

BRIDGERTON SERIES AS A PARADIGM OF FEMINIST CO-CREATION OF THE TELEVISION AUDIENCE

Graciela Padilla-Castillo, Aysel Zeynalova, Asunción Bernárdez-Rodal

Complutense University of Madrid (Spain)

gracielp@ucm.es; aysezey@ucm.es; asbernar@ccinf.ucm.es

INTRODUCTION

Bridgerton is a television series created by Chris Van Dusen, produced by Chris Van Dusen, Betsy Beers and Shonda Rhimes. Its first season premiered worldwide on 25 December 2020 on Netflix. The first season has eight episodes, as is the norm for all Netflix series, and a second season is already confirmed thanks to the fact that it racked up 82 million views in the first month of its premiere (Zorrilla, 2021). If it follows the structure of the collection of novels written by Julia Quinn, from which the original idea stems, the series could have up to 8 seasons, as there are 8 different books, each centred on the 8 Bridgerton children. The action takes place in London, around 1810, among the high society parties. It begins with the presentation of the young brides to the Queen of England and the appearance of a gossip bulletin, signed by an anonymous author: Lady Whistledown.

The plot, which at first sight does not seem very original, is adapted to our reality, offering original and necessary touches that form the basis of this investigation. On-screen, Shonda Rhimes innovates once again with a choral and multiracial cast, which she has previously imposed on all her series and which made her stand out especially from the first season of *Grey's Anatomy* onwards. Rhimes proposes blind casting so that actors and actresses are not chosen on the basis of physical characteristics imposed by the script. Thanks to this, the Queen of England, the Duke of Hastings (Sir Simon Basset), and his stepmother are black, breaking with history and with other fiction set in this era, always with Caucasian actors. Outside fiction, the promotion of the series has been original and humorous, on Twitter and Instagram, with the usual tone of the official Netflix account. However, viewers have created content based on the series, which has become more viral than Netflix's official publications. Specifically, the hashtag #bridgertonmusical, created by the user and singer @abigailbarlowww, has accumulated more than 185.7 million views to date, surpassing the audience figures for the series itself and standing as an excellent example of the importance of co-creation of content and the active role of the audience in cultural production.

With these precedents, this paper aims to study the Netflix series with three objectives: 1) to analyse the original ideas offered by Bridgerton in terms of its female and multiracial cast; 2) to compare this proposal with the series previously produced by Shonda Rhimes and look for the proposals of female empowerment that she always bets on; and 3) to study the cultural produsage or co-creation of content of the audience of the series in TikTok, commenting on the typologies of proposals and the messages of female empowerment that they promulgate. These three objectives will be addressed with a qualitative methodology in three phases: 1) longitudinal study of the concepts of cultural produsage, audience co-creation and empowerment; 2) commentary on the figure and filmography of Shonda Rhimes; and 3) exploration of the most used hashtags of the series on TikTok, listing the proposals, formats, tone and scope.

ON AUDIENCE CO-CREATION AND THE ACTIVE ROLE OF AUDIENCES

Taking advantage of the technologies and innovative tools provided by social networks, consumers have become protagonists and content generators. In 1979, Alvin Toffler, in his manuscript *The Third Wave*, argued that consumers are a phenomenon of the industrial era. He maintained that in the post-industrial era, consumer behaviour was moving towards prosumers, those who, in addition to consuming, produced for themselves. More than forty years later, this concept is still valid and more plausible than ever.

Verwey (2015) highlights the collaborative and expressive nature of interactive media and technology, and the ability they offer users to participate in the production and publication of branded content within digital affinity communities. He adds that this landscape presents greater possibilities for self-expression, as well as unlimited opportunities for participation in determining and influencing the narratives being developed at any given moment. And Marinas (2019) notes that with social networks, new forms of communication and learning have emerged that were previously unknown.

Hatch and Schultz (2010) were pioneers in defining the 4 basic pillars of the co-creation process: dialogue, access to information, transparency and risk. They propose a simple model of co-creation in two dimensions: engagement between the company and its stakeholders and information provided by the company. They conclude that there is a growing interest on the part of companies in offering multiple channels that allow them to create a commitment or link between the company and its stakeholders; generating dialogue with their publics through the channels through which the company is accessed. On the other hand, they confirm that stakeholders are increasingly demanding more information about organisations and brands, even with the risk that this may entail for the corporate image.

In a similar vein, Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2016) concluded that in the traditional brand value creation process, companies viewed their audiences as passive recipients. However, in the latest brand co-creation processes, all stakeholders play a more active role. They contribute their opinions to the creation of brand value together with the company. The authors recommend that company managers set up brand experiences where individuals can carry out co-creation actions to increase brand value. The same authors, in another paper from the same year (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016) focused on developing the concept of "joint experience of agents in the creation of brand value". They delved into how to involve different stakeholders, personally and collectively, in brand value creation, expanding the way in which the firm connects brand value creation opportunities with brand resources.

In this context, digital engagement platforms are fundamental, specifically designed as a system of people, elements, interfaces and processes that favour the development of interactive environments to intensify the joint experience and action of co-creators and generate mutually valuable results for all participants and agents in the brand value co-creation system. It is interesting how they insist on the difference between "agent" and "actor", understanding that the "agent" has the capacity to act motivated by its engagement as an individual who reproduces and transforms its structural environment through its relationships with the same environment and with the other agents interacting in that environment.

Hsieh and Chang (2016), meanwhile, integrated perceived psychological benefits and distinctive motivations into consumers' brand co-creation process from self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 1980) and implicit self-esteem theory (Greenwald and Bnaji, 1995). They found that: (1) high self-connectedness to the brand facilitates brand co-creation engagement; (2) both autonomy and perceived personal competence or aptitude in brand co-creation tasks are positively associated with brand co-creation engagement; and (3) brand co-creation tasks that bring a perception of relatedness or affinity among co-creation team members also facilitate brand co-creation engagement to be

established, which, in turn, increases purchase intention and other positive attitudes toward the brand.

Erdem et al. (2016) studied the control companies have over their own brands; the new relationships they are establishing with consumers; the risks of co-branding; and the threats of this new process for brand management. They consider it essential to study whether co-creation affects the growth of brands and whether brand ownership is diluted. They also address the question of how companies should develop integrated communications strategies to better reflect the wide variety of digital options. Tajvidi, Wang, Hajli and Love (2017) also propose a model of brand co-creation in which consumers' relationship with each other and with brands positively affects the sense of belonging to a community and facilitates brand co-creation in electronic environments. Following the precedent of Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), they assume that co-creation of brand equity is deeply rooted in the concept of co-creation of value. They take up Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) definition of co-creation as the collaboration between a customer and a supplier in the activities of co-design, co-design and co-development of new products. They point out that the academic literature traditionally recognises that value can be created in the co-creation process, when customers move from being a passive audience to being a social partner in the co-creation process, and that value can be created in the co-creation process when customers move from being a passive audience to a social partner in the co-creation process. In this way, they accept that value creation between customers and suppliers is based on a unique experiential environment in which customers engage in dialogue and interaction with their suppliers, as well as access to their resources (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004).

ON ACTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA AUDIENCES: TIKTOK

The social, economic and cultural context almost a year and a half after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic respiratory disease is on many levels very different. The course of events forced half of the world's population, 3.9 billion people, to respect some form of confinement (France24, 2020). In Spain, the government declared a state of alarm, limiting, among other things, social relations and the free movement of the population (Government of Spain 2020).

The *23rd Surfers on the Net Report* (in original Spanish, *23º Informe Navegantes en la Red*), conducted by the Association for Media Research (in original Spanish, AIMC, 2021), details the growth of Internet connectivity with a constant frequency, according to 47.48% of respondents, and 92.30% who connect several times a day. The smartphone is the most chosen access device, according to 93.1% of respondents, and the laptop (71.4%) or desktop (50.75%) occupy, respectively, the second and third place.

Bearing in mind that 87% of internet users aged between 16 and 65 use social networks (IAB Spain, 2021), we can deduce that a large part of this connection time is spent on these platforms, which were born to socialise, but which have developed and evolved towards marketing and interactivity at all times. On this point, in the *Social Networking Study 2021* (in original Spanish, *Estudio de Redes Sociales 2021*, IAB Spain, 2021) there is a categorisation that indicates the activities most carried out by users. 81% seek to be entertained, 77% seek to interact and 66% seek information.

Consequently, social networks have adapted and evolved to positively address all these needs and this is demonstrated by the growth of users and the increase in connection time mentioned in the first lines. Also in the Spanish case, reports by Hootsuite and We Are Social, The Social Media Family, IAB Spain, Statista or Inesdi highlighted TikTok as the social network with the highest growth. In fact, the app has been named as the 'Social Network Revolution' of 2020 and has increased all its metrics by 3 or 4 compared to 2019 (Weimann and Masri, 2020).

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This app (still under the name Douyin in the People's Republic of China) is part of the ByteDance Company. The Asian corporation has its tax domicile in the Cayman Islands, although its headquarters are in Beijing. To date, it has shareholders from all continents, through the venture capital funds that have invested in the company. Among the most prominent are Sequoia Capital, Kohlberg Kravis Roberts and General Atlantic. Its operations are divided into offices in different countries, although its main revenue base is China (Liu and Yu, 2020). Projections for this year 2021 announce spectacular revenues, taking into account the rise to \$35 billion in 2020 (Huang, 2021).

Moreover, the keys to TikTok are numerous, but simple. Detecting and understanding them makes its growth and virality understandable (Padilla-Castillo, 2021):

- No need to have an account or register. Anyone, by downloading the app, can watch videos, download them, forward them, press likes or report them.
- It has videos on every imaginable topic.
- The algorithm suggests videos "For you" and has memory: it not only offers you topics of videos you have watched in the last hours, but also in the previous weeks or months, in case you had forgotten them.
- A video can go viral without the user who created it being an influencer or having thousands of followers.
- The humorous and cathartic component has been fundamental, as a pastime during sanitary confinement.
- It is a very simple network to use and does not offer navigation tutorials, promoting precisely its simplicity.
- The videos are very short, up to one minute long, and can be viewed at any time and occasion of the day.
- It offers simple and viral challenges, seeking the co-creation of the public, so that they imitate them following the original idea.
- It does not demonize plagiarism, but virality: you can make a video with the background, audio and music of another user, or you can make a duet with him/her with the shared screen.
- Video editing is very simple, with numerous filters, always free and completely openly available. They are on the platform itself and the user does not require other image, video or audio editing programs. No previous technical knowledge is required either.

In these circumstances, users quickly feel like protagonists and users. They see that they are part of the series, that they can influence its continuity and its history. For some, TikTok allows a direct and simple form of monetization, an artistic space that also becomes a professional space.

ABOUT THE LIFE AND WORK OF SHONDA RHIMES

Shonda Rhimes was born in Chicago in 1970 to a family of five siblings and parents in academia: her mother was a professor and her father a manager at the University of Chicago. She graduated from Dartmouth College and won a scholarship to the University of Southern California for a master's degree in film and television screenwriting. After graduating, he was unemployed for several months and had only very short-term jobs. The exception was the documentary *Hank Aaron: Chasing the Dream* (1995)

and the short film *Blossoms and Veils* (1998), acquired by New Line Cinema. Soon after, he got his break as a screenwriter for the 1999 TV movie *Dorothy Dandridge*, which made actress Halle Berry famous. And from there to teen films with two titles: *Crossroads: To the End* (starring Britney Spears) in 2002, and *The Princess Diaries 2: Royal Engagement* in 2004. It did not find its place and the titles did not perform at the box office as expected.

Until the first episode of *Grey's Anatomy* aired on 27 March 2005, and her CV changed forever. The series, meant to be a mid-season break or transition product, won over audiences and quickly gained its own space. It moved from Sunday to Thursday, a prime time slot in the American prime time. It revived the medical series, along with *House, M.D.*, which had not enjoyed such splendour since *ER*. It made Shonda Rhimes one of the 100 most influential people in the world, according to *Time* magazine's ranking. All thanks to a choral and multiracial series, with the young and inexperienced doctors learning about the profession and about human and love relationships.

The success of the series would lead to the appearance of a sequel or spin-off. Dr. Addison Montgomery left *Grey's Anatomy* for her own show, *Private Practice*. In fiction, she moved from Seattle to Los Angeles. In reality, the then husband of the lead actress, an ABC executive, proposed to Shonda Rhimes that she create a whole new series, as *Grey's Anatomy* had done. It was made to show off actress Kate Walsh and Rhimes was happy because she was also producing it with her company, ShondaLand. Finally, in 2013, and after 6 seasons, the series was cancelled with 11 international television awards and more than a score of nominations.

It was not to be Rhimes' great success as the predecessor series, *Grey's Anatomy*, remains her benchmark and her other successes have not been able to surpass it. At the close of this paper, the series has 381 episodes, 18 seasons, 16 years on the air, 4 Emmy Awards, 76 other international television awards and more than 230 nominations. Its protagonist, Ellen Pompeo, who gives life to the Grey of the title, is also a producer of the title and one of the most influential women in the United States. In fiction, she survived the death of her first partner and father of her children; and in media interviews, she has often referred to the rumours that guessed, without reason, that she alone could not carry the weight of the entire series without a male partner.

In addition to this series, and before *Bridgerton*, Shonda Rhimes has triumphed with many other titles that endorse her good eye for choosing and implementing television fiction projects. After *Private Practice* came *The Catch*, which lasted only two seasons (2016 and 2017), but gave great international popularity to its protagonist, actress Mireille Enos. Known for her brilliant role as a police inspector in the dramatic and black series *The Killing* (2011-2014), the decision to cast her as the protagonist was by no means gratuitous. In fact, after *The Catch* she has moved on to another powerful role, in *Hanna* (2019-2021).

In parallel, Shonda Rhimes developed *Scandal*, another feminist and multiracial milestone in her filmography. It was premiered by ABC (American Broadcasting Company), on April 5, 2012, and remained on air for 7 seasons, until 2018. It is a drama series, with episodes of 43 minutes each. Each installment contains a self-conclusive plot: the protagonist, Olivia Pope, and her team must fix a communication crisis of a client. This crisis opens each episode and is resolved at the end of the episode. Apart from these episodic plots, with episodic characters, there are long plots for each season, which affect the main characters and the empathy they can and do provoke in the viewers.

Scandal was filmed in Los Angeles (California), although the fiction was developed in Washington, D.C., always around the White House. It was produced by ShondaLand, Shonda Rhimes' production company, and ABC Studios, as was the case with *Grey's Anatomy* and *Private Practice*. In addition to having the audience's favor, during those 7 seasons, the series deserved 2 Emmy Awards, 33 other

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television awards and more than 70 nominations. Almost all of them were to recognize the role of black actress Kerry Washington, playing the protagonist, Olivia Pope.

Pope is the alter ego of Judy Smith, Rhimes' other half for this project. She was born in 1958, in Washington, D.C. She studied Public Relations at Boston University and after graduating, she was a communications assistant at the College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists in her hometown. Shortly thereafter, in 1989, she became a deputy spokesperson for the U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia. Interestingly, this position would have great importance, years later, in the series *Scandal*, where the same character appears: David Rosen played by actor Joshua Malina.

She was in that position for two years because in 1991, she became part of the cabinet of the President of the United States, George H.W. Bush. The country's forty-first president served from 1989 to 1993. Previously, he had served as Ronald Reagan's vice president from 1981 to 1989 and as director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) from 1975 to 1977. It is no coincidence that the CIA is also an essential part of the plot of *Scandal*.

In the Bush administration, international policy was a fundamental part. The President decided to invade Panama on December 20, 1989, in *Operation Just Cause*, to capture General Manuel Antonio Noriega, military leader and then dictator of the country. He also initiated the Gulf War in the summer of 1990, with a coalition of 31 countries and the authorization of the United Nations, in response to the invasion of Kuwait by the then Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. The conflict lasted until February 1991. And in June 1993, the president ordered the bombing of Iraq again, in retaliation against the alleged plot to end his life. Yet again, reality would invade fiction because President Fitzgerald Grant, in *Scandal*, played by Tony Goldwyn, lives the same threat.

The real conflicts with Iraq would return in 1998, during Bill Clinton's administration and *Operation Desert Fox*; and during the administration of George H.W. Bush's son, George W. Bush, in 1998. However, those crises were far removed from the work of Judy Smith, who was closely involved in the first Gulf War. After finishing her term and leaving the White House, she founded her own firm: *Smith & Company*, specializing in crisis management and public relations. She would never leave politics, as she advised high-ranking officials and Monica Lewinsky, who declared having nine sexual encounters with then President Bill Clinton, between 1995 and 1997.

Smith was also vice-president of the communications office of the American television network NBC (National Broadcasting Company). Thanks to this job and her television contacts, in 2009, she was introduced to Shonda Rhimes and her partner, Betsy Beers. The meeting was scheduled to last about half an hour. But the three women talked for several hours and the germ of *Scandal* was born. Smith would become executive producer of the series, along with Rhimes, and of course, plot and script consultant.

Rhimes tried her hand at historical TV drama with *Still Star-Crossed*, in 2017, but it only ran for one season. And after *Scandal* ended, she got her start in legal drama with 2-season *For the People* in 2018-2019. These series became unremarkable flops because as the end of *Scandal* approached, Rhimes returned to hit the bullseye with *How to Get Away with Murder*. The series has had 6 seasons, through 2020, and its lead is another strong, empowered, black woman. Viola Davis plays criminal defence attorney Annalise Keating for 90 episodes and has earned the series an Emmy Award, 17 other international awards, and 77 other nominations at the close of this project.

Finally, before *Bridgerton*, Rhimes returned to drama-sanitary series with *Station 19*, set in a fire station in Seattle, Washington. This proposal stands out for giving a broad protagonism to women in a profession that is usually represented in fiction, almost always, by men. It has been on the air for 5

seasons, until 2021, and the parity and multiracial cast includes actors of black and Latino descent, which is another important plea for equality and the reduction of discrimination by gender or race.

BRIDGERTON AT TIKTOK: PARADIGM OF AUDIENCE CO-CREATION

According to the objectives of the paper, after the longitudinal study of the concepts of cultural produsage, audience co-creation and empowerment and the commentary on the figure and filmography of Shonda Rhimes, we offer an exploration of the most used hashtags of the *Bridgerton* series on TikTok, listing the proposals, formats, tone and scope.

In order to be as aseptic as possible, this search has been done from a mobile phone with the app downloaded, but without having a registered user account. By Popularity, TikTok offers 10 videos for #bridgerton, as the most recommended, without logging in or having any knowledge of the user's tastes and habits:

1. "Bridgerton in real life" (@annahosp): 2.5M likes, 55.1K comments and 76.9K shared.
2. "bridgerton" (@gloriday): 600.6K likes, 7,865 comments and 32,3K shares.
3. "Me watching the First episode of Bridgerton" (@rozyqueenofcups): 2.2M likes, 22.4K comments and 126.9K shares.
4. "Just girly things" (@keirayasmin6): 23.5K likes, 438 comments and 791 shares.
5. "Currently facing Bridgerton" (@hosesloveashanti): 253.6K likes, 2,892 comments and 3,363 shares.
6. "Your grace!" (@mishdontkillmyvibe): 382.6K likes, 5,079 comments and 13.0K shares.
7. "Not me rewatching it the 3rd time" (@futuremilfwithoutkids): 1.4M likes, 23.7K comments and 37.5K shares.
8. "Duque" (@s.netflix): 44.9K likes, 704 comments and 5,842 shares.
9. "Simon & Daphne" (@bridgertonlatino): 13.3K likes, 65 comments and 578 shares.
10. "It's on Netflix" (@ubiiinetflix): 200.5K likes, 812 comments and 991 shares.

For Users, we list the 10 accounts offered by TikTok, in the same decreasing order in which they appear in the app for the #bridgerton search:

1. @bridgertonlatino: 39.7K followers and 44 videos.
2. @bridgerton.romania: 4,803 followers and 17 videos.
3. @iiburnforyou: 1,699 followers and 71 videos.
4. @osbridgertons.2021: 2,112 followers and 9 videos.
5. @bridgerton_ofc: 6,814 followers and 56 videos.
6. @bridgerton20: 13,7K followers and 99 videos.
7. @bridgertons.0: 5,963 followers and 79 videos.
8. @bridgerton_life: 908 followers and 38 videos.
9. @netflixbridgerton: 130 followers and 6 videos.
10. @bridgertonlovers: 344 followers and 1 video.

It is very striking, as in *Popularity*, that these accounts do not appear in order of number of followers, number of videos or number of likes. The social network's secret algorithm offers them in the same order, for the #bridgerton search, understanding geographical and language issues, as there is no previous history of searches or views on the account used for the study. As proposed for *Popularity*, it would be interesting to delve deeper into each of these accounts, in future research, and to understand why TikTok presents them in this decreasing order. Above all, it is striking that there are accounts with few followers, with few videos or a single video, or with few followers and dozens of videos at the same time. It would also be very interesting to draw up a ratio of followers/number of videos and to analyse in depth whether the series, within an account, is dealt with in one or several videos; and whether it is related to other series, feminist issues or other topics.

Specifically, the hashtag #bridgertonmusical, created by the user and singer @abigailbarlowww, has accumulated more than 185.7 million views to date, surpassing the audience figures for the series itself and standing as an excellent example of the importance of co-creation of content and the active role of the audience in cultural production. Its creator defines herself in these terms: "Songwriter girl. Co-creator of #bridgertonmusical. Check out our website below! www.barlowandbear.com" (@abigailbarlowww, 2021). She has 2.3M followers, 41.5M likes and several hundred videos: her own and duets with her followers.

The key to her success is to make songs of musical genre, sung and spoken, mixing her own text and lines from the script of the series. She appears in clothes of our present time, not like the protagonists of the series, and her hair is dyed purple. She always sings live, without editing, and with the accompaniment of an instrument (almost always piano) in some cases. She alone plays several characters when in her videos she refers to a dialogue between the characters in the series.

The partner playing the piano in some of the videos is Emily Bear, her partner in the company Barlow & Bear. On their website, they explain that they have broken the glass ceiling for women by offering a Broadway-style musical on a social network, free of charge, and with many more viewers than a real show gets (Barlow & Bear, 2021).

En su página web también explican, en unas líneas, el origen de su éxito: #bridgertonmusical. Abigail Barlow supo que era una historia perfecta para el escenario teatral-musical y escribió los temas "Oceans Away" y "I Burn For You", que cantó en TikTok. "Absolutamente asombrada por la respuesta" (Barlow & Bear, 2021), contacto con Bear para desarrollar más temas a partir de las tramas de la primera temporada. Respondieron usuarios anónimos, cantantes, Netflix, la autora de los libros (Julia Quinn) y los creadores de la música original de la serie, Pasek and Paul, que la han felicitado públicamente por crear un nuevo género musical.

CONCLUSIONS: TIKTOK, CO-CREATION AND THE ROLE OF THE AUDIENCE

This research had three objectives: 1) to analyse the original ideas offered by *Bridgerton* in terms of its female and multiracial cast; 2) to compare this proposal with the series previously produced by Shonda Rhimes and look for the proposals of female empowerment that she always bets on; and 3) to study the cultural produsage or co-creation of content of the audience of the series in TikTok, commenting on the typologies of proposals and the messages of female empowerment that they promulgate. According to the methodology and the results discussed in the previous lines, the three objectives have been met, although the research has revealed new and very interesting prospects for further research. On TikTok we have discovered that its algorithm can make any video, any hashtag and any account go viral, regardless of these three aspects of each other. When a user goes viral, like @abigailbarlowww, it is understandable that her videos also go viral, but there is no such reciprocity all the time, and she

herself achieved worldwide fame thanks to just two videos. As for Shonda Rhimes, after analysing the role of women and race in her series, we see courage and hopefully proposals that many series may follow. *Bridgerton* is her latest success, but it is not her first, and it is striking that people criticise the parity and ethnicity of her cast when it should be a trend to follow in the times we live in.

The union of the social network, the series and its cast, and the original co-creation of the audience give rise to a parallel world to the Netflix screen, where the series takes on new life, shaped by its users, and becomes bigger and multiplies. Social networks, like TikTok in this case, offer a dynamic, changing, original life, with many approaches and readings, where the audience becomes the creator. New stories are constructed that may not be incorporated into the series, but that enjoy thousands or millions of views. And in the midst of this virality, feminist empowerment becomes greater, as Rhimes has been trying to do since her first work. Her series break the gender gap and the social dialogue of her series contribute to that ceiling not only being broken in fiction, but also in the reality of the audience. @abigailbarlowwww is the best example because she has created a musical on the Chinese social network that no one would have produced for her on Broadway. Now, she makes a living from the music she dreamed of writing and singing. If only many more series would allow for such success stories and paradigm shifts, which show the best consequences of television, so unfairly demonised and undervalued.

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