

# Diachronic analysis of adolescence in Spanish television fiction set in classrooms (1998-2018)

## *Análisis diacrónico de la adolescencia en las ficciones televisivas españolas ambientadas en las aulas (1998-2018)*



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### Abstract:

This research analyses the representation of adolescence in Spanish television fiction set in classrooms over the period 1998 to 2018, by means of a case study of the series *Compañeros* (Classmates) (Antena 3, 1998-2002), *Física o Química* (Physics or Chemistry) (Antena 3, 2008-2011) and *Merlí* (TV3, 2015-2018). A mixed quantitative and qualitative methodology has been employed, based on analysis of audio-visual content to determine whether there has been development in the handling of social values. This analysis helps to understand how teenagers have been represented over the last twenty years and to assess whether the values they receive today tend to be increasingly inclusive and educational. The results demonstrate that not all subjects are changing, finding only an increased representation of sexual orientation and the adolescent's family environment; a consistent representation over time of masculinity, sexuality, alcohol and drugs; and a lesser representation of the current role of women.

### Keywords:

Tv series; adolescence; gender; masculinity; sexuality.

### Resumen:

*Esta investigación analiza la representación de la adolescencia en las ficciones televisivas españolas ambientadas en las aulas durante el periodo de tiempo comprendido entre 1998 y 2018, a través del estudio de caso de las series Compañeros (Antena 3, 1998-2002), Física o Química (Antena 3, 2008-2011) y Merlí (TV3, 2015-2018). Para ello se hace uso de una metodología mixta, cuantitativa y cualitativa, a partir del análisis de contenido audiovisual para determinar si existe una evolución en el tratamiento de los valores sociales. Este análisis ayuda a comprender la representación que se ha hecho de los y las adolescentes en los últimos veinte años y a evaluar si los valores que reciben hoy día están tendiendo a ser cada vez más inclusivos y educativos. Los resultados evidencian que no todas las temáticas evolucionan, encontrando así únicamente una representación al alza de la orientación sexual y el entorno familiar; una representación constante a través de los años de la masculinidad, la sexualidad, el alcohol y las drogas; y una menor representación en la actualidad del papel de la mujer.*

### Palabras clave:

*Ficción televisiva; adolescencia; género; masculinidad; sexualidad.*

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## 1. Introduction

It is a fact that television fiction arouses increasing interest both in society and in the academic world, and that such programmes are booming and enjoying greater audience share. Their social importance makes it necessary to reflect on the representations being transmitted, even more so as their target audience are adolescents, individuals whose personality is being formed and who are in search of references and the acquisition of values (Arnett, 1995; Bandura, 2001; Cohen, 2001; Gil-Quintana & Gil-Tevar, 2020; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Menéndez Menéndez et al., 2017; Russel et al., 2004).

Thus, analysis of series has generated a major theoretical current to help understand what the media transmits, with a gradual increase in the tendency to deal with the issue of teenagers and the fiction products created for them (De-Caso- Bausela et al., 2020; Forteza Martínez et al., 2021; García-Muñoz & Fedele, 2011; Guarinos, 2009; Mateos-Pérez, 2021; Montero Rivero, 2006). However, defining the term teen or adolescent series is still the subject of debate. This is due to the absence of a scientific framework, since research has tended to focus on analysis of specific cases and not on establishing general characteristics. Despite this, since Moseley (2001) provided the first definition, some common elements have been identified: they are aimed mainly at teenagers and feature adolescent characters, are set in the educational environment or at home (Meyer, 2009) and their plots revolve around problems corresponding to that age group (Davis & Dickinson, 2004; Wee, 2010). These criteria were of use when selecting the sample for this study.

The subject of adolescent television fiction has been approached in recent years from content analysis, either by analysing series globally (Ferrera, 2020; González-de-Garay et al., 2020; Masanet & Fedele, 2019; Raya Bravo et al., 2018) or from various specific approaches, such as gender or sexuality. From the point of view of gender there is reflection on the specificities of the feminine (Guarinos, 2011; Hernández-Carrillo, 2022), on influences on masculinity (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2014; Serrano Machuca & Machuca Lozano, 2020), or making a comparison between the two (Fedele & Masanet, 2021). Academia has also been interested in sexuality in this type of series and its expression (Kelly, 2010; Masanet Jordá et al., 2012; Pérez Lence, 2019; Van Damme, 2010; Van Damme & Van Bauwel, 2013); focusing in some cases on the representation of sexual violence (Berridge, 2013; Masanet & Dhaenens, 2019; Ryalls, 2021).

There is also a theoretical framework regarding sexual orientation, specifically on homosexuality (Ballesteros Aguayo et al. 2021; Cuenca Orellana & Martínez Pérez, 2022; Ramírez Alvarado & Cobo Durán, 2013) including other identities in some cases (Marcos Ramos, et al. 2020). More and more new research topics are emerging, such as functional diversity (Palenzuela et al., 2021); substance use (Alarcón & Segovia, 2021; Chapoton et al., 2019; Donstrup, 2022; Palomares-Sánchez, 2022) or racism (Ellithorpe & Bleakley, 2016).

Thus, after reviewing the state of the question on adolescent series, it can be seen that there are no studies that seek to detect all the subjects that are repeated recurrently in teen series and analyse them comparatively and diachronically. Although Lacalle et al. (2021) have carried out a historical review of the series starring adolescents in Spain from their appearance in 1997 to 2020 and map out their development, they do not focus on representations. How this is represented is of importance for the academic community, as it is essential to know what values are being transmitted to society and to future generations and how they are changing. Thus, being aware of this deficiency, the main objective of this study is the following:

- Analyse the representation of adolescence and the issues that surround it in Spanish television fiction set in classrooms and produced over a twenty-year period.

Secondary objectives are to:

- Identify the most representative Spanish series on adolescence in classrooms whose broadcast began and ended between 1998 and 2018.
- Detect the most frequently repeated subjects in Spanish adolescent series.
- Check if there was any change in how these issues were dealt with over this period of time.
- In response to this, the following hypotheses was taken as a starting point:
- The most representative Spanish adolescent series over the years focus their plots on specific recurring issues.
- These themes have moved increasingly to address social values.

## 2. Method

This study is based on content analysis, suited as it is to describe, inventory and categorise the variables that build stereotypes about teens and all that surrounds them in fiction of this type (Casetti & Di Chio, 1999). A mixed method has been utilised which combines quantitative and qualitative analysis; combining a set of interpretive procedures, as well as hypothesis testing and verification techniques, applied to communication products (in this case a television series) that have been recorded to extract and process relevant data concerning the prevailing conditions (Piñuel & Gaitán, 1999: 511). However, of particular importance for the research is its qualitative and exploratory perspective, since the final sample is made up of three series and demonstrates the changing aspects of the analysis.

Design of the study is divided into the following phases: research into Spanish series for adolescents; sample selection; first viewing; identification and preparation of the categories of analysis and their variables; second viewing and quantification of the series; qualitative analysis; weighting of data in percentages for quantitative analysis; and, finally, comparative mixed analysis of the series. With regard to the sample, it was necessary to select the most representative classroom-based Spanish series that both began and ended their broadcast between 1998 and 2018, which gives a sample from twenty years ago at the time the research started. To this end, it has sufficed to establish some basic criteria discussed below and based on the defining characteristics of this product in the Spanish television market as described by several theorists (García de Castro, 2002; Diego & Pardo, 2008).

They must be domestic productions from the period which have finished, which allows evaluation of their impact, of the closure of plotlines and of their character development, meaning the exclusion of *Elite* (Netflix, 2018-). They must also belong to the “dramedy” or dramatic comedy genre, the genre par excellence in Spain, which rules out some that tend towards science fiction, such as *El Internado* (Antena 3, 2007-2010). They must also have a minimum duration of around 45 minutes, which eliminates *Skam España* (Movistar, 2018-), with 20 minutes per episode; and must have been broadcast weekly and not daily, such as *Al salir de clase* (Tele 5, 1997-2002) or *La Pecera de Eva* (Tele 5, 2010-2011). Lastly, they have to be set in the classrooms

of a high school, so some series aimed at adolescents cannot be used, falling outside the study's scope, as is the case of *Un paso adelante* (Antena 3, 2002-2005).

Thus, having watched and researched all the series from this period, the choice of the chosen sample is explained: *Merlí* (TV3, 2015-2018); *Física o Química* (Physics or Chemistry) (Antena 3, 2008-2011); and *Compañeros* (Classmates) (Antena 3, 1998-2002). These, in addition to satisfying the above criteria, are endorsed as being representative of each era by virtue of broadcast data and their popularity among young people. *Compañeros* reached 36.9% audience share in its third season (Radiotv, 1999); *Física o Química*, 20.9% for its first episode (20 minutos, 2008); and *Merlí* 22.2% for its final episode, the highest figure in the history of TV3 (Redacción AV451, 2018). Television awards also support the selection, *Compañeros* and *Física o Química* receiving the Ondas Award for the best Spanish series in 1999 and 2008 respectively; and *Merlí* won in the television category at the *Premis Nacionals de Comunicació* in 2019. Furthermore, there are the subsequent repercussions caused by the fan phenomenon. *Compañeros* gave rise to a film: *No te hablaré* (I won't let you down) (Antena 3, 2001); *Física o Química* generated a sequel: *El reencuentro* (*The reunion*) (Atresplayer Premium, 2021) with two episodes; and the story of Pol Rubio from *Merlí* continued through its two-season spin-off: *Merlí: Sapere aude* (Movistar, 2019-2021).

As regards the unit of analysis, it is limited to all the episodes of the first three seasons of each series, since that is considered to be when the characters were presented and where the initial characters and their plots are still preserved before the introduction of new generations. Moreover, it is a way of giving the sample a more uniform volume, since *Merlí* ran for only three seasons. Thus, the following were analysed: 40 episodes of *Merlí*; 33 episodes of *Física o Química*; and 40 episodes of *Compañeros*. That gives a total viewing for analysis of 113 episodes, with an estimated running time of 7075 minutes. Regarding the sample units for the quantitative analysis, it was thought necessary to express the data in percentages to be able to compare the number of times that each variable appears in the three series, given that they have different numbers of episodes. Therefore, these percentages result from the measurement of the items that appear in each episode, which are then divided by the total.

The instrument employed for the application of this methodology is an analysis sheet drawn up following the reading and consultation of several theorists, all of them dedicated to the analysis of dramatic, script, or character structures (Greimas, 1987; Pérez-Rufi, 2016; Propp, 2001); allowing for the creation of a database. That includes a section that establishes, both as a description and to catalogue the names of the series, the season and the episode under analysis, as well as a brief synopsis. A series of items figure below that include all the variables observed after the first viewing, for their subsequent quantification by episode and a more detailed description for their qualitative analysis. Thus, the content is firstly focused on an analysis of gender and LGTB issues, made up of several sections related to those topics; to later focus on other factors that are considered to affect teenagers. Therefore, the codebook for the variables and categories analysed is as follows:

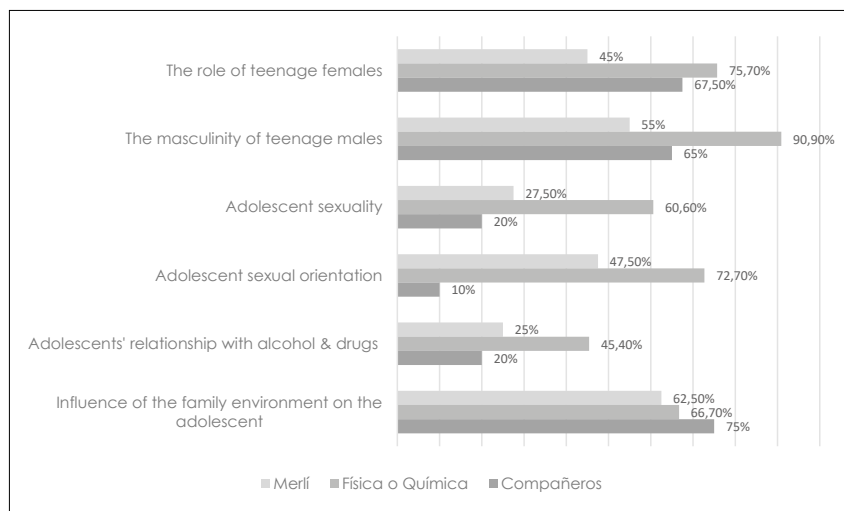
- The role of female teenagers: gender specificities in relation to female sexuality; demand for normativity of female bodies; rivalry between women; sorority among women; adolescent motherhood; gender violence (psychological, emotional, physical, sexual, or institutional).
- The masculinity of teenage males: the repression of feelings and the absence of displays of weakness; friendship between males represented from the absence of ties; jealousy and feelings of possession exercised by men; violent attitudes on the part of men to be “more masculine”; deconstruction of traditional masculinity.

- The sexuality of adolescents: the use of condoms in sexual relations; the non-utilisation of condoms in sexual relations; social pressure on adolescents to “lose their virginity”; sexual practices approached from empathy and respect; sexual practices where discomfort or abuse of power is displayed; female masturbation; male masturbation; sexually transmitted diseases; unwanted pregnancies.
- Teenage sexual orientation: female homosexuality; male homosexuality; female bisexuality; male bisexuality; homophobic behaviour; biphobic behaviour.
- The relationship of adolescents with alcohol and drugs: alcohol consumption; consumption of drugs; overdosing or alcohol-induced coma; rehabilitation after alcohol or drug use; violence associated with the consumption of alcohol or drugs; drug dealing.
- The influence of the family environment on teens: unconventional family models; the process of breaking the family nucleus; family abandonment; disease in the family nucleus; death in the family nucleus; overprotective and strict families; dysfunctional families; families with financial problems.

### 3. Results

As a result of the viewing and analysis of the series selected as a sample, that is, *Merlí*, *Física o Química* and *Compañeros*, six recurring themes are identified in all three series, which demonstrate the concern which the study subject, male and female adolescents, feel for them. These are: the role of adolescent females; the masculinity of adolescent males; adolescent sexuality; adolescent sexual orientation; adolescents’ relationships with alcohol and drugs; and lastly, the influence of the family environment on adolescents.

The first comparative result consists of seeing how often each subject is addressed, in percentual terms. As Graph 1 illustrates, the influence of the family environment on adolescents is the most commonly represented variable in each of the three series. Furthermore, the qualitative analysis shows that the young protagonists of these series are strongly influenced by their relatives, who appear to be the cause of a large part of their problems. Regarding the other variables, it can be observed that *Física o Química* is the series that presents them most frequently, which does not imply that information is better dealt with in the series, but rather demonstrates greater exposure and debate of the different subjects in the series. When comparing *Merlí* and *Compañeros*, one or the other stands out in different fields. The most recent, *Merlí*, demonstrates greater representation of sexuality, sexual orientation and relationships with alcohol and drugs, while in *Compañeros* women, masculinity, or family stand out.

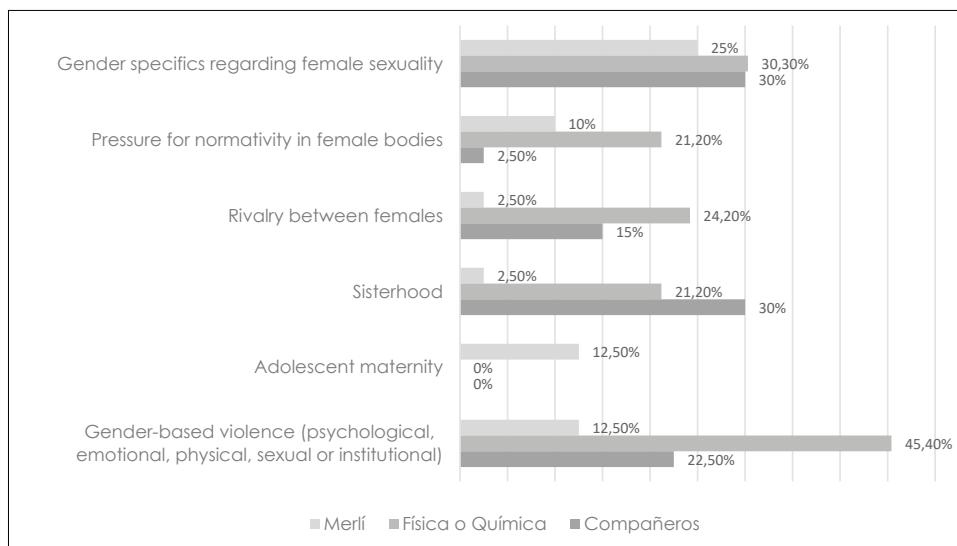
**Graph 1. Subjects dealt with in the series analysed**

Source: created by the author

### 3.1. The role of the adolescent female

Each variable has been divided into different items, in order to perform a detailed analysis. These represent the different sub-themes observed in the first viewing. Thus, within the role that adolescent women play in the series, the specificities that occur to women compared to adolescent men in the context in which they operate are highlighted. As can be seen in Graph 2, the item is represented equally among the three series. Women's attitudes in relation to sexuality are portrayed in the aspects where, by virtue of being female, they are judged differently from men. In general, the differences perceived are based on the limitation of female sexual freedom and on how society judges them with a different scale.

Numerous plotlines in the sample coincide in this, despite their being set at different times. In *Merlí*, Berta is a sexually liberated girl who, despite having fewer sexual encounters than her male classmates, finds herself punished by the recurring harassment of a female teacher. The teacher encourages her to dress more discretely and behave modestly with men, under the pretext that otherwise they will lose interest in her, and she will end up alone. In *Física o Química* we find Yoli, who is called a "cheap slut" by her own classmates, and who throughout the series suffers innumerable insults and harassment because of her sexual freedom. In *Compañeros* there is a plot revolving around Valle, the boys making a list and describing her as "the biggest whore in the class". The result is the same in each instance, the teenage girl changes her behaviour and her way of dressing. However, while in *Física o Química* and *Compañeros* this leads to a call to be oneself and in defence of women's rights, with the characters returning to their original point of departure, in *Merlí* the characters penalized for their behaviour, such as Berta or Oksana, are changed forever.

**Graph 2. Representation of the role of adolescent females in the series analysed**

Source: created by the author

The requirement for normativity of female bodies alludes to society's attitude towards women, and opinions and assessment of their bodies, from the point of view of the disparate requirements and criticism compared to men. This is not a major topic in *Compañeros*, where males suffering from eating disorders is also addressed. In *Física o Química*, and to a lesser extent in *Merlí*, there are examples of body shaming towards women. This happens even when they have a normative body, as is the case of Ruth (*Física o Química*) and comes from their partners: men are not subject to this pressure (Gorka). Furthermore, when a body is outside the norm for women, there are plotlines that revolve around the issue: this is observed in the case of Tània (*Merlí*) and Violeta (*Física o Química*), both mutually in love with a popular boy, who is unable to recognise his feelings due to her physique.

The representation of friendship between adolescent women in the series is indicative of how they relate to each other. Thus, this analysis is divided between sorority, which arises when women help and support each other; and feelings of competitiveness, envy and rivalry. *Merlí* is numerically different from the rest of the series, since it does not go deeply into the relationships that take place between the female characters, its plotlines in this aspect focusing on the men. Throughout the analysis, the two sides of the coin are shown, alternating scenes of rivalry and betrayal, in most cases by a man (Berta and Tània in *Merlí* are betrayed by Marc; Ruth and Alma by Gorka in *Física o Química*; and in *Compañeros*, Isa and Valle by Quimi); with others of protecting friends in bad times (Tània with Mónica in *Merlí* ; Yoli with Ruth in *Física o Química* and Arancha with Valle in *Compañeros*). A special camaraderie between women figures clearly in *Compañeros*, furthermore, rivalries are not always caused by a man but by women's ambition, be they for grades at school or wanting to be the star in a play.

*Merlí* is the only series in the analysed sample that raises the issue of adolescent motherhood. The different problems inherent to the situation are portrayed through the character of Oksana, who gives birth to a son at the age of sixteen. The series offers social criticism about the lack of conciliation, the need for considerable economic resources to raise a child, the social stigma of being a young, single mother, as well as the difficulties deriving from everyday situations.

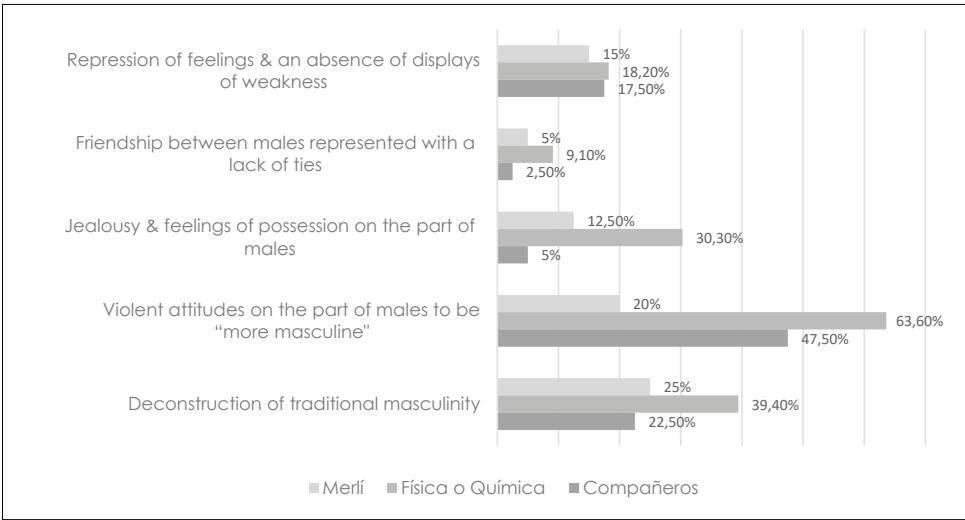
It is necessary to consider the representation of different aspects of gender-based violence in the series. This refers to acts directed against women because of their gender and includes physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, and institutional acts. The largest number are found in *Física o Química*, with several types of violence in various contexts, as when Ruth suffers psychological violence at the hands of her boyfriend Gorka (even causing her to suffer from an eating disorder) or when Yoli is raped by Oliver, a boy from her class. The thoroughness and complexity of the series in approaching the issue should be mentioned, as it asks the viewer if it is indeed rape, despite the fact that Yoli consented to kiss Oliver. The series shows the difficult process of reporting the crime and the blame society projects toward her, something which ends up affecting her. The same thing occurs in *Compañeros*, although it is dealt with more swiftly, since Arancha gets into the car of a boy from her class, and although she does not want to have relations with him, he forces her until she manages to escape. Finally, Arancha has to report her attacker and face him daily at school. There is no sexual abuse in *Merlí*; however, Monica's ex-boyfriend widely distributes a sex video without her consent, and it is then that she says he had been harassing her and that was the reason for her changing schools. Unlike the other series, there is continuous verbal and physical violence in the classrooms in *Compañeros*, in the form of comments and unwanted touching.

### 3.2. Representation of the masculinity of adolescent males

Graph 3 analyses the different items included within the variable of the masculinity of teenage males in order to study their behaviour. Firstly, the repression of feelings and the absence of displays of weakness are analysed. This refers to attitudes whereby men do not show emotions or fragility because such characteristics are not socially associated with masculinity, obliging them to appear strong in all aspects of their daily lives. The three series have similar percentages of representation of this issue, and indeed similar stories. They show characters who do not express their feelings in different situations: faced with death (Julio with the suicide of his brother in *Física o Química*) or love (Pol in *Merlí*, or Gorka in *Física o Química*), this repression usually leading to outbursts of violence (Quimi in *Compañeros*, frightened by the terrorist attack, kicks the drinks machine).



Graph 3. The representation of adolescent male masculinity in the series analysed



Source: created by the author

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Some cases of friendship between males are presented, but always from the perspective of an absence of ties. It is the characters themselves who express the problems that this stereotype causes them. Both points of view are to be seen in *Merlí*, as is certain character development, as Marc asks his childhood friend Gerard for more affection. Marc also tells Tània how not being able to talk to Gerard about certain topics pains him, since men do not share such feelings. The same thing happens with Cabano in *Física o Química*, who is saddened by his inability to tell his friend Gorka about a family problem, saying that he already has his girlfriend to talk about boring things. However, *Compañeros* dismisses this representation and shows deep, affective relationships of male friendship (Luismi and César).

All three series feature jealousy, as well as a feeling of possession exercised by a man. However, it is in *Física o Química* where extreme situations are shown through Gorka and Ruth's relationship, as, even after breaking off the relationship, he is violent towards those who speak to her. The phrase that he uses on several occasions is paradigmatic: "the blonde is mine, private property". *Merlí* also deals with the topic through the relationship between Joan and Mónica, since he spies on her mobile phone and forbids her to speak to her friend Gerard. *Compañeros* does not show any relationships of this type, however, there are numerous comments treating jealousy as a positive quality.

The three series frequently portray violent attitudes on the part of men trying to be "more masculine," such behaviour being present in 63% of the episodes of *Física o Química* and in 47% of *Compañeros*. *Merlí* is more nuanced, as it approaches masculinity from a non-traditional standpoint. This point refers to situations in which males employ force or aggression in order to extol their virility, qualitative analysis reveals different types of such conduct. The first are those directed towards women, *Compañeros* having most examples of this. There are numerous examples of insults, harassment, unwanted touching

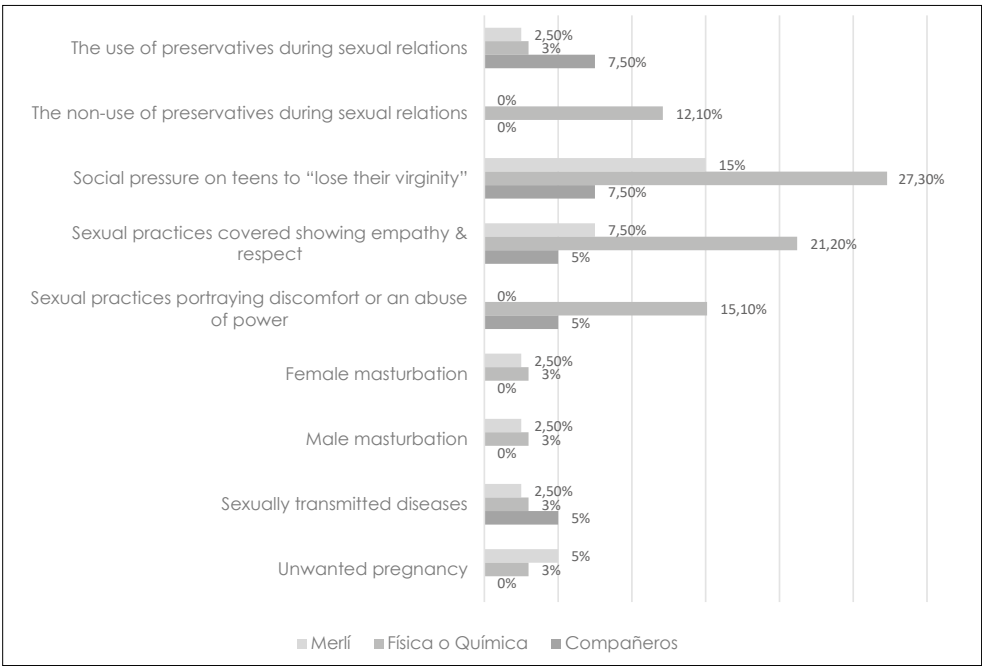
and comments; many of them during school hours and under the gaze of the teachers, who, far from reprimanding such behaviour, normalise it (an example of this is Quimi with Valle, and Luismi with Sara). The same misogyny can be seen in *Física o Química*, although not as frequently, and the series itself portrays it as something negative, through Gorka and Cabano. There are few examples in *Merlí*, although there they speak disrespectfully about women. Another type of violence is shown towards the concept of otherness, as a means of differentiation, resulting in homophobic or racist attitudes, most commonly in *Física o Química* (toward Fer or Jan). There are also violent acts that put the character's physical integrity at risk to flaunt their virility. This is associated with men in the series and is exemplified in storylines such as the motorcycle and car races in *Compañeros* or Gorka's parkour exhibition in *Física o Química*.

All the series offer a deconstruction of traditional masculinity and show attitudes far removed from what was described above, representing a new model of manhood. Even the most violent characters undergo development towards sensitivity and values such as inclusion and empathy; such is the case with Pol in *Merlí*, Gorka in *Física o Química* and Quimi in *Compañeros*. They display vulnerability in terms of self-esteem and give voice to insecurities about their physique (Iván in *Merlí* and Jan in *Física o Química*). Both *Merlí* and *Física o Química* have heterosexual male characters who do not feel threatened by a close friendship with a homosexual man, and who maintain their relationship after moments of confused feelings, as is the case with Julio or Iván.

### 3.3. Representations of adolescent sexuality

Sexuality is an important aspect of adolescence and for that reason it is analysed in Graph 4. How this is dealt with regarding condoms is studied in the first two points. *Compañeros* offers a considerable and didactic representation of this, as they are frequently used among the characters, and they even make a short film about condoms for a class project. *Física o Química* shows what happens when they are not used, talking about this problem and involving teachers, who try to raise awareness about the subject. Some reasons for not using them are shown in certain scenes, such as their price or the loss of sensation, and the teenage girls state that their male partners refuse to use them. The issue of condoms is not addressed directly in *Merlí*, although on one occasion they are shown prior to a sexual encounter.

Graph 4. Representation of adolescent sexuality in the series analysed



Source: created by the author

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The social pressure on adolescents around “losing their virginity” is reflected in the three series and alludes to those situations in which they feel under pressure, directly or indirectly, to have their first sexual relationship. The qualitative analysis reveals a greater tendency to represent this plot through the female characters, it happens to Tània in *Merlí* and to Arancha in *Compañeros*; in *Física o Química* it happens to Paula, Julio and Quino. It is worse for the males, as they become the object of ridicule from their peers. Throughout the sample there are similar numbers of women who are sexually active and others who are afraid of having sex for the first time, offering a double perspective. Both in *Compañeros* and in *Física o Química* the characters talk to debunk the idealisation that one may have regarding the first time, explicitly saying that it is not perfect, and that incidents may arise. In *Merlí*, on the contrary, this romanticisation is perpetuated.

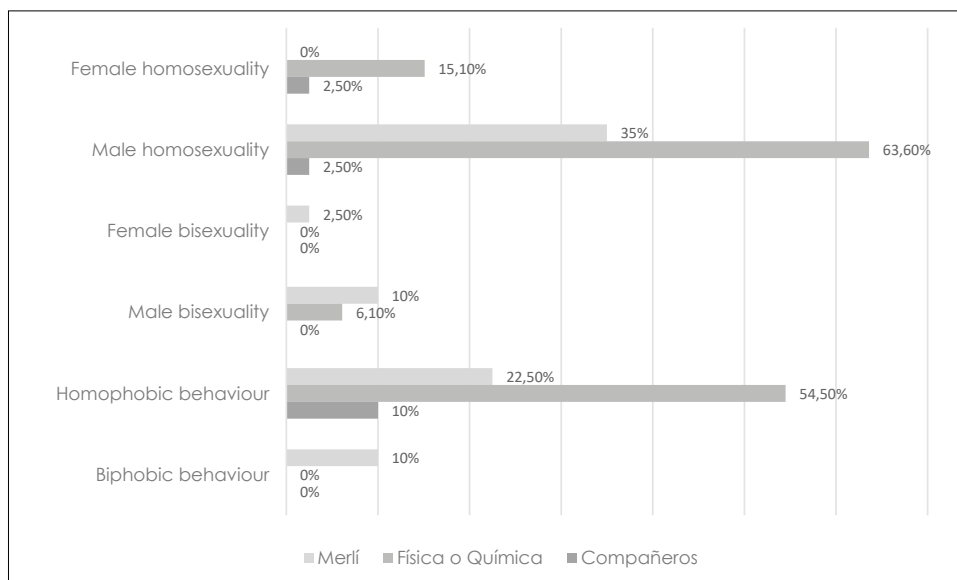
Concerning the attitude taken to sexual practices, *Merlí* only represents them from a posture of empathy and respect, while *Companions* shows both positive and negative parts in equal measure. *Física o Química* includes a high percentage of both, the series portrays both gratifying sexual encounters and situations the adolescents find traumatic, and which lead to sexual violence. The latter happens only to female characters in the series, thus showing a gender bias with men always being the aggressors. Masturbation is absent from *Compañeros*, and though it is seldom shown in the other two series, both genders are equally represented in the practice.

These series teach the consequences that sexual acts can have. Sexually transmitted diseases are an example: they are only named in *Merlí*; some students suffer from them in *Física o Química* and explain to the viewer in a didactic way that they are not only contracted through penetration; in *Compañeros* only human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is discussed. Unwanted pregnancies are not portrayed in *Compañeros*. It is the character of Cova in *Compañeros* who, after having sex without a condom with her boyfriend, thinks she is pregnant. That story is the only one that discusses the termination of pregnancy and whether or not the father should be part of the decision. Teenaged Oksana in *Merlí*, who became pregnant at the age of 16 claims that this fact does not make her irresponsible or a worse person than the other girls. She declares that when she found out about her pregnancy, she knew it was her son and that she was going to have him.

### 3.4. Representation of adolescents' sexual orientation

Graph 5 describes the different items corresponding to the variable on sexual orientation in the sample. The issue does not appear in *Compañeros*, it is mentioned obliquely in a couple of episodes, but there is no LGBT representation among the teenagers. *Física o Química* includes the character of Fer, a homosexual, from the beginning; Alma is later introduced who, although she does not consider herself bisexual, is attracted to both men and women. The most recent series, *Merlí*, features two homosexual characters in the gang: Bruno and Oliver; and one bisexual, Pol. There is a lack of representation of female homosexuality throughout the sample, though it is mentioned on occasion it is not attributed to any character.

**Graph 5. Representation of adolescents' sexual orientation in the series analysed**



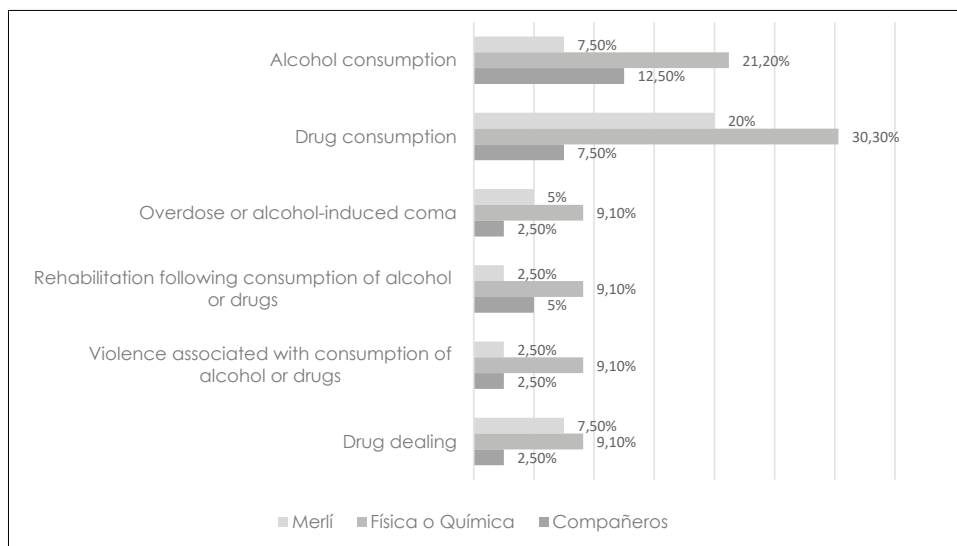
Source: created by the author

There are numerous scenes showing male homosexuality in *Física o Química*, the issue appearing in 63% of episodes; and in *Merlí*, in 35%. These plots revolve around the sexual awakening of Fer and Bruno respectively and coincide in showing situations associated with their awareness of their orientation: suffering, denial, the need to pretend that they like women and support from family and friends to come to terms with themselves. It is worth noting how *Merlí* makes clear that it is not necessary to comply with the stereotype of “coming out of the closet,” Oliver advising Bruno to simply act as he is at all times.

The acts that come about due to the opposing point of view should also be analysed. This is the case of homophobic behaviour, which is triggered mostly when Fer and Bruno make their orientation known. While characters in *Merlí* react with light-hearted, though equally homophobic, comments; there are students in *Física o Química* like Gorka, who even become physically violent against Fer. Both series show scenes in which it is their own sexual partners who carry out acts against them; such is the case of David and Pol, who denigrate their partners to keep the other characters from knowing of their desire for men. Biphobia is dealt with mostly in *Merlí*, through the character of Pol, who is bisexual. Pol claims that he does not belong to the collective and that, despite the fact that he likes men and women, he does not agree with the use of labels. Biphobia is also present in the invisibility that occurs with the character of Alma in *Física o Química*. She claims to have an ex-girlfriend and her object of desire is Paula, but the rest of the characters do not classify her as bisexual (or homosexual), and simply attribute this to a stage she is going through. Something similar happens in *Merlí*, Oksana kisses Berta at a pyjama party and claims that it is something that girls do just to see what it is like, without feeling any attraction towards other women.

### 3.5. Representation of adolescents' relationships with alcohol & drugs

Graph 6 explains the different points that refer to alcohol and drugs. A distinction is made between the two, despite the fact that alcohol is also a drug and causes addiction, due to society's different perception of the two, a fact reflected in the universe of the series analysed. Consumption of alcohol by the adolescent characters occurs in all three series and it is common to see scenes in which they meet during the week or on weekends to drink beer or spirits. There is a difference in *Compañeros*, here alcohol is consumed under the watchful eye and approval of some adults. It is also the only series in which the issue is considered and talked about as an addiction. Drug use is a topic that is studied in depth in the entire sample. Regarding the types of drugs, marijuana and hashish are consumed regularly (at the school entrance or in the bathrooms) in *Merlí* and in *Física o Química*. Less frequently, but also in a high percentage of episodes, synthetic drugs are taken in *Física o Química*, both at parties and before going to school. In *Merlí*, only one pill is consumed at a party, where a classmate is drugged for a laugh to see how he reacts. The only drug shown in *Compañeros* is heroin; however, it is not consumed by teens, but by relatives and addicts who live on the street.

**Graph 6. Representation of adolescents' relationships with alcohol & drugs in the series analysed**

Source: created by the author

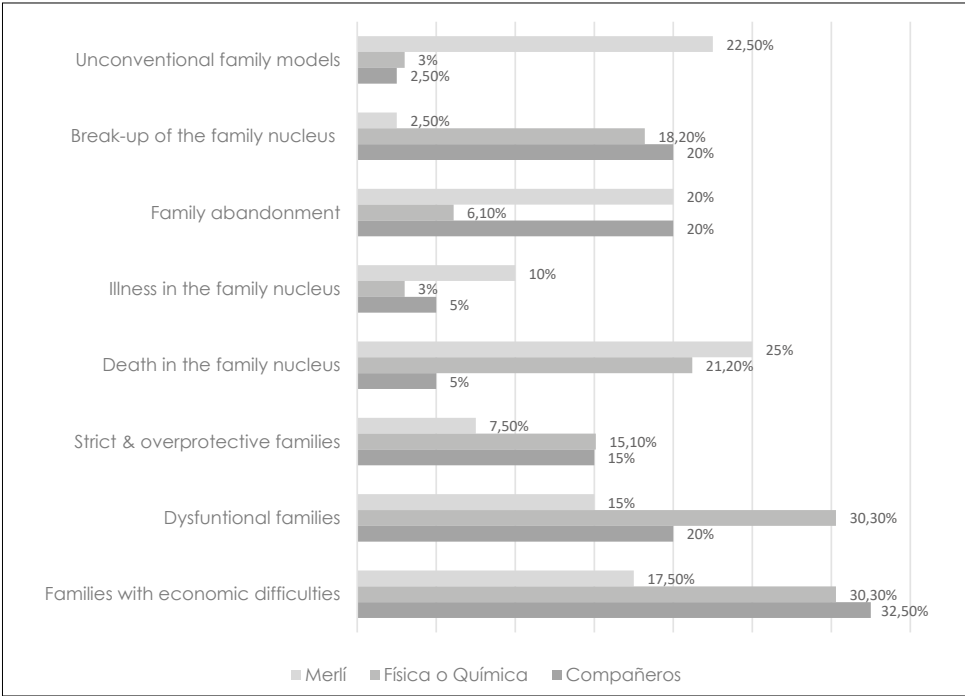
The consequences of alcohol and drug consumption are also shown. Thus, in *Merlí*, excessive marijuana consumption leads Gerard to suffer a psychotic episode, which sees him being admitted to hospital, being medicated and requiring psychological therapy. Similarly, there is a case of alcohol-induced coma in *Física o Química* that leads to death and Ruth is hospitalised following an overdose of ketamine. *Compañeros* portrays Quimi's brother as a heroin addict, who finally has to enter a rehabilitation centre, the consequent suffering of his family being shown. The same series speaks about alcohol consumption as we observe Luismi's drowning, he drinks until he passes out in the sea on an end-of-year trip; as well as Quimi's alcoholism. Moreover, there is a representation of violent behaviour caused by the consumption of alcohol or drugs, placing the lives of some characters in danger. Quimi gets into a car in the junkyard when he is drunk, Rubén abuses a woman when high, and Gerard becomes violent when he suffers a psychotic outburst caused by marijuana. The qualitative analysis shows that a character from each series has addiction problems, this is the case of Gorka with pills, Joan with marijuana and Quimi with alcohol. All of them coincide in repressing their feelings after a romantic disappointment and begin to consume these substances. This variable is shown exclusively in males.

The question of drug dealing becomes important in the plot in *Merlí*. Pol decides to become a dealer due to financial problems at home. The series shows the danger of ending up in jail and without a future. *Compañeros* also warns of risks, since Quimi has to look after his brother's drug stash and accompany him to sell it, which places them in the middle of a dangerous shootout. It is not represented in that way in *Física o Química*, where drugs are sold without consequences.

3.6. Representation of adolescents’ relationships with their families

The adolescents’ family environments are portrayed in numerous episodes. Graph 7 shows the major differences in the representation of non-conventional family models and the process of breaking the family nucleus in the different series. Unconventional families figure in *Merlí*, where it is common to find divorced (Bruno, Marc and Mónica) or separated couples (Gerard), as well as single mothers (Iván), without the plot explicitly revolving around that. Separation or divorce processes are shown in *Física o Química* and *Compañeros*, it is depicted as a traumatic event that affects adolescents at every level. Paula and her brother Isaac are saddened, their academic performance being adversely affected; Mercedes, fed up with her parents using her in their fights, decides to leave home and sleep rough.

Graph 7. Representation of the adolescent family environment in the series analysed



Source: created by the author

Family abandonment is a recurring event in all three series. There are two types of abandonment, one that takes place in the strict sense, that is, the relatives move out and leave the adolescents to their own devices; and one in which they evade their responsibilities, that is, the relatives are physically present but do not perform their role of caring for the teenager. There are several examples of the first type, Oksana in *Merlí* narrates tearfully that she is from Ukraine, but her mother abandoned her,

and she was adopted in Spain; Iván sadly recounts how his father left when he found out about Ivan's mother's pregnancy. *Física o Química* shows the story of Ruth, her uncle and the rest of her family do not want to become her legal guardian and take care of her when she becomes an orphan. *Compañeros* tells the story of Isa and her two younger brothers, whose mother leaves due to a lack of financial resources, causing her to be admitted to a shelter. It can be seen in the qualitative analysis that this item affects the characters' self-esteem, they feel themselves to be of less worth than other people. The second typology is represented through the lack of care received by Marc and Pol in *Merlí* and Quimi in *Compañeros*; however, there is certain character development, and the plot revolves around their reconciliation with their relatives.

There is less representation of illness and death in *Compañeros* and it is different from the other series in that it alludes to unconventional situations: the terrorist attack against Sara's father, who is wounded, and the death of Tanja's sister in the war in her native Bosnia. Both *Merlí* and *Física o Química* portray illness and death in the characters' daily lives, although it is true that the former gives them more exhaustive and complex treatment through Joan's father's cancer and subsequent death. Both series relate the death of siblings (Oliver's in *Merlí* and Julio and Paula's in *Física o Química*), of parents (Pol's and Joan's in *Merlí* and Ruth's in *Física o Química*) and the passing away of other relatives (Pol's grandmother). This affects them to a greater or lesser degree in their later development: Ruth gets into a vicious circle, which leads to an abusive relationship with Gorka, then bulimia and suicide attempts; Julio represses his emotions and becomes violent, joining a neo-Nazi group; Pol is unable to express his feelings for fear of greater loss; and Joan consumes marijuana.

Strict and overprotective families coincide in involving themselves in their children's decisions about their futures. Each series has a story of that type: Joan's father in *Merlí* wants her to study law and not literature; Jan's father in *Física o Química* doesn't understand why he wants to dedicate himself to drawing and in *Compañeros*, Carolo's father forces him to study business and not biology. All of them coincide in involving only male characters and that it negatively affects their relationship.

It is also common to find dysfunctional families, ones which, for different reasons, do not conform to pre-established models of behaviour. One cause is domestic violence, which is portrayed from its least pronounced manifestation (fathers and mothers who go to the school to yell at teachers, like Joan's in *Merlí*) to situations of physical abuse towards the children (such as Cabano in *Física o Química* or Quimi in *Compañeros*). There are also family members who have problems with the law, such as Marc's father in *Merlí* who is involved in business with the mafia; or Yoli's brother, who made enemies in jail who come looking for payment. Finally, addiction problems: this is the case of Quimi's father with alcohol and his brother with heroin; and in *Compañeros*, Valle's father is a compulsive gambler.

The last point analysed concerning the family refers to economic difficulties, which receives considerable representation. All three series have stories in which the teenagers have to work due to the family's precarious financial situation. *Merlí* has Pol living in a house with no income whatsoever, where the electricity is cut off due to the accumulation of bills; faced with that situation, he feels obliged to work, first in a bar, and later asking for a microcredit to pay the rent, which he manages to pay by dealing in drugs. Cabano in *Física o Química* is also in a precarious situation, because after denouncing his father for domestic abuse and seeing him go to jail, his mother suffers from depression and is unable to work. He tries to find a job, however, having no experience, he ends up recording sexual content on a website. Valle in *Compañeros* works in a catering business when her father is fired for gambling away his taxi's takings and her mother, a school porter, also loses her job. These characters



all coincide in seeing their school performance suffer due to their new timetable, which takes time from their studies. There is also a relationship between money and immigration: this happens to Jan, who helps out his parents in a grocery store; and to Tanja, who lives in a precarious and risky situation as her documentation is not in order.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

The principal objective of this work, to analyse the representation of adolescence and the issues that surround it on Spanish television fiction set in classrooms over a period of twenty years, is considered to have been achieved. Having carried out a first viewing of the series in the sample in search of the variables and items that make up the analysis tables, the most frequently repeated issues in this type of series have been identified, thus also fulfilling the second objective. The issues are: the role of teenage females; the masculinity of teenage males; adolescent sexuality; adolescent sexual orientation; the relationship of teens with alcohol and drugs; and, finally, the influence of the family environment on adolescents. The first hypothesis is therefore refuted: the most representative Spanish adolescent series over the years focus their plots on specific recurring themes.

A priori, popular stereotypes presuppose that series of this kind focus their stories on unwholesome and superficial matters such as sex, alcohol and drugs. However, the results show that in numerical terms the chief concern is the family, which greatly affects and influences adolescents. Furthermore, issues that specifically concern females are dealt with, as well as the many facets of masculinity. An effort can be perceived on the part of all the series to raise awareness of the issues, even when they are not given a high percentage of screentime, as is the case with the variables of sexuality, alcohol and drugs.

Regarding the secondary objectives, the first of these was to identify the most representative Spanish series on adolescence in the classroom whose broadcast began and ended between 1998 and 2018; this can be taken as done with the selection of the sample. That was the result of meticulous research and viewing of all the other teen series from the period on the Spanish audio-visual market and of the effort to adapt the research to the theoretical criteria explained in the methodology section of this paper; the most representative of each era being the following: *Compañeros*, *Física o Química* and *Merlí*.

Finding an answer to our main objective whilst also responding to the secondary objective concerning the types of representation and whether these have changed requires a consideration of each variable. The first aspect to look at is the role of women, which is slightly reduced in terms of subjects represented in *Merlí*, as there are no cases of sexual abuse or of unity among women. Although the series does propose new topics, such as motherhood, it chooses to show only that option, leaving abortion out of the debate, though that does feature in *Física o Química*. There is some minimal improvement towards casting females with greater variety of body types, without yet reaching a representation of reality. Despite the fact that the sample covers a twenty-year period, female bodies are still judged, and their sexual freedom remains penalised. Taking all the above into consideration, there cannot be said to be a clear development towards new social values in this variable, and in the latest series certain important issues have been abandoned, considering them as struggles of the past, although daily life would suggest otherwise.

Regarding the issue of masculinity, although the stereotype of toxic masculinity is reinforced through some characters, all three series also include examples far from the traditional hegemonic: complex, sensitive men who seek to reach out to others. There is a change in specific aspects, such as male attitudes of violence, turning towards less normalisation; an example of this is the decrease in catcalling, unwanted physical contact and harassment of women. The opposite can be observed concerning

jealousy, an upward trend being seen, the males being increasingly possessive in relationships, controlling their partner's lifestyle and ways of socialising.

Teenagers are equally represented as sexual beings in all the series, no favourable development being observed. Although *Compañeros* did not go as far as to normalise practices such as masturbation, it was a pioneer with respect to the proper use of condoms and awareness of sexually transmitted diseases; something ignored in the more recent *Merlí. Física o Química* was the first to look at issues such as men trying to dissuade women from using condoms, and the dynamics of power and gender that intervene transversally in sex. None of the series adopts a moralistic tone about waiting for Mr/Mrs Right before having sex, but they do speak of the need to have sex only when the teenager feels comfortable and ready. They also coincide in not having every character blinded by sex, but reflective about the subject and under pressure from a hypersexualised world.

Portrayals of male homosexuality have undergone considerable change, as can be seen in some of the values presented, going from an anecdotal presence in *Compañeros*, to being defended in *Física o Química*, and then relatively normalised in *Merlí*. However, the rest of the LGBT community continues to be invisible: lesbians and dissident gender identities are issues that still do not register, and bisexuality is made invisible under the aegis of avoiding labels. Progress is also observed regarding homophobia, as such attitudes have gone from being physical, habitual and very pronounced to becoming merely verbal and sporadic.

Throughout the sample, adolescents are represented to a greater or lesser degree as habitual consumers of alcohol; drug consumption, however, is less frequent. Although it is reasonable to say that the representation of this may be somewhat exaggerated, it is not treated from the point of view of apology, but all kinds of consequences are shown: alcohol-induced comas, overdoses, and subsequent rehabilitation. Therefore, no development in the representation of alcohol consumption can be appreciated in the sample; although with regard to drugs, it does go from being something consumed by others (heroin addicts) to being an increasingly widespread activity among the teenage characters.

The family is represented in all the series as something of great importance for adolescents. Although they do not verbalise it, when analysing the plots it is observed that family influences them on several levels: academic performance, mood, self-esteem and their development as people. Representation of the separation and divorce of relatives has changed over the years, storylines in the earlier seasons treating it as a serious problem. But more recent seasons display a tendency to normalise it and unconventional family models are increasingly integrated into society. It is thus common to see single fathers and mothers, widowers and divorced families in *Merlí*; although families made up of people of the same sex are not yet represented. There has also been a shift toward greater representation of the death and illness of family members. It should also be noted that economic situation and social class is a constant throughout the sample, and that it is represented transversely, indicating its importance for family well-being.

Thus, having considered the results, the second hypothesis, that all subjects tend towards a greater and more exhaustive treatment of social values, is rejected. It can be concluded that the general trend is not upward, and that there was previously a more sensitive representation in the variables concerning the role of women; and a similar one, broadly speaking, in terms of the values transmitted on masculinity, sexuality, alcohol and drugs. There has, however, been considerable development regarding adolescent sexual orientation and teenagers' family environment. Therefore, the results of the study undeniably show some general tendencies, despite the fact that each series shows a certain authorial point of view and adopts a different

tone. The issues are addressed in a more didactic way in *Compañeros*, more innocently in *Merlí* or crudely showing reality so that the viewer can draw their own conclusions in *Física o Química*.

The importance of these results is evident, as they help to understand the representation of teenagers over the twenty years covered in the sample and to evaluate whether the social values they receive today are becoming more inclusive and educational. The same can be said regarding the implications for the future, as they could serve for comparisons with other audio-visual products. The limitation of this study lies in the size of the sample chosen; and could provide a future line of research, as the variables analysed can be observed in other teen television series, both domestic and international.

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