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# Television Fiction Series Targeted at Young Audience: Plots and Conflicts Portrayed in a Teen Series

Las series televisivas juveniles: tramas y conflictos en una «teen series»

## ABSTRACT

This paper presents the main findings of a research project on teen series, which are television fiction series featuring teenagers and specifically targeted at a young audience. The analysis of the portrayal of young people in television fictional series specifically targeted at a young audience has a meaningful value both for television production and for audience reception. In fact, the potential consumers of the teen series –the teenagers– find themselves at a key moment in the construction of their identities. First, the article presents a review of the background literature on young people's portrayal in television fiction series. Secondly, it discusses the concept of teen series and their relationship with youth consumption. Finally, the article presents a case study that consisted of a content analysis of the North American teen drama *Dawson's Creek*. Content analysis was conducted on a representative sample of three seasons of the show, in order to analyse two groups of variables: the variables of the characters' personalities and those of plot and story characteristics. The article discusses the results of the second group of variables, focusing on the main characteristics of the plots and on the characters' roles in the development and resolution of the conflicts. Acceptance of one's personal identity, love and friendship have been identified as the most highly recurring themes. In addition, the importance of social relationships among the characters in the development of plots and conflicts has been highlighted.

## RESUMEN

Se presentan los principales hallazgos de un estudio sobre las «teen series», es decir las series de ficción televisiva protagonizadas por personajes adolescentes y dirigidas expresamente a una audiencia juvenil. El análisis del retrato de los jóvenes representados en productos específicamente dirigidos a un público juvenil tiene un valor muy significativo tanto por la producción de ficción como por la recepción, ya que los consumidores potenciales se encuentran en un momento clave del proceso de construcción de sus identidades. Después de repasar los principales antecedentes en el estudio de la representación de los jóvenes en la ficción televisiva, se describe el marco conceptual relativo a las «teen series» y se discute su relación con el consumo juvenil. Sucesivamente se presenta un estudio de caso que consiste en un análisis de contenido de la serie norteamericana «Dawson's creek», realizado sobre una muestra representativa de tres temporadas de la serie, para analizar dos grupos de variables: variables relativas a los personajes y variables relativas a las tramas y a los conflictos. Se discuten los resultados relativos al segundo grupo de variables, con particular atención a las características de las tramas y al papel de los personajes en el desarrollo y en la resolución de las mismas. La aceptación de la identidad personal, el amor y la amistad han resultado ser las temáticas más recurrentes. Además, las relaciones sociales entre los personajes han resultado ejercer un papel fundamental en el desarrollo de las tramas y de los conflictos.

## KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Young people, teen series, television fiction, characters, content analysis, audience, adolescents.  
Jóvenes, series juveniles, ficción televisiva, personajes, análisis de contenido, audiencia, adolescentes.

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## 1. Introduction

Research into television fiction and young people is of meaningful value when analysing a fiction genre in which young people are the main characters. The role played by television in portraying different kinds of roles is still a social and cultural phenomenon regarding influence and the way it perpetuates beliefs, stereotypes and values among audiences (Peterson & Peters, 1983; Gerbner & al., 2002). Identification with fictional characters (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Igartua & Muñiz-Muriel, 2008) is a strategic communicative process that has interested both academics and producers in cultural industries. Teen series are television fiction products that portray a specific reality of youth culture in different contexts and settings to capture young audiences. That is why providing exploratory as well as analytical knowledge of a television format like teen series is a valuable opportunity to study the way in which teens are portrayed in fictional settings. This article presents the findings of a study conducted on the characteristics of teen series and the characters' interaction with the plots and conflicts in one of the most successful international teen series, the US teen drama «Dawson's Creek».

### 1.1. How young people are portrayed in television fiction

How young people are portrayed in fiction can be studied using research that either includes fiction as one of many other programme content types that focus on the image of young people and/or teens, or by using research into specific television fiction programs. In the first reference framework we can highlight the work on young people's image on primetime TV (Signorielli, 1987; Heintz-Knowles; 2000). The study of young fictional characters' sexual behaviour has been of significant interest both in social and academic fields (Meyer; 2003; Aubrey, 2004). Gender character studies are also of interest in much research, both related to specific areas such as body image (Robinson & al., 2008; Barriga & al., 2009), and generally (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999; Glascock, 2001; Lauzen & al., 2008).

Some, though fewer, studies related to fiction and young people have also been carried out by analysing specific television productions. In this respect, the research gathered by Davis and Dickinson (2004) on teen series in the 90s is particularly important, as is that compiled on other fiction programmes such as «Beverly Hills 90210» (McKinley, 1997), «Buffy the Vampire Slayer» (Wilcox & Lavery, 2002) and «Dawson's Creek» (Andrews, 2001; Brooker, 2001; Crossdale, 2001).

In Spain the following studies are worth highlighting: the gender stereotypes analysis conducted on two Spanish series directed by Galán-Fajardo (2007); the study carried out by Belmonte y Guillamón (2008) on gender stereotypes in the most widely seen TV series amongst young Spanish people; and the study presented by Guarinos (2009) on teenage prototypes depicted in fiction television products broadcast in Spain and targeted at young audiences. Lastly, we must mention studies conducted in Spain on fiction analysis, but which are not specifically focused on young characters (Fernández-Villanueva & al., 2009; López-Téllez & Cuenca-García, 2005; Perales & Pérez-Chica, 2008).

### 1.2. Teen series as a consumer product for the young audience

The concept of youth culture in a media context has been partly generated by a merchandising approach that has ended up creating both TV and cinema products (Lewis, 1992). This fact has brought about the phenomenon of TV movies targeted at young and teenage audiences, which feedback the creation of serialised fiction. This feedback has supplied part of the programme offer of the general channels and taken over the thematic channels which target young people as a potential audience.

Teen series make up one of the star content formats of the youth culture media market. Although there is not enough theoretical background on the concept of teen series to enable us to talk of them as an independent and autonomous genre, there are certainly elements that allow us to characterise their content and presence in the TV offer. By way of synthesis, there is a common denominator in teen series, namely the teen target, and their relationship with generic teen TV, that is to say the set of television and multimedia products expressly devised for and targeted at teenagers (Fedele & García-Muñoz, 2010b). Teen series can be considered serialised fiction products, generally dramatic in style, targeted mainly and specifically at young people. They last 40 to 60 minutes and have been produced from the 90s especially in English-speaking countries to narrate the stories and lives of teenagers. They may have a single main character or a group of lead characters; they occur during the high school period and have plots centred on interpersonal relationships, especially love and friendship (Guarinos, 2009).

Audiovisual products targeted at and acted out by young people basically came into being in 50s films. They moved into television channels from the 60s

onwards accompanied by music and young people and teenage characters (Mosely, 2001). These two elements appeared both in series and sitcoms which were placed in a family setting. However, it was the 80<sup>s</sup> fiction genres in which young people or teenagers were the main characters or co-stars. In this period, several internationally successful soap operas began to incorporate young characters in the cast and many sitcoms, initially US in origin, had teenagers as sole protagonists<sup>1</sup>.

Without forgetting the financial aims of fiction products (Davis & Dickinson, 2004), the birth of the concept of teen series is related to television content targeted directly at teens and/or the young. This format chose contexts already commonly seen in other kinds of fiction that were of interest to young people, like family and school. The scenarios portrayed are therefore the home of one or several of the main characters and the settings, more interior than exterior, mainly in high schools<sup>2</sup>. These portrayals do not lead, however, to a greater interest in family plots, as it is precisely the social relationships within a group of equals, of friends, that becomes the themes of teen series. These audiovisual products recreate and offer the audience a symbolic transcription of reality that intervenes in some way in the construction process of the young people's identities, in most cases through parasocial relationships that are created thanks to the fictional characters (Livingstone, 1988). These relationships make up the social functions of fiction, like narrative, fable, ritual, bard, modelling, familiarising, community, socialising and identity (Fiske & Hartley, 1978; Davis, 1990; Casetti & Villa, 1992; Signorielli & Lears, 1992; Arnett, Larson & Offer, 1995; Keddie & Churchill, 1999; Buonanno, 1999, cited by Fedele & García-Muñoz, 2010b), and in some way influence audiences on the basis of meaning-making processes in reception studies (García-Muñoz & Martínez-García, 2009).

From a review of the background studies, the following hypotheses have been formulated leading to the analysis of the plots and conflicts portrayed in the US teen series «Dawson's Creek»: Hp 1: Most plots

focus on themes related to love and friendship; Hp 2: Plot and conflict development is closely linked to the interactions and the relationships between the characters; Hp 3: Behaviour analysis of the characters within the stories reveals more complex and less stereotyped portrayals of these characters.

## 2. Methodology

A case study was conducted on the US teen series «Dawson's Creek» as part of a research project on fiction series aimed at a young target. This fiction series is made up of six seasons broadcast for the first time from 1998 to 2003 in the United States on WB Television Network. In Spain, this series was shown

**Therefore, the study of television fiction products specifically targeted at young audiences can contribute knowledge on what kind of images and portrayals of teenagers they will consume. In addition, teen series are products closely linked to global media and cultural phenomena, such as teen culture, teen movies and teen TV. As consumer products they are being consumed not only through television but also through multimedia and cross-media formats, and can therefore be adapted to new consumer formats for a typically multitasking audience as are young people.**

on La 2 of Televisión Española, on ClanTV and on Canal+ as «Dawson crece»<sup>3</sup>.

There are several reasons why we chose to conduct the case study on this teen series as a representative product of the teen series phenomenon that came about during the 90<sup>s</sup>. Firstly, the series has been internationally successful and broadcast in over 40 countries. Secondly, of all the teen series produced in the USA in the second half of the 90<sup>s</sup>, «Dawson's Creek» is highly realistic, if we leave aside the fantastic or science fiction elements which occur in other products. Lastly, in the seasons chosen for this study, the series affords the possibility of following a group of six teenage characters, equally distributed between the genders.

The study we present analysed a random sample of the episodes from seasons 2, 3 and 4 of the series.

The main reasons why these three seasons were chosen is summed up in the following points: the presence of the same six characters; a common and regular setting throughout the sampled episodes (the fictional town of Capeside); the portrayal of the main teen years (15-18), coinciding with the US high school cycle; and the possibility of analysing the family typologies depicted in the series, as the main characters have not yet left home, unlike the last two seasons.

The sample brought together 18 episodes. Two researchers conducted a content analysis to measure a total of 29 variables, following prior instruction on cataloguing criteria. Variables were defined by the researchers and based on contributions from their previous works as well as from other authors, among whom we can include Pignotti (1976), Smith (1980), Pauwels (1998), Goddard and Patterson (2000), Seger (1990), and Robinson & al. (2008).

Analysis variables corresponded to the main characters' traits (physical, socio-demographic, social and psychological descriptors) and to categories concerning the characters' relationship with the stories and plots depicted. This article focuses on the findings in the second group of variables.

These variables allowed us to ascertain not only what the main themes and conflicts existed in the series, but also what attitudes and behaviour patterns the characters held in the plots. Among the variables in this group we can highlight: the kind of relationship established between the secondary and main character; the attitude adopted by the character in each episode; plot theme; plot origin; type of conflict; the character's role and involvement in resolving the conflict.

The data was gathered in a database of the SPSS program used by the Statistics Service at the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona to obtain univariable, bivariable and multivariable analysis using SAS v9.1.3, SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC, USA, taking the value 0.05 as the mean level.

In addition to this, character development was analysed over the three seasons. Finally, in order to complement quantitative statistical treatment, a qualitative analysis of the sample episodes was also performed, as was its relation to the whole set of episodes in the series.

### 3. Results

A total of 31 characters: 6 main and 25 secondary characters were analysed. Several findings related to the socio-demographic descriptors allowed for the affirmation that gender stereotyping persisted in the series

«Dawson's Creek», where women tended to occupy less favoured social positions than men (Fedele & García-Muñoz, 2010a). This did not occur when analysing personality trait and stereotype variables, based on behaviour and attitude analysis in the development of the plot.

The most significant themes occurring in this series were personal acceptance (27.98%), love (26.94%) and friendship (17.1%), as shown in Table 1. Personal acceptance included those plots linked to growth processes and the formation or acceptance of character identity.

While love and friendship are usually the most commonly occurring themes in young people's series, as seen in the background review above, personal acceptance seems to be a specific characteristic of «Dawson's Creek». In this fiction series characters talked constantly of the internal processes they were going through, showed their anxieties, dreams, plans and problems and put them into words. Job expectations in the plots were less likely to be associated with main characters than with secondary roles. Finally, there were no plots directly linked to drugs and violence. Alcohol consumption and drug-taking, albeit rare, was almost always related to processes of personal acceptance and character identity. Therefore no problem of dependence on illicit substances per se was described in the series. Moreover, characters often explicitly condemned this kind of behaviour as being immature and not constructive at all.

In character analysis during the series, it was observed that character development was linked to the different plot themes unfolding throughout the three seasons. In the first two seasons, almost all the main characters were recurrently involved in themes relating to love and friendship and, to a lesser extent, family conflicts. However, in the fourth season, the most prominent themes dealt with acceptance and personal growth. Interestingly, the period narrated in this season corresponded to the main characters' last year at high school, a moment in which they had to take important decisions about their future after reflecting on their identity. At this time they asked themselves

PLOT THEME	Percentage	Accumulated percentage
Friendship	17.10	17.10
Love	26.94	44.04
Family problems	9.84	53.89
Sex	4.15	58.03
Personal acceptance	27.98	86.01
Job expectations	10.88	96.89
Discrimination	3.11	100.00

Table 1. Plot themes.

what they were passionate about, they questioned their childhood projects, considered getting into degree courses that might allow them to fulfil their dreams, and they even had full-blown identity crises, and didn't know what to do with their lives. Here we must highlight the theme revolving around personal acceptance that one of the main characters was involved in: the theme was linked essentially to the boy's sexual identity, in which he defined himself as a homosexual teenager who had to face twice the number of problems as other boys of his age. As Meyer (2003) has shown, the character defines his identity and homosexuality above all through conversational dynamics.

Plot origin was clearly social in nature (71.5%), but there were others of less quantitative value which must be mentioned including: personal (9.84%), when the character took the initiative and got involved in some kind of conflict; family (9.84%), when the conflict was sparked off inside the family; love (7.77%), when it was because of the partner or loved one; or financial (1.04%), when the reason why there was conflict was economic in nature. It is interesting to note that personal origin referred almost exclusively to teenage characters, while romantic conflicts were found amongst «teenagers» (53.3%) and adults (46.7%).

Conflict setting was also social in nature (54.92%), that is, it occurred in relation to the other characters. As indicated above, one of the characteristics of «Dawson's Creek» was indeed the constant interaction, especially verbal, among the characters. There was also a certain complexity in the language and dialogues used by the characters to build up their character, define their relationships with others and finally develop and resolve the plot conflicts. These statements were also supported by the findings on two descriptive character variables: explicit character responsibility and leisure activities. In both cases the most common occurring activity undertaken was social relations.

The least common types of conflict discovered in the analysis were internal in nature (15.03%). These were conflicts that the characters could not resolve by interacting with others, but through their own reflections and internal struggles.

Finally, 30.05% of the conflicts analysed were classified as contextual conflicts. These were incidental conflicts where the

character had no real role. This conflict typology, where the character was a mere spectator in the narrative, was usually linked to secondary characters (81%) that were often in the background of the plots involving the main characters. This data is shown in

Character typology	Conflict type		
	Internal %	Social %	Contextual %
Main character	89.7%	64.2%	19.0%
Secondary	10.3%	35.8%	81.0%
TOTAL	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
p < .0001			

Table 2. Conflict type according to character typology.

table 2, which shows that internal conflict is more frequently associated with main characters than secondary ones.

Internal conflict was almost exclusively found amongst teenagers (93.1%), and was especially linked to plots on personal acceptance, and secondly, to romantic entanglements, as shown in table 3. However, social conflict type tended to be linked to romantic plots, although it was more equally distributed within the diverse plot categories.

A key element in personality stereotypes was in fact the role the characters played in handling conflict, especially with regards to active or passive involvement, as shown in graph 1.

An active role tended to be associated above all with stereotypes like tenacity (or stubbornness), idealism, activity or rebelliousness, i.e. to a series of personality traits that are intrinsically assertive, affirmative and proactive. Yet at the same time, this was also linked to other traits that involve greater reflection and reflexivity, such as maturity, tenderness, integrity and caution. On the other hand, a passive role in dealing with conflict was linked more closely to stereotypes that have passive connotations, such as fragility, immaturity or a passive nature. In this instance, apparently

Plot theme	Conflict type		
	Internal	Social	Contextual
	%	%	%
Friendship	10.3%	16.0%	22.4%
Love	27.6%	30.2%	20.7%
Family problems	.	15.1%	5.2%
Sex	3.4%	4.7%	3.4%
Personal acceptance	58.6%	16.0%	34.5%
Job expectations	.	13.2%	12.1%
Discrimination	.	4.7%	1.7%
TOTAL	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
p = 0.0002			

Table 3. Conflict type according to plot theme.

contradictory associations were formed, as the passive role is also linked to more positive and generally proactive traits like ambition, intelligence and reason.

This analysis verifies a three-dimensional, versatile and even contradictory portrayal of teens, thereby enhancing, to a certain degree, the realism of the characters in the series.

#### 4. Conclusions

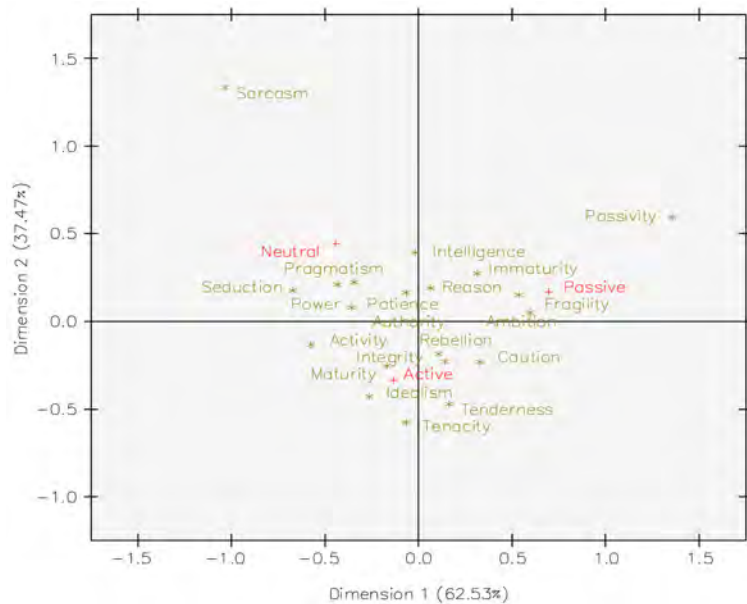
The teen years are a key, crucial stage in the development and construction of both individual and collective values and identities. During this sensitive and complex process, individuals usually turn to role models and examples of people important to them, i.e. the so-called socialising agents, like family, peers' group or school. But, besides models, patterns or real stereotypes, young people turn to others that are to be found in media. Though we are now in the digital era television still carries a certain weight in socialising young people, together with the new electronic media. In particular, its function as a role model becomes even clearer in fiction products, which are also placed at the top of teenagers' preference list (von Feilitzen, 2004; Livingstone, 1998; Garitaonandia & al., 1998; Ramírez de la Piscina & al., 2006; Medrano-Samaniego & al. 2007; Pindado, 2006). Therefore, the study of television fiction products specifically targeted at young audiences can contribute knowledge on what kind of images and portrayals of teenagers they will consume. In addition, teen series are products closely linked to global media and cultural phenomena, such as teen culture, teen movies and teen TV. As consumer products they are being consumed not only through television but also through multimedia and cross-media formats, and can therefore be adapted to new consumer formats for a typically multi-tasking audience as are young people (Jordan & al., 2007).

In particular, «Dawson's Creek» has been considered as a good example of convergence in relation to crossover and cross-media mobility (Brooker, 2001; Wee, 2004).

Furthermore, «Dawson's Creek» has been considered a high quality teen series due to the different characteristics of fiction

narrative: self-consciousness, intense emotionality, high self-referentiality, analytical dialogues, and the hypertextual strategy that the series sets in motion with other media products or other communication media (Mosely, 2001). This series has also been analysed in accordance with the concept of mainstream cult, a fact that has allowed it to be described as a quality product for three reasons: the high reflexivity of the characters, the romantic relationship models depicted, which refer to the romantic relationship models proposed by Giddens; the authorship of the series, created by the director Kevin Williamson (Hills, 2004). Many of these elements have been highlighted in this analysis. In the study on characters relationship to plot, it has firstly been possible to identify the most highly recurring themes in the series, namely acceptance of one's personal identity, love and friendship. In addition, the importance of social relations among the characters, interpersonal dynamics, especially dialogue interaction, in the development of plots and conflicts, has been highlighted.

Finally, it has been shown that there is a certain complexity in the portrayal of young people, especially the main characters in the series. They are shown as multidimensional and versatile characters, with varied and variable personality traits and stereotypes, who offer an image that shies away from stereotype canons found in teen series and, more particularly, in sitcoms. They are people who develop constantly within the three areas commonly related to adolescence: first



Graph 1. Personality stereotypes by character role in handling conflict.

love, first conflicts in the group of friends, first existential doubts and decisions regarding the future.

Nevertheless, the reality presented by teen series aims to capture the attention of an audience that is trying to create its own personal identity. At the same time, it does not ignore the permanent scrutiny of the cultural industry market producers.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Televisión Española produced «Verano Azul», a fiction series starring teenagers and young people in 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Referential context which is explicitly present even in the title of some fiction, such as the Spanish produced series «El Internado» (The Boarding School).

<sup>3</sup> While this study was being conducted, the series was being broadcast as «Dawson's Creek» every day at 14.30 on the second channel of Televisión de Cataluña, channel 33/K3.

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