

## The teen film comes of age: towards a more inclusive approach in recent TV series

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### **1. Introduction**

*"We need to encourage the production of movies that make teens feel good about themselves and their abilities in a progressive way. Furthermore, we need to encourage teens to actually see those movies and discuss them ... We need to be sensitive to the concerns of youth and work toward better conditions under which they are represented in the media, in which they understand the media, and through which they produce media themselves." (Note 1)*

This was the hope expressed, at the start of the 21st century, by Timothy Shary, one of the leading experts in teen movies. This hope was linked to an analysis of the history of this film genre, which, to a large extent, for the whole of last century, as well as at the beginning of the new one, had seen adolescents being exploited by cinema as a source of attractive content, mostly in terms of sex and/or violence. This "teenploitation" (like similar ways of exploiting the image of other groups) has accompanied teen films from the beginning and all through their history - with teens placed in the rather depressing position of being both the exploited group on the screen and the audience enjoying the exploitation itself. Regretfully, movies depicting teens as more superficial and stupid than they really are have enjoyed, especially in the past, the appreciation of those same teens. (Note 1).

What the new century has brought (and continues to bring) to the depiction of youth in the movies is the ever-increasing variety of ways in which their images are constructed by filmmakers and then offered to moviegoers - including, of course, teenagers, who are at the same time the objects of representation and the subjects as the (main) audience of teen films. As Josh Schwartz, co-creator of the Gossip Girl series, happened to say:

*"The number of issues that you can now talk about really honestly has evolved greatly and I think that's to the benefit of everybody because it means that there's a lot more of the audience who can see themselves in these shows now because there's more representation at the front and center of the screen." (Note 2).*

What is remarkable is a move away from stereotypes, particularly the good/bad dichotomy and the masculine viewpoint as the only source of signification, and a more open, frank and serious consideration and representation of teenagers. Negative elements associated with adolescence (like juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity) have often given

way to more complex, if contradictory, views of the concerns and plights that coming-of-age entails. And, as is mostly shown in the treatment of LGBTQIA+ issues, a tolerance for differences, an acceptance of conflicts and the capacity to deal with them, and a renewed sense of community and responsibility have found their place in the stories told by contemporary teen cinema (Note 3).

## ***2. Towards a more inclusive approach***

### *2.1. The series "format"*

Despite these positive features, teen movies still have a long way to go in producing images of youths that are closer to the reality of adolescence in specific contexts, like the North American one: girls are less frequently portrayed than boys; African-Americans, Latin-Americans and other minorities do not appear as much as the predominant white, middle-class characters (including the ideologies behind them); crucial issues in teenagers' life, like pregnancy, abortion, parenting, but also drug abuse, depression and physical and mental disabilities, do not receive the attention they deserve; and the social and political commitment of younger generations rarely finds expression on the screen.

It is interesting to note that a clear tendency towards greater inclusiveness (in the widest possible sense of this term) is emerging, in particular in some recent television series (Note 4) - a film format that has enjoyed an ever growing diffusion and popularity in the first decades of the new century. TV series, distributed but also increasingly produced, by streaming platforms such as Amazon Prime Video, Netflix or Disney+, have become a promising vehicle for the introduction of complex topics and for their discussion in ways and times that, although always with a very attentive eye to the needs of the reference audience, allow a variety of approaches and an in-depth analysis that can sometimes be missing in the "classic" film format.

*"[In] films ... the development of relationships happens in one sitting instead of them happening over several episodes [of a television series]. [T]he "potent messages could boost the impact on attentive viewers" in a film rather than a television show. However, I believe a television show has more similarities to the development of a budding romance in real life time: it takes some time to happen, and viewers can see the change of characters and their feelings toward their counterpart. Most relationships happen slowly, over time."* (Note 5)

### *2.2. The SKAM series*

The progenitor of this trend can be considered the Norwegian series *Skam*, which, launched in 2015 and continued with four seasons until 2017, immediately obtained a sensational success, first in the neighbouring Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland), where it immediately became the subject of great attention in social media. Set in one of the oldest and most famous high schools in Oslo, the Hartwig Nissen School, the series was immediately characterized by the integration of different media: a scene, a conversation or a post were made available on the website of the public television network NRK, in real time, every day, and then recombined every Friday in a full episode. The characters also had profiles on social media, where spectators could follow their activities and also interact with them during the airing of each episode. This was a highly original format, almost a reality show (but with fictitious characters), based on the sharing and participation of the audience,

which thus became an integral part of the stories: a format that clearly met the demands of the specific teenage reference audience.

Another important feature of the series was the focus, in each season, on a particular character, to whom a certain topic was connected. Topics ranged from interpersonal relationships to social and gender identities, from homosexuality to mental health problems (like food disorders), from sexual violence to ethnic and religious themes: a diversity of problems of great interest to the reference audience, which was continually stimulated by the variety of proposals and by their presentation in very direct, open, tolerant ways. The series, which was breaking new ground if compared with the usual rigid television programmes, in addition to a huge audience success, won numerous awards in Norway, in all the production sectors (from script to direction, from narrative formats to the cast). Another proof of the popularity of the series was that, since it could not be subtitled in English for copyright reasons, its fans immediately made their own translations available through social media: this was only the first step towards an unprecedented expansion of the stories and characters in all the forms that are easily available on the net today. In December 2017, the Tumblr platform confirmed that SKAM was the most popular series, even when compared to highly successful American television series such as *The Walking Dead*, *Game of Thrones* and *Stranger Things*.

SKAM's international success soon led to several adaptations in a variety of countries, including the United States, France, Italy, Spain, Holland, Belgium, Germany and Croatia (Video 1a - A selection of episodes from the various adaptations is available on YouTube)). And, as happens in these cases, a series of books also originated from the television series, which were also translated and published in various languages, as well as theatrical performances and even conventions with the participation of some members of the cast.



Video 1a: SKAM France Saison 2 Episode 1 (with English subtitles)

A further demonstration of the innovative scope of SKAM, in addition to the series adapted in various countries, is the proliferation of new series in various ways inspired by the original one. In Italy, the *Prisma* series, streaming on Amazon Prime Video for two seasons between 2022 and 2024, was an instant success. Produced by the same company that had edited the Italian edition of SKAM, the series follows the romantic relationships of two twin teenagers (played by the same actor) and their friends and is set in the town of Latina and surroundings. *Prisma* also follows the evolution and the difficult coming-of-age of its characters, struggling with the problems treated in SKAM, including bullying, drug dealing and self-harm (Video 1b). Given the great success, the series has been translated into various languages and made available in many countries beyond Italy.



Video 1b: Prisma Season 2 trailer (with English subtitles)

### **3. *Beyond the queer issue***

For a long time, stories with teenagers dealing with the problems of defining their own sexual orientation have focused on the coming out experience, i.e. the usually difficult if not dramatic situation in which a girl or boy openly declares her/his homosexuality. However, in the TV series just mentioned the "coming out" process is now often seen as part of a more general "coming-of-age" process, when a person goes through a period during which she/he has to face her/his own identity problems, including of course gender identification and sexual orientation. This process can make for quite interesting and intriguing stories, as sex and gender identity is a controversial but also potentially rich and productive issue to be explored in a movie or a series. The factors involved in and the implications of such an issue imply psychological as well social and cultural elements, and this is increasingly taken into consideration in more recent films, often coming from different national cinematographies and different cultural traditions - witness to a growing concern with issues of tolerance, acceptance and even appreciation of alternative lifestyles.

While many queer-themed movies of the last century still tended to portray problems and difficulties in sexual identification and orientation within dramatic contexts, with teenagers often having to pay a price for their diversity, more recent changes in cultural attitudes and expectations have implied a wider range of contexts, both social and cultural, and a correspondingly wider range of ways and means to tell a queer story and to bring it to a positive conclusion. This fact is reflected in the "film genres" that tell such stories, from comedies to drama, often merging the two ("dramedies"), which does not prevent the story itself to be treated in serious, honest terms, with queer characters now at last being portrayed as "ordinary" people even though they might face not-so-ordinary circumstances (Note 6).

Furthermore, as we have seen, the queer (or LGBTQIA+) theme is losing its character of "exceptionality", becoming part of a wider interest in *inclusiveness* in all its forms, thus responding to the problems which afflict (but it would be better to say "interest") a teenage audience. Such themes are not confined to the sexual sphere but include bullying, the use of drugs, problems of ethnic and cultural integration, issues of mental health and handicap. Teen movies, i.e. films for/on teenagers, are perhaps "coming of age" themselves - which constitutes a note of great novelty in the panorama of film genres. We will explore these new trends by analyzing in detail and in depth a very successful recent television series, *Love, Victor*.

### **4. *From a book to a film: Love, Simon***

At the origin of *Love, Victor*, there is a novel, published in 2015, by American writer Becky Albertalli (*Simon Vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda*), who specializes in the fiction for teenagers (also called *Young Adult*). The novel, focused in particular on the themes of coming out and bullying, was adapted for the screen three years later in a film, *Love, Simon*, directed by Greg Berlanti, which immediately proved to be a great commercial success.

The film clearly did away with the long-standing and widespread representation of queer characters in difficult and highly dramatized contexts. Instead, *Love, Simon* is part of a new tradition of teen films, now portraying young people who are dealing with their sexual identity in honest, empathic ways. The film clearly shows the progress of cultural attitudes in mainstream cinema in the new century, and for the Internet generation: complex and potentially dramatic issues are now addressed in a light and optimistic tone, which can

alternate moments of humour, more dramatic twists, sentimental touches, thus prompting a high degree of empathy from the audience - totally avoiding the tragic situations that have been the staple of films on homosexuality for a long time.

The beginning of the film makes this tone very clear (watch the trailer in Video 2), with Simon (Nick Robinson), a high school student, describing his life, his family, his friends as very ordinary ("I'm just like you"): he leads quite a normal life and has a caring family and good friends - yet he has a secret: he is gay. Thus the issue of sexual identity is introduced right from the start as "one of the facts of life", a fact that is worth dealing with not for its exceptional value but simply as an interesting element which can enhance the appeal of a character and the development of the plot.

Simon has started a romantic web chat with an unknown student, and when this secret risks being exposed, things start getting a bit more difficult for him. However, although families are not, by definition, the easiest places where to discuss such issues (and adults turn out to be unaware of their children's real troubles), he manages, first, to reveal his gayness to his parents, with no dramatic consequences, and then to receive his mother's unconditioned acceptance and sympathy ("Now you can be yourself" - watch Video 3). In addition, although his "coming out" to his friends is not altogether without problems (especially since Simon used to have a "girlfriend" who really loved him), in the end he can count on his friends' caring and empathic community: they will actually arrange for him to meet his secret lover, who will come as a surprise for both Simon and the audience (watch the ending scene in Video 4).

The treatment of homosexuality is thus introduced in such an "ordinary" way that it can even be the subject of irony and "reversals": the film, for example, raises the question of why "coming out" is reserved for gays and not for heterosexuals, and we have a funny series of scenes (watch Video 5a) in which teenagers of both sexes "come out" to their parents as "heterosexuals", causing them a shock ...

The first gay feature film from a major Hollywood studio, *Love, Simon* received critical appraisal for its "big heart, diverse and talented cast, and revolutionary normalcy", describing it as "tender, sweet, and affecting" and a "hugely charming crowd-pleaser" that is "funny, warm-hearted and life-affirming" (Note 7).



Video 2: *Love, Simon* trailer



Video 3



Video 4: Ending scene



Video 5a

### 5. *From the film to the series: Love, Victor*

The great success enjoyed by *Love, Simon* convinced the producers to create a television series (Note 8), clearly identifiable as a spin-off, i.e. as a work derived from an original primary work, whose setting is maintained, while at the same time introducing different characters. In this specific case, the TV series, made available in streaming between 2020 and 2022, has kept very close ties with the original film: we are still at the Creekwood High School, the high school where *Love, Simon* was set, but Simon, who has now finished his course of studies and lives in New York, acts as a "consultant" at a distance (through a chat) to Victor, a seventeen-year-old struggling, in turn, as Simon had been, with the definition of his sexual orientation (watch the trailer in Video 5b). The series therefore continues to deal with the topics of the original film, but introduces a more diversified variety of themes: although Victor is the main focus of the series, large space is left to several other parallel stories, involving not only Victor's classmates, but also his parents and those of his friends - adults in turn struggling with various types of problems. As a matter of fact, some episodes are devoted to these parallel stories, which are all closely connected to each other.



Video 5b: *Love, Victor* trailer

It is interesting to note that the series, initially scheduled to be distributed on the Disney+ platform, was judged too "adult" (in particular for the homosexual theme) for the traditional reference audience of the platform itself, and it was therefore moved to the Hulu platform (belonging to the same Disney group), which could count on a slightly wider and heterogeneous audience (Note 9).

#### 5.1 *Critical issues in the representation of teenagers*

Despite the change of direction in teen movies mentioned in the previous paragraphs, several critical issues in the ways in which teenagers are represented persist in these films, as well as in the television series of the same kind, which is worth underlining before proceeding with a more detailed analysis.

Each film or series conveys, more directly through the dialogues and "narrative voices", and more indirectly (but no less incisive) through the characters, contexts and narrated events, a wide range of messages regarding the ways in which teenagers are represented: as teens constitute the main reference audience, it is (often wrongly) assumed that they find themselves clearly represented. This does not always happen, since films and series are subject to complex and sometimes contradictory decisions, which for example aim to ensure the widest possible circulation of these products, making them suitable for other audiences, to be very cautious in dealing with sometimes controversial topics, and to introduce the right doses of drama, humour, suspense in order to make the events attractive and, especially in the

case of series, capable of making audiences "stay tuned" for a medium/long time span (unlike a single film, which is "consumed" in a single session, rarely lasting over two hours). In other words, the commercial reasons behind production choices affect, sometimes quite heavily, the contents and forms of the narrative, and therefore also the ways in which adolescents are actually portrayed.

The *direct verbal* messages contained in a screenplay (texts of dialogues and "narrative voices") can also be very different from those that are conveyed through all the *video* components (characters and cast, socio-cultural contexts, places, costumes, characters' actions and their relationships, events, and so on). This is very evident in the *Love, Victor* series, in which the verbal messages (which we will analyze below), focusing on inclusiveness, tolerance, acceptance (the new positive values of these cultural products), coexist with representations of teenagers which are still far from the actual reality of this age group, and which teenagers themselves can find it hard to identify themselves with.

### 5.1.1. Characters and cast

In this series, as in most teen films, the actresses and actors are generally much older than the characters they play. In *Love, Victor* almost all teen characters attend the third and penultimate year (Eleventh Grade) of the American high school, i.e. they are between 16 and 17 years old. This was their actual age at the time of filming (2020):

Victor (Michael Cimino) 21; Mia (Rachel Hilson) 25; Felix (Anthony Turpel) 20; Lake (Bebe Wood) 19; Andrew (Mason Gooding) 24; Benji (George Sear) 23; Rahim (Anthony Keyvan) 20; Pilar (Victor's younger sister, about 15)(Isabella Ferreira) 18.

This difference is not only clearly visible in the physical aspect of these actors/actresses, who sometimes look, even at first sight, absolutely beyond their own teenage years, but has important consequences for the image that is conveyed of teenagers themselves: these are young women and men rather than girls/boys - physically, but above all, despite their acting efforts, displaying attitudes, gestures, face expressions, etc., which inevitably "betray" their older age and experience and their psychological and emotional attributes, making their identification with younger characters (very) difficult.

In addition, these actresses/actors are all beautiful and handsome: there are never people with a "normal", "common" appearance, and certainly not people with some imperfection or physical irregularity - thus embodying an age group which is clearly non-existent in these terms.

The casting choices that favour the employment of more "adult" actors can be understood, at least in part, with the need to protect minors from excessive or improper working hours, with the convenience of resorting to professional actors with a longer acting experience and of greater emotional maturity, and with bodily changes (for example, in voices) that would prevent teenage actors/actresses from playing the same role for several years: however, one could be object that these changes, and even the relative insecurity of teenage players, could reinforce authenticity in the representations (Note 10).

Finally, some LGBTQAI+ communities have contested the interpretation of homosexual characters by actors/actresses always strictly heterosexual. The question could be debated for a long time: if on the one hand the life experience of a gay person could impact on her/his

acting, this interpretation is always mediated by the professional ability to impersonate characters of all kinds. One could say that these actors/actresses (who, as we have seen, are actually much older than their characters) do not "look" at all gay - but this statement is very dangerous, as it seems to cast gay people into "types" verging on stereotypes. If, for example, none of the various gay characters in the series exhibits "effeminate" behaviors, must we conclude that these characters are not credible? We would be at risk of "pigeonholing" homosexual people into dangerous stereotypes. From a different point of view, the series places heterosexual and homosexual people within the same context, and for once we must recognize that sexual orientation does not constitute a reason for differentiation, or even worse of marginalization. Problems in a couple are portrayed as the same, regardless of sex and sexual orientation - and this I think can be considered a point in favour of the *inclusiveness* we have mentioned.

### 5.1.2. *The sociocultural contexts*

The *social classes* represented are very limited: most of these teenagers seem to belong to medium- (and in some cases high-) middle class families and therefore financially favoured. This is clear, in particular, when looking at the domestic environments, often elegant and refined, at the characters' clothes, at the cars they drive (sometimes of their exclusive property - in the US it is possible to get a driving license their license, depending on the states, even at 16), and, in general, at their standard of living. This is also linked to the parents' jobs: Mia's father is a university professor, and about to become dean of a Californian university (despite being African American); Lake's mother is a successful television anchor; and it is clear that other parents also have rather high-level jobs. The only exceptions are Victor's family, who could be defined as lower-middle class (Victor's father is an electrician and his mother is a housewife and an occasional piano teacher - even if at the end of the series we are told that they intend to create their own company .. .), and, above all, Felix's family, living in a small apartment with a depressed mother, and whose situation also gives rise to financial difficulties.

### 5.1.3. *School and adults*

Many of the events take place at the Creekwood High School in Atlanta (State of Georgia), the same where *Love, Simon* (the film) was set. The series does not differ from the classic iconography which has for decades been associated, in teen movies, with American high schools: the characteristic yellow school buses, the campus where students have lunch or take a break, the gym where the basketball team trains, and, above all, the long corridors with the individual lockers, which are the set of many meetings. The scenes in the classroom are scarcely present, as if the most classic environment of school life did not represent a significant place for these students: on the contrary, parties and dances are very frequent, sometimes organized by the same school, but often also at home. The school is mainly just a background, providing opportunities for social gatherings, but does not affect in any way the choices and concerns of these young people, whose studies we know practically nothing about. It is rare to see these teenagers study or engaged in school lessons or homework. We generally see them around the city, in bars and restaurants, or shopping, and, of course, playing with video games, surfing the internet, chatting with friends, and so on.

*"As someone who watched teen television before even becoming a teenager myself, these shows set me up for a rude awakening in high school. I thought I would spend every afternoon at the mall or at some cafe that was mysteriously the only restaurant in town. And I*



*really thought that I might have a boyfriend the day I stepped onto campus my freshman year. Instead, life continued as usual, only the work was harder, and there was more of it. Of course, these shows don't purport to be anything more than entertainment, but there is clearly a gap between the representation of adolescence "as seen on TV" and the reality of the teenage experience ... At the end of the day, we don't live out our teenage years on a stage in which our primary focus is to be beautiful and date our peers. We just have a lot more going on, and life isn't that straightforward." (Note 11)*

At the same time, even teachers do not play important roles, indeed they are often funny characters, a little "empty-headed", made fun of by the students, who certainly do not see them as reference figures: the deputy principal introducing herself "as a good friend", the psychology teacher teaching sex education as a game, the coach all concentrated on obtaining the much coveted victory for the school team ... even the opportunity, which is a classical trope in teen films, of the Saturday detention, i.e. the punishment inflicted on some students, forced to remain at school for the whole Saturday, carrying out useful jobs (Note 12), turns into a day of tricks and gossip, which the teacher cannot control ... Ultimately, the interests and concerns of these girls and boys are elsewhere, in many other contexts which are far more significant for them than the school.

As for the families' socio-cultural features, it is interesting to note that many of the families represented are single-parent ones, due to separation or divorce: this is the case, for example, of Mia's family, as well as of Lake's (Mia's best friend and Felix's temporary girlfriend) and of Felix's. The family that apparently seems more stable (as well as "traditional"), predictably, Victor's: but also in this case it is a fragile structure, as right from the start we get to know that the mother had betrayed her husband, who, following this event, had lost his job - causing the whole family to move from Texas to Atlanta. And a part, albeit secondary, of the narrated events also includes the difficult relationships between Victor's parents, who at a certain point will decide to separate. Perhaps from this point of view the series is closer to reality.

All in all, the families, who certainly do not belong to a traditional, "classical" model, do not offer images of adults as possible reference models, and indeed they often seem to be sources of conflict: if the focus is mainly on Victor's family, no less problematic is the relationship between Mia and her father, who has always given priority to his career and is very uncertain about accepting his new role as dean (which would force his daughter to move to California with him); he starts a new relationship with a woman, who soon gets pregnant - with serious repercussions on Mia. Lake also has an absent and at the same time intrusive mother, very much concerned with appearances and the management of her social role, which clearly has an impact on her daughter. And Felix's mother proves to suffer from depression and will complicate the life of her son. Benji (Victor's first "love")'s parents, too, in the few scenes in which they appear, are described as rather superficial. Thus these teenagers often experience difficult family relationships, and adults, like teachers, certainly do not show authenticity and psychological solidity. In comparison, Victor's family lives its conflicts in a more open and sincere way.

However, these adults, when faced with the coming out of their children, overall react less violently than one might expect: apart from Victor's mother, who, as we said, enters a deep personal crisis, the other parents seem to accept the thing without too much difficulty - which might seem, again, a source of unrealism. It should also be mentioned, that, as part of the

treatment of this topic, we are repeatedly shown a self-help or mutual support group for parents of gay children.

#### *5.1.4. Teenagers' resiliency*

Compared with these adult figures, who seem to experience as many problems as their children, and who are often a source of conflict rather than support, these kids often seem to exhibit a degree of wisdom, and a capacity for endurance and even the ability to manage different sorts of conflicts. Victor, in particular, proves to be sensitive to interpersonal relationships: he manages to play a role of mediator in his parents' crisis, has listening and understanding skills towards his friends, is always ready to give advice and suggestions (sometimes even involuntarily causing further problems ...). Felix, struggling with a strongly depressed mother and with financial problems, also shows a great supportive and positive reaction. In short, the series suggests a strong component of *empowerment* in these kids, i.e. their ability to be resilient, adapt and react productively to situations - which sometimes may seem rather unrealistic but which, from another point of view, points to new and original ways of conveying images of teenagers rather different from the ones that media often offer, with teens full of problems and lacking in solutions.

Another ambiguous feature is the sense of community and solidarity that unites these teenagers. Faced with the absence of adult reference figures, they seem to find in their peers support, acceptance, understanding and often a way to search for and find a solution to their problems: they look and sound wise, resilient and capable of solidarity, sometimes well beyond the critical issues and weaknesses that are often associated with this complex period of life - if not always alone, but often with the help of their friends, they seem to be able to manage the critical issues of their sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy.

All this helps to place these characters at the centre of events: perhaps it could not be otherwise in a series for/about teenagers, but it is also true, above all, that this implies that the *point of view* which is used to present and evaluate events is indeed the same characters'. This centrality of teenagers from a narrative point of view, beyond the issue of realism or unrealism, undoubtedly constitutes an element of novelty and originality of the series.

#### *5.1.5. Gender roles and romantic and sexual relationships*

A very clear feature in the series is the disproportionate interest that these teenagers seem to have for romantic and sexual relationships. Indeed, their greatest daily concern seems to be to manage sentimental relationships, including the sexual component. Dates, meetings, messages, discussions, confessions between friends and gossip take up almost all of their time (at least, of the time displayed on the screen). Certainly sentimental and sexual relationships are one of the most deeply felt issues in adolescence, but this almost exclusive insistence and this sexual hyper-activism appear as stereotypes and completely unrealistic aspects. For the great majority of real teenagers, romantic and sexual relationships, and the efforts to manage them, are an important part, but still one of the many components of their life and experience.

*"In the way that pornography presents a warped perception of what sex is (to say the least), these scenes definitely plant the narrative to teenagers that "these characters my age are all doing it... why am I not doing it?" or, perhaps, "Why isn't it like that when I do it?" Older viewers have the maturity to accept how ridiculous the storylines are, but for teenagers, the*

*glamorous lifestyles and attractive cast members are enough to distract from logic.*" (Note 13)

Another aspect that we could take for granted, but which instead takes on a particular relevance, is the representation of sexual and gender roles, free from anachronisms and stereotypes. Apart from the stereotyped physical aspect of the characters, which we have already mentioned, the series does not present stereotypes related to gender issues: in particular, girls are not described as weak, insecure or dependent on boys - who are not represented according to a traditional model of "virility". Both sexes, for example, prove sensitive, willing to talk about and reflect on their problems, open to show their feelings, both in friendships and in sentimental relationships. The initiative in these relationships is taken in the same way by girls and boys, and in particular any image of hyper-masculinity that still afflicts many cultural products of this type is avoided. And when it comes to representing the typical problems that may arise in the dynamics of a couple, no difference is made between hetero- and homo-sexual couples.

Even the question of the "popularity index" or, at the opposite extreme, of the "marginalization index", despite being present, is not emphasized as in traditional teen films: for example, at the beginning it is immediately made clear that Mia is very popular (and at the same time considered as "difficult to contact" by the boys), but her popularity is not unduly exhibited and, above all, does not become a source of conflict, jealousy or tension in the school community.

#### *5.1.6. Ethnic, religious, social and cultural diversity*

Compared to common characters in teen movies of the last decades, centered mainly on white boys, *Love, Victor* exhibits a significant ethnic variety (with reference to the North American social setting): for example, Victor is from a Latin American family; Mia, Victor's first "crush", and her later boyfriend, Andrew, are African American, like many other characters; Rahim belongs to an Iranian family. These ethnic differences in themselves do not seem to count much from these young people's point of view - they easily entertain friendships and sentimental relationships. However, ethnic differences may involve religious differences, which instead constitute obstacles in relationships, with consequent family crises (skilfully exploited from a dramatic point of view): for example, Victor's parents are observant Catholics, and this has a substantial impact on the effect that Victor's coming out has on his family, in particular on his mother, who struggles to accept her son's homosexuality; and Rahim's strictly Muslim family has obviously even greater problems in this respect. All in all, however, a tendency to a greater inclusiveness from an ethnic and religious point of view is evident.

#### *5.2. Audiences' reactions*

Ultimately, what images of adolescence seem to be conveyed by series such as *Love, Victor*, and how can they be received by a teenage audience? Although teenagers are much more critically open than is sometimes believed, there is no doubt that it is a very sensitive age group and in a certain sense easily influenced by social media, which also include television series. The models offered, implicitly and explicitly, are certainly unattainable, as they suggest, for example, impossible if not exceptional beauty standards: how many young spectators can identify with these beautiful, handsome, wealthy characters, free from school tasks and perpetually in search of sentimental and sexual gratification? Since teenagers (and

not just teenagers!) are often led to compare themselves to the models proposed by social media, there is a danger that unrealistic expectations are created, far from the concreteness of the daily life of most people (for example, young people could worry about their physical appearance and their sexual performance); alternatively, teenagers as an audience may not identify at all - which would jeopardize, at least in part, the success of the series. Since series like this have been extremely successful, however, we are left with the important issue of how they are received by their audience, in particular by the teen audience, and what impact they may have on their attitudes, beliefs, values and, ultimately, behaviours (Note 14).

### *5.3. Characters in transition*

The series revolves around the problems and conflicts that shake these teenagers, all moving towards a path of personal, sentimental and sexual maturation, often difficult if not painful. Conflicts are one with sentimental relationships, with couples who form and part, often in the unsuccessful search of the ideal partner, but also with the friendships that intertwine and which constitute points of reference for the definition of self and of one's place in the world; finally conflicts resonate with relationships within the family. These conflicts can also take (melo)dramatic tones, but in general they tend to be brought to resolution in a simpler and straightforward way than what would happen in real life.

It is interesting to note how interpersonal relationships are often mediated by the forms of technological communication (blogs, chats, social media - even the school has an internal chat intended for students, called "Creekwood Secrets"), but not to the point to be replaced massively by physical relationships. As has been said, these kids often have opportunities for meeting: in addition to the school, the frequent parties that are organized and various opportunities in their spare time - although Victor establishes a fruitful relationship with Simon through messages (later, however, meeting him in person on a special trip to New York).

Beyond the critical issues in the representations of adolescents, which we cannot underestimate, the more strictly sexual problems are outlined with honesty, frankness and, above all, a relative serenity: we will examine how Victor manages this aspect, but in general the series does not back away in the face of the doubts and insecurities with which, in particular, the topic of the first sexual intercourse is addressed. And if the school and the family, that is, the adult world, are painted as unable to provide a minimal support in this direction, the topic is certainly not taboo for these teenagers, who speak openly and sometimes with an admirable serious (perhaps a bit unrealistic) approach.

However, an important step forward is made in this series in the representation of adolescents, now finally absolute protagonists of processes of transition, identification and personal and social maturation that they themselves, in most cases, are able to manage in a positive way, albeit through conflicting experiences. At the centre of this representation we find the figure of Victor and the management of his sexual orientation, described in detail, with precision and with a sincere and honest approach, respectful of his own feelings as well as others': an approach that sees homosexual relationships as a simple variant of the range of possible experiences, in which a high degree of inclusiveness seems to be a consolidated value - even if Victor's actions do not hide, and indeed explicitly deal with, the several cultural obstacles that still make a homosexual person's path of discovery particularly hard.

#### 5.4. Victor's transition

After discussing the messages that the series conveys *indirectly* (i.e. through the visual elements that outline the characters, the contexts and the events), we now start to explore Victor's transition, not just by taking into consideration the actual events, but also by analyzing the dialogues and exchanges, because in these *verbal* texts we can detect feelings, emotions and in particular the beliefs, attitudes and values that the series intends to convey *directly* to its reference audience.

##### 5.4.1. Victor's "first time" and his exploration of sexuality

The start of the series reflects an event that has become a classical trope in teen movies: the "New Kid in Town"), i.e., the focus on a character (generally speaking, the main character) who comes from another place and must therefore fit into a new community, especially in a new school. This narrative expedient is very productive, as it allows, on the one hand, to present the context and to introduce the most important characters, and on the other, to show the world of the film or the series with the eyes of the newcomer. But in one of the first scenes we are clearly shown what Victor's fundamental problem is, that is, its confusion about his sexual orientation. Victor himself starts writing a message to Simon, who, as we said, in the film *Love, Simon* had already experienced his own coming, and who now presents himself as Victor's privileged interlocutor-counsellor - which also allows the series to immediately underline the links with the previous film, to the advantage of an audience that, presumably, is already familiar with the previous events. So Victor writes his first message to Simon.

Dear Simon, you don't know me, but my family just moved to Atlanta, and today was my first day at Creekwood High, and I heard all about you. How you started messaging with another secretly gay kid at Creekwood. How you wound up making a crazy romantic declaration of love. And how you had your first big kiss on the Ferris wheel in front of the whole school. And I just want to say, screw you. Screw you for having the world's most perfect, accepting parents, the world's most supportive friends. Because for some of us, it's not that easy. I can't believe that 24 hours ago, I was actually looking forward to having a fresh start at Creekwood. That I thought I'd finally get the chance to be myself. Or at least ... figure out who that even is.

Simon is quick to send Victor his answer.

Dear Victor, glad you reached out. First of all, welcome to Creekwood. I know beginnings are rocky, but I really hope you end up loving it as much as I did. I'm sorry that you don't have anyone in your life that you can open up to. And you're right. I have no idea what it's like to be you. I can only tell you what I do know. For me, figuring out who I was and declaring it to the world was the scariest thing I ever had to do, even with parents who are so liberal they have special sneakers just for protesting. It was hard, but we found our way through it. Who knows? Maybe your family could find their way through your stuff, too.

From the beginning it is clear that, although Simon can be a "model" for Victor, in reality moving along a path of discovery is a personal and difficult process, which, however, can be experienced with hope and optimism. Thanks to the immediate empathy with his new friend,

Felix, Victor is able to fit in at Creekwood High - so much so that, a few days later, Simon congratulates him.

Victor, happy to hear that things are going well at Creekwood, and that your social standing is on the rise. There's nothing wrong with wanting to fit in. Sophomore year, I tried to grow a goatee, because I thought it would make me look badass. Instead, it made me look like an armpit with lips. You just have to make sure that if you're riding the Ferris wheel with a cool girl, it's because you want to. Not because other people want you to. Don't be so desperate to fit in that you betray yourself or the people you care about, okay?

Notice the frankness of Simon's message, above all the balance between making oneself accepted by others (integration) and respecting one's own self (social pressures) Victor is quick to pick up all this, although he calls it "words of wisdom" in his answer to Simon.

Hey, Simon. Thanks for the words of wisdom. All day, everyone liked me because they thought I liked Mia. Here's the twist: Now that I've spent some time with her, I do like her. She's funny, and kind, and she gets me. Did you ever feel super connected to a girl and think, I don't know, maybe this could work?

As a matter of fact, Victor has all the qualities to be appreciated by his new friends. And he is truly "in transition": his path necessarily implies an exploration of possible interpersonal relationships, starting with what is obvious for (almost) everybody, i.e., the relationship with a girl (among other things, Victor has clearly made a big impression on Mia, who is considered as highly desirable by all the boys, but also almost unapproachable). Shortly thereafter, in one of the rare moments of intimacy with his father, Victor, looking for reference points to understand his sensations, will ask him, "Hey, dad. How did you know that mom was the right one for you?".

And it is almost moving as Victor, in search of answers on sexuality, turns (how could he not?) to an Internet search, thus discovering a new world, above all the possibility that human sexuality may have many faces and cannot be confined within strict schemes (Video 6).



Video 6

Well, Simon, I don't know what's going on, because I thought I might be like you, but lately I've been hanging out with Mia, and I really like her, which is confusing, so I've been doing research. Like, a lot of research. And sexuality is a spectrum. Some guys like guys, some guys like girls, some guys like both, and some guys like feet? I'm not even sure what I like, but it's definitely not feet. So, I think I'm gonna give things with Mia a chance. I feel really connected to her, and who knows? I didn't think I was gonna like the Impossible Burger until I had one, and it was actually pretty good. So, maybe Mia's my Impossible Burger.

Simon never has a judging stand and in his answer is ready to share Victor's joy about the effect that Mia has had on his feelings.

Well, Victor, I'm really glad to hear that you liked kissing Mia. Maybe she is your... Impossible Burger. And you're right. Kissing is pretty great. But for me, it's more than just butterflies. It's like those jet fighters that fly over the Super Bowl. Or like, getting hit by a huge wave.

We then see Victor at his birthday party with his family, and here we get an opportunity to appreciate the way he manages to be a balancing element in the conflict that his parents are experiencing. However, Simon's position is straightforward: he immediately warns Victor about the fact that sometimes taking care of others could be a good excuse to ignore or put off an actual confrontation with oneself.

Dear Simon, against the odds, I think my party actually brought my family closer together. But you might be right. Focusing on their problems is way easier than focusing on my own. My brother asked me to make wish tonight, and I didn't even know how to put what I want into words. But I guess if I had to try, I wish that 16 will be the year I finally figure out what I want.

The relationship with Mia makes Victor almost euphoric, because it seems to confirm his apparent attraction for the opposite sex (i.e., what would constitute his "normality"), making him discover feelings and sensations never experienced before, and which he faithfully records in his messages to Simon - even if doubts, uncertainties and fears begin to emerge regarding the inevitable evolution of this relationship towards a more direct sexual approach. Note the function of empathic and encouraging "moderator" that Simon adopts towards Victor in the exchange of messages, by referring to his own (now solved) personal problems. And an open and positive vision of sexuality is gradually made explicit.

Simon, I have big news. Mia and I are officially in a relationship. She's basically my favorite person to hang out with. And my family loves her, too. And I know what you're gonna ask me, so I'll save you the trouble. The physical stuff is actually awesome. Mia's lips are mad soft, and she wears this lip gloss that tastes like blue raspberry, which is my favorite flavor of Gatorade.

Wow, Victor. Who knew you were such a romantic? Mia is a lucky lady.

Yeah. She's the luckiest.

Okay, why'd you just do your uncomfortable scrunch face when you said that?

Okay, I'm hanging out with Mia on Friday.

You don't sound excited.

I think Mia wants to take things to the next level, and I'm... you know.

Oh. You're a virgin. That's fine. You've just gotta relax. If I can have sex with girls, anybody can.

Wait, you-But you're...

Gay? I know. This was back when I was figuring things out. Turns out human sexuality is less of a straight line, and more of a Cirque du Soleil show. Long, confusing, and full of sexy clowns.

When Victor feels himself "put to the test" about the sexual aspect of his relationship with Mia, his difficulties and sense of inadequacy soon emerge: however, in this case too, Simon is ready to support him, by inviting Victor to come to New York to meet him in person, at the same time underlining the responsibility that each of us has towards other people.

Dear Simon, I really do like Mia, but what if that isn't enough?

Hey, Victor. I know you really like Mia, and you've been trying to figure out if you're attracted to her. It sounds like tonight, you realized that you're not, and that's okay. But maybe it's time for you to really figure out what you want. Before someone gets hurt.

Victor! How'd it go with Mia? Did you guys...? I choked. Big time. But honestly, Simon, is sex such a big deal? I mean, everything else about our relationship is picture perfect. I know you probably think I'm grasping at straws, but if there's a chance for me to be happy and normal, why not try?

Victor, it breaks my heart to hear you talk about yourself like that. You're perfect. And that part of you that you wish you could cut out, that's the part that makes you... you. If you could only see what my life is like in New York, you'd see that there's a world beyond high school. Beyond your family. I wish you were here right now so I could give you a hug, and make you believe it. Love, Simon

#### *5.5.2. Social pressures, expectations and attitudes in hetero- and homo-sexual relationships*

At this point a digression is in order to focus on the difficulties that even an openly gay couple can experience - which indeed are the same that a straight couple can experience. Within a gay couple, too, a dynamic tension can develop between expectations of conformity due to social pressures and needs of authenticity in the relationship. This is the case of Benji, who, to celebrate the first anniversary of the meeting with his boyfriend Derek, organizes a romantic dinner based on the meatballs they had enjoyed on that first occasion - which soon shows the different views about the ways of considering a relationship, and in particular Derek's need to avoid heterosexual stereotypes - which, however, implies a rejection of deeper feelings.

So, do you like it? Spaghetti and meatballs, like we had on our first date. Remember?

Mm. Mm-hmm. It's great. But shouldn't we head to the show soon? The opener are these two blind sisters who do bluegrass covers of TLC songs. I mean, it's supposed to be awesome.

Oh, yeah?



Yeah.

Sounds really cool, but I thought maybe we could skip the show tonight. You know, since it's our first anniversary and everything.

Anniversary? What, are we straight people now?

Oh. Sorry. I didn't mean, like.

I just don't really know if I believe in all that stuff.

What stuff? Anniversaries?

Stuff that society tells us to want just 'cause straight people do. Like, one of the best things about being gay is that we don't have to conform to that hetero-normative, rom-com bullshit that is dreamt up by corporations to help sell greeting cards to morons.

Well guess I'm one of those morons.

Hey. I didn't mean. I'm sorry. I I'm a dick, and these meatballs are really great.

Yeah?

Yeah. Sorry. Hey, do you think it would be cool if we caught the end of the show?

You know what? Yeah, you go ahead. I'll meet you there. I gotta clean up first.

Okay. Hey. You're the best.

Have a good time.

Thank you.

### *5.5.3. Victor's journey to New York: a new perspective*

By telling a lie to his family, Victor manages to spend a weekend in New York, but is disappointed when Simon does not turn up - although he is welcomed by a small group of Simon's friends, a queer group who, with their apparent freedom of attitudes and speech, clearly shock Victor, at the same time allowing him to perceive for the first time a world of alternative values (Video 7).



Video 7

I prefer the term "flatmates," actually. It makes us sound more European. I'm Justin, with soft J, like "joosh."

I'm Victor.

I'm Ivy.

I'm Kim.

And before you ask, my pronouns are they, them, theirs.

Oh, okay. Nice to meet... they.

So what's your deal?

My deal? Mm-hmm. Oh, I'm just, uh, visiting. I'm Bram and Simon's pre-frosh. Yeah. We all used to go to the same high school, so my college counselor hooked us up. Wanted to get a taste of NYU. You know, check out the basketball program.

What?

You wanted to come to NYU for the sports?

Ooh, your college counselor hooked you up with the wrong-ass people, girl.

Ooh! I'm not a girl.

Don't mind him. He's harmless. Any friend of Bram and Simon's is a friend of ours.

Absolutely. You should totally come with us to Messy Boots tonight.

Yes!

Oh, my God! What's Messy Boots?

It is the best party in town.

Yes.

They have this drag show where they bring people from the audience on stage.

Nah.

I mean, it's just, I just have so much to do with this pre-frosh thing. So...

Um, can I steal you for a second?

Yeah.

Yeah. Okay.

Nice to meet you guys.

Nice to meet you.

What is a pre-frosh?

Okay, what was that? Why did you tell them that you're my pre-frosh?

Because I don't know them. I barely know you. Look, Simon is the only person I've told, and I I'm not ready to open up to a whole bunch of strangers.

Okay. I get it. And I'm sorry. I forgot how scary it is when you're first coming out, even around other gay people.

I'm sorry. I, I know I came out here to experience gay stuff, but it all just feels so...

Gay?

Come on. I gotta show you something, all right?

When later Victor meets Simon outside the gay club where his new friends have taken him (which will constitute a true experience of a newly discovered freedom), he cannot hide his disappointment for Simon's absence and for having to deal with people that are "foreign" to him - but, also in this case too, Simon reverses the case: these "strangers" are actually a community, indeed, a "family" of people who have also gone through what Victor is now experiencing and who, precisely for this reason, have offered him their sincere friendship as well as their support.

Victor!

Simon?

Hey, man! Hey. God, I've been texting with Bram, and I just felt so bad about missing this whole thing that I, I left the bachelor party, and... Wait, what's the matter? Why aren't you inside with everyone else?

Look, Simon, I trusted you. I thought that what I told you stayed between us, but now I realize this whole time you've been sitting around with your friends, laughing about my stupid, messed up life.

Well, no. Victor, that's not... That is not what happened, I swear. Look, when you first messaged me, I was touched. Really. But ... You know, I was scared, too. I, I know you want me to be this, like, guru who has all the answers, but the truth is, I don't. And I didn't want to push you too hard, or tell you the wrong thing. Or make your life any harder than it already was. And look, like you said in your first message, we're not the same. I never had a girlfriend. But Bram did. And I, I didn't have super religious parents, but Justin did. Every one of my friends had a little bit to offer. A little piece of the puzzle. They weren't sitting around laughing about your life. They were in your corner, listening, and helping, and, and cheering you on.

Why would they want to help a complete stranger?

Because you're not a stranger. You're one of us. To me, that's the best part about all of this. Having a community. A group of friends that gave up an entire weekend to help a kid that they've never met, just because they know that on some level, we've all been through the same thing. Because we're family.

#### 5.5.4. *Victor's first coming out*

On his return from New York, Victor has had the opportunity to experience an alternative reality, and this, together with the need to clarify his situation with Mia, pushes him to start thinking about coming out. But how, and who with? The first to welcome his "declaration" is Felix, Victor's schoolmate and neighbour, whom he feels he can trust, and who indeed welcomes Victor's "confession" without embarrassment, but with warmth and sympathy - a message of solidarity that goes far beyond the mere acceptance or tolerance of differences to become a way of sharing that conveys both respect for the other and deep emotional closeness.

So what's up?

I don't know how I'm gonna say this, but I know that if I don't say it now, I'm gonna lose my nerve, so, um ... Here it goes. Can you turn around?

Seriously?

I'm, I'm sorry, it's just too much pressure with you staring at me, especially since you hardly ever blink.

What are you talking about? I blink a normal amount.

Felix, uh ... I Like guys. Like, I'm into them. I thought I might for a while, but I wasn't totally sure, and I really wanted to make things work with Mia, because she's awesome. But I, but I can't. Because I like guys.

Can I turn around now?

Yeah.

I, um I really don't know the perfect thing to say. But I'm really happy you told me. And this doesn't change anything between us, obviously.

Actually, as... As far as perfect things to say go, that was pretty good.

Felix, don't cry.

I'm not crying. You made me aware of my blinking. Irritated my eye. Whew. So ... How does it feel to get all this off your chest?

Kind of amazing. But, um, you were the easy one.

Yeah. Telling Mia's gonna suck.

Yeah.

But she'll understand. It's not like you cheated on her, or killed her cat.

Simon is obviously immediately told about this event and, as usual, his answers are full of empathy and support.

Hey, Vic. I'm not gonna sugarcoat it. Telling Mia is gonna be really, really hard. You just gotta rip the gay Band-Aid off and hope that eventually she forgives you.

Victor, I totally understand wanting to give Mia the perfect night before you come clean. But here's the thing about the truth: You can't control how people will react to it. All you can do is be honest with the people you love. The rest is up to them. Whatever happens, you'll always have me. Love, Simon

However, the events take a sudden unexpected turn, and Victor's efforts to carefully explain his situation to Mia are destined to be overwhelmed by such events. At a party, Mia happens to see Victor kissing Benji, and is obviously very upset. Pilar, Victor's sister, too, has reason to criticize Victor's behaviour (which, as we have already mentioned, fits into a problematic family situation (Video 8)).



### Video 8

Mia! Mia, wait! Look, I, I don't know what Andrew told you, b-but--.

He didn't tell me anything. I saw you. With Benji.

Just...

All this time, was any of it real?

Yes.

Mia, you're, like, my favorite person.

Goodbye, Victor.

She found out. Didn't she? That you've been cheating on her.

Pilar, it's not what you think.

I don't believe you. Mom and Dad ripped us out of Texas and moved us here. I lost all my friends. My boyfriend broke up with me. Mom turned out to be a cheater. And Dad got himself fired. My whole world has been collapsing around me all year. But I thought, at least I still have my brother. At least Victor is still Victor. You were the only person I thought I could trust, and now I feel like I don't even know you.

Pilar, of course you do. I've been going through something. And I want to explain it to you, but not here. Okay? So can, can we please go home? Please.

Yeah. Yeah, we can go home.

Okay.

And Victor's first "official" coming out will take place a few minutes later, at home ... determined to declare himself in front of his parents, he is however shocked by another declaration - his parents inform him and Pilar about their decision to separate ... It would not seem the right time for Victor to come out, but he eventually takes up his courage and does come out ... (Video 9).



### Video 9

What do you mean, apart? We're separating. Just for now. After what we've been through this year, we just needed to take a breather. I'm so sorry, mis amores. I know this is hard. I'm gonna change. Wait, Victor. What were you gonna tell us?

Nothing. No. Not nothing. Mom... Dad... I'm gay.

From this moment on, Victo's self-confidence seems to be boosted. His new relationship with Benji is a source of great happiness, but also of new anxieties: it is now necessary to come out "officially" even at school, in front of his closest friends as well as of the whole school community. After various hesitations and postponements, Victor finally decides: his coming out will be in the name of the maximum transparency - in a scene that can perhaps verge on the "melodramatic" ... (Video 10).



Video 10

What are you doing?

What I should have done yesterday. Excuse me. Hey! Uh... so... Not that it's anyone's business, but Mia didn't cheat on me. And it's also not her fault that we broke up. It's not anyone's fault. Um... The truth is... I'm gay, and I'm with Benji now. I-I don't want it to be a secret anymore, because I'm happy about it. Like... Like really, really happy. So, uh... yeah. Uh, we won't be taking any questions at this time.

#### 5.5.5. *Social and religious stigma*

From this point on, the issue of inclusiveness becomes central: Victor's coming out is actually only the first step in a process that involves all his life contexts, from his family to the social ones. A coming out experience can thus bring to the surface beliefs and attitudes that are generally hidden under a cloud of conformism and passive acceptance of the "majority" values. The path of tolerance, acceptance and reception proves to be hard and fraught with obstacles. Victor finds himself having to face the resistance, first of all, of his family. His father proves to be quite open and seems to accept, albeit with difficulty, his homosexuality (despite having previously clearly expressed his position towards homosexuality by saying, "I only hope ... that your little brother does not turn up like this!"). His mother's reaction is quite different: she reacts with a range of feelings, from anger to resignation, and her process of adaptation to the new situation will be longer and hard.

However, the social stigma insinuates pervades all contexts, and the series provides several significant examples. In an embarrassing dialogue (Video 11), the basketball coach points out to Victor that, following some unspecified "complaints", he could use a separate locker room and shower...



Video 11

How's my star player?

Uh, excited. I've been practicing my jump shot all summer.

Great.

So, um, I heard about your recent announcement. Yeah. It's okay.

We, we really don't have to talk about it.

Listen, I think it's awesome. I really do. Um... I mean, I'm basically gay, myself. I've been living with my best friend Mike for twenty years, and we share a SodaStream, so... Okay, um... The point I'm trying to make is that I want you to feel comfortable and safe both on the court, and in the locker room. And also, uh, in fact, if-if you would now like to maybe change away from the other guys, I mean, we could figure that out. I actually have an empty coach's office that nobody's using. It's got its own shower. I mean, you'd have your own changing area! I mean, Steph Curry doesn't even have that.

Uh, thanks, but I'll just keep showering and changing with the rest of the team.

Even more traumatic is the stigma that explodes in the context of the Catholic Church, which Victor's mother attends regularly. During a religious function, in which Victor's mother performs a song, Victor, who feels the pressure of the context mounting around him, leaves the church, and shortly after he is reached outside by his mother. It is an opportunity to reaffirm his feelings and, among other things, to remind her, on the one hand, that she does not approve of his relationship with his boyfriend Benji, and, on the other, that she has not yet found the courage to explain to Adrian, Victor's little brother, his homosexuality.

There you are. Why did you leave in the middle of my song?

Mom, I thought we were finally making some progress, and then I find out that you're trying to pray me into being straight?

What? Who told you that?

Father Lawrence.

Is it true?

You know, I am trying so hard to be proud of who I am. And it's almost impossible when my own mom thinks I need to be fixed.

I am doing the best that I can, Victor.

This is the best you can do? Because Benji doesn't feel welcome in our home. And you still won't tell Adrian that I'm gay.

Adrian's just a child.

Don't say that. That's what people say when they're shielding their children from bad things, like murder. Or drugs. Not that their son has a boyfriend.

As matter of fact, when Adrian is informed, he will react in the most straightforward way, accepting the thing with great naturalness. However, after the priest of the Church suggests, not too implicitly, during a catechism lesson, that certain behaviours will be punished by God, Victor's mother hastens to reassure Adrian, who was impressed by the priest's words, reminding him that Victor is the best person in the world ... She is gradually, and albeit in a painful way, starting to realize the hypocrisy underlying many attitudes, and will soon face the priest himself, highlighting her love and sympathy for her son (video 12).



## Video 12

Isabel. Did we have an appointment?

No, we did not. You told Adrian that Victor, who he loves more than anyone in the whole world, is going to Hell?

I did not use those exact words. I was just trying to explain that Victor needs his family's help - to find his way back to Jesus...

What Victor needs is for his family to love and accept him for who he is.

Isabel, you and I both know it is not that simple.

Actually, I think it is. Today, I saw Adrian accept his brother without a second thought. I have been raised to believe a lot of ugly things, Father. Things that will probably take me the rest of my life to unlearn. But I will unlearn them. And I won't pass them on to my kids. And no matter what you or the church say, I know in my heart that God loves my son. My beautiful, perfect, gay son. You're gonna have to find a new music director, Father.

Isabel, I urge you not to give up on God.

I'm not giving up on God. I'm giving up on you.

### *5.5.6. Towards a new "normality"*

Victor's coming out marks an important point of passage: his relationship with Benji moves towards a sentimental one, along with the various other romantic stories that are narrated in the series. In other words, these stories do not distinguish between hetero- and homosexuality, thus outlining interpersonal dynamics that depend on the characteristics of individual people, not on their sexual orientation. However, the strictly sexual aspect continues to create anxiety in Victor, who is affected (like in any couple) by the doubts and uncertainties with respect to "the first time". Simon is, however, always present in giving support to Victor, guaranteeing him his solidarity.

Victor, sorry I missed your call. And you're right... I did tell you we could talk about anything. But your sex life is... Well, it's between you and Benji. If you're truly ready, you won't need my advice, or anyone else's. The only person who can make that decision is you.

Thus the relationship between Victor and Benji feeds on, and at the same time suffers from, all the dynamics that make such a relationship so important but also so potentially fragile. For example, when Victor accidentally discovers that Benji has had problems with alcoholism and is still attending a support group, a crisis breaks out: Victor reproaches Benji for not having talked about it, and therefore of having betrayed his confidence in him. It is the first crisis in this relationship, with further ups and downs (which obviously help the development of the plot). Victor's new status within the school community has made him "famous" and, just as Simon has for a long time acted towards him as an "adviser", now Victor himself is contacted by another student, Rahim, who asks him for support in his homosexual situation



within an Iranian family of strict Muslim observance. In short, solidarity seems to widen out ... the relationship that Victor establishes with Rahim will also cause Benji's jealousy ... and will accelerate Victor's further evolution towards new relationships.

It is precisely within the relationship that Victor establishes with a new boy, Nick, that we can witness a typical problem of any romantic relationship, with no discrimination as for sexual orientation - once again underlining a sense of "ordinary reality" in sentimental relationships. The attraction between Victor and Nick is immediate, and this time there are no hesitations or doubts: the two boys soon have sex, but while Nick immediately clarifies that he only intends to "have fun" in a casual way, without committing himself, Victor, whom we have learned to appreciate as sensitive and perhaps a little "romantic" boy, enters a crisis because he aspires, as he had already done with Benji, to a deeper and lasting relationship (Video 13). Is there the risk that gay relationships may be represented, as often happens, as superficial and "promiscuous"? Perhaps, but what is underlined is above all Victor's discomfort: now, after his coming out, he is looking for a significant, committed relationship. (Compare the above-mentioned dialogue between Benji and his boyfriend, who accused him of being a "romantic comedy" type, with deeper feelings perceived as apparently extraneous to the status of a gay couple.)



Video 13

W- Would you wanna, maybe, catch a movie or something? Oh, um, like a... Like a, like a date.

Uh, I, I didn't think that's what we were doin' here.

W- Well, as-as much as I love hooking up in your parents' car, I, I figured maybe we could just... share a meal together?

Um... to be honest, I'm not... I'm not really looking for a relationship right now. Um, I'm just havin' fun, and meetin' people, and...

People? S- So you're, uh, hanging out with multiple people?

Just a few. Is, is that... cool with you? That we just keep this casual?

Uh... Y- Yeah, yeah. T- Totally. Why are we still talking?

In the third and final season of the series, events quickly move forward the story, but there is an opportunity to introduce, even if in a hasty and a little superficial way, other aspects of the sexual life of these teenagers. Benji, struggling with his alcohol problems, will have to resort to a rehabilitation period; Victor fears that he has contracted a sexually transmitted disease, and will therefore contact a centre for homosexual people; besides, after the end of his relationship with Nick, he will be tempted by a gay dating website, and will end up with a meeting with a stranger (who, paradoxically, will prove to be ... Benji himself!); Victor's sister Pilar, who is now dating Felix, will be discovered by the family to use the contraceptive pill, which will obviously cause further conflicts; and finally Lake, Felix's ex-girlfriend, will find out that she is attracted, albeit temporarily, by another girl. In short, the series continues

to provide representations, although maybe in shallow ways, of different aspects of adolescent sexuality, focusing above all on an image of sexuality "in transition", still floating and unresolved, like Lake 's alleged homosexuality (or bisexuality?).

And in this final season there is also room for one of the few scenes (Video 14) of homophobic bullying in the whole series. Apart from some verbal exchanges involving Victor in the locker rooms before his coming out, the series had so far ignored this important factor of conflict and discomfort, which we know to be well present in the life of teenagers. The series has chosen not to emphasize this aspect, probably in order not to tackle such a complex theme, and also perhaps so as to maintain the tone and the rhythm of dramatic events within acceptable limits for its reference audience.



Video 14

Hey, a-are you okay? Y-you just seem upset.

I'm fine. What are you looking at?

Yeah, you wish, fag.

I wish? I wish what exactly?

You know.

Come on. You really think that I would go for someone like you? 'Cause look at me and then look at yourself. Your face is so busted, your hairline's literally running away from it, and I am a Persian Clark Kent. I am tall. I am fashion-forward. I am the moment. You are sad. You're ignorant. You're yesterday. So, I think you and your little backup dancer should probably get going. You might be late to your micro-dick meeting.

Whoa, is there a problem here?

It's not worth it, man. Let's get out of here.

Holy shit. Are you guys okay?

Yeah. That was intense.

How did you come up with that on the spot?

I didn't. The second I saw those guys, I was thinking about what I was gonna say if they bothered us. I'm constantly in situations like this, so when there are guys laughing at me, I can't just ignore them. Not like you ... I really don't want to do this right now.

### *5.6. The final message*

In the final episode, which ends with the classic Hollywood-style "Happy Ending", with both hetero -and-homo-sexual couples now (re)united, there is room for a direct message, which is clearly meant to summarize and convey in a very explicit way some of the values that were offered throughout the series. The occasion is very formal: a school meeting of students and

parents where prizes are awarded to students who have distinguished themselves in the sports field. There is no shortage of reasons for reflection, mainly for the fact that Victor is awarded a somewhat particular prize, for the "courage" shown in his coming out and in the management of his homosexuality. The ambiguity of this motivation is expressed by Victor, who, at first annoyed by the nature of this prize ("Why isn't a similar prize awarded to heterosexuals?", he wonders) and tempted to refuse it, will end up accepting it (at Rahim's solicitation), also because he glimpses an opportunity to convey a positive message (as well as an opportunity to thank friends and partners). Victor thus presents himself on the stage of the award ceremony (Video 15) explicitly declaring the nature of the prize ("A gay award"), recognizing the role of the group of friends and lovers (Felix, Mia, Benji) in giving him security and encouragement - courage that does not mean "not to be afraid of anything" but rather "not be afraid of being afraid", to admit "who you are ... or who you love".



Video 15

Um, thanks, Coach. I'm gonna be honest, I felt conflicted when Coach told me I was getting this because we all know the Bravery Award basically means... the Gay Award. And I didn't know how I felt about accepting the Gay Award. But then I spoke to a friend of mine, someone way smarter and cooler than me, and he made me realize I feel pretty damn good about accepting the Gay Award. When I first moved to Creekwood a year ago, I didn't know a single gay person. And I was so scared to tell anyone. But then I met this incredible group of people, including the best friend a guy could ask for, the kind that remembers your friend-aversary. I found the best girlfriend a confused gay kid could ask for. She made me feel totally safe when I needed it most. I also fell in love with an amazing guy who was patient, and, and wise, and... pushed me to be the very best version of myself. These people... showed me what it meant to be brave. I, I used to think it meant that you weren't scared of anything, but now I realize that being brave means that you aren't afraid... to be scared. It means that you embrace the scary because a lot of the times, the scariest things are also the most important. Like... admitting who you are or who you love. So, to my family, to my friends, thank you, guys. I hope I only get braver from here.

## **6. Conclusion**

This final message thus summarizes the beliefs, attitudes and values that the series has conveyed and, beyond the melodramatic emphasis, provides evidence of the basic honesty

and respect with which *Love, Victor* has attempted to address an audience of teenagers with messages of acceptance, tolerance, empathy and *inclusiveness*.

*"Is there any accurate way to represent adolescence when teenagers themselves are so malleable, ephemeral and full of contradictions? Maybe the issue isn't accuracy at all, but rather honesty. If we seek and demand honesty in the teen television genre, there is a world of untapped potential to mine for the beauty that lies in the utter confusion of teenagehood."*  
(Note 15)

## Notes

1. Shary T. 2005. *Teen movies. American youth on screen*, Wallflower, London and New York, p. 110.
2. Highfill S. 2021. [\*For the love of teen TV: How the genre has evolved and why it's so powerful\*](#), Entertainment Weekly.
3. Mariani L. 2021. [\*Teen films: il cinema per gli adolescenti, il cinema sugli adolescenti. Parte quinta: Alcune tendenze del nuovo secolo\*](#), [www.cinemafocus.eu](http://www.cinemafocus.eu)
4. On inclusiveness in films and TV series see Smith S., Pieper K., Choueiti M., Yao K., Case A., Hernandez K. & Moore Z. 2021. [\*Inclusion in Netflix Original U.S. Scripted Series & Films\*](#), USC Annenberg.
5. Lamb S.V. 2018. [\*A content analysis of relationships and intimacy in Teen Dramas on Television\*](#), Brigham Young University, Theses and Dissertations, 6923.
6. Mariani L. 2022. [\*L'omosessualità nella storia del cinema. Terza parte: I primi decenni del nuovo secolo\*](#), [www.cinemafocus.eu](http://www.cinemafocus.eu)
7. Adapted from [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)
8. See:
  - the [official site](#) of the series
  - the [fan community site](#) (@lovevictorfanpage)
  - *social media*: @loveVictorHulu #LoveVictor
  - GLSEN, an association working for the well-being of LGBTQAI+ people in school settings, has published a [Discussion Guide](#) (also available as a [pdf document](#)) for use in discussion groups on the topics dealt with in the series.
9. The US film rating system has assigned *Love, Victor* the PG13 rating (parents might consider some content inappropriate for children under13) owing to language used, alcohol consumption, racial stereotypes, homophobia, non-consensual kissing, sexism and discriminatory language to refer to disability.

10. Hart A. 2019. [The problems with casting older actors to play teenagers](#), Arts Award on Voic
11. Rhodes I. 2021. [CULTURE: As Seen on TV – The Reality of Teen Drama Television](#), Yale News.
12. "Saturday detention" is the focus of one of the most famous and iconic teen films, *The Breakfast Club* (by John Hughes, USA 1985), where, however, the restricted setting serves the purpose of introducing a group of students and exploring their different characters and interpersonal dynamics. This film had a profound influence on the teen film genre, crystallizing for a long time the "types" of students that cinema would offer in the following decades. See Mariani L. 2021. The films of John Hughes in [American teen pics: movies for teenagers, movies about teenagers - Part 3: Revamping teen pics: the '80s](#)
13. Amos R. 2021. [The effect of US 'Teen' dramas on their actual teen audience](#), Voice. See also Nervo C. 2023. [Relatability of teen dramas](#), thefourthstate.net
14. See the results of a survey on the topics that American teenagers would like entertainment media to deal with in Rivas-Lara S., Pham B. & Uhls Y. 2022. [What Stories Do Teens Want to See in Movies and TV?](#), Greater Good Magazine. For a critical analysis and evaluation of how teen issues are represented in TV series see Bullock T. 2024. [TV Show Reviews for Teen Drama Enthusiasts: Exploring the Best Picks](#), bobsterner.com
15. Rhodes I. 2021, op. cit.



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