

UN/FIT FOR YOUNG VIEWERS

LGBT+ representation in Flemish and Irish children's television

Florian Vanlee & Páraic Kerrigan

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INTRODUCTION

Analyses of LGBT+ representations on television feature in queer studies since the 1990s (e.g. Fejes & Petrich 1993; Battles & Hilton-Morrow 2002; Chambers 2009; Dhaenens 2012; Marshall 2016) – unsurprisingly, given the field's constructionist perspective. Committed to deconstructing gender and sexuality's (re)creation and regulation through cultural representations (Warner 2000), popular television is a crucial site for queer scholarship. TV remains a formidable force in contemporary culture, validating certain sexual and gender identity configurations while marginalizing others. Scholars have discussed how television representations of LGBT+ people reiterate the hetero- and cisnormative status quo (e.g. Dow 2001; Avila-Saavedra 2009; Kies 2016) or, conversely, subvert heteronormality by queering established representational strategies (e.g. Munt 2006; Dhaenens & Van Bauwel 2012). This is not to say that queer television analyses adopt exclusively textual perspectives. Some address issues of sexuality and gender in relation to organizational aspects of television (e.g. Aslinger 2009; Ng 2013; Kerrigan 2016), while others explore television producers' discourses on creating LGBT+ characters (e.g. Martin 2015; Thorfinssdottir & Jensen 2017).

Despite this demonstrable variety, productions intended for children and adolescents remain dramatically understudied (Kelso 2015), and little is known about LGBT+ portrayals in content consumed by young audiences. TV representations are nevertheless formative resources for young people's attitudes on gender and sexuality, and are therefore a crucial site of analysis. Because queer television studies have predominantly scrutinized US programming (see Vanlee 2019), the dearth of works on LGBT+ portrayals in television content for young audiences is likely related to the invisibility of sexual and gender diversity in US childrens' television. As Dennis (2009: 751), notes, the '*intentional portrayal* [of LGBT+ people] *would result in howls of outrage and probable cancellation* [of a program intended for children and/or adolescents]', and the absence of (openly) non-heterosexual or non-cisgendered characters presumably accounts for the scarcity of queer television scholarship on this particular segment of US TV programming. That such LGBT+ representations are structurally absent from US programming by no way means that this situation can be universalized. With Isak, Even and Eskild, Norwegian teen web series *Skam* [Shame] (NRK 2015-2017) – produced and distributed by public service broadcaster [PSB] NRK – features three openly non-heterosexual characters, for

instance. Similarly, German PSB children's soap opera *Schloss Einstein* [Castle Einstein] (KiKa 1998-) ran a storyline in 2008 on Marie-Luise entering into a short-lived relationship with her roommate Karla. That these portrayals occurred openly in PSB's programming for young audiences suggests that potential '*howls of outrage*' (Dennis 2009: 751) are less of a consideration, but also allude to TV production cultures that recognize the necessity of featuring LGBT+ roles in content for children and adolescents. Naturally, these are anecdotal examples that all but support claims about shared progressive discourses on LGBT+ representation in Western European PSB programming for young audiences. For instance, Thorfinnsdottir and Jensen (2017) show that children's programming of some PSBs – in this case, Denmark's DR – '*serves to reinforce heteronormativity*' (413) and rarely undermines it.

Despite qualitative differences demonstrated by aforementioned examples, they suggest LGBT+ televisibility¹ – or the overt presence of LGBT+ people in TV content – in Western European PSB children's and youth offerings. This coincides with historical parallels in mainstream portrayals of LGBT+ people on Western European small screens (see Vanlee 2019), but calls for further analyses of PSBs' engagement with sexual and gender diversity in their young audience schedules. Focused on LGBT+ televisibility in Flanders and Ireland, this chapter offers a comparative analysis tracing the earliest instances of explicit attention for (certain) LGBT+ people to the contemporary role of sexual and gender diversity in children's and youth offerings. First assessing the position of children's and youth programming at VRT^{2 3} and RTÉ⁴ – the Flemish and Irish PSBs respectively – it asserts the prominence of this segment in both schedules. Regulating the style and substance of content intended for young audiences was a core consideration herein, both for in-house production and the selection of foreign imports. Turning to the earliest portrayals of same-sex desire, it shows how domestic non-fiction programming offered initial pathways for rare but explicit instances of LGBT+ televisibility in the 1970s. Where these first examples in Flanders and Ireland parallel each other in their contingency on prosocial discourses on PSB responsibilities, subsequent developments in LGBT+ mainstreaming differ significantly. Starting in the late 1990s, VRT fiction productions for young audiences increasingly feature LGBT+ characters and counter their limited visibility in popular imported series broadcast by domestic commercial channels. RTÉ by contrast, embraced imports with openly LGBT+ characters – primarily British and Australian – to address the subject without risking potential controversy. These

¹ The term 'televisibility' refers to instances of explicit rather than implicit attention for sexual and gender diversity. As such, when the term is used, it does not allude to portrayals that invite queer readings or suggest same-sex desire/non-binary gender identification, but to representations overtly coded as such.

² *Vlaamse Radio- en Televisieomroeporganisatie* [Flemish Radio & Television Broadcasting Organization]

³ At the time, VRT was not yet regionalized, and was called NIR. For the sake of clarity, this chapter will consistently address the Flemish PSB by its current name.

⁴ *Raidió Teilifís Éireann* [Radio-Television of Ireland]

contemporary differences notwithstanding, the chapter concludes by asserting the comparability of both cases and the formative role of PSB remits in ensuring LGBT+ televisibility children's content.

YOUTH PROGRAMMING IN FLANDERS AND IRELAND

Each a small domestic TV market and industry, Flanders and Ireland have several comparable characteristics. Like most Western European contexts, both currently feature public service, commercial and independent company actors, although VRT and RTÉ historically enjoyed monopolies (see Corcoran 1996; Dhoest 2007). Temporary difficulties to retain dominance upon commercial rivals' entry to the market notwithstanding, both PSBs were and are at the core of their regional media ecosystem. The charters and policy documents structuring their operations keep VRT and RTÉ not only to serving children and young audiences, but to clauses about the substance of content and notions of diversity in representation too. This has motivated them to produce and/or commission domestic TV content for their youngest audience segments. Nevertheless, both regions, like many small-scale European media landscapes (see Moran 2007), are subject to global market forces regarding children's TV. High prices in domestic production and the need to fill schedules ensure circulation of international youth content on commercial and public channels in Ireland and Flanders. Accordingly, studying historical and contemporary LGBT+ televisibility on the Flemish and Irish small screens cannot consider domestic productions exclusively, as LGBT+ televisibility may be enacted through imports. Whereas the diversity mandates of VRT and RTÉ underline the relevance of analyzing 'homegrown' programming, the Irish case in particular emphasizes the importance of purchasing strategies to LGBT+ televisibility.

Initially though, like in other European countries, domestic TV content for young audiences originated in PSB offerings (see Corcoran 1996; Dhoest 2007). Flemish VRT first prioritized youth programming in 1960; creating the '*Youth and Documentary*' department in the '*Directorate for Cultural Programs*', which became an autonomous department in 1975 (see Dhoest 2007: 313). In Ireland, the RTÉ Authority's commitment to (domestic) children's programming was evidenced by appointing a Head of Children's programmes, Maeve Conway, in 1962. 253 hours of children's programming were broadcast in the first year of broadcasting, a figure that increased in subsequent decades (Gilligan 1993). Producing and programming content for young audiences was deemed important enough to merit autonomous departments at VRT and RTÉ. This is unsurprising, because PSB TV for children is a historical site of concern over appropriateness and demands for 'elevating content'. As Buckingham (1995) notes, 'children's television is not produced by children, but for them' and accordingly, 'children's television is often more of a reflection of adult interests, fantasies or desires' (p. 47). Irish youth programming has always been contentious, both as a site of production

and a vehicle of representation (see Corcoran 1996). That youth content resorted under the '*Directorate for Cultural Programs*' at VRT – rather than under '*Current Affairs*' or '*Film and Entertainment*' – points to the desire to carefully gatekeep programs offered to young audiences in Flanders brought by concerns about potential 'nefarious influences' on children (see Dhoest 2007: 313-314).

Paternalism was not confined to the production of in-house, domestic series and shows. Although this composed much of RTÉ's children and young people offerings, imported children's programming has historically filled at least more than half of the television schedule since the first year of broadcast (see Gilligan 1993; Linehan 2016). Gatekeeping 'appropriate' content therefore took place in acquisition too. For instance, VRT's department of '*Acquisition of Foreign Fiction*' – mandated to purchase children's series – intentionally steered clear from portrayals of violence before 22h00 (Dhoest 2007: 314). That the department explicitly contrasted this to Dutch channels available to Flemish audiences (ibid: 314) points to considerations articulating youth TV programming strategies to tensions between domestically produced and imported content, and the different norms they reflect. Indeed, Flanders and Ireland are examples of dual-reception television markets, with domestic and foreign broadcasters on offer. In Ireland, BBC and ITV were fully available, particularly along the east coast. This became more pervasive in the 1980s, when cable television became established, effectuating a multi-channel reception system simultaneously offering Irish and British terrestrial television (see Kerrigan 2018). Dutch broadcasters – including commercial stations, which did not exist in Flanders before 1989 – formed VRT's competitors. This adds to the relevance of studying portrayals of sexual and gender diversity in Flemish and Irish children's television. The multi-channel media system ensures variety – regarding public/commercial and domestic/imported texts – in the content consumed by children and young viewers. This heterogeneity ensures youthful audiences' exposure to varying ideological frameworks potentially at odds with domestic norms, inviting specific approaches that negotiate contingent circumstances. As the analyses below show, VRT and RTÉ developed distinct strategies to deal with LGBT+ televisibility in their respective markets.

Flanders and Ireland uphold comparable organizational distinctions in youth TV content. The categorization into pre-school, children's and young people programming throughout RTÉ's existence (Holt and Sheehan 1997) surfaces in the schedule of KETNET – VRT's dedicated children's channel since 1997 – with daytime content for toddlers, afternoon children's programs and series for adolescents in the early evening (see Vanlee et al. 2018a). Children's television is an expressively globalized programming type (Havens 2007) though, and neither Flanders nor Ireland are exceptional cases. VRT and RTÉ offer a mixture of 'homegrown' content and a selection of foreign imports. In comparison to RTÉ, VRT tends to broadcast more domestic productions intended for children though. This reflects

stagnating funds for public service broadcasting throughout RTÉ's history, but also the institutional position of children's programming in the organization, which was often not financially prioritized (Gilligan 1993). Additionally, it is related to a linguistic matter, with VRT producing or commissioning more programs to address viewer demands for content in the regional language (i.e. Dutch) and fulfill its educational mandate vis-à-vis young audiences. This has been exasperated, moreover, by commercial Flemish broadcasters' relative disinterest in content for young audiences.

An important difference between Flemish and Irish TV content for young audiences is the operationalization of (government) directives and expectations in output. Since its inception, Irish children's programming follows strict formal categories: story programmes, variety and magazine programmes, information programming and arts and crafts (Gilligan 1993). Divided into genres, Irish programming policy envisions an equilibrium between different kinds of children's TV content – resulting in productions pertaining to identifiable categories. Flemish programming policy for children's TV has historically emphasized central PSB values, not genres. Mandating attention for '*information, education and entertainment*' (Dhoest 2007: 313-314) prioritizes certain elements for productions, but does not formulate generic expectations. Combining 'information', 'education' and 'entertainment' in one production, therefore, became common practice, resulting in a growing catalogue of domestic fiction series for young viewers since the 1960s (see Dhoest 2007: 314-316) – with educational or informational qualities substantiated by their setting or focus. Compared to Ireland, this permissiveness for youth programming at VRT resulted in increased fiction production at the expense of variety, magazine and information programming. The significant differences between LGBT+ televisibility in Irish and Flemish youth programming are situated on this fault line. Inasmuch as VRT has effectuated visible presence of LGBT+ characters in children's fiction programming since the 1990s, a survey of the RTÉ Archives reveals a minimal presence in terms of domestically produced content pertaining to queerness and children. Expressively contrasting the Flemish situation, however, those ephemeral, brief traces of LGBT+ visibility in content intended for young audiences are to be found in informational segments since the 1970s. Following the trajectory of much LGBT+ content in contemporaneous Irish broadcasting, particularly within news and current affairs (Kerrigan 2017; 2018), children's information programming fostered prosocial discourses around LGBT+ identities.

“KEEPING IT REAL”: LGBT+ TELEVISIBILITY IN 20TH CENTURY YOUTH PROGRAMMING

One of the earliest Irish examples hereof was a special episode on relationships in *Youngline* (1975-1983) – a youth magazine programme composed of various interest pieces that often featured discussions among young audience members. Although the episode itself did not address LGBT+ issues, two of the audience members happened to be gay and used the airtime to discuss similarities between

heterosexual and homosexual relationships, noting the added pressure of the oppressive Irish society at the time on maintaining a gay relationship. Their points were positively embraced, but constituted a fleeting instance of visibility. At its founding, OUT – Ireland’s first commercial LGBT+ magazine – obtained a slot on children’s magazine programme *TV Gaga* (1985-1987), a children’s magazine programme, for a feature and an interview with founder Edmund Lynch. This presentation of a commercial LGBT+ publication on such a show such initiated active acknowledgments of LGBT+ people at RTÉ. A significant moment for LGBT+ visibility was Ciana Campbell’s *Talk It Over* (1987), an intimate discussion programme examining topical issues for young people. One episode’s subject centralized a letter sent by a teenager, feeling ‘homosexual tendencies he could not come to terms with’ (RTÉ Archives, 1988). Responding to the letter, Don Donnelly, gay rights activist and director of Tel-A-Friend, a confidential counselling support phone service, offered advice and support, noting that there are services out there and a welcoming gay community when he chose to come out. These moments account for just three instances in RTÉ’s early broadcasting history, revealing an undeniable lack of queerness at the broadcaster. Despite its ephemerality, however, children’s programming displayed momentary potential to counter exclusionary tendencies in broadcasting.

Comprising primarily of fiction series that loosely reflect VRT’s core values, Flemish youth programming schedules before the 1990s are decidedly different. Where RTÉ emphasized non-fiction formats, domestic series and serials have long been a staple of VRT youth content – acting as a popular vehicle to address its PSB missions. Historical serials like *Dirk Van Haveskerke* (BRT 1978) – thematizing Flemish struggles for emancipation from France in the 14th century – or *Tijl Uilenspiegel* [Till Eulenspiegel] (BRT 1961) – based on the eponymous picaresque character from Low Countries folklore – introduced children to meaningful components of Flemish identity through entertainment, paralleling historical fiction for adults (see Dhoest 2001). Serials with contemporaneous settings – like *Het Veenmysterie* [The Bog Mystery] (BRT 1982), featuring revived Paleolithic creatures – touched upon scientific subjects while also offering moral examples for young viewers. When surveyed about childhood memories of domestic television, older Flemish audiences invariably refer to fiction series of the 1960s and 70s (see Dhoest 2015), underscoring the marginal role of non-fiction in youth programming. This strong emphasis on fiction came at the expense of the comparatively greater opportunity to address same-sex desire offered by non-fiction programmes testified to by Irish examples. Instances of implied homosexuality aside, like opera-singing hairdresser Alberto Vermicelli in sitcom *Samson & Gert* (VRT/KETNET 1990-)⁵, non-heterosexuality was addressed only once in

⁵ Alberto Vermicelli was outed as gay in 2017 by the actor portraying the role. His same-sex desire was never explicated in the series, however, hence his absence in the overview of LGBT+ character in Flemish children’s and youth programming (i.e. table 1).

Flemish youth programming before the surge of LGBT+ visibility in the late 1990s. In 1970, popular singer Will Ferdy appeared as a guest in *Tienerklanken* [Teenage Sounds] (BRT 1961-1973), a variety show featuring Flemish music intended for adolescent and young adult viewers. During *Inspraak* [Participation], a segment addressing relevant themes to young people, Ferdy revealed his homosexuality (see Herremans 2017). *Tienerklanken* is not strictly youth programming – because it was featured in an ‘adult’ timeslot – but it is notable to observe that this early instance of LGBT+ visibility surfaced as something ‘relevant to young people’. Clearly, Ferdy’s ability to address his homosexuality in a programme watched by young people suggests a degree of permissiveness in VRT attitudes towards homosexuality in the 1970s. He neither interrupted nor judged by show host Louis Neefs, moreover. Rather, the moment was couched in the prosocial frameworks the PSB had deployed with same-sex desire since the 1966 broadcast of *Diagnose van het Anders-Zijn* [Diagnosis of Being Different] (BRT) (see Borghs 2016) – which addressed the marginalization Flemish gay men faced. This momentary instance of gay visibility in Flemish adolescent and young adult programming nevertheless remained an oddity.

The prosocial discourses of children’s information programming that affirmed LGBT+ identities in Ireland – but to a lesser extent in Flanders too – did not translate to children’s television fiction. These series continued to feature more problematic representations, particularly on gay men. The only inclusion of LGBT+ issues on Irish youth fiction happened in *Finbar’s Class* (1994-1996), a drama series on a group of teenagers from the working-class area of north inner-city Dublin. Novice teacher Finbar, taking a vested interest in the youngster’s educational endeavors, attempts to encourage them through music and set them on the right, ‘respectable’ path. None of the main characters identified as LGBT+, but the show’s second season introduced a problematic storyline on a predatory sex ring of gay men attempting to groom boys. The sex ring storyline features pop mogul Geoff attempting to recruit teenage boys for his new band, accosting central character Snowy randomly on the street, informing him ‘he’s exactly what he’s looking for’. Initially tempted by the promise of stardom – offered a chance to feature in ‘Ireland’s next boyband sensation’ – he declines, with Geoff’s project soon uncovered as a gay sex ring. Problematically, this instance of LGBT+ visibility is couched in homophobic stereotypes of predatory older gay men. Deploying these tropes, however brief, infers that gay identities are problematic, articulating associations with criminality and abuse. While fleeting, such portrayals align with early representational strategies noted by Gross (2001), Dyer (1990) and Russo (1981), associating homosexuality with criminality and pedophilia. Such problematic tropes potentially reflect production culture in RTÉ at the time, with writers not knowing how to write gay characters and falling upon stereotypes (Kerrigan 2018). Flemish youth programming, by contrast, knew few instances wherein LGBT+ people were vilified or ridiculed, but at the cost of invisibility – and youth and adult

programming in Flanders differ herein (see Vanlee 2019). In the 1990s, however, domestic portrayals of sexual and (later) gender diversity suddenly became a mainstay in Flemish youth programming. Here, again, Flanders and Ireland show different trajectories of LGBT+ representations in children's TV content.

IMPORTANT IMPORTS: LGBT+ PORTRAYALS IN 21st-CENTURY YOUTH PROGRAMMING

Although imports featured in VRT youth schedules beforehand, the liberalization of the Flemish market in 1989 (see Raats & Pauwels 2013) the levels of foreign productions on public and private domestic channels – in terms of adult and youth scheduling. Domestic youth television content is almost exclusively produced and distributed by VRT children and youth channel KETNET. Of the 32 domestic youth productions between 2000 and 2016, 27 were produced for and broadcasted by KETNET (see Vanlee et al. 2018a). Commercial broadcasters' limited interest here is likely informed by Flemish legal frameworks on youth programming. These stipulate that segments intended for young viewers cannot be interrupted by advertisements, and enforce a ten-minute embargo for commercial messages before and after broadcasting such productions (see Oates et al., 2002). Consequently, commercial broadcasters are less incentivized to make investments in domestic productions for young audiences, which cannot generate much advertising revenue. Commercial channel VTM⁶ – now a subsidiary of media conglomerate DPG Media – has operated a dedicated youth programming channel since 2000, and has produced and broadcast 5 children's programmes to this date (see Vanlee et al. 2018a). De Vijver Media, the second commercial Flemish broadcaster – operating channels VIER, VIJF and ZES – has long glossed over domestically produced youth programming, but currently distributes a remake of the Norwegian web series *Skam* called *WtFOCK* (VIER 2018-) online. This is the broadcaster's first domestic production for (pre)adolescents, and other youth programming consists of foreign imports. Finally, international television conglomerates – like Viacom subsidiary Nickelodeon Vlaanderen – offer youth programming but do not produce or program 'homegrown' content.

More often than not, imports scheduled by Flemish commercial broadcasters originate in the US, at ridiculing LGBT+ people or altogether erasing them (see Dennis 2009; Kelso 2015). Reflecting increased visibility and acceptance of same-sex desire in late 1990s/early 2000s Flemish society (see Borghs 2016), KETNET productions suddenly started counteracting the lack of LGBT+ televisibility in imported productions. Since introducing openly gay man Steve in youth sitcom *W817* (KETNET 1999-2003) (see Vanlee et al. 2018b) – 25 openly LGBT+ characters have been included in domestic children's fiction programming. Of this total, 19 featured in content produced for and broadcasted by PSB channel KETNET, with commercial productions including LGBT+ characters since 2014 (see Table 1).

⁶ *Vlaamse Televisiemaatschappij* [Flemish Television Company]

Contrasting commercial portrayals, moreover, LGBT+ characters on KETNET distinguish themselves as prominent, main characters with full-fledged storylines.

Table 1: LGBT+ Characters in Flemish Domestic Youth Fiction Programming since 1999 (N=25)

Series	Channel	Genre	Character	Type	Gender	Sexuality	Age	Period
W817	KETNET	Sitcom	Steve	Main	Cis Man	Homosexual	Young adult	1999-2003
			Tony	Side	Cis Man	Homosexual	Young adult	1999-2001, 2003
			Robbie	Side	Cis Man	Homosexual	Young adult	2002-2003
Spring	KETNET	Soap Opera	Jo De Klein	Main	Cis Man	Homosexual	Young adult	2005-2008
			Ben	Side	Cis Man	Homosexual	Young adult	2006
			Koen	Guest	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adult	2008
En Daarmee Basta	KETNET	Sitcom	Kathy	Main	Cis Woman	Bisexual	Adolescent	2005-2007
			Lies	Side	Cis Woman	Bisexual or Lesbian	Adolescent	2006
			Laura	Side-Main	Cis Woman	Bisexual	Adolescent	2007-2008
Ghost Rockers	KETNET	Soap Opera/Musical	Alex	Main	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adolescent	2014-2017
			Jules	Main	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adolescent	2016-2017
Teen Scenes	JIM TV	Scripted Reality	Maarten	Side	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adolescent	2014
D5R	KETNET	Scripted Reality/Soap Opera	Vincent	Main	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adolescent-Young Adult	2014-
			Bernt	Guest	Cis Man	Homosexual	Young adult	2018
			Jonas	Main	Cis Man	Homosexual	Young adult	2018-
4eVeR	KETNET	Scripted Reality/Soap Opera	Marieke	Side	Cis Woman	Lesbian	Adult	2017-2019
			Patje	Side	Cis Woman	Lesbian	Adult	2017-2019
			Lewis	Main	Trans Man	?	Adolescent	2019
#Likeme	KETNET	Soap Opera/Musical	Olivier Dubois	Side	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adult	2019-
			Philippe Meusen	Side	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adult	2019-
Vloglab Beach	VTM Kids	Scripted Reality/Soap Opera	Leandro	Guest	Cis Man	Homosexual	Young adult	2018
			Unknown	Guest	Cis Man	Homosexual	Young adult	2018
WtFOCK	VIER	Scripted Reality/Soap Opera	Robbe	Main	Cis Man	Homosexual	Young adult	2018-
			Sander	Main	Cis Man	Homosexual	Young adult	2018-
			Milan	Side	Cis Man	Homosexual	Young adult	2018-

W817's first season treated lead character Steve's homosexuality as a mere given – with most characters aware of and comfortable with his sexuality at the series' onset. He and his boyfriend Tony would sometimes kiss or make allusions to their sex life, without this setting them apart from the rest of the sitcom's core group. Rather, the 'difference' of non-heterosexuality was banalized in relation to that of other, straight characters, producing a sense of 'queer normality' (see Vanlee et al. 2018b). Since this first character, explicit attention for same-sex desire has been a consistent theme in KETNET productions. A survey of the LGBT+ characters they have featured over the past twenty years (see table 1) illustrates several representational patterns. Flagship productions like *Spring* (2002-2008), *En Daarmee Basta* (2005-2008) or *D5R* (2014-) include non-heterosexual lead roles, whose romantic encounters are subsequently cast on consecutive side or guest characters. Kathy's bisexuality in *En Daarmee Basta*, for instance, was acknowledged but not 'performed' in the series first season, and concretized in the next season by a fling with neighbor Joost and subsequent stable relation with Lies – a girl from her ice hockey team. Later, her second girlfriend Laura replaced Kathy as a main character and fell in love with main male role Ruben. Crucially, less frequently featured characters' sexuality – most notably that of their partners – never served comic effect, as happens in sitcoms (see Walters 2003; Joyrich 2009). Instead, their presence simply confirmed the same-sex desire of main roles – which had been established beforehand. The limited seriality of the sitcom genre gave way to representational strategies deemphasizing non-heterosexuality's centrality as a narrative device. In *D5R*, Vincent's homosexuality was first addressed by focusing on his unrequited love for his straight best friend Wout. Later, guest character Bernt was introduced to provide Vincent with a romantic storyline, after which he became involved with Jonas – initially cast for a side role but eventually becoming a main character. These examples clearly allude to profound qualitative differences in how same-sex desire has been dealt with in PSB and commercial youth content.

Indeed, *WtFOCK* is the first commercial production to openly deal with same-sex desire – situating the onset of LGBT+ televisibility in Flemish commercial youth programming in 2018. Notably, the sexuality of earlier LGBT+ characters in KETNET series was just a given. Each felt comfortable with their desire, and young viewers learned about it through organic references made by themselves or by other characters throughout the series. This way, non-heterosexuality was not constructed as something to be "confessed" (see Herman 2005), but as an everyday fact to one's existence. Contemporary domestic commercial and PSB series show different approaches to same-sex desire in youth programming. This relates to genre: early examples such as Steve and Kathy featured in sitcoms – a genre less accommodating to prolonged character development (see Battles & Hilton-Morrow 2002). Later examples like Lewis (*4eVeR*) or Alex (*Ghost Rockers*) surfaced in productions resembling soap operas, and give considerable attention to coming to terms with sexual or gendered difference.

Contrasting earlier logics, contemporary tendencies to *develop* rather than *feature* LGBT+ characters allow series to go into the particular hardships (some) LGBT+ adolescents and young adults face. Arguably, this represents a new phase in KETNET's commitment to offer productions resonating with its young viewership. This aligns with aforementioned core VRT values, and negotiates the absence of LGBT+ portrayals in imports with domestic fiction content. This is not to say that Flemish youth programming is without its defaults on this subject. The limited diversity in 'sexual and gender diversity' characteristic of Flemish TV fiction in general (see Vanlee 2019) seems exasperated in children's content. Lesbian or bisexual characters – female and male – remain underrepresented, for instance, as are trans characters (see table 1). The relative prominence of LGBT+ characters in general cannot be allowed to obscure the inequities within LGBT+ televisibility, which continue to reflect gendered power mechanisms that erase lesbian, bisexual and trans experiences from the smallest screen.

Table 2: LGBT+ Characters in Youth Fiction Programming Broadcast in Ireland since 1992 (Domestic and Imported programming aimed at youths)

Domestic, n=1; Imported youth programming, n= 23

Series	Channel	Genre	Character	Type	Gender	Sexuality	Age	Period
<i>Finbar's Class</i>	RTÉ 2	Television Drama	Snowy	Guest	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adult	1996
<i>Grange Hill</i>	BBC 1	Television Drama	Mr. Brisley	Main	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adult	1992-1999
<i>Home and Away</i>	RTÉ 2/ Channel 7 Australia	Soap Opera	Ty Anderson	Main	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adolescent	2018
			Charlie Buckton	Main	Cis Woman	Bisexual	Adult	2008-2013
			Joey Collins	Guest	Cis Woman	Lesbian	Adult	2009
			Christopher Fletcher	Guest	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adolescent	2003
			Dean Silverman	Guest	Cis Man	Homosexual/ Bisexual	Adolescent	2006
			Gareth Westwood	Guest	Cis Man	Homosexual/ Bisexual	Adolescent	2006
<i>Neighbours</i>	RTÉ 2/Chanel 10 Australia	Soap Opera	Gino Esposito	Main	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adult	2000-2007
			Lana Crawford	Guest	Cis Woman	Lesbian	Adolescent /Adult	2004-2005; 2020 -
			Sky Mangel	Main	Cis Woman	Bisexual	Adolescent /Adult	2003-2007; 2020 -
			Stephanie Scully	Main	Cis Woman	Bisexual	Adult	1999-2018
			Chris Pappas	Main	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adolescent	2010-2015
			Aidan Foster	Main	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adult	2011-2013

			Hudson Walsh	Guest	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adult	2013-2014
			Nate Kinski	Guest	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adult	2014-2016
			Aaron Brennan	Main	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adult	2015 -
			Tom Quill	Guest	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adult	2016-2017
			David Tanaka	Main	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adult	2016-
			Chloe Brennan	Guest	Cis Woman	Bisexual	Adult	2018
			Melissa Lohan	Guest	Cis Woman	Lesbian	Adult	2019
			Rafael Humphries	Guest	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adult	2018
			Rory Zemiro	Guest	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adult	2017-2018
			Mick Allsop	Guest	Cis Man	Homosexual	Adult	2018

Ireland, on the other hand, provides an almost inverted image of Flemish tendencies since 1999. Indeed, the Irish situation digresses from European broadcasters altogether. Whereas Flemish children's television has witnessed a tendency to develop LGBT+ characters, rather than only feature them, Irish TV has confined LGBT+ characters to information programming for young people, and in one instance, inexorably articulated LGBT+ identities to harmful stereotypes in fiction. Earlier examples notwithstanding, LGBT+ visibility on Irish children's television programming throughout the 2000s and 2010s has been scarce, with a notable anomaly in coverage of the marriage equality referendum, when children's news programme *News2Day* (2003 -) included stories on the campaign and eventual 'yes' result. But while domestic programming historically composed much of RTÉ's children and young people schedule, imported children's programming has composed at least more than half of the television schedule since the first year of broadcast (see Gilligan 1993; Linehan 2016).

Accordingly, where LGBT+ representations may have fallen short in domestic fiction programming, mediated images of LGBT+ identities were transmitted to young people in Ireland through imported English-language programming on RTÉ or access to British channels on Irish cable services. Popular children's drama series *Grange Hill* (1978-2008), widely available in Ireland through BBC1, introduced a gay teacher, Mr. Brisley, in 1992, who became a central character until his departure in 1999. Although initially subjected to homophobic taunts by students, Mr. Brisley's sexuality became widely accepted within the text and explored numerous relationships and difficulties associated with his sexuality, including challenges to obtaining a promotion within the school administration. In the early 2000s, RTÉ 2 focused a lot of its resources on children and young people's content and began a teen orientated programming block from 17:30 to 19:00, featuring international sitcoms and soap operas with a teen appeal. Australian soap operas *Neighbours* (1985 -) and *Home*

and Away (1988 -) supported this designated teen slot and occasionally offered transgressive LGBT+ fare. Together, both shows included 22 LGBT+ characters since their entry into this teen block. In *Neighbours*, 2004 saw cast regular Sky kiss classmate Alana in the show's first gay kiss. This was followed by a series of LGBT+ storylines from 2008 onwards, with married gay couple Aaron Brennan and David Tanaka becoming main cast members and Sky and Lana's 2020 return and marriage. The show portrayed several teens and their coming-out experiences, including Chris Pappas and David Tanaka. *Home and Away* similarly saw its first overtly gay storyline in 2009, when police officer Charlie Buckton began a brief lesbian relationship with Joey Collins. This was an anomaly, given that much representation on Irish programming has centralized gay male experiences (see Kerrigan, 2018), which is also reflected in imported youth programming. This internationalization of television, particularly in relation to children's television, wrought LGBT+ visibility into the Irish media landscape – reflecting existing patterns of visibility and invisibility. Like domestic productions in Flanders, imports offer a partial image of the LGBT+ community, emphasizing white, middle class gay male couples and underrepresenting lesbian women, bisexual roles and trans characters (see Becker 2006). Nevertheless, imports were certainly at odds with domestic programming, given that some of that content tended to be more transgressive around sexual identity and often conflicted directly with Ireland's cultural conservatism.

CONCLUSION

With few indications about '*howls of outrage*' (Dennis 2009: 751), young television audiences in Flanders and Ireland have increasingly witnessed LGBT+ televisibility on domestic channels since the 1970s. Initially with fleeting instances of visible queerness – like Will Ferdy's coming out in Flanders or Edmund Lynch's presence on *TV Gaga* – VRT and RTÉ have since followed contingent trajectories of growing LGBT+ televisibility on the smallest screen. VRT emphasizes domestic fiction series to meet responsibilities regarding socio-cultural diversity in youth programming (see Dhoest 2007) – particularly since the increased attention for gay and lesbian rights in the 1990s (see Borghs 2016). With commercial domestic broadcasters' children's and youth schedules made up primarily by US imports, VRT's practice of including LGBT+ characters in its flagship productions has effectively safeguarded LGBT+ televisibility on the Flemish smallest screen. Wedged between a conservative socio-cultural climate on the one hand (see Kerrigan 2018) and a demand to be attentive for various forms of diversity on the other, RTÉ has conversely taken to carefully selecting imports to ensure LGBT+ televisibility. Less involved in fiction production altogether, RTÉ2's youth schedule has and continues to offer an opportunity to materialize prosocial discourses on sexual and gender diversity in content consumed by children and young audiences. Rather than pursuing creative control over the *production* of imagery and narratives deemed suitable for young audiences, RTÉ's commitment to LGBT+

televisibility emphasizes selection procedures in acquisition. This is not to say that representations of sexual and gender diversity on the smallest screen in Flanders and Ireland are without defaults, or that VRT and RTÉ practices are univocally laudable. Neither the 'active' system in Flanders nor the 'passive' system in Ireland necessarily leads to equitable regimes of representation – with a noted overrepresentation of gay male characters in both schedules, for instance. It is nevertheless important to emphasize that these PSBs have translated directives in their respective management agreements (see Vanlee et al. 2018b; Kerrigan 2018) into observable increases in the frequency with which children and youth audiences witness LGBT+ televisibility in Flanders and Ireland. More than anything else, this hints at production cultures centralizing the prosocial potential of television representation, and invites domestic queer scholarship to reflect on the contributions it might make in this regard.

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