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# Media Misrepresentations: Evaluating Their Impact on the Inclusion and Development of Transgender Women in South Africa

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**Media Misrepresentations: Evaluating Their Impact on the Inclusion and Development of Transgender Women in South Africa.**

A Research Report submitted in partial fulfilment of the Degree of

Master of Commerce (Inequality Studies)

In the School of Economics and Finance,

University of the Witwatersrand

by

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Supervised by

**Dr. David Francis**

Date

**July 2025**

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# RESEARCH REPORT

## DECLARATION

I, **Khanimamba Masuluke (Student Number: 2616230)**, am a student enrolled in ECON7069A - Research Report in Inequality Studies for the academic year 2024/25. I declare that this research document and its content, which I hereby submit for the Master of Commerce (Inequality Studies) at the University of Witwatersrand, is my own work and has never been submitted by me to this institution or any other institution.

**Signature** **Date**



04 July 2025

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this master's degree to my mom and grandmother, whom I miss dearly:

**Tsakani Portia Myambo**

(06 May 1977 – 16 March 2007)

And

**Nyanisi "Hanjhisa" Myambo**

(10 November 1926 – 31 July 2016)

May your souls continue to rest in peace. My wish is to be someone you would be proud of and be your wildest dream. This one is for you!

Additionally, I dedicate this work to "those before us, to those amongst us, to those we'll see on the other side," all transgender and gender queer/diverse identifying individuals.

Your lives matter, and your resilience has not gone unnoticed!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This journey has been exciting and, at times, daunting. I was met with a few turbulences, but through prayer, courage, and support, I emerged victorious.

Maya Angelou once said, “When you walk into an office, you do not go alone. Bring your people with you. Bring everybody who has ever loved you, with you. Say, ‘Grandma, come on, let’s go. Great grandpa, you’ve been dead all this time, come on, let’s go.” I therefore wish to express my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to the following organisations and people who made my journey worth travelling and possible:

I would like to thank the God of Mount Zion for the life, strength, and knowledge in this journey.

To my supervisor, Dr. David Francis, I would like to express my sincere appreciation for your unwavering support, patience, and guidance. To Dr. Shireen Ally, thank you for going out of your way to review my work and for the feedback.

To the National Research Foundation and Ford Foundation (in partnership with the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies), I appreciate the financial assistance in this journey.

To my participants, Karabo ‘Lexi’ Mahlangu, Abongile Quthu, Aurora Krotoa Moses, Dee Moore, Thabani ‘Thabsie’ Mabezane, Thabile Baloyi, Ikageng Olifant, Katleho Mofokeng, Kgolagano Khuto, Lehlogonolo Machaba, and those I cannot name, this would not have been possible without you. I cannot even imagine how hard it must have been to share your lived experiences, so I thank you.

Hulu wa mina Phyllis and vana va mhani Hlulani, Nkarhi, and Mandla for your love, inspirations, and support – For, “without you, I would be nothing.”

## ABSTRACT

This study explores the misrepresentation of transgender women in South Africa's mainstream media, using intersecting theories of gender, capability/development, and media representation. It further evaluates how this form of media representation influences perceptions, affects social inclusion, and exacerbates socioeconomic inequalities. Employing qualitative methods, the research paper draws on semi-structured interviews with transgender women and LGBTQ+ activists. It also analyses news media articles. The findings reveal that there has been a noticeable increase in transgender representations in the media and efforts made to protect the rights and dignity of marginalized communities, including transgender women. However, transgender women remain socially marginalized due to harmful stereotypes perpetuated by and in the media. These findings further reveal that transgender identities are framed within heteronormative ideologies and sensationalist lenses. Consequently, this leaves transgender women vulnerable to acts of physical violence and systematic oppression. If left unattended, this can further stunt transgender women's quality of life, freedoms, and development. Furthermore, the capitalist and exclusionary nature of the media often fails to account for the diverse contexts and unique experiences of transgender women, thus marginalizing a community already set on the margins. However, the study also found forms of resistance, such as collective activism and alternative media, which offer empowering representations. Ultimately, this study posits that equitable and authentic media representations are pivotal to the expansion of transgender women's capabilities, functionings, and inclusion. As such, it calls for an intersectional and nuanced approach to media representations that amplifies transgender voices and disrupts entrenched systems of exclusion and socioeconomic inequalities. This research paper further calls for rights-based and context-sensitive policies and legal frameworks to improve the recognition and protection of transgender and gender-diverse individuals in society.

# KEYWORDS AND ACRONYMS

## KEYWORDS & DEFINITIONS:

- **Transgender Women:** Pinto and Moleiro (2015) define this term as individuals who perform and express their genders in incongruity with their assigned sex at birth. These individuals do not conform to binary or hegemonic gender and sexuality norms, behaviours, and roles.
- **Media Representation and Misrepresentation:** Media representations are concerned with how media texts, audio, and visuals depict and portray subjects or issues (Hall, 1997). This, as a result, shapes societal perceptions, constructs meanings, and influences behaviours. Representations can either reflect reality or distort it, often shaped by hegemonic ideologies. Media texts construct meanings through framing – e.g., using language or tone. Media misrepresentations refer to distorted, simplified, and skewed depictions and portrayals of subjects and realities (Van Dijk, 1991). This includes sensationalizing, stereotyping, or misgendering subjects, often to serve certain interests and agendas. This, as a result, perpetuates harmful stereotypes and reinforces exclusionary practices.
- **Mainstream Media:** These are popular broadcasting and print outlets such as television, radio, newspapers, and magazines (Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020).
- **Social Inclusion and Development:** This refers to the integration and recognition of individuals into sociocultural, political, or economic life (Sen, 2007). This ensures that everyone has equal access to rights, opportunities, and resources, thus reducing inequality. Sen (2001) evaluates development as an economic factor that prioritizes wealth and income, and the expansion of people's capabilities and functionings. This includes increasing opportunities needed to lead fulfilling lives (e.g., access to healthcare services, education, and economic resources). It is also concerned with people's freedoms to achieve the lifestyles they value (e.g., protective security, social recognition, dignity, and rights).

## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

- LGBTQ+ : Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, and many more.
- NGOs : Non-government organizations.
- HIV : Human Immunodeficiency Virus.
- PTSD : Post-traumatic stress disorder.
- OHCHR : Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.
- KTLA : Television Los Angeles.
- IOL : International Labour Organization.
- WHO : World Health Organization.

## ORGANIZATIONS

- Activate Wits : An award-winning queer student advocacy and social club based at the University of Witwatersrand, established in 1980.

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# CHAPTER 1

# GENERAL ORIENTATION OF THE STUDY

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing focus on the representation of transgender women in the media. As global and contemporary discourses around gender identity and performance continuously develop and evolve, the media have been pivotal in influencing and shaping how societies perceive and treat transgender women and gender queer/diverse people. Although media representation has the potential to foster social inclusion, it can also reinforce systematic marginalization, exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities, perpetuate stereotypes, and distort realities. In South Africa, where deeply entrenched sociocultural norms (e.g., heteronormativity) and legacies of apartheid construct our experiences of gender and sexuality, this research paper evaluates the effects of media misrepresentations on the inclusion and personal development of transgender women. The media, as both a reflection and a social structure that shapes our societies, can perpetuate dominant ideologies that influence societal perceptions and understanding. However, these ideologies are often framed within heteronormative or cisnormative and patriarchal standards. For transgender women and gender queer/diverse people, this results in media representations that are hypersexualized, stereotyped, or exclusionary. This research paper evaluates how these media misrepresentations affect transgender women's inclusion in society, access to socioeconomic opportunities, and participation in sociocultural life.

The representation of transgender women in the media has also drawn attention from LGBTQ+ activists, civil and international organizations fighting for social justice (Zhang, 2022). Activists and NGOs have since voiced their concerns and launched social movements to address the marginalization of transgender women and genderqueer/diverse individuals in the media and society, especially within transgender-of-color activism (ibid). For example, *MambaOnline*, a South African LGBTQ+ news outlet, amplifies LGBTQ+ voices, experiences, and representation to promote greater understanding and inclusivity. These efforts to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights and safety have inspired this study to challenge media misrepresentations and societal misconceptions of transgender identities. By critically engaging with media portrayals of transgender women, the research aims to foster greater inclusion and personal growth, as well as to improve the lived experiences of transgender women. Social movements, for the most part, have been effective in building a coalition among transgender women, activists, and allies to fight for transgender rights and dismantle heterosexist and cisgender

hegemonic structures (Cumming-Potvin, 2023). However, transphobia and homophobia remain widespread globally, including in South African society (Luhur et al., 2021). These attitudes perpetuate distorted images of transgender identities in the media (Solomon & Kurtz-Costes, 2018a). Transgender women and other LGBTQ+ individuals continue to live in fear of violence or victimization from homophobic, transphobic, religious, political, and law enforcement groups. In South Africa, media representations of transgender women have increased significantly; however, the media often stigmatizes and discriminates against transgender people.

This chapter serves as an introduction to the research paper, including the background, rationale, and research problem statement. It includes the research questions, aim, objectives, and the study's significance for trans rights and visibility, as well as for the field of inequality studies.

## 1.2 BACKGROUND & RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Heteronormative societies recognize a sex or gender system that constitutes only two, opposite sexes, determined by biology, and signaled by the shape of genitals – i.e., the concept of sexual difference normalizes sexual relations between “opposite” bodies. Sex between two men, or two women, however, is considered unnatural and immoral in some societies (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Taking this into account, along with Moleiro and Pinto's (2015) concept of transgender people as a term that describes individuals whose performance of gender is incongruent with their assigned sex at birth, this research paper suggests that we look at transgender women as marginalized individuals and a gender minority group. According to Winter et al. (2016), transgender people are socially marginalized, stigmatized, excluded, discriminated against, victimized, and provided with poor healthcare services

South Africa also reflects broader global patterns observed in many other contexts, where transgender women have limited access to educational and employment opportunities, as well as access to healthcare services (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2012; Letsoalo, 2019; Muwanguzi et al., 2023). Transgender women and gender-diverse people also face challenges of economic disempowerment and violence (OHCHR, n.d). As a result, impeding these socioeconomic determinants causes unfavorable psychological and social experiences, such as the prevalence of homelessness, suicide, mental health disorders, an increased risk of contracting HIV, as well as other life-threatening health issues (Usman et al., 2018). Furthermore, systematic and institutional hindrances, rooted in white colonial laws and

traditions, exacerbate these intersecting oppressions and their prominent role in media and contemporary discourses (Povinelli & Zhao, 2024). Mainstream media often misrepresents and perpetuates harmful stereotypes of transgender women (Billard, 2018). By problematizing media misrepresentations and showing that identities are nuanced and intersectional, we hope that societies will gain a better understanding of gender diversity, which will help eliminate harmful and transphobic attitudes. The media are a powerful social construct mechanism through which gender and identity are depicted and shaped. The media also reflect societal realities and perceptions. As a result, media representation influences and shapes how societies perceive gender and Identity. Transgender women, as the marginalized "other," are prone to hostile media representation, which has the potential to impede their capabilities and functionings. As a result, exacerbating socioeconomic inequalities:

> "The inequality that should bother all decent human beings is the unequal capability to function fully as a human being, the unequal capability to choose a life of dignity and well-being – under prevailing conditions and human knowledge" (Therborn, 2013, p. 48) .

Thus, critically engaging with media representations to disrupt societal misconceptions of transgender identities and foster the inclusion of transgender women into sociopolitical and economic life is worth studying. Media representations of transgender women cannot be ignored because they have a significant impact on society's perceptions, attitudes, and treatment of transgender individuals. Additionally, depending on whether media representations of transgender women are negative or positive determines whether their lived experiences in society continue to deteriorate or improve. Moreover, this research paper focuses on transgender women because they often face unique and complex forms of discrimination for no reason other than that of their gender identity and societal expectations of femininity or womanhood (see Müller et al., 2021; and Buthelezi & Brown, 2023 on some of the issues affecting transgender women). While gender-queer and transgender men are also underrepresented, transgender women face widespread discrimination and limited access to essential social services. According to Serano (2007), as cited in Lewis (2009a), transgender women are subjected to transmisogyny, a concept that describes a type of misogyny that exacerbates the challenges they face, such as higher rates of victimization, discrimination in the workplace, or limited access to healthcare services compared to gender-queer and transgender men. Focusing on transgender women serves as an entry point to address the more evident forms of discrimination. Lewis (2009b) posits that transgender women are

disproportionately impacted by gender-based prejudice, making their representations in the media crucial in research.

## 1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The misrepresentation of transgender women in the media reinforces harmful stereotypes that hinder their inclusion in society and personal development. Despite the increased representation of transgender identities in the media and South Africa's progressive Constitution that prohibits discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation, transgender women, nonetheless, are discriminated against in different sectors, including labour markets and healthcare. Transgender women's social discrimination and exclusion feed into existing and distorted stereotypes of transgender people as "tricksters" who perform their genders to seduce cisgender men. The media profoundly constructs our societies, including our perceptions, behaviors, and ideologies. As such, it is crucial to engage with media discourses to challenge their role in widening gendered disparities.

Media representations play a vital role in shaping societal perceptions and policies, yet they are often framed within heteronormative and cisnormative ideologies that marginalize transgender women. A concerning issue is the persistent representation of transgender women through oversimplified and frequently distorted tropes, such as the victim, the deceptive, or the sensationalized image. These representations misrepresent their lived experiences and exacerbate violence and social exclusion. The sensationalization of transgender women in news media and television soap operas reinforces societal misconceptions and exacerbates systemic inequalities that impede transgender women's access to socioeconomic opportunities. The misrepresentation of transgender women in the media has consequences beyond the individual level, affecting responses to transgender issues at the institutional and policy levels (Bracco et al., 2024). Negative media representations of transgender women could have unfavorable effects on their access to employment opportunities and vital social services such as healthcare. Despite the ongoing activism for gender-inclusive media representations, there remains a gap in research evaluating the effects of these representations on the inclusion and personal development of transgender women in South African societies. This research paper addresses this gap by evaluating the misrepresentation of transgender women in the media, their implications for social inclusion and development, and the broader systematic structures that sustain exclusionary media representations. By employing media representation, gender, and capability theories, this research provides a nuanced understanding of how media misrepresentations exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities and proposes strategies for more

authentic and inclusive media representations, as well as recommendations needed to improve the lives of transgender women in South Africa.

## 1.4 RESEARCH AIM, OBJECTIVES, AND QUESTIONS

### 1.4.1 Aim

The relationship between mainstream media representation and its influence on various facets of South Africa's development, including societal perceptions and sociopolitical (ex)inclusion, remains complex. This study evaluates the misrepresentation of transgender women in South Africa's mainstream media, focusing on how misrepresenting them influences societal perceptions and their development trajectory.

### 1.4.2 Research Objective

Research objectives are significant because they indicate what researchers wish to attain from the research project. To attain the purpose of this research paper, the objectives were set out to understand how transgender women are represented and misrepresented in the media; to evaluate how media misrepresentations influence societal perceptions, attitudes and behaviours; to understand how media misrepresentations affect transgender women's lived experiences; to understand how media misrepresentations affect the broader objectives of social inclusion, diversity, and development; and to provide recommendations on how we can foster social inclusion and authentic media representations, and even reduce socioeconomic and gendered inequalities.

### 1.4.3 Research Question(s)

There are still efforts needed in research to address the misrepresentation of transgender women in the media, including fostering authentic media representations and social inclusion, improving the lived experiences of transgender women in society, eradicating socioeconomic and gendered inequalities, as well as understanding how these misrepresentations influence societal perceptions and hinder their development trajectory. The research questions that inform this research paper follow thusly:

- How does the misrepresentation of transgender women in South Africa's mainstream media hinder their inclusion in society and personal development?

Sub-questions:

- How are transgender women represented in the mainstream media? What are the misrepresentations?

- How do these misrepresentations influence societal perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward transgender women in the country?
- How do the misrepresentations impact transgender women's lived experiences?
- How does the misrepresentation of transgender women in the media affect the broader objectives of social inclusion, diversity, development, and equality?

## 1.5 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

The findings of this research paper will enrich transgender, gender, and inequality studies. This research paper will assist activists, activist organizations, and media producers or owners to improve the representations and lived experiences of transgender women in South Africa. The research paper will benefit institutions of policy-making and political and cultural structures in establishing policies that foster equitable societies. This research paper also complements an evaluation of existing literature. It provides recommendations and solutions. Scholars who want to focus on this research area can use this research paper to supplement their research. This research paper also contributes to society and the improvement of transgender women's well-being and social standing.

## 1.6 SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

This research paper is based on the effects of media misrepresentations on societal perceptions and attitudes, and even on transgender women's development trajectory. The primary purpose of this research paper is to evaluate the relationship between media misrepresentations and the inclusion and personal development of transgender women in South African societies. The research paper is structured into the following chapters: Chapter one serves as an introduction to the research paper, including the background, rationale, and research problem statement. It further includes the research questions, aim, objectives, and significance of the study to trans-representations and the field of inequality studies. Chapter two presents existing literature on transgender representations, their influence on societal perceptions, and impact on transgender women's lived experiences, as well as issues affecting transgender women in South Africa. Chapter three discusses theories that guide the research paper: the media representation, gender, and capability theories. In chapter four, the research paper presents the methodology and research design, including methods used to collect and analyse data. Chapter five presents the findings collected through case studies and semi-structured interviews with transgender women and LGBTQAI+ activists. Chapter six uses thematic and discourse analysis to identify themes of media and their implications on social

inclusion and equality. Chapter seven recommends solutions to the problem identified in this research paper and concludes.

# CHAPTER 2

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

The media are powerful sources of information that shape societal perceptions, reinforcing stereotypes and influencing the inclusion or exclusion of marginalized people. In South Africa, like other places around the world, social norms are entrenched in heteronormative ideologies; the representation of transgender women in the media remains an area of contestation. This chapter discusses existing literature, focusing on transgender representations in the media and their influence on societal perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. It highlights issues stunting the lives of transgender women, as a result, hindering their development. The chapter reveals that media misrepresentations – e.g., misgendering and sensationalizing transgender identities - contribute to their exclusion in society. Additionally, it identifies gaps in existing literature, particularly about the intersection of media representation with transgender women's lived experiences and the broader socioeconomic inequalities. Lastly, this review signifies the need for more authentic, diverse, affirming, and empowering media representations that improve the well-being and support the full participation of transgender women in societies.

### 2.1.1 Transgender representations in mainstream media

LGBT activist and transgender actress Laverne Cox, shining a light on transgender representations in the media in the new documentary, '*Disclosure*,' said,

> "I think for a very long time, how trans people have been represented on screen has suggested that we are not real, that we are mentally ill, that we do not exist, and yet, here I am, here we are, and we have always been here." (KTLA, 2020)

The representations of marginalized communities in the media, especially transgender people, have increasingly become a common phenomenon (Solomon & Kurtz-Costes, 2018; Van Haelter et al., 2022; Faheem et al., 2024). However, the media represents transgender and gender-queer people as one-dimensional, ignoring other LGBT+ members in favor of more prominent identities – e.g., gay identities (McInroy & Craig, 2017; Ng, Chow & Yang, 2024). In some instances, the media mainly focuses on the L and G acronyms (Billard, 2016). This implicitly constructs the ignored members of the LG**BTQ** community as the "other" (McInroy and Craig, 2017; Rahman, 2004). Thus, it further marginalizes and excludes a community that is already set on the margins (Billard, 2016). Television and print media lack diversity. For

example, there is a noticeable underrepresentation of Black transgender women and a greater concentration on White transgender representation ( Van Vliet, 2020; McLaren et al., 2021). Generally, transgender representations in the media illustrate the misrepresentation of transgender women (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Barker-Plummer, 2013; Jobe, 2013; Billard, 2016; McInroy & Craig, 2017; Hughto et al., 2021; Lopes, 2021; Seely, 2021; Dhiman, 2023; Faheem et al., 2024). The portrayal of transgender identities in the media is embedded within an image of deception (Willox, 2003; Barker-Plummer, 2013). By sensationalizing and hypersexualizing transgender identities, the media objectifies, depicts, and constructs stereotypes of transgender women as "tricksters" who perform their gender to seduce cisgender men (Sloop, 2000; Barker-Plummer, 2013; Jobe, 2013; Denny, 2014; Billard, 2019; Avalos, 2024).

The news media underrepresent and underreport transgender-related issues and perspectives (Sloop, 2000; Billard, 2016; Ciszek, 2020). As such, this excludes transgender voices in socio-political discourses. Moreover, by deadnaming[1] victims of hate crimes, the news media misnames, mispronounces, and misgenders transgender people (Barker-Plummer, 2013; Billard, 2016). This delegitimizes and stigmatizes transgender identities (Billard, 2016). For example, following the murders of transgender-identifying victims Gwen Araujo and Brandon Teena, media texts referred to transgender woman Araujo as a "he", and used her birth name, Edward (Barker-Plummer, 2013). Teena was referred to as "the person often called Brandon Teena" (Billard, 2016). Consequently, the media's incorrect usage of name conventions and pronouns, putting quotation marks around victims' chosen names, and failure to characterize transgender identities suggest that transgender people are illegitimate and artificial (Billard, 2016; Seely, 2021). Billard (2016) nevertheless argued that using correct pronouns and proper name conventions legitimizes transgender identities.

Similar to the print media, television and film depictions and casting of transgender characters are often stereotyped and negative, and do not reflect the real lives of transgender people, which often delegitimize and stigmatize transgender identities (Reitz, 2017; McLaren, Bryant & Brown, 2021; Thomson, 2021). For example, the casting of cisgender actors to play transgender roles reinforces the stereotype that transgender women are men pretending to be women (Reitz, 2017; Solomon & Kurtz-Costes, 2018b). Additionally, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (2012) cataloged 102 television storylines containing transgender

[1] Deadnaming refers to using someone's birthname, rather than their chosen name (Dunne et al., 2017).

actors, revealing that 40% were cast as victims and 21% as villains or killers. While the series *Orange is the New Black* (2013) has often been praised for its role in positively enhancing trans visibility, the character Sophie, played by activist Laverne Cox, embodies a victim and criminal persona, two common roles transgender women are cast in (Reitz, 2017). Additionally, in the genres where transgender women are cast or represented as victims, their victimization is narrated as if they are responsible for their demise (Billard et al., 2020).

Recent research indicates that transgender representations in the media are evolving (Dhiman, 2023; Moody-Ramirez et al., 2023; Cruz, 2024). These representations shift from harmful stereotypes that detrimentally affect the well-being of transgender people to authentic and diverse representations that challenge existing stereotypes and amplify transgender voices in the community (Dhiman, 2023). As such, creating public spaces where LGBTQ+ individuals can securely perform their gender (Cruz, 2024). For example, featuring influential figures in media releases, such as actress Laverne Cox, tv-personality Caitlyn Jenner, and actor Elliot Page, has helped amplify transgender voices and visibility in society (Van Haelter et al., 2022). However, despite these diverse and evolving representations, transgender people are still underrepresented (Dhiman, 2023; Moody-Ramirez et al., 2023; Cruz, 2024). Notwithstanding this evidence in research, the studies may not encompass the media landscape or transgender experiences in their entirety or different contexts (Dhiman, 2023). Therefore, there is a need for continued efforts to ensure authentic media representations. By evaluating how the media portrays transgender women, this research paper seeks to amplify transgender voices in the community, challenge stereotypes, and foster equitable and accepting societies (Dhiman, 2023; Takenshadow, 2023).

### 2.1.2 Media Representations and Their Influence.

Societies are increasingly integrated with powerful media tools; thus, their influence on perceptions cannot be ignored. This influence can be powerful, especially when it comes to how the media shapes our attitudes toward marginalized groups who continue to endure discrimination due to prevalent stereotypes and prejudice (Solomon, 2016). The media are pervasive in society (Jobe, 2013; Dhiman, 2023). They are also crucial sources of information – e.g., television and film are powerful and influential, often shaping perceptions and changing how communities view themselves and the world around them (Thomson, 2021; Dhiman, 2023; Cruz, 2024). The media profoundly influences perceptions, attitudes, and the understanding of different social issues (Dhiman, 2023; Takenshadow, 2023). The extent of exposure to particular content has a significant impact on people's beliefs, emotions, and

behaviors (Genner & Süss, 2017). Müller et al. (2021) conducted a survey study focusing on transgender women's lived experiences in the Western Cape of South Africa. The themes that emerged from the study included the stigmatization of transgender women and the need for inclusive media representation (ibid). Additionally, the study found that media representation of gender and identity has adverse consequences, such as suffering a lack of respect from other members of society and the rise of physical violence towards marginalized communities (ibid). Media representation of individuals has effects beyond the individual level. They may also affect the community or group to which the individual belongs. Furthermore, most cisgender people rarely interact with transgender people in a way that constructively reduces transphobia (Solomon and Kurtz-Costes, 2018a). As such, media portrayals may be some of the few ways that cisgender people learn about and perceive transgender people (Solomon and Kurtz-Costes, 2018b; Jobe, 2013). It is, therefore, significant to critically engage with these representations to uncover how they influence attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs. The media occupies a significant space in the representation and construction of identities, making its pervasiveness and function in influencing ideas, attitudes, and behaviors worth studying (Santoniccolo et al., 2023). Therefore, how has the media influenced societal attitudes, behaviors, and the lives of transgender women?

**Some key studies on media representations, their influence, and effects:**

In 'Transgender Voices: Analyzing Discourse and Representation in Media in Pakistan Society,' Faheem et al. (2024) explore the representation of transgender women in Pakistan media and investigate how these representations influence societal perceptions and foster inclusive societies. This study found that the representation of marginalized communities, especially transgender people, has garnered local and international attention toward fostering equitable and inclusive societies. The study also found that instead of authentic representations, the Pakistan media sensationalized transgender identities, reinforcing stigma and social exclusion. This study underscores the need for nuanced and respectful transgender representations in the media, arguing that this shift will enhance social acceptance, eliminate stigma, and improve the quality of life of transgender persons.

In 'Media's Influence on Perceptions of Trans Women,' Solomon and Kurtz-Costes (2018b) investigate how the media influences the public's perceptions of transgender women, comparing the impacts of negative and positive representations. This study posits that although media representations of transgender women are common, transgender women still face

discrimination in society because of stereotypes and prejudice that are reinforced in and by the media. This study found that negative representations often perpetuate harmful stereotypes and biases against transgender women, whereas positive representations counter that by challenging prejudice, thereby fostering empathy and acceptance of transgender women in society. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the power of the media in either reinforcing stigmas or fostering acceptance, calling for more diverse and positive media representations to counteract harmful stereotypes and promote the inclusion of transgender women in social life. Thus, it appeals to media producers to be mindful of their media's influence on societies and to produce balanced or authentic media content and texts.

Lastly, in 'Negative Transgender – Related Media Messages Are Associated with Adverse Mental Health Outcomes in a Multistate Study of Transgender Adults,' Hughto et al. (2021) examine mental health issues in transgender adults associated with exposure to negative media representations of transgender identities, including issues of depression, anxiety, PTSD, and other psychological distresses. This study found that, of the 545 transgender participants, 97.6% reported having been exposed to negative media content or texts about transgender identities. This, they further reported, was often the cause of their loss of self-esteem, fear, sadness, internalized stigma (e.g., internalized transphobia), and delay in seeking help. Consequently, this increased their levels of anxiety, PTSD, and depression. This study, however, also found that another cause for deteriorating mental health in transgender people is physical and sexual abuse that they experienced in their childhood. This study underscores the detrimental effects of negative media representations on the mental health of transgender people. It suggests multilevel interventions to remedy these damages, including positive representations and mental health support for transgender people, as well as advocating for efforts to fight stigmas and create supportive communities for transgender people.

These studies illustrate the power of media representations on societal perceptions and the well-being of transgender people. They highlight how negative media representations perpetuate harmful stigmas, mental health issues, and social exclusion. Whereas positive media representations foster the acceptance and inclusion of transgender people in society. Therefore, in the shifting terrain of societal and cultural perceptions, the lens through which societies perceive transgender women impacts their lived experiences and has far-reaching repercussions for their participation in socioeconomic and cultural life. Understanding these perceptions is critical in navigating South Africa's shifting socialization in pursuit of paving a path toward inclusive societies.

### 2.1.3 Issues affecting transgender women.

South Africa has Africa's most progressive Constitution because of its justiciable and democratic Bill of Rights (Baird, 2024). However, the country's sociopolitical landscape is home to some of the world's highest levels of violence, inequality, and injustice (Govender, 2023). For example, there are insurmountable cases of human rights violations committed regularly against marginalized communities and minority groups, such as women, children, migrants, sex workers, and members of the LGBTQ+ community (see Chimatira et al, 2023 on Human Rights violations among men who have sex with men and transgender people in South Africa).

**Examples of systematic and institutional barriers stunting the lives of transgender people:**

Buthelezi and Brown (2023) explored the lived experiences of transgender students in South African universities, focusing on their encounters with systemic barriers and exclusion. Their study found that transgender students face challenges of exclusionary identification and access systems. For example, biometric systems require fixed gender markers, often invalidating transgender students' identities and restricting their access to facilities such as laboratories and libraries. Student cards with specified gender biometrics result in surveillance and discrimination, destabilizing transgender students' safety and inclusion. Most universities' infrastructural designs, such as restrooms and residences, reflect cisnormative designs, which further marginalize transgender students. This study argued for biometric systems that recognize self-determined gender identities, gender-neutral facilities, cultural training of staff and students, and visible support structures to foster inclusion and improve the well-being and academic excellence of transgender students.

Müller et al. (2021) examined the prevalence of physical and sexual violence in the lives of gender minorities in 9 African countries, including South Africa. The study found that of the 3,798 participants, all gender minorities (women, children, and transgender women) experienced high levels of violence compared to cisgender participants. However, transgender women experienced the highest levels of violence, with 73% reporting to have endured it in their lifetime and 45% in the past year (ibid). 70% of the participants reported that the cause of their victimization was due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and health status (e.g., HIV positive). As such, this study underscores the urgency for inclusive policies and the

integration of protective legal provisions (e.g., non-discrimination laws) into legal frameworks that align with international human rights values to reduce violence against gender minorities.

Furthermore, the South African Constitution of 1996, sections 9(3) and 6(1) of the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 prohibit discriminatory practices and policies in the workplace based on sex, gender, and sexual orientation (Smit, 2016). The International Labour Organization (2016), in contrast, argued that employees identifying within the LGBT spectrum are discriminated against in the job market, which includes being dismissed from work and denied access to employment, promotion, and career development opportunities for no other reason than that of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Moreover, in a focus group study investigating discrimination in the workplace based on gender identity and sexual orientation, LGBTQ+ identifying participants Phumi and Katlego shared their workplace discrimination experiences (IOL, 2016). The participants indicated that their colleagues refused to share rooms with them in team-building boot camps because of the stereotype that genderqueer people are sexual predators and pests (ibid). In more workplace discriminatory practices, Smit (2016) noted that a prospective employee (transgender woman) was offered a job opportunity, which was later rescinded when the employer discovered that the employee had intentions to transition from male to female surgically. Another transgender woman was dismissed from work amid her surgical transition process, and even before the dismissal, the employee was instructed to present as a male figure – i.e., wearing dresses, doing nails, and legally changing their gender marker often sparked conflicts with colleagues (ibid). This, as a result, disregards transgender women's self-concept of their gender identity, self-expression, and even contributes to their socioeconomic inequalities.

What is particularly appalling is that these injustices and inequalities are produced, reproduced, and normalized by prominent social structures, including political, legal, educational, and even cultural institutions. Violence, injustice, and inequality in South Africa, motivated by gender binarism, must be challenged and eradicated to improve the lived experiences of transgender women in sociocultural and political life. By doing this, the research paper also seeks to foster equitable societies where individuals can thrive regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

# CHAPTER 3

# THEORETICAL & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

## 3.1 INTRODUCTION

According to Grant and Osanloo (2014), as cited in Ragolane (2022), a research paper's theoretical framework serves as the foundation upon which all knowledge is built. It supports the research paper's justification, problem statement, objectives, significance, and research questions. It is also the foundation for the literature review, methodologies, and analysis (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, as cited in Ragolane, 2022). This study adopts media representation, gender, and capability theories. Media representation theory helps researchers understand how media representations and misrepresentations happen. Gender theory explains why representations and misrepresentations happen, and how they are tied to dominant social norms (e.g., heteronormativity). Lastly, Sen's capability approach evaluates the 'so what?' – focusing on the implications that media representations and misrepresentations have on transgender women's inclusion in society and personal development.

### 3.1.1 Media Representation Theory

According to Faheem et al. (2024), to understand how media representation constructs cultural identities, especially gender identities, we must adopt Stuart Hall's (1997) representation theory. Stuart Hall (1997), as cited in Media Studies (2021), defines representation as techniques that cultural societies and social structures, such as the media, use to make meanings of the world around them. This process includes using language and signs to construct values and ideologies (ibid). These meanings are neither "fixed" nor "real;" however, they are created and defined by society (ibid). In this research paper, the theories will help us in our analysis of the misrepresentation of transgender women in South Africa's mainstream media, shedding light on how these misrepresentations influence societal perceptions and impact transgender women's lived experiences. For example, the study by Solomon and Kurtz-Costes (2018b) investigates how the media influences the public's perceptions of transgender women, arguing that despite the increase in media representations of transgender women, they still face discrimination in society, often caused by stereotypes and prejudice that are reinforced in and by the media. Negative representations often perpetuate harmful stereotypes and biases against transgender women, whereas positive representations foster the inclusion of transgender women in society.

Stuart Hall's (1997) representation theory demonstrates how negative or positive media representation perpetuates harmful stereotypes or acceptance of transgender people, consequently influencing societal perceptions and attitudes. Furthermore, the study by Hughto et al. (2021) explore the effect of exposure to and negative media representations of transgender identities on the mental health of transgender adults. This study associates negative media representations with loss of self-esteem, fear, sadness, internalized stigma (e.g., internalized transphobia), and delay in seeking help – i.e., often causing depression, anxiety, and PTSD. This study looks beyond the impact of media representation on societal perceptions; it also involves the importance of assessing how media representations stunt or improve the quality of life of transgender women. Hall's (1997) theory provides a lens through which we can explore and understand how media representations and misrepresentations construct transgender identities, thereby influencing societies' perceptions of these identities. Additionally, Hall's (1997) theory encourages the need to critically engage with media texts to uncover how the media constructs gender identities, including their meanings and ideologies, thereby shaping perceptions (Faheem et al. 2021).

This research paper aligns with Hall's representation theory as it evaluates the misrepresentation of transgender women in South Africa's mainstream media and their influence on societal perceptions, revealing the layers of influence that impact both individual lives and the collective progress of transgender women. In the context of this research paper, this theory helps us uncover how transgender women are represented in the media and what meanings are constructed through these representations (Cupido, 2022). By uncovering the representations, this theory enables us to identify patterns of misrepresentation – e.g., hypersexualization and sensationalism, as discussed in the findings and analysis chapter. This theory further helps us to evaluate the extent to which media representations either challenge or reinforce heteronormativity and harmful stereotypes (ibid). Lastly, this theory enables us to connect media representations to societal perceptions and policy discourses around transgender identities and rights (ibid).

### 3.1.2 Gender Theory

While some societies have often used gender and sex interchangeably, these concepts are different. Sex refers to biological constructs, including genetics, genitalia, and hormones – for example, people are either assigned female or male at birth (Arnegard et al., 2020). The concept of gender, in its broadest sense, differentiates men from women in terms of their performances of gender norms and behaviors – i.e., gender evolves and differs from one society to another

(WHO, 2021). Generally, transgender people perform and express their genders in incongruity with their assigned sex at birth (Pinto & Moleiro, 2015). Therefore, this research paper adopts this definition of transgender identities. Buttler (1999) posits that gender performativity is rooted in cultural expectations and ideologies, which determine people's roles based on whether they are male or female. As such, this creates a dialectical relationship between media representations and social or cultural values. In other words, what we consume in the media reflects our perceptions, and our perceptions reflect what we consume in the media. Butler (1999) further argues that cultural discourses (such as media representations) either empower or illegitimate gender identities because they are set within binary structures of either maleness or femaleness. Thus, there is power in performing a socially recognized and accepted gender, whereas, performing outside of the two categories of gender might be responded to with violence, backlash, social exclusion, or even poor quality of life (e.g., see studies by Müller et al. 2021; Buthelezi & Brown, 2023 on issues stunting the lives of transgender women).

This theory aligns with the study because it is a framework through which researchers critique the binary understanding of gender and evaluate how gender identities are constructed and performed within societies. The theory also allows researchers to critically engage with the framing of transgender women within cisnormative lenses in the media (see Shabalala et al., 2023 on how gender theory was used to examine the framing of transgender women in the media). The theory further helps researchers to evaluate the intersection of gender with other socioeconomic determinants, such as race and class (ibid). Lastly, the theory allows researchers to analyse issues of power and exclusion, highlighting how transgender women are often represented as the "other" in the media (ibid).

### 3.1.3 Evaluating Development Through Amartya Sen's Capability Approach

In its broadest terms, development, both as a concept and a definition, has evolved since the Second World War (Goldin, 2018). The concept now incorporates psychological, economic, and environmental determinants into development strategies to meet the social needs and well-being of people (Goldin, 2018). Since then, different scholars and development practitioners have incorporated their ideas of development into developing communities, nations, and individuals. One of these pioneers was Amartya Sen, through his capability approach. Sen's (1985, p. 10) capability approach is central to two normative factors for societal and human development – i.e., "functionings and capabilities". Functionings signify what an individual "manages to do or be," rather than their income or possessions. This incorporates numerous aspects of life, such as education, nutrition, healthcare, and participating

in socio-political life without shame or lack of self-respect (Dang, 2014). Capabilities incorporate the idea of freedom and real opportunities to live and achieve the lifestyle that people have reason to value and choose (Sen, 1985; Frediani, 2010; Dang, 2014). Sen's capability approach provides us with a lens through which we can assess societal and human development, as well as human well-being beyond income and wealth (Hicks, 2002).

Moreover, Sen's capability approach aligns with this study's objective to assess how media misrepresentation impacts the broader objectives of social inclusion, equality, and development. According to Kuhumba (2018), Sen's idea of development seeks to amplify people's freedoms to live the lives they value. Misrepresenting transgender women can further marginalize them, thereby disrupting the realization of a truly inclusive South Africa where everyone has the freedom to thrive. Additionally, social exclusion can hinder or disrupt the participatory capabilities of transgender women in different socioeconomic and political sectors that drive their growth, well-being, and ultimately, social mobility. The approach also aligns with the study's quest to ascertain how media misrepresentation could impact transgender women's lived experiences in society. Dang (2014) posits that Sen's idea of "what a person manages to do or be" incorporates aspects of life such as education, nutrition, healthcare, and dignity. Therefore, misrepresenting transgender women could distort societal perceptions of transgender identities, thus exacerbating gendered inequalities, discrimination, and socioeconomic exclusion. Consequently, this could have adverse consequences on their mental health, access to health care, and could even affect their capabilities to lead a life of dignity and security.

In development, particularly the development of nations, in this case, South Africa, the approach provides us with lessons needed to assess problems and conditions of disempowered people and gender minorities, including transgender women. Transgender women are crucial socioeconomic and development participants. They contribute diverse skills and perspectives in different industries (e.g., education, software development, advocacy, and communication, as seen in *Figure 1*), thereby enhancing productivity. Including transgender women in the workforce can promote inclusive growth and decrease economic inequality. Moreover, authentic representations of transgender women in television and news articles challenge stereotypes and raise awareness, which fosters acceptance and support for their achievements. Positive media representations can raise public awareness of and support for transgender rights, which can enhance the socioeconomic standing of transgender people (McInroy & Craig, 2017). Increased media awareness legitimizes transgender identities, reducing stigmas that

hinder their full socio-economic participation (Tebbe et al., 2014). Sen (1985), as cited in Hicks (2002), advocated for all human beings to be given equal opportunities for basic capabilities. Hence, the need to challenge discrimination against gender minorities in all aspects of life. Buttler (1999, p. 2) posits that representation "seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy". Therefore, the misrepresentation of transgender women in the media could illegitimize their identities and limit their prospects in life. This research paper evaluates how perceived identities of transgender women due to media misrepresentation hinder their capabilities to participate in socio-political life, as well as the effects that this poses on the overall objectivity of social inclusion, equality, and personal development in South Africa.

In the context of this research paper, Sen's capability approach allows researchers to evaluate and analyse how media representation and misrepresentation impact personal development and equality. First, the theory provides a framework to evaluate how media misrepresentation constrains transgender women's functionings and capabilities, including participating in socioeconomic and cultural activities, accessing vital services (e.g., healthcare), or achieving psychological well-being (Reed, 2020). The theory further enables researchers to conceptualize personal development as a matter of social justice, not charity, signifying the role of social dignity, recognition, and dignity (ibid). Lastly, the theory helps researchers to connect media representation and misrepresentation to broader systematic inequalities that hinder transgender women's freedom and life chances.

# CHAPTER 4

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides the research methodology and design used in this research paper. Siliyew (2019), as cited in Ragolane (2022), posits that the research design and methodology chapter illustrates how the research findings were obtained, as outlined in the research objectives. Thus, in this chapter, the researcher discusses the process through which data was collected and interpreted, including data collection and sampling techniques and analysis methods. According to Rabothata (2014, p. 33), "without this, the research exercise is not likely to yield good results." Therefore, this chapter presents the research framework that guided the study. It begins by outlining the permission to conduct interviews for the study. A brief explanation of the research design follows this. It further examines the research methodology, including the research approach, sample, and analysis techniques. Lastly, it concludes and provides an overview of ethical considerations, including research limitations, validity, and reliability.

## 4.2 PERMISSION TO CONDUCT THE STUDY AND INTERVIEWS

The researcher submitted a letter of request to interview Activate Wits members, which was received and signed by the organization's secretary (see Annexure A). The researcher also requested permission to conduct interviews with transgender women and LGBTQ+ activists, and they responded with a signed consent form (see Annexure B). This research paper was also approved by the University of Witwatersrand Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management (see Annexure C).

## 4.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

A research design refers to a plan for a study, outlining the framework for data collection and analysis (Leedy, 2001). This plan selects the subjects or participants, research site, and data collection techniques to answer the research questions (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2001, as cited in Creswell, 2014). This ensures that the study is systematically planned to reduce biases, produce consistent results over repeated applications, and enhance the validity and reliability of the research (Heale & Twycross, 2015).

## 4.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research methodology describes the process and approach used to identify, collect, and analyze data in a study (Sreekumar, 2023). As established in previous chapters, several issues

stunting the lives of transgender women include media misrepresentations. This research paper evaluates media representations of transgender women in South Africa's television and newspaper media. This research focus highlights how media misrepresentations influence societal perceptions and impact the inclusion and personal development of transgender women in South African societies.

### 4.4.1 Qualitative Research Methodology

This is a qualitative study. Qualitative research involves using methods such as interviews to understand participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and behaviors (Agius, 2013). This method seeks to get and understand in-depth opinions and insights of participants involved in the study (Dawson, 2006). Engaging in discussions or interviews with transgender women and LGBTQ+ activists and reading related textual media materials (e.g., newspapers articles), enables us to understand "why people behave the way they do; how people are affected by events, how attitudes and opinions are formed; how and why cultures and practices have developed in the way they have" (Agius, 2013, p. 204). Therefore, through this method, the researcher was able to gain an in-depth understanding of how media representations, particularly misrepresenting transgender women, impact their experiences in society, including the implications this has on the broader inclusion and personal development of marginalized communities. This method was crucial to understanding the "how," "why," and "what" of the phenomenon studied - i.e., how are transgender women represented? What are the misrepresentations? Why is this the case? And what are the implications of these representations and misrepresentations?

### 4.4.2 Research Approach

This study is theory-based and of qualitative composition. According to Hassan (2024), qualitative research methods are useful in collecting non-numerical data to explore meanings of media texts or trends, understand the lived experiences of individuals (e.g., transgender women's experiences in socio-political life), or gain insights into intersecting social issues (e.g., gender, representation, culture, identity, performativity, and inequality). While this research could have adopted other methods, such as quantitative methods, the researcher understands that there is a range of ways to make sense of certain phenomena and the world around us from the perspectives of the participants rather than those of the researcher. Whereas in quantitative research, researchers anticipate what they will discover in their study (Loisello et al., 2004, as cited in Klopper, 2008). A qualitative research approach is also crucial in this study because the researcher seeks to understand human experiences, behaviors, and social phenomena, and

these cannot be fully understood through quantifying the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This approach is also crucial because it enables researchers to identify the nuances and complexities of phenomena that would be flattened if the study were quantified.

### 4.4.3 Sample and Sampling Technique

"A sample is a subset of the whole population which is investigated by a researcher and whose characteristics are generalised to the entire population" (Rabothata, 2014, p. 34). A sample theory guides this process, a technique that rationalizes the collection of data and sources of information (e.g., objects and people) from which insights and data are drawn (Bless & Higson-Smith, 1995, as cited in Rabothata, 2014). The study approached eight transgender women and four LGBTQ+ activists from different parts of South Africa, including Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Pretoria. Engaging directly with transgender women allows us to understand their firsthand experiences with media representations and misrepresentations. They provide insights into how media misrepresentations affect their everyday lives, including issues of employment, safety, healthcare access, and social acceptance. Additionally, engaging with transgender women disrupts reductive or harmful media stereotypes by showcasing their diverse identities, experiences, and achievements. Activists, as those on the front line of social justice movements, suggested solutions for authentic media representations to mitigate the impact of media misrepresentations on the well-being, functionings, and capabilities of transgender women. Both transgender women and LGBTQ+ activists shared insights into how media representations and misrepresentations shape societal perceptions, affect the lives of transgender women, and exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities, as well as how we can counteract the effects of the media on human well-being and personal development.

These participants were selected using a snowball technique. Snowballing is a common technique in qualitative research (Shaheen et al.,2019). This technique involves a process where a researcher approaches participants who fit the research criteria and with whom he or she is already acquainted. (Parker et al., 2019). Thereafter, these participants are asked to recommend other information-rich participants, and so on (Parker et al., 2019). However, Parker et al. (2019) also posit that the researcher stops this process once the sampling size or saturation stage has been reached. This was an appropriate technique to employ in this study because the researcher is acquainted with a member of Wits Activate, who then recommended other potential participants, and so on. The participants were recruited through emails, text messages, and a poster that was distributed on different social media platforms, including LinkedIn and Instagram (see annexure D).

The biographical information of transgender women and LGBTQ+ activists is diverse (see Tables 1 and 2 below):

### 5.2.2 Biographical Information of Transgender Women

All eight participants have knowledge or experience of media representations and/or misrepresentations. Seven of the eight transgender women consented to have their real names used in the study. Mbalenhle Ndabeni is a pseudonym because the participant is uncomfortable having her real name disclosed. The interviews were conducted on Teams between November 2024 and February 2025. The biographical background of transgender women is diverse:

**Table 1: List of Participants**

| Name and Age | Gender Identity and Pronouns | Residential Area | Occupation | Race |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Karabo 'Lexi' Mahlangu (24) | Transgender Woman (She/Her) | Mamelodi, Pretoria | Educator/Teacher | Black African |
| Abongile Quthu (22) | Trans-non-binary person (They/Them) | Stellenbosch, Cape Town | Master's Candidate and Communications Consultant | Black African |
| Pseudonym: Mbalenhle Ndabeni (23) | Transgender Woman (She/Her) | Cape Town/Johannesburg | Medical Student | Black African |
| Kgolagano Khutho (24) | Transgender Woman (She/Her) | Vereeniging | University Student and LGBTQAI+ Activist | Black African |
| Aurora Krotoa Moses (23) | Transgender Woman (She/Hers) | Stellenbosch, Cape Town | Independent Human Rights Defender and Community Leader | Coloured |
| Dee Moore (43) | Transgender Woman (She/Her) | Mowbray, Cape Town | Software Development Manager | White |
| Thabani Mabezane | Transgender Woman (She/Her) | Vaal | Queer Activist at Lebo Basadi Foundation | Black African |
| Lehlogonolo Machaba (27) | Transgender woman (She/Her) | Pretoria | Unemployed | Black African |

### 5.3.1 Biographical Information of LGBTQAI+ Activists

All four participants knew about media representations and/or misrepresentations. Three of the four activists consented to have their real names used in the study. Ntsikelelo Qamata is a pseudonym because the participant is uncomfortable having her real name disclosed. These interviews were also conducted on Teams between December 2024 and January 2025. The activists' biographical information was also diverse:

**Figure 2: List of Participants**

| Name and Age | Gender Identity and Pronouns | Residential Area | Occupation | Race |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ikageng Reagile Olifant (24) | Non-binary person (They/Them) | Soweto, Gauteng) | University Student whose activism is service-oriented, such as providing shelter to displaced LGBTQ+ individuals and healthcare services. | Black African |
| Katlego Mofokeng (19) | Non-binary Person (They/He) | Johannesburg | University student whose activism is centred around amplifying LGBTQ+ voices and visibility. | Black African |
| Pseudonym: Ntsikelelo Qamata (38) | Female (No preferred pronouns) | Johannesburg | Gender Justice Consultant and works mostly on GBV projects, curating feminist curricula, and amplifying LGBTQ+ voices. | Black African |
| Thabile Baloyi (27) | Female (She/Her) | Eastern Cape | A dietitian who works on service-oriented activism, such as healthcare services. | Black African |

### 4.4.4 Data Collection Techniques

This section involves a process in which researchers discuss all the methods or tools used to collect information from different sources to answer the research question or test hypotheses – i.e., this may include interviews and document analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This process is crucial because it ensures that the data collected is both reliable and relevant to the research, thus allowing researchers to make informed arguments and draw meaningful conclusions (ibid).

#### 4.4.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

According to Kallio et al., semi-structured interviews involve using open-ended questions in qualitative research to gain a deep understanding of participants' opinions and perspectives about the study (see annexure E, sections A & B). This method is vital in social research where researchers aim to understand experiences and context while maintaining some level of comparability across interviews (Kallio et al., 2016). The interviews were conducted via Teams and lasted between 24 and 47 minutes. The researcher carried out semi-structured interviews with transgender women to gather insights into their experiences in sociocultural life, focusing on the role of the media in this process. This approach enhances our understanding of how the intersection of media with broader systems of social inclusion and personal development affects the freedoms and rights of transgender women. Consulting with LGBTQ+ activists helps us reduce the media's impact on human well-being, personal growth, and socioeconomic inequalities related to gender identities.

#### 4.4.4.2 Textual Analysis

Researchers use this qualitative technique to interpret and evaluate written or visual media texts - to uncover hidden meanings and establish themes or patterns – thereby allowing researchers to understand how representation and language are used to construct ideologies, identities, and power dynamics (Mckee, 2001). This research paper analyses two case studies in the form of news media articles, one about Aurora Krotoa Moses and the other about Clement Hadebe (more details are provided in chapter five, section 5.4). The former was selected because it came up in one of the interviews with a participant, and the researcher was drawn to the latter because of the insurmountable social media attention it received. Both case studies are crucial to this research paper because they support some of the themes emerging from the interviews and literature, such as the misgendering and victim-blaming of transgender women in the media. This, therefore, further enhances the credibility of the study.

### 4.4.5 Data Analysis

To analyze this data, the study uses thematic and discourse analyses. Thematic analysis is a tool used to establish and analyze emerging themes or themes within data – i.e., it is flexible across different frameworks and focuses on what is said, allowing researchers to establish key themes relevant to their study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Discourse analysis, on the other hand, focuses on how language (e.g., tone, phrases, etc.) is used to communicate or construct meanings, ideologies, and social identities (Gee, 2011). According to Fairclough (1995), discourse analysis allows researchers to examine how the media influences societal perceptions, as well as how certain individuals, such as transgender women, are represented or underrepresented within dominant cultural narratives and norms. As a result, this shapes the boundaries of who is seen as legitimate, normal, prominent, or palatable, or deserving of rights (Butler, 2004). Therefore, by evaluating these ideological constructions, we can understand how societies assimilate transgender identities with distorted and harmful stereotypes, such as narratives of transgender women as victims or "tricksters." These perceptions dehumanise transgender identities and undermine their capabilities to function as human beings. Discourse analysis is particularly relevant to this study, which explores the misrepresentation of transgender women in the media and its impact on their inclusion and development. According to Van Dijk (1993), the media are not always a true reflection of our societies; rather, they actively construct and influence how societies perceive and understand transgender identities. This, as a result, helps us to uncover themes of media misrepresentation (e.g., sensationalism, tokenism, and hypersexualization). As such, exploring these themes helps researchers understand how media language and framing contribute to representations of transgender women as either legitimate social actors or as the marginalized other. Furthermore, Stryker and Whittle (2006) posit that discriminatory media representations correlate with increased stigma, socioeconomic exclusion, and violence against transgender communities. Therefore, analysing discourse helps us understand and evaluate the relationship between representation and social outcomes.

These methods also enhance our knowledge about underlying social patterns that construct transgender identities and influence societal perceptions and attitudes. They further help us establish the implications that media representations and misrepresentations have on social inclusion, personal development, and socioeconomic inequalities.

## 4.5 RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY OF THE STUDY

Ncube (2017), as cited in Ragolane (2024), asserts that researchers often face different challenges when conducting their studies, including the reliability and validity of the sources of information (e.g., literature or biased media texts). Thus, the data used in this study were guided by two frameworks – i.e., reliability and validity (Naidoo, 2017). According to Le-Compe and Goetz (1982), as cited in Brink (1993), research validity is "concerned with the truthfulness of scientific findings." Brink (1993) identifies two types of validity parameters – i.e., internal and external validity. Internal validity is concerned with the extent to which research findings represent and reflect lived experiences rather than being influenced by external factors (ibid). Thus, to ensure internal validity, this study gathered information from transgender women who have been represented and affected by the media. It also gathers information from LGBTQ+ activists who are at the forefront of social movements and initiatives aimed at mitigating the effects of the media on the lived experiences of transgender women. To further enhance this, the study uses real-life case studies, reflecting some of the insights shared by participants. External validity seeks to evaluate "the extent to which such representations and reflections of reality are legitimately applicable across groups" (Brink, 1993). Additionally, to ensure the reliability of research findings, Brink (1993) asserts that the research methods used in the study must produce the same results when applied to the same or comparable subjects. Therefore, this study followed the following standards to maintain trustworthiness, validity, and reliability:

### 4.5.1 Consistency and Accuracy

To ensure that the research findings are legitimately applicable in similar contexts, the researcher employed the same interview questionnaire across all semi-structured interviews with participants. These interviews were documented and transcribed to enhance accuracy.

### 4.5.2 Applicability and Transferability

While the researcher might not know which areas other researchers will use the research findings, the concepts, research frameworks, and all other aspects found in the study were described and justified. As a result, it allows others to apply and transfer the findings of this study.

### 4.5.3 Truth Value

To ensure that the insights and information gathered in this study are credible, the researcher verified that all participants were knowledgeable about the research topic and

objectives. All participants were given an informed consent form discussing all relevant and crucial information about the study (see Annexure B). The researcher also approached transgender women who were once represented in the media to share their experiences.

## 4.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical consideration plays a crucial role in the research process, ensuring that research is conducted with integrity and accountability toward participants and societies (Resnik, 2018). This further protects the rights and well-being of everyone involved in the study. Therefore, the following standards were employed:

- **Ethics Training:** The researcher received ethics training and a certificate from TRREE. This certificate, with other supporting documents (e.g., research proposal and consent forms/letters), were submitted to the University of Witwatersrand School of Economics and Finance Ethics Committee for approval (Protocol Number: CBUSE2277, see Annexure F).
- **Information Participation Sheet and Informed Consent:** The researcher provided all participants with a document explaining all details about the study, including the research objectives and process. All participants were informed of their choice to engage in the interviews or withdraw at any given point. Participants were given a consent form to sign, allowing the researcher to conduct, record, and use the findings in this study. Additionally, participants were ensured privacy and confidentiality, hence the use of pseudonyms in some instances.
- **Protection from harm or risks:** The researcher also understands that transgender women are a socially marginalized group and some victims of transphobia and other forms of violence because of their gender identity. As such, all participants were given a choice to choose between virtual interviews on Teams or in-person interviews, of which all chose Teams. They were informed of their right not to disclose information they did not want to or answer questions they did not wish to answer. They were also informed of the free counselling services available at the Counselling and Careers Development Unit (CCDU) – i.e., should they be triggered.

## 4.7 LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS OF THE STUDY

Media representations focus on the L and G acronyms of the LGBTQ+ community (Billard, 2016; McInroy & Craig, 2017; Ng, Chow & Yang, 2024). Therefore, despite this study's focus on media representations of transgender women, it still excludes transgender men, the B and

Q+ members of the LGBTQ+ community. It further does not illuminate harmful stereotypes perpetuated by religious, cultural, and other social structures. However, this opens a gap for future research on this topic. The qualitative methods used provide us with the tools we can use to gather detailed data needed to understand phenomena in their complexities, intersectionality, and in-depth. The methods used are also flexible – i.e., interviews were used together with case studies to enhance the credibility and generalization of findings. Thematic and discourse analysis uncover themes, nuances, and hidden meanings in data, thus fortifying the quality of the study in the field of transgender and inequality studies. Lastly, it is also important to note that the design could have encouraged respondents to foreground media in their accounts of discrimination. Instead, a more general account of what kinds of things affect their socioeconomic rights and opportunities, and within that, to see how the media emerges as the theme.

# CHAPTER 5

# PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

## 5.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the findings of the data collected during fieldwork. As stated in the methodology chapter, the data were collected through semi-structured interviews with transgender women and LGBTQ+ activists. To enhance the validity of these findings, the researcher also brings in real-life case studies in the form of newspaper articles. This chapter, therefore, reveals the findings in terms of perceptions, experiences, opinions, and ideas from selected participants who were part of the study and the interview process, as well as media texts. This chapter is structured and presented in four sections. The first section introduces the purpose of the chapter, the second section presents data from transgender women, and the third section presents data from LGBTQAI+ activists. Section four presents two case studies.

The findings are presented by interview. The researcher chose this approach because it helps preserve the complexities, nuances, and individuality of each participant (see Anderson, 2010 on the importance of preserving participants' voices). Additionally, this approach allows for contradictions and nuances between participants, which might have been faint through any other categorization (e.g., thematic). Given the nature of this research paper – focusing on gender, lived experiences, and subjectivity – it is important to preserve the voices of transgender women and LGBTQ+ activists in their individuality and context. The choice to honour each participant by presenting their voice in ways that do not disintegrate it through a more analytical discussion of common themes, but maintain their wholeness, is important to the politics of trans visibility. This approach also allows for a more holistic approach to each participant's social experiences, emotions, and thought processes. It further allows for a more constructivist epistemology, valuing the co-construction of meaning between research participants and researchers, rather than imposing pre-conceived stereotypes or analytical frames.

## 5.2 Transgender Women's Responses to Media Representations and Misrepresentations, Social Inclusion, and Personal Development

The researcher conducted individual virtual interviews on Teams with transgender women. The interviews were open-ended and were useful and informative to the study since they offered valuable information about media representations and misrepresentations, as well as their impacts on social inclusion and personal development. The interviews began with the

researcher asking participants basic biographical questions, such as who they are, their gender identity, where they come from, and what they do for a living. Karabo 'Lexi' Mahlangu, a high school teacher, shared that she identifies as female, recalling her childhood memories of wearing her mother's clothes and envisioning herself growing up as a woman. However, it was only in 2019, after being exposed to the idea of transitioning and undergoing therapy, that she started identifying herself as a transgender woman.

### 5.2.1 Karabo Lexi Mahlangu

Karabo 'Lexi' Mahlangu expressed concerns regarding the underrepresentation of transgender women in South Africa's mainstream media, stating, "There's less representation of trans women in the media." She further noted that if the press were more widespread, societies would be more accepting of transgender women, as this would prevent marginalization and discrimination. Karabo also highlighted that mainstream media platforms often misrepresent transgender women, stating that television shows fail to cast transgender women in transgender roles. Instead, they cast cisgender actors to play these characters: "They took a female, who they gave a male character that later on transitioned instead of taking a real transgender woman who is going through the journey," she said, referring to the soapie Generations. Moreover, Karabo criticized media platforms for their narrow approach to transgender representations by focusing on medical transition, such as surgery and hormone therapy, ignoring social transitioning, where some transgender women choose not to undergo medical transition but still identify and perform their gender as women. "They are dimming the light of women that transition socially," she said, noting that these transgender women are often mislabelled as feminine-presenting gay men or crossdressers. While the participant acknowledged some authenticity in transgender representations, she could only name a few examples, such as the reality show *The Way Ngingakhona* on Moja Love, which she said casts transgender women and represents their lived experiences.

Furthermore, she strongly believes that media representations shape societal perceptions and attitudes toward transgender identities. She asserts that with inaccurate media representations of transgender women, such as centering transgender identities around bottom surgeries[2], societies are likely to adopt the same narrow view. "If the media says you can only be regarded as a trans woman when you've done the bottom surgery, then society is going to

[2] According to Witten and Eyler (2012), bottom surgery refers to a surgical gender-affirming procedure to align an individual with their gender identity. These procedures vary – for transgender women, that is male-to-female, the procedure may include vaginoplasty and/or orchiectomy (removal of testicles).

say the same," she added. Additionally, she highlights how certain media representations reinforce harmful stereotypes about transgender identities being deceptive in romantic relationships. For example, she referenced a narrative from *The Bold and the Beautiful*, saying, "It seems as if trans women hide their identity to trap men into loving them before they disclose," which she argued creates prejudice and distrust against transgender women in relationships. Additionally, she observed an enormous contrast between South African and International media representations of transgender women: "Internationally, trans women are embraced fully for who they are. They are not bashed, they are not shamed, whereas in South African media platforms, transgender women are excluded and/or name-called." However, Karabo notes that she has also observed progress in the media, referencing a transgender participant in the Miss South Africa pageant, although stating that such milestones remain invisible in the media.

Karabo also shared her experiences where media misrepresentations and societal prejudice impacted her access to opportunities. She highlighted an instance at her workplace where she encountered administrative issues linked to her gender identity. After legally changing her gender marker, she was faced with resistance from management when trying to update her employment records: "They said, 'You know this is going to change a lot of things, you might go back to being temporary until everything is validated.'" Additionally, she experienced discrimination in gender-based empowerment opportunities: "There are opportunities for women, but when they learn you're a trans woman and haven't changed your genitals, they say, 'This is only for women, so you cannot get this opportunity.'" Socially, the participant expressed that she has often been faced with rejection and stigma from non-LGBTQAI+ persons in the community. She notes that upon returning home after transitioning, the community accused her of being "possessed by demons" and "a disgrace to her family." This, she said, reveals that societies are generally rooted in cultural practices and customs that resist any form of gender diversity. Furthermore, the participant also found university residential policies discriminatory and binary, stating that she was forced to reside in a male residence despite identifying as a transgender woman, recalling a residence manager asking her: "How must we place you on the girls' floor when the documents say this?" This, she argued, exemplifies a bureaucratic system that transgender and gender diverse persons face in accessing gender-affirming facilities.

Lastly, Karabo believes that accurate media representations can improve transgender women's access to opportunities for personal development, as well as their inclusion in society.

She asserts that casting transgender actors in trans roles will foster acceptance and open societies to diversity: “If you give it as raw as it is, without any edits, people get to take it in and understand what trans women go through.” She further states that “opportunities should be given because you are an individual who meets the requirements, not because of whether you are trans or cisgender.”

### 5.2.2 Abongile Quthu

Abongile Quthu stated that mainstream media platforms often present a narrow and inaccurate image of transgender women. They highlighted that the media typically cast transgender women who are in the process of surgical transition, creating a "structured view of what a trans woman should look like." They argued that a one-dimensional and linear approach to transgender representations excludes individuals who may be legally and/or socially transitioning. As such, they argued that this creates an unrealistic standard of what transness should look like and makes transgender women who do not conform to this representation feel invisible or underrepresented in the media. Abongile further highlighted that the media presents narrow narratives of transgender experiences by casting a specific type of transgender woman, consequently erasing the intersectionality and diversity of trans experiences and identities. They further criticized research and advocacy organizations for co-opting trans experiences without fully understanding their realities: "My biggest problem, specifically looking at research, is that trans women's stories are told by people who do not understand the lived experiences of trans people." The participant calls for stories about trans experiences to emerge from within the transgender community rather than through external perspectives, which often distort transgender identities and realities.

Moreover, they are concerned about the commodification and commercialization of transgender experiences in the media. They highlighted an instance where a photographer profited from featuring transgender women in their project while offering little to nothing to the trans individuals involved: "We tell our stories, and people make gains out of our stories, whereas trans people and gender-diverse persons who told those stories get nothing out of those experiences," they denounced. Additionally, they argued that the exploitation of transgender and gender-diverse people reflects a widespread issue of queer tokenization, where LGBTAI+ experiences merely serve to fulfill performative inclusivity goals without tangible and genuine support for the community. They also highlighted specific media misrepresentations, pointing to predicaments that trans athletes are often faced with in the Olympics and how narratives often frame transgender women as “not woman enough.” They further referenced Chimamanda

Ngozi Adichie, explicitly stating that transgender women should not fully claim womanhood, asserting that such rhetorics incite transphobia. They were also saddened by the language used in media reports about transgender women, noting a report that referred to a murdered transgender woman in Gauteng as "a man who turned into a woman," which they recounted as deeply harmful: "The language used within media discriminates against us, even though they tell our stories." Despite these concerns and critiques, they acknowledged that media representations are gradually improving. Lastly, they emphasized the need for trans-inclusive and intentional media representations that embrace diverse and intersectional experiences, including transgender women in rural areas, whom they deem extremely marginalized.

### 5.2.3 Mbalenhle Ndabeni

Mbalenhle echoed many of Abongile's critiques and concerns about the misrepresentation of transgender women in South Africa's mainstream media. She too condemns the media for excessively and narrowly focusing on the medical transition aspect of trans lives and experiences, casting aside their legal and social dimensions: "Transitioning is not just the medical part of it… but media representation only focuses on the medical transition, which is just part of the life of a transgender person," she said. Mbalenhle believes that by prioritizing medical surgery over legal and social aspects, the media perpetuates a misleading and often narrow image of transgender experiences. Additionally, she argued that this approach to trans representations is harmful and reinforces the stigma that all transgender people must undergo medical surgery to be legitimate. Moreover, she raised concerns over the fixation on transgender women's bodies rather than their lived experiences and identities in the media, arguing that the sexualization of transgender women is often damaging and harmful to transgender identities. "The minute you say to someone, 'Oh, I'm transgender,' the first thing they think about is the sexual organs. 'Oh, so have you done the surgery?'" she said, stressing how the sexualization of transgender identities transcends perceptions as it also affects the way other members of society interact or socialize with her. She further criticized the media for depersonalizing and dehumanizing transgender women, representing them as "a separate thing that just happens on the side" rather than as individuals who lead homes and are fully integrated into society. She asserts that this alienation exacerbates their exclusion from society. However, she has also noticed a shift in trans representations, particularly in reality shows and interviews that feature the everyday lives and experiences of transgender women. Additionally, she argued that any form of media representation is good representation, whether positive or negative, because it fosters some form of education and awareness.

Furthermore, when asked whether she thinks media representations influence societal perceptions or not, she firmly said they do: "The media is a large wealth from which we feed off." She further pointed out that what people consume in the media shapes their opinions, attitudes, and biases. Consequently, she argued that misrepresentations reinforce distorted stereotypes and create a barrier to the inclusion of transgender women in broader society. Lastly, she calls for authentic and diverse transgender representations in media. Without it, she worries that transgender women will continue to be perceived in a distorted and often dehumanizing way.

### 5.2.4 Kgolagano Khuto

When asked about how she thinks transgender women are typically represented in South Africa's mainstream media, Kgolagano expressed her discontent with the current state of media representations. She highlighted that transgender representations are confined to individuals in the entertainment industry, as such, excluding transgender women in other fields, such as academia and corporate sectors: *"*I feel like they are not really represented... the representation is really based on trans women in art, but never trans women in other fields." She further expressed her discontentment about the issue of misrepresentation, stating that the media often focuses on negative narratives of transgender experiences, such as hate crimes, rather than commending trans communities for their resilience and achievements. She also stressed the need for more authentic representations that focus on both successes and struggles, allowing societies to better understand the diverse and multidimensional experiences of trans communities.

Furthermore, talking about the impact of media misrepresentations on societal perceptions, she asserts that people consume what is depicted in the media, shaping their behaviour and attitudes toward transgender women: "Right now in the world that we are living in, we consume a lot of media… The representation that we get is what we consume, and it is what you are going to act on," she stated. Additionally, she noted that negative representations or the invisibility of transgender women in the media lead to prejudice, misconceptions, and exclusion. She was particularly concerned about the casting of cisgender people in transgender roles on *Generations*, stating that it erases transgender experiences and people from the media. Instead, she advocates for media platforms to cast transgender people because "a transgender person should see an actual trans person living the same lived experience." As such, she believes that this practice perpetuates the misrepresentation of transgender women in the media and deprives transgender women of opportunities.

Moreover, she shared her experiences of institutional challenges and exclusion. She shared how bureaucratic barriers, such as changing a gender marker[3] in legal documents, present unnecessary obstacles: "It's a long process for you to actually change your gender marker at Home Affairs and then be able to change your bank card or anything legal-related," she stated. With this bureaucratic rigidity, she argues that transgender women are prohibited from securely performing their gender in society. Despite these issues, she commends the positive shift in media representations, particularly in international media, noting that platforms such as Netflix are an example of progress because they cast transgender actors in lead roles. Additionally, she firmly said that she has yet to see progressive and evolving representations in South Africa's media.

Regarding action for change, she believes that a social movement fighting for transgender rights and authentic representations should start with transgender communities and that tangible progress can only be achieved through collective action: "If you're not going to fight for change, then we're not going to get change… It can never be one person marching around demanding change. It should be the whole transgender community." Lastly, Kgolagano implores media producers and owners to give transgender women the media coverage they deserve, arguing that they should not pick and choose, and that just because they do not understand transgender communities does not mean they cannot learn from them. She advocates for equitable opportunities and representation for all members of society, regardless of gender identity. As such, she believes that authentic, empowering, and diverse media representations foster societal acceptance and serve as an institution through which transgender women see themselves represented in ways that legitimize their identities and aspirations.

### 5.2.5 Aurora Krotoa Moses

Aurora Krotoa, when asked about media representations and misrepresentations, noted that the South African media has become more progressive and inclusive, attributing this shift to the advocacy work of activists and South Africa's evolving Constitution. However, she criticized media representations for their limited approach: "A lot of times, there's always the tragic things that are represented, like a transgender woman being murdered, something bad happening," she pointed out. Similar to what Kgolagano said, she believes that this approach to trans representations perpetuates stereotypes of trans experiences as inherently linked to

[3] A gender marker is a person's designated gender on official or legal documents; Males are represented by the letter "M," Females "F," and non-binary people "X" (Currah & Mulqueen, 2011).

tragedy rather than celebrating their diversity and achievements. Moreover, comparing local and international media, she highlighted that international media sometimes misrepresent transgender individuals, referencing an instance in a Namibian newspaper article where an activist was misgendered. To counter this issue, Aurora suggested that journalistic training is essential in shaping and fostering better media representations. Aurora also shared her experience with media representations, recalling a newspaper article in The *Sunday Times* titled '*From Being a Colored Man to African Woman.*' She found the headline disrespectful to one's identity, but also a tactic to grab people's attention. However, Aurora later found out that the journalist had initially titled the article differently, asserting that editorial decisions may have played a role in sensationalizing her journey. Despite this encounter, she appreciated positive media experiences and representations, where journalists were well-informed and trained about transgender communities and linguistics. In addition to this, she commended all the media platforms that asked for her consent concerning language choices, such as whether it was appropriate to use her dead name (which she rejected).

Furthermore, she emphasized that media misrepresentations significantly impact the inclusion and personal development of transgender women in society. She recounted how societal perceptions of transgender communities often depend on their performance to "pass" as cisgender women: "When you're not passable enough, then you are treated differently," she said. She noted an obvious change in societal attitudes and behaviors after she began her gender-affirming healthcare journey. Additionally, she stated that before her hormone therapy replacement, people would bluntly call her a "weirdo." However, since she appeared more feminine, they treated her like a woman – and that was only until they found out she was transgender; "then, they acted awkward again." Aurora also highlighted how negative media representations, or the lack thereof, affect job opportunities, arguing that authentic media representations of transgender women would "make jobs available and inclusive, transgender people will be seen as normal." She believes that increased and better media representations would disrupt misconceptions and distorted stereotypes, fostering broader acceptance.

Aurora further discussed systematic barriers faced by transgender women and communities at large, such as accessing healthcare and legal recognition. She condemned the bureaucracy transgender people encounter when changing their gender marker, stating that the South African legal system requires transgender people to obtain two letters from a doctor to validate and/or legitimize their identity. Her concerns are, what happens when you do not have money to consult a doctor? Why should transgender people have to prove their identity? Therefore,

she emphasized the importance of forming coalitions between media producers, activists, and government institutions to ensure transgender voices are visible in the media and in institutions of decision-making: "There needs to be seats for transgender people…" Lastly, she signified her desire for media representations to transcend stereotypes and biases and explore the everyday realities of transgender people. She believes that both documentaries and biographical films could counteract harmful stereotypes and educate the broader public.

### 5.2.6 Dee Moore

Dee Moore also shared her insights on trans media representations and misrepresentations, as well as their implications for personal development and social inclusion. Similarly, Dee has observed tremendous shifts in trans representations in the media over time, reminiscing about her lived experiences of battling with her gender identity. She reflected on her first exposure to transgender media representations in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, where a transgender character was mocked: "He has sex with a transgender woman and then finds out she's transgender, and then his reaction is 'Oh, she's a man,' and then vomiting." This, she argued, perpetuates harmful societal perceptions of transgender people. While commending media progress, Dee posits that media representations remain harmful, often sensationalizing and stereotyping transgender experiences. She referenced shows such as *Pose* and *Transparent*, arguing that while they foster greater visibility, they still frame transgender narratives within a limited range. In addition, Dee has noted how the visibility of non-binary people in the media transgresses heteronormative and rigid gender norms. Despite this progress, she signified the need for multidimensional and complex transgender representations in the media.

When asked how media representations influence various aspects of society and individuals, Dee recounted how the absence of positive representations delayed her journey: "The reason I brought up Ace Ventura is that it derailed my gender journey by 15 years. The lack of representation, that lack of being able to see anything which looked like I felt, gave me no language." She argued that many transgender people struggle with self-acceptance due to the absence of realistic and empowering media portrayals. She further contended that authentic media representations could foster social inclusion, stating how representation would have helped her figure out some things about herself. This, she emphasized, is why contemporary media representations are particularly significant for young transgender individuals. Moreover, Dee commended the South African media landscape for its progress, although it is slower compared to international platforms such as Netflix. She pointed out that the representation of transgender women in South African media remains stereotypical and limited. Additionally,

she explained that in instances where transgender actors are cast in South African shows, they are often framed within a "very camp" and "very feminine" scope – i.e., which is not always the reality, she added. She recalled a local show, but could not remember the title, which cast a transgender actor, explaining that one of her colleagues found it helpful while navigating her transition. Dee also condemned the absence of transgender men and non-binary people in local media.

Furthermore, she stated that media representations influence societal perceptions, consequently affecting the inclusion of transgender women in society. She shared experiences of discrimination, particularly in social spaces such as gyms, where access to gender-diverse facilities remains an issue: "Before I had surgery, the options for places like gyms were still quite discriminatory. I didn't have access to the ladies' room, so I just stopped going," she said. She also shared an experience in London where she was warned to avoid a supposedly queer-friendly religious space due to its trans-discriminatory stance. This, she argued, indicates how deeply entrenched misconceptions can hinder transgender people's ability to participate fully in social spaces. Similar to Karabo and Kgolagano, an issue she is concerned about is the casting of cisgender people in transgender roles. Referencing shows, *Transamerica* and *Transparent*, she commends that while these representations may have been well-intentioned, they are unrealistic. Therefore, she advocates for transgender people to be given opportunities to play transgender characters, particularly in South Africa, where many talented transgender actors remain unemployed.

### 5.2.7 Thabani Mbazane

Thabani also provided crucial insights into the misrepresentations of transgender people in South African media and their implications on trans lives and societies. As an activist working at the Lebo Basadi Foundation, which advocates for social and economic empowerment and seeks to amplify queer voices, Thabani noted that the media inaccurately and insensitively represent transgender women, reinforcing distorted stereotypes and exacerbating social exclusion. Thabani observed one key issue, highlighting that transgender representations in the media lack research and understanding of transgender identities. She further highlighted that media representations often misgender transgender women, use inappropriate language, and fail to represent authentic transgender experiences and realities. These misrepresentations, she argued, are misleading and perpetuate misinformation, thereby exacerbating discrimination and prejudice.

Thabani also observed the vast differences between international and South African media representations of transgender women. While the international media has successfully fostered accurate and inclusive representations of LGBTQI+ people, South African media appears to be catching up too slowly. In many instances, South African shows, including soap operas and advertisements, erase transgender realities or frame them in ways that conform to cis-normative and heteropatriarchal narratives. This, she argued, distorts societal perceptions and affects the lived experiences of transgender women. She noted that misrepresentations exacerbate the exclusion of transgender people from socio-economic opportunities, such as long-term employment. Moreover, she argued that the pervasiveness of negative media representations and the absence of trans visibility perpetuate stigmas and the marginalization of transgender people. As such, Thabani calls for policies that support and promote equitable societies and authentic transgender media representations, asserting that policy reforms are significant in fostering inclusive societies and holding media conglomerates accountable for authentic representations. Lastly, she calls for activists, media organizations, and policymakers to form a coalition to drive systematic change and improve the lives of transgender people in South Africa.

### 5.2.8 Lehlogonolo Machaba

Lehlogonolo also shared her experiences and insights about transgender representations in South African mainstream media, reflecting on both international and local representations and their broader implications. She emphasized the absence of transgender representations in South African mainstream media, stating, “There’s no representation in the media.” Contrasting this with international television shows, she commended *Pose* for providing more authentic representations by displaying diverse transgender realities and experiences. She praised the character Angel, played by transgender model and actor Indya Moore, as an example of transgender women thriving in spaces (modelling) traditionally reserved for heterosexual women, arguing that such representations can empower young transgender women to “feel life in a different way” and “believe in their dreams.” However, Lehlogonolo also raised her concerns about the prevalence of media misrepresentations, particularly framing transgender women within “sex worker” stereotypes. She criticized the media for sexualizing transgender women rather than representing them as people with diverse life experiences. This narrow approach to media representations, she argued, perpetuates societal misconceptions about transgender identities, thus hindering social inclusion.

When asked if media representations reflect the lived experiences of transgender women, Lehlogonolo acknowledged that while some aspects are represented, crucial aspects of transgender experiences – such as gender reassignment surgery, changing gender markers, and accessing hormone replacement therapy (HRT) – are often overlooked in the media. She further argued that representing these diverse experiences could foster the understanding and acceptance of transgender people in society. Furthermore, reflecting on the broader implications of media representations, Lehlogonolo noted that they influence societal perceptions and personal identity, recalling that the absence of trans representations in the media limited her sense of possibility as a child. However, as she grew up, she became determined to advocate for trans visibility in the media and serve as a visible role model, stating: "I'm going to be that representation that is needed in South Africa." Despite her resilience, she acknowledged the discrimination and stigmas stunting the lives of transgender women, such as the fear of disclosing their identity due to potential marginalization and sexualization.

As such, Lehlogonolo calls for media platforms to allow transgender women to tell their own stories and provide platforms where their voices can be heard. She further stated that authentic representations will not come from outside the trans community: "No one else can do it better than us because we know what it is that we experience on a daily basis," arguing that a step toward positive media representations should start within transgender communities. Lastly, Lehlogonolo believes that nuanced and positive media representations could empower transgender people and address real-life issues. For example, she argued that this shift would challenge societal misconceptions of trans identities and help societies recognize transgender people as individuals with the same rights as everyone, and that they are "not mythical creatures."

### 5.3 LGBTQAI+ Activists' Responses to Media Representations and Misrepresentations, their impacts, and solutions for change.

The researcher also conducted virtual interviews on Teams with LGBTQAI+ activists. The interviews were useful for the study since they provided us with invaluable information about media representations, their impacts, and solutions for change.

#### 5.3.1 Ikageng Reagile Olifant

Ikageng shared in-depth insights regarding media representations and misrepresentations of transgender people in South Africa. They observed that transgender women are

underrepresented in the media, and when they are represented, the narratives often lack depth or are not widely visible. They referenced Yaya Mavundla (a transgender woman, activist, and public figure) as one of the few transgender people receiving media attention. Despite this, Ikageng noted that transgender figures remain “scarce” in the media. When asked to compare and/or contrast the international and South African media, they stated that international media landscapes provide broader platforms for transgender visibility compared to the latter. This, they argued, is because South African societies still have not fully integrated gender-diverse people into everyday sociocultural experiences and dynamics: “It is still a very new wave for a lot of us," they said. Moreover, they observed that queer spaces often do not prioritize transgender representations, arguing that "It is only within very intentional queer spaces that efforts are being made." They further argued that this issue is exacerbated by the lack of proper social structures that strive to amplify trans voices, visibility, and even understanding of transgender people. Ikageng believes that media representations significantly influence societal perceptions. “Representation is essential,” they emphasized, adding that the erasure of transgender women in the media or misrepresentations perpetuate violence, social exclusion, and even discrimination. They explained that if we have a transgender character or figure represented in the media with a certain framing, it affects how every other transgender person is perceived in society. This, they added, allows other non-LGBTQAI+ members of society to perpetuate either good or bad perceptions of trans identities, and distorted perceptions often lead to “attacks or even murder.”

Furthermore, they discussed how systematic racism, poverty, and socioeconomic issues further stunt the lives of transgender people. "If you add identity as an issue, then it just feels like you’re bringing more layers of struggle," they stated, explaining how the intersection of numerous struggles or identities exacerbates the marginalization of transgender people. Additionally, they highlighted how the “scarcity mindset” hinders transgender visibility because of their reluctance to include diverse voices. Lastly, to counteract media misrepresentations, they suggested increased media inclusivity, visibility, and stronger activism – i.e., adding that having transgender people in the media is essential. They also said that having transgender people in decision-making in media conglomerates would lead to more authentic and empowering representations. "We need people to be cognizant of the fact that trans representation can be the oxygen that helps keep us alive," Ikageng concluded.

### 5.3.2 Katleho Mofokeng

Katheho provided a detailed critique of transgender representations in South Africa's mainstream media. Katleho also observed that transgender women's representations in the media are often dehumanized and sensationalized or rooted in violence. This, they argued, perpetuates harmful stereotypes and erases the diverse experiences of transgender women. Katleho referenced several problematic media representations, such as *The Way Ngingakhona* and *This Body Works for Me.* They condemned these shows for their failure to handle transgender representations sensitively. Katleho criticized *The Way Ngingakona* for sensationalizing transgender experiences, suggesting that they could showcase their agency or resilience. They also criticized *This Body Works for Me* for hypersexualizing transgender women, arguing that it limits society's understanding of their realities and diverse experiences.

When asked to compare South African and International media landscapes, they noted that international shows such as *Pose* and *Orange is the New Black* are more nuanced, while South African shows lag. Despite acknowledging that South African media platforms have made strides in including transgender stories, they, however, argued that the representations are often shallow, sensationalized, or primarily focused on trauma. Similar to Ikageng, they attributed these representations to South Africa's discomfort with gender diversity, which limits authentic storytelling.

Moreover, Katleho believes that media representations significantly influence societal perceptions and transgender women's access to opportunities. They further argued that negative representations create barriers to opportunities for employment, access to healthcare, and broader social acceptance. In addition, they argued that employers, landlords, or policymakers who have absorbed these distorted representations may consciously or unconsciously discriminate against transgender women. Similar to Abongile, Katleho noted the controversy stunting the lives of transgender people in sports. They noted that exclusionary policies against transgender people in sports are perpetuated by transphobia and misconceptions rather than scientific evidence. This exclusion, they believe, reinforces societal misconceptions that transgender women are not "real women." Like eleven other participants, Katleho observed that there has been some progress in transgender representations in the media, referencing shows such as *Pose* and *Euphoria*. However, they argued that much work remains, noting that representations remain "surface-level" or "limited to niche platforms" and reduce transgender people to "plot devices" or "punchlines." Ultimately, they argued that tangible progress needs systematic change rather than better representations by creating

societies where transgender people are visible, embraced, and protected in all structures of society.

### 5.3.3 Ntsikelelo Qamata

Ntsikelelo observed the underrepresentation and lack of authentic transgender representations in South African mainstream media. When asked why she thinks transgender women are underrepresented, Ntsikelelo said, “Trying to break through multiple barriers whilst holding a marginalized identity means by the end of the line you’re not going to be seen because transgender people aren’t in boardrooms making decisions.” This, she argued, is caused by “inequality.” Ntsikelelo also highlighted that the media implicitly represents and frames transgender experiences within a “caricature” scope, or often “conflating transgender identities with drag culture.” She further stated that she does not recall an instance where transgender women were being represented for who they are, arguing that drag culture is often confused with transgender identities. This, she added, distorts public perceptions. Ntsikelelo also criticized the media for hyper-feminizing and exaggerating transgender identities and even for failing to represent transgender women as “typical women,” adding that this is often marked as being “peculiar.” Additionally, she observed that this contrasts with transgender men’s experiences, noting that they often go unrecognized in society due to the absence of media representations and societal expectations of gender norms.

Furthermore, Ntsikelelo raised concerns regarding the problematic casting of cisgender people in transgender roles, recalling an instance where the soap opera *Generations* cast a cisgender woman as a transgender character. "To not cast trans people for trans roles, at an era where there's so much marginalization, is a problem," she criticized, questioning whether this approach in casting helps or hinders transgender visibility. However, she believes that inclusive casting could be empowering to young transgender people in society. When also asked to compare international and South African media representations, she commended *Pose* for presenting diversity within transgender communities. She further noted that the South African media lacks intentional representations. This, she argued, makes it difficult for transgender people to see themselves reflected in the media. "I haven't seen a single transgender person on television in a while," Ntsikelelo added, emphasizing the underrepresentation of transgender women in the media. Lastly, she also linked media misrepresentations to broader societal acceptance and/or exclusion, arguing that the media plays a pivotal role in shaping societal perceptions and attitudes. She also called for greater inclusion of transgender voices in society, the media, and institutions of policymaking, stating that “we need to do a bit more.”

### 5.3.4 Thabile Baloyi

Thabile echoed similar concerns and critiques regarding the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of transgender people in South African mainstream media. She observed that mainstream media outlets, including television, barely cast transgender people, and when they do, they often frame transgender characters within inaccurate contexts. Thabile identified one key problem as an underlying misconception of what it means to be transgender, causing inaccurate representations that perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Similar to Ntsikelelo, she condemned the casting of cisgender actors in transgender roles, asserting that it often leads to media misrepresentations. "If you bring somebody that is not transgender to act in a role... they need to study and understand the whole thing about transgender identity," she added, arguing that the lack of proper research and knowledge among media producers and cisgender actors perpetuates distorted representations.

Despite these issues, and similar to what Ikageng observed, she acknowledged the visibility of activist and public figure Yaya Mavundla in the media as an example of positive representation – i.e., adding that Yaya accurately represents the transgender experience in South Africa. She further highlighted that Yaya uses her social media to show her everyday lived experiences as a transgender woman, as well as the issues that she faces in society. However, she emphasized that transgender women remain underrepresented in the media, which she believes is caused by societal stigma and transgender women's discomfort with publicity. When comparing South African media to international media, Thabile noted that international platforms are more diverse, inclusive, and even open to transgender representations. On the other hand, she expressed that the South African media still faces backlash whenever they feature transgender-related stories or issues. This, she argues, limits positive representations.

Furthermore, like all the other eleven participants, she observed that media representations influence societal perceptions. In addition, she believes that media misrepresentations perpetuate misconceptions, ultimately affecting how societies view and treat transgender people. She further linked this issue to some adverse consequences that transgender women encounter, such as social exclusion and limited access to resources and opportunities. Lastly, she highlighted that systemic issues, including power dynamics in media production and ownership, as well as the lack of transgender voices in areas of decision-making that sustain media misrepresentations and hinder any efforts toward authentic representations.

### 5.4 Case Studies: Media Representation and News Media Reporting

The following section briefly discusses two case studies. The first case study published by the *Sunday Times* takes us on the personal journey and lived experience of transgender woman, Aurora Krotoa Moses. This case study highlights the social challenges that transgender people face in South Africa, such as being misgendered. It further reflects the complexity of intersecting identities, such as gender and identity. The second case study published by *MambaOnline*, *Independent Online*, *Times Live*, and *Zimoja* reports on the murder of transgender woman, Clement Hadebe. These news articles highlight the adverse consequences associated with transphobia and the lack of protection of transgender people in South Africa. These news articles further reflect the risks that transgender people face, including how public discourses about gender influence societal perceptions, behaviours, and attitudes. The articles also reveal how rigid binary norms and misrecognition exacerbate queer violence and vulnerability. Both case studies offer real-life and applicable examples of transgender women's lived experiences. They further reflect existing literature, and the data collected from interviews, such as the misgendering, victim-blaming, and victimization of transgender women:


NEWS

‘I’ve always known I was different’: The remarkable rebirth of Aurora Moses

Stellenbosch student was a coloured man, now she's an African woman

20 November 2022 - 00:00

*Figure 1: Title of Sunday Times article about transgender woman Aurora Krotoa Moses, published 20 November 2022.*

During the semi-structured interview, Aurora highlighted that she was once represented in the *Sunday Times* in an article titled, "'I've always known I was different': The remarkable rebirth of Aurora Moses. Stellenbosch student was a coloured man, now she's an African woman," (See figure 1). The article narrates her personal and social transition, highlighting how she came to understand her gender identity and the challenges she has faced, such as discrimination. It further reflects her resilience and determination to live authentically. Aurora

found the headline "disrespectful," stating that she saw this kind of media framing[4] as a tactic to grab people's attention. She further stated that the journalist had initially titled the article differently, asserting that editorial decisions may have played a role in sensationalizing her journey as a transgender woman. This, she argues, reinforces the stereotype of transgender women as "just a man, dressing up as a woman." Additionally, she problematized this kind of media framing, stating that media representations influence societal perception and the society represented. "A representation of minority groups becomes associated with the identity," she said, arguing that a representation of one becomes a representation of the entire community.

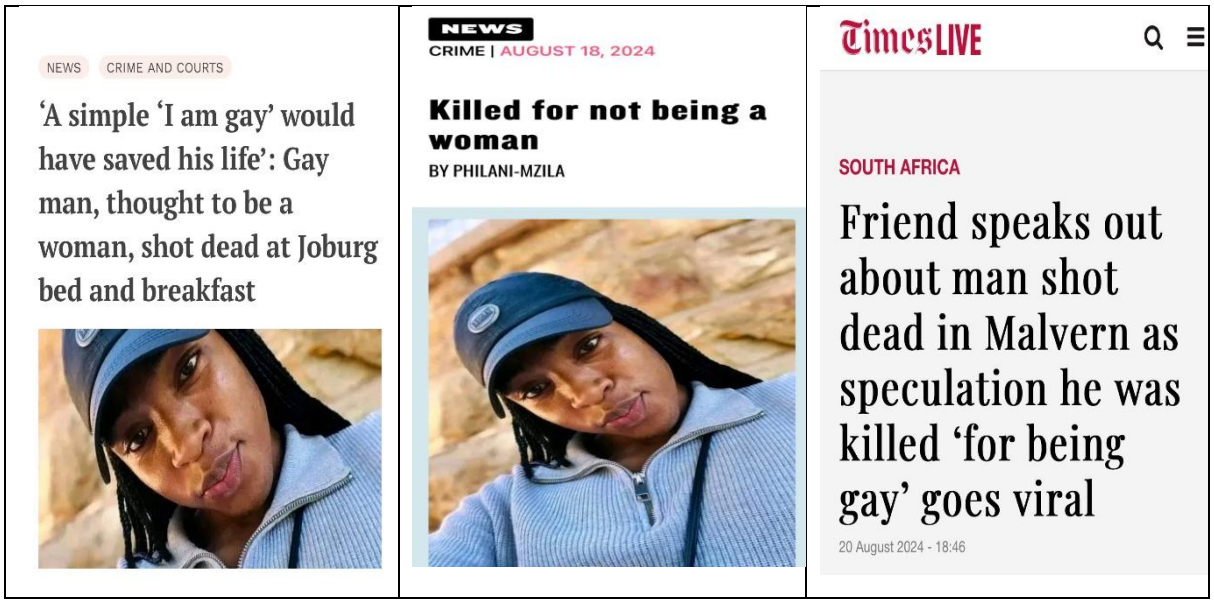



*Figure 2: Shows an Independent Online article published August 20, 2024; A ZiMoja article published August 18, 2024; and a TimesLive article published August 20, 2024 - about a murdered transgender woman, Clement Hadebe.*

The murder of Clement Hadebe, a 22-year-old transgender woman who had recently started transitioning, garnered social and news media attention, thus raising concerns regarding the violence against LGBTQAI+ people in South Africa. Clement was originally from Newcastle, KwaZulu-Natal, and had moved to Malvern in Johannesburg (De Barros, 2024). According to the 2024 *MambaOnline* article titled, 'Joburg Murder Sparks Transphobic Victim Blaming' – On the evening of August 9, 2024, Clement and friends (one friend was identified as Sasha) went out clubbing. However, one of the friends got into an altercation, leading to the group

[4] Media Framing refers to the process by which journalists use language, images, or structural choices to shape how news, issues, and/or events are represented; this process emphasizes certain aspects while omitting others, influencing public perceptions and interpretation (Entman, 1993).

spending several hours at a hospital. In the early morning hours, Clement and Sasha decided to unwind at the Broadway Pub on Jules Street. At approximately 4:45 am, after hours of socializing, Clement left the pub, telling Sasha she was going home. Shortly after that, Sasha received a call telling her that Clement had been shot. Upon arriving at the scene, Sasha noticed that Clement had suffered multiple gunshots and was unresponsive. The police and paramedics pronounced her dead at the scene.

Several media outlets, including *ZiMoja* (written by Mzila, 2024), *Independent Online* (written by Buda, 2024), and *Times Live* ( written by Mashamaite, 2024) reported on this tragic murder. First, *Independent Online* published an article titled, 'A simple 'I am gay' would have saved his life': Gay man, thought to be a woman, shot dead at Joburg bed and breakfast.' *Times Live* titled its article, "Friend speaks out about man shot dead in Malvern as speculation he was killed 'for being gay' goes viral." *ZiMoja* also released an article titled, 'Killed for not being a woman" (see figure 2 for the articles' headlines). According to the *MambaOnline* article by De Barros (2024), the OUT-LGBT Well-being organization criticized the "queerphobic victim-blaming sensationalism" in media reports about Clement's death. The organization further criticized media reports and social media comments for suggesting that Clement was "to blame" for her murder, for no other reason than that she was allegedly "deceiving" about her gender identity (De Barros, 2024). Moreover, Mpho Buntse, the Secretary-General of the Embrace Diversity Movement (EDM) organization, condemned the murder as an absurd act of violence (ibid). "The killing of Clement Hadebe is a stark example of the dangers faced by the queer community, particularly those who are marginalized and excluded," Buntse said, calling for the support and protection of the LGBTQ+ community in South Africa and appealing to authorities to ensure justice for Clement (ibid).

# CHAPTER 6

# INTERPRETATION, DISCUSSION, AND ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter critically interprets, discusses, and analyzes the findings. Data interpretation and analysis are important because they make the research study more effective and help researchers reach conclusions (Dibekulu, 2020). This process included using thematic and discourse analysis. As stated in the methodology section, these analysis methods help researchers identify recurring themes and patterns in this study of media representations and misrepresentations. Through the interviews with transgender women and LGBTQAI+ activists, we gain insights into underlying social patterns that construct transgender identities and influence societal perceptions, attitudes, and, ultimately, the development of transgender women. To enhance the validity of these findings, the researcher brings in real-life examples of media representations in the form of newspaper articles (see figures 1 and 2).

### 6.1.1 Themes and Patterns of Media Representations and Misrepresentations

Recurring themes emerging from the interviews are the stereotyping, misrepresentation, and underrepresentation of transgender identities in South African media. This speaks to the broader literature on transgender representations in the media, asserting that transgender media representations illustrate either their misrepresentation or underrepresentation (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Barker-Plummer, 2013; Jobe, 2013; Billard, 2016; McInroy & Craig, 2017; Hughto et al., 2021; Lopes, 2021; Seely, 2021; Dhiman, 2023; Faheem et al., 2024). All twelve participants observed that transgender women are invisible in the media, or when they are, they are either constrained to narrow or oversimplified representations.

#### 6.1.1.1 Media Underrepresentation and Misrepresentations

All twelve participants observed the pervasive misrepresentation and underrepresentation of transgender women in South African media. The underrepresentation of transgender women in the media speaks to what Hall (1997) refers to as “symbolic annihilation,” the exclusion and erasure of marginalized people through invisibility and distortion. The broader literature shows us that transgender women are often marginalized through media misrepresentation. For example, media representations of transgender women are framed within cis-normative and heteropatriarchal lenses, thus perpetuating their “otherness” (McInroy & Craig, 2017; Dhiman, 2023). Lehlogonolo, Ntsikelelo, Ikageng, Thabile, Kgolagano, and Karabo explicitly pointed out the minimal presence of transgender representations and stories in the media: “They are

not represented as much or as often. It is still a very new wave for a lot of us," Ikageng noted. This observation reflects the broader literature: Sloop (2000), Billard (2016), and Ciszek (2020) argued that, particularly in the news media, trans stories are underrepresented and underreported, thus excluding transgender voices in sociopolitical discourses. These media representations influence societal perceptions and attitudes toward transgender women, to which Karabo noted that "when the media says you can only be regarded as a transgender woman when you've undergone surgical transition, then society is going to think the same."

#### 6.1.1.2 Tokenism and Selective Representation

Kgolagano pointed out that trans representations often prioritize transgender women in the arts, calling for media outlets to represent transgender women in other fields, including corporate. Despite this, Ikageng and Thabile argued that the visibility of activist and transgender woman Yaya Mavundla in the media detracts from the oversimplified and linear approach. They further highlighted that her representation in the media illustrates diversity and complexity because she shares her experiences and challenges as a transgender woman living in South Africa.

According to Van Haelter et al. (2022), featuring influential transgender figures in the media, such as actress Laverne Cox, tv-personality Caitlyn Jenner, and actor Elliot Page, has helped amplify transgender voices and visibility in society. However, this was also reflected in McInroy and Craig (2017) and Ng, Chow and Yang (2024) when they argued that the media often underrepresent other LGBT+ members in favor of more prominent identities or figures – e.g., gay identities. In other instances, Billard (2016) argued that the media prioritizes the L and G acronyms of the **LG**BTQ+ community, thereby excluding and marginalizing a community that is already set on the margins. Additionally, prioritizing certain LGBTQ+ individuals over others implicitly constructs the identities of ignored members as the "other" (Rahman, 2004; McInroy & Craig, 2017). As such, the media should "represent everyone equally" (Karabo Mahlangu). The literature further shows us that there is a disproportionate focus on White transgender women, with Black transgender women insurmountably absent from media discourses (McLaren et al., 2021; Van Vliet, 2020). Such tokenism and selectivity diminish visibility and hinder the possibility of nuanced and diverse media representations. Therefore, Kholagano calls for a shift in media representations, stating, "Give everyone equal representations, let's not choose and pick."

### 6.1.1.3 Problematic Casting

Karabo, Tsikelelo, Mbalenhle, and Kgolagano firmly raised their concerns over the casting of cisgender actors in transgender roles:

> "It shows me that there is a lack of effort from the side of directors, producers, or the casting team because whatever story they are going to tell is not going to be a direct or true reflection of the lived experiences of transgender women in South Africa."

Mbalenhle noted this, criticizing the soapie *Generations* for casting a cisgender actress, Chiedza Mhende, in a transgender role. Ntsikelelo, however, commends this example as a "gender-bending"[5] move in media representations. On the other hand, she and Kgolagano also problematize this, arguing that casting cisgender people in trans roles further marginalizes an already marginalized community. Moreover, Ntsikelelo praised international shows such as *Pose*, stating that they are diverse and "they show the fullness of the community." According to Reitz (2017), Solomon and Kurtz-Costes (2018b), the casting of cisgender actors to play transgender roles reinforces the stereotype that transgender women are men pretending to be women rather than individuals embodying an authentic identity.

The casting of transgender women in the media is also characterized by tragic representations, such as hate crimes, victims, and murder stories: "A lot of times, there's always the tragic things that are represented, like a transgender woman being murdered," Aurora noted. Such media framing reduces transgender identities to a series of tragic and crisis experiences. It further reinforces the dichotomy between normative and deviant behaviour. Consequently, the media perpetuates a narrow cultural pattern that associates transgender experiences with immorality, misfortune, and victimization. According to the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (2012) catalogue, 102 television storylines with transgender actors revealed that 40% were cast as victims and 21% as villains or killers. Moreover, while the series *Orange is the New Black* (2013) has often been praised for its role in positively enhancing trans visibility, the character Sophie, played by a transgender woman, Laverne Cox, embodies a victim and criminal persona, two common roles transgender women are cast in (Reitz, 2017). Additionally,

[5] Gender-bending refers to representing and performing gender in ways that challenge, transcend, and subvert traditional gender norms and expectations by adopting behaviours normally associated with another gender – i.e., this occurs in different contexts such as identity (Shaw & Ardener, 2022).

in shows where transgender women are cast as victims, their victimization is narrated as if they are responsible for their demise, mainly because of fetishism (Billard et al., 2020).

#### 6.1.1.4 Stereotyping and Constrained Representations

Another recurring theme involves the stereotyping of transgender identities in South African media. Dee, Lehlogonolo, Mbalenhle, and Aurora revealed that transgender women are often constrained to hypersexualized representations focusing on medical transitions. Lehlogonolo added that media representations frequently frame transgender identities within "sex worker" stereotypes. Moreover, Karabo, Abongile, Kgolagano, and Mbalenhle highlighted that when transgender women are represented, the media often takes a "linear," "oversimplified," and "narrow" approach, lacking diverse and lived experiences of transgender women. Karabo and Ikageng echoed this observation, stating that trans representations in the media are one-dimensional and heavily medicalized – "we are killed," Karabo noted, emphasizing how such crucial social issues and narratives in trans representations are ignored over medical transition stories. This one-dimensional representation has long been condemned in literature: Sloop (2000) and Jobe (2013) highlight that the media often fetishize and medicalize transgender identities while ignoring the complexities of their lived experiences.

Mbalenhle criticized the media's obsession with transgender women's medical transitions, noting that by prioritizing medical surgery over legal and social aspects, the media perpetuates a deceptive and often narrow image of transgender identities. "The minute you say to someone, 'Oh, I'm transgender,' the first thing they think about is the sexual organs. 'Oh, so have you done the surgery?'" Mbalenhle highlighted, arguing that such obsessions with physical and surgical transitions rather than their lived experiences are harmful and damaging and reduce transgender Identities to "sexual objects." This, Aurora also argued, is harmful and suggests that all transgender people must undergo medical surgery to be legitimized. According to Stryker and Whittle (2006), such stereotypes have pressured transgender women into performing extreme gender-affirming surgeries. Instead of being legitimized as the women they identified to be, transgender women were perceived as a deceptive and "disturbed gender system" (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). This reinforces the stereotype that "trans women are just men in women's clothes" (Aurora Krotoa Moses). It also affects their socialization, "We do accept people like you; just do not go after the boys," Abongile noted, highlighting how she has been treated in some social spaces. This aligns with the broader literature: Sloop (2000), Jobe (2013), Denny (2014), and Billard (2019) posit that hypersexualizing transgender identities objectifies and depicts them as "tricksters" who perform their gender to seduce cisgender men. Nonetheless,

Aurora argued that an inclusive media landscape would ensure that "transgender people are perceived as just people and would be seen as normal." According to Faheem et al. (2024), nuanced and respectful transgender representations in the media could foster social acceptance, eliminate stigmas, and improve the quality of life of transgender individuals in society.

### 6.2.1 Media Framing and Language

The media texts and interviews reveal that the language and media framing used in transgender representations are powerful tools that continue to perpetuate exclusionary norms and construct social structures. A critical discourse was at play: the use of dehumanizing language in trans representations, such as misgendering, sensationalism, deadnaming[6], and victim blaming.

#### 6.2.1.1 Victim-Blaming and Sensationalism

The phrases used in several news media outlets that reported about Clement Hadebe's murder (see figure 2) - including 'A simple 'I am gay' would have saved his life,' 'Friend speaks out about man shot dead in Malvern as speculation he was killed 'for being gay' goes viral', and 'Killed for not being a woman,' – suggest that Clement's alleged "deceitful identity" caused her death. This reflects the persistent transphobic bigotry that transgender people are tricksters who attract violence (Sloop, 2000; Avalos, 2024). Consequently, such media discourses exacerbate real-world violence and the victimization of transgender people by justifying heterosexism and victim-blaming (Solomon & Kurtz-Costes, 2018). It further reinforces the stereotype of transgender women as having deceptive identities, a discourse long scrutinized in transgender media studies (see Willox, 2003 & Barker-Plummer, 2013). Such discourses reduce transgender identities to mistaken identities, thereby delegitimizing and justifying violence against them (Billard, 2016).

Aurora's case study shows us how media framing can be used to sensationalize transgender people rather than to affirm their identities. The phrase - "…Stellenbosch student was a coloured man, now she's an African woman" – suggests that transgender identities can simply be changed to one's liking rather than acknowledging that transgender women have always existed and have always been women, even before medical transitions. This resonates with what Laverne Cox said in the documentary, *Disclosure*, - "I think for a very long time, how trans

[6] Deadnaming refers to the act of using someone's birthname or pronouns associated with their assigned sex at birth, rather than their chosen name and pronouns (Koles, 2024).

people have been represented on screen have suggested that we are not real, that we are mentally ill, that we do not exist, and yet, here I am, here we are, and we have always been here" (Television Los Angeles, 2020). Furthermore, Aurora was displeased with the title of the newspaper article, highlighting that it was "disrespectful" and believes such media framing is a tactic to grab people's attention. Consequently, such media framing perpetuates the stereotype that transgender women can suddenly transform rather than seeing trans identities as lifelong and deeply personal experiences and/or realities. This aligns with the broader literature on media discourses: Schilt and Westbrook (2009) and Billard (2016) assert that transgender representations in the media are framed within lenses of deception and spectacle. As further observed in Aurora's case, the highlights of her before and after transition reinforce an essentialist understanding of identities that denies the legitimacy of transgender people (see Billard, 2019). This further aligns with typical trends of transgender representations, where stories are reduced to scenes of shock or spectacle rather than complex human experiences (Jobe, 2013; Lopes, 2021).

As broader literature on media representation suggests, such media framing (e.g., victim-blaming and sensationalism) influences societal perceptions, reinforcing discrimination and prejudice, and exacerbating the exclusion and victimization of transgender women in society (Faheem et al., 2024; Cruz, 2024). Thus, an urgent need for authentic and diverse transgender media representations that foster equitable and accepting societies rather than media representations that perpetuate harmful stereotypes and continue to be detrimental to the well-being of transgender people (Dhiman, 2023; Takenshadow, 2023).

#### 6.2.1.2 Dehumanizing Language and Dead-Naming

The interviews with Thabani and Abongile reveal the persistent use of inappropriate language, inadequate research, dead-naming, and misgendering in transgender media representations. This aligns with Barker-Plummer (2013) and Billard (2016), who argue that the news media often misname, mispronounce, and misgender transgender people. This reinforces stigmas surrounding transgender women – e.g., Karabo's employer said she would have to remain a temporary employee until her gender marker aligns with her gender identity. It also delegitimizes transgender identities (Billard, 2016). The use of phrases such as "his," "gay," "he," and "man" by *Times Live* and *Independent Online* (refer to figure 2) when referring to a transgender woman and murder victim, Clement Hadebe, misgenders her. This kind of news reporting of trans hate crimes has long been observed and condemned in trans literature. For example, following the murders of transgender-identifying victims Gwen Araujo

and Brandon Teena, media texts referred to transgender woman Araujo as a "he" and used her birthname, Edward (Barker-Plummer, 2013). Teena was referred to as "the person often called Brandon Teena" (Billard, 2016). When the media deliberately uses incorrect name conventions and pronouns, puts quotation marks around victims' chosen names, and fails to humanize transgender stories, they reinforce stereotypes that perceive transgender communities as illegitimate and artificial individuals (Billard, 2016; Seely, 2021). Billard (2016), nevertheless, argued that using correct pronouns and proper name conventions legitimizes transgender identities. Moreover, Dhiman (2023) highlights the shift in media representations, arguing that positive representations can foster the broader social acceptance and inclusion of transgender people.

### 6.3.1 Media Representations and Misrepresentations: Implications on the broader inclusion and personal development of transgender women in society.

Beyond shaping societal perceptions, media representations have implications for the socio-economic prospects and opportunities available to transgender women. The Other Foundation (2024) highlights that persistent stereotypes and sensationalised representations often distort societal perceptions and reinforce discrimination in the workplace, healthcare facilities, and education systems. Nyeck and Sheperd (2019), as cited in The Other Foundation (2024), posit that socio-economic exclusion and hostility hinder individuals from earning a living and negatively affect their overall economic growth. When the media persistently frames transgender identities as deceptive and hypersexual, these narratives influence institutional decision-making processes, such as who is deemed legitimate or professional. Therefore, representations are not an isolated social issue but intersect with economic outcomes by reinforcing exclusionary and discriminatory practices that constrain transgender women's capabilities.

#### 6.3.1.1 Impact on Perceptions and Attitudes

The misrepresentation of transgender women in South African mainstream media has profound implications for societal perceptions and behavioural outcomes, thus hindering the inclusion and personal development of transgender individuals in society. This speaks to Dhiman (2023) and Takenshadow (2023) when they argue that the media influences perceptions, attitudes, the understanding of different social issues, and the collective consciousness of societies. As Karabo, Abongile, Ikageng, Mbalenhle, and Aurora highlighted that the focus on medical transition and sensational tragedies reinforces a set of distorted stereotypes that exacerbate the marginalization and discrimination of transgender women in

everyday life. According to Solomon (2016) and Dhiman (2023), media representations are one of the few primary sources through which societies develop their understanding of marginalized communities. Cisgender people also rarely socialize with transgender people in ways that constructively disrupt transphobia, making media representations some of the few ways that cisgender people learn about and perceive transgender people (Jobe, 2013; Solomon and Kurtz-Costes). Consequently, the cumulative effect of repeated and distorted media narratives significantly impacts societal beliefs, emotions, and behaviours, often normalizing discriminatory and exclusionary practices (Genner & Süss, 2017). For example, when the news media use deadnaming language or misgender transgender women, as seen in Clement Hadebe, Brandon Teena, and Gwen Araujo murder reports, they invalidate transgender identities and indicate to society that transgender lives are not worthy of protection and respect. Such dynamics construct societies where discriminatory behaviours are condoned and expected, exacerbating structural inequalities and limiting the prospects for diverse and inclusive societies (Bracco et al., 2024). To counter the effects of media misrepresentations on societal perceptions and attitudes, Faheem et al (2024) emphasized the need for nuanced and respectful transgender representations, arguing that this shift will foster social acceptance, eliminate stigmas, and improve the quality of life of transgender persons.

#### 6.3.1.2 Impact on Lived Experiences and Well-Being

Media misrepresentations are not merely an issue of distorted portrayals; they have significant and adverse effects on the lived experiences and well-being of transgender women. The findings reveal that media representations and misrepresentations, or the lack thereof, significantly impact the lived experiences of transgender women, such as personal identity and well-being. “When I was younger, yes, it was affecting me; lack of representations limited my imagination to what it is that I can achieve,” Lehlogonolo stated, highlighting how the underrepresentation of transgender women in the media affected her prospects for growth and development. “My first exposure to the idea of transgender was in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, where he has sex with a transgender woman, and when he finds out she’s transgender… his reaction was ‘oh she is a man’ and he vomited,” Dee recounted, sharing how such representations made her bury and deny her identity from the age of thirteen until thirty-six. Lehlogonolo and Dee’s recounts reveal how the absence of empowering and positive media representations affects transgender individuals’ sense of belonging and ability to aspire, and even leaves transgender youths without a language for understanding their identities.

This phenomenon is well-noted in literature: Cook (2024) found that media representations have psychosocial effects on queer youths, arguing that positive representations foster social support and enhance self-esteem, whereas negative representations may lead to feelings of anxiety or depression among queer individuals. Media representations are influential and multifaceted, with significant effects on the development of transgender identities among the youth – i.e., negative or narrow representations perpetuate acts of discrimination and prejudice, affecting transgender youths' self-concept of gender and societal acceptance (McInroy & Craig, 2015). Moreover, Hughto et al. (2021) argued that negative media representations contributed to internalized transphobia, adversely affecting transgender women's self-esteem and mental health. In effect, media representations influence societal perceptions; they set up unrealistic standards of what it means to be transgender and pose significant and often undesirable implications on the well-being and lived experiences of transgender individuals. The psychological effects of living in a society where your identity is constantly disempowered cannot be exaggerated. In this context, media representations reflect societal biases and function as a mechanism that contributes to psychological distress among transgender communities. Therefore, Hughto et al. (2021) emphasized the need for multilevel interventions to remedy these damages, including positive representations, mental health support, and social activism efforts to fight stigmas and create supportive communities for transgender people.

#### 6.3.1.3 Broader Implications on Social, Resource, and Economic Equality

> "According to fundamental rights and freedoms, all humans are equal. Democratic constitutions are built on this premise; international diplomatic relations respect this principle, and the third estate (judiciary) is fundamentally rooted in the equality of people; therefore, inequality should not exist." (Trappel, 2019, p. 9)

However, Trappel (2019) also argues that this principle contradicts our day-to-day experiences, arguing that several factors such as gender, social and economic status, and even race continuously stunt people's fundamental rights and freedom to equality. For example, Govender (2023) posits that South Africa has some of the world's highest levels of violence, inequality, and injustice, mostly affecting women, children, and members of the LGBTQAI+ community, thereby marginalizing gender minorities and reinforcing socioeconomic inequalities. Goran Therborn distinguishes three types of interconnected inequalities: social, economic, and political. In this context of transgender media representations, each of these

inequalities manifests in ways that reinforce one another, thereby exacerbating the exclusion and marginalization of gender minorities - e.g., LGBTQAI+ people.

### (a) Social Inequalities and Capabilities

Social inequality, as identified in *The Killing Fields of Inequality*, is evident when marginalized people are denied the opportunity to participate fully in sociocultural life, including the disregard for recognizing certain groups or individuals in society (Therborn, 2013). When asked why transgender voices are faint in the media and society, Ntsikelelo said, “Trying to break through multiple barriers whilst holding a marginalized identity means by the end of the line you’re not going to be seen because transgender people aren’t in boardrooms making decisions.” In the same vein as Ntsikelelo, Ikageng said, "If you add identity as an issue, then it just feels like you’re bringing more layers of struggle." Kgolagano also expressed her discontent with selective media representations, where transgender women in the arts are prioritized over those in corporate or other sectors. Although Thabile and Ikageng praised the media visibility of public figure and transgender woman Yaya Mavundla, arguing that it fosters diverse and authentic transgender representations. Literature indicates that prioritizing prominent LGBTQAI+ individuals over other queer members further marginalizes a community already set on the margins by implicitly constructing the ignored members as the “other” (Rahman, 2004; Billard, 2016; McInroy & Craig, 2017; Ng, Chow & Yang, 2024). These findings reveal how transgender women are not fully integrated into society and how the complexity of intersecting identities, including gender and socioeconomic status, reinforces pre-existing inequalities among transgender communities. Additionally, while transgender women are generally underrepresented, there is a noticeable bias favouring White transgender women over Black transgender women (McLaren et al., 2021; van Vliet, 2020). This biased approach to trans representations stunts the lives of Black transgender women who already face “systematic racism and socioeconomic issues” (Ikageng Olifant).

Furthermore, Kgolagano expressed her discontent with media owners' and producers' failure to authentically and accurately represent transgender women, noting that media producers pick and choose what they want to show, often highlighting the struggles rather than the achievements of transgender women. Abongile criticized the commodification of transgender experiences in the media, emphasizing that people make gains out of transgender stories. In contrast, she also noted that transgender people themselves get close to nothing from the profits. This reflects a broader concern about the exploitation of transgender identities in the media, where transgender experiences are merely used for entertainment and profit without

contributing meaningfully to social inclusion and visibility (Reinke, 2016). This further speaks to Therborn (2013), who, in his work on inequality, asserts that the media are a reflection and reinforcement of social inequalities. Therborn (2013) posits that media systems are influenced by economic interests and broader power or cultural structures, often serving the interests of the elite, reinforcing class or gender inequalities while limiting diverse perspectives and marginalizing the voices of the underprivileged. Additionally, while Therborn (2013) acknowledges that the media often upholds ideological hegemony and power, he also suggests that communities can use alternative and independent media to disrupt inequalities by countering dominant discourses and amplifying marginalized voices. For example, Kusumawadani et al. (2020) argued that *YouTube*, as an alternative medium, has proven progressive in transgender representations – i.e., first, it provides transgender women with a platform through which they can create content inspired by transgender experiences and realities, and it also allows transgender women to form virtual societies where they can socialize or share their lived experiences. According to Sen (1985), social equality signifies the importance of social recognition and the ability to form relations that foster dignity and self-respect. Thus, by creating virtual relationships and communities, *YouTube* allows transgender women to actualize their identities, improve their self-esteem, and securely perform their gender (Kusumawadani et al., 2020).

As observed in discriminatory practices in university residences, negative media representations shape societal perceptions and infiltrate institutional policies. For example, Abongile shared her university residence experience, where the residence managers told her, “We do accept people like you, just do not go after the boys.” This, she believes, was caused by the “sexual notion” that sees transgender women as “sexual bodies.” In this example, social inequality is evident when Abongile’s perceived identity as a sexual object hinders her ability to engage meaningfully with society in ways that foster respect and dignity. This example further reflects what happened to LGBTQ identifying workers Katlego and Phumi, who were discriminated against because of the stereotype that genderqueer people are sexual predators and pests (IOL, 2016). This, therefore, diminishes transgender women’s social standing and hinders their ability to engage meaningfully or peacefully co-exist with other members of society. Consequently, it exacerbates the exclusion and marginalization of transgender women in society.

### (b) Economic Inequalities and Capabilities

Goran Therborn and Amartya Sen's concept of economic inequality includes disparities in life chances (functionings), such as access to education, health care, and employment opportunities (Sen, 1985; Therborn, 2013). The representation of transgender women in the media contributes to their economic marginalization. As Therborn (2013) posits, economic inequality is not merely about the unequal distribution of wealth and income; it also includes unequal access to resources that enable individuals to pursue socioeconomic opportunities, thus improving their material conditions. In our findings, we learn that transgender women are often underrepresented and framed within narrowly defined roles, such as casting cisgender actors in transgender characters. As a result, this limits their employment prospects. Katleho and Kgolagano argued that if media owners employed enough transgender producers and writers, or even cast transgender people in trans roles, we would have more authentic representations. Additionally, Kgolagano argued that this would also increase employment opportunities for transgender people. In contrast, when media producers and directors cast cisgender actors in transgender roles or characters, they hinder authentic transgender visibility and indicate to employers that transgender people are less valuable and legitimate. This fosters labour markets in which marginalized people face overt discrimination, limiting their employment prospects and leading to precarious work.

Media representations and how they shape societal perceptions have profound effects on transgender women's access to crucial socioeconomic opportunities in society. As observed by Lehlogonolo, Kgolagano, Ntsikelelo, and Thabile, transgender women are often represented as outsiders, reinforcing social narratives that portray them as the "other." This discriminatory imagery influences societal perceptions, fostering societies where transgender women are victimized, harassed, and economically excluded. Moreover, Karabo shared her workplace experience, centered on issues of gender markers and identity:

> "There are opportunities here in the workplace that are given to women because they want to empower women. When they get to learn that you are a trans woman, but you have not changed your ID to female, you are still male on the ID. Then it restricts you, it says, 'No, this is only for women. Therefore, you cannot get this opportunity – that's the impact it has on my personal development and access to equal opportunities that cisgender women have," she said.

In this instance, Karabo's gender marker and identity restrict her functionings, including accessing career development and promotion opportunities free from discrimination. In another instance, Karabo's employer, despite having documents indicating that she is in the process of changing her gender marker, said that she might lose her job or remain a temporary employee until they could validate her gender identity. According to the International Labour Organization (2016), LGBT employees often face discrimination in the workplace, such as being denied access to promotion and career development opportunities based on their gender identity or sexual orientation. As a result, transgender women's functionings are hindered, which leads to them not being able to lead productive and fulfilling lives, perpetuating cycles of economic exclusion, restricting access to career advancement opportunities for personal development, and further entrenching socioeconomic inequalities. According to Sen (1985), the lack of representations of marginalized groups hinders their freedoms to secure economic opportunities that broaden their means to pursue other valued functionings, including healthcare services.

### (c) Media Misrepresentation: Intersectionality and Socioeconomic Inequalities

In the interviews with Ikageng and Ntsikelelo, as well as Clement Hadebe's case study, we learn that systematic racism and the complexities associated with gender identity contribute to biased, exclusionary, one-dimensional, and transphobic media representations. This teaches us that transphobia and the exclusion of Black transgender women in the media are not monolithic phenomena; they are distinctly racialised and maintained through intersecting systems of marginalization that disproportionately affect Black transgender women. Crenshaw (1989) posits that intersecting and overlapping identities - such as sex, race, gender identity, and class – stunt the lives of transgender women and compound their experiences of transphobia. Thus, when media representations disregard these intersecting identities, they erase nuanced and complex experiences of transness and systematically reinforce racialised exclusion and transphobia. Additionally, Mocarski et al. (2019) posit that the media often depicts transgender identities through an urban, White, and Western lens. As a result, this framing further marginalizes Black transgender women whose performance of gender and lived experiences differ from hegemonic standards of transness.

As Therborn (2013) posits, inequality manifests in three dimensions: resource, vital, and existential. Racialised transphobia and exclusion operate across all dimensions. In terms of resources, Shabalala and Campbell (2025) posit that anti-trans stigmas, heteronormative workplace expectations, and racism contribute to high levels of unemployment and

homelessness, which disproportionately affect Black transgender women. Vitally, they face high rates of violence, victimization, and poor access to health care (see Hughto et al. 2021; Müller et al. 2021; Muwanguzi et al., 2023). Existentially, the media construct meanings and identities (see Hall, 1997). Consequently, when media representations exclude and misrepresent Black transgender women, they reflect what Therborn (2013, p. 49-50) calls "existential inequality" – "the unequal allocation of personhood" and "recognition" – i.e., "of autonomy, dignity, degrees of freedom, and rights to respect and self-development."

Moreover, when media representations frame transgender identities as one-dimensional and apolitical experiences, disregarding social and racial contexts, they implicitly align with Eurocentric standards of transness and cater to Whiteness (see Matebeni, 2011 on how representations of queerness in South Africa often reflect Western and White-centric narratives). According to Crenshaw (1991), a single-axis framework renders the lived experiences of individuals who exist at multiple axes of marginalization invisible. Therefore, for Black transgender women, this further sets them on the margins and intensifies their vulnerability to violence and hostile media representations, particularly when such representations are transphobic, caricatured, hypersexualised, and sensationalised. As such, Martino and Kuhl (2024) posit that disrupting racialised transphobia requires us to reimagine media representations in ways that also prioritize Black transgender voices and challenge the violence of erasure from an epistemological perspective.

# CHAPTER 7

# SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## 7.1 INTRODUCTION

Throughout this research, the researcher was on a quest to explore transgender representations in the media, identify media misrepresentations, and understand how they shape societal perceptions and affect the broader inclusion and personal development of transgender women in South Africa. Despite South Africa's progressive Constitution prohibiting discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation, transgender women, however, are still discriminated against, victimized, and excluded from socioeconomic activities for no other reason than that of their gender identity. It was, therefore, imperative to evaluate and challenge media representations as a site that perpetuates harmful stereotypes, reinforces social exclusion, and exacerbates inequalities.

Notwithstanding the progress and efforts that media texts have shown and made in recent years by authentically representing transgender women, the persistence of media misrepresentations, such as misgendering and sensationalizing transgender women, calls for more efforts toward fostering equitable, safe, and inclusive societies where everyone, regardless of their gender, is recognized and respected. Therefore, this chapter provides recommendations and solutions to reduce media misrepresentations. These solutions can be adopted by media producers and owners, policymakers, activists, and activist organizations to foster equitable societies.

## 7.2 RECOMMENDATIONS AND SOLUTIONS

Both transgender women and LGBTQ+ activists made several recommendations to reduce media misrepresentations and foster equitable societies:

- **Authentic and Inclusive Representations:** Participants felt there is a need for continuous efforts from the media to producers, owners, and directors for authentic and inclusive representations. They suggested that the media must represent everyone and "not choose and pick" certain individuals because "trans kids need to grow to be trans adults." As a result, this will affirm the identities of transgender youths who are often exposed to the stigma that associates transgender people with being "sick." Additionally, the participants indicated that we need to counteract media misrepresentations with reality. This could include humanizing transgender stories by showing that they, too, are human beings, children, and parents.

- **Equal Opportunities:** The participants were concerned with the casting of cisgender actors in transgender roles, arguing that societies must create diverse spaces and open opportunities for transgender women. This will help transgender women reclaim their voices, which are faint and silenced in sociocultural discourses. This will further broaden their career prospects, allowing them to acquire materials and resources to improve their socioeconomic standing and lives.
- **Education and Research:** The participants suggested that media outlets must rigorously train, sensitize, and conscientize their staff on gender issues and politics, particularly those of marginalized communities. This, they argued, could involve thorough research, language training, education, and awareness campaigns, hiring and in-housing transgender women. The education must also be extended to other members of society, including teaching them how to consume media texts in ways that disrupt stereotypes and transphobia.
- **Collaboration and Collective Activism:** The participants expressed concerns about "fragmented struggle" or division in activism. Therefore, they called for a coalition between activists, policymaking institutions, and leaders to engage in "open-minded reviews of policies." These dialogues, they believe, will push boundaries, disrupt the capitalist and racial nature of the media that perpetuates harmful stereotypes, reinforce exclusionary policies, and exacerbate inequalities. This will further result in policy efforts aimed at improving the lives of transgender women (e.g., well-being and development). Additionally, they also suggested that transgender women must be brought in within these conversations.
- **Legal protection and recognition:** This research paper further takes us on participants' experiences of legal recognition – e.g., changing gender markers. The violence experienced by transgender women (as seen in Clement's case and as discussed in the literature) is also a call for concern and needs to be addressed. To improve recognition and protection of transgender women in society, Camminga (2019) posits that we need to develop rights-based and context-sensitive legal frameworks. This approach should involve depathologizing gender identity, introducing self-identification mechanisms for legal transitions, and decolonizing recognition frameworks in ways that reflect and acknowledge indigenous gender diversity. Additionally, this approach should include the adoption of legal frameworks that protect transgender rights without co-opting transgender development, rights, and

recognition into Eurocentric assumptions or ideologies – i.e., ensuring that policies do not conform to binary gender frameworks by recognizing the unique experiences faced by gender non-conforming people.

## 7.3 CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this research paper was to understand the effects of media misrepresentations on the inclusion and personal development of transgender women in South Africa. This involved exploring how transgender women are generally represented and what the misrepresentations are. This study was also interested in understanding how these representations and misrepresentations shape or influence societal perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. It further evaluated how this affects social inclusion and personal development and exacerbates socioeconomic inequalities. In this research paper, we learn that the media are sources of information and powerful tools that shape societal perceptions, influence policies, reinforce social exclusion, and constrain development. This research paper has also indicated that while both global and South African media landscapes have proven progressive as they shift toward more authentic and inclusive representations, transgender identities remain entangled in sensationalized, stereotyped, and dehumanized images. Whether in television shows or the news media, the representation of transgender women is often framed through lenses of deviance, victimhood, and deception, which perpetuate harmful stereotypes and undermine their legitimacy and agency.

Particularly in South Africa, where the constitution protects the rights of LGBTQ+ people, media representations serve as a paradoxical site that can either foster inclusivity or be a mechanism that exacerbates exclusion and inequality. Transgender stories are often narrowed to their medical transitions rather than representing them as full social beings. Such representations obscure other issues stunting the lives of transgender women, including unemployment and limited access to healthcare services. This further creates a dichotomy between individuals who do not fit the dominant standards of class and race and the acceptable transgender or LGBTQ+ individuals. Moreover, the capitalist and racial nature of the media reproduces representations that fail to capture the diverse contexts and unique experiences of transgender people. As a result, activists argued that the lack of different perspectives and voices becomes a site where inequality manifests. Despite this, resistance is not absent. LGBTQ+ activists and alternative media (e.g., *YouTube*) have increasingly disrupted distorted and dominant narratives, often framed within heteronormative standards, by counter-representations that prioritize diverse perspectives, embrace diversity, and challenge

systematic marginalization. These efforts open an opportunity for the media to be reclaimed as an empowerment, educational, and community-building tool. Yet, for these efforts to be sustainable, societies must look beyond diversity and actively commit to policy reforms in media practices. This could include establishing fair and just hiring processes, rigorous training, and policies that seek to amplify the voices of gender minorities and marginalized communities.

Moreover, this research paper further teaches us that the media are a site where inequality manifests. By systematically serving the interests of the elite and favouring certain voices (e.g., White transgender women, public figures, or gay and urban individuals), the media further marginalizes those who do not fit the mould and reinforces power hierarchies or dynamics and hegemonic norms. Particularly in the South African media, representations are framed within broader societal stereotypes that stigmatize transgender identities or even erase them altogether. This exclusionary and capitalist nature of media representations, as well as structural inequalities in editorial control, perpetuates a binary and cisnormative framework that exacerbates transgender women's socioeconomic marginalization and reinforces the illegitimacy of their identities. Consequently, the media becomes a site where inequality is both manifested and actively produced and maintained.

In conclusion, media misrepresentations are not merely a matter of sensationalism; they are rooted in complex political issues, inequality, and structural dominance, which have adverse consequences on the lives of marginalized communities. This requires us to rethink social inclusion and development in ways that also engage with intersectionality and justice. Only then can the media foster equitable societies and liberate transgender women.

***Aluta Continua***!

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# ANNEXURES

## Annexure A: Permission letter from Activate Wits



**Office 29 DJ DU PLESSIS, Wits West Campus**
**• Mobile: +27 68 165 8771**
**• activatewits@gmail.com**
**•Twitter: activatewits**
**•Instagram: activate_wits**

23 August 2024

**Permission to Conduct Research in collaboration with Activate Wits.**

This letter serves to approve the request for access to research data and grant permission to Khanimamba Masuluke, a Master of Commerce (Inequality Studies) student at the University of the Witwatersrand, to conduct research interviews with members of Activate Wits as part of their research and study titled representation of transgender women in South Africa's television and newspaper media, thereby affecting the transgender women's capacity to participate in sociopolitical life.

Activate Wits has reviewed the research proposal, we confirm that they have provided sufficient information about their research purpose and have agreed to adhere to our data sharing agreements and protocols. We authorize the release of the requested data and are satisfied that the requester is bona fide and has a legitimate research purpose.

The researcher is granted permission to conduct semi-structured interviews with members of Activate Wits, including transgender women, gender-diverse individuals, and LGBTQ+ activists and access to data within Activates archives. It is to our knowledge and on this basis that permission is granted, that:

- interviews will be conducted either on campus or virtually, as per the participants' preference.
- All interviews will be audio recorded and stored securely.
- Participants will be informed about the nature of the research, their right to withdraw at any time, and their responses will be kept confidential.
- All interviews will be conducted with respect for the participants' privacy and well-being, and that no participants will be compensated for their involvement.

We wish Khanimamba Masuluke success in their research and are pleased to support their academic endeavours.

**Issued by approval of the Activate wits committee 2023/24**

**Enquiries**
**Phila Dhlamini**
**Secretary**
**activatewits@gmail.com**



THE YEAR OF MASS UNITY AND ACTION AGAISNT QUEERPHOBIA

| Chairperson | D. Chairperson | Secretary | D. Secretary | Treasurer | Projects Officer |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Zandile Mashaba | Nkosinathi Mtumbula | Phila Dhlamini | Ikageng Olifant | Rethabile Lebakeng | Takashi Phakathi |

## Annexure B: Informed Consent Form
## Information Participation Letter and Informed Consent Form

Research Title: **Media Misrepresentation: Evaluating Their Impact on The Inclusion and Development of Transgender Women in South Africa (Protocol Number: CBUSE2277).**

***Please read this document carefully before you sign***

Dear Respondent

I am a Master of Commerce candidate in the field of Inequality Studies at the University of Witwatersrand. I am conducting a research paper on the representation and misrepresentation of transgender women in the media to illuminate how media misrepresentations influence societal perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. It further evaluates how these misrepresentations affect transgender women's capacities to participate in sociocultural and economic life. In doing so, the study also aims to deliberate and establish solutions on how we can mitigate the effects on human well-being, social inclusion, and inequalities that exist within gender identities. I therefore invite you to engage in semi-structured interviews on Teams. The duration of these interviews will last for an hour or less. With your permission, I would like to audio record the interviews, which will be privately stored and used in my master's research paper.

If you agree to participate in this research study, it should be because you want to volunteer, meaning that you will not be compensated. You should also be aware that you may withdraw your participation from this study. You have the freedom not to answer any questions you do not want to. This study does not pose any risks other than those that happen in everyday life. However, if some of the questions asked make you uncomfortable, I will stop the interview and continue another time. Additionally, should you be triggered or experience trauma during or after the interviews, you may seek professional help at the Counselling Careers and Development Unit (CCDU). Please also note that counselling sessions are free, and the unit accepts walk-ins from Monday to Friday. Alternatively, the counselling sessions can be conducted virtually.

**Participants' Consent:**

I, _____, agree to participate in this research study.

| **Consent to be interviewed by** Khanimamba Masuluke | **Please initial each box to indicate consent** |
|---|---|

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. I confirm that the study has been explained to me. I understand the subject of the study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions that have been answered to my satisfaction. | |
| 2. I understand that my answers will be used in a master's dissertation. | |
| 3. I understand that I will remain anonymous, unless stated otherwise. | |
| 4. I consent to be audio recorded. | |
| 5. I understand that I am voluntarily participating in this study and that I am free to withdraw from the research study. | |

Signature_____(Participant)_____(date)

Signature_____(Researcher)_____(date)

If you have any questions during or after the research study, please contact my supervisor or me at the details listed below.

Sincerely,

Khanimamba Masuluke (Researcher)

2616230@students.wits.ac.za | 072 053 7525.

Dr. David Francis (PhD) – (Supervisor)

David.francis@wits.ac.za | 011 717 4426.

## Annexure C: Approval from the University of Witwatersrand Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND JOHANNESBURG

Private Bag 3 Wits, 2050
Fax:
Tel:

Reference: Mr Tshepo Mohlakoane
E-mail: Tshepo.mohlakoane@wits.ac.za

21 February 2025
Person No: 2616230
TAA

Mr K Masuluke
house 16C
MALAMULELE
Malamulele
0982
South Africa

Dear Mr Khanimamba Masuluke

**Master of Commerce: Change of title of research**

I am pleased to inform you that the following change in the title of your Research Report for the degree of **Master of Commerce** has been approved:

| | |
|---|---|
| From: | **The misrepresentation of Transgender Women in South Africa¿s Mainstream Media as a Barrier to Their Social Inclusion and Progressive Development** |
| To: | **Media Misrepresentations: Evaluating Their Impact on the Inclusion and Development of Transgender Women in South Africa** |

Yours sincerely

Mrs Marike Bosman
Faculty Registrar
Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management

## Annexure D: Research Poster used to recruit participants on LinkedIn and Instagram

WITS UNIVERSITY

# LOOKING FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

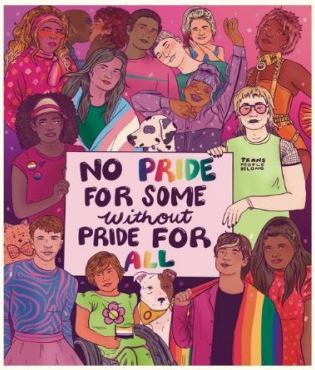


**Are you a transgender woman or LGBTQ+ activist? and have insights on transgender representations in South African media? I am evaluating the impact of media misrepresentations on the inclusion and development of transgender women in South Africa.**

## WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?



- **Transgender Women/LGBTQ+ activists aged 21+ years.**
- **Individuals with experience or knowledge about media representations in SA.**
- **Individuals advocating for transgender/queer rights/inclusion/development.**
- **Individuals Currently Living in South Africa.**




## WHAT'S INVOLVED?

- **In-person/virtual interviews to share your thoughts and experiences. Your insights will contribute to a master's mini-research project aimed at fostering authentic media representations, inclusion, and development of transgender women.**

**To participate, please Contact Researcher: Khanimamba Masuluke**
**Email: khaniemasuluke@gmail.com**
**WhatsApp/Calls - 072 053 7525.**

THANK YOU

## Annexure E: Interview Questions

### Section A: Semi-Structured Interviews with Transgender Women

Kindly provide the following details for biographical purposes:

Name and Surname :…….

Gender Identity :…….....

Preferred Pronouns :…….

Age :…….

Occupation :…….

Residential Area :…….

1. Can you please share how you feel transgender women are generally represented in the media? Are transgender women misrepresented? And if so, how?
   ……
   ……
2. Do you know any examples of media misrepresentation or good representations?
   ……
   ……
3. In your opinion, do you think these representations affect attitudes, behaviours, and societal perceptions? How? Why not?
   ……
   ……
4. In your opinion, how different are media representations from your reality and lived experiences?
   ……
   ……
5. What differences have you noticed between how transgender women are represented in South African media compared to international media?
   ……
   ……
6. Can you think of an occasion where media misrepresentations have influenced your access to opportunities, social inclusion, and personal development?
   ……
   ……
7. Do you think authentic media representations could improve the lives of transgender women in South Africa? Why or why not?
   ……
8. Does the lack or underrepresentation of transgender identities in the media influence your sense of belonging and Identity? And how?
   ……
   ……

9. Have you observed any shift toward authentic and positive media representations in recent years? If so, what are your views on these changes?
   ……
   ……
10. What do you think needs to change in the media to better represent transgender women?
   ……
   ……
11. Who do you think can play a role in promoting authentic media representation and fostering the inclusion of transgender women in society?
   ……
   ……
12. Can you kindly share any closing remarks about media representations and misrepresentations of transgender women in South Africa?

**Thank you!**

## Section B: Semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ+ activists

Kindly provide the following details for biographical purposes:

Name and Surname :…….

Gender Identity :…….....

Preferred Pronouns :…….

Age :…….

Occupation :…….

Residential Area :…….

1. Can you please share how you feel transgender women are generally represented in the media? Are transgender women misrepresented? And if so, how?
   ……
   ……
2. Do you know any examples of media misrepresentation or good representations?
   ……
   ……
3. In your opinion, do you think these representations affect attitudes, behaviours, and societal perceptions? How? Why not?
   ……
   ……
4. What differences have you noticed between how transgender women are represented in South African media compared to international media?

……
……

5. Have you observed any shift toward authentic and positive media representations in recent years? If so, what are your views on these changes?

……
……

6. Are there televisions, magazines, and/or newspapers that you think are doing a great job of representing transgender women? What makes them unique?

……
……

7. What structural and/or systematic issues within South African societies and the media do you think exacerbate socioeconomic inequality and contribute to the misrepresentation of transgender women?

……
……

8. Do you think transgender voices are faint in the media? If so, why do you think this is the case?

……
……

9. What do you think needs to change in the media to better represent transgender women?

……
……

13. Who do you think can play a role in promoting authentic media representation and fostering the inclusion of transgender women in society?

……
……

14. What solutions do you think can be taken to improve transgender representations in the media?

……
……

15. As an activist, have you or the organization you work with/for been involved in any initiatives or efforts to address transgender misrepresentations in the media? If so, what have been some of the challenges or successes?

……
……

16. In closing, how do you envision and more inclusive, diverse, and progressive media landscape in South Africa? And what are your hopes for the role of media outlets in improving the lives of transgender women, such as fostering their inclusion in society and development? And kindly share any closing remarks.

……..
……..

**Thank you!**

## Annexure F: Ethics Clearance Certificate

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

**SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND FINANCE ETHICS COMMITTEE**
**CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)**

| | |
|---|---|
| **CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE** | **PROTOCOL NUMBER: CBUSE2277** |
| **PROJECT TITLE** | Media Misrepresentations: Evaluating Their Impact on the Inclusion and Development of Transgender Women in South Africa. |
| **INVESTIGATOR** | Mr Khanimamba Masuluke |
| **SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR** | School of Economics and Finance |
| **DATE CONSIDERED** | 26 August 2024 |
| **DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE** | Approved Unconditionally |
| **RISK LEVEL** | Low Risk |
| **EXPIRY DATE** | 31 December 2027 |

**ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE** 26 August 2024 **CHAIRPERSON** _____
(Dr Sibulele Nkunzi)

cc: Supervisor: Dr. David Francis

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**DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR**

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I/we fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure be contemplated from the research procedure as approved, I/we undertake to submit an amendment of the protocol to the Committee.

K Masuluke
**Signature**

**Date** 30 / 06 / 2025

**PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES**