

To Hate or Not to Hate: Defining Transphobia in Facebook Comments
A Comparative Study Between the Netherlands and the United States

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ABSTRACT

Transgender emancipation and visibility are becoming progressively more important in a world where trans-related violence and suicide among transgender youth are increasing at an alarming rate. TV shows that highlight this juxtaposition of the joys and dangers for trans people navigating a gender normative society, such as *Pose* on FX, amplify the importance of recognition in both society and academics. However, such media products often aim to shed light on offline transphobia, whereas there is little to no attention given to online transphobia. Multiple studies have demonstrated that cyberbullying negatively impacts the wellbeing of online users, and can lead to mental health issues, as well as violence and suicide. With regards to the predominantly US-oriented available academic resources on transgender topics, and the lack of broader qualitative in-depth studies, the current research aims to discover the differences in transphobic narratives in Facebook comments between the United States and the Netherlands, through a content analysis of 436 Facebook comments. The data was collected through the Facebook comments under transgender related news articles, posted on the Facebook pages of news sites. The narrative analysis revealed eight different categories of transphobia in Facebook comments, which are: ‘denying the trans identity’, ‘scientific/biological arguments’, ‘mean/hurtful comments’, ‘trans is illness’, ‘disproving based on religion’, ‘loss of (national) identity’, ‘blaming politics’, and ‘trans is a trend’. In several categories, Dutch and American comments were significantly different. Dutch transphobia seems to be more focused on ridicule, sarcasm, and passive aggressiveness. These are often written out of fear to lose one’s traditional ‘Dutch’ nationality, or in frustration with their conflicting understanding of the world. American transphobia appears to be grounded in religion, focused more often on mentioning one’s sex organs, and regularly imply violence and harassment. This study therefore concludes that transphobic Facebook comments obstruct the liberation and emancipation of the trans community, but that with knowing the differences between these two countries, specific policies can be drawn up to decrease the online hate aimed at trans people.

KEYWORDS: *Transphobia, transgender, hate speech, Facebook comments, hate comments*

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1. Introduction

Advanced technologies and the increasing importance of social networking sites (SNSs), allows news websites to utilize platforms like Facebook as a channel to post articles and invite user interaction (Hille & Bakker, 2014). This interaction takes place in the form of an ‘open’ comment section under posts, which are accessible to any Facebook user. Facebook serves as a third party for news websites to outsource the comment section (Hille & Bakker, 2014), and this often results in a lot of user interaction in the form of likes, comments, and shares. However, (too) often these comments get hateful and verbally violent.

There is a considerable amount of research on this topic, looking into various aspects of the Facebook comment sections and this phenomenon is now known as ‘hate comments’. Hille and Bakker (2014) researched the difference in narratives of comments on news websites and their Facebook pages. They found that people on Facebook are more reluctant to post hateful messages because their words are attached to their name and face. This is not the case for the news websites where comments are often completely anonymous. Yet, the hate comments that do exist on Facebook are potentially harmful. The content of these hate messages differs per comment. Del Vigna et al (2017) researched the contents of hate comments under Italian public Facebook pages, and categorized them into different themes. They then tried to classify these comments according to the defined taxonomy. These themes are based on a scale of no hate to hate, yet not on which type of hate in terms of narratives. Such quantitative studies are useful to detect hate speech and provide indications on the ‘level’ of hate, but lack in investigating motivations behind hate, as well as consequences of hate. This is one of the factors why the current research intends to not simply classify comments as ‘hate’ or ‘no hate’, but instead look at the narratives and see what exactly the type of hate is, and what possible consequences can come from this.

1.1 Research problem

The studies mentioned before thoroughly investigated hate comments on Facebook in terms of frequency and scale. However, none of them had a specific focus on what type of hate comments these are, and to what extent they concern a specific minority group in society, such as the transgender community. There is no doubt that trans people face discrimination, societal disapproval, and violence, on a regular basis. A simple Google search on the word ‘trans violence’ results in millions of search results on news articles, statistics, viral videos, etc. It can be argued that the trans community is currently in the midst of an emancipatory revolution, fighting for their rights, recognition, and protection.

I believe this group is underrepresented in academics, lacking the much-needed visibility to emancipate. Studies with a focus on transgender issues often have inadequate transgender-related data: “(...) we lack official information about unemployment rates, income and poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, and all other data that are regularly measured in the general population” (National Center for Transgender Equality, n.d.). In order to better understand trans-related issues and prevent unwanted developments such as homelessness, violence, or suicide, the transgender community must therefore be paid a fair amount of academic attention.

It seems that while the topic of transgender is making headlines more often, with stories of famous celebrities coming out (like Olympic athlete Caitlyn Jenner or YouTube star NikkieTutorials) or violence against trans people (like Alexa Negrón), the amount of academic recognition is not increasing at a similar rate. Arguably one of the most notable cases in the US, in which a transgender woman died from violence, is the murder of Gwen Araujo in 2002. Araujo was murdered by a group of four men, two of which she had been sexually intimate with. After they discovered Araujo was transgender, the men encouraged each other to inflict violence on Araujo, resulting in her being strangled with a rope, struck in the head with a shovel, and eventually buried (Heidenreich, 2006).

But trans-related violence is not just something from the past, in fact, it is still happening today. The Times report: “Overall, eight people from the LGBTQ community have been killed in Puerto Rico in the past 15 months (...). None of the cases have been solved” (Coto, 2020). For this reason, the transgender community is the main topic of the current research, and the findings will contribute to the social relevance of the overall study (section 1.4).

Another problem that arises when discussing the topic of transgender is the argument that this is a new phenomenon. However, transgender people have existed as long as humans have existed, in several cultures around the world. For example, the Mahu in Hawaii, which are people who embrace both the masculine and feminine gender traits (Virk, 2017), and the Two-Spirit in Native American culture, which refers to people who fulfill a traditional third-gender role (West, 2010). Through colonization, Western cultures have tried to rid such native cultures of their gender diversity, replacing it with the Western cisgender normativity. Nonetheless, transgender is definitely not something ‘new’, and should therefore not be neglected as a trend, denying its rights for emancipation and visibility.

1.2 Research questions

The problems as described in 1.1. show that there is still a great lack of research on this community, specifically on the online hate targeted against trans people. This is why the current research builds on the studies done by previous researchers, of which a few are named earlier in this paper. Using that framework of the current understanding of these issues, but seeking answers to the more specific field of hate comments, the current paper aims to answer the following research question (RQ): “How do transphobic narratives in Facebook comments under Dutch news articles differ from those under American news articles?” The choice of these specific two countries is further explained in sections 1.3 and 3.4.

Besides the main research question, the current study identified three sub questions that derive from the research gaps found in the literature review in section 2. These sub questions help understand the broad topic of transphobia, and guide the reader into understanding the findings, in addition to comprehending the answer to the main research question. The sub questions are (SQ1): “To what extent do these online transphobic narratives reflect the Netherlands’ and the United States’ tolerance level towards trans people?” (SQ2): “What is the type of verbal violence that implies physical threats and direct harassment to trans people?” (SQ3): “What do the hateful/transphobic narratives in Facebook comments look like?”

1.3 International aspect

The research question suggests a cross-national comparative research between the Netherlands and the United States. The relevance to include both these countries is further explained in section 3.4. However, it is important to briefly address now, as the theoretical framework of this study concerns trans-related theory in general, thus relating to both countries. A vast majority of the available online (academic) resources concern American studies or are written in English. These do not look at the intersectionality of gender identity (Capuzza, Spencer, Allen, & Barnett, 2016, p 87), such as race and culture. In their book on gender studies, Capuzza et al. (2016) suggest to study the topic transgender beyond the Western lens: “One obvious direction for future transgender communication research is to examine the production of gender – and its accompanying intersections – in cultural contexts beyond the U.S. and the global West” (p. 87).

However, a study by Transgender Netwerk Nederland (TNN, 2020) showed that in 2019, 40% of trans people were victim of domestic violence, 20% experienced sexual violence, and 60% felt unsafe. These numbers concern the Netherlands, which means that

the topic is definitely not irrelevant in this country. To understand these statistics and the influencing factors behind it, the current study looks into transphobic Facebook comments on news pages from both countries.

1.4 Social and academic relevance

The social relevance of this study is to shed light on the ways in which online narratives contribute to the alarming suicide rates, and trans-related violence. Transgender people battle mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, more frequently than other minority groups (Mizock & Mueser, 2014), and are more likely to attempt suicide (Clements-Nolle, Marx, & Katz, 2016). The online narratives, such as transphobic Facebook comments, arguably contribute to these statistics, and should therefore be researched.

Additionally, the literature gaps presented in this study show that on several aspects of the topic, there is still a lack in academic research. In order to understand the motivations for trans people to inflict self-harm, or have these severe mental health issues, academia need to look into all possible influencing factors, including online transphobia, that contribute to these disquieting numbers. Without the correct and sufficient representation of the trans community in educational resources, the general public, including those participating in transphobic narratives, are unable to be informed and educated on the topic.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical concepts mentioned in the introduction lay foundation to the following part of the present study. In this section, the concepts of LGBTQ tolerance and transphobia (Atkins & Marston, 1999; Elks, 2019; Miller, 2019; Hadler, 2012), trans-related violence and suicide (Mizock & Mueser, 2014; Clements-Nolle et al., 2006; Luxton, June, & Fairall, 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Maguen & Shipherd, 2010), and online hate comments (Hille & Bakker, 2014; Del Vigna et al., 2017) will be further elaborated on, as the framework for the current research. These concepts present three current research gaps that serve as the basis for answering the research question. The next sections explain the theory related to the queer community, trans identity, transphobia, and trans-related violence. These theories explain the research gaps in current literature, and based on that present three sub questions.

2.1 Tolerance for the queer community

The terms 'queer', 'transgender' and 'LGBTQ' are important words or concepts to this research and will be used throughout the paper. Trans-related news often include these

words, and Facebook users that comment on these posts, both anti and pro trans issues, are also likely to use any of the terms mentioned above. In order to get a clear image of how the current research understands these terms, all three will be briefly addressed in the following sections. First the terms ‘queer’ and ‘LGBTQ’ are defined, as they have an important historical background. After, in section 2.2, the term ‘transphobia’ is defined, as this relates closely to the trans identity and anti-LGBTQ narratives.

The term queer was first used in the 16th century, meaning something ‘strange’, ‘unconventional’, ‘sick’ or ‘odd’ (Perlman, 2019). Later, in 1894, queer, as in gay, became a general term to refer to homosexuality (Perlman, 2019), in particular homosexual men. Consequently, lesbians argued that the term gay erases the differences in experiences of being homosexual for women and men (Perlman, 2019). Such theories resulted in the development of the term queer and its meaning. Although the formal definition has not much changed since its origin, scholars nowadays widely associate the word with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community (Atkins & Marston, 1999). Notwithstanding that from an outsider’s view the term queer was used in a derogatory way (Perlman, 2019), for those on the inside it became a strategy of inclusiveness, emphasizing the difference from the perceived norm (Atkins & Marston, 1999).

However, today the term queer is often loosely used to define every gender identification or sexual orientation that is not considered the norm. The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) therefore suggests the ‘Q’ for queer should be included in reference to the LGBT community plus anyone else that does not fit the ‘norm’ (GLAAD, n.d.). The acronym that is broadly used today is LGBTQ, standing for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (Cooper & Brownell, 2016). Other acronyms that are also used are LGBTQIA+ or LBGTQ+ (Cooper & Brownell, 2016), in which the ‘I’ stands for intersex, the ‘A’ for asexual or allies (Mollet & Lackman, 2018) the extra ‘T’ for two-spirit, and the ‘+’ for anything else. Within the parameters of the current research, the term LGBTQ will be used.

As Atkins and Marston (1999) rightfully note, the term community is challenging to define or use, as there are many overlapping communities among those who identify as being part of the LGBTQ community. Such overlaps occur in different areas of geography and structure (Atkins & Marston, 1999), like race, class, religion, etc. However, the term community also highlights the shared experience of a common support group, based on common experiences (Atkins & Marston, 1999). These shared experiences are based on a common struggle for emancipation, similar basis of discrimination, or similar cultural experiences.

In many contexts, these terms are found in anti-LGBTQ narratives, meaning they are used in a negative form. These narratives relate closely to homophobic and/or transphobic discourses. According to the 2019 Legatum Prosperity Index (Legatum Institute, 2019), the Netherlands rank as the second most tolerant country towards the LGBTQ community (Elks, 2019). However, according to a study conducted in 2016, in the Netherlands 14% of the respondents of a survey were considered to be homophobic (Hadler, 2012). The same study found that for the United States, this percentage was double, at 31%. In this research, 130,000 respondents from 32 countries were presented surveys with questions regarding tolerance towards the LGBTQ community. The first survey was conducted in 1993, and the last one in 2010. Interestingly, over a time period of 17 years, respondents from the United States showed a decrease in homophobia of 15%, whereas this was only a 5% decrease for the Netherlands (Hadler, 2012). Contrary, a study by USA Today found that in 2018 only 45% of respondents between the ages 18 to 34 are comfortable interacting with LGBTQ people (Miller, 2019). Compared to the same study conducted in 2017, this is a decrease of 8%.

These changes in (in)tolerance towards the LGBTQ community, in specifically trans persons, are partially based on factors such as national political history, societal affluence, or the presence of international organizations (Hadler, 2012), or individual-level determinants such as income, education, or political affiliation. This is where the first research gap arises. The studies mentioned above only quantified their data on the amount or level of intolerance towards the LGBTQ community, or a country's percentage of homophobic individuals. However, none investigate or visualize the individual transphobic narratives, such as transphobic Facebook comments, that could possibly explain these percentages and reflect the results of the previous studies on LGBTQ intolerance. For the purpose of this study, transphobia in hateful Facebook comments posted to trans-related articles is researched in order to understand the countries' intolerance levels towards trans persons. This leads to this research' first sub-question (SQ1): "To what extent do these online transphobic narratives reflect the Netherlands' and the United States' tolerance level towards trans people?" Answering this sub question will help understand if the findings of the current study regarding the difference in transphobic narratives, could actually (partly) explain the intolerance level of the two countries, and reflect the findings of existing research.

2.2. The trans identity

It is important to understand the history of the term queer, and to see how it developed over the years. However, each letter in the acronym LGBTQ has its own history.

With regards to the research topic of the current paper, the next section will be a more elaborated explanation of the transgender (or trans) community.

Following the definitions as set by GLAAD (n.d.), the term transgender is defined as “an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.” Here, both gender identity and gender expression are included. Gender expression refers to a person's expression of their gender (Bosmans & Motmans, 2016), for example portraying a ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ look in the form of clothing, body language, hairstyle, etc. Gender expression is separate from gender identity, which is one’s internal sense of gender (Bosmans & Motmans, 2016) or sexual orientation. A trans person does therefore not have to appear with (physical) gender characteristics that are associated with the sex, as both gender expression and gender identity are part of being transgender. This means that for example butch and femme lesbian women (terms that are used in lesbian subculture, describing either more masculine or more feminine identities), or androgynous persons (the combination of masculine and feminine gender characteristics in one person), could identify as transgender, same for someone who is gender nonconforming. This definition is therefore very broad, and it is important to understand that there is not one universal definition. In different cultures and communities, the term transgender is characterized differently. However, within the scope of this research, the definition as provided by GLAAD is used.

2.3 Transphobia and trans-related violence

The current research also discusses the notion of homophobia and transphobia, these two terms are in some contexts used interchangeably, but do in fact have different meanings. In general terms, homophobia is often understood as the fear of or hatred against homosexual people (GLAAD, n.d.). However, the term is sometimes used in a broader sense, including the entire LGBTQ community. For this research, this term is therefore defined as the “irrational fear of or prejudice against individuals who are or perceived to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, and other non-heterosexual people” (Open Education Sociology Dictionary, n.d.). Another word for the specific fear of or hatred against transgender persons is transphobia.

Despite academia sometimes using these terms interchangeably, it is important to note that in different contexts the terms might not actually mean the same thing. When it comes to hatred towards or fear of transgender persons, the term transphobia is more likely, and more appropriate to be used. Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (n.d.) defines transphobia as the “irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against transgender

people.” However, as Bettcher (2014) critically annotates, using the word ‘irrational’ to describe transphobia is problematic. This suggests that transphobia is based on irrationality (Bettcher, 2014), whereas in reality, forms of transphobia occur in a broad social, cisgenderist (people whose sense of gender and personal identity corresponds with their birth-sex) context, that are often rooted in rational decisions. For example, trans persons being banned from the military in the United States is based on the ration that medical expenses for trans soldiers are too high. If this would be labeled irrational, then it gives these institutions, in this case the US military, reasons to defend their transphobic decisions with rational explanations. This undermines the fight for emancipation and recognition in the trans community, thus such definitions need to be nuanced.

One of the factors influencing trans-related violence arise from straight cisgender men. They experience societal pressure to fit into the hegemonic form of masculinity. To not be considered a social outcast by their friends or be seen as less masculine, these straight men express contempt for trans women and in some cases resort to violence. As explained in the introduction to this research, such behavior and expression of hegemonic masculinity can result in trans-related violence, such as the death of Gwen Araujo. But this is just one example of how transphobia can lead to violence towards, or even the murder of, trans people, as there are countless other cases which makes this is not a rare happening. In 2019 in the US alone, at least 26 transgender and gender nonconforming people were killed, with estimates as high as 40 (Srikanth, 2019).

Transphobia and the consequences of severe hatred and/or physical violence towards the transgender community are one of the reasons why this research aims to shed more light on the current issues. Transgender persons deal with symptoms of depression, anxiety, and suicidality more than other minority groups (Mizock & Mueser, 2014). One study with 66 transgender persons even showed that from the transgender youth under the age of 25, 47% has attempted suicide at least once (Clements-Nolle et al., 2016). More recent data shows that serious suicide attempts are four times more likely among LGBTQ youth than any other group (SAVE, n.d.). As the Internet and social networking sites play an increasingly more important role in the lives of people, researchers also suspect that these social media platforms influence suicide-related behavior (Luxton et al., 2012). Cyberbullying related to suicide is referred to as cyberbullicide (Luxton et al., 2012), and studies show that children who are victim of cyberbullying are two times more likely to commit suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Considering that LGBTQ youth are already more likely to commit suicide, regardless of being cyberbullied or not, these statistics are alarming and need to be further studied in order to be prevented.

Maguen and Shipherd (2010) researched the frequency and predictive factors of suicide attempts among transgender people. They found that 18% of the studies' participants reported a history of suicide attempts. Factors involved with these suicide attempts are female sex assigned at birth, hospitalizations in psychiatric institutions, and having experienced trans-related violence (Maguen and Shipherd, 2010). Another study in Sweden conducted between 1973 and 2003 followed 324 trans persons that had undergone sex-reassignment. They found that these people were 19 times more at risk of dying by suicide than other people (Dhejne et al., 2011). Moreover, they found that trans people who undergo sex-reassignment have considerably higher risks for psychiatric morbidity.

Several researches reported similar percentages as mentioned earlier regarding to suicidal rates among transgender (youth). These studies all conclude similar, yet different explanations for these alarmingly high rates. One study for example, interviewed 515 trans people looking at what factors specifically influence suicidal behavior among MTF (male-to-female) and FTM (female-to-male) transgender persons. Clements-Nolle et al. (2006) found that risk factors identified in earlier research, such as gender nonconformity, interpersonal conflict regarding sexual orientation, disclosure of sexuality, and lack of support, are also prevalent among trans persons. However, such studies, dating back to 2006 or older, do not take into account the influence of social media and SNSs, such as cyberbullicide among children (Luxton et al., 2012).

This is where the second research gap exists. There are several studies, as mentioned earlier, on suicide among trans people, as well as on the effects of cyberbullying on the general suicide rates. However, there are no studies that look into the effects of cyberbullying through SNSs on suicide rates among trans people. More specifically, what exactly these narratives look like. In other words, what is the type of verbal violence that trans people might experience online, such as physical threats or an direct harassment? This leads to the research' second sub-question (SQ2): "What is the type of verbal violence that implies physical threats and direct harassment to trans people?" Important to note is that this study does not aim to establish a correlation between hateful online narratives and suicide rates, because that cannot be done based on the data gathered for this research, and should therefore be considered a venue for future research. Nonetheless, as previous research demonstrates, cyberbullying can and does lead to increased suicide rates. Thus, to possibly pose policy changes that can prevent suicide among trans people as a result of cyberbullying, the current research aims to put this verbal violence under scrutiny.

2.4 The role of social networking sites and the comment section

This is where the comment sections on Facebook come into play. Advanced technologies and the increasing importance of SNSs, allow news websites to utilize platforms like Facebook as a channel to post articles and invite user interaction. As explained in section 1, this interaction that is happening under Facebook posts can lead to hate narratives that are dangerous to the trans community. Users often express hurtful opinions and violent words when it comes to trans related news articles. Facebook has become a new medium for users, in specific Millennials and Baby Boomers, to get their political news (Mitchell, Gottfried, Matsa, 2015). Although this on itself does not have to be a negative development considering there is a lot of correct news reporting on Facebook, it can be a negative side effect for people who read comments from users (such as transphobic comments) and consider that to be ‘facts’. Therefore, this paper argues that these social networking sites, in particular Facebook, facilitate the hate towards trans people, and in that way contribute to the unwanted consequences such as those mentioned in section 2.3.

The effects of cyberbullying on suicide statistics are known, as is explained earlier in this paper, and studies prove that people who experience online hate are more likely to have suicidal thoughts (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). However, it is unclear to what extent this holds true for trans people, and what exactly the type of hate is. Transgender people make up a smaller percentage of the total population, and thus also a smaller representation of Facebook users. However, considering trans people are generally more likely to commit suicide (Dhejne et al., 2011; Maguen & Shipherd, 2010), it is valuable to study this and see how Facebook comments contribute to the suicide numbers. Moreover, if the specific narratives of transphobic comments are known, and can be categorized, policy makers and interest groups can implement change in combating specific areas of this hate. For example, if for one country the majority of hate is based on the misinformation or lack of information on the topic transgender, then schools can implement mandatory teaching materials on transgender in their curriculums.

This is where the third research gap arises. The studies on hate comments do not specifically research the effects on transgender people, regarding transphobic comments. There are also several studies about hate based on sex and/or gender, yet non look at the narratives of these texts. As explained, in order to battle online transphobia, it is important to first understand what these narratives are and in which ways users express their transphobia. This leads to this research’ third sub-question (SQ3): “What do the hateful/transphobic narratives in Facebook comments look like?” This sub-question relates

closely to the main research question, and serves as a stepping stone to analyze the difference in narratives between the Netherlands and the United States.

2.5 Closing the gaps

The three research gaps and their corresponding SQ's presented in sections 2.1, 2.3, and 2.4 (intolerance towards trans persons, suicide or violence as result of hate comments, and narratives of transphobic Facebook comments) will be answered in this research through the analysis of transphobic comments on Facebook posts of news sites (section 4). It is no secret that trans persons experience hatred on a daily basis, both verbal and physical, as well as online and offline. As mapped out earlier, there are several factors that contribute to this transphobic behavior of individuals. To what extent Facebook comments play a role remains rather vague, and how this differs per country, is even more ambiguous. This research assumes that a distinction can be made between transphobic comments in the Netherlands and in the United States, and that the difference between these narratives might contribute to the explanations of influencing factors behind the suicide and violence rates among trans people.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

To answer the research question of this study, this paper conducted a qualitative content analysis of hate comments under Facebook posts of Dutch and American news websites. Qualitative research fits the scope of this research best as it allows the study of narratives, or languages (Brennen, 2017), such as one's comments on Facebook posts. Language is fundamental to qualitative research (Brennen, 2017), as realities and ideologies are communicated through our daily discourses. When it comes to researching hateful messages towards trans people, looking at the language in terms of choice of words, tone of voice, or emotions is substantial. It is not about quantifying the data, as previous research already clearly shows that hate comments on Facebook do exist (Hille & Bakker, 2014; Del Vigna et al., 2017), and also to what amount. For the current research it is therefore important to go beyond the quantitative academic data that is available, and look with a more detailed eye at the narratives behind those numbers. A quantitative research approach would therefore not suffice to answer the research questions thoroughly. However, the current research does present parts of the data expressed in numbers and percentages, considering the frequency of codes in the two countries are in fact important. To visualize this data, graphs and tables are included.

In order to conduct this qualitative approach, the research studied Facebook comments using a thematic analysis approach. This form of qualitative research emphasizes identifying patterns of meaning, and interpreting them using an existing frame of theories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Rather than to approach the data completely blank, and analyze every type of narrative found in the units of analysis going word by word, this research purposely focused on collecting data on hate comments that included internalized messages of transphobia. This means that each theme of the data relates to (a part of) the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Expecting to find specific patterns of transphobic narratives such as ridiculing body image, name shaming, disapproving based on religious beliefs, this research coded only those parts of the Facebook comments that fit into this framework, and could therefore be considered 'hate comments'. Positive comments on the Facebook posts for example, were therefore not subject to research.

Accordingly, it is important to define hate comments in the context of this research. As stated by the United Nations (Saad, 2019), hate speech is:

(...) any kind of communication speech, writing or behavior, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, gender or other identity factor (para. 1).

Hate comments, as defined by this paper, are then this form of hate speech as described above, but in the form of Facebook comments. The specific codes created for this research are presented in the following section, and in an overview in Appendix B.

3.2 Overview of codes

The initial coding scheme contained 21 codes, as taken from an initial observation of the data and based on the literature discussed in section 2. These codes are: transgender is illness or disease, advising medical help, blame politician, blame politics, losing national identity, current state of world/country/city, defending gender binary theory, argument about science, argument about chromosomes, argument about biology, mention religion, mention God, wishing ill or death, use of insulting language, calling ugly, body shaming, using wrong pronouns, sarcastic undertone, mention sex organs, mention former/wrong name, and mention former/wrong gender. During the process of coding, five new codes emerged. There were pieces of text that did not seem to fit any of the initial 21 codes, but were still of importance to the research. These five codes are: worried for children, trans is not normal, denying existence, trans is hype/trend, and homophobia.

The codes were then attributed to the 436 Facebook comments, which amounted to a total of 673 quotations. Depending on the length of the comment, there were between one and three codes per coding unit. However, the majority of Facebook comments were very short, and could only be assigned one single code. In some comments, text related to one of the codes appeared more than once. An example of that is a comment such as: “(...) you are one of God’s children. Please be faithful to your birth sex (...) but seek God’s grace and wisdom” (US5, 2019). In these cases, the code, in this case ‘mention God’, was only attributed once because the meaning of both pieces of text are exactly the same. However, when the meaning of the multiple pieces of text were significantly different, thus had a different narrative, the code was attributed twice. An example of such is the following: “It all comes down science. (...) There are scientific/medical differences and they are important!” (US10, 2018). In this case, the code ‘argument about science’ was attributed twice. One time for the argument that facts come down to science, and another time for the argument that there are scientific differences (between the sexes). Because of this, the coding frequency of this research is actually important and does show valuable results. Usually the coding frequency can show skewed results, as the same code can be found in the same document. However, considering there are a total of 436 documents of short lengths, looking at the coding frequency in particular per country, is an accurate way to present the data of this research.

After the initial coding process was done, each code was reviewed and put into a main category or ‘theme’. Through this process, the code ‘homophobia’ was removed as it contained only two quotations that were both hate aimed at, or about sexual orientation. However, this research only looks at transgender as gender identity or gender expression, therefore it does not concern homophobic comments. The categorization process resulted in eight main themes. Each theme is internally homogeneous, and externally heterogeneous (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). This overview can be found in Table 2, section 4.1.

In efforts to answer the research question, a number of themes that emerged from the data will be presented for analysis. Each theme highlights the difference in narratives between the Netherlands and the United States, thus presenting the answer to the question.

3.3 Data collection process

To collect the data, in total five news websites per country were used (Appendix A). From each news website, at least two articles were chosen between a time period of two years (between May 1st of 2018 and May 1st of 2020). These articles are labeled either US or NL (for their corresponding countries) and with a number indicating the article. Because of

the lack of hate comments in some articles, a third article was chosen to reach the desired amount of data. From these articles/Facebook posts, the aim was to collect the 25 most recent hate comments for final data collection. The actual numbers differ per news post and Facebook page, since some posts had more or less comments (Appendix A).

The selection of articles is based on the keywords: 'trans' and 'transgender', which were inserted into the search engine of the Facebook page. Then, from the results, the two (or three) articles with the most comments were chosen, as they were probably most popular and thus had the highest chance of containing sufficient data. The comments were then selected based on key words related to transphobia or hate, such as 'hate', 'disagree', 'disgusting', 'sick', 'ridiculous', 'it', 'mental illness', 'wrong', 'dead/die' or 'death'. Additionally, the comments were also selected based on narrative patterns, such as the denial of the trans identity, purpose use of wrong pronouns, the promotion of violence, etc. This means that the comments were manually filtered to find hate comments based on the definition provided earlier in this paper. Before selecting the comments, the Facebook filter of the comment section was set to 'all comments', to ensure the algorithm of prioritizing comments was the same for each post. As explained, the aim of this study is to compare transphobic narratives, thus only those comments that fit this framework of hate were considered suitable. This is a limitation to this study, as positive comments were not taken into account and in some cases there were more positive than negative comments. An example of a hate comment used for the analysis is "if you got a dick, you're a dude and you go to mens bathroom. Dress and lipstick don't change a thing, you're a DUDE! A creepy looking one too" (US10, 2018).

For the American Facebook pages, only English comments were selected. For the Dutch Facebook pages, both Dutch and English comments were selected, taking into account there are many English speaking people living in the Netherlands. This selection is also primarily based on the limitation of language skills of the author in only two languages: Dutch and English. However, for the Dutch case, only a handful of English comments were used for analysis, and thus this limitation is not considered to negatively impact the study.

The data that was collected derived from the theory based on the research gaps presented in section 2 of this study (acceptance of trans persons, suicide or violence as result of hate comments, and narratives of transphobic Facebook comments), which is a more theoretical data collection process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This meant that the data collection is based on a coding scheme, as explained in section 3.2. This process of going from the initial codes to the main categories based on preconceived themes related to the literature review is a deductive way of coding, deemed most suitable for the nature and aim

of this research. The codes were then gathered based on the keywords listed earlier, in addition to the three research gaps identified in section 2. However, considering that from the data, new themes arrived that do not fit the keywords mapped out for the coding scheme, this process is also a form of inductive coding.

An overview of the amount of comments per Facebook page and country is presented in Table 1. In total, 436 comments were analyzed. The length of each comment varies from a word, to a sentence of two, to a full paragraph. Overall, the one-sentence comments were the most common. However, there was a significant amount of codes with a length of one or two full paragraphs. The comments are almost evenly distributed for both countries, and somewhat equally spread over the five articles per country.

Country	Total comments	Facebook Page	Number of posts	Total comments per page
The United States	222	Washington Post	2	39
		The New York Times	2	43
		CNN	2	58
		HuffPost	2	37
		Fox News	2	45
The Netherlands	214	AD.nl	2	50
		NU.nl	3	51
		De Telegraaf	2	40
		NOS	3	44
		RTL Nieuws	2	29

Table 1. Amount of selected comments per Facebook page and country

All the data was collected in the coding software Atlas.ti by pasting screenshots of each Facebook comment into the software program. This allowed for the data to be digitally stored, and easily processed and categorized. The bulk of data was then analyzed by coding each (part of) the Facebook comments. In the first round of the coding process, the codes are labeled as ‘initial codes’, as explained by Braun and Clarke (2006), these initial codes are based on first observations. They describe phenomena related to the research topic in its most basic form. During the second round, all initial codes were put into categories to look at certain overarching themes. These codes are referred to as the main codes. These themes were then further analyzed in the third round of the coding progress, called the review. Each theme has to be internally homogeneous, and externally heterogeneous (Javadi & Zarea, 2016), or else they do not have enough supported data to be themes on their own. This meant that some themes from the second round of coding ended up merging in the third round, and in some themes, subthemes emerged. The final row of codes are labeled as the main categories of hateful narratives towards trans people, i.e. themes.

3.4 Comparative approach and country selection

The countries are selected based on the research by Hadler (2016). He researched homophobia in 32 countries by collecting survey data from 130.000 respondents over a time of 21 years. By the end of 2010, the Netherlands scored 14% of respondents to be homophobic, whereas the US scored 31% (Hadler, 2016). The intolerance level towards people that identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender in the US was almost double of the intolerance level from the Dutch. Now, 10 years later, it is important to see whether or not these findings are still prevalent in these societies, and if they are present in daily narratives about such topics, such as Facebook comments. Besides, the research that this paper builds on has a rather specific focus on the United States. Most data is drawn from American newspapers and/or Facebook pages. It is important to see if this data holds true for other countries and if it could be an indicator for hateful narratives in different cultures or nationalities. For that reason, the paper uses a comparative approach of looking at the United States and the Netherlands.

3.5 Newspaper selection

The five Dutch news sites used for data analysis in this research are a selection based on a research by Bakker (2018), on the biggest media brands of the Netherlands. The research showed that in 2018, in order, NU.nl, NOS, het Algemeen Dagblad, de Telegraaf, and RTL Nieuws were the biggest news sites in terms of online reach. The reason for picking the most 'popular' brands with the largest online reach is to increase the likelihood of having sufficient data to analyze. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2018) indicates that of these news sites, users consider NOS, RTL Nieuws, NU.nl, and het Algemeen Dagblad to be slightly left (or liberal) oriented. De Telegraaf is placed slightly on the right (or conservative) side.

The five American news sites used for data analysis in this research are a selection based on statistics by Statista (Watson, 2020). CNN, The New York Times, Fox News, The Washington Post, and HuffPost are all in the top 10 of most popular news sites (Statista, 2020). Another study by the Pew Research Center (2014) shows that besides FOX, all of the chosen news sites are placed on the left (or liberal) side of the political spectrum. FOX news is considered to be right (or conservative) oriented (Pew Research Center, 2014).

It is important to note that newspapers can have a political bias, and the topic of transgender is a political issue in many countries. However, the affordances of the Internet allow users from all different political spectrums to comment on Facebook pages and posts of all news sites. This political background per news site is therefore taken for granted, and

not considered a variable in this research. Additionally, this research does not aim to discover the different transphobic narratives based on political background.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Research participants could not voluntarily participate in this study, or in any way consent to their text being used. However, Facebook is a public social networking site, accessible to anyone with a profile. The comments under the Facebook posts are public, and available to read for any user. Nevertheless, to prevent specific data from being linked or connected to a user, the names and profile pictures were left out in this study and replaced with labels. This protects the users' personal information that can be found on their profiles, and in that way not violate their privacy. Additionally, this research ensures the anonymity of all individuals from which Facebook comments were extracted for analysis.

3.7 Limitations to methodology

There are some limitations to the methodology of this research. First, it is important to note that regarding the sampling method of the data there are some drawbacks. For the purpose of this research, only textual content of hate comments with a transphobic narrative were considered suitable. However, a user's response to these Facebook posts on transgender related news by these news sites is not just dependent on the general topic of the post being transgender. The image, header, text preview, caption and time of day when it was posted are also variables that could possibly affect a user's hateful comment. However, this research does not intend to study the user's response or evoked emotions to certain Facebook posts, but instead focuses on the general differences in transphobic comments between the Netherlands and the United States. Therefore, this limitation was acknowledged, but taken for granted.

Additionally, only plain text was considered for analysis. This means that comments with emojis, a gif, an image, or a video, were not selected. In a few cases this certainly limited the research, as images or 'memes' often include words or sentences that could also count as a plain text comment. However, with regards to consistency, such comments were neglected for this research.

Furthermore, some Facebook pages have active moderators or house rules. Admins can delete and/or report comments, as well as block users from visiting the page and interacting with its content. This could mean that the research might not collect the maximum potential of data, and that some hate comments could not have been coded. This could result in unfair analyses where the comparisons made between the narratives of the US

and the Netherlands might present a skewed image. However, since this possibility of moderating content is something that can happen to all pages equally, this limitation rather poses a venue for future research, looking into the role of moderation and house rules.

Finally, it is also important to note that the results from entering one of the keywords into the search engine did not show a chronological order. Although the most popular posts were chosen for analysis from the presented search results, it could mean that Facebook's algorithm did not show all the results for the keyword entered in the search engine. This restraint is considered insignificant, nevertheless it could possibly present skewed results and should therefore be recognized.

4. Results

In this section, the findings to this study will be presented, as well as an interpretation and discussion of the most important themes. First, an overview of the final themes and their correlating frequencies per country will be presented. Then, five themes are highlighted because of their relevance or remarkable values. These themes are: 'loss of (national) identity', 'disproving based on religion', 'mean/hurtful comments', 'denying trans identity', and 'trans is hype/trend'. Each theme in itself presents the answers to the research question "How do transphobic narratives in Facebook comments under Dutch news articles differ from those under American news articles?", which will be discussed in section 5. Within the five themes, there are some significant differences between the code frequency of the United States and the Netherlands, as well as the difference in language and meaning.

4.1 Overview of all themes

The first theme, 'denying the trans identity' concerns comments that in some way deny the existence of the trans identity, transgender people, or gender identity in general, such as "(...) I don't believe in denying anyone health care; we just believe that there is no such thing as gender identity, you are either male or female" (US4, 2020). However, the theme is broad and includes several interpretations of 'denying existence'. Purposely using the wrong pronoun(s) like "I never heard of her/him/something is that wrong? Why is this news" (NL2, 2020, translated by author), or "(...) uh... woman... uh men... uh thing" (NL2, 2020). This theme is the biggest for both countries, and will be further explained in section 4.5.

The second theme, 'scientific/biological arguments', are comments where users referred to science or biological arguments while mocking or denying the trans identity: "scientifically speaking, this is BULLSHIT. The chromosomes of a person decide the

gender” (NL12, 2019, translated by author). However, sometimes the argument itself was just to use the word ‘science’ or ‘biology’, without providing further explanation: “he’s a man! He was born a man. Biologically he is a man period!” (US6, 2018). The narratives for each country were quite similar to one another, and no significant differences arose from the data.

The third theme, ‘mean/hurtful comments’, describe the direct hateful words or slurs users used to describe, attack, humiliate or hurt trans people. Such slurs that were used are: “gross, you can see his ‘junk!’” (US7, 2019) or “trans women are disgusting!” (US7, 2019). There are relevant differences in these narratives between the Netherlands and the United States, so this theme will be further elaborated on in section 4.4.

The fourth theme, ‘trans is illness’ consist of codes that were attributed to text that classified transgender as an illness, such as “it’s a brain problem, not a genitalia problem” (US10, 2018). These texts were often also contributed the code ‘sarcastic undertone’ for their comedic tone: “‘man shot for playing and asking for exceptance for excepting what he truly is’ fixed it” (US8, 2019). The quotations from this theme are almost equally distributed over the two countries (see Table 2), and there are no major differences in narratives. However, that does not mean this is not a relevant finding. To call someone ill, or refer them to a psychologist, is wrong, degrading, and humiliating. Additionally, comments such as “intense therapy is called for” (US10, 2018) or “(...) they should be given treatment to cure there sickness...” (US10, 2018) are contributing to the online hate that potentially increases suicidal behavior among transgender people (Luxton et al., 2012).

The fifth theme, ‘disproving based on religion’ does in fact show a significant difference in code distribution. Based on the data, this theme seems to be significantly more present in the United States than in the Netherlands. The cause of that, and the type of narratives that fit this theme are discussed in section 4.3.

The sixth theme, ‘loss of (national) identity’ is based on three codes that explain the feeling of losing one’s identity that the users on Facebook experience. Some are worried for their children: “how do we tell this to our kids...?” (NL2, 2020, translated by author). Others worried more about the current state of society and what would happen to it when transgender people exist: “society is completely breaking down” (US9, 2020). Considering the difference in code distribution between the two countries (see Table 2), this theme is explained more elaborately in section 4.2.

The seventh theme is ‘blaming politics’, which is based on the assumption that users would criticize politics or politicians for pro-transgender policies. The data can however not support this assumption as for both countries the amount of comments this theme can be

attributed to is very little. There are only thirteen quotations in total, with no difference in narratives between the two countries. Considering the type of transphobia related to politics are similar in both countries, this theme is not relevant for further analysis in context of answering the research question.

The final theme, ‘trans is a trend’ is the smallest theme in terms of total number of quotations (see Table 2). However, this theme is considered important to the research because the transphobic comments in this theme contribute to problematic development that blocks the emancipation of trans people. This is further explained in section 4.6.

Theme	Total amount of quotations	Total (NL)	% of total (NL)	Total (USA)	% of total (USA)
Denying the trans identity	295	154	45,97	141	41,72
Scientific/biological arguments	111	42	12,54	69	20,41
Mean/hurtful comments	92	54	16,12	38	11,24
Trans is illness	66	33	9,85	33	9,76
Disproving based on religion	46	5	1,49	41	12,13
Loss of (national) identity	44	35	10,45	9	2,66
Blaming politics	12	6	1,79	6	1,78
Trans is a trend	7	6	1,79	1	0,30
	673	335	100	338	100

Table 2. Distribution and frequency of codes.

4.2 Loss of (national) identity

In the coming and following sections, five themes are highlighted because of their relevance in answering the research questions.

The first theme that resulted in some surprising findings is ‘loss of (national) identity’. The codes belonging to this theme are ‘losing identity’ and ‘current state of world/country/city’. Although for both the Netherlands and the United States the frequency is very low (respectively 10,45% and 2,66%, see Table 2), these findings are still somewhat unexpected. It appears from the data that for the Dutch, transgender people are seen as a threat to their national identity. This feeling was verbalized in ways such as “(...) this is the country of the crazy” (NL2, 2020, translated by author), and “(..) where are we going with this weak Netherlands” (NL7, 2020, translated by author). Such comments were significantly less present for the American pages. It is important to understand these feelings of frustration, considering that apparently the trans identity is seen, by certain individuals, as a threat to their identity and freedoms. This is an obstacle for trans emancipation as here transgender is associated with a ‘bad current state of society’ or a ‘weak country’.

The United States has a population of 328 million people, with several significant racial minority groups accounting for 13,7% of the total population in 2018, according to Migration Policy Institute (Batalova, Blizzard, & Bolter, 2020). In the Netherlands this

number in 2020 is 24,4% (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2020). Therefore, there is possibly less of a threat to the national identity in the United States than in the Netherlands, considering the amount of people with an immigration background is respectively higher in the latter country. Especially taking into account that only 0,8% of the American population identifies as transgender (Flores, Herman, Gates, & Brown, 2016), compared to the 3,9% of the Dutch population (Felten & Boss, 2018), cisgender Dutch people might experience transgender people more as a threat to their own identity. This could explain the difference in code distribution (see Figure 1), and why this seems to be a more relevant theme in the Netherlands.

Additionally, the theme of national identity has been a major topic on the political agenda throughout the last elections, including the refugee crisis and Black Pete. The Dutch have gone through major cultural shifts, and are triggered to think and talk about their national identity, or the question ‘who are we?’ (Lechner, 2007). Interestingly though, the data might not be in line with recent developments regarding US president Donald Trump and his nationalist campaign ‘America First’. In light of this, a more significant presence of this theme in American transphobic comments would also make sense, although this is not supported by the data of the current research.

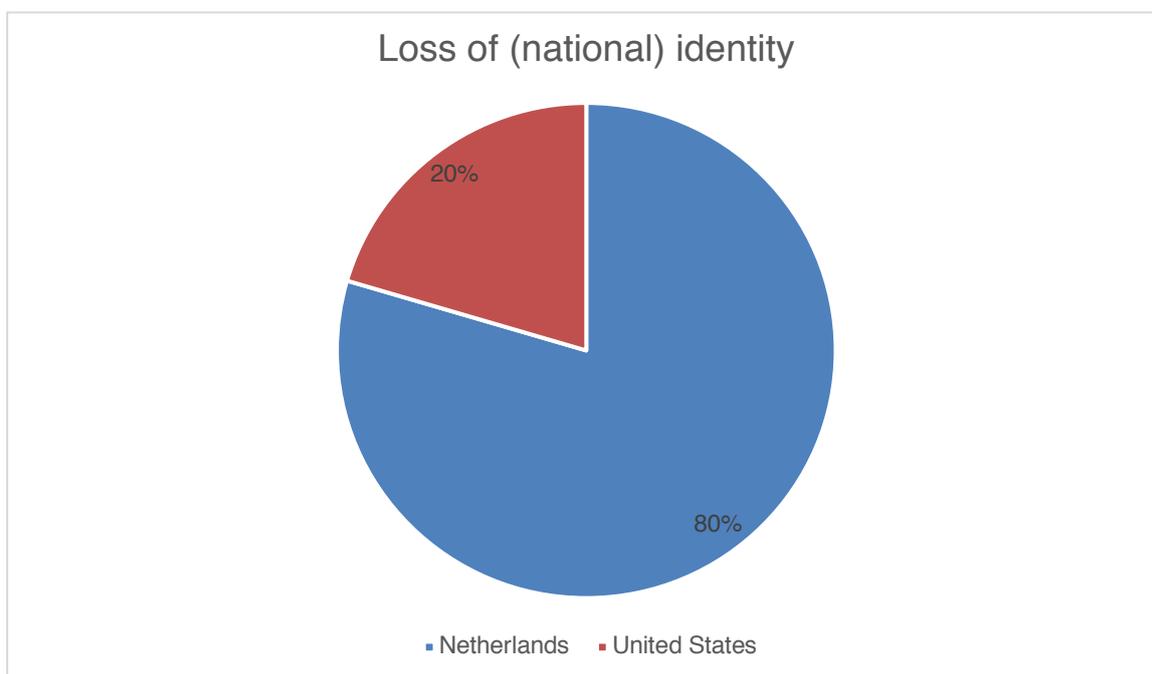


Figure 1. Code distribution per country of the theme 'loss of national identity'.

4.3 Disproving based on religion

The second theme relevant for discussion is ‘disproving based on religion’. The codes for this theme are ‘mention religion’ and ‘mention God’. Both codes were already initially recorded before the coding process of the actual data. That is because, based on first

observations of the dataset, religion seemed to be an important theme. However, this turned out to be quite the opposite. For the Netherlands, this theme accounted for only 1,49% of the total amount of quotations. Whereas for the United States, this percentage was quite higher, at 12,13% (see Table 2). The difference itself is worthy to note, but not surprising, considering two thirds of Americans consider religion important in their daily life (Newport, 2009), opposed to the one third of Dutch people (see Figure 2). These differences also showed in the narratives themselves. Where the Dutch comments were often ‘moderately’ religious: “you have to be happy with how God created you. Some people forget that” (NL11, 2018, translated by author), the American comments more often contained quite ‘strong’ religious messages: "god doesn't make mistakes he knew you in the womb. The gender you are born with is the gender you are to be. God is never wrong. Remember God loves you (...)" (US9, 2020).

The linguistics of these hateful messages are important to look at in attempt to answer the research question. Comments such as “transgender people are simply evil people, (...) out of distraction among people of God” (US3, 2018) deny the coexistence of multiple identity factors and enforce the idea that within religion there is no place for the LGBTQ community. Trans people growing up religious, or feeling strongly connected to a certain religion are therefore considered to not exist, or ought not to exist. In itself, this is denying their identity of who they are. Such ideologies are harmful to the trans community and their wellbeing. Taking into consideration that this theme is more present in the American comments, and that religion in this country plays a more important role among a greater number of people (Newport, 2009), it is important to study the effects and ways to prevent these transphobic narratives.

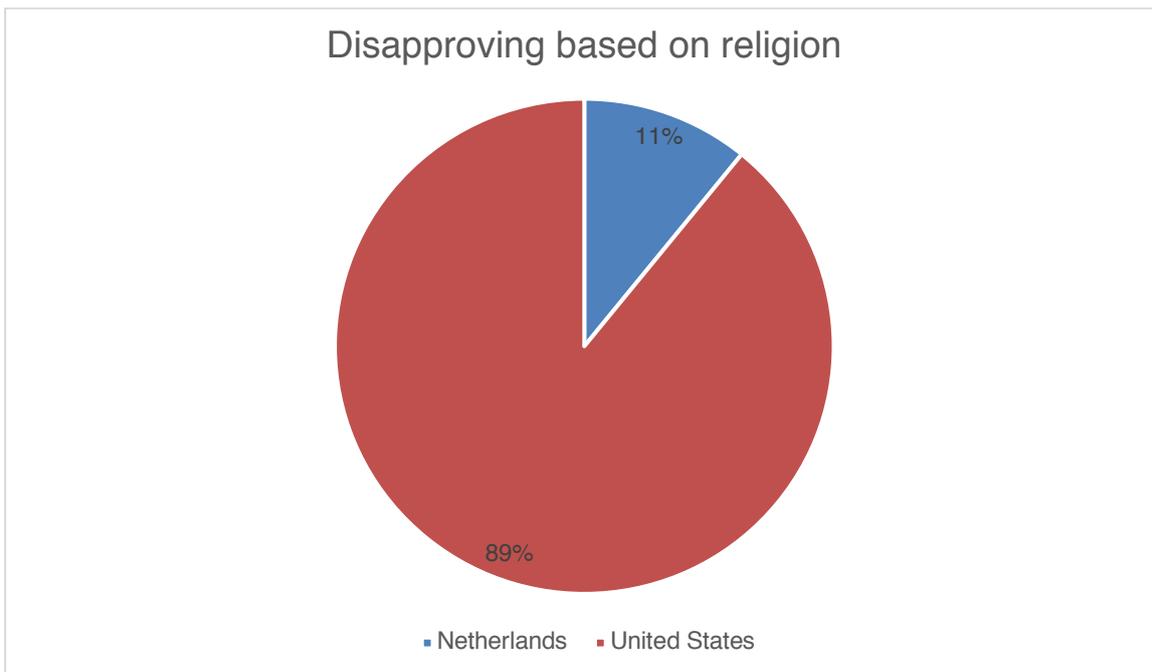


Figure 2. Code distribution per country of the theme 'disapproving based on religion'

4.4 Mean/hurtful comments

The next theme up for discussion is 'mean/hurtful comments'. This theme consists of four codes: 'wishing ill or death', 'use of insulting language', 'calling ugly', and 'body shaming'. All these codes are similar in the way that they intend to inflict hurt. The comments in this theme represent direct hatred aimed at trans people. An important keyword that was consistently coded under 'body shaming' is 'reconstruction'. This word, frequently used in the Netherlands as a way of talking about a trans person's transition, has negative connotations as it assumes each trans person did or has to undergo sex surgery. Moreover, it dehumanizes a person, as reconstruction is jargon used for buildings, not people.

Among the comments on American pages, this theme was not as prevalent compared to the Dutch pages (see Figure 3). However, one of the codes, 'wishing ill or death', only appeared in American comments: "if I EVERRR see a man in my bathroom you can be sure I'll be helping him transition quicker than any surgery could" (US6, 2018). Such messages are almost direct death threats, although not always aimed at one specific person. With 16.12% of the total amount of quotations (see Table 2), this is the second largest theme for the Dutch transphobic comments. These comments can be considered as hurtful because they are not motivated by anything like religion or science, instead, it is just Facebook users bullying trans people, commenting things such as: "she never really looked feminine (...)" (NL7, 2020, translated by author), "(...) what an ugly head" (NL7, 2020, translated by author), and "(...) I would look at this woman and laugh" (US6, 2018). Most of the articles under which these comments are posted concern real trans individuals. Taking into account

they are likely to read the comments made about them, this is considered a form of cyberbullying, aimed at specific individuals. As explained earlier, cyberbullying can lead to suicidal behavior (Luxton et al., 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010), and thus such comments are a threat to the safety of trans individuals.

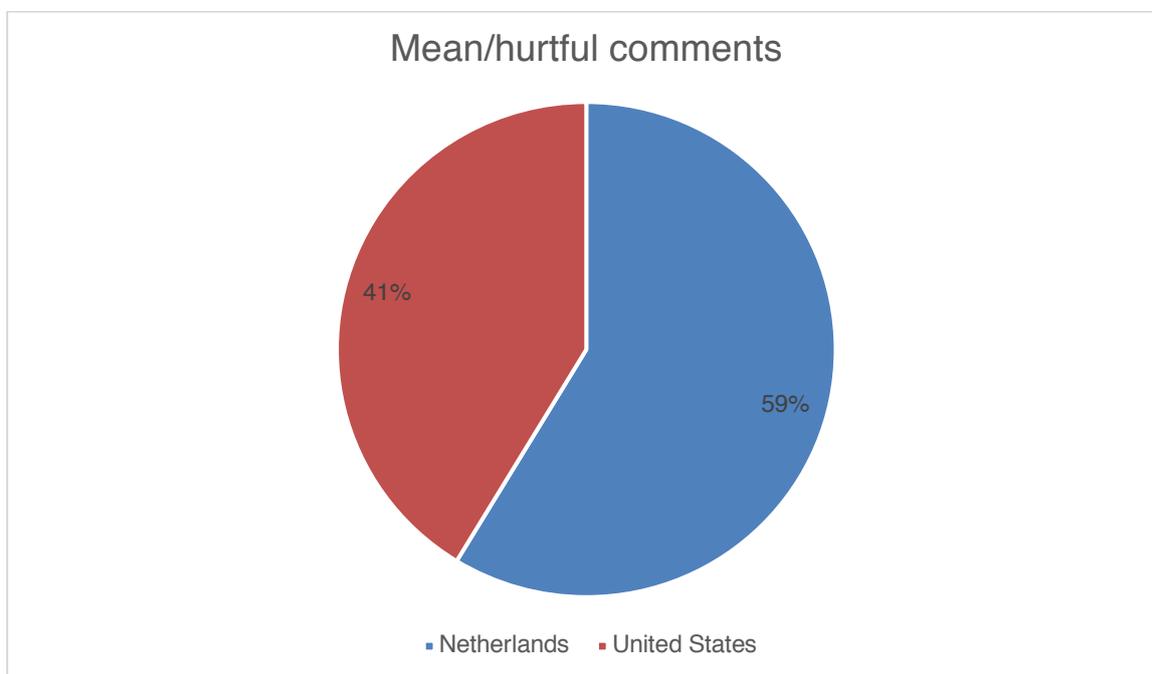


Figure 3. Code distribution per country for the theme 'mean/hurtful comments'

4.5 Denying trans identity

The biggest theme for both the United States and the Netherlands is 'denying trans identity'. It consists the following codes: 'using wrong pronouns', 'sarcastic undertone', 'mention sex organs', 'mention former/wrong name', 'mention former/wrong gender', 'trans is not normal', and 'denying existence'. This theme has the most codes of all themes, and is as prevalent in both countries, with an almost equal distribution (see Figure 4). All of the codes in this theme in a way deny the existence of the transgender identity, or mock attributes related to it. Although for the theme on itself there is not a significant difference in code distribution, some codes within the theme do have a notable different code distribution. The code in this theme with the most quotations is 'sarcastic undertone'. Especially for the Netherlands, this was very frequent, with 69,66% of the total quotations for both countries (see Appendix B). Comments that had a sarcastic undertone often mocked gender identity, by naming either an object or animal they would allegedly identify as: "(...) I am bisnacksual and also chocolateholic" (NL1, 2020, translated by author), or "(...) for years I felt like a green apple and I wanna hang from a tree (...)" (NL1, 2020, translated by author). These comments might seem innocent or funny, yet the underlying tone of voice in these narratives are of transphobic origin. For the United States, the sarcastic comments were less common,

yet had a very similar narrative. Sarcasm is a dangerous form of hate because the person behind the message can claim it was intended comedic, and escape responsibility. In reality, most of these comments do have the intention to hurt and divide, which makes them a threat to the trans emancipation.

Another important code within this theme is ‘mention sex organs’. Comments about genitalia or sex organs often intend to mock the fact that without the gender corresponding sex organs one cannot be ‘fully’ male or female. These narratives, such as “if there’s a cock between the legs it’s a man (...)” (US6, 2018), result from the misunderstanding or lack of knowledge on the topic of transgender. The uneducated vocalizations of thoughts then result in hateful comments, denying a trans person their true identity. Although significantly present in both countries, the American comments seem to point out genitalia and sex organs more explicitly, and more often.

The codes ‘trans is not normal’ and ‘denying existence’ might look similar. However, they produced significantly different data. For ‘trans is not normal’, 66,67% of the comments are Dutch, saying things as: “being transgender is anything but normal (..)” (NL8, 2020, translated by author), or “are there also still normal people being born???” (NL3, 2020, translated by author). The code ‘denying existence’ is however more prevalent in American comments, with 76,47% of the total amount of quotations for this code (see Appendix B). These comments often quite literally deny the existence of transgender people or the trans identity: “there’s no such thing as ‘gender identity’ and there’s nothing American about it” (US4, 2020) or “it’s kind of irrelevant because transgenders never existed in the first place (...)” (US3, 2018).

From all of the themes that are identified from in the data, ‘denying the trans identity’ is arguably the most harmful to the trans community, as it assumes trans people do not even exist in the first place. These comments intend to spread hate and undermine any form of trans emancipation in contemporary society.

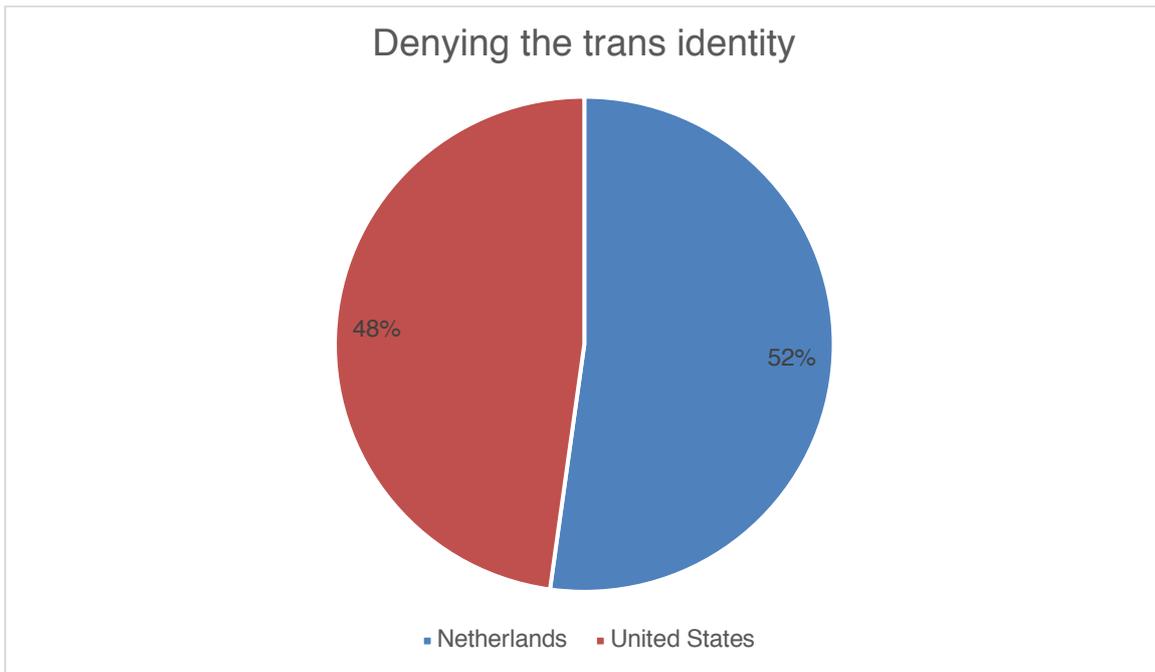


Figure 4. Code distribution per country for the theme 'denying the trans identity'

4.6 Trans is a trend

The final relevant theme that arose from the data is 'trans is hype/trend'. This was initially only one open code: 'trans is hype/trend', but appropriate and distinctive enough to serve as a theme on itself. What is also striking is the code distribution of these quotations. Almost all quotations belong to the Dutch comments. Examples are: "nowadays everybody is transgender" (NL1, 2020, translated by author), "the whole transgender hype of the last 10 years (...)" (NL10, 2019, translated by author), and "(...) it is starting to become a trend" (NL3, 2020, translated by author). This data is particularly interesting as it seems like such comments do not appear on the American pages. A possible explanation for this is that the first trans person (to undergo sex surgery) in the United States was years before the first trans person in the Netherlands. Moreover, there seems to be a more frequent representation of trans people in media entertainment in the United States, through popular programs such as TLC's *I Am Jazz*, *Orange Is The New Black*, *Pose*, and *RuPaul's Drag Race*. In the Netherlands, there are less significant transgender characters in media entertainment, and thus a lower frequency of visibility in popular media.

The comments, and this theme, are a problematic development to the trans community. If people assume trans is a 'hype' or 'trend', this means that there will also be an end to it, as is the case with most hypes or trends. This closely relates to the theme of 'denying the trans identity', as the comments in this theme suggest that trans people are just following a 'trend' and are not 'really' trans. However, being transgender is part of your identity. It has existed as long as mankind, in several native cultures, such as the *Mahu* in

Hawaii, Hijras in South Asia, or the Two-Spirit in Native Americans (West, 2010; De Vries, 2009). These people have always existed, and will continue to exist. Suggesting that they are part of a hype or trend is undermining their emancipation, and negatively impacts our common understanding of what it is like to be transgender.

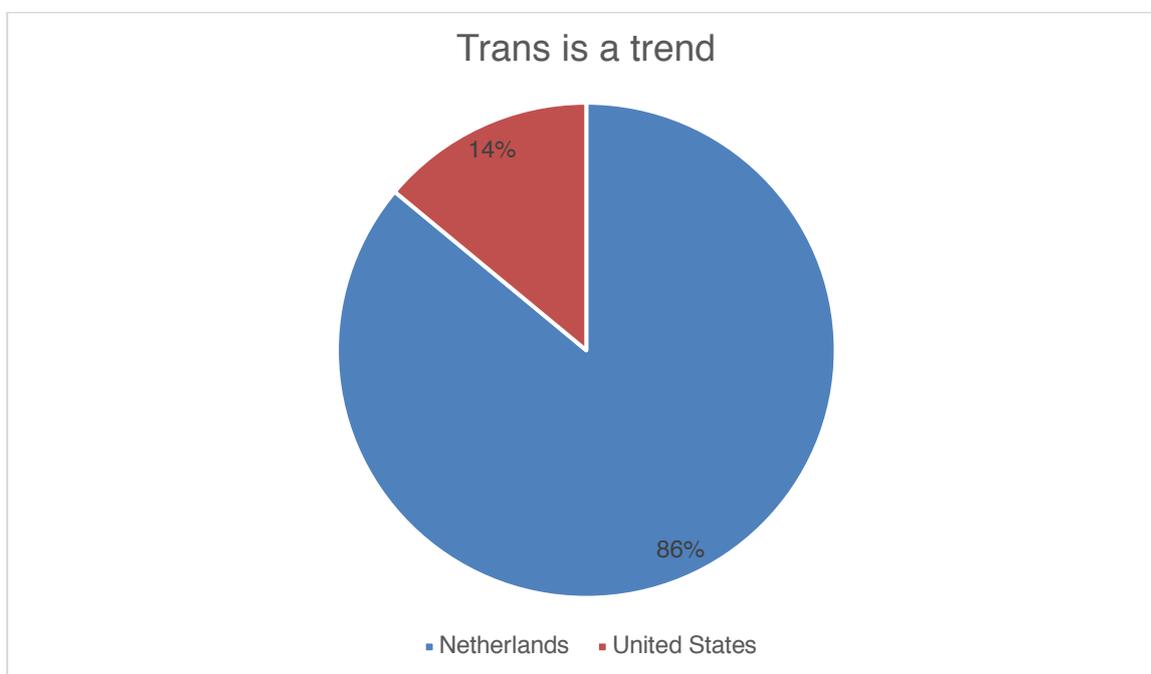


Figure 5. Code distribution per country for the theme 'trans is a trend'

5. Discussion and conclusion

Through a content analysis of 436 Facebook comments under transgender-related news articles, this study found that there are eight main categories of transphobia. In order to answer the research question: “How do transphobic narratives in Facebook comments under Dutch news articles differ from those under American news articles?”, these eight themes for each country were compared to each other which resulted in some significant differences in transphobic narratives per country. Through analysis of these themes, the research is also able to answer the three sub questions.

In regards to the first sub question of this research (SQ1): “To what extend do these online transphobic narratives reflect the Netherlands’ and the United States’ tolerance level towards trans people?”, this paper found that the online transphobic narratives accurately represent the type of hate that trans people endure, as described by previous studies. As shown in the analysis of the data, certain themes reflect a specific cultural value of a country, such as religious based transphobia in the United States and sarcastic transphobia in the Netherlands. To some, the loss of national identity for one group equals the gain of identity and recognition for another, in this case trans people. Transphobic comments based on these themes therefore show a certain intolerance among both the Dutch Facebook

comments as the American ones. Nonetheless, this study cannot generalize these findings because of the qualitative nature of the data. There are many factors, such as the choice of Facebook pages, which can influence and alter the results. However, the current study successfully managed to contribute in solving the research gap of insufficient qualitative data on transphobic narratives. The dataset and findings of this study do present a current reflection of transgender intolerance in the United States and the Netherlands, and provide for a more in-depth understanding of online transphobia.

The findings of this research also answer the second sub question: (SQ2) “What is the type of verbal violence that implies physical threats and direct harassment to trans people?” The verbal violence, visible in these hateful comments such as “we should line them up and burn them (...)” (US4, 2020), are direct death threats, body shaming comments, expressing discontent, and wishing ill. Some of these comments can be seen as physical threats to the transgender identity, as well as transgender individuals. The theme ‘meant/hurtful comment’ offers multiple examples of how transphobic comments can take on a threatening character. Additionally, perhaps comments from all the themes can be considered physical threats to trans people, as the interpretation of words are subjective to the receiver’s process of encoding. These comments are therefore also a form of harassment to trans people, as they include messages of intimidation and verbal aggressiveness. As explained earlier, this inevitably negatively contributes to the impact and consequences of cyberbullying, such as trans-related violence and suicide. Through answering this second sub question, this study also accomplished solving the second research gap by providing data on how exactly SNSs and hate comments contribute to online and offline transphobia.

The third sub question (SQ3): “What do the hateful/transphobic narratives in Facebook comments look like?”, can also be answered using the analysis from this research. Throughout all the themes, multiple examples are provided of how these transphobic comments look like. They are based on religion: “God created a male and a female. Read your Bible!!!” (US4, 2020), on the fear of losing one’s national identity: “(...) Amsterdam lost its identity long ago (...)” (NL11, 2018, translated by author), on science and biology: “you are whatever your chromosomes say you are (...)” (US4, 2020), and on five other categories as presented in Table 2. The comments range from sarcastic jokes, to direct threats of violence. Similar to the first two sub question, answering the third sub question of this study also helped to close the third research gap as presented earlier in this paper.

To answer the main research question, this study found several significant differences between the two countries in terms of transphobic comments. For the United States, religion seemed to play a bigger role in transphobic comments than it did for the

Netherlands. The research suggests that this can be explained because of the larger, and more important role, religion plays in the lives of the American people. Additionally, the American comments about a transgender people's sex organs are often more explicit and vulgar. However, the theme which this code belongs to, 'denying the trans identity', is more present in the Dutch comments, where the main difference is that the Dutch transphobic comments are substantially more sarcastic. In addition, the data also shows that the Dutch comments more often directly comment on transgender people not being normal, whereas the American comments simply deny the entire existence of trans people.

Although the data suggests that the theme 'mean/hurtful comments' is equally present in the comments of both countries, there are some important differences among the different narratives. The code 'wishing ill or death' only appears in the American comments. In contrast, the code 'body shaming' only appears in the Dutch comments. These findings, including the earlier mentioned differences in sarcastic comments and vulgar references to sex organs lead to believe that American Facebook users are more verbally violent, and aggressive in their choice of words. Whereas the findings suggest that the Dutch Facebook users are rather passively aggressive, using anecdotes and sarcastic jokes in their transphobic language.

Another significant difference is found in the theme 'loss of (national) identity', which is broadly present in the Dutch comments. The research suggests that the topic of identity plays a more important role in the Dutch public debate, considering the larger number of people with an immigrant background, as well as a larger number of transgender people. Both of which, to some, are considered a threat to their national identity.

Furthermore, the findings of this research can also be used to determine which 'areas' of transphobia need help to ensure a decline in hate speech. Because this research specifically looked at the differences between the Netherlands and the United States, it also allows for specific changes to be made in order to prevent (online) transphobia. News sites on Facebook can, insofar they are not already doing it, monitor hate speech and censor violent language. Facebook can alter its algorithm in finding these types of hate speeches and either provide a violent content warning or offer links to transgender resources. These findings exposed numerous possibilities for new areas of research, which are briefly discussed in the next section.

6. Venues for future research

As mentioned earlier in section 3, there are two specific limitations to the methodology of this research. The first is that this research did not take into consideration

the difference in narratives that could arise from the article's photo, caption, text preview, and time of posting. However, the research also did not find many comments directly aimed at or about the header or picture of an article. Nonetheless, this limitation poses a venue for future research, where the effects of an article's header and picture on the comments, can be studied. The second venue for future research is to look into the possible effects of house rules and/or active page moderators. As is suggested earlier in this paper, perhaps having a moderator, or even Facebook algorithm, can filter out hate comments and result in more positive comment sections. Considering this was not the main objective of the current research, this factor is left out and should instead be examined in another research.

Finally, another venue for future research is to quantify the data as for example found in the current study. It is important to understand the narratives of hate comments and what type of transphobic language users on Facebook use. On the other hand, it is also valuable to know how often which type of hate appears, and in which country. To have a quantitative dataset with these statistics is useful to combat online transphobia and create specific anti-hate speech policies, protecting the trans community. This paper contributed to those research foundations in the way that it was able to label and categorize different type of transphobic narratives, setting up for potential hate speech preventing policies, both online as offline.

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8. Appendices

Appendix A: Table overview of chosen Facebook pages and articles

This table includes an overview of the Facebook pages and the articles from which the comments were chosen. Each news article/post is labeled with the abbreviation of the country and a number. These labels are used in the text of this study to indicate from which article a comment derives from.

	Facebook Page	Title of article in original post	Label	Date
The United States	A. Washington Post	A Virginia teacher was fired for refusing to use a trans student's pronouns. Now, he's suing his school's district.	US1	01/10/19
		Miss Spain makes history as first transgender woman to compete in Miss Universe pageant	US2	18/12/18
	B. The New York Times	'Transgender' Could Be Defined Out of Existence Under Trump Administration	US3	21/10/18
		Trump Administration Proposes Rollback of Transgender Protections	US4	24/05/20
	C. CNN	Trans actor and writer D'Lo reacts to new Gillette ad featuring a transgender son shaving with his dad	US5	29/05/19
		Transgender woman asked for ID to use bathroom	US6	30/06/18
	D. HuffPost	Carmen Liu Why My Lingerie Is Helping Transwomen	US7	08/03/19
		Transgender Woman Found Dead	US8	20/05/19
	E. Fox News	Missouri lawmakers consider restricting transgender high school athletes to teams of their birth gender	US9	27/02/20
		Trump administration mulls rollback of Obama-era transgender protections, report says	US10	22/10/18
The Netherlands*	F. AD.nl	Nikkie Tutorials reveals: 'I am transgender'	NL1	13/01/20
		For the first time, Marvel brings a transgender superhero to the silver screen	NL2	02/01/20
	G. NU.nl	Number of transgender UMCG patients increased sevenfold in the past decade	NL3	17/01/20
		These four athletes want to be the first trans woman to go to the Olympics	NL4	29/02/20
		Transgender people under the age of sixteen can also change gender in passport	NL5	10/04/19
	H. De Telegraaf	This is Miss Netherlands during the pageant for trans women	NL6	09/12/19
		Nikkie Tutorials reveals: 'I am transgender'	NL7	13/01/20
	I. NOS	'I discovered through social media that I am transgender'	NL8	14/01/20
		American judge allows transgender person to use men's restroom	NL9	20/08/19
		Sarah Bettens (K's Choice) now identifies as a man	NL10	18/05/19
	J. RTL Nieuws	Transgender officials are given leave to change sex	NL11	01/12/18

Special ad: father helps trans son with shaving

NL12

29/05/19

Table 3. Overview of chosen news sites and corresponding selection of articles.

*Titles of the articles are translated by the author.

Appendix B: Codebook in table overview

This is the codebook for this research. The first 12 rows are the final themes as taken from the data, including a percentage expressing their share in the total amount of quotations for one country. The other rows are an overview of the codes used to analyze the data. The percentages express their distribution over the total amount of quotations, in other words how often did a code appear in the total dataset.

Themes	Codes	Example	Total frq	Frq NL	% of total	Frq USA	% of total
Trans is illness	Transgender is illness or disease	“The guy has Mental health issues.”	52	26	50,00	26	50,00
	Advising medical help	“Transgender people need mental healthcare, not surgery (...)”	14	7	50,00	7	50,00
Blaming politics	Blame politician	“(...) that left b*tch ruins Amsterdam. R.I.P Amsterdam.”	5	3	60,00	2	40,00
	Blame politics	“Transgender is another lie perpetrated by liberals (...)”	7	3	42,86	4	57,14
Loss of (national) identity	Losing national identity	“(...) Amsterdam lost its identity (...)”	2	1	50,00	1	50,00
	Worried for children	“How do we tell this to our kids...?”	7	6	85,71	1	14,29
	Current state of world/ country/city	“Society is completely breaking down (...)”	35	28	80,00	7	20,00
Scientific/ biological arguments	Defending gender binary theory	“You’re either Male or Female”	42	6	14,29	36	85,71
	Argument about science	“It all comes down science (...)”	12	6	50,00	6	50,00
	Argument about chromosomes	“Chromosomes define gender! (...)”	11	6	54,55	5	45,45
	Argument about biology	“Another one who goes against nature (...)”	46	24	52,17	22	47,83
Disapproving based on religion	Mention religion	“JESUS!!!! PLEASE REIGN DOWN FROM THE HEAVENS (...)”	11	2	18,18	9	81,82
	Mention God	“You are a man live with it God created you”	35	3	8,57	32	91,43
Mean/hurtful comment	Wishing ill or death	“We should line them up and burn them (...)”	2	0	0,00	2	100,00
	Use of insulting language	“Gross, you can see his ‘junk!’”	62	31	50,00	31	50,00
	Calling ugly	“She looks like a melted e.t (...)”	11	6	54,55	5	45,45
	Body shaming	“This explains why she is built so big (...)”	17	17	100,00	0	0,00
Denying the trans identity	Using wrong pronouns	“No he was a man dressed like a woman.”	65	26	40,00	39	60,00
	Sarcastic undertone	“I’d like to identify as a 8yr girl scout so I can	91	62	68,13	29	31,87

		get my hands on some cookies (...)"					
	Mention sex organs	"Just one more Man without balls"	44	24	54,55	20	45,45
	Mention former/ wrong name	"Respect. Shout out for you Nick"	4	3	75,00	1	25,00
	Mention former/ wrong gender	"it was a dude"	62	27	43,55	35	56,45
	Trans is not normal	"Omg wtf not normal"	12	8	66,67	4	33,33
	Denying existence	"That's because they don't exist, actually"	17	4	23,53	13	76,47
Trans is a hype/ trend	Trans is a hype/trend	"Nowadays everyone is transgender"	7	6	85,71	1	14,29
Homophobia (removed from data)	Homophobia (removed from data)	"(...) without gay propaganda"	2	2	100,00	0	0,00
Total			673	335	49,78	338	50,22

Table 4. Overview the codes and themes, including code frequency per country.