

# Queer and Non-Normative Characters: Underrepresentation and Clichés in Contemporary Sports TV Series\*

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## Abstract

This article highlights the lack of visibility of queer and non-normative characters in contemporary European and American sports television series by studying how these characters are usually presented and a narrative analysis of characters. We carried out mixed methods research, involving a qualitative study with two focus groups, with results pointing to the perpetuation of stereotypes and the idea of heterosexual overrepresentation, and quantitative research, based on 208 characters in 15 sports TV series, which confirms the limited diversity of these characters in contemporary

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fictional sports TV series. The quantitative results are strikingly contradictory to the qualitative results and show that the audience's perception is that LGBTQI+ characters are overrepresented, which is a heteronormative attitude and a major discrepancy with the assumptions of gender studies. Interestingly, the few TV series that highlight the subject do so with a generous representation of homosexual characters (*The Hockey Girls*, *Ted Lasso*, and *A League of Their Own*) and a positive inclusion, promoting their acceptance and normalization, from a standpoint that is clearly opposed to homophobia.

## **Keywords**

Social inclusion; gender minorities; serials; television; homophobia

# Subrepresentación y tópicos de los personajes *queer* y no normativos en las series deportivas contemporáneas

## Resumen

Este artículo constata la falta de visibilidad de personajes *queer* y no normativos en las series deportivas contemporáneas europeas y estadounidenses a través del estudio de la representación característica de estos personajes y del análisis narrativo correspondiente. Para ello, se llevó a cabo una investigación mixta: un estudio cualitativo a través de dos grupos focales cuyos resultados apuntan a la perpetuación de estereotipos y a la idea de sobrerrepresentación, y una investigación cuantitativa de 208 personajes de 15 series deportivas europeas y estadounidenses que corrobora la poca presencia de estos personajes en la ficción deportiva serial contemporánea. Los resultados cuantitativos son llamativamente opuestos a los cualitativos y explicitan que la percepción de la audiencia es de sobrerrepresentación de personajes LGTBIQ+, lo que demuestra un planteamiento heteronormativo y una gran brecha con los postulados de los estudios de género. Cabe destacar que las pocas series que visibilizan el tema lo hacen con una representación positiva y abundante de personajes homosexuales (*Les de l'hoquei*, *Ted Lasso* y *A League of Their Own*) que promueve la aceptación y normalización del colectivo, desde una posición claramente contraria a la homofobia.

## Palabras clave

Inclusión social; serie; televisión; grupo sexual minoritario; homofobia

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# Sub-representação e clichês de personagens *queer* e não normativos em séries esportivas contemporâneas\*

## Resumo

Este artigo confirma a falta de visibilidade de personagens *queer* e não normativos nas séries esportivas europeias e estadunidenses contemporâneas por meio do estudo da representação característica desses personagens e da análise narrativa correspondente. Para tanto, foi realizada uma pesquisa mista: um estudo qualitativo a partir de dois grupos focais, cujos resultados apontam para a perpetuação de estereótipos e a ideia de super-representação; e uma pesquisa quantitativa de 208 personagens de 15 séries esportivas europeias e estadunidenses, que corrobora a baixa presença desses personagens na ficção esportiva seriada contemporânea. Os resultados quantitativos são notavelmente contrários aos qualitativos e deixam explícito que a percepção do público é de super-representação de personagens LGTBIQ+, o que demonstra uma abordagem heteronormativa e uma grande lacuna em relação aos postulados dos estudos de gênero. Deve-se notar que as poucas séries que tornam a questão visível o fazem com uma representação positiva e abundante de personagens homossexuais (*Les de l'hoquei*, *Ted Lasso* e *A League of Their Own*), promovendo a aceitação e normalização do coletivo a partir de uma posição claramente contrária à homofobia.

## Palavras-chave

Inclusão social; série; televisão; grupo sexual minoritário; homofobia

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# Introduction: Significant Absences and Structural Heteronormativity

Fiction is a powerful medium that shapes and reflects sociocultural norms, creating identities through its representation of issues, communities, and trends (Collier et al., 2009; Fiske, 1987/2011; Gergen, 2009), by means of what Lal (1995) termed “symbolic interactions.” The case of the queer community, in which serial fiction plays a crucial role for emerging LGBTQI+ people,<sup>5</sup> is no exception, as social cognitive theory points out (Bandura, 2011). Various studies (González de Garay et al., 2023; Higueras-Ruiz, 2023) have pointed out that the representation of sexual and gender minorities in the media is crucial if these identities are to be visible and normalized in society (González de Garay & Álvarez, 2017; Madžarević & Soto, 2018).

## Theoretical Framework

### Greater Visibility but Limited Representation

The number of LGBTQI+ characters on international streaming television has increased significantly in recent years (Masanet et al., 2022; Sánchez Sorianó, 2024), and the phenomenon of quality television has foregrounded this community’s stories and experiences (GLAAD, 2023). Since the beginning of the third golden age of television,<sup>6</sup> there have been numerous gay-friendly fictions.

Fiction exists within a hierarchical social system that privileges and punishes individuals based on binary assumptions about gender and sexuality and defines beliefs about what is “normal” (Herz & Johansson, 2015,

5 The selection of the term LGBTQI+ over other variants such as LGBT, LGBTQI, or LGBTQNAP+ is due to criteria of inclusivity, clarity, and recognition of identity dynamism. This acronym maintains an accessible and widely recognized structure, making it easy to understand in different contexts. The addition of the letter Q, which represents queer identities and/or people who question their gender orientation or identity, broadens inclusivity without over-extending the term. In addition, the + sign reinforces openness to other identities not explicitly mentioned, such as non-binary, asexual, and pansexual people, without making the acronym too complex. The use of LGBTQI+ is supported by its wide acceptance by international bodies, academic studies, and human rights legislation. Unlike more expansive terms such as LGBTQNAP+, which can be confusing, this acronym strikes a balance between inclusivity and clarity, encouraging the appropriation of the term in a variety of settings. Its adoption also contributes to discursive coherence and more effective representation of gender diversity in public and academic debates.

6 The Third Golden Age of Television began in the 1990s. It was marked by high-quality productions, complex narratives, and greater creative freedom, driven by streaming platforms and premium cable networks.

p. 2). Although their visibility has increased, only 11 % of regular characters in U.S. television series were identified as LGBTQI+ in the 2022–2023 television season (GLAAD, 2023). LGBTQI+ people continue to be portrayed as one-dimensional and stereotypical, and many of their subgroups are ignored (McInroy & Craig, 2017). They are more visible as a group, but underrepresented (Woods & Hardman, 2021). Recent studies argue that characters from this group are, in fact, included as a narrative resource (Valverde Maestre & Pérez Ruffí, 2021, p. 169).

Non-heteronormative identities are practically non-existent, and when they do appear, they are based on various representational clichés: “Does he even like sports? Everyone knows he’s gay” (*Heartstopper*, Piggott, 2022). The quote illustrates the association bias between gender identity and sports. The issue seems to be more complex in the sporting sphere due to the traditional ties between sports, hegemonic masculinity and cis-heterosexuality (Messner, 2002), with sports as places for male socialization within classic heteronormativity (Rutherford, 1992/2023), and the celebration of male bonding (Lotz, 2014). The study by Bachmann and Gooch (2018) on representation in sports media shows that stories of LGBTQI+ people are often rendered invisible or dealt with superficially, perpetuating prevailing social attitudes, within which sport has been a bastion of traditional masculinity and normative heterosexuality (Miller, 2001). Recent research shows that there is still a lack of representation and “distortion” in the representation of LGBTQI+ characters in various media formats and countries, with “adherence to binary gender roles” (Soto-Sanfiel & Sánchez Soriano, 2024).

## **Stereotypical Representational Characteristics: Microhomophobia and Sexism**

How this group is presented does not always reflect reality, and television tropes and stereotypes, which are legacies of social prejudices, continue to be used (Valverde Maestre & Pérez Ruffí, 2021, p. 179). Some of these clichés are sexist as well as homophobic. They include gay men being represented as effeminate (Shugart, 2003), with stereotypically feminine characteristics, such as dressing well, being exaggeratedly flamboyant, or adopting high-

pitched voices (Chambers, 2009), as well as positive characteristics such as warmth and competence (Sink et al., 2018). Microhomophobic signals are also plentiful. These consist of internalized homophobia (Aznar Orbea, 2020) and consolidate the dominance of heteronormativity over other non-heterosexual sexual identities (Heredia Leal, 2021). The representation of gay men may also include stereotyping as a victim or as a villainous “other.” The association with a lack of masculinity is reinforced in gay men (Marcos-Ramos et al., 2023), and the stereotypical gay man is presented as “white, Caucasian, high-class, with a nice physique, educated and sophisticated” (Ramírez Alvarado & Cobo Durán, 2013, p. 65).

Given that social identities and the lack of equality between them based on sexual orientation and gender are intersectional (Bowleg, 2008), lesbians are represented in a sexist manner as women and as lesbians. They were initially represented as being tough, with masculine gestures, short hair, baggy clothes, and involved in masculine sports (Tropiano, 2002), usually known as *tomboys* (Bailey et al., 2002). This representation increasingly seems to verge on being a cliché, with a prevailing and inescapable femininity (Meyer & Lee, 2006), leading to a characteristic binary perpetuation and objectification based on the sexualization of the established heteropatriarchal male gaze, where “this type of plot and character has often been more closely linked to the construction of an object of desire intended to please a heterosexual male gaze—the *hot lesbian* (Annati & Ramsey, 2022)—than to offer a model which could provide the basis for lesbian women to identify with” (Guerrero-Pico et al., 2017, p. 32). Within this trend, lesbian women live in an oxymoron involving objectified visibility on the one hand, and one of invisibility on the other. There are also plot clichés typical of how these groups have been traditionally represented in fiction, such as a large number of *gay* characters meeting tragic ends (*Bury Your Gays*), which although it affects all types of men, women and *queer* identities, “has a particularly significant impact on lesbian and bisexual characters, who have their own name for the cliché ‘Dead Lesbian Syndrome’” (Guerrero-Pico et al., 2017, p. 31).

These *queer* characters, both male and female, are included in heteronormative plots, perpetuating structures of sociocultural relationships

based on normative cisheteropatriarchal mechanisms (Ramírez Alvarado & Cobo Durán, 2013, p. 65). They are represented identities that adopt a role similar to what is culturally accepted as feminine or masculine (Sánchez Soriano, 2024).

## **Exceptions: Examples of Sports Series with LGBTQI+ Characters**

From the analyzed sample (15 series), we have selected the most important sports series that included main characters from this group. In *The Hockey Girls* (Azemar et al., 2019), the hockey players in the Patí Minerva club and their coach fight to ensure the future of their team as they struggle to find their niche in the world. The players are teenagers, and some of them are homosexuals who are accepted and respected by their communities.

*Ted Lasso* (Sudeikis et al., 2020) is the name of the coach who leaves the American football league to coach a British soccer team. The series adopts a feel-good tone as it chronicles the adventures of the AFC Richmond team in the Premier League and those of the club's management and players, interweaving the club's story with their personal lives. There is a naturalized representation in the third season with Keeley (Juno Temple) and Colin (Billy Harris).

*A League of Their Own* (Graham & Jacobson, 2022) is the heir to the 1992 film of the same name. Against the backdrop of World War II, the narrative recounts how, between 1943 and 1954, in the absence of male players fighting at the front, a professional women's baseball league—the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL)—was established. The series looks at the lives of the Rockford Peaches players, focusing above all on the changes in their lives and their unprecedented opportunity to play a sport they are passionate about professionally. The series is one of the most famous exceptions in the representation of lesbian women in sports television series. The players' image and behavior (in reality and the fictional version) had to be ostensibly feminine (Dreier, 2021).

Male professional soccer players disclosing their homosexuality remains a sensitive issue, as reflected in *Ted Lasso*. Very few have done so in

recent decades, and those presumably represent a very small proportion of the real numbers. Justin Fashanu was the first player to come out as gay (The Sun, 1990) and came to a tragic end. One of the most recent and famous players to do so was Josh Cavallo, who plays for Adelaide United in Australia (Gillespie, 2021), although there have been others, such as Jakub Jankto from the Czech Republic (BBC News Mundo, 2023). There have been a limited number of cases, and as such, those who publicly disclose their sexual orientation continue to make the news today. The absence of any normalization in “coming out” by gay male professional soccer players is entirely counter to the narrative representation of the quasi warrior, because of their association with an (ultra-)normative heterosexuality. The institutions involved currently adopt a conservative, indifferent, or homophobic attitude. FIFA has been accused of “rainbow-washing” (Beare & Boucaut, 2024), while the English Premier League and the Australian League have undertaken initiatives including the Rainbow Laces campaign (2023) and the Pride Round (2023). However, the LGBTQI+ slogans were quickly removed as soon as they sparked controversy.

The initial position of female homosexuality in sport is diametrically opposite, as it has only recently begun to obtain some media coverage. Minority sports appeal to an even smaller minority when they are women’s sports. In these contexts, i.e., without being subject to public scrutiny as some soccer players, it would be reasonable to assume that players who are lesbians could acknowledge their sexuality without too much difficulty, or simply not conceal it because they see no need to do so. The absence of a taboo may mean that the representation in women’s sport is more consistent with the real figure than in men’s sport, and public opinion often confuses this due to a prejudiced association between sport and lesbianism (De la Cretaz, 2022).

## **Objectives and Hypotheses**

Primary objectives: to determine whether there is a paradigm shift in sports television series in terms of the presence of LGBTQI+ characters; to determine the (under)representation of LGBTQI+ characters in fictional sports series; to examine sports narratives in terms of the balanced levels of repre-

sentation of *queer* characters in sports series; and to examine the audience's perception of homosexual characters.

Primary hypothesis: LGBTQI+ representation in sports television fiction continues to be stereotyped and promotes a false increase in its visibility, when in fact there is an underrepresentation. The assertion of the role and prominence of LGBTQI+ characters is not significant in sports fiction (quantitative methodology). Sexist and homophobic behaviors persist in television sports fiction (qualitative methodology of character analysis). There is a vast difference between gender studies and society's perception (qualitative methodology used for focus group reception).

## Methodology and Sample

### Quantitative Analysis

A sample of 15 series, comprising 208 characters, was subjected to quantitative content analysis. The inclusion criteria stipulated that the productions had been broadcast in Spain between 2018 and 2023, were aimed at adult audiences, and reflected the scope of the most relevant U.S. audio-visual platforms (Netflix, Apple TV, Prime Video, HBO, Disney+, Starz) and European TV channels (NRK, ZDF, TVC). The resulting list is presented in Tables 1 and 2, categorized into productions with and without homosexual characters.

**Table 1. TV Series with LGBTQI+ Characters**

Title	Platform/TV channel	Years broadcast	Seasons	Format
<i>Heimebane (Homeground)</i>	NRK-1	2018-19	2	Series
<i>The Hockey Girls</i>	TVC/Netflix	2019-20	2	Series
<i>Ted Lasso</i>	Apple TV	2020-present	3	Series
<i>The Queen's Gambit</i>	Netflix	2020	1	Mini-series
<i>All American: Homecoming</i>	HBO	2022-24	3	Series
<i>A League Of Their Own</i>	Prime Video	2022	1	Series
<i>Fifteen Love</i>	Prime Video	2023	1	Series

Source: Own elaboration

**Table 2. TV Series without LGBTQI+ Characters**

Title	Platform/TV channel	Years broadcast	Seasons	Format
<i>The English Game</i>	Netflix	2020	1	Mini-series
<i>Spinning Out</i>	Netflix	2020	1	Series
<i>Heels</i>	Starz	2021	2	Series
<i>The Crew</i>	Netflix	2021	1	Series
<i>Swagger</i>	Apple TV	2021-23	2	Series
<i>Nattryttarna (Riding in the Darkness)</i>	ZDF	2022	1	Series
<i>Winning Time: The Rise of the Lakers Dynasty</i>	HBO	2022-23	2	Series
<i>The Crossover</i>	Disney	2023	1	Series

Source: Own elaboration

Approximately 15 characters from each series were studied. The analysis sheet was based on the following dependent variables: identification, description, geographic origin, family situation, work and leisure, physical characteristics, sexuality, character traits, and relationship with the sport. The variables studied included gender in terms of identification: cis-male, cis-female, transgender, other (non-binary, queer, fluid), intersex, and sexual orientation, and sexuality: homosexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality, polysexuality, asexuality, and pansexuality.

Seven members of the Research Group conducted the analysis,<sup>7</sup> and a pre-test was performed on 21 characters. Krippendorf's Alpha was applied to the pre-test, the codebook and coder training were reviewed, and the minimum inter-coder agreement for the variables was set at 0.6.

## Qualitative Analysis: Focus Groups

Two focus group discussions, one with eight female participants and the other with eight male participants, were conducted in Barcelona on July 17 and 18, 2024, respectively. The participants were selected by a specialized company, which ensured informed consent, anonymity, and the supervision of essential ethical processes in qualitative research with individuals,

<sup>7</sup> Yago Ramis, Marta Borrueto and Rogmary García, as well as the authors of this paper.

following the Code of Good Research Practice (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Consell de Govern, 2020) and the Ethical Code (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Consell de Govern, 2023). The selection of participants based on their gender identity and sexual orientation is challenging because these are considered sensitive data by ethical codes and current legislation, to which participants and potential participants have the right not to respond. The objective was to analyze perceptions of homosexuality and compare them with the working hypotheses based on a focus group. The participants' sociodemographic characteristics are equivalent to those of the middle class. In addition to having experience watching sports fiction on television (80 %), they were from the city of Barcelona or its metropolitan area (more than 80 %) and aged between 25 and 45 years old; 62.5 % of them were Spanish, and half of the participants had a degree. The remainder had completed secondary education (31.25 %), vocational training (12.5 %), or doctoral studies (6.25 %).

The focus group approach consisted of viewing excerpts from the series analyzed, the most significant of the main theme of this research: a scene from *The Hockey Girls*, in which the players Lorena and Flor kiss and have an adulterous relationship; and the scene featuring Colin's disclosure of his sexuality to his teammates in *Ted Lasso* (Table 3).

**Table 3. Clips Watched by the Focus Group**

Series	Season and episode	Character(s)	Subject	Minutes
<i>Ted Lasso</i>	3.09	Colin	Coming out	4.09"
<i>The Hockey Girls</i>	1.14	Lorena and Flor	Kiss	2.44"

Source: Own elaboration

After viewing the content, the participants were asked two types of questions: 1) about their emotional reaction (Korobkova et al., 2024), and 2) about their opinion and information (based on the semi-structured interview model; Corbetta, 2007). The subsequent analysis was performed

with the help of the ATLAS.ti software package, v.23, for the correct coding and identification of content clusters.

## **Qualitative Analysis: Narrative Analysis of Characters**

The main methodology used for the analysis was discourse analysis and the characteristics established by Pearson (2003), based on those of Bordewell (1985), especially his category of *dialogue* and *characteristics*. The social and sexual characteristics established by Alfeo (2011), also studied by Blanco-Fernández et al. (2024), were also taken into consideration. We selected the series in which homosexual characters have a leading role among the sample analyzed.

## **Results**

### **Quantitative Results: Sociodemographic Characteristics**

**A. Gender, male: cisgender binarism (Knott-Fayle et al., 2022).** Only 1.5 % of the total are transgender, non-binary, queer or gender-fluid characters, and these few cases appear in female ensemble roles. Only 0.5 % of the characters are transsexual, and there are no other types of gender representation in the sample.

**B. Ethnicity: cisgender white men (Vianden & Gregg, 2017).** Most of the characters in the corpus analyzed, whether male (35.6 %) or female (29.8 %), are white (65.4 %). The second-largest ethnic group in the United States, in terms of production, is those of black African descent, comprising 13.9% males and 9.6% females. Latinos are far behind, with an overall rate of 3.40 %.

**C. Sexual orientation: prevailing heterosexuality and parity in homosexuality (Mulvey, 2023).** In the few cases in which homosexuality is present, it is distributed almost equally between the genders (8.2 % male characters and 7.2 % female characters). The tomboy/effeminate variable only applies to female characters, with 1.4 %.

## Qualitative Results: Narrative Study of Characters

### The Hockey Girls

*The Hockey Girls* has a large percentage of homosexual protagonists. It is a series broadcast during prime-time hours for family audiences. Over the two seasons, the program presents a core of main characters (the main players) and the two coaches. All the main characters are female. The fact that Lorena (Mireia Oriol) and Flor (Asia Ortega) are lesbians and Gina (Claudia Ribera) is bisexual means that LGBTQI+ characters account for a large percentage of the total number of protagonists. Meanwhile, most of the heterosexual relationships that appear are shown to be conflicted for various reasons (Germán's infidelity; loss of Raquel's virginity (1.4)); the socio-economic differences between partners (Enric and Silvia), or age differences (Toni and Emma); and the marital crises of their parents (Santi and Nuria). The *heteropessimism* (Seresin, 2019) that appears to be predominant in contemporary audiovisual fiction, as opposed to a self-accepted (Alfeo, 2011) homosexuality, is prevalent among all the homosexual characters in the series.

Meanwhile, adultery (the scene used in the analysis), polyamory (Gina and Lorena, 1.7, 1.9), and amorous jealousy (Gina) are also presented in the homosexual relationships, which are completely normalized and accepted. The scenes involving conflict are occasional and anecdotal. There is a complete absence of insults, derogatory language, or exclusive acceptance of heterosexual relationships. LGBTQI+ characters are not presented in a distorted manner at any time. The series adopts an intersectional approach, entirely countering homophobic, racist, and sexist behaviors (Lopera-Mármol et al., 2023).

Gina is presented as the most alternative character—she is a feminist, independent, theoretically free of taboos (1.2, 1.4), but in practice, she is more conservative than Lorena. She cannot deal with having an open relationship or (the possibility of) Lorena cheating on her with Flor, and she ends up leaving her for this reason (1.7). There are no differences in the dialogues compared to a heterosexual couple reconciling (1.7). In its egalitarian approach between genders and sexual orientations, the series shows that

neither difficulties with relationships nor promiscuity are inherent to one gender or sexual orientation. As regards sexual characterization, Gina's and Lorena's homosexuality appears to be linked to an atypical type of character who is something special (Gina's peculiar clothing, Lorena's blue hair), while Flor has no distinctive characteristics. In general, the series does not delve into great depth regarding the characters' degree of self-acceptance or their emergence and genesis, and it does not present homosexuality as the characters' exclusive trait.

### **Ted Lasso**

Both cases of meaningful homosexual representation in *Ted Lasso* are limited by season three, which was presumed to be the final season (Orr, 2023) when it premiered. The inspiring and nuanced story of Colin, a gay soccer player coming out, is contrasted with an upsetting entanglement between PR consultant Keeley and an investor.

Keeley's same-sex romance main concern is the power dynamic rather than their gender or sexuality. Jack's politeness and masculine business clothes (Tropiano, 2002) make her strikingly different from Keeley's explosive ex-boyfriends. Despite the depicted acceptance of the relationship, the toxic break-up leads Keeley to reunite with her conventional male ex-partner, reinforcing the heteronormative mode (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Rutherford, 1992/2023).

Colin had to keep his private life secret for two seasons. First, the problem was limited to coming out to his best friend and teammates. "My whole life is two lives" (3.6), he confesses, describing the gap between his private and working lives as aching "to be able to kiss my fella the same way the guys kiss their girls." The character fulfils this dream in the final episode of season 3. Colin repeats a self-affirmation: "I'm a strong and capable man" whenever he feels self-conscious about being exposed (3.3). Although Isaak is initially hurt at being uninformed, he fiercely defends Colin after he is subject to a homophobic expletive from a fan (3.9), promoting a narrative of defense and advocacy of homosexuality in the series. There is an obvious difference in the team's behavior in terms of politely accepting Colin's news with a supportive "we don't care" from coach Lasso (3.9)

and the preceding microhomophobic gossip about Isaak's presumable gayness. Colin's storyline is an idealized narrative of acceptance of a gay man in soccer, which is as yet unattainable for most professional athletes. His relationships with his family and his boyfriend, Michael, are not problematic—hence the focus is on coming out to his colleagues in a profession well-known for its homophobia.

Colin's narrative is treated less dramatically than Keeley's and is depicted with greater nuance, benefiting the character concerned.

### **A League of Their Own**

This adaptation focuses on queerness and is striking due to the number of queer characters present, unlike the original film by Penny Marshall (1992), which, despite emphasizing a story of feminist empowerment, ignored any non-heteronormative aspects in the story and contained no LGBTQI+ representation.

The series focuses on the characters of Carson Shaw (Abbi Jacobson), Jo Deluca (Melanie Field), and Max Chapman (Chanté Adams). Carson is a married woman running away from her humdrum life to join the Rockford Peaches female baseball team. That is her primary motivation, but the real one is to flee from a marriage to a man fighting at the front, who is her childhood best friend more than her husband. The opportunity to play with the Peaches and above all to meet Greta Gill (D'Arcy Carden), with whom she will begin a romantic relationship, will make her life more hazardous, in which she ends up becoming who she really is: "I think you're running towards your destiny" (1.1), says Greta to Carson after she cuts her hair, reinforcing the idea of a transition in her identity. Carson herself gradually becomes aware of her escape in a process of self-acceptance (Alfeo, 2011). The arc of her relationship with Greta begins as an attraction to the freedom of action she gives off. Carson discovers that she is not alone, and that "35 % of the women's league is queer" (1.4), which helps her in her process of normalization and integration (Alfeo, 2011).

There is hardly any pejorative representation of queer characters; the only negative comments are made by characters who are in the process of

accepting their identity: “I’m not like you, stop... I’m normal” (1.1); but neither is there any normalization nor social integration as a result of the display of their identity within the historical context. Jo Deluca talks to Greta about how they have been concealing (“making up”) their identities in the past, and Jo expresses the wish that “maybe things are changing now” (1.5). After the raid on the queer club in the following scenes, the production highlights that people who are not sexually heteronormative are subjected to significant repression involving police violence, of which Jo is a victim. Deluca’s character embodies the problematic representation of queerness and the punishment they receive for celebrating it, as she is one of the characters who makes little effort to disguise her identity and clearly ignores the codes of behavior of the charm school organized by the AAG-PBL (“no pants in public”, 1.1)—codes designed to promote the femininity of the players on and off the field. Like Jess McCready and Lupe Garcia, Jo always wears trousers, spits, talks with a cigarette in the corner of her mouth, drinks, and has uncanny hygiene standards; this is a far cry from the make-up they have to wear, along with the powdered pink outfit with a skirt that the players repeatedly complain about. These three characters are subject to the sexist characterization of lesbian women, as they are depicted with traditionally heteronormative masculine traits, incurring the recurring motif of the tomboy (Bailey et al., 2002).

The series also portrays the construction of Max Chapman’s identity, a lesbian woman who seeks inclusion and refuses to accept her predetermined destiny. Max wants to play baseball above all else. She remains left behind not because of her gender, but because she is black. She gradually discovers that there are grey areas in this black and white society—other opportunities for her life and identity, such as the life led by her Uncle Bert (formerly Aunt Bertie), who identifies as male, and presents himself as such in society, with his wife and is presented as *queer*. For his freedom and activism, Uncle Bert was ostracized from the family by Max’s mother, but he embodies the freedom of choice, identity, and the display thereof.

### **Qualitative Results: Focus Group**

The nomenclature of the participants is coded according to the participant (P), random numbering, and gender (M/F). As mentioned above, the ques-

tions were divided into two categories: 1) emotional reaction to the clips, 2) opinion and information. The results of the focus group, organized according to the different content clusters obtained, are shown in Table 4:

**Table 4. Synthesis of the Focus Group Content Clusters**

Subject	Male	Female
a. Overrepresentation of LGBTQI+ characters in TV series	x	x
b. Homosexuality – Acceptance/Indifference	x	x
b.1. Homosexuality – Discomfort/Rejection	x	
b.2. Homosexuality – Discomfort/Rejection (Adultery)	x	x
b.3. Homosexuality – Discomfort/Rejection (Wrongdoing)		x
b.4. Homosexuality and men's sports	x	x
c. Stereotypes	x	x
c.1. Stereotyping – Association between “female” sports and gay men		x
c.2. Stereotyping – Association between women's sports and lesbianism	x	x
d. Lesbians		
d.1. Representation of lesbians compared to gays	x	x
I. Overrepresentation		
II. Under-representation		
d.2. Increased sexualization of lesbian characters	x	x

Source: Compiled by the authors based on Atlas.ti (v.23)

### **a. Overrepresentation of LGBTQI+ characters in television series.**

Both the female and male focus groups believe that LGBTQI+ relationships are overrepresented in television series, and their opinions suggest that they do not believe that this representation is consistent with reality. They expressed criticism from the perspective of overrepresentation: “It’s gratuitous in the series. And yes, you have to normalize it and whatever you like, but I don’t think it’s necessary,” said P4-F. Concerning *Heartstoppers*, P1-F mentions the idea of a trend towards over-representation of LGBTQI+ characters: “They include gay characters, for example, bisexuals, lesbians, and all of that used to be unthinkable. Or non-binary genders, which is also something very new these days, and you also see it, and it’s also interesting be-

cause it also exists.” Only one of the female participants (P8-F) was more nuanced: “I think you see more than there really is. In other words, they need to attract your attention, and perhaps you remember this bit more.”

**b. Homosexuality - Acceptance/Indifference.** The female participants explicitly accept homosexual characters in the series (P3-F): “I wouldn’t ask anyone who you’ve slept with, if you’re going to the Olympics.” They are also accepted by the male participants (P8-M: “It seems very natural to me”), with some expressing indifference (P5-M: “Neither good nor bad”).

**b.1. Homosexuality - Discomfort/Rejection.** The male participants were more uncomfortable than the female participants with the lesbian kissing scene, although the prevailing discourse in both groups was one of political correctness.

**b.2. Homosexuality - Discomfort/Rejection (Adultery).** Some of the participants (P5-M) said that what they found objectionable was adultery, whether in a heterosexual or homosexual couple.

**b.3. Homosexuality - Discomfort/Rejection (Youthful wrongdoing).** Several female participants (some of them mothers) said they were more concerned about youthful wrongdoing (marijuana) than sexual orientation: “It bothers me more that they are smoking (than the kiss between two girls)” (P3-F), “or that they hit the bottle” (P5-F).

**b.4. Homosexuality - Male sport.** There was consensus among both the male and female participants that male homosexuality is rarely associated with athletes, especially soccer players, as few “come out of the closet”: “I think it’s rare to see a man, a soccer player, say look, I’m gay. There must be a lot of them.” (P4-F). P1-M: “In soccer, it’s like a taboo. Not in other sports, there’s no problem if someone’s a homosexual, but in soccer...” And P3-M: “He was like a leper” (about a homosexual soccer player).

Only P7-M and P3-M offered any nuances, saying that the subject is “a thing of the past.” P7-M: “Cristiano wouldn’t have sold any shirts”); and that many people in Spain disclose their homosexuality when their sports career has come to an end (P3-M).

**c. Stereotypes.** Both male and female participants reiterated stereotypes prevalent in society. Among those referring to male homosexuality, P7-M was somewhat critical (“As far as I can remember, soccer players have always been extremely macho. Grass doesn’t grow where they’ve walked. But that hasn’t really been the case”); while the female participant seems to be complicit in some stereotypes: “There’s the homosexual man, who’s a ‘drama queen’ (dramatic), he cries and helps you, and he’s like just another friend, and there’s the straight man, who’s an alpha male, who can handle anything, I’ll help you, don’t worry” (P3-F).

**c.1. Stereotyping - Association between “female” sports and gay men.** The women in particular stressed that some sports or professions are associated with homosexuality, reiterating the stereotype: “You watch figure skating and you see some men who say ‘he’s gay’” (P3-F). The cliché of effeminate homosexual male characters is perpetuated, according to P3-F: “Those who work in jobs that have traditionally been female, like in fashion or as secretaries, tend to be gay more than masculine men. [...] And there are some men who, for whatever reason, can be secretaries without being (homosexual).” P5-F: “He’s a gay man who’s a bit flamboyant, he’s a bit comical with the feathers.”

**c.2. Stereotyping - Association between women’s sports and lesbianism.** The link between lesbianism and women’s sports was mentioned by both women (P3-F and P6-F: “You assume that the vast majority are lesbians”) and men (P3-M: “When it’s a female team, you always have to include a couple...” and P5-M: “Women who play soccer (seem to have to be) butch”).

**d.1. Representation of lesbians compared to gay men.** The representation of lesbians in television fiction was one of the most hotly debat-

ed topics: Most of the men felt they were overrepresented, as did one of the female participants (P4-F). According to P3-M:

There is a problem here that usually tends to apply to women's sports. I don't know why they always have to shoehorn a lesbian or two into the team. And yet, when you look at men's sports, it's... Very few male players have come out [...] they may sometimes be able to tell their teammates about it, but often they can't.

In the same vein, P4-F says:

I'm not uncomfortable with the series (*The Hockey Girls*) itself, but with the series I watch and what I see. It seems like all the women are lesbians or bisexual these days. It doesn't bother me, but I think it's exaggerated. They want to occupy the space, which men and women are obviously entitled to.

Meanwhile, the women generally agreed that lesbians are underrepresented: "Gay men are represented more than gay women" (P3-F). In the same vein, P6-F says:

I don't think it's out of proportion. What is striking is that, obviously, if there is a homosexual partner, it's a man. Gay homosexual men are more represented than gay women. And I don't know what the percentages are, but I imagine it must be more or less the same as normal life. And it seems that in fiction, gay men are more visible than lesbian women.

**d.2. Increased sexualization of lesbian characters.** Although all the participants agree that there are also sexualized male homosexual characters in some series like *Merlí* (Lozano, 2015), they reiterate their opinion that "women are always more sexualized" (P3-F). They all agree that the on-screen sexualization of sexual relations is enhanced when the characters involved are two women. According to P5-M: "I also don't know if perhaps a scene between lesbian women is more sexualized than a scene between two men," thereby perpetuating the representational stereotype mentioned above concerning the sexualization of gay female or *hot lesbian* characters, subjected to a male perspective in their representation.

## Conclusions

Our primary hypothesis of false overrepresentation is confirmed, with a representation of LGBTQI+ characters of 1.5 %, creating a false increase in visibility. Representational stereotypes are confirmed: Women are represented as tomboys in 1.4 % of the study, more than men as effeminate (0 %). The idea that an emphasis and protagonism of LGBTQI+ characters is not significant in sports-themed fiction is confirmed. The female and male characters are mostly white and heterosexual. There is barely any representation of the non-cisgender spectrum.

Narrative analysis confirms a positive treatment of homosexual characters, showing self-acceptance and normalization. There is a notable absence of earlier trends such as the destruction of gay characters (*bury your gays/dead lesbian syndrome*).

The qualitative results (from focus groups) indicate that the audience's perception in the sample studied is inconsistent with the quantitative findings. They believe that there is an overrepresentation of LGBTQI+ people in the series they saw. This also runs contrary to the postulates of gender studies, presenting a difference from society. An association between certain sports and certain gender stereotypes is also inferred, confirming Messner's (2002) assertions.

The same TV shows have been analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively, and it has been observed that the audience perceives an overrepresentation of homosexual characters, in contradiction with the quantitative results of this study and with gender studies. A gap appears to exist between gender studies and audience perception, which warrants further study due to its social and academic implications. This study is based on a limited corpus of contemporary sports series, which may limit the generalizability of the findings and could be expanded upon in future research.

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## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the results or interpretation of this work.

## Ethics Statement

Throughout the application of the methodology and conduct of the research, strict ethical standards were maintained at all times, and participants were provided with the necessary information regarding the ethical approval of the study.

## Data Availability Statement

The authors will provide access to the information and data supporting the study’s findings, as well as the images used in the article, to interested parties who contact them via email, with the aim of promoting transparency and reproducibility.

## Consent for Publication

It is declared that consent was obtained for the publication of personal information or identifiable images included in the course of this study.

# AI Disclosure

No artificial intelligence was used in the writing or analysis of this manuscript.

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