



Utrecht University

Transgender Visibility

*A Critical Discourse Analysis on
Representation in Written Media*

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Abstract

Transvisibility is a highly contested subject. Research has shown that representation of trans people/topics has increased in the last decades, but violence and discrimination against trans people is still a big issue in society. Transgender people in the Netherlands are seven times more likely to face abuse (or be threaten by it) compared to people that are cisgender. This study aims to analyze trans representation in Dutch media, the impact this representation has on trans visibility; and the gains and losses of visibility achieved through mainstream media representation. Through the theoretical framework on representation and trans visibility, I conducted a critical discourse analysis on trans representation. By using the articles that were coded in the *Transgender Netwerk Nederland* media monitor report of 2020, I analyzed what discursive formations and stereotypes were present; in order to understand the power/knowledge dynamic surrounding the media coverage of trans people in the Netherlands. Analysis of the articles demonstrates that issues of homonormativity and transnormativity were present. These issues presented themselves through simplistic story lines, hypervisibility of trans women, a dominant representation of gender as binary and narratives that use transgender emancipation to further nationalistic and xenophobic sentiments. However, there is a surge in storylines that are classified as layered, which depicts a more authentic picture of trans lives. The results illustrate that trans visibility in the Netherlands is not a straightforward tool towards emancipation. In most cases, trans representation in 2019 is presented in normative discourses. However, most articles have a positive sentiment when representing trans people. The surge of a layered story line could have a positive impact; by illustrating a more authentic depiction of trans lives that move away from hegemonic normativities.

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1. Introduction

Correct representation is important, especially because people can identify and feel that the lives they live are legitimate. When representation is created, there are many factors interwoven in its creation of meaning that have real social, political and ethical repercussions. These representations might seem neutral, innocent and natural; however, they are always connected to structures of power (Kidd, 2015). It is therefore of utmost importance to always question and interpret representations in spaces such as in mass media, which have a colossal effect.

Normativities in mass media tied to gender binaries are still very much present in society. There are still groups of people that are under- or incorrectly represented, such as queer and transgender people. However, after continuous erasure in mass media for decades, recently there has been an upcoming surge of trans representation (Fischer, 2019). Popular U.S. magazine *Time* has brought out an issue with Laverne Cox on the cover, titled ‘The Transgender Tipping Point’ (ibid). At the same time, trans people today are still confronted with high levels of violence and discrimination because of their gender identity. In the Netherlands, the number of reports of trans discrimination in 2019 has increased with 23% compared to 2018 (TNN, 2019a). Because trans people are being oppressed and discriminated against, it is important to understand in what ways mass media representation is affecting politics and the emancipation of trans people. Visibility has been a political tool for many queer, lesbian and gay rights activists and organizations to reach emancipation and acceptance in society (Fischer, 2019). However, trans studies scholars, such as Gosset et al. (2019), have highlighted and complicated the notion that visibility for trans people means liberation, specifically on demographics of the United States. However, trans discrimination is ever present in the Netherlands as well. Thus, focusing on the Dutch context, this thesis asks: How does Dutch media represent trans bodies and issues, and does this representation contribute to the achievement of trans visibility? If so, what are the gains and losses of trans visibility achieved through mainstream media representation? In order to address and answer this research question, I conducted a critical discourse analysis of Dutch written media in 2019.

The layout of this research consists of three chapters: a theoretical framework, methodological approach and an analysis. The theoretical framework will address theories on representation through Stuart Hall (2013). In this section I primarily focus on semiotics and discursive practices of analyzing representation. After discussing representation I move towards visibility, as a political tool towards emancipation especially used by the LGBTQI+ community. However, I challenge the notion of visibility as a clear-cut tool for acceptance in society, and argue that it creates pressure on adhering to normative structures. I contest visibility through theories on transnormativity, intersectionality and (trans) liberalism.

The second chapter consists of the methodological approach I took to create this thesis. I take a constructivist epistemological stance to conduct this study. Furthermore, the thesis uses both quantitative and qualitative data, which is a mix of secondary desk research and content analysis. The main method of analysis is a critical discourse analysis of the content of Dutch written articles found in 2019 that had transgender representation, in order to analyze the present power dynamics.

The third and last section of the research consists of the analysis: Discursive representation in Dutch written media. The analysis uses several articles from Dutch written media 2019 to analyze the discourses present surrounding trans representation. Firstly, homonormativity is addressed by linking relevant theories with three articles. I argue that these articles have an element of homonormativity because of a banal use of “LGBTQI+” and because they connote being trans with a sexual orientation. Secondly, I address issues of transnormativity present in trans representation, by addressing the hypervisibility of trans women present, the hegemonic discourse of gender as binary and through looking at simplistic story lines and their impact: “the successful trans person” and “the victim”. I also argue that a layered storyline is present by analyzing a case study that goes beyond the simplistic narratives. Lastly, I address articles that use trans rights as a way to further xenophobic discourses.

2. Theoretical framework

In this chapter, I discuss relevant theories and academic debates for understanding representation, visibility and power structures that are related to gender identity. I discuss the

theory of representation through Hall's work in order to understand how representations in spaces such as mass media are charged with power dynamics. Hall (2013) uses approaches to analyzing media such as the semiotic and discursive approach. These representations have political and social consequences and are therefore important to analyze when trying to understand how certain identities are portrayed on places such as mass media, to have a clearer picture of the consequences that popular narratives have. Because of its political and social impact, representation has been used in order to create more visibility and bring awareness and emancipation for groups that have been invisibilized. The next theory I build on is therefore on trans visibility, where the phenomenon of visibility is challenged and discussed through trans studies scholars. Issues concerning transnormativity are addressed; by discussing passing through Sandy Stone's theory and by building on the hyper visibility of trans femininity, the invisibility of trans masculinities. Additionally I discuss the theory of intersectionality by Crenshaw and how this applies in the representation of transgender representation. The chapter ends by discussing the presence of these normativities in the contemporary neoliberal climate through an intersectional approach. The way people and things are represented on these platforms have real repercussions, which is why it is important to understand and study representation.

2.1 Representation

Mainstream media is one of the mediums, especially in the globalized world we live in, that drives the creation and circulation of cultural symbols and their assigned meanings. In the book *Representation*, Hall, Evans, and Nixon (2013) argue that culture, although difficult to define, has to do with "shared meanings" between people pertaining to a society or group. The constructionist approach to representation developed by Stuart Hall is concerned with the production of meaning through signs, symbols, cultural codes and discourse. In the media these codes are established through different ways such as images, sounds and text. These codes share information that is received by us, which we understand because we share a common language.

Thus, the way we share meaning with one another is through language. Language in this sense means, simply put, everything that communicates information, be it through

written text, visual medium, verbal and non-verbal communication (Hall et al., 2013). These signs and symbols create a sense of identity and belonging because of the meaning we give to the world around us, and the way we interpret it. We can think of a symbol such as a toilet sign. On an almost universal level, everyone knows what these toilet signs mean and what they communicate. And that is because these signs are attached to the way we are constructed to understand the world around us. In the case of the toilet signs, often times they refer to a space that is either for women or men. This is because the dominant discourse of gender is rooted in the binary male/female, and it therefore further reinforces this construct of the gender binary. Here it is evident that these meanings are not just limited to the individual; they have actual social implications as well. As Hall eloquently explains, “Culture, in this sense, permeates all of society. It is what distinguishes the ‘human’ element in social life from what is simply biologically driven. Its study underlines the crucial role of the symbolic domain at the very heart of social life” (2013, xix).

However, even if culture is a system of shared meanings, it is also internally heterogeneous because it is a terrain on which opposing representations and values confront one another. Values and meanings are contested and renegotiated, as the constructionists argue; these codes are never static, since they rely on our social circumstances, which are tied with historical events and so change overtime. Culture is a practice of coding and decoding, where “language works as a system of representation”, which is understood as a “signifying practice” that drives the creation and circulation of cultural symbols and their assigned meanings (Hall et al., 2013, 22). In order to study these symbols, Hall deploys a semiotic approach influenced by the work of Roland Barthes and Ferdinand de Saussure.

On the one hand, Saussure’s model to analyzing representation is through signs compartmentalized in: signifiers, which are the “forms of expression used by language” and the signified, which are “the mental concepts” tied to these expressions (Hall et al., 2013, 20). Together these two concepts create signs, and these signs are transmitted through language where meaning is produced in order to communicate with one another.

On the other hand, Barthes took the analysis a next step by analyzing the cultural meaning of these signs through what he termed “denotation” and “connotation”. The first level of meaning, a denotation, lies more in the literal meaning of the signs and symbols that most people would be able to recognize. Since all images and signs are culturally informed, it

is challenging to categorize signs on the level of denotation. However, it is understood as the descriptive level, the most palpable level to which materials mean something and the level that is predominantly constant (Hall et al., 2013). The second level of meaning, which is the connotation, is the metaphorical and socially informed relationship between signifiers and signified. It is historically and socially informed and tied to a specific moment and location, which creates the level on the connotation one that is in constant negotiation and never steadfast (ibid).

Finally, for Barthes (2013), a “myth” is a connotation, which has been universalized and repeated to a degree that makes it appear natural and on the level of a denotation. These are those cultural codes that present themselves as objective and commonsense. For instance, since a myth appears as natural, it is oftentimes hard to spot and therefore it is left unquestioned (Kidd, 2015). In the media, one function of these myths is to create stereotypes assigned to certain groups based on race, gender, and other identities. These myths can be created in the media by repetition of a certain representation over and over again, which then assigns meaning to certain symbols. As Kidd argues, “representations as they relate to race, class, gender, age, disability and sexuality are notoriously and historically problematic. It is not controversial to assert that in Western contexts at least there has been a privileging of white, middle-class, hetero-normative, and often male, perspectives within the media and broader cultural output” (Kidd, 2015, 36). Myths therefore are charged with power structures and favor dominant ideologies.

Where the semiotic approach deals with how language works and the creation of meaning, other constructionist approaches to the study of representation used by Hall is the “discursive” approach, coined by Michel Foucault. Discourse has more to do with representation and the production of knowledge, the power this holds and the consequences representations carry within society; whereas the semiotic approach attends more to the production of meaning (Hall et al., 2013). These two approaches to the analysis of representation do overlap in many ways. However, discourse analysis shifts epistemologically towards the analysis of the production of power as a main concern instead of the production of meaning.

Discourse is history bound, so that means that these relations of power change or shift depending on the historical context. The discursive approach is also about the relationship

between the production of knowledge and the truth, which makes up the way we live in the world and what we understand as reality. The production of knowledge, power, and truth operate in institutional contexts, thus regulating the ways we live and what is deemed, for example, punishable (Hall, 2013, pp. 32). These shared meanings are thus completely interwoven with relations of power while depicting what is “normal” and what is not, creating belonging and exclusion. Here you can think again about the toilet signs as an example. As stated before, these signs communicate that epistemologically gender exists through a binary lens (women and men). While enforcing that reality onto everyone, it excludes people who do not fit in these binaries, therefore not acknowledging, for example, the existence of non-binary lives. What is interesting to note is that for Hall meaning in general is mainly understood in binaries:

Think of how profoundly our lives are shaped, depending on which meanings of male/female, black/white, rich/poor, gay/straight, young/old, citizen/alien, are in play in which circumstances. Meanings are often organized into sharply opposed binaries or opposites. However, these binaries are constantly being undermined, as representations interact with one another, substituting for each other, displacing one another along an unending chain (Hall et al., 2013, 10).

According to Hall, meaning is “relational” and always understood in opposites (224). While these binaries are useful in understanding and relating to the world around us, they are “reductionist” and they are rarely ever neutral (225). This means that there are always power structures tied to these binaries, and one of them is always the dominant pole (ibid). Our identities and bodies are enmeshed with the creation of meaning and the interpretation of it, depending on the circumstances. Mainstream media communicates ideals and normativities that adhere to these binaries, such as the gender binary, which creates norms of what is deemed ‘normal’ or ‘beautiful’. Bodies that fall outside of these norms are oftentimes erased, or represented in ways that keep them in a position of subjugation. Therefore, it is not surprising that the visibility of bodies that fall outside of these norms has been used as a political tool.

2.2 (Trans) Visibility

In contemporary Western societies, visibility has been used as a political tool in order to work towards the emancipation of minority groups. It is a tool that is very present in the LGBTQI+ community. Queer visibility as a political tool emerged around the 60's, through key events such as the Stonewall riots (Gosset et al., 2017). Additionally, groups such as *ACTUP*¹ started using visibility in order to raise awareness about the ways governments were stigmatizing LGBTQI+ members with anti-gay sentiment and ignoring the care that was needed during the AIDS pandemic for those affected (Konst, 2018). During the 90's, visibility remained a strong tool to advocate for LGBTQI+ rights (ibid). While the use of visibility was effective in creating awareness and representation in mass media for LGBTQI+ communities, the movements receiving attention was mainly white and reflected the neo-liberal political climate. The people that were highlighted and acknowledged were white, young, educated gay and lesbians who became the face of these visibility movements while represented through heteronormative structures (ibid). The idea behind these tools of visibility is that the more visible a minority group is, the more acceptances there will be culturally, socially and politically. However, this is a widely contested subject. On the one hand, gaining visibility goes hand in hand with the assimilation of current normativities, while on the other hand such visibility creates space for voices previously marginalized to be heard (Konst, 2018).

Since representation is a way towards more visibility, it is key to understand the relationship of trans identities in mainstream media. After a lot of erasure in mainstream media, trans people have gained representation in many countries since the 1990's (Koch-Rein, Haschemi Yekani, & Verlinden, 2020).

As Fischer observes: “*Rolling Stone* magazine proclaimed 2014 as the ‘Biggest Year in Transgender History’ and the media’s fascination with transgender people reached an initial high in June 2014 when actress and transgender rights activist Laverne Cox became the first openly trans person to grace the cover of *Time* magazine under the headline ‘The Transgender Tipping Point’” (Fischer, 2019, 1). In the Netherlands, representation of trans people has also risen since the 90's (TNN, 2019b). There are well-known TV series such as

¹ “The AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power — is a diverse, non-partisan group of individuals, united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis” (actupny.com).

Hij is een Zij (He is a She) that are aired on mainstream media platforms and have great influence on the way trans people are viewed in Dutch society (ibid).

Representation is a tool that could be used towards the emancipation of trans people. As Keegan, Horak and Steinbock (2018) note, “media acts as a staging ground for the types of life that are permitted to become real and to shape reality in turn” (17). Hence, the representation of trans lives creates comprehension and visibility, which in turn have social and political effects. Nonetheless, trans people experience a great deal of discrimination, as the number of reports at anti-discrimination centers have increased of a quarter in 2019 in the Netherlands compared to the year before. These discriminations are mostly in the labor market and in collective facilities (Meldingen transgender discriminatie 2019). This paradox, more representation but also increasing discrimination and violence, is an important factor to build upon and analyze if we assume that more representation should lead with more acceptance.

According to the editors of *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (2019), representation of trans people has not straightforwardly caused more acceptance. They state that even with a surge in representation of trans people in mainstream media, violence against trans people, specifically trans women of color and non-binary people, has increased in the United States. The editors collectively indicate the ways in which trans people are offered metaphorical “doors” that actually are “traps”. They critique the neoliberal idea of positive representation being the only road leading towards more acceptability and emancipation, which in reality only is the case as long as it coincides with hegemonic norms.

2.3 Transnormativity

Increase in representation and visibility brings with it normativities that deem who are acceptable trans subjectivities. These normativities assimilate heteronormative structures, which infiltrate the transgender community.

Heteronormativity is coined by Warner in *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1991), where simply put; the concept illustrates how heterosexual normativities are forced upon queer individuals in order to draw on the oppression of sexual minorities. He argues how this

heteronormativity is interwoven institutionally:

Social theory, moreover, must begin to do more than occasionally acknowledge the gay movement because so much of heterosexual privilege lies in heterosexual culture's exclusive ability to interpret itself as society. Even when coupled with a toleration of minority sexualities, heteronormativity has a totalizing tendency that can only be overcome by actively imagining a necessarily and desirably queer world. (Warner, 1991, 8)

In this passage Warner illustrates the normalizing force of heteronormativity and how this is oppressive to LGBTQI+ people. Warner therefore is stating the importance of challenging and questioning the heterosexual structures. Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) also defines heteronormativity, not just through sex but also focusing on gender: Butler explains how gender is constructed through heteronormativity and therefore, holds power over how certain expressions of gender are regarded as normal, while anything that does not fit under this "compulsory heterosexuality" is placed as abnormal (Butler, 1990, 188).

Drawing from theories on heteronormative, Duggan argues how heteronormative structures permeate gay culture by theorizing homonormativity as gay politics and culture that sustain heteronormative structures, through neoliberal sentiment (2003). Stryker, reformulates the concept of homonormativity, by stating that this term was created in order to explore the ways trans people were both oppressed by heteronormative structures and from the lesbian and gay community at the same time during the 19th and 20th century. Exploring this double subjugation, later on, scholars such as Ruin, have drawn upon Stryker's theory of homonormativity to argue transnormativity, which she addresses as the following:

Transnormativity is more than policing the gender practices of individual trans persons and re/producing a fittingly heteronormative lifestyle in the neoliberal era; it is more than the mere disqualification of any act on the part of a trans person that threatens the normative order. Transnormativity both naturalizes discordant lives within hegemonic gender norms and at the same time excludes lifestyles, gender practices, and voices of any trans person who does not adhere to the norms, thereby

containing or eliminating ways of being and living that threaten the norms (Ruin, 2016, p. 205).

As Ruin explains in this quote, transnormativity creates a myth of acceptable trans bodies and excludes lives that do not fit into this order. The way trans lives are portrayed through dominant discourses on mainstream media, falls short on portraying and representing the actual complexity of a trans person's life, and creates an illusion for cis people to consume a simplistic and normative idea of what it means to be trans (Ruin, 2016). One of the ways transnormativity manifests, is by the enforcement of the gender binary on to trans people. Which creates the discourse of passing, and excludes anyone who does not pass as a cis person.

2.3.1 Passing

Thus, representation is still mainly presented through a binary lens. This further reinforces the issue with passing, which puts pressure on trans people to pass as a cisgender person (Ruin, 2016). According to Sandy Stone in "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" (1992), because of the medicalized discourse of the trans body, trans people during the 19th and 20th century were thought to behave in highly binary gendered ways in order to get hormones and/or surgeries. Stone further explains that much of the discourses surrounding trans people are about the "wrong body", produced through the western "binary phallographic founding myth" which constructs the idea that there is just one type of body fixed into two genders; and all other bodies that do not fit the man/woman, boy/girl gender norms are therefore "wrong bodies". Consequently, it creates a pressure for trans people to fit in to these binaries in order to live a life that is accepted in society. It creates a discourse around "the right type" of trans person, Stone argues:

The essence of transsexualism is the act of passing. A transsexual who passes is obeying the Derridean imperative: "Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres." I could not ask a transsexual for anything more inconceivable than to forgo passing, to be consciously "read," to read oneself aloud – and by this troubling and

productive reading, to begin to *write oneself* into the discourses by which one has been written – in effect, then, to become a (look out – dare I say it again?) posttranssexual. (Stone 1992, 51-52)

With her post-transsexual manifesto, Stone calls for a polyvocal trans movement that moves beyond the gender norms in order to change the discourse of the “wrong body” and give space for a polyvocal reality of bodies and genders. Even though in many western countries the term transgender is preferred over the term transsexual, and one could say with the same argument that Stone makes (to move beyond the binary towards a more inclusive polyvocal understanding of being trans), still today mainstream media represent trans lives through the binary lens. Thus, Sandy Stone’s essay is still relevant to contemporary debates, especially when considering media representation and the socio-political discourses that these uphold.

Additionally, these gender binaries, according to Koch-Rein et al., (2020) adhere to the hyper visibility of trans femininity and the invisibility of trans masculinities in media because of “a mix of passing privilege” and the male gaze (6). Trans masculinities are not classified as object to be seen, in contrast to trans femininity. Laura Mulvey (1975) coined the term male gaze in order to explain the ways in which women in cinema were being portrayed as objects to be looked at by men, for men. It created a spectatorship of fetishism, which pacifies and renders women in a subjugated position without power. The theory of the male gaze can be applied to trans visibility in order to portray the ways in which these heteronormative structures infiltrate trans representation.

Trans masculinities are therefore lacking in representation, which consequently comes with a “denial of the means to access the supposedly primary path towards communicating a shared humanity” (Koch-Rein et al., 2020, 6). Trans femininities on the other hand face hyper visibility that is correlated with objectification and ridiculing (ibid).

Stone’s influence has been fundamental for contemporary trans studies and for the lives of many trans persons, especially the ones that do not pass or do not fit in the box of a real “transsexual”. However, Stone’s contribution has also other consequences that might bring challenges to the trans community. According to Emmett Harsin Drager and Andrea Long Chu (2019), Stone created certain binaries that have influenced trans studies significantly, mainly “authenticity versus inauthenticity, medical identities versus vernacular

identities, and the transsexual versus the posttranssexual” (106). These binaries created a “narratological shift” specifically in academia, where there is a significant attention on proving that trans studies have shifted from the medicalized narrative to the polyvocal mix of genres that Stone calls upon. Consequently, this results in the shift from one set of binaries, to the other. It creates a discourse of trans studies only being able to exist in radicalness, resistance and antinormativity, which create a pressure on trans people, since their bodies are always marked with politics. While we look critically at the new norms appearing with increased representation and visibility, that is transnormativity, we should also be careful not to establish *anti*-normativity as a new norm, which further ostracizes trans bodies deemed “too normative”.

2.3.2 Intersectionality

Another important aspect to contemplate is that of the intersections of race and gender identities. This is a second aspect to consider in the context of an analysis of transnormativity, when analyzing how increasing media representation can generate, not just acceptance and emancipation, but also new forms of normativity. For example, according to Alok Vaid-Menon (2018), growing up as an Indian-American trans person in the United States they realized how there was no representation of queer people that was not centered on whiteness. They further explain the pain of holding both these identities and the conflicts that arise from not fitting in the white LGBTQI+ or in the Asian-American community. They eloquently explain how this is tied to the history of colonization:

Part of the way that cultural racism works, is that we think that immigrants and that we think that brown people are more “traditional” are more “homophobic” and are more “transphobic” but that is a total historical revisionism that has so much to do with the legacies of colonization. Part of the ways colonization worked was the degradation of sacred femininity and the demonization of gender nonconformity, and the sort of scapegoating of women and LGBT people as the enemy (“*The Complicated Reality Of Being Trans And Indian-American | Perspectives*,” 2018, 02:09–02:38).

Vaid-Menon's experience is an example of why it is important to not exclude race from gender and vice versa as mutually constitutive forms of injustice. Gosset et al., also point out in *Trap Door* that the increase in positive media attention to trans lives has ensued at the same time that women of color are increasingly victims of discrimination and violence in the United States. They reflect on this in order to argue that traps of visibility and representation have to be approached through an intersectional lens, as there are some that are continuously more at risk even when discrimination and violence affects trans people as a whole (2017, xxiii).

The concept of intersectionality was coined by Kimberly Crenshaw (1989) to address how the American judicial system was not taking the subjugation of black women into account. The fact that these women face sexism and racism, sometimes at the same time, makes their experience unique and different from that of white women and black men. Intersectionality points out "how dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis" (Crenshaw, 1989, 140). This single-axis framework focuses on the most privileged of the subjugated group and leaves out those who are differently marginalized in more than one way, therefore creating a simplistic view of discrimination (150). It is key to adopt an intersectional lens throughout any critical analysis of systems of power.

When considering the representation of trans lives, it is important to analyze in what ways the white, cisgender, heteronormative hegemonic discourses help reinforce problematic stereotypes that further marginalize trans people. Nat Raha accordingly argues in "Transfeminine Brokenness, Radical Transfeminism" (2017), that the visibility that has increased on transgender issues is actually negatively impacting most trans people. She challenges this supposedly progressive attitude towards trans people in the following way:

Along with this new visibility comes a fresh push for transgender legal rights, including the pursuit of widespread legal gender recognition, employment rights, rights for trans-related healthcare, and marriage rights. However, the stratification of livable trans and gender non-conforming lives along the lines of race, class, gender, dis/ability, nationality and migration status remains firmly and increasingly in place,

as neoliberal governments disinvest in social security, ramp up racialized policing and the criminalization of certain – largely Muslim and Black – migrant persons, and facilitate innovate methods in the upward redistribution of wealth while amplifying xenophobic rhetoric and policy (Raha, 2017, 3).

Thus, Raha argues that while there is to a certain extent “support” for so-called trans issues, this visibility is a tool used by politicians and the state that is not in favor of trans lives. The aim is not in reality the emancipation for trans people, but a way neoliberalism furthers its agenda through LGBTQI+ rights while furthering the push for xenophobic policies. As this analysis shows, visibility should always be looked at through an intersectional eye, in order not to risk the universalization and erasure of the reality of trans lives.

In order to understand and study the ways visibility impacts contemporary trans lives, the focus of this thesis aims to analyze the representation of trans people, issues and topics. My focus will be on the Dutch written media; together with the above-mentioned theories this thesis unpacks what dominant and impactful portrayals of transgender lives are present in the Netherlands. I will do this by understanding the normative structures present in mainstream media when written about trans people/topics. Mainstream media is impactful in creating meaning. In the following chapter I explain the methodological approach I took in order to analyze and understand in what ways trans representation and trans visibility are present in Dutch mass media.

3. Methodological approach

As a collective project, I participated in a research for my internship at *Transgender Netwerk Nederland* (TNN) to investigate the representation of transgender people and related subjects in the Dutch media of 2019. With that research we have produced a Media Monitor of 2019. For that project, written media was selected through the *Meltwater* software program, which has access to major newspapers (e.g., *Volkscrant*, *NRC*, *Telegraaf*), regional newspapers (e.g., *De Stentor*, *Noord-Hollands Dagblad*), weekly and monthly newspapers (e.g., *De Groene Amsterdammer*, *Viva*), online news sites (e.g., *Joop.nl*, *Vice*, *the Post Online*) and small websites that occasionally post news items (e.g., *Ditjes en Datjes*). With the program, we

used the following search terms: gender incongruent, transgender, transsex, transman, trans man, transwoman, trans woman, gender dysphoria, trans person, transperson, transvestite, cross dresser, tranny, ladyboy, shemale, transphobia². From this selection, 4,679 articles emerged that were then coded into various sections, such as the identity of the transgender person described, the narrative, and the topics discussed. We also looked at what terminology the written media used to write about trans people and topics. Developments, specific words (such as offensive words) and the narratives used were examined.

In this thesis, I further analyze the outcomes of the Media Monitor 2019 through theories of representation, visibility and (trans) normativity. Thus, I focus on how Dutch media represent trans bodies and issues but also on the gains *and* losses of trans visibility achieved through mainstream media representation.

3.1 Methodology

The epistemological perspective adopted in this research is a constructionist viewpoint on representation. This perspective points out that we construct meaning by using language as a tool, which in turn has a sociopolitical impact (Hall et al., 2013). Thus, the analysis of the media objects are done through this epistemological lens. Different theories were used that explain relations of power through different standpoints of subjugation. I use and reflect on queer, trans and intersectional feminist theory. And my method is a discursive analysis, which is a constructionist method, since it interprets language and argues that knowledge and power are interwoven.

3.2 Methods

In order to answer the research question, I carried out both quantitative and qualitative analysis. I used secondary desk research and content analysis. In the next two sections, I will further expand and discuss the chosen methods.

3.2.1 Secondary desk research

² Translated from Dutch. All translations from Dutch sources are my own.

Quantitative analysis has to do with the collection of numerical data, which is in turn analyzed through a database using statistical tools (Verhoeven, 2015). In the TNN report, we used quantitative analysis in order to come up with percentages that tell us information such as how many times trans issues were discussed in Dutch written media or the amount of times a specific narrative was used. This was done in order to trace the development of trans representation in Dutch media.

In this thesis, I used the quantitative data of my internship research in order to discuss issues such as homonormativity and transnormativity, by looking at the total of certain narratives compared to others. In other words, I used the data of my internship research to address a new research question. This method is called secondary desk research (Verhoeven, 2015), and is used because of several obvious reasons such as the convenience of saving time and in order to further explore the internship research more in-depth. I chose this method because this way I could further extend the information and skills gained during my internship through my thesis project.

One of the disadvantages of such an analysis is that you do not have control over the data carried out in another research. In my case, I did have control over the data, yet once finished and handed in; it was not possible to make additional changes.

An example in this research is the fact that, only when the research for the TNN report was almost finished, I realized that it would have been more interesting and impactful to further problematize the gender identity classification. In the TNN research, gender identity was categorized in three different categories: 'Woman', 'Man', and 'Non-binary'. However, gender expressions can be expressed in many more ways than just these three options. I afterwards realized that in a couple of articles this was indeed the case, however we could not further analyze the representation of gender identity beyond those three options because the analysis was almost done. During my thesis, I have been aware of that limitation.

3.2.2 Content analysis (Critical discourse analysis)

Analyzing the content of the articles found by the TNN report holds qualitative research, because it is an analysis on the text and composition of the articles. This information is analyzed through feminist, queer, trans and intersectional theories and within the framework

of a constructivist approach to representation. Consequently, a discourse analysis of the content was carried out in order to find the hegemonic narratives present in Dutch mainstream media.

According to Harding (2013) this type of method is a critical discourse analysis, because it analyses the way certain representations (such as texts, visual content etc.) uphold and reinforce power relations and the way power acts as a normalized practice which is decentralized.

Hall uses discourse in the analysis of representation in order to situate the “power/knowledge” relationship when talking about certain topics. He argues through Foucault, that knowledge does not simply mirror reality in an innocent manner, but that it is always connected to power dynamics (2013). It is therefore important to understand when analyzing a specific subject, what power dynamics are at play, in other words, what discourses are present. In order to do that it is important to situate the subject/object historically. It is as well important to understand its discursive formations. This is as put forth by Hall, a “systemic operation of several discourses or statements constituting a ‘body of knowledge’, which work together to construct a specific object /topic of analysis in a particular way, and limit the other ways in which that object/topic may be constituted” (Hall et al., 2013, 164). By analyzing popular media, I analyzed the way trans people/topics are being presented in the Netherlands. In this research, I analyze power relations by looking at the way representation creates and further reinforces certain ideas that look like they are universal, natural and thus normalized, by criticizing hegemonic discourses and power. In this case I analyzed the way transgender people/issues/topics are represented, by looking at the language that was used in written media, who was being represented and in what contexts. I analyzed the way in which certain normativities were present in the representation that either reinforce and/or deconstruct social and political inequality faced by trans people. I also historically situate trans representation and visibility, by understanding the body of knowledge that surrounds this topic. What is apparent is that there are consistencies in the body of knowledge produced around how trans people/subjects are presented in Dutch mainstream media, which creates the discursive formation on how we talk about and think of trans people. Accordingly, I illustrate how mainstream media has power since it influences the way trans people are seen in society.

According to Harding, CDA raises questions on the validity and ethics of the analyses because of its interpretive character. However, the aim of this research is not to underpin my interpretation as superior to someone else's, but to see it as one of many possible interpretations.

4. Analysis: Discursive representation in Dutch written media

Since the 90's there has been a surge of representation of trans people and issues in Dutch media. Earlier research into the Dutch media from 1991 to 2016 showed that the media coverage is rather one-sided, as it mainly shows successful trans women (Atria, 2018). In 2019, this was not entirely different. Below I will reflect and analyze the outcomes of the TNN report, how this relates to trans visibility and what the influence is of this visibility. Firstly, I look at the theory of homonormativity and how this is present in the representation of trans people in Dutch media in 2019. Secondly, next to analyzing the extent to which trans people are being represented, I look at transnormativity in order to analyze the normativities existing in how trans people are being represented and what effects that has. Lastly, I look at a phenomenon that is tied to transnormativity, which is “(trans)liberalism” (Raha, 2017), to understand the ways in which trans rights are being pushed in order to advance rhetoric, such as anti-immigration propaganda, that are xenophobic and subjugating.

4.1 Homonormativity

I choose to firstly analyze the outcomes of the TNN report through homonormativity because in 2019, in 52.75% of the articles in which the word transgender (or synonym) was found, further analysis shows that the word was used to explain the abbreviation LGBTQI+. This is more than half of the articles that mentioned the word transgender (or synonym).

Susan Stryker, in “Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity” (2008), argues that Lisa Duggan's theory of homonormativity states that it “does not challenge heterosexist institutions and values, but rather upholds, sustains, and seeks inclusion within them” (145). However, Stryker reformulates the concept of homonormativity that specifically includes the way trans people were outcasted during the 90's by the lesbian and gay

community, as they were by the heterosexual community. The term thus composes the double subjugation experienced by trans people. According to Stryker, the term homonormativity emerged through the denial of trans people during the 90's, and through how many gay and lesbian rights group addressed sexual orientation issues, without incorporating trans issues. Stryker argues that the emergence of the term "was an intuitive, almost self-evident, back-formation from the ubiquitous heteronormative, suitable for use where homosexual community norms marginalized other kinds of sex/gender/sexuality difference" (147).

In some of the articles I analyzed, the term LGBTQI+ could have in fact been replaced with gay or lesbian.

An example where LGBTQI+ issues (and trans issues) are possibly overshadowed by lesbian and gay issues and politics can be seen in an article in the *Reformatrische Dagblad* about the reaction of the Dutch parties in the European Union to the calling of attention to zones in Poland where LGBT³ rights are being violated: "PiS⁴ member and Chancellery Secretary of State, Pawel Szefernaker, said in an interview that the party opposes ideological insanity and that marriage is a relationship between a woman and a man" (Pippel, 2019). The Article further mentions LGBT and transgender people, but in the rest of the context, such as the chosen passage, the author only refers the sexual orientation. This is article illustrates a banal use of the term LGBT. The element of homonormativity lies in the fact that many of the articles used words such as "LGBT" and "transgender people", but in fact it could have been replaced with "gay and lesbian" because the article only addresses sexual orientation.

An equally interesting article to analyze is one that addresses the Dutch Nashville declaration⁵ by *De Stentor*, which is a regional newspaper. It is an interview with one of the people that signed the declaration, pastor Barend Labee, where he was given a full page to explain his intentions of signing the declaration, and to address his shock of how the Nashville Declaration was received as offensive towards the LGBTQI+ community. The articles states: "Not that the pastor doesn't know what he put his name under. That is a series

³ I use LGBT instead of LGBTQI+, because that is what the article refers to.

⁴ Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, polish political party.

⁵ The Nashville declaration is originally drafted in Nashville, United States, in 2017 by, primarily, Orthodox and conservative Protestant or Evangelical believers. The document was intended to give a voice on themes such as sexuality and gender identity. It expresses opposition to LGBTQI+ people. In January 2019 a Dutch version was created, and signed by approximately 250 people in the Netherlands from the orthodox-protestant community.

of statements based on biblical interpretation, about marriage that can only be a union between man and woman, that sex can only take place in such a relationship, that you are not supposed to profile yourself as gay or transgender. Nor is it in line with God's word to have sex with someone of the same sex” (Bruinsma, 2019).

When reading the article, the word transgender is used, but the focus here is again on orientation and they never mention anything about gender identity. I propose that it could be read as the connotation of transgender as a sexual practice or orientation. Stryker mentions there are three different ways in which homonormativity had presented itself during the emergence of the term: “homonormativity was a threat to a broadly conceived politics of alliance and affinity, regardless of identity; it aimed at securing privilege for gendernormative gays and lesbians based on adherence to dominant cultural constructions of gender, and it diminished the scope of potential resistance to oppression” (Stryker, 2008, 147). Homonormativity, also “took the shape of lesbian subcultural norms that perversely grounded themselves in reactionary notions of biological determinism as the only legitimate basis of gender identity and paradoxically resisted feminist arguments that ‘woman’ and ‘lesbian’ were political rather than ontological categories” (147-148). The third way she explains homonormativity was (is) present is through seeing transgender as a third option, as an orientation related to kink. This article could fall in to this third form of homonormativity. Stryker states that in such cases “the ‘T’ in this version of the LGBT community becomes a group of people who are attracted to one another on the basis of enjoying certain sexual practices — in the same way that gay men are attracted to gay men, and lesbians are attracted to lesbians, on the basis of a shared desire for particular sexual practices. ‘T’ is thus homonormatively constructed as a properly distinct group of people with a different orientation than gays, lesbians, and bisexuals (or, for that matter, straights)” (Stryker, 2008, 148).

The article mentions the word transgender and keeps talking only about sexual orientation, simplifying what LGBT issues entail. And even if, of course, there are trans people with lesbian, gay or bisexual orientations⁶ it has to be regarded as intersections, rather than parallels in order to correctly address them.

Another case of a similar dynamic is an article from infamous *RTL Nieuws* about the

⁶ I only mention gay, lesbian bisexual as sexual orientations since the articles mostly only use the abbreviation LGBT.

King Willem-Alexander and how he won a prize for being LGBT friendly: Willem-Alexander received the prize for his speech at the UN at the end of September 2019, in which he called for the protection of the rights of sexual minorities: “With the OUT Media Award we want to normalize themes such as homosexuality and transsexuality socially and the king has certainly contributed this year”, says *OUTtv* (“Koning Willem-Alexander geprezen door LHBT+-organisatie,” 2019).

The author of the article mentions homosexuality and ‘transsexuality’⁷, and only mentions sexual orientation. The article does not mention gender identity. It is a similar case as it was with the previous example. By mentioning homosexuality and transsexuality, and further addressing sexual orientation it can create a connotation that trans people are as well a sexual minority. This connotation does not fully and carefully address trans subjugation.

4.2 Trans normativity

Next to the problem of homonormativity discussed above, the current surge in transgender representation actually demands that we analyze not only the marginalization of trans people and issues, but also the normative frameworks through which new representations are appearing in Dutch media. So, this requires an integration of homonormativity with transnormativity, which in turn manifests in different ways discussed further in this section.

4.2.1 Hypervisibility of Trans women

Among the 4,679 articles collected and coded, a total of 2,221 articles concretely addressed trans people and issues. When looking at gender identity, trans women are more present than trans men in Dutch media in 2019. However, the script “success verhaal” (success story) with a positive sentiment was prominently present with both men and women. This means that, simply put, trans people in these articles were presented in a positive light. This type of media representation can be positive because, as already mentioned, positive representation creates acceptance in society and represented lives are deemed real and existing (Keegan et

⁷ I only here use transsexuality because this is what the article refers to. When this is not the case I have and will keep using terms such as transgender people or transgender issues.

al., 2018). However, according to the report *Trans* in/ & de Media* written by Atria (2018), even though trans people were being represented more in Dutch media, there was a strong presence of ridicule specifically towards trans women.

An interesting case to look at is that of the famous Dutch football commentator René van der Gijp and a comment he made that got quite some media attention. This comment was made about a famous Dutch cis woman, Manon Meijers. Van der Gijp called Meijers ‘omgebouwd’, which is an insulting and degrading Dutch word to use when referring to trans people. He was “joking” about the fact that, according to him, Meijers looked manly. The word ‘omgebouwd’ connotes trans people as devices, or houses that can be built. It adds an element of othering and de-humanization. Most of the articles addressing this incident stated the following: “René van der Gijp did not think that his funny comment about Manon Meijers would have such an impact. The cheerful analyst insulted the stylist last week in *Veronica Inside* by calling her the “omgebouwde brother”⁸ of her boyfriend Guus Meeuwis” (Quekel, 2019). In other words, most of the articles surrounding this comment were neutral, which normalizes the use of the language, even when the article is about the backlash the commentator got about his comment. The fact that he states it as a joke also connotes to the ridiculing of trans woman. Important to note here is that in 2018, during the talk show *Voetbal Inside*, van der Gijp had ridiculed a trans woman by dressing like her (TNN, 2019b). This narrative of ridiculing trans people is one that is not uncommon in Dutch media. According to the participants in the Atria report (2018), these “jokes” about trans people mainly were presented with a narrative of a cisgender man dressing up like a woman, for laughs.

Indeed, when looking at storylines such as “spektakel” (spectacle) and “trans als grap” (trans as a joke) it was a dominant storyline when trans women were presented in 2019. This is an interesting find, as it suggests that there is indeed an aspect of fetishization and ridicule in 2019. Trans women are commonly hypervisibilized as a result of a mixture of passing privilege (for trans men) and the male gaze (Koch-Rein et al., 2020, 6). The male gaze reduces the one being looked at to an inferior and passive position and has therefore an element of fetishization (Mulvey 1975). Thus, I argue that the hypervisibility of trans women, especially with narratives such as “spectacle” and “trans as joke”, reinforce objectification

⁸ Intentionally left the word in Dutch, since it's meaning changes when translated to English.

and fetishization of trans women, which can further which can further implicate stigmatization and violence.

When looking at the Louisa Janssen, who is a famous Dutch trans woman in 2019, the narrative “spektakel” (spectacle) was very present when she was represented. Jansen is openly trans and her transition had been televised. Together with her husband she has a reality TV show called *Onze transgender liefde* (Our transgender love). There is quite some media attention when it comes to Jansen her transition. For example, in 2019 there was a lot of media attention focused mainly on her surgeries. One of the articles mentions: “Louisa Jansen is not averse to injections. Recently, the reality star shared all she had done: her buttocks, hips and waist. Apparently she’s working from the bottom up because now she has tackled her double chin. Previously, she had her waist, butt and hips done. She wanted to have more feminine shapes, and with success” (“Louisa Janssen ondergaat wederom ingrijpende operatie,” 2019).

The above-mentioned passage is from an article that talks about the latest cosmetic procedure Janssen had done, and further relates it to her becoming “more womanly”. She was also one of the most talked about trans people in 2019 according to our TNN report (2020). These articles have a high spectacle factor, which further reinforces the hypervisibility of trans women and the fetishization that reinforces the connotation of objectification.

These examples also reinforce the myth that there is a fixed idea of what being “womanly” means, and thus it ties in to a fixed gender binary. This is prominent in the case of the coverage of famous Dutch super model Loiza Lamers, who won a spot in FHM500 among the 500 most beautiful women of 2019 in the Netherlands⁹. One specific case that illustrates the tone of most of these articles is the following: “Loiza Lamers made history by being the first transgender ever to win Holland’s Next Top Model. And more importantly, she was the first transgender ever to secure a spot in the FHM500. And we think quite rightly, because the blonde is a classic beauty” (“Loiza Lamers slingert stomend hete naaktfoto op Instagram,” 2019).

The article represents Loiza Lamers as successful because as a transgender woman she got to win and was featured in highly feminine contests that are associated with physical

⁹ FHM500 is a magazine that features a list of 500 women that were voted by the Dutch public as the most beautiful women of the Netherlands.

beauty. Moreover, the author explains the victory of the model by referring to Loiza as a classic beauty. As Ruin (2016) argues, in Korea, trans women are represented as embodying prevalent female gender norms, which in turn systematizes trans people through binary gender norms. I argue that articles such as the above-mentioned example of Loiza Lamers are equally fortifying binary gender norms.

4.2.2 Simplistic narratives

In Dutch media, the “success story”, where a trans person is represented as finally being happy after their coming out, is one of the most dominant storylines. Additionally, the “victim” narrative is also prominent, which includes storylines that discuss discrimination, social isolation and depression, mainly because of the fact that the person is trans. In 2019 these narratives were very prominent, as they were in the years before as well (TNN, 2020)

The case of Ryan Rijnen and the narrative used by *RTL Nieuws* captures what I mean with simplistic narratives. The headlines state the following: “In the summer of 2016, Ryan went into transition to finally become himself. To do this, he had to work hard – and it required developing a healthier lifestyle” (“Ryan ging in transitie om eindelijk écht zichzelf te worden,” 2019). The article further quotes Ryan: “Before my transition, from my 16th to my 30th, I had great struggles with my weight and condition. I was overweight and not comfortable in my body, which automatically meant that I didn’t bother to take good care of it” (“Ryan ging in transitie om eindelijk écht zichzelf te worden,” 2019). These storylines can be true to an extent, for it is statistically known that trans people actually do experience a lot of discrimination and harassment for being trans. These types of storylines are superficially positive, as they do, to an extent, create empathy and understanding towards trans people. Nonetheless, it becomes a hegemonic discourse, and overshadows the complexity of trans lives.

According to Ruin, these types of narratives fit under what she calls “The Erasure of Lived temporalities” (2016, 203). What Ruin means with the erasure of lived temporalities is that these types of dominant story lines the complexity of trans lives. These types of predominant narratives, which are simplistic, are made for cisgender people in order to promote information about trans people. As a consequence, the narratives reinforce

stereotypes of trans people and simplify their lives, to the extent that cis-gender readers get a false sense of knowing trans people. Thereupon, such narratives erase certain people's "lived temporality" (Ruin, 2016, 203), and place trans people's lives as stagnant. If we look at the sentence, "Ryan went into a transition to finally become himself", it makes it seem as if before transitioning his life was one of struggle and pain and now after transition he finally has become himself. Another major focus of these types of storylines is the focus on the medical transition. In this article this was the case as well: "It has been 2 years since Ryan had his breasts removed. Last year, his uterine removal took place and he has been receiving hormonal treatment for 2 years" ("Ryan ging in transitie om eindelijk écht zichzelf te worden," 2019).

Additionally, there is a specific headline that addresses "sex reassignment surgery": "It is also not necessary. Karin likes me as I am, as long as I feel good about myself. There is a high risk of complications with such an operation. It's a complicated operation and I don't feel like it right now. If the techniques change to make it easier, I could consider it" ("Ryan ging in transitie om eindelijk écht zichzelf te worden," 2019).¹⁰ This focus on the medical transition creates the false idea according to which trans people always have to undergo a medical transition, which creates normative representation. As Ruin mentions, this excludes different experiences, "thereby containing or eliminating ways of being and living that threaten the norms" (2016, 205).

However, mainstream media are not necessarily bound to reproduce these simplistic narratives about trans people in order to analyze which articles represented a more in-depth and complex storyline, we had a tag called "gelaagd" (layered). These storylines represent trans people and issues not just as a success story or a victim story. As explained in the report:

The layered story is one in which the lives of transgender people are realistically portrayed as dynamic entities full of victories, setbacks, just as is usually the case with reporting about cis people. Reports telling this storyline tell of transgender people as being happy in some moments and less happy in others, without either of them dominating the story. In this way, storylines of idealizing "successful" transgender

¹⁰ Karin, mentioned at the beginning of this quote, is Ryan Rijnen's partner.

people, as well as attributing a victim role to transgender people as a whole, are avoided (TNN, 2020).

Compared to 2018, this storyline has had a remarkable increase (16.60%) in the Dutch media, which is a very promising result that hopefully will keep increasing. An article that illustrates this layered narrative is one about Mik Bron, who is a trans person who recently had a child. The article states: “How do you navigate in a world that is divided into the boxes “man” and “woman” if you do not fit in there yourself? This is something Mik Bron questions every day. He talks about his choices and dilemmas, which have become even more complicated since his son was born” (Maassen, 2019). This article represents a trans person with challenges, setbacks but also with victories. There is not a dominant “success” or “victim” storyline, but a more complex and in-depth narrative that talks about parenting and its complexities and humanizes the person, since it is something many people go through regardless of their gender identity.

Another interesting case of layered storyline is the representation of Nanoah Struik. Nanoah is the second person in the Netherlands to get an X in their passport, and therefore they received media attention. However, because of this exposure Nanoah had received a lot of online harassments with even death threats. Consequently, *NPO* (Lobosco, 2019) interviewed Nanoah on generalizations made about non-binary people. Even though the headline does portray Nanoah as a victim – “Non-binary Nanoah (19) had to be stoned”, the title was chosen because this is one of the threats Nanoah had received online– in the rest of the interview Nanoah thoroughly explains their experience and addresses the generalizations mentioned in the interview. I choose to look at this specific case because of its ambiguity. The interviewer is asking questions to Nanoah, so it is catering to a cisgender public, but the fact that Nanoah is interviewed and they get to go against these generalizations in their own words, makes it a piece that deconstructs normative assumptions people have of trans people that are non-binary. Gosset et al., dispute that there is a third option, where there is a door away from normativities: “trapdoors, those clever contraptions that are not entrances or exits but secret passageways that take you someplace else, often someplace as yet unknown” (Gosset et al., 2017, xxiii). These spaces are where there is resistance against normativities imposed by the state, where there is a refusal to be

categorized by them and a coming together under these deconstructions. This last mentioned case of Nanoah where they are dismantling stereotypes and illustrating their own experience as a non-binary trans person, can be seen as that third option through and away from the constructions imposed on trans people.

4.2.3 Trans (Neo) Liberalism

Since years (post-9/11) the incorporation of gay and lesbian rights into forms of nationalism and racism has been discussed, in the West and in the Netherlands (Puar, 2007). An article in 2019 that illustrates that states the following: Homosexuality is a sensitive issue, especially in neighborhoods with many Muslims, such as in South Rotterdam (König, 2019). This article is stating that Muslim people are not tolerant and accepting towards gay people in comparison to Dutch people, and that therefore gay people are in danger in areas of the Netherlands where there is a large Muslim community. As argued by Mepschen:

Such representations arguably derive from representations that associate white middle-class culture with homo-tolerance and *gay capital* while associating young post-migrant men with tradition, aggression and homophobia. In this way, ‘peripheral’, pluri-ethnic neighbourhoods, regarded as lacking sufficient gay capital and at the same time housing too many Muslims, are construed as spaces of discomfort and alienation for LGBTIQ people (Mepschen, 2016, 159)

Mepschen reveals how there is a dominant discourse present of white middle-class culture and areas being “progressive” and accepting of LGBTIQ+ people. Whereas, the framing of Muslims in the Netherlands is one of homophobia. The article mentioned, illustrates this stereotyping of Muslims being orthodox by reinforcing the discourse of predominantly Muslim areas being dangerous neighborhoods, especially for gay people.

The articles of 2019 reveal that something similar is happening with trans people. According to Nat Raha (2017), with the surge of positive representation and visibility of transgender issues and people came more support for trans rights and policies in the context of the U.K. However, there is at the same time a growth of interest in far-right politics and

policies, where xenophobic discourses, such as anti-migration policies are being upheld. These types of rhetoric might not seem as a trans issue. However, they unequivocally affect LGBTQI+ and queer communities, such as poor and/or black and brown trans women. Raha calls this phenomenon trans liberalism, where she explains that “the political and material background of trans and queer liberalisms within contemporary neoliberal capitalism ensures that certain groupings of poor, trans and queer people are class fodder as cheap, precarious labor for the reproduction of capital—at best granted formal legal rights, but with a cost” (7). She argues that superficially it might seem like a step towards emancipation. However, it is another way for neoliberal capitalist governments to further bolster power, which is possible through racist, sexist and classist discourses.

This phenomenon was arguably found in the articles of 2019, as there was a rise of far-right media that is interested in trans topics, such as the Dutch far-right media source, *De Dagerlijkse Standaard*. When looking at the tag: “pion-nationalisme” (pion-nationalism), there is a significant surge compared to former years. In this storyline, transgender people are used to show the alleged advanced tolerance for and emancipation of transgender people in the Netherlands to emphasize the difference between the Netherlands and the “other” (TNN, 2019b). These types of articles can be categorized as trans liberalism as formulated by Raha (2017), since these narratives use LGBTQI+ rights, and specifically mention trans people, to reinforce ideas of “othering” tied to ethnic minorities. The article portrays the West (in this case the Netherlands) as progressive and predominantly Muslim communities as traditional, which, as Raha argues, is a way of redistributing power and wealth, through xenophobic rhetoric.

A piece in *De Dagerlijkse Standaard* writes about an article published in *de Volkskrant* that addresses Islamization in Indonesia. The DDS article states the following: “Michael Maas was a correspondent in Indonesia for eighteen years. He has a clear idea of how free it was then and what it has become now. He speaks of tolerance towards gays and transgender people, hospitality and a reasonably progressive country (albeit with the necessary problems). But that was still in 2003. The year 2019 is very different” (Willemsen, 2019). In this part of the article, the author is connoting a “progressive country” with tolerance towards gay and transgender people. According to Willemsen, because of Islamization, the country has “gone backwards” and therefore stating that there is no tolerance towards gay and transgender

people anymore. The author further makes a comparison with the Netherlands and Indonesia: “You can hardly help but try to draw a cautious parallel with what Maas describes and what is happening in the Netherlands and the rest of Europe” (Willemsen, 2019). Clearly stating his concern that according to him, this is happening in the Netherlands as well because of the Islam religion, and because “Muslims” in the Netherlands are becoming more conservative. Willemsen finishes the article, illustrating his islamophobia with: Chances are that social tensions will only increase and that the same power strategy will be used by that group as Muslims in Indonesia have and continue to do. Anyway, let’s first see if women really wear burqas of their own free will, because that’s really important in this country (Willemsen, 2019).

With the above-mentioned pieces of the article, the author is drawing a connection between Islam being orthodox and conservative, therefore non-accepting of trans and gay people. He also refers to the third and fourth generations of Muslims in Europe. By saying that he is stating a clear distinction between “us and them”, Dutch people being progressive and liberal (and so accepting of trans and gay people) and people coming from a predominantly Muslim diasporas, as orthodox, conservative. This is a discourse that is prominent in Dutch media. In a study done by Balcik about the representation of Muslim people in the four biggest newspapers in the Netherlands, the author found that the “us vs. them” narrative, “the free West” and “the Islamic other”, is often present in reports about “the Muslims” and/or “Islam” (2019). We can draw back the article of DDS to the theory of Raha (2017), to the extent that creates the illusion that this push for acceptance for trans rights is being threatened by Muslim people. Raha explains: “such capitalist restructuring takes forms known as austerity, structural adjustment and the extraction of wealth from surplus populations including incarcerated people, alongside migrant persons and refugees” (Raha, 2017, 3). In other words, this rhetoric might superficially seem as if they are pushing for trans rights, when in fact it creates more difficulty for black and brown trans women and gender non-confirming people, who already face challenges with unemployment and documentation (5). Articles such as the ones in DDS and *Volkskrant* keep such discourse of what Raha calls trans liberalism alive.

Moreover, in general the representation and visibility of trans people in the Dutch media of 2019 has been considerably white and young. In other words, the media coverage

has not been intersectional and therefore reinforces, as Raha argues, the divisions of racialized, gendered and classist power dynamics. Even though there is more positive representation of people of color compared to 2018, where people of color were mainly presented in the victim narrative, it is now mainly the successful narrative. However, it is important to note, as mentioned before, that simplistic narratives do not have a straightforward positive influence on the emancipation of trans people.

To conclude, to talk about the gains and losses of increased representation of trans people in the Dutch media of 2019 is an ambiguous and not straightforward matter. When looking at the amount of articles that mention the word trans or a synonym of the word, almost half of the articles do not further go in depth about trans people or issues. Some of the articles that mention the term trans (or synonym) only use it to explain the abbreviation of LGBT, and/or other articles the word LGBT could have been replaced with gay and/or lesbian issues/people. These articles clearly just talked about sexual orientation and there was not any aspect of gender to it. On the other hand, the other half of the articles that did talk about trans people/issues, where there was an actual representation, were to an extent still charged with normativities such as gender binaries. Transnormativity was a very present issue in the articles. Many of them were written in a “success” or “victim” narrative. An important find in the representation of 2019, is as well the element of trans liberalism, where articles written had a hidden agenda behind advocating for trans rights, which was one that used nationalistic and xenophobic rhetoric. However, a positive find was the one of the layered story, where in contrast to the simplified and stagnant stories of trans people and the ones that caters to neoliberalism, trans lives are portrayed in a more complex manner.

4. Conclusion

The main research question of this thesis was: How does Dutch media represent trans bodies and issues, and does this representation contribute to the achievement of trans visibility? If so, what are the gains and losses of trans visibility achieved through mainstream media representation?

By analyzing representations of trans people and issues in Dutch written media in the year of 2019, this thesis has shown how media discourse can directly and indirectly impact

trans lives through a secondary quantitative analysis and a critical discourse analysis. It can be concluded that representation and visibility walk hand in hand with one another, because representation has social and political impacts. When considering the gains and losses of trans visibility achieved through mainstream media representation it is important to note that normativities are still reflected in these representations.

Although there has been a surge in representation in recent years in the Dutch written media when it comes to trans lives and issues, the representation available was mainly of white, young trans women. Additionally, more than half of the articles in which the word transgender or synonym was used, highlighted that it was only written to explain the abbreviation LGBT. This indicates an element of homonormativity, since the articles that write about LGBT experiences mainly focus on homosexuality and transgender experiences do not receive the same amount of attention in the context of LGBT topics.

In contrast, the articles that did actually represent trans people or issues generally had either a positive or neutral sentiment; nonetheless most of the media was transnormative and reinforces hegemonic codes of certain acceptable transgender lives/realities. Many of the articles either portrayed trans people as victims or as a success story, with an eminent focus on the medical transition. The problem is not necessarily the story line, but the hyper focus on these narratives that consolidate discourses of trans lives that are superficial and of essence for the consumption of cis-gender audiences. Additionally there was in 2019 a hyper visibility of trans women, in the analysis I argument that this hyper visibility is tied to the objectification and fetish of trans women, these storylines also further reinforce the gender binary and issues of passing. As well as narratives that fall under trans liberalism, who use discourses of trans rights in order to push forward xenophobic arguments that are tied to race, immigration and class power struggles.

On the other hand, there is an auspicious finding that seems to be moving away from simplistic narratives and a one-sided representation of trans identity. These narratives were coded as layered, since they portrayed trans lives in more complex ways (not just success or victim narratives) and in diverse ways. These story lines were one of the most present story lines in 2019. I do want to note that these story lines, even if more layered are still talking about trans people their gender identity, but in a more anti-normative matter. Here too I think it is important to tread carefully, since representation in many ways is always portrayed in

binaries, that these types of narratives could create hegemonic discourse situated in anti-normativity. To better understand the ramifications of the relationship between representations and trans visibility in the Netherlands, I suggest that future studies address the concept of visibility and anti-normativity. Additionally, my intention is not to reinforce a simplistic narrative of trans lives, as victims of representation. This thesis only focused on written mainstream media, whereas there are many alternative mediums where there is a different representation. One, that as Gosset et al. (2017) states, offers a “trapdoor” away from these normative structures dominant in mass media. Therefore, I recommend that further studies analyze the ways in which alternative representations influence trans representation. It is important to analyze what the impact of alternative representations are on the mainstream representation of trans people/topics.

This research illustrates the relationship between representation of trans subjectivities in Dutch written media of 2019 and the ambiguous space of the impact of visibility on trans lives. I illustrate that in this case representation leads towards more visibility, but that this visibility both reinforces and challenges normativities that impact trans lives positively, negatively or both at the same time. It illustrates that narratives that are hypervisibilized have impactful consequences, therefore that it is important to understand these consequences and challenge them.

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