

# The Power of a Profile

*Gender Norms and Stereotypes in LGBTQIA+ People's  
Online Partner Search*



*Figure 1: Sung, Jia. Art Piece.*



Dewi van der Kuip and Anniek van Weeghel



**Universiteit Utrecht**

**Department of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology**

Student: Dewi van der Kuip (6171729)

*d.vanderkuip@students.uu.nl*

Student: Anniek van Weeghel (6150616)

*a.t.vanweeghel@students.uu.nl*

Supervisor: Sabine Wong van der Horst

*s.a.l.vanderhorst@uu.nl*

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*“Iedereen die niet op iedereen blijkt te lijken,  
moet altijd bereid zijn zich te laten bekijken.  
Maar, hoe noem je dat wat gloeit achter glas?  
Licht.”<sup>1</sup>*

Edward van de Vendel<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Anyone who turns out not to be like everyone else, should always be willing to be looked at.  
But, what do you call that, what shines behind glass?  
Light.”

<sup>2</sup> “Queer Café – Gloei op Valentijnsdag” Biep Biep by Bibliotheek Utrecht (podcast). February 14, 2021. Accessed February 24, 2021.  
[https://open.spotify.com/episode/0ZgGATkCpFBPwsuFGh4fm5?si=xnVqthbURyWO44RfPnsc\\_w&dl\\_branch=1](https://open.spotify.com/episode/0ZgGATkCpFBPwsuFGh4fm5?si=xnVqthbURyWO44RfPnsc_w&dl_branch=1)



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## Glossary and Relevance

### 1. Bi+

- a. Bi+ includes anyone who is into more than one gender. For instance, bisexual, pan, queer and sexually fluid people.
- b. It is a term used in the Netherlands by the organization ‘Bi plus’, that advocates for a place of Dutch people who are attracted to more than one gender or sex.

### 2. BIPOC

- a. Stands for Black, Indigenous, People Of Colour.
- b. It is a general umbrella term that collectively refers to *all* people of colour — anyone who isn’t white — and aims to emphasize the historic oppression of black and indigenous people.

### 3. Cishet

- a. Cishet is an abbreviation of cisgender and heterosexual.
- b. It is being used to refer to anyone who belongs to the current Dutch, sociocultural norm, gender and sexual identity-wise, in contrast to for example LGBTQIA+ or queer people.

### 4. LGBTQIA+

- a. LGBTQIA+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual or any other possibility of not being heterosexual or cisgender.
- b. We are aware of the criticism<sup>3</sup> concerning the acronym. The main argument lot of its opposers is that it contains a strange and confusing combination of letters, as it includes both gender and sexual identities, which are two separate axes of identity, as well as a biological condition (intersex). Elsewise, it is focusing on differences between people, consciously separating them from what is “normal”. It puts them into quite fixed boxes as well, while their gender and sexual identities are often more fluid than that and can have overlap. For a completely inclusive acronym, meanwhile, a lot of gender and sexual identities are still lacking.

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<sup>3</sup> For further reference, specifically applied on the Dutch society, we recommend the Dutch YouTube video by Kutmannen “De "T" moet weg uit "LGBT+”. - Stellingen | TransTalk”.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=03hA6qWmi68>

- c. Nevertheless, making use of these letters has helped us considerably in getting access to the field and keeping in mind a representative sample. Even though there are major differences between all gender and sexual identities, mentioning for example the T, A or I separately, can contribute to recognition and visibility. More information and attention to the marginalized letters, can lead to more emancipation and understanding.<sup>4</sup> Besides, the Q and + are incorporated, that capture any other possibility. We are aware that we could have also chosen queer to immediately cover all non-normative gender and sexual identities, however, we want to stay in line with how our participants self-identified themselves towards us – see the question posed at the end of this glossary.
- d. Important to note is that no intersex person participated in our research. However, we have decided to use the full acronym as it is usually being used in practice.

## **5. LGBTQIA+ community**

- a. We use LGBTQIA+ ‘community’ to refer to all LGBTQIA+ persons world-wide - unless we say Dutch - in a group sense.
- b. There is a lot of criticism on using the word community regarding LGBTQIA+ fellowship, as there are very different communities (of which some have overlap). Meanwhile, others do not feel part of a certain LGBTQIA+ community at all, like many of our participants. By using ‘community’, we thus do not aim to imply that all LGBTQIA+ persons share a bond because of having the same attitudes and interests.

## **6. Sexual identity**

- a. Sexual identity refers to how a person think about one's (possible) romantical and sexual orientation, sexual interests (kink) and preferred relationship form. Throughout the thesis we capture all these facets together or we will specify it in case it is about one of them.
- b. For some of our participants their preferred sexual relationship form is not just a ‘form’, but part of their identity instead. In our case, that is for polyamory. We have thus decided to add polyamory in the description of our explicit polyamorous participants in the footnotes.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.movisie.nl/artikel/5-vragen-over-intersekse-beantwoord>

## 7. Trans\*

- a. Trans\* is an umbrella term for anyone who is not cisgender, including non-binary, gender non-conforming/fluid, third gender and two-spirit people.
- b. The use of an asterisk has been a debate for almost three decades. Some find it offensive because an asterisk may imply that there is something wrong with being trans. However, we chose to use the asterisk to be more inclusive for the wide variety of not-cisgender identities.<sup>5</sup>

## 8. Queer

- a. Next to ‘queer theory’, ‘queer’ refers to all non-heterosexual and presumably non-normative sexual and gender identities (Wilson 2014, 194).
- b. Queer has often been used as a swear word in the past, originally meaning “strange” or “peculiar”. Nowadays it issued as a gloss and replacement for the LGBTQIA+ diversity, as it covers a broad spectrum of identities at once, aiming to reject binarism and normativity and focusing on intersectionality.

### Why do we use ‘LGBTQIA+’ over ‘queer’?

Throughout our research we continuously debated whether LGBTQIA+ or queer was the appropriate terminology to use for describing our participants as a group, mainly because our participants differed in their personal preference. Even though our society is at a crossroads where more and more people are switching from LGBTQIA+ to queer, not everyone agrees with this development, neither agrees with the definition of ‘queer’. Anniek has had different chats with self-proclaimed gay, male Grindr users, who considered themselves (gays) and lesbians as being part of the societal norm already, while they consider ‘queers’ people who actively renounce this. Three other participants of Anniek thought that ‘queer’ had more to do with your gender identity than sexual identity (probably referring to the term ‘genderqueer’). As these participants would not identify themselves as ‘queer’ at all and others very explicitly choose to do so, we want to listen to them and respect their considerations and choices in this matter. In conclusion: for expedience, next to appealing to both our participants and readers, we have thus decided to stick with the widespread use of LGBTQIA+. Notwithstanding, we do mark that such usage perpetuates problems that sensitive scholarship is trying to recover.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://lgbtqexperiment.com/2019/02/18/is-there-a-difference-between-trans-and-trans-is-trans-offensive/>



## Introduction

The weather is nice today, but we can only feel it through our window. As almost everything else during our fieldwork period, our focus group will be taking place on Microsoft Teams. We enter the online meeting ten minutes early, eagerly waiting on our six participants. While the minutes pass, our worries increase that no one will show up. But there they come, dripping in. We start with some ice-breaking small talk but quickly move on to our prepared set of statements, memes and TikTok videos about which we hope to start a discussion. The conversation arrives at the purposes of online dating:

“I used it as pastime, but nowadays I use it more consciously, as a chance to really get to know someone and to gain social contacts. But also, to learn more about myself, learning to put boundaries, learn what I like and dislike. And, of course, it is also a part confirmation, a boost of self-confidence.”<sup>6</sup>

Alongside more structural motivations around dating as a Dutch LGBTQIA+ individual, we also discuss more niche subjects in the scene. The conversation moves to unicorn hunting. Maarten<sup>7</sup> asks what this means, on which Luna answers:

“Situations where a -often heterosexual- couple is searching for an entertaining bisexual woman for a fun night. But this sexualizes bisexual women, and it effaces bisexual men. I am very against this phenomenon. I understand it can be fun, but it can be very harmful.”<sup>8</sup>

The whole one and a half hours are filled with such interesting explanations, nuances, and points of view. Our participants are educating each other on various subjects. Tamar<sup>9</sup> refers later to unicorn hunting in relation to racism, when she says:

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<sup>6</sup> Luna, white, polyamorous, pansexual, cisgender woman. Focus group on 30/03/2021.

<sup>7</sup> Maarten, white, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 18/02/2021.

<sup>8</sup> Luna, white, polyamorous, pansexual, cisgender woman. Focus group on 30/03/2021.

<sup>9</sup> Tamar, black, lesbian, cisgender woman. Focus group on 30/03/2021.

“On online dating apps I sometimes experience a negative stereotype of how black and queer people are perceived. People often think that I am dominant, or I am being sexualized by interracial couples that practise unicorn hunting. I also often hear that I am straight passing. In the lesbian community it is really like: you are either femme, stan, or dyke. There are a lot of boxes, but are you allowed to be something in between? That freedom is not something that I experience.”<sup>10</sup>

The night ends with a greater understanding of what others go through in their quest for love. Our participants express that they are happy that an open-end conversation with like-minded people can take place in a safe space. Immediately after the meeting, we flirt with the idea of organizing another focus group.

The vignette above is a description from the focus group we organized on the 30<sup>th</sup> of March. It illustrates the advantages and disadvantages that LGBTQIA+ people experience when dating online. Related to these experiences are the norms and stereotypes related to different axes of identity. Especially gender is mentioned many times, as Luna<sup>11</sup> mentions sexualizing bisexual woman and Tamar<sup>12</sup> talks about dividing lesbian women according to how “feminine” or “masculine” way the look. Luna mentions that the notions around these stereotypes can either give a boost or dent in people’s self-confidence. While images of the LGBTQIA+ community in the media have increased recently, realistic representations of lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ people are rarely seen, which is enforcing the static gender norms and stereotypes that are portrayed. In general, when minority groups are shown, this is from the same perspective over and over again. A white, middleclass man, for example, knows many faces in the media, but a black, trans woman is still extremely underrepresented. Even if so, she is often represented as a villain (Reitz 2017, 2). Furthermore, we found that there is barely any research on the lived dating experience of transgender people that is not about violence, sexual risks, or acceptance, especially in the Netherlands. As Stuart Hall (1989, 80) says, identity is not constructed outside,

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<sup>10</sup> Tamar, black, lesbian, cisgender woman. Focus group on 30/03/2021.

<sup>11</sup> Luna, white, polyamorous, pansexual, cisgender woman. Focus group on 30/03/2021.

<sup>12</sup> Tamar, black, lesbian, cisgender woman. Focus group on 30/03/2021.



but within representation. We firstly aim to shine more light on the effect of superficial- and underrepresentation.

We believe an anthropological research can deepen the understanding of the relationship between gender norms and stereotypes and the experience of LGBTQIA+ persons during their online partner search, as it captures lived experiences in a holistic, cultural relativistic and critical perspective. We do so by substantiating this call from society with theory. Croce (2015, 4) has contributed to the work of queer critics by explaining that lesbians and gays have readjusted their own desires and interests in a way that they would be more compatible with traditional, heterosexual values and institutions, even though earlier homosexual movements regarded these the main cause of their oppression. This means that it is important for us to look at the impact of this heteronormative hegemonic masculine order - a particular set of practices that subordinates anything that is not hetero and men (García-Gómez 2020, 392) - on a lot of people living in the Netherlands today. When knowing what the impact of gender norms and stereotypes (affected by (under)representation) is in the context of a heteronormative hegemonic masculine society, more attention could go to portraying the LGBTQIA+ people simply as people experiencing life.

Thereby, we find it important to emphasize the contesting of gender norms and stereotypes as well. We certainly do not intend to portray our findings from a victimized standpoint, where LGBTQIA+ people have no agency and are solely oppressed by the hegemonic order. With this thesis, we aim to show how different layers of society and their intertwinement shape the online dating experience of our participants, yet how our participants shape the experience themselves. In conclusion, our purpose is to broaden the body of knowledge on this subject in a nuanced way by answering the following question:

*How do Dutch LGBTQIA+ people experience gender norms and stereotypes during their online partner search?*

To answer our main question, we will use professor of linguistics, García-Gómez' conceptualization of gender norms: they legitimize a subject position for anyone who is not the perceived "normal" and they prescribe particular social behavior and determine social group relations (García-Gómez 2020, 393). This is closely related to our idea of stereotypes, which social theorist Cover (2004, 83) explains as a set of symbolic and connotative codes fixing

ascribed social behavior in an image. We furthermore draw from communication scholars Enli and Thumin's (2012, 5) explanation of the concept of online self-representation in relation to media. The media represents things in a way that is, according to them, always political. The individual mediates itself as a part of this online environment, by strategically choosing what aspects of the self to represent and when to represent them, resulting in a particular form of (political) self-representation. Lastly, it is important to demarcate what we mean by 'partner'. Since we will specifically look at dating apps, the type of partner we will elaborate on will either be a potential romantic partner or a quick 'hook-up' (Vrangalova 2015).

### **Population, methods and ethics**

We performed a comparative study between Dutch LGBTQIA+ people who identify either as non-binary, men and/or women.<sup>13</sup> As an object of our research is to shine more light on the diversity and fluidity of the LGBTQIA+ community, our participants gender identity does not have to be a strict decision between masculine or feminine. We are aware that such a "vague" subdivision between male and female may feel arbitrary, but we aim to remain open and true to the lived experiences of our participants. Besides having noticed that the Dutch literature on this community is scarce, it often approached from a heteronormative perspective, in which the binary thinking – the idea that there are only men versus women and heterosexuals versus homosexuals – comes forward, which we aim to prevent in this thesis.

Intending to include the lived experiences of all LGBTQIA+ people, we both have spoken to thirteen persons, twenty-six in total, including: three lesbian women; four gay men; three bisexual women; three bisexual men; two trans women; one trans man; one non-binary trans person; two queer women; three non-binary queers; one queer man; one questioning man and woman and one asexual, non-binary person. Furthermore, three women and one man explicitly defined themselves as pansexual, and a few participants could not define their sexual identity with one of these letters (besides, these identifications can of course overlap). These are all people between age 18-29 that are romantically or sexually online dating (an)other person(s) right now or have been (online) dating (an)other person(s) up and until one year ago. We have

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<sup>13</sup> Dewi hereby focused on self-identified women and non-binary persons, Anniek on self-identified men and non-binary persons.

chosen this selection criteria, because the dating experience and corresponding feelings were therefore still fresh in our participants' mind. Elsewise, we have consciously selected a diverse group of participants regarding all their axes of identity, for example skin color, relationship (forms), sexual kinks and (dis)abilities, as from an assemblage perspective (Puar 2012) a diverse group of people makes us able to explore a diverse range of experiences concerning our research topic. As we only conducted research in the time of a COVID-19 pandemic, it was all about online dating. Even though we have focused on participants living in the Randstad, we had the opportunity to widen our research population, as our ethnographic research took place online. With the tools that the internet has, we were able to conduct a research with a much greater scope and find a wide variety of participants in a selective and targeted way. It is thus important to mark that some of our participants have also had online dating experiences outside of the Randstad. Thereby, were we able to better grasp the nuance in the lived experience of our participants.

Throughout our online fieldwork period, that took place from February 8th until April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021<sup>14</sup>, we have used a myriad of techniques tailored to the situation of living in a pandemic. This means that our first concern was that everything needed to happen safely for both our participants and for us. We created an Instagram page where we introduced ourselves, made a call about our search for participants and posted a monthly update for our followers.<sup>14</sup> Hence, we started by finding our participants through the snowball method. Being active on social media was not only a way to build our personal, small network, yet it themed our phone algorithms wholly LGBTQIA+. Furthermore, we created accounts on various dating apps<sup>15</sup> on which we explained who we are, that we were looking for participants, and gathered data. People who were interested were able to 'match' with us so that we were able to further contact them.

To come as close to participant observation as possible and thereby gain knowledge of underlying cultural acts and artifacts in other ways, we attended various online seminars and workshops that had a varying level of interaction. We practiced 'being there' on fora, (our) Instagram page(s) and group pages on Facebook, Reddit, and Discord, by commenting on posts or posting something ourselves. When interviewing our participants, we scheduled either an unstructured or semi-structured interview with them, that happened online or at a safe distance

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/anniekdewi/>

<sup>15</sup> These will be discussed in the context.

outside. We have tried to keep our online interviews as similar as possible to offline interviews, to be able to compare our data. Furthermore, we practiced visual anthropology by discussing memes and dating profiles with the interviewee, which created a collaborative method that helped us gain a more in-depth understanding of our participants. In our last weeks, we have organized an online focus group with six participants, to let them discuss the subject with each other, instead of us. To guarantee that we do not assume our objectivity in any case, we have theorized our subjectivity by being very reflexive throughout the fieldwork and while writing this thesis. We will make our biases as explicit as possible throughout the empirical chapters and discussion of this thesis, so others may use these in judging our work.

To analyze all our transcribed interviews and focus group data we have made use of the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Next to this, we developed our field notes into analytical notes on paper and discussed it afterwards with our key informants. As we attach great value at maintaining the privacy and anonymity of our participants, we have chosen to work with the safest online tools as possible and stored non-pseudonymized data on a local hard drive. All this data will be deleted after completing our bachelor's degree. We always double-checked informed consent and verified during and at the end of the interviews if any possible harm was done while talking about this intimate subject. Lastly, we have reassured our participants that they could contact us if they had any doubts or regrets about their participation.

## **Thesis outline**

Our thesis starts with our theoretical framework, in which we lay the groundwork for our research. With this acquired knowledge we are better equipped to analyze our data. Our theoretical framework is supplemented with the context, which explains who our research population is and in what context they find themselves in. The main part of our thesis follows with our empirical chapters. This is where our data will be linked to theory. It consists of three chapters. The first one explains how our participants define gender and sexual identity, and how those two intertwine according to them. Herein, we combine the data of all our (female, male, and non-binary) participants, as their thoughts and experiences concerning this chapter have a lot of common facets. The second chapter is built around media representation, its impact on the gender performance of LGBTQIA+ people and the difference that living in a socially isolated

pandemic makes in this. It firstly discusses the influence of the most common gender norms and stereotypes on our male, female, and non-binary participants' gender performance separately, as they have a rather distinct sociocultural and theoretical background. All of our participants' data is, however, combined again when we explain what media representation and COVID-19 generally have to do with this. The third and last chapter brings the analysis of the first two chapters together and applies it to the dating experience of our participants. We do this through laying out in- and exclusion mechanisms in the online dating environment. Since it contains different arguments for our different groups of participants again, first men's data will be discussed, secondly women's, and then the data of (both) our trans\* participants. We finally conclude this thesis with a summary of the empirical chapters, a deeper comparison between our participant groups and a discussion, after which we lay out our reflections and thoughts on further research.

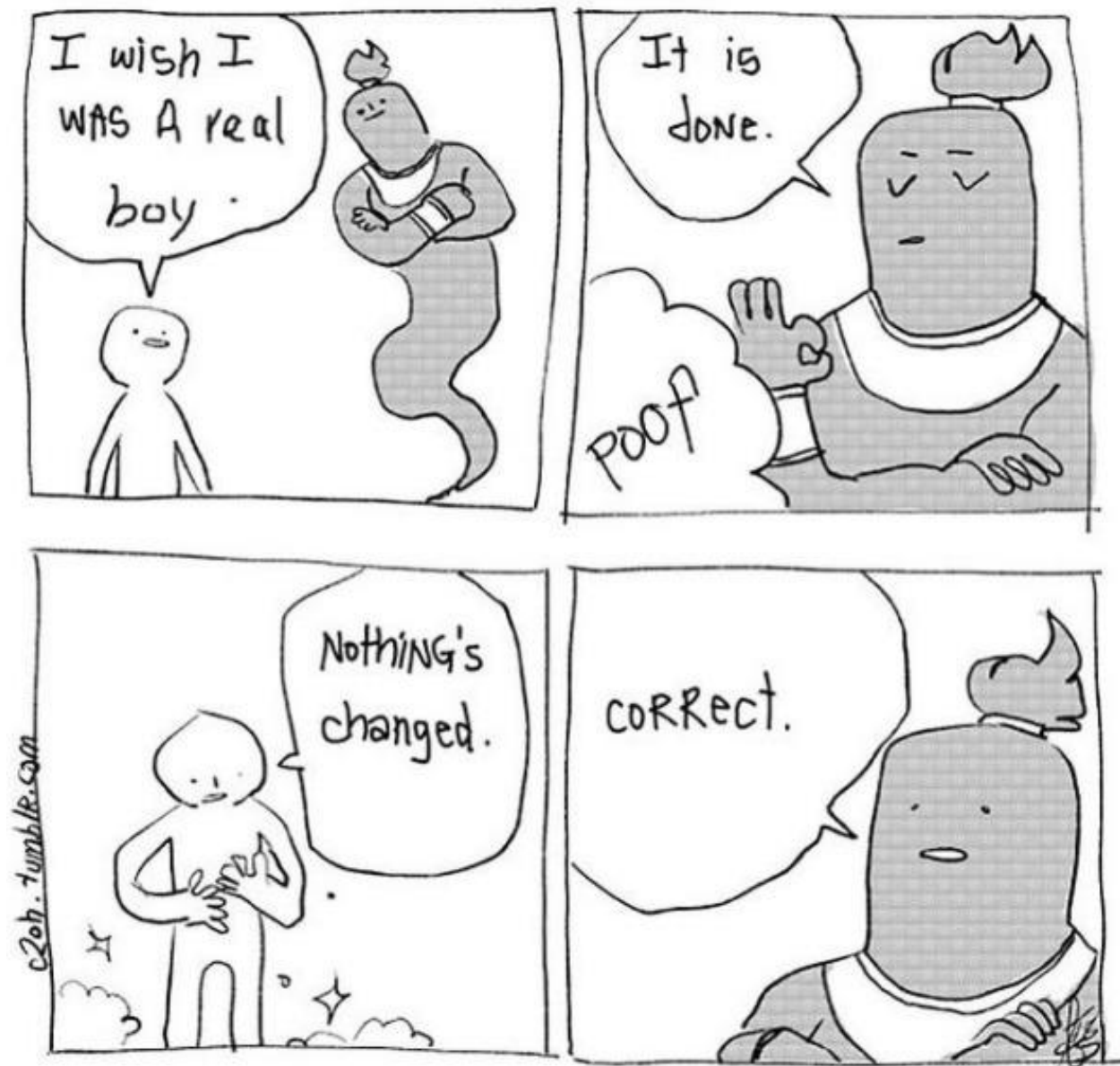


Figure 2: Black and white trans cartoon drawing. Digital Image.

# Theoretical Framework

## Chapter 1: Introduction - gender and sexual identity

Anniek van Weeghel

*To be able to understand how LGBTQIA+ people experience gender norms and stereotypes, it is important to firstly elaborate on the notions of gender and sexual identity that underly this research question. What does gender mean for an individual, and how is this related to the construction of gender and sexual identity on a societal level? What makes gender performable? These are questions that will be answered in this introductory paragraph. Thereby, the concepts intersectionality and assemblage will be introduced as an analytical tool which we will use throughout our research.*

### 1.1 Social constructionism (Anniek)

As human beings we like to keep our social world manageable. Therefore, we classify all kinds of aspects of it – such as people, practices, and ideas – into categories, based on their shared characteristics. Sex and gender are such social ordering principles (Scott 1986, 1056). They are sometimes mistakenly confused with each other, but it is important to make a distinction between “sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity” (Butler 1988, 522). Gender, the sociocultural categories of masculinity and femininity, is often seen as an essentialist, natural thing - just like sex. However, gender is constructed by human beings in everyday life (Butler 1988, 520). The form and content of the gender categories can consequently differ a lot today from 50 years ago and can be completely different in the Netherlands relative to Kenya.

The perception of differences between the two sexes is so deeply rooted in our society, that it also caused a perception of a universal opposition of two gender categories. The physical differences between the sexes so have become defining traits of human essence (Scott 1986, 1059). In the West sexual identity is also seen as a binary, with heterosexuality being the norm (DeMello 2014, 147). This plays a major role in the lived experiences of people. We have been socialized our whole lives with gendered and sexualized norms associated with femininity and masculinity. The perception that there are only men versus women and heterosexuals versus homosexuals, with typical traits belonging to those categories, excludes persons who cannot

identify with these notions. Like Stuart Hall (1989, 80) again, states, identity is constructed “not outside, but within representation.” Often, sexual identity and gender non-conformity are being conflated, with gay men being seen as feminine and gay women being seen as masculine. The way LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual + any other possibility of not being hetero or cisgender) people dress and behave – which challenges the gender norms – are therefore considered “proof” for being, for instance, gay (DeMello 2014, 8). However, many gay or transgendered people, “in fact, emphasize that gender identity can be ambiguous and fluid rather than fixed and unchanging” (DeMello 2014, 8). We will go further into the fluidity of gender as an axis of identity in the next chapter.

## **1.2 The hegemonic order (Anniek)**

Since gender and sexual identity are embedded in our social world, it is a primary way of signifying social relationships and the hierarchy between them. Social relationships are, after all, power relationships (Scott 1986, 1069). The appreciation of one category over the other is a matter of ideology, reflecting a system of ideals. Nevertheless, “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas and Thomas 1928, 571-572). The gender and sexual identity binary (and conflation of those) therefore has a big, practical influence on the position of men, women and persons who identify otherwise, and the relationship between them. Hegemonic masculinity is a system of idealistic masculine gender practices that serves the legitimatization of patriarchy and heterosexuality, assuring the dominant position of men and heterosexuals, along with the subordination of women and LGBTQIA+ persons in our society today (Anderson-Martinez and Vianden 2014, 287). Because of this system, masculinity is generally highly valued, and femininity devalued – a phenomenon called ‘femmephobia’ (Hoskin 2020, 2). This can cause a big, internalized conflict for, for example, gay men; on the one hand are they portrayed as being socialized (because of their sex) and on the other hand are they portrayed as not a “real man” in Western contexts (McNeal 1999, 359). In our fieldwork we will further explore how gender roles are being experienced in the partner search of Dutch LGBTQIA+ people.



### **1.3 The performativity of gender (Annie)**

People do have a certain amount of agency to fight societal gender structures. As Simone de Beauvoir (1973, 301) states, “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman.” An individual continuously constructs its gender through a stylized repetition of acts. Without those acts, there would be no gender at all. You can understand the gendered self by looking at bodily gestures, movements, and other acts – not because gender shapes these actions, but because it is being shaped through them (Butler 1988). This is called ‘performativity’. By means of performance of existing actions, individuals can repeat scripted gender meanings and norms, which causes them to feel natural – called ‘internalization’. On the other hand, the performative essence of gender gives individuals the chance to reconstruct its meanings and norms (Butler 1988, 520). Being a gender - whatever this gender may be, means that you are engaged in a continuous interpretation of bodies from a cultural lens, and therefore dynamically positioned within a field of cultural opportunities (Butler 1986, 36).

To reconstruct gender meanings and norms and the oppressions and privileges that go hand in hand with these, people thus need to make use of their body as a site of resistance. People can threaten the social order by marking their bodies differently than dominant bodily norms – for example norms what femininity looks like - would prescribe (DeMello 2014, 18). For the gay community, for instance, body modification practices such as tattooing, have long been a visible marker of their sexual orientation as well as a form of liberation (DeMello 2014, 218). In chapter three we will go further into the gender performance of LGBTQIA+ people.

### **1.4 Intersectionality and assemblage (Dewi)**

Intersectionality has been the dominant framework of feminist scholars in the last several decades. An idea coined by Crenshaw (1991) explains that axes of identity, such as race and sexual identity, intersect with each other, forging someone’s identity. This idea made a large impact on feminist women of color who are often ignored in (white, upper-class) feminist struggles because of the color of their skin, and from racial struggles because of their gender. This opened up conversations about systematic exclusions.

In addition to Butler’s idea of gender as being performative, Stachowiak (2017) described the idea of a genderqueer identity not as one axis of identity that you do or do not “own”, but rather a verb. Doing or performing gender then, means that your identity is constituted of being

and doing simultaneously. It is a space in which people contest, confirm and/or negate gender norms (Stachowiak 2017, 542). The idea of assemblage is a valuable addition to intersectionality because of its fluidity. We strive to stay away from the defined categories that intersectionality preaches. The categories that are the building blocks within intersectionality, are actions and encounters within the assemblage approach; an everchanging web of connections, feelings, and attitudes. We want to approach our research from the point of view that axes of identity are indeed overflowing, interconnecting and never completely defined, to distance ourselves from the binary thinking warned for in the beginning of this chapter. An assemblage approach focuses on such connections and relationships between axes of identity - this is what gives these axes meaning (Puar 2012, 57).

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen in this chapter, sex and gender are social ordering principles, constructed by human beings in everyday life through gender performance. Often, sexual orientation and gender non-conformity are being conflated, which means that LGBTQIA+ people's gender role is assumed, just by their sexual orientation. In the next chapter we will examine how LGBTQIA+ people are being represented in visual culture and what consequences stereotypes about them have. Furthermore, we introduced the idea of intersectionality and assemblage, to make more in-depth analyzations of gender norms and stereotypes. Like queer anthropologists, we will make sure that the concepts we address are viewed holistically.

## **Chapter 2: Gender norms and stereotypes in visual culture**

*Dewi van der Kuip*

*This chapter concerns the normative gender norms and stereotypes derived from popular culture. We will show that because of existing power relations within a hegemonistic order, stereotypes become internalized and normalized. Thereby, we will show how these discourses work within visual culture; how gender norms and stereotypes are continuously reconfirmed through the coding and decoding of (media) representations.*

### **2.1 Stereotypes**

We have seen in the first chapter, gender can be conceptualized in other ways than the intersectional versus assemblage approach. Gender is also a way in which the world is organized and shows how power relations are expressed. Therefore, it is important to look at stereotypes. If gender is power, then it would seem logical if the gender that holds the power, is the one who gets to make the decisions about what can be seen in, for example, visual culture. This is just one way in which the hegemonic order expresses itself. To explore this further, let us conceptualize what we mean by stereotypes. Stereotypes (or norms) are shared cognitive representations of a social category (Cascalheira and Smith 2019, 632). Stereotypes enable people to make distinctions between different social groups, which often happens without conscious reflection or intent. Stereotypes are reinforced and reconfirmed anywhere, anytime through media representations.

### **2.2 Stereotypes in visual culture**

What is important now, is the social identity theory; the idea that a person looks positively to its own in-group (the same social category) and negatively to its out-group (another social category) (Cascalheira and Smit 2019, 631). This thus predicts one's preference when it comes to social relationships and non-platonic partners. Appadurai's (2006) thinking about 'the fear of small numbers' is then also important. The tendency of people to categorize each other in majority, minority, out of fear of discrimination, causes the existence of the LGBTQIA+ community. This is a coping mechanism to endure the hardships coming from the cishet majority of the Netherlands, by standing stronger together (Appadurai 2006, 11). It also says something

about the prominence of stereotypes. Within the hegemonic order, the male gaze is more often the represented gaze in visual media than any other gaze (Mulvey 1989, 67). This male gaze is the creation of visual media from the perspective of white, heterosexual middle/upper-class men (Evans and Nixon 2013, 258). Therefore, it lacks an assemblage approach. This gaze is characterized by the idea that it is just one point of view instead of the potential intertwinement of axes of identity. When this is applied to the social identity theory, we can deduct that the created stereotypes in visual media are there because people reflect positively to their own in-group (which is thus the in-group of white heterosexual middle/upper-class men). The importance of this line of thought will be made clear in following chapters.

Even though LGBTQIA+ representation has been increasing in the last decades, it is often still problematic (McInroy and Craig 2016, 34). This stereotypical representation is that of villains, criminals, mentally or physical ill people, or victims of violence (McInroy and Craig 2016, 34). Thereby, it lacks diversity in class, ethnicity, age, (dis)ability and certain LGBTQIA+ sub-groups (trans men or non-binary people). Especially for adolescents, lack of representation causes less access to identity-related information, which then diminishes identity development and -presentation (McInroy and Craig 2016, 35). Sociologist Patel (2019) speaks of ‘selective racial representation’ with which she talks about the idea that “brown girls can’t be gay”. This is a constructed narrative by western media that mostly represents white and (to a lesser extent) black women (Patel 2019, 10). Due to this invisibility, South Asian queer women remain the colonial “Other”. This increases micro aggressive behavior towards them and thus puts them in a marginalized position even more (Patel 2019, 11).

To be able to analyze stereotypes in visual culture, one could make use of encoding and decoding. According to Hall (1980) we all possess a framework of knowledge to interpret what “creators of the gaze” mean when creating visual material. Both creators and receivers of visual media have a certain framework of knowledge with which they encode (put meaning in) and decode (interpret the meaning of) this visual material. Furthermore, internalization is the idea that some codes are so naturalized into a culture, that people forget they are constructed; think of stereotypes (Hall 1980, 508). Keeping in mind the focus on online dating environments, these notions about internalizations of stereotypes through coding are a useful tool to analyze these environments in the following chapters.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have seen how stereotypes take their position in media representations. The continuing coding of messages through stereotypes in the context of the male gaze can cause for an internalization of the ideas that lie within these codes because they can feel so naturalized. By using an assemblage lens, we can look at these processes in a more fluid way. This may have the result that people are then less connected to essentialized notions of identities and could thus separate themselves from stereotypes. This could take shape in practice by emphasizing that gender is a spectrum and that stereotypes are just one pin on a larger range.

The following chapters will discuss how people deal with these images, what they do to be found attractive.

## **Chapter 3: LGBTQIA+ people performing gender**

*Anniek van Weeghel*

*Now that we have seen how notions of gender and sexual identity become internalized and how power dynamics influence this process, this paragraph will explore how LGBTQIA+-people deal with the gender norms and stereotypes ruling over them. What moves them to either conform themselves ((un)consciously) to the notions of their gender and sexual identity, or actively contest those?*

### **3.1 Visual “proof”**

Homosexual people can make their “deviant” sexual orientation socially readable in heteronormative spaces by adopting visual markers on their body (Cover 2004, 86). Self-stereotyping often occurs through this subjective performativity of the body, for example, through looks. Some scholars claim that lesbian and gay communities carry their own masquerade system, consciously selected identities that include certain fashion and language styles (Cover 2004, 87). Cover (2004, 87) himself does agree that the homosexual culture includes certain “survival tactics”, usually by either undermining or hyperperforming gender signifiers, but does not agree with Harvey and Shalom (1997, 13–14), who state that this is only a completely conscious, theatrical act. We will show how, in line with Cover, societal norms and stereotypes rule in some way over different LGBTQIA+ people while they perform their gender, since they ((un)consciously) navigate their gender expressions within a hegemonic masculine and heteronormative culture (Johnson 2005).

### **3.2 Men performing gender**

While trying to maintain their masculine gender privilege, despite their sexual identity, many gay men worldwide actively attempt to disassociate themselves with femininity by exaggerating aspects of hegemonic masculinity, therefore reinforce this oppressive ideology (Johnson 2005, 448). In Anderson-Martinez and Vianden’s (2014, 296) research in the United States among white, gay college men, participants concealed their gay identity, unless they felt safe in their surroundings. They described diverse means of maneuvering masculine norms, including adapting physical appearances, behaviors, and attitudes to conform to the norms (2014, 294).

Their masculine performance did not alter much from heterosexual men but differed in a way that they firstly interpreted gender cues from a unique lens of gay sexual identity. Consequently, homophobia – negative attitudes towards homosexuality - and stereotypes became a component of their masculine identity development, compromising them to develop a masculine identity of their own (Anderson-Martinez and Vianden 2014, 287).

Johnson's (2005) ethnographic fieldwork research in a country-western gay bar demonstrates how dancing the two-step together provides a recreational opportunity for his participants to both challenge and reinforce dominant, heteromasculine ideologies. Whereas these ideologies today label intimacy between the same genders as synonymously with sex, the image of two gay men dancing together and holding each other proves the opposite: a moment of non-sexual intimacy. However, in the process of deciding who takes which role while dancing, the men even create their own gender binary, assigning the roles based on the position they take during sex. 'Tops' (dominants) are actively masculine and thus leaders, 'bottoms' (receivers) are passively feminine and thus followers (Johnson 2005, 458-461). This argument is in line with a process what Croce (2015, 4) calls 'homonormativity', meaning that lesbian and gay people have readjusted their personal desires and interests to make them more compatible with heterosexual traditional values and institutions, even though earlier homosexual movements regarded these heterosexual values and institutions as the main cause of their oppression.

### **3.3 Women performing gender**

Lesbian gender identity development has been woven into group membership for a long time. The standard for lesbians is often 'butch' (stereotypically masculine) or 'femme' (stereotypically feminine) (Krakauer and Rose 2002, 33). When a lesbian first comes out, her physical appearance is likely to change, conveying her group membership and serving as a sexual signal for prospective partners. Krakauer and Rose (2002, 33) found that most of their participants' appearance changed into the direction of 'butch', meaning, for instance, having shorter hair and no make-up on. Similarly, Wright (2008) describes in her qualitative comparative study about lesbian and heterosexual female firefighters in the UK, how the openly lesbian women could avoid the over-protectiveness and unwanted sexual attention from male colleagues by identifying with certain "masculine" forms of behavior. Following these examples, lesbians seem to experience less pressure to conform to heteronormative feminine norms, such as having less

body weight. However, the shorter they have come out, the more pressure they thus may feel to apply to lesbian peer group norms instead (Krakauer and Rose 2002, 41).

### **3.4 Trans-men and -women performing gender**

Although gay women and men struggle with performing their gender identity because of hegemonic gender norms, Croce (2015, 15) explains through the concept of homonormativity that certain LGBTQIA+ people are even more excluded in our society, such as transgender persons. Trans athletes, for example, are often disciplined and punished for revealing the arbitrary relationship between sex, gender, and the body (Semerjian and Cohen 2006, 41). It might therefore be critical for their survival to blend (partly) into the gender binary. Meanwhile, some actually take pleasure in embodying queer identities that disrupt the gender binary. For example, more and more trans persons do not consider a total body transformation determinative for their trans identity (Semerjian and Cohen 2006, 37).

### **Conclusion**

What we have seen in this chapter is that, among both LGBTQIA+ persons who identify as (trans)men and/or (trans)women, there are two practices going on in constructing their gender identity: ((un)conscious) restricting and reinforcing the dominant norms and stereotypes. What is being practiced is very much context dependent, which calls for an assemblage approach. In the next chapter we will examine how gender performance flows through in their partner search.



## **Chapter 4: The role of gender norms and stereotypes in the search for a partner in an online dating environment**

*Dewi van der Kuip*

*We have described the presence of gender norms and stereotypes and how those are contested and confirmed by LGBTQIA+ people through performativity. Now, we will look at the role of gender norms and stereotypes in relation to self-representation and the (re)affirmation of stereotypes in the search for a partner among LGBTQIA+ people.*

### **4.1 Male stereotyping**

We have seen in chapter two that stereotyping is the in- and exclusion of people in your social group in an (often) unconscious way. It is likely that on online dating-apps, where people swipe or scroll until they see someone they deem worthy to chat with, stereotypes and the classification into social groups happens quickly without much cognitive effort (Cascalheira and Smith 2019, 632).

Several scholars have written about the conforming to heteronormativity among gay men on online dating platforms. Valocchi (2005) studied stereotyping on dating-apps among men who have sex with men, and he found out that stereotyping predominantly happens over two axes of identity: gender and race. Gender identities are often experienced as fixed and stable, and correspond with behaviors, social institutions, and media representations. However, this does not mean that these identities are not socially constructed. Rather, it proves the ideological power that lies within essentialist notions of our “selves,” which originates in the hegemonic order (Valocchi 2005, 754). The research of Cascalheira and Smith (2019) showed that men on dating apps have a clear preference for muscular, white men over non-white men or more effeminate men, showing heteronormativity. Valocchi, illustrated that drag queens said that they were attracted to masculine men and gay men were not attracted to drag queens because they were too feminine (2005, 758). Many men described themselves on the apps according to the gender-power nexus; they explicitly stated not to be a feminine guy but “a real man” (García-Gómez 2020). Sarson (2020) explained the idea of “straight-acting” as performance by conforming to hegemonic masculine gender norms, which is afforded higher cultural value (Sarson 2020, 2). Some men reported in the interviews that they start with straight-acting to

improve their chances on the apps (Sarson 2020, 9). Men reported to chat with a direct tone and continuously seeking sex to come over as more masculine.

#### **4.2 Women conforming to heteronormativity**

For lesbians in an online dating environment, something else emerges from the literature. Here, it is the classification in different “subcategories” of lesbianism. Hightower (2015) wrote about an US-based online platform concerning the labels butch, femme and queer members as were also discussed in chapter three through Krakauer and Rose (2002). Women reported in her study that these labels play a significant role in identity formation when it comes to finding your place as a lesbian when looking for a partner (Hightower 2015, 34).

We will here discuss some aspects of lesbians conforming to the heteronormative hegemonic order even though a lot had been written about the objectification of lesbians. Lesbian stereotypes reinforce the idea that lesbian sexual identity is constructed within heterosexual hegemonic power relations (Gordon 2006, 173). When sociologist Gordon asked in her interviews to white, middle-class lesbians in the US how this hegemonic order played out in their dating life, most of them answered that they often do not even know whether they are on a date or simply with a friend (Gordon 2006, 177). There was a lack of defined roles within lesbian dating, the “dating rules” were unclear because there is no man present. This shows the role of heteronormativity in lesbian dating, as did the earlier discussed labels about the binary definition of lesbians. Another form of heteronormativity within lesbian dating is that informants told Gordon that monogamy plays an important role. Within heterosexual relationships, monogamy is more expected from women than it is from men which causes lesbian relationships to experience this pressure even more (Gordon 2006, 179). Queer women, and lesbians in particular, sometimes oppose the idea of monogamy as part of heteronormativity because they see marriage (and thus monogamy) as a patriarchal system from which they want to detach themselves (Jackson and Scott 2004, 152). Bisexual women, experience a pressure to be non-monogamous in another way. Because bisexuality is thought of as a mix between heterosexuality and homosexuality, this supposedly necessitates both forms of sexual relationships simultaneously, which is not the case (Klesse 2005, 448).

Lastly, participants noted that when finding a partner, they were hesitant to come across as “sexy” because, as they said, the idea of sexy comes from the male gaze (Gordon 2006, 183).

### **4.3 Trans-men and -women experiencing external influences**

For transgender people, conforming to gender norms and stereotypes is more often an explicit external pressure. Firstly, they are often excluded from the dating scene since a significant amount of people reported to not want to date a transgender person (Blair and Hoskin 2018, 2075). Thereby, transgender people reported to feel hesitantly to date due to their fear of rejection (Hines 2006, 361). As discussed in chapter two, media representation shapes cultural knowledge and identity formation. Trans representation is often hypersexualized, with the pressure to come across as ‘passing’ as cisgender. This may sensationalize their identity (McInroy and Craig 2015, 607). This is then shaping the ideas cisgender people have about transgender people and creates fetishization when it comes to dating (Ashley and Roberston 2020, 216). Because of these existing stigmas around them, they try to anticipate others’ reaction by conforming to (gender)norms (Fernandez and Birnholtz 2019, 4). Therefore, online dating environments could pose a helpful solution, since you can do everything anonymously and safer (Hines 2006, 361).

### **Conclusion**

Different studies show us that both dating gay men and women perform their gender in a (un)conscious heteronormative way. For gay men, literature review suggests that there is a widespread notion that masculine men are more attractive. Sometimes gay men reported to conform to patriarchal stereotypes, and sometimes they contested them by reclaiming agency while stating to be feminine (García-Gómez 2020, 405). This contrasts with lesbians who expressed various implicit notions of heteronormativity. Which were nevertheless noted and (sometimes) contested. Transgender people, lastly, experienced explicit notions of heteronormativity from cisgender people.

## **Context**

### **Demographic overview of research population**

*Dewi van der Kuip*

The following statistical overview, derived from three studies, show us how many LGBTQIA+ people are living in the Netherlands; 4 to 6 percent is gay, lesbian or bisexual. 0,6 to 0,7 percent is transgender. 0,5 percent is intersex, and 3.9 percent is genderfluid (Boss and Felten 2019, 2). Because we will conduct a comparative study between women, men, and non-binary people, it is important to bring that nuance into these statistics; 2,3 to 2,8 percent of the men identifies as homosexual and 0,7 to 2,1 percent as bisexual. For women, 1,2 to 1,8 percent identifies as lesbian and 2,1 to 3,3 percent as bisexual. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that according to the COC NL, only 80 percent of LGBTQIA+ people has come out, which make the following statistics not completely representative for all LGBTQIA+ people (COC 2015).

### **Gender norms and stereotypes in the Netherlands regarding LGBTQIA+ people**

*Anniek van Weeghel*

The Netherlands is often perceived as a tolerant and liberal country. The nation has the celebratory status of being gay-friendly and likes to present herself in that way, a concept called 'homonationalism' (Puar 2007, 2). In the 'Randstad,' a conglomerate of the big cities in the Netherlands, there are a lot of organizations and initiatives regarding anything related to LGBTQIA+ issues. Especially the capital city, Amsterdam, is often associated with LGBTQIA+ emancipation (Buijs, Hekma and Duyvendak 2011, 633). From its origin, the Netherlands was a country with strong religious and conservative morals concerning sexual identity, but nowadays the country is more secular in such affairs. Laws in the Netherlands have historically moved from the decriminalization of homosexuality, to protecting homosexuality from discrimination, to partnership recognition for gay couples, to being the first to legally recognize gay marriage in 2001 (Cox 2005, 49). Even though such public policies that allow more individuals access to important institutions are significant first steps, they are not adequate efforts for full social

inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in a society (Badgett 2011, 332). The idea that legal change does not guarantee social change, counts for the Netherlands as well.

Although Dutch citizens claim to be accepting and open-minded towards LGBTQIA+ persons, this frequently turns out to be untrue in practice (Besamusca and Verheul 2014, 130). Yet LGBTQIA+ identities are racialized as inherently Dutch, as they serve to shape and reproduce the same neoliberal values the country stands for (Akachar 2015, 182). The dominant discourse about homosexuality consists partly of the idea that everything went well with gay and lesbian liberation, until Islamic people showed up with their backward, religious tradition. Because of this us-versus-them scheme, LGBTQIA+ people are white in the public eye, and black, migrant and refugee citizens - the gay Other - are virtually invisible in the current Dutch LGBTQIA+ landscape (Wekker 2016, 118). LGBTQIA+ people from an ethnic or religious minority thus hold a deviant social position in the Netherlands from all other LGBTQIA+ people, as they are often portrayed via one axe of their identity, instead of the web of connections between axes of identity that the assemblage approach focuses on. Besides, homonormativity is very much present; while white gay men and lesbians may seem to be regarded as “normal,” deviant queers, such as transgender individuals, are still considered being too “radical” (Akachar 2015, 173).

As the Dutch (popular media) often represent(s) their country as tolerant and liberal, they overshadow some self-reflection. The occurrence of homonationalism in the Netherlands does not mean heteronormative attitudes have been completely surpassed. Recent studies have, in contrast, shown a decline in tolerance towards homosexual identification as well as low acceptance in terms of public displays of homosexuality and gender deviant behavior in the Dutch society. Institutional representatives have even recommended LGBTQIA+ individuals to mask their sexual identity for trying to prevent hate crimes such as anti-gay violence from happening (Patterson and Leurs 2019, 99). Four aspects perceived inherently to homosexuality - anal sex, feminine behavior, public displays, and seduction attempts – did not comply with heteronormative notions of gender and sexual identity found in Amsterdam and therefore formed a “breeding ground” for this sort of violence (Buijs, Hekma and Duyvendak 2012, 647). The kind of stereotypes and gender norms in the Netherlands regarding LGBTQIA+ people mostly have to do with the inverting of gender roles– lesbian women are seen as masculine; gay men are seen as effeminate. The fear for showing any “gay” or “lesbian” signs and being discriminated

correspondently, has ensured that, most Dutch lesbians and gay men have become eager to behave like straight people and prompted them to even criticize their LGBTQIA+ peers for “abnormal” behavior (Hekma and Duyvendak 2012, 629). In the case of transgender people, a survey found that Dutch trans women experienced relatively more social stigma after their transition than trans men, with the reactions of cisgender women being generally more positively than those of cisgender men. Therefore, trans stigmatization in the Netherlands could depend on the gender identification of both the victim and the perpetrator. Negative reactions against trans individuals did decrease after their transition process, yet only in private spheres, not in public (Verbeek et al. 2020, 228).

Most Dutch gay and lesbian people keep their sexual identity performance low key, saying that their sexual identity is only one axis of their identity and not fully determining the way they express themselves. “The absence of strong sexual identities parallels the lack of spatially concentrated gay and lesbian communities” (Hekma and Duyvendak 2007, 443). A lot of Dutch lesbian and gay persons do not feel the need to create their own organizations or events. They just move to housing areas within the Netherlands that are the most gay-friendly and socialize in the bars where they are most accepted. Whenever they do want to organize together, there is a lot of criticism on it, under the guise that LGBTQIA+ emancipation is already finished in the Netherlands (Hekma and Duyvendak 2007, 443). Given that there are a lot of bars, discos, and marital options available, some people state that there is no reason for gay and lesbian people to flaunt their sexual expression in public. Everything is allowed, as long as they do not “bother” others with their openness (Hekma and Duyvendak 2007, 443-444).

### **COVID-19 and online dating in the Netherlands among LGBTQIA+ people**

*Dewi van der Kuip*

On another note, we are currently experiencing a pandemic due to COVID-19. This pushed people to live their lives in an online environment, including their date life. For the behavior of our research population regarding online dating, we will solely look at the time period from which the pandemic started in the Netherlands, which is March 2020. Dutch youth reported increased levels of loneliness during the pandemic, which is caused by the lockdowns that shut down schools and entertainment-, and catering industries which are predominantly youth

activities (Landman 2020). Rutgers Institute (2020) did a quantitative study to ask teenagers how their behavior changed since the start of the pandemic concerning their dating behavior. 15 percent of the teenagers met people via dating apps before the pandemic and 21 percent during (Marra et al. 2020, 3). This shows that the online dating platforms are increasing in popularity in the Netherlands. This wave of new people in search for a partner in times where the youth is more isolated, calls for a deeper understanding of phenomena taking place on dating apps.

Popular dating-apps in the Netherlands that are fit for LGBTQIA+ people are, amongst others, Grindr, Her, Taimi and Tinder. Grindr is an app specifically made for LGBTQIA+ men. It works, just like Tinder and Her, through geolocation; in the app you can see the people who are close to you (Rivera and Bressanin 2013). On a profile are (possibly) age, length and weight displayed. It is also possible to add a profile picture. Since 2018, Grindr limited their options. Before, it was also possible to disclose discriminatory comments in your bio, such as which race you would (not) want to see, and whether you wanted heavier or effeminate men (Shadel 2018). However, one could still find specifications in bio's describing preference based on race, showing that this problem is not yet tackled. Tinder is not specifically tailored for LGBTQIA+ people, but in the settings, it is possible to choose for another sex, the same, or both. It is thus not inclusive for non-binary or intersex people since the app is made around the binary idea of the existence of just two sexes and genders. Her is an app that is made for lesbian, queer, bisexual and straight women, and non-binary people. It is not solely made for finding a partner, it also focuses on making friends, having an overview of LGBTQIA+ events and to collect information about related topics. Lastly, Taimi is a social network, dating app and livestream service. It is a lesser-known app but very LGBTQIA+ inclusive. The options for gender identities are by far the most extensive compared to the other apps. It works furthermore the same as Tinder and Her with the geolocation swipe technique.

Bisexual and transgender people stand out in the context of online dating. Maliepaard (2014, 319) reported that bisexuals have a tough time finding a safe space on the internet because most forums are tailored for people who have an affection for just one sex (monosexuality). There thus lacks a sense of belonging, or sense of community. We are therefore interested in the lived experiences of Dutch bisexual people. Transgender people report to have difficulties whether and when they disclose the fact that they are transgender (Fernandez and Birnholtz 2019, 2). This is sometimes out of safety precautions since the transgender community often

experiences (sexual) violence and harassment because of their identity. Related to this is the fact that in the US less than 20 percent would date a transgender person (Fernandez and Birnholtz 2019, 6). The voice of these groups is thus a valuable addition to the limited body of knowledge.

Both groups mentioned above illustrate the heteronormative layout of the Dutch society. The lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ people in the Netherlands therefore differ than expected from such a “tolerant” society, as discussed before. Emphasizing the lived experiences of the LGBTQIA+ people in the Netherlands aims for more visibility and fluidity of their gender identity. Elsewise, it tries to counter their ascribed, static categories and classifications, which function as a site of LGBTQIA+ oppression (Croce 2014, 17).



Karen: Bisexuals don't  
exist, you're faking it  
because you can't decide  
Me:



*Figure 3: Dr. Doofenshmirtz bisexuals I-don't-care-inator. Digital Image.*

# Empirical Chapter 1: Beyond the Binary

Anniek van Weeghel

The rainbow-colored background makes the audience of this forum immediately clear. With 4.939 pages, it is “meant to be a resource for members of the LGBTA+ community, people who are questioning, or anyone who’s curious,” as its description goes.<sup>16</sup> On the top left, the forum name, ‘LGBT A Wiki,’ can be found, with on the right its logo. The logo looks similar to a camera lens, but in rainbow-style, with the inner layer of the open circle being divided in separate pieces from dark grey to light grey, and the outer layer being divided in separate pieces from red to green. Right beside the logo, there are five tabs: Popular Pages; Community; Discord; Explore and Main Page. Below these, a white box states: “What’s on your mind, ATVW8?”<sup>17</sup>

It is the 18<sup>th</sup> of February, the second week of fieldwork. I am eager to become engaged within the LGBTQIA+ community, but where to start? As I scroll through all the forum posts containing trigger warnings<sup>18</sup> and traumatic experiences, I begin to doubt if I even have the right to find myself in this safe space. Then, however, I remember the forum description: “for anyone who’s curious.” This surely applies to me.

While hanging out online and conducting my first interviews, one word has occurred remarkably often in such a brief period of time, the word ‘gaydar’. I thus decide to gain more insight into this subject and type in: “Do you feel like a gaydar exists? (pls explain in the reply).”<sup>19</sup> Within a few minutes, the first anonymous respondent explains why she chose ‘yes’: “... Like to straight people, gaydar is just seeing the stereotypically “gay” traits of a gender and then being like ‘omg I see a gay person’ ... Since I’m actually part of the community I can see past the stereotypes, and a lot of times I just *know* if that makes sense.” The response gets appreciated with six hearts. The discussion continues for two days, with a total of 28 people voting ‘yes’ and seven voting ‘no’. The

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<sup>16</sup> [https://lgbta.wikia.org/wiki/LGBT A Wiki](https://lgbta.wikia.org/wiki/LGBT_A_Wiki)

<sup>17</sup> This is my anonymous username.

<sup>18</sup> A statement at the beginning of a piece of writing, before the start of a film, etc., warning people that they may find the content very upsetting, especially if they have experienced something similar (Cambridge Dictionary).

<sup>19</sup> <https://lgbta.wikia.org/f/p/4400000000000095242>

last respondent (anonymous as well) addresses me, asking: “Hunny.... do you really think you found this place by choice?”

By posing this question, the last respondent reflects the idea that there is an intrinsic sense which ensures that LGBTQIA+ people find their way towards each other, something larger than life. The comment chiefly captures the thoughts our participants have shared in the past ten weeks: being Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual or any other possibility of not being heterosexual or cisgender is a gut feeling, which, as I will demonstrate, somehow binds you to other LGBTQIA+ people. The forum that I elaborated on above, is one of the many (online) spaces they organize together. Its logo is the current MOGAI (Marginalized Orientations Gender Alignments and Intersex) flag, a proposed, “more inclusive”<sup>20</sup> synonym for LGBTQIA+. MOGAI does not list out all the possible gender and sexual identities, hence it includes everyone whose sexuality or gender deviates from the “standard.” The circle from the “lens” is divided in more colored pieces than the LGBTQIA+ rainbow flag - since it, for example, covers three different shades of orange already – and in all probability stands for a gender and sexuality spectrum with a wider range of possibilities, just like the forum is meant as a resource for identities that are often unknown, unheard from or hard to find information on.<sup>21</sup>

In the following chapter, I will take a closer look at the construction of gender and sexual identity through the multicolored lens of our participants. I will argue that they do not experience a direct connection between these two axes of identity, even though the Dutch society expects this from them, but that an intertwinement between sexual identity and gender expression can indeed be found.

## 1.1 Gender identity

“Gender is a role in society, it has of course something to do with sex and genitalia in its origin, but the term gender is separate from that. It has more to do with how you feel from

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<sup>20</sup> I find it important to mention that this is just one (of many) proposal(s) for a “more inclusive” synonym for LGBTQIA+. There is a lot of disagreement in the community if this is indeed the case, with the biggest criticism being that MOGAI leads to cis het claiming new terms and entering the community.

<sup>21</sup> [https://lgbta.wikia.org/wiki/LGBT\\_A\\_Wiki](https://lgbta.wikia.org/wiki/LGBT_A_Wiki)

the inside, how you experience the world and how you want to present yourself to the world. That, in relation to how you behave, how you dress, yes kind of like that.”<sup>22</sup>

As discussed, gender identity is often seen as something essentialist, which would be the connection to biological sex and genitalia in this case. Jane, just as all our 26 participants, recognizes that gender identity is more than that: the combination of how she felt about her own gender and how she wants to portray or perform this to the world. Her remark about the definition of gender here, is in line with Butler (1988, 520), who also explained gender as a sociocultural category, continuously constructed by individuals through the performance of certain gestures, movements, and acts. Butler would agree with Jane that without those acts, there would be no gender at all.

Like Jane, participant Engel confirms how gender is a social construct, shaped not only within a cultural context, but within social power relations (Scott 1986). Being a non-binary trans person (pre-operation), Engel reveals the arbitrary relationship between sex, gender, and the body (Semerjian and Cohen 2006, 41), as they say to currently own a feminine body, identify as non-binary, yet will go in transition because they have the tendency towards feeling and expressing more “masculine” – at present, they are wearing a white, Victorian-styled, in their own words, “men’s” blouse and neat lacquered “men’s” shoes.<sup>23</sup> About gender identity, Engel states:

“This may sound very strange, but I think that if we as a society put less people into the male or female category, there would be far less trans people, because then you can be anything you want. I think of it as a huge spectrum, like *really* enormous.”<sup>24</sup>

Even though all our participants emphasized that there are many people like Engel, who do not fit into the binary and should not be forced to either, the gender spectrum often came forth during conversations as “everything between man and women”. In line with this, a handful cisgender<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Jane, white, lesbian, trans woman. Semi-structured interview 26/02/2021.

<sup>23</sup> Engel has also said they sometimes prefer wearing “feminine” skirts and dresses pre-operation, as these hide their feminine body features better and prevent them from being misgendered.

<sup>24</sup> Engel, white, asexual, queer, non-binary trans person. Unstructured interview on 09/04/2021.

<sup>25</sup> Even though some of my participants actually do not care about their sex, pronouns, or the way they look and

participants have explicitly shared concerns that gender identification gets too complicated to explain to cisgender others that still think in boxes. On the internet, indeed, the LGBTQIA+ community gets mocked for keeping adding up letters in their name with being called ‘Alphabet Mafia’, in particular by these cisgender people. This illustrates how, because of the physical differences between the sexes, the gender binary has become internalized in many people’s minds to this day (Scott 1986). Accordingly, non-binary people like Engel feel as if they must choose between a feminine or masculine looking body, whilst they identify as neither one of these genders.

## 1.2 Sexual identity

Luna,<sup>26</sup> a pansexual woman, sees sexual identity not necessarily as a scale, but a spectrum,<sup>27</sup> in which the possibilities are seemingly endless. Rens, a queer, non-binary person, wearing an emerald green sweater with the word ‘gender’ spelled on it in white capitals, however, adds nuance to Luna’s perception on sexual identity. After thinking for a while, they state the following:

“I do see sexuality as another spectrum than I would see gender. I myself have experienced it a bit as a kind of sea - when I am thinking visually. It changes a bit continuously, but it sticks around one center. For example, I have gone from gay to queer. I like men a lot more, but non-binary people, or women, or a-gendered people are also ... very nice. *Laughs*. If I then meet a person I like, that [label] does not get in the way.”<sup>28</sup>

In the remarks from both Luna and Rens, a sentiment can be traced that the forum respondents and MOGAI flag (described in the vignette above) also try to disclose: sexual and gender identity are not a personal choice per se, but fluid concepts that are able to change. This is in line with the assemblage approach, where concrete and distinct categories do not really exist (Puar

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therefore do not feel explicitly masculine, they did tell me to be fine with identifying as a man. For this reason, this research covers them as cisgender.

<sup>26</sup> Luna, white, polyamorous, pansexual, cisgender woman. Open interview 18/02/2021.

<sup>27</sup> Luna explained scale as a straight line with, in the case of gender identity, female on the left, male on the right and non-binary in the middle, for example. According to her, a spectrum, however, is a circle, which means things exist outside of the “borders” and there are multiple directions in which you can deviate from the norm.

<sup>28</sup> Rens, white, queer, non-binary person. Unstructured interview on 05/03/2021.

2012). However, 22 out of 26 participants do describe a concrete and strong romantic and sexual preference for the gender identification of their potential partner. Just as Rens explains, sexual identity could therefore still be considered slightly less fluid than gender identity.

In general, participants consider labeling your sexual identity as external politics. Even though they find it easier in communication with others, eleven out of 26 participants told us that it feels like it limits a certain openness while searching a partner, like Rens aims to avoid. And while ‘pansexual’ - feeling romantically, sexually, or emotionally attracted towards people regardless of their gender identity – offers some participants like Luna grip on their sexual identity, four others say that it seems to have the connotation (and pressure) behind it that you would like and have had experience with everyone. Just as Rens, they have therefore refrained from calling themselves ‘pansexual,’ and preferred ‘queer’ instead. Next to ‘queer theory’, ‘queer’ refers to all non-heterosexual and presumably non-normative sexual and gender identities (Wilson 2014, 194). The term gives these several participants a certain peace of mind, as it is practically used for describing that you are open for all persons, even though you might have had a certain preference or experience in your life so far.

‘Queer’ is yet another label. Participant Daan, very active in the kink scene, confidently says to call himself as ‘sexual’ more than anything else, to keep away from labeling at all:

“Whether I'm bisexual or not, I think that's just external politics. Like (*with a high tone of voice*) ‘we don't get it, here's a label.’ Self-identifying I would say: sexual and a pervert. I really don't feel like thinking about it, just so you know what to do with me.”<sup>29</sup>

With saying that the sexual axis of identity is never completely defined, Daan takes the ultimate assemblage point of view (Puar 2012). Correspondingly, he, like many other participants, highly appreciated my openness when saying that I was not sure about my sexual identity, and I have found it hard to label it. Eventually, the freedom to figure your sexual identity out is what our participants are striving for.

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<sup>29</sup> Daan, white, (bi)sexual, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 02/03/2021.

### 1.3 The intertwinement

In the following quote, Celeste talks about the period in which she started exploring her transgender identity:

“It is that when I felt really nice after accepting my sexuality, that I also started thinking about my [gender] identity, and that took quite some time. Because yes: it is a whole other level of things, but yes: they do go hand in hand.”<sup>30</sup>

Celeste has experienced exploring her gender identity as a wholly different, more challenging journey, compared to exploring her sexual identity. When asking participants if they felt like their gender identity is inherently related to their sexual identity, not one participant agreed. After coming out, however, they did experience to become increasingly self-conscious about their gender identity and invested in it – just like Celeste. Therefore, in practice, a correlation between being more fluid in sexual identification and gender identification can be found among our participants. On the internet, a lot of memes depict this:

me: \*comes out as gay\*  
me: \*figures out gender\*



Figure 4: *SpongeBob sexuality and gender. Digital Image.*

So even though our participants' gender identity remained unchanged, a handful participants explained that, as soon as they accepted their sexual orientation, their gender expression did change. Participant Kira explains about the time she had just came out as lesbian:

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<sup>30</sup> Celeste, brown, pansexual, trans woman. Semi-structured interview 14/04/2021.

“Some of my friends told me that I looked boyish. And then I was like, I do not want to hear this. One of them said: ‘yes, you have become gayer since you came out.’ And then I am thinking, yes all right, I did that, but that is more because everything was cropped up inside.”<sup>31</sup>

As discussed earlier in the theoretical framework, when women come out as lesbian, their gender performance is most likely to change towards a more “masculine” presentation (Krakauer and Rose 2002, 33). In Kira’s case, this means that she started to wear wider, more practical clothes and footwear and altered her body language by making coarser movements – when Dewi met her, she was, for instance, wearing shoes from a skate brand. The societal notion that sexual orientation and gender non-conformity are conflated and the way LGBTQIA+ people dress and behave are “proof” for their sexual identity, can be traced in the response of her friends (DeMello 2014, 8). Nevertheless, Kira does not like to hear that she became “gayer”, as for herself, she is the same persons that she has always been – only it was cropped up inside. One reason for the fact that she does express differently since then, could be that she came out at an older age. Like Celeste and nine other non-binary, female<sup>32</sup> and male<sup>33</sup> participants, Kira’s awareness of having a gender identity and the development of it started during puberty. She realised that before, she unconsciously navigated her gender expressions according to the expectations of a hegemonic masculine and heteronormative culture (Johnson 2005). Just as Kira, many participants felt comfortable to be gender non- or less conforming since having a non-normative label on their sexual identity, as this made their family and friends more accepting of a non-normative gender expression as well.

Indeed, every participant experiences the cultural intersection between gender identity and sexual identity. Because the conflation between sexual orientation and gender non-conformity causes gay men to be seen as feminine and gay women to be seen as masculine, their environment started to look differently at them or treat them differently after coming out (DeMello 2014, 8). For instance, gay man Abdi<sup>34</sup> says female colleagues tell him personal information more easily than they would to gay female or heterosexual male colleagues. For a

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<sup>31</sup> Kira, white, lesbian, cisgender woman. Open interview 09/03/2021.

<sup>32</sup> When saying “female participants”, we refer to self-identified females, both trans and cisgender participants.

<sup>33</sup> When saying “male participants”, we refer to self-identified males, both trans and cisgender participants.

<sup>34</sup> Abdi, black, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 29/03/2021.



few others, an effect of this is that they have felt less space to be themselves after coming out, in opposite to Kira. As Rick points out:

“If you suddenly become the gay of the class, then you *are* “the class gay.” Then you will scream the loudest. Then you will start to say: ‘oh, is it because I like men?!’ ... I was just quite far from being myself because I positioned myself a bit to the hysterical.”<sup>35</sup>

Rick says to have overly behaved according to the sociocultural expectations that were imposed upon him. This is in line with Cover (2004, 87) who states that the gay culture includes certain “survival tactics”, of which one is hyper performing gender signifiers. Rick and these other participants, however, did experience a certain development: they felt some identity confusion at first and hyper performed “feminine” characteristics, but as they started to become more comfortable with who they are once they got older and got to meet more like-minded people, this behavior diminished again. Nonetheless, stereotypes and gender norms have been a large component of their identity development (Anderson-Martinez and Vianden 2014). This will be further explained in the next chapter.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have clarified our participants’ perception on gender and sexual identity. Even though many of them take an assemblage point of view on both axes of identity, in practice, their sexual identity is experienced relatively tangible. Furthermore, their sexual identity does not define their gender identity and the other way around, although their gender expression did change after coming out. Societal expectations, based gender norms and stereotypes, have played a big part in this. We will dive further into the workings of gender norms and stereotypes on our participants’ gender expression in chapter two.

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<sup>35</sup> Rick, white, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 15/02/2021.

## **Empirical Chapter 2:**

# **Femmes, Mascs and Butches: Stereotyped Distinctions Within the LGBTQIA+ Community**

*Introduction by Dewi van der Kuip*

To be able to grasp what the influence and impact of stereotypes within the LGBTQIA+ community is, it is important to start by defining them. Broadly said, stereotypes that our participants come across are divided in a masculine to feminine scale. For women that is butch and femme, for men that is masc and femme. We can immediately recognize that human's binary thinking shows itself in these divides. Apparently, and as we will argue in this chapter, the Dutch LGBTQIA+ people still categorize themselves and others around them, accordingly to the heterosexual gaze. This categorization will be analysed through performativity. Apart from the idea that gender and sexuality influence each other, it is important to realize that one's gender performance is inherently linked to the outside world - performativity only exists in relation to other people (Butler 1990). The following paragraphs delve deeper into how this relationship works in different contexts of relationships through the existence and use of stereotypes and gender norms.

## **2.1 Femme and Masc**

*Anniek van Weeghel*

As all my male and non-binary participants, except for one, are interested in having sex with men, they generally feel addressed by stereotypes that concern the male “gay” community and thus all recognize the societal expectation that they would identify and express themselves as more feminine. Typical characteristics that they mention are being hysterical and “bitchy”, walking in certain, flamboyant way, wearing make-up, and having a high voice intonation. Within the LGBTQIA+ community, these men are often called ‘femmes.’

As explained in chapter one, on the one hand, coming out often feels liberating (after a while). Abdi says, for example, that it feels nice not always having to be “a tough man”. On the other hand, ‘femmephobia’ (Hoskin 2020, 2) is very apparent in the Dutch society, as he

experiences that masculinity is generally highly valued, while femininity is devalued. For this reason, Abdi, like nine of the thirteen other participants, still cannot be himself completely, as he regularly oppresses his “feminine” features or emphasizes his “masculine” features consciously. While wearing a dark colored t-shirt and taking another sip from his beer, he casually tells me:

“Especially when I’m alone – you’re much less afraid of that in a group – and I go to the supermarket or the train station, I think: how do I walk, in what voice do I talk? Because you don’t want to provoke a reaction that could cause you to be yelled at or actually surrounded.”<sup>36</sup>

In line with this, participants who identify more towards cisgender, experience fewer negative attitudes in their environment when looking “straight-passing” (Sarson 2020, 2). Within the community, these participants are mostly seen as ‘masc,’ while displaying traditional masculine features such as practical, sober clothes, a muscled body and a “tough” attitude. The Dutch idea that you should not bother others with your openness, captured by the saying “*doe maar normaal, dan ben je al gek genoeg*”,<sup>37</sup> comes forward here and is also shared by for example Rick’s<sup>38</sup> and Alain’s<sup>39</sup> family members as well (Hekma and Duyvendak 2007, 443-444). Comparable to this saying, a few participants even explicitly state themselves to value their and others’ “masculine” characteristics over their “feminine” ones. This shows how femmephobia and homophobia accordingly have become a part of some participants’ identity development (Anderson-Martinez and Vianden 2014), which consequently serves to reinforce the oppressive ideology called hegemonic masculinity (Johnson 2005, 448).

Many participants, including Abdi, therefore feel like they have multiple faces, with most people in their surroundings only knowing one of them. Even though male and non-binary participants say to put feeling comfortable before anything else, feeling comfortable while contesting gender norms depends on feeling safe, which differs again per context and the corresponding spectators (Anderson-Martinez and Vianden 2014; Butler 1990). The male gaze (Gordon 2006, 183) is very much present at any time in public, explained by Engel when talking

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<sup>36</sup> Abdi, black, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 29/03/2021.

<sup>37</sup> “Just act normal, then you are crazy enough already.”

<sup>38</sup> Rick, white, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 15/02/2021.

<sup>39</sup> Alain, white, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 13/03/2021.

about street intimidation. While pointing at their black, winged eyeliner – stating that they normally wear more extensive eye make-up, they say:

“It is always about the man: if you’re a man wearing make-up, you are doing it for the man, but if you’re a woman wearing make-up, you are also doing it for the man.”<sup>40</sup>

As participants share the most fear for aggressiveness of cishet men, they seem to be the most cautious with expressing themselves in such environments, for example their group of cishet, male friends or a male-dominated workplace. Their parents often warn them when looking gender less or non-conforming, out of concern for aggressiveness too. Rick,<sup>41</sup> furthermore, mentioned the fear of not being taken seriously in an academical environment such as the university, as stupidity is stereotypically seen a feminine trait. Meanwhile, two participants themselves believe that their stereotypical LGBTQIA+ expressions do not really belong in their workplaces, both construction and elderly care, and voluntarily adapt to this specific context. For daring to contest gender norms, in contrast, being surrounded by LGBTQIA+ friends<sup>42</sup> has been described as the main support. Alain,<sup>43</sup> committed to drawing and crafting his own (drag) outfits, gave the example that his queer friends have encouraged him to actually wear these and put on make-up when going out.

For Siem, the reason for not contesting gender norms is particularly the enforced gender binary (Scott 1986). As a trans man in transition, he would only dare to wear nail polish again once he has fully gone through the process – otherwise the hospital may not believe he really identifies as a man:

“I am now undergoing treatment at a transgender clinic and once I arrived there with nail polish and a women's coat. And I thought, well, you know, there are so many men wearing black nail polish these days. And that coat doesn't bother me much, I just wear it until it breaks and then I'll see. But then my psychiatrist said: ‘well, but you're still

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<sup>40</sup> Engel, white, asexual, queer, non-binary trans person. Unstructured interview on 09/04/2021.

<sup>41</sup> Rick, white, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 15/02/2021.

<sup>42</sup> Eleven out of thirteen male and/or non- binary participants feel more connected to a smaller group of LGBTQIA+ friends than the LGBTQIA+ community as a fellowship, as they cannot relate to the community for different reasons - for example, not feeling like fitting in or not being activist “enough”.

<sup>43</sup> Alain, white, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 25/03/2021.

wearing nail polish and a women's coat, aren't you...?' As if you have to be exactly the same as the model they present you, just a very stereotypical boy: always short hair, preferably as little earrings, and make-up as possible, and only plain, boring menswear.”<sup>44</sup>

The example Siem gives shows how every human being – even the psychiatrist of a transgender clinic – is inclined to organize their social life into categories, based on what has common characteristics. As gender is a social ordering principle, we have been socialized our whole life into the idea that there are only men versus women, with “typical” masculine traits belonging to men as well as “typical” feminine traits belonging to women. Therefore, it is difficult for many people to socially include persons who do not identify with these notions (Scott 1986, 1056-1059). People like Siem can, however, threaten this social order and reconstruct gender norms by marking their bodies differently than the dominant bodily norms – for example norms about what masculinity looks like – would prescribe (DeMello 2014, 18). With a big smile Siem also has shared that he is planning to wear, next to nail polish, glittered clothes again after his transition. In the end, many participants thus do take matters into their own hands and decide themselves what is “normal”, especially when being supported by each other.

## **2.2 Femme and Butch**

*Dewi van der Kuip*

For women, the difference between being butch and femme, lies for the greatest part in clothing and hairstyle. Butches and femmes are not exclusive for lesbians, they are, according to my participants, present everywhere in the LGBTQIA+ community. Butch women are described as a ‘*pot*’ who has short hair, wears casual clothing and has more “masculine” traits and interests. As can be seen in the following screenshot:

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<sup>44</sup> Siem, white transman, generally into man. Semi-structured interview on 01/03/2021.



Figure 4: *Butches and Studs, in their own words. Screenshot.*

Femmes are described as looking more heterosexual, meaning, others do not recognize them immediately as being queer. Which is caused by longer hair and more “feminine” traits and interests. However, these distinctions are still very fluid, and these descriptions are generalized and simplistic. There namely exist specific details within this divide. For instance, a nose piercing,<sup>45</sup> rolled up trouser legs, an undercut or a love for plants, as we theorized through Cover (2004, 87). This is in line with what is discussed in the theoretical framework about the bodily performances of the gay community to mark their sexual orientation and as a form of liberation (DeMello 2014, 218). This shows itself through the so-called gaydar.<sup>46</sup> A lot of interviews covered the subject of being able to recognize other LGBTQIA+ people based on visual markers as described above. In chapter three, we will see that recognizing each other can be helpful when figuring out if someone could be interested in you, since most people are heterosexual. These examples of stereotypes are everchanging and influenced (or created) by social media. TikTok is one example of where this takes place. Vigile<sup>47</sup> expressed that even though one can find likeminded people or examples on this platform, it can also be quite toxic, which can be read in the following statement:

“It is not like a cocktail you have to mix before getting the right drink, I am a person. I am comfortable with my identity, you know, but people try to put others in boxes. That is

<sup>45</sup> A nose piercing, according to Kira should be on the left side of your nose if you are LGBTQIA+. Heterosexual people wear their nose piercings on the right side.

<sup>46</sup> Gaydar comes from the word radar and is ‘used’ by LGBTQIA+ people to recognize other LGBTQIA+ people on the streets, clubs etcetera.

<sup>47</sup> Vigile, non-binary, white, queer. Semi-structured interview on 29/03/2021.

why I am afraid to wear a dress or a skirt because then I know for 100% that I will be misgendered all day, because then people are super confident to address me as a woman.”<sup>48</sup>

According to Vigile and Marie Olivier,<sup>49</sup> when you identify as non-binary, people expect androgyny from you. Thus, presenting in a “masculine” or “feminine” way causes them to be misgendered. They are, in a way, forced in their gender expression if they want people to see that they are non-binary, due to the Dutch heteronormative society. As is also confirmed through memes on Reddit:



Figure 5: *That non-binary feel.* Digital Image.

This is in line with what is described in chapter one by Engel.<sup>50</sup> The ambiguity and fluidity of the body and how it is exhibited seems to be determined by our society, while its nuance thereby gets overlooked. However, Rens<sup>51</sup> feels more comfortable in expressing more “feminine” now they identify as a queer, non-binary person, compared to the period they identified as a gay man, since expressing “feminine” characteristics was less accepted then. Anticipating the reaction of people around our participants can be navigated by conforming to (gender)norms (Fernandez and Birnholtz 2018, 4). In comparison, my other participants experienced something similar to what the non-binary participants described above. Instead of gender norms and stereotypes being seen as a one-sided, superficial portrayal of gender and sexual identity, it is sometimes seen as a

<sup>48</sup> Vigile, non-binary, white, queer. Semi-structured interview on 29/03/2021.

<sup>49</sup> Marie Olivier, non-binary, white, pansexual. Semi-structured interview on 14/04/2021.

<sup>50</sup> Engel, white, asexual, queer, non-binary trans person. Unstructured interview on 09/04/2021.

<sup>51</sup> Rens, white, queer, non-binary person. Unstructured interview on 05/03/2021.

necessity to be part of the LGBTQIA+ community. My participants explained that when they walk on the streets that they like to come across as queer, both because they like that part of their identity and also to signal to others that they are part of the community. This happens using the described stereotypes and the butch-femme divide. It is thus more based on sexual identity than on gender, even though not exclusively. However, this is only the case when it can happen in a safe way. The cisgender participants I talk about here are (almost) never misgendered and they did not feel the threat of violence as much as our trans\* participants. The chances are simply higher to be misgendered when people do not know you. This pushes some participants into stereotypical behavior to show the world to which gender they belong. However, Jane,<sup>52</sup> for instance, expressed that the face masks she must wear in stores due to COVID-19, helps being seen as a woman. The mask covers up half of her face, so if she wears her hair “feminine” and puts some eye make-up on, people see that she is a woman, which helps building confidence being outside. Again, showing the conflation between sexual orientation and gender non-conformity.

The existence of stereotypes and its use to perform your gender causes some participants to feel insecure about whether they are queer enough to call themselves a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. As Vigile, having an undercut and wearing punk clothing, explains:

“Stereotypes can be very limiting. All those stereotypes, if you do not have those, then you are not part of the community, so that can be very gatekeeping. If there is something that I could say about how toxic the LGBTQIA+ community is, then it would be this gatekeeping.”<sup>53</sup>

It seems like Dutch LGBTQIA+ individuals need to conform to existing stereotypes to be validated by the community. In chapter one, we saw that gender expression is likely to change after a coming out. This gatekeeping could be the reason why my female and/or non-binary participants feel the pressure to position themselves, once again, in predetermined boxes that are butch and femme. Nevertheless, most of my participants enjoy the way they perform their gender

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<sup>52</sup> Jane, transgender, white, transgender, lesbian woman. Semi-structured interview on 26/02/2021.

<sup>53</sup> Vigile, non-binary, white, queer. Semi-structured interview on 29/03/2021.



and sexuality and do not experience it as a forced pressure. Being butch, femme or anything around those, remains a free choice that reflects the interests of my participants.

### **2.3 Idolizing icons or increasing insecurities? Media representation in relation to gender norms and stereotypes**

*Dewi van der Kuip*

Gender and sexuality construction takes shape through stereotypes and gender norms and is for a large part influenced by the Dutch heteronormative society. As discussed in the theoretical framework, the male gaze plays a role in this (Evans and Nixon 2013, 258). This could be problematic for our participants because identity formation for young people is intertwined with media (McInroy 2016, 35). The impact that this has on people can be very nuanced and could be happening unconsciously. Proper LGBTQIA+ representation would help LGBTQIA+ people in their coming out and gender expression. Just like Hall (1980, 80) says, identity is constructed within representation. Eight of our participants explicitly stated that they discovered their sexuality or gender identification by finding an example of it. As could be read in the vignette, fora like LGBT Wiki form a platform for this search. Maarten<sup>54</sup> described that he first thought that there were only feminine gays and masculine hetero men before he saw people like Rob Jetten, a Dutch politician who showed him that being gay is not always over the top and does not always define everything you do. Kira<sup>55</sup> illustrates this through TikTok and her ideas about androgyny:

“I think it [social media] has had an influence, because, you could say that without TikTok I would have never thought about it. There was [this video of] a girl who said how flat her was chest that day and her friend did not understand, so this girl said that that she was happy about it. And then I was thinking about how I have experienced this as well but never thought of it as valid or normal. But now there is more freedom, and I am blessed with that, that I can talk about it with more people.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Maarten, white, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 18/02/2021.

<sup>55</sup> Kira, cisgender, white, lesbian woman. Open interview on 09/03/2021.

<sup>56</sup> Kira, cisgender, white, lesbian woman. Open interview on 09/03/2021.

Maarten<sup>57</sup> and Kira need examples to understand their own feelings to validate them. These examples, however, can also have a negative impact. When I was talking with Marijne<sup>58</sup> about insecurities stemming from a reality television series she said the following:

“So, I am completely addicted to Love Island while it is also something that I am against. On the one hand is everything they do against my principles, but I also enjoy watching it. And then I can really look at those men with all kinds of superficial ideas about how women should look and that can make me really insecure.”<sup>59</sup>

Love Island is a show where young ‘sexy’ singles are being followed on an idyllic island trying to find ‘true love’. It is a very heteronormative and biphobic<sup>60</sup> show since bisexuality does not exist, unless it is drunk women kissing in front of men, on which more in chapter three. This is an example of how the male gaze is used on Dutch television. The encoded meaning of the program is entertainment. That is why Marijne<sup>61</sup> enjoys watching it, although it is against her principles. Her decoded meaning, however, is that it is not only entertainment, but also making her insecure about herself. Even though the opinions of the men in these series would not bother her in daily life. The portrayal of hyperfeminine women and the experienced pressure to have (bigger) boobs (Kira<sup>62</sup>) show how women are portrayed through the eyes of men, while she is searching for a different kind of representation. For the male participants, this example causes insecurities in a different way, namely physical insecurities stemming from how those men look.

“The popular gays on Instagram are really those perfect gays with such a sixpack. And then I think, do you really need to have a body like that to have fun with other gays? Or can you have fun while looking average?”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Maarten, white, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 18/02/2021.

<sup>58</sup> Marijne, cisgender, white, queer woman. Semi-structured interview on 03/03/2021.

<sup>59</sup> Marijne, cisgender, white, queer woman. Semi-structured interview on 03/03/2021.

<sup>60</sup> Biphobia is the ‘fear’ of people who are romantically or sexually attracted to more than one gender. It is an aversion to both bisexuality and bisexual individuals.

<sup>61</sup> Marijne, cisgender, white, queer woman. Semi-structured interview on 03/03/2021.

<sup>62</sup> Kira, cisgender, white, lesbian woman. Open interview on 09/03/2021.

<sup>63</sup> Maarten, white, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 18/02/2021.

These examples illustrate how media representation is a double-edged sword. Even though you consume media willingly, that does not mean that it only has a positive effect on you. They thus experience gender norms through which they negotiate their own identities through their framework of knowledge (Hall 1980). In other words, they believe that their identity and ideas about masculinity and femininity, are forming through the ideas of these men on television/social media.

Another example of how media representation influences identity construction, is the decoded meaning of Dutch transgender representation on television. For Celeste<sup>64</sup> this is that it is not meant for a transgender public but for the masses to understand transgender people. This opinion is based on a state-sponsored program that is called 'He is a She,' which is offensive towards transgender people because, for obvious reasons, she is a she. This title is clearly a catchy title that is created to appeal to the larger public. The representation of transgender people in movies was, until around a decade ago often that of a villain, mentally ill or criminal character, while non-binary people are often autistic (Reitz 2017, 2).<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, most representation in movies is built around the struggle of being queer, whether it is a coming out story, or being bullied at school.<sup>66</sup> Luckily, more attention is paid to comprehensive representation of the LGBTQIA+ community. With the arrival of social media, where its creators can now be anyone, representation becomes more nuanced. Transgender people do not have to enter, for example, the world of Hollywood to still contribute to the media representation of trans experiences. Rens<sup>67</sup> feels completely comfortable with contesting gender norms online, and shares pictures wearing a skirt followed by #fuckgender. The hashtag ensured that they have found more like-minded people online. It also increases the societal understanding of trans\* subjects, just like the programs *Kutmannen* and *GenderZender*.<sup>68</sup>

Next to the general underrepresentation of trans\* people or non-monogamous relationship forms, the perceived problem is that screenwriters are almost never LGBTQIA+ people themselves and therefore are not able to depict the complexity of possible LGBTQIA+ characters. Just like it is important who is authoring the story, it is important who is making the

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<sup>64</sup> Celeste, brown, pansexual, trans woman. Semi-structured interview 14/04/2021.

<sup>65</sup> According to four (all) of my trans\* participants.

<sup>66</sup> According to three of our participants.

<sup>67</sup> Rens, white, queer, non-binary person. Unstructured interview on 05/03/2021.

<sup>68</sup> These two shows are both YouTube series made by trans\* people about trans\* issues.

joke. When a meme is created by an LGBTQIA+ person themselves, it is seen as just a matter of self-mockery. Most of our participants find it hurtful and annoying when (online) LGBTQIA+ jokes are taken over by cisnet people. According to Alain,<sup>69</sup> this is more about making fun of something in a way that “they reclaim their identity,” instead of being laughed at by a majority/unmarginalized group. It is thus important to realize when looking at the coded meaning of memes, that the interpretation of it is influenced by who is the creator. The decoded meaning thus varies depending on who makes (and shares) the meme.

We have argued that media representation influences the identity construction of our participants. However, what happens on TikTok, has a similar effect on Celeste<sup>70</sup> as Love Island has on Marijne,<sup>71</sup> as she explains passionately:

“It is something that I am still accepting, because you often see the end product, of someone who is in transition for years and has had all the operations, like all of the facial feminization surgeries. And then you look at yourself and you think, yes, see how I look and then you feel the pressure immediately, like I will never be that. That is the representation you often see, the hyperfeminine women, that is a shame, it is just not the case, it is only a small percentage.”<sup>5</sup>

Siem<sup>72</sup> gave a similar example about when a trans man is shirtless on tv, the traces from a possible breast surgery are often unrecognizable. The stereotypical trans man is expected to resemble the stereotypical masculine beauty ideal, having short hair, and being muscled as described in the theoretical context through Cascalheira and Smith (2019). This is similar to what is discussed about women who come out in chapter one, where their identity formation changed into more a ‘butch’ (life)style (Krakauer and Rose 2002, 33).

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<sup>69</sup> Alain, white, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 25/03/2021.

<sup>70</sup> Celeste, brown, pansexual, trans woman. Semi-structured interview 14/04/2021.

<sup>71</sup> Marijne, cisgender, white, queer woman. Semi-structured interview on 03/03/2021.

<sup>72</sup> Siem, white transman, generally into man. Semi-structured interview on 01/03/2021.

## 2.4 A solo gender performance, the influence of COVID-19 on the gender performance of Dutch LGBTQIA+ people

*Dewi van der Kuip*

It is insightful to look at gender expression in the context of today's society. That is, a global pandemic where COVID-19 plays a role in the gender construction and expression of some of our participants.<sup>73</sup> This could be showed via the following screenshot I took from a non-binary Instagram user:

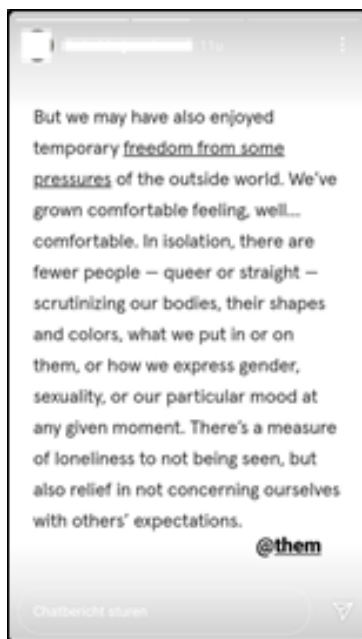


Figure 6: Typed text about pandemic freedom. Screenshot.

The portraying of gender here, is in line with what de Beauvoir said: gender is a performance. The influence on societal gender expectations often comes subconsciously. We repeat small acts that constitute to our idea of gender. However, since we have been staying home for a large part over the past year, the audience for whom we perform our gender has decreased significantly. This could have as a result that the women I spoke to experienced less pressure to behave in the way that society expected from them. For some of my participants this is true. For instance,

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<sup>73</sup> This thesis should be read with the knowledge that our findings are not necessarily applicable to non-pandemic life since we only talked about the daily gender performance of our participants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bianca<sup>74</sup> shaved her hair at the beginning of the pandemic saying that she liked how it contributed to her androgyny. Kira<sup>75</sup> and Vigile<sup>76</sup> started watching TikTok videos in the extra spare time the pandemic created which caused them to be more conscious of certain gendered behavior in which they actually did not believe. This has caused Vigile<sup>77</sup> to cut their hair short, get a nose piercing and dress more androgynous to explore her non-binarity. The lockdowns made Kira<sup>78</sup> make the step to stop shaving her leg hair and to start to dress more “masculine”. Celeste<sup>79</sup> and Marie Olivier<sup>80</sup> both felt the space to start exploring their femininity more by trying out make-up and/or “women’s” clothing. I argue people would have been less aware of the pressure that society puts on them if it they had not experienced the downfall of that pressure during COVID-19. Suddenly, it was okay to wear sweatpants multiple days in a row and come to online meetings while still in bed. This decreased the pressure on women to always look groomed and styled (Ipsos 2016). For men, however, the influence differs slightly. Five male and/or non-binary participants, shared concerns about how the pandemic affects LGBTQIA+ peers who just came out. This is because they are unable to go to queer parties (because of the lockdowns), where they would meet like-minded, inspirational others, causing a decrease in the development of their gender identity, since adolescents need examples of others to form their own identity.

## Conclusion

*Dewi van der Kuip*

This chapter laid the groundwork of how stereotypes and gender norms take their shape in the LGBTQIA+ community. For our male participants, we have seen that stereotypes and gender norms evolve around the hegemonic order, where femmephobia and homophobia play a key role. For our female and non-binary participants, however, stereotypes and gender norms are based on group membership. This difference will tell us -in the following chapter- interesting things about

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<sup>74</sup> Bianca, cisgender, white, bisexual woman. Semi-structured interview on 02/03/2021.

<sup>75</sup> Kira, cisgender, white, lesbian woman. Open interview on 09/03/2021.

<sup>76</sup> Vigile, non-binary, white, queer. Semi-structured interview on 29/03/2021.

<sup>77</sup> Vigile, non-binary, white, queer. Semi-structured interview on 29/03/2021.

<sup>78</sup> Kira, cisgender, white, lesbian woman. Open interview on 09/03/2021.

<sup>79</sup> Celeste, brown, pansexual, trans woman. Semi-structured interview 14/04/2021.

<sup>80</sup> Marie Olivier, non-binary, white, pansexual. Semi-structured interview on 14/04/2021.

how our participants live with these constructs and how they use stereotypes and gender norms in their dating life. Furthermore, we have illustrated how COVID-19 has changed the gender performance of certain participants, which, once again, showed how performativity is an everchanging and context related concept.

## Empirical Chapter 3:

### Just a Preference? Our Participants on Online Dating

*Introduction by Anniek van Weeghel*

Our participants have shared a lot of reasons for using dating apps, depending on the participant and the mood this person is in – from pastime to finding everlasting love. A lot of them generally consider dating apps a “necessary evil” for them to know who their “fellows” are in the heteronormative, Dutch society. As Grindr, for instance, works location-based, a few male participants sometimes quickly check Grindr whenever they see someone cute in the supermarket, to be sure if it is a potential partner. They thus experience the offline recognition of other dating app users thus as something advantageous, as it makes the tactical, stereotypical LGBTQIA+ appearance created within the (online) community (clarified in chapter two) unnecessary. Whereas Luna has been afraid in the past that her ‘gaydar’ was adjusted incorrectly, the use of dating apps would make such fear vanish.

Online dating, however, again causes a kind of hyper focus on appearance, while attraction can often follow once you get to know someone’s character better.<sup>81</sup> Alain,<sup>82</sup> along with four others of my participants, told me that he often gives a person he met in a bar a chance, who he would probably quickly swipe left<sup>83</sup> on Tinder. All of Dewi’s participants firstly expressed to be very open-minded towards others on dating apps while aiming to see personality in others' dating app profiles, but when they started swiping, the rejection mindset<sup>84</sup> showed itself as well.<sup>85</sup>

In this chapter we will show how the hyper focus on appearance – along with the rejection mindset - is even more apparent in the LGBTQIA+ community, as categorization and

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<sup>81</sup> Verheijden, Olga, host. “Voorkeur of Racisme?” Twintigersdilemma by Felix Meritis (podcast). May 2020. Accessed on February 17, 2021. <https://felixmeritis.nl/podcast-twintigersdilemma/>

<sup>82</sup> Alain, white, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 13/03/2021.

<sup>83</sup> Meaning that the longer you spend on dating apps, the more people you reject.

<sup>84</sup> The rejection mindset is the idea that the longer you spent on dating apps the more people you reject. This caused Dewi’s participants to mostly swipe left (reject someone) and only every now and then, when they were “swept from their feet”, swipe right.

LaLaLoveYou Webinar 2021. “Liefde op het eerste bericht” LaLaLoveYou. Aired on March 9, 2021.



stereotyping within the LGBTQIA+ dating scene have been brought to new extremes. While diving deeper into our participants' experiences on dating apps, we aim to lay out how gender norms and stereotypes manifest themselves while dating online and demonstrate that the internalization of these norms and stereotypes affects both our LGBTQIA+ participants' partner preference and self-representation.

### **3.1 Male and non-binary participants' dating scene**

*Anniek van Weeghel*

As explained in chapter two, the masculine/feminine binary expresses itself within the “gay”<sup>86</sup> community through the labels ‘masc’ and ‘femme.’ In the (online) dating scene, further stereotyping mainly takes place based on body types, so-called ‘tribes’.<sup>87</sup> A ‘twink’ for example, is a young, tall, and slim boy, whereas a ‘bear’ is an older, hairy and chubby man. There is a great intertwinement between the gender binary, tribes, and sexual preferences. According to my participants, ‘twinks’ are for example considered more feminine, and owning the label ‘femme’ again carries the expectation that they would be the receiver, ‘bottom,’ in bed (whereas ‘mascs’ would be the giver, the ‘top’). This is in line with Johnson (2005, 458-461), who also found that gay men assign a passive sexual role to “feminine” men, and an assertive role to “masculine” men. While struggling to find the right words to explain this, Noah<sup>88</sup> says he thinks that ‘femmes’ are considered more suitable for hookups than serious love and more frequently send nudes to please the ‘mascs’. Because of the assumptions above, he sometimes worries about being seen as a ‘femme’:

“If a gay is a bit more feminine [like me], they often assume that the person is a bottom, which is also a bit frustrating for me. Firstly: it's not all about sex for me. And secondly: I don't want to be pigeonholed either. I also don't explicitly put it on my profile, because you can choose to put that down, but no... Things like: ‘Do you ever dress up as a

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<sup>86</sup> Again, not all my participants identify as gay, but as they are all (except for one) romantically or sexually interested in men, they do feel addressed by the gender norms and stereotypes concerning gay men and often referred to the “gay dating scene” when talking about their online dating experiences.

<sup>87</sup> On Grindr, for example, there is an option to filter other users, based on a certain tribe.

<sup>88</sup> Noah, brown, gay, cisgender man. Semi-structured interview on 24/02/2021.

woman? Do you ever put on girls' underwear?' are asked. And that just based on your photos..."<sup>89</sup>

Like Noah, a vast majority of the male and non-binary participants experience these labels as oppressive. Only Maarten<sup>90</sup> explicitly says he likes to surprise somebody with being different from what they would expect. When seeing 'twink' representations, he firstly worried that he fell into this 'tribe' - being white, slim, and quite tall as well. He thought this was terrible, as he personally considers 'twinks' "skinny, completely submissive chappies". After finding out his bed position, however, he realized that this did not comply with a typical 'twink' and was happy he could define himself otherwise. This shows how Maarten is dynamically positioned within a field of cultural opportunities while (re)constructing his gender and sexual identity (Butler 1986, 36). Another positive working of the labels has been mentioned by Wout, who, with a nervous laugh, tells me they offer him clarity:

"I have autism and depression, so I like it when people label themselves online, so I immediately know what I'm dealing with."<sup>91</sup>

### ***3.1.2 Men are hunters and women are prey***

"Straights hope for sex after the date and gays hope for a date after the sex."<sup>92</sup>

Tinder has been created after Grindr, and adopted the matching mechanism within the app design to form a safe, online space that would attract women. Apparently, the creators of Grindr did not consider a dating app with one-sided communication, meaning that anonymous messages can be sent before giving consent for it, a problem for men. I argue that the underlying reason for this is the stereotypical, sexist notion that men are predators, which overshadows their vulnerability.

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<sup>89</sup> Noah, brown, gay, cisgender man. Semi-structured interview on 24/02/2021.

<sup>90</sup> Maarten, white, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 18/02/2021.

<sup>91</sup> Wout, white, pansexual, cisgender man. Semi-structured interview on 09/03/2021.

<sup>92</sup> Rick, white, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 15/02/2021.

Unlike what Sarson (2020, 9) found, my male participants did not report to continuously seek sex to come over as more “masculine”, but they did experience this from others.<sup>93</sup> They describe an extreme hookup culture – comparable to the quote from Rick above, especially on Grindr. Abdi<sup>94</sup> says he frequently receives dickpics when simply wanting to have a chat conversation with someone. Next to this, Maarten<sup>95</sup> feels that the gay dating scene expects you to be open-minded about non-monogamous relationship forms, whereas Noah<sup>96</sup> worries about finding a long-term relationship as a gay man. Even though it has been described as an extremely toxic environment by all my participants, Grindr largely influences their online dating experience, with around 3.8 million users a day (*RTL Nieuws* 2019). The design of the app clears the road for many racist, ageist, femmephobic, transphobic and body shaming sentiments. These sentiments pass by, as you can find profile descriptions such as “no trans/blacks/Asians”, but are also posed at participants directly. Both Levi<sup>97</sup> and Willem,<sup>98</sup> for example, once heard: “Oh sorry, you are a bit too black.” Besides, Rick<sup>99</sup> heard: “Not my type, you’re too fat.” Elsewise, ageism is very noticeable. Whereas five participants are disgusted by receiving (sometimes inappropriate) request from older men, these responses make a few other participants worry about not finding a committed relationship before their thirties. The masculine beauty ideal is appearing in these last two examples - being young, fit, and muscular seems indeed required in the “gay” dating scene (Cascalheira and Smith 2019).

### ***3.1.3 Birds of a feather, flock together***

“I don't think the LGBT/queer community exists. At least... you have a very white, queer community in the Netherlands, in Amsterdam for example. The vast majority of them are the same white people, and they all party and date with each other. They clearly fall within the image of the down-to-earth, Pim Fortuyn-esque gay we accept, who also

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<sup>93</sup> Even though I did not track my participants' online behavior, it is important to note that the two things being said here somehow form a paradox. My participants say they do not behave in a certain way, but others in the same community do. Mutually they are, however, each other's “others”. I thus want to make a point of criticism here on the questions I have asked, or the way in which I have asked them, as well as my participants' answers.

<sup>94</sup> Abdi, black, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 29/03/2021.

<sup>95</sup> Maarten, white, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 18/02/2021.

<sup>96</sup> Noah, brown, gay, cisgender man. Semi-structured interview on 24/02/2021.

<sup>97</sup> Levi, black, queer, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 05/04/2021.

<sup>98</sup> Willem, black, bisexual, cisgender man. Semi-structured interview on 23/03/2021.

<sup>99</sup> Rick, white, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 15/02/2021.

studied public administration. On Tinder and on Grindr and places like that you see that people are mainly looking for that [type] as well.”<sup>100</sup>

Like Levi argues above, similarity seems to play an important part in my participants’ partner search. Below, I will propose a few explanations for this. First of all, a few participants experience a strong homonormative scene in the Netherlands, with the type of persons Levi describes, who all date each other. As a black person, Levi feels automatically excluded from this scene, which he describes as generally consisting of white, highly educated, right-wing men who often claim to be “progressive” but show a lot of subtle racism.

Secondly, hegemonic masculinity and femmephobia accordingly, linger through in the partner preference of men. I saw the words ‘masc for masc’ passing by in self-proclaimed gay males’ dating profiles, meaning that more “masculine” men generally indeed seem to prefer other “masculine” men (Valocchi 2005, 758). Like Valocchi (2005) found, five out of my thirteen participants explicitly said their type is a more “masculine” man as well, although not all of these participants explicitly proclaim to be a “masculine” man themselves. Bisexual men Jurre explains why he dislikes extremely ‘femme’-looking men:

“I understand that people do it [dressing up very feminine], but then I might as well find a girl.”<sup>101</sup>

The two reasons above cause another separation in the “gay” online dating scene. Participants who also consciously reject the tribes and other stereotypes and therefore describe themselves as “alternative”,<sup>102</sup> also look for “alternative” people like them. One example is Alain.<sup>103</sup>

According to him, the homonormative and “masc for masc” persons<sup>104</sup> are, next to stereotyping, copying a heteronormative lifestyle, which is not his cup of tea. He realizes that it pays to shape yourself and your relationship to a heteronormative picture, as we live in very heteronormative

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<sup>100</sup> Levi, black, queer, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 05/04/2021.

<sup>101</sup> Jurre, white, bisexual, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 08/03/2021.

<sup>102</sup> For my participants, an alternative person is thus someone more open-minded and eccentric, not following the sociocultural norms look- and behavior-wise. What typically attracts “alternative” persons, according to Rens, follows below the next subhead.

<sup>103</sup> Alain, white, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 13/03/2021.

<sup>104</sup> Alain further mentioned that these gays are portrayed on the Instagram account [@homo.uit.ams.](https://www.instagram.com/homo.uit.ams/)

society – for example, it is made easier to find a home or job. His example demonstrates that a lot of gay men in fact have readjusted their personal desires and interests to make them more compatible with heterosexual traditional values and institutions (Croce 2015, 4).<sup>105</sup> This is, however, not the life Alain aims for, and he looks for a partner who shares similar ideals. When there is a  symbol (meaning ‘top’) in someone’s profile description, for example, “alternative” participants like Alain have often mentioned not to swipe or start a conversation with this person. The awareness and frustrations about the labels in the “gay” online dating scene, in conclusion, lead to in- and outgroup divisions – comparable to the Social Identity Theory (Cascalheira and Smit 2019, 631), which then lead to sexual and romantic matches who look alike from both inside and outside.

The last way in which similarity plays a role concerns gender identity, skin color and religion. Both trans\*, religious participants and BIPOC have described to often consider it easier to date someone who shares similar experiences with them. Even though their explanations for this stem from completely different experiences because it concerns completely different (combinations of) axes of identity per person, they all like not having to explain themselves over and over again to a potential partner. Abdi,<sup>106</sup> a gay man with a Muslim-background, has often felt misunderstood by non-Muslim partners when they kept asking how he could be okay with his families’ religion, for instance.

### ***3.1.4 What you see is what you get... is it?***

A lot of participants have become very self-conscious from creating a dating profile. While they often aim to make it look spontaneous, they often started to realize during the interview that there are a lot of thoughts behind the design of their profile, mainly based on what they expect others to think of them. Many male and non-binary participants are struggling between showing personal content (such as a picture) and protecting themselves, especially from receiving nudes on Grindr. Elsewise, they are struggling with finding a balance in coming across sexy and being objectified or exoticized. Even though none of my participants explicitly states to be “a real

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<sup>105</sup> Two out of three bisexual men also told me they have a picture in their mind that they will end up with a girl one day, as, because of the sociocultural expectations, this is made much easier in the Netherlands.

<sup>106</sup> Abdi, black, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 29/03/2021.

man”, on one hand, they again put hegemonic “masculine” characteristics consciously forward again, whereas “feminine” characteristics are being tucked away (Sarson 2020, 2):

“I do have pictures with friends on a night out, with a nice pose or crazy outfits, of which I think: oh, those are really nice pictures of me, that I'm having a fun time. But that I know when I put it out there that people think I'm super feminine or start to get a certain image in me that I'm not always, or not even a bit. So, I deliberately don't post those photos.”<sup>107</sup>

Similarly, among Tinder profiles I found one self-proclaimed gay men from an Asian background introducing himself with the quote: “‘you’re like a spicy white’ – a friend of mine”, which could be a sign of internalized racism.<sup>108</sup>

On dating apps such as Tinder, about which my participants assert that it is more about finding someone with similar, everyday interests, participants mainly disclaim who they are. According to Rens, this is a dating profile-guide to attract “alternative” people like they are:

"In any case, colored hair works very well, adding the music that you like, what kind of movies you like, for example... Really one of those things that make you think: okay, this is not just a standard person who will immediately vote for the CDA [Christian Democrats].”<sup>109</sup>

Rens’ quote shows how, in line with Cover (2004, 86-87), self-stereotyping - in this case of alternativity - often occurs through subjective performativity of the body, such as looks. With swiping themselves as well as their profile content, participants consciously select a style and make their personality overly clear, so that others are “prepared” for all of their sides and will accept them for who they are. Alain gave the example that some men state on their Tinder

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<sup>107</sup> Abdi, black, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 29/03/2021.

<sup>108</sup> As a white researcher, it does not feel like my place to judge about this, as it is putting a fierce label on this person. Furthermore, black participant Levi pointed out to me that BIPOC do not always do such things out of racism, meaning that the men’s statement on Tinder could also be a means of coping, provocation or connection.

<sup>109</sup> Rens, white, queer, non-binary person. Unstructured interview on 05/03/2021.

profile: “If you don’t like me at my femme, you don’t deserve my at my masc.” He himself also disclaims his bed position on his profile:

“Predominantly I do take on – I *hate* the term ‘bottom,’ but I often do take on that role. I insinuate it, because then I’m sure they can do something with it. I mean, it’s nice if they know how to deal with that. Sometimes I feel quite different from that. But then I know that in general it will match sexually.”<sup>110</sup>

Alain has once been rejected by someone he dated, after that person found out he is mainly a ‘bottom’. Disclaiming this on their profiles prevents them from being rejected later on, which makes self-representations a way of self-protection. The same counts for Engel,<sup>111</sup> who is asexual. However, putting the fact that they are asexual on their profile still provoked reactions from other non-asexual dating app users claiming that “a night with them could change this”.

### **3.2 Female and/or non-binary participants’ dating scene**

*Dewi van der Kuip*

To understand the lived experience of my participants while they are dating online, we should take a look at where online dating takes place for them. Most of my participants only used one app at the time, which was commonly Tinder. This app is described along the following lines by six of my participants.

“Tinder really is a *vleeskeuring*<sup>112</sup> but simultaneously, you have the biggest chance to meet someone.”<sup>113</sup>

Sanne cheerlessly explains that even though Tinder has its downsides, that because its popularity, most people are active on Tinder, which increases your chances of a successful dating experience. When compared to other dating apps, Bumble proved to attract more alternative

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<sup>110</sup> Alain, white, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 13/03/2021.

<sup>111</sup> Engel, white, asexual, queer, non-binary trans person. Unstructured interview on 09/04/2021.

<sup>112</sup> “Beefcake parade”

<sup>113</sup> Sanne, cisgender, white, bisexual woman. Semi-structured interview on 15/02/2021.

people when it comes to style. Her has more open-minded people and appears to be more serious and trans\* inclusive. Just as the new app Taimi. This app is specifically made for the LGBTQIA+ community and was the first app where I noted that intersex people have an explicit place as well.<sup>114</sup>

When one of my participants had a negative experience on a dating app, they flexibly hopped over to another, more inclusive app and their problem diminished. Only on Tinder gender normativity was explicitly noted by my participants. Three of them changed their self-representation accordingly in line with the visual markers discussed in the theoretical framework (Cover 2004). For instance, Marijne self-consciously chose to pick less revealing photos of her body after remarks of a friend. Others switched apps and some just ignored those who were being unkind. Two of my participants told me that when they put their pronouns in their bio, or when they mention that they are, for instance, a feminist, that the conversations with men (not women) are often superficial and uninformed. Vigile,<sup>115</sup> therefore, went back and forth with putting their pronouns in their bio because they kept getting messages about not understanding their choice for other pronouns than she/her or he/him. This, again, shows the binary way in which the Dutch society works (DeMello 2014, 147).

Within these dating apps, several things are happening. First, all apps allow people to write a bio about themselves. In the female dating scene it is, just like the male scene, common to describe yourself in terms of top, bottom, and switch. However, this has a lesser impact on the dating experiences, than described above. Tops are considered more assertive than bottoms and are associated with butches. These distinctions can be helpful to position yourself in the LGBTQIA+ community, especially when dating, but did not seem to implicate discrimination.

We have seen that both the direct surroundings and media platforms influence the identity construction of our participants. But how does this apply to the dating scene? For the female and/or non-binary participants, there are two main mechanisms at play: the effects of media representation and gatekeeping as described in chapter two. Appadurai (2006) talks about the tendency of people create a collective identity as a survival tactic. The fear of being with small

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<sup>114</sup> This is in striking contrast with dating app Bumble, for example, where Anniek had to call the moderators to be able to change her gender identity on her profile (which was in this case necessary for recruiting participants during fieldwork). Creating such a threshold as a dating app does not reflect today's climate of gender identities. Taimi, for example, offers the possibility to change this yourself in the apps' settings at any time.

<sup>115</sup> Vigile, non-binary, white, queer. Semi-structured interview on 29/03/2021.



numbers (a minority group) creates a sense of belonging with similar people. As discussed in the theoretical framework, this is probably why the LGBTQIA+ community is created. However, within this community there still exists a dynamic in which separate groups try to in- and exclude others in the same way heterosexuals and LGBTQIA+ people are being separated. One way in which this happens is gatekeeping via biphobia.

### ***3.2.2 Biphobia: how female and/or non-binary people sometimes live as crabs***

The Dutch heteronormative society learned to deal with same sex couples, but people who feel attracted to more than one gender are still broadly misunderstood and excluded.<sup>116</sup> From within as outside the LGBTQIA+ community people still carry binary ideas about attraction, according to Amarinde<sup>117</sup> because she sees that people are continuously trying to put others in male and female (or butch and femme) divides. This is part of the social identity theory, where people divide others in an in- or outgroup based on shared characteristics (Cascalheira and Smit 2019, 631). Sanne<sup>118</sup> expressed insecurities whether she was allowed at certain gay parties in Amsterdam, because she felt like an illegitimate queer. A lot of my bi+ participants expressed in some way their insecurities to be bi+. This varied between exclusion from the lesbian dating scene, exclusions from organizations like COC or parties in clubs.

“There are expectations for heterosexuals and queer people, but sometimes I feel like I have to comply to both, that I am a little bit in between. So, within the queer community I would feel hesitant to talk about being in love with a man, but outside I would less likely talk about being in love with a woman.”<sup>119</sup>

Apart from a general exclusion of bi+ people in the Netherlands, are a lot of women insecure about dating a bi+ woman. Some of my participants expressed that they were hesitant to date a bi+ woman because they were afraid that she will leave with another man, because she has been with men in the past, or because the competition in the dating scene is bigger than if she were

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<sup>116</sup> Bi plus Nederland. 2020. “Niet in één hokje: Ervaringen en welzijn van bi+ personen in Nederland” *Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Rutgers, Bi+ onderzoeksc consortium*.

<sup>117</sup> Amarinde, cisgender, white, polyamorous, pansexual woman. Open interview 22/02/2021.

<sup>118</sup> Sanne, cisgender, white, bisexual woman. Semi-structured on interview 15/02/2021.

<sup>119</sup> Sanne, cisgender, white, bisexual woman. Semi-structured interview on 15/02/2021.

only attracted to women. This works just like crabs in a basket, women, as well as crabs, pull each other down to be able to escape the basket, which is in this case acceptance in the LGBTQIA+ community and dating scene. For instance, a ‘gold star lesbian’ is a woman who has never been with a man which is a status symbol within the community that can be experienced as toxic.<sup>120</sup> These insecurities also originate from women who identify as bicurious.<sup>121</sup> Starting a relationship with bi+ women who have little experience dating with other women, or bicurious women, have in the experiences of my participants, caused heartbreak. Their partner would decide that they actually prefer men and leave them. This is now developed into a widely recognized phenomenon which makes bi+ people more insecure and lesbians more hesitant about dating each other. This is influencing the partner search of both groups. Four of the bi+ participants were actively trying to show others that they are part of the community. This happened, for example, via stereotypical expression and behavior. The discrimination that a bi+ woman experiences in a woman-man relationship, as described above by Sanne,<sup>122</sup> causes them to be more outspoken about really being bi+.

### ***3.2.3 Uncertainty and unclarity, dating with women***

The influence of gender norms and stereotypes on the date experience of the female and/or non-binary participants is partly originated in media representation. This means that the only example they received of relationships and dates was that of a hetero-sexual/romantic couple. This has caused that women-women dates have unclear dating rules. The women simply never had examples of how to flirt with other women, which is now causing insecurities and uncertainties (Gordon 2006, 177).

“There is less of a script, that is why I dated only men for a long time, because it is quite easy. You know what to do when there is a certain attraction or expectation. With queer dating, there is less of a script, but I noted that there are either conversation about sexuality, how you identify, talking trash about men and then that you discover that you

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<sup>120</sup> Anne-li, cisgender, yellow, bisexual women. Semi-structured interview 24/02/2021. We use the term yellow in agreement with Anne-li to reclaim the word and thereby dismissing the negative connotations that this word has.

<sup>121</sup> Women who are curious whether they (also) like women or not.

<sup>122</sup> Sanne, cisgender, white, bisexual woman. Semi-structured interview on 15/02/2021.

have dated the same people. This, while slowly moving closer together and while no one dares to kiss each other.”<sup>123</sup>

This quote of Luna tells us two interesting things. Firstly, she describes that dating with men is easier because you know what to do and expect. I argue that this is because of the described media representation. We learn by seeing, and heterosexual dates is what is shown. Secondly, even though she implies that queer dating has no script, she hesitantly continues describing how most of her queer dates<sup>124</sup> went, thereby describing a ‘script.’ Dating rules are unclear, which can be one of the causes why stereotypes from within the LGBTQIA+ community are used to be able to recognize each other on the streets.

According to seven of my participants, going on dates with a woman takes practice and they would prefer to go on a date with those who have more experience. For transgender women this uncertainty is even greater because they are not sure how their date feels about dating someone who is transgender, since a significant amount of people said that they were hesitant to date a transgender person (Blair and Hoskin 2018, 2075). Therefore, apps such as Her and Taimi are a safe space according to Jane<sup>125</sup> because you can clearly state that you are transgender. Thus, when you go on a date, you already know that your date is probably accepting of you. This is important, because as Croce (2015, 15) explained, transgender people are often excluded from society and transgender people reported that they were hesitant to date due to fear of rejection (Hines 2006, 361). The safety of dating apps does not only apply here but are a wider solution for the insecurity for all participants who feel uncertain about the unclarity of LGBTQIA+ dating, since everyone is more aware about the intention of others (Gordon 2006).

### ***3.2.4 Self-representation as a social experiment***

How do my participants negotiate the two issues described above within their online dating life? The way you portray yourself can, according to Vigile,<sup>126</sup> be seen as a social experiment. They like to switch up their photos just to see what the reactions are going to be. Various participants

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<sup>123</sup> Luna, cisgender, white, polyamorous, pansexual woman. Open interview 18/02/2021.

<sup>124</sup> Luna is queer, so every date she goes on is a queer date. I make the distinction here between a heterosexual and a queer date to make the difference clearer.

<sup>125</sup> Jane, white, lesbian, trans woman. Semi-structured interview 26/02/2021.

<sup>126</sup> Vigile, non-binary, white, queer. Semi-structured interview on 29/03/2021.

went through distinct phases of self-representations, while others went into transition which caused their date experience to change. But all of them use their photos to show the world how they want to be read. This is in line with what is earlier discussed using Thumin (2012, 5) who illustrated that people always use online self-representation in relation to the media in a political way. As being part to the online environment, people strategically choose aspects of the self to represent themselves in a certain way. This is also how Tamar<sup>127</sup> experimented with her identity considering skin tones. According to Tamar, there is a trend in (media) representations of people of color. She said that the light skinned girl, "like Zendaya and Beyonce", is the 'shade' of brown that is popular. This influences how people on dating apps perceive her. Because she has a similar skin tone, people see her as more attractive. Her date experiences on dating apps varied with changing self-representation:

“So, I had a different profile with big earrings and lipstick, more the stereotype of a black girl on Instagram with laid edges. And then, really different types of people approached me.”<sup>128</sup>

She describes here, that when she conforms to a beauty ideal, her dating experience was different than when it was when she did not do that. However, she also described that the beauty ideal of LGBTQIA+ women is a skinny, long, white girl to whom she is also mostly attracted. This shows that even though someone is aware of internalized ideas about beauty, that that does not necessarily changes the perceived attractiveness of others. This very clearly shows the degree of politics within online self-representation. Conforming or contesting stereotypes and gender norms is a way of picking certain visual markers, as discussed through Cover (2004) to create an online 'chosen' identity. This is something that can happen either unconsciously or with conscious intent.

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<sup>127</sup> Tamar, black, lesbian, cisgender woman. Focus group on 30/03/2021.

<sup>128</sup> Tamar, cisgender, black, lesbian woman. Semi-structured interview on 12/03/2021.

### 3.3 Trans\* dating scene

*Anniek van Weeghel*

Trans\* participants are covering themselves or being covered with the label ‘trans’ in the dating scene – it is also one of the ‘tribes’ on Grindr. As homonormativity is very much present, trans\* individuals are being considered too “radical” in their gender identity (Akachar 2015, 173). The “no trans/blacks/Asians” profiles reflect, next to racism, signs of such transphobia (Blair and Hoskin 2018, 2075). A personal reason for not dating female-to-male trans persons (post-operation) is shared by participant Wout:

“Sexually I am with anything but trans female-to-male, post-operation. I do not speak from experience, but post-operation there are very few ways that they can make a penis work, and those are not natural. I do think you should be able to control your own genitals.”<sup>129</sup>

Wout considers the workings of the genitals of post-operation trans persons “not natural”, because these genitals are formed by surgery. He worries whether a trans man can perform sexual acts in the way Wout thinks he should - by “control” and “making work” your genitals, he means the stiffening of a penis when aroused. Wout’s thoughts display why transgender people are often being “punished”: they reveal the arbitrary relationship between sex, gender, and the body (Semerjian and Cohen 2006, 41). Since their bodies – including genitals – are biologically seen not in line with their gender identity (as with cisgender men), Wout does not want to date trans men. It shows that for many people it is still important that sex, gender, and the body “naturally” match.

This is one of the reasons why trans\* participants have come across a great deal of transphobia while dating. Siem<sup>130</sup> said online dating environments pose a helpful solution for trans persons, not since they can do everything anonymously (Hines 2006, 361), but since they can filter transphobic people out in advance. However, through mentioning that they are a

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<sup>129</sup> Wout, white, pansexual cisgender man. Semi-structured interview on 09/03/2021.

<sup>130</sup> Siem, white transman, generally into man. Semi-structured interview on 01/03/2021.

transgender or non-binary person, Siem, as well as Rens,<sup>131</sup> Celeste<sup>132</sup> and Jane<sup>133</sup> regularly feel fetishized and used as a kink while online dating, in line with what Ashley and Roberston (2020, 216) found. They describe often being approached in a sexual manner for being trans\*, and not for the person they are, which makes them feel objectified.

### **3.4 ‘Huidhonger’, the need for human contact in times of a pandemic**

*Dewi van der Kuip*

During an online gathering among Utrecht University College students about queer dating, one of the attendees sadly expressed that because of the lockdowns and quarantines that the pandemic brought along, that their mental health was not good enough to even think about dating. Social isolation and, as the Dutch say, *huidhonger* (‘skin hunger’) have a great negative impact on the way adolescents look at dating. Six of my participants who I met through dating apps, expressed that one of the reasons why they are dating right now is to be able to meet new people as is also supported by the research of Nguyen (2020, 16). This is not necessarily with the aim of falling in love, but to simply enjoy human connection. This could be why Rutgers institute (2020) found an increase in Dutch youth who used dating apps. Because we have been spending more time at home since March 2020, our participants have been spending increased time alone. Here, they were able to reflect more on what they wanted from their dating life. Instead of coincidentally meeting someone on a party, dating became more intentional. Additionally, there are hiccups and risks involved with dating during a pandemic. People are unable to go for drinks or other traditional date venues (Nguyen 2020, 14). Thereby, it can be dangerous to meet up with strangers with whom the chances are higher that physical contact occurs. Because COVID-19 is airborne, close contact puts you at risk. The pandemic thus greatly changes the way Dutch people are dating.

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<sup>131</sup> Rens, white, queer, non-binary person. Unstructured interview on 05/03/2021.

<sup>132</sup> Celeste, brown, pansexual, trans woman. Semi-structured interview 14/04/2021.

<sup>133</sup> Jane, white, lesbian, trans woman. Semi-structured interview 26/02/2021.

## **Conclusion: Dating scene: efficient or discriminatory?**

*Dewi van der Kuip*

Some participants think labels work efficiently. Especially when it is just about sex, you simply want to find somebody that you are attracted to. Others are frustrated about this, which are feelings that are shared in the expansive online LGBTQIA+ community as well.<sup>134</sup> If our society that is inherently racist and sexist is structurally shaping beauty ideals, your personal preference is only to a limited extend “personal”. For instance, among our female participants, femmes were higher valued than butches and among the male dating scene, white people were more preferred. We argue that such preferences are not coincidentally existing, separate cases, but part of a larger structure: the Dutch heteronormative, patriarchal society. It works like the assemblage approach, it is not just various facets of one’s identity that are intertwined, but all of the described exclusion mechanisms that exist in the same everchanging web.

The border between a preference and an oppressive thought then seems to be a grey area. A lot of participants explain that their personal limit is when another person starts to fill in how they should behave, when stereotyping has a negative societal impact, or when told what sexual acts they should perform according to the other persons’ idea of them. The superficiality of online dating is described by Rick<sup>135</sup> when he explains that the anonymity of the internet, and dating apps in particular, can cause insecurities. This is because people can reject and block you without giving an explanation. This would not happen if the dating took place in the physical world.

In general, the use of discriminatory stereotyping is, as we have laid out in this chapter, more present among our male participants than it is among our female participants. As Appadurai (2006) and this chapter showed, groups of people have the tendency to categorize into minority and majority. For our female and/or non-binary participants, this categorizing expresses itself through gatekeeping. When you are not part of the stereotypical groups butch or femme, then you are excluded. Just like the process where bi+ people are excluded from dating opportunities, and certain ‘shades’ of brown and black skin tones are repelled (Patel 2019, 10). Our male and/or non-binary participants, on the other side, explicitly try to distance themselves from others because of existing stigmas - in this chapter described as, among other things,

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<sup>134</sup> <https://bit.ly/3w8XkEk>

<sup>135</sup> Rick, white, gay, cisgender man. Unstructured interview on 15/02/2021.

racism, transphobia and femmephobia. The interplay between constant categorization and placing yourself in these butch/masc-femme scales, causes a decrease in mental health:

“There was a period where it [dating apps] took over my life. I then deleted everything because I lost my mind. You are continuously looking for that confirmation, constant confirmation.”<sup>136</sup>

What Noah says illustrates how some of our participants had a challenging time managing online dating. Longing for a sense of belonging is at a constant suspense because our participants form their identity, based on apps where described exclusion mechanisms are at play. They are thus trying to be themselves, fit in or fit out in their search for love. It is believed that more insecurities lead to more dating app dependence, and the other way around. For most participants, the impact that a partner would have on their life was bigger when they were younger. As the years went by, their identity formation developed, resulting in the idea that a partner would supplement, but not define their life. Therefore, however, there are especially concerns about the dating app experience of LGBTQIA+ persons who just came out, especially in times of a socially isolated pandemic.

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<sup>136</sup> Noah, brown, gay, cisgender man. Semi-structured interview on 24/02/2021.



↑  
587  
↓

Posted by u/[deleted] 22 days ago 🐱 🐶

cue the mutual confusion



💬 3 Comments ➦ Share 📌 Save ...

Figure 7: Mutual confusion twink and butch in car. Digital Image.

## Conclusion and Discussion

There exists a clear discrepancy between our two research populations when we look at how the described gender norms and stereotypes play a role in their dating life. At first glance, they look similar with experiencing gender and sexual identity both as fluid spectrums and experiencing the binary oppositions butch/masc and femme when it comes to LGBTQIA+ gender norms and stereotypes. However, delving deeper into how our participants deal with these structures, differences emerge.

Chapter one has outlined the way in which our participants looked at the concepts of gender and sexual identity, as well as their personal experience of (the intertwinement between) these two axes. The relationship between sex, gender, and the body, as explained through Butler's (1986; 1988) performativity, has proven to be more complex than the bare eye would suspect. Our participants experienced a divide in knowledge between them (as the LGBTQIA+ community) and their cishet environment when it comes to awareness about how sex, gender, and the body intertwine. Both our non-binary, female and male participants expressed that it can be hard explain to others the nuance that both their gender and sexual identity encompasses. Even though they are both fluid, everchanging concepts – though gender relatively more, in line with the assemblage approach (Puar 2012) our participants feel the need to label their gender and sexual identity more rigidly for others. To lift some responsibility of the shoulders of Dutch LGBTQIA+ people, the Dutch society could increase their information sharing about gender and sexual identity at schools. Movisie emphasizes the importance of safe online and offline spaces for children to see examples of, for instance, non-binary people (Levie 2021). Anniek recently taught children of the ages eleven and twelve about LGBTQIA+ experiences. At that moment, she realized that the awareness and knowledge about the diversity of gender and sexual identities is bigger nowadays than what it was when we were in elementary school ourselves. The children's remarks were more informed and nuanced, which, as we expect, will have as a result that less LGBTIA+ people in the near future have to label and explain themselves when encountering cishet others.<sup>137</sup> On the other hand, participants expressed that when they came out,

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<sup>137</sup> This could, however, differ per school. In a few of our interviews we discussed that there is an experienced difference between the Randstad and, for instance the Bible Belt (this is a region in the Netherlands that is considered to be more religious and conservative), when it comes to the freedom to perform gender in any

it was easier to perform their gender in the way that they wanted to. Because they passed the threshold of telling others they were LGBTQIA+, it became easier to be gender non- or less conforming.

Throughout all empirical chapters, gender has been proven to be continuously constructed by our participants through various social acts that have been illustrated. We have furthermore described how our participants behave and dress accordingly to the contexts they reside in, meaning that their gender performativity changes depending on whether they have come out, or to which extent they are influenced by gender norms and stereotypes created within society. The latter is what we have focused on in chapter two. Here, we introduced the butch/masc and femme divide that exists in both of our participant groups, meaning that our participants have taken over the hegemonic gender binary within their community. For women, these stereotypes originate in a sense of belonging. We addressed the social identity theory (Cascalheira and Smit 2019, 631), which is intricately linked to the idea of Appadurai about inclusion and exclusion mechanisms on a societal level. It appeared that the female and/or non-binary participants were constantly negotiating their own identity (formation) through group membership that showed itself through stereotypes. However, this group membership is highly influenced by the Dutch heteronormative, patriarchal society, meaning the ideas Dewi's participants had about gender norms and stereotypes were soaked in societal practices of dividing the LGBTQIA+ people from the rest of the Netherlands. For men, in contrast, these stereotypes originate in the devaluation of femininity by the hegemonic masculinity. As the gender and sexual identity binary have caused a conflation of those two, inducing the societal notion that "all gay men are feminine". Hereby, femmephobia and homophobia have become part of some participants' identity development (Anderson-Martinez and Vianden 2014). Therefore, they continue to use the devaluation of femininity and valuation of masculine features themselves as a stereotypical division between LGBTQIA+ men. For non-binary participants, the role of androgyny was most prominent. Most of them expressed that they struggled with the idea that people expect androgyny from non-binary people. However, they view their gender and sexual identity, and thereby their gender performance, as something more complex and nuanced than simply the label 'androgynous'. However, as we have talked about the use of visual markers

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desired way. According to Duvekot (2020) this could be because stereotyping and diverse representation within the Bible Belt is culturally more homogenous.

to show that you are part of the LGBTQIA+ community among our female participants, the same could be said for the non-binary participants (Cover 2004, 86). They are trying to avoid being misgendered, which pushes them into stereotypical expression. What causes the situations described above, is explained by Appadurai (2006), who says that media representation can be a strategy to increase a minority/majority divide by repeatedly portraying the minority group in a more, for instance, victimized way than the majority group. This is in line with the way in which the male gaze works. This gaze also increases the divide between white cis het men (majority) and minority groups, since these men have the power to decide what is being created and publicized in the media landscape. This is in all probability why the media representation of Dutch LGBTQIA+ people are often one of a struggle. It is a manifestation of portraying this minority group in the discussed victimized way. A way to tackle this problem is, as we discussed with our participants as well, making sure the creators of media are more often LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC. Thereby supplementing the male gaze with a queer, female or trans\* gaze.

Our third and last chapter was the place where all of our research came together. Using in- and exclusion mechanisms, we have addressed the lived experiences of our participants in their partner search. Biphobia was for our female and/or non-binary participants the most prominent why that in- and outgroup exclusion took place. We have seen that experience and media representation caused these participants to become more and more insecure about dating as and with a bi+ woman. Some participants used their self-representation to broadcast to others that they are non-heterosexual when in a relationship with a man partly because of this discrimination. A sense of belonging in the dating scene has proved to be quite important among our female and/or non-binary participants. That is also why the pressure exists to conform to existing visual markers of the LGBTQIA+ community (Cover 2004, 86). However, Tamar<sup>138</sup> illustrated the narrowness of the butch and femme divide in the introducing vignette of this thesis. Here she expressed that this stereotypical divide leaves little room to 'be' something besides the existing stereotypes. Vigile<sup>139</sup> explained this as gatekeeping; you are seemingly less part of the community if you do not make use of the visual markers. However, by many female and/or non-binary participants self-representation was described as a social experiment where they could explore different ways to perform and broadcast their gender and sexual identity on

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<sup>138</sup> Tamar, black, lesbian, cisgender woman. Focus group on 30/03/2021.

<sup>139</sup> Vigile, non-binary, white, queer. Semi-structured interview on 29/03/2021.

online dating apps by choosing certain photos or writing certain biographies. For most, the described stereotypes and gender norms were created by the community and thus based on things that they actually liked. This is thus not an imposed image created by cis het people. In the dating scene, this resulted in the in- and exclusion of bi+ people, unclear dating rules and experimentations with self-representation. For Anniek's participants who were dating with men, an intertwining between stereotypes concerning the gender binary, tribes and sexual preferences could be found in the dating scene. Most participants experienced all the labels seen and used while dating as oppressive and as they consciously kept down their feminine expressions in certain real-life contexts because of experienced femmephobia, they did so online (Sarson 2020, 2) Others saw the labels as efficient or felt able to give their own turn to it, but trans participants and BIPOC felt the least flexibility in this. By all means, the stereotypes caused separation in the "gay" online dating scene, in contrast to Dewi's participants, between so-called 'homonormative' (Croce 2015, 4) and self-proclaimed "alternative" participants. To make sure these groups find each other in the dating scene, they all make use of self-representation (and self-stereotyping (Cover 2004, 87)), disclaiming their gender expressions or sexual preference, to make sure they filter out all possible femmephobic, transphobic, homophobic, and racist people they come across.

What we have seen, is how non-binary, male and female participants move their ways in a hegemonic masculine sociocultural context while searching for a partner. Even though, as we argued, it affects every person in a different way, some main distinctions between these groups are worth mentioning. While for women, the Dutch heteronormative and patriarchal society makes them afraid of being sexualized and objectified. Therefore, they consciously stick together and use stereotypes to create recognition within their own community, as thus in the dating scene. Our research shows that for some men and trans\* people, on the contrary, homophobia and femmephobia have become actual part of their identity, which causes further in- and exclusion mechanisms while dating. We claim that this is because women, men and non-binary persons threaten the hegemonic social order in a totally different way. Non-heterosexual men have a big, internalized conflict: on the one hand are they portrayed as being socialized (because of their sex) and on the other hand are they portrayed as not a "real man" (McNeal 1999, 359). As hegemonic masculinity is a system of idealistic masculine gender practices and gay men are stereotypically regarded more "feminine," they tend to be seen as the weak spot within their own

“group” of men. This is why, among our participants, gender non-conforming men, trans man and non-binary persons have experienced more (fear for) aggression from cishet men, whereas gender non-conforming women and trans women did not share this. Anxious to become a victim, some of them cope with this by using the same oppressive gender norms that they experience in Dutch society to create an in- and outgroup within their own community, inducing homonormativity (Sarson 2020) and therefore attribute to unsafe dating environments. As female participants experience both in their gender and sexual identity a subject position in the Netherlands, for them it is thus more important to create a bigger in-group as a coping mechanism.

This argumentation, however, can be further used than only applied on the male/and female binary and the femme/masc division. What we found is that there are not only differences in the lived experiences of men and women, but also between various sexual identities and other axes of identity, such as ethnicity. Since non-hetero men are still in a higher societal position, having the male sex, they feel the power to exclude even further within “the community,” pointed towards more marginalized LGBTQIA+ people. The “no trans/blacks/Asians” dating profiles show how two completely different axis of identity, being both ethnicity and gender, become excluded all at once, as they are now not a part of the hegemonic masculine norm, neither the homonorm (that follows from homonormativity). The additional exclusion of more marginalized LGBTQIA+ people is not only coming from the perspective of participants who are romantically or sexually interested in men, as all participants have come across racism and transphobia. In general, however, discriminatory sentiments are extremely apparent and the most direct on Grindr, as the app design does not include a matching mechanism. Female participants, however, experience both in their gender and sexual identity a subject position in the Netherlands. For them, it could thus be more important to create a bigger ingroup as a coping mechanism. Lastly, what is described above has a specific effect on bi+ people. We have argued that bi+ women are being sexualized and that bi+ men experience the pressure to end up with a woman. Both these implications originate in patriarchy. Or in other words, they are both caused because of the views of cishet men. Because women-women relationships are viewed as sexy by cishet men they are sexualized. In addition, because of femmephobia, bi+ men experience a pressure to be heterosexual. This is also why bi+ men are less accepted and represented in the Dutch society, since representation is based on the male gaze (Mulvey 1989, 67).

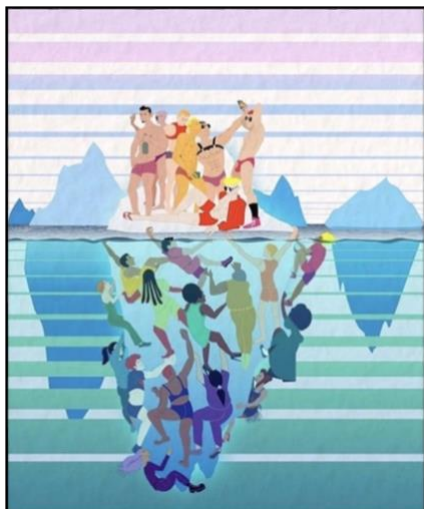


Figure 8: LGBTQIA+ community iceberg metaphor. Digital Image.

We want to conclude our analysis by addressing the image above. We see the classic ‘tip of the iceberg’ metaphor applied to our research topic. The visible ‘tip’ is covered with white men who look like the homonormative, masculine, trained beauty ideal that we have intensively discussed throughout this thesis. Underneath the water, the more invisible part, we see various people of color, feminine-presenting people and people with different body shapes trying to climb to the top. For us, this image illustrates how media portrayal and the Dutch, widespread notion about the acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community, is incomplete. We have advocated, instead of a media representation that is heteronormative, white, and male oriented, for a representation according to the assemblage approach, as all voices should be able to dance on top of the iceberg.

However, this thesis is not free from limitations, as researching the LGBTQIA+ community asks for continuous nuance. It is a fast-developing world in which debates about inclusion change continuously. This has created feelings of doubt about whether we have been inclusive, well-informed, non-binary and most of all, respectful in this thesis and towards our participants at any time. We are sure that we did not hit all the nails right on its head, as we are still white, middle-class university students talking about issues we have no to little experience with. We have only had the (often one-sided) outsiders’ perspective on the community before starting our fieldwork and might not be aware of everything going on inside of it, especially back then. Even though we feel more confident about this nowadays, it has still been hard to find the line between drawing conclusions from our data and making generalized assumptions. As our

subject is very personal and sensitive after all, on one hand we have aimed to speak the truth and get to the point in this thesis, while on the other hand we have aimed to monitor the sensitivities of our participants and most certainly do not want to harm them. A way to find a better balance between these aims would be, firstly, by choosing a subject where we had explicit personal experience in, and secondly, by putting away pride and shame to be able to ask the hard and uncomfortable questions to a further extent. It remains a fact that we are taking up space as cisgender, white women that is not necessarily ours.

Because we found most of our participants through online dating apps, it is important to note a couple of selection biases. Firstly, because you both have to ‘match’ each other, we ask a certain assertiveness from our participants, which might have attracted a certain public – as we think, a more articulated, activist group of people. LGBTQIA+ people who are hesitant in participating, are immediately excluded in this way. In a physical environment we could have tried to make a connection more casually, which online ethnographic research via dating apps does not allow for. Nevertheless, we are fond of the agency we gave to our potential participants on these apps - we assumed that we were not that intrusive, knowing that they could simply ignore our presence if they were not interested in participating. Meanwhile, as we were both not on these apps with the intention of dating someone, we might have invaded the safe space that online dating apps have to a certain extent. Furthermore, even though we aimed to shine a light all kinds of people within the LGBTQIA+ community, we note that unfortunately, data from an intersex person is lacking. This happens, in our opinion, too often in academic research and text that focus on a sociocultural perspective. We hope more insight will come on the lived experiences of intersex people in the future. It was rather ignorant from us to think we could include the lived experiences of all LGBTQIA+ people, in all their diversity.

In terms of our used methods, we should have been more active on social media platforms and fora. We consider this a missed opportunity as we realized the great advantages of talking with people online and being part of an online community in the last couple of weeks of our field work period. We mistakenly thought that small talk could mainly happen during physical fieldwork (next to some WhatsApp and dating app chat conversations), whereas the internet could actually pose a tightknit, supportive community. Furthermore, we were not prepared well enough for online interviews. Because we (video) recorded almost all of our interviews, the need for detailed notes did not occur that much to us. In retrospect, however we



see the value of notes about non-verbal, or “peculiar” things during seemingly static online interviews. As online interviews felt more static to us compared to real-life interviews, this allowed for less rapport to be built with our participants, which could have as a result that our data is less thick than we desired. However, our subject is very personal and sensitive after all, and jumping to conclusions about inclusion and exclusion mechanisms too fast is quite problematic. On one hand we have aimed to speak the truth and get to the point in this thesis, while on the other hand we have aimed to monitor the sensitivities of our participants and most certainly do not want to harm them. It is important to mark that finding this balance has been more difficult for us, as we have frequently based our arguments on a set of one-time, online conversations. The fact that we have not met some of our participants in real life and generally did not see our participants “move around” that often, may thus have made us a little cautious in the analysis.

All the same, this research may even have left us with more interesting subjects to research than what we have begun with. Some of these subjects, however, remain in a Eurocentric space. One of them being the use of trans\* with an asterisk. We remarked that the Dutch society is only in the last year really facing non-binary identities and accepting their preferences for pronouns in news articles. Before, big news outlets would interview a non-binary person but ignore their preferred pronouns and thereby disrespectfully misgendering them<sup>140</sup>. Within many cultures, for hundreds of years, genders beside ‘men’ and ‘women’ have existed, such as Hijras (Duits 2021). The fact that the Netherlands is struggling so much with the presence of vocal non-binary people is not a world-spread phenomenon and should thus be put in perspective. Among everyone who fits underneath the trans\* umbrella, we have only interviewed non-binary and transgender people. Thereby missing for instance, third gender, agender or genderfluid people. Further research should be done, next to intersex people, specifically with trans\* people to show their diversity and to show the Dutch society that they are here, and that they were always here.

We have used the assemblage approach instead of intersectionality to emphasize the fluidity of the Dutch LGBTQIA+ community. However, we noted that many participants view their own axes of identity more static than expected. We are therefore not sure whether the assemblage approach is in practice a better way of researching the Dutch LGBTQIA+

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<sup>140</sup> Nanoah Struik in an Instagram post on May 20th, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CPFoOK9Fj9x/>

community. Further research could examine the practical differences between intersectionality and assemblage to determine in which cases which approach is best.

For the last eight months, we have learned a tremendous amount about the Dutch LGBTQIA+ community. Its diversity, strength but first and foremost its beauty struck us again and again. We had the privilege of getting insights in the lives of 26 wonderful individuals and we hope that their interesting thoughts and beliefs inspired our readers as much as they have inspired us. Our participants affirmed that the seemingly clear bounded constructs of gender and sexuality have an ever-evolving complexities and subtleties, but above all, that these constructs offer them possibilities. As author, performer and speaker Alok Vaid-Menon alluringly concludes:

“I don’t want to be a woman, I just want to be me. I don’t want to be a man, I just want to be free.”<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Alok Vaid-Menon in an Instagram post on May 11, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/COtVxYRrVIQ/>

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## Visuals<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> We have only used public content which is allowed to be quoted ("citaatrecht") (Blom 2018).



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# Appendix

## 1. Samenvatting<sup>143</sup>

In een veldwerkperiode van 8 februari tot en met 16 april 2021 hebben wij online etnografisch onderzoek uitgevoerd binnen LHBTQIA+ Nederlanders. We hebben in deze periode interviews gehouden met 26 individuen die zowel variërende seksuele en gender identiteiten hebben, en online participierend geobserveerd op sociale media en online dating platforms. Door middel van het koppelen van deze data aan theorieën, hebben wij in deze thesis de volgende vraag beantwoord:

*Hoe ervaren Nederlandse LHBTQIA+ personen gendernormen en stereotypes tijdens hun online zoektocht naar een partner?*

In het eerste deel van de thesis worden bestaande theorieën rondom gender en seksuele identiteit als een construct uitgelegd en in verband gebracht met de rol van gender normen en stereotyperingen op zogenoemde gender performance van LHBTQIA+'ers (in de online date omgeving). Vervolgens leggen we uit hoe dit specifiek in de homonationalistische maar toch heteronormatieve Nederlandse context speelt, en hoe online dating is toegenomen met de komst van COVID-19.

De empirie, waarin we onze veldwerk data introduceren, bestaat uit drie hoofdstukken. Ten eerste hebben we uitgelegd dat gender en seksuele identiteit voor onze participanten geen duidelijke “regels” hebben, maar fluïde aanvoelen, vergelijkbaar met een assemblage benadering - alhoewel genderidentiteit voor onze participanten iets veranderlijker wordt ervaren dan seksuele identiteit. Daarnaast is gebleken dat gender- en seksuele identiteit niet direct met elkaar samenhangen, maar gender performance en seksuele identiteit vaak wel. Sommige participanten vonden het bijvoorbeeld makkelijker om gendernormen te contesteren en zich te uiten zoals ze altijd al verlangden vanaf het moment dat ze uit de kast kwamen, terwijl anderen zich juist in een hokje gestopt voelden, doordat hun omgeving (een) niet-conformerend(e) gedrag en stijl “vanzelfsprekender” vindt nadat iemand uit de kast is gekomen. Ondanks de ervaren fluïde

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<sup>143</sup> The following is a summary of our thesis in Dutch.

identiteit, blijft het afbakenen van hun seksuele of genderidentiteit met ‘labels’ voor velen dus belangrijk om te communiceren naar de buitenwereld wie ze zijn.

In het tweede hoofdstuk hebben we de gendernormen en stereotypes die onze participanten ervaren uiteengezet, en opgemerkt dat er binnen de LHBTQIA+ gemeenschap zelf ook vanuit een binaire en heteroseksuele blik gecategoriseerd wordt. Voor de mannelijke participanten gaan de stereotypes voornamelijk over de tweedeling ‘masc’ en ‘femme’, waar ze bij vrouwelijke participanten gaan over ‘butch’ en ‘femme’. De ‘mascs’ en ‘butches’ zouden meer ‘mannelijke’ eigenschappen en uiterlijke kenmerken bekleden, terwijl ‘femmes’ door participanten beschreven worden als meer ‘vrouwelijk’ wat betreft interesses en uiterlijk. De oorzaak van deze tweedeling verschilt echter per groep. Uit angst om slachtoffer te worden van voornamelijk cishet mannen die LHBTQIA+ mannen als dreiging voor hun machtspositie zien (vanwege het idee dat ze “vrouwelijker” en dus “zwakker” zouden zijn), reproduceren sommige LHBTQIA+ mannen deze gendernormen en stereotypes (inclusief waardeoordeel) om elkaar onderling in- en uit te sluiten. Omdat vrouwelijke participanten zowel in hun gender als seksuele identiteit een subjectieve positie in Nederland ervaren, conformeren zij echter juist aan gender normen en stereotypes om een sterker groepsgevoel te creëren. Non-binaire participanten, daarentegen, voelen druk vanuit de maatschappij om als non-binair persoon androgeen over te komen, uit angst om verkeerd gelabeld (misgendered) te worden door anderen. Dit duwt hen richting meer stereotyperende gedragingen en houdt daarmee het stigma in de stand dat non-binaire personen bijvoorbeeld geen jurk kunnen dragen.

We hebben daarnaast gekeken naar wat de invloed is van continue onder-representatie van de LHBTQIA+ gemeenschap op onze participanten en gevonden dat het niet kunnen zien van voorbeelden van hoe zij zich voelen, wat zij leuk vinden, of hoe zij eruitzien, ervoor zorgt dat ze ook meer moeite hebben met het ontwikkelen van hun identiteit. Het kan bijvoorbeeld leiden tot onzekerheid of je wel goed genoeg bent (om jezelf te scharen onder LHBTQIA+). Een andere reden hiervoor is dat de representatie van LHBTQIA+ mensen vaak eenzijdig is en draait om identiteitsproblematiek, zoals gepest worden.

In het derde en laatste hoofdstuk wordt dit alles in verband gebracht met online daten, aan de hand van de beschrijving van in- en uitsluitingsmechanismen. Mannelijke en non-binaire participanten die met mannen daten beschrijven een grote verwevenheid tussen gender stereotypen, lichaamstypes en verwachtingen rondom seksuele voorkeuren in deze scene. Er is

femmefobie, racisme, leeftijdsdiscriminatie, transfobie en *fatshaming* aanwezig. De meeste participanten ervaren het scala aan labels als onderdrukkend en bedwingen vaak, vanwege femmefobie, “vrouwelijke” uitingen. Anderen zien de labels als efficiënt, of voelen zich in staat er een eigen draai aan te geven. Desalniettemin voelen transpersonen en BIPOC zich het minst flexibel hierin. Uit onze data is gebleken dat er tussen lesbiennes en bi+ mensen uitsluiting plaatsvindt op basis van seksuele oriëntatie. Bi+ vrouwen en non-binaire personen voelen zich onzeker om met lesbiennes te daten. Omdat media representatie voornamelijk heteroseksuele dates laat zien, weten veel vrouwen niet hoe een date met een andere vrouw verloopt.

Ten slotte zijn we kort ingegaan op zelf-representatie op dating apps onder onze participanten. Hier blijkt dat dit een soort sociaal experiment is, waarbij participanten bewust foto's of profielteksten uitkiezen om geschikte partners of reacties aan te trekken, of juist te vermijden. Online identiteitsvorming is op deze manier altijd gelinkt aan grotere machtsstructuren maar toont tegelijkertijd hoe onze participanten er zelf voor kiezen om met gendernormen en stereotypes mee te gaan, of er juist tegenin te gaan. Onze participanten hebben hiermee laten zien dat gender en seksuele identiteit een steeds veranderende complexiteit en subtiliteit hebben, maar ook dat de performativiteit van deze sociale constructen hen mogelijkheden biedt in het zijn van jezelf en het vinden van een geschikte partner.

