"FROM THE SERIES, I SEE THAT LGBTQ+ CHARACTERS ARE ORDINARY PEOPLE": AN AUDIENCE STUDY ON NETFLIX SERIES WITH LGBTQ+ THEMES IN 2020–2022

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ABSTRACT

The research focused on how the audience of gender-diverse series in Indonesia reacted to the LGBTQ+ themes broadcasted in some Netflix series aired from 2020 to 2022. It was interesting to discuss, considering that LGBTQ+ issues were still taboo, and that Indonesian society was known to be conventional and religious. By examining the audience's reactions to the narration of LGBTQ+ themes, the research delved deeper into how Indonesian audience members problematize the LGBTQ+ issues in the Netflix series. The research was conducted with the qualitative research method by asking 70 participants, from whom validated informed consent was retrieved in advance, to answer the questions posed in the online questionnaire employed herein and by inviting them to join Zoom-mediated interviews. Three problematizations are found: Netflix's ideology related to its LGBTQ+ content, audience perception about the LGBTQ+ community, and audience religiosity before and after watching such a series. There are also varying views on these problematizations according to the various manners in which audience members are reasoning, which are subsequently assigned to several clusters. Ultimately, such problematizations help shed light on how Netflix and its LGBTQ+ content is dynamically perceived by the audience.

Keywords: audience study, gender study, LGBTQ+, Netflix Series

INTRODUCTION

Netflix is a streaming platform that offers various types of shows such as TV shows, movies, documentaries, and many more. It provides convenience to its viewers because it can be accessed anywhere and anytime at a low price. There are various features provided, including customizable profiles, personalized recommendations, offline viewing, parental controls, continuous playback, and even original contents that can only be watched on Netflix. As of mid-2023, there have been around 238.4 million Netflix paid subscribers worldwide. With its affordable prices and variety of contents, Netflix can easily attract customers of various groups, backgrounds, and ages. Nonetheless, Netflix also raises numerous issues in society, some of which are related to LGBTQ+. *Sex Education, Young Royals, Elite,* and *I Am Not Okay with This* are a few examples of shows that feature LGBTQ+ themes in their contents.

LGBTQ+ contents can be considered sensitive to some communities. It is usually influenced by their varying values, beliefs, or cultural backgrounds. In contrast to Western cultures, most Eastern cultures or Asian societies still adhere to social and religious norms, making them more conservative, which influences their attitudes and resistance against LGBTQ+ (Ramdas, 2021; Wijaya, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2017; Yu & Lam, 2023). Nevertheless, it is undeniable that technological developments and frequent use of social media, too, can influence their attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community (Mokhtar, Sukeri, & Latiff, 2020). It is because social media and even streaming platforms like Netflix provide

LGBTQ+ movies, series, or contents for their users, thus providing individuals both within and outside the LGBTQ+ community with exposure. It is also their way of promoting diversity and inclusivity as well as reaching a wider range of users or viewers. However, it is important to note that not all users have the same response. Some viewers may appreciate and celebrate the inclusivity of LGBTQ+ contents, while some others may show concerns and objection to them. Even though many countries have begun to accept the existence of the LGBTQ+ community and often include LGBTQ+ issues in various kinds of content and discussion, LGBTQ+ is still considered taboo and a topic of hot debate in Asian countries, especially those in Southeast Asia (Wilkinson et al., 2017). LGBTQ+ contents in Asia are often criticized for being considered contrary to 'Asian values' as well as cultural and religious values (Syam et al., 2021). Asian value is a term used to refer to social norms, ethics, and principles that characterize Asian societies, coming from different imaginary construction of various areas such as East Asian, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, for instance. As a Muslim-majority country, Indonesia is definitely conservative towards the LGBTQ+ phenomenon. Consequently, the LGBTQ+ community is oftentimes considered dangerous, leading to its members receiving violence, experiencing exclusion, and even being criminalized (Listiorini, Asteria, & Sarwono, 2019; Ridwan & Wu, 2018).

Several previous studies have examined Netflix series with LGBTQ+ content. The first is research carried out by Boisvert (2020), which analyzes the responses of audiences on the official Facebook accounts of two US drama series: *Sense8* (Netflix 2015-2018) and *Billions* (Showtime 2016-). The results have shown that the two series have very different responses. The *Sense8* series tends to deflect criticism and promote progressive reading, while the *Billions* series attracts more aggressive debates and discussions about efforts to 'resolve' gender ambiguity. Thus, it can be concluded that media platforms and gender-diverse series featuring LGBTQ characters have an influence on the audience's interpretations and mindsets.

Second, there is research by Guskos and Nordmann (2023), who examine the impact of the representation of LGBTQ+ characters in streaming services on LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ+ viewers. The results have shown that the representation of LGBTQ+ characters has a significant effect on non-LGBTQ+ individuals' views about the real-life LGBTQ+ community if they have fewer personal interactions with the community and its members. On the other hand, the representation of LGBTQ+ characters is welcomed by LGBTQ+ individuals because they feel included and less isolated from society. Although stereotypical depictions still exist, participants praise the diversity of representation currently available on streaming platforms.

Conventionally, audiences in research on LGBTQ+ contents are categorized as 'women', 'lesbian', 'black women', and so on, which makes the results tend to be homogenized (Sullivan, 2003). To be able to reveal more updated results, the research involves a general audience. In brief, the research offers its novelty by positioning itself as research of the views and reactions to gender-diverse series broadcasted on Netflix by the general audience and how these general audiences problematize the issues of LGBTQ+ in the Netflix series.

METHODS

The analysis of the research is conducted under the framework of film audience studies. The research focuses on the shifting role of audience members as active viewers who can interpret films in various ways (Livingstone, 2013; Wessels, 2023). The interaction and relationship between the audience and the film are influenced by several factors, such as the audience members' personal life experiences, life stage and circumstances, culture, and media exposure (Wessels, 2023). As a result, each audience member is likely to have different reactions and opinions towards a film or series. It involves 70 participants who are members of the audience of gender-diverse series on the Netflix platform. The current research examines the audience's reactions to and views of LGBTQ+ content shown in movies or series on Netflix.

The research participants are 70 individuals who have watched a Netflix series with LGBTQ+ themes aired between 2020 and 2022. Their participation in the research is legally confirmed through their informed consent, which enables the researchers to proceed in the research, employing the data collected from the participants. As requested, the data from the participants are displayed anonymously. Thus, the quotes from their responses to the questionnaire and Zoom-mediated interviews are displayed without mentioning their name, sex, and other information.

The last part is data collection and analysis. Data collection for the research is carried out in two interview stages: written interview and Zoom-mediated meeting. The written interview is carried out by distributing a Google Forms questionnaire to be completed by participants. The questions are intended to find out audience reactions and perceptions towards LGBTQ+ content on Netflix and the role of religion in influencing their views. Questions are listed as: (1) Why do you choose to watch such a Netflix series (if yes)? (2) Why do you choose not to watch such a Netflix series (if no)? (3) What do you think of any Netflix series with LGBTQ issues? (4) Do you think your perspectives on the LGBTQ community have shifted because of the series? (5) When watching the Netflix series about LGBTQ issues, how do you position yourself in relation to the religion you embrace? (5) Do you feel sinful after watching the Netflix series about LGBTQ issues?

After receiving responses from participants, the researchers review the answers and then continue

with the second stage, which takes the form of a Zoom-mediated meeting, to confirm the participants' responses so that there are no misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the data. The confirmation is done, for instance, to confirm the audience's self-explanation on their religiosity, their sexual orientation, etc. Next, the data are grouped to facilitate the analysis process. From the responses from the participants, three problematizations are identified: Netflix's ideology, audience perception, and audience religiosity. Those problematizations are further divided into several clusters and analyzed based on the factors behind them.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section discusses the problematizations and reactions of participants after watching a Netflix series with LGBTQ+ content. It is divided into three sub-sections: the ideology of Netflix related to LGBTQ+ content, participants' perceptions about the LGBTQ+ community, and participants' religiosity before and after watching such a series.

The first part to discuss is Netflix's ideology related to LGBTQ+ content. Ideology is a set of beliefs and values held by a group of people. In a cultural context, media ideology is largely related to aspects of representation that are interrelated with the influence and interests of the media itself (Yunior, 2023). Narratives and representations in the media usually tend to be closely related to dominant ideologies that are valued by many people because they aim to reflect society. However, it does not rule out the possibility that new ideologies can be normalized and accepted over time with their frequent appearance in mass media. Moreover, media producers would focus more on popularity than commitment to any particular ideology because their main goal is to attract as large an audience as possible to make a profit (Guess & Lyons, 2020). It applies to media platforms such as Netflix. Not only does Netflix offer a variety of shows and movies, but it is also known for intentionally highlighting issues regarding marginalized groups, which differentiates it from other streaming platforms (Khoo, 2022). It is even considered to be pushing the homosexual agenda as Netflix producers often feature 'unnecessary gay characters' because they are deemed to fit their liberal-progressive standards (Hall, 2020). In addition, Netflix has also been regarded as the most LGBTQ-inclusive streaming platform until 2023 (GLAAD, 2023). As a result, it is able to attract and captivate people from the LGBTQ+ community. However, it may be viewed differently by people who do not support LGBTQ+. This insight is confirmed in this research by the existence of two different types of responses regarding Netflix's ideology, which often includes LGBTQ+ content.

First, responses come from viewers who have watched Netflix movies or series that contain LGBTQ+ issues. As previously explained, Netflix promotes inclusivity, which has resulted in many films and series featuring LGBTQ+ characters. Sometimes, audience members do not even know that there are LGBTQ+ elements in the series they watch. It can be seen from the following excerpts:

> "Firstly, I really like watching Netflix, so I don't really think about what I watch. Secondly, I don't know if it turns out that what I watched contained an LGBT element."

> "I watched *The Half of It* just because I was bored and wanted to watch a movie. I actually was surprised when the girls were portrayed as lesbians in the end, for I had not paid attention to its synopsis. I just clicked the play button and watched it."

> "I watched it because I didn't know that the series has the portrayal of LGBTQ. I didn't mind it though because they appeared accidentally. I've never really watched series that obviously talk about LGBTQ+, such as the *Heartstopper* series, which features various LGBTQ+ characters, including lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgenders."

The responses show that some members of the audience are clueless about the LGBTQ+ elements in the movies or series. They most likely do not realize such elements because LGBTQ+ is not the main theme of the series. LGBTQ+ only appears briefly as an addition to the story or through side characters. It might have been done as a way to increase acceptance of LGBTQ+ in a subtle way. Indeed, entertainment media such as movies or shows can encourage positive attitudes towards diversity, especially if minority characters are depicted as attractive and having friendly interactions with others and society (Żerebecki et al., 2021). It may be because LGBTQ+ is still a very sensitive and controversial issue in many societies, especially in Eastern culture (Güney, 2021). Consequently, LGBTQ+ is often represented only through side characters who are not too prominent so as not to disturb those who are against the LGBTQ+ community. It is also supported by responses from other members of the audience who claim that they do not mind the LGBTQ+ elements because they are interested in the cast and only focus on the storyline or plot of the movie or series.

> "I watched those shows not knowing there were LGBTQ representations. I personally don't mind about the portrayals of LGBTQ issues as I mainly go for the plot when watching the series."

> "Initially, I got intrigued by the main character of this series. I never knew that there would be certain episodes where the LGBTQ+ issue is brought up since it is not the primary theme of the series."

"I was mostly interested in the story and the characters. So, as long as the story is great, all the LGBT+ aspects do not really bother me that much."

The audience in the research watches Netflix not for its LGBTQ+ content. Even though they know beforehand that there are LGBTQ+ elements in the movie or series, they decide to keep watching because they are interested in the cast or actors. The choice of actors influences the audience's preferences in deciding whether to watch a movie because the audience may have an emotional bond with the cast, making the movie more engaging for them (Zhu & Wu, 2021). Furthermore, the storyline and plot shown in the film trailer are also effective in attracting the audience's interest (Afifah, Daud, & Mulyadina, 2022). However, LGBTQ+ contents often do not appear in trailers unless they are the main themes of the movies due to the limited duration. Thus, LGBTQ+ elements may shock the audience, yet they do not mind them because they are not prominent in the movies/series and because they mainly focus on the plot and core storyline.

In addition, popularity is also the reason members of the audience are interested in watching series that contain LGBTQ+ elements. Nowadays, there are many forums on social media that discuss the latest movies or series. People can also leave comments regarding their impressions of the movies or series they have watched. A hype may arise among film enthusiasts, which can intrigue other people to watch the movies. It is verified in the following excerpts:

"Personally, I didn't choose to watch such a Netflix series that has LGBTQ elements in it. I didn't expect any of the elements to be in the series that I've watched (except *Sex Education*). I just saw an Instagram post from @netflixid on series that are currently a hype."

"I chose to watch the series because I saw people's reviews and because it caught my interest, so I thought I'd check it out for myself."

"I watched *Call Me by Your Name* because it was so famous back then, with all of the controversial scenes, which somehow triggered me to watch and analyze the movie. I remember there was a heated discussion on Twitter about whether or not to justify the feelings that the characters had towards each other and how sexuality denial will only lead to fake love towards the opposite gender and cause harm. So, because I wanted to fully understand the context and have my own opinion regarding the matters, I decided to watch the movie."

"I was curious about the story, and most of my friends recommended me to watch it."

The quotes show that audience members are influenced by external factors. They become curious about a movie or series because they receive recommendations from friends and because it is a hot topic on social media such as Instagram and Twitter. As a matter of fact, social media is often used in film promotion as a marketing strategy because it can make promotions more effective with a wider reach of the global audience, especially with viral marketing (Ahmed et al., 2022). Apart from social media, family and friends also have quite a big influence on members of the audience's interest in watching movies or series (Changsong, 2019). Close relationships most likely make them more trusting of opinions and reviews about movies or series. Also, they may assume that family and friends already understand and know their tastes in movies or series.

In contrast to the former group, there are also Netflix users who deliberately avoid LGBTQ+ content. These members of the audience do not watch movies or series on Netflix with LGBTQ+ content at all because, first and foremost, watching such content is against their religious values. Consequently, they do not agree with Netflix's ideology, which tries to normalize LGBTQ+ by inserting issues related to LGBTQ+ into movies or series. The following are some excerpts from the audience:

"I choose not to watch series with LGBTQ+ themes because my religion is against it."

"I choose not to watch it because it's against my religion, and I think I cannot enjoy the series if there's an LGBTQ scene in the story."

"I live in a conservative Muslim environment where homosexuality is considered a sin and sexual relations outside of heterosexual marriages are prohibited in Islam. I choose not to watch Netflix series that contain LGBTQ+ contents because it goes against my religion."

In the quotes, the audience clearly states that they do not watch Netflix series or movies with LGBTQ+ content because of their religion. Besides, families with conservative views also encourage such kind of mindset. This is because parents have an important role in shaping their children's character and mindset as well as in influencing their perceptions and views about things (Mills-Koonce, Rehder, & McCurdy, 2018). Although most people watch films for entertainment and escapism from reality (Gabbiadini et al., 2021), they cannot enjoy films with LGBTQ+ content because they are aware that watching such content is prohibited in their religion, causing them to be uncomfortable watching movies or series that contain LGBTQ+ elements. Sometimes, it is also exacerbated by media framing, which generates stigma against the LGBTQ+ community in Indonesia (Syam et al., 2021). Therefore, they choose not to watch such films and look for other alternative shows.

Some members of the audience state that they do not watch movies or series with LGBTQ+ content simply because they are not interested in such issues. Some quotes from them are as follows:

> "The reason why I do not watch such Netflix series is because I have no interest in watching series with LGBTQ+ issues in the story. I tend to avoid things related to LGBTQ+."

> "I'm not interested in that thing so none of the series I've watch has LGBTQ content/ characters."

The responses show that everyone has his/her own preferences and interests in choosing what to watch. Although it sounds familiar, it sheds light on what is called genre preference. It gives rise to the term genre preference, which refers to the genre of movies an individual is mostly exposed to and would likely return to (Kamalesh, Lakhotia, & Pandey, 2019). Several factors influence a person's film preferences, including the individual's personality, values, age, and gender (Infortuna et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2020). As such, a film that is popular and watched by many people is not necessarily interesting to some other people.

Accordingly, responses to Netflix's ideology are divided into two categories. First, because Netflix's ideology promotes LGBTQ+, members of the first group of the audience watch movies or series with LGBTQ+ content on Netflix accidentally. They are more interested in the cast, storyline, and plot of the movies or series than in the LGBTQ+ issues that are raised. They watch such movies or series because of their popularity on social media and recommendations from friends that grab their curiosity and interest. On the other hand, members of the second group of audience avoid LGBTQ+ content because they adhere to their religious values. Besides, films or series containing LGBTQ+ issues are not their genre preferences.

The second discussion concerns the audience's perception of the LGBTQ+ community. Perception is the process of organizing sensory information used to help interpret and produce meaningful experiences of the world (Ansow, Olii, & Kumayas, 2022). Apart from the five human senses, perception is also influenced by memory, emotions, and personal experience, all of which affect individuals' view of the world (Mcdonald, 2012). Perception of others is also influenced by cultural factors such as expectations, stereotypes, and personal biases. These factors are greatly influential in determining views and attitudes towards individuals or groups. In addition, perception can change over time as individuals learn new information about others from various sources (Tankard & Paluck, 2016). One of the sources most familiar today is the media. Media is a source of information that can influence public perception by creating narratives in such a way that it shapes attitudes and motivates individuals'

behavior (Liao, 2023). However, considering that each individual has different experiences and exposure, the same person or situation may be interpreted differently by each person. Consequently, audience perceptions of LGBTQ+ after watching Netflix that raise related themes in its contents are clustered into three categories in this research. First, the audience's perception of LGBTQ+ is persistently positive. In this category, the perception of some members of the audience of LGBTQ+ issues does not significantly change as they believe that LGBTQ+ people are just like any other human beings who are attracted to other people. It can be seen from the response given by one of the audiences:

> "My perspective is just the same as before: they are just a group of people who are attracted to others, just like cis-hetero people."

The excerpt reflects the participant's firm stance. It indicates that series containing LGBTQ+ issues cause no changes in perception. The participant perceives LGBTQ+ relationships to be comparable to heterosexual relationships. He/she perceives LGBTQ+ people as individuals who also desire a partner, love, and happiness. This makes LGBTQ+ relationships seem not to be much different from any relationships heterosexual couples are in (Lin, Yu, & Su, 2019). The primary difference lies only in the gender to which LGBTQ+ people are attracted. This way of thinking does not make the audience's view on LGBTQ+ shift in the negative direction.

A sense of humanity is also crucial to keeping the audience's positive perception intact. Fundamentally, humans have personal and social values that add to a sense of tolerance and understanding between individuals within a community (Gamage, Dehideniya, & Ekanayake, 2021). It allows individuals with all their differences and preferences to coexist in the society. In fact, humans often express their sense of humanity through their capability to perceive other people as being the same as themselves (Taylor, 2013). Hence, it causes members of the audience to casually embrace the concept of LGBTQ+ because they believe that people in the community are also human. It is evident from the following excerpts:

> "I have never had any bad perception of the LGBTQ+ community in the first place. To me, they are human like me."

> "From the series, I see that LGBTQ+ characters are ordinary people who just want to be accepted by everyone despite their sexual orientation."

> "Even if it's just a movie, I know that kind of complicated feelings are happening in the real society. So, I want to treat them as human beings equally and not to avoid them because of their sexuality."

The quotes show that the audience members

view LGBTQ+ people as ordinary human beings. LGBTQ+ members are often treated unfairly in society. They frequently receive discrimination, negative stereotypes, and even violence because they are considered to violate social and religious norms, especially in Eastern culture (Flores et al., 2022). The struggle faced by LGBTQ+ characters in the series creates empathy, which makes the audience want to treat LGBTQ+ members equally as other people.

In addition, the audience's background knowledge about the LGBTQ+ community's existence also plays an important role in the way that their perception is persistently positive after watching Netflix series with LGBTQ+ content. Background knowledge is closely related to perception because it can influence the interpretation of newly received information (Chen et al., 2018). Individuals who do not have background knowledge regarding the LGBTQ+ community may frown on the community and be shocked when they see LGBTQ+ content in the series they watch. It is because they view the issues as something abnormal and violating social norms, especially in Eastern culture. It is in contrast to those who have more knowledge about LGBTQ+, which gives them more exposure too. Netflix series that feature LGBTQ+ content neither take them by surprise nor disgust them. Instead, such series raise more awareness and give them more understanding about LGBTQ+. It can be seen from these excerpts:

> "Since I grew up with plenty of access to knowledge about sexual orientation, I am aware of their existence and have known a lot since I was in junior high school. So, watching Netflix with LGBTQ+ contents do not really change my perspectives."

> "My perception of the topic hasn't changed much because I'm open-minded about it. However, the scenes and issues presented in the series made me more aware of and understand further about the LGBTQ+ community."

One participant's thoughts on LGBTQ+ do not significantly alter after he/she watches the Netflix series due to the awareness about the community existence he/she already developed when he/she was young. As explained before, background knowledge and personal experiences play a significant role in shaping individuals' perceptions and expectations (Zhao et al., 2022). Members of the audience who have had exposure to LGBTQ+ become familiar with it, so seeing these issues in a Netflix series is not really surprising. Moreover, the awareness of the LGBTQ+ community that they have already developed even before being exposed to the community through the Netflix LGBTQ+ series helps members of the audience keep hold of their positive way of viewing and even adding new knowledge about the LGBTQ+ community.

Then, some audiences also continue to have negative perceptions. While in the previous category, the audience members perceive LGBTQ+ positively, the audience members in this category still believe that the actions taken by the LGBTQ+ community are wrong and violate existing norms. Historically, negative views like these are nothing new within the LGBTQ+ community, particularly in Asian countries (Riadil, 2020). One response can be seen in the following excerpt:

> "I still think the same about it. It's wrong but I won't do anything about it because I'm not part of it."

The excerpt implies that the participant's perception does not change into a better light regarding LGBTQ+, although he/she has watched Netflix series with LGBTQ+ themes. He/she still thinks it is wrong. The view has not changed, perhaps because of the conservative environment the participant lives in and because it has been instilled for a long time that the LGBTQ+ community violates social norms. The mindset of individuals is very dependent on the learning environment in which they grow and develop (Kapasi & Pei, 2022). In Indonesia, parents or old people tend to be more conservative, especially regarding matters related to LGBTQ+, and they pass on these thoughts to their children. The Indonesian Psychiatrist Association even considers homosexuality, bisexuality, and transsexualism as a mental disorder (Putri et al., 2023). Therefore, even though LGBTQ+ issues appear in Netflix series, they do not have any significant effect because, in the mindset of certain audiences, it is wrong.

Besides, the audience members have a negative perception possibly because they are concerned about the consequences if they normalize such matters. LGBTQ+ issues are a difficult topic to discuss and understand, especially in Indonesia, where it is still considered taboo. Thus, the audience is concerned about the exposure of LGBTQ+ issues in children's programs because it might confuse the young generation about their sexuality. This is as seen in the excerpts below:

> "Although I don't judge people who belong to the LGBTQ group, I just don't want to normalize that thing"

> "I think LGBTQ might confuse the young generation about their sexuality. I have nothing against LGBTQ people, but I don't believe children's and teenagers' shows should be foisting sexual themes, especially complex and confusing themes like homosexuality."

The excerpts show similar responses in which the audience members are not really happy with LGBTQ+ content. The first response from a participant was that even though he/she does not mind members of the LGBTQ+ community, it does

not mean that he/she is okay with LGBTQ+. The participant still does not want to normalize it, which means he/she still thinks that it is wrong and violates norms. The second response expresses concerns about the presence of LGBTQ+ content in Netflix series. It should be noted that children usually easily absorb and imitate the information they receive (Watini, 2020). Likewise, teenagers are also in a period of a search for identity (Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018). Henceforth, the participant is worried that shows with LGBTQ+ content may confuse children and teenagers and lead them to the wrong perception and understanding.

Again, members of the audience also find it hard to accept the idea of LGBTQ+ because it is against the religion they are embracing. Indonesia acknowledges six religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. It is also known as one of the most religious countries in the world (Aditya et al., 2021). Thus, religion becomes an important aspect that influences the Indonesian people's views on some issues, such as LGBTQ+. Many responses focus on the negative aspects of LGBTQ+ because watching LGBTQ+ content is considered a sin in their religion. Some of those responses are reflected in these quotes:

> "No, cause in my religion, LGBTQ is forbidden. The Netflix series does not change my perception about LGBTQ."

> "I still can't say LGBTQ people can be accepted because we know that God created us with different genders to preserve our existence. We can't do it if we marry the same gender. And also, in my religion, it is wrong and a big sin."

> "In my opinion, regardless of my religion that does not allow such things, I also think that's a strange thing."

> "In the past, I used to watch a lot of lesbian-themed anime, but some of my friends opened my mind to the fact that it is against God. Now, I really don't like them because they try to normalize absurd things such as abortion, adultery, and even molestation of minors. Everything they do is against religion, science, and social norms."

All these responses straightforwardly reveal that members of the audience do not tolerate the existence of the LGBTQ+ community in the slightest. They realize that it is prohibited in their religion and violates God's destiny. It can be concluded that religion has a significant impact in determining how members of the audience perceive the LGBTQ+ community. Even one participant who claimed to be used to watching LGBTQ+ content changed his/her mind after being reminded by his/her friends. Individuals' perception is greatly influenced by the people around them, or usually called social influence (Naqvi et al., 2020).

In conclusion, members of the audience most likely oppose the idea of LGBTQ+ sexuality since their religion teaches them that it is wrong, and their perception seems to be intact. It does not change into a better light even after they watch the LGBTQ+ Netflix series.

Next, there are also audience perceptions that have shifted from negative to positive perception. Netflix series have successfully changed the stereotyping viewpoint of members of the audience on the LGBTQ+ community. Inclusivity and diversity are offered in Netflix series with LGBTQ+ as the theme, which exposes the audience to the struggles of members of the LGBTQ+ community have been through and the hardships they have to face on a daily basis. Members of the LGBTQ+ community have been experiencing many stereotypes in society, and the fact that Netflix series with LGBTQ+ themes are able to help members of the audience develop a better understanding of the community, as well as their shifting perception, has proven how influential representation of the community in media is to the general audience. Some members of the audience, who previously are homophobic and strongly against LGBTQ+ and even considered it as taboo, start to accept it after they watch LGBTQ+ Netflix series. It can be seen from the excerpts:

> "I used to think that LGBTQ is a 'taboo'. But after watching *Call Me by Your Name*, it no longer sounds 'weird' because LGBTQ people really exist. They are just human."

> "At first, I was strongly against the existence of the LGBTQ+ community, but after watching the *Sex Education* series I have become more neutral. I try to respect other people's choices and choose not to judge other people."

> "After watching *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer*, I realized that they are also human beings. The series also broadened my knowledge that sassy gay men who are usually weak and delicate like women can be strong as well."

> "Actually, I was homophobic and I've never watched nor experienced such a thing. But after I watched the *Call Me by Your Name* movie, I changed my mind. Love is complex, and I believe that people have their own perception about it. People can fall in love with no reason, and it can be painful when there's a stigma or, in other word, it's socially not acceptable. It doesn't mean I support the community, but I respect them. I respect their opinions and how they interpret love because we all do have our own perception about it. They're all people after all, and all people have rights."

> "I accept them more. People have choices, and

I try to respect that, but I still cannot accept transgenders because once they changed their body, it will be harder to change it back to what it used to be."

These responses imply that the variety of depictions of the LGBTQ+ community represented in the Netflix series promotes awareness and helps the audience raise their empathy toward the community. Series with LGBTQ+ themes that are being aired on Netflix can help clear up misconceptions and prejudices, as well as raise public awareness of the difficulties that many LGBTQ+ people endure, including harassment, exclusion, and mental health problems (Amaki, 2022). The audience can better comprehend the variety of experiences within the LGBTQ+ community and become more aware of the community's needs for encouragement, tolerance, and inclusion through more exposure to different depictions of LGBTQ+ people. Although the perception of some members of the audience has changed, there remain a few unacceptable ideas. One of them states that even though his/her viewpoint has shifted in a positive direction, he/she still cannot accept transgender people. This signifies that watching the series does not make the audience entirely agree with the concept of LGBTQ+.

In conclusion, there are three clusters of the audience's perceptions regarding LGBTQ+ content in the Netflix series. The first cluster consists of positive perceptions based on the idea that LGBTQ+ people are all human, a sense of humanity, and background knowledge, which makes people more tolerant of the presence of LGBTQ+ content in Netflix series. Second, there are negative perceptions that LGBTQ+ is morally and religiously wrong, so it should not be normalized or represented, especially in children's and teenagers' shows. Lastly, some audience perceptions shift from negative to positive after watching a Netflix series with an LGBTQ+ theme, which is influenced by the storyline and depiction of LGBTQ+ characters in the series.

Lastly, the final discussion is regarding audience religiosity before and after watching the LGBTQ+ series. This aspect cannot be overlooked as it is raised by the audience via the questionnaires' answers and via the confirmation session during the interview. As mentioned in the previous discussion, Indonesia is a secular democratic country with a religious society. The Indonesian people often link religious values to every aspect of daily life. Religion is used as a guide to determine social norms to perceive whether something is good or bad, wrong or right, and so on (Nisa, Hidayat, & Samiun, 2023). By their perceptions of whether it transgresses religions or not when they are watching Netflix series that feature LGBTQ+, members of the audience are clustered into three groups: those who are not against the idea of LGBTQ+ in Netflix series but still believe that they are not supposed to conduct the action themselves; those who neither oppose nor agree with the idea of LGBTQ+ in Netflix series; and

those who are strictly religious and strongly opposed to the idea of LGBTQ+ in Netflix series as they are attempting to embrace their religion thoroughly.

The first group is the tolerant group. This group perceives that LGBTQ+ is, in fact, defying the belief that they follow, but they are not entirely opposed to the idea, considering that they are not the ones who engage in LGBTQ+. They still follow the values of their religion, and they do not mind if other people have different views. They are not indifferent but demonstrate tolerance by not interfering with other people's opinions or views, which are considered negative in society (Verkuyten & Killen, 2021). These are some responses from the audience:

"I'm a Christian and my religion is against it. But I'm fine with it because I'm not part of the LGBTQ+ community."

"In my opinion, there is no problem with watching a Netflix series that features LGBTQ issues in it. I think there is nothing wrong with acknowledging these issues. As long as it doesn't affect how I feel about my religion, then it's okay."

"To be honest, I know that this is not permitted by my religion, but it doesn't really bother me that much because it doesn't affect me. I still carry out all my obligations, such as praying, fasting, and reading the Qur'an."

"In all religions, doing anything that God forbids is a sin. But if someone else does it, then it's their sin, not mine, so I don't really have a problem with it."

"I have no problem at all to be honest. It's okay as long as the series never force me and my religion to have the same opinion as them."

The responses show that members of the audience in this group have a high tolerance. They adhere to what their religion teaches them, which is not in accordance with the idea of LGBTQ+, yet they are not fully opposed either. They regard LGBTQ+ not as something that can harm or affect them personally and emotionally in terms of religion. They maintain that watching a series or movie that features LGBTQ+ will not have any immediate influence on them. Although several studies have proven that films affect individuals, the impact may be different for each individual because various factors such as age, educational status, and previous experiences are also at play (Kubrak, 2020). They believe that LGBTQ+ films or series are not actually encouraging them to engage in LGBTQ+ themselves. Instead, the choice is in the hands of the person who watches such films or series. In other words, there are no problems with watching a film or series that features LGBTQ+ as long as the person who watches it is able to act responsibly.

If the person embraces one religion, then he/she must not let the movie or series cause him/her to doubt his/her belief and thus make him/her imitate the LGBTQ+ community's behavior. In addition, one viewing of a film or series will not have any significant or long-lasting impact on the audience (Kubrak, 2020).

The second group is neutral in comparison to the previous group. Audiences in this group separate religion from the act of viewing movies or series. They tend to position themselves as individuals who take an interest in gaining a deep understanding of LGBTQ+ and establishing an awareness of what members of the LGBTQ+ community have to endure and experience as individuals. Besides, while movies or series have many purposes, they feel that they are mainly intended to be entertainment. Some responses from the audience are:

> "I separate it from religious rules because this is just entertainment, not something that I personally do."

> "I position myself as a person who wants to learn about the issues experienced by LGBTQ people, such as why they got into the LGBTQ world in the first place."

> "I, of course, know my religion forbids any of it, and I agree with my religion. However, I think faith is a really personal thing, so I'll just apply what my religion has taught me only to myself. I won't force other people to follow it. If anyone wants to be gay, it's none of my business. Yet, I still don't like the fact that some people discriminate the LGBT+ community when being gay is not a crime, and it's harmless."

> "Since I am not a religious person, I don't really mind it as long as it portrays healthy LGBTQ relationships."

The intriguing point of their perspective is that they try not to involve their moral or personal beliefs as they watch films or series. This is because religiosity is often seen as highly favoring conservative values instead of openness-to-change (Novis-Deutsch et al., 2022; Usman et al., 2023). Consequently, separating the series they watch from their religious values places them in a neutral, or mostly likely secular, position and therefore spares them from any influence from the series. They also acknowledge that the people who commit LGBTQ+ are also human. Thus, as in the case of the tolerant group, they believe that LGBTQ+ people have the right to embrace their own beliefs and values, and there is no valid reason for anyone to force LGBTQ+ people to have the same values and beliefs as them. In their perspective, all people, including those from the LGBTQ+ community, deserve to be treated with acceptance and respect for what they are.

Moreover, they tend to believe that the series is also acceptable to watch as long as the LGBTQ+ concept is portrayed in a healthy way or in a way that does not cause any harmful misconception to those who watch such a series. It implies they are more concerned with the portrayals of relationship dynamics between a couple regardless of who is involved in the relationship. Regardless of contrasting beliefs about LGBTQ+, individuals of this group are of the view that LGBTQ+ people should be treated the way other human beings are treated.

Last of all, it is the opposing group. Members of the third group strictly embrace their religion and rigidly follow the sets of rules or prohibitions within their religion. They strongly disagree with the idea of LGBTQ+ and conceive the community as a group of people who betray God's rules and defy their religion. Thus, they absolutely disapprove of the presence of LGBTQ+ content in films. Their responses are:

> "LGBTQ defies God's rule. I feel sorry for anyone who is part of it. Thus, I learn not to get involved because there are lots of consequences that come along. In movies or series, these impacts are often presented. I can only pray that my thoughts and feelings may always be protected from such things."

> "I feel sinful after watching series that have LGBTQ+ contents simply because it's *haram* according to my religion. Besides, watching a movie with LGBT propaganda can gradually bend our views toward them, which in the end may make us slowly accept and normalize LGBT."

> "I try to embrace Islam as much as I can, so I normally avoid those kinds of things. Still, it's impossible to avoid movies with LGBT propaganda because it's being a common thing nowadays. So, I would ignore it if it's only a small detail. However, if the propaganda is being the main focus and plays a big role in the movie, I simply avoid it."

> "Well, I know that the concept of LGBTQ itself is wrong in the religion that I embrace, and there is no valid reason to justify it."

These responses display that the audience members in this group are firm in their religious stance. They believe that it is sinful and actually wrong for them to intentionally and deliberately watch movies or series that contain LGBTQ+ issues. It is because in their religion, deviant behavior, such as the behavior LGBTQ+ people engage in, is considered a sinful act. So, while watching a film is permissible, it can be sinful if it features unlawful content and promotes immorality (Zed, 2015). Media are often used to promote inclusivity by involving characters from minority groups as a way to encourage social change and increase tolerance (Cover, 2022). It is used to change negative views towards queer people,

so they become more acceptable in society (Thomson, 2021). Members of the audience in this group believe that LGBTQ+ series or movies present a doctrine and propaganda that encourage people to take part in the concept of LGBTQ+. Consequently, they will avoid watching the series or films if the main or the most prominent themes are about LGBTQ+ and thoroughly ignore the issues if they are only a small part of the series or films and thus not going to have a significant appearance or effect on the main story.

In conclusion, just like audience perception, audience religiosity is also divided into three groups of views. The first group is the tolerant group, whose members adhere to religious values but do not mind people having different opinions because it will not have any impact on their stance. The second group is the neutral group, whose members do not mind the LGBTQ+ content in the series they watch because they consider such content as mere entertainment; they do not involve their moral and personal beliefs when watching the series. The third group is the opposing group, whose members oppose LGBTQ+ content because it is considered sinful to watch them according to their religion and because such content might influence people to think that the behavior LGBTQ+ people engage in is normal. Therefore, they try to avoid LGBTQ+ content at all costs.

The research is not without limitations. The data in the research are collected via Google Forms using non-random sampling. It means that some units in the population miss the opportunity to be included in the sample because the responses to the questions are not aligned, causing a high possibility of under coverage bias. However, the results of the research still provide helpful information about the views and perceptions of Indonesian people who are considered conservative towards LGBTQ+ regarding gender-diverse series on Netflix.

CONCLUSIONS

The research examines the reactions of members of the gender-diverse series audience to LGBTQ+ themes broadcast on Netflix. The research has exposed three problematizations raised by the audience, namely, Netflix's ideology, audience perception, and audience religiosity. Members of the audience have various views regarding each of these problematizations. These problematizations have shown how dynamic their perceptions are.

Negative views are clearly closely related to individual religiosity and the conservative culture that participants firmly adhere to. However, even though LGBTQ+ issues are strongly opposed by the majority of the Indonesian society, several participants in appear to be tolerant towards LGBTQ+. Participants who hold positive or neutral views are influenced by a sense of humanity, awareness, and good exposure to the LGBTQ+ community. Such dynamics can be taken into account as novel perspectives that this current research can offer.

The results of the research imply that reactions to gender-diverse series are different for each individual. Although media can be a potential tool for eliminating stereotypes and changing people's perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community, it is not the only influencing factor. It all comes back to how these individuals process information, their surrounding environment, and their religiosity. Furthermore, future research may analyze audience reactions to LGBTQ+ contents in other geographic regions or through representations in other media.

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