

# New trends in Spanish-produced television series for young audiences. A case study of *Merlí* (TV3, 2015) and *Skam España* (Movistar, 2018)<sup>1</sup>

## *Modelos de renovación en las series de televisión juveniles de producción española. Estudio de caso de Merlí (TV3, 2015) y Skam España (Movistar, 2018)*



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### Abstract:

This study investigates Spanish television fiction starring young people produced in the 21st century. Two recent series for young viewers were selected, namely, *Merlí* (TV3, 2015) and *Skam España* (Movistar, 2018). These case studies are used to provide theoretical insights into youth representations in television fiction to explain how the genre has evolved and what have been its main innovations. The analysis employed a qualitative methodology, and text analysis of the series was chosen to reconstruct the key aspects of their narrative and audiovisual content. The conclusions identify different strategies in each series: narrative and aesthetic strategies; and strategies related to production, distribution and

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### Resumen:

*Este trabajo es una aproximación a la ficción televisiva de producción española del siglo XXI protagonizada por jóvenes. Se seleccionan dos series juveniles recientes: Merlí (TV3, 2015) y Skam España (Movistar, 2018), y a través del estudio de caso se relacionan aportaciones teóricas sobre la representación juvenil en la ficción televisiva, se determina la evolución del género y se resaltan sus principales innovaciones. Para el análisis se emplea una metodología de corte cualitativo y como técnica se escoge el análisis textual de las series con el fin de reconstruir las principales claves del contenido, narrativo y audiovisual. Las conclusiones propuestas distinguen diferentes estrategias en cada serie: narrativas y estéticas; y de producción,*

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narrative extension. These two series illustrate the new trends in Spanish series for young audiences and underline the use of different meanings about adolescence present in current Spanish fiction.

**Keywords:**

TV series; Spain; VOD platforms; TV fiction for young audiences; Young people.

*distribución y extensión narrativa. El conjunto permite observar la renovación en las series juveniles españolas y subraya el uso de distintas significaciones sobre la adolescencia fijadas en la ficción española actual.*

**Palabras clave:**

*Series de televisión; España; plataformas VOD; ficción televisiva juvenil; jóvenes.*

## 1. Introduction and state of the art

This study discusses Spanish-produced television drama series created for and starring young people. These story lines are organised on the basis of realistic plots that deal with issues that concern young people and are contextualised in settings and contexts specific to them. The school, the characters' homes, and the urban environment are the main settings at the core of the action. A cast of varied characters move through these spaces. They have different profiles, lifestyles and means of identifying with the audience. The various settings allow the range of characters to be expanded to the adult segment, which helps to broaden the audience to include this population group as well. These social dramas are significant because they are a portrayal of a generation and encourage reflection on young people's worldviews by naturalistically reconstructing the society in which they are living.

There are two types of television fiction series for young viewers. The first is made up of series about young people that specifically address this audience from the perspective of youth culture. These are referred to as teen series (Raya, Sánchez-Labela & Durán, 2018; Navarro & Climent, 2014). These series are included among the programmes of generalist channels and dominate the content of thematic television channels that have viewers people as a potential audience (García & Fedele, 2011). The second group includes those series whose narrative also mainly revolves around young characters but also incorporate characters, themes and plots that concern other age groups, such as adults, children, and the elderly. Some of these series can also be part of the so-called 'family dramas', a sub-genre that is targeted at the whole family and includes the different members in the plots (Hidalgo-Marí & de la Cuadra, 2020: 637).

The phenomenon of television fiction for young audiences leveraged the technological progression and the generational wisdom of teenagers to link them to new screens (Guarinos, 2009:205). Young people have become an attractive segment for programmers, as they are seen as potential consumers and proficient technology users. The generalist channels articulated a multimedia framework around the series and through online media in order to make use of promotional strategies, offer greater viewing opportunities and build audience loyalty. This transmedia environment was used by young participatory audiences to share tastes and concerns, extend narratives and show their stories outside of commercial channels (Galán & Del Pino, 2010). Audiovisual consumption has spread beyond television to other screens, including mobiles, tablets and computers, which led to an increasing tendency for young people to view audiovisual content. They were particularly interested in fiction series, where there has been an exponential increase in supply since

the widespread use of VOD platforms and online viewing. This meant that young people had the technology at their fingertips to decide what to watch, and where and when to watch it.

According to studies on media effects, TV series influence the audience's personality, behaviour, and values. This is particularly the case for the youth segment, as they are at a stage of development when their personal identity is being constructed. Some studies have dealt with the uses and reception of series and the effects that they produce in young people (Medrano, Airbe and Martínez de Moretin, 2011). This research argues that young people are influenced by the characters in the series they watch (Jinadasa, 2015; Bermejo, 2012; Pindado, 2006). Through mimesis and identification, they acquire attitudes, behaviours, values, beliefs and goals that are suggested by these television narratives (Hoffner and Buchanan, 2005; Cohen, 2006). Other recurring themes related to the effects of series emanate from the representation triad, namely image, sexuality, and violence. Thus, research has explored the image of young people on prime-time television (Heintz-Knowles, 2000); the representation of violence (González, 2012); the sexual behaviour of young characters (Aubrey, 2004; Meyer, 2003); young people's perceptions of sexual and affective relationships shown in Spanish series (Figueras, Tortajada & Arana, 2014); and the representation of sexuality in fiction series aimed at young people (Masanet, Medina & Ferrés, 2012). There was even a study that proposed a methodological basis for a systematic analysis of sexual content in television series for adolescents (Crespo, 2005).

More recently, other more integrated approaches have been developed, such as those related to edutainment and educommunication. They also focus on the relationship between young people and entertainment television, where educational content related to health or science can be found (Gutiérrez, 2019; Grande, 2019; Villa, 2012).

Television fiction has regularly depicted the transition from childhood to adulthood, contributing to the creation of a set of stereotypes about adolescents. For this reason, the prototypes of adolescents in Spanish fiction products have been analysed (Guarinos, 2009) and, in particular, the male ones (Guarinos, *et al.* 2010). The stereotype of the young social misfit and their evolution towards a postmodern conception where they mutate into a hero with the quality of self-reflexivity has also been studied (García, 2011). This tendency to actualise individuality and difference is a characteristic theme of teenage narratives that Netflix has used in recent years in order to bring bullying and autism (among others) to the viewer's attention (Raya, Sánchez-Labela & Durán, 2018).

The most extensive study on the representation of young people in Spanish television fiction, taking into account the sample size (516 characters), covered the last two years of the 2000s (Lacalle, 2013). This study provided some insights into the stories that help to establish the characteristics of this type of series. For example, the story notably includes a linear structure, is constructed through the perspective of different characters, takes care of the *mise-en-scène* and objectivity is prioritised in the editing process, which shows the disinterest in the rhetoric of the image (Lacalle, 2013: 140-153).

## 2. Objectives, hypotheses, methodology and purpose

This article discusses television fiction starring teenagers through the case study of two recent series that target young viewers: *Merlí* (TV3, 2015) and *Skam España* (Movistar, 2018). The starting hypothesis is that both series showcase a series of innovations that have revitalised and updated fiction for young audiences produced in Spain. These innovations concern narratives and aesthetics, as well as the production and broadcasting of such productions.

The aim of this paper is to establish how the format has evolved. Background information and two current series are analysed in depth as case studies to fulfil the stated aim.

A qualitative methodology was used for the analysis. Text Analysis was used, which focuses on specific elements of the text and the ways in which the text is constructed. To this end, an analysis sheet was created as a resource to compile and organise the data extracted about the productions (Table 1). Finally, interest is directed towards how to interpret its meaning in a global sense, showcasing both the themes they address and the forms of enunciation of discourse itself (Casetti & Di Chio, 1999: 149-151).

**Table 1**

<b>1. Context</b>	
Identification data	Data and creative sheets; years of production and programming; broadcasting channels
Classification	Genres; formats and typologies
<b>2. Narrative aspects</b>	
Themes	Primary and secondary
Plots	General and specific
Dramatic structure	Confrontation, rising action, and resolution
Narrative categories	Narrator(s), perspectives, and points of view
Characters	Physical and psychological description; role(s) and conflict(s)
<b>3. Formal aspects</b>	
Icon codes	Shots; camera movements; frames
Sound codes	Functions and opening sequence
Graphic codes	Credits and context indicators
Syntactic codes	Editing
<b>4. Interpretation</b>	

Source: Developed by the author

The selected research objects were the series *Merlí* and *Skam España*. Both are Spanish productions. *Merlí* was broadcast in Catalan on the regional television channel TV3 between 14 September 2015 and 15 January 2018. It was dubbed into Spanish to be temporarily shown on *La Sexta* between April and July 2016, and on *Neox*, between 2017 and 2018. It can currently be found in the Netflix catalogue. It consisted of 40 episodes, each of them 50 minutes long, aired over three seasons. *Skam España* premiered on 16 September 2018 on the Movistar platform. Some 38 episodes have been broadcast to date, ranging from 20 to 40 minutes in length. They were aired over four seasons.

Both series star teenagers and present a realistic narrative of the stories of two groups of secondary school students, one in Madrid and the other in Barcelona. Both have been a successful media phenomenon (*Merlí* in Latin America, *Skam* in Europe) and have become alternatives to the hegemonic US market, which provides added interest in understanding the message they convey.

Despite these similarities, there are many differences between these two productions. *Merlí* is an original series created by Héctor Lozano and produced by a regional television station. It was very successful, to the extent that it was the leader in its time slot with an audience share of 18% in prime time. It is a contemporary story about young people, although it also appeals to other audiences, as it also features adult characters that have equal clout in the narrative. The positive impact of the series led to a sequel called *Merlí, Sapere Aude* (Movistar, 2020), which follows some of the characters as they move from secondary school to university. By contrast, *Skam España* is a Spanish adaptation of the Norwegian series *Skam*, created by Julie Andem, and is produced by Movistar. In addition to having all the content available on the paid platform, the series can also be accessed through social networks, albeit in a fragmented way. It also offers a contemporary portrait of young people, although it focuses on a group of female school friends and the adult characters have secondary roles.

The study was organised into two phases, namely an initial viewing of the purposive sample and a second viewing for analysis. The Norwegian series *Skam* was added in order to determine the differences between the original series and the Spanish version; and *Merlí Sapere Aude*, *spin-off* of *Merlí*, was also included with a view to observing the narrative extension of the original. Viewings and analyses of these four series were used to compare their content with that of new productions.

### 3. Spanish television fiction series for young people. Background

The first precedent was *Verano azul* (TVE, 1981), produced and directed by Antonio Mercero. This was woven through a thread of collective memory from the 1980s that challenged the status quo of Francoist television with its open and uninhibited treatment of adolescent issues. The story followed the summer holidays of a group of girls and boys on the Costa del Sol and delved into their social and family relationships. Mercero had experience both in television (*Crónicas de un pueblo*, TVE, 1971; *Este señor de negro*, TVE, 1975) and in cinema, where he had tried out several projects whose main characters were minors (*La guerra de papá*, 1977; *Toby*, 1978). The impact was remarkable. *Verano azul* is considered an emblematic series of the public channel's fiction, and it is still being rebroadcast (Bazán & Sastre, 2014). Its importance can be gauged by the fact that the death of the character *Chanquete* was reported on the front page of the national

newspapers the day following the broadcast as if he were a real person. Although the series was intended for a general audience, most of the themes and plots concerned young people, who were the protagonists of the story.

Five years later, *Segunda enseñanza* (TVE, 1986), written by Ana Diosdado and produced and directed by Pedro Masó, was broadcast. They had previously produced the successful and open-minded drama *Anillos de oro* (TVE, 1983) after the law allowing divorce was passed in Spain. Masó then created another social representation of his time, set in a school in Oviedo, with Diosdado acting as a teacher and a group of students performed by a strong generation of young actors of the time: Ana Torrent, Jorge Sanz, Aitana Sánchez-Gijón, Gabino Diego and Javier Bardem, among others. Part of the narrative was set in the Santullano School, an innovative school that promoted an atypical teaching system: parents were shareholders, teachers were approachable, and students gave their opinions and questioned learning contents and methodologies. Throughout the 13 chapters, each lasting between 50 and 60 minutes, issues that were relevant to young people were raised and developed, including respect for beliefs, drug use, interest in learning, adherence to stereotypes, and the use of violence, among others. The narrative expanded into the families of the different characters, completing a generational fresco at a time of social change and incipient modernisation. *Seguna enseñanza* formally and narratively contained characteristics of teenage television fiction or family drama, but it was not a series aimed only at young people. It seemed to relate more to learning about life as the teacher matured, and the young people around her played a role in helping her in this process.

Although these series were broadcast in the 1980s, the 1990s are considered to be the period when broadcasters first began to pay attention to the hitherto residual audience of young people. In an effort to appeal to as many viewers as possible, and in light of the favourable attitude that advertisers had towards the adolescent stratum, the new channels programmed content aimed at attracting them. It was a uniform menu that was profuse in advertising and scarce in creativity, which contained competitions, music programmes and, above all, canned programmes (Mateos-Pérez, 2012). The latter notably included fiction series starring young people, most of them imported. TVE started with *Degrassi Junior High* (CBC, 1987); Tele 5 with *Family Ties* (NBC, 1982) and *Doogie Howser, M.D.* (ABC, 1989); and Canal Plus expanded the offering by airing *Head of the Class* (ABC, 1986); *Press Gang* (ITV, 1989) and *Full House* (ABC, 1987). However, it was Tele 5 that broadcast the most successful show of the period: *Beverly Hills, 90210* (Fox, 1990). A realistic, prime-time drama series starring young, wealthy, attractive characters set in a Los Angeles high school. This series, created by Darren Star and produced by Aaron Spelling, became increasingly more popular in the United States and also in Spain, attracting up to 5 million viewers per episode (Ecotel, 1992). It did not take long for the cast members to be featured on the covers of teen magazines. The success of *Beverly Hills, 90210* led to a follow-up with *Melrose Place* (Fox, 1992), which included a crossover of the main characters in the first episodes with the intention of transferring audiences and established a model that has continued to be replicated in different forms ever since. It was a fiction drama starring a group of young people, which started with the common scenario of a secondary school located in an urban environment and then extended to the families of each of the main characters with the aim of giving them depth and placing them in a context. The themes presented in the series were taken from topical situations and developed through plots that explored all kinds of conflicts inherent to youth.

The then new private channels relied on foreign series at first, but later produced their own teenage stories. The most prominent shows at the turn of the century were *Al salir de clase* (Tele 5, 1997) and *Compañeros* (Antena 3, 1998). The former was produced by Boca a Boca and directed by Antonio Cuadri. This drama series was presented in a daily format, with 25 minutes per episode in the afternoon programming block, traditionally reserved for afternoon magazine programmes and soap operas, which they ended up imitating. *Al salir de clase* told a realistic tale of the lives and relationships of a handful of students at Siete Robles High School, but due to its daily broadcast with hardly any breaks (five years, 1,199 episodes), the plots, the characters and even the genre of the series were modified and/or became over-complex to the point of exhaustion. Carlos Moreno, creator of *Élite* and member of the team of scriptwriters from 1997 to 1999, reported on the oscillations of the project's narrative and the creative process: 'I arrived in the third season, when the plots were already crazy, as happens in any daily series. We worked in blocks of five chapters, with very little time. It was a great learning process. I lost my fear of the blank page. The important thing was to produce, because the machinery could not stop' (Llanos, 2018). This series served screenwriters, directors and actors as a means to access new fiction, theatre, television and film projects. Names such as Sergio Peris Mencheta, Pilar López de Ayala, Rubén Ochandiano, Hugo Silva, Leticia Dolera and Rodolfo Sancho are examples of this.

*Compañeros* was a Globomedia project. This production was aimed at an older audience than the youth audience. It was aired on Wednesdays, with episodes of 65-75 minutes, and focused on a group of teenagers set in the Azcona school. To make it suitable for all audiences, some adult characters were introduced to take on the roles of teachers and parents. The themes were in line with the actual situation and concerns of teenagers, as typically found in series about young people: racism, sexual violence, unwanted pregnancies, drug use, etcetera. To cover nine seasons (122 episodes) increasingly complex narratives had to be improvised and aesthetics revitalised which entailed more shots per minute, the camera jumping around, and use of the steadycam to make action more dynamic. The narrative extension of the series resulted in the release of *No te fallaré* (Manuel Ríos San Martín, 2001), a film for unconditional fans that provided glimpses of how the characters had evolved years later.

A group of series starring young people were launched over the following years: *SMS-Sin miedo a soñar* (La Sexta, 2006); *El Internado* (Antena 3, 2007); *Física o Química* (Antena 3, 2008); and *Los protegidos* (Antena 3, 2010), which altered the format, but maintained the narrative mould. These shows provided high audience ratings and went beyond the Spanish market to other countries, where the original series was either broadcast or adapted. In parallel to the stories, transmedia contents were offered for promotion purposes, as well as to build audience loyalty and extend the series' narratives. These productions, such as recently *Élite* (Netflix, 2018), also set out to recount the lives and vicissitudes of groups of students gravitating around an educational institution. However, the innovative element was the use of hybrid genres in its design and the addition of themes and characters that proposed heterogeneous narrative developments, detached from reality and current affairs by subordinating themselves to genres of proven success on television - which also form part of the teen culture - such as thrillers, horror, mystery, or fantasy genres. In these cases, the social component of the series was blurred to the detriment of spectacular stories, unconventional plots, and hyperbolic characters. They also included carefully-staged depictions of sexual and violent content. The appeal to audiences other than young people now came from the mixing of genres.

Other series were also launched, including *La pecera de Eva* (Tele 5, 2010), *Pulseras rojas* (TV3, 2011), *Merlí* (TV3, 2015), *Skam España* (Movistar, 2018), *Merlí, Sapere Aude* (Movistar, 2019) and *HIT* (TVE, 2020), which featured new trends and innovations in broadcasting, formats, narratives and, in some cases, also in aesthetics. This group of series offered realistic stories that drew on social issues and were seasoned with references to current affairs.

This study proposes an analysis of two of these contemporary television productions targeting young viewers. They are different, but also alternative and complementary models, which point to key content, production and broadcasting elements in the new trends of Spanish series for young audiences.

#### 4. *Merlí*. Education, philosophy, and male point of view for all audiences

*Merlí* is a series created and produced by Veranda TV (Grupo Godó and Boomerang TV) and broadcast by the regional channel TV3. It was written by Héctor Lozano, an experienced scriptwriter who had previously worked on *Jet lag* (TV3, 2001), *Vendepià* (TV3, 2005), and *La Riera* (TV3, 2010), and directed by Eduard Cortés. The project resulted from a conversation with a literature teacher friend who explained how he motivated and worked with his pupils (Solà, 2015).

*Merlí* falls into the genre of *dramedy*. Although it was conceived for young audiences, it has captured a family audience. It is one of the most emblematic products of regional television in recent years: filmed in Catalan and aimed at the audiences living in that area. In 2015 Atresmedia acquired the rights to the series, dubbed it into Spanish and broadcast it to a national audience (first on La Sexta and then on Neox). Undeterred by the uneven results of the private network's audience following, it was acquired by Netflix in 2016 for its Latin American and Spanish-language catalogue in the United States. The platform served as an international launch pad for the series, which became one of the most watched Netflix productions in 2017 and extremely popular in Latin American countries including Chile, Argentina and Uruguay. TVE and ETB (which dubbed it into Basque) also obtained the broadcasting rights. An adaptation is also being prepared in Germany. This success was enough for Movistar and TV3 to close a deal in 2018 to continue the series. The new project kept Lozano as a writer and allocated a larger budget to the production of shorter episodes. The first season of *Merlí: Sapere Aude (Atrévete a saber)* could be initially seen exclusively on the Movistar paid platform (end of 2019) and was then released on free-to-air TV3 one year after its premiere.

The series was named after a philosophy teacher at the Angel Guimerà secondary school in Barcelona. *Merlí Bergeron*, a contentious man with his own moral values, makes an impact on the lives of his students thanks to his personality, his commitment, his direct language, and his innovative and unusual pedagogical techniques, in the style of *The Dead Poets Society* (Peter Weir, 1989). The aim was to teach students to think, so the episodes are structured around a philosophical concept that *Merlí* explains and discusses in class, and then graphically developed in the lives of the characters. This didactic approach (an echo of the novel *Sofia's World* by the Norwegian Jostein Gaarder, 1991), which offered a practical and tangible application of philosophy, is one of the main breakthroughs of the series. Its influence has been such that, since the broadcast of *Merlí*, pre-enrolment and enrolment in philosophy degrees in Catalonia increased between 2015 and 2017 (Martínez & Rodó de Zárate, 2020).

The major themes that emerge in the series are those linked to current affairs, which invite social reflection on the present. A number of issues are discussed in the classroom, such as the economic crisis and its consequences (evictions, the public bailout of the banks, unemployment, and political corruption). The critical treatment of the political situation in Catalonia and the humorous assessment of nationalism, particularly Catalan nationalism, is striking, considering that the series was broadcast on a public channel and the government during the production period was held by pro-independence parties. Criticism of the education system, the poor performance of the political class and religion are also given attention. Other common themes include love, sexuality, infidelity, friendship, and family. Generational issues are also continuously addressed in the series, including early motherhood, drug addiction and cyberbullying.

The series emphasises the prominence of its main character right from its very title. Merlí Bergeron is critical, has progressive values on political and social issues, and is self-confident. He accepts his son's homosexuality naturally and behaves inclusively towards a transgender teacher, but he also stands out for his questionable ethics, his permanent machismo and his anthropocentric sexist attitudes (Bonavitta & de Garay, 2019: 216). He is accompanied by a cast of young characters, male and female, who form the group known as *els peripatètics*. In general, the series represents a predominantly male gaze. The male characters are more developed in terms of number, variety and depth of their profiles. They take some stereotypes as a basis, including the handsome man, the closeted gay man, the clown, the mummy's boy, etc. and evolve until they move away from these initial characteristics and acquire new ones thanks to the teacher's influence during the narration. The female characters receive less attention and are closer to the stereotype. Paradoxically, the series proposes a novel and liberating discourse on sexuality, and links sexual relations to critical thinking because it manages to make sexuality a subject to think about (Alcalá, Rodríguez & Solórzano, 2018:92). Furthermore, *Merlí* takes on the current trend of incorporating roles with a great diversity of sexual orientations: heterosexuals, homosexuals and bisexuals are represented in the series. It also makes the LGBTQBIQ population visible, a group that is not often represented on screen in Spain (Marcos, González de Garay & Arcila, 2020).

In audio-visual terms, the series appeals to the classic language of soap operas, with the use of transparent camera work, simple continuity editing and a realistic composition in the scale of shots. Parallel editing is sometimes used to explain actions that occur in different places at the same time and elliptical time transitions with images of the city of Barcelona at different times of the day to contextualise the action and mark the passage of time. In these, an owl appears as a reference to wisdom and the Greek world, the cradle of critical thought in Western philosophy. Innovations include the use of classical music as a soundtrack that plays a descriptive and narrative role (Millà, 2019); and an opening sequence that immerses the audience in the school environment of philosophy through images of desks, boards, books, pedagogical diagrams, and concepts linked to youth. *The Flight of the Bumblebee* by Rimsky-Korsakov provides the music for the introduction, when the protagonist is presented in a medium shot standing in front of the board that shows an ontological outline of philosophy. A fly (which flies, copulates, walks over the teaching material, sits on a coffee cup, before finally underlining Merlí's name) accompanies this piece of music, suggesting pointers to the irritating character of the protagonist.

The popularity of Merlí led to the emergence of other cultural products that extended the narrative of the series into the transmedia sphere. On Mondays, after the broadcast of the premiere episode and before a rerun episode, TV3 scheduled

the television programme *Merlinari* (TV3, 2017), where some of the performers of the series went into a real secondary school to talk to students about the issues raised in the fictional series. In addition, Héctor Lozano wrote a book published by Planeta (*Atresmedia*) entitled *Cuando fuimos los peripatéticos*, and Rebecca Beltrán wrote another one entitled *El libro de Merlí: filosofía y merlinadas que te harán flipar*, published by Grijalbo. These were followed by the novel *Yo, Pol Rubio* (published in Spanish by Crossbooks, and in Catalan by Columna), which expanded the story of the new series.

## 5. *Skam Spain*. Technology and social reflection on women targeted at young people

*Skam España* is a series produced by Zeppelin TV (Endemol Shine Iberia) and broadcast on a paid platform: Movistar+. Directed by Begoña Álvarez and José Ramón Ayerra and written by Beatriz Arias, Jon de la Cuesta and Estíbaliz Burgaleta, as script coordinator. A mostly female creative team was used that was consistent with the original idea, as this series is an adaptation of the Norwegian production *Skam* (shame) (4 seasons, 43 episodes) broadcast by the public broadcaster NRK. The series was a success in Norway, and its global popularity coincided with the premiere of its third season in the autumn of 2016. The production came from the Norwegian broadcaster, which had noted a decline in the number of young viewers (Bengtsson, Källquist & Sveningsson, 2018). Julie Andem, director and scriptwriter of INRK P3, a state-run channel focusing on youth culture, was commissioned to work on the project. Andem only fleshed out the narrative after conducting an ethnographic process that involved performing interviews with Norwegian adolescents in different secondary schools (Sabina, de la Fuente & Martínez, 2019).

*Skam Spain* is a teen series targeting young audiences. Movistar+ acquired its rights for the Spanish production in 2017 and premiered it a year later. The team responsible for the Spanish adaptation set itself the objective of realistically portraying contemporary Spanish young people. To do so, they carried out preparatory fieldwork by conducting interviews with secondary school students to find out about their concerns and motivations.

The series follows the storyline in the original version, with minimal changes in plots and characters, except to some adaptations to Spanish audiences. It portrays the life of a group of adolescents at a secondary school in Madrid. An innovative feature is the narrative device of changing the perspective of the story in each new season. This approach serves to compose a polyphonic story, which broadens the range of identifications and representations. Thanks to this, viewers gain an in-depth knowledge of the characters, understand their contexts and empathise with their conflicts. With the change of the main character, the series took a difference direction and disregarded some characters to focus more intensely on new or previously secondary ones. The female protagonists do not fit into stereotypes and reflect a complex society in their relationships with their male and female peers. The narrative significance of the adult characters is residual, and they perform complementary roles.

Consistent with its core cast, the series offers a female perspective. The essential theme that runs through it is friendship between women, moving away from the hackneyed approach of previous fiction dramas where female characters are narratively dependent on men and tend to compete with each other. *Skam Spain* provides a modern, alternative, realistic representation of women. It avoids the sexualised presentation of female bodies and portrays them naturally, seeking authenticity, even though it sometimes fails to achieve it. One of the protagonists (Nora) uses this framework to put

forward feminist concepts that radiate throughout her environment and gradually spread to the rest of her peers. This results in a discourse of sisterhood that trickles down to and protects the group and helps it to resolve the conflicts and differences between its members.

Among the themes covered are age-specific topics and others that are not the exclusive preserve of adolescents. The series tackles a broad range of issues such as religion (in particular, the Muslim religion), jealousy, hate speech, mental disorders, peer abuse, negative uses of social media, harmful relationships, and the discovery of sexual identities. What is important about this fiction series is that it tries to deal with characters and their values (friendship, tolerance, generosity) inclusively. The intention is to make viewers aware of existing problems and offer them tools to overcome them. 'Far from moralising, the purpose of *Skam* is to build a series that takes care of stories and characters by conveying positive values of respect and humanity to viewers. The website *#thankyouskam* contains a multitude of anonymous messages of appreciation for the series' (Lozano, 2018).

The aesthetic of the series is supposedly intimate. Its language is close to the documentary genre, shot with a shoulder-mounted camera, uses close-ups and silence as narrative resources and naturalistic lighting. This is aligned with the use of a cast with no previous experience in acting. Each episode is made up of different sequences that allude to different points in time. These begin *in media res* and end with a fade to black. Superimposed on the black background is the time stamp (day, time) that contextualises the beginning of the clips and also highlights *Skam*, the title of the series, which appears in fluorescent yellow across the full width of the screen.

Another fundamental contribution of the series is the way the story is told, as it transcends the usual television broadcast and provides new viewing alternatives. *Skam España* widened this potential by using transmedia devices. The different sequences into which the weekly episode is divided are posted in real time on the <http://skamespana.movistarplus.es> webpage. All these episodes are supplemented by *WhatsApp* messages, as well as content posted on the characters' *Instagram* accounts (which are not seen in the final edited version of each episode). This commitment to broadcasting from social networks was strengthened during the second season with the initiative to upload the clips to *Youtube* without geographical restrictions, and included subtitles to increase the number of visits and outreach of the series (López, 2019). This also added an extra dimension to the development of the characters, making them appear more real.

The *Skam* phenomenon has become widespread in a short period of time. As of 2018, in addition to the Spanish adaptation, there were also several seasons of *Skam France* (2018); the German version, entitled *Druck* (2018); *Skam Austin* in the United States (2018); *Skam Italia*; *Skam NL*, in the Netherlands and *wtFock*, which was the title of the remake in Belgium. All adaptations make variations in content to suit the idiosyncrasies of each country. However, the transmedia broadcast format is common to all versions.

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

Based on the results obtained, it can be concluded that fiction series for young audiences in Spain experienced significantly new trends in the past two decades when compared with previous productions. VOD channels and platforms have facilitated access to productions to the extent that viewers can watch content on different devices and at any time.

*Skam España* implemented new developments in series, by dividing episodes into scenes and broadcasting them in a fragmented way on social media, together with messages, chats, photographs, and videos. This all complements conventional broadcasting, helping to develop the characters in an alternative way and immersing the audience into the story further. Something similar happened with the novels and books published around *Merlí*. These texts were used to gain access to the characters' thoughts, to understand their world in greater depth, and to enable a prospective view of them. In these new offerings, the transmedia format was used as a connector between the stories and their dissemination to young audiences. It is now considered that articulating the story through the mixed languages and practices used by young people (the Internet, television, social media, fan communities, books, novels) can be fruitful for the wide distribution of television fiction and equally beneficial for active audiences, since this audiovisual architecture encourages creativity and broadens the debate on the themes and ideas expressed in the fiction series.

The commercial paths of these new series are different and specific. Although both were initially conceived and broadcast by public television stations (Catalan TV3 and Norwegian NRK), the trend towards the cultural globalisation of television and the strong appeal of both productions have led them to be part of the catalogues of VOD platforms (Netflix and Movistar), at least in Spain. This itinerary reflects the business strategies of broadcasters: on the one hand, they support the creators of the most successful series and offer them resources to produce shows aimed at the same audience. On the other hand, broadcasters and platforms are extremely fast in capturing successful new formats. This is the case with *Skam*, with adaptations in multiple countries; and with *Merlí*, which yet again re-enacts the approach of the controversial teacher who uses unorthodox pedagogical techniques to motivate students. This is clearly an attractive, current plot, as demonstrated by the three seasons of *Merlí* and its subsequent *spinoff*, and by *HIT* (TVE, 2020), the latest TVE production to try out a new variation on the same starting point.

Storytelling changes and is adapted to present trends. These are contents that seek authenticity, stories and characters linked to reality. They use repetitive, spontaneous jargon, typically found among the young people and social class portrayed in the series. They aim for representativeness: diverse family backgrounds, different religious characters, alternative sexualities, studying and working, located in state schools and recognisable urban spaces.

These series deal with current issues and use them to create plots and characters. Feminism permeates *Skam Spain* and its characters. After a hesitant start, they moved towards a model of female empowerment. The relationships between the main characters went beyond the traditional, conservative representation of female roles to show new models that prioritise values such as friendship, tolerance and integrity.

The new trends also affected the characters, by representing heteronormative people, presenting diverse sexual orientations and ways of being. These series contribute to normalising some of the LGTBIQ population, and making them visible. What is interesting is not so much the approach to the subject as the fact that the characters are organically introduced into the plot.

The purpose of the new TV series for young viewers is to seduce teenagers with a formal, rather than intellectual, appeal to the cast, the mix of genres, and the unexpected twists in the story. However, these new productions are also intended to raise critical awareness among the target audiences. They convey transformative and inclusive messages,

related to edutainment, in line with productions from other countries, such as the Chilean *El reemplazante* (TVN, 2012), the American *Atypical* (Netflix, 2017), and the British *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019). Even if this involved changing the aesthetic approach by seeking an intimate language, as in *Skam*, or resorting to provocative statements, as in *Merlí*.

Despite the heterogeneity of these two offerings and their different commercial outputs, they have both shown that innovation in teen television fiction is produced in both original works and adaptations. Both *Merlí* and *Skam España* share characteristics that are linked to the quality of public television: they are entertaining fiction productions that also include innovation in the story, commitment to society, and reflection. Ultimately, these series promote positive social change through their characters and plots, are committed to integration and to the recognition of personal and cultural differences, and value the audience (young people) in a way that goes beyond their commercial profitability.

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