A Girls'-Eye View: Italian female adolescence and girlhood media representations

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Abstract: Over the last few years, production companies and streaming platforms in Italy have enriched their catalogues with films and TV series targeting adolescents, where the topoi of this age are addressed in order to build identification and engagement: conflict with parents, school, self-discovery in terms of identity and sexuality, body changes, friendship, love, rule breaking and so on.
In the plethora of adolescent-themed films and TV series, the experience of girlhood is narrated with its own specificity, and not necessarily within the frame of post-feminist girl power culture, but in more nuanced ways, representing all the issues and contradictions of being a girl.
In order to understand the degree of identification with such products, the *A Girls' Eye View* research project interviewed girls from ten different schools across Italy on themes such as media consumption, adolescence, body issues, and gender issues.
This article focuses on three main aspects of girlhood and how it is narrated by both interviewees and media products: parent-adolescent conflict, the relationship with one's own body especially once it enters the regime of heterosexist society, and mother-daughter relationships. What the research has discovered is that, even though streaming platforms and production companies have made significant effort in portraying relatable experiences of girlhood, some topics are addressed in ways that are very different from the responses of the girls interviewed. Nonetheless, the multiplication of girlhood narratives has led to a higher degree of appropriation, adaptation, and negotiation between media products and audience.
Keywords: Girlhood; adolescence; post-feminism; representation; body; mother-daughter relationship.

ESP A Girls' Eye View: adolescencia femenina italiana y representaciones mediáticas de la condición de niña (*girlhood*)

Resumen: En los últimos años, las compañías productoras y las plataformas de *streaming* en Italia han enriquecido sus catálogos con películas y series de televisión dirigidas a adolescentes, en las que se abordan las temáticas propias de esta etapa para generar identificación y participación: conflictos con sus padres y sus madres, la escuela, el autodescubrimiento en términos de identidad y sexualidad, cambios corporales, amistad, amor, ruptura de reglas, etc.
En la la amplia variedad de películas y series de televisión con temática adolescente, la experiencia de la niñez se narra con su propia especificidad, y no necesariamente dentro del marco de la cultura del poder femenino posfeminista, sino de formas más matizadas, que representan todos los problemas y contradicciones de ser una niña.
Para comprender el grado de identificación de dichos productos, el proyecto de investigación *A Girls' Eye View* entrevistó a niñas de diez escuelas diferentes en toda Italia sobre temas como el consumo de medios, sobre temas como el consumo de medios, la adolescencia, el cuerpo y las cuestiones de género.
Este artículo se centra en tres aspectos principales de la experiencia de ser niña (*girlhood*) y en cómo la narran tanto las entrevistadas como los productos mediáticos: la rebeldía, la relación con el cuerpo, especialmente cuando este entra en el régimen de la sociedad heterosexista, y las relaciones madre-hija. Lo que la investigación ha descubierto es que, si bien las plataformas de *streaming* y las compañías de producción han hecho un esfuerzo significativo por retratar experiencias cercanas de la niñez de las niñas, algunos

temas se abordan de maneras muy diferentes a las respuestas de las niñas entrevistadas. No obstante, la multiplicación de las narrativas sobre la *girlhood* ha llevado a un mayor grado de apropiación, adaptación y negociación entre los productos mediáticos y la audiencia.

Palabras clave: *Girlhood*; adolescencia, posfeminismo, representación, cuerpo, relación madre-hija.

1. Introduction: Girlhood on TV

As media and audience scholars, we are well aware that representations matter, and that representations are constantly proliferating, growing both in terms of quantity and quality, within the media system, giving space to a never-ending process of constructing, dismantling, or reinventing the definition of girlhood.

Girlhood representations are currently shaped by both traditional media and social media storytelling and narratives, and they are immediately incorporated into girls' minds through media consumption. This process of "double articulation" (Hall 1996) arises in both the media discourses that explicitly "interpellate" (in Althusser's sense) those female audiences and in their own social discourses that negotiate the multiple meanings of being a young woman nowadays.

In the last twenty years, television has gradually gained visibility (even within academic discourses) and has earned a different social status thanks to a high level of textual production, often defined as 'quality TV' due to its innovative content, high production values, casts increasingly borrowed from the world of cinema, and substantial endorsement by critics.

This quality popular television (Jancovich & Lyons 2003) depends on the presence of fandom phenomena (Jenkins 2006; Hills 2002, Scaglioni 2006) that legitimate the status of must-see TV, and more recently must-click tv (Gillan 2010). Scholars also refer to cult television, namely, those serial productions characterized by an active and participatory fandom and audience, which is engaged in creative practices and production around the media text (Gwenllian-Jones & Pearson 2004; Andò, Marinelli 2016).

The quality television series, therefore, has had the effect of reinforcing the idea of television as a cultural form and as a producer of the imaginary (Andò, Antonioni 2024), even in the case of the youngest generations who have had experienced what we may call a sort of "divorce" from the traditional TV screen (and broadcast television model) in favor of social media, but who are currently strongly attracted by the cult TV content introduced by the over the top television services (such as Netflix, Amazon Prime etc.) (Lotz 2014; Lobato 2019.

Moving back to the focus of this paper on teen female audiences, we have to consider that in such a frame everyday TV platforms provide adolescents with a huge library of targeted content that may be explored according to an "anywhere and anytime" model of consumption which perfectly suits adolescents' habits and expectations. Moreover, these platforms become highly recognizable brands that provide adolescents with "certified" content aligned with their tastes and expectations. Particularly focusing on teen television, thanks to this huge production of TV content dedicated to them, female teenagers may select and combine different kinds of representations of female role models, creating a sort of bricolage of personalities that is strongly consistent with the idea of an identity under construction: tentative, contradictory, but open, productive and definitely experimental.

In a sense we may say that the contemporary complexity of television content and protagonists (Mittell 2015) goes hand in hand with the complexity of female adolescent identity – that is even more under the microscope compared to the past – and the (TV) screen acts as a reflective surface of both teens' own image and those of current society depicted by TV-makers.

The aim of this paper – and of the research behind it – is to analyse how TV content provides girls with identity tools and symbolic materials, and how much the girls are aware of the constant process of identity negotiation that happens through and thanks to media content.

2. It's been a long journey. Becoming girls, becoming women

Actually contemporary TV shows question many crucial issues with respect to girlhood studies: at a general level they stress the representation of female adolescence within media culture and the multiple possibilities of appropriation open to young people as their personalities evolve; they also emphasize girl friendship as a post-feminist idea of sisterhood (Winch 2013) and offer a redefinition of the mother-daughter relationship as an opportunity to build girls' identities in continuity with, instead of separating from, other women (Irigaray 1985, 1991; Muraro 2018).

In many recent TV series based on female characters, the *fil rouge* is the idea of becoming. As Renold and Ringrose stated, it is now more correct to refer "the concept of 'becoming' to foreground the transitional space of young femininity as always in-movement, where transitions are experienced as multiple, liminal and reversible, rather than one progressive state to another" (2011, p. 392). This is true not only in the case of adolescents: this sense of becoming seems to be a constant feeling in women's lives, because of their precarious balance and the belated (and incomplete) recognition of their social role in contemporary society.

However, in order to understand this complex, variable and ongoing girls' work, we need to briefly analyze the media scenario where this process of becoming takes place using a longitudinal lens.

As a matter of fact the girls we are talking about constantly struggle to balance the girl-power that TV representation has circulated since the Nineties, the post-feminist claim of independence and "do it yourself identity", and the corresponding growing neoliberal individualism that is based on a progressive obsolescence of feminism as something that is taken for granted in the everyday life of the youngest generations (McRobbie 2009).

On the one hand, when we talk about girl power in relation to contemporary adolescents and young women, it is worth noting that our interviewees are part of that generation which has grown up with cartoons that were the first to feature new girl heroines as protagonists of children's TV, i.e. *The Powerpuff Girls* (1998-2005), *Kim Possible* (2002-2007), *My Life*

as a Teenage Robot (2003-2007) etc. As documented by Sarah Banet-Weiser in her analysis of Nickelodeon, the story of this TV network reveals its role as producer of girl power in more than one sense: first of all Nickelodeon implies girls as active audiences who are able to position themselves in a variety of relationships with the ideological structures and messages of the media. Secondly it empowers girls as a consumer group, not totally free from the commercial power of the media but in active relation with it. Finally it promotes girl power also in terms of investment in women as cultural producers: girls then not only consume content but produce content for themselves. In the experience of Nickelodeon the conceptual association between girl and power "become[s] normalized within the discourses of consumer culture. In the contemporary cultural climate, in other words, the empowerment of girls is now something that is more or less taken for granted by both children and parents, and has certainly been incorporated into commodity culture" (Banet Weiser 2004, pp. 119-120).

On the other hand, the idea of girlhood agency with respect to the process of identity-building seems coherent with the idea of post-feminist independence, while at the same time it seems not to be perceived in cultural continuity with the second wave of feminism. Analyzing social discourses produced by adolescents, their consciousness about female independence and self-confidence, in particular with respect to sexual relationships, are not necessarily (or explicitly) read as the historical consequences of past generations' agency in terms of collective political movements. What we see in media content and we hear from girls' discourses is a feminism taken for granted that provides the youngest generation with the freedom to experience contradictions, to make mistakes as a part of their life trajectory, and finally to evolve. That process allows the girl audiences to experience everything at the same time, strength and fragility, power and dependence, moral and immoral behaviours within girlhood representations, while appearing aware and conscious of themselves and of their position within society.

Not surprisingly, within contemporary TV shows contradictory characters often coexist; moreover, the same character may experience the coexistence of contradictory personalities within a plot that is diluted over many seasons (that mirrors the long path of the adolescent evolution too).

As we will address in the last part of this essay, for our interviewees girl power consists of the ability to deal with the challenges of everyday life, without depending on a stereotypical representation that depicts girls as good or bad. The characters are not one-dimensional and inflexible: rather they are genuine and convincing because of their ambivalence.

To overcome this contradiction, we have to consider that "these elements of empowerment—as a consumer group, as media visibility, and as cultural producers—are all part of girl power. The dynamics between these variations within the theme of empowerment are complicated, and represent significant tensions and even ambivalence within feminisms" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 126).

In other words, a self-centered attitude can be seen as a product of neoliberal capitalists' reinforcement of individualism; but it can also be read "as a feminist quality, a female expression of beauty for her own pleasure not the male's" (Bae 2011, p. 37).

The idea, then, that femininity has to play between the polarities of submissiveness and independence leads us to reflect on "feminism's renewed mattering to popular culture" (Keller & Ryan 2018, 1). And it puts into question the way girls are addressing this dichotomy in their everyday life, while negotiating their adolescence through sisterhood, mother-daughter relationship etc.

3. Methodology and Research Questions

The results that we are going to discuss in this essay are part of a wider research project, *A Girls' Eye View*, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) from 2021 to 2024.

In part the project aimed to enquire into the relationship between girls' representations within Italian teen media (mostly cinema and television) and the young audience's negotiation of female images and discourses that coalesce in building their identity in everyday life.

More specifically the research questions were:

– Q1. Investigating how girls in Italy build their identities: what are the models they are inspired by, what are the narratives of girlhood they bond with;
– Q2. Understanding the degree of correspondence between girlhood media representation and the actual experiences of girls in Italy, if the girlhood portrayed in films and TV series is somehow reflective of the actual experience of girlhood, if there are any discrepancies or points of suture;
– Q3. Which models of femininity are Italian girls most inspired by, nowadays, what are the emotions that stand out in the experiences of girlhood narrated in the media.

The project, that lasted three years, was divided in three distinct phases that employ different methodologies (Andò, Hipkins 2022):

– The first phase consisted of a series of individual qualitative interviews with girls between 14 and 19 years old, coopted in the research with the help of different schools across the country. After the individual interviews, that over time involved 81 girls from ten different schools[1], the girls were interviewed collectively through focus groups where they were invited to engage in a discussion concerning

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[1]   The girls involved in the project were recruited with the help of their teachers, to whom we extend our heartfelt thanks, on a voluntary basis and by means of an authorization signed by parents or legal guardians, and are divided as follows: 22 girls from Inzago (Lombardy), 6 girls from Trieste (Friuli Venezia-Giulia), 4 girls from Ventimiglia (Liguria), 8 girls from Teramo (Abruzzo), 5 girls from Teramo (Latium), 15 girls from Rome (Latium), 9 girls from Siderno (Calabria), 3 girls from Reggio Calabria (Calabria), 9 girls from Sant'Agata di Militello (Sicily). The schools involved were chosen paying attention to diversification according to the North-South and Center-Province parameters. As for their age, 3 girls are 14 years old, 11 girls are 15 years old, 18 girls are 16 years old, 26 girls are 17 years old, 22 girls are 18 years old, 3 girls are 19 years old, one girl is 21 years old.

scenes from different Italian films and TV series we screened.

– For the second phase, we wanted to engage the girls in a more active and creative way, asking them to work in groups for the production of a video essay responding to a film or TV show based on female adolescent characters (Andò, Hipkins 2025).

The third and final part was intended to emphasize the active participation of the girls, enabling them to become qualitative researchers themselves. In order for the project to acquire a historical dimension, it was important to investigate how different generations of women thought about their adolescence, so we elaborated a questionnaire the girls could use as the base for an oral history interview with their mothers, grandmothers, older sisters, aunts, female teachers, that could constitute a moment of bonding, a chance for girls to experiment with qualitative research and interviewing, and a further means for us to collect sources of oral history. Along with it, we asked the girls to encourage their interviewees to talk about a significant object of their adolescence, and to photograph it in order to build a digital archive on girlhood culture in Italy.

The interviews we conducted, and the interviews the girls conducted with their interviewees, aimed at investigating two different aspect of being a girl in the contemporary mediascape. On the one side, we wanted to investigate media consumption in the broadest sense: their relationship with mass media and social media and the impact on teenagers' lives (Drusian, Magaudda, Scarcelli 2019), everyday life routines and habits, media representations of girlhood (Hipkins 2016; Antonioni & Checcaglini 2025), and a comparison between cinema and TV content produced in Italy and abroad. Over the last few years, many streaming platforms and company productions in Italy have created content specifically targeted for teenagers, that narrate adolescence in its multiple forms and in many different social contexts: these products address topics typical of contemporary adolescence such as slut shaming and catcalling, body issues and eating disorders, conflict with parents and adults, digital intimacy, gender identity, sexual orientation, and sexuality in general. Some of these products have met with great enthusiasm among Italian teenagers: this is especially the case for *Skam Italia* (2018-present), the Italian version of the well renowned Norwegian webseries, and *Mare fuori* (2020-present), a TV series produced by Rai focused on the life of teenagers and young adults into the Nisida youth detention centre.

On the other side, it was important to collect data on girls' definition of adolescence, gender, mother-daughter relationships, sisterhood, and their body image.

For the purpose of this essay we decided to focus on i) the definition of adolescence, as both an abstract imagined concept and a real-life ongoing experience; ii) the body changing in terms of physicality, and the development of female features that in adolescence enter the regime of heterosexual desire; iii) the relationship with their mothers.

4. Defining adolescence through gender and body

In common sense, adolescence has always been defined as a moment of transition, of becoming, very often connected with the experience of conflict.

The first shared definition of adolescence that emerges from the interviews is the idea of a playground, a space and time where teens are continuously testing their emerging identities.

"Adolescence for me is an age of change, one goes through different situations in life that maybe, when you're a child, you tend not to consider. That's the age that shapes you, that you need for when you'll be an adult. In my opinion, based on that, it's very important. Based on that, you become the person you'll be" (A_17_18)[2].

In this sense adolescence is mostly narrated, in a variety of expressions, as a time of change and evolution. Some of them tend to define adolescence in very generic (and quite conventional) ways: a period of rule-breaking, of passage between childhood and adulthood, of experimentation, incomprehension, confusion, of highs and lows; some others get more complex, and almost poetic, in defining it as a time of "throwing oneself in another world" (A_2_16), "an explosion of emotions" (D_4_15), "a testing ground" (B_6_17) and also "a meteorological phenomenon: one day it's sunny, the next day there's bad weather." (C_4_16).

It was especially interesting to discover that the interviewees seemed to empathize a lot with films and tv series that depict adolescence as a multilayered and everchanging experience. Many of them mentioned *Skam Italia* as a narrative that encompasses their own experience as teenagers, all the highs and lows, their daily lives: "I liked *Skam* a lot, because every season represents, I mean, tells a problem that is present in everyone's adolescence. So, for example, in the first one there's the use of drugs, the second one was about first love, the third one was about gay love, and the fourth one about religion. And they are all very contemporary issues, that are present in my life, in the lives of my girlfriends, of my sisters (A_4_18); "*Skam* is like a diary, not written, but filmed" (A_6_18); "*Skam* is a reality that belongs to all teenagers, right? I mean, it shows friendships, schools, it's like a recording of my day, my days altogether, the parties" (F_5_16).

Many interviewees highlighted the exquisitely emotional quality of adolescence, defining it as a time of first experiences: "first love, first pain, friendships, clubs" (I_5_17), "new experiences and first love" (A_20_18). The focus on love and emotionality, as well as the need for freedom and the general lightness of Italian adolescence was brought up by second generation migrant students too, especially in comparison with the experience of adolescence in their homelands. In one case (A_18_17), the recounting of adolescence is split between Italy and Albania, and

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[2] In order to protect the interviewees' anonymity, each interview has been coded in the following way: the letter corresponds to a city (A - Inzago [Milan], B - Trieste, C - Ventimiglia [Imperia], D - Atri [Teramo], E - Tivoli [Rome], F - Rome, G - Siderno [Reggio Calabria], H - Reggio Calabria, I - Sant'Agata di Militello [Messina]); the first number of the code differentiates each girl, while the second number refers to her age.

compared on the themes of love and freedom: in Albania, teenagers do not necessarily emphasize such things, while in Italy they are solid staples of adolescence. In another case, cultural differences are underlined through clothing (a topic that will be addressed later): "going out with the veil here [in Italy] it's a bit difficult. [...] The stares, sideways glances, so, maybe it's a bit annoying, while when I'm in Morocco I wear long dresses, I'm relaxed, I wear pajamas for example, I don't have to worry about how I'm dressed there [...] Yes, it's how they look at you perhaps. You can't tell if it's out of curiosity or they look at you maybe with, let's say, a mean face. So you never know what people think" (A_13_21).

As we mentioned, adolescence is very often spoken of, represented and experienced as a terrain of conflict. There is an extended literature (mostly pedagogical and psychological) that deals with the themes of adolescence and conflict with parents, and focuses on conflict management and resolution, the issues adolescents and their parents argue about, the intensity of conflict according to age, gender and closeness with parents, family dynamics and affective economy (Deković 1999; Kim 2006; Branje et al. 2009). Moreover, the emergence of conflicts during teenage years is one of the most preferred topics in films and tv series as well, as demonstrated by films on girlhood such as *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) and *Lady Bird* (2007), *Come te nessuno mai* (1999) *Caterina va in città* (2003), *Cosmonauta* (2009), *Genitori & figli – Agitare bene prima dell'uso* (2010), as well as in TV shows like *Skins* (2007-2013), *This Is Us* (2016-2022), *Euphoria* (2019-present), *Sex Education* (2019-present), *Padri & Figli* (2005) *L'amica geniale* (2018-present), *Baby* (2018-2020), and in general in coming of age novels (Ferrante 2011; Ciabatti 2017; Caminito 2021; Campofreda 2023).

However, in the interviews, adolescence is not necessarily addressed as a part of life characterized by conflict with parents, and conflict with parents and adults is not necessarily explicitly addressed in the films and TV series mentioned by the interviewees.

A few of the girls interviewed mentioned adolescence as a time of conflict, but not in explicitly conflictual terms: "They can't fully understand" (G_13_18); "One feels a bit let's say, not completely understood, especially by family, so one starts to have maybe more serious arguments" (A_4_18).

If anything, adolescence becomes a terrain of conflict in terms of gender differences, as they are built and acted out not by the girls, but by parents in their relationship with their kids: "I think females have more fights with their parents, let's say, I mean, they're a bit more controlled by parents... compared to boys who are a bit more stubborn sometimes, but it also depends on the type of person so I don't know" (F_2_16). In this case, the source of conflict is located in gender differences, something that has been discussed in different ways by a lot of girls especially concerning the distribution of domestic labor and differences in upbringing between girls and boys in the same household.

Girls are well aware that the distribution of domestic work is unbalanced between girls and boys, that boys are not taught to be responsible for the household as much as girls are: "They often tell you that you also need to, I don't know, do the laundry. But they don't tell my [male] friend to do the laundry" (A_5_18); "Maybe I don't know, some mothers ask their daughters to clean the dishes, to clear the table, but not because it's about helping the parents to manage at home, but because they're female, and maybe if they have a smaller or bigger brother they don't make them do it because they're men" (F_7_16).

This consideration leads us to address the gender issue, from a double perspective: firstly, we were interested in investigating how the participants perceived themselves as girls in terms of social injustice related to gender issues; secondly, we intended to understand their perception of society from a gendered perspective. In this way we can frame the impact of films and TV series in terms of representation of diversity as well as to investigate how they impacted on the girls' perspective of themselves as girls. The results have been very complex to analyze, especially because the topic of gender, particularly in adolescence, always intersects with the themes of body and more specifically with beauty standards, as well as with peer pressure generated by social media.

A significant proof of the cultural work done by TV series, films, and social media in general, in terms of gender awareness and diversity, is given by the consideration that girls strongly believe in gender equality. Many of the interviewees follow feminist social media pages that address women's and gender issues in all sorts of fields, and tend to share information on such topics with their girlfriends. Moreover, gender issues such violence against girls and women, slut shaming, and sexual harassment are increasingly represented in films and TV series in Italy and abroad (*Euphoria*, *Baby*, *L'amica geniale*), and girls are depicted as strong enough to face these issues within the safety net of sisterhood. However, the topic of feminism is addressed in more nuanced ways: "For me there's absolutely no difference between male or female. Some think that feminism is that girls, that women in general are better than men but that's not feminism, that's absolutely equality" (G_1_17); "For example the idea that every girl has to be a feminist, let's say. Or the idea that girls must defend girls. [...] I prefer to say that I'm a paritarist [paritarista], equalist [egualitarista], because I don't proceed from the assumption that women can do everything that men do, I proceed from the assumption that every individual can do one way or the other everything that everybody else does independently of sex, age, skin color or anything else. I don't like to generalize and confine myself to what is man or woman" (G_7_16); "I'm so honored to be a part of this gender. Additionally, I'm a big feminist" (G_9_18). However, the conviction regarding gender equality interferes with the reality of gender issues: a lot of girls, in different ways, perceive differences in how they are treated as females, especially the ones who have brothers, close male relatives, or boyfriends.

In this sense, many of the interviewees' responses concerning gender differences resonate with Erving Goffman's "The Arrangement Between The Sexes" (1977), especially when it comes to the issues of domestic labour and body sexualization in the public sphere, exemplified the numerous episodes of catcalling and sexual harassment narrated. Following Goffman, it seems that girlhood, in the experiences narrated by the interviewees, is the quintessential

age where girls learn the structure and rules of heterosexist society, despite the general sensitivity on gender issues having been enhanced by media narratives.

Moreover, a big difference emerges when it comes to sexualization of the body, which is partially connected with girls' representations in the media and results in a sexualized adult male gaze. As R. Danielle Egan has suggested, sexualization is not so much a problem per se as its discursive effect on girls' lives (2013). Many academics and researchers "have argued that some early adolescent girls are likely to internalize the notion that being sexually attractive is an important aspect of their identity and, as a consequence, experience negative outcomes in a number of domains (e.g. self-esteem, academic outcomes, peer relations)" (McKenney & Bigler 2014, 172).

Almost the totality of the girls interviewed feel scared, insecure, and anxious in the public sphere, describing multiple cases of catcalling, which is exactly the opposite of the process of girls' self-sexualization emphasized by media: "You don't know what's behind that look, but also from men of any age. In fact it happened to me many times on the subway that … maybe I was relaxed, I was minding my own business, like normally and maybe it happens to me that a man in front of me, also older than me, starts staring at me. Or I move on purpose because I didn't want to be stared at and immediately that man starts looking for you maybe and let's say that there's always a bit of fear"; "That I was going home back from the beach and a man started whistling at me from his car but I pretended nothing happened (I_2_15). But it was something that never happened to me before so I got a bit… scared"; "It happened once that a man that must have been fifty years old, more or less, in his car, I was with my girlfriends and he was taking pictures of us saying 'That's a nice picture'" (D_8_15).

A premise on the Italian context here is needed, as many of the gender issues that girls and women face today can be easily read within the cultural framework of "velinism" (Hipkins 2011), particularly related to Berlusconi's business and media ventures in private television and the exploitation of the sexual archetype of female adolescence, where sexual objectification, catcalling and sexual harassment were spectacularized and very often legitimized.

The tangible perception of these issues, and what it means to feel constantly subjected to the male gaze brings the girls to narrate themselves as more sensitive, but also more aware and responsible, than boys. Moreover, the fear of being harassed in the public sphere causes a more tense relationship with fashion and clothing. Fashion is an essential aspect of one's own adolescence: it helps experiment with identity and in constructing one's own personality (Marion & Nairn 2011, Lincoln 2013, Blanchard-Emmerson 2022), but the very idea of receiving unsolicited and unsettling attention from men because of the way a girl is dressed, often makes them tone down their fashion choices: "I see many times, maybe I'm wearing a sweatshirt and a pair of trousers and they honk at me. In my opinion it's so wrong. […] I should be free to wear what I want" (A_2_16); "Also on the street simply, it happens that maybe they whistle and honk at you, anyway you feel bad, but you say,

oh well that's a habit, but it's bad even thinking that if you're dressed in a certain way, you might expect something like this; so, also bad to think it's a habit that happens every day. I think something like that would never happen to a man" (A_6_18). "You're a bit more in danger if you dress a bit more low-necked, with shorts or miniskirts, something that apparently, as a girl, you would say that's fine, there's nothing wrong. But it could be a reason for harassment from other people" (F_15_16).

5. Mother and daughter stuff. From separation to continuity

A crucial aspect that emerges from the research is the way the girls interpreted the mother-daughter relationship. As mentioned before (see the methodology) we asked the girls to reflect on both media representation of the girlhood and on their own idea and experience of growing up as a girl. Within this frame we asked them to answer about adult female figures that count in their life, and as a matter of fact most of the girls immediately mentioned their mother together with friends. If the answer was not surprising per se, what really impressed us were the words and discourse used by the girls to describe their mothers.

Mothers are mostly depicted by the girls as someone who is always present, "always beside me", someone to confide in, someone to be admired for her ability to manage a life in constant balance between work and family. They are portrayed as strong, courageous women, aspirational figures who have chosen resilience and versatility to manage an increasingly complex life: "My mum is very strong, in my opinion. And brave, let's say, empathetic, kind, cheerful" (F_13_17); "She can turn her hand to anything […] to say she's a smart woman because she has had some highs and lows as a person. But she's always been strong and never burdened me with her problems she's always stayed silent sometimes I would see her a bit off. But she didn't, she'd reassure me because obviously I think every mother would want this for their child" (I_8_17).

Several considerations have emerged from these premises: first of all the question of the absence of conflict and contraposition with parents (see above), and specifically with the mothers; or in any case the erasure of conflict within the hierarchy of feelings and thought that define the mother-daughter relationship.

This almost total absence of a mother-daughter conflict in girls' discourses could be read as the projection of new models of mother-daughter relationship that already went through a series of media representations since the '90s. This shift has involved the mothers (who were daughters at that time) and successively the girls who are daughters nowadays and it is still ongoing in the continuous exchange of reciprocal references about the definition of the relationship itself. In this rearticulation of the mother-daughter relationship, media representations and especially television have probably played a crucial role.

Within media representations the relationship between mother and daughter was very often problematized and we can select three important turning points that we consider could have had an effect in

rewriting the relationship as an affective alliance as proposed by the girls.

The first turning point was the rise of the "Responsible daughtering" (Alford & Harrigan 2019) where mothers were represented as both demanding a close relationship with her daughter and as sexually awakened (*Terms of Endearment* [1983]; *Mermaids* [1990]).

The second turning point was the shift introduced by *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2016) in the 2000s. The show's main characters are thirty-two-year-old Lorelai Gilmore and her sixteen year-old daughter Rory (Lorelai, as named after her mother). Over six seasons (and a recent TV sequel) they are both engaged in navigating the world of adulthood as an accomplished pair, who share thoughts, feelings, emotions, fears, and expectations.

Finally the third turning point is the one introduced by *Lady Bird* (2017), where we can observe a feminist recalibration within which maternal love is depicted with a necessary brutality, and is far from idealized. Sometimes it could even be perceived as passive aggressive and abusive because of a lack of communication about emotions. However, the mother fosters in her daughter the grit and resolve required to exist in the world, a strength she vividly inhabits.

Even if from a textual analysis of the media content mentioned by the girls (see *Baby*, *Skam Italia*, *Summertime* [2020-2022] or even *Mare fuori*) parents emerged as almost entirely invisible or marginal, or even unstable and destabilizing[3], the emphasis of the girls on their affective liaison with their mothers dramatically resonates with a model that media have contributed to building.

To understand this model and the revolutionary elements it introduced – not focusing here on the criticisms devoted to it, for example to the lack of intersectionality in the social representations and other elements of superficiality - it is necessary to dwell on the fact that for the first time in a continuous way (several episodes) the mother-daughter relationship was staged as a constant and developing dialogue, capable of absorbing the generational repercussions and the confrontation between the second and third waves of feminism.

Until the 2000s, the mother-daughter relationship was defined by society and reinforced within the media in terms of separation; media representations have built absent mothers, incapable of feeling and empathy (*Mommie dearest* [1981], *Postcards from the Edge* [1990]), unhappy, unable to reconcile motherhood with their own professional affirmation, very often frustrated and violent towards their daughters (*Family Life* [1971], *Anywhere but Here* [1999], A nuanced version of this model is the one of "unacceptable" mothers, unhealthy mothers who were stigmatized due to their embarrassing behaviors; who are definitely unable to adapt to social norms and therefore rejected by patriarchal society (*La prima cosa bella* [2010], *L'immensità* [2022]). Finally, the sexualized independent mother who emerged from cult movies like *Terms of Endearment* (1983) and *Mermaids* (1990).

For many decades, then, film, print and television representations worked on mother/daughter separation and particularly on the daughter's need to separate from the mother in order to enter the world of adulthood. Indeed, as Kathleen Rowe Karlyn has argued, postfeminist cinema often reinscribed a vision of "Girl World" as "daddy-identified, a bittersweet recognition that outside it's still a man's world" (Rowe Karlyn 2011, 98).

However, in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) Chodorow argues that for girls (different than boys who differentiate a gender identity that is not female) gender identity is built on unity and continuity, not in separation. In other words, a girl's identity is formed not in opposition to her first object love (mother), but in continuity with it.

In this sense among the three turning points we mentioned, *Gilmore Girls* represents the most extraordinary opportunity to explore this continuity as it emerged from the interviews. Both Lorelai and Rory incarnate the ideals of post-feminist girl power culture: Lorelai is the single mother who raised her daughter on her own, refusing to be an authoritative figure and preferring a mother-daughter relationship model focused on equality and honesty; Rory is the ambitious "girlculture" daughter who is very much looking forward to pursuing the education that suits her aspirations the most.

These representations seem to resonate in the interviewees' discourses. As one of them states "My mom is always close to me, I tell her everything. When I come from school, I tell her things that some girls tend not to say to their parents because they're ashamed, and I tell her everything because she often gives me advice when there are some discussions et cetera" (F_9_14).

Even if Gilmore Girls was rarely mentioned during the interviews, we may suppose that thanks to OTT libraries and the sequel produced by Netflix in 2016, this portrait of mother-daughter connectiveness and mutuality is part of the collective imagery.

What we found here is a kind of new and active girl-culture that is stressing the importance of talking through feelings and emotions.

During the interviews separation was never cited by the girls as a moment to go through in order to gain independence, as in the psychoanalytic frame. Even if we found many references to patriarchal culture in the interviewees' discourses, no one mentioned directly or indirectly, the perception of one's own independence as inevitably based on the symbolic matricide, on the separation of the daughter from the mother, which definitely means for women to align themselves with the symbolic order of the father.

"Where I live, like at home too I see that my mother, that really my mother and my grandmother had a lot of courage. My grandmother because she had a lot of courage in raising four daughters not far from each other and with an absent husband because he did... he worked, he always worked far from home so it takes courage. My mother has always had a lot of courage in raising two daughters with a husband that worked all the time. [...] And because raising two dau-

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3   One exception worth mentioning is the relationship between Sana and her mother in the fourth season of *Skam Italia*, characterized by complicity and openness. However, in this case, the mother figure serves especially as a cultural and religious mediator for the protagonist, who is an Italian second generation Muslim girl in constant struggle with her double identity.

ghters… daughters always resent their mothers. At least I've noticed this, because being the only ones, me and my sister are the only girls because the other ones are all male cousins. So I see boys that have a beautiful relationship with the mother. Us girls instead from eight or ten years of age already we start being mad at our mothers for anything. So it takes courage in raising a daughter" (G_3_18).

Let us consider Muraro's reflection in *The Symbolic Order of the Mother* (2018) about a culture in which the mother's love is not taught to women. Within the same culture we may see the mother/daughter relationship reduced to jealousies and resentments.

If we want to assume that girls in the Generation Z can count on a taken for granted feminism then we can find the trace of this shift in the focus put by the interviewees on both friendship, and on the mother-daughter relationship. The film *18 regali* (2020), based on the true story of Elisa Girotto and her daughter Anna, and the appreciation it received from more than half of the interviewees demonstrates girls' crave for deep and nuanced representations of the mother-daughter relationship.

Attention to friendships and mother-daughter relationships can be considered as a new paradigm through which to rethink the relationships between women, including those between teachers and pupils that we have been able to observe in our experience in schools: "My mother but I would also say my Italian teacher. I think my teacher is a very strong woman that really deserves a lot. I really love her" (C_2_18).

The recovery of a female genealogy that emerged so powerfully from the first phase of our project and which will be accounted for in the last part of the research, which is dedicated to the collection of adult women's oral histories about their own adolescence, therefore appears decisive: "My mother and my two grandmothers because they're my biggest love, I love them too much and my cousin as well… My cousin [matters] a lot, she's basically my best friend. We talk about everything even though she's bigger than me because she's twenty-three, so she's bigger but I see her as a guide and… and that's all, they are the main figures of my life" (F_12_16).

When asked to describe their mother through adjectives, girls clearly attempted to solicit the woman in the mother. Following Irigaray, looking for women in the mothers means giving value to a process of knowledge, which is based on "getting out of roles" and in which the relationships established with other women and the relationship with the mother become bipolar and destructive terms of the social order.

"She's really my guide that I see, I want to be like this person, it's my mother because I mean, me and mum are very much alike in our personalities and I would really like to become like she's become because she has grown strong, she's beautiful and I hope to become like her" (D_8_15).

Tracing the originality of the female path allows the woman to become an autonomous subject, because only through the relationship with the mother, can the woman affirm her own specificity and difference.

6. Conclusion

Over the last few years production companies and streaming platforms have made an effort to represent adolescence, and girlhood more specifically, through films and TV series in Italy, trying to depict the very multifaceted experience of girlhood. Despite adolescence being narrated as a time of enhanced generational conflict, the interviewees have defined it in a multiplicity of ways that do not necessarily highlight the need to distance themselves from their families in search for their identity. On the contrary, a lot of the girls interviewed deemed their mothers and other women in their families and social circles as examples to follow and cherish in order to build their own identities. It is almost as if the positive 1990s/2000s narratives on mother-daughter relationships have affected girls without them necessarily having been consciously exposed to those products. In this sense, mothers in contemporary films and TV series, as we have mentioned, are often distant or absent, frivolous, childish, while their daughters are represented as realistic and disenchanted.

Nonetheless, the role that films and TV series, and social media as well, in raising both a personal and social conscience concerning gender issues, is undeniable.

Moreover, as demonstrated by the interviewees, the multiplication of girlhood media representations brings a higher possibility of appropriation, adaptation, and negotiation. Ultimately, as shown by the general acclaim for *Skam Italia* and *Mare fuori*, the most appreciated products are the ones where identification happens immediately, where girls are able to recognize their own experiences, whether this identification happens objectively or emotionally. The fact that identity narratives and media narratives proceed simultaneously demonstrates the capacity of streaming platforms and networks to respond to a need for representation, as audiences continue negotiating their identities having media as intermedial landscapes, where media storytelling and girlhood narratives collide.

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