Title: Girls and the Media: Girlhood Studies Agenda and Prospects in Italy
Journal Issue: gender/sexuality/italy, 4 (2017)
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Publication date: September 2017
Publication info: gender/sexuality/italy, "Invited Perspectives"
Permalink: http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/7-girls-and-the-media-girlhood-studies-agenda-and-prospects-in-italy

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Abstract: Within the Italian context, girlhood studies can hardly be considered a specific field: adolescence and gender construction in Italy have historically been investigated by sociology and psychology, although, in recent years, media studies have also focused on youth media consumption as a cultural process in the broader sense, investigating the relevance of the media in the identity-building process. Actually, the lack of a definition of girlhood studies *as such* did not prevent Italian research from providing theoretical contributions and significant research on girlhood, mostly in the fields of reception studies, audience studies and textual analysis. On these premises, the article aims at discussing the relationships between girlhood and the media nowadays, keeping in mind firstly the recent transformations in media consumption within the networked society; secondly the coexistence of contradictory representations of girlhood in both the local and the global and the way it is assembled in the young audience discourse; and thirdly the phenomenon of identity co-creation in creative fandom practices.

Girls and the Media: Girlhood Studies Agenda and Prospects in Italy
ROMANA ANDÒ

Within the Italian context, girlhood studies can hardly be considered a specific field, as its theoretical and methodological definition has been affected by the influence of different disciplines that have covered these themes, as well as, inevitably, by its theoretical development. Adolescence and gender construction in Italy have historically been investigated by sociology and psychology, with the two disciplines sharing a few research topics (identity, body, sexuality, family, work, study, relationships).[1] However, in recent years, media studies have also focused on adolescence and, namely, on media consumption as a cultural process in the broader sense. Symbolic media usage occurs within a "media-polis," where content not only functions for entertainment purposes, but ultimately becomes political with respect to its role in the production and circulation of meaning and identity in the public sphere.[2] In this sense, the theme of girlhood could be studied according to media ethnography with the aim of investigating the qualitative aspects of media consumption, as well as the relevance of the media in the identity-building process.[3]

On the contrary, the first stage of Italian media studies in Italy was characterized by a predominantly quantitative approach, while less attention was paid to the reception processes, which was also due to the late development of audience studies. As a consequence, teenagers, along with children, were considered as individuals to be protected according to very traditional media effects theories. In this first phase, the relationship between youths and the media has been investigated with respect to the time spent consuming media content and on its quality (the so-called "media diet"); the individual and social risks associated with consumption (from food disorders to premature sexualization, to the risk of violent behaviors, etc.); and, more recently, the skills needed (according to the media education approach) to properly use media in everyday life.[4]

During the 1990s, research conducted by universities, policy makers, industry, child welfare experts and educators shared an approach based on statistical description (i.e. how, where and with whom the media is used), on media consequences analysis (long-term cognitive effects) and on media literacy, with minor attention paid to audience reception practices.[5]

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[1] For the sociological point of view, see, among others, *Genere. La costruzione sociale del femminile e del maschile*, eds. Simonetta Piccone Stella and Chiara Saraceno (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996); *Tra i generi. Rileggendo le differenze di genere, di generazione, di orientamento sessuale*, ed. Carmen Leccardi (Milano: Guerini & Associati, 2002); Renate Siebert, *"E femmina, però è bella": tre generazioni di donne al sud* (Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1991). For the phsycological aspects see, among others, Giorgio Tonolo, *Adolescenza e identità*, (Bologna: Il mulino, 1999); Emy Beseghi, *L'isola misteriosa. Adolescenza* (Milano: Mondadori 1996); Anna Oliverio Ferraris, *La ricerca dell'identità* (Firenze: Giunti, 2002).

[2] For more on the concept of the "media-polis," see Roger Silverstone, *Media and morality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007). For the political aspects of television see: Peter Dahlgren, *Television and the public sphere: Citizenship, democracy and the media* (London: Sage, 1995) and Liesbet Van Zoonen, *Entertaining the citizen: When politics and popular culture converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

[3] See, for example, Mariagrazia Fanchi, *Identità mediatiche: televisione e cinema nelle storie di vita di due generazioni di spettatori* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2002); *Le età della Tv: indagine su quattro generazioni di spettatori italiani*, eds. Piermarco Aroldi and Fausto Colombo (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2003); Fausto Colombo et al., *Media e generazioni nella società italiana* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2012).

[4] See, among others, Anna Oliverio Ferraris, *TV per un figlio* (Bari: Laterza, 1995); Mario Morcellini, *Passaggio al futuro. La socializzazione nell'età dei mass media* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1992); Simona Tirocchi, Romana Andò, and Marzia Antenore, *Giovani a parole. Dalla generazione media alla networked generation* (Milano: Guerini, 2002); Pier Cesare Rivoltella, *Screen Generation: Gli adolescenti e le prospettive dell'educazione nell'età dei media digitali* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2006).

[5] See, for example, the research on youths' reception practices in Saveria Capecchi and Mariagrazia Ferrari, *Una baby sitter a Beverly Hills. Immaginario, media e dintorni: rappresentazioni e progetti di bambini e bambine* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1998).

While childhood centrality in media studies has been emphasized by the public debate (and by the moral panic related to childhood), above all, during the affirmation of broadcast television, the adolescent was perceived as elusive, living closed in his/her bedroom, where new devices and content appear, and TV is no longer the only or the main screen. This sort of "transparency" of teenagers as media consumers is moreover aggravated by the limited investment in teen television, excluding reality TV or the so-called "family drama," which are mostly focused on intergenerational issues.[6] The solution to this lack of imagery has been provided by international TV shows that are in tune with the target audience, which are considered the real Italian teen television.[7]

More recently, teenagers have gained a new prominence in media studies, with particular respect to the social media environment. Many quantitative surveys are taking into account, for instance, the premature adoption of mobile devices and all the risks they bring (such as cyberbullying and pornography).[8] Less attention has been dedicated to all the affective, emotional and relational aspects of teen life in online environments, as in the brilliant ethnographic studies by Sherry Turkle and danah boyd.[9] Despite the rise of the so-called Internet Studies, in Italy, the concept of girlhood continues to be unnoticed and neglected.

From the perspective of textual analysis, the definition of girlhood also seems to be problematic. Situating the issue within the framework of gender studies is quite obvious: Nonetheless, gender analysis seems to be concerned with the identity of a woman rather than with the process of "becoming a woman."

When it comes to the broader public debate, the media are often seen as a sort of malignant force that corrupts young people, with all the traditional, patriarchal and catholic values put in jeopardy by the commercial networks during the 1980s (see, for instance, the popular TV show *Drive In*). It is not surprising that hyper-sexualization is one of the most debated issues. What is more relevant is that the public discourse is very ambivalent. On the one hand, body exploitation still triggers moral panic, particularly with respect to the over-sexualization of youths (as in the case of the so-called "velinism").[10] On the other hand, the same performances can be interpreted as a sort of re-elaboration of the feminist idea of girls' self-determination, which eventually engenders sexual liberation.

Another relevant issue for gender studies concerns women's roles in everyday life. The reiteration of the same female roles on TV and in media content in general is clear evidence of women's condition in Italy, and it is likely to strengthen gender stereotypes maintaining the social status quo.[11]

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[6] See, for example, *Un medico in famiglia* (1998 -), *I Cesaroni* (2006-2014), and the most recent *È arrivata la felicità* (2015 -).

[7] This trend is evidenced by the shows *Beverly Hills 90210* to *Dawson's Creek, O.C.*, or more recently, *Pretty Little Liars, Gossip Girls*, etc. In regards to teen television, see Aldo Grasso, Massino Scaglioni, and Stefania Carini, "La linea d'ombra della tv: i giovani e i telefilm Usa." *VITA E PENSIERO, 88*(1), (2005) 95-109.

[8] See, for example, Giovanna Mascheroni, *I ragazzi e la rete. La ricerca EU Kids Online e il caso Italia* (Brescia: La Scuola, 2012); Francesca Pasquali, Barbara Scifo, and Nicoletta Vittadini, *Crossmedia cultures. Giovani e pratiche di consumo digitali* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2010).

[9] See, in this sense, Michela Drusian *Acrobati dello specchio magico: l'esperienza degli adolescenti in chat* (Milano: Guerini e Associati, 2005); Sherry Turkle, *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other* (New York: Basic Books, 2012); danah boyd, *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2014).

[10] Danielle Hipkins, "'Whore-ocracy': Show girls, the beauty trade-off, and mainstream oppositional discourse in contemporary Italy," *Italian Studies 66,* no. 3, (2011): 413-430; Rossella Ghigi, "Nude ambizioni. Il velinismo secondo gli adolescenti," *Studi culturali*, no. *3* (2013): 431-455.

[11] Milly Buonanno, ed., *Il prisma dei generi. Immagini di donne in tv* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2014); Elisabetta Ruspini, ed., *Tv a nudo. Stereotipi, valori ed intrattenimento televisivo* (Roma: Carocci, 2010); Elisa Giomi, "Da Drive in alla Makeover Television. Modelli di femminilità e di rapporto fra i sessi nella TV berlusconiana (e non)," *Studi culturali* (2012): 3-27; Saveria Capecchi, *Identità di genere e media* (Roma: Carocci, 2006); Milly Buonanno, *Visibilità senza potere. Le sorti progressive*

The diffusion and social impact of media, as testified by statistical data, gave raise to new quantitative studies - in such disparate fields as sociology, semiotics and psychology – focused on growing problems: the representation of violence; gender-based stereotypes; the depiction of disability and all forms of diversity; and so on.[12] Whether they are mentioned or not, girlhood issues belong within this framework. In fact, feminist studies are focusing on the representation of women in the media, with the aim of detecting symbolic materials that individuals will use for the definition of their gender identity. However, the textual analysis of gender stereotypes in media discourse is often not matched by studies attempting to explain the decoding processes and audience activities; rather, it is still concerned with the power of the media in affirming and reproducing the identity models that are already provided by a patriarchal society.

As a matter of fact, the attention paid to the text—and its hypostatization—can hardly account for the individualization process described in terms of reflexive postmodernism.[13] In addition, it cannot account for and fails to consider the dis-embedding process through which individuals can eliminate local communitarian rules and all the gender roles prescribed by these rules.

In Italy, a new approach has only recently been developed that deals with both the textual and content analysis context (including the media industry perspective), on the one hand, and audience practices, on the other. As to the international context, on the contrary, the late 1980s reception studies had already provided a new definition of feminist studies that was eventually overturned by McRobbie's reflections on post-feminism in popular culture.[14] In one way, reception studies largely proved the negotiability of role expectations in the interactions between the audience and the media (as in the case of the "referential comments" identified by Hobson in her research on women and soap operas).[15] Reception studies have also dealt with the transnational composition of TV audiences and the creative uses of media content created by people belonging to different geographical and cultural contexts.[16] "In comparison with earlier feminist studies of the media, reception analysis has several advantages. The understanding of audiences as producers of meaning has directed researchers to the day-to-day experiences of audiences and has produced a steadily increasing body of material about the tastes, preferences and pleasures of women."[17]

In another way, a further step forward is needed, which McRobbie describes, from her post-feminist perspective, as the Bridget Jones' phenomenon. Bridget Jones' success, McRobbie asserts, is due to the fact that "the audience is wholly on her side. She ought to be able to find the right man, because she has negotiated that tricky path which requires being independent, earning her own

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ma non magnifiche delle donne giornaliste italiane (Napoli: Liguori, 2005); Cristina Demaria and Roberta Sassatelli, "Visioni del femminile," *Studi culturali,* no. 3 (2013): 375-380.

[12] A great contribution to media and gender studies in Italy comes from the VQPT book series published by RAI. Among others, Milly Buonanno, *L'immagine inattesa: la donna nei programmi televisivi tra reale e immaginario* (Roma: Rai ERI, 1982); Luisella Bolla and Flaminia Cardini, *Carne in scatola. La rappresentazione del corpo nella televisione italiana* (Roma: Rai ERI VQPT, 1999); Loredana Cornero, ed., *Una, nessuna … a quando centomila?: la rappresentazione della donna in televisione* (Roma, Rai ERI VQPT, 2001).

[13] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

[14] For information on reception studies see: Janice Radway, *Reading the romance: Women, patriarchy and popular literature* (London: Verso, 1987); Charlotte Brundson, "Feminism and soap opera," in *Out of focus: Writing on women and the media,* eds. K. Davies, J. Dickey and T. Stratford (London: The Women's Press, 1988). For information on post-feminism as theorized by McRobbie, see Angela McRobbie, *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change* (London: Sage, 2009).

[15] Dorothy Hobson, *Crossroads: The drama of a soap opera* (London: Methuen, Limited 1982).

[16] Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap opera and the melodramatic imagination* (London: Methuen, 1985); E. Katz and T. Liebes, "Interacting with 'Dallas': Cross Cultural Readings of American TV," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 15, no. 1 (1990): 45-66.

[17] Liesbet Van Zoonen, *Feminist media studies* (London: Sage, 1994), 122.

living, standing up for herself against demeaning comments, remaining funny and good humoured throughout, without being angry or too critical of men, without foregoing her femininity, her desires for love and motherhood, her sense of humour and her appealing vulnerability."[18] If feminism is *taken for granted* and broadly accepted in contemporary society, a female audience can identify with Bridget and other female characters in the popular culture, without running the risk of carrying conservative behavior and identity patterns (and, what is more relevant, of *being accused* of doing that, and of relying on a patriarchal value system).

Studying girlhood: a method proposal

Starting with these brief – and necessarily incomplete – findings, I consider it of paramount importance to stimulate a new debate on girlhood issues within the frame of Italian cultural studies, and, more specifically, audience studies. In short, I think it is necessary to reflect on the role played by the audiences in the daily definition of gender and social identities, and it is even more necessary to analyze these practices in the case of teenagers, who are actually experiencing a continuous evolution of their gender roles.

Today, girlhood is a more complex experience than it used to be. The transition to adulthood is characterized by contradictory experiences and is marked by high levels of experimentation and fickleness: 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."[19] In this multiplicity of experiences, the media continue to play a decisive role, but the rules of the game, so to speak, have changed. The media do provide symbolic materials, which are likely to affect identity-building processes. But they do so in a new and more complex way, given that the fragmentation and multiplication of the content offers girls a range of opportunities, cultural resources and nuanced gender-related performances. As we know, traditional audiences were not passive at all, and girls used to define their *girlhood* according to several strategies, so as to create their own meaning out of their readers' or viewers' experiences. The more complex, uncertain and contradictory nature of contemporary womanness, nonetheless, can only be made possible by a richer media landscape, which would allow people to share a new space for identity experimentation. In this sense, Renold and Ringrose's idea of "schizoid subjectivities," referring to female (adolescent) sexual cultures, can ideally apply to gender discourses in online platforms, where identity experiences are multiple, reversible, and contradictory, but decisively day-to-day (far beyond the gender-switching practices emphasized in the era of the so-called Web 1.0).[20]

Studying the relationships between girlhood and the media today requires us to keep in mind three main elements: first, transformations in media consumption due to universal access, always-on connection, and the rise of the new landscape of the convergent culture; secondly, the coexistence of contradictory representations of girlhood involving the tension between the local and the global that are assembled in the audience discourse; and thirdly, the *normalization* of fandom practices by which the most creative consumption practices meet the creative aspects of identity investigation, giving youths a new opportunity to understand their coming of age.[21]

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[18] McRobbie, 22.

[19] Emma Renold and Jessica Ringrose, "Schizoid subjectivities? Re-theorizing teen girls' sexual cultures in an era of 'sexualization.'" *Journal of Sociology* 47, no. 4 (2011): 389-409.

[20] Ibid.

[21] For the notion of "convergence culture," see Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York University Press: New York, 2008).

The digital circulation of content and the new media consumption practices

The recent evolution of the media ecosystem and consumption practices has brought about a totally new scenario that we must address. In fact, it is impossible to present such a complex scenario in a few words: In short, this transformation has essentially resulted in two key elements.

On the one hand, the digital circulation is replacing the very ideas of flow and schedule and, more generally, it is showing that traditional push logic can no longer work in the digital media market, which is characterized by audience empowerment. "Content digital life and circulation depend on both producers and consumers. The former provide multiple 'touch points' for accessing the content, focusing on multi-platform storytelling and audience engagement strategies. The latter manage and improve the circulation of content by appropriating and sharing online meanings and pleasures connected to the consumption experience, and expanding the [media] text beyond its defined boundaries."[22]

On the other hand, a new definition of medium (and media use) as a concept is needed, which deals with all the activities of engaged audiences. In actuality, audiences already have overcome the boundaries between different devices, distribution platforms, and content genres. Expanded media engenders a daily consumption experience that is enabled by endless digital touch points with media texts and with other audiences. With respect to the idea of engaged audiences, I refer to Askwith's idea of TV engagement: "engagement describes the larger system of material, emotional, intellectual, social and psychological investments a viewer forms through their interactions with the expanded television text."[23]

The previous aspects are both useful in reflecting on girlhood, especially if we consider that the main actor in the new scenario is the youngest generation, which is engaged in original and innovative practices that take advantage of new technologies to explore media content (and, by means of the media content, their identity). The so-called Gen-Z (as in the market definition of young people) passionately looks for new content and experiences in digital platforms, paying little attention to traditional distribution logic. These youths not only switch from one screen to another, they do not perceive any boundaries between them.

Transformations of TV consumption in Italy are very useful to discuss and provide insight into the broader evolution of media systems.[24] Among all generations, Gen-Z makes the most intensive use of the smartphone to watch TV content, sharing the experience of time-shifting and place-shifting, well beyond the traditional organization of TV consumption. As a consequence, and at the same time, we must deal with the idea that teenagers are actually a post-TV generation (in the sense of post-TV screen) while their viewing experiences are enriched by device availability and by grassroots and transmedia strategies.[25] As to the well-discussed dimension of engagement, teenagers are told to be extremely active, interactive and participatory: They exploit multi-screening in order to satisfy their knowledge needs (searching online), to share comments with others, or to produce their

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[22] Alberto Marinelli and Romana Andò, "From linearity to circulation. How TV flow Is changing in networked media space," *TECNOSCIENZA: Italian Journal of Science & Technology Studies* 7, no. 2 (2017): 103-128. See also John Fiske, "The cultural economy of fandom" in *The adoring audience: Fan culture and popular media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992): 30-49.

[23] Ivan Askwith, *Television 2.0: Reconceptualizing TV as an engagement medium.* Master degree of Science in Comparative Media Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2007), 154.

[24] Romana Andò and Alberto Marinelli, "Multiscreening and social TV. The changing landscape of TV consumption in Italy," *View. Journal of European Television History & Culture* 3, no. 6 (2014): 24-36; Alberto Marinelli and Giandomenico Celata, eds., *Connecting Television. La televisione al tempo di Internet* (Milano: Guerini e Associati, 2012); Massimo Scaglioni, *La tv dopo la tv. Il decennio che ha cambiato la televisione: scenario, offerta, pubblico* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2011).

[25] Romana Andò, "What does TV actually mean? New consumer experience and generations." *Participations. Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 11, no. 2 (2014): 156-181.

own user-generated content. For Gen-Z, media and identity building are connected in a deeper and more significant way than they were for previous generations, both in terms of *quantity* (the range of available models) and *quality* (the opportunity for a deep appropriation of meanings and social sharing).

Online environments – and social media in particular – have become the public space in which to discuss the representations of reality offered by the media: the public space that, according to Radway, was not available for female readers in Smithton, who were not allowed to transform private feelings into shared feelings, and therefore into public and political issues.[26] In this sense, the show *13 Reasons Why*, which was distributed by Netflix in April 2017, is quite emblematic, as it was one of the most discussed TV-related issues on social media in one month.[27] In my research, I analyzed the comments posted by young people – mostly girls – and I conducted a series of interviews with girls aged 15 to 25 years.[28] As a result, teenagers do not agree with the moral panic that seems to surround the program, which was described as presenting socially dangerous content. Nor did the youths seem to consider *13 Reasons Why* as a pedagogical program about becoming an adult: For them, it is a strong opportunity for sharing the anxieties and difficulties related to typical teen-age issues such as bullying, love, sexuality and friendship. Along with the widespread success of cult products – such as TV series or original Netflix shows – we must keep in mind that this shared imagery provides youths with a unique opportunity to discuss their emotions: something they could hardly do in their local, daily spaces of living.[29]

Schizophrenic female imagery (but not too much) between tradition and innovation, global and local

The aforementioned TV show leads me to the following issue: the convergence process allowing connected audiences to access content *anytime* and *anywhere*. This transformation has been experienced by different targets. For adolescents, though, it is an extraordinary opportunity to discover new content beyond the boundaries of the national media systems. In actuality, this is something previous generations had already experienced by means of importation (American teen-dramas have always been very popular in Italy) or by means of illegal practices (downloading and streaming). More recently, global communications brought with it a huge library of audiovisual platforms such as YouTube and OTT (Over the Top Television).

At the same time, we are witnessing the emergence of a "cult-textuality" culture in which some content is apparently considered not-to-be-missed (due to its real or alleged quality), and audiences can immediately recognize it. In this sense, digital circulation goes hand-in-hand with the process of dis-embedding, removing the ties between generations, places, and symbolic universes provided by traditional media. We may consider, in this regard, the OTT libraries, which make old-fashioned content available for binge watching, allowing people to read the media texts in a totally different way from the decoding schemes imagined at the time of ideation and production. With respect to Netflix, the 1990s cult show *Friends* is an ideal example, as it has become part of Gen-Z's contemporary imagery. Similarly, revivals and re-boots can both satisfy traditional nostalgic audiences and contemporary audiences interested in the cultural heritage of previous generations (i.e. *Twin Peaks* or *Gilmore Girls*).

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[26] Janice Radway, *Reading the romance: Women, patriarchy and popular literature* (London: Verso, 1987).

[27] There were 406,985 interactions (Twitter and Facebook) in one month, while the number of subcribers in Italy totals 300,000.

[28] I refer to the ethnographic (qualitative interviews) and netnographic (Facebook pages analysis) research I conducted at Sapienza University in May 2017.

[29] Massimo Scaglioni, *TV di culto: la serialità televisiva americana e il suo fandom* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2006).

Teen schizoid subjectivity is then mirrored by the schizophrenic structure of the imagery, which is made of different images that are often in contrast with each other. Different images can also produce different values and representations that are difficult to put together in a meaningful way and to be accepted based upon the principles of socially-accepted tastes.[30] For audience and girlhood studies, therefore, the real challenge is the understanding of the connection between cult-texts and engaged audiences. As in De Certeau's idea of trajectories, we must investigate the meaningful bricolages that assemble contemporary quality TV products, such as *13* or *Stranger Things* (with all their references, not accidentally, to 1980s and 1990s imagery), *Friends'* old-fashioned characters, *Gilmore Girls'* inter-generational theme, and *Orange is the New Black*'s sexualization discourse.[31]

We also must consider that the digital ecosystem blurs the boundaries between different formats and media in such a way that dystopian fantasy heroines (*Hunger Games*, *Divergent* etc.) go hand in hand with the "ordinary celebrities" of the Web (*Sofia Viscardi*, *Cleo Toms*, *Greta Menchi*), and the protagonists of American teen-dramas (the aforementioned *13*, or *Pretty Little Liars* or *Degrassi*) share the daily life of those on reality television (*Friends*, *Ginnaste*, etc.).

Drawing on these examples (from my research activity at the Sapienza University), two considerations are possible.[32] First, even though media consumption is still largely age-driven and gender-driven, when it comes to content *production*, the audience's creativity looks like a more complex bricolage. Secondly, in media consumption, local content (i.e. reality TV and YouTube content creators) coexists with transnational content, or even with global patterns that are not geographically grounded. Addressing this scenario by only relying on textual analysis could run the risk of focusing on hegemonic definitions of culture, as required by producers, rather than on the appropriation processes that are typical of young women in search of a definition of their girlhood. On the contrary, an analysis of girls' discourse on online platforms could help us to understand the audience's ability to find a momentary point of common interest: dystopic heroine Katniss Everdeen, teenagers' ambiguity represented by Lorelai Gilmore or Hannah Baker, or teenagers' normality typical of successful vloggers such as Sofia Viscardi or Cleo Toms.[33] In all these cases, cultural and emotional proximity are not part of the original story: It is rather rebuilt on the web, and namely, by means of audience discourse.

The search for authenticity is expressed by realism, which can be both represented (as in the vloggers' room or in the hidden cameras of reality TV) or experienced as such only at the emotional level. In doing so, and in any case, girls apparently transform the meaningless consumption trajectories in which they look for meaning and pleasure.

Identity co-creation. What we learn about girlhood from fandom experiences

Several times in the preceding paragraphs, I referred to media content as cult objects. Cult-textuality, in its turn, has to do with fandom culture, and it reminds us of the link between the engagement and participative cultures.

Two issues related to fan studies seem to be relevant in defining girlhood (without mentioning the progressive feminization of fandom itself): first, fan subjectivity and its relationship with cult objects; secondly, the creative and productive nature of fandom as a public space for

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[30] Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction: critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979).

[31] Michel De Certeau, *The practice of everyday life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

[32] Romana Andò, "The ordinary celebrity: Italian young vloggers and the definition of girlhood," *Film, Fashion & Consumption* 5, no. 1 (2016): 123-139; Romana Andò, "'Spacchettiamo!'. Il fenomeno dei video haul nella relazione tra adolescenti e fashion brand," *Comunicazioni Sociali* 1 (2017).

[33] Stuart Hall, "Who needs identity?" in Hall, S., and du Gay, P., (eds.). *Questions of cultural identity*, (London: Sage, 1996).

detecting and sharing the meanings of media texts. With respect to fandom subjectivity, Matt Hills suggests that "it is important to view fans as players in the sense that they become immersed in non-competitive and affective play. […] What is distinctive about this view of play is that (i) it deals with the emotional attachment of the fan and (ii) it suggests that play is not always caught up in a pre-established 'boundedness' or set of cultural boundaries, but may instead imaginatively create its own set of boundaries and its own auto-'context'. […] Fans, I am suggesting, create the conventions that they attend through subjective and affective play."[34]

In other words, the relationship between fans and the cult object is a creative game, through which the adolescent explores his/her identity not only as a fan, but also as an individual. Fans use symbolic materials offered by media in order to build their own playground, where they can perform their own representations. Cosplay practices, in this perspective, can be referred to as self-performances based on the identity kit provided by the media content. Within fandom's normalization scenario, this practice turns into the activity of the detection and appropriation of a fashion outfit seen on TV and then worn in everyday life.[35] With respect to girlhood, these practices can be seen as performative opportunities, within the framework of cult-textuality.

The creative dimension of fandom, however, is symptomatic of the audience's ability to focus on the most relevant issues in the media text. From fanfiction to fanzine, to fan-art, to the more recent mimes and animated gifs, the so-called textual productivity helps us in clearly identifying the primary meanings attributed by the audience to the content.[36] The so-called shipping phenomenon is an aspect of this process. By inventing their favorite (canon and non-canon) couples of characters, fans reveal an emotional investment in characters, as well as the relational models upon which they draw. The slash versions of media content, for instance, show us the way teenagers deal with homosexual identity, which is temporarily reified in the texts, and at the same time, put to the test. As to the aforementioned media universe, we can consider the contrast between *Hunger Games'* couples *Everlark* (Katniss Everdeen/Peeta Mellark) and *Everthorne* (Katniss Everdeen/Gale Hawthorne); *13 Reasons Why*'s canonic (Hannah Baker and Clay) and non-canonic couples (Alex Standall and Justin Foley), or finally, *Clissa*, the liaison between the vloggers Cleo Toms and Jalissa J performed on YouTube and discussed by fans.

The emotional attachment to characters is also an opportunity for youths to critically identify with them – despite the widely accepted idea of fans as uncritical consumers – and dynamically explore another possible world made of different identities and relational models (Bruner). Once again, we can consider *13 Reasons Why*, whose audience deals instinctively with the protagonist's relational (and sexual) behavior, her deviant action (suicide) and her friends' ethical (or immoral) choices. The latter is a sort of projective activity that we can summarize in the "what would I do in her/their place" or even the "what I did in her/their place" dilemma.

Provisional conclusions

At the end of this contribution, I will try to be self-critical.

The first point I intended to address is the lack of definition of girlhood studies in Italy. Actually, the lack of a definition of girlhood studies *as such* did not prevent Italian research from

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[34] Matt Hills, *Fan cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 112.

[35] Romana Andò, "Fashion and fandom on TV and social media: Claire Underwood's power dressing," *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty* 6, no. 2 (2015): 207-231; Romana Andò, "Fashion fandom and TV quality drama: From poaching to everyday identity performance through Pinterest" in *Fashion tales. Feeding the imaginary,* eds. Emanuela Mora and Marco Pedroni (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2017).

[36] John Fiske, "The cultural economy of fandom," in *The adoring audience: Fan culture and popular media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 30-49.

providing theoretical contributions and significant research on girlhood, mostly in the fields of reception studies, audience studies and textual analysis. However, this does mean that these contributions are not part of a consistent framework, as has occurred in other countries. In addition, it means that Italian media studies – also due to their short tradition – have paid too little attention, for too long of a time, to teenagers' identity-building process (while mostly focusing on children and adults), as proved by the very small amount of dialogue in sociology and psychoanalysis.[37]

With respect to the second issue, the female representation, it is important to remember that the Italian media system experienced a late transition from broadcast TV to the new, digital system. This traditional scenario also resulted in very conservative imagery, and feminist studies were seen – and they actually were forced to be – antagonist to the Italian gendered media.[38]

Finally, I addressed the issue of participatory audiences and fandom. When it comes to creative, productive and participatory practices, we can obviously run the risk of overestimating those members of the audience that can take advantage of technological innovation and high media literacy (i.e. in a media market like the U.S.). If we look at the whole picture, we know that different people reveal very different abilities in negotiating the symbolic material offered by the media. In this sense, it would be of fundamental importance to investigate different historical-cultural contexts and to promote those studies based on a transnational approach, especially when it comes to a global cult, which delivers transnational content.

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[37] See McRobbie.

[38] Cecilia Penati and Anna Sfardini, *La tv delle donne. Brand, programmi e pubblici* (Milano: Unicopli, 2015).

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