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Ticking off the (pink) diversity box? Production views on LGBT+ in children's fiction

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Abstract

This paper provides insight on the perceived importance Flemish producers attach to including sexual and gender diversity in their productions targeting children. Drawing on the frameworks of the ‘production ecology’, ‘cultures of production’ and ‘queer production studies’, this paper considers the different internal and external influences that might impact why and how producers depict these LGBT+ narratives. Through qualitative in-depth interviews with different involved parties of these production processes, this paper first and foremost demonstrates a unanimous, strong advocacy for diversified representations by all the participants. The formative role of television in informing and evoking empathy among children, as well as parents as an implicit secondary audience, are primary objectives when creating these narratives. However, the approach to this didactic premise differs for the public broadcaster compared to the commercial channels, and is further nuanced and varies in relation to the perceived cognitive abilities of children as an audience. In particular, sexual diversity is approached differently compared to non-normative gender expressions (e.g. transgender characters), the latter being perceived as (too) complex within a child’s frame of reference. The current production ecology has thus facilitated the recurrence of certain storylines and characters, while others remain underrepresented.

Key words: sexual diversity, gender diversity, qualitative research, inclusive storytelling, production studies

Ticking off the (pink) diversity box?

Production views on LGBT+ in children's fiction

Children's television is now, more than ever, characterized by its intentions for diversified representations. Reflecting the intention for inclusive storytelling, narratives and characters built around sexual and gender diversity have become more common over the years (Butler, 2010; Dennis, 2009; Jane, 2015; Limbach, 2013). Globalized children's media conglomerates like Disney, Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon have all received public and academic acknowledgement for depicting sexual and gender diversity and cautiously breaking away from the predominant heteronormative images in children's television. Likewise, Sesame Workshop's *The Not-Too-Late Show with Elmo* received the GLAAD award for *Outstanding Children's Programming* and queer inclusivity (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2021). The growing list of efforts for LGBT+¹ visibility, however, is not accompanied by similar enlightened public reception. From the 'moral panic' regarding the *Teletubbies* in Poland (Robinson, 2008), to the more recent digital uproar when Sesame Street's '*Muppet Baby*' Gonzo showed up in a princess dress, public controversy seems ongoing when sexual and gender diversity are depicted in children's television.

This broader discussion on what is considered suitable content for children also preoccupies TV producers of children's programs. They play a vital role in establishing a 'mediated world', consisting of diverse characters and storylines, some of which children might not have any references to in real life. Regardless of their own willingness for inclusivity on screen, producers operate in a field that is regulated by internal, commercial, and institutional policies regarding 'appropriate' children's content. Hence, it is interesting to see if, and how,

¹ In this paper, we will use LGBT+ as an overarching term for sexual and gender minorities. When referring to existing literature on the subject, we adopt the term used by the authors, which may be different (e.g., 'homosexual').

these premises for inclusivity are shaped by intrinsic values and ideas, rather than “ticking off the pink diversity box” because of commercial, societal or activist demands.

Discussions on the suitability of certain content for children should also be situated in their cultural context. Current tendencies of globalization and digitization have created a propensity to focus on the global rather than the local, strengthening the predominance of research on Anglo-Saxon productions. Accordingly, Potter and Steemers (2017) emphasize the importance of studying local production practices and national representations. Our focus on the production of Flemish children’s television is inspired by this need for research on sexual and gender diversity in local contexts, beside pragmatic considerations of proximity to and cultural familiarity with the Flemish case.

Previous research disclosed that sexual and gender diversity is strongly present in Flemish children’s fiction (Citation Omitted; Vanlee & Kerrigan, 2021). In this paper, we aim to assess why this is the case, working in the tradition of production studies and contributing to the emerging field of ‘queer production studies’ (Martin, 2018a; Ng, 2021). Drawing on the frameworks of the ‘production ecology’ (Steemers, 2009) and ‘cultures of production’ (Caldwell, 2009), this study aims to answer why Flemish producers choose to include LGBT+ narratives and characters in children's programming. Hence, this study considers the perspectives of parties involved in different levels of the production process, which will be collectively designated as ‘producers’ (Ng, 2021). By means of 10 qualitative in-depth interviews, this research incorporates different perspectives of producers, channel managers, directors and other creatives in answering the research question: *“Why and how do producers include LGBT+ characters in Flemish children’s fiction?”* In doing so, this study wishes to disclose the importance of depicting sexual and gender diversity in programs aimed at children, a target audience that might not be as familiar with this subject.

Producing LGBT+ content for children: a challenging task?

The landscape of media content produced for children is growing faster than ever. Diversity in general, but specifically representations of sexual and gender diversity, have now trickled down from mainstream adult media to children's productions, too. Though the positive outcomes of diverse media representations have been studied extensively, such as the increase in societal acceptance and general wellbeing of minorities (Choi, 2021; Mares & Acosta, 2010; Mares & Pan, 2013), the premise for sexual and gender diversity is more complicated when children are the target audience of such content. The notion of 'childhood innocence' (Lemish, 2007) is crucial in this matter, as it uncovers the perception of children as 'innocent' and 'asexual' viewers of content that could consequently be perceived as inappropriate when it alludes to sexuality. Hence, it is compelling to investigate if and how these notions influence the specific production processes of children's content. This study thus moves away from the level of representation and depiction of such narratives, to the specific production of sexual and gender diversity in children's media.

One useful framework for such an analysis, is the notion of the 'production ecology' as elaborated by Steemers (2009). This framework goes beyond considering the institutional influences on current production policies, and it does not merely engage with the organizational or individual relations within a specific field of production. Instead, it bridges internal and external practices, as they are inherently associated with and influenced by one another. When it comes to this specific 'production ecology' of children's television in Flanders, the strong position of the public service media (PSM) institution VRT (Vlaamse Radio & Televisie) is of great importance. Its children's channel Ketnet has a market share of 19.19%, taking a leading position compared to other channels targeting children in Flanders, such as the international conglomerates Nickelodeon (11.53%) or Disney Channel (5.11%) and smaller Flemish channels such as VTM Kids (2,51%) and Studio 100 TV (0,86%) (CIM, 2020). Its contract with

Flemish government stipulates that VRT has to offer diversified, representative, and correct representations of all segments of society (Beheersovereenkomst 2021–2025). This premise is also an important part of Ketnet’s remit: “Ketnet gives children a window on the world, stimulates them to find their place in an ever-changing world and appeals to their engagement to make a difference” (Beheersovereenkomst 2021 – 2025, p. 65). In view of this fundamental objective, the overarching focus on entertainment goes hand in hand with an educational premise including diversified storytelling. Due to Ketnet's strong market position, socio-cultural diversity in fictional content is something Flemish children frequently encounter on television.

Whereas the aforementioned framework of ‘production ecology’ (Steemers, 2009) is especially useful to consider the influence of macro tendencies (e.g., commercialization, globalization, and digitization), a complementary framework is that of ‘cultures of production’ as elaborated by Caldwell (2009). Here, the production process itself is perceived as a culture, constructed by shared ideas, values and beliefs of the producers that are at the core of this production culture. By centralizing these continuously changing practices, this framework allows to delve deeper into the complex social dynamics in which producers operate, rather than only perceiving macro influences (e.g., economic tendencies).

These practices and ‘cultures of production’ (Caldwell, 2009) in Flanders should first and foremost be seen in relation to the broader public acceptance, support for and legal protection of sexual and gender diversity in Flanders (Borghs & Eeckhout, 2010; Dierckx et. al., 2014; Eeckhout & Paternotte, 2011). Although broad societal receptivity does not automatically lead to coverage on screen, sexual diversity has indeed been part of Flemish commercial and public broadcasting for many years. For example, Ketnet has included references to homosexuality in its domestic productions not long after it started to air in 1997 (Vanlee & Kerrigan, 2021). By providing screen time for an internationally neglected or underrepresented group while at the

same time preventing practices of ‘othering’ them through fictional storylines, Flemish television attempts to construct a ‘queer normality’ (Vanlee, Dhaenens & Van Bauwel, 2018). Accordingly, current children’s fiction in Flanders provides its audience with a variety of characters that differ from the prevailing heteronormative pattern, thereby representing every identity within the LGBT-acronym on public as well as commercial channels (Citation Omitted).

By focusing particularly on the production of representations of sexual and gender diversity, the current paper equally contributes to the emerging field of ‘queer production studies’. As mentioned in the works of Martin (2018a), Ng (2013, 2021) and O’Brien & Kerrigan (2020), this field studies ‘queer production’ on the one hand (e.g. how LGBT+ communities use media spaces to distribute queer content), but equally sheds light on the ‘production of queerness’ (e.g. how industry workers produce and represent LGBT+ content). Our study contributes in particular to the latter, acknowledging the importance of production perspectives to better understand processes of depicting and producing ‘LGBT imagery’ (Ng, 2021). It is not our aim to only focus on industry workers who do identify as LGBT+, but more so on how personal affinity, amongst many other institutional and external influences, might influence the production processes of LGBT+ content.

Most importantly, however, this study wishes to complement the existing queer production studies literature on ‘queer production’ and ‘production of queerness’ by extending the scope to children's television, specifically. By putting the production perspective at the center of our analysis, we aim to contribute to the field of LGBT+ and queer media studies, particularly queer production studies. Accordingly, we combine three individually relevant yet complementary frameworks, i.e. ‘production ecology’, ‘cultures of production’ and ‘queer production studies’.

Empirical research on the inclusion of sexual and gender diversity: method

While research on media industries gravitates towards an interest in macro-tendencies primarily, such as technological or commercial developments, “production study research frequently makes use of interviews and ethnographic research with producers (...) to center the practices of cultural producers and the outcomes of these practices” (Ng, 2021 p.3). Hence, we conducted ten qualitative semi-structured interviews with different creative workers and involved parties in the industry (see table 1). Comprising these perspectives, we aim to answer the research question *why* producers include sexual and gender diversity (elementary intentions, pursued objectives, institutional policies, ...), along with the specific construction of these narratives, i.e., *how* they include it (procedures in creating, writing, casting, and depicting these characters). By gathering different perceptions and knowledge of these stakeholders, this study wishes to obtain general insights on the production process of a specific niche representation, i.e., the creation, writing and shaping of contemporary LGBT+ characters. In this respect, involving the public service as well as commercial broadcasters is imperative, along with perspectives on different levels, from policy-making executives to the individual creators involved in the production process.

The interview guidelines were deductively constructed based on previous research within the field of children’s media and the representation of sexual and gender diversity. This resulted in a semi-structured list of different topics that were similarly presented during the interviews. The interviewees were contacted through purposive snowball sampling, first identifying the key players in different aspects of the production process and subsequently asking for referral to relevant others. These interviews were then transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed, aiming to identify the main recurring themes and concerns raised by the producers. In a second round of coding, these themes were related to the two aspects of our research question, namely (1) *why* these producers chose to include sexual and gender diversity,

(2) and *how* they do so. In discussing the research findings, we will follow this two-part structure, aiming to reconstruct the discourses and motivations provided by the producers, to then add a third, more critical part where we discuss what can still be improved.

Name	Function or involvement with respective production process
Annemie Gulickx	Channel manager of Ketnet (public broadcaster).
Telidja Klai	Developmental psychologist working for Ketnet and person in charge of the production supply broadcasted by Ketnet.
Sven Duym	Creative producer of commercial broadcaster Studio 100 and person in charge of <i>Ghost Rockers</i> , a popular fictional program aimed at children between 6 and 12 years old.
Catherine Baeyens	Screenwriter for Ketnet and Studio 100, closely involved with LGBT+ characters in several programs, including <i>Ghost Rockers</i> .
Mathijs Dekyvere	Director and scriptwriter of <i>D5R</i> (produced by WBITVP). The first seasons were broadcast by Ketnet and were aimed at children between 9 and 12 years old.
Camiel Scheer	Director, writer, and founder of <i>4eVeR</i> (ScheMa Producties), a popular fictional program aimed at children between 9 and 12 years old.
Emile Jacobs	Actor who played transgender character Lewis in <i>4eVeR</i> .
Leen Steenacker	Program developer at commercial broadcaster VTM Kids (DPG Media) and person in charge of <i>Vloglab</i> , a popular fictional program aimed at children between 8 and 14 years old.
Charlie Dewulf	Director, scriptwriter, consultant, and digital marketing producer who identifies as non-binary and has made this topic a recurring, central theme throughout their work. Their pronouns are they/them, which will be used in this paper correspondingly.
Sibille Declercq	Managing director and coordinator of <i>Awel</i> vzw, a national youth aid platform, often working together with Ketnet in providing expertise on sexual and gender diversity as a recurring theme brought up by users of the digital platforms provided by Awel.

Why include sexual and gender diversity?

The formative role of television for children – and parents?

Given the wide array of sexual and gender diversity represented in Flemish children's fiction, it should first be mentioned that sexual diversity was resolutely supported by all our interviewees. Seeing that they were all involved in the production of fiction with LGBT+ characters, this is not surprising. This can furthermore be linked to the broader societal acceptance of LGBT+ people in Flanders, illustrating the socially desirable handling of this matter – which is not the case across the globe, nor has it always been in Flanders. Despite this reflection, it is interesting to consider where this unanimity on the production side stems from.

A primary finding in this respect is the perceived formative role of television. All of the interviewees shared a similar belief: if television provides a correct reflection of an increasingly diverse society, it can incite children to navigate empathically and well-informed through an ever more complex society. In a digitized landscape that is increasingly shaped by algorithms and personalized content, television was furthermore appraised as a medium for *everyone*, in contrast to individualized and often uncontrolled usage of other audiovisual platforms. No matter the device through which it is distributed, television content is constructed exactly in the same way for every recipient. “If you give people screen time, you associate it with being of importance. If someone's story is being told, you perceive it as something worth acknowledging, because television has that kind of alleged prestige”, according to screenwriter Charlie Dewulf. “The emotional connection with someone's story goes further than mere persuasive sensitizing, and that is the greatest opportunity of television – especially for kids.” Annemie Gulickx, the Ketnet channel manager, was very vocal on the responsibility of the public broadcaster in guiding children through a diverse society:

The starting point of Ketnet is providing some sort of recognizability to children, of all that our society consists of, so they can recognize themselves (...) It is important to us that we guide them in growing up (...) If you are introduced to all these things from a young age, perhaps, eventually, you could create a warmer world. At least, that is my conviction when I come to work every day.

This emancipatory virtue, or objective to make a difference as a producer, was even more present when discussing the formative opportunities in representing sexual and gender diversity specifically. As the broad societal acceptance in Flanders does not imply uniform receptivity in every household, which the interviewees were acutely aware of, the importance of television then is its ability to provide viewers with practical tools to address this subject at home. Interestingly, though most interviewees did not explicitly mention catering to a “double public”, they did nonetheless often consider two kinds of viewers with different objectives: children on the one hand, and parents on the other. As a very diverse group of children remain the primary audience of these fictional programs, the focus on inclusivity and recognizability is evident. Camiel Scheer, who introduced the very first transgender character in his show *4eVeR*, distinguished three different types of children in this regard: those who know about sexual and gender diversity, those who do not, and those who need help. Television can be particularly valuable for the latter group, growing up in an environment that is not receptive to this topic. The opportunity of producers to help even one child in their struggle with their sexual or gender identity, is the most beneficial objective Scheer seeks to achieve.

In line with this lack of receptivity, Sibille Declercq recounted her personal experience with a couple of parents who publicly scolded her for her involvement with depicting homosexuality in shows watched by her daughter’s schoolmates. This public opposition brings to the fore the role of parents as an implicit, secondary audience, as recognised by Ketnet channel manager Gulickx:

Purely when it comes to the content and how people look at life, children are less judgmental than adults (...) Often the context around the program has to be told differently to adults, because it is “groundbreaking” or even “shocking” to some (...). We know that if we get criticized, it is often by adults, and we know how to defend our choices beforehand. “Promoting abnormality” is a reaction we often get, to which we respond: “No, this is reality.”

This quote first and foremost indicates that there are divergent, less receptive opinions on the topic of sexual and gender diversity in contemporary Flemish society, contrary to the aforementioned impression of general acceptance. However, Gulickx’ quote also brings to the fore a more fundamental issue. The last part of her quote (“this is reality”) evokes a view of television merely *reflecting* society and its inherent diversity. However, the previously mentioned aspiration “to create a warmer world” goes beyond merely representing society as it is, but implies constructing and shaping beliefs regarding the represented diversity by bringing certain narratives to the foreground. Gulickx’ broader comments hint at the role of television in *constructing* a particular world view.

Likewise, other interviewees mentioned similar emancipatory motives, especially when discussing these hostile reactions of parents. When mentioning this lack of receptivity, the ‘Committee of Concerned Parents’ [‘Comité Bezorgde Ouders’] was regularly referred to. This public collective of activist parents is very vocal in its aversion of television’s contemporary approach to sexual diversity, resulting in many complaints addressing the public broadcaster. These parental complaints have encouraged Catherine Baeyens, scriptwriter for Ketnet and Studio 100, to focus on the underestimated or even neglected psychological impact these hostile reactions can have on children. Hence, she strongly advocates for highlighting mental health and psychological well-being amongst children, which she accordingly has included in many of her scripts. Similarly, Charlie Dewulf reiterated the vital role of television in providing

guidance for people diverging from normative beliefs regarding sexuality and gender. Dewulf have had many difficult encounters when coming out as non-binary, because their environment simply did not possess the correct language to really apprehend the notion of ‘gender’ or ‘identity’. Hence, television has a valuable role in providing intergenerational tools to make conversations happen, regardless of the outcome or receptivity. Children’s fiction should then not exclusively cater to children’s cognitive abilities, nor should it prioritize the parental audience, but it can build a bridge between both generations in facilitating conversations that would otherwise perhaps not be had. In sum, the importance of representing sexual and gender diversity was equally and fiercely supported by all of the interviewees, thereby demonstrating their shared belief within the broader production culture.

Sexual inclusivity as evident, but avoidance of a ‘spotlight’

Although the producers widely agreed on the formative role of television, this does not imply that they think these characters should occupy a prominent position on screen. To explain why they often positioned these narratives in the margins of their productions, the interviewees frequently referred to the pitfall of “putting a spotlight on it”, as this was associated with focusing on someone’s sexuality as if it were a diverging attribute. By consciously not making characters’ sexuality their distinctive characteristic, or reducing these characters to that characteristic only, children’s television seems to similarly pursue ‘queer normality’ as identified by Vanlee, Dhaenens and Van Bauwel (2018) in Flemish fiction for adults.

Whereas most interviewees resorted to terms such as “normal” to describe the way LGBT+ characters were represented, Annemie Gulickx (Ketnet) disagreed with “normalization” being a main objective:

Normalization... I don’t know if that is really our goal. Maybe it was before, but right now, it really stems from some sort of inclusivity of all there is this day and age, you know? With Ketnet, we don’t want to say something is “normal”

anymore – we are beyond that point. (...) “Normalization” is now used as a critique, and that is why I may be a bit sensitive towards that word. “You are actually making propaganda.” No, people *can* be green, yellow, and blue, *can* fall in love with boys and girls, or *can* be a boy in a girl's body. They just *can* – that is reality.

Again, Gulickx evokes a view of television merely ‘reflecting’ society as it is, rather than deliberately constructing a particular world view. To her, ‘normalization’ seems to evoke the notion of imposing certain norms, by virtue of how this concept has been used in broader societal discourse. Ketnet's main aim, in her view, is to present sexual and gender diversity as self-evident, as a natural part of contemporary society which the public broadcaster has a duty to represent. The public broadcaster has made it evident to include sexual and gender diversity in their production ethos, regardless of how ‘normal’ it is perceived by parents. Hence, the activist connotations of the term ‘normalization’ might explain while Gulickx emphasizes that television is merely ‘reflecting’ diversity – as an implicit response to the critique received on the emancipatory choices producers make.

Further adding to the discussion on normalization, it is important to note that the single transgender character in Flemish children's television, Lewis in *4eVer*, was played by trans actor Emile Jacobs. However, as Jacobs stated in our interview, “real normalization” would imply transgender actors, like himself, be cast for regular cis-gender roles instead of always reiterating the trans label. This closely ties in with Martin’s work on the politics of ‘best actor’ discourses (2018b). In his analysis on casting gay roles, he critiques how “on one hand, pre-conceptions [of perceived masculinity] would presumably only exclude gay actors who cannot convincingly convey masculine. On the other hand, the result is often that gay masculinity is construed as the terrain of hetero sexual actors playing gay” (p. 7). Correspondingly, Jacobs addresses a similar obstacle of surpassing the trans label in casting processes. Stating that “we should first learn

how to walk before we can run”, however, Jacobs emphasized the public broadcaster is doing its best in taking first important steps, nonetheless.

How to include sexual and gender diversity?

Doing it the right way for kids, or ticking off the diversity box?

Whereas the depiction of sexual and gender diversity was uniformly advocated by all interviewees, there were many differences in how they tackle this premise. As mentioned in the work of Ng on ‘queer production studies’ (2021), a primary point of attention is the distinct approach of the public broadcaster (PSM) compared to the commercial channels. For our analysis specifically, a compelling question is whether the production processes of the PSM and commercial broadcasters are shaped by similar objectives and resources, or other incentives ‘to tick off the diversity box’.

When it comes to the Flemish public broadcaster, Ketnet is strongly tied to institutional policies and protocols (Beheersovereenkomst, 2021–2025). As diversity goes further than mere sexual and gender inclusivity, the PSM is provided with an abundance of resources (e.g., corporate data provided by Awel, or expertise of in-house psychologist Telidja Klai on the cognitive abilities of children) to ensure that other forms of diversity such as ethnicity or disability are depicted as correctly, realistically, and recognizably as possible. Commercial broadcasters equally pursue this elementary premise for diversified representations, though the monetary revenue of drama and entertainment seem to take precedence. Leen Steenacker, spokesperson and producer for VTM Kids, acknowledged that the overarching commercial company DPG Media has not provided its children’s channel with sufficient resources to develop expertise on diversity, which may have led to a less profound approach to sexual and gender diversity in their productions.

In this regard, Steenacker mentioned the anecdote of a temporary intern who criticized the dramatic, even problematic approach to one of the ongoing LGBT+ narratives in their most watched program *Vloglab*. One of the main characters got kicked out by her father when she came out as a lesbian, and some episodes later her girlfriend got assaulted for rejecting the advances of some boys. As the intern was the only (and temporary) employee to identify as gay, the potential impact of such dramatic narratives previously never occurred to any other colleague. It is telling that it took a temporary employee to identify this issue, which illustrates the close connection between the two dimensions identified in queer production studies, 'the production of queer' and 'queer production'. As mentioned by O'Brien and Kerrigan (2020), the involvement of LGBT+ media workers is essential for providing nuanced and well-founded representations. In this case, however, only a temporary staff member had the diversity literacy to identify problematic representation. The commercial objective to create drama that 'sells' seems to take precedence over proactively seeking structural engagement with the LGBT+ community itself in the creation of these narratives.

Being dependent on external funds and profitable revenues has constructed a distinct logic for these commercial broadcasters that is mainly financially driven. Some interviewees working as independent creatives strongly disapproved of this commercial strategy. The recurring obstacle to them lies in where these corporations believe money comes from:

In the U.S. it changed because of films like *Black Panther* or *Love, Simon*, as they have proven it can be a box office success. It was long believed that, because it concerns a niche group [LGBT+], it could not be profitable. And that is where VTM gets stuck sometimes, in thinking "if we do this, we are going to lose the mainstream audience". (Charlie Dewulf)

Hence, if commercial considerations take the upper hand over intrinsic motivations to represent diversity, one could wonder whether the premise for inclusivity is a matter of

wanting rather than *having to*, in order to keep up with public service broadcasting. To Dewulf, if a fictional narrative regarding sexual and gender inclusivity is merely included to ‘tick of the diversity box’, we could wonder if it is better to not have any representation at all. This critical nuance, as well as the abovementioned anecdote of the temporary intern, demonstrate how different (commercial and non-commercial) players operate within the broader ‘production ecology’, and how it subsequently affects the micro-practices throughout the production processes (Ng, 2021). Whereas both public and commercial channels choose to represent sexual and gender diversity, which indicates a shared belief in the broader ‘production culture’, *how* they do so differs according to their position within the broader ‘production ecology’.

Sexual diversity, gender diversity, and sex: degrees of appropriateness?

Despite their extensive support for diversified representations, our interviewees are more nuanced when asked if targeting a certain age group implies restrictions. Children as an audience consist of a heterogeneous group with varied cognitive abilities, resulting in varied classifications of suitable content. In turn, productions are often tailored to a defined age group e.g., pre-school (0–6), school (6–10) or pre-teens (10–12). Although the premise for diversity as such transcends these categories, our interviewees resorted to a similar pedagogical didactic when creating content, continuously assessing if something has a rightful place in a child’s frame of reference. Accordingly, a threefold gradation emerged when considering the appropriateness of certain topics; sexual diversity, gender diversity, and sexual intimacy.

In terms of *sexual diversity*, producers are aware of the varied environments and perceptions children are shaped by at home. Due to the assumed prevalence of heterosexuality, productions are predominantly heteronormative. “Children gravitate towards a classical [heterosexual] pattern because it presumably applies to their own reality”, as mentioned by Sven Duym when explaining the lack of sexual diversity in productions specifically aimed at

the youngest viewers. In presuming that sexuality is not yet a suitable topic in a child's life, whether it alludes to heterosexuality or homosexuality, inclusive representations are reserved for those who are able to comprehend it. This implicit restriction differs from the notion of 'childhood innocence' (Lemish, 2007) as it is seemingly not related to moral or ethical considerations, but more so to the intellectual understanding of 'sexual orientation' as a concept. Our interviewees nonetheless emphasized it *can* be rightfully included in any program for any age, if adapted to the cognitive abilities of the viewers.

This caution tied to the presumed understanding of sexuality was even more pronounced in relation to *gender diversity*. Representing sexuality is ostensibly easier than including non-normative gender identities, once more reiterating the perceived cognitive capacities of children. As a developmental psychologist, Telidja Klai raised the following consideration in relation to sexual and gender diversity:

I think it can be included in every program, as long as you can integrate it in a natural way and explain it. I can hardly explain 'transgender' to a toddler, because they do not yet possess the cognitive abilities to understand what that's about. To me, that's not a matter of societal norms, it's purely about the cognitive aspect. Whereas... the fact that you can have feelings for a boy, a girl, both, or neither – that is very easy to explain to a toddler.

In opposition to this, Charlie Dewulf emphasized the importance of television in overstepping these dispositions regarding normative gender representations. Quite to the opposite, to them including gender diversity is especially important when targeting the youngest viewers, as it is extremely difficult to break up these normative beliefs later in life. To Dewulf, television has a vital responsibility in dismantling presumptions linked to being 'manly' or 'womanly'. "However, the practicalities of it are very difficult. To a lot of people, gender is a way of proving they are doing something right because they conform to what society expects

of being manly or womanly in that moment of time.” Likewise, Emile Jacobs touched upon the opportunity as an actor to convey his personal experiences as a transgender man through the character of Lewis. Providing screen time for transgender narratives is not only a matter of contributing to a realistic depiction of an increasingly diverse society, but would also have been of great value to Jacobs earlier in his life. His transition might have looked very different if television had touched upon these feelings of gender confusion, which would possibly have facilitated his subsequent transition. As Dewulf and Jacobs are the only two interviewees who (openly) identify as LGBT+, their anecdotes are particularly valuable in light of ‘queer production’, specifically how people within the community (and moreover working in the media industry) produce media and use media as a counterpublic (Kerrigan & O’Brien, 2020; Martin, 2018a; Martin, 2018b).

What is considered appropriate for certain age categories does not only relate to sexual and gender diversity, but also to *physical intimacy* or implicit references to *sex*. Similar to Nordic productions, Flemish children’s television has been praised for its progressive approach to sexual diversity (Lemish, 2010), and subsequent inclusion of affectionate, physical depictions of love between two people of the same sex (Citation Omitted). Intimacy in children's television, however, does not go further than holding hands, cuddling, or kissing in the public. References to pronounced physicality, nudity or sex were unanimously disapproved by all interviewees. In terms of suitability for children, “the public broadcaster should be a safe haven” (Sven Duym), and “sexual inuendo does not belong in a child’s reality” (Catherine Baeyens). This again demonstrates the normative associations with physicality – whether heterosexual or homosexual. However, in restating the formative ability of television as a “taboo breaker”, Sibille Declercq emphasized the seemingly unexpected proximity of ‘sex’ in children’s (passive) field of interest. “Seeing that children seek out sexual related information from the age of seven or eight, we still have a long way to go when it comes to providing

correct, well-considered exposure to this topic.” Hence, it is interesting that the perceived moral restrictions of suitability, or the notion of ‘childhood innocence’, are more pronounced in relation to physicality or sex than to gender and particularly sexual diversity.

How can we improve?

Seeking diversity within diversity

Though every identity in the LGBT-acronym is represented in Flemish children’s fiction (Citation Omitted), some nuances are called for regarding the extent of these depictions. A primary remark concerns the normative portrayal of especially gay male characters, also commonly referred as ‘the post gay era’ (Ng, 2013). The assimilationist drive to minimize external signs of ‘otherness’ in pursuing the aforementioned well-intentioned objective for normalization, has led to a very homogeneous group of gay characters (Citation Omitted). In practice, this includes the evolution from stereotypical ‘sissy’ archetypes to more normative, manly gay characters (e.g., seemingly heterosexual athletic football coaches, or popular high school jocks, who later turn out to have a boyfriend). When asked if this was a conscious, intentional evolution, most interviewees agreed while at the same time endorsing the view that those normative depictions should not rule out any reference to more ‘stereotypical’, non-normative representations. Television must provide a space for male and female characters at both ends of the gender spectrum since society consists of both, too. Especially independent writers disagreed with this tendency for normative depictions. This lack of nuanced, diversified representations has resulted in what Dewulf describes as “meta-LGBT characters”, or the continuous recurrence of copied, limited attributes of characters that are perceived as ‘good’ or normative representations of a heterogeneous group.

Additionally, Mathijs Dekyvere implicitly referred to the assimilationist pitfall caused by normalization, also described by Vanlee, Dhaenens and Van Bauwel (2018) as the “we are all unique yet all the same”-trope in pursuing ‘queer normality’.

Depicting someone with a limp wrist is something you should not do anymore as a writer. But why not? *That* should be normalized. Representing people as differently as they want to and can be (...) I think we somewhat got stuck in the aftermath of the idea of “equality” – “everyone is equal, and everything should be treated equally, also our characters”. They *are* equal, 100%. But we are focusing too much on that, while we should actually represent diversity in its extremes.

(Mathijs Dekyvere)

The pronounced contrast in perceptions between the writers on the one hand, and the need to comply with normative expectations and pragmatic possibilities on the other, once again demonstrates the varied and complex influences on the construction of these characters. The current production culture facilitates the recurrence of certain storylines and characters, while others remain underrepresented. Beside normativity, the lack of intersectionality further constricts the level of diversity within the representation of sexual and gender diversity. With only one character with a non-Western European ethnic background identifying as gay, Flemish children’s television does not sufficiently contribute to intersectional representations (Citation Omitted). While acknowledging this pervasive lack, our interviewees alluded to practical difficulties in casting people with different ethnic or religious backgrounds for roles that diverge from the heteronormative dogma in certain ethno-cultural communities.

Additionally, our interviewees raised one final yet substantial remark on the pursuit of diversified representations, very much in line with the concerns raised in queer production studies. Sexual and gender inclusivity on screen is only one aspect of diversity, which should be accompanied by more inclusivity behind the screen. This encompasses equal opportunities for those who identify as LGBT+, but in terms of employment it should go beyond merely ticking the diversity box. Instead, LGBT+ producers should be actively listened to and have a voice in altering inaccurate or even harmful depictions, as illustrated by the anecdote of the

VTM Kids intern mentioned above. According to Charlie Dewulf, if internal resources do not allow for well-founded representations of sexual and gender diversity, broadcasters should actively seek outside expertise to provide realistic, accurate narratives:

The fact it is not yet fully inclusive behind the camera has a great influence on the things happening in front of it (...) The voice behind [the camera], that is where the power lies. As a director myself, I notice that too: I have produced one thing, and I receive more involvement. My voice is being listened to and I can demand things I could not demand before. It is a long-term process, but that process can only start if someone gets a chance to do so.

Conclusion

This study takes inspiration from the frameworks of ‘production ecology’, ‘cultures of production’ and builds upon the field of ‘queer production studies’ to analyse the representation of LGBT+ in children’s fiction. Whereas these concepts have mostly been used as self-contained frameworks or research area’s in the past, the combination of the three has been proved useful to answer our two-part research question, i.e. *why* and *how* producers include sexual and gender diversity in Flemish children’s programs.

Regarding the first part of our research question, we should first and foremost re-emphasize the unanimous encouragement of all the producers we interviewed to offer inclusive and diversified representations. Their primary objective was to use the formative potential of television in stimulating children to adopt an inclusive and empathic way of making sense of an increasingly diverse society. Rather than providing a mere reflection of sexual and gender diversity that is present in society, the interviewees seemed aware of the opportunities television has to shape and influence how this reality is perceived. Moreover, they saw the portrayal of sexual and gender diversity as a way to convince less receptive parents, the latter group being a secondary, more implicit audience in the production rationale. Both the public broadcaster as

well as the commercial channels strive for diversified representations, although the focus of the latter is primarily on profitability and the exploitation of the dramatic potential in narratives regarding sexual and gender diversity, as opposed to the didactic premise of the public broadcaster. Whereas this unanimous support for diversified representations demonstrates a shared objective as part of the broader ‘production culture’, *how* they respectively include these LGBT+ characters thus differs according to their position within the ‘production ecology’ as a whole.

Additionally, taking more conservative societal views into account on the one hand, while simultaneously relying on the opportunity of television to “create a warmer world” as mentioned by Annemie Gulickx, demonstrates that Flemish producers are subject to conflicting visions on what is considered suitable children’s content. This might also explain why Gulickx, as the channel manager of Ketnet and primary spokesperson for the Flemish public broadcaster, was perhaps more hesitant in explicitly adhering to normative statements (e.g., her careful use of the word ‘normalization’, and her stress on television merely ‘reflecting’ societal diversity), as opposed to screenwriter and consultant Charlie Dewulf, who sees it as their job to dismantle these conservative perceptions in society. Here, it is interesting to recognize the difference in the interviewees’ acknowledged, or minimized, active role in representing sexual and gender inclusivity on screen. This moreover ties in with the distinction between ‘queer production’ and ‘production of queerness’ as elaborated by Martin (2018a) and Ng (2021), or how one’s personal affinity with the LGBT+ community might shape the corresponding production practices.

Regarding the practicalities of *how* sexual and gender diversity is included, the current production culture of Flemish children’s television has prompted different perceptions among the producers. The perceived cognitive abilities of children as an audience have led to different approaches to include sexual diversity and non-normative gender diversity: the first is regarded

as easy to represent, while the latter is often perceived as too elusive and complex within a child's frame of reference. This could explain why the only existing transgender character appears in a production targeting the oldest children. Furthermore, the normative tendencies within the production culture to represent LGBT+ characters a certain way, have created a sense of creative restriction, especially for the independent writers. Accordingly, the production culture has facilitated the recurrence of certain storylines and characters (e.g., male gay characters that epitomize the 'post gay era' (Ng, 2013; Martin, 2018a, 2018b)), while others remain underrepresented (e.g., transgender, non-binary or more fluid characters).

An important nuance must be considered regarding our findings. Given that our respondents were all involved in the production of fiction containing LGBT+ characters, thereby demonstrating their support for diversified representations, the observed advocacy for sexual and gender inclusivity is rather evident, and may not be generalized to all producers of Flemish children's fiction. Our findings may also be tainted by the social desirability of support for sexual and gender diversity and inclusivity in the Flemish context, and by the interviewees' perception of the researchers' receptiveness to the issue. Follow-up research should therefore analyze why producers would choose *not* to diverge from the preeminent heteronormative pattern. In this research, however, we did not aim to understand *if* but *why* producers attach importance to diversified representations, given the wide array of narratives including sexual and gender diversity in contemporary Flemish children's fiction.

In terms of practical implications for creative industry workers, this study brings forward some concrete recommendations. The critical reflections specifically made by interviewees who openly identify as LGBT+, as well as the abovementioned anecdote of the temporary intern, primarily demonstrate the need for equal diversity in front of and behind the camera. Diverse production crews can furthermore enhance broader diversity literacy amongst the team, which is in return beneficial (and perhaps even necessary) for providing nuanced and well-

founded LGBT+ representations on screen, as has been amply demonstrated in the literature on queer production studies (Martin, 2018a, 2018b, O'Brien & Kerrigan, 2020). Notwithstanding these critical reflections, we can nonetheless conclude that Flemish producers *are* taking responsibility in providing local representations of sexual and gender diversity within the globalized, digitized, and ever more curated landscape of children's media. Though terms like 'normalization' and its activist associations are rejected by some, these producers *do* make conscious choices to represent and construct LGBT+ narratives a certain way (e.g. consciously *not* putting a spotlight on sexual diversity, or differentiating between degrees of appropriate content according to children's cognitive abilities). Hence, they are not merely "reflecting reality as it is", but make varied choices out of either intrinsic objectives (e.g. the PBS), or more commercial motives (e.g. VTM Kids). Regardless of where these motives stem from, all of the producers unanimously advocated for diverse representations. Flemish children's fiction therefore is, and pursues to be, on the right road to sexual and gender inclusivity.

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