Uncomfortable encounters

van Lisdonk, J.T.A.

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Chapter 3

Labeling Same-Sex Sexuality in a Tolerant Society that Values Normality: The Dutch Case[1]

Abstract

Studies have pointed to a trend in Western societies toward the normalization of homosexuality and emerging 'post-gayness' among young people, who no longer consider their sexual identity meaningful in defining themselves. This article takes a closer look at the Dutch case where tolerance is regarded as a national virtue, while society remains heteronormative. In 38 interviews with Dutch same-sex attracted young people we investigated the labels they used to describe their sexual orientation to reveal what they can tell us about normalization, tolerance, and heteronormativity. In their labeling strategies participants de-emphasized their sexual identity, othered, and reinforced the hetero/homo binary. They preferred labels without connotations to gender expression. While post-gay rhetoric was ideologically appealing, its use was not an outcome of their sexual orientation having become insignificant; it rather enabled them to produce normality. We discuss the findings against the backdrop of *Dutch tolerance*, which rests upon an ideology of normality.

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In recent decades, many Western European countries and parts of the United States have undergone a transformation from predominantly homophobic societies into societies with an increasing tolerance for homosexuality (Flores 2014; Kuyper et al. 2013). Several scholars have noted that increased legal and social acceptance has led to a trend toward homosexuality becoming normalized (Richardson & Monro 2012; Seidman et al. 1999). Normalization refers to 'processes of social acceptance, so that LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) people are not seen as any different from anyone else' (Richardson & Monro 2012: p. 1). Thus, same-sex attracted (SSA) people feel part of mainstream society due to this process of normalization.

Scholars have explored the impact normalization has on the sexual identity of SSA people (Nash 2013; Savin-Williams 2005; Seidman et al. 1999). They argue that youth who grow up in a gay-friendly environment may be less inclined to use conventional labels, such as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Cohler & Hammack 2007; Savin-Williams 2005; Seidman et al. 1999). Instead, it is becoming more common for SSA youth to not label their sexual orientation by describing who they like or fall in love with, or by stating that they have a boyfriend or a girlfriend. These scholars also noted that these young people are more likely to perceive themselves as questioning[2], use multiple labels, adopt unconventional labels (such as queer) or alternative labels that provide space for flexibility and change like bi-curious or, pansexual (Diamond 2008; Savin-Williams 2005).

Several studies observed the use of the category 'post-gay' by American and Canadian SSA young people (Ghaziani 2011; Nash 2013; Savin-Williams 2005). In his seminal work on the 'new gay teenager,' Savin-Williams states how 'new gay teenagers' or 'post-gay teenagers' 'are increasingly redefining, reinterpreting , and renegotiating their sexuality such that possessing a gay, lesbian or bisexual identity is practically meaningless' (2005: p. 1). In a post-gay society, sexuality is still important in people's lives, but their sexual orientation does not define who they are. Therefore, claiming a sexual identity by labeling one's sexual orientation is no longer meaningful.

Post-gayness is characterized by two processes, namely the normalization of same-sex sexuality in society, and the recognition that the multiplicity of sexuality experiences goes beyond sexual orientation (Cohler & Hammack 2007; Ghaziani 2011; Nash 2013; Savin-Williams 2005). Labeling one's sexual orientation unnecessarily marks SSA people's difference from other-sex attracted peers, which may have the undesirable effect of creating distance between themselves and others in mainstream society.

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[2] 'Questioning' is used to express not knowing or not being certain about one's sexual orientation, or is used as a sexual label to openly refuse to conform to fixed sexual categories.

In addition, sexual orientation as an identity marker becomes rather meaningless when diversity in sexuality experiences are recognized, regardless of people's sexual orientation (Diamond 2008; Savin-Williams 2005; Seidman et al. 1999). We understand diversity as recognizing differences in identity and experiences, 'which are themselves diversified through their complex intersections' (Richardson & Monro 2012: p. 174). When applied to sexual diversity, we may wonder what unites a young queer-identifying man who lives a cosmopolitan life and prefers casual sex with men, with a same-sex female monogamous married couple living with their children in the suburbs? In a post-gay perspective, the heterogeneity of non-heterosexual and heterosexual people in experiencing their sexuality as well as the possible similarities shared between them, makes sexual orientation as an identity marker rather insignificant.

While normalization and post-gayness go hand in hand (Ghaziani 2011; Nash 2013), it is important not to conflate them. Normalization can be a pre-condition for post-gayness. However, normalization can produce other social outcomes. For example, the acceptance of same-sex sexuality as normal may ultimately facilitate SSA people to blend in or assimilate in mainstream society. Normalization enables SSA individuals not to stand out in a heteronormative society and thus, in this case, it does not reflect post-gayness as described above, because in a post-gay society normalization would be an outcome of the recognition of diversity – the multiplicity of sexual experiences. In the Dutch case normalization does not question heteronormativity, heterosexuality remains the norm which is assumed, expected and naturalized.

Through studying sexual labeling of Dutch SSA young people, we aim to explore what this tells us about labeling strategies and in turn, what this reveals about normalization, heteronormativity, and giving meaning to their sexual identity.

The Dutch case: The relevance of tolerance

In the Netherlands, tolerance of homosexuality is considered to be a general societal norm and could be considered a 'national virtue' (Buijs et al. 2011, Ghorashi 2010; Hekma 2011; Keuzenkamp & Bos 2007). In the last decades, Dutch tolerance has contributed to the Netherlands' reputation of being liberal and pragmatic concerning political and legal solutions in tolerating traditionally sensitive practices such as homosexuality, abortion, the consumption of soft drugs, euthanasia, and sex work (Hekma 2011; Mepschen et al. 2010). It has been well documented how the specificity of Dutch tolerance should be contextualized in a historical process of large-scale secularization, the Dutch sexual revolution in the 1960s, which led to more progressive norms of sexuality and morality, and the consensual decision making style of Dutch authorities/politicians (Davis & Nencel 2011; Keuzenkamp & Bos 2007: Mepschen et al. 2010).

Most Dutch people are proud that their country is one of the world's frontrunners regarding legislative equality and social acceptance of homosexuality (Hekma 2011). This high level of tolerance is also reflected in attitudinal studies. A national survey revealed that only 7 percent of the Dutch adult population report a negative attitude toward homosexuality (Kuyper 2016). Hypothetically speaking, such a tolerant climate could provide the right conditions for the normalization of same-sex sexuality to be interpreted as an expression of post-gay rhetoric.

However, tolerance is complex, since it embodies the paradoxical nature of tolerating people or a phenomenon one dislikes, rejects, or disagrees with to overcome important differences and promote harmony (Oberdiek 2001; Vogt 1997). Tolerance has limitations and this becomes apparent when expressions of same-sex sexuality are visible or explicit in mainstream society. Equal rights support for lesbian and gay people is high, yet a substantial proportion of the Dutch population (31%) does not approve of adoption rights for gay couples (Kuyper 2016). Public expressions of intimacy between two men are more often met with discomfort or objection compared to straight couples: In the Dutch population, 32% perceive two men kissing in public to be offensive and 23% is less comfortable with a man and woman walking hand in hand compared to two men (Kuyper 2016). Thus, the Netherlands could be described as a society which nationally values the tolerance of homosexuality, but its heteronormative nature remains intact.

In this context of Dutch tolerance, we explored how and why Dutch SSA young people labeled their sexual orientation the way they did, and what their labeling processes reveal about normalization, tolerance and heteronormativity.

Labeling same-sex sexuality

We analyzed SSA young people's view of their same-sex sexuality and their position in Dutch tolerant society through the lens of sexual labeling and the motivations underlying them. Sexual labeling can be defined as the words or names people use to refer to their sexual orientation. Studying the use or non-use of sexual labels and their motivations is insightful, because 'each label carries different meanings' with 'a different set of expectations' (Verkuyten 2005: p. 66). The complexity of labeling sexual orientation has been widely acknowledged and discussed within various disciplines and theoretical perspectives (e.g. Blackwood & Wieringa 1999; Goffman 1963; Herdt 1997; Jenkins 2008; Verkuyten 2005; Weeks 1999).

Motivations for sexual labeling vary across places and times and meanings are historically and culturally embedded (Jenkins 2008). During the Dutch early homophile and gay liberation eras in the sixties and seventies, sexual identity was considered highly political and radical labels such as *flikker* (faggot / poof), *nicht*

(sissy / queen), *pot* (dyke) were more common to be used as sobriquet (Duyvendak et al. 2006; Keuzenkamp & Bos 2007). For decades, using the label 'homosexual' or 'lesbian' was a powerful way to identify with and participate in Western gay and lesbian communities. Labeling created opportunities to meet each other, and to organize political mobilization to strive for more visibility, legal rights, and equality (Cohler & Hammack 2007; Ghaziani 2011; Howard 2000; Nash 2013). There is, however, a drawback to labeling one's non-heterosexual orientation and claiming a sexual identity: one is supposed to identify with a sexual category that underscores a minority or stigmatized position (Coleman-Fountain 2014; Hegna 2007; Howard 2000). Hence in a heteronormative society, labeling a non-heterosexual orientation can be perceived as a stigmatizing experience. In contrast, in a post-gay society, labeling sexual orientation has become fairly meaningless.

To date, large-scale survey evidence regarding post-gay labeling by young Western SSA people has not been empirically convincing. In two American studies, based on incidence rates of the use of sexual labels, researchers concluded that American youth are not post-gay (Glover, Galliher, & Lamere 2009; Russell, Clarke, & Clary 2009). Although non-labeling (not using a label) and unconventional labeling (e.g. queer, dyke, sissy) occurred among SSA youth, most American teenagers still used conventional labels like lesbian, gay, and bisexual to describe their same-sex orientation. If the absence of conventional labeling is an indicator of post-gayness, does the high incidence rates of conventional labeling in the Netherlands (Kuyper 2015a; Van Lisdonk & Van Bergen 2010a) suggest the opposite, - a lack or absence of post-gayness in these countries?

We are wary to draw such a conclusion, since we question whether non-labeling or unconventional labeling should be interpreted as an indicator of 'being post-gay.' After all, these survey studies do not provide insight into what is the motivation to use a certain label. Accordingly, it is impossible to determine whether the occurrence of non-labeling and unconventional labeling is an outcome of post-gayness. Perhaps there are other viable explanations for the use of unconventional and non-labeling. Or maybe the use of conventional labels is not in conflict with post-gayness. Hence, it is important to contextualize labeling as to what the labels mean for specific groups of people in particular contexts

While the phenomenon 'post-gay' young people has received growing attention in academia (Cohler & Hammack 2007; Farquhar 2000; Ghaziani 2011; Nash 2013; Russell et al. 2009; Savin-Williams 2005), studies concluding that post-gayness exists have focussed on cosmopolitan American and Canadian cities (e.g. Ghaziani 2011; Nash 2013; Savin-Williams 2005). Scholars in the UK and Australia were more reticent to come to similar conclusions (Farquhar 2000; Willis 2012). Furthermore, several

scholars question whether post-gayness is class-related and limited to socially privileged subgroups such as higher educated, middle or upper class, (sub)urban, young, White people living in tolerant, liberal environments (Cohler & Hammack 2007; Ghaziani 2011; Nash 2013).

In this study, we go beyond ascertaining the prevalence of non-conventional labeling in Dutch society. We analyse the labeling processes and labeling strategies in order to discuss what this means in relation to normalization, tolerance, and heteronormativity.

Method

Study design and recruitment
The study focused on Dutch SSA people between the ages of 18 and 26 years, with an average of 23 years. This article is based on 38 qualitative in-depth interviews. The interviews were carried out in the second phase of a mixed methods research project, following a quantitative web-based survey. For this survey we used multiple online and offline recruitment techniques to minimize the expected shortcomings of convenience sampling (i.e. representativeness, selective non-response). All recruitment materials were addressed to "young men who feel attracted, or also feel attracted, to men" and "young women who feel attracted, or also feel attracted, to women." Labels such as homosexual, lesbian, gay, and bisexual were avoided. After quantitative data collection (*N*=1,636), participants were purposefully selected for in-depth interviews. Data collection took place from October 2010 until March 2011. On an average the interviews took 135 minutes; none were shorter than 50 minutes. We strove to achieve maximal variation in the qualitative sample on the basis of gender, age, place of residence (rural and urban), geographically spread throughout the country, and the labels they used to refer to their sexual orientation in the survey.

Topics and data analysis
The interviews were semi-structured, using a topic list. The list included topics concerning various dimensions of sexual orientation experiences -attraction, sexual encounters, relationships-, sexual orientation labeling in predominantly heterosexual and non-heterosexual contexts, motivation for the choice of the labels, associations with different labels, gender expression, relations with heterosexual and SSA peers, coming out, and stigma experiences.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Meta-themes for further analysis were identified based on the major topics that emerged from the initial analysis of the first 20 transcripts, as well as the researcher's logbook of the qualitative data collection

phase. These meta-themes were used to develop a first version of a codebook. All transcripts were subsequently fine coded and analyzed in Atlas.ti (version 6.2), using the a priori codebook, which was further developed by inductive coding (i.e., developing new codes). The writing of memos during the coding process was conducive to generating and promoting transparency in interpreting findings (Friese 2012). This process of fine coding was followed by axial coding, in which codes were combined and analyzed to find patterns. Axial coding is a concept used in Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory (1990) that describes the process of 'specifying a category' (Ezzy 2002: p. 91), in other words a way to generate subthemes.

Three aspects regarding the process of labeling were analyzed. First, we examined the labels used to describe their sexual orientation. Second, we explored the motivations for their chosen labels. To complete the picture, we also examined the associations they gave to labels they did not use. Third, we looked for strategies which can be found in their labeling processes. Since sexual labels and the meanings attached to them are assumed to be different for women and men, gender differences were also taken into account.

Participants

The study sample consisted of 19 young men and 19 young women. 21 were enrolled in school, 19 worked, 2 were unemployed, and 1 was chronically ill. The majority (27) was enrolled in or had completed higher education, 9 were enrolled in or had completed vocational education, and two were enrolled in secondary school. Nine participants lived with their parents. Six had a migrant background, with one or both parents being of non-Dutch descent. Fourteen had a religious upbringing (all Christian) and four considered themselves to be religious (three Christian, one Buddhist).

Coming out process

To contextualize their labeling processes we first present an overall picture of the coming out process of the Dutch SSA young people, their steps toward more openness about their same-sex sexuality and people's reactions to their coming out. All the participants shared the experience of being raised in a social environment in which heterosexuality was both the norm and expected. Although the vast majority had accepted their same-sex sexuality, hardly any of them had come to terms with their same-sex sexuality immediately. It was not uncommon that their trajectory toward self-acceptance took quite some time, during which they felt lonely, different, in doubt, desperate, or afraid for their future. At the time of the interview, most of them were open about their same-sex sexuality to their parents and friends, and they felt supported and accepted by them. Nevertheless, the anticipation of coming out to family and close friends was usually not easy and many did not disclose their same-

sex sexuality to their immediate environment until years after they had first become aware of it. Hester's story exemplifies the difficulties which can be experienced even in a tolerant environment:

> My whole life felt as if I had to keep it a secret and had to be…well, not behave differently, but it is like you always think, well I should not do that because than they might think that I am like that and they should't think that. While it does not make sense, because my parents for example always told us 'as long as you are happy and it does not matter with whom, whether it is with a man or a woman.' […] From when we were young, they spoke like that so I knew that it is not a problem at all, because it just isn't. But I still found it so scary. I don't know why. […] Well, then I gave it [a letter] to them and I went upstairs. Then they came upstairs, of course, and they came to really hug me and like 'we don't mind and we are glad that you told us.' That was just very nice. […] But yeah, when I had told my parents, that was actually a very big relief.

Hester's narrative illustrates she upholds the double social message in her environment. Although she knew her parents would accept her same-sex sexuality, she still felt the "secret" to be a burden and felt relief when she finally told them. Thus, on the one hand she acknowledges that her environment is tolerant, yet on the other hand she holds on to the idea that heterosexuality is still expected.

Interestingly, with the exception of those young people who were severely ostracized by their parents and close friends, most young people were initially reluctant to discuss their negative experiences with the interviewer. Many denied or played down experiences of stigmatization. They preferred to emphasize the positive experiences of being accepted, even though almost all participants appeared to have experienced stigmatization at one time or another. In sum, most of the participants emphasized that they are part of a tolerant and accepting social environment when it comes to their same-sex sexuality, however in their daily lives their experiences of tolerance were less uniform and more varied than the tolerant environment they described.

Labeling

In the Netherlands, non-heterosexual people are generally referred to in the media, organizations, and politics as homo or homosexual, lesbian, or gay. The label 'bisexual' is increasingly added to this list, particularly in the term LHBT (lesbian, homosexual, bisexual, transgender); the Dutch equivalent of the English term LGBT). These labels could be considered conventional labels for non-heterosexual orientation in the Netherlands. However, SSA young people's self-labeling did not always match the labels they were generally assigned by others. The interview accounts revealed that

not all conventional labels were popular among the Dutch SSA young people. This section provides an overall picture of the use of conventional labels, non-labeling, and unconventional labels, and the associations tied with the different labels.

Conventional labeling

Homo

Of the young men, 9 of the 19 labeled themselves as *homo*. Associations attached to *homo* reflected two sides of the label. On the one hand, the participants noted the negative associations constituting the label *homo*, mentioning that it 'emphasizes stereotypes,' 'sounds heavy,' or 'is an insult.' Other Dutch studies also show that *homo* is frequently used as an insult in school contexts (Bucx & Van der Sman 2014; Kuyper 2015a). Stereotypes associated to *homo* were mostly related to gender nonconforming expressions such as being effeminate or feminine. Rob's self-observation that he is 'becoming more homo,' showed how he conflated *homo* with gender nonconformity.

> R: I think homo... is becoming more an insult. Well, I say that I fancy guys. Yet, I do have the idea that recently I am becoming more homo.
> I: What do you mean by that? Can you explain?
> R: Previously.. I am becoming more and more feminine, with more manners. I used to behave like this and I behave like...I used to slap on the back to a friend, and now it is really a [homo/gay] hand (smiles).

According to Rob, becoming more feminine and expressing more manners associated with being feminine or gay, means increasingly exemplifies the 'homo.' He addresses "becoming more homo" in terms of gender, albeit a stereotypical image, and not only as a sexual orientation.

On the other hand, the majority of the SSA young men said that the word *homo* sounded 'normal' or 'neutral.' For them, *homo* served to describe their same-sex attraction and was not associated with gender expression or negative stereotypical images.

> Erik: I would still call myself homo. But if I meet a very nice girl, then that may perhaps change a bit.
> I: And homo, what kind of associations or images do you have with that?
> Erik: That is just someone who feels attracted to the same sex. That is for me just the meaning of the word. Like in the dictionary, that is what I think of homo.
> I: What kind of image or associations do you have with homo?
> Chris: That is just someone who fancies his own sex and not the other. The literal meaning.

Generally, in the Netherlands, homo and homosexuality are not associated with a medical discourse, as sometimes is the case in other Western countries.

Lesbian

In the Netherlands, being a non-heterosexual woman is almost always equated with being a lesbian. Unlike the term homo, the word lesbian (in Dutch: *lesbisch*;[3] variations are *lesbo* and *lesbi*) is not to the same extent used as an insult to openly disqualify women in the general population. However, many of the SSA young women were reticent to label themselves as lesbian. The primary reason was that the label lesbian carried several negative connotations and for many it was not a well-liked term. It sounded 'unkind,' 'problematic,' and 'offensive,' it emphasized 'negative stereotypes,' and it was 'an insult.' Three women, including Elise, expressed their aversion to this label:

> If I say that I feel attracted to women then that sounds much closer to who I am than saying I am lesbian. I don't know, perhaps I have a bit of an aversion to it because that word is sometimes used as abuse as well. 'Hey, lesbo!' – that does not sound nice. […] 'Are you bisexual or are you lesbian?' Yes, it is really a label, I think. So, in terms of criteria, I'm probably lesbian, but I just don't like that word.

The stereotypes they referred to concerned appearances, such as looking masculine, having short hair, wearing overalls, being very grumpy, being serious, not having a sense of humor, and being ugly. Clearly, many of these stereotypes describe features that are associated with non-feminine characteristics.

A few SSA young women associated lesbian with older women. To them, lesbian sounded old-fashioned. A couple of the women found the label pre-defined sexual encounters as same-sex experiences excluding any possibility for having sex with men. This in turn was associated with being a feminist, which they did not regard highly. Only two of the women thought the word lesbian had neutral or positive connotations.

Twelve of the nineteen young women interviewed were ambiguous about adopting the label lesbian. Whereas they self-identified as lesbians – since the label was most attuned with their feelings – more than half of these twelve women did not want to be perceived as a lesbian by others. Only five used the label lesbian to describe themselves to other people. In other words, whereas lesbian is the conventional and standard label for non-heterosexual Dutch women, it is not an appealing label for the new generation of SSA girls and young women.

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[3]The most literal translation is the noun *lesbiënne*. Although this word is used among older women and in formal language, it is hardly used among younger women, who prefer the adjective *lesbisch*, which is also used among older women.

Gay

Many Dutch people perceive the label 'gay' as imported from the English language, yet its popularity is increasing in Dutch society. In the interviews, participants used 'gay' in reference to the LGB community, for example in phrases like 'going out gay' – referring to 'gay friends' or a 'gay lifestyle.' As a sexual label, gay can be used for both men and women, though it is more often associated with men. Its attractiveness is clearly gendered, as young men and women associated different meanings to it.

Among the young men, gay was generally not used to refer to themselves. Niels was the only man who labeled himself gay, in addition to *homo*. Ten young men (out of nineteen) highlighted the negative attributes it contained. Here, once again, we see that in their majority these characteristics reflect the stereotypical images often attributed to gay men, such as 'being effeminate,' 'walking gay,' 'not being serious,' 'doing gay,' 'exaggerating,' and 'dancing in pink clothes during Amsterdam Gay Pride.' Several of them found it an 'ugly' or 'harsh' word. Paul explained why he self-identified as *homo* and not as gay:

> If you say to someone 'I'm homo,' it sounds more normal than if you say 'I'm gay.' People... If you say 'I'm homo,' then they react with 'Okay.' If you say 'I'm gay,' then people immediately have this image of, er... He walks with one of those pink purses through an alley and wears a dress and high heels in the night. And I have heard from friends things like 'Fortunately you're just a homo and not a real gay gay.'

For men, the label gay was strongly attached to gender nonconforming expressions, which most men rejected or did not want to be associated with. When gay and *homo* were compared, *homo* was used to indicate neutrality or normality and to distance themselves from SSA men who express in stereotypical ways.

The young women, however, were a lot more positive about the label gay. Five women associated the term with positive adjectives such as 'uncomplicated,' 'nice,' and 'cool.' Several of the young women found gay appealing since it lacked strong negative associations. Some preferred gay over lesbian, because gay sounded less stereotypical and value-laden than for example the conventional label lesbian. Others found the fact that the label did not evoke any clear image of a SSA woman appealing. Similar conclusions were made in a British study, in which women in the lesbian community said that gay sounded softer than lesbian (Farquhar 2000). Daphne:

> Yes, I always say 'gay.' It sounds nicer, a bit less... 'Lesbian' is such an ugly word.. It just doesn't feel good. [...] Lesbian women are often sulky... that's what follows. While with gay, people don't have these kinds of fixed ideas.

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Nevertheless, the interviews showed that despite the fact the label was appealing, SSA women found it difficult to use it in their daily lives because it was not part of the Dutch repertoire to refer to same-sex sexuality between women. This also made it complicated to use it in mainstream society, since the label gay is not often associated with SSA women but rather with SSA men. Sara, the only woman who used the label consistently in her life, was internationally oriented (i.e. she had temporarily lived in America, liked the community of international students, and loved traveling to other countries), and adopted gay to refer to a cosmopolitan lifestyle.

Bisexual

Seven Dutch SSA young people self-identified as bisexual.[4] Additionally, four others mentioned they had had a bisexual period in their lives. The label bisexual, and more generally bisexuality as a sexual orientation was surrounded with controversy. Not all interviewed Dutch SSA young people considered bisexuality a real and stable sexual orientation, viewing bisexual people as 'not having made up their mind yet,' 'wanting to have it both ways,' and 'not to be taken seriously.' This reflects Western popular images and stereotypes about bisexuality (Esterberg 2007). Some participants perceived bisexual as a temporary, safe position, since it leaves everything open and appears less definitive than an exclusive same-sex orientation. However, most of them also criticized the indecisiveness they associated with bisexuality and the label bisexual. People were expected to ultimately choose between a heterosexual or homosexual position and label.

Five of the seven young people who self-identified as bisexual strategically labeled themselves as bisexual to other people. Linda described how labeling as bisexual was important for her, but could also be uncomfortable for her long-term partner. She interchanged labels depending on the context:

> For me it is like, I may have a boyfriend, but I am really bisexual and that is something I keep saying to everyone, no matter what. I am not all of a sudden saying that I am hetero. Because that is not the case. Yes, I find it important that you can be who you want. […] I have to say that in my boyfriend's circle of friends, of course all hetero couples, not everyone knows. His brother doesn't know, his mother doesn't now. He is a bit more cautious, more from his perspective, protective toward me. Like, 'I want my friends to have a good impression of you first, before they get prejudiced.'

While she passed for heterosexual in heterosexual contexts, her lesbian friends asked her how it is like to have a boyfriend and to go back to a man. They did not perceive her as bisexual either. Linda's experience shows that it is difficult to express a bisexual identity to others, particularly in the case of a long-term relationship with one partner.

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[4] In Dutch, bisexual is often abbreviated to *bi.* For the sake of clarity, in this article we consistently refer to the label bisexual, except in participants' quotes.

In the setting of college life same-sex behavior among young women was met with more enthusiasm when framed as bisexual or bi-curious (i.e. people who have a curiosity or interest in sexual behavior or relationships with more than one gender, but who do not identify as bisexual) than labeling as lesbian. Hence, although Claire felt mostly same-sex attracted, she socially labeled herself as bisexual. Her labeling was fueled by the notion that sexual behavior between women can be exciting to men when it is framed as bisexual or bi-curious and reconcilable with heterosexuality, while being lesbian is associated with excluding men, distancing her from heterosexual peers (Fahs 2009; Willis 2012):

> Lesbian… it sounds as if you don't want to have to do anything with men. It just sounds so final. […] Bi, well that's exciting and fun, while lesbian is immediately: 'Whoa!' Then, they speak to you differently, and that's a pity.

SSA young men rarely labeled themselves bisexual. In accordance with other Dutch studies, young men appear to feel even more pressured to choose between a homosexual and heterosexual orientation (Felten, Van Hoof, and Schuyf 2010; Van Lisdonk and Kooiman 2012). Ilan said he wished he was unambiguously homosexual or heterosexual, and he wished he could pass for homosexual. He considered bisexuality to be more marginalized and more difficult to be open about to others compared to homosexuality. This view is shared by other Dutch SSA young people (see chapter 2). Erik and Stephen, however, preferred to see themselves as homosexual and in that light felt ambiguous about their past crushes on girls. Erik said, 'Of course, it is very difficult. When you are bi than many people want you to be clear That you are either hetero or homo.'

To sum up, there were limited positive spaces to identify as bisexual in mainstream, heterosexual as well as gay and lesbian social contexts. Connotations to bisexual were not related to gender expression, though the label was associated with a temporary position and was met with suspicion in the context of a long-term relationship with one partner.

Non-labeling and unconventional labeling

Non-labeling
About half of the young men and women primarily not labeled their sexual orientation. The majority of them described their sexual orientation by saying 'I like men and/or women.' Some described their sexual orientation as 'I have/do not have a girlfriend/boyfriend.' Most of these people switched between non-labeling and using conventional label(s). Only Elise, Leo, and Rob exclusively not labeled their sexual orientation.

The SSA young people's accounts revealed two main motivations for non-labeling. First, several of them did not like the act of labeling in general. They rejected labeling because it stressed their sexual orientation too much, or they did not like fitting their sexual orientation in a specific box: 'Labeling is a hassle'; 'I don't like to put such labels on it [homosexuality]'; 'It's minor. I don't see myself as something. It's just a part of me'; 'Thinking in boxes... I don't like doing that at all.'

The second reason to not label their sexual orientation was that that they did not feel comfortable identifying with the available labels since, according to them, these had negative connotations. Ho motivated his choice for non-labeling:

> I almost never say that I am homo. I usually say that I fancy guys. And well, if I have to give it a label than I would be homosexual. [...] I think that I still have the idea a bit that homo...when you see that [homosexuality] on TV, you get to see these stereotypical images. And I just don't identify with that.

The stereotypical image of *homo* referred to gender nonconforming expressions or extravagant, gay celebrities, while Ho perceived himself to be normal, which apparently was not reconcilable with the connotations attached to the labels homo and gay.

Unconventional labeling
The vast majority rarely used unconventional labels to refer to themselves. Though unconventional labels which featured stereotypical images were sometimes used in relation to other people, such as *nicht*, *flikker*, gay (for men), *pot*, dyke (for women), and queer. *Nicht*, *nichterig* ('sissy' / 'sissy-like'), and *flikker* ('faggot') were usually used by young men, to refer to SSA men who exaggerated and/or flaunted their effeminate appearance, behavior, and mannerisms by, for example, carrying a purse, wearing make-up, speaking in a high voice, or having a stereotypical gait.

> Dirk: When heterosexual people in my circle see me with someone who walks around a bit feminine, well of course you receive remarks like 'who is that *nicht* you were walking with?'

As an exception, Frank liked the word *flikker*, but he was aware that most people associate *flikker* with 'extravagant homos' and he did not consider himself to be like that. In fact, none of the SSA young men identified or liked to be associated with *nicht*, *flikker*, or gay. A couple of young men 'admitted' to occasionally teasing each other about doing *nichterig*, yet subsequently they distanced themselves from these labels, making clear they were not a *nicht*, *flikker*, or gay.

SSA women's use of non-conventional labels was to a large extent confined to the label *pot* ('dyke'). They used it to denote a stereotypical masculine lesbian - women

with short hair who look tough and wear men's clothing. They generally perceived *pot* to be a negative label: 'even worse than lesbian,' 'really derogatory,' 'humiliating,' or 'an insult.' Bianca described the negative connotations to *pot*:

> B: For me it is very negative, because often it is also used as an insult. Similar as *flikker*, for example.
> I: Do you have the idea that it is used for specific women or girls?
> B: Yes, there are really those typical girls, well okay, perhaps I look a bit like that too. Most say that the prototypical *pot*, to put it like that, has short hair, is large, wears men's cloths. That's it. At least, those are the common prejudices you hear.

Two women brought up the labels 'butch' and 'dyke,' which were more or less synonymous with *pot*. Just as the young men used *nicht*, *flikker*, and gay among themselves, a few young women jokingly called each other *pot*, but none self-identified as *pot*, butch, or dyke.

None of the SSA young people used the label 'queer.' In fact, the majority did not even know what it meant. The few people who were familiar with queer all rejected this label. They situated queer within English-speaking contexts and did not consider it to be a Dutch label. There was no clear notion of queer and associations ranged from strange, deviant and 'the most extreme that you can think of' to 'a film word' and 'a politically correct term.' The unfamiliarity with the term queer reflects the marginal position of queer movements and communities in Dutch society and SSA populations (Mepschen et al. 2010).

Finally, labels that suggest sexual fluidity or doubt about their sexual orientation (such as questioning, bi-curious or pansexual) were not adopted by the participants. This may be an indication that the interviewed young SSA people felt social pressure to ultimately 'choose' and not question or switch between sexual orientation positions.

Three strategies used in the process of labeling

For most participants labeling was a way to show that they were or wanted to be normal. They avoided labels that stressed being different, that were stereotypical or that made them stand out. In their labeling processes most participants used labels that made them not stand out or that showed they were normal. Three labeling strategies can be discerned: de-emphasizing sexual identity, othering, and reinforcing the hetero/homo binary.

De-emphasizing sexual identity

Whereas having a same-sex orientation was generally accepted in their social environments, expressing a non-heterosexual identity was a delicate issue. The vast

majority of the Dutch SSA young people de-emphasized their sexual identity. This does not mean that they denied or concealed their sexual orientation. For the majority, their sexual orientation was an important or at least obvious part of themselves. Yet, many of them did not feel compelled to call attention to it or emphasize their non-heterosexual identity, most particularly in heterosexual contexts. In their choice for labels they avoided labels which conferred a stereotypical images or would portray them as gender nonconforming (Herek 2002; Whitley 2001). Sexual labels which described sexual orientation 'neutrally' were used more often than gender nonconforming labels.

The SSA young people de-emphasized their sexual identity in two ways. The first was through non-labeling. By describing their sexual orientation without using labels, they showed they were ordinary and part of mainstream society. Non-labeling was conducive to feeling 'normal' and to perceiving oneself to be like everybody else. Leo expresses his ambiguity toward labeling:

> I don't see myself as something. It's just a part of me. So I don't call myself homo, or gay, or whatever. I'm just…You could maybe say that I'm a hetero and like guys. But again, that's labeling yourself. So, yeah, I'm an average ordinary somebody.

Leo considers himself ordinary and just like any other heterosexual person. Non-labeling was also a way to avoid having to use sexual labels that had a distancing effect and did not always correspond to their self-image, since these labels had negative connotations.

The second way they de-emphasized their sexual identity was by using the label *homo* as a descriptive indicator of an exclusively same-sex sexual attraction, despite existing negative associations. Several SSA young people referred to themselves as *gewoon homo*. The use of the word *gewoon* has culturally significant meaning which Schalet notes is translated in dictionaries as '"commonly, normally, simply, or plainly." It is important to note, however, that "normally" in this context means "ordinarily" but also contains an intensely, if obfuscated, normative component: To say something is "normal" implies that it is acceptable and right' (Schalet 2011: p. 33). Hence, *gewoon homo* is used to de-emphasize sexual identity and underscore the normalization of 'being *homo*' as a sexual orientation:

> [*Homo*] is *gewoon* someone who fancies his own sex. (Chris)
> [*Homo*] is *gewoon* someone who feels attracted to the same sex. That is for me *gewoon* the meaning of the word, like in the dictionary, that is what I think of *homo*. (Erik)

To say that they are *gewoon homo*, they assert normal, ordinary and nothing special. This facilitated them blending into mainstream society.

SSA young women found it difficult to use a label that described their sexual orientation without emphasizing their sexual identity. The label lesbian accentuated being different from mainstream society. The labels *homo* and gay also provoked questions or reactions, since these were generally reserved for men.

Othering

The process of othering refers to marking difference and distancing oneself from others who symbolize or manifest undesired characteristics. Images of 'the other' are constructed and used to 'reinforce an image of the "self"' (Ghorashi 2002: p. 137). Through othering, boundaries between insiders and outsiders are negotiated and established. Othering can be used as a strategy to gain admittance to the dominant group (Cox & Gallois 1996), which in this case is the heteronormative mainstream society. Goffman noted that stratifying and separating oneself from people who are evidently more stigmatized can be a successful strategy to cope with stigma (Goffman 1963).

For the young people in this study, othering was a practice commonly used to emphasize their normality and to show they were part of mainstream society. They constructed a normal self by comparing themselves to people they considered 'other.' Many SSA young people chose labels that underscored their normality by comparing and dissociating themselves from images and labels that embodied stereotypes, such as *nicht*, *flikker*, and *pot*, and sometimes gay, lesbian and, *homo*. Arie, for example, attempted to express his normality, stating that he noticed that people rather like 'his type of *homo* than someone who acts extremely *nichterig*.' Mark placed himself higher in the social hierarchy by distinguishing between 'the more normal guys...who like guys' with '*homo's*... who are these effeminate figures with little purses [...] who look like girls.' In the case of Mark, he attached both meanings to the label *homo*. He described himself as being '*gewoon homo*' while he also used *homo* as a way of othering and distancing himself from gender nonconforming *homo's*.

Othering as strategy to assimilate, is not available to everyone. It requires qualities to 'pass' (Goffman 1963; Nash 2013). Emphasizing their normality through othering was particularly difficult for SSA young people who happened to 'look' non-heterosexual or gender nonconforming, which was often conflated. Most of these participants disliked when others identified them as non-heterosexual. Some of them adjusted their behavior, appearance, and gestures to feel assimilated in mainstream society. Another way of othering was to accentuate their normality by differentiating themselves from those SSA people who are 'drama queens,' who 'exaggerate' and purposely behave *nichterig.*

Reinforcing the hetero/homo binary

In the mainstream conceptualization of sexuality, sexual orientation is perceived as essentialist and fixed, organized as either heterosexual or homosexual (Richardson & Monro 2012). Most Dutch SSA young people reinforced the hetero/homo binary, particularly in the company of heterosexual people. The prevailing hetero/homo binary was apparent in the more frequent use of the conventional labels *homo* and lesbian in heterosexual contexts. Even though some young women expressed their own discomfort with the word lesbian, several of them chose to label themselves lesbian because it was clear to others. The bisexual participants who were in a long-term relationship often chose to pass for heterosexual or *homo*/lesbian through not explicitly labeling as bisexual. This act of non-labeling did not make people question their loyalty to their partner, however their bisexuality was marginalized. A bisexual identity was not reconcilable with the heteronormative, binary conceptualization of sexual orientation.

Overall, unconventional labeling was uncommon, and even more so in heterosexual social environments. Whereas among non-heterosexual peers several SSA young people flirted with labels such as *nicht*, gay, and *pot* — when they were with heterosexual peers all of them used conventional labels to avoid provoking confusion or adverse reactions.

Studies in other countries have shown that young people invent all kinds of new and creative sexual labels which challenge stable sexual orientation categories and the hetero/homo binary (e.g., questioning, pansexual, genderqueer; see Diamond 2008; Savin-Williams 2005). However, in this qualitative study, as well as in Dutch large-scale survey studies (Kuyper 2015a; Van Lisdonk & Van Bergen 2010a), unconventional labels and questioning were exceptional. The SSA young people's accounts did not reflect notions of sexual fluidity, or being comfortable with questioning, or openly playing with sexual positionings and labels. Such labels do not produce this clarity which is needed in maintaining the hetero/homo binary (McCarl Nielsen et al. 2000; Willis 2012).

Normalization and post-gay rhetoric

High tolerance of homosexuality in the Netherlands paved the way for SSA individuals to live a 'normal life' — a possibility that was unimaginable several decades ago (Hekma 2011; Kuyper et al. 2013; Schalet 2011). The majority of SSA young people in this study were open about their same-sex sexuality to family and friends, most of them expressed that important others had accepted their sexual orientation and considered this normal. It was possible to openly label their sexual orientation and simultaneously feel normal. Though normalization was not automatic and needed to be produced.

In their labeling many SSA young people were engaged to show their normality. Sexual labels or non-labeling, which function to solely describe a sexual orientation without any implicit connotations to gender expression, fostered normalization and were used by most SSA young people. Discomfort to use specific labels was not so much caused by the fact that these labels revealed their same-sex sexuality, but because specific labels emphasized a sexual identity which was associated with gender nonconformity or challenged the heteronormative hetero/homo binary.

The significance normality has in Dutch society has also been observed by other scholars (Buijs et al. 2011; Fobear 2012; Mepschen et al. 2010; Robinson 2012). When being 'normal' and *gewoon* is valued, it makes sense that labels are chosen that promote normality. Accordingly, unconventional labels like queer and questioning, or arbitrarily using labels or referring to 'post-gay' are practices that will not be in use.

Several SSA young people, however, ideologically employed post-gay rhetoric. These Dutch SSA young people emphasized the insignificance of their sexual identity in their lives. They did not consider their sexual orientation to be a major component defining their identity. The following two excerpts exemplify their usage of the post-gay rhetoric:

> About *homo*: People are allowed to label me as *homo*, but it just doesn't say a lot. (Frank)
> About lesbian: I find that... Well, thinking in boxes. Look, perhaps it is like that, but why do you need to call it that? I say *gewoon* that I like women. Maybe that's a box, too. (Hester).

While these statements appear to be prophesizing a post-gay rhetoric, their motivations to avoid conventional labels is less of a recognition of sexual diversity and more a means to feel normal and accepted in mainstream society. In fact, none of the SSA young people's accounts showed that their sexual identity was meaningless in daily life. This is illustrated by the three labeling strategies discussed above. Normalization needed to be produced through de-emphasizing their sexual identity, othering and reinforcing the hetero/homo binary. Moreover, with the exception of Ben, all the participants mentioned that, to some degree, they adjusted, concealed or hid behavior or speech in heterosexual contexts in order to blend in or avoid stigma. Hester, for example, – who felt a great relief when she came out to her parents (see section Coming Out) – is aware that other people see her as 'different because people always think in boxes and what is considered normal is hetero.' She still felt the need to hide the fact she had a girlfriend to fellow students. Positioning her use of post-gay rhetoric next to her need to hide her relationship reaffirms the assertion that the use of post-gay rhetoric does not mean that her sexual identity has become meaningless.

SSA young people recognize that diversity exists within the group of non-heterosexual people. Yet, this was not outwardly discussed as such but rather encountered in the message underlying the binary they used to define themselves: those who are 'normal' and the 'other.' Hence, this should not be interpreted as a recognition of the multiplicity of sexuality experiences beyond sexual orientation but rather as a reaffirmation of one's own 'normal' sexual orientation. It served normalization, but was not an indication of post-gayness.

Discussion and conclusion

In line with other Dutch studies (Buijs et al. 2011; Hekma 2011), several SSA young people said they were proud of the Dutch tolerant social climate regarding homosexuality, particularly compared to other countries. Such expressions endorse the notion that tolerance is considered a national virtue. However, the Dutch scholar Hekma is critical of the conceptualization of Dutch tolerance. According to him, positive attitudes toward homosexuality or in other words its tolerance, are based on a 'drive for sexual equality' which promotes sameness and paves the way for homosexual people to be fully included in society, but only 'as long as they behave "normally"' (Hekma 2011: p. 137).

Therefore, Dutch tolerance of same-sex sexuality is grounded in an ideology of normality. This ideology restricts same-sex sexuality to expressions that can be readily accepted and do not challenge heteronormativity. Queer scholars, in particular, have been critical about the possibly negative effect of normalization when it serves heteronormativity and reproduces homonormativity (Duggan 2002; Nash 2013; Robinson 2012). Homonormativity refers to articulations of lesbian and gay identity which do not contest heteronormativity but replicate, uphold and sustain heteronormativity and underlying sexual and gender norms (Duggan 2002; Mepschen et al. 2010).

An ideology of normality neutralizes, silences and erases diversity (Richardson & Monro 2012). In a society where this ideology prevails, there is a failure to create spaces in which sexual and gender diversity is appreciated (Hostetler & Herdt 1998; Warner 1999). Moreover, and intimately related, tolerance based on an ideology of normality potentially creates intolerance of those non-heterosexual individuals that do not want or cannot be 'normal' or fit in. Nevertheless, for individuals who have the desire to assimilate, avoiding same-sex sexuality-related stigmatization makes sense.

This article has shown that in a tolerant society like the Netherlands a particular type of inclusion is promoted which emphasizes sameness and equality, making it difficult to raise issues regarding structural gender and sexual inequalities (Schalet 2011).

When you get right down to it, acknowledging structural inequality would tarnish the national self image based on tolerance and egalitarianism (Schalet 2011; Wekker 2016). In addition, the article shows how in this specific case tolerance and normality go hand in hand and the role labeling plays in fostering acceptance and normality.

This Dutch case exemplifies how structural heteronormativity is reproduced, even in a society that prides itself for its tolerance and normality. Hence, it provides analytic tools to carry out this type of research in societies which do not consider tolerance and nomality national virtues, for example the United States and Great Britain. In these societies other policing mechanisms are in place which are based on other societal ideologies concerning for instance, the 'moral citizen', 'good citizen', 'multicultural citizen', and cosmopolitan citizen' (e.g. Mitchell 2003; Westheimer and Kahne 2004). Thus, the analysis of labeling and the societal ideologies are essential to understand how normalization and heteronormativity work and why post-gay societies or communities are still scarce.

This study challenges the idea that non-labeling is an expression of post-gay; as the previous pages have shown non-labeling was an outcome of wanting to conform, to being normal. Hence, SSA young people's sexual identity has not become meaningless in their lives. Quantitative studies have used non-labeling and the dismissal of conventional labels as an indicator of being post-gay (Glover et al. 2009; Russell et al. 2009). However, this study shows that it is not only essential to investigate how labels are used, but also to contextualize their use and explore their motivations for using them. In this case, non-labeling is not an outcome of same-sex sexuality having become less significant in society. Rather, non-labeling is used to promote normality, aimed at feeling more accepted and included. Moving toward a post-gay society may be appealing. Yet, for that to become reality and beneficial to all people in society, it is essential that tolerance is not based on an ideology of normality.