“I think I need help”: An analysis of the representation of non-suicidal self-harm in fictional digital series for adolescents

“Creo que necesito ayuda”: un análisis de la representación de las autolesiones no suicidas en el entorno digital de ficción seriada para adolescentes

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Abstract:

Digital leisure constitutes a fundamental component in adolescents' lives. The aim of this research is to compile a corpus of television series broadcast or available via streaming in which, as part of the plot, a character engages in self-harm; and to conduct a narrative analysis of how and why self-harm occurs, what function it fulfills within the story and whether the act is romanticized.. The methodology of this study is based on filmic analysis combined with discourse analysis, applied to eight series selected through a screening process using both general and specialized search engines. The results include eleven characters and a total of thirteen on-screen self-harming acts, which vary in form, place and intent. The analysis makes it possible to distinguish two representations approaches to self-harm: those that emphasize sensationalist aspects and those that adopt a more responsible perspective. This study highlights the challenges involved in addressing mental health issues among adolescents within a fictional digital environment designed for a broad audience.

Keywords:

Digital streaming, TV shows, media representation, non suicidal self injury, self harm, audiovisual storytelling.

Resumen:

El ocio digital es un componente fundamental en la vida de los adolescentes. El objetivo de esta investigación es reunir un corpus de series emitidas o disponibles en streaming en las que, como parte de su trama, un personaje se autolesione; y analizar narrativamente el cómo y el porqué de la autolesión, qué función cumple en el relato y si romantiza el acto autolesivo. La metodología de este estudio se fundamenta en el análisis fílmico junto con el análisis del discurso, que se aplicará a ocho series seleccionadas tras un proceso de criba mediante buscadores tanto generalistas como especializados. El resultado incluye once personajes y un total de trece actos autolesivos en pantalla, actos que varían en cuanto a forma, lugar e intención. El análisis ha permitido distinguir dos representaciones de la autolesión, aquellas que se enfocan en aspectos sensacionalistas y las que optan por un enfoque más responsable. Este estudio pone de manifiesto los problemas que conlleva tratar temas de salud mental protagonizados por adolescentes dentro de un entorno digital de ficción con vocación de llegar a público amplio.

Palabras clave:

streaming, series de televisión, representaciónn mediática, autolesión no suicida, autolesiones, narrativa audiovisual.

1. Introduction

Fiction, regardless of its form –film, television shows, or literature– has always been a field of study for analyzing the interrelationships and connections between narrative and mental health (Heath, 2019; Holmes, 2014). Within this field, the present study focuses on non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) depicted in 21st-century serial fiction. While suicide in audiovisual fiction has been the subject of analysis in various studies (Scalco *et al.*, 2016; Seggi, 2022), the same is not true for NSSI, for which analysis of its representation in films or series is almost non-existent in academic literature, beyond mentions in studies on suicide (Arendt *et al.*, 2019; Kruzan *et al.*, 2025; Mueller, 2019; Scalvini, 2020) or violence related to mental health (Peña and Sarrionandia, 2023). Moreover, very few narrative analyses are found (Stack and Bowman, 2012) amongst the works on the representation of suicide in audiovisual fiction, making the study presented here one of the first discursive analyses of the representation of self-harm in serial fiction.

On the other hand, there are numerous studies on self-harm, youth, and online media, such as social media, which analyze the construction of digital communities where young people talk about self-harm through the creation of their own language (Atauri *et al.*, 2025; Martín and Atauri, 2024). This can be explained, in part, by the fact that the narratives constructed on these platforms are mostly controlled by users, whereas in audiovisual fiction, control of the narrative is beyond the reach of viewers.

Currently, NSSI are increasingly present in the lives of adolescents, as this behavior is widely known amongst this population group (Arqueros *et al.*, 2025; Vázquez *et al.*, 2023). This situation has led to concern and alarm among health professionals,

who already describe the current context as a public health problem (Vázquez *et al.*, 2023). Despite the current situation, self-harm is still a minority narrative element in contemporary audiovisual fiction. However, reflecting the increase in cases amongst younth, the appearance of NSSI in fiction is becoming increasingly common, mainly in the growing body of work aimed at young audiences, although it still has little weight in the plot or the characters. These facts could be explained by the general lack of knowledge among the adult population regarding self-harming behavior and the virtual absence of the issue in public debate (Fernández and Martínez-Pastor, 2023; Martínez, Blanco, and Martínez, 2023). The emerging appearance of self-harm in serial fiction, and the fact that it is occurring especially in works aimed at young audiences, creates a need for a comprehensive analysis that addresses the characteristics of this representation.

1.1. Non-suicidal self-injury

Non-suicidal self-injury refers to deliberate behaviors through which individuals inflict physical harm upon themselves without the intention of dying (Rascón, 2024). These behaviors appear in early adolescence, around the age of 11 (Martínez-Pastor *et al.*, 2023), although they are most frequent between the ages of 13 and 16 (Faura-García *et al.*, 2021). The main reason for self-harm is psychological suffering. This is temporarily mitigated through physical pain, serving to self-regulate negative feelings such as anxiety, stress, or depression (Vázquez *et al.*, 2023). This temporary release can lead adolescents to engage in cyclical self-harm, turning it into an addictive behavior (Fernandes *et al.*, 2022) and a possible gateway to suicidal ideation (Rascón, 2024). The main method used is cutting –with sharp or pointed objects– although other methods are also used, such as burning the skin –with lighters, cigarettes, matches, or other hot objects– scratching or scraping the skin, pulling out hair, pinching the skin until it bleeds, picking at a wound, inserting objects under the nails or skin, getting tattoos, and hitting the body (Faura-García *et al.*, 2021; Ose *et al.*, 2021).

There is no consensus regarding gender, with some studies indicating a higher frequency of self-harm amongst girls (Resett and González, 2020), while others say that there are no differences, or that they are not significant (Victor *et al.*, 2018), and some even point to a majority of boys depending on the geographical region (Moloney *et al.*, 2024). However, a difference in method is detected depending on gender. Girls prefer cutting or scratching, while boys are more prone to hitting or burning (Rascón, 2024).

Various studies indicate an upward trend in self-harm over the last decade (Arqueros *et al.*, 2025; Vázquez *et al.*, 2023). The ANAR Foundation (2024) reports a 6.91% increase in calls received for self-harm in the last five years, from 484 cases in 2019 to 3,348 in 2023. The literature indicates an overall prevalence of self-harm among adolescents of between 15-25% (Frida *et al.*, 2023; Vázquez *et al.*, 2023). However, a wide variety in incidence levels is found depending on the study, due, amongst other things, to the variety of methods used for analysis (Swannell *et al.*, 2014), although the fundamental reason is that a minority of adolescents who self-harm (0.21-6.5%) seek help (Faura-García *et al.*, 2021).

1.2. Self-harm and narrative

Until the 1980s, the representation of NSSI in media, specifically in fictional stories, focused solely on showing it as a symptom of mental health problems or disorders that inevitably led to the character's suicide (Whitlock and Purington, 2010). In the

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21st century, the increase in representations of NSSI in popular culture, mainly in music and film, grew sharply (Whitlock, Purington, and Gershkovich, 2009), raising the dilemma of whether it would positively or negatively affect the incidence of self-harm in the real lives of adolescents exposed to this content.

Unlike the presence of NSSI on social media, when they appear in a film or series, viewers do not have access to a community, but rather to a narratively self-contained product, unless they watch it in company and generate a subsequent debate. That is why the most important effects that fiction can have are imitative ones. Whether we are talking about suicide or NSSI, audiovisual fiction could have a negative effect on vulnerable populations (Till *et al.*, 2015), but the opposite can also occur, serving to prevent these behaviors and even encouraging people with suicidal or self-harming thoughts to seek help (Scalvini and Rigamonti, 2017). Media representation of suicidal or self-harming behaviors is studied as a factor to be taken into account in imitative behaviors, but there is no evidence of a causal relationship between scenes or characters that commit self-harm or suicide and an increase in these behaviors in the real world (Mueller, 2019).

It is not surprising that most studies and representations of self-harm in fiction focus on the experiences of young people in general and adolescents in particular. Adolescence is a period characterized by a certain amount of existential angst in the face of the challenge of constructing an adult personality, which can easily lead to maladaptive ways of managing anxiety, which are heavily influenced by the media (Hawley *et al.*, 2023). When asked, adolescents recognize the importance of their social environment and media consumption in emotionally locating self-harming acts (Hill and Dallos, 2012).

2. Method

This research, which focuses on the representation of self-harm in television series, has the following objectives:

- To study the archetype of characters who self-harm in television series.
- To interpret the context and consequences of non-suicidal self-harm in the plot from a narrative point of view.

This paper presents a qualitative study based on the narrative and film analysis developed by Casetti and DiChio (1991). The authors specify that any analysis of an audiovisual text must be based on representation, communication, and, specifically, narration. For them, narration is "a concatenation of situations in which events take place and characters operate in specific environments" (Casetti and DiChio, 1991:172). Within the narrative, the basis of this analysis will be the character, as understood by both Casetti and DiChio (1991) and Chatman (2013:162), who defines the character as "a paradigm of traits, [the trait being] a stable and enduring personal quality."

Alongside film analysis, discourse analysis will also be used, a multidisciplinary tool that serves to analyze cultural texts, in our case fiction series, focusing on the messages they convey (Van, 2001). Fiction series are audiovisual texts that have the capacity to construct ideological discourses in the society in which they are created, while also receiving the values and ideals of that same society in a continuous feedback process (Wodak and Fairclough, 1997).

The sample analyzed in this study consists of eight fiction series, in which 11 characters are studied who, in total, commit 15 self-harming acts of different kinds. Selecting the sample was complex, as examples were sought where the sequence of self-harm appeared on screen. Characters who, although known to self-harm in the fiction, did not show the moment of self-harm

on screen were not included in the study. Furthermore, given the limited representation of NSSI in fiction, even in teen series –series aimed at young and adolescent audiences (Donstrup, 2022)– it was more difficult to locate a sufficiently representative corpus. This sample was selected non-probabilistically, for convenience and strategy, based on the work of Wimmer and Dominick (1966: 70-71).

The first step in obtaining the study sample consisted of locating fiction series on general search engines (Google) and specialized search engines (Internet Movie Database-IMDB) using keywords in English and Spanish, such as "autolesión," "self-harm," "self-injury," "self-inflicted injury," or "cutting."

The initial search yielded 27 possible fiction series that met the essential requirement of being available on a streaming platform in Spain or, where applicable, having been released on home video (DVD or Blu-Ray) in Spain. The following exclusion criteria were applied to these 27 series:

- Self-harm was committed by an adult character and not a young person/teenager.
- The NSSI led to suicide.
- The self-harm took place in a fantasy, science fiction, or animated fiction series, as the search was for representations in series with realistic contexts.

The final result was eight selected series, all of which were broadcast on television or streaming platforms operating in Spain in the 21st century. This group consists of five American series, two Spanish series, and one Canadian series:

USA

- *Euphoria* (USA, 2019-present). Available on HBO Max.
- *Ginny & Georgia* (USA, 2021-present). Available on Netflix.
- *American Horror Story: Murder House* (USA, 2011). Available on Disney+.
- *Castle* (US, 2009-2016). Available on Disney+.
- *Scream* (US, 2015-2019). Available on Netflix.

SPAIN

- *HIT* (Spain, 2019-2024). Available on RTVE.es.
- *Física o Química* (Spain, 2008-2011). Available on Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and ATresPlayer.

CANADA

- *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (Canada, 2001-2015). Available on Apple TV.

Two data tables have been designed to collect information from viewing the series. The first table shows basic aspects of each character and details of self-harm, reflected in six variables: gender, sexual orientation, and emotional status of the character; these include type, object, and area of self-harm (Figure 1).

The second table dissects the presence of the main narrative elements within an audiovisual work, which, in this case, is translated into eight variables focused on the sequences in which self-harm takes place: character type, presence or absence of

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a soundtrack, nature of the space where it takes place, presence or absence of dialogue and, if so, whether it is voice-over or an exchange between two or more characters; type of lighting; whether or not the frame shows the self-harming act; and, finally, its narrative function in the story (Figure 2).

The design of this analytical tool follows the conceptualization and typologies expressed by other authors. For Figure 1, documentary support is sought from reference works such as Evaluation and Clinical Management of Self-Injury in Adolescence: Evidence-Based Protocol (OPBE Working Group, 2022) and contributions from the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2022); García Couceiro (2022); or Trewavas *et al.* (2010). For Figure 2, use is made of the elements of narration typified according to Cuadrado (2017) and Chatman (2013).

3. Results

3.1. Characters and non-suicidal self-injury

The fifteen sequences analyzed correspond to eleven characters from the eight selected shows. In terms of number of sequences, *Euphoria* has three, two starring the character Jules –Images 1 and 2– and one starring the character Cassie.

Image 1. First sequence in which Jules self-harms in *Euphoria*

Source: HBO Max

Image 2. Second sequence in which Jules self-harms (flashback) in *Euphoria*

Source: HBO Max

The Spanish show *HIT* features four sequences, two starring the character Silvia, one starring the character Teo, and another starring the character Marc, making it the series with the highest number of sequences involving self-harm (Image 3).

Image 3. Silvia self-harming with a box cutter in *HIT*

Source: RTVE.es

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The show *Ginny & Georgia* has two sequences of self-harm featuring the main character, Ginny, as the subject of the self-harm (Images 4 and 5).

Image 4. Ginny self-harming with a lighter in *Ginny & Georgia*

Source: Netflix

Image 5. Ginny self-harms with a candle in *Ginny & Georgia*

Source: Netflix

The next show is *American Horror Story: Murder House*, with Violet as a character who represents two sequences of self-harm (Image 6).

Image 6. Violet self-harms with a razor blade in *American Horror Story: Murder House*

Source: Disney +

The rest of the shows analyzed feature a single sequence each. First, we have the show *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, with the character Ellie as the subject of self-harm (Image 7).

Image 7. Ellie self-harms with a compass in *Degrassi: The Next Generation*

Source: Apple TV

Secondly, we have the show *Física o Química*, in which Ruth is the character who self-harms (see Image 8).

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Image 8. Ruth self-harms with a broken piece of glass in *Fisica o Quimica*

Source: ATresPlayer

Finally, we included the show *Castle*, with the character Chloe as the subject of self-harm, and the show *Scream*, with Rachel as a character who self-harms, in the study.

The analysis of the sample sequences will begin by referring to the character-centered elements shown in Figure 1. The sample consists of eleven characters who commit some type of NSSI, of which nine are girls (81%) and two are boys (19%). All the girls fit the prototype of a young, white, middle-class woman –except for the protagonist of *Ginny & Georgia*– who has traditionally been the subject of self-harm in fiction (Chandler *et al.*, 2011). Interestingly, the only two boys who self-harm are characters from the same show, *HIT*, produced in Spain. There are no examples of boys self-harming in the English-language series included in this study. In terms of sexual orientation, the boys are both heterosexual, while the girls show greater variability, with eight of them being heterosexual, two bisexual, and one homosexual.

Figure 1. Basic characters' features and the NSSI analyzed

		Characters' features			NSSI		
Show	**Character**	**Gender**	**Sexual orientation**	**Relationship status**	**Tipology**	**Object/tool**	**Body area**
Euphoria	Jules	Girl	Bisexual	Single	Cut	Kitchen knife	Forearm
	Jules (*flashback*)			Unknown	Cut	Torn soda can	Wrist
	Cassie	Girl	Heterosexual	Monogamous	Cut	Corkscrew	Wrist

Ginny & Georgia	Ginny	Girl	Heterosexual	Monogamous	Burn	Lighter	Thigh
	Ginny				Burn	Candle	Hand
American Horror Story	Violet	Girl	Heterosexual	Single	Cut	Razor	Forearm
	Violet						
HIT	Silvia	Girl	Bisexual	Single	Burn	Lighter	Forearm
	Silvia				Cut	Cutter	Forearm
	Teo	Boy	Heterosexual	Single	Stapled	Stapler	Head
	Marc	Boy	Heterosexual	Single	Cut	Kitchen knife	Forearm
Física o Química	Ruth	Girl	Heterosexual	Single	Cut	Broken glass	Wrist
Degrassi	Ellie	Girl	Heterosexual	Single	Cut	Compass	Forearm
Castle	Chloe	Girl	Heterosexual	Single	Cut	Knife	Thigh
Scream	Rachel	Girl	Homosexual	Monogamous	Cut	Razor	Forearm
Total	11 characters						

Source: Personal compilation

All characters are teenagers, bearing in mind that their actual age is rarely specified. If the character is in high school, it is easy to ascertain that they are a teenager, but if, on the contrary, they are not, as in *Castle* or in the third season of *HIT*, we infer their status of youngster/teenager from the narrative context.

With regard to the characters' romantic/emotional situations, the analysis has focused on the moment when self-harm occurs, as measuring this variable is complex for two reasons. On the one hand, in the case of main characters, this situation may

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change throughout the entire series or a season –as in the case of Ginny in *Ginny & Georgia*–. On the other hand, it should be noted that romantic relationships in teen fiction present fluid contexts that are hard to fit into classic relationship frameworks. Therefore, as can be seen in Figure 1, *Euphoria* (Cassie), *Ginny & Georgia*, and Scream present the characters analyzed within monogamous relationships. Characters who are single are present in *HIT*, *American Horror Story: Murder House, Física o Química*, *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, and *Castle*; while in the case of *Euphoria*, the character of Jules is assumed to be single in one instance and her status in this regard is unknown in another. Therefore, we have a majority of eight characters who are single at the time they self-harm in the fiction.

Figure 1 also includes a description of the nature of self-harm carried out by each character analyzed. Most of them, specifically nine, self-harm by cutting themselves with a sharp object such as razor blades (Violet and Rachel), a box cutter (Silvia), the remains of a torn soda can (Jules), a compass (Ellie), different types of knives (Jules, Marc, Chloe), a corkscrew (Cassie), and a piece of broken glass (Ruth). The character Ginny (*Ginny & Georgia*) self-harms by burning herself with a lighter and a candle. Teo, a character in *HIT*, uses a stapler to staple his head. Finally, in terms of the part of the body where the character self-harms, most do so on the forearm (seven characters), followed by wrists (three characters), thigh (two characters), hand (one character) and head (one character).

3.2. Narrative elements in self-harm scenes

Figure 2 shows the analysis of the narrative elements of the sequences studied. In terms of the importance of the character in the plot, three categories can be distinguished: protagonist or co-protagonist, secondary character, and episodic character. In this sense, we find Jules and Cassie in *Euphoria*, Ginny in *Ginny & Georgia*, Ruth in *Física o Química*, and Ellie in *Degrassi, the new generation* as main or co-main characters. Secondary characters in the plot, but present in almost every episode of at least one season, are Violet in *American Horror Story: Murder House*; and Silvia, Teo, and Marc in *HIT*. Finally, we call those characters who only appear in one episode of the series episodic, such as Chloe in *Castle* and Rachel in *Scream*. In summary, of the eleven characters analyzed, five are main characters, four are secondary characters, and two are episodic characters.

Figure 2 also shows the results for the sound, which reveal a significant division, with seven sequences using the soundtrack and eight not doing so. Those with soundtrack are: *Castle*, *Física o Química*, the two from *American Horror Story: Murder House*, the one from *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, and the flashback to Jules' childhood in *Euphoria*. The case of *Scream* stands out, as it is the only one in which the soundtrack is not instrumental music but a pop song. In the four scenes from *HIT*, the other two scenes from *Euphoria*, and the two from *Ginny & Georgia*, no soundtrack of any kind is used to accompany the self-harming act.

The next element to highlight, included in Figure 2, is the space where self-harm takes place. All the spaces shown in the scenes analyzed are indoors; self-harm never takes place outdoors. Of the fifteen scenes analyzed, nine take place inside the character's home, four of which occur in the bedroom –the first one with Ginny in *Ginny & Georgia*, the two with Silvia in *HIT*, and the one with Rachel in *Scream*–three in the bathroom– the second one with Ginny in *Ginny & Georgia* and the two with Violet in *American Horror Story: Murder Hous*e –and two in the kitchen– the first one with Jules and the one with Cassie in *Euphoria*. The remaining six take place outside the family home: in a high school meeting room –Teo in *HIT*–, in a high

school bathroom –Ellie in *Degrassi: The Next Generation*–, in a rehabilitation center –Marc in *HIT*–, in a hospital for patients with mental health issues –Ruth in *Física o Química* and Jules' flashback in *Euphoria*–, and in a laundry room located in the basement of an apartment building –Chloe in *Castle*–.

Figure 2. Narrative features on every scene

Show	Character	Character catergory	Soundtrack	Space	Dialog	Lighting	Framing/ show NSSI	Narrative function
Euphoria	Jules	Lead or co-lead	No	Inside family home	Yes	Artificial	Yes	Advancing the plot
	Jules *flashback*		Yes	Outside family home	Yes	Artificial	No	Revealing character psychology
	Cassie		No	Inside family home	Yes	Artificial	No	
Ginny & Georgia	Ginny	Lead or co-lead	No	Inside family home	No	Artificial	No	Revealing character psychology
	Ginny			Inside family home	No	Artificial	Yes	
American Horror Story	Violet	Supporting	Yes	Inside family home	Yes	Artificial	Yes	Revealing character psychology
	Violet				No	Artificial		
HIT	Silvia	Supporting	No	Inside family home	No	Artificial	No	Revealing character psychology
	Silvia			Inside family home	Yes	Artificial	No	Advancing the plot
	Teo			Outside family home	Yes	Natural	Yes	Advancing the plot
	Marc			Outside family home	Yes	Natural		Advancing the plot

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Física o Química	Ruth	Lead or co-lead	Yes	Outside family home	Yes	Artificial	Yes	Revealing character psychology
Degrassi	Ellie	Lead or co-lead	Yes	Outside family home	Yes	Artificial	Yes	Revealing character psychology
Castle	Chloe	Episodic	Yes	Outside family home	Yes	Artificial	Yes	Revealing character psychology
Scream	Rachel	Episodic	Yes	Inside family home	No	Artificial	Yes	Revealing character psychology

Source: Personal compilation

The use of dialogue is more widespread in the sequences analyzed, as ten of them contain some form of dialogue, compared to five that do not. Understanding a scene as a dramatic unit, dialogue is included in it, regardless of whether it occurs before or after self-harm, as no examples have been found in which dialogue and self-harm take place at the same time.

Every scene in *Euphoria* includes dialogue, whether between Jules and Nate (another character in the series), Jules and the orderlies at the hospital where she is admitted, or Cassie with her sister and mother. In *HIT*, Marc and Teo self-harm in the context of conversations with one person (in Marc's case) or two people (in Teo's case), with self-harm being a marker that breaks the conversational dynamic. The same is true of Ruth in *Física o Química*, who, before cutting herself, finds herself in a moment of great tension while talking to her legal guardian and her ex-boyfriend. In the first scene with Violet in *American Horror Story: Murder House*, the dialogue with another teenager takes place just after she self-harms, unlike in *Degrassi: The Next Generation* and *Castle*, where the dialogue between the characters takes place just before. The most difficult case to categorize is the second scene starring Silvia in *HIT*, since the young woman self-harms with the help of a YouTube video in which another girl comments on the steps to follow to cut her forearm; therefore, it is understood that there is dialogue, which is fundamental to the development of self-harm, but not within a conversation (Figure 2).

The five instances of self-harm that are not accompanied by dialogue all take place in the character's bedroom or bathroom, showing a private act that is hidden from the other characters, but not from the audience. No examples have been found in which voice-over is used in these scenes, even in the series *Euphoria* or *Ginny & Georgia*, where the protagonist's voice-over is a fundamental element for the narrative.

There is no evidence that any of the scenes analyzed were filmed in natural light, although the lighting in the cases of Teo and Marc's self-harm in *HIT* are the examples where natural light is simulated most realistically.

One of the most controversial aspects of depicting self-harm is how much to show on screen. The framing variable, included in Figure 2, indicates whether the exact moment of self-harm appears on screen or whether the camera decides to focus on another part of the character's body or object, provided that the action is taking place. On ten occasions, the camera always

films the moment in close-up, except in the first scene of Jules –*Euphoria*– shot in medium long. Among the shots where the viewer witnesses the self-harm firsthand are the scenes from: *Física o Química*, *Castle*, *Scream*, *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, *American Horror Story: Murder House* (both), *HIT* -Teo and Marc-, and the second scene of Ginny in *Ginny & Georgia* -in which she burns herself with a candle-. In the other cases, the self-harm is filmed off-screen, with the camera focusing mainly on the character's face (Ginny burning herself with a lighter in her room in *Ginny & Georgia*, Silvia doing the same in *HIT*) or on spaces outside the place where it is happening, at that very moment (Cassie, and Jules in their flashback in *Euphoria* and Silvia cutting her forearm in *HIT*) –Figure 2–.

Finally, the most complex variable to analyze is the narrative function, included in Figure 2, understood as the role played by the narrative unit, in this case the scene, within the story (Propp, 1968). In most cases (eleven sequences), the scenes in which the character self-harms serve to reveal the character's personality or highlight an element of their personality that is hidden from the other characters or the viewer. These eleven cases are: the first starring Silvia in *HIT*, Jules' flashback and Cassie's self-harm in *Euphoria*, the two in *Ginny & Georgia*, the two in *American Horror Story: Murder House*, and those in *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, *Castle*, *Scream*, and *Física o Química*.

Four of the scenes serve the narrative function of advancing the plot. These are: the scene in *Euphoria* where Jules cuts her forearm to escape Nate's aggressive behavior; Silvia in *HIT* cutting herself and subsequently fainting, which leads her parents to discover what she has been doing in the privacy of her room; Teo stabbing himself in the head with a stapler and Marc cutting his forearm, both in *HIT*, prompting a reaction from the teacher's leading character (Figure 2).

In the fiction analyzed as a whole, there is a general tendency to focus on drama and narrative conflict, without addressing in depth the underlying causes of self-harming behavior, such as anxiety, depression, or other emotional disorders. The representation of self-harm suffers, in general terms, from an excess of effectiveness and, in some cases, a certain degree of sensationalism.

Effectiveness manifests itself in the use of NSSI as a dramatic device intended to provoke an intense emotional reaction in the viewer, rather than to generate reflection on the psychological issues that motivate it. Except for *Ginny & Georgia*, there is no evidence of an interest on the part of the screenwriters in exploring a therapeutic, pharmacological, or psychiatric resolution to the symptoms that lead to self-harm. Although the existence of medical treatments or interventions is implied, these are rarely shown explicitly on screen or mentioned in dialogues. In *HIT*, Silvia is admitted to the hospital after cutting her forearm and fainting, only to reappear two episodes later telling her classmates that she has been discharged after being "stuffed with pills." Only in three of the NSSI cases analyzed does a health professional appear, two of them psychologists –*Euphoria*, *Ginny & Georgia*, and *Física o Química*– which shows a lack of interest in the physical and psychological consequences of self-harm on the affected character.

These shows are not interested in discussing NSSI within the plot, narratively isolating self-harm by presenting it as an act performed in private and hidden from the other characters by loose-fitting clothing that covers the injured areas, mainly the forearms and wrists, which helps to keep the phenomenon in the private sphere and avoid its explicit problematization within the story.

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Based on an analysis of the characters who engage in NSSI in the selected works of fiction, it can be said that the archetype of the adolescent who self-harms is mostly that of a girl with symptoms of anxiety and a marked sense of alienation from her environment, whether family or social. In the narrative development, this archetype usually plays a leading or relevant secondary role, with the character self-harming using sharp objects –knives, razor blades– on their upper limbs –forearms or wrists.

4. Discussion

The series analyzed in this study present women as the main subjects who engage in self-harm. If we review academic literature, this fact would be consistent with some published works that point to a higher incidence of self-harm in girls than in boys (Resett and González, 2020). However, there are also studies that point to a higher incidence in boys (Moloney *et al.*, 2024) or the same prevalence for both genders (Victor *et al.*, 2018). Given the discrepancy in the research, the sequences studied establish a link between women and self-harm based on the stereotype, rather than scientific evidence, of women as "crazy" or "hysterical" (Sánchez, 2021), more susceptible to mental disorders than men. This form of representation has not yet been overcome in general audiovisual production (Klin and Lemish, 2008).

Regarding sexual orientation, it is mainly heterosexual characters who self-harm, compared to two cases of bisexual people and one homosexual. In this regard, although the incidence levels reported in the literature are contradictory (Lim *et al.*, 2024; Liu, 2019), it is positive that there is no overrepresentation of self-harm amongst LGTBIQ+ adolescents, as this avoids creating causal relationships and reduces the group stigmatization. Likewise, the presence of heterosexual characters who self-harm helps to understand that any youngster is susceptible to this behavior, and not exclusively the most vulnerable groups, enabling the viewer to understand self-harm as a behavior that can extend to any adolescent.

In terms of the methods used for self-harm, the characters mainly cut themselves with sharp or pointed objects and, less frequently, use other methods, such as burning or stapling themselves; a representation consistent with published data (Faura-García *et al.*, 2022). Likewise, if we consider the age of the characters, they meet the parameters of higher frequency of self-harm assigned by the literature to the adolescent stage (Faura-García *et al.*, 2021; Martínez-Pastor *et al.*, 2023).

The main reason behind self-harm is emotional suffering (Vázquez *et al.*, 2023). Nevertheless, the series studied do not develop the characters in a way that shows their suffering and the reasons for it. There is a practical absence of a "language of suffering" (Brinkmann, 2014), used with an educational intention, and with the viewer in mind. This points to a certain irresponsibility on the part of those who produce these shows regarding the consequences that content such as that studied may have without contextualization and understanding of the causes that lead the characters to feel the need to self-harm. This irresponsibility is even greater when we consider that all the content analyzed is categorized as teen series, i.e., aimed at young and adolescent audiences.

The romanticization of self-destructive behaviors, such as suicide attempts and NSSI, in audiovisual fiction is associated with the glamorous and aesthetically appealing representation of the destructive act, the person performing it, or both. Romanticizing or glamorizing the act of self-harm means giving it a meaning that goes beyond the action and its consequences –the wound,

the treatment, the psychopharmacological response–; a meaning in which the act and/or the person who commits it become objects of desire for the viewer (Faubert, 2018).

The step prior to romanticization is what we call sensationalism, that is, "the narration of events related to taboos in the public sphere in a way that intentionally obstructs the rationalization of these issues by the public" (Fernández, 1999: 254). Sensationalist portrayals of self-harm involve stereotypical representations, associating it, for example, with "uncontrolled" women, and showing it solely to have the greatest possible emotional impact on the viewer.

Much of the self-harm that appears in the selected shows can be classified as scenes with sensationalist elements or intent. Furthermore, this sensationalism is based on a key element: the association between self-harm and mental health problems. The characters classified as episodic are framed within this way of narrating self-harm. In *Scream*, Rachel is a young woman who has been humiliated and embarrassed by a video of her posted on social media. The camera shows us several scars from cuts on her arms just before she cuts herself again. The representation is sensationalist and only serves to show a person in pain and without the tools to manage their emotional problems. This pattern is repeated with few variations in the rest of the examples analyzed. In *Castle*, Chole is a youngster who, in love and pregnant by the father of the baby she was babysitting, murders a friend who had replaced her as a babysitter in the same family. As the police corner her in the laundry room of an apartment building, Chloe cuts her thigh with a knife as if it were a nervous tic that shows her mental instability. Something similar, without leading to homicidal impulses, happens to the character of Ruth in *Física o Química*. Ruth suffers from eating disorders and what the series describes as severe anxiety, culminating in her admission to a clinic where, in a confrontation with her adoptive mother and her boyfriend, she cuts her forearm with a knife before being subdued and disarmed.

The example that focuses most intensely on morbid fascination is *American Horror Story: Murder House*. In this horror thriller, a family moves into an old house that is apparently under the influence of a certain evil presence. The daughter of this family, Violet, cuts her wrists –on screen– twice (Image 6) in response to depression, in sequences that mix the erotic with the unhealthy and are related to Violet's attraction to another young man named Tate.

Sensationalism is a common response in the representation of NSSI in media, whilst romanticization is more common in shared forums such as social media (Jadayel *et al.*, 2018). But how does an act that causes suffering become something aesthetic and narratively appealing in fiction? First, there must be elements that are eye-catching and appealing to young audiences, such as the self-harming character having normative beauty, being socially integrated, and not being an outcast amongst their peers (Jadayel *et al.*, 2018). In addition, it is important that the self-harm itself is framed as a 'positive' act within the narrative context. However, romanticization is perceived through creative decisions, such as the selection and duration of shots, the rhythm of the editing, and, above all, the music.

All these elements come together in the case of Jules –*Euphoria*–, a transgender girl who, in one of the scenes, makes very unusual use of self-harm within the fiction. In the pilot episode, Jules crashes a party and is aggressively confronted by a boy, to which she responds by cutting her forearm with a knife (Image 1) in front of all the people gathered around the two characters during the argument. In this sequence, Jules makes utilitarian use of self-harm, using it as a weapon against someone who threatens to hurt her. Self-harm as a form of protection is extremely rare in fiction, whether audiovisual or not (Heney, 2024; Stack and Bowman, 2012).

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We can find another example of sensationalism with Cassie in *Euphoria*. In second season, Cassie suffers several anxiety attacks, one of them in her kitchen where she cuts her wrist with a corkscrew. The show presents the character as an out-of-control woman, whom her own family, especially her sister, treat as if she were crazy ("she's unbalanced," her sister says at one point in the series), receiving no affection from her loved ones and, in general, being ignored. The narrative shows Cassie from the end of the first season as a girl subjected to stress and potentially traumatic situations (abortion, abandonment by her partner, alienation from her group of friends), but no solution to her problems is ever proposed. Instead, the series plays on putting her in a sensationalist self-destructive spiral. All of this reinforces the stereotype of the hysterical woman (Woods, 2012) which, based on what is shown in this scene, is far from having been overcome in fiction, as argued above.

When it comes to romanticization, the best example of those studied can be found in the fourth episode of the first season of *Euphoria*, in an extensive flashback showing Jules in her early teens, where she appears to be unhappy with her body and her desire to transition. Jules' mother deceitfully locks her daughter in a psychiatric institution, and Jules cuts her wrists with the remains of a soda can (Image 2). In this scene, we see the romanticization of self-harm, above all through the voiceover that emphasizes Jules' discomfort and her desire to escape her body/reality, and high-pitched music, with vocals but no lyrics, which is skillfully mixed with fast-paced editing that nevertheless clearly conveys the story. The scene is shocking but aesthetically appealing, with plays of light and shadow and camera movements with very effective transitions, such as the one that ends Jules' stay in her forced confinement.

There is, however, one exception in the case of *Ginny & Georgia*. This show, with two seasons released on Netflix, stars a mother and her teenage daughter who, on their own, start a new life in a new city. Ginny is 15 years old and self-harms by burning herself with a lighter on the inside of her thigh (Image 4). The scars from old burns are clearly visible, indicating a pattern of repeated behavior. During the first season, the young woman suffers several episodes whose symptoms are consistent with what we know as anxiety attacks (Mardomingo, 2001), which in the narrative explains the self-harm. Even so, the issue is never addressed in the series' plot and remains unresolved until season 2, when Ginny confesses her self-harming behavior to her father, from whom her mother separated many years ago. Thanks to her father, Ginny begins therapy with a psychologist who will help her deal with stress and anxiety. Ginny's recovery is based on the support of her family and friends, professional help, and her own commitment to improving as a patient. All of these are essential ways to help her overcome her self-harming behaviors, as identified by psychologists and psychiatrists and supported as fundamental by published literature (Duarte-Tánori *et al.*, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2019, Berger *et al.*, 2014) reveal how young people themselves recognize that what helps them most to overcome self-harm is having a safe environment where they are listened to without judgment. The series also reminds us that those who self-harm must be active participants in their own recovery, a point that echoes published studies (Berger *et al.* 2014; Fortune *et al.*, 2008). Far from appearing as an idyllic solution, *Ginny & Georgia* is the best example of those analyzed in this study of how to approach self-harm cases. Less than half of the representations of self-harming behaviors in the fiction analyzed show a psychopharmacological response and even fewer show support from the social context. Psychopharmacological treatment is usually taken for granted, as in the case of Ruth in *Física o Química* or Silvia in *HIT* – when she is admitted to the hospital. Despite attempts in *HIT* to address mental health issues from an adult and responsible perspective, in the series, self-harming behaviors do not lead to solutions that could promote the prevention and treatment of these behaviors, as they are treated superficially and resolved off-screen, after fulfilling their mission of supporting the plot of a

specific episode. Therefore, the sensationalist representation of self-harm in the scenes analyzed coincides with the definition given by Trevawas (2010) and Martin (1998), authors who associate this form of representation with a greater risk of imitative behavior on the part of the viewer.

Despite the possibilities offered by serial fiction, there is a total absence of voice-over narration, which prevents the viewer from learning about the character's self-narrative (Chandler, 2014) regarding their own self-harming behavior. With regard to the prototype of the self-harming character, the insistence on presenting them as female is consistent with existing academic literature (Biempica, 2025; Chandler and Simopoulou, 2021; Salisbury, 2018).

Finally, given the influence of audiovisual culture on the viewer's interpretation of reality, it would be important to extend Scalvini's (2020) call to producers regarding their moral responsibility when including representations of self-harm in their audiovisual productions to directors and screenwriters, and even to the platforms or channels that broadcast this content, as they also bear this responsibility.

5. Conclusion

After analyzing the selection of characters that are the focus of this research, it can be said, returning to the first objective of the study, that the archetype of the adolescent figure who self-harms in serial fiction focuses on a girl with anxiety problems who feels alienated from her family environment or social circle. Within the narrative, this archetype is completed with a leading or secondary role, which also self-harms with a sharp object, mainly a knife, on the upper limbs (forearm or wrist). Regarding the second proposed objective, the representation of self-harm serves, above all, a dramatic purpose, so elements that could serve as a reference for real people affected by the same problem are minimized, if not directly absent from the plot.

The context of self-harm is marked by the importance of the character in the story (whether protagonist or not) and the time devoted to explaining or showing the possible causes of their behavior, which is generally limited and based on psychological problems that are assumed to affect the character. As for the consequences of self-harm, post-act psycho-pharmacological intervention is inferred but rarely discussed in detail, leaving the solution to the problem aside once the self-harming action has fulfilled its dramatic function. Only on rare occasions will the victim be shown hospitalized or visiting a mental health professional.

Narrative analysis allows us to conclude that scenes depicting self-harm are generally characterized by not including the use of a soundtrack, being shot with artificial light in indoor spaces, presenting situations with dialogue between characters but without the use of voice-overs, showing the self-harm on screen, and, finally, having a narrative function focused on revealing the character's psychology, either to the audience, to another character, or both.

On the other hand, the fictional works studied tend to fall into aesthetic romanticism, as in the case of *Euphoria*, or into the pathologization of self-harm, as in *Castle* or *American Horror Story: Murder House*. Very rarely are models of detection and action in response to self-harm presented that could help vulnerable populations who access these shows. In most, but not all, of the cases studied, self-harm is a response, with varying degrees of conditioned behavior, to anxiety problems that manifest themselves in isolation or accompanied by other pathologies.

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Overall, we must consider whether the responsible and non-sensationalist representation of self-harm in serial fiction can be the standard rather than the exception when it comes to creating stories that engage teenage and young adult audiences. Therefore, it is important to return to *Ginny & Georgia*, an example of contemporary storytelling that appeals to this audience and is capable of exposing the problem in such a way that the viewer empathizes with the character and understands their recovery process.

This article proposes the first narrative analysis of the representation of self-harm in serial fiction, but at the same time, it would be desirable for it to lead to future lines of research, such as the relationship between the examples of romanticization and sensationalization presented here and the response of vulnerable populations to viewing these series. Other areas of work could focus on the language used –or not used– in audiovisual fiction to talk about self-harm, which Brinkmann (2014) calls "the language of suffering" and which is almost non-existent in the examples analyzed. These gaps show that this research is only a first approximation to a social problem that is more widespread than its presence in fiction.

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7. Specific contributions from each author

	Name and surname
Conception and design of work	Pablo Sánchez
Methodology	Pablo Sánchez
Data collection and análisis	Pablo Sánchez y Raquel Moraleda
Discussion and conclusions	Pablo Sánchez y Raquel Moraleda
Drafting, formatting, review and approval of versions	Pablo Sánchez

8. Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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