

Aesthetic ambivalence and ethical tensions on streaming platforms: examining the television series adolescence as a case study

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine the aesthetic, narrative and ethical dimensions of postmodern audiovisual productions in the streaming era, focusing on how adolescence, mental health and violence are represented in Adolescence series. It aims to explore the ambivalence between “cute” and “macabre” esthetics and the implications of these portrayals for audience perception and media ethics.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative, interpretive and exploratory methodology was adopted, combining textual analysis, visual semiotics and thematic analysis. Four independent coders – experts in communication, media studies and film – analyzed a purposive sample of Adolescence series. This study examines the aesthetic, narrative and ethical dimensions of postmodern audiovisual productions in the streaming era, focusing on how adolescence, mental health and violence are represented in Adolescence, a British television psychological crime drama series created by Jack Thorne and Stephen Graham and directed by Philip Barantini (2024, WARP Films). Data triangulation was achieved through the integration of primary audiovisual texts, paratextual materials (posters, trailers and social media campaigns) and secondary sources (critical reviews, scholarly literature and audience commentary).

Findings – The findings indicate that Adolescence combines striking visual impact with a critical reflection on violence and suffering. While aesthetic excess can risk transforming pain into spectacle, the series simultaneously exposes the fragility of institutions and the vulnerability of parental figures, shifting the narrative focus from sensationalism to the structural roots of social conflict. These results contribute to the broader debate on the ethics of audiovisual culture by highlighting how political, economic and social dynamics shape the ways in which younger generations perceive the world, construct their identities and understand their place within society. Furthermore, the study suggests that future research should examine the role of streaming platforms in leveraging emotional impact to capture audience attention and assess whether



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such portrayals – particularly those depicting parental figures and institutions such as the police or schools in a negative light – may generate adverse effects on the perceptions and value frameworks of younger audiences.

Originality/value – By theorizing ethical ambivalence as a category for analyzing teen streaming narratives, this study contributes to ongoing debates on postmodern audiovisual culture. Beyond describing aesthetic strategies, it highlights the ethical risks and responsibilities these series entail for audiences, educators and platforms, opening avenues for future research on the social impact of streaming entertainment.

Keywords Postmodern esthetics, Adolescence, Streaming platforms, Media ethics, Adolescent representation, Mental health portrayal, Narrative analysis, Visual semiotics, Cultural critique, Violence in media, Audiovisual narratives, Ethical storytelling

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

“We tell you what’s happening to you.” This former tagline of the Netflix series *Black Mirror* encapsulates a defining feature of contemporary screen culture: its capacity to mirror, distort and reconfigure the realities its audiences inhabit. The global rise of streaming platforms has transformed the economics of audiovisual production and distribution and ushered in new aesthetic sensibilities and narrative strategies that blur the lines between entertainment, social commentary and ethical provocation.

In this algorithmically curated ecosystem, prestige drama, dystopian storytelling and teen-oriented narratives have emerged as transnational cultural exports with an unprecedented reach. Postmodern esthetics – characterized by moral ambiguity, narrative fragmentation and a fascination with violence and the abject – now coexist with the seemingly contradictory allure of “cute” imagery, the banalization of monstrosity and the gamification of cruelty. While artistically compelling, these forms raise urgent questions about the ethical representation of vulnerable subjects, particularly adolescents navigating the complex intersections of identity, mental health and social belonging.

Teen series such as *13 Reasons Why*, *Euphoria* and *Adolescence* exemplify this duality: celebrated for initiating public debate on sensitive topics yet criticized for their potential to oversimplify, stereotype or sensationalize. Their global circulation, coupled with the participatory logics of social media, amplifies their cultural impact and positions streaming services as active agents in the construction of adolescent imaginaries. This dynamic situates the ethical stakes of audiovisual storytelling at the nexus of creative innovation, commercial imperatives and audience vulnerability.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines how postmodern audiovisual esthetics in the streaming era reflect and shape cultural understandings of adolescence through a case study of the TV series *Adolescence*. Drawing on interdisciplinary frameworks from media studies, narrative ethics, cultural sociology and psychology, it interrogates the aesthetic, cultural and moral implications of representing youth by merging spectacle with social critique. By focusing on selected case studies and thematic clusters, this analysis aims to illuminate how these narratives negotiate the tension between fostering public discourse and capitalizing on the market appeal of ethically charged content.

1.1 From postmodern cruelty to the streaming narrative culture

Cultural critics have long noted educated audiences’ conflicted relationship with television – simultaneous repulsion and dependence (Foster Wallace *et al.*, 2025). This paradox highlights the medium’s deep capacity to shape values, self-perception and interpersonal relationships. Earlier, George Gerbner’s *cultivation theory* offered empirical grounding: extensive exposure to televised violence fosters exaggerated perceptions of danger and a

“mean world” worldview (Gerbner *et al.*, 1980; Morgan and Shanahan, 2010). The more violence is consumed, the more distorted the audience’s view of social reality, producing inflated fears about crime and personal risk.

In contemporary audiovisual culture, these dynamics are preserved and intensified. Postmodern film and later prestige television have evolved into “neo-existentialist” narratives (Imbert *et al.*, 2024) that privilege crisis, identity construction and moral ambiguity over resolution or catharsis. These works dwell on insecurity, mortality and systemic collapse, resisting easy closure. According to VanArendonk *et al.* (2017), prestige television often valorizes the abject, embraces narrative opacity and rewards attentive decoding while centering flawed, violent male protagonists whose emptiness is never fully resolved.

Within this corpus, the “banalization of the monster” becomes a defining trope: seemingly ordinary individuals are capable of acts of extreme cruelty. Films such as *Titane* or *Manticora* subtly construct this monstrosity, engaging the subconscious and mobilizing audience empathy even as they unsettle moral judgment (Imbert *et al.*, 2024; Rodríguez Serrano *et al.*, 2024). This blurring of innocence and threat – especially when applied to child or adolescent characters – complicates ethical evaluation and invites reflection on the nature of spectatorship itself.

Today’s audiences often engage from a confirmatory stance, seeking narratives that affirm their preexisting beliefs rather than challenge them (Rodríguez Serrano *et al.*, 2024). This fosters reductive synecdoches – depicting entire social groups through the lens of a single negative portrayal – and discourages complex, ambiguous and contradictory depictions.

These tendencies are ethically charged issues. There is no consensus on how to represent sexual and interpersonal violence, yet the aestheticization of harm proliferates, often prioritizing style over reflection (Serrano Sánchez *et al.*, 2024). In a media economy built on instant affective engagement, hypervisibility has tipped into what Imbert *et al.* (2017) calls the “pornography of horror,” where intensity and explicitness crowd out contemplation. Han *et al.* (2022, 2024a, 2024b) identifies this as part of a “post-narrative” condition in which storytelling circulates as a commodified identity amid cultural disorientation.

According to Tait *et al.* (2008, p. 107), the term *pornography* has expanded in contemporary viewing contexts to capture public anxieties while simultaneously excluding an understanding of the specific crime or ethical transgression being represented, as well as the interpretive gaze it elicits. Thus, pornography is currently discussed as both a reflection of modern anxieties and a manifestation of the voyeuristic or shocked gaze of the spectator. However, this morbid curiosity, characteristic of both academic and popular audiences, typically revolves around what Tait *et al.* (2008, p. 96) refers to as *mainstream pornography* – content in which participants provide consent to appear on screen. In contrast, the real victims portrayed in documentaries dealing with death and horror cannot offer such consent. Hence, while the documentary aspires to social awareness and testimonial value, pornography remains primarily oriented toward providing sensory gratification to the viewer (*ibid.*).

Holman *et al.* (2024) argue that graphic images of massacres are increasingly used today for political gain, underscoring the need for media literacy campaigns that help the public identify misinformation and understand the psychological and ethical risks of viewing and sharing explicit visual content. In this regard, a cross-sectional study analyzing 2,880 YouTube video thumbnails found that searches using 12 terms popular among children yielded a high prevalence of attention-grabbing and problematic imagery, including violent and frightening content (Radesky *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, users exposed to inherently polarizing political material are guided by YouTube’s recommendation algorithm toward even greater ideological polarization (van der Breggen *et al.*, 2025). Furthermore, the

cultural function of aggressive or hostile narratives appears to persist within the complex ecosystem of live-streaming platforms such as Twitch (Chae *et al.*, 2025). In essence, digital media platforms increasingly attract and retain users through content that capitalizes on aggression, shock and emotional arousal.

The moral dimension is further shaped by the market logic of television as a spectacle (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1997; González Requena *et al.*, 2024). Here, narratives select and amplify the “primary” manifestations of human experience – particularly monstrosity – not as acts of communication but as consumable moral postures aligned with audience demand and commercial imperatives. In this context, streaming platforms are not neutral distributors; they actively curate cultural imaginaries, influencing how violence, morality and youth are framed and understood. For digital-native audiences, this normalizes an ambivalent stance toward cruelty and erodes the ethical distinction between portrayal and endorsement – issues central to evaluating the social and pedagogical responsibilities of streaming-era narratives.

1.2 *The ambivalent aesthetic: between the cute and the macabre*

May *et al.* (2023) identifies the cultural power of “cuteness” in contemporary esthetics, noting that what appears adorable can also be mysterious, sinister and alluring. This duality blurs the boundaries between fragility and monstrosity, allowing a single image to simultaneously embody both. This ambivalence resonates with the long-standing tradition of the “cinema of cruelty” (Bazin *et al.*, 1977), which has consistently explored the potential for cruelty within ostensibly pure beings. This motif is evident in modern classics such as Buñuel’s *Los olvidados* (1950), Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and Ibáñez Serrador’s *Who Can Kill a Child?* (1976).

With the advent of postmodern cinema, the trope gained new prominence, particularly through the work of Michael Haneke, whose films (*Benny’s Video*, *Caché*, *The White Ribbon*, *Happy End*) interrogate the banality of evil and the façade of childhood innocence. This lineage extends to contemporary works such as Kowalski’s *Playground* (2016), which portrays a real-life child-perpetrated murder without sensationalism but also without offering audiences emotional refuge. Since the early postmodern period, a growing body of auteur, commercial and serialized television has featured the figure of the child psychopath – from Todd Solondz’s dark comedies (*Welcome to the Dollhouse*, *Happiness*) to Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant* and *Paranoid Park*, Ramsay’s *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and Guzzoni’s *Jesús*.

Postmodern cinema tends to abandon notions of redemption, transcendence or salvation, driven by a deep-seated mistrust toward such narrative structures. As Gutiérrez Córrea *et al.* (2014, p. 297) observes, “postmodern cinema presents a disenchanting vision of reality; it no longer seeks to depict reality as it is, but rather relativizes it into partial truths shaped by different perspectives.” For Imbert *et al.* (2019, p. 19), postmodern cinema constitutes a narrative of questioning and rupture – an exploratory and radical form that rejects binary thinking to probe the complexities of human experience. It distances itself from the moral simplicity of good versus evil, transcends social taboos and foregrounds objects and subjects through hyper-visibility. In doing so, it exposes them, privileging raw experience and emotional immediacy over logical exposition or moral closure.

In television, this duality between the cute and the macabre is particularly visible in *Squid Game*, which juxtaposes social realism with fantastical game-like structures while retaining an abject and symbolically rich visual style (Fernández-Rodríguez and Romero-Rodríguez, 2024). This combination of social themes and explicit violence underscores the fragile boundary between appearance and reality. Similarly, dystopian and techno-paranoid series such as *Black Mirror* and *13 Reasons Why* resonate strongly with younger audiences by weaving together aesthetic seduction, moral unease and topical issues.

According to [González Requena et al. \(2024\)](#), *Black Mirror*'s central drama lies in its depiction of a state of permanent surveillance – not only by governments and corporations but also by any individual capable of exploiting everyday technologies. This narrative, read through Jung's archetypal lens, stages a confrontation between the “self” and the “shadow,” a dynamic also visible in films such as *The Substance*, *Joker: Folie à Deux*, *Parasite*, *Black Swan* and *Fight Club*. These works oppose two symbolic “faces”: one ordered, conventional and communicative, shaped by social interaction and the other disorderly, impulsive and disruptive, erupting from the realm of instinct ([González Requena et al., 2021](#)).

Contemporary auteurs show fascination not only with the everyday monster but also with the moment its mask slips, exposing humiliation and vulnerability. In *Black Mirror*, this unmasking often coincides with the erosion of foundational democratic and moral values – politics, familial trust, marital bonds and romantic commitments – revealing what [González Requena et al. \(2024\)](#) terms the “psychotic substratum” of our era. The series, which has long presented itself on social media with the tagline “We tell you what's happening to you,” is emblematic: it invites viewers to see themselves in a distorted mirror. The show's visual branding, merging cute and sinister elements, mirrors broader trends in which smiling faces become simulacra of psychological instability, echoed in films such as *Smile* (2022) and *Joker* (2019), where violence remains deliberately ambiguous.

Figure 1, composed of three grouped images, juxtaposes a promotional poster from *Black Mirror*, a still from *Smile* and another from *Joker*. The first image, representing *Black Mirror*, depicts a sinister smile rendered in lines of binary code or digital text resembling computer programming sequences – an unsettling visual metaphor suggesting the horror concealed within technological advancement. The second image, drawn from the film *Smile*, which critiques the “dictatorship of happiness” in an era marked by anxiety and distress, presents a close-up of a young woman whose forced, eerie smile precedes her act of suicide. Finally, the third image portrays the central character of *Joker*, crying in despair while struggling to maintain an exaggerated grin. Collectively, these mainstream audiovisual works, all recent and widely popular, explore the simulation of happiness as a façade, revealing the tension between outward expressions of joy and the deep sense of inner falseness and psychological conflict that lies beneath.

1.3 Teen series in the new streaming landscape

[Raya-Bravo et al. \(2018\)](#) highlight that in Netflix's *13 Reasons Why*, one of the most significant psychological features is the constant tension between characters' internal self-reflection and their external presentation. This duality shapes adolescent portrayals in ways that often reinforce, but sometimes challenge, entrenched roles and stereotypes in the media. As a leading global producer, Netflix has been instrumental in reconfiguring the contemporary audiovisual environment, responding to the decline of mass television

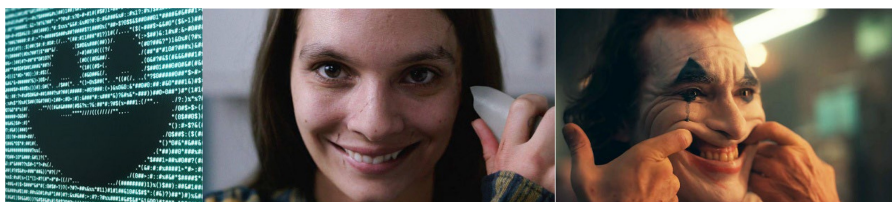


Figure 1. From left to right: *Black Mirror*, *Smile* and *Joker*

Source: Netflix, Paramount Pictures and DC Films

audiences, the fragmentation of publics, the influence of social media and the growing autonomy of viewers to determine their own pacing and sequencing of narratives.

However, these shifts in narrative production and consumption raise notable ethical concerns, particularly regarding the representation of adolescent mental health. [Virós-Martín et al. \(2025\)](#) outline a series of current risks:

- The number of adolescent girls diagnosed with mental disorders far exceeds that of boys.
- Screen portrayals of mentally ill adolescents frequently frame them as violent, unpredictable or incapable, thereby ignoring the diversity, intersectional perspectives and socio-economic and cultural factors influencing psychological distress.
- Digital influencers and streamers sometimes trivialize or commodify mental health topics, creating the risk of banalization.
- Adults often struggle to keep pace with the constant changes in the digital environments in which their children inhabit.
- Teacher training on adolescent mental health remains insufficient and schools frequently operate in isolation from the families.

Even as Netflix tends to present its content under the umbrella of “global” appeal, [Ferrera et al. \(2020\)](#) found that adolescent characters aged 13–19 appear as part of the regular cast in 47.91% of the productions studied. Many of these series have historically replicated gendered archetypes – “rebellious, fun, bad-boy” male characters contrasted with “responsible, sincere” female characters ([Masanet and Fedele, 2019](#)). However, more recent productions have displayed a gradual shift toward deeper and more complex gender representations. *Euphoria* (2019–), for example, traces journeys of empowerment and self-acceptance; *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018–2020) engages with themes of agency and self-definition; and *Sex Education* (2019–2023) foregrounds storylines dealing with gender, identity and sexual orientation ([Valverde Maestre and Pérez Rufí, 2021](#)).

Such series can also generate constructive dialogues. [Wang et al. \(2023\)](#) reported that *13 Reasons Why* prompted meaningful family conversations about suicide and mental health, even among adolescent boys – traditionally a hard-to-engage demographic – who expressed trust in their parents’ support when processing challenging storylines ([Uhls et al., 2021](#)).

The visual culture of these narratives is also noteworthy. Both *13 Reasons Why* and *Adolescence* (2023) share similar poster designs, presenting a clear, half-profile face with a blurred “other” in the background ([Figure 2](#)). [Figure 2](#) consists of two images: the official posters of the series *13 Reasons Why* and *Adolescence*. The first image, corresponding to *13 Reasons Why*, features the main character, Clay Jensen, wearing headphones as he listens to the cassette tapes recorded by Hannah Baker, the girl who takes her own life in the narrative. Hannah’s figure appears spectrally reflected in front of Clay, evoking her presence as an absence. The side-profile composition, rendered in cold blue and gray tones and reinforced by the ghostly reflection of Hannah, produces a visual effect of indirect connection and profound melancholy: although Clay does not look at her directly, Hannah’s story gazes back at him, binding both characters in a silent dialogue of guilt and remembrance.

The *Adolescence* poster, which closely resembles the aesthetic and compositional style of *13 Reasons Why* (both Netflix productions), depicts the father of Jaimie in profile, unable to look at his son – who has murdered a classmate. Jaimie, by contrast, stares directly and coldly at his father, whose image appears blurred. In this case, the spectral presence is embodied by the father, while the child – the narrative’s central figure – remains sharply focused. Yet neither character is deceased in the series, suggesting that, in psychoanalytic



Figure 2. From left to right: official posters of *13 Reasons Why* and *Adolescence*
Source: Netflix

terms, father and son mirror each other's fragmented selves. The father's averted gaze conveys both pain and guilt, while the son's piercing stare externalizes unresolved emotional trauma.

Both posters – belonging to a series that interrogates male violence against adolescent women – visually encapsulate key thematic concerns: the taboo of confronting responsibility for everyday violence among youth, the impulse toward emotional evasion and the unsettling presence of evil that dares to look back. This imagery symbolically encodes the interplay between identity and otherness that lies at the core of their narratives. *Adolescence*, much like recent family-centered animations such as *Inside Out 2* and *Elemental* (both Disney releases), explores adolescence and familial relationships through the lenses of anxiety, guilt, fear of disappointing others and the urgent pursuit of self-discovery beyond external expectations (Alameda Pita da Veiga and Chiclana, 2025).

Importantly, *Adolescence* resists the idealization of childhood, exploring its shadows alongside its vulnerabilities. The series quickly became one of Netflix's most-watched titles, surpassing the viewership of *Squid Game*, *The Queen's Gambit* and *Baby Reindeer*. However, it also generated controversy: many health professionals and educators rejected the notion that adolescent reality or the prevailing attitudes of school staff resemble those depicted. Critics have expressed concern that such portrayals might provoke unnecessary alarm among parents (Pérez Herrera, 2025). Despite these reservations, the UK's Government announced that the miniseries would be distributed free of charge to secondary schools. British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, in a public statement on X, accompanied by the series' promotional imagery (Figure 3), remarked that "as a parent" he found it "very difficult to watch" (El País et al., 2025). However, it is noteworthy that this strategic decision – clearly aimed at enhancing the series' visibility and popularity – has targeted young audiences, even though the narrative of *Adolescence* is explicitly centered on adults who are incapable of coping with Jaimie's character. *Adolescence* is, in essence, a series for parents, not for adolescents.



Figure 3. The British Prime Minister announced that he will distribute *Adolescence* free of charge to schools across the country

Source: [Starmer et al. \(2025\)](#)

Beyond the specifics of individual series, these high-budget productions demonstrate how dystopia has become “a privileged mechanism for carrying ethical and political reflection” ([Gómez et al., 2024](#)). This aligns with another major preoccupation of postmodern cinema: exploring the effects of new technologies on individuals. In *Nerve* (2016), the protagonists abandon their offline lives for a gamified environment shaped by the demands of social media, transforming themselves into “statistics on a screen dominated by others” ([Gómez et al., 2024](#)). Similar concerns about the digital capture of youth and fascination with avatar-based existence appear in *Ready Player One* (2018), *Sweat* (2020) and *Belle* (2021).

[Sapolsky et al. \(2024\)](#) offers a sobering reflection: humans are “biological machines wobbling on turtles all the way down,” never truly captains of their own ships. Within this cultural context, the popular series landscape has contributed to the stylization of violence that seeks to reconcile artistic sophistication with realism. However, the commodification of narratives rooted in real suffering – particularly when marketed for entertainment – remains ethically contentious ([Serrano Sánchez et al., 2024](#)).

2. Materials and methods

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretative design situated within the traditions of cultural and media studies ([Denzin and Lincoln, 2018](#); [Flick et al., 2018](#)), aimed at exploring the aesthetic, narrative and ethical dimensions of contemporary audiovisual productions in the streaming era in the case study of *the Adolescence* series. Qualitative approaches are particularly suitable for analyzing meaning-making processes in media texts, as they allow for an in-depth and contextualized understanding of cultural artifacts within their broader social, political and technological environments ([Silverman et al., 2020](#)). This orientation enables the identification of complex postmodern narrative features – such as moral ambiguity, aesthetic ambivalence and representations of adolescence – that would be difficult to capture through quantitative measures alone.

The study follows a case-based thematic analysis combining textual analysis, visual semiotics and interpretative synthesis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Rose *et al.*, 2016). This approach facilitates the systematic identification of recurrent patterns and aesthetic strategies while maintaining sensitivity to the specificities of each case. Case selection was conducted using purposive sampling (Patton *et al.*, 2015). The analysis considered primary sources (audiovisual texts) and paratextual materials (official posters, trailers and promotional campaigns), as well as secondary sources (critical reviews, scholarly articles and public audience commentary). This multi-source approach ensured data triangulation (Yin *et al.*, 2018), thereby enhancing the interpretive validity. Although limited to one case, the series was selected because it exemplifies current global trends in the representation of adolescence and mental health in streaming culture.

The analytical process was conducted in three interrelated stages. First, a close reading and visual analysis of the series *Adolescence* was conducted, focusing on narrative structure, characterization, cinematography and symbolic motifs, with particular attention to the articulation of ethical tensions and moral dilemmas. Second, thematic coding was performed (Braun and Clarke, 2019), identifying recurring patterns such as the “cute–macabre” duality, the banalization of monstrosity and portrayals of adolescent mental health crises. Finally, a cross-case comparative synthesis was undertaken to highlight convergences and divergences across the corpus, enabling the formulation of broader theoretical insights into the representation of adolescence and violence in streaming media.

The analysis was structured around three research questions (RQ):

RQ1. How does the series *Adolescence* construct otherness?

RQ2. What narrative, visual, symbolic and rhetorical strategies express educational disenchantment among minors?

RQ3. What role do technological tools play in discourse formation?

To increase the reliability of the findings, the coding process involved four independent coders, all of whom were academics and practitioners specializing in communication, media studies and film analysis. Prior to the main analysis, the coders jointly developed and refined a shared coding framework, which was tested on a pilot subset of the materials to ensure intercoder consistency. Discrepancies were resolved through iterative discussions until a consensus was reached. This collaborative process not only strengthened the robustness of the coding but also reduced potential researcher bias, aligning with the best practices for qualitative rigor in social sciences (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The thematic coding process followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase model, combining inductive and theory-driven approaches. During the open-coding stage, recurrent elements of visual and narrative construction were identified and grouped into preliminary categories. These included, among others, ambivalence between empathy and spectacle, banalization of monstrosity, parental impotence and institutional fragility and digital mediation of guilt and control. Through axial coding, these categories evolved into higher-order themes such as “ethical ambivalence,” “the cute–macabre duality,” “commodified suffering” and “the postmodern dissolution of innocence.” The coders independently highlighted signs and symbolic patterns – such as mirrors, screens, toys and long takes – that repeatedly linked vulnerability with latent violence.

These codes and categories were subsequently refined through iterative comparison and consensus-building among the four coders to ensure coherence and interpretive depth. The process revealed cross-cutting patterns connecting aesthetic form and ethical content, particularly the visual oscillation between comfort and horror, the normalization of

surveillance and the transformation of childhood symbols into emblems of anxiety. Overall, the coding results underscored how *Adolescence* constructs an ambivalent moral landscape in which empathy and discomfort coexist, offering insight into the ethical tensions underpinning contemporary streaming narratives.

The interpretive claims were situated within established theoretical models from media ethics (Ward *et al.*, 2020), postmodern film studies (Lyotard *et al.*, 1984; Hutcheon *et al.*, 2002) and youth representation scholarship (Buckingham *et al.*, 2008). Triangulation across textual, visual and paratextual evidence, combined with cross-checking against prior empirical research published in high-impact journals, further reinforced the credibility of the analysis.

Ethical considerations adhered to international academic standards for research involving publicly available cultural content (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). No direct human participation was involved and all intellectual contributions were appropriately acknowledged. The analytical stance remained critical yet respectful of the creators' work, balancing interpretative depth with fidelity to the texts. Reflexive awareness of the researcher's positionality, now widely emphasized in qualitative social research (Berger *et al.*, 2015), informed all stages of the study.

3. Results

The series is divided, in chronological order, into the evolution of the murder case of a teenage girl by Jamie Miller (Oween Cooper), a "normal" 13-year-old boy. The word "normal" is fundamental in this series. In this regard, the opening credits of the miniseries are sinister, as they show images of children, apparently ordinary and innocent, accompanied by terrifying music. According to the mythologist Cirlot *et al.* (1992, p. 137), "Children instinctively reject all mixed and impure colors, because for them these mean nothing."

Cirlot (*op. cit.*) suggests that Blake's notion of "progress as God's punishment" encapsulates the tragic paradox of human development: the very process of advancing through life entails a continual detachment from the pure, instinctive wholeness of childhood. This transformation mirrors the mythical transition from the "golden age" – an unconscious, paradisiacal state of spontaneity and grace – to a world governed by reason, duty and awareness of mortality. In this sense, Cirlot (*op. cit.*) interprets surrealism as an aesthetic rebellion seeking to restore fragments of that primordial, pre-rational vitality that modern consciousness has irretrievably lost.

As can be seen, *Adolescence* reveals from its title the exploration of a life stage traditionally marked in narrative by its darkness; in this sense, the series injects this phase with a series of ambiguous questions about the hidden reality of those born in the digital age. Thus, it is important to note that *Adolescence* is not based on a true story but on various incidents of youth violence that have occurred in the UK. It is interesting to see how, at the time, Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) – accused by many critics of promoting or eroticizing urban violence – addressed, according to Solorzano (2020, p. 37), something that had already been happening since the early twentieth century in the UK: "a wave of youth terrorism." Beyond sensationalism, Solorzano (2020, p. 15) believed that it was necessary to reflect on what she would call "The Masks of Violence." In this way, it can be seen that this theme is not entirely new, but it is relevant in today's times. That is, what is the violence exercised by ordinary adolescents like nowadays?

The first shot in the series refers to the head seen from behind (Figure 4). The head belongs to a police officer, but the viewer's first contact with this secondary character relates to his identity as a father. Furthermore, the conversation this character has with his son is not even a live dialogue, as he is listening to an audio message sent via a messaging app on his



Figure 4. First image of *Adolescence*
Source: Netflix

smartphone. *Adolescence* raises questions about the difficulty of exploring the psyche of children and teenagers in the digital age. Through the presentation of a character who is a father before he is a police officer, the miniseries reveals a dual foundation that will be present throughout the series: are parents the police of their children? Is there a difference? Is one a father before a police officer? Should one be? The shot is of a head and it is there that *Adolescence* seems to want to unmask the intimate and everyday horror faced in the complex situations depicted in the heads of fathers (in the masculine). This is because the series problematizes or at least reflects on, the upbringing that boys receive in the digital age. Thus, this opening shot establishes the narrative trigger of the series: a father deeply concerned about his son yet unaware – as later episodes reveal – of the complex social and cultural circumstances that shape the boy's world.

Here, *Adolescence* introduces more than just the parenthood/police duality; it establishes a problem of miscommunication. Indeed, this miscommunication occurs through a technological medium (which is another theme that will be present in the series). In just one scene, *Adolescence* has presented all its frameworks: parent-child miscommunication, the educational and cultural struggles of any ordinary teenage boy (the boy's family is working class) in the West, the surveillance and unmasking of juvenile wrongdoing in the digital age and the stress adults feel toward a world slipping out of their grasp: social media.

In this sense, the series' mechanisms for introducing the nightmarish into the everyday life of an ordinary family are striking: in the first episode, we see the father's plumbing van (which has "friendly, reliable and professional" written on it) surrounded by armed police and in the last episode, we see that the van has been spray-painted with the word "Pedophile" (Figure 5). Thus, *Adolescence* also focuses on how the unmasking of childhood horror leads to a hell that leaves collateral victims: the family. The two images in Figure 5 illustrate that Jaimie is not portrayed as the victim of a dysfunctional or abusive family environment.

On the contrary, he is the son of caring, middle-class and affectionate parents. Yet, despite these apparent safety nets, the narrative delivers a sharp critique of the family institution: love and affection alone are not sufficient to prevent tragedy. In this sense, the series underscores that children's actions can profoundly affect their parents' lives – just as parental actions shape those of their children. Ultimately, *Adolescence* functions as a piercing and unsettling reminder to parents that adolescents, too, belong fully to the human condition, with all its contradictions, darkness and moral complexity.

Fernández-Rodríguez and Romero-Rodríguez (2021, p. 238) predicted this mechanism, common in today's mainstream audiovisual media, which consists of introducing horror into



Figure 5. The pickup truck is a symbol of horror invading the ordinary in the first and fourth episodes
Source: Netflix

everyday life, as can be seen in the series *Chernobyl* (Craig Mazin), where the explosion at the plant (the trigger for the tragedy) is shown from inside a home, with the explosion visible through a window (Figure 6). In other words, it is when “what cannot happen” actually “happens,” when politics “touches” the ordinary, everyday citizen. Thus, as illustrated in Figure 6, horror penetrates the ordinary, intimate and seemingly safe space of the everyday home.

Thus, this episode lays the groundwork – through the lens of thriller and noir – for two questions: First, what has Jaimie done? Second, has he done it? The place where Jaimie is arrested is his room (Figure 7). According to Cirlot *et al.* (1992, p. 233), the room is a “symbol of individuality, of personal thought,” but it also alludes directly to puberty when describing this symbol: “the closed room, lacking windows, can symbolize virginity, according to Frazer or also suggest another kind of isolation. Many rites of confinement accompany puberty in various parts of the world.” The police incursion into Jaimie’s sanctuary once again displays the simulacrum of this character: he is both a killer and a child at the same time (at least until the climax of this episode). Thus, this temple of pubescent in communication is, on the one hand, a lovable space filled with spaceships and stuffed animals, while on the other hand, it is the bedroom of a dangerous killer. Figure 7 captures one of the series’ most powerful simulations: “Who should fear whom?”

The episode is filmed in a single long take (like all the episodes), which is intended to give the chapter a certain hyper-realistic or documentary tone meant to both unsettle and entertain in equal measure. However, Rodríguez Serrano *et al.* (2024, p. 202) argued that, although “nowadays the long take still serves as a marker of authorship and as a supposed guarantee of a film’s quality,” this can sound naive in contemporary audiovisual media given the countless



Figure 6. The narrative triggers of the series Chernobyl from an everyday perspective
Source: HBO Max



Figure 7. Jaimie arrested in his room
Source: Netflix

number of films that include a long take as a guarantee of “formal authorship,” where “the camera climbs, crawls and moves” with the aim of fascinating the audience through an exercise in sensory saturation: “The sensation is that of an imposed narrative, the hammer-blow storytelling that often hides the director’s inability to plan differently or his narcissistic exercise in formal display” (op. cit.).

For this reason, the use of four tremendously choreographed long takes (Netflix emphasized during the series’ promotion on the social network X how the long takes were done, sharing behind-the-scenes curiosities about *Adolescence*) today raises suspicion: Is it a narcissistic display by the directors or, on the contrary, did the story require a long take? In *Adolescence*, the long take only serves to expose, almost pornographically, the devastating feelings of guilt or helplessness experienced by the characters themselves. Even though there is no explicit violence in the series, the camera lingers on the shattered faces of the murdered girl’s parents, her teachers or her classmates, as well as that of the boy responsible. In other words, *Adolescence* bathes itself in the shame and suffering caused by a hyper-realistic approach.

It is common in postmodern audiovisual works to find that plots fall into “idle moments” on which the narrative rests. For example, in *Joker* (2019), the character of the Joker is

written – unlike in other adaptations – from a clinical overexposure, as the character is diagnosed with pseudobulbar affect (which makes him laugh excessively and suddenly), caregiver syndrome with his elderly mother, psychosocial stress (his constant fights) and psychological trauma stemming from childhood abuse ([Viana-Vivanco et al., 2020](#)). In the case of the series being analyzed, the plot does not rest on the character's clinical development (the third episode looks a bit more into this aspect, but the episode's reflections are more social than psychological); on the contrary, time in *Adolescence* rests on bureaucracy (police, educational, clinical) and, ultimately, on the disastrous emotional consequences of Jaimie's murder, both on an emotional, cultural and political level.

In the first episode, police bureaucracy is carried out in a procedural and professional manner, but, on the other hand, many officers seem tense when dealing with an ordinary child, who cries as would be expected of someone his age, who, at least at that point in the series, is a suspected murderer. The questions they ask him are often accompanied in the script by affectionate terms: “sweetheart,” “come on, champ” and “you’re doing very well.” It is clear that one of the main theses of the series lies here: society is not prepared to face the potential monstrosity that may exist in minors. This treatment is repeated in the third episode, in which a child psychologist tries to win over Jaimie's affection with a hot chocolate topped with marshmallows.

The result in that episode, the best of the series, is of great dramatic depth, as it is where the creators explore the character of Jaimie as a simulacrum of the real. In this chapter, Jaimie manipulates with his naïve and childlike image, occasionally revealing his cynicism and violence in surprising ways. Jaimie is a boy who believes that women are inferior to men, who appears to be influenced by dangerous misogynistic ideas he has read on the internet and who, ultimately, has killed a schoolmate. Yet, at the same time, he is not the monster one might expect at first glance: he is afraid of needles, wets himself when he is arrested, feels embarrassed when forced to undress in front of officials and asks the psychologist for affection shortly after yelling at and intimidating her. In this sense, the series raises more questions than answers. Along these lines, [Zizek \(2023, p. 12\)](#) portrayed popular culture, which primarily includes film and television series, as “a machine that records (and confuses) our social and ideological dead ends.”

As [González Requena et al. \(2024, p. 299\)](#) stated, today's dystopian series seek to expose the decline of the democratic or moral values upon which civilization is based, “such as politics, family trust, marital union or the promise of love,” all from a psychotic perspective. In the second episode, we continue to see more police protocols in a school; in the third episode, there is a tense therapy session between Jaimie and a psychologist (Erin Doherty), in which Jaimie manages to frighten the professional. Finally, the fourth episode centers on the series' catharsis: Jaimie's heartbroken father hugs his son's teddy bear. Thus, Jaimie's father undergoes a radical transformation: he goes from trusting his son to experiencing absolute terror and deep disappointment and sadness. On the other hand, institutions – specifically educational and police – are depicted in *Adolescence* as frightened but, at the same time, accustomed to horror. However, if the problem no longer lies within criminal or educational institutions, in the case of Jaimie's family, one perceives total ignorance about what a minor does in their room with a phone.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of *Adolescence* confirms the persistence of postmodern esthetics characterized by ambivalence between the “cute” and the macabre, the banalization of monstrosity and the aestheticization of violence. These findings resonate with [Gerbner et al.'s \(1980\)](#) and [Morgan and Shanahan's \(2010\)](#) theories on the media's capacity to shape social perceptions, but they

recontextualize them in the algorithmically curated streaming ecosystem. The series situates adolescence as a distorted mirror in which innocence coexists with latent threat, thus engaging both young and adult audiences in ethically charged ways that are often contradictory.

The narrative strategy of depicting violence through “ordinary” characters reinforces what [Imbert et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Rodríguez Serrano et al. \(2024\)](#) identify as the dissolution of the boundary between innocence and threat. At the same time, the absence of definitive answers and the predominance of moral ambiguity echo [Žižek’s et al. \(2023\)](#) notion of popular culture as a machine that records rather than resolves social and ideological dead ends. In this sense, the miniseries not only entertains but also embodies cultural confusion in late modernity.

In this sense, *Adolescence* both confirms and challenges [Imbert’s et al. \(2017\)](#) idea of the “pornography of horror.” On one hand, the long takes and hyperrealist focus on devastated faces risk aestheticizing suffering, turning trauma into a consumable spectacle. In contrast, the series resists pure sensationalism by foregrounding institutional fragility and parental impotence, thereby shifting attention from gratuitous violence to the social and ethical structures that fail to contain it. This ambivalence nuances [Žižek’s et al. \(2023\)](#) thesis of popular culture as a machine that merely records ideological dead ends: while *Adolescence* mirrors social impasses, it also provokes reflection on how responsibility is distributed among families, schools and digital cultures. Thus, the findings suggest that streaming narratives not only reproduce the esthetics of cruelty but can also destabilize them by exposing the systemic vulnerabilities behind adolescent violence.

Regarding youth representation, the results align with those of [Masanet and Fedele \(2019\)](#) and [Virós-Martín et al. \(2025\)](#), who emphasized how adolescents are often depicted through stigmatizing tropes linked to mental health, gender and violence. Yet, as [Wang et al. \(2023\)](#) show, such productions can also spark constructive dialogue in families and schools, even if they operate within dramatized and commercial frameworks. *Adolescence*, therefore, exemplifies the tension between emancipatory potential and by foregrounding contemporary problems such as intergenerational disconnection and digital-age vulnerabilities – and the risk of trivialization through the commodification of suffering.

The identification of an aesthetic of ethical ambivalence in *Adolescence* – that constant oscillation between empathy and spectacle – places the educational sphere before an unavoidable challenge: to rethink how teachers engage with the images and narratives that shape their students’ sensibilities. In the streaming era, where emotion often supplants moral judgment and algorithms determine much of cultural exposure, media literacy ceases to be a merely technical skill and becomes a form of ethical awareness. As [Ward et al. \(2020\)](#) warns, the problem does not lie in the images themselves but in the absence of a critical gaze capable of contextualizing their affective power.

According to the European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators ([Redecker and Punie, 2017](#)), media literacy should be understood as a transversal competence that integrates technological, cultural and ethical dimensions. It is not simply about teaching how to use media but about teaching how to read, contextualize and debate them. In line with [Area-Moreira et al. \(2016\)](#), media literacy must be oriented toward critical emancipation rather than limited to mastering digital tools.

[Cabero-Almenara and Palacios-Rodríguez \(2020\)](#) expand this vision by conceptualizing teachers’ digital competence as a reflective practice that articulates technical knowledge, social sensitivity and ethical commitment. Training teachers along these lines involves three complementary levels. First, denaturalizing form – learning to recognize how framing, color and sound guide viewers’ empathy and shape the boundary between identification and critical distance. Second, distinguishing between representation and endorsement – so that

violence or suffering is not mistaken for aesthetic legitimation or fascination with filmed pain. Finally, mediating the impact of viewing – acknowledging that media education also entails caring for the emotions that arise in the classroom, providing interpretive contexts and facilitating closure that transforms initial affective responses into reflection and learning. Only through such ethical and emotional mediation can teachers turn audiovisual experiences into opportunities for personal and collective growth.

Initial and ongoing teacher education should, therefore, systematically incorporate modules on media ethics and digital storytelling, including case studies, analyses of contemporary series and films and reflective exercises on teaching practices. Collaborative spaces such as those described by Buckingham *et al.* (2008) and later updated by Pérez-Tornero and Tayie (2022) – where media literacy is conceived as a cultural, democratic and civic practice – can foster interdisciplinary dialogue and the creation of professional learning communities. In this sense, media literacy ceases to be a peripheral appendix of the curriculum and becomes a core axis of professional competence.

Finally, the political reception of the series illustrates this duality. The UK Government's decision to distribute it free of charge in schools underscores both its cultural impact and the unresolved ethical debate on the limits between pedagogy and spectacle (El País *et al.*, 2025; Starmer *et al.*, 2025). The series' circulation thus places streaming platforms as active cultural agents that shape not only entertainment but also public discourse on adolescence, violence and ethics.

The study shows that *Adolescence* constructs an ambivalent representation of adolescence as both fragile and threatening, reinforcing the duality of innocence and monstrosity. Its hyperrealist esthetics aestheticize adolescent suffering while exposing institutional impotence (familial, educational and police) in confronting youth subjectivity in digital contexts. By doing so, the series illustrates how streaming culture transforms violence and trauma into consumable cultural products that oscillate between ethical provocation and commercial spectacle.

These findings call for a rethinking of youth representation theories by integrating postmodern aesthetic ambivalence, the “pornography of horror” (Fernández-Rodríguez and Romero-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2021; Imbert *et al.*, 2017) and the global circulation of streaming imaginaries. This study contributes to media ethics scholarship by highlighting how narrative ambiguity and aesthetic seduction function as ethical challenges in contemporary audiovisual production (Ward *et al.*, 2020).

The most pressing dimension concerns ethics. *Adolescence* demonstrates the risks of aestheticizing violence and mental illness, potentially trivializing real suffering. By commodifying tragedy, the series reveals the fine line between artistic representation and its exploitation. This underscores the need for stronger ethical codes in audiovisual production, particularly when drawing inspiration from recognizable social traumas. The challenge for contemporary media is to balance creativity and commercial success with responsibility toward vulnerable subjects and audiences.

Ultimately, the analysis suggests that *Adolescence* exemplifies what could be termed an “esthetics of ethical ambivalence,” where the tension between sensationalism and critique becomes constitutive of the narrative itself. This conceptualization goes beyond Imbert's notion of a mere “pornography of horror,” because it accounts for the simultaneous reproduction and destabilization of cruelty in contemporary streaming. By naming and theorizing this ambivalence, this study contributes to ongoing debates on the ethics of audiovisual culture, offering a lens that future research can apply to other teen series across platforms and contexts.

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