

Publiekssamenvatting

With this research I seek to contribute to the emergent body of work within the already established research inquiry connecting leisure studies and geographies of sexuality. In this research I focus on a sexually oriented leisure activity for which part of public space is appropriated. More specifically I focus on the spatial practices of men making use of public space for sex with other men, or in other words gay meeting places, as a context to explore the spatial formation of a socially contested phenomenon. I chose not to focus on gay meeting places indoor, like saunas, bars, movie theatres, etc, as these are a generally accepted phenomenon in the Netherlands. The reason for focusing on gay meeting places in outdoor public space ranging from parks and recreational areas to parking places along highways is that these places are a contested spatial phenomenon in the Netherlands. This research has two goals:

- providing an insight in the phenomenon of gay meeting places to reach a better understanding of and for these places as leisure places, and;
- a critical analysis that aims to demonstrate the contested nature of this spatial phenomenon, and through this exploring deeper issues of the way how homosexuality is perceived in the Netherlands.

This research is predominantly founded on the theoretical insights of the French historian/philosopher Michel Foucault, the post-structuralist philosopher Judith Butler, and the French sociologist/philosopher Henri Lefebvre. Basing myself on their work I discuss in the theoretical framework a diversity of concepts ranging from abstract notions of power, performativity and gender/sexuality to more concrete notions of space. I show how power and power relations have led to the creation of 'truths' about gender and sexuality, and how these are the foundations on which society and public space are (re)produced. The reason for introducing these concepts is that it provides me the opportunity to critically reflect on this sexualised (re)production of public space as either homosexual or heterosexual within a heteronormative social context. The term heteronormativity denotes the assumption that heterosexuality is the natural, normal, and correct sexuality implying that only opposite sex relations and behaviours are acceptable. Within a heteronormative society people are expected to conform to hegemonic heterosexual standards. Hegemony refers to the cultural dominance present within society. In this sense heterosexuality is the basis on which society, families, institutions, and public spaces are ordered. Heteronormativity is so imbedded within societies that people seldom question heterosexuality, and rather take these assumptions for granted.

I obtained data by having in-depth interviews with the users of gay meeting places. The interviews lasted between one-and-a-half and two hours. Due to the secret and anonymous character of sex at gay meeting places it was a challenge to find men willing to participate in the research. However, through calls on the Internet and sending emails I found eventually seven men willing to participate. I met with six of them in refreshment rooms, and with one man I had an interview over the MSN. Moreover, to place the phenomenon of gay meeting places within a broader social context, I did a discourse analysis

of the comments people post on the Internet in reaction to news items on gay meeting places. A discourse analysis looks at the conventions of talking and writing, in which a discourse can best be described as “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about [...] a particular topic at a particular historical moment”¹.

The results show that the men make use of gay meeting places to explore and enjoy their non-heterosexual feelings and satisfy their sexual needs. Visiting gay meeting places is a form of leisure as it gives the men an opportunity to relax and get out of the routines of everyday life. Besides, the activities at gay meeting places are described as enjoyable and pleasurable with a high degree of mutual respect towards each other. One of the most important motivations to visit a gay meeting places is a desire for sex, for letting of some sexual tension. Besides, the lack of verbal communication confirms that these men do not go there for sociality, but purely for satisfaction of sexual needs and pleasures. The communication at gay meeting places is of a non-verbal kind, they communicate to their possible sex partner with certain signs, like eye-contact, following someone, showing intimate body parts. The reaction that follows from the other on these signs signals the willingness to have a sexual encounter. There is a kind of mutual agreement on what one prefers and does not prefer, what kind of encounter one wishes for, and with whom. This is, however, dependent on the area where a gay meeting place can be found. At parking places there is more a tendency to get out of the car, find a partner, have sex and leave as soon as one is satisfied. In parks and recreational areas there is more sociality. People walk around more, talk more, more specificity in the kind of partner one prefers, more time taken to find someone. In the case of recreational areas there is also a strong sense of belonging to a certain place. Most men describe gay meeting places as an easy way to satisfy certain sexual needs, for one reason they can be found everywhere. Another reason why gay meeting places are experienced as being easy places for sexual satisfaction is that men visit gay meeting places for the same reasons and purposes. Additional tension and arousal is reached due to the secrecy and anonymous character of the encounters, and not knowing what will happen or whom one will meet.

Another motivation for men to visit gay meeting places has a stronger societal background. In general gay meeting places are mostly visited by men who live for the outside a heterosexual life. Although the research participants were reluctant to give an approximation of the percentage of married men visiting gay meeting places, they indicated that about 70 to 90 percent of the men is indeed married to a woman. The most obvious reason to stay married to a woman is the fear of coming out of the closet to identify oneself as being homosexual, this can have several reasons. One of the most obvious reasons is the fear of being rejected by family and friends, and society at large. This shows that homosexuality is still not being accepted within the Netherlands, as people still experience a fear of coming out. However, at a certain moment the research participants who were not openly homosexual or bisexual felt the need to do something with their feelings. They felt the strong need to choose for themselves

¹ Hall, S. 1997. *Representation : cultural representations and signifying practices*. London [etc.]: Sage. Pp. 44

and come to terms with their homosexual feelings, which has been a difficult process for most of them. Visiting gay meeting places was/is for these men a way to deal with and explore their homosexual feelings. In this way gay meeting places provide men who wish to explore or act upon their non-heterosexual feelings an opportunity to move beyond the social roles they get assigned by the heteronormative society. This could be a reason to legalise or tolerate gay meeting places.

Nonetheless, there is a strong tendency to counter-act the appropriation of space by visitors of gay meeting places. This is clearly reflected in state and police intervention. The state and police are only allowed to intervene when the sexual practices or intimate body parts are visible from the public road, thus practices at gay meeting places out of sight of the public are not liable to penalty. Nevertheless, the majority of municipalities have a policy in which they aim at closing down gay meeting places with different measures. However, the results indicate that the closure of gay meeting places is not a successful measure, due to what is called the waterbed-effect, when one gay meeting place is closed down, another one will be created somewhere else. An often used measure is cutting down the bushes. By cutting down the bushes those who wish to remain invisible are made visible forcing upon the visitors of gay meeting places the gaze of the state and the general public, leading to non-desirable situations from the view-point of the visitors of gay meeting places as the two most important conditions, namely anonymity and secrecy become threatened. The aspect of visibility is considered highly important by the men visiting gay meeting places. They have a preference for places with a high density of bushes to create leisure spaces out of the sight of the public and the state. All of the research participants agreed that their sexual encounters should stay out of sight of the general public. It became clear during the interviews that the men visiting gay meeting places do not want to be confronted with, or offend or shock, visitors to the same place with different purposes. In a similar way as there is mutual respect to each other, there is a high degree of respect for the general public. Nonetheless, some co-researchers have a more exhibitionistic longing and enjoy being watched by other visitors of gay meeting places during their sexual practices.

Although the co-researchers indicate to be careful not to confront others with their sexual practices, the discourse analysis shows that often negative comments made are related to a fear of being confronted with men having sex with other men, often this concern is related to children. However, there are also people who argue that gay meeting places only occupy small part of public space, and that there is no reason to go those areas when you have no reason, as there are many other areas one can visit. Moreover, the commentators on the Internet do not see the need for maintaining gay meeting places, they often argue that there is no reason why there should be gay meeting places, as there are also no heterosexual meeting places, and more importantly they argue that by now homosexuality is accepted in a way that men do not have to have secret sex anymore with other men, as you can just come out of the closet. What becomes clear is that people in the Netherlands have a distorted, rosier image of the acceptance of homosexuality in the Netherlands, than research on the acceptance of homosexuality in the Netherlands reveals. On the other hand, there are people who

argue in favour of gay meeting places, to give visitors the freedom to be, and to do whatever they feel like, however under the condition of not having to be confronted with it. The results obtained from the Internet also indicate that often people have a negative association with the users of gay meeting places characterised by the use of words like bestiality, perversity, yech, sick, abnormal, immoral, etc. It can be concluded from this research that the (married) men making use of gay meeting places challenge heteronormativity in three ways: they challenge the common sense understanding of appropriate, moral sexual behaviour; they challenge the social divide between heterosexuality and homosexuality as some men live for the outside world a heterosexual life while having sex with other men; and they challenge the heteronormative production of space through their spatial practices. However, these different challenges lead to a reinforcement of heteronormativity, which became clear from the high degree of negative reactions on the internet on the phenomenon of gay meeting places, and the measures taken by police and state. Moreover, as people have a strong tendency to label particular people and places on the basis of socially accepted ideas, the men and the places they use for their sexual practices become labeled as homosexual on the basis of the same-sex sexual practices. This has as an effect that the associations of disgust, perversity, bestiality, and so on, people have with gay meeting places are placed upon homosexuality in general leading to a further stigmatization of homosexuality, rather than a decrease of heteronormativity. Thus, although the results indicate that gay meeting places are a means to give space to non-heterosexual desires and feelings, places to move beyond the social roles assigned by society, the practices at gay meeting places actually lead to the reinforcement of these social roles.

Besides, my research shows that homosexuality in the Netherlands is still not accepted, which becomes clear from the percentage of family men visiting gay meeting places to explore and enjoy their non-heterosexual feelings out of fear to come out of the closet, and the high degree of negative reactions on the internet. However, this needs to be nuanced, as there are not only negative reactions articulated on the internet, but also people making a plea for the existence of gay meeting places, as long as they do not have to be confronted with the practices of the visitors of gay meeting places.