



**Universiteit Utrecht**

## **I, Technobody**

**A study of the way a sex toy can contribute to the understanding of the body as a merge of artificial and natural.**



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## Foreword

In March 2013, I saw an advertisement for the brand Durex on television. This sparked a conversation between me and my partner about the sex toy industry. It got me thinking about the social acceptance of sex toys, which lead me to question in what way a sex toy could influence my view on my body. Although I already had a subject for my master's thesis, I could not let go of my ideas about the sex toy industry. Eventually, I decided to drastically change my plans and go with a study of sex toys instead and I'm happy I did. This thesis has provided me insight in the execution of research, but also taught me a lot about sex toys and sexuality.

I could not have completed this thesis without the help of my mentor and supervisor Domitilla Olivieri. She guided me through this intricate process and provided me with the necessary feedback (and humour) to continue and complete the thesis the best way I could. I would also like to thank the staff of the Comparative Women's Studies programme, as all courses and information has contributed to my knowledge on theories and writing.

Many thanks to all people that have contributed in one way or another to the completion of this work, in particular my partner and my family for sparking discussion and asking questions.

A special thanks to my fellow student Sven Oostrik, who provided me with support and feedback, when times were tough.

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## Chapter 1

### Theoretical-methodological framework

#### *Sex, feminism and the cyborg*

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*Miranda: "You don't even need them [men] to have sex with any more, as I've just very pleasantly discovered."*

*Samantha: "Sounds like someone just got their first vibrator!"*

*Charlotte: "Oh stop it! This is so sad!"*

*Carrie: "I'm not going to replace a man with some battery-operated device."*

*Miranda: "You say that, but you haven't met the Rabbit."*

(Sex and the City, 1998)

The conversation above took place between the four main characters in an episode of the popular TV-show *Sex and the City*. One of the main characters, Miranda, elaborates on her new vibrator, whilst two other girls do not like to "replace a man with some battery-operated device".

Sex is booming business. The adult entertainment industry is incredibly large and grosses between \$10 and \$14 billion dollars annually (Comella, 2008). An interesting part of the sex industry revolves around sex toys. Sex toys are gaining popularity rapidly and consumers in the United States spend around \$500 million dollars on sex toys each year (University of Chicago & MyPleasure, 2002). In the United Kingdom, sex toy sales have doubled in the last two years (*Volkskrant*, 2012). Sex toys are also becoming available in stores other than sex shops. In the United States, grocery stores such as Walgreens and Wal-Mart sell vibrators (Comella, 2008). In the Netherlands, online store bol.com offers over 16,000 sex products, including stimulants, lubricants, vibrators, and penis

pumps (Bol.com, 2014). Dutch convenience stores such as Kruidvat and Etos sell a variety of lubricants and small vibrators.

When it comes to using a sex toy, women lead the way. In the Netherlands, about 63% of women have used a sex toy (Bakker & Vanwesenbeeck, 2006). In the U.S., 52% of women have used or use a vibrator (Herbenick et al., 2009). Women spend more money on sex items than men, paying up till \$83 on average (Dorfman, as quoted in Comella, 2008). Swedish-American research shows that about 31% of women have purchased a sex toy online (Daneback, Månsson & Ross, 2011). And with the increased popularity of the sex toy, the so-called in-home sex toy parties arose. These parties involve a host or salesperson displaying sex toys at someone's home, where a group of people can see the toys and purchase them in a non-store environment. These parties are typically held in women's homes for other women (Fisher et al., 2010; McCaughey & French, as quoted in Jozkowski, Schick, Herbenick, & Reece, 2012). In conclusion, it is plausible that there is a female-oriented focus in the sex toy industry.

Sex toys are older than one might think. As early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century, women used dildos to "*relieve their sexual frustration*" (Maines, 1999). In 1880, the first electrical vibrator was invented (ibid, 1999). These days, models vary from battery-powered to waterproof to all sorts of sizes, shapes and colours. Technology has helped to create better and more sex toys. This is obviously not the only industry that has benefitted from technological advancement. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, practices such as plastic surgery, the development of bionic limbs, and hypodermic heart rate monitors are no longer rare. Plastic surgery allows a human to change their face, whereas a bionic limb might allow a human to change their mobility. Coming back to the question of sex and sexuality in relation to technology, reconstructive and plastic surgeries play major roles in the lives of transsexuals, for example. These surgeries allow transsexuals – intended as people who undergo surgery and other medical interventions to change their gendered appearance and their biological sex – to change their exterior and genitalia, to express the gender they identify with through their physical bodies.

These techniques are improving more and more, as was demonstrated this year. In 2014, surgeons successfully created four tissue-engineered vaginas for patients with vaginal defects (Raya-Rivera et al., 2014). This allows women to have fully functioning genitalia, with working nerve endings. These types of surgeries provide a woman with the opportunity to experience sex and orgasm, just like any other woman without a vaginal defect.

This vaginal construction brings up an important point. These four women have mechanically engineered vaginas, so what does that say about their bodies? Are they no longer considered fully human or natural? Are they now a mixture between natural and mechanical? A similar question could be asked with regards to women with breast implants or women with an intrauterine device (IUD). They have a piece of technology in their bodies: how does that affect the way their bodies are perceived?

### **Feminist framework**

An important scholar to discuss the topic of natural and mechanical is biologist and feminist scholar Donna Haraway. Haraway wrote about it extensively in her book *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: the Reinvention of Nature* (1991). Haraway acknowledges that:

*“Machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between the natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines.”*

(Haraway, 1991, p. 152)

Thus, the technological developments are blurring boundaries between certain dichotomies, such as mind and body, natural and artificial. As mentioned above, there are plenty of examples of this blurring. Haraway then continues to use the notion of a cyborg to argue how humans and machines are merging. She argues *“Contemporary science [and] modern medicine is full of cyborgs, of couplings*

*between organism and machine*" (1991, p. 149 – 150). To paraphrase, she argues that humans are (slowly becoming) cyborgs, a "*hybrid*", as they are a merging of natural and artificial. Haraway's cyborg is a theoretical approach to blur boundaries and to redefine the relationship between human and machine. She understands the cyborg as a merge between organic and mechanic, through which all dichotomies such as nature/nurture, and sex/gender collapse. Her cyborg does not so much revolve around bodily changes that come with technology, but is centred around the way science and technology are a part of our lives (Buikema & Van der Tuin, 2009). This way, the cyborg allows scientists to think outside traditional concepts.

The cyborg can be considered an interesting tool to investigate (social) situations. Related to the sex (toy) industry is the notion of shame. In this thesis, shame is linked to sex/sexuality. Shame can be defined in many ways, but it could be connected to a feeling of 'being wrong'. Professor of health psychology and sexual habits researcher Bente Traeen explains shame as:

*"Feelings of shame have to do with our perception of who we are, as opposed to feelings of guilt, which deal with regret over what we have done. There is forgiveness for doing wrong, but not for being wrong – for who we are."*

(Traeen, 2009, p. 81)

Another powerful definition of shame is related to the merging of (appropriate) contexts. Literature scholar Martin Swales argues that the merging from one context to another evokes shame, as the merge seems socially inappropriate. I will address this more extensively later in this chapter. Yet, it could be argued that this notion of shame does not apply to the cyborg. Haraway believes that the cyborg is "*no longer structured by the polarity of public and private*" (1991, p. 151). Following Swales, the cyborg does not seem to be affected by this difference in social context. The moving from one social context to another (for example, from private to public) does not have any influence on the cyborg, rendering it shameless, so to speak. This makes the cyborg an interesting tool to research the notion of shame related to sex.

Philosophical feminist scholar Sara Ahmed also wrote extensively on shame:

*"Shame can be described as an intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body. [...] When shamed, one's body seems to burn up with the negation that is perceived (self-negation); and shame impresses upon the skin, as an intense feeling of the subject 'being against itself'."*

(Ahmed, 2004, p. 103)

Ahmed links shame to the physical body, explaining how shame is a response that impresses upon the body itself. This bodily effect is very interesting with regards to sex toys, as they also evoke a physical response. Traeen also touches upon the notion of shame and sexuality, as she argues *"a lack of sexual health is closely connected to a person's self-perception"* (2009, p. 81). She believes that shame influences someone's self-perception, which in turn has its effect on sexual health. In conclusion, shame can have a negative influence on one's sexual health.

Martin Swales acknowledges the social aspect of shame. Swales argues that the main forces behind shame are in fact socio-psychological and cultural (2003). As mentioned above, he elaborates how shame arises when certain frontiers are crossed: *"This crossing [...] has nothing to do with the infringement of laws, and everything to do with a sense of the commingling of inappropriate contexts"* (Swales, 2003, p. 11). In other words, Swales argues that shame does not depend on a set of rules that are disobeyed, but is invoked subtler. One is ashamed when contexts mix, for example, from a professional context to a more personal one. This experience could invoke a feeling of inappropriateness, of shame. Ahmed also addresses the social issue of shame, as she explains that shame *"involves the de-forming and re-forming of bodily and social spaces"* (Ahmed, 2004, p. 103). Psychologist Susan Quilliam (2007) links shame to sex toys and believes that discussions about sex toys should be encouraged, as they can decrease shame and embarrassment. Shame and social acceptance are core aspects when



considering sex toys, and I wonder whether the dynamic between the two has changed with the popularity of sex toys.

## **Technobody**

It could be argued that the sex toy itself is a merging between human and non-human. It allows for the human to have a sexual experience using a mechanical device, without there necessarily being another human present. Haraway claims that:

*“communications technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies. [...] Communication sciences and biology are constructions of natural-technical objects of knowledge in which the difference between machine and organism is thoroughly blurred; mind, body, and tool are on very intimate terms.”*

(Haraway, 1991, p. 164)

In the quote above, Haraway highlights how sciences, such as biology, are a merge between natural and artificial. In that sense, using a vibrator, for example, could be seen as an intimate merging between mind, body, and technological tool. This merging could redefine the boundaries of the human body, as it changes the relation between human and pleasure. As Haraway aptly puts it: *“Why should our bodies end at the skin?”* (ibid). It could be argued that a woman plus a vibrator equals a ‘technobody’. In this argument, the term ‘technobody’ means a merge between a human body and technology, in a very practical sense. Haraway’s cyborg is a theoretical tool to criticise and blur social and cultural boundaries. The term technobody refers to a more practical approach. For example, Olympic medallist runner “Blade Runner” Oscar Pistorius has had a double below-the-knee amputation and runs on carbon fibre feet. His body has become a merge between body and technology, allowing him to have had a very successful sporting career<sup>1</sup>. I wonder how the matters of the natural/artificial split, shame, social acceptance, and the perception of the body tie together. Have

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on Oscar Pistorius, see: <http://oscarpistorius.com/about-oscar/>.

the sex toys changed our Western view on the female body? Can a sex toy be considered an extension of a female body in this day and age? These considerations have led to my research question and a set of sub-questions for this thesis.

While the focus of my inquiry is on the Netherlands, I aim at answering a broader question, namely; *in what way does a sex toy contribute to a view of the female body as a 'technobody'?*

In order to answer my research question, I have broken it down into sub-questions:

1. How does a sex toy fit within the current Western, and particularly Dutch, technological culture, which seems to rely on technological 'advancement' to alter/better the body?
2. How is the female body conceptualised and defined within this same context?
3. In what way can sex toys be viewed as an extension of the female sexual body?

## **Methods and methodology**

For this thesis, I want to use multiple methods to conduct the research. In order to provide an answer for my (sub)question(s), I want to analyse different materials. First, I want to try and find out what the Dutch sex toy industry offers. In order to do so, I want to perform a content analysis of three Dutch websites that sell sex toys; [www.christineleduc.nl](http://www.christineleduc.nl), [www.pabo.nl](http://www.pabo.nl), and [www.willie.nl](http://www.willie.nl). In particular, I will focus on the amount of toys available for women and men: are there more toys for either women or men? Is there a different variety in toys? What key words are used to describe and sell these toys? And how are images used on the home page of the website?

Secondly, I would like to conduct a small survey to find out how users of sex toys define their toys, how they perceive them (e.g. as an extension of their body or

more in terms of an alteration) and how they perceive the social acceptance of said toys. I would also add a number of questions related to the impact of popular culture (specifically two examples, which I will elaborate on further) on their conceptions of sex toys. I propose that it is interesting and important to reach out to sex toy owners of different age groups, in order to identify a possible influence of pop culture on daily experiences. By approaching people between approximately 18 and 55 years of age, I will attempt to have a small yet representative sample. I also aim at having a variety of participants, in terms of sexual orientation, gender, and geographical location, in my sample.

I had intended to include some form of research on the discourses in popular culture. However, due to lack of time, I will not have enough room to explore these elements. Therefore, I have decided to add a few questions regarding popular culture to my survey, in order to see how respondents think about the influence of popular culture. I will use two examples of popular culture: an episode of the TV-show *Sex and the City* called “*The Turtle and The Hare*” and the book *Fifty Shades of Grey*. *Sex and the City* was broadcasted in the 1990s and nominated for over 50 Emmy Awards and 24 Golden Globe Awards<sup>2</sup>. *Sex and the City* revolves around the lives of four white, working women in New York City. The main character, Carrie Bradshaw, is a writer and she explores the dating scene of New York. With her friends, she discusses the concepts of sex and relationships, which include a variety of subjects, including sex toys. In the episode “*The Turtle and The Hare*”, the four main characters discuss and focus on a sex toy called the Pearl Rabbit vibrator. *Fifty Shades of Grey* is an erotic novel by E.L. James, published in 2011 and sold over 100 million copies worldwide. It has led to a film adaptation and the book inspired many sex toys<sup>3</sup>. The book centres on Anastasia Steele, a virgin and literature student, and on entrepreneur Christian Grey. Grey is a Dominant and wants to have BDSM experiences with Ana. BDSM refers to an ample range of erotic and sexual practices, and stands for

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<sup>2</sup> For more info on the TV-show *Sex and the City*, see <http://www.hbo.com/sex-and-the-city#/sex-and-the-city/about/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> For more info on the book trilogy of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, see <http://www.eljamesauthor.com/books/fifty-shades-of-grey/>

Bondage, Discipline, Sadism, and Masochism; it involves dominance and submission, the use of restraints, and role-playing. In the book, Grey is the Dominant and wants Steele to be his Submissive: i.e. he wants to involve her in role playing activities and the use of restraints, whips, and other tools to experience a different kind of pleasure.

By adding a number of questions about these examples of popular culture, I wish to find out about their influence. For instance, *Sex and the City's* episode on the Pearl Rabbit vibrator has generated higher sales of that vibrator and is also considered to have a positive influence on the taboo on sex toys. As sexologist Yvonne K. Fulbright explains: "*One of the good things is that it [the episode] has been permission-giving, it's advertised the Rabbit, normalising it and making it acceptable to use.*" (Fulbright, as quoted in Perks, 2006). I wonder how these examples of popular culture have had an impact on the thoughts about the sex toy industry, as both the show and the book openly discuss the theme<sup>4</sup>. Thus, by asking my participants questions about the show and the book, I will be able to use these examples to contextualise their opinions on sex toys within the Dutch contemporary culture.

After some thought, I have decided against conducting interviews. Even though this would be an excellent way to ask about social acceptance and the perception of the body, it might become too personal, especially considering the somewhat short timespan of this research. As I have found participants through my own social network, I would have risked ruining a relationship with someone for the sake of the research. The same consideration applies to the possibility of doing focus groups: these might be too personal.

As I have mentioned above, I will use several methods to gather my research material. I have chosen this mixed-methods approach, because my background is

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<sup>4</sup> For more info on the impact of the episode "*The Turtle and The Hare*", see <http://snarkoplex.wordpress.com/2014/01/04/sex-and-the-city-re-watch-recap-the-turtle-and-the-hare/>

in social sciences. This has taught me to perform quantitative research. However, my master's programme has shown me different views on research and I want to use this knowledge and include a qualitative approach. Hence, my choice of a mix methodology: website content analysis and survey. In order to know how sex toy users experience sex, their body, sex toys, and social acceptance, I have conducted a small survey. I aimed at reaching at least 25 people who would complete the survey, as I have assumed that this would allow me to analyse the data from a quantitative point of view and perhaps attempt to draw conclusions for a larger population. However, I also took into account the possibility of having a smaller amount of participants; I was aware that in that way I would have been able to learn more about the participant's feelings (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). Realistically, I could not gather a great deal of respondents for my survey, making it difficult to consider it representative for the Dutch population (Bryman, 2008). Therefore, I must be cautious when interpreting the results. For the website, I will perform a content analysis. This content analysis allows me to study text and images, the various aspects of a cultural product, and can help me identify social and cultural norms (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007).

This combination of methods has its downsides, of which I am aware. Although I expected around 25 participants for the survey, I received 100 responses. This was above my expectations, as I anticipated that a survey about intimate details might not be popular. However, even though these 100 participants are more than expected, this sample is not large enough to be an accurate representation of the Dutch population. Hence, I have been cautious with drawing of conclusions.

By using several methods to answer my research question, I have been able to gather various views on the sex toy industry. By looking at the sex toy websites, I have provided some context about the dominant discourse on sex toys. The findings from my survey allowed me to study the issues of social acceptance and taboos related to sex toys. The extra questions related to popular culture could contextualise the answers in contemporary Dutch culture. In particular, these questions enabled me to look at how pop culture can function to both change

one's view on 'personal' issues, such as those related to sex and sexual practices, and affect cultural perceptions and definitions of what a female sexual body is and does.

## **Relevance**

The question whether the female body is perceived as a 'technobody' through the use of a sex toy, could contribute to the knowledge about the sexuality of the female body, about the use of sex toys, and about the cyborg. Accordingly, this research taps into an area, taking sex and sexual practices into account, which is not discussed in Donna Haraway's literature. This means that with my study I also hope to inspire other scholars to further investigate the (female) 'technobody'.

Furthermore, this research intends to contribute to the body of knowledge on sex toys. There has been research on sex toys use and sales, but my study could provide more data to this body of research, as it explores the Dutch contemporary community. Also, by looking at the feelings and opinions of sex toy users, the outcome of this study could provide the sex toy industry with extra information on how to target its audience more specifically. In this sense, the kind of research I am doing and proposing could contribute to the development of new devices to comply with the wishes of the sex toy users. For example, by working in conjunction with the health care business, the sex products industry has developed a specific range of vibrators before (Quilliam, 2007). The analysis of the websites and examples of popular culture could perhaps show a niche for the industry to explore.

## Chapter 2

### Analysis of the survey about sex toys

*How does the Dutch public see the sex toy in relation to themselves?*

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In this chapter, I will outline how the survey was created, distributed and processed. I will explain the results and interpret those with the help of feminist theoretical approaches. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the choice of the survey lies in the quantitative roots of my bachelor's degree. This survey will be useful to find out what the general attitude towards (the use of) sex toys is in the Netherlands. I aim to find out whether sex toys are used, socially accepted, and how popular culture has influenced these issues. A survey is typically useful to address a large group of people within a certain timeframe. In this case, a cross-sectional survey was used, due to limited time. A cross-sectional approach uses a short timespan (e.g. a few weeks) to gather data, as opposed to longitudinal, which can take up to decades. Although surveys can be used as representative of a certain population, it depends on the number of respondents to conjure an accurate representation. This questionnaire received 100 responses, which is a good sample. By analysing the personal information of the respondents such as age or gender, some conclusions can be drawn for a specific target group. Yet, a sample of 100 respondents is not large enough to represent the Dutch population, but rather a specific part of it.

#### **Set up and distribution**

There was no template available for this survey. As I was specifically interested in certain topics, I decided to write it myself. Taking into account the fact that I have read and answered numerous questionnaires, and having learned about several aspects of surveys during my bachelor's degree, this seemed the fastest,

cheapest and thus my best option<sup>5</sup>. Also, by constructing my own survey, I could be very specific about the questions I wanted to ask, and be aware of the terminology used with regards to gender and sexuality. This would provide me with more control. Finally, as the questionnaire contained very personal information, I thought it would ethically be the best option to be the sole person handling it. I decided to construct a survey that would take participants approximately ten minutes to complete, to keep it accessible. I also decided on an online, digital medium rather than an offline medium (such as on paper), because I would be able to distribute the online version faster. Also, by using a digital survey, I would not have to process all the data by typing it by hand; instead, programmes such as SPSS could do that for me<sup>6</sup>.

The survey was divided into three major parts. The first part included questions about personal information, such as age, sex, sexual orientation, and location in the Netherlands. These four questions were listed as questions with multiple options. The second part was about owning and using a sex toy, and what relationship a sex toy has to one's body. In the second part, statements were issued, asking the participant to use a Likert-scale to answer them. I will elaborate on the Likert-scale later in this chapter. The third and final part consisted of a few questions about popular culture, mixing both open questions with yes/no-questions. I left out questions about field of work/study out, as this was not one of my areas of interest. I also excluded the question of ethnicity, which was unplanned. I had intended to add it, but as I wanted to have the survey up and running as fast as possible, I simply overlooked its absence, much to my regret.

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<sup>5</sup> The original survey was in Dutch. The translation to English can be found in the Appendix. See Appendix A.

<sup>6</sup> SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) is a mathematical programme that is used commonly in the social sciences. It can perform actions to process quantitative data, such as displaying the mean, median and outliers and data, or more extended actions, such as regression analyses.



Several theoretical considerations were taken into account when designing the survey. First of all, a 5-point Likert scale was implemented. The Likert scale is a way to measure someone's intensity of feelings towards a specific subject (Bryman, 2008). This scale consists of several answers, ranging from "completely disagree", to "completely agree". A participant has to pick the intensity that matches their feelings the best. In this case, a 5-point Likert scale was used to measure how people felt about sex toys, their bodies, and their sexuality. The scale was listed as: "completely agree", "agree", "neutral/don't know", "disagree", "completely disagree". Of course, the scale was written in Dutch, translating the options to: "*helemaal mee eens*", "*mee eens*", "*neutraal/weet ik niet*", "*niet mee eens*", "*helemaal niet mee eens*". However, a number of open questions were also used, providing the participants with the option of voicing their opinion.

Secondly, to try and prevent participants from answering according to a response set, multiple questions were phrased both positive and negative. For example, two questions of the survey were "Using a sex toy is socially unacceptable" and "Using a sex toy is perfectly normal". By phrasing a question in both a negative and positive tone, it can be determined whether participants use a specific set of responses, such as acquiescence. Acquiescence is a practice that involves participants always entering the same answer, regardless of what the question is (Bryman, 2008). If every question is answered with "agree", then using both positive and negative questions could pinpoint this practice, offering the researcher the choice to exclude the data from the analysis. Also, some questions were repeated in slightly different forms, to see if people really understood the questions.

Thirdly, when asking for someone's personal information, a broad approach was taken, for example, when asking for someone's sexual orientation. To push participants to read the question properly, the option "heterosexual" was the last option, breaking away from the usual order in surveys. Also, after listing multiple options, such as heterosexual, lesbian, and asexual, the final answer was "other, namely". This space provided people with room to clarify their sexual orientation, if they did not consider the options listed applicable to their person.

This set up was on purpose, making use of the practice of “double-consciousness” and “subjugated knowledges” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). A “double consciousness” allows for feminist researcher to avoid hierarchies and dichotomies. This concept involves the idea that a feminist researcher can view both the dominant discourse, but also the exceptions, as a feminist researcher usually does not align with the dominant discourse. This allows for a better perspective on both the larger dominant groups and the marginalised groups. Usually, the term “subjugated knowledges” refers to knowledge of marginalised groups, that are usually not apparent. In this case, subjugated knowledges were sought after, as the opinions of marginalised people (for instance, such as people identifying as “asexual”) can display a very interesting difference with the dominant group. Also, by listing more options than usual, certain silenced voices might be able to speak up through the survey (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). A survey that does not include multiple options when asking for sexual orientation might (unknowingly) exclude groups of people that do not conform to the usually used options of heterosexual, bisexual, or gay. Hence, by including a large variety of options and providing the respondent with some space to write, otherwise silenced voices should be able to speak up.

After designing the questions, the survey was distributed through a digital medium, an online service called Qualtrics. This programme allows for a researcher to set up an online survey, generating a URL to the specific survey. In this case, the survey’s URL was distributed via all possible channels of the social network of the researcher, to broaden the range of participants. As of May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014, the survey was activated and distributed through Facebook, Whatsapp and e-mail. It remained active until June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014. As described in the previous chapter, the initial goal was to reach at least 25 participants, between the ages of 18 and 55 years. Over a twelve-day period, 146 participants started the survey. Of those 146, 130 people between the ages of 18 and 85 completed the survey, meaning a dropout rate of 11%. However, it seems that some people left questions unanswered if they did not consider the question applicable to them. This has its effect on the data, leaving certain topics unanswered. Therefore, the

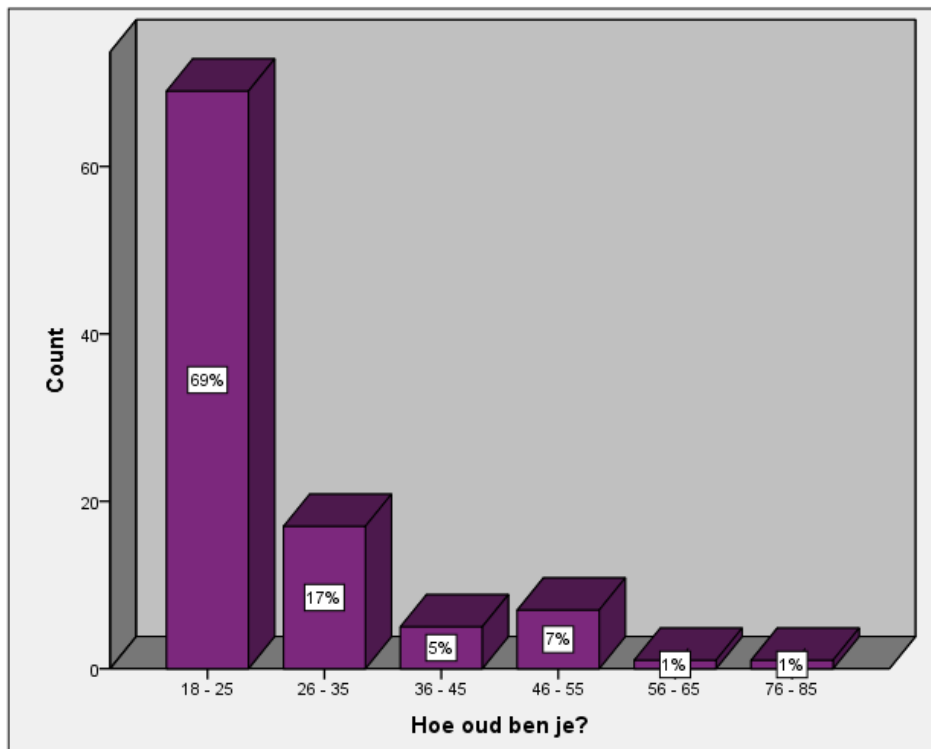
decision has been made to only take the fully completed surveys into account. Thus, 100 participants were used in this analysis.

## Data analysis

### *Part one: age, sex, sexual orientation, and province.*

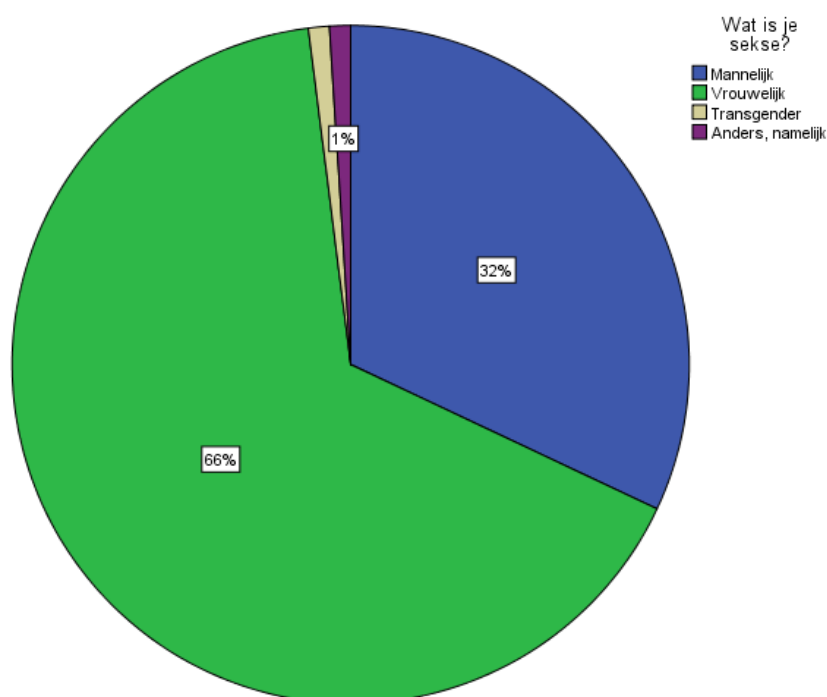
In the first part, the survey asked about personal details, such as sex, or sexual orientation. As mentioned above, with both sex and sexual orientation, broad categories were applied and an option of “other, namely” was used to ensure everyone could answer these questions. This proved to be a good move, as somebody entered their sexual orientation to be “*pansexueel*” (which translates to pansexual), which was not included as a category. A similar situation occurred with the question about someone’s sex. One participant answered with “*niet-binair (demigirl)*”, which translates into non-binary (demigirl). The question of age was divided into age groups of approximately ten years each, such as “26-35”. The question about province simply listed all the Dutch provinces. Below, in Figure 1, the distribution of ages is visible.

Figure 1: age distribution of survey



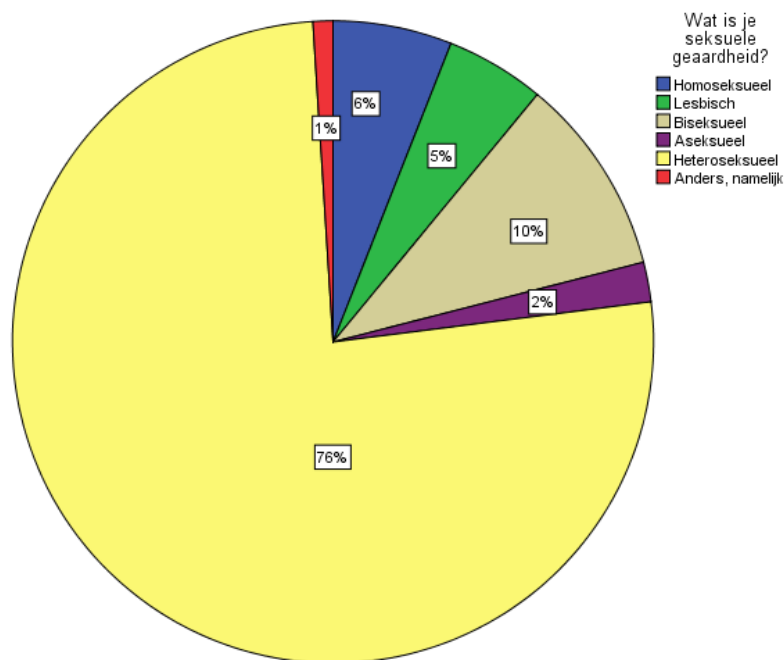
Evidently, the largest group of participants were aged between 18 and 25 years. This can be explained by my personal social network as the researcher, being a student. The same applies to the large group of 46-55 years, as this is the generation of some of my friends' and mine family members. As visible in Figure 2 (below), mostly women completed the survey (66%), although one participant identified as transgender and another one identified as non-binary.

Figure 2: distribution of sexes within survey



As seen in Figure 3 (below), most respondents identified as heterosexual (76%). Only one percent did not identify with any of the categories, and answered with pansexual.

Figure 3: distribution of sexual orientation within survey



#### *Part two: sex toys.*

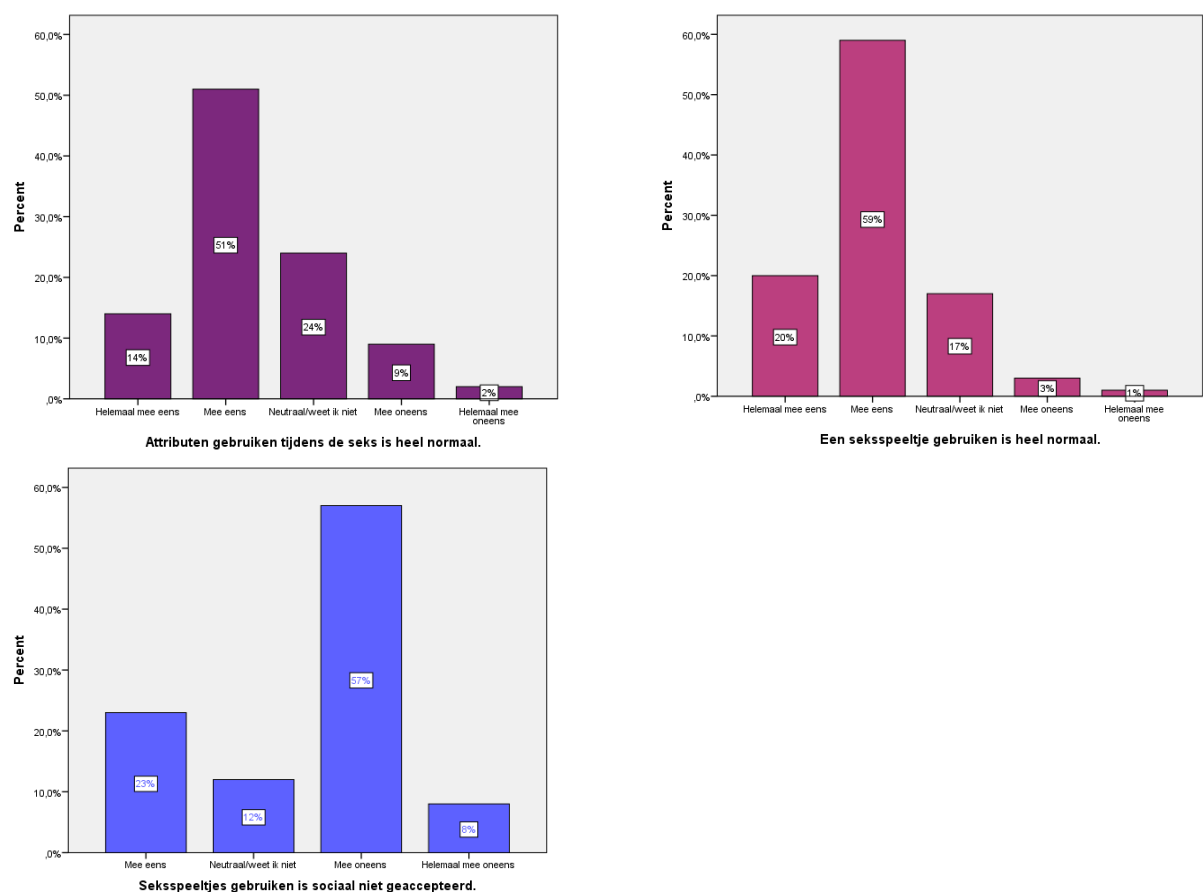
As explained in the section above, the second part of the survey was about the ownership, use, and feelings about sex toys, the body and sexuality. People were asked questions like: “Do you own a sex toy?”; “Do you consider a sex toy an extension of your sexuality?”; “Does using a sex toy change your perception of sex?” This part was specifically aimed at two of the sub-questions that drive this thesis: finding out how a sex toy fits in the Dutch culture to alter/better the body, and whether a sex toy can be understood as being an extension of one’s sexual body.

One of the first questions concerned owning a sex toy. According to the survey, 50% of the participants owned a sex toy. Of this 50%, 35% purchased their toy through the Internet, versus 24% in a shop. The majority of the sex toy owners had had theirs for 2 – 5 years (63%). Interestingly enough, 62% of sex toy owners use theirs for masturbation. This means that the other 38% use theirs for

sexual encounters, instead of masturbation<sup>7</sup>. Mostly women use their toy for a solo experience (29% women vs. 7% men).

It would seem that the negative and positive posing of the questions worked. As can be seen in Figure 4, three similar questions were asked regarding the social acceptance and 'normality' of sex toy use. Two of the questions used a positive tone (the top two), whereas the bottom one utilised a negative tone. If the negative question is reversed into a positive tone, most participants answered with "agree". This could indicate that most people that have completed the survey consider the use of a sex toy socially acceptable and normal, so to speak.

**Figure 4: questions about social acceptance of sex toys**



<sup>7</sup> However, some sex toys, like the Europe Magic Wand, also double as massage devices. As this was not a question in the survey, it is uncertain whether the 38% all use their toys only during a sexual encounter, or also as massage instrument.

A similar set of questions revolved around the use of objects/tools during sex. Three questions were asked about this subject through the survey and all three had the same consistent outcome: most people (around 40 – 50%) agreed that using objects/tools in the bedroom was fine. When asked whether one would feel threatened by their partner's sex toy, most participants (50%) disagreed. Only a small group (15%) agreed with the statement. Also, the majority of participants (72%) disagreed with the statement "if my partner has a personal sex toy, I feel like I fall short". Again, a small group of 14% agreed with the statement.

Table 1: overview effect of sex toys on own body, sexuality, and sex, in percentages.

	<b>Total</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Transgender</b>	<b>Non-binary</b>
Toys can be considered an extension of sexuality					
<b>Yes</b>	36	30	35	100	0
<b>Don't know</b>	41	44	42	0	100
<b>No</b>	23	23	21	0	0
Toys can change the perception of what sex is					
<b>Yes</b>	19	14	19	100	100
<b>Don't know</b>	30	44	27	0	0
<b>No</b>	50	41	53	0	0
Toys could be considered an extension of one's own body					
<b>Yes</b>	21	23	16	100	100
<b>Don't know</b>	34	17	45	0	0
<b>No</b>	45	58	37	0	0
Toys can change the perception of one's own body					
<b>Yes</b>	15	11	14	0	0
<b>Don't know</b>	24	17	31	0	0
<b>No</b>	61	70	54	100	100

The overview above (Table 1) shows the percentages of the respondents' opinions on the questions related to sex toys in combination with the perception of the body, sex, and sexuality. It appears that there is a difference in men and



women, versus trans and non-binary gender persons. For the first three questions, the transgender category seemed to contrast the main opinions of men and women. For example, this is visible with question #2, about sex toys changing the perception of what sex is. Both men and women mostly think toys do not change their perception or they do not know. However, the transgender group does think toys can change the perception of sex. The same is applicable when considering the question whether toys are an extension of one's own body: the transgender people agree, whereas most women do not know and most men disagree. The non-binary category answers in the similar pattern as the transgender category, which could lead to some interesting questions.

*Part three: popular culture.*

Table 2: Comparison of *Sex and the City* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*

	<b>Sex and the City</b>	<b>Fifty Shades of Grey</b>
<b>Familiar with it</b>	84%	83%
<b>Seen/read it</b>	65%	27%
<b>Popular terms used to describe display of sex.</b>	Superficial; made it an open topic.	Unrealistic; disgusting; ridiculous; bad representation of BDSM culture.
<b>Yes, it has as affected my perception of sex.</b>	15%	21%
<b>Yes, sex is a more open topic through it.</b>	49%	42%
<b>Popular terms used to describe how it addresses the topic?</b>	Less of a taboo; more open topic; sex is subject of discussion.	Less of a taboo; you can discuss the topic more openly; socially accepted more.

During the making of this survey, the decision was made to leave the popular culture out of the actual focus of the thesis, as in this context there is not enough time or space to discuss the techniques, meanings, impact, and other aspects of popular culture such as film and literature. However, the questions were included in the survey anyway so as to use the information to give some context to the content analysis of the websites.

From Table 2 (above), it seems as though both examples of popular culture are equally well known. However, an interesting difference lies in the second column. It appears that in both cases, slightly more than 80% of the respondents are familiar with both forms of pop culture. However, even though 83% has heard of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, only 27% has actually read (a part of) it. That percentage for *Sex and the City* is much higher (65%). The other numbers, regarding the influence of either series on the perception of sex and openness of the topic are quite close to one another. What immediately stands out is the similarity with which both series are described. Terms such as “less of a taboo”, and “you can discuss the topic more openly” are used for both the TV show and the book trilogy. Not all notes on *Fifty Shades of Grey* were positive, though. Some described the books as “disgusting”, “ridiculous” and “vulgar”. *Sex and the City* got slightly better reviews, although terms like “very over the top”, “very American”, and “meh, you don’t even see tits” were also included.

## **Interpretation**

Although the number of participants is four times higher than anticipated, caution is necessary when interpreting the results. It is important to note that this interpretation and possible generalisation is only representative for the population that has been researched. In this survey, the majority of the respondents were people between 18 and 25 years of age, residing in the provinces Noord-Holland and Zuid-Holland, and identified themselves as heterosexual females. In conclusion, the results of this survey are only valid for a section of the heterosexual, female, young Dutch population from the West regions of the Netherlands.

Some interesting elements came up in the questions about sex toys. It would appear that half of the sample’s population owns a sex toy. This could be due to their age, as sex toys seem to be more popular with younger generations (Cooper, Månsson, Daneback, Tikkanen & Ross, 2003; Daneback, Månsson & Ross, 2011). It could also be due to a difference between men and women, as women are the main users of sex toys (Bakker & Vanwesenbeeck, 2006;

Herbenick et al., 2009). Another interesting fact is that nearly 40% of the sex toy owners do not use it for masturbation, but for sex. I expected a larger percentage of the respondents to use the toys for masturbation. However, as mentioned in a footnote, some vibrators are also used as massage devices<sup>8</sup>.

Through asking three similar questions about the social acceptance and 'normality' of sex toys, the survey aimed to understand if people consider sex toys to be 'normal' and accepted in Dutch culture. The majority of the respondents agreed that sex toys are socially accepted and normal to use. The survey also asked about the use of sex devices in bed, compared to other devices. Again, the majority agreed that sex attributes were similar to any other devices and 'normal to use'. From these two types of question themes, it could be deducted that the general opinion of young, heterosexual women in Western Holland is that the use of a sex toy is no longer a taboo. Most participants considered the sex toy a normal device to use. This has implications, which I will address in the final chapter.

### *Shame*

As I mentioned in chapter one, the notion of shame is interesting, as Haraway's cyborg seems to lack it, but shame is linked to the physical body, sex, and sex toys. It would seem that shame is not really related to admitting owning a sex toy (anymore) in this case. This seems to comply with other research, where talking about sex toys is in fact recommended to decrease the feeling of shame and embarrassment (Quilliam, 2007). Additionally, gender studies professors Breanna Fahs and Eric Swank found that the shame of women with sex toys was mostly related to disclosing details of their use of the toy to their partners (2013). In the introductory chapter of this thesis, the notion of shame has been introduced and elaborated on. Martin Swales argues that shame is about the crossing of cultural frontiers: from a clear, non-invasive context to a mingling of

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<sup>8</sup> For an example, see also: <http://europemagicwand.com/>.

contexts, creating an inappropriate sense (2003). He uses an example to explain this mingling of contexts:

*“To invoke a familiar example from moral philosophy: the artist’s model may be unashamed at posing naked as long as the scrupulously professional climate is sustained; but once that context is supplanted by desire on the part of the painter, the context has changed, and shame results.”*

(Swales, 2003, p. 11)

It is possible to connect his ideas with a different aspect connected with sex toys: the specific details related to using them. Perhaps television series such as *Sex and the City* have already paved the way in the Netherlands to being open about owning a sex toy, considering that the makers have dedicated an entire episode to the Pearl Rabbit vibrator. However, the intimate details about the use of such sex toys are not discussed on the show. It is then possible to argue that shame about sex toys has shifted from keeping the sex toy itself a secret, to keeping details of how one uses it a secret. Research seems to back up this argument as Fahs and Swank recently researched the details of female masturbation.

*“Interestingly, even though nearly all women masturbated with clitoral stimulation rather than vaginal stimulation, heterosexual women expressed the most reluctance and shame when disclosing these patterns to male partners.”*

(Fahs & Swank, 2013, p. 679)

This study links the notion of shame with masturbation and the non-penetrative use of a sex toy, of which some have a phallic shape. Their findings are relevant, as it highlights how women do not typically prefer a phallic shape to enter their vaginas for masturbation. This is relevant for their possible partners, as the study also found that heterosexual women expressed the most shame to disclose these patterns and preferences to their partners. Hence, it is possible that partners 1) might not really know what this particular woman finds enjoyable during sexual activity and 2) might feel less necessary, as the phallic shape is not specifically preferred in this study. That might contribute to feelings of de-

masculinisation for the male partners involved, as the need for their penis is not per se expressed. Thus, it is not so much owning and using a sex toy that generates shame, but the details of use do.

These findings could relate to the information gathered through my survey about pop culture. One could consider *Sex and the City* a show that introduces the subject of sex toys openly. However, the use of a sex toy is never explicitly shown or discussed. In contrast, the books *Fifty Shades of Grey* describe the use of sex toys in details, as they are used during BDSM. For example, the book describes how a sex toy is used to arouse the main characters.

*"In his right hand is a flogger<sup>9</sup>. I remember the name from my first introduction to this room. "Touch it," he whispers, and he sounds like the devil himself. My body flames in response. Tentatively, I reach out and brush the long strands. It has many long fronds, all soft suede with small beads at the end. "I will use this. It will not hurt, but it will bring your blood to the surface of your skin and make you very sensitive.""*

(James, 2011, p. 338)

In the book *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the use of a variety of sex toys is described. It might be plausible that *Sex and the City* has opened up the discourse about the buying of toys for sex, whereas *Fifty Shades of Grey* could provide a way to discuss the detailed use of specific toys. Sara Ahmed acknowledges the impact of socio-cultural changes, as she argues that shame also involves de-forming and re-forming of social surroundings (2004). Ahmed highlights how the bodies 'turn away' from the other who witness the shame. In other words, one tries to move away from the witnesses to hide their shamefulness. Yet, if popular culture breaks open a specific taboo related to sex, this turning away could be rendered unnecessary. Thus, this could be the case with either *Sex and the City* or *Fifty Shades of Grey*, as they could change the socio-cultural discourse on sex toys,

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<sup>9</sup> A flogger is a type of whip. It consists of a handle, of which long strands protrude. These strands can be made of leather or other materials.

shame, and sexuality. Hence, the social shape could be (partially) re-formed through the books and TV-series one is exposed to.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike the case of *Sex and the City*, a large group of participants that had heard of the books *Fifty Shades of Grey* had not actually read them. With the Internet to provide people with information on such a book series, non-readers could be exposed to information about activities such as BDSM much faster and easier than in the 1990s. For example, as I did not own the books myself, I simply typed in “Fifty Shades of Grey” on [www.google.nl](http://www.google.nl) and immediately found reviews, descriptions, and even the entire book on the Internet. This resulted in me knowing a lot of details about the book, without actually reading it. It is plausible to think other people have done a similar thing with the term BDSM, and this might provide them with immediate, hands-on information. This type of immediate knowledge would have been a lot more difficult to find, for example, in the 1990s. However, as *Fifty Shades of Grey* is a relatively young book series, research has not been conducted extensively on the effects this text might be having on broad cultural understandings of sex and sexuality. Perhaps time is of the essence here: it could be possible that the discourse about sex toys will have shifted to include openness about details of their use in a few years.

A different concept that employs shame is the way the sex toy could be considered a threat. Most respondents did not see a sex toy as a threat. Only a small percentage considered their partner’s sex toy a threat to themselves. This could indicate that, to a small extent, a sex toy can be seen as a replacement for sexual contact with a person. A similar question revolved around their partner’s use of a sex toy. Nearly three quarters of the participants stated they do not feel like they fall short if their partner has a sex toy. Thus, in both cases, only a small

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<sup>10</sup> I am aware that there are considerations to be taken into account about the impact of popular culture on the shaping of identities and subjectivities. However, due to lack of space in this thesis, I cannot elaborate on those topics. Interesting reads about this topic can be found in: Dines, G. & Humez, J. M. (2002). *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Text-Reader*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. Another good read on this topic is: Milestone, K. & Meyer, A. (2011). *Gender and Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Polity.

part (ranging from 15 to 25%) of the participants connected the sex toy with a negative feeling, either of feeling threatened or feeling insufficient. These participants were mostly between the ages of 18 and 25, and identified as women. It is possible that this negative emotion is also linked to shame. A study by Bente Traeen (2009) showed in detail how feelings of sexual incompetence are closely linked to feelings of shame. She performed in-depth interviews with people between the ages of 22 and 53, and asked them about their feelings of sexual competence. She concluded that some of the key elements of their narratives involved feelings of shame. As she notes: *"Feelings of shame have to do with our perception of who we are. [...] Accordingly, a lack of sexual health is closely connected to a person's self-perception."* (Traeen, 2009, p. 81). And this can contribute to a vicious circle of shame: one is ashamed, which leads to a negative self-perception, which is connected to sexual health. Hence, if the sexual health is influenced negatively, shame could again prop up, as one might not be as sexually competent as desired. This is also likely to be related to sex toys. A partner might feel sexually incompetent, be ashamed, and then learns about their partner's use of a sex toy. This could trigger more extensive feelings of incompetence, less sexual pleasure and competence, more shame and thus a worse self-perception. So, although it is unlikely that possessing a sex toy is considered shameful for this specific sample, feelings of shame could be linked to a different territory: the link between the partner using a sex toy and one's own sexual incompetence. As mentioned before, this could have a negative effect on sexual health, feelings of competence, and self-perception.

#### *Perception of body, sex, and sexuality*

Another interesting set of questions was directed at the perception of the body, sexuality, and sex itself. It seems that both women and men agree on the notion of sex toys being an extension of one's sexuality. Although a large group answered, "I don't know/neutral", over one third of both men and women agreed with this statement. These numbers could indicate that, similar to other technological devices used in daily life, a sex toy is considered a part of human (sexual) behaviour. Sexuality could be seen as no longer limited to the 'natural'

body, but extending into vibrators, cockrings, and other appliances. Especially when masturbating, such a device could be seen as an addition to our sexuality. However, when asked whether toys could be seen as an extension of one's own body, men answered predominantly "no". Women did not know or kept neutral. This could be because the participants did not consider the two intertwined. Yet, both the transgender and the non-binary participants answered yes, contradicting what the main groups answered. This complexifies the statement I posed about a sex toy being an extension of one's sexuality. This connects to the question: How are body and sexuality linked and separated?

This could relate to the questions in the survey about the perception of the body. The majority of the respondents (men, women, trans, and non-binary) did not think that sex toys changed their perception of their bodies. This adds to the complexity of the link between body and sexuality. If one believes that the sex toy can be an extension of one's sexuality, but not of one's body, how does this relate to the difference between body and sexuality? Could the cyborgian approach be of use here, to overcome the binary between body and sexuality? I will come back to these questions in my final chapter.

The final question in part two asked the respondents whether they thought sex toys changed their perception of what sex itself is. Women answered predominantly "no", men noted, "don't know/neutral", but both the transgender and the non-binary category argued "yes". This could indicate that the trans and non-binary group believes that the domains of sexuality and sex are stretched through the use of sex toys, whereas the body remains the same. Perhaps the transgender and non-binary people consider sexuality to be similar to Judith's notion of performativity, a more fluid concept. Feminist scholar Judith Butler argues that gender itself is in fact a performance.

*"Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed. [...] Certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity."*

(Butler, 1988, p. 527)



In conclusion, it seems as though the survey was mostly filled out by a young, Western Dutch, female, and heterosexual audience (although some interesting exceptions were present). Most of the participants considered a sex toy a socially accepted, normal item, and did not differentiate between a sex toy or other life-improving devices, such as glasses for better visibility or cars to travel faster. Most respondents also considered the sex toy an extension of their sexuality and some even thought that sex toys altered their perception of sex itself. However, with regards to the perception of the body, most dominant groups (i.e. men and women) did not think that had changed through the sex toy. Minorities such as the transgender and non-binary category contested that and did consider (the perception and extension of) the body changed by the sex toys. This allows for an interesting contrast and raises questions of what the difference is between body and sexuality. Again, I will discuss these questions in the final chapter of this thesis. In the next chapter, a content analysis of a selection of three online sex shops will be performed. This will provide a qualitative element that will later on in the thesis be put into dialogue with the quantitative study performed in this chapter.

## Chapter 3

### Content analysis as a methodology to analyse three online sex shops

#### *How are representation and power used?*

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In the previous chapter, I have outlined the theoretical frameworks involved in this thesis, the methodology, and how I performed a survey. In this chapter, I will outline how I performed a content analysis on three Dutch online sex shops. Those shops are [www.pabo.nl](http://www.pabo.nl), [www.christineeduc.nl](http://www.christineeduc.nl), and [www.willie.nl](http://www.willie.nl). These websites sell sex toys, as well as lingerie, gadgets and accessories, such as lubricants or condoms. The content analysis has the aim to find out whether the three sex shops display a certain power structure that could indicate cultural and social norms. In the final chapter, I will link my findings with the information from this and the previous chapters to interpret the results in more detail. This chapter will focus on the theory of content analysis, how I approached it, and how the analyses were performed. Furthermore, the results will be discussed and, finally, interpreted with the use of the theoretical frameworks that have been introduced.

#### **Content analysis: an introduction**

In my mixed-methods approach, I have decided upon a content analysis to gain a more detailed view of the websites that sell sex toys (and other items, such as condoms). By performing a content analysis, I do not deal with responses from participants, but with non-responsive, cultural data. This methodology allows me to look at possible examples of cultural norms in a different way. It could point to underlying cultural norms that might not come forward explicitly when talking to respondents. I will now give a brief overview of what content analysis entails and how it can be used. Probably the best-known definition of content analysis is as follows:

*“Content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.”*

(Berelson, 1952, as quoted in Bryman, 2008, p. 274)

In this quote, behavioural scientist Bernard Berelson highlights how content analysis focuses on the content of communication. This communication can be in many forms, including texts on a website. Berelson considers this technique objective and systematic, and adds how it is mostly quantitative. However, in this thesis, a slightly different definition of content analysis will be used. Feminist researchers Sharlene Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy define content analysis as *“the systematic study of texts and other cultural products of nonliving data forms”* (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007, p. 227). By saying ‘texts and cultural products of nonliving data form’, they mean that, while performing content analysis, a researcher does not create the data him/herself, as in the case of interviewing or conducting a survey. With content analysis, the data already exists and does not purposively interact with the researcher. To fall back on Hesse-Biber and Leavy, *“By using such documents, feminist researchers identify social norms without using interactive methods that may affect the norms they are trying to study”* (Reinharz, 1992, as quoted in Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007, p. 227). Thus, the approach Hesse-Biber and Leavy use, differs from Berelson, by leaving out the part about objectivity and acknowledging the cultural element of content analysis. Where Berelson uses the term ‘communication’, Hesse-Biber and Leavy use the terms ‘texts’ and ‘cultural products’. Although both researchers address content analysis as ‘systematic’, Hesse-Biber and Leavy do not mention either ‘objective’ or ‘quantitative’. The term ‘objective’ is a precarious one within gender studies. Multiple feminists including Donna Haraway have discussed the concept of objectivity. Haraway argues in one of her most famous articles how there is a patriarchal notion of ‘objectivity’, which claims that the male researchers consider their research to entail a form of transparency and objectivity. However, she argues this is not the case, as she considers the current scientific approaches to be patriarchal. She argues for a different concept, being *situated knowledges* (Haraway, 1988). She writes:

*"Feminists don't need a doctrine of objectivity that promises transcendence, a story that loses track of its mediations just where someone might be held responsible for something, and unlimited instrumental power. [...] We need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meaning and bodies [...]."*

(Haraway, 1988, p. 579 – 580)

This quote highlights the difference between Berelson and the feminist researchers. The feminist approach is to use personal, subjective experience to form a body of knowledge. Following this reasoning, Hesse-Biber and Leavy do not mention the concept of objectivity. Within their feminist approach, they do not consider a content analysis to be objective the way Berelson describes it. Also, although Hesse-Biber and Leavy acknowledge the possibility of both quantitative and qualitative content analysis, this thesis employs a qualitative form. As described in their book: *"Under this qualitative feminist approach, researchers would, for example, use words directly from the text under investigation to form their code categories. This kind of approach produces a thematic analysis with rich descriptive data."* (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007, p. 228). In my research, a feminist point of view will be adopted to execute the content analysis. This approach can be used to study the perspectives that are either emphasised or marginalised in specific texts or images. Feminist content analysis is important, as it looks at power relations, questions of difference, social hierarchies, and hierarchies of values.

In this thesis, I will use content analysis as a methodology to study three Dutch websites, as they already existed before this thesis and do not interact with the researcher. These qualities allow for the researcher to study socio-cultural norms, without interacting with, and thus influencing those norms (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). By looking at norms, a dominant narrative or idea in a society can be exposed, and then challenged. Stereotypical representations could also be demonstrated, possibly resulting in a change of these representations.

Using content analysis as a tool provides researchers with the opportunity to observe (some aspects of) a society, in this case Dutch contemporary society, and learn about its norms and values. A text, image or in this case, website, reflects Dutch social norms and certain social processes. An interesting example is a much-discussed advertisement in the folder of a Dutch toy store, called the Bart Smit<sup>11</sup>. One of the images portrayed in the folder displays four little girls using toy household equipment<sup>12</sup>. All of the equipment is either pink or red, and the page reads in large letters: “To be as good as mommy, that’s what you want!”<sup>13</sup>. Other images, targeted at boys, are mostly in blue, green or black colours, with professions and vehicles such as airplanes, cars, and building constructions. The folder generated a lot of attention at the end of 2013. Dutch scientific journalist Asha ten Broeke even added the folder to her personal online sexism-museum, which consists of examples of sexism throughout Dutch society. As she describes it: *“Boys reduced to competitive breadwinners-to-be, girls being pushed into the role of stay-at-home-mother at a very young age.”* (Ten Broeke, 2013, n.p.). Another Dutch news website described the folder as *“Bart Smit sleeps through emancipation. Look, gender stereotypes of the 50s are very much alive at the toy store.”* (Joop.nl, 2013, n.p.). The images in the folder put forward a very dualistic approach to men and women. Women are ‘meant to be’ in the household, performing everyday tasks like cleaning. On the other hand, men are ‘supposed’ to work for a living, preferably in a profession that entails science or technology. This is an extreme, yet actual example of a normative dynamic within the contemporary Dutch marketing strategies.

A similar situation might be found when researching the three online sex shops. These websites are likely to express norms of the socio-cultural context in which they are embedded, such as ideas about gender or race. Studying these texts or cultural products can shed light onto the values of the individuals as well as the society that created them. This is the case when doing both a textual and a visual

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<sup>11</sup> For the full folder, including the images provided in Appendix B, see

<http://view.publitas.com/bart-smit-nl/bart-smit-cadeauboek-2013/page/46-47>

<sup>12</sup> For the image, see Appendix B.

<sup>13</sup> Translation by author. Original text: “Zo goed zijn als mama, dat wil je ook!”.

content analysis. In the context of my study for example, textual analysis can show how a website expresses (the lack of) certain perspectives. For example, how are customers addressed? Does the site merely aim at heterosexual customers and are other sexualities ignored? A similar principle applies to visual analysis: how are the images shown on in these websites used to display ideas about, for example, the female body? With a visual analysis, the concept of representation can be explained. Later in this chapter, I will elaborate on the definition of representation.

In order to analyse these three websites, I will use both textual and visual content analysis. The textual part will refer to the texts used on the website, for example, the categories that are used to guide customers through the websites. I will look at both the home page and the page with the sex toys. The visual analysis will be used to look at the images used. On the two pages per website, I will observe the images of people and images of the objects. I will pay attention to the use of colour for different objects and the portrayal of the people.

## **Representation**

As mentioned above, content analysis is a tool that can be used to highlight cultural norms and values. The text and imagery on a website can be a representation of these norms. Therefore, the notion of representation is closely intertwined with the method of content analysis. This paragraph will elaborate on the concept of representation.

Stuart Hall, a cultural theorist, defines representation as *“an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture”* (Hall, 1997, p. 15). He argues this process can involve both texts and images, which stand for/represent something. As representation is a complex concept, I will attempt to clarify it as much as possible. Hall argues there are two systems of representation. The first system consists of a set of concepts of all things, which allows us to make sense of the world around us. For instance, the reason why we recognise a computer is because we use a classification system to

determine it is a computer. Also, when being not near a pc, we can still think about one. Hall clarifies this with an example:

*"If you put down a glass you are holding and walk out of the room, you can still think about the glass, even though it is no longer physically there. Actually, you can't think with a glass. You can only think with the concept of a glass."*

(Hall, 1997, p. 17)

This is what Hall means by a concept of an object. The first system of representation does not simply rely on these concepts of objects, but also on different ways to classify concepts and on the complex relationships between these concepts. This first system of representation ensures a mental conceptual map of things. If one is able to communicate through roughly the same conceptual maps with another, both belong to same culture, according to Hall.

This shared conceptual map heavily relies on a shared language. Hall believes a shared language to be the second system of representation. This shared language uses signs (e.g. texts or images) to translate the concepts one knows. The language then allows for a person to express concepts or meaning to others. To quote Hall:

*"One way of thinking about 'culture', then, is in terms of these shared conceptual maps, shared language systems and the codes which govern the relationships of translation between them. Codes fix the relationships between concepts and signs."*

(Hall, 1997, p. 19)

In other words, following Hall, it can be argued that culture encompasses certain ideas and concepts, which are shared within a community or group. To come back to the usefulness of content analysis, it becomes clear how studying the practices and politics of representation becomes important in pointing out which norms and values are specific to a certain cultural and social context. In the case of this research, then, content analysis is chosen as a methodology that enables me to study the cultural values and ideas connected with the use of sex toys in

the Netherlands. Furthermore, it is important to stress how these norms and values are also connected with specific power relations at play in society. For this reason, a Foucauldian approach to power in relation to knowledge becomes necessary.

## **Power/knowledge**

French philosopher Michel Foucault also wrote on the topic of representation. However, his understanding of the word 'representation' is slightly different. He does not care as much about the meaning of things, but more about the production of knowledge. He was interested in "*how human beings understand themselves in our culture*" (Foucault, as quoted in Hall, 1997, p. 43). Foucault also used the term 'discourse' rather than 'language', as he was interested in the cultural understanding and shared meanings of people. However, his work was not so much about relations of meaning, but about relations of power.

One of Foucault's major points was the link between knowledge and power. He considered these two to be intertwined. He argued that knowledge is always a form of power and, in turn, power regulates if, when, and how knowledge should be applied (Hall, 1997). Another crucial contribution of his theory is the understanding that power is not exuberated in a single direction, but in fact, it circulates. Therefore, it runs through all the components of the social body, not just in a top-down direction. Foucault's notion of power/knowledge is relevant in relation to the concept of representation. In this thesis, through content analysis, I wish to analyse three Dutch websites that sell sex toys and related products. To perform this analysis, a theoretical framework is necessary. By connecting Foucault's ideas about power/knowledge, with the concept of representation, I can shed light on the power dynamics and/or the cultural norms present in contemporary Dutch society, concerning, for example, the female body, notions of normal or normative sexuality, or pleasure and shame. Let us consider one specific case, the image of a woman. Such image could display both a power dynamic and a cultural norm. The image could be a representation of a 'normative' woman in Dutch society, and through that,



display how contemporary Dutch society holds a power dynamic that dictates the attractiveness of a woman.

This notion of power is connected to the concept of *heteronormativity*. Heteronormativity is used to point out a power structure where heterosexuality and its practices are dominant and impose their ways onto others that do not identify with heterosexuality. This entails a certain form of power. Foucault describes this power structure as *biopower*, where biological elements of the human are used for political strategy (Dreyfus, Rabinow & Foucault, 1982). Biopower is closely related to *biopolitics*, which is the strategy a governing unit employs to regulate the lives of people. For example, the development of birth control methods could be considered a form of biopolitics, as it regulates the size of the population indirectly. To come back to heteronormativity, professor of Women's Studies Stevi Jackson argues that

*"[It] defines not only a normative sexual practice, but also a normal way of life. [...] Heteronormativity is mobilized and reproduced in everyday life, not only through talk, but also through routine activities in which gender, sexuality and heterosexuality interconnect."*

(Jackson, 2006, p. 107)

Jackson considers heteronormativity a way in which heterosexual privileges are embedded in social life. Hence, heteronormativity employs a form of biopolitics, by considering a heterosexual lifestyle to be preferable, which has its effect on the regulation of the population.

### **Methods for the analysis and general results of the study of three websites**

American scholar in media, arts, and technology Kimberley Neuendorf has devised a scheme to perform a content analysis, consisting of nine steps. Her scheme is useful for my research, as it is the first time I will conduct a content analysis. Her method will provide me with a well-defined direction and execution of the research. Her flowchart has the following order:

1. Theory and rationale: theoretical framework and research questions.
2. Conceptualisations: which variables will be used and how are they defined?
3. Operationalisations: which measures are used?
4. Coding: create a codebook and coding form.
5. Sampling: which content is sampled?
6. Training and pilot reliability: coders need to be trained.
7. Coding: multiple coders are used and should code independently.
8. Final reliability: calculate a reliability figure.
9. Tabulation and reporting.

(Neuendorf, 2002, p. 50 - 51)

However, for this analysis, I have altered the steps to fit my research. As I am the only researcher and coder, step 6 (training and pilot reliability) would be useless. Also, calculating reliability is only applicable if the research is quantitative. As it is qualitative, I will not perform this step. I will use personal notes as a codebook, but will refrain from writing a full codebook. Therefore, I have decided to construct my content analysis according to the following steps:

1. Theoretical framework and research question
2. Which material should be included? Which content is sampled?
3. Select units of analysis.
4. Develop coding categories.
5. Code material.
6. Analyse and interpret results.

I will now proceed to elaborate how I performed the steps of my analysis of the Dutch websites.

#### *Theoretical framework and research question*

As mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, my aim of this content analysis is to find out whether there is a difference in terms of how sex toys are marketed

and made available for women and men: are there more toys for either women or men? Is there a different variety in toys? What key words are used to describe and sell these toys? And how are images used on the home page of the website? These aspects will be considered in the content analysis, thus providing me with the opportunity to compare the three websites. After the analysis, I will interpret the findings, taking into account Foucault's notion of power/knowledge and Hall's notion of representation.

*Which material should be included? Which content is sampled?*

In this content analysis, I will focus on three Dutch websites: [www.pabo.nl](http://www.pabo.nl), [www.christineleduc.nl](http://www.christineleduc.nl), and [www.willie.nl](http://www.willie.nl). As my native tongue is Dutch and this thesis is focused on the Dutch population and culture, Dutch websites were the logical choice. These specific websites were chosen based on their descriptions. Pabo.nl is the largest mail order company in the Netherlands, offering a variety of products, ranging from sex toys to home accessories. According to their website, Pabo has been the Erotic specialist in Europe for over 25 years and holds a key position in the erotics branche. Pabo sells over 30,000 items and aims to give one's love life more depth<sup>14</sup>. The second company, Christine le Duc, was founded in 1968 and has been part of the German Beate Uhse concern since 2003. Unlike Pabo, Christine le Duc has her own offline stores, with 31 different shops spread across the Netherlands. Her stores are known for the discrete and knowledgeable staff<sup>15</sup>. The third website Willie.nl was founded in 2010 and was based on the idea that customer satisfaction is key. Willie aims to provide the largest range of products, with an excellent customer service and low prices. So far, Willie offers over 5,000 products, with a delivery time of two workdays<sup>16</sup>. Thus, these three websites vary in the number of years they exist, their aim, and amount of products. Although it is not my main focus, it might be interesting to

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<sup>14</sup> For more information about Pabo, see <http://www.pabo.nl/impressie>.

<sup>15</sup> For more information about Christine le Duc, see [http://www.christineleduc.nl/page/wscontent?id=1887&source=navi\\_top](http://www.christineleduc.nl/page/wscontent?id=1887&source=navi_top).

<sup>16</sup> For more information about Willie, see <http://www.willie.nl/informatie/over-ons.aspx>.

see whether the younger companies differ from the elder ones in imagery or texts used.

I will start my analysis on the home pages of the three web-stores. I will focus on the different categories posted on the homepages and on the images used on the homepage. Then I will continue to the pages on sex toys and look at the use of images, categories, and buzzwords. By looking at the different categories on the websites, I can determine whether a certain group of people are included, or excluded in the websites, that is to say, I can observe who is addressed as potential customer, and how and whether this in/exclusion works along lines of gender, age, sexual practices, sexual orientation, etc.. Also, the use of certain images could point to a cultural norm related to sex toys. For instance, it could display how female-oriented toys are more accepted, as there are more female-oriented products available.

### *Units of analysis*

As mentioned in the paragraph above, the different textual categories and images are the major aspects of this analysis. The visual analysis will focus on the images on the websites and those will be screened for the following components: how many images are there on the page; is it a man or woman in the image; what is the ratio women to men; what is the ratio people to objects; are they portrayed in a sexual way or not at all? When considering images that are not of people, but of items, I will also review whether there seems to be a consistency in the use of colour for female- or male-oriented devices. This provides me with six different units for images.

The textual analysis will mostly concentrate on the use of language when describing the categories. I will screen for the amount of categories used on the home page and the terms that are used to address customers (men/women or gay/straight/bi etc). When researching the categories, I will focus on which Dutch terms are used for the category of sex toys, which system is used to

differentiate different toys and which words are used to describe different genres of toys. Within the textual analysis, I will have five units.

### *Coding categories*

After devising these units of measurement, I have constructed the coding categories for the analysis. For the visual analysis, the categories for coding are simple. All except the last unit can be coded through simple counting. The final unit (the colour of the devices) will be coded based counting and noting the different colours. For the textual analysis, a descriptive approach will be taken. I will note the answers to my questions and count the number of categories.

### *Code material*

I performed this analysis on Friday, May 23<sup>rd</sup>. The analysis itself took approximately three hours to complete. Of course, since that date, the images and texts might have changed.

### Textual

I performed my textual analysis on the home page and the subpage of the sex toys for all three websites. All three websites have a broad range of products, varying from "*lingerie*", "*(sex)toys*", to "*home & living*"<sup>17</sup>. Neither Pabo nor Christine le Duc addressed their customers through their categories, yet this is the case with Willie. They had two categories that could be considered aimed at a certain group. Two of their categories included "*ondergoed voor hem*" (underwear for him) and "*gayshop*". Arguably, these aim at (gay) men.

An interesting part of the categories is how all three websites used an English term to refer to the sex toy department. Instead of the Dutch "*sekspeeltje*" (sex

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<sup>17</sup> These terms were not translated, they were on the website in English. All terms in italics are the terms as displayed on the website. My translation will be between brackets after the Dutch term.

toy), Pabo and Christine le Duc used “*toys*” and Willie used “*sextoys*”. A possible explanation could lie in marketing strategies: perhaps the use of English terms makes the website appear as ‘cool’ to customers, making it popular and therefore generating income.

When it came to the page of the actual sex toys, some interesting similarities and differences occurred. The page of Christine le Duc had sections on vibrators, vibrating eggs, anal toys and toy sets. Pabo on the other hand, used different sections for different customers. There were sections “*voor haar*” and “*voor hem*” (for her; for him). Willie was somewhere in the middle, offering the toys by different kinds, but Willie also listed a section entitled “*sextoys voor mannen*” (sextoys for men). All websites listed a section for couples, calling it either “*koppeltogs*”, “*voor koppels*” or “*partnervibrators*” (toys for couples; for couples; vibrators for partners).

In conclusion, it seems as though there is a tendency to address men and women differently. Pabo has taken a stance in addressing men and women separately, but the other two sites are not as strict with their categorization. However, both women and men are able to purchase items for their bodies from all websites. A sexual orientation-oriented component is only present on Willie’s website. As it offers a tab for the “*gayshop*”, it is the only one addressing the gay community openly. However, this does not mean that gay, bisexual or transsexual people are not able to purchase items, as they are free to surf every part of the website.

### Visual

As for the visual analysis, the three websites differed on many aspects. Pabo and Christine le Duc had less than 10 images on the home page, whereas Willie displayed more than 30. Pabo and Christine le Duc’s page were predominantly filled with images of women, in sexually tinted photographs. There were no men on either page. Willie’s homepage on the other hand, contained one photograph of a couple, a few images of women, but mostly images of objects in the form of sex toys. Both Pabo and Christine le Duc showed sensual women, young, white,

slim women. The men displayed were also young, white, and well built. However, Willie's focus was on the sex toys themselves. Also, there were no people in the images of the toys, just displaying the device itself. Thus, there seems to be a difference in focus. Willie displays the toys immediately, without images of people. However, Pabo and Christine le Duc show mostly sexy women on their homepage. On the specific page for the toys, another difference occurs. All websites display mostly toys, but Willie is the only one to have no women and one man on its page. Both Pabo and Christine le Duc show a few women, but no men.

When it comes to colour, Pabo displays mostly purple, red or pink toys. These toys are vibrators, dildos or vibrating eggs. Most of these toys are marketed towards women. Christine le Duc shows mostly female-oriented products, with only two products that could be for male use as well. An interesting observation at the Christine le Duc website is that the top image is an ad for their sale. It shows a bucket filled with cleaning materials, such as soap, yellow cleaning gloves, but also a purple vibrator.. Willie displays toys of all colours and for different types of users. Most fleshlights (a male-oriented product) are pink, with a coloured sleeve. This is probably to enhance the feeling and look of real skin, The vaginal and anal vibrators are purple or pink, but can be used by both men and women. With the Willie website, it is difficult to spot a trend, in terms of a link between a colour and specific gender-oriented toy.

### *Analyse and interpret results*

This content analysis has highlighted several interesting aspects of these Dutch sex toy websites. First of all, it seems that Pabo is the only website aiming specifically at women and men in different categories. The other two list their products by sort. A possible explanation for this could lie with the age of the business. Pabo is much older than the other two, so it might be that case that, the others, especially Willie, are more open to other definitions of gender than "him" or "her". Using a dualistic framework that separates the female and male customers points to a hierarchical, normative, and hegemonic gender system in

the Pabo website. It suggests a binary structure where there are two options, identifying as a man or as a woman, hence excluding those subjects who do not identify as male or female, man or woman, “him” or “her”. In other words, Pabo reproduces a patriarchal framework, which exercises a certain power over the customers. It forces the visitor to choose a category, either/or male or female, hence to adjust to the system. It would appear that Dutch society and its cultural norms, in this case, are organised along patriarchal, hegemonic, and dualistic lines. This indicates that Dutch society does not leave room for people that do not identify with male/female, men/women etc. It could point to ignoring and discriminating against the LGBTQ community, by excluding them from the Foucauldian discourse. Thus, one wonders to what extent the Dutch society is accepting of people of different genders, sexes, sexual orientations and so forth.

However, the difference between the websites could highlight a cultural transition. First of all, as Pabo reproduces a dualistic gender system, the other two do not. This might indicate that they have accepted that some people have difficulty identifying with certain terms, and altered their website. Although the websites of Christine le Duc and Willie were founded later than Pabo’s, this does not mean that Pabo could not have taken the effort to change their website accordingly. Of course, a financial strategy could very well be the motive behind the change of Christine le Duc and Willie, but it is a change nonetheless. This could be a form of social acceptance that could benefit certain communities that are not conforming to the binary system<sup>18</sup>. Second, it seems that the older websites, Pabo and Christine le Duc, use images of women to attract their customers. They also refrain from displaying the sex toys themselves on their home page. On the sex toy page, they do display the toys, but also images of people. Willie has chosen a different approach, by displaying mostly toys and men on their page. As both Pabo and Christine le Duc use imagery of sexualised

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<sup>18</sup> Yet, I must address the way Willie aims at gay people by having a tab with ‘gayshop’. This is a different form of exclusion, as it seems to suggest that all other tabs are solely for non-gay people. This curious exclusion could be considered a similar dualistic dynamic, separating gay and non-gay customers.



females, it could be argued they use a woman's body to convey the idea of sensuality and sexuality. Using this type of image highlights a stereotype that links femininity to sexuality. According to Stuart Hall, stereotyping means:

*"To get hold of the few 'simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized' characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them, and fix them without change or development."*

(Hall, 1997, p. 258)

Hall argues that stereotyping fixes specific boundaries and excludes that which does not belong. Stereotyping is a social practice, resulting in an invisible dividing line between 'normal' and 'abnormal', 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable', etcetera. Also, stereotyping is usually found in situations that are linked with unequal power relations. It goes back to Foucault's notion of power/knowledge: it classifies a certain group as the norm (included) and others as excluded. Within imagery, this stereotyping is a form of power that shows a certain discourse. I believe the images that are used on the website of Pabo and Christine le Duc are a form of stereotyping that categorises women as sexy. This corresponds with Hall's argument on stereotyping and fantasy. He says *"the important point is that stereotypes refer as much to what is imagined in fantasy as to what is perceived as 'real'"* (Hall, 1997, p. 263). In other words, a stereotypical sexy woman on a website could also trigger the fantasy of that woman performing sexual acts with the customer. Or, in case of other customers, that woman could be seen as a role model for themselves.

However, it is important to ask: is the link between femininity and sexuality a negative aspect? Arguably, by associating femininity with the sex toys, the perception of the female body in combination with sex toys could be changed. It could lead to greater social acceptance of the use of sex toys. This links to the main question in my thesis: *in what way does a sex toy contribute to a view of the female body as a 'technobody'?* By associating this femininity with a sex toy, the view of the female body could be changing. Using images of women on online sex

shops could contribute to the way Dutch contemporary society views the female body. Perhaps this display contributes to a greater social acceptance of a women's body linked to a sex toy.

Finally, there seems to be an interesting relation between the sex toys and colour. Both Pabo and Christine le Duc mostly use red, pink, or purple in their images of female-oriented sex toys. This observation fits the alignment of men being associated with blue, and women with softer colours, such as red or pink (Garber, 1992). Willie, on the other hand, uses a broad range of colours for all products. Male-oriented products are in pink, probably to enhance the idea of skin authenticity. Female-oriented products are green, purple, pink, silver, and black. There is no trend distinguishable from their sex toy-page when it comes to specific sexual orientation and use of colour.

In conclusion, I would argue that Pabo uses representation to (perhaps unknowingly) fit into a patriarchal system, which therefore exercises a certain kind of normative power over customers. Their use of categories based on one's sex, images of stereotypically beautiful women, and colours for toys indicate a reproduction and representation of a binary system. I would not consider Christine le Duc to be the same, as this website offers toys based on kind of products, rather than the sex of the customers. However, the images and colours also fit the binary system. They display the way the binary system employs specific colours to target men/women and how a stereotypical males/females are portrayed as the ultimate (gender) ideal within Dutch society. The Willie website is the only one that does not explicitly reproduces a patriarchal and dualistic gender system. Of course, this could be read as a way of exerting power. In this case, Willie might be more knowledgeable about the existence of different genders, the problems intrinsic in visual representations and so forth; but this displaying of awareness of the discussion on gender, sex, and sexual orientation could indicate a way of knowing how to use this knowledge. This knowledge could be used by Willie to coerce customers to shop at their website, providing them with a comfortable shopping environment for all different kinds of people.

Hence, the knowledge creates a power structure, of which Willie could benefit in the form of better sales and more income.

## Chapter 4

### Conclusion and discussion

#### *How do body, sexuality, cyborg, and technobody tie together?*

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In this final chapter, I will review the results from both analyses. These results will be linked to theoretical frameworks in order to answer my research question. I will also reflect on possible errors and the social relevance of this study.

#### **Results from the survey and content analysis**

For this thesis, two types of research were conducted. First, a survey was distributed, to find out more about the users and use of sex toys. The goal of this questionnaire was to see whether the Dutch population considers sex toy socially acceptable, how one perceives a sex toy in relation to their body and sexuality, and how popular culture has had influence on the social acceptance of sex toys. Second, a content analysis was performed on three Dutch sex toy websites. These websites varied in age and set up, and by analysing specific pages, the goal was to inspect whether the web shops display a power structure within our society.

#### **The survey**

As has been explained in chapter two, the survey showed how the majority of the respondents considered sex toys socially acceptable. This can be considered a positive development, because a sex toy could be an expression/representation of sexual freedom (Minge & Zimmerman, 2008). Hence, as a sex toy is then socially acceptable, this implies that the respondents considered this sexual freedom 'normal'. Or in other words, most participants believe that it is normal to engage sexually on multiple levels. This attitude could possibly pave the way for acceptance of other taboos, such as BDSM, fetishes, or other types sexual

preferences. However, the participants of the sample replied quite varied with regards to the notion of a sex toy being an extension of one's body and/or sexuality. About one third of the sample considered a sex toy an extension of the sexuality. Yet, only one fifth of the sample believed the sex toy to be an extension of the body. Of course, it is difficult to say what the participants meant by this, as I did not ask for their definitions of an extension of the body/sexuality. But their answers raise the question of what the difference is between the body and sexuality? Is sexuality merely 'inside' the body or does it extend beyond the body?

When considering the body, social psychology scholar Alan Radley argues that the body is 1) *"an encasement for corporeal, psychological and social identities"* and 2) *"a medium of display, as it transmits expressions of our identifications, resistances, and transformations"* (Radley, 1998, p. 14). Embodiment is also a mode to situate ourselves in relation to each other. To complexify his concept of the body, it is interesting to consider the way sociologist Gesa Lindemann (1997) makes distinctions between the various assets of the body. She considers three types of bodies. First, the *"objectified body"* refers to the corporeal entity that moves through both physical and social space. The second, the *"experiencing body"* is the sensory body, using multiple senses to experience the environment, such as sight and hearing. The last one, the *"experienced body"* is one's sense of the own body. The difference between these two approaches lies in the experiencing and experienced body. Lindemann argues that these two constitute the *"living body"*, excluding the objectified body from 'living'. Apparently, Lindemann considers the objectification of the body not to be a part of a "living body", possibly because objectification of one's body is not executed by oneself. To conclude, a body is not just a encasing, but is also inscribed with socio-cultural norms and values.

While keeping this in mind, the question is how sexuality fits within this frame. Sexologist Stephen Goettsch provides a broad and somewhat clinical definition of sexuality:

*"The definition of sexuality proposed [...] is that sexuality is the individual capacity to respond to physical experiences which are capable of producing body-centered genital excitation. [...] The concept is differentiated from statistical frequencies or culturally engendered sexual manifestations which are identified as "sexual enactment.""*

(Goettsch, 1989, p. 250)

In other words, sexuality is very much focused on genital excitement, and does not seem to consider cultural norms. However, Stevi Jackson provides a different outlook on the term 'sexuality', claiming that it is a broader term than the term 'sex'. Sexuality refers to *"all erotically significant aspects of social life and social being, such as desires, practices, relationships and identities."* (Jackson, 2006, p. 106). The difference between the two authors lies in the social and cultural aspect. Goettsch does not acknowledge any cultural norms, whereas Jackson broadens Goettsch' definition with social life and social being. In this thesis, Stevi Jackson's definition is used, as I consider sexuality to be fluid and not fixed. I consider sexuality to be subject to social change and without real boundaries.

Professor of cultural studies Feona Attwood elaborates specifically on female sexuality:

*"[...] female sexuality appears to function as a form of self-imaging, a type of self-pleasuring that is both inner and outer directed. It is clearly bound up with the consumption of commodities. It is a kind of auto-eroticism. It is a response to sexism and to second-wave feminism. It is a form of health and self-development."*

(Attwood, 2005, p. 404)

In this quote, it becomes apparent how Attwood considers female sexuality to be different from male sexuality. By linking female sexuality with the self-image and the self-development, sexuality is lifted to a higher level of development. Thus, sexuality can be considered a bodily aspect (through the genital excitement), but also a socio-cultural concept. This is similar to the definitions provided for the body. Both concepts seem to involve a socio-cultural aspect. Hence, it would

appear that both the body and sexuality are being shaped by social and/or cultural norms and practices.

### **The content analysis**

As has been highlighted in chapter three, the content analysis showed a number of differences between the three Dutch websites. The company Pabo was the only one using terms such as “for him” and “for her” to create categories, whereas the other two websites listed products in categories. By using this binary opposition, a heteronormative power frame is possibly present. In the case of the Pabo website, a power structure could be at hand. For example, a male could be interested in dildos just as much as females, but the categories provided might (unknowingly) exclude or scare off customers. By sorting categories based on type of sex toy, everybody can choose their preferred product, including people who identify more with terms like “hir” or “sie”<sup>19</sup>.

Apart from the categories, the images of women and the colours of female-oriented toys point to a cultural norm of the sexualized female. Pabo offers most female-oriented toys in red, purple, or pink colours. This also portrays a dichotomy where women are aimed at via softer colours, and men via darker colours (Garber, 1992). By using erotic images of nearly naked women, Pabo aligns sex with femininity, seemingly aiming at men as their primary customers of toys. Breanne Fahs and Eric Swank explain this in their research on sex toys:

*"Though feminist-owned and woman-focused sex toy shops often differ in packaging sex toys, the typical advertising and packaging of sex toys in male-targeted sex toy shops depicts women in stereotypically objectified poses, referencing themes found in mainstream pornography. Though sex toys are clearly meant to stimulate women, the packaging in traditional sex toy shops portrays men as the primary purchasers and disseminators of sex toys to “their” women."*

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<sup>19</sup> These two terms can be used as gender-neutral pronouns, when speaking about someone that does not identify with “his” or “her” or if the pronoun is unknown.

in other words, although a large variety of sex toys aim at women, the packages display sexualised women, as if aiming at men as primary customers. In conclusion, the three websites differ in their use of colour, images, and categories. Pabo, being the eldest website, uses stereotypical colours for female- and male-oriented toys and organises their toys based on women/men. Christine le Duc was founded later than Pabo and does use the same colour approach, but organises the toys according to the type of toy. Willie, as the newest shop of the three, seems to use neither colour nor categories, and could be considered the least normative in that sense.

### *Cyborg and technobody*

In the first chapter, I mentioned how Donna Haraway's cyborg is a theoretical tool to blur boundaries and think outside heteronormative power structures (1991). With the cyborg, patriarchal dichotomies collapse. Sex, gender, or race are no longer applicable, making the cyborg an interesting theoretical tool to use when thinking about socio-cultural norms. The technobody is the practical embodiment of the theory of the cyborg: a technobody is a hybrid of natural and artificial. As mentioned before, this can be seen in various parts of our society. Women with artificial vaginas, people with eyes lasered, runners with bionic limbs, all implementing technology directly into their bodies. These are examples of the way technology can alter the body to contribute to its improvement. In this thesis, the question revolved around the technobody being a female body with a

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<sup>20</sup> Writer Ms Luna of the Dutch website [www.climaximaal.nl](http://www.climaximaal.nl) even argues that one should never buy a sex toy that displays a highly sexualised woman on the package, as they seem to coincide with bad quality. [www.climaximaal.nl](http://www.climaximaal.nl) is a Dutch website I stumbled upon during my research process. The writer, Ms Luna, reviews a large variety of sex toys by trying them out personally and writing about it on her website. In my opinion, a great initiative to educate people, and to provide a useful guide in the overwhelming jungle that is the sex toy industry. I would recommend the reader to visit it and enjoy the read.



sex toy. This can be any sex toy, ranging from dildos and vibrators to vibrating eggs and clitoral butterflies<sup>21</sup>. In this technobody, the use of a sex toy can have various meanings. It is of course a tool for sexual pleasure, during masturbation, sexual encounters or both, as can be detected from the survey. However, the sex toy can also portray the sexual freedom of the female body. The sex toy allows for a person to experience sexual pleasure, without needing a person. As Miranda argues during an episode of *Sex and the City*, “You don’t even need men to have sex with any more!”. Yet, this concept of sexual freedom goes much further beyond the notion of not needing people. There has been a debate whether phallus-shaped sex toys such as dildos or vibrators in fact underline the patriarchal power structure, by suggesting that a woman needs to “fill a void” and a phallus-shaped object is needed for this job (Minge & Zimmerman, 2008). Jeanne Hamming, a professor of English, notes how the dildo has had negative connotations, of it being a representation of the penis (Hamming, 2001). According to radical feminists, “*the dildo creates and recreates the heterosexual assumption that men have power over women in the bedroom. [...] [It] is a source/representation of this hegemonic control.*” (Minge & Zimmerman, 2008, p. 338). Hamming argues that the dildo is in fact more than that. She considers the dildo itself to be a cyborg, and it offers flexibility of gender, as it disconnects it from its masculine history (2001). Hence, the dildo is not a patriarchal power structure, but a post gender-neutral object.

Professor of communications Jeanine Minge contributes to Hamming’s conceptualization of the dildo through a very moving and personal account of her experiences with it. In her article, she writes about her personal experience with (multiple occasions of) rape in her life (2008). She describes how any form of penetration after these horrifying incidents would make her freeze and would invoke a physical reaction of fear. However, she used a dildo for sex with her female partner and this changed her fear of penetration.

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<sup>21</sup> All of which are available at [www.pabo.nl](http://www.pabo.nl), [www.christineleduc.nl](http://www.christineleduc.nl), and [www.willie.nl](http://www.willie.nl).

*"The dildo need not be a tool for scripting masculine hegemony. Rather, it has the potential to reshape penetration from a violent act into a powerful act of cocreation, involving both partners in consensual, connected desire. [...] I do not see my use of the dildo as a replacement for the penis but a supplement to the way my lover and I move our bodies together to orgasm."*

(Minge & Zimmerman, 2008, p. 346)

Minge elaborates even further, highlighting how the dildo has taught her about her own sexual agency. Eventually, this leads her to conclude that *"now, the dildo offers an even fuller sense of sexual agency with my lover. [...] Because of this, I realize that I am a sexual agent of my own making."* (Minge & Zimmerman, 2008, p. 347). Thus, a sex toy is very capable to providing a form of sexual freedom, whether it be engaging in sexual pleasure without a human being necessary, or using a sex toy to become aware of one's own sexual agency. This leads me to argue that a sex toy can in fact be an extension of the female sexuality. When a statement was posed about this concept, 30% of the respondents to the survey agreed with this. And by using a sex toy to gain sexual freedom, it would seem that it offers an extension of the female sexuality.

As I explained earlier on, multiple definitions of the body and sexuality are available. Both sexuality and the body seem to encompass a form of socio-cultural inscription. However, I believe that most participants were unaware of these definitions, therefore considered the body merely as an encasing of some 'inner self'. Yet, when the concept of sexuality was discussed, a discrepancy appeared between the men/women and the transgender and non-binary people. The latter group considered a sex toy an extension of the sexuality, which could indicate their definition is more fluid than the definition of the other people. This could point to a certain difference in social acceptance of the sex toy itself. Perhaps the transgender people have different connotations for a toy in relation to their sexuality, whereas the people who identify as men and women are more inclined to believe their sexuality is limited to their body.

So it could be argued that the use of, specifically, a dildo is not so much a patriarchal power structure. As most participants considered the owning and using of sex toys to be socially acceptable and not shameful at all, it would appear that, in the current Western Dutch, heterosexual female culture segment, this form of power is not at hand. As there was no evidence for either social unacceptance or shame about sex toys, heteronormativity has not been enabled per se.

Based on the results of the survey, I believe popular culture has contributed to this phenomenon. Most respondents considered both *Sex and the City* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* to be pop culture that discusses taboos, breaks those taboos open, and sparks discussion about topics such as sex toys. The main characters of *Sex and the City* showcasing the Pearl Rabbit Vibrator has boosted sales of this Rabbit in the late 1990s (Attwood, 2005; Comella, 2003). Sexuality scholars Rye and Meaney (2007) argue that the show has allowed for more discussion on the topic of sex toys and the survey confirms that argument. *Fifty Shades of Grey* also allowed for more discussion on a taboo topic, namely the world of BDSM (Martin, 2013). The *Fifty Shades* trilogy has increased the acceptance and visibility of BDSM and reduced the stigma (Attwood, 2009). According to law scholar Alex Dymock (2013), “[it] conforms to a popular reading of mainstream heterosexual BDSM as ‘kinky’, sexy and titillating rather than a pathological or juridical interpretation of BDSM as disgusting, criminal and risky.”<sup>22</sup> Most of the participants of the survey agreed with these convictions, as can be read in the diagram in the second chapter.

## **Research questions**

In the first chapter, I submitted my research question and sub-questions for this thesis. The main question was: *in what way does a sex toy contribute to a view of the female body as a ‘technobody’?* I deconstructed my research question into

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<sup>22</sup> She does argue that the storyline itself reinforces a patriarchal power structure, but the book itself can be considered to open up taboos.

multiple sub-questions, being: *How does a sex toy fit within the current Western, and particularly Dutch, technological culture, which seems to rely on technological 'advancement' to alter/better the body?*, *How is the female body conceptualised and defined within this same context?* and *In what way can sex toys be viewed as an extension of the female sexual body?*

Based on the study I have conducted I can continue to answer the sub-questions. The sex toy fits within the female heterosexual Western Dutch population, as it is an accepted tool to enhance one's sex life. The majority of my sample (around 50%) considered this type of tool no different from another tool to enhance the quality of life. This indicates that the sex toy fits like a condom, in a manner of speaking. With regards to my second question, it appears that the female body is conceptualized as a sexual and sensual body. In the content analysis was found that two out of three websites portrayed women as highly sexual and linked their femininity with sex and the selling of products. This could be considered a patriarchal power structure. However, women are also the dominant owners and users of sex toys. Feminists like Jeanine Minge argue for the phallus-shaped sex toys as a way to gain sexual agency, as opposed to reinforcing the patriarchal system. Hence, it might be the case that the Dutch sex shops have yet to redefine their portrayal of women on their pages. And finally, from the results of the survey, it would seem that the sex toy is an extension of the female sexuality. Sex toys are socially accepted and not shameful (anymore), hence it allows for women to use these toys to enhance their sex lives. Also, as can be understood from Minge's article, a dildo for example, can provide a literal extension of the sexuality, but also a figurative extension, by providing the user with a sense of sexual agency. I must note that it would seem that the people that do not identify as men or women consider also consider the sex toy an extension of the body itself.

I believe the cyborg could be a useful tool to consider this division between the body and sexuality and in fact overcome it. As the cyborg is a theoretical tool upon which all dichotomies collapse, using it to do away with the division between body and sexuality could provide a new outlook on the issue of the

female technobody. Hence, from a cyborgian perspective, the female technobody would intertwine the body and sexuality, and extend it beyond the 'natural' human body into machinery.

In conclusion, I believe that the sex toy contributes to a view of the female technobody in multiple ways. It is plausible to consider that popular culture has had an (yet perhaps small) effect on the way women speak about their bodies, sex toys, and social acceptance of the toys. The current Western (Dutch) social acceptance contributes to the view of the female body as a technobody, as it considers the use of a tool to be normal and no different from the use of another tool to improve life.

### **Improvements, social relevance of this study and openings towards further research**

During the process of this research, errors and faults might have occurred. For instance, the websites could have changed since I have performed my analysis, rendering my content analysis slightly redundant. Also, as I have constructed my own questionnaire, it is possible I have left out relevant questions unknowingly, or excluded participants through the use of wrong terminology (even though I have tried to be as open-minded as possible). Finally, in retrospect, it might have been better to use a different method to conduct this type of research. Perhaps using in-depth interviews or focus groups might have given me a different insight in the experiences of my participants.

By combining both qualitative and quantitative research, I have attempted to gain insight in the power structures that surround the sex toy industry and how they relate to the female technobody. The execution of this research has contributed to the body of knowledge about sex toys. As far as I could find during the preliminary literature research, there has been little research on the link between technology in the form of sex toys and the female body, rendering it a technobody. It could inspire future scholars to investigate the notion of the female technobody.

Also, by looking at the websites and the opinions of my sample, niches could be highlighted with regards to the marketing of sex toys. This research could contribute to sex toy shops aiming at a more varied group of customers, also including people who do not identify with “him” or “her” or offering certain items for fetishists. The outcomes of this research could provide people with some awareness with regards to the way sex toy shops advertise their products and hence they might opt for a more female-friendly/LGBTQ-friendly, feminist shop instead.

Part of the social relevance of this study is by developing a further notion of the (female) technobody. It explores the entanglements between sex toy, body, sexuality, and shame, hence contributing to a further understanding of the female sexuality. It could raise the quality of female sexual life and contribute to enhancement of female relations towards pleasure, sexuality and their own body.

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## Appendix

### *Appendix A: English translation of survey used in this thesis.*

#### Questionnaire thesis

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your sexual orientation?
4. In which Dutch province do you live?
5. I have used a sex toy (once): yes/no
6. I own a sex toy: yes/no
7. If yes, how did you get your toy? Via internet; bought in a shop; was a gift from my partner; was a gift from a friend; other (multiple answers possible)
8. If no, have you ever used or owned a toy in the past? Yes/no
9. If no, would you ever want to own or use a toy? Yes/no
10. How long have you owned your toy? Less than a year; between 1-4 years; between 5-10 years; longer than 10 years.
11. I use my sex toy to masturbate: yes/no
12. If yes, how often? Never; hardly ever; sometimes; regularly; always.
13. I use my sex toy during sex (with my partner): yes/no
14. If yes, how often? Never; hardly ever; sometimes; regularly; always.
15. My partner owns a sex toy: yes/no/don't know
16. My partner uses their sex toy to masturbate: yes/no
17. If yes, how often? Never; hardly ever; sometimes; regularly; always.
18. I like the use of a sex toy: completely agree, agree, neutral/don't know, disagree, completely disagree.
19. Using sex toys is socially unacceptable: completely agree, agree, neutral/don't know, disagree, completely disagree.
20. Using a sex toy is completely normal: completely agree, agree, neutral/don't know, disagree, completely disagree.

21. I do not think that using a sex toy is a replacement for a human being: completely agree, agree, neutral/don't know, disagree, completely disagree.
22. Masturbating with a sex toy satisfies me more than sex with a human being: completely agree, agree, neutral/don't know, disagree, completely disagree.
23. If my partner owns a sex toy, I see this as a threat to myself: completely agree, agree, neutral/don't know, disagree, completely disagree.
24. If my partner owns a sex toy, I feel like a failure: completely agree, agree, neutral/don't know, disagree, completely disagree.
25. Using things such as a cockring, vibrator or vibrating egg during sex is normal: completely agree, agree, neutral/don't know, disagree, completely disagree.
26. The use of sex toys has changed my view on what sex is: completely agree, agree, neutral/don't know, disagree, completely disagree.
27. The use of sex toys has changed my view of my own body: completely agree, agree, neutral/don't know, disagree, completely disagree.
28. I think that using a device for sex is nothing different than using other appliances: completely agree, agree, neutral/don't know, disagree, completely disagree.
29. If you use a sex toy to enjoy sex more, it is similar to using other devices for improving life, such as sunglasses for your eyes or a car to travel faster: completely agree, agree, neutral/don't know, disagree, completely disagree.
30. I would rather masturbate "manually" than use a sex toy: completely agree, agree, neutral/don't know, disagree, completely disagree.
31. I think the use of sex toys is a positive development, because the sex is better: completely agree, agree, neutral/don't know, disagree, completely disagree.
32. Using a vibrator or fleshlight during masturbation is fine, because it makes it better: completely agree, agree, neutral/don't know, disagree, completely disagree.

33. Are you familiar with the tv-series "Sex and the City"? yes/no/rather not answer
34. Have you ever seen (part of) an episode? Yes/no/rather not answer
35. How do you feel about the portrayal of sex in the tv-show? Open question
36. Do you think the show has influenced your perception of sex?  
Yes/no/don't know
37. If so, explain in what way? Open question
38. Do you think that the show has made sex a more open topic?  
Yes/no/don't know
39. Are you familiar with the book trilogy "Fifty Shades of Grey"? yes/no/  
rather not answer
40. Have you ever read (part of) one of the books? Yes/no/ rather not answer
41. How do you feel about the portrayal of sex in the books? Open question
42. Do you think the books have influenced your perception of sex? Yes/ no/  
don't know
43. If so, explain in what way? Open question.
44. Do you think that the books have made sex a more open topic?  
Yes/no/don't know

Appendix B: image retrieved from Bart Smit folder.

**Queenie Home**

Kwaliteitsartikelen waarmee kinderen de sfeer van het huishouden spelenderwijs kunnen beleven en nabootsen.

**BART'S TIP**

**ALLEEN BIJ BARTSMIT**

**Qweenie Home schoonmaak trolley**  
Vanaf 3 jaar.  
Compleet met stoffer en blik, ommer en dweil.  
Art.nr. 25571622

~~14,99~~  
**10,-**  
BART'S BODEMPRIJS

**ALLEEN BIJ BARTSMIT**

**Qweenie Home strijkbout**  
Vanaf 3 jaar.  
Met licht, geluid en sprayfunctie.  
Met gratis batterijen. Art.nr. 25565447

~~9,99~~  
**7,99**

**WERKT ECHT**

**Qweenie Home stofzuiger**  
Vanaf 3 jaar.  
Met gratis batterijen. Art.nr. 20739393

~~24,99~~  
**19,99**

**ALLEEN BIJ BARTSMIT**

**Zo goed zijn als mama, dat wil je ook!**

**ALLEEN BIJ BARTSMIT**

**WERKT ECHT**

**Schoonmaakset**  
Vanaf 3 jaar.  
Art.nr. 20929904

~~6,99~~

**STOFZUIGER WERKT ECHT**

**Qweenie Home schoonmaak-trolley met stofzuiger**  
Vanaf 3 jaar.  
Met echte stofzuigergeluiden en sluitende stofballen.  
Met gratis batterijen. Art.nr. 25560411

~~29,99~~  
**24,99**

**BOSCH**

**Bosch stofzuiger**  
Vanaf 3 jaar.  
Met realistisch geluid en verwijderbare stofcontainer. Met gratis batterijen. Art.nr. 24521680

~~29,99~~  
**24,99**

**bart smit**

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