

“Roman-ness” in Italian Crime Dramas. Media Representations and Audience Perception*

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Over the last years, several Italian crime dramas have increasingly explored Roman-ness, defined as the distinctive way of living and thinking (as well as speaking) traditionally ascribed to the inhabitants of the Eternal City. This article presents the results of an empirical study aimed at investigating *whether* and *how* representations of Roman identity provided by crime dramas align with audience perceptions of “Roman-ness”. Employing a mixed-method approach, the research combines qualitative media content analysis of eight selected crime dramas with a structured quantitative survey of audience perceptions. Findings show that Roman-ness emerges as a cultural identity equally constructed in crime dramas and recognized by audiences across three distinct narrative levels: plot, settings, and characters. The crucial role of actors/actresses’ authentic Roman origins in shaping audience perceptions is particularly notable, highlighting the significance of Roman celebrities in legitimizing mediated representations of cultural identity.

Keywords: Crime dramas, Roman-ness, Media Representations, Audiences, Mixed Methods

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Introduction

In recent years, the Italian city of Rome has often stood out as a recurring setting for many serial dramas (e.g., “I Cesaroni”, “Skam Italia”, “Tutti pazzi per amore”, “Un medico in famiglia”, etc.), whose storytelling blends the structural elements of serial narratives with the typical features (sometimes, actual stereotypes) of the so called “Roman-ness”.

This term, which is uncommon in Roman sources, was first coined by the 3rd-century Roman writer Tertullian, who used it pejoratively to refer to those in his native Carthage who imitated Roman culture. Today, it traditionally refers to cultural, social, and political characteristics, values, and institutions of ancient Roman civilization, which significantly influenced the culture and history of Europe and, more generally, the Western world (e.g., the Latin language, the Roman religion, Roman art and architecture, the Roman political organization, Roman law, Roman engineering, etc.) (Pohl, 2014). Roman-ness also stands out as a synonym for the way of living and thinking and the slang that popular images traditionally ascribe to the inhabitants of the Eternal City, even when they “play away” (Gruen, 1992; Hamilton, 1993).

The strong interest shown by serial dramas in Roman-ness allows for the construction of cultural images of Roman-ness by audiences to certainly depend on the meaning traditionally ascribed to this concept, but also – and above all – on the discourses they engage in (Holdaway & Trentin, 2013). Indeed, serial dramas provide audiences with social representations that involve a wide range of cultural identities (e.g., ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, gender, etc.), and these representations are highly effective as they operate through *characters* (e.g., embodying stereotypes and prejudices), *settings* (e.g., suggesting that certain places rhyme with insecurity, crime, wealth, etc.), and *situations* (e.g., referring to real events) (Kellner, 1995; Marinescu, Branea, & Mitu, 2014).

From this point of view, serial dramas serve as cultural texts (Hall, 1997) that both reflect and shape societal values, beliefs, and norms (Couldry, 2003; Mittell, 2015), having the potential to contribute to symbolic power relations (Bourdieu, 1991). Furthermore, serial narratives are increasingly emerging as new forms of media experience (Boccia Artieri & Fiorentino, 2024), engaging audiences in diverse ways, particularly through the remediation and reuse of languages, formats, and content (Ragone, 2023; Hill & Lunt, 2024).

One of the main mechanisms through which these dramas impact audiences is through the process of identification (Cohen, 2001), by providing viewers with characters and narratives that allow for emotional and psychological connections. This identification process often crosses various categories of identity, making serial dramas’ representations able to influence audiences’ perceptions of specific social groups (such as women, men, people of colour, LGBTQI+ people, etc.) (Hendersen, 2007) and enabling viewers from diverse backgrounds to see aspects of themselves, or what they aspire to be, reflected in the narratives’ storytelling.

However, because they are social representations that provide audiences with salient models, their meaning structures may (or may not) coincide with those ones that audiences

assume when decoding the messages (Moore, 1993; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998), with the consequence that the social representation of a particular group, a cultural identity or, in our case, a way of living and thinking, becomes the result of a negotiation process between different points of view.

Aims and Methodology

Based on these premises, this article presents the results of an empirical study focusing on the representations of Roman-ness in Italian crime dramas, with the aim of understanding *whether* and *how* the idea of what it means to be Roman corresponds to audiences' perception of "Roman-ness".¹

Therefore, the article aims to test the following hypotheses:

- As meaningful discourses, crime dramas provide audiences with their representations of Roman-ness, which may be influenced by the specific features of crime narratives.
- In turn, audiences decode the frames of meaning suggested by crime dramas by accepting, negotiating, or opposing them. In the latter case, especially, they might attribute to Roman-ness a meaning different from that suggested by media narratives.

The decision to focus specifically on the crime genre is based on four main reasons.

First of all, audiovisual representations of crime "Roman-ness" have a long and varied tradition, initially shaped by post-war cinema and later crystallized in the neorealist and *poliziottesco* genres (Marmo, 2018). In the 1970s, a corpus of films focused on delinquency and systemic corruption in Rome gave rise to what some scholars have defined as the "Roman crime movie" (Santandrea, 2019; 2024), portraying the capital not only as a picturesque emblem of national identity, but also as a fractured and morally compromised city. This tradition persists in contemporary crime dramas, which both revisit and revise "Roman-ness" through the lens of renewed popular culture (Grubb & Posik, 2021), often filtered through intersectional perspectives on identity and representation (Farci, 2019).

Second, among the many serial dramas that have dealt with Roman-ness in recent years, crime dramas stand out (Buonanno, 2012; Lepratto, 2021), with Rome oscillating between marginalization, often replaced by more provincial settings, and a renewed centrality as a symbolic and cinematic capital of crime (Pezzotti, 2012).

Additionally, the great popularity of crime dramas (Dall'Asta, Migozzi, Pagello, & Pepper, 2023) allows us to consider them as "the most popular genre across Europe" (Bondebjerg, Redvall, Helles, Lai, Søndergaard, & Astrupgaard, 2017, p. 223) and an effective "lens through which to observe the local, national and even transnational issues that are prevalent in a society" (Hansen, Peacock, & Turnbull, 2018, p. 1), laying the ground for the development of a shared popular culture (Barra, Jacquelin, & Pagello, 2021).

Lastly, precisely due to their role as both *mirror* and *shaper* of national identities, crime narratives (and especially local ones) could deeply influence the perception of the countries and places they are set in (Bengesser, De Rosa, Jensen, & Spalletta, 2023), while also contributing to forms of “banal cosmopolitanism” (Beck, 2004), allowing distant audiences to engage with local stories through shared narrative codes and transnational genre conventions.

From a methodological point of view, the study adopts a mixed-method approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), proceeding along two complementary steps that combine media content analysis and empirical audience research.

The first step focuses on the internal construction of Roman-ness within crime narratives through a qualitative analysis aimed at taxonomizing the different meanings of Roman-ness across a selected corpus of 8 crime dramas related to the Eternal City. The selection did not follow a strict chronological frame but rather a strategic sampling logic, integrating different parameters, such as: *release* (before/after the rising of platforms); *distribution* (linear television, pay tv, VOD); *location* (series explicitly set in Rome or featuring Roman-native characters); *presence of Roman characters/actors in key roles* (criminals, detectives, victims, legal roles).

The selected case studies consist of:

- “Il Maresciallo Rocca” (Rai, 1996-2005, 5 seasons + final episode), set in the Latium city of Viterbo and played by one of the most popular Roman actors (Gigi Proietti), exemplifying public service crime drama, with moral overtones and a rural setting that contrasts with traditional urban narratives.
- “Distretto di Polizia” (Mediaset, 2000-2012, 11 seasons), set in a fictional Police station located in the well-known Roman suburb of Tuscolano, represents a typical commercial TV crime format focusing on the intersection between crime and every day urban life.
- “Romanzo criminale – La serie” (Sky, 2008-2010, 2 seasons), based on Giancarlo De Cataldo’s novel and inspired by the real story of the “Banda della Magliana”, portrays Rome as a violent metropolis, merging historical accuracy with stylized storytelling.
- “Suburra – La serie” (Netflix, 2017-2020, 3 seasons), inspired by De Cataldo and Carlo Bonini’s novel and drawn from the real events of the “Mafia Capitale” scandal, is Netflix’s first Italian original production depicting the power struggles between organized crime, politics, and the Vatican in contemporary Rome.
- “Rocco Schiavone” (Rai, 2016-current, 6 seasons), based on Antonio Manzini’s novel and set in the Northern small city of Aosta, features a Roman police inspector who displays his embedded Roman-ness outside of Rome.
- “Baby” (Netflix, 2018-2020, 3 seasons), a hybrid teen/crime drama inspired by real events (the so-called “Baby Squillo” scandal) involving upper-class Roman high schoolers.
- “Nero a metà” (Rai, 2018-2022, 3 seasons), set in Rome’s Monti neighbourhood, and led by Roman actor Claudio Amendola, combining procedural tropes with social

themes such as race, identity, and generational tension within a contemporary Roman life.

- “Petra” (Sky, 2020-current, 2 season), adapted from Alicia Giménez-Bartlett’s novels and set in the Italian northern city of Genoa. Although geographically detached from Rome, it features a popular Roman actress (Paola Cortellesi) in the lead role.

All available seasons of each series were considered, although the analytical focus was placed on recurring thematic patterns and representative characters rather than full episodic breakdowns. For classification purposes, the crime dimension was assessed functionally rather than strictly generically, in line with recent scholarship on hybrid storytelling (Lotz & Lobato, 2023).²

The second step of the research aimed to understand *whether* and *how* viewers perceive Roman-ness in relation to the same four levels of representation identified in the textual analysis. To this purpose, a structured questionnaire with a predetermined fixed set of alternatives (Corbetta, 2014) was administered using the survey administration app Google Forms.³ The survey consisted of closed-ended questions, designed to explore how these perceptions vary across key socio-demographic variables (age, gender identity, and place of residence – Rome vs. outside Rome).

Respondents were asked to evaluate, in both general and specific terms, how Roman-ness is expressed through language, characters, social roles, and narrative spaces. Data collection consists of 296 filled eligible answers, coming from viewers who reported having watched (fully or partially) the 8 crime dramas analysed in the first step of the research.⁴

Representations of Roman-ness in crime dramas

The content analysis carried out in the first phase of the research allowed for the identification of four different levels of Roman-ness: *plot*, *setting*, *characters*, and *actors/actresses*.

The choice of these analytical dimensions stems both from previous media studies literature, which stresses the interplay between textual content and cultural identity (Fiske, 1987; Couldry, 2003) and from the adaptation of the noir genre to both film and television outlets (Hellwig, 2023). These levels allow for examining both the construction of Roman-ness and its symbolic aspects through familiar urban symbols and recognizable performers.

Roman-ness in the plot

Roman-ness in the plot specifically concerns references to real news events: while “Baby” and “Romanzo criminale” focus on the faithful transposition of criminal news stories that occurred in Rome, the narrative that underlies “Suburra” tends to become more realistic over the seasons, starting from a more general representation of criminal trends that belong to the image of the city of Rome (power clashes and corruption among organized crime,

politicians and churchmen), and moving toward a more faithful representation of the real events of the Mafia Capitale scandal.

Roman-ness of the plot also refers to the *depiction of family ties*, which often act as strategic resources and the first battlefield: in “Distretto di Polizia”, the crime stories are interwoven with personal lives of the characters; in “Baby”, the adolescent perdition is explicitly traced back to the need to satisfy family frustrations; in “Rocco Schiavone”, the wife’s death is a recurring torment; “Nero a metà” highlights the human being’s innate inability to relate to the “unfamiliar”, especially when it threatens one’s own family relations (e.g., the main character Claudio Guerrieri resents the relationship between the deputy inspector Malik and his daughter Alba).

Finally, Roman-ness of the plot emerges in relation to *differences/conflicts between the City’s neighbourhoods*. From this point of view, “Baby” stages the opposition between the high society of Rome and its suburbs (Parioli vs. Quarticciolo), two opposite souls within the same city whose inhabitants feel uncomfortable in places far from their origins. Conversely, “Suburra” portrays the dichotomy between the criminal underworld and the Roman upper class, through the conflict between people disillusioned with politics and the social climbers of the gangland, halfway between depravity and criminal vocation (Fig. 1).

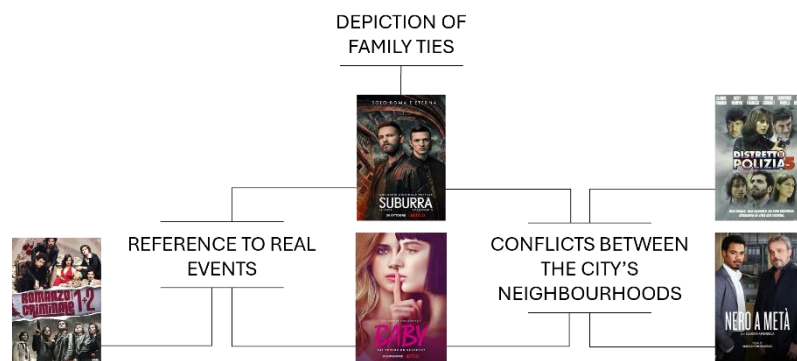


Fig. 1 – The “Roman-ness” of the plot

Roman-ness as setting

As a setting, the city of Rome becomes an active part of the story, both through its symbolic places (such as the Magliana, Monti, and Tuscolano districts) and through its relocation.

Looking at the first perspective, the Rome of “Romanzo criminale” is both the inspiration and the victim of the criminal saga, thanks to the faithful representation of the historical setting, which adds to the authenticity of the story. Rome is also the protagonist in “Nero a metà”, which shows both the wonders and the contradictions of the city, from the multiethnic Rione Monti to the suburban sheds of the Ostiense district. Finally, “Distretto di polizia” tends to become one with its own police station, the “X Tuscolano”, to the point that it often suggests the image of a very playful and at times unreal Rome, which barely engages with crime stories. On the contrary, the relocation of Roman-ness tends to take two different shapes: *from the periphery to the city centre* (this is the case of “Suburra”, which shifts from the Ostia setting of the first season to the conquest of Rome in the following seasons), and *from the city of Rome to external locations* (such as the city of Aosta, the setting for the investigations of Rocco Schiavone, who is nevertheless always closely linked to the memory of Rome) (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 – “Roman-ness” as setting

A character named Roman-ness

The Roman-ness of the characters takes shape in terms of typical aspects of the Roman lifestyle (macro-level), as well as in terms of characteristic attitudes of the Roman people (micro-level).

On a macro-level, Roman-ness is easily detectable in the character of Rocco Schiavone: his Roman personality is strong and proud, together with his recurring habit of speaking the Roman dialect, which he also offers to teach to his northern colleagues, to enable them to become part of his world. Schiavone also embodies, on a micro-level, some of the distinguishing features usually attributed to Roman citizens, in particular a combination of roughness and truthfulness, which together shape his full characterization. The representation of this character, sometimes stereotyped (but never caricatured), is also functional to the representation of an ideal-type of Roman-ness that is synonymous with non-conformism, rebellion against rules created specifically to break – if not the conventions of the genre – certainly those of custom, to the point of making him seem like an “anti-hero”.

The distinctive features of Roman-ness, both in terms of personality and way of thinking and living of the Roman citizens, also appear in “Distretto di Polizia” and “Nero a metà”. In the first case, the portrayal of some typical Roman features (such as spontaneity and genuineness, common to almost all the policemen/women of the “X Tuscolano”) reaches its maximum expression in the character of Mauro Belli, the “Romano de Roma” inspector who has left a special place in the hearts of many fans (also due to his sudden death during the 6th season). In the second case, the Roman-ness of the protagonist Carlo Guerrieri seems to be closely linked to his empathy.

The characters’ Roman-ness is also expressed through the language they use to mark their being Roman: this is the case of Schiavone (e.g., the well-known episode in which the inspector explains to his colleagues the difference between “me coglioni” and “sti cazzi”), but also of “Suburra”, where the importance of the Roman slang refers to the dialectical variations that identify different areas of Rome (e.g., the cadence typical of Ostia, the South of Rome).

Finally, Roman-ness also appears in contrast to a more general anti-Roman-ness, embodied by characters such as Petra – a Police inspector based in Genoa, who never regrets her Roman origins but increasingly identifies with her new host city – or stands out as synonym for “*anti*-Italian-ness”, as in “Nero a metà”, where this dynamic is articulated through the opposition between the distinctly Roman Carlo Guerrieri and his right-hand man Malik Soprani, a young immigrant born in the Ivory Coast and raised in Italy (Fig. 3).

Special attention must also be paid to the Roman female characters, whose representations consist of determined and out of the ordinary women, who assert themselves in predominantly male environments. However, their depiction also suggests that crime fiction remains a masculine genre by default.

On the criminal-side, Roman-ness takes shape in two different representations of women: on one hand, the more stereotypical depiction offered by “Romanzo criminale”, where female characters (Donatella, Roberta, and Patrizia) do not play leading roles, but rather serve as “wing women” of the male gang members. On the other hand, the more empowered status gained by the female characters of “Suburra” (Sara, Livia, Angelica, and Nadia), who progressively take over their fathers’ or husbands’ criminal business, using power as a means of self-determination, to the point of becoming the real driving force behind the action.

On the detective-side, the emphasis on the portrayal of female “crime women” is largely linked to the main character of Petra, a police inspector with a sharp wit and biting irony, portrayed as a solitary and independent woman who uses her femininity to mislead not only suspects but also her colleagues and superiors. A similarly strong and combative personality is also found in the character of Giulia Corsi (“Distretto di Polizia”), one of the most beloved and iconic female characters in Italian crime television.

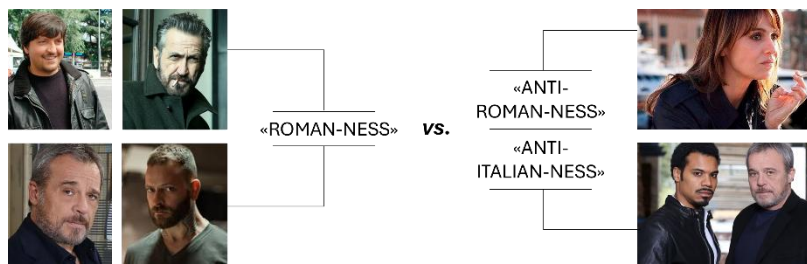


Fig. 3 – The “Roman-ness” of characters

How Actors’ and Actresses’ “Being Roman” Matters

The Roman-ness of the characters tends to match with the “being Roman” of the involved actors/actress. The existence of true and proper “binomials”, expressing a clear identification between the Roman-ness of the characters and that of their associated actors, emerges in relation to several crime dramas and involves both the male and the female perspective (Rocco Schiavone/Marco Giallini, Carlo Guerrieri/Claudio Amendola, Mauro Belli/Ricky Memphis, Sara Monaschi/Claudia Gerini, Giulia Corsi/Claudia Pandolfi). All of these binomials are characterized by a continuous crossover between the character and their performer, to the point of transferring the characteristics of the one to the other and vice versa.

By contrast, this symbiosis is broken only in a few cases, and always in the form of a denial of one’s Roman-ness, on the one hand for reasons of geographical relocation (Petra Delicato/Paola Cortellesi in “Petra”), and on the other hand because the actress’ being Roman matters less than her closeness in age to the played character (Chiara Altieri/Benedetta Porcaroli in “Baby”).

Against this, however, there is an additional level of Roman-ness that goes beyond any kind of identification, which seems to rely only on the personal features of the actor as a Roman star. This is the realm of Gigi Proietti, a Roman actor who is universally recognized as a symbol of Roman-ness in the world, and whose interpretation of Giovanni Rocca is able to give a Roman imprint to the whole series, even though it isn’t set in Rome and doesn’t involve Roman characters. Even though “Il Maresciallo Rocca” doesn’t show any analogy to actual news events that occurred in Rome, nor does it clearly identify Roman settings, nor does it explicitly refer to the Roman origins of the characters’ stories, the leading role played by Gigi Proietti becomes in itself an expression of the Roman-ness of his character, to the point that the general public often (wrongly) takes his Roman origins for granted (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 – The interplay between the “being Roman” of actors/actresses and the “Roman-ness” of characters

Audience perceptions of the representations of Roman-ness in crime dramas

The second phase of the research focuses on how audiences perceive and interpret the representations of Roman-ness identified in the content analysis.

While the sample was not statistically representative, it reflects a wide and diverse demographic distribution. Gender was nearly balanced, with 48.8% of respondents identifying as male and 51.2% as female, and no respondents selecting the “other” category. The majority of respondents were over 30 years old (88.5% in total), with more than half aged between 30 and 45 (53.4%) and 35.1% over 45.⁵ By contrast, younger participants under 30 accounted for only 10.8% of the sample. Notably, 70.3% of participants live in Rome – and this ensures cultural familiarity with the geographical and symbolic references encoded in the series – even though the percentages of who lived outside Rome is nonetheless more than 1 in 4 (28.4%).

The survey was structured to detect both general impressions (e.g., traits associated with Roman identity) and detailed associations with specific series and levels of representation (e.g., the role of dialect, character types, narrative settings).

Roman-ness as social and cultural frame

Respondents tend to identify Roman-ness with both the personal attributes of the Roman inhabitants and the city’s features: 1 in 4 respondents (24.8%) consider Roman-ness as to be synonymous with the Roman “way of doing”, while for 23.3% it coincides with Rome’s neighbourhoods and streets; finally, 16.6% think that Roman-ness refers to its history and traditions.

According to the interviewees, the three adjectives that best describe the Roman natives are, on the one hand, the expression of a more negative evaluation, as confirmed by the choice of “coatto” (which stands for “redneck”) (19.3%) and “sborone” (which stands for “show-off”) (14.9%); on the other hand, a more positive evaluation is expressed by those 28.4% of respondents who describe the Roman as “verace” (truthful). It is reasonable to assume that, by choosing the adjective “verace”, the respondents would identify the Roman with a straightforward person, who nevertheless does not border on the negative dimension of “redneck”/“show-off”. What is more, the “genuine” personality of Roman is perceived more by his own fellow citizens (29.8%) rather than by those who live in other cities (23.9%) (Fig. 5).

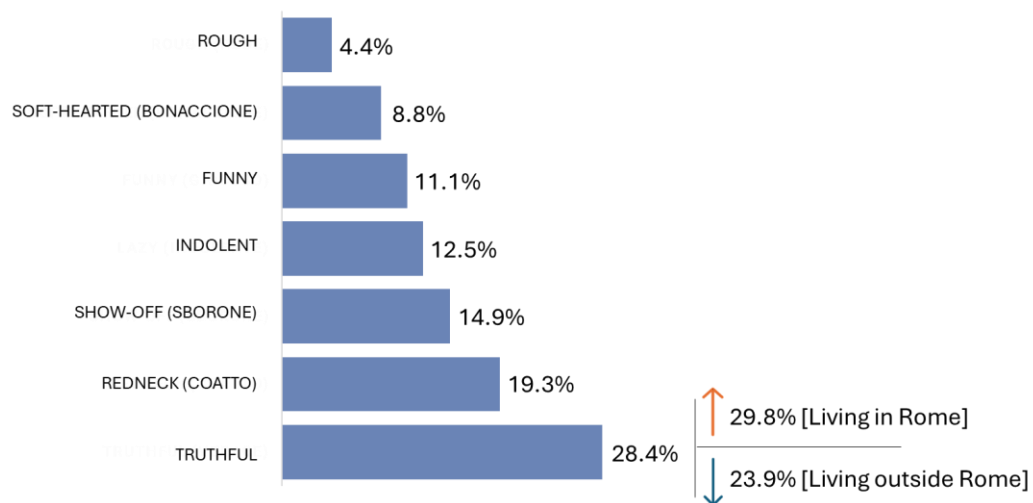


Fig. 5 – Adjectives describing Roman natives

Which crime dramas best rhyme with Roman-ness?

Respondents (and especially the youngest ones) tend to associate the idea of Roman-ness especially to “Romanzo criminale” (33.9%) and “Suburra” (23%), two crime dramas which boast a common past, marked by a pre-existing movie on the same plot. From this point of view, although it was made clear in our survey that all questions were specifically related to serial dramas, the influence of movies on respondents’ perception cannot be completely ruled out. The ranking third place is gained by “Distretto di Polizia” (14.5%), whose Roman-ness has affected the collective image, persisting over the time even after many years from the end of the last season. However, if the Roman-ness ascribed to “Romanzo criminale” and “Suburra” seems affected by interviewees’ age, the Roman-ness of “Distretto di Polizia” stands out as universally recognized by all age groups, taking shape as an intergenerational common feature (Fig. 6).

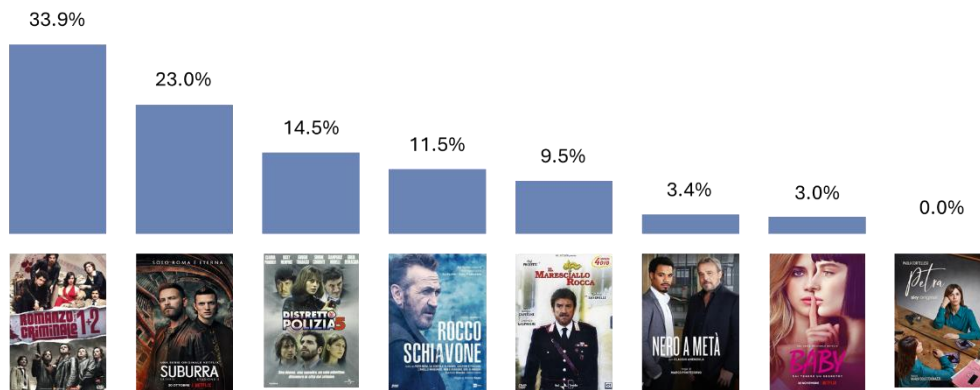


Fig. 6 – Which crime series best rhyme with “Roman-ness”?

Moving to explore more specifically the 4 dimensions of Roman-ness suggested by the content analysis, the interviewees are used to identify Roman-ness mainly with characters (47%) – an item selected to a greater extent by women (52%, compared with 42.5% of male respondents) – as well as settings (35.1%), which instead is a perception more common among men (38.4%) rather than women (31.1%). Looking at the age perspective, the identification of Roman-ness with settings is stronger among the over-45s (40.4%), compared with the lower percentages recorded among the under-30s (34.4%) and the 30-45-year-olds (31.6%). On the contrary, Roman-ness embodied by the characters turns out to be a common perception among the youngest spectators (56.2%), which tends to decrease among the 30-45-year-olds (48.7%) and even more among the over 45s (41.3%) (Fig. 7).

Four levels of Roman-ness embodied by crime dramas

Respondents' perceptions tend to match with crime dramas' representations referring to the interplay between the four levels of Roman-ness and the way in which crime dramas embody them. The plot stands out as the most important feature of Roman-ness in relation to “Suburra” (37.1%) and “Romanzo criminale” (31.1%), followed by “Baby” (23%), that is the three serial dramas based on true crime stories involving the Roman territory.

On the contrary, crime dramas such as “Baby”, “Distretto di Polizia” and “Nero a metà” owe their Roman-ness mainly to the settings (respectively 57%, 38.9% and 28.7%) while, surprisingly, only 25.2% quote “Romanzo criminale”. Characters, too, are also of paramount importance to transfer Roman-ness firstly for “Rocco Schiavone” (40.7%), then for “Suburra” (30.6%), “Romanzo criminale” (31.1%) and “Il Maresciallo Rocca” (32.6%). Finally, Roman-ness is a matter of actors/actresses both in crime dramas not set in Rome (30.8% “Petra”, 31.4% “Rocco Schiavone”), or played by very famous and popular testimonials of Roman-

ness, such as Claudio Amendola (33.7% “Nero a metà”) and Gigi Proietti (31% “Il Maresciallo Rocca”).

In particular, the Roman-ness of the plot seems to be strongly related to the fictionalization of true crime (31.9%), but also to the differences between the neighbourhood of Rome (28.7%) and the relationship between legality and lawlessness (27%). In terms of characters, respondents confirm that the Roman dialect is one of the most important factors in conveying Roman-ness (43.2%), followed by personality (24%) and gesture (18.2%).

Regarding the locations that best express Roman-ness, 41.9% of respondents chose the “real” set of “Romanzo criminale” (i.e., the Roman neighbourhood of Magliana, which also appears in the name of the criminal organization that inspired both the film and the serial drama), followed by a very fictional set such as the “X Tuscolano” police station (20.9%). On the contrary, other real locations, such as the Parioli district or the Ostia coastline, score lower percentages (10.1% and 13.2% respectively) (Fig. 7).

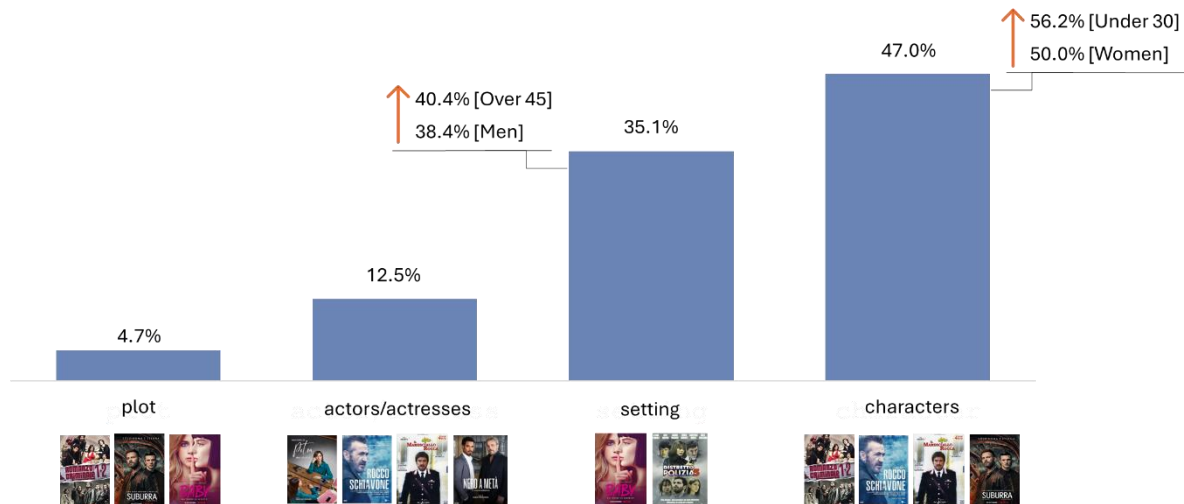


Fig. 7 – The interplay between crime dramas and the four levels of “Roman-ness”

The dark and male side of Roman-ness

The survey also aims at establishing whether and how Roman-ness is perceived by audiences as a matter of role, gender, and neighbourhood. With regard to the first issue, respondents tend to associate Roman-ness with the “dark side” of crime, with 66.9% stating that its fictional representation is more effective when embodied by criminals.

On the contrary, there is no doubt that Roman-ness rhymes with men and with those who come from suburban neighbourhoods characterized by a significant social, cultural, and economic degeneration. Indeed, 93.2% of respondents state that the male roles are more trustworthy testimonials of Roman-ness than the female ones, and 85.8% think that Roman-ness refers to the so-called “borgatari” rather than to those who live in upper-class neighbourhoods (the so-called “pariolini”) (Fig. 8).

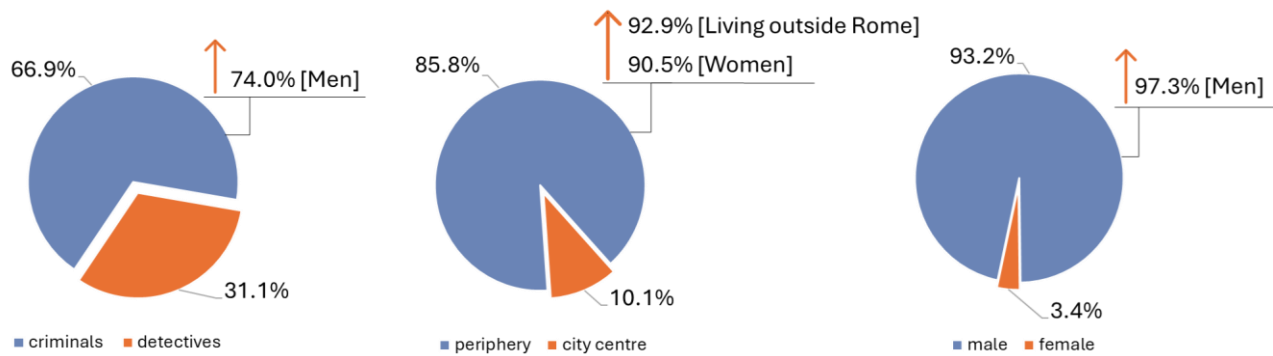


Fig. 8 – The dark and male side of “Roman-ness”

While they may not always play leading roles, Roman female characters are perceived as active and self-assertive figures who reflect key aspects of Roman-ness, namely resilience, irony, and a strong presence in public or institutional settings.

A total of 66.9% of participants believe that female characters convey Roman-ness *quite a lot* (51.4%) or *a lot* (15.5%). This percentage is higher among female respondents (71.7%) compared to male ones (61.7%). It is also interesting to note that respondents not living in Rome express stronger agreement with the idea that female characters convey a sense of Roman-ness (76.2%) than those residing in the capital (64.4%).

Further insights come from a follow-up question that asked participants to specify what character traits they associate with Roman female figures in crime series. The two most frequently cited attributes are “asserting themselves in male-dominated environments” (28% overall), and “being determined women” (26.4%). Both these traits are particularly emphasized by female viewers (31.1% and 29.7% respectively).

However, respondents also acknowledge limitations: 15.2% note that female characters rarely hold leading roles, and 12.8% detect stereotypical elements in their portrayal — with both percentages higher among male viewers (19.2% and 16.7% respectively).

These findings suggest that crime dramas appear as a symbolic battleground where older stereotypes persist, but where negotiations of gender and authenticity are nonetheless visible (Fig. 9).

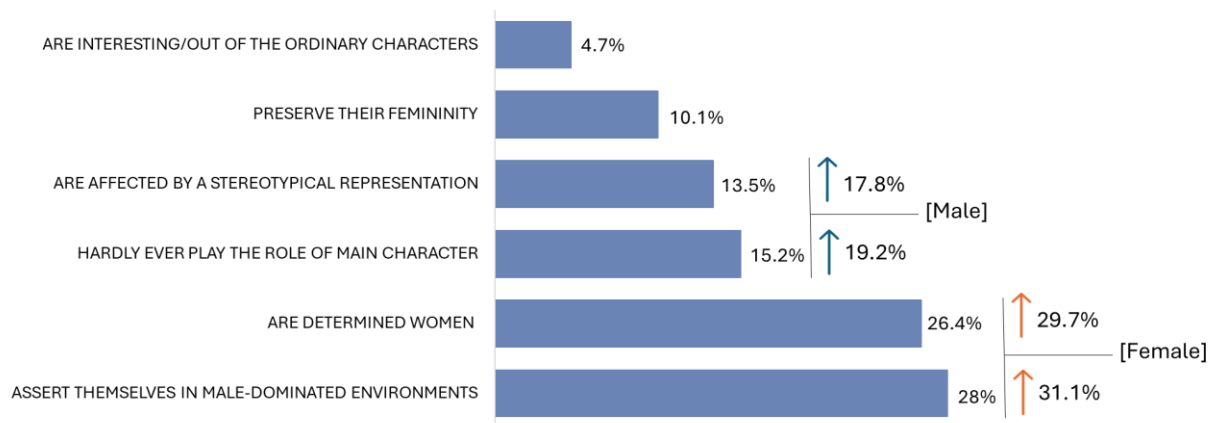


Fig. 9 – Audience perceptions of Roman female characters in crime dramas

Roman-ness without Roman actors/actresses?

According to the respondents, the Roman-ness of the actors/actresses has a significant influence on the Roman-ness of the character: almost all the respondents (89.8%) consider the presence of real Roman actors/actresses as a guarantee of a more credible and faithful interpretation of their Roman characters.

Among male figures, the pairing most closely associated with Roman-ness is Mauro Belli and Ricky Memphis (“Distretto di Polizia”, 20.3%) – particularly among female respondents (28.4%) and those not living in Rome (22.6%). This is followed by the duo “Rocco Schiavone” and Marco Giallini (18.6%), which resonates especially with both younger viewers (under 30: 28.1%) and older ones (over 45: 26%), suggesting that Roman-ness is being reconfigured through contemporary, more ambivalent portrayals. Next comes the binomial “Il Maresciallo Rocca” and Gigi Proietti (15.5%) which also resonates with younger audiences, particularly with nearly 1 in 5 respondents under 30 (18.8%).

In contrast, “Suburra” and “Romanzo criminale”, while widely recognized for their depiction of Roman criminality, present characters less directly associated with Roman-ness as individuals. This may be partly due to their ensemble storytelling and fragmented urban narratives, which distribute identity across a broader canvas, making single characters like *Il Libanese* or *Aureliano* part of a collective atmosphere rather than isolated emblems of local identity.

For female characters, the most powerful association is found in the pairing of Sara Monaschi and Claudia Gerini (“Suburra”, 24.7%), whose performance draws on both the narrative relevance of the character and – presumably – Gerini’s long-standing, familiar image as an iconic representation of Roman femininity. She is followed by the duo of Angelina and Greta Scarano (“Romanzo criminale”, 17.9%), with particular appeal among male respondents (23.9%).

Unlike the case with male characters, it is noteworthy that the most memorable female characters often emerge from ensemble narratives – such as “Suburra” and “Romanzo criminale”. This may reflect the plot’s gradual shift toward greater visibility and agency for female figures who, while embedded within collective storylines, assert themselves in traditionally masculine domains, enhancing their symbolic association with a modernized image of Roman-ness (Fig. 10).

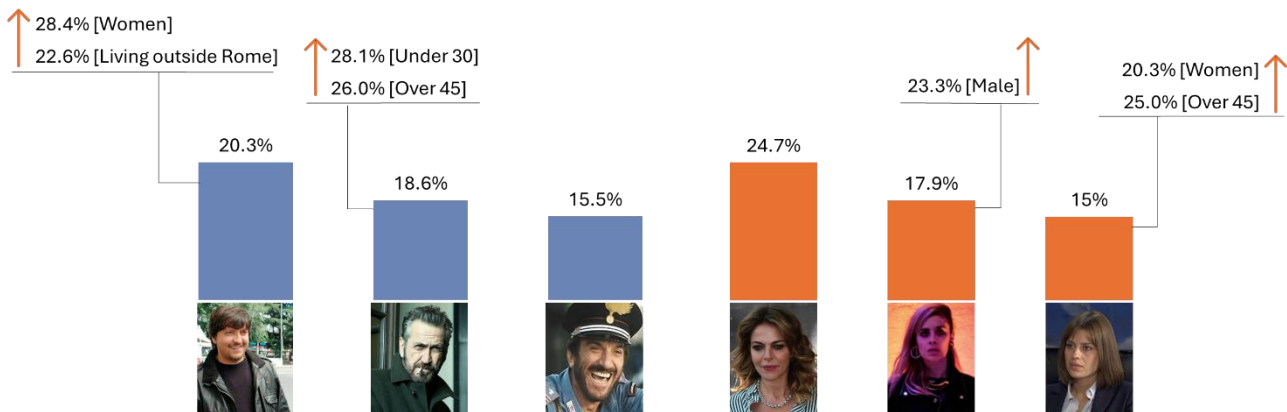


Fig. 10 – The most effective binomials of “Roman-ness”

Discussion and conclusions

By formulating two different hypotheses, this study aimed to investigate whether and how representations of “Roman-ness” in Italian crime dramas correspond to audiences’ perceptions of this cultural identity.

Regarding the first hypothesis, the research confirms that crime dramas depict Roman-ness across multiple narrative levels originating from the interplay between textual content and cultural identity (Fiske, 1987; Couldry, 2003) – namely, plot, setting, and characters – with particular emphasis on Roman slang, which, although it emerges in all the crime dramas as an essential part of the Roman cultural identity, stands out in particular as an additional feature that helps to reinforce the personification of Roman-ness.

Crime narratives, however, vary in how they deploy these elements, sometimes focusing more on the plot, other times on the setting or characters, each enriched by sub-levels of representation (e.g., fictional vs. factual dimensions of the plot).

Furthermore, while Roman-ness as a historical identity rooted in ancient civilization (Pohl, 2014) tends to recede into the background, the contemporary cultural identity conveyed by crime dramas is more prominently shaped by the so-called “Roman way of thinking and living”. As a result, although plots and settings play a significant role in conveying the idea of Roman-ness (and in shaping the images associated with it), it is above all the characters who stand out as the primary and most effective Roman ambassadors.

From this point of view, across all series, leads and co-leads embody traits commonly associated with Roman identity: authenticity, irony, roughness, and resilience. Nevertheless, this more genuine representation appears predominantly in the depiction of detectives or their relatives, while Roman criminals are more frequently rendered in grotesque or stereotypical terms.

With respect to the second hypothesis, although the study does not produce generalizable data, it does offer significant insights into audience responses. These reveal that viewers largely *accept* the narrative frames proposed by crime dramas, though they also demonstrate moments of *negotiation* or *opposition* (Hall, 1980).

Crime lovers' perceptions of the characteristics of Roman-ness tend to align with those prevailing in crime drama representations, especially in connection with "Roman way of thinking and living" and the Roman dialect, seen as the most effective marker of Roman identity. Characters' attitudes, ranging from roughness to playfulness, further reinforce this identification, though criminal characters are additionally perceived using colloquial, often derogatory labels such as "coatto" and "sborone".

Secondly, it is noteworthy that the perception of Roman-ness emerging from crime dramas does not clearly distinguish between real and fictional representations. Rather, these two "extremes" are embodied by "Romanzo criminale" (the more realistic) and "Distretto di Polizia" (the more fictional). Supporting this interplay between reality and fiction, viewers often refer to *Suburra*, whose narrative gradually shifts over the seasons from fictional storytelling to a stronger alignment with actual events.

In contrast, an oppositional decoding approach emerges in relation with the perception of Roman-ness, particularly when filtered through narrative and gender roles. While the encoded messages in crime dramas do not explicitly distinguish between good and bad characters, or between male and female representations of "being Roman," audience interpretations reveal a marked preference for a "dark" and "male" vision of Roman-ness. In this oppositional reading, Roman identity tends to be strongly associated with male figure – even in the presence of popular and well-regarded female characters, such as *Giulia Corsi* from "Distretto di Polizia" – and is more readily linked to criminal roles, despite the high degree of Roman-ness embodied by non-criminal characters like *Rocco Schiavone* or *Mauro Belli*.

In conclusion, on the one hand, audiences seem to accept the representations suggested by crime dramas, thus confirming the significant "framing power" of seriality (Scaglioni, 2016); on the other hand, they also tend to reject them (or at least some of them) especially when the representation of Roman-ness becomes more ambivalent, preferring in these cases the more grotesque and stereotypical interpretative frames over the (at least apparently) more honest and truthful ones.

However, the most interesting aspect emerging from the research concerns the ways in which audiences tend to negotiate the meaning frames suggested by crime dramas. This is particularly evident about the perception of Roman-ness as embodied by actors and actresses. From this point of view, serial dramas in most cases encode Roman-ness by drawing on the added value of the actor's or actress's Roman origins, while also attempting

to go beyond it (as in the previously mentioned cases of “Petra” and “Baby”). By contrast, audiences appear to be almost reassured by the actor’s or actress’s Roman-ness, to the extent that this feature, in their perception, becomes a kind of precondition, without which the Roman-ness of the character itself may be questioned.

In this case, the use of the conditional is necessary, since the analyzed crime dramas do not allow for the full validation of this hypothesis, given that their main leads and co-leads (or at least their most emblematic characters) are mostly played by Roman actors or actresses. However, an interesting “clue” in this regard comes from the contrasting case of “Il Maresciallo Rocca”. In this crime drama, Roman-ness is not expressed through the plot, characters, or setting, but solely through the Roman identity of its lead actor, Gigi Proietti, whose well-established status as an authentic “Roman celebrity” is transferred to the series, endowing it with a shared and widely recognized status as an “ambassador of Roman-ness”.

Biographical Note

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Notes

¹ This article is positioned as part of the long queue of dissemination activities deriving from the H2020 research project DETECT-*Detecting Transcultural Identities in European Popular Crime Narratives*, which combined large-scale investigations of transnational crime narratives with more focused studies on national and local articulations of cultural identity. In continuity with this framework, the current study shifts from broad comparative logics to a localized case study, narrowing in on how Roman-ness is represented and perceived through Italian crime dramas.

² The series “Baby”, though marketed as a teen drama, was included due to its hybrid storytelling (Lotz & Lobato, 2023), since it embeds themes like sexual exploitation, criminal networks, and institutional complicity – narrative elements that align it with a broader understanding of contemporary crime dramas.

³ The questionnaire was disseminated through a call for participation shared concurrently across the social media channels of the above mentioned DETECT-H2020 project and Link LAB – the Social Research Centre based at Link Campus University. The aim was to reach a public already familiar with or interested in cultural representations, media narratives, and television studies, thereby engaging an audience particularly inclined to reflect on symbolic content and its meanings.

⁴ A preliminary filter question was included to assess whether respondents had watched (fully or partially) the eight selected series. Responses from participants who declared they had not seen any of the series were excluded from the analysis.

⁵ The higher percentage recorded in this age group is in line with previous research on the age-related appeal of the crime genre, particularly among viewers aged 30 to 50 (Coviello, De Rosa, Re, & Spalletta, 2021).