Acknowledging/denying LGBT+ difference: Understanding homonormativity and LGBT+ homogeneity in Flemish TV fiction through production research

Florian Vanlee
Universiteit Gent, Belgium

Abstract
Premised on the lack of in-depth engagements with television professionals’ views as a unit of analysis in queer television studies, this essay presents the results of expert interviews with seven respondents employed in the Flemish television industry. Television professionals consider it commonsensical and even necessary to textually reflect sexual and gender diversity as a component to socio-cultural verisimilitude. On the other hand, they rely on a homonormative conception of LGBT+ representation that emphasizes assimilation and conformity. Closer analysis reveals that this strategy is informed by unwillingness to engage in stereotyping. Accordingly, the noted homonormativity of Flemish television fiction is a product of benevolence and paradoxical dispositions towards televising difference on the level of production. Consequently, the paper calls for scholars to engage with the industry as a supplement to critical textual explorations of LGBT+ portrayals on television.

Keywords
Homonormativity, LGBT+ representation, production studies, queer television studies, stereotyping

Domestic television fiction in Flanders – the Dutch-speaking northern part of Belgium – is demonstrably attentive for issues of sexual and gender diversity in representing contemporary Flemish society. A non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgendered lead character

Corresponding author:
Florian Vanlee, Universiteit Gent, Korte Meer 7, B-9000 Gent, Belgium.
Email: florian.vanlee@ugent.be
featured in 36 of a total of 156 ‘homemade’ series (23.04%) aired on Flemish channels between 2001 and 2016 (Vanlee et al., 2018a, 2018b). This figure is even greater when taking into account side and guest characters, showing that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT)+ characters and storylines are a habitual component to the Flemish televisual imagination. Sizable presence does not entail equitable representation however, and the majority of these characters formally correspond to and potentially reinforce what Lisa Duggan (2003) dubs homonormative discourses. With most Flemish gay and lesbian characters conforming to traditional gender scripts or heterosexual cultural institutions like marriage or procreation (see Vanlee et al., 2018a), they reproduce sociocultural inequalities privileging those that conform most to heterosexual ideals of desire and citizenship at the cost of those that do not (Duggan, 2003: 50) – without necessarily reiterating a hierarchical dichotomy between cisgender, heterosexual people and LGBT+ subjects. In such a politics of respectability (see Cavalcante, 2015; Warner, 2000), assimilation is presented as a natural precondition for equality, and LGBT+ diversity is symbolically annihilated (Gross, 1991). This is exasperated, moreover, by the sustained absence of LGBT+ characters whose sexuality and/or gender intersects with racial or class difference (see Vanlee et al., 2018a) – further homogenizing the popular imaginary of sexual and gender diversity in Flanders.

These are important critiques to articulate and elucidate an expressively problematic dimension to LGBT+ televisibility in a region that ostensibly prides itself on the inclusion of sexual and gender diversity (see Borghs, 2016). It unpacks the discursive role LGBT+ characters play in Flanders, troubling interlinkages between fictional representations and broadly shared assumptions on what constitutes ‘normal’ LGBT+ life. As to the question of why these homonormative representations are dominant in Flemish television fiction, interpretative clarity is less readily available. Flemish LGBT+ television representations presumably feed into or reinforce wider socio-cultural discourses of homonormativity, but this does not necessarily entail that they interlock with homonormative discourses prevalent in the television industry. Simply put, the question explored in this article is whether homonormative representations necessarily imply that television professionals rely on homonormative discourses in their craft. Accordingly, the aim of this study is not to approach problematic representations in Flemish television fiction from an exclusively textual perspective – the dominant approach in queer television studies (see Villarejo, 2008), but rather to unravel the conditions, negotiations and reflexive processes shaping them. Using semi-structured expert interviews with seven television professionals, this article identifies crucial industry assumptions, practices and expectations responsible for the homonormative myopia of LGBT+ lives in Flemish television fiction. Engaging with shared discourses and reflexive processes on the level of production, the study shows, is an indispensable research modality for a television scholarship that aims to contribute to socio-cultural advancement of minoritized groups.

LGBT+ televisibility in Flanders

With roughly one quarter of domestic fiction series aired on Flemish channels between 2001 and 2016 featuring an openly LGBT+ lead character (see Vanlee et al., 2018a, 2018b). Flemish audiovisual pop-culture is relatively hospitable for sexual and gender
diversity. To an extent, this is the result of institutional conditions. Public service broadcaster (PSB) VRT\(^3\) accounts for both the highest share of domestic fiction series (see Vanlee et al., 2018a) and market share (Dhoest, 2015) and has a mandated responsibility to reflect ‘the diversity of contemporary Flanders’ (VRT, 2015) – including sexual and gender diversity. Since the 1990s, VRT fiction has adopted an observational perspective on the representation of everyday Flemish life, allowing for a relatively inconspicuous inclusion of socio-cultural minorities in VRT programming (see Dhoest, 2015; Vanlee et al., 2018b). Domestic LGBT\(^+\) characters are almost evenly distributed between VRT\(^4\) and commercial channels (see Vanlee et al., 2018), however, and such roles tend to feature quickly in commercial programming after their initial inclusion in PSB content (see Vanlee, 2019). As a result, LGBT\(^+\) subjects have rarely been stigmatized or ridiculed in domestic fiction series – contrasting early portrayals in the United States (see Fejes and Petrich, 1993; Gross, 2001). Instead, fictional representations of non-heterosexual – and more recently, non-cisgendered – subjects emphasize the *sameness* of LGBT\(^+\) people (see Dhaenens, 2016; Vanlee, 2019; Vanlee et al., 2018b) and rarely reify a hierarchical opposition between straight and queer identifications. Insofar as heteronormativity (see Warner, 1993) in the context of television refers to a system wherein a natural link between biological sex, gender performance and sexual desire is reproduced (Avilasaavedra, 2009), the concept insufficiently describes the situation in Flemish television fiction. Whereas straight, cisgender characters are of course in the majority, they are never explicitly constructed as *normal* by contrasting them with the supposed abnormal-ity of LGBT\(^+\) people (see Vanlee et al., 2018b, 2019, for an in-depth discussion). These observations allude to hegemonic discourses of tolerance and inclusivity circulating in domestic fiction production.

This is not to say that this reflection of diversity is necessarily emancipatory – and significant representation does not necessarily translate into equable portrayals. The presence of LGBT\(^+\) characters in Flemish fiction series borders on banal. But, banality in this context appears synonymous to homogeneity. Most non-heterosexual characters are virtually indiscernible from their straight counterparts until they either explicitly articulate their gender identity or sexuality, physically assert their desire for characters of the same gender (or both) or are defined as such in extra-textual material (see Vanlee et al., 2018a). The overwhelming majority of LGBT\(^+\) characters conform to traditional scripts of masculinity and femininity. They are detached from social and cultural scripts historically associated with gay men, lesbian women, bisexual or trans people (see Dyer, 2005; Halperin, 2012). Problematically, this reduces the LGBT\(^+\) community to a segment comfortably assimilated to heterosexual and cisgender scripts of sociability. As Lisa Duggan (2003) argues, homonormativity establishes a sexual and gender hierarchy, privileging those willing – and able – to assimilate to heterosexual norms and values at the cost of others. Critiquing media representations, authors like Michael Warner (2000) or Andre Cavalcante (2015) understand the prominence of perennial, exclusive monogamy and parenthood with fictional gay and lesbian characters as components to a discourse claiming social respectability for conforming LGBT\(^+\) people – implicitly discrediting others. These ‘politics of respectability’ formally resonate in Flanders too: only a small minority of characters – 19.66% – has more than one relationship, and over half is portrayed in a monogamous coupling (see Vanlee et al., 2018a: 44–45).
Homonormative representational strategies furthermore interlock with racial and class inequities (Warner, 2000). Fictional reflections of ‘sexual and gender diversity’ forward white, middle-class characters and erase the diversity of the LGBT+ community (Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Kooijman, 2005; Ng, 2013). Featuring only four recognizably non-white LGBT+ characters between 2001 and 2016 – on a total of 117, Flemish fiction series dislodge gender and sexuality from their intersections with race and class (see Vanlee et al., 2018a: 46). Ostensibly, Flemish fiction series are attentive for sexual and gender diversity – exemplified by the many LGBT+ characters they feature. The homogeneity of characters, however, erases the diversity in ‘sexual and gender diversity’.

Surely, at least a fraction of people that do not identify either as straight or cisgender recognize themselves in the discreet, assimilated image of LGBT+’s in Flemish television fiction. But the myopia of this representational regime is troublesome. A television culture that presents the entire LGBT+ community as gender-conforming, (serially) monogamous and generally conforming to heterosexual scripts contributes to structural inequalities in the communities it supposedly reflects and reifies society’s assumptions about ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ sexual and gender identifications. Indeed, it merits to note that in a region sometimes (self)identified as a ‘paradise for GLBTQ rights’ (see Borghs, 2016), assimilation remains a stringent criterion for acceptance and phrases along the lines of ‘I’m fine with homosexuality, but I’m uncomfortable with poofs’ have yet to disappear from acceptable mainstream discourse. Comments made by Theo Francken, then state secretary for asylum and migration, on lingerie for men are quite illustrative of this schizophrenic logic of acceptance and rejection. In a Facebook post in the summer of 2018, the nationalist politician – whose party, the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA, Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie) explicitly claims to support LGBT+ rights – decried the decline of traditional masculinity and celebrated ‘normal’ men who ‘do not need make-up, purses, depilation or lingerie’ to feel comfortable (Van Berlaer, 2018: 8). Notably, Francken did not refer to sexuality in his post, but rather decried gender-non-conforming behaviour without explicitly vilifying lesbian, gay, bisexual or even trans people that do meet rigid binary gender standards. While his opinion generated considerable outrage (see De Lobel and Verbergt, 2018; Sturtewagen, 2018), the fact that he felt comfortable to articulate it – especially considering his role as a member of the federal government – exemplifies the commonality and pervasiveness of homonormative discourses in Flemish society.

**Producing LGBT+ representations**

LGBT+ representations in domestic fiction series affirm rather than counteract homonormative discourses in wider Flemish society. LGBT+ characters on the small screen are partial, even conservative representatives of a highly diverse community. They reify normative, assimilationist expectations society imposes on LGBT+ people. However, the overrepresentation of gender-conforming, monogamous characters on the domestic small screen is paradoxical. Not only does the pervasive homonormativity of LGBT+ characters in Flemish television fiction collides with the diversity mandate of the dominant broadcaster on the market (i.e. VRT), but it is also particular to domestic fiction series. That is to say, the televisual presence of LGBT+ people who are not the product
of screenwriting is ostensibly more heterogenous. The popularity of presenter Jani Kazaltsis, for instance, shows that Flemish television culture can be a space wherein non-homonormative male homosexuality can be articulated. Similarly, serial documentaries like M/V/X (één, 2018) – documenting how five trans people experience and shape their gender identity – illustrate how Flemish television deals with gender without reiterating strictly binary conceptualizations. It would also be difficult to argue that the LGBT+ people who participate in Flemish game shows or feature in other forms of non-fiction programming are selected because of their conformity to homonormative standards. Such momentous representations of ‘real’ LGBT+ people in Flemish television tend to contrast sharply with the modest, assimilationist image of the LGBT+ community offered by fiction programming – although racial and class diversity remain problematic even in domestic non-fiction content.

While this situation certainly invites further textual analysis, unpacking this paradox also benefits from deeper understandings of specific discourses informing the production of fictional LGBT+ representations. Currently, dynamics of encoding (Hall, 2001) remain underexplored in queer television studies (Martin, 2015, 2018). Whereas authorship has been discussed in relation to sexuality and film (e.g. Doty, 1993; Dyer, 1991, 2005), television’s limited degree of cultural autonomy (see Bourdieu, 1993) has historically deprived it of consideration as a medium wherein authorship plays a role of importance to (queer) analysis. The mechanistic production cycle of television, perceived as an industrial rather than an artistic process (Joyrich, 2014), fragments the imagined role of individual television professionals. It relegates creative output to the interplay of different industrial levels rather than particular agents and often presumes television representations to directly reflect hegemonic socio-cultural discourses. However, research like Alfred Martin’s (2015) exploration of the negotiations and considerations made by African American sitcom writers in creating black gay characters illustrates the merits of studying discourses television professionals operate in when reflecting on how to represent sexual and gender diversity. Adding to textual deconstructions of dominant logics like homonormativity (Duggan, 2003) or televsual closet politics (Joyrich, 2009), Martin employs interviews to show how representations are the product of reflexive discursive processes in the creative team behind fictional television content. His work shows it is ‘productive to examine what writers wrote, their authorial intentions and negotiations to get these representations on air’ (Martin, 2015: 661). Similarly, Dia Thorfinnsdottir and Helle Strandgaard Jensen (2017) include stakeholder interviews in their analysis of heteronormativity in Danish children’s television. Their study, focused specifically on Danish public service broadcasting content, clarifies how television professionals rely on discourses that construct same-sex desire as an ‘adult theme’ – too complex to be understood by young viewers. This defective conceptualization of how children understand (LGBT+) sexuality leads them to produce profoundly heteronormative representations of love and desire (p. 15).

Crucially, these studies incorporate the views of television professionals to understand how normative discourses crystallize in fiction series. They shift critical attention from how television representations interlock with or add to broader societal discourses understood as (homo)normative (e.g. Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Kies, 2016) to how situated discourses shape or inform television representations perceived as (homo)normative.
More importantly, they allow the identification of specific industrial practices and logics that invite readjustment. This is particularly relevant in television cultures where PSBs account for a sizable portion of domestic fiction series and have a noted guiding role in mainstreaming marginalized groups (Vanlee, 2019). Since PSBs operate by a diversity mandate (Horsti and Hultén, 2011) – often shaped, evaluated and adjusted by (media) scholars (see Horsti and Hultén, 2011; Panis et al., 2019), queer analyses of production discourses on LGBT+ representations could potentially feed back into television production. As Alexander Bogner and Wolfgang Menz (2009) argue, engaging professionals in a particular social field allows to ‘reconstruct interpretative knowledge’ to gauge its ‘sphere of ideas and ideologies, of fragmentary, inconsistent configurations of meaning and patterns of explanation’ (p. 52). Critically unpacking the views and discourses of television professionals enables scholars to study the reflexive processes that precede textual output. Direct interactions with the industry, in turn, enable queer interventions in the systems of meaning that structure the relation between fictional LGBT+ representations and wider societal assumptions on the reality of sexual and gender diversity. Hence, the present analysis builds on previous research, like Dhoest’s (2015), Martin’s (2015) or Thorfinnssdottir and Jensen’s (2017) studies, in explicitly taking the dissonances between academic and industrial practice – noted by all cited authors – as a core interest. The goal of incorporating professionals’ views on LGBT+ representations is not only to explore the discourses television professionals subscribe to when reflecting on the representation of sexual and gender diversity, but the kind of politics they invite queer television scholars to engage in too (Doty, 1993).

The creators behind Flemish LGBT+ characters

Seven television professionals employed in the Flemish television industry agreed to an interview as a means to understand the discursive logics underlying the homogeneity of Flemish LGBT+ characters. Considering that LGBT+ characters and storylines are creative output, the majority of the respondents occupy creative roles in the production process and have all been involved in productions with prominent LGBT+ characters. The head writers of Flanders’ two daily soap operas – Thuis (Home; één, 1995–) and Familie (Family; VTM, 1991–) – Stef Wouters and Dirk Nielandt, respectively, were selected because of the significant reach of their work and because they provide insights into both PSB and commercial broadcasting discourses on the representation of sexual and gender diversity. Writer Rik D’hiet has worked both on middlebrow productions – most notably police procedural Flikken (Cops; één, 1999–2009) – and prestigious productions – like Het Goddelijke Monster (The Divine Monster; één, 2011). He provides added insights into the role diversity plays in educating future television professionals because of his occupation as a screenwriting lecturer at RITCS (Royal Institute for Theatre, Cinema and Sound). Writer/director Jan Eelen is a mainstay in the prestige segment of domestic television fiction and is arguably one of the few Flemish television professionals with auteur status. His work engages very little in the portrayal of sexual and gender diversity – only his last work Callboys (VIER, 2016) featured a recurring gay character – and his views provide insight into the noted lack of LGBT+ characters in Flemish ‘quality television’ (see Vanlee et al., 2018a, 2019). Actors Leen Dendievel and
Abigail Abraham were both interviewed because of the uncommon roles they portray. Currently, Leen Dendievel plays the role of Kaat Bomans in soap opera *Thuis*, a lead transwoman character. Abigail Abraham, who has Caribbean heritage, however, portrayed queer jurist Bâina Mpenza in *Coppers* (*Coppers*; VTM, 2016), a police procedural on commercial channel VTM. Her role is especially relevant as it is one of only four LGBT+ characters of colour in Flemish television fiction in the 2001–2016 period (see Vanlee et al., 2018a: 46). Geertje De Ceuleneer, finally, does not hold a creative position in the Flemish television industry. However, as coordinator of the diversity taskforce of VRT, she is responsible not only for diversity policy at the PSB but also for assisting creative personnel with incorporating diversity in their output.

### Erasing socio-cultural diversity

Flemish production discourses on including sexual and gender diversity in fiction series situate LGBT+ characters in an aesthetic regime of ‘social realism’. Noting that ‘you nowadays get confronted with people from diverse origins and it would be weird not to tell stories about people in our society today’ (Wouters, 2016, interview) or that fiction’s ‘relation to reality is of paramount importance’ (D’hiet, 2018, interview), Flemish TV professionals deem the presence of non-heterosexual and – more recently – non-cisgendered characters a commonsensical component to their social realist aesthetic ambitions. Paralleling quantitative (Vanlee et al., 2018a) and qualitative (Dhoest, 2015; Vanlee, 2019; Vanlee et al., 2018b, 2019) analyses of Flemish LGBT+ televisibility, respondents understand reflections of contemporary Flanders’ socio-cultural diversity – related to sexuality and gender or otherwise – in fiction series as a modality to accomplish socio-cultural verisimilitude (see Neale, 2005). Discourses in domestic fiction production emphasize audience preferences for culturally proximate stories (see Straubhaar, 1991). Punctuating cultural proximity in fiction series necessitates cues that *geographically* situate the text as taking place in Flemish territory – accomplished by featuring typical Flemish landscapes as a setting, including reflections of Flemish material culture or scripting dialogues in regional vernaculars (Dhoest, 2007). Conversely, centralizing cultural proximity relies on *temporal* contingency too – which invites the import of cues articulating contemporaneity in Flemish fiction series, such as prominent themes shaping public debate (Dhoest, 2007) or LGBT+ characters (Vanlee et al., 2019). While Flemish production discourses naturally gloss over this analytical distinction, they nevertheless underscore the temporally articulative quality to the representation of sexual and gender diversity. Screenwriters understand LGBT+ characters and narratives as a self-evidence in series situated in a ‘contemporary Flemish setting’ (D’hiet, 2018; Eelen, 2017, interview; Nielandt, 2017, interview; Wouters, 2016), whereas actors comprehend the roles they perform as a natural component to narratives that reflect ‘today’s Flemish society’ (Abraham, 2018, interview; Dendievel, 2018, interview). VRT diversity coordinator Geertje (De Ceuleneer, 2017, interview) too considers the presence of LGBT+ characters commonsensical in Flemish series, because Flemish viewers expect a ‘realistic reflection’ of their ‘everyday environment’.

The prominence of ‘social realism’ in production discourses on LGBT+ presentation in fiction series on one hand constructs diversity as an evaluative benchmark, but on the
other hand, it obscures that the ‘reality’ acting as the referent underlying ‘socially realistic’ reflections of Flanders is in itself a construction. The first dimension contextualizes the widespread presence of LGBT+ characters in domestic fiction series, whereas the latter helps to understand their demographic homogeneity. The hegemony of social realism in production discourses on the aesthetics of domestic fiction series logically entails a negative evaluation of texts considered ‘unrealistic’ – which incentivizes the inclusion of LGBT+ characters. This does not necessarily imply that series omitting sexual and gender diversity are negatively evaluated. Rather, it suggests that texts that do include non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgendered characters and storylines correspond more to the social realist aesthetics emphasized in production discourses on fiction programming. That several respondents refer to (hypothetical) series portraying Flanders as homogenously white, straight and cisgender as ‘surpassed’ or ‘outdated’ (e.g. Abraham, 2018; De Ceuleneer, 2017; Dendievel, 2018; D’hiet, 2018; Nielandt, 2017; Wouters, 2016) illustrates how representing diverse socio-cultural identities has become a dominant evaluative benchmark in industrial conceptions of ‘good’ Flemish fiction television. Although these shared dispositions in Flemish fiction production might be understood as a functionalist approach to LGBT+ representation – in that they emphasize not emancipatory ideals but aesthetic considerations, moral imperatives permeate social realist discourse. With the exception of Jan Eelen (2017) – who as a television auteur unapologetically privileges his creative vision over (un)desirable representational practices, TV professionals articulate notions of fairness and industrial responsibility to pursuing social realism (e.g. Abraham, 2018; De Ceuleneer, 2017; Dendievel, 2018; D’hiet, 2018; Nielandt, 2017; Wouters, 2016). Shared constructions of ‘responsible’ ways to ‘realistically’ represent contemporary society, however, both individualize its referent ‘reality’ and obscure attention for ‘wider media structures and political discourses’ (Malik and Nwonka, 2017: 437).

Discussing the relation between the ‘reality’ of sexual and gender diversity and its reflection in fiction series, respondents invariably refer to highly individual perceptions of and experiences with the LGBT+ community. Citing help from – respectively trans and lesbian – friends to give feedback on their performance (Abraham, 2018; Dendievel, 2018), ensuring diverse writing teams (Nielandt, 2017) or relying on LGBT+ acquaintances in their personal environment as a resource to ‘realistically’ create characters and storylines (D’hiet, 2018; Wouters, 2016), TV professionals centralize the reality of sexual and gender diversity they personally experience as the primary source to create socially realistic fiction series. That Jan Eelen (2017) cites his limited personal interactions with non-heterosexual and non-cisgendered people as the primary reason he will ‘probably never create a gay lead character’ testifies to the self-evidence of treating personal, immediate experiences as the ‘objective reality’ underlying socially realistic representational practices. Crucially – and this will be discussed in detail later – this suggests a critical discursive dynamic leading to a refusal to mindlessly reproduce established tropes in the portrayal of sexual and gender diversity. Juxtaposing individual perceptions to a faulty ‘general image’ of the LGBT+ community, however, both universalizes the conditions wherein sexual and gender diversity are situated in the environment of TV professionals and obfuscates the necessity to reflect on the partial or constructed nature of these perceptions. When respondents note that they portray ‘various people like you
would meet them in reality’ (D’hiet, 2018), they do not question that they might meet only a certain people in the LGBT+ community. Non-heterosexual and non-cisgendered people of colour, with a lower socio-economic status or disabilities face intersecting structures of marginalization (see Huysentruyt et al., 2015). Given that TV professionals privilege their individual environment and perceptions in constructing the ‘reality of LGBT+ life’, it is not entirely unreasonable to assume that people with intersecting marginalized identities are largely absent from their lives – thus ensuring their absence from the fiction series respondents create.

The lack of LGBT+ characters of colour, with a lower socio-economic status or disabilities in Flemish television fiction (see Vanlee et al., 2018a) cannot be dislodged from particular constructions of reality in Flemish television production and their relation to social realist aesthetics. In this dimension, the social realist discourse invites an a posteriori representation of the diversity of contemporary Flemish society, wherein certain subjects are represented in fiction series only after they have succeeded in claiming a mainstream presence in the lives and minds of Flemings. It obscures fiction series’ potential role in creating a mainstream presence, implicitly situating responsibility with marginalized groups – both in- and outside of the LGBT+ community – to ‘matter’ enough for fictional representation. On one hand, it is difficult to detach these discourses from the non-stigmatizing and non-stereotypical representations of LGBT+ identities in Flemish fiction series (Dhoest, 2015; Vanlee et al., 2018b), but on the other hand, it is equally difficult to dislodge them from the limited diversity in ‘sexual and gender diversity’. It is noteworthy, however, that the TV professionals interviewed valued descriptive, numerical research on the lack of diversity in LGBT+ representation in both national and international contexts (e.g. Townsend et al., 2017; Vanlee et al., 2018a), pointing to the political currency of such endeavours to the field. While collecting, categorizing and counting LGBT+ characters is often dismissed by queer scholars of television as a simplistic (or even complacent) method to critically engage with the medium (e.g. Chambers, 2009; Heller, 2011), TV professionals – unaccustomed to the jargon and style of close readings – welcome such broad overviews as a valuable and accommodating critical resource to reflect on their representational practices. Particularly in television industries with strong PSBs – institutions obliged to reflect the diversity of the communities they cater to (Horsti and Hultén, 2011; Panis et al., 2019) – such descriptive and seemingly ‘uncritical’ methods (Villarejo, 2008: 49) have potential to queer scholarship as an important modality to engage the television industry with.

**Erasing sexual and gender difference**

In emphasizing social realism, production discourses juxtapose how TV professionals personally perceive the ‘reality’ of sexual and gender diversity with a loosely defined ‘mainstream image’ of the LGBT+ community. On one hand, the prominence of personal constructions of social reality as the referent for social realist fiction erases the diversity of sexual and gender diversity in favour of LGBT+ people that do not face intersecting structures of marginalization. On the other hand, the particular construction of ‘mainstream portrayals of the LGBT+ community’ ensures a formal and narrative homogenization of LGBT+ characters into homonormative representational practices.
Arguing that many mainstream representations of non-heterosexual or non-cisgendered people reduce them to their *difference*, Flemish TV professionals construct ‘realistic’ formal and narrative traits in opposition to certain modes of portraying sexual and gender diversity. Considering representations of sexual and gender in media like newspapers or television journalism (De Ceuleneer, 2017), popular entertainment shows (Eelen, 2017; Wouters, 2016) or ‘older fiction series’ (D’hiet, 2018; Nielandt, 2017) problematic and reductive, Flemish TV professionals rely on a shared understanding of certain traits and cues deemed undesirable in (socially realistic) fiction series. These traits and cues are invariably associated with allowing the ‘difference’ brought by same-sex desire or transgender identifications to be legibly present in the television text. Commenting on a prominent gay couple in *Thuis*, Stef Wouters (2016) stresses that first and foremost, ‘absolutely no [formal or narrative] distinctions with other (i.e. heterosexual) couples in the soap are made whatsoever’, whereas Leen Dendievel (2018) approaches the transwoman role she plays ‘basically as a woman’ only accentuating her transness ‘in subtle, momentous instances in the story’. Similarly, Dirk Nielandt and Rik D’hiet eschew creating LGBT+ characters with traits that would make them stand out from straight, cisgender cast members and avoid narratives that highlight the sexual or gendered difference of non-heterosexual and non-cisgendered roles. At VRT, these discourses on the circumvention of LGBT+ difference are part of institutional diversity policies. Geertje De Ceuleneer (2017) notes that in her function, she observes that television makers ‘are often initially tempted to focus on how people differ from the majority’, but that she assists them in creating LGBT+ roles that are ‘just like any other character’.

The inherent benevolence informing discourses on ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ ways to represent sexual and gender diversity notwithstanding, these shared industrial convictions dramatically constrict how LGBT+ characters can be televised. When Jan Eelen (2017) disavows ‘the mandatory weekly effeminate gay candidate in *Komen Eten*’ – a popular Flemish cooking competition – because he perceives it as a tokenistic attempt to ‘show a gay man only because of his gayness’, he implicitly rejects effeminateness as an acceptable trait to a fictional gay male character. When starting as a head writer for *Familie*, Dirk Nielandt (2017) took offence with the fact that gay couple Zjef and Rudi called each other ‘bolleke’ – Flemish vernacular for ‘honey’ or ‘sweetheart’ – and rewrote the couple’s verbal interactions: ‘they used to seem childish, which bugged me immensely, so we changed that – they’re a couple like any other now’. Because the couple campily articulated their desire for one another, Nielandt felt that they were portrayed ‘differently’ from others, resulting in adjustments to reframe the relation in terms that erased the sexual difference it supposedly symbolized. Similarly, Geertje De Ceuleneer (2017) critiques coverage on pride parades, stating that it tends to overemphasize ‘dancing men in flamboyant outfits’, while obscuring ‘regular LGBT+ people that do not stand out’, framing such representations as a form of ‘othering’. While Flemish production discourses on the portrayal of (sexual and gender) diversity circumvent heteronormative representational practices (see Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Chambers, 2009) – in that they emphasize the creation of characters and narratives that avoid reifying the hierarchical hetero/homo binary (see Vanlee et al., 2018b) – they ironically contribute to homonormative representational practices by stripping LGBT+ characters of traits and qualities that would discernably distinguish them from straight, cisgender roles. Logically,
depriving non-heterosexual and non-cisgendered characters from any and all cues that would make them stand out from heterosexual, cisgender roles produces assimilationist, homogenized representations that gloss over particular segments of the LGBT+ community. Considering the (sub)cultural dimension to sexual and gender identity (see Dyer, 2005; Halperin, 2012), some people’s sexual or gender difference is to an extent legible. Since production discourses construct the formal discernibility of sexual or gender difference as undesirable or even unacceptable, these subjects are invariably absent in Flemish fiction series.

Whereas queer critics have often understood portrayals of discreet, assimilated LGBT+ people in terms of a ‘politics of respectability’ (e.g. Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Cavalcante, 2015; Martin, 2015; Warner, 2000), Flemish production discourses centralize the (imagined) demands and wishes of the LGBT+ community rather than that of the straight, cisgender majority – notwithstanding similar formal outcomes. The underwhelming attention given to issues related to sexual and/or gender identity in the LGBT+ storylines of Flemish fiction series does not serve to make non-heterosexuality or transgender subjectivities palpable for straight, cisgender audiences – claiming respectability for assimilated, conforming segments of the LGBT+ community. Rather, it supposedly privileges the interests of non-heterosexual and non-cisgendered people over a sensationalist fascination for LGBT+ difference. That discourses on the representation of sexual and gender diversity caution against formally acknowledging sexual and gender difference is intimately related to a critical awareness of stereotypes and the fact that the historical marginalization of the LGBT+ community was enacted through representation too. Flemish TV professionals consider it undesirable to reiterate ‘harmful tropes of the past’ (D’hiet, 2018), with Geertje De Ceuleneer (2017) noting that ‘because in the minds of many people, “gay” is connected to “effeminate”, it’s good to show that many just have a regular job and a run-of-the-mill life’. The prominence of these views in production discourses on LGBT+ representation result in the erasure of certain portrayals, like ‘effeminate [gay] men working as hairdressers’ (Nielandt, 2017), ‘butch [lesbian] women in plaid shirts’ (Wouters, 2016), ‘[trans] women dressing in a masculine way’ (Dendievel, 2018) – notwithstanding that TV professionals recognize that (some) real LGBT+ might actually identify as such. That non-homonormative representations do circulate in non-fiction programming, moreover, suggests that these sensitivities are inherently articulated to the creation of (fictional) non-heterosexual and non-cisgendered characters.

Potentially, ‘real’ discernably LGBT+ people are an acceptable presence on Flemish television, because in the minds of TV professionals, their representation is less likely to generate critique. Several respondents (Abraham, 2018; Dendievel, 2018; Wouters, 2016) allude to the difficulties in portraying socio-cultural difference at a time where popular representations often act as a catalyst for debates on identity and diversity. The awareness of and anxiety for stereotyping so prominent in production discourses on LGBT+ representations can of course not be dislodged from wider societal debates on the role of popular culture on the lives of marginalized subjects, and the views expressed by respondents sketch a production culture attentive for such discussions. Hegemonic conceptualizations of stereotypes in television production are expressively reductive, however, and articulate their harmful dimensions solely to certain formal qualities. There is nothing wrong with ‘effeminate [gay] men working as hairdressers’ (Nielandt, 2017),
if they are multifaceted characters in a respectful narrative that may or may not revolve around homosexuality. ‘Butch [lesbian] women in plaid shirts’ (Wouters, 2016) or ‘[trans] women dressing in masculine ways’ (Dendievel, 2018) are perfectly acceptable portrayals of (existing) LGBT+ people, provided that these formal qualities do not serve to ridicule or stigmatize the subjects they reflect. Counteracting the pervasive homonormativity of LGBT+ representations in Flemish television fiction not only supposes open dialogues between queer scholarship and television production based on accessible, descriptive research. It also necessitates critical and nuanced discussions on where harmful representational practices end and portraying the diversity of the LGBT+ community begins.

Conclusion

Assessing the portrayal of sexual and gender diversity in Flemish fiction series points to both laudable and problematic representational mechanisms. LGBT+ characters feature habitually in domestic fiction programming – and when they do, they articulate the co-equality of same-sex desires and transgender identifications to cisgender heterosexuality rather than reify hierarchical dichotomies. Since the introduction of the first gay and lesbian characters in the 1990s (see Vanlee, 2019; Vanlee et al., 2018b), instances wherein LGBT+ people were ridiculed or stigmatized by fiction programming have been exceedingly rare – and domestic media’s treatment of sexual and gender diversity has arguably contributed to the legalization of same-sex marriage and the introduction of anti-discrimination law at the turn of the century (Borghs, 2016). Nevertheless, these same portrayals simultaneously articulate homonormative expectations and assumptions by framing non-heterosexual enactments of desire and non-cisgender embodiments of gender through visual imaginaries and narrative structures that forward gender conformity and relational traditionalism as core ideals for the LGBT+ community. The internal diversity of ‘sexual and gender diversity’, moreover, is obfuscated in favour of a homogeneously white, middle class and able-bodied reflection of LGBT+ people. In doing so, fiction production glosses over its potential to actively counteract the intersecting structures of marginalization faced by some LGBT+ and (inadvertently) legitimizes pervasive homonormative discourses circulating in Flemish society. To queer television scholars, it is downright crucial to critically examine these portrayals and expose their detrimental role in reproducing societal assumptions on ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ ways of differing from the cisgender heterosexual norm. This study also underscores the necessity and value of exploring how TV professionals understand the representation of sexual and gender diversity and how their shared discourses, assumptions and dispositions underlie and shape LGBT+ portrayals that can only be argued to reify dominant discourses detrimental to some segments of the LGBT+ community. Especially in a television culture like that of Flanders – with a scale small enough to facilitate direct interactions between scholars and practitioners and a prominent PSB with a strong diversity mandate – incorporating production studies has particular promise to the inherent politics of queer television scholarship. Forging links between academia and screenwriters, directors, actors and broadcasting professionals not only offers a better understanding of the discursive logics that structure the homogeneity of LGBT+ televisibility – in this case
social realist aesthetics and the denial of LGBT+ difference but also produces fruitful conditions for intervention and adjustment. Broadening queer television scholarship’s textual focus (see Villarejo, 2008) with methods that consider peripheral dimensions to the television text is therefore a crucial avenue to further explore and experiment with. Invariably, the interviews conducted in this study testified to the eagerness of TV professionals to disclose their views on the representation of sexual and gender diversity and their willingness to be confronted with critical perspectives on the characters and stories they create.

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ORCID iD
Florian Vanlee https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7384-0201

Notes
1. For a textual perspective on LGBT+ representations in Flemish television fiction, see Vanlee et al. (2018b, 2019).
2. This article uses the moniker LGBT+ as opposed to acronyms that include other identity categories or the generic term ‘queer’. Given the pervasive homonormativity of Flemish television fiction, this acronym reflects the representation of sexual and gender diversity in this particular television context most aptly.
3. Flemish Radio and Television Broadcasting Organization (Vlaamse Radio- en Televisieomroeporganisatie)
4. VRT operates different channels: generalist channel één, ‘quality content’ channel Canvas and children’s channel KETNET. Each of these channels program domestic content, either produced by VRT or by independent production companies.
5. The fact that the overrepresentation of homonormative characters is not limited to Flemish television fiction content produced by and for commercial broadcasters, but is observed in PSB content too, suggests that arguments of profitability and mercantile conservatism are ill suited as an explanatory frame in this context, despite the emphasis Duggan (2003) places on them.

References


