



# DiGeSt

Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies

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*DiGeSt Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies, Volume 9, Issue 1*

<https://doi.org/10.21825/digest.81844>

Print ISSN: 2593-0273. Online ISSN: 2593-0281

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# Trans persons on trans representations in popular media culture: A reception study.

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## **Abstract**

After having been largely ignored, people with a trans\*gender identity are more represented in mainstream film and television, yet little research on the viewpoints of trans persons themselves exists (McInroy & Craig, 2015). Therefore, this article explores how Belgian transgender persons assess the recurring and contemporary media depictions of trans persons. Based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with transgender persons with ages ranging from eighteen to seventy years old (N=13), we found that the participants appreciated the increased visibility of trans persons and themes in media but noted that trans men and nonbinary persons are still rarely represented. Generally, respondents expressed fairly satisfied sentiments regarding representations that they perceived as realistic, especially in non-fictional and infotainment programs. Nevertheless, they also argued that media tend to focus too much on the physical body of a transgender person and depict a complete physical transition as a precondition to fully fit into society.

## **Keywords**

Transgender representation, Media representation, LGBTQ, Reception analysis, In-depth interviews

## Introduction

In 2018, the Belgian arthouse film *Girl* by Lukas Dhont — which revolves around a fifteen-year-old trans\*gender<sup>1</sup> girl who wants to become a professional ballerina — received critical acclaim and won various prestigious awards at renowned film festivals (Trio, 2018). As part of a broader shift towards more trans representations on screen, the film was able to bring transgender themes to the attention of a larger audience. However, despite all praise, *Girl* was fiercely criticized for not casting a transgender actor, for overly focusing on the transgender body, and for being made from an overall cisgender viewpoint ('Er is geen goede reden', 2019; Collins, 2019). *Girl*, however, is not the only case that caused a polarized debate on how to represent transgender characters and illustrates the overarching sense of unbalanced representation of transgender persons in audiovisual media content ('Er is geen goede reden', 2019; Collins, 2019).

Humphry (2016) claims that transgender audiences often feel misrepresented by the media. Nevertheless, only little attention has been given to their perceptions and experiences (Humphry, 2016; McInroy & Craig, 2017), although McInroy and Craig (2015, p.606) found out that 'this population may be particularly well positioned to consider the impact of these representations on themselves and their peers in the LGBTQ community'. Furthermore, for cisgender and transgender people, media act as predominant sources of information concerning transgender issues (McInroy & Craig 2015; GLAAD, 2019). As such, research from Gillig et al. (2018) shows that, for cisgender people, watching media portrayals of transgender persons is associated with more supportive attitudes toward transgender people and policies. For transgender individuals, in turn, being able to see meaningful role models represented on screen can co-construct their own gender identities (Berkovich, 2016). Although Berkovich (2016) emphasized that the results of her study cannot be generalized, she found out that engaging with transgender role models can encourage trans people to appropriate certain characteristics from them or to express more aspects of their own gender identity to a greater extent.

Therefore, this study explores how people with a transgender identity perceive the contemporary audiovisual media<sup>2</sup> depictions of trans<sup>3</sup> persons. Concretely, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with Belgian transgender persons aged eighteen to seventy years old. Consequently, this study does not only bring more transgender voices into the timely debate on media representations, but also transcends the dominant Anglo-American context by focusing largely on media from Flanders and The Netherlands<sup>4</sup>. Despite the lack of research, many widely disseminated transgender representations (*Girl* (2018), *M/V/X* (Eén, 2018-2018), *Hij is een Zij* (NPO 3, 2014)...) are to be found in these regions among which one of the lead characters in Flanders' most popular daily soap opera, *Thuis*, that has approximately 1.5 million daily viewers (Vanlee et al., 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> People whose gender correlates with their sex assigned at birth can be identified as cisgender (Aultman, 2014). Individuals whose gender deviates from their birth sex, however, are transgender (Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2011; Aultman, 2014; Kosenko et al., 2018). As 'transgender' is an umbrella term that includes different genders and sexualities (Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2011), the word 'trans' is often followed by an asterisk (\*) to open the term to a wider range of meanings (Tompkins, 2014; Halberstam, 2017). Despite not using the asterisk consistently throughout the article, this inclusive meaning of the word is used.

<sup>2</sup> Although the term 'media' is often used throughout the article, the research we have conducted focuses specifically on film and television, including both fictional and factual content.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout the article, the term 'trans persons' will mostly be used to refer to people with a transgender identity.

<sup>4</sup> All our participants speak Dutch. Consequently, the productions that were discussed are predominantly Dutch, which includes content from Flanders and The Netherlands. Because of a shared language and cultural space, participants in Flanders often have access to contemporary media discourses produced in The Netherlands and vice versa.

### **Contemporary transgender representation in popular media culture**

Stryker (2006) argued that academic attention has shifted since the mid-90s from depicting transgender people as mentally ill, to socially engaged interdisciplinary fields that are concerned with day-to-day transgender issues. Similarly, the way in which transgender people have been portrayed in media changed. Until the end of the twentieth century, transgender people were poorly represented in traditional mainstream media (Padva, 2008; Keegan, 2013; McInroy & Craig, 2017) while the available depictions were mostly negative and stereotypical (Cavalcante, 2013). Today, despite still being underrepresented (Billard, 2016; McInroy & Craig, 2017), an upsurge of transgender representations is notable in Western mainstream media (Keegan, 2013; McInroy & Craig, 2015; Jenzen, 2017; McInroy & Craig, 2017; GLAAD, 2019; Zamantakis & Sumerau, 2019; Vipond, 2021), whereby not only adults but also adolescents and children get the opportunity to consume content that is centered around gender diversity (Sandercock, 2015). The visibility of transgender people in mainstream popular media has notably increased in the United States with influential people such as actress Laverne Cox, tv-personality Caitlyn Jenner (Fischer, 2018; Zamantakis & Sumerau, 2019) and actor Elliot Page (Verstraete, 2020), helping this visibility. It should be noted that the US market is mostly taken as the benchmark, as international research has been conducted on trans representations so far. Furthermore, given the global cultural importance of the American media industry, these trends are of international importance. Nevertheless, thanks to the appearance of, for example, Youtuber NikkieTutorials, journalist Bo Van Spilbeeck and singer Sam Bettens, the media presence of transgender people has also grown in The Netherlands and Flanders; the latter being a self-labeled progressive and tolerant region (Vanlee, 2019).

When it comes to fictional content, we notice an upsurge of series where transgender identities are represented. *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019) (Hayes, 2019), *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-2019) and *Transparent* (Amazon Instant Video, 2014-2019) are leading examples (Fischer, 2018). On one hand, studies indicate that trans men remain underrepresented in comparison to trans women (McInroy & Craig, 2015; GLAAD, 2019). On the other hand, research from GLAAD (2019) discovered that the number of trans men on US television rose to twelve during the season 2019-2020; compared to twenty-one trans women and five nonbinary characters. Moreover, this is accompanied by less monolithic and more diverse representations regarding class, race, and sexuality (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017) comprising of a growing number of transgender persons of color (GLAAD, 2019). Currently, different representational practices that were praised for their truthfulness are prevailing. For instance, more actors with a transgender identity are being cast to play transgender characters (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; GLAAD, 2019). The most revolutionary example seems to be *Pose* (FX, 2018), a tv series with five regular roles played by transgender actors of color (GLAAD, 2018). Although multiple voices claim that cisgender actors can also fulfill these roles, casting cisgender actors to play transgender roles remains a disputed point as many argue that transgender actors' performances may bring more sensitivity and authenticity (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). McInroy and Craig (2017) add that transgender persons highly value more authentic representations, as they can depict characters as more complicated individuals (McInroy & Craig, 2015). Those multi-dimensional portraits contribute to countering stereotypes and can increase social acceptance (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017).

However, despite an increase in more balanced and fair representations of trans people and themes, stereotypical, demeaning, and negative depictions have not vanished. Trans communities remain misrepresented and transgender people are even made fun of from time to time (GLAAD, 2012; Cavalcante, 2013; Jobe, 2013; Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). As such, characters in drag are laughed at and using wrong pronouns is considered to be a joke (Jobe, 2013). Billard (2016) nevertheless showed that using someone's correct name and pronouns and applying proper terms to refer to trans people in media, increasingly legitimizes trans individuals; in contrast to name-calling them and using incorrect pronouns, which delegitimizes them. Media furthermore tend to portray transgender persons in stereotypical

roles (GLAAD, 2012; Cavalcante, 2013; Jobe, 2013) such as ‘the psycho-trans’, the victim, or the traitor (Cavalcante, 2013). Moreover, similar to the ‘medical model’ on disability that considers handicap as a health problem and a personal tragedy (Vertoont, 2017), trans narratives are frequently reduced to stories that are largely fixated on the transgender body (Keegan, 2013). This is linked to ‘the wrong body discourse’ (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017), whereby body dysphoria and feeling bad about the bodily appearance become central themes (Keegan, 2013). Having a transgender identity is thereby accompanied by sentiments of rage, sorrow and denial and is presented as a mode of feeling that needs to be ‘fixed’ (Keegan, 2013). Accordingly, Johnson (2016, p.466) demonstrated that the prevailing discourse to depict transgender persons is transnormativity, which he defines as ‘a hegemonic ideology that structures transgender experience, identification, and narratives into a hierarchy of legitimacy that is dependent upon a binary medical model and its accompanying standards, regardless of individual transgender people’s interest in or intention to undertake medical pathways to transition’. When a transition eventually gets depicted, this process is regularly simplified into one uncomplicated surgery (Jobe, 2013). With this study, we aim to investigate if the most important findings from the literature apply to Dutch media as well and how trans persons assess these media representations. Therefore, we have based our semi-structured questionnaire on the themes discussed above. A more detailed description of the applied methodology and the result section can be found below.

### Method

This study explores how transgender persons evaluate the recurring and contemporary media depictions of their communities by the use of roughly one hour in-depth interviews, mainly performed via Skype due to Covid-19 measures. This research method allows us to gather a comprehensive amount of information from relatively few people (Guion et al., 2011). We investigated the perspectives of thirteen Belgian transgender persons with ages ranging from eighteen to seventy years old. The participants were recruited via a call launched at the webpage of *Transgender Infopunt*<sup>5</sup> and via the snowball method<sup>6</sup>.

During the interviews, we relied on a semi-structured questionnaire. The interview was structured around three categories of questions: The first category included questions about the sociocultural importance of media as a source of information for transgender people and their peers (e. g. ‘how important do you consider media as a source of information for both transgender and cisgender people?’,...). The second category focused on the quantity and visibility of trans persons in media (e. g. ‘do you notice a difference in visibility of trans persons today compared to the past?’,...). The third category dealt with the overall value and credibility of recurring trans representations and was divided into three subcategories; namely (1) the correspondence with their own experiences and expectations (e. g. ‘can you give one or more examples of trans representations that you really (dis)liked?’,...), (2) the representation of the transgender body and the potential transition process (e. g. ‘do you think trans stories focus too little, enough, or too much on the physical aspect?’,...) and (3) diversity-on a representational level as well as on the level of production-in stories about trans persons (e. g. ‘do you think the existing media representations are diverse enough?’; ‘how do you feel about cisgender persons playing transgender roles?’,...).

After having conducted the in-depth interviews, all recordings were transcribed ad verbatim. Subsequently, a critical reading and a thematic coding analysis (Jensen, 2013), informed by the literature review, were performed. This method entails that all remarkable, conflicting and recurring statements from the interviews were identified and thematically linked to each other to deduct the implicit and explicit sentiments of our participants.

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<sup>5</sup> *Transgender Infopunt* is a Flemish expertise centre that deals with all questions about gender diversity and the transgender theme (Transgender Infopunt, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> All participants signed an informed consent before taking part in the interviews.

## Results

### *Sources of information*

The majority of the participants indicated that fictionalized and non-fictionalized media were seen as important sources of information from which they were able to make sense of their own gender identities in the early stages of their processes of self-identification. They searched for matter-of-fact information as well as personal stories from transgender peers. Indeed, Kosenko et al. (2018, p.274) stated that transgender people ‘used media to make sense of feelings, sexual relations, community, and transition options’. Many of the respondents pointed out that in later stages — after coming out as transgender or after potentially having undergone a transition process — mainstream media became less important to them as an information source, mainly because they felt like they already knew most of the conveyed information. Instead, both younger and older respondents tended to turn more to online media, including online fora or expert centers such as *Transgender Infopunt* and *GenderExpress* to retrieve information. Videos on Youtube have become important to some as well, since this platform allows every individual to create content and tell a personal story, resulting in a wide range of available information. This is not to say that the respondents were no longer concerned with the modes of representation in traditional media. Contrarily, they are aware of the fact that these representations still function as the predominant information sources on transgender issues for cisgender persons. Participant one (he/him, twenty-two years old) pointed out:

I come from a small village and I don't know anyone else here in my environment who is transgender as well. [...] Then you notice that media are the only way for people to gather information on the subject. But I think it might differ in larger cities and where more transgender persons live.

Hall et al. (1997) already made clear in their writings about the politics of representation (of minorities) that it is through the signifiers of mainstream media that people interpret and make sense of the world, objects, events, and other people, in this particular case, transgender identities. Similarly, Gillig et al. (2018) pointed out that watching storylines with transgender people as main characters is associated with more supportive attitudes toward transgender people. Nonetheless, this study focuses on the different viewpoints of transgender persons, concerning media representations of their communities.

### *Visibility*

In accordance with many scholars (e.g. Keegan, 2013; McInroy & Craig, 2015; Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; Jenzen, 2017; McInroy & Craig, 2017; Zamantakis & Sumerau, 2019), almost every participant agreed that the number of media that focuses implicitly or explicitly on transgender themes has increased significantly, which greatly pleased them. Regarding the current visibility of trans persons in media, however, the participants’ opinions were divided. In line with the findings of Jenzen (2017), McInroy and Craig (2017) and GLAAD (2019), three of them clearly stated that transgender identities remain undoubtedly underrepresented. Participant five (she/her, thirty-four years old) argued, ‘Name roughly five or ten audiovisual products that you watch. Will there be a transgender person present in one of those ten? Probably not’. In writing about the representation of minorities, Gerbner and Gross (1976, p.182) pointed to Gerbner’s concept of symbolic annihilation, implying that ‘representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation’. Gross elaborated on this by introducing the concept in relation to particularly gender and sexual minorities. Not all participants agreed that trans people were underrepresented. Three participants stressed that they were very much pleased with the amount of representation. Three other persons even indicated that they were worried about the emergence of too much content on the topic. Participant one (he/him, twenty-two years old) claims that:

It [media content on the transgender theme] comes very much in waves. [...] On a certain moment, everything occurred all at once and I think that is a pity. People who are hostile to the very existence of transgender identities and who need time to discover that it might be normal, are being overwhelmed with content, which will not improve anything. [...] It is not going to change their point of view.

A considerable amount of visibility of trans persons made some participants fear that the audience would be inundated with and even satiated by transgender stories. Though, participant seven (she/her, twenty-three years old) could imagine that ‘people that have nothing to do with it [the transgender theme] and do not know anything about it, might think “oh, again”’, but she immediately added that ‘these people also have to realize that these representational practices are partly done in order to break taboos’. In that regard, Vipond (2021) points out the paradox of transgender visibility and builds upon the findings of Gossett et al. (2017) that the increased visibility of trans persons can be a ‘trap door’. This means that ‘trans people are frequently offered ‘doors’— entrances to visibility and recognition — that are actually ‘traps’ (Gossett et al., 2017, cited in Vipond, 2021, p.146), as this visibility only applies to those who meet the norm and consequently leads to invisibility of those who don’t (Vipond, 2021). Another issue that was raised by McInroy and Craig (2015) and GLAAD (2019), is that transgender women are significantly more visible in comparison to transgender men and nonbinary persons, which ten out of the thirteen respondents noticed as well. Most of them stated that they have no problem whatsoever with trans women being predominantly represented<sup>7</sup>, as they believed these proportions to be more or less in accordance with society. According to the most recent findings from IGVM (2019), 60 percent of all officially registered binary trans people in Belgium do identify as trans women compared to 40 percent of trans men. We may wonder if the proportions in media are not more disproportionate than the statistics seem to be and if this has consequences to the way audiences make sense of transgender persons. Sensationalism and spectacle also seem to play a considerable role in determining visibility. Similar to the findings of Serano (2016), several participants declared that MTF<sup>8</sup> identities can be presented in a more sensationalized and sexualized way, which media seem eager to respond to. Participant five (she/her, thirty-four years old) acknowledges that trans women are predominantly represented and emphasized that especially nonbinary persons are barely visible. She narrated:

Someone I know once told me that he was watching *M/V/X*<sup>9</sup>. He said, ‘the series is perhaps called *M/V/X*, but I have actually never seen someone that identifies as X’. They are all trans men and trans women, but there are no nonbinary persons present in the show.

A few participants added that, when nonbinary people do appear on the screen, they are often misunderstood by the audience due to a lack of contextualization of their gender identities, which is something that not everyone might be familiar with.

### ***Recurring transgender representations: the value of representations***

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<sup>7</sup> The majority of the participants are transgender women, which could potentially affect the finding that a disproportional representation of trans women is not considered to be a problem by the participants.

<sup>8</sup> MTF is the abbreviation for ‘male to female’.

<sup>9</sup> *M/V/X* is the Dutch abbreviation for ‘male, female, gender fluid/nonbinary’. The program, broadcasted on public broadcaster VRT, described itself as a human-interest series ‘about the lives of five Flemish transgender persons’.

Nearly all respondents, regardless of age, attached great importance to the occurrence of 'realistic representations', meaning that they aim to see truthful images that are in accordance with their perception of reality, especially concerning depictions of people in transition and the transition process itself. It seems particularly important to pursue accuracy in non-fictional and informational series. One of the participants explained he disliked *Topdokters*<sup>10</sup> because the episodes about trans persons featured wrong information about hormone treatment. The series made him expect that he would receive a hormone syringe immediately, while this was not the case.

Several participants did indicate to be pleased with infotainment series such as *Topdokters*, *M/V/X* or *Hij is een Zij*<sup>11</sup> because they believed that the programs had changed something in society due to the enormous scope some of the series have had. The importance of truthful representations is reaffirmed when it comes to the depictions of well-known transgender people. As such, some respondents, mostly those with ages above 30 years old, referred to Bo Van Spilbeeck<sup>12</sup> while expressing their dissatisfaction about how her transition had been presented in media. As argued by Jobe (2013), media regularly tend to simplify a transition process, which seems to have happened in this case as well. Participant four (she/her, fifty-three years old) stated:

In 2017, she medically came out as transgender. [...] After three months, she started with hormone treatment. Again three months later, she underwent face surgery and six months later gender affirming surgery followed. There is no single trans person with whom that is possible. Except for Bo Van Spilbeeck whose complete transition happened in one year. I'm happy for her that it was possible, but that is not reality.

Participant three (she/her, thirty-seven years old) disapprovingly elaborated on the way Van Spilbeeck's coming out was welcomed. 'When I watched Bo Van Spilbeeck's coming out, I saw a whole media outing with applause and celebrations. I never had that and I would have never wanted that either'. The way in which media depicted Sam Bettens<sup>13</sup>' coming out and transition process, however, was considered to be a much more positive example as it was more in accordance with their experiences, partly due to the duration of the transition process. They furthermore pointed out that they were satisfied with the truthful and respectful depictions of other well-known trans persons' stories such as Nora Monsecour's<sup>14</sup> and Petra De Sutter's<sup>15</sup>, since they believed these people to be role models for other trans persons. Indeed, Berkovich (2016) already demonstrated that the presence of transgender role models is positively associated with transgender persons' own identity construction.

Concerning fictionalized content, the occurrence of truthful depictions seems to be slightly less important in comparison to non-fiction and infotainment series. Yet, the respondents nevertheless argued that they feel frustrated when seeing representations that are not in accordance with their understanding of reality, as these remain harmful and humiliating to them anyhow. Almost all participants shared this opinion and age seemed not to play a

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<sup>10</sup> *Topdokters* is a Flemish television program, broadcasted on channel *Play4*, in which the audience get insights in several prestigious doctors' daily jobs. The series is not particularly about transgender persons but shows a series of medical matters in general.

<sup>11</sup> *Hij is een Zij* is a television series that shows the daily lives of six young transgender people and is produced by the Dutch Public Broadcasting *KRO-NCRV*.

<sup>12</sup> *Bo Van Spilbeeck* is a Belgian journalist for the commercial broadcaster, who came out as a trans woman in January 2018.

<sup>13</sup> *Sam Bettens* is a Belgian singer, who is best known as the front singer of *K's Choice*. In May 2019, Sam came out as a trans man.

<sup>14</sup> *Nora Monsecour* is a Belgian trans woman, whose life the film *Girl* was based on.

<sup>15</sup> *Petra De Sutter* is a Belgian professor in medicine, doctor and politician who is furthermore the first transgender minister and deputy prime minister in Europe.



considerable role. A much-discussed example during the interviews concerns the character Kaat from the daily soap opera *Thuis* – which is broadcast on the Flemish public broadcaster VRT and features a storyline where ‘Franky’ travels to America to come back as ‘Kaat’. The actors playing Franky and Kaat being respectively a cisgender man and a cisgender woman may give the impression that transitioning can be done very easily and always leads to a perfect result without any complications along the way. Some participants argued that the storyline would have been portrayed much more truthful if Kaat did not completely pass<sup>16</sup>. On the contrary, other films and series in which transgender persons were portrayed in accordance with their experiences, seemed to please the participants for that particular reason. Some examples they provided were *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-2019), *Chaussée d’Amour* (Prime, 2016-2017), *Ma Vie en Rose* (1997) and *Sense8* (Netflix, 2015-2018).

***Recurring transgender representations: focus on the body and the transition process***

Multiple respondents were bothered by narratives in which trans personages had few characteristics other than their transness, because this reduces them to only one aspect of their entire identity. Multi-dimensional representations, on the other hand, can counter stereotypes and increase social acceptance of transgender individuals (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). Participant ten (she/her, thirty-two years old) describes it as:

The fact that I identify as a woman now is indeed a small part of my identity. Am I intensely preoccupied with that? From time to time, but much less than a few years ago. So, I also try to develop myself strongly in many different areas and that is actually much more who I am and what defines my personality, rather than the fact that I am transgender.

Furthermore, most participants declared that media tend to focus too much on the transgender body and therefore oftentimes ignore the mental and societal aspects of being transgender. This excessive bodily fixation goes hand in hand with what Keegan (2013) and Capuzza and Spencer (2017) described as ‘the wrong body’ discourse (cfr. supra). According to some participants, media hereby depict trans persons’ genitals as a main cause of dysphoria, while they indicated this not always to be in accordance with how they feel or have been feeling about their own physical body. A few participants argued that they have less problems with their genitals than with other characteristics such as their voice, their facial appearance, their beard, or the size of their hands and feet. Therefore, controversy arose among the participants concerning the ending scene of *Girl*. Generally, the movie was praised by those who had seen it, mostly due to the storyline, the depiction of the family bond and the acting performance of the main actor. The fact that she has an aversion of her body and tries to cut off her genitals at the end of the movie, however, was considered exaggerated by the majority of the participants.

This extreme fixation on the physical bodily appearance is accompanied by the idea that gender affirming surgery is the most crucial step in the transition process and that it is a *conditio sine qua non* to feel fully male or female and to fit into society as such. This transnormative trope does not only marginalize trans persons that do not undergo a medical transition (Johnson, 2016), but also essentializes the transition process to gender affirming surgery. Accordingly, it does injustice to Halberstam’s (2017) inclusive definition of the word ‘trans\*’ and its accompanying asterisk (cfr. supra). Indeed, although some participants felt undergoing gender affirming surgery is important, others declared that this is not necessary for them. Moreover, some storylines simplify the transition process in as much that they do not even depict any aspects of the medical transition in the first place. A case that

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<sup>16</sup> Passing is a term that is used within the binary gender division. When someone ‘passes’, it means that this person has made a gender transition but that other people will not know about it because this person can be perceived cisgender (James, 2014).

was discussed several times was the story of Kaat from *Thuis*. The character left the show for quite some time and reappeared the moment she had undergone a complete medical transition. A few participants also recognized similar patterns in non-fiction content. Participant twelve (she/her, thirty-six years old) noticed that:

Media think that they are cool because they show transgender persons on television [...] but they could be really cool for once if they put someone in the television studio who is in the midst of the transition process. Someone whose outer and inner struggle is still ongoing.

Contrary to other respondents, this participant argued *M/V/X* to be a very conducive show to get a better understanding of the transgender theme, because it is one of the few series broadcasted in Flanders and The Netherlands that depicts people in transition. In accordance with the findings of McInroy and Craig (2015) that media act as predominant sources of information concerning transgender issues (McInroy & Craig, 2015; GLAAD, 2019), participant twelve (she/her, thirty-six years old) also adds that:

Showing these depictions [people in the midst of their transition] in media would be much more valuable. As such, a lot more transgender persons would feel addressed. Because, at this moment, they get to see an ideal image that is not easy to achieve. And I think that would contribute to the general acceptance of transgender people.

***Recurring transgender representations: diversity***

In addition to their aspiration to see various stages of the transition process, the respondents also emphasized a more general proclivity towards more diversity in terms of narratives and characters on the representational level. Earlier, it was already discussed that the majority of the respondents claimed that trans women are much more represented than trans men and nonbinary persons; which is an issue of diversity as well. In contrast to the findings of Capuzza and Spencer (2017), the participants postulated that an insufficient amount of people of color are to be seen and that the difficult circumstances in which they sometimes find themselves are often neglected. According to some, it is furthermore insufficiently shown that trans persons are often called names or are given less privileged positions than cisgender persons. One of the participants added that she would like to see more depictions of transgender people in difficult circumstances, such as people living in countries where trans persons have less rights.

The study also considered the level of production and self-representation. As stated earlier, casting cisgender actors to play transgender roles causes a polemic (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). Our participants, however, pointed out that they did not have a large problem with it. When discussing Victor Polster's acting performance in *Girl*, eleven out of the thirteen respondents were rather satisfied with the casting of a cisgender man to play a transgender woman. They cited several reasons for this, such as the actor having a rather androgynous appearance, the acting performance being strong and very respectful towards transgender people, the fact that the main character is transitioning and the very specific role of a ballet dancing trans woman that needed to be covered. Despite their overall laudatory assessments, several participants did indicate it to be a missed opportunity to cast a transgender actor. Concerns were raised that cisgender persons are allowed to play transgender roles, but that the reverse rarely happens. Participant two (he/him, eighteen years old) elaborates on this in the following words:

I think the real problem is that it is very hard for trans persons to find roles that are not meant to be for trans persons. Thus, they cannot play cis people.

If it was easier for trans persons to play cisgender characters, then I think it would be much less a problem that they also can't play trans characters.

*Girl* has, on the other hand, also seized an important opportunity, namely integrating transgender persons into the production process of the film. According to the majority of the participants, it shows that Nora Monsecour, the woman on whose life the film was based, collaborated closely with director Lukas Dhont. While the ending scene was perceived as exaggerated, they clearly noticed recognizable elements in the film, that, according to them, would probably not have been included if only cisgender people contributed. Indeed, audiovisual products involving persons with a transgender identity in the production process were generally approved by the respondents because of their ability to contribute to truthful representations. Hence, it is invariably argued by the participants that hiring trans\* media professionals (as actors, directors, etc.) is a major step towards more truthful and authentic representations on the screen.

### **Conclusion**

After having conducted in-depth interviews with thirteen Belgian transgender persons, it becomes clear that transgender people value media as a source of information, both for themselves — mostly before coming out as transgender — and for cisgender people, especially those who rarely encounter transgender people. In terms of quantity, almost all participants expressed joyful sentiments regarding the upsurge of trans representations and stated that they did not have any problem with trans women being predominantly depicted. Nonetheless, concerning the current amount of representations in contemporary media, opinions were more divided. While some were pleased with the number of transgender identities on screen, others pointed out a sense of invisibility. Conversely, some of them emphasized the pernicious impact of too much transgender representations on screen, which can be linked to the metaphor of the 'trap door', whereby the visibility of some trans persons is related to the invisibility of others (Gossett et al., 2017; Vipond, 2021). Although the participants' opinions were divided on this and other topics, neither gender identity nor age seemed to play a considerable role in meaning construction.

In terms of value of the representations, nearly all respondents attached great importance to the occurrence of 'realistic representations', meaning that they aim to see truthful depictions that are in accordance with their perception of reality, particularly in non-fictional and infotainment series that are intended to be informative. The aim for 'realistic representations' is reaffirmed when it comes to representations of well-known transgender people and their potential transition process, as these people are believed to be considerable role models for other transgender persons, which is confirmed by Berkovich (2016). Furthermore, several respondents declared that media tend to overly focus on the physical body of a transgender person and consequently oftentimes ignore the mental and societal aspects of being transgender. This goes hand in hand with what Keegan (2013) and Capuzza and Spencer (2017) describe as 'the wrong body' discourse. According to some participants, media hereby depict trans persons' genitals as a main cause of dysphoria, while they indicated that this is not always in accordance with how they feel or have been feeling about their own physical body. The extreme fixation on the physical bodily appearance is also accompanied by transnormative frameworks (Johnson, 2016) and the idea that gender affirming surgery is the most crucial step in the transition process.

The participants also pointed out a lack of diverse representations, both in terms of storylines and characters that are depicted. Especially trans persons of color appear to be invisible. Concerning the disputed topic of casting cisgender actors to play transgender roles (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017), the respondents agreed that they did not have a large issue with that practice, given the often very specific casting that is sometimes needed, if the acting performance and the general storyline remain respectful towards transgender people. Nevertheless, all participants agreed that opening cisgender roles to transgender people as

well as involving them in the production process of media making would already be large steps towards more truthful and authentic representations. In the same way, with this research, we have attempted to map the opinions of transgender persons, as they are in a good position to assess media content on their communities (McInroy & Craig, 2015). It should be noted that the researchers have a cisgender identity, but all findings from this research are entirely based on the opinions of the respondents, who all identify as transgender. Given the limited sample of the research (N=13), the results cannot be generalized, yet they should be an indication of how media is evaluated by people with a transgender identity; hoping to improve media depictions in the future.

#### **Declaration of conflict of interests**

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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