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Author Bio: Maria Taddia recently obtained her MA in Education and Social Justice awarded with distinction from Lancaster University and is currently pursuing her PhD in Education at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain. Her research is led by a comprehensive interest in gender issues in education, with a particular focus on Southern Europe and Italy. At the heart of her work is the exploration of high-achieving girlhood and the constructions and negotiations entailed in performing successful femininities within the context of post-feminism and neoliberal individualism.

Abstract: In supposedly post-feminist times, where high-achieving girlhood entails high expectations but is riddled with contradiction, this multiple site case study explores how Italian upper-secondary school female students construct their identities as high achievers. Fifteen semi-structured interviews with students from three Northern Italian upper-secondary institutions were carried out and analyzed. Research findings illustrate the prevalence of narratives constructing success as a multidimensional and contradicting position to occupy, thus emphasizing the influence of deceitful notions around neoliberal individualism and post-feminism. The interactions between the students and their family, educational and cultural environments were also underscored in light of their connection with the participants’ gender and high-achiever identities. While addressing the dearth of research centering the experiences of Italian girls approaching the end of their time in school, this research underscores the need for further investing in the provision of gender equality education within teacher training and curricula in the Italian education system.

Keywords: high-achieving femininities, gender performativity, post-feminism, case study, Southern Europe

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“The Kind of Girl Everyone Would Like to Be”: Neoliberalism and the Making of Successful Femininities in Upper-Secondary Italian Education

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Introduction

Despite neoliberal tendencies valuing results over process and girls’ outperformance of boys in education, masculine ways of learning are rated more highly than feminine ones.¹ Therefore, female students’ high-achiever identities must be adapted to their gender expression through careful negotiations which can involve contradiction.² In the era of supposed post-feminism and neoliberalism, characterized by profound instability, girlhood is fabricated as a site of hope and ability to excel by embracing new successful femininities, which conceal systemic inequalities thanks to the influence of individualism and meritocracy.³ Girls are thus held accountable for their achievement or failure, irrespective of their privilege or lack thereof.⁴ Moreover, high achievers are expected to display educational smartness while also being outstanding in other arenas like sports, sociability and romantic relationships, thus confining the availability of success discourses to individuals at the intersection of class, race, and gender privilege.⁵ Throughout the study, the participants’ dominant success discourse was in line with this multidimensionality. The ramifications of this phenomenon point to the relevance of the “supergirl narrative” referring to young female students who strive to juggle a variety of dimensions of success at the most proficient level possible.

Deeply embedded in this perception of achievement as multidimensional is the embracing of misleading ideals concerning neoliberal individualism and post-feminism.⁶ Thus, this project counters the need for further research exhaustively dissecting female students’ negotiations at the intersection of success and gender, as well as the reach of discourses around post-feminism, neoliberal individualism and girl power in interaction with educational environments.⁷ It also responds to demands for qualitative research, vital to providing a comprehensive portrayal of any given phenomenon that explores notions around success in female students at different stages in various education systems.⁸ The latter aspect becomes particularly salient given the conspicuous availability of literature around such themes set in English-speaking contexts and the lack of representation of Southern European countries.

Previous research addressed configurations of femininities in education mostly at the primary

* My deepest gratitude to the reviewers and editors who kindly offered their feedback. I would also like to appreciate the help of the members of staff at Lancaster University’s Educational Research Department and at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona’s Faculty of Educational Sciences.

¹ See Jackson and Dempster, “I Sat Back on My Computer,” 341–42, 351.

² See Power et al., “Schoolboys and Schoolwork,” 138; Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis, “Feminisation of Success or Successful Femininities?” 11; Francis, Skelton, and Read, “Simultaneous Production of Educational Achievement and Popularity,” 336; Ringrose, “Successful Girls?” 485; Budgeon, “Dynamics of Gender Hegemony,” 321, 325–26.

³ See Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis, “Feminisation of Success or Successful Femininities?” 2; Ringrose, “Successful Girls?” 483–484; Harris, *Future Girl*, 13–36.

⁴ See Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis, “Feminisation of Success or Successful Femininities?” 4–7.

⁵ See Nyström, Jackson, and Salminen-Karlsson, “What Counts as Success?” 6.

⁶ See Pomerantz and Raby, “She’s So Smart,” 553–558, 562.

⁷ See Renold and Allan, “Bright and Beautiful,” 470; Ringrose, “Successful Girls?” 485; Pomerantz and Raby, “She’s So Smart,” 562.

⁸ See Watkins, “Qualitative Research,” 153; Borgonovi and Han, “Gender Disparities in Fear of Failure,” 37.

school level in Anglophone countries. Models of femininity were identified in relation to schoolwork, heterosexuality, looks, displayed amiability, and good behavior.⁹ Prior studies examined the experiences of high-achieving, British primary school girls who embrace aspects like popularity and those who partly or completely renounce prevailing forms of femininity in favor of attainment and cleverness.¹⁰ Less socially popular expressions of femininity characterized by a rejection of social recognition and redefining of isolating discourses were also analyzed, together with archetypes defined by the dismissal of dominant femininity or hyperfemininity.¹¹ At the secondary school and university level, previous work concentrated on the negotiations between academic excellence and gender in successful Canadian, British, and Australian female students.¹² The ubiquity of discourses around neoliberal individualism and post-feminism in young women's elaborations of achievement is a critical aspect exemplified by the dominant configuration of the supergirl. Therefore, this research project tackles the exploration of the phenomenon at the upper-secondary school level, a crucial period in terms of the crystallizing of gender stereotypes.¹³

The focus of this study bridges the research gap between high school and university by concentrating on female students approaching the end of upper-secondary school who will soon determine their future educational and career plans, which play a significant role in forecasting trends in the selection of educational and career paths.¹⁴ This stage is particularly critical within the frame of achievement because it coincides with an increase of pressure on female students connected to the university admission process perceived as defining of their future success.¹⁵

This investigation also addresses the scarcity of research on the topic of successful femininities based in Southern European countries and in Italy specifically. The relative underrepresentation of the Italian education system in analyses of gender and achievement, along with the influence of the country's sexist cultural and societal heritage on education and the recent backlash against gender equality witnessed in the region, as the European Parliament highlighted, make investigating the phenomenon in the Italian context particularly compelling.¹⁶ Furthermore, I cannot bypass the significance of my own experience in the Italian education system as a girl who, like the participants in the study, had to juggle different demands and tensions to construct her identity as successfully feminine and high achieving. Consequently, the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the constructions and negotiations of the identities of high achieving female students at the secondary school level within the Italian education system. In other words, I grappled with the "performativity of success" within the frame of Italian female students' expressions of their gender identity.¹⁷ As a result, the project is a multiple site case study involving three upper-secondary schools in Northern Italy. I carried out semi-structured interviews with a sample of high-achieving female students approaching the end of their education cycle, and mapped the data collected by generating codes and themes, thanks to thematic analysis.

⁹ See Reay, "Spice Girls," "Nice Girls," "Girlies," 158–161.

¹⁰ See Renold, "Square Girls," 578–87; Renold and Allan, "Bright and Beautiful," 462–471.

¹¹ See Paechter and Clark, "Being 'Nice' or Being 'Normal,'" 5–13; Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie, "Skater Girlhood and Emphasised Femininity," 232–246; Archer et al., "Balancing Acts," 973–984; Francis et al., "Femininity, Science and the Denigration of the Girly Girl," 5–10.

¹² See Pomerantz and Raby, "She's So Smart," 553–562; Raby and Pomerantz, "Playing It Down/Playing It Up," 513–523; Rich, "Young Women, Feminist Identities and Neo-liberalism," 497–506; Scholes, "Popular Girls Aren't into Reading," 6–13.

¹³ See Legewie and DiPrete, "High School Environment and Gender Gap," 276.

¹⁴ See Morgan, Gelbiser, and Weeden, "Feeding the Pipeline," 1003.

¹⁵ See Spencer et al., "Having it All?" 22–23.

¹⁶ See Biemmi, "Gender in Schools and Culture," 818–19; European Parliament, *Backlash in Gender Equality*, 41–50.

¹⁷ Renold and Allan, "Bright and Beautiful," 468.

Gender Identity: Performance, Experience, and Agency

In this study, I draw from Paechter’s notion of gender as the “ways in which we ‘do’ boy or girl, man or woman,” linked to Butler’s influential works.¹⁸ I also draw from Morison and Macleod’s article on performance and performativity to understand how individuals “do gender.”¹⁹ In this realm, *performance* refers to the executing and performing implemented by individuals and underscores a certain degree of agency, while *performativity* indicates the construction of meaning and canons regulating performance.²⁰ Therefore, conceiving performance as the fundamental subject of performativity allowed me to explore how individuals construct gender identity.²¹

Drawing from Morison and Macleod’s work that frames individual performances as elements of gender performativity also allowed me to highlight the agency in the reshaping of gender involved in its construction. In this way, agency in the negotiating implicated in gender identity is a defining aspect of the latter, allowing us to frame the process in social systems by investigating experience. Consequently, gender is “a lived social relation that necessarily involves the negotiation of conflict and tension.”²² In other words, gender is not simply imposed through regulations: it is the result of friction and mediation. Accordingly, it is a development forged in social exchange as opposed to being congealed before it.²³ The participants’ experiences this project is based on can be analyzed in their complexity without neglecting their connection to social systems.²⁴

High-Achieving Femininities in Education

Contemporary conceptualizations of successful femininities are associated with ideals of individualistic exceptional success, hereby glorifying depictions of “girl power” and the progress achieved through feminism, without disengaging from a conventionally feminine character. Thus, they seemingly conceal the need to challenge the conventional gender order.²⁵ This association with neoliberal individualism, along with the subsequent obscuration of systemic inequalities and disinvestment in subverting gender hegemony, are ascribable to the cluster of new femininities, rooted in the crafting of girlhood as the most suitable identity configuration to face the hurdles of contemporary society.²⁶ The model for the contemporary ideal young woman, or “can-do girl,” is construed as “flexible, individualized, resilient, self-driven, and self-made and who easily follows nonlinear trajectories to fulfillment and success.”²⁷ It thereby becomes the trope of deceptive neoliberal narratives around

¹⁸ Paechter, *Being Boys, Being Girls*, 14. As for Butler, one should see at least “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”; *Gender Trouble*; *Bodies that Matter*; *Undoing Gender*.

¹⁹ Morison and Macleod, “A Performative-Performance Analytical Approach.”

²⁰ See Langellier, “Personal Narrative, Performance, Performativity,” 136; Brickell, “Masculinities, Performativity, and Subversion,” 28; Meyerhoff, “Gender Performativity,” 2.

²¹ See Morison and Macleod, “A Performative-Performance Analytical Approach,” 572.

²² McNay, “Agency and Experience,” 185.

²³ See Connell, *Masculinities*, 35.

²⁴ See McNay, “Agency and Experience,” 185.

²⁵ See Paechter, “Rethinking the Possibilities for Hegemonic Femininity,” 127.

²⁶ See Rich, “Young Women, Feminist Identities and Neo-liberalism,” 497–502; Budgeon, “Dynamics of Gender Hegemony,” 325–26; Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis, “Feminisation of Success or Successful Femininities?” 2–3, 8; Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm and Rumelili, “From Female Masculinity to Hegemonic Femininity.”

²⁷ Harris, *Future Girl*, 16.

attainment, autonomy, individual responsibility, and possibility.²⁸ These patterns of femininity are fabricated as high achieving within and beyond education, like the students in this project. They are also construed as unencumbered by limitations of gender discrimination thanks to second wave feminism and to the power of individual choice.²⁹ The pervasiveness of such narratives in conceptualizations of feminine success was discussed in New Zealander, British, and Canadian educational contexts.³⁰ Consequently, patterns of new femininity are formulated by participants in this work and previous ones through disassociation from the victimhood allegedly entailed in the framing of gender discrimination within systems of inequality.³¹

Throughout the research project, the significance of the supergirl archetype specifically, reflected in young female students seeking to balance multiple dimensions of success at the most proficient level possible, was substantiated. The connection between this archetype and paradigms of success grounded in neoliberal individualism and post-feminism was also corroborated.³² The aspiring Canadian high school supergirls in Raby and Pomerantz's 2015 study tend to be white, have middle-class backgrounds, and participate in a wide range of after-school activities. They show robust social abilities which help them reconcile education with popularity and peer relationships: the supergirl is someone who shines in every realm and whose core strength is demonstrating that she can manage everything at the same time.³³ Previous analyses examined the variety of approaches British, Canadian, and Australian primary, high school, and undergraduate supergirls employ to mediate their high academic attainment with their popular status, appearance, demeanor, and gender identity.³⁴ Among others, some girls invest time and effort in their hyper-feminine looks, while others reject such displays of femininity. Some are assertive, often considered a masculine characteristic, and are thus perceived negatively, whereas others value niceness and the approval of peers and adults. Therefore, girls can resort to underplaying their academic accomplishments and trying to appear less intelligent to avoid being perceived as overconfident or boastful, as documented in countries like the UK, Canada, Norway, and Australia, and mostly at the primary and lower-secondary school level.³⁵ Social status is therefore critical when performing such successful femininities, together with complying with standards of acceptable non-threatening femininity by displaying niceness, humility, and constraint.³⁶

Despite the conspicuous availability of literature on successful femininities in education, the reflections provided exposed the urgency of addressing two fundamental concerns in the body of work produced thus far: first, we must take into consideration the scarcity of projects centered on Southern Europe and on the Italian education system specifically. This context becomes particularly

²⁸ See Ringrose, "Successful Girls?" 480–481.

²⁹ See Budgeon, "Emergent Feminist(?) Identities," 25; Rich, "Young Women, Feminist Identities and Neo-liberalism," 497–502; Raby and Pomerantz, "Playing It Down/Playing It Up," 522–523; Pomerantz and Raby, "She's So Smart," 549–550.

³⁰ See Cossens and Jackson, "White, Classed and Gendered," 5–14; Rich, "Young Women, Feminist Identities and Neo-liberalism," 497–506; Pomerantz and Raby, "She's So Smart," 553–562.

³¹ See Rich, "Young Women, Feminist Identities and Neo-liberalism," 504–505.

³² See Rich, "Young Women, Feminist Identities and Neo-liberalism," 497–502; Pomerantz and Raby, "She's So Smart," 556–58; Raby and Pomerantz, "Playing It Down/Playing It Up," 519.

³³ See Pomerantz and Raby, "She's So Smart," 556, 562.

³⁴ See Renold and Allan, "Bright and Beautiful," 462–471; Raby and Pomerantz, "Playing It Down/Playing It Up," 513–523; Stahl, McDonald, and Loeser, "Feminine Subjectivities and Aspirational Learner Identities," 5–13.

³⁵ See Renold, "Square Girls," 579–581; Renold and Allan, "Bright and Beautiful," 462–463; Raby and Pomerantz, "Playing It Down/Playing It Up," 513–17; Foyn, Solomon, and Braathe, "Clever Girls' Stories," 90–91; Scholes, "Popular Girls Aren't into Reading," 6–11.

³⁶ See Renold and Allan, "Bright and Beautiful," 466–470; Raby and Pomerantz, "Playing It Down/Playing It Up," 518–521.

significant in light of the influence of the country’s culture of sexism on education and the Catholic Church’s scope and reach on Italian society and culture, evidenced by the backlash against gender equality witnessed in the country’s political, cultural, and educational life.³⁷ Second, the need for literature focusing on the last portion of upper-secondary education becomes evident, considering the crystallizing of stereotypical views of gender witnessed at this stage.³⁸ The weight of students’ decisions at the end of secondary school on their future pathways also makes this phase a significant one to explore.³⁹ This novel emphasis addresses the gap between research conducted at elementary and secondary school level and work pertaining to the period beyond secondary education.

Setting

Before delving into the other aspects of the proposed research, I will briefly outline some relevant features of the Italian education system. The system is divided into three main cycles: primary school (*scuola primaria*), which lasts for five years and is attended by children aged between six and eleven, lower-secondary school (*scuola secondaria di primo grado*), which lasts for three years and is attended by students aged between eleven and fourteen, and upper-secondary school (*scuola secondaria di secondo grado*), which lasts for five years and is for students aged between fourteen and nineteen.⁴⁰ Once they have concluded their lower-secondary education, Italian students have to choose between three main types of institutions which can be categorized as follows based on the educational programs they provide: lyceums or general high schools (*liceo*), technical high schools (*istituto tecnico*), and vocational high schools (*istituto professionale*). These three types of institutes provide a variety of paths students can decide to specialize in. Even though the curricula of these different types of institutions are standardized at national level and present a certain number of compulsory subjects, there are some fundamental differences in the kinds of specializations offered and the time dedicated to each subject.⁴¹

The three schools included in this research project are public co-educational *licei* (lyceums or general high schools) in northern Italy. School 1 is a provincial institution located thirty-five kilometers away from the closest city, thus gathering mostly students from the surrounding small towns, and the types of curricular tracks offered are focused mainly on humanities. School 2 is a bigger institution located on the outskirts of the city, therefore attracting students from the city and smaller towns around it. They offer mostly curricular tracks with a focus on scientific subjects, except for the foreign languages track option. School 3 is also bigger and is located right in the heart of the city. The curricular tracks proposed consist of a mix of humanities-based and scientific options.

Methods

This project explores the experiences of high achieving female students between the ages of 18 and 20, hailing from three schools in a northern Italian district through a multiple site case study aimed at

³⁷ See Biemmi, “Gender in Schools and Culture,” 818–19; Lavizzari and Prearo, “The Anti-gender Movement in Italy,” 7–18; see also the European Parliament, *Backlash in Gender Equality*, 41–50.

³⁸ See Legewie and DiPrete, “High School Environment and Gender Gap,” 276.

³⁹ See Morgan, Gelbiser, and Weeden, “Feeding the Pipeline,” 1003.

⁴⁰ See Ministero dell’Istruzione, dell’Università e della Ricerca (MIUR) and INDIRE, *The Italian Education System*, 7.

⁴¹ See Contini, Di Tommaso and Mendolia, “Gender Gap in Mathematics Achievement,” 7.

investigating characteristics of the supergirl.⁴² The research was thus executed by interviewing 15 female students (Table 1) from the three schools about their achievement and time in the education system as high achievers. Additionally, this research design allowed me to focus on the successful female students' agency as leading characters in the negotiation of their identities, therefore portraying a social process which centers its actors.⁴³

Table 1: Overview of relevant information about the participants.

Participant	Age	School location	Background	Family involvement in the participant's education
Abigail	19	City	Non-immigrant	Providing academic support (older brother for specific subjects). Providing cultural activities and resources (parents). Engaging in education (parents monitoring grades and offering help when needed).
Amelia	19	City	Non-immigrant	Providing academic and emotional support (parents). Engaging in education (parents monitoring grades and offering help when needed).
Camilla	18	City	Non-immigrant	Providing academic and emotional support (parents). Providing cultural activities and resources (parents). Engaging in education (parents monitoring grades and offering help when needed).
Charlotte	19	Province	Immigrant	Unable to provide academic support because of language barrier (parents). Engaging in education (parents helping with choice of educational and career path).
Chloe	19	City	Non-immigrant	Providing academic support (parents). Engaging in education (parents monitoring grades, offering help when needed, helping with choice of educational and career path).
Elizabeth	19	City	Non-immigrant	Providing academic support (aunt). Providing cultural activities and resources (parents). Engaging in education (parents monitoring grades, offering help when needed, helping with choice of educational and career path).
Emma	18	Province	Non-immigrant	Providing emotional support (parents). Engaging in education (parents monitoring grades and offering help when needed).
Emily	18	City	Non-immigrant	Providing academic support (parents). Engaging in education (parents monitoring grades and offering help when needed).
Evelyn	18	City	Non-immigrant	Providing emotional support (parents). Engaging in education (parents actively supporting mental wellbeing and helping with choice of educational and career path).
Grace	20	City	Non-immigrant	Providing academic support and emotional support (parents). Engaging in education (parents monitoring grades and offering help when needed).
Isabella	18	City	Non-immigrant	Providing academic and emotional support (parents). Providing cultural activities and resources (parents). Engaging in education (parents monitoring grades and offering help if needed).
Natalie	20	City	Non-immigrant	Providing emotional support (parents). Engaging in education (parents monitoring grades and offering help when needed).

⁴² See Simons, *Case Study Research in Practice*, 3–5; Lapan, Quartaroli; Riemer, *Qualitative Research*, 243–244; Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, *Research Methods in Education*, 375–377.

⁴³ See Swanborn, *Case Study Research*, 1–23.

Mia	19	City	Non-immigrant	Providing academic and emotional support (parents). Engaging in education (parents monitoring grades and offering help when needed).
Olivia	19	Province	Non-immigrant	Providing academic support (parents). Engaging in education (parents monitoring grades and offering help when needed).
Sophia	19	City	Immigrant	Unable to provide academic support because of language barrier (parents). Engaging in education (parents financing private school fees in the country of origin, moving to Italy for her to study medicine, helping select the right school in Italy).

The institutions selected for the study were three upper-secondary schools in northern Italy offering curricular tracks pertaining exclusively to academic education. The schools’ educational provision made them particularly relevant for the research project since I was specifically interested in educational environments valuing academic distinction and an extreme desire for excellence in their students: these environments are normally intense in heavily academic education, as corroborated by most students interviewed, who perceived their schools as demanding and exacting.

From the pool of upper-secondary institutions offering such educational provision present in the district with which I am most familiar, the three schools were selected thanks to personal connections. The sampling criteria utilized concerned the participants’ gender, age, and academic and/or extracurricular attainment. In other words, I was granted permission by the schools to talk to some female students who were at least eighteen, because the project revolved around the perspective of young women who are approaching the end of their educational paths at secondary school level.

While I provided the institutions I contacted with brief guidelines for the selection of pupils based on their educational and extracurricular achievement, I also relied on the teachers’ familiarity with the students and their own perceptions of their students’ success. I ensured I received formal consent from the participants through approved consent forms which were filled out, signed, and sent back to me. This research also obtained ethical approval from Lancaster University.

The data was generated by carrying out semi-structured interviews with the participants which allowed me to produce a data set relevant to the focal points of the research and zoom in on the participants’ perspectives on the issue.⁴⁴ The interviews were carried out utilizing the platform Microsoft Teams. The convenience of using such platforms emerged on this occasion too, since I do not reside in Italy and I would have had to travel to interview the participants. Similarly, although ethnographic observation could have provided me with the opportunity to delve deeper into the participants’ experiences, it was not a viable option when this research project was carried out. It is also important to bear in mind that ethnographic observation can be complex for less experienced researchers because of the risk of “unduly affect[ing] the action of others in their ‘natural setting.’”⁴⁵

The interviews started with a set of introductory questions to understand the participants’ everyday lives and how they perceived themselves as high-achieving girls. The next part of the interview focused on how they defined success and how they felt as successful young women. The third and final part explored how the young women engaged with the people, environments, and cultures they interacted with. To recruit the participants for the study, first, I contacted the schools’ headteachers to be granted permission to execute the study in those settings. Second, the headteachers of the schools selected, with the help of other members of staff, singled out students according to the

⁴⁴ See Brinkmann, “Unstructured and Semi-Structured Interviewing,” 277–299; Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 197–219.

⁴⁵ Grix, *Foundations of Research*, 125.

criteria described above. They then proceeded to either provide me with a list of students I could contact by email or provide the pupils with my email address so that they could connect with me. The interviews lasted between 35 and 70 minutes. During the online meetings, the students seemed at ease, probably because of the minimal age difference between us. Nevertheless, I tried to make the procedure comfortable for them by keeping the conversation informal and, most importantly, by reassuring them about their anonymity in the project. Two participants in particular seemed hesitant to report on instances of discrimination or their relationships with their teachers, and I had to encourage them to discuss those issues by reminding them of the anonymity entailed in their participation.

The data set was interpreted through thematic analysis which enabled me to deconstruct students' experiences and thus illustrate the subtle and heterogeneous implications within the participants' statements.⁴⁶ Within the framework of thematic analysis, the approach used to map codes and themes was both deductive and inductive.⁴⁷ In this type of qualitative research, the researcher's subjectivity is not isolated from the project—it is appreciated as an integral part of knowledge production.⁴⁸ This is particularly relevant for feminist endeavors which do not support notions of “objective” research but instead “[celebrate] the ‘personal’ in research.”⁴⁹ In other words, my experience as a student in the Italian education system likely informed every aspect of the project, from the crafting of the interview guide to the analyses of the data set. This circumstance needs to be acknowledged and valued.

Doing High-Achieving Girlhood

Using Macleod and Morison's performance-performativity model allowed me to investigate how the participants perform high-achieving girlhood, as well as the value of such performances within the performativity of gender and achievement. Therefore, the analyses in the following paragraphs decipher the multiple and contrasting ways Italian female students craft their identities as high achievers. In so doing, they identify the contradictions and complex negotiations embedded in their performances of gender and achievement, and underline the relevance of the supergirl model.⁵⁰ This model is rendered through many themes encompassing confidence, balancing multiple dimensions of success, looks and heterosexuality, independence, hard work, and discrimination, among others.

Within the former, a tension between expressions of modesty, humility, and timidity on the one hand and self-assurance on the other, was identified. In other words, the participants oscillated between “discourses of ‘lack’” and displaying cleverness by taking ownership of girl-power narratives.⁵¹ In relation to the second theme mentioned, for the participants, success entails more than excellent credentials: it requires doing everything “all at once.”⁵² The importance of sociability and popularity as a marker of success was also brought up consistently, together with worrying about social exclusion and not wanting to stand out excessively as “the kind of girl everyone would like to be” (Chloe). When it comes to appearance, a ubiquitous concern and investment in looks was observed, together with a feeling of apprehension towards their bodies for some of the participants specifically.

⁴⁶ See Guest, MacQueen, and Namey, *Applied Thematic Analysis*, 11.

⁴⁷ See Joffe, “Thematic Analysis,” 210.

⁴⁸ See Leavy, “Introduction,” 4.

⁴⁹ Grix, *Foundations of Research*, 82.

⁵⁰ See Pomerantz and Raby, “She’s So Smart,” 556–558.

⁵¹ Renold and Allan, “Bright and Beautiful,” 469.

⁵² Pomerantz and Raby, “She’s So Smart,” 557.

The dominant supergirl femininity shaping girls’ perceptions of themselves thus entails the upkeep of feminine physical aspects in the framework of neoliberal girl-power success tropes.⁵³ Furthermore, the participants’ investment in heterosexuality was particularly ambiguous because of its perceived importance and the risk of stigmatization it can involve, especially in association with academic achievement and queerness. In the following paragraphs, I focus on independence, hard work, and discrimination as the key themes of analysis. Their relevance is connected to the rendering of the contradictions required by high achieving femininities, and they will thus clarify the intricacies of the supergirl model within the participants’ recounts.

Independence

Despite the importance given to helping others, participants valued a sense of independence exemplified by Emma’s words: “at the end of the day in life ... we are always by ourselves.” The value placed on autonomy and self-determination is in line with hegemonic femininity discourses of strength and independence ascribable to distorted neoliberal narratives of success as a wholly individual endeavor.⁵⁴

This emphasis on self-sufficiency permeated Natalie’s recounts of her experience with Special Educational Needs (SEN) support educators. When in elementary school she was assigned a SEN educator due to her deafness, later improved by surgery and a cochlear implant, she was determined to prove others that she could succeed autonomously. Eventually, she convinced her parents and school that she did not need SEN support because it was doing too little. She felt she was regarded as different and that her peers could not comprehend why someone as high achieving would need support. Despite the unfavorable impact of SEN status on students’ academic self-esteem, inclusion in mainstream education for students with hearing impairments can promote self-confidence.⁵⁵ However, adopting an intersectional perspective is key to better understanding Nathalie’s experience in mainstream education as a female student dealing with deafness. Effective interventions aimed at improving her day-to-day life as a high achiever need to be cognizant of how these experiences intersect.⁵⁶ Not doing so can yield unfavorable results, as Nathalie herself explained:

Appreciating myself, accepting my disability, even if it’s difficult because, for example ... I go to school, we all have masks on, and with the background noises, classmates talking, desks moving, and maybe we even have the windows open, so you can hear all the noises nearby outside. ... We’re near the train station, so you can hear the trains braking, so it’s difficult. It’s been a bit difficult now because I’m having a hard time hearing.

Nevertheless, failing to rise above traditional forms of femininity characterized by dependence, in spite of one’s impairment, risks plunging one’s performance into a pariah status guilty of the inability to reject emphasized configurations of traditional femininity.⁵⁷ Furthermore, this type of narrative around independence is emblematic of neoliberal notions of individualism depicting girls as in charge of their success or failure irrespective of systemic benefits or barriers, and so obscuring the inequality allowing

⁵³ See Harris, *Future Girl*, 13–36.

⁵⁴ See Paechter, “Rethinking the Possibilities for Hegemonic Femininity,” 124, 127; Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis, “Feminisation of Success or Successful Femininities?” 6, 11.

⁵⁵ See DeVries, Knickenberg, and Trygger, “Special Needs and Gender,” 10–11; Theunissen et al., “Self-Esteem in Hearing-Impaired Children,” 5–8.

⁵⁶ See Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1250.

⁵⁷ See Budgeon, “Dynamics of Gender Hegemony,” 326–27.

some to do better than others.⁵⁸ This mechanism is recognizable in Natalie's accounts as a student with a disability who feels pressured to claim autonomy and demonstrate that she can achieve as highly and with the same tools as others, irrespective of her condition. The emphasis on independence and avoidance of excessive conventional femininity is ascribable to the influence of the local dominant supergirl femininity congruent with neoliberal trends of individualized attainment.⁵⁹ Addressing Nathalie's needs from an intersectional perspective would help institutions design interventions which ensure that she utilize the support given to her without needing to work herself to exhaustion:

I've also had ... moments of profound crisis partly related to my deafness, partly also to the relationship I had with school ... I had reached a point where I expected a lot from myself ... There was a period in my third year in February, ... I was tired, physically and mentally. And I noticed that my grades were getting worse, I don't say worsening like I got a four, just half a grade less. So much so that this thing bothered me. And I told myself: "I have to study even more." So I went to bed late, I studied, I went to bed late, I woke up earlier in the morning to finish revising. ... I had an absurd rhythm, in fact, I couldn't keep up with this rigid rhythm any more.

"Sharing" and "Caring"?

Despite emphasizing independence, most participants valued helpfulness: Camilla and Mia, for example, embraced being nice to others.⁶⁰ However, this focus on helpfulness indicates yet another conflicting tendency for them: success is constructed by balancing overt confidence, independence, and achievement stemming from girl-power narratives with expressions of conventional femininity for their gender and high achiever identity to be welcomed.⁶¹ Accordingly, the dominant form of supergirl femininity the participants measure themselves against entails fostering independence in their achievement while (moderately) promoting helpfulness in the framework of new successful femininities' ability to handle different demands.⁶²

Moreover, the participants' engagement with the concept of sharing and caring is even more contradictory because of the cultural context they live in, characterized by slow-evolving gender roles and more conservative views on said roles even among younger people. In this sense, the influence of the male breadwinner model on gender roles and stereotypes in Italian society becomes evident in the unequal division of caregiving practices in the country and the widespread essentialist belief that women are biologically more suited to caregiving than men.⁶³ The participants' contradictory engagement with behaviors of sharing and caring is thus also emblematic of the oscillation between the conventionally feminine and conservative expectations learned and unlearned at home and in other environments and the need to reject conservative familial models for more progressive ones.⁶⁴

Hard Work

⁵⁸ See Ringrose, "Successful Girls?" 480–81, 484; Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis, "Feminisation of Success or Successful Femininities?" 11.

⁵⁹ See Pomerantz and Raby, "She's So Smart," 553–556; Raby and Pomerantz, "Playing It Down/Playing It Up," 522–523.

⁶⁰ Girls' tendency to prioritize *sharing* and *caring* has been documented in Renold and Allan, "Bright and Beautiful," 469.

⁶¹ See Harris, *Future Girl*, 13–36.

⁶² See Raby and Pomerantz, "Playing It Down/Playing It Up," 520–521.

⁶³ See Bramanti, Bosoni, and Nanetti, "Sociology of the Family in Italy," 186; Cannito, Falzea, and Torroni, "Socializzazione al Genere," 112, 116–17.

⁶⁴ See Bainotti and Torroni, "What Kind of Gender Socialization?" 204–205.

Participants mentioned determination, effort, and hard work in relation to their nature and achievements. They often interpreted their success as resulting from hard work and dedication, thereby adopting discourses constructing success as earned and not given, exemplified by Grace’s words: “I work hard, so ... it is not like things are just handed to me.” Notions surrounding hard work and its effectiveness in ensuring success stem from neoliberal individualist discourses effective in concealing systemic inequalities.⁶⁵ The combination of effort and good time management skills, as phrased by Mia—“at the end of the day, twenty-four hours do not seem like a lot, but ... if you really want something, you can achieve it”—is therefore crucial to interpret their attainments. It also indicates the influence of dominant notions of supergirl femininity entailing commitment to education and hard work to maintain high credentials counterbalanced by finding time to smoothly incorporate many ways of being successful.⁶⁶

Although most participants showed gratefulness and affection towards their families, their narratives of hard work, individual resolve, and achievement did not always recognize the pivotal role played by their support system in sustaining their achievement: families can influence not only their children’s fields of study choice in upper-secondary education, but also their views on the importance of high credentials, schooling, and culture more generally, as was underscored by many participants.⁶⁷ Most described their parents as supportive of their educational and extracurricular endeavors in varying degrees and ways (Table 1), in line with Raby and Pomerantz’s findings.⁶⁸ Providing support to high-achieving students, though, requires the right financial and cultural means from parents and therefore is intertwined with favorable social conditions concerning race and class, among others.⁶⁹ Sophia’s parents, for example, sacrificed time, effort, and resources to ensure their daughter could get the education she desired: Sophia recalled attending a private institution in Turkey, moving to Italy from Turkey at fourteen to finish secondary school, and visiting many Italian schools with her parents until she found the ideal one. The circumstances display Sophia’s parents’ willingness and financial resources deployed for her to continue studying how she wanted, despite their unfamiliarity with Italian culture. At the same time, for Charlotte and Sophia, whose cultural backgrounds are Moldovan and Turkish, respectively, the encouragement provided by parents is not necessarily supported through schoolwork, unlike other participants. Both girls affirmed that their parents had little to no involvement with the day-to-day responsibilities of schoolwork, mainly because of their language barrier. Therefore, it is clear that direct academic support is predominantly the prerogative of parents who pursued their own education and have the time and suitable cultural and linguistic background to do so.⁷⁰

Never Giving Up

Another recurring theme the participants discussed concerns never giving up even in the face of adversities. This trend is ascribable to the dominant supergirl archetype outlined thus far, fostering perseverance as the defining matrix of girls as post-feminist success stories.⁷¹ While Amelia does not accept failure, Grace, whose educational career had not been linear, recalls having to weather the storm

⁶⁵ See Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis, “Feminisation of Success or Successful Femininities?” 11.

⁶⁶ See Pomerantz and Raby, “She’s So Smart,” 556.

⁶⁷ See Biemmi, “Scuole medie,” 124.

⁶⁸ See Raby and Pomerantz, “Playing It Down/Playing It Up,” 521–522.

⁶⁹ See Raby and Pomerantz, “Playing It Down/Playing It Up,” 512, 519–520; “Landscapes of Academic Success,” 79–82; see also Pomerantz and Raby, *Smart Girls*, 177; Stahl et al., “Feminine Subjectivities,” 6–7, 13.

⁷⁰ See Pomerantz and Raby, *Smart Girls*, 177.

⁷¹ See Ringrose, “Successful Girls?” 474, 484–485.

of a difficult time to achieve the academic results she was striving for. Similarly, Sophia's experience moving to Italy at fourteen is emblematic of this narrative. She recounted working hard to learn Italian from zero through Latin, a subject in the curriculum she undertook:

I didn't even know a word of Italian, and [the teacher] made me translate from Latin to Italian. ... She told me: "You're better off with Latin than with Italian" because ... even though they don't come from the same family and language, Latin and Turkish have something similar, I don't know how to explain it. And so it was "a language of mathematics" she told me, so I can say that Latin helped me learn Italian.

These stories are rooted in the (mis)belief that individual resolve and persistence are all one needs to rise above systemic inequality.⁷² When applied to contemporary high-achieving girls, such assumptions are ascribable to "popular feminism," through which the concept is disassociated from battling against collective systems of oppression for its reconfiguration as an individual hurdle.⁷³ The popular feminism permeating the anecdotes is traceable to new hegemonic femininities' "heightened emphasis on individual responsibility" and subsequent neutralizing of unequal gender interactions.⁷⁴

When Charlotte asserts that women who work hard can be as successful as men, the effect of this stance becomes evident:

Women can undoubtedly achieve the same goals, the same successes. But I'm not so optimistic as to believe they can achieve them in the same way. They'll certainly have to work harder, prove themselves, and maybe even ... have a few doors slammed in their faces or, in any case, some disappointments. Well, I believe that those who really work hard and truly want it can truly achieve the same goals.

Charlotte is drawing a clear line between the women who apparently work hard to overcome inequality and those who allegedly choose to be victims of their own negligence. She is separating the *can-do* from *at-risk* girl archetypes: the empowered ambitious girls who have it all and the failing disempowered ones susceptible to the disadvantageous circumstances they find themselves in.⁷⁵ The pride the participant takes in choosing a less conventional path for her gender beyond school is therefore associated with her desire to construct her success story as someone who managed to defeat statistics and customs through willpower and effort:

Choosing a purely male field makes me proud on the one hand because I feel the push to do what I want, regardless of ... statistics or conventions, but on the other hand ... I feel a bit held back by the idea that in some situations I may have to prove myself more than others in order, in short, to be accepted and recognized.

Charlotte's statements are particularly compelling when reflecting on her experience with schoolwork in the Italian education system. Since her parents had migrated to Italy from Moldova before she was born, she had to deal with her schoolwork independently from a young age due to her parents' difficulties with Italian. The narratives she adopts, then, are rooted in the hurdles she had to face to construct her success story and her identity as a high achiever. Additionally, I cannot disregard how

⁷² See Rich, "Young Women, Feminist Identities and Neo-liberalism," 498–502.

⁷³ See Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender*, as quoted in Rich, "Young Women, Feminist Identities and Neo-liberalism," 501.

⁷⁴ Budgeon, "Dynamics of Gender Hegemony," 326.

⁷⁵ See Harris, *Future Girl*, 13–36.

her family’s immigrant background intersects with Charlotte’s gender identity in shaping her everyday experience and determination, as exemplified by her approach to schoolwork and attainment.⁷⁶

Effortless Achievement

Additionally, effortless achievement narratives related to juggling academic, social, and athletic responsibilities smoothly influence how high-achieving girls might conceal their labor to avoid stigmatization. This necessity is at odds with the neoliberal narratives discussed valuing labor and effort and represents one of the many contradictions associated with performing acceptable successful femininities.⁷⁷ This attitude was mainly detected in Isabella and Emily, who stressed that they revise for tests on the day they are due and procrastinate and nap in the afternoon. These instances pertain to the predilection of masculine approaches to learning depicting “effortless achievement as the pinnacle of accomplishment.”⁷⁸ Nevertheless, Emily and Isabella cannot claim this identity equally: Emily, with lower credentials than Isabella, described her experience at school positively as someone admired by peers and teachers alike, whereas Isabella was vocal about the ways her classmates confined her to swot status: labels like *teacher’s pet* and *swot* were used by other students to shame high achievers within the participants’ education environments. The swot specifically described students who do nothing but study and whose explicit hard work gets rewarded with high grades. While it was acknowledged by a few participants, only Isabella, Natalie and Abigail revealed that it had been used against them. This type of disciplinary gaze exerted by students on their peers is particularly strong among teenagers, crucial to guaranteeing compliance with acceptable local forms of femininity.⁷⁹ This procedure pushed participants to carefully embrace their achievements in modest and quiet ways, hence the ubiquitous scorn for bragging in participants’ narratives.⁸⁰ Emblematic of the consequences of the fear of being labelled a swot is Mia’s story of bullying in middle school caused by her overt success and competition, to the point that she started studying less not to garner her peers’ hostility:

In class, I stood out because I acted too much like a main character in elementary school ... it was a bit more competitive ... I took this attitude with me from elementary school to middle school. In middle school, I met some people, especially one boy who was a bit of a bully, in short, very unpleasant, and so there was a bit of derision, a bit of teasing. ... One situation happened and then others followed, and therefore you feel a lot of pressure on you. It creates a particularly hostile environment, so in this sense it was a bit of a problem. In fact, I remember that I had started to study a little less in some subjects, for example.

Mia’s account echoes that of Sarah, a participant in Jackson’s 2006 study who adopted similar strategies to avoid getting bullied after her negative experience in primary school.⁸¹ It shows the tension between students’ awareness of the importance of acquiring academic skills and ensuring their social survival in school.⁸²

Educational Environment and Discrimination

⁷⁶ See Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1249–1250.

⁷⁷ See Jackson and Dempster, “I Sat Back on My Computer,” 351; Pomerantz and Raby, “She’s So Smart,” 556, 561–562.

⁷⁸ Jackson and Dempster, “I Sat Back on My Computer,” 352.

⁷⁹ See Paechter, “Rethinking the Possibilities for Hegemonic Femininity,” 125–126.

⁸⁰ This trend has been observed in Pomerantz and Raby, “She’s So Smart,” 560; Foyen et al., “Clever Girls’ Story,” 89.

⁸¹ See Jackson, *Lads and Ladettes in School*, 107.

⁸² See Scholes, “Popular Girls Aren’t into Reading,” 12–13.

When discussing high-achieving girlhood, it is crucial to concentrate on school environments. The three secondary schools the participants attended were described as demanding by the students, who felt that one had to work hard to excel there. Additionally, the two urban institutions were perceived as stimulating, welcoming and supportive environments providing pupils with opportunities to learn beyond traditional classroom settings. The significance of positive educational surroundings to foster girls' success and development of their identities as high achievers was already pinpointed and bolstered by the participants' remarks in this project.⁸³ However, the participants' descriptions of their school environments presented contradictions. Implicit in their comments was the awareness that you can embrace your achievements, on the condition that you do not overtly display them (e.g. "yes [it is] a fairly [supportive environment] if you do not take it too far"). Fortunately, the participants also reported building small circles of like-minded supportive high achieving students where they could confidently embrace their smartness, a type of strong group subculture.⁸⁴

Within these environments, educators are especially influential because of their ability to support students' wellbeing or negatively contribute to feelings of distress.⁸⁵ Most students felt supported as high achievers, although some participants shared circumstances where they felt discriminated against because of their gender. Educators have been identified as perpetrators or enablers of discrimination in the Italian education system because of their biased convictions or inaction towards discriminatory attitudes. In Italian students' experiences, teachers tend to treat students differently based on their gender, thus perpetuating gender stereotypes more or less consciously.⁸⁶ These stereotypical representations of gender, then, influence educational models and practices and, in turn, foster gender-stereotypical expectations for pupils through sanctioning and reinforcement. Gender expectations thus become self-fulfilling prophecies.⁸⁷ Therefore, teachers' stereotypes and expectations can impact aspects such as the gender gap in female students' math performance, students' self-perception of their abilities, and curricular track choices.⁸⁸

In this study, Isabella and Camilla felt that their teachers valued their male peers' apparently effortless learning approaches more and that they perceived boys as innately smarter in scientific subjects, as purported in previous work on teachers' differing perceptions of boys and girls in mathematics.⁸⁹ Isabella reported that her physics teacher tends to blame her substandard performances to the fact that she studies "by heart," while for her fellow high-achieving male classmates, it is attributed to their lack of effort: "Maybe I sense a little sexism at school every now and then, because boys are always associated with the talent for reason and logic without studying. They do very well in subjects like physics. They just have it, they're almost geniuses. ... It's usually like this."

Furthermore,

I experienced [sexism] first-hand with my physics teacher. The first two years I wasn't very happy with this teacher because obviously when I failed it was because I had studied by heart and I didn't understand things. And he would actually tell me, "You study by heart." While to my male classmate who usually had the same grades as me and once did poorly, "No, you have to study, Jack, you never

⁸³ See Pomerantz and Raby, "She's So Smart," 560; Raby and Pomerantz, "Landscapes of Academic Success," 72, 74–75.

⁸⁴ For supportive subcultures, see Raby and Pomerantz, "Playing It Down/Playing It Up," 521.

⁸⁵ See Daniele, "Salute mentale e disagio a scuola," 9.

⁸⁶ See Sulla et al., "Development of Gender Stereotypes," 15.

⁸⁷ See Abbatecola and Stagi, "Stereotipi, riproduzione e segnali di cambiamento," 78.

⁸⁸ See Tomasetto et al., "Parents Math-Gender Stereotypes," 195; Biemmi, "Scuole medie," 122–123; Carlana, "Implicit Stereotypes," 1219.

⁸⁹ See Tiedemann, "Gender-Related Beliefs," 204–206.

study.”

Camilla asserted that her female science teacher tends to grade her and other high-achieving girls lower than their male counterparts, even when the former performs better than the latter: “I have ... this science teacher who always gives you lower grades than the other [male] students, even though you did better. I swear!”

These instances substantiate the idea that, despite the rise of neoliberal success narratives cherishing hard work and results, masculine effortless approaches to learning are still valued more and perceived as genuine expressions of scholarship.⁹⁰ This tendency is rooted in the figure of the “brilliant boy” who accomplishes without apparent effort, which determines what type of success is recognized and fostered.⁹¹ Indeed, research in the Italian context has highlighted that teachers instinctively enforce gender expectations in their interactions with students and that these expectations are entrenched in their educational practices as common sense beliefs.⁹² The influence of educators’ stereotyped notions around gender, education and achievement on students’ beliefs and attitudes and their role in fostering positive or negative attitudes towards specific subjects in students, though, is undeniable.⁹³ In light of this, the recounts of discrimination shared by the participants should not be disregarded.

Downplaying Discrimination

When reporting such instances, Camilla tried to downplay what she felt by claiming that she had not experienced many significant occurrences of discrimination. This attitude is emblematic of the contradicting feeling living in allegedly post-feminist societies causes in accomplished girls.

Given that they are supposed to exist in a time and place where equality has been achieved, there is no room for them to confront discrimination and interpret it as part of systems of inequality.⁹⁴ Charlotte and Emily also explicitly rejected feminism as too radical an endeavor. For instance, Charlotte affirmed that “some people tend to exaggerate and think that women should be or are better than men,” whereas Natalie was reluctant to use the expression “male chauvinism” when discussing inequality. In terms of success, despite their awareness that beyond school they will have to work harder than men to prove their worth and for their achievements to be recognized, they failed to contextualize the issue as part of systems of inequality, a conventional tendency among successful young girls.⁹⁵ If girls’ performances must be seen as symbols of individualized neoliberal success then fully embracing feminism or recognizing the far-reaching implications of gender inequality as a system of oppression becomes arduous.⁹⁶ The partial embracing of feminism for these confident high-achievers is therefore in line with neoliberal narratives pointing to individual effort and choice to overcome injustice.⁹⁷ This approach is traceable to their conformation as “a unique category of girls who are self-assured, living lives lightly inflected but by no means driven by feminism” in the current neoliberal climate.⁹⁸ Moreover, ascribing to feminism, associated with aggressiveness but also

⁹⁰ See Jackson, *Lads and Ladettes in School*, 132; Jackson and Dempster, “I Sat Back on My Computer,” 351–352.

⁹¹ See Paule, *Girlhood, Schools and Media*, 3.

⁹² See Abbatecola and Stagi, “Stereotipi, riproduzione e segnali di cambiamento,” 78.

⁹³ See Keller, “Effect of Teachers’ Stereotyping,” 170–2; Guerrin, “Women and STEM,” 408–409.

⁹⁴ See Pomerantz and Raby, “She’s So Smart,” 558–561.

⁹⁵ See Rich, “Young Women, Feminist Identities and Neo-liberalism,” 501–502.

⁹⁶ See Ringrose, “Successful Girls?” 484–486.

⁹⁷ See Rich, “Young Women, Feminist Identities and Neo-liberalism,” 501; Budgeon, “Dynamics of Gender Hegemony,” 325–326.

⁹⁸ Harris, *Future Girl*, 17.

victimhood, can signify pariah femininity because of the risk of subverting the hierarchical gender system intrinsic in such positioning.⁹⁹

Interestingly, when reflecting on gender inequality in Italy, participants did not express the sense of luck connected to living in a time and age of endless opportunities examined by Pomerantz and Raby in their 2011 study, but depicted Italy as a country where equality is far-fetched. In this context, female students' awareness of inequality and disadvantage in the sphere of work pushes them to view education as social redemption to maximize their opportunities, and therefore invest more time and effort in it compared to their male counterparts, as Charlotte clearly states: "my idea of femininity nowadays ... is to work, maybe even a little harder, to feel the need to assert oneself more decisively than men, because in any case there is this pressure of a certain gender inequality."¹⁰⁰ Although most of the participants were conscious of the ubiquity of gender segregation in the working world, they struggled to acknowledge the reach of the phenomenon in education. This aspect can be interpreted as an expression of misconceptions depicting educational institutions in Italy as free from gender inequality.¹⁰¹ While the Italian education system is unrealistically depicted as unaffected by gender inequality, the surging rate of educational achievement and persistence in female students witnessed in the area does not translate to the working world, still characterized by some of the lowest female employment rates among industrialized countries.¹⁰²

Conclusion

By analyzing interviews carried out with 15 participants, this study explored the multiple ways upper-secondary Italian female students construct and negotiate their identities as high-achieving girls. The balancing of feminine and masculine features in contemporary archetypes of successful femininity was therefore corroborated.¹⁰³ The dominant model of successful femininity influencing the participants' conceptualizations of their successful identities was in line with the so-called "supergirl."¹⁰⁴ The latter is ascribable to post-feminist tendencies depicting girls as tropes of success characterized by neoliberal individualist conceptions emphasizing personal responsibility and erasing the scope of systemic inequalities.¹⁰⁵ This paradigm and its tensions permeated the girls' recounts and emerged in numerous patterns, which were codified and arranged in a variety of themes. Although these analyses allowed me to identify several transnational themes in the participants' performances of high-achieving girlhood, I could not thoroughly evaluate aspects related to the Italian context specifically. Comparative studies are needed to explore the inner-workings of these themes.

Investigating high achieving female students' experiences in the Italian education system has implications on different scales, from individual to social. At the individual level, the ubiquity of successful femininity models, as purported in this study and in others, which are difficult to support and can be a source of strain on girls, should be addressed by focusing on alternative narratives that can uncover "the insidious effects of the absorption and appropriation of feminist goals by neoliberal

⁹⁹ See Budgeon, "Dynamics of Gender Hegemony," 325–326.

¹⁰⁰ See Bianco, "Diseguaglianze educative e genere," 334; Carbone and Monaci, "What Kind of Work?" 169.

¹⁰¹ See Biemmi, "Gender in Schools and Culture," 820.

¹⁰² See Colombo and Salmieri, "Gender and Education in Italy," 19.

¹⁰³ See Budgeon, "Dynamics of Gender Hegemony," 322; Ringrose, "Successful Girls?" 474.

¹⁰⁴ See Renold and Allan, "Bright and Beautiful," 466–470; Pomerantz and Raby, "She's So Smart," 556–558; Raby and Pomerantz, "Playing It Down, Playing It Up," 519–521.

¹⁰⁵ Ringrose, "Successful Girls?" 480–481, 484.

discourses which gloss over structural explanations for inequalities.”¹⁰⁶ This would allow us to provide an urgent reformulation of success for young women that does not condemn failure as the result of mere personal choice. At the level of institutions, despite the influential role of teachers in supporting high achieving female students, we cannot overlook how they can negatively impact their self-concept, educational experiences and future educational and career plans through instances of discrimination such as the ones reported in this study.¹⁰⁷ Educators should thus be supplied with more possibilities of improving their practice through lifelong learning in the form of compulsory workshops and programs around gender equality, especially in the Italian context where there is a lack of systematic training on gender equality for educators. Considering the hostile peer culture which still influences girls’ approaches to learning and embracing of attainment, we shall invest in educating students on issues connected to bullying and gender equality through educational programs on local and national scales, since education for gender equality in the country relies on individual enterprise. At the level of interaction with society and culture, acknowledging girls’ reluctance to identify wider systems of inequality and their influence on the everyday lives of individuals calls for extensively educating students on systemic inequalities in their multiple configurations and ramifications through the institution of modules to be introduced in national educational curricula, which are currently not satisfactory in the context of the Italian school system.¹⁰⁸

After discussing the main implications of the study, I emphasize that this project is subject to three fundamental limitations: first, the lack of ethnographic observation of the participants in the institutions they attend to get a more comprehensive understanding of the issue and the interplay between phenomenon and environment is a primary limitation of this investigation.¹⁰⁹ Second, to triangulate the data generated and better comprehend the scope of the issue, interviews with significant adult figures in the students’ lives, namely parents and teachers, should be carried out. Finally, the project should be extended over longer periods of time, at different stages of the education cycle, and in different types of upper-secondary institutions and tracks to analyze the reach of the phenomenon. Consequently, further research by means of (1) ethnographic observation of classroom interactions, (2) interviewing of significant adults for the students and (3) extension over longer periods of time, at different stages of the education cycle and in different kinds of institutions is needed to develop our expertise on the subject.

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¹⁰⁶ See Renold and Allan, “Bright and Beautiful,” 469; Pomerantz and Raby, “She’s So Smart,” 561–562; Raby and Pomerantz, “Playing It Down, Playing It Up,” 522–523; Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis, “Feminisation of Success or Successful Femininities?” 12.

¹⁰⁷ See Keller, “Effect of Teachers’ Stereotyping,” 170–172; Tiedemann, “Gender-Related Beliefs,” 204–206; Tiedemann, “Teachers’ Gender Stereotypes,” 58–60.

¹⁰⁸ See European Parliament, *Backlash in Gender Equality*, 43–45.

¹⁰⁹ See, for instance, Renold, “Square-Girls,” 578; Renold and Allan, “Bright and Beautiful,” 460; Skelton, Francis, and Read, “Brains before ‘Beauty?’” 188.

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