

Trans Identity in Italian TV Shows: A *Prisma* Study Case

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Abstract: In response to the gradual appearance of streaming services and the consequent extension of the consumer base, LGBTQIA+ visibility has dramatically increased. In order to extend the legitimacy of the trans person's identity, this paper intends to examine representations of trans people in mainstream Italian media. To this end, a first selection of Italian television shows is discussed to contextualize the Italian panorama. Subsequently, a specific case study will be addressed by analyzing the Amazon Original television show *Prisma*. The TV program is then discussed using Critical Discourse Analysis regarding its intersectionality and (apparent)inclusiveness. This study concludes that mainstream media coverage of trans* individuals is limited and reductive. These conclusions seem to be correct because, despite the more recent studies defining contemporary trans representation as its "golden age", the representation is primarily focused on trans women, excluding other identities. Therefore, such representation proposes a stereotypical perspective and risks erasing a unique individual perspective of transness by creating a tokenized representation.

Keywords: Inclusion, Representation, Stereotypes, Trans, TV Shows,

1. Terminological Premise

Before starting the analysis and the discussion, an explanation is needed to clarify why the term "identity" has been chosen instead of the plural "identities" in this work title. As will be shown throughout the paper, Italian television tends to show a reductive and limited representation of the self, whether it is a person being part of the LGBTQIA+ community or not, creating and perpetuating a vision of a singular possibility of identification. Therefore, the use of identity – in its singular form – was used to stress how Italian transness depiction has been limited and stereotyped. Moreover, it is crucial to mention that the term trans* - taken from Jack Halberstam (2018) - is used to be as inclusive as possible, rejecting the traditional use of transgender or transsexual, considering that being trans* does not necessarily mean to undergo hormonal therapy, surgeries or believe in gender binarism. However, these obsolete words in the paper will underline the times when gender binarism or specific stereotypes were involved. Finally, *Prisma's* main character, Andrea, is hardly ever referred to as a woman in the show since the events are before an eventual coming out. However, in this paper, the pronouns they/them will be used since Andrea did not specify which pronouns to use during the first season, which is the object of this analysis.

2. Introduction

Thanks to the gradual and exponential growth of streaming services such as Netflix, Prime Video, and Disney+, different identities have been shown, and they have started to appear more systematically in films and television shows. Local "traditional" television broadcasting had to adapt to this shift of consumption based on the on-demand fruition of content. In the Italian context, both Rai and Mediaset – the two largest and most important television networks in Italy – have satisfied this need with mobile applications and websites offering a similar experience to Netflix and others. In response to this consumption change and the consequent extension of the consumer base, the LGBTQIA+ community representation has increased rapidly, allowing identities not yet depicted in cinema or television to be part of the contemporary discourse. It is, however, important to underline that in this paper, the focus is only on mainstream content since many studies have shown that media and its exposure impact people's perception of reality (Bednarek, 2018; Turkle, 1995).

Based on the "Average number of unique users of selected subscription video-on-demand services [SVOD] in Italy" by Statista (2024a), updated until June 2023, around 22 million people have at least one subscription. The latter data is essential to remember; since 2006 – according to Statista – the number of television viewers has decreased from 53.4 million to roughly 50 million (Statista, 2024b). That means that in 2023, around one-fourth of the Italian population has at least one SVOD and watch television. Moreover, the newer generations (18–19 years old people) have lost interest in national broadcasting services, with less than one million viewers (Statista, 2024c). Therefore, it is clear that young adults are more interested in SVOD, and consequently, much content is specifically designed for them. Lastly, it is crucial to underline the fact that in 2023, according to the latest data available, in the Italian market, Netflix was the first SVOD for unique viewers with roughly 9 million users, and Amazon Prime Video was the second one with around 6.5 million unique users (Statista, 2024a). Considering the popularity of Netflix, it is interesting to analyze other original productions that might be funded to increase the

popularity of the SVOD involved. *Prisma*, as well as many different television shows that have come out since the SVOD started to arise, is a teen drama focusing on the story of some students in a public school in Latina, in the province of Rome. Because of the different topics proposed by the show - among others, it is possible to find identity, disability, and catfish - it became extremely popular among Italians, and not only thanks to the English dubbing and the subtitles in various languages, making the show accessible to young adults across different linguistic backgrounds. The show and its transness representation must be thoroughly analyzed and discussed.

3. Brief History of Trans Representation

In the context of this paper, it is fundamental to discuss the state of contemporary Italian trans* representation and provide a brief history of the past global depiction of the trans* community. Despite the LGBTQIA+ community's visibility in mainstream television and SVOD, before 2022, no Italian original television show production has ever had a trans* person not only as a main character but also as a character itself. *Prisma* is the first ever Italian television show with a trans* character, and it happens to be one of the main characters in the show. Before a few years ago, trans* people have been depicted in SVOD multiple times, but never in an original local production. Moreover, as a result of the widespread practice of dubbing television shows in Italy, trans* people have faced a series of non-physical forms of violence due to this phenomenon.

An example may be dubbing for trans men, which women have done - and by men for trans women - emphasizing the feminine voice and confusing many viewers because of the discrepancy between the voice and the physical aspect (Zottola, 20218). This inadequate representation has had a very negative impact on the trans* community, aggravating the situation of marginalization and stigmatization that trans* people have been dealing with for years. Moreover, the lack of effort in the Italian dubbing industry shows the little interest in the trans* community from the Italian television industry in general.

Despite the Italian original productions being inferior in terms of number in the context of SVOD, the trans* representation in mainstream SVOD in the last decade has increased and got better year by year. As Castro pointed out in his article, the trans* representations have gone through different phases, which he calls "psychopath", "freak show", and finally "normal people" (Bermúdez de Castro, 2017). Many of the TV shows cited by Bermúdez de Castro have been dubbed and distributed in Italy as well, perpetuating the "psychopath" and "freak show" phases. To make some examples, the author of the mentioned article mentions *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* (CBS, 1962 – 1965) for the "psychopath" phase and the worldwide famous TV Show *Friends* (NBC, 1994 – 2004) for the "freak show" phase. However, Bermúdez de Castro - in the conclusion of his article - defines the contemporary representation of trans* people as a "golden age", – meaning the increased awareness in terms of trans* representation. However, it is arguable that, despite the increasing visibility and the progressive improvements in representation, there is still much to discuss and challenge regarding representation. It is worth mentioning that the visibility has increased and improved for transgender and transsexual women, excluding other identities such as trans* people who do not want to subject themselves to hormone therapy or surgeries, trans* men, non-binary people and so on. In the media, numerous studies have emphasized the need for more significant efforts to achieve more inclusive representation (Zottola, 2022). However, as a term, inclusiveness presumes the need for someone or something to be generally excluded. Moreover, by "including" someone, inevitably, someone else will be excluded, creating a situation in which minorities are less and less represented in favor of a more generalized representation of a tokenized perception of the self. An example of this exclusive inclusion might be the Amazon Original Show *Transparent* (2014 – 2016), in which "transgender issues have been put realistically on the front line with the accuracy and integrity that they deserve" (Bermúdez de Castro, 2017). However, like many other TV shows, including *Prisma*, *Transparent* represents a trans woman. As the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) 2023 – 2024 report points out, of the twenty-four trans* characters in TV Shows, only five are trans* men and eight are non-binary people. These numbers leave the spectators with the majority (eleven characters) of characters being trans* women – often transsexual and stereotyped. The following section delves into an analysis of the TV Show *Prisma* (2022 –) to explore the contemporary landscape and representation of transness within the Italian media industry.

4. *Prisma* Study Case

This paper will discuss only *Prisma*'s first season, considering the number of topics discussed in the first eight episodes. Each part of the show is named after a color, which has nothing in common with the episode's content. However, the totality of the episodes and the colors are placed in the prism order, hinting at what the series is about. It is popular opinion now - with the advent of the "intersectionality" concept, first discussed by Kimberlé

Crenshaw in 1991 - that every experience can be seen as a spectrum: no one is experiencing things in the same way, and there are many factors, such as social, or economic background, that can influence the way someone perceives the reality. Similarly, thanks to refraction, the prism is a medium for which a unique white light can show all the color spectrum, which otherwise would not show its colors. The episodes, therefore, are named after the color that the prism shows, converging all back to the white - name the last episodes, which tries to resolve all the ongoing main events. Therefore, the TV show is attempting to be a prism for a unique point of view (the white light), showing the different issues young adults might experience in high school nowadays.

The series is about two identical twins - Marco and Andrea - played by the same actor (Mattia Carrano). Marco is a sensible and fragile character with self-esteem problems and insecurities that are openly shown. On the other hand, Andrea seems to be precisely the opposite: charismatic and well-inserted in a group of friends, who, however, experiences a series of doubts about their gender identity and sexuality. The most important characters are Daniele (Lorenzo Zurzolo), Nina (Caterina Forza), and Carola (Chiara Bordi), who are the ones who interact the most with Andrea. Those characters are all connected, starting from the fact that they all attend the same high school in Latina (Rome).

Young adults use social media to express themselves. Instagram is the second most used social media in Italy, with 69% of the total social media users being in this social and 24% being Generation Z. The target audience is ideally placed to directly talk to young adults with the language and media they use daily. Therefore, the show opens with a recurrent topic when discussing social media: catfish. Andrea has a second account in which they are "pretending" to be a woman and is texting with Daniele, who does not know who is texting, although he is determined to find it out. In this way, the TV show is introducing to the viewers the main focus of this paper, which is transgenderism and gender identity representation. Considering that the first insight the spectator has for a trans person is a "scammer" who is faking to be someone else on social media, it is certainly not an excellent start for a better representation because it might be seen, again, as a "psychopath" phase. The first impression the viewers have is, in fact, of a person who is trying to cheat a guy and - although this behavior might be seen as familiar nowadays with the advent of social media between young adults - it does not reflect a "normal people" phase described by Bermúdez de Castro.

Another topic related to media and the use of it by young adults is Carola, a young woman with a disability, being a victim of revenge porn. Revenge porn is part of a broader phenomenon known as non-consensual pornography (NCP), encompassing any digital sharing and dissemination of sexual images without the consent of the individual depicted. The term revenge porn is reductive, as the intent behind such acts is often not merely retaliation or personal resentment (EURISPES, 2020). As highlighted by a 2019 study from the EURISPES Cybersecurity Observatory, most acts of NCP are perpetrated by individuals who have or have had, an emotional relationship with the victim. Frequently, these perpetrators, unwilling to accept the end of a relationship, seek to harm the dignity of their former partner, compromising or destroying their reputation. According to data collected by EURISPES, at least one in ten Italians (12.7%) has indirect knowledge of someone who has fallen victim to revenge porn. Awareness of the phenomenon is exceptionally high among young people under 25 (21%) and women (15.4% compared to 9.9% of men). In northeastern Italy, nearly one in four citizens (23.1%) reports knowing individuals whose intimate images or videos were shared online or via mobile devices. Victims also experienced blackmail in nearly half of the cases (47.9%). Additionally, a quarter of respondents were unsure whether blackmail had occurred.

In the TV show, Carola is not experiencing what, based on the statistics, might be considered a typical situation since she is not being blackmailed. However, people who know her see the video in which she has sex with her ex-boyfriend (Daniele) and is cheating on her current one (Marco). This situation not only brings up emotional issues because of the revenge porn itself but also causes a series of other issues with her friends and Marco because of the cheating.

Despite the topic being particularly heavy and with a contemporary resonance, it is worth mentioning that, in terms of visibility and representation, *Prisma* does not fail - in this issue - to be reductive and superficial. The fact that Carola is the victim shows that disability is not the only characteristic of a person: they may be victims of not only bullying because of the everyday difficulties they might experience but also other issues.

Where the TV show seems to fail, however, is in taking a step forward, compared to other mainstream productions, on trans* representation. It is undoubtedly essential to note that *Prisma* is the first Italian show in which one of the main characters is a transgender person, and it does not only focus on the fact that Andrea is trans. In other mainstream television shows or movies, it is common to focus only on this aspect of the character, lacking intersectionality and representing a dystrophic reality. To make a significant example, *Orange Is The New*

Black (OITNB) became one of the most famous TV shows ever made because of its variety of ethnicity and sexual orientation. It also became a fundamental example of trans* representation since one of its main characters is Sophia Burset (interpreted by Laverne Cox, a transgender woman herself) and showed a more “human” version of trans* people. However, one of the most criticized characteristics of Sophia’s character is the fact that she is a criminal, perpetuating the stereotype of trans* people not being able to live their lives as society expects from cisgender people. Sophia, then, reflects the perfect example of a tokenized representation. She is a transsexual woman who takes hormones and has undergone all gender-affirming surgeries to fit into the “woman” cubbyhole heteronormative society imposes. Finally, Sophia - as well as other trans* characters in television shows - are presented to the spectator with the only characteristic of being trans*, excluding any intersectionality. Therefore, Prisma does not fail to represent Andrea only as trans*, showing different aspects of themselves such as friendships, relationships, and family, and does not exclude psychological issues which might arise during adolescence - not necessarily related to gender identity.

However, Prisma is far from being able to be considered a “normal people” representation: unfortunately, the representation is still quite reductive and idyllic when considering gender identity issues. One of the biggest criticisms might be made of Andrea’s coming out with the father. The almost immediate acceptance and understanding of the situation is quite understandably unrealistic. Considering that around 40% of the population hides being part of the LGBTQI+ Community in school because of discrimination and general intolerance among peers, it is no surprise that Andrea has come out - before talking to the father - with one person only, hiding and rejecting their identity to others. However, by trying to be inclusive, Prisma fails to represent the gender identity spectrum, avoiding questioning gender binarism and therefore taking it for granted, although Andrea does not (yet) express the need to change their name or use female pronouns.

5. Conclusions

Generally speaking, Prisma might be considered a milestone in Italian original productions despite all the criticisms that might be brought about. However, a representation which does not differentiate from other mainstream productions still cannot be considered an acceptable perspective of trans* people, not only because of the gender binarism which is still perpetuated and promoted but also because of the methods used to narrate Andrea’s questions and difficulties. Such representations propose a stereotypical perspective and risk annihilating the individual by creating a tokenized representation instead of proposing different ways of perceiving identities. This depiction of transness makes it far from a “golden age” of representation (Bermúdez de Castro, 2017). Prisma had the occasion to express gender identity more fluidly and, therefore, could have been an excellent occasion for Italian original productions to rise in terms of inclusion and visibility. Quite the opposite, Prisma confirms itself as a mainstream production - by narrating the story of a trans* woman - and does not add anything new to the Italian panorama, which still stereotypes trans* identity to only one possibility. Finally, because of the current Italian political situation and the rise of even more intolerance, it is pretty challenging to see a different and more inclusive trans* representation any time soon, even though it is not only needed but also necessary for a more inclusive society, since the influence of media on people’s perspective of the world.

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