

Abstract: Helsinki Photomedia
Danielle Arets, Michiel Bles
Fontys University of Applied Sciences, professorship Designing Journalism

Humanizing the Invisible: A Call for Destigmatized Photography of Homeless Young Adults

This study delves into the critical intersection between press photography and the portrayal of homeless young adults, emphasizing the pressing need for destigmatized images to counteract prevalent dehumanizing representations. Homelessness among young adults, a pervasive societal issue, is often exacerbated by negative stereotypes perpetuated through visual media. Current photographic depictions of this demographic in journalistic outlets tend to reinforce stigmas, further marginalizing individuals already grappling with societal neglect. Through an analysis of existing visual narratives in Dutch newspapers and design-driven research focused on creating new representative images, this research underscores the profound impact of imagery on public perception and the potential to overcome negative framing through collaboration between journalism researchers, press photographers, and young homeless adults.

Destigmatizing, visual research, photography, young homeless, design research

Visual communication plays a pivotal role in shaping societal perceptions and attitudes. Although there is a growing attention to verbal framing, visual framing is often overlooked (Fahmy, 2004; Messaris, Abraham, 2001). In this study we focus on the impact of visual representation of homeless youngsters in Dutch media outings.

In our previous study on journalistic representation of homeless young people in Dutch media, we examined how journalists have represented this target group over the past 20 years. Based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2001) we explored dominant concepts in describing this target group. We observed a shift towards more constructive language in recent years. Negative terms like 'vagrants' or 'cripples,' used two decades ago, have been replaced by constructive descriptions like people with housing and/or broad social problems (De Cooker, Boonman, 2021, Arets et al. 2022).

Interestingly, there is no corresponding positive trend in the use of images. A visual analysis of dominant images in journalistic reporting over the past 20 years reveals a persistent association of homelessness with life on a street bench, dirty clothes, and a limited demographic group (middle-aged men) (Brugman, 2023). These images are not representative of the target group, which increasingly consists of young people, women, and migrant groups (Van Doorn, 2010). When young people are pictured, it is often with a hooded jumper, hands in their hair, and in a blurred background.

Image interviews with the target group—a cohort of 6 homeless young adults in the Netherlands—demonstrate their discomfort with these images; they are not representative of their situation and are perceived as hurtful. This corresponds with findings of Van Steenbergen who noticed that negative visual associations could reinforce negative self esteem (Van Steenbergen, 2020)

Through image sessions (a designed workshop where we discussed images in a systematic manner) with journalists from four Dutch national, regional, and local outlets, we discovered that ignorance often prevails. Journalists frequently use images available in their databases, furthermore, expressing the need to highlight the seriousness of the homelessness situation, hence the use of often stigmatized pictures.

"I wasn't even aware that my picture—that is often used in news coverages—can be hurtful," remarked a photographer.

Building on our insights, we initiated the creation of new images through close collaboration with the target audience, press photographers, journalistic, and design researchers, resulting in the image repository *Het Beelddepot* (www.hetbeelddepot.nl/) and a framework for destigmatized photograph. The new images are already frequently used by Dutch outlets, as well as researchers on homelessness. We aim to further develop *Het Beelddepot* simultaneously investigating whether these images can contribute to a better understanding of the situation of homeless young adults.

Through a combination of theoretical analysis and case studies, our study contributes to the evolving discourse on visual representation and its impact on young homeless adults in the Netherlands. Our initial findings underscore the responsibility of photographers, media organizations, to document the experiences of homeless young adults. In proposing a framework for destigmatized photography, our study emphasizes the importance of collaboration with affected communities, incorporating their voices and narratives into the creation process.

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