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Balancing boundaries: Mapping parents' perceived concerns and opportunities of LGBTQ storylines in children's television.

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1 Abstract

In today's global media landscape, the integration of LGBTQ characters and storylines in children's television has transformed media representations for young audiences. However, little is known about the way parents evaluate this on-screen presence. By means of interview with 53 Flemish parents, this study uncovered a complex interplay of considerations related to children, media, gender, and sexuality. In terms of possible opportunities associated with LGBTQ characters, parents referred to possibilities of information, socialization, promoting prosocial behavior, and aiding identification. However, parents also harbored some concerns regarding characteristics of the viewers (children's young age and gender differences) as well as characteristics of these media representations (as to quantity, quality, and physicality between characters). Parents mentioned they were worried about the perceived maturity needed to comprehend what these LGBTQ characters represent, and they showed more discomfort with gender diversity (trans and non-binary characters) than sexual diversity (non-heterosexual characters). They also feared that an overabundance of LGBTQ references might prioritize 'political correctness' over authentic representation, which moreover could confuse children.

Key words: LGBTQ, qualitative research, parental attitudes, children's television

2 Introduction

In recent years, the landscape of media productions for children and youth has undergone many transformations, becoming more diverse than ever before. A notable aspect of this evolution is the heightened emphasis on inclusive representations, particularly with regard to sexual and gender diversity (Gross, 2007; Dennis, 2009; Jane, 2015; Snyder, 2023). Although LGBTQ characters often remain an implicit part of children's media offering, *Disney* and *Pixar* have increasingly included LGBTQ references in their productions (Key, 2015; Rearick, 2020). On a local level, the northern European region has been characterized by its liberal approach to sexual and gender diversity on screen, specifically Scandinavian and Dutch children's productions (Lemish, 2011; Jensen, 2018). This research focuses on children's media in Flanders, the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, where the strong position of the public broadcaster plays a pivotal role in this increased attention to diversity and inclusion (Citation Omitted). Producers of these LGBTQ storylines emphasize the importance of inclusive media representations in shaping a generation of well-informed and emphatic young audiences.

Yet, despite this increasingly progressive stance in children's television, studies reveal persisting negative societal attitudes towards sexual and gender minorities, with increased instances of emotional or psychological exclusion globally and locally (Ghabrial, 2017; Huijnk et al, 2022; Motmans et al, 2023). The discourse on LGBTQ visibility becomes particularly charged when children are involved, with recurring examples of public protests against children's exposure to sexuality-related topics. Examples of these controversies are the 'Don't Say Gay Bill' in the United States (Parental Rights in Education Act, 2022), as well as recent protests in Belgium against the 'EVRAS' program (evras.be) that would, for instance, include LGBTQ topics in reformed sexuality education curricula for children in primary school. Prior research has indicated that parents who adhere to more conventional beliefs on children's sexual development tend to harbor more negative attitudes towards LGBTQ representation, and these

attitudes are highest among fathers and parents with lower educational backgrounds (Citation Omitted). In this regard, primary arguments for these negative perceptions can be attributed to the idea of ‘childhood innocence’ (Robinson, 2008; Robinson, Smith and Davies, 2017). The strict distinction between *childhood* and *adulthood*, where discussions of sexuality have traditionally been limited to the latter, is rooted in conventional beliefs about children’s sexual development. Consequently, tendencies for LGBTQ equality often face resistance when it involves children, revealing deep-rooted concerns about preserving the symbolic innocence of young children. This issue is also captured in the framework of ‘bounded acceptance’ (Huijnk et al., 2022), which implies that support for equality often coexists with biased attitudes towards LGBTQ individuals, which could be summarized as a ‘yes, but’-response (e.g., ‘I don’t have a problem with homosexuality, but I think two men should not kiss each other publicly’ or ‘I don’t mind, but leave our children out of it’).

To investigate whether this boundary to initial acceptance also persists in Flanders, this study examines the varied perceptions of Flemish parents on LGBTQ characters and storylines in contemporary children’s fiction. Additionally, we aimed to examine how make sense of the role of television, and the extent to which these LGBTQ depictions may impact the audience. A total of 53 Flemish parents, with at least one child between four and twelve years old, participated in in-depth qualitative interviews. Rather than presenting their attitudes as static (‘I find this good/bad’), the interviews aimed to understand how parents engage in this intricate negotiation. Which specific depictions align with parents’ embedded norms and values, and conversely, when do they deviate? Which aspects of LGBTQ representation tend to cross which (heteronormative) boundaries, at what point? Accordingly, this study provides an in-depth exploration of specific opportunities and concerns mentioned by parents. By delving into these varied viewpoints, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the complex

interplay between societal ideals, parental values, and the significance of inclusive media representations for children as an audience.

3 LGBTQ representation in children's media: which stories are represented?

The current media landscape available to children consists of both traditional and digital media outlets, with tendencies of globalization and digitization further broadening the content children have access to (Flew et al., 2016; Potter et al., 2017; Gotz, 2023). This in turn has brought a shift in the depiction of people, cultures and narratives represented on screens. Internationally, current attention to inclusive media representations has played a significant role in showcasing LGBTQ characters and storylines in media for children (Jane, 2015; Key, 2015; Snyder, 2023). According to the latest GLAAD report (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2023), children's media is following the example of mainstream adult television in depicting sexual and gender minorities, with no less than 259 LGBTQ references found in cartoon shows aimed at children (White and Chik, 2023). Partly due to international projects such as *Diversity and Childhood* (European Commission Directorate-General Justice, 2019–2021), children now encounter more diverse representations on screen. These initiatives have paved the way for more diverse characters and storylines, allowing children to see themselves and their experiences reflected in global media productions.

On a local scale, Belgium has taken a progressive stance in promoting inclusivity in society, with its vast framework of legal protection of sexual and gender minorities (Borghs and Eeckhout, 2010; Dierckx et al., 2014; 2017). The PSM children's channel *Ketnet* has equally contributed to increased visibility of the LGBTQ community (Vanlee, Dhaenens & Van Bauwel, 2018). Partly due to the strong position of PSM, Flemish media productions focusing on children and young people introduced a number of diverse characters and storylines, including a variety of identities within the LGBTQ-acronym on screen, while they have equally included LGBTQ people that work behind the camera (Citation Omitted). Those involved in

the production process mentioned it is important to include LGBTQ representation because, so they argue, it has the potential to foster empathy, socialization, and a better understanding of sexual and gender diversity among young audiences and parents alike.

4 Children, sexuality, and innocence: what is the debate about?

Despite the attention given to LGBTQ inclusion by media producers, the public reception of this issue is not always positive. The precarious relationship between children, sexuality, and media is at the core of this discussion. While concerns about the ‘influence’ of television on children initially focused on exposure to violence and inappropriate language, ongoing debates often center around whether children should be exposed to topics of sexuality and gender diversity. As discussed by Robinson and colleagues (2012; 2017), a dominant argument revolves around the idea of childhood innocence. This notion is rooted in traditional views on children’s sexual development, which primarily relies on a rigid differentiation between adulthood and childhood. Children are supposed to go through fixed, successive developmental stages until they reach the marker of adulthood. Throughout this process, children are often given little agency.

As mentioned in Prioletta’s (2020) interpretation of Mindy Blaise’s ‘post-developmentalism’ (2009), these traditional developmental discourses often position children as unknowing and innocent ‘adults in the making’, rather than agentic beings (p. 248). When applied to gender studies, this traditional developmental perspective tends to reinforce binary and heteronormative interpretations of gender, while equally positioning children as too young to actively engage with notions of gender. Hence, behavior that falls outside of normative gender expectations (cross-dressing, for example) is often labeled as ‘funny’ or sometimes harmful, rather than acknowledging children’s interaction with and handling of gender norms. Post-developmentalists challenge these pathologizing labels and call for a more inclusive

understanding of children's sexual and gender development based on social, cultural, and individual contexts. Scholars in this field argue that the presumption of a heterosexual default not only excludes LGBTQ experiences from discussions of childhood and sexuality, but also reinforces the erasure of non-heteronormative identities in societal narratives and policies related to children (Robinson, 2008; 2012, Robinson, Smith and Davies, 2017).

If we apply this perspective to media studies, similar comparisons can be drawn. The long-time dominance of heteronormativity on screen (Dennis, 2009; Thornfinnsdottir and Jensen, 2015) renders every non-heterosexual or non-gender conforming character deviant from what children are used to seeing. This could explain why some consider them less suitable for children to watch (Clarke, 2010; Kennedy, 2013). However, many scholars have equally studied the important role of television on children, specifically regarding their societal, psychological, and prosocial outcomes (Mares and Acosta, 2010; Mares and Pan, 2013; Choi, 2021; Mares and Bond, 2021). For instance, research has shown that exposure to non-heterosexual characters on television increases support for equality (Bond and Compton, 2015) and improves the well-being of gay, lesbian and bisexual youth (Bond, 2015). In addition to providing didactic learning opportunities, inclusive media facilitates mediated socialization, where children can engage and bond with fictional characters that might be different from people in their close environment. This in turn could foster acceptance (Mares et al, 2023), increases support for equality (Bond and Compton, 2015), and enhances the well-being of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth later in life (Bond, 2015). This is particularly valuable in environments where personal connections to sexual and gender minorities may be limited.

4.1 'Bounded acceptance' and limits to equality

As mentioned previously, Flanders has taken a leading position in advancing equal rights for the LGBTQ community, particularly in terms of decriminalization and legal protection of these

minority groups (Statistiek Vlaanderen, 2017; ILGA Europe, 2022). Over the past decades, there has been a general increase in acceptance and endorsement of equality (Pickery and Noppe, 2017; Motmans et al, 2023). For instance, 89% of Flemish citizens agree that individuals who identify as homosexual should be able to live their lives freely (Motmans et al, 2023). This progression to an inclusive society is not always as widely supported, however. Empirical data revealed that one in four Flemish citizens (25%) feels like there is currently too much attention given to sexual minorities, and 30% feels like this eventually will be bothersome (Kuyper, 2017; Motmans et al, 2023). In a survey on parental attitudes on LGBTQ representation in children's media, 50.9% of Flemish parents think transgender or non-binary characters are confusing to young audiences, and 50.6% expressed that they could potentially encourage children to not identify with their gender of birth (Citation Omitted). These counter voices become even more concrete in the Flemish *Committee of Concerned Parents*, a collective of parents that has filled multiple complaints against programs and educational curricula that include LGBTQ themes, denouncing them as 'gender ideology' with 'destructive consequences' (CitizenGo, 2017; Citation Omitted)

This tension can be explained through the notion of 'bounded acceptance' (Huijnk et al, 2022), which aligns with the apparent, superficial acceptance observed by several authors and builds on notions of heteronormativity (Dewaele, 2006; 2009; Motmans et al, 2014; 2023; Huijnk et al, 2022). Bounded acceptance signifies an initial concession for LGBTQ individuals to indeed live their lives freely, as long as 'they adhere to generally accepted norms imposed on them by a heterosexual, cisgender environment' (Motmans, 2023, p. 19). Accordingly, it acknowledges a shared sentiment or social desirability for equality, while at the same time harboring biased attitudes towards these minority groups. This is especially the case when 'being different' becomes visible (e.g., when individuals do not adhere to binary gender expressions or heteronormative expectations), or when equality takes tangible form (e.g., the right to adopt).

Moreover, this boundary to initial acceptance is more pronounced when children become part of the controversy, which is the focus of this research.

5 Methodology

The aim of this research is to delve into the perceptions and beliefs of Flemish parents regarding LGBTQ representation in contemporary children's fiction. Rather than aiming to identify fixed opinions, the interviews aimed to uncover underlying considerations and beliefs in relation to children, media, and sexuality. We aim to identify which specific LGBTQ characters and storylines align with parents' norms and values, as well as when or why depictions diverge and might prompt concerns. This led to two interrelated research questions:

RQ1. Which opportunities do parents attribute to LGBTQ characters and storylines in children's television?

RQ2. Which concerns do parents raise regarding LGBTQ characters and storylines in children's television?

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. In total, 43 interviews were conducted with 53 Flemish parents, including 33 mothers and 20 fathers. Eight parents identified as LGBTQ. Participants were required to reside in Flanders at the moment of the interview and had to be a (step)parent of at least one child between four and twelve years. The age of the participants ranged from 24 to 51 years. Based on their availability, interviews were conducted either individually or with both parents simultaneously. The latter allowed for conversations where both parents could interact with each other, and thus further clarify their views.

The interview guide included questions on children's sexual development, seeking insight into parental beliefs about children's understanding of and engagement with sexuality-related themes (e.g., 'are your kids familiar with the concept of homosexuality?' or 'would your child understand what this storyline is about?'). Additionally, we aimed to examine how parents

evaluate the impact of television on children, and the extent to which these LGBTQ depictions may impact children within the wide array of available media content today (e.g., ‘do your kids still watch television?’ or ‘would this storyline have an impact on your child?’). Some questions were preceded by audiovisual material as interview prompts. We used a total of five prompts, all varying from news fragments (e.g. of Flemish children’s idol who recently came out as bisexual), to excerpts from children’s television shows where a character did their coming-out, characters who introduced themselves as transgender, and scenes where these LGBTQ characters visibly displayed affection towards one another by hugging and kissing.

The qualitative data obtained from the interviews was transcribed verbatim, whilst omitting personal identifiers to protect the participants’ privacy. Each transcription was coded using NVivo, which facilitated the identification of recurring patterns in participants’ data. These findings were subsequently examined, redefined, and thematized in categories using the principles of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

An inductive approach to our data revealed general perceptions regarding the central theme. Additionally, it provided room to specifically thematize certain opportunities and boundaries raised by parents, in accordance with our two research questions. We identified four interrelated opportunities mentioned by parents, and two clusters of concerns, which were often brought up in the nuances of parents’ answers. These findings will be respectively discussed in the subsequent section.

6 Opportunities of LGBTQ characters and storylines in children’s television

6.1 Information

One opportunity that was frequently mentioned by parents, is the didactic potential of LGBTQ characters and storylines. When parents were asked if their children already understood what sexual diversity might entail (e.g., having heard of terms like ‘homosexuality’ or ‘sexual

orientation'), most of them responded that their kids primarily had a vague and conceptual understanding of it – that two men could fall in love and get married, for example. This was particularly true for parents with younger children, or children within mostly heterosexual family structures. Parents indicated that, on average, children start to use and contextually understand the concept of homosexuality around the age of six to seven years old.

In this regard, some parents especially emphasized the role of television as 'a powerful educational tool' that could foster a more informed understanding of human diversity. Accordingly, one mother (aged 42 with a son of 12) acknowledged 'the more laid-back and accessible context' of fictional television in particular, compared to more formal and sometimes impersonal educational curricula. This was especially mentioned with the clip of transgender character Lewis, as his storyline encompasses a profound image of 'someone who is trans' and offers knowledge on pronoun usage and gender identification – which would otherwise remain rather abstract notions to grasp. For the youngest of viewers, most parents acknowledged that 'gender diversity' as a concept was too complex to explain, although it has become more integrated in their day-to-day lives. For instance, some parents brought up stories of their child's classmates who like to cross-dress, or 'princes who wanted to be a princess during the school play'. 'Though my daughter might not understand the loaded term, she quickly understood how someone might feel (...) and to her, these princesses are simply nice and caring friends, regardless of their gender', as mentioned by one father (aged 43).

6.2 Socialization and conversation

Some parents also highlighted the potential for mediated socialization, or bonding with a fictional character that might be different to what children are used to seeing in their close environment. By breaking away from traditional heteronormative patterns that have historically dominated media narratives, some parents acknowledged that this might also work to normalize

differences. It could help children ‘to develop more empathy and more understanding of diverse individuals’ (mother aged 30 with son of 4).

Additionally, parents mentioned that these programs could prompt a natural discussion about diversity and acceptance, which serves as a catalyst to start more in-depth conversations. It encourages children and parents alike to talk openly about a topic that once was taboo, as mentioned by multiple parents, but also equips children with tools to navigate this topic with respect and empathy:

With the next generation, fifty percent less questions have to be asked, and maybe fifty percent less people will be bullied (...). For my grandparents, all of this was taboo. In our time, it got a little better, and my grandparents eventually went with it. And if we continue to do it like that, I only see a very positive evolution. (mother aged 42 with of son of 12)

6.3 Prosocial behavior

Moreover, parents mentioned specific prosocial outcomes of watching inclusive media representations. The storyline in *#LikeMe*, where one of the main characters is bullied for being a more ‘feminine’ boy (having an interest in singing, dancing, and fashion, rather than conforming to traditional masculine norms of being sporty or strong), was highly praised. The demeaning use of the word ‘gay’ as an insult was recognized by some parents as an unfortunate reality, still, particularly among boys in primary school. Therefore, parents emphasized the importance of portraying this reality and the challenges that people still face daily, while also showing ‘corrective behavior’ (Citation Omitted). This refers to the practice of illustrating how the audience should behave by setting an example of empathetic, respectful, and ‘correct’ behavior through characters that stand up to the bully.

6.4 Identification

Whereas the previous three opportunities may be beneficial for all children watching these programs, some parents also highlighted that it could be particularly useful for a limited group of viewers (children and parents alike) who identify with the depicted storyline. It allows the audience to recognize their own experiences and elements of their personal backgrounds. This was described as particularly meaningful, as it affirms own lived realities and provides validation to children who may be grappling with their own identity or lack support at home. Accordingly, seeing relatable characters on screen can provide a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of isolation. ‘Even if just one child gets something out of it’, as premised by one mother (aged 35).

Some LGBTQ parents mentioned that the portrayal of LGBTQ characters and storylines offers feelings of being connected, both for their own children and for those who may have lacked such representation in their own formative years:

Mother 1: I remember when that second movie of *Frozen* came out (...) they wanted to give Elsa a girlfriend. I was totally into that and talked about it with our kids (...) A big Disney princess like that... I would have really loved that.

Mother 2: Yeah, if our children were to see that – they could recognize themselves in it. It would make it all more okay in the long run (...). Disney has a young audience, and then those kids would know that we are “normal”, that we exist, and that it is okay. (two mothers aged 40 and 39 with son and daughter aged 10)

7 Concerns about LGBTQ characters and storylines in children’s television

While the majority of the participating parents were vocal about the positive impact of LGBTQ characters and storylines in children's media, many also expressed concerns. In this regard, a significant portion of the information was hidden in implicit rather than explicit responses.

Parents often nuanced their own initial positivity: they acknowledged the broader importance of diversity on screen, but questioned if it was beneficial for *every* child. They recognized the value of inclusivity, but wondered if it would still be socially valuable if children would not yet understand what really is being represented. These ‘yes, but’-responses bring to the fore a negotiation of receptivity, which is where the framework of ‘bounded acceptance’ comes into play. These concerns can be clustered in characteristics of the viewers (children’s age and gender), and characteristics of the representation (the quantity, quality and depiction of physicality).

7.1 Characteristics of the viewers

7.1.1 The question of age appropriateness

One of the most discussed issues during the interviews was the question of age appropriateness. Specifically, parents with younger children (four to seven years old) expressed reservations on the suitability of these topics within the realm of young viewers. In this regard, common arguments included the ‘complexity’ of it all and the plea to ‘simply let kids be kids’:

I just wonder if it is necessary to broadcast and provide a forum for all these things. (...) Because again, not even one in a hundred kids are dealing with those kinds of feelings, right? It’s not representative. I feel like it makes children think about things that are likely not relevant. And there are already enough difficult things for children to think about, regardless of who they have feelings for (...) or whether they want to be a boy or a girl. (...) (father aged 37 with sons of 8 and 4)

The issue of age appropriateness encompasses two main arguments. First of all, these concerns can be traced back to concerns about their children’s psychological wellbeing. Some parents argued that children, especially at a young age, may not have the cognitive maturity to understand topics related to sexual and gender diversity. Especially with regards to the latter, parents expressed that ‘prematurely’ exposing children to such characters and storylines could

lead to misinterpretation of abstract concepts – ‘which I do not even understand myself’, as argued by one father (aged 39) when talking about transgender and non-binary characters.

This question of age appropriateness and cognitive maturity adheres to a more traditional developmental perspective (Robinson, 2008; 2012). In the view of these parents, most children have not reached a sufficient stage of emotional development to be exposed to the subject matter, which in turn evokes concerns of confusion and unsuitability. Contrarily, parents who support LGBTQ inclusion for younger children emphasized the need for contextual understanding and the individuality of each viewer, thereby questioning the reliability of age-based determinations. They argue that, with appropriate guidance and context, children can benefit from these if it resonates with them (e.g., ‘it will ring a bell if it should’ or ‘even if it only helps one child’, as seen previously). This reasoning ties in with principles of post-developmental discourses.

In addition to this psychological argument, reservations about age appropriateness are also based on moral considerations. A small group of parents expressed that ‘children nowadays see more than I see past 8 p.m.’ (father aged 44) and ‘[they] should just leave this for adult television’ (mother aged 36), which indicates that LGBTQ content is sometimes associated with sexualization. These parents felt particularly alarmed by the potential influence of media on children, stating that LGBTQ storylines force them to think about things they have not considered themselves yet. Notably, this ‘tabula rasa’ idea suggests that children only have limited sexual agency, which aligns with previously mentioned traditional developmentalist ideas (Prioletta, 2020). Similarly, it is a fundamental core of the discourse on childhood innocence (Robinson, 2008; 2012). While these arguments were mostly expressed when talking about gender diversity, some parents applied it to discussions of sexuality in general.

7.1.2 Gender discrepancies between boys and girls

Besides discussions on age-appropriateness, the interviews also revealed interesting findings related to children's gender. Though it was often not explicitly articulated, parents made implicit differences in how they approach the topic of sexuality with their daughters compared to their sons. They suggested that girls are often more aware and discuss the topic with less reservation, which creates room for open dialogue. Conversely, they suggested preteen boys tend to think less actively about the topic and often still view romance (in any setting, heterosexual or non-heterosexual) as 'frivolous' or 'stupid'. Conversations often only take place when the opportunity arises. Additionally, some parents also mentioned the negative association with the word gay as an insult for a lack of masculinity, particularly used among boys in primary school.

This notable gender discrepancy might suggest a difference in normalization. The heteronormative idea of acting like a 'typical boy' (and hence not having an interest in anything sexuality-related yet) potentially hinders the propensity for open dialogue and might lead to a more stigmatized view of the subject. This belief seems to be more dismantled when the same conversation is being held with girls.

7.1.3 Concern of 'social contagion'

As mentioned before, the discussion of age-appropriateness highlighted that LGBTQ characters tend to be perceived as only suitable for cognitively mature children. As seen earlier, some parents feared it might introduce certain ideas to children, which were moreover described as likely not relevant nor suitable for young viewers. For instance, when discussing current transgender and non-binary characters, one mother briefly stated that 'they will have a lot of work in the hospitals' after watching the fragment of transgender character Lewis. Though it seemed to be meant as a light-hearted comment, this rather provocative 'joke' closely ties in with beliefs of social contagion.

This notion pertains the unfounded fear that exposure to LGBTQ identities, particular in media or social environments, may prompt individuals to adopt these identities themselves (Buck et al., 2013; CAAPS, 2021). In this regard specifically, it is rooted in the (mis)conception that exposure to LGBTQ characters might encourage or install certain ideas with children and have them ‘prematurely’ reflect on their sexual orientation/gender identity – or potentially ‘turning’ them LGBTQ. Accordingly, this notion operates on the belief that identifying as LGBTQ is predominantly due to external influences rather than an intrinsic aspect of human diversity. Specifically in the realm of children, their perceived susceptibility to external sources (such as media) evokes the need to protect children’s innocence when it comes to sexuality related topics (Robinson, 2008).

7.2 Characteristics of the representation

7.2.1 Quantity of LGBTQ characters

In terms of characteristics of LGBTQ representation, parents frequently referred to the current quantity of these characters on screen, which to them has reached a point of excess. This was apparent with recurrent mentions of ‘a hype’ and references to ‘the political correctness’ of it all. This sentiment was notably linked to the amount of LGBTQ references in media in general, whether in children’s television, advertisements, or contemporary adult programs. Some parents argued that it surpasses the intent of promoting diversity: in their view, this surplus risks shifting the focus away from authentic and purposeful inclusion to representing sexual and gender minorities simply ‘for the sake of it’, which ties in with the concept of *tokenism*, the tendency to represent a single token member of a group (Hodkinson, 2011).

Notably, this perspective was shared by some parents from the LGBTQ community as well. They feared that the current ‘spotlight’ on diversity risks emphasizing difference rather than leading to destigmatized attitudes in society:

It's so heavily emphasized in the media. Advertisements, television, soap operas, ... (...) It highlights the otherness of it (...). People might think 'oh, it seems so easy, maybe I should try it too' – even though they're not actually gay. That is really hard for people who do struggle with those inner emotions (...). By just throwing it in there and representing it so evidently, it's actually making a bit of a mockery of it. (mother aged 39 of daughters aged 7 and 4)

Moreover, some more conservative parents described the tendency of overrepresentation as normalizing a minority group that is fundamentally a minority in society. With regard to gender diversity in particular, they indicated that it may inadvertently blur the lines between what has traditionally been perceived as the 'normal' family structure, ultimately causing 'normal and abnormal to turn around'. While some statements were explicit in this regard, it should be noted that they only represent a (vocal) minority of participating parents:

You give so much attention to such a small minority to the point that we're making a normality out of it. I mean, it's not 'abnormal', you know. But I do want them to remain a minority. It should be okay to just be a man or a woman, like it always has been. (father aged 37 of daughters aged 8 and 10)

If I get the feeling that they just put there for the sake of it, to encourage children to simply 'accept it more', then I have a problem with it (...). It's almost indoctrination. (father aged 51 of son and daughter aged 8 and 11)

7.2.2 *Quality of LGBTQ characters*

In terms of how these LGBTQ characters are depicted, the interviews illustrated a preference for more conventional depictions of homosexual characters rather than relying on stereotypes. For instance, the character Alberto from *Samson & Gert*, a frivolous singing hairdresser who has been on television for the past three decades, was often cited as an example of an outdated character. Parents expressed concerns that such stereotypes might reinforce ridiculed and

stigmatized beliefs. While these traditional or stereotypical portrayals of gay men only represent a minority of the characters (Citation Omitted), a small group of parents pointed out that solely adhering to heteronormative depictions can be limiting as well and fail to reflect the diversity of community.

7.2.3 Physical affection, nudity, and intimacy

As mentioned above, Flanders has been recognized for their open approach to topics of sexuality (Lemish, 2011; Jensen, 2017). For instance, Flemish children's television has depicted various forms of affection and romantic relationships (Citation Omitted). 'Love' between two characters, regardless of their sexual orientation, is visibly represented, including open displays of affection and kissing scenes in both public and private settings. Most interviewed parents did not find this disconcerting, although some fathers expressed being more comfortable with verbal references (for example, when a character would mention to be in love with someone from the same gender or have two dads, rather than showing this).

Moreover, nearly all parents expressed significant discomfort with the idea of more explicit content on children's television, referring to more sexual images or pornography. Kissing and cuddling scenes between two characters was considered a pivotal boundary. Similarly, some parents expressed discomfort with what they referred to as 'transformed' bodies of trans and non-binary individuals in children's programs. Not all parents deemed it appropriate for children to visually witness anatomical aspects of a body in transition, even within an informative context.

7.2.4 Degrees of appropriateness: sexual diversity and gender diversity

As mentioned throughout the preceding concerns, the interviews illustrate a notable difference in reservation towards gender minorities (individuals who do not conform to the normative gender binary) compared to sexual minorities (gay, lesbian, bisexual, or other references to non-heterosexuality). This discrepancy is in line with previous research: Flemish citizens indeed

exhibit more negative and stigmatized attitudes towards gender minorities (Motmans et al, 2023), especially fathers and parents with a lower educational degree (Citation Omitted).

A possible explanation might be rooted in how parents personally relate to the concept of gender diversity, and how (limitedly) acquainted they are with the subject matter. For instance, many parents expressed greater familiarity with the idea of homosexuality because it has been part of their personal frame of reference. Contrarily, the perceived ‘newness’ of gender diversity renders the topic ‘vague’ and only remotely connected to parents’ personal experience. One parent explained that the overemphasis on diversity is used as a mechanism to get something out of the taboo sphere, which ‘inevitably will evoke resisting attitudes.’ To him, this transitional period was similarly present when sexual diversity was a taboo:

I mean, homosexuality was a silent taboo when I was a kid. That was my generation.

I grew up in a time where it was still often considered ‘wrong’ — right until the point where it wasn’t. (...) This same process is repeating itself. We are entering a period where [gender diversity] has to be overexposed (...) and everything has to be so open for discussion, to the point where little exceptions in society become so mainstream and are the ‘new normal’ (...). In the meantime, I will be considered anti-gay, or racist, because I am not at that point yet. (Father aged 40 with daughter aged 11)

8 Conclusion: ‘why not’ vs. ‘yes, but’ dynamics

The findings of this study first and foremost illustrate the complex and delicate relation between children, sexuality, and media representation. This ongoing discussion is reflected in the varied responses of Flemish parents regarding LGBTQ characters and storylines in children’s fiction.

On the one hand, parents were often positive about LGBTQ characters and storylines in children’s television. Accordingly, our research identified four opportunities associated with

these LGBTQ characters: (1) information, (2) socialization and conversation, (3) inciting prosocial behavior and (4) possibilities for identification. Many parents acknowledged the educational potential of LGBTQ storylines, recognizing the role of television in broadening children's knowledge on diversity and its potential to normalize differences. This is especially significant given the historical dominance of heteronormative representation, and often limited encounters with sexual and gender diversity in children's personal environment. Additionally, parents stated that these characters and storylines could generate a sense of belonging for those who find resonance in them.

Conversely, the interviews also indicated two clusters of concerns associated with LGBTQ characters in children's media. These concerns stem from (1) characteristics of the audience (children's age and gender discrepancies), and (2) characteristics of the represented characters and storylines (the quantity, quality, and depiction of physicality). Parents expressed reservations about the (young) age at which these characters and storylines are introduced to children, underscoring their concerns about the cognitive maturity needed to fully understand what these representations are about. While references to non-heterosexuality seem to be generally more accepted, references to gender diversity (trans or non-binary characters) are met with reservation. Furthermore, parents especially raised concerns about the current prevalence of LGBTQ references in contemporary media, which might shift the focus away from authentic inclusion to a mere act of 'political correctness'. Moreover, this was described as potentially confusing to children, as it might prematurely introduce and install certain ideas with them. In some extreme cases, this led to statements of social contagion (e.g., 'initiating more work in the hospitals'). This was only a minority of the participating parents, however.

Hence, even in a country with a vast legal framework to protect sexual and gender minorities (Borghs and Eeckhout, 2010; Dierckx et al., 2014; 2017), and which moreover has been applauded for its progressive children's productions (Lemish, 2011), the debate on children and

sexuality-related topic remains present. While many parents initially advocated for LGBTQ inclusion based on norms of equality and acceptance, this was sometimes tempered by more conventional arguments that focus on safeguarding children. This interplay between support for inclusive children's media, while subsequently expressing reservations about the impact of these media representations on (young) audiences, illustrates that acceptance indeed remains rather bounded (Huijnk et al, 2022). It could be summarized as a '*why not*' versus '*yes but*' - dynamic, indicating a delicate negotiation between perceived opportunities and boundaries. Accordingly, it should be noted that these clusters of opportunities and concerns are often rooted in related arguments (e.g., 'I think this storyline is valuable, but my child does not understand what it is about yet' or 'I support diversity on screen, but not the current overrepresentation of it'). These hidden contradictions in parents' answers illustrate how nuanced the debate on children, media, sexuality, and gender is – without minimizing the less nuanced and rather provocative quotes of a small minority of the participating parents.

In terms of possible limitations of this research, we first of all acknowledge the rather small sample of parents from within the LGBTQ community (e.g., parents who do not identify with the normative gender binary, or parents with gender diverse children) in our sample. Our study could have benefitted from more insights from LGBTQ parents, especially to counter the rather provocative statements made by more conservative parents. Other critical reflections include the local, Northern-European context in which this study was conducted. This might limit possibilities of generalization, but equally invites further research to explore similar dynamics in other cultural and geographical settings. In this regard, this study provides a starting point and gives valuable insight into the ongoing discussion on societal ideals, parental values, and the evolving landscape of diversified children's television.

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