

Streaming Post-feminism

Young women and the Netflix Original teen romance

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Genre Reinvention

Prioritising what was considered a worn-out format, since 2018 Netflix have developed highly successful original romantic series and films, targeted to appeal to teenage girls. I consider contemporary viewing habits of young female spectators and to what degree these programmes are breaking the mould of the romance genre.



Post-feminist relationships

These young female protagonists pursue romance with hyperactive fervour, demonstrating resilience in the face of setbacks and enforcing the post-feminist ideal that young women should control their own narrative. At times the girls seem to reverse the exploitative power in sexual relations, with predatory advances as Elle tells Noah 'I'm gonna treat you like my own personal jungle gym' in *The Kissing Booth 2*, catfishing in *Sierra Burgess is a Loser* and non-consensual sex instigated by Daphne in *Bridgerton*.



Narrative disruption

Classic romcoms follow a 3-act structure: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy finds girl. However, trilogies of *To All the Boys...* and *The Kissing Booth* place the neat resolutions of their first films in peril again, introducing new romantic complications for their second films before ending with reinstated original couples. The focus shifts from instigating to maintaining the relationship. These narrative backflips create interest for the next instalment of the franchise whilst keeping the satisfaction of happily ever after at the end of each film.

Diversity

Fifty-two percent of Netflix films and series from 2018/2019 had girls or women in starring roles and thirty-five percent of all Netflix leads during that time came from underrepresented groups. Alice Wu believes writing and directing *The Half of It* for Netflix gave her greater freedom with plot and casting, showcasing a nerdy 17-year-old gay Asian girl, rarely seen as a lead in romance. Laurie Nunn's *Sex Education*, possibly one of the most sex-positive youth programmes ever, was pitched to Netflix as 'teenagers in their own utopia' and prominently examines race and gender politics.



Why do young women watch bad romcoms?

While Mulvey identified visual pleasure in the gaze, recent Netflix Originals *Emily in Paris* and *Riverdale* unite viewers on social media as a community of hate-watchers. *Rotten Tomatoes* gives *The Kissing Booth* a critics' rating of 15%, yet it is thought to be one of the most watched new films of the past three years.

Young female spectatorship

Ofcom's 2020 survey suggests that young women watched mainly on their phones during quarantine. The viewing experience is, therefore, intimate and controlled: Visch, Tan & Molenaar's research indicates that the closer the viewer is to the screen, the more the experience is perceived as an 'alternative to reality'.



Stars: Is Netflix creating a new form of the Hollywood Studio system, with leading actors playing similar roles in a range of in-house pictures? Noah Centineo has been the male lead in five Netflix Original romcoms between 2018 and 2020 and gained nearly 13 million Instagram followers in the weeks after the launch of *To All the Boys...* Regé-Jean Page added 5 million after *Bridgerton* premiered, while Lily Collins of *Emily in Paris* now has over 23 million followers.