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Scriptwriters' Conceptions of Audience Attitudes Toward LGBTQ+ Characters

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on media production studies, this research observes the understudied figure of the scriptwriters of fictional series to identify their feelings about different audiences and the way they respond to LGBTQ+ characters and narratives. Specifically, it seeks to understand how they use these mental images of their audiences when they create LGBTQ+ content. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online with twenty scriptwriters of different genders and sexual identities. A thematic analysis of their responses shows that they mostly have stereotypical mental images of their audiences' preferences regarding LGBTQ+ characters and contents, which these scriptwriters actively draw upon in their work. Moreover, those images are based on their personal life experiences. Young LGBTQ+ scriptwriters are the only ones who tend not to conceive audiences as conservative or traditionalist. It is also observed that female and gay scriptwriters employ narrative strategies to protect queer audiences, female writers are inclined toward emotionally supportive portrayals, and gay writers develop characters that defend LGBTQ+ rights. The conclusion is that the creation of LGBTQ+ characters for TV series requires diverse teams of writers and literacy on sexual and gender prejudices, even among queer scriptwriters.

In recent years, the representation of LGBTQ people in audio-visual fiction has notably increased in some cultural contexts (e.g., Edwards, 2020; González-de-Garay et al., 2023). Although it has been a long and often bumpy journey, the quality and quantity of such representations on TV series across channels and

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platforms has also matured (Scott, 2019), and they have progressively become more positive: LGBTQ+ characters perform narrative roles similar to non-LGBTQ characters (Dhoest & Simons, 2012), their presence is more normalized, their features are less stereotyped (Durán-Manso, 2015), and LGBTQ+ aesthetics are depicted (McInroy & Craig, 2017).

Despite progress, normalized representations of LGBTQ+ people in media narratives coexist alongside distorted (Durán-Manso, 2015), unrepresentative (e.g., Price, 2021; Woods & Hardman, 2021), and stereotyped portrayals. These stereotypes include LGBTQ+ individuals facing tragic lives, suffering illnesses, moral punishment, shame, remorse, and present a binary understanding of gender and social roles (Soto-Sanfiel & Sánchez-Soriano, 2023). Additionally, they might be depicted as marginal (Sánchez-Soriano, 2022; Scott, 2019) and one-dimensional (McInroy & Craig, 2017). Moreover, some LGBTQ+ depictions are heterosexist and prejudiced (González-de-Garay et al., 2023), exhibiting negative social traits or being portrayed as agents of symbolic excess (Cavalcante, 2015). These representations perpetuate recurring stereotypes and reinforce the hegemony of white, monogamous, middle-class men (Francisco Amat et al., 2022; Sánchez-Soriano, 2022). They also ignore the complexity of LGBTQ+ identities and the different ways that individuals experience them (Francisco Amat et al., 2022).

The lack of adequate LGBTQ+ depictions in the entertainment industry has been particularly described as dangerous (Woods & Hardman, 2021). The media is the primary source of social knowledge regarding LGBTQ+ identities and TV and movies shape people's attitudes and drive changes in the way they perceive the world (McInroy & Craig, 2017). From a media effect perspective, scholarship has determined the impact of LGTBIQ media characters on queer people's identity (e.g., Bond, 2018; Gross, 2007; Mares et al., 2023). For instance, Bond (2018) noted media characters significantly influence LGB adolescents' socialization. In their study, Mares et al. (2023) showed how media moments prompt conversations between LGTBIQ children and parents about their queer identity. Additionally, Gillig and Murphy (2016) found that viewers' sexual orientation affects the emotional involvement they develop with LGB characters. Likewise, Bond (2021) discovered that parasocial relationships with outgroup TV characters influence attitudes and behaviors similarly to direct interpersonal contact. Consequently, realistic, non-stereotyped depictions of LGBTQ+ people might help queer individuals, particularly youngsters, with their identity construction. They might also inform society about LGBTQ+ circumstances and lives (McInroy & Craig, 2017) and be a means to counteract homophobic discourse and hostility toward the LGBTQ+ community and minority groups (Madžarević & Soto-Sanfiel, 2018; Masanet et al., 2022).

Realistic LGBTQ+ representations portray diverse, complex individuals with multifaceted identities and emotions beyond their sexual orientation or gender identity. They lead authentic lives, facing everyday challenges and forming genuine relations, while avoiding harmful stereotypes and respecting LGBTQ+ diversity. As a matter of fact, and regardless of their gender or sexual identity, audiences might not only enjoy and appreciate LGBTQ+ characters, but could also identify with them (Madžarević & Soto-Sanfiel, 2019; Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2014). So, what are the reasons for such LGBTQ+ misrepresentation in fictional series? Do the attitudes of media professionals, and particularly scriptwriters, toward LGBTQ+ portrayals matter?

Media professionals' attitudes toward audiences

Research argues that media producers are still circumspect regarding the depiction of LGBTQ+ characters (Scott, 2019), which they include in fictional series as a marketing tactic to gratify heterosexist audiences, particularly conservatives—traditional or tending/disposed to maintain existing views, conditions, or institutions (Scott, 2019; Woods & Hardman, 2021)—while simultaneously satisfying their LGBTQ+ allies or strategic partners who are aligned with the LGBTQ+ cause (Sánchez-Soriano & García-Jiménez, 2020; Woods & Hardman, 2021). The inclusion of such characters might also be a way to lure LGBTQ+ audiences, as well as of those of other identities who support the representation of sexual diversity, or even feel attracted by homoerotic symbols, gestures or comedy as opposed to positive, real, non-stereotyped portrayals of queer people (Sánchez-Soriano & García-Jiménez, 2020). Fictional series might practice *queerbaiting*, whereby scriptwriters merely hint indirectly at LGBTQ+ storylines without ever fully developing them, which can be upsetting (Brennan, 2019) or psychologically harmful to LGBTQ+ audiences (Bond, 2023). They can also engage in *pinkwashing* in the form of token gestures to apparently project an open and tolerant attitude toward LGBTQ+ people and thus avoid being criticized for lack of diversity (Sánchez-Soriano & García-Jiménez, 2020). These practices merely perpetrate the hegemonic heteronormative representation, and concealment, of sexual diversity (Sánchez-Soriano & García-Jiménez, 2020).

There is certainly an increasing number of media professionals working on the creation of LGBTQ+ contents today and LGBTQ+ people are playing more influential executive and creative roles in audiovisual production (Sender, 2012). However, they are still a small minority in the industry and their sexuality affects their careers (Martin, 2015, 2018; O'Brien & Kerrigan, 2020) since they are often associated with certain stereotypical assumptions by their hetero-managers and the resulting tension can lead

them to adopt a homonormative approach to their work (O'Brien & Kerrigan, 2020).

Audience images

A normative approach to fictional content design (O'Brien & Kerrigan, 2020) might be manifestation of the hegemonic persistence of determined ideologies in the media industry (Havens, 2013). Fiction design has been described as the echo of an industry that establishes rules, codes, attitudes, and behaviors regarding such aspects as production values and what is deemed appropriate or not. Media workers are expected to align with this culture and its often-unspoken priorities (Draper, 2014) in pursuit of capitalist goals (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2021). Even when they enjoy a certain creative autonomy, such agency is inevitably accommodated to the cultural and structural conventions of the audiovisual system (Andersen, 2020; Havens & Lotz, 2016). For instance, one of the few studies on the matter confirms that LGBTQ+ scriptwriters often exercise agency in their work and draw on their own autobiographies in attempts to transcode the meanings attached to LGBTQ+ people, but they inevitably end up mirroring the homonormative scripts that dominate the industry (Martin, 2015).

Research also informs that creative media workers behave like gatekeepers (Andersen, 2020) and are characteristically attributed the savvy and talent not only to recognize what it means to be creative in the industry (Mayer, 2017) but to also understand their audience's preferences, and hence voice opinions, speak or act on their behalf regardless of differences in socio-demographic backgrounds. This might lead media professionals to theorize, be reluctant to accept change or fail to obtain further information about their audiences (Ross, 2014).

A key aspect of decision-making about content is that media workers actively draw on their own mental images of their audiences and the ideals they defend (e.g., Ross, 2014). These may be based on market research and consumer habits but are undoubtedly rooted in their own tastes and those of their immediate social circles. Indeed, media professionals apply intuitive knowledge and preconceived beliefs, and view all audiences in the same way that they view themselves and as a result promote the kind of content that they personally enjoy (Ross, 2019). Therefore, it is logical to assume that content creators hold mental images about their audiences' attitudes toward LGBTQ+ fiction, and that these impact the way such characters get portrayed. Although this topic has not been explored previously in the context of serialized fictional narratives, recent research has identified a direct relationship between media scriptwriters', producers' and programmers' mental images of their audiences and the lack of related content on television (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2021).

All the above, together with the absence of related academic evidence, leads to the following research questions:

RQ1: What images do scriptwriters of fictional series have of their audiences and their attitudes to LGBTQ+ content?

RQ2: Do scriptwriters' sexual and gender identities have an impact on such images?

Screenwriters are the first to establish meaning in a narrative (Wolff, 1981) and are present throughout the production process, from the initial conceptualization through to the final development. They can hence be described as cultural intermediaries (Kerrigan & Batty, 2016).

At present, fictional screenwriting is not done in isolation. Rather, it involves groups of writers working collaboratively, usually in the same room and overseen by a showrunner who manages the actual production (Bourgeois-Bougrine & Glăveanu, 2018; Higueras-Ruiz et al., 2021; Kerrigan & Batty, 2016). Writers typically work on a set of assumptions created and subsequently refined by all participants (Kerrigan & Batty, 2016), although the process can be long and intensive as they each talk about their own lives or include personal memories in the stories they are creating (Higueras-Ruiz et al., 2021). Here, LGBTQ+ scriptwriters might exert agency to challenge the homonormativity of current queer portrayals (Martin, 2015).

However, scriptwriting today not only implies emotional involvement, but also industrialization because writers must constantly negotiate between their personalities, feelings, ideas, visions or feedback and commercial structures, formulas, codes, policies, and conventions. Consequently, it is a cultural and social creative process (Kerrigan & Batty, 2016) that consists of bringing an idea to the screen that is derived from the writers' passions and visions, but which is conditioned by the imperatives of the audiovisual industry and the social environment in which it is produced (Taylor & Batty, 2016). That may be why LGBTQ+ writers mirror the standard homonormativity of the media, as reported by Martin (2015). Indeed, changing the representation of queer, gender and sexuality issues might require systematic training of potential scriptwriters on these values from the earliest stages of their education (Green, 2013).

Theoretical background

This research adds to the expanding field of media production studies (MPS; Zoellner, 2022), which accepts the interconnected impact of producers' experiences and media production structures within specific contexts

(Paterson et al., 2016). MPS has called for research on audience needs and thoughts regarding fictional content to respond by producing relevant stories and characters (Redvall, 2018). It has also suggested the inclusion of sexuality and queerness on its own agenda (Martin, 2018). This research examines what media professionals believe their audiences think about fictional content. Albeit innovative, this approach is based on preliminary research on the importance of the relationship between media creators and their audiences. It also answers the MPS's call by observing scriptwriters' attitudes, which have been surprisingly ignored despite most studies focusing on the script development process. When authors have called for more research on scriptwriters (Kerrigan & Batty, 2016; Taylor & Batty, 2016), they have claimed that the lack of such studies is an indicator of the marginalization of these professionals within the audio-visual industry (Bourgeois-Bougrine & Glăveanu, 2018).

This research is specifically associated with queer production studies (QPS), which investigates media industries, professionals (Martin, 2018) and audiences to understand the influences and opinions in this field. As a recent subfield of MPS officially appearing in 2018 (Ng, 2021), QPS mostly observe LGBTQ+ narratives from their authorship or content (Wuest, 2018) and seek to unveil the conditions and reflexive processes that shape them by incorporating professionals' views and ideologies (Vanlee, 2019). In doing so, it answers Vanlee's (2019) call for greater engagement with the industry to explain LGBTQ+ portrayals. Consequently, this research contributes to theory building and offers valuable information on the construction and distribution of queerness in the media (i.e., McInroy & Craig, 2015, 2017), on the possible reasons why modern-day scriptwriters depict queers the way they do and contributes to theory-building. The opinions of practitioners are a necessary source of knowledge for screenwriting and television studies since they inform about best practices (Redvall & Cook, 2015) to create LGBTQ+ characters (Krikova, 2021). However, with few exceptions (e.g., Hart, 2016; Krikova, 2021; Martin, 2015, 2018), LGBTQ+ representations have not been examined from the writer's perspective. These contributions are summarized next.

Individual perceptions as a starting point

Martin (2015) examined the processes for creating gay characters in the writers' rooms of US black-cast sitcoms to understand the organizational and industrial logic behind such portrayals. After holding in-depth interviews, he reports that the writers' individual biographies are important for the creation of queer characters because their lives and worldviews are reflected in what they write and portray. However, Martin reported that

although gay writers try to transcend certain dominant representations of gay people, they can also come to reinforce others that even encourage homonormativity. He also identified that industrial practices, such as the schedules or duration of series, are used as excuses to justify the absence of gay characters. He therefore proposed observation of the processes employed by scriptwriters, as well as their individual perceptions, because these modulate the ways in which episodes develop, despite that what they write is negotiated in the writers' room. This study does just that.

Recognizing one's own prejudices and limitations

When observing the portrayal of intersex people on North American television, Hart (2016) suggests that to create appropriate representations of these people, scriptwriters need to start by recognizing their own convictions and limitations, and should investigate intersex people, relate to them and learn from them. Only then are they being able to create characters that genuinely reflect the stories, conflicts, and goals of intersex people, thereby reducing their stigmatization. Consequently, Hart feels that the writer's humility is an important part of the how the reality is depicted, particularly at times when retrograde characterizations resurface.

More recently, the study by Krikova (2021) proposed as a model the case of Julie Kalceff, the LGBTQ+ screenwriter who led the team that created the Australian series First Day, about the high school experiences of a transgender girl. After realizing how little she knew about adolescent gender identity, Kalceff learned about it from various sources, but mostly through direct contact with people who had experienced it in their own lives. She interviewed the parents of transgender children and sought advice and comments on her scripts from associations and people familiar with the reality of transgender people. The results of her research were discussed and adapted in the writers' room. Krikova (2021) concluded that series could explore universal social, psychological, and physical issues while destroying stigmas about LGBTQ people.

Negotiation outside the writers' room

The cited studies (Hart, 2016; Krikova, 2021; Martin, 2015, 2018) propose three important variables for adequate configuration of LGBTQ+ narratives and characters: (a) the personal experiences of the scriptwriters with the queer world, not only for the representation of more minority diversities; (b) awareness among scriptwriters of how much they know about the particularities of the different queer realities, as well as their willingness to become informed by different means, in particular through contact with people with life experiences around the portrayed themes/varieties, and (c) the capacity of LGBTQ+ scriptwriters to negotiate in the writers' room, where decisions are made on fictional

storylines, normally by teams made up of writers from different personal backgrounds. However, as well as recognizing the influence of scriptwriters' individual biographies on the fiction writing process, this study also considers the need to recognize their individual conceptions of potential audiences (e.g., their attitudes, interests, and preferences), an idea that has previously been termed in television studies as "audiences" mental images" (e.g., Ross, 2014; Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2021), but which has been ignored by QPS. However, this study recognizes this notion as the link between writers' personal profiles, the industry's demands for content and the representation of LGBTQ+ characters in serial fiction. It therefore takes an interest not only in writers who are part of the LGBTQ+ community, but also in those who are involved in the creation of TV series, regardless of their gender and sexual identities.

Method

Due to the absence of literature on the topic, this research adopts an interpretative phenomenology approach (IPA), which is based on the interpretation of people's everyday experiences (Finlay, 2021) and the meanings attributed to them (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA has been used before to observe LGBTQ+ experiences (Chan & Farmer, 2017).

Design and procedure

Data was collected from video-recorded online semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom from February to April 2022. The sample was purposefully recruited using a snowballing technique, following a similar approach to a previous study on media professionals' attitudes toward LGBTQ+ topics (Vanlee, 2019). Zoom was chosen as the recommended platform for its ability to connect with ¡geographically distant people and discuss personal topics (Gray et al., 2020).

The questions related to the RQs were:

(1) What do you think audiences expect from LGBTQ+ characters in series?
(2) Do you think about the potential audiences of your LGBTQ+ characters and plots while writing them? How? When?
(3) Are there factors that shape the creation of LGBTQ+ characters?

Participants

Twenty fiction scriptwriters from Spain participated in the study, ensuring data saturation (Alam, 2021). Participants were selected

from professional catalogs in the audiovisual industry based on their experience in writing for series broadcast on commercial platforms and/or TV channels, including at least one LGBTQ+ character. Most were directly invited through e-mails, while others came through agent or participant referrals. None had prior contact with the researchers. All participated voluntarily without reimbursement, believing the knowledge could benefit society. Ethical aspects were explained, and verbal content was recorded.

Participants were seven heterosexual males, six gay males, four heterosexual females, one lesbian female, one bisexual female, and one transgender male. Their mean age was 45.73 years (Rg_{Age} 28–64). The male transgender and cis-female bisexual were the youngest writers in the sample (28 and 33, respectively) while the remainder were ages 41 to 64. All of them were independent or freelance workers. The research followed the ethics guide of the National University of Singapore and all participants provided informed verbal consent.

It is worth considering that Spain's audiovisual market is known for its lively production and distribution of original series with international appeal (Barra & Scaglioni, 2020). Public broadcasters and commercial networks focus on the domestic audience, while video-on-demand (VOD) products target the global market. Both align with local traits and preferences (Holdaway et al., 2020).

On the other hand, Spain has been declared one of the most accepting countries regarding LGBTQ+ issues and rights, with a high number of openly non-heterosexual individuals (IPSOS, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2020). Although there is limited knowledge about LGBTQ+ representations on Spanish TV series, the study of González-de-Garay et al. (2023) found heavy stereotyping of queer characters, a prevalence of gay cis-males, and a lack of representation for trans and non-binary identities. The researchers were optimistic about the 10%-character representation in Spanish TV series, close to the country's overall population.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) was conducted on verbatim transcriptions of interviews to identify response patterns (Mieles et al., 2012), using Atlas.ti software (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). TA allows concepts to be derived from lived experiences spontaneous descriptions, bypassing limitations imposed by theories (Guest et al., 2012). It has been effectively used for analyzing queer narratives (Bradford et al., 2019).

Results

Audiences matter

Most writers admit that the audience and channel impact the nature of the fictional product since their goal is to achieve large audiences. Hence, they embrace the market logic of the audio-visual industry. A cis-male heterosexual scriptwriter said:

> The audience always has an affect … Audiences of [anonymized commercial TV channel] or Netflix are different, and you always think about what the audience needs because you want the TV series to be watched by the largest possible number of viewers.

Success in terms of audience engagement is a major concern for most writers. Indeed, the aforesaid heterosexual professional suggests that the "[audience] is always worrying, and we [the writers] know in advance that there are things that are difficult for concrete targets to accept." Consequently, some refrain from pursuing certain LGBTQ+ storylines or characters right from the start. A cis-female heterosexual scriptwriter, who always teams up with a cis-gay colleague, said:

> I have censored myself when thinking, for example, about romantic comedies. My colleague and I have always wanted to create a romantic comedy about two male teens: a gay love story, like typical romantic comedies such as "My Best Friend's Wedding" … or a mainstream comedy with two gay protagonists. We have both censored ourselves (he is gay) because when you tell this kind of story you are trying to get fans; you are trying to awaken the fan phenomenon in teenagers that is mainly driven by girls … The [teen] female audience is not going to get engaged in this [kind of story], or are going to engage to a lesser extent than with heterosexual stories … We always end up aborting the project.

Scriptwriters do not always think about their target audiences throughout the entire process, from conception to consumption. Many only truly consider their viewers during the early stages of conceptualizing a TV series, after which they are largely ignored. According to a cis-male heterosexual, writers tend "to not only forget LGBTQ+ audiences but mainstream audiences [MAINAUD] too." However, others prefer to keep MA in mind throughout the rest of the process, and that means everyone " … from 5-year-old kids to an 82-year-old transgender," as the same scriptwriter states. Indeed, he prefers not to "make distinctions," which is a way to ensure that LGBTQ+ stories will satisfy all audiences.

Some writers argue that audiences might support the inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters in narratives for the general public. Although the original plan might have been to drop certain LGBTQ+ characters from a script, they are sometimes continued in response to positive audience reactions. In such cases, the writers' assumptions regarding their audiences' attitudes to LGBTQ+ characters are challenged by the facts, as this heterosexual male stated:

> If we find that a transgender police officer is a success, we try to expand the story. We don't drop her from the series. Fortunately, [a specific trans character] went down well. She was supposed to appear in 100 episodes but ended up appearing in 300 episodes thanks to the support of the audience.

Despite the above, getting to know the audience is not as straightforward as it used to be. The boom of streaming platforms and the lack of public viewing figures mean some scriptwriters can only get an idea of their audiences from their comments on social networks. According to a male-trans scriptwriter, this is a deliberate business strategy among media producers when making decisions about LGBTQ+ representation:

> Platforms don't report the number of subscribers or how many of them watch each series. We are in an ocean of series, which is good for the industry because everybody has work … But, we don't know if the audience prefers a certain type of series and whether the rest is all noise. It benefits me because I can work. But we don't really know. Social networks are the only measure … If a series is getting reactions on social networks, then audiences are watching it.

The mission of protecting and comforting LGBTQ+ (young) audiences

Contrarily to what has been described above, some cis-female heterosexual and cis-gay writers may specifically bear adolescent audiences in mind when creating a certain LGBTQ+ character at a specific moment of the plot, in the hope that the script will protect and comfort LGBTQ+ youngsters. A female writer said:

> I try not to hurt them. I want them to find comfort onscreen for circumstances they are experiencing at home, because there must be audience members who are experiencing similar things.

However, these writers not only negotiate with the need to provide a safe narrative space for young LGBTQ+ audiences, but also for all their potential audiences. Indeed, their narrative strategies, which include avoiding victimization of LGBTQ+ people or the depiction of sexual orientation as a problem, are presented within conciliatory storylines that seek to satisfy different audiences and avoid rejection. However, such conciliation might also convey the message that people consider queerness as a problem. For example, this 54-year-old cis-heterosexual writer discusses her script ideas with her own mother of over 70 years to check that they are appropriate because she is aware of the different perceptions of portrayals of LGBTQ+ people. Although she actively seeks to protect LGBTQ+ adolescents from being exposed to negative portrayals, she still inadvertently defines sexual orientation as a problem:

> [I] avoid portrayals that victimize LGBTQ+ people and send the message that diverse sexual orientation is a problem … and I do that by showing the different options and postures regarding the problem. It is good to show all perspectives, but the moral should not be that people are poor parents because they don't understand their kid or are poor parents because they have a problem with their child's homosexuality … I never would do such a thing.

Framing the audience-scriptwriter relationship

The relationship between writers and their images of their audience may depend on the origin of the series. Sometimes, scriptwriters develop their own ideas with the intention of selling them to TV platforms or channels afterward. In such cases, writers envision their potential clients and audiences at the definition phase. On other occasions, writers are commissioned by platforms to create specific products and are given precise instructions about the target audience. However, unless the client commissions a series for a specific audience, writers draw on their conceptions of audiences during the creation process. A cis-male heterosexual says that "revolutionary scripts sometimes [are not acquired by the platform they were originally created for and] end up on public channels with the inevitable negotiations of the imagined plots and characters to protect their ideological and commercial interests."

Occasionally, a media outlet and its audience interact regarding the need for LGBTQ+ writers to tell queer stories of particular personal interest to them. In these cases, writers might find creative solutions to negotiate the tension involved in satisfying all the parties, including themselves. They do not entirely renounce their agency but, as suggested earlier, prefer to pragmatically adapt to their potential audiences. For example, a gay scriptwriter said:

> I probably wouldn't write about a gay sadomasochist protagonist for [public television anonymized] because I don't think they'd get it, unless I did it in a very special and concrete way. But, if I want to include a specific [queer] character, I typically think about that TV channel's audience, and I also think about the audience I'd like to attract and then I try to fit my story as close as I can to my idea without scaring the audience that I need to continue watching my series … [I try] to tell my story to the largest possible number of people.

On the other hand, TV audiences are perceived as conservative [traditional] by some writers, who hence justify their use of clichés and conventional discourses in their narratives. As stated by this gay scriptwriter: "[the character] does things that conservative audiences want to see."

Likewise, some cis-male writers not only describe TV audiences as conservative [traditionalists] but also as mainly composed of men, claiming that this impedes the creation of certain types of LGBTQ+ characters and audiences' engagement with them. Indeed, a heterosexual writer claims that these audiences have cognitive difficulties processing certain kinds of queer characters because they have not had many opportunities to recognize or become familiar with sexual diversity:

> … including a transgender male character who was previously a woman and transited to a man is a difficult thing to process because your brain simply [resists] something that it hasn't seen before. I believe it's trendier to present a man who transits to a woman because this has been seen more often … It's as absurd as that. It's no better or worse for society but the audience finds it easier to accept and understand a trans woman.

Along the same lines, queer stories targeting general audiences tend to romanticize and sweeten male-to-female transitions due to the belief that MAINAUD are not ready to naturally enjoy realistic portrayals of transgender people, and hence do not get attached to such narratives. According to a cis-male heterosexual writer, it is imperative to generate empathy with transgender characters by using love themes, which are common to all human beings. However, LGBTQ+ audiences are receptive to complex stories and characters: "[For LGBTQ+ audiences, instead], you can create a vicious transgender who does heroin and is bisexual … or a series containing only lesbian characters."

Image as key

The following cis-female heterosexual writer considers that the key issue is the characteristics of writers' mental images of their audiences. She claims that society has changed a lot on LGBTQ+ matters, and images of audiences have changed accordingly, hence it is fundamental for LGBTQ+ characters and stories to be portrayed adequately:

> … there was an image of viewers as ignorant people that you could get away with showing anything to, like that old lady from [small town] who was so macho-patriarchal or simple folk enjoying stupid jokes … and I think that the change in the perception of viewers has impacted the development of series. Viewers aren't stupid. They are smart. They are very literate when it comes to series because they've watched so many. So, this change in ideas about who is listening to you on the other side has played an essential role in the evolution of TV series in. [country anonymized]

Another issue is that LGBTQ+ scriptwriters use themselves as a reference, whereby the queer characters they create are inspired by their own

personal tastes, preferences, and conceptions. They often mistakenly believe that those ideas can be extrapolated to all LGBTQ+ audiences, in the belief that they have the knowledge and savvy to be the spokespeople for the entire queer community. Writers also self-appoint the responsibility for protecting or defending their LGBTQ+ audience, as suggested in a previous quote. This is a consequence of the recent incorporation of queer people into the industry. For instance, a gay scriptwriter said:

> I am part of the LGBTQ+ audience and I think about what I'd like to watch myself, and so I make certain decisions … I'm always my first spectator, so I need to like [the story/character] first. I need to understand it first. I need to be moved by it first. Then comes the rest of the audience. I definitely bear certain things in mind, but that's not only out of concern for the LGBTQ+ audience but for myself too … There are things that I don't want to watch or I don't want my characters to do and I extrapolate this to the LGBTQ+ audience, because I don't want them to watch these things either.

This protective attitude toward the audience is particularly evident when female and gay writers create portrayals of LGBTQ+ adolescents. For example, a cis-gay scriptwriter says that he tries to avoid clichés and stereotypes that perpetuate harmful ideas about queer people. Again, he sees himself as a kind of gatekeeper for all LGBTQ+ individuals: "If [the portrayal] provokes a negative reaction in me, I assume I reflect the whole queer community and say that I'm not doing that. Everything goes through me first."

Personal resonance

As introduced earlier, personal resonance permeates writers' work. The youngest scriptwriter in the sample agrees with her cis-gay colleagues in that she uses her own experiences as a bisexual person as a motivation to create LGBTQ+ plots and characters. By doing so, she is engaging in a form of activism. She is particularly interested in creating narratives representing female minorities and their circumstances, which she was unable to watch as an adolescent. She advocates for female audiences when she said that:

> … it is important for different forms of experiencing femininity to be shown because a lot of non-heterosexual people would like to see themselves being represented onscreen.

However, contrary to her male colleagues' opinions, this female scriptwriter claims that not only LGBTQ+ and female people but MAINAUD too are interested in such alternative representations today. According to her, although public channels are afraid to broadcast nonstandard series, general audiences have already changed:

> … [they] increasingly like to see [different] things: natural, realistic, everyday stories. People expect those [representations] more today. People are not shocked anymore by watching queer characters … It's a mistake to think [cis-heterosexuals] aren't interested in such plots. LGBTQ+ characters aren't only for LGBTQ+ people. [MA] like and demand them too.

This writer also argues for the urgent need to introduce a new generation of younger scriptwriters who have a different perception of audiences. She feels that diversity is a generational issue, and that audiences and scriptwriters need to work together to support it:

> I think about my showrunner, who's a 50-year-old male that spouts all kinds of garbage that he probably shares with other male scriptwriters who [typically] create stories about 50-year-old women whose husbands cheat on them … Unless [audiences] force the industry to search for younger and more diverse people or projects [then change won't happen]. It's difficult to break those structures … And young and diverse people are certainly entering the audiovisual sector, but they are in unstable jobs or low down in the creation chain, far from the positions of power. So, [audiences and scriptwriters] need to push for change until diversity becomes normal. It would help to improve things.

A highly experienced lesbian scriptwriter (in her fifties) declares herself to be a huge consumer of LGBTQ+ narratives to compensate for the lack of queer representation that she has suffered all her life. Now that she is a senior executive, she is better positioned to campaign for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters in the TV series she is creating. Her purpose is to provide new, realistic, and untypical role models for LGBTQ+ audiences to identify with:

> I love to watch US TV series that include diverse characters and deal with homosexual themes. I like them because we have always had to consume the other side that we don't identify with and had to find our own role models … I don't know how I am going to do it because I'll have to fight for it, but I'm going to do it. I'm going to include a character who's coherent but isn't in the show because of his/her/their sexual identity. I want to do it now because I have to make the most of my creativity and the fact that I have a free rein to put LGBTQ+ people on the show … I need LGBTQ+ people to see something real that isn't being shown anywhere else, that we're not used to seeing.

LGBTQ+ audiences

Writers acknowledge that series with a significant number of LGBTQ+ characters are often niche shows aimed at specific LGBTQ+ audiences and platforms. The recent consolidation of these programs has influenced how queer characters are created, as one heterosexual-male writer says: "Before you had to create a series to be watched by adults, grannies and children … by everyone."

A cis-female heterosexual writer argues that LGBTQ+ audiences do not expect the queerness of LGBTQ+ characters to drive the plot or be the theme of series, but just want them to be treated normally. The idea of them being conflictive and non-ordinary is out of fashion. Accordingly, she said:

> They expect to watch a series about news reporters or the police and they expect you to talk about journalism or police stations … For them, the characters' main conflict should not be being LGBTQ+. That's simply what they are.

A cis gay agrees that most LGBTQ+ audiences just expect to watch interesting stories that feature engaging queer characters "with conflicts and imperfections like non-queer characters, who are not loaded with the burden of representing the LGBTQ+ category." However, this writer also reflects on sensitive LGBTQ+ members of the audience who expect idealized images of queer people and use social networks to vociferously criticize any representation that is not flattering of and fails to pander to their community: " … unfortunately they are the most heard queer audiences. Most of us just expect interesting characters regardless of their sexual components."

Another gay writer highlights what he considers to be a problem among some gay audiences, namely their internalized homophobia that leads them to protest against any effeminate representation. To him this reflects learned scripts about what constitutes masculinity and being a man:

> … they criticize effeminate characters because they don't think gay men are like that, that this is the stereotypical image of gays … This is false. In fact, there are lots of masculine men on television, which is kind of disturbing because it's as if the only way to be gay is to be masculine. This is related to an internalized homophobia and their need for representation … We've been told so many times that men have to act in such a specific manner! There's a high percentage of self-hate … What's more, it's boring to watch idealized versions of gays onscreen.

A cis-female bisexual writer also thinks that LGBTQ+ audiences expect some kind of recognition of their existence onscreen, explicitly or not, and that this would help them to understand and deal with their sexual and gender identities:

> I know of a guy who dared to tell his parents about his sexual orientation while watching a TV series that included a nice, gay character. The series was a means for his family to address the topic … They can also help you to understand that you're not alone and that your problems or your reality aren't something weird … I have many lesbian friends who learned they liked girls from seeing girls kissing in a TV series.

Discussion

This research advances in the identification of the mental images held by fiction series scriptwriters of modern-day audiences' attitudes, conceptions, and preferences with regard to LGBTQ+ characters and storylines in serialized narratives. In doing so, it answers the call for studies of the assumptions, practices and expectations of industry members that shape media representations of LGBTQ+ people and the subsequent policies of cultural industries regarding sexual and gender diversity in modern societies (Martin, 2015; Vanlee, 2019).

Framed within MPS, this research accepts the interrelation between media professionals' experiences and production (Paterson et al., 2016) and conceptualizes what scriptwriters think about audiences' needs and attitudes (Redvall, 2018). Inexplicably, writers have been ignored by mainstream scholarship (Taylor & Batty, 2016) and have a low profile in the audio-visual industry (Bourgeois-Bougrine & Glăveanu, 2018) despite their major role as cultural intermediaries who convey social meanings in media narratives (Kerrigan & Batty, 2016; Wolff, 1981), as this study also recognizes.

Moreover, this research furthers the scarce scholarship concerning the relationship between scriptwriters (Hart, 2016; Krikova, 2021; Martin, 2015, 2018) and media queerness (e.g., McInroy & Craig, 2017). It specifically contributes to efforts from QPS to identify the influences behind the conception of queer media contents (Martin, 2018) by focusing on the important role played by scriptwriters (Wuest, 2018), which this study confirms, as propagators of society's image of LGBTQ+ people.

The results are aligned to previous work on MPS that has identified how media professionals draw on their own attitudes regarding audiences and use them actively in their work (e.g., Ross, 2014). As identified for media executives and other kinds of content (i.e., Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2021), most scriptwriters of televised fiction hold certain views of what their audiences prefer about LGBTQ+ contents. This undoubtedly permeates the configuration of the narratives and characters they design. These mental images are based on the personal experiences of writers their immediate social circles, meaning that they conceive audiences as they do themselves (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2021) and hence encourage the kind of LGBTQ+ representations that they would prefer to see. These results also indicate that these mental images are shaped by the writers' own sexual and gender identities, although age also plays a part in shaping the way they view their audiences. LGBTQ+ writers, and particularly the younger ones participating, seem to conceive general audiences as more open, needing of, appreciative of and interested in LGBTQ+ portrayals than most other writers, especially cis-heterosexual men. They tend to define general audiences as masculine and

conservative or traditionalist, which is in line with the so-called hegemonic heteronormative representations perpetuated by the audio-visual industry (Sánchez-Soriano & García-Jiménez, 2020) and its common marketing strategy of mainly focusing on satisfying heterosexual viewers (Scott, 2019; Woods & Hardman, 2021).

Moreover, LGBTQ+ writers of the sample, and especially younger ones, demand a generational shift not only among scriptwriters but also in the managerial structures of the audio-visual industry, which they feel should reflect the needs of audiences in advanced societies who expect a more realistic representation of LGBTQ+ people. This would in turn contribute to the total normalization of queer people on television. However, this revolutionary attitude contrasts with the more cautious approach of experienced middle-aged professionals, including queers, to the representation of LGBTQ+ characters, which they may personally advocate but are nevertheless conditioned by their assumptions as to what older generations of viewers might or might not accept and enjoy. All of the above informs that scriptwriters invariably view audiences through their own lenses: young LGBTQ+ writers might consider that society has already changed its attitude to gender and sexual identity, so audiences expect more positive portrayals of queers, while experienced middle-aged writers, regardless of their identities, tend to think the opposite. Both groups ultimately agree on the need to uphold the conservative approach to audiences as endorsed by audio-visual executives, which is defined by an experienced cis-male heterosexual writer in the sample as masculine and heteronormative.

One of the most interesting observations of this research is that all writers, except for some cis-male heterosexuals, spontaneously recognize their agency and effect in shaping audiences' values regarding LGBTQ+ matters, in line with Martin (2015). Since LGBTQ+ writers are aware of being a minority in the audio-visual industry (Martin, 2015, 2018; O'Brien & Kerrigan, 2020), they admit to exercising as much of their authority as they can (Sender, 2012) to develop the contents they like (Mayer, 2017). This is also rooted in their self-perception as experienced scriptwriters who are knowledgeable about their audiences' needs (e.g., Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2021) and who impose their own criteria when they reach high levels of the writing chain. In doing so, they are acting as gatekeepers for LGBTQ+ audiences (e.g., Andersen, 2020) in the belief that they possess the savvy and talent to recognize the needs of queer youngsters (e.g., Mayer, 2017) and act on their behalf (e.g., Ross, 2014). Paradoxically, scriptwriters seem to ignore the willingness of MAINAUD, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity, to enjoy and appreciate LGBTQ+ characters and stories, particularly those portraying good-hearted queer people (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2014).

Likewise, most cis-male heterosexual scriptwriters of the sample relate to their audiences in more pragmatic, results-oriented manners (i.e., achieving large audiences, doing successful creative work or recognizing queer people as part of the audience) in alignment with capitalistic goals (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2021). Moreover, their attitudes are coherent with previous research indicating that mainstream media reproduce dominant ideologies that are ideologically and politically challenged by queerness (Joyrich, 2014). Contrarily, LGBTQ+ and female scriptwriters claim to have an emotional bond with their viewers, and feel their mission is to provide youngsters with the fictional role models that they lack to help them to construct their identities. Although the emotional involvement of scriptwriters with their work has been described previously (Higueras-Ruiz et al., 2021; Kerrigan & Batty, 2016; Krikova, 2021), this is the first empirical study to have identified the conditions in which such engagement with audiences occurs. Precisely, two different attitudes have been identified among scriptwriters: (a) a more activist one among LGBTQ + professionals in defense of queer rights and the need for younger queers in particular to be represented more in the media; and (b) a more caring, perhaps maternalistic, attitude among female heterosexual writers who want to protect adolescents from exposure to erroneous/stereotypical representations. Both these groups are operating from a position of authority above their younger audiences, who they view as passive consumers who need to be protected against harmful media. However, regardless of their purpose, these LGBTQ+ and female writers must work their aspirations around the homonormativity (Martin, 2015), commercial structures, and conventions of traditional media industries (Kerrigan & Batty, 2016). To some extent it is paradoxical that scriptwriters should self-attribute the authority to create narratives for certain audiences (Mayer, 2017) and to talk on their behalf (Ross, 2014), and yet end up yielding to the cultural and structural conventions of the audiovisual system (Andersen, 2020; Havens & Lotz, 2016).

This hierarchy of scriptwriters over their audiences is particularly challenged by the younger generation of the former. These participants insist that the latter are demanding more adequate LGBTQ+ contents, and that audiences should play an active role in eliciting these changes by modifying their consumption habits and voicing criticism, especially via social networks. As indicated earlier, scriptwriters' images of their audiences seem conditioned by their age and generation. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first research to unveil such a connection.

Finally, according to the results, all scriptwriters regardless of their sexual and gender identities hold stereotypical images of their audiences that are based on their own preferences and personal experiences. However, these are also the result of their internalization of the standard professional practices of the audio-visual industry. Consequently, as proposed by this research, the notion of mental images of the audiences links the individual profiles of the

scriptwriters with the perceived industrial necessities. Indeed, this research finds that scriptwriters actively follow the industry conventions when creating LGBTQ+ stories and characters, even in the cases of queer activists who disagree with such stereotypical understandings of audiences. For instance, a gay scriptwriter had long desired to create a gay romantic comedy but refrained from doing so due to the fear that nobody in the industry would support it. Consequently, different actions would be required to change scriptwriters' perceptions about the relationship between modern-day audiences and LGBTQ+ representations and the subsequent effect on conceptions of queer stories and characters in fictional series. These might include fostering more diverse teams of writers in terms of gender, sexuality and age, access for queer people to creative and executive positions in the industry, training programs on ways to counter sexual and gender prejudices, and encouragement to shift from self-centered tunnel visions toward becoming agents of change instead.

Limitations

Future research should replicate the observations in various contexts, especially in those that may be less respectful of diversity. As most participating scriptwriters in this study had not developed LGBTQ+ contents for specific queer audiences, further investigation should explore how writers perceive queer audiences in such productions.

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