

Urbino, 03/07/2025

Con la presente si dichiara che il saggio *Girl to Girl: Italian Girls and Girlhood Models in Serial Narratives* contenuto in *Participations. Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* v. 21, n. 1, maggio 2025, è stato concepito e sviluppato dalle autrici Stefania Antonioni e Chiara Checcaglini in stretta collaborazione.

Riguardo alla stesura, Stefania Antonioni ha scritto le sezioni “Methodology”, “The ambivalent disposition towards Italian TV series”, “Who are these girls?”; Chiara Checcaglini ha scritto le sezioni “Delving into girlhood”, “Emotional realism and the need to be seen”, “Damaging representations?”. Le sezioni “Introduction” e “Conclusion” sono state scritte congiuntamente dalle due autrici.

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# Volume 21, Issue 1

May 2025 – Current Issue

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## **Girl to Girl: Italian Girls and Girlhood Models in Serial Narratives**

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### **Abstract**

In the age of platformisation, digital distribution, and multiplication of audiovisual products, several TV series are distinguished by a new effort towards a diverse and nuanced representation of marginalised groups, one that includes a richer representation of girls. Given the global and disseminated nature of contemporary audiovisual industry, fictional girls and their storylines seem designed to project onto young female viewers precise imaginaries to inhabit, troubled characters to identify with, or role models to follow. Building on the evidence that these televisual trends has also affected Italian TV series, we designed a research project aimed at exploring the relationship between girls as narrative subjects in Italian serial products, and Italian girls as audiovisual media consumers. This paper aims to investigate the reception of teen dramas and girlhood representation in young female audiences, as well as the effect of such representation on their imaginary. With this purpose, we conducted five focus groups with a sample of fifty-two high school students in a medium-sized town, representative of the Italian urban landscape. We therefore examined the relationship between local and global productions with regard to girls' representation, how it is perceived by our interviewees and what is their level of awareness as the target audience for these productions.

**Keywords:** Girlhood, Teen drama, TV seriality, Gender representation, Italian teen drama, Audience research

## Introduction

The global emergence of digital distribution and streaming platforms has fostered the proliferation of serial narratives. Being that this new digital scenario is particularly well-suited to younger audiences (Doyle, 2016; Marghitsu, 2021; Evens et al., 2021; Asmar et al., 2024) teen dramas have experienced a significant increase in production, especially on streaming platforms. The global abundance of teen series has been gradually matched by local production: in Italy, for instance, teen series' new wave of popularity has pushed both traditional TV channels, such as the Italian Public Service Broadcaster Rai, and the Italian divisions of international OTT platforms, like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, to invest in the creation and production of series featuring teenagers as protagonists and with teenagers in mind as the primary target audience.<sup>1</sup>

The multiplication of series and stories has given space to a diverse inclusion of underrepresented groups, including more nuanced and complex depictions of young female characters. In Italy, teen series released after *Baby* (Netflix, 2018-2020), the first original Italian teen drama produced by Netflix, demonstrate particular care in featuring more complex narrative arcs for girl characters, who may behave in unpredictable ways, possess greater agency in different areas, and are characterised by nuanced relationships with concepts of good and bad, what is deemed appropriate or not, and the expectations of their families and peers. For instance, in *Baby* or *Mare Fuori* girls flirt with moral ambiguity; in *5 minuti prima*, Nina openly reflects on her sexuality; and *Nudes* explore the anxieties of girls growing up under the scrutiny of the digital world.

These examples highlight the challenging balance between the global and local dimensions of contents and representations offered to audiences, who are themselves both local and global. If authenticity, a factor that is tied to local productions (Wayne and Uribe Sandoval, 2023), is one of the key elements determining the success of these products, according to the global platforms' strategies, then the relationship between these two dimensions calls for further examination. With this aim, our research explores this local/global dynamic through three levels that have not yet been thoroughly investigated: 1. a geographical level, namely the Italian context; 2. a genre level, namely the context of Italian teen series; 3. a demographic-audience level, namely the young female viewers of Italian teen series. It is worth emphasising that each of these levels, which both express and are shaped by locality, interacts with a global dimension in terms of culture, production, genre and audience tastes and habits.

Building on these observations, we use audience research with Italian girls as a methodological tool that will enable us to explore the ways in which they encounter and engage with the representations of girlhoods that are present within these teen series. To this end we are concerned with asking how they relate to these images, how they accept, negotiate, or reject them in the processes of structuring their understandings of on-screen girlhoods. As we will see below, these research objectives will be pursued through a qualitative survey conducted with an empirical reference group of high school students.

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<sup>1</sup> To name but a few of the latest series: *SKAM Italia* (TIMVision, 2018-), *Mental* (RaiPlay, 2020), *Mare fuori* ([*The sea beyond*] Rai2, 2020-), *Nudes* (RaiPlay, 2021-), *5 minuti prima* (RaiPlay, 2022), *Prisma* (Amazon Prime Video, 2022-2024), *Noi siamo leggenda* (Rai2, 2023), *Adorazione* (Netflix, 2024).

## **Delving into girlhood**

Since its entry into popular culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Driscoll, 2002; Harris, 2004) adolescence has been framed as an undetermined phase, a space and time range defined by its interstitial nature between childhood and adulthood, meaning ‘the process of developing a self [...] rather than any definition of that self’ (Driscoll, 2002: 6). The accent is on the process of the construction of the self, and the keywords that better define adolescence are ‘liminal’, ‘indefinable’, ‘in-between’. The adolescent is perpetually ‘placeless, dislocated’, and this condition intensifies especially when they are female and/or queer (Bradbury-Rance, 2016: 87). It is within the contrast between the inherent indefinability of that age, perpetually in progress, and the increasing focus on adolescence as a cultural phenomenon, as a point of fascination and as a commercial target, that we find the contradiction which, for a long time, left girlhood underexplored and excluded from theoretical discourse on gender. As Driscoll argues, female adolescents have been ‘excluded from theories of modern subjectivity despite being widely employed as both metaphor for modern life and crucial data source for developmental models of identity’ (Driscoll, 2002: 9). This dismissive attitude extends to audiovisual content focused on adolescence, and to teenagers’ consumption habits and engagement with such media, particularly teenage girls. Like many other aspects of teen culture, audiovisual products centred on and marketed to teenagers have long been neglected by critics and scholars (Aslinger, 2008).

Over the years, this gap in research has been addressed primarily by scholars and research teams in the Anglophone area, who have approached the study of girlhood and the media from diverse perspectives (Keller et al., 2015). Research about girlhood and girls, both on-screen as narrative subjects and off-screen as viewers, has allowed for the exploration of various interrelated issues, including which categories of girls are afforded space in audiovisual representation, the potential impact of mainstream representations on public perceptions of this social group, and the repositioning of girls as cultural consumers as well as producers of meaning, as underlined by historically gendered practices such as the creation of fanzines, fanfiction, blogs, and content on social media platforms (see Baym, 1999; Kearney, 2006; Tralli, 2021). Within this line of research, with this work we seek to amplify the voices of Italian teen girls who experience the periphery of a provincial town. These coordinates—Italian province and underage girls’ understanding of teen series—remain largely unexplored within girlhood studies.

Additionally, girls’ media studies address the effects on girlhood of the controversial emphasis on empowerment and agency promoted by neoliberal postfeminist sensibilities (Handyside and Taylor-Jones, 2016: 3; see also Gill, 2007; Banet-Weiser, 2018), alongside the persistent discourse on the objectification of female bodies, both young and adult, which is frequently framed within the moral contrast between sexual desire and respectable femininity (Jackson and Vares, 2015: 483). Furthermore, such studies highlight the identification of ‘girlish’ traits that are deemed desirable to prolong, rooted in a heteronormative and patriarchal conception of attractiveness and desirability.

In this regard, other scholars have referred to ‘girl industries’ (Kim, 2011) to describe the commodification of values such as girl power and empowerment of young femininity. More specifically, the term ‘girl industries’

refers to cultural industries and to the popular daily practice of cultural contents that are produced and distributed of and for girls, as well as consumed by them. Girls industries in the current mediascape are global and local in nature and diverse in genres as media technologies and social, cultural and political norms and rules are intertwined in the formulation, cultivation, promotion and regulation of girl culture and girl market. (Kim, 2011: 334)

Furthermore, according to the author, because the aim of girl industries is to reinforce the neoliberal governance of girl bodies on a global scale, the multiplication of conflicting repertoires of girl images 'is more adoptable for and advantageous to the creation of segmented markets in terms of generation, gender and ethnicity' (Kim, 2011: 343). This provides an additional reason why an approach that examines the unfolding of these dynamics in diverse, non-English-speaking local contexts - while recognising their global dimension - holds significant interest.

In line with this purpose, recent years have seen some international research teams within the fields of Film and Television Studies, as well as Italian Studies, focusing on Italian teenagers, primarily from the perspective of reception and cultural consumption. We would like to mention two recent research projects. The first one is the European Union-funded *GEMINI* Research Project,<sup>2</sup> led by Link University Campus, dedicated to young adults' consumption of serial drama and their experience of gender issues through fiction and serial content. The second one is the AHRC funded research project *A Girls' Eye View: Girlhood on the Italian Screen since the 1950s*,<sup>3</sup> led by the University of Exeter and Sapienza Università di Roma, which is explicitly focused on the relationship between Italian girls and the depiction of girlhood in Italian film and television. One of the outcomes of the project has been the creation of *A Girls' Eye View* research network, of which we are members.

## Methodology

Based on this conceptual framework, our project stemmed from an interest in Italian girls' cultural consumption, combined with the observation of the multiplication of strong, diverse young female characters on screen, especially in international TV series, both on linear and non-linear media. We chose to concentrate on these products for two main reasons: first, within the current multifaceted and multiplatform landscape of audiovisual storytelling, serial narratives have proven to play a central role in challenging gender stereotypes through the representation of diversified subjectivities; second, the extended time provided by serial storylines allows for more in-depth development of characters' identities, feelings, and relationships. We therefore aimed to investigate teenage girls' interaction with the 'girlscape' shaped by shows centred on young female characters, with storylines that are seemingly designed to project inspirational or challenging imaginaries, particularly onto female viewers.

Our research proceeded following two intertwined purposes: first, to analyse how girls are depicted in Italian television and platform-based teen series, detecting what models of girlhood they predominantly show; second, to investigate the modes of reception of teen

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://gemini.unilink.it/>. The authors of this article will participate in the forthcoming conference GEMINI-SCAPES organised by the *GEMINI Research Project* team.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://agirlseyeview.exeter.ac.uk/it/>.

series and girlhood representation in young female audiences, as well as the impact of such representation on their own girlhood experiences. The textual analysis around the representation of girlhood in TV series has been the subject of a few conference papers<sup>4</sup> and it will be featured in a forthcoming article; in this contribution, we opted to focus on investigating the reception side, which we consider to be relatively underexplored, especially from a qualitative perspective.

For the analysis of the reception of these series by our target audience, we chose a qualitative research method of focus group, because it offers some advantages for studying contemporary media reception, and especially young audiences. Focus groups enable us to observe the interactions and the conversational processes through which participants elaborate, receive or contest interpretations of media content. Compared to one-on-one interviews, focus groups encourage participants to articulate opinions and feelings in response to others' responses, making meaning through a dialogical dimension that recalls the reality of social processes (Acocella, 2005; Parker and Tritter, 2006). Moreover, this method is particularly fitting when researching adolescents. By replicating a conversational context similar to their everyday peer group interactions, focus groups create an environment in which participants feel more at ease in sharing insights and thoughts about their engagement with media text, as well as in discussing their feelings: 'the discussions are relaxed, and participants are selected because of common experiences related to the topic of interest, and they are encouraged to share ideas and perceptions in a group discussion atmosphere' (Peterson-Sweeney, 2005: 104).

The reference population of our survey consists of high school students, so we constructed a snowball sample drawn by five high schools, representing different fields of study set in a medium-sized Italian town, Pesaro. We selected Pesaro precisely for its medium size, as we were interested in examining a geographical context distinct from major cities. We believe that a town like Pesaro better represents Italy's urban and suburban typical structure - a setting that is frequently overlooked and has received less research attention compared to larger urban areas.

With our focus groups we succeeded in interviewing fifty-two students (16+) in total: forty-six female students and six male students, according to the way they identified themselves to us. We initially had planned to focus only on female participants, but following an interaction with a teacher who informed us that some boys were also willing to take part in the conversation, we partially reconsidered our approach. We believed it would be interesting and valuable to include other gender identities in the discussion: specifically, we sought to avoid excluding boys from conversations about female characters, with the aim of challenging, or at least complicating, the binary assumption that only girls engage with female characters, and only boys engage with male ones. Thus, we decided to experiment with a mixed-gender composition in one focus group (seven female students, four male students), and later added a second group (nine female students, two male students), while ensuring that a female majority was always maintained. This approach enabled us to observe whether any differences emerged in the development of discussions between all-girl groups and those

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<sup>4</sup> Checcaglini C., *La (serie) TV delle ragazze: girlhood e amicizia nella serialità italiana contemporanea*, FAScinA - Forum Annuale delle Studiose di Cinema e Audiovisivi, Università degli Studi di Sassari, Nov. 10-13, 2021; Antonioni S., Checcaglini C., *Girls on Screen: The Representation of Girlhood in the Italian Series SKAM Italia and Nudes*, Gender and Media Matters Conference, Sapienza Università di Roma, Oct. 15-16, 2021; Antonioni S., Checcaglini C., *New Girls: Italian Teen Series Challenging Conventional Representations*, Discourses of (Fictional) Digital TV Series, Universitat de València, Oct. 19-21, 2022.

that included boys, an aspect we intend to explore further in future research. For this article we deemed it more appropriate to focus on the girls' perspectives, because, as we mentioned earlier, we find it particularly relevant to centre their voices when engaging with their onscreen representation in serialised narratives that directly concern them.

All the participants in the focus groups gave their permission to be recorded and to be quoted anonymously. The focus group discussions have been recorded on-site, subsequently transcribed and subjected to content analysis. We guided the discussions following a framework based on our areas of interest. In presenting the collected data, we will draw on participants' reflections on those themes. As the discussions progressed, we observed that the thematic areas could be grouped into two main categories: discourses centred on the content of audiovisual products, including the students' audiovisual tastes and their engagement with the content; discourses related to their viewing habits, such as their preferred devices, as well as the time, places, and company they favour for watching serial shows. The shape and boundaries of the girlscape emerged most prominently within the first category, which will therefore be the focus of the following sections.

## **The ambivalent disposition towards Italian TV series**

One of the issues that soon emerged was the detached relationship that the participants had with Italian TV shows. In fact, we initially intended to limit the focus group discussions to Italian TV series, but it quickly became clear that in the conversations about what they watched, appreciated or disliked we had to expand the scope to include international productions as well. Nonetheless, the reception of Italian teen series remained our principal focus, and three series were recurrently mentioned in the conversations: *Baby*, centred on two teenage girls who engage in sex work; *SKAM Italia*, the Italian version of popular Norwegian teen format *SKAM*; and *Mare fuori*, a PBS TV series that follows the difficult lives and sentimental journeys of the young inmates of a juvenile correctional facility in Naples.

Yet, many students declared that they do not watch Italian series, nor do they particularly appreciate them. When interrogated about the reasons, some biases emerge about the acting skills and even the style of speech: 'Especially the Italian teen series, you see the actors, you just can tell it's not their bread and butter'<sup>5</sup> (G2, female, 16). Another respondent cites the Italian teen drama *Summertime* (Netflix, 2020-2022) as an example of the sense of inauthenticity that, in her view, is heightened by the acting style: 'I don't like the way they acted because it all looked fake' (F1, female, 17). Others point out the slower pace and a general sense of difference from international series in a pejorative manner: 'You can totally tell the difference, if it is a foreign TV series or an Italian one from... I don't know, maybe it's the dubbing, I don't know, but you can really feel the difference when they talk' (G1, female, 18); 'They are always all very slow, the events are always all very slow and all alike' (G4, female, 17).

One aspect they cite as a reason to dislike Italian series, and especially teen series, is indeed what they feel as poor acting and bad performances, which therefore affects their choice not to watch them. The evaluation emerged in comparison to other non-Italian series and concern especially the acting style, aesthetic choices, and a sense of slow-paced narrative. However, some answers also show a long-standing prejudice towards local serial

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<sup>5</sup> The focus group verbatim responses were translated from Italian by the authors.

entertainment, which extends from Italian TV series broadcast on traditional TV channels to Italian streaming series. Streaming platforms have accustomed users to a large quantity of content, ideally mixing global programs with local productions; in practice, international high-profile shows are usually more appealing to Italian young audiences, because their tastes and expectations related to fictional narratives are mostly shaped by American films and TV shows' standards.

Nonetheless, some characteristics of Italian series are praised, such as the chance to see an environment that is recognised as positively distinct from what is usually seen in fictional storytelling. This comes up especially while discussing teen series where the location is an important part of the narrative, like Naples in *Mare fuori* or Rome in *SKAM Italia*:

All those shots of parts of Italy that are real, that are realities that other countries maybe don't have, those ones I really like, just how it's filmed, how the actors let's say, put themselves in front of the cameras, that one I like. (A1, female, 18, about *Mare Fuori*)

The Italian ones in my opinion have a background even a little bit more real, that is, something that connects you more to reality... Maybe the Italian ones, like *Baby* or even *SKAM* [...] they are centred in Rome, in a high school, they are just things that we could live just as well. Or even *Baby*, in my opinion this story of two teenage girls like that, I mean, I don't say a problem, in the end ... however a need that maybe a lot of other girls have as well, I mean, not a need, however an ordeal or something that other girls may have as well. (G3, female, 17)

In her answer, A1 mentions the relevance of being able to see 'real' parts of Italy that are more than a simple background to the action, underlining that being set in the same, recognisable geographical and cultural area of the viewers is one important point of connection. G3 emphasises that what she appreciates in *SKAM* and *Baby* is the chance to see 'things' that resemble her everyday experience in school.

*SKAM Italia* is the only Italian teen series that has been watched and appreciated by the majority of the participants, although someone noted that 'Yes, but *SKAM* is not Italian, it's from Norway' (F1, female, 17), referring to the original format that has been adapted in several countries, besides Italy. Here the non-originality of the series is considered a flaw, regardless of the quality of the Italian version. However, most of the participants liked *SKAM Italia*. On the one hand, it addresses themes and topics that are rarely seen in Italian TV series:

*SKAM Italia* came to mind, because [...] it deals with topics about teenagers that aren't really talked about much and... unlike the Norwegian series, they also had a fifth season, where they talked about this guy who struggled to accept the fact that he has 'small measures' and... so, I really liked it, both because I usually don't watch Italian series since they're not that interesting to me, but this one was one of the few that I really enjoyed for the diversity in it. (S3, female, 17)

Another girl emphasises that *SKAM Italia* has the merit of not overdramatising: 'I liked it very much, yes, because it shows these issues, racism, many issues, without exaggerating,

so it doesn't exaggerate like other series, it still stays around normalcy' (V3, female, 17). On the other hand, *SKAM* is praised for its ability to make young viewers feel seen and possibly understood. To be able to see a reflection of their lives seems particularly important: 'But at the same time, even if it's the norm, it doesn't bore you because the theme is done well and you can see yourself' (I2, female, 17); 'I especially loved *SKAM* because in my opinion, unlike the others, it really shows what reality is actually like' (G4, female, 17).

The responses above point to a recurring priority in evaluating appreciation for a teen series: the extent to which storylines are perceived as closely reflecting participants' own realities as teenagers, both in terms of everyday experience and emotional lives, as we had previously found in an earlier survey of *SKAM Italia*'s online audience (Antonioni et al., 2021). In this case, the appreciation for what they perceive as Italian-ness and the local dimension of the audiovisual product intensifies in contrast to the negative judgement they tend to express toward them.

## Who are these girls?

As we mentioned above, the three most-watched and frequently mentioned Italian teen series are *Baby*, *SKAM Italia*, and *Mare Fuori*. All three feature young female characters central to the storylines, even though with different tones and different degrees of in-depth characterisation.

Inspired by actual events that occurred in Rome, *Baby* is centred on two underage schoolmates, Chiara and Ludovica, who willingly become involved in sex work within Rome's elite. The series mixes drama with crime and noir tones, addressing topics like the objectification of the young female body, and the slippery boundary between consent, exploitation, and manipulation. Coming from different backgrounds and reputational statuses, Chiara and Ludovica's 'psychological differences lead them to respond differently to the experience, each evolving in relation to prostitution and to one another' (Andò and Hipkins, 2022: 208). They form a friendship and an alliance, fostered by the same boredom and anxieties towards their school environment, and the experience and the dangers of the adult world they carelessly enter.

*SKAM Italia* retains its season-based structure centred on individual characters within the same group of friends. *SKAM*'s focus is placed on the everyday life of its protagonists and the series' style explicitly tries to increase the degree of authenticity; particular attention is given to bonds of friendship and support, especially within the girls' group – Eva, Eleonora, Sana, Federica and Silvia.

*Mare fuori* has an even more ensemble structure, featuring many characters, both boys and girls, each with their own backstory that led them to prison. *Mare fuori* is less focused on the dynamics of growth and identity exploration and more oriented towards the criminal and sentimental dramas of the young inmates. Indeed, some respondents stress the unbalanced representation of boys and girls in the series: 'I really like the female characters there because they are independent compared to the males, so yes I like them. They are few, though' (A1, female, 18); 'It is mostly about boys more than girls, that is, they are also, in my opinion, a bit overshadowed' (G6, female, 16).

The main objective of our focus groups was to uncover what young female viewers think and how they feel about the representation of girls 'like them' on screen. When asked more specifically how they feel about the representation of young female characters, the

respondents share their desire to see more independent, assertive and strong girls and women, both in terms of the number of female characters and the depth of their characterisation.

*Mare fuori* is both appreciated for its portrayal of strong young female characters and called into question because they are also depicted in a negative light. The juvenile prison and criminal setting favour characters whose agency develops either to defend their own safety, to challenge dangerous adults or wrongful convictions, or to seek revenge and plot against rivals. Silvia is a good-hearted teenager with a difficult past; it's revealed that she had been framed for drug trafficking by her older, manipulative boyfriend, with whom she then falls back into an unbalanced relationship. V6 empathises with the injustice Silvia has suffered and with the need to shield herself from the hardships of prison.

I mean, she ended up... evolving in prison, because you'd see her as this neighbourhood girl, sweet, but then she had to build a kind of shield for herself in prison [...] But still, as a girl, it's like... and then there's the whole thing with the drugs in her suitcase, it's unfair, I think, he could have done that to someone else. (V6, female, 17)

In the series *Rosa*, the daughter of a Camorra boss, joins the group later on but quickly steals the scene as a bold, aggressive character who is eventually involved in a Romeo-and-Juliet-style romance with Carmine, her family's rival: '*Mare fuori* with Rosa, she has always appeared to be very strong for the family as well, but actually in the end she shows that she has more heart than others' (F2, female, 16).

Another respondent mentions Viola, the evil, manipulative antagonist who hides a past of mental health issues. She is impressed by the surprisingly 'creepy' things Viola does.

Viola... in general, it's different from the boys' side, but... the vibe... I mean, maybe you wouldn't expect that from a girl. Like, for me, Viola was just creepy, because thinking that a girl could think and do things like that... (V5, female, 17)

*Mare fuori's* ensemble structure and its frequent dramatic twists enable viewers to follow a variety of characters and storylines. The responses show an appreciation for great variety, moral complexity, and even ambiguity for teen female characters. At the same time, the conversations often reveal a need for self-reflection and recognition in on-screen characters, whether through shared experiences or, at the very least, a sense of closeness to their reality. We will explore this theme further in the next section.

## **Emotional realism and the need to be seen**

The category of 'real' is mentioned by the participants to convey a positive feeling of proximity to the characters and events in the series. Although the terms 'real' and 'reality' are often dropped in general terms, they often imply nuances in empathy and identification. *SKAM Italia* is frequently mentioned for its greater authenticity, both factual and emotional, compared to other teen series: 'I watched only *SKAM* and yes, I liked it [...] it actually goes to the real, I mean it seems more realistic' (L2, female, 16).

The connection with 'slices of reality' is also mentioned as that elusive tangle of factors able to hook the viewer into the story:

They need to represent a certain slice of reality, because to make a series in the end you always need that factor... The *wow* factor, that makes you say, oh, that's a good one, I want to watch it. (A2, female, 17)

'Real' can either be attributed to the realism of the situations portrayed in the shows, or to characters' behaviours, or to formal and visual features. 'To be real' is generally praised, as opposed to what is deemed as unrealistic: to be real includes perceiving the storytelling as an authentic representation of youth, closer to their experience at school, within the family, with friends; to be unreal may mean distant from what they feel and experience in everyday life, therefore less interesting or not worthy of appreciation; but the distance from reality may also produce a positive effect of surprise and escapism. The real/unreal opposition takes a concrete form when participants compare Italian productions to international ones, like American TV series *Gossip Girl* (The CW, 2007-2012) and *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019-):

In my opinion *Euphoria* was done, recorded, just everything, in a way that was a little bit unrealistic, I mean not unrealistic though... I mean, in my opinion *SKAM* represents the world of youth a little bit better, in a more realistic way. (Z, female, 16)

In this case, the comparative response bypasses, and tries to solve, the inability to better define the categories of realistic and unrealistic. *SKAM*'s realism means to better represent the 'world of youth'. However, another respondent characterises *Gossip Girl*'s glamorous depiction of adolescence as a dreamlike, entertaining factor, even though far from her reality.

Italian series are a little different, like, you can tell... [...] *Gossip Girl* comes to mind, for example, because it really captures all of adolescence, and with every episode I was surprised by how the director connected things [...] it was great, I really liked it. But I think Italian series [...] are usually shorter, like *Baby*, which has 2-3 seasons... But I think they have a bit more realism, like something that connects you more to reality. With *Gossip Girl*, instead, you're watching the Upper East Side crowd [...] and it kind of makes you dream, you know? In the end, even the characters are a bit more... I don't know, unattainable. (G5, female, 16)

The construction of emotional realism that fosters connection for young viewers also relies on the portrayal of relational bonds. Romantic entanglements and friendships typically developing within the characters' peer groups or families are constant threads in teen dramas, but some of them show particular care in depicting the inner dynamics of friendship, and what it means to be friends, especially among girls, in narratives that increasingly consider the insidious forms of sexism, abuse and manipulation to which girls are exposed from a young age.

Commenting on friendship dynamics, the respondents find *SKAM* relatable. They do not necessarily identify with one character or the other, but with the display of mutual support

and solidarity: 'I see myself in it a lot. Maybe not so much in, like, any one of them or their specific stories, but definitely in the group of friends' (A8, female, 16).

Yeah, definitely, there are different stories going on, but the friend group, the real kind of friends, could be more of them, but, like, a group of friends who support each other, hang out together, that part, yes, a lot. (V6, female, 17)

*SKAM Italia* centres on the dynamic between the main characters' individual emotional journeys and the portrayal of everyday life at school. The friend group becomes a safe space that bridges daily life both inside and outside of school and helps them navigate the challenges unique to each of their journeys: Eva and her tendency to isolate herself in her relationship; Eleonora managing her romantic life; Sana and the complex balance between her culture and teenage life; Asia struggling with her eating disorder.

One of them had a tougher past, another is maybe going through something hard right now, or others... like, she has the perfect family, but still feel bad about herself, you know? It depends. And each of them was teaching the others things without even realizing it. Just through their actions. (A5, female, 16)

The emphasis on female friendship in girl-oriented media is considered an established result of the social and cultural shifts that have accompanied the emergence of female youth culture, then boosted by the popularisation of feminist and postfeminist trajectories, along with the decentralisation of heterosexual romance (McRobbie, 1991; Kearney, 2002). While the first claim is confirmed by the more and more central and nuanced depiction of friendship in contemporary teen series, the latter is contradicted by the centrality of ever-present (mostly) heterosexual sentimental plots in the life of fictional adolescents. Indeed, according to some respondents, teen series indulge decisively too much in romantic storylines. G2 expresses frustration in her account of *SKAM Italia's* season three, centred on a troubled romance between the lead character Eleonora and the elusive Edoardo:

Anyway, Eleonora too, in my opinion, is very stereotypical because [...] she is the girl who stands up for her friend, and her friend has a crush on the school's dreamboat, and then the school's dreamboat has a crush on Eleonora, and Eleonora is like 'ah no, I'm different, because you just want to tease me' and then in the end she falls for him too. (G2, female, 17)

V1 echoes a similar feeling, generalising it to the whole teen genre:

I think teen series always focus too much on the love story [...] I mean, it's not like the girl always needs a guy to feel good or vice versa, she could easily be happy with family and friends, but that doesn't really get much attention because she is supposed to find love. (V1, female, 17)

The assertion that a girl's narrative does not necessarily need to include a guy is shared by several respondents, and it is elevated as a desirable principle in all kinds of stories about women:

I mean, seeing a woman who's truly on her own, like she doesn't need a man, or anyone else, or love to, you know, to live her life, to have a career, or to feel fulfilled... there's always a man involved who in some way is pushing her to become who she wants to be. But it's always the man giving that push, never the woman herself. (G1, female, 18)

Maybe women's roles, I mean a woman who doesn't need to rely on a male role, and in work settings too, seeing her actually build herself up on her own, not needing to depend on anyone [...] I'd love to see more shows really focused on the woman's individual journey, how she, all on her own and through her own abilities, because we all have them, really succeeds in becoming who she wants to be without having to rely on outside forces or on people above her. (V3, female, 17)

Of course, these responses must be contextualised within the participants' range of viewings and perceptions: some of the shows they watch already portray girls with agency and strong identities, but the respondents' observations seem to highlight that satisfying female roles are still not enough, especially when compared to the variety of male roles.

Indeed, our respondents appear to be well aware of the greater variety of male roles compared to female ones. Moreover, their observations highlight the need for as much diversity as possible in representations of girlhood: a range of female characters in which any girl can see herself and identify. This entails moving beyond stereotypical portrayals of female adolescence, even within reassuring, ordinary, or mainstream narratives.

## **Damaging representations?**

The expectations for a portrayal of adolescence in which the girls can recognise themselves extend not only to relational interactions but also to the characters' behaviours. While some participants are bored by recurring narrative tropes and developments, considered repetitive and therefore unsatisfying, others voice doubts about the overarching vision of adolescence that emerges from these teen series. On the one hand, they are concerned about the effects such representations might have on how adults perceive adolescents as a group. This possibly reveals their frustration with a public narrative about youth that they find misleading and degrading. On the other hand, they express anxiety about the danger of emulation, particularly with a younger audience who may not be equipped to critically unpack the underlying reasons for what they see.

These considerations emerge particularly in connection with television series that feature a daring treatment of sexuality, portrayals of problematic behaviours, and the consumption of alcohol and drugs. The Italian Netflix series *Baby* and the American HBO series *Euphoria* stand out in this line of conversation. A participant is impressed with *Baby's* negative depiction of sexuality, but she also acknowledges that the series managed to work on some inner and psychological processes that she considers typical of adolescence.

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, female, 17)

Another girl highlights the problem of stereotyping teenage habits, questioning how a misleading portrayal could reinforce clichés and prejudices about adolescence, and stressing that all this stems from adults' vision of that age.

Especially the American ones, I mean, they had this vision of the teenager that was really but really very stereotypical, I mean all the series were just the same, they all had the same plot, they all had the same ending, I mean, after a while... it was just boring to watch... it's not that if one teenager who goes crazy and says EH NO I... 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, female, 18)

*Euphoria* especially raises questions about the appropriateness of certain storylines, and it is criticised for its representation of unnecessary reckless behaviours, risky situations, and oversexualisation for dramatic effect: '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' (G3, female, 17).

Another participant signals an aesthetic discrepancy, commenting that 'just going to school wearing clothes that... if we showed up dressed like that here, we'd probably get kicked out' (G4, female, 17).

Other respondents acknowledge the series' efforts to problematise drug and alcohol abuse, conceding that the negative effects of addiction are a relevant part of the storytelling: 'But without romanticising it, like, without making that side look good—showing the negative aspects too, like smoking or drinking, not just showing the fun part' (C2, female, 17); 'Exactly, like at parties, where you might have people taking drugs, and they show, like, an acid trip as if it's the most amazing experience of your life' (A2, female, 17).

The preoccupation with younger viewers emerged in two directions: first, the inclination of twelve-, thirteen-year-olds to imitate what they see because it's cool; second, the danger of further triggering their insecurities.

Like thirteen-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. (C2, female, 17)

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, female, 17)

These reactions underscore an apparent disconnection between the creators' vision for these series, who interpret the intention of an authentic representation as the unfiltered depiction of discomfort, anxieties, and more daring or shocking behaviours, and the perspective of viewers, who find themselves distant from such an attitude.

The fact that it is no longer normal to talk about everyday life, and so this could be an element that I would perhaps like to find, that could be innovative, because they are all focused on finding that detail, as it could be, for example in *Ginny & Georgia* [Netflix, 2021-] the self-harm, or in *Baby* the issue of sexuality, always seen as problems and not as normal life. (V3, female, 17).

I'd like something that tackles these themes but treats them more as normality, in the sense that you show a theme but you integrate it into the normal, everyday reality, not that you focus on that, you make the whole show about that one thing without exploring anything else [...] They don't need to emphasise the problem too much, because then it really feels forced, and I don't enjoy watching that. (A1, female, 18)

Through their responses, the viewers express a longing for depictions of 'normal' behaviours, that is, teenagers in ordinary situations where they can see themselves reflected. This search for representations of normalcy is intertwined with that for a sense of reality, rooted in the desire to see themselves portrayed in a way that is neither idealised, nor overly problematic, to restore dignity and depth to adolescence and teenage experience.

More broadly, what emerges is the need for adolescence to be told in a less stereotypical and more realistic way, even in its ordinariness, without necessarily resorting to extremes that only fuel excessive dramatisation. This idea of realism as a closer adherence to experiences that young girls can relate to, as already discussed in the previous paragraph, can only be achieved through a precise and attentive gaze. Such a perspective should not be solely shaped by adults depicting youth; rather, it should increasingly incorporate young people's viewpoints, for instance, including them in the writers' rooms.

## Conclusion

Our research reveals some patterns in how girls interpret on-screen girlhood in teen dramas. On the one hand, respondents recognise different intentions and purposes in different teen series, both international and Italian. Regarding content and characters, they appreciate more authentic representations of teenage life and relationships, along with strong and emancipated female characters; concerning the social and cultural value of these portrayals, they highlight the importance of addressing challenging and uncomfortable topics while voicing concerns over the depiction of excessively reckless teenagers.

From the participants' responses, the contours of the girlscape as a conceptual space connecting on-screen and off-screen girls is shaped by a few key dimensions: - Perceived authenticity: a tension between what is considered 'real', therefore relatable to

the young viewers' experience, and what is considered distant. Respondents express the desire to see behaviours, emotions, situations they can identify with;

- Sensitivity to relevant topics: issues like addictions, mental health, and abuse are seen as important to address, but there is concern that such representation leans into exaggerated habits and behaviours, which for many respondents fail to resonate with their lived adolescence;
- Diversity in storytelling: a desire for different narratives and inclinations, including female characters less defined by romantic relationships.

On the one hand, these results confirm a correspondence between the trends of transnational teen dramas, specifically the tendency towards authenticity and the attention to diversity, and the respondents' desires. On the other, the respondents fluctuate between an interest in more challenging or uncomfortable themes and a sense of perplexity, if not outright rejection, towards a representation that risks glamourising the characters' problematic behaviours; they also criticise the attribution of habits that verge on excess to teen characters, a strategy they criticise for being exploited to serve purposes of overdramatisation.

This critical and ambivalent attitude may depend on two aspects characterising teen series more broadly. In one respect, as the interviewees themselves often acknowledge, these series are the product of creative work that almost exclusively involves adults. Consequently, representations of teenagers are subject to an inherent bias, reflecting how adults perceive the younger generation, as demonstrated by Laura Schumacher's research on the production of teen series (Schumacher, 2024). In another respect, it may relate to what Mareike Jenner (2021: 185) has termed 'the grammar of transnationalism', which concerns 'the ways in which text, and specifically Netflix self-produced originals, aim to appeal to a transnational sensibility'. According to this grammar, TV series distributed by streaming platforms try to combine globally recognisable content and themes that appeal to universal sensibilities, with minimal local elements that can also be understood by a global audience, because they are not too specific or deeply rooted in the local context. This dynamic may explain why certain stereotypical generalisations and excessive dramatisations are problematic for some participants, who declare a preference for more ordinary, unexaggerated narratives they consider more 'authentic' and realistic. At the same time, their familiarity with international series makes them critical of certain aspects of the Italian ones, yet they appreciate that these stories still allow for identification.

These seemingly contradictory positions actually provide a multifaceted picture of serial consumption among teenage girls, as well as a similarly varied perception of the media representations of them. This underlines the importance of broadening as much as possible the spectrum of diversity in the representation of girlhood and adolescence, and at the same time gaining a deeper understanding of their lives and experiences, to help reduce bias and create a more nuanced and sensitive representation.

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