

# The invisibility of Female Masturbation:

## How Young Dutch Women Relate to Masturbation



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## **ABSTRACT**

In the last decade, partially due to feminism, a broad progressive discussion has emerged regarding female sexuality and masturbation (Dabhoiwala 2012, 5-7). Still, female masturbation remains largely invisible in the public space due to a lack of trustworthy information and correct and diverse representation. Also in the academic discourse, women's own meaning making and understanding of masturbation remains largely under-researched. This research breaks through the pattern of sidelining female masturbation and its social-emotional aspects by investigating how young Dutch women perceive female masturbation. Through the use of a focus groups and a qualitative methodology, the thesis centers the everyday experiences of 14 young Dutch women, aged between 18 and 30. The thesis starts with an literature review that maps the important theories around women's sexuality, spanning from the 18th century to contemporary studies, which is subsequently linked to the analysis of the discourses emerging from the focus groups. This analysis focuses on three main themes: (a) learning about masturbation (b) talking about masturbation, and (c) experiencing masturbation. By exploring topics such as sexual education, a missing lexicon for female masturbation, gendered power dynamics and vibrators, this thesis creates a space for female narratives about masturbation.

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## INTRODUCTION

Just six minutes into the first episode of season 2 of *Dear White People* (2017), a Netflix show about the life of a group of friends at a prestigious university, there is a shot of something that is rarely shown on TV: a woman masturbating. One of the main characters Sam (Logan Browning) is getting into it with herself in her dorm room and seemingly enjoying it. Right before she reaches her climax, her friend and roommate Joelle (Ashley Blaine Featherson) walks in and catches her in the act. Sam is in shock and drops her shiny, gold vibrator, and asks Joelle why she is not still in class. Class ended an hour ago and Sam had apparently been at it for a while. Joelle asks Sam to either put a sock on the door or to “lady-tickle herself in the shower like everybody else does” and promises to never speak of the incident again. That is until she realizes why Sam was masturbating in the first place. Sam was just about to head to a class where her ex-boyfriend Gabe (John Patrick Amedori) would also be present. “Wait, were you pre-bating?” Joelle asks. I, at the time, had no idea what that meant and neither did Sam. So Joelle explained it as: “When you take care of yourself so you don't lose your mind in the company of problematic dick.”

I remembered I was so intrigued by how the two female characters talked about masturbation. There was this atmosphere in which it became evitable that they both approved of the act. Although it became clear that masturbation is something you should do in private, the girls talked about it with such nonchalance that asserts a kind of normalization. On the one hand, Joelle jokes around by using the word “lady-tickling”, making the conversation light and funny. On the other hand, she asks Sam about the social-emotional aspects behind her act of masturbation. By this she affirms both that there is a social-emotional aspect to masturbation and that it is acceptable to communicate about this with others. I realised I had never seen this before in tv-shows or movies.

While it is an everyday activity, masturbation scenes often have a loaded meaning. They almost never depict sexual satisfaction alone, like standard sex scenes between two people. No, masturbation scenes are there to explain something bigger about the character. I noticed in my own observations so far, that once characters in popular culture start to masturbate, there are roughly two storylines that can unfold. For female characters this can mean that they start to deviate from society, they turn away from social norms and they start answering to their own needs (*Girls* 2012, *Mad Men* 2007, *Sex & the City* 2001, *Orange is the New Black* 2013). For male characters masturbation

scenes either used as jolly entertainment scenes where the character is usually caught in the act. Here masturbation is not about liberation, but something for the young, naive and silly. The character fails to achieve a partner. (American Pie 2 2001, Not Another Teenage Movie 2001, American Beauty 1999, There's Something about Mary 1998)

### **Academic & Social Relevance**

Since tv-shows and movies simultaneously produce and mirror popular culture, they generally show us practices, beliefs, and objects that are predominant or prevalent in a society at a given point in time. For masturbation this means that in our modern western society, men who masturbate are seen as silly and 'boyish', while women are seen as promiscuous and dirty. Also, in real life, the taboo on masturbation doesn't seem to have completely disappeared, especially for women. In the last decade, partially due to feminism, a broad progressive discussion has emerged regarding female sexuality and masturbation (Dabhoiwala 2012, 5-7). Still, female masturbation remains largely invisible in the public space due to a lack of trustworthy information and correct and diverse representation. This hole in the public discourse is then filled with shame and guilt and as a result women talk less to each other about masturbation. Research from Pennsylvania University (2004) showed that college women have more frequent communication with their friends on all sex-related topics except for masturbation, which college men reported discussing more frequently. After seeing that scene of Sam and Joelle, I realized that within my own group of friends, women who I would all consider 'sex positive', we hardly ever talk about masturbation.

Also in the academic discourse, female masturbation has remained largely undiscussed. Previous research has long shown that women have the same sex drive as men and research by Rutgers (2011), a Dutch NGO concerned with sexual and reproductive rights, shows that 83% of Dutch men and 65% of Dutch women occasionally masturbate. Yet, if you search for scientific articles on male masturbation, you will quickly get a few million hits but if you are looking for research on female masturbation, then you will find just a few hundred articles. Just like there are hardly any movie and television scenes that portray female masturbation as the human and natural-emotional act it is, there is hardly any research which approaches female masturbation as such. Within the research that has been done, women's own meaning making about masturbation remains largely under-researched.

## **Aim of the Research**

This study investigates how women understand and give meaning to their masturbation practices. It asks the question of *How do 'sex positive' young Dutch women perceive female masturbation?* In order to answer this research question into 1. *how young Dutch women learn about masturbation*, 2. *with whom young Dutch women communicate about masturbation* and 3. *How young Dutch women feel about their own masturbation practices*. It thus centers the everyday experiences of fourteen young Dutch women, aged between 18 and 30. In this thesis I give space to female narratives about masturbation by focusing on how women talk about their masturbation experiences and make sense of their experiences in the context of their own choices. My main goal was to investigate how and where women receive information, how and with whom they talk about masturbation and how this influences their perception of their own masturbation practices. Given that little socio-cultural research has been conducted into female masturbation in the Netherlands. The research was of an exploratory nature, open to any feelings, reasons or factors that were relevant to this perplexity of the invisibility of female masturbation. With this research I want to break through the pattern of sidelining female masturbation and its social-emotional aspects.

## Structure

This thesis is structured into four main chapters: the theoretical framework, the methodology, the analysis of the discourses emerging from the interviews and, finally, the conclusion.

In Chapter 1, I conduct a literature review that maps the important theories around women's sexuality, spanning from the 18th century to contemporary studies. I will discuss the sexual double standard and the complex ways it manifests through the social and psychological lives of women. I will introduce the topic of female masturbation and address the lack of education and information. I will explain how female masturbation is made invisible and why this is a feminist issue. Finally I will discuss how it establishes a pattern of shame and guilt, which I argue, needs to be broken.

In chapter 2, I address the methodological approach of the thesis. Here I present the methods that I have used to conduct my research. The data on which my research is built, consists of the transcriptions of the four focus groups that I have organised and my personal notes on these events. In every focus group three to four women between the age of 21 and 26, participated. I will explain the choice of doing qualitative research with semi-structured interviews techniques and focus groups. I will touch upon my own positionality and the limitations of my research. Finally, I provide an explanation of how I have analysed and interpreted the data.

In chapter 3, I offer the analysis of the collected data. The chapter focuses on three main themes that came to the service during the conversations: (a) learning about masturbation (b) talking about masturbation, and (c) experiencing masturbation. I will trace the resemblances and connections between the narratives of the fourteen women who participated and map out the connections between the narratives and theories discussed in chapter 1.

In chapter 4, I draw the conclusions from chapter 1, 2 and 3, give a final answer to the research question as well as give recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER 1: The Theoretical Framework**

### **Introduction**

This research looks at how young sex positive Dutch women perceive and relate to female masturbation. While women's sexuality in the Western context in general, and the Dutch one in particular, has taken a more central role in the media and popular culture, societal norms about sexuality are still gendered, with women's sexuality being more scrutinized than that of their male counterparts (Sakaluk et al. 2014; Wiederman 2005). Women are expected to behave passively when it comes to sexual activity and have traditionally been kept restricted in their sexual opportunities and expressions (Armstrong et al. 2012). This gendered approach to sexuality has been conserved and reproduced in the society via various cultural representations: in film, literature, or everyday stereotypes and jokes. Hence, they still hold power over how women personally experience their sexual subjectivity and how they are perceived by others (Fetterolf and Sanchez 2015; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Townsend and Wasserman 2011). Masturbation, in this thesis defined as the sexual stimulation of one's own genitals for sexual pleasure, usually to the point of orgasm, could be thought of as a sexual activity with uppermost control and agency. Thus, the opposite of what is traditionally expected of women. This could be the reason that female masturbation is still a taboo practice and a taboo topic to discuss. Fortunately, nowadays there are some media outlets that provide young women with a sex-positive content and in which the female sexuality is taken seriously or centered. However media outlets seem to be the only source of information for young people since both school and parents really struggle with discussing the topic of masturbation (Ingham, 2005). In the context of this absence, the taboo regarding this topic is further internalized by young people. In this chapter I will discuss how female masturbation has been made invisible, what factors play a role in maintaining the patriarchal myth that female masturbation is shameful or dirty, and why we should break the pattern.

First, I offer a literature review that maps the important theories around women's sexuality and female masturbation, spanning from the 18th century to the 21st century. I will discuss the sexual double standard and the complex ways it manifests in the social and psychological lives of women. Next, I will introduce the topic of female masturbation and address the lack of education and trustworthy correct information for girls and women. I argue that despite contemporary attempts, there is little diverse and realistic representation. Then, I will elaborate on the social relevance of this thesis and explain how the gendered power dynamics around masturbation make it a feminist issue. I will explain how female masturbation is made invisible and how this creates a lack of female scripts around the topic. Finally, I will discuss how girls and women instead internalize patriarchal scripts and how this establishes a pattern of shame and guilt, which I debate, we should break through.

## **The History of Female Sexual Pleasure**

The exploration of the sexual identity of women started relatively late in human history compared to that of the man. Until the 18th century it was believed that a woman, like a man, had to orgasm in order to conceive. When researchers found out that this wasn't the case, women's sexuality was considered to be either non-existent or an inappropriate topic to discuss in the public sphere (Montemurro 2003, 440). After the 18th century in the Victorian<sup>1</sup> era, girls were taught to not regard themselves as sexual beings, apart from serving their duty as procreators. Talk about women's sexual pleasure was strongly discouraged (Giddens 2013; Montemurro 2003; Petersen and Hyde 2010). The little information that exists on the topic, is mostly obtained through medical records from that time. Women's sexuality entered in the medicalized discourse and female hysteria became a common medical diagnosis for women exhibiting a wide array of symptoms, including "compulsive" masturbating. Doctors sent these women to mental hospitals to get treatment (Maines 2001, 7). There are also records in which some doctors treated their female patients with genital stimulation. It is debated that since there were so many women benefiting from this practice, the physical labour became too heavy, which led to the use of the first 'medical' vibrators (Maines

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<sup>1</sup> The Victorian era was the period of Queen Victoria's reign, from 20 June 1837 until her death on 22 January 1901

2001, 11). It is important to acknowledge that at the time, these activities were understood as medical rather than sexual exchanges (Findlay 1992, 567).

In the early 1900s, a change took place that redefined social relations between men and women in the western world. Because of the upcoming commercialized consumer culture, Victorian values gradually started to fade. Instead the image of the “flapper girl”<sup>2</sup> became the female figure that embodied early-twentieth century femininity which included pre-marital sex. This period (1870–1910) is what we would now call “the first sexual revolution” (Dabhoiwala 2012, 241).

In 1950 a work was published which brought significant change in the way women’s sexuality was viewed. Five years after writing “Sexual Behaviour in the Male”, Kinsey and colleagues published their landmark study of “Sexual Behavior in the Female”. Aside from studying women’s ‘first source’ of orgasm, as well as frequency, techniques, attitudes, and sources of information, almost half of the participants claimed to masturbate, at least at some time during their life. By acknowledging the clitoral stimulation the women described, the study also played a big part in proving that the male phallus was not necessary for a female orgasm. Rather the opposite, only 20 percent of the women claimed to use vaginal penetration as a technique to orgasm during masturbation (Kinsey et al. 1953, 221).

Another important milestone in discourse around women’s sexuality was the sexual revolution in the 1960’s. From the 19th and early-20th centuries, feminist thinkers started to explore the different cultural layers and social constructs around sexuality (D’Emilio & Freedman 1988, 270-472). Throughout the multiple waves of feminism, different movements and opinions influenced the way women’s sexuality was perceived. Especially the feminist sex-wars in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which ultimately led to the third wave of feminism, contributed to the idea of sex-positive feminism which played a big part in the sexual liberation of women. The second sexual revolution was built on the ideas initiated by psychologists, scientists and feminist philosophers such as Wilhelm Reich, Alfred Kinsey and Sigmund Freud, who believed that sexual repression could cause long term harmful consequences (D’Emilio, & Freedman 1988, 472-480). This revolution was typified by the sentiment that the erotic should be celebrated as a normal part

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<sup>2</sup> The flapper girls were a generation of women in the 1920s who cut their hair short in a bob, listened to jazz, and expressed dissatisfaction with the existing gender norms for women at the time.

of life. Sexuality should not be repressed by social morality and family or suppressed by religion and the state. It caused a dramatic shift in traditional values related to sexual identities and sexual activities. Also those outside the strict boundaries of heterosexual marriage became more socially acceptable (Marks & Wosick 2017, 3-4).

Yet, even after two sexual revolutions, women's sexuality went back to being a controversial subject, subdued by negative inflictions of the past mixed with modern conceptions. Even though, society grew more curious about and accepting of women's sexuality, a sexual double standard on the base of gender, continued to exist as a result of the past. (Schwartz and Rutter 1998, 90-94)

### **The Double Standard**

First I will discuss the sexual double standard and the complex ways it manifests through the social and psychological lives of women. Through daily life men and women face restrictive gender norms regarding sexual agency and expression. These norms form a role that is expected of us depending on gender. Society expects men to be sexual agents and to focus on the physical elements of love and relationships (Armstrong et al 2012, 437). Girls have been traditionally precluded from freely expressing their sexuality in order to remain 'pure and innocent', to be desirable for men (Armstrong et al 2012, 438). Women are expected to behave passively when it comes to sexual activity and to focus on the emotional elements of love and relationships (Sakaluk et al. 2014; Wiederman 2005). This undermines women's sexual subjectivity, the way they see themselves as sexual beings, their feeling of entitlement to sexual pleasure and sexual safety and their ability to make confident active sexual choices (Montemurro 2014, 3). This undermining is a product of decades of exposure to gender stereotypes and a lifetime of gendered socialization either through personal social life or elements that reflect society and culture such as art, literature and film. Although women might make different choices in current times, these stereotypes and norms still hold power over how they personally feel and are perceived by others (Fetterolf and Sanchez 2015; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Townsend and Wasserman 2011).

While the double standard has been challenged by new approaches, I believe that other forms of oppressions of women's sexuality still persist in contemporary times. The idea that women do have sexual desire outside the confinement of a heterosexual romantic relationship has settled gradually. Still, women that actively seek sexual pleasure outside of this commitment, are judged more harshly than men who do so (Crawford and Popp 2003; Peterson and Hyde 2010; Risman and Schwartz, 2002). In environments such as bars and clubs, women are expected to behave sexually passive and to solely respond to the desire of the men. While men are expected to actively pursue sex, women who do so are likely to be perceived as 'desperate' (Armstrong et al 2012, 444)

On the contrary, women who show the opposite of sexual enthusiasm are also judged. In the early 1900s, Freud (1912) identified a psychological dichotomy in his male patients known as the 'Madonna-Whore complex'. These individuals placed women into two dichotomous categories, women were either saints (Madonna) or prostitutes (whores), one could be loved and the other could be sexually desired, never both (Freud, 1912). In today's Western society the Madonna-whore dichotomy ultimately means that women have to be either pure and 'virginal' or sexual and forthcoming. Psychology and Women's Studies professor Laina Y. Bay-Cheng offers a new contemporary reading of the Madonna-Whore complex: the 'Slut-Virgin continuum', a model that shows how women are judged based on their sexual activity.

On one end there are the virtuous (virgins) and on the other there are the licentious (sluts). The presence of a committed romantic partner plays a factor in determining to which extent their sexual behaviour is acceptable, hence their position on the continuum (Bay-Cheng 2015, 281). Other factors in this process include sexual orientation, monogamy versus non-monogamy, long-term versus short-term commitment (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988, 492-502). Staying within the bounds of what is accepted sexual behaviour, is a complex balancing act for women. They should present themselves as desirable but not desiring, to be a sexually giving girlfriend, but a fastidious single woman (Gavey 2005, 156). Women are celebrated when they are 'picky' about which men they let themselves be courted by, but they can also get negative responses when they provoke male desire without satisfying it, in which case they might be called 'a tease' (Bay-Cheng 2015, 281). Whatever position the women end up with on the continuum, ultimately comes down to how they respond to the sexual desire of the male, which is unquestionably acknowledged as of serious, demanding, irrepressible nature (Gavey 2005, 271). This means that the only agency women have

over how well they are perceived and accepted, is by choosing between refusing or consenting to men's sexual propositions (Gavey 2005, 301).

Yet, Bay-Cheng also notes that there is an upcoming predominantly positive view on women's sexual agency. In popular culture there is a new display of young women, celebrities such as artists, movie stars, social media influencers and reality-stars but also fictional characters, who proudly exhibit the action they undertake to feed their sexual appetite. Songs and storylines about women who unapologetically pursue sexual fun and pleasure, whether romantically committed or not. The pitfall of this trend is that it is not always clear where the distinction between sexual empowerment and sexualization lays. Furthermore, it is important to remain critical of to which extent women are able to resist this trend or to capitalize on it (Bay-Cheng 2015, 287). The manner in which women's sexuality is perceived in society, also reflects and influences how women relate to their own sexuality, including masturbation. In the next sections I thus specifically address how female masturbation has been recognized and understood in Western society.

## **Masturbation**

Masturbation could be thought of as the sexual activity with uppermost control and agency, the opposite of what is traditionally expected of women. We see that in some ways society and the media have opened more to discussing the theme of masturbation. Scientific research has been promoting it as a healthy part of sexual development for a long time now, but this wasn't always the case. For decades people believed that masturbation could lead to all kinds of health problems from mental illness to sexually transmitted diseases to "dementia, blindness and infertility" making it a very controversial sexual activity (Coleman, 2002, 6). Nowadays those conceptions are mostly understood as a product of ancient myths and religious beliefs (Coleman, 2002, 6). Although its proven safety, these ideas might still influence how masturbation is looked upon today. Along with the fact that female masturbation defies the image of women as sexually passive this could be the reason that masturbation is still either a taboo practice or a taboo topic to discuss, in a wide range of cultures around the world.

As noted above, the first research on masturbation was prominently about health risks or how to prevent the practice. Later research was often confined to statistics about age, gender and frequency. Most of the results showed that boys start earlier and masturbate more frequently than girls (Gagnon, 1985; Hyde & Jaffee, 2000; Smith, Rosenthal, & Reichler, 1996). Very few studies have been dedicated to finding out what motivates young people to engage in or withdraw from the act and how this contributes to their sexual development and sexual subjectivity. Qualitative research on women and masturbation is especially very rare. To find out how young people perceive (their own) masturbation practices, it is essential to understand which information they have been given and by whom. Because of the stigma that continues to surround the subject, it is hard to find a safe space for young people in which they can find true information (Kaestle & Allen 2011, 5). Masturbation is a complex and difficult part of sexual education both for school and parents (Ingham 2005, 379).

### **Contemporary Representation of Female Masturbation**

Fortunately, nowadays more and more media are starting to include positive portrayals of female masturbation. They provide young women with a sex-positive context in which they can learn that masturbation is normal and healthy and can have positive outcomes (Watson & McKee 2013, 30). Within the media a lot has changed around the representation of female sexuality. Fifteen years ago, the series “Sex and the City” might have been the only series to capture the idea of female sexual subjectivity. Nowadays there are more and more television shows that also center around the desire of the woman. Taboo breaking series such as ‘Girls’, ‘Dear White People’ and ‘Sex education’ even show female masturbation scenes, which are still very rare.

Especially the internet has played a big part in creating a space for people to discuss female masturbation. There are tons of feminist news outlets or blogs such as ‘Jezebel’<sup>3</sup>, ‘Repeller’<sup>4</sup> and ‘Bitch Media’<sup>5</sup> that offer to report news from a feminist angle or write about contemporary feminist discourses including masturbation. Even women’s magazines like ‘Vogue’, ‘Cosmopolitan’ and ‘Marie Claire’ are including the topic in their magazines and websites, ultimately contributing to the visibility of female masturbation. The difficulty is that the media usually comes ‘too late’, hence most young women have already internalized the shame and negative associations from their parents, school and peers. This means that they do not always accept the knowledge that the media gives them. At least the media has the potential to prevent them from having an entirely negative view of masturbation and to develop ambivalent attitudes at least. It seems likely that until masturbation becomes a normalized topic within sexual education by the other sources of information, the media will continue to fill in this gap (Watson & Mckee 2013, 37).

## **Masturbation Education**

Interestingly enough, most parents claim they like to be the primary educators for their children when it comes to sex but a lot of them feel distressed doing so (Dyson 2010, 12). Especially when it comes to masturbation, many parents feel uncomfortable, which eventually leads to them hardly addressing it at all (Kaestle & Allen 2011, 985). The other authority structure in children's lives, school, struggles with it as well. Research has pointed out that most schools take a very clinical approach to sex education which discusses puberty, penetration and procreation. It explains the causes and effects of sex, with more emphasis on the negative effects and how to avoid them, then on the positive effects and how to obtain them. Masturbation is a topic that is rarely included (Allen 2008, 578).

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<sup>3</sup> <https://jezebel.com/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://repeller.com/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bitchmedia.org/>

In 1994, the head of the US Public Health Service Joycelyn Elders, spoke out her support on including masturbation as a mandatory topic in sex educations at schools. As a result she was forced to resign because of the controversy that erupted around her statements (Roberts 1994, 1604). Although her statements were part of an national plan to battle STDs and unwanted pregnancies, they were seen as outrageous by conservatives who demanded her resignation (Roberts 1994, 1604). This shows how not only the practice but also the discussion of the topic continues to be controversial. Until this day Dr. Elders is still advocating for masturbation education. Yet, the idea of pleasure remains almost excluded and masturbation is almost never mentioned (Kaestle & Allen 2011, 986). The consequence of this is that young people internalize the taboo in the absence of a proper information source. This way they learn that masturbation is shameful instead of a normal desire in the realm of human sexuality. This taboo around the topic also implies that young people who do enjoy masturbation should feel shame. This cultural shame is also imposed on them through disdainful jokes, stereotypes in the media and humiliation of people who speak out (Kaestle & Allen 2011, 991).

### **Gendered Differences in Masturbation**

To psychologists Harriet Hogarth and Roger Ingham (2005), the real shame is that it has been proven so many times that masturbation actually has important health and wellbeing benefits for young people. Aside from the fact that it is a normal part of the development of sexual desire, it provides a greater understanding of the body and the self, which in most cases leads to “greater social competence, positive self-development and self esteem, and well-being, culminating in greater acquisition of the skills necessary for the establishment of intimate and fulfilling long-term relationships” (Hogarth & Ingham 2005, 559-563). A side effect of understanding your own body is exploring and fulfilling its desires. Overall, it is widely shown through research that practices that provide direct clitoral stimulation are extremely important for women to achieve an orgasm. Women who partake in self-stimulation during sexual activities with partners increase their chances of an orgasm with more than fifty percent (Armstrong et al 2012, 436). In a research by Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck (2005) on 449 young women in Australia, it was stated that women who frequently masturbated claimed to have higher levels of sexual subjectivity. This meant that they

felt more deserving of sexual pleasure and more successful in achieving it. Furthermore, these women were more expressive in their intimate relationships and more resistant to gendered double standards.

As noted before, most of the research about masturbation showed that boys start earlier than girls. The effect of this is that boys start earlier with learning about their own sexuality and what gives them pleasure. Ultimately this means that most boys experience their first orgasm through masturbation, before they have done any sexual activity with a partner. By the time that they do have it with a partner, they are already (partly) aware of what triggers them into orgasm (Hogarth & Ingham 2009, 568). For most girls their first sexual encounter happens with a male partner, as does their first orgasm. To conclude, it can be argued that boys learn about sexual pleasure through themselves and girls learn about sexual pleasure through boys (Hogarth & Ingham 2009, 566).

### **Invisibility of Female Masturbation**

Another remarkable difference between young men and women is their communication about masturbation with peers. Since parents and school hardly talk about the topic, friends become an important source of information (Parks 2010, 502). Yet, it seems that women hardly talk about the topic among themselves. While boys report that they do mention it occasionally with friends, the majority of girls claim they never speak about masturbation with anyone, including friends (Hogarth & Ingham 2009, 562). This difference seems to stick during the years. In a research from Pennsylvania University from 2004, college women reported more frequent communication with their friends than college men, on all sex-related topics except for masturbation, which the men reported discussing more frequently.

This communication difference can also be seen in the available vocabulary around the subject. Men have a wide range of words to signify their genitals or euphemisms for the act of masturbation. For example, in the English language “spanking the monkey”, “jacking off” and “wanking” are pretty well known easy ways to describe male masturbation. For female masturbation this lexicon is notably smaller and less known (Fahs & Frank 2015, 243). Even the actual terms that describe the female genitals are not even that established in everyday language. Most women find out about terms such as vulva, clitoris and labia, at a pretty late age, which results in an ‘missing

discourse of desire' (Fahs & Frank 2015, 245). Ultimately, this absence of words and conversations, contributes to the invisibility of female masturbation, which then again influences the way women 'talk about, think about and engage in masturbation' (Fahs & Frank 2015, 245).

This invisibility means that there are hardly any 'scripts' available to young women about what is normal and healthy behaviour when it comes to masturbation. Which then makes it easy for them to fall into the pitfall of incorporating the traditional patriarchal scripts that are available. Especially the extreme focus on penetration, gets so internalized that most women are convinced that other women masturbate with self-penetration, when actually almost non women do (Fahs & Frank 2015, 248). Some women internalize the belief that masturbation will undermine the skills and ego of their partner, leading them to do it in secret. Then there is the internalization of female masturbation, solely as a product for male desire, leading women to give a performance rather than to take pleasure (Fahs & Frank 2015, 248). To conclude, when there are hardly any guides on female masturbation, patriarchal guidelines will take their place, establishing the same old traditional understandings of gender, power, and pleasure.

### **Young Women's Shame and Discomfort around Masturbation**

The invisibility of female masturbation and absence of scripts on female bodies and pleasure also lead to another ascertainment: a big discomfort. When girls are at an age that they start to explore their own body and sexuality, they are often bombarded with mixed messages and contradictory information. The traditional patriarchal scripts discussed above usually don't come in clear explanations or warnings. They are rather communicated through subtle remarks and secret gossip, mystifying the scripts in such a way that it becomes hard for girls to fully examine and question these messages (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, and Thomson 1992, 655). For example the message that women shouldn't dress 'inappropriately', otherwise they are 'asking for it' but they should 'make an effort' to look good, otherwise no men will want them. It's the balancing act around male desire, as mentioned before, that can make women ambivalent to the sexual side of their bodies.

This discomfort also became apparent in the results of a qualitative research done by Hogarth and Ingham (2009). The authors interviewed English women aged between 16 and 18 about their experiences with masturbation. According to their answers, the women were divided in three groups. One group had a very negative view on female masturbation and saw it as a sign of desperation, connecting it to loneliness and getting old. They actively distanced themselves from women who did masturbate. One group had quite a positive view on female masturbation. These women were happy they discomfort this part of themselves, describing it a fulfilling practice, which included 'amazing' orgasms and calmness and release afterwards. Although, sometimes also shame. The third group mainly expressed their confusion and disappointment with masturbation. The attempts of these women had ended in 'failure' which they described as feeling guilty, shameful, dirty, sad or incompetent. They felt unsure how to pick it up from their last attempt and expressed a lack of information or people to talk to. They found communication with their parents 'awkward' and wished that they could be more open about it. They also had difficulties communicating about sexual desires and safety, with their sexual partners (Hogarth & Ingham 2009, 560- 566).

This difficulty could be an effect of the patriarchal script that states that romance should be the master narrative in sexual relations for women. As a result, sexuality becomes inseparably intertwined with romantic 'love'. In this way, romantic relationships should form the only accepted space for women to talk about their desires, their emotional ones that is (Tolman 2002, 748). This narrative can be so persuasive, that it becomes hard for women to comprehend the single entities and orient on their emotional needs and physical desires separately. This makes it hard to communicate about their bodies, since finding the words to cover both needs as one entity is often impossible (Tolman 2002, 748-749). I argue that it is important that women are encouraged to explore both of these aspects separately and then are free to choose if they want one with or without the other.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that while women's sexuality in the Western world has taken a more central role in the media and popular culture, societal norms about sexuality are still gendered. Women are expected to behave passive when it comes to sexual activity and have traditionally been kept restricted in their sexual opportunities and expressions. These gendered ideas, conserved through stereotypes, jokes and representation in elements that reflect society and culture such as art, literature and film, still hold power over how women personally experience their sexual subjectivity and how they are perceived by others. Masturbation could be thought of as a sexual activity with uppermost control and agency. Thus, the opposite of what is traditionally expected of women. This could be the reason that female masturbation is still a taboo practice and a taboo topic to discuss. Fortunately, nowadays there are some media outlets that provide young women with a sex-positive content and in which the female sexuality is taken seriously or centered. However media outlets seem to be the only source of information for young people. Since both schools and parents don't include the topic in sex education, there are no trustworthy authorities in the lives of young girls who teach them about the possible feelings, longings and effects of masturbation. The consequence of this is that young people pick up on the absence of the topic and its taboo, and internalize it. This maintains the taboo and creates the invisibility of female masturbation in the western society. An example of this is the fact that there are hardly any terms to describe female masturbation which leads to "missing discourse of desire". This invisibility also means that there are hardly any 'scripts' available to young women about what is normal and healthy behaviour when it comes to masturbation. As a result women are more prone to internalizing the traditional patriarchal scripts that are presented to them in society, which only further establishes the pattern of discomfort and shame. I argue, that to break out of these patterns and to further pursue the liberation of women's sexuality, we should move away from the patriarchal script that claims that romance should be the master narrative in sexual relations for women and instead encourage them to explore both their emotional needs and physical desires separately, to claim them both without being judged by society. In the next chapter I will analyze the conversations that took place during the focus groups and make connections between the theories of this chapter and lived experiences of the women who participated.

## **CHAPTER 2: Methodology**

### **Qualitative Research**

One thing that I have learned from my own journey of constructing knowledge on sexuality and masturbation is that everyone's experience is different. I noticed that the women I consider my friends, all had totally different introductions to, information about and experiences with the topic, which in many ways influenced their feelings towards it. To capture such a complex dynamic of broad yet personal information, qualitative research was considered as best suited. The aim of any qualitative research is to understand a social phenomenon on the basis of the meaning that the participants in the research give to it (Boeije & Bleijenbergh, 2013). Given that little socio-cultural research has been conducted about female masturbation in the Netherlands, this research is of an exploratory nature. My aim was to use a method of inquiry that could expose the largest amount of unforeseen information. The method of focus groups with semi structured interview questions was selected to capture the perspective and lived experiences of my participants.

### **Semi Structured Interviews**

Different types of interview structures are suitable for different moments, questions and people. For semi-structured interview questions, a topic-list is conducted which steers the interview in a certain direction (Boeije & Bleijenbergh, 2013). For every topic I prepared some possible interview questions to function as a safety net in case the natural flow of the conversation was not sufficient. Although the researcher has some control over what topics are discussed, there is room for the participant to determine the intensity of these topics and to bring new concepts to the table with importance to them. Since masturbation is a delicate and extremely intimate topic, which is still frequently surrounded by shame, I found it important to create an environment in which my participants would feel safe. In my opinion semi-structured interviews are fitted to lead to informal conversations, where both researcher and participant are equal interlocutors.

## **Focus Groups**

I wanted to avoid that the participants could feel isolated or alone in the way they relate to masturbation. To further secure this feeling of safety and equality, focus groups seemed the best suited method of inquiry. A focus group is a communal conversation with multiple participants. The different participants can express their opinion and respond directly to each other, which can create a more secure feeling for participants. The most important reason to use focus groups is that they are an extremely interesting method for taboo topics. They can differ from the more traditional individual interviews, in the fact that they can “provide access to forms of data” that are difficult to obtain with the other methods. (Morgan 1997, p. 2). Since the discussion arises between the participants as well as with the moderator, the interactivity is less traditional and binary. This method also provides a way to observe “how and why individuals accept or reject others’ ideas.” (Stewart et al. 2007, p. 11). Focus groups can provide the stimulus for the participants to “articulate those normally unarticulated normative assumptions.” (Stewart et al. 2007, p. 11). The fact that the participants mostly talk to each other, encourages them to use any language, including slang terms or expletives that they would normally use when speaking amongst themselves. Which means group members can express their thoughts and feelings using their own terminology, not the language of the researcher (Bloor et al. 2001, p. 9). For this purpose I have organised four focus groups with three to four people. While I initially planned to not intervene in the discussions, in practice I found that it was much rather appreciated if I took part in the conversation by sharing my own stories and anecdotes. The analysis of the data refers however only to the interactions between the participants themselves and not my own interventions.

## **Conducting the Data**

The data on which my research is built consists of the transcriptions of the focus groups and my personal notes. As mentioned before, I have organised four focus groups with three to four participants, which all took place in the informal setting of one of the participants' houses. My intention was not to offer any new information or ideas on any of the related topics, but to record what ideas and views the participants already had on the topic of masturbation.

During the focus groups I used both audio recording and handwritten notes to capture the data. This was done with permission from the participants. Recording an interview, gave me the chance to replay and properly transcribe everything that was said. The notes have functioned as a memory aid for observations about additional information such as body language, facial expressions, and intonation. By the use of a notebook instead of an electronic device, I have aimed to increase the informality of the focus groups.

Since my aim was not statistical, but theoretical representativeness, I used snowball sampling to collect participants. This method is especially suitable for research on hidden populations or on behaviour that is prohibited or a subject of taboo (Naderifar et al, 2017). I simply asked women in my personal circle if they would be open to the idea of discussing female masturbation with a group of other women, for a scientific purpose. Those women, thereafter, asked their friends and so the focus groups came to life. In order to qualify for my research, the individual had to: a) identify as a woman at the time of the interview; b) be between 18 and 28 years old, and c) have grown up in the Netherlands. Ultimately, my participants were all cis-gender women between the age of 21 and 26. I tried to emphasize that I was both interested in women who masturbate and women who do not, but mostly attracted women who did. Ten out of the fourteen women identified as heterosexual, three women identified as bi-sexual and one women identified as pan-sexual. The participants were all white. Nine out of the fourteen women were in a heterosexual relationship at the time of the focusgroup and the other five women were single.

## **Organizing and Analysing the Data**

We have talked about highly personal experiences around a topic that still holds an awkward and judged place in society. I wanted my participants to feel free to disclose anything without fear of possible negative backlash from readers. For this reason, the names of the participants are anonymized. As such, all names used in the thesis are pseudonyms.

Proper organization of the research data is crucial for being able to analyze and subsequently interpret everything. However, it is also important that a large part of the analysis of the data also takes place during the period of data collection (Boeije & Bleijenbergh, 2013). I have strived for a

constant alternation between data collection and data analysis. In order to make this possible, I have literally transcribed every recording of the focus group, right after it had taken place. Based on the transcriptions, I made notes about striking or frequently occurring storylines. After this, I adjusted or supplemented the topic lists for the following focus groups.

Then, I analyzed all collected data, using the computer program Nvivo. By putting all data in Nvivo, I was able to further organize and analyze the data according to the coding process. This means that in the beginning I was mainly concerned with open coding, breaking up and categorizing the data. This gave me a clear overview of the assigned meaning or theme of a fragment (Boeije & Bleijenbergh, 2013). In the second half of the analysis I focused on the axial coding of the data, looking for connections between the different categories that were given to the fragments.

## **Positionality & Limitations**

Aside from the rich data that focus groups deliver, it is important to understand that interviewing is not a flawless research method. These conversations take place under artificial conditions, their aim is to contribute to the research, of which the participants are aware. On the one hand this awareness is important to require informed consent. On the other hand, this can also produce artificial responses as opposed to more desired authentic responses (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2013). It is possible that the participants catered their answers to fit a feminist framework, since they knew the research was done from a gender studies angle of approach. In addition, there is always a performative element to personal interviews. The participants have to present themselves with the knowledge that their stories can be exposed to others who read the research (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2013). Besides the representativeness, I was also concerned with the issue of objectivity.

Feminist theorist Donna Haraway reconceptualized objectivity as situated knowledge. The way we come to understand the world is affected by our own position in it. Our position is a product of the multiple axes of our identity, situated in (historic) time and space. Only by understanding that our own perspectives are partial, can we claim a small part of objectivity (Haraway, 1988). This research aims to expose the situated knowledge of the participants, rather than to claim a neutral truth about female masturbation.

It is important to acknowledge that in all phases of qualitative research it is both the words of the participant and the interpretation of these words by the researcher, that form the outcome of the research. Because of this, reflexivity is important in all stages of the research (Boeije & Bleijenbergh, 2013). I would like to emphasize that I have tried to be aware of my role as a researcher and its effects on the research results. My own gender identity, sexual orientation, norms and values, and academic and cultural background influence how I obtained, reported and analyzed the data. I have tried to keep this in mind at all times through constant self-reflection. Simply acknowledging my positionality does, of course, not erase the consequences of my position. Nevertheless, by using reflexivity, I hope to take accountability for my interpretation of the truth that the participants presented to me.

## **CHAPTER 3: An Analysis of how Young Dutch Women Relate to Masturbation.**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I discuss the main themes that emerged during the focus groups. I will give an answer to the sub-questions 1. How do young Dutch women learn about masturbation? 2. How and with whom do young Dutch women communicate about masturbation? 3. How do young Dutch women feel about their own masturbation practices? These answer will be formed by both discussing the topics and experiences that were common for most of the women and by paying attention to individual stories and experiences that differed across the cases. The answers to these questions come from fourteen individuals that share social and cultural backgrounds, while at the same time having their own particular experiences in relation to the topic of the study. In this I want to insist on the fact that there are no wrong or right considerations, only personal and communal ones. My sub questions are as followed: I identified the following themes (a) Learning about masturbation (b) Talking about masturbation (c) Experiencing masturbation.

I will discuss how most women claimed there was a lack of information on the topic. Most women learned about masturbation from the media because the two big authorities structures, parents and school, do not step up with sufficient sex education. I will explain how this lack of information was fertile soil for confusion and shame and how this led to invisibility of female masturbation. I will lay out how in most cases this invisibility led the woman to internalize patriarchal scripts. A process that was reinforced by the disdainful jokes of male classmates and the lack of conversations on the topic between women due to shame. I will discuss how the women experienced shame around the frequency of masturbating. I will explain how for most women, a vibrator has helped them explore and develop their masturbation practices and finally, what meaning they give to orgasms and debate how this could be connected to patriarchal scripts. Since, discussing and disclosing these uttermost personal topics is an overcome challenge for all the women who participated, it is my honor to introduce to you: the results of the research.

## **(A) Learning about Masturbation**

### **Beginning to Masturbate**

Most of the women who participated in the focus group were quite unsure about the first time they found out about the act of masturbation. They could not really remember when they first consciously heard about it. They mention Dutch magazines for teenage girls such as 'Girlz' and 'Hitkrant' as their first source of information. Indeed, Watson & Mckee (2013) mention the important role that the media sometimes takes on by providing information about masturbation to young people. For boys this is usually through television comedies and for girls this is usually through books and magazines (Watson & Mckee, 2013). These magazines had sections where readers' sex-related questions were answered and where masturbation was frequently mentioned. Some of the women recall these sections as the most exciting part of the magazine, immediately reading it first. Other women found themselves simply uninterested in these sections for a long time, although they read it as part of the magazine as a whole. This difference in curiosity can be explained by the fact of whether the women were active masturbators at the time they read the magazine, as most of the women mentioned.

Only three of the fourteen women had a vivid memory of how they came to know. Leonie remembers her female babysitter calmly explaining it to her and answering all her questions when she was 11 years old. Jente remembers the educational book that her Christian parents gave her on the subject of sex, including the condemning of masturbation, when she was 14 years old. Indie remembers the movie she watched about a teenage girl going on an exploration tour to find out how she could give herself an orgasm, also around the age of 14. All three women explained they first masturbated that very same night. This possibly explains why they have such a sharp memory of it. They became immediately curious about it and the memory of learning about masturbation is linked to their first-time masturbating.

Next to this, social interactions played an important role in how the women discovered masturbation. Some women believe that they first heard about it through friends. They vaguely remember exciting, awkward and giggly conversations where girls asked each other whether they knew what it was or if they did it. These conversations could be a little awkward or feel weird as the topic was already identified as a taboo one. Still, these conversations felt safe to the women

because they were between girlfriends and people of the same age. Another way in which women were introduced to the topic of masturbation was through jokes of their male classmates. In this case, the women felt less safe. Sometimes they could feel stupid because they did not know what was talked about, sometimes the jokes could be mean and demeaning of female masturbation and sometimes they just did not want to receive that kind information about their classmates. This shows that from a very young age girls are made aware of the double and gendered way masturbation is perceived.

### **Learning About Masturbation from Parents**

To get a more complex picture of how the women perceived masturbation practices, it was essential to understand which information they had been given and by whom. As mentioned in the former chapter, it is hard to find a safe space for young people in which they can find correct information because of the stigma that continues to surround the subject (Kaestle & Allen, 2011) Parents are in most cases the greatest authority in the lives of children. However, none of the women heard about the topic from their parents. Four of the women were given an education book on the topic of sex, which incorporated both the physical-biological side as well as the social-emotional side of sex. Only one woman remembers that the book explicitly mentioned masturbation. This was Jente, whose Christian parents wanted to discourage the act because of their religious beliefs. Still, there was never a conversation between Jente and her parents about this topic. None of the parents of these women made the decision to sit down with their child and talk about the possibility of masturbation. The most obvious reason could be that even though most parents claim they like to be the primary educators for their children when it comes to sex but a lot of them feel distressed to do so (Dyson, 2010). Especially when it comes to masturbation, many parents feel uncomfortable, which eventually leads to them hardly addressing it at all (Kaestle & Allen, 2011).

When I asked the women if they would have liked it if their parents gave them some sort of information, all women said no. Everyone claimed they never felt a need to talk to their parents about it. Quite the opposite, most women said they would feel really uncomfortable doing so, even now. Most women said that they felt pretty comfortable talking about partner-sex with their parents

and do so from time to time. Yet, they claimed that the subject of masturbation is too ‘intimate’ and that it would be too ‘awkward’ to discuss with parents. On the other hand, some women also indicated that the fact that their parents never talked about it, contributed to the taboo they felt around the topic, which they perceived as a bad thing.

Only two women had a conversation on the topic with the parents. Leonie once asked her mother if her masturbation behaviour was normal. She was 12 years old and afraid that maybe she was ‘doing it too much’. Her mother reassured her that her behaviour was normal and Leonie recalls it as a positive memory. Noa has a rather negative memory about the time that her dad asked her about masturbation. Her parents were divorced at the time and she assumes her dad wanted to have a “responsible and educational” conversation about it with her. Still, she felt extremely uncomfortable and unsafe. She lied to her dad that she had never done it and tried to end the conversation as soon as possible. They never talked about it again and Noa still feels uncomfortable when she thinks about it now. This discomfort that the women share, might be a reason to believe that parents are not always the right persons to educate their kids on this topic.

### **Learning About Masturbation at School**

Another relevant institution of authority in the lives of teenagers is formal school. This institution has the potential to teach teenagers about important themes such as physical and mental sexual health, when there is no room for it at home. Throughout history, schools in the Netherlands have opted for a more or less pragmatic approach, in which sexual behavior of young people was accepted and education on the subject was seen as important. With the AIDS-crisis in the 1980s, the main focus became the prevention of sexual risks and the promotion of safe sex (Rutgers, 2016). In 2009 new educational guidelines were set which required that children and young people must know how to take care of their own bodies, must have knowledge of the bodily functions and secondary sex characteristics and should be responsible for healthy behavior. Schools are expected to ensure a socially safe climate in and around the school and to teach children about responsible citizenship. However, schools are free to decide how they want to give substance to this (Rutgers, 2016). Especially the guidelines on teaching children about their own bodily functions in combination with

the importance of children practicing and exploring safe sex, seems like a great window to teach children about masturbation and its pleasure and benefits (Watson & Mckee, 2013).

All the women who participated in the focus groups went to school between 1998 and 2017, which meant that they must have experienced some of the new guidelines. Yet, none of the women recall masturbation being discussed in high school sex education classes. All women believe that they discussed the subject of human reproduction during biology class but this only addressed the anatomical and biological aspects of sex, not the cultural and emotional ones. Some women did indicate that they had a separate class during civic education or health education, on sex education in which the social and emotional side of sex was highlighted more. The focus however remained, on the avoidance of sexual risks: unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Many women indicated that this was 'not adequate education on the role sex plays in a woman's life'. In particular, the male orgasm was emphasized, something that leads to ejaculation and potential fertilization. How a woman can be brought to an orgasm remained undiscussed in all cases. The topic of pleasure also remained unconsidered and masturbation and its benefits were left out of the discussion as well. This also emerged in a lot of studies on sex education in the western world. Most schools still take the techno-rational approach to sex education which discusses penetration and procreation. While it does explain the causes and effects of sex, the emphasis is almost entirely on the negative effects and how to avoid them, instead of on the positive effects and how to obtain them (Allen, 2008). When both their parents and school stay silent on the topic of masturbation, they enforce the taboo. Young people pick up on the absence of the subject, and internalize it. This way they learn that masturbation is shameful instead of a normal desire in the realm of human sexuality (Kaestle & Allen, 2011).

However, during the focus groups it became apparent that the majority of the women would have liked it if a young adult, someone close to their own age, had given them information about masturbation, physical needs and the female orgasm in a playful and calm way. Now most of them felt too uncomfortable to ask questions on these subjects. Sometimes because of the presence of male classmates and sometimes because of the fact they did not feel comfortable with the teacher. The following excerpt shows how most women felt that their sex education at school was insufficient and awkward.

**Interviewer:** *How would you have liked to learn about masturbation?*

**Elisa:** *Maybe at school, if they just had a presentation with a final slide on masturbating.*

**Indie:** *Yes, maybe there.*

**Rosa:** *But maybe boys and girls should get separated into small groups, otherwise boys will disturb the conversation, I think.*

**Talia:** *Yes but maybe they should especially show they boys, then maybe they will finally become good at it.*

*\*everyone laughs\**

**Rosa:** *But I had a male biology teacher whom I really didn't trust enough to ask that sort of questions during the class*

**Talia:** *It doesn't make any sense that you only get it with biology! It just has to be a separate program. With a young person in a safe environment and then it should discuss all the emotional parts of sex and relationships.<sup>6</sup>*

The women clearly show how gender can play an important role in how comfortable girls feel in receiving information about masturbation. This gendered difference in perception and communication will be further discussed in the next section.

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<sup>6</sup> All quotations from the interviews are translated by me from Dutch to English.

## (B) Speaking about masturbation

### The Gendered Power Dynamics

As stated above, Rosa mentions her fear of male classmates interrupting conversations on masturbation. Earlier, the women also mentioned the jokes that were made by boys at school, that could make them feel uncomfortable. It is proven that most boys start a bit earlier with masturbation than most girls (Hyde & Jaffee, 2000). This fact enables gendered power dynamics because their advantage in experience gives them authority when they speak about it in spaces such as the school. The cultural shame around female masturbation is often imposed on teenagers through disdainful jokes, stereotypes in the media and humiliation (Kaestle & Allen, 2011), the jokes of male classmates can leave quite an imprint on young girls. The conception that male masturbation is perceived differently in society than female masturbation, was a recurring topic in the focus groups. Something that first occurred to most of the women during high school, when they heard their male classmates speak about ‘wet dreams, tissue boxes underneath the bed and *rukken*<sup>7</sup> when they would get home’. This information was always presented somewhere between a joke and something they were proud of. Sometimes they would use it to tease each other and sometimes it would be a part of “tough behaviour”. The women described it as absolutely unthinkable that girls would talk about masturbation in the same way. Frederieke recalls a moment during her seventh grade camp, where it was mentioned that “masturbation was only for boys and it was dirty when girls did it.” She remembers that while she was actually practicing masturbation, she did not dare to speak her mind at that time. This responds to the different restrictive gender norms men and women face through daily life, regarding sexual agency and expression. As men are expected to be sexual agents, women are expected to behave passively when it comes to engaging in sexual activity.

Something that also came up in multiple focus groups, is the wide range in vocabulary that men can use to describe the act of masturbation, compared to that of women. Some women felt as if the term ‘jacking off’, which is often used when talking about male masturbation, is so embedded in the Dutch language and culture that it feels normal to use it. They personally perceive the words as neutral rather than offensive. As opposed to the words there are to describe female masturbation,

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<sup>7</sup> Rukken is a Dutch colloquial term for male masturbation. My interpretive translation would be “jacking off”

which in the Dutch language is actually only one: ‘fingering’. Most women perceived this word as dirty or scandalous and rather not use it at all. The reason for this could be that women who seek sexual pleasure outside of the commitment of a romantic relationship, are judged more harshly than men who do so (Crawford & Popp, 2003) and that women who do show enthusiasm for a sexual encounter, are more likely to be perceived as “desperate” (Elizabeth A. Armstrong, Paula England, Alison C. K. Fogarty, 2012). To simply use the word masturbation, felt rather clinical and stiff, which also prevented them from using it. Their only other option was to steer away from the actual words and talk around the act in a certain way they felt was more “soft or sexy”. They would say *mezelf bevredigen*<sup>8</sup> or *mezelf helpen*<sup>9</sup>. This also came forward in the research of Fahs & Frank (2015) who claimed that men have a wide range of words to signify their genitals or euphemisms for the act of masturbation. While, for female masturbation this lexicon is notably smaller and less known. This indirectly normalizes male masturbation and makes female masturbation invisible. This became extremely apparent in the following excerpt where the woman talked about which terms they use for masturbation.

**Noa:** Yes *rukken* is much more socially accepted! It’s just more visible in society.

**Jente:** Yes it is more common, for example in movies. In movies you never see a woman masturbating but *rukken* is often mentioned.

**Noa:** Also in high school, when the guys were just very openly, and in front of the whole class, they would just say that they ‘were gonna *ruk* when they got home’.

**Jente:** Yes as a boy that would just make you look cool. If you were a woman...

**Noa:** Yeah, can you imagine if I would say ‘Hey I’m going to *vinger*<sup>10</sup> myself when I get home’

\*Everyone laughs \*

**Noa:** Isn’t that just completely unthinkable in high school? Completely unthinkable!

**Leonie:** Yeah like the word alone... *vingeren*

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<sup>8</sup> A Dutch colloquial term for female masturbation. My interpretive translation would be “pleasuring oneself”

<sup>9</sup> A Dutch colloquial term for female masturbation. My interpretive translation would be “helping oneself”

<sup>10</sup> A Dutch colloquial term for female masturbation. My interpretive translation would be “finger”

**Noa:** Yes *rukken* is just less loaded or something. Guys just have more casual words for it. *Rukken* just sounds pretty neutral. Jerking off sounds a bit dirtier, I think.

**Leonie:** *Fappen!*<sup>11</sup>

**Noa:** The only words we have are *vingeren* or masturbating and masturbating sounds so clinical. You're not going to say that. It just occurred to me that during this focus group I really don't even know which word to use.

### **Speaking About Masturbation with Friends**

From the excerpt above it becomes clear that there are differences in perception between female and male masturbation. Perhaps the discomfort around the terms for female masturbation and the imposed shame around the act for women in high school, plays a role in the fact that women only start discussing the topic among friends at a very old age. All women indicate that they only started talking about it in the last grades of high school and some even never spoke about it until their first years in college. Most women started masturbating between the ages of 11 and 15. This means that they had quite some years of experience before they spoke to other people about it. This corresponds to the study of Hogarth & Ingham (2009) which showed that while boys occasionally mention it among friends, the majority of girls never speak about masturbation with anyone, including friends. The absence of words and terms as mentioned above, could also be a sign of the ‘missing discourse of female desire’, contributing to the invisibility of female masturbation and ultimately to the shame around the topic.

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<sup>11</sup> A Dutch colloquial term for male masturbation. Comes from the english word “fapping”.

Many women explained that they were very relieved after that first conversation with friends. Leonie recalls that she was 17 years old when she first spoke to a friend about it. Back then, she was a little ashamed about the fact that she started masturbating at a young age. She and the friend got a little drunk at a party and while waiting in the line of the bathroom her friend made a joke about masturbation. This ultimately created an opening for both girls to ‘confess’ that they masturbated. She found it comforting that a friend could recognize and identify with her behaviour and from that point on, the opening was there. Lana recalls a similar experience.

**Lana:** *“Yes I still vividly remember talking about it with a friend for the first time. It was in fourth grade and me and a friend were riding back home on our bicycles. The conversation went a bit in that direction and I thought: ‘are we going to talk about this?’ Then I said that I did it sometimes and then she said “oh yes I do that too sometimes!” Then I really thought: ‘wow I’m not the only one!’ You kind of know that others probably do it too, but when you hear someone say it for the first time, that was such a ‘wow’ moment.”*

Now during college years, some women indicate that they can easily talk about it with good friends. All women agree that it is easier to talk about sex with a partner than about masturbation. When they do talk about it, it is often indirectly. They talk about owning or shopping for a vibrator for example or they discuss pornography. Owning a vibrator or watching pornography indicates that they masturbate but it does not explicitly go into details of the act. In addition to that, most women claimed to feel comfortable enough to talk about masturbation in this indirect way, also with men. However, they only discussed really intimate details about the act with two or three good female friends. The following excerpt is from one of the focus groups where it became very clear that two women who had a very positive attitude towards masturbation, also had a lot of fun discussing the topic together.

**Interviewer:** Okay and if you're talking about it with friends, what do you share?

**Noa:** Well, for example, if I bought a new vibrator that is very nice, then that should be shared with the group.

\*Everyone laughs\*

**Leonie:** Yes and Noa demonstrates them as well! Especially when they make strange noises.

\*Everyone laughs\*

**Interviewer:** Okay on the palm of your hand or?

**Noa:** Yes yes yes

\*Everyone laughs \*

**Noa:** No I don't lie down and put in on there

**Leonie:** Yeah and sometimes you have girlfriends who are in a phase where they are just fingering a lot. Then they will just say "well I've been fingering so much lately".

**Noa:** Do you guys ever have that? I'm just... like now with corona that people work from home and they say like "Yes dude, I'm just fingering nonstop, like five times a day".

**Leonie:** Yes and we also often talk about porn, so yes that is implicitly also about masturbation. For example, we exchange tips on ethical porn or more female-oriented porn.

It should be mentioned that none of the women in this research perceived masturbation as a bad thing with negative associations. Yet, some women spoke of discomfort or embarrassment around the topic, which prevented them from starting the conversation. For example Vera, she said that she doesn't like to talk about masturbation at all. She just finds the subject a bit uncomfortable, mainly because she is not very familiar with it and doesn't really know her own position in it. Another woman, Lisa, often feels intimidated by the stories of other women and frustrated by the fact she can't seem to enjoy it in the same way.

Other women who claimed to feel less shame for themselves, were more concerned with making other women feel uncomfortable by bringing it up. In addition, the women spoke of a certain sense of 'security' they had to feel with a person before venturing into the subject of masturbation. Some women indicated that this feeling equated to being friends with someone for a long time. Other women experienced this feeling more as an atmosphere in which the other would not be disapproving or judging. Some women explained that talking about masturbation together could be very helpful and fun, in the sense that it could provide advice and entertaining stories. This sense of security was less often experienced with men, because the women did not want to risk inadvertently sexualizing themselves in the eyes of their male interlocutor.

These two different attitudes and approaches to female masturbation corresponded with the attitudes that also became apparent in research done by Hogarth and Ingham (2009) on how young English women perceived female masturbation. One group felt predominantly positive towards the subject and happy they discovered this part of themselves. Describing it as a fulfilling practice and fun to discuss with friends. The other group felt predominantly hesitant and disappointed, associating the act with failure and confusion or shame and uncleanness. The latter group had more difficulty with communicating about masturbation (Hogarth & Ingham, 2009). Which in the end, contributes to the maintenance of shame and discomfort. These women will not easily find recognition in the stories of others, exchange advice or normalize masturbation for themselves.

## **(C) Experiencing Masturbation**

### **Frequencies**

How often the other women masturbated was very diverse. Three women said they masturbated once a week; Two women masturbated two to three times a week; Four women masturbated three to four times a week; One woman masturbated four to six times a week. Then there were two women who masturbated once a month or less and two women who almost never masturbated. Four of the women find that they don't masturbate very often but none of them see this as a problem of something they long to change. Jente explains she 'just doesn't feel the need' more than once a week and doesn't think she is missing out. All the other women also claimed they were happy about or content with their own masturbation practices.

Yet, when the actual question of frequency was asked most women turned a little silent. The answers came slow and doubtfully and were usually followed by a nervous laugh. In the way it seemed as if the women were afraid that their answer would deviate from the rest, especially when their frequencies would be at the higher end. Some women even changed their answers to lower frequencies after hearing the answers from the rest. This behaviour showed that to disclose the actual frequency, made women feel vulnerable. They could be hit by judgement of the other women. Then there were also Three women who said they would 'literally do it everyday if only they had the time!' These women presented themselves with such confidence that seemed impossible to be affected by the judgement of others. It was a mechanism they had made their own throughout the last three or five years to help them enjoy masturbation without shame.

There were different factors influencing how often women masturbate. Most women mentioned having time as the most important one. How comfortable the women would feel in their own skin was also an influence. Finally, the connection women made between masturbation and other sexual activities also played a big role. Half of the women saw masturbation as a casual sexual activity, something separate from sex with a partner. The other half of the women found that their need for masturbation diminishes as they get into a relationship, which for them equals frequent sex with a partner. However, some of the same women also later spoke of "correcting" the lack of orgasms with partners, through masturbation, something that sounds somewhat inconsistent.

## **Vibrators and Techniques**

Vibrators played a big part in the conversations women had with friends and they were also often mentioned in the focus groups. Nine out of the fourteen women owned a vibrator and from those nine women, five had multiple vibrators. Whenever the Satisfier Pro Next Generation was mentioned, a vibrator model owned by multiple of the women, they would laugh and smile at each other as if they shared a scandalous secret club. Those nine women all agreed that the vibrator was a great and accessible tool for masturbation. However, they had not always felt this way. Most women explained that they were hesitant or even reluctant to get one at first. Almost none of these women bought their first vibrator themselves. They were all gifts from friends, and in one case from a partner. Rosa got one as a joke for her 15th birthday, that laid on a shelf for a year or two before she first tried it. Jente and Inez went to a sex shop at the ages of 21 and 23 to buy their first vibrator together. Some women claimed it was quite a big step to get comfortable with the idea of using a tool specifically designed for masturbation. When they did, they absolutely loved it. The initial reluctance, however, is not uncommon. In a recent research by sociologists Dennis Waskul and Michelle Anklan (2020) it became apparent that one third of the women feel discomfort, shame, embarrassment or fear when acquiring a first vibrator. In this research also many women reported getting their vibrator as a present. However, when the vibrator is given as ‘a joke’, like in Rosa’s case, this perpetuates the sentiment that buying a vibrator is shameful or embarrassing (Waskul & Anklan, 2020). Buying the vibrator together with friends, like Jente and Inez did, can actually counter this sentiment and become a positive experience that leads to group bonding both at the store and afterwards (Waskul & Anklan, 2020).

For three of the women the vibrator helped them achieve their first orgasm which had groundbreaking effects for the rest of their sexlives. More generally, nine women experienced their first orgasm through masturbation. In most cases this was before they ever had sex with a partner, which in this case refutes the conception of Hogarth & Ingham (2009) that girls learn about sex and orgasms through boys instead of masturbation. However, in some cases the women had sex with male partners before in which they could not achieve an orgasm. In these cases the women came up with a plan to ‘learn’ how to achieve an orgasm, by themselves and with vibrators. This meant that their goal was not masturbation but they used masturbation as a tool to learn how to enjoy sex with a partner. For most of the women this idea has turned around and all of the twelve women who

masturbate regularly claim to do this entirely for their own pleasure. However, Vera, who has explained that she has great difficulty with achieving an orgasm, claims she still uses masturbation solely as a tool to make the orgasm more accessible with a partner. Which results in her only actively masturbating when she is dating someone.

## **Ending with an Orgasm**

This seemingly discrepancy entangled further around the topic of the importance of orgasms. When the women were asked if they found it important to achieve orgasm during masturbation, they unanimously said: ‘Yes, absolutely’. Some women laughed because of the apparent obviousness of the question. Some women almost seemed to feel guilty after they gave their answer and looked around the room for confirmation from the other participants. As if their unfiltered determination for an orgasm had only now just become obvious to them and they felt uncomfortable with it. As if they wondered if it was ‘normal’. It could be that this uncomfortableness was due to the fact that women are not traditionally taught to strive for their own orgasms during sex with partners (Armstrong et al, 2012). Women who have sex with men have about one orgasm for every three their male partners have, while only 5 percent of women find it difficult to orgasm during occasional masturbation (Wade, 2017). This ‘orgasm-gap’ is a result of a deeply rooted patriarchy structure in the heterosexual bedroom, that centralizes the phallus in any form of sexual activity (Wade, 2017). When in reality the phallus just doesn't always play that big of a role in the female orgasm, as most of the women indicated they were not able to climax from just penetration. The techniques that the women used when they masturbated can be clinically divided into two categories: clitoral stimulation and vaginal penetration. Only four of the twelve women who masturbated regularly, sometimes penetrated themselves with a vibrator or their fingers during masturbation. The other eight women felt no need to ‘put anything in’ as it did not add anything to the sensation. Three women even expressed that they feel uncomfortable with the idea of penetrating themselves. Hence, none of the women owned a dildo, the product that is designed to imitate the phallus, while a lot of the women owned a vibrator, the product that is designed to stimulate the clitoris.

Most of the women indicated that they were not as fixated on their own orgasms during sex with a partner. Some said that it was just much more difficult to achieve an orgasm with a partner which resulted in low expectations. Other women explained they felt uncomfortable making their partner work for it for a long time, which affected their capacity to enjoy the activity. Then there were also some women who explained that sex with a partner felt like a whole other sort of activity, capturing other movements, feelings and benefits. This meant that sex with a partner had a different goal than masturbation: intimacy. While it is important to respect that women might have different motives for sex with a partner, it is also important to acknowledge there is some evidence that women may be internalizing men's disinterest in their orgasm (Wade, 2017). As a result they de-emphasize the value of an orgasm to themselves and instead put their energies into giving their partners one. When they are alone, women do find reaching that climax important. It seemed as if the women in the focus groups felt uncomfortable or guilty about their determination for an orgasm during masturbation because it does not entirely add up to their de-emphasizing of orgasms during sex with a partner. In any case this could mean that masturbation can be a great departure point for unlearning the traditional patriarchal scripts around female bodies and female sexual pleasure.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter focused on three main themes that came to the service during the conversations: (a) learning about masturbation (b) talking about masturbation, and (c) experiencing masturbation. It became apparent that most women indeed felt that there was a lack of trustworthy information around the topic of female masturbation, as the media and social interactions were their only source. It was especially through these social interactions at school that the women became aware of the taboo around female masturbation. This taboo further developed into shame and discomfort as the women hardly talked about masturbation with their friends until they were in college. There was some proof that the women indeed internalized patriarchal scripts that de-emphasize the sexual pleasure of women. In the next chapter I will make the final conclusion of the link between the analyses of the focus group and the theory.

## CHAPTER 4: Conclusion

In chapter 1, this thesis investigated how in the Western world women's sexuality has been widely ignored, misunderstood and suppressed throughout history. From the 19th and early-20th centuries the multiple waves of feminism started to influence the way women's sexuality is perceived in different ways. Especially the second sexual revolution, inspired by work of feminist thinkers like Reich, Kinsey and Freud contributed to the idea of sex-positive feminism which played a big part in the sexual liberation of women. Because of this, norms have changed over the years in the Western world and there is more room for female sexual empowerment and women's sexual subjectivity. Nevertheless, gendered conceptions on how women should behave sexually, prevailed. Whereas men are expected to behave like sexual agents, women are expected to behave like sexual objects and they are scrutinized when they behave as sexual agents. This double standard is mostly conserved through media representation and stereotypical humor. The effect is that it influences how women personally experience their sexual practices and sexual subjectivity. In chapter one I also discussed how female masturbation can challenge this idea of women as sexual objects and how this might be the reason that the topic remains a big taboo. Because of the taboo, it is hard for young women to find trustworthy and correct information. The topic is left out of both sexual education at school and sexual education from parents, leaving the media as their only source of information. This maintains the taboo and creates the invisibility of female masturbation in the western society. A practical example of this is the small lexicon that describes female masturbation. This invisibility also means that young women have no female "scripts" to teach them about the possible feelings, longings and effects of masturbation, that normalizes the practice. This leads them to internalizing the traditional patriarchal scripts that are presented to them in society through media representation and stereotypical humor, which teach them that female masturbation is divergent or shameful behaviour. The effect of this is that young women hardly talk about masturbation amongst friends, which only further establishes the pattern of discomfort and shame around the topic. Finally, I argued in chapter one, that to break out of this vicious circle of invisibility and shame, women need a space in which they can share their experiences and normalize female masturbation. a space in which they can unlearn patriarchal scripts about masturbation and relearn their physical desires.

In chapter 3, I further explored the topic of female masturbation and offered my analysis of how young Dutch women relate to masturbation. During the focus groups it became evident that there were three main themes that answered this question: (a) the way women learn about masturbation (b) the way women talk about masturbation, and (c) the way women experience their own masturbation practices.

As regards to (a) the way women learn about masturbation, it became obvious that their experiences matched with the theory of chapter one. Most women learned about it from media sources such as magazines and films, because the two big authorities structures, parents and school, did not step up with sufficient sex education. They explained that at school the focus had been on reproduction and the avoidance of sexual risks. Which meant that topics like pleasure and masturbation remained undiscussed. Most women explained that they noticed the absence of the subject, and that this further enforced the taboo for them. Something that also played a big role in learning about masturbation were the social interactions at school. Most women recall the jokes of male classmates, that implicated that female masturbation is dirty and shameful, made them aware of the gendered differences in how masturbation is perceived for boys and girls.

This led to theme (b) the way women talk about masturbation. Most women noticed during high school that boys could talk about masturbation, as an act of “tough behaviour” or humor. For women this was absolutely unthinkable. Most women found that men have a wide range of terms for masturbation, that seem so embedded in the Dutch language and culture that it feels normal to use them. As opposed to the lexicon for female masturbation, which feels small and clinical to them. Most of the women only started discussing the topic among friends in the last grades of high school or their first years in college, even though all women started masturbating between the age of 11 and 15. Some women explained that by now they felt comfortable talking about masturbation with friends and it could be very helpful and fun, in the sense that it could provide advice and entertaining stories. Yet, some women also spoke of discomfort or embarrassment around the topic, which prevented them from starting the conversation. The fact that the women did not talk about masturbation inhibited them from finding recognition in each other's stories and ultimately from normalizing female masturbation.

This effected (c) the way women experience their own masturbation practices. I found that most of the women in fact did internalize some of the shame that society casts on female masturbation. Even though all the women claimed they were happy about or content with the

frequency of their masturbation practices, most women became shy when the actual question of frequency was asked, afraid that their answer would deviate from the rest. Another example was the initial reluctance to buy a sex toy. Although nine women owned a vibrator they had all been very hesitant to get one at first. They explained it was quite a big step to get comfortable with the idea of using a tool specifically designed for masturbation and that they were also scared that they would be ‘caught’ when buying one. I argue that this fear of being judged, is the internalized shame that patriarchal scripts cast on female masturbation. Finally, the manner in which the women seemed to de-emphasize the value of their own orgasm during sex with a partner also seemed to reflect these internalized patriarchal scripts. The women did claim to be determined for a climax when they were alone. In this sense, I argued, subsequently to chapter one, that masturbation can be a great departure point for unlearning the traditional patriarchal scripts around female bodies and female sexual pleasure.

To conduct this research I spoke to fourteen different women from the previously selected research population: sex-positive young Dutch women. I believe that the women form a representative and diverse sample for the research in the fact that all the women are between the age of 21 and 27 and that they all grew up and went to school in the Netherlands. They gathered in groups of three to four, which I think was a great group size to let everyone immerse in the safety of a group but also give everyone enough space to tell their story. I witnessed how the women could react to each other, ask each other questions, and how the stories of others made them recall certain memories that would have been forgotten, all the things that make focus groups a very unique method that can give very rich and unexpected data. Most of the women seemed very comfortable with the questions and the subjects that were discussed. Since creating a safe space was one of my first priorities, this was one of the greatest successes of the research. A lot of women claimed to feel very relieved to talk about masturbation in a way like this. There were also some women who felt slightly less confident about their own masturbation practices and discussing them. They kept quiet more often and rather listened to the answers of others. For these women the method of focus groups was less suitable and one on one interviews would probably be a better fit. Therefore, my sidenote to the methodology is that the data is slightly biased towards the women who had very positive experiences with- and attitudes towards masturbation.

This research was done on a very small scale among a very specific research population. It could be very interesting to see if the same patterns perpetuate on a big scale. To organise more focus groups with the same research population. Of course it would also be immensely interesting to see if the greater outcomes of the research would change with a slightly different research population, for example young Dutch women with a background of immigration, young Dutch women who live in more rural parts of the Netherlands, as opposed to the women in this research who all live in the city. Or to carry out the research with young Dutch women who have followed different forms of education, for example women who followed post-secondary vocational education or women who follow a study in applied sciences, as opposed to the women in this research who are all (graduate) university students. Another noteworthy fact about this research is that it was carried out with women who all identify as either cis heterosexual or cis bi-sexual women. It would be highly interesting to hear the stories and experiences of non-cis women or people who identify with other gender identities and sexual preferences. This could only broaden up our understanding of sexuality and how to break away from the traditional gender roles and patriarchal scripts around it.

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