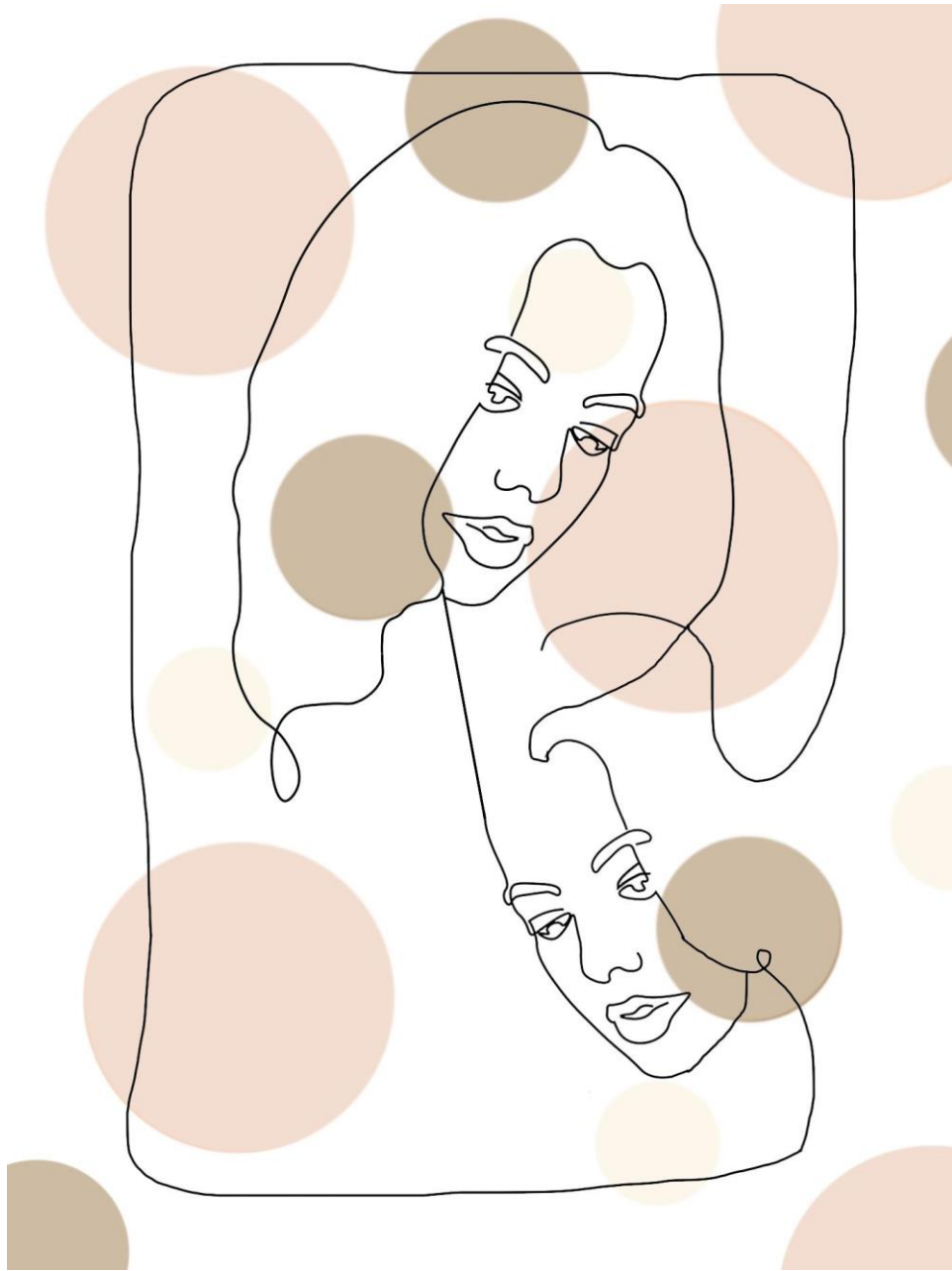


Feeling Feminine

An Analysis of the Construction of Femininity
through Body Practices by Young Women in Amsterdam.



Iva Hoefnagel & Zoé Fransen

The illustration on the front page is designed for our thesis by Sofie Hoefnagel

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*Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.
I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size
But when I start to tell them,
They think I'm telling lies.
I say,
It's in the reach of my arms,
The span of my hips,
The stride of my step,
The curl of my lips.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.*

-

Maya Angelou, Phenomenal Woman

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Iva Hoefnagel & Zoé Fransen

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“I was just born. (...) With the umbilical cord still wrapped around me, I am pushed out into the world five weeks early. It is 23.35 in the evening and people are taking a quick peek between my legs. 'It is a boy', they say. (...) I now also have a boy's name. I am Diederik. I am a son now, whether I want to be or not.” We are watching a part of the performance ‘Fok me Hokje’, featured during the online opening of the exposition ‘What a Genderful World’. This performer, Diederik, dressed in a beautiful black suit with a sort of veil attached to it, has just put into words how bizarre it is to be born and have people base your gender identity on your genitals. He goes on to outline how so many things in life were expected of him, because he was regarded as a boy. When we watch this performance, it is the end of March, we are in the last phase of our research and once again we are reminded of the questions that induced us to start this research. Which factors play a role in constructing one’s gender identity? We wondered, are there certain ways a woman is supposed to act or look like? What if, like Diederik, you don't feel like you fit in the box you were placed in? How does that affect your sense of femininity? And what does femininity even entail?

Although terms like ‘femininity’ ‘non-binary’ and ‘masculinity’ are often used in the public sphere, their meanings remain unclear. Anthropologist Gayle Rubin (1975) described sex and gender by using an economic metaphor. She argued that sex should be considered to be ‘raw material’ which through culture is processed into ‘the product’ gender. From this perspective every human society starts with differently sexed bodies and turns them into gendered beings. In doing so males and females transform into men and women, according to the culture-bound notions of how ‘men’ and ‘women’ are defined in that specific society (Rubin 1975; Halperin 2014, 450). This resounds with the famous words of Simone de Beauvoir: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 1949, 2). How femininity is constructed and experienced thus depends on the society you grow up in, the extent to which you are affected by external influences, and the internalization of gender norms. Different women¹ therefore experience different levels of expectation from society to perform femininity (Given 2020, 32).

¹ It is important to note that the word ‘women’ refers to anyone who identifies as such, i.e. their gender identity is female. This means that ‘women’ is not limited to cisgender women, but can also apply to transgender women, femmes, and other persons who consider themselves to be female.

In recent years there has been a great deal of attention for the position of women worldwide, which is reflected in the huge turnout at the Women's Marches that have been held since March 2017. Every year people in cities all over the world, including Amsterdam, come together to march and celebrate womanhood while asking attention for women's rights (Women's March, n.d.). Likewise, within online spheres there are more and more platforms that connect women in their femininity, for instance the Dutch podcast 'Damn, Honey' that discusses the "daily and recognizable struggles that women deal with every day" (Damn, Honey, n.d.). Earlier, in 2012, the body positivity movement emerged online to counter unrepresentative depictions of women and unrealistic beauty expectations. The movement was supposed to be an inclusive online space, in which all kinds of bodies were represented (Sastre 2014). However, studies show that the movement was taken over by the mainstream culture which has quickly moved the attention away from its original goals and intentions (Gelsing 2021; Sastre 2014). These examples demonstrate the growing need for a space in which women in all their forms are represented.

However, according to anthropologist Ulrika Dahl (2012), femininity seems to still be defined by lack within the scientific domain. She argues in favour of more journals, conferences and even courses dedicated to creative research on the subject of femininity. In order to achieve this goal, it is important to acknowledge that femininity is an ambiguous concept, since different aspects such as class, religion and age will influence the ways in which it is defined and experienced (Black and Sharma 2001, 102). Through our research we are therefore not trying to define femininity and thereby reify the concept. On the contrary, with our anthropological research within the context of the Netherlands in the year 2021, more specifically Amsterdam, we aim to provide a broader understanding of the concept of femininity by drawing on the personal experiences of contemporary young women. By means of anthropological research, also known as fieldwork, we have used a combination of observation and embodied participation to gain detailed data on the lived-experience of our participants. Ultimately, this has resulted in the following central question:

How do young (feminist) women² in Amsterdam construct femininity through body practices?

Moreover, Simone de Beauvoir (1949) argued that the very concept 'woman' is a male concept. According to her, the woman is considered an object and 'the other', because the male is the 'seer' and therefore the subject. She states that the meaning of what it is to be a woman is generally given by men. Even now, more than seventy years later, Hoskin (2019) concludes that the female body is still predominantly studied through the male gaze, i.e. from a male point of view. Through our present research we strive to overcome this issue by approaching femininity through the perspective of women themselves, i.e. the female gaze.

² With 'women' we refer in our research to anyone who identifies as such, i.e. their gender identity is female.

We offered our participants the opportunity to tell, discuss and reflect on what femininity means to them and how they experience their femininity in relation to body practices.

Research population

As mentioned before, our research aims to gain anthropological understanding of the construction of femininity from the perspective and lived-experience of women themselves, based on a case-study on young women in Amsterdam. With ‘women’ we refer to anyone who identifies as such, i.e. their gender identity is female. Our research population consists of women living in Amsterdam³ between the age of 20 and 30 years old. We have chosen this delineation due to various reasons. First of all, following Mohanty’s argument (1998), it is important that we as researchers do not regard women as being one cohesive group with identical interests and experiences. The construction of femininity therefore needs to be studied within a specific cultural and historical context, in our case the Dutch city Amsterdam in the year 2021. As Black and Sharma (2001, 102) argue that, among others, age will influence the ways in which femininity is experienced and defined, we have chosen to delineate the age of our research group to young adults. Secondly, we have chosen this age category because of pragmatic reasons. We found it important to take the current pandemic into account that limits access to our research location and thereby the population. As we believe that young people are expected to navigate more easily online and are more likely to be open to physical contact with strangers, we decided to specify the age limit to young adult women. Moreover, we ourselves are women in our early twenties, which makes it easier for us to reach out and keep in contact, if necessary, through online methods. In the end, we engaged with thirty different individual participants and one professional who worked at a clinic for cosmetic procedures in Amsterdam.

We initially planned to make a comparison between young women who explicitly identified as feminists and women who did not explicitly identify as feminists, to see if there would be a difference in the way they construct their femininity. Zoé was responsible for the first group and Iva for the latter. However, during the course of this fieldwork we found this distinction to be a less common dichotomy than we initially thought. A large proportion of the participants, for instance, had difficulty placing themselves in either group and the experiences of women in both groups were very similar. To gain a better understanding of this remarkable outcome, we will specifically focus on the motives of our participants for (non)self-labelling as feminist in our first empirical chapter. As there appeared to be no clear dividing line between the two groups, we decided to combine the data of both research groups and analyze them all together. To

³ Zoé acquired two of her participants through others, and she discovered during a conversation that they do not live in Amsterdam. We decided to include their data, since their experiences as being activist feminists were a great addition to our research and they also live in major Dutch cities.

still show who belonged to which original group, we placed a (I), from Iva and (Z) from Zoé, after each pseudonym.

In the field

We have conducted fieldwork from the 8th of February until the 16th of April 2021. Due to the pandemic, it was more uncertain than ever to predict what we would encounter in the field, therefore we adopted a flexible and proactive attitude, and made sure to adapt our research methods when needed. We were able to spend several days in Amsterdam, but most of our research had to be carried out online because of the lockdown measures. Nevertheless, we managed to come in close contact with participants through various (online) methods and to build a good rapport. To ensure the validity of our research, we have collected data through multiple qualitative methods, i.e. data triangulation (Clark et al., 2019): qualitative interviewing, participant observation, journalism, photo elicitation, autoethnography and duoethnography, which will be discussed in more detail below. In doing so, we worked in a cyclical manner, which means that we alternated data collection with analysis and repeated this process during the different phases of our research. Therefore, we were able to adapt our research to the 'discovery' of themes or phenomena of which we were in the beginning not aware of.

Methods

Participant observation is considered as the starting point of ethnographic anthropological research. It is a research method in which the researchers take part in the daily interactions, rituals, activities, and events of their research population, in order to learn both the tacit and explicit aspects of their culture and life routine (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 1-3). During our research we have mostly conducted participant observation online. We attended online events concerning femininity, beauty practices and feminism. Whenever possible we chatted with other participants in the chat box. On the days we spent in Amsterdam we did participant observation during the Women's March NL, and during online gatherings concerning International Women's Day. Finally, we have joined some of our participants in their performing of body practices online as well as offline, such as make-up and skincare routines, and separately we visited a few beauty salons, such as hairdressers. During the latter there was unfortunately not much opportunity for a chat. We have always made sure to capture these data in fieldnotes, vignettes and diary fragments.

Another important anthropological method for data collection is interviewing. A qualitative interview is characterized as a form of conversation in which one person - the interviewer - asks questions concerning behaviours, attitudes and experiences with regard to social phenomena that are studied, to one or more others - the participants or interviewees - who are offered the opportunity for digression on the topics

(Boeije 2010, 61; Evers 2015, 35). During our research we conducted various types of qualitative interviews, which differed by the degree of pre-structuring. First of all, we conducted semi-structured interviews with all of our participants, for which we prepared a list of questions, which were adjusted over the course of the fieldwork period. This allowed us to discuss all topics in more or less the same way, but also to give our participants the space to share with us what they consider to be important. In addition, at the end of our fieldwork we conducted several unstructured interviews, in which we brought up the themes in conversation, but our participants determined the content. Lastly, we also collected data through more casual, everyday, conversations we had in participant observation and in interactions in our own daily lives, which we then reflected on in our fieldnotes.

As everyday practices, such as body practices, are often taken for granted or easily forgotten, we used a combination of the methods of journalism and photo elicitation to analyze the body practices that our participants perform. Through digital diaries we asked our participants to capture, describe and reflect on their daily body practices for a short period of time. This method is called ‘photo elicitation’ and the resulting self-made images and journal prompts have later been analyzed and used as interview stimuli (Boeije 2010, 65-67).

As stated before, the only thing that sets us apart from our research population is the fact that we do not live in Amsterdam, but we do both identify as young women as well as feminists. Therefore, we consider it important that not only our participants take a vulnerable position in sharing their stories, but that we reflect on our own encounters with femininity too. In this we follow Scheper-Hughes’ (1995, 410, 419) line of thought that mere observation is a passive act that positions the anthropologist as an uncommitted and objective spectator of human condition. Instead, we as anthropologists should engage in human events and position ourselves as a “responsive, reflexive, and morally committed being, one who will ‘take sides’ and make judgments” (Scheper-Hughes 1995, 419). With the autoethnographic method, we were able to place ‘ourselves’ as a subject in the research. Through this method we reflected on our personal experiences in performing femininity through body practices to advance the understanding of the lived-experience of our participants (Wall 2008; White 2003). During our fieldwork we regularly recorded these findings and reflected on them in our autoethnographic diaries. In addition, we also used the duoethnography method to interview each other to discuss and reflect on our experiences and the digital diaries we ourselves kept.

Ethical considerations

From the beginning, we have been aware of the fact that we, as researchers, have the responsibility to recognize and ensure the rights and safety of our participants⁴. We have therefore actively informed our participants on matters regarding privacy, trust and anonymity. We did this, among other things, by asking for oral or written informed consent, which ensures that people have the right to freely choose whether to participate in our research or not (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 215). In addition, we of course aspired to do no harm in any way to our research participants. We tried to handle sensitive topics carefully and respect our participants' boundaries and well-being. Besides, as we are currently going through a pandemic, we made sure to keep the COVID-19 restrictions in mind. Furthermore, we always communicated with our participants as clearly as possible our research goals, methods and impact of participation to avoid misleading them. Moreover, we have been honest and open about the fact that we ourselves identify as feminists, which may, however, have caused people to adapt their own opinions on the subject of feminism influenced by us as researchers. Nonetheless, we considered it to be important to make our positionality known. We have tried to be as neutral as possible during the conversations with our participants. At times this might have been difficult as our research participants are also our peers and the themes of femininity, feminism and intersectionality are dear to us. We have tried to overcome this bias by constantly reflecting on our own position, perceptions and relation to our participants. During the fieldwork period we have therefore kept a diary about the research process. In the words of Schensul et al. (1999, 66), an ethnographer has to self-interrogate: "hold her/his own opinions, conclusions and beliefs about the field site up for inspection to ensure they are valid". This requires disciplined subjectivity: practice of rigorous self-reflection about one's own preferences, prejudices, hopes and concerns. We consider this introspective reflection as an important tool to avoid distortions.

Layout thesis

Firstly, in Chapter 1 we develop our theoretical framework by discussing the theoretical debates surrounding the notions of gender, the body, dominant femininity and body practices that serve as a foundation for the other empirical chapters. In doing so, we follow the intersectionalist approach to emphasize that multiple factors influence a person's identity. Subsequently, in Chapter 2 we expand this theoretical knowledge on the specific context of our research by, among other things, analyzing female body practices and feminism in the Netherlands. In the four chapters that follow, we outline our empirical findings from the field in relation to our theoretical framework. The third chapter, then, provides an insight

⁴ In doing so, we followed the 'Code of Ethics' of the American Anthropological Association (AAA 2019) and ethical guidelines of Antropologen Beroepsvereniging (ABv 2018).

into the way young women in Amsterdam relate to feminism leading them to label themselves as feminists or not. Chapter 4 will discuss how our research population defines gender categories, and more importantly, how they apply these categories in their daily lives. In doing so, it also focuses on the cultural norms concerning femininity. The fifth chapter gives an overview of how young women in Amsterdam construct their femininity in their daily lives. Subsequently, in Chapter 6 we take a closer look at the different body practices our participants perform for their femininity. We specifically zoom in on make-up, hair removal and cosmetic surgery. Finally, we will end our thesis with some concluding remarks on the core findings of our research, limitations on our study and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 1: Theoretical framework

Paragraph 1: Anthropological perspectives on gender and the body

Several concepts are important for the understanding of the construction of femininity. In this paragraph we take a closer look at the notions of gender, performativity and the body. In doing so we answer the following questions: What is gender and how is it related to sex? How does performativity ensure that gender is something one does instead of one is? What factors play a role in constructing gender identity? And how are the body and mind linked through the social constructionist approach and concept of embodiment? Finally, we look at the intersectional approach, which forms the basis of our analysis.

§ 1.1.1 Gender and performativity

Zoé Fransen

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” with those words Simone de Beauvoir opened her book ‘The Second Sex’ (Beauvoir 1949). One of the most important insights of the study of gender over the years has been the need to make a distinction between sex and gender. Where sex is mostly considered as referring to the biological differences between men and women, and thus seen as a biological category, gender refers to the social, cultural and psychological constructions of femininity and masculinity. Both sex, i.e. the natural facts, and gender, i.e., the cultural meanings, influence one another and are closely interlinked (Stimpson and Herdt 2014; Jansen 1987).

People organize the world around them through classification. Furthermore, humans tend to think in binary oppositions and, according to Douglas (1996), even become uncomfortable when they come across things or persons that do not fit into accepted categories. Classifications of, for example, male and female play a role not only in the classification of people, but also in that of space, clothing, way of thinking, character traits, body movements and behaviour. These areas are all gender-charged, the assumptions of what is masculine and what is feminine affects them (Douglas 1996; Jansen 1987). The dynamic interactions between these different areas influence the way one sees and places oneself within gender structures, which in turn determines how one reacts to the world one lives in (Stimpson and Herdt 2014). Butler adds that gender is not something one simply *is*, but instead something one *does*. Instead of being gender, Butler says people *perform* their gender (Salih 2006).

This brings us to the concept of performativity, a concept Butler introduced in 1990. While her theory has been critiqued for being potentially exclusionary, her work is still considered as one of the most authoritative works within the gender discipline (Schep 2012). She regards gender as something that arises through (unconsciously) repeated acts and stylizations of the body. The fact that society sees those acts and

stylizations as gendered, is exactly what makes them gendered (Butler 1990, 33). She interprets gender as something you learn by doing, and thus gender identity and gendered bodies are created by continuous social performances or actions. In addition, gender reality is performative because it is only real to the extent that it is performed (Butler 1990, 78; Salih 2006). To explain gender performativity Salih compares it to one's choice of clothes. Both are restricted by the economy, society and social context in which they are situated (Salih 2006, 56). Performance is the way we present our bodies, we perform gender in the ways we talk, dress, work, etc. Those actions are not new, they are based on pre-existing ideas of what is feminine and what is masculine and they feel natural because they have been repeated so many times, this is called naturalization. Nagel (2003, 52-53) states that exactly this is why performativity is such a powerful mechanism of social construction and social control, it tends to go unnoticed.

§ 1.1.2 Theorizing the body

Iva Hoefnagel

Following the Cartesian mind-body dualism, the body and mind were until recently interpreted as two separate entities. In this essentialist view, the body reflects an entity with biological features, such as bones, organs and hormones (Strathern 1996). In contrast, in the social constructionist approach to the body it is suggested that these bodily features are partly socially constructed. This means that physically identical body practices can have different meanings depending on the place and time in which they were performed (Vance 2007). Similarly, DeMello (2014) argued that bodies are formed by culture, society and history and are therefore subject to change. In contrast to the Cartesian framework, the body in the social constructionist approach became related to the mind. Here, anthropologists were inspired by the field of phenomenology with philosopher Merleau-Ponty's (1962) view on the body as the 'lived' body through which we experience the world around us, where the body is an integral part of what and how we perceive. Csordas (1990) therefore states that the bodies should be considered as subjects rather than objects. The interpretation that physical bodies are constructed within a specific cultural, social and historical context is often referred to as embodiment. According to Allegranti (2011, 2) embodiment can be defined as "a process and one that changes according to our lived body experiences over time". An example of the way in which culture shapes female bodies is illustrated by philosopher Young (1980) in her essay 'Throwing Like a Girl'. She demonstrates that due to hegemonic gender norms related to femininity, women tend to restrain themselves during exercising, since female bodies are culturally considered as objects rather than as active subjects. This can ultimately have the effect that women throw differently, less strongly, than men.

Moreover, the body is inherent to power relations as illustrated by different scholars. According to Mary Douglas (1966) people overcome their fear of societal disorder through classification and the creation of categories, purity and danger. Similarly described by Mauss (1979, 104) as "the body is man's first and

most natural instrument”, Douglas argues that the body forms the most natural symbol for classification. Purity of the physical body then symbolizes the unity of society. In that way, the regulation of the physical body serves as a means for social control. This is closely linked to philosopher Foucault’s line of thought that physical bodies are subject to power and disciplined through controlling mechanisms, for instance education and law. Through these social mechanisms, referred to as body politic, bodies also tend to regulate themselves (DeMello 2014; Strathern 1996). The body, both as subject and as object of power, will be further discussed in the analysis of dominant gender norms in Chapter 2, and of different body practices in Chapter 3.

§ 1.1.3 The intersectional approach

Zoé Fransen

When taking into consideration the notion of femininity, it is important to note that there is more to people than their gender identity alone. There are multiple factors that constitute one’s identity, for example: ethnicity, religion, social class, age, skin-colour and ableness (Lutz 2015; Mohanty 1988). When looking at differences in the experience of femininity, all of the above factors should be taken into account, because, as Moore (1994) puts it: “Gender can no longer be analyzed as distinct from other forms of difference. The lived-experience of gender is that it is already class, already race or ethnicity.” Mohanty (1988, 73) argues that the category ‘woman’ is constructed in a mixture of political circumstances that coexist and overlap one another. Lutz (2015) adds to this that the concept of intersectionality helps to detect the overlapping and co-construction of both visible and invisible strands of inequality. It is only by looking at the different axes that women find themselves on, that we can understand why the same concept has different meanings for different people.

Paragraph 2: The construction of femininity, gender hegemony and body ideals

The term femininity helps organize one's experience of the world. But what is it exactly? In this chapter we take a closer look at the notion of femininity, we will explore dominant gender forms and the way people adjust to the prevailing gender norms. Finally, we will look at the body not only being both subject and object to power and the role of beauty in shaping the female body.

§ 1.2.1 The notion of femininity

Zoé Fransen

The terms masculinity and femininity are used to understand and create meaning of the world and our societies. According to Butler (1990), the gender binary exists of the categories 'man' and 'woman'. Her construction of gender assumes that there are certain bodies, desires, personality traits and behaviours that match one of both categories. Both categories encompass symbolic meanings that establish the origins, significance and quality characteristics of each category (Schippers 2007, 89). Sociologist Mimi Schippers (2007) states that both femininity and masculinity can be considered as a web of symbolic meaning. According to the gender schema theory, children learn the symbols for masculine and feminine behaviour early on, and through the process of socialization learn to perform their gender identity as to be consistent with their assumed gender (Crespi 2004; Martin and Finn 2010).

However, what masculinity and femininity precisely entail stays unclear. One reason given for this is that feminist scholars are said to have eschewed the study of masculinity and femininity because it is believed that these concepts hinder the equality for women and men, inhibit changes in the social milieu, and most importantly reify the socially constructed stereotypes (Martin and Finn 2010; Ortner 1972). Therefore, and because scientific efforts to come to an agreement of the term have been influenced by the current political and social opinions on gender/sex differences, we cannot provide a clear definition of femininity (Black and Sharma 2001; Martin and Finn 2010; Paechter 2018; Schippers 2007). Besides, according to Black and Sharma (2001, 102), it needs to be acknowledged that femininity is a highly ambiguous concept, not in the least because age, class and ethnicity will radically influence the ways in which it is experienced and defined. This statement substantiates the need for the earlier mentioned intersectional approach.

As stated before, gender is a means of classification. Since classification is rarely neutral, there exists a power-imbalance between femininity and masculinity. Research has shown that there is no universalized 'femininity', but that there exist multiple femininities. Therefore, we have to acknowledge that there are power differences between femininities, some femininities are more dominant than others (Messerschmidt 2020; Paechter 2018). When we talk about dominant femininity we refer to the most celebrated, common or current form of femininity in a particular social setting (Messerschmidt 2020, 6). According to

Messerschmidt (2020, 3), it is whenever those dominant femininities facilitate the legitimation of a hierarchical relationship between masculinity and femininity, that we should call them emphasized femininities. Finally, we can state that the dominant femininity in a particular society, which comes with certain cultural (beauty) norms, is generally the one that women feel forced to conform to. We will further discuss this phenomenon in the following paragraphs.

§ 1.2.2 Cultural norms concerning femininity and the female body

Zoé Fransen

One important notion, other than class, race, religious beliefs and ableness, that plays an important role in the discourse about women, femininity and their position in society, is beauty. Standards of beauty are different for men and women, but in general women are held to a much higher-to-attain standard than men (DeMello 2014, 177). According to several scholars, this is especially interesting because those standards were predominantly created by men, but men are not as defined by beauty standards as women are (DeMello 2014, 177-178; Hoskin 2020). During an interview with documentarist Sunny Bergman (2007), professor of psychology Liesbeth Woertman remarked something similar. She said that the intertwinement between beauty and femininity is stronger than the intertwinement between beauty and masculinity. The more women are considered to be beautiful, the more they are considered to be feminine. DeMello (2014) further states that female beauty exists of a combination of characteristics that indicate both youth and fertility, which indicates that beauty is something one cannot possess forever. In our present-day Western society, for women beauty plays a role in many aspects of their life, such as finding a job or a life partner (DeMello 2014, 181). Beauty norms differ from society to society and even within societies there are different cultural ideas on what the ideal, the to be pursued concept of beauty and femininity, is (Black and Sharma 2001; DeMello 2014; Pylypa 1998). But mostly, in order to appear feminine, to conform to the feminine norm, women are required to put on make-up, deodorize, and depilate their bodies. Femininity then, is most of all “a state to be constantly sought” (Black and Sharma 2001, 101). Next to this, the womanly desire for thinness and fitness is reinforced by their association with an ideal of femininity.

This is where Foucault’s concept of biopower comes into play. According to Foucault, biopower derives its force from both knowledge and desire, leading to a discourse of normality to which people desire to conform (Pylypa 1998, 21-22). He argues that power is dispersed through society and is therefore not only inherent in social relationships but is also operating on the micro levels of everyday life (Pylypa 1998, 22). Foucault ultimately demonstrates that women voluntarily control themselves by self-imposing conformity to cultural norms through self-surveillance and self-disciplinary practices, especially those of the body such as the self-regulation of health, sexuality and hygiene. There is not necessarily a higher force that imposes these beauty norms upon women, but rather a consequence of power being embedded in our discourses and

norms and daily practices, and we ourselves continue to produce and reinforce it (Pylypa 1998). Butler's 'Gender Trouble' (1990) elaborates on Foucault's concepts, which is why the idea of performativity is so similar to biopower.

Foucault shows that power changes its course over time. For example, he proposes that sexuality in the eighteenth century was an object of control and repressive surveillance. Later, this repression led to an increased desire in, and for, one's body, which caused the revolt of the sexual body. Foucault then states that where there used to be control through repression, it has now evolved to control by desire. Power nowadays thrives, among other things, by the idea of the creation of the 'perfect body'. This perfect body is fit, thin and healthy, three different things which have become interwoven and are treated as being equal. Finally, Foucault argues that power creates the type of (female) bodies that society requires. The current beauty ideal is therefore appropriate to the capitalist enterprise and is supported and created by the discourse of health as well as the discourse of sexual attraction (Pylypa 1998, 25-28). The latter has been extensively examined by Duits and Van Zoonen (2006) as well. They conclude that the dominant discourse is accountable for relabelling practices concerning headscarves and porno-chic of girls as inappropriate, thereby depriving them of the power of defining their own actions. Besides, they demonstrate that women have to balance on the decency continuum as 'nice girls', a concept coined by Fox (1977) to summarize the social standards women have to live up to. According to the article of Duits and Van Zoonen (2006, 114), a nice girl should not show too much of herself, nor cover herself up too much.

However, as stated before, the body is not only subject to power, but can be the object of power as well. There are ways in which one can challenge conventional beauty norms and overcome gender norms, namely through using the body as a site of resistance. This happens when people mark their bodies in a way that threatens the existing social order (DeMello 2014, 18-19). For example, Strübel and Jones (2017) discovered that by negating the subversive meanings of and the masculine associations with tattoos, the female participants of a research study attempted to redefine feminine beauty. Cosmetic surgery, hair and make-up are other factors that could be used as forms of resistance to social oppression when refusing to conform to bodily norms, which will be further elaborated on by discussing three different body practices in the following paragraph (DeMello 2014).

Paragraph 3 - Performing femininity through body practices

In the previous paragraphs it is argued that there exist multiple constructions of femininity, even multiple dominant femininities. How is femininity then performed in relation to the female body? And how do ideals concerning femininity affect this performance? To answer these questions this paragraph focuses on the conceptualisation of body practices, their cultural origin and the process of naturalization. To illustrate the way in which femininity can be performed through body practices, this paragraph then looks more closely into three specific practices.

§ 1.3.1 Body practices

Iva Hoefnagel

Sociologist Goffman (1956) states that individuals, by mobilizing their activity, try to present themselves in a way that will hopefully evoke a particular impression on others. He argues that individuals can have multiple motives and techniques, including physical expressions, in trying to control this impression. Moreover, Goffman argues that presenting oneself is not only done intentionally, but that individuals may also be unconscious of their expressive behaviours. His work shows that cultural norms affect the way in which people present themselves, while they tend to adjust themselves according to what is culturally accepted as ‘normal’ (Goffman 1956). In addition, philosopher Bordo (1993) proposes that cultural norms concerning femininity were previously culturally transmitted through verbal descriptions of how women should present themselves. Due to technological developments, such as the television, these ideals are nowadays transmitted through standardized visual images, for instance of female body shape or clothes. Therefore, feminine ideals are currently largely conducted through bodily discourse, where Bordo refers to normalizing body practices such as make-up, as ‘practice of femininity’ (Bordo 1993, 166, 169-170).

Mauss (1979, 70) describes such body practices as part of the ‘technique du corps’, i.e., the way in which people from society to society know how to use their bodies. His essay demonstrates that these habits are a product of culture, which people learn mostly through imitation and education. Similarly, Bordo (1993, 165) argues that: “(...) the daily rituals through which we attend to the body - is a medium of culture”. Nevertheless, the body and related customs are often experienced as natural, since they are frequently performed habits (DeMello 2014; Mauss 1979). Moreover, Mauss demonstrates that these ‘technique du corps’ differ by sex and age. However, following the intersectional approach, femininity is also performed in conjunction with other important axes of social significance, whereby standardized norms for the female body are, among other things, often racialized. In addition, women should not be interpreted as being one cohesive group with identical interests and experiences (Mohanty 1988). Female body practices, and femininity in general, therefore, may have different meanings for different women, depending on the specific cultural and historical context in which they are performed. In this way, femininity can be

constructed and performed through different body practices, from which some will be further analyzed in the following sections.

§ 1.3.2 Body hair removal

Iva Hoefnagel

Body hair removal is not a modern practice, but has been performed across cultures throughout history. Recently, however, hairlessness has become the normative condition for the female body in Western cultures. This is partly due to changing ideals of feminine beauty, promoted by advertising campaigns, and to a decline in the discourse of decency, leading women to show more parts of their bodies in public through revealing clothes (DeMello 2014, 126-128; Toerien and Wilkinson 2003). According to sociologist Ferrante (1988), hair is constructed as something masculine, and serves as a symbol for masculine strength. In contrast, female body hair is often experienced as something ‘dirty’. Mary Douglas (1966) shows that concepts of ‘clean’ and ‘dirt’ are culturally constructed. In this respect, she refers to dirt as “matter out of place”, where something is only experienced as dirt when it does not fit in a particular system of classification. Therefore, Douglas argues that the notion of ‘dirty’ female hair is not natural but serves to strengthen or maintain cultural norms and, as discussed, to protect the purity of the social body. Similarly, Hope (1982) and Wolf (2013) argue that hairlessness could have been developed in order to create differences between masculinity and femininity. Other interpretations are that it serves to construct women as primarily concerned with their looks or as less than fully mature, since the lack of hair is associated with a child-like status (Hope 1982; Toerien and Wilkinson 2003).

Women’s hair removal as the western norm indicates that the female body is not acceptable in its natural, unaltered, form. Qualitative data show that English women's motives for removing their body hair were to create an attractive, smooth, clean and tidy, or feminine body. Hairy women, on the contrary, are often referred to as unattractive, dirty and masculine. This shows how the conditions of body hair are constructed on dichotomous bodily states: hairlessness as positive, a beauty ideal, and hairiness as a negative alternative, a taboo. As a consequence, both bodily conditions don’t contain the same symbolic value (Smelik 2015; Toerien and Wilkinson 2004). Women who do not conform to the hairlessness norm will potentially suffer from negative social consequences, such as ridicule. This shows how the female body is disciplined through social controlling mechanisms, where social interaction enforces the hairlessness norm (Toerien and Wilkinson 2003).

§ 1.3.3 Make-up

Iva Hoefnagel

Following Goffman’s (1956) line of reasoning, cosmetic practices can be understood as performances to present oneself to others in a certain way. Various social psychologists argue that women wear make-up to

appear more attractive, healthy or confident (McCabe et al 2020). However, a recent anthropological study (McCabe et al 2020) on women's make-up rituals in America demonstrates that women also apply cosmetic products as means of 'self-transformation'. The researchers show that cosmetic practices are embodied experiences in which women reflect on who they are internally and externally. Cosmetic practices, then, connect their outer beauty, their physical appearance, with their inner beauty, the internal self. This is illustrated in the way women conform their make-up to their changing social context, personal feelings, and own notions of what beauty entails. Here, anthropologists also analyzed a before-after transformation in putting on make-up, namely from feeling disheveled to feeling confident and beautiful (McCabe et al 2020, 9-12). This relates to Maschio's (2015, 345) claim that consumer practices are "often emotionally satisfying to perform, and the performance is meant to evoke certain emotional states". On the other hand, the cosmetic industry creates a discourse in which women's beauty is evaluated through the lens of their physical appearance. Due to this influential advertising, women often experience negative physiological effects, such as low self-esteem, when they don't perform their cosmetic routines (DeMello 2014, 177-180). This shows how cultural standards concerning female cosmetics become internalized in female bodies.

§ 1.3.4 Cosmetic Surgery

Iva Hoefnagel

Cosmetic surgery was first performed during World War I to repair the disfigured bodies of the wounded soldiers (Kaw 2007, 82). During the 1950s it became advertised within public spheres for the first time, followed by an enormous and constant growth in surgeries all over the world (Brooks 2004, 211). In our analysis, cosmetic treatments refers to the voluntary surgical and non-surgical procedures performed to alter, often beautify, one's appearance, such as breast lifts and Botox injections, all of which are not without health risks (Brooks 2004, 3; DeMello 2014, 186). Following an intersectional view, cosmetic surgery can have different meanings for different women, which is illustrated by a psychological qualitative research on breast augmentation. The researchers found different generating factors that contributed to Norwegian women's decisions for surgery, namely appearance dissatisfaction, ideal figure, self-esteem, comments, clothes and sexuality. Under these generating factors they discovered a basic drive for femininity, but their participants' definitions of femininity differed (Solvi et al., 2010).

As discussed in the second paragraph, the Western ideal of feminine beauty contains a combination of characteristics that indicate youth and fertility. Therefore, according to DeMello (2014, 186-187) most of the voluntary procedures are performed by women and aimed to create a youthful appearance, and thus enhance their beauty. Moreover as mentioned earlier, beauty standards are often racialized, which is also evident in certain cosmetic surgeries. For instance, anthropologist Kaw (2007) analyzed the way in which Asian American women undergo cosmetic surgery for wider eyes or heightened noses to conform to

Western standards of beauty, such as Caucasian facial features. On the other hand, cosmetic surgery can also be performed to resist cultural norms. For instance, people use medical treatments, such as top surgery, to alter their body to affirm their non-binary gender identity. By modifying their bodies to neither culturally constructed masculine or feminine bodies, they destabilize binary gender norms. This is in line with Foucault's theory, whereby non-binary bodies are not only objects, but also subjects of power that create new forms of identity (De Souza and Parker 2020; Taylor et al. 2019). Overall, the removal of body hair, cosmetics, and cosmetic surgery should not simply be considered as beauty routines, instead they serve as important aspects of the construction of femininity.

Chapter 2: Context

This chapter focuses on the context of our thesis by first of all looking into the factors that change and maintain Dutch feminine beauty ideals and practices. As feminists are part of our research population, this chapter also analyzes the development of the feminist landscape in the Netherlands, the label ‘feminist’ itself, and Dutch feminist perspectives on female body practices.

§ 2.1 Female body ideals and practices in the Netherlands

Zoé Fransen

There are 439.878 women living in Amsterdam, out of a total population of 872.757. Of these women, 213.182 are between twenty and thirty years old (CBS 2020). In 2015, the newspaper *Het Parool* wrote: “Amsterdam is a honeypot for young women, especially because the city's large number of universities and colleges attracts lots of students”. With its 180 different nationalities, Amsterdam is often characterized as a diverse city (Russell 2020). This is probably one of the reasons why it is so hard to define the ‘Amsterdam woman’ or the dominant beauty ideals. As argued in the previous chapter, there are multiple femininities, this analysis therefore refrains from focusing on ‘one’ Dutch beauty ideal or ‘the Dutch femininity’ but highlights three factors concerning feminine ideals in the Netherlands.

Research by professor of psychology Liesbeth Woertman in 2008 shows that Dutch women generally indicate that they are satisfied with their appearance, but that the pressure to look perfect still beckons. According to a study by Tiggeman (2004) however, the importance attached to appearance seems to decrease with age. Liesbeth Woertman concludes that adult women are mostly satisfied with their bodies and appearance, but that they often do not match the cultural beauty ideal. This leads to insecurity and creates pressure to look a certain way. The idea of the makeable body thrives in contemporary society, which leads to a lot of pressure (Woertman 2008, 270).

In later research Woertman (2019) states that the current Western beauty ideal for women is having big breasts, being slim, having a narrow waist and big round buttocks. She adds that due to globalization the Western beauty ideal adapts to Latin American and American influences, something she considers an interesting phenomenon, regarding the fact that it used to be the Western ideal that spread to other continents (RTL 2019). Social media is one of the major catalysts of the changing of beauty ideals. Research shows that because of social media more people experience a discrepancy between the way they look and the way they desire to look. This is partly attributable to the filters of social media apps like Snapchat and Instagram, they alter faces to make them look flawless. This phenomenon is called snapchat dysmorphia; the desire to look like the edited version of yourself (Volkskrant 2019). Next to this, representation in magazines and other mainstream media also plays quite a significant role. A research study about gender representation in

Dutch fashion magazines discovered that nowadays rather than reflecting female empowerment, the overall portrayal of both men and women has become more objectified (Kuipers 2017, 644). In the following paragraphs we will examine Dutch feminism and the way Dutch feminists reflect on and experience certain beauty practices.

§ 2.2 Feminism in The Netherlands

Iva Hoefnagel

According to Atria, the Dutch institute on gender equality and women's history, feminism is “the collective term for social and political movements that criticize unequal relationships between men and women and strive for women's emancipation” (Atria, n.d.). However, as stated in the introduction, it is important to keep in mind that feminists can differ on what feminism and being a feminist means to them.

According to Mohanty (1988), social phenomena should be analyzed within their specific historical and cultural contexts, which is why this section includes a short overview of the development of the feminist landscape in the Netherlands. An analysis of the development of feminism is often explained through different waves to which individuals as well as feminist groups are ascribed. However, other scholars are opposed to this approach, since feminism then becomes bound to time and place and indicates a progress (van der Tuin 2010). Therefore, we are cautious to label certain periods as feminist waves to avoid generalization and exclusion.

During the second half of the nineteenth century feminism developed also in the Netherlands, a period referred to by many as the ‘first feminist wave’. The ‘Vrije Vrouwenvereniging’ (Free Women Association), founded in 1889, was the first organization to address the women’s disadvantaged position in society. Soon followed by different successful initiatives, mostly by middle-class women, that raised issues concerning women’s suffrage, their access to education, and unequal legal position, particularly within marriage laws (Ribberink 1987, 7-21). During the late sixties feminism was revived again, labelled as ‘second feminist wave’, after the publication of the critical article ‘Het onbehagen van de vrouw’ (The woman’s discontent) of feminist Joke Smit on breaking the gender roles. With this mission, she co-founded the action group ‘Man Vrouw Maatschappij’ (Man Woman Society) in 1968, which included men and mobilized their action mainly through official manners (Van Steen 2015, 31-35; Vuijsje 2017). Shortly after, more radical feminist action groups such as ‘Dolle Mina’ became increasingly popular. In spite of their different modes of action, both feminist groups often had similar demands, such as legal equality between both sexes, legal abortion and childcare. Moreover, this period is characterized by the emergence of women’s support groups in which women shared their experiences to create awareness of the meaning of womanhood (Atria 2016; Van Steen 2015, 34; Tijsseling 2015, 8-15). In contrast to the previous ‘waves’,

as from the nineties the awareness of the differences between women, instead of their sameness, became central. Dutch lesbian, black and migrant movements, among others, criticized the white heterosexual dominance of feminism. These views created awareness of the intersection of sexism with other social inequalities, such as racism, ethnocentrism and sexual orientation. In this debate the concept of intersectionality, as explained in Chapter 1, was introduced, which is still prominent in contemporary feminism. To emphasize how this feminist approach, focused on inclusivity and diversity, differs from the second wave, some refer to this period as the third or fourth wave feminism (Atria 2016; Ghorashi 2010; Ribberink 1987, 53-54).

Nowadays, feminism is still a major movement in the Netherlands both online and offline, which is also noticeable in Amsterdam. Various feminist platforms and organisations provide places where feminists meet, share their thoughts or take action. A research on behalf of women's rights organization ActionAid demonstrated that in 2019 one out of three Dutch respondents called themselves feminist (ActionAid, 2019). However, this study also suggests there are women in Amsterdam who do not identify as feminist. It is, therefore, also interesting to analyze why certain women label themselves as feminist and others do not. Psychologists Williams and Wittig (1997, 901) argue that besides being supportive of feminist goals, exposure to feminism, positive evaluation of feminists, and belief in collective action are likely factors contributing to women's willingness to identify as feminist. However, several studies demonstrate that there are also women who admit to sharing the feminist goals of gender equality but refrain from labelling themselves as feminist (Hall and Rodriguez 2003, 883-885; Williams and Wittig 1997). These women, for instance, prefer not to be associated with any formally recognized social movement, relating to the notion of individualism. In addition, some women refrain from identifying as feminists because they view themselves as non-radical, which shows how certain women connect character traits to feminism. Both arguments, however, were also mentioned by some feminists to nuance their self-labeling as feminist (Alexander and Ryan 1997). Other studies suggest that negative stereotypes might discourage women to take on a feminist identity, and vice versa, positive perceptions might increase engagement in feminism. In general, this shows how, in addition to different definitions of feminism, young women in Amsterdam might also have different considerations about whether or not to label themselves as feminist.

§ 2.3 Dutch feminist perspectives on female body practices

Iva Hoefnagel

Femininity, the female body and beauty standards have long been a part of Dutch feminist debates. As Gastmeier (2016, 32) argues that “there is neither one ‘feminism’ nor one type of ‘femininity’ ”, it is important to keep in mind that feminists might view these topics differently and should not be mistaken as being one group. Many feminists expressed concerns regarding the focus on women's appearance in

Western society. According to some, these beauty standards are a product of patriarchal ideologies and inequalities (Gastmeier 2016). Others, mostly radical feminists, pursue the argument that beauty itself is an important aspect of women's oppression. Beauty practices, in their view, are “harmful cultural practices” that damage women’s physical and mental health (Jeffreys 2014). Not performing certain beauty practices then is a way for many Dutch feminists to resist the female beauty ideals. For instance, some feminists stopped removing their body hair as “a feminist act” (Linge 2017). Other Dutch feminists expressed not shaving as a difficult process, accompanied by discomfort and insecurity about the reactions of others. These women also expressed making different choices with different parts of their body, whereas one woman mentioned being comfortable with armpit hair in public, but still reluctant to show her unshaven legs (van de Beek 2018). However, intersectional feminists argue that women are pressured differently by female body ideals in their performance of femininity. Marginalized women, such as trans women, usually don’t have the privilege to stop conforming to beauty norms (Given 2020).

In contrast to feminists who oppose beauty practices, other feminists, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, see certain practices as an expression of women’s choices or an act of agency (Jeffreys 2014, 11-13; Safronova 2016). For example, the Dutch feminist platform 'Stellingdames' shows that some feminists see make-up as a female phenomenon that serves for self-empowerment. In that view, women don't put make-up on to look attractive to men, but, for instance, to create a fashionable or artistic character (Stellingdames, n.d.). In the same way, Susan Smit argued in in the feminist magazine *Opzij* that “Men always think that we make ourselves beautiful for them. But making myself beautiful is making life a party: I've always seen it separate from lust.” (Schoenmacker 2019). On the other hand, other Dutch feminists, such as Kaouthar Darmoni, perform certain body practices to generate their sensual energy as a way of bringing feminine values and power back to women (Riemersma 2020; Kaouthar, n.d.). To conclude, this section shows how feminist views concerning female beauty practices differ, causing them to perform or refrain from certain body practices.

A big stage is placed on a large, green field in the middle of the Bijlmer. White dots have been painted on the grass at a distance of 1.5 meters from each other. More and more people, mainly women, are gathering and scattering across the field on the dots. In front of me is a group of girls from 'Rutgers'⁵ with signs about sexual consent. Next to me two girls are standing with a large banner with "Viva La Vulva" written on it. We are at the Women's March NL and this year's theme is "Use your voice". The host steps on the stage and opens the afternoon. She states that the Women's March is all about "strength, unity and equality." I feel this, the words hit me, and the people around me seem to feel it too. There is a lot of shouting and clapping when different speakers tell their story. There is a positive energy spreading over the field. "Black lives matter" we are shouting. "Trans lives matter, refugee lives matter, disability lives matter", we are shouting. It gives me goosebumps. Intersectional feminism is ubiquitous. The women around me are of different ages, there are young children, women with babies, in their twenties, forties and even older feminists like Anja Meulenbelt. There are black women, white women, veiled women, disabled women, fat women, thin women. Everyone is dressed differently, colourfully, in skirts, dresses or trousers. Some have their hair loose, others wear it fixed. One thing is clear this afternoon: femininity comes in many forms.⁶

This vignette is based on the field notes from our trip to the Women's March NL. It was the first time we could finally physically see and come into contact with our research group, young women (living in Amsterdam). For our research we had made the decision to compare young women who explicitly identify as feminists to young women who don't explicitly identify as feminists. We wanted to see if there was a difference in their approach to the concept of femininity. In retrospect, it turned out to be a less common dichotomy than we had expected. While we were recruiting our informants, many women indicated they weren't sure about what identifying as a feminist meant and even if they did they were not sure to which category they belonged. In this chapter we will delve into the motives for the (non) labelling of the term feminist. In doing so, we will investigate what feminism means to our participants.

⁵ Rutgers is the Dutch knowledge center on sexuality.

⁶ Participant observation Women's March NL 7 March 2021

From the moment I knew what a feminist was, I thought ‘of course that’s what I am!’ (...)
For me, feminism is about equal opportunities and the prerogative that men and women
should be treated equally. – Belle ⁷

For the majority of the women who identify themselves as feminists, feminism is something they value strongly. Several women even consider it such an important aspect of themselves that they name it when introducing themselves and their daily activities. One thing was evident for every participant we have spoken to, including the women who did not explicitly identify as feminists, feminism is all about equal opportunities and equal treatment between men and women. Some participants, predominantly the women who introduce themselves as intersectional feminists, put the emphasis on equal treatment and opportunities for everyone.

Intersectional feminism means that you perceive different forms of oppression and show solidarity with the struggles of others - Christina⁸

In literature intersectionality is indeed described as being aware of the different ways of oppression that one can experience, while at the same time being aware of the privileges you do have (Mohanty 1988; Moore 1994; Lutz 2015). This awareness became apparent during our conversations with self-identified (intersectional) feminists. Belle⁹ for example, reflected on the dominant beauty ideal by saying that the contemporary ideal is based on the white, heterosexual cis woman and therefore quite exclusive.

In addition, the feminists I talked with emphasized that feminism was about having the freedom to make your own choices. Being free to choose whether or not to display your body, being free to pursue a career and children, but also being free to choose to stay at home as a housewife. In literature this is considered as typical third or fourth wave feminism (Atria 2016). Furthermore, emphasis was placed on taking ownership of your body, a feminist choice is a choice made by women themselves.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Williams and Wittig (1997) analyzed several factors that are likely to contribute the willingness to identify as a feminist. From the conversations we have had, it appears that being supportive of feminist goals is not always enough to identify as a feminist. For example, although they all shared feminist values as discussed in our context, a quarter of the women Iva talked with, did not consider themselves activists and therefore did not call themselves feminists. Contrastingly, the women I spoke to, who did consider themselves highly activist, were also the ones who were most vocal about being a feminist in their daily life. Furthermore, it appears that the women who spoke of their environment as very feminist,

⁷ Semi-structured Interview Belle (Z) 1 April 2021

⁸ Semi-structured Interview Christina (Z) 2 April 2021

⁹ Semi-structured Interview Belle (Z) 1 April 2021

which they sometimes jokingly called their ‘leftist bubble’¹⁰, were more likely to label themselves as feminists as well. Positive perceptions of femininity, might thus increase one’s engagement in feminism (Alexander and Ryan 1997). Finally, knowledge seems to be an important factor for the (non-)identification as a feminist as well. For example, Lieke¹¹ and Cloë¹² wondered if they were well-informed enough to identify as a feminist, but decided that the fact that they supported feminist values was enough. Hannah¹³ on the other hand, believed that she was not well-informed enough and thus couldn’t call herself a feminist. Another reason for not labelling was given by Tess :

I think basically everyone should be a feminist, in the sense that I believe that most people are feminists. I mean, I think everyone agrees that we [women] have rights. But how I see the term being used lately... How it’s portrayed in the media, it seems as if men should have less rights. No, I am not a fan of this new wave and therefore I absolutely would not explicitly call myself a feminist. - Tess¹⁴

This relates to what Alexander and Ryan (1997) discovered: that some women refrain from identifying as feminist because they consider themselves non-radical and because they prefer not to be associated with any big social movement. The negative stereotypes Tess mentions here - I say stereotype because feminism in itself is about equal rights and opportunities for everyone, thus men having less rights would undermine the entire feminist ideology - partly prevent Tess from identifying as a feminist, even if she agrees with feminist values. At the same time, the stereotypes not only deter people, but also make them doubt their self-labelling. Lieke¹⁵ and Iris¹⁶ said they sometimes felt as if they were not good feminists because they did not let all their bodily hair grow, as they supposed a ‘good’ or ‘convincing’ feminist would do.

What becomes clear, is that both groups of women support feminist values and that the associations one has with the term ‘feminist’ highly influences the decision whether or not to identify as a feminist. We had expected there to be a significant difference in the attitude towards using body practices in the construction of femininity, but our research did not find such explicit distinction. However, the women who described themselves as activist feminists were the ones who made constant comments and references to

¹⁰ ‘Linkse bubbel’ with links referring to being left oriented on the Dutch political spectrum

¹¹ Semi-structured Interview Lieke (Z) 12 March 2021

¹² Conversation Cloë (Z) 12 February 2021

¹³ Semi-structured Interview Hannah (I) 25 February 2021

¹⁴ Semi-structured Interview Tess (I) 15 February 2021

¹⁵ Semi-structured Interview Lieke (Z) 12 March 2021

¹⁶ Semi-structured Interview Iris (Z) 18 February 2021

(intersectional) feminism and reflected the most on their use of body practices, which leads us to believe that being activist about your beliefs impacts the ideas surrounding and the construction of femininity more than identifying as a feminist itself. In the following chapter we will outline what kind of implications this has for the way our participants place themselves within gender structures.

As beautifully expressed by one of our participants “just because gender is a social construct, this does not mean that we do not experience the ramifications of it”; in order to understand how young women in Amsterdam construct their femininity, it is important to analyze how they place themselves within gender structures. This chapter, therefore, demonstrates how our participants define different gender categories and how they use these to categorize the world around them, specifically focusing on femininity and masculinity. In addition, this chapter aims to give an insight into the cultural norms concerning femininity that our participants encounter in their particular social context.

§ 4.1 Defining gender

For Christina¹⁷ gender means: “what you identify with as a person, this can be male, female, non-binary or any other form of gender identity”. Similarly, when discussing the notion of gender, 25 of the 30 women referred to gender as the way someone identifies or a feeling that someone has. In doing so, a few women did use the words gender and sex interchangeably, but most of them emphasized the difference between the concepts. This relates to the arguments in Chapter 1, which demonstrate the need for a distinction between sex, biological differences between men and women, and gender, the cultural constructs of femininity and masculinity (Stimpson and Herdt 2014; Jansen 1987). On this subject, Motmans and Longman (2017) argue that although people distinguish sex from gender, they often do so on the basis of the binary sex-gender-model. This model suggests that there are two biological sexes (male and female) upon which two genders (masculine and feminine) are culturally constructed (Motmans and Longman 2017). With a few exceptions, our participants acknowledged that the way someone identifies is not limited to male or female. For instance, non-binary as a gender identity was often mentioned in the interviews. Two of Zoé’s participants, for instance, actively use gender-neutral language or ask people for their personal pronouns to avoid misconstruing their gender identity. This demonstrates that most of our participants did not consider gender to be a binary division. Gender, then, is perceived more as a spectrum. One difference in discussing gender as identification between both groups was that in Zoé’s conversations with some self-identified feminists they went more deeply into the subject of the construction and implication of gender. For instance, four of these women claimed that gender is a social construct, the cultural effects of one’s ascribed gender. Even though most participants perceive gender as a spectrum, many of them admitted that the first things that came to mind when hearing the word gender was still only men and women:

¹⁷ Semi-structured interview Christina (Z) 2 April 2021

At first I think of a man and a woman, but I do know that there are also people who identify themselves in between. So I think those dividing lines of gender are not that black-and-white. - Liz¹⁸

This shows how gender as a binary system is deeply internalized and might still (unconsciously) influence the participants' making sense of the world around them. In contrast to the views above, for three participants gender equals being sex, while for Tessa someone's gender is determined by their genitals:

Gender is the genitals you have. I am a woman because I have a vagina. So that's gender to me. Very simple actually (...) for me it is like: *hello* it is down there either male or female.
- Tessa¹⁹

When discussing whether she uses other gender categories besides men and women, Tessa explains that she does so if someone specifically wants to identify in a different manner. Even though Tessa expresses to 'go along with how others want to be addressed', she personally preserves a binary division of gender based on genitals. Similarly, Motmans and Longman (2017, 68) argue that differences between humans are sometimes reduced to their genitals. Moreover, it relates to their analysis that despite the fact that there are nowadays social and scientific findings that reveal sex and gender variations, gender and sex are often determined by binary thinking (Motmans and Longman 2017).

§ 4.2 Categorizing: notions of femininity and masculinity

As many participants (in)directly link gender to men and women, it is interesting to analyze how they define these gender categories. While reflecting on this, a lot of women remarked that what femininity or masculinity means to them is not necessarily what it means to others. Therefore, participants were sometimes hesitant to describe these notions, since they did not want to exclude others who identified as female or male, but did not match their description of the gender category. Moreover, during our conversations the women reflected on their answers as presumably being based on the stereotypical view of femininity or masculinity. For instance, Christina²⁰ discussed with Zoé that it is difficult to describe masculinity without upholding social constructs of gender. In addition, we observe that for many women the notions of femininity and masculinity are also difficult to define because they go unnoticed. Even though

¹⁸ Semi-structured interview Liz (I) 17 February 2021

¹⁹ Semi-structured interview Tessa (I) 17 February 2021

²⁰ Semi-structured interview Christina (Z) 2 April 2021

one might often use these categories, it is not something one consciously thinks about. This can be understood through the naturalization effect associated with Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity. The social performances that form one's gender are repeated so often that they tend to appear natural (Butler 1990). Accordingly, during our fieldwork we noticed that for most women these notions do generate certain (unconscious) associations.

What our participants then regarded as femininity and masculinity turned out to be very diverse. Many of them referred to behavioural traits, whereby, among others, masculinity was associated with a certain toughness, directness and taking up space, and femininity with elegance, sensitivity or strength. Other participants linked these concepts to biological characteristics, such as sex organs, hormones or bodily aspects. Douglas (1966) argues that the human body serves as the most natural symbol for classification. Similarly, we analyzed that a person's appearance or bodily aspects were common means for categorizing people. In this respect, our participants referred, among others, to breasts, buttocks and a graceful way of moving as typically feminine. Roughness of bodies, presence of facial hair and 'sharp' facial features, were, among others, named as more masculine bodily features. In addition, the majority of the participants I spoke to mentioned behaviour as a means for categorizing. For instance, talking about or having an interest in certain topics, such as makeup or one's feelings, were suggested as being indications of femininity. During my interviews, I noticed that my participants did not only use masculinity and femininity to differentiate between people as men and women, but also to make a distinction between women by attributing to them the labels of 'masculine' or 'feminine'. When referring to these terms some of them used their fingers to make the quote gesture, in my view implying that these categories might be imagined instead of real and maybe even based on stereotyped characteristics. Some participants thereby referred to 'woman woman', 'girl girl' or 'feminine woman' to describe a woman who pays attention to her appearance or wears dresses and make-up, and 'masculine woman' or 'tougher woman' for those who, for instance, wear wider clothing instead of dresses or move more clumsily. This is illustrated by my conversation with Jade:

Sometimes when I see a girl, I am not so sure, that is a tougher or a bit more clumsy girl, then I immediately think of her as a slightly more masculine girl. If you see someone walking in a short skirt, who is busy with make-up or talking a lot about clothing and make-up, you might think of her as a feminine girl. - Jade²¹

²¹ Semi-structured interview Jade (I) 22 February 2021

Most women using these labels did not hold a value judgment on either term (or category). For example, some women also placed themselves along these categories of more ‘feminine’ or more ‘masculine’ women. Overall, this is in line with the theory of Butler (2014), Douglas (1996) and Jansen (1987) that classifications of male and female play a role not only in the classification of people, but also in the classification of space, clothing, way of thinking, personality traits, body movements and behaviour. Although some participants actively try to distance themselves from the gender norms they have been taught, they still subconsciously categorize people:

In theory I can say that there is a spectrum. However, my brain unconsciously labels someone as male or female. For example, I notice that when I see transgender women, who have more angular faces, which are part of what we view as masculine characteristics, my brain has trouble processing it. - Lola²²

This internal confusion of Lola illustrates that people have learned to think in binary oppositions and become uncomfortable, or confused, when they come across people who do not fit the normalized categories (Douglas 1966). The way in which our participants automatically label people into categories is not surprising when we consider the gender schema theory. This theory suggests that, from an early age, people learn to categorize the world around them according to symbols of masculinity and femininity (Martin and Finn 2010). Some participants also question concepts like masculinity and femininity as a whole. These women doubt whether it would not be better to avoid using certain terms to distinguish the world around us. One of them is Tara²³, who when we went through her digital diary one day, informed me that our conversations got her thinking about this. She doubts whether concepts such as masculinity and femininity are really necessary. This relates to the scholars Ortner (1972) and Martin and Finn (2010) who eschew the conceptualization of femininity and masculinity, since these concepts reify the socially constructed stereotypes. Following this line of thought, Tessa shares her determination not to refer to these notions anymore in her daily life, because she views both masculinity and femininity as humanity:

Masculinity and femininity are equal to me and that is just humanity. (...) Even now during this conversation I think gosh I am really detached from concepts such as masculinity and femininity... - Tessa²⁴

²² Semi-structured interview Lola (Z) 3 March 2021

²³ Unstructured interview Tara (I) 2 April 2021

²⁴ Semi-structured interview Tessa (I) 17 February 2021

While analyzing this, to me it feels a bit contradictory to Tessa's view that we discussed earlier. On the one hand, she strongly advocates biological definitions of men and women, since for her a person's gender is based on their genitals. On the other hand, she shares the feeling that she has distanced herself from the cultural concepts of masculinity and femininity. To me the first view does not quite correspond with the latter, i.e. her view to treat and consider men and women as 'human-beings' rather than gendered beings. This shows how the use of the concepts sex and gender, or masculinity and femininity, can be a complicated and unconscious process for people in their daily lives.

§ 4.3 Constructing dominant femininity: feminine (beauty) ideals

"I think we have unconsciously been taught a kind of image of what femininity is and what a beautiful woman looks like." Lynn told me one day. Similarly, during our fieldwork we noticed that all 30 participants agree that there exist certain (cultural) ideals surrounding femininity. As demonstrated in our theoretical framework, we refer to cultural norms concerning femininity as dominant femininity, i.e. the most celebrated, common or current form of femininity in a particular social setting (Messerschmidt 2020, 6). Our participants, however, have different opinions on what these ideals entail and how they are constructed.

I think usually women are expected to be more modest and reserved, since it is more conspicuous when a woman attracts attention than when a man does so, since we are used to men doing that - Yara²⁵

On the one hand, 27 of the 30 participating women refer to ideals on how women are expected to behave, for instance to be caring, elegant and less dominant than men in interaction. This resonates with the behavioural traits associated with femininity discussed in the previous section. Here, I notice that these are often put in relation to men, namely as something that is not expected of men or associated with masculinity. This contrast is, for some women, also apparent in the expectations about one's position in society. For instance, I had conversations on these different gender roles between men and women with participants from various ethnic backgrounds, which led to interesting findings. For example, the experiences of a Surinamese woman, Yasmine²⁶, and a Pakistani woman, Maira²⁷, demonstrate that certain ideals differ per culture. They gave me insight into the dominant femininity in their native countries from which they moved

²⁵ Semi-structured interview Yara (I) 25 February 2021

²⁶ Semi-structured interview Yasmine (I) 24 February 2021

²⁷ Semi-structured interview Maira (I) 7 April 2021

to the Netherlands a few years ago. Both suggest that back in Suriname and in Pakistan women are expected to take care of the children and the household. According to Yasmine and Maire this ideal is part of the culture and transmitted from generation to generation. Nevertheless, both women noticed that these cultural norms are changing, with the younger generation slowly breaking away from the traditional gender roles. Women are starting to study and work more, and in some cases, men are taking on more household tasks. This is something both women already experience in the Netherlands:

In my native country [Pakistan] a woman has to do more in the house, and the man is outside and working. Here [in the Netherlands] they have the same rights, both work, both take care of the kids and both clean the house. In my country men do not help in home activities. They come home and say 'hi' ... - Maira²⁸

In this respect, it is interesting to find that two white cis-hetero women, born and raised in the Netherlands, do not share this opinion. In their view, even though it might be 'old-fashioned', the dominant idea in the Netherlands is still that women are expected to take care of the household and the children instead of the men. In addition, Jess²⁹ mentioned to Zoé that getting children at a certain age is in itself something that is expected of women, and less of men, in society. This shows how cultural norms concerning femininity can change over time, and different ideals, dominant femininities, can even co-exist (Black and Sharma 2001; DeMello 2014; Pylypa 1998).

Besides feminine ideals concerning behaviour, all participants shared that they encounter ideals concerning women's appearance in society. This is not surprising as, among others, psychologist Liesbeth Woertman emphasizes the strong intertwinement between beauty and femininity (Bergman 2007). This also relates to philosopher Bordo's argument (1993) that due to technological developments, such as television, these cultural norms concerning femininity are nowadays transmitted through standardized visual images, and thereby conducted through bodily discourse. The (beauty) ideals that were often mentioned during our fieldwork were, among others, long hair, hourglass figure, tanned skin, without body hair, big breasts and butt, and looking well-groomed in general. When Belle³⁰ discussed these ideals with Zoé, she acknowledged that in the Netherlands the feminine ideals apply mostly to white, abled, cis women. Following the intersectionalist approach, dominant femininity is perceived in relation to other axes of social

²⁸ Semi-structured interview Maira (I) 7 April 2021

²⁹ Semi-structured interview Jess (Z) 11 March 2021

³⁰ Semi-structured Interview Belle (Z) 1 April 2021

significance, such as ethnicity, skin colour and ableness (Lutz 2015; Mohanty 1988). Beauty standards, then, are often racialized and classed (DeMello 2014).

When discussing these ideals with our participants, almost all of them emphasized the influence of (social) media on the construction and spread of these female beauty ideals. This supports Bordo's (1993) argument of the influence of technological developments, discussed above. Interestingly, I talked to one woman in her late twenties, who discussed her experience before and after social media was predominantly present. Previously, Tessa's³¹ only exposure to beauty ideals was in magazines or on television. With the expansion of social media, she now is confronted on a daily basis, often unconsciously, with certain images of how women should look. Pressure to look a certain way for women is something that many participants associate with beauty ideals. Four women mentioned that beauty ideals in general are often accompanied by a lot of criticism, while they observed two alternatives of women's appearances, which are both viewed negatively:

There can be quite a lot of criticism on women for being too feminine, for example on the cover of a magazine without a bra, but if you look really clumsy, you are not not feminine enough. There is a lot of pressure on women - Jade³²

Likewise, Rosa³³ discussed with Zoé that as a woman one should look sexy, but not too much, especially in the media. These reflections relate to the argument of Duits and Van Zoonen (2006), that women have to balance on a 'decency' continuum that is based on conflicting demands from the debates on 'porno-chic' and headscarves. Similarly described by the participants above, women should appear to look not too decent as well as not too sexy. As a result, Duits and Van Zoonen (2006) state that the women's autonomy is denied and their sexuality is regulated. When discussing this with our participants we could clearly sense their frustration and feeling of powerlessness in their voices. The pressure from beauty ideals is therefore not only too high, but the ideals themselves might even be impossible to attain (DeMello 2014, 171)

Although certain beauty ideals were brought up, not all women did consider the ideals to be exactly the same. Beauty norms differ from society to society and even within societies there are different cultural ideas on what the ideal, the to be pursued concept of beauty and femininity, is (Black and Sharma 2001; DeMello 2014; Pylypa 1998). In this light, Belle mentioned that the cultural norms concerning femininity that she encounters differ from social settings; from 'bubble to bubble'. Moreover, dominant femininities can

³¹ Semi-structured interview Tessa (I) 17 February 2021

³² Unstructured interview Jade (I) 10 March 2021

³³ Semi-structured Interview Rosa (Z) 25 February 2021

change over time. As argued by Liesbeth Woertman in an interview, diversity in the media can contribute to the way women break free from beauty ideals (Radarplus n.d.). For instance, some participants mentioned the campaigns on body positivity that criticize an ideal body type by presenting diverse body types. In addition, we noticed that diversity in one's surroundings can also contribute to this. Several participants, especially named their city Amsterdam as contributing to widening their view on the concept of femininity. For instance, both Jade³⁴ and Megan³⁵ have the experience that people in Amsterdam dress more expressively than in other cities, leading to a blurring of the boundaries between typically feminine or masculine clothing. Likewise, according to Belle³⁶, living in Amsterdam you can appear feminine in different ways because there is not “one way to be a woman”..

To summarize, in this section we have shown that multiple dominant femininities are coexisting among the young women in Amsterdam. These ideals are, according to them, shaped and taught by different factors, mostly by media, by a person's surrounding, culture and history. Some of the quotes above already give an indication of the (negative) effect of the pressure on women associated with these ideals. Therefore, in the next chapter we will also focus on the way in which our participants experience these ideals and try to conform to them, but also on how they might influence their own sense of femininity.

³⁴ Semi-structured interview Jade (I) 22 February 2021

³⁵ Semi-structured interview Megan (I) 3 March 2021

³⁶ Semi-structured Interview Belle 1 April 2021

Femininity is not a fixed concept and cannot simply be understood as a certain set of characteristics. Therefore, getting a grip on the participants' sense of femininity proved to be fairly complicated. However, in this chapter we hope to offer a glimpse into the inner world of our participants by delving deep into the ways young women in Amsterdam perceive and express their femininity.

§ 5.1 What makes a woman

Recently I had a conversation with my boyfriend about how I still don't know what really makes me a woman. I have no idea why I identify as a woman, I was given the gender of a woman at birth. But does my vulva make me a woman? Not necessarily, there are also men and non-binary individuals with a vulva. So what really makes me a woman? I think about it often but to this day I find it difficult to answer that question. What is femininity and why do we think in these categories? - Christina³⁷

The differences in meanings attributed to femininity became clear to us early on in the research process. As we thus could have expected, not everyone felt the same degree of femininity. Fay³⁸ for example, said that sometimes she would feel hyperfeminine and on other days she would feel (and dress) more androgyne, while Yara stated:

Yes I identify as a woman, but I don't feel super feminine or something. I think I might be closer to the feminine side, but not entirely with the super feminine-women. - Yara³⁹

This resounded with, among others, Sam⁴⁰, who made it clear that she saw gender as a spectrum. During our conversation she drew an imaginary line and pointed out that on some days she would find herself in the middle of the line, between masculinity and femininity. On other days she would move more towards one of those sides, and thus feel more feminine or masculine. While she explained this, she expressed her aversion for the categorization of certain things as being feminine or masculine. This sentiment was perceptible among other participants as well and is currently being reflected in the earlier mentioned art

³⁷ Semi-structured Interview Christina (Z) 2 April 2021

³⁸ Semi-structured Interview Fay (Z) 26 February 2021

³⁹ Semi-structured Interview Yara (I) 25 February 2021

⁴⁰ Semi-structured Interview Sam (Z) 22 February 2021

performance 'Fok me Hokje' (2021). Besides indicating how feminine they felt, for the women we spoke with the self-defining of femininity is at least as complex.

For at least twelve of the women we talked with, femininity forms a highly important aspect of their identity, it is considered quite self-evident, and almost taken for granted. Their femininity is an aspect of their being which is inherent to their feeling of self, but at the same time is something they are unconscious of. Dina⁴¹ stated that when she did not feel feminine, she didn't feel like herself. This somewhat resounded with what Florine said:

I am a woman, so I always feel feminine. If I would not feel feminine, what would there be left of me?- Florine ⁴²

For Florine her femininity is apparently such a vital aspect of her sense of self that she cannot see them separate from one another, it is a certain state of being. Belle⁴³, on the other hand, told me how her femininity is closely intertwined with her relation to God, her Christian upbringing therefore affected the way she learned to perform her gender identity. This resonates with what Martin and Finn (2010) found in their research, i.e.that the way you are socialized affects (the performing of) your gender identity. None of the women we interacted with were actually able to pin-point what femininity means to them exactly. This can be explained through the fact that femininity, as well as masculinity, is a web of symbolic meanings, and these are complicated to describe (Schippers 2007). At the same time this phenomenon can be interpreted through Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and the earlier mentioned idea of naturalization. Butler (1990) claims that gender is nothing in itself, as gender is constituted through the stylized repetition of acts. It is a fluid, timebound concept. Another important and certainly more tangible aspect of one's feeling of self, is the body, which explains why appearance is often mentioned in discussions of femininity, something which we'll explore in the following paragraph.

§ 5.2 Femininity intertwined with appearance

It is through certain movements, acts and the way we use our bodies that gender becomes apparent and even then, the significance and meaning of those acts can differ from society to society and from culture to culture (Butler 1990; Black and Sharma 2001). In linking feeling feminine to appearing beautiful, well-groomed, our research group emphasized the vital role of bodies for expressing gender. Appearance is a word that almost every participant used when referring to their femininity. The majority reported that appearing feminine is mostly important when there are others around, they feel social pressure to look a

⁴¹ Semi-structured Interview Dina (Z) 18 February 2021

⁴² Semi-structured Interview Florine (Z) 11 February 2021

⁴³ Semi-structured Interview Belle (Z) 2 April 2021

certain way. Besides, because many women are looking for the validation of being accepted as how they feel (feminine), they make sure to live up to the norm. This became apparent when Cloë⁴⁴ and Linda⁴⁵ showed us their hairy legs, they did it in a giggly way as if it was something they still were a little ashamed of. Certain participants, like Maeve⁴⁶, are nonetheless aware of having internalized certain norms and societal standards. They said they felt free to make certain choices like shaving their body hair, but they also said something along the lines of: “If it wasn’t common practice, I don’t think I would ever have thought of shaving off my leg hair.”

This eventually led to the debate about whether or not women are free to make their own choices. Rosa, Christina, Maeve, Jess, Dina, Belle - remarkably all women who explicitly identified as feminists - all mentioned struggling with deciding whether or not some of the things they did were by choice or because they felt compelled to fit in with the feminine (beauty) standards. Some women, for example, were not sure why exactly they wore make-up, something we will elaborate on further in the following chapter. Maeve told me she actively tried to reflect on beauty standards and on what part of her wanted to perform certain body practices for herself and what part did it to fit in with the beauty standards. When asked how she made the distinction between the two she answered:

I think I do it by reflecting on the feeling of shame. Do I have shame and is that the reason I’m doing it? Do I not feel good enough and is that the reason I’m doing this? From that perspective I try to see what my motivation is in participating in certain things. - Maeve⁴⁷

This is a highly interesting remark, mainly because several participants reported they had chosen to wear less and less makeup over the course of the current pandemic. This was reflected in the sales figures of Kruidvat as well, they sold ten percent less cosmetics than before the pandemic (Volkskrant 2021). Some of our participants remarked that, even now that they go out more often they find it less difficult to go out without being fully groomed. It could be that the lack of ‘judging eyes’ and comments from others - which Foucault would call the disciplinary gaze (Pylypa 1998) - freed women from the pressure to look or act a certain way. Furthermore, we might even go as far as to say that power, as described by Foucault, shifted its focus during the pandemic. The disciplinary gaze could not become visible through gym classes, the office and cafés anymore, and had to find its expression in other ways, for example mainly through social media.

⁴⁴ Conversation Cloë (Z) 7 March 2021

⁴⁵ Semi-structured Interview Linda (Z) 17 February 2021

⁴⁶ Semi-structured Interview Maeve (Z) 13 april 2021

⁴⁷ Semi-structured Interview Maeve (Z) 13 April 2021

Aging seems to be another factor that decreases the need to look like certain norms. Liz⁴⁸ for example, said that appearance, such as having big breasts, was something she linked to femininity when she was younger. Nowadays she no longer attaches much value to those kinds of bodily aspects. She thinks this is partly because she has grown less insecure and is more satisfied with her appearance in general. The latter was something that we heard often from our older participants. They said they felt more comfortable about themselves and their self-expression with age, whereas they were more compelled to conform to ‘dominant forms of femininity’ and cultural norms when they were younger. This resounds with what professor of psychology Liesbeth Woertman (2007) stated, i.e. that the importance attached to appearance decreases with age. Correspondingly, Liz⁴⁹ elaborated on this, saying she now linked femininity more to a certain type of personality. She certainly was not the only one making these claims. In the following paragraph we will demonstrate the importance of the interaction between appearance and certain characteristics for the personal experience of femininity.

§ 5.3 Interplay of appearance and state of mind

In all of our conversations the words fierceness, powerful and self-confidence were recurring. Megan, for example linked both the aspects of feeling good about your appearance and being self-confident, to femininity:

When I feel comfortable in my own skin, when I am full of self-confidence and think to myself ‘I look good’, that’s when I think ‘I feel really feminine.’ - Megan⁵⁰

In addition, the majority of women linked femininity to taking care of their body, where they referred to ‘dressing up’, ‘grooming’, ‘self-care’, ‘making effort’ or ‘getting ready’. This reveals to what extent feeling comfortable in their own skin is associated with femininity. Their stories show that taking care of their appearance is a way for them to feel better or stronger. There seems to be a sort of interplay between feeling good and confident, and taking care of one’s appearance. Both factors influence each other and can either strengthen or devalue one’s feeling of femininity. Similarly, sitting on the couch in joggings, being hungover and just waking up were marked as moments where one would feel less feminine. We can say here that it is especially when people are seeing themselves through the eyes of others that they are more prone to making themselves more ‘presentable’. This is similar to what Merleau-Ponty (1962) described in his book ‘Phenomenology of perception’. We experience the world around us through our bodies, whereby

⁴⁸ Semi-structured Interview Liz (I) 17 February 2021

⁴⁹ Semi-structured Interview Liz (I) 17 February 2021

⁵⁰ Semi-structured Interview Megan (I) 3 March 2021

the body is an integral part of what and how we perceive. Our findings then support this theory by concluding that through taking care of the body, one feels better about oneself.

Furthermore, we noticed that when asked what femininity meant for them, many participants mainly started talking about things that were related to physical appearances, or practices that are commonly linked to femininity, which we will explore more in the following chapter. However, when we pursued the matter further, or asked point blank if they could describe someone who embodied femininity to them, the answer almost always had to do with certain characteristics, such as warmth, fierceness etc. Rihanna⁵¹ for instance, was named because of her strength and confidence. Secondly, they would refer to the way that a specific person looked or dressed. When I confronted Cloë with the fact that she predominantly mentioned matters related to appearance until she was asked to describe the ultimate feminine person, she reflected on it and said:

I think I have mentioned many things that have to do with appearance because those are more tangible, and one's energy, presence or something is more difficult to explain. - Cloë⁵²

After filling in the digital diary and reflecting on it during another conversation with Iva, Tara⁵³ came to the same kind of conclusion. She said she thoroughly discussed the meaning of femininity with a friend who participated in our research as well. She then had come to the conclusion that in the end femininity ultimately meant strength and independence. Finally, Jade⁵⁴ added that she noticed that feeling feminine and feeling beautiful to her were almost one and the same thing. She made a reference to the chicken and the egg riddle, which came first? She wondered if she felt more beautiful because she felt feminine or if she felt feminine because she felt beautiful. Women have increasingly become more objectified and their beauty influences a lot of their life aspects such as job opportunities, chances of finding a romantic partner and so on (DeMello 2014; Kuipers 2017). Therefore we suppose there is not really a sharp division between the two concepts in our present day society anymore.

§ 5.4 Strengthening femininity

Through the digital diaries it became apparent that reading about women, or femininity, could strengthen one's feeling of femininity as well. Other given examples of practices that reinforced the feeling of femininity were dancing and masturbating. Surrounding oneself with other women also has a strengthening effect on the feeling of femininity, something we ourselves experienced when attending the Women's

⁵¹ Rihanna is a Barbadian singer, actress, and businesswoman

⁵² Semi-structured Interview Cloë (Z) 26 February 2021

⁵³ Unstructured Interview Tara (I) 2 April 2021

⁵⁴ Unstructured Interview Jade (I) 10 March 2021

March at Nelson Mandela Park, March 7th. We listened to the touching stories of the speakers, encouraging them by clapping and cheering whenever they got emotional. For two and a half hours we found ourselves in this bubble with like-minded people. This shared experience made us appreciate our ‘womanhood’ even more.

What our experience at the Women’s March proves is that femininity appears to be something that is reinforced through interaction with others. Mara⁵⁵ explained that when in public, she felt that her femininity was being reinforced, because of the way people interacted with her. Moreover, for those who are attracted to men, the attention of men could increase the feeling of femininity. Being acknowledged as feminine by others was considered to be important in general, but even more so when they were acknowledged by people whom they found sexually or romantically attractive. Lola⁵⁶ said she sometimes was afraid she was too graceless which led her to feel she wasn’t feminine. It would be her boyfriend who would then affirm her femininity by giving her compliments, through which she would eventually feel more feminine. She went on saying that she was almost ashamed to admit this, commenting she didn’t think it was very feminist of her. What is confirmed here then, is the importance of appearance for femininity (DeMello 2014; Woertman 2007). When being complimented on looks, or getting attention when going out, female beauty (body) is admired and because female beauty is almost interchangeable with femininity itself, femininity is reaffirmed.

This might explain why some cis-hetero women stated that they explicitly express their femininity when surrounded by men whom they are interested in. For Hannah⁵⁷ this was something she at first only experienced with men, but now that she thinks she might be bi-sexual, she also feels feminine when flirting with women. Feeling feminine or expressing femininity in (romantic) interaction with someone you are attracted to, then, might be something not only cis-hetero women experience. This is also reflected in the conversations Iva had with Yara⁵⁸, who is attracted to women. However, she declared that the degree in which she expresses her femininity in order to be found attractive depends on the person she is with. Whenever she considers the other woman to be more feminine, she (un)consciously acts more masculine and expresses her femininity less, and vice versa. Three of Iva’s other participants added to this subject that the degree of femininity they felt also had to do with how feminine they thought the women they were

⁵⁵ Semi-structured Interview Mara (I) 5 March 2021

⁵⁶ Semi-structured Interview Lola (Z) 3 March 2021

⁵⁷ Semi-structured Interview Hannah (I) 23 February 2021

⁵⁸ Semi-structured Interview and Yara (I) 25 February & 16 March 2021

surrounded with were. Jade⁵⁹ for example, told Iva that whenever she was with a very ‘girlish’ group of women she felt less graceful herself and therefore less feminine.

Instead of emphasizing their femininity around men, some other participants confessed that they perform their femininity less when surrounded by men. The fear of getting negative attention from men, such as street harassment, is also a reason to distance themselves from their femininity, for example by wearing covering clothing. Lynn⁶⁰ and Lieke⁶¹ gave examples of hiding their cleavage – something which is commonly considered a physical way of showing femininity – because of the (negative) attention that comes with it. Even if their breasts are a part of their body and thus of themselves, they often choose to cover themselves up. There were more examples like these. Tara⁶² felt it was easier to conceal her body, it felt safer and other people couldn’t judge her body in that way. Dina, Linda and Mara said similar things, remarking that physically expressing ‘femininity’ (this word was often said while making quote signs) could lead to feeling endangered or unsafe, for example while walking alone in the dark, or when going out. As Butler stated, femininity is something one performs (Butler 1990). Our data shows that the degree of performance depends on the environment, the situation, but most importantly, on what kind of people are around.

§ 5.5 Dealing with cultural norms and expectations

There are a lot of expectations that come with femininity. In the minds of the participants there is always this idea of what a woman is supposed to be, feel and act like. However, that is not always how they perceive themselves to be as a woman. For example, Belle⁶³ explained that sometimes while playing sports she thought she was being ‘more masculine, more aggressive’ and then added that she reminded herself that those characteristics don’t belong exclusively to masculinity. Apparently, it is something she does or feels as well and thus it is a part of her being feminine. Cloë came with the following statement:

I think society's image of femininity has a lot of influence on how you or I see femininity. Because it is something you grow up with, it gets so deeply embedded in your unconsciousness that you don't even realize that you think of something as masculine or feminine. - Cloë⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Unstructured Interview Jade (I) 10 March 2021

⁶⁰ Semi-structured Interview Lynn (I) 5 March 2021

⁶¹ Several conversations Lieke (Z) February - March 2021

⁶² Semi-structured Interview Tara (I) 18 February 2021

⁶³ Semi-structured Interview Belle (Z) 1 April 2021

⁶⁴ Semi-structured Interview Cloë (Z) 26 February 2021

This resonated with several other participants who constantly stressed the fact that they were socialized or conditioned, and influenced on their ideas and paradigms of femininity. Rosa⁶⁵ talked about how she feels women aren't allowed to do the same things as men. That there are certain bodily things like farting and burping, that women aren't allowed to do, and if they do it, they're being shamed for it. Cloë mentioned something similar in a conversation, saying that is why she would never fart in public. Burping then was less shameful for her, but she still found it a masculine thing to do. This resounds with the ideas of Martin and Finn (2010), who claim that you learn from a young age what kind of behaviour is consistent with your gender identity, and if your behaviour deviates from what you have learned is normal, that behaviour feels weird. Rosa later said she also felt that she as a woman had to be sexy, but not too sexy⁶⁶. Not being 'too' much of something was an idea that I heard more during interviews. Some gave examples of how they have to handle things gracefully, so as not to come off too bitchy, or too strong. But most importantly participants indicated that women are expected to look good and be well-groomed. This has affected the way the participants see themselves, some feel less feminine without make-up on. Others didn't feel feminine at all with a hangover. However, Fay, for example, said the following:

I think that my own feeling, my own definition of femininity is so important to me that I contrast it very much with other social images of femininity, that helps me a lot. By contrasting it with another version, I feel a lot freer, also in my femininity. I don't have to push myself away, or conform to standards. - Fay⁶⁷

Then again, the cultural norms regarding femininity differ from (sub)culture to (sub)culture as was stated among others, by Fay and Christina⁶⁸. The latter described how she would act differently around her family in her country of birth, because the cultural norms for women were different there. Fay on the other hand, explained that she was surprised to see how many people in Amsterdam dressed so free of gender norms, she came from a village and wasn't used to seeing that at all. This resonates with what was already stated in Chapter 4, that because Amsterdam is considered such a mix of different cultures, participants feel like they can express themselves more freely there, i.e. Amsterdam is considered to be more tolerant for deviating femininities.

⁶⁵ Follow up conversation Rosa (Z) 7 April 2021

⁶⁶ See Duits en Van Zoonen (2006) as discussed in Chapter 4

⁶⁷ Semi-structured Interview Fay (Z) 12 March 2021

⁶⁸ Semi-structured Interview Christina (Z) 2 April 2021

Butler (1990) stated: “Gender arises through repeated acts and stylizations of the body”. Performing body practices is therefore considered as a way of strengthening the feeling of femininity. To grasp in what ways our participants construct femininity, we decided to take a closer look at the different body practices they perform. Since they are frequently performed habits, body practices are often experienced as natural (DeMello 2014; Mauss 1979). During our interviews, and while analyzing the completed digital diaries later, numerous different body practices came up. The body practices most often mentioned were: make-up, hair removal, skincare, and clothing. Other body practices that came up as being important during the conversations we had were haircare, parfum, cosmetic surgery, and sports: ‘fitness, dancing and stretching’. These body practices are often something that women enjoy doing and are experienced as moments for themselves or ‘self-care’. Moreover, the women pointed out that it was not always predominantly the effect of the body practice, but also the performing of the practice itself that made them feel feminine. This resonates with Bordo’s (1993) argument that feminine ideals are largely conducted through bodily discourse. Therefore it makes sense that many of the participants feel more feminine when they perform the body practices that society considers to be particularly feminine. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this research to cover all the body practices that were mentioned, but in this chapter we will analyze three of them, namely make-up, hair removal and cosmetic surgery. We will demonstrate how these practices can be a means of conformity, and we will show how they reinforce a sense of agency as well.

§ 6.1 A hairless woman

Iva Hoefnagel

I think I shave to express my femininity, since there is this stereotypical image that only men have hairy legs. Therefore, to show that you identify as a woman, you shave your leg hair - Megan⁶⁹

Several women, among them Megan, associate having body hair with men. This is not surprising, as in Western society hair is constructed as something masculine, and serves as a symbol for masculine strength (Ferrante 1988). As a consequence, body hair for these participants is something that does not belong on their female body, and therefore needs to be removed in order to appear feminine. Being hairy or being hairless then serve as gender markers that distinguish masculinity from femininity (Ferrante 1988; Hope 1982; Wolf 2013). In addition, several participants regard hair on the female body as dirty or unsanitary.

⁶⁹ Semi-structured interview Megan (I) 3 March 2021

While discussing this, most of them wrinkled their noses and curled their upper lips, facial expressions I interpret as signs of disgust. Among them is Yana⁷⁰, who one day discussed with me pictures of women with armpit hair, something she sees as ‘very dirty and not neat’. She hesitantly added that sometimes she even considers it to be less feminine. This relates to Douglas’ (1966) line of thought, whereby ‘clean’ hairless and ‘dirty’ hairy female bodies need to be understood as culturally constructed phenomena. Hair is perceived as a ‘matter out of place’ on the female body, and as such is seen as dirty, since it does not fit in with the classification of women. For this reason, we found that for fifteen participants a motive for body hair removal is to improve their personal hygiene or to feel ‘fresher’ and ‘cleaner’. Among others, Lieke⁷¹ and Lynn⁷² indicated that they shave their armpit hair to prevent sweating. In general, body hair removal is for many participants a way to look well-groomed, and thereby increase their sense of femininity, as we discovered while analyzing a close intertwinement between appearance and femininity earlier.

Various women, on the other hand, think of hair on the female body as being natural and not something that is disgusting or must be removed. Nevertheless, almost every woman Zoé and I talked with admitted to removing at least one type of body hair. This is mostly due to the fact that these women experience enormous pressure to conform to the cultural norm of the female body as being hairless. Being hairy, a taboo, and being hairless, the beauty ideal, do not contain the same symbolic value and thereby are valued differently in society (Smelik 2015; Toerien and Wilkinson 2004). In line with this, our participants fear that they will suffer from negative social consequences if they let their body hair grow. In this regard, Cloë⁷³ wrote a prompt in her digital diary about her being on the train that morning. At the time, she was extremely aware of her leg hair. She wrote that she felt less feminine, since she was surrounded by many different people and thought the hair on her legs was visible under the pants she wore. Accordingly, many women remarked that during the summer they remove their body hair more often than in the winter, as they wear more revealing clothes, which, for instance, are exposing their legs. Nearly all participants shared similar stories of them feeling uncomfortable with the idea of appearing hairy in public. The stares and remarks, as described by Cloë, need to be understood as disciplinary mechanisms which control the female body (Pylypa 1998, 21-22). This is in line with Foucault’s theory as most of our participants voluntarily control themselves by self-imposing conformity to the hairlessness norm through the self-disciplinary practices of body hair removal (Pylypa 1998). Several women, like Tara⁷⁴, mentioned not to mind or remove their body hair when being alone, but to do so if they are going to meet others. This supports our argument that women

⁷⁰ Semi-structured interview Yana (I) 12 March 2021

⁷¹ Digital diary Lieke (Z) 8 April 2021

⁷² Semi-structured interview Lynn (I) 3 March 2021

⁷³ Digital diary Cloë (Z) 12 April 2021

⁷⁴ Semi-structured interview Tara (I) 18 February 2021

strive to be acknowledged as feminine by others, for which they feel they must conform to the feminine hairless ideal. Moreover, we argue that this is especially important when interacting with people they are attracted to. In this regard, meeting with one's date or (new) partner while being unshaven was explicitly outlined by seven women as a situation in which they would feel really uncomfortable. This is illustrated by a section from the digital diary of Tess:

Today I was going to meet a guy, therefore I shaved. Just in case. No idea why, but I would have hated it if I had had hairy legs. Interesting that I am so sensitive to that.. - Tess⁷⁵

While discussing this subject, I sensed that her concern was that her date would react negatively to her body hair. However, many women, such as Tess, also shared that when they were in a committed relationship or a close friendship, this discomfort disappeared, probably because they knew that this person would not mind. Moreover, I felt that having shaved made Tess feel more comfortable and confident when meeting a (new) guy. Similarly, Fay⁷⁶ admitted to shaving before having sex as it makes her feel more at ease, but also more attractive and beautiful. As for the latter she tells Zoé that she 'catches' herself having these thoughts, which suggests that it is not something she is proud of. Having such conflicting feelings is something more women shared with us, especially Zoé's participants. Even though many women do not agree with the beauty ideal, they often feel more feminine when being hairless themselves. This internal struggle I recognize in myself too, and have often reflected on in my autoethnographic diary:

This afternoon I was in doubt again whether or not to go to my appointment with unshaven legs. When looking at my hairy legs, I get an uneasy feeling. It looks rather dirty and unkempt doesn't it? Maybe it would be better if I remove it? As soon as I catch myself thinking this, the uneasy feeling is accompanied by shame and guilt. Why does it still bother me? Should I let my body hair grow out of convenience? Or to resist the norm I strongly oppose to, but to what cost? How do I deal with others who might give me strange looks? As this thought does not leave my mind, I decide to quickly shave before going out. Nevertheless, I am still left with a bad feeling. Am I failing as a feminist when I fear the negative reactions of others or when I feel more comfortable when having shaved?⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Digital diary Tess (I) 20 February 2021

⁷⁶ Semi-structured interview Fay (Z) 12 March 2021

⁷⁷ Section of autoethnographic diary (I) 3 April 2021

This demonstrates that the hairless norm is not only reinforced in interaction with others, but is also deeply internalized in women's bodies. Even though women oppose this norm, they still struggle to view their body hair as something neutral, and they feel uncomfortable or dirty when looking at it. Nevertheless, two participants admitted to not removing certain areas of their body hair as a statement against the norm. Indy⁷⁸ for instance, does not remove all of her pubic hair to oppose the ideal that a woman should be free of pubic hair. This is in line with what DeMello (2014, 18-19) states, i.e. that people use their bodies as a site of resistance. Six other women admit that, although not doing so themselves, they admire the women daring enough to let their body hair grow. Iris⁷⁹ for instance, considers it feminist when women don't shave their armpits. Feminism for her, especially in terms of body practices, means doing what you want..

Overall, for 21 of the 30 young women in Amsterdam we spoke to, removing their body hair contributes in some way to their sense of femininity. As hair on the female body is culturally constructed as 'matter out of place', women feel the pressure from (self-)disciplinary mechanisms to remove their body hair in order to be acknowledged as feminine by others. For many women, this practice is accompanied by conflicting feelings, namely shame for conforming to the norm and fear of negative reactions. This demonstrates that social interaction enforces the hairlessness norm (Toerien and Wilkinson 2003).

§ 6.2 Feeling feminine with make-up on

Iva Hoefnagel

This morning I did my make-up on the train! I feel more beautiful after putting on make-up. I notice that with bigger lashes (...) I feel remarkably more feminine! - Tess⁸⁰

Tess is not the only one who feels feminine with make-up on, namely 21 of the 30 women perform their femininity through wearing make-up. This relates to the close intertwinement of femininity and appearance (Woertman 2007). They put on make-up to look beautiful or well-groomed, which then contributes to them feeling feminine. In Chapter 5 we illustrated that feeling feminine for most of our participants is especially important when being surrounded by others. Wearing make-up, then, is something Megan⁸¹ and Yasmine⁸², among others, do when they go out and meet other people, but not so much when they are alone. This can be explained by our analysis that many women desire to be acknowledged as feminine by others, especially those they are attracted to. As looking well-groomed, or specifically wearing make-up, was often mentioned

⁷⁸ Semi-structured interview Indy (I) 2 March 2021

⁷⁹ Semi-structured interview Iris (Z) 18 February 2021

⁸⁰ Digital diary Tess (I) 16 February 2021

⁸¹ Semi-structured interview Megan (I) 3 March 2021

⁸² Semi-structured interview Yasmine (I) 24 February 2021

as an aspect of dominant femininity, women probably (unconsciously) link wearing make-up to their femininity. Several participants discussed with Zoé their struggles to decide whether they wear make-up by their own free will, because they really like to look like that, or because they will be regarded as being pretty when conforming to feminine beauty ideals, and as such are conditioned to wear make-up.

To perform femininity, however, is for many women not the main reason to apply make-up. On a Sunday afternoon I joined an online make-up session of two friends, Leah and Sam. This is something they do regularly, applying make-up together while catching up on their lives. This is illustrated in my field notes from that day:

Sam enthusiastically tells me that this is their standard thing, because applying make-up together is a lot more fun. This is something I immediately can relate to myself, since they talk about each other's weekends and make light jokes back and forth. While all three of us are applying our make-up, Leah and Sam discuss which products they are going to use. It soon becomes clear that they devise their looks themselves depending on how they feel that day. Today both their looks consist of bright colors. Leah then tells me: 'Applying make-up is like a routine. Something you don't have to think too much about, but you still create something, which then makes you feel better. Sometimes it helps even if you don't feel like it.' Sam adds that it often helps them to get productive and 'in the flow'. Finally, they jokingly illustrate that for them doing make-up sometimes even feels like therapy. It is a way to forget their worries or, when applying together, open up their hearts to a friend, which I am lucky to now experience myself. When our make-up session ends, I am left with a happy and satisfied feeling.⁸³

This demonstrates that women do not only wear make-up to look a certain way or to beautify their appearance. First of all, many participants, like Leah and Sam, emphasized that they really enjoy putting on their make-up. It is not only about the result that is created, but applying make-up is in itself considered a fun activity. Others describe applying make-up as a moment they take for themselves during their busy lives. Make-up, then, serves as 'me-time' or 'self-care', a way to take care of their own well-being. Megan⁸⁴ for instance, perceives it as a way for her to relax and Leah and Sam refer to it as therapy. This relates to Maschio's (2015, 345) claim that consumer practices, such as make-up routines, are often emotionally satisfying to perform. Moreover, make-up practices are for some women closely intertwined with their

⁸³ Participant observation during online make-up session with Leah (I) and Sam (Z) 14 February 2021

⁸⁴ Semi-structured interview Megan (I) 3 March 2021

mood. Leah and Sam, for instance, felt that Sunday in a positive mood, which reflects in their make-up choices of bright colours. This demonstrates that make-up practices are embodied experiences through which women connect their physical appearance, their outer beauty, with the internal self, their inner beauty (McCabe et al 2020, 9-12). Wearing make-up, therefore, appears to also improve the women's mood. Several participants mentioned feeling more confident with make-up on. Among them is Christina⁸⁵, who confessed to Zoé that make-up does not only make her feel more beautiful, but also more fierce and unstoppable. Likewise, Hannah⁸⁶ told me that on the days that she is more insecure, she often wears more make-up, which makes her feel better. This relates to our analysis given in Chapter 5, i.e. that for many women taking care of their appearance is a way to feel better about themselves. This also relates to the before-after transformation studied by McCabe et al (2020, 9-12), i.e. that women through make-up transform from feeling disheveled to feeling confident or beautiful.

Seven women, however, mentioned that they do not wear (much) make-up in their daily lives, mostly because they find themselves more beautiful without, they consider it to be too much effort or they think that they have a healthier skin without. Mara⁸⁷ and Dina⁸⁸ also expressed to feel more natural, more like themselves, without any make-up on. Not wearing make-up for them can therefore be understood as a way of performing femininity, since it corresponds to their internal self, and therefore to their femininity. Likewise, not wearing make-up for others is a way to feel comfortable in their own skin, and therefore might contribute to their own sense of femininity, as the interplay between femininity and women's state of mind as highlighted in Chapter 5 shows. Furthermore, various participants indicated they used to wear more make-up during their puberty. According to Woertman (2007), the value people place on their appearance diminishes with age, and also our participants feel less compelled to conform to the beauty norm of a made-up face now than when they were teenagers.

Generally speaking, wearing make-up is for multiple young women in Amsterdam a way to feel like themselves, beautiful and confident. Hereby, we analyze an underlying connection with femininity, since many women connect their sense of femininity to their (positive) mood and feeling of confidence. In addition, wearing makeup is for women a way of performing femininity, as it fits the cultural expectations of women's appearance which put a lot of pressure on women. This supports Butler's (1990) claim that a

⁸⁵ Semi-structured interview Christina (Z) 2 April 2021

⁸⁶ Unstructured interview Hannah (I) 7 April 2021

⁸⁷ Semi-structured Interview Mara (Z) 5 March 2021

⁸⁸ Semi-structured Interview Dina (Z) 18 February 2021

female gender-identity is not something our participants have, but something they perform through repeated acts and the stylization of the body, such make-up practices.

§ 6.3 Cosmetic surgery

Zoé Fransen

I find it very difficult. I do want women to feel comfortable in their bodies. But I think cosmetic surgery... it is rooted in very dark and racist matters, it upholds white beauty standards and skinny beauty standards, and it is a men dominated field that profits from it. So I struggle. (...) There have been moments where I'm like 'Oh my gosh I have cellulite, I should just look at something. But then... I would never do it. I have to remember 'okay 90% of the women have cellulite, I'm not the problem, it is the fact that society is not accepting normal bodies that is the problem'. - Maeve⁸⁹

We have encountered the topic of cosmetic surgery quite often when we were researching body practices in combination with femininity and feminine beauty for our theoretical framework. However, none of our participants had actually undergone such a procedure. Like Maeve, many women shared being insecure about certain body parts, but the majority of women emphasized that they were not willing to use cosmetic procedures in order to alter their body. Maeve further argued that:

By accepting not having a normal body, I'm reinforcing that [beauty ideal]. If I have children for example... I would find it really hard to teach children to love their bodies and celebrate their bodies, if I altered mine so drastically to celebrate my own.- Maeve⁹⁰

This sentiment was palpable in most of our conversations; loving your body as it is, is considered to be important. Lieke said: "Cosmetic surgery feels like a bandage on the wound of insecurity"⁹¹. At the same time there is sympathy for the notion that it could make one more confident. The overall sentiment was therefore, that it should be one's own choice whether or not to undergo such procedures. Nonetheless, it is important to note that youth and fertility are crucial aspects for feminine beauty (Demello 2014; Woertman 2007). As our research group is still very young, and at the stage in life when women are generally considered to be the most beautiful, this can explain why they have not been involved with such practices yet. Yana, Indy and Hannah accordingly said they could imagine that they would reconsider their opinion when they grow older. This matches with what Karen, who works at a clinic for cosmetic procedures, told us about the clientele at her workplace. Although she says there are a lot of twenty-year-olds who come in,

⁸⁹ Semi-structured interview Maeve (Z) 13 April 2021

⁹⁰ Semi-structured interview Maeve (Z) 13 April 2021

⁹¹ Unstructured interview Lieke (Z) 8 April 2021

the largest group of women is between thirty and forty years old. She further explains that the twenty year olds who actually undergo such procedures are often influenced by images on social media, which is in line with what Woertman (2019) discovered, i.e. that owing to social media more people experience a discrepancy between the way they look and the way they desire to look.

Four women we talked with did mention that they had considered cosmetic or plastic surgery, and what they all wanted was to alter their breasts. Tess, Yasmine and Christina shared that they considered breast augmentations somewhere in the past to appear more feminine, while having big breasts is something they link to femininity mainly because images of women with big breasts are widely distributed and praised through (social) media. Recently the documentary 'Moordtieten' (Murder tits) about Dionne Slagter came out. She felt the same way and said she eventually chose to 'buy' her femininity with breast implants (Valkering 2021). However this feminine norm works two ways, another participant admitted that she has considered a breast reduction, because her breasts are bigger than those of the average woman.

This shows us how much beauty ideals and the sense of femininity affect the way in which one looks at one's own body, which corresponds with what Solvi et al. (2010) found, i.e. there is a basic drive for femininity that contributes to the decision to undergo surgery. Karen said this practice of cosmetic surgery eventually will lead to one universal type of face and body, people trying to look like 'the ideal', which makes everybody look alike.

In this final section we will summarize our arguments and address the important points of our research. Since the label ‘feminist’ needs to be understood as an ambiguous and fluid rather than fixed identity, we decided not to draw a clear boundary between our research groups and only mention the separate groups when there were significant differences between them. First of all, we noticed that for all participants it was difficult to grasp what their personal sense of femininity entails. Femininity, namely, is a web of symbolic meanings that is complicated to describe, and for several participants it is inextricably linked to their sense of self (Schippers 2007). Moreover, femininity is something the women do not often contemplate on. This links to Butler’s (1990) claim that a person’s gender identity is constituted through the stylized repetition of acts which tends to go unnoticed as they are naturalized. Femininity, thus, is a fluid part of the identity that women perform, instead of are (Butler 1990). In this performance the body has shown to play a vital role, which relates to Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) take on the ‘lived’ body through which we experience the world around us. Body practices, the daily rituals through which women attend to their body, therefore need to be understood as a medium of culture (Bordo 1993, 156). For most participants, performing diverse body practices is a way of strengthening their feeling of femininity. In this respect, we analyzed an interplay between taking care of one’s appearance, such as grooming, and a positive state of mind, as self-confidence. Both factors influence each other and can either strengthen or devalue one’s feeling of femininity. In this respect, the degree of performance of femininity is influenced by the situation and the environment women find themselves in.

Furthermore, in line with Machio’s claim (2015, 345), body practices appear to be emotionally satisfying to perform. They function as moments that our participants take for themselves during their busy lives. Applying make-up or shaving, then, are used as ‘self-care’, a way to take care of one’s own well-being. Through body practices women transform from feeling dishevelled to feeling confident or beautiful, which relates to the before-after transformation studied by McCabe et al (2020, 9-12). These practises contribute to women feeling feminine as there is a strong interplay between femininity and state of mind. Feeling comfortable in one’s skin appears to be the foundation for the construction of femininity. Body practices, such as applying make-up, need to be understood as embodied experiences through which women connect their physical appearance, their outer beauty, with the internal self, their inner beauty (McCabe et al 2020, 9-12).

Besides having a positive influence on the mood of women, the performing of certain body practices is also a way of performing femininity in the sense that it helps conforming to the feminine beauty ideals. Multiple dominant femininities, the most celebrated, common or current forms of femininity in their particular social settings, are coexisting among the young women in Amsterdam. These dominant femininities are shaped by different factors, mostly by (social) media and by a person's surroundings. On the one hand, some women hold on to ideals on how women are expected to behave, such as to be caring. On the other hand, all participants experience pressure from ideals concerning women's appearance, such as having an hourglass figure, big breasts and butt, being hairless and looking well-groomed in general. This ties in with Bordo (1993), who argues that due to technological developments feminine ideals are nowadays largely conducted through bodily discourse. Likewise, we argue that normalizing body practices, such as make-up, needs to be understood as 'practices of femininity'. Even though none of our participants had undergone a cosmetic procedure, several mentioned having considered breast augmentations somewhere in the past to appear more feminine, while having big breasts is something they link to femininity mainly because images of women with big breasts are widely distributed and praised through (social) media. This is in line with what Woertman (2019) discovered, i.e. that owing to social media more people experience a discrepancy between the way they look and the way they desire to look. Body practices, for many participants, are a way to look well-groomed or beautiful according to the ideals, and thereby increase their sense of femininity. This corresponds with Woertman's statement (2007) that femininity is strongly intertwined with women's appearance.

Following Goffman (1956), we argue that many women, by mobilizing their activity, try to present themselves in a way that will hopefully be acknowledged as feminine by others. In doing so, they tend to present themselves according to what is culturally accepted as 'normal', especially with regard to their appearance (Goffman 1956). For instance, hair is culturally constructed as a 'matter out of place' on the female body, and as such is seen as dirty, which is why many women feel it needs to be removed in order to appear feminine. This resonates with Douglas' (1966) theory that the human body serves as the most natural symbol for classification. From an early age on, people learn to use gender symbols, the cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity, as means of classification (Butler 2014; Douglas 1996; Martin and Finn 2010). On this subject, there was one difference between the two groups, namely, some of Iva's participants not only used masculinity and femininity to differentiate between people as men and women, but also to make a distinction between women by attributing to them the labels of 'masculine' or 'feminine'. Even though many participants perceive gender as a spectrum, we found that gender as a binary system is deeply internalized and still (unconsciously) influences the participants' making sense of the world around them. In this respect, our participants referred to, among others, breasts, buttocks and a graceful way of

moving as feminine bodily features. Hereby, it is important to note that participants often were hesitant to describe these gender symbols, since they were afraid to reinforce gender stereotypes and thereby exclude others who identified as female, but did not match their description of femininity.

In order to be acknowledged as feminine our participants thus feel they must conform their body to the feminine beauty ideals. This is in line with Foucault's theory, since most of our participants voluntarily control themselves by self-imposing conformity to cultural norms through self-disciplinary body practices (Pylypa 1998). Moreover, we argue that being acknowledged as feminine is especially important when interacting with people they are attracted to. In this light, several women mentioned not removing their body hair or applying make-up when being alone, but to do so if they are going to meet others. Most participants fear that they will suffer from negative social consequences, such as stares and remarks, if they do not conform to the norm. These stares and remarks need to be understood as disciplinary mechanisms which control the female body (Pylypa 1998, 21-22). Moreover, some women told us that, when their performance deviates from what is culturally accepted as femininity, they themselves also feel less feminine, because from a young age they learn to internalize gender-appropriate behaviour (Crespi 2004; Martin and Finn 2010). However, because Amsterdam has such a mix of different cultures, our participants admitted that they felt that they could express themselves more freely there. Amsterdam was therefore considered to be more tolerant for deviating femininities. Next to diversity in one's surroundings, diversity in (social) media contributes to women breaking free of the pressure they feel because of the current prevalent beauty ideals. In line with what Woertman (2008) found, we also analyzed that the importance attached to the beauty ideals decreases with age. We can therefore conclude that the older our participants become, the less pressure they feel to conform to the ideals, and they perform body practices, such as make-up and shaving, less often than when they were teenagers. In addition, we discovered that some women also view the non-performing of body practices as a way to oppose the beauty ideals, for example by not shaving or not applying make-up. Our analysis, therefore, follows Foucault's (Strathern 1996) and DeMello's (2014) argument that the body is subject as well as object of power.

Interestingly, we also found that even though many women do not agree with the beauty ideals, such as the ideal of the hairless women, they often feel more feminine when they do conform and remove their body hair. This demonstrates how feminine ideals are deeply internalized in women's bodies. We argue therefore that there is an apparent discrepancy between what our participants consider to be socially acceptable and the standard to which they adhere to themselves. Moreover, several of Zoé's participants wondered whether they performed certain body practices out of free choice or out of the need to fit in with the feminine beauty standards. This shows that they are actually aware of the internalization of beauty ideals. Next to this, we

noticed that especially the feminists who said they were quite activist, were preoccupied with the implications of their body practices. They expressed having hesitations about performing certain body practices out of fear of excluding other women. This shows that an interest in the topic of feminism influences the way one experiences her own, as well as other persons' femininity.

To answer Christina's question 'What really makes me a woman?', we conclude that what femininity embodies, differs per individual, and femininity is something one performs instead of is. As we demonstrated in this thesis, the body is an important instrument for strengthening women's sense of femininity. Body practices therefore should not simply be considered as beauty routines, instead they serve as important aspects of the construction of femininity. In doing so, body practices have different meanings for different women, depending on the specific cultural and historical context in which they are performed.

Limitations and recommendations

We will conclude this thesis by discussing several limitations we have encountered, and finally propose some recommendations for further research.

When we began our research we aimed to select a group as diverse as possible regarding ethnicity, religion, class and skin-colour, while, following the intersectionalist approach, femininity is constructed in conjunction with other important axes of social significance besides gender (Lutz 2015; Mohanty 1988). The covid-restrictions have proved to be a barrier for connecting with and recruiting participants in the field. We have therefore recruited our participants through our own networks, the so-called snowball method and from a women's emancipation centre in Amsterdam. Ultimately, we managed to engage with 30 different women of seven different ethnicities, from which approximately two thirds are native Dutch. In addition, all of them were cis women and all but three were heterosexual, which makes our research quite heteronormative. Apart from this, the fact that 90% of our participants were highly educated may also have resulted in a distorted picture. Since all aspects of identity are of significance for the performance of femininity it would be interesting to see how a more diverse group, including noncis women, and inclusion in terms of diversity of sexual preference, with a different level of education, would construct their femininity and what would be important matters for them in further research.

As we have conducted fieldwork during a time in which the corona infection rates were high and the measures quite strict, we have been forced to reduce physical contact with our participants to a minimum. This means we have been compelled to conduct a big part of our research online. Whenever possible, with participants who were up for it, we have had physical interviews and we did participant

observation in real life as well as online. However, this was not as often as we would have liked, and it constitutes a serious limitation to our research since participant observation is the most important method for an ethnographer. Under normal circumstances participant observation allows for the distance between researcher and the participant to be reduced. It is a way to easily build rapport, and which could lead to the discovery of themes and phenomena the researcher was not aware of and eventually lead to a deeper understanding of the lived-experience of the participant. As sometimes there is a disconnect between what people say they do and what they actually do, we would have preferred to be able to closely observe their actions ourselves. In addition, people often do not think about things they regularly do which might mean that certain body practices have not been mentioned, but are actually being performed. We have tried to tackle this issue by implementing the digital diaries. Through these, we have found that certain body practices that had not been discussed during the interviews were mentioned and reflected on in the diary. We also received positive feedback from the participants saying the diaries were a good way for them to keep track of the practices they normally did not reflect on. Lastly, the digital environment through which we have conducted 85% of our fieldwork has caused some problems every now and then. A connection that faltered when a participant was making some interesting comments was one thing, but the fact that everything was online also made the environment less safe⁹² than it would have been if we had been able to carry out the interviews face to face. We have tried to overcome this by using privacy-friendly platforms wherever possible.

Finally, we would like to make some recommendations for further research. First of all we think that further research on the topic of (non)labelling as feminist would be relevant, since we demonstrated that the label 'feminist' is a highly ambiguous, personal and fluid concept. A new study exploring people's motives for identifying or not identifying as feminist would be an interesting project. In doing so, it would be relevant to analyze how this label might affect different aspects of people's lives, since several of Zoé's participants consider being a feminist as an important aspect of their identity and their daily activities. Moreover, it became apparent that body practices are an important aspect of the construction of femininity. Due to time constraints, our research into body practices has mostly focused on body hair removal, make-up and cosmetic surgery. We believe in the relevance of a study on the relation between femininity and the body practices that were beyond the scope of this study, such as clothing and hair care. In addition, we believe that anthropological understanding of concepts such as femininity and masculinity by drawing on the personal experiences of people within a specific cultural

⁹² Zoom, google meets and skype, all videotools our participants wanted to use, are known as being not very privacy-friendly. We found privacy-friendly alternatives, but our participants predominantly preferred more mainstream modes of communication, to which we complied. We believe that as anthropologists we should adapt to preferences of our participants and not the other way around.

and historical context enhances knowledge within gender studies. Lastly, our research hints at the positive effect of diversity in women's (social) media and surroundings for breaking free from beauty ideals. Further research into this would hopefully provide more insight into the question whether diversity indeed contributes to women feeling less pressure to look a certain way, and if so, how and why.

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