

EXPLORING DIGITAL LITERATURE LITERACY AND READING THROUGH A GENDER LENS

LA ALFABETIZACIÓN LITERARIA Y LA LECTURA DIGITAL DESDE UNA PERSPECTIVA DE GÉNERO

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ABSTRACT

Digital Literature (DL) has emerged as a significant artistic expression, challenging traditional storytelling and engaging audiences in new ways. This paper explores Digital Literature, DL Literacy (DLL), and their intersection with gender perspectives. Attempting to provide a definition for DL, drawing from sources like the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) and scholars' insights, various forms of e-literature are examined, emphasizing technological skills, critical thinking, and interpretive abilities. Strategies for developing DLL, including engaging with diverse texts and online collaboration, are also discussed. Central to the paper is how gender influences digital literary creation, distribution, and reception, highlighting implications for societal norms and stereotypes, and advocating for inclusive approaches and ethical storytelling practices to spark digital literary engagement.

Keywords: Digital Literature, Digital Literature Literacy, gender, art, stereotypes

RESUMEN

La literatura digital (LD) ha surgido como una importante expresión artística que desafía la narrativa tradicional, lo cual ha atraído al público de nuevas maneras. Este artículo explora la LD, la alfabetización digital y su intersección con las perspectivas de género. A partir de fuentes como la Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) y diferentes autoridades académicas, se examinan diversas formas de LD, enfatizando habilidades tecnológicas, pensamiento crítico y capacidades interpretativas. También se analizan estrategias para desarrollar la LD, como el uso de textos diversos y la colaboración en línea. Un aspecto central es la influencia del género en la creación, distribución y recepción de la LD, y su implicación en normas sociales y estereotipos, así como su manera de promover enfoques inclusivos y prácticas narrativas éticas.

Palabras clave: literatura digital, alfabetización literaria digital, género, arte, estereotipos

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1. Digital Literature. An Attempt Towards a Definition

The relationship between literature, an intellectual activity in itself intangible, liminal and transcendent, and the book, a physical support and an immanent and finite object, has been intertwined for so long that it is difficult to think of them separately (Meschini, 2020, p. 92). In his notorious *Lezioni americane* (1988), Italo Calvino proposes language, literature and the book as a triad of ideas; while he first questions the fate of the book and literature in the post-industrial era, thus suggesting that they are closely linked, he then declares himself confident about the survival of literature as endowed with unique qualities, but does not explore the future of the book, maybe assuming it will either depend on that of literature, or be “entirely secondary and irrelevant, and consequently the latter able to survive and evolve intertwined with other forms and media” (Meschini, 2020, p. 92).

Digital Literature represents a transformative dimension of textual engagement, intertwining traditional literary practices with digital technologies to create new forms of narrative and interactivity. Understanding and promoting Digital Literature Literacy in today’s fast-evolving technological context is therefore crucial, encompassing not only the ability to read and interpret digital texts but also the competence to create and critically analyse them. This raises many significant questions, relating, in addition to the definition (if a definition can be agreed upon) of Digital Literature, to its connection to art and creativity, and, equally important, to roles, functions and responsibilities in teaching Digital Literature Literacy. As educators, we must reflect on our own competence in this area. Are we adequately prepared to guide our students through the complexities of Digital Literature? Are we able to consider and enhance different perspectives in the process of integrating Digital Literature into education, committing to prepare students for a world where digital literacy is increasingly essential? Addressing these questions is fundamental to grant research progress in this area, and is at the core of the objectives of new-developing investigation actions, such as the Erasmus Ka220 *DILECTINGS* project (*Digital Literature Educational Competences for Teachers: Intercultural iNclusive Good-practices for Second-language learning*), which aims to explore and expand the pedagogical approaches to Digital Literature purposes by promoting and scaling-up Digital Literature Literacy (DLL) and Literature Digital Reading (LDR) skills in European schools through achievement, assessment and exchange of specific digital competences in both educators and students.²

² See <https://dilectings.uniroma3.it/>

Additionally, the idea of Digital Literature being a creative work, a work of art according to some (as for Simanowski, 2010), opens further reflection on gender impact on both the creation, the publication, and the fruition processes it involves. Do gender perspectives condition the digital word so to consistently change the form and/or the perception of a Digital Literature product? Is the perception of a Digital Literature work affected by the fact that it is created by a man, a woman, or an AI?

To explore the concept of Digital Literature, understand its usefulness in teaching and learning (in particular concerning Second language (L2)/Foreign Language (FL) acquisition), and highlight the role of gender perspectives in its fruition, an analysis of the existing literature has been carried out within the aforementioned *DILECTINGS* project, closely following the guidelines provided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol (Page, McKenzie, Bossuyt et al., 2021).³

Literature research conducted on some of the main relevant databases such as ERIC and EBSCO, as well as queries proposed on Google Scholar, show that the predominant results when typing a string on “digital”, “literature”, and “gender” concern the gender digital gap and the need for bridging the digital divide among sexes, while references to the production and fruition of Digital Literature in a gender perspective are comparatively scarce. So far, no specific systematic review on Digital Literature and gender seems to have been carried out; many relevant studies have been published about gender and LGBTQ+ representation in digital texts (Brushwood Rose, 2009; Tso, 2023; Larson & Carter, 2023), some concerning the representation of gender in the digital media more than in Digital Literature (Popa & Gavrilu, 2015) and some focusing on the influence of platforms on the creation and diffusion of culture and cultural products — among which, of course, Digital

³ To the scopes and aims of the project, the review was carried out within a MA thesis in e-Learning and Media Education: *Il ruolo della letteratura digitale nel migliorare l'apprendimento delle lingue: Un'analisi sistematica delle strategie multimodali nell'acquisizione delle lingue straniere* (“The role of Digital Literature in improving language learning: a systematic analysis of the multimodal strategies in the acquisition of foreign languages”), currently under publication (Reggio, 2004). The corpus has been identified in fifty publications, selected according to inclusion and exclusion criteria established as follows:

- Inclusion Criteria: (a) Articles published between 2010 and 2023 (when the research was conducted); (b) Articles indexed in ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), EBSCO, Semantic Scholar, Scopus, and Google Scholar; (c) Experimental studies, case studies, innovative proposals, and grey materials; (d) Studies that promote sustainability through the use of technology; (e) Educational levels; (f) Geographical distribution surveys.
- Exclusion Criteria: Studies that did not present a direct contribution towards one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and Artificial Intelligence (AI), that did not propose relevant innovations, or that did not offer specific digital literary reading strategies for improving the learning of a Foreign Language (FL) or Second Language (SL) were excluded.

Databases consulted: BEI (British Education Index); EBSCO; ERIC (Education Resources Information Center); Scopus; OATD (Open Access Theses and Dissertations); Google Scholar, and Semantic Scholar.

Literature (McInroy, Craig, & Leung, 2019; Larson, 2020, & 2022; Poell, Nieborg, & Duffy, 2021; Myles, Duguay, & Flores Echaiz, 2023; Larson & Carter, 2023).⁴ Such studies have been therefore considered in this paper to focus on the evolution and characteristics of Digital Literature and its impact on readers' comprehension, learning and motivation, which allows to encompass various aspects, including the digital reading environment, as well as the peculiarities of texts and readers.

Digital Literature (DL) can be understood as a dynamic and interactive form of literature that involves the active participation of readers. It not only shapes and is shaped by the readers' imagination, but also enhances their capacity to hypothesize, predict, and view the world from diverse perspectives. As such, it fosters a deeper understanding of the contemporary context and encourages the expansion of learning and competences. The ELO, Electronic Literature Organization, founded in Chicago, Illinois, in 1999, stated in 2007 that digital, or electronic, literature "refers to works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer,"⁵ encompassing those works that possess significant literary qualities while utilizing the unique capabilities and contexts provided by standalone or networked computers.

Simon Rowberry (2020) explored the many definitions given to electronic and Digital Literature, reflecting on the juxtaposition of DL and print, on the correlated different issues posed by the nature of "digital", the types of "digital" and their evolution, as well as on the impermanent availability of DL due to "increased computational power of hardware predicted by Moore's Law," determining a "constant upgrade cycle that makes maintenance of old code difficult" (Rowberry, 2020, p. 321). In response to this frailty of DL, different attempts have been made; in particular, Dene Grigar and Stuart Moulthrop have been working to fight "the threatened obsolescence of key works from the first modern generation (or 'Golden Age') of digital writing," so to document and preserve electronic literature through their *Pathfinders* project and its series of "Traversals", video and audio recordings of demonstrations performed on historically appropriate platforms, with participation and commentary by the authors of the works (Moulthrop, Grigar, & Tabbi, 2017).

⁴ For a thorough analysis of the evolution and change in perspectives due to platformization, and on the way "new digital platforms [...] institutionalize new practices and promote field-wide legitimacy for new forms of content and new corporate structures", see in particular Larson & Carter (2023, pp. 3-4) on platformized cultural industries and isomorphism, where they "[...] identify similar processes at work in romance publishing, as e-books and indie publishing transformed the political economy of publishing".

⁵ See <https://eliterature.org/about/> [Last accessed: 27/05/2024].

Simon Groth further elaborated on the intention of Digital Literature to highlight innovation and creativity in storytelling specifically designed for digital media, and on how DL represents new directions in contemporary literary practices that are informed and influenced by technological advancements.⁶ He stressed that the difficulty on defining DL highly depends on the placement of boundaries: “The boundaries for Digital Literature are wide, much wider than for any other category [...]. There is no uniform approach to Digital Literature: no form, no medium, no genre, not even a consistent means for navigating through a story” (Groth, 2018). Moreover, perception of what is digital presents a challenge to the future of literary categories built around technology:

A myopic focus on the screen as the defining characteristic of Digital Literature could eventually lead to a cul-de-sac. Our society and technologies might be screen obsessed today, but the fluidity of digital media has been influencing storytelling long before we carried screens everywhere with us and will continue long after the next interface innovation comes along. (Ibid.)

This perspective underscores the transformative potential of Digital Literature in redefining how stories are created, shared, and experienced in the digital age.

Fabio De Vivo (2011) carried out a research where he interviewed various practitioners of Digital Literature, including teachers, experts, and passionate individuals, gathering a diverse array of insights into the nature of Digital Literature. According to L. B. from Spain, “Digital Literature is that specific kind of literature that is born within digital media and can only be consumed in these media, as it explores the creative possibilities of the medium.” M. M. from Ireland views it as “works with traditional literary merit created in new electronic or trans medial form(s),” while C. D. from Italy describes it as “a wide and various ambit of experimentation and production which conjugates writing and electronic media.” Similarly, M. T. from Ireland defines it as “literature that is produced using new media and presented using a new media format.” D. G. from Switzerland emphasizes the emergence of a new genre born in the web, comprising new forms like interactive reading, ergodic and hypertextual literature, electronic poetry, and collective novels. D. L. from the USA highlights that it is “literature that uses functions permitted by electronics (e.g., images, links, sound, animation, GIS locations) in a way fundamental to the meaning of the work.” Another perspective views e-Literature, Digital Literature, as a creative digital work employing some form of language, texts of narrative, or product communication, with ICT integral to both

⁶ Groth so defined DL in 2017 when invited onto local radio to talk about the QUT Digital Literature Award, at that time, a new category introduced to the Queensland Literary Awards. For further reading, see <https://thewritingplatform.com/2018/05/still-defining-digital-literature/> [Last accessed: 27/05/2024].

its creation and reception. It is also defined as a hypothesis of nonlinear literature, engaging in linguistic experimentation and virtual applications such as hypertext as literature that integrates computational resources in its production, incorporating the language of computing (algorithms) alongside the language of literature (signs). Ultimately, Digital Literature emerged as a mutant form of writing that fully engages with digital means, using one or more specific elements of the digital medium as essential components of the work.

In *Electronic Literature. New Horizons for the Literary* (2008) Katherine Hayles sketched the first comprehensive systematic review on the field of Digital Literature, a helpful tool to understand how electronic literature both grows under print tradition and requires new reading and interpretative strategies. Hayles grounds the approach in the dynamic which links humans and technology, demonstrating that a new mode of narration is emerging, significantly different from previous models. Her central argument posits that contemporary literature originates as electronic files, rendering print a specific mode of electronic text rather than a distinct medium. This phenomenon is evident in our daily experiences, as we increasingly digitize content on various devices such as laptops and computers, only printing these digital texts to disseminate our ideas on certain occasions.

2. Types of E-Literature (ELO)... To Be Continued

The expansive and innovative nature of Digital Literature takes different forms, reflecting its continuous evolution in response to technological advancements.

For many, as Kelly underlines (2018), the e-book represents a real change, especially from a publishing point of view. According to Meschini's analysis (2020), on the one side, it becomes apparent how the positive aspects it features, such as the possibility of knowing and sharing users' annotations, mainly refer to reading practices, and in particular to the new modes defined as social reading. On the other hand, the possibility of hypertexts to arbitrarily connect autonomous portions of text — with high information potential — seems to be at odds with the immersive pleasure of reading, the monosensory high definition, the warmth emanating from writing as a medium (McLuhan, 1964).

In Digital Literature, textual-typographical fixity and completeness are forsaken in favour of a constant dynamism which, deferring the process of interpretation, emphasizes form: a fundamental aspect of poetic language. Gino Roncaglia (2016) situates electronic poems within a long and noble tradition, illustrating a more mature and evolved use of the expressive medium starting from the technopaignia of the classical world, to Queneau, to *Tape Mark I*, the combinatorial poems by Nanni Balestrini (1962); a perspective that triggers

reflection on the nature and characteristics of works of art, and on the criteria applied to the categorization of such works in the literary (more in general, artistic) canon.

The main types of Digital Literature, as classified by the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) in the first decade of the XXI century, encompass a diverse and evolving range of forms. These include hypertext fiction and poetry, available both on and off the web, as well as kinetic poetry presented on various platforms such as Flash. Digital Literature also encompasses computer art installations that require viewer interaction to read or engage with the literary aspects of the work. This classification also features conversational characters, such as chatbot interactive fictions, which immerse users in interactive narrative experiences. Furthermore, Digital Literature may take the form of novels conveyed through e-mails, SMS messages, or blogs, modernizing the traditional epistolary novel format. Another category includes poems and stories generated by computers, which can be interactive or based on parameters set at the beginning, exemplified by computer-generated poetry, video poetry, and net poetry. MUVE literature, multi-user virtual environment interactive fictions, stands on its own, representing a unique convergence of multiple literary forms within digital spaces in which collaborative storytelling experiences are offered.

3. Digital Literature Literacy: Educational Implications

To effectively create and engage with Digital Literature (DL), both creators and users must possess a repertoire of technological skills, critical thinking abilities, and interpretive capacities, which may be grouped within the concept of Digital Literature Literacy (DLL). Developing Digital Literature Literacy involves using various methods and strategies that encourage individuals to interact with diverse digital texts, ranging from hypertext fiction to interactive narratives, while experimenting with different platforms and collaborating with others online. This process combines literary skills with ICT capabilities, so that the acquisition of DLL for the creation and fruition of DL not only exposes readers/consumers (and, to educational scopes, learners) to a wide array of literary forms, but also cultivates their ability to handle and analyze complex digital narratives through ICT tools, programs, and devices. For teachers and educators, developing DLL skills is nowadays fundamental to promote the same and further skills in their pupils' education, encompassing ICT, multi-language, and intercultural competences. In particular, in the class of L2/FL, such competences can be acquired, promoted and empowered through conscious and well-focused reading and storytelling activities, which can furthermore provide scaffolding to inclusion and diversity promotion.

Mike Matas offered an interesting perspective in *A next-generation digital book* (2011), a TED conference released in 2008 where he explored shapes, resources and ideas which a digital book can trigger: digital books can be used to read them, actually, to learn and also to explore the features that they are using in order to teach different things from what was originally meant; a book like the one he presented can be used to tackle topics such as sustainability, language itself, ICT, and so on and so forth.

Experimenting with different platforms allows to explore the assets and constraints of various digital mediums, fostering a deeper understanding of how storytelling can be shaped by digital technologies. Additionally, collaborating with others online provides opportunities for co-creation and collective interpretation, enriching the experience of Digital Literature by encouraging dialogue and collaboration within digital communities. Educators and teachers should consider this precious feature in their classroom, as it may help their learners feel a sense of community-belonging in their learning process, as well as it may provide real, authentic materials and challenges for them to work on.

Presenting a TED talk in 2018, Giovanna Di Rosario pondered the future of literature, particularly in the digital age, questioning whether pixels would become the new medium for storytelling. She defined e-texts as creations designed for digital devices such as computers, smartphones, and tablets. Di Rosario emphasized that Digital Literature blends various semiotic systems and media, incorporating not only linguistic texts but also images, sounds, and interactive elements. She cited *Liberty*, a ground-breaking work created in 2013 by a multidisciplinary team led by Alckmar dos Santos and Chico Marinho, as a prime example of this evolving genre.

In *Liberty* readers are transported into a three-dimensional space where they can navigate and interact with the text, akin to controlling a character in a video game. This immersive experience requires readers to actively engage with the text, sometimes being “really inventive to get what you need to do in order to keep reading” (Di Rosario, 2018), directing their navigation by using a combination of mouse and keyboard inputs. Di Rosario highlighted the concept of “e-Freedom”, where readers are challenged to interpret and process the text in inventive ways, mirroring their experience as participants in an interactive digital narrative. She noted a unique rhetorical device employed in *Liberty* known as ‘interfacial antagonism’, where the text subverts the reader’s expectations by producing unexpected outcomes. For instance, despite inviting readers to type freely in a designated space, the resulting text

diverges from their input, challenging notions of reader agency and freedom within Digital Literature.⁷

According to Di Rosario, “this text, besides telling you a story... mirrors your experience as a reader of an interactive, digital literary work” (ibid.), thus underscoring the evolving role of readers in shaping and interpreting digital narratives, and demonstrating how the aesthetics of reader engagement can vary and evolve within the realm of Digital Literature. At the same time, the machine flows produce an unstable text, in the sense that the same text cannot reappear exactly the same way to different readers, producing what may be called “aesthetics of the ephemeral” or “aesthetics of the flow”. Using such texts for education and teaching purposes may trigger self-reflective attitudes and certain self-awareness in the learners, providing them food for thought to potentially share and discuss within the classroom and outside. In the case of FL7SL learners, it also boosts metalinguistic reflection and use of vocabulary and structures in the target language.

The differences between printed texts and digital texts, though, also imply a difference in literacy when it comes to decoding the text, where poetry provides a case in point for comparison; as they may be either in print or digital, poetry texts may present similar features and may undergo similar analysis. The reader can focus on the words, the syntax, the grammar, the form, the features; but while in print the text presents a visual structure, a sort of “what-you-see-is-what-you-get”, digital texts add a behaviour to this: they can do different things under different conditions — words can move on the page on their own or at the mouse’s click, thus actively depending on the data and metadata of the text; digital media display a screen text, but at the same time different, contemporary media can affect the behaviour of the text, like images, audio, video, and the very code which is used to make the text digital (Flores, 2016). Dynamic, “behavioural” texts can be used to focus on cognitive processes, as well as on native language/L2/FL specifics, making learners experience some different effects of texts and the change in the form/meaning relation in a work of poetry as well as making them comment on their comprehension and emotional response, thus triggering critical thinking —.

⁷ “While reading online, we think that we are kind of free. We think it’s a democratic space. One of these things, the last one, is showing us that it’s not always like this. In this scene, the main protagonist is retaking control over his life. And you, the reader, are retaking control over the text. The text is suggesting to you that you can type whatever you want, in a special space. In fact, it doesn’t matter what kind of letter you try to type, the text that emerges is always another one. This is a new rhetorical figure, one of those literary aspects that we talked about before. It is called ‘interfacial antagonism’. It means that the text does exactly the opposite of what you, the reader, are expecting. You think you can type whatever you want. In fact, you cannot” (Di Rosario, 2018).

4. Gender and Digital Literature

4.1. How Gender Influences the Creation, Distribution, and Reception of Digital Literature

Gender plays a significant role in shaping the creation of Digital Literature, which may reflect and perpetuate societal norms and stereotypes related to gender. Female and non-binary authors often approach writing from perspectives influenced by their experiences with gender, which can manifest in themes, character development, and narrative style.⁸ Historically marginalized voices are increasingly finding platforms in digital spaces where traditional publishing barriers are less rigid.⁹ This shift has allowed for a richer diversity of stories and styles, highlighting issues such as gender identity, feminism, and intersectionality.¹⁰ However, these authors may also face challenges such as online harassment and bias, which can influence their creative output and the authenticity of their voices.

The distribution of Digital Literature is also impacted by gender dynamics. Social media and digital platforms have democratized the distribution process, allowing authors from various gender backgrounds to self-publish and reach global audiences (Poell, Nieborg, & Duffy, 2021; Larson, 2022). While many digital literary works challenge conventional notions of gender and sexuality, promoting empowerment and social change, algorithms and market biases can still favour works by male authors or those conforming to traditional gender norms, thus limiting visibility for others (Thompson, 2021; Myles, Duguay, & Flores Echaiz, 2023). Crowdfunding and subscription models (like the platform Patreon)¹¹ have emerged as alternative distribution channels, offering female and non-binary authors more control over their work and audience engagement. Despite these advancements, though, the struggle for equal representation and recognition in digital marketplaces continues (Tomasena, 2019).

⁸ Characters, narratives, and themes may reinforce traditional gender roles or challenge them. *The Book of Jezebel* is an interactive digital encyclopaedia that celebrates the achievements and contributions of women across various identities, including race, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability. By highlighting the intersectional experiences of women throughout history, the project seeks to challenge stereotypes and expand readers' understanding of gender and diversity.

⁹ The online platform Wattpad, for example, provides a space for amateur writers, including many young women and non-binary individuals, in which to share their stories and connect with readers around the world, who, through features such as comments, likes, and shares, can actively engage with and support diverse voices, contributing to a vibrant and inclusive literary community.

¹⁰ See *infra*, § 5.1.

¹¹ Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/it-IT>) is a popular internet platform among video producers, artists, podcast authors and other categories of users who need to publish their content online on a regular basis that allows content creators to receive donations directly from their fans, called "patrons", to finance their content.

Gender significantly affects the reception of Digital Literature, as readers' perceptions and critical reception are often influenced by the author's gender. Studies have shown that works by female and non-binary authors are frequently subjected to different standards of critique, with biases potentially affecting reviews, awards, and academic recognition (McInroy, Craig, & Leung, 2019). Furthermore, the themes and narratives explored by these authors may resonate differently with diverse audiences, often garnering passionate followings among readers who see their own experiences reflected in the literature, and sadly frequently generating open opposition in those who do not recognize themselves in the same system of values. This reception can create vibrant communities around digital texts but also highlights ongoing gender disparities in literary criticism and consumption (Larson, 2020).

4.2. Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Digital Texts, Including Issues of Stereotyping, Empowerment, and Subversion

Digital texts provide a unique platform for exploring and representing gender and sexuality, often pushing boundaries that traditional media may shy away from. Larson & Carter's study (2023, pp. 5-7 and following), for instance, demonstrates "how e-book publishing prompted what we call reverse isomorphism, where economic, technological, and normative pressures led large publishers to adopt structures and practices pioneered by tiny digital publishers, facilitating the rise of LGBTQ romance" (*italics in the source text*).¹² The anonymity and reach of the internet enable diverse voices to share their stories and perspectives, contributing to a more inclusive literary landscape. However, these representations still present many challenges, as issues of stereotyping, empowerment, and subversion frequently arise. Despite the potential for diversity, digital texts can perpetuate stereotypes related to gender and sexuality, stereotypes which oftentimes manifest through one-dimensional characters and clichéd narratives that reinforce traditional gender roles and heteronormativity. Female characters, for instance, may be depicted primarily as male characters' romantic interests or caregivers, or on the opposite as "more males than males", especially when dealing with high-position professionals, while LGBTQ+ characters might be reduced to their sexual orientation or gender identity without further character development

¹² According to the authors' research, "the rise of LGBTQ+ romance publishing at major publishers was inextricably tied to the rise of e-books and digital self-publishing. Specifically, major publishers underwent isomorphic processes that transformed their internal production practices and structures, making them more similar to indie and small presses" (2023, p. 8). They define the process of spread of practices and structures from peripheral to core players "reverse isomorphism," and underline how, by reducing costs and risks, the adoption of digital-first presses, no-advance policies, faster production times, and a changing relationship with print distributors and retailers facilitated the boom in LGBTQ+ romance from Big Five publishers (*ibid.*).

(Wang, 2009; Lepper, Stang-Rabrig, & McElvany, 2022).¹³ These simplistic portrayals can perpetuate harmful biases and limit the scope of representation in Digital Literature. Conversely, digital texts also serve as powerful tools for empowerment. They offer marginalized groups a platform to voice their experiences and challenge societal norms. Female and LGBTQ+ authors use digital spaces to write stories that celebrate their identities and advocate for social change through texts which feature strong, multifaceted characters who defy conventional stereotypes, providing readers with role models and narratives that reflect their own experiences (Hlalele & Brexa, 2015; Fung, 2017).¹⁴ This empowerment through storytelling can foster community and solidarity among readers and writers alike.

Digital Literature excels in subverting traditional norms of gender and sexuality, as authors experiment with narrative forms and genres to challenge and deconstruct established ideas (Hayles, 2008). For example, speculative fiction and fantasy genres are frequently used to envision societies with different gender dynamics or to explore fluidity in gender and sexual identity; by presenting alternative realities, these texts encourage readers to question and rethink their assumptions about gender and sexuality. Additionally, fan fiction communities often subvert mainstream media narratives by reimagining characters and relationships in ways that promote inclusivity and diversity.¹⁵

4.3. The Role of Gender in Shaping Reading Preferences, Online Communities, and Participation in Digital Literary Activities

Gender significantly influences reading preferences in Digital Literature. Studies have shown that women tend to read more fiction, particularly genres such as romance, mystery, and young adult fiction, while men often gravitate towards non-fiction, science fiction, and fantasy. These preferences can be shaped by social and cultural factors that influence how

¹³ Lepper, Stang-Rabrig and McElvany's study concludes that one possible explanation for boys' considerably lower interest in female-attributed texts "may stem from the perceived social pressure to conform to gender-specific expectations from family, peers, and teachers," so that "the stereotype that reading is a rather female activity might underlie boys' lower identification with reading and the more selective text-based interest" possibly implying that boys not conforming to gender-specific expectations might experience social sanctions from peers; for this reason, "social expectations and fear of exclusion could contribute to boys' lower text-based interest, specifically in rather female-attributed texts" (2022, p. 7).

¹⁴ The literary magazine *Strange Horizons* actively seeks to publish speculative fiction and poetry that challenges mainstream narratives and amplifies marginalized voices, including women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people of colour. By prioritizing diversity and inclusivity in its editorial process, the magazine aims at fostering a supportive environment for emerging authors to share their unique perspectives and experiences.

¹⁵ In the series of podcasts presenting the Center for Digital Narrative (CDN) at the University of Bergen they co-direct, Scott Rettberg and Jill Walker Rettberg discuss the main features by which digital texts may challenge the paradigm of narrative and influence the social frontiers of narration. See <https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/episode-1-introducing-the-center-for-digital-narrative-with-jill-walker-rettberg/> [Last accessed: 27/05/2024].

individuals relate to certain themes and narratives (Craig, 2019). For example, narratives exploring relationships and emotions may appeal more to female readers due to societal encouragement of emotional expressiveness in women. Meanwhile, male readers may be drawn to genres that align with traditional notions of masculinity, such as adventure and technical subjects (Jarvis, 2003). Digital platforms, with their vast and varied offerings, cater to these diverse preferences, allowing readers to explore their interests more freely.

Gender also plays a crucial role in the formation and dynamics of online literary communities. Female and non-binary readers and writers often form supportive networks that foster discussion, critique, and promotion of digital texts. These communities, such as those found on platforms like Goodreads, Wattpad, and Tumblr, can provide safe spaces for sharing and celebrating diverse literary voices. Gender influences the topics and themes discussed within these groups, with female and LGBTQ+ communities frequently focusing on issues of identity, representation, and social justice (Craig, 2019). However, these spaces are not immune to the broader societal issues of gender bias and discrimination, which can impact the inclusivity and safety of online interactions. Participation in digital literary activities is also shaped by gender. Women and non-binary individuals are often at the forefront of digital literary innovation, utilizing blogs, social media, and self-publishing platforms to share their work and engage with audiences. They are active participants in book clubs, writing workshops, and literary forums, contributing to a vibrant and dynamic literary culture online. These activities enable them to bypass traditional publishing gatekeepers and reach a global audience directly (Larson & Carter, 2023). However, gender disparities persist, as female and non-binary authors may face challenges such as online harassment and unequal recognition compared to their male counterparts. Despite these challenges, their active participation continues to drive the evolution of Digital Literature.

5. Perspectives

5.1. Digital Literature and Intersectionality

As aforementioned, digital platforms enable the voices of marginalized communities to be heard, fostering a richer and more inclusive literary landscape; on this wise DL allows authors and readers alike to explore how various aspects of identity influence the creation, distribution, and reception of literary works. By emphasizing the interconnected nature of these identities, Digital Literature offers precious opportunities to inquire into the intersections of gender with other social categories, highlighting alternate visions.

Digital Literature invites an intersectional approach to understanding and analyzing gender, emphasizing the interconnected nature of social identities, including gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability — a crucial approach for exploring the complex and many-sided experiences of individuals, as it recognizes that these social identities do not exist in isolation but intersect and influence one another in significant ways.¹⁶

An intersectional approach to analyzing gender in Digital Literature requires considering how factors such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geographical location intersect with gender to shape experiences of reading and writing. For example, the experiences of a queer woman of colour from a low-income background will differ markedly from those of a white, middle-class, cisgender man. These differences manifest in the themes explored in digital texts, the accessibility of digital platforms, and the ways in which audiences engage with these works (Hlalele & Brexa, 2015; Shishko, 2022).

Through the lens of intersectionality, Digital Literature can serve as a powerful tool for illuminating the varied experiences of individuals who cross multiple, intersecting social identities. It allows for the creation of narratives that reflect the complexity of real-world experiences, moving beyond simplistic or monolithic portrayals of gender; an inclusivity which enriches the digital literary canon and fosters a deeper understanding of the ways in which gender and other social categories interact. Furthermore, Digital Literature's accessibility and global reach mean that stories from diverse perspectives can gain visibility and traction in ways that traditional print media often hinder. This democratization of literary production and consumption allows for — and triggers — a broader array of voices to contribute to the cultural discourse, challenging dominant narratives and offering new insights into the human experience (Larson & Carter, 2023).

5.2. Gender Representation and Inclusion in Digital Literature

Gender representation and inclusion in Digital Literature are critical issues that encompass a range of ethical considerations: as Digital Literature continues to expand and evolve, it is essential to consider and address ethical questions such as cultural appropriation, misrepresentation, and the responsibility of authors and publishers regarding the promotion

¹⁶ The term “intersectionality” was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 to illustrate the experiences of African American women, highlighting how various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. The six core pillars of intersectionality are social inequality, intersecting power relations, social context, relationality, social justice, and complexity. See Crenshaw, Kimberle. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>

of diversity and equity; these concerns are paramount in ensuring that digital literary spaces are inclusive and respectful of all identities.

Cultural appropriation, also in Digital Literature, occurs when authors borrow elements from cultures other than their own without proper understanding or respect, often leading to misrepresentation. This attitude can perpetuate stereotypes and contribute to the erasure of marginalized voices. Misrepresentation, on the other hand, involves inaccurate or harmful portrayals of gender and other social identities; portrayals which, though sometimes sketched inadvertently, can reinforce existing biases and exclude authentic experiences from the narrative landscape.

Authors and publishers have a responsibility to promote diversity and equity in Digital Literature; they should engage in actively seeking out and uplifting underrepresented voices, ensuring that a wide range of perspectives are included in the literary discourse, a task which also requires a commitment to ethical storytelling practices that respect the identities and experiences of all individuals (Larson & Carter, 2023).

5.3. Best Practices for Ethical Storytelling and Collaboration

To address these ethical concerns, best practices for ethical storytelling and collaboration in digital literary projects have been developed, including the employment of sensitivity readers, cultural consultants, and the use of inclusive editorial processes (Gerhart, 2016).

Sensitivity readers are individuals who review manuscripts to ensure that representations of gender, race, sexuality, and other social identities are accurate and respectful. They provide valuable feedback to authors, helping to identify and rectify potential issues of misrepresentation or cultural appropriation. Cultural consultants serve a similar role, offering expertise on specific cultural contexts to enhance the authenticity and sensitivity of the narrative. Inclusive editorial processes involve assembling diverse editorial teams that can bring multiple perspectives to the review and publication process, to identify and address biases that may otherwise go unnoticed (Otmár, 2023).

Additionally, inclusive practices may include training for authors and editors on cultural competency and ethical storytelling, as well as the implementation of guidelines and standards that prioritize diversity and equity (ibid.). The European Union strongly promotes such best practices and attention in the projects it supports, demanding to all institutions involved quality assurance and gender respect in all phases of the actions.

By adopting these best practices, the digital literary community can work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable space for all voices. These efforts not only improve the quality and authenticity of Digital Literature, but also contribute to a broader cultural shift towards greater respect and understanding of diverse identities.

6. Conclusions (... So far)

Exploring Digital Literature and Digital Literature Literacy and reading through a gender lens, involves understanding how gender influences not only the content of digital texts but also the ways in which readers (and learners) engage with and interpret these texts. As Michael Coventry states, “Digital storytelling provides an effective pedagogy that enhances this process of stating and restating, forcing students to express themselves in the new language of multimedia” (2008, p. 205), as well as in all languages involved in the creation, comprehension and discussion of the text (native language, L2/FL, and social connotations of languages in terms of respect, inclusion, interculturality). This approach highlights the importance of considering gender dynamics in the development of digital literacy skills (Seok & DaCosta, 2017, p. 171) and the broader cultural implications of reading practice, especially as far as education stakeholders are concerned. As previously mentioned, women and men, as well as non-binary individuals, may gravitate towards different genres and types of Digital Literature, being influenced by and influencing cultural and societal expectations. Understanding these preferences can inform the creation of digital content that resonates with diverse audiences, as well as determine the introduction of some texts in the classroom, for teaching purposes. Moreover, examining how gender affects reading practices can reveal insights into the ways readers interpret and find meaning in digital texts. For example, female readers might seek out narratives that reflect their own experiences and struggles with gender identity, while male readers might be drawn to stories that explore themes of masculinity and power, and non-binary individuals may be interested in exploring texts dealing with LGBTQ+ related themes and perspectives (see *infra*, §4). The impact of gender on reader engagement is therefore a critical area of exploration, with some studies suggesting that women are more likely to participate in online literary communities and take part in social reading practices, in search of valuable spaces for discussion, critique, and support; communities that may foster a sense of belonging and shared identity among readers. By understanding the gendered dynamics of these spaces, we can better support and enhance readers’ engagement in Digital Literature and, in the educational context, promote more effective, motivating, inclusive, and respectful educational strategies.

Gender representation and inclusion in Digital Literature also require careful consideration of ethical issues and the adoption of best practices for ethical storytelling; through the use of sensitivity readers, cultural consultants, and inclusive editorial processes, authors and publishers can promote diversity and equity, ensuring that Digital Literature is a reflective and respectful space for all. Adopting an intersectional perspective in Digital Literature can help smoothing the transition towards a more inclusive canon, as it not only enriches our understanding of gender, but also broadens the scope of literary analysis to include a wider range of social identities and experiences. By embracing this complexity, Digital Literature can better reflect the diverse realities of its creators and readers, promoting a more inclusive and equitable literary landscape.

Gender plays a significant role in the development of digital literacy skills, too. Research indicates that there are differences in how individuals of different genders make use of technology and digital media (Wu, 2014; Campos & Scherer, 2024). For instance, women and girls may face societal barriers that limit their access to technology or discourage their interest in digital fields. Addressing these barriers is crucial for fostering digital literacy across all genders. Educational initiatives and digital literacy programs must be designed to be inclusive, encouraging participation from underrepresented genders and providing role models that challenge traditional gender norms. Besides, promoting gender equity in digital literary spaces requires ensuring that digital platforms are accessible and welcoming to all genders, and that they provide resources and support for female and non-binary writers, as well as actively challenge gender biases in literary criticism and publishing. Encouraging diverse voices and perspectives in Digital Literature enriches the literary landscape and helps to create a more equitable and inclusive cultural environment.

Exploring Digital Literature literacy and reading through a gender lens, especially in educational contexts, and in particular in L2/FL learning, allows a deeper understanding of the mechanism by which gender influences the creation, distribution, and reception of digital texts while enhancing different perspectives in the process of integrating Digital Literature into education. The main research findings in the *DILECTINGS* project, for instance, emphasize the importance of integrating Digital Literature into educational contexts, highlighting the myriad of benefits it brings, from improving engagement and accessibility to strengthening information and communication technology (ICT) skills. The research also distinguishes between native Digital Literature, created specifically for digital platforms, and adopted Digital Literature, i.e., traditional texts adapted for digital consumption. By exploiting the interactive and multimedia nature of Digital Literature, educators can offer

L2/FL learners a more active and contextual learning experience, thus accelerating their language acquisition journey. This approach benefits individual readers and writers, teachers and learners, contributing at the same time to a broader understanding of the complex interplay between gender and digital media. By considering gender dynamics in the development of digital literacy skills, understanding gendered reading practices and preferences, and promoting gender equity in digital literary spaces, we can foster a diverse, more equal, more inclusive literary culture.

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