



**UNIVERSIDADE DA CORUÑA**

**FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA**

**DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOXÍA INGLESA**

**GRAO EN INGLÉS: ESTUDOS LINGÜÍSTICOS E LITERARIOS**

**The Representation of  
Adolescence in Media: Puberty,  
Gender and Sexuality through  
*Big Mouth***

**Daniela Pensado García**

**Tutor: Eduardo Barros Grela**

**Ano académico 2022-2023**

**BARROS  
GRELA  
EDUARDO -**



# Table of Contents

Abstract .....	iii
Contextualization .....	1
Introduction .....	3
1. Adolescence .....	7
1.1 Defining Adolescence .....	7
1.1.1 Puberty .....	8
1.2 Adolescent Development .....	9
1.2.1 Physical & Hormonal Development.....	9
1.2.2 Mental & Emotional Development .....	10
2. Gender & Sexuality .....	12
2.1 Gender .....	12
2.1.1 Gender Identity.....	12
2.1.2 Gender Roles .....	14
2.2 Sexuality.....	15
2.2.1 Sexual Education.....	15
2.2.2 Sexual Orientation.....	16
3. Representation of Adolescence in Media.....	18
4. Representation of Gender & Sexuality in Media .....	21
4.1 Representation of Gender in Media .....	21
4.2 Representation of Sexuality in Media .....	23
5. Theory analysis: <i>Big Mouth</i> .....	26
5.1 Adolescence Analysis .....	26
5.2 Gender & Sexuality Analysis .....	29
5.3 Representation Analysis.....	33
Conclusions .....	38
Works Cited .....	40

## Abstract

This study focuses on the modern media representation of gender, sexuality, and adolescence development. These complex issues are commonly failed to be contemplated, understood or even disclose in contemporary educational, institutional and social realms. Additionally, the role of cinematic and media portrayals as representative of current sociocultural events have touched these intricate topics; however, these productions offered a rather simplistic, unauthentic and brief portrayal of gender and sexuality, barely discussing teenage development nor puberty. For this reason, this dissertation will concentrate on the representation of said issues through the American adult animated coming-of-age sitcom *Big Mouth* (2017-); mainly due to its recent popularity, contemporary ‘quality’ style and good approach to the topics previously mentioned. The central aim is to analyse the information compiled in articles, journals and published books surrounding the topics about genre and sexuality with the series’ approach and consequent representation of societal standpoints while presenting, as well as normalizing, the taboo issues of teenagers in an original manner. Furthermore, findings will provide evidence on how contemporary academic knowledge taken from recent studies about the concepts of gender, sexuality and teenage development can be relocated in a simpler media outlet to portray the issues of the youth, to educate all levels of society and raise awareness about its causes, implications and problems.

**Keywords:** adolescence, animation, *Big Mouth*, film studies, gender studies, LGBTQ+, media representation, puberty, sexuality studies.

## Contextualization

Adolescence could be the most troublesome and confusing stage in human life. It is the time when children enter adulthood, not only shown by the obvious corporal and mental changes, but also for the discovery of the inner and outer self in society. Therefore, adolescence could be defined as the developmental transformation point shared by each individual. However, human beings have faced this stage for centuries, yet every teenage experience differs from others. While pubertal hormone alterations transform the body, it also affects mental and emotional states, incomparable to any other.

As previously mentioned, self-discovery and outer awareness play a key role in teenage experiences. Taking away the sugar-coated vision of early days, adolescence gives teenagers an opportunity to transition a brand-new sociocultural world. Nevertheless, there are some intricate yet substantial concepts that need to be explored. For instance, concepts of gender, sexuality and puberty.

Gender, sexuality and puberty have been taboo topics for centuries. Even though there has been an improving situation on parental and institutional education, teenagers still struggle to understand and challenge themselves in relation to said topics. Living in a binary cis-heteropatriarchal society, it is common to perceived gender inequalities and lack of sexual education and orientations. As a result, this problematic will continuously evolve and persist through succeeding generations, jeopardizing the senses of identity of millions of teenagers worldwide. However, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has experienced a lot of transformations, namely social progression in the normalization and antidiscrimination of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. Due to this standardisation, most teenagers can understand, empathise and relate with non-normative individuals.

It seems like adolescence is not only a stage of hardships and transformations, but also a time of realisation and acceptance. Even so, the evolution of teenage transformations, alongside gender and sexuality issues are hardly ever discussed in media. Accordingly, cinematic representation reflects societal attitudes and can help youth to connect and empathize with countless experiences and situations, ultimately recognizing and embracing themselves through them.

In fact, it is only now that teenager problematics, alongside the topics of gender, sexuality and puberty are being discussed in a rather real and honest form in ‘quality’ media such in streaming services. For instance, Netflix series such as *Sex Education* (2019-), *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020) and *Big Mouth* (2017-) are capable to bring a different, yet authentic perspective on these topics. In particular, *Big Mouth* aims to represent in a humorous and explicit manner the difficulties of puberty, illustrating the confusing world of gender, sexuality and adolescence through ever-developing characters, cutaway gags and remarkable intertextuality and convention codes.

## Introduction

Adolescence is considered to be one of the most complex and important stages for humanity. This “critical developmental period” (Curtis, 1) begins with the onset of puberty, which will gradually transform both the body (e.g., physical and physiological changes) and the brain (e.g., mental and emotional changes). This phase affects all human beings, for what could be viewed as a collective experience shared by a large group of people at one time. However, there is an unequal progression or set of developmental changes for everyone, leading to the distinction of adolescence as both an individual and joint chapter in the eventual transition to adulthood. Apart from its complexity and importance, adolescence can also be described as a stage of constant confusion. This confusion mostly appears when questioning the “self” involving others, hence creating our personalities and shaping our identities. Because of this, topics regarding gender and sexuality first begin to be explored and addressed during this period.

The subjects of gender and sexuality are being constantly transformed by its progressive discussion, as by the ever-shifting gendered and cultural standpoints. Due to its variable and subjective nature, gender and sexuality matters are still misleading when deciding whether to educate them on a traditional and conservative viewpoint or a more progressive and liberal one. Although external education may touch on these issues objectively, reality shows a visible lack of information about gender and sexuality topics, or a rather limited one. Consequently, adolescents will present a lack of knowledge, which will invalidate the past and present discrimination of marginalized minorities, as well as the possibility of jeopardizing their own identities and others.

Due to the difficulty in comprehending the transformational turmoil of adolescence, as well as the complexity to grasp issues concerning gender and queer studies for better

integration in society, the contemporary western media representation of both topics has always been hard to approach.

To begin with, adolescence has been portrayed in films since the 1930s; growing in production in the '80s and gaining an enormous amount of popularity in the '90s and early 2000s. Most of these representations were mainly based on the cultural dynamics conceived at the time, allowing audiences an opportunity to understand adolescents. However, portrayals of teenagers were often ill-depicted, creating a negative impression for this group, later described as “teenage stereotypes.” Additionally, the bleak-painted picture of adolescents in media would continue to be illustrated to this day, not only affecting the external perception of society, but also the perception of the self and adolescence as a whole. In fact, adolescence and schools’ portrayal in media is perceived as “unequivocally negative” (Butler, 396) by adolescents themselves.

Similarly, gender and sexuality issues have been undisclosed in media until the 1960s and 1970s, coinciding with the gay liberation, sexual and feminist counterculture revolutions. Before these revolts took place, feminist and LGBTQ+ media representation was scrutinized under the social conservatism of the time. For example, the development of feminist films started to combat the long-time perpetuation of women stereotypes, as well as to give them a protagonist space without falling into the “male gaze” depiction. Nowadays, an accurate portrayal of women in films has grown exponentially. Likewise, LGBTQ+ portrayals suffered transformations through time. Regarding film representation, there was an interesting evolution from the maniac psychopath gay (limited to cis-male homosexuality) to the overly stereotyped gay man used for ridicule, progressing into the “token gay” character used both in films and television series. However, in the last two decades, the representation of the LGBTQ+ community has

improved by including gender and sexual diversity, as well as conveying and validating queer realities.

As previously described, the media representation of adolescence and teenagers, alongside gender and sexuality issues has evolved favourably from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Due to the growth and recognition obtained, it is easier to find accurate depictions of adolescence, feminist and queer realities in media. In particular, the animated American TV show *Big Mouth* (2017~) could be considered one of the most relatable and explicit animated series displaying these topics to the public.

Nick Kroll and Andrew Goldberg created *Big Mouth* back in 2017. This adult animation show presents the real-life experiences of the creators throughout the characters of Andrew and Nick (Goldberg and Kroll alter-egos, respectively) alongside their school peers during their stages of puberty and adolescence. Significantly, the coming-of-age sitcom series focuses on the sexual and corporeal development during the pubescent period. Overall, *Big Mouth* aims to portray an insight into teenagers' mental and physical struggles with puberty in a humorous style, to validate and embrace them.

Considering all the above-mentioned issues, the following dissertation will analyse the representation of adolescence, gender and sexuality matters in cinematic media, taking the TV show *Big Mouth* (2017~) as the case in point. The principal purpose of this end-of-degree project is to examine the portrayals of the previously disclosed topics to discern a possible evolution in media depiction through a contemporary western cultural viewpoint. In addition, the dissertation will also explore the illustrations of the Netflix animated series to evaluate the faithful modern portrayal of adolescence, gender and sexuality issues. Therefore, all depicting methods and tools will be considered for analysis, providing examples if possible (i.e., through episodes, characters, scenes, etc.). In contemplation of achieving the stated objectives, a former scanning of the series'



episodes has been carried out. In this case, concerning the extension of the dissertation, only the first four seasons (i.e., 41 episodes) of the show have been reviewed.

The dissertation analysis will consist of the research and study of the issues at hand. First, it will provide information about research studies concerning adolescence (i.e., definition, puberty, physical, physiological, mental and emotional developments) and gender and sexuality issues (i.e., gender identity, gender roles, sexual education, sexual orientation, etc.). Following, an examination on visual media representation of adolescence, gender and sexuality matters will be conducted (i.e., first to latest portrayals, etc.). To conclude, all the data obtained will be analysed through the *Big Mouth*'s series, later providing conclusions and bibliographical references.

# 1. Adolescence

## 1.1 Defining Adolescence

Adolescence could be briefly described as a “critical development period” (Curtis 1). However, the term englobes a greater number of simplistic and elaborated definitions. Conventionally, adolescence could be understood as a unique human process. Oftentimes considered a moody, angsty and confusing stage, the transitional process takes several years of neural and bodily growing pains. As a result, brain development becomes stronger, faster and more sophisticated. Even though this explanation is correct and valid, it is needed a more factual definition comprising adolescence as a whole.

To begin with, adolescence entails a particular phase in the developmental life cycle of humans. The term ‘adolescence’ has generated plenty of meanings and chronologies throughout history. Although there is no correct nor incorrect form of defining adolescence, it cannot be understated to a single definition.

One description defines adolescence as an ever-evolving "theoretical construct informed through physiologic, psychological, temporal and cultural lenses" (Curtis 1). Besides, it is also considered a "complex, multi-system transitional process involving progression from the social dependency of childhood into adult life, with the goal and expectation of fulfilled developmental potential, personal agency and social accountability" (Greenfield Keller, Fuligni & Maynard, 2003; Graber & Brookes-Gunn, 1996; Modella & Goodman, 1990; Steinberg, 2002 qtd. in Curtis 1), or a "synthesis of profound corporal development with the evolution of a matured existential essence and integration of the nascent self within the family, community and culture" (Arnett, 2002; Berzonsky, 2000; Blos, 1979 qtd. in Curtis, 2).

Accordingly, there is another side to take into consideration for the construction of adolescence, and that is culture. Adolescents are “simultaneously biological and cultural beings” (Greenfield et al., 2003; Swanson et al., 2003 qtd. in Curtis 2). This interpretation not only does reflect the collective experiences of adolescence, but also demonstrates adolescence as a cultural construct. This cultural input may vary in different contexts and affect the construction of adolescence. For instance, its chronological definition. Usually described as the time between "the onset of puberty to the establishment of social independence" (Steinberg, 2014 qtd. in Curtis 1), the most commonly used chronologic definition of adolescence comprehends the ages of 10 to 18.

Overall, the definition of adolescence varies from the perspective given, although with no inconsistencies. Therefore, it would be appropriate to contemplate adolescence as an evolutionary development, acknowledging its multiple variations in meaning and chronology by "international and cross-cultural commonalities" (Arnett & Galambos, 2003 qtd. Curtis 3).

#### 1.1.1 Puberty

Another essential feature of adolescence is the process of puberty. Puberty begins with hormonal shifts (e.g., activation of the achenial, gonadal and growth chemicals), affecting human behaviour, hair and organs growth, sexual pleasures, body hydration, etc., necessary for our development. Apart from the evident gradual physical changes, the stage of puberty is a salient factor in the brain structural development during adolescence (i.e., regions implicating emotion, social processing and self-awareness). Therefore, puberty "influences social-emotional processing via psychological effects on self-image and self-awareness, as well as effects on the structure and functions of the brain" (Burnett, 2011).

Even though considered the most characteristic trait of adolescence, there is no consensus on the definition of puberty. In fact, puberty “is not an event or unitary process” (Dorn et al., 2006), but actually “comprises several distinct processes [...] culminating in reproductive maturity” (Burnett et al., 2011).

## 1.2 Adolescent Development

### 1.2.1 Physical & Hormonal Development

The first indications of physical evolution happen in the stage of ‘early adolescence.’ This phase starts on the onset of puberty, coinciding with the transition to secondary school. At this point, puberty influences corporeal development through accelerated physical and sexual maturation, primarily affecting growth spurt, the development of primary and secondary sex characters and increase sexual libido. Other prominent alterations can be observed through height growth, change in shape, voice variation, acne appearance and the development of sex organs. Ultimately, the physical characteristics of adolescence will lead teenagers to develop into an adult body stature and complete sexual maturation, helping the individual to improve and eventually accept its new physique.

Another salient factor is the adolescent physiologic development. The initial surge of hormones occurs earlier than adolescence, continuing to evolve in puberty. This stage also functions as an endocrinological event with the objective of achieving sexual maturation. In parallel with physical alterations, there are several hormonal changes appearing in puberty. For example, rapid physical growth; sexually dimorphic alterations within the facial and vocal structure, plus physical characteristics; metabolic alterations; the activation of new drives and motivations; sleep variations and an array of social, behavioural and emotional changes. However, all neuroendocrinal changes can only be discern through the physical development of secondary sex characteristics. Additionally,

pubertal hormones directly influence brain activity during social-emotional processing, also impacting cognitive function.

To conclude, physiologic development not only conditions somatic evolution, but also mental and emotional development. Particularly, furthering nudging adolescents to explore and engage in complex social interactions by promoting social adaptation and effective learning.

### 1.2.2 Mental & Emotional Development

To better understand brain activity, it would be appropriate to divide the diverse types of psychological changes. First, mental changes help the teenager to learn better, bringing them a greater understanding of complex emotion (e.g., guilt, shame, pride and jealousy). Secondly, teenagers present a greater activity in the arMPFC region during social cognition related to inner and outer awareness assessments. The adolescent brain also displays unique plasticity, affecting the maturation of neuronal systems (e.g., affective reasoning capacity and impulse control). Lastly, mental activity alterations culminate with the evolution of cognitive changes creates a shift in the adolescent consciousness. In this progression, teenagers will develop both their reflective and abstract thinking, eventually adapting by sophisticating its information-processing and skills-learning ability.

Moreover, it is necessary to understand that adolescence is a “period of acute socio-emotional change” (Burnett, 2011). At this point, teenagers gain an intense development of self-awareness and self-concept, intricately linked to physical and hormonal development. However, there are difficulties the early youth must face. Namely, the stress of pubertal change, school transitions and emerging sexuality.

The initial shared emotional connections of the adolescent begin to shift in puberty. On the one hand, the teenager will start to question family rules and roles, eventually distancing during the independence-seeking process. On the other hand, there is an increased focus on friendships and prioritization of social activities, as well as external acceptance and appearance. Friendship support helps the adolescent to reinforce their existing strengths and weaknesses; alternatively, peer conformity may damage teenagers, especially if corrupted by negative influences. Conjointly, there is a gradual emotional disengagement with the school institution, oftentimes experimenting sensations such as academic competition, social comparison and self-assessment only fuelling the creation of higher standards, decrease in motivation and self-perception. Finally, it is also observed an expansion of open sexual curiosity and its experimentation.

To conclude, it is very amusing to observe that mental growth and emotional changes create such a notable influence on the emotional development of adolescents throughout their teenage years. Ultimately, adolescence is the period of attempting to figure out the persona. Therefore, despite the constant emotional turmoil inherent to puberty, teenagers will establish conscious sexual, ethnic and career identities determined to define both the personal and societal 'self.'

## 2. Gender & Sexuality

It is necessary to understand that gender and sexuality issues are composed of multiple dimensions affecting our lives as an integral part of our identity. Even though cultural norms influence desires and interpersonal behaviours (Rutter, 2014 qtd. in Crooks & Baur 2), people might not be aware of the extent of how much gendered and sexual attitudes and behaviours shape society and particularly adolescents. In this case, assimilating societal expectations of gender and sexuality can make individuals perceive their behaviours and feelings as innate. However, examinations of such issues in other historical periods or cultures display flexible considerations. Consequently, the knowledge of cultural and individual experience assists people as a reminder that there are no universals in gendered and sexual attitudes nor experiences, understanding that the self should ultimately master these matters.

To tackle gender and sexuality in all its fundamental forms, essential information has been extracted from the textbook *Our Sexuality, 13th ed.* (2017) by Robert L. Crooks & Karla Baur, providing an inclusive psychosocial approach to human expressions of gender and sexuality. Ultimately, to fully cover the essential topics displayed in *Big Mouth*, this section will be split into gender and sexuality sections. This fragmentation intends to present the pivotal elements in the most direct and efficient way possible.

### 2.1 Gender

#### 2.1.1 Gender Identity

Historically, sexual assignation at birth was viewed as conforming to defined gender patterns. However, a simplistic consideration of sex and gender is inaccurate, as they entail distinct concepts. Whereas sex refers to “biological femaleness or maleness” (Crooks & Baur, 2017; 117) differentiated by genetic and anatomical sex, gender

“encompasses the behaviours, socially constructed roles, and psychological attributes commonly associated with being male or female.” (pp. 117). Hence, gender refers to psychological and sociocultural characteristics associated with sex (i.e., masculinity and femininity). These labels often limit the expression of certain behaviours for both sexes, perpetuating gender stereotypes based on gender assumptions in social interactions.

To begin with, most people conceive sexual assignation and identity in the first years of age. Nonetheless, that does not mean that gender identity self-awareness will be consistent with biological sex. Gender is a part of identity often presupposed since there is more complexity than to look like a male or female. There are two approaches concerning gender identity self-awareness: prenatal biological processes and social-learning theories.

Sex differentiation is influenced by biological factors, particularly during prenatal development. For instance, biological sex is determined at a chromosomal level by the sperm and ovum, while gonads release hormones that eventually effects physical sex characteristics and reproductive structures. On a separate note, gender identity formation also heavily relies on social exposure of cultural models. Social learning is taught through preconceived notions of gender differences and role expectations from close social influences at an early age. Therefore, young infants develop a firm conditioned gender identity through self-perpetuating reinforcement adhered to certain sociocultural gender norms and assumptions.

Finally, it seems clear that gender identity is both a product of an intrinsic interplay biological and social leaning factors, principally due to the early complex biological understanding of gender-based social interactions and ultimately diverse life experiences.



### 2.1.2 Gender Roles

Gender roles (i.e., “collection of attitudes and behaviours [...] considered normal and appropriate in a specific culture for people of a particular sex” (118)) are often attributed to certain behavioural expectations, which function as stereotypes (i.e., “generalized notion of what a person is like based only on [...] sex, race, religion, ethnic background, or similar criteria.” (141). The most socially accepted are traditional gender-based stereotypes. The prevailing presumptions of men as aggressive, unemotional, independent and dominant beings while women are pictured as non-assertive, emotional, subordinate and nurturing creatures still prevail in Western society, which raises the question on how people learn gender roles.

To shortly answer, gender roles are principally a product of socialization with differences in gender behaviour influenced by social learning and cultural traditions. For this reason, gender-role socialization agents such as parenting, early peer-group involvement, school textbooks and media promote the development and reinforcement of traditional gender-role assumptions and behaviours.

Last but not least, gender-role conditioning profoundly impacts our sexuality, affecting our perception and quality of sexual and intimate relationships. There are certain gender-role assumptions that condition relationships (e.g., women being inherently less sexual than men, men as overtly sexual, men as initiators and women as regulators of sexual intimacy, etc.) resulting in difficulties to experience sexual feelings and emotional development in intimate relationships. Additionally, strict adherence to traditional gender roles limits sexuality expression.

To conclude, rigid gender-role expectations remain inhibiting our growth as multidimensional people since they are socially instructed and interpreted at an early age

through contact with close individuals, social institutions and society in general. Although many people are breaking away from stereotyped gender roles and are learning to fully accept and express themselves, it would be imprudent to underestimate the extent of societal gender-role learning.

## 2.2 Sexuality

### 2.2.1 Sexual Education

For starters, adolescence is a period of exploration with growth in sexual behaviours. Unfortunately, sexual double standards highlight gender differentiation with teenagers facing different conventions of sexual permissiveness, impacting their sexual behaviour. For instance, social reinforcement of stereotypical masculine attitudes are commonly approved while women face more restrictive standards, experiencing ambivalence between overtly sexual behaviours and the preservation of virginity.

Therefore, one essential approach on improving knowledge and behaviour about sexuality is to educate adolescents on its implications and consequences. Even though parental figures try to contribute, most defer sex education to trained individuals, often managing it poorly if not at all. First inquiries about sex should be tackled by having informational and straightforward conversations. As a result, sexual matters will be handled with a sense of easiness and naturalness.

Nonetheless, some topics remain undiscussed unless parents take the initiative, such in common teenage sexual maturation aspects (e.g., menstruation, first ejaculation, orgasms, etc.) As a result, it is preferred that parents be the primary source of sexual information, providing accurate depictions while sharing responsibility. However, teenagers often encounter difficulties in communicating about sex with their progenitors; fearing embarrassment and misunderstandings.

In the United States, studies show that the principal source of sex information for youth comes from friends and the media (Sprecher et al., 2008; 396), which often entails misinformation, traditional gender roles encouragement and pressure to initiate sexual activity. However, positive parental sexual communication can minimize some pitfalls, providing more effective and beneficial input. Besides, social institutions are addressing parental insufficiency and peer inaccuracy through school-based sex education programs. Whereas comprehensive programs offer adolescents broad information on diverse topics (e.g., sexual maturation, contraception, abortion, STDs, etc.), abstinence-only programs instruct youth to abstain from sex until marriage.

Ultimately, studies have shown that comprehensive sex education increases safer sex, providing more accurate data about contraception, not precipitating earlier sexual activity nor increasing the number of adolescents' sexual partners, unlike abstinence-only programs.

### 2.2.2 Sexual Orientation

The complexity and ambiguity of sexual orientation definition results from various combinations of four main components: engaging in sexual behaviour, feeling of sexual desires and romantic feelings towards men, women, both or neither – or defined sexual orientation identification. However, even scientists fail to use a consistent criterion for categorizing subjects into sexual orientations. Thus, it is most valid to consider sexual orientation as a constantly fluid multidimensional phenomenon to avoid simplistic definitions.

There are numerous manners to explain the development of sexual attraction. Firstly, psychosocial theories relate to life incidents, parenting patterns and psychological attributes affecting sexual identification. Secondly, biological research concludes that

there is not definitive nor consistent answers for a correlation due to the extreme complexity of behavioural patterns and sexual orientation characteristics. Overall, it appears appropriate to consider sexual orientation as “dynamic interactions among various biological, environmental, and cultural factors” (274).

On a separate note, homosexuality has been negatively viewed according to Western tradition. The stigmatizing anti-homosexual attitudes towards non-conventional behaviours and identities is known as homophobia. The causes are varied; for instance, the reflection of the poorest level of diversity acceptance, extreme rigid traditional gender role identification and conformity to masculine stereotypical norms. Nevertheless, these individual attitudes can change through experience, education and closer contact with LGBTQ+ individuals.

Moreover, sexual orientation exposure has become an issue for queer people. Additionally, acknowledging, accepting and finally disclosing sexuality can be especially problematic for teenagers, frequently lacking support and guidance during these confusing stages. Sometimes even receiving hostility, bullying and rejection that negatively affects their psychological well-being. Despite said drawbacks, many teenagers effectively develop a positive sexual identity as long as they feel a sense of belonging and acceptance from the community.

To conclude, sexual orientation has demonstrated to be a complex and ambiguous issue due to its various definitions and determinants. Besides, the sociocultural issues regarding expectations and attitudes are no less impressive to explore. Nevertheless, sexual orientation issues keep attracting confronting attitudes that may jeopardise the physical and mental health of queer individuals. Hence, it is vital to continue acknowledging LGBTQ+ identities and issues by educating ourselves on how to create a favourable relation with non-conventional sexuality matters.

### 3. Representation of Adolescence in Media

Adolescence is a complex and critical stage of human development, with cinematic parallels displaying the character of the adolescent to comprehend its behaviours, motivations and psyche. Theoretically, ‘teenage’ films are defined as a film genre targeted at teenagers based on their special interests; however, adolescents may not be the only expected audiences in these films, or even needs to appeal teenagers at all. Categorically, teenagers have been object of ruthless cinematic exploitation, becoming objects of dishonest agitational portrayals and subjects of mass film consumption.

To begin with, 1920s and 1930s films were only implicated in the restriction of ‘unacceptable behaviours’ young people could potentially emulate. These types of ‘clean teen’ films often showed adolescents addressing teenage problems with optimism and energy, which were very well-received in the moment (e.g., *The Wizard of Oz* (1939)). Contrastingly, there was another group of movies concerned with teenagers’ social problems, termed ‘juvenile delinquency.’ The subgenre consisted of showcasing young poor boys being preyed to gangs, adding the explicit moral message of taking care of kids to avoid criminality (e.g., *City across the River* (1949)).

Moreover, the socio-cultural context of the 1950s was one of widespread anxiety and unrest. At this point, due to the threat ‘teen life’ entailed for the general public, juvenile delinquency films resurfaced adding more restless and anxious characters, capturing their existential anguish and deep anxiety (e.g., *Rebel without a Cause* (1955)).

Apart from the growing popularity of the ‘teen rebel films,’ the late 1950s brought back the ‘clean teen pictures.’ Still targeted at teenagers, the genre pursued parental approval by featuring youths without rebellious and conflicted attitudes (e.g., *Gidget* (1959)). Other genres like ‘melodrama’ started to reflect deeper into “adult” adolescent issues,

highlighting family and social failure for hyper-sensitive teens in need for an identity (e.g., *East of Eden* (1955)). In essence, the 1950s provided a vast range of teen films fitting the diverse attitudes and tastes of teenagers at the time.

Following the decade of the 1960s, the social and cultural atmosphere underwent dramatic changes that culminated in rebellion and “counterculture”. The ‘60s teen films considered these new cultural contexts, incorporating the themes of drug use, hippy pacifism and a new teenage rebellion. They also portrayed the protest background, focusing on collective action in a political and psychological approach, as well as the synchronic sexual liberation and feminist movement, translated into a more open teen sexual depiction (e.g., *Last Summer* (1969)).

Alternatively, the 1980s provided more raunchy, vulgar and outrageous descriptions on teen sexuality portrayals with ‘sex comedies’ centring ‘losing’ virginity as an inevitable “rite of passage” (e.g., *Porky’s* (1981)). Nonetheless, other subgenres were set out to portray and explore teenage problems with an earnest concern, representing the typical socio-cultural American youth of the time (e.g., *The Breakfast Club* (1985)). Moreover, a number of films decided to explore a much darker and distressing picture of the problems and anxieties of teenagers with ‘comedy-dramas,’ presenting let-down teenage rebels trying to find a sense of belonging and identity, set out to defy adults’ social order and eventually destined to hopelessness (e.g., *The Outsiders* (1983)). Correspondingly, other ‘teen dramas’ offered more disturbing images of the American youth, portraying adolescents as nihilistic and deranged (e.g., *Heathers* (1988)).

The 1990s teen films opened with a picture of an uncertain and confused generation never experienced before. These unresolved feelings were captured by ‘comedy’ films, often showing interesting insights of the inner lives of the characters departing from standardized clichés. Also, they continued to portray themes of coming-of age, sexual

discovery, identification and socialization, depicting young people becoming victims of their social context (e.g., *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995)), as well as adolescent love and sex as problematic (e.g., *Election* (1999)).

Last but not least, the new century kept renovating former teen film cycles. For instance, the “supernatural” element became the basic structural element of the plot for some films for the first time (e.g., *Harry Potter* saga (2001-2011)), tackling the unsettling concerns of young people, telling stories as a dose of encouraging empowerment to confront later-in-life issues. Additionally, the end of a decade saw a resurgence of the “gross” sex comedies, focusing on the young male characters losing their virginity with no limit to vulgarity (e.g., *American Pie* (1999)). Additionally, 2000s teen films found other forms to express the common concerns about youth roaming for integration and love (e.g., *The Perks of being a Wildflower* (2012)).

All things considered; the new century has brought an abundant number of depictions of youth in films. For the first time, teenagers could be both the object and subject of representation. Moreover, the development of teenage portrayal has significantly improved, digressing from old-fashioned negative elements associated with adolescence to an earnest consideration and representation of teenagers. Nonetheless, it is still necessary to progress in the production of accurate youth representation. As Shary T. states in “Teen Movies. American Youth on Screen” (qtd. *American Teen Pics* 65): “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”.

## 4. Representation of Gender & Sexuality in Media

### 4.1 Representation of Gender in Media

Since the early days, gender roles have been portrayed in films according to traditional and patriarchal stereotypes, only recently mitigated by more flexible and well-developed characters. To begin with, the 1930s economic crisis had challenged the roles of women. Although at service of traditional roles, women were portrayed as smart and independent (e.g., *Blonde Venus* (1932)); however, in a limited manner, having to reaffirm the traditional values of gender expectations (e.g., *Stella Dallas* (1937)). Compared to the complex females, male characters appeared in violent films to showcase male strength and virility (e.g., *Scarface* (1932)).

Moreover, 1950s characters largely embodied traditional gender stereotypes, with subtle variations on female portrayals. On the one hand, there was the sensual complex woman, often described as vulnerable and innocent (e.g., *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953)). On the other hand, there was the sweet, puritan yet strong and unconventional woman providing security for her family (e.g., *Tea for Two* (1950)). All in all, both figures subtly hinted a foreshadowing subversion of the dominant gender ideologies.

At the beginning of the 1960s, even though stereotypical gender reinforcement, central female characters exhibited more complexity, creativeness and independence (e.g., *Mary Poppins* (1964)). Conversely, Hollywood continued to feature male dominance as capable of curing and restoring women (e.g., *Marnie* (1964)). Within a few years, despite new feminist waves had highlighted gender inequality issues, younger generations disregarded gender role awareness in favour of violent portrayals (e.g., *Bonnie & Clyde* (1967)). Alongside violence, sexual liberation found its cinematic expression in unprecedented



revolutionary films which effectively broke traditional patriarchal attitudes (e.g., *The Graduate* (1967)).

Moreover, former ‘counterculture’ and feminist movements contributed to break established traditional gender roles in the 1970s. For instance, women now played pivotal independent characters for the development of the plot while men were represented through ambiguous and flawed characters (e.g., *Chinatown* (1974)). As a consequence, gender and sexual relationships developed difficulties in positively defining their roles and identities (e.g., *Cabaret* (1972)).

Furthermore, the new wave of the 1980s capitalist liberalism matched with a renewed emphasis on traditional values. As a consequence, cinematic productions reflected a prominent display of sex linked to violence, exploiting women through the ‘male gaze’ (e.g., *Body Double* (1984)). However, other ‘80s gender films provided alternative images reflecting the dramatic impact of men physical and psychological violence on women (e.g., *The Accused* (1988)), as well as the complex portrayal of gender roles and sexuality (e.g., *Blue Velvet* (1986)).

The 1990s experimented both a consolidation and evolution in gender identities. Whereas women were integrating their traditional roles with professional and political images, men tended to show sensitivity and self-awareness while preserving classical stereotypes. Additionally, new film cycles displayed the solidarity through close female friendships against the violent male world (e.g., *Thelma & Louise* (1991)), as well as reviewing consumptive feminism (e.g., *Pretty Woman* (1990)). Additionally, men were exposed under unbalanced and shattered images (e.g., *Fight Club* (1999)). Overall, 1990s productions crossed invisible traditional gender lines through its characters.

Amidst the 2010s, cinematic gender inequality continued to emerge. In order to reach screen visibility and success, women needed to restore traditional feminine qualities, while male counterparts were still portrayed in higher power positions. Linked to gender inequality is the cinematic sexualization and objectification of women, striving for male validation and generally downgrading personal qualities. Accordingly, from extended female casts, complex female characters to films exploring female identity issues, female directors have produced stories altering the cinematic gender role representation (e.g., *Lady Bird* (2017)). In the case of male representation, characters appear to become more multi-faceted than ever, presenting male figures as sensitive, emotional and self-conscious of their traditional roles and status. Nonetheless, cinematic portrayals cannot correlate with societal traditional expectations, resulting in mixed messages about masculinity.

To conclude, the representation of gender has positively improved in terms of gender role representations. Male characters no longer need to prove their virility through violence and aggression, instead capable of engaging with their vulnerable side; on the same page, female characters are slowly being accurately depicted, tackling their issues from a feminist standpoint and discontinuing their cinematic typecasted traditional image. Notwithstanding, cinematic portrayals of progressive gender roles and identities need to be developed past former societal expectations, entering a fresh realm of favourable gender relationships while tackling contemporary gender issues.

## 4.2 Representation of Sexuality in Media

In the early days of cinema history, homosexuality was depicted in a ludicrous manner, counterbalanced by the reaffirmation of masculine virtues (e.g., *Grandma's Boy* (1922)). Another form of direct yet controlled portrayal was having seemingly “normal”

characters behaving in effeminate ways (e.g., *The Soilers* (1923)), providing a humorous reaction for the audience. Moving forward, homosexuality appeared in a variety of covert references in '30s and '40s films; from a more comic and inoffensive perspective (e.g., *Bringing up baby* (1938)) to a more drastic condemned depiction (e.g., *Adam's Rib* (1949)). At the end of the 1950s, whereas the explicit display of homosexuality was implausible, films could indirectly deal with its psychological implications (e.g., *Suddenly Last Summer* (1959)).

Even when the Production Code allowed homosexuality on screen, it was not morally nor socially acceptable, continuing to perpetuate the inexorable tragedy of homosexuals (e.g., *Victim* (1961)). This new “visibility” often associated “queerness” with various forms of amoral and condemning anti-social behaviour, resulting in characters doomed to death while suffering physical and psychological violence (e.g., *The Incident* (1967)). Additionally, films began to disclose queer lifestyle implications by depicting homosexuals living in “their own world,” culminating in the recurring death of the character. Other cases of explicit homosexuality particularly showcased queers as derelict beings filled with guilt and self-loathe (e.g., *Midnight Cowboy* (1969)).

The end of the 1960s was defined by revolts and demonstrations, affecting the gay liberation movement. Due to homosexual activism, gay themes in films became more apparent, fairly portraying gay men as ‘civilised’ individuals (e.g., *The Boys in the Band* (1970)). Despite the innovative exploitation of queer issues, homosexuality was yet again represented as a problem, leaving its ostracised characters with a sense of sadness and loneliness.

Although gay characters featured 1980s cinema, the treatment of homosexuality had still attached a strong stigma. Because of this, gay people were painted as either “villains” or “victims” (i.e., doomed to destruction) in Hollywood films. Once again, the queer scene

was portrayed as inherently dangerous and violent (e.g., *Windows* (1980)). However, independent filmmaking helped promoting a new culture for queer films, exploring the deep implications of human relationships; not recursing to stereotypes nor disruptive atmospheres, sorely focusing on the story and characters (e.g., *Desert Hearts* (1985)).

The late 20<sup>th</sup> century experienced a wider visibility of queer characters and stories being explored realistically and faithfully. The '90s film issue was no longer the visibility of homosexuality, but characters contributing to the significance of the film while portraying their difficult position of LGBTQ+ minorities. All in all, queer themes became the subject matter of a variety of film genres, exploiting sexuality from a wide range of angles (e.g., *Philadelphia* (1993)).

Moving forward, the new century media development draw attention to LGTBQ+ issues in an unprecedented manner, becoming widely accepted and tolerated in films, with queer characters portrayed with respect and sympathy. Hence, 21<sup>st</sup> century queer cinematography witnessed new cultural and social queer sensibilities on screen. Modern teenage queer films focus on the discovery of love and sexuality, also acting as a reminder of the hazards concerning self-acceptance and its implications. Effectively, recent queer films showcase the progress of modern cultural attitudes in mainstream cinema and in the Internet era (e.g., *Love, Simon* (2018)). All in all, the main focus of these productions lies on love as a human experience with sexual orientation as a casual factor of the storyline.

To conclude, the cinematic portrayals of LGBTQ+ issues have been constantly evolving. From a more traditional, prejudiced standpoint to modern fair and respectful illustrations, it is visible a change in the consideration and acceptance of society in their interpretation of queer people connecting with their identities. Finally, to become further accepted in bigoted environments, queer representation still needs to be challenged, considered and accepted.

## 5. Theory analysis: *Big Mouth*

Taking into consideration the aforementioned topics examined, it is essential to analyse the issues of adolescence, gender, sexuality and their means of representation through the Netflix TV show *Big Mouth*. As previously described in the introduction of the dissertation, *Big Mouth* (2017-) tackles the real-life teenage experiences of the creators of the series and other characters portraying the drawbacks of puberty, gender and sexuality issues. Presented in an animated and humorous style, the series depicts the problematics of teenagers through different methods worth reviewing in what could be consider a feasible interpretation of realistic events. Therefore, the fractionated analysis of adolescence, gender and sexuality issues, alongside its cinematic representations will be carried out regarding empirical paper studies and more importantly, the examination and exemplification of the targeted portrayals illustrated in the opening four seasons of the American TV series.

### 5.1 Adolescence Analysis

To begin with, from the initial female puberty speech ('Ejaculation' S1E1: 00:09-19) to the appearance of the Hormone Monster figure depicting the complexities of adolescence arrival, there are a variety of moments reflecting the corporal and hormonal evolutions in the series.

During the show, the Hormone Monster is depicted as a violent and impulsive character that constantly incites Andrew to give in to his uncontrollable sexual urges. However, the boy attempts to prevent these hormonal responses to no avail, as if unprepared to confront the growing pains of puberty: "Andrew: You are not real. You're just some hormone monster my brain created / Hormone Monster: If I'm not real, then how come I'm sending blood to your sweet penis right now?" ('Ejaculation' 00:33-44). Additionally, once addressed as 'the puberty fairy,' Maury (i.e., Andrew's Hormone Monster) furiously

affirms his identity as ‘the Hormone Monster.’ The representation of a monster rather than a fairy raises the idea of adolescence not as a pleasant period, but one filled with fright and turmoil.

Moreover, *Big Mouth* also addresses female puberty issues. In ‘Everybody Bleeds’ (S1E2) Jessi gets her first period at a high school trip. At a time of despair, an animated Statue of Liberty welcomes Jessi into the world of menstruation, describing womanhood as a painful misery that cannot be escaped. “Statue of Liberty: You are a woman now, Jessi, and nothing will ever be the same again. / Jessi: Jesus. Is there anything good about being a woman?” (13:03-11). Later on, when Andrew reveals the situation to Nick, the boy apologizes for it, infuriating Jessi for treating menstruation as an extraordinary event: “Jessi: It’s not a disease, it’s totally normal. And I know nobody talks about it, but everyone gets their period and now I got mine [...]” (16:30-37). The reactions of disgust and pity showcase a lack of information concerning female pubertal changes. At one point, an anthropomorphic tampon performs the theme song “Everybody Bleeds” (riff of R.E.M.’s *Everybody Hurts*) to describe the process of menstruation, thus deconstructing the idea as an abnormal phenomenon. For Jessi, these are the first signs of adolescence and its implications.

Other episodes also portray the physical and hormonal changes of its characters. For instance, the episode ‘Am I Normal?’ (S2E1) covers the contrasted issues of both pubertal acceleration and delay of physical and sexual maturation in Andrew and Nick, respectively. During the episode, Nick feels insecure about his short height and his lack of sexual interest, while Andrew shows uneasiness regarding his accelerated physical changes. As a result, both boys resent their respective Hormone Monsters for being “too over-developed” and late for puberty, aggravating their concerns about their body image. “Andrew: Are we just a couple of freaks?” (09:06-08).

Furthermore, *Big Mouth* tackles topics concerning sociological and emotional states that largely affect teenagers. In the episode ‘The Shame Wizard’ (S2E3), Andrew has a tough time confronting his unrestrainable turbulent sexual urges. Meeting parental emotional unavailability, Andrew gets a visit from the Shame Wizard, immediately taking the teenager to Shame Court for “being loathsome.” In this trial, Andrew is accused being a deplorable person. and later proven guilty of his uncontrollable masturbation urges. “Shame Wizard: Andrew, my boy, we’ve heard but a fraction of the many wretched things you’ve done in your pathetic life. [...] There is no denying it. You are irredeemable. / Andrew: I know that. Don’t you think I know that? [...] I’m a pervert! [...] And maybe at the end of the day, I’m just a bad person.” (23:14-4:16).

In ‘Smooch or Share’ (S2E9) shame continues to appear as a form of a shielded response to potential threads. “Shame Wizard: Whether they know it or not, people need shame. It protects them from the sickening filth that festers within their humiliating inadequacies, self-destructive proclivities, [...] their fundamental otherness. [...]” (00:10-30). During the episode, all the school teenagers defeat the Shame Wizard when admitting their mistakes and dark secrets, finding liberation in sharing emotional conflicts. This scene accurately showcases the nature of adolescents to search for peer support and external acceptance to reinforce their strengths.

Finally, the series also offers a redemption for these lost teenagers. In the episode ‘What are you gonna do?’ (S4E10), Nick realises how he has become a brutal and self-centred person towards his friends and family once replaced by his alter-ego ‘Nick Star’, ultimately sympathizing with this inconsiderate version of himself to become himself again. “Vulnerable Nick: Do you hate me? Are you gonna kill me? / Nick: Uh, no. / Vulnerable Nick: Why not? I’m such a piece of shit. / Nick: But you’re a part of me. And I have to embrace you.” (23:15-28).

## 5.2 Gender & Sexuality Analysis

### Gender Analysis

The Netflix TV series *Big Mouth* represents the ongoing setbacks concerning gender issues as part of the characters' hardships. In 'Guy Town' (S2E7) Andrew and Nick visit Guy Town, an apartment complex run by Jay's father for socially misfit men. In the meanwhile, while Andrew deals with the consequences for taking advantage of Lola, Nick laments for the emotional and delicate attitudes of his father, assuming the traditional social behaviour of men as inherently non-emotional and dominant. "Nick: My dad is such a wuss. I wish he could be more like your dad. / Andrew: Oh, cheap and angry? / Nick: No! Like... like a man." (12:36-42). After this, both Andrew and Nick meet Jay's father, portrayed as the most traditional stereotype of a man (e.g., assertive, dominant, nonapologetic, etc.), who supports Andrew's actions and advises Nick to exert superiority on his love interest. Conclusively, Andrew and Nick gradually understand the actions of their consequences, realizing that gender-typed behaviour can be flexible. A good ending to the episode illustrates the flexibility of masculinity, irrespective of socially accepted toxic male behaviours and attitudes. "Matthew: Sometimes being a man means putting the people you love first, and sometimes it means owning up to your mistakes. [...] Not all men value the same things, and that means you can be any man you want. [...] All you need to do is figure out who you are, and be true to yourself." (23:36-4:17).

To continue, the episode 'Girls are Angry too' (S3E2) deals with the representation of toxic masculinity and sexism. Due to a dangerous incident, the Dean calls a meeting to discuss 'toxic masculinity,' reproducing it with a dress code. As a consequence, female characters organize the "SlutWalk," a provocative protest about the school favoured "rape



culture” environment. At this time, the series displays how men are influenced to either defend sexist behaviours as an excuse for personal angers, “Andrew: I’m not a creep. You’re the ones that dressed up all sexy, and then you get mad at us for saying you’re sexy. It’s like... what do you bitches want for us?” (16:15-21), or condoning traditional gender behaviours to fit societal expectations. “Nick: I don’t want to be the guy that tells other guys they’re being misogynistic.” (13:22-25). Later on, both Andrew and Nick reflect on the irrationalness of their anger toward the girls, demonstrating it is possible to challenge social influences and give women recognition and equal treatment.

On a related note, the conjoint episodes ‘What is it about boobs?’ (S2E2) and ‘Dark side of the boob’ (S2E8) address the themes of slut-shaming and its implications. Due to the accelerated breast development of Gina, all the schoolgirls either become self-aware of their own bodies or envious of the external male validation Gina receives for her recent corporeal development. After Jessi publicly outs Gina for letting Nick touch her breasts, Nick is applauded and respected for this intimate moment, whereas the girl suffers the harsh criticism and exclusion for “letting Nick do it to her.” Ultimately, the series draws a comparison from societal expectations of gender biases; women are assumed to be less sexual and thus need to repress their sexual feelings whereas men are seen as acclaimed super sexual beings. For this reason, women defining their sexual boundaries or even engaging in any sexual activity can result in public repudiation (e.g., Gina), while men are mostly admired for their sexual conquests (e.g., Nick).

### **Sexuality Analysis**

For starters, it is fundamental to take into consideration the episode ‘The Planned Parenthood Show’ (S2E5) for its witty instructive metaphors and entertaining skits on a various sexual education themes. The series begins with Coach Steve teaching a Sex Ed

class. Ironically enough, the man clearly demonstrates a lack of information about the topic at hand, instead instructed by his students through captivating skits.

First, Missy tells the story of ‘The Vagilantes,’ a space medical team aiding women affected by the ban on medical healthcare dictated by Lord Bilzerian, referencing both *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* universes, showcasing that Planned Parenthood is an organization that provides protection and healthcare to bodies of women. Secondly, Matthew adds birth control to the list of contributions. In a parody of *The Bachelorette*, Matthew helps Leah find the perfect contraception for her. On the show, Leah is presented with various candidates as contraceptives; namely, the condom, the pill, the implant, the diaphragm, the IUD and lastly the “pull out” method. After discussing the female contraception options and how men should also take responsibilities, Nick’s father appears in the classroom to tell the story of his decision of getting a vasectomy in the style of *Annie Hall*.

The fourth story is shown through the reminiscent past of Barbara (i.e., Andrew’s mother) and her personal story of abortion. Referencing *White Zombie*, the last story starts with Andrew being accused of transmitting Lola “Blue Waffles,” an infection resulting in the explosion of the genital parts. “Lola: You can’t tell anybody about it, ‘cause no one will ever speak to you or touch you ever again” (19:55-20:00). Thus, every time he discusses his disease with others, Andrew immediately infects his family and friends. At an attempt to save himself, Andrew rushes to the closer Planned Parenthood clinic. “Nurse: Uh, Blue Waffles is an urban legend. It’s a complete hoax. [...] STDs are real, but they are treatable. And I wish people would come in and get tested before they start Googling and driving themselves crazy.” (23:25-40). In essence, the skit resurfaces the 2010’s “Blue Waffle” urban legend to showcase the importance of preventing STDs by being open about them and get tested to effectively treat them.

Ultimately, the show accurately represents the U.S. situation of peer instruction and media as the primary sources for sex information. Even though positive parental sexual communication and school-based sex education programmes attempt to introduce sexuality, the series shows the unfortunate reality of lack of sexual resources from parental communication and limited comprehensive sex classes. Essentially, the episode aims to explain sexuality from broad-minded discussions about sexual matters (e.g., medical screenings, birth control, abortion and STDs), directly approached through collective participation and visual observation, assuring a sense of naturalness and easiness when addressing said topics.

Furthermore, the series also touches sexual orientation and its outcomes in several episodes. For example, 'Am I Gay?' (S1E3) presents how Andrew starts to question his sexuality. Intending to resolve his sexual orientation, Andrew consults Matthew, the only openly gay individual at school, leaving the confused teen ever more puzzled. "Matthew: Let's face it Andrew, if you're asking, you're probably gay. / Andrew: "Probably gay"? Well, what does that even mean." (7:12-18). As a last resort, Andrew visits the ghost of Duke Wellington, who introduces the teenager to three gay ghost personalities. The celebrities show Andrew the virtues of homosexuality, especially Freddy Mercury, who discusses the theme through a musical-like song that eventually aids the boy confirming his new identity. However, Andrew still has his doubts, so once kissing Nick he ultimately confirms his heterosexuality. Finally, as Matthew tells Andrew: "You had a whole little journey, didn't you? Well, guess what, sack of potatoes? No one is 100-percent gay or straight. It's a spectrum." (24:50-58).

Another instance of sexuality navigation appears in 'The Department of Puberty' (S2E10), where Jay feels conflicted about his sexual orientation after making out with Matthew. Moving forward to 'Cellsea' (S3E3), conflicted about his sexuality, Jay comes

across to a Netflix show addressing the sexuality exploration of Gordie. After the show finishes without concretely defining the sexuality of the protagonist, Jay enters in utter bafflement. As a result, the ghost of Duke of Wellington, alongside other sexual non-conformist celebrity ghosts and Gordie start a new informative musical-like performance about the spectrum of sexuality. “Gordie: ♪ The modern world’s a sexual cornucopia. We take comfort knowing if we’re this or that. No longer simply straight or gay, there’s a mind-boggling array ♪.” (21:10-21). After discussing different labels of the sexual spectrum, Jay finally recognizes himself as a bisexual, cisgendered polyamorous individual.

Last but not least, the themes of homophobia and coming out are expressed through Matthew. In the episode ‘The Funeral’ (S4E8), after Matthew’s Christian mother finds out his son is dating a boy, she begins to isolate herself from him. In attempts to unpack the conversation of homosexuality, Matthew assures that his gay identity does not change who he is, although his mother cannot condone nor accept “the idea of you making these sinful choices” (17:14-17). Moreover, in ‘What are you going to do?’ (S4E10), against his mother wishes, Matthew concludes to agitatedly come out to his accepting father. “Matthew’s father: I already knew you were gay. [...] / Matthew: Oh, but mom said not to tell you. / Matthew’s father: [...] she might need more time to wrap her head around this. [...] It’s okay, son, we’ll figure this out.” (16:32-51).

### 5.3 Representation Analysis

To begin with, *Big Mouth* has crossed established demographic methods to offer insightful deconstructions of gender, challenging portraits of adolescence and rather controversial depictions of childhood sexual and social development. Generally, contemporary ‘quality’ shows utilize film history and forms of textual allusion (e.g.,

imitation, pastiche and parody) as a primary structuring principle for the plot. In the case of *Big Mouth*, the creative use of the animation format and intertextuality helps to achieve greater visual humour and style, capitalizing on the cultural literacy of its audience. This cultural literacy is evident in the treatment of controversial topics (e.g., ‘Planned Parenthood Show’ (S2E5), ‘Girls are Angry too’ (S3E2), etc.) and depictions of cult stars (e.g., ‘Am I Gay?’ (S1E3), ‘Cellsea’ (S3E3), etc.) Hence, the show depends on the enveloping discourses that reinforce their comedic ‘smartness’ through intertextuality.

Moreover, innovative TV programs seem overtly designed to cater audiences by disregarding the conventions of television animations. Case in point, *Big Mouth* utilizes the theme of childhood as a platform for transgressive adult humour, also providing childhood regression for adult viewers with episodes citing current topical events for narrative structure, such as the ongoing sexuality discussions. For instance, ‘Everybody Bleeds’ (S1E2) displays the problems arising out of a vague and unhelpful national discourse on child sexual development, recurring on the importance of transparently educating teenagers about their sexual development. The conveyance of this message through animation manages to evade ethical implications and provide a unique platform for bizarre experimentation, with nostalgic references to popular and obscure objects of significance (e.g., episode titles, visual allusions, throwaway gags, etc.)

Focusing on the show, *Big Mouth* is clearly known for its animating abjection. First of all, even though the series revolves around children it does not seem to be for child audiences due to its tendency for lewd content. However, the central mantra of the show continues to be the importance of the transparency discussion of adolescent and teenage issues to protect and benefit children. Through a nuanced, sensitive and metatextual examination of adolescence representation, the series sends the positive message of communication as a form of bridging cultural and generational divides, assuring that

growing up is loathsome but it is okay because it is a natural collective process. Likewise, despite its characteristic dirtiness and lewd humour, the show delivers insightful and affecting social commentary.

To continue, the show presents the passage of teenage sexual development through the description of the abject experiences of its characters, manifested in the corporeal embodiment of pubertal bodily changes. For example, the figures of the Hormone Monsters may be the exemplification of the horrors occurring within the conflictive mind of the characters. This description could explain the reality displacement of corporeal and emotional pubertal changes, rendering the abject under physical development disregarding any identities, boundaries and social limitations. Other examples could be the figure of the Shame Wizard, designed to reflect the systemic forms of teenage self-punishment to the point of despair for actions beyond understanding, and the role of social spaces as liminal sites of erasure and pubertal monstrosity. These anxieties not only serve as justifications for an explicit discourse concerning sexual and pubertal development, but also to showcase the flexibility of the transformation of social spaces as subcultural structures offering formative experiences for its characters.

For instance, 'Guy Town' (S2E7) tackles the difficulties of navigating manhood. In fact, Guy Town could not be a better example of a heterotopic spatial facsimile for various forms of masculinity. The episode ubicates the developing understanding and misconceptions of manhood for Nick and Andrew, framed against a cultural backdrop of accountability. In this clear observation of abject virility, the teenagers learn the fluid and indefinable nature of masculinity, leading to a deep reflection of their own maleness. Irrevocably, *Big Mouth* is capable of convey the ineffable growing experiences, possible due to the 'smart' tactics and limitless possibilities offered by animation.

Furthermore, it is also impressive the delivery of abjection by animated scenes, narratives and metaphors. One exemplar representation happens in ‘Girls are Horny Too’ (S1E5) through the productive conversation of Jessi with her sentient vagina, serving as a portrayal of the absence of female sexual pleasure from pedagogical agendas. Thus, abject graphic representations of the body are primary caused by the neglectful broader cultural discourse regarding corporeal frameworks. In fact, episodes such as ‘The Planned Parenthood Show’ (S2E5) promote liberal education for young people to empower them into taking informed decisions about their bodies and overall lives. That being so, *Big Mouth* demonstrates direct engagement with the present political and sociocultural contexts, showcasing the determination to vocalize and even reconcile current anxieties through the application of polemical topics for the relevance of the show.

Correspondingly, the show evokes the concept of body genre with excessive iconography, codes and conventions of pornography, horror and melodrama to incite adult audiences to recall the intense pubertal emotions. The most obvious example is the recollection of pornography, exaggeratingly depicting puberty and sexuality (e.g., Jessi’s talking vagina, etc.). Another example is the treatment of pubertal changes as overtly horrific and melodramatic (e.g., Jessi’s introduction to Connie in ‘Everybody Bleeds’) to showcase the inner feelings of young teenagers. Additionally, the incorporation of the body genre serves to address sexual differences and identities in a progressive, queer sex-positive form. Therefore, the show focuses on encouraging its audiences to search for critical introspection on the diverse experiences of puberty.

One characteristic of the series is its subversion of physical mimetic reaction through animation. The show does not intend to replicate pornography, horror nor melodrama tropes, but rather infusing all the former elements together to emphasise the animated body. For instance, *Big Mouth* incorporates anthropomorphic incarnations of inanimate

objects (e.g., Jessi's tampons, etc.) and bizarre blurrings of boundaries to challenge reality. As means to do so, the show blurs physical reality with the personification of non-existent beings to convey the mysterious parts of puberty through physical embodiments of the emotions felt during adolescence (e.g., Maury and Connie), thus emotionally and mentally involving the audience. Because of this, spectator identification can only occur through the mental and emotional ties of the characters, leaving animation to navigate the foreign body through a 'safe distance.'

Besides, the body genre can even challenge ideas of gender and sexual identities, focusing on the experiences of desire, uncertainty and turmoil. In fact, *Big Mouth* tackles queerness identities in its storylines and characters (e.g., 'Am I Gay?' (S1E3), 'Cellsea' (S3E3), etc.), encouraging the active participation of spectators to read through the series animated symbols and signs. As a genre-bending program, *Big Mouth* reinvents and widens the 'presumed' audience to be more inclusive and transgressive, calling into question the experiences of gender, sexuality and adolescence through diverse characters and plots. (e.g., questioning sexuality, narrativization of the female puberty, disruption of heterosexuality, etc.) Ultimately, the physical 'safe distance' enabled by animation creates emotional and mental identification, thus providing greater possibilities while producing more forms of audience engagement allowing them to appreciate and identify with the emotional threads of the show.



## Conclusions

The series animation presents a myriad of critical content. In terms of physical and hormonal changes, *Big Mouth* validly portrays the development of primary and secondary sex characteristics and other agitated issues under witty metaphors, entertaining songs and relatable character experiences. During the series, characters undergo a greater understanding of complex emotions, showcasing their desire for autonomy, and prioritizing their self-consciousness (e.g., obeying their Hormone Monsters). Additionally, the characters are primarily moved by the stress of pubertal change, resulting in lowered self-esteem and personal despair, contributing to a more turbulent emotional state for the characters.

To continue, the show also reflects on the perpetuation of traditional gender-role stereotypes and its implications. On retrospect, the prevailing societal gender behavioural expectations of men are broken in *Big Mouth*, ending with a broader-minded concept of positive masculinity. Additionally, the series explores the themes of sexist behaviours influenced from external agents such as educational institutions while focusing on the internal battles of male characters as excuses for the irrational anger towards women, resulting in the recognition of the drawbacks of female characters. Other issues concerning slut-shaming display how much gender-role conditioning impacts on sexuality. Nevertheless, the series does not condone these actions and represents women empowerment, friendly cooperation and emotional sympathy as weapons to finally break away from societal gender expectations to start a journey of growth to fully accept the self and others.

Moreover, the series veridically presents the theme of sexual orientation in its nature as a complex multidimensional phenomenon. Additionally, it also portrays the negative and

stigmatizing attitudes of homosexuality, representing homophobia and discrimination. Finally, the representation of navigating the journey of sexual orientation and coming out issues display the hardships of coming to terms with sexual orientation for teenagers. Nonetheless, the show ends on a good note, showcasing the development of positive sexual identities for its queer characters through sympathetic guidance, offering a sense of belonging and acceptance for these confused children.

Finally, the series has creatively use the animation format and intertextuality to achieve greater visual transgressive humour and style, capitalizing on the cultural literacy of its audience. Additionally, the show has surpassed established demographic methods to offer instructive deconstructions of gender, complex representations and somewhat divisive depictions of sexual and adolescent development. Unquestionably, *Big Mouth* is able to express the indescribable feelings of growing up, made possible by "smart" strategies and virtually endless possibilities.

## Works Cited

- Burnett, Stephanie, et al. "Pubertal Development of the Understanding of Social Emotions: Implications for Education." *Learning and Individual Differences*, vol. 21, no. 6, 2011, pp. 681–89. *Crossref*, [doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2010.05.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2010.05.007). Accessed 17 Jan. 2022.
- Butler, Allison. "BEFORE MEDIA EDUCATION GETS TO SCHOOL: UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENCE AND EDUCATION." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, vol. 66, no. 4, Institute of General Semantics, 2009, pp. 393–417, [www.jstor.org/stable/42579841](http://www.jstor.org/stable/42579841). Accessed 17 Jan. 2022.
- "Changes during Puberty - Part 1 | Reaching Adolescence | Don't Memorise." *YouTube*, uploaded by Don't Memorise, 23 Nov. 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=TlfsGKDoVIQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TlfsGKDoVIQ). Accessed 16 Sep. 2021.
- "Changes during Puberty - Part 2 | Reaching Adolescence | Don't Memorise." *YouTube*, uploaded by Don't Memorise, 27 Nov. 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8PyEVacaVA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8PyEVacaVA). Accessed 16 Sep. 2021.
- Crooks, Robert. L, and Karla Baur. *Our Sexuality*, 13th ed., *Wadsworth/Cengage Learning*, 2017. *CengageBrain.com*, [file:///C:/Users/Daniela/Downloads/Our%20Sexuality%20\(Robert%20L.%200Crooks%20and%20Karla%20Baur\)%20\(z-lib.org\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Daniela/Downloads/Our%20Sexuality%20(Robert%20L.%200Crooks%20and%20Karla%20Baur)%20(z-lib.org).pdf). PDF Download. Accessed 15 March. 2023.
- Curtis, Alexa C. "Defining Adolescence." *Journal of Adolescent and Family Health*, vol. 7, no. 2, Article 2., 2015, pp. 1-20, [scholar.utc.edu/jafh/vol7/iss2/2](http://scholar.utc.edu/jafh/vol7/iss2/2). Accessed 17 Jan. 2022.

Eccles, Jacquelynne S. "The Development of Children Ages 6 to 14." *The Future of Children*, vol. 9, no. 2, Princeton University, 1999, pp. 36–40, [doi.org/10.2307/1602703](https://doi.org/10.2307/1602703). Accessed 17 Jan. 2022.

Falvey, Eddie. "Situating Netflix's original adult animation: Observing taste cultures and the legacies of 'quality' television through BoJack Horseman and Big Mouth." *Animation*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2020, pp. 117–26, [doi.org/10.1177/1746847720933791](https://doi.org/10.1177/1746847720933791). Accessed 19 June. 2023.

Kroll, Nick, et al., creators. *Big Mouth*, Netflix, 2017-2022. Accessed 18 June. 2023.

Mariani, Luciano. "American teen pics: movies 'for' teenagers, movies 'about' teenagers". *Cinemapocus.eu*. [www.cinemapocus.eu/Studi%20sul%20cinema/Teen.pdf](http://www.cinemapocus.eu/Studi%20sul%20cinema/Teen.pdf). PDF Download. Accessed 8 May. 2023.

Mariani, Luciano. "Homosexuality in Film History." *Cinema and Sexual and Gender Identities Project*, Cinemapocus.eu. [www.cinemapocus.eu/Studi%20sul%20cinema/Sex%20and%20gender/Homosexual.pdf](http://www.cinemapocus.eu/Studi%20sul%20cinema/Sex%20and%20gender/Homosexual.pdf). PDF Download. Accessed 15 May. 2023.

Mariani, Luciano. "The Evolution of Female and Male Gender Roles through Cinema's History" Part 1-2-3. *Cinema and Sexual and Gender Identities Project*, Cinemapocus.eu. [www.cinemapocus.eu/Studi%20sul%20cinema/Sex%20and%20gender/Femalemalegenderroles1.pdf](http://www.cinemapocus.eu/Studi%20sul%20cinema/Sex%20and%20gender/Femalemalegenderroles1.pdf) [www.cinemapocus.eu/Studi%20sul%20cinema/Sex%20and%20gender/Femalemalegenderroles2.pdf](http://www.cinemapocus.eu/Studi%20sul%20cinema/Sex%20and%20gender/Femalemalegenderroles2.pdf) /

[www.cinemafocus.eu/Studi%20sul%20cinema/Sex%20and%20gender/Femalegenderroles3.pdf](http://www.cinemafocus.eu/Studi%20sul%20cinema/Sex%20and%20gender/Femalegenderroles3.pdf). PDF Download. Accessed 7 June. 2023.

Miller, Brooke. "Brain changes during adolescence | Behavior | MCAT | Khan Academy." *YouTube*, uploaded by khanacademymedicine, 21 July. 2015, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Fa8U6BkhNo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Fa8U6BkhNo). Accessed 16 Sep. 2021.

Montgomery, Carter. "LGBTQ+ Journeys and Femininity, Masculinity throughout Puberty: A Thematic Analysis of Netflix's Big Mouth." *SOARS Virtual Conference*. Office of Undergraduate Research, 2020, University of North Florida, Florida. Presentation, [unfsoars.domains.unf.edu/lgbtq-journeys-and-femininity-masculinity-throughout-puberty-a-thematic-analysis-of-netflixs-big-mouth/](http://unfsoars.domains.unf.edu/lgbtq-journeys-and-femininity-masculinity-throughout-puberty-a-thematic-analysis-of-netflixs-big-mouth/). Accessed 15 June. 2023.

Peper, Jiska S., and Ronald E. Dahl. "The Teenage Brain: Surging Hormones—Brain-Behavior Interactions During Puberty." *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2013, pp. 134–39, [www.jstor.org/stable/44318648](http://www.jstor.org/stable/44318648). Accessed 26 Apr. 2022.

Pyle, Cassidy. "Animation & the Queering of the Body in Big Mouth." *Chief Copy Editor 4*, 2018, pp. 5-13, [tinnalam.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/focus2019layout\\_FINAL\\_2.pdf#page=14](http://tinnalam.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/focus2019layout_FINAL_2.pdf#page=14). PDF Download. Accessed 19 June. 2023.

"The Teenage Brain Explained." *YouTube*, uploaded by SciShow, 12 Mar. 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiduiTq1ei8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiduiTq1ei8). Accessed 16 Sep. 2021.