



‘Difference Is the One Thing That We Have in Common’. A Photovoice Exploration of Fans Articulating Fair Representation in Netflix’s ‘Sense8’

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Television production is championing diversity in representation with record numbers compared to previous years. Netflix’s Sense8 is definitely amongst the highest scoring shows as concerns intersectional representation. Such remarkable representation was worth the 2016 GLAAD Outstanding Drama Series award, a prize granted to the most diverse television shows. However, this applause is geared solely to numerical representations while current academic discussion focuses more on the concept of fair representations. Not only is being represented of importance, but how one is represented. The present paper employs photovoice and photo elicitation to investigate how Sense8 fans articulate what constitutes a fair representation of queer gender identities within the show. The

present research addresses two gaps in the literature. First, a methodological one: the employment of creative visual methodologies to transcend the limitations of the most common methods used for audience research —interviews and focus groups. Secondly, this study follows the contemporary conversation around fair representation by addressing what is now a gap in the existing literature on queer television: what is fair representation from an audience perspective? The results of this study show how audiences’ perspectives on fair representation differ from those formulated in public and academic debates.

Keywords: queer representation, LG-BTQ+, Sense8, audience studies, photovoice.

The past two years were particularly significant in the gender universe and reflect the contemporary wave of the worldwide socio-political change of the #MeToo era, marking several achievements in women and LGBTQ+ rights. A fundamental development is the heightened visibility and growing voice of LGBTQ+ issues and advocates—and gender issues as a whole—especially enabled by the media. Through media, these issues gained momentum within current public attention, the most pressing debates including the #MeToo movement, toxic masculinity, and the fight for LGBTQ+ rights.

Television championed the representation of queer characters with record numbers in 2019 (GLAAD, 2019). A particularly significant case is that of *quality television*, a portion of television production offering high-quality content, style, and characters (Santo, 2008). This television genre is central to the widening of the gender spectrum in TV production, promoting gender (and ethnic) diversity both in the casting and in the design of characters. Recent series such as *Sense8*, *Pose*, and *Tales of the City* are just a few examples of quality television featuring queer characters with relevant storylines. The greatest queer representation score was shown by streaming platforms, with Netflix in the lead (GLAAD, 2019).

The contemporary social turmoil around gender issues mentioned above, however, results not only in the increased media visibility of queerness. Rather, audiences themselves join the conversation: the debate about representation is now part of mainstream popular culture. Numbers appear to be a mere starting point towards fair representation for all. Public opinion has successfully pressured for greater diversity (GLAAD, 2019). Nonetheless, since the film and television industries conspicuously opened their doors to the casting of queer and non-white characters in mainstream productions, a segment of public opinion diverted their attention from the initial advocacy for inclusion and diversity towards the quality of such representation. Numbers do not suffice if the narrative embedding diverse characters remains biased, these voices argue (Dow, 2001). Heteronormative and stereotypical representations are damaging for both the LGBTQ+ community and audiences at large, as they articulate homophobic discourses that, at best, limit the potential and agency of LGBTQ+ people.

In addition to paying attention to TV shows' contents, we argue for the study of (un)fair representation in terms of audiences' reception thereof. This study, therefore, will focus on television audiences and attempt to unravel how they articulate what constitutes a fair representation of queer gender identities on television.

Netflix's *Sense8*, led and created by the Wachowski sisters (both transgender women), offers a particularly interesting case study. The series revolves around a group of eight people from around the globe who are *sensates*: mentally and emotionally linked together. While the eight attempt to discover how they are bonded together, they are also hunted by those who feel they are a threat to the world order. The show's diverse cast features people from different races, genders, and sexualities. The primary roles are attributed to a transgender

homosexual woman (Nomi) and a cisgender¹ gay man (Lito). A cisgender woman (Amanita, Nomi's partner) and a second cisgender gay man (Hernando, Lito's partner) star as recurring secondary characters, along with cisgender heterosexual characters and ones whose sexuality remains blurred throughout the show. The numbers indicate that *Sense8* is amongst the highest scoring shows concerning intersectional representation. Such a remarkable representation earned it the 2016 GLAAD Outstanding Drama Series award, a prize awarded to the most diverse television shows that focus on LGBTQ+ representation. Nonetheless, following the award, criticism emerged around the *quality* of *Sense8* representation.

Sense8 consumers can be assumed to be a homologous audience, as individuals engaging with LGBTQ+ TV shows are likely to support (or, at least, open to) such diversity. However, the controversy around the show (and, in general, around queer-friendly media production) proves how audience perspectives can vary substantially despite their supposed homogeneity. This reasoning led to this paper's research question: 'How do *Sense8* audiences articulate what constitutes a fair representation of queer gender identities?' Moving past traditional audience studies on the one hand, and television content analysis—constituting the most widespread kind of queer media studies—on the other, the present paper employs a combination of creative visual methodologies to investigate audience opinions about fair representation. This study will employ creative visual methodologies that encourage reflective research that privileges direct experiences as they allow a different layer of meaning to emerge (Author, year). Quality television is characterized by its focus on the visual element (Santo, 2008); hence, a mix of photovoice and photo-elicitation will be employed to answer the present paper's research question. Following the above-mentioned contemporary public debate about what makes queer representation fair in television shows, this analysis focuses on *Sense8*'s audiences, due to the show's impressive rate of intersectional representation.

IDENTITY POLITICS VERSUS QUEER THEORY: WHAT CONSTITUTES FAIR REPRESENTATION?

Television provides a particularly stimulating site for an investigation of queer gender identities. It can both disrupt and reinforce stereotypes about gender (Conor, Gill, and Taylor, 2015). As audiences generally assume that every television character is heterosexual, the portrayal of queer identities is often overly conspicuous (Chambers, 2009), representing non-conforming gender identities in the stereotypical gender essentialist ways they should be contrasting. Distinguishing between presentation and re-presentation (Iedema, 2001), the latter can be regarded as embodying socio-cultural dynamics (including gender),

1 i.e. whenever gender identity corresponds to biological sex, as opposed to transgender.

emphasizing the relevance of analyses that seek to identify ways in which television reproduces or challenges those dynamics (Piazza, Bednarek, and Rossi, 2011).

Audiences are not ‘cultural dopes’ but are, instead, active participants in processes of meaning negotiation between themselves and the television content they consume, either in conforming or resistant ways (Hall, 1980). This offers the vast potential of television as a site of identity negotiation, establishing an ongoing link between television representation and the formation of (ethnic, sexual, and gender) social identities (McKinley, 2011). Consequently, television representation acquires a particular relevance for the LGBTQ+ community. The way in which queer sexual and romantic relationships are displayed on TV may become a template for audiences to learn about queer sexuality (Meyer, 2003). Moreover, film and television are sometimes the first contacts the LGBTQ+ youth has with non-heteronormative sexual desire (Padva, 2004), determining the queer community’s preoccupation with queer visibility and the quality of queer representation on television.

Numerous television shows have been investigated to unravel the quality of representation beyond numbers. Generally, studies show that despite the increased LGBTQ+ presence on television witnessed in recent times, queer representation often remains problematic due to a series of recurring stereotypes (McInroy and Craig, 2016), which turns these queer representations into unfair representations.

This paper aims to challenge the tendency in media studies on gay and lesbian identities to remain within two dominant paradigms: the essentialist or the post-structuralist traditions. In fact, the study of LGBTQ+ representations in media is marked by two distinct paradigms: an essentialist and a post-structural tradition, also known as a *politics of representation* and a *politics of norms* (Ridder, Dhaenens, and Bauwel, 2011; Chambers, 2009). As Ridder, Dhaenens, and Bauwel, (2011: 199) explain:

A politics of representation, which claims strategic essentialist identities, emphasizes a political outcome; while a politics of norms operates at the individual, social, and cultural level rather than at the political.

Essentialism acknowledges homosexuality as a fixed, uniform identity, notwithstanding situational differences (Ortiz, 1993). The emergence of gay and lesbian liberation movements is intertwined with identity politics, as the establishment of a gay and lesbian identity alongside heterosexuality —‘normalizing’ gayness— was the first step towards recognition and civic inclusion (Seidman, 2001). A struggle emerged within those movements once fluid, anti-essentialist queer gender identities joined the conversation, advocating for the praise of *difference* in lieu of fixed identities (Slagle, 1995), and led to the emergence of queer theory —the politics of norms.

‘New Gender Politics’ (Butler, 2004), which opposes gender essentialism, advocated for the recognition of gender as a contingent performance based on interaction. Scholars soon began to investigate the possibility of an *undoing* of (binary) gender (Nentwich and Kelan, 2014). Though the word *queer* used to carry

a derogatory connotation, after queer movements' positive re-appropriation of the word, 'queer' now functions as an 'umbrella term' and encompasses every non-heteronormative individual, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual, intersex, and asexual identities (Callis, 2009). The emergence of queer theory then focused on anti-identitarianism and non-normativity, and it developed a new paradigm that strongly opposed sexual categorization and contemporarily attempted to expose hegemonic power dynamics (Hall and Jagose, 2013). Therefore, queer subject-positions are legitimated because of the theoretical dismantling of essentialist gender models (Butler, 1989); they are sites of resistance and are central to the deconstructive nature of queer studies (Green, 2007).

The distinction and opposition between identity politics and queer theory are particularly relevant in media studies. Television, in this sense, is part of the cultural practices that contribute to the reproduction of social norms about gender and sexuality and, therefore, owns a political connotation (Chambers, 2009). As such, it is investigated in order to unravel the mechanisms through which it sustains heteronormativity, predominantly focusing on the quality of media representation (Avila-Saavedra, 2009). When queer media studies emerged, they focused on underrepresentation: queer characters were rare and were not given relevant roles (Marwick, Gray, and Ananny, 2014). At that time, identity politics were guiding the battle towards the greater visibility of gay and lesbian identity to overcome their 'symbolic annihilation' (Ridder, Dhaenens, and Bauwel, 2011). However, when queer characters gained more visibility on television, this was not paralleled with increased cultural acceptance (Dow, 2001). Consequently, academic attention also shifted from numeric representation 'towards an analysis of the nature and complexity of such representations in the context of a broader notion of hegemony' (Avila-Saavedra, 2009: 8): the politics of norms.

Ensuing developments of queer media studies initially addressed gay representation, but they later encompassed the range of LGBTQ+ identities and subsequently highlighted several problems. The main points of criticism include the following: the de-politicization of gay identities (Marwick, Gray, and Ananny, 2014); the detrimental conspicuous feminization of gay characters (Linneman, 2008); the stereotypical gay man / straight woman friendship narrative (Shugart, 2003); the crystallization of male gay characters as white, upper-middle class (Battles and Hilton-Morrow, 2002); excessive fixation on stereotypical coming-out narratives (Brody, 2011); and the absence of gay eroticism as opposed to the reinforcement of traditional values (e.g. family and monogamy) to make homosexuality 'acceptable' to the heteronormative society (Chambers, 2009). Netflix's *Sense8* fits right into such debate: on the one hand, the show is recognized amongst contemporary TV productions that are embedded in queer-centric texts (Keegan, 2016a), bringing remarkable LGBTQ+ representation into mainstream television (Kroener, 2018). However, the content of the show has been criticized due to its gender and ethnic stereotypes (Keegan, 2016b). For example, Lito's character is portrayed as a Mexican homosexual man within a typical Latin-lover 'macho' narrative, which is problematic to heterosexual and Latin representations (Fernández, 2018).

Some scholars began to broaden the scope of queer media studies beyond content analyses to include audiences. The *active audience* principle in media studies recognizes the role of audiences in the creation of cultural meanings, for example, through oppositional or alternative interpretations of the content (Hall, 1980). Audiences are neither completely disembedded from the dominant ideologies portrayed in television, nor are they capable of absolute autonomy in their understanding (Raymond, 2003). However, given the increased visibility of LGBTQ+ characters on television, viewers may develop diverse and contrasting readings of the queer content of a show (Dhoest and Simons, 2012). At the same time, LGBTQ+-friendly television can either challenge or reinforce heteronormativity (Chambers, 2009).

This process is amplified by trans-media engagement that allows for conversations about the representation of race and gender to continue on social media after consumption (Hunt, 2019). Simultaneously, narrowcasting makes it increasingly challenging for a single network or TV show to reproduce a specific set of beliefs to a broad audience, and more difficult to recognize who the audience is composed of (Kuipers, 2012; Lotz, 2007). Hence, what audiences actually do with (un)fair queer representation is fairly opaque.

PHOTOVOICE, PHOTO-ELICITATION, AND THE RELEVANCE OF CREATIVE VISUAL METHODS

This study employs innovative, creative methodologies: photovoice and photo-elicitation. These methodologies acknowledge the significance of the visual element of quality television (Santo, 2008) and for a participant-centred approach to audience studies. The methodology is composed of a mixture of screen-capture photovoice (cf. Author, year) of one episode from Netflix's *Sense8*, and photo-elicitation, whereby pictures resulting from the photovoice process are employed to foster discussion during the interviews. Such methodologies allow the investigation of a different substratum of meaning, thus encapsulating the contents' visual and narrative elements. Photovoice, in particular, allows for a grounded approach where participants are empowered to make their own meanings relevant, which is in line with the intention of this paper to not constrain participants' articulations through pre-emptive, theoretical, notions.

Ten people were interviewed,² recruited via a mixture of convenience and snowball sampling by publishing a recruitment message on social media; the sole criterion for entry required that participants had watched the entire *Sense8* show, as photovoice results involving visual media products are more successful with participants who are familiar with what they need to watch

² 5 out of the 10 participants self-identified themselves as queer during the interviews. For an overview of the participants, see Appendix A.

(Author, year). Such a decision undoubtedly informs the quality of results. Nonetheless, this analysis aims to investigate audience opinions about what they believe is a fair representation of queer gender identities, and selecting involved and informed participants is, therefore, a logical decision. The method allows participants to communicate and express themselves in a way that would not be possible with any other methodology (Novak, 2010). The episode from Netflix's *Sense8* selected for the photovoice analysis is 'I Am Also a We' (s01e02), as its content is mainly focused on introducing the main queer characters of the show and their respective relationships.

Participants were asked to watch one episode from Netflix's *Sense8* and to take as many screenshots as they chose whenever the representation of a queer character impressed them, for either positive or negative reasons. Thereafter, the five most significant pictures would have to be selected (Sims-Gould *et al.*, 2010) and provided with a caption. These pictures were also used as input for the photo-elicitation. Next, a mixture of iconographic and narrative analysis of all the photographs and captions resulting from the photovoice assignments was performed to determine relatedness and pattern identification (Fleming *et al.*, 2009). This intermediate step allowed several themes and subthemes to emerge, which were then employed as sensitizing concepts during interviews, acknowledging the potential for different meanings and interpretations to arise from the same picture (Wang *et al.*, 1998) and for the same subject to be photographed multiple times (Novak, 2010). This improves the quality of the discussion, which aligns with the active interview's emphasis on multivocality (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

Photovoice investigations, founded on the co-participation of researcher and respondents, audio-recorded, semi-structured active interviews, were employed for the 'photo assignment discussion' (Hergenrather *et al.*, 2009). Photo elicitation comprises displaying photographs taken by the participant to stimulate discussion and investigate the subjective interpretations that such pictures evoke (Croghan *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, participants were asked to discuss the screen captures from their photovoice assignment in combination with the captions they provided, which aimed to achieve more concrete responses and trigger their memory (Samuels, 2004).

Interview transcriptions were analysed through a mixture of qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis. The former was applied to build a frame for the analysis, and it was composed of themes and sub-themes designed in a concept-driven and data-driven way (Schreier, 2014). Concept-driven categories were operationalized according to the identity-politics versus queer-theory debate discussed in the theory section. In particular, three themes were extracted from the literature: *Normalization*, *Politics of Representation versus Politics of Norms*, and *Fixed versus Fluid Identities*. Data-driven (sub-)themes, however, were developed from the transcripts and the thematic analysis to identify themes and patterns within the data and possible links among them (Willig, 2014).

ARTICULATING FAIR REPRESENTATION

The present paper aims to investigate audiences' articulations of what they believe to be a fair representation of queer characters in Netflix's *Sense8*. The iconographic and narrative analysis of the 51³ screenshots and captions led to the emergence of various themes, all of which were further explored during interviews and are, therefore, jointly discussed. Three overarching themes emerged through which fair representation was articulated by the participants: Normalization, Politics of Representation versus Politics of Norms, and Fixed versus Fluid Identities.

NORMALIZATION

Normalization is the category enclosing all articulations of fair representation in terms of opposition to heteronormative standards. Normalization as fair representation was strongly framed along non-normativity as a force opposing the heterosexual gender structure (Hall and Jagose, 2013). This theme emerged during the analysis of the screenshots and captions, and it was articulated around three sub-themes: *normalization of queer relationships*, *normalization of queer sex*, and *role reversal*. Participants discussed normalization in terms of *Sense8*'s narrative and in terms of explicit statements. The normalizing roles of LGBTQ+ characters in the show are embedded in the deconstructive nature of queer theory (Green, 2007), which aims to expose heteronormative power structures (Hall and Jagose, 2013) by conspicuously normalizing queer relationships, queer sex, and through role reversal.

Screenshot 1 was screen-captured by six of the ten participants. Captions assigned to the picture referred to the normalization of queer relationships in more or less explicit ways, ranging from 'Normalisation of queer couple within a public context' to 'The beautiful routine of being together'. This kind of normalization was also discussed during the interviews, especially in terms of the equalizing of queer couples to heterosexual. One participant, Carlo,⁴ explained:

I took this picture because I think that it's a good representation of the freedom that every kind of couple should have to walk hand in hand down the street and nobody says nothing to them, and this should be the normality.

³ Despite instructions, one of the participants handed in 6 screen shots instead of the requested 5.

⁴ The names of the participants are feigned for reasons of privacy.

Image 1. Nomi and Amanita holding hands



Source: Carlo (also screenshotted by 5 other participants).

The *normalization of queer relationships* connects to the second sub-theme: *normalization of (queer) sex*. Sex is not treated as taboo in *Sense8*, as the show often features rather explicit sexual scenes, including a couple of orgy scenes involving numerous characters —both queer and heterosexual. No participant expressed a negative opinion about the topic. On the contrary, only positive reactions emerged on the topic. When asked what she thought of the orgy scenes, Giorgia answered:

I've never seen an orgy in a TV show, but it wasn't something crude; it was just people making love to each other. So, I think that it's also good to normalize sex on TV. [...] And I think that was a very actually romantic way to break down some stereotypes about sex in TV and just seeing a whole group all together.

The normalization of queer sex was, therefore, regarded as another way the show directly challenges stereotypes.

All participants overtly appreciated explicit normalizing statements that countered heteronormative frameworks. Especially *role reversal*, a particular narrative instrument used in the show, was considered a more radical form of normalization. Role reversal includes all instances in which the show features situations that the public is accustomed to seeing the other way around. The most noted instance of role reversal was the first queer throuple encountered in the show, composed of Lito, Hernando, and Daniela. Participants noticed role reversal in two instances: first, this throuple portrays the objectification of men by a woman, as Daniela is aroused by the two men having sex and taking pictures

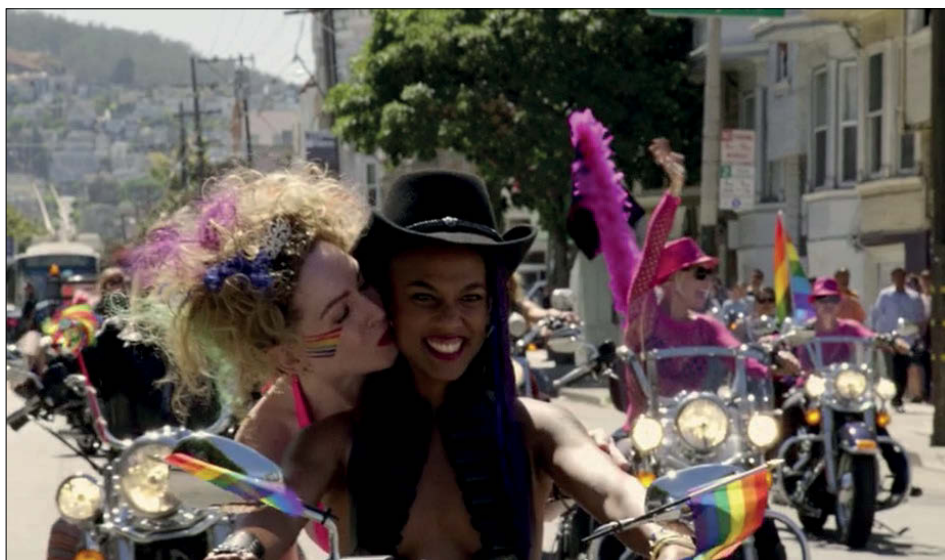
of them. Second, Daniela is shown as continuously pushing Lito to have sex with her, unable to accept 'no' for an answer.

Within the normalization theme, fair representation is articulated in identity politics and queer theory. Normalizing queerness as a means towards recognition, civic inclusion, and acceptance (Seidman, 2001), while simultaneously challenging heteronormative power structures (Hall and Jagose, 2013) were both deemed important by the participants.

FAIR REPRESENTATION AS A BALANCING ACT

This theme explicitly addresses the elements that make queer representation fair. The theme consists of two sub-themes: *balance* and *external factors*. While *balance* addresses articulations of fair representation in terms of both 'positive' and 'negative' elements related to the queer existence, *external factors* refers to elements other than the content of the show itself that still contribute to fairness in representation according to the participants.

Image 2. The Pride parade



Source: Josefa (also screenshots by 4 other participants).

Participants praised the representation of positive, happy, or celebratory moments involving queer characters as an example of *Sense8's* fair representation. Half of the participants (see Screenshot 2) captured the Pride celebration, and captions ranged from 'The joy of being myself' to 'Wild, queer and carefree – collective expression of who WE are'. Pride belongs to the politics of representation. Discussions centred on the significance of these scenes for queer participants, for which this scene had particular emotional

significance, and for the non-queer participants, as a means to connect to the LGBTQ+ community as a whole. Josefa discussed the Pride parade scenes in the show as follows:

[I]t's one huge event of euphoria and it's... just this amazing day where everyone gets to celebrate who they are. [...] Also, how they represent it in the show... it's just like a day where, you know, there's paradise on earth [*laughs*].

Another instance of participant appreciation for positive moments is the portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community as a support system. This has a special significance for the queer audience of the show, both personally and as a statement. Throughout *Sense8*, this kind of support oftentimes translates into a more private sphere as a way to re-define the concept of family. As anticipated, this element had a special value to some participants who could relate this to their own story:

If you are not accepted by your family in the way that Nomi isn't accepted by her parents uhm you can always turn to people, your community, and I think that's a beautiful thing (Josefa).

Countering these positive representations were the negative, unpleasant, or sad elements that were still considered as instances of fair representation. Interestingly, this was never characterised as negative queer representation in the qualitative meaning: again, most participants articulated these elements around narratives of 'showing the good and the bad', suggesting how this contributed to a more realistic representation of the queer community. Central to this are the characters of Nomi, the 'out and proud' transgender woman who still has to deal with unacceptance from both her family and institutions, and Lito, a closeted homosexual with a career as a macho, hyper-masculine superstar in Mexico. For most participants, the diametric difference between these two characters allowed *Sense8* to display a more diversified array of the struggles of being queer. Struggles with one's (biological) family, institutions, and the self were all discussed as additions to fair representations. In this case, the portrayals of the negative side of queer existence were accepted because the negative elements were balanced by the strong presence of the positive elements mentioned above or because society now accepts seeing both sides of the queer existence in pursuit of a more *realistic* representation.

Most participants referred to Nomi's character when discussing the struggle with family and societal institutions. Nomi is admitted to hospital and needs brain surgery. While her unaccepting mother keeps calling her 'Michael' and 'my son', Amanita, Nomi's life partner, is not allowed in. Nomi's mother's unacceptance is also institutionalized, as the biological family gets to decide about Nomi's brain surgery. The struggle with self is, instead, illustrated by Lito, portrayed in eight screenshots, in situations showing his inner conflict and denial (e.g. Screenshot 3).

Image 3. Lito looking in two mirrors



Source: Anna (also screenshotted by Rita).

Unlike Nomi, Lito is still closeted during the first episodes of the show. While some of Lito's features were mentioned as negative instances, overall, the character was always justified, mainly on grounds of personal identification (by queer and non-queer participants). Lito's struggle with himself was illustrated by participants' screen captures displaying Lito at his movie premiere accompanied by Daniela, his fake girlfriend, Lito denying evidence when Daniela finds out about his sexual orientation, and Lito looking into two mirrors, reflecting about his identity. All images focus on two main, interconnected topics: Lito's complex closeted existence and his paralyzing fear of external judgment. Even though all these moments represent hardship and pessimistic aspects of being queer, all participants gave a similar comment to the following:

I've chosen this picture [*screenshot 3*] because I think that is the perfect representation of the moral conflict that can be in some people and the struggle between what they are and what they pretend to be. [...] It's perfect to show, for me, the fear of being ourselves with other people (Carlo).

Participants considered the narration of negative aspects of LGBTQ+ lives to be necessary, not only as they make representation more realistic, but also due to their socio-political relevance.

When discussing 'the good and the bad' together, participants questioned what constitutes fair representation. They generally agreed that *Sense8* was doing an excellent job because the good and the bad balance each other. Often,

the 'good' part made the most negative instances acceptable, and vice versa. Participants articulated fair representation in terms of the balancing of positive and negative moments connected to 'being' queer in today's world, employing qualitative reasoning alone, making politics of norms the sole relevant aspect to be considered around this topic.

The second sub-theme, *external factors*, covers fair representation beyond the content of *Sense8* itself. Ulterior elements that added to the quality of the show's queer representation were discussed. A few participants mentioned the Wachowski sisters: the transgender sisters who created and directed *Sense8* but, who, aside from this show, are usually involved in action movies. Most participants believed the sisters' transgenderism added to the quality of the show's representation. Giorgia stated:

I think the best way to communicate with your audience is actually to touch some subjects that touch you intimately because in that way you can really be in contact with the audience.

Some participants agreed that consultation with the queer community is needed to produce fairly representative television shows. The same appreciation applied for the casting of a transgender actress to play the character of Nomi.

Participants mentioned identity politics and queer theory in this theme. The latter was predominant in the *balance* sub-theme. Appreciation for the positive and negative 'performances' of the queer existence followed queer theory's advocacy for difference (Slagle, 1995) and fluidity, rather than gender essentialism. Identity politics, nonetheless, were more evident with external factors.

FIXED VERSUS FLUID IDENTITIES

The final theme of this analysis, fixed versus fluid identities, articulates fair representation as including all instances in which the quality of LGBTQ+ representation was discussed in terms of characterization, between labels and their own absence, fixed and / or fluid features. This theme is the most directly linked with participants' judgments about the portrayal of individual characters in the show. Given the volume of data concerning the characterization of Lito, which contradicts not only public opinion but also academic literature (Fernández, 2018), results about this character are discussed in a separate sub-theme: *Lito*. Finally, the sub-theme of *nuance*, related to the more general judgments on representation based on fixed and fluid identities, concludes the results section.

During the *Sense8*'s first season, Lito is initially presented as a closeted gay man. He uses beautiful and unaware Daniela as his 'beard' (fake girlfriend) to keep up his macho, heterosexual appearances during his movie premiere, making her and everyone else believe the two are a solid couple. While some respondents explicitly voiced how they thought Lito's character was not stereotypical to begin with, others recognized they were initially bothered by his character. Nonetheless, they all changed their minds as the show progressed and Lito's

character developed, offering a more multifaceted representation. Furthermore, as noted earlier, Lito's character balances the unapologetic positivity of Nomi's representation, thus improving realism. Finally yet importantly, Lito's character is placed in the context of societal heteronormative pressure. One participant explicitly framed the representation of Lito's character according to the identity politics versus queer theory debate:

[...] I think like right now it's cool that we can show Lito as a gay man who also has those flaws [...]. Gay people are not perfect, they're not superhuman but to make something more palatable for the society, at first, we need to kind of like make it into superlatives, into great people (Dan).

Dan acknowledged that the state of contemporary society allows a more flexible representation of gay men, even a negative one, for the sake of realism (queer theory). However, before this status is achieved, LGBTQ+ characters need to be made palatable to the public to be acknowledged and accepted (identity politics). In this regard, Dan mentioned Nomi's character which, given contemporary unacceptance of the transgender community, is indeed represented as the show's 'superheroine'.

The final sub-theme, *nuance*, encompasses participants' judgments about characters' representation. Some participants dismissed the use of labels. The reasoning behind this was grounded in queer theory: labelling could be problematic for queer individuals who do not identify with a label and have a restrictive impact on sexual freedom. Other participants employed identity politics in acknowledging that, at times, labels may still be important for audiences to be educated, especially as queer representation is still significantly low in numbers and the problem of 'assumed heterosexuality' (Chambers, 2009) can only be solved by explicitly underlining a character's queerness.

Participants discussed labelling and fluidity within *Sense8* framed in appreciation. Despite their personal opinion being in favour or against the use of labels, respondents agreed on praising *Sense8*'s way of characterizing queerness along three main arguments. First, respondents underlined how, within the show, sexuality is not at the forefront. Every character's storyline developed while presenting numerous other aspects of their identity that became predominant over 'being queer'. Talking about Lito and Hernando, Rosa stated:

I think it's good that they show them as people first and then as homosexual men [...]. I feel like them being gay doesn't define them and that's what I really like I guess.

Secondly, concerning the first argument, participants valued the all-roundness of queer characters' storylines, acknowledging how this contributed to a fairer representation as it avoids more stereotypical portrayals. One participant, Violeta, noted:

This kind of representation really is necessary in television because too often [...] either you're a gay character or you're like a multifaceted character.

In summary, participants proved to be aware of the ambivalent role of television as concerns representation, acknowledging its potential to both reinforce stereotypes and dismantle them (Conor, Gill, and Taylor, 2015). However, what emerged was an appreciation for the way the show balances the need to make queerness conspicuous to present all-round, nuanced storylines. Therefore, once again, fair representation is articulated through both identity politics and queer theory. While the existence of a fixed, queer 'essence' (Ortiz, 1993) —in the form of crystallized labels— was completely dismissed by some of the participants, identity politics were still employed: the political value of making queer existence 'visible' through some degree of labelling was generally acknowledged as a needed tool towards recognition and acceptance (Ridder, Dhaenens, and Bauwel, 2011). However, what rendered labels acceptable, and even appreciated, in *Sense8* was their mitigation: for queer representation to be fair, queer theory's anti-essentialist advocacy for difference and fluidity (Slagle, 1995) was employed to negotiate the need for nuance and all-roundness.

CONCLUSION

This study's results contrast significantly with criticism on *Sense8*'s queer representation obtained from the literature (Fernández, 2018; Keegan, 2016b), which is mostly based on content analysis, and even from online public opinion. According to the participants, stereotypical representations —such as Lito's character— are as realistic as positive representations —such as Nomi's character, provided they are both present in the narrative. Mostly, respondents —queer and non-queer alike— expressed homologous articulations on what they considered fair queer representation in Netflix's *Sense8*. The fairness of queer television representation was primarily articulated beyond individual instances. In fact, participants were generally able to individuate single instances of non-positive or stereotypical representations in *Sense8*. Nonetheless, fairness in representation was always determined by the entirety of each character's multifaceted storyline, which comprehensively justified the presence of those instances and even granted them overall appreciation on grounds of authenticity or increased personal connectedness with the characters. In general, one fundamental attribute necessary for fair representation was balance: positive narratives to balance negative ones; nuanced and multifaceted storylines to mitigate the conspicuousness of LGBTQ+ labels, and yet maintain them in the background; representation in numbers, but only when paired with quality content.

The same balance needed for fair queer representation is present in the negotiation between identity politics and queer theory. On the one hand, gender essentialism is entirely dismissed, on account of considering the state of contemporary queer representation improved enough (Dhoest and Simons, 2012) not to need a crystallized 'gay essence' to be made conspicuous for queer characters to affirm themselves on television. However, identity politics were still maintained within their socio-cultural and political aim (Seidman, 2001), especially in recognizing queer representation's role as a strategy towards greater

education, visibility, and, therefore, acceptance of diversity on television. As concerns queer theory, the politics of norms was the instrument employed in participants' focus on the qualitative aspects of representation (Avila-Saavedra, 2009), as well as in explicitly recognizing the potential of queer representation as a means to challenge heteronormativity through normalization, thus acknowledging queer identities as sites of resistance (Green, 2007).

Therefore, the outcome of this study has two implications. First, it advocates for greater employment of active visual methodologies in audience studies, which allows for increased immediacy in responses and heightened participant involvement. Second, it validates the claim that the increased visibility of queer characters on television can lead viewers to develop diverse, sometimes contrasting, opinions on the queer representation of a show (Dhoest and Simons, 2012). Analyses of queer representation should adopt a more holistic approach, focusing on all representations of characters in a certain show and engaging with their narrative developments. Viewers, after all, consume TV in a similar fashion.

Finally yet importantly, some limitations to the present analysis are worth mentioning, especially in light of informing and advocating for further, more in-depth, research on fair representation. While the decision to only sample fans of the show emerged as one of the strengths of this project—the involvement and insight shared by all participants permeated all discussions on fair representation—it bears a significant implication: the outcome of this study clarifies the meaning of fair queer representation from the perspective of an audience that is already open to 'queerness' on television. Staging this research in Rotterdam, a highly international environment, and all participants being under 50 (most of them in their 20s) has surely contributed to such openness, as well. A more heterogeneous sample would be necessary to look for generalization, although doing so could carry the risk of diverting the aim of the research from 'quality' towards more politicized negotiations. Increased sample diversification in terms of age, nationality, and social status, however, would have enriched perspectives on fair representation beyond a Western-centric, upper-middle-class viewpoint. In addition, greater diversity could allow a comprehensive, intersectional analysis to be performed, taking into account the other power structures intertwining with TV representation (such as ethnicity and social status, but also ableism, ageism, and so on).

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In 2015, her book (co-authored with Prof. dr. Sofie van Bauwel) *Gender and Media* was published with Routledge, a second edition appears in 2020. Tonny is also the chair of the IAMCR's Popular Culture Working Group; member of the board for the Erasmus Research Centre for Media, Communication and from 2006 till 2012 she served as the (co)chair of the Gender and Communication Section of ECREA.

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Appendix A – Overview of participants

	Age	Gender	Nationality	Occupation
Participant 1 – 'Carlo'	26	M	Italian	Practicing lawyer
Participant 2 – 'Dan'	27	M	Polish	Student (MA)
Participant 3 – 'Josefa'	21	F	Dutch	Student (BA)
Participant 4 – 'Madeleine'	21	F	French	Student (BA)
Participant 5 – 'Anna'	33	F	Italian	Architect
Participant 6 – 'Louisa'	46	F	Italian	Employee

	Age	Gender	Nationality	Occupation
Participant 7 – ‘Fabio’	19	M	Italian	Trainee
Participant 8 – ‘Violeta’	25	F	Romanian	Student (MA)
Participant 9 – ‘Rita’	28	F	Dutch	PhD
Participant 10 – ‘Giorgia’	25	F	British - Italian	Student (MA)