"We also can have happy endings": reception and interpretation of LGBTIQ+ characters in TV series

"También podemos tener finales felices": recepción e interpretación de personajes LGTBIQ+ en series de televisión

"Também podemos ter finais felizes": recepção e interpretação das personagens LGBTQ+ em séries de televisão

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ABSTRACT | Given the scant research on audience reception based on group techniques, we used a focus group approach to compare interpretations by straight and cisgender and LGBTIQ+ individuals of representations of LGBTIQ+ characters in contemporary fiction series. The methodology is based on conducting four focus groups, two with LGBTIQ+ participants and two with cissexual participants, with questions based, on a first block, on fragments of series with LGBTIQ+ characters, a second on representation and inclusion, and a third on identification. The objective is to detect similarities and differences in the interpretations of these two groups. The results point to conflicting interpretations on various issues. For instance, while the LGBTIQ+ participants state that they can feel identified with any character, regardless of their sexual orientation, the straight and cisgender participants feel unable to fully identify with LGBTIQ+ characters. In conclusion, we infer that, despite confirmation of the paradigm of the active audience in terms of sexuality issues, our LGBTIQ+ participants tended to be more critical, while our straight and cisgender participants tended to be more accepting of media messages.

KEYWORDS: audiences; LGBTIQ+; TV series; focus group; representation; interpretation; reception studies.

RESUMEN | *Ante la escasez de investigaciones sobre recepción, específicamente de aquellas realizadas con técnicas grupales, este estudio analiza la interpretación de la audiencia, tanto cisheterosexual como LGTBIQ+, sobre la representación de series actuales con personajes del colectivo. La metodología se basa en la realización de cuatro focus groups, dos con participantes LGTBIQ+ y dos con participantes cisheterosexuales, con preguntas basadas en un primer bloque sobre fragmentos de series con personajes LGTBIQ+, un segundo sobre representación e inclusión, y un tercero sobre identificación. El objetivo es detectar similitudes y diferencias en las interpretaciones de estos dos grupos. Los resultados muestran percepciones enfrentadas en diversas cuestiones. Así, entre otras conclusiones, mientras los participantes del colectivo manifiestan poder sentirse identificados con cualquier personaje, independientemente de su orientación sexual, los cisheterosexuales afirman no poder sentirse identificados con estos. Las conclusiones infieren que, a pesar de confirmar el paradigma de la audiencia activa en todos los grupos en cuestiones de sexualidad, hay una tendencia mayor a la crítica por parte del colectivo LGTBIQ+ y una mayor aceptación de los mensajes mediáticos por parte de los participantes cisheterosexuales.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *audiencias; LGTBIQ+; ficción seriada; focus group; representación; interpretación; estudios de recepción.*

RESUMO | Dada a escassez de investigação sobre a recepção e, especificamente, das realizadas com técnicas de grupo, este estudo analisa a interpretação do público, tanto cis heterossexual como LGBTQ+, sobre a representação das séries atuais com personagens LGBTQ+. A metodologia assenta-se em quatro grupos focais, dois com participantes LGBTQ+ e dois com participantes cis heterossexuais, com questões baseadas num primeiro bloco sobre fragmentos de séries com personagens LGBTQ+, um segundo sobre representação e inclusão e um terceiro sobre identificação. O objetivo é detectar semelhanças e diferenças nas interpretações desses dois grupos. Os resultados mostram interpretações contraditórias sobre várias questões. Assim, entre outras conclusões, enquanto os participantes LGBTQ+ dizem que se podem identificar com qualquer personagem, independentemente da sua orientação sexual, os cis heterossexuais dizem que não se podem identificar com eles. As conclusões inferem que apesar de confirmar o paradigma do público ativo em todos os grupos sobre questões de sexualidade, há uma maior tendência para a crítica por parte da comunidade LGBTIQ+ e uma maior aceitação das mensagens da mídia por parte dos participantes cis heterossexuais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: audiências; LGBTQ+; ficção seriada; grupo focal; representação; desempenho; estudos de recepção.

INTRODUCTION

Currently, the increase in serialized fiction, as well as in its quality, points to the existence of a new golden age of television (Wayne, 2016). This has led to changes in the representation of various groups such as LGTBIQ+[1] or women, now represented in a more complex and diverse way than before (Hohenstein & Thalmann, 2019). However, most studies have focused on media representation (Sánchez-Soriano & García-Jiménez, 2020a), explored mainly through the content analysis technique, and not so much on the process of reception of such messages (García Jiménez et al., 2021), as this article does.

Among the scarce research focused on the audience, several have analyzed the identification of viewers, individually, with LGTBIQ+ characters, such as the study by Soto-Sanfiel and colleagues (2014), which related a greater identification with lesbian characters by LGTBIQ+ viewers, and showed that the characters' moral attitude affected this variable. In the same vein, McLaughlin and Rodriguez's (2017) research found that exposure to LGTBIQ+ characters can aid greater identification and acceptance but that, at the same time, it can reaffirm stereotypes if those characters are constructed in a distorted way. Thus, stigma in the media leads to less empathy for social collectives (Fongkaew et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, most of these researches have focused on individual techniques, such as the survey (Tukachinsky-Forster et al., 2022) or in-depth interviews (Lissitsa & Kushnirovich, 2020), and have not considered group interpretations, as we do in this work through focus group. In this regard, Guest and colleagues' (2017) research confirmed that group interaction techniques involve greater disclosure of particularly sensitive and personal topics than those conducted individually, because the interaction and encounter with people sensitive to certain topics promote greater deliberation.

If we consider the legalization of same-sex marriage as a fundamental turning point in the recognition of rights, we must bear in mind that equal marriage was legalized in 2005 in Spain. This legal framework, along with others, such as anti-discrimination laws or the approval of civil unions, has had its influence on the social acceptance of different sexual options. In Latin America, this legalization occurred some years later: Argentina (2010), Brazil (2013), Uruguay (2013), Colombia (2016), Ecuador (2019), Costa Rica (2020), and Chile (2022). Hence the

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1. This research uses the term LGTBIQ+, with the understanding that each diverse sexual identity or orientation, including asexual or non-binary gender, has its own peculiarities or specific context. Therefore, it would merit a future specific study of each one of them.

interest of this study in investigating how cultural industries represent part of these changes, in this case, in audiovisual series.

On the other hand, the media have a great influence on societies due to the world representations they present in their narratives (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2016). Thus, research by Madžarević and Soto-Sanfiel (2018) relates the viewing of LGTBIQ+ characters narratively constructed without distortions to an increase in tolerance towards the collective and to the reduction of prejudice.

Thus, the knowledge we have about the LGTBIQ+ collective, built from elements such as socialization in the media, is a crucial element that affects not only the image, prejudices, and stigma that society in general has about these people (Meyer, 2016), but also on the self-image. Therefore, we state that media images are important sources of construction of both social-collective and individual-personal identities. Thus, when the media talk about concepts such as trans person they are generating social representations that influence the relationship, self or external, with this group (Slater, 2007).

All the above justifies the need to conduct this research, which fills two important gaps in the scientific literature: first, it responds to the scarcity of research focused on the reception of LGTBIQ+ characters and, second, it does so by implementing an unusual group technique in reception analysis.

The objectives are:

- To get to know the interpretations of audiences, both cissexual and LGTBIQ+, on the depiction of LGTBIQ+ characters or plots in contemporary and relevant serialized fiction in popular culture.

- To analyze the interpretative similarities and differences between the two groups.

- To study the processes of audience identification with LGTBQI+ characters.

- To determine the interpretative positions of audiences regarding LGTBIQ+ discourses.

Based on these objectives, the following research questions are posed:

1. What are the dominant discursive interpretations of LGTBIQ+ characters by cis and mixed sexuality audiences?

2. What are the differences and similarities in interpretation between cis and LGTBIQ+ audiences?

3. Do audiences identify with LGTBIQ+ characters?

4. What are the stances of the cis and LGTBIQ+ audiences participating in the research technique?

Social imaginaries and the active audience

The importance of the media, including serialized fiction, lies in their role as carriers of social imaginaries, which can be defined as shared, imagined, and constructed social representations that allow us to define reality and live in society (Adams et al., 2015). Imaginaries influence both the image we have of ourselves, i.e., individual identity, and that of other groups or collective identities, as well as the expectations we have about them (Raco, 2018). Thus, social imaginaries have implications in the definition of various social groups (Gilleard, 2018), as the LGTBIQ+ collective.

The media thus maintain this idea of common worlds or imagined societies (Valaskivi & Sumiala, 2014), which becomes particularly powerful in globalized societies that share a common culture. This fact, in the case of fiction, has been favored by the emergence of global distribution platforms, such as Netflix, HBOMax or Disney+, which have ubiquity as a differential characteristic (Stewart, 2016). This implies that contents produced in a specific country, mainly in the United States, are equally consumed in other parts of the planet.

These imaginaries tend to reproduce stereotyped visions of sexual minorities, although, as defended by the postulates of cultural studies, they can be reinterpreted (Storey, 2010), since different social groups, when receiving media messages, can accept, reject or negotiate the messages according to their own identity characteristics (Hall, 1974). Thus arises the paradigm of the active audience (McQuail, 1997), which entails a critical attitude towards hegemonic media messages by an audience that does not behave passively and in which issues such as gender, sexual orientation or ethnoculture are involved (Stokes, 2021). To such an extent do these processes of resistance occur that Warner (2008) differentiates between dominant audiences (those who take it for granted that their life worlds are universal) and counterpublics, which are not merely replicative, but also transformative. Talking about the latter is especially relevant when addressing LGTBIQ+ identities, as these audiences have a clear awareness of their subordinate status (Warner, 2008).

An example of analysis of this resistance to social imaginaries (and, therefore, of counterpublics) is found in queer theory, which criticizes the iron hegemonic imaginaries about gender, sex, and sexual orientation, as indicated by Butler (1990), who theorizes about how conceptions such as homosexual or man are performative social constructions in which we have been socialized, and not natural elements. In this regard, there are numerous practical examples of this

LGTBIQ+ counterculture, as occurs, among others, in slash fictions, defined as subversive LGTBIQ+ themed fan fictions (Dhaenens et al., 2008).

New narratives and phenomena in LGTBIQ+ fiction

The increased number of serialized fictions with LGTBIQ+ plots and characters in the last two decades (Monaghan, 2021) and, especially, with the arrival of distribution platforms (Marcos-Ramos & González-de-Garay, 2021), has brought changes in collective imaginaries and has implied the emergence of new phenomena.

Research such as that of González-de-Garay and colleagues (2020) has analyzed the characteristics of these current fictions with characters of that collective, discovering an underrepresentation of these characters with respect to the total, even in countries with favorable laws towards the collective, such as Spain. At a qualitative level, the presence of classic negative stereotypes has been detected, such as hyper sexualization or the use of femininity as a parodic element (McLaughlin & Rodríguez, 2017). In the same vein, these works confirm that the most naturalized and integrated LGTBIQ+ characters in serialized fictions are so through homonormativity, as an attempt to assimilate the socially acceptable patterns of cissexuality: white, middle-class, healthy, and slender (Kerrigan, 2020). However, these investigations have uncovered other phenomena, such as the increase of LGTBIQ+ characters in adolescent serialized fiction (Masanet & Dhaenens, 2019; Masanet et al., 2022).

The last GLAAD report (2022), an association that annually analyzes LGTBIQ+ representation in cinematography and television fiction since 1985, with a corpus composed of all American serialized fiction on both networks and distribution platforms, states that in 2021 there was, for the first time, a greater number of lesbian characters than gay men. It also mentions an increase, still scarce, of trans and racialized characters. On the other hand, there is an underrepresentation of asexual people or people with some kind of disability.

These changes in the narratives and characters have led to the use of unique techniques with which the major fiction production companies have tried to join the phenomenon of increased tolerance towards the collective in Western countries, but at the same time, trying not to face the potential economic losses of conservative sectors or countries. Among them, pinkwashing stands out, a marketing strategy that consists of presenting a favorable orientation to the LGTBIQ+ collective, but without showing explicit characters or scenes, a technique widely used in Hollywood blockbusters (Sánchez-Soriano & García-Jiménez, 2020b). The concept of queer coding, which consists of suggesting, but not mentioning, that a character belongs to the LGTBIQ+ collective through subtexts, features, and patterns recognizable by viewers, is in the same vein (Greenhill, 2015). Derived from this

last concept appears queerbaiting, which is based on insinuating relationships between characters of the same gender through homoeroticism without this relationship ever being embodied, as has been analyzed in serialized fictions such as *Sherlock* (BBC, 2010-2017), *Merlin* (BBC, 2008-2012) (Brennan, 2018) or *Dark Shadows* (Owens, 2016).

As we have seen up to this point, it could be said, without a doubt, that collective imaginaries about diverse identities have undergone a process of change during the last decades, partly as a consequence of the transforming action of counterpublics. This process has implied a greater visibility and complexity of the images that make up LGTBIQ+ identities. Below, we analyze how these images are interpreted.

METHODOLOGY

Through a qualitative study, the research used the focus group technique to know the audience's interpretations of current fiction with LGTBIQ+ characters in the framework of group interactions. This technique consists of generating an active group discussion among a group of people, guided by a moderator, and on a specific topic (Cyr, 2019).

To reach information saturation, placed at a minimum of two focus groups (Hennink et al., 2019), we conducted a total of four in February 2021, divided into two with cissexual participants and two with LGTBIQ+ participants, in order to gain insight into the similarities and differences between these two groups. There were eight participants in each group, following the recommendations of a minimum of six and a maximum of 10 (Hennink & Kaiser, 2020), and the usual average time of 90 minutes was met (O.Nyumba et al., 2018).

The type of sample selection was based on non-probability sampling, specifically quota sampling, selecting individuals by specific conditions: by identity and sexual orientation. The technique for seeking participants was snowballing, which consists of progressively increasing the participating individuals through having people sending the information to their contacts (Geddes et al., 2018). The announcement about the focus groups, to seek this snowball effect, was distributed through LGTBIQ+ associations and the social networks Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, as these facilitated the sharing and dissemination of information. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Universidad de Murcia.

To promote the interpretation processes among the participants, some scenes from television series were presented as a starting point. Thus, three videos were produced with an approximate duration of five minutes each. To produce them, the first episodes of 14 Spanish and American serialized fiction series with LGTBIQ+

characters or plots (Sánchez-Soriano, 2022) were previously analyzed, as they contained the series' basic narrative information. They were the following: *Élite* (Spain, 2018), *Euphoria* (United States, 2019), *Looking* (United States, 2014), *Malaka* (Spain, 2019), *Merlí: Sapere Aude* (Spain, 2019), *Orange is the New Black* (United States, 2013), *Pose* (United States, 2018), *Sense8* (United States, 2015), *Shameless* (United States, 2011), *El Ministerio del Tiempo* (Spain, 2015), *Transparent* (United States, 2014), *Vivir sin permiso* (Spain, 2018), *Veneno* (Spain, 2020), and *Vis a Vis* (Spain, 2015). These series were chosen randomly for having a score above 7.5 in IMBD (Internet Movie Database), the most important database on audiovisual content worldwide, having a relative success among critics and audiences, and for their relevance in popular culture. All of them also have at least one main character belonging to the collective.

The viewing of the three videos with positive, negative, and neutral scenes made it possible for the participants in the focus groups to conduct a discursive interpretation, regardless of whether or not they were familiar with the selected series. The selection of these scenes is based on a critical analysis of the previous discourse (Sánchez-Soriano, 2021, 2022) that detected the three main discourses on sexual orientation present in the sample's series. These are naturalized LGTBIQ+ sexual orientation, in which diverse sexual orientation is integrated and the characters maintain healthy relationships; conflictive LGTBIQ+ sexual orientation, in which it is shown in a problematic way (for example, evil characters who are assigned negative actions, sexuality is a problem, or LGTBIQ+ is framed in contexts of violence, drug trafficking, drug addiction, disease, etc.), and sexual orientation as ambiguous discourse, those situations in which there are elements of the two previous discourses (both positive and negative aspects), so it is unclear whether the discourse is naturalized or problematic (for example, when two gay characters show their orientation in public in a naturalized way, but at the same time the life of one of them is framed in drug addiction).

The content of the fragments viewed is shown in table 1 on the following page.

To guide the participants' interpretation processes, we designed a script with questions structured in three parts, conducted within the framework of Sánchez-Soriano's research (2021). First, participants were asked about the fragments viewed: "How do you think the LGTBIQ+ collective is represented in fragment 1, 2, and 3? Do you perceive clear differences or similarities between the three videos, which ones?", among other questions. Secondly, they were asked about the inclusion and representation of LGTBIQ+ characters in fiction series, for example: "Do you think that serialized fiction shows a real reflection of the LGTBIQ+ collective? Why?", "Do you consider that in recent years there has been an increase of LGTBIQ+ characters in fiction?".

1: positive and normalized representations of the LGTBIQ+ community.	*Sense8*: a trans character receives support after being attacked. 58 seconds.
	Transparent: emotional and financial support from a father to his lesbian daughter. 50 seconds.
	Vivir sin permiso: two gay men kiss and show affection in public. 55 seconds.
	Vis a vis: lesbian character shows compassion towards another deceased character. 1 minute and 5 seconds.
	Looking: a gay character meets another gay character and the two flirt. 1 minute and 30 seconds.
Fragment 2: stereotyped, negative or violent scenes	*Pose*: a trans character is diagnosed with HIV. 48 seconds.
	Merlí: Sapere Aude: the bisexual character denies his bisexuality to another character. 50 seconds.
	Veneno: el personaje trans se prostituye en un parque. 1 minuto y 11 segundos.
	Euphoria: the trans character tries to attack another character with a knife, while threatening to attack herself. 42 seconds.
	Shameless: the gay character's brother berates him for being gay, calling him "unnatural". 51 seconds.
	Élite: the gay character sells drugs on a bridge to another gay character. 33 seconds.
Fragment 3: neutral scenes, with positive and negative aspects in which the media text coding stance is unclear. There is a contradiction, since both aspects are included	*Malaka*: the lesbian character threatens other people (violent element) while showing affectionate gestures towards her girlfriend (positive element). 48 seconds.
	El Ministerio del Tiempo: the lesbian character shows inconsequential plots and behaves in a foul-mouthed way with other characters (negative element), while trying to protect one of the female workers (positive element), who is trying to save the world. 2 minutes and 20 seconds.
	Orange is the New Black: the bisexual character thinks at the same time about her "normalized" life with her male husband while recalling her encounters with her imprisoned ex-girlfriend that she has hidden from him (an element of conflict in which it is not clear if the LGTBIQ+ element is a variable that the character is trying to avoid). 1 minute and 30 seconds.

Table 1. Fragments viewed and length

Source: Own elaboration.

Thirdly, we asked about the possible identification of the participants in the focus groups with the LGTBIQ+ characters projected in the videos: "Regardless of your sexual or gender identity and sexual orientation, do you feel identified with the LGTBIQ+ characters present in the series (their feelings, plots, relationships, etc.)? Why?", among other questions. Table 2 shows a summary of the technique used.

Number of focus groups	4 focus groups in total: 2 focus groups with cissexual participants 2 focus groups with LGTBIQ participants
Number of participants per focus group	8 people (32 people in total)
Selection criteria	By sexual orientation and sexual identity: cissexuality/ LGTBIQ+ collective
Place of execution	Online via the ZOOM platform
Date of execution	February 2021
Duration of focus groups	Average duration of 93 minutes

Table 2. Focus group data sheet

Source: Own elaboration.

First focus group	Second focus group	Third focus group	Fourth focus group
Man cissexual, 37 years old, Spain	Woman, bisexual, 38 years old, Spain	Woman bisexual, 38 years old, Spain	Woman cissexual, 50 years old, Spain
Woman cissexual, 30 years old, Spain	Man gay, 35 years old, Spain	Man bisexual, 27 years old, Venezuela	Man cissexual, 26 years old, Spain
Woman cissexual, 39 years old, Spain	Woman bisexual, 32 years old, Spain	Non-binary gender, bisexual, 25 years old, Spain	Woman cissexual, 30 years old, Spain
Woman cissexual, 46 years old, Spain	Non-binary gender, gay, 28 years old, Spain	Man bisexual, 28 years old, Spain	Man Cissexual, 44 years old, Spain
Man cissexual, 43 years old, Spain	Non-binary gender, lesbian, 24 years old, Spain	Woman bisexual, 53 years old, Spain	Woman cissexual, 49 years old, Spain
Woman cissexual, 31 years old, Spain	Man gay, 48 years old, France	Man gay, 32 years old, Spain	Woman cissexual, 24 years old, Spain
Woman cissexual, 24 years old, Spain	Non-binary, queer, 41 years old, Spain	Agender, pansexual, 30 years old, Spain	Woman cissexual, 37 years old, Spain
Man cissexual, 63 years old, Brazil	Man bisexual, 28 years old, Spain	Man gay, 55 years old, Spain	Woman cissexual, 59 years old, Spain

Table 3. Focus group participants

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 3 shows the characteristics of the participants in the focus groups, most of whom were Spanish, although there were citizens of other countries who decided to participate voluntarily. This made the sample valid, given that the purpose of the technique is not representative in sociodemographic terms, but its entirely hermeneutic, i.e., to interpret the social imaginaries present in the media discourses. All participants signed an informed consent form previously approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the university to which two of the authors of this article are affiliated. The research team pledged to maintain anonymity to enable the expression of the participants' opinions with minimum conditioning.

Although three blocks were presented during the methodology, the thematic structure allowed us to generate a different development based on the participants' responses through four major themes that we will further elaborate below: economic strategy, reflection of reality, naturalization, and identification with the characters.

Increase in LGTBIQ+ characters as an economic strategy

To the question: "Do you consider that in recent years there has been an increase of LGTBIQ+ characters in fiction?", the results showed that all participants, regardless of their belonging to the cissexual or LGTBIQ+ groups, perceive an increase in the number of characters in serialized fiction in recent years, as also shown by the works of Monaghan (2021), Marcos-Ramos & González-de-Garay (2021). or Sánchez-Soriano (2022). However, this increase is interpreted by the people in the focus groups as a commercial claim to attract a certain type of audience that demanded the inclusion of this diversity, something that we have already mentioned has been occurring through phenomena such as pinkwashing, queer coding, or queerbaiting (Greenhill, 2015; Sánchez-Soriano & García-Jiménez, 2020b).

Thus, the participants affirm the existence in fiction in general of "quotas" (bisexual man, 28 years old) in which production companies include a minimum number of characters from the LGTBIQ+ collective due to the aforementioned economic purpose. This fact, however, is not considered negative, as it can help future generations. The statement of this 31-year-old cissexual woman serves as an example:

> It is necessary to push it a little bit for the younger generations... My mother might be a bit shocked, to me it might seem like they wanted to put in a little bit of everything... and my nephew will see it as something completely normal.

This normalization referred to in the quote is symptomatic of the media's symbolic power in the construction of social imaginaries (Valaskivi & Sumiala, 2014). Likewise, they perceive that this increase has occurred to a greater extent in distribution platforms than in traditional television channels as previous studies

have pointed out (Marcos-Ramos & González-de-Garay, 2021). They believe that this difference is due to the fact that generalist channels seek to attract an audience that is as heterogeneous as possible, while distribution platforms have found a market niche that was not occupied.

However, LGTBIQ+ participants, unlike cissexuals, consider this increase insufficient, and call for greater visibility, as indicated by this non-binary gender, lesbian, 24-year-old:

> Years ago, there was nothing, and it's great now that there is a little bit, but that has to continue. I think about LGBT youth and I don't want them to go through these identity crises, and part of that problem is in the absence of representation.

This quote reflects, as Gilleard (2018) indicates, the possible effects that representations have on the self-conception of the LGTBIQ+ collective, causing situations in which one's identity is distorted, in the absence of referents or in the face of bad symbolic constructions.

Stereotypical construction and (non) reflection of social reality

Both groups, cissexual and LGTBIQ+, recognize the existence of numerous repeated stereotypes about the collective in fiction. This critical interpretation would be pointing to an active audience (McQuail, 1997), at least in issues related to sexual orientation.

In the first place, to the question "Do you think that LGTBIQ+ characters and the events that happen to them present stereotypes about sexual diversity?", they answer yes, stating that the most used stereotype is the association of the collective with marginal environments and social isolation, with emphasis on linking homosexuality and HIV. Let us recall that the stereotype of linking homosexuality to disease has been a constant in the history of television (Sallabank et al., 2021).

Secondly, respondents mentioned the fact of showing LGTBIQ+ characters as promiscuous or vicious people in the fragments seen. These stereotypes are followed by showing the "feather" as a parodic element.

These are corroborated in previous research, such as those of McLaughlin and Rodríguez (2017). Likewise, they mention one of the most recurrent phenomena in fiction, the tragic end for LGTBIQ+ couples (Guerrero-Pico et al., 2017), as indicated by a 28-year-old bisexual man: "The rest of the cissexual couples are still alive and kicking, but the homosexual one… Homosexuality is punished a little in that sense".

They also consider that these stereotypes are more prevalent in traditional networks than in distribution platforms, especially the one that associates a homonormative pattern to the construction of LGTBIQ+ characters. They mention that the aim is to attract a potential general audience that can identify with these normative patterns or recognize traditional stereotypes. The participants thus corroborate the commercial intentions of the use of homonormativity, as research such as Kerrigan's (2020) has shown.

However, despite both groups recognizing these stereotypes, those belonging to the cissexual group observe that they are being reduced in fiction in general, and that they do reflect a reality or at least a part of the collective. This interpretation would be aligned with the dominant hegemonic position in which audiences interpret media messages with the meanings with which they were encoded (Hall, 1974). Thus, a 46-year-old cissexual woman, from the negative fragments, affirms that even the conflicting elements are truthful: "I think it highlights the complexity of the LGBT collective. Even though we are in a much more advanced period …, I do think that some of the concepts that are presented are quite real".

LGTBIQ+ participants, on the other hand, disagree and consider that there is currently a poor and unrealistic representation in the series, which usually choose very specific realities that can be more striking for fiction. This issue is exemplified in the testimony of a 25-year-old non-binary person, again from the negative fragments:

> There's a lot of drama around the stories of LGBT people, and in real life that's not necessarily the case. We can also have happy, joyful endings, and we're not all on drugs, have HIV or are in jail.

This perception would be more in line, as Hall (1974) again indicates, with the position in which there is a more critical part of the audience that opposes the preferred meaning of media discourses. Thus, and following the ideas pointed out in the theoretical framework, the interpretative stance of the cis audience would correspond to that of the dominant audiences, while the critical one of the LGTBIQ+ audiences would be representative of the counterpublics, spaces of circulation of transformative meanings (Warner, 2008).

Naturalization of sexual orientation and gender identity in narratives

The results show a clear discrepancy between the two groups in this category. Thus, to the question: "Do you consider that in the three videos sexual identity and orientation is still an important issue or that it is a more naturally integrated characteristic?", the LGTBIQ+ participants affirm that, currently, sexual identity and orientation is the main element that defines the characters of the collective

and their dramatic arcs. On the contrary, cissexual participants affirm that these features do not represent the main plot. Let us take a closer look at both interpretations, again, opposing.

In the first hand, the LGTBIQ+ group defends that the only characters integrated in the positive fragments are those constructed from homonormative canons, confirming Kerrigan's research (2020). The homonormativity denounced implies that other realities of the collective are left out, such as androgynous people or people with diverse bodies, and exemplified by a 38-year-old bisexual woman, after viewing of the positive fragments: "There are characters that, if you bring them closer to the normativity, to the image of a cis woman, even if she is a lesbian… we accept her, because she is not someone very far from who we are, especially if a straight or conservative person sees her".

Participants with diverse sexual orientations see the producers' fear of losing a part of the general audience as an explanation for this, as well as the fact that LGTBIQ+ plots and characters represent the image that cissexual audiovisual creators have of the LGTBIQ+ collective. Thus, they consider that fiction leaves out realities such as non-binary gender, bisexuality or trans men from their narratives. In fact, audiovisual production does not have a diversity that reflects social reality, as indicated in the study by González-de-Garay and colleagues (2020), and diverse audiences are aware of their subordinate status (Warner, 2008), because the point of view of fictions is cissexual, as Youngbauer and Jones' (2018) research reflects. In this regard, LGTBIQ+ participants demand more participation of creators (screenwriters, directors, producers, etc.) belonging to the collective or trained in this reality to avoid normative and stereotypical narrative constructions, as indicated by a non-binary, lesbian, 24-year-old: "It is important that the stories are told by people who have lived these experiences, who know how to tell them and know how to empathize, so that they do not end up being narratives at the service of a normative perspective, because otherwise that hurts even more".

This cissexual focus of television narratives, therefore, may end up having negative implications on the social-collective identity of the LGTBIQ+ community, as proposed by research on media effects by Morgan and colleagues (2009).

In contrast to the interpretation of LGTBIQ+ people, the majority of the cissexual group, when asked the question "Do you consider that all members of the LGTBIQ+ community are equally represented in the fragments viewed?", consider that they are, which does not correspond to the GLAAD report (2022), that mentions a scarce representation of trans men and non-binary characters. They also state that nowadays gender identity or sexual orientation is a more naturally integrated

characteristic in the plots. This preferential reading would be, again, more in line with the acceptance stance of media messages proposed by Hall (1974).

On the other hand, to the question "Do you think that more importance is given to any specific point of view (LGTBIQ+ or heterosexual)?", the cissexual group states that in the fragments the fiction's standpoint is not made from a cissexual view, as indicated by the LGTBIQ+ group, but that this depends on the target audience for which the fiction is intended, which does not correspond with previous research (Youngbauer & Jones, 2018). Cis people make up what Warner (2008) defines as dominant publics, hence they identify their own experiences as the "natural" or "neutral" ones.

Finally, both groups do agree on two issues. First, both perceive that there is a hierarchy in the representation in fiction in general, in which gay men are the sexual orientation with the highest presence, followed by lesbian women. Secondly, they observe that there is little diversity when it comes to representing intersectionalities with the LGTBIQ+ collective. Intersectionalities are characteristics transversal to sexual identity or orientation that are also found at the symbolic level in a minority position, such as age, ethnoculture or disability (Rice et al., 2020).

Identification and empathy with LGTBIQ+ characters

The results again show a disparity between the two participant groups. Thus, LGTBIQ+ participants claim to be able to identify with any character, regardless of whether or not they belong to the collective, provided that the character's story is well constructed. This interpretation is not shared by the cissexual participants who, once again, are divided.

First of all, LGTBIQ+ people state that, due to the scarce historical representation, the collective has been forced to identify with cissexual characters, as exemplified by a 35-year-old gay man: "As a homosexual man, there is no problem for me to identify with a cissexual policeman who has a wife, four children, and whose reality has nothing to do with mine, as long as the story is well told".

This quote refers to the importance of media stories have as sources of construction of individual-personal identity, as an element of socialization that allows us to learn and unlearn patterns, features or characteristics that bring us closer to or differentiate us from others (Wood, 2010).

Secondly, the cissexual participants are divided, and some of them state that they cannot identify with the LGTBIQ+ characters because they consider their realities to be very different from their own. They agree that the narrative plot is very focused on sexual identity and orientation, which makes identification difficult. This, again, is not in accordance with previous research, which has

studied a representation made from a heteropatriarchal perspective (Sánchez-Soriano & García-Jiménez, 2020b) at present.

However, when asked the same question, another part of the cissexual group does express the possibility of generating empathic bonds, and that this favors the understanding of experiences that they have not lived. They consider that these empathic bonds are generated due to the presence of universal emotions, such as love or hate, as indicated by a 30-year-old cissexual woman, after viewing the positive fragments:

> The emotions they deal with, regardless of sexual orientation, are inherent to human beings. It happened to me watching *Veneno* that I empathized a lot with the girl regarding different issues, or with *Transparent*'s family, and I have not been involved in that process on a personal level.

These data on identification are in line with the research conducted by Soto-Sanfiel and colleagues (2014), which relates a greater identification with LGTBIQ+ characters by LGTBIQ+ viewers than by cissexuals.

Finally, both groups consider that media education is a positive tool, not only for the collective's own identity, but also to normalize and generate this aforementioned empathy in a part of society that is not used to these realities. This generalized opinion of all participants has been corroborated by the research of Madžarević and Soto-Sanfiel (2018), who infer positive effects of viewing undistorted representations in individuals subjected to these stimuli.

CONCLUSIONS

The use of focus groups has allowed to cover part of the research deficit based on this methodology among audiences of serial fiction and, especially, in those with LGTBIQ+ component. In this regard, the fact of conducting a group interpretation and interaction has allowed the disclosure of issues and personal experiences, as well as the debate and discussion of different opinions among the participants, enabling the negotiation of these opinions, which would not have been possible through individual techniques.

Thus, the research has made several findings, among others, that there are points in common in the interpretations of the two participating groups, cissexual and LGTBIQ+. Both identify the existence of recurrent stereotypes in audiovisual fiction or the inclusion of diverse characters as an economic tool, a critical interpretation of the audiences coinciding with research on representation. However, both differ in most of the categories analyzed. Thus, it is found that LGTBIQ+ participants

are more critical of serialized fiction in which these characters appear. For example, they consider that the only characters of the collective integrated in the plots are those that comply with well-regarded patterns of cissexuality. They therefore demand greater involvement of LGTBIQ+ people or people informed about their reality during the creative process, something that is not highlighted by the cissexual participants, who consider that the characters of the collective are usually integrated.

Similarly, the most striking differential feature is that of identification, where the LGTBIQ+ group claims to be able to identify with any character, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation, while the cissexual group states that they cannot feel identified at all or only create empathetic bonds, without complete identification. Therefore, a noteworthy aspect of this research is that there is a greater division in the readings of the cissexual participants than in those of the LGTBIQ+, who show greater homogeneity.

Finally, it has been possible to verify that the paradigm of the active audience, which attempts to redefine the hegemonic social imaginaries, exists indeed in the participants of these focus groups. Thus, both groups support media education, especially during childhood and adolescence, as a tool to normalize the group and to generate empathy in a part of cissexual society that does not experiences this type of reality.

Nevertheless, we infer a greater negotiation and criticism of media messages on the part of LGTBIQ+ participants, and a greater acceptance on the part of cissexuals. In this regard, LGTBIQ+ participants are more critical with their own representation and with the imaginaries presented by the media but, in the face of several categories, cissexuals participants have shown a more flexible attitude. This would point to a greater acceptance of the preferred readings established by the audiovisual productions on the part of this group.

It should be considered that one is always more critical of the representations of the collectives to which one belongs, as long as this belonging implies a sufficiently important identity identification. For example, a cissexual man will not necessarily feel identified with the representation of any cissexual male character, but university professors will certainly be much more critical of the representations of university professors. We do not think, for example, that many archaeologists would identify with Professor Indiana Jones. That is, one tends to be more critical of representations that we feel represent us, and much more indulgent of those that do not. Thus, regarding the increase of LGTBIQ+ characters and plots, the participants of the collective consider it insufficient, while cissexuals consider it sufficient and a sign of openness.

Therefore, this article presents sexual orientation as a key cultural identity in the interpretation of media messages. Now the challenge is to build a critical media education that, based on the similarities and differences detected, advocates diversity and sexual normalization, since such media education has been shown to lead to an increase in issues such as empathy, awareness, or social inclusion of minority groups.

This research has certain limitations, among them, those inherent to the focus group techniques, due to the restriction of the sample and the non-generalization of the results. Therefore, as future lines of research, it is proposed to complement the focus group technique with other methodologies, or to choose other variables for comparative analysis, such as social class, nationality or age.

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