

# Intersectionality through Life Stories: Care, Temporality, and Reflexivity in Audience Studies

Interseccionalidade através de histórias de vida: cuidado, temporalidade e reflexividade nos estudos de audiências

Interseccionalidad a través de historias de vida: cuidado, temporalidad y reflexividad en los estudios de audiencias

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## Abstract

This paper proposes life stories as a methodological tool for addressing complex intersectional issues within audience research. It begins by reviewing existing intersectional audience research alongside methodological contributions on life stories from across the social sciences. Drawing on insights from the R&D project “Tales from Sex, Media and Youth: Experiences of Young People Learning about Sexuality through Media” (SEXMEDIA) the paper then evaluates both the potential and the challenges of employing life stories in intersectional audience research. Three key potentialities are highlighted: the method’s suitability for intersectional approaches, its ability to center on youth voices and counter adultcentrism, and the social impact of its outcomes. At the same time, there are three major challenges: building careful and trusting environments, addressing power hierarchies through self-reflexibility, and managing time and resource constraints. The paper ends by advocating for further intersectional research and deeper reflexive methodological work within communication studies.

## Keywords

Life stories  
Intersectionality  
Audience studies  
Young people  
Gender and sexualities

## Resumo

Este artigo propõe as histórias de vida como uma ferramenta metodológica para abordar questões interseccionais complexas na investigação de audiências. Começa por analisar a investigação interseccional existente sobre audiências, juntamente com contribuições metodológicas sobre histórias de vida provenientes de várias ciências sociais. Com base nas conclusões do projeto de I&D “Relatos sobre sexo, meios de comunicação e juventude: experiências de jovens que aprendem sobre sexualidades através dos meios de comunicação” (SEXMEDIA), o artigo avalia então tanto o potencial como os desafios da utilização de histórias de vida na investigação interseccional de audiências. Três potencialidades principais são destacadas: a adequação do método para abordagens interseccionais, a sua capacidade de centrar as vozes dos jovens e contrariar o adultocentrismo e o impacto social dos seus resultados. Ao mesmo tempo, isso implica três grandes desafios: construir ambientes cuidadosos e de confiança, abordar as hierarquias de poder por meio da autorreflexividade e gerenciar as restrições de tempo e recursos. O artigo termina defendendo mais pesquisas interseccionais e um trabalho metodológico reflexivo mais profundo dentro dos estudos da comunicação.

## Palavras-chave

Histórias de vida  
Interseccionalidade  
Estudos de audiências  
Juventude  
Gênero e sexualidades

## Resumen

Este artículo propone las historias de vida como herramienta metodológica para abordar cuestiones interseccionales complejas en la investigación de audiencias. Comienza con una revisión de la investigación interseccional existente sobre audiencias, junto con contribuciones metodológicas sobre historias de vida procedentes de diversas ciencias sociales. A partir de las conclusiones del proyecto de I+D “Relatos sobre sexo, medios y juventudes: experiencias de personas jóvenes aprendiendo sobre sexualidades a través de los medios” (SEXMEDIA), el artículo evalúa tanto el potencial como los retos que plantea el uso de historias de vida en la investigación interseccional de audiencias. Se destacan tres potencialidades clave: la idoneidad del método para los enfoques interseccionales, su capacidad para centrarse en las voces de las personas jóvenes y contrarrestar el adultocentrismo, y el impacto social de sus resultados. Al mismo tiempo, existen tres retos importantes: crear entornos cuidadosos y de confianza, abordar las jerarquías de poder a través de la autorreflexividad y gestionar las limitaciones de tiempo y recursos. El artículo concluye abogando por una mayor investigación interseccional y un trabajo metodológico reflexivo más profundo dentro de los estudios de comunicación.

## Palabras clave

Historias de vida  
Interseccionalidad  
Estudios de audiencias  
Juventud  
Género y sexualidades

## 1. Introduction

In 2023, we were conducting fieldwork for the “Transmedia Gender & LGBTI+ Literacy” (TRANSGELIT) project — focused on the relationship between gender, sexualities, and media (Fedele et al., 2024) — at a non-formal education center in one of the most impoverished districts of Barcelona. This institution provides guidance and psychosocial support to adolescents in vulnerable situations. During different workshops, we asked them what issues related to sexuality they would like to explore through the project. The answers unsettled us. Among others, the participants brought up subjects such as selling eggs and sperm for economic purposes, prostitution, the relationship between sexuality and religion, and rape within the family.

At this point, it is important to note that nearly all of these young people are children of working-class migrants, and their families face significant economic difficulties and vulnerability. These themes and discussions, therefore, revealed the weight of the participants’ everyday realities, shaped by forms of violence emerging at the intersections of gender, migration experiences, social class, religion, and other dimensions of their lives. Indeed, these discussions showed

that their realities were different from those of the adolescents we had previously worked with in two formal education centers: a public high school in a middle-upper class neighborhood of Barcelona and a semi-public high school in its metropolitan area.

The fieldwork, therefore, revealed how complex our research topic was and showed the difficulties of approaching it from an intersectional perspective. After the workshops, we conducted individual interviews with some of the participants. However, these interviews were not enough to fully understand how the different categories of oppression shaping their lives had influenced their experiences with sexuality and media. It is not easy to build trust and intimacy to discuss topics that can be violent or traumatic, and while our project had overcome some barriers, it had not broken them all. Several limitations of the TRANSGELIT methodology became evident at this point: limited time for fieldwork, difficulties in discussing sensitive topics in educational spaces that may feel unsafe, tensions between research and action, among others (Masanet et al., pending publication). These experiences revealed the necessity to critically reflect on the methodological tools we were employing, not only to better understand the complexity of the project participants' realities, but also to improve the design of future audience studies from an intersectional perspective.

Although the TRANSGELIT project had been designed from the outset to incorporate an intersectional perspective, the fieldwork revealed the limits of this approach. The challenges we encountered resonate with broader debates in research. In recent decades, national and international funding calls (e.g., R&D&I, Spain; H2020, European Union) have increasingly required the gender perspective to be included across all disciplines, and more recently, they require a truly intersectional approach. However, implementing these perspectives in the field is far from straightforward. In our case, what worked on paper revealed significant limitations in practice. Indeed, in the end, we were only able to publish articles addressing gender differences (Masanet et al, 2025; Fernández et al. 2025), as the intersectional perspective and its categories could not be explored in depth and could only be suggested as an avenue for future research.

Building on the lessons learned, we created the project “Tales from Sex, Media and Youth: Experiences of Young People Learning about Sexuality through Media” (SEXMEDIA). It aims to place young people's voices at the center of academic discussion and to understand their realities from a complex intersectional perspective. We propose life stories as a methodological tool for audience studies, as it is an innovative perspective that enables a historical, attentive, and reflexive approach.

The project has a duration of two years (from April 2024 to June 2026). At the time of reviewing this article (March 2026), we have been in contact with 26 participants (13 in Madrid and 13 in Barcelona) and we have conducted 89 personal interviews –we conduct between 3 and 6 interviews per person to reconstruct their life story, and each interview last between one and one and a half hours. We audio-record interviews, transcribe the audio into text and analyse it in different processes: we codify the interviews using the web version of qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti, we create timelines with the main milestones around the key topics of the project (media, gender and sexualities), and we narratively write each life story. In the coming months, we will also carry out participatory workshops, which will help us complement the data collected for the life stories. In terms of the sample, a core objective of the project has been to ensure a diverse sample in terms of gender identity, sexuality, racial or cultural identity, religion and spirituality, ideological beliefs, body diversity, disability, social class, rural and urban living environments, and age range (from 18 to 29 years).

In this article, we undertake a methodological self-reflection (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) on the design and research process we are carrying out in the SEXMEDIA project with the use of life stories. Our aim is to stimulate debate around three specific areas:

- 1) How to investigate the relationship between sexualities and media from an intersectional perspective;
- 2) The potential of life stories in audience studies to incorporate an intersectional perspective;
- 3) The limitations and challenges encountered when the life stories methodology is applied in audience studies.

Through these discussions, we openly share our research experience to contribute to methodological debates and provide insights for future audience research that aims to integrate an intersectional perspective.

## **2. Researching Gender, Sexualities, and Audiences from an Intersectional Approach**

Gender and sexuality-focused media studies have primarily concentrated on critically assessing representation (Chan, 2017), often through an intersectional lens (e.g., Nölke, 2017). Recently, however, audience research has gained prominence in the field (Cavalcante et al., 2017; Samer & Whittington, 2017), incorporating diverse

methodologies and perspectives. Intersectional audience research examines viewers' identities within entrenched systems of power and domination. Instead of focusing solely on one identity marker, such as gender or sexism, intersectional analysis views audiences as complex intersections of multiple subjectivities, embodiments, and power relations (Hankivsky & Grace, 2015; Parent et al., 2013).

Despite the growth of intersectional audience research (Cavalcante et al., 2017), various meta-analyses continue to identify intersectionality as one of the most pressing challenges for the field's development (Chan, 2017; Herrero et al., 2026). Parameswaran (2013) argues that intersectional approaches often focus on entrenched forms of discrimination or marginalization, rather than examining the intersectional dynamics of privilege.

Audience research encompasses both quantitative and qualitative paradigms, each with distinct limitations in capturing intersectional complexity. Quantitative methods — such as surveys (e.g., Francisco Amat et al., 2020) and experimental designs (e.g., Rodríguez-de-Dios & Soto-Sanfiel, 2024) — require predefined and discrete identity categories, which can restrict more fluid, narrative, and multidimensional understandings of identity (Browne & Nash, 2010). Nonetheless, these approaches yield valuable empirical insights.

Qualitative methods, by contrast, are more attuned to the complexities of intersectionality, though they often yield non-generalizable, case-specific findings (Cavalcante et al., 2017; Nash & Browne, 2010). Interviews and focus groups are among the most commonly employed tools in qualitative audience studies on gender and sexuality (e.g., Soto-Sanfiel & Vázquez-Tapia, 2024; Villegas-Simón et al., 2025). Other qualitative methods in audience research include longitudinal in-depth interviews, which focus on a phenomenon and how it unfolds in a person's life over time, i.e., a professional career (Hermanowicz, 2013), or how the studied phenomenon occurs during a transitional stage, i.e., adolescents' perceptions of the future (Vogl & Zartler, 2021); or media diaries, which enable the collection of information on people's interaction with various media and technologies in their daily practices (e.g. Berg & Düvel, 2012; Miller et al., 2016).

Ethnographic approaches — incorporating observation, prolonged engagement, and iterative dialogue — are less common but offer distinctive potential (e.g., Iñigo et al., 2024). This article recognizes the value of diverse methods while highlighting ethnography's particular strength in capturing the depth and embodied complexity of intersectional audience experiences (Collins, 2023). In particular, narrative ethnography (Tedlock, 1991) focuses on the observation of

participation and the ethnographic dialogue, which is suitable to research media reception. Similarly, media and reception ethnography analyses the interaction between a media text, its context and its audience from an ethnographic epistemology (Jensen, 2002).

### 3. Life Stories: An Interdisciplinary Methodology

Audience studies can be enriched by qualitative and ethnographic approaches such as life stories, which are able to capture more subjective and multidimensional aspects of audiences' experiences. The narrative and biographical tradition of life stories has a broad and deep interdisciplinary background, although it has been little explored in the field of communication and audience studies. This methodological crossroads offers enormous potential for its more systematic incorporation into the field.

Life stories have been employed in multiple disciplines including psychology, health sciences, oral history, sociology, anthropology, education, linguistics, and journalism, among others. In psychology, for example, they have been used to study development throughout life (Bertaux & Kohli, 1984) as well as mental health experiences (Anderson et al., 1987). Anderson et al. (1987) emphasize their value in reconstructing the oral history of women from a feminist perspective that explores emotions and lived experiences.

In sociology and social anthropology, life stories have been key for understanding the different groups that cohabit the same society, as in the famous work by Thomas and Znaniecki (1958 [1918–1920]) on Polish peasant immigrants in Chicago. They have also been essential in the anthropological approach to other cultures, contributing to the analysis of cultural narratives, social exclusion, transformation processes, identity roles and value systems (González Monteagudo, 2009). In the field of education, they are used both for teacher training and for socio-educational research (Hernández et al., 2011).

The literature around life stories addresses different concepts and approaches, including life histories, life stories and narrative productions (Balasch & Montenegro, 2003). Although concepts often overlap, we use the term “life stories” specifically. Life histories have been understood as a personal history based on a series of personal documents such as letters, diaries, or recordings, among others (Bertaux & Kohli 1984; Thomas & Znaniecki, 1958). Life stories, however, can be broadly defined as “narratives about one’s life or relevant parts thereof” (Bertaux & Kohli, 1984, p. 217), which involve the personal

conception of the past and its different stages (Tagg, 1985). Following Tagg (1985), life stories rescue key remembered entities such as events, actions, and places. Balasch and Montenegro (2003), through their concept of “narrative productions”, aim to transcend the traditional debate between realism and relativism in life story research by integrating the perspective of situated knowledge. Their approach advocates for the creation of hybrid texts — products of multiple interpretations brought into dialogue — with a particular emphasis on the participants’ agency.

Life stories can encompass a person’s entire life or focus on specific thematic aspects of interest (Mckernan, 1999). For the field of communication, and specifically audience studies, we believe that thematic life stories can be more fruitful as they allow specific research objectives to be explored. In our case, they allow us to study the role of media in the learning experiences of young people concerning gender and sexuality.

While life stories, as described, share certain tools with methodologies from audience analysis, such as longitudinal in-depth interviews, reception ethnography, or media diary methods, we argue that they uniquely contribute to the field by its epistemological paradigm: it’s emphasis on life experience from the participants’ own viewpoint, temporal reconstruction and symbolic universe. Life stories also constitute a longitudinal method, as they allow the reconstruction of the life trajectories, including learnings, changes, milestones and a complete and subjective notion on how media is entangled in the person’s life throughout time. They also allow for a deeper exploration of media use in relation to the temporal and affective dimensions: which technologies and platforms have proved central at certain points in life or, more specifically, in relation to different life experiences linked to intersectional experiences and the media. Finally, life stories also incorporate the ethnographic perspective typical of narrative ethnography and reception ethnography, but their emphasis is on the biographical narrative as a whole, rather than on specific mediated interactions.

In our life stories, we use the in-depth personal interview as a pivotal tool (Blanco-Fernández et al., 2025), in which researchers guide the subjective reconstruction of the interviewee’s life through questions on the main topics of interest to the research. This life experience is reconstructed and given meaning jointly by the interviewee and the interviewer. The researcher must approach the interview with active listening, avoiding interruptions. It is beneficial not to impose a script with predefined or very narrow categories, since part of what is sought through the life story is the “emic” perspective of anthropology — the individual’s own worldview and the meanings they make

of their lived experiences. This situates the individual within a particular cultural vision (González Monteagudo, 2009) and adds a sense of “historical clarity” (Kouritzin, 2000) so it can illuminate a specific historical moment with certain contextual and cultural sensitivities. As Anderson et al. (1987) explain, understanding the inner world of interviewees — particularly those facing systemic oppressions — requires including questions that address feelings, attitudes, values, and meanings, beyond facts. These lived experiences are valuable in themselves, but also provide a rich lens for interpreting broader social and communicative phenomena (Chárriez Cordero, 2012).

To achieve greater depth and triangulation in the life stories, personal interviews can be supplemented with other research tools, such as ethnographic observations, co-viewing practices, online and offline accompaniments and workshops (Blanco-Fernández et al., 2025). Researchers document their observations of participant interactions in field notes, which helps capture key aspects to address in future interviews or to approach with sensitivity when they involve potentially painful topics. This practice also allows to identify contradictions in participants’ narratives and to understand how non-verbal language shapes the interviewer-interviewee dynamic. Offline and online accompaniments, as well as workshops, enable to observe participants in interaction with peers and through their own creations and engagements with others. These situations provide insight into how participants function socially beyond the interview setting and help us situate them within diverse online and offline social worlds. Finally, co-viewing sessions foster more detailed discussions about their interpretations of specific audiovisual representations and narratives, the meanings they derive from media products, and the learnings, uses, and gratifications they obtain from various media and audiovisual materials.

## **4. Bringing Life Stories into Audience Studies: Particularities and Potentialities**

### **4.1. Cultivating Intersectionality**

Identity and embodiment are inherently multifaceted, dynamic, and deeply contextual. They unfold across time and space, shaped by evolving social forces. As such, they resist rigid categorization. Intersectional methodological frameworks must grapple with this complexity. For instance, when constructing samples for quantitative

research, investigators frequently rely on predefined categories to define markers such as race, gender, class, sexuality, or capacities. While these markers can capture significant dimensions of identity at a given moment, they often fail to convey the fluidity and shifting interrelations that characterize lived experiences. This is not to suggest that these quantitative parameters are invalid. On the contrary, simplified identity markers can still effectively reflect a participant's current self-identification and intersectional positionality, and they are instrumental in generating aggregated data.

In contrast, qualitative methods often prove more adept at capturing the depth and variability of identity and embodiment. They not only enable richer description, but also a deeper exploration of contradictions and contextual shifts. Through in-depth interviews, for instance, participants can articulate their personal understandings of body normativity, describe how their own bodies conform to or diverge from societal standards, and reflect on the impact of this — such as fat-phobia or racism — as well as the strategies they employ in response.

Such methods are particularly valuable when the focus shifts from individual identity labels to broader systems of privilege and oppression. Qualitative engagement enables researchers to highlight the interplay between entrenched power structures and personal experiences, revealing how systems of normativity shape and are negotiated by individuals. Additionally, collective methods, such as focus groups, further enrich this process by creating spaces where identity markers can be collaboratively examined and redefined.

This article advocates for the use of life stories as a qualitative method that embraces intersectional complexity in two key dimensions. First, life stories enable researchers to embed intersectional identity and embodiment within a temporal framework. This opens a productive dialogue between intersectionality and temporality. Identities and embodied experiences are not static — they change throughout life. Gender expression, socio-economic position, migratory status, physical ability, and other identity dimensions are subject to substantial transformations over time. By extending the analytical lens to the participants' entire life trajectories, life stories facilitate a more thorough examination of these evolutions. More significantly, the narrative nature of life stories allows participants to reflect on how different identity dimensions have interacted and overlapped through time. For example, the intersection of race and gender may take on markedly different forms before, during, and after migration.

Deyanira's life story (women, 29) reflects how media intersects with personal positions regarding social class, gender, and, later, migration.

In her native country in Latin America, when she was a teenager, Deyanira explained to us that she was forbidden from going out with her friends, since, given her social class and gender, her family required her presence to perform domestic and caregiving tasks; at the same time, from the moment she had her first period, she was forbidden from going out due to the risk of socializing with boys and engaging in sexual relations. Deyanira considered that television — specifically soap operas and a local relationship show hosted by a psychologist — was her lifeline during those years, her space for learning and her escape from the rigidity and control she experienced at home. She moved to Madrid years later, and far away from that constraining environment, new challenges emerged, such as economic instability, gender violence perpetrated by his ex-husband and cultural challenges. In this new context, she reflected on how media continued to provide her with an escape to deal with oppression and loneliness, and a space to rethink her own life and relationships, now through online content — her favourite Latin American and Korean soap operas on TikTok.

Second, life stories function as ethnographic tools. Interviews are not isolated; they form part of a broader ethnographic engagement that includes various forms of participant observation, such as participatory workshops and co-viewing practices. This combination enables a more nuanced understanding of identity, particularly when assessing privilege. Privilege is often difficult to self-report due to a lack of awareness or social invisibility. For instance, a participant may describe their environment as intercultural, while ethnographic observation indicates that their setting is predominantly racially homogeneous. These discrepancies do not imply falsehoods but rather highlight the need to examine self-reported truths through an intersectional lens.

Finally, the sampling strategy used in life story research offers notable advantages for intersectional inquiry. Quantitative studies often prioritize representativity, but in normative societies, intersectional identities and embodied experiences are frequently underreported. As a result, representative samples can inadvertently reproduce dominant norms by underrepresenting diversity. Life stories, by contrast, rely on purposive sampling that is aligned with the analytical interests of the research rather than demographic proportionality. This flexibility allows researchers to intentionally include underrepresented voices and attend to specific intersectional constellations (Blanco-Fernández et al., 2025). It is crucial, however, that sampling criteria be transparently communicated and that results are not generalized inappropriately.

## 4.2. Centering on Youth Voices

During the fieldwork of the “Transmedia Gender & LGBTI+ Literacy” (TRANSGELIT) project, a group of boys were recording a podcast on the topic of consent. As an example for debate, they referred to the case of former football player Dani Alves, who at that time was awaiting trial for sexual assault. The boys blamed the victim for making false accusations in order to harm the footballer, and justified Alves’ behavior. This took place amid jokes that reinforced their male complicity. A female researcher was observing the situation while taking notes, but the boys’ comments made her question what her role should be at that moment. In her field diary, she wrote: “I’m not sure whether we should step in and not let these violences happen and at the same time I don’t want to do that because I don’t want to direct and influence their process.”

This situation is just one example of the dilemmas the research team experienced during the fieldwork of TRANSGELIT, which prompted us to reflect deeply on our role in the field and the effects it might have (Masanet et al., pending publication). This is not a new debate: in social sciences, the researcher’s role in the field has been discussed for decades. In our case, the situation described helps us to understand the ambiguous situations that researchers may experience when conducting research with young people with the aim of incorporating their voices and experiences into academic discussions, while avoiding adult-centered filters and perspectives.

Our objective was to observe and understand which discourses are reproduced among adolescents regarding sexualities and what role the media play in this process — an endeavor that inevitably entails engaging with stereotypes, discrimination, and violence. Therefore, to access and make sense of young people’s discourses, we needed to suspend our preconceived ideas, listen openly to their perspectives, and observe the situations that were unfolding naturally in the field.

Our dilemma, however, lay in the fact that we were conducting fieldwork in an educational setting and were primarily using collective tools: reflective and creative workshops carried out in groups. Therefore, not intervening in situations such as the one described meant allowing these discourses to circulate and to gain an audience through the project itself. Eventually, the research team sought ways to intervene pedagogically, without undermining the trust built with participants and avoiding imposing our own views on the young people’s perspectives (Masanet et al., pending publication).

These situations led us to reflect on how we could investigate the project's topics while allowing discussions that are normally stigmatized to emerge. For instance, within our research, it is important to observe and understand how anti-feminist and anti-LGBTI+ discourses are being generated among young people in media ecosystems such as the manosphere (Iñigo, 2025; Iñigo et al., 2024). As researchers, we must remain open to listening and understanding them, while avoiding judgment or interpreting them from our own perspective.

Similarly, there are also discourses and experiences that remain hidden precisely because they fall outside normative conceptions of gender and sexualities, or even outside hegemonic understandings of media uses. In this sense, risk and moral panic discourses, concerning both sexualities and media (Masanet & Soto-Sanfiel, 2024), have proliferated and have often been adopted by young people as a way of responding to what adults expect from them. In the SEXMEDIA project we were conducting a life story with a young gay man with an active sex life. At the very end of the first interview, when saying goodbye to the researchers, he commented that he was surprised they had not asked him about chemsex — the practice of using psychoactive substances to enhance or prolong sexual experiences. This situation exemplifies how he already anticipated the adult-centered frameworks through which these topics are usually approached and expected that we would ask him about sexual practices considered risky and stigmatized. His surprise demonstrates that, in contrast, our approach broke with these frameworks, creating a space where he could share his experience without being automatically framed within narratives of risk or moralization.

These examples highlight that the SEXMEDIA project seeks to understand and make visible the different phenomena that often remain hidden, either because they are seemingly concealed due to their potential to generate forms of violence (e.g., sexism, LGBTI-phobia), or because they escape and transgress hegemonic views of sexualities and gender. Our aim is to avoid adult-centered perspectives (Duar-te Quapper, 2012) that have frequently predominated in studies with young people. Moreover, such perspectives introduce an additional layer of oppression in research, since age itself constitutes an intersectional category that must be considered (Rodó-Zárate, 2021) within audience studies.

### 4.3. Giving Back and Returning Knowledge

Life stories are a powerful methodological tool for conducting meaningful research, benefiting not only participants and researchers but also returning knowledge to society. Life stories allow participants to feel heard, which is a fundamental human need. According to Kouritzin (2000), the dialogical nature of interviews not only helps to organize thoughts but also encourages a more coherent construction of the self, challenging binary and dichotomous structures of thought.

Active listening by researchers has important value: it can facilitate memory, offer validation, and provide support. For example, when a participant recounts an experience of discrimination and the researcher points out that other people have also experienced similar situations, a sense of community is built. The implicit recognition that their story deserves to be heard can be especially comforting for young people as their voices are often made invisible.

Participation in life story-based research can be particularly meaningful for those facing intersecting structural oppressions, as it allows them to see themselves represented in spaces where they are normally absent, such as the media and hegemonic narratives. One output of the SEXMEDIA project is the co-creation of a personalized timeline for each participant, which collects significant personal milestones related to gender, sexuality, and the media. This output is a form of give-back in which participants “retrieve” and can visually access the experiences they have generously entrusted to us.

In addition to their individual impact, life stories can promote social education and transformation. They can be turned into a book or an experiential project, such as an art exhibition open to the public (Blanco-Fernández et al., 2025). Life stories are an accessible material because they are based on everyday meanings and are easily understandable (Kouritzin, 2000). In our experience, participants find satisfaction in being part of a project that can be meaningful to other young people and construct ways of learning, reflecting, and questioning that can be applied to their own lives. Kouritzin (2000) emphasizes that life stories allow a “comprehensive (re)interpretation,” as they can be flexibly analyzed from multiple theoretical perspectives and at different times.

In our project, we have found that sexuality continues to be a taboo subject and linked to the private sphere. Openly addressing gender and sexuality issues through life stories encourages identification, recognizing diversity, and reducing stereotypes and prejudices. This

helps to break the silence imposed on certain experiences and promote a more diverse understanding. The focus on media content and elements of popular culture also facilitates productive engagement that encourages critical reflection and co-educational processes.

For researchers, working with life stories is also deeply enriching. This methodology encourages constant reflection, critical thinking, and the development of attentive and careful listening. It also allows micro (individual, subjective and interpersonal) dimensions to be combined with macro (structural) dimensions, broadening the analytical scope and social relevance of the analysis. Unexpected stories, such as those that interrupt the pre-established script of the project, have the power to destabilize epistemological control and open new avenues of knowledge (Cary, 1999). In our project, two participants talked about their asexual experiences, which led us to detect biases in our interview script regarding sexual desire and attraction. This experience allowed the team to learn more about asexuality and to improve the script to avoid reproducing potentially harmful notions such as compulsory sexuality (Chen, 2020).

## 5. Rethinking Life Stories in Intersectional Research: Challenges, Limitations, and Pathways Forward

### 5.1. Towards a Caring and Trusting Environment

As outlined throughout this article, life stories constitute a particularly powerful methodological tool for examining intersectional identities. Nevertheless, like all qualitative methods, they entail challenges and limitations. First, in research that focuses on gender and sexualities, youth, and other intersectional identity markers, the topics that arise during fieldwork are often highly sensitive. They frequently involve intimate aspects of participants' lives and are, regrettably, entangled with experiences of violence, and systemic exclusion. For instance, discussions related to masturbation or porn consumption can be difficult to address with ease, while narratives involving sexual violence, familiar rejection, or body-related struggles demand heightened ethical sensitivity and care.

These complexities require more than methodological rigor, such as ethical and data management protocols — the SEXMEDIA project was approved by the Bioethics Committee of the Universitat de Barcelona (IRB00003099). They also necessitate trust, mutual respect and care to be developed between researchers and participants.

Establishing such a relationship depends not only on interpersonal warmth but also on a broader ethos of transparency and accountability. We advocate for an approach that includes clear communication about the research project's goals, shared commitment to the results and dissemination, and participant co-ownership of their own data. During fieldwork, we emphasize — often and explicitly — that participants have the right to decline answering questions or to withdraw entirely at any point. Furthermore, we encourage co-authorship or collaborative input in the presentation of some specific findings (Balash & Montenegro, 2003), while upholding the scholarly independence and ethical integrity of the research. We consider that this openness enhances participants' comfort and deepens their sense of agency and commitment within the research process.

This orientation demands a continuous practice of care, that must operate in two directions. First, as researchers, we are responsible for creating environments in which participants feel respected and safe. Moreover, we adopt a posture of attentiveness and prioritize the participants' wellbeing over collecting data. For instance, while narratives of sexual violence may be analytically rich and relevant, if recounting them causes the participant significant emotional distress, their wellbeing must take precedence. In these cases, it is appropriate to pause the interview, shift the conversation, or reschedule if the participant is willing.

This is not to suggest, however, that participants should be shielded from discussing difficult or painful experiences. On the contrary, stories of resistance, resilience, and survival are vital both to the ethical dimensions of the research encounter and to the production of meaningful knowledge. To suppress these narratives in the name of protection, risks reinforcing paternalistic logics, particularly with young participants. Ethical care, therefore, involves navigating a careful balance: recognizing when past trauma continues to cause harm, while remaining open to participants' agency in choosing to share those experiences. In times of uncertainty, it may be appropriate to discuss these concerns with participants, acknowledging the tension rather than resolving it unilaterally.

The second dimension of care concerns the researcher. We, too, inhabit intersectional subject positions shaped by histories of privilege and marginalization. We are not neutral, disembodied entities. Consequently, we are affected by the stories we hear and by the resonances they may evoke in our own lives. For instance, listening to participants' recollections of high school may stir memories from our own adolescence — memories that may be comforting, painful, or

complex in unpredictable ways. Three practices can help here. First, researchers should be prepared for some emotional difficulty and should have strategies for managing these situations, including pausing or rescheduling fieldwork when necessary. Second, cultivating inter-reflexivity by using field notes and personal journals regularly provides a space to process and contextualize emotional responses. Third, fostering a culture of mutual care within the research team is essential. Open dialogue among team members and flexible redistribution of responsibilities — for example, transferring a participant to another team member — can help mitigate harm and sustain the wellbeing of both researchers and participants.

## 5.2. Self-Reflexivity, Positionality, and Power Hierarchies

All these relational dynamics unfold within structured hierarchies of power. As researchers, we must remain aware of the asymmetries embedded in our roles, including those associated with academic authority and access to knowledge production. While building trust and confidence is crucial, it is equally important not to blur the boundaries of the research relationship. Throughout the project, we remain researchers, and participants remain participants. Acknowledging this distinction helps preserve the clarity of the ethical agreement and prevents misunderstandings or confusion that may otherwise compromise the integrity of the research encounter.

In addition to considering our roles of power as researchers, it is productive to consider reflexivity in more systemic terms, in the sense that it constitutes a “window into structural oppression and privilege and not only into the power of researchers as individuals” (D’Arcangelis, 2017). This issue leads us to positionality in research. Positionality allows us to reflect on the preconceptions, visible and invisible traits that we display, and the way in which our identities and positions alter interaction during fieldwork, and, ultimately, condition research results (Ataci, 2024).

Reflecting on positionality is part of a process that, despite being uncomfortable (Ataci, 2024), makes us aware of our own limitations and potentialities as researchers from our intersectional positions and embodied experiences in dialogue with those of our participants. Positionality helps us understand structural inertias such as adultcentrism (Duarte Quapper, 2012), which can emerge in research as a preconception or judgment toward young participants (e.g., reinforcing ageist stereotypes about the ignorance of youth or their inability to

make decisions for themselves). The participants can also have these preconceptions towards the researchers (if, for example, they place us in an expert role).

Within the project's framework of positionality, we are mindful of navigating both the visible and invisible traits (Reyes, 2020) in each interaction with our participants. Some visible traits could be our position as white researchers, or our age — young adults, with different age gaps with our participants. Other traits, such as certain personal experiences related to discrimination or mental health, may remain less visible in the context of the interview but still have an impact on the dynamics and interaction with participants.

We continuously inhabit positionality as researchers through our gender identities and sexualities. Gender identity tends to be more visible in research contexts, for example, through the use of gendered pronouns in Spanish — although the notion of “visibility” is itself problematic, as it often reproduces heterosexist and cisnormative assumptions. In contrast, sexuality is not something we typically disclose in research settings, even if it is not concealed and may be shared when participants ask or when it becomes contextually relevant during fieldwork. Nevertheless, both identities shape the research encounter and can foster affinities with participants, particularly when their experiences resonate with our own. As cisgender women and non-binary individuals, we have formed meaningful connections with participants who have reflected on gender identity exploration, misogyny, transphobia, or sexual abuse. At the same time, we consider it essential to maintain a critical stance toward the universalization of experiences based on shared identities (Cary, 1999) and to recognize the complexity, dynamism, and internal diversity within categories such as “women” or “trans people.”

A vivid example of this kind of affinity can be seen in the interviews with Sarai (non-binary, 25) and their interaction with the interviewer, for instance, when discussing their experience with sexting: “Men approach sexting in a very basic way — it's like, ‘I'll send you a picture of my dick,’ you know? And suddenly I'm supposed to be turned on, and it's like, okay, but it doesn't work that way.”; and sexual harassment: “I think violence is always there, wherever you look — in men's stares, everywhere, you know? And the way they read your body.”

Conversely, our gender identities can also constrain openness around certain topics. For example, some male participants drew on media references associated with the manosphere, which circulates sexist and anti-feminist content (Iñigo, 2025). It is likely that interaction with a male researcher would have elicited different narratives

and allowed these media references to surface more fully, as participants may have felt inhibited by our gender identities or by assumptions about our feminist ideological frameworks. Indeed, engaging male, heterosexual participants has been one of our main challenges, as they appear less interested in the project's topic and research team.

We also reflected on how our identities can shape interaction with participants and limit our research in relation to our position as white, non-migrant people. When we interviewed migrant participants, we realized how unfamiliar we were with some of their media references. We recognized that our lack of firsthand experience of racism, xenophobia, and the emotional implications of migration — and our position as legacy beneficiaries of white colonialism, the root of these structural violences — could influence the flow of the research and the more detailed elaboration of certain topics. This does not mean that we did not listen carefully and attentively to the experiences of our migrant participants, but it does imply a recognition of our blind spots, or “white ignorance” (Mills, 2007), which we cannot overlook, and which also biases and shapes the research. Positional awareness, in this sense, is a tool that allows us to become more reflexively aware of structural biases in our research and that continually invites us to exercise humility and epistemological transparency.

### 5.3. Slow and Committed Research: Time and Resources

A final and significant challenge associated with life stories as a methodological approach lies in the substantial demands it places on both time and resources — particularly during the fieldwork stage. Life story research necessitates sustained and repeated engagement with participants, often across multiple formats, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, field notes, workshops, among others. Each individual life story typically involves a series of one-on-one interviews lasting approximately one hour, all of which require transcription and detailed analysis. Even when assisted by automatic transcription software, transcription remains labor-intensive, particularly when interviews are conducted in less dominant languages. These transcripts must then be carefully revised and subjected to rigorous qualitative analysis — such as thematic or coding-based approaches — to produce meaningful insights.

Additionally, the inherently relational and sensitive nature of life story work calls for small, carefully composed research teams capable of building trust and offering sustained attention to participants'

narratives. As a result, the research encounter often necessitates reduced team sizes and individual-based formats — both of which intensify the researcher’s workload and extend project timelines.

The collaborative production of research findings and their dissemination — central commitments of our proposal — further complicate the temporal structure of such projects. These stages unfold according to participants’ availability, priorities, and levels of engagement, often introducing unpredictability into the research timeline. While this openness to participant-led pacing reflects the ethical and epistemological core of the methodology, it often comes into conflict with the rigid structures of academic institutions and funding bodies, which increasingly prioritize efficiency, rapid publication cycles, and streamlined project proposals (Masanet et al., pending publication). In the communication studies field, current trends favor fast-turnaround research and readily quantifiable outputs — a paradigm that is often misaligned with the slower, relational, and more reflective temporality required by life story research.

Despite these constraints, life stories remain a highly flexible and adaptable method. The absence of requirements for statistical representativeness or large sample sizes enables researchers to work with fewer participants while still generating rich, in-depth data. Similarly, the range of methodological tools available within this framework can be selectively deployed according to the aims and constraints of a given project, allowing both strategic focus and resource sensitivity. Therefore, even under conditions of institutional or financial limitation, the life story approach continues to offer a powerful and ethically grounded avenue for producing socially relevant and academically robust knowledge.

## 6. Conclusions

Throughout the current paper, we advocate for incorporating the life stories methodology within communication studies, considering our current R&D project “Tales from Sex, Media and Youth: Experiences of Young People Learning about Sexuality through Media” (SEXMEDIA) as a case study. Life stories are an anthropological tool for assessing participant’s life events in relation to specific issues. Within our project, life stories are employed through in-depth interviews, observations, and participative workshops (Blanco-Fernández et al., 2025) for exploring the young participants’ life experiences in relation to their media usage, gender and sexuality. We argue that

this method has potential for producing innovative, complex, and nuanced results for audience research.

We consider that life stories are particularly well suited to intersectional analysis. Indeed, the paper's main contribution lies in a methodological discussion on how life stories may help overcome several challenges encountered when intersectional approaches are incorporated in communication research — limitations we have experienced in previous research projects. Life stories — especially when they are developed over time, enriched by many encounters and growing trust and cooperation with participants, and complemented by additional tools and ethnographic observations — offer significant potential for examining how diverse issues of identity, embodiment, and positions of privilege and oppression, intersect, overlap, and interact. For instance, life stories can be used to examine how intersectionality and temporality relate by determining how diverse intersectional positions evolve over time in changing scenarios. Similarly, ethnographic observation helps researchers to address non-expressed positions of privilege: as privilege often goes unnoticed, it is common that participants do not self-report their experiences of privilege within interviews.

Of course, every methodology has its challenges, and researchers must be mindful of them. Within our current project, we found three challenges: First, it is necessary to build trust and care, which can be achieved with warmth, as well as specific policies, such as co-ownership of the data and creating support networks for researchers working on complex issues. Second, researchers must balance their own intersectional positions of privilege and oppression, critically reflecting on and avoiding impositions shaped by adultcentrism or white ignorance, among others. Third, the extended time frames of life stories often clash with institutional calendars and deadlines, as well as with the implicit pressure to rapidly publish quantitative, scalable results.

Nonetheless, the current paper offers a strong meta-methodological argument in favor of the life stories approach, as we consider it capable of resolving some of the challenges resulting from incorporating intersectional lenses into audience research within media studies. Further research must be conducted on this methodological approach to determine its advantages and disadvantages. Our experience leaves us to recommend the life stories methodology in communication studies, and particularly in audience research. In particular, we recommend:

- 1) A research design that incorporates triangulation techniques such as ethnographic observation or participatory workshops, and which recognises that a variable number of interviews is required to construct each life story.
- 2) Consideration to the fact that life stories it is a method capable of addressing intersectional and power dimensions in the field while it requires great sensitivity, attentiveness and considerable emotional and technical effort.
- 3) The use of methodological tools such as field diaries, as well as individual and team-level reflexivity during the whole project timeline is fundamental.
- 4) When evaluating research that employs this methodology, it is essential to consider the co-productive dimension from an ethic of care, involvement, consent and return of the interviewees during the research process, as ultimately it is their own life experiences which constitute the core of this method.

Finally, it is important to highlight that reflexive methodological work remains rare in communication studies, where project limitations and weaknesses are often concealed instead of treated as opportunities for reflection and improvement. In this regard, our paper is innovative, as it highlights and learns from the challenges of studying the complexities of people's interactions with the media ecosystem from an intersectional perspective.

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## Authors Contributions Contribuições dos Autores

Laura Fernández: Study conception, Data collection, Data analysis, Manuscript writing, Critical review of content; Vitor Blanco-Fernández: Study conception, Data collection, Data analysis, Manuscript writing, Critical review of content; Maria-Jose Masanet: Study conception, Data collection, Data analysis, Manuscript writing, Critical review of content, Project administration and Funding acquisition.

## Data Availability Statement Declaração de Disponibilidade de Dados

We have shared our methodological approach in this document, publicly available in our university’s digital repository: Blanco Fernández, V., Fernández, L., & Masanet, M.-J. <https://hdl.handle.net/2445/221392>. Also, once the research is complete, we will upload the guides for our interviews and workshops to the repository of the Universitat de Barcelona. For ethical reasons of privacy and out of consideration for the participants’ intimacy and safety, we will not upload the interview transcripts or any other data that could identify them.

## AI tools Ferramentas de IA

We have used AI—Microsoft Copilot, licensed by our university—to review and polish some English sentences and paragraphs, since we are not native speakers. All the content of the article is original and written by the authors.

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