

New Girl(hood). Diversity, Inclusion, and Generational Audiences in Rai's TV Series *

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This article analyses the representation of girlhood in contemporary Italian teen series produced by the public service broadcaster Rai, with particular attention to the divergences between linear broadcast television and the streaming platform RaiPlay. First, the study situates the analysis within the transformations of the Italian television landscape over the past decade, following the entry of global SVOD platforms such as Netflix, which have reshaped production practices, audience expectations, and representational norms. Within this context, it examines the rise of youth-oriented seriality and the increasing centrality of themes related to identity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging, highlighting the emergence of girlhood as a key narrative site within Italian teen drama. The article then turns to Rai's response to these shifts, focusing on its transition from public service broadcaster to public service media – a process that has effectively produced two distinct spaces for serial storytelling: prime-time generalist television and the digital-first environment of RaiPlay. Finally, through a comparative textual analysis of selected teen series, the article shows how prime-time productions remain shaped by co-viewing logics and pedagogical imperatives, whereas RaiPlay enables more youth-centred, intersectional, and empowerment-oriented narratives aligned with the cultural expectations of Gen Z audiences. In doing so, the article contributes to ongoing debates on public service media, platformisation, and the evolving representation of girlhood in contemporary European television.

Keywords: Public Service Media; Girlhood; Teen drama; Gen Z Audiences; Diversity and Inclusion

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Introduction¹

In a sketch-like animation inspired by comic-book aesthetics, male hands move toward a female pelvis, pulling down her pair of shorts; then, a group of naked figures are shown intertwined, in gestures of intimacy and desire. As the title credits appear, sex toys rain down and winged penises fly upwards in a playful yet provocative sequence. Judging from this opening credits alone, this series could recall an iteration of Netflix's *Sex Education* (2019-2023), emblematic of a strand of youth-oriented streaming content built around identity, diversity, sexuality. And yet, these are the opening credits of RaiPlay's *5 minuti prima* (2022), a series produced for the streaming platform of Rai, Italy's public service broadcaster, whose generalist mission has historically favoured broadly accessible and relatively cautious representational frameworks.

This novelty is situated within the broader transformations driven by the digitalisation and platformisation of the television industry. In particular, the entry of international subscription video on demand services (SVOD) into the Italian market has reshaped its configuration, compelling national broadcasters to contend with global players both as competitors and potential partners. This has altered industrial strategies, in terms of production and distribution cultures, and has ultimately impacted content trends, encouraging broadcasters to engage with representational territories previously marginal or confined to niche contexts.

Against this backdrop, this article examines how Rai, as a public service broadcaster, has responded to the growing influence of global streaming platforms within the national television market, particularly in relation to editorial and representational policies that have pushed the boundaries of what has traditionally been considered "safe" to produce. Focusing on a selection of contemporary Rai series distributed across linear broadcasting and RaiPlay, the article analyses how youth – and, more specifically, girlhood – is articulated at the intersection of diversity, inclusion, and identity, as well as of the editorial constraints and affordances shaping public service television across broadcast and streaming contexts.

Drawing on the layers of television studies, public service media studies, and girlhood studies, the article pursues a twofold aim: first, to explore how Rai seeks to engage younger audiences while maintaining its universalist public service remit; and second, to assess whether these narratives ultimately challenge or reproduce established representational frameworks within Italian television culture.

Global Platforms in the Italian Market

Understanding the object of this study requires situating it within a broader industrial and cultural context. A key turning point in Italian television occurred in 2015, with the arrival of the U.S.-based SVOD platform Netflix, whose entry prompted a reconfiguration of the national media landscape and set in motion dynamics later echoed by other global streamers, including Disney+ and Amazon Prime Video.

In the United States, Netflix accompanied its venture into the field of original scripted series with a rhetoric of “disruption” articulated across technological, cultural, and production dimensions. From a technological standpoint, the platform emphasized the abundance of content in its library, the promise of anytime-anywhere access, and the apparent personalization of consumption. From a production perspective, it mobilised a discourse of creative freedom, presenting itself as a more flexible and innovative environment for writers, producers, and creative talent (Brembilla, 2018); culturally, it foregrounded diversity, equity and inclusion policies (Asmaar et al., 2023). Overall, Netflix positioned itself in deliberate contrast to the conventions of traditional broadcast television, mirroring the launch strategies associated with the rise of original scripted programming on U.S. premium cable in the late 1990s and early 2000s, revolving around discourses of differentiation and cultural distinction and appealing to younger and paying audiences (Newman and Levine, 2012; Tryon, 2015).

As Netflix expanded globally, its rhetoric of disruption was rearticulated across the markets in which it launched, including Italy. In this context, the company introduced SVOD-specific technological and distribution models while simultaneously reshaping production practices, narrative forms, and representational strategies. To this end, it positioned itself toward creative professionals as a space of unprecedented freedom beyond the constraints of traditional broadcasting, and toward audiences as an abundant, high-quality, and affordable subscription-based service that was (at the time) advertising-free. This rhetoric was particularly visible in *Wired Italia*’s June 2015 cover, which depicted Netflix co-founder Reed Hastings symbolically switching off an old television set under the headline: “This gentleman will shut down old TV forever.” Although subsequent developments have shown that streamers’ practices and catalogues increasingly resemble traditional television (Jenner, 2018; Brembilla, 2026), focusing on Netflix’s early discursive positioning remains analytically productive.

A central component of this rhetoric is the *branding of diversity* (Asmaar et al., 2023), an approach that frames difference as inclusive and universal while operating through logics of commercial valorisation aimed at specific global audiences. Embedded in a rhetoric of distinction that casts the platform as “industry’s wind of change” (Asmaar et al., 2023, p. 35), this strategy has enabled Netflix to “dominate cultural conversations worldwide by influencing prevailing norms and narratives about life in (multicultural) societies” (Asmaar et al. 2023, p. 35).

In Italy, as in other European markets, Netflix positioned itself through distribution agreements and co-productions with national players (Afilipoaie et al., 2021; Barra, 2023; Barra and Noto, 2024), combining collaboration with local producers and editorial differentiation from domestic broadcasters. This dual strategy enabled the platform to exert competitive pressure on the national television ecosystem while leveraging cultural and social debates to reinforce its disruptive self-image. Within this context, Netflix’s investment in specific narrative genres can be read as a privileged site for the localization of its editorial strategies, particularly those related to the *branding of diversity*.

The Role of Teen and Girlhood Narratives

This rhetoric of disruption found one of its most effective articulations in Netflix's strategic investment in the teen drama, a genre historically marginal within Italian television, which the platform reactivated as a site of innovation and differentiation. Importantly, the genre has also been leveraged to combine discourses of inclusivity with the cultivation of audience loyalty among young viewers accustomed to on-demand consumption (Evens et. al., 2021; Marghitu, 2021; Asmar et al., 2024).

Since its emergence in nineteenth-century popular culture, adolescence has been theorised as a liminal and indeterminate phase, defined less by stable identity than by ongoing processes of becoming (Driscoll, 2002; Harris, 2004), providing a particularly fertile terrain for narratives centred on identity formation, intimacy, sexuality, and social relations. Crucially, adolescence functions not only as a thematic focus but also as an embodied site of social tension: the teenager is simultaneously fragile and disruptive, and therefore central to the negotiation of norms, values, and cultural anxieties (Mosley, 2015; Marghitu, 2021). For this reason, teen drama constitutes a privileged vehicle for the circulation of DEI discourses within emotionally resonant and widely recognisable narratives. In fact, this openness is further intensified when adolescence is experienced through gendered and sexual differences, especially in the case of girls and queer subjects (Bradbury-Rance, 2016).

Within this framework, girlhood has indeed emerged as a key site of intersectional and progressive storytelling. Over the past two decades, representations of girlhood on screen have multiplied to such an extent that have prompted critics to theorise a condition of "hypervisibility" (Handyside and Taylor-Jones, 2016) and, more broadly, a process of the girl's "spectacularisation" in media culture (Projansky, 2014). This expansion is closely linked to a growing awareness of girls' consumer power and to their idealisation as flexible, self-regulating subjects within neoliberal societies, a framework within which girl-centred narratives have come to permeate cinema, television, and social media alike (Andò and Hipkins, 2025).

This trend first crystallised in U.S. cinema between the late 1990s and early 2000s, a period in which teenage girls in American cinema began to appear more aware of their historical misrepresentation and more assertive in claiming political and sexual agency (Shary, 2005). This shift also reflected broader industrial dynamics: as the film industry recognised teenage girls as an increasingly influential segment of the audience and a significant force at the box office by the end of the 1990s (Weinraub, 1998), production strategies progressively moved towards narratives designed to appeal to female teen audiences and to foreground their experiences, desires, and forms of agency (Roberts, 2002).

A comparable trajectory can be identified in post-2000 Italian cinema, where there has been a noticeable increase in films featuring young female protagonists (Renga, 2014), as well as in Italian television series, where recent years have seen a growing number of productions placing girls at the centre of the narrative (Checcaglini, 2021). Within this

landscape, SVOD teen series have given space to “a diverse inclusion of underrepresented groups, including more nuanced and complex depictions of young female characters” (Antonioni and Checcaglini, 2025a, p. 19).

In the Italian context, however, this rearticulation is marked by a specific tension between the persistence of traditional value frameworks – often linked to family, education, respectability, and intergenerational mediation – and the increasing circulation of neoliberal ideals of female self-determination, agency, and individual empowerment. This tension is visible in a range of recent Italian series centred on female adolescence, including Netflix’s *Baby* (2018-2020), *Summertime* (2020-2022), and *La vita bugiarda degli adulti* (2023), HBO/Rai’s adaptation of *L’amica geniale* (2018-2024), and Timvision/Netflix’s *Skam Italia* (2018-). As Andò and Hipkins (2025) suggest, these productions tend to construct models of femininity as strong, independent, and emotionally mature, often capable of existing outside male-defined frameworks. Their cultural specificity is crucial: by embedding female adolescence within recognisable social, institutional, and affective settings – including family, school, peer relationships, and everyday practices of sociability – these narratives articulate models of femininity that Italian teenage girls can recognise as proximate to their own lived experiences and cultural horizons (Andò and Hipkins, 2025). In this sense, contemporary Italian girlhood narratives can be understood as part of a broader strategy of “(re)discovering” teen drama through a local sensibility, whereby globally circulating genres are rearticulated through culturally specific settings, values, and affective registers (Barra, 2023).

Taken together, these developments indicate that global streaming platforms have contributed to the localisation and normalisation of new approaches to the representation of girlhood, foregrounding adolescent girls as complex and agentic subjects and positioning girlhood as a key site of narrative innovation and cultural distinction within contemporary youth-oriented seriality. Yet, while global streamers have demonstrated the strategic value of centring teen narratives and girlhood, it remains unclear how – and to what extent – national public service broadcasters have engaged with this shift. In the Italian context, this raises critical questions about Rai’s dual role as a public service institution and as a participant in a platformised media ecosystem, particularly regarding the differences between representations developed for linear broadcasting and those produced for digital-first environments.

Rai’s Transformation: A Balancing Act

To better contextualise the texts analysed in the following sections, it is useful to establish a broader institutional and industrial framework through which Rai has sought to adapt to the landscape outlined above.

The transformation from Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) to Public Service Media (PSM) marks a significant reconfiguration of public service television in the digital era (Lowe and Bardoel, 2007; Brevini, 2010). This shift has involved the development of catch-up and

on-demand platforms, new forms of audience engagement through social media, experimentation with innovative narrative formats, and the exploitation of the personalization affordances of digital environments (Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2021, p. 4). At the same time, the example set by platforms has shown that demographic groups such as Gen Z and Millennials represent solid and active niches within SVOD services (Becattini, 2018),

Against this backdrop, public service media across Europe have increasingly experimented with digital-first strategies (Grainge and Johnson, 2018; Bruun et al., 2025; lordache et al., 2025), including youth-oriented seriality and socially progressive storytelling aimed at younger audiences. The paradigmatic case is NRK's *Skam* (2015-2017), whose combination of online circulation, social media engagement, and narratives centred on identity, sexuality, mental health, and belonging established a widely influential model for youth-oriented storytelling, later adapted in several national contexts, including Germany's *Druck* (funk/ZDF, 2018-). Similarly, BBC Three and iPlayer have increasingly relied on youth-oriented and diversity-driven productions – such as *Normal People* (2020) and *Boarders* (2024-) – as tools for maintaining cultural relevance among younger audiences within an increasingly platformised environment. Within this broader European transformation of PSM, Rai's investment in RaiPlay and youth-oriented seriality can therefore be understood as part of a wider attempt to renegotiate cultural legitimacy and relevance in the platform era. In this context, the Italian broadcaster has sought to remain faithful to its universalist mission and cultural remit while simultaneously engaging with the innovative and connective potential of digital technologies (Antonioni and Checcaglini, 2025b, p. 84).

Italian television has historically provided dedicated programming for younger audiences, following the long-standing model of *televisione per ragazzi* (Grasso, 2019). However, a recognisable and consolidated tradition of scripted teen drama has never fully developed within the national television landscape. Rather than embracing the genre as such, Italian television has long favoured its importation over original production and relied primarily on the family comedy genre, which has deep roots in the national context (Barra and Penati, 2011), as the main narrative space for addressing younger viewers. With a few notable exceptions – e.g. *I ragazzi della 3^a C* (Italia 1, 1987–1989) and *I ragazzi del muretto* (Rai 2, 1991–1996) – generalist television has historically embedded adolescent characters within broader intergenerational storylines, privileging co-viewing practices and ensuring accessibility across age groups (Buonanno, 2012; Barra et al., 2024, pp. 217–224). Within this framework, adolescence is typically represented in reassuring settings characterised by a light tone, a relaxed narrative pace, and a strong educational orientation. As discussed later, this legacy continues to shape Rai's contemporary serial production for its generalist channels.

More recently, however, the afore-mentioned expansion of the television market into the digital space has compelled broadcasters to move toward greater audience segmentation in order to engage younger viewers, creating new conditions for the (re)emergence of youth- and teen-oriented narratives.

Rai has strengthened its digital presence on multiple fronts. On the one hand, it has licensed some of its most popular series to SVODs such as Netflix, Prime Video and

Disney+, increasing their visibility among audiences disengaged from linear television and generating, in some cases, positive spillover effects on broadcasting (Scaglioni, 2023). On the other hand, Rai has consolidated its own streaming offer through the streaming platform RaiPlay, transforming it from a catch-up service into a digital-first content hub explicitly addressed to younger audiences (Scaglioni, Nucci, and Galli 2024). As stated on Rai's official website, RaiPlay is designed to engage audience segments increasingly distant from generalist television through original productions centred on coming-of-age genres, hybrid forms, short formats, and languages familiar to online users (<https://www.rai.it/portale/La-fabbrica-delle-storie-86dc82f3-3f7a-4f7a-9b06-bf21e4185832.html>). This strategic shift has been explicitly promoted by RaiPlay director Elena Capparelli, who described the platform as a project of "cultural repositioning," stating that its core objective is to attract viewers who do not include linear public service television in their everyday viewing practices (Redazione Blog, 2019; Danna, 2021). As we will see in the next sections, this repositioning is particularly evident in *online-first* content, which departs from the stylistic and narrative conventions of Rai's established prime-time productions and moves closer to the *branding of diversity* strategies associated with international streamers, especially through teen-oriented series.

While Rai must seek to regain the attention of younger audiences, it cannot afford to disregard the continued importance of linear programming. Over the past decade, generalist series have undergone a process of redefinition too, combining more traditional productions with series featuring innovative stylistic, narrative, formal, and thematic approaches (Cardini and Brembilla, 2024). In fact, as early as 2014, the editorial vision encapsulated in the slogan *Nessuno escluso* ("No one left behind") guided Rai's TV series production company, Rai Fiction, under the direction of Eleonora "Tinny" Andreatta (2013-2020). While promoting inclusive storytelling and a plurality of perspectives, the initiative also responded to institutional debates surrounding the concentration of production within a small group of established production companies, in an attempt to increase transparency and openness to new productions while preserving established criteria of editorial reliability (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opnuGmit1Kc&t=422s>).

Later on, this orientation seemed to find structural support in the 2018-2022 Rai Service Contract, the first signed after Netflix's arrival in Italy. In the document, the broadcaster committed to an offer grounded in several principles, including:

taking care to reach the different components of society, paying attention to its complex composition in terms of gender, generations, ethnic, cultural, and religious identities, as well as minorities and people with disabilities, in order to foster the development of an inclusive, fair, cohesive society that respects diversity (https://www.rai.it/dl/doc/1607970429668_Contratto%20di%20servizio%202018-2022.pdf, my translation).

An examination of the *Guidelines for the submission of audiovisual projects* available on Rai.it (<https://www.rai.it/portale/La-fabbrica-delle-storie-86dc82f3-3f7a-4f7a-9b06-bf21e4185832.html>) reveals that channels Rai 2 and Rai 3 might actually lean on this perspective: the former is associated with "non-conventional themes and content," and the latter with "social issues and contemporary problems". Meanwhile Rai 1, Rai's flagship and

most-watched channel, remains a largely traditionalist space as it is, in fact, expected to host the most successful “traditional genres”, as well as “popular stories, strong in terms of values, addressing all segments of the audience”. Series on Rai 1 are therefore required to appeal to its “standard” audience: a broad, generalist population, predominantly older, with a significant female component, and with a relatively low level of formal education (Istat, 2024). And to do that, it must bet on traditionally safe choices.

In this renewed context, serial production for younger audiences has indeed undergone a significant reappraisal (Barra and Rossi, 2025). But while Rai has taken part in this renewed attention to youth-oriented storytelling, it has done so through representational strategies that diverge markedly between linear broadcasting and streaming. This raises the question of how the multiple – and at times conflicting – requirements of public service broadcasting have been negotiated in relation to the “new rules” of the digital market and the growing prominence of youth and girlhood narratives across Rai’s two main distribution environments.

The Limits of Girlhood Representation in Rai’s Prime-Time Series

An examination of Rai’s prime-time broadcast programming highlights the centrality of co-viewing as a structuring principle of its dominant narrative framework. Beyond its aggregative function, co-viewing has historically shaped Rai’s editorial strategies, encouraging the production of content designed to appeal to a broad, cross-generational audience accustomed to established narrative conventions. In this sense, co-viewing operates as a structuring editorial logic that deeply influences representational choices (Rapporto Nielsen, 2024). “Domestic” television has long been conceived as a symbolic space in which values, social roles, and intergenerational conflicts are negotiated (Spiegel, 1992); within Rai, this logic often translates into a traditionalist and domesticated approach, oriented toward reassuring themes and accessible formats, in line with the broadcaster’s public service guidelines.

Within this framework, series that genuinely centre on adolescent subjectivities, and more specifically on girlhood, remain relatively rare. More frequently, teenage experiences are mediated through the gaze and value system of adult characters, who retain narrative centrality. This is the case, for instance, in *La compagnia del cigno* (Rai 1, 2019-2021), set in a conservatory. Although the series features a large ensemble of young musicians, its narrative gravity revolves primarily around their male teacher, whose professional and emotional trajectory structures the episodic development, often at the expense of the adolescents’ individual subjectivities. A similar dynamic can be observed in *Vivere non è un gioco da ragazzi* (Rai 1, 2023), where the inciting incident is a reckless act committed by a teenage boy, yet the narrative quickly recentre on his parents, who become the true emotional catalysts of the story. In both cases, adolescent characters are not absent, but their experiences function as ancillary or even instrumental to the adult protagonist’s arc, rather than as autonomous narrative trajectories.

A significant exception to this model is *Mare fuori* (Rai 2/RaiPlay, 2020-), set in a juvenile detention centre in Naples, which foregrounds the stories of adolescents with complex and often marginalized backgrounds. Originally conceived for linear broadcasting and co-viewing practices, the series has gradually evolved into a full-fledged teen drama: while maintaining a choral structure and themes suitable for shared viewing, it increasingly engages a younger, digitally oriented audience. Following a relatively muted debut on Rai 2, the series' distribution on Netflix enabled it to emerge as a cultural phenomenon, becoming an object of cult fandom among Gen Z viewers through social media platforms – most notably TikTok. This process has fostered an unprecedented form of teen stardom within the Italian media landscape, embodied by digital celebrities with millions of followers such as Nicolas Maupas, Massimiliano Caiazzo, Maria Esposito, Giacomo Giorgio, and Domenico Cuomo. From the third season onward, without entirely abandoning the adult value filter and the (re-)educational tone characteristic of Rai's generalist productions, *Mare fuori* has increasingly expanded the narrative space devoted to adolescent characters, including female ones, in an effort to capitalise on the popularity and recognisability of its young cast (D'Amelio, 2025). In this respect, *Mare fuori* represents a paradigmatic case in the reconfiguration of the relationship between broadcasting and streaming, an issue to which this article will return.

A second recurring feature in Rai's representation of Gen Z, and of girlhood in particular, concerns the tendency to embed teenage characters within ensemble narratives or to privilege a predominantly male focus. As already noted in *La compagnia del cigno*, this dynamic is also evident in *Un professore* (Rai 1, 2021-), set in a Roman high school. Here, the two main teenage characters, Simone and Manuel, are initially defined primarily through their relationships with adult figures, and only gradually acquire narrative autonomy. The series, in fact, elevates as its main protagonist Dante, a philosophy teacher whose personal trajectory – as a father, partner, son, and educator – constitutes the narrative axis around which the stories of a group of students revolve. Although *Un professore* engages with themes that resonate strongly with the sensibilities of Generation Z – such as gender identity, sexual orientation, body positivity, mental health, social dysmorphia, revenge porn, second-generation immigration, and symbolic violence within educational contexts – the series remains firmly grounded in a generalist narrative framework. Designed for Rai 1 prime time and addressed to a broad, intergenerational audience, adolescent experiences are filtered through an adult gaze and integrated into a pedagogical and conciliatory storytelling logic.

Within this context, *L'amica geniale* (Rai/HBO, 2018-2024) stands out as a significant exception, insofar as it places the friendship and coming-of-age of two girls at the very core of its narrative, tracing their growth, conflicts, and transformations over time. However, the series' literary origins, strong authorial imprint, and international co-production context render it a largely singular case within Italian television (Pérez, 2023; Dunleavy, 2020; Bioni and Farinacci, 2020). Another notable – yet marginal – exception is the thriller series *Corpo libero* (Rai/Paramount+, 2022), set in the world of women's artistic gymnastics and centred on a group of young female athletes. Rather than foregrounding adult mediation, the series focuses on girlhood as a space of embodied discipline, emotional vulnerability, rivalry,

solidarity, and the negotiation of power within institutionalised systems of control. Through its emphasis on female bonds, physical performance, and the pressures placed on young female bodies, *Corpo libero* articulates a complex representation of girlhood marked by both resilience and constraint. In this sense, the series appears to pursue national recognisability while simultaneously constructing a narrative and female protagonists endowed with traits conducive to international “exportability” (Caputo, 2025). However, its limited and delayed distribution within Rai – broadcast on Rai 2 over a single week, a year after its release on the streaming platform Paramount+, and never made available on RaiPlay – has effectively relegated *Corpo libero* to the margins of the broadcaster’s offer, significantly reducing its cultural visibility and potential impact. As such, even when Rai produces content that places girlhood at the centre of the narrative in innovative ways, these representations remain structurally peripheral within the public broadcaster’s mainstream ecosystem.

Finally, a defining trait of girlhood and adolescence in Rai’s generalist series is the strong educational and moralistic tone that characterises these narratives (Antonioni and Checcaglini, 2025b). Stories involving Gen Z frequently engage with contemporary social issues, including drug use, online risks, revenge porn, and peer violence, yet they often do so through an explicitly pedagogical lens that emphasises negative consequences and corrective trajectories. *Tutto può succedere* (Rai 1, 2015-2018), the Italian adaptation of the U.S. series *Parenthood* (NBC, 2010-2015), offers a paradigmatic example. While structured around an intergenerational ensemble, its adolescent subplots are consistently framed within a value-laden framework dominated by adult figures – parents, grandparents, educators – who function as ethical mediators and guides. As a result, transgression and deviance are invariably reinscribed within narratives of redemption, education, or reconciliation, reinforcing a normative and conciliatory reading of youth conflict (Antonioni and Checcaglini, 2020). This tendency aligns with the public service remit of Rai, yet it also risks promoting an alarmist and conservative vision of adolescence bordering on moral panic. As Catherine Driscoll has noted, the teen genre is intrinsically ambivalent: while it can provide space for articulating complex youth experiences, it often reinforces traditional norms and values, especially when produced within institutional contexts (Driscoll, 2011).

In this sense, Rai’s generalist series continue to struggle to represent girlhood as an autonomous and central subject of narration. Although not entirely absent, adolescent – and especially female – subjectivities remain mediated by traditional narrative logics, co-viewing imperatives, and an educational approach that prioritises moral regulation over exploration. The contrast with the more flexible and targeted strategies adopted by streaming platforms thus highlights Rai’s ongoing difficulty in fully integrating teen and girl-centred drama as an authentic space for engaging with contemporary youth culture.

RaiPlay as a Space for New Representations of Girlhood

If we turn to the analysis of series produced specifically for Rai’s streaming platform, RaiPlay, several substantial differences emerge when compared to content developed for

generalist broadcast channels. While still operating within the institutional framework of public service media, RaiPlay increasingly experiments with languages, formats, and themes that resonate with those adopted by international OTT players, albeit rearticulated within a national cultural and production context. In this sense, RaiPlay can be read as Rai's attempt to reaffirm its public service mission within the digital ecosystem, while simultaneously positioning itself as a competitive player in the on-demand market.

Much like Netflix or Amazon Prime Video productions, a number of RaiPlay Originals adopt narrative strategies aligned with more complex and inclusive modes of representation, consistent with what has been defined as “meaningful diversity”: representational practices that go beyond stereotyping and tokenistic inclusion, positioning minority characters as complex, stratified figures with the capacity to meaningfully advance the narrative (Beltrán, 2010). This orientation is particularly significant given that RaiPlay explicitly targets a younger audience – primarily Gen Z and young Millennials – who tend to be more receptive to values such as inclusivity, authenticity, and intersectionality, and more inclined toward fragmented, personalised modes of consumption. As a result, RaiPlay's original productions display a marked affinity with teen drama and, more broadly, a greater openness toward the representation of adolescence and girlhood.

A first distinctive feature concerns the increased centrality of teenage protagonists and, crucially, the recurrent privileging of female points of view. Compared to Rai's generalist output, RaiPlay Originals do include a higher number of adolescent-centred narratives and more frequently construct these narratives around girls' subjectivities. This is the case, for instance, in *Mental* (2020), a teen drama set in a psychiatric clinic for adolescents, which follows the journey of Nina, a teenage girl hospitalised after a suicide attempt. Her path toward self-awareness unfolds through encounters with other young patients, and the series frames youth mental distress through a discourse centred on care, listening, and empathy, clearly distancing itself from the alarmist and moralising tones typical of prime-time narratives. Similar dynamics can be observed in series such as *5 minuti prima* (2022), *Eppure cadiamo felici* (2023), as well as in the majority of episodes of anthology series like *Crush* (2022-) and *Nudes* (2021-2024), where female perspectives structure both narrative focalisation and emotional engagement.

A second defining element of RaiPlay's approach to girlhood concerns the tonal shift that characterises these productions. While many of the issues addressed – drug use, sexuality, cyberbullying, revenge porn – overlap with those found in Rai's traditional broadcast narratives, their narrative treatment differs substantially. Rather than relying on the logic of the cautionary tale, RaiPlay series tend to privilege frameworks of empowerment, self-determination, and individual responsibility. The emphasis is placed less on moral warning and more on processes of growth, transformation, and resistance. Themes such as body positivity, mental health awareness, coming out, sexual fluidity, non-binary identities, and female friendship are explored through narrative strategies aimed at fostering understanding and empathy. A paradigmatic example is *Nudes*, the Italian adaptation of the Norwegian series of the same name. Focusing on the first season, it is noteworthy that two out of three episodes adopt the perspective of young female protagonists and prioritise the personal and collective elaboration of trauma over explicit moral condemnation.

From this perspective, it is particularly illuminating to compare three episodes from different series, produced and distributed in distinct contexts, yet addressing the same issue – the non-consensual circulation of intimate images online – through markedly different narrative frameworks.

In *Nudes*, the storyline centred on Sofia, a teenage girl subjected to revenge porn and slut-shaming, frames the process of reclaiming agency as a collective and relational experience. Rather than retreating into isolation or internalising shame, Sofia is able to process the trauma and emancipate herself from stigma through the support of her group of female friends. This dynamic resonates with postfeminist interpretations of girl friendship as a renewed form of sisterhood, understood not merely as emotional bonding but as a space of mutual recognition, empowerment, and resistance (Winch, 2013). One of the reasons for the success of *Nudes* can thus be traced to its ability to articulate a contemporary perspective on female agency and empowerment, reclaiming the right to self-determination and to affirm desire beyond taboo, while asserting control over one's own narrative and visibility (Barra and Rossi, 2025). A similar narrative trajectory can be observed in *Crush – La storia di Stella* (Rai Gulp, 2022), initially broadcast on the children's channel Rai Gulp and later included in the RaiPlay catalogue. Here, the protagonist Stella faces a comparable situation involving the non-consensual sharing of intimate material by her boyfriend and his group of friends. While her mother initially suggests changing schools as a means of escape, Stella ultimately finds the courage to report the abuse and confront its consequences. Crucially, this process is enabled by the support of her girlfriend Andrea and by the testimony of Marika, an older girl who has previously endured a similar experience. Through this intergenerational exchange between girls, the series foregrounds female solidarity as both a resource for coping with trauma and a catalyst for reclaiming agency. In fact, across these series, albeit with varying degrees of narrative effectiveness, friendship between girls emerges as a fundamental device in the representation of girlhood: not only as a form of resistance to the toxic dynamics generated by peers, romantic partners, or parental figures, but also as a core site for identity construction. Girl friendship functions as a multifaceted space of support, exchange, confrontation, and experimentation, ultimately enabling processes of personal growth and self-definition (Checcaglini, 2021). By contrast, a different representational logic emerges in the second season of prime-time series *Un professore*, where the character of Luna faces a situation similar to those experienced by Sofia and Stella. In this case, however, the narrative resolution hinges primarily on the intervention of the adult protagonist, Professor Dante, alongside the involvement of her classmates Laura, Simone, and Manuel. While the value of female friendship is not entirely negated – indeed, it is Laura who first raises the alarm – the decisive, “saving” intervention is ultimately re-centred on adult and institutional authority. As a result, female empowerment is subordinated to the pedagogical and educational role assigned to institutions within what has been defined as the “educational series” format (Forni, 2020), a model that continues to characterise Rai's generalist productions (Caputo, 2025).

The most innovative aspect of RaiPlay Originals, however, arguably lies in their consistently intersectional approach to the representation of Gen Z and girlhood. Adolescent subjectivities are frequently articulated along multiple and intersecting axes – gender,

ethnicity, class, sexuality – resulting in narratives that foreground complexity rather than singular identity positions. *Shake* (2023), a loose adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*, exemplifies this tendency by reworking the traditional love triangle through a gender swap of the character of Iago, who becomes a lesbian girl driven by opaque and ambiguous motivations. At the same time, racial identity is brought to the fore through the figure of Otis, a Black teenage boy whose vulnerability is shaped not only by jealousy and power dynamics within the peer group, but also by the broader context of racial prejudice surrounding him. Similarly, the second episode of the first season of *Nudes* portrays Viola, an Afro-descendant and openly lesbian girl. An even more expansive articulation of intersectional girlhood can be found in the series mentioned in the introduction to this article: *5 minuti prima*, often compared to Netflix's *Sex Education*. Here, the protagonist is a teenage girl who identifies as asexual and channels her anxieties and sexual fantasies into the creation of pornographic comics. The series also features a second-generation Latina girl fully integrated into their school's social fabric; a gay male character who lives his sexuality openly without being subjected to bullying; and a female character with ADHD who experiences an open, fluid, and polyamorous sexuality, depicted in explicit and intimate contexts with both male and female partners.

The defining features of RaiPlay Originals are further reinforced by a number of RaiPlay Exclusives – that is, acquired or co-produced titles not always originally conceived for the platform, but selected for their thematic and narrative affinity. One example is *Crush – La storia di Tamina* (Rai Gulp, 2023), initially produced for Rai Gulp (Rai's free-to-air thematic television channel primarily targeting children and early adolescents aged 8 to 14) and subsequently distributed as a RaiPlay exclusive. The series follows Tamina, a young Afghan refugee who arrives in Italy after the Taliban's return to power, confronting migration-related trauma, racism, and integration. In her case, girls' football becomes a space of belonging, empowerment, and social redemption.

Taken as a whole, RaiPlay emerges as a narrative laboratory open to experimentation, capable of engaging with emerging social sensibilities and addressing a generation in search of authentic stories and inclusive representations of girlhood. Nonetheless, this innovative vocation remains partial and discontinuous, definitely underpromoted, so still marginal when compared to the centrality of generalist television within Rai's ecosystem (Scaglioni et al., 2024). For Italian public service media, the key challenge lies in transforming this experimental openness into a systemic and durable strategy, consolidating RaiPlay as a structural space for cultural research, gender-sensitive storytelling, and expressive renewal.

Conclusions

Generalist television, historically oriented toward cultivating a broad, intergenerational, and predominantly conservative audience, is today confronted with an increasingly fragmented public, characterised by diverse demographic and cultural segments that demand more

inclusive narratives, more authentic representations, and less normative languages. Within this shifting landscape, Rai navigates a complex negotiation between its institutional identity, rooted in a public service mission, and the need to remain competitive in a media landscape increasingly shaped by international OTT platforms. This study has addressed this phase of strategic redefinition, focusing on how Rai has approached issues of diversity, inclusion, and generational representation in its recent serial productions, with particular attention to the teen drama genre and to the representation of girlhood.

From a representational standpoint, RaiPlay clearly emerges as a site of experimentation and narrative innovation, offering space for stories that foreground girlhood and youth more broadly: the platform functions as a site where less conventional storytelling modes can be tested, sensitive themes addressed, and subjectivities foregrounded that rarely find visibility in prime-time television. Freed, at least partially, from the rigidities of scheduling and from the commercial pressures associated with advertising, RaiPlay allows for productions that resonate more directly with the cultural sensibilities of Gen Z. Within this environment, girlhood becomes not only more visible, but also more complex: narratives centred on girls frequently intersect with issues of mental health, sexual identity, ethnic difference, and class, giving rise to representations that are explicitly intersectional rather than merely additive.

This shift also invites reflection on the intended audiences of these productions. In this respect, the generational profile of RaiPlay's target audience plays a crucial role in shaping its representational strategies: girlhood is framed not as a moral problem to be managed through adult mediation, but as a lived experience articulated from within, often through female points of view that foreground agency, relationality, and processes of self-definition. The resulting narratives tend to privilege empowerment over admonition, and exploration over correction, marking a clear departure from the pedagogical and moralistic frameworks that continue to characterise much of Rai's generalist output. These choices point to an emerging willingness to expand the scope of Rai's narrative imagination and to respond, albeit partially, to the expectations of younger audiences, while still attempting to maintain its position within the Italian television market.

This process, however, remains marked by a structural ambivalence, as it brings to the surface an internal fracture within Rai's editorial line: between the narrative prudence of prime-time broadcasting, still shaped by co-viewing logics and adult value filters, and the more innovative, risk-tolerant orientation of RaiPlay. Intersectional and inclusive representation of girlhood thus appears less as a stable, transversal principle of public service media and more as a selective strategy, confined to the relatively "safer" margins of the platform environment, where experimentation is perceived as less risky than on broadcast channels.

In this context, the underpromotion and partial marginalisation of RaiPlay within Rai's broader ecosystem take on particular significance. The platform's progressive representations of girlhood and youth remain limited in reach, precisely because they are largely confined to a digital space that does not enjoy the same visibility or cultural centrality as prime-time television. The challenge for Rai, therefore, is not merely to continue producing inclusive and intersectional narratives, but to integrate them more coherently and systematically into its overall public service mission. Doing so would require transforming

the current tension between experimentation and tradition into an articulated and durable strategy. In this perspective, girlhood emerges as a critical ground for the future of Rai's serial storytelling: a space in which the broadcaster's capacity to engage with contemporary youth culture, social change, and media transformation is most clearly put to the test.

Biographical notes

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Notes

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