

FRAMING DIVERSITY IN TEEN DRAMA

Streaming series as a case study for social and discursive constructions

MARIANNA LYA ZUMMO
UNIVERSITY OF PALERMO

Abstract – Concepts of inclusivity and diversity are socially and discursively constructed through a variety of contexts, including televisual/streaming series. Undoubtedly, televisual/streaming products strongly impact how individuals (especially younger generations; Bednarek 2017; Trudgill 1986) are exposed to and have experience with construed situations, since they broaden the range of different positions in contexts. In fact, certain themes are problematized in dramas and are successively negotiated in dialogues, favoring different viewpoints and attitudes. In ongoing screen interactions, therefore, the audience participates in the enactment and alignment of meanings that challenge the different representations of reality (Bednarek 2018; Dewulf, Bouwen 2012). In the context of the socio-political input that favours inclusivity, this paper investigates the type of diversity that is framed and in what way it is negotiated within fictional interactions in teen drama. The analytical tools of Critical Discourse Studies are combined with the interaction-oriented ones to investigate the discursive strategies of identity constructions in interaction (Stamou 2018). Exchanges from three American teen dramas, representing the audiovisual experience that would best fit the age group of adolescents, are investigated to explore fictionalization within and throughout dialogues, and to study how specific identities are constructed (as in normalized/accepted/rejected), and what discourses are drawn for these constructions. Results show that some differences in how specific (stereotypical) identities are treated occur and that certain exchanges in dialogues strategically sustain, support or reject particular messages about diversity to frame “group identity” meanings.

Keywords: Teen drama; inclusivity; age(ism); interaction; diversity.

1. Introduction

Seriality is a significant phenomenon involving audiovisual narratives that address issues of engagement, intertextuality, authorship and cultural legitimacy, as well as remakes, adaptations, sequels and reboots (Hudelet, Crémieux 2021). The new wave of serial production is determined by various features, namely changes in the narrative formulas, a more focused attention on the audience’s expectations, franchise, and a general understanding of onscreen products as a multimodal experience conveying meanings (Innocenti, Pescatore 2014). Moreover, changes in society challenge authors and scriptwriters when setting new narrative boundaries.

TV dramas, among other things, create practices of acceptance and inclusivity; as a matter of fact, they have a profound impact on the way individuals (e.g. teenagers) are exposed to and have experience of (construed) situations since they participate in the enactment (and sometimes the alignment) of meanings and values. Along with the psychological and cultural impact of these onscreen products, TV productions can reach a wide audience on a transnational level, given that these are often international products. As such, studies on TV/streaming entertainment have attracted the attention of many scholars, including those interested in the linguistic aspects as applied linguists inquiring into language issues (e.g. in class, Bruti 2015; or for the specialized use of English,

Vignozzi 2020), and also those engaged in the media-mediated representation of culture(s) (Piazza 2020) and cultural aspects (Bednarek 2018). Although still limited to a few studies, a growing number of TV series analyses are currently emerging and gaining their own status in the many areas of linguistic research. A new impetus for such interest was probably due to the rise of online streaming platforms which, compared to broadcast television, have given more attention to certain representations, in particular to the LGBTQI community. In fact, similarly to cable networks, these platforms rely less on advertisers (i.e. they are less afraid of alienating them) and more on subscribers. As Cook (2018) noted, this means that platforms can target (also) niche audiences, without being subjected to the regulations that broadcast shows need to conform to, which allows more freedom in representing diversity.

In regard to the audience, “quality demographics has been going on for decades” (Birchall 2004, p. 177). Adolescents have gained prominence as a distinct consumer category in the second half of the twentieth century, when the culture industries have directly addressed them. Therefore, it is not surprising that the televisual industry has heightened their interest in targeting teen audiences. It should be noted that although there is not a common agreement on what age represents the teen community, as the group involving tweens (8- to 12-year-olds; Tagliamonte 2018), or teenagers (13- to 19-year-olds), in this paper, adolescent audience is explicitly referring to the group whose life stage involves a biological, cognitive, social, or emotional development, which places the youth group as distinct from adult culture (Eckert 1988, 2003).

There is extensive literature on TV series, involving different approaches and points of view. Research has highlighted how in teen dramas, topics are related to teenagers and their representations, i.e., their struggle for autonomy (Davis, Dickinson 2004), friendship (Baxter 2012), romance (Birchall 2004) and self-discovery (including sexuality, Berridge 2012), and generally perpetuating sexist ideologies. Studies dealing with the representation of diversity have pointed out how queer sexuality has been represented as an “issue” to be discussed, which perpetuates a sense of otherness. The teen serial, Dawson’s Creek, for example, is one among the earliest shows in which one character openly questions his sexuality (Baxter 2012), and is claimed to be the leading one to offer the first gay kiss on screen, but despite the general acceptance, queer identities have been problematized during the entire TV season (Cook 2018). As such, a closer attention to the practices that the cultural and creative industries place in the representation of diversity may explore the widespread inequality, exclusion and discrimination of individuals due to their ethnicity, race, gender identity, age, dis/ability, to mention a few. The notion of diversity is often influenced by socio-political settings, therefore in the last decades and in western countries it has been framed within the dominant ideology of inclusion, with an emphasis on gender and sexual orientations. In this paper, diversity is understood as difference in power relations and power balance on the basis of categorizations of otherness (i.e. what is “other-than-groups’ category” and how it is reshaped), and leading to exclusion.

Although the onscreen texts seem now to be shaped to cover issues of inclusivity, this article questions the possibility that some forms of diversity (i.e. genderism and ageism) are still treated in an exclusive way, given that identity construction often relies on the pair relation of adequation-distinction (Stamou 2018). Therefore, from a linguistic perspective, dialogues should be investigated to see how identities, in particular “diverse” identities, are negotiated in the interaction. The aim of this paper is to analyze the type of diversity which is still employed in onscreen products that construct identity and in what way it is negotiated in the interaction. Accordingly, the genre chosen for this study is teen

drama because of the sense of belonging, which is particularly important during certain stages of life.

The article presents the general background and the theoretical framework adopted to analyze the data, which are presented in section 2 and 3, along with the method. Section 4 discusses and reports on the findings. The closing remarks reflect upon the implications the study has in revealing the typology of diversity in teen seriality.

2. Aims and Theoretical framework

2.1. Diversity in on-screen products

Concepts of inclusivity and diversity are socially and discursively constructed through a variety of contexts, including televisual/streaming series. It is known that their availability and diffusion influence social meanings, for instance language ideologies (Eckert 2008), a sense of belonging to attractive groups (Tagliamonte 2018), and psychological engagement with particular characters (Bednarek 2017; Trudgill 1986). Considering the availability of screen entertainment and its accessibility in terms of space, time and means, watching TV serials has become a common daily recreational activity, especially for a young audience. Undoubtedly, televisual/streaming products, integrating verbal and audiovisual messages, have a strong impact on the way adolescents are exposed to and have experience of construed situations. This is due to the fact that these products broaden the range of different positions in contexts, in particular those concerning specific themes that are problematized in teen dramas and negotiated in dialogues, thus favoring differences in viewpoints and behaviors. In the ongoing screen interactions, adolescents participate in the enactment and alignment of meanings that may challenge different representations of reality (Bednarek 2018; Dewulf and Bouwen, 2012). As stated by Dhoest (2015), the representation of diversity is essential because, while being fictional, TV drama is not disconnected from reality since it tries to reflect on current social issues. A report conducted in 2021, and referring to releases during 2018 and 2019, examined inclusion (gender, race/ethnicity, LGBTQI, and disability) in Netflix films and series by evaluating lead roles, co-leads, main cast and speaking characters on screen as well as behind the camera (e.g. scriptwriters, producers, directors), and revealed that platform productions reflect gender equality in key roles, and racial and ethnic inclusion in storytelling roles (especially women of color), while “LGBTQ and disability communities are rarely seen or heard in storytelling” (Smith *et al.* 2021, p. 29). Perhaps for this reason, scholars have mostly looked at diversity focusing on Clark’s representation of minority (i.e. queer) identities, which considers four stages of portrayal (i.e. non-representation, ridicule, regulation and respect; Clark 1969). Streaming series, in particular, enable a polysemic interpretation of acceptance, ranging from the consideration of homophobic abuse (Berridge 2012) to a more consistent presence of bisexual and transgender characters, and an allowance of more displays of affection (Cook 2018). However, traditional gender stereotypes are still confirmed, particularly when it comes to the manipulation or interactive dynamics with children (Cook 2018). Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that while sexual, gendered minorities were mostly looked at through the lens of negativity contributing to negative diversity attitudes (Żerebecki *et al.* 2021), in recent years, television series have been increasingly featuring gay (leading) characters, promoting the role of TV series in fostering diversity attitudes. Moreover, if on one hand, gender inequalities and sexual violence have dominated in young adult paranormal series;

on the other hand, new teen series functions, in Kendal and Kendal's words "feminist and queer-friendly texts" (2017, p. 26), pay attention to issues of equal power dynamics, consent, and sexual identity with their romantic combinations that sometimes invert the typical gender roles and offer positive alternatives (e.g. challenging heteronormative manliness where, being the leader is correlated with taking control over one's impulses through acts of peace and dialogue as opposed to traditional representations of aggressiveness, physical strength and authority). Other scholars (D'Cruz 2015; William 2013) have focused their attention on the alternative views of independent and fighting spirit characters that reflect and represent the multiple personalities of a growing teenager. Women no longer seem to be dependent on the male character for support, nor are they portrayed as sexual characters. Gay characters are no longer subject to homophobic jokes, and plotlines take an interest in the problems that gay people may face in life, such as how to figure out falling in love, or other people's reaction to their coming out, and also the trauma associated to conversion therapies.

Considering the evolution of societal values and the "niche" audience of teen dramas, this paper aims to investigate what meanings are currently associated to diversity. Specifically, it questions whether the notion of diversity has evolved considering different specificities, and how it is negotiated in streaming/TV productions aimed at adolescents.

2.2. Theoretical framework

Onscreen drama represents an intercultural product that carries multimodal aspects of meanings (e.g. written auditory and audio-visual reference), where the verbal references are dialogues that have been planned in advance by someone (i.e. the scriptwriter(s)) rather than the speaker (i.e. the actor playing the role). Data collection is a non-naturally social interaction, occurring in non-natural contexts, i.e. when speech is construed. These characteristics are the reason why interaction analysis would seem unfitting to the exploration of spoken interaction in movies and tv series.

However, scholars have established how onscreen dialogues represent a variety of language (Jucker, Locher 2017) that can be studied in its own terms since it mirrors functions (e.g. how language determines and is determined by social and cultural contexts; Richardson 2010)). As Chaume (2004) asserts, these dialogues represent a "prefabricated orality" (2004, p. 168) because, despite their written form, they seem spontaneous and natural conversations. The exchanges, in fact, represent what the scriptwriter thinks certain persons would say in certain situations because they need to create contexts, situations and exchanges as similar as they would be in natural settings, and they may therefore reveal trending discourses. For example, the gender stereotypes used for compliments and insults that are displayed in the screen dialogues should not be taken as representing the speaker's attitude toward specific values, but rather the societal trending positioning and discourses that the scriptwriter has interpreted, and the working system of screen products has accepted. Consequently, dialogues can be studied by means of interaction analysis; more importantly, combining its tools with critical discourse studies may reveal how identity is constructed and negotiated within and throughout the text, while considering the polyphony of voices.

In televisual series, the contexts and the situations in which exchanges occur are as similar as they would be in natural settings; therefore, dialogues may be taken into account to reveal trending discourses, and positioning or language to a lesser extent. Television series, in fact, make use of narrative elements that incorporate social and cultural issues taken from real social and cultural contexts (Kozloff 2000). Thus, the analysis of

interaction becomes a way to interpret diversity, when communicating back and forth, in the dynamic relationship between and among all participants.

In terms of the language employed on screen, although fictional in its essence, it can be a rich source of data, if investigated in its own terms, i.e. as a variety of language, which reproduces what writers think men and women would use in a social or cultural context. According to Jucker and Locher (2017) “the boundaries between fictional and non-fictional language are fuzzy and slippery” (2017, p. 5), in the sense that these show the characters’ attempt to imitate reality through their speech and behaviors. Teen series are particularly fascinating because they reproduce the variety of language that is used by teenagers, which is constantly under continual change and makes use of extra contextual references (e.g. in *Riverdale*, one character says “You and Ms. Four-eyes were pulling a Mary Kay Letourneau?”, which is a reference to a piece of news about an American teacher and a student).

The analytical framework for this study is grounded on Stamou’s model (2008), which is based on Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) analytical tools with interaction-oriented ones. Stamou employs diverse approaches and explores identity as emerging in interaction; she does this according to Bucholtz and Hall’s (2008) principles, which she reinterprets as discursive strategies for self- and other-presentation. In particular, she employs perspectivation strategies (i.e. the discourses that are drawn for identity constructions), along with the categories of positionality, which refer to how someone positions or is positioned by others in interactions (i.e. what identities are attributed), and relationality, which gives importance to one’s identity in relation with others. For clarity, she does not adopt the terms CDS-derived “discursive strategies” and uses instead the term “indexicality”, which she considers a “more suitable term for identity construction in interaction” (2008, p. 573). In fact, as Stamou points out, CDS has extensively “explored the representation of social groups and collective identities, [yet], in non-interactional texts” (2008, p. 571). On the one hand, for example, Reisigl and Wodak (2001) have looked at how identities are constructed in relation to social groups and are produced in society as part of a broader socio-historical context. In other words, the construction of reiteration of specific identities is part of an ideological project which aims at legitimizing practices of inclusion or exclusion of particular minority identities. For this reason, the contraposition strategy is employed to construct others as an opposing group by positively presenting the ingroup and negatively referring to outgroups (van Dijk 1998). In addition, according to the Social Actor framework (van Leeuwen 1996, 2008), it is important to consider the social actors represented, and whether they are included or excluded in establishing a (screen) discourse.

Considering the interactional approach, and still according to Stamou (2008), identities are explored, as outlined by Bucholtz and Hall (2008), according to five principles: emergence (i.e. identity is defined by interaction), partialness (i.e. identity is shaped by the micro-level of interaction and influenced by the institutional macro-level), positionality (or the way(s) in which a person positions themselves and others, as well as how a person is positioned by others in interaction), relationality (the construction of identity acquires meaning in relation to the identities of other people), and indexicality (the linguistic and visual forms associated to the social implications). Most importantly, a speaker constructs themselves or others through three pairs of identity relations: adequation/distinction (similarity and difference), authentication, and authorization. Considering the peculiarities of the dialogues to be analyzed, Stamou (2018) also looks at perspectivation (i.e. what discourses are drawn from the identity, Reisigl and Wodak 2001) in terms of fictionalization (i.e. the ideological perspectives adopted by the agents to

construct identities in fiction as representations). Combining the two approaches, therefore, means looking at identities by considering the different voices and worldviews, aside from the sequential construction which unfolds during the flow of interaction.

It should be noted, as pointed out by Stubbe et al. (2003), that “the unfolding of interaction depends on the interpretation of a speaker’s utterance by the next speaker, and to show that they are engaged in a joint activity, they need to display that interpretation in some way”. This means that the interactants on the screen, who are not engaged in a spontaneous talk, jointly construct a frame which is displayed, negotiated within the exchange, and eventually offered to the audience. The speaker’s interpretation may allow different views and further understanding of a particular concept. In this context, the audience is more easily engaged because individuals are not focusing on forms and inequalities patterned with race, gender, and other stigmatised categories that emerge from dialogues (i.e. situated interactional othering). As stated by Rawls and Davids (2005), individuals are otherized when they are referred to in talk “as not being committed to the same practices, not giving the benefit of doubt, not being sufficiently competent to the practice” (p. 473). In dialogues, therefore, speakers reproduce the assumed links between categories and moral judgements; and what emerges most interestingly is the gradual reproduction of ideologies in interaction. In the following example, falling in love with somebody else than one’s boyfriend, which challenges monogamy as a value, is presented as a problem. Still, the audience assists to how the problematic aspect becomes something natural that is unimpeachable. To justify her interlocutor, the character employs a category (i.e. being human):

Elena: Ok, you and Damon were both right. I was trying to change him. But if he wants to be in my life...

Caroline: Wait. I... It's been a long week, so I'm just going to be blunt. It doesn't matter what he does, Damon's gotten under your skin

Elena: That's not true

Caroline: God, just admit it, Elena, ok? You are attracted to him! In all of his bad brother glory

Elena: No

Caroline: Wait, no, you're not attracted to him, or no, you just won't admit it?

Elena: I can't, Caroline! If I admit it, if I even thought it for just a second... What does that say about me?

Caroline: It says you're human, Elena

Categories are often employed in othering processes. As Martikainen (2022) suggests, categories are understood as inference-rich structures that are under constant reconstruction and represent personal and societal understanding of what is to be considered “normal”, “appropriate” and “acceptable”. Most importantly, categories are not used (only) to describe or classify people, but they are a resource to make normative assumptions and judgements about one’s identity; for instance, “being a girl” has been associated, stereotypically, with being less brave and less strong.

3. Materials and study design

3.1. *The corpus*

The corpus is composed of three American teen dramas, namely *The Vampire Diaries*, *Teen Wolf*, and *Riverdale*. These titles have been chosen according to the results of a survey adopted and adapted from Bednarek (2018), administered to 278 undergraduate

students, including those from other countries, who were attending the researcher’s university. Data were collected online through Google forms, and several titles emerged as being suitable for individuals in the 14-18 year age group. To limit the selection, only three titles were chosen among the most viewed and the most appreciated, which were the ones watched by the students repeatedly over time.

Considering that the titles are of shows with several seasons (from 6 for Riverdale and Teen Wolf to 8 for The Vampire Diaries), each consisting of a number of episodes (from 12 to 22, depending on the show and the season), only a selection of episodes from the different seasons were chosen randomly (Table 1). The corpus consists of the dialogues taken from the screenplay of each episode.

<i>Teen Drama Corpus</i>			
Title	Episode	% of corpus	Word tokens
The Vampire Diaries (2010-2017)	1x02, 1x05, 1x06, 1x11, 1x18, 3x04, 3x08, 3x09, 3x10, 3x16, 4x08, 4x12, 4x18, 5x06, 6x12, 7x01	42,3%	83373
Teen Wolf (2011-2017)	1x01, 2x03, 2x06, 2x11, 3x04, 3x11, 3x18, 3x21, 4x07, 4x12, 5x07, 5x13, 5x15, 6x08, 6x14	24,4%	52908
Riverdale (2017-2023)	1x03, 2x03, 2x12, 2x22, 3x10, 3x15, 3x22, 4x01, 4x8, 4x09, 4x14, 4x18, 5x02, 5x05, 5x06	33,3%	72037
Total	45 episodes	100%	216457

Table 1
Dataset overview.

The sample consists of three American teen drama series broadcast on different platforms (both TV and streaming) from 2010. The narratives involve teenagers as main characters, attending high school and sharing the same demographic features. They live in fictional cities, where they try to have an everyday teenage life, despite the unusual circumstances related to their fighting against creatures and monsters with or without superpowers. The group of friends are generally split into males and females, with more than one character identifying as homosexual or bisexual. Narratives usually do not indulge or focus on themes like sexuality, ageism, or gendered identity; however, in at least two episodes in two drama series, the plotline is about conversion therapy and the theme of consent. The central point seems to be the growing process of the characters, e.g. sex is an important step into getting to know one’s Self. From a different perspective, these dramas reproduce old topoi recontextualized for contemporary teen audiences mixing horror genre, fantasy and young adult issues (Williams 2013). As such, they renegotiate the myth of modern vampire on TV (*The Vampire Diaries*), of werewolves (*Teen Wolf*) and power (*Riverdale*) while talking about love triangles, friendship and crime mysteries. Characters are usually attractive, active and powerful, often portrayed as weak individuals who become the target of manipulation. A note must be made here: these shows are apparently shaped to cover issues of inclusivity (e.g. in terms of ethnicity and gendered identities); dramas display affection, loyalty, love, lust and aggressiveness, but most of all they display feminist and

queer-friendly attitudes, carrying hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses about sexual fluidity, masculinity (e.g. on one hand, male characters are often shirtless and try to provoke voyeurism; on the other, they question their sexualities as a normal step in their identity quest) with concern for issues as consent, gender equality and sexual identity. The author's interpretation answers the socio-political aspects that the networks or the producers are responsible for.

The Vampire Diaries is a vampire teen drama that first aired in 2009. It is set in the fictional town of Mystic Falls and tells the story of a young teenage girl caught in a love triangle with two vampires, who happen to be brothers in a love-hate relationship, while facing her own challenges with friends, family and her nemesis. It is a gothic romance which combines the vampire myth adapted for teen TV with the fantasy horror genre to address young adult issues such as parental tensions or romantic relationships. Characters are seen in transition; they grow from being frail and insecure to becoming confident and bold. It is often the female character, who in traditional horror genres is shown as a damsel in distress, passive and powerless, who now drives the dramatic action.

Riverdale is a screen adaptation of the Archie Comics; it is a crime drama with intricate storylines about mysteries and supernatural horror. It has been received as a gender free TV serial for its marked attention to the LGBT component, its acceptance of different sexualities and gendered identities. Relationships are equally portrayed, featuring common issues that teenagers face when falling in love. The show is also recognized as to promote acceptance and to cover important issues such as conversion therapy more directly than other TV dramas (e.g. *The Vampire Diaries* features a character who is "forced" to repress her vampirism to be "normal"). In terms of the representation of diversity, the show seems to neglect asexuality in that one of the characters, who both in the comics and on the small screen is portrayed as always having been asexual, is instead in a long-term relationship on the teen drama.

Teen Wolf is an American supernatural teen drama based on the 1985 film with the same title. The narratives involve werewolves and the creation of a group of teenagers, whose alphas show different characteristics than usual. The episodes negotiate a hegemonic and counter-hegemonic masculinity and sexual identity (i.e. sexual fluidity); and the show promotes a sex-positive approach by promoting consent and equal power dynamics. Moreover, throughout the episodes, adolescents negotiate and/or reject masculine violence and show how growing up means forging one's identity (e.g. taking control of one's aggressiveness).

These TV dramas are shaped to cover issues of inclusivity, probably to respond to the socio-political input that producers or networks are responsible for. Although there are no narratives firmly involved with the representation of diversity, and despite the general acceptance and various examples of inclusivity, data have been collected to investigate whether or not exclusive traits emerge from the dialogues.

3.2. Methodology

The first step in compiling the corpus was the administration of a survey (Bednarek 2018) to 278 undergraduate students, including those from other countries, who were attending the researcher's university. The participants were asked to identify from a selected list of shows the ones they watched the most, when they were between the ages of 14 to 18, or to indicate other ones which were not on the selected list. After selecting the sample, consisting of three shows, the author watched the episodes in chronological order to familiarize herself with the material, while taking notes of particular exchanges which

were then analyzed using interactional analysis. The corresponding screenplays were downloaded from and stored in a txt. file, and were analyzed with AntConc. This step was useful as it allowed looking at data in its raw forms and identifying possible exchanges containing references to age. As in Vignozzi (2020), the episodes were organized in tables and stored with the corresponding video and audio. Data were first searched for keyness and collocations to verify that they were significant for the purpose of the present study (i.e. singling out the conversational exchanges related to possible exclusive traits, e.g. ageism, gendered stereotypes). Once the exchange was located, it was watched again and studied through interaction analysis. For space limitations, only a few examples are reproduced in the 4th section. The dialogue sampling was chosen to reflect corresponding research targets, therefore examples in the following section include dialogues with or about individuals with other-than main group's characteristics (e.g. age, sexuality, gender) and referring to diversity.

4. Framing diversity

Addressing diversity and inclusion is very challenging since many definitional approaches look at different dimensions. This analysis investigates the power dynamics established or reiterated through TV dramas and penetrating as assumed notions. Diversity is understood, in this study, as the representation of differences associated with other(s)-than-Self (and the Self can be one's identity or the group one belongs to), while inclusion is associated with the strategies employed to remove such differences. The different aspects of diversity can be captured according to presence, prominence and portrayal. Since this analysis focuses on the latter, stereotypes and identity constructions in narratives are taken into account.

4.1. *Stereotypes and sexual/gender representations*

A stereotype is a cognitive linguistic representation of attributes that are believed to characterize an individual by oversimplified images, ideas or portrayals. It is usually addressed to other-representations, where emphasis on differences rather than similarities reinforces or builds prejudice. Common stereotypes in gothic/fantastic literature concerns a difference in power relations between the victim and the creature, therefore women are shown as damsels in distress, unable to fight against vampires in the sensual and intimate scenes, and the werewolf is the highest expression of virility in terms of physical strength and leading behavior. The most common way to characterize these creatures is the repeated reference to their sexuality, with attributes of charm, beauty and physical prowess. There is a growing trend in teen dramas, however, toward the introduction of different concepts and imagery, where the oversimplification of particular actors is replaced by positive images (countertypes) that emphasize the positive features, challenging the stereotypes associated to them. Gendered identities, for example, are usually represented as a minority in the drama ecology, and they typically achieve prominence only if they are the villain. In the corpus, however, gay male and female characters are acknowledged and tacitly accepted and are never considered a threat to other sexual identities. Instead, since teenage characters are often portrayed while still figuring out their own identity, dialogues contain references where their identity (sexuality and/or gender issues) is questioned (example 1):

1. “Your newfound heroism is making me very attracted to you. No, seriously. Do you wanna making out for a sec? just to see how it feels?” (TW 2x03)

More than references to stereotypes, the corpus offers dialogues with countertypes. The TV drama supporters, for instance, have discussed the following example, where the expression “being a girl” first becomes natural and is then renegotiated.

1. Allison: I’m sorry... I freaked out like a total girl
2. Scott: You are a girl.
3. Allison: I freaked out like a girly girl. And I’m not a girly girl.
4. Scott: What kind of girl are you?
5. Allison: Tougher than that. At least I thought I was.
6. Scott: I’d be freaked out too. In fact, I’d probably cry. And not like a man. I’d cry like the girliest girl. It would be pathetic. (TW 1x01)

When in (1) the female character (Allison) expresses the need to justify her actions by using the expression “like a total girl” to refer to her emotion (fear), the male character (Scott) states that being a girl is what she is, referring to her identity, deliberately not taking into account the connotations associated to the expression. Therefore, Allison explains what she means by adding “girly” to maximize the common inference of being less confident or tough, as she explains in 5. Scott, who is the alpha of his pack (the leader of a group of werewolves), is usually represented as the highest expression of machismo, virility, and braveness; and not only does he express solidarity, but also states he would behave “like the girliest girl”. This statement obviously challenges the usual attributes of a leader, but it is still attributed to a leader, therefore it evokes a neutral (to positive) connotation. Thus, the dialogue does not reinforce the stereotype; both characters challenge the notion of masculinity and accept attributes that are external to their sexual identity. If “being a girl” does not mean being less tough, it does not mean being “less feminine” either. Later on in the episode, Allison redefines what being a girl means in a dialogue to her mother:

1. Victoria: keeping away from Scott will make you strong, unlike all those other girls pining for a boy to take them to senior prom
2. Allison: Can’t I be strong and go to prom? (TW 1x01)

When her mother categorizes “all those other girls” as being dependent on a boy and dedicated to frivolous activities, such as the senior prom, Allison states that she can be (a girl who is) tough but still with a desire for more frivolous activities (2), as highlighted by the connector of addition, which marks equality between being strong and her desire. Therefore, the stereotype associated with being a girl, is deconstructed in the onscreen product without framing new stereotypes.

The change in the social understanding of the notion of inclusivity is highlighted in the following dialogue:

1. Nora: Heh. Admit you love me more for it.
2. Mary Louise: You know I do. [They hold hands. Self-conscious Mary Louise breaks free]
3. Nora: Mar... It’s the 21st century. We can hold hands now. (TVD 7x01)

Mary Louise (Mar, as her lover calls her) and Nora are vampires, who have been in love for more than a century. They have kept their relationship a secret (except for those they trusted) because of XIX century society. When they returned to life, Mary Louise had some difficulties in adapting to modern day thinking and relating to many things, from

fashion to the understanding of how society has changed during her sleep, including the new concept of inclusivity. In fact, at a public event, Mary Louise, who is self-conscious, seems unconformable when Nora publicly holds her hand and eventually breaks free. Nora, however, explains that holding hands is accepted in modern society. The deontic modality in “we can hold hands” marks a set of unimaginable possibilities that were neglected in the last century but are accepted and highlighted by “now” in the last position. Reminding Mary Louise that this is the 21st century seems a way to lead to an inference that is made explicit in the last sentence of the exchange for the listener (both Mary Louise and the audience).

Homosexuality, as a problematic trait, is still present in teen shows:

1. KEVIN: You act like we've got the same set of options, but we don't. You live in this pale-pink world of milk shakes and first kisses and "Am I gonna date Archie or Jughead?"
2. CHERYL: Except for when she's Dark Betty.
3. KEVIN: Right, right, right. Except for when you're exploring your BDSM sexuality, which again, you're allowed to do, but I'm not, because why? This is what I've got, Betty. Me, these woods. So, please don't come here and tell me it's disgusting. If you can't accept what I do, whatever I do, then we're just... We're not really friends. (RV 2x03)

In this exchange, Betty argues with Kevin, her best friend, because she is worried about his evening walks (and inferred sexual intercourses) and asks him to stop. Kevin explains that his walks are the only way to explore his sexuality and highlights how for heterosexuals everything is easier and possible, even when such exploration might be debatable for societal norms (e.g. the acronym BDSM refers to sexual preferences related to enjoyment of control and/or pain). As already stated, if one does not accept a friend's sexuality that means they do not belong to the same in-group. Despite this exchange, sexual and gender stereotypes are treated on noticeably more positive/normalized ways in the teen shows, as one can see in the next examples, where being a gay is now no longer considered a trait of diversity:

1. DAD: You're not gay
2. STYLES: I could be (TW 2x06)

CHERYL: Is being the gay best friend still a thing? (RV 1x03)

In the first example, which is a conversation between Styles and his father, the possibility of being gay is genuinely explored by the character. The second example, sarcastically, refers to the common stereotype for gay characters who are either the girl's best friend or a comedic aide. However, even in this case, this label is downsized as something belonging to the past and now no longer worthy of attention.

4.2. Age representations

While sexualities and gendered identities are negotiated in an inclusive, positive way, with positive behavior and associations, aging and aged identities are still represented through othering processes as a deviation from normal individuals or as a possible threat. The distance between the teenage protagonists and the aged characters increases according to the age gap. In the following example taken from a dialogue in *Riverdale*, a teenage student is talking to the guidance counselor at Riverdale High School about her issues with her father:

1. Veronica: What are you saying, Mrs. Burble?
2. Mrs. Burble: Obviously, I'm not suggesting murder. But rather, to cut ties with him for good. He's trolling you. So why not ghost him?
3. Veronica: No offense, Mrs. Burble, but your "teen-speak" could use an update. As could your advice. (RV 4x08)

In the student-counselor exchange, the linguistic strategies employed aim at accommodation and alignment, which highlight and favor rapport building. In her effort to establish a warm relationship with her interlocutor, the teacher (Mrs. Burble) adapts her language to that of teens by using a specific set of vocabulary commonly used by teenagers (e.g. cut ties, trolling, ghost someone). Apparently, she fails in her attempt which gives the teenager (Veronica) the possibility to question her language skills and downgrade her professional authority. In the dialogue, language maximizes the distance between the two speakers. Still, more importantly, it demeans the adult character along with her (professional) position and the power balance in the interaction. The dialogue between a student and a teacher activates a template in which the adult possesses decision-making, awareness and experience. The dialogue, however, offers an image in which this representation is rejected and adults are reframed as dull interlocutors.

The representation of seniority in teen dramas is further framed as a threat, as in the following example taken from *The Vampire Diaries*. During a carwash event at school, Elena, a teenager who is still unaware of the existence of vampires (up to that moment), talks to an old man who had previously met her boyfriend (a vampire himself). Meeting a man who had not aged, with a bewildered look on his face, confuses Elena who wants to investigate:

- 1 ELENA: [...] I saw you last night. You were talking to a friend of mine, at the grill?
- 2 OLD MAN: Well, i--i thought it was somebody i knew.
- 3 ELENA: Stefan Salvatore.
- 4 OLD MAN: Nah, it can't be. It's just my mind playing tricks on me.
- 5 ELENA: Where do you think you'd seen him before?
- 6 OLD MAN: When i first moved here, I stayed at the Salvatore boarding house.
[...]
- 7 ELENA: I'm sorry, sir. I don't think I'm familiar with the story.
- 8 OLD MAN: Oh, how could you? I mean, this happened years ago.
- 9 TIKI: Grandpa, you gotta go. Mom wants you home. Ok?
- 10 OLD MAN: (*confused*) Ah.
- 11 TIKI: He wasn't bugging you, was he? He's a little alzy-heimer.
- 12 ELENA: No, he was sweet. (TVD 1x05)

As for the discursive strategy of positionality, the old man is never named and is constructed through classification (turn 7), particularly relational identification (turn 9). From a more analytical point of view, the old man is verbally and visually indexed as "being old". The most prominent verbal index is his unsteady cognitive capacity, i.e. his uncertainty and confusion (turn 4). For example, he fails to pair the sequence where Tiki (his niece) asks him to go back home and produces a minimal adjacency response (turn 10, "ah"). Looking at the transitivity pattern of the entire fictional interaction, Elena seems to hold the power in that, although she initiates only two mental processes, she is always a Sayer; in contrast, the man, who creates more than one process (material, mental, relational), is a Sayer and a Receiver. This confusion is visually mirrored in his scruffy clothing and in the setting: he seems confused about being at the carwash, which is full of teenagers, and he gives the impression of not knowing his whereabouts. The references about uncertainty are spaced out throughout the exchange and may also seem an interpersonal engagement device with the intention to justify his cognitive disorientation.

It is clear that the comprehension failure is the result of his suffering from Alzheimer's, a senior disease, and there is an iterated (even non-verbally) use of cognitive disorientation and confusion. It is due to his mental illness that he sees something wrong, and Tiki's observation seems to confirm this, addressing his severe unhealthy condition (Alzheimer's disease, turn 11). The exchanges, first between Tiki and the man (turn 9, 10), and then between Tiki and Elena (turn 11, 12), are particularly interesting for different reasons. In 9-10, Tiki employs an adaptation of the child-directed language (informal language, use of repetition, and questions for feedback) to talk to an adult. She then switches to teen talk, with its non-standard vocabulary, when she speaks to Elena (e.g. alzy-heimer), who, being a teenager, belongs to her ingroup. In this exchange, the senior is framed as a possible annoying person, a deviance, or a threat to Elena. The fictionalization of old age is associated with confusion and lapses of cognitive abilities which are attributed to a severe unhealthy condition.

However, the man merges into a different identity later in the exchange with Elena:

- 1 ELENA: Hey, sir, I'm sorry. Um, are you sure that the man that you saw, that you knew, his name was Stefan Salvatore?
- 2 OLD MAN: Yes. I remember his ring and his brother—
- 3 ELENA: Damon?
- 4 OLD MAN: Yeah. Stefan and Damon Salvatore.
- 5 ELENA: When was this?
- 6 OLD MAN: It was early June, 1953. Yeah. June, 1953. (TVD 1x05)

When further addressed by Elena, who interestingly uses perception (e.g. saw) and cognitive (e.g. knew) verbs, he establishes relational processes as well as material ones, producing specific dates (turn 4 and 6). As the aged tend to be associated to a lack of memory, this juxtaposition is bizarre. Although "old age is stereotypically associated with declining abilities in the frame of dominant discourse of old age" (Stamou 2008, p. 581), this counter-image is associated with the fictionalization of experience. Elena, unlike Tiki, expresses her acceptance and authentication of the man's words. There is, therefore, a conflict between the two discourses: the hegemonic discourse of old age (devaluation, passivity, dependence, and reduced status) where older adults are marginalized, and the positive association with insightfulness and self-reliance. This seems to be reiterated in a different dialogue between Elena and Stefan, where Elena is angry with Stefan for a mistake he made, when dealing with a friend who has cancer.

1. Elena: You're like, what, like 165 years old? [...]
2. Stefan: So that makes me an expert in supernatural cancer treatment? (TVD 6x12)

In this exchange, Elena seems to expect Stefan to know better because of his old age.

Age is not an attribute of the individual but it stands on its own. In the following example, the vain Katherine, who was a vampire and has become human again, is asking Dr. Maxfield to run some tests since she is not feeling well and is witnessing some troubling changes in her body.

- 1 Katherine: So, what am I looking at here, hmmm? Blood clot? Tumor? What?
- 2 Dr. Maxfield: I did a full workup on your blood, Katherine. It's clean
- 3 Katherine: My hair is going gray and my teeth are falling out. I'm not sure what that suggests, but it's not health.
[...] tell me exactly what the hell is going on with me
- 4 Dr. Maxfield: You're aging.
- 5 Katherine: What? [...] Okay. Okay. Well, how do we stop it?

6 Dr. Maxfield: We don't. it's just life running its course. (TVD 5x06)

She labels these changes “not healthy” (turn 3), and when the doctor acknowledges that she is simply aging, Katherine is shocked and at first reacts with disbelief. Then she antagonizes the aging process as something to be stopped. It is interesting to notice that she adopts the same sentences that characters in the show use when they debate on how to stop an enemy (“how do we stop it?”). When she finally accepts the aging process, she defines herself using the attributes “fragile”, “undesirable”, “about to die”, “useless”, and this reiterates the ideological hegemonic discourse of old age as devaluation.

There seems to be, therefore, a conflict between two representational discourses: one with experience that has positive associations with insightfulness and self-reliance; the other one with devaluation that is associated to declining abilities, health condition, passivity and reduced status. In any case, clearly age is still represented as a discrimination factor.

5. Conclusion

To understand the new cultural models and practices, the study of the references with which the new generations are confronted, including entertainment material, is deemed necessary. The first studies on teen drama highlighted the lack of representation of minority groups, specifically women (as opposed to men), racial and ethnic-cultural minorities (as opposed to white people), and LGBTQI+ individuals (as opposed to heterosexuals, Dhoest 2015), while others have focused on the representation of teenagers' world, and specifically teen romance (Birchall 2004), sexualities (Berridge 2012), friendship (Baxter 2012), and a general struggle for autonomy (Davis, Dickinson 2004)

The analysis in this study has shown how some values are included in the storyline of teen dramas, and are accepted and/or negotiated in exchanges. It has focused on the representation of diversity in dialogues, and in particular on sexism and genderisms (since sexuality and gender identity are two challenging themes in adolescents' personal empowerment) and age (which is part of one of the distinctive traits of being a teenager), as an inclusive/exclusive trait.

Narratives and exchanges in contemporary teen drama seem to negotiate the understanding of sexual/gender diversity, with representations that tend to portray these traits under normalised/normalising processes. Being gay, for example, is still a diversity trait but, different from the past (Cook 2018), explorations of one's sexuality and/or identity are welcomed and accepted by the in-group. When the gendered diversity is problematised, it is used to reaffirm the necessity of being included, as well as normalised, to the point of downsizing the reference of the diversity trait as an outdated discursive event. Dialogues do not report differences in power relations and power balance, and when present, the categorization of otherness does not lead to exclusion. In this way, these products not only generate attention for a specific section of society but also contribute to express a cultural valuation of inclusive norms for the audience, with affinities to the contemporary fluidity aesthetics and culture.

Despite the awareness of the notion of inclusivity, the need to find ways to mediate the representation of elderly people is still at stake. The study has shown that teen dramas still do not convey an inclusive representation of elderly people, who are employed to represent disorientation, confusion, and even specific references of death. If on the one hand, the inclusion of older adults and even senior adults is to be seen as a desire to create

inclusiveness; on the other, the exchanges and the use of aged characters lack accuracy that cause misidentification of senior identities and potential harm. This is particularly true when older people are seen constantly facing death or illness, especially if cognitive, where the image of the aged is associated with one disturbing/disturbed individual, or is even seen as a threat.

TV dramas already support a redefinition and new conceptualizations of being senior since increasing longevity along with low birth rates are making older people an increasingly large proportion of the population. Consequently, the redefinition of being old responds to socio-political and economic factors. However, in teen dramas, where the audience is composed by teenagers, the representation of older people is characterized by the gap between the two groups. Age is represented in discourse, but aged people and their activities seem to be deleted, suppressed, with direct references being ignored. The physical and emotional distance between seniors and teenagers is reproduced in behavioral and communicative differences; and the elderly are still excluded from the teenage world. Negative stereotyping (involving cognitive issues and dissonance) has been identified as a significant factor in the discrimination against senior people. For this reason, it is important to reconsider the representation of ageing as a process, especially in teen dramas where individuals are described as opposites: either being healthy, wise and responsible or being unhealthy, frail and problematic.

This paper has attempted to critically question the dialogues within popular cultural teen dramas to assess what diversity traits penetrate as instances of otherness. The premises for this study has been that TV dramas have established themselves as a new cultural product within the boundaries of entertainment practices. This frame focuses the audience's attention on the narrative techniques, allowing individuals to indulge on the plot, the costumes, the actors' physical presence and performance, and yet, the audience perceives messages which are explicitly given on the screen and that penetrate through dialogues. The discursive representations make specific frames more salient, and in doing so, they influence the way the audience elects some aspects of a perceived reality.

In conclusion, the analysis conducted in this study has shown that despite the sociopolitical input to cover issues linked to diversity in inclusive examples, age as diversity still needs to be addressed. Teen dramas still do not convey an inclusive representation of elderly people, whose representation lacks accuracy, causing misidentification of seniors and potential harm.

Bionote: Marianna Lya Zummo is Associate Professor at the University of Palermo. Her interests cover issues in genre, communication dynamics and studies on the dimension of modality and evidentiality. Her research is primarily related to issues in health communication in online contexts and new media discourse(s). Recently, she has added to her area of research the language by and about elderly and adolescent people. Recent publication include: *Young generation and accessibility to health dissemination: TikTok as a case study* (2022), *Defence strategies in an online community of caregivers* (2021), *Seniors' social image: The representation of ageing in electoral campaigns* (2020)

Author's address: mariannalya.zummo@unipa.it

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