

GEMINI INTERDISCIPLINARY EDITED BOOK

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Introduction

Gender-Related Issues, Young Adults and the Role of Serial Drama in the European Mediascape

Marica Spalletta, Valentina Re, and Kim Toft Hansen

1. Gender and Diversity in the EU scenario

Gender and diversity have become central topics in the European policy agenda, though their interpretation and implementation vary significantly across member states. As the Gender Equality Index points out by providing a comparative measure of gender equality across member states, some countries have advanced comprehensive equality frameworks, while others show resistance or slower progress, influenced by cultural, political, and religious factors.

Nonetheless, the European Union plays a key role in promoting gender equality and diversity, notably through policy directives, funding programs, and awareness campaigns aimed at supporting a more cohesive understanding of gender issues, despite national disparities. EU-level efforts aim not only to standardize legal protections but also to foster a shared cultural and social awareness of diversity, creating a foundation for more inclusive and reflective cultural representations across Europe.

To achieve this goal, the EU recognizes the central role of communication and media—especially audiovisual media—in shaping public discourse and fostering inclusive social imaginaries. Media are thus seen as strategic tools for promoting shared values and encouraging democratic engagement across diverse audiences.

2. Cultural Products and Social Awareness

In contemporary European societies, cultural products—particularly audiovisual media—play a fundamental role in shaping imaginaries and fostering awareness of gender and diversity issues. The platformisation of culture, characterized by the dominance of streaming platforms and algorithmic recommendation systems, has transformed how content is produced, accessed, and consumed, especially among younger audiences. Serial dramas, films, social media content, and user-generated videos constitute not only entertainment but also powerful discursive spaces where

norms, identities, and differences are negotiated. These cultural texts contribute to constructing social meanings and, in some cases, challenge dominant narratives by offering alternative representations of gender roles, sexual identities, and intersectional experiences.

Young people, as digital natives, are particularly receptive to the symbolic power of these texts. Cultural products thus become key agents in informal education, complementing or sometimes contradicting institutional teachings. The ability of media to both reproduce and contest stereotypes makes them strategic sites for raising awareness and engaging audiences in critical thinking. However, the influence of global platforms raises questions about cultural homogenization, algorithmic bias, and the commercial imperatives that often prioritize visibility over diversity. The tension between market logic and cultural agency is central to understanding how audiovisual products can support—or hinder—more inclusive representations. Given their status as both consumers and cultural participants, young audiences are not only shaped by these narratives but also actively shape and engage (with) them, playing a crucial role in circulating serial content and negotiating their meanings.

In this context, analysing the dynamics of cultural production and reception is essential to grasp the evolving role of media in constructing gender-sensitive imaginaries among young Europeans.

3. Gender and Diversity in Serial Narratives

Although recent commentary suggests that the era of “peak TV” has finally “un-peaked”, serial dramas remain among the most pervasive forms of popular storytelling across the globe. Their cultural reach makes them a central medium for both reflecting and challenging dominant societal norms. One of the most significant frameworks for analysing this transformative potential is the concept of inclusive diversity, conceived as a key dimension within the broader notion of cultural diversity. This perspective draws attention not only to the presence of different cultural expressions, but also to the systemic inequalities and exclusions that shape access and visibility within the media landscape. Inclusive diversity specifically foregrounds the representation, both off- and onscreen, of historically marginalised groups (such as women, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities) while also considering intersecting factors of exclusion such as age, class, and religion. In this respect, serial dramas can expose the widespread stereotypes that persist in our society, helping to recognize and question these biases. Moreover, they have the power to change stereotypes by showcasing strong, diverse characters who defy traditional expectations.

Major streaming platforms like Netflix have embraced inclusive diversity as part of their corporate and content strategies, aligning themselves with global social movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter. However, scholars have critically examined how such strategies may turn diversity into a branding tool rather than a structural commitment. Understanding gender and diversity in serial narratives thus requires attention to both representations and the industrial forces that shape them—especially in the context of streaming platforms like Netflix, whose immense popularity among younger audiences make them key players in shaping their social values and consciousness.

4. Serial Narratives and Media Literacy

In today's fragmented media landscape, serial drama offers a powerful tool for teaching media and gender literacy. Through the GEMINI project, educators use serialized television as a “common third”—a shared narrative space that allows students to explore complex gender issues without personal exposure. Central to this approach is the GMN Triangle (Gender, Media, Narrative), which supports critical engagement with how gender norms are constructed and challenged in media.

This method fosters media literacy by helping students analyse how serial drama uses characters, plots, and visual storytelling to reflect or resist gender stereotypes. It moves beyond passive viewing to active participation: students critique, remix, and create content, developing both critical insight and creative agency. Tested across diverse European classrooms, the GEMINI pedagogical approaches and educational tools adapts to local contexts while promoting inclusive, transnational dialogue on media, identity, and representation.

5. Book's Aims and Structure

This book explores the intersection between gender issues, serial narratives, and young audiences within the European context. Drawing from media studies, gender theory, cultural sociology, and education, it examines how serial dramas function as sites of negotiation where identities are represented, contested, and reimagined. It considers both the cultural and institutional dynamics that shape these narratives, as well as their reception and pedagogical potential among youth.

The volume aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how media representations influence the ways in which gender and diversity are perceived and experienced particularly within the tension between reproducing dominant cultural norms or opening-up counter-narratives.

To this purpose, the book is structured in three thematic sections, which reproduce the conceptual evolution of the GEMINI project. Each section is designed not only to stand on its own value as a research contribution, but to gradually lead toward an enriched pedagogical framework that supports the implementation of the GEMINI Educational Toolkit.

Section 1 investigates how gender-related issues are perceived, interpreted, and negotiated by young audiences, with particular attention to high school students across four European countries. Combining audience research through both qualitative and quantitative approaches, this section captures a wide range of perspectives and experiences that shape the understanding of gender and diversity within different cultural and educational contexts. It also presents key findings from semi-structured interviews with high school teachers and trainers, who act as “change agents” within their institutions. These insights enrich the broader picture of how media narratives intersect with educational settings and pedagogical practices.

Section 2 functions as an ideal bridge between the research-driven insights of Section 1 and the pedagogical applications developed in Section 3. By focusing on the narrative strategies and representational patterns in selected serial dramas, this section equips educators and trainers with analytical tools to deconstruct media narratives on gender and diversity. These analyses also anticipate and support the themes and methodologies presented in the GEMINI Educational Toolkit, where academic content is translated into accessible, practice-oriented formats.

Section 3 shifts the focus toward pedagogical implementation. It presents applied methodologies and tools developed within the GEMINI project, illustrating how serial drama can be used in formal and informal educational settings to promote gender awareness and media literacy. These contributions show how the toolkit integrates empirical research and critical reflection into flexible and innovative teaching practices, tailored to the needs of professionals, teachers, and policymakers.

By tracing the full evolution of the project, from audience insights to media content analysis, up to media literacy applications, the book offers a well-rounded base that strengthens the educational strategies proposed in the toolkit. Thus, the three interconnected sections ensure that the toolkit is not presented in isolation, but is embedded within a meaningful background of empirical research and critical reflection, maximizing its relevance and adaptability across diverse educational settings.

This layered structure enhances the toolkit’s effectiveness by grounding it in research-based findings and fostering a deeper insight of the media ecosystem in which young audiences are immersed. The added value of this interdisciplinary approach lies in its

capacity to translate complex research findings into practical educational tools, empowering professionals and educators to address gender representation through informed, critical engagement with media.

SECTION 1

Serial Dramas and Gender-Related Issues: The Audiences' Perspective

Chapter 1

Between Normalisation and “Minimal Effects”. A Qualitative Approach to Understand the Interplay Between European High School Students, Gender-Related Issues and Serial Dramas

Paola De Rosa, Louise Brix Jacobsen, Izzy Fox, Nicoleta Talpeş,
and Kim Toft Hansen

1. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Over the last years, serial dramas have increasingly become a key cultural space for encountering representations of gender equality and diversity (Sulimma, 2020; Pietaryte & Suzina, 2023), acting both as a mirror of traditional gender roles and as a shaper of more progressive representations (Heim, 2020; Andò & Hipkins, 2022). From the audience perspective, these narratives have a particularly strong impact on young adults, who use them to make sense of social values, identity, and belonging (Díaz-Fernández, 2022; Masanet *et al.*, 2022), in a context where the reception of gender-related messages is increasingly shaped by more inclusive and normalised approaches (Hines *et al.*, 2024).

At the same time, globalized streaming platforms and transmedia exposure (Jenkins, 2014) have positioned young adults as part of transnational audiences (Athique, 2016; Hill, 2018), whose media consumption is shaped by a hybrid ecology of local, national, and global flows of content, shaping their expectations and interpretive frameworks in context-specific ways. Within this media environment, young viewers tend to engage actively with serial narratives, negotiating what they see through a complex web of mediating factors (Hall, 1980).

This is even more evident when it comes to gender-related issues, where these mediators stem both from young adults' closer socio-cultural context and their personal life experiences and identity paths.

While such narratives often involve emotionally and prompt reflection, young adults appear to engage with them critically and selectively, suggesting that their impact may,

in some cases, reflect the “minimal effects” of media (Klapper, 1960; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008), reinforcing rather than reshaping existing attitudes and beliefs.

Building on these premises, this chapter investigates how serial dramas shape young adults’ engagement with gender-related issues within different sociocultural contexts.

To guide this inquiry, the research addresses three interrelated research questions:

- How do young adults’ interests and attitudes toward gender-related issues develop within their social and cultural context?
- How are gender-related themes portrayed in serial dramas, and how do young audiences from different sociocultural backgrounds interpret these representations?
- What is the perceived impact of serial dramas on young adults’ views on gender and diversity?

From a methodological perspective, this qualitative study is based on 15 focus group interviews (FGIs) carried out in Denmark, Ireland, Italy, and Romania, involving a total of 190 high school students aged between 15 and 19 years old, through a shared FGI Protocol, ensuring a coherent cross-national framework while allowing for adaptation to local contexts. The FG methodology combined the flexibility required to foster open dialogue with a rigorous approach to data collection, grounded in established practices (Acocella & Cataldi, 2021).

2. Mediating Contexts: The Role of Socialization in Shaping Gender Attitudes

Across all countries, three primary agents of socialization emerged as central to how young adults engage with gender-related issues: family, peer groups, and media.

Italian students frequently identify family as the most formative space, attributing both conservative and progressive gender beliefs to early domestic influences. By contrast, Romanians often describe their families as less open to discussions on gender and sexuality, with traditional norms going largely unquestioned. Danish students articulate a more dialogical family model, where sometimes they even take on the role of “educators” of their parents, while Irish ones highlight how the rapid flow of information in their generation has facilitated quicker changes in attitudes.

Peer groups also serve as important spaces for negotiating gender meanings. Danish and Irish youth frequently cite peer conversations—often amplified by social media—as central to their engagement with gender-related topics. For Italian students, peer environments are more ambivalent: while friends provide opportunities for discussion, they are also spaces where humour, or difference, may be misinterpreted.

Finally, serial dramas and digital media play a dual role in young adults' experiences. In contexts such as Ireland and Romania, students describe media as compensating for a lack of formal gender education in schools. In Italy, particularly international productions are often perceived as countering dominant national discourse. Danish students, by contrast, emphasize the role of opinion leaders in shaping conversations around gender.

3. Reading Representation: Recognition, Stereotypes, and Narrative Credibility

Young adults across all countries show a high degree of critical awareness when discussing gender representation in serial dramas. In both Denmark and Italy, many respondents reject the very logic of stereotyping, arguing that it fails to reflect the complexity of individual identities. While acknowledging the limitations of stereotypes, in Ireland and Italy some students argue that they can foster recognition, or even relatability, when grounded in lived experience. Romanians often express a mixed view—identifying gender stereotypes in media while also holding traditional beliefs about gender roles, such as equating physical strength with masculinity.

Across contexts, students express a preference for authentic stories over tokenistic or didactic representations. Series such as *Sex Education*, *Heartstopper*, and *Euphoria* are praised not only for their inclusive content but for the natural integration of diversity into the narrative. By contrast, representations that appear “forced” or inclusive at all costs are widely rejected.

4. Beyond Influence? Emotional Involvement and Behavioural Trends

A recurring thread across all FGIs is the distinction drawn by participants between the perceived social impact of serial dramas and their limited personal influence.

On the one hand, students widely recognize the potential of these narratives to foster societal change—whether by promoting inclusivity, challenging taboos, or normalizing diversity. Romanian, Italian, and Danish students expressed a broadly positive attitude toward the capacity of serial narratives to stimulate public debate and contribute to progressive change. Frequently cited examples included *Sex Education*—particularly among Italian participants—as a valuable resource for promoting sex education and body positivity, and *Euphoria*, often mentioned by Danish students for its bold portrayal of youth experiences. Irish participants, too, praised serial dramas for their ability to highlight urgent social issues such as racism, valuing their role in raising awareness and fostering empathy.

On the other hand, many young people resist the idea of being directly influenced, often asserting a conscious detachment from the content they consume. Yet this perceived “immunity” contrasts with numerous examples that suggest subtle yet meaningful forms of affective and behavioural influence. Danish participants, while frequently denying direct influence, revealed strong emotional involvement, as reflected in their tone, word choices, and the intensity of group discussions. Among Irish, Italian, and Romanian viewers, serial dramas were often described as sources of “inspiration,” even when gender or diversity were not central themes. Italians and Irish highlighted the influence of serials in shaping trends and personal style—sometimes extending to cosplay and fashion—while Romanian interviewees emphasized behavioural imitation as a way of expressing identity and navigating peer relationships, particularly in connection with gender roles.

What emerges is a complex process of selective engagement: young viewers filter, rework, and appropriate media content in ways that align with their evolving identities. Rather than admitting overt influence, they tend to frame these effects as forms of inspiration or resonance, embedded in the broader negotiation of self-understanding and social belonging. This highlights the ambivalent space between resistance and permeability, where emotional involvement may quietly shape attitudes and habits, even in the absence of full awareness.

5. Main Conclusions

The comparative analysis reveals a complex dynamic between media consumption and youth attitudes toward gender and diversity, shaped by both local sociocultural conditions and shared modes of engagement typical of increasingly transnational youth audiences (Hill, 2018). Despite national specificities, participants show shared sensibilities in how they negotiate representation and influence processes (Spalletta *et al.*, 2025), as a result of an interplay between cultural context, narrative framing, and audience agency (Livingstone, 2003).

On one hand, there is clear evidence that young adults are immersed in a generational shift where diversity is increasingly normalized. As a result, a shared aesthetic and ethical stance emerges among them—one that favours narrative normalisation or naturalisation (Barthes, 1964) over overtly ideological approaches to gender representation.

On the other hand, in line with the minimal effects paradigm, this study suggests that while serial dramas occasionally provoke reflection or challenge stereotypes, they predominantly reinforce pre-existing attitudes rather than generating significant

ideological shifts. In doing so, they primarily function as symbolic resources, by activating affective effects (Potter, 2012; Spalletta & De Rosa, *forthcoming*) and forms of engagement that reflect Ien Ang's (1982) notion of emotional realism, where viewers are moved not by ideological persuasion, but by emotional and relational identification.

Chapter 2

“This Is the Trend”: The Role of High School Teachers and Fictional Media in Gently Shaping a Common Vision About a Gender-Inclusive Future

Raluca Radu, Paola De Rosa, Izzy Fox, Kim Toft Hansen,
and Louise Brix Jacobsen

1. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Starting from 42 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with teachers and trainers in Denmark, Ireland, Italy and Romania, this chapter presents the challenges and opportunities of teaching gender equality using serial drama, in (apparently) functional institutional frameworks.

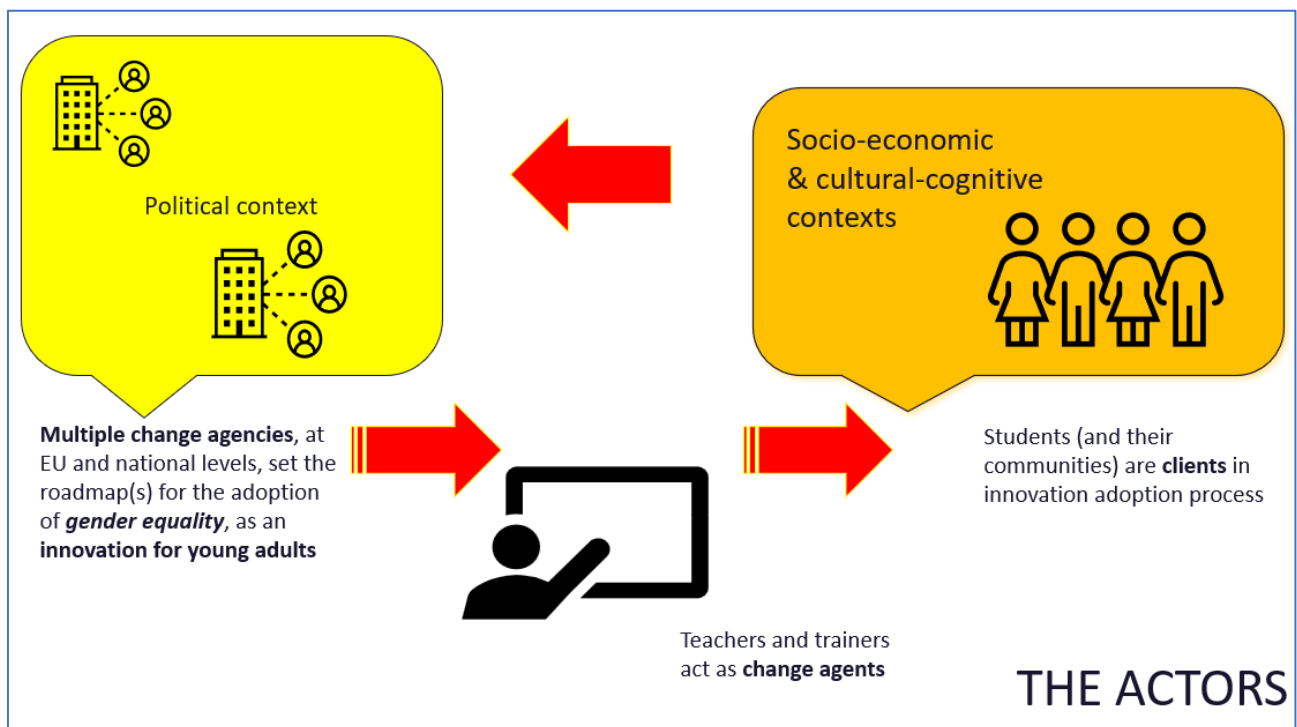
The theoretical approach is informed by the diffusion of innovation research, with a focus on the challenges encountered by change agents (Rogers, 2003) in promoting the idea of gender equality in communities with different social realities.

In addition, teaching gender issues through serial drama also invites broader frameworks of media literacy, including establishing reflexive approaches to young adults' own media consumption (Potter, 2008). We are interested in the circulation of ideas through popular serial dramas, and how teachers perceive their added intangible value for young audiences and for society at large – a possible research gap in the available literature.

More specifically, the chapter focus on the role of serial dramas and of high school teachers and trainers in shaping a better, kinder future for all of us, despite gender differences or sexual orientations. Across all countries, the interviewed teachers express a sense of responsibility for educating young adults about gender equality and show openness to incorporating new teaching tools, such as popular serial dramas. All the interviewees have a genuine interest in promoting gender equality, yet many of them are worried about socio-cultural resistance to gender topics from students, parents, other teachers and even from school management. In addition, teaching gender topics with the help of serial drama may encounter institutional challenges, such as different

copyright provisions and available technical infrastructure, as revealed by the teachers interviewed.

Fig. 1. Conceptualisation of the position and the role of teachers and trainers in promoting gender equality in high schools. Source: the GEMINI project.



2. Research Findings

The chapter starts with a comparative presentation of the impact of the larger social and political context of gender equality, in the four countries, explaining how evolutions at societal level are perceived by high school teachers and trainers. In all four countries, teachers talk about two main approaches to gender equality: (1) a conservative approach and (2) a very tolerant approach. Teachers report that cultural and cognitive differences—sometimes within the same school or classroom—make it difficult to teach gender issues.

In a second step, the comparative analysis focuses on school environments, discussing if high school are formally required to promote gender equality, and what is their current offer, what works, what does not work and why and what are the logistics that support teaching activities. Interviews allowed to discover that in Ireland and Denmark, gender equality and media literacy are integrated in compulsory courses, such as English/

Danish, Social Sciences & Relationships and Sexuality Education. Italy and Romania rely on elective courses.

In all four countries, training and teaching tools are limited, and some teachers admit they received no institutional support that would allow them to discuss confidently gender equality issues, with their students. This aspect is covered in the third part, developed around teachers' self-assessment of interest in gender issues, previous training and serial drama consumption habits. Our research design was based on a nonprobability, volunteer sampling, that bears a selection bias (Agresti, 2018: 30-31). Nevertheless, we did reach a level of empirical saturation and the data we gathered during the interviews allow for a deep dive into the social reality of young people and high school teachers interested in gender equality.

A central interest of the chapter is the comparative analysis of the way teachers understand students' socio-cognitive backgrounds and educational needs. The discussion evolves from perceived generational differences to representation of teens in serial dramas, influences of serial dramas on students and the possible adoption of serial dramas as teaching instruments.

3. Main Conclusions

The chapter concludes that streaming platforms propose similar cultural references on gender equality, across Europe, as we found out both during the interviews with teachers and the focus groups with high school students. Yet, national contexts are different when it comes to public policies and political discourse, school curricula and approach to media literacy, women and children's status, and minorities' status. These contexts have a powerful impact on the ability of teachers to include, in an efficient manner, sensitive subjects such as gender equality, in the curriculum.

The interviews prove there is a noteworthy interest in gender issues among teachers, in Denmark, Ireland, Italy, and Romania, and a genuine openness for innovative teaching instruments. Teachers appear quite interested in using serial drama as a tool for teaching gender, when blended in a more complex teaching instrument, that includes a theoretical discussion based on social studies, alongside exercises or applications. The teaching tools they already use are scarce and the institutional support could be improved.

The pressures teachers feel, as change agents, intermediating between local and national government (change agencies) and students (clients), are stronger than in other contexts of innovation diffusion. There are multiple change agencies, at European

and at national levels, that have different visions about teaching gender equality in primary and secondary schools. These visions are influenced by the power struggles in the political arena and may shift from one side of the political spectrum to the other, depending on national election results. The complex interplay of news, entertainment and social media content, supporting or, on the contrary, contesting gender equality, interferes with teachers' mission as change agents, making it harder in some cultural contexts. Nevertheless, in all teachers interviews across the four countries our interlocutors expressed a real interest in teaching gender issues and a need for institutional support in promoting basic civil rights and gender equality for the benefit of all of us.

Chapter 3

From Screens to Selves: How Serial Drama Shapes Gendered Imaginaries Among European Young Audiences

Marica Spalletta, Nicola Ferrigni, and Paola De Rosa

1. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Within the theoretical framework of British cultural studies (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1992), cultural products are conceived as powerful agents in the construction of collective imaginaries. Media texts are not merely passively consumed but actively interpreted by audiences, whose meaning-making processes are rooted in their personal experiences and socio-cultural backgrounds. This approach foregrounds the agency of audiences in accepting, negotiating, or resisting media representations, particularly around socially relevant themes such as gender (Gill, 2007).

In today's digital mediascape—characterized by algorithmically driven platforms and ubiquitous connectivity (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018)—media consumption is increasingly shaped by affective and networked practices (Jenkins *et al.*, 2013; Papacharissi, 2015). In this scenario, over the last decade, serial dramas have emerged both as a key cultural product (Mittell, 2015) and as a way of experiencing everyday life that influences not only cultural consumption but also politics, economics, sport, and even terrorism (Boccia Artieri & Fiorentino, 2024).

If cultural representations—and especially serial dramas—do not merely reflect but actively participate in shaping social opinions and behaviours, these dynamics become particularly significant when analysing the engagement of young adults (Denson & Mayer, 2019), a demographic highly embedded in online environments and especially responsive to serial narratives. The media experiences of young publics, situated at the intersection of identity construction and participatory culture (Jenkins *et al.*, 2016), make them not only avid consumers but also active co-creators of meaning within gendered media discourses.

Based on these premises, the chapter aims to explore how gender-related meanings are constructed, negotiated, and potentially internalized by young audiences within their

everyday media practices. This is done by presenting and discussing the main findings of an international survey involving approximately 1,200 high school students across four European countries—Italy, Ireland, Denmark, and Romania. Methodologically, the chapter adopts a mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017): while the quantitative component provides a broad overview of cultural consumption patterns among young adults, particular attention is devoted to the qualitative interpretation of these findings.

The analysis addresses four main questions:

- The patterns of serial drama consumption among European youth
- Their engagement with gender-related issues
- Their perceptions of how gender is represented in serial narratives
- The influence of these narratives on their opinions and behaviours.

2. Serial Lives: Consumption Patterns in a (G)local World

Regarding the first question, the transition to platform-based media has profoundly reshaped not only production and distribution logics but also everyday viewing practices. Serial dramas have become emblematic cultural products of the platform society. They are now embedded in fluid and personalized routines that reflect broader shifts in audience behaviour.

This transformation can be interpreted through three key sociological lenses. First, the concept of *(g)locality* illustrates how digital platforms enable access to a wide range of content that is both transnational and locally rooted (Athique, 2016). Young viewers today navigate an expansive mediascape that includes not only dominant U.S. productions but also national and European serials—such as the Italian series *Mare fuori*—that resonate with culturally specific experiences. Second, the notion of *seriality* highlights the ritualistic dimension of viewing, whereby the episodic structure of serial dramas aligns with daily habits and emotional attachments, despite the flexibility of on-demand consumption. Third, the idea of *duality* captures the hybrid motivations behind serial consumption: while young adults often seek entertainment and escapism, they also engage with serial dramas as a way of exploring social issues, identities, and intercultural perspectives. Their viewing choices are shaped both by peer influence and algorithmically curated recommendations, revealing the entanglement of individual agency and social context.

3. Dealing with Gender: Knowledge, Awareness and Engagement

The second question focuses on the relationship between youth and gender-related issues, revealing marked differences across three interrelated domains. In terms of *knowledge*, young audiences can typically situate gender issues within the intersectional framework of diversity. However, this diversity is often narrowly associated with sexual orientation, reflecting a focused yet limited interpretive lens. This knowledge is largely acquired through peer interactions, as gender topics are rarely addressed in formal educational settings, exposing a gap in institutional engagement. In terms of *awareness*, young adults generally acknowledge the relevance of gender issues and the public debate surrounding them. Yet this awareness is predominantly negative in tone, framed around the prevalence of gender-based violence—especially against women—rather than around progressive cultural change. Despite this awareness, however *personal engagement* remains low. Many young respondents express limited personal interest in gender topics and report minimal involvement in school discussions, suggesting a disconnect between the recognition of relevance and active participation in gender discourse.

4. Gender Stereotypes as Narrative and Counter-Narrative Strategy

The third question examines how young audiences perceive gender representations in serial narratives. The dominant theme emerging from their responses is that of stereotyping, understood along two interconnected dimensions: *narrative* and *counter-narrative*. On the one hand, stereotypes are seen as recurring storytelling devices in both American and national television series, even though the first ones are nevertheless credited with a comparatively greater attention to gender balance and LGBTQ+ inclusion rather than the latter ones. Stereotypes are identified across various narrative layers, often simplifying gender issues into binary contrasts—such as cognitive and emotional differences between men and women, sexual identity and orientation, or gender equality in domestic and workplace settings. Yet, from the perspective of young viewers, these stereotypes may also serve a counter-narrative function: by dramatizing familiar tropes, serial dramas can help normalize gender diversity and foster awareness, ultimately encouraging more inclusive attitudes among youth.

The fourth question concerns the influence of serial narratives on young adults' opinions and behaviours. Here, a clear distinction emerges between *inspiration* and *transformation*. While respondents recognize the capacity of serial dramas—particularly certain characters—to spark debates on gender-related issues, this engagement primarily occurs within online communities perceived as safe spaces, where opinions

can be freely shared without fear of judgment. However, when moving from inspiration to transformation, the influence of serial narratives appears notably reduced. Their impact is mostly confined to emotional sphere rather than in shaping concrete opinions or behaviours. When changes do occur, serial dramas tend to reinforce rather than radically transform pre-existing beliefs. In this light, serial narratives function more as confirmatory than transformative agents within the cultural landscape of youth media consumption.

5. Main Conclusions

The analysis shows that contemporary serial dramas represent far more than simple forms of entertainment. They function as complex cultural apparatus, capable of articulating and reshaping gender representations that are deeply embedded in the everyday lives of European youth. At the same time, serial narratives influence the construction of collective imaginaries, contributing both to the normalization of stereotypes and the emergence of more inclusive counter-narratives.

Within today's digitally transformed media environment, serial dramas are consumed in an interconnected, algorithmically driven ecosystem. Here, seriality is not just about content—it is about the ways in which these narratives become entangled with daily life. In this context, seriality becomes a grammar of contemporary experience: it doesn't merely reflect reality, but actively shapes how young adults perceive and interpret social, political, and emotional life. As the research highlights, serial consumption is never neutral. It intertwines with identity formation and participatory practices, creating a cultural landscape where the boundary between screen and lived experience is increasingly porous.

One of the most critical issues to emerge consists of the gap between awareness and engagement. While young adults generally acknowledge the social relevance of gender issues, their engagement often remains abstract. It does not necessarily translate into personal interest or active participation. This disconnect can be understood through the dichotomy proposed by Furstenberg (1971) between “concern about crime” and “fear of crime”. While concern refers to the recognition of an issue as socially important, fear implies a more internalized and personal perception. In our case, many European students seem to fall into the first category: they recognize the importance of gender discourse but do not yet experience it as something that directly affects their lives.

These findings suggest a broader reflection on the role of research and European cultural policies. While knowledge is undoubtedly the necessary foundation for any form of change, awareness alone cannot be the ultimate goal. On the contrary, a real

transformation only occurs when knowledge and awareness become embedded in everyday practices. In other words, the ultimate objective should be to foster a process of internalization—where media messages become tools through which individuals can rethink their way of being in the world, in relationships, and in society at large.

In conclusion, serial dramas prove to be a privileged lens through which to understand the tensions and possibilities surrounding gender discourse among young adults. But precisely because these narratives play such a vital role in shaping the self, media consumption must be accompanied by educational and cultural policies aimed at strengthening the cultural capital of younger generations. Only then will it be possible to bridge the gap between what young adults know and what they truly believe—transforming awareness into engagement, and engagement into meaningful change.

SECTION 2

The On-Screen Representation of Gender: Topics and Issues

Chapter 4

Gender Empowerment and Banal Gender-Bending. Towards Naturalised Gender Narratives in *Rita* and *Zusa*

Louise Brix Jacobsen and Kim Toft Hansen

1. Introduction

This chapter analyses two representative case studies chosen from Danish focus group interview data: *Zusa* (Risvig, 2022-) and *Rita* (TV 2/Netflix, 2012-20). It introduces textual representations of relevant gender topics to offer nuanced pedagogical approaches to them. Advancing from how Danish focus groups explicated an interest in “unforced narratives”, the chapter starts by suggesting the concepts of “naturalisation” (Barthes, 1964) and “authenticity as emotional truth” (Hill, 2019) to describe how popular narratives for young adults should feel “natural” to their life-worlds. This is followed by the case studies where *Zusa* invites a rephrasing of the notion of the female gaze and a discussion of gender empowerment, and *Rita* represents an opportunity to introduce the concept of banal gender-bending. Finally, the chapter emphasises ways to address such difficult concepts pedagogically in a Danish and international high school setting.

Focus group interviews with high school students in Denmark, Italy, Ireland and Romania show that students prefer authentic, non-forced representations of gender in serial drama. To account for this, we propose two interpretative models:

- A return to Roland Barthes’ classic concept *naturalisation* (Barthes, 1964) which allows us to explain how narratives must contain some degree of empirical realism to appear “unforced” and create an emotional resonance with young adult audiences
- Annette Hill’s conception of authenticity as “emotional truth”. In her work on audience perception in serial drama and reality, Hill discovered that when audiences declare shows as authentic, «they are talking about emotional truth, where these series are meaningful to people’s lives» (Hill, 2019: 39).

These interpretative models comprise the overall theoretical framework which this chapter will use to address how the unforced and authentic have more to do with naturalisation and real emotions than factual truth. Based on the GEMINI pedagogical

tools of *One series, one scene, one issue* and the *GMN triangle* (Hansen & Jacobsen, 2025) which allows a concurrent focus on narrative, media literacy and gender issues, this presents an opportunity to explore how high school students can develop specific insights into gender-related issues and an understanding of authenticity as intersubjective and shaped by intercultural influences.

2. *Zusa*: female gaze and gender empowerment

The Danish self-taught independent director Jonas Risvig has created a wide range of series about and for young adults. He uses different formats and media platforms to address identity formation, sexuality, gender stereotypes and the various personal issues associated with being a teenager. As a popular public figure in Denmark, he is well-known for a close target group collaboration with young adults in the production phase. He has been able to attract the attention of young adult audiences, which has been very difficult for established “legacy” media (Hansen, 2025). Risvig came up in all Danish focus groups and we have chosen *Zusa* as a representative for his comprehensive catalogue. *Zusa* is a web series produced for YouTube distribution and privately funded by a cancer society, a society for children’s well-being and a psychiatry fund. It deals with youth vulnerability and group dynamics. While Risvig has negotiated toxic masculinity through the perspective of male protagonists in the series *Drenge* (Boys 2022), Risvig focalises other serial dramas such as *Nylon* (2021-), *Salsa* (2022-), and *Zusa* (2022) in the perspective of female protagonists.

In the literature on the female gaze, there is a consensus that it positions women as active subjects with agency, rather than as passive objects of male desire as seen in the male gaze (French, 2022). For film director Jill Soloway, an application of a female gaze involves a focus on the feeling body, where a subjective camera «attempts to get inside the protagonist» (French, 2022: 60). The purpose is to move away from the voyeuristic and evoke in the viewer a «feeling of being in feeling rather than looking at the character» (60). For Soloway, the female gaze implies agency. The characters show awareness of how it feels to be seen or to be the object of the gaze, and they show resistance towards it. They “take up subjectivity” by returning the gaze, causing the viewer to reflect on their gazing position. We use theories of female gaze (French, 2022; Soloway, 2016; Benson-Allott, 2017) to discuss the pedagogical potential of a focus on female focalization and gender empowerment.

3. *Rita* and banal gender bending

Rita was mentioned spontaneously in Danish focus group interviews, and it appears as a much-watched series by many Danish high school students. It is an example of local and commercial public service entering into co-production agreements with global streamers such as Netflix. It tells the story of the controversial elementary school teacher, Rita, who constantly disagrees with teachers, parents and the head of school. She cares deeply for especially her challenged students, and she invests herself and crosses several lines to help them, often not noticing the needs of her own young adult children who are struggling with low self-esteem and the acceptance of homosexuality. The series motivates discussions about gender and sexuality as well as gender-blended character traits.

Rita represents a case of what we refer to as banal gender-bending, where traditional gender norms are subtly yet significantly destabilized through a character who blends masculine and feminine traits without the overt theatricality of drag performance. Described by creator Christian Thorpe as «a grown woman who was basically still a child» and by actress Mille Dinesen as an «edgy, masculine, politically incorrect woman» (Série Series, 2011), Rita operates in a serialised space shaped by themes of authority, identity, and resistance. Her character embodies a complex mix of traits often reserved for hard-boiled male sentimentalities (Cassuto, 2008): a self-destructive relationship with alcohol and smoking, sharp-tongued humour, defiance of superiors, and a confident, agentic sexuality. Rita's portrayal aligns with queer worldmaking: not through flamboyant subversion, but via a subtle presence that bends gender norms through a nuanced character portrayal. Her role creates a space where gender is less a binary and more a fluid idea to be subtly bent and questioned.

4. Main Conclusions

Based on the case studies presented in this chapter, it is possible to conclude that popular series such as *Zusa* and *Rita* offer rich material for pedagogical engagement with complex gender issues in contemporary society.

These include themes such as gender empowerment, the female gaze, gender-bending, and the negotiation of stereotypical gender roles. By examining gender empowerment in *Zusa* and banal gender-bending in *Rita* through the interpretive frameworks of naturalisation and authenticity as emotional truth, it becomes clear that gender can be fluidly negotiated when it is integrated into narratives that evoke genuine emotional responses and “feel” authentic.

In an educational context, this creates opportunities to explore how students' interpretations of serialised authenticity are shaped by intercultural influences.

Chapter 5

Heteronormativity and Irish Coming of Age Serial Drama. Progressive Possibilities and Conservative Realities in *Derry Girls* and *Normal People*

Sarah Arnold and Izzy Fox

This chapter discusses two Irish serial drama case studies: *Derry Girls* and *Normal People*, and analyses their gender representations through the prism of form and narrative. Both series offer paradoxical challenges to and reinforcements of gender stereotypes, especially heteronormative romance and cis-gender identities. This chapter addresses how these serial dramas can be used as pedagogical tools to understand how narrative forms like serial drama work to normalise gender conventionality but also, at times, offer radical departures from such norms. It offers examples of how formal and narrative analysis of scenes and sequences can be used to unpack and interpret gender representation in teaching contexts.

1. Literature

Scholarship on Irish television drama emphasises the low quality and quantity of it since the early years of television. Despite several individually praised series such as *Family* (RTÉ/BBC1, 1994) and *Prosperity* (RTÉ, 2007), there is a general consensus that Ireland does not excel in its drama as compared to its news and current affairs, where it has been considered a modernisation force in society. Brennan (2000) notes that drama is more challenging to produce in Ireland, given the high costs and low returns, compared to a genre like sport. Nonetheless, he reports that producers are invested in representing social issues and marginalised and minoritised groups. Likewise, Sheehan (2004: 75) notes the very low number of dramas produced by national broadcaster RTÉ, but that there is some attempt «to shed light on what it was to be standing in Ireland». However, she points to a «postmodern paralysis in conceptualising contemporary experience» (*ib.*). Instead, drama series that tackle social and political issues are often transnational rather than indigenous, as though reflection upon Irish society requires an outsider's perspective (Berry, 2025). Those series that do address issues regarding identity, for

example, race or sexuality, are often described as “uneven”, in other words, veering between stereotype and authentic representations. They may spur debate about issues such as gay marriage or direct provision (the State’s method of holding International Protection Applications), all while reverting to gender, sexual or racial “normativity”, elsewhere (Asava, 2020; Kerrigan, 2020). Given the dearth of Irish television drama, it is perhaps no surprise that young people are an underserved audience.

Something similar can be said of teen television drama, which has been argued to oscillate between ideological conservatism and progressivism (Ross & Stein, 2008). Marghitu (2021) argues that the transformations in the distribution of television coupled with the rise in identity issues as central to contemporary US politics have coincided with more diverse representation of identities, issues and concerns of young people. Both Marghitu and Woods emphasise teen television drama’s concern with “authenticity” as a moral principle, underscoring the importance of selfhood, individualism and identity for young people watching contemporary serial drama addressed to young people (Woods, 2016). While authenticity itself is an elusive concept, it can be considered the antithesis of stereotyping, of conformity, normativity, and so on. This trend towards challenging normativity is evidenced, as Asmar *et al.* (2024) argue, in Netflix’s “branding” of itself around «the concept of diversity» and its «liberal value system» (2024: 3), which attempts to steer away from tired and narrow representations of young people. Nonetheless, Abbott (2025) argues that more diverse representations do not necessarily mean more authentic or progressive representations. Referencing the proliferation of LGBTQ representations in contemporary television, including teen television, Abbott (2025) suggests that such representations tend towards depoliticised, hypersexualised characterisation. Schumacher likewise is cautious about the liberal potential of teen TV citing representations of sex positive teen girls in which their sexual agency brings them risk, thereby limiting the progressive range of the texts. In other words, what is deemed to be liberal, progressive or authentic does not necessarily forego conservatism, the inauthentic or stereotypical.

These paradoxes of representation are evident in the limited number of serial dramas featuring young people and set in Ireland: *Derry Girls* and *Normal People*. There is very little address to young people through its drama programmes, in comparison to Norwegian series such as *Skam* (NRK 2015-2017) or UK series such as *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019-2023) or *Heartstopper* (Netflix, 2022-2024). Therefore, the corpus of texts is already limited.

2. Methods

This chapter undertakes close textual analysis of two serial dramas set in Ireland—*Derry Girls* and *Normal People*—and analyse them through three themes related to heteronormativity: “courtly love” romance; women’s desire is bad; and feminine boys. Each serial drama contains examples of each of these themes. Using the pedagogical/GMN triangle utilised on the GEMINI project and available on its toolkit, we select an exemplary scene from each series for discussion via each theme, thus providing examples of how the clips may be used to develop learners’ understanding of gender issues in serial drama.

3. Analysis

Each of the series reproduces heteronormativity through its gender relations and hierarchies and especially through its representation of romance and coupling, which mostly take place in male/female couples. Particularly, men are represented as the sexual or romantic pursuers, whereas women’s pursuit of men is represented as comical and is unsuccessful. In the selected clips, men are represented as having romantic agency. In the scene from *Normal People*, Marianne is beaten by her abusive brother and calls on Connall to protect her. He responds by warning Marianne’s brother never to hurt her again and rescues Marianne from the abusive household. In *Derry Girls*, the clip examined shows Erin seek out the affection of a male love interest not by speaking to him but by trying to catch his attention so that he pursues her.

Following on from the discussion of heteronormativity, this is also evident in how female sexuality is represented as deviant and problematic. Because patriarchal relations between men and women require that women are sexually passive, and men sexually assertive, women’s expression of sexual desire and interest is represented as destructive and unhealthy. In the clip from *Normal People*, Marianne’s conversation with Connall about her participation in BDSM with her sexual partner, including how he beats her with a belt, makes Connall uncomfortable and question their previous relationship. It also signposts to the abuse that Marianne suffers at the hands of her family. In *Derry Girls*, Michelle chases a frightened love interest down a hallway, evidencing the absurdity of women’s pursuit of a male love interest. She is instead rejected, something that occurs many times throughout the series where she attempts to sexually pursue a boy but is thwarted. This forms part of the comedy of the series.

Because patriarchal societies require that men’s gender is highly conformist and aligned with their sexuality, any expressions of sexual and/or gender difference are confronting and troubling to men (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2003). Therefore, men police other

men's behaviour in order to ensure that “men are men”. This is undertaken by bullying those that are deemed to be lacking in masculine features and expressions (Kimmel, 2016). In *Normal People*, the scene that illustrates this has Connall getting laughed about because he has a friendship with a female teacher. Other students and even Marianne belittle him and joke about this equal relationship with a woman. In *Derry Girls*, the character of James—the only male of the *Derry Girls*—is subjected to much mocking by his female peer group, especially his cousin Michelle.

Chapter 6

Looking Through a Prism.

How *SKAM Italia* and *Prisma* Challenge Gender Stereotypes and Defy Social Expectations

Valentina Re, Gianluigi Rossini, and Arianna Vergari

This chapter focuses on the Italian serial dramas *SKAM Italia* (2018-2024) and *Prisma* (2022-2024) as case studies to discuss how audiovisual narratives can challenge dominant gender representations and viewers' expectations in terms of gender roles, heteronormativity, ableism, and inclusivity. Drawing on media industry studies and textual analysis, the chapter explores both series' aesthetic and narrative specificities and their educational potential in promoting discussions about gender-related issues among high school students.

1. Italian Serial Drama and the Teen Audience

The two series are examined in relation to the ongoing transformations in the Italian audiovisual landscape. locates the two series in the context of the rapidly changing Italian audiovisual landscape. While scripted television series specifically aimed at adolescent audiences are a relatively recent phenomenon in the Italian media landscape, this genre has grown significantly in recent years, mainly due to the arrival of global streaming platforms. Although the national SVOD service TIMVision was one of the first players to act in this sense, with the production of *SKAM Italia* (seasons 1 to 3) and *Dark Polo Gang – La serie* (2018), a significant role was undoubtedly played by Netflix (Hansen, 2021; Barra, 2023; Asmar et al., 2024; Wayne & Castro, 2025) with original content such as *Baby* (2018-2020), *Zero* (2021), *Curon* (2020), *Summertime* (2020-2022), *SKAM Italia* (seasons 4 to 6), *Tutto chiede salvezza* (2022-2024), *Adorazione* (2024).

This prompted other players to invest more in the same demographics. While global SVOD operators like Amazon Prime Video (*Bang Bang Baby*, 2022; *Prisma*) and Disney+ (*Uonderboys*, 2024), and even the pay TV service Sky (*We Are Who We Are*, 2020; *Un'estate fa*, 2023), made some efforts in this direction, it was the public broadcaster RAI (and its BVOD service RaiPlay), that achieved the most significant outcome in terms of

popularity with TV series like *Mare fuori* (*The Sea Beyond*, 2020-) and *Un professore* (*A professor*, 2021-).

2. *SKAM Italia*: Reality Effect and Reversing Stereotypes

SKAM Italia is one of the most relevant examples of renewal in Italian serial drama, and so far also the longest-lived: compared to *SKAM*'s six seasons, of all the other titles mentioned, only *Mare fuori* managed to surpass the third season. Consequently, it is not surprising that the series has often been mentioned in the Italian focus groups conducted in the framework of the GEMINI project. Antonioni *et al.* (2021) have already provided a well-documented account of the production history of the Norwegian *SKAM* and its Italian adaptation *SKAM Italia*. In particular, the latter inherited the methodology and the «public service mission» (Sundet, 2020) of the former but had to fit the needs of SVOD commercial services. Interviews conducted with producer Maddalena Rinaldo and showrunner Ludovico Bessegato show how, adopting the “*SKAM* methodology”, the series’ narrative is heavily based on real-life stories and patterns of speech collected during many interviews conducted with adolescents.

The specific narrative style adopted by *SKAM Italia* was able to create a “reality effect” aimed explicitly at reversing tropes and stereotypes often present in Italian television when dealing with issues of gender and sexual orientation. Throughout its six seasons, *SKAM Italia* tackled power relations between genders, homosexual desire in a heteronormative environment, sexual harassment, changing masculinities, second-generation immigrant identities, and more. While much of the literature about *SKAM* contends that the series’ perceived realism and authenticity were conjured by the aid of its transmedia extensions, the Italian adaptation—which abandoned most transmedia activity since the move to Netflix after the third season—was able to achieve the same results through the dramaturgical structure and visual style.

3. *Prisma*: Transitional Spaces Beyond Stereotypes

Prisma is an Italian coming-of-age drama that follows the intertwined lives of identical twins, Andrea and Marco, and their community of friends in the small provincial town of Latina. Despite the cliffhanger ending of the second season (2024), on September 11, 2024, Ludovico Bessegato announced via Instagram that Amazon Prime would not renew *Prisma* for a third season. The subsequent mobilisation of the fanbase in response to the cancellation highlights the urgency and cultural relevance of narratives that challenge normative frameworks and dominant representations. In this sense, *Prisma*

emerges as a cultural device of resistance and transformation within the Italian media landscape, making it particularly suitable for pedagogical purposes.

Combining textual analysis with attention to the production context, the analysis demonstrates how *Prisma* functions as a multilayered and complex narrative object. The series articulates a plurality of aesthetic, political, and identity-driven concerns through stylistic and structural choices designed to portray multiple forms of transitional space. These transitional spaces include the liminal dimension of adolescence, the fluid and evolving identity space of each character, and the polyphonic narrative space «which reveals the multitude of data, tension points, trajectories, and energies at play, all contributing to the sense of complexity that defines contemporary experience» (De Pascalis, 2024: 152). A further transitional space is the multifaceted virtual one—oscillating between being a site of privacy violations and a space of social media sharing that enables self-affirmation and visibility, replacing verbal language with performative expression. Physical space, too, is rendered fluid by the movements of the characters between centre and periphery, fiction and reality, set against the stark contrast between the rationalist monumental architecture of Latina—a city founded during Fascism—and the anti-monumentality of personal experience. In line with the deconstructive approach of queer studies (de Lauretis, 1991), the series resists fixed categories, offering instead a proliferation of possibilities through formal choices that challenge temporal and spatial linearity and coherence. Finally, the spectator's gaze is placed in a transition state—disoriented and reconfigured—encouraged «to adopt a different perspective on what it means to be socially constructed in binary terms» (D'Amelio *et al.*, forthcoming).

4. Conclusion: *SKAM* and *Prisma* in the Classroom

Both series demonstrate significant educational potential in fostering discussions about gender-related issues and enhancing media literacy skills among high school students. We show how teachers can conduct textual analysis in the classroom, linking the various narrative devices used by both series to issues about gender, identity, and social roles. Moreover, since both series foreground intergenerational conflict, parental absence, and adolescent struggles for self-definition, in addition to their relevance for youth education, these narratives also highlight the urgent need for adult engagement with gender literacy.

We argue that the development of media literacy is intrinsically connected to the development of gender literacy. In order to understand how these series, and audiovisual narratives more generally, address the complex terrain of gender roles, gender identities, stereotypes, discrimination, and, conversely, inclusive practices toward

underrepresented groups, it is essential to analyse not only what is told but also how it is told. This involves a dual focus: analysing characters and narrative strategies while examining audiovisual language, which significantly contributes to the construction of meaning and the emotional impact of gender representations.

Furthermore, a comparative perspective can significantly enrich the educational value of these analyses. By juxtaposing *SKAM Italia* and *Prisma* with other Italian and international serial dramas, students can be encouraged to reflect critically on the similarities and differences in how gender and diversity are represented across cultural contexts. These comparisons can begin with students' own experiences and preferences regarding media, which fosters a more engaged and reflective relationship with the stories they consume. Ultimately, this approach not only enhances analytical skills but also empowers students to consider how media representations shape their understanding of identity, inclusion, and diversity.

Chapter 7

Breaking With Tradition. Gender and Family in The Fictional Universes of *Breaking Bad* and *Wednesday*

Mihai Coman and Anamaria Sasu

1. Introduction

This chapter explores the perception of gender and family in *Breaking Bad* and *Wednesday*, two serial dramas watched by Romanian teenagers, according to the GEMINI focus group and survey responses. *Breaking Bad* discusses traditional family values as impacted by the challenges and overall conditions of modern society, offering examples of toxic masculinity, toxic relationships and the role of women within the family, while *Wednesday* is an upside-down image of reality, within an unconventional family, where discussions about individualism, parental expectations and gender nonconformity are the norm. Both shows use complex relationships to critique gender norms and the evolving concept of family, while engaging audiences with nuanced portrayals of social identity.

The analysis explores the liminal worlds and archetypal references in these two fictional universes, in an attempt to discover their appeal to young audiences. The choice of the two serial dramas analysed stemmed from the findings of the GEMINI project. In late 2023, the Romanian research team conducted 3 focus group sessions with 44 Romanian teenagers. Later, we had 306 responders to our survey trying to measure the influence of serial dramas on European young adults' perception of gender-related issues. The aim was to discern any emerging patterns and learn how we could help them and their teachers even further, by using serial dramas to teach about gender issues.

2. Romanian Young Audiences and the Global Streaming Landscape

First of all, we expected to get a sizeable list of Romanian TV series to analyse and monitor. However, the responses received in the focus groups and in the subsequent online survey showed that Romanian teenagers did not watch Romanian TV series. According to the survey, Romanian teenagers, just like their Irish counterparts, tend to

cite international or non-local serial dramas, and Romanians are the most “(pro)European” viewers (53.3%). The most popular names listed in our discussions were US titles, not necessarily age-appropriate, and, furthermore, titles that were not available on TV, but only on streaming platforms. Girls mentioned mostly titles with strong female leads, such as *Wednesday* or *Gilmore Girls*, or sitcoms (*Friends*, *The Big Bang Theory*, etc.). Boys stated they watched mostly crime and action serial dramas, like *Breaking Bad*, *Game of Thrones*, etc. Local titles were rarely mentioned in focus groups and were mostly related to watching TV along with a family member. The survey further clarified this aspect, showing that some teenagers consider that local series refer to a societal model perceived as distant from their generation.

The choice of foreign serial dramas may seem strange, yet explainable as Romania has one of the best fixed and mobile internet connections in Europe (European Commission, 2024), and teenagers have easy access to streaming platforms: figures in October 2023 showed that 54% of the urban internet users have at least one subscription (personal or in the household) for accessing video streaming platforms (Spark Foundry and Data Intelligence, 2023).

Two names were, nevertheless, recurrently mentioned in all three focus groups: *Wednesday* and *Breaking Bad*, and the choice of these serial dramas for this analysis seemed obvious. The choice of *Wednesday* could be easily explained: it has a strong female lead, it is targeted at teenagers (a teenage character undergoing change, exploring family relationships, friendships, and romance), and part of the first season was filmed on location in Romania. *Wednesday* is a spin-off of the hugely successful *Addams Family* franchise, focusing on the family’s teenage daughter, who is enrolled in a high school for children with special abilities, since “normal” schools would no longer admit her. Although initially a misfit among misfits, *Wednesday* ends up discovering herself and others, while exploring family values, friendship and romance, and, of course, solving a mystery while writing a crime novel, like the prodigy she is. The world of the Addams Family has always been one of fantasy and (sometimes) of the absurd, where weirdness is the norm, but strong family values and ties underline entire plots. The Addamses are often more normal than normal people by being themselves.

Finding a reason for the popularity of *Breaking Bad* among Romanian teenagers was more challenging. It was available on Netflix, the most popular streaming platform in Romania (Spark Foundry and Data Intelligence, 2023), but it was nonetheless a mature show (rated 16+ on the streaming platform), with a very serious topic and themes. Walter White is a discontent, yet quiet family man, working two jobs, who, upon discovering he is suffering from lung cancer, turns to a life of crime, cooking meth, to provide for his

family when he is gone. Ultimately, he is drawn too much to this second life, turning into a criminal mastermind, losing his family and his life in the process.

3. Liminality, Archetypal Structures and Family: A Comparative Reading

The common denominator of these two series is liminality: both main characters are undergoing a change, just like regular teenagers do, and are similar to us, being at the same time different. According to Victor Turner (1969: 169), liminality is «a legitimized situation of freedom from cultural constraints and social classifications». During the liminal break, societies experience a form of “acceptable disorder”, which is the product of dis-membering the usual system of classification, of values, and of daily behaviour (norms).

Another important factor that contributes to the strength and appeal of the two stories is their structure, which encompasses numerous archetypal constructions. For the purposes of this research, we have considered Jung’s acceptance of the archetype as a «internal mental model of a typical, generic story character to which an observer might resonate emotionally» (Faber & Mayer, 2009: 307), within Faber and Mayer’s redefined matrix of modern archetypes. From this perspective, both shows are explorations of the Other—in *Breaking Bad*, the character’s journey is a descent into enmity (Otherness), a play on the regular man-turned-monster myth, while in *Wednesday* the journey is reversed, a story of humanization, where the “monster” is turned into a regular person. It should be noted that the story of ascent is a feminine one, while the dramatic descent into Otherness features a male character. This note is supported by this study: the dichotomy “heroine woman vs. villain man” was mentioned in our survey by most Romanian teenagers (50.3%).

The survey results showed a high perceived emotional impact of serial dramas for Romanian teenagers (41.8%, above the 40.3% average), with a significant impact on self-esteem (34.6%). Romanian teenagers also consider that serial dramas have a positive impact on people’s attitudes and understanding of gender roles in society (58.5%, the highest among surveyed teenagers).

Family appears both as an underlying motive and motif (*Breaking Bad*), and as a support structure (*Wednesday*). In both shows, family provides a mirror image for characters to relate and adjust to. Albeit both instances provide traditional families and values, there are secondary characters and subplots with “non-traditional” families—in *Breaking Bad*, for instance, one of the (few) female criminals are divorced and is raising her daughter on her own, while in *Wednesday*, another (positive and somewhat naive) character has two mothers.

Chapter 8

Sex and Power. Gender-Based Violence and Toxic Masculinity in *Sex Education* and *Euphoria*

Maria Elena D'Amelio, Kim Toft Hansen, and Louise Brix Jacobsen

This chapter explores how two internationally acclaimed serial dramas, *Sex Education* (Netflix) and *Euphoria* (HBO), navigate and represent key gender issues such as gender-based violence (GBV), toxic masculinity, consent, and identity. Drawing from the GEMINI project's focus group data, which highlights both series as reference points for youth engagement with gender themes, the chapter approaches these texts through the lens of storytelling pedagogy (Landrum *et al.*, 2019). It examines how long-form serial television, with its layered characters and emotional arcs, can serve as an effective tool for media education, inviting nuanced reflection on gender, power, and identity.

Structured into four sections—(1) Theoretical and Methodological Framework; (2) *Sex Education*: Consent, Vulnerability, and Gender-Based Violence; (3) *Euphoria*: Toxic Masculinity, Trauma, and Visual Narrative Complexity; and (4) Pedagogical Reflections—the chapter uses close textual readings alongside media literacy theory and qualitative focus group data to demonstrate the potential of storytelling pedagogy in enhancing critical gender education.

1. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Central to the analysis is media literacy pedagogy (Buckingham, 2013, 2019), gender studies (Gill, 2007; Carter *et al.*, 2013; Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021), and serial narrative theory (Mittell, 2015). These lenses are employed to examine how extended narrative structures and stylistic elements in serialized drama invite nuanced engagements with gender identity, power, and violence.

The methodological approach combines close textual analysis—focusing on *mise-en-scène*, narrative arcs, and performance—with qualitative insights from the GEMINI focus groups. This mixed method allows the authors to explore both representational strategies and audience reception, highlighting how youth viewers interpret and emotionally respond to scenes involving GBV or expressions of toxic masculinity. The

chapter positions television serials as sites where viewers, particularly adolescents, navigate complex feelings around gender, identity, and social expectations.

2. *Sex Education*: Consent, Vulnerability, and Gender-Based Violence

Sex Education addresses gender and power dynamics through its diverse ensemble cast. Characters such as Otis, Eric, Maeve, and especially Aimee become conduits for exploring issues like consent, vulnerability, sexual trauma, and gender solidarity. The chapter provides an in-depth reading of the episode in which Aimee is assaulted on a bus and later finds solidarity in an all-girls detention session. This moment is read as a performative feminist intervention—where GBV is not only named but reframed as a collective awakening.

Narrative techniques such as interweaving story arcs and non-linear character development are analysed as pedagogical tools. For instance, the series' visual strategy—use of close-ups, colour palettes, and spatial intimacy—supports a pedagogy of empathy by fostering viewer identification. The use of humour and irony also plays a significant role in defusing tension while sustaining serious conversations around gendered experiences. The section argues that *Sex Education* cultivates a safe affective space where young audiences can reflect on their own perceptions of gender and power.

3. *Euphoria*: Toxic Masculinity, Trauma, and Visual Narrative Complexity

While *Sex Education* offers a relatively optimistic portrayal of gender issues within a supportive narrative framework, *Euphoria* presents a darker, more fragmented exploration. This section examines the characters of Nate Jacobs, Rue Bennett, and Jules Vaughn to reveal how gender identity and toxic masculinity are interwoven with trauma, repression, and power.

Nate's storyline is analysed as a critical portrayal of inherited and internalised patriarchal violence. His hyper-masculinity and emotional repression are read as symptomatic of a toxic lineage reinforced by his father's abusive behaviour. Meanwhile, Rue's journey through addiction, emotional instability, and gender ambivalence presents a chaotic but deeply human depiction of struggle and precarity. Jules, as a transfeminine character, brings visibility to queer experiences, but the chapter also questions the limitations of such representation—particularly how visibility intersects with vulnerability and voyeurism in the show's stylised visual economy. The series' visual style—marked by dream sequences, saturated colour palettes, and symbolic montage—creates an atmosphere of visual narrative complexity. This complexity deepens the audience's

engagement with gender issues, not by offering resolution but by immersing the viewer in affective and ambiguous experiences.

4. Teaching-based Reflections: Teaching Gender through Serial Drama

Media literacy scholarship and empirical data from the GEMINI project highlight the value of using serial drama as an educational tool in high school and university classrooms. The comparative reading of *Sex Education* and *Euphoria* demonstrates how different modes of storytelling can serve as complementary teaching tools. *Sex Education* lends itself to classroom discussions around consent and solidarity, while *Euphoria* opens up space for critical dialogues on masculinity, trauma, and systemic oppression.

Both shows are effective in fostering students' media literacy skills by encouraging them to interpret visual and narrative codes, question stereotypes, and articulate emotional responses to complex gender issues. The section also provides practical insights on lesson planning and discussion prompts, aligning the use of serial drama with curricular goals related to gender equality, empathy, and critical thinking.

In conclusion, serial dramas like *Sex Education* and *Euphoria* are powerful vehicles for teaching about gender-based violence, toxic masculinity, and identity. Their contrasting narrative styles offer complementary pathways for pedagogical storytelling. By enabling students to interpret emotional narratives, reflect on character arcs, and engage with stylistic choices, these series demonstrate the transformative potential of media education as a tool for critical gender education.

SECTION 3

Pedagogical approaches to teaching gender through serial drama

Chapter 9

Serial Drama as a Common Third.

Research-Action Approaches to Teaching Gender Issues and Media Literacy

Kim Toft Hansen, Massimiliano Coviello, Silvia Fanti, and Fabrizio Boldrini

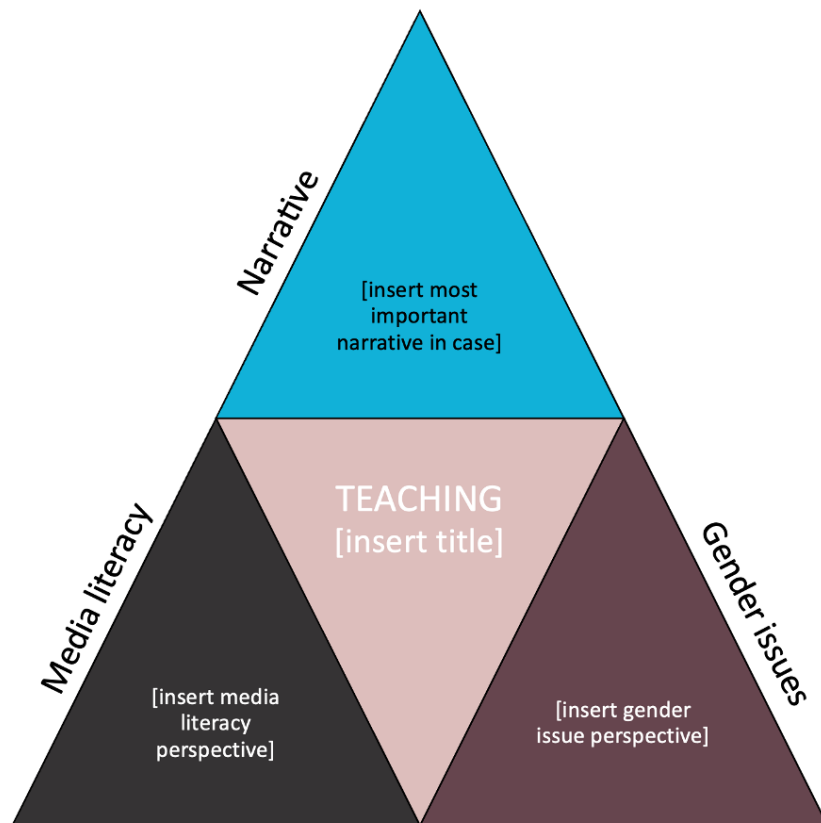
In an increasingly fragmented and media-saturated cultural environment, engaging students with complex social issues—particularly those surrounding gender—demands innovative pedagogical strategies. This chapter outlines a research-action approach that uses serial drama as a ‘common third’, enabling a safe and productive learning space for addressing gender issues and developing media literacy. Drawing from the GEMINI project, this chapter proposes a pedagogical framework grounded in the GMN Triangle—gender, media, and narrative—as a flexible, adaptable, and transnational model for classroom use.

1. Pedagogical Premise and Transnational Application

The chapter is rooted in the idea that media, particularly serialized narratives such as television drama, serve as a shared cultural artifact that may bridge personal experience and social discourse. The GMN Triangle (figure 1) enables teachers and students to explore gender representations in serial drama while also reflecting on the narrative mechanisms that shape them (Jacobsen & Hansen, 2025). Crucially, the approach has been tested, refined and adapted across diverse European teaching contexts, highlighting both the commonalities and differences in how gender is taught and understood transnationally.

These differences underscore the need for pedagogical models that are flexible enough to adapt to local values and curriculum demands, while offering a shared theoretical language across borders. For example, where Danish and Italian classrooms may be open to explicitly addressing queer identities in media, Irish and Romanian contexts might require more indirect strategies. As a very basic tool, the GMN Triangle accommodates both extremes by focusing on narrative structures and media forms rather than individual identity disclosure.

Figure 1: Visualisation of pedagogical tool “The GMN triangle” as proposed by Jacobsen & Hansen (2025).



2. From Gender Literacy to Media Literacy

At the heart of the contribution is the dual aim of developing gender literacy and media literacy, two overlapping but distinct educational goals. Gender literacy (Guzzetti, 2022; Guzzetti *et al.*, 2019) involves helping students understand gender as a socially constructed, performative concept influenced by culture, norms, and institutional structures. Media literacy (Buckingham, 2003; Fraser & Wardle, 2013), on the other hand, equips students with tools to critically analyse the media environments in which these gendered narratives circulate. Using serial drama as the focal point, students are invited to consider how characters, plots, and production choices construct gender norms, sometimes reinforcing them, other times subverting them. This pedagogical model empowers students to ask: Whose stories are being told? Who is excluded? What visual or narrative cues suggest power or marginality?

Through guided analysis of serial drama, students not only recognize stereotypical or binary representations but also learn to identify nuanced portrayals of gender fluidity, queerness, and intersectionality. In *The Pedagogy of Queer TV* (2019), Ava Laure

Parsemain underscores how popular television can serve as a vehicle for queer and feminist pedagogies without demanding personal disclosure from either teacher or student, leading to our approaches to serial drama as a common third.

3. Serial Drama as a “Common Third”

The idea of the “common third”, borrowed from Michael Husen (1996), serves as the theoretical linchpin of the pedagogical approach. In pedagogical settings, a common third is a neutral, shared object of focus that allows teachers and learners to explore emotionally charged or personal topics at a safe distance. In our case, serial drama becomes that common ground: it enables discussion of difficult gender issues without necessitating students’ personal exposure or confrontation.

Serial drama is particularly well-suited for this role due to its serialized nature: characters evolve over time, narratives are layered, and audience engagement is sustained. This allows students to develop a longitudinal understanding of character development and thematic complexity, ideal for unpacking evolving representations of gender. Moreover, serialized formats often include ensemble casts and multiple subplots, offering diverse entry points for analysis and character identification. Students can align themselves with different characters, interpret storylines in relation to their own experiences, and debate the implications of particular portrayals, all while maintaining the pedagogical buffer that the fictional world provides.

4. From Analysis to Creative Interventions

Finally, the pedagogical approach suggests a move from comprehension to creative work with the original material, offering a three-tiered strategy for teacher and student engagement where teachers first become acquainted with the GMN method. Teachers first become familiar with the GMN Triangle and GEMINI materials through professional development or training modules, which leads to teacher-led curation. Educators then use the GMN framework to identify relevant serial drama excerpts suited to their own classroom context, which could be scenes from various locally popular dramas.

Finally, the last step includes student-led creations: by educators, students are encouraged to record, re-edit or remix scenes, confront ways of producing, or produce their own narrative responses. This hands-on activity allows students to see themselves through creative work with common third objects, reflecting on the choices involved in portraying gender onscreen. This shift from passive consumption to active creation underscores the empowerment ethos of the GMN method. Rather than merely

interpreting media texts, students learn to challenge, reshape, and re-author them, gaining both critical insight and expressive agency.

5. Conclusion: Toward a Transnational Flexible Pedagogy

This pedagogical approach affirms the potential of the GMN Triangle and the use of serial drama as scalable, transnational tools for fostering gender and media literacy. By moving fluidly between theoretical discussion, textual analysis, and creative engagement, the method provides a multi-layered pedagogical approach adaptable to various educational contexts across Europe. While grounded in local realities, the approach aspires to create shared European pedagogical values—inclusion, dialogue, critical thinking, and creative agency—through a common medium that resonates with young people and beyond. Ultimately, serial drama becomes not just a teaching tool, but a platform for democratic learning and cultural negotiation, making abstract gender theories tangible and media systems comprehensible.

Chapter 10

Educational Tools Approaching Gender Issues in Serial Dramas. The Gemini E-Platform and the Piloting Experience

Massimiliano Coviello, Antonio Opromolla, Maria Rita Bracchini,
and Arianna Vergari

The GEMINI audience research (see Section 1), conducted in Denmark, Ireland, Italy, and Romania, examines how young adults engage with gender representations in serial dramas. Findings suggest that these narratives can positively influence understanding of gender-related issues in contemporary society. In recent years, streaming platforms have embraced cultural diversity on multiple fronts (Re, forthcoming): as a means of marketing and brand positioning; as a rhetorical device to promote glocal, multicultural storytelling; and as an inclusion strategy aimed at historically marginalized or underrepresented groups. However, these approaches also highlight the rise of “woke-washing”—the strategic use of diversity discourse for commercial advantage and soft power.

In this framework, the gender representation analyses carried out introduced key concepts for understanding the nuances of serial dramas distributed across Europe, focusing particularly on gender equality and youth perspectives. Furthermore, the integration of these series into the GMN Triangle educational model (see chapter 9) provides powerful narrative tools that can foster classroom discussions on prevalent gender topics.

Building upon and scaling up the research findings and pedagogical framework, the GEMINI e-platform is an educational toolkit for secondary school students and teachers, combining digital resources and creative writing and making them accessible and adaptable to transnational classroom contexts. This chapter discusses the steps leading to the platform design, the results from the pilot phase in Italy, Ireland, and Romania, and the effectiveness of such digital tools as part of research-action approaches to gender issues and serial dramas.

1. Digital and Interactive Tools Fostering Learning and Practice Community

Research on media education (Buckingham, 2019; Rivoltella, 2017) and studies on visual culture (Elkins, 2008; Previtali, 2021) converge in emphasizing the centrality of educational pathways that foster awareness and critical reflection on the content shaped and transmitted by media. Learning about, through and within/for the media means considering stylistics and modes of communication both as expressive forms for analyses and as creative tools, capable of enhancing individuals' imaginative capacities (Montani, 2022) and improving ways of living together.

Education about gender issues is certainly fundamental to addressing systemic inequalities and fostering a more inclusive society (Cersosimo & Landolfi, 2024). By empowering individuals with knowledge and tools to critically engage with gender representations, such education acts as a catalyst for social innovation, enabling cultural transformations that promote equity and collective well-being.

2. The GMN e-platform: design structure and implementation

The GMN e-platform is an interactive educational toolkit designed to foster the development of a learning and practice community (Foti & Bratitsis, 2025). It aims to enable in-depth exploration of gender-related issues through the lens of serial dramas, approaching creative writing, and ultimately engaging young adults to become ambassadors for gender equality in their everyday lives. At the heart of the contribution is the GMN e-platform, a toolkit designed in a modular and flexible way to realize a direct and interactive learning experience (GEMINI, 2024). Structured into three main units and an additional writing contest, the platform offers an adaptable organization to the curricular needs and is inspired by the principles of active learning (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). The first unit supports students and teachers to recognize gender stereotypes and detect how serial dramas deal with them. The second and third units address the content of serial dramas from the perspectives of production and writing. These two units aim to make secondary school students aware of the creative and organizational processes behind television content production. All these educational modules provide various materials, including video lessons and testimonies, case studies, materials for teachers, classroom exercises and self-assessment tests.

The most immersive and practical component of the platform is the collaborative screenwriting contest, where students put their learning into action by developing their story concept and making their pitch. The fourth unit provides an opportunity to apply the acquired skills through a guided creative writing process, starting from plots of

possible narratives and encouraging students to expand the narrative process, thereby engaging in a genuine writing experience related to the narration of gender stereotypes. The tools offered by the GEMINI e-platform allow an integration of gender-focused media education into teaching practices, promoting social innovation and fostering a more inclusive learning environment.

3. Transnational Piloting Experiences and GEMINI TV Drama European Contest

The GMN e-platform was piloted in schools and other educational institutes across Italy, Ireland, and Bulgaria, engaging both students and teachers to validate its effectiveness. The testing phase followed a structured implementation plan, beginning with theoretical sessions (units one to three) and progressing to practical application (unit four) through a European screenwriting contest.

Designed as a progressive learning experience, the contest guided students through different stages of collaborative writing. They began by analysing the proposed story concepts (logline), crafted by a professional screenwriter and inspired by the gender stereotypes explored in the first unit, discovering their core themes, and discussing potential narrative directions (main plot, key characters, and overarching themes).

The most promising scripts underwent further refinement for potential production or publication, adding an extra layer of motivation and real-world applicability to the experience. As a further incentive, the top five winning teams were given the opportunity to participate in an advanced workshop focused on the development of a teaser for their script.

Teachers highly appreciated the methodology's flexibility, which allowed adaptation to specific educational contexts while fostering students' critical thinking and creativity. The toolkit is grounded in a transnational logic, as its flexibility enables adaptation to the diverse social, cultural, and political contexts across different countries. For example, in August 2025 a Bulgarian law makes it illegal to "encourage" a "non-traditional sexual orientation" and a gender identity "other than biological". Despite constraints, Bulgarian students remained eager to explore social justice through creative storytelling and critical thinking using the GEMINI toolkit through a focus on broader themes like social activism and inequality.

Across the other countries, students appreciated different elements of the toolkit: Italians favoured storytelling, Irish liked more the writing phase. The associated positive feedback relates to experiences of student autonomy, valuable hands-on activities, and



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participatory approach while areas for improvement include concerns about negative media exposure, parental or institutional objections, rigid curricula and time constraints.

4. Conclusion: Opening New Potentialities of the GEMINI e-Platform

As the piloting phase has shown, the GEMINI e-platform is a powerful media educational tool capable of fostering young adults' engagement on gender issues, audiovisual creativity, hands-on learning, and critical thinking. By incorporating serial storytelling, it has effectively encouraged European students to explore gender identities through an interactive and dynamic approach. Through a participatory process and the showcasing of strong, diverse gender representations it fostered a more well-rounded understanding of gender-related topics and issues.

Furthermore, the flexibility and modularity of the platform structure are key elements that ensure its adaptability to different European contexts, encouraging the overcoming of institutional and legislative barriers. For all these reasons the GEMINI e-platform has the potential to be further exploited, and it can serve as a tool for experimenting with new styles and aesthetics of serial drama centred on cultural diversity and for developing new forms of inclusivity on a transnational level.

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