



COMMUNICATING YOUTH REPRESENTATION IN THE STREAMING ERA: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

The effects and impact of emotional and behavioural reactions in fiction series are rarely considered in systematic reviews. This systematic review considers research studies published in the last ten years related to youth representation in fiction series. It includes 18 research studies published in the last decade in 4 selected databases: EBSCOhost, PubMed, Dialnet and Google Scholar. The results of the study indicate a greater display of marginalised genders and sexual identities, as well as various practices of prevention and exposure of suicide and violence.

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1. Introduction

The consumption of fiction series on streaming platforms has become part of the daily lives of young people. Streaming platforms allow audience members to consume the content they want when they want and on the device of their choice, becoming an à la carte menu. This has led to the boom in streaming on any device, without relying on a television and/or a specific schedule for consuming a series or programme (Bentley & Lottridge, 2019).

Fiction series in the youth genre, those aimed at a specific audience in transition from adolescence to adulthood, have been around for decades. However, each series adapts to the current situation of the generations that consume them. In the 1990s, series tended to focus on issues related to social classes and romances. In the early 2000s, series featured themes of mystery, fantasy, science fiction, and even musical stories (Forni, 2020).

In the 2010s, youth fiction series began to show situations related to young people's mental health more openly and explicitly. Furthermore, it was the phenomenon and high audience ratings of the series *13 Reasons Why* (2017-2020) that sparked concern about the quality of the representation of "sensitive" issues to the audience. There was an increase in the number of suicides among young people at the same time that the series was released. Eventually, Netflix removed an explicit scene of youth suicide from the series. However, the mental health of those who consumed the production had already been affected (Hong et al., 2019; Raya Bravo et al., 2018; Rosa et al., 2019).

Systematic reviews related to youth fiction series and streaming platform content have focused on different variables, such as the mental health of young people and the state of the art of suicide representation in fiction after the release of *13 Reasons Why* (Guinovart et al., 2023). Previous research indicates that the quality of youth fiction series is of utmost importance due to the potential impact they may have on the audience, especially those who are in a stage of self-discovery and identity formation (Raya Bravo et al., 2018). However, it cannot be ruled out that fiction series are a medium that can convey positive values to young people, as well as a channel that can teach them about topics with which they are not completely familiar (Allen, 2023).

It should also be noted that the current generation of young people is the first to grow up with technology and, from their earliest days, has had access to electronic devices as a means of consuming entertainment (Morduchowicz, 2018). Studies related to the effects and impact of streaming content are relatively recent, and there are not many systematic reviews. This systematic review aims to fill a gap in the state of the art, considering studies published in the last ten years related to the representation of young people in fiction series. It also considers the possible impact on young audiences who spend time consuming this content.

2. Methods

The systematic review considered various databases as the main source of information for searching for research articles. The results obtained from the following databases were considered: EBSCO, PubMed, Dialnet, and Google Scholar. The main keywords used for the search engine were: "YOUTH + REPRESENTATION + NETFLIX" and "YOUTH AND NETFLIX AND REPRESENTATION". Likewise, when considering studies in English and Spanish, the direct translation of these terms into Spanish was used: "JÓVENES + REPRESENTACIÓN + NETFLIX".

Research articles published in the last ten years (between 2014 and 2024) in open-access journals and/or research magazines were considered (publications that did not meet these criteria were excluded). However, when applying the search criteria, the results obtained were published in the period 2020-2024.

The PICEC technique for social sciences was used to carry out the systematic review. For the population, studies that focused on fiction series and/or the audience of such content were considered. The representation of young people was considered as the point of intervention. The aim was to construct a theoretical framework of where the representation of the youth experience in fiction series currently stands and the degree of quality of this representation since the boom in streaming platforms.

Likewise, the comparison of the study lies in the relationship between the representation of young people in fiction series and the possible impact this may have on the audience. On the other hand, the context of the systematic review considered articles published globally in the two main languages of the review (English and Spanish).

The systematic review considers social representation to be the main variable, based on the previous work of Moscovici (Moscovici, 1979), who points out that social representation is an organised body of "psychic and social knowledge and activities" that allow individuals to understand an aspect of social and/or physical reality. The inclusion criteria were defined based on those aspects considered most appropriate for the objective of the systematic review and the state of the art that was sought to be constructed.

2.1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

As shown in Table 1, the main inclusion criteria for the systematic review were that: 1) the language in which the article was published was English and/or Spanish, 2) the research focused on fiction series (studies were considered that had as their main variables the impact of content, the representation of young people, and those that used methods such as content analysis), 3) studies that explicitly express the results (regardless of the approach), 4) research articles whose object of research and/or subject of study are humans or the content of fiction series, and 5) studies that specifically analyse elements within audiovisual narratives and whose main variables are the representation of violence and/or its impact.

On the other hand, the exclusion criteria consisted of: 1) research articles published in a language other than English and/or Spanish (as well as publications that were not research articles), 2) research that did not explicitly focus on fiction series and/or the representation of young people in such audiovisual productions, 3) studies that did not explicitly express the results obtained (whether through qualitative, quantitative and/or mixed approaches), 4) studies where humans and/or the content of fiction series were not the object of the research or the main subject of study, and 5) studies that analysed different aspects within the audiovisual narrative other than the representation of young people.

It is important to note that no restrictions were considered in terms of gender, ethnicity and/or country of origin of the participants in the research articles selected for the systematic review, nor of the authors in any of the publications.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
1) Articles written in English and/or Spanish.	1) Research articles written in a language other than English and/or Spanish.
2) Research focused on fiction series (considering studies on the impact of consumption of content in fiction series that depict violence and studies on the depiction of violence using content analysis methods).	2) Research that does not explicitly focus on fiction series and the representation of violence in such productions.
3) Studies that explicitly express the results (whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed).	3) Studies that do not explicitly express the results (of any nature, whether qualitative, quantitative and/or mixed).
4) Research articles where the subjects of study are humans and/or the content of fiction series.	4) Studies that do not consider humans and/or the content of fiction series as the main subject of study or object of research.
5) Studies that specifically analyse aspects within audiovisual narratives and have the representation of violence or its impact as the main variable.	5) Studies that analyse other aspects within audiovisual narratives and do not focus specifically on the representation of violence in fiction series and/or audiovisual productions.

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

2.2. Articles included and excluded

As shown in Table 2, 18 publications were found in the selected databases: EBSCOhost, PubMed, Dialnet, and Google Scholar, based on a search of keywords with filters for years (2014-2024) and languages of publication (English and Spanish). Of these, nine were excluded because they had a different subject matter than the content of the fiction series, did not have young people as the subject of study, considered historical figures as the focus of the study, were not research articles, and/or considered the impact of media other than streaming platforms (such as social media and/or cinema). It should also be noted that some articles were found twice in two different databases, as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2. Articles obtained through the databases

Author and year of publication	Title	Type of publication	Language	Database	Subject of study	Meets inclusion criteria
(Mateos-Pérez, 2021)	Research on Spanish fiction television series. A critical review study (1998–2020)	Academic journal article	Spanish	Google Scholar	Previous studies on Spanish fiction series.	Yes
(Pallejá, 2023)	Cristina Fernandez Cubas's haunted houses: menace and sentience	Academic journal article	English	Google Scholar	The narrative of Cristina Fernández Cubas's works as contributions to the use of the "sensitive house" in the horror genre.	No
(Granados-León et al., 2022)	Bibliometric analysis and thematic review of studies on children's consumption from 1974 to 2019	Academic journal article	English	Google Scholar	The influence of social marketing on children's consumption of products	No
(Rendón, 2020)	A First-Generation Scholar's Path to Knowledge	Book chapter	English	Google Scholar	Laura Rendón's Self-History and Theory of Self-History	No
(Villarreal et al., 2024)	Eating Disorders and Hallyu: A Literature Review	Academic journal article	Spanish	Google Scholar	The relationship between consumption of Korean content (K-pop, K-beauty, K-drama, and mukbang) and the increase in the prevalence of eating disorders and food intake	No
(Vasquez Mego & Diaz Balcazar, 2024)	Audiovisual language in contemporary cinema: a review of the literature between 2020 and 2024	Academic journal article	Spanish	Google Scholar	Globalisation, audiovisual language and sensitive issues in cinema.	No
(Martín Calvete, 2024)	Mechanisms of association between the use of digital social networks and suicidal behaviour in adolescents and young adults: a systematic review	Academic journal article	Spanish	Google Scholar	The increase in suicide among adolescents and young adults and its possible relationship with social media use.	No
(Manfredi & Bartolini, 2023a)	Multilingual and Multi-Generational Italian Identity in a Netflix Series: Subtitling Generazione 56k (2021) into English	Academic journal article	English	EBSCOhost Dialnet	The representation of Italians in Netflix fiction series: Generazione 56k.	Yes

(Garrido Muñoz de Arenillas & Zaptsi, 2021)	Archetypes, Me Too, Time's Up and the representation of diverse women on TV	Academic journal article	Spanish	EBSCOhost Dialnet	The representation of women in Netflix and HBO fiction series.	Yes
(Mussies, 2024)	"The Fate of England Rested With a 22-Year-Old Boy" – Media Representations of the Youth and Childhood of King Alfred the Great.	Academic journal article	English	EBSCOhost	The representation of "Alfred the Great" in the media (including Netflix).	No
(Albertalli et al., 2024)	Alice Oseman.	Periodical	English	EBSCOhost	The Heartstopper series by Alice Oseman.	No
(McKenzie et al., 2021)	Young People's Perspectives and Understanding of the Suicide Story in 13 Reasons Why	Academic journal article	English	PubMed	Young people's perspectives on the portrayal of youth suicide in the fictional series "13 Reasons Why"	Yes
(Vázquez Rodríguez et al., 2020)	The representation of queer adolescent identities in 'Sex Education' (Netflix, 2019-)	Academic journal article	Spanish	Dialnet	The representation of adolescents who identify as queer in the fictional series 'Sex Education'.	Yes
(Ferrera, 2020)	Construction of the adolescent character in European television series. Netflix original series as a case study	Academic journal article	Spanish	Dialnet	Young characters in 23 European fiction series on Netflix.	Yes
(Simón Astudillo, 2023)	"Only yes means yes": Analysis of sexual violence in streaming series and its reception by young audiences	Academic journal article	Spanish	Dialnet	The representation of the #MeToo movement in streaming fiction series and the perception of young audiences regarding this representation.	Yes
(Gutiérrez Lozano et al., 2020)	New online television content distribution offerings and their reception by young audiences	Book chapter	Spanish	Dialnet	The perception of Spanish youth audiences regarding the content offered by television channels and streaming platforms.	No

Source: Own work, 2025.

The evaluation of the quality of the research articles included in the study was based on the AXIS system (Downes et al., 2016), which considered fourteen questions shown in Annex 1. The first quality criterion questioned whether the research objectives were clear, whether the study design was appropriate, whether the sample considered was appropriate, whether the study population was clearly defined, whether the selection of subjects was adequate, whether the variables were appropriate, and whether the instruments used had prior validity or were validated at the time of the study. Likewise, it was questioned whether the description of methods was adequate, whether the results were consistent with the study, whether the results of the analysis were described in the methods presented, whether there was a justification for the discussion and conclusion of results, whether the limitations of the study were explicitly pointed out, whether there were conflicts of interest that could have affected the author's point of view of interpretation, and finally, whether ethical approval or consent from the study participants was obtained. The research articles analysed met most of the study quality criteria.

3. Results. Synthesis strategy

The synthesis strategy for the systematic review can be seen in the results section, in Table 3. Here, the authors of the research articles were listed first. This was followed by the title of the publication, the methodology applied in the study, the theories used, the main variables (or variable in the case of only one being identified), the main results, and finally, the relevance and/or contribution it provided.

Table 3. Summary of selected articles

Author(s)	Title	Methodology used	Theory(ies) applied	Variable(s)	Results	Relevance and/or contribution
Mateos-Pérez	Research on Spanish fiction television series. A critical review study (1998-2020)	Search, evaluation, synthesis and analysis of previous research.	-Theory of film practice	Previous research on Spanish fiction series.	The publication of research related to Spanish fiction series has been on the rise since the growth of streaming, with studies on content being the main focus (rather than audiences and production).	The study presents a relevant contribution on the current state of research focused on streaming platforms. It also presents the main themes on which studies have previously focused (including specific topics such as feminism).
Manfredi & Bartolini	Multilingual and Multi-Generational Italian Identity in a Netflix Series: Subtitling <i>Generazione 56k</i> (2021) into English	-Descriptive translation study methodology. -Qualitative analysis of "multilingualism".	Not specified	-The content of the Italian fiction series <i>Generazione 56k</i> -The language used in the subtitles of the fiction series <i>Generazione 56k</i>	-There are some phrases in the dialogues that are lost when translating from one language to another. -The language used by the characters changes according to the generation and/or age range they represent.	The study highlights the importance of translating the characters' dialogue due to the potential loss of meaning. Likewise, series such as <i>Generazione 56k</i> stand out from other series due to the way they characterise the characters they show on screen.
Garrido Muñoz de	Archetypes, Me Too, Time's Up	Qualitative and quantitative	Neo-archetypal theory	The representation of	In the wake of the #MeToo movement,	The study shows the current state of the

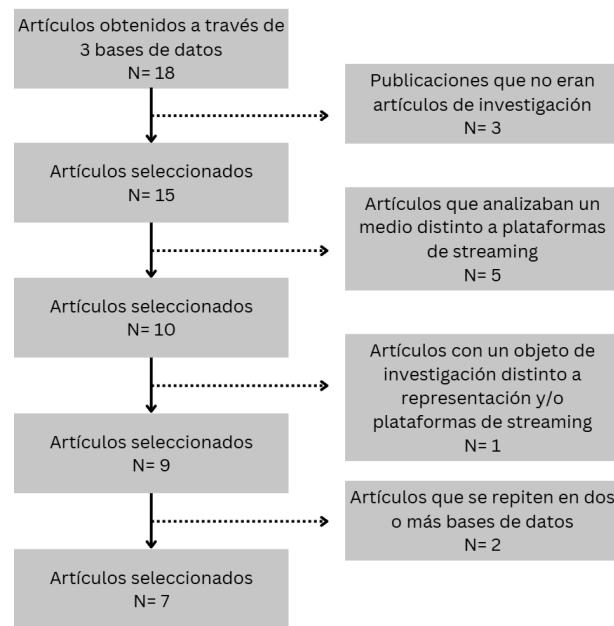
Arenillas & Zaptsi	and the representation of diverse women on TV	analysis of the screen time given to women in and the quality of their representation.		women in fiction series (including their sociodemographic profile on screen and the behaviour or stereotypes attributed to these characters).	female characters shown on screen are more complex and diverse than in previous times.	representation of women in fiction series and how stereotypes previously established by other audiovisual productions have been subverted.
McKenzie et al.	Young People's Perspectives and Understanding of the Suicide Story in <i>13 Reasons Why</i>	Semi-structured interviews with 25 adolescents and/or young people regarding their perspective on the youth fiction series <i>13 Reasons Why</i>	Not specified	-The representation of young people in the fiction series <i>13 Reasons Why</i> . -Teenagers' perception of the youth series <i>13 Reasons Why</i>	The teen fiction series <i>13 Reasons Why</i> is perceived in a somewhat negative light by the audience that previously consumed it. Some pointed out that it was very "dramatised" and that the conversations it generated were due to the shock of the explicit suicide scene.	This study presents a relevant model for approaching young audiences and allows us to understand their perception of how youth issues are represented on screen.
Vázquez Rodríguez et al.	The representation of queer adolescent identities in 'Sex Education' (Netflix, 2019-)	Content analysis of the youth fiction series <i>Sex Education</i>	Queer theory and the concept of intersectionality	-The representation of adolescent characters who are part of the LGBTIQ+ community in the youth fiction series <i>Sex Education</i>	-Although <i>Sex Education</i> depicts characters of different sexual identities, it propagates stereotypes such as that of the homophobic aggressor. - <i>Sex Education</i> could be an educational tool for teenagers to learn about sexuality.	The study presents an analytical model that allows for the identification of relevant aspects within the narratives of youth fiction series, which can be adapted to more than one fiction series.
Ferrera	Construction of the adolescent	Analysis of the characterisation	Not specified	-The characterisation of	-Although there is a certain degree	The study presents a method and model of

	character in European serial fiction. The Netflix original series as a case study	on of adolescent characters in 23 European Netflix original fiction series, applying a mixed methodology that analyses a total of 132 adolescent characters.		adolescent characters in European productions released through the Netflix streaming platform.	of equality between the presence of female and male characters in the genre, those who identify as heterosexual continue to predominate. -In most youth productions, the main characters are searching for their identity.	analysis relevant to the current state of streaming fiction content and series that allows for the analysis of these productions aimed at young audiences.
Simón Astudillo	"Only yes means yes": Analysis of sexual violence in streaming series and its reception by young audiences	Mixed methodology consisting of content analysis of five series available for streaming to recognise how sexuality is represented, complemented by interviews with 20 young consumers of streaming platform content.	Not specified	-The representation of sexuality (including sexual violence) in fiction series on streaming platforms. -Young people's perceptions of the representation of sexuality in fiction series.	-The representation of sexuality has advanced, but it still does not explicitly address the problems that arise from sexual violence and/or issues related to consent.	The study presents relevant information on the current state of issues related to sexuality and sexual violence in fictional series in the streaming era, as well as a content analysis model that may be useful for future audiovisual productions.

Source: Own elaboration based on Ferrera, 2020; Garrido Muñoz de Arenillas & Zaptsi, 2021; Manfredi & Bartolini, 2023b; Mateos-Pérez, 2021; McKenzie et al., 2021; Mussies, 2024; Simón Astudillo, 2023; Vázquez Rodríguez et al., 2020; Villarreal et al., 2024.

As shown in Figure 1, in the flow chart, 18 studies available in four databases were initially considered, of which three were discarded because they were not research articles (some being book chapters and/or newspaper articles). Subsequently, 15 research articles were considered, of which five were discarded because they analysed a different medium (such as cinema and/or literature). Then, of the ten remaining articles, one was discarded because its object of study was different from that of the systematic review (the representation of a historical figure).

Finally, with nine articles remaining, two were omitted because they were repeated in two databases, being available in both databases with the search keywords. Therefore, seven research articles were selected to carry out the synthesis of the systematic review.

Figure 1. Flow chart

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The systematic review, which consisted of the analysis and synthesis of seven research articles related to youth representation in the streaming era, considering publications from the last decade, found that the main elements to highlight were the fact that most of the studies focus on characterising the way in which fiction series try to represent aspects such as sexuality, mental health status and/or youth experience in their narratives. However, a significant portion focuses on young people's perceptions of specific variables (such as the representation of a particular theme, as in the case of mental health in *13 Reasons Why*).

Research focused on fiction series, and specifically those that seek to understand the representation of particular themes, relies on the construction of content analysis models as its main technique. However, when it comes to quantitative variables, questionnaires and/or surveys are used.

Among the main conclusions of previous studies, it is worth noting that, despite positive progress in giving greater visibility to people of genders and sexual identities that had previously been marginalised in audiovisual productions, the way in which fiction series represent sensitive topics such as suicide and/or physical or mental violence still has a long way to go to be perceived more positively by the audience and avoid having a negative impact on those who devote their time to consuming fiction series.

4.1. Limitations

In the development of the systematic review, there were some limitations, such as the fact that only four databases were considered, and although there were no limitations in terms of country, and/or context, language was a limitation that could have affected the number of results. Furthermore, the data analysis period may have been impacted by the fact that the studies analysed are based on data from the last five years and no data was obtained from when the streaming platform boom initially occurred, which experts consider to be 2017 (Bentley & Lottridge, 2019).

4.2. Recommendations for future studies

It is suggested that future studies include a greater number of research articles to analyse, as well as a larger number of databases, in addition to considering studies in languages other than English and Spanish and evaluating the possibility of expanding the search terms. On the other hand, it is important to note that most studies related to representation in fiction series focused on audiovisual productions released in English or set in European countries.

This is why they may only portray the situation of the white American population, with white teenagers continuing to play a more prominent role in youth fiction series (Raya Bravo et al., 2018).

Therefore, it is suggested that studies analysing audiovisual productions from different countries released in a greater number of languages besides English and Spanish be considered.

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Appendix 1. Quality assessment of included articles

Criterion	Study: <i>Research on Spanish fiction television series. A critical review study (1998-2020)</i> (Mateos-Pérez, 2021)	Study: <i>Multilingual and Multi-Generational Italian Identity in a Netflix Series: Subtitling Generazione 56k (2021) into English</i> (Manfredi & Bartolini, 2023b)	Study: <i>Archetypes, Me Too, Time's Up, and the Representation of Diverse Women on TV</i> (Garrido Muñoz de Arenillas & Zaptsi, 2021)	Study: <i>Young People's Perspectives and Understanding of the Suicide Story in 13 Reasons Why</i> (McKenzie et al., 2021)	Study: <i>The representation of queer adolescent identities in 'Sex Education' (Netflix, 2019-)</i> (Vázquez Rodríguez et al., 2020)	Study: <i>Construction of the adolescent character in European fiction. Netflix original series as a case study</i> (Ferrera, 2020)	Study: <i>"Only yes means yes": Analysis of sexual violence in streaming series and its reception by young audiences</i> (Simón Astudillo, 2023)
Were the research objectives clear?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Was the study design appropriate?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Was the sample adequate?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Is the population clearly defined?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Was the subject selection process adequate?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Were the variables appropriate?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Were validated instruments used, or instruments that had been previously piloted/validated in other publications?	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Are the methods adequately described?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Are the results consistent?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Are the results of the analysis described in the methods presented?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Are the discussion and conclusion justified by the results ?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Are the limitations of the study noted?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Is there any conflict of interest that could affect the author's interpretation?	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Was ethical approval and/or participant consent obtained?		No	No	Yes	No	No	No

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.