

## **The Teen Series and the Young Target. Gender Stereotypes In Television Fiction Targeted to Teenagers.**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents the key results arising from a study about representation of male and female characters of the teen series. The main aim of the study is to build knowledge about the images of young people portrayed in a television show featuring teenagers. The study has consisted in the analysis of the antecedents about gender representation on television fiction and the content analysis of the American teen drama *Dawson's creek*. The content analysis was conducted on a representative sample of 18 episodes of three seasons of the series, measuring 29 variables. The key findings on gender role representation are based on physical and social descriptors, personality traits attributed to the characters, and plot-related variables. Among the principal results, it has to be stressed the presence of traditional gender stereotypes within the socio demographical characteristics of the characters, especially the physical and social traits.

**Keywords:** Teen series, young people, gender representation, content analysis.

### **Introduction**

The study of gender stereotype of teenagers represented on fiction programs specifically targeted to young people has a meaningful value both for television production and for audience's reception. In fact, the potential consumers of the teen series – the teenagers – find themselves in a key moment for the construction of their identities. Besides, young people can use fiction content, as well as gender representations and stereotypes, in the process of their identity building.

This paper presents the principal results of an investigation that has been carried out within the research team GRISS of UAB (Autonomous University of Barcelona) in the context of a research project financed by the Spanish Ministry of Sciences and Innovation (ref. CSO2009-12822). The study has consisted in the analysis of the antecedents about gender representation on television fiction and the content analysis of the American teen drama *Dawson's creek*, in order to identify and analyze the portrayals of male and female characters.

Teen series, or teen dramas, are television fiction products which cannot be considered as a specific and independent television genre according to the classification of Observatory Euromonitor<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, they do can be described through some specific characteristics that allow differentiating them from the rest of television fiction. The most remarkable features of teen series are the seeking of teen target, and the representation of several contexts and themes, as well as school or friendship. About teen target, it is important to stress at least two points. On one hand, young people tend to consume less television than other targets; and, on the other, teenagers usually prefer television fiction series and serials among all television contents, as remarked by several scholars, as Von Feilitzen (2004) or Livingstone, d'Haenens and Hasebrink (2001). This phenomenon reaffirms the necessity of studying the television portrayals of young people, more than ever the ones featured by television programs especially targeted to teenagers, as teen dramas.

### **Gender representation on television fiction programs**

Despite the growing importance of new media, television continues to have a central role in the transmission of representations and stereotypes in our societies, especially in relation to gender. As has been noted by Behm-Morawitz and Mastro referring to Bandura's social cognitive theory (2008: 132), media products represent a powerful and preferential source for the conveyance and acquisition of gender roles, knowledge, expectations and behavior. The social roles developed by the female and male characters in prime-time television programs forcefully contribute to the construction and maintenance of gender stereotypes (Lauzen, Dozier & Horan, 2008: 201).

Especially in fictional products, the characters, situations and stories act as schematic representations of the world, i.e. as behavioral and opinion models and, at the same time, as keys for deciphering the world (Casetti & Villa, 1992). These schematic representations are constructed in the imagination, which is why these models work on an emotional plane, through empathy between the audience and the situations and/or characters portrayed.

As Glascock affirms (2001: 656) "previous research of television programming has shown that male and female characters have often been portrayed in stereotypical ways". This scholar offers a brief and clear overview of the main background to the study of the representation of female and male characters in television programming, citing first of all numerous key studies from the seventies (McNeil, 1975; Tedesco, 1974; Lemon, 1977; Turow, 1974), and moving on to note how the feminist school has drawn attention to the treatment of female characters affirms: "Researchers investigating gender differences have studied a

<sup>1</sup> Euromonitor is a permanent observatory of television programming in Europe, active since 1989. It has been created by a group of European scholars (Paolo Baldi, Ian Connell, Claus Dieter Rath i Emili Prado), on demand of VQPT Service of RAI (the Italian Public Broadcasting Company).

variety of genres besides prime-time fare, including children's programming (Busby, 1975; Greenberg, 1980; Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995) and soap operas (Turow, 1974). The types of character coded have included single women, working women (Akting, Moorman & Lin, 1991), those with definable occupations (Seggar & Wheeler, 1973); those involved in interactions (Lemon, 1977; Turow, 1974), as well as all characters (Davis, 1990; Greenberg, 1980; Lauzen & Dozier, 1999; Signorelli, 1987) and just central characters (Dominick, 1979; Greenberg & Collette, 1997)" (Glascock, 2001: 656-657). A further study in addition to these is Signorelli's (1987) research on the representation of children and teenagers on prime-time and weekend-daytime network drama programs; Butsch's work (1992) on the representation of class and gender in sitcoms and Ward's work (1995) on the specific content of sexual messages on the 12 most popular child and adolescent prime-time TV programs.

During the last decade, many studies have been published analyzing the characters of various fictional programs, especially prime-time dramas and sitcoms. Among others, these include Signorielli and Bacue (1999), about prime-time fictional characters of the last three decades (1970s, 1980s and 1990s); Elasmara, Hasegawa and Brain (1999), about the portrayal of women in U.S. prime time television; Fouts and Burggraf (1999, 2000) and Fouts and Vaughan (2002), about the remarks and opinions relating to the body or weight of female and male characters in prime-time sitcoms. Other relevant studies of prime-time fiction are the analysis of teenage characters in prime-time entertainment programs conducted by Heintz-Knowles (2000); Glascock (2001), about the portrayal of male and female characters in terms of demographics and behavior in prime-time network programs; the analysis carried out by Scharrer (2001) of the male characters in police and detective dramas of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, analyzing the relationship between the "macho" personality and criminal behavior; Good, Porter and Dillon (2002), about men's self-disclosures in the 11 most popular sitcoms; Harwood and Anderson (2002) about the presence and portrayal of social groups on prime-time television.

Although the reception or consumption of gender representation does not form part of the aim of our study, it is important to mention the cross-sectional relevance of the audience studies carried out, from qualitative and quantitative perspectives (Larson, 1996; Harrison, 2003; Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Eggermont, 2006; Barriga, Shapiro & Jhaveri, 2009; Garcia & Martinez 2009; Want, Vickers & Amos, 2009).

Therefore, a study of the characters of a teen series is justified and necessary, both with regard to their physical traits, their demographic, social and psychological characteristics, and, lastly, to the role they adopt in the conflicts in which they find themselves involved. A content analysis of this type may shed light on the models and stereotypes of young people consumed by the teenagers themselves.

## Method

The study presented in this paper includes the analysis of previous investigations about gender stereotypes and roles in television fiction. This framework has allowed concreting those antecedents in a case study. In particular, it has carried out a content analysis of the American teen drama *Dawson's Creek*, whose six seasons were originally broadcast on the WB Television Network, between 20 January 1998 and 14 May 2003. The international success of this drama - broadcast in more than 40 countries worldwide - was a significant factor in the choice of this case. Besides that, during the study, *Dawson's creek* was been aired on the second channel of Catalan public television (K3/33, now ClubSuper3), every afternoon, from 2.30 p.m. to 3.30 p.m.

A content analysis was conducted on the 18 episodes of the sample in order to analyze the main and supporting characters of the series, measuring 29 variables, in a total of 178 categories. Following Robinson, Callister and Jankoski (2008), the main characters were defined as characters listed on the show's website as such and who had a continuing role in most of the episodes throughout each season. Supporting characters were defined as recurring characters in the television series and, to be included in the database, they had to appear at least in two episodes of a season. Those who just appear in one episode were not studied as their development could not be followed.

The variables were examined based on the contributions from other scholars, particularly including Pignotti (1976), Smith (1980), Adamson (1991), Griffiths (1993), Pauwels (1998), Goddard and Patterson (2000), Seger (1990) and Robinson and Anderson (2006). The main variables used in the study are: sex, age, race, physical build, clothes, sexual preference, social class, type of family, leisure activity, main responsibility of the character, type of relationship between the supporting and the main character, sets in which the characters normally appear, main personality traits of the character, main stereotypes representing the character, the character's attitude within the story, theme of the plot, origin of the plot, type of conflict represented, role of the character in the development of the plot and involvement of the character in the resolution of the plot. Two coders examined the episodes of the sample, based on previous instruction regarding the criteria for cataloguing, and processed the data into a SPSS database.

Following the principal conclusions arising from the analysis of the most important previous studies about gender representation in television fiction, female characters of *Dawson's creek* are expected to be represented in less favorable situations than male characters. In particular, they are expected to be outnumbered by male characters and to be younger than male characters. Finally, emotional and sentimental personalities are expected to tend to be associated to female characters rather than to male ones.

## Results

Descriptive statistics offer a general picture of main and supporting characters of the sample, according to the four groups of variables used in the study: physical characteristics, social descriptors, psychological traits, and the plot. The only two exceptions are two complex psychological variables, personality and stereotype, which were analyzed with multivariable analysis.

A total of 31 characters were identified and were analyzed: 6 main characters and 25 supporting characters. Main characters obtained a frequency distribution of 54.4%, while supporting characters of 45.6%.

Referring to the first physical characteristic, sex, 54.4% of characters are male and 45.6% are female. This result confirms one of the principal expectations of the analysis (that was: female characters are outnumbered by male ones).

Clearly, with regard to Age, the teenagers obtain the highest frequencies (63.73%), although the Tweens record the lowest (0.52%). This result indicates that *Dawson's creek* is focused on middle adolescent characters rather than on early adolescent ones.

Regarding the characters' build, the following frequency distribution was obtained: Thin (36.27%); Normal (36.79); Muscular (22.80%); Well-built (3.11%); and Fat (1.04%). The dress style Casual obtains 62.18% vs. 20.21% Classic dress.

Among the general characteristics revealed with the univariable analysis, the high frequencies of both the upper or upper-middle social classes (the two categories add up to 47.15%), and the traditional-type families, i.e. parents with one or more children (43.53%), should also be noted.

Lastly, regarding the set where the characters appear the most, frequency distribution reveals that the two most common sets are House (43.53%) and School (28.5%). The house can be broken down into: House – more than 2 rooms (17.62%), Garden/Porch (9.84), Kitchen (6.74%), Bedroom (5.7%) and Living room (3.63).

Bivariable analysis enables results to be obtained according to the gender variable. In most of the physical and socio-demographic descriptors, a non-homogenous gender distribution has been observed. In particular, a dependency relation has been observed between the gender variable and age ( $p= 0,006$ ), but not in the way expected by the authors (that was: the women represented tend to be younger than the men). In this regard it may be noted that, while the majority of teenagers and adults represented are men (respectively 56.1% and 70.3%), most of the young people (20 – 24 years) and old people (over 65 years) are women.

A dependency relation has also been found between Sex and two other physical variables: Build ( $p<0,001$ ) and Clothes ( $p<0,001$ ).

In particular, referring to the variable Build of the character, all the thin characters are female, whereas all the muscular, well-built and fat characters are men. Additionally, in the category Normal there is a clear prevalence of male characters (74.6% of characters associated to a normal build are men, opposed to 25.4% of women with a normal build). These results permit to affirm that the representation of thin bodies is more associated with the female characters than the male).

Regarding the type of Clothes, although the majority of the characters, both female and male, come into the Casual category (62.18%), Sporty clothes are an exclusively male choice, whereas Trendy clothes are mostly worn by women (77.8%).

Lastly, the non-homogeneous distribution of the variable Sex in relation to Sexual preference ( $p < 0,001$ ) should be noted: all the homosexual characters represented are male, and there are no lesbian women in the sample.

No dependency has been observed between gender and the following variables: Race, Set where the character usually appear and Responsibility of the character. With regard to this last variable, it should be noted that the kind of responsibility most assumed by all the characters is Social (47.67%), i.e. responsibility in relation to their relationships with others.

Finally, it is interesting to stress that, focusing the analysis on the main characters, traits and stereotypes related to more emotional or sentimental personalities are associated both to female and male characters.

## Discussion

Dawson's Creek has been considered a quality teen series by Mosely (2001) and Hills (2004). Mosely (2001) affirms this based on the following characteristics of the teen drama: its self-consciousness, the intense emotionality and the high self-referentiality; the analytical dialogues; the hypertextual strategies that are implemented with other audiovisual products or other media; the feeling of nostalgia that pervades the series and extends the audience beyond teenagers to young adults. Hills (2004: 54-70) considers Dawson's Creek as a *mainstream cult* and singles out three characteristics of the series: 1) the high reflexivity of the characters; 2) the types of sentimental relationships depicted, which would be similar to the models described by Giddens as *romantic love* and *confluent love* (or *pure relationship*); 3) its authorship, which enables it to be related to other products of its writer Kevin Williamson, creator, scriptwriter and director of horror movies. Brooker (2001) highlights the capacity of Dawson's Creek to achieve a cultural convergence between various media, where as Wee (2004) describes this phenomenon with the term cross-media mobility. Wee considers the series as an example of postmodern hyper-

intertextuality, precisely because of all the homage the teen drama pays to other past and contemporary audiovisual products (especially films).

The analysis of the results of our study enable us to argue that in *Dawson's Creek* various traditional gender role stereotypes can be seen to be portrayed alongside other less discriminatory ones. In particular, it can be stressed the presence of traditional gender stereotypes within the socio demographical characteristics of the characters, especially the physical and social traits.

However, no proof has been found that the female characters are younger than their male counterparts, instead, the opposite has been observed to be the case. However this fact must be qualified – it is important to remember that old people are under-represented in this series (6.22%) and that one of the recurring supporting characters is Jen's grandmother (Grams).

About the principal personality stereotypes representing main characters, it has to be stressed that the three girl stars are located close to stereotypes like Intelligence, Reason or Activity (Andie); Intelligence, Caution or Fragility (Joey); Immaturity, Power and Sarcasm (Jen). Whereas the three boys are located close to stereotypes like Tenderness and Patience (Jack); Idealism, Rebellion and Pragmatism (Pacey); Activity and Integrity (Dawson). It should especially be noted that the character nearest to Ambition is a woman and the character of Jen is relatively near the stereotype Rebellion. Lastly, it can be noted that the stereotypes attributed to the character of Jack may be equivocal if we take into account that he is the only homosexual main character of the series, i.e. he may possess more typically feminine attributes precisely due to his sexual orientation. However, it has to be clarified that most of secondary characters are fairly subject to stereotypes, especially characters that only appear in a few episodes.

To conclude, the analysis of certain television programs enables us to discover which aspects of gender representation in the media follow patterns that contribute to perpetuating traditional archetypes or which show a non-stereotyped portrayal. The importance of the gender image represented in the media and especially in fiction has a core value for audiences. The television products targeted at young people, as in the case of the teen series, take on a special significance in the processes of construction of young people's identities. Therefore, there continues to be a social need for specific studies of audiovisual products that are about and for teenagers.

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