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Constructing a Stratified Representative Sample of Italian TV Series (2000–2023): A Methodological Framework for Quantitative and Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Since the advent of original content production by streaming platforms, the volume of scripted television has surged, making holistic academic study increasingly challenging. This is particularly true in Italy, where the absence of a national audiovisual archive complicates comprehensive research on domestic TV series. This paper proposes a stratified random sampling methodology for building a representative and updatable sample of Italian television seriality from 2000 to 2023. Using a dataset of over 22.000 episodes from 487 series, stratified by year, genre and distributor, we developed a sample of 431 episodes aimed at balancing representativeness, statistical power and data accessibility. The methodology includes corrective measures in sampling strategies and validation through statistical tests. This approach offers a robust framework for future research on Italian television, supporting diverse analyses while mitigating selection bias and facilitating systematic, replicable and interdisciplinary research in media and communication studies.

Keywords: Italian Television; Stratified Sampling; Audiovisual Preservation; Media Research Methodology; TV Series Corpus.

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1 Navigating production and preservation: strategies for researching Italian TV

1.1 Peak TV, missing archives: mapping Italian serial production in the contemporary media ecology

Since streaming platforms began producing original content in 2013, the number of fictional audiovisual productions has increased rapidly. In 2015, John Landgraf, chief executive of FX Networks, stated that "there is simply too much television", coining the term Peak TV and predicting a subsequent decline in production (Littleton 2015). However, the production of English-language scripted television programs—which are emblematic of global production models—has grown steadily year after year since 2009 and declined only in 2023, with a single earlier exception in 2020, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Palmer 2025). Scripted television may indeed have reached its peak in volume. Yet, this era has generated an extraordinary abundance of original material, making it increasingly difficult for both audiences and media scholars to keep pace with the multitude of fictional serial productions and their episodes.

Even before this recent increase, however, the number of audiovisual productions was always considerably elevated. For this reason, some countries hold national archives to stock audiovisual products and maintain comprehensive databases of metadata. Examples include the British Film Institute (BFI, https://www.bfi.org.uk/) in the UK and the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA, https://www.ina.fr/) in France. Italy, however, lacks a similar archival system, and the closest institution is RAI Teche (https://www.teche.rai.it/), which collects and promotes audiovisual material exclusively broadcast by the Italian public broadcasting service, RAI. An important initiative that deserves recognition is the Osservatorio sulla Fiction Italiana (OFI), founded by Milly Buonanno in 1988, which publishes yearly reports on Italian TV series. However, while series-level information is released, details and statistics are more often presented at an aggregated level and the latest report dates to 2022.[1]

Italy represents a particularly compelling case compared to other national contexts, not only in terms of audiovisual preservation, but also in relation to production, particularly when focusing on TV series. Italian TV seriality has undergone three distinct phases, reflected in the different terms used to describe them (Cardini and Brembilla 2025). In the first phase, when TV series were referred to as *sceneggiati*, these products served a political and pedagogical function within the newly established televised system. The second phase coincides with the advent of the private network Mediaset and the importation of American media content, which influenced domestic production in terms of stories, format, and distribution practices (Buonanno 2012: 20–42). This phase also saw the rise of the term *fictions*. The emergence of domestic long-form seriality marks another significant shift in Italian TV production—once again influenced by American media—which occurred at the turn of the 1990s and 2000s, significantly later than in other European countries. For instance, *The Grove Family* (1954–1957) was the first domestically produced soap opera in the UK, followed by *Rue Carnot* (1984–1987) in France and *Lindenstraße* (1985–2020) in Germany, whereas the first Italian soap opera, *Un Posto al Sole* (1996–), arrived years later. Similarly, this phase also marked the end of "weak seriality"—a type of seriality based on audience familiarity with narrated stories, such as biopics, news-based narratives and literary adaptations (Innocenti and Pescatore 2008: 10). These two major changes, i.e., the inauguration of domestic soap operas and the conclusion of "weak seriality", led to the emergence of structured research on Italian TV series at the beginning of the new millennium (Martina and Palmieri 2015: 100).

The original content production of pay TV network *Sky*, and later that of over-the-top (OTT) platforms, marked the third phase in the evolution of Italian TV serial production. It was only during this period that such content began to be referred to as "TV series" by broadcasters and academics to differentiate it from RAI and Mediaset's productions, which were still referred to as *fictions* (Cardini and Brembilla 2025: 221). Moreover, these free-to-air linear television networks were compelled to adapt, at least partially, to the features introduced by emerging competitors—such as high-quality content and transnational distribution—which, in turn, prompted a transformation of their programming schemes (D'Arma *et al.* 2021).

1. The latest published report can be found at the following link: https://ricerche.apaonline.it/ricerca/serie-tv-bilancio-della-stagione-2021-2022/ (last accessed 10-10-25).

1.2 Early sampling strategies in media research: balancing scope, scale and selection

Due to the recent formalization of research on TV seriality in Italy and the uniqueness of this national case compared to other European countries, more comprehensive analyses on these products should be encouraged. Nevertheless, due to the high volume of scripted TV series and the lack of an exhaustive archive, identifying Italian television material is non-trivial. Consequently, researchers often abandon holistic approaches to television studies, opting instead to analyze limited, more manageable datasets, whose selection criteria are not always made explicit.

Selecting a smaller number of occurrences to study a much larger collection of audiovisual material is not a novelty in media studies. Pioneering work in this field includes Barry Salt's early statistical approach to film analysis (Salt 1974), which established the foundation for systematic stylistic analysis of cinema through sampling methodologies. A foundational contribution to this approach comes from David Bordwell *et al.* (1985), who constructed an "unbiased sample" of 100 Hollywood films produced from 1917 to 1960 based on their availability rather than on "personal preferences or conceptions of influential or masterful films" (Bordwell *et al.* 1985: 388). This methodologically rigorous approach enabled comprehensive research on style, technology and modes of cinematic production, establishing a model for systematic audiovisual analysis that has influenced subsequent scholarship. Building on this tradition, Barry Salt developed statistical methods for stylistic analysis of films, focusing on technological tools in cinema from 1895 to 2007 (Salt 2009), and examining directorial styles across diverse contexts, including cartoons and British television dramas, over a 50-year period (Salt 2006). More recently, James Cutting has employed sampling methodologies to analyze historical changes in cinematic style and the psychological effects of these changes (Cutting *et al.* 2011) and to examine audience engagement through computational analysis of movie structure and narration from 1915 to 2015 (Cutting 2021).

While case study research can serve various purposes, such as narrative and content analysis and sociocultural examinations of character representation, particular care must be taken during corpus construction in both qualitative and quantitative approaches. This is essential to avoid the "cherry-picking" phenomenon, defined as the use of minimal datasets "[...] that support the commentary that are deliberately selected to endorse the same commentary" (Morse 2010: 3). When researching TV series, it is common to select one episode per product to represent the entire series or season, sometimes even the first or the last episode—which, however, often differs from the core episodes in terms of narrative structure, character development, ratings and sometimes even distribution criteria (Mittell 2015: 55–85, 319–353). Quantitative studies aware of these dynamics have mitigated such effects by selecting one episode from the middle of a season or series (for example, Re and Spalletta 2023: 85). However, even this strategy may fail to provide an accurate representation of the series as a whole and, ultimately, of the corpus under consideration. A few other studies focusing on content analysis have explored how to generalize findings from individual episodes to entire seasons or series: Manganello *et al.* (2008) examined the minimum sample size of random episodes needed to generalize sexual content representation, noting that the required size varied depending on the study setting (i.e., behavior- or character-based), which limits generalizability, while Rocchi and Pescatore (2022) attempted to reconstruct a "typical episode" by coding an entire series for formulaic narrative patterns—a method that, however, is extremely time-consuming and limited in scope.

Given the vast amount of recently produced scripted TV content, the limited capacity of Italian archives and the low representativeness of a single episode for an entire series, it is essential to carefully determine the number of observations needed when researching Italian audiovisual productions, while maintaining both accuracy and generalizability. This paper proposes a robust methodology for constructing a stratified, representative sample of contemporary Italian television seriality from 2000 to 2023, which can support both qualitative and quantitative research. The proposed sample is designed to be inherently updatable over time, allowing adjustments as new episodes become accessible, metadata are corrected, or additional years of production are included.

2 Methodological framework: sampling frame, stratification variables, sample size and proportionality

To identify a restricted number of episodes that could well represent contemporary Italian TV seriality, the *population* had to be identified, that is, the complete number of occurrences (in our case: episodes) produced and distributed within a specific time span. The completed list of TV series produced was collected from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb, https://www.imdb.com/) by conducting an advanced search for TV series and TV miniseries, using 1980 as the lower time threshold. The data were obtained through a data mining process, followed by several pre-processing steps during the data-cleaning phase. First, the titles of the TV series that ended production before 2000 were excluded. Next, non-fiction and animated productions were manually filtered out, along with TV series that were under ten minutes in episode length or lacked sufficient information. TV series (from both linear and non-linear television) were then separated from web series. Two additional searches were performed using similar parameters—one excluding the Italian language and the other excluding the Italian country tag. The results were cross-referenced to capture any items potentially missing one of the two tags and were annotated accordingly. The final number of TV series identified is 487.

While IMDb represents a comprehensive repository for Italian TV series titles, covering the vast majority of productions, it exhibits significant gaps at the episode level. To estimate the full scope of episodes, we utilised additional sources, including video-on-demand (VOD) platforms, Wikipedia, the Italian website dedicated to audiovisual products, MYMovies (https://www.mymovies.it/), and the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* (https://www.repubblica.it/). The final number of the episode population is 22,226.

However, the primary constraint in corpus construction derives not from cataloguing completeness but from the limited availability of complete episodes for viewing and analysis, particularly for minor, niche or discontinued series absent from current streaming platforms. This accessibility limitation necessitated the adoption of a sampling strategy that could maximize representativeness while working within practical constraints. Out of the many existing sampling strategies, the stratified random sampling technique was selected. The method consists of dividing a heterogeneous population into homogeneous sub-groups called "strata" and randomly sampling units from each stratum in proportion to the stratum's size of the population (Singh and Masuku 2014: 4). However, the random nature of selection within strata requires additional methodological considerations when dealing with limited material accessibility, necessitating systematic procedures for episode substitution and stratum re-weighting as detailed in subsequent sections.

To stratify the episode population, we relied on years, macro-genres and macro-distributors as stratification variables. While years can capture longitudinal variation patterns, genre is a fundamental narrative and production variable (Altman 1999; Creeber 2023). In particular, genre is paramount for both audiences and industries: if audiences use genres to organize their personal preferences, viewing practices and activities as fans, broadcasters rely on them to produce shows, to self-define their thematic networks and in television schedules, placing genres within pre-established time slots (Mittell 2001: 4). Based on these economic and audience-oriented factors and along with editorial policies, distributors establish production models that orient the features of original TV series' production in terms of narrative and aesthetic specificities. In Italy, for instance, *RAI* tends to have a socially committed offering for the general public,[2] *Mediaset* is more prone to produce popular content, while *Sky* aspires to a more sophisticated, rebellious and quality offering (Barra and Scaglioni 2015). In addition to these players, OTT platforms established themselves as an alternative model, intensifying some of the features of linear pay TV, starting with its "international" scope. Netflix, the most prolific platform in the realm of original production, blended continuity and renewal in Italy, rediscovering especially teen dramas with a local sensibility (Barra 2023).

By conducting inevitable generalizations to ensure methodological manageability, the strata were derived from the combinations resulting from years (2000–2023), macro-genres (Comedy, Drama and Soap Opera) and macro-distributors (RAI, Mediaset and Other). This configuration results in 216 distinct strata (24 years × 3 macro-genres × 3 macro-distributors), which represented the maximum feasible subdivision—any further splitting would have made constructing and analyzing the corpus impractical.

2. To know more about the TV serial production modes of the public service network, see Valentini (2012).

The size of a sample needs to ensure two key elements: (i) Representativeness; (ii) Sufficient statistical power for descriptive and inferential analyses. Three elements determine representativeness: (i) The population size (22,226 in our case); (ii) The confidence level (or confidence coefficient), that is, the probability that the confidence interval constructed from the sample will contain the actual population parameter (usually set at 95%); (iii) The margin of error represents the maximum expected difference between the sample estimate and the actual population parameter (generally set at 5%).

The minimum significant sample size reflecting these three criteria is 378 episodes.[3] The statistical power of a sample, by contrast, refers to the probability of detecting a statistically significant effect if it exists in the population. A commonly acceptable threshold is 0.80, which corresponds to a probability of 80% to avoid committing a false negative (type II error), that is, failing to reject a false null hypothesis (Araujo and Frøyland 2007: 307). The statistical power is estimated using G*Power, a free and easy-to-use software.[4] By selecting linear regression as the intended statistical test, the statistical power for a sample of 378 occurrences amounts to 0.9031206 (i.e., 90%, error probability set at 5%), which suggests a high likelihood of detecting a real effect.

To enable the proportional allocation of episodes across strata, we computed the percentage distribution of episodes in the population across the 216 strata identified by multiplying the values from the three stratification variables. Based on these percentages and the provisional selected sample size (378 episodes), the number of episodes to be allocated to each stratum was calculated, yielding decimal values that required rounding to integers. To compensate for the distortions introduced by this necessary rounding process, a weighting coefficient was calculated for each stratum to maintain proportional representation in subsequent analyses. Every allocation number for a stratum was rounded to the nearest integer. However, if the computed allocation was greater than zero but lower than 0.5, the value was rounded up to 1 to ensure that every represented stratum contributed at least one episode to the sample.

3 Methodological challenges and mitigation procedures: overrepresentation risk, preliminary validation and corrective strategies

Stratifying a sample based on years, genre categories, and broadcasters can provide an important first methodological framework for studying Italian TV series. However, many other variables can remain unaccounted for. For instance, selecting sample episodes from accessible repositories rather than the entire population may overrepresent certain TV series and, simultaneously, underrepresent those that are absent. Likewise, long-running series like soap operas may be underrepresented due to their extended nature, which can result in inaccuracies when reporting data at the episode level in databases.

To shed light on the distribution of the TV series titles in the sample, we visualized the observed and expected occurrences of individual products through charts and frequency tables. Furthermore, we performed the Jensen–Shannon Divergence (JSD) test, which measures the similarity between two probability distributions from 0 (identical) to 1 (completely different) and is shown to be more effective than more commonly used tests like Chi-squared, as it performs well even with low-volume distributions (Dhinakaran 2023).[5] The JSD obtained by our provisional sample indicated a moderate divergence between the population and sample distributions (JSD > 0.30), suggesting the need for optimization.

To minimize the divergence between the population and the sample while preserving the proportionality established during the stratified random sampling stage, an iterative optimization algorithm was implemented. The procedure combined two main strategies:

3. See Singh and Masuku (2014) for an overview of how sample size is calculated.

4. To learn more about how *G*Power* can be used to determine a sample size and its statistical power, see Kang (2021).

5. The Chi-squared test was not suitable for our analysis due to the presence of numerous strata with very low expected frequencies or zero values, which violate the test's assumptions regarding minimum expected cell counts (typically ≥5). The JSD test proves more robust in handling such sparse distributions common in stratified sampling with multiple variables.

1) episodes from overrepresented products were systematically substituted with episodes from underrepresented series within the same stratum using a local search algorithm that iteratively tested episode reallocations to minimize JSD;

2) the sample size was increased through proportional allocation of additional episodes across strata based on their remaining capacity and population weights.

The optimization algorithm simultaneously adjusted both episode selection and weighting coefficients to maintain statistical rigor while accommodating practical constraints related to time allocation of resources and data accessibility. Accordingly, the final optimized sample size amounts to 431 episodes, and, following these computational procedures, the divergence between the population and sample distributions decreased to 0.18.

Based on the new sample size, we therefore re-computed the weighting coefficients of the strata and finally collected the episodes and their metadata. In cases where some episodes were not found in repositories, two main strategies were adopted:

(i) If the missing episode was the only one present in its stratum, it was replaced with another episode from a stratum that shares at least two out of the three variables under consideration (i.e., year, macro-genre and macro-distributor);[6]

(ii) If the missing episode was not the only one in its stratum and metadata about the others were available, the weighting coefficient of its stratum was re-distributed across a smaller number of episodes.[7]

These two strategies had to be adopted for only 5 out of 431 episodes, a small number that does not risk introducing bias into the dataset.

A bootstrap analysis showed that the average JSD across 1,000 randomly resampled samples is 0.254 (95% confidence interval: 0.240–0.272), confirming that the optimized sample is significantly more representative of the population than the average of the random samples. Finally, the coverage of the sample was assessed by examining the representation of unique stratum-series combinations. The population contains 902 distinct combinations of strata and individual series (i.e., each series counted within each year-genre-distributor stratum where it appears).[8] The sample represents 244 of these combinations, yielding a coverage of 27.05%. Although coverage is not complete, the optimization process enables us to maximize representativeness within the given constraints. Further reducing the JSD would likely have required increasing the sample size, thereby compromising the sample's compactness, which was deliberately kept small to ensure its usability in qualitative analyses.

To assess the overall quality of the stratified sample, we developed a composite sample quality index following multi-criteria evaluation approaches commonly used in sampling methodology when multiple objectives must be balanced (Groves *et al.* 2011, Lohr 2008, Särndal *et al.* 1992). The index combines two key dimensions: proportional fidelity (measured as 1 – JSD, where higher values indicate better representativeness) and sample diversity (measured as coverage). The composite index is calculated as Q = (1 – JSD) × coverage, yielding a value of 0.222. This metric confirms a good balance between proportional fidelity and diversity of representation, providing a synthetic measure of sample quality that accounts for both statistical accuracy and heterogeneity coverage.

Furthermore, a post-hoc computation of the statistical power of the sample of 431 episodes calculated through G*Power for a linear regression test shows that it amounts to 0.9331787, increasing the power relative to the minimum sample size and achieving an extremely high probability to identify a statistically significant effect.

6. This occurred for only two episodes, both from *Bradipo* (2001–2002). Specifically, the series appeared with one episode in the stratum 2001_Comedy_Other and one episode in 2002_Comedy_Other. Accordingly, the first was replaced with an episode from a RAI comedy in 2001, and the second with an episode from a Mediaset comedy in 2002.

7. This occurred only for *Un posto al sole* (1996–) in three strata, from 2009, 2010 and 2011. For instance, in the stratum 2009_RAI_-Soap Opera, the series had a weighting coefficient of 6.386, to be distributed across four episodes (single-episode weight 1.596). Since one episode was unavailable, its coefficient was transferred to another, doubling that episode's weight and re-distributing the stratum coefficient over three episodes.

8. For example, *Un posto al sole* appears in each of the twenty-four years considered (2000–2023) and therefore accounts for 24 out of the 902 combinations.

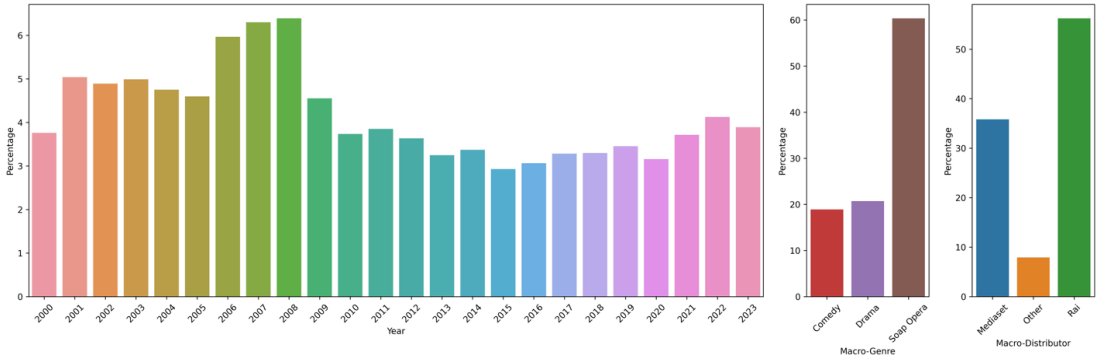
Tab. 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the key statistical parameters and validation metrics that characterize the final stratified sample, summarizing the methodological process and its outcomes.

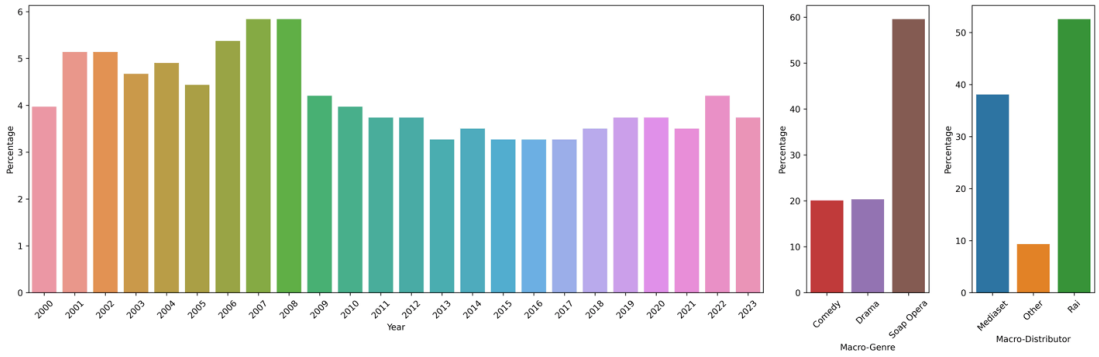
Tab. 1. – Summary of Key Statistical Results of the Stratified Sampling Process for Italian TV Series (2000–2023). Note: JSD = Jensen-Shannon Divergence; CI = Confidence Interval; Q = Composite Quality Index calculated as (1 – JSD) × coverage.

Statistical Measure	Value	Notes
Population		
Total TV series	487	Italian TV series identified
Total episodes	22,226	From 487 TV series (2000–2023)
Total series instances	902	Series counted across all years
Stratification variables	3	Year, macro-genre, macro-distributor
Number of strata	216	24 years × 3 genres × 3 distributors
Sample Design		
Confidence level	95%	Standard threshold
Margin of error	5%	Standard threshold
Minimum sample size	378 episodes	Based on representativeness criteria
Final optimized sample size	431 episodes	After optimization procedures
Validation Metrics		
Initial JSD	>0.30	Moderate divergence (pre-optimization)
Final JSD	0.18	Acceptable divergence (post-optimization)
Bootstrap JSD mean	0.254	95% CI: 0.240–0.272 (1,000 iterations)
Sample coverage	27.05%	244 out of 902 combinations represented
Composite quality index (Q)	0.222	Q = (1 – JSD) × coverage
Statistical Power		
Minimum sample power	0.9031206	α = 0.05, linear regression test
Final sample power	0.9331787	α = 0.05, linear regression test

4 Final sample validation and descriptive statistics

To further shed light on whether the sample accurately represents the population, we computed descriptive statistics of both the population and the sample across the stratification variables (namely year, genre and distributor) and visualized the results through graphs.



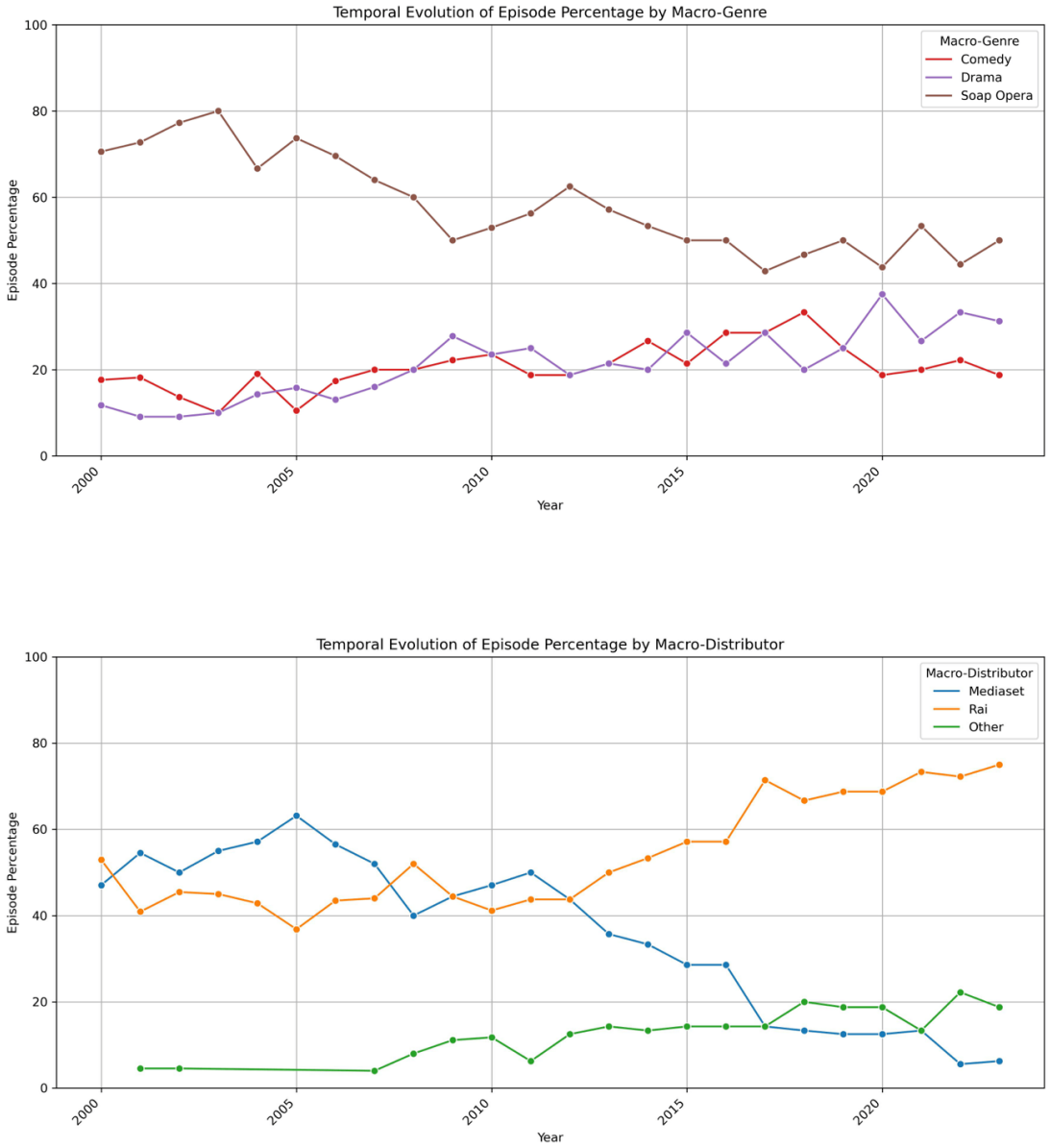


Figs. 1a–b. – Distribution of the stratification variables (year, macro-genre and macro-distributor) in population and sample, respectively, in percentages.

As shown (Figs. 1a and 1b), the sample accurately reflects the distribution of the stratification variables of the population, with minimal shifts, such as a slightly higher weight given to comedy as a macro-genre and to Mediaset as a macro-distributor, further corroborating that the sample is representative of the population.

Moving beyond the population and sample comparison, what further emerges from these distributions is a peak in overall production from 2006 to 2008, a sharp decrease in 2009 and a re-increase from 2018, corroborating the tendencies observed by the OFI.[9] As for genres, soap operas are unsurprisingly the most represented macro-genre in episode volume, while comedy and drama do not present substantial differences in terms of representation. Considering distributors, *RAI* is the most prolific broadcaster, followed by *Mediaset* and the other broadcasters, even though we can hypothesize that alternative distributors to *RAI* and *Mediaset* have increased their production recently. To verify this hypothesis and to further describe the dynamics of Italian TV serial production, Figs. 2a and 2b show the time trends of the episode sample regarding macro-genres and macro-distributors, respectively.

9. See https://ricerche.apaonline.it/ricerca/i-dati-dellofferta-rai-mediaset-sky-disney-discovery-netflix/indicatori/volume-orario//#content (last accessed: 10-10-25) and https://ricerche.apaonline.it/ricerca/serie-tv-bilancio-della-stagione-2021-2022/indicatori/volume-orario//#content (last accessed: 10-10-25).



Figs. 2a–b. – Temporal evolution of the percentage of episodes in Italian TV-series production (2000–2023): (a) by macro-genre; (b) by macro-distributor.

As Fig. 2a illustrates, although still by far the most represented genre in episode volume, soap operas have undergone a drop in production: after a peak of 80% in 2003, they now compose 50% of the episode volume produced yearly, a decline also confirmed by other studies (for example, Cardini 2017). After years of similar production levels for comedies and dramas, drama TV series have outpaced comedies in recent years. While the decrease in comedy production is due to the economic crisis and the fact that many recent productions by Mediaset—the most prolific broadcaster of comedies—failed to find an audience (Barra 2020), the recent rise of dramas could be due to OTT platforms' inclination to invest in this macro-genre, especially under the form of teen dramas (Barra 2023).

As for macro-distributor (Fig. 2b), it is worth acknowledging a huge shift in production over time: if Mediaset was the broadcaster that produced the highest quantity of episodes until 2011 (exceptions being made for 2000, 2008 and 2009), its production decreased more and more in the following years, amounting to only

6% of the overall serial production volume in 2023. In contrast, RAI has constantly increased its original scripted production, accounting for 75% of the overall number of episodes in the last years. Likewise, other broadcasters have increased their original productions, stabilizing at around 20%. These tendencies align with the results shown in the latest available report produced by the OFI.[10]

5 Sample applications and research implications for Italian TV studies

The validated stratified sample of episodes of Italian TV series can be applied across a range of research domains. Given the broad scope of stratification variables used in its construction, the sample is particularly well-suited for research aimed at identifying trends and tendencies across the television landscape, rather than conducting precise or granular analyses. Nevertheless, its design makes it an asset not only for quantitative investigations but also for qualitative research: while these latter analyses often focus on a limited number of audiovisual productions, the representativeness of this sample ensures that selected episodes reflect the broader characteristics and developments of the TV series population. As such, the sample lends itself to a wide array of applications, some of which are listed below. For each research application, we also report examples of studies in that field and, where applicable, we privilege research works on Italian TV series. Hence, the main applications of the sample are:

- Production Trends: The sample enables systematic analysis of evolving production practices, including the changing presence of specific professions in cast and crew credits such as technical specialization and creative hierarchies. This can reveal broader industry dynamics and shifts in labor organization within Italian television production (for studies addressing similar issues, see Re and Spalletta 2023; Rocchi *et al.* 2023).
- Representation Studies: By capturing variation across time, genre and broadcasters, the sample supports investigations into how gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, disability and other sociocultural patterns are represented on screen, which could enable assessment of equity, inclusion and diversity in Italian TV series (for example, Cattani and Innocenti 2024).
- Stylistic, Aesthetic and Narratological Research: The stratified nature of the sample allows for comparative studies of visual style, narrative structure, genre conventions, directorial techniques and technological innovations, aiding in the identification of trends and mutations in television storytelling (illustrated in studies such as Cardwell 2021; Innocenti and Pescatore 2011, 2014).
- Economic and Marketing Analysis: Researchers can use the sample to explore how economic imperatives, marketing strategies, and media policies have influenced content production, distribution, and circulation (for example, Carelli and Garofalo 2020; Scaglioni 2020).
- Audience and Reception Studies: The episodes provide a basis for selecting audiovisual products to study audience engagement, viewer interpretation, reception patterns and fan activities across different demographic and cultural contexts (as exemplified by Avezzù 2019 and Crespo-Pereira and Juanatey-Boga 2016).
- Linguistic, Discourse and Semiotic Analysis: The sample supports detailed analysis of language use in television—such as dialogue and translation patterns, character speech styles and narrative discourse (for example, Bruti and Ranzato 2019)—and can be extended to multimodal studies of communication in media texts, incorporating a semiotic perspective on how meaning is constructed through the interplay of verbal, visual and auditory signs.

Other researchers can utilize the sample for various methodological purposes: (i) as a baseline for comparative studies with other European national contexts; (ii) as a training set for developing machine learning algorithms applied to automatic analysis of audiovisual content and (iii) for longitudinal studies requiring standardized and methodologically consistent datasets.

10. Available at: https://ricerche.apaonline.it/ricerca/serie-tv-bilancio-della-stagione-2021-2022/indicatori/volume-orario/#content (last accessed: 10-10-25).

The sample subset functionality further extends its research utility. Scholars can construct focused subsamples by limiting temporal ranges (for example, pre- and post-streaming era comparisons), specific genres (for example, the evolution of crime drama), or particular distributors (e.g., public versus commercial broadcaster strategies), while maintaining statistical rigor through appropriate power analysis and significance testing. For example, a study examining the representation of social issues in post-2015 dramas could extract relevant episodes while recalculating statistical power for the reduced sample size.

The modular nature of the stratification design and the weighting system offers further flexibility for diverse research applications. The sample includes episode-duration metadata, enabling researchers to implement alternative weighting schemes tailored to specific analytical needs. For instance, duration-based weighting could reduce the episode-level overrepresentation of soap operas, providing more balanced genre comparisons in studies focused on narrative structures or production values. Similarly, duration weighting proves essential for representation studies employing voice recognition algorithms to analyze speaking time distribution between male and female characters, where raw episode counts would distort temporal analyses.

The open nature of the dataset also promotes interdisciplinary collaborations and fosters external validation of results through replication of analyses by independent research groups, thereby strengthening the robustness of scientific conclusions regarding contemporary Italian seriality.

As seen from the examples reported for every application, most studies are rooted in a foreign national television context, and research on Italian TV series remains limited. Therefore, we hope this sample will help stimulate more systematic investigations on domestic serial production in Italy.

6 Conclusions, limitations and future developments

This study proposed a methodological framework for constructing a stratified representative corpus of contemporary Italian TV seriality to enhance qualitative and quantitative media research. By adopting the rigorous methodological approach of stratified random sampling based on year, genre, and distributor as strata, and through multiple validation stages, we developed a sample of 431 episodes that reflect the broad characteristics and trends of Italian television serial production from 2000 to 2023. This approach supports not only comprehensive analysis but also ensures rigor and replicability in research on Italian TV series. By leveraging this sample, scholars from both quantitative and qualitative approaches, as well as from diverse academic fields, can conduct studies that span production trends, genre evolution, representation issues, and aesthetic shifts. Researchers can also customize their use by relying on sub-samples or specific metadata, such as episode duration. Research on the sample, in turn, may also contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Italian television as a cultural and industrial product, enabling comparisons with other national media dynamics. These comparisons help contextualize Italian TV within global media trends and foster a deeper understanding of how national television industries shape and are shaped by cultural, economic and technological forces.

Although methodologically robust, the sample construction has limitations. First, the sample was built based on previously available metadata. Future research could therefore expand the scope of the corpus by integrating additional TV series details based on emerging data repositories or by developing new tools for automated collection. Second, the sample was stratified based on the macro-variables of genres and distributors, for practical reasons related to time and data management. To increase the granularity of the research that the sample can support, future studies could enlarge the corpus to include data on specific genres and broadcasters, which could also help more accurately reflect underrepresented areas of television production.

One of the main advantages of the proposed methodological framework lies in its intrinsic updatability, which enables dynamic adaptation of the sample in response to the evolution of Italian serial production. This flexibility manifests through two complementary dimensions. First, the integration of new productions: with the continuous production of new Italian TV series, the sample can be systematically updated by incorporating episodes from subsequent years of production, maintaining the same stratification methodology and the same proportions between strata. This process does not require redistributing existing weighting coefficients, thereby preserving the methodological integrity of the original sample. Second, retrospective integration: the sample can benefit from the eventual ex post availability of previously inaccessible episodes, either

through the emergence of new digital archives or through research agreements with broadcasters and producers. Similarly, the framework readily accommodates the integration of additional weighting variables—such as production budgets, audience ratings, or critical reception scores—whenever such data becomes available. This dual updating capacity makes the sample a particularly valuable longitudinal research tool for monitoring transformations in Italian seriality over time.

Future research applications demonstrate the dataset's adaptability to emerging methodological approaches. Longitudinal studies tracking gender representation could benefit from regular sample updates to capture ongoing changes in the industry. Machine learning approaches to automatic content analysis could leverage the stratified metadata as training labels. At the same time, comparative European studies could use the Italian sample as a methodological template for constructing equivalent national datasets. Digital humanities projects examining the evolution of visual style could combine the episode sample with automated image analysis, using the stratification weights to ensure representative coverage across different production eras and aesthetic traditions.

Data availability statement

The stratified sample of 431 episodes of Italian TV series (2000–2023) is publicly available as open data on Zenodo.[11] The dataset is provided in CSV format and contains metadata for each sampled episode, including stratification variables (year, macro-genre, macro-distributor), series information, and episode-level details. Additional episode-level information (e.g. cast and crew credits) will be progressively released within the "Italian TV Series" Zenodo community. Data are accessible and reusable under Creative Commons (CC BY) licensing terms, supporting reproducible research and facilitating further investigations into Italian television seriality.

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