03

"WHAT BINDS YOU TOGETHER AS WOMEN?": *SEX EDUCATION'S* SEXUAL ASSAULT STORYLINE AS A #METOO NARRATIVE*

"¿Qué tenéis todas en común?": Agresión sexual en *Sex Education* como relato del movimiento #MeToo*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the didactic potential of the sexual assault storyline found in the second season of *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019-2023). Specifically, it examines how this narrative facilitates the recognition of such traumatic experiences and portrays an ideal response of sorority through a liberal feminist lens, echoing the #MeToo movement within the context of fourth-wave feminism. To this end, the essay analyses the evolution of cinematic representations of sexual violence over time, focusing on its current depiction after the ignition of the #MeToo movement. Subsequently, an analysis of the five-episode storyline explores the trajectory of trauma, from its actual perpetration until the point when the victim/survivor begins her healing journey, emphasising the long-time impact of the aggression and its psychological consequences. The essay ultimately concludes that this process demands the victim to redefine her identity, representing an empowerment quest towards a more educated, self-aware, and multi-faceted version of herself.

Keywords

#MeToo; Restorative justice; *Sex Education*; Sexual Assault; Sorority

RESUMEN

El presente artículo explora el potencial didáctico de la línea argumental de agresión sexual perteneciente

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a la segunda temporada de *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019-2023). Específicamente, examina cómo dicha narrativa facilita el reconocimiento de tales experiencias traumáticas y retrata una respuesta ideal de sororidad a través de una perspectiva feminista liberal, haciéndose eco del movimiento #MeToo en el contexto del feminismo de la cuarta ola. Con este fin, el ensayo analiza la evolución de las representaciones cinematográficas de la violencia sexual a lo largo del tiempo, centrándose en su representación actual después del inicio del movimiento #MeToo. Posteriormente, mediante el análisis de los cinco episodios que configuran la trama, el texto navega a través de la trayectoria del trauma, desde la perpetración del abuso hasta el momento en el que la víctima/superviviente comienza su proceso de curación, enfatizando el efecto a largo plazo de la agresión y sus correspondientes consecuencias psicológicas. Finalmente, se demuestra cómo el proceso exige a la víctima la re-definición de su identidad, en una búsqueda de empoderamiento hacia una versión más instruida, sensibilizada y polifacética de sí misma.

Palabras clave

#MeToo; Justicia restaurativa; *Sex Education*; Agresión sexual; Sororidad

INTRODUCTION

In an Anglo-American context, current feminism is understood and materialised through "visible and accessible" popular media texts, which emphasize "visibility over action", raising concerns about how it becomes a "mainstream story" (Boyle, 2019: 2). SVOD systems like Netflix, targeting multinational subscribers over a national "mass audience", are able to produce content addressing different "tastes and sensibilities" that are not often approached in prevailing television (Lotz, 2021: 207). *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019 - 2023) comprises an outstanding illustration of the above, as by means of teen-genre tropes, aims to fill a gap found in formal educative frameworks regarding contemporary teenagers' understanding of sexuality and its practice (Dudek et al., 2022: 11). Over four seasons, the series has explored different aspects of sexuality, including a "smorgasbord of sexualities" (gay, lesbian, bisexuality, and asexuality), practices not limited to traditional sexual intercourse (fingering, anal sex, oral sex, masturbation, or BDSM) and other issues including STD's, erectile dysfunction, vaginismus, abortion, porn, and, of most interest for this essay, sexual assault (Horeck, 2020).

As Horeck (2021) also notes, the previously mentioned aspects are explored through a comedic -yet didactic- tone, by means of "well-established character arcs and storylines developed across seasons". The starting point sets inexperienced sex-expert Otis (Asa Butterfield) and independent punk-feminist Maeve (Emma Mackey) aiming to provide sexual knowledge

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to their high-school colleagues whilst dealing with their own personal dilemmas. Over the course of the episodes, all the characters' emotional immaturity is evidenced. However, the series intends to convey their different experiences of growth and development thanks to the education they receive throughout the seasons. While all the characters' arcs are relevant and demonstrate the significance of the series, it can be said that the one depicted by Aimee (Aimee Lou Wood), Maeve's best friend, is one of the most emotional and striking. Despite being an apparently naive blonde girl who embodies the ideals of class and heteronormativity, she will become a victim of sexual assault, which will force her to redefine her identity through an empowerment quest. During 5 episodes in season 2, *Sex Education* explores the way she copes with the aftermath of the assault, which, at first, she is even reluctant to name as such (Horeck, 2021). Social realism plays a key role in the didacticism of the storyline, as by addressing Aimee's non-linear process of trauma, as well as her friends' response to it, an impressive representation -and validation- of victimhood is delivered, enhanced by hints of liberal feminism. It is also relevant to highlight the paratextuality in which the audiovisual product was released, during the worldwide outrage around Harvey Weinstein's scandal that led to the #MeToo movement.

The objective of this essay is to explore the didactic potential inherent in Aimee's sexual assault storyline from the second season of *Sex Education*. Specifically, it will seek to analyse the ways in which it may facilitate the recognition and processing of such traumatic experiences, as well as modelling the exemplary response of sorority through an educated, liberal feminist perspective, echoing today's #MeToo Era. The essay starts with a brief contextualization of the depiction of sexual violence on screen throughout the years, emphasising the contrast between representation of sexual abuse before and after the #MeToo movement. Subsequently, theoretical underpinnings situate #MeToo within the context of fourth-wave feminism, drawing on trauma and restorative justice theories. This is followed by a textual analysis of Aimee's narrative, divided into three sections. The first one addresses the actual assault (episode 3), the second section focuses on the evolution of Aimee's trauma over time (episodes 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7), and the last one is devoted to the -beginning of the- resolution facilitated by her feminist support network (episode 7).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Narratives of sexual violence

The ongoing cinematic depictions of sexual harassment, abuse, and rape, either as a central or overlooked theme, evidence the structural problem in which any form of sexual violation can be "celebrated or trivialised culturally and socially" (Boyle, 2019: 75). Therefore, despite the specific paratextual

context surrounding each audiovisual text, the cultural normalisation of sexual misconduct may also be analysed from a current feminist perspective.

According to Rentschler, feminists from the mid-1970s coined the term "rape culture" to hint at "the cultural practices that reproduce and justify the perpetration of violence" (2014: 67). Mainstream media's portrayal of such practices varies widely, ranging from overtly parodic misogynistic gags to explicit depictions of rape, underscoring the complexity of the analysed issue. While Projansky (2014: 3) acknowledges it as a "timeless (...) key aspect of storytelling throughout Western history", it is crucial to examine how the portrayal of sexual violence has evolved over time, in terms of frequency and modes of representation (:26), and in response to the prevailing socio-cultural context. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that all the narratives coincide in their aim of structuring women's position and agency regarding "complex phenomena such as gender, race, class, and nation" (Projansky, 2001: 7).

Until the 70s, the antithesis between vulnerability and independence constituted the paradigm on which most narratives were built. As Projansky (2001: 32) also asserts, during the first decade of the 20th century, sexual violence was presumed to "discipline independent women" who were "active or visible in public [spaces]", like the street (*Pull Down the Curtains, Suzie*, 1904) or a train (*What Happened in the Tunnel*, 1903). Similarly, examples from the 1910s and early 1920s, such as *The Cheat* (1915), *The Ruse* (1915), or *The Sunset Princess* (1918), convey how "independent expressions of sexuality" or the desire of "working for a wage" may be repressed through explicit (or attempted) rape (Projansky, 2001: 32-33). However, in the 1930s, with the introduction of the Production Code, themes of sexual violence became less prevalent. The Code maintained that representations of rape and seduction "should never be more than suggested, and even then, never shown by explicit method", as such subjects were deemed inappropriate (Production Code, 1930). In this way, screwball comedies from the 1930s and 1940s reconceptualize the "ideal love relationship between men and women" while addressing a courtship sexual tension and confrontation (Lent, 2013: 314-315). Thus, as explained by Vasey (1995: 81), an "elision, or effacement of sensitive subjects" regarding the portrayal of sexual violence was then found (*We're Not Dressing*, 1934; *It Happened One Night*, 1934; *Bringing Up Baby*, 1938; *His Girl Friday*, 1940; *The Lady Eve*, 1941). The issue of sexual violence as punishment for women's independence was recovered in the subsequent decades, as their desire to leave their marriages (*Jubal*, 1956) and their "psychological afflictions" -including "excessive sexual behaviour" (*Anatomy of a Murder*, 1959) or "delusion" (*A Streetcar Named Desire, 1951*)- led them to encounter rape or other forms of sexual abuse (Projansky, 2001: 35). By losing their independence to sexual violence and becoming vulnerable, family and heterosexual romance represented women's salvation.

The Women's Liberation Movement in the late 1960s helped in the establishment of feminist discourse within the abusive portrayals. According to Fitria et al., previous cinematographic representations had "failed to explore the impact on victims, but instead utilised violence to dramatise the film", desensitising the audience to the severity of sexual violence (2023: 57). However, from acknowledging sexual violence as a social problem which needed law reform, to directly confronting feminist arguments (Projansky, 2001: 11, 54), films in the late 1970s and 1980s constituted a turning point concerning the portrayal of rape culture. As argued by Serisier, the seriousness of sexual violence as a "gendered crime and a particularly traumatic experience" had been accepted

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as common sense (2018: 5). Yet, while aiming to educate the audience regarding rape myths from a feminist perspective, some films, like *Sophie's Choice* (1982) and *The Accused* (1988), still contributed to the prevalence of violence against women in media culture (Projansky, 2001: 96). As explained by Cuklanz and Moorti, the scenes sometimes depict such "graphic detail that sometimes objectifies the victim while emphasizing her lack of consent" (2006: 307).

Through the 1990s, the presence of sexual violence also provided "a social narrative through which articulate anxieties", developing a problematic view of a "post-rape" independent woman forced to overcome the situation to protect "herself and her family" (Projansky, 2001: 11, 97, 99), as seen in *Trial by Jury* (1994) and *Rob Roy* (1995). These representations tend to focus on "victim accountability rather than the behaviour of the assailant" (Pollino, 2023: 1997) and neglect to explore the impact of sexual crimes on women (Fitria et al., 2023: 57).

In response to such a broadly problematic and destructive atmosphere towards women, a new cinematic movement started to emerge. By switching the focalization to the survivor of sexual abuse and focusing on the roots of restorative justice and the need for accountability of the offenders, a new approach to the depiction of sexual misconduct is slowly but surely being introduced, synchronous to the rise of the #MeToo movement within the Fourth Wave of Feminism.

#MeToo movement and #MeToo film narratives

According to Cochrane (2013), the fourth wave of feminism is characterised by its use of technology as a platform to allow women to "build a strong, popular reactive movement online". This is further reinforced by the "rapid, multivocal response to particular forms of sexual violence" (Parry et al., 2018: 7) through social media, which has become the "defining feature of the new wave" (Zimmerman, 2017: 56). This globalized approach to feminism and power relations revitalised Crenshaw's foundational concept of intersectionality, recognising that "oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type" (Hill Collins, 2000: 18). The intersection of racism and sexism creates unique, individualised experiences, where "experiences of racism are shaped by (…) gender, and experiences of sexism are often shaped by (…) race" (Crenshaw, 1992: 1468). It is within this framework of intersectionality that hashtag feminism movements like #MeToo should be critically examined.

The phrase was originally coined by Tarana Burke in 2006 "to eradicate sexual abuse against black girls" (Olson, 2022: 186) and, as Corrigan explains, the hashtag was "hijacked and whitewashed" by celebrities, who erased the existence of male victims, disregarded bidirectional violence, sexual violence

against LGTBQ+ people and especially violence against "trans women of colour" (2019: 264). Typically, only "white, middle-class, heterosexual women who exhibit the hallmarks of good victimhood" have had access to platforms "to share their personal experiences in the public sphere" (Loney-Howes, 2019: 30). On the other hand, campaigns such as #YesAllWomen, #BringBackOurGirls, and #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen have helped to raise awareness against the excessive emphasis on "cisgender women's experience of harassment and assault" (Cobb and Horeck, 2018: 490).

#MeToo started trending on October 15 after U.S. actress Alyssa Milano tweeted "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet", and within 24 hours, more than half a million people gave a response (Wexler et al., 2019: 92). Milano's tweet was published in relation to movie mogul Harvey Weinstein's allegations of a decades-long sexual scandal involving more than 80 different women, divulged by *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* in the same month (Kantor and Twohey, 2017). According to Rhode (2019: 396) and Wiegman (2019: 2), the outrageousness of the crimes was enhanced by a "constellation of factors", including "the pervasiveness of abuse and the strategies that enabled it", as his unacceptable behaviour was an open secret in the Hollywood industry. For instance, actress Rose McGowan claims that when she told actor Ben Affleck about an incident with Weinstein, his response was, "God damn it, I told him to stop doing this". Similarly, Quentin Tarantino, a "long-time collaborator of Weintein's" admitted "I knew enough to have done something about it" (Luo and Zhang, 2021: 7; Kantor, 2017).

Milano's initial aim was to "give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem" (Milano, 2017), that is "discursive activism", with the goal of broadening the understanding of sexual harassment and assault and expanding the recognition of its victims (Boyle, 2019: 3), a "mass reckoning with sexual harassment" (Cobb and Horeck, 2018: 490). The movement "illustrated that the work of second-wave feminists to make the personal political was far from complete" (Loney-Howes, 2019: 29), as the scope of industries in which "patterns of wrongdoing" were found was unimaginable, evidencing the normalization of certain conducts of abuse in the workplace (Wexler et al., 2019: 92). According to socio-cultural theory of sexual harassment, this is linked to the sexist ideology of male dominance, which acknowledges women as the inferior sex, yet it "serves to maintain the already existing gender stratification" (Pina et al., 2009: 131). In fact, Rhode claims that #MeToo is "the outgrowth of long-standing inadequacies in the way (...) legal institutions responded or failed to respond" (2019: 380). The movement is based on solidarity among women (Wiegman, 2019: 10), who individually declare, and collectively validate the survivors' experiences, "effectively challenging (...) the power structures" (Loney-Howes, 2019: 29) and showing the harsh "daily reality in women's lives" (Cossman, 2021: 98). According to Benight and Bandura (2004: 1130), trauma recovery coping responses affect "intrapersonal, interpersonal, and occupational functioning", depending on both "individual-level and situational factors" (Campbell et al., 2009: 231). The posttraumatic reactions may include ruminative thoughts, anxiety increase, avoidant behaviour, detachment from others, and disengagement from fulfilling aspects of life (Benight and Bandura, 2004: 1130). However, it is inevitable to highlight the relationship between these declarations "with neoliberal and neoconservative principles" (Rivers, 2017: 24) as, apart from social recognition, they seek access to justice and support for the victims and the legal accountability of the offenders. This is in line with theories of restorative justice, establishing the acknowledgement of the perpetration as one of the key elements of the healing process, which

also entails the creation of empathy connections among survivors, external recognition by the community, and "discussions of accountability, transparency and vulnerability" (Wexler et al., 2019: 51, 65).

As Deborah Rhode explains in her publication regarding a database by Termin and Company, in less than two years, more than 1,200 distinguished figures were publicly accused of "sexual harassment, assault, and other related workplace misconduct", including Kevin Spacey, Jeffrey Tambor, Charlie Rose, or Matt Lauer, to name a few (2019: 395). As previously stated, it has become evident that the issue has transcended social media, as the rising awareness and the established social climate are being reflected in current audiovisual production. Films such as *She Said* (2022) or *Bombshell* (2019) depict real-life investigations into the allegations of sexual misconduct against Harvey Weinstein and Roger Ailes, respectively. While both films are of great importance in the ongoing conversation about the accountability of the perpetrators, the actions take place in different institutions of Hollywood and media, which may seem implausible and distant for some audiences. On the other hand, *The Assistant* (2019) offers a unique perspective through the eyes of a young employee who becomes aware of the potential abuse of power by her weinstein-esque boss.

The figure of the abusive chief is also found in *Tár* (2022), but with the twist that the abuser is a lesbian woman, offering a different angle on the issue. Films like *Promising Young Woman* (2020) or *Women Talking* (2022) deal with the process of navigating through trauma and healing after a sexual aggression (either a loved one's or their own). This approach is further explored in *How to Have Sex* (2023), which uncomfortably examines the ethics of consent within a coming-of-age narrative. *Mon Crime* (2023), however, addresses the subject from a comic perspective while still managing to deliver social commentary. Additionally, notable Netflix productions such as *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019), *House of Cards* (2013-2018), *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019), and *13 Reasons Why* (2017-2020) also tackle different handlings of victimhood. Therefore, it is possible to note that the increasing presence of #MeToo on screen is playing an essential role in the consolidation of the moment and the transmission of its core principles.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK, HYPOTHESIS, AND OBJECTIVES

To contextualise *Sex Education's* sexual assault storyline as a leading and exemplary #MeToo narrative, the essay provides a systematic overview of the evolution of cinematic depictions of sexual violence through the years in response to shifting socio-cultural and political contexts. This approach situates the series within the broader genre of sexual violence narratives, identifying it as a subversive contemporary subgenre. Building on this foun-

dation, the analysis adopts a macro framework to trace the roots of the #MeToo movement within the fourth wave of feminism, drawing on theories of trauma and restorative justice to establish the specific guidelines for further exploration. Using textual analysis as the primary methodology, the essay subsequently examines the diverse aesthetic and narrative strategies that consolidate the series as a prominent example of a #MeToo narrative.

In this way, the essay hypothesises that Aimee's sexual assault storyline in *Sex Education*'s second season provides the audience with inherent didactic potential, facilitating the recognition and processing of such traumatic experiences while modelling an exemplary response of sorority through an educated, liberal feminist perspective that resonates with the contemporary #MeToo movement. To support this claim, one of the main objectives is to demonstrate that the storyline develops logically in alignment with the previously discussed trauma theory. Additionally, the essay also aims to analyse how these theories are conveyed in the series, drawing connections between the theoretical underpinnings and the textual analysis. This includes addressing the most relevant visual, auditory, and narrative strategies that facilitate the recognition of the processes through which the protagonist reclaims her agency, in line with the socio-cultural and political context of the fourth wave of feminism. Finally, it will explore the significance of the cultural representation in shaping public discourse around sexual violence, contributing to a deeper understanding of trauma and recovery.

DISCUSSION - AIMEE'S EMPOWERMENT QUEST

Aimee's empowerment quest is explored throughout *Sex Education's* all three seasons, as the character is forced to undergo a painful process of self-recognition and maturity. In season one, her naiveté, insecurity and people-pleasing personality are made evident by her extreme display of sweetness and kindness, which result in her popular friends taking advantage of her. However, the beginning of her relationship with Steve (Chris Jenks), as well as her friendship with Maeve, help her start standing up for herself. Nevertheless, her sexual assault storyline from season two marks the deconstruction of her socially framed identity, creating an imposed, authentic, and subversive coming-of-age arc that runs parallel to her construction of a new identity as a survivor of sexual violence. By means of the use of social realism and a liberal feminist approach, the series conveys the long-term psychological impact of Aimee's traumatic experience, which will lead to her process of self-awareness as a multi-faceted, strong and empowered young woman who keeps developing in season three. The use of the storyline as a unit of analysis, rather than a scene or episode, helps in the understanding and framing of the issue (Aurah, 2021: 53). Therefore, despite the importance of

each of the seasons in Aimee's growth, the following sections will critically examine the most compelling scenes in relation to the depiction of sexual assault and trauma found in Aimee's storyline in the second season of *Sex Education*.

Perpetuation: "I got jizz on my jeans"

As Famurewa (2020) explains in her interview with the series creator Laurie Nunn, there is a clear dramatical and -as per its name- educational purpose in the show's graphic content. This is in line with *Sex Education*'s goal of attaining social realism through the application of social cognitive theory, portraying the existing consequences of certain styles of conduct (Aruah, 2021: 52). This section will discuss the focus on the depiction of the actual assault on Aimee and her initial reaction, as shown in the third episode.

A cheerful and positive track (Captain Sensible's "Happy Talk") acts as the opening for the storyline, conveying Aimee's naive and sweet personality, completely unaware of what is about to happen in her routine bus ride to school. As the bus is really crowded, she has to stand among many people, holding the pink bunny cake she has baked for Maeve's birthday. However, after some time, a close-up of her face reveals to the audience that there is something wrong with the man right behind her. The music suddenly fades and, by means of a point-of-view shot, it is shown that the man was actually masturbating on her. Even though Aimee manifests it out loud ("He's wanking on me!" S2:E3 03:35), nobody on the bus tries to help her. The change in the music, along with the unstable handheld camera close-ups, convey the distress and feeling of suffocation Aimee is experiencing inside the bus, which, from that moment, will constitute a triggering atmosphere for her. When she manages to get out of the vehicle, she realizes that the man had ejaculated on her jeans. This is evidently aimed at compelling viewers to reflect on their engagement with the power dynamics portrayed.

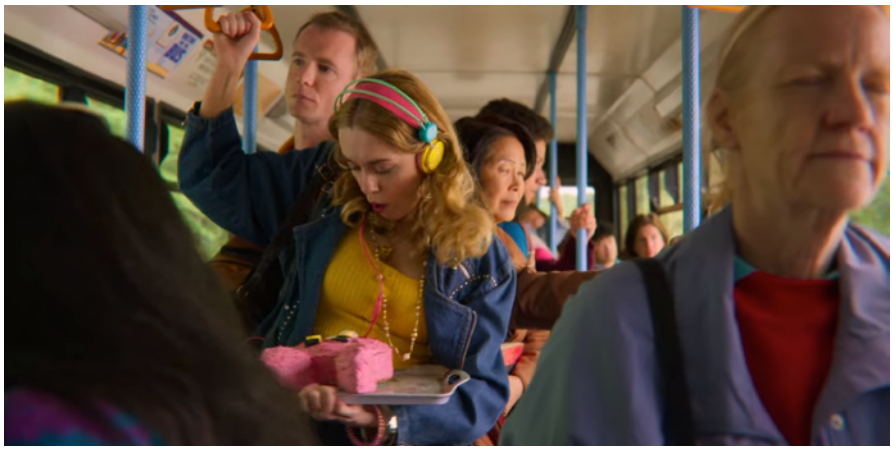

Figure 1: Aimee standing next to her abuser on the crowded bus.

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While the rest of the passengers fail to validate the aggression, Maeve acts as the viewers' voice by condemning the offence and asserting, for the first time, that Aimee had been assaulted. However, when Maeve suggests reporting the incident to the police, Aimee downplays its relevance, justifying the man's actions ("I think he was just lonely, or not right in the head or something, which is weird 'cause he was quite handsome" S2:E3 11:18). As Stępień and Mhórdha (2023: 47) address, her early dismissal of what happened is an obvious consequence of the absence of discussion regarding sexual violence -both at home and in school-, as well as her "socially constructed femininity that defers to male sexuality", that has taught her not to "take up space", accommodating to everyone else's needs but hers (Aimee Lou Wood in *Still Watching Netflix,* 2020: 11:45 - 12:12). This is also evidenced when, once Maeve convinces Aimee to go to the police station, she tells the police-officer that probably they were just wasting her time (S2:E3 16:16).

The use of humour, which is, according to Horeck (2020) "central to the show's approach to sex education" can be considered "liberating" in a context that aims to take sexual assault seriously. In order to take the heat off the issue, a nervous Aimee compares the assault to someone sneezing on her, as "cum is kind of like a penis having a sneeze" (S2:E3 15:52). Also, the fact that Aimee seems more worried about her jeans ("Hope I get my jeans back [...] They're the perfect bootleg" S2:E3 24:21) than about the way she feels after the aggression provides a comedic tone to the situation. However, as it will be discussed later, Aimee's jeans convey the materialization of the assault and will play a relevant role in her process of healing. Maeve, on the other hand, is so calm and assured throughout the whole situation (Horeck, 2020). When the interrogation commences and Aimee is forced to recall the traumatic incident, Maeve questions the necessity of certain queries ([To the police officer] "Are you saying she shouldn't have smiled at him?" S2:E3 25:38). Furthermore, she convinces Aimee to proceed with the report in spite of the questions, invoking her empathy and sorority ("What if he does this to someone else? I know you can do this" S2:E3 25:58). All of the above cement Maeve as the perfect, utopian depiction of the educated liberal feminist challenging contemporary sexism. Her approach to Aimee's assault relying on justice and the importance of reporting as soon as possible undoubtedly contributes to the acknowledgement of the perpetration. Despite the harshness of the police station sequence, it is designed to function as a model of performing for the audience, manifested by the social cognitive theory leading the show (Aruah, 2021: 52).

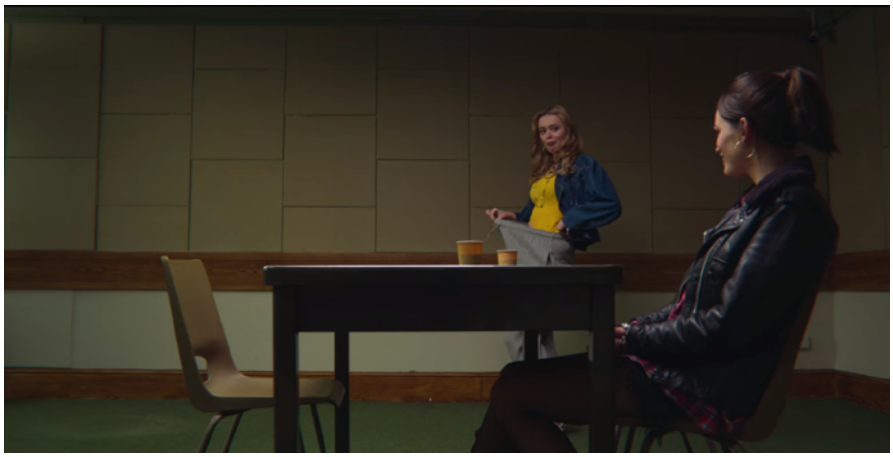

Figure 2: Aimee joking about her borrowed pants in the interrogation room.

Trauma: "I don't like you touching me anymore"

Aimee's initial response towards the sexual assault conveys realism, as she usually operates "in a plane of trust" (Aimee Lou Wood in *Still Watching Netflix,* 2020: 08:20 – 08:59) and does not have the tools to cope with the abuse. Therefore, she tries to avoid the subject and get on with her day celebrating Maeve's birthday. However, once she finds herself alone in her bedroom, she starts processing what has happened to her. The use of the storyline as a narrative device allows the depiction of the long-term impact that the assault had on Aimee, constructing a didactic reality for the audience. This section will analyse the repercussions of the sexual assault on Aimee's behaviour as briefly shown in episodes 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 of the second season of *Sex Education.*

At the end of the third episode, when Aimee comes back home, she refuses to tell her mother what happened on the bus despite their apparent close relationship. Then, a revealing 36-second steady-cam-shot long take (S2:E3 39:59 - 40:35) follows Aimee after closing her bedroom door, when she finds herself alone for the first time in the day and is able to actually reflect on the assault. Regardless of the presumed simplicity of the shot, it is of great importance to understand Aimee's individual process of trauma. The audience has a direct and explicit view of the victim's facial expression, invading her most intimate space where she is allowed to reveal her absolute vulnerability. When she starts crying, the camera zooms in slightly, with the purpose of bringing the spectator closer to her, forcing a sense of empathy. This scene can therefore be considered a turning point for Aimee, as it marks the beginning of her identity deconstruction as a survivor of sexual violence.

In Aimee's case, one of the most evident psychological consequences of the assault is that she sees her abuser in different situations of her everyday life (again on the bus, S2:E4 5:58; at a party, S2:E6 35:57; and in her own high school, S2:E7 7:23), when, in fact, he is not actually there and it is just her anxious mind making it up as a self-defense mechanism.

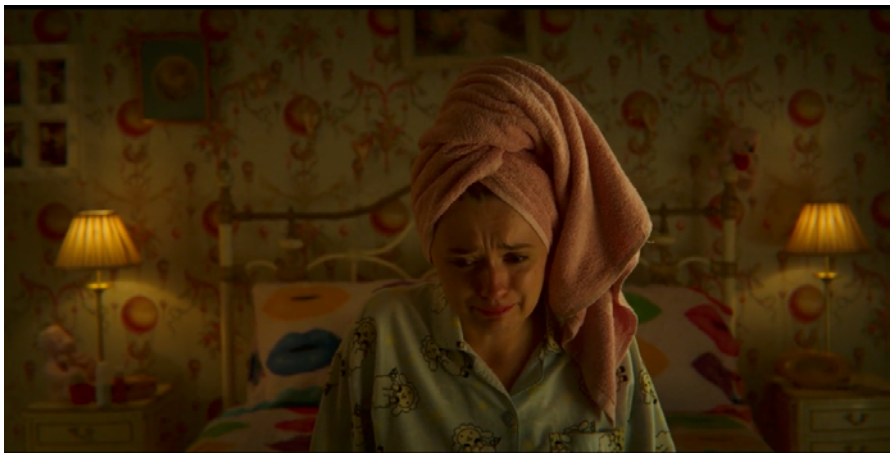

Figure 3: Aimee crying in her room, acknowledging the assault.

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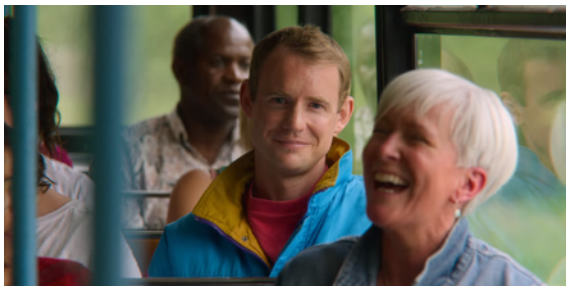
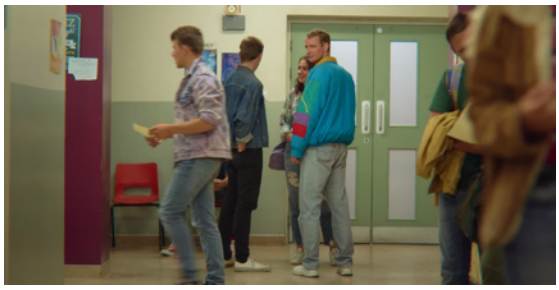
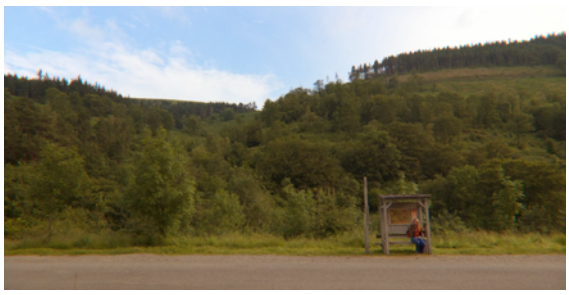



Figures 4 and 5: Aimee's vision of his abuser on the bus and in her high school.

She also rejects physical contact with her boyfriend Steve, as exemplified when she unconsciously slaps him while making out (S2:E5 24:50) or when she begs him to stop touching her ("Don't touch me, Steve. I don't think I like you touching me anymore" S2:E6 36:15). Although it can be considered as a minor or subtler adjustment, Aimee also slightly changes her way of dressing, as from episode 6 she starts wearing turtleneck jerseys and putting her hair up rather than wearing it down. Even though the assault occurred in episode 3, in the following two Aimee still wears her usual fashionable outfits, implying that the process of trauma is dynamic and changes over time. Nevertheless, the most explicit consequence is her avoidant behaviour towards taking the bus, which is the physical location where the assault took place. It constitutes the most triggering atmosphere for her, as from the first day after the assault, she had not been able to get back on (S2:E3 43:14; S2:E4 5:49). The assailant's wrongdoings have taken away Aimee's freedom to use public transport while feeling safe and secure, forcing her to change her routine. As Butler et al. state, by losing her means of movement, she is made "static", both physically and mentally, as "she cannot take her mind off the event" (2023: 26). It is also relevant to note that, by switching public transport by lengthy walks, her feeling of isolation is undoubtedly enhanced, as can be perceived in the extreme long shots from episode 3 after not taking the bus for the first time (S2:E3 43:14). The different episodes facilitate reflecting the passage of time and the various transformations that Aimee, as a survivor of sexual violence, is compelled to undertake throughout her journey. Her character deconstruction is evident, mostly due to the manifestation of post-traumatic stress.

Figures 6 and 7: Extreme long shots conveying Aimee's isolation.

Healing: "It's just a stupid bus"

In spite of Maeve's initial support, it is possible to state that Aimee goes through the development of her trauma alone. However, rather than improving over time, she feels worse and worse psychologically, leading to a cathartic sequence where a sphere of support and sorority among women is established, materialising the core values of 2017's #MeToo movement. While it cannot be considered that it completes her entire healing process, verbalising and validating her emotions, as well as finding actual encouragement, constitutes Aimee's first step towards the self-recognition of her new identity as a survivor of sexual violence. This section will establish a connection between the cathartic culmination of Aimee's second-season storyline -as shown in the seventh episode- and core sorority values rooted in the #MeToo movement.

As Horeck (2020) asserts, the outset of the episode -a nod to the premise of John Hughes' *The Breakfast Club* (1985)- can be understood as part of *Sex Education*'s "feminist subversion of the casual misogyny of earlier iterations of the teen-comedy drama". Aimee and five other girls (Maeve, Ola [Patricia Allison], Viv [Chinenye Ezeudu], Olivia [Simone Ashley], and Lily [Tanya Reynolds]) are accused of allegedly slut-shaming one of their teachers, who makes them prepare a presentation on what binds them together as women to enhance sorority among them ("One, or all of you, wanted to tear a fellow female down, now you can spend some time thinking about what you have in common instead" S2:E7 17:43). It may seem quite ironic, as all of them being of different "races, classes, sexualities, sizes, shapes, and backgrounds" (Horeck, 2021) apparently have nothing in common. In fact, before long they start fighting and insulting each other ([Ola to Maeve] "You pretend to be all radical and feminist when you're just a girl who goes around stabbing other girls in the back." "You're a snake." S2:E7 29:30). This hostile atmosphere overwhelms Aimee, who, triggered and exhausted, starts stroking her jeans, serving as "an effective articulation of [her] embodied feelings" (Horeck, 2021), bringing to the surface the memories of her trauma. As it can be perceived by the audience, the tactile significance of the jeans results in Aimee bursting into tears. While the argument continues out of the shot, the external focalization of the scene privileges Aimee, whose anxiety increases every second until she explodes shouting and crying, confessing her concerns about getting on the bus ("Aimee, why are you crying?" "Because I can't get on the bus" S2:E7 30:03). From that exact moment, all the women put their differences aside in order to help Aimee.

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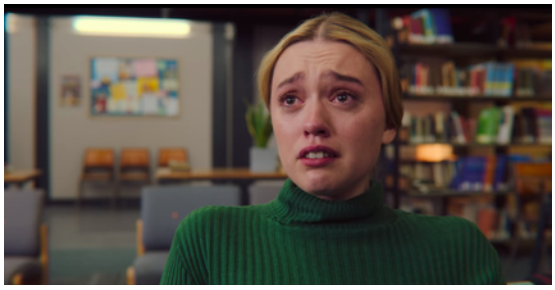
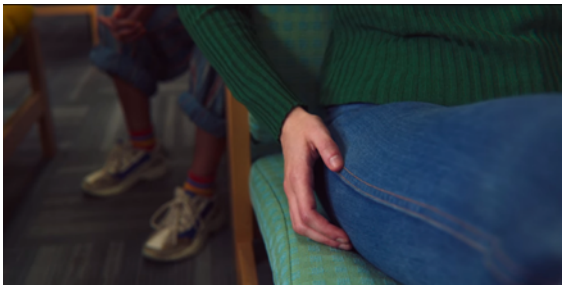
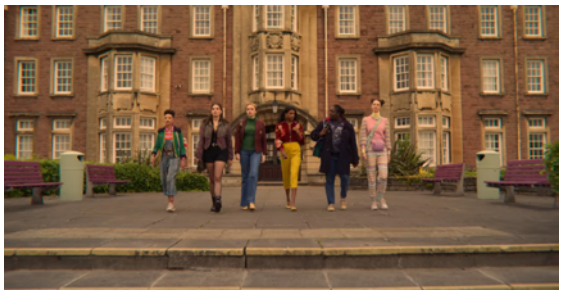
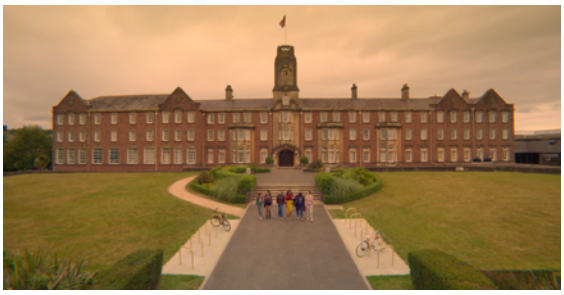



Figures 8 and 9: Aimee strokes her jeans, remembering the assault.

Once Aimee is more serene, she acknowledges that it was not only the traumatising event itself that caused her distress, but the fact that she had lost faith in people. As she asserts, "[the assailant] had this really kind face (...) he didn't look like a wanking psycho killer (...) if he could do something like that, then anyone could" (S2:E7 31:13). The character had always been defined by her sweetness and kindness, but this event has shifted her personality, and she does not know how to navigate through life now, as she has experienced that such a simple gesture as smiling at a stranger could invite unwanted sexual behaviour. Additionally, she also admits that she used to feel so safe in the past, but not anymore (S2:E7 31:28). This could be related to the fact that nobody tried to help her on the bus, as everybody ignored the assault, normalising the situation. As a woman, she had been taught to accommodate everyone from a really young age, so rather than trying to find external help or a support network, she had been isolating herself (Aimee Lou Wood in *Still Watching Netflix,* 2020: 11:45 - 12:12). Olivia is the first one (besides Maeve) to validate her emotions, confirming that the way she is feeling "doesn't sound stupid" (S2:E7 31:33). The fact that it is Olivia conveys a clear sisterhood ideology, as she is one of Aimee's former friends who used to bully her.

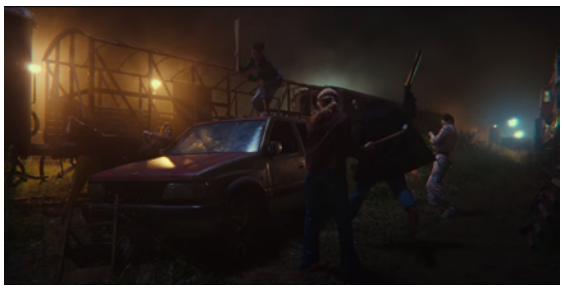
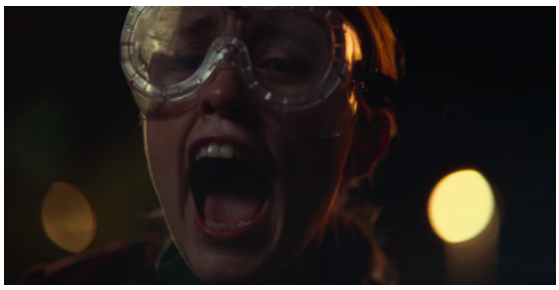
Through the character of Viv, *Sex Education* notes that, statistically, "two-thirds of girls experience unwanted sexual attention or contact in public spaces before the age of 21" (S2:E7 32:35). However, the series refrains from trapping its female characters within that statistic, empowering them to own their individual stories (Horeck, 2020 and 2021). By means of flashbacks (but with the use of present-day voiceover) each of the women in detention starts describing their experiences regarding sexual assault. They find a common link between all the narrations, that is that sexual assault has limited their movement in certain public spaces (the bus, the train station, Maeve's trailer park, the swimming pool, the street, or even the internet). Thanks to their group reflection, the young women come to the conclusion that they are treated as "public property" (S2:E7 31:53), however, they also agree on the fact that they should not change their behaviour because of men's past actions (S2:E7 32:05), which are usually based on a power imbalance ("Maybe it's a power thing" "I think the man on the bus liked that I was afraid" S2:E7 33:10). A safe sphere of compassion and tenderness is consolidated among the six women, who attentively listen to each other's stories without judging or questioning any of the details, nor the victim's response. It is relevant to highlight that not for a second do they doubt the version of their peers or consider that they have overreacted. On the contrary, from the first moment a connection of empathy is created ("I'm sorry that happened to you." "You too." S2:E7 33:33), which, according to Wexler et al., is of great importance in the process of healing (2019: 65). Despite finally not being guilty of slut-shaming

their teacher, they concluded that "non-consensual penises" (S2:E7 35:27) were what bind them together. However, as Butler et al. acknowledge, this may be considered quite controversial, as it "perpetuates a dangerous narrative" about their relationship, mainly reduced to their "subjugated experience" with "misogynistic oppression" (2023: 26).

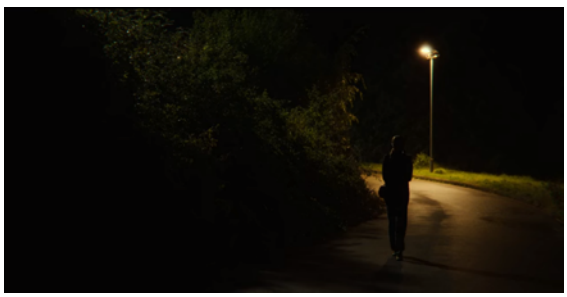



Figures 10 and 11: the young women leaving detention together.

The powerful shots of the women leaving the high school together convey strong political significance regarding resistance to patriarchal abuse, which gets reinforced by Aimee's statement: "I don't feel sad. I just feel angry" (S2:E7 35:37). This leads to the scene in which they smash abandoned cars in a landfill "as a form of group therapy" (Horeck, 2020) allowing them to express the anger caused by their traumatic experiences. The scene reaches its peak when Aimee shouts "I'm angry that a horrible man ruined my best jeans and nobody did anything, and now, I can't get on the fucking bus!" (S2:E7 40:48) while destroying a window with a hammer. By means of a slow-motion montage sequence, all the women are depicted destroying the car, in what Butler et al. acknowledge as "a crescendo of feminist rage against the patriarchy" (2023: 26). This is also conveyed by the scene's soundtrack, Cass Elliot's "Make Your Own Kind of Music", which aims to validate the distinctive and effective -as well as legitimate- way in which they decide to address their fury.

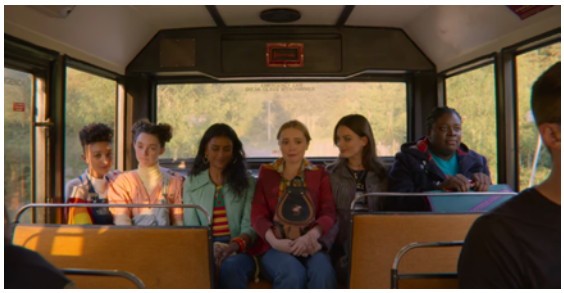
Figures 12 and 13: Aimee and the other women smashing the car.

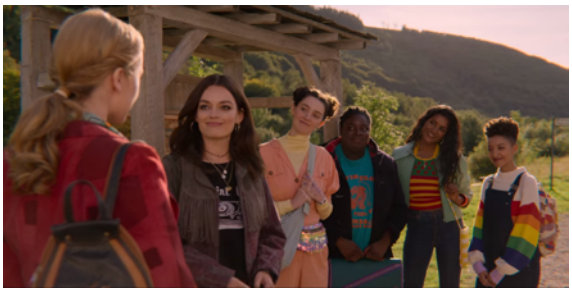



Figures 14 and 15: Contrast between episodes 6 and 7 regarding Aimee's support.

Another significant image can be found in S2:E7 41:24, where a long shot depicts all the girls coming back home together, on an empty road at night. However, they are not scared, as they have a strong support network. It takes on greater significance when compared to a similar shot from the previous episode (S2:E6 45:02), in which Aimee returns home alone from a party after getting overwhelmed by her boyfriend Steve.

The seventh episode's final scene marks the emotional culmination of Aimee's second-season storyline, providing an outstanding demonstration of collective female solidarity and resilience. The morning after the sorority session, Aimee seems to have found the strength to get back on the bus. However, when she gets to the bus stop, she realizes that Maeve and the other women are also there to support her ("What are you doing here?""We're all getting the bus" S2:E7 46:52). This is consistent with the educational aim of the series, implying that all the characters are expected to advocate for the victim, not just Maeve because of their friendship. Even if Aimee hesitates for a short period of time, Maeve ends up convincing her to get on, expressing that "It's just a stupid bus" (S2:E7 47:25), trying to make her safe and secure. One of the final shots depicts the young women sitting together filling the whole backseat of the bus, highlighting their differences and, at the same time, their unity. Echoing Horeck (2020 and 2021) the power of such an image should not be under-estimated, as it is essential to learn about "creative and resilient practices of young women as they push back against a culture that does not want them to take up space". They are both physically and psychologically recovering the public space that was taken away from Aimee the moment the man on the bus decided to harass her. Even though Aimee is terrified (as evidenced by her facial expression), she will have a strong circle of women to provide aid when necessary through her journey, which conveys both the tangible and triggering bus ride, and the coming-of-age process she is already going through, which will allow her to become an educated, strong, and multi-faceted young woman. It can be considered that the extradiegetic soundtrack (Sharon Van Etten's "Seventeen") mirrors Aimee's inner thoughts of nostalgia towards her previous self ("I used to be free. I used to be seventeen."), but as the bus departs, a new process of self-awareness and recognition commences for her.





Figures 16 and 17: Aimee's support network getting on the bus with her.

As depressing and disheartening as it may seem, *Sex Education* seems to imply that a woman's personal development appears to be linked to traumatic experiences arising from structural (and ostensibly unavoidable) patriarchal violence that operates as a catalyst for such growth. This, of course, perpetuates a problematic discourse about what a woman's identity is. Especially, if Aimee, the embodiment of the ideals of "class, femininity, sexuality, and race"

represents "the patriarchal ideal of a woman that [should be] protected" as she is not considered threatening to society (Butler et al., 2023: 26). Furthermore, Aimee's healing is still not complete, as in season 3 of *Sex Education*, it is shown that she decides to start therapy to deal with the remaining long-term impact of the assault on her mental health ("Last term I was sexually assaulted and I thought that I was getting over it, but I don't think I am. I used to like my body, I used to like having sex, but ever since it happened, I don't like the way my body feels." S3:E3 05:00). What the therapist tells her ("What that man did to you on the bus has nothing to do with your smile or your personality and is only about him." S3:E6 07:26) resonates throughout the rest of the season and leads to the culmination of the storyline in season 4. While part of the audience was expecting her to "eventually find justice" (Aruah, 2021: 60), it is by means of artistic exploration and creation that she is finally able to "overcome" her trauma. By photographing herself dancing in front of her burning jeans, the trauma starts to heal and Aimee is ready to engage in sexual intercourse again.

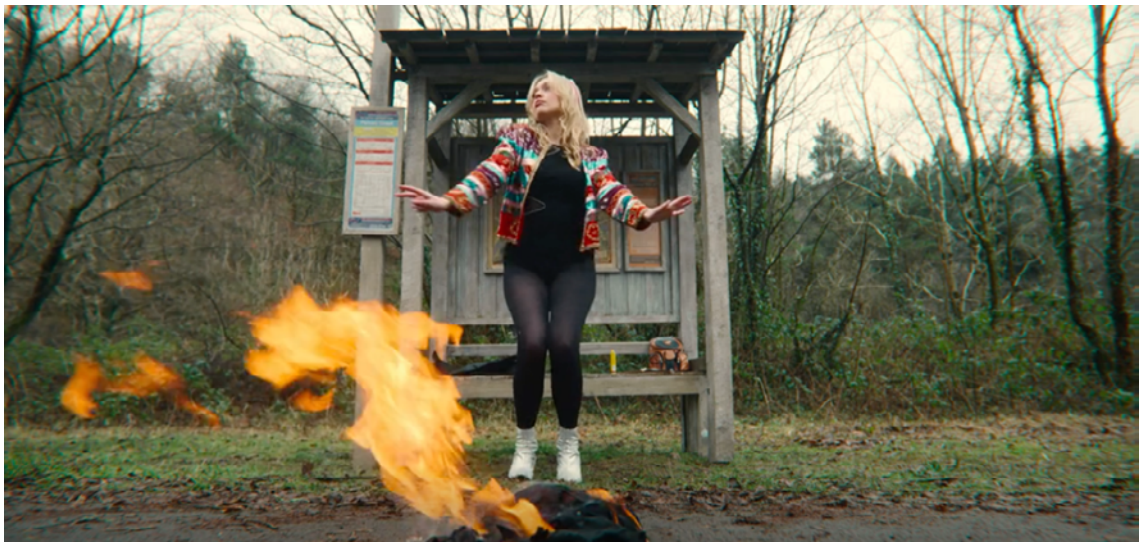


Figure 18: Aimee dancing in front of her burning jeans in Season 4.

This may seem inconsistent regarding the rest of the storyline, which is carefully developed and treats the subject with greater narrative sensitivity. The need to provide a happy ending implicitly places responsibility on the victim and partly detracts from the unstable and non-linear process that had been built up throughout the series. However, at the same time, the ending may be interpreted as an attempt to shed light and give hope to those who are still immersed in the early stages of the process.

Despite the controversial ending, Aimee's storyline undoubtedly constitutes a brilliant portrait of the long-time consequences of sexual assault in teenagers and her circle's response should be taken as a model of conduct in such situations, reinforcing the educational and pedagogical purpose of the series.

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CONCLUSION

After analysing the didactic potential of Aimee's sexual assault storyline in *Sex Education* within a post #MeToo context, it can be concluded that the series provides a laudable example of a liberal feminist response towards misogyny and sexual misconduct, validating the figure of the victim/survivor and acknowledging the non-linear process of trauma.

The essay has manifested that the antithesis between vulnerability and independence, assumed to have been outgrown in films from the 1970s, persists in contemporary narratives. This becomes particularly evident in this case, as the protagonist is depicted as static, with a restricted presence in the public space. However, through focalization, a different response and perspective are made visible, facilitating an analysis of the impact that the assault had on the survivor and the condemnation of the action. From initially failing to recognize the aggression as such, to eventually finding a strong feminist support network, Aimee navigates through a complex traumatic process which leads to a quest for empowerment towards a more educated, aware, and multi-faceted version of herself.

By setting an innocent and naïve woman as the victim of the abuse, the relevance of *Sex Education's* didactic potential is highlighted, as it sets the overtones for a conversation regarding the public denunciation of structural sexual misconduct. Similarly, theories of restorative justice are embodied by Maeve, who is presented as a role model for the audience in terms of educated liberal feminism. The use of the storyline as a narrative device helps in portraying the long-time impact of the assault, conveying Aimee's post-traumatic stress, a non-linear process of avoidance, isolation, and anxiety. The text, by invading her private space and emphasising her vulnerability, provides a sense of liberation for other survivors of sexual violence, as they encounter a validating reflection of their own experiences through Aimee's process.

Finally, season two provides a cathartic closure to Aimee's storyline, a celebration of feminist rage against the patriarchy and the beginning of her restoration journey. The creation of the network of support and understanding undoubtedly constitutes one of the most outstanding examples of sorority found in contemporary audiovisual production, focusing on the significance of actively listening to other women's stories and aiding each other despite existing social and cultural differences. In spite of the controversy regarding the ideal model of victimhood portrayed by Aimee, both her and her social environment constitute a strong and effective articulation of the main features of the #MeToo movement, as well as an exemplary educational tool for younger generations who will hopefully not tolerate any kind of sexual abuse.

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