

The role of serial dramas in shifting gender boundaries for teenage audiences, in a conservative context*

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The reception of serial dramas by teenagers is a fertile field for analyzing how symbolic gender boundaries are negotiated, in an environment with strong, yet contested social boundaries. Internationally, structural changes in production and distribution of popular culture have made multiple gender identities more visible. In addition, shifting values have made gender issues more salient. Nevertheless, social contexts remain conservative in many countries, with evidence ranging from opinion polls and populist parties positioning to political initiatives and gender-related crimes. Based on focus groups with teenagers and semi-structured interviews with high-school teachers, this article discusses the effects of international serial dramas on young adults' construction of symbolic gender boundaries, against a conservative background in an Eastern European country. The results indicate that many teenagers have a different perception of multiple gender identities and gender issues, as compared to their relatives and other members of their community. This perception is directly influenced by their cultural consumption. Young adults have little or no opportunity to talk about gender equality issues within the family, at school or in their community. Some admit to avoiding discussing gender equality with both adults and their peers, because it is a controversial subject. Nevertheless, they are all aware of the main gender-related issues discussed worldwide, from women's representation in politics to LGBTQ+ rights. The main source of information for these teenagers is social media and serial dramas on streaming platforms, and their cultural consumption is shifting symbolic gender boundaries towards more inclusive views.

Keywords: symbolic gender boundaries, serial drama, teenagers, reception studies, Romania

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There is a long tradition in the social sciences of studying the creation, institutionalization, and transgression of boundaries among groups based on class, ethnicity or race, nationality, gender, and sex (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). There is also a long tradition of analyzing the use of culture in creating boundaries and distinction (Bourdieu, 1979), or, on the contrary, in boundary transgression and in symbolic elevation for specific groups (Bryson, 1996; Alba, 2024). This interest is supported by the fact that symbolic boundaries, which are expressed in and influenced by cultural consumption, sustain social boundaries that affect the lives and self-perceptions of marginalized individuals (Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

Following the definitions of Lamont and Molnár (2002), symbolic boundaries are understood here as principles of classification used by social actors to categorize objects, people, and practices. Social boundaries, by contrast, are “objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities” (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168). Thus, symbolic boundaries can be identified through interviews (Lamont, 1992), while social boundaries can be mapped using demographic data, legislative analysis, and even data about criminal activities.

A change in symbolic boundaries that is widely accepted by the large majority may lead to a change in social boundaries and improve the lives of formerly marginalized groups (Alba, 2024). Various studies discuss how shifts in symbolic boundaries are supported and influenced by the consumption of popular culture products such as music, social media, and serial dramas, particularly regarding high– versus low–status groups (Peterson & Kern, 1996), of ethnic minorities (Alba, 2024), of women (Pinedo, 2021; Lauzen, 2025) and sexual minorities (Parsemain, 2019; Sulimma, 2020). Serial dramas, more specifically, are considered both a reflection of social change (Gitlin, 2000; Alba, 2024) and a cause of social change (Parsemain, 2019; Sulimma, 2020).

This article analyzes the possible influence of serial dramas on how teenagers from an Eastern European country perceive symbolic gender boundaries. This evaluation is based on self-assessments several teenagers were invited to share during focus group interviews, and on assessments made by high school teachers about their students, during semi-structured interviews focused on gender issues and serial drama.

During the last decade, we have witnessed the increased importance of streaming platforms at international level. These platforms share the same serial dramas titles, approaching gender issues, to a global audience, with the potential to affect national symbolic boundaries shifting regarding women and sexual minorities. Thus, this study evaluates the possible influence of international structural changes and value changes (to use the terms of Peterson and Kern, 1996), on symbolic gender boundaries in a national context.

Gender issues and serial dramas

Teenagers' cultural consumption, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, was marked worldwide by an increased dependency on social media and streaming platforms (Fernandes et al., 2020; Eurostat, 2025). This tendency is a result of a structural change: the improvement of technologies supporting over-the-top television and algorithm-based platforms provided access to and encouraged people of all ages to increase their consumption of entertainment, and, in some cases, information and opinion created for multinational audiences. Topics such as women's rights and gender rights are now discussed in media markets where they were once considered taboo.

While traditional media guide content consumption with the help of human gatekeepers, digital platforms, such as social media and streaming, use algorithmic gatekeepers. There are two main categories of algorithms (Kotkov et al., 2020): (1) accuracy-oriented algorithms, based on popular items and previous consumption, that can lead to lower user satisfaction and (2) serendipity-oriented algorithms, which are reranking algorithms that increase diversity and diminish the overspecialization issue. Serendipity algorithms act against filter bubbles, exposing people to content they might enjoy, but with which they are not familiar. Automated serendipity increases the information influx from different categories of content. The effects depend on the algorithms used by each platform, as previous research on news consumption shows. Search engines generate diverse and balanced news consumption (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018), while some social networks lead to diversified consumption, but push more partisan content toward their users (Kitchens et al., 2020). Thus, algorithms can be used both for marketing and for ideological ends, exposing people to diverse issues and standpoints, including gender rights.

Regarding content production, another structural change is worth noticing: the increased percentages of women and of LGBTQ+¹ representatives in executive or creative positions, in the news and entertainment industries, and online, as content creators on social media (Horak, 2017; Rocchi et al., 2023; Lauzen, 2025). Several authors have linked the invisibility or the stereotypical portrayals of women and minorities in film and entertainment to a lack of diversity in creative jobs, such as screenwriters, or in management positions in the film industry (see Erigha, 2015). In the case of women, for example, an increased percentage in decision-making roles is correlated with an increased percentage of female characters in speaking roles and in major roles across broadcast and streaming, and an increased percentage of major female characters specifically for original streaming (Lauzen, 2025). Serial dramas centered on "difficult women" are now a programming trend, targeting female audiences with feminist subjects, from domestic violence to equal pay (Pinedo, 2021, p. 1). A similar process happens also in the case of sexual minorities (Parsemain, 2019; Sulimma, 2020).

This structural change has a proven effect on some members of the audience. Studying television audiences over several decades, Jeremiah Garretson (2015) found that an increased exposure to complex portrayals of women, as well as racial and sexual minorities,

led to greater social tolerance among heavy television viewers, and even more so for younger audiences, who do not actively sort out or avoid specific content.

The structural change in content production is an effect of value changes regarding the role and “moral worthiness” (to use the term of Alba, 2024) of women and minorities in society. Major historical developments, such as World War II or the Holocaust (Peterson & Kern, 1996; Alba, 2024) clarified, for the dominant majority, the adverse effects of marginalization and demonization based on race, ethnicity, or gender, creating the base for social change. Thus, public opinion became more open to discussing persistent issues revealed by women’s rights or LGBTQ+ social movements. These movements had both cultural and political dimensions, changing the visibility of women and sexual minorities in news and entertainment and applying pressure for changes in legislation for equal rights, equal access to opportunities and greater protection against discrimination and hate crimes.

For European or North American teenagers, these major social, political, and cultural transformations have merely historical value: the world in which they grew up is different from the world their parents or grandparents grew up in. The Western world now recognizes women’s labor rights, women’s active participation in politics, same-sex civil unions, and even gender-based hate crimes.

At the same time, other factors contribute to the way teenagers understand and evaluate gender issues, from a different perspective. These factors include (Radu et al., in press): religious or ethnic values, the politicization of gender by populist and conservative parties, and the urban/rural or big city/small town divide. Teenagers’ views are based on personalized consumption of entertainment, news and opinion on social media and on streaming platforms, which mix conservative influencers who propagate hate speech against minorities, alongside serial dramas with strong female characters and complex portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals.

We know from previous audience research that shared norms and values influence the diffusion of ideas and behavior – and these studies may inform a new research article on symbolic boundaries shifting in the case of women and gender minorities. In a classical study, Lazarsfeld and Katz show that media messages are mediated by opinion leaders who are sensitive to group norms and values: the two-step flow of communication hypothesis (Katz, 1957). Opinion leaders are members of a community who differentiate themselves from their peers by a higher interest and informational access to a specific field, outside the group to which they belong. They bring new ideas inside their communities, trying at the same time to preserve a balance between innovation and the group’s value system. More recent research shows that parasocial opinion leaders, from TV news anchors to serial drama characters, may also influence opinion and even behavior in the short term, based on affinity and perceived homophily (Giles, 2002). Seriality allows screenwriters to elaborate complex characters for whom members of the audience can develop feelings of empathy (Parsemain, 2019) and affinity.

The social context is important, as another classical research study shows. Manifest opinions influence behavior: to avoid isolation, people tend to express in public only opinions that will not bring upon social sanctions. This is the spiral of silence hypothesis. When presenting this hypothesis, Noelle-Neumann remarks that social change is still possible, due

to daring opinion leaders: “the active role of starting a process of public opinion formation is reserved to the one who does not allow himself to be threatened with isolation” (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 44).

If cultural products support symbolic boundaries’ transgression or shifting, how is the actual process developing for gender issues?

As the previous research question is too large, I will narrow the scope of this article by focusing on teenagers, as previous literature indicates this segment of the audience is more open to experimenting and change. I will also focus on gender symbolic boundaries, as the main issue, and on serial dramas, as a specific cultural product. My main research question for this article is:

- Are serial dramas influencing young adults’ perspectives on gender equality?

If the answer is yes, the follow-up questions are:

- How do these media products support change in symbolic gender boundaries? Are opinion leaders important? Is the social context important, also?

Research design

To answer these questions, I used the transcripts of focus groups with teenagers and of interviews with high school teachers, gathered during the research phase of GEMINI, a multinational project I was part of. Out of the four countries from which data were gathered, this analysis will focus on Romania, which has some of the highest social gender boundaries in Europe.

The project team gathered data from three focus groups with high school students from Bucharest, in October-December 2023, and 10 semi-structured interviews with high school teachers, from Bucharest and the rest of the country, in December 2023-April 2024. The high schools represented by students and teachers were diverse, encompassing theoretical, technological, and economic profiles. Nevertheless, the sample is not representative of the whole high school student population in Romania. During the focus groups, 17 girls and 27 boys, with ages between 15 and 18 years old, were interviewed. Each focus group gathered members of the same class, from three different high schools. Students knew each other, allowing group dynamics to develop more naturally. Of the high school teachers, the vast majority was female (nine women and one man). Four teachers were under 40 years old and six teachers were over this age, in an effort to obtain a broader representation of the different age groups. Teachers and students came from different institutions².

The data are qualitative and are not representative of the whole Romanian high school population. Both focus groups and interviews were conducted with a self-selected sample that presumably share the same interest in teenagers’ consumption of serial dramas and gender equality as the researchers involved in the project. Yet, the data allow for a deep dive into the social reality of young people and high school teachers interested in gender equality, as interviews are personal accounts on a given subject, during a participant-researcher interaction, and focus groups gather personal accounts on a given subject,

during “participant-researcher interaction and interaction between participants” (Smithson, 2008, p. 357).

For this article, I selected the answers to focus group questions and interviews with teachers related to (1) serial drama influence on teenagers’ perspectives, (2) opinion leaders and change in symbolic gender boundaries and (3) social context and change in symbolic gender boundaries. I am also discussing the interaction between teenagers, during the focus group interviews, to underscore how opinion leaders and social context influence conversations on gender issues, despite previous tendencies towards or against gender equality.

Existing social gender boundaries in Romania

In the period 2023-2024, when the interviews and the focus groups took place, Romania outperformed the average of the European Union (EU) countries in reducing gender inequalities in participation in education and training, in the workplace and in access to financial resources, the Gender Equality Index shows (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2025). The overall performance is, nevertheless, lower than the EU average for the general index and for several other domains, such as the allocation of time for domestic work and social activities, decision making positions related to political, economic or social fields and health status, health behavior and access to health services.

Another set of data, on sexual crimes, shows an even gloomier difference between the status of men and women, reflecting an utter disregard for the well-being of girls. The Eurostat data for 2023 on live births by mother’s age and citizenship (Eurostat, 2026) indicate that nearly half of all teenage mothers in the EU (between the ages of 10 and 14) come from Romania. Romania is, additionally, one of the main sources of human trafficking in Europe, for sex and labor (U.S. Department of State, 2024). The recruiting methods, for girls and boys alike, range from human trafficking done by a member of the family or an acquaintance who offers the perspective of a better life, to the *lover boy* method, which promises emotional and financial support (Tarnovschi, 2015).

Sexual crimes against young girls and human trafficking for forced labor and commercial sexual exploitation are supported by social perceptions of the role and the place of women and children in Romanian society, as well as the role of the state in protecting the vulnerable. Journalistic investigations have showed that the judiciary regularly treated sexual crimes against minors – mostly girls – as consensual acts, even though Romania lost a case at the European Court of Human Rights in 2016, on the matter (Oncioiu, 2019). Legislation against domestic violence came into force in 2003, due to public pressures from women’s rights organizations. Yet, it was only in 2025 that crimes against women were publicly labeled as femicides in Romania.

Social gender boundaries can also be found in statistical data about sexual minorities, in the way Romanian authorities acknowledge LGBTQ+ rights, and in hate crime statistics. In the case of hate crimes targeting LGBTQ+ people in Romania, “data from international

surveys reveal a high level of victimization and a low level of reporting, often due to fear of homophobic or transphobic reactions from law enforcement” (Council of Europe, 2023, p. 4).

Social barriers leading to discrimination are present in Romania regarding employment, the recognition of same-sex civil unions, securing stable housing, access to health services and the protection of bodily integrity in intersex children, all occurring on a background of growing attacks from conservative political forces, both in Eastern and in Western Europe (ILGA Europe, 2025). However, the symbolic gender barriers are changing. Over the years, there has been an “increasing acceptance of LGBTI people and same-sex families in the country... 70% of Romanians believe same-sex couples should be legally protected” (ILGA Europe, 2025, p. 118).

In this article I intend to examine whether cultural consumption is one of the reasons for this shift in symbolic gender barriers, focusing on teenagers and their consumption of serial dramas, within this complex social background of the Romanian society.

Serial dramas’ influence on teenagers’ perspectives

Many teenagers do not directly admit that they are influenced by media products in their attitudes toward gender issues. When asked if people their age are influenced by serial dramas, one participant in a focus group replied that their views do not change because they watch videos on TV and on streaming platforms. They argue that teenagers are more mature:

If you are a small child, like 10, yes, you are influenced [*by serial dramas*] (FG1).

In-depth discussions led to more nuanced descriptions of the relationship between serial drama characters and teenagers. A female student from the first focus group admitted she likes strong female characters of a similar age to her:

I like to emulate some girl characters, if they are stronger, if I like how they dress or how they behave with some boys, with some girls (FG1).

Strong female characters can also strengthen a predisposition among some male students toward considering women as equal to men. Describing a female character who wanted to work with metal, doing a job that was historically reserved for men, one student concluded:

She proved a woman can be better than a man. As I said earlier, in some situations, a woman can be better than a man (FG2).

Male and female students do not share the same tastes in serial dramas. Boys tend to prefer more action series and those that talk about outsiders, in which men and women are represented in traditional roles, such as *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013). Girls tend to prefer

romance and series challenging stereotypes about young women, such as *Wednesday* (2022-present). Both groups know and watch the most popular international titles and have casual conversations about the plot and the motivations of the characters. This insight supports the hypothesis of a diverse media consumption, based on serendipity-oriented algorithms.

Teachers who were interviewed recognized that serial dramas influence students' attitudes and behaviors, even if the influence is not always beneficial. One female teacher noted:

Many of them identify with people in series, some try to become the characters they see, they try to do what they see in those movies or serial dramas. Some shows are educational, but they don't really watch these shows (F5, over 40).

There are also cases where students who feel social pressure because of their sexual orientation find refuge in serial dramas:

I have a student [...] he told me he was gay, he said it just like that, and that his parents did not understand him and that he had been watching serial dramas since 2019, and that his whole life was in serial dramas. [...] He realized that the reality there is not the same as the reality of this everyday life (F3, over 40).

Apart from the influence of serial drama, teachers talk about a strong influence from social media. Social platforms were also indicated by teenagers as sources of information about gender issues. One student told us that he heard about gender equality on social media:

I saw discussions on TikTok and Instagram [about gender equality], but I do not know much about this (FG2).

Another student recognized that he saw acts of violence against transgender people on social media (FG2).

Interviews with students and teachers highlight the influence of social media and of streaming platforms on the attitudes teenagers have toward gender equality. Both posts and serial dramas serve as informational and entertainment sources. Serendipity-based algorithms expose teenagers to a mix of representations of women and LGBTQ+ people. Most of the time, these representations strengthen the predispositions students already have, but in some cases, they are the primary source of information about gender issues, for teenagers who have never discussed these issues before in their families or in school.

Opinion leaders and symbolic gender boundaries

Perspectives vary slightly between teachers and students regarding with whom teenagers discuss gender equality with. Teachers believe that teenagers talk to their parents. During the interviews, teachers underscored the influence that families and members of the

community have on students. Some teachers recognized that some parents have difficulties in speaking about sensitive subjects, such as sexual minorities, with their children:

Parents do not know how to approach the issue and it is easier for them to leave to teachers or to schools what they should do at home (F1, over 40).

Besides parents, teachers noted that the teaching staff, school counselors (F2, over 40), peer groups, and NGO representatives (F10, below 40) serve as interlocutors for teenagers regarding gender-related subjects.

In turn, teenagers admitted talking to their parents and relatives about gender issues. Their relatives may be more or less tolerant toward women and minorities. If an adult has a more conservative approach and the teenager disagrees with this attitude, discussions may be avoided:

I am not discussing it with anyone, because it is not an issue that can be solved by discussing it, said one teenager in the first focus group.

Another participant added to this sentiment:

It is a useless discussion that leads nowhere... It is a personal matter, added a second teenager (FG1).

In other cases, when teenagers get involved in debates on gender equality, they tend to act as opinion leaders for their adult relatives. One female student told us:

I speak a lot with my uncle, because he has a completely different way of thinking compared to mine. And we debate this subject very much (FG1).

Another female student admitted:

My mom has a more old-fashioned way of thinking about this topic and no, she doesn't necessarily support gender equality. I don't necessarily think this is a good thing. And I'm trying to get her to change that way of thinking (FG2).

When asked by the interviewer if they discussed the topic, the student replied, "Yes, when we have the chance, we do talk about it" (FG2).

Teenagers also talk with their peers, if they feel their friends share similar opinions on gender issues or if the discussion develops with civility:

My group is 50–50 [*split*], this is why when we discuss things we share almost all opinions, but we are quite united so that we have a good collaboration. I can see the perspectives of some girls and of people that are disadvantaged in some cases, but also supported, in others (FG3).

The most comfortable discussions are with people who share similar views on gender issues. Teenagers who have a very tolerant approach to gender-related issues face difficulty finding interlocutors within the Romanian context:

In principle, I prefer to debate this topic with people from outside Romania, from an Erasmus project, for example, because I think they have a more open perspective (FG3).

If teenagers do not avoid the subject of gender equality altogether, they usually talk about it with their relatives, their teachers, school counselors, and their peers. Interview data show that some teenagers act, in fact, as opinion leaders, explaining to their more conservative counterparts how to approach gender equality subjects in a more tolerant manner. These findings suggest that teenagers look beyond family and school contexts for information on symbolic gender boundaries and are influenced by these complementary sources of information and opinion in their attitudes toward women and LGBTQ+ individuals.

Social context and symbolic gender boundaries

The interviews revealed that the social context has an impact both on teenagers' self-evaluations and on their behavior. The focus groups included gender equality supporters as well as gender equality contesters. The contributions to the focus groups were guided by the perceived direction of the discussions and by self-assessments in relation to the opinion of the perceived majority.

For example, teenagers perceived the interviewers as supporters of gender equality, as the questionnaire was built around key terms such as *equality*, *inclusive society* and *stereotypes*. As a result, some positioned their views on gender equality against a perceived universal standard of tolerance. A gender equality supporter, for example, commented that gender issues are not a common topic of conversation, because Romania is located in a region of the world with more conservative values:

Because we are a Balkan country, these issues are not very often discussed (FG3).

A gender equality contestant used a similar tactic, framing intolerance toward sexual minorities as an obsolete attitude:

I agree with the generation of my parents. I am a bit homophobic (FG1).

The same approach was present in the teachers' interviews. An interviewee described gender equality in the following words:

This is the trend in the West, and it is clear we are going to align with that eventually [...] in decades (F1, over 40).

In different contexts, some teenagers may behave differently in order to secure group approval. Children can be cruel to each other, teachers told us. Students tend to copy their peer group when it comes to approaching gender issues, and they are easily influenced

either in supporting women and sexual minorities or in adopting discriminatory behaviors. One teacher described the cohorts of students after COVID-19:

After the pandemic, it seems to me [*students*] will accept each other more easily. [*LGBTQ+ students*] are more numerous. I think the community has increased and they are more easily accepted. But there are also colleagues who marginalize them and use labels for them (F3, over 40).

During the focus groups, some of the teenagers maintained their previously held positions, against gender equality, and their strong positioning influenced group dynamics by silencing opposing views. During the first focus group, a male student asserted:

Now movies show women as the strongest thing, and it is not true [...] The rule is that men are better than women [...] ever since the beginning of the world, all empires were ruled by men (FG1).

When the moderator invited the female students to respond, no one answered. Half an hour later, when the group was asked if gender issues are a “private” matter or if they have a “public” dimension, the group concluded that gender equality must be an issue discussed privately because it is too controversial.

Based on the group dynamics during the focus group interviews, the three high school classes invited to the discussion about gender equality and serial drama reached three different conclusions. According to the first focus group, gender issues are private. The second focus group decided that gender issues are public matters, while the third focus group determined that gender issues are private matters with a public dimension.

Gender equality is often an avoided issue in conversations, for fear of controversy, and public positioning toward gender issues depends on the perceived social context. Alternative views risk disappearing behind a disapproving silence, even if those alternative views are in line with what is generally regarded as a normative standard of universal tolerance toward people, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation.

Main findings

Starting from a rich literature on cultural consumption and the shift in symbolic boundaries, this article discusses the possible effects of international serial dramas on young adults’ construction of symbolic gender boundaries, against a conservative background in an Eastern European country. This article investigates whether serial dramas influence young adults’ perspectives on gender equality. Upon establishing this impact, the study addresses the following secondary questions: (a) how do these media products reshape symbolic gender boundaries? (b) what role do opinion leaders play in this process? and (c) how does the broader social context modulate these effects?

Three focus groups with Romanian teenagers from different high schools in Bucharest and ten in-depth semi-structured interviews with high school teachers from Romania indicate that cultural products with international circulation do indeed shape indeed young

adults' attitudes toward gender equality. Younger generations are more inclined to acknowledge, understand and even defend fundamental human rights, including gender equality, as compared to the generations of their parents or older relatives.

In general, teenagers have little or no possibility to talk about gender equality issues in their families, at school or in their communities. Some of them admit to avoiding gender equality discussions, because it is a controversial subject among both adults and their peers. Nevertheless, all participants are aware of the main themes discussed internationally, from women's representation in politics to LGBTQ+ rights.

The main source of information, for many teenagers, is social media and serial dramas on streaming platforms. Both teenagers, during focus groups, and high school teachers, during interviews, indicate that serial dramas are influencing young adults' perspectives on gender equality – thus answering the main research question of this study. These findings are in line with previous research on the renegotiation of symbolic boundaries due to cultural consumption. They add to the rich literature in reception studies by discussing a case of symbolic gender boundaries shifting at the level of young adults, in a context of strong social gender boundaries, due to online cultural consumption.

The answer to the first follow-up question, how do media products support change in symbolic gender boundaries, is complex. What teenagers consume is based on algorithmic recommendations on social media and streaming platforms. Even if boys prefer action series featuring men and women in more traditional roles, and girls prefer stronger female characters, both boys and girls tend to consume the most prominent serial dramas that their peers talk about. Teenagers follow serial dramas with strong and complex female and LGBTQ+ characters, an effect of the growth in importance and usage of international streaming platforms, where more female and LGBTQ+ individuals hold creative and managerial positions. On the other hand, social media presents content creators who support gender equality, alongside content creators who exhibit patriarchal views or even promote hate speech against LGBTQ+ individuals. The results of this cultural consumption are mixed, depending on personal background and predispositions toward women or sexual minorities. Media products may support change in symbolic gender boundaries, depending on personal background, social context and predispositions.

The second follow-up question refers to the importance of opinion leaders in shaping symbolic boundaries. Teachers indicate that students often follow their family members in supporting or contesting gender rights. Focus group data show, however, that teenagers sometimes choose to follow online parasocial opinion leaders on subjects that are absent from real life discussions, including gender issues. Some teenagers are open to shaping their opinions on gender issues while watching serial dramas that promote the rights of women and sexual minorities. On the other hand, teenagers are also exposed to online hate speech targeting sexual minorities. With views based on cultural consumption, some teenagers adopt an opinion leader position inside their families and their group of peers, in real life, supporting gender rights. This last finding is in line with the hypothesis proposed by Noelle-Neumann (1974), about members of a community who resist the pressure of the majority on controversial subjects. Exposed to information and opinions on social media and on streaming platforms, some young adults adopt the role of opinion leaders inside their

communities, on gender issues and gender rights, when former opinion leaders expose views considered too conservative.

The last follow up question refers to the importance of social context in the transgression of symbolic boundaries. The interviews revealed that the general perception among people willing to discuss gender issues is that gender equality is the norm abroad and will become the norm in Romania in the distant future. This perception is built on the consumption of foreign (mainly U.S.) media content, on social and on streaming platforms. When strong opinions against gender equality are presented during a discussion, a coping strategy is adopted by people with more moderate views. A disapproving silence is used in contexts infused with traditional norms and values, leading to little or no possibility, for teenagers, to talk about gender equality issues in some families, in some schools or in some communities.

Policy recommendations

Focus group and interview data show that algorithms alone cannot be trusted to nurture an inclusive society. Online content can support old stereotypes or create new ones, as automated serendipity allows for all views to be discovered. Parasocial opinion leaders, from social media, movies, and serial dramas, can support more tolerant views or, on the contrary, more patriarchal and even intolerant attitudes toward women and LGBTQ+ people. For an inclusive society, we need coherent public policies that address actual problems regarding gender equality and a coherent educational offer for all high school students, regardless of their personal background and former knowledge and understanding of gender equality. Since media content is so influential and algorithm-based platforms are sources of information on gender equality for young adults and for their teachers, media literacy classes that address both fictional and news content are also needed.

Biographical note

Raluca-Nicoleta Radu (PhD, communication studies) is a full professor at the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Studies, University of Bucharest, Romania. Her research and teaching focus on media industries, in general, and journalism, in particular. Her published work builds on research done in national and international teams in media ethics (including conspiracy theories, disinformation campaigns, fact-checking and debunking), audience studies (consumption of information and opinion, for adults, and entertainment, for teenagers), journalism production (with a focus on data visualization) and media economics. With more than two decades in academia, including an extensive experience as an academic manager, Radu has served as an expert in consultancy bodies for the Romanian Ministry of Education and for the European Union, among other stakeholders.

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Notes

¹ LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other identities.

² All interviewees were anonymized. For teachers, the interviews were coded with F or M (masculine or feminine), the number of the interview in the sample and the age of the interviewee, under or over 40. For example, F1, over 40 means that the analysis refers to the first interview from the Romanian sample (1), with a lady (F) and the age of the interviewee was over 40 years old (over 40). For students, only the information about the focus group is present, as FG1, FG2 or FG3 – the first, the second or the third focus group in the Romanian sample.