, I think they've been really influenced by this romanticisation of these themes (C2, 17yo).

One respondent points to the dangers of associating certain behaviours with adolescence as a whole and failing to problematise them.

I've never really seen myself in these things [referring to drug use, A/N] (...) I've never had that, and it kind of feels like you can maybe become a better person if you've gone through those things first, which I personally haven't, so I've never really related to that, because it's not like you have to go through those things to then grow and become a person (A3, 16yo).

Another respondent highlights the risk of normalising ways of experiencing adolescence that are perceived as extreme and detached from reality, citing specific teen series as examples of excess that depart from what a “normal” teenager would do. Implicit in her account is the concern that younger viewers may take these portrayals as models to emulate, interpreting them as the “right” way to experience adolescence.

Ginny & Georgia (...) is kind of excessive, in the sense that my biggest fear is that things might get normalised, that topics that aren't normal might get normalised, and in other TV series too there's this tendency to normalise, like drinking or smoking at an age when it's not normal to do it. For example in *Gossip Girl* there are these kids who, really young, who basically live a life that's not really normal, or also in *Outer Banks*, I don't know if... there are these kind of rebellious kids who get chased by the police, like... they're not really normal, and seen by a really young boy or a really young girl, they might be interpreted in a negative way (B1, 17yo)

Crucially, the sense of distance expressed here by the participant is rooted not in a perception of transnational or national cultural difference, but in a profound experiential gap. Throughout the discussions, young viewers routinely collapse the distinction between national and international productions, evaluating Italian series like *Baby* or *Mare fuori* through the exact same interpretive lens as American titles like *Gossip Girl* or *Outer Banks*. Their critical focus is directed less toward the geographical or cultural origin of the text than toward its degree of experiential proximity; they value narratives based on how closely the emotional and social coordinates resonate with their lived reality, while actively disidentifying with narrative exaggerations and stylised representations that fail to register within their horizon of experience. It is also worth noting that participants' concerns extend beyond the risk of emulation to include the frustration and insecurities that such representations may generate.

Another participant expresses similar concerns, emphasising issues related to appearance, particularly for girls.

(...) if these things are done by people who are too young, maybe it's not the best example to set for teenagers. And I also think that female characters are often sexualised and represented with this so-called perfect body. I think this way of representing them needs to change (...) because they're always shown with a perfect, slim, linear figure (C1, 17yo).

Interesting observations also emerged in relation to the reception of *Adolescence*. “Older” participants noted that the series appeared to resonate with adult audiences, pointing to their parents. A participant recalls that it was her mother who recommended the series to her, and she further notes that it seemed to shape her mother's perception of younger adolescents, prompting increased attention to her younger daughter's environment.

One thing that struck me was when *Adolescence* came out, my mum was like, ‘no, you absolutely have to watch it’, like literally as soon as it came out she was like ‘you have to watch it, [...] because you need to know about all this stuff’ (...) and then she also told my sister, who's younger, she was like ‘you have to watch it’, because my sister was basically the same age as the main character, and so she was kind of

shocked at how much this kind of things can affect younger kids too, and after that she really started worrying a lot more in general, like even when we go out and stuff, she got a lot more worried (R1, 20yo).

Another respondent reports a similar reaction, describing how her mother's viewing of the series influenced her understanding of younger sibling.

My brother, who's the same age as his, so now they keep a much closer eye on him, [...] because he's kind of between middle school and the first year of high school [...] it's that kind of age, so now they're much more on his case than before, like, now they're much more on computers, so they're even more on his case, because you never really know what can happen on the internet (M6, 20yo)

One participant also expresses a clear sensitivity towards the representation of parent-child relationships, calling for more nuanced and empathetic portrayals that move beyond the frequent depiction of parents as merely antagonistic figures.

I think the relationship with parents (...) like, very often the person who gets in the protagonist's way, who kind of... imposes restrictions... but I think they should go more in depth into the relationship between teenagers and their parents, maybe also how parents feel towards their kids (...) that relationship isn't really shown, like there's not really any kind of closeness between the child and the parent, maybe a good, healthy relationship (...) I think they should explore this aspect more... like reflecting on yourself, on what happens in the family, not blaming parents but trying to bring in a bit of empathy, also being able to put yourself in the parents' shoes, who have to deal with this... this bundle of energy, of, like, deviance, and... I mean, I think this is important... maybe it would also help young people think more about the relationship they have with their parents (C2, 17yo).

Ultimately, these accounts highlight how teen dramas function as a powerful mediator between generations, often triggering heightened parental anxiety and surveillance. Rather than regarding these shows as mere entertainment, participants interpret them as influential scripts that shape how both parents and youth navigate the perceived risks and moral expectations of contemporary adolescence.

Adult Audiences and Teen Drama

A further aspect worth considering is adult engagement with teen drama: participants explicitly acknowledge that adults – particularly parents – are also among the audiences for these series, and are therefore equally exposed to the representations these narratives convey

They describe practices of co-viewing associated with specific titles characterised by intergenerational ensemble casts and reflect on the motivations that may lead adults to engage with these series.

For me with *Mare fuori*, because... well, I mean, my parents are from the South, so we were talking about the juvenile prison, and they've always lived there, and *Mare fuori* was filmed where my dad did his military

service, which is a barracks, so there were all these memories, they'd talk about Naples, this and that... and that's why we watched it together (M6, 20yo).

In relation to *Stranger Things*, one respondent points to nostalgia, as well as to the show's aesthetic and formal qualities, as a factor in its appeal to older viewers: "[*Stranger Things*] is just really well made, even an older person can find it engaging, beyond the elements already mentioned, like the fact that it is set in the '80s, that it's new, the whole Upside Down thing, and so on" (C5, 20yo).

Watching, or re-watching, a show together can also serve as a form of intergenerational bonding over a shared interest. In this sense, co-viewing becomes a domestic routine – a low-pressure way for parents and teenagers to maintain a connection and spend time in each other's company. This pleasure is largely reciprocal: parents enjoy being involved in their children's cultural worlds, just as young viewers value sharing these moments of entertainment with their parents. It is precisely this mutual desire for shared viewing experiences, grounded in overlapping interests and tastes, that increasingly shapes the contemporary television market. To address this intergenerational audience, contemporary teen dramas are increasingly adopting hybrid structures, using ensemble casts and "adultified" storylines to ensure the text can appeal to different demographics within the same household.

I watched *Stranger Things* with my mum because she... well, actually I had already seen it, but then I told her – because I like talking to my mum about what I watch, and then she was like, "no, no, I want to watch it too, but I'll watch it with you". I don't know, she just wanted to watch it with me, so we watched it again (A3, 16yo).

However, adults' involvement also raises respondents' concerns about how teen representations may shape adult perceptions of adolescents as a social group.

This leads some respondents to question the ambiguity with which certain behaviours are depicted, highlighting issues of appropriateness, the stereotyping of teenage practices, and the risk that misleading portrayals may reinforce clichés and prejudices about adolescence. In the following excerpt, three participants voice their unease about the possibility that their parents might be exposed to such representations of teenage life.

- Yeah, maybe you see yourself reflected in some traits, but everything else is just like... meh... I mean, my life isn't like that" (A1, 18yo).
- Maybe from the outside it looks like that... (G2, 17yo).
- Then my parents watch the show... (A1, 18yo).
- ...And they think it's really like that! (G1, 18yo).
- "Oh my gosh, are you guys really like that?" No, we're not like that! (A1, 18yo).

Some participants underscore a long-standing issue in the writing and representation of teens in TV shows: that these portrayals ultimately stem from an adult perspective on adolescence.

Maybe it's a vision that adults may have of kids, they report it in the movies, then afterwards the adults say 'oh, but kids are all like that, they're all the same and you're all...' I mean... and that's a thing that leaves me a sour taste in my mouth (A1, 18yo).

But it kind of annoys me, like a salesperson who shows up saying 'okay now I'm going to show you this thing because I know I'm talking to your age group and so it'll grab you and you'll feel understood'. And then you watch it and you're like... what am I doing, what am I watching, I don't feel... you're supposed to feel understood in what you see, you're supposed to feel reflected (M2, 17yo).

Finally, participants express a desire for representations that not only allow them to recognise themselves on screen but also convey the complexity and nuance of adolescence to adult audiences, highlighting the role of teen series as key vehicles through which broader cultural understandings of youth are shaped.

That's not us, like, people don't get that we as teenagers have loads of different sides in how we live, in our personalities, so in the end we basically lose all our value, like our whole person, the pride of being young, which you're supposed to be happy about... I don't know, like being the future of the generation, and you're just there thinking, is this really how they see me? (G2, 17yo).

These reflections underline a significant disconnect between teenagers' lived experiences and the dramatised versions consumed by their parents. By critiquing these "adult-authored" narratives, respondents advocate for a more "realistic" and diverse media landscape that bridges the generational gap rather than widening it through sensationalism and stereotyping.

Conclusion

The contemporary evolution of teen drama reveals a significant tension between industrial strategies and audience reception. As SVOD services face increasing economic pressures due to their multiplication, they have pivoted toward a "neo-generalist" model, a programming strategy that seeks to combine niche targeting with content capable of appealing to broad, heterogeneous, and intergenerational audiences. This shift is characterised by the "adultification" of themes and the hybridisation of teen narratives with genres like crime, noir, or horror, as seen in global hits like *Stranger Things* or *Wednesday*. While these strategies successfully attract young adult and older viewers, who now constitute a significant portion of the genre's audience through appeals to nostalgia and sophisticated aesthetics, they simultaneously risk creating a "distancing effect" for younger viewers, or at least some criticism.

The focus group responses demonstrate that young viewers are far from passive recipients of these "adultified" narratives. Participants suggest that this "adult gaze" often results in representations perceived by teens as unrealistic or "exaggerated", filtered through adult assumptions rather than lived experience. Moreover, they express concerns about how these depictions might shape adult assumptions about teenage life. Particularly among

girls, these reflections reveal a layer of reflexivity in their viewing practices, expressed through critical assessments not only of the representation of adolescent experience but also of the way adults might interpret and judge teen behaviour.

Ultimately, teen dramas today function as complex cultural mediators; they are not only youth-specific programming, but hybrid narrative spaces that cross generations and shape how they perceive one another. From a socio-cultural perspective they function as sophisticated cultural texts that contribute to broader discourses about adolescence, shaping how society makes sense of and evaluates youth. From a more genre-based perspective, what emerges from our research – which, we would point out, is merely exploratory in nature and would require further investigation – is that the teen drama genre is undergoing a period of transition. And for the genre to maintain its cultural relevance, it must navigate the gap between the industrial drive for broad, “neo-generalist” appeal and the desire among teenagers and young adults for authentic, nuanced representations that reflect the complexity of their social and emotional lives.

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Notes

¹ For the purposes of authorship attribution, we hereby attest that both authors have equally contributed to the conceptualisation and writing of this article. Stefania Antonioni has authored the sections "Methodology", "Forms of Hybridity and Adaptability in Teen Drama", and "Adult Audiences and Teen Drama". Chiara Checcaglini has authored the sections "Beyond the Teen", "Adultification of Teenagers" and "Generational Concerns". The Introduction and Conclusion sections were jointly developed and written by the two authors.

² Initially, we had planned to focus exclusively on female participants; however, following a conversation with one of the teachers, we were informed that some male students were also interested in participating. Their inclusion offered an opportunity to complicate the binary assumption that female viewers primarily engage with female characters while male viewers engage with male ones. For this reason, three focus groups were organised with a mixed-gender composition, while maintaining a clear female majority among participants.

³ All verbatim excerpts from the focus groups have been translated from Italian into English by the authors.