



YOUTH PERCEPTION OF SELF-HARM IN SERIALISED AUDIOVISUAL FICTION: A Quantitative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Non-suicidal self-injury is a growing issue among young people, but its portrayal in fiction is recent. This study explores university students' perceptions of audiovisual sequences showing explicit self-injury. The 216 surveys reveal strong awareness of self-injury and a more realistic depiction, often focusing on cuts in private. Girls identify with the scenes more, while boys see more romanticisation. Most participants believe viewing such content could negatively affect young people with self-injury, although they agree it helps raise awareness of the issue, which is underrepresented in current popular culture

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1. Introduction

Talking about fiction, whether in the context of literature or audiovisual media, seems to imply a kind of label that warns the viewer about the fictional and somewhat unreal nature of the content they are watching. However, the debate about how much reality is contained in the narrative and aesthetics of a story is something that has long concerned theorists. In this regard, Quintana (2003, pp. 62-63) draws on Danto's ideas to explain where the cinematic image fits within the universe of images and how to understand the realism they convey. The author establishes that cinema always lies between realistic transparency and the subjectivity or consciousness of the viewer. This means that, on many occasions, attention is paid to the world that is presented, ignoring its interweaving with the processes involved in its construction.

All of this is related to the ability of audiovisual media to record images that represent reality, and to the point of view or approach of those who take or conceive them in order to offer them to the audience. In other words, it is related to mimesis as an analogy of the world coexisting with the subjectivity inherent in the composition of images (Quintana, 2003, p. 62). And perhaps the key is how much of each there is when dealing with sensitive issues, as audiovisual media convey stereotypes, ideas and values that help shape current imaginaries (Pérez, 2011, p. 13).

Concern for mental health among children, adolescents and young people seems to have become particularly acute in the wake of the 2020 pandemic. During the state of emergency, the ANAR Foundation (Help for Children and Adolescents at Risk) responded to 166,433 requests for help throughout Spain and was considered an essential service provider (ANAR Foundation, 2021). For its part, the report published by Kuric et al. (2023) estimates that 60% of young people have suffered from some form of mental health problem and points out that 47% have experienced suicidal thoughts at some point.

Although non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) is a relatively emerging field of study, the scientific community has conducted more research in the context of online media, especially social media, and directly focused on the adolescent and youth population. Some research seeks to understand how these digital spaces and platforms interfere with self-harming behaviours (Khasawneh et al., 2020; Alhassan et al., 2021). These digital meeting places for young people from all over the world encourage the exchange of autobiographical experiences of self-harm (Alhassan et al., 2021; Lookingbill, 2022; Martínez et al., 2025; Martínez and Gaete, 2023) and ultimately become spaces for understanding and empathy (Hilton, 2017; Martínez-Pastor et al., 2023) where communities are formed that create and adopt their own forms of communication (Atauri-Mezquida et al., 2025; Martín and Atauri, 2024).

However, in the ecosystem of social networks and the digital communities that are generated around them, users are the ones who maintain control of the narrative, whereas in audiovisual fiction that control falls to someone outside the viewer (Sánchez López and Moraleda-Esteban, 2026). This aspect, together with the scarcity of studies focusing on the consumption of serial fiction by young university students in Spain (Villén, Higuera, 2022), is the basis for this research, which aims to observe how this segment of the population perceives a narrative constructed by external agents about a reality so closely connected to them and their daily lives.

1.1. Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI) and Young People

Non-suicidal self-injury is a behaviour that aims to mitigate intense emotional situations that cause distress in those who experience them. These self-inflicted acts function as a way of reducing emotional pain (Nock, 2010) that originates in "lived experiences and a lack of adaptive resources to process them" (Aumaitre et al., 2021, p. 29). The relief is almost instantaneous (Angelakis & Gooding, 2021) and this translates into a recovery of control over suffering, albeit partial (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). However, the problem with this behaviour is that it eventually becomes a repetitive and addictive practice (Angelakis & Gooding, 2021), making it difficult to stop without the necessary professional support and help (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2020).

Despite prior knowledge and conceptualisations, it was not until 2014 that self-harm was included as a separate entity in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5, 2014)* (American Psychiatric Association, 2014). Previously, self-harm was linked to other mental health disorders and even to cases of domestic violence or sexual abuse (Faura-García et al., 2021). However, NSSI is not necessarily a prelude to suicide (Martínez Pastor et al., 2025); on the contrary, it consists of deliberately self-inflicted acts, but where death is not the ultimate goal (Rascón, 2024).

Some studies show an upward trend in cases of self-harm over the last ten years (Arqueros et al., 2025; Vázquez et al., 2023). This is reinforced by data provided by the ANAR Foundation (2024), which reports a 6.91% increase in calls received for self-harm between 2019 and 2023. Furthermore, not all segments of the population are equally susceptible to this phenomenon, as there is a prevalence among adolescents of between 15% and 25% (Frida et al., 2023; Vázquez et al., 2023). It should be noted that incidence levels vary greatly, mainly because of the low rate of those affected who seek professional help, with only 0.21-6.5% of them doing so (Faura-García, et al., 2021).

1.2. Television Series, Young People and Self-Harm

The way we watch television has changed with the advent of digital content platforms towards mixed formats—linear and non-linear television—which has facilitated access to content and allowed younger generations to consume it in a way that suits their habits (Navarro and Vázquez, 2020). An individual aged 18+ has a combined audiovisual consumption of 276 minutes per day, i.e. 4 hours and 36 minutes (Barlovento Comunicación, 2025). This segment of the population shows a preference for serialised fiction products over films (Martín Sanz, 2020). As a result of the above and given the value of this audience for the audiovisual industry, there has been a boom in teen series or fiction series aimed at young audiences in recent years (Fedele, 2021).

The fact that young people continue to invest part of their leisure time in watching television fiction is even more significant when considering the capacity of television, and therefore its discourse and content, to construct models (Casetti y di Chio, 1999, p. 311). In this social function, television uses symbols, places, times, values, and other elements borrowed from reality to then return simplified representations that end up becoming imitable models. Casetti and di Chio (1999, p. 312) go a step further when they point out the influence these representations exert and the consequences that viewers may experience as a result of their reception. This reflection was verified by Lacalle (2005, p. 31-32), who showed how television defined the social construction of HIV patients for a time.

Health has been a recurring theme in audiovisual fiction and has served as a narrative resource for its plots and/or characters from different perspectives. Series such as *M*A*S*H* (CBS, 1972-1983), *Médico de familia (Family Doctor)* (Telecinco, 1995-1999) and *House* (Fox, 2004-2012) are examples of the diversity with which the medical field has been approached over time. For its part, *La pecera de Eva (Eva's Fish Tank)* (Telecinco, 2010-2011) is a pioneer among Spanish television series in bringing the mental health problems of adolescents to the screen as the central theme of its narrative. In this regard, academic literature includes significant works that explore the links and connections between mental health and narrative construction (Heath, 2019; Holmes, 2014).

Non-suicidal self-injury is a much less explored area in academic research, in contrast to the numerous studies focused on the analysis of suicide (Scalco et al., 2016; Seggi, 2022; Stack y Bowman, 2012). NSSI is often mentioned tangentially in studies on violence in relation to mental health (Peña and Sarrionandia, 2023) or, more prolifically, in those on suicide (Arendt et al., 2019; Kruzan et al., 2025; Mueller, 2019; Scalvini y Rigamonti, 2017; Scalvini, 2020).

Felton's study (2023) points to the influence of the series *13 Reasons Why* (Netflix, 2017-2020) on the increase in emergency room visits for self-harm. It also indicates that patients, mostly adolescent women, attached importance to the contagion effect produced by media representations. Along the same lines, Susi et al. (2024) conducted research focusing on the influence of audiovisual fiction representations on self-harming behaviour among young people. 54.6% of the individuals in the study stated that exposure to this type of content stimulated their thoughts of self-harm and therefore constituted a risk for them.

Despite the limited volume of scientific work on NSSI in fiction, research is beginning to emerge that focuses on the representation of NSSI and its narrative integration in adolescent and youth fiction series (Sánchez López and Moraleda-Esteban, 2026).

There is an ongoing debate in academic literature about the possible beneficial and adverse effects that representations in audiovisual fiction can have on young audiences. On the positive side are those who believe that they can help viewers with self-harming ideas to seek help (Scalvini and Rigamonti, 2017). In contrast, there are critical voices (Till et al., 2015) that warn of the possible contagion effect on young audiences, who are particularly vulnerable to the risk of developing these behaviours. However, the truth is that there is no research showing evidence of a causal relationship between exposure to fictional sequences depicting acts of self-harm and an increase in real cases (Mueller, 2019).

2. Methodology

2.1. Objectives

This research aims to assess the level of knowledge and perception of young university students regarding fictional series sequences in which a character engages in non-suicidal self-harm. Therefore, the specific objectives are:

- SO1. To determine young people's knowledge of non-suicidal self-harm and whether this is influenced by gender.
- SO2. To verify the perception expressed by young people after their exposure to sequences from fictional series in which NSSI appear, emphasising their position with regard to plausibility, realism and romanticisation.
- SO3. To find out whether sociodemographic factors such as gender, frequency of consumption of teen series or having a close case of NSSI (friend/family member) influence young people's perception of the proposed sequences.

2.2. Study Design and Participants

This study was carried out by conducting a survey of 216 undergraduate and master's students at Spanish public universities, spread across different autonomous communities in the country to reduce possible territorial biases in the results. According to García Ferrando (1993), a survey is a type of research applied to a sample of people representing a larger group. It is carried out in the context of everyday life and uses standardised questioning methods to obtain quantitative measurements of various characteristics, both objective and subjective, of a population. This type of measurement is usually carried out on an ad hoc and circumstantial basis and is the most common method for exploring public opinion on specific topics of interest.

The subjects of the study were selected non-probabilistically and based on convenience criteria, given the proximity of the teaching staff writing this article to the university students. In addition, the sample was expanded using the snowball technique thanks to the participation of other university lecturers who were part of the authors' network of contacts.

2.3. Instrument and Data Collection

The survey was developed using the *Microsoft Forms* platform and approved by the Ethics Committee of Rey Juan Carlos University. It was structured in two blocks of questions, the first relating to sociodemographic information and the second consisting of a set of items related to the study objectives. In both cases, closed questions were designed, with several answer options and mixed questions—multiple choice and open-ended.

The second block included two video clips, taken from two fiction series, in which an act of self-harm appears. These sequences were accompanied by a series of questions that gathered the respondents' perceptions of the representation of self-harm in fiction. In addition, the clips were short, in no case exceeding two minutes, and were chosen for convenience. The reasons for this selection were, on the one hand, that the self-harming acts depicted in each video took place in two contrasting settings—one public and one private—and, on the other hand, that each video showed a different type of self-harm: in one case, cutting, and in the other, burning.

The intention behind the selection was to find out which form of self-harm was closest to reality, according to young people. The selection of these two series was based on a search in the specialised Internet Movie Database using keywords in Spanish and English such as '*autolesión*', 'self-harm', 'self-injury' and 'cutting'.

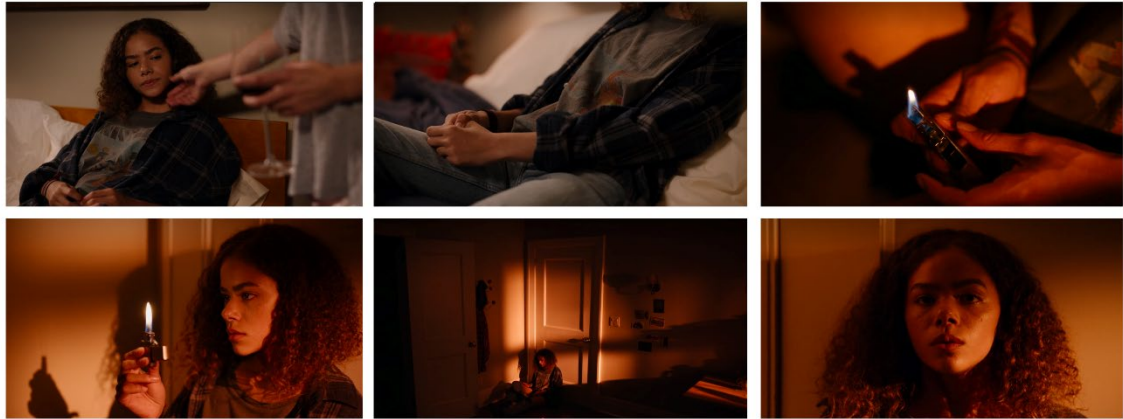
These searches yielded 27 results for series that also met the requirement of being available for streaming in the Spanish market. The following exclusion criteria were applied to this result: a) the self-harm is carried out by an adult; and b) the fiction is part of the science fiction, fantasy or animation genres, as the aim was to find representations in series in contexts that were as realistic as possible. With the application of these criteria, the selection was narrowed down to eight series, which, for this study, was reduced to two because they were specifically aimed at young audiences and had high audience figures (Campioni, 2022; Variety, 2022).

Clip 1 in the survey corresponds to a sequence from the series *Ginny & Georgia* (Netflix, 2021-present) and clip 2 to a sequence from the series *Euphoria* (HBO MAX, 2019-present). Both series are

classified as teen series and feature storylines in which one of the main teenage characters engages in non-suicidal self-harm, which is depicted explicitly and at length.

Images 1 and 2 show some stills that summarise the sequences viewed by respondents in clips 1 and 2, respectively. In clip 1, from *Ginny & Georgia*, the teenage character Ginny, after a conversation with her mother, takes refuge in the solitude of her room, where she burns the inside of one of her thighs with a lighter. When the self-harming act takes place, it can be seen that the protagonist has scars from previous self-harm.

Image 1. Stills from episode S01xE02 of the series *Ginny & Georgia* corresponding to clip 1 of the survey.



Source: Netflix. Own work, 2025.

In clip 2, which corresponds to *Euphoria*, the teenage character Jules appears at a party to which she has not been invited. There she is confronted by a boy, Nate, who begins to verbally attack her in front of the crowd that is gathering around them. Faced with this aggression, Jules resolves the situation by taking a kitchen knife—the setting where the action takes place—and cutting her forearm in public, which is shown on screen.

Image 2. Stills from episode S01xE01 of the series *Euphoria* corresponding to clip 2 of the survey.



Source: HBO MAX. Own elaboration, 2025.

Finally, the survey was sent by email to participating teaching staff so that they could ask their students to answer it in class, thus ensuring that individual responses were obtained. Responses were collected between April and November 2025, excluding the summer months (July and August) due to the academic break during that period.

2.4. Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 31.0 software. Frequency distributions were used to calculate response proportions, as well as contingency tables and chi-square tests (χ^2 , $p \leq .05$) to determine the existence of associations between variables and Cramer's Phi (ϕ) and V statistics to calculate their strength.

2.5. Weightings

The gender variable was weighted based on the total proportion of students, in relation to gender, enrolled in Spanish universities for the 2024/2025 academic year¹. The weights used were Women = 0.78; Men = 1.60.

2.6. Ethical Criteria

Participation was voluntary, anonymous and mediated by informed consent. The confidentiality of responses was guaranteed, complying with EU data protection rights (GDPR) and the right to withdraw at any time. Data processing was carried out in accordance with the ethical criteria set out in the Declaration of Helsinki.

2.7. Sample Characteristics

The sample consists of university students with an average age of 21.02 years, of whom 71.8% are women, 26.4% are men and 1.9% identify with other genders. The majority of the students surveyed (72.2%) belong to nuclear families (two parents), compared to 16.2% who are part of reconstituted families (separated father/mother) and 11.6% from single-parent families (one parent).

3. Results

3.1. Young People's Familiarity with Non-Suicidal Self-Harm and its Representation in Fictional Content

All respondents are aware of non-suicidal self-harm (100%). Sixty per cent of them acknowledge having a friend/family member who exhibits or has exhibited the behaviour, and 33% reveal that they do not know of any such cases close to them, but do know someone, known or unknown, who has developed it. Only 7% of young people say they do not know of any cases of self-harm, either close to them or further afield.

Table 1 reveals that the familiarity of the young respondents with NSSI is significantly influenced ($p < .01$) by gender, affecting the probability of knowing a close case of NSSI by 23.4%. Women (65.3%) are more likely to have a friend or family member with this behaviour than men (46.2%). However, men (38.5%) know more cases of people who are less close to them, such as acquaintances or strangers.

Table 1. Influence of gender on the presence of self-harm in the immediate environment of young people.

Friend/family member who self-harms	Gender		Contrast test	
	Female	Man	X ²	Phi
Yes	65.3%	46.2%		
No, although I know of some cases among acquaintances (not friends) or strangers	30.6 %	38.5 %	< .005**	.234
No, and I don't know of any cases among acquaintances or strangers either.	4.1 %	15.4 %		

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

In the Contrast Test: X² (NS) = Not Significant = $p > 0.05$; * = $p \leq 0.05$; ** = $p \leq 0.01$; *** = $p \leq 0.001$.

Most students watch teen series almost always (49%) or occasionally (45%), with girls consuming them more frequently—58.7% consume them almost always—than boys—63% consume them

¹ Data source: Spanish University System: Facts and Figures 2024/25, Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (Spain). <https://www.ciencia.gob.es/InfoGeneralPortal/detalle-publicacion/MICIU/Datos-y-cifras-del-Sistema-Universitario-Espanol0.html>

occasionally. Seventy-five per cent of respondents are familiar with the series *Euphoria* (clip 2) compared to 50% who are familiar with *Ginny & Georgia* (clip 1).

Table 2 shows that women are more familiar with both series (63.6% with clip 1 and 68.6% with clip 2) than men (15.4% with *Ginny & Georgia* and 47.3% with *Euphoria*).

Table 2. Influence of gender on awareness of the series *Ginny & Georgia* and *Euphoria*, to which clips 1 and 2 belong.

Are you familiar with the series in CLIP 1?	Gender		Contrast test	
	Female	Male	X ²	Phi
Yes	63.6%	15.4%	< .001***	.480
No	36.7%	84.6%		
Are you familiar with the CLIP 2 series?				
Yes	68.6%	47.3%	< .005**	.215
No	31.4%	52.7%		

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

In the Contrast Test: X² (NS) = Not Significant = p > 0.05; * = p ≤ 0.05; ** = p ≤ 0.01; *** = p ≤ 0.001.

Ninety-seven per cent of young people admit to having seen scenes featuring characters who self-harm. However, the majority (74%) say that such scenes are rare, although 24% say they are quite common. In any case, 81% think it is okay to show such scenes, compared to 19% who say the opposite, a perception that does not vary by gender.

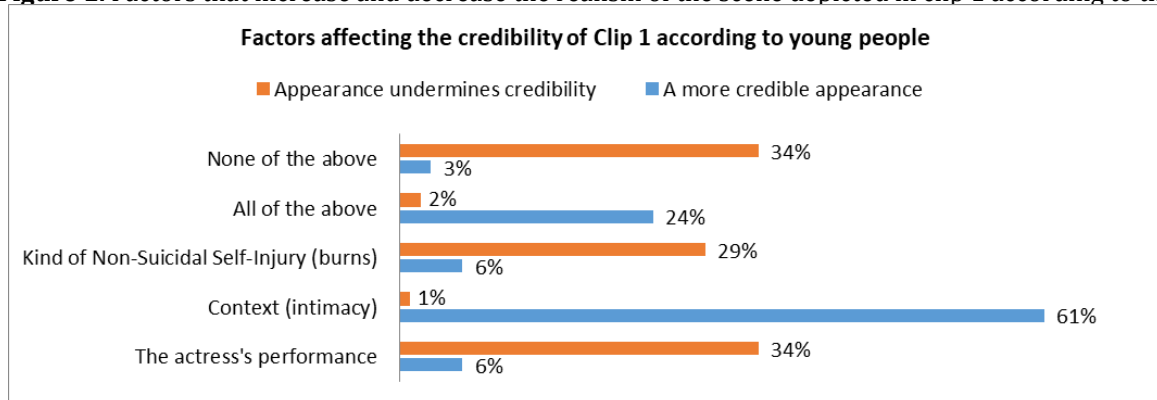
When asked about the emotions felt while watching clip 1, 36% felt sadness, 35% felt discomfort and 21% felt empathy, compared to 3% who felt fear. The remaining 4% had other feelings, such as distress, indifference, helplessness and pity.

In relation to the feelings produced when viewing clip 2, most students (39%) felt discomfort, followed by those who felt fear (19%), sadness (17%), and empathy (11%). Fourteen per cent said they felt anger, surprise, disbelief, strangeness, shock, among others.

3.2. Perception of the Representation of Self-Harm in Clip 1, *Ginny & Georgia*

Seventy-five per cent of the student sample believes that the scene in clip 1 represents reality, compared to 25% who consider the content to be unrealistic. The majority of young people (61%) point to the context in which the self-harm takes place—the intimacy of a bedroom—as the aspect that makes the scene more credible, while 24% believe that all the elements of the scene are relevant—see Graph 1. In relation to the aspects that most diminish the realism of the scene, 34% of young people consider that it is the actress's performance, although the same proportion believe that none of the aspects analysed have this effect. Twenty-nine per cent point to the type of self-harm by burning as the most influential factor (see Figure 1). These results are not affected by the gender of the students.

Figure 1. Factors that increase and decrease the realism of the scene depicted in clip 1 according to the



Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

3.2.1. Perception of Reality and Factors Influencing the Realism of the Scene Depicted in Clip 1

Table 3 shows a highly significant association ($p \leq .001$) between the perception of reality in clip 1 and the factors noted as most influential in the credibility of the scene. The majority of students who view the realistic representation (57.1%) indicate that the most credible aspect is the intimate context in which the self-harm occurs, followed by 30.7% who consider all elements to be important. In addition, the majority (42.3%) consider that no aspect diminishes the realism of the scene, although 33.7% think it is the actress's performance and 21.5% the self-harm by burning.

Also, the majority of young people (71.7%) who perceive the scene as unrealistic point to the context as the most realistic aspect, but do not attach importance to other factors. In turn, 52.8% highlight the type of injury as the aspect that most diminishes the realism of the scene, while 32.1% point to the actress's performance —see Table 3—.

Table 3. Influence of the perception of reality in clip 1 on the perception of the most important factors in increasing and decreasing its realism.

Most credible aspect CLIP 1	CLIP 1 represents reality		Friend/relative with NSSI	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Actress's performance	4.3%	11.3%	4.7%	8.0%
Context (intimacy)	57.1%	71.7%	61.2%	59.8%
Type of self-harm (burn)	6.7%	3.8%	7.0%	4.6%
All of the above	30.7%	3.8%	24.0%	24.1%
None of the above	1.2%	9.4%	3.1%	3.4%
Contrast Test	$X^2 < .001$ *** Phi = .344		X^2 (NS)	
Least credible aspect CLIP 1				
Actress's performance	33.7%	32.1%	35.7%	29.9%
Context (intimacy)	0%	3.8%	1.6%	0%
Type of self-harm (burn)	21.5%	52.8%	27.1%	32.2%
All of the above	2.5%	1.9%	2.3%	2.3%
None of the above	42.3%	9.4%	33.3%	35.6%
Contrast Test	$X^2 < .001$ *** Phi = .387		X^2 (NS)	

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

In the Contrast Test: X^2 (NS) = Not Significant = $p > 0.05$; * = $p \leq 0.05$; ** = $p \leq 0.01$; *** = $p \leq 0.001$.

3.2.2. Influence of Familiarity with NSSI on the Perception of its Representation in Fiction

The perception of reality of the scene depicted in clip 1 is not affected by having a case of self-harm in the immediate environment. Table 3 shows that knowing a friend or family member who self-harms does not significantly influence the perception of the aspects that increase or decrease the credibility of the scene. Likewise, knowing someone close who self-harms does not significantly affect the feelings experienced by young people when watching clip 1.

3.2.3. Relationship between the Frequency of Teen Series Consumption and the Perception of Reality

The frequency of consumption of teen series does not influence the perception of reality in clip 1, nor does it influence the factors that increase its plausibility. However, it does significantly influence ($p < .05$) the perception of the aspects that make the scene less credible. Nevertheless, the strength of the association is low, as frequency of consumption only explains 18.6% of the variation in perception.

In Table 4, young people who never consume teen series perceive self-harm by burning as the factor that most influences the decrease in the credibility of the scene depicted in clip 1, while those who consume them occasionally point to the actress's performance (36.1%) and the same proportion

(36.2%) of those who consume them almost always indicate that none of the aspects analysed are the most relevant in reducing credibility.

Table 4. Influence of the frequency of consumption of teen series on young people's perception of the most influential factors in reducing the credibility of clip 1.

Least credible aspect CLIP 1	Frequency of teen series consumption			
	Never	Occasionally	Almost always	Always
Actress's performance	9.1%	36.1%	33.3%	33.3%
Context (intimacy)	0%	2.1%	0%	0%
Type of self-harm (burn)	45.5%	27.8%	29.5%	0%
All of the above	9.1%	2.1%	1.0%	33.3%
None of the above	36.4%	32.0%	36.2%	33.3%
Contrast Test		X ² < .05*	Cramer's V = .186	

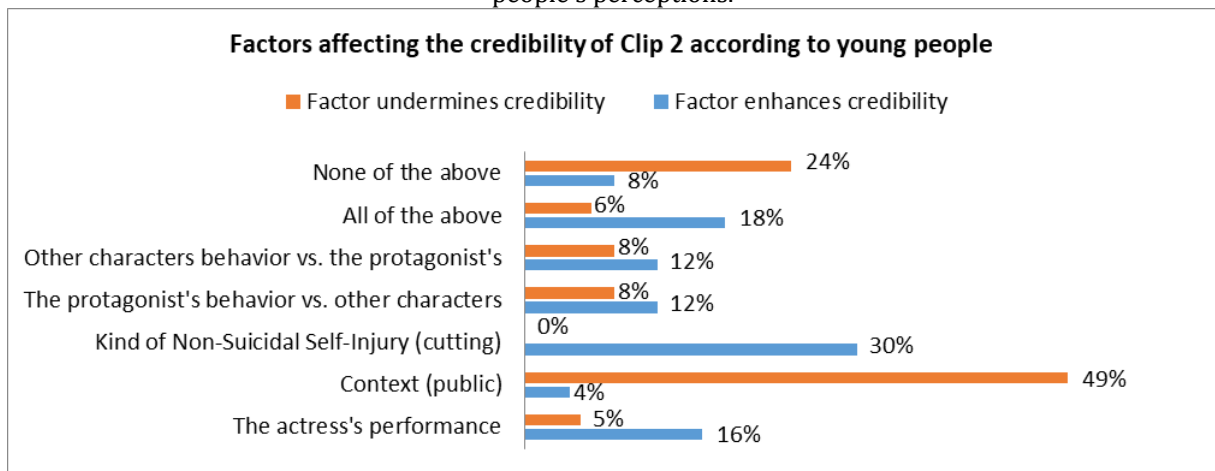
Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

In the Contrast Test: X² (NS) = Not Significant = p > 0.05; * = p ≤ 0.05; ** = p ≤ 0.01; *** = p ≤ 0.001.

3.3. Perception of the Representation of Self-Harm in Clip 2

The majority of young people surveyed (60%) say that the scene shown in clip 2 does not represent reality, compared to 40% who say the opposite. Regarding the factors that make the scene less credible, most (49%) consider it to be the context—a public space—where the self-harm takes place. Meanwhile, for 30%, the aspect that makes the scene more credible is the type of self-harm by cutting—see Figure 2. These perceptions do not vary according to gender.

Figure 2. Factors that increase and decrease the realism of the scene depicted in clip 2 according to young people's perceptions.



Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

3.3.1. Perception of Reality and Factors Influencing the Realism of the Setting in Clip 2

The perception of reality in clip 2 significantly influences the aspects perceived as most influential in the credibility of the scene depicted. In relation to the elements that give the scene greater credibility, Table 5 shows that 40.8% of young people who see the scene as unrealistic consider it to be the type of self-harm by cutting. Meanwhile, 37.2% of those who consider the scene realistic point out that all the factors analysed contribute to its credibility.

If we look at the aspects that reduce the realism of clip 2, half of the young people (50%) who see the scene as plausible consider that no factor reduces its credibility, followed by 29.1% who consider that it is the context. However, a clear majority (61.5%) of young people who do not perceive the scene as credible believe that this is mainly due to the context in which it takes place (see Table 5).

Table 5. Influence of the perception of reality in clip 2 on the perception of the most important aspects in increasing and decreasing its scenographic realism.

Most credible aspect CLIP 2	CLIP 2 represents reality		Friend/relative with NSSI	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Actress's performance	17.4%	14.6 %	17.8%	12.6%
Context (audience)	8.1%	1.5%	2.3%	6.9%
Type of self-harm (cutting)	15.1 %	40.8%	29.5%	32.2%
Protagonist behaviour vs. other characters	11.6%	13.1%	11.6%	13.8%
Behaviour of other characters towards the protagonist	10.5%	12.3%	7.0%	18.4%
All of the above	37.2%	4.6%	21.7%	11.5%
None of the above	0%	13.1%	10.1%	4.6%
Contrast Test	X ² < .001 *** Phi = .525		X ² < .05 * Phi = .261	
Least credible aspect CLIP 2				
Actress's interpretation	2.3%	6.2%	3.1%	6.9%
Context (audience)	29.1%	61.5%	48.1%	49.4%
Type of self-harm (burn)	1.2%	0%	6.2%	10.3%
Protagonist behaviour vs. other characters	3.5%	10.8%	9.3%	5.7%
Behaviour of other characters towards the protagonist	10.5%	6.2%	0%	1.1%
All of the above	3.5%	8.5%	7.8%	4.6%
None of the above	50.0%	6.9%	25.6%	21.8%
Contrast Test	X ² < .001 *** Phi = .531		X ² (NS)	

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

In the Contrast Test: X² (NS) = Not Significant = p > 0.05; * = p ≤ 0.05; ** = p ≤ 0.01; *** = p ≤ 0.001.

3.3.2. Influence of Familiarity with NSSI on the Perception of its Representation in Fiction

The perception of reality in clip 2 is not affected by having a case of self-harm in the immediate environment. However, Table 5 shows that knowing a friend or family member with self-harming behaviours significantly influences ($p < .05$) the perception of the factors that increase the credibility of clip 2 but does not affect those elements that decrease it. Most young people (32.2%) who do not know anyone close to them with NSSI point to self-harm by cutting as the most credible factor. However, those who have a friend or family member who self-harms have a greater variation in their responses. Twenty-nine point five per cent consider it to be the type of self-harm, but 21.7% consider that all factors are influential.

The frequency of consumption of teen series does not influence the perception of reality in clip 1, nor does it influence the factors that increase or decrease its plausibility.

3.4. Perception of Romanticisation in Clips 1 and 2

Almost all university students surveyed (91%) believe that clip 1 provides a more realistic representation of a young person who self-harms than clip 2, a perception that is not influenced by gender. Furthermore, 44% of students believe that neither scene romanticises self-harm, although 27% believe that clip 1 does, 16% believe that clip 2 does, and 13% believe that both scenes do.

Table 6 shows a statistically significant association ($p < .01$) between the perception of romanticisation and gender, which influences 24.3% of the variation in perception. The majority of female girls (47.1%) consider that neither scene romanticises NSSI, however, the majority of male boys (37%) believe that clip 1 does romanticise it, followed by 22.8% who consider that clip 2 does —see Table 6—.

Table 6. Influence of gender on the perception of romanticisation of self-harm depicted in clips 1 and 2.

Romanticisation of self-harm	Gender		Contrast test	
	Female	Man	X ²	Phi
Only in clip 1	24.0%	37.0 %	< .01**	.243
Only clip 2	13.2%	22.8%		
Both	15.7%	5.4%		
Neither	47.1%	34.8%		

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.. N=216; Lost=0.

r the Test Contrast: X² (NS) = Not Significant = p > 0.05; * = p ≤ 0.05; ** = p ≤ 0.01; *** = p ≤ 0.001.

3.5. Perception of the Social Effects of the Representation of NSSI in Fiction according to Young People with Close Cases in their Environment

The vast majority of students surveyed (85%) believe that the representation of self-harm in fiction helps to raise awareness of the problem in society. This perception is significantly (p<.05) influenced by knowing someone close to them who self-harms. Young people with friends or family members who self-harm are 10% more likely to agree that these scenes help —see Table 7—. However, gender does not produce any variation.

Table 7. Influence of familiarity with NSSI on the perception of the effects of the representation of NSSI in fiction.

Help to talk about the issue in society	Friend/family member with NSSI		Gender	
	Yes	No	Female	Man
Yes	89.1%	79.3%	85.1%	84.6%
No	10.9%	20.7%	14.9%	15.4%
Contrast Test	X ² < .05*; Phi: .136		X ² >.05 (NS)	
How NSSI content affects				
Negatively	56.6%	67.8%	63.6%	54.9%
Positively	38.0%	29.9%	34.7%	33%
Not affected	5.4%	2.3%	1.7%	12.1%
Contrast test	X ² >.05 (NS)		X ² < .01**, Phi: .216	

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

r the Contrast Test : X² (NS) = Not Significant = p > 0.05; * = p ≤ 0.05; ** = p ≤ 0.01; *** = p ≤ 0.001.

Sixty-one per cent of university students believe that viewing scenes of NSSI in fiction could negatively affect young people who self-harm, compared to 35% who believe it could affect them positively and 4% who believe it would not affect them. Table 7 shows that knowing someone close who self-harms does not significantly affect (p> .05) the perception of these effects. However, gender does affect the perception of the effects, with women perceiving more negative effects than men.

4. Discussion

The results of this study reveal a significant gender bias in terms of familiarity with the reality of NSSI, but also in relation to knowledge of the two selected series, with girls having a greater familiarity than boys. Television series that show scenes of self-harm, without necessarily being aimed at a female audience, generally present characters who self-harm as female (Sánchez López and Moraleda-Esteban, 2026), which could lead to girls identifying with these characters to a certain extent. However, this form of representation of self-harm creates an association between the behaviour and the female gender that is of dubious scientific basis, as the academic literature is inconclusive regarding the incidence of self-harming behaviours according to sex; some studies claim a higher prevalence in girls (Carretero *et al.*, 2024; Resett and González, 2020), while others claim that it is higher in boys (Moloney *et al.*, 2024) and others say that there is no evidence to show differences between the two sexes (Victor *et al.*, 2018).

No similar work or study has been found with regard to the methodology in relation to the object of study, non-suicidal self-harm in audiovisual fiction; although parallels can be drawn with academic literature on the representation of suicidal behaviour in fiction. The bibliometric analysis carried out by Posselt *et al.* (2021) includes 16 research articles that study the reception and perception of a given population in response to images of suicidal behaviour, with the most commonly used fiction in these studies being *13 Reasons Why* (Netflix 2017-2020). As in the present study, the emotion most frequently reported by the surveyed population was discomfort. Furthermore, in 13 of the 16 studies analysed, female participation significantly exceeded male participation (an average of 83% women and 17%

men). A fundamental difference between these studies and the present research is that the case addressed here does not analyse the increase or decrease in the incidence of self-harming behaviour in young people after viewing self-harm in fiction, a type of analysis that is, if not the basis, a substantial part of most studies on the representation of suicide in the media (Kruzan et al., 2025; Scalvini y Rigamonti, 2017; Stack y Bowman, 2012; Till et al., 2015). However, on this occasion, the intention has been to find out how young audiences perceive the representation of self-harm in serialised fiction.

The factors identified by young people as most important in determining the realism of the sequences presented are the context/space/place where the self-harm occurs and the methodology used by the character. The elements associated with increasing the realism of the scenes are the privacy of the place where the self-harm occurs in clip 1—the character's bedroom—and the type of self-harm shown in clip 2—cutting. Conversely, the reasons cited as reducing the veracity of the scenes are the public context in which the self-harm takes place in clip 2—a party—and the type of self-harm depicted in clip 1—burns. Therefore, the respondents' imagination aligns with the notion of self-harm as an intimate, rather than public, act in which a person cuts a part of their body; an idea consistent with the scientific evidence presented in studies on the habits of people who self-harm (Canol et al., 2022, Díaz de Neira, 2015). However, the expansion and ubiquity of social media have transformed behaviours, with multiple studies showing how young people have created digital communities to talk specifically about self-harm (Martín and Atauri, 2024; Martínez, et al., 2025; Martínez and Gaete, 2023). In these communities, young people exchange information and advice on how to self-harm or how to heal wounds, post pictures of their injuries, and even inflict physical harm on themselves live (Atauri et al., 2025; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2020; Martínez et al., 2025), findings that call into question the fact that self-harm is currently a purely private act, which, in turn, makes it striking that the young people surveyed have this perception of privacy in the face of such facts. On the other hand, in relation to the most widely used methodology, we again find a gender bias, since, although women tend to self-harm by cutting themselves, men use other types of injuries such as hitting themselves. Thus, once again, the perception of realism associated with self-harm by cutting could be influenced by a stereotypical configuration of the self-harming subject.

Therefore, even taking into account that 60% of the young people surveyed know a family member or friend who has self-harmed, without assessing their degree of familiarity with these experiences, we cannot conclude which factor most influences young people's perceptions. However, we agree with Newton and Bale (2012) and Kubrak (2020) that these perceptions may be partially based on what they see in the media, having internalised a collective stereotypical discourse. We consider this to be most likely based on the cultivation theory developed by Gerbner et al. (1984), who analyse the effects of television content on the general population's perception of reality. This theory has also been used to investigate the public's ideas about psychological problems (Gillig et al., 2018; Hoffner et al., 2017; Niederkrotenthaler, et al., 2019). With regard to the respondents' position on the appropriateness of including scenes of self-harm in current television series, the majority are in favour of showing such scenes, as they believe it can be beneficial for society to talk about the problem. However, they believe that such scenes could have negative effects on young people who self-harm, which contrasts with what is described in the academic literature. This is not the case for the depiction of suicide in fiction, which highlights beneficial effects on people susceptible to suicidal behaviour, such as increasing the likelihood of seeking help or being better understood by family and friends (Posselt et al., 2021). Thus, young people's perceptions could once again be explained by the influence of media discourse, as explained by Gerbner et al. (1984).

With regard to the romanticisation of self-harm in the fictional series shown, it has been found that most young people consider that none of the scenes romanticise the behaviour, a view held more strongly by girls. The romanticisation of habits that are harmful to health in audiovisual fiction, such as NSSI, is associated with a representation of these habits that emphasises an attractive or glamorous aesthetic, which would make the act an object of desire for the viewer (Faubert, 2018). Although the characters who self-harm in the two sequences presented coincide with the characteristics theoretically most prone to romanticising this type of act, such as possessing normative beauty, being integrated into the social group and not being an outcast (Jadayel et al., 2018), these attributes are not endorsed in terms of the respondents' perception of romanticisation.

5. Conclusions

After a search of the academic literature, this could be the first study dedicated to analysing the perception of young people regarding the representation of non-suicidal self-harm in television series. As was the case with eating disorders a few decades ago, NSSI is a reality among young people that is barely present in popular culture. Conducting a survey within this population group has provided first-hand insight into young people's opinions on how audiovisual fiction presents an issue that directly affects them. The evidence gathered reveals the following:

- Non-suicidal self-harm is a behaviour that is unanimously known among those surveyed, and most of them acknowledge having a friend or family member who has self-harmed at some point in their lives, with females being more likely to know of a close case of self-harm and having greater knowledge of the series from which the NSSI sequences have been extracted.
- The young respondents consider that self-harm committed in private is more realistic than that committed in public, in relation to the representations shown. In turn, young people understand that self-harm involving cuts is more realistic than that involving burns with a lighter.
- In general, respondents consider clip 1 to be more credible than clip 2. Credibility and realism do not correlate with the romanticisation of self-harm, as most young people do not consider that there is any romanticisation of the behaviour in either clip, a perception that is more prevalent among women, followed by those who consider that clip 1 does romanticise NSSI.
- The perception of the representation of self-harming behaviours could be more influenced by the discourse offered by the media, which shapes a stereotypical image of the self-harming subject by associating it with femininity and intimacy, than by young people's own experiences with NSSI, such as viewing content about the behaviour on social media, with no divergent opinions found between those who have a case of self-harm in their immediate environment and those who do not.

Self-harm is a social problem that is beginning to be perceived as such by society as a whole. However, the data from this research does not seem to indicate that young people's exposure to audiovisual content with scenes of self-harm is having a negative impact on this population group.

The study of self-harm in audiovisual fiction remains an under-explored area, especially when compared to the field of social media. Therefore, this research aims to be a first approach to understanding young people's opinions on a complex issue that they are only now beginning to see reflected in the fiction they consume.

6. Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study centre on the sample size, which could be expanded in future studies, using probabilistic sampling techniques to obtain representative results. Another limitation is the small number of sequences used in the survey due to the current lack of examples of television series in which young people or adolescents commit acts of self-harm on screen.

Another avenue for future methodological expansion would be the design of panels or *focus groups* made up of young audiences of different age groups and professionals from the audiovisual sector, such as creators and screenwriters, to generate discussions about specific viewings that provide insight into how to address the issue of non-suicidal self-harm on screen.

On the other hand, future research could focus specifically, through *pre-* and *post-testing*, on analysing the influence that sequences on NSSI could have on vulnerable populations. Finally, it would be interesting to study the association between young people's prior opinions about NSSI and those who engage in it and their perception of the representation of self-harm in fiction.

7. Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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