

Homonormativity or marginality: the double pattern in LGTBIQ+ characters in TV series

JUAN-JOSÉ SÁNCHEZ SORIANO

Lecturer

Department of Journalism and Corporate Communication

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos

juanjose.sanchez@urjc.es

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4371-0099>

Paper received on 2 May 2023 and accepted on 7 July 2023

How to cite:

Sánchez-Soriano, J.-J. (2023). Homonormativity or marginality: the double pattern in LGTBIQ+ characters in TV series. *Quaderns del CAC*, 49, 53-69. doi: <https://doi.org/10.34810/qcac49id420682>

Abstract

In the last decade there has been an increase in the number of LGTBIQ+ characters in television series, both in linear channels and distribution platforms. This fact, together with the importance of the media and the social problems that this group has historically suffered, raises the objective of understanding the narrative patterns with which these LGTBIQ+ characters are constructed. For this reason, the research carried out a content analysis based on three levels: physical dimension, social dimension and psychic dimension. Thus, a random and representative sample of Western television series has been analysed: Euphoria; Looking; Orange is the New Black; Pose; Sense8; Shameless; Transparent; Élite; El Ministerio del Tiempo; Malaka; Merlí; Sapere Aude; Veneno; Vis a Vis and Vivir sin permiso. The results show, among others, the existence of two opposing narrative patterns, one that places these characters in marginal places, and a second that constructs them with homonormative profiles, with characters who have assimilated socially acceptable standards of heteronormativity. We conclude, therefore, by affirming that stereotypical constructions from other eras are still maintained alongside others of recent appearance.

Keywords

TV series; LGTBIQ+; representation; homonormativity; marginality

Resum

En l'última dècada s'ha produït un augment dels personatges LGTBIQ+ a les sèries de televisió, tant en cadenes lineals com en plataformes de distribució. Aquest fet, juntament amb la importància dels mitjans de comunicació i les problemàtiques socials que ha patit històricament aquest grup, planteja l'objectiu de conèixer els patrons narratius amb els quals són construïts aquests personatges LGTBIQ+. Per això, la recerca realitza una anàlisi de contingut basada en tres nivells: dimensió física, dimensió social i dimensió psíquica. Així, ha estat analitzada una mostra aleatòria i representativa de sèries de televisió occidentals: Euphoria; Looking; Orange is the New Black; Pose; Sense8; Shameless; Transparent; Élite; El Ministerio del Tiempo; Malaka; Merlí; Sapere Aude; Veneno; Vis a Vis, i Vivir sin permiso. Els resultats mostren, entre altres aspectes, l'existència de dos patrons narratius contraposats: un primer, que situa aquests personatges en llocs marginals, i un segon, que els construeix amb perfils homonormatius, és a dir, amb personatges que han assimilat estàndards acceptables socialment de l'heteronormativitat. Es conclou, per tant, afirmant que encara es mantenen construccions estereotipades d'altres èpoques al costat d'altres d'aparició recent.

Paraules clau

Sèries de televisió; LGTBIQ+; representació; homonormativitat; marginalitat.

1. Introduction

TV series, as cultural product, have increased exponentially in recent years (Rojas-Lamorena et al., 2019). This boost has been favoured by the emergence of new distribution and video-on-demand platforms (Higuera-Ruiz, Gómez-Pérez and Alberich-Pascual, 2018). This context has also been accompanied by an

increase in the quality of television series (Waldfoegel, 2017).

This new era of audiovisual growth, both in the number of fictional programmes on linear television channels and SVoD (*Subscription Video On Demand*) and in the forms of consumption, has led to an increase in the number of series with characters and plots from the LGTBIQ+ collective (lesbian, gay, trans, bisexual, intersex and other diverse sexual orientations or

identities, such as asexual or non-binary gender) (Monaghan, 2021). These fictional programmes have undergone a peculiar evolution, from the invisibility of characters due to censorship in countries such as Spain or the United States (Waggoner, 2018), to the present day, where there is explicit representation. In recent years, moreover, the narrative constructions of these characters have been based on numerous stereotypes, such as using LGBTIQ+ characters parodically or in a comical way to provoke laughter in the viewer (McLaughlin and Rodriguez, 2017).

In this sense, the representation of historically invisible collectives, such as LGBTIQ+, is of great importance on a social level, due to the role of the media as agents of socialisation (Sultan and Masood, 2020). This implies that representations in audiovisual media make invisible or show different realities (Ganter and Ortega, 2019) and generate social imaginaries on what the collective perceives about itself and the image that society has of these people's reality (Gilleard, 2018). Therefore, a distorted image is directly linked to negative social beliefs, as indicated by research such as that conducted by Yan (2019). In addition, recent analyses have focused on specific series, such as *Sense8* (Asante, Baig and Huang, 2019). However, more general studies are needed in order to analyse in depth the profiles with which LGBTIQ+ characters are being constructed in current and relevant television series in popular culture.

There are therefore two basic reasons for conducting this research. Firstly, it is based on the importance of minority representation, both in society in general and in the collective's self-image. This is especially important if we are talking about a collective that suffers a high degree of social problems, such as homophobic *bullying* (Moyano and Sánchez-Fuentes, 2020). Secondly, this research is based on the growth of LGBTIQ+ characters and plots in television series, on the appearance of phenomena such as *queerbaiting*, *pinkwashing* or homonormativity, and on the scarcity of specific and general studies on LGBTIQ+ characters. In this way, the research proposes a content analysis of a sample of contemporary television series, produced by both traditional channels and distribution platforms, which are representative of popular culture. The aim is to find out what they are like and which patterns (physical, personality, visibility of their sexual orientation, etc.) these narratives are using when constructing characters from this collective.

1.1 Evolution and trends of representation in TV series with LGBTIQ+ characters

LGBTIQ+ characters in television series have evolved differently depending on the geographical location in which they have been developed. In countries such as Russia, for example, such content is banned as "homosexual propaganda" and as harmful during childhood, as it goes against "traditional family values" (Tolkachev and Tolordava, 2020). On the other hand, in Western countries such as Spain, the United States, Portugal or Italy, there are certain specific and shared patterns (Richardson,

2022). There was an initial period in which LGBTIQ+ characters were censored on television and cinema screens, as they were considered amoral or outright dangerous. This coincided with dictatorships, such as that of Francisco Franco in Spain during the 1960s and 1970s (Melero-Salvador, 2014), and censorship regulations, such as the US Hays Code (Davies, 2016). In these decades, the only LGBTIQ+ representation possible was in two forms, as parodic characters or as villains, with a moralising purpose in both cases for the viewer (Bridges, 2018).

Thus, there was no increase in these characters until the end of the 1970s, represented with the usual stereotypes of previous decades and emphasising sick or criminal characters, though already including explicit LGBTIQ+ characters (Branchik and O'Leary, 2016). In the 1980s, on the other hand, these stereotypes were compounded by linking the homosexual character with the HIV virus, in the face of the pandemic that began at that time, which meant a new stigma for the community (Gross, 2001).

In the 1990s and 2000s, coinciding with several milestones, such as the removal of homosexuality from the list of mental illnesses by the WHO in 1990 and the equal marriage law in countries such as Spain and Canada in 2005, there was an increase in the number of LGBTIQ+ characters in Western *prime-time* television series (Monaghan, 2021). This is of particular interest, as it occurs in hit series such as *Grows The WB: 1998-2003* and *Aquí no hay quien viva* (Antena 3: 2003-2006), with characters that were recognisable to the majority of viewers, as they were watched by a large number of people, which allowed certain media stigmas to be broken (Crowley Webber, 2019).

In the 2010s, there was a large increase in the number of LGBTIQ+ characters in Western series, favoured by the arrival of distribution platforms such as Netflix and HBO (Marcos-Ramos and González-de-Garay, 2021), which have two important characteristics. Firstly, they are consumed in different parts of the world and come mostly, though not exclusively, from the United States (Gao et al., 2020). Secondly, they occupied a niche market requested by a section of the public (Shields, 2022), such as series with characters and plots from this collective.

Finally, the US association GLAAD, which analyses the representation of LGBTIQ+ characters in US TV series, highlights some current trends. Firstly, they claim that 2021 was the year with the highest number of characters from this collective in US history, with an increase in bisexual and racialised characters, and where the number of women and men, both cis and trans, were at a similar percentage for the first time. Secondly, and in contrast, they point out that there are still underrepresented realities, such as asexuality, non-binary trans people or people with disabilities (GLAAD, 2022). In the same vein, the ODA (Observatory of Diversity in Audiovisual Media) in Spain infers a null presence of asexual, non-binary, trans non-binary, intersex or non-normative physical characters (ODA, 2022).

1.2 New phenomena in the construction of LGBTIQ+ characters

The increase in LGBTIQ+ characters and plots has led to the appearance of new phenomena related to their representation in television series. On the one hand, with the aim of attracting a general audience, television series began to introduce characters whose narrative constructions resemble the traditional and habitual patterns of heterosexual characters, which is known as *homonormativity* (Sánchez-Soriano, 2022).

Homonormativity, therefore, by differentiating the “acceptable” from the “unacceptable”, provokes the rejection of certain realities of the collective, such as “being camp” or the representation of intersectionalities (Vanlee, 2019). Intersectionalities can be defined as characteristics that are at an unequal social level, such as gender, religion, racialised people, people with disabilities or people with a non-normative body, such as those who are overweight or obese (Al-Faham, Davis and Ernst, 2019). These people are therefore subjected to double discrimination, firstly because they belong to the collective and secondly because of this intersectionality.

On the other hand, and for profit, numerous audiovisual production companies have introduced the technique known as *pinkwashing* into their productions. This is a marketing strategy that consists of showing an apparent favourable position towards the collective solely for economic purposes (Hartal, 2020). This, applied to the audiovisual panorama, means that various productions have promoted the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ characters without this actually being implemented, or where they are reduced to mere anecdotes. The aim is not to lose the potential conservative audience, while attracting the LGBTIQ+ audience, but without showing real actions towards the collective, as analysed by Sánchez-Soriano and García-Jiménez’s (2020) research on Hollywood *blockbusters*.

Again, and as a business strategy, numerous television series have been partaking in the concept popularised under the term *queerbaiting*, which is defined as a way of insinuating, through subtext, a relationship between same-sex couples that is never explicitly stated or mentioned (Brennan, 2018). This has occurred in series such as *Sherlock* (BBC: 2010-2017), through elements such as the sexual tension between the protagonists. The aim of this technique is again to attract an LGBTIQ+ audience eager to see couples in which they can see themselves reflected (Anselmo, 2018).

Thus, most of these new phenomena that have appeared alongside the growth of fiction with LGBTIQ+ characters are related, to a greater or lesser extent, to strategies based on economic profitability under an “LGBTIQ+ friendly” guise, with the aim of attracting the potential LGBTIQ+ audience without losing a conservative niche market. This occurs under the paradigm of “Rainbow capitalism” (Barry and Drak, 2019), which aims to obtain economic benefits from the presumed greater economic capacity of a part of the homonormativised LGBTIQ+ collective, but which ultimately leaves out other realities that do not have this purchasing power.

2. Methodology

In order to fulfil the objectives of the research, to know the narrative patterns with which current LGBTIQ+ characters have been constructed, the methodology used was content analysis. It was chosen because it is a methodology that allows us, among other things, to analyse the basic components of communicative discourses through a systematised process (Neuendorf, 2017).

Television series released in recent years, from 2011 to the date of the research, December 2021, were thus selected, as this is the decade in which there has been a quantitative increase, in addition to the emergence of new concepts related to this matter. Western series were selected as they share the common patterns analysed in the theoretical framework and previous literature review. Therefore, series from Europe, in this case from Spain, and from the United States were chosen. The reason for choosing Spain is because it is the geographical location where the research was carried out, due to the extensive growth in the production of Spanish series in the last decade (Huerta-Floriano, 2020) and due to the establishment of this national fiction abroad, which makes it influential in other markets (Diego and Grandío-Pérez, 2018). The reason for choosing the United States is that it is the world’s leading cultural exponent, i.e. culture produced in the United States is widely consumed in other parts of the world, especially in the West (Gao et al., 2020).

In the selected series, the characters had to be protagonists or recurring secondary characters during the first season, with a relevant role from the pilot episode, and they had to have considerable success with audiences and critics. For this purpose, the IMDB (Internet Movie Database) website was chosen, the most important and best-known database worldwide on television series and other audiovisual products (Canet Centellas, Valero Navarro and Codina Bonilla, 2016). It was also decided that the series should have a minimum of 7.5 points out of 10, in order to obtain series that were relevant in popular culture and among critics due to the importance of their impact. The search date was December 2011 and the following filters were applied (see Table 1).

Table 1. Filters applied for sample selection

Title Type	TV Series
Release Date	2011 to now
User rating	7.5 to 10
Number of votes	Minimum of 15,000 votes
Genre	All
Countries	Spain/United States
Keywords	Gay, lesbian, bisexual; trans, intersex, queer, non binary, gender fluid; lgbt

Source: Own elaboration.

After applying these filters, the results showed 38 US series, eliminating another 10 that did not feature LGTBIQ+ characters from their first episode. With respect to Spanish series, 16 results were found. In this case, the *number of votes* category was removed due to the fact that these series had a lower number of votes than the American ones, due to their national production, although several of them are hits with international audiences, as in the case of *Élite* (Netflix: 2018-now). However, in these Spanish series, *other categories* were applied, including the minimum vote of 7.5 out of 10. Finally, seven Spanish television series and seven American series that met the chosen criteria were selected, so the final sample consisted of the following series (see Table 2).

The content analysis form used was based on an adaptation of the one proposed in the research by González-de-Garay, Marcos-Ramos and Portillo-Delgado (2020). It was divided into three levels (physical dimension, social dimension and psychological dimension) to analyse the patterns of the characters in depth. Firstly, the predominant type of physical representation in the selected sample was analysed (See Table 3).

Secondly, the cultural and social context was analysed (see Table 4).

Thirdly, the more internal variables were analysed (see Table 5).

Finally, after applying these three content analysis sheets to the selected characters in the sample, the results were obtained.

Table 2. Series and characters that make up the sample

Series	Platform	Year of initial broadcast	Character
<i>Euphoria</i>	HBO	2019	Rue
			Jules
<i>Looking</i>	HBO	2014	Patrick Murray
			Agustín Lanuez
			Dominic “Dom” Basaluzzo
<i>Orange is the New Black</i>	Netflix	2013	Piper Chapman
			Alex Vause
<i>Pose</i>	FX	2018	Angel
			Blanca Rodriguez-Evangelista
			Elektra Abundance
			Damon Richards
<i>Sense8</i>	Netflix	2015	Amanita “Neets” Caplan
			Nomi Marks
<i>Shameless</i>	Showtime	2011	Ian Gallagher
<i>Transparent</i>	Amazon Prime Video	2014	Maura Pfefferman
			Sarah Pfefferman
<i>Élite</i>	Netflix	2018	Ander Muñoz
			Omar Shanaa
<i>El Ministerio del Tiempo</i>	TVE/HBO	2015	Irene Larra Girón
<i>Malaka</i>	TVE	2019	Asunción Cortés “La Tota”
<i>Merlí: Sapere Aude</i>	Movistar+/Netflix	2019	Pol Rubio
<i>Veneno</i>	Atresplayer	2020	Cristina Ortiz “La Veneno”
			Valeria Vegas
<i>Vis a Vis</i>	Antena 3/Netflix	2015	Estefanía Kabila Silva “Rizos”
			Saray Vargas de Jesús
<i>Vivir sin permiso</i>	Telecinco/Netflix	2018	Alejandro Lamas
			Carlos Bandeira Moliner

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 3. Content Analysis (CA) fact sheet. Physical dimension

Variable	Category
Age	Childhood (0-11 years) Adolescence (12-25 years) Young adults (25-39 years) Mature adult (40-65 years) Older than 65 years old
Physical build	Slim (ectomorphs) Sturdy (endomorphs) Muscular (mesomorphs)
Gender expression	Masculine Feminine Androgynous

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 4. Content Analysis (CA) fact sheet. Social dimension

Variable	Categoria
Socio-economic status	High Middle Low
Cultural or educational level	High Middle Low
Profession	Doctor Student Teacher Actor/actress Other
Marital status	Single Single (in a stable relationship) Single in a relationship for money Married Domestic partnership Divorced - separated Widowed
Children	Yes No
Number of children	1 2 3 More than 3
Religion	Catholic Protestant Muslim Jewish Atheist Agnostic Other Not stated

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 5. Content Analysis (CA) fact sheet. Psychological dimension

Variable	Categoria
Personality	Extravertida Introvertida
Sexual or gender identity	Home cis Home trans Dona cis Dona trans Gènere no binari Agènere Altres
Sexual orientation	Gai Lesbiana Bisexual Asexual Altres
External acceptance of sexual orientation	Acceptada Refusada Ambdues No definida

Source: Own elaboration.

3. Results

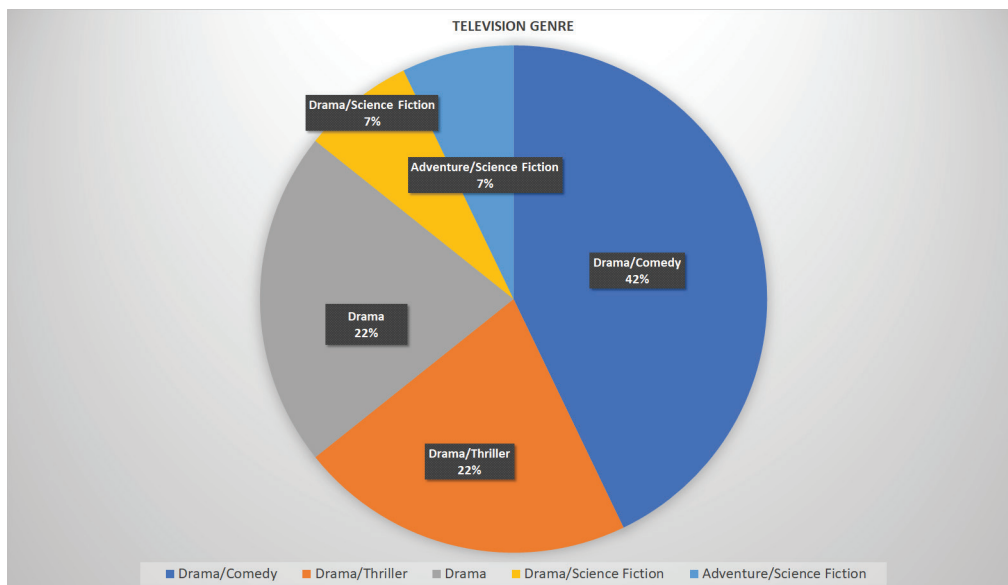
3.1 TV series genre

Most of the series in the sample fall into the hybrid genre known as *dramedy*, which combines drama and comedy plots. This is followed by pure drama and drama with *thriller*. Finally, drama with science fiction and series that combine adventure with science fiction. Thus, it can be observed that the majority of fictional programmes are framed within the comedy or dramatic genre in its different varieties and forms.

3.2 Physical dimension: age and physical understanding of LGBTIQ+ characters

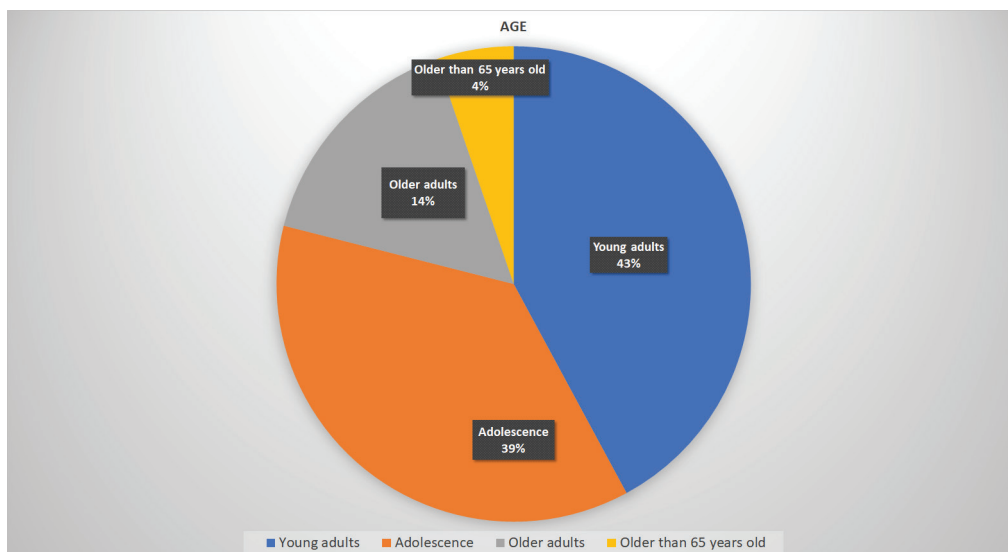
With regards to age, most of the characters analysed are in the *young adult* range between 25 and 39 years of age, as is the case, for example, with Patrick in *Looking*. There is a similar percentage of adolescents, aged between 12 and 25. Far removed from these are the *mature adults*, aged between 40 and 65, and exceptionally, with only one character found, characters over 65, with Maura in *Transparent*. The sample did not find any LGBTIQ+ characters in the childhood period,

Figure 1. LGBTIQ+ TV series genre



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 2. Age of LGBTIQ+ characters



Source: Own elaboration.

up to the age of 11. Therefore, it is clear that the majority of characters are between 12 and 39 years of age, with 82% of the total, and minimal or no presence of characters over 40 or under 11.

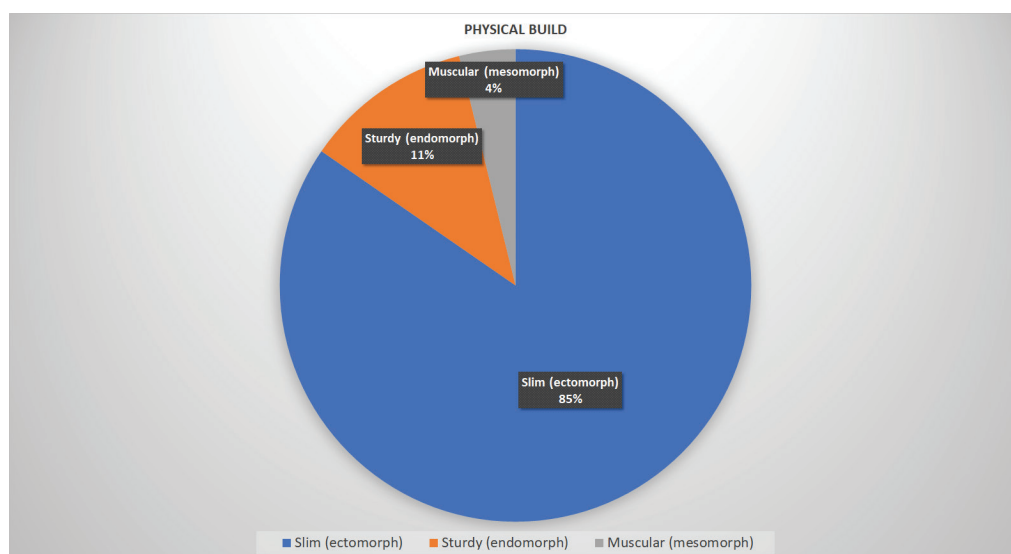
In relation to physical build, the vast majority of characters (90%) have a slim or muscular build, as in the case of Pol Rubio in *Merli: Sapere Aude*. In this sense, the only three exceptions of sturdy or overweight characters are found in a character over 65 years old, a character who has just been released from prison, where he has suffered addictions and physical abuse,

and in a marginal drug context. Therefore, this type of physique manifests itself as an element outside the normality of the rest of the characters.

3.3 Physical dimension: gender expression of LGTBIQ+ characters

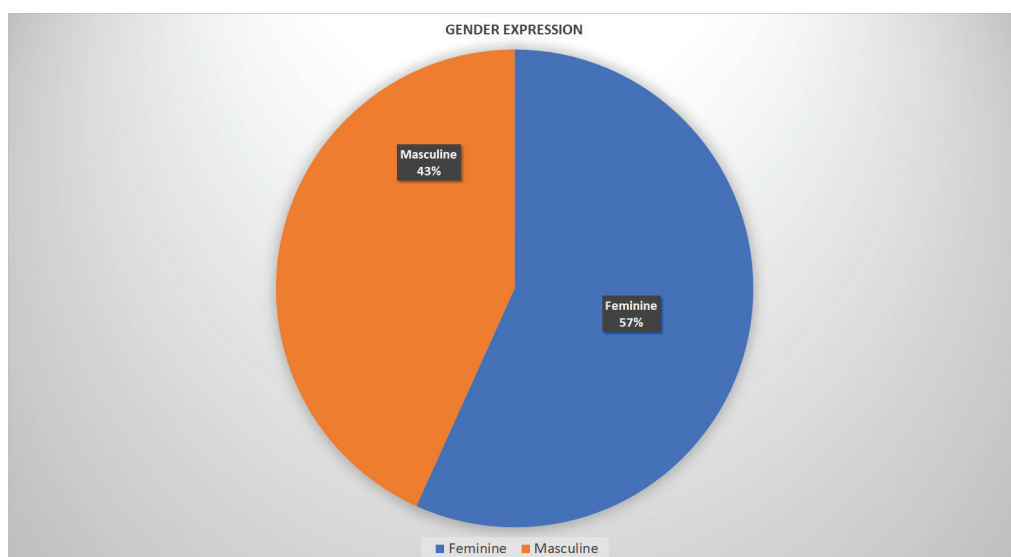
Gender expression is independent of the character's gender identity, which includes the diverse expression of trans or transitioning characters and the way they appear and behave in the world and in society. The results of the TV series analysed

Figure 3. Physical build of LGBTIQ+ characters



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 4. Gender expression of LGBTIQ+ characters



Source: Own elaboration.

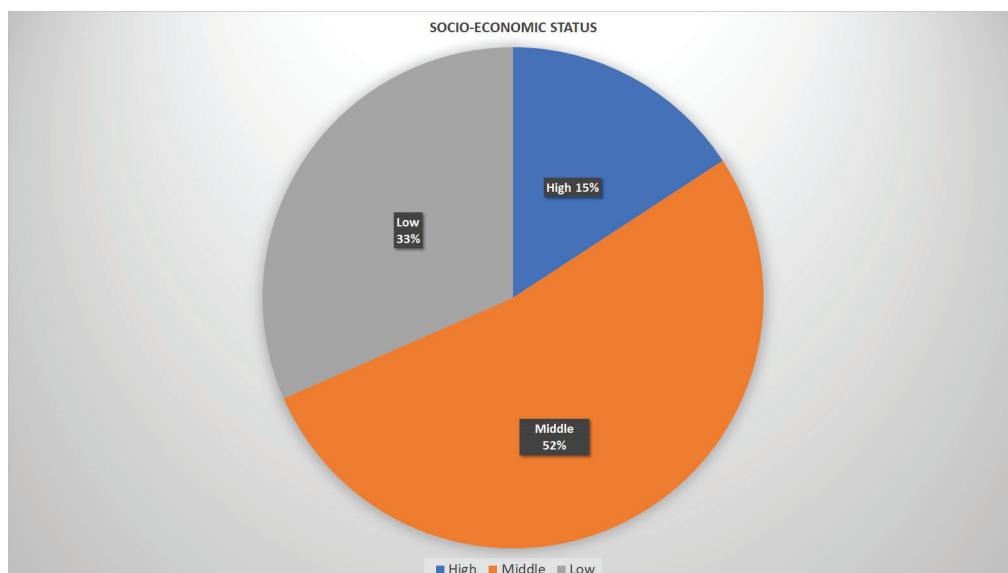
show that 57% of the characters have a female gender expression, while 43% are male and none are androgynous.

3.4 Social dimension: cultural and socio-economic status of LGTBIQ+ characters

With regards to socio-economic level, two out of three characters are in the medium-high socio-economic level. In contrast, 33% are in disadvantaged environments and situations, such as places dedicated to prostitution, drug trafficking or in neighbourhoods with a high percentage of poverty, as in the

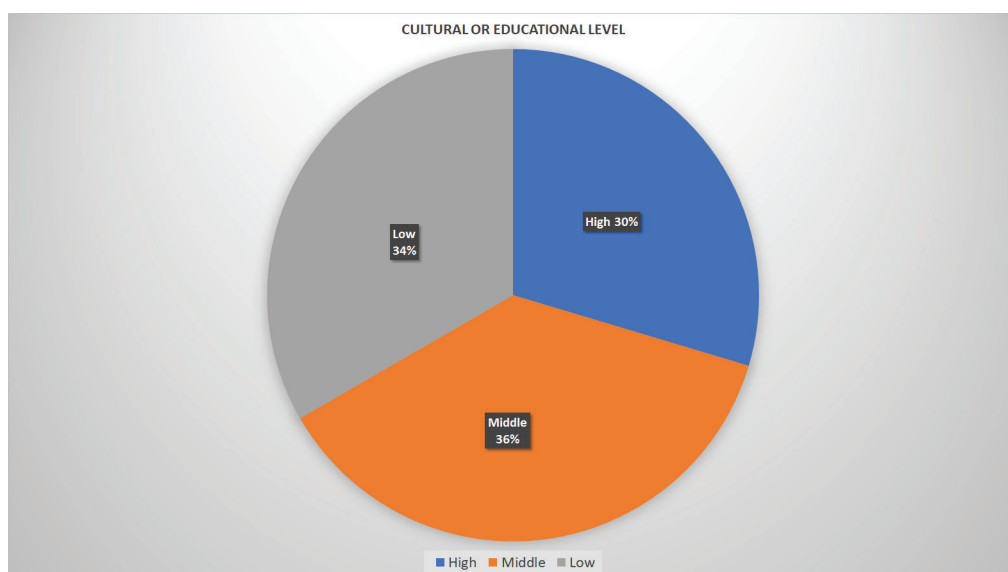
case of the series *Pose* or *Shameless*. A very similar pattern is found when analysing the cultural level. 36% of the characters analysed have an average cultural and/or educational level. One explanation for this is that a large number of the characters are adolescents and are not in a position to have completed higher education or university-level studies. 30% have university studies or similar, while again, one in three have a low level of education, i.e. they are characters that have not completed compulsory secondary education.

Figure 5. Socio-economic level of LGTBIQ+ characters



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 6. Socio-cultural level of LGTBIQ+ characters



Source: Own elaboration.

3.5 Social dimension: profession and marital status of LGBTIQ+ characters

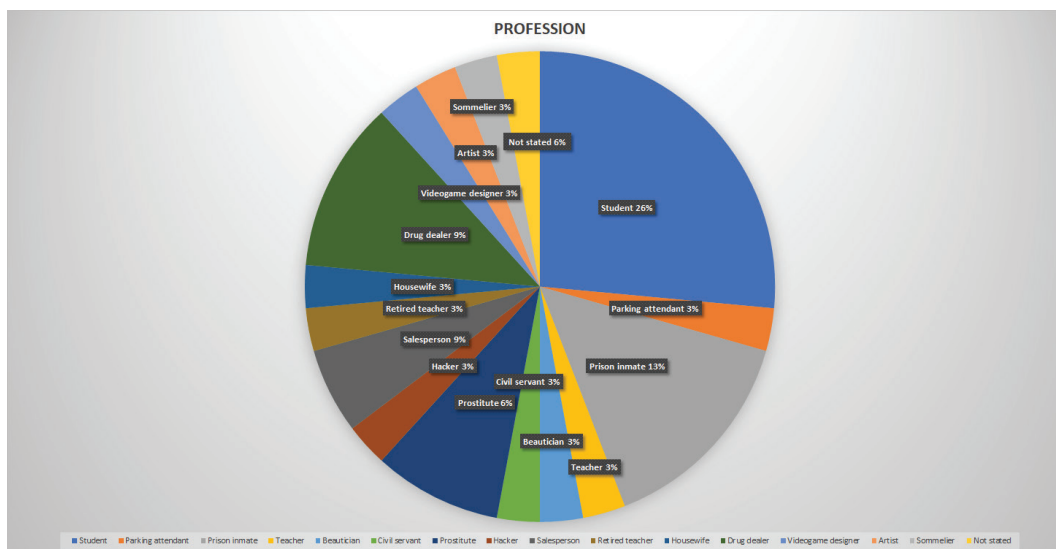
A large number of the characters are *students*, which is indicative of the high percentage who are in their teenage years. This is followed by professions with negative connotations, such as *prison inmates*, *drug dealers* and *prostitutes*, like in “La Veneno”. Lastly, there is a wide range of professions, such as *teacher*, *civil servant* or *videogame designer*. As such, we again find a double pattern in which the characters either have normalised professions in society or jobs linked to marginality or that are illegal.

With regards to marital status, more than half of the characters are single. They are followed, in order, by characters who are single but in an unstable relationship, single in a relationship for economic reasons, married, divorced and characters whose marital status is not stated.

3.6 Social dimension: offspring and number among LGBTIQ+ characters

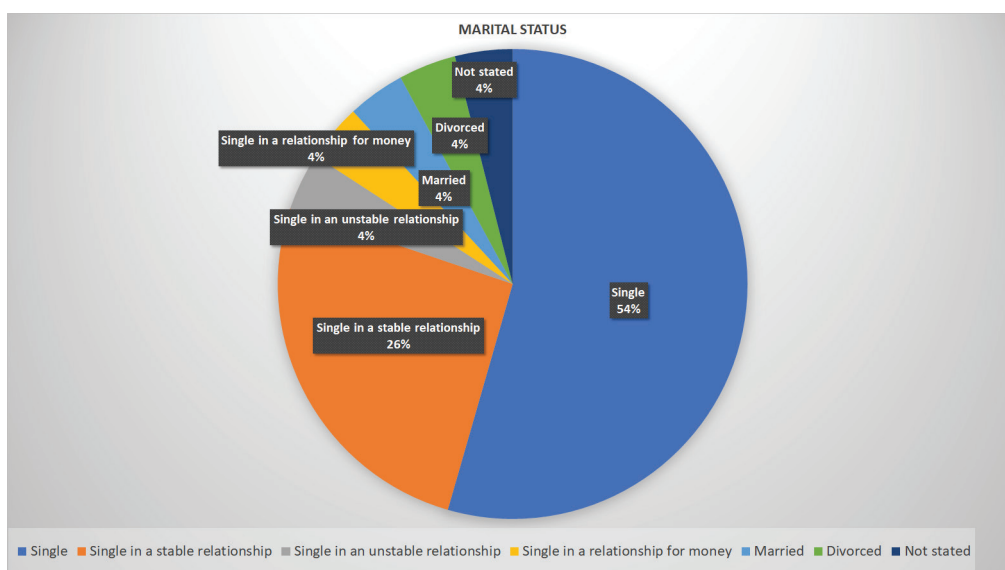
Continuing with the previous section, which covers the analysis of the family ties of LGBTIQ+ characters, the results show that the vast majority do not have offspring, either biologically or

Figure 7. Profession of LGBTIQ+ characters



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 8. Marital status of LGBTIQ+ characters



Source: Own elaboration.

through adoption. One possible explanation for this can be found in the age of the characters, as they are in the adolescent age bracket. Furthermore, this is related to the high percentage of characters who are not in an affective or loving relationship in the series analysed.

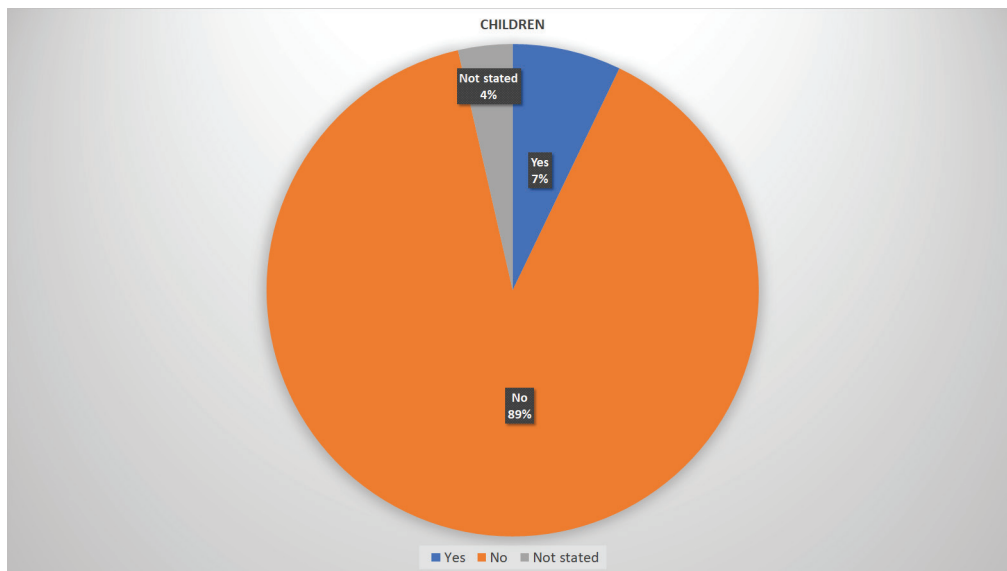
On the other hand, in relation to this, of the two parents found, one has two children and the other has three. In addition, the only two characters with children became parents when they did not identify as part of the LGBTIQ+ collective, as in the case of Maura and Sarah in *Transparent*. Therefore, it can be inferred that, in the sample analysed, once they identify as part

of the LGBTIQ+ collective, the characters do not have plots related to being fathers or mothers in their narrative arcs.

3.7 Social dimension: religion of LGBTIQ+ characters

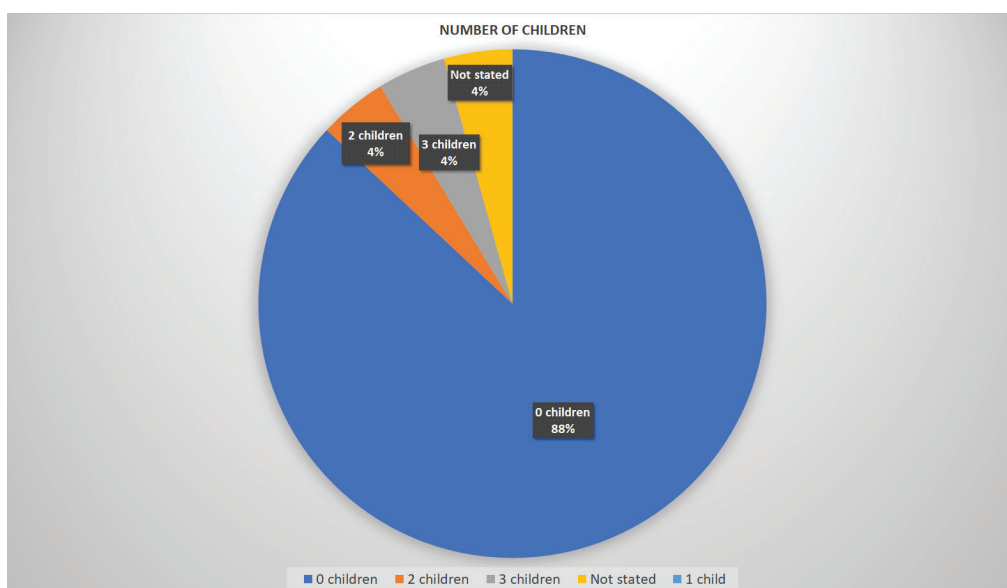
In 89% of the characters analysed, their religion is not stated, followed by 7% who self-identify as Jewish and 4%, represented by just one character, who does not expressly state their religion, as they live in a Muslim family, but no evidence was found regarding whether or not they belong to this religion. Therefore, the religion of the characters is not a major narrative or plot arc in most of the selected episodes, except in the case

Figure 9. Offspring of LGBTIQ+ characters



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 10. Number of sons and daughters of LGBTIQ+ characters



Source: Own elaboration.

of Omar's character, with a conservative Muslim family in *Élite*, which marks the concealment of his diverse sexual orientation throughout the season.

3.8 Psychological dimension: personality of LGTBIQ+ characters

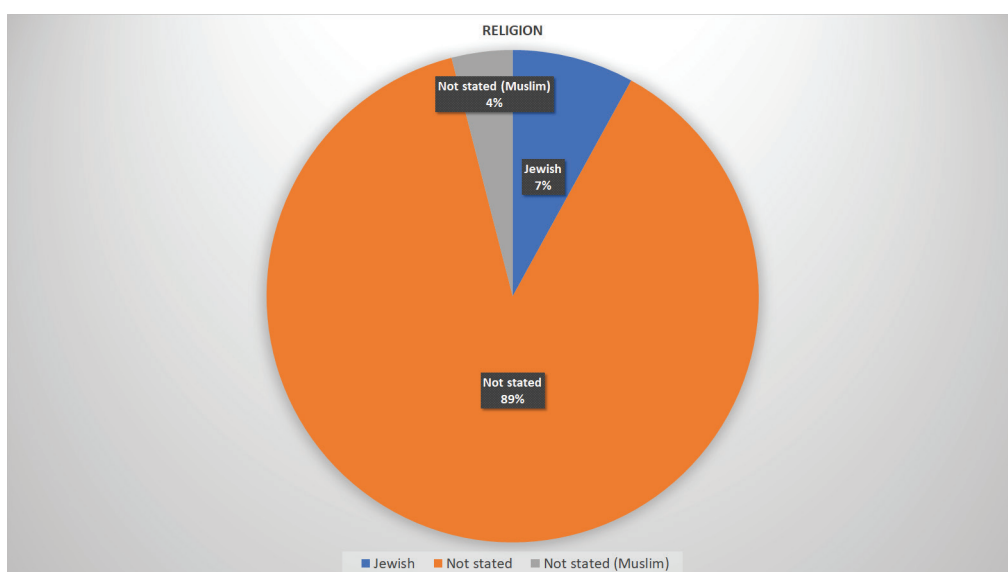
The majority of the characters analysed (67%) have an extrovert personality, i.e. with an inclination towards the outside world and social relations, openly expressing their emotions and feelings, such as Saray in *a Vis a Vis*. In contrast, 33% are

introverted, i.e. characters with a tendency towards their inner world and characterised by their more reserved nature, as in the case of Valeria in *Veneno*.

3.9 Psychological dimension: gender identity and sexual orientation of LGTBIQ+ characters

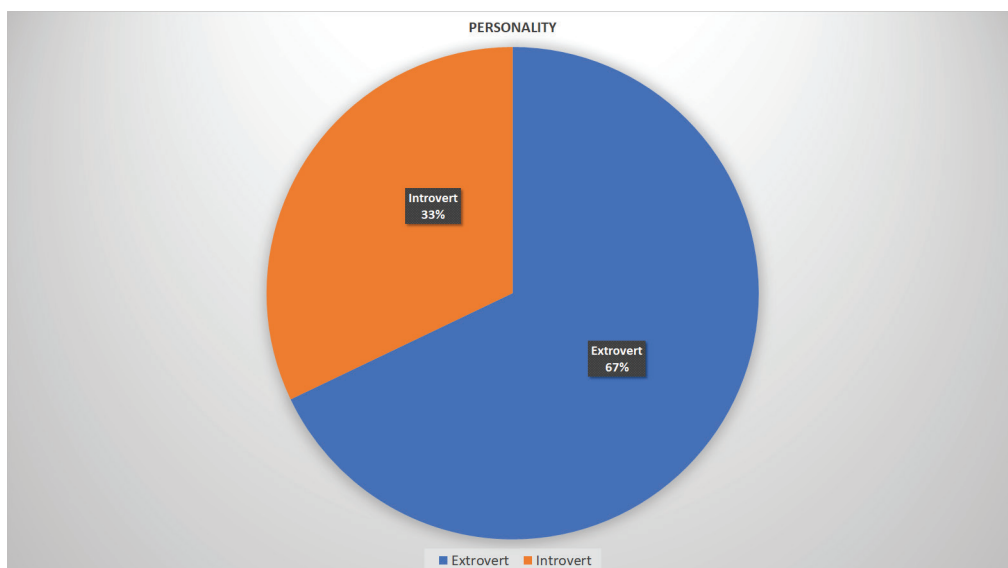
Firstly, related to gender identity, the results show that the highest percentage is found among cis men, i.e. male characters in which their biological sex coincides with their felt gender, such as Agustín in *Looking*, with 37% of the total. However,

Figure 11. Religion of LGTBIQ+ characters



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 12. Personality of LGTBIQ+ characters



Source: Own elaboration.

if we add cis women, such as Rue in *Euphoria*, with 33%, followed by trans women, such as Angel in *Pose*, with 30%, the results confirm a predominance of female characters. On the other hand, it is observed that, in the sample, none of the characters in the chapters analysed are part of the trans men or non-binary community.

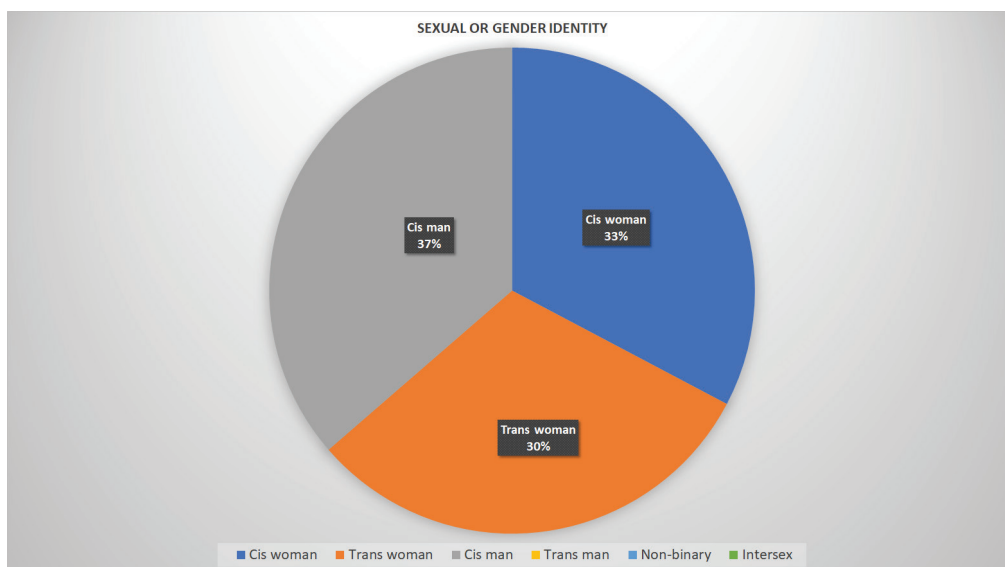
Secondly, the results show that 33% of the characters are classified as having a male homosexual sexual orientation. This is followed by lesbian women with 26%. Thirdly, 22% of the characters are classified as having a heterosexual sexual orientation. This characteristic, despite the fact that the show

is based on LGBTIQ+ characters, is due to the presence of trans gender identity characters, who therefore belonging to the collective, but have a heterosexual sexual orientation. In fourth place, with 19%, are bisexual characters. In last place, with no characters found, are asexuals.

3.10 Psychological dimension: external acceptance of sexual orientation

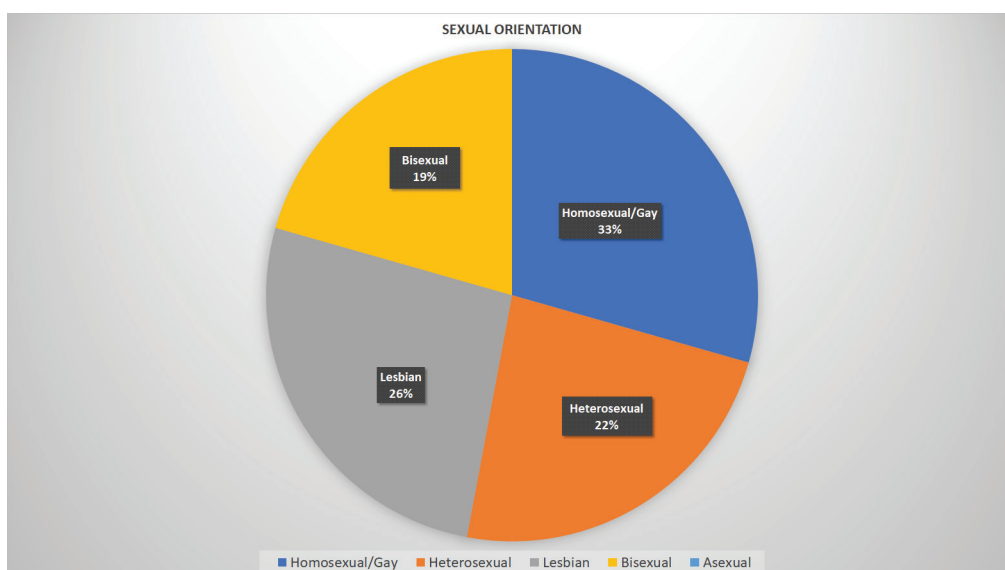
In more than half of the characters (52%), the external acceptance of sexual orientation by other people is not defined and is not clear in the analysed seasons. In second place

Figure 13. Gender identity of LGTBIQ+ characters

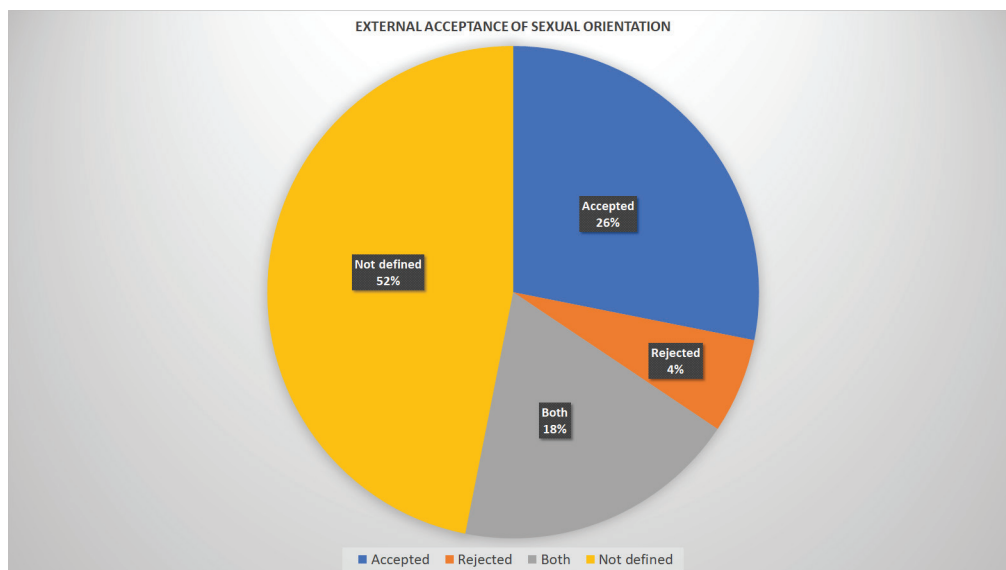


Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 14. Sexual orientation of LGTBIQ+ characters



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 15. External acceptance of sexual orientation

Source: Own elaboration.

(26%) are characters whose sexual orientation is accepted by all the characters with whom they share a plot in the fictional programme. In third place (18%) are characters whose sexual orientation is accepted by some of the other characters in the fictional programme and rejected by others. Lastly (4%) are the characters whose sexual orientation is rejected by all the characters who are aware of it. Thus, for 22%, sexual orientation remains a problem for some or all of the other characters, while it is only accepted for 26% and unknown for 52%.

4. Discussion

The results found can be related to research on LGBTIQ+ representation in serialised fiction. Firstly, these results allow us to discuss the use of homonormative patterns researched by authors such as Vanlee (2019), which link LGBTIQ+ characters to very specific characteristics that are well integrated in society. Thus, there is a wide use of adolescent or young adult characters, as well as slim or muscular ones. Also with regards to the age of the characters, these results are consistent with other studies that infer a considerable use of adolescent LGBTIQ+ characters (Robinson et al., 2014). On a socio-economic and cultural level, there is an equivalence between the number of characters with a medium/high socio-economic and cultural level (approximately three out of four characters), which is again associated with the homonormative pattern of LGBTIQ+ characters (Francis, 2021). However, one in three have a low socio-economic and cultural level, which infers, secondly, a persistence of old narrative constructions that associated characters from this collective with drug environments and with dark and evil characters (Bridges, 2018).

On the other hand, drama and comedy are the two genres most used currently in series that involve LGBTIQ+ characters and plots, as was the case in previous decades. It is important to note that both genres have their origins in the appearance of serialised fiction, during censorship in Western countries such as the United States or Spain, where sexual diversity was presented either as a censurable, evil or dramatic element, or as an element to provoke laughter in the viewer. These two representations continued in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, with a large percentage of fictional programmes in which coming out, social acceptance or comic relief were the main plot of the LGBTIQ+ character (Branchik and O'Leary, 2016); Bridges, 2018).

With regards to gender identity, the results are along the same lines as those shown by the GLAAD (2022) and ODA (2022) reports in relation to non-binary characters or trans men, confirming their scarce presence. In relation to trans women, the results are in line with the GLAAD (2022) report, which infers an increase of these characters, but not with the ODA (2022) report, which, on the contrary, observes a decrease, but a better qualitative representation of these characters. In this sense, gender expression, which is mostly female, is in line with the US GLAAD report (2022), which infers an increase of female characters in TV series in the last year, setting a new record, although the percentage of this research is higher than GLAAD's results (57% vs 47%). However, the ODA (2022) report, the Spanish counterpart to GLAAD, points to a decrease in female characters this year, with 44.2% in 2021.

On sexual orientation, both the GLAAD (2022) and ODA (2022) reports show an increase of bisexual characters and a lack of asexual characters in current serialised fiction, a fact that is demonstrated in both the report and the results found. With

regards to the external acceptance of this sexual orientation, the fact that it is not accepted by the majority of characters reinforces the idea found in similar research that diverse sexual orientations are not naturally integrated in current television series, with the exception of characters with a homonormative construction (Kerrigan, 2020), who have assimilated socially accepted patterns of their heterosexual counterparts.

It is also possible to observe that the majority of these analysed characters are not in an affective relationship of any kind with other people, and that these characters without a stable partner usually have affective/sexual relationships with a large number of characters. This causes, as research linked to this aspect has analysed, LGBTIQ+ people to be associated with more promiscuous behaviour than their cissexual counterparts (Villanueva-Baselga, 2021). In this respect, the fact that LGBTIQ+ characters do not have affective relationships, as is the case with most cissexual characters, places them in a different symbolic position and sows the seed of distorted social imaginaries about them. As such, research based on analyses of family ties in LGBTIQ+ characters verifies these results and infers that LGBTIQ+ characters tend not to have family ties and that they are more likely to create families, not in a biological or legal sense, but in an affective sense, with other LGBTIQ+ characters or with people who are related to them (Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan, 2016).

Regarding the personality of the characters, other research confirms the existence of the double and contrasting pattern of the extrovert LGBTIQ+ character, usually associated with histrionics or “being camp”, as opposed to the introvert LGBTIQ+ character, who tries to go unnoticed (Ramírez Alvarado and Cobo Durán, 2013). Finally, it is worth noting that religion is not a differential characteristic nor has it been habitually used in the narrative plots of characters in recent years, as similar research focusing on characters in Spanish television series on SVoD platforms, such as that carried out by Marcos-Ramos and González-de-Garay (2021), has shown.

5. Conclusions

The increase in the number of LGBTIQ+ characters in current Western television series is clear, as is the evolution of their representation, as there has been a journey from an initial invisibility to a more explicit presence in serialised fiction. However, due to the media’s socialisation capacity, if this representation is distorted, it has negative effects both on the self-conception, identity and self-esteem of LGBTIQ+ people, as well as on the image society has of them. We therefore understand a distorted representation as one in which sexual diversities are presented with traditional and recurrent stereotypes in the audiovisual panorama: drug addiction, promiscuity, HIV, etc., and which, therefore, does not allow for a more integrated representation in which a greater variety of arcs and diverse narrative constructions about these characters are shown.

Moreover, it is not possible to know whether this increase is due to a predisposition of solidarity on the part of the production companies or to a strategy of *pinkwashing* as an economic lure on their part, as they are aware that part of their audience is eager to see these realities captured in their narratives. However, in the fictional programmes analysed, it is not possible to speak of *queerbaiting*, as all of the analysed characters have been explicitly from the collective.

In this sense, the existence of a contrasting double pattern was observed in the LGBTIQ+ characters examined, which is a contribution of this research. On the one hand, a pattern that links these characters to environments of exclusion and poverty, with lives in slums, social rejection or involvement in prostitution, among others, where the characters usually find themselves isolated from the rest of cissexual society. This pattern of marginality was found both among trans characters, such as in the *Pose* series and among cis characters, such as Ian in *Shameless* or “La Tota” in *Malaka*. On the other hand, there is a homonormative pattern, in which LGBTIQ+ characters have assimilated socioculturally valued characteristics of heteronormativity. These include belonging to the upper-middle class both culturally and educationally, being young, having a slim or muscular physique, or being in a recognised profession in society, such as a university lecturer. These homonormative characters, unlike the former, do integrate naturally into the rest of the plots.

Thus, the problem with these two patterns lies in the fact that the first one continues to uphold distorted social imaginaries about the LGBTIQ+ collective, linking them to marginal places, prostitution and drugs. And the second one generates precepts about which LGBTIQ+ characters are acceptable and which are not. In addition, it makes realities of the collective invisible or eliminates them, such as lesbians or LGBTIQ+ characters with disabilities or that are overweight, making it difficult to understand these identities. In this respect, there is an absence of asexual or non-binary people in the analysed series, and this is reaffirmed by similar research and reports, such as by the ODA or GLAAD, which represents a challenge for the audiovisual industry, making it necessary to include more diverse identities and orientations that cannot be found in current series.

For future research, on the one hand, it is proposed to extend the analysed sample to include a larger number of television series or countries, which may be a limitation of this research. However, the purpose of this study was to find trends in the patterns of representation and not to carry out an exhaustive analysis of all existing series, due to the large number of series. On the other hand, multidisciplinary studies are proposed to analyse the psychological effects of this stereotypical representation among LGBTIQ+ and cisheterosexual audiences.

In this way, the analysed television series continue to present historical and distorted patterns from other eras. These include the fact that diverse sexual orientation continues to be a problem for a considerable percentage of characters in fiction, or that the characters are not associated with family ties or offspring, which

on many occasions relates LGBTIQ+ characters to promiscuous behaviour, presenting them in an unequal way to their cissexual counterparts. However, this is combined with a certain tendency towards greater integration of LGBTIQ+ characters, but only with the homonormative characteristics analysed, thus presenting models of what the characters should or should not be like in order to be optimally integrated in the context of the series. In this way, this integration only in environments and with specific characteristics does not necessarily imply a greater naturalisation of these realities, which undoubtedly, and due to the role of the audiovisual sector as a creator of social imaginaries, has implications for the reality of both LGBTIQ+ people themselves and the conception of the rest of society.

Therefore, this research raises several shortfalls in representation, which should be taken into account during the process of constructing characters of the collective in television series. The aim is to improve their creation in order to achieve better LGBTIQ+ media representation and improve social imaginaries about them.

Note

This research has been funded by the contract FPU15/04411 of the Ministerio de Universidades of Spain. He has won the first prize of the XXXIV CAC Awards for research in audiovisual communication.

References

- Al-Faham, H., Davis, A. M. & Ernst, R. (2019). Intersectionality: From theory to practice. *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 15(1), 247-265. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-101518-042942>
- Anselmo, D. W. (2018). Gender and Queer Fan Labor on Tumblr: The Case of BBC's Sherlock. *Feminist Media Histories*, 4(1), 84-114. <https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2018.4.1.84>
- Asante, G., Baig, N. & Huang, S. (2019). (De)politicized pleasures and the construction of (white) queer utopia in Netflix's Sense8. *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture*, 4(3), 319-334. https://doi.org/10.1386/qsmcpc_00015_1
- Barry, B. & Drak, D. (2019). Intersectional Interventions into Queer and Trans Liberation: Youth Resistance Against Right-Wing Populism Through Fashion Hacking. *Fashion Theory*, 23(6), 679-709. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2019.1657260>
- Branchik, B.J. & O'Leary, B. (2016). Funny, scary, dead: Negative depictions of male homosexuality in American advertising. *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, 8(4), 524-544. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JHRM-07-2015-0027>
- Brennan, J. (2018). Queerbaiting: The 'playful' possibilities of homoeroticism. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 21(2), 189-206. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877916631050>
- Bridges, E. (2018). A genealogy of queerbaiting: Legal codes, production codes, 'bury your gays' and 'The 100 mess'. *The Journal of Fandom Studies*, 6(2), 115-132. https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs.6.2.115_1
- Canet Centellas, F. J., Valero Navarro, M. A. & Codina Bonilla, L. (2016). Quantitative approaches for evaluating the influence of films using the IMDb database. *Communication & Society*, 29(2), 151-172. <https://doi.org/10.15581/003.29.2.151-172>
- Crowley Webber, E. (2019). "The Liberatory Potential of Dawson's Creek: Panicked Reactions to Teen Sex and Television in 1990s US Culture. *The Velvet Light Trap*, (84), 50-63. <https://doi.org/10.7560/VLT8405>
- Davies, S. P. (2016). *Out at the Movies: A History of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transexual and Queer Cinema*. Oldcastle Books.
- Diego, P. & Grandío-Pérez, M. D. M. (2018). El asentamiento de la ficción seriada española en el extranjero (2005-2017). El caso de la adaptación norteamericana de Los misterios de Laura desde el punto de vista de sus creadores. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, (73), 828-844. DOI: [10.4185/RLCS-2018-1284en](https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2018-1284en)
- Francis, I. (2021). Homonormativity and the queer love story in *Love, Simon* (2018) and *Happiest Season* (2020). *Women's Studies Journal*, 35(1), 80-93. <https://bit.ly/3Q2tyfg>
- Ganter, S. A. & Ortega, F. (2019). The invisibility of Latin American scholarship in European media and communication studies: Challenges and opportunities of de-westernization and academic cosmopolitanism. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 68-91. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/8449>
- Gao, W., Ji, L., Liu, Y. & Sun, Q. (2020). Branding cultural products in international markets: A study of hollywood movies in China. *Journal of Marketing*, 84(3), 86-105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242920912704>
- Gilleard, C. (2018). From collective representations to social imaginaries: How society represents itself to itself. *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 5(3), 320-340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2017.1409130>
- GLAAD (2022). Where we are on TV 2021–2022. GLAAD. <https://www.glaad.org/whereweareontv21>
- González-de-Garay, B., Marcos-Ramos, M. & Portillo-Delgado, C. (2020). Gender representation in Spanish prime-time TV series. *Feminist Media Studies*, 20(3), 414-433. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1593875>
- Gross, L. (2001). *Up from invisibility: Lesbians, gay men, and the media in America*. Columbia University Press.

- Hartal, G. (2020). Touring and obscuring: How sensual, embodied and haptic gay touristic practices construct the geopolitics of pinkwashing. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 1-19.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2020.1821391>
- Hermann-Wilmarth, J. M. & Ryan, C. L. (2016). Queering chapter books with LGBT characters for young readers: Recognizing and complicating representations of homonormativity. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 37(6), 846-866.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2014.940234>
- Higuera-Ruiz, M. J., Gómez-Pérez, F. J. & Alberich-Pascual, J. (2018). Historical review and contemporary characterization of showrunner as professional profile in TV series production: Traits, skills, competences, and style. *Communication & Society*, 31(1), 91-106.
<https://doi.org/10.15581/003.31.35721>
- Huerta-Florian, M.A. (2020). *Revolución seriada: El gran cambio de la ficción televisiva en España*. Tirant lo Blanch.
- Kerrigan, P. (2020). After Marriage: The assimilation, representation, and diversification of LGBTQ lives on Irish television. *Television & New Media*, 22(1), 47-64.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476420976122>
- Marcos-Ramos, M. & González-de-Garay, B. (2021). New Feminist Studies in Audiovisual Industries| Gender Representation in Subscription Video-On-Demand Spanish TV Series. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 581-604.
<https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/15855>
- McLaughlin, B. & Rodriguez, N. S. (2017). Identifying with a stereotype: The divergent effects of exposure to homosexual television characters. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 64(9), 1196-1213.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2016.1242335>
- Melero Salvador, A. (2014). The representation of homosexuality in the cinema of Franco's dictatorship. *ZER Revista de Estudios de Comunicación*, 19(36), 189-204.
<https://www.ehu.es/ojs/index.php/Zer/article/view/13500>
- Monaghan, W. (2021). Post-gay television: LGBTQ representation and the negotiation of 'normal' in MTV's Faking It. *Media, Culture & Society*, 43(3), 428-443.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720957553>
- Moyano, N. & Sánchez-Fuentes, M.D.M. (2020). Homophobic bullying at schools: A systematic review of research, prevalence, school-related predictors and consequences. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 53, 101441.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2020.101441>
- Neuendorf, K. A. (2017). *The content analysis guidebook*. Sage.
- ODA (2022). *Informe 2021 del Observatorio de la Diversidad en los Medios Audiovisuales*. ODA.
http://oda.org.es/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/InformeODA2022_0011.pdf
- Ramírez Alvarado, M. D. M. & Cobo Durán, S. (2013). La ficción gay-friendly en las series de televisión españolas. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, (19), 213-235.
<https://bit.ly/3yVLP50>
- Richardson, D. (2021). Queer Bandits and Partisans: Reimagining Male Homosexuality in Early Post-War Italy. *Italian Studies*, 77(1), 65-79.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00751634.2021.1917160>
- Robinson, K. H., Bansel, P., Denson, N., Ovenden, G. & Davies, C. (2014). *Growing up queer: Issues facing young Australians who are gender variant and sexuality diverse*. University of Western Sydney.
- Rojas-Lamorena, Á. J., Alcántara-Pilar, J. M., Sánchez-Duarte, I. M. & Rodríguez-López, M. E. (2019). The effect of spectators' cultural values and their involvement on the attitude towards the contents of the television series. *Journal of Spatial and Organizational Dynamics*, 7(1), 53-66.
<https://www.jsod-cieo.net/journal/index.php/jsod/article/view/173>
- Sánchez-Soriano, J. J. & García-Jiménez, L. (2020). The media construction of LGBT+ characters in Hollywood blockbuster movies. The use of pinkwashing and queerbaiting. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, (77), 95-115.
<https://www.doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2020-1451>
- Sánchez-Soriano, J. J. (2022). Representación del colectivo LGBT+ en la ficción televisiva española contemporánea (2015-2020). *Comunicación y Sociedad*, 1-23.
<https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2022.8307>
- Shields, A. (2022). Streaming Giants Carve New Paths in India: The Rise of Female Production, Content, and Consumption. *Studies in World Cinema*, 1(aop), 1-22.
<https://bit.ly/3n6Dgml>
- Sultan, R. S. & Masood, F. B. (2020). Portrayals of Love, Romance & Sexuality in Animated Films for Children A Content Analysis of Animated Films Released in 2018. *Journal of Mass Communication*, 23.
<https://doi.org/10.46568/jmcd.v23i1.113>
- Tolkachev, D. & Tolordava, T. (2020). Shared past, different future? Russian and Georgian authorities' discourse concerning homosexuality. *Sexuality & Culture*, 24(2), 447-464.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-019-09688-2>
- Vanlee, F. (2019). Acknowledging/denying LGBT+ difference: Understanding homonormativity and LGBT+ homogeneity in Flemish TV fiction through production research. *European Journal of Communication*, 34(5), 520-534.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323119874250>
- Villanueva-Baselga, S. V. (2021). HIV-related stigma in the European cinema: Conflictive representations of a cultural trauma. In: C. M. Scarcelli, D. Chronaki, S. D. Vuyst & S. Villanueva-Baselga (Eds.), *Gender and Sexuality in the European Media: Exploring Different*

Contexts Through Conceptualisations of Age (73-84).
Routledge.

Waggoner, E. B. (2018). Bury your gays and social media fan response: Television, LGBTQ representation, and communitarian ethics. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 65(13), 1877-1891.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2017.1391015>

Waldfoegel, J. (2017). The random long tail and the golden age of television. *Innovation Policy and the Economy*, 17(1), 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1086/688842>

Yan, H. Y. (2019). "The Rippled Perceptions": The Effects of LGBT-Inclusive TV on Own Attitudes and Perceived Attitudes of Peers Toward Lesbians and Gays. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 96(3), 848-871. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699018821327>