



# LESBIAN IDENTITIES IN AUDIOVISUAL PRODUCTIONS

## Research and analyses of lesbian characters and their plots

Identidades Lesbianas En Producciones Audiovisuales

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### KEYWORDS

Lesbians  
Stereotypes  
Social Imaginaries  
Sexual Diversity  
Identity Construction  
LGTBI+

### ABSTRACT

*The proposal of the research is to review and analyse the role of the media as constructors of social imaginaries, and to do so, we will analyse the power of the audiovisual industry to create and re-create stereotypes about lesbians, and as generators of a social imaginary, we will also analyse lesbian plots and characters, through which direct messages are sent to society in general, but also to lesbians. Finally, after conducting discussion groups and focus groups with lesbians who have participated in the research, we present some conclusions.*

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### PALABRAS CLAVE

Lesbianas  
Estereotipos  
Imaginarios Sociales  
Diversidad Sexual  
Construcción de Identidad  
LGTBIQ+

### RESUMEN

*La propuesta de la investigación, es revisar y analizar el papel de los medios de comunicación como constructores de imaginarios sociales, y para ello, analizaremos el poder que tiene la industria audiovisual, para crear y re-crear, estereotipos sobre las lesbianas, y como generadores de un imaginario social, también analizaremos las tramas y personajes lesbianos, a través de los que se lanzan mensajes directos a toda la sociedad en general, pero también a las lesbianas. Finalmente, tras realizar grupos de debate y grupos focales con lesbianas que han participado en la investigación, presentamos algunas conclusiones.*

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## 1. Introduction

On the one hand, it is a reality that the media and the new communication technologies are powerful generator and transmitter of the collective imaginary, and are agents of socialisation from which we learn more or less consciously those cultural issues that permeate each person from the earliest childhood, but which continue to do so throughout life, and these values include those linked to respect for gender diversity, and their daily appearance in audiovisual products, thus legitimising models in the world Ferrés (1996) and Masterman (1993) stress the fact that the media create and/or mould ideas that allow us to see, understand and interpret the world.

In Spain, communication channels are multiplying, technological innovation does not stop, and the time dedicated to media consumption is growing at a dizzying rate, with the increase in the number of screens invading the spaces of society and our daily lives. Images and information flow, occupying public and private spaces.

The multiplication of media and content has for some time now led us to a saturation of images (Acaso, 2006; Aparici & García Mantilla, 2008; Bauman, 2007; Díaz Nosty, 1996; Francisco, 2008 and 2009). For more than a century we have been moving towards the contemporary sensation of supersaturation, the overflow of an environment that exudes signs and posters and generates insular reactions to information overload. In this context, media space increasingly fills our working and personal lives. According to the most recent statistics, in Spain, on average people watch television almost four hours a day, to which is added the permanent connection through mobile devices, but this is not an isolated fact, in general, at a global level, an increasing consumption of media content is being experienced Paredes (2012).

As Aparici (1996) explains, the discourses and representations of the media can be considered as mirrors of reality, as windows to the world or as constructors of reality. This work is based on the idea of the media as constructors of reality, on the influence of the media in the formation and socialisation of people, on the construction of their imaginary. Our beliefs, our cultural values, our ideology is shaped by the stories we are told at home, at school, in the street or through the media.

Who are we as people? Which group do we belong to? Who is the other? What is bad? What is good? What is success and beauty? All these questions are insistently answered through television, cinema, webseries and comics. Through fictional stories or “real” stories the world, or a part of the world, is explained to us. That is why, when we watch a film about a historical event of our people, we are surely hooked not only by the story but also by the characters, the costumes, the scenery, the music. The media present the world to us by constructing stories through their own syntax and grammar, and they do so in such a “natural” way that we often lose sight of the fact that it is a recreation, with ideas, values and points of view embedded in it.

Masterman (1993) argues that the media are important shapers of our perceptions and ideas; they are consciousness-raising enterprises that provide not only information about the world but ways of seeing and understanding it. The media, through their choice of subjects and the way they are told, condition viewers’ images of the world in which they live. Media representations influence the way we see, believe, think, know, understand or imagine the world and are inscribed as “knowledge” to which individuals appeal in order to manage their daily lives.

Morduchowicz and Munzi (2003) point out how representations are tools of discourse since they select, hierarchise, reorganise, nuance, highlight, underline and fragment reality. And this selection, this particular way of re-presenting reality has consequences for citizens’ decisions and behaviour.

We should remember, for example, the profile of directors and producers in Hollywood: 99% are white, 98% are men and 63% earn more than 200,000 dollars a year when the average is 24,000; and how this influences audiovisual fiction productions (Bettetini & Fumagalli, 2003). These data allow us to get an idea of what kind of stories, what type of characters and what vision of the world prevails in the big audiovisual fiction productions that reach screens all over the world.

But audiences are also creators of meanings and can transform stereotyped images. This possibility of social action includes the revitalisation of spaces of individual and group recognition that need to be established in conditions of co-presentiality apart from mediated communicative constructions (Lozano, 2001, p. 495). In this line, as Foucault (1995) points out, the technologies of the self (which never act independently of other types of technologies) would trace the possibility of the selfacting on itself, from itself, and therefore open a space for considering a subject with the capacity for action, for human agency.

### 1.1. Objectives

The main objective is to analyze the image of the current lesbian community through the analysis of the audiovisual products indicated by the participants in the research, from a qualitative perspective.

Secondary objectives of the research would be:

- To find out what they think about the lesbian characters appearing in series, webseries and films, which they indicate as the most popular or the most interesting ones.
- To analyze the main characters and the plots of the series in which they appear.

- Understand the dynamics and repetitive plots around lesbian characters, which have social influence.
- To identify and show lesbian stereotypes, which raised by lesbian characters in audiovisual productions.

To this effect, initial questions are asked to provide starting points. Hypotheses are defined which, after the study, we will see whether can verify or, on the contrary, we must refute them.

Initial questions would be: Do stereotypes about lesbians still exist? To what extent do the media perpetuate these stereotypes or do they not? How do they perceive themselves in the stereotypes? How do they see themselves reflected in series, web series, films? Are they attracted to the characters in these series because they see themselves represented?

We are particularly interested in information from lesbian women who are diverse in terms of: age, place of residence, place of origin, marital status, social class, level of education, external appearance/clothing, etc., in order to obtain the broadest possible information that will help us to achieve the most diverse representation possible and to procure the most realistic and representative results possible.

## 2. Audiovisuals and love, models and standards

Like Esteban, Medina and Távora (2005), we believe that although love, as a cultural ideology but also as a shaper of social and individual practices, is an intrinsic part of the process of constructing gender relations. It is an aspect of women's lives that is not sufficiently analyzed in feminist studies. It plays a fundamental role in the maintenance and perpetuation of women's social subordination and can be of direct and crucial importance in providing alternative points of view on highly topical issues such as, for example, violence against women. And we believe that focusing on the case of lesbian women can shed light on issues that have normally been approached from a heterosexual and male/female perspective.

On attraction models, we have the studies of (Gómez, 2004; Oliver & Valls, 2004; Duque, 2006; Valls, Puigvert and Duque, 2008; Melgar, 2009) and their proposal of preventive socialization, i.e. the social process through which we develop awareness of rules and values that prevent behaviors and attitudes that lead to violence against women and favour egalitarian and respectful behaviours (Oliver & Valls, 2004).

Valls, Puigvert and Duque (2008 in Melgar, 2009: 156), in the conclusions of their research, alerts us to the widespread idea among adolescent boys and girls that falling in love is something that cannot be controlled, and s cases of adolescent girls who, even though they are aware that they are suffering in their relationship, do not believe they can stop being in love and, therefore, put an end to the relationship. Recent research shows that attraction is related to domination and abuse (Valls, Puigvert & Duque, 2008), values and attitudes that can lead to violence. This is recognized in the increased attraction to aggressive young men (Bukowski, Sippola & Newcomb, 2000). The person with non-egalitarian values and attitudes, who is labelled as a "bad boy", "punk", etc., is associated with passion, while the person with egalitarian values is associated with monotony.

Valls, Puigvert and Duque (2008) also highlight among their results that several of the adolescents participating in their research considered that excessive sincerity and support in the relationship leads to a loss of interest in the other person. Therefore, some of the adolescents expressed the contradiction of recognizing that they would not be able to fall in love with the friend they value as a good person, because he or she is attentive or caring to them.

One of the proposals for working on the roots of violence and attraction is the dialogue on the media and models of men and women (Gómez, 2004; Díaz-Aguado, 2002 in Oliver and Valls, 2004). The reflection they propose is that which arises from talking with friends and other women about the models of attraction shown in the media and how they are hardly acceptable from a perspective of women's equality and dignity. As Oliver and Valls (2004, p. 117) explain, it is also through these conversations that we transform our affective and sexual socialization.

This is the line this research takes, as it seeks to analyze, together with a group of lesbian women, the model of attraction constructed by media discourses and to investigate alternative models. With all the implications that this hegemonic model of masculinity has on the relationships between two women. Relationships that can also suffer from partner violence (Bunker, 2006; Renzett, 1998).

## 3. Lesbian love and the media

It is urgent to point out lesbian invisibility (Calvo & Escudero, 2009; Dhaenens, 2011; González, 2011; Francisco and Moliner, 2011). In media constructions, lesbian women have been doubly discriminated against as members of two minorities in relation to power; women and lesbians. In fact, until a few years ago, the norm had been to consider these sexual practices as invisible. The media helped to create this collective imaginary in which lesbians apparently did not exist, and this invisibility perpetuated their discrimination and their possibilities to participate and enjoy their civil rights.

But visibility is as necessary as it is costly (Pérez, 2012). In the words of Diana Fuss (1999) coming out can contribute both to placing oneself inside and to throwing oneself out of the wardrobe. The cost of visibility is often homogenization, either through stereotyping or through normalization or assimilation aimed at achieving

cultural intelligibility. These two consequences relegate to invisibility –perhaps to an even darker invisibility by contrast– everything, everyone who does not fit into the narrow scene of the showable.

Since the early days of cinema and television, lesbian characters were virtually non-existent, at least in major productions intended for mass consumption. When a love story between two women was shown, it always ended in tragedy, depression, madness or perversion. In one of the few films to address this issue, “The hour of the children” (1961), the character played by Audrey Hepburn says there must be some place where they could go, but it seemed that lesbians did not really have a place to live. We would have to wait until the release of *Desert Hearts* in 1985 to find the first mainstream film with an ending that does not punish desire between two women.

Nor have lesbian characters been predominant on television. In the USA, one of the largest producers and exporters of audiovisual fiction in the world, it was not until 1996, in the series *Relativity*, that we saw the first kiss between two female characters. And we had to wait until 2003 to see the first sex scene between two women on broadcast television in the series *Buffy*. All this shows that this community has been excluded from mainstream media productions until very recently. Specifically, the representation of lesbians on television changed with the premiere of the series *The L Word* in 2004, where all the main characters were lesbian and bisexual women. It was a big step forward in terms of visibility (Medina, Simelio & Lorenzo, 2010). But it was also criticized because the main characters represented the current archetype of mostly white, successful, upper-middle-class beauty (Burns & Davies, 2009). In that sense, not only visibility matters but also an image that can be multidimensional and diverse (Nair, 2008; Bacon, 2009; Blackman, 2009; Van Bauwel, 2011).

In the specific case of Spanish audiovisual productions, many of the similarities are repeated. With regard to cinema, until the mid-1970s, the lesbian seen in Spanish films was a caricature: either the tormented, obsessive woman or the vampire in horror films. And although today lesbianism is no longer associated with a tragic fate or a sick picture, there is still little representation and therefore little diversity (González, 2011, p. 222).

As a fact to bear in mind, in the last decade, according to the Spanish film yearbooks published by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, 1510 feature films were produced, including fiction and documentaries, co-productions and entirely Spanish works. Of this total, only 25 featured women involved in a homoerotic and/or affective relationship. González (2011). Along the same lines, a study analyzing adolescent characters related to LGBT+ issues in Spanish film narratives pointed to the scarce representations related to lesbianism, as if only male homosexuality were representationally relevant in the field of commercial cinema (Alfeo, González de Garay and Rosado, 2011; Unanue, 2016).

In the case of Spanish television series, the visibility panorama improved in the mid-1990s, the first fixed or recurring characters appeared and, since then, the growth has been almost exponential.

The first characters appeared in “*Mar de Dudas*” (1995) and, since then, lesbian characters began to take centre stage in fiction and grow in number and forms of representation. It is worth highlighting the case of “*Siete Vidas*” (1999-06) for its longevity and the character’s leading role, and *Hospital Central* (2000-2012), which was the first to present a continuous relationship between two protagonists. But, as González (2011) points out, the vast majority and the most influential lesbian characters in generalist fiction have characteristics that make them more assimilable by contemporary Spanish society.

In other words, repeating the analysis made of the series at the international level, they comply with Western canons of feminine beauty, they are white and of Spanish nationality, young, with higher education and of upper-middle social class. Moreover, they act according to behavioural patterns traditionally associated with heterosexuality, such as physical appearance, marriage, motherhood or monogamy.

The treatment, design and evolution of the characters would be a strategy of integration into heteronormative society (Platero, 2008, pp. 310-311). This narrative shows the transition from invisibility to a series of stereotyped images. The media construct sexuality, selecting which elements to show and which to hide, generating identities congruent with the heterosexual imaginary. By telling a happy story about how lesbians relate to their environment, it seems as if social changes have taken place de facto when there are problems such as lesbophobia (social and internal) and labour discrimination that remain unresolved. Thus, this progressive visibility does not necessarily imply a positive or realistic representation of lesbian experiences.

The social imaginary is built on lesbian invisibility, with limited roles as bad women, mothers or wives, as well as lesbian images as a source of pleasure designed for the male eye (Platero, 2008). Taken together, none of these archetypal constructions depict women’s or lesbian relationships as citizens with diverse experiences and sexualities.

Sexuality in the media is not only linked to absence and repression, but also to normativity and discourses. Representation is understood as a space of political and cultural struggle and debate. Foucault (1995) would use the term technology to deal above all with technologies of power (which control individual behaviour) and technologies of the self, which allow individuals to perform, on their own or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their body and soul, thoughts, behaviour or any form of being, thus obtaining a transformation of themselves in order to attain a certain degree of happiness, purity, wisdom or immortality.



Platero (2008, pp. 337-338) concludes that it is a matter of problematizing these representations and identities. It is lesbian organizations, leaders and women themselves who have the power to generate other images, transform stereotypes and decide in which spheres they want to signify themselves and how. Good practices for the media would include questioning the usual identity processes, facilitating more fluid and less homogenizing sexual representations, with flesh and blood people as referents. On the other hand, we would need to be less shy about showing lesbophobia, in its different manifestations, because it is news, it is real and its discussion is of common interest. And finally, when it comes to showing homoerotic relationships between women, it is vital to diversify lesbian images.

#### 4. Methodology

As for the design of this research, along the lines of Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (1994), in their studies on ethnography and sociology, in participant observation the design remains flexible, both before and during the actual process, even though we may have a general methodology and research interests, the specifics of the approach evolve as we operate. This is why most qualitative researchers typically define the sample on a basis that evolves as the study progresses, which has been termed "theoretical sampling" and would designate the procedure by which researchers consciously select additional cases to study, according to the potential development of new insights or for the refinement and expansion of those already gained, so that we can examine whether and to what extent findings from one setting are applicable to others, and to what extent they are central to this research. In that they are part of different social, family and personal realities and, like all social realities, they are dynamic, i.e. they can change during the research.

The information that comes from fieldwork may seem very concise at first, but for personal, psychological or generosity reasons, it can become an inexhaustible source of experiences that people share with whoever they have in front of them, asking and listening, experiences that are sometimes very hard to retell, I believe that it is up to the freedom of each person to set the limits of what they are willing to share and what they are not, instead of asking for more and more information. In my opinion, we must never forget lose the fact that what we have in front of us is a person, with all their vital baggage.

The research techniques used were: a literature review, in-depth interviews and semi- structured interviews with lesbian women, a short initial questionnaire and discussions in a forum and in a closed Webex group (focus groups). Interviews were conducted using new technologies and social networks, such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and platforms such as Webex.

The qualitative methodological technique is the option that allows us to obtain quality information and to cover a wider range of people, which in turn allows us to access various scenarios in a shorter period of time than would be required for participant observation, or to travel to the participants' places of residence, which as we have pointed out would considerably increase the time required, but in addition, travelling to the places of residence of all the participants would be something that could not be economically feasible in this research.

The ethnographic method is based on collecting data through fieldwork. This, according to Velasco and Díaz de Rada (2003, p. 18), is the primary basis of ethnographic research.

Fieldwork requires a series of research strategies and techniques. In my research I have carried out two main ones: participant observation and interviewing.

Participant observation consists of "capturing the social and cultural reality of a specific society or social group, through the inclusion of the researcher in the group under study" (Maestre, 1990, p. 37).

The use of participant observation seeks, as mentioned above, an insider's view, i.e. trying to understand the reasons and the meaning that different customs and cultural practices have for the group under study. Participant observation assumes an understanding between the researcher-observer and the community under study, as well as a permissiveness in the exchange (Barbolla, 2006, p. 595).

Velasco and Díaz de Rada (2003) point out that participant observation involves egalitarian relationships, learning the rules of communication in the group, as well as a certain degree of empathy. This is of vitally importance for the success of our research.

Throughout the interviews, as proposed by Maestre (1990), I tried to ensure that the dialogue was not forced, but without allowing the interviews to stray too far from the interesting topics for us.

In respect of the virtual ethnography, we will point out that the multiple ways of conceptualising virtual ethnography are associated with a reflection on the cultural background of the internet and on the dialogue of experiences and social interactions with that cultural background. The internet is rich in social interactions where practice, meanings and cultural identities are intermingled in many different ways. The forms of social relations in the virtual scenario pose a challenge for social researchers and open up new fields for analysis of qualitative methodology Joan Mayans i Planeéis (2002).

Many disciplines use virtual ethnography to approach their objects of study, but from an anthropological perspective, internet studies refer to several complementary levels. Far from forming a corpus of established research practices and analyses, what is presented under the banner of virtual ethnography shows a wide range

of lines of experimentation that respond to the multiple methodological challenges arising from a process of change. This process exposes qualitative research to new possibilities of data collection and analysis in different social settings.

But there is a basic question, namely the role we should play as researchers in online social research. In the words of Arriazu (2007), the decision of whether or not to be part of the research context is one of the most important decisions in the design of the study, since the obtaining of a certain type of information will depend on it.

## **5. Results and Discussion of the results**

Although we have seen series, webseries and films that the participants have named, at this point we will only focus on those broadcast on mainstream channels, since, as they reach much more people, we believe that they are the ones that have a more important impact on the collective imagination and which more directly influence society's view of lesbians. We will include *The L Word*, which, although it started out as a webseries, was later distributed by mainstream television channels due to its commercial success.

The categories we are analysing would be those that would outline a representative image of the character, according to Pelayo (2009).

With the analysed categories, we try to obtain information that will lead us to verify whether the characters fulfill the features of the current Western beauty canon.

It seems interesting to us to assess the degree of acceptance of the characters of their gender role in order to contrast it with the existing feminine and lesbian stereotypes in society later.

In addition, through categories such as age, complexion, ethnicity, we will also obtain interesting information about the image that the media projects of lesbians, through the use of the characters that represent them. Check whether they represent real diversity or, on the contrary, respond to the present canon of beauty.

As for the femininity of the characters, we understand that the traits associated with one or the other gender respond to social constructions and uses, but the analysis of these social uses will allow us to find out whether or not the lesbian characters are based on the stereotype that links lesbianism with masculinity, or more specifically with masculine behaviours and uses, according to Unanue (2016).

At this point we would contextualise the concept called "feather", which according to Viñuales (2000) would be those differentiators or visual identifiers that indicate real or hypothetical lesbianism: short hair, trousers, shoes without heels, short and unpainted nails, absence of make-up, ornamentation and accessories.

At both ends of the classification through external appearance (to be flamboyant), there are two of the social types associated with lesbianism: the femmes and the butch.

In terms of occupation, social, economic, and cultural level, we can analyze whether in the case of lesbian characters, they would share the status of women, or if on the contrary they are close to the levels of men.

The rest of the categories, such as marital status, sentimental relationships, or offspring, will provide us with information about the evolution of these characters, which will allow us to know if they have differentiated cycles, or if, on the contrary, the plot leads these characters towards attraction, love and a heteronormative lifestyle.

### **5.1. Physical and external appearance, social expression**

The characters are mainly young lesbians, aged between 20 and 40, very few are teenagers, far fewer are over 60 and no child characters appear.

We could link this matter with standards of beauty, within which youth is the most desirable and valued feature, especially among women, regardless of whether or not they are lesbians in fiction.

Lesbianism would be a reality of more recent social surfacing than homosexuality, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that of more recently visibility, therefore this could be another factor that could influence the majority of young characters, as it is of newly social visibility and of recent appearance in the series, there would not exist in the collective imagination any lesbian reference over 60 or 70 years old, although in reality, of course, there are many.

In terms of the weight and height of the characters, the vast majority are slim, slender women than average or above-average height for women.

### **5.2. Profession, Social Status**

There is a clear division here, on the one hand the characters who have a professional career, whose social status is medium-high and whose income is also medium-high, judging by the cars they drive, the houses they live in and the clothes they wear.

At the other extreme would be marginal characters, within social exclusion and marginalisation.

This dichotomy between characters at the extremes is particularly striking in US productions.

In terms of professions, there is a predominance of characters linked to the field of healthcare: general medicine, specialists, nursing and auxiliary staff. In this sense, we can mention the characters Maca, Ester and

Verónica in “Hospital Central”, and characters from “Grey’s Anatomy”, “Los Hombres de Paco”, “La que se avecina” and “House”.

There is also a group of service professions such as: secretaries, waitresses, tour guides, hairdressers, therapists, sports coaches and shop assistants.

And much less frequently, there are characters in the fields of fashion and entertainment sectors: model, actress, singer, scriptwriter and assistant director in cinema.

We also have outstanding professionals “extremes” in national productions, as: company owner, agriculture ministry, airline pilot, prostitute, British government spy and drug dealer.

We must look at “The L Word” again as the series where we can find more lesbians in careers traditionally assigned to men, featuring: Contemporary Museum Director, Dean of Faculty, University Chancellor, elite athlete, owner of one of the best known and most successful party venues, the country’s most sought-after matrimonial lawyer, a multi- millionaire heiress who is dedicated to the patronage of projects initiated by lesbians, and a famous and sought-after DJ, among others.

After reviewing this data, we can point out that the portrayal of lesbianism in Spain through films, series and webseries is based on attributes that are socially valued. According to a survey carried out by the “Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas” in 2006, the professions most valued by Spaniards are those related to health care. It is also worth highlighting the fact that most of the characters have qualified professions, which increases their social value, and that none of them, except for specific periods, are unemployed, which reduces their risk of social exclusion.

But on the other hand, this image does not reflect the Spanish lesbian community, according to the participants, who widely expressed the perception of job insecurity within the lesbian community. The image portrayed in the media tends to integrate lesbians into the so-called “pink money” (professionals with high incomes and no family responsibilities, who can spend a large part of their salaries), while all the participants, and in this case we must stress that all 75 participants (including the few who have a professional and economic situation closer to the image of the media), have stressed the precarious employment situation of the collective as a group.

It is also important to stress the positive aspect that they see in the disappearance of violent, murderous, thieving and totally marginalised lesbian characters, which fostered an image closely linked to that of the past of “vagabonds and thugs”.

Finally, it should be noted that the professions most frequently represented in lesbian characters are, mainly, those traditionally associated with the feminine. This is the case of care work, which throughout history has usually been carried out by women. It is also the case of jobs related to the world of fashion, and even the dedication to the care of the house and the family.

Therefore, the portrayal of lesbianism offers an image more associated with gender stereotypes than with sexual orientation and, going a little deeper, this strategy is consistent with the conciliatory vocation –permanently detected– that these characters maintain with the social imaginary and what is associated with traditionally feminine professions.

As for the socio-economic level in national productions, we can highlight how Spanish television fiction has tended and tends to represent lesbianism in characters of a socio- economic level generally between medium and high. We highlight the absence of portrayals of lesbianism in economically low and/or precarious environments, which would mean joining two potential factors of risk of exclusion and, therefore, of rejection by viewers. We see an attempt to endow lesbian characters with characteristics that do not make them vulnerable beyond their lesbian condition and, therefore, less prone to viewers’ disaffection, which could lead to a loss of audience.

The cultural level of the characters in Spanish productions is linked to the development of their professions, and so on the one hand we have those professions for which, as we have seen, higher education is mostly required (medicine, nursing, dentistry or veterinary medicine), and on the other hand we have those characters whose high cultural level is due to an elite education to which they have gained access because of their family’s good economic situation (aristocrats who own family businesses and characters who receive academic training abroad, coming from a wealthy family). There are other characters whose professions do not require higher education, but who, throughout the plot of the series or film in which they appear, have certain specific training linked to their jobs (hotel management, shop assistants, policemen...).

### 5.3. Marital status

In this regard, almost half of the lesbian characters in the Spanish series are single, although the change in legislation and civil rights with respect to marriage has been dealt with in the fiction, so that several cases of marriage between women have been reflected, and there is even a case of widowhood in a lesbian couple. Among the lesbian couples who got married, we will point out the two most transgressive cases in the eyes of society: in one of the cases throughout the plot of the series, the protagonists get married and then get divorced, but finally end up together (Maca and Ester in “Hospital Central”); in the other case, in a matter of hours, one of the

protagonists goes from being married to being a widow because during the banquet there is a shooting and his wife is killed (Silvia and Pepa in “Los Hombres de Paco”).

Prior to the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Spain, there were two occasions on which they tried to resolve this situation by registering the protagonists in the first case, and even considering formalising the union in another country where it was legal and accepted (Diana and her partner in *Siete Vidas* and in the series “*Nissaga de Poder*”).

In international productions, US productions, both in series and films, once again stand out for the reduced number of married lesbian couples, as opposed to single characters. It should be added that in several cases, the lesbian couple is formed after the break-up of one of the two women with her previous male partner, which continues to perpetuate a stigmatised image of lesbians as family breakers, which is not at all realistic. Once again, “*The L Word*” stands out above the rest. Almost all the comments on this subject on international series point to it.

#### **5.4. Nationality and Religion**

As for the nationality of the lesbian characters in Spanish productions, it should be noted that the vast majority are Spanish and only two characters with other nationalities appear, which are Mexican and Swedish. It is true that in the fiction only the situation regarding nationality is raised at that moment of the plot, at no time is it specified if they have acquired it, or if they have it by birth.

In this sense, the nationalities of the lesbian characters would not reflect the increasing diversity of nationalities in Spanish society.

This fact could again reflect a desire not to accumulate more variables of possible social exclusion about lesbian characters, so as not to lose the loyalty of viewers, an issue that makes the reality of lesbian diversity invisible.

As for the religious beliefs linked to the lesbian characters that appear in Spanish productions, we could divide the analysis into two groups: on the one hand, productions contextualised in historical moments in which the Catholic Church had great presence and power in Spain; here certain glimpses of Catholicism would appear, but we cannot conclude whether they are due to a free and voluntary decision, or to the imposition of the time. The other group would be that of productions contextualised in more recent historical moments, in which the presence of religious behaviour is absent.

There are cases that are striking, such as the christening of Maca and Ester’s first child (*Hospital Central*), a moment that shows that it is done to please the families of both, and carried by the tradition of Spanish society.

Among the few religious contents, only Catholicism appears, although some characters go on “spiritual journeys” to remote places such as Tibet, at no time do lesbians of religious confessions other than Catholicism appear.

#### **5.5. Sexual characterisation**

In this section we will review the genesis of the lesbian condition of the characters, as well as the appearance of this lesbianism in the plot.

The common feature between national and international productions in terms of the origin of lesbianism, would be that most of the characters are fully aware of their lesbianism from before the beginning of the plot, so that the viewers would perceive their sexual orientation from the beginning, in this sense we emphasize that both Maca, as Pepa, as characters of “*The L Word*” Shane, Bette, Marina, Dana....are shown from the very first episode, or from their inclusion in the plot, in an openly lesbian way that does not give rise to any possible confusion.

However, the late emergence of lesbian characterisation also has a high level of incidence in representation. These would be cases in which the character discovers during the development of the plot that she feels attraction for a character of the same sex, which generally makes her rethink her sexual identity.

The process of coming to terms with sexual orientation can be more or less prolonged in time and, during this period, the character is not aware of her sexual orientation. Here we would have two possible endings to the dilemma, on the one hand those endings in which she ends up perceiving herself as a lesbian or as bisexual. And on the other hand, those endings in which a “knight errant” appears, in the form of an ex-partner or a new man, who finish up clearing up any possible doubts.

This would be a reflection of social heteronormativity, i.e. the pressure exerted by society on people to develop heterosexual behaviour. But on the other hand, it may also convey to the audience the idea of the ductility of lesbian orientation, an idea that has traditionally been associated with lesbianism. That is, it could suggest the idea that lesbian, and therefore female, identity is not stable and innate, but flexible, malleable.

The international productions, on the other hand, coexist to a large extent with the national productions, with the exception that in the majority of cases in which lesbian identity appears in the characters throughout the plot, the genesis of this identity has to do with another lesbian character, an issue that we will analyse below.

As for the genesis, the appearance of lesbian desire, in most cases there is no explanation, which would be linked to what we pointed out earlier, that when the plot begins they are already lesbians, another part in which it occurs almost spontaneously and a final part in which the acquisition of lesbian identity would be induced.



It should be noted that on this point there are quite a few differences between series and films, while in series the number of “induced lesbians” is minimal, in films it is the most common casuistry.

The above reflects, on the one hand, the plot’s lack of concern for the causes that determine the sexual orientation of the characters, since in most cases no explanation is offered. On the other hand, in almost all cases in which the genesis of the lesbian trait is explained, spontaneous causes are alluded to, and only in one case is it a consequence of factors external to the character’s own psychological development.

The representation of lesbianism in series and webseries either does not offer an explanation of the genesis of homosexual orientation or understands it as something spontaneous. In the first group, we find those characters who appear in the plot defined with the characteristic of lesbian orientation and no explanations are given as to how their homosexual desire arose, in the same way that no explanations are given about heterosexual desire in the rest of the characters, some of the ones for whom no explanation is offered would be, for example, Maca and Vero in “Hospital Central”, Pepa in “Los hombres de Paco”, etc. The second group is made up of those characters who are either defined as lesbians from the beginning, but with the nuance that at a certain point in their lives they simply realised that they were attracted to people of the same sex (spontaneous genesis), as it is the case of Bea in “Más que amigos”, or they become aware of their sexual orientation during the course of the series, characters of this type are: Diana in “Siete vidas”, Esther in “Hospital Central” or Silvia in “Los hombres de Paco”.

In any case, the most relevant factor in the reading of the data on the genesis of the character’s sexual orientation is that the lesbian portrayal sometimes refers to elements external to the character herself to explain her lesbianism. This is the case of Cristina in “Tierra de Lobos”, the prostitute who seduces Isabel’s character in order to blackmail her father. In any case, the story ends up opting for the sentimental plot with Cristina’s falling in love, or the case of Marina in “The L Word”, who seduces Jenny, a woman married to a man who is confuse to see the openness with which the group of protagonists of the series live their lesbianism.

The fact that cases of induced genesis are rare may convey the following message to viewers: lesbianism is natural because it occurs without an external factor mediating the person’s behaviour.

However, in some of the early depictions, external factors were more frequently suggested as determinants of the character’s sexual orientation. Thus we can see how in one series the fact that the lesbian character had grown up among boys, her three brothers, was emphasised, and in another case it was explained that the trigger for her eventual androphobia was a bad relationship with her father.

But the importance of these characters in the viewers’ imagination is, in all likelihood, much less because they are secondary characters or appeared in only a few episodes, or are not interpreted as lesbians because the trait was not maintained over time.

With respect to the films, a greater number of “induced lesbians” can be seen, and in some characters with a representation that launches a devastating image of lesbians, as we can observe in the film “Monster”.

## 5.6. Couple and family life

In almost all of the series and films analysed, lesbian romantic relationships are depicted. Only “The L Word”, “Pelotas” and “Sin tetas no hay paraíso” present lesbian or bisexual characters without romantic partners.

The importance of this truth lies in the fact that most of the characters are paired, a trait that facilitates their assimilation in a society in which life as a couple is valued above other options.

We must add that in Spanish series, most of the characters only have one relationship during the plot, and the number of characters who have more than two is minimal. This shows the tendency of fiction to show long-lasting and stable relationships, which on the one hand contradicts the social stereotype associated with promiscuity, and on the other hand, ratifies the tendency of the fictional discourse to present models similar to the heteronormative one.

With regard to the formalisation of the relationships that appear, in the majority of cases, although most of the couples portrayed consider formalising their relationship, they do not actually do so. Only in “Hospital Central” and “Los hombres de Paco” do they get married, and in “Siete Vidas” they perform a ceremony when they register as a common-law couple. This shows that, although the legal changes that have taken place in Spain with regard to the issue have been reflected, their repercussion has been more noticeable in the increase in the number and weight of the characters, as well as in the inclusive way in which they are represented.

If we look at the offspring of these stable couples shown in fiction, in more than half of the series, lesbian characters have no offspring. On the other hand, there are a small number of cases in which the children are the result of previous relationships, and in a small number of cases, motherhood occurs within the lesbian couple. However, in a large part of the plots, the characters’ desire to become mothers is shown, which occupies a significant part of the plots.

If the decision to have offspring is made within the lesbian couple, almost half of the couples do so by having a sexual relationship (“Mar de dudas” and “Hospital Central”), or by insemination from a known donor, with the option of an unknown donor being a minority. It is striking that there are no cases of adoption.

With regard to the break-ups of the couples who appear in the fiction, the break-ups or crises in the relationships of the lesbian characters generally occur for non-differential reasons, that is to say, they are not related to lesbianism, which indicates a certain degree of naturalness in the treatment of the issue. When they do occur for differential reasons, they are due to a repressive context, or to the problems of one of the characters in making her lesbianism visible.

## 6. Conclusions

With regard to the profile of the character appearing in series, webseries and films, the generalisations are as follows:

The “typical lesbian” who reaches the general public is a young lesbian, between 20 and 39 years old, of slim build, Caucasian, with an external appearance that complies with the traditional female model, with a qualified and socially recognised profession, a medium-high socio-economic and high cultural level, single, Spanish, without defined religious beliefs and who does not present radical feminist attitudes.

As far as her sexual characterisation is concerned, the genesis of the trait is generally not explained and, when it is, it is attributed to spontaneous causes, in most cases the character is aware of her sexual orientation from before her appearance in the plot. We could say that the audience perceives the character as a lesbian from the beginning. Generally, the characters have integrated their lesbianism into their psychological profile and always bring their sexual orientation into the action. Finally, most of them have or have had heterosexual relationships as well.

As for the environment of the lesbian protagonist, the family nucleus is generally unknown, as well as the attitude of the latter towards him/her. However, when information is available, their attitude is usually favourable. There is usually no homosexual environment surrounding the character.

As far as their integration in different spheres is concerned, the sexual orientation of the lesbian character is mostly accepted by their work and personal environment and is often unknown or evolves towards greater acceptance in the family environment.

The visibility of lesbianism when the series begins or when the character discovers her sexual orientation is mostly public, and this feature increases in percentage when the plot ends. In cases where visibility develops over the course of the story, it always develops towards greater visibility and the consequences are generally positive.

In this sense, of the 75 participants, only 5 categorically affirmed that the characters reflect the Spanish lesbian reality, which would mean that 93.4% saw hardly any analogies between the characters and 6.6% did so.

We could say that although the participants value very positively the appearance of lesbian characters in plots consumed by the public, they complain that these characters do not really respond to what they should, they do not represent the reality, or rather we should say the existing realities.

Some of the most repeated complaints in this sense would be that only women who respond to society’s ideal of femininity appear, in very few cases, if not practically non-existent, butch lesbians appear, or lesbians who are not what any heterosexual man would be attracted to.

Nor do they see themselves represented in the fact that, throughout the plot, visibility brings positive things, they state emphatically that if this were really the case, the problem of lesbian invisibility would not exist.

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