

Identity, stigma and deviance: A sociological analysis of the Stefunknee Wolscht case

Identidad, estigma y desviación: Análisis sociológico del caso Stefunknee Wolscht

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Cite as

Rodríguez Salazar H. Identity, stigma and deviance: A sociological analysis of the Stefunknee Wolscht case. SAP Netnography. 2025; 3:209. <https://doi.org/10.62486/net2025209>

Publication History

Submitted: 28-06-2025

Revised: 09-09-2025

Accepted: 15-11-2025

Published: 16-11-2025

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: the case of Stefunknee Wolscht, a Canadian transgender woman who publicly identified as an “inner child,” was sensationalized and stigmatized by the media. This study analyzed how her identity was socially constructed as deviant, using theoretical frameworks of labeling, stigma, and symbolic control.

Method: a mixed-method approach was applied, combining theoretical-documentary analysis with a structured survey administered to 50 adult participants selected through non-probabilistic convenience sampling. The questionnaire consisted of 13 Likert-scale items grouped into three thematic axes: perceptions of stigma, media influence, and acceptance of diversity.

Results: the findings showed that most respondents rejected the idea that non-normative identities represent social deviance. Participants expressed critical views of the media, seen as agents that reinforce stigma and distort diverse identities. There was also a high level of support for legal protection and social respect toward gender diversity and non-traditional identities.

Conclusions: the study concluded that deviance is not an inherent individual condition, but rather a social construct shaped by power relations and normative discourses. Wolscht’s case functioned as a catalyst for cultural tensions surrounding identity and social normalcy. Educational, media, and legislative interventions were recommended to promote more inclusive, respectful, and pluralistic communities.

Keywords: Social Stigmatization; Gender Identity; Sociology of Deviance; Mass Media; Diversity.

RESUMEN

Introducción: el caso de Stefunknee Wolscht, una mujer trans canadiense que se identificó públicamente como “niña interior”, fue mediatizado de forma sensacionalista y estigmatizante. Esta investigación analizó cómo se construyó socialmente su figura como desviada, en el marco de las teorías del etiquetamiento, el estigma y el control simbólico.

Método: se empleó un enfoque mixto con un componente teórico-documental y una encuesta estructurada aplicada a 50 personas adultas seleccionadas mediante muestreo no probabilístico por conveniencia. El cuestionario incluyó 13 ítems tipo Likert organizados en tres ejes: percepción del estigma, influencia mediática y aceptación de la diversidad.

Resultados: los datos evidenciaron que la mayoría de los participantes rechazaron la idea de que las identidades no normativas constituyen desviación social. Se identificó una percepción crítica hacia los medios de comunicación, considerados como actores que refuerzan el estigma y distorsionan las identidades diversas. Asimismo, se observó una alta valoración de la protección legal y el respeto hacia la diversidad.

Conclusiones: el estudio concluyó que la desviación, más que una condición individual, es una construcción social influida por relaciones de poder y discursos normativos. El caso de Wolscht funcionó como catalizador de tensiones culturales en torno a la identidad y la normalidad. Se recomendaron acciones educativas, mediáticas y legislativas para avanzar hacia comunidades más inclusivas.

Palabras clave: Estigmatización Social; Identidad de Género; Sociología de las Desviaciones; Medios de Comunicación; Diversidad.

INTRODUCTION

Non-normative gender identities continue to be subject to moral surveillance, public debate, and symbolic exclusion in contemporary societies, despite the legal and cultural recognition that various transgender and non-binary groups have achieved in recent decades.^(1,2) This persistent social resistance highlights the existence of institutional, discursive, and media mechanisms that define and sanction expressions of identity that deviate from what is considered “normal.”

A paradigmatic case is that of Stefunknee Wolscht, a Canadian trans woman who, after a marital separation and various episodes of family rejection, began to openly live her identity as an “inner girl.” The dissemination of her story in digital and international media sparked a wave of public reactions that placed her at the center of a global debate on the limits of identity, childhood, personal freedom, and mental health.⁽¹⁾ Far from empathetic coverage, the prevailing media narrative constructed her figure as an object of ridicule, suspicion, and even symbolic criminalization.^(2,3,4)

From the perspective of the sociology of deviance, this phenomenon offers an opportunity to analyze how societies construct the categories of “deviant” and “normal” through processes of social labeling, stigmatization, and symbolic control. Authors such as Becker, Lemert, Goffman, and Foucault have shown that deviance does not reside in the acts or characteristics themselves, but in the way they are interpreted by dominant social groups.^(5,6,7,8)

In the current context of mass digitization, media platforms and social networks not only reflect public opinion, but actively produce it, generating moral panics and reinforcing stereotypes through discourses that exclude, pathologize, and dehumanize diverse identities.^(9,10) The Wolscht case represents an extreme example of how communication technologies amplify social control through symbolic mechanisms that affect the dignity, well-being, and inclusion of non-normative people in their communities.

Despite its international dissemination, there is little academic production in the Spanish-American sphere that analyzes this case from a critical sociological perspective, incorporating contemporary theories on gender, deviance, and the media. This research seeks to fill that gap, contributing to the understanding of the relationships between identity, stigma, and power from an interdisciplinary approach.

Therefore, the objective of this article is to analyze the social construction of deviance in the case of Stefunknee Wolscht, based on the processes of labeling, stigmatization, and media representation, in order to reflect on the challenges faced by communities in promoting a more inclusive, fair, and respectful coexistence of diversity.

METHOD

Research design

This study is part of a mixed exploratory-descriptive design, with the aim of analyzing social perceptions of non-normative identities, taking Stefunknee Wolscht’s case as a starting point. The combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques allowed us to approach the phenomenon from a comprehensive perspective, addressing both symbolic constructions and prevailing social attitudes.

Methodological approach

The methodological approach integrated:

- A theoretical-documentary analysis, focused on a critical review of specialized literature in the sociology of deviance, gender studies, and media theory.
- A quantitative component, based on a structured Likert-type survey, designed to explore beliefs, attitudes, and levels of acceptance towards unconventional gender identities.

This methodological strategy allowed for the triangulation of data to interpret the social representations that contribute to the stigmatization and labeling of people like Wolscht.

Participants and sampling

The sample consisted of 50 adults (over 18 years of age) living in urban areas of Mexico. A non-probability convenience sample was used, aimed at capturing a diversity of sociocultural perceptions of the phenomenon.

The inclusion criteria were:

- Age over 18.
- Access to digital platforms (to respond to the survey).
- Informed consent to participate in academic research.

Data collection instrument

A structured questionnaire was administered, consisting of 13 closed-ended items on a four-point Likert scale, grouped into three thematic areas:

- a) Perceptions of deviance and social stigma.
- b) Influence of the media and dominant culture.
- c) Social acceptance of non-normative identities.

The instrument was designed based on principles of symbolic interactionism and labeling theory, and underwent content validation by two specialists in sociology and social psychology.

Procedure

The survey was distributed online via digital forms, ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of responses. Subsequently, a descriptive statistical analysis of frequencies and percentages was performed to identify trends in perceptions.

The qualitative analysis consisted of a critical review of academic sources in Spanish and English on the Wolscht case, as well as a theoretical interpretation of the data from a critical constructivist approach.

Ethical considerations

The research was conducted under the ethical principles of respect, anonymity, and informed consent. The data collected was used exclusively for academic purposes. No personally identifiable information was collected. The study was developed within the framework of a university training project, in accordance with the ethical standards of social research.

RESULTS

The results obtained from the structured questionnaire applied to a sample of 50 adults are presented. The analysis was organized into three thematic areas: (1) perceptions of deviance and stigma, (2) influence of the media and cultural discourses, and (3) social acceptance of non-normative identities.

Perception of deviance and social stigma

Most of the people surveyed did not consider the expression of non-normative identities to be social deviance. In addition, there was a general consensus on the stigmatizing role played by traditional social norms.

Table 1. Perceptions of deviance and stigma (n=50)				
Item	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Non-traditional identities can be considered social deviance	6 (12 %)	8 (16 %)	17 (34 %)	19 (38 %)
Today's society is tolerant of non-normative identities	4 (8 %)	12	22	12
People with non-normative identities are seen as a threat to social norms	2 (4 %)	10 (20 %)	18	20
Religion influences perceptions of what is considered deviant behavior.	22 (44 %)	18 (36 %)	6 (12 %)	4

There is a predominantly critical stance towards the traditional concept of deviance, as well as recognition of the role that religion and social norms play in reproducing stigma.

Influence of the media and cultural discourses

The results indicate that the media are perceived as influential agents in the creation of stigma, reinforcing biased views of non-normative identities.

Table 2. Influence of the media and dominant culture (n=50)				
Item	A lot	Some	A little	Not at all
The media influences perceptions of transgender or non-normative people	28 (56 %)	14 (28 %)	6	2
The Wolscht case was treated objectively by the media	3 (6 %)	6 (12 %)	18 (36 %)	23 (46 %)
Institutions (school, family) reinforce stereotypes about "normal" behavior	30 (60 %)	14 (28 %)	4	2

There is widespread mistrust of the media, which is perceived as a source of stigmatization rather than a source of objective information. Traditional institutions are also seen as reproducing normative stereotypes.

Acceptance and appreciation of diversity

Finally, attitudes toward the inclusion and legal protection of diverse identities were investigated, finding high levels of support for non-discrimination policies and recognition of diversity.

The results reflect a predominantly inclusive attitude on the part of the respondents, who support regulatory and legal change in favor of diverse populations. The value of cases such as Wolscht's is recognized in promoting broader social reflection on the limits of normality.

Table 3. Attitudes toward inclusion and social justice (n=50)

Item	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Gender and age rules should be more flexible	20 (40 %)	22 (44 %)	6 (12 %)	2 (4 %)
Laws should protect people with non-traditional identities	28 (56 %)	18 (36 %)	3 (6 %)	1 (2 %)
Cases such as Wolscht's help to open up the debate on normality	24 (48 %)	18 (36 %)	6 (12 %)	2
Social acceptance of diversity contributes to a more just society.	30 (60 %)	16 (32 %)	3	1 (2 %)

DISCUSSION

The analysis of Stefanknee Wolscht's case is based on theoretical frameworks that allow us to understand how societies produce deviance as a relational, symbolic, and political phenomenon. Below, we develop the fundamental conceptual axes from the sociology of deviance and apply their analysis to the context of the case.

Social labeling and secondary deviance

The theory of social labeling, developed mainly by Howard Becker and Edwin Lemert,^(5,6) argues that deviance does not reside in the act itself, but in the social reaction that defines it as such. In this framework, Stefanknee Wolscht is not “deviant” because of her identity per se, but because of how it is interpreted and sanctioned by society through the media, institutions, and public opinion.⁽¹⁰⁾

Lemert distinguishes between primary deviance, understood as a non-stigmatized transgression, and secondary deviance, which arises when the subject internalizes the label of deviant and reorganizes their identity based on that social mark.⁽⁶⁾ In Wolscht's case, her self-identification as a “girl” can be seen as an act of affirmation that was reconfigured by the public narrative as deviance, producing an intense and stigmatizing social reaction.

This approach reveals how groups with normative power impose categories that shape the symbolic limits of acceptability. Wolscht's identity transgresses several boundaries (gender, age, body), which contributed to a disproportionate social response, more oriented toward moral punishment than toward understanding the phenomenon.

Stigma and management of public identity

From the theory of stigma, Goffman points out that certain characteristics, when they deviate from what is socially expected, operate as deeply discrediting attributes.^(7,11,12) In this case, Wolscht's identity was coded as “abnormal,” not because of her subjective experience, but because of how it was perceived through the normative frameworks of gender and age.

Stigma has concrete effects on an individual's social life: it restricts opportunities, damages relationships, and dehumanizes. In response, stigmatized individuals develop stigma management strategies, ranging from concealment to deliberate visibility. Wolscht's decision to publicly share her story can be read as an attempt to redefine her identity, although it ended up being exploited by the media as a moral spectacle.

Goffman distinguishes between virtual social identity (the public image constructed by the environment) and real social identity (the subjective experience of the individual). This discrepancy was evident in the Wolscht case, whose identity was reduced by the media and social networks to a caricature, nullifying his human and symbolic dimension.

Symbolic interaction and identity meanings

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, identity is not a fixed attribute, but a construction that emerges through social interaction.⁽¹³⁾ Gender identity, in particular, is understood as a series of meanings that are continuously negotiated with “significant others.” For Wolscht, this negotiation resulted in family rejection, media exposure, and a search for new networks of validation.

The symbols used by Wolscht (clothing, childish language, games) are not mere performative gestures, but acts of signification aimed at expressing a lived identity. The problem does not lie in the use of these symbols, but in how society interprets and sanctions their use outside the normative script. Thus, social judgment is directed not only at the act, but also at its symbolic meaning.

This approach allows us to see that the conflict is not essentially individual, but relational. What generates tension is not the existence of a dissident identity, but society's inability to accept alternative meanings. Wolscht's case reveals how the possibility of articulating legitimate identity narratives outside the dominant normative framework is hindered.

Critical criminology and symbolic moral control

Critical criminology, influenced by Foucault's thinking, analyzes how power defines and regulates acceptable behavior through discursive, institutional, and normative devices. In this approach, there is no deviant essence, but rather a series of power relations that produce deviant subjects.⁽⁸⁾

Wolscht was made the object of surveillance and media ridicule without having committed any crime. This form of symbolic criminalization reveals how power acts not only by punishing actions, but also by shaping identities through discourses that pathologize and delegitimize.⁽¹²⁾ Wolscht was instrumentalized as an example of “excessive freedom” in conservative contexts, thus reinforcing the dominant moral order.

Media exposure translates into a form of modern public punishment, aligned with what Foucault described as a disciplinary power that does not need to lock people up, but rather expose, classify, and subject them to continuous judgment.⁽⁸⁾ This type of symbolic punishment has concrete consequences on people's lives, weakening their support networks, mental health, and access to rights.

Media production of stigma and moral panic

The media coverage of the Wolscht case shows how the media acts as a producer of social morality, not only reporting the facts, but also constructing interpretive frameworks that legitimize exclusion.⁽¹³⁾ Instead of reporting rigorously, the dominant narrative presented the case as an extreme deviation, reducing the complexity of identity to a provocative headline.

This treatment is part of what Cohen called moral panic: a process by which the media and social actors exaggerate a perceived threat, creating alarm and mobilizing repressive responses.⁽³⁾ In this context, Wolscht was positioned as a "cultural enemy," a symbol of the collapse of traditional norms.

The media construction of this type of panic contributes to reinforcing the symbolic limits of social morality, penalizing anything that deviates from the expected script. Thus, the case not only affects the person involved, but also sends a disciplinary message to all those whose identities or expressions deviate from the norm.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the Stefanknee Wolscht case shows that the social construction of deviance is a phenomenon deeply rooted in the symbolic and normative structures of contemporary societies. Far from being an individual quality, deviance emerges from a collective process of labeling, stigmatization, and discursive control, activated in this case by the media, social networks, and traditional institutions.

Through the intersection of theories of labeling, stigma, symbolic interactionism, and critical criminology, it is evident that Wolscht was constructed as a "moral threat" in the public imagination. This process not only affected his personal well-being and identity rights but also served as a disciplinary mechanism toward other non-normative expressions.

The empirical results of the study reveal, however, a trend toward the denaturalization of deviance and a progressive openness to more inclusive discourses on the part of some social sectors. While the impact of the media on the reproduction of stigma persists, there are also spaces for symbolic resistance and social criticism, especially among young urban people.

The case analyzed directly challenges our communities: to what extent are we willing to accept diversity beyond our own cultural norms? The answer is not limited to tolerance, but to the collective capacity to build a pluralistic coexistence based on respect, empathy, and human rights.

Recommendations

- a) For the media: an ethical review of the narrative frameworks applied to non-normative identities is required. Training journalists in gender-sensitive and diversity-sensitive approaches is recommended.
- b) For educational institutions: promote critical training programs on sexual and gender diversity from an early age, encouraging reflection on social stigmas and the construction of normality.
- c) For legislators and public policy makers: it is urgent to strengthen legal frameworks that guarantee the protection of people with unconventional gender expressions, as well as to punish hate speech and symbolic discrimination.
- d) For civil society and communities: foster spaces for intercultural dialogue where identity can be negotiated and expressed without symbolic violence, recognizing that difference is a collective value and not a threat.

Limitations of the study

This study has some methodological limitations that should be considered. First, the sample was non-probabilistic and limited to a small number of participants, which restricts the generalizability of the results. Second, the approach focused on the analysis of a single case (single case study), which, although it allows for interpretive depth, limits the possibility of comparison with other contexts or similar cases.

Furthermore, direct interviews and systematic digital discourse analysis (such as social media data mining) were not incorporated, which would have enriched the qualitative component and broadened the scope of the study.

Future lines of research

To advance the critical understanding of deviance as a social construct, several lines of research are proposed:

- a) Comparative analysis of media cases on non-normative identities in different cultural and geographical contexts.
- b) Longitudinal studies on the psychosocial impact of media labeling on transgender and non-binary people.
- c) Interdisciplinary research integrating sociology, communication, law, and mental health to address the complexity of social stigmatization.
- d) Exploration of community resistance and counter-hegemonic narratives in digital social networks as spaces for the reconfiguration of stigma.

These future lines of research will enable us to move toward a more complex, contextualized, and empathetic understanding of

human diversity in the contemporary world.

FINANCING

None.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION

Conceptualization: Héctor Rodríguez Salazar.

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