REVIEW ARTICLE

Discussing Lesbian In/Visibility: A Scoping Review

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Abstract

This study aims to understand the discussions surrounding lesbian in/visibility in the scientific literature. After a careful study selection process, we analyzed 19 articles on the dynamics and negotiations lesbians make with in/visibility. We then carried out a scoping review and, through thematic analysis, we found four main themes: (1) The need for visibility; (2) Negotiations with in/visibility; (3) Representativity; and (4) Beyond the visibility/invisibility dichotomy. This scoping review emphasizes that both visibility and invisibility are ambiguous and often overlapping concepts and that the relationship between them is complex and multifaceted. While dominant activist discourses of lesbian visibility might open possibilities for lesbian existence, it is also important to question who are the lesbian subjects that can become visible and consider the negotiations they are willing to make with in/visibility. Criteria for lesbian social legibility are embedded in homonormativity, ideals of respectable citizenship, and neoliberalism, resulting in multiple exclusions in the stride for legitimization. When the dichotomy visibility/invisibility is problematized, visibility politics fall short, and places of invisibility can also be regarded as places of subversive agency.

Keywords Lesbian · Visibility · Invisibility · Representativity · Homonormativity · Scoping review

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Introduction

In this article, we aim to understand the discussions surrounding lesbian in/visibility in the scientific literature. The history of lesbians and lesbianity has been ignored and marked by invisibilities, maintained by the double discrimination that results from sexism and homophobia (Martins, 2019; Rodrigues et al., 2018). There is a scarcity of studies focusing on examining the lesbian identity. Most studies that include lesbianism have treated it as a mere appendage of male homosexuality, thus not considering the specificities of lesbian existences (Oliveira & Mattos, 2018; Santos et al., 2017). Consequently, there has been an erasure of these experiences in academia (Oliveira & Mattos, 2018; Rich, 1980; Santos et al., 2017). What is more, Ferreira (2015) states that the background of social discrimination results in the (sometimes) self-imposed invisibility of many lesbians. That is, using invisibility as a strategy to avoid social discrimination. This invisibility can be reflected, for example, in the absence of public displays of affection and in hiding/not disclosing their sexual orientation to people with whom they interact regularly (Ferreira, 2015). This is also largely due to the situation of non-recognition and delegitimization of lesbian lives by society.

This non-recognition of lesbian existences, or the perception of their experiences as an "exception" or something "accidental", may come from the assumption that women are inherently heterosexual– what Rich (1980) called compulsory heterosexuality. According to Rich (1980), heterosexuality is not only a sexual orientation, but a system of power and control imposed on women, which aims to maintain male supremacy, making it impossible to understand lesbian identities as legitimate (Alves et al., 2019; Martin, 2019; Reis & Lopes, 2020; Rich, 1980).

In the 1970s, lesbian feminism emerged to grant visibility to lesbian women who were not considered in mainstream feminism, and who felt that their claims did not coincide with those of heterosexual feminists for resisting heterosexism, wanting lives that did not include relationships with men and questioning aspects such as marriage and motherhood (Brandão, 2009; Browne & Olasik, 2016).

Through the 1980s and 1990s, lesbians were pivotal to LGBT activism, at the time mostly concerning the AIDS epidemic; however, they were still regarded as safe from HIV and their essential role in the AIDS movement was viewed as an innate trait of feminine nurtures rather than as an activist and political act (Patton, 1994; Rand, 2013). Thus, specific struggles stayed practically unnoticed and overlooked, both by mainstream culture and gay activism (Rand, 2013; Romeiro & Santos, 2020).

Since the Stonewall Riots (New York City, 1969), gay and lesbian liberation movements conventionally tend to focus on visibility, coming out, and public disclosure of sexual orientation as a means of challenging heteronormativity and the feeling of shame linked to being gay/lesbian (Rousseau, 2015). From a visibility politics point of view, "'being seen' and 'being heard' are beneficial and often crucial for individuals or a group to gain greater social, political, cultural, or economic legitimacy, power, authority, or access to resources" (Brouwer, 1998, p. 118). Because of this, lesbian visibility is still one of the main demands of lesbian activism.

Although visibility and "coming out" discourses have become central to Western LGBT politics, postcolonial scholarship and some queer authors of color have criticized the imposition of this model (Decena, 2008; Hu, 2019; Jones, 2020; Liinason,

2020; Phelan, 1993). The problem is not the existence of visibility strategies, but that this type of activism becomes the main force that shapes global LGBT politics and through which other practices can be designated as regressive (Manalansan, 1995). It has been shown that this narrative is not necessarily true and that there are local LGBT communities in several non-Western countries that are built without the expected emphasis on visibility politics (Chua, 2016; Jones, 2020).

Acosta (2011) contends that the Western and white-centered focus on lesbian visibility and "coming out" denies the possibilities that lay in an in-between place (between in and out, seen and unseen) for racialized and non-Western lesbian subjects to negotiate with heteronormativity in their day-to-day life. This in-between place can be better explained through the notion of "tacit subjects" proposed by Decena (2008), through which he reclaims the legitimacy of alternative practices to "visibility". Hence, these authors intent to move the discussion beyond the binary visibility/invisibility, and alert to the importance of subjective agency, sociocultural specificity, and the intersections that structure non-normative existences (Hu, 2019; Liinason, 2020).

Thus, discourses about lesbian in/visibility and the dynamics surrounding lesbian lives can be multifaceted. For some, visibility is a necessity to achieve equality while for others it can become a source of pressure to adhere to certain expectations. Therefore, the goal of this scoping review is to discuss the various processes of interacting with in/visibility and which lesbians have the possibility (or want) to assume "out and proud" lives.

Methods

The current study consisted of a scoping review, conducted to map key concepts and provide a preliminary, exploratory analysis of the literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010). The review followed a slightly modified version of Arksey and O'Malley (2005) framework for conducting scoping reviews, involving the following five steps: (1) identifying the research question, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) study selection, (4) charting the data, and (5) collating, summarizing, and reporting the results. A modification was made in step 5 by incorporating Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013, 2019) thematic analysis to enhance the interpretative depth of the findings.

Step 1: Identifying the Research Question

The specific aims of this study were (1) to map the scientific literature on lesbian in/visibility and (2) to understand how the dynamics around lesbian in/visibility have been conceptualized within it. To achieve these aims, the research question guiding this scoping review was: "How has lesbian in/visibility been discussed in the scientific literature?"

Step 2: Identifying Relevant Studies

To identify relevant studies, we conducted a comprehensive search in three databases: SCPOUS, Web of Science, and EBSCOhost. The search terms used were "lesbian visibility" OR "lesbian invisibility", restricted to titles. To focus on recent scientific production, the data range was set from 1 January 2010 to 31 December 2022. As stated in the research question for this study, the focus was on scientific literature, therefore grey literature was not considered.
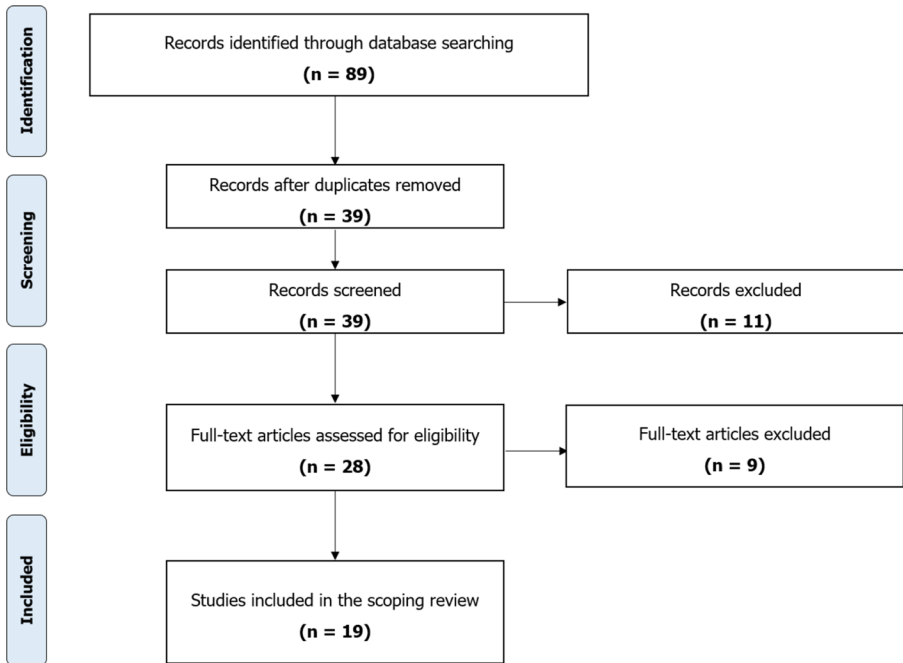
Step 3: Study Selection

To meet the proposed goals, the eligibility criteria for this review included: (1) theoretical or qualitative articles focusing specifically on lesbian visibility or invisibility; (2) articles published in Portuguese, English, or Spanish; (3) articles published between 1 January 2010 and 31 December 2022; and (4) articles published in peer-reviewed and indexed scientific journals. The exclusion criteria were: (1) strictly quantitative studies; (2) articles that addressed broader LGBTQ+populations, without specific analysis of lesbian experiences; (3) articles where lesbian in/visibility was a peripheral rather than central focus; and (4) systematic reviews, documentary studies, commentaries, conference proceedings, or editorials.

The study selection process consisted of several stages. First, a total of 89 articles were retrieved from the databases. Duplicate articles were identified and removed, leaving 39 articles for screening. Titles and abstracts were then screened for relevance, which excluded 11 articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria. Full-text readings of the remaining 28 articles resulted in the exclusion of an additional 9 articles. Common reasons for exclusion included the lack of lesbian specificity or insufficient emphasis on lesbian-specific issues (e.g., focus on broader LGBT populations without specific attention to lesbian identities, combined analyses of lesbian and bisexual women without differentiation), and reliance on strictly quantitative methods without qualitative insights. Ultimately, 19 articles met the eligibility criteria and were included in the review. To better illustrate this process, we present a PRISMA flowchart (Fig. 1).

Step 4: Charting the Data

Data from the selected articles were extracted using a structured template. Key information charted included the author(s), year of publication, methodological approach, objectives, and main conclusions/relevance to the present study. The charting process was primarily conducted by the first author, and was performed continuously, allowing for modifications as new insights and patterns were identified, particularly regarding the main conclusions/relevance to our study. The other authors were consulted when inconsistencies were found. The outcome of this process can be found in Table 1.

Fig. 1 Flowchart of study selection process (adapted from PRISMA; Moher Et Al., 2009)

Step 5: Collating, Summarizing, and Reporting Results

The synthesis of data involved two stages. First, a descriptive analysis summarized the characteristics of the included studies, such as publication years and methodological approaches. Second, thematic analysis, following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013, 2019), was conducted to identify and interpret patterns and themes in the articles. This study was guided by the principles of reflexive thematic analysis, which emphasizes the active role of the researcher, acknowledging that themes are not inherent in the data but rather constructed through an iterative and reflexive engagement with it. This process was undertaken as follows:

1. **Familiarization with the data**: The selected articles were read multiple times in their entirety. By immersing ourselves in the data, this step allowed for an in-depth understanding of the content of each study.
2. **Generating initial codes**: Key features of the data were systematically identified and coded. This involved labeling relevant sections of text that addressed the dynamics of lesbian in/visibility or conceptualized its broader implications. Examples of codes generated include "visibility politics", "hetero-economy of desire", "safety", and "homonormativity".
3. **Constructing themes**: Codes were then grouped into broader categories that captured significant patterns across the data. The preliminary themes represented recurring ideas or concepts related to the research question.

Table 1 Characteristics of the included articles

Article (author/ year)	Methods	Objectives	Main conclusions/Relevance
A Lavender League of Their Own? Voice and Visibility of Lesbian Ballplayers (Dreier, 2021)	Theoretical	Not specified.	This article shows how lesbian visibility in sports, particularly in US baseball, increased exponentially since the 1940s. Through varied examples, we become aware of the social shifts that made it possible to be out today, and the dangers and constraints that lesbians faced until recently in sports.
An Appetite for Activism: The Lesbian Avengers and the Queer Politics of Visibility (Rand, 2013)	Qualitative	To explore the ways in which the Lesbian Avengers' attempts to increase lesbian visibility were both restricted and permitted by their articulation with the capitalist and heteronormative economy of desire, represented by the "lesbian chic" phenomenon.	This article brings into question the political potential of visibility and the extent to which resistance to homonormativity can work "on, with, and against" dominant cultural formations, in this case, the "hetero-economy of desire" and the expectations of visibility politics. By participating in the dominant "lesbian chic" discourse but also subverting it, the Lesbian Avengers were able to increase visibility, even if dependent on concealment.
Balancing safety and visibility: Lesbian community building strategies in South Korea (Jones, 2020)	Qualitative: ethnography; 86 semi-structured interviews of lesbian community members	To analyze the spatial tactics deployed by lesbian social entrepreneurs in South Korea, while balancing competing needs for safety and visibility.	This article reveals how visibility should not be regarded as the default strategy for community building, but as a strategy that may better suit particular conditions, and not others. By reducing visibility, these lesbian entrepreneurs were able to successfully establish safe spaces away from harassment and violence.
Be who you are and be proud: Brittney Griner, intersectional invisibility and digital possibilities for lesbian sporting celebrity (Chawansky, 2016)	Qualitative: 'critical reading of visual body texts'	To examine Brittney Griner's social media (professional basketball player) and how her personal and athletic lives are represented.	This article discusses the importance of lesbian representation, and how Griner's Instagram account, as a celebrity athlete, can challenge the invisibility of Black lesbian lives.
Lilac Bibliography: *Lesboteca* and the construction of a bibliographic catalog for lesbian visibility (Romeiro & Santos, 2020)	Qualitative and quantitative; exploratory and descriptive	To present and describe the *Lesboteca* website and content.	This article evidences the importance of this initiative as a tool to fight lesbophobia and lesbian invisibility.

Table 1 (continued)

Article (author/ year)	Methods	Objectives	Main conclusions/Relevance
Challenging the visibility paradigm: Tracing ambivalences in lesbian migrant women's negotiations of sexual identity (Liinason, 2020)	Qualitative: field diaries; seven in-depth interviews with members of two LGBTI organizations	To examine how non-heterosexual migrant women, primarily Muslim, in Norway and Denmark, negotiate the degree to which they disclose their sexual identities.	This article concludes that non-heterosexual migrant women's experiences in the Nordic region often do not align with a visibility/invisibility dichotomy, as they appear to be simultaneously in and out of the closet, or neither in nor out. As such, it becomes possible to understand both visibility and invisibility as ambivalent and ambiguous concepts.
Concealing, revealing, and coming out: lesbian visibility in Dalibor Matanic's *Fine Dead Girls* and Dana Budisavljevic's *Family Meals* (Lacan, 2015)	Qualitative: analysis of films' production and consumption, their narrative structures and cinematic techniques	To examine lesbian representation in two Croatian movies.	This article focuses on the way lesbians are represented in cinema. While many films, like *Fine Dead Girls*, use lesbian characters to ultimately reaffirm heteronormativity, others, such as *Family Meals*, do offer a nuanced portrait of 'real lesbians', considering their subjectivities and the social dynamics through which lesbian identity is constructed.
Between the right to health and invisibility: lesbian and bisexual women (Silva, Mota, Hatje, Acosta, Cadaval & Silva, 2022)	Qualitative and quantitative: content analysis; 163 lesbian and bisexual women	To identify lesbian and bisexual women's perception regarding their access to health services and the medical care received.	This article highlights the discrimination non-heterosexual women face when accessing health services, such as: refusal of professional assistance, lack of acceptance, and moral and religious judgments regarding their sexual orientation. These heterosexist practices become a barrier to access, contributing to the distancing of this population from health services.
Experiences of gynecological care by lesbian and bisexual women: (in)visibility and barriers to the exercise of the right to health (Rodrigues & Falcão, 2021)	Qualitative: semi-structured interviews with 12 lesbians and 5 bisexual women	To discuss the experiences of non-heterosexual women in gynecological care spaces, specifically the (non) disclosure of the lesbian/bisexual sexual orientation.	This article shows how gynecological care spaces have been exclusionary towards non-heterosexual women and regulated by heteronormative patterns regarding gender, sexual orientation and sexual practices between women, contributing to their invisibility.
Family violence laws: Traditional narratives and the (in)visibility of lesbian relationships and lesbian-parented families (Hudson, 2019)	Qualitative	To consider the extent to which family violence laws in Australia recognize lesbian identity in intimate relationships.	This article underlines how, at a legislative level, the heteronormative narrative remains undisrupted and the issue of LGBT family violence unconsidered.

Table 1 (continued)

Article (author/ year)	Methods	Objectives	Main conclusions/Relevance
Fish and elephant: Reexamining (in) visibility and claiming queer agency in China's first lesbian film (Nunes, 2018)	Qualitative	To examine the Chinese lesbian film *Fish and Elephant* (2001) and problematize visibility politics, acknowledging the subversive queer female agency in invisibility.	While not denying the need for visibility and the dangers of invisibility, this article proposes that there is power and subversive agency in invisibility. In this way, the author aims to complicate the visible/invisible binary and disrupt the "Western" focus on visibility as a default strategy for LGBTQ activism. Furthermore, the assumption that visual representation alone equals political power or acceptance of difference is criticized.
Fumerism as Queer Feminist Activism: Humour and Rage in the Lesbian Avengers' Visibility Politics (Leng, 2020)	Qualitative	To examine the Lesbian Avengers' use of humor in the form of "fumerism" to increase lesbian visibility.	This article shows that humor/"fumer" (blending humor and anger) was a crucial tool for the Lesbian Avengers to express themselves, raise awareness, and make demands.
In visibilities: the *Groupe du 6 novembre* and the production of liberal lesbian identity in contemporary France (Provitola, 2019)	Qualitative	To analyze the contributions of the *Groupe du 6 novembre*, a French activist group of self-identified lesbians of colour.	This article highlights the marginalization faced by black lesbians and the whitewashing of lesbian spaces, shining a light on the concept of intersectionality. The article also criticizes the incitement to visibility brought by the "Western confessional model" as being a form of subjection and something that encourages a focus on individual oppression rather than collective struggle.
Lesbian visibility and the politics of covering in women's basketball game spaces (Myrdahl, 2011)	Qualitative: participant observation; 31 in-depth individual interviews and 2 focus group interviews with lesbian fans of the Minnesota Lynx; one in-depth interview with a marketing professional from the same team.	To outline how heteronormativity and exclusionary cultural politics in women's basketball game spaces (re) produces self-regulation (covering) amongst lesbian fans.	This article focuses on the phenomenon of "covering", that is the perceived need to mute certain enactments associated with non-normative sexualities, as an attempt to reduce a perceived threat. Covering, as an assimilationist approach, illustrates the relationship between lesbian fans and a space structured by heteronormativity. Furthermore, it is also problematized that politics of "tolerance" promote covering, since they encourage a limited acceptance of difference and maintain these people as "second class citizens".

Table 1 (continued)

Article (author/ year)	Methods	Objectives	Main conclusions/Relevance
Mainstreaming female masculinity, signifying lesbian visibility: The rise of the *zhongxing* phenomenon in transnational Taiwan (Hu, 2019)	Qualitative: data collected from popular cultural materials; ethnographic research; in-depth interviews in Taiwanese lesbian communities	To observe and expand on the social implications that the *zhongxing* phenomenon has on women's non-normative gender and sexual identification.	This article demonstrates how Taiwanese lesbians take advantage of the *zhongxing* discourse to perform a masculinity congruent with their identification. While *zhongxing* can be regarded as a transitory popular fashion, subjected to commercialized appropriation, it also opens possibilities for masculine lesbians to negotiate their non-normative identity in a way that is acceptable to Taiwanese society.
Negotiating In/visibility: The Political Economy of Lesbian Activism and Rights Advocacy (Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017)	Qualitative; Two case studies	To examine lesbian in/visibility and activists' agency in China and Myanmar.	This article highlights how political and economic conditions in China and Myanmar constrain lesbian activism and in/visibility, but also how activists negotiate those conditions in ways that enable them to advance rights advocacy.
Our Lives: Scribal Activism, Intimacy, and Black Lesbian Visibility in 1980s Canada (Wallace, 2020)	Qualitative	To investigate the counter-narratives found in Our Lives and, through them, understand 1980s queer Black women's experiences.	This article shows how depictions of intimacy are used to counter heteronormative ideologies and bring forth Black lesbian visibility, both politically and personally.
Sexual Dissidence and Feminist Documentary Video in the 1970s The Brazilian Filmmakers Rita Moreira and Norma Bahia Pontes are Pioneers in Denouncing Female Oppression and Lesbian Invisibility (Rosa, 2017)	Qualitative	To analyze 3 films– *Lesbian Mothers*, *She Has a Beard*, and *The Apartment*– by Rita Moreira and Norma Bahia Pontes.	This article addresses a series of documentary films that put in evidence the existing homophobia and make a satirical critique of gender roles, the ideal of female beauty, and more. These films made pioneering contributions for lesbian visibility and feminist art.
Wages Due Lesbians: Visibility and Feminist Organizing in 1970s Canada (Rousseau, 2015)	Qualitative; Historical case study	To reassess the notion of "visibility" in relation to lesbian motherhood in Canada in the 1970s.	This article highlights both liberating and limiting aspects of visibility and coming out in the 1970s. It was liberating because lesbians were able to claim their identities and create new communities; it was limiting because, once out, they faced innumerous discrimination. Namely, issues regarding child custody, welfare and violence were real barriers to lesbian women who wanted to be out.

4. **Reviewing potential themes**: The initial themes were reviewed against the coded data and the full dataset to ensure coherence and relevance. Refinements were made to ensure the themes accurately represented the complexities of the data.
5. **Defining and naming themes**: Each theme was clearly defined and given a descriptive name to encapsulate its core meaning. In this step we arrived at the final nomenclature for each theme: (1) The need for visibility; (2) Negotiations with in/visibility; (3) Representativity; and (4) Beyond a visibility/invisibility dichotomy.
6. **Producing the report**: The final themes were synthesized into a coherent narrative, integrating both descriptive and interpretative analysis. This report highlights the complex and nuanced discussions surrounding lesbian in/visibility within the scientific literature.

By engaging with Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis, this study recognizes the importance of researcher subjectivity and positionality as integral to the analytical process. This reflexive engagement enabled a richer and more nuanced interpretation of lesbian in/visibility as a dynamic, context-dependent phenomenon, fostering a deeper understanding of its multifaceted dynamics.

Results and Discussion

The 19 considered articles make important contributions regarding the conceptualization, dynamics, and experiences of lesbian in/visibility. Table 1 details the methods, objectives, and main conclusions/relevance to the scoping review of each included article. After the careful reading of all articles included in this scoping review, a thematic analysis was carried out and four themes were constructed: (1) The need for visibility; (2) Negotiations with in/visibility; (3) Representativity; and (4) Beyond the visibility/invisibility dichotomy.

The Need for Visibility

As stated before, although lesbians had been on the front lines of AIDS and LGBT activism throughout the 1980s and 1990s, their struggles continued to be ignored and neglected not only in mainstream debates on sexuality but also within the gay and feminist movements (Rand, 2013; Romeiro & Santos, 2020). As such, lesbians have gained far fewer benefits than gay men (Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017). According to visibility politics, being seen and acknowledged would help lesbians have access to legitimacy and better political opportunities and economic resources, which have remained unevenly distributed (Brouwer, 1998; Rand, 2013). Considering this, for many activists, lesbian visibility is still an issue to be discussed and something to be accomplished.

Some of the articles included in this scoping review focus on lesbian activist groups/initiatives whose primary goals have often included increasing lesbian visi-

bility (e.g. Leng, 2020; Provitola, 2019; Rand, 2013; Romeiro & Santos, 2020; Rousseau, 2015; Wallace, 2020).

Even if the emphasis is on visibility, the strategies and needs have varied across time, countries, and people involved. For example, in the 1970s, Wages Due Lesbians battled the struggles of child custody, welfare, and violence, in Canada, as lesbians began to come out and become more visible (Rousseau, 2015). Also in the 1970s, the documentaries by Brazilian filmmakers Rita Moreira and Norma Bahia Pontes put into evidence the homophobia in society and made a satirical critique of gender roles, making pioneering contributions to lesbian visibility and the deconstruction of gender (Rosa, 2017). In the 1980s, the magazine Our Lives put forth a form of scribal activism that used depictions of intimacy in a way that broke heteronormative expectations and that had the potential to increase the visibility of black lesbians in Canada (Wallace, 2020). In the 1990s, the Lesbian Avengers adopted a style of activism focused on performance, sexuality, and insurrection (Rand, 2013). Through the use of "fumerism", that is the blend of humor and anger, they were able to express their anger in a playful and ironic tone that kept people listening (Leng, 2020). In the end of the century, the *Groupe du 6 novembre* brought forward the denunciation of the whitewashing of lesbian and feminist movements and the marginalization of black lesbians in France, while also criticizing the lack of intersectionality and the dominant conceptualization of "visibility" (see below; Provitola, 2019). In 2019, in Brazil, the *Lesboteca* was created, as a strategy to battle lesbophobia and invisibility by compiling and promoting literary and scientific productions by and/or about lesbians (Romeiro & Santos, 2020).

Through the process of this analysis, it becomes apparent that dominant discourses within lesbian activism view visibility as a necessity for advancing in equality and rights, although this is not always the case (as discussed afterward).

As some of the articles considered highlight, the consequences of lesbian invisibility are still felt today. For example, as shown by Hudson (2019) in an Australian article regarding family violence laws, there continues to be a lack of legal framework that encompasses lesbian lives, as a result of invisibility. Furthermore, regarding access to health services, the studies conducted in Brazil by Silva et al. (2022) and Rodrigues and Falcão (2021) found that lesbian women (and other non-heterosexual women) face embarrassing, discriminatory, and violent situations, such as refusal of assistance, moral and religious judgments, lack of acceptance or delegitimization of their sexual orientation/practices. When it comes to gynecology services, the participants describe the lack of preparedness to correctly inform lesbian patients, for example regarding contraceptive methods (Rodrigues & Falcão, 2021). Because these malpractices are informed by heterosexism and heteronormative patterns concerning gender, sexual orientation, and sexual practices between women, disclosing sexual orientation becomes a challenge: if it is not disclosed, they will be treated incorrectly as straight women; if it is disclosed, they face the risk of being discriminated against (Rodrigues & Falcão, 2021; Silva et al., 2022). In the end, this results in exclusions and invisibilities, distancing this population from health services (Rodrigues & Falcão, 2021; Silva et al., 2022).

Negotiations with In/Visibility

Despite visibility being crucial for many, sometimes in order to be more or less visible one has to make several negotiations with the possibilities at hand. The need to consider competing demands for visibility and safety is brought up in some of the articles included in this scoping review. When this is the case, safety is often put first.

Hildebrandt and Chua (2017) discuss the lesbian activist movements in China and Myanmar, where invisibility and the politic and economic conditions make it hard, even dangerous, for lesbians to organize. Even so, they are able to slightly and discreetly push their agendas while staying within the boundaries of what their governments find acceptable (Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017).

A study regarding the establishment of lesbian bars in South Korea (Jones, 2020) highlights how invisibility is chosen over visibility to create the possibility of safe spaces away from homophobic and misogynist violence and discrimination. These lesbian entrepreneurs employ a series of strategies to keep themselves and their costumers safe, such as limiting public access to information regarding these spaces, hiding these bars in plain sight so that only frequent costumers or someone of trust can find them, and patron screening (Jones, 2020). These tactics are crucial not only for physical protection, but also to contour the fear of outing, and for this community to remain able to come together. According to Jones (2020, p. 282), "visibility should not be regarded as the default strategy for community building; it is a strategic choice that suits particular conditions". Indeed, this article shows that invisibility can contribute to the production of safe and constructive spaces for lesbians to exist.

These negotiations can also happen when it comes to family environments since the home sometimes appears as the primary sight of oppression and homophobia. This is also the case for many Muslim lesbians living in Nordic countries, as seen in the study conducted by Liinason (2020). For these women, coming out is not always regarded as a necessity or as something empowering, for it is considered that they have more to lose from visibility, including family support (Liinason, 2020). For this reason, some lesbians may prefer to compromise their visibility for their safety and comfort. What is more, it becomes apparent how these negotiations are rooted in specific social circumstances that may limit their choices.

Another noteworthy finding concerns the phenomenon of "covering", that is the perceived need to temporarily and spatially mute certain enactments associated with non-normative sexualities, as an attempt to reduce a perceived threat (Myrdahl, 2011; Yoshino, 2006). Covering is not an attempt to hide or deny being a lesbian, but rather a way of conforming to an ideal of a "suitable for children", "respectable" lesbian. Thus, covering is an assimilationist approach that demonstrates how lesbians interact with spaces structured by heteronormativity (Myrdahl, 2011). As Myrdahl (2011) shows in the study conducted with lesbian WNBA fans, some assume the primacy of heterosexuality themselves, internalizing that who they are must be tamed for straight social adequacy, and therefore assume something resembling second-class citizenship.

The "hetero-economy of desire", as employed by Rand (2013), is another major factor that forces the need for these negotiations (Hu, 2019; Rand, 2013). This is to say that the capitalist economy of desire that determines which embodiments and

sexualities can be intelligible is specifically heterosexual. In fact, heterosexual desire greatly influences popular culture and public and economic norms by which some, and not others, can become visible (Rand, 2013). Thus, through the determination of what is available for consumption and through the shaping of which discourses of desire are acceptable, identities acquire a value within this economy. As Rand (2013; p. 130) states, "a certain variety of lesbianism might be available to be consumed as a product, but the heterosexuality of this economic system of desire remains firmly intact.".

For instance, in the 1990s, through the "lesbian chic" phenomenon, lesbians– the white, feminine, and traditionally attractive ones– gained an unprecedented kind of visibility (McKenna, 2002; Rand, 2013). Lesbianism became a new trend or style available for consumption, that combined sexuality with fashion. Importantly, this "new" lesbian was detached from the stereotyped lesbian– unfashionable, manhating, feminist– creating the dichotomy good/bad lesbian and apolitical/political lesbian (McKenna, 2002; Rand, 2013). Thus, this perceived visibility was based on a sexualized appearance built on consumer ideals, on the erasure of difference, and on depoliticized individualism (McKenna, 2002).

The Lesbian Avengers, already mentioned above, emerged in this context where the celebration of "lesbian chic" was being paired with systemic homophobia (Rand, 2013). Caught in these particular circumstances, the Avengers were able to achieve unparalleled visibility, but only to the degree that their activism could be heterosexualized, tamed and turned into an aesthetic (Rand, 2013). Rand (2013) contends that their endeavors to increase lesbian visibility were both restrained and facilitated by their presence within this hetero-economy of desire expressed through "lesbian chic" discourses. While exploiting this narrative by presenting gendered and sexualized bodies that were considered "valuable" and marketable in their visual and textual rhetoric, the Lesbian Avengers were still able to go beyond the acceptable categories of gender and sexuality. Thus, they had to make negotiations within the cultural mainstream and were able to achieve a sort of visibility dependent on concealment (Rand, 2013).

More recently, in Taiwan, the rise of the *zhongxing* (Hu, 2019) phenomenon might indicate another negotiation with visibility. This concept can be translated as "gender neutrality" and it became a fashion choice associated with masculine lesbians (Hu, 2019). On the one hand, *zhongxing* might simply convey a temporary popular trend that, similarly to "lesbian chic", can be commercialized and is subjected to the heterosexual male gaze (Hu, 2019; Rand, 2013). But, on the other hand, Hu (2019) found that this consumerist desire is expanding social space for masculine lesbians to negotiate their non-normative gender expression in a way that is acceptable to Taiwanese society. In this conservative cultural atmosphere, lesbian identities can be implied but not directly disclosed. Thus, *zhongxing* has become a "popular signifier of lesbian identification and queer subversion through capitalistic commercialization of the gender style" (Hu, 2019; p. 184).

We can consider the lesbian women who make these negotiations with in/visibility through the notion of "tacit subjects" (Decena, 2008). That is, they stand in ambiguous positions; both in and out or neither in nor out of the heteronormative system. Even when as openly lesbians, they often reproduce normative gender and

sexual expressions that grant them social acceptance, in the attempt to assimilate to heteronormativity, i.e. homonormativity (Duggan, 2002). On the other hand, when a dissident gender expression is assumed, this positioning is not always accompanied by the disclosure of a dissident sexual orientation, but inference is left as a possibility. These places of ambiguity are often places of safety.

Representativity

Representativity is one of the ways lesbian visibility can be achieved. Indeed, the availability of lesbian portrayals, whether fictional or not, can have a major influence on how the public, and society, perceive lesbian identities. The increase in cultural representations of queer people has had positive effects, such as greater acceptance, inclusion, and normalization of non-normative sexualities (Rousseau, 2015). For instance, there is importance in films that represent lesbians as multifaceted subjects, who construct their lesbian identities in interaction and in response to the hegemonic social norms and ideologies, and in doing so resist the essentializing assumptions that exist in silence (Laćan, 2015). Making "real" lesbians visible is thus significant in advocating for lesbian visibility and outspokenness (Laćan, 2015; Rosa, 2017).

We can also refer to the effect lesbian celebrities have on reducing stigma and normalizing their sexualities. In particular, in the world of sports, Chawansky (2016) contends that by being open about their personal and intimate lives on social media, lesbian celebrities can contribute to social change, resembling the motto "the personal is political" put forth by lesbian feminists in the 1970s. Posts on social media can be socially impactful as they have the capacity to affect the ways of "seeing and being seen" (Chawansky, 2016, p. 772; Tiidenberg & Cruz, 2015). By analyzing Brittney Griner's Instagram, Chawansky (2016) argues that her profile can also contribute to challenging the intersectional invisibility of black lesbians in the heterosexist environment of sports. In fact, as documented by Dreier (2021), women's college and professional sports have been imbued with homophobia and heterosexism, forcing lesbians to be invisible with the excuse of protecting the league or the team's image (Chawansky, 2016; Dreier, 2021). Considering this, these women's social media profiles and the reach they have due to their celebrity status allow them to be a source of support and inspiration for many followers who find themselves in the same intersections (Chawansky, 2016).

Although representativity can play a beneficial role in challenging lesbian invisibility, depending on how it is done, it can also contribute to the maintenance and reinforcement of heteronormativity. In one of the articles included in this scoping review, Laćan (2015) explores some frequent and harmful tropes employed when depicting lesbian women in cinema. For instance, the author finds that lesbians are often used as simple metaphors and as repositories of straight directors' ideals, who have no interest or intention of portraying a "real" lesbian (Laćan, 2015). Furthermore, lesbians have been typically associated with intense trauma (as the reason for their non-normative sexuality) and they are often subjected to extreme violence, usually rape, as a way of converting them into heterosexuality and "true femininity" (Laćan, 2015).

What is more, here we can also observe the hetero-economy of desire at work, since it is not unusual for lesbian portrayals to cater to a heterosexual audience: from cinema to pornography to literature, lesbians have been stereotyped, sexualized, objectified, and, in the end, employed to satisfy the male gaze (Laćan, 2015; McKenna, 2002; Nunes, 2018; Rich, 1980; Romeiro & Santos, 2020). Specifically, one of the films analyzed by Laćan (2015, p. 236) "ends with the elimination of nonnormative sexuality and triumphant images of reproductive heterosexuality". Thus, what may appear like a chance for lesbian visibility can sometimes turn out to be a celebration of heteronormativity.

Another complex topic is how the relationships butch-femme are depicted. Although these relationships do exist, the representation of lesbian couples with a "feminine" and a "masculine" woman frequently culminates in the reinforcement of the stereotypes of the passive feminine lesbian– seen as a "fake" lesbian– and the active masculine lesbian– considered to be the "real" lesbian since, just as men, would feel attracted to "feminine" women (Laćan, 2015; Romeiro & Santos, 2020). In fact, in the same film analyzed by Laćan (2015), these dynamics are present: the butch lesbian is used as a "masculine substitute" for the male gaze regarding the femme lesbian, and, as such, the femme becomes dependent on this masculine gaze. As so far as when the butch lesbian is removed from the screen (by being murdered), the femme lesbian ceases to exist and becomes a straight woman (Laćan, 2015). We contend that this distortion of lesbian identity, which includes heterosexual and heteronormative dynamics in relationships and sexual performances, should be deconstructed (Rich, 1980; Romeiro & Santos, 2020).

To conclude, even though lesbian representativity can reveal itself to be of extreme importance, we should remain aware that increased visibility or visual representation does not directly lead to equal political power, social change, or acceptance of difference (Chawansky, 2016; Nunes, 2018; Phelan, 1993).

Beyond the Visibility/invisibility Dichotomy

A recurring theme in the articles included in this scoping review concerns the problematization of Western-centric notions of "out and proud" visibility (Jones, 2020; Liinason, 2020; Myrdahl, 2011; Nunes, 2018; Provitola, 2019). Through this lens, promoting visibility and normalization would be a path to acceptance, inclusion, and political and economic empowerment (King, 2009; Myrdahl, 2011; Nunes, 2018). Indeed, coming out and visibility have been regarded as key strategies for Western LGBT politics. However, these articles, most of them inserted in non-Western societies or communities, alert for the fact that the choice to be visible is not available to everyone and that the visibility of some comes at the expense of others (Liinason, 2020; Myrdahl, 2011).

For marginalized groups, being intelligible can result in more oppression (Jones, 2020; Myrdahl, 2011; Phelan, 1993; Skeggs, 1999). As explored before, Jones (2020) highlights how invisibility can mean safety and enable community building in South Korea. Provitola (2019, p. 223) contends that "the seemingly laudable aim of combating lesbian invisibility– within both scholarship and activism– can actually serve to marginalize racialized lesbians" and that "dominant conceptions of lesbian sexual

identity are imbued with liberal racism". Besides, Liinason (2020) shows how this Western paradigm of visibility does not apply to most migrant Muslim lesbians living in the Nordic countries. For many of these women, who might prefer a tactical use of silence, the incitement to be visible can thus be a form of subjection (Jones, 2020; Myrdahl, 2011; Provitola, 2019). We assert that it is not the existence of this Western confessional model that is a problem, but rather the fact that it is the dominant model, through which other approaches to in/visibility are seen as less evolved or as a sign of cowardness (Jones, 2020; Provitola, 2019).

Thus, it becomes possible to move this discussion beyond problematic binary notions of visibility (agency)/invisibility (weakness), while considering the intersecting dynamics that construct non-conforming existences (Liinason, 2020; Nunes, 2018; Phelan, 1993). Phelan (1993) proposes a challenge to visibility politics, by contending that representativity does not lead to equality or acceptance. Following this, she complicates the invisibility/visibility dichotomy and assigns importance and subversive power to invisibility by seeing it as a possible productive source of resistance (Phelan, 1993). This is not to say that visibility does not matter, but to recognize the agency of those who are not visible or those who do not comply with Western visibility expectations– minorities have influence over their own positionings within in/visibility, which can be strategically employed for their benefit (Liinason, 2020; Nunes, 2018; Phelan, 1993). Therefore, there is power in the lesbian subject whether she is legible by hegemonic structures or not (Nunes, 2018).

In the critical analysis Nunes (2018, p. 75) does of "Fish and Elephant", the first Chinese movie with lesbian protagonists, characterized by the removal of these characters from the screen in pivotal moments, the author states:

> Claiming that there is presence beyond what normative power structures make visible asserts a more legitimizing and suggestive queer female discourse that activates spaces external to the hegemonic norm. It also reminds us that just because a group of people are not fully 'seen' by the cultural or political mainstream it does not mean they do not exist or that the work they do, even if it is simply living their lives in a way that is at a distance from what has been considered the norm, is without impact. Recognizing power in unseen work is particularly important for those who continue to struggle in the shadows.

As mentioned before, Decena's (2008) notion of "tacit subjects", which reconfigures visibility as a subjective aspect that is understood but not disclosed, helps make sense of these dynamics which are not easily captured by visibility politics. Through this concept, we can comprehend these performances as occupying a space simultaneously in and out of the closet, or neither in nor out, neither secret nor silent; sometimes in conflicting ways (Decena, 2008; Liinason, 2020). Thus, in/visibility could rather be understood as "an ambivalent, ambiguous, and performative concept" (Liinason, 2020, p. 122). Through these tacit agreements, coming out can become redundant rather than empowering, and heteronormativity can still be challenged (Liinason, 2020). In this way, lesbian visibility is no longer solely determined by straightforward disclosure, but a whole set of bodily and behavioral signs that may indicate a lesbian identification. This is especially relevant in communities where a

sense of privacy and social belonging may be more relevant to these women's lives than individual openness (Hu, 2019; Liinason, 2020).

Moreover, while problematizing the in/visibility dichotomy, Phelan (1993) also suggests that visibility can lead to surveillance and regulation by the dominant culture. In the context of non-normative sexualities, this means an increased pressure to adhere to homonormativity (Duggan, 2002; Myrdahl, 2011; Nunes, 2018), which does not contribute to equality; instead, it exists within a set of politics of tolerance and assimilation which have exclusionary outcomes (Nunes, 2018; Rousseau, 2015). In sum, queer individuals are legitimized depending on their possibility or "competence" to conform to heteronormative norms of citizenship, which become boundaries of tolerance (Valverde, 2006; Rousseau, 2015).

This idea of "tolerance", while not presenting as evident discrimination, serves to uphold ideals of normalcy and maintain non-normative subjects invisible within the heteronormative system (Nunes, 2018). Moreover, encouraging tolerance frames political oppression in psychological terms and puts the focus on individualism, "agency", "empowerment", and political reforms (e.g. same-sex marriage), rather than structural violence and collective struggle (Provitola, 2019; Rousseau, 2015).

Additionally, it is important to note that these visibility and assimilation politics are embedded in the context of global capitalism and neoliberalism (Myrdahl, 2011; Nunes, 2018; Provitola, 2019; Rand, 2013). We turn to Phelan (1993, p. 11), who states that "visibility politics are compatible with capitalism's relentless appetite for new markets", and that they feed capitalist ideologies of being welcoming as long as someone is productive (Myrdahl, 2011; Phelan, 1993; Rand, 2013; Skeggs, 1999). As Myrdahl (2011, p. 143) concludes, "visibility cannot be an end to itself as its success will always be limited by that which is legible".

As such, we can begin to think about who is being excluded in this fight for equal rights (Rousseau, 2015). The exclusion of certain "improper" lesbian subjects can be explained by considering global neoliberalism (Nunes, 2018). For example, the WNBA fans who feel the need to cover, do so because of the league's financial interests– the league needs and relies on the lesbian audience, but does not want the *lesbians* unless they "behave respectfully" (Myrdahl, 2011). In this economy, being someone from the diverse LGBT population practically implies an identification with the model designed and marketed specifically to them, which we can consider a sort of "gay consumer citizenship" (Nunes, 2018). To illustrate this, we remind the article by Rand (2013) that focuses on the "lesbian chic" phenomenon and the article by Hu (2019) about the *zhongxing* trend in Taiwan. In both these studies, legibility or visibility is possible but only if an adherence to these specific and commercialized trends is secured (Hu, 2019; Rand, 2013).

We must think critically about the notion of citizenship– who is considered a respectable subject and whose visibility is recognized– for it remains regulated by capitalism, and the ability to conform to the homonormative ideal (Rosseau, 2015). Phelan's (1993) defiance to visibility politics allows for a revaluation of invisible or not represented subjects and makes room for other ways of existing and resisting, that because not yet visible, cannot be absorbed or regulated by neoliberalism (Nunes, 2018).

Summary of Evidence

Visibility has long been central to Western LGBT politics, often seen as a path toward recognition and rights. While it has contributed to challenging compulsory heterosexuality and creating new possibilities for lesbian existence, it does not account for the lived realities of all lesbians.

The articles reviewed in this scoping review collectively demonstrate that visibility, though important, is not universally available or beneficial, particularly for those further marginalized by race, class, religion, and nationality. These limitations become especially evident when applied outside Western contexts or to already marginalized communities within them. For example, racialized lesbians often face erasure within visibility movements that prioritize white, Western narratives (Provitola, 2019), while migrant Muslim lesbians in Nordic countries may strategically employ silence and invisibility to navigate their social realities (Liinason, 2020). These examples underscore that visibility is not equally accessible– it is regulated by dominant social, economic, and political structures that reinforce normative ideals and exclude those who do not conform.

While visibility can foster social, economic, and political power, as well as significant modes of organizing, it is also shaped by homonormativity and capitalist exploitation. Often, visibility is commodified, benefiting those who fit a marketable, respectable, and depoliticized lesbian ideal (Liinason, 2020; McKenna, 2002; Rand, 2013; Rousseau, 2015). This can be seen in the studies on the *zhongxing* trend in Taiwan (Hu, 2019) and the "lesbian chic" phenomenon in the West (Rand, 2013). Such dynamics illustrate how visibility is often granted selectively, reinforcing hierarchies that privilege some while excluding others. What is more, it is regulated by dominant social and economic structures, shaping who can be seen and under what terms.

Visibility and invisibility are ambivalent concepts, better understood not as mutually exclusive, but as co-existing and overlapping. From a critical perspective, visibility does not inherently lead to equality; it can also invite surveillance and regulation (Phelan, 1993). Meanwhile, in some contexts, invisibility offers safety, resistance, and community, as seen in South Korea (Jones, 2020). These findings highlight that invisibility is not synonymous with nonexistence or powerlessness. Rather, it can be strategically employed to resist the homogenizing effects of visibility politics. Thus, we are compelled to critically examine who can become visible, under what conditions, and at what cost (McKenna, 2002; Myrdahl, 2011; Provitola, 2019; Rand, 2013).

Ultimately, this review urges a rethinking of visibility politics to move beyond binary notions of visibility as inherently empowering and invisibility as inherently oppressive. A more critical and nuanced approach to visibility politics is needed– one that does not erase marginalized groups, reduce lesbian identity to marketable representations, or reproduce neoliberal depoliticization. Recognizing the agency of those who navigate both visible and invisible existences is crucial. This includes embracing tactical uses of invisibility and creating space for nuanced, intersectional approaches that honor diverse lesbian experiences and pose resistance to the regulatory forces of homonormativity and neoliberal capitalism.

Conclusion

This scoping review demonstrates that lesbian in/visibility is not simply about being seen or unseen but a dynamic process shaped by intersecting structures of power, agency, and collective identity. As such, it challenges dominant visibility frameworks in both academia and activism, calling for more nuanced understandings of non-normative sexualities that do not rely on visibility as the sole marker of recognition and legitimacy.

Rather than existing in opposition, visibility and invisibility are ambivalent, overlapping concepts. While visibility can foster empowerment and political organizing, it is often constrained by normative narratives that exclude racialized, migrant, and non-conforming lesbians. Conversely, invisibility is not inherently oppressive; although it can leave individuals vulnerable to discrimination and violence, it can also provide safety, resistance, and subversive power.

Moreover, while visibility politics are often celebrated, they can also risk perpetuating exclusion when they erase intersectional differences or commodify non-normative identities for neoliberal purposes. Efforts to combat invisibility should avoid reinforcing homonormative ideals and instead embrace frameworks that recognize diverse and complex lesbian existences.

However, this review has certain limitations. The search and selection process—restricted by database choice, language, and a focus on theoretical and qualitative studies—while necessary for coherence, may have led to the omission of relevant research that could further enrich these discussions. Additionally, while the inclusion of articles from multiple fields provided valuable interdisciplinary insights, it also posed challenges in synthesizing diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives. Moreover, the reliance on available literature may have resulted in geographic and demographic gaps, potentially overlooking region-specific lesbian experiences. Future research should address these gaps, amplify the voices of marginalized lesbians, and further examine the dynamics of in/visibility across diverse socio-political contexts.

Scholars and activists must continue to engage critically with visibility politics, resisting simplistic binaries and fostering intersectional, inclusive frameworks that acknowledge both the empowering and regulatory potentials of visibility. By doing so, they can create spaces that honor the full spectrum of lesbian experiences while challenging structures of power and inequality.

Declarations

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