

“Old” Series and “Young” Generations: Popular Culture, Media Representations and the Re-figuration of Gender Values *

Silvia Leonzi^{**}
Sapienza Università di Roma

Giovanni Ciofalo^{***}
Sapienza Università di Roma

Lorenzo Ugolini^{****}
Sapienza Università di Roma

The present paper is part of a broader research project, aimed at analysing the transformation of the nature, role, functions and modes of production and reproduction of popular culture in Italy in the context of deep mediatization and platformization. Specifically, it examines the current capacity of popular culture to contribute to the construction of collective identities, intergenerational dialogue and a shared we-sense within the Italian context. In light of this framework, the paper presents the first results of a part of the research project aimed at exploring the current potential of specific media contents to serve as a vehicle for expressing, sharing and disseminating socially relevant values across generations. More specifically, this part of the research focuses on two television series (“Sex and the City” and “Desperate Housewives”) that have been considered milestones in the representation of gender issues for audiences belonging to Baby Boomers and especially Generation X and Millennials, and addresses whether and to what extent they appear to be able to convey gender-related values to audiences belonging to Generation Z as they did to previous generations. The paper begins with the theoretical framework, then outlines the research methodology, before presenting the results and main insights. The primary objective is to outline the critical issues, potential and limitations of popular culture as a habitat for conveying values across generations. From this phase of the research, several interesting insights emerge, among which the fact that participants interpret *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* through a strongly present-oriented lens. Values and conflicts are assessed as “current” or “outdated,” while their once-disruptive narrative forms are largely normalized. This suggests a gap between recognizing themes and acknowledging their cultural impact, ultimately confirming that popular culture’s capacity to sustain a stable, shared “we-sense” across generations appears to be put into question.

Keywords: Popular culture, gender, TV-Series, generations, social values

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** silvia.leonzi@uniroma1.it

*** giovanni.ciofalo@uniroma1.it

**** lorenzo.ugolini@uniroma1.it

The present paper is part of the broader research project “Understanding Popular Culture in the Age of Deep Mediatization”, carried out at the Department of Communication and Social Research of Sapienza University of Rome, aimed at investigating the evolution of the nature, role, characteristics, functions and modes of production and reproduction of popular culture in Italy in light of the profound changes that have affected the social system in recent years and, above all, the media system in the sense of deep mediatization and platformization. The research addresses the current ability of popular culture to participate, as has always been the case in the past, and as seems to be more difficult and rarer nowadays (as we will explore in more detail later), in the construction of collective identities, intergenerational dialogue, and a shared we-sense within the considered Italian context.

Popular culture: theoretical framework

The concept of popular culture holds a central place in sociological research because it is one of the main arenas where meanings, identities, memories, imaginaries and social relations are generated, disseminated, and negotiated. For this reason, popular culture displays a complex and multifaceted character and, from a transdisciplinary perspective, engages several research fields, such as cultural studies, memory studies, sociology of the imaginary, media studies and digital media studies, semiotics, sociology of consumption and generational studies. Popular culture has been examined from different angles, and for this reflection, three main perspectives can be distinguished.

First, it has been examined within broader debates about the concept of culture. From this perspective, scholars analyse the historical development of cultural objects and practices, especially since the emergence of mass society and mass media, along with the related processes of producing, circulating and consuming meanings, leading to a variety of definitions and approaches. These include the construction of identity and the enactment of practices (Hoggart, 1957; Bourdieu, 1979; Griswold, 1994); cultural production and the evolution of cultural and creative industries (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947; Morin, 1962; Eco, 1964; Jenkins, 2006; Hesmondhalgh, 2018); and the processes of consumption and the role of audiences (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; Morley, 1980; Livingstone, 2002; Storey, 2018).

A second line of research examines the functions that popular culture performs within society, particularly in building, sharing, and preserving collective memories and imaginaries that sustain identity and foster a community *we-sense* (Fiske, 1989; Edensor 2002; Colombo, 2025). This strand addresses both the persistence of traditional functions and the emergence of new ones in contemporary contexts. It also considers the crisis of traditional generational classifications (Mannheim, 1928; Assmann, 1995; Edmunds & Turner, 2005; Aroldi & Colombo, 2003; Bolin, 2016) and the growing overload of texts and popular culture products consumed across increasingly diversified media environments.

The third perspective examines how digital media, platformization and mediatization (and deep mediatization) (Chadwick, 2017; Couldry & Hepp, 2017; van Dijck *et al.*, 2018) shape different aspects of popular culture, with the aim of assessing whether and to what extent

popular culture is shaped by media logics and how changes in the media landscape influence how it is created, transmitted and reinterpreted across generations. Considering the effects of the mediatization of memory (Hoskins, 2009) and of culture (Hjarvard, 2008), such as redefined archives, digital oblivion or memorial mania (Doss, 2010), and the related disconnection between signifiers and signifieds (Eco, 1975), this research explores processes such as algorithmic selection, datafication dynamics, the algorithmic redefinition of audiences (Bucher, 2018; Couldry & Mejias, 2019), practices such as rendering, fragmentation and semantic deconstruction, together with the risks of a potential data gaze (Zuboff, 2019; Beer, 2019; etc.).

Given the wide range of critical issues and the intellectual and scientific approaches involved in studies of popular culture, our research adopts a figurational perspective that draws on the sociology of Norbert Elias (Elias, 1939) and focuses on the possible re-figuration of popular culture (Hepp, 2020; Knoblauch, 2021). Within this ecological and process-oriented framework, popular culture is seen as the result of interdependence among media, practices, objects and social relations.

More specifically, popular culture is understood, on the one hand, as a figuration of actors, practices and cultural objects that contributes to shaping and transforming the collective identity of an (actual or imagined) community, primarily in terms of national belonging (we-sense), by enabling the understanding, reproduction and transmission of values and practices (beliefs, mentalities, customs, habits, etc.), traditions and memories (rites, myths, symbols, stories, languages, characters, events, etc.), thereby preserving and nurturing a shared imaginary; on the other hand, it is conceived as a field of power and tension between apparatuses/producers and subjects/users, in which production logics (top-down and/or bottom-up), consumption practices and processes of signification operate and are continuously negotiated for ideological, value-based and/or commercial purposes.

Within this context, the media play a crucial role because they enable a recursive process of transformation (creation/production, transmission/dissemination, innovation/mutation) of popular culture, a process that can be described as a re-figuration (the incessant transformation of the figurational and field dimensions of popular culture), involving social relations, technologies, tastes, habits and symbolic hierarchies.

Popular culture and the re-figuration of values

The main point for reflection that we intend to develop in the different phases of the research takes shape precisely at this level, which constitutes one of the main critical issues affecting the evolution of popular culture from all three points of view: nature, functions and role of the media.

Over time popular culture has represented the main source (or, to use a metaphor that is less common from a linguistic point of view, but probably more appropriate, a *reservoir*) from which collective memories and collective imaginaries have drawn to consolidate and establish themselves as the ideal repository of the shared identity within a community of

individuals (as for example a nation, but also large communities such as cities or regions): a sense of belonging and togetherness referred to as the idea of *we-sense*.

The role of *we-sense* in nurturing and preserving common values, norms, and models of behaviour within communities has been considered as fundamentally stable and somehow self-evident. Even within a country such as Italy, where the sense of statehood and unity has always been debated as weak and underdeveloped (from the consequences of late unification to the atavistic instability of the political and social framework, passing through the divisions between different geographical areas of Italy or the structural prevalence of the family dimension over that of the community, made famous worldwide by the mafia dynamics and “amoral familism” described by Banfield in 1958), the sense of collective identity linked to popular culture (which could be summarised, perhaps somewhat simplistically, with the term “Italianness”) has always been easily identifiable (not only referring to media such as TV, cinema, music, etc., but also with respect to history, art, cooking, languages and customs, etc.), as well as claimed by a significant portion of Italians, net of the elements that gradually left it and others that joined it for obvious reasons linked to the passage of time.

In the last few years, nonetheless, this set of images, symbols, myths and shared values no longer seems capable of maintaining a firm grip on increasingly large sections of our society. We seem to be witnessing a progressive contraction of a common substrate capable of bringing different groups into dialogue with each other, primarily at the level of age and generations, but not only. In more and more contexts, we are seeing forms of “breach” of a code that was previously shared and adopted by a significant portion of society of all ages despite differences and difficulties. Popular culture appears to have profoundly changed both its nature and its role; the pre-existing common *we-sense* seems to be giving way to a multiplicity of different belongings and identifications, in which what is in crisis is precisely the ability of increasingly numerous, specific sets of values, practices, traditions and memories, shared by increasingly numerous, restricted communities, to dialogue with each other.

It is crucial to emphasize that we do not interpret this profound change as signalling the disappearance of popular culture, as though its very existence were being called into question. Rather, we understand popular culture as something that cannot simply cease to exist. Acknowledging its deep transformation therefore means that our primary task as scholars is to grasp it in its contemporary forms, moving beyond simplistic approaches rooted in a sedimented and standardized conception of popular culture inherited from earlier generations. As previously noted, the core hypothesis explaining this profound change concerns the nature and functions of contemporary popular culture and the media’s shaping role.

Therefore, the main goal of our research is to understand how cultural and media products are consumed, resemantized, co-created and shared by audiences in the age of platformization and deep mediatization, through the analysis of the modes through which popular culture is accessed, shared, participated, sedimented and socialized. In order to do so, we aim to identify the processes and motivations behind the use of individual cultural products and/or sedimented narratives (such as famous transmedia franchise); to analyse

practices of consumption of cultural products (by pointing out sharing practices, the role of algorithms and social media, etc.), focusing also on the involuntary consumption due to the massive exposition to media contents in everyday media consumption; to identify specific paths of hybridization and re-generation of narratives, related to the processed of resemantization, co-creation and participation allowed and facilitated by platforms; finally to analyse the dynamics of engagement from an intergenerational and intragenerational perspective.

The progressive fragmentation of shared memories and imaginaries across generations leads us to consider that the significance of these products may have undergone significant changes. As emerged in the previous phases of the research (Leonzi & Ugolini, 2023), as stated, the progressive contraction of a shared set of meanings associated with popular culture elements has brought about a substantial shift in the ability of popular culture to generate imaginaries, which, albeit evolving, do not appear to be stable and shared by a significant part of the community. Rather, the current scenario evokes a sort of constellation of different imaginaries, linked to more volatile communities, and therefore deeply changeable. We have described this configuration in terms of a “long tail of imaginaries” (drawing on the classic formulation proposed by Chris Anderson in 2006) precisely to recall and highlight some trajectories that characterize according to us the current construction of imaginaries: the opportunity, offered by the practices enabled by platforms, to build “tailor-made” imaginaries; the related emergence of significant differences even within generations, prompting reflection on the very significance of generational cohorts; the difficulty of establishing and perpetuating the original meaning of cultural and media contents, even when they are very well known, particularly as a result of the bottom-up creation, resemantization and co-creation of content.

This last element addresses specifically the processes of building (or not) and consolidating (or not) shared memories and imaginaries, foundations of a common we-sense. One of the main historical characteristics of popular culture with respect to cultural and media contents was precisely the use of the latter as references to convey specific meanings (political issues, social phenomena, cultural trends, etc.), shaping them as a shared language to facilitate an intergenerational dialogue and therefore to perpetuate and disseminate identities, memories, imaginaries through time and generations. The intergenerational knowledge and sharing of particularly significant content (such as films, songs, television programmes, books, etc.) made it possible to preserve their meaning regardless of whether users had enjoyed them at the time of their release and whether they were characteristic of their generation¹. Not only this has allowed specific narratives to be appreciated and remembered over time, turning cultural and media products into “classics” or “cult”, but also, and perhaps above all, to convey certain important meanings (of historical, social, cultural, political, customary nature, etc.) that classic or cult products carry with them, contributing to build a core of shared meanings and social values through generations. Consequently, the change in conveying meanings through generations could correspond plausibly in a related change in perpetuating a shared set of values that characterize a community’s we-sense.

The research on “old” TV Series

This leads us to the main aspect we aim to explore in the part of the research presented in this paper. While our broader research objective is to understand whether the current re-figuration of popular culture is still capable of constructing and conveying a collective we-sense in light of the profound changes brought about, especially by hybridization and platformization, this specific phase focuses on the ability of cultural and media products (specifically television series) to convey a defined set of values (namely gender-related ones), even years after their initial release. Our goal is therefore to investigate whether the contemporary redefinition of popular culture acts as both a mirror and a shaper of the values involved in the re-figuration of a shared we-sense.

To this purpose, we focused our research on two well-known TV-series, “Sex and the City” (HBO, 1998-2004, 6 seasons, 94 episodes) and “Desperate Housewives” (ABC, 2004-2012, 8 seasons, 180 episodes) – SATC and DH from now on.

These two TV-series were selected because of several reasons. First of all, they can certainly be considered highly successful series, famous in Italy as well as worldwide, winners of numerous awards (including Emmy Awards and Golden Globes). Secondly, these series had a strong impact on public, becoming highly discussed both for the issues addressed and for the narrative choices (locations, fashion, characterisation and stereotyping, sexuality, common saying, etc.) (Akass & McCabe, 2003, 2006).

This led us to consider both series as “cult” series, able to generate meanings and imaginaries related to them, that made them significant both in the period of their release and in the following years. Consequently, we consider them as a prime example of media and cultural products becoming part of popular culture as it has always been understood. The notion of *cult* adopted here draws on the established literature on cult television, which identifies cult series as texts capable of generating intense audience engagement, layered intertextual meanings, and lasting cultural resonance beyond their original broadcast context (Hills, 2002; Gwenllian-Jones & Pearson, 2004; Jones, 2023).

Furthermore, the two series were considered highly innovative in the way they portrayed women and womanhood at the time they were broadcast (Arthurs, 2003; Richards, 2003; Gerhard, 2005; Jermyn, 2009; Kaufer Busch, 2009; Hill, 2010). Firstly, from a more general point of view, because they adopted a multiple/choral female protagonism, which represented at the time a profound innovation and an almost unique case amongst successful TV-series (along with the TV-series “Charmed”, WB, 1998-2006).

Secondly, both series were considered as having a disruptive effect of innovation and taboo-breaking in the narration of the womanhood and the “real life” of women of that period (which distinguishes them from “Charmed”, a fantasy series whose narrative is structurally more disconnected from everyday life). SATC and DH involve several cultural and social topics which were increasingly considered central and fundamental by women of late 1990s and early 2000s, which had nonetheless only marginally entered the mainstream and successful narratives of the time².

The series, both belonging to the “dramedy” genre each with its own narrative characteristics³, addressed from a feminine perspective issues such as professional and personal affirmation, desires and ambitions, relationship with men, sexuality and taboos, womanhood, motherhood, socialization. This interweaving of thematic threads depicted in the series seems particularly consistent with the evolving debate on postfeminism in the media and popular culture, which was taking shape at that very time (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2007). Consequently, it is no surprise that they were perceived as meaningful and representative by women worldwide, and especially by those who mainly belong to the same generations of the protagonists, that is the younger segments of Baby-Boomers and especially Generation X.

For the purposes of our research, therefore, the analysis of the two series appears particularly significant precisely because they represent a cult product for certain generations, laden with meanings that also relate to social issues. Analysing their continued presence, or conversely their disappearance, in current popular culture, in terms of knowledge, memory and the imagination of subsequent generations, therefore offers us the opportunity to identify significant insights into the evolution of the impact of the media on popular culture and its ability to convey meanings and values, namely referred to gender issues and womanhood, across generations.

From a methodological viewpoint, a qualitative approach was chosen. We carried out four focus groups involving only participants selected from the Generation Z; the participants were therefore selected among people born between 1997 and 2006⁴. Crucially, no reference was made to the two series during the participant selection process, in order to ensure that responses would be entirely free from prior knowledge or appreciation of the shows.

Participants were then divided according to gender, creating two focus groups with only female participants and two focus groups with only male participants. In addition, we added a further subdivision between students/graduates in media and communication-related courses and students/graduates in other subjects (or not enrolled at university): our aim was to avoid potential biases linked to pre-existing knowledge and reflection on cultural and media content gained both from courses attended and from an overall predisposition towards issues related to cultural and media products. The four focus groups were: FG1 (7 participants, GenZ, female, students in media and communication studies); FG2 (6 participants, GenZ, male, students in media and communication studies); FG3 (7 participants, GenZ, female, non-students in media and communication studies); FG4 (7 participants, GenZ, male, non-students in media and communication studies).

The focus groups were conducted using visual stimuli. Specifically, five videos (lasting a total of approximately 21 minutes) were prepared⁵. These videos were aligned montages presenting different samples from SATC and DH, addressing specific issues and values related to gender and womanhood. The selected clips included in the montages were chosen based on their significance in relation to themes, meanings and values relating to womanhood and gender issues. They were preferably selected from the episodes of the first seasons of the two series, both for the sake of consistency, in order to highlight the primary narrative lines rather than those that may have developed over the following seasons, and

to keep the episodes mentioned within the time frame of the late 1990s and the first half of the 2000s.

The first video was intended to be introductory, including only two scenes from the first season of the two series – the very beginning of SATC (S1E1) and the season finale of DH (S1E23) – where all the main characters were briefly presented. This part of the focus group was aimed to introduce the main topic (which the participants were unaware of) and analyse their general knowledge of the two series.

The following four videos were created to show how the two series addressed certain sets of issues relevant to the representation of womanhood and gender related values. More specifically:

- the first video focused on the issues related to the *body*, including the aesthetic dimension, the judgment of others, the role and meanings of sex and its dimension related to independence⁶;
- the second video focused on the relationship with *other people and society*, referring to the dimensions of family, friendship, neighbourhood, gossip and rumours⁷;
- the third video focused on the relationship with *men*, addressing the dimensions of power, control and disparity (for economic, social, cultural reasons)⁸;
- finally, the fourth video focused on the issue of *maternity and motherhood*, addressing the desire to become a mother, the impact on professional career, the social expectations related to motherhood⁹.

At the end of each clip, participants were asked to discuss the issues raised in the videos, organised along three main lines (which also represented the main contribution from the moderator): *awareness*; *understanding of the narration*; *perception of the meaning*. With respect to awareness, the participants were asked firstly about their direct engagement with the series, and their appreciation. Secondly, and specifically whether they had not seen the series before, they were asked to try to express what they knew about the series, from a superficial knowledge by reputation (even if only for the mere knowledge of the name and/or its use as a set phrase) to a deep and articulated knowledge due to its direct exposure.

Concerning the second line, participants were asked to describe what had happened in the scenes that were shown, highlighting the themes they considered most interesting to emphasize based on their own perspective and experience. Finally, with respect to the third line, the dimension of values and meanings was addressed more specifically, asking the participants to explain what the issues evoked in the samples meant to them, and whether and to what extent they considered them as relevant and current. The main point for reflection that we intend to develop in the different phases of the research takes shape precisely at this level, which constitutes one of the main critical issues affecting the evolution of popular culture from all three points of view: nature, functions and role of media.

In light of this framework, this part of the research addresses three main research questions:

1. To what extent are SATC and DH known and recognised by Generation Z audiences in Italy?

2. How do Generation Z participants understand and interpret the narrative and values conveyed by these series?
3. In what ways do gender and generational positioning shape the perception of the values embedded in these series?

Findings

The first relevant finding is related to the line of the awareness, and inevitably represents a sort of preview of one of the research questions related to our topic. In fact, none of the 27 participants had seen either of the two series. Moreover, nine of them, seven of whom were men, said they had never even heard of the shows, at least in response to the first video.

Then, the total lack of prior familiarity with the series, while not anticipated at the design stage, ultimately strengthened the internal consistency of the data, ensuring that responses were not shaped by prior attachment to or knowledge of the shows. At the same time, this finding offers a preliminary indication (which is necessarily limited by the small sample size, yet sufficiently consistent to warrant attention) of a significant generational discontinuity in the cultural memory of these series, in line with what scholars have observed regarding the mediatization of memory (Hoskins, 2009) and the role of generational experience in shaping media consumption (Bolin, 2016).

A second interesting aspect emerged consequently from the reactions to the first video. Part of the participants, almost exclusively women (including those who never heard about the series), affirmed that they recognised them through clips encountered on social media, sometimes even without associating the clips to the series¹⁰:

Certain scenes from SATC go very viral on Instagram, for example, it often happens. Of course it depends on the algorithm of the individual. But they happened to drop by me very often and so I also got an idea about the dynamics between the character, despite the fact that I've hardly ever seen the series (FG1)

The other day I came across an excerpt talking about it (FG3)

When asked about an impression concerning the two series, some interesting associations emerged. First of all, with respect to DH, a male participant who had not heard about the series stated that he knew about the expression “desperate housewife” *“to describe a person, a woman in this case, overwhelmed by the duties of a housewife, cleaning, looking after the children and stuff like that. That is a desperate housewife”* (FG4). Concerning SATC, some reactions were related to the overall perception of the series as being a content dedicated to a female audience (*“So much so that to this day it is still seen as a female TV series anyway. The man who watches SATC is not exactly the typical macho man”*¹¹, FG1) and to the context where the story takes shape, as for example the city of New York or the field of fashion, which emerged clearly:

It is also a source of inspiration in terms of fashion. I've seen on Pinterest, for example, many photos of Carrie, who is the protagonist, I guess [...] I guess she worked in the fashion world, maybe as a journalist for some kind of, I don't know, Vogue? (FG1)

Regard to this aspect, it should be noted that Carrie Bradshaw, the protagonist and narrator of the series, actually does not work in fashion: she is a journalist who writes a weekly column (named precisely "Sex and the City") where she addresses issues such as friendship, relationships, sex and family from a woman's perspective. She has indeed become a fashion icon due to her passion for fashion in the series, and has also contributed to making Sarah Jessica Parker, the actress who plays her, a fashion icon.

From the point of view of the awareness, therefore, we highlight two main insights. First, a generally superficial and impressionistic knowledge, based mainly on the association of meanings (fashion, "female" content, set phrase) rather than on an in-depth awareness of the characteristics of the series and the issues addressed. Secondly, the role of the current media landscape, as this superficial knowledge appears to be consistent with, and somehow nurtured by, platforms logics and affordances (such as the random viewing of videos extrapolated from context, or the aesthetic dimension related to the logics of Pinterest).

With respect to the second main line related to the *understanding of the narration*, a relevant difference between the female participants and the male participants emerged. The reaction of the male participants, in fact, tended to be linked to the content of the scenes they had just seen, describing them and adding some impressions and opinions related to what happened in the samples shown. On the other hand, female participants tended to jump straight into interpretation, projecting what they have seen into a more general context, where there is also a tendency to read things in a personal way.

As for example, we quote two answers related to same videos. Referring to the issues of "Other people and society", in the selected samples a protagonist of DH, Bree van de Kamp, is presented as very uptight and perfectionist, much more concerned with the judgment of others than that of her family; and the protagonists of SATC debate a newspaper article in which one of them, Carrie Bradshaw, is cited as an example of single, unhappy women in their thirties.

Bree also plays a role that society expects, that of the perfect housewife, the perfect woman, however, unlike the first woman, she remains stuck in her character. Whereas the first woman chooses to play that character and when she wants to, she manages to unravel the interpretation by talking to the policeman who is doing the investigating, Bree, on the other hand, is stuck, right up to the very end. Despite having received the news of her husband asking for a divorce, she, instead of venting to the lady, which she wanted to do, remains stuck in her character (FG2)

At a certain age a woman is expected to marry, to have children, to be a mother, a wife, a career woman, and so perhaps this is perceived more negatively, almost as a burden by the characters despite actually trying to convince themselves otherwise, as Carrie said. You try to overturn this expectation and in a way go against what are the various social constructs. But at the same time you feel a bit of a burden of not having respected them (FG3)

Referring to the issues related to “Body”, the selected samples show Gabrielle Solis, a protagonist of DH, who is a strong and proud woman who is also capricious and frivolous, experiencing discomfort related to her daughter’s excess weight; and the protagonists of SATC discussing their insecurities about their physical appearance, and address the limitations and opportunities of using a sex toy (the “rabbit” that became famous worldwide thanks to the series and which, at the time, somehow legitimized the use of sex toys by women).

The idea that comes through at least from this image is that [Gabrielle] cares so much about what others think of her, especially in the way she behaves, trying to adapt her daughter to what others also want, and in my opinion, also linking to the other two clips, maybe Gabrielle is much less superficial than the other mothers, because she doesn’t stop at the appearance of the child. While the other mothers only see a chubby little girl, she knows her daughter, she knows that there is more, she does not stop only at the aesthetic character, as perhaps in the other scene of *Sex and the City*, where the character says she bought the ‘rabbit’, she stops at what that ‘rabbit’ can give her, but she does not think about what it cannot give her and what a man can give her (FG2)

I am not familiar with the character, but it is clear from the clip that the mother’s insecurity is reflected in her behaviour towards the child and could influence her negatively. In the first two clips, there is a continuity in the way female insecurities, especially related to aesthetics, are transmitted and internalised. These insecurities, inculcated from childhood, seem to normalise in adulthood, which is why in *Sex and the City* they are treated lightly, as if they were an inevitable aspect of the female experience (FG3).

Finally, concerning the third aspect related to values and meanings, the distance between the interpretation of the selected scenes between female participants and male participants appeared to grow. It is interesting to point out that both categories, when asked to focus on the relevance of the issues at the time of the series as well as in their current experience, chose to interpret the expressed values in terms of the present (which is consistent with the question they were asked and with their young age). Nonetheless, the main critical issues emerging from the videos appear to be analysed in the light of the current social landscape, proposing a sort of resemantization of SATC and DH in their today experience, proposing a female and male perspective which appears to be different, and also diverging from the message that aimed to be conveyed by the narration.

This aspect emerges particularly clearly in the reactions to the contents related to motherhood. The montage related to maternity and motherhood presents firstly two scenes from DH relating to the character of Lynette Scavo, a former career woman who gave up her career to raise four children (later five) with her husband Tom, who encouraged her to leave her career. Now confined to the role of stay-at-home mother, she feels trapped and unfulfilled, struggling with the relentless demands of daily family life and with a deep sense of guilt, as she worries that her unhappiness makes her a bad mother. Then, two scenes from SATC relating to the characters of Charlotte York and Miranda Hobbes: the first is the most romantic and traditional of the four protagonists and appears to be unable to get pregnant despite her craving for it, the latter is a pragmatic career woman who gets pregnant unexpectedly and without feeling any particular joy or emotion about it.

In response to this content, both female and male participants tended to project meaning onto their present and their current experiences. The female respondents, however, use the meaning of the scenes as a way to interpret the current scenario, as they perceive it, concerning maternity and motherhood, evoking social pressure and disparities concerning parenthood.

About motherhood we still tend to talk more about the positive aspects than the negative ones. Often we do not talk about what is the path for the body to get to have a child, what is after childbirth, what is precisely the role of the man [...] In these clips man are hardly mentioned [...] In fact, the only time he is mentioned is when she gets pregnant and her husband says "I had an idea, why don't you quit your job and dedicate yourself to the children?" (FG1)

It's a conversation that's still relevant, even today there is this exact perception of maternity, so there hasn't been a real change in that regard. [...] Some things have changed more, I mean there is no point in denying it, but up to a certain point [...] Of course it has to be contextualised in that era [...] however, certain realities do not seem so distant from us, as they are depicted in these clips (FG3)

Male respondents focus instead on another part of the current debate on parenthood, assuming a totally different position towards the way in which SATC and DH address the issue. The series are perceived as outdated because of the depiction of a family model as excessively stereotypical, in the involvement of the only heterosexual orientation and in the consideration of men as uninvolved and irresponsible with respect to the family life and especially children:

in my opinion you can see that [both series] aged, even badly in some aspects. Basically also because of the reality in which we live today, where fortunately there is no longer discrimination for other types of relationships. Such a product presented today could make people of other sexual orientations feel discriminated against, because it perhaps offers a narrative of a "classic" hetero relationship (FG4)

In the narrative, the male gender is not present, it is not considered, which is fortunately no longer the case today. I would not feel represented by such a narrative. I am sure that many straight males like me would not feel represented. Of course, there are still guys of our age who, seeing a 35-year-old woman who is still not pregnant, may turn up their noses. But that doesn't happen because they haven't seen *Sex and the City*, because none of us have, and yet what is portrayed in the series seems like the normality we grew up with (FG2)

The most relevant difference between female and male respondents emerged nonetheless with respect to another scene, which involves maternity but which was included in the montage concerning the relationship with men. The scene involves again the character of Gabrielle Solis, who in the series is married to Carlos, a traditionalist, jealous and possessive businessman with anger management issues that lead him to be violent towards his wife and others. In the scene, Gabrielle discovers she is pregnant despite at that time not wanting to become a mother and taking the birth control pill; she later realises that her pregnancy is due to Carlos, unbeknownst to her, replacing her birth control pills with another drug, imposing his desire to become a father on her. The scene ends with Gabrielle leaving home,

sarcastically and provocatively suggesting to her husband that the child she is carrying may be another man's.

The respondents' reactions differed significantly. Male respondents emphasised Gabrielle's reaction, highlighting how energetic it was and how she was immediately able to "take revenge". Only one of the respondents highlighted the violent and abusive nature of Carlos's actions, which, on the other hand, had a strong impact on the female respondents, who were shocked by the scene and, interestingly, agreed that the scene was too strong for today's audience. In this case, therefore, for profoundly different reasons, male respondents perceived the series as still relevant, whereas for female respondents it appeared unacceptable in today's concept.

There is an argument between a couple, which I think is emblematic of how society is changing. In the sense, the woman becomes aware of her powers, of what she can do [...]. So in my opinion this reflects very well how things are changing, still not completely changed because it's not totally like that yet, clearly, but it's how it's changing. And then later on it continues this sort of snubbing of the man, especially in one of the last scenes when the woman walks away saying to him, "Do you think it's your child, do you think it has to be yours?" (FG1)

N2: The clip regarding the pregnancy was really upsetting.

N5: It wouldn't be accepted today.

N2: Unthinkable.

N6: Such a thing on television today, at least not like during the period when the TV series was broadcast. Basically, it's a very serious thing that happened that he did, but today even more so it would be seen as something, that is a violence, if we really want to say so (FG4)

Discussion and conclusion

Let us now try to summarise this first part of the research. Although, obviously, four focus groups relating to the same generation do not allow us to draw definitive conclusions, the analysis highlights several key insights regarding the reception and interpretation of the two TV series.

First, the very low level of awareness of the shows appears to be consistent with the (relatively) short life cycle of media products even if they are considered as "cult", and as a consequence with the re-figuration framework: what we observe appears not to be mere ignorance, but a structural transformation in the way generational cultural products are transmitted and re-activated. In light of this, it is not surprising that products rarely manage to become part of shared memory and collective imaginary, reducing opportunities for cultural and media products to become shared cultural reference points. It is also interesting to note that platforms seem to contribute in some way to awareness of these products but at the same time failing to convey their meanings, because these are difficult to understand as a whole if they are included in short clips and difficult to associate with their lore.

We could then hypothesise that a platform-led cultural and media consumption can contribute to increasing the shift between knowledge (success and appreciation) and

understanding (meaning and values), representing a structural barrier for cultural and media products to become part of a popular culture. This dynamic is consistent with what scholars of deep mediatization and platformization have described as the restructuring of cultural practices through media logics (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; van Dijck *et al.*, 2018): platforms do not simply mediate access to cultural products, on the contrary, through algorithmic selection, fragmentation and decontextualization, they actively shape the conditions under which their meanings can be perceived, shared and transmitted across generations.

The second aspect, related to the first one, concerns the fact that both series were perceived (and presented by platform logics) as gender-oriented, but in different ways. They were widely considered “women’s series”, a label that shaped both awareness and meanings. From the point of view of awareness, it is interesting to point out that the total lack of awareness of the series mainly concerned male participants: this finding is consistent with the perception expressed by female participants themselves, who evoked the idea that a man interested in these series would be “not exactly the typical macho man” (FG1). This perspective is confirmed by the fact that only female respondents said they had received a significant amount of content related to the series from the platforms: it seems plausible to assume, therefore, that the algorithmic choices in terms of profiling attributed a “feminine” connotation to the series.

These aspects suggest a pattern (that certainly would require further investigation and a larger sample to be substantiated) whereby the gendered framing of SATC and DH as series aimed primarily at women appears to shape the interpretive approach of participants along gender lines: male respondents tended to engage more with narrative elements and plot structures, while female respondents more readily connected the conveyed meanings to their personal experiences and self-reflection.

This brings us to the third interesting aspect to highlight, perhaps the most relevant in terms of our reflection on popular culture. When asked to reflect on the semantic significance of the series, as for example its ability to embody socially relevant values and meanings, participants of both genders tend to apply a present-oriented perspective. Though understandably differing according to gender, the approach appears similar: the meanings of what they see are interpreted according to current value systems, and the impact of the series is assessed almost exclusively in terms of “current” or “outdated” (depending not only on the gender but also on the topics addressed).

The result of this apparent two-dimensionality is the separation between the perception of values and the perception of the characteristics of the way in which they are described. While the values and conflicts articulated by the shows are clearly recognised, the narrative elements and choices were not consistently perceived as disruptive or controversial. This perception, according to us, stems not only from the temporal distance separating the series from the present, but also from a sense of normalisation and apparent contemporaneity. The issues related to womanhood present in the series are strongly perceived, as well as their current relevance. At the same time, the ways in which the series addressed and participated in the struggles related to these issues did not seem to have an impact on participants, regardless of their gender, making the series feel ordinary, outdated or even unacceptable today.

This is where, in our opinion, lies the main contribution that this part of the research can offer to the overall reflection on popular culture. The ability of cultural and media content to become part of a common substrate shared by a significant number of people (we-sense) appears to be called into question not only by the decrease of its success over the years, but also by the fact that the ways in which it is consumed appear to be increasingly less uniform. As a consequence, the meaning associated with a cultural and media content appears to be susceptible to be influenced by several factors, including personal experience, current debate concerning different issues and media consumption.

As it stands, it does not appear to be a significant change from the previous use and consumption of cultural and media products. However, considering the three aspects analysed in the research, *awareness* appears to be present only through impressionistic association of meanings (sometimes incorrect or stereotypical); *understanding* of the narration appears to be simplified and/or quickly projected on a personal interpretation; as a consequence, *perception* of the meanings appears to be adjusted to some extent in order to correspond to a pre-existing set of feelings, convictions and beliefs, with respect to which the series appear to be normalised.

In other words, the insights coming from the analysis related to SATC and DH suggest that the current consumption by younger audiences does not correspond as much only to the way in which a TV-series (unknown to them) is perceived decades after its release; but rather it describes the way in which the enjoyment of a series can only evolve over time: limited room for deep knowledge due to the growing variety of cultural and media products and increasing ease of access to them; fragmented use determined by the logic of platforms; finally, limited space for values and meanings emerging from contents to influence and determine beliefs, mentalities, customs, habits, etc., which appear to be undergoing a process of confirmation and adherence based on the content they consume.

This picture is consistent with the evolution of we-sense and popular culture, which we intend to explore in depth in our reflection. Although this research cannot offer general results due to its limitations in terms of dimension and scope, it nevertheless provides some interesting insights into the nature and functions of current popular culture, as well as the profoundly different but equally essential role of the media landscape. The next steps, already being defined, will include the possibility of using these results as a starting point for other focus groups including participants from different genders and different generations, in order to understand the extent to which cultural and media products can represent a tool for dialogue aimed at creating and consolidating a we-sense.

Biographical notes

Silvia Leonzi is Full Professor of Sociology of Cultural and Communication Processes at the Department of Communication and Social Research (CoRiS) of Sapienza University of Rome, where she teaches Cultural and Media Studies and Transmedia Studies. Her research focuses on cultural consumption, the relationship between gender and media, the imaginary, narration and transmedia. Among her publications: *Transmedia Studies. Logiche e pratiche degli ecosistemi della comunicazione* (2022, Armando Editore), “Per un approccio ecologico ai media tra processi di piattaforma e dinamiche transmediali” (with A. Marinelli, «Sociologia della Comunicazione», 2022), “Schermo, habitat, piattaforma. Metafore dell’immaginario della comunicazione” (with G. Ciofalo, «H-ermes», 2021).

Giovanni Ciofalo is Full Professor of Sociology of Cultural and Communication Processes at the Department of Communication and Social Research (CoRiS) of Sapienza University of Rome. He teaches Theories of Communication and New Media, and Digital Media Studies. His main research interests include media ecology, cultural production and consumption dynamics, and the logics and practices of social media and transmedia. Among his publications: “Glocalization processes and new centrifugal dynamics in the international entertainment landscape: the Netflix Case in Italy” (with P. Sigismondi, in *Handbook of Culture and Glocalization*, Elgar, 2022), “Rileggere la media ecology: ambiente, campo, figurazione, mediatizzazione” (with M. Pedroni, in «Sociologia della Comunicazione», 2022), “The Toon Gaze. La rappresentazione del femminile nei cartoni animati prescolari” (with S. Leonzi, G. Quercia, in «Ocula», 2021).

Lorenzo Ugolini is a Researcher in Sociology of Cultural and Communication Processes at the Department of Communication and Social Research (CoRiS) of Sapienza University of Rome, where he teaches Cultural and Media Studies and Digital Media Studies. His main research areas include cultural and social media studies, journalism, and transmedia studies. Among his publications, *Transmedia Journalism. Per un’informazione sostenibile nell’era delle piattaforme* (Armando Editore, 2023); “Immaginari in trasformazione tra memorie, narrazioni e piattaforme” (with S. Leonzi, «H-ermes», 2023), “Data perception and information disorder in the Italian context during the pandemic” (with G. Ciofalo, F. Ciammella, «VIEW», 2024).

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Notes

¹ To give just one example, the 1954 Italian movie *Un Americano a Roma* (“An American in Rome”) starring Alberto Sordi was used well beyond its actual release to represent both the Americanisation of post-war Italy and Italian society’s fascination with everything that came from overseas, as well as certain dynamics of resistance and affection towards its own traditions, as exemplified by its most famous scene in which the protagonist tries to eat what he imagines Americans to eat, only to be disgusted and prefer the very Italian *maccheroni*. As emerged from the early stages of our research, the current knowledge of this film among the younger generations appears to be in sharp decline, as well as the mere knowledge of Alberto Sordi himself. The residual knowledge of the movie appears furthermore to be often limited to memes taken from the aforementioned scene, which, however, taken out of context from the rest of the movie, is unable to convey the social and cultural complexity that the film described so profoundly.

² The only comparable phenomenon of that period, in terms of success and representativeness, is probably that of the so-called “chick-lit” novels, whose main titles are probably Helen Fielding’s “Bridget Jones’s Diary”, published in 1996, the “Shopaholic” series by the recently deceased Sophie Kinsella, whose first volume was published in 2000, and also Candace Bushnell’s “Sex and the City”, published in 1997, which inspired the TV-series (Harzewski, 2011; Montoro, 2012).

³ “Sex and the City” is more closely linked to comedy, with its episodic structure, first-person voice-over narration by the protagonist Carrie Bradshaw, and self-contained storylines; “Desperate Housewives”, by contrast, adopts a serial format closer to noir and mystery, with an omniscient posthumous narrator, season-long story arcs and a strong ensemble cast dynamic.

⁴ We selected only participants who were of legal age at the time of the focus groups, that is December 2024/January 2025.

⁵ The selection, research and production of the videos and the focus groups were carried out as part of the activities of TransmediaLab, based at the Department of Communication and Social Research at Sapienza University of Rome. We take this opportunity to thank all those who participated in the activities, and in particular Dr Michele Balducci and Dr Delia Mangano for their research, coordination and supervision.

⁶ Clips selected from: SATC S01E02, S01E09; DH S05E01.

⁷ Clips selected from: SATC S02E04; DH S01E01, S01E09.

⁸ Clips selected from: SATC S02E05, S02E10; DH S01E12, S01E20.

⁹ Clips selected from: SATC S04E11; DH S01E01, S01E08.

¹⁰ The focus groups were conducted in Italian. The passages quoted have been translated by us, attempting to reproduce as faithfully as possible not only the content but also the tone of the statements made. Some grammatical errors or Italianisms may be attributable to this aspect.

¹¹ From the respondent’s ironic and embarrassed attitude, it can be inferred that the reference is also linked to the perception of SATC as a highly successful series among the gay community.