We Deserve Better: Spanish Adolescents' Perspectives of the Portrayal of LGBTQ+ Characters in Fiction

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This research explores Spanish adolescents' attitudes toward the representation of young LGBTQ+ individuals in Spanish fiction series on digital platforms and TV channels. It focuses on (1) preferred portrayals and (2) disliked aspects of available portrayals. Opinions from 20 adolescents (16–21 years old) were gathered through four online focus groups (4–7 participants each). Thematic analysis reveals a perceived lack of diversity among fictional LGBTQ+ characters. Adolescents desire portrayals that include diverse gender and sexual identities, comprehensive representation of transgender experiences, and multifaceted LGBTQ+ characters. They prefer portrayals that normalize LGBTQ+ identities and address real challenges faced by adolescents. They seek authentic, visually appealing, and diverse depictions of love and intimacy and LGBTQ+ adolescent communities portrayed by LGBTQ+ actors. They criticize idealized depictions of love, improbable sexual interactions, misrepresentations of LGBTQ+ adolescents' interest in romance, sex, or parties, the inclusion of characters just to fulfill diversity quotas, the objectification of females, and tragic LGBTQ+ narratives. Adolescents also challenge normative assumptions and media adultcentrism. The results offer insights for communication studies, media professionals, and educators.

Keywords: LGBTI, gender studies, adolescents, serials, LGBTQ+ characters, queer production studies

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The media presence of LGBTQ+ people has increased in certain cultural contexts (e.g., Gillig, 2020; Woods & Hardman, 2022) and has attracted a growing number of writers and producers (Sánchez-Soriano & García-Jiménez, 2020; Van Wichelen & Dhoest, 2023). However, there has been insufficient research on its impact on both LGBTQ+ and heterosexual adolescents (Dhoest & Simons, 2012; McInroy & Craig, 2015, 2017).

Adolescents navigating societal and technological changes increasingly rely on media for identity formation (Dhoest & Van-Ouytsel, 2022), and this entails the need for inclusive representations, especially about sexual and gender diversity, to reduce LGBTQ+ phobia and enhance social acceptance (Amat, González-de-Garay, & Moliner-Miravet, 2020).

LGBTQ+ representations in media serve as valuable tools for educating audiences about queer issues (Parsemain, 2019), combating homophobia (Masanet, Ventura, & Ballesté, 2022; McInroy & Craig, 2017), and shaping social knowledge of LGBTQ+ identities (Gray, 2009). Such representations serve as vital role models for young LGBTQ+ individuals by supporting their identity construction (Bond & Miller, 2017; McInroy & Craig, 2015), shaping their self-concept and behaviors (McInroy & Craig, 2017), clarifying their sexual orientation (Li, Liu, Yan, & Yin, 2023), instilling hope, fostering positive attitudes (Gillig & Murphy, 2016), normalizing sexual and gender diversity (White, 2023), and contributing to their well-being (Bond & Miller, 2017).

Hence, there is a need to understand adolescents' views of LGBTQ+ representations in media, especially about social and moral values (Mares & Bonus, 2021). This study builds on existing research on this topic (e.g., Bond & Miller, 2017; Dhoest & Van-Ouytsel, 2022; Gillig & Murphy, 2016; Li et al., 2023; McInroy & Craig, 2015, 2017), mostly informing production studios by addressing the issue of adolescents: the "missing audience" (Davison, Bulger, & Madden, 2020).

Media and schools significantly shape young people's cultural and social practices during adolescence (Amat et al., 2020), a crucial period for personality development and belief formation (Plaisier & Konijn, 2013). Adolescence, spanning puberty to adult independence, is influenced by both individual growth and cultural norms (Blakemore, 2019). Young people prioritize media for entertainment and socialization (Davison et al., 2020), using it to share experiences, strengthen social ties, and navigate positive and negative emotions (Mares & Bonus, 2021). Despite this, their relationship with entertainment products remains underexplored (Mares & Bonus, 2021; McInroy & Craig, 2017; Soto-Sanfiel, Villegas-Simón, & Angulo-Brunet, 2021), particularly in media production studies (MPS; Andersen & Sundet, 2019; Davison et al., 2020; Sundet, 2021).

Recent European investigations indicate that adolescents primarily consume fiction at home for emotional engagement, entertainment, and information (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2021). Yet, more research is needed on their attitudes toward media depictions, especially in MPS (e.g., Andersen & Sundet, 2019). Broadcasters require detailed insights to create engaging content for adolescents (Redvall, 2018), while institutions and education programs need narratives that foster adolescent growth and well-being.

One aspiration of this study is to depart from *adultcentrism*, or *adultism*, a bias that positions adults at the center and undermines or ignores the capacities and perspectives of young people (Campbell, 2021). Adults often use their duty to protect children to justify their authority in youth matters, potentially undermining youth autonomy (Marre & San Roman, 2012). They frequently assume they know what is best for adolescents (Holloway & Valentine, 2000). However, Platero, San Román, Montenegro, and Pujol (2023) found divergent adult and youth perspectives on LGBTQ+ issues in Spain. While adults favor formal interventions to raise awareness, young people demonstrate agency, crafting nuanced identities rooted in self-expression and resistance to adult-centric views.

Considering all of the above, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1:   *What kind of LGBTQ+ representations do Spanish adolescents prefer and like to consume in the realm of audiovisual fiction, particularly fictional series?*

RQ2:   *What are the attitudes of Spanish adolescents toward existing Spanish representations of LGBTQ+ adolescents in such products?*

Scholars have observed that depictions of LGBTQ+ individuals in traditional media are increasingly positive, with queer characters portrayed more similarly to non-LGBTQ+ ones, resulting in greater visibility and a shift away from stereotypical, one-dimensional portrayals (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; Dhoest & Simons, 2012; McInroy & Craig, 2017). Nevertheless, challenges remain, particularly for young LGBTQ+ individuals who still face numerous stereotypes that perpetuate heterosexism and prejudice, reinforcing dominant gender, race, and class norms (Amat et al., 2020).

Theoretical Background

Aligned with the growing field of MPS (Zoellner, 2022), this study accepts the interrelated influences of media consumption, producers' experiences, media production structures, and cultural context (Paterson, Lee, Saha, & Zoellner, 2016). Within this broad perspective, it specifically relates to queer production studies (QPS), which mainly investigate cultural media industries or professionals (Martin, 2018) in terms of (1) influences during the production of queer media content; (2) uses and consumption of media content by LGBTQ+ people; and (3) audience opinions of queer content regardless of their own sexual and gender identity (Soto-Sanfiel, Palencia, & Ibiti, 2014; Soto-Sanfiel, Ibiti, & Palencia, 2014). Thus, QPS typically observe gay or LGBT fictional narratives from their authorship, spectatorship, or textual form/content (Wuest, 2018).

Nevertheless, the innovative aspect of this study is that it aims to (a) inform media producers about audiences, in line with recent but scarce efforts to use audience research to inspire content development (Redvall, 2018). In doing so, it further pursues the mission of scholarship to engage in the transfer of knowledge to society. The study addresses how adolescents are overlooked in MPS and highlights the need for producers to understand how teenagers use media to meet their social, cultural, and political goals (Davison et al., 2020). Scholars advocate for the inclusion of sexuality and queerness in media agendas (Martin, 2018), and Redvall (2018) particularly emphasizes the importance of listening to

adolescent preferences in this regard to create relevant content that meets their needs. Media decision-makers should view this as a strategic opportunity and follow the example of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), which has been especially adept at tailoring TV series to teenagers' preferences (Andersen & Sundet, 2019; Redvall, 2018).

More specifically, this study contributes to QPS by examining adolescents' perceptions of LGBTQ+ characters in fictional media and the portrayal of queerness in media products. Unlike previous research (e.g., Dhoest & Van-Ouytsel, 2022; McInroy & Craig, 2017), it considers adolescents' attitudes irrespective of their sexual or gender identities, acknowledging the contemporary openness and naturalness of young people toward these issues (Dhoest & Van-Ouytsel, 2022). The research also challenges the conservative views of media employees concerning audience expectations (Soto-Sanfiel & Villegas-Simón, 2024; Villegas-Simón & Soto-Sanfiel, 2024) and commercial interests (Brady, Burns, & Davies, 2017; Villegas-Simón, Sánchez-Soriano, & Ventura, 2023) by shifting away from *adultcentrism* (Campbell, 2021; Holloway & Valentine, 2000) and instead recognizing the disparities between how adults and teenagers perceive LGBTQ+ matters (Platero et al., 2023).

The research notes that writers and producers may lack a genuine understanding of young people and their views on queer sexualities, leading to simplistic storylines (Bond, Miller, & Aubrey, 2019) and reliance on outdated assumptions (Mayo, 2017). Although QPS often overlooks young adults' critical engagement with media representations, preliminary research shows that Spanish adolescents actively discuss TV series and relate them to their own lives and peers' attitudes on topics like love and relationships (Masanet & Dhaenens, 2019). On the other hand, this research recognizes that Queer Studies (QS) scholars have critically examined the tensions between queer identities and TV representation and often, as noted by Boyer (2011), aim to deconstruct cisgendered heterosexuality by focusing on concepts like homonormativity, heteronormativity, and transnormativity. Homonormativity depoliticizes gay culture (Vanlee, 2019), while heteronormativity marginalizes nonheterosexual identities, reinforcing society's prioritization of heterosexuality by erasing or misrepresenting LGBTQ+ individuals (McIntosh, 2023). Similarly, transnormativity imposes standardized representations of transgender characters within heteronormative systems (Johnson, 2016).

The LGBTIQ+ community tends to be critical of the "cis gaze" in TV production (Cavalcante, 2017), claiming that it emphasizes commercial interests over authentic narratives (Brady et al., 2017; Villegas-Simón et al., 2023) and entails practices such as queerbaiting and pinkwashing (Sánchez-Soriano & García-Jiménez, 2020). Indeed, Vanlee, Dhaenens, and Van Bauwel (2018) argue that queer media representation should instead reflect sociocultural change and challenge antiquated norms.

Precisely, in the Spanish media context, ongoing debates among scriptwriters about LGBTQ+ normalization have influenced character portrayals (Villegas-Simón & Soto-Sanfiel, 2024), potentially resulting in a greater number of homonormative or heteronormative representations (Vanlee, 2019), particularly, and interestingly, among generally more progressive young LGBTQ+ scriptwriters (Soto-Sanfiel & Villegas-Simón, 2024). However, once again, while the cited studies are illuminating, they primarily analyze LGBTQ+ representations from an adult framework and hence reproduce the prevailing adult theoretical perspectives in the field.

This study acknowledges the traditional critical perspective on QS but builds on McInroy and Craig's (2015, 2017) findings that Canadian LGBTQ+ late adolescents criticize TV and film portrayals for lacking depth, exaggerating narratives, and underrepresenting diversity. Their 2015 study highlighted insufficient transgender representation, prevalent stereotypes, and greater visibility of transgender males compared with females, limiting the understanding of transgender experiences (McInroy & Craig, 2015, 2017). While no studies have replicated this work in other cultural contexts, Dhoest and Van Ouytsel (2022) found that Generation Z in Belgium prefers nonstereotypical media representations and values increased LGBTQ+ content on platforms like Netflix, reflecting similar observations.

Other research on the attitudes of LGBTQ+ adults toward the representation of gender and sexual identity in fiction in various cultural contexts (e.g., Van Haelter, Dhaenens, & Van Bauwel, 2022; Villegas-Simón et al., 2023) has observed comparable criticism of the quality of portrayals of gender and sexual identity. These studies underscore the importance of aligning such representations with the real experiences of individuals.

Finally, Vanlee (2021) notes the prevalence of queer TV studies in the United States but sees a unique opportunity in Western European television, where public broadcasters prioritize democratic responsibilities and collaborate with academia to promote positive representations. The author calls for future studies to move beyond traditional queer analytics and advocate for positive queer representations, aligning with this study's perspective.

The Spanish Context

Western Europe has witnessed a resurgence of original scripted TV series, with a wealth of high-quality locally made fiction now available for younger audiences (Barra & Scaglioni, 2020). Spain, with its robust audiovisual market, has mirrored this trend, focusing on young viewers and producing shows for national and international markets (Lacalle, Gómez, & Hidalgo, 2021). Successful Spanish series (e.g., *Élite* (Montero & Madrona, 2018–2024) and *Merlí* (Montánchez, 2015–2018) on Netflix) have raised the global profile of the country's TV industry (González-de-Garay, Marcos-Ramos, & Angulo-Brunet, 2022). These series often include sentimental melodramas and the exploration of feminist themes, thus appealing to a broader audience, while teen-oriented Spanish shows address sexuality and identity transitions in a realistic manner (Lacalle et al., 2021) despite often featuring stereotyped portrayals of love and romance (Masanet & Dhaenens, 2019).

Spain has been recognized as increasingly accepting of LGBTQ+ people and rights (Pew Research Center, 2020). Reports indicate that Generation Z and late millennial Spaniards are more likely to identify as nonheterosexual than previous generations (Institut de Publique Sondage d'Opinion Secteur [IPSOS], 2023). Nevertheless, despite this progress, nonheterosexual adolescents in Spain still face high rates of bullying and cyberbullying, which negatively impact their mental health. Female teenagers experience more victimization, cybervictimization, and poly-victimization than their male peers, who are in turn more likely to perpetrate LGBTQ+ bullying and cyberbullying (Ojeda, Elipe, & Del Rey, 2023).

However, knowledge about the portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters in Spanish TV series remains limited. González-de-Garay et al. (2022) analyzed 749 characters from 38 Spanish series on domestic VOD platforms and found a major stereotyping of queer characters and a prevalence of gay cis-male representation. Transgender women were often depicted as hypersexualized and with health problems. Paradoxically, 10% of the characters were LGBTQ+, mirroring the population percentage.

Research on Spanish audiences, including adolescents, consuming LGBTQ+ fiction is limited (Sanz-López, 2018). While Spanish adults generally appreciate queer characters in U.S. TV series, regardless of personal traits (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2014, 2014), LGBTQ+ adults in rural Catalonia still feel inadequately represented despite some progress (Sanz-López, 2018). Spanish teenagers and young adults enjoy both U.S. and Spanish teen series (Masanet & Dhaenens, 2019), highlighting the complex interplay of social, cultural, and political factors in audience-media dynamics.

Method

This study uses interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to examine how individuals interpret their everyday experiences and the meanings they assign to them (Finlay, 2011; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA allows participants to reflect on their behaviors, thoughts, and emotions in response to open research questions, enabling a free analysis of their lived experiences and their connection to relevant concepts (Chan & Farmer, 2017).

IPA has gained popularity for studying LGBTQ+ experiences because of its alignment with social justice values and queer theory's focus on challenging power structures and LGBTQ+ phobias. It examines participants' views on social justice and the meanings they attach to their experiences, emphasizing marginalized communities. IPA helps contextualize individual interpretations as valuable narratives, offering insights into participants' experiences and supporting efforts for change (Chan & Farmer, 2017). Its methodological flexibility allows for diverse data collection strategies, enhancing the understanding of LGBTQ+ experiences (Griffith et al., 2017).

Although IPA has not been used in QPS, it has effectively studied LGBTQ+ adolescents' experiences (e.g., Roberts et al., 2023) and young adults' perceptions of LGBTQ+ culture (Parmenter, Galliher, & Maughan, 2020). IPA is valuable for authentically capturing adolescents' individual experiences and narratives related to LGBTQ+ issues. Therefore, it presents a promising approach for exploring an age group often marginalized in QPS, where adult perspectives have predominated. The existential approach of IPA enables the ideography of contemporary Spanish adolescents' attitudes and experiences with LGBTQ+ media representation, covering aspects like identity, meaning, authenticity, struggles, autonomy, existential anxieties, and the importance of relationships. Given the limited evidence on IPA's suitability for describing media experiences, this research could advance its exploration within QPS.

Design and Procedure

Data were collected from four online focus groups (FGs) held between March and July 2022 in Zoom. This method is compatible with IPA (Love, Vetere, & Davis, 2020) because FGs are well-suited for exploring

adolescents' daily experiences, relationships, and identities (Bagnoli & Clark, 2010), while also balancing potential power imbalances between researchers and participants (Adler, Salanterä, & Zumstein-Shaha, 2019). Online FGs are particularly effective for engaging vulnerable populations, such as LGBTQ+ teenagers, because they offer the opportunity for remote participation in discussions, thus empowering anonymity and encouraging the sharing of personal or sensitive information (Stover, 2012). They are time- and cost-efficient and allow less-heard or more geographically isolated people to have a say. Moreover, they were useful for overcoming COVID-19 restrictions (Keemink, Sharp, Dargan, & Forder, 2022). All sessions lasted about two hours and were video recorded for transcription. Ethical approval was obtained from the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain), where the study was conducted. Signed informed consent was obtained.

A researcher who was unknown to the participants conducted the FGs by asking the questions and eliciting spontaneous accounts in a semistructured manner. They were also asked to discuss examples from TV series they had watched. The core questions were: What do you like and dislike about current representations of LGBTQ+ adolescents in series and why? What LGBTQ+ representations would you like to see in TV series? Take your wish list directly to the producers!

Following recommended practices for adolescent FGs (Adler et al., 2019), one author acted as the interviewer and the other as the observer and notetaker. We aimed to foster inclusion by valuing each contribution and emphasizing participants' experiences. Participants were encouraged to express their thoughts freely, with conversation dynamics managed to ensure balanced participation.

Participants

The participants included 20 late adolescents aged 16–21 (M_{Age} = 18.5) from diverse urban areas of Spain, organized into FGs of 4–7 people. Each teenager participated in just one FG. They were all students, albeit at different levels (i.e., middle school, high school, or vocational training). Ten identified as cisgender (6 female, 4 male), two as transgender (1 male), and eight as agender. About sexual orientation, six were uncertain or identified with the LGBTQ+ community, five as bisexual, three as pansexual, three as heterosexual, two as gay, and one as asexual.

Data Analysis

In the analysis, participants' viewpoints were examined through two lenses. Thematic analysis (TA) using Atlas.ti software identified key dimensions shaping perceptions of LGBTQ+ characters on Spanish TV, focusing on general concepts derived from spontaneous descriptions of lived experiences (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012).

Simultaneously, an existential perspective through IPA (Willig, 2007) uncovered nuanced meanings and individual viewpoints rooted in personal experiences and interpretations of portrayals. This combined approach aimed to capture the full complexity of the phenomenon (Spiers & Riley, 2019), which involved (1) identifying main themes/aspects from participant responses, (2) exploring rich narratives, (3) detecting underlying meanings and emotions, (4) comparing themes/aspects across diverse understandings, and (5) using individual experiences to vividly illustrate thematic aspects. The data set is available upon request to other researchers.

Results

The results of our analysis are organized into two main themes: (a) what adolescents dislike about the industry's portrayals of LGBTQ+ adolescents, and (b) what they would like to see in TV series.

What Spanish Adolescents Dislike About the Industry's Portrayals

Unrealistic Portrayals of Adolescents

The participants do not like to see unrealistic, stereotyped characters, particularly effeminate, depressed, or mentally ill gays. They do not like them to be associated with AIDS or HIV or depicted as weak or victims. They do not want LGBTQ+ teen characters to be concerned only about romance and sex or to be portrayed as adopting different sexual identities without experiencing internal struggles, doubts, or reflection processes before understanding their sexuality or sexual behavior.

They also dislike portrayals of characters who are completely sure about how to behave during sexual intercourse, who engage in frequent sexual exchanges, or whose sexual orientations are depicted frivolously. As a cis-female lesbian says, "I didn't turn into a lesbian. Nobody does. [A TV series] shows a character suddenly becoming a lesbian and starting to have a lot of sex just like that."

Idealized Love

The respondents also claim that TV series unrealistically idealize love [the pinnacle of human accomplishment], which produces misunderstandings. For instance, a cis-male heterosexual comments, "they say love can solve everything, which is untrue. If you're sick, love isn't going to solve that." This observation highlights the adolescents' perceived discrepancy between the portrayal of love in TV series and the implications of love in real-life situations.

Unlikely Sexual Interactions Among Adolescents

Some adolescents dislike intimate scenes portraying improbable sexual exchanges between adolescents (as their practical understanding of sexual intercourse is still developing), which are even performed by adult actors "as if the intimacy is between two bodies instead of two people," as a cis-male bisexual puts it. Another claims that young people are learning to experience sex, and their sexual performance is erratic and hesitant, unlike representations of adolescent sex in TV series, saying, "it's like they've been doing it forever while the truth is that we don't really know how to make love very well."

Others feel that these scenes idealize sex because they are performed by good-looking actors, apparently to attract heterosexual audiences. One cis-lesbian dislikes the idea of LGBTQ+ characters being particularly seductive because "like heterosexuals, LGBTQ people are not only after seduction or romance." Indeed, one cis bisexual says she fast-forwards sex scenes because they are completely irrelevant for her.

Insignificant LGBTQ+ Characters to Meet Diversity Quotas

Some participants are uncomfortable with TV series that include LGBTQ+ characters only on a superficial or background level, not in a main or supporting role, as if pandering to inclusion quotas. As a cis-female lesbian says,

> to me [an inclusive] TV series must really talk about LGBTQ issues. It's not just about having a character who's gay but is a distant cousin of the main character . . . The show is just trying to say, hey, we're not homophobic.

Consequently, adolescents are aware of the "cis gaze" in TV production, whereby commercial interests take precedence over authentic narratives (e.g., Villegas-Simón et al., 2023), along with practices like queerbaiting and pinkwashing (Sánchez-Soriano & García-Jiménez, 2020).

Female Characters as Objects of Male Desire

Almost all female participants say they dislike female adolescents being portrayed in sexual exchanges to satisfy male desires. One of them even criticizes producers and scriptwriters for tending to portray lesbian characters engaging in sexual encounters to satisfy cis-male heterosexual audiences who might find such portrayals erotic: "[cis-male heterosexual audiences] see two boys kissing and they're like 'gross!' But they're turned on by seeing two girls kissing." Indeed, Soto-Sanfiel and Villegas-Simón (2024) found that some Spanish series scriptwriters design characters for a heterosexual male audience. These results suggest that young people are aware of this.

Adolescents Always Partying, Having Fun, Getting Drunk, or Doing Drugs

Most of the participants strongly dislike adolescents always being shown to be partying, having fun, or drinking alcohol. A cis-gay youngster says, "it's annoying to be put in a box as an adolescent . . . I don't like the stereotype of adolescents always partying." Likewise, a cis-female bisexual says, "TV series are always perpetuating the stereotype of adolescents who don't care about anything and their only concerns being drugs and parties."

Tragic or Tumultuous Stories of LGBTQ+ Adolescents

Some participants dislike tragic stories about coming out, believing them to be overdramatized by most series, which they consider unhelpful for LGBTQ+ people. A cis-female bisexual says, "we've never been in a closet because we weren't born in a box, not even with a label." A bisexual male dislikes the stereotyping of bisexuals as confused, experiencing existential crises, or being shy and quiet.

TV Series Created/Performed by Nondiverse Scriptwriters/Actors

Finally, some participants dislike how TV series are mostly written by men and would prefer more female scriptwriters. A gay male claims, "Most TV plots are written by White men from their privileged

homes, drinking beer, without taking anything into account. More nonbinary people are needed in the audiovisual [industry]!" A transgender male stresses the importance of being trans or consulting transgender people to create good stories about trans characters. Likewise, nonbinary and trans adolescents dislike being represented by actors who are not. Adolescents' aspirations for representation align with those expressed by Spanish transgender individuals (Villegas-Simón et al., 2023). The participants also reflect on Spanish scriptwriters' practices when designing series and characters, as reported by Soto-Sanfiel and Villegas-Simón (2024).

What Spanish Adolescents Would Like to see in TV Series

Greater Diversity of Gender and Sexual Identities Despite the Challenges

Similar to adolescents in other cultural contexts (e.g., McInroy & Craig, 2015, 2017), most of the participants state that they would like to see more varied and diverse LGBTQ+ characters rather than solely gay men. They particularly feel that there is a lack of good portrayals [refer to 4.2.5] of lesbian, transgender, bisexual, asexual, and aromantic persons. For example, a transgender male says that "bisexuality is either not or badly depicted." Some participants recognize that the representation of particular LGBTQ+ identities can pose greater challenges, which they perceive as a contributing factor to their underrepresentation.

For instance, the cited transgender male also says that "it's easier to portray a gay or a lesbian, but bisexuality is harder to represent. It's the same with transgender, binary transgender, nonbinary, agender and fluid-gender people." Soto-Sanfiel and Villegas-Simón (2024) note that to improve portrayals of transgender characters in TV series, Spanish production companies are incorporating adult transgender scriptwriters or consulting them. This supports the argument that advice from young people, who most resemble the depicted teenage characters, might enhance verisimilitude and realism.

Accurate Portrayal of LGBTQ+ Identities in TV Series, Which Would Boost Their Visibility and Normalization

Certain participants perceive that faithful portrayals of LGBTQ+ identities in TV series could potentially enhance comprehension of the varied nature of these identities and mitigate violence toward them. TV series, in this regard, could act as catalysts for normalization. The same transgender male thinks, "there's so much hate in society because it doesn't understand [the complexity of today's sexual and gender identities]. Putting them in a TV series would be a way to make people find it more normal." Indeed, Villegas-Simón and Soto-Sanfiel (2024) illustrate that the normalization of LGBTQ+ characters is a critical matter for many scriptwriters of Spanish series, despite their varied and complex perspectives on its implications.

The participants relate the absence of such representations to their own need for LGBTQ+ references. TV fiction not only shows them how to express their gender and sexual identities but also how to interact with other LGBTQ+ people. For instance, a cis-female bisexual adolescent says, "there's nothing. Nothing! [characters in TV series]. If someone says they're asexual, you'd be like helloooo! You wouldn't know how to react because there's no visibility of the topic at all and little information on it."

LGBTQ+ representations play a vital role in guiding individuals to not only deal with their gender and sexual identities but also navigate interactions within the LGBTQ+ community. They serve as a medium through which adolescents learn to express themselves and establish connections with others who might share similar identities. Some adolescents stress the lack of nonbinary representation, including the use of adequate personal pronouns to refer to these people, although they do meet nonbinary persons within their social circles. A cis-female lesbian participant says,

> a lot of nonbinary people need to be represented. I met one and I didn't know how to react when she said she preferred the pronoun *elle* and I was shocked because I hadn't been in an LGBTQ environment before . . . People can respond wrongly [to nonbinary persons] if they aren't properly represented so as to normalize the use of the right pronouns.

Greater Representation of Diverse Transgender Experiences

Other adolescents also note the absence of representations of the variety of transgender people (e.g., bodies, behaviors, and circumstances). For instance, a cis-male gay youngster says,

> a lot of trans people don't want to have surgery or hormone treatment and this needs to be visible because it sometimes seems like you're only valid as a trans person if you've gone through a total transition, which is untrue. A lot of people don't want surgery. This doesn't make them more or less of a woman or man.

This aligns with the aspirations for representation among transgender Canadian adolescents (McInroy & Craig, 2015) and Spanish adults (Villegas-Simón et al., 2023). It also shows that the participating teenagers empathize with the need for their peers with diverse sexual and gender identities to be represented.

Complex and Multifaceted LGBTQ+ Characters Beyond Their Sexual and Gender Identities

In line with the views among young Canadians reported by McInroy & Craig (2015, 2017), some adolescents in the sample insist that LGBTQ+ characters need to be complex and multifaceted. Their sexual and gender identities should be just another component of their personality, not the most important. A cis-gay youngster says, "being gay, trans or bi [should] not be the basis of their personality . . . In a lot of TV series a character is just gay and that's it. He's just that." Similarly, a male-trans participant says, "there's a lack of series where a character is gay and it isn't even mentioned."

Several adolescents would like LGBTQ+ characters to be completely normalized and for their portrayals to be fully realistic. A transgender male says, "I hope being LGBTQ is so normalized one day that a character can be bad, manipulative or morally controversial while also being trans . . . [LGBTQ+ people] are good or bad the same way." And a cis-male bisexual youngster adds that,

we should have variety. I believe there should also be LGBTQ people [in TV series] who are exaggerated, speak all the time and perform . . . because people are complex and their personalities should be something other than their gender and sexual identity.

The normalization of representations is a critical aspect for Spanish scriptwriters (Villegas-Simón & Soto-Sanfiel, 2024).

Some adolescents feel that the unicity of LGBTQ+ experiences is reflected in their portrayals. For instance, a female bisexual claims that "there is no single way of being gay or lesbian."

Finally, a few participants mention the need to represent fluidity in sexual orientations. For example, the cis-female who is unsure about her identity says, "it's important to depict people who don't stick to one sexual option, who don't put labels on themselves or always question themselves."

Adolescent LGBTQ+ Characters With Varying Levels of Certainty About Their Sexual Orientation and Gender Identities

Most participants feel they need to see characters who are unsure about their sexual orientation or who experience internal processes to discover or accept their reality, as in real life. For example, a cis female who does not know what her sexual orientation is yet refers to a TV series where, "I felt very identified with Nick's doubts about his sexuality . . . We see his evolution, how he's surprised, how he searches on Google, how he asks his close friends if he's gay."

However, a few others insist that, coherently with the diversity of life experiences, people also need to be shown who do not question such matters. A cis-female bisexual says, "it's very important to be careful [with content] because millions of people will see it, which entails a huge responsibility. The variety of representations also implies that some people shouldn't doubt [their LGBTQ+ identities] at all."

Actual Challenges Faced by Adolescents and Actionable Guidance

Other participants mention the need to show how the adolescent world involves real problems. In general, they expect TV series to offer guidelines for action in real life, not only for themselves but also for all audiences. For instance, a cis-male gay youngster says, "there are mental problems in adolescence. I'd like to see how [characters] solve them." And a transgender male says, "it would be great to see the internal processes and pain of adolescents who experience bullying or are harassed for being LGBTQ+. It could be very instructive for society."

Aesthetically Pleasing, Tender, and Diverse Portrayals of Love, Intimacy, and Romance

Some participants demand aesthetically beautiful and caring love and sex scenes, while a cis-male gay participant is mainly interested in seeing more polyamorous, aromantic, or asexual people, because "there are many taboos in TV series although these depictions are necessary." It should be noted that Masanet and Dhaenens (2019) reported that Spanish teenagers may internalize stereotypes and myths

about romantic love acquired from fictional representations, thus influencing their concepts and behaviors in relationships.

Almost all members of the sample believe that TV series teach audiences about LGBTQ+ issues, and some feel that greater exposure to public TV would help to connect generations. This can also be enjoyable. For example, a gay cis-male says,

> there was a nonbinary person in the second season that I liked a lot. Since I came out, I've been educating my mother through movies. . . . She's incredible and likes to learn. I always think that my mothers' and grandmothers' generations didn't have these representations and had it harder.

In turn, a cis-female bisexual says,

> I was watching a TV series with my grandma. There was a male trans, and she exclaimed, 'Oh! A girl that's a boy!' And I said 'Grandma, he's a male trans. You have to say he's a trans boy.' I was explaining it all to her. That's very necessary, fun, and good.

TV Series Featuring LGBTQ+ Adolescent Communities Portrayed by LGBTQ+ Actors

Transgender individuals in the sample express a desire for transgender characters to be portrayed exclusively by transgender actors, as also highlighted by adult transgender respondents in Villegas-Simón et al. (2023). They see this not only as a symbol of inclusion and respect but also as a means to free themselves from marginalization within both society and the audiovisual industry.

A transgender male says that he likes TV series that are solely about LGBTQ+ communities and are performed by LGBTQ+ casts too. He enjoys non-comedy or mocking stories and characters because they offer a safe haven for people of his sexuality and "are not focused on overcoming transphobia or homophobia. Just queer people having fun and fooling around. I felt good because I wasn't threatened." This viewpoint has been validated by recent studies involving transgender audience members (Villegas-Simón et al., 2023) and acknowledged as an essential consideration by media scriptwriters (Soto-Sanfiel & Villegas-Simón, 2024) within the same cultural framework.

Discussion and Conclusions

This research explores Spanish adolescents' views on LGBTQ+ characters in Spanish series, asking what they prefer to see on TV and digital platforms. Drawing on studies of adolescent LGBTQ+ audiences' perceptions and media consumption (Amat et al., 2020; Dhoest & Simons, 2012; McInroy & Craig, 2015, 2017), it enhances understanding of how media shape their reflections on social values and life meanings (Mares & Bonus, 2021).

Specifically, this study addresses the knowledge gap related to the oft-overlooked adolescent audience (Andersen & Sundet, 2019; Sundet, 2021) and contributes to QPS and the audiovisual industries.

It informs suitable queer content for adolescents, aligning with the recommendations of scholars, educators, and social workers (Amat et al., 2020; Dhoest & Van Ouytsel, 2022; McInroy & Craig, 2015, 2017; Redvall, 2018) and bridging the gap between adolescents, academia, and audiovisual professionals. This aligns with media executives' focus on engaging adolescent audiences in today's competitive landscape (Andersen & Sundet, 2019; Redvall, 2018) as well as the growing range of products offered by the European and Spanish audiovisual industry (Lacalle et al., 2021).

In particular, departing from the notion of adultocracy (Campbell, 2021), this research advocates for the recognition of adolescents' agency and perspectives in identifying their media consumption needs, while acknowledging the differences between the ways that adults and young people understand queer issues in today's world (Platero et al., 2023). In doing so, it underscores the potential to depart from the adult perspective in (queer) media research, thereby challenging the inadvertently perpetuated adult gaze in both media representation and research related to QPS. By straightforwardly and pragmatically describing Spanish adolescents' perceptions and ambitions about the representation of LGBTQ+ youth, this study bridges academic research with the audiovisual industries, potentially enhancing young people's social well-being.

The study's primary finding is that adolescents feel a notable absence of diverse LGBTQ+ characters in fiction. They would like to see characters with a broader range of gender and sexual identities, nuanced representations of transgender experiences, and multidimensional LGBTQ+ characters beyond their sexual or gender identities. They also prefer accurate portrayals that normalize LGBTQ+ identities, tackle genuine challenges, and offer practical advice. They desire authentic depictions of love, intimacy, and diverse romance, with a preference for LGBTQ+ adolescent communities being portrayed by LGBTQ+ actors. Moreover, the research emphasizes how heavily adolescents rely on media for learning, connection, and recreation, especially for shaping their gender and sexual identity. The findings confirm the critical role of media in shaping people's understanding of LGBTQ+ identities and self-concepts and countering prejudice at both the individual and societal levels (McInroy & Craig, 2017; Parsemain, 2019).

In contrast, the results highlight the participants' concerns about certain attributes within current media portrayals. These include inaccurate depictions of adolescents, overidealized depictions of love, and unrealistic sexual interactions among adolescents. They also feel that the media often misrepresents LGBTQ+ adolescents by focusing solely on romance and sex, introducing LGBTQ+ characters merely to fulfill diversity quotas, objectifying female characters, and portraying adolescents as primarily interested in partying and substance abuse. They dislike the profusion of tragic or tumultuous stories about LGBTQ+ adolescents and the lack of diversity among actors too. Overall, these results align with essential features for representing LGBTQ+ characters in various cultural contexts (Dhoest & Simons, 2012; McInroy & Craig, 2015, 2017), as well as depictions of Spanish adolescents' romantic and love interactions (Masanet & Dhaenens, 2019), contributing to ongoing research. They also reflect existential perspectives on adolescence in the examined European country.

The results show that, when it comes to identifying needs and shortcomings about the representation of the queer community in Spanish fiction, the adolescents in the sample have proven themselves to be critical viewers with the ability to discern the cis gaze (Cavalcante, 2017; Villegas-Simón

et al., 2023) and condemn normative attributes not only in the representation of queers but also of adolescents. By advocating for authentic portrayals that reflect their true concerns, behaviors, and aspirations, they highlight how current depictions of queer content for teenagers are predominantly shaped by adults (Soto-Sanfiel & Villegas-Simón, 2024; Villegas-Simón & Soto-Sanfiel, 2024) and ignore the diverse sensibilities of youth today. These representations from an assumed position of authority are influenced by adults' personal experiences, mental images, and conceptions of LGBTQ+ audiences and the queer world (Soto-Sanfiel & Villegas-Simón, 2024).

Although they are treading unfamiliar ground by depicting queer identities (Villegas-Simón & Soto-Sanfiel, 2024), media creators, including LGBTQ+ ones, adopt a certain entitlement to dictate how audiences would like to see LGBTQ+ people portrayed on television. In doing so, they are assuming a protective, hierarchically superior position over young audiences, driven by the notion of safeguarding or rescuing LGBTQ+ audiences from potentially harmful or ambiguous queer representations (Soto-Sanfiel & Villegas-Simón, 2024), aligning with the adult inclination to diminish youth agency (Marre & San Roman, 2012). Furthermore, disparities in the viewpoints of young people and adults about LGBTQ+ matters (Platero et al., 2023) extend to the portrayal of queer themes in serialized audiovisual fiction.

This research highlights the boundaries of perceived normality in portraying LGBTQ+ characters among adolescents in countries with strong public service media, such as Spain, as recommended by Vanlee (2021). Spanish adolescents criticize TV series for issues like adultification, homonormativity, heteronormativity, transnormativity, and the cis gaze. Amid controversies over normalizing LGBTQ+ characters on Spanish TV (Villegas-Simón & Soto-Sanfiel, 2024), they expect public service fulfillment but notice a tendency toward homonormative/heteronormative perspectives, similar to other contexts (Vanlee, 2019). They also detect opportunistic, market-driven, and inauthentic representations, aligning with queer scholarship (Wiegman & Wilson, 2015). This suggests Spanish media creators have a rigid perception of normality in adolescent representation and might be ignoring young people's critical capacities.

On the other hand, the results also confirm the potential of adopting IPA in studying adolescents' attitudes toward their media representations, especially about LGBTQ+ portrayals, thus benefiting both QS and QPS. IPA's experiential approach, which considers individual opinions and ideographies, along with the pragmatic nature of TA (Spiers & Riley, 2019), clearly informs audiovisual industries about adolescents' specific demands and critiques, as well as the experiential meanings behind them. This interplay also supports the research objective of avoiding the adult-centric views that are so prevalent in both audiovisual industries and adolescent-related research on queerness and media, thereby ensuring that young people's authentic voices are properly considered.

In summary, this study underscores the modern values of young Spanish audiences with regard to media portrayals, emphasizing their insistence on authenticity and inclusion in fiction, which they share with adolescents in other developed Western nations. Its results align with studies highlighting the lack of understanding among audiovisual creators of the attitudes of new generations to sexual-affective and gender diversity (Dhoest & Van-Ouytsel, 2022; Soto-Sanfiel & Villegas-Simón, 2024). They also confirm that (1) adolescents actively manage and critically engage with media (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2021); (2) they seek role models and a better understanding of concerns such as sexuality, love, and identity through media

(Arnett, 1995; Masanet & Dhaenens, 2019); (3) LGBTQ+ adolescents identify with media representations that reflect their realities, despite the occasional reinforcement of stereotypes (Dhaenens, Mediavilla Aboulaoula, & Lion, 2023); and (4) they critique the cis and adult gaze in representations of (LGBTQ+) adolescents. In the context of the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, especially young ones, this study provides vital insights to help protect their rights and well-being across diverse cultural contexts.

Limitations

The participants, urban middle-class Spanish adolescents, volunteered via an open social media call, indicating potential vested interest. Future research should replicate these findings in diverse contexts, especially with cis-heterosexual adolescents from rural areas.

These results could be compared with samples of LGBTQ+ teenagers exclusively to assess generalizability. Further research should explore whether teenage critiques and demands vary across different fiction subgenres, such as dramas and comedies. Despite efforts to respect young participants' viewpoints, the adult authors may have introduced biases. Future studies should examine and validate this assumption, given academia's adult-centric nature.

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