"Isn't that what you want, to be accepted?": Critical analysis of LGTBIQ+ characters on television series in the United States

"¿No es lo que pretendes, ser aceptado?": análisis crítico de personajes LGTBIQ+ en series de televisión estadounidenses

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Abstract:

In recent years, there has been an exponential increase in the number of LGTBIQ+ characters and storylines appearing in serialized fiction in the United States. This has gained importance due to the effects of media discourses on social imaginaries with regard to the sexual diversity of a community that suffers a high degree of social, political and labor discrimination. Therefore, the objective is to critically analyze which are the general trends in recent years. Hence, this research is based on a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of fictional series from the last decade. This analysis is approached from two levels: first, the macro-level, in which the discourse around which the storylines are based is analyzed; and a second micro-level, which addresses the issues of lexicalization, focus and conceptual polarization. The results

Resumen:

Los personajes y tramas del colectivo LGTBIQ+ en las ficciones seriadas estadounidenses han experimentado un aumento exponencial en los últimos años. Esto cobra importancia debido a los efectos de los discursos mediáticos en los imaginarios sociales sobre la diversidad sexual en un colectivo que sufre un alto grado de discriminación social, política y laboral. Por ello, el objetivo es analizar críticamente cuáles son las principales tendencias en la representación actual. Para ello, la investigación se basa en un análisis crítico del discurso (CDA) de ficciones seriadas de la última década. Este análisis se ha articulado en dos niveles: un primero macro, donde se analizan los discursos que articulan las tramas; y un segundo micro, que aborda las cuestiones de la lexicalización, el focus o la polarización conceptual. Los resultados muestran la existencia

suggest the existence of a dual pattern in these characters, whereby they are based within the construction of a homonormative narrative and/or otherwise placed in marginal or socially excluded settings. Moreover, many traditionally common stereotypes are maintained, and sexual identity and orientation continue to feature prominently among the main story arcs of these characters. It is thus concluded that quantitative growth is insufficient if it is not accompanied by greater normalization.

Keywords:

Television series; LGTBIQ+; United States; representation; critical discourse analysis.

de un doble patrón en estos personajes, que se basan o bien en una construcción narrativa homonormativa o bien en la ubicación de estos personajes en entornos marginales y de exclusión social. Además, se mantienen numerosos estereotipos frecuentes históricamente y la identidad y orientación sexuales siguen siendo una de las tramas principales de estos. Se concluye, por lo tanto, afirmando que el crecimiento cuantitativo no es suficiente si este no se acompaña de una mayor normalización.

Palabras clave:

Series de televisión; LGTBIQ+; Estados Unidos; representación; análisis crítico del discurso.

1. Introduction

Serialized fiction involving characters and storylines from the LGTBIQ+ collective are increasingly more common in audiovisual production (Monaghan, 2021) and, following the arrival of streaming platforms (HBO Max, Netflix, etc.), they now have a global reach. And North American fiction is of particular relevance due to the crucial role that the United States plays as a cultural reference in other parts of the world (Gao et al., 2020).

On the one hand, the media exert a powerful influence due to their role as creators of shared imaginaries (Valaskivi & Sumiala, 2014) in societies as a whole, but also in the self-image of the community itself. These imaginaries play a prominent role because they can generate distorted or misguided ideas about the social image of different communities, such as immigrants, LGTBIQ+, women, etc.

On the other hand, the LGTBIQ+ community, despite benefitting from certain legislative measures, such as the nationwide endorsement of same-sex marriage in the US in 2015, is still one of the minorities that suffers the greatest inequality on a social level. This is the case in different areas, such as workplace discrimination. Indeed, they are one of the groups that are on the receiving end of the most hate crimes in the United States (Gerstenfeld, 2019).

In addition, American serial fiction has undergone very particular historical developments, from the censorship and non-existence of LGTBIQ+ characters in the early years to the present (Hernández-Pérez & Sánchez-Soriano, 2023), where the increase in representation has even led to various phenomena along the lines of 'queer coding' and 'pinkwashing'.

Thus, the recent growth in fiction featuring characters and storylines from this community, the appearance of new techniques that this increase has entailed, and the impact of the media on society and various social groups have raised the need for a study of the media discourses that are currently taking place. This is especially of interest to a group that has traditionally faced situations of inequality on so many social, political and economic levels, among others. The goal of this research is therefore to critically understand the general trends in the representation of the LGTBIQ+ community in US fiction series in recent years.

1.1. Social imaginaries and their effects on the LGTBIQ+ community

One of the key issues regarding the role of the media is their function as creators of social imaginaries, which are legitimized through media discourse (Andreassen, 2017). Social imaginaries can be viewed as subjective and shared sociocultural constructions that enable us to understand, interpret and intervene in what we understand to be reality and the meanings thereof (Jasanoff & Kim, 2013). These imaginaries originating from the media have an impact on society's perception of various concepts, such as hegemonic masculinity (Levon et al., 2017), or of communities, such as LGTBIQ+ people.

In this regard, research such as that by Kulpa (2019) has analyzed the imaginaries produced by the media in countries such as Poland, encountering representations of the LGTBIQ+ community that situate it in a symbolic 'otherness'. Other studies on social imaginaries and the LGTBIQ+ community in the West, such as those by Vertovec (2012), infer a tendency for society to recognize the existence of a diversity in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation and so on that should facilitate social change. However, he comments that this trend does not necessarily imply a positive attitude towards said difference, and that this does not presuppose the direct disappearance of homophobia since it can even trigger violent reactions.

Said imaginaries emanating from the media, and in the particular case of this research from serialized fiction, have frequently been investigated for the presence of stereotypical elements that are then socialized by their audiences (Ward & Grower, 2020). These negative stereotypes have direct effects on the LGTBIQ+ community, causing situations of inequality, discrimination or violence (Mortimer et al., 2019). Hence, social imaginaries, which are symbolic constructions, ultimately produce direct and material effects.

However, various theories from cultural studies regarding the way people negotiate and interpret media messages maintain that these imaginaries can be modified. These are currents such as queer theory, which criticizes the established categories (homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman, etc.), considering them imposed and classificatory (Butler, 1990). Examples of research that has followed the current of critical queer theory include the studies by Atkins (2012), which seek to provide, from academia, positive views to counteract the hegemonic stereotyped imaginaries associated to the LGTBIQ+ community.

1.2. Evolution of LGTBIQ+ in serialized fiction in the United States: from invisibility to exponential growth

The historical development of US serial fiction featuring LGTBIQ+ characters and storylines has gone from invisibility (Waggoner, 2018) to the current scenario, with the highest number of such characters ever (GLAAD, 2023). In the early days of television, narratives about this community were censored due to such regulations as the Hays Code, which considered these practices to be a perversion and was active from the 1930s to the 1960s (Davies, 2016).

It was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that LGTBIQ+ characters began to appear on American television. It happened in different ways, always sporadically. At first, they were introduced as secondary characters in series such as *Bewitched* (ABC: 1964-1972), although they were not explicitly called homosexuals (Miller, 2021). Later, the characters were explicit, but were portrayed as wicked, such as the murderous lesbian in *Police Woman* (NBC: 1974-1978), or to get the audience laughing, such as the effeminate Bruce character in *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In* (NBC: 1968-1973) (Levine, 2007).

Moving on to the 1980s and the outbreak of the HIV crisis, new stereotypes were added to the imaginaries created by the media, and the pandemic caused a certain degree of invisibility (MacIsaac, 2017). However, this was also the era when the first non-sporadic and openly LGTBIQ+ characters started to appear, such as the gay character called Steven in *Dynasty* (ABC: 1981-1989).

In the 1990s, coinciding with certain social progress, there was a notable increase in such representations in prime-time fiction (Kohnen, 2015), such as Matt in *Melrose Place* (Fox: 1992-1999). There were also certain milestones, including the first prime-time kiss between two men in 2000, which happened on *Dawson's Creek* (The WB: 1998-2003) (Crowley Webber, 2019).

There was a major increase in the 2000s, and particularly on subscription television, which included series with fully LGTBIQ+ casts, such as the male characters in *Queer as Folk* (Showtime: 2000-2005) and the female ones in *The L Word* (Showtime: 2004-2009) (Peters, 2011). There was further increase in the 2010s, and on traditional networks too, with shows like *Modern Family* (ABC: 2009-2020), and especially with the arrival of new streaming services like Netflix (Marcos-Ramos & González-de-Garay, 2021).

This growth has been corroborated by the GLAAD association, which publishes its annual *Where We Are on TV* report that analyzes LGTBIQ+ representation on fictional serials in the United States and suggests a gradual increase in the number of such characters since 2010 (GLAAD, 2023).

2. Methodology

Starting from the boom in the last decade of televised fiction with characters from the LGTBIQ+ community, the intention is to understand the main trends in representation in recent years by means of a critical discourse analysis (CDA). This approach was chosen because, as Van Dijk (2009) notes, society is a condition or consequence of discourse. This implies that present discourses on this community in media narratives have ideological effects and that these have the capacity to condition social imaginaries and, therefore, to determine reality (Wodak, 2011).

CDA analyzes and questions the practices of domination and inequality that are present in discourses, and which foster the reproduction of power and ultimately provoke symbolic violence (Van Dijk, 2009). It has also been used in similar examples of discrimination against certain social groups, such as studies on homophobia (Van Leeuwen, 2018).

A multimodal discourse analysis is proposed because, due to its very nature, serial fiction is not limited to pure textual analysis. Other elements, such as images, also need to be analyzed (Roderick, 2018). This adaptation of CDA was proposed by Sánchez-Soriano and García-Jiménez (2020) for Hollywood feature films with LGTBIQ+ characters. It is based on two levels:

▪ Macro-level analysis: These are the large macrostructures or meanings present in media discourse. In other words, the main discourse, as described by García-Jiménez et al., (2015, p. 312). Following an initial overview, they propose:

– Naturalized LGTBIQ+ representation: Diverse sexual orientation and gender identity is positively integrated both in characters and in their storylines.

– Conflictive LGTBIQ+ representation: Sexual orientation is depicted as a problematic issue. For example, such characters are the baddies, are emotionally instable or their sexuality is a problem for themselves or for others.

– Ambiguous LGTBIQ+ representation: The portrayal in the narrative is unclear. Elements of both of the above forms, naturalization and conflict, are introduced.

This differentiation between positive, negative and neutral discourses in the LGTBIQ+ audiovisual corpus has been used before in other similar studies (Lissitsa & Kushnirovich, 2019).

▪ Micro-level analysis: These are the more specific structures that derive from the macrostructures. They are divided into:

1. Themes: The main themes associated to LGTBIQ+ characters. There can be several, such as professional, love, conflict over sexuality, etc.

2. Lexicalization: Analysis of the lexicon, which includes the expressions, names, adjectives, etc., used by the characters (Pineda, et al., 2016). In turn, this is divided into:

– Lexicalization of the characters: Analysis of the characters and their main attributes. Whether they are inmates, teachers, doctors, etc.

– Lexicalization of the action: Analysis of the main actions performed during a character's dramatic arc. Whether they are traffickers, care workers, etc.

– Display of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity: Analysis of whether they are shown to belong to the community in a public, restricted or concealed way.

– Stereotypes: Analysis of traditional stereotypes in sociocultural imaginaries, such as the baddies and comic relief mentioned in the theoretical framework.

3. Propositional structures: This analysis is based on the allocation of roles to the analyzed characters. This is further divided into:

– Agentivization: Analysis of who is responsible for the action or, in the opposite sense, whether de-agentivization occurs, a process that reduces the agentivity of the person who performs it. This serves to unmask the underlying ideology in discourse, as described by López-González et al., (2015, p. 218).

– Roles: Analysis of the roles presented by the analyzed characters. Whether they perform positive, comic, negative actions, etc.

– Conceptual polarization: Analysis of the existence of a divide between a symbolically dominant group ('Us') and a symbolically dominated group ('Them') in narratives.

– Focus: Determination and analysis of the privileged point of view that discourse might favor (Pineda et al., 2016, p. 7), which, among others, could be heteronormative, homonormative, based on diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, etc.

Due to the material difficulty of analyzing all the US serials of recent years on all the traditional networks and streaming platforms, the proposal was to choose a certain number of fictional series from the last decade. These serials with LGTBIQ+ characters and storylines were selected from the IMBd (Internet Movie Database) website, one of the world's leading databases of television series. The selection criteria were:

Table 1. Selection criteria

Search Date	December 2021
Title Type	TV Series
Release Date	2011 to present
User Rating	7.5 to 10
Number of Votes	Minimum of 15,000
Genre	All
Countries	United States
Keywords	Gay, lesbian, trans, intersex, queer, non-binary, gender fluid, LGBT

Source: own elaboration

The reason for having a minimum average score of 7.5 out of 10 and a minimum of 15,000 votes was to only include shows that had been successful among critics and audiences alike, and were therefore relevant in terms of popular culture. Series were chosen from 2011 onwards in order to analyze the last available decade and the best-known categories on the LGTBIQ+ community were searched. Once these filters had been applied, the sample consisted of 48 series, of which ten were eliminated because they had no LGTBIQ+ lead characters from the pilot episode through to the end of the first season, leaving a final sample of 38 series.

Once all of the criteria had been applied, a random sample of seven series was selected, and a total of 18 characters were analyzed. We then viewed the whole of the first season, picking out significant scenes involving the following characters and series:

Table 2. Selected sample

Series	Platform	Broadcast year	Character	Age	Gender identity and sexual orientation
Euphoria	HBO	2019	Rue	17	Female cis bisexual
			Jules	17	Female trans bisexual
Looking	HBO	2014	Patrick Murray	29	Male cis homosexual
			Agustín Lanuez	31	Male cis homosexual
			Dominic «Dom» Basaluzzo	39	Male cis homosexual
Orange is the New Black	Netflix	2013	Piper Chapman	32	Female cis bisexual
			Alex Vause	31	Female cis lesbian
Pose	FX	2018	Angel	23	Female trans heterosexual
			Blanca Rodriguez-Evangelista	26	Female trans heterosexual
			Elektra Abundance	49	Female trans heterosexual
			Damon Richards	17	Male cis homosexual
			Pray Tell	42	Male cis homosexual
Sense8	Netflix	2015	Amanita "Neets" Caplan	27	Female cis lesbian
			Lito Rodríguez	25	Male cis homosexual
			Nomi Marks	27	Female trans lesbian
Shameless	Showtime	2011	Ian Gallagher	15	Male cis homosexual
Transparent	Amazon Prime Video	2014	Maura Pfefferman	70	Female trans lesbian
			Sarah Pfefferman	45	Female cis bisexual

Source: own elaboration

3. Results and Discussion

A. Macro-level

In most of the analyzed series, 5 out of the 7, a macro or general discourse is observed that associates diverse sexual orientation and gender identity with elements of conflict. This occurs in shows such as *Pose*, in which the characters live in marginalized, criminal environments, which leads them to carry out actions such as theft; or in *Orange is the New Black*, in prison. Also Ian's homosexuality in *Shameless* is a conflict for him, and he keeps it hidden from most other characters. This portrayal with abundant elements of conflict has been corroborated by other similar studies, such as that by McLaughlin & Rodriguez (2017). Numerous stereotypes are also observed, such as associating the LGTBIQ+ community to the HIV virus, a frequent stereotype since the earliest audiovisual representations of this group (Sallabank et al., 2021).

Only two shows, *Transparent* and *Sense8*, present an ambiguous discourse in which positive and conflictive elements are introduced, as occurs with the Lito character in *Sense8*, who hides her membership of the group in order to keep up appearances and out of fear of losing her job as an acclaimed actress among the cisheterosexual female audience. Therefore, diverse sexual orientations and gender identities do not fit naturally into the context of the analyzed series. We examine these macro discourses in greater detail at the micro-level.

B. Micro-level:

1. Themes

The most used theme in these series is one of a negative nature, and is that dealing with the conflict over the characters' sexuality. This occurs with the Angel character in *Pose*, who is refused jobs because she is trans, and with Ian in *Shameless*, who hides his homosexuality until he is found out by his brother Lip, whose initial reaction is negative.

Second, there is a theme based on a criminal, marginalized context, which we find in *Pose*, where racialized and LGTBIQ+ characters live in marginal neighborhoods of New York City and need to resort to such work as prostitution in order to survive. Here we once again encounter the association between the LGTBIQ+ community and conflict, as observed in other studies such as those by Fredenburg (2019).

Two other themes appear in these series to a lesser extent. On the one hand, the search for a large number of affective and sexual relations, as is the case with the characters in *Looking*, who often have several partners, such promiscuous behavior being a common element in the show (Villanueva-Baselga, 2021):

– *Dom (to Patrick): "Something awful happened to me at work today. I didn't get to fuck someone I wanted to fuck"*

– *Patrick: "So?"*

– *Dom: "So it's the first time it's ever happened to me. I'm so sick of all these annoying, overachieving 20-something cunts"*

On the other hand, the defense of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity is also observed, as occurs in *Sense8*, which features charity fundraising for the LGTBIQ+ community, and in which Amanita defends the fact that Nomi is trans against other characters' transphobia. These mainly negative or activist themes are therefore not helping to naturalize these characters in equal conditions either within the plot or with regard to other cisheterosexual characters.

2. Lexicalization

2.1. Lexicalization of characters and action

Numerous analyzed characters have professional jobs, however, a large percentage have roles that are viewed as socio-culturally negative, such as prisoners (Piper in *Orange is the New Black*) or drug dealers or users, like Rue in *Euphoria*. Indeed, recent studies claim that young people feel that TV and movies present a direct relationship between the LGTBIQ+ community and drug use as part of their culture (Demant et al., 2021).

On the other hand, despite the fact that several characters are depicted as kind and friendly, one example being how Blanca from *Pose* regularly helps the others, most of them perform violent, authoritarian or impulsive actions, such as the characters in *Pose*, Blanca included, who even steal clothes from a museum to wear at a drag ball. They are also shown acting in an immature or infantile manner, or manipulating others to get what they want, like Alex does to Piper in *Orange is the New Black*:

– *Piper (to Alex, unsure whether to help her get a case full of drug money through the airport): "Alright Alex, I don't know if I can"*

– *Alex: "Hey. You're a nice young lady, aren't you? A proper young lady. Just picking up her sensible bag in the baggage lane. Before heading on to her mid-range hotel to go over her schedules. Museum visits and fancy dinners. It's all fine. It's all good. And I will meet you in Brussels and everything will work out perfectly, babe. I promise"*

This direct and distorted link between the LGTBIQ+ community and negative attributes, especially concerning drugs, helps to maintain these misleading social imaginaries of such groups (Mortimer et al., 2019).

2.2. Display of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity:

In most fiction, a discourse is observed in which gender and sexual diversity are only made public in specific contexts where it is beneficial to do so. This occurs with the characters of Dom, Patrick and Agustín (*Looking*), who mostly interact with other LGTBIQ+ characters from a gay neighborhood of San Francisco. Hence, there is no real coexistence between sexual diversities. Other characters are only openly LGTBIQ+ with certain characters and not the others, as is the case with Sarah (*Transparent*), since her husband and current family does not know about her past with another woman.

Meanwhile, other characters hide their sexual orientation, such as Piper (*Orange is the New Black*), who denies her lesbian relationship at college, even considering her membership of the community to be something 'temporary':

– *Piper (to her fiancé, Larry): "It was a phase. It was my lost soul, post-college, adventure phase. I was so embarrassed."*

Piper claims that she was able to "run away" from being a lesbian.

– *Piper (to her fiancé, Larry): "I was 22! I thought that I was in love. I was in love and it was all crazy. And then it got scary, and I ran away and I became the nice blonde lady that I was supposed to be".*

So, once again there is discourse that does not integrate the sexual diversity of numerous analyzed characters in a naturalized manner, keeping it hidden, restricted or only open in favorable settings. However, among other cisheterosexual characters this is neither their main story arc, nor a problem for them or other characters. It should be noted how these media are able to define our own identities and what we know about other people regarding such matters as sexual orientation (Holtzman & Sharpe, 2014), thus cultivating the idea that sexual diversities are not an integrated part of society.

2.3. Stereotypes

Numerous recurring stereotypes from the history of American LGTBIQ+ fiction are observed in the analyzed shows. The most common stereotype is that of associating the community with marginal or tragic lives, as occurs in *Pose,* which is set in a deprived neighborhood. This traditional stereotype also tends to associate these characters to HIV (Sallabank et al., 2021).

Second, many shows include discourses that present a stereotype whereby the characters are either homonormativized or develop gender roles in LGTBIQ+ couples. There are characters who have assimilated the typical characteristics of upper-middle class, young middle-age Caucasians with a muscular or slim body, which heteronormativity accepts, while eliminating such characteristics as effeminacy and eccentricity, which are viewed in a negative light (Francis, 2021). Hence, a social construct is established with regard to what is 'normal' (Vanlee, 2019). Similarly, numerous characters play traditional male or female roles, like Piper in *Orange is the New Black*, whose role is 'submissive', 'passive' and feminine, while Alex is shown to be 'dominant', possessive and more associated to toxic hypermasculinity.

Other frequent stereotypes associate the group with promiscuity, sometimes linking this to drug use. That is the case with the characters in *Looking*, who go cruising. This stereotype is widely established in social imaginaries of the LGTBIQ+ community, especially among young people (Jensen et al., 2022).

3. Propositional structures

3.1. Agentivization

In most of the analyzed shows, it is the cisheterosexual characters who are responsible for driving the dramatic action in which the LGTBIQ+ characters will subsequently participate. This occurs in series like *Shameless*, where the plots revolve around Frank, an alcoholic father, and his daughter Fiona. In this case, it is Lip, who is cisheterosexual, who finds a gay pornographic magazine, which triggers the plot with the LGTBIQ+ character. Similar research corroborates the use of LGTBIQ+ characters whose story arcs depend on cisheterosexual characters (Sánchez-Soriano & García-Jiménez, 2020).

But there are also exceptions in which LGTBIQ+ characters alone are responsible for the action, but this only occurs in shows where the whole cast belongs to the community, such as *Looking*. A majority tendency to deagentivize the negative actions of cisheterosexual characters, that are generally not justified among LGTBIQ+ characters, is also observed, as in the sexual aggression between McKay and Cassie in *Euphoria*, which is justified by watching pornography, and the social pressure from McKay's friends. In the LGTBIQ+ case, on the other hand, it is Rue who is presented as the only person to blame for her drug addiction, despite receiving help from other characters. So, the discourse promotes symbolic cisheterosexual dominance and self-justification of its negative elements.

3.2. Roles

Derived again from the macro-level, most of the roles observed in LGTBIQ+ characters are of a negative nature, which has been a constant throughout history (Levine, 2007). Such is the case of *Orange is the New Black*, where Alex is involved drug trafficking and dealing. Lesbianism in prison is associated with being addicted to drugs and promiscuous. In contrast, the cisheterosexual characters have positive roles on the outside and their negative nature when in prison is less emphasized, including nuns who are in prison for campaigning against nuclear energy and yoga instructors who help the other inmates.

There is also a tendency towards inconsequential or comic roles, as in shows like *Looking,* with its storyline in which Dom feels bad about being sexually rejected for the first time. These two roles only increase the process of symbolic dominance in the discourse of cisheterosexual characters, who play more vital and transcendental roles in the plot in comparison to the LGTBIQ+ ones, who tend to be used more as a complement or light relief. These non-positive roles have a direct negative impact on social imaginaries of social minorities, especially among audiences that are not used to these realities (Jacobs & van der Linden, 2017).

3.3. Conceptual polarization

In the analyzed shows, there is an 'Us' group formed mainly by symbolically privileged cisheterosexual people. In contrast, the 'Them' group is made up of minorities, such as immigrants and the LGTBIQ+ community, who hold an unequal symbolic position.

We can observe this in greater detail through the example of *Orange is the New Black*, where the 'otherness' and marginal side of the prison consists of women, African-Americans, lesbians, and so on. Here, cisheterosexual relationships are portrayed as healthy, positive and loving, such as the one between Piper and her fiancé, Larry, and the characters are depicted as compassionate and kind. In contrast, LGTBIQ+ relationships are sometimes shown to be toxic, as in the scene where Piper finds out that Alex gave her name to the federal police, which is how she ended up in jail. Moreover, in this prison context, lesbianism is used as intimidation. The officers themselves warn Piper about it:

– *Sam (corrections officer at the prison): "And there are lesbians. They're not gonna bother you. They'll try to be your friend. Just stay away from them. I want you to understand. You do not have to have lesbian sex. Don't make friends".*

Piper argues that she is not one of 'Them':

–   *Piper (to the officer): "That one time. Ten years ago"*

We find another example of this in *Shameless*, whose 'Us' versus 'Them' entails a 'Them' made up of lower class, homosexual, Muslim and other characters. However, LGTBIQ+ characters are depicted on an even lower level, and homosexual practices are even described as unnatural:

–   *Lip (to his homosexual brother Ian): "But seriously, like up the ass? Do you get used to that? I mean, the whole point of the digestive system is one-way traffic."*

The same happens in *Pose*, where there is an 'Us' and 'Them' in which the latter is made up of LGTBIQ+ characters, mostly from non-Caucasian ethno-cultures. These characters are hidden away in their own ghettos, set apart from and rejected by society while the 'Us' group is allowed to show itself freely. One such case is Stan, who hides his relationship with Angel, one of 'Them'. When she goes to visit him at work, Stan is worried that someone might see them together:

–   *Stan (to Angel): "What are you doing here?"*

–   *Angel: "I just wanted to see you. You want to get a salad or a coffee or something?"*

–   *Stan: "I have a wife. And kids. You're not somebody I can be with. Please go"*

Meanwhile, the 'Us' rejects 'Them', who try to shed their otherness, but society prevents them from doing so, as in the scene where Angel goes into a mall to enquire about a vacancy and is rejected because she is trans. The 'Us' and 'Them' polarization in *Pose* is exemplified by Blanca's definition of a ball:

–   *Blanca (a Damon): "Realness is what it's all about. Being able to fit into the straight, white world, to embody the American dream. But we don't have access to that dream. And it's not because of ability. Trust me. I mean, isn't that what you're trying to do? Dance your way into that world?"*

In this sense, it should be considered that some of these scenes, despite this strong polarization, may also increase the audience's empathy towards these characters.

On the other hand, there are shows in which there is also a cisheterosexual 'Us' versus a 'Them' formed by the LGTBIQ+ community, although this time in a non-polarized manner. This occurs in shows like *Looking*, where polarization can be observed between the main characters (who are members of the LGTBIQ+ community in a San Francisco neighborhood whose relationships are predominantly with other members of that same community) and other people. Cohabitation between the different sexual options is not shown. However, despite this polarization, the LGTBIQ+ characters' narrative characteristics are based on homonormativity and they seek to fit in as well as they can with heteronormative standards. This homonormativity is a recurring feature in shows with characters from the modern-day LGTBIQ+ community (Parsemain, 2019), thus promoting those who have assimilated specific patterns (slim, Caucasian, etc.) and relegating the rest to the side-lines.

3.4. Focus

In most of the analyzed shows, the focus is from heteronormativity, which is the predominant perspective in media discourse. This occurs in series like *Shameless*, where Ian's brother Lip tries to 'correct' the latter's homosexuality:

– *Lip (to Ian, showing him a homosexual porn magazine): "How can that be good for you? Or that?"*

Also, the common assumption is that all characters are heterosexual:

– *Fiona (to Ian, her homosexual brother): "Just tell me you didn't go and get some girl pregnant"*

– *Ian: "No worries"*

This presumption of heterosexuality coincides with the theory of the same name that has been analyzed in research such as that by Massey et al., (2021), where it is claimed that in various aspects of society, which includes the media as agents of socialization, the idea is upheld that heterosexuality is the default sexuality for human beings, and that anyone of diverse sexuality needs to demonstrate that they are exceptions.

This heteronormative focus is also present in shows like *Orange is the New Black*, where being LGTBIQ+ is portrayed as something conflictive, and can even lead characters to end up behind bars. In that show, homosexuality is even described as 'repulsive' and immoral:

– *Piper's grandmother: "What on Earth did you do with the money?"*

– *Piper: "Well, grandmother I wasn't really in it for the money"*

– *Piper's gra*ndmother: "Oh Piper. For Heaven's sake"*

Second, in other analyzed serials, despite the fact that diverse gender identities or sexual orientations are an important part of the story, heterosexuality continues to be portrayed as the privileged sexual orientation in the discourse and it is presented as the model to follow. This happens in *Looking*, where the LGTBIQ+ protagonists have narratively assimilated numerous accepted traits of heteronormativity, which is presented as the ideal to aim for. This heteronormativity is not only the symbolic focus of the analyzed shows, but also occurs in most media and implies a measure of social control and exclusion of other realities, which also has direct effects on attitudes like homophobia (Lenskyj, 2013).

4. Conclusions

These are historic times, with the GLAAD association reporting more LGTBIQ+ characters in televised fiction in the United States than ever before. However, this increase will not achieve enough if it is not accompanied by the construction of naturalized, undistorted discourse. This is motivated by the fact that these hegemonic imaginaries, despite being of a symbolic nature, have tangible material effects on the community, through such phenomena as homophobia and denial of employment. This is due to the fundamental role played by media discourse in the socialization of the population, and which is even more important in the United States due to its role in the export of global culture.

As a limitation of this study, it would undoubtedly be beneficial to include a larger number of shows in the corpus. However, the goal of this research was to perform a qualitative analysis of a hermeneutic nature, to detect trends in the current representation of the LGTBIQ+ community in the United States. Hence, it is a useful complement to quantitative studies, such as those being done by organizations like GLAAD itself.

This analysis has observed the existence of a dual polarized pattern in the narrative structures of LGTBIQ+ characters and their realities. First, there is the marginality that associates such characters with conflictive environments or behaviors, including prisons, drugs, poverty, and others. Second, there is a homonormativity whereby these characters have assimilated traits that sociocultural imaginaries view as acceptable (slender physique, Caucasian, wealthy, etc.). Both are cases of negative discourse, since the former associates the community with social exclusion and the latter marginalizes other realities, such as non-binary genders, agender, butch lesbian, effeminacy and others.

The analyzed shows certainly do include humane characters like Blanca in *Pose*, and others who the audience might reinterpret as being critical of social homophobia, such as Lito's story arc in *Sense8* about prejudice in the movie industry. Attempts at integration are also observed, with the inclusion of naturalized professions like teaching and working in a store, as evidenced by the ambiguous discourses in series such as *Transparent*. This is indicative of the on-going negotiations happening in all areas of the media and how, even in mainstream productions, representations may not have been completely deconstructed, but at least the norms of gender and sexual identity are being broken.

However, storylines continue to revolve around the characters' gender identities and sexual orientations, which are often kept secret, while numerous stereotypes also appear. Moreover, many characters are portrayed as drug users, prostitutes, prisoners, and so on. That is not to say that cisheterosexual characters do not also act negatively, in fact, some of the negative traits analysed here are directly related to the environment in which the series is set, as is the case in *Shameless*, but their storylines do not revolve around their gender identity or sexual orientation, and neither is this a problem for them. They are not attached to the same stereotypes that have been dragged out for decades (HIV, promiscuity, etc.) and they do not all live together in physical places that are exclusively for people of a certain sexual orientation, as is the case with several LGTBIQ+ characters.

Therefore, despite the progress and the quantitative increase in the number of diverse characters, this research shows that there is still a long way to go before achieving the real integration of sexual and gender dissidence in US serial fiction. Hence, a paradigm shift is required among creators, producers and directors, but more importantly, there is a need for reflection among viewers, as the consumers and main protagonists of the media industry. The goal is, therefore, to advance towards better representation and greater social equality.

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6. Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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