

D3.1

Understanding young adults and gender equality through serial drama



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Executive summary

This report presents GEMINI research into production and representation of gender issues in the four empirical territories Ireland, Romania, Italy, and Denmark. From the insights developed, the report presents easy-to-use learning opportunities with special attention towards teaching gender issues in European high schools.

Sections 2 and 3 articulate the methodology of the report (predominantly desktop production studies and studies of gender representation) and offer a state-of-the-art research overview on the relationship between gender topics, youth/adolescents, and serial drama. While there is much research into each area alone, the relationship between them has received little attention, which means that the scholarly output of this report is original and especially relevant in a continental context where gender issues appear in different guises across Europe.

Section 4 demonstrates how gender issues have been an often conscious and sometimes unconscious matter during production. Based on insights from focus group interviews with high school students (see D3.2), 11 applicable cases have been chosen from the four empirical territories. From the perspective of desktop production studies, the series have been scrutinised from the productional gaze on gender issues. In most cases, the gender approach during production has been a deliberate topic for generating debate or constructive dialogue on critical issues, but in some cases the gender issues have arisen in hindsight. The chosen cases also represent different local taste regimes and interests, ranging from the widespread lack of local production for the young target audience in Romania to having young adults as a target audience in Denmark. Overall, the cases also epitomise a dominant US drift in European taste regimes.

Section 5 reads the 11 cases through representative excerpts from longer serial dramas. Issuing the *one series, one scene, one issue* dogma, the analyses highlight not only the textual qualities of the series. These excerpts also present a simple way to utilise serial dramas in high school teaching. Each chosen serial drama has been incorporated into a pedagogical triangle that features a significant focus on media literacy and gender issues. Essentially, this approach introduces a case-neutral approach that may motivate both high school teachers and students to locate and scrutinise new excerpts from serial dramas themselves.

In this way, the key takeaway points from this report are not only insightful readings of relevant serial dramas in light of gender issues. The most significant contribution is the presentation of how to integrate gender issues and media literacy issues in high school teaching at a very easy-to-use level for teachers.

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1. About GEMINI

In line with the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 and from an intersectional perspective, the research-action project GEMINI (Gender Equality through Media Investigation and New training Insights) aims to tackle gender-based stereotypes that create gender inequalities and empower young adults to develop products and tools that convey positive messages of gender equality.

Focusing on the representation of gender identities in serial drama and how they can contribute to gender equality, GEMINI addresses European high school students and trainers/teachers in four different European geographical and socio-cultural areas (Mediterranean, Northern, Eastern and Anglo-Saxon) to reach the following goals through a varied set of activities:

1. Investigating the production and narrative strategies underlying the representation of gender identities in TV series and how such representation affects the promotion of gender equality among the target groups through in-depth interviews with key informants, textual/production analysis, and media content/sentiment analysis on a selected corpus of TV series.
2. Understanding the target groups' awareness about gender equality and how they perceive the representation of gender identities on serial drama through focus groups, multi-language surveys, semi-structured interviews.
3. Enhancing analytical, relational and communication skills on gender equality practices and models through the development of the educational toolkit.
4. Spreading a gender equality-oriented culture through self-produced communication initiatives, such as audio-visual products and a screenwriting contest.
5. Providing guidelines and policy recommendations on how to communicate gender equality addressed to EU and national institutions as well as broadcasters and streaming platforms.
6. Exploiting the project results and disseminating them among the target groups and the general public through the website, communication activities, academic and promotional events, and scholarly publications.

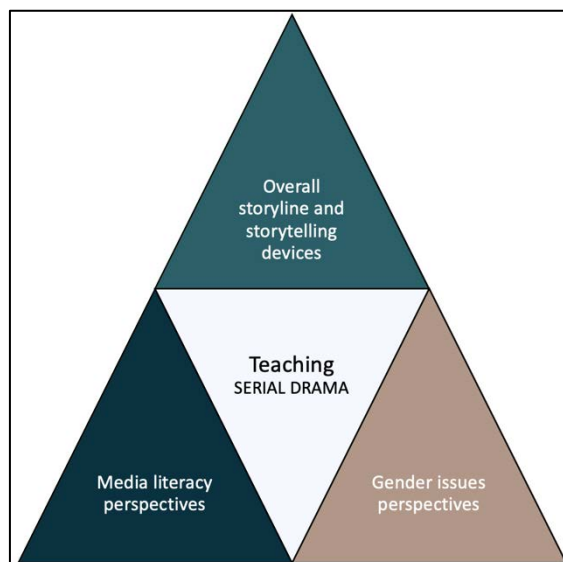
2. Background and methodology

For GEMINI, reaching young audiences through teaching serial drama in high schools is a prerequisite. While acknowledging significant changes in global media cultures for audiences aged 15-19, GEMINI's interest in producing teaching material starts from the perspectives of young adult students in European high schools. In each empirical territory (Italy, Romania, Ireland, and Denmark), focus groups have been conducted with the intention to understand media practices, series consumption, and the perception of gender issues among our target audience. Based on the results from GEMINI reception studies, 2-3 cases have been chosen from each territory for further inspection (see D3.2 for GEMINI audience studies). The premise is that choosing exemplary serial dramas that have reached our target audience may make it easier to create an interest about gender issues through teaching activities. As pointed out by Doyle and Roda, new communication practices “reshape human agency” through technological means that create an “abundance of information” and, as a result, “attention scarcity” (Doyle and Roda 2019). Of course, this shapes attention for all ages towards communication and media, but for young audiences the impact has been extremely disruptive with a push towards social media, short form video content, and interactive media practices. Clearly, young audiences nevertheless still watch a lot of serial drama, which is the most important conclusion reached from the focus group interviews. Using serial dramas as a tool means that GEMINI may meet young people and adolescents in high schools on ‘home turf’ as much as possible.

Shaping our production studies, studies of representation, and pedagogical suggestions by our focus groups provides an opportunity to choose and exemplify material that may have an interest among 15-19-year-old high school students. Besides resonating with our target audience, serial dramas have been chosen with an attempt to also represent a number of additional criteria, including both local and international material in each territory, different platforms ranging from ‘traditional’ public service institutions to international media service providers and streaming agencies, and different gender issues for closer analysis.

Firstly, this report reaches into the creative intentions behind the chosen examples by approaching serial dramas from desktop production studies, i.e. scouting and sourcing online content for interviews, deep text material, and other production perspectives (section 3). On the one hand, this may cast a scripted light on each series as the content may have been guided towards promotional purposes and editorial agendas from newspapers and online magazines. On the other hand, such a situation provides an opportunity to critically inspect how the cases have been discussed in public media. Based on these discourses, the report highlights important ‘textual’ representations of gender issues that may be singled out as teaching topics in classroom situations (section 4). In this way, the report produces a direct lineage from insights from focus groups, across creative approaches to gender issues, to teaching the textuality/stylistics of gender representation in serial drama.

Alongside analysing young people as a core audience, GEMINI researches approaches to serial drama and gender issues among European high school teachers through single in-depth interviews (see D3.2 for further information about this research). Based on insights from these interviews, GEMINI scholars frame propositions of teaching material in this report based on the importance of facilitating direct integration in the teaching situation while also acknowledging the issue that the material that the target audience actually watches may not be available through platforms with teaching material for high schools. Lack of preparation time and lack of access to material have been significant issues raised in the GEMINI teacher interviews. For this reason, transposing



analyses of serial drama to teaching material needs to keep such issues in mind. Hence, the chapters in this report propose ‘ready-made’ examples that may be directly incorporated into a high school lesson plan, while the examples, at the same time, recommend a combined teaching emphasis on the connection between issues of media literacy and gender complexities. On the GEMINI website, the series *Euphoria* (HBO 2019-) has been used as an exemplary teaching example to be directly used in a teaching situation, including making one central scene from the series available online (see Hansen 2024). Subsequently, additional series analysed below will be transposed for online distribution of teaching material and content availability.

While the cases used in the report may connect to many different media literacy and gender issues, the specific ‘textual’ examples have been chosen from the principle: *one series, one scene, one point*. In one serial drama, scholars have chosen one representative scene or sequence that – by the teacher – should be contextualised in the teaching situation, but the scenes are approachable and understandable by themselves. Each chosen scene, then, showcases one specific gender issue that establishes an opportunity for the teacher to teach this specific topic from a media and gender perspective. For instance, *Euphoria* has been chosen to target changes in character sympathy (media literacy perspective on style, narrative, and editing) and to teach the reproduction of toxic masculinity (sociological focus on an important gender issue). Some examples have been chosen to open a positive dialogue on gender issues, e.g. using the series *Wednesday* (Netflix 2022-) to teach female gender empowerment, while others like *Euphoria* propose an opportunity to discuss gender problems and equality issues.

Finally, it is clear from the focus group interviews that tastes change fast, that new serial dramas may quickly catch the attention from young high school students, and that series may sometimes become ‘old’ rather quickly and, hence, become even a mandatory viewing activity. For instance, the Danish focus groups showed that the very important and significantly popular series *SKAM* (NRK 2015-17) has changed from a most-watched series among young adults only a few years ago to a series that the students today know mostly from a teaching situation. This does not necessarily make *SKAM* a useless case, but it shows the speedy changes in taste systems among young people as a target audience and that popular series may switch from being voluntary entertainment to mandatory teaching material. This means that this report does *not* propose everlasting transnational cases for teaching media and gender issues; rather, the report discloses how single series may be analogously approached across different European cultures and teaching situations, and how cases can be adapted locally. However, most importantly the report highlights a system to choose and approach gender issues from the point of view of serial drama. Approaching a teaching situation, GEMINI scholars propose the simple *pedagogical triangle* as a case-neutral approach to developing teaching material, demonstrating through four exemplary excerpts how the combined view on media literacy and gender issues works in practice.

As suggested by W. James Potter (2013), media literacy deals with taking a specific act of media communication apart in order to understand its “meaningful elements”, evaluating the meaning of each element, understanding how such elements fit into a general media situation and context, being able to see how opinions and discourses are shaped by media strategies and stylistics, and in the end recognize that content is never neutrally communicated to the receiver. This means that the student analysing gender issues in serial drama needs to know the dynamics of serial drama storytelling and the nature of a scene and sequence in order to extract points about gender identities and gender equality from a series. This report’s most important contribution is, then, that it stresses that analysing gender equality in serial drama requires a combined approach to both gender issues and media literacy.

3. Exploring the state of art about gender equality in a comparative perspective

This section of the report offers working definitions of key concepts important for the GEMINI project, namely, *serial drama*, *gender equality* and *youth/adolescents*. It also scopes the literature and identifies common trends in academic scholarship on gender and serial drama specifically in relation to gender representation on-screen. Furthermore, this section offers four national overviews (Ireland, Romania, Italy, and Denmark) and explains the context of serial drama production in these countries as well as gender equality issues in each.

The geographical scope of the report represents the scholarly institutions of GEMINI and four different empirical territories. In this way, the Italian sections represent the Mediterranean region, the Romanian sections represent the Eastern European context, the Danish sections represent Northern Europe, and the Irish section represents the British Isles or Anglo-Saxon context. The specific geographical orientations of the report do not essentially signal broader tendencies within the regions represented, since each area surely has its own internal differences. Instead, the report welcomes other scholars to follow along similar routes for more specific insights into other empirical territories than Italy, Ireland, Romania, and Denmark.

3.1. Defining Central Concepts

The three subsections below introduce *serial drama*, *gender equality*, and *youth/adolescents* from an overall scholarly perspective. The following sections place attention on local results from each empirical territory. The intention is, firstly, to frame the analyses in the report by generally used concepts and theoretical assumptions, and secondly, to highlight similarities and differences across the areas in which data has been compiled.

3.1.1. Serial Drama

Critical attention to television drama since the 1990s has emphasised its quality (McCabe and Akass 2007; Thompson 1997) and complexity (Dunleavy 2017; Mittell 2015). Furthermore, the recent prevalence of serialised drama across platforms has helped to maintain and increase audiences of this genre (Simon 2023; Hansen 2020; Santo 2009; Lotz 2007). Drama itself has long been a staple of television and has taken many forms over the years (Cantor 1980); one of its earliest being the soap opera (Allen 1997), a genre which has often been castigated as a 'feminised' form, resulting in serial drama being undervalued institutionally and critically. Taking the soap opera as a model of the serial drama, Butler (1994 30-33) describes some of its key characteristics as including multiple protagonists with multiple storylines, numerous moments of exposition, storylines leading to a climax as well as family and romance being key narrative drivers.

With the proliferation of multiplatform services and transnational TV in recent years, serial dramas have received a critical reappraisal (Dunleavy 2018) through an examination of both their form and structure (Richards 2021; Newman and Levine 2012; Nelson 2006; Ndalianis 2003; Thompson 2003). Complex serial drama, for instance, is differentiated from the soap opera tradition because the former typically has a story arc resolved within a season (Bignell and Woods 2022), unlike soap operas' open-ended storylines. In such prestige serial dramas, storytelling is said to demonstrate more narrative complexity, while characters are also understood to be more nuanced than in soap operas (Dunleavy 2018 5; see also Bignell and Woods 2022; Keinonen 2016; Mittell 2015). Conversely, soap operas, have traditionally tended to have greater popular appeal than prestige dramas due to the familiar and familial nature of their narrative form and characters (Buonanno 2019; Newcomb 1974).

Overall, contemporary serial dramas demonstrate huge variation in form and structure. For example, serial dramas are temporally disparate, with some series running at 4 episodes in length, while others stretch to the hundreds (*Eastenders* BBC 1985-ongoing). Serial dramas also have varied 'homes' with some airing on traditional broadcast television in a scheduled form, while there is also an increasing trend towards streaming services, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. At the same time, broadcast television has during the past decade strategically switched the broadcast model to a streaming model with online apps to compete with streaming services. This switch away from using TV as a viewing device is also highlighted by the scholarly shift towards using the platform-neutral reference to serial drama rather than TV drama or TV series, although the concept has no widespread use outside scholarship.

The nature of gender representation in serial drama is, however, multi-faceted, which is why the next sub-section focuses on defining 'gender equality', drawing from numerous EU and UN reports and guidelines, while also complicating these official definitions.

3.1.2. Gender Equality

The meaning and conceptualisation of gender has undergone significant change in recent years, particularly at the European level where gender equality and gender mainstreaming are core policies across numerous agencies such as the Council of Europe (2023) and especially EIGE: European Institute of Gender Equality (2024). Gender equality is understood as "equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys" (EIGE 2023; UN Women: Training Centre glossary 2021). The Council of Europe adds to this by stating that gender equality "means accepting and valuing equally the differences between women and men and the diverse roles they play in society" (Council of Europe, 2023). Overall, at European Union level definitions of gender equality start from the position that there are social, economic, and political inequalities between the genders that need to be addressed.

For example, the European Union has recognised that there have been inequalities in relation to education and employment, acknowledging the enduring nature of gender-based violence and gender stereotypes (European Parliament 2019). Further, the Council of Europe recognises that gender equality is dependent upon many factors including the media, which “can either hinder or hasten structural change towards gender equality” (Council of Europe 2013). Gender is often described in such policy literature in binary terms as the social construction of (‘both’ i.e. two) sexes, wherein societies produce, and citizens internalise, gender norms (European Institute for Gender Equality 2023; United Nations 2023; United Nations: Women 2022). However, contemporary definitions of gender are inclusive of a much wider array of gender identities such as transgender, gender fluid and non-binary. In sum, GEMINI understands ‘gender equality’ as referring to equality for all genders, while recognising differences amongst them.

3.1.3. Youth/Adolescents (15-18)

Since the overall intention with GEMINI is producing teaching material that reaches students in high schools, this project takes young people, specifically adolescents, as the target demographic. It uses the United Nations definition of ‘youth’ (15-24) but also adopts the commonly used age limit of youth within many nations’ legal frameworks, which is 18 years old (United Nations 2022). Therefore, the project is primarily concerned with those aged between 15 and 18 who are of high school age and in the transitional period between childhood and adulthood, i.e. the years leading up to what is usually referred to as ‘young adulthood’ (appr. 18-25) (Tanner and Arnett 2009: 39). While recognising that conceptualisations of ‘youth’ are historically and socially determined, this project nonetheless addresses this cohort because these young people are seen in European-wide agencies and institutions as being agents of change, particularly regarding social issues such as gender equality.

This sample group, therefore, includes those whose age falls within the categories of late adolescence and very early adulthood, sometimes referred to as young adults. Adolescents include those who are: in the process of puberty changes (World Health Organization 2023; Sawyer et al. 2018); in either formal or informal education; experiencing growing independence and autonomy; forming their external presentation of identity, while at the same time being influenced by peers (Lesko 2012; Kroger 2004; Head 2002). Meanwhile, young adulthood includes the period of 18-25 years, during which individuals establish intimate relationships; develop goals and dreams; as well as begin to assert themselves through life choices (such as educational, family and/or career goals) (Levinson 2011, 1978; Erikson 1993).

Since the 1950s, young people have been an important consumer market for, and audience of, media (Osgerby 2004). However, there are competing understandings of the relationship between young people and media: they are perceived in some ways as passive victims of entertainment capitalism (Giroux and Pollock 2018; Boyles 2008) and elsewhere as producers who shift power hierarchies between producer and consumer (Pires et al. 2021; Guerrero et al. 2018). Young people are often thought to require more media literacy (Middaugh 2019), while at the same time they are understood

as advanced users of media technology, as early adopters and digital natives (Lim and Tan 2020). From a more liberal standpoint, Buckingham (2008) refers to Erikson's notion of adolescence as a period of "psychosocial moratorium", i.e. a time-out period where young people experiment with identity construction, and for Buckingham media "provide important opportunities for self-reflection and self-realization" (2008: 3), stressing that the intersection between media and identity formation is significantly important. Recent digital media development provides ample openings for young media users to 'test-run' different identity expressions and formative endeavours, including reflections offered by serial drama consumption.

While critical of entertainment capitalism, the GEMINI project encourages a more nuanced and liberal understanding of young people's media consumption that implies a mediated, formative identity and gender construction, maintaining young adults as critical media users rather than victims as such. Nevertheless, it acknowledges the need to integrate media literacy perspectives on teaching serial drama in high school environments in order to enhance young adults' attention towards gender issues in and around media environments.

3.2. International academic perspectives on the relation between serial drama and gender issues

This section outlines academic analyses of the representation of gender in serial dramas as well as audience responses to these issues. Academic scholarship concerned with gender issues and TV series emerged in the 1970s in the anglophone world (Brunsdon 1993 309-310). Television scholarship drew from other disciplines such as communication studies, film studies, and cultural studies. As television studies developed into a specific subfield, areas of focus included television audiences and representation, both of which are central to feminist television scholarship. Scholars such as Ang (1985), Feuer (1984), Kuhn (1984), Hobson (1982), and Geraghty (1981) collectively worked to highlight the inattention towards women in television, television criticism and television scholarship, and made the case that the typically denigrated genres and viewing practices for, and of, women were far more sophisticated and meaningful than they had previously been given credit for.

For example, the soap opera genre was central to the recuperative exercise undertaken by feminist scholars who argued that it was an important genre due to its high female on-screen representation and a female audience majority. Audience and reception studies prioritised gender as an analytic frame with studies such as Len Ang's *Watching Dallas* (1985) and Spigel's *Make Room for TV* (1992). Having established the importance of women as a gendered group in the ecology of television and television studies, further academic attention was paid to other genres beyond the soap. For example, US scholarship drew attention both to the invisibility of women in prime-time television as well as to the ways in which television dramas managed the representations of women in a period of social change, e.g. D'Acci's *Defining Women* (1994) and Dow's *Prime-Time Feminism* (1996).

Various studies emphasised how television by the mid to late 1990s reflected a conservative ethos that was largely heteronormative, white, and middle-class. For instance, Gunter (1995) argued that the absence of women in key roles in television drama reflected their social position in patriarchy, and that representations of women were largely stereotypical in nature (see also Lauzen et al. 2008; Brooks and Hebert 2006; Garrett 2005; Glascock and Ruggiero 2004). Moreover, the representation of men at this time reflected what Connell (2002) has conceptualised as hegemonic masculinity (see also Feasey 2008; Signorielli and Kahlenberg 2001; Signorielli and Bacue 1999). Despite an increase in television drama series internationally in the wake of the growth of cable, subscription and streaming services, gender representations have not improved greatly (Pietaryte and Suzina 2023; Sink and Mastro 2017; Arnold 2016).

Content and textual analyses of television dramas have identified problematic gender representations that include an absence of women and LGBTQ+ characters. Moreover, prestige serial dramas, such as *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, often championed hegemonic masculinity in its most destructive form (Joy 2017; Imre 2009). Since the 2000s and, particularly in the wake of the globalisation of serial drama distribution via platforms such as Netflix, there is a wider international corpus of series available for analysis and a variety of critical lenses deployed in the study of gender and television drama series. However, common themes emerge in the literature across multiple nation states that highlight the nature of gender representation in each context: *television drama series can be conservative and reinforce heteronormativity and gender conformity; television drama series can be contradictory and ambivalent; or television drama series can be progressive and liberal.*

For instance, content and textual analyses of serial drama in the Arabic language, in Spain, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, China and Colombia have identified patterns of the underrepresentation of women and gender minorities as well as gender stereotyping (Riaz et al. 2021; Zohoori 2021; Gonzales de Garay et al. 2020; Miller et al. 2019; Lacalle and Castro 2017; Koetse 2016; Kharroub and Weaver 2014). More often, studies of serial drama evidence contradictory or varied representations of gender whereby there is little consistency across television series nor is there an overarching gender ideology evident across a body of texts. For example, scholarship on British television drama has problematised the post-feminist sensibility of many serial dramas that treat feminism as a completed project, but the literature also finds many dramas to be ambivalent when it comes to post-feminism (Bainbridge 2023; Jermyn 2017; Hamad 2014; Brunsdon 2013).

There is a growing body of scholarship that identifies how and where television drama series are progressive agents of change, evidencing better practices in gender representation including having diversity of gender representation and more positive representations of LGBTQ+ characters. However, some criticism has queried whether such television dramas engage in queerbaiting or are tokenistic while avoiding radical politics. Such television dramas are nonetheless taken as evidence of a shift away from conservative, heteronormative gender representations (Kerrigan 2021; Thelen 2021;

Glynn and Kim 2017; Harlap 2017; Smith 2017). Thus, while increasing LGBTQ+ visibility is welcome, television scholars caution that representations must be meaningful and complex rather than exploitative. Teen television, in particular, has been singled out as evidencing a “definitive shift to LGBT-inclusive [...] narratives” (Sarkissian 2014 146) with shows such as the US *Teen Wolf* (MTV 2011-17), the US *Euphoria* (HBO 2019-), the Norwegian *SKAM* (NRK 2017-19), the British *It’s a Sin* (Channel 4 2021), the Spanish *Élite* (Netflix 2018-), and the British *Sex Education* (Netflix 2019-23) said to contain more nuanced and sensitive representations of queer youth (Díaz-Fernández 2022; Macintosh 2022; Masanet et al. 2022; Vázquez-Rodríguez et al. 2022).

Little scholarly attention has, however, been shown towards the specific intersection between seriality and gender. However, in recent scholarship Sulimma (2020) has offered a specific bridging approach to gender and seriality. For her, within gender studies “serial identity performance runs as an undercurrent”, which means that the notion of *seriality* allows an approach to gender “as a cultural and social construction continuously enacted and inscribed in bodies through processes of reiteration, repetition, and normalisation”. For Sulimma, gender identities become popular culture in itself, usurped in “serial dynamics of storytelling, production, and reception” (Sulimma 2020: 7), essentially serving a weighty argument for GEMINI’s application of serial drama as a ‘can-opener’ for gender studies in high school teaching. Creatively, Sulimma coins this intersection between gender performance and serial storytelling as a relationship between *serial genders*, since gender construction is a serial performance, and *gendered seriality*, since series offer “interpretations involved in gender enactments” (ibid. 17). Essentially, this argument situates serial drama storytelling in Buckingham’s mediated ‘psychosocial moratorium’, arguing that series may pose different formative perceptions of gender identity.

Ultimately, then, scholarship on the question of gender representation in serial dramas is concerned with the quantity and quality of representations, particularly regarding minoritised genders, sexes, and sexualities. Criticism is levelled, as those dramas that carry a more conservative ethos are not seen to reflect a social reality, in contrast to what more gender diverse and nuanced serial dramas allow for. Equally, scholarship identifies instances where gender representations are more progressive and socially attuned. Consequently, what serial dramas say about gender carries weight and importance.

The following four sections each focus on national contexts that inform the empirical part of the GEMINI project, namely Ireland, Romania, Italy, and Denmark. The sections contain a brief introduction to the media landscape and to the socio-political context regarding gender and serial drama in each country.

3.3. The Irish media landscape and sociological gender context

In some ways, the Irish audiovisual sector is distinctly national and, in other ways, global and transnational. Ireland has a mixture of public service (PSB) and commercial radio and television broadcasting with PSB Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) being the largest and longest serving. While most audiovisual media in Ireland is broadcast through English, the TV channel TG4 (Teilifís na Gaeilge) has a public service remit to broadcast primarily through the medium of the Irish language. Irish television screens typically feature national content supplemented by imported film and television drama, in particular. Both RTÉ and TG4 have channels that target young audiences. RTÉ has in recent years limited its provision and cut funding for youth-oriented programmes and channels suggested a divestment of interest in young audiences as it struggles, more generally, with budget constraints. TG4, on the other hand, had invested in youth audiences with additional funding aimed at expanding its content and the forthcoming launch of youth channel, Cúla4 in 2023. Commercial broadcaster Virgin Media does not specifically target young audiences with little children or youth programmes across its four Irish channels.

Studies of gender representation in Irish media have typically been focused on one particular medium, for example, radio (O'Brien 2019; O'Brien et al. 2017), television (Wait 2022; Kerrigan 2021), film (Barton 2017; Ging 2012; Meaney 2010; O'Connor 1984) or print media (Meehan 2023; Kiely 2021). There is little scholarship that addresses gender representation among young people. Collectively, gender representation has been understood to be uneven, with men argued to have better quality and quantity of representation than women, especially in screen media. The high volume of studies of men and masculinities in Irish film and television drama, for example, point to the commonality and popularity of male-centred narratives, even while these same studies argue that such representations are self-reflexive and challenge dominant hegemonic Irish masculinity (Holohan and Tracey 2014; Moser 2013). Elsewhere, however, Ging (2017) has noted that male audiences of Irish television crime drama, for instance, reject such readings, instead using this genre as a means of recuperating male power. This suggests that further understanding of gender and reception is required to assess how gendered representations are consumed in Ireland.

Regarding representations of women, cultural constructions of Irish womanhood and femininity have, as scholars note, leaned on stereotypes of self-sacrifice, piety, passivity, and maternal devotion (Sihra 2007; Inglis 2005; O'Connor 1998). Irish film has been said to represent 'woman' as metaphor of the land in the context of colonialism and subsequent independence, whereby women's suffering and victimisation embodies "the nation's suffering" (Meaney 1998 250; see also Rocha 2022; Holohan 2011). Referring to early representations of women on TV screens, Wait (2022) has challenged the myth that television was a liberalising force arguing instead that women were largely absent due to an undervaluing of women as an audience. In more recent years, there is some evidence of engagement with feminist concerns about equality and more representation of women in film, in particular (Barton 2020; Collins 2020; Terrasaz 2019). However,

literature on female representation in television serial drama is scant and, where women do come up for discussion, it is largely in relation to studies of masculinity (Bollas 2020; Ging 2012).

In addition, there has been growing scholarly interest in LGBTQ+ representation in Irish media with a number of recent publications mapping the emergence of more positive and progressive representations in contemporary texts (Kerrigan 2021, 2020, 2019; McDonagh 2017). In film scholarship, studies of LGBTQ+ identities have emphasised the growing visibility of queer characters, while also critiquing the homogeneity of many of these representations (Ging 2009; Murphy 2003). Further, in such representations, male gender and sexuality has been attended to much more frequently and with much more nuance than female queer identity. Kerrigan, for example, states that “lesbians still occupy a liminal space within the story of queer Irish visibility” (2021; see also MacLeod 2018). Thus, media texts and scholarly literature are productive of gender hierarchies in which some gender identities are explored and engaged with, whereas others are neglected.

The gender hierarchies that are a continued feature of Irish audiovisual representations are also found, and possibly caused by, similar gender hierarchies in the audiovisual industries whereby production and representational power is confined largely to a small cis male heteronormative clique (Liddy 2022; Kerrigan et al. 2021; O’Brien and Liddy 2021; Arnold et al. 2020; O’Brien 2019, 2015, 2014). Ireland is said to fall below the European figures of female participation in the audiovisual sectors (O’Brien 2019) with women being underrepresented in above the line creative roles in film (Liddy 2015) and television production (O’Brien 2015, 2014). A gender pay gap was also revealed to exist in the national PSB RTÉ, at the upper and lower end of the salary scale (O’Brien 2019). Campaign groups such as Women in Film and Television Ireland, in the absence of gender data gathered by the national audiovisual funding body Irish Film Board (now Screen Ireland), commenced evidencing the rates of participation of women in various forms of media work.

Since then, the Irish audiovisual industries have seen somewhat of a cultural shift with attention increasingly being paid to the dearth of women in key production roles and the relational lack of female-led narratives (Liddy 2020). Key funding bodies including Screen Ireland and the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) (now dissolved and replaced by regulating body Coimisiún na Meán) developed policies and action plans aimed at increasing female representation in the audiovisual sectors. Screen Ireland’s Six Point Plan on Gender Diversity included mentorship and training schemes but, more crucially, it ringfenced funding for female-led projects (Screen Ireland Gender & Diversity Policy 2018). The BAI followed suit in 2018 and commenced gathering gender data on successful funding applications and developed a rating system that attributes points to projects evidencing gender balance (BAI 2023; Liddy 2020). It also ringfenced funding under a ‘Women’s Stories’ scheme in 2019 (BAI 2023).

Also, in 2018 RTÉ published its Diversity and Inclusion Charter which was concerned with increasing EDI representation in production as well as in its content. The broadcaster has also appointed a Diversity Lead and committed to increased representation of women in key areas such as sports broadcasting. Along with promising to maintain gender balance of 50/50, it also set targets for increased representation of people who identify as LGBTQ+ (although this was set at a modest 4%) (O'Brien et al. 2022; RTÉ 2018). Therefore, among key industry organisations and funding bodies, gender equality has become an ongoing concern with documentation of gender representation in production and content. Scholarship on such gender equality initiatives in the fields of audiovisual production has identified good practice and points towards a progressive change in policies and activities aimed at inclusion but also recognises continued barriers to entry for key demographics, for example, mothers or new entrants (Arnold and O'Brien 2022; O'Brien and Liddy 2021).

3.4. The Romanian media landscape and sociological gender context

Romania provides an interesting case study in terms of analysing young people's attitudes regarding gender representation in media because there is a distinct generational divide in the country. This divide is particularly evident in relation to knowledge and acceptance of the problematics of gender inequality on screen, including the perpetuation of gender stereotyping. In 2020, UNICEF conducted a survey to see how Romanian adolescents understood gender equality (UNICEF 2020). More than half of those that responded stated that neither equal opportunities nor equal treatment existed in the Romanian context, identifying pressures related to physical appearance, differences in expectations and support, as well as online harassment, as the main three causes. Nine out of ten respondents stated that gender equality should be taught in schools to raise young people's consciousness of the subject. However, the results of this survey show that there is a growing awareness of gender issues, gender stereotypes, harassment, and sexual crimes in Romania, which represents a distinctive cultural shift in attitudes compared to the 1990s (see Bucur 2021). This significant change in attitudes to gender issues among young people is partly due to the evolution of international media discourse (see Boca 2019 for the Netflix case), as well as being a response to the rise of gender studies in academia and as an acknowledgement of women and sexual minorities being an important part of audiovisual audiences.

Gender studies is a relatively new research field in Romanian academia, emerging at the same time as awareness and advocacy campaigns for women's rights. Academic representatives of the field were involved in all aspects of research, education, and advocacy with a focus on the "emancipatory potential" of gender studies (Bucur 2021 386) and women's "autonomy through knowledge" (Miroiu 2020 1). Consequently, Bucur notes: "[g]ender studies has achieved a unique position of dubious notoriety in Romania. Within twenty-five years, it went from being unknown and not having even a terminology in Romanian to becoming a presumed threat to the morality of young people and a form of political 'proselytism'" (2021 385). Gender studies is now a well-established field of research, yet it is seen by some conservative factions as a threat to the traditional way of life. Academic teachings in gender studies, including the importance of

diversity in gender representation as well as the dangers of gender stereotyping, have migrated to the screen and now inform many recent TV series and films in Romania.

Research and awareness campaigns, dependent on international financial support (such as European Union funds) and on comparative studies done at international level, continue to encourage media, official figures, and communities in general to acknowledge and accept women's rights and gender equality. Research studies have focused on gender representation in advertising (Băluță 2013), in the news (Rovența-Frumușani 2014; Grunberg 2005), in politics (Băluță 2015) and in the newsrooms (Rovența-Frumușani et al. 2017). The studies have followed the evolution of gender representation on the screen that traditionally reflected "misogynist perspectives" (Bucur 2021 394) to the present day, where gender stereotypes are avoided, and women are presented as strong, complex characters (Duma 2019). This research has a particular focus on product analysis (news bulletins, ads, films), production (newsrooms composition) and public personalities (political representatives). One study interested in audience perception of TV stars (Dinu 2014) links gender representations, teenagers, and media consumption.

In addition, industry research has had a particular interest in the consumption habits of young people. Local productions with a large following of young adults and adolescents (Initiative 2022) include drama series such as *Las Fierbieni* (ProTV 2012-) and *Vlad* (ProTV 2019-). Other popular series include talent, business, cookery, renovation and travel TV shows, alongside Turkish soap operas (on Kanal D). The 12-17 age group mainly watches Antena 1 and Kanal D (generalist channels), Acasă TV (primarily showing soap operas, talk shows, news, and family films), and Pro Cinema (movie channel) (Initiative 2022). Young people's consumption of TV shows is not limited to terrestrial television, as with other national contexts, streaming platforms are growing in popularity amongst this cohort for numerous reasons. For instance, stable and high-speed internet, in both urban and rural areas, support the digital consumption of content for young people: in 2022, 98% of the 16-34 age group had internet access. Their digital consumption mainly focuses on social media, with YouTube being the leading platform, and online streaming platforms, primarily Netflix (Initiative 2022). Furthermore, online cultural consumption allows teenagers to experiment with popular cultural content from around the world, such as Hallyu from South Korea (Marinescu 2022).

Research on gender and locally produced films and serial drama is limited to films produced by the new wave of directors (Duma 2019) and to the analysis of *Shadows*, an HBO production (Eichel 2022). As Duma (2019) remarks: "the directors belonging to the New Romanian Cinema attempt to avoid stereotypes in depicting women" and present "female characters [... with] an outstanding profile" (167-168). This approach, Duma adds, is embraced by both female and male film directors. Gender representation on Romanian screens is, therefore, a quickly evolving landscape with a relatively recent shift away from engaging in gender stereotyping. Furthermore, young people are leading the way in terms of both

recognising the importance of this cultural development as well as being leaders in producing content that is more progressive.

3.5. The Italian media landscape and sociological gender context

While Italian television has a long tradition of educational programmes for children (Barra 2020; D'Amato 2002), fictional TV series targeted specifically at a young audience are, with some exceptions, a much more recent phenomenon, mostly introduced in the late 1990s through US imports (Fornasari 2021; Mediaset 2011). The growth of locally produced young adult/adolescent serial dramas has been boosted in the last five years both by the arrival of private SVOD operators and by the reaction to said arrival by the public broadcaster Rai through its online portal RaiPlay (Barra 2023). As shown by a 2022 report authored by Censis and Auditel, while 42.6% of Italians watch TV content through online platforms, the percentage increases to 62.9% of adolescents aged 11 to 17, and to 67.8% of young adults aged 18 to 34.

These changes resulted in a growing academic interest in serial drama aimed at young people/adolescents, often intersecting with topics relevant to GEMINI, for example. The first output of the project *A Girl's Eye View* – which aims to “contribute in a timely fashion to a new inclusivity for Italian cinema [re-engaging] the film industry with female audiences, and female audiences with Italian cinema” – was a study about the Italian teen drama *Baby*, produced by Netflix (Andò and Hipkins 2022). Discourses on gender and identity are common in this strand of literature (D'Amelio and Gorgolini 2023), whether it is focused on representation (Paul 2022), sexuality (Pelli 2021; Rossi 2013), consumption (Tirino and Auriemma 2021), or even Italian localisation of US serial drama (Antonioni and Checcaglini 2020; Bernabo 2017). Some publications tackle risks and bad habits such as binge watching (Costa, Bugatti and Lucchini 2022; Forni 2020), while the critical and popular success of *SKAM Italia* (TIMvision/Netflix 2018-) spawned numerous contributions, often dealing with issues of representation and identity (Alampi 2022; Del Guercio 2022; Antonioni, Barra and Checcaglini 2021; Meneghin 2021). It is worth noting that, while serial drama for young adults is mostly associated with private SVOD operators (i.e. *Baby*, *Summertime*, *Prisma*), the public broadcaster has recently made some efforts to recapture the younger audience, mostly through its online portal RaiPlay with targeted serial dramas (*Nudes*, *Confusi*, *Shake*), imports (*Normal People*, *Conversations With Friends*) and also factuais (*La conferenza stampa*). Significantly, the unexpected success of *Mare fuori*, set in a juvenile prison in Naples, drew many teenagers to RaiPlay (Rai Ufficio Stampa 2023).

Academic literature is still catching up with these very recent phenomena. Serial dramas are, however, often central in literature dealing with themes at the cross-section of adolescents, media consumption and sexuality (Lombardi et al. 2023; Burgio 2021). Broadening the scope of Italian literature about media and gender (Faccioli and Panarese 2022; Farci and Scarcelli 2022; Panarese, Parisi and Comunello 2021; Buonanno and Faccioli 2020; Comunello et al. 2017; Scarcelli

2015), we can identify two main perspectives: on the one hand, digital media is seen as a form of reproduction of traditional gender models (Saccà and Belmonte 2022; Comunello, Parisi and Iercitano 2021); on the other, there is a focus on media as a tool to convey cultural changes, to allow “the opening of new spaces for interaction and self-modeling” (Caiazza 2021; Paccagnella and Vellar 2016). This trend is also underlined in the 2022 Censis report on media consumption. When these strands of literature are concerned with serial drama, they highlight their importance as agents of socialisation among young people and as a vehicle of identity and gender formation (Peruzzi, Bernardini and Lombardi 2023). In this respect, adolescent serial dramas are described as modern generational storytellers (Cabassi 2022), or as an important part of adolescents’ shared culture, as shown by the project *Orientaserie* (in association with the Cattolica University of Milano), which is intended as a tool to help teachers and parents stay informed about recent serial dramas (Garassini 2021).

While traditional cultural and sociological readings often associated serial dramas with informal education – pertinent only to the dimensions of entertainment and free time – a more complex and intersectional perspective is emerging which shows that scholars now consider serial dramas as innovative cultural forms, both in how they can convey modes of undermining stereotypes and as an orientation of identities (Casetti 1992). Many recent publications relevant to GEMINI’s themes analyse gender equality and representation in Italian serial drama. The project “*Atlante del giallo*” (which involved Link Campus University), for instance, addressed female representation in Italian crime dramas (D’Amelio and Re 2023, 2021; Re and Spalletta 2023a, 2023b), documenting both the perpetuation of, and resistance to, gender stereotypes.

Female representation in serial dramas is undoubtedly an emergent theme (Capalbi 2021; Pierri 2020), as is the representation of LGBTQ+ identities (Pelusi 2021; Heim 2020). The public broadcaster Rai publishes an annual report concerning the representation of “the female figure” in its programming, with the 2022 edition detecting a slight increase in five chosen markers (Rai 2022). There is also sociological literature that focuses on the relationship between media, gender representation and diversity in the Italian context (Giomi and Magaraggia 2017; Grossi and Ruspini 2007; Tota 2008). In this way, serial dramas, playing the role of modern cultural forms, prove to be particularly relevant precisely because of their representation of gender, whether that is conservative, ambivalent, or progressive. For adolescents and young adults, then, serial dramas are especially influential (Porrovecchio 2012). While in the Italian context there is a lack of academic literature and reports that tackle all three of GEMINI’s themes (serial drama, gender equality and young people/adolescents), there is a growing scholarly interest in these issues.

3.6. The Danish media landscape and sociological gender context

The relationship between gender issues, young adults, and serial drama collectively is a relatively under-researched topic in a Danish context, while two strands emerge that are relevant to GEMINI. Firstly, focus on young adults' media consumption has mostly concentrated on their use of mobile devices and social media platforms (Larsen and Johansen 2023; Drotner 2009). Concomitantly, recent reports and debates have focused on both on- and off-screen representations of gender (DFI 2022a). For instance, the internationally successful show *SKAM* (Sundet 2021a, 2021b) has been used as a pedagogical tool (Lindtner and Skarstein 2018), as well as informing discourses on gender and sexuality (Kaur 2022; Lindtner and Dahl 2020). Research studies into other series have focused on youth culture (Højer 2011; Jensen 2010; Povlsen 1999), the integration of various media platforms as a narrative and technological tool (Sundet 2021; Bengtsson, Källquist and Sveningsson 2018), and gender performance in serial drama in general (e.g. Jacobsen 2018), or in Nordic Noir specifically (e.g. Agger 2011).

Recently, *Toxic* (2022), the first Nordic series produced specifically for TikTok, premiered with an ambition to reach young adults with a romantic series about mental health and eating disorders (Klevjer 2022; Mouritsen 2022). Earlier, YLE, the Finnish public service channel, launched the series *Karma* (2019), branding it as the first real-time series produced for Instagram. Moreover, Danish series for young adults like *Doggystyle* (2018-22), *SIIT Happens* (2012-17), and others have innovatively worked with an integration of social media in the series' universe. Altogether, the Danish context presents research and report strands that mark an interest in adolescents, young adults, culturally influential issues, and new media formats, while the Nordic creative industries appear ready to embrace new media trends as aesthetic/format variations of serial drama. In the Nordic region, there is a widespread creative interest in producing serial drama for young adults focusing on gender, sexuality, and other related issues. Even if that is the case, recent developments in the Danish and Nordic context indicate a shift away from attempting transmedia integration in serial drama. Data from the Danish GEMINI focus groups indicate that multiple screening still takes place to great extent, but viewers wish to have the mobile device free for other screen activities than transmedia serial drama, which may be the reason that contemporary producers are pursuing transmedia storytelling like *SKAM* to a lesser degree.

A recent Danish research project, Reaching Young Audiences (RYA 2019-24), has specifically focused on fiction series for children and adolescents, including research into production and audience (e.g. Redvall and Novrup 2021a, 2021b). The project has not explicitly researched gender representation, but results from RYA have informed the focus of the GEMINI project. According to RYA, the platform that 8–17-year-olds from Denmark “watch the most – YouTube – cater(s) to their need for non-fictional content such as vlogs, music videos and game play. When they want to watch a series or a film, they log in to Netflix or Disney+ – and even the national players DR and TV 2” (Jensen et al. 2021). RYA's age-range does not fully align with GEMINI's but in a few years the RYA respondents move directly into the GEMINI target group. For this reason, we also expected Danish young adults and adolescents to show a predominant interest in YouTube content,

while their serial drama preferences may point towards US content, though with a cautious expectation that they also watch some local series. The recent edited volume *Audiovisual Content for Children and Adolescents in Scandinavia* (2023) collects results from RYA and shows a range of perspectives in close alignment with GEMINI's results, including changes in the coming-out-scene (Lysne 2023), approaching young adults through YouTube (Sundet 2023), and children and adolescents' preference for US content (Jensen 2023).

In a Danish context, gender representation on- and off-screen has received attention from policymakers and official public institutions, especially The Danish Film Institute (DFI). In 2016, DFI launched "the policy for a better gender balance in Danish film" (2016), but as DFI also comprises a more general Danish media policy, including TV series and web content, this also includes gender representation in serial drama. This initiative involves yearly reports, such as the recent "Gender in Danish Film" (2022b), while the 2020 report introduced compulsory "gender declaration" in all applications for public support for Danish film and series production. During the same period, DFI launched the initiative CONNECT (2016-19) with special attention towards "youth and community, identity, gender, sexuality, body ideals, performance culture, and mental health" (DFI undated a). During this project, panels of young adults were set up to council the Danish ministry of health with advice on topics like media cultures, gender, sexuality, and body issues among young adults. This project concluded specifically that youth cultures need concrete advice on how to navigate within a changing media culture. However, the fate of continued activities after the termination of CONNECT is uncertain.

At the same time, creatives involved in the project show reluctance towards having a specific agenda to change attitudes towards gender and sexuality, e.g. Anne Emma Houdal, the showrunner behind the successful Danish TV and web series *Doggystyle*: "It is not my responsibility as a creator of fiction to work with gender and identity. My responsibility is to create whole, nuanced, human characters. The problem is exactly that we create clichés and stereotypes when we start to talk about representation, because we then create boxes, and these are the boxes we need to get out of" (Pahl 2019). On the one hand, policy initiatives, then, indicate a shift in attention towards gender issues and other topics in Danish film and series production, but on the other hand, the lack of obvious continuation of such initiatives (for instance, the CONNECT initiative has been silent since 2019) also highlights that gender equality issues in Denmark still need research and policy attention, most significantly in the interrelated areas between gender, serial drama, and young adults.

3.7. From state of the art to pedagogical motivation

This section has shown how local contexts to greater extent vary within the European Union, including different social environments around gender representation and the degree of local production. Despite significant differences, the state-of-the-art perspectives outlined here indicate that research practices show increasing and noteworthy attention towards different gender-related issues, which motivates dissemination and communication practices that facilitate the

research material for high school teaching environments. Nevertheless, the differences found across the continent, including various teaching topics in which media literacy may or may not be incorporated, stress that teaching material produced for a continental level should be dynamic and locally adaptable. In three territories, it is possible to find local material that may work well for local teaching, but in a Romanian context the teaching situation and media culture appear oriented towards very dominant US content trends.

Differences in teaching and media practices motivate a pedagogical approach that not only works directly towards easy and direct integration into teaching activities, but they also stress that teaching recommendations should be open to new input and serial content. As the material below suggests, educational tools should establish a teaching situation where material may be swiftly swapped and replaced by different, often newer content examples, which integrates a flexible approach to content use that, at the same time, keeps many of the above outlined topics, concepts, and gender issues intact. The pedagogical motivation reached through the above summary and the analyses below is one of local flexibility and a teaching practice that enhances high school students abilities to discuss and negotiate gender representation and gender equality issues from the basis of varying popular serial dramas.

4. Production: Creative approaches to gender equality through serial drama

4.1. Introducing desktop production studies

This section of the report approaches the chosen cases from the creative perspective of predominantly desktop production studies. As outlined by Hansen and Re (2023), desktop production studies propose an alternative to time-consuming production studies that involve important issues regarding time and access to data and people. The approach suggests “using ready-made data on film and TV” that have been “distributed for a wider readership with a specific interest in the creative background of media productions.” This methodical variation is cost-effective and fits a short-term research project like GEMINI very well, while such approaches “assist in unearthing how series, through an array of communicative traces, are intentionally launched and communicatively interpreted” (Hansen and Re 2023, 22-26). In addition, there are a number of points to pay attention to when using desktop approaches to production studies: “Accessing information through online sources adds yet another codification system to the material, which means that we need to be extra cautious with accepting the information as authentic insights into production circumstances.” Rephrasing Hansen and Re as a defence, “our main concern is reckoning how *gender issues* are *negotiated* through serial narratives, including online expositions in producers’ and creatives’ nevertheless ‘corporate scripts’” (ibid. 25, added italics). Essentially, desktop production studies regard ready-made online material as paratextual material that frames and communicates the intentions and promotional objectives of serial drama in a way that may also be practised by high school students as class exercises. While GEMINI proposes to teach media literacy and gender issues through serial drama analyses, scanning the internet for insights into relevant serial dramas may also heighten students’ understanding of how gender issues may be debated from a creative perspective.

4.2. Creative insights into Irish cases: *Derry Girls*, *Normal People* and *The Young Offenders*

The three Irish case serial dramas considered here are *Derry Girls* (Channel 4, 2018-2022), *Normal People* (RTÉ, 2020) and *The Young Offenders* (RTÉ, 2018- present). All shows were broadcast on Irish national television and were distributed in European and international territories and on global streaming platforms. All three are concerned with the lives and relationships of young people. Desktop production studies approach to data gathering was employed in which the researchers identified a number of openly available qualitative resources that provide context for the broadcast and television production landscape in Ireland (particularly as it pertains to young audiences), the intentions of the programme makers in regards to messaging and meaning, and the extent to which programme makers were concerned with or aimed to address gender issues through their programmes. Data was triangulated from three main sources: organisational data, the press, and interviews. Organisational data – including annual reports, policy documents and strategic documents published by the main public service broadcasters – were used to identify if and how broadcasters address young audiences through serial drama production or commissioning, or how the broadcasters address gender issues in their

organisation and in programming and commissioning. Data about the creative and production processes was gathered through a combination of trade and industry press and popular news and entertainment magazines and online sources. Finally, pre-existing interviews carried out with creatives and production personnel were used to understand how and where gender issues were consciously addressed in the programmes and how young people were represented in or addressed through the programmes from the perspective of those who made them.

It is important to note how serial drama production in Ireland is related to its small size and, therefore, it is difficult to speak of national trends from such a small sample. Further, *Derry Girls*, although set on the island of Ireland is a UK production. The two public service broadcasters, RTÉ and Irish-language TG4, both have a responsibility to represent the diversity of the Irish population in its representations and as audiences. RTÉ published its Diversity and Inclusion Charter in 2018 committing the organisation to improved representation in terms of gender (RTÉ, 2018). It also commits to engaging young audiences although activities have predominantly focused on factual content or engaging outside of traditional broadcast formats. TG4, on the other hand, has been more active in drama production aimed at or representing young people and in recent years has launched a broadcast and streamed channel, Cúla4, which is addressed at children and young people and includes shows centring on the lives of teenagers including *Saol Ella* (TG4, 2023) and *Aifric* (TG4, 2006-2008). Because TG4 is an Irish-language broadcaster, programmes do not receive the same level of viewership as other national and commercial English-language broadcaster. Although the audiences for its programmes may be small, they are an important demographic in the national political context.

Given that all three shows are concerned with the lives of young people and are coming-of-age narratives, the themes of ‘firsts’ features heavily in online material about the productions. However, discussions of gender are explicit only in relation to *Derry Girls* whereby the female focus of the programme, the coming out of one character as a lesbian, and the identification of one character as non-binary have been core to the meaning of the show among the production team and talent. For example, Louise Harland, who played Orla, posted a widely circulated TikTok video in which she revealed Orla’s non-binary identity (Carpenter 2022). Discussion and reporting of this show positions it as a change agent in relation to gender representation. *The Young Offenders* and *Normal People*, on the other hand, are discussed less explicitly in terms of gender, even though the importance of relationships and romances dominate the production narratives. Both shows tend towards assumed heteronormativity and normative family structures (mother as carer, father as disciplinarian). *The Young Offenders* actor, Alex Murphy, for example, stated that writer Peter Foott “doesn’t write thinking of gender... he doesn’t write thinking of class” (Ganatra 2020). *Normal People* director Lenny Abrahamson referenced the ambition towards gender balance in the production crew, whereas many reviewers and critics pointed to the conservative gender ideology at the heart of the show (Larki 2020).

Analysis of interviews with creative personnel on the three shows demonstrates the extent to which gender issues were intentionally or unintentionally referenced in the shows, or whether they were negated altogether. For example, *Derry Girls* writer and showrunner, Lisa McGee, stated in interview that the show intentionally aimed at undermining gender stereotypes of girlhood typical of television drama representation: “I just thought about what real women are like, young women, and they don’t spend all of their time talking about men or relationships” (Robinson 2021). Similarly, Nicola Coughlan, who played Clare in *Derry Girls*, was very vocal about her concern with getting the ‘coming out’ story right and cites her trust in the production team and writer to do so (Allen 2019). Gender issues were, therefore, very conscious topics during the writing and production of *Derry Girls*.

Gender issues in *Normal People* tended to be discussed through the lens of sex and sexual expression and in the context of heterosexual romance. The production team and talent detailed the importance of representations of sexual activity between protagonists Conall and Marianne. Writer Sally Rooney and actor Daisy Edgar-Jones, for example, both refer to the class or sexual power dynamics that are at play between the male and female protagonists (Glasgow 2020, Jaksic 2020).

In the case of *The Young Offenders*, there is little evidence that gender was a specific concern during the development or production of the show. Yet, issues relating to masculinity, fatherhood and domestic violence are evident. One of the main characters, Jock, for example, has been fostered by single mother Mairead because Jock’s father is an abusive alcoholic, and his mother is dead. Despite the obviousness of gender in the representations, though, there are few indications that a particular gender lens was taken in the development of these stories.

As all three programmes are coming-of-age narratives, the dominant points and messages are about the journey towards adulthood and the encounter with adult life, for example, through romantic partnerships, leaving the family home, and dealing with serious issues such as death. Each programme, though, addresses these themes through various lenses. In *Derry Girls*, the ambition was to represent the tense and violent political period known as The Troubles, through the often-neglected perspective of young women to evidence how ordinary people and women in particular managed daily life in this environment (Williams 2022). *The Young Offenders* is about youth and social disadvantage and the persistent tension between the temptation to engage in criminality, get into trouble with peers, and the urge to become morally grounded adults (Guerin 2018, Foott 2017). The creators of *Normal People* note how the drama was particularly concerned to represent sexual maturation and of having the two young characters learn about communication and intimacy through their relationship. Collectively, then, all three shows aim towards treating youth and teenagers with seriousness and as having rich interior lives.

Since each programme addresses gender in different ways and to different degrees, they can together be effective tools in addressing gender issues and gender stereotypes in teaching contexts. The overtness of the gender themes in *Derry Girls*, for example, allows for analysis of individual characters, storylines, or plots. For example, the female perspective is central to the series and, given the writer's concern with tackling gender stereotypes, there are opportunities to select and analyse instances where this may or may not occur. Equally, episodes which address the sexuality of characters might be used as lessons in diversity representation. *Normal People* may be used in part, but care should be taken to use age-appropriate material for screening and analysis. Storylines and plots that may provide opportunities for learning include sequences that take place in the school and that evidence the gender structures and hierarchies established in the school cohort; sequences that demonstrate the emerging but fraught relationship between the key characters; and scenes which feature the family dynamics of key characters, and which demonstrate the intersection of gender and class particularly regarding parenthood. Finally, *The Young Offenders* is an especially useful teaching resource for engaging young people in discussions about masculinity and male gender stereotypes since much of the comedy moments rest upon the negation of homosexuality and the reinforcement of conservative gender ideology. While these are not consciously addressed in the production research, they are overt in the representations throughout the series. Collectively, sequences of each of the shows and the characters' relationships with peers, family and romantic partners can be used to encourage discussion about dominant ideological norms such as heteronormativity and gender normativity.

4.3. Creative insights into Romanian cases: Wednesday and Breaking Bad

Based on the Romanian focus group results, two serial dramas have been selected for further production, textual and pedagogical inspection. These are the two US productions *Wednesday* (Netflix 2022-) and *Breaking Bad* (AMC 2008-2013) both currently available through Netflix in Romania. The two titles were mentioned in all three focus groups conducted with high school students with *Wednesday* mentioned mainly by girls and *Breaking Bad* cited by boys. As the series appear naturally through focus group conversations, and since the two titles tease out indications of a gendered taste system, these would work well as representative cases for pedagogical utilisation.

During the focus group interviews, *Wednesday* was identified as one of the popular favourites among Romanian high-school students, which may have been motivated by the first season being filmed in Romania. *Wednesday* is a spin-off series from *The Addams Family* franchise, and presents Wednesday Addams as a unique, strong, and independent character who defies traditional female stereotypes and celebrates individuality. The focus group results suggest an appeal of the series' themes, the high-end production quality, and the Netflix's local accessibility. The focus group interviews indicate strong engagement with the series, suggesting its relevance in relation to gender issues among young adults. The audience gained insightful and valuable experiences with relationships, society, and personal identity through the experiences of the titular character (Mars 2022).

“I think the show will appeal to teenage girls in particular because Wednesday Addams is such a compelling and complex character”, says Miles Millar, co-creator of *Wednesday*. “She is someone who knows who she is and will never apologize for that. She also isn’t defined by romance or boys,” Millar adds (Palmer 2022). The show's focus on relationships between women and the depth given to each female character contribute to its gender empowering narrative. Additionally, Wednesday's portrayal as a Latina character played by a Latina actress represents a step forward in authentic representation, addressing issues like whitewashing and systemic inequalities. Overall, the Wednesday character emerges as a visible role model for standing up against prejudice, with her character embodying strength, complexity, and defiance of gender norms.

Wednesday offers a negotiated perspective on gender roles through its portrayal of the titular character. Jena Ortega, the 20-year-old actress playing the main teen character, stressed in an interview about the serial drama: “My favorite thing about being a woman in horror is that [the characters] are always written [as] strong” (Changnon 2023). Wednesday Addams is depicted as a strong, independent, and unconventional character, deviating from stereotypical female representations in similar narratives. She embodies a strong sense of self, unashamedly embracing her uniqueness, often challenging societal expectations.

As frequently emphasized in *The Addams Family* franchise, this characteristic reinforces the message that being distinct is perfectly acceptable (Goddart 2022). Wednesday's character is presented as a self-reliant, young smart woman who does not hesitate to express her opinions or question conventional norms (Alves 2022). *Wednesday* is a subversive narrative with an iconised character serving as inspiration for assertive and ‘unusual’ girls (Pearl 2022). For *The Hollywood Reporter*, co-creator Millar highlights how the narrative intentionally focussed on difference discourses:

Wednesday is also a celebration of otherness and the different forms it takes and a celebration of being proud of that. Everyone sees Wednesday is an aspirational character. Everyone sees themselves as an outsider. So, she’s the ultimate outsider. In a school of outcasts, she is the ultimate outcast. So, I think that’s something that thematically works for right now as well in terms of very modern theme that is resonating, and it’s something that is the underlay of the series, but isn’t something that is preferred. (Piña 2022)

The friendship development between the female outcast characters Wednesday and Enid is, by for instance *Movieweb*, picked up as a most important contribution from the series (Press 2022). Despite their differences, the bond between Wednesday and Enid has captured the attention of the audience, indicated by fanart and videos distributed through especially TikTok and Tumblr using the hashtag #Wenclair, a contraction of the names Wednesday and Enid Sinclair. In this way, the audience picks up on the intention stressed by co-creator Miller: “this idea of sisterhood is key to the show” (Piña 2022).

The main character's emotional detachment and intellectual superiority, attention towards sisterhood, and focus on difference discourses are defining traits that may challenge gender norms. Her direct language and formidable presence defy traditional expectations of femininity, while her intelligence and agency reinforce her role as the hero of her own story. The creative process of *Wednesday* represents an intentional effort to represent a non-stereotypical female lead associated with broader societal changes in gender perception and equality. Creators Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, and director and producer Tim Burton, seek to capture teenagers through an alternative to representing teen angst and mental growing pains. In an interview, Tim Burton stated that the story “just spoke to me about how I felt in school and how you feel about your parents, how you feel as a person. It gave the Addams Family a different kind of reality” (Butcher 2022). While the series appealed mostly to females in the focus groups, it appears interesting from a gender perspective that the story resonates with the male director Burton and his approaches to filmmaking.

The second case motivated by Romanian focus groups, *Breaking Bad*, is a violent crime series that tells the story of the mild-mannered middle-aged chemistry teacher, Walter White, who is diagnosed with terminal cancer. Therefore, he decides to start producing the illegal stimulant methamphetamine (popularly referred to as meth) to lay aside enough money for his family to live a comfortable life after his death. It is a story of transformation from the dependable family head to the amoral criminal mastermind. Teenagers in this series are marginally represented, but the age-group is epitomised by the main character's son, a disabled 16-year-old forced into maturity by his father's actions. The show frames important gender-related issues such as (toxic) masculinity, family dynamics, and gender roles. Throughout the show, the feminine perspective is provided mainly by Walter's wife Skyler, a suburban mother confined by her slow discovery of Walter's crimes (Thompson 2019).

Breaking Bad was originally pitched by creator Vince Gilligan as “a story about a man who transforms himself from Mr Chips into Scarface” (MacInnes 2012). According to Bryan Cranston (Walter White), the intention was to try “something that has never been done on television before – to change a character completely from beginning to end” (Dibdin 2018). While the show does contain female characters, the perspective and character sympathy lie with main male characters and the drug-dealing setting dominated by men. The serial drama has been described as a “fierce portrayal and criticism of masculinity” (Govier 2018), “(re)present[ing] male and female propensities for criminality differently” (Wakeman). Sympathies for the main character decreases throughout the five seasons, as he breaks several moral codes: he manufactures and sells drugs, cheats, lies, manipulates, and commits murders. Surprisingly enough, however, his wife Skyler became the most unpopular character from the series in what Anna Gunn, the actress playing Skyler, refers to as an “undercurrent of extreme sexism” (Longeretta 2019). Having found no empirical data that asserts gender as a targeted, conscious topic in the creative process, gender nevertheless becomes “a site of tension within *Breaking Bad*” (Work 2016), running concurrently with the series' male-dominated main theme.

The character Skyler was targeted negatively during broadcasts in what *Indiewire* refers to as a “sexist fan reaction”. For the magazine, Vincie Gilligan, in fact, shows some regret regarding the storytelling devices in the show: “I realize in hindsight that the show was rigged, in the sense that the storytelling was solely through Walt’s eyes, even in scenes he wasn’t present for. Even Gus [played by Giancarlo Esposito], his archenemy, didn’t suffer the animosity Skyler received. It’s a weird thing. I’m still thinking about it all these years later.” Regarding the character Skyler, he states “I think that always troubled Anna Gunn [who played Skyler]. And I can tell you it always troubled me, because Skyler, the character, did nothing to deserve that” (Bergeson 2022). Interestingly, gender was not intentionally targeted as a specific topic during production, but the series’ focus on what could be referred to as a ‘male gaze’ (cf. section 5c) appears to have motivated an unpremeditated gendered fan-base reaction.

While creative intentions behind *Wednesday* provide obvious opportunities to find, read, and understand the series from a range of gender-related issues, *Breaking Bad* requires a different perspective on the ‘text’ pertaining to a negotiated reading of the series against the creative intentions, which is, however, directly motivated by creator Gilligan’s ‘troubles’ with the Skyler character. In both cases, there are several textual codes to be analysed from a gender perspective.

4.4. Creative insights into Italian cases: *The Sea Beyond*, *Sex Education* and *Prisma*

The three Italian serial dramas explored in this section have been chosen as case studies based on various criteria, including focus group interviews conducted in Italy with Italian high school students, in-depth interviews with audiovisual professionals, and the objective of providing an accurate, albeit partial, snapshot of the Italian media system and its diverse production and consumption practices. *Mare fuori* (*The Sea Beyond*, Rai, 2020-) is a crime drama set in a juvenile prison in Naples. It is co-produced by the PSB Rai and distributed on linear TV, the RaiPlay streaming platform, and through Netflix. It has achieved outstanding ratings especially among younger spectators (aged between 15 and 24) (Bernocchi 2023; Scaglioni 2023). *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019-23) was revealed by focus groups as one of the most discussed serial dramas directly tackling gender issues. As a British production by Netflix, the most frequently cited streaming service in the Italian focus groups, it also sheds light on young Italian viewers’ widespread habit of watching Anglo-American products. Finally, *Prisma* (Prime Video, 2022-) is a coming-of-age serial drama co-produced by Prime Video and Cross Productions, the production company behind *SKAM Italia* (TIMvision 2018-19, Netflix 2020-). As an extension of the “SKAM methodology” applied to original content, it is a useful example of an Italian production directly addressing gender issues by narrating the lives of a group of adolescents in a small provincial town.

Data collected about the case studies consists of 1) interviews with professionals (Elena Capparelli, RaiPlay director; Maddalena Rinaldo, Head of Content for Cross Productions; Domizia De Rosa, President of Women in Film, Television and Media Italia); 2) publicity material provided by media offices (e.g. pressbooks, press releases); 3) publicly available

material gathered through desktop production studies. Hence, all three cases were triangulated with a mix of methods. For the two Italian dramas, insights from professionals directly involved in the production or distribution processes were merged with data gathered through desktop production studies. For *Sex Education*, desktop production studies included particular attention towards how the serial drama circulated and was promoted in the Italian context.

The Sea Beyond does not explicitly deal with issues of gender and identity. Instead, most of the characters are teenagers “who made mistakes” (Rai 2020) which has led them to prison. The narrative is therefore more attentive towards stories of crime, guilt, and redemption, namely the hope for a better future symbolized by the “sea beyond” the prison’s window bars. Nonetheless, issues of abuse, gender-based violence and oppression are often addressed. The character of Gemma, for example, ends up in the women’s wing of the prison after shooting an abusive boyfriend; Naditza, a Roma girl, gets voluntarily arrested to escape an arranged marriage imposed by her family. Thus, *The Sea Beyond* is well integrated into RaiPlay’s strategy to win back young audiences and “chase an audience not just to get it, but with content that has powerful moral value elements” (Capparelli 2023). Pursuing the PBS mission, teen series produced or distributed exclusively by RaiPlay address contemporary social issues concerning young adults. *Nudes* (2021-) is, for example, an original series about revenge porn; the French import *Stalk* (2020-21) tackles cyberbullying; the Norwegian production *Rumors* (2022) investigates the blurring boundaries between real life and social media.

The Sea Beyond realistically portrays a disadvantaged and backwards environment that drives young people to embrace the values of organized crime. At the same time, the narrative is soapy and melodramatic, revolving around friendship and “infinite love triangles” (De Rosa 2023). Creator Cristiana Farina has an extensive background in soap operas and brought those narrative techniques and sensibilities to the series. As a result, *The Sea Beyond* often represents gender relations typical of a patriarchal tradition that is deeply rooted in Italian society, but it does not always succeed in questioning them, thus risking normalizing and naturalizing gender bias.

In contrast, *Prisma* deals first and foremost with issues of gender identity, diversity, and inclusivity. It “revolves around the complex relationship between identity, aspirations, physical appearance and sexual orientation of a group of Latina teenagers” (Prime Video 2023). While the main plot concerns the self-discovery of a young person exploring gender identities, there are also issues concerning toxic masculinity, performance anxiety, and disability. According to the creator and director Ludovico Bessegato, the series intends to represent “a generation and a world in which the very concept of diversity no longer seems able to describe reality. [...] We have borrowed the image of the optical prism, which manages to break down light, only apparently white, into the infinite spectrum of colors that compose it. White, the canon, does not exist. It’s just a crowded summary” (Prime Video 2023). Bessegato, the executive producer of *SKAM Italia*, brought the experiences from the *SKAM* franchise to *Prisma*. Maddalena Rinaldo, head of content in Cross Productions,

said that *Prisma* faithfully replicated the “SKAM method”, according to which “we had to conduct thousands of interviews with young people, we had to have consultants, we had to go right into schools and observe”. In her opinion, this work was essential to faithfully represent young people’s lives because “you learn about things you would not imagine, simply because they are not our [adult, ed.] culture, they do not belong to us” (Rinaldo 2023). *Prisma* is a complex and informed representation of gender issues and sexual identity, albeit sometimes feeling slightly didactic with story arcs often designed to convey a clear and positive meaning, as if they were contemporary morality tales.

As the title itself indicates, *Sex Education* may also be read as having educational objectives, even though it has a more foregrounded comedic tone. The creator Laurie Nunn often remarked how the underlying theme was less about sexuality than it was about friendship and community (Lamadrid 2023). Netflix’s Italian promotion shares assertions made by the British one, marketing the series as “a coming-of-age story with a fresh, feminist heart, [...] presenting intersectional and multidimensional characters that audiences have fallen in love with” (Netflix 2019). The Italian promotion highlighted both the comedy and the educational aspects, e.g. in a series of promotional YouTube videos, members of the cast were asked to read and translate some Italian sentences (Netflix Italia 2020a), or to guess the meaning of vernacular words indicating genitals (Netflix Italia 2020b), or they would read some bizarre traditional Italian legends about how babies are born (Netflix Italia 2021). In the Italian focus groups, *Sex Education* was spontaneously mentioned by students as an example of a series able to influence behaviours and ways of thinking regarding both fashion and manners (e.g. the “bad girl” attitude showed by Maeve), and to forward a positive focus on valuable information about sex and the normalization of non-standard bodies. Moreover, students appreciated the series’ characters as more truthful portrayals of adolescents, contrasting it with other stereotypical representations.

In the Italian focus groups, participants mentioned a wide range of very different titles. The three cases discussed here were chosen to reflect this variety. *The Sea Beyond* is a hugely popular public service production, combining Italian textual traditions (PSB “social problem dramas” and melodrama) with international genres (teen drama, prison drama). While not explicitly addressing gender issues, its occasionally ambiguous depiction of gender relations can be a stimulus for discussion. On the other hand, *Prisma* is appreciated as an authentic meditation on young people and issues of gender, identity, inclusivity, and disability. Its sometimes overt educational purpose and its generally delicate tone make it a text suitable for classroom use. *Sex Education* is, finally, part of a large group of English language teen dramas that make up for a scarcity of this genre in local production, able to address numerous relevant topics such as consent, body positivity, mental health, queer identities, and feminism, while still being a highly entertaining comedy.

4.5: Creative insights into Danish cases: *Euphoria*, *Rita* and *Zusa*

Based on focus group interviews conducted in Denmark, the data suggests three cases that were debated by several high school respondents: 1) The US series *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019-21) is a well-known series among Danish high school students, and it is applauded for its ‘naturalised’ narrative about transgender identities, among other things. Other series meet disapproval for a ‘forced’ or caricatured representation of gender issues. The series represents the presence of larger US platforms on the Danish market and the audience’s dominant taste in US content. 2) The Danish series *Rita* (TV 2/Netflix, 2012-20) surfaced unmotivated by the interviewer in four out of five interviews and appears as a much-watched series by many Danish high school students. The series epitomises local and commercial public service entering co-production agreements with larger streaming services such as Netflix. 3) The Danish series *Zusa* (YouTube 2022-23) works as an overall incorporation of the Danish creator Jonas Risvig, a notorious voice among Danish young adults. This specific series represents a recognizable sociocultural environment for young adults, while it – as a series specifically distributed through YouTube – also points towards new, independent production and circulation of serial drama content through social media.

All data on the serial dramas and the creatives has been gathered through desktop production studies. The material must be regarded as ‘publicly disclosed deep texts’, which means that all material is publicly available, while it still showcases insights from the creative process. On the one hand, this means that some material may be somewhat scripted content, but on the other hand, this means that this approach to the series also reconstructs public images of the series. In some cases, the material needed a bit of online ‘archaeology’, which indicates that conducting desktop production studies also encompasses ‘going down rabbit holes’ to find material through a labyrinthic route. In the case of Jonas Risvig, this involved uncovering a noteworthy debate about the representation of gender and sexuality in one of his series, a debate that was discussed in depth in one focus group interview. In this way, the material gathered does not necessarily represent ‘the truth’ about each case, but it characterises the series ‘official’ approaches to gender issues and representation.

According to the series’ creator Sam Levinson (Stack 2019), *Euphoria* is not directly about gender issues as such, but rather about “my personal history with drugs”, which indicates why audiences may perceive the representation of gender and sexuality as authentic: the storyline involves stories about gender issues, but these work more like a backdrop to the stories about drug addiction. According to Scott Turner Schofield, transgender activist and trans consultant on *Euphoria*, the series “feels authentic because it is authentic — it’s something that is really there and really of this moment because it was brought to the table by an actual person” (Haasch 2019). In developing the series, Levinson was in close collaboration with Schofield as well as the actors playing the central characters, including in-depth talks with Hunter Schafer who plays the trans-girl Jules (Stack 2019, Radish 2021). As stressed in the interview, Schafer explicitly approaches gender from “an emotional and philosophical standpoint, rather than something political or binary” (Radish

2021), which furthers cultural questions towards how to approach gender identities. However, she still stresses that it's "not what her narrative concentrates on, really" (ibid.), which reverts to how her portrayal of Jules rather represents a so-called "passing privilege" (i.e. trans-persons abilities to get acknowledged for the gender that they identity with) and, essentially, a naturalised representation of trans-identities. Through explicit scenes, Levinson wishes for the series to be a "means of communication" (Stack 2019) and, hence, negotiate issues among young adults, including gender issues.

Like *Euphoria*, the Danish series *Rita* does not exactly confront gender issues headfirst, but rather it establishes character traits and sexuality as themes that tackle issues that have to do with gender. The creator Christian Thorpe refers to the protagonist Rita as "a grown woman who was basically still a child" and stresses how he places her in "an arena where the themes that are present in her – childhood, upbringing, authority, identity – would resonate" (Debolt 2025). As a result, *Rita* may have more to do with age than gender: "I was attracted to writing a character around 40 that was still a teenager in her mind" (Série Series 2013). This establishes a sometimes-lonely character with a self-destructive approach to alcohol and smoking, wise-cracking one-liners, conflicts with superiors, and an assertive sexuality, which are traits often associated with hardboiled male leads in detective fiction. The series, then, approaches gender issues through themes of sexuality, including the storyline about Rita's homosexual son. For the creator Thorpe, this character avoids stereotypification, because he is not portrayed as a victim (Daimier & Blegvad 2012), based on which the series was awarded the 2012 Danish BENT-prize for the finest gay character (Jørgensen 2012). Through what Mille Dinesen, the actress playing Rita, calls an "edgy, masculine, politically incorrect woman", the series implicitly negotiates gender traits and sexuality rather directly confronting such issues.

The series *Zusa* shares similarities with *Euphoria* and *Rita* in the way it tackles gender issues by storytelling youth through different themes without specifically entering debates about gender. To avoid 'forced' narratives, the creator Jonas Risvig attempts to build what he refers to as "adult-free spaces", creating a narrative space where "all these moral lectures and unresolved plots unrelatable for young people are removed [...]. I don't have a political message for the young, and I don't really have anything to teach them," he says (Bjørklund 2021). In *Zusa*, this turns into a young adult relationship drama where gender issues operate integrated in the plot about being young and finding yourself. "I realized that I've been part of creating an image of what it means to be young in Denmark in a cool way [...]. This has really given me a bellyache," he says (Ludvigsen 2023). In relation to *Zusa*, Risvig points out that he "produces series for young people because there are many important themes that need normalisation. With TV series young people acquire tools and reflections to talk about things that are tough and difficult" (Nielsen 2022). While *Zusa* specifically works towards normalisation and naturalisation of a range of issues such as sorrow and intoxicants, with gender relationships as a backdrop, Risvig's 'voice' in Danish TV highlights that Danish young adults may be reached with content guided directly towards them as an audience.

The cases *Euphoria*, *Rita* and *Zusa* have all been chosen for their more subtle approaches to tackling gender issues. During the Danish focus groups, it became clear that young adults in high schools react against titles that confront gender issues too directly, which was referred to as ‘forced’ narratives. To meet this criteria, all three series ‘naturalises’ storylines about transgender identities (*Euphoria*), gender stereotypes and sexual orientation (*Rita*), and young adults’ group-based relationships (*Zusa*). Two of the series indicates this narrative focus in the titles too. Firstly, while ‘euphoria’ surely points towards drug abuse and ‘being high’, the notion of ‘gender euphoria’ also refers to ‘feeling right in your gender identity’, underlining how the character Jules rests in her transgender identity despite other dominant problems. Secondly, the title ‘Zusa’ is a contraction of the German word ‘zusammen’ (together), which highlights the understated approach to showing – rather than telling – how relationships work, how they are negotiated, and how young adults act out their gender roles in ‘being together’ in a natural manner. *Rita* confronts gender stereotypes more directly but does so rather through the mixed traditional traits of the protagonists (attractive woman with traditionally male traits). Excerpts from such series may institute intended, natural and implicit negotiations of gender roles for young adult viewers in teaching environments, since the high school audiences themselves request more understated ways of approaching gender identities.

4.6. Approaching gender through production

As these 11 cases show, gender issues may be targeted directly and intentionally during production, while gender may turn up as an unintended concern after distributing the series. Firstly, this highlights that gender and equality issues have become a conscious matter for creatives’ reflections both during and after production. This means that many series may, from the start, invite researchers, teachers, and high school students into ‘the engine room’ of the creative approaches to series, which motivates interesting reflections about how to tackle gender and equality in writing and producing popular serial drama.

Secondly, this opens an opportunity to incorporate desktop production studies of gender issues into high school teaching. While young people’s media practice is different from that of former generations, focus groups also show that the target group consists of highly conscious media consumers who know about and are interested in the intentions behind the material that they consume.

In a teaching situation, then, creative approaches to serial drama propose a double opportunity for teachers to 1) engage in productive dialogues with students about whether the intentions behind a production may be recognized in the final series, and 2) engage students in their own creative repurposing of serial drama content in video production. One basic assignment for students could be to find online material about series (including scenes and excerpts), recut this into



video content that ‘tests’ the creative intentions behind the series, and in this way showcase critical inspections of serial drama, which in the end teaches them attention towards how gender issues may be framed by editing, cinematography, and other stylistic devices in serial drama production. Teaching creative intentions behind and production discourses around serial drama may probe students’ own creative engagement with complex material.

5. Text: Representation of gender issues in serial drama

5.1. Transnational issues through local cases

This section reads the case studies from the perspectives of text studies, representation, and pedagogical utilisation. As highlighted throughout section 4, there is a range of significant issues directly or indirectly negotiated through the series, which shows how each case works well as both a local case and as a transnational proposition for teaching material. While some cases are local cases (for instance, the Danish series *Zusa* or the Italian series *Prisma*), scholars from each territory have also followed the dominant appetite for US content among young high school students. The interest in mostly US serial dramas is a widespread transnational trend across all four empirical territories (Ireland, Italy, Romania, and Denmark), but the focus groups in Italy, Ireland, and Denmark show that there is a simultaneous interest in local material (sometimes consumed in collective family environments). For these three territories, it appears meaningful to combine US and local material in choices of cases. Especially in the Irish and Danish context, this speaks to the specific teaching context where media literacy perspectives are mostly taught in ‘national’ topics such as English and Danish, respectively. Although this highlights some differences in teaching systems across Europe, it teases out an opportunity to also teach local material for local students in a local school discourse.

Even if there are local variations in teaching topics and obligatory lesson plans, the cases chosen – on the basis of local focus group interviews – show several consistent gender topics across the empirical territories. This includes dominant liberal approaches to homosexuality and coming-out-scenes in much serial drama, critical approaches to toxic masculinity, coming-of-age narratives about gender and sexual identities, and negotiated approaches to stereotypical representations of male and female characters, while a representation of a liberal approach to different gender identities rather than the mere dynamics between male and female characters may still have a way to go, although there are examples of constructive inclusions of transgender or non-binary identities in some cases. Approaches to homosexuality in serial drama have been vastly liberalised, since it appears difficult to find cases with critical discourses around gay communities and characters, which may indicate that popular narrative integration of different sexual identities may have shared public views on naturalising the discourse around homosexuality. Teaching serial drama with, for instance, naturalised transgender characters, such as *Euphoria*, may negotiate gender identities along similar patterns. Opening a dialogue through popular storytelling creates an opportunity for teachers to facilitate constructive dialogues about the representation of gender and sexual identities in serial drama and surrounding local social contexts.

5.2. Irish case choices: *Derry Girls*, *Normal People*, and *The Young Offenders*

The three case studies are selected primarily because they represent popular Irish serial dramas that were cited in the Irish focus groups with young people. They were also very popular with national audiences and recognizable even to those who have not watched the shows. These serial dramas are each very illustrative of gender issues in the Irish context and speak to historical and contemporary socio-political concerns about gender particularly regarding young people. Each of the serial dramas is at least partially set in school. All can be described as coming-of-age narratives that address issues regarding sexuality, peer relations, family relations, and the emergence of adulthood. Because they are so closely aligned with the lives of secondary school-age people, they are useful tools in teaching gender issues. The scenes selected for analysis here collectively evidence gender norms in Ireland, especially in terms of prescribed social roles for men and women. These are reinforced through the daily lives, interactions, and relationships of the various characters in the scenes and can be used as implicit examples of gender and heteronormativity. However, some of the scenes also demonstrate explicit negotiation of or shift away from gender norms and address gender issues regarding women's role in society and around heterosexuality. The scenes discussed, therefore, encourage students in their critical thinking about how gender norms are reinforced or resisted.



Image 1. In *Derry Girls*, Clare's sexual identity sees her excluded from her peer group in the foreground.

Derry Girls is focused on the experiences and lives of a group of mainly teenage girls and in representing a female perspective of the coming-of-age narrative. Most of the characters are coded as heterosexual and cis-gender and their relationship dynamics and romantic desires are heteronormative. From the perspective of writer Lisa McGee and actor Nicola Coughlan, one episode/sequence is, however, significantly important, i.e. the scene in which one of the primary 'Derry girls', Clare, comes out to her peer group as a lesbian (S1:E6). Given the serial drama's setting in Catholic

conservative Derry in the 1990s, this coming out process is fraught with risk. In the first part of the sequence, the group of friends is tasked with producing an issue of the school magazine. Realising that they don't have the support of the magazine staff, they co-opt an anonymous coming out letter submitted by a student. The letter was written by Clare, unbeknownst to the rest of them who joke and are shocked that there a lesbian amongst them. When, in the second part of the sequence, Clare then reveals to her friend Erin that she wrote the letter and is, in fact, a lesbian, Erin is disgusted and tells her to 'go back into the closet', leading to a crack in their friendship. The sequence demonstrates heteronormative privilege whereby most of the girls do not take seriously lesbian sexual identity. One character states that she doesn't 'really believe in lesbians'. This is a valuable learning tool since the school setting and the mocking of homosexuality are shown to be hurtful and inconsiderate and may prompt discussion about how such behaviour excludes others.



Image 2. In *The Young Offenders*, Jock's machismo is compared with Conor's romantic nature.

The Young Offenders centres on the lives of mischievous teenage boys Jock and Conor who navigate various romantic, peer and familial relationships as they go about their lives. The drama blends comedy and tragedy by situating the silly, deviant plots the boys concoct to steal anything from bikes to fish, to more serious issues relating to death, domestic abuse, and fatherhood. The interactions between the boys and their pursuits of and attitude towards romance with girls offer learning opportunities for students who may engage in debates about the representations of masculinity, of heterosexual romance, and of the connections between gender and social power. One key sequence early in the series has Jock and Conor discuss their different attitudes to heterosexual romance and relationships. The scene opens with Jock

and Conor sitting on a park bench. Jock is kissing a girl passionately. Conor's voice-over narration suggests that Jock is an expert at kissing. The unnamed girl and Jock finish kissing after which they have an exchange where Jock dismisses her, calls her emotional and she leaves crying. Another girl, then, sits down and begins kissing Jock. In the next scene in which the boys steal a bike, Conor's voice-over says that "Jock is like a mentor to me when it comes to women." They discuss their relationship with women via an analogy about bikes. Jock says that he'd rather try a new bike every day whereas Conor knows that he likes a particular bike and only wants that one. The scene reveals different types of 'masculinities' and demonstrates some of the traits of problematic masculinity that depends upon the subordination of women. The scene can be used as a teaching tool to initiate discussions about the negative behaviours associated with the sexes through gender stereotypes.



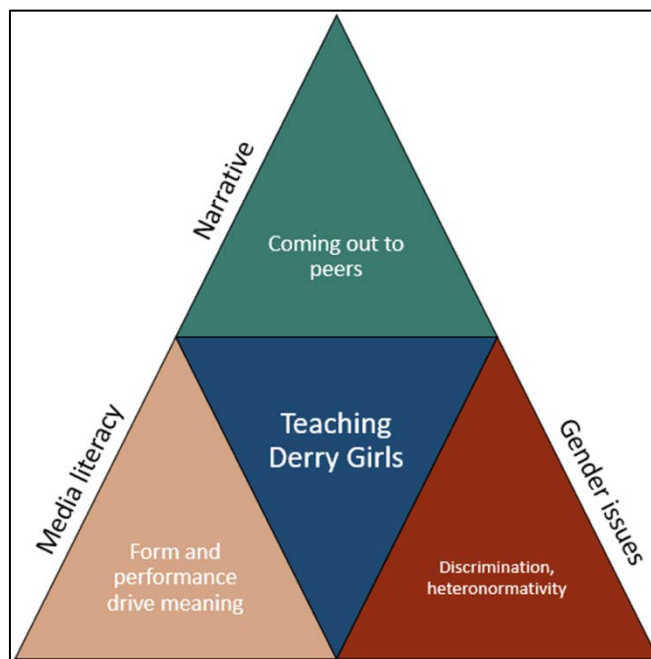
Image 3. In *Normal People*, Marianne's assertion and confidence scare off Conall.

Although only one season long, *Normal People* was national and international hit when it first aired in 2020, and it was mentioned by focus group participants as an influential show. The series is set in Ireland and follows two characters, Conall and Marianne who move in and out of a relationship as they progress through school and on to university. Much of the drama of the series rests on the maturing of the characters in relation to each other. An important theme of the series is the relationship between power, gender, and social class. In one sequence which shows the initial developing connection between Marianne and Conall, they speak with each other in a silent school hallway. The scene plays out the tension between Marianne's assertiveness and dominance and Conall's shyness and passivity. He challenges Marianne for being cruel to a teacher, she retorts by suggesting he is having an affair with a teacher, which embarrasses Conall. However, she apologises and says she is thankful that he speaks to her when nobody else does. She tells him that she likes him, which he is awkward about, saying that he needs to leave for sports training. The scene represents the

discomfort caused by upended gender conventions. Marianne takes on the assertive romantic role typically afforded to male characters, while Conall is the object of romantic affection, often associated with female characters. This scene can be used to prompt students to consider deeply embedded gender stereotypes about conventional gender relations, the way that gender stereotypes play out, and what audience responses may be when conventionalities and stereotypes are undermined.

All three programmes and sequences may be used to facilitate students' engagement with gender issues, either through discussion of gender stereotypes or positive representations of gender. The scene from *Derry Girls* in which Clare reluctantly comes out to her peer group may be especially engaging since it introduces conflict around gender and sexuality within an otherwise humorous and comedic episode. The group, who are typically very loyal to each other struggle with the introduction of 'difference' in Clare's identity as a lesbian. Upon hearing first that there is a lesbian at the school, Clare's friends evidence a great deal of judgement, bias, and a lack of understanding. When Clare tells her friend Erin that she is a lesbian, Erin reacts with hostility and alienates Clare who, in turn, must defend herself and her identity. Clare does not fulfil Erin's preconceived notion of a lesbian. She also believes that Clare is romantically interested in her.

Applying the pedagogic triangle, the *narrative* focuses on the introduction of conflict around Clare's sexuality and gender identity and the groups confusion and poor reaction to sexual difference. From a *media literacy perspective*, the scene provides a variety of ways to analyse how the topic of sexual identity plays out through the dialogue, framing and performance. When the girls each comment on the lesbian in the school, their collective views, demonstrated through short, direct negative statements, indicate the general bias of those in the school. The girls' facial expressions show discomfort and disgust. The framing of Erin and Clare separates them with Erin positioned towards the left edge of frame, almost moving out, and Clare centred and in close-up.



Erin's visual position is weaker, while Clare's is more confident and powerful, suggesting to the audience the perspective they should align with. The gender issues that can be discussed through this clip are the attitudes towards sexuality in peer groups, the prevalence of heteronormativity and the 'Othering' of non-heteronormative identities and the impact

of gender and sexual discrimination. The familiar school setting may encourage students to reflect on their own experiences of gender issues at the more local and personal level.

5.3. Romanian case choices: *Wednesday* and *Breaking Bad*

The *Wednesday* case owes its popularity to the role played by characters who appear to resonate well with its audience, especially in the way it approaches the topic of gender. Throughout the series, Wednesday's relationships with other female characters, including her best friend Enid and her mother, are central to the storyline. Even her interactions with antagonists like Principal Weems and Bianca Barclay evolve into rivalries based on mutual respect, highlighting female abilities to uplift others despite differences. This complexity given to each female character contributes to an overall gender empowering message.

While *Wednesday* may represent a role model figure in the main character, such perspectives are difficult to locate in *Breaking Bad*. Instead, the series invites the viewer's critical gaze upon gender representation, including stylistic play with stereotypes and critical reflections motivated by creative afterthoughts. On the one hand, the series places its sympathy with Walter, underlining his good intentions behind his darker deeds. On the other hand, the basic premise of the series – that Walter must become criminal since he is the main provider for the family – rests upon a stereotypical assumption about primary male support for an American family. In a Romanian context, this storytelling device resonates with assumptions about traditional Romanian family structures too, which aligns well how the popular Romanian series *Umbre* (HBO 2014-19), a series about the enforcer Relu who works hard to keep his dark mafia profession from his family, has been referenced as 'the Romanian *Breaking Bad*'.

In the first episode of *Wednesday*, one specific scene stages character traits and places significant cues to be followed up later in the series. The fencing scene from the first episode not only displays Wednesday's spectacular skills and the introduction of the antagonism between Wednesday Addams and Bianca Barclay; it also highlights the series gender dynamics and empowerment. Dressed in head-to-toe black, Wednesday clearly stands out visually in a room with white-clad fencing students. Revoking colour-based archetypes from popular culture, the Wednesday character is in this case a reversion of the traditional black outfit for the antagonist and white garments for the good protagonist, which is underlined by Bianca's comment to Wednesday: "Let's see if you bleed black and white." Setting up the ensuing struggle between the characters, Bianca wins the challenge by cutting Wednesday's forehead.

While swords and fighting may be an association to male aggression and power, the scene reverts this by letting the undefeated champion Bianca forcefully overpower a male fencer – and places the 'real' fight between two female fighters, while framing a number of traditional male traits in the Bianca character, including strength, skill, contracted sympathy, and power maintenance. Defying expectations of femininity, Wednesday's blunt and morbid demeanour

challenges gender ideology and expectations, complexly narrated through one scene that challenges societal expectations and gender stereotypes by placing the ideological ‘gender match’ between two female characters. On one level, this showcases Wednesday’s agency and determination to prove herself in a male-dominated arena, but on another level, it stresses how masculine stereotypes may be challenged stylistically on a male ‘home turf’ by situating customary female figures within a traditionally male environment.



Image 4: In Wednesday (S1:E1), the fencing scene between Wednesday and Bianca set the scene for upcoming antagonism, while at the same time highlighting female empowerment and breaks with gender stereotypes.

The fencing match may be discussed as a metaphor for the broader struggles faced by women in society. Through their intense duel, the characters confront issues of competition, ambition, and the pressure to conform to gender roles. The outcome of the match becomes symbolic of the ongoing battle for gender equality and the ability of women to thrive in traditionally male-dominated spaces, here with the tough sports environment, duelling, and power struggles as the main context. In addition, the scene may be seen as a specific and stylistic staging of the characters, underlining their ensuing mutual respect through similar cinematography. Both characters are established through shoulder-level shots, which creates visual equality in contrast to how antagonists are often established through low-angle shots often associated with power.

As highlighted earlier (see section 4), *Breaking Bad* had no specific creative intention to negotiate gender relations through the series, but the “sexist” fan criticism of the Skyler character and creator Gilligan’s reaction to this serve an

opportunity to pinpoint how the series' gendered character sympathy works. The overall character development arches of the two characters show how the viewer is exclusively invited into Walter's point of view, while the family is denied access to his good intentions. Placing the perspective with Walter, produces structures of sympathy with him as we get visual access to his emotions and virtuous motivations. At the same time, Skyler appears to be a hindrance for his overall project, i.e. saving his family's financial capabilities when he eventually would die from cancer.



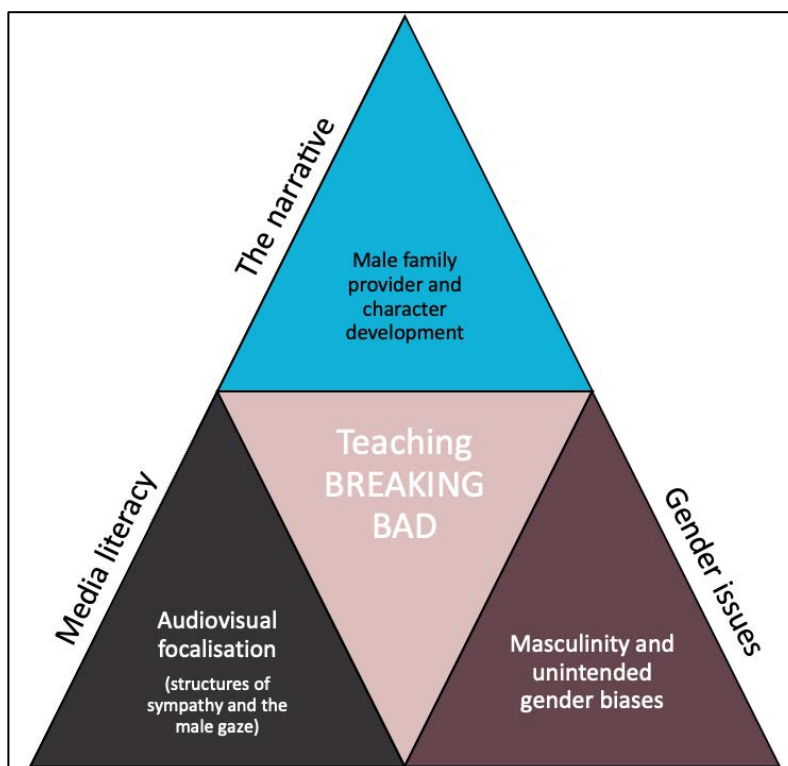
Image 5: In a scene from *Breaking Bad* (S3:E3), the perspective and the sympathy structure changes from the female lead Skyler to the protagonist Walter White, indicating a male-dominated gaze on the problems addressed.

One scene, however, is particularly emblematic of this developing character relationship and technique between Walter and Skyler. In the final scene from the third episode in season three, Skyler arrives home to the house after having initiated a love affair with another man, seemingly pressured into this relationship by the lack of attention from Walter. Focusing on Skyler in the car before entering the house, the scene opens through Skyler's perspective, emphasising the psychological dilemmas in her relation to her husband. When she enters the house, the atmosphere is cosy and serene with their son watching cartoons on TV, while Walter is in the kitchen making dinner. Manifestly, the scene reverts traditional gender roles by letting the female partner come home late and placing the male partner in the kitchen wearing an apron. Through the stylistic staging of the scene, the cinematography purposefully changes not only the perspective, but also the character sympathy. Firstly, Skyler says very little during the scene, while Walter is the talkative character; then, Skyler looks increasingly furious until she finally says: "I fucked Ted", leaving Walter bewildered as she brings dinner to the table. The scene and the episode end with the stumped Walter looking into the living room detached from the family life that he will eventually lose when he dies. Skyler's resentment towards Walter and her distrust in the family relationship is underlined by the fact that she, allegedly, brought their new-born baby with her during her instigation of her love affair.

The overall premise of the series, including the ideal male financial support for an archetypical American family, is commented on by staging Walter as a 'housewife' and a family man. While the series revels in toxic masculinity, male power

scruffles, and aestheticized violence, this specific scene shows how male and female relationships have been staged in the series in the service of Walter's (male) gaze on the matters, indicating how the series may have unintentionally avoided the female gaze on the problems arising through Walter's criminal activities.

This scene and dialogue exchange between Skyler and Walter proposes an opportunity to teach different media and gender issues to high school students, underlined by the themes and topics mentioned in the pedagogical triangle. The teaching situation would start by outlining the male perspective in the premise of the series, switching



attention towards the specific scene that feeds an opportunity to teach both understanding of the stylistics of visual storytelling and the fundamentals and complexities of gendered biases produced through the visual traits of cinematography and editing.

From a media literacy angle, the changes of perspective and structures of sympathy during the scene may serve as a means to teach cinematic stylistics. Usually referred to as focalisation, the scene shows how a scene – through close-ups, production design, symbolism – may tweak the viewer's opportunity to share allegiance with a character. On a structural level, the scene revokes what Laura Mulvey called "the male gaze" (Mulvey 1975), a term referring to how males in cinema are often stylistically and narratively portrayed as the active part and females as the passive part. The premise of *Breaking Bad* stressed this point with Walter being the active provider for the family, while this scene shows how the series – although initiating a female perspective and, to some extent, sympathy – falls back to Walter's perspective and his "male gaze".

This approach to understanding how masculinity is performed stylistically in one scene and in a complete longform serial drama offers a pedagogical purpose to, firstly, teach societal approaches to gender representation, masculinity in society, and traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Secondly, this debate may also open a discussion about how a series like *Breaking Bad* had no specific intention to reproduce a male gaze on the topics of the series, but that creatives may end

up reproducing an unintended gendered gaze through storytelling. In the end, this may prime high school students to debate other/older examples of unintended male cultural manifestations in and outside of serial drama.

5.4. Italian case choices: *The Sea Beyond*, *Sex Education*, and *Prisma*

All three Italian case studies are ensemble dramas with many co-lead characters and parallel storylines. Therefore, selecting a representative scene means choosing some characters and stories over others. In contrast to *Prisma*, *The Sea Beyond* and *Sex Education* evolve across successive seasons, which means that a single scene could never effectively represent the complete series. Yet, the selected sequences indicate how gender relations and gender identities are typically portrayed in each case.

The sequences selected for each serial drama focus on specific issues in terms of gender equality and representation of gender roles. The sequence in *The Sea Beyond* displays the problematic construction of alpha-male, toxic masculinity within a patriarchal criminal subculture; the *Prisma* scene portrays the coming-of-age of a character through the nuances of exploring one's own complex, non-binary gender identity and how to communicate this to others; the *Sex Education* examples features the aftermath of a sexual attack and the experience of unwanted sexual attentions that the majority of women share at one point of their lives.

The main themes of *The Sea Beyond* are redemption, making suitable choices, and the distinction between good and bad. Issues of gender and identity are present but rarely foregrounded, although the third season introduces LGBTQ+ characters who hide sexual orientations unaccepted in their environment. The series intentionally represents a patriarchal, criminal subculture in which gender roles are stereotyped and oppressively static. In this respect, creator Cristiana Farina often stated how the series “doesn't judge” the characters and reverts from displaying their behaviour as it would be in real life (Farina 2023). However, such presumed realism is often contradicted by the soapy, melodramatic mode of narration and the scarce attention to realistic details of prison life (e.g. characters wear necklaces and jewellery that would be forbidden in a real prison). In claiming the series' authenticity, however, the series takes the risk of normalising patriarchal stereotypes and unbalanced power relations between genders.

In one sequence from *The Sea Beyond* (S1:E6), Edoardo enjoys temporary release from prison and heads back home to his family. Aged seventeen, he is already affiliated with “the system”, i.e. the Camorra (an Italian type of organised crime), quickly climbing the ranks. He is portrayed as a womaniser, despite having a pregnant girlfriend waiting for him at home. Shortly after the beginning of the episode, he strolls through his neighbourhood, savouring his brief taste of freedom, emphasised by the non-diegetic musical score. When he gets home, he is warmly greeted by three women on the verge of tears from happiness: his mother, aunt, and grandmother, who have prepared a magnificent balcony lunch with “all his favourites”. Then, his girlfriend Carmela appears, pregnant, well-dressed and with make-up on, telling him that all

she does is wait for him to come back. Edoardo kisses her and eagerly takes her into the house, despite protests from his mother about the food getting cold. In his mother's bedroom, Edoardo pushes Carmela through a consensual but too fast sexual intercourse, ignoring her requests for more time, intimacy, and tenderness. In the subsequent scenes, Edoardo joins his friend Sasà to deal drugs, heading into a night of excess, which ends with a new police arrest. This sequence may be read as a representation of internalised patriarchy, including the female characters' acceptance of Edoardo's selfish behaviour, indirectly sharing patriarchal assumptions about men's dominant role and the subordinate role of women in the family. In contrast, though, viewers may note how the sequence reinforces gender stereotypes, since the episode never thoroughly explores Carmela's or the mother's points of view.



Image 6. In *The Sea Beyond*, Edoardo's mother and his girlfriend Carmela welcome him home. (S1:E6, Rai 2020).

Compared with *The Sea Beyond*, *Prisma* displays a more relaxed pace and fewer characters. The characters have independent storylines and significant screen time with the twins Andrea and Marco as the most prominent ones. They attend the same high school, but while Andrea is self-assured and popular, Marco is shy and gloomy and does not befriend others easily. The narrative reverses viewer expectations, however, since the one who turns out to have a secret life is Andrea, who cross-dresses as a woman in the basement and as a woman flirts online with Daniele, a boy from the same school. Throughout the series, Andrea explores gender identity, and in the penultimate episode, during a night out in Rome, they finally dress as a woman in public. Andrea's gender identity remains fluid until the end of the series, but in the last episode, advised by the volunteer of an LGBTQ+ helpline, they decide to finally come out by confessing that they are not the otherwise expected cisgendered, heterosexual boys. Driving with their father, they openly take out women's clothing and makeup from their backpack. Andrea's father is characterised as a quite traditional man who lived all his life in Latina, a small provincial town near Rome, founded during fascism and with a widespread far-right reputation. When the father enquires about the clothes, Andrea asks him to pull over, clearly intending to disclose their gender identity to the father. When the car stops, the camera pulls slowly out during a long shot and remains motionless for a few seconds until the father opens the car door, gets out, and lights up a cigarette. Hence, Andrea's coming out took

place off-screen, i.e. rather than over-dramatising it, the moment is described as too intimate and delicate to be shown.¹ As the camera pushes back in, Andrea gets out of the car, visibly shaken, and reaches the father, who offers a cigarette. Slowly and briefly, the two get physically closer until the father hugs them, again reversing our expectations of an angry and repressive reaction. The anticlimactic reversal of the characteristic coming-out-narrative, which may involve fights and shouting, aligns with *Prisma*'s effort to normalise diversity and represent adolescence as a journey towards self-discovery rather than a path of social or professional self-realisation. Moreover, Andrea's gender fluidity motivates discussions about non-binarism and the concept of cis-heteronormativity, which is a cultural situation that makes it necessary to "come out" to others.



Image 7. In *Prisma*, Andrea comes out with the father off screen. After a long silence, the two hug. (S1:E8, Prime Video 2023).

Sex Education is a coming-of-age comedy drama set in a British high school, which focuses on sentimental and sexual lives of teenagers through a teenager-run sex clinic set up in school by two students, Otis and Maeve. The series was praised for its ground-breaking and inclusive depiction of contemporary teenagers' sex life and for dealing with socially relevant topics such as consent, body positivity, mental health, queer identities, and feminism. In season 2, Maeve's best friend Aimee deals with the aftermath of being sexually assaulted on her way to school when a man masturbates on her. Throughout the season, Aimee downplays and minimises the attack, despite being traumatised by it and becoming triggered by any physical intimacy. While in detention with five fellow female classmates (S2:E7), Aimee breaks down and admits her inability to travel by bus after the incident, meriting her classmates' solidarity. The five girls are kept in detention since one of them is suspected of having written slurs against an English teacher, who gives them a seemingly impossible task: define what unites them all as women. All girls appear considerably different in personality, lifestyle, and interests, and do not go along particularly well. At first, they seem to have very little in common until Aimee professes why she cannot take the bus anymore. This encourages her classmates to also share their own stories of harassment or assault.

¹ Nicoletta Marini Maio also focused on this sequence in her presentation titled "Refracting Colors of *Prisma*: The Therapeutic, Non-Conforming, Desiring Community of a Teen Drama" during the Summer School "Mediating Italy in Global Culture", University of Bologna, Rimini, 19-23 June 2023.

After hearing that each of them has been subjected to unwanted sexual attention by men at one point, they realise that what they all have in common are “non-consensual penises”, as one character puts it. The sequence demonstrates the importance of a support system that validates personal trauma, not only as a requisite to start healing but also as a necessary starting point to address gender violence in society. The scene can be used as a teaching tool to initiate discussions about sexual violence, challenging especially the concept of sexual violence hierarchy and the capacity to recognise that any unwanted and inappropriate sexual approach is considered violence.

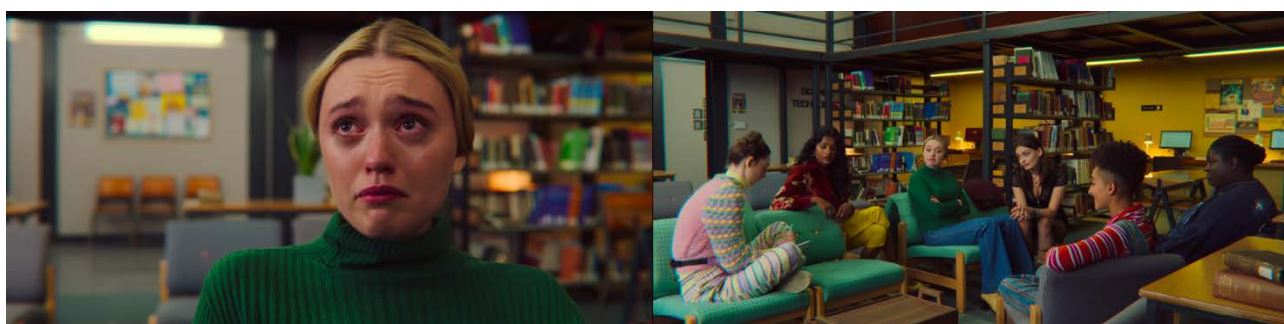
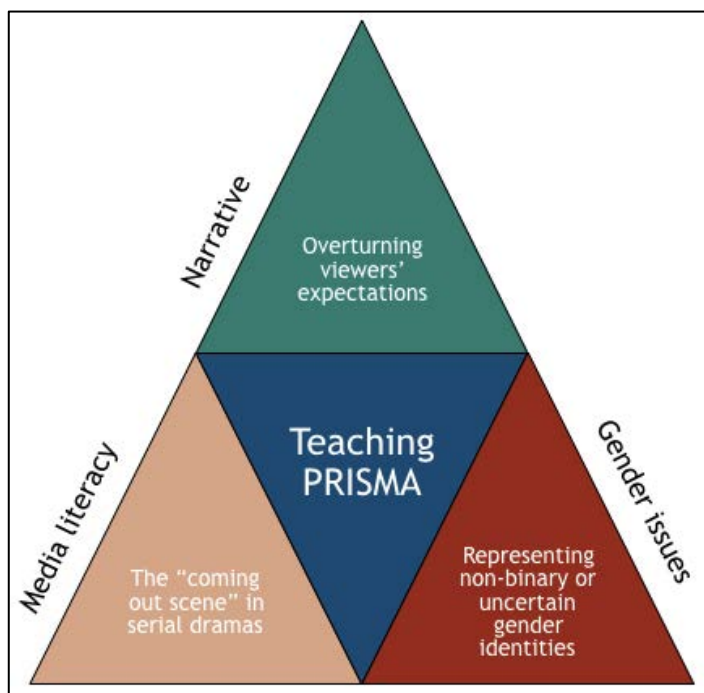


Image 8: Remembering her assault, Aimee breaks down. The group realise that what they have in common is the experience of unwanted sexual attention from men (S2:E7, Netflix 2020).

While all three cases offer scope for discussion, the sequence from *Prisma*, vehiculating positive values of self-discovery and productive dialogue with parental figures, seems particularly apt for classroom teaching. The “coming-out-scene” as a motif could be the framework from which to discuss narrative strategies, media literacy, and gender representation. Following the pedagogical triangle for teaching gender issues through serial drama, teachers may illustrate how the style and narrative of the coming-out-scene work to overturn viewers’ expectations by, firstly, keeping the coming-out moment off-screen, and then through the father’s calm and affectionate reaction in contrast to rage and violence. In this way, the scene’s climax is not the coming-out moment but the final hug between the two at the end of the scene, underlined by rising extradiegetic music,



which is absent in the first part. The teacher may also invite students to imagine other ways in which the coming-out-scene could be orchestrated on screen in the case of both these specific characters and in general. A discussion about conceivable alternatives may trigger a shift to a media literacy perspective by, firstly, emphasising differences between literary and audiovisual narration with attention towards the stylistic relationship between on-screen and off-screen narrative elements. Subsequently, students may compare various coming-out-scenes in other serial dramas and films. Contemporary serial dramas have offered several interesting and nuanced coming-out representations (including the scene from the Danish series *Rita* discussed below in section 5e). In *Sex Education*, for instance, several storylines focus on characters' progressive acceptance of their LGBTQ+ identities, such as Eric's coming-out in church and Adam's acknowledgement of his bisexuality in front of his dad. Remodelled from the original Norwegian version, Martino's coming-out in *SKAM Italia* (TIMvision 2018-19, Netflix 2020-) could be seen as an Italian predecessor of an anticlimactic coming-out-scene. Regarding representation of non-binary characters, HBO's *We Are Who We Are* (HBO/Sky 2020) is a coming-of-age series focusing on two teenagers grappling with their gender identities and subverting gender binarism. Such examples offer many opportunities to discuss the complexities of representing contemporary gender identities. *Prisma* provides a nuanced representation of non-binary identity and the right to choose undetermined, not-stable gender identities. The reversal of viewer expectations, seen above in reference to the coming out scene, is used more generally throughout the series to undermine and subvert prejudices and stereotypes. Altogether, such examples motivate different ways of teaching the representation and meaning of LGBTQ+ identities in different media genres, focusing on narrative and stylistic ways to subvert viewer expectations.

5.5. Danish case choices: *Euphoria*, *Rita*, and *Zusa*

While the three cases chosen from the Danish focus groups (*Euphoria*, *Rita*, and *Zusa*) all integrate various gender issues and perspectives from an implicit level, there are also scenes and sequences that explicitly open negotiations of gender relations. In the series, the indirect *show-not-tell-strategy* may establish an overall narrative environment with room for more categorical scenes about gender issues, which may motivate class discussions and work representatively for the series' overall stance towards gender topics. All three scenes are, then, representative of how the series both generally naturalise gender identities while also confronting specific topics like toxic masculinity, gender-blended character traits, and female sexual empowerment. When the Danish creator Jonas Risvig, then, addresses serial drama as "adult-free spaces", using series in teaching may also facilitate the teaching situation with such a free space. When put in relation to the overall serial narrative of the drama, the three excerpts below demonstrate how certain topics may be addressed directly from specific scenes while the pedagogical proposition is to engage in open classroom discussions about such delicate topics. This may motivate a debate about gender issues from what the actress Schafer playing Jules refers to as a "emotional and philosophical standpoint" (cf. section 4d), stressing how such debates may be enhanced by emotional relationships established through engagement with fictional characters.

In *Euphoria*, much of the narrative focusses on sexuality, gender relations, and how specific cultures motivate certain behavioural patterns. In a late episode in the first season, a tense key 5-minute sequence pulls together several narrative threads. The sequence commences with the protagonist Rue confronting the character Nate with leaked videos of his father's sexual abuse of the transgendered Jules. In the next scene, Nate's touchdown saves the day for his football team resulting in a mixed praise of his talents, since his performance also lacked team leadership. In the following, his father confronts Nate with his lack of talent, eventually making Nate break down to such a degree that his father entrenches himself in his office, ending in a point-of-view perspective on the locked desk-drawer containing his video-recordings of Jules. The sequence closes with images of a high school student making copies of one of these videos. While Nate himself is controlling and abusive towards his own girlfriend, this scene builds empathy for Nate, since he seems to reproduce the environment that he grew up in, while it also comprises his gender identity in toxic masculinities around American football cultures. At the same time, the sequence details that the father's lack of passing privilege (his suppressed/hidden sexual interest in the transgendered Jules) turns into subliminal anger and control towards his son. This sequence may motivate discussions about cultural reproduction of gender identities, toxic masculinity, and sexual orientation.

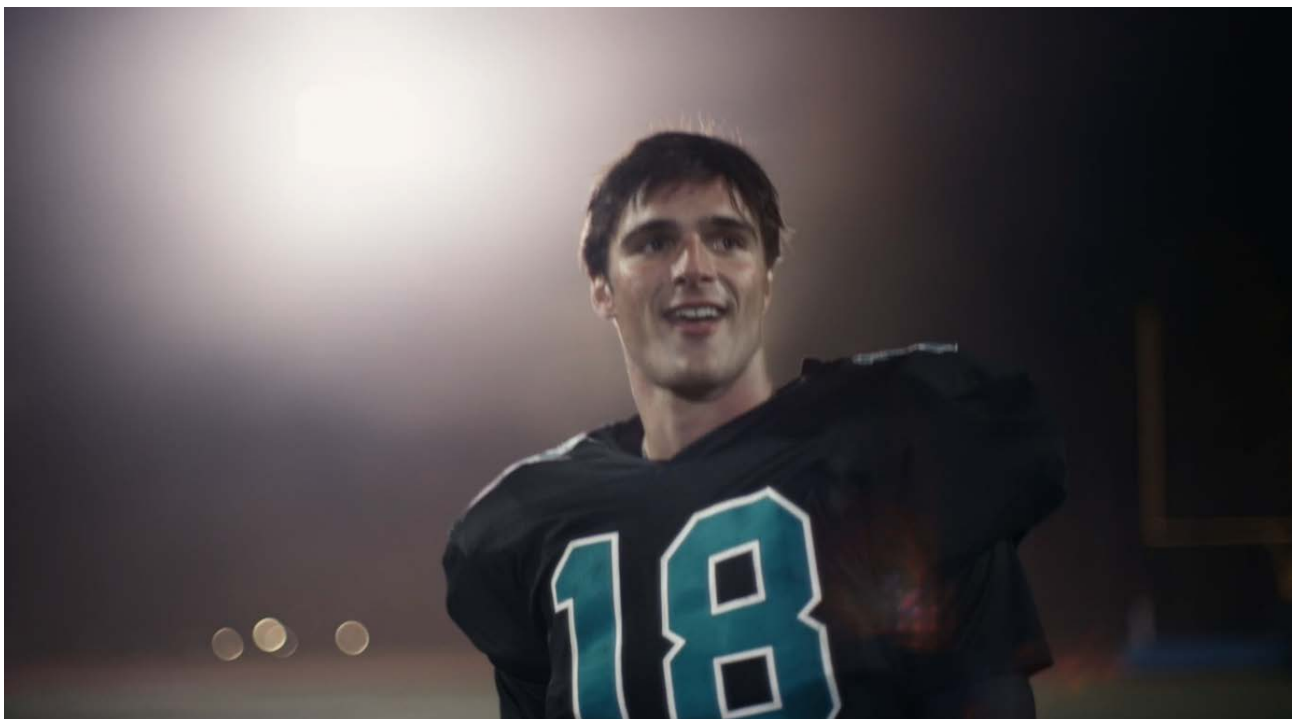


Image 9. The lonely Nate on football field in *Euphoria* (S1:E8) before his breakdown and fatherly abuse (HBO Max 2019).

According to Christian Thorpe, the creator of *Rita*, one specific scene was controversial for the broadcaster: “Of course, we had some discussions [with the broadcaster] on how far she can go. Definitely, a scene like the one where they have dinner in the garden and she says “hey, you’re teasing your gay brother” that was a big discussion. They felt that she went too far in that scene. And we felt that as long as she says I’m sorry afterwards, we understand that it doesn’t come from a bad place.” (Thorpe in *Série Series* 2013)



Image 10. Rita lighting up a cigarette during dinner before explicitly addressing her son’s sexuality with the guests (S1:E1) (TV 2 Denmark 2012).

This garden dinner scene from the opening episode of the series introduces Rita’s gender-blended traits while also announcing her son’s homosexual identity. On the surface, the scene was controversial because it mocks his gay sexuality, but Thorpe has underlined that it should be read conversely, since “no one has the faintest problem with Jeppe being gay, except himself” (Daimier & Blegvad 2012). Tightly constructed, the scene communicates Rita’s use of cigarettes and alcohol, her ability to expose other people’s double standards through witty one-liners, and her light-hearted approach to sexual relationships, while it introduces Jeppe’s coming-out as something internally rather than culturally difficult. Rather than being what Brett Martin (2013) has referred to as a ‘difficult man’ (hardboiled male characters with softer sensibilities), Rita is exposed as a ‘difficult woman’ with an explicitly cis-gendered orientation with traditionally attractive female features in combination with traditional male traits. The series’ gender portrayal may be used for a constructive

dialogue on traditional masculinity/femininity, while Jeppe's coming-out narrative and romantic storyline highlights a naturalised acceptance of homosexuality without the need for external character traits indicating his sexual orientation.

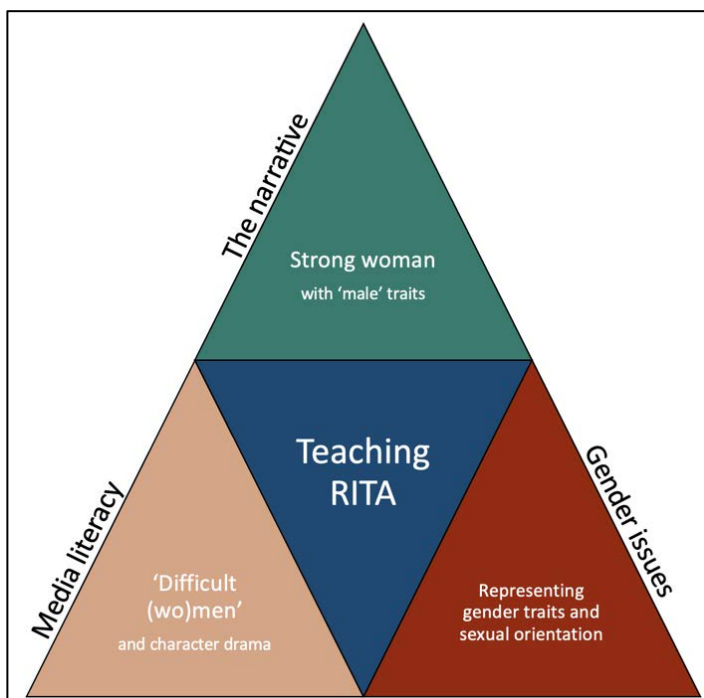
While *Zusa* tackles other issues more directly (sorrow, mental illness, and smoking among young adults), the series attention towards gender relationships is more subtle and integrated in the overall narrative. However, one scene from episode 5 directly confronts male and female relationships. In this scene, the sexually active teenager Clara has invited her flirt Asger downstairs during a party with the intention to have sex, but Asger's friends keep interrupting through his phone. For this reason, he moves forward too quickly, while Clara stresses that this was not what she intended, making Asger leave in anger. The scene introduces different gendered approaches to sexuality and shows the toxicity of Asger's "bro-mentality" (he literally addresses his friend 'bro' while making a pass at Clara), but it also displays Clara's "sexual empowerment" as she finally turns down Asger. In this way, the scene exposes debates about consent and sexual reputation, gender negotiations of power, but it never turns into abuse or violence (as in *Euphoria*), but rather it leaves Asger sexually disappointed, and Clara dejected, since her successful empowerment at the same time leaves her rather jaded. The scene, then, motivates analyses of visual character display and modest displays of gendered modes of sexuality.



Image 11. In *Zusa*, having turned down sex with a guy (sexual empowerment), Clara is left jaded and gloomy at a party (S1:E5) (YouTube/Risvig 2023).

Whereas all three excerpts and series in general may motivate discussions of a wide range of gender issues, the scene from *Rita* described above may be especially suitable, since it confronts such issues with a sense of humour and positive approach to conflict. The scene integrates complex notions of gender traits and sexual identity not by confronting relations of power, but rather by narrating a cosy-friendly environment where personal identities may be enjoyed without controlling environments. Following the pedagogical triangle for teaching gender issues in series, the teacher may motivate students' comprehension of *the narrative* with attention towards negotiating gender traits through especially the protagonist Rita. Being a teacher herself, the environment around Rita presents opportunities to handle different socio-political issues, while the way she handles problems displays her difficulties with leadership (both male and female), stressing soft integration of traditional male traits from hardboiled fiction. At the same time, other characters, such as the gay Jeppe, display less conspicuous external identity traits, leaving narrative space for telling naturalised stories about character identities. This type of gender negotiation could be termed *banal gender bending*, since it does not maintain the theatrical and obvious display of different blended gender traits (e.g. like the artist Boy George); rather, it takes traditional male and female gender traits and flips and negotiates them through Rita's character. In this way, gender bending becomes banal (in a similar manner as Michael Billig (1995) refers to *banal nationalism*).

From a *media literacy* perspective, the specific scene may emphasise stylistic ways to introduce and characterise a protagonist for the audiences, including the notion of 'difficult women' reversing the idea of difficult men, i.e. Rita displays traditionally empathic female solicitude in the guise of hardboiled masculinity. This may motivate pedagogical media perspectives on characterisation of protagonists and development of character-based narratives, while the pedagogical attention towards gender issues may include how gender traits are negotiated through screen narratives. The specific scene from *Rita* may be compared with an important scene from the canonical Danish series *Matador* (DR 1978-81) (which is usually taught in Danish high schools). In this series, the son



Danial comes home with a boyfriend only to be disgraced by his dominant father, which – at the time – included an outspoken, almost controversial display of accepted homosexuality. As Danial has accepted his sexual orientation, the family – mainly the father – shows considerable difficulties in doing so, but *Rita* turns this scene on its head as the family

has both acknowledged and accepted Jeppe's sexual orientation; he only needs to do so himself. Hence, the *Rita* scene/case embraces an opportunity for historical contextualisation, contemporary gender debates, and media literacy perspectives on what Murray Smith (1995) calls character recognition, alignment, and allegiance, i.e. building character empathy. In all three cases, this may also revert to the high school respondents' interest in naturalised narrative environments around gender issues in serial drama.

5.6. Negotiating gender issues through texts

Texts are discourses that may obtain, debate, and negotiate opinions and perspectives on reality. Creative intentions may disclose texts bounded in time or attempt to push boundaries regarding perceptions of delicate and difficult issues. Creative intentions may also fail to realize a stereotypical reproduction of problematic discourses, which may be disclosed through textual interpretations. Gender identities in serial drama are such an issue that may be read and negotiated through representation and classroom analysis. The 11 cases presented and analysed above are only a tiny excerpt from a plethora of opportunities at a time when much serial drama is produced each year, which means that the cases presented and interpreted here are not even close to constituting an exhaustive list of series that may motivate negotiation and dialogue about gender issues in a high school context.

Rather, each case shows how one scene from a series may reveal an important gender issue, but the cases show, from a more methodical perspective, how new examples may be easily incorporated into the pedagogical triangle. Essentially, this approach acknowledges the teaching situation in European high schools where busy teachers should be able to swiftly adapt to new media discourses, and how teachers may motivate dialogues about gender by choosing contemporary popular examples from the surplus of usable series, both locally and globally. Media texts such as serial drama through its popularity may often pick up new trends in the ideological formation of gender identity, which means that they work well as tools for motivating classroom discussions, but at the same time such a fluid cultural situation – concerned with incorporating material stimulating for the target group – necessitates a dynamic relationship between cultural changes, teaching situation, and approaches to developing case material. In this way, the pedagogical triangle is a simple, yet dynamic way to insert cases into the 'one series, one scene, one issue' dogma to see what pops out at the other end of the machinery.

6. Conclusion

6.1. One series, one scene, one issue: case-neutral teaching approaches to serial drama

While the cases chosen for close inspection in this report may propose several scenes and sequences for teaching gender issues, the *one series, one scene, one issue* dogma has been important to expose how high schools' pedagogical context needs a "case-neutral" approach to teaching gender through serial drama. Approaching one gender issue through one specific scene excerpt from a series, inserting the scene into the pedagogical triangle, which motivates the combined perspectives of both media literacy and gender issues, develops a basic grid into which new examples may be featured.

Case-neutrality in working with serial drama and gender issues means that local teachers may use scenes and series proposed by GEMINI researchers to understand how the grid or methodical approach works, but in the end the teacher will be able to continuously exchange the cases while sticking to the overall outline of teaching important gender issues from scene excerpts from series. Case-neutrality, then, speaks to the longevity of GEMINI as a research project since GEMINI scholars acknowledge that what is important to high school students now and which cases are interesting to teach now does not mean that they stay important and interesting. The dynamics of the case-neutral grid marks an entry point for teachers to use the approach to facilitate local approaches to gender issues utilizing both local and international cases as teaching material. During the lifespan of GEMINI, scholars will develop interesting examples for the GEMINI website based on the cases presented in this report, but at the same time, scholars acknowledge that such cases are contemporary exemplifications of a merged teaching approach to media (serial drama) and social issues (gender).

In the end, the pedagogical triangle and the GEMINI approach to teaching gender through serial drama also suggest a situation where gender and series may facilitate an independent classroom exercise in which high school students themselves may choose case examples and illustrative excerpts to be inserted into the pedagogical triangle. This report proposes a situation in which the teacher may, firstly, start from the material presented in the report and in online teaching examples. Secondly, teachers may use the approach to develop their own excerpts and examples. Lastly, the approach may be a handy tool in establishing student activities that may involve developing students' own creative material, too.

6.2. From production and text to audience and teaching

There is a circular interaction between this report about production and text studies and the GEMINI report about audiences and teacher interviews (see D3.2 for more information). The cases and ideas presented in this report have been developed from insights gathered in focus group interviews with high school students, while the simplicity in approaches to developing teaching material aligns with insights gathered from interviews with teachers. While the audience studies

and teacher interviews are outlined in the associated report, the propositions developed in this research report also point towards the development of teaching material in D4.2-6 as well as the ideation of stakeholder integration and sustainability efforts in D5.1-3. Finally, the material condensed for this report also conceives dissemination and communication material for website and social media publication; see Hansen 2024 for an example of how case study (*Euphoria*), website presentation (teaching material), and social media integration (sequence excerpt publication) has been composed. This report, then, highlights that it is possible to untangle difficult and sometimes politically sensitive material in a teaching situation where texts become the ‘mouthpiece’ rather than the teacher, setting the opinion of the teacher free by letting a serial drama speak on behalf of gender issues such as toxic masculinity, gender empowerment, or sexual identities.

In a teaching situation, *understanding young adults and gender equality through serial drama* starts with choosing the right exemplary excerpt and ends in a communicative situation where a fruitful dialogue about complex material may enhance knowledge and curiosity about gender equality and serial drama aesthetics among high school students.

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