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# LGBT+ televisibility in Flanders: The presence of sexual and gender diversity in Flemish television fiction (2001-2016)

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## **Abstract**

Fictional representations of LGBT+ people offer a way to study how socio-cultural discourses on sexual and gender identity are reflected in popular culture. Notwithstanding the fact that particular contexts play a pivotal role in this dynamic, queer television theory currently derives exclusively from U.S. cases. With a quantitative analysis of LGBT+ characters in Flemish television fiction between 2001 and 2016, this study provides a descriptive framework to engage with the representation of sexual and gender diversity in a different context. Firstly, the study establishes the prominent presence of LGBT+ characters in Flemish television fiction. It shows that differences between Flemish public and commercial fiction content are negligible, but that discrepancies between genres are significant. The scarcity of sexual and gender diversity in externally produced ‘quality’ fiction, moreover, suggests a need for channels to formulate stricter expectations to production companies. Concerning individual characters, the study points to an overrepresentation of gay male characters, a lack of LGBT+ characters of color and the pervasiveness of gender conformity. Closer analysis, on the contrary, reveals a disarticulation of Flemings of color from homophobic violence, and the recasting of gender non-conformity on straight characters. This suggests a critical, self-reflexive awareness of stereotyping in fiction production. Accordingly, the findings of this study offer a point of departure for qualitative engagements with LGBT+ televisibility in Flanders. The data presented should not be conceived of as a finality, but as a necessary framework to internationalize and diversify the study of sexual and gender diversity on television.

## **Keywords**

Flemish TV fiction, LGBT representation, queer television studies, character monitor.

## Introduction

As the work of queer games scholar Adrienne Shaw (2017, 2019) argues and shows, adopting descriptive, data-driven methods proves valuable to introduce discrete research objects to queer studies—the field’s fraught relationship to such methods notwithstanding (see Villarejo, 2009). Offering general, often quantitative information on the inclusion of LGBTQ characters in video games—such as longitudinal representational evolutions, the (in)visibility of certain identities or their distribution over genres—Shaw’s ‘LGBTQ Game Archive’ (2016) assesses the presence of sexual and gender diversity in a medium often overlooked by queer studies, thereby opening up a field for further (interpretative) queer analysis. By expanding on similar insights derived from a database on LGBT+ characters in Flemish television fiction between 2001 and 2016 (see Vanlee et al., 2018a), this paper makes a comparable intervention in queer television studies. Conceived of as an explorative topography of Flemish LGBT+ televisibility, it shows where, when and how non-heterosexual and non-cisgendered characters have been featured in domestic television series. Doing so identifies wider dynamics and tendencies particular to the Flemish television landscape and facilitates further qualitative analysis of how sexual and gender diversity are represented in domestic television fiction content.

## Studying Flemish LGBT+ televisibility

Television content is of course a staple to queer analysis (e.g. Kooijman, 2005; Becker, 2006; Chambers, 2009; Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Dhaenens, 2012, 2014; Kies, 2016), but the bulk of existing scholarship discusses programming from the United States—with notable exceptions like Luca Malici (2011, 2014), analyzing the reception of LGBT+ characters among television viewers in Italy, or Steven Miller (2000), who explored the queerness of Japanese series. As such, content produced outside of the United States remains underexplored by queer television scholarship, meaning that established critiques of LGBT+ television representations draw disproportionately on transnationally consumed American<sup>1</sup> programming. Because the insights of established queer television scholarship—and the politics they articulate—do not necessarily resonate in non-American television cultures, the field benefits from domestic engagements with queer television analysis. Indeed, if one of the fields’ core goals is to theorize on how the self-evidence of cisgendered heterosexuality is challenged through popular culture, it should consider contexts wherein, for instance, pro-LGBT+ legislation was passed without the controversy it generated and still generates in the United States (see Warner, 2000; Engel, 2013).

Paul Borghs’ (2016) account of the LGBT+ movement in Belgium from the 1950s to the first decades of the new millennium characterize the country as a decidedly different context from the United States. Discussing how the social movement succeeded in acquiring legal protections and recognitions for sexual and gender minorities, culminating in marriage and adoption rights and thorough anti-discrimination laws in 2003, Borghs shows how initiatives for LGBT+ emancipation became increasingly state-funded. As the essay notes, ‘the Flemish umbrella organization çavaria is now one of the biggest GLBTQ organizations in Europe’ (Borghs, 2016, p. 30), situating the center of gravity of LGBT+ politics in

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<sup>1</sup> This essay follows Kylo-Patrick Hart (2000) in his use of ‘American television [fiction]’. When ‘American’ is employed as a quality to describe television series, it ‘refers to the collective body of television programming produced in the United States and made available to viewers nationwide [i.e. in the United States of America], which depicts U.S. American culture, stars primarily U.S. actors, and is presented in the English language’. (Hart, 2000, p. 59)

Flanders—the Dutch-speaking northern region of Belgium. Notably, Borghs (2016) points to the role of the media as an important site wherein the emancipation of sexual and gender diversity was achieved, arguing that the lack of polarization and sensationalism in domestic media contributed to serene debate and public acceptance (p. 61). Naturally, this distinguishes Flanders—and Belgium by extension—from the well-known context of the United States. Following Borghs' argument, Flemish media portrayals of sexual and gender diversity offer productive cases to theorize the prosocial and emancipatory role popular culture might play for LGBT+ people, alongside legal efforts such as antidiscrimination legislation and the ratification of same-sex marriage in 2003 (see Borghs & Eeckhout, 2009). This seems especially pertinent with regards to the Flemish public service broadcaster, which is bound by decree to reflect the socio-cultural diversity of the community it caters to—which logically includes LGBT+ people (Dhoest, 2015). Theorization can only thrive after certain prerequisites have been met (see Villarejo, 2009), however, necessitating a descriptive and factual account on the state of LGBT+ visibility in Flanders.

Fictional portrayals in particular have significant potential to map out the visibility of sexual and gender diversity, as the presence of certain characters and storylines exceeds the sometimes momentary attention of non-scripted media. Domestic fiction, more importantly, has the added advantage of reflecting an explicitly local discursive construction of sexual and gender diversity, allowing an understanding of how LGBT+ subjectivities relate to notions of national and/or regional identity. As domestically produced fiction is decidedly more popular than foreign imports in Flanders (see Vanlee et al., 2018a), its non-heterosexual and non-cisgendered characters can be expected to resonate more in the public debate too. As George Gerbner and Larry Gross (1976) argue, 'representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation' (p. 182), alluding to fictional characters' reflection of the social. This does not mean, of course, that LGBT+ representation is a mere 'numbers game' and increasing numbers of non-heterosexual or non-cisgendered characters necessarily signify political progress. In fact, many queer television scholars (e.g. Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Chambers, 2009; Heller, 2011) are highly critical of such a simplistic 'politics of visibility' entrenched in quantitative analysis and argue for interpretative, qualitative approaches. Elsewhere, we acknowledge the necessity of approaching Flemish LGBT+ visibility by way of close readings and textual analyses of specific cases (see Vanlee et al., 2018b, 2019), but contend that quantitative analysis is a useful method to disclose broader representational patterns found in domestic television culture. Descriptive, quantitative approaches offer the means to contextualize individual case studies, and contribute to a broader understanding of particular domestic contexts in a global cultural system such as television.

### **Collecting and counting Flemish LGBT+ characters**

Though necessary, mapping Flemish LGBT+ characters is difficult, and the scarcity of data on Flemish television fiction in general proves an important hurdle. Notwithstanding this general scarcity, some data are accessible. Audience ratings are aggregated by the Centre for Information on the Media [Centrum voor Informatie over de Media] (CIM), and display the viewer shares of Flemish television channels (e.g. CIM, 2017). While these figures disclose very little regarding content, they are a useful secondary source to gauge the popularity of series wherein certain characters and storylines are featured. The study of diversity on Flemish television is situated within public service broadcaster VRT's [Flemish Radio and Television Broadcasting Organization] democratic mission to be a broadcaster 'for all

Flemings'. VRT is bound to offer a 'representative, non-stereotypical, gender-neutral and nuanced portrayal of all branches of society' (VRT, 2016: 15). To attain this, the broadcaster relies on a yearly 'Diversity Monitor' aimed at evaluating the diversity of their output (De Swert et al., 2017). The reliance on this monitor suggests an active engagement on behalf of the VRT, alluding to critical self-evaluation, but is of limited value for the current study. Sexual and gender diversity are not included as variables, as LGBT+ identities cannot always be dependably coded in a sample-based qualitative content analysis.

Given the large temporal frame of the study, qualitative content analysis (see Bignell, 2012) does not provide a suitable method. Demarcating a certain period wherein all LGBT+ characters in domestic fiction content are counted provides little insight into longitudinal trends—a key goal for this study. The objective of the study is descriptive rather than inferential, moreover, and aims to provide a factual context to facilitate further qualitative enquiry (see Flanders, 2014). Accordingly, the method deployed is more related to the field of digital humanities (see Arthur & Bode, 2014; Warwick, Terras & Nyhan, 2012; Berry, 2012) than communication sciences—the field traditionally associated with television monitoring. Specifically, this entails an approach akin to cataloguing, wherein LGBT+ characters are identified, collected and indexed. Hence, data collection did not rely on a code book, but a set of indexing guidelines denoting the type of factual information required to submit a character to the database. For the inclusion of particular indexes in relation to LGBT+ characters, the study relied on an extensive literature review of existing scholarship on the subject. This resulted in a framework based on pertinent parameters needed to contextualize the Flemish case in the wider field of queer television studies. The most important indexed traits employed for individual characters are: character type, LGBT+ identity (sexual and/or gender), seasons present, explicit LGBT+ storyline, ethnicity, class, relationship(s), marriage and phobic violence (for an exhaustive overview of all indexing guidelines, see Vanlee et al., 2018a).

Because of the temporal scope, data-collection could not rely on primary sources (i.e. analyzing currently broadcast television series), and thus instead made extensive use of secondary sources. Concretely, this entailed the triangulation of meta- and paratextual sources on Flemish television fiction series, resulting in a database of LGBT+ characters in fifteen years of domestic television fiction content. Scholarly literature on sexual and gender diversity in Flemish television fiction is scarce at best, leaving popular sources to be the most reliable source of information. Fragmented and heterogeneous, these sources include—but are not limited to—channel and broadcaster websites, DVD-covers, written press databases, online encyclopedia, fan-curated wiki's and online fora. As a measure to ensure the reliability of sources, the existence of individual characters had to be corroborated by two different sources. Because some characters were not reliably supported by two different sources, and because other characters might have been overlooked altogether owing to the obscurity of the series they were featured in, some portrayals might not be included in the database. Its purpose is to provide a robust descriptive framework to facilitate qualitative analysis, however, and does not aim to report inferential prognoses of LGBT+ representations in Flemish television fiction.

### **Overall LGBT+ inclusion in Flemish television fiction**

Discussing the overall presence of LGBT+ characters—i.e., treating them as one group—is by definition an abstraction, and such figures tend to obscure the heterogeneity—or homogeneity for that matter—of the group discussed. Nevertheless, they offer a factual

baseline to make general evaluations on LGBT+ visibility in a particular television landscape. Discussing their overall presence, moreover, facilitates both longitudinal observations and non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgendered characters' distribution across channels and genres.

In the demarcated timeframe—January 1<sup>st</sup> 2001 to December 31<sup>st</sup> 2016—a total of 156 domestic fiction series were broadcasted in their original run on Flemish television channels. Herein, 117 LGBT+ characters were featured, ranging from lead to side and guest roles. Notably, only 60 of the totaling 156 domestic fiction series account for the amount of characters counted, meaning that 38,46% of Flemish scripted television content contains at least one non-heterosexual or non-cisgendered character. The significance of this number is difficult to gauge, however, without considering the longitudinal perspective. Table 1 shows the distribution of series with an LGBT+ characters over the entire timeframe, and relates them to the total number of domestic series broadcasted per year.

Year	LGBT+ presence	No LGBT+ presence	Total #Series	LGBT+ presence % of total series
2001	4	26	30	13,33%
2002	5	28	33	15,15%
2003	7	26	33	21,21%
2004	10	17	27	37,04%
2005	13	22	35	37,14%
2006	14	24	38	36,84%
2007	12	22	34	35,29%
2008	13	26	39	33,33%
2009	9	34	43	20,93%
2010	7	27	34	20,59%
2011	6	30	36	16,67%
2012	4	34	38	10,53%
2013	9	31	40	22,50%
2014	13	31	44	29,55%
2015	7	34	41	17,07%
2016	8	28	36	22,22%

As Table 1 shows, the share of television fiction series with LGBT+ presence does not display a progressive upward trend, and an intuitive hypothesis that increased LGBT+ emancipation<sup>2</sup> is qualitatively reflected in television fiction cannot be corroborated. The figures in Table 1 do not differentiate between lead, secondary or guest characters, however, and offer little insight into the quality of LGBT+ representation.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of LGBT+ emancipation in Flanders, see Borghs (2016).

Year	Total Main Char.	LGBT+ Main Char.	% LGBT+ Main Char.
2001	198	6	3,03%
2002	227	7	3,08%
2003	233	9	3,86%
2004	207	11	5,31%
2005	255	15	5,88%
2006	232	16	6,90%
2007	284	14	4,93%
2008	295	16	5,42%
2009	219	14	6,39%
2010	222	10	4,50%
2011	220	12	4,45%
2012	210	7	3,33%
2013	190	12	6,31%
2014	216	14	6,48%
2015	202	14	6,93%
2016	191	12	6,28%

Displaying the yearly relative share of LGBT+ main characters, Table 2 illustrates that on average, 5,19% of Flemish lead characters in television fiction have been non-heterosexual or non-cisgendered. Compared to the situation in the United States, where 4,6% of the series regular characters in the 2016-2017 season were identified as LGBT+ (GLAAD, 2016), it conveys that LGBT+ people have a more prominent place in domestic fiction in Flanders. GLAAD-figures, moreover, include all ‘recurring’ characters—including side characters—whereas the figures reported in Table 2 display lead characters exclusively. Table 3 furthermore illustrates that 48,72% of all Flemish LGBT+ characters (N=117) is in fact a main cast member. Quantitatively speaking, then, it seems that Flemish television fiction is relatively hospitable to sexual and gender diversity. Relating the distribution of lead LGBT+ characters to the total of Flemish television fiction series for the period studied (N=156) shows that 36 series—or 23,04%—feature a non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgendered main character.

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<sup>3</sup> Table 2 differs slightly from corresponding data in Vanlee et al. (2018a). Previously, two characters had been included for their overall presence in the series wherein they were featured, but were not out during the entire duration of the series. Specifically, Ann De Decker (*Thuis*, één, 1995 – ongoing) is now included in Table 2 after her first same-sex experience in the soap’s 10<sup>th</sup> season (2004), whereas Franky Bomans (*Thuis*, één, 1995 – ongoing) is now included after his coming-out in the soap’s 16<sup>th</sup> season (2010).

Genre	Main Characters	Side Characters	Guest Characters	Total	% of Total
Action	0	0	0	0	0,00%
Serial Tragicomedy	4	3	0	7	5,98%
Serial Drama	9	4	0	13	11,11%
Mockumentary	1	2	2	5	4,27%
Scripted Reality	3	0	0	3	2,56%
Children's Animation	0	0	0	0	0,00%
Children's Live Action	6	1	0	7	5,98%
Police Procedural/Crime	5	7	11	23	19,56%
Comedy/Sketches	5	3	13	21	17,94%
Sitcom	1	0	3	4	3,41%
Soap/Telenovela	23	8	3	34	29,05%
Total	57	28	32	117	100%

When genre is taken into account, however, Table 3 shows that LGBT+ inclusion is heavily dependent on genre in Flemish television fiction. Of special interest here is the relatively low share of serial drama and serial tragicomedy in the representation of sexual and gender diversity in Flanders. Whereas these two genres—and serial tragicomedy in particular—are often associated with ‘prestige’ television content in Flanders (see Dhoest, 2015; Vanlee et al., 2019), they account for only 17,09% (N=117) of all LGBT+ characters in total, or 22,81% (N=57) of the lead LGBT+ characters found.

The low share of LGBT+ characters found in Flemish ‘quality’ television—usually described as ‘prestige fiction’ in Flanders (see Dhoest, 2014)—contrasts observations in the United States, where ‘quality’ content is responsible for high shares of LGBT+ main characters (see Becker, 2006; Chambers, 2009). Soap and telenovela are the main genres for Flemish LGBT+ visibility, accounting for 40,35% (N=57) of all non-heterosexual and non-cisgendered lead characters. Police procedurals and comedy/sketches display a high share of LGBT+ guest characters, because both generic clusters rely on characters outside of the main cast in their narratives—exemplified by, for instance, suspects and victims in crime series and singular LGBT+ characters in sketch shows. The importance of genre to the representation of sexual and gender diversity also clarifies the uneven temporal distribution of LGBT+ characters in general, as their presence is codependent on the popularity of the genres wherein they are often featured.



Genre	Main Characters	Side Characters	Guest Characters
Action	0	0	0
Serial Tragicomedy	4	3	0
Serial Drama	9	4	0
Mockumentary	1	2	2
Scripted Reality	3	0	0
Children's Animation	0	0	0
Children's Live Action	6	1	0
Police Procedural/Crime	5	7	11
Comedy/Sketches	5	3	13
Sitcom	1	0	3
Soap/Telenovela	23	8	3
Total	57	28	32

Notably, Flemish public and commercial broadcasting content differs little regarding the presence of LGBT+ characters. Table 4 shows—counterintuitively—that commercial channel VTM accounts for 28—or 49,12%—of lead LGBT+ characters (N=57). Combined, the three VRT channels—*één*, *Canvas* and *KETNET*—represent 27—or 47,37%—of main LGBT+ characters. Accordingly, the erasure of sexual and gender diversity for commercial benefits observed in the United States (see Becker, 2006) does not seem to resonate particularly in Flanders. VTM's high share of LGBT+ characters is partially explained by the channel's production and broadcasting of soaps and telenovelas, which—as noted before—are likely to include sexual and gender diversity in Flanders. The findings do suggest one critical difference between VRT and VTM. VRT children's channel *KETNET* featured a total of 7 prominent LGBT+ characters in the timeframe studied, whereas the corresponding VTM channel *vtmKzoom* featured none.

#### **Specific trends in Flemish LGBT+ televisibility**

Treating LGBT+ characters as a single group has the benefit of clarity when discussing large representational patterns but proves of limited value to provide in-depth insights into the Flemish situation. Focusing on characters' specific traits allows a more critical engagement with the way non-heterosexual and non-cisgendered people are featured in Flemish television narratives.

Channel	Gay	Lesbian	Bi-sexual	Trans-gender	Trans-sexual	A-sexual	Non-Binary	Total
Één	17	12	3	0	2	0	2	36
Canvas	5	2	0	0	0	0	0	7
KETNET	6	0	1	0	0	0	0	7
VTM	26	16	4	0	0	1	4	51
VT4/VIÉR	3	0	0	1	0	0	0	4
Kanaal 2/2BE/Q2	7	2	0	1	0	0	1	11
VIJF	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Vitaya	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
ACHT	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
VTM Kzoom	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cadet	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
JIM	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
TMF	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	65	29	9	2	2	1	9	117

LGBT+ representations are a mainstream phenomenon in Flemish television fiction. With één and VTM having the highest market shares in the television landscape, the majority of non-heterosexual and non-cisgendered characters is featured in content oriented at the widest possible audience. Accordingly, attention for sexual and gender diversity does not seem mutually exclusive with mass appeal in Flemish television fiction. The fact that all LGBT+ characters circulate in content that is not explicitly oriented towards sexual and gender minorities or socially liberal viewers also suggests that their presence is understood as a necessary component to a contemporary image of Flanders. The absence of series that specifically target the LGBT+ community, on the other hand, also entails that such characters are often detached from a larger peer group, which might give them a certain tokenistic quality (see Dhoest, 2015).

Character Identity	Main Character (N=57)	Side Character (N=28)	Guest Character (N=32)
Homosexual	56,14% (32)	35,71% (10)	71,88% (23)
Lesbian	19,30% (11)	46,43% (13)	15,63% (5)
Bisexual	8,77% (5)	7,14% (2)	6,25% (2)
Transsexual	1,75% (1)	3,57% (1)	0,00% (0)
Transgender	1,75% (1)	0,00% (0)	3,13% (1)
Asexual	1,75% (1)	0,00% (0)	0,00% (0)
Non-Binary	10,53% (6)	7,14% (2)	3,13% (1)
Total	100,00% (57)	100,00% (28)	100,00% (32)

The share of main characters counted, however, argues against an orthodox interpretation organized around the idea of tokenism. Table 6 shows that LGBT+ characters are main

characters in 48,72% (N=57) of the cases. This demonstrates that their narrative function generally transcends mere tokenism, and that they are autonomous characters in their own right.

However, table 6 also illustrates how the problematic distribution of particular LGBT+ subjectivities parallels that of the United States—(see GLAAD, 2016), with a noted overrepresentation of gay male characters (amounting to 49% of all counted characters in the U.S.), and a gradually diminishing presence of other identities under the LGBT+ umbrella. Still, certain figures merit specific attention. Notwithstanding their lower share in lead characters, lesbian characters comprise 46,43% (N=28) of LGBT+ side characters. This is related to the fact that lesbian characters tend to have more romantic relationships, explaining the need for side characters. Notably, most non-binary entries are main characters, hinting that they feature prominently in series in spite of their overall scarcity. Moreover, non-binary characters are indiscriminately female, and their fluidity relates to their sexuality rather than their gender.

Character Identity	Main Character (N=57)	Side Character (N=28)	Guest Character (N=32)
Homosexual	56,14% (32)	35,71% (10)	71,88% (23)
Lesbian	19,30% (11)	46,43% (13)	15,63% (5)
Bisexual	8,77% (5)	7,14% (2)	6,25% (2)
Transsexual	1,75% (1)	3,57% (1)	0,00% (0)
Transgender	1,75% (1)	0,00% (0)	3,13% (1)
Asexual	1,75% (1)	0,00% (0)	0,00% (0)
Non-Binary	10,53% (6)	7,14% (2)	3,13% (1)
Total	100,00% (57)	100,00% (28)	100,00% (32)

The high share of lesbian women as LGBT+ side characters is related to their role as partners to lesbian main characters, as Table 7 demonstrates. In Flemish television fiction, only a small minority of lesbian characters is denied a romantic partnering as opposed to a relatively high number of seemingly celibate gay male characters. This corresponds to both qualitative and quantitative observations in American television fiction (see Fischer et al., 2007; Avila Saavedra, 2009; Netzley, 2010). The relative share of gay male characters having multiple relationships, moreover, is significantly lower than that of female lesbian characters, suggesting that gay male characters are more often articulated to homonormative values such as monogamy.

The vast majority of bisexual characters, by contrast, has multiple relationships in Flemish television fiction. This is likely related to a practice of having bisexual characters engage in a relationship with both male and female partners to narratively solidify their bisexuality. A similar hypothesis might be made for non-binary characters, whereby their fluid sexuality is narratively emphasized by romantic partnering with consecutive characters. Interestingly, the relatively high number of LGBT+ characters in relationships differs significantly from those in a marriage. Given Belgium's legalization of same-sex marriage in 2003 (see Borghs, 2016), it could be hypothesized that this change in legislation would be reflected in television too. Only 14 out of 117 characters were found to be wed, however, suggesting that marriage is of little significance to the representation of LGBT+ people in Flemish television fiction.

Character Type	Victim Of Physical Violence	Not A Victim Of Physical Violence	Unclear
Main Character	3	54	0
Side Character	2	26	0
Guest Character	9	22	1
Total	14	102	1

Flemish LGBT+ characters are generally not depicted as victims of physical phobic violence in domestic television series. This is not to say that they never suffer from physical assaults, but rather that they feature little in storylines that position their sexual and/or gender identity as the prime motif for that violence. These findings, therefore, offer little insights on verbal, emotional or other types of violence LGBT+ characters might be subjected to in the storylines they feature in. Such instances were generally not described in secondary data, alluding both to the fact that phobic violence is often understood as a physical matter, and the minimization of other forms of abuse LGBT+ people suffer. Unsurprisingly, guest characters form a significant majority in the characters faced with identity-related physical violence. As Table 3 illustrated, police procedurals account for 34,38% (N=32) of all guest characters, and a majority of them are featured in episodes centered on homo- or transphobic crimes. In these narratives, moreover, violence is disarticulated from ethno-cultural minorities, with suspicion unjustly cast upon Flemings of color and white Flemings as actual perpetrators.

Character Identity	Victimized	Not Victimized	Unclear
Homosexual	9	55	1
Lesbian	3	26	1
Bisexual	1	8	0
Transsexual	0	2	0
Transgender	0	2	0
Asexual	0	1	0
Non-Binary	1	8	0

Notably though, the representation of violence related to sexual and/or gender identity in Flemish television fiction tends to obscure the fact that all LGBT+ subjects are susceptible to violence because of their sexuality or gender in Flanders (see D’Haese et al., 2013, 2014). Table 8 shows that gay men feature in 64,29% (N=14) of narratives revolving around homo- or transphobic violence. In doing so, Flemish television fiction seems to reproduce the disproportional focus on phobic violence targeting gay males in Flemish news media.

Ethnicity	Character Count	Percentage
Caucasian	113	96,58%
Sub-Saharan African	4	3,42%
Northern African	0	0,00%
Middle Eastern	0	0,00%
Eastern Asiatic	0	0,00%
Southern Asiatic	0	0,00%
Northern Asiatic	0	0,00%

To characterize Flemish LGBT+ characters as ‘predominantly white’ would be an understatement. Although ethnicity and cultural background are difficult traits to assess in characters (for a discussion, see Vanlee et al., 2018a), Table 10 shows the overwhelming ethno-cultural homogeneity of sexual and gender diversity in domestic scripted television series. With only 4 out of 117 characters, the notion of intersectionality seems virtually absent in the televisibility of LGBT+ subjectivities in Flanders. Moreover, while (dis)ability was not explicitly included as a specific index in the construction of the database, it should be noted that non-heterosexual and non-cisgendered characters are not only homogeneously white, but able-bodied too. As is the case with other observations in this paper, the white, able-bodiedness of LGBT+ characters in Flanders corresponds to analyses made in the United States (e.g. Peters, 2011; Ng, 2013).

Character Identity	Lower Class	Middle Class	Upper Class
Homosexual	5	48	12
Lesbian	2	13	14
Bisexual	1	4	4
Transsexual	0	2	0
Transgender	0	2	0
Asexual	0	1	0
Non-Binary	0	7	2
Total	8 (6,84%)	77 (65,81%)	32 (27,35%)

The lack of attention for intersectionality in Flemish LGBT+ televisibility resonates in the notion of class too. Table 11 shows that a vast majority of non-heterosexual and non-cisgendered characters are situated in the middle class, whereas lower class LGBT+ characters are a fairly small minority. Only 4 of 8 lower-class LGBT+ characters are main characters, moreover, suggesting a very limited engagement with the intersection between social class and sexual or gender diversity in Flemish television fiction.

### Discussion

The findings presented in this study point to both strong parallels and differences with LGBT+ televisibility in the U.S. The presence of sexual and gender diversity in domestic scripted television displays a similar homogeneity—with a noted overrepresentation of white, middle class gay male characters—and a penchant for characters that fit clear-cut identity

categories. Conversely, the practice of narrowcasting—wherein LGBT+ characters are featured in content oriented at one particular demographic (see Becker, 2006)—is completely absent in Flanders, having no explicit LGBT+ themed series. If and when sexual and gender diversity are represented in domestic productions, it happens in the mainstream rather than in the margins. Notably, the mainstream dimension to LGBT+ televisibility in Flanders resonates with its generic location too. Contrary to the United States, the vast majority of characters is situated in content not understood as ‘quality television’, but in considerably less prestigious content. The difference between public service broadcasting and commercial broadcasting is negligible, moreover, again highlighting the representation of sexual and gender diversity as a decidedly mainstream phenomenon.

The heavy emphasis on commercial logics as an explanatory frame for problematic dimensions to LGBT+ representations in the United States (e.g. Hart, 2000; Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Kooijman, 2005; Peters, 2011) cannot be simply transposed to the Flemish situation. It does seem to inform a particular logic of adaptation with commercial channels, however. Having a formal expectation to represent the ‘diversity of Flemish society and culture’ (VRT, 2002), LGBT+ identities find their initial way to the mainstream through VRT productions, to later be included in commercial content too. For instance, VRT soap opera *Thuis* (één, 1995 – ongoing) prominently featured a lesbian couple and a gay couple since the 10<sup>th</sup> (2004-2005) and 17<sup>th</sup> season (2011-2012), respectively. VTM soap opera *Familie* (1991 – ongoing), on the other hand, chose to include a main storyline on a lesbian relationship in its 16<sup>th</sup> (2006-2007) season and one on a gay couple in the 23<sup>rd</sup> (2013-2014). Given public service broadcaster VRT’s pioneering role in introducing sexual diversity on television in the late 1990s (see Vanlee et al., 2018b), it seems to play a mainstreaming role. As such, VRT content introduces certain marginalized people to popular audiovisual culture, with commercial channels following suit in subsequent seasons. Broader social trends play a role too, however. It is difficult, for instance, to read the simultaneous introduction of an openly gay male character and their respective partners in *Flikken* (één, 1999-2009) and *Zone Stad* (VTM, 2003-2013)—police procedurals on public and commercial channels respectively—in the 2004-2005 television season without considering their relation to the introduction of same-sex marriage in 2003.

The foregoing testifies to the importance of social realism—as perceived by producers—in Flemish television fiction and accentuates the anomaly represented by Flemish ‘quality’ series. Although such series are firmly grounded in the notion of everyday Flemishness (see Dhoest, 2007; Vanlee et al., 2019), they present a considerably more homogenous image of society than less prestigious content. Especially with series broadcasted on VRT channels, particularly één and Canvas, this seems at odds with the mission of the public service broadcaster, although similar tendencies can be observed in VTM programming too. Diversity does not seem an essential component to quality discourses in Flanders (see Vanlee et al., 2019), leading issues of marginalization to be ignored. Production company *Woestijnvis* is exemplary hereof, as the most prominent player in the Flemish television industry. Responsible for eight fiction productions between 2001 and 2016, its content only accounts for 2 main LGBT+ characters. Notably, many *Woestijnvis* productions have been bought by public service broadcaster VRT (e.g. *Het Eiland* [The Island] (één, 2004-2005), *Van Vlees en Bloed* [Flesh and Bone] (één, 2009)), but generally fail to ‘reflect the diversity of contemporary Flanders’ expected in the PSB’s management agreement (VRT, 2007: 2, 2002: 2). Similarly, content by production companies founded by ex-*Woestijnvis* personnel, like Bart De Pauw’s *Koeken Troef* or Tom Van Dyck’s *Toespits*,

is characterized by decidedly homogenous characters. This observation, of course, should and cannot be disconnected from the fact that the top echelon of Flemish television fiction production was and—to an extent—remains a straight, cis, white men’s world. As ‘quality’ fiction is often produced by external production companies in Flanders—as opposed to less prestigious content wherein broadcasters and channels are more closely involved—(see Raats et al., 2014), it seems that the attention both VRT and VTM foster for diversity is not reflected in the content both broadcasters buy externally. If they are committed to reflect their prosocial policies in their programming, they should consider formulating clear expectations regarding diversity to external production companies.

From a more applied perspective on the tendencies found in Flemish LGBT+ characters, sexual diversity is manifestly privileged over gender diversity. Quantitatively, transsexual and transgender characters represent a negligible minority, making up 4 of 117 characters. Although *Thuis*’ introduction of a lead transwoman—Kaat Bomans—is certainly welcome with regards to the televisibility of gender diversity in Flanders, overemphasizing her worth obscures more salient problems in Flemish television fiction. The fluidity of 8 out of 9 collected characters in the ‘non-binary’ category, pertains to their sexual desire rather than their gender identity, which alludes to erasure of gender non-conformity in Flemish television fiction. Indeed, apart from the near all-encompassing whiteness of Flemish LGBT+ characters, their defining unifying quality is their gender conformity. Effeminate gay men, butch lesbians and genderqueer characters rival the scarcity of non-white LGBT+ people, resulting in a highly homonormative portrayal of non-heterosexual characters. Nevertheless, it must also be noted that representations of male femininity and female masculinity do circulate in Flemish television fiction, albeit cast on straight roles. Characters like the gentle, purse-wearing Benny in mockumentary *Het Geslacht De Pauw* [The De Pauw Dynasty] (éen, 2004-2005) or Hannah Maes, the hard-boiled revenge-seeking police inspector in *Code 37* (VTM, 2009-2012) clearly challenge established gender norms. The fact that most LGBT+ characters are shown to conform to these norms, then, might suggest an unwillingness to create representations television professionals interpret as stereotypical portrayals of sexual and gender diversity. A similar nuance should be made with regards to the ethno-cultural diversity of Flemish LGBT+ characters. Their scarcity intuitively suggests homonationalism (see Puar, 2007, 2013) as a dominant strategy in domestic television fiction, with LGBT+ inclusivity articulated as a fundamentally white and Western disposition. The fact that no single storyline on phobic violence featured perpetrators with a non-Western ethno-cultural background, however, complicates such an interpretation. Insofar as the racialization of homo- and transphobia is an important component to the (re-)production of homonationalist discourses (see Szulc & Smets, 2015), Flemish television fiction takes an oppositional position, explicitly disarticulating ethnicity and cultural identity as essential components to hostile attitudes towards sexual and gender diversity.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study are admittedly rough and unrefined with regards to other queer television scholarship. They do not offer a nuanced deconstruction of how gay parenting is normalized by the use of ‘anxious displacements’ that recast negative traits to their surrounding straight characters, like Andre Cavalcante (2015) argues in his study. Nor do they critique how particular LGBT+ fiction narratives act as a form of containment, sustaining rather than dislodging heterosexist discourses, as Dana Mitchell (2003) contends in her study of *Will and Grace* (NBC, 1998-2006). Their value lies not in the meticulous

understanding of how particular portrayals refract particular ideologies, but rather in the fact that they enable similar engagements with Flemish LGBT+ televisibility in the future. Character monitoring is by definition a reductive, abstract undertaking, and it would be ill advised, for instance, to proclaim Flemish television fiction as ‘LGBT+ friendly’ merely by virtue that one quarter of its series has an LGBT+ main character. The findings of this study are a point of departure rather than a finality. Nevertheless, it also merits to draw attention to the method deployed for this study in relation to the role of sexual and gender diversity in domestic television fiction in Flanders. It is downright remarkable to be able to reliably catalogue (almost) all LGBT+ characters in such an expansive timeframe based on secondary sources alone. The fact that these characters were all documented in popular sources—ranging from reviews in the written press to fan-curated pages—testifies to the importance ascribed to sexual and gender identity in the Flemish public debate on television fiction. Being able to find a singular guest character featured in a sitcom more than a decade ago based solely on their sexual or gender identity demonstrates how these dimensions are still taken to be fundamental components to social intelligibility.

### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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