

Pleasurable Practices and Scripted Sex

A qualitative study exploring how cis-gender women with higher sexual desire than their male partners navigate sexual scripts

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Abstract

This thesis explores how cis-gender women in a sexual relationship with a man, who experience higher levels of sexual desire than their male partners, navigate sexual scripts amid the discourse surrounding the orgasm- and pleasure gap. Women who have sex with men (WSM) experience the lowest likelihood of orgasm and overall sexual pleasure compared to individuals of other genders and sexual orientations (Frederick et al. 2018). This disparity is rooted in sexual scripts favouring male pleasure and penile-vaginal intercourse (Laan and Van Lunsen 2023). This thesis explores how sexual scripts are embedded within gendered and heteronormative frameworks, how WSM experience sexual pleasure in their sexual encounters, how these scripts affect and influence WSM with higher sexual desire than their partner, and how these women reconcile their sexual desire with societal expectations. By delving into the lived experiences of cisgender women aged 25 to 35 in sexual relationships with a male partner for over two years, holding Dutch nationality and residing in the Netherlands, my aim is to offer insights into the intricate dynamics of desire, pleasure, and negotiation of sexual scripts within the framework of societal norms. Through semi-structured interviews, offering an exploration of sexual pleasure and its intersection with gendered and heteronormative sexual scripts, my thesis aims to shed light on the often overlooked phenomenon of imbalanced sexual experiences and desires within woman-man intimate relationship. Drawing from *Sexual Script Theory* and *Pleasure Theory*, the results of this research indicate that WSM experiencing higher sexual desire than their male partners, navigate sexual scripts in varied ways, with these scripts being both reproduced and challenged at different moments in their sexual experiences. Through the insights of this research, I hope to enrich our understanding of the complexities inherent in intimate relationships, ultimately contributing to a world where sex is more pleasurable for all individuals.

Keywords: Sexual Script Theory, Pleasure Theory, WSM, Heteronormativity, Sexual Desire

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As someone with a fascination for the complexities of sex and sexual desire, I have often found myself engaged in discussions with friends about their sexual experiences. In these discussions, a recurring theme often emerges – the perceived disparity between the sexual desires of women and men. In particular, when discussing this with female friends who are in a relationship with a man, the perception that women ‘naturally’ have a lower sexual desire and that men are always ‘in the mood’, almost seems to be common sense. This aligns with the prevailing popular belief that men inherently possess a higher sex drive, while women are often portrayed as less sexually inclined (Mintz 2018; Nagoski 2018). However, amidst these commonly held conversations, I have also encountered women in a sexual relationship with a man who were experiencing just the opposite. In these cases, it was precisely the woman who felt like having sex more than the man, where the man had to disappoint her more often with a ‘no’. This grabbed my interest and got me thinking. With a background in cultural anthropology, I increasingly began to wonder what role people’s culture and social environment had concerning their sex and sexual desire. Did women really “naturally” desire sex less and men “naturally” desire sex more? Or were cultural and social factors also involved?

The dynamics of sexual desire within male-female relationships have long been scrutinized, with studies consistently revealing differences between the experiences of women and men. Evolving from an evolutionary standpoint, psychologists traditionally interpreted differences in male and female sexual desires through the lens of ancestral reproductive strategies (Freud 1953). According to this perspective, men and women have evolved distinct sexual desires with men possessing a natural, biological impulse, usually called *libido*, that drives their sexual desires more intensely compared to women (Freud 1953). In addition, evolutionary psychologists consider pleasure less important for women than for men, a perspective reinforced by a prevailing idea that women have greater challenges in achieving orgasm (Buss 1986 [2021]; Pinker 2002; Wilson and Daly 1996 [1998]). However, contemporary research proves the assumptions underlying the evolutionary psychologists’ perspective wrong (Fine, Joel, and Rippon 2019; Laan and Van Lunsen 2023; Nagoski 2018; Thomé 2023; Pham 2016; Willis et al. 2018). According to Ellen Laan and others (Laan and Everaerd 1995; Laan et. al 2007; Laan and Both 2008; Laan et. al 2021; Laan and Van Lunsen 2023), physiologically, there are no differences between men and women in their capacity for sexual pleasure. Moreover, the concept of a so-called ‘natural sex drive,’ often attributed to what Freud (1953) called *libido*, does not exist (Laan and Van Lunsen 2023).

Nevertheless, women¹ who have sex with men (WSM)² often do face significant challenges in achieving sexual satisfaction. In particular, it is this group that experiences the lowest likelihood of orgasm compared to individuals of other genders and sexual orientations (Mintz 2018). The largest, most recent study on orgasm differences shows that during female-male sex, about 95% of men usually-always experience an orgasm, while the number for women lies at 65% (Frederick et al. 2018). The term *orgasm gap* encapsulates these observed difference in orgasm rates, showing that men tend to achieve orgasms more consistently during sex than women. However, the discrepancy goes beyond just orgasms; it points to a larger pattern where women often express lower overall enjoyment in sexual encounters compared to men (Herbenick et al. 2010; Ogletree and Ginsburg 2000). This leads to not only an *orgasm gap*, but more importantly a huge *pleasure gap* (Laan and Van Lunsen 2023, 92). Due to the fact that, in this case cisgender women, can reach orgasm without feeling pleasure (Laan and Van Lunsen 2023, 90), my thesis underscores the necessity of focusing on sexual pleasure, as a central concept of exploration.

The origins of this disparity can be traced back to societal constructs prescribing rigid *sexual scripts* (Laan and Van Lunsen 2023, 21; Spiering 2023). The fundamental principle of the *Sexual Script Theory* (SST) as proposed by Gagnon and Simon in 1973, asserts that all sexual behaviour is socially scripted, implying that they are constructed and influenced by societal norms and expectations (Wiederman 2015). Research highlights that the dominant sexual script in our global northern society is highly gendered (Wiederman 2005). Men are typically expected to take on dominant roles while women are encouraged to adopt submissive roles (Masters et al. 2013). In addition, researchers propose that sexual scripts are embedded within frameworks that prioritize and uphold a heteronormative and androcentric pattern, wherein male pleasure takes precedence over female pleasure (Dienberg et al. 2022; Harvey, Jones, and Copulsky 2023; Laan and Van Lunsen 2023, 39; Wiederman 2005). For example, the sexual script holds on to a *coital imperative*, a norm that if women and men are going to have sex, it must include penile-vaginal intercourse (PVI). However, although PVI is the only act that almost everyone agrees counts as ‘real sex’ (Laan and Van Lunsen 2023), it often fails to provide adequate pleasure for women (Thomé 2023; Willis et al. 2018), contributing to the largest *pleasure gap* within this group (Frederick et al. 2018; Laan and Van Lunsen 2023;

¹ Here and in every subsequent time I use the term ‘women’, I am referring to cis-gender women, this is because it is in these women that the orgasm/pleasure gap is the greatest.

² I deliberately use this term instead of what is often used, heterosexual, because not every woman who has sex with a man is immediately and only heterosexually oriented.

Laverty 2018; Vanweesenbeeck 2020). Challenging the prevalent notion that men possess a ‘naturally higher sex drive,’ my thesis draws from the *Pleasure Theory* (Abramson and Pinkerton 2002), suggesting that pleasure motivates sexual behaviour. Building on this theory, the notion that men have a ‘naturally higher sex drive’ than women, has nothing to do with physiological differences, but only with the fact that they experience sex as more pleasurable. As feminist sexologists Laan and Van Lunsen elucidate, sexual arousal precedes desire, with past experiences shaping individuals’ anticipation of pleasure during sexual encounters (Laan and Van Lunsen 2023). In other words, desire for sex, or *libido*, does not come out of the blue but is the result of incipient arousal and not the other way around (Laan and Van Lunsen 2023, 38-54). Hence, desire for sex is only obtained through pleasurable sex. Thus, the predominant sexual script, which prioritizes male pleasure and overlooks female pleasure, warrants re-evaluation. By challenging the entrenched belief in men’s inherently higher sex desire, my thesis paves the way for a more equitable understanding of sexual desire within female-male relationships. By understanding *libido* not as a biologically determined factor, but rather as a consequence of the current sexual script, it is plausible that once we redefine what sex means - with elements necessary for female sexual pleasure - women will naturally exhibit a greater desire for sexual intimacy. Accordingly, since sexual desire is not a natural thing, but a response to a stimulus, from which one does or does not make the choice to act on it, based on previous (positive) experiences, I am curious if women with higher sexual desire than their male partner experience their sex differently, possibly using a different sexual script than the preconceived, heteronormative one. With this background, the research question for this thesis emerges:

How do cis-gender women in a sexual relationship with a man, who experience higher levels of sexual desire than their male partners, navigate sexual scripts amid the discourse surrounding the orgasm- and pleasure gap?

This question addresses the complexity of sexual desire within the context of societal norms and aims to explore the dynamics between partners when traditional expectations are challenged and women’s sexual pleasure takes centrality.

Sub-research questions:

- a) How do WSM describe and interpret the prevailing sexual scripts?
- b) How do WSM describe and experience sexual pleasure?
- c) How do sexual scripts influence the experiences of WSM?

In order to answer these questions, I used a qualitative research approach. In *Chapter 2*, I present the theoretical and conceptual framework of my thesis. Here I discuss various theories and concepts that this thesis builds upon. For example, *Sexual Script Theory* (Gagnon and Simon), *Compulsory Heterosexuality* (Adrienne Rich), *Gender Intelligibility* (Judith Butler), *the Pleasure Theory* (Abramson and Pinkerton) and *the pleasure- and orgasm gap*. In *Chapter 3* the methodology of this thesis is discussed. I present the research design and reflect on my own position while discussing the complexities of doing critical feminist research. Furthermore, *Chapter 4, 5, and 6*, delve into the main findings of the interviews by discussing the main themes that came up from participants and analysing them based on the theoretical and conceptual framework. Lastly, *Chapter 7* presents the conclusion. Here I summarize the key findings and give an answer to the research question.

Relevance

My thesis aims to shed light on the often-overlooked phenomenon of imbalanced sexual experiences and desires within cis- female-male intimate relationships. This thesis offers insights into negotiating sexual scripts and societal expectations, contributing to discussions on agency, power dynamics, and gender roles. From a societal perspective, understanding how WSM navigate the dynamics of heightened sexual desire has implications for promoting more equitable relationships. It has the potential to reshape societal perceptions of female sexuality, moving away from the conventional narrative that predominantly emphasizes male pleasure. As such, it advances sexual equality conversations and challenges gendered stereotypes. Theoretically, it fills a literature gap by addressing women with higher sex drives than their male partners, providing a mostly unexplored perspective. From this perspective, my thesis contributes to theories and concepts regarding sexual scripts, sexual pleasure, and the orgasm- / pleasure gap.

Chapter 2: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This theoretical and conceptual framework first delves into an exploration of the *Sexual Script Theory*, focusing particularly on gendered and heteronormative scripts, alongside the pervasive influence of the coital imperative. These frameworks provide a lens through which I analyse how societal expectations shape sexual behaviours and desires. The second concept I explore is that of female sexual pleasure and desire. Here I delve into contrasting perspectives offered by evolutionary theories and the *Pleasure Theory*. Central to my analysis is the recognition of the orgasm- and pleasure gap, a phenomenon that underscores disparities in sexual satisfaction mostly apparent in female-male sex. In this thesis, I primarily rely on *Sexual Script Theory* and *Pleasure Theory*, to explore how cis-gender women with higher sexual desire than their male partners, navigate their sexual scripts.

2.1 Sexual Script Theory (SST)

Sexual Script Theory (SST), introduced by sociologists John H. Gagnon and William Simon (1973), revolutionized the understanding of sexual behaviour. The central notion of SST is that sexuality is shaped and learned by societally and culturally available messages that define what constitutes ‘real’ sex, how to identify sexual situations, and how to navigate sexual encounters (Wiederman 2005; Wiederman 2015). Sexual scripts contain specific sexual messages and behavioural patterns people follow or act upon in a sexual context (Gagnon and Simon 1986). These messages are not rigidly defined or formulated, instead, they include beliefs, attitudes and norms passed on to individuals by society (Gagnon and Simon 1973). Individuals draw upon these sexual scripts when judging their sexual experiences and participating in sexual activities (Wiederman 2015). According to feminist scholar Emily Nagoski (2018), these scripts offer a framework for the beliefs that shape our interpretation of the sexual world. Despite potential disagreements about sexual scripts, individuals often conform to them and interpret their experiences accordingly (Nagoski 2018, 300). Various social institutions such as family, mass media, government, legal systems, education, workplaces, upbringing, and religion contribute to the creation and conveying of these scripts (Wiederman 2015; Pham 2016). However, because sexual scripts often operate unnoticed, this contributes to the earlier perception of sexual behaviour as ‘natural’ or biologically determined (Gagnon and Simon 1973, 1986; Rutagumirwa and Bailey 2018). Previously, sex and sexual behaviour were conceptualized as originating from individuals’ inherent motivations. Sexual behaviour was

viewed as predominantly driven by instincts or biological urges inherent to human biology (Wiederman 2015, 10). Gagnon and Simon (1973) were one of the first to reject these dominant biological and psychoanalytical approaches and ideas about sex and sexuality. They proposed a social constructionist approach towards understanding sexual behaviour, representing a radical break with predominant views on sex and sexuality, which is applauded and often worked with by many feminist researchers (Laan and Van Lunsen 2023, Laan et al. 2021; Nagoski 2018; Mintz 2018; Pham 2016).

In my thesis, I closely align with SST as it offers a valuable framework to analyse the sexual experiences of cisgender women with heightened desire in female-male relationships. By understanding sexual behaviour as learned within societal and cultural contexts, I aim to explore how prevailing sexual scripts shape the expectations and experiences of these women. By adopting SST with its social constructionist perspective, I depart from traditional views that attribute sexual behaviour solely to innate drives or biological urges, allowing for a nuanced examination of the complexity of social factors influencing sexual dynamics.

2.1.1 Gendered and Heteronormative Sexual Scripts

According to many feminist scientists, sexual scripts are generally learned through heteronormative frameworks (Laan and Van Lunsen 2023; Laan et al. 2021; Nagoski 2018; Mintz 2018). Heteronormativity refers to the societal process that upholds heterosexuality as the normative standard in society, both through institutional frameworks and everyday practices. In a seminal study, Kim et al. (2007) introduced the notion of the 'Heterosexual Script', denoting sexual norms that reinforce traditional gender roles and perpetuate *compulsory heterosexuality*. Conceptualized by Adrienne Rich (1980), *compulsory heterosexuality* outlines that heterosexual relationships are not inherently natural, but are socially constructed and imposed as the only acceptable relational and sexual behaviour between male and female individuals. *Compulsory heterosexuality* thus functions as an explanation of how heterosexuality functions as the norm -heteronormative- in society (Rich 1980). Rich's theory elucidates how societal norms marginalize non-heterosexual orientations, particularly affecting women, who are steered toward prioritizing relationships with men. This prevalence of heteronormativity also shapes the construction of sexual scripts, as feminist scholars have observed (Laan and Van Lunsen 2023; Pham 2016; Nagoski 2018; Mintz 2018). These scripts adhere to heteronormative standards, as outlined by Kim et al. (2007), who identify the

'heterosexual script' as the blueprint for socially sanctioned romantic and sexual interactions. The heterosexual script, echoing Rich's *compulsory heterosexuality*, grants men entitlement to prioritize and pursue their sexual desires while placing an expectation on women to fulfil the sexual desires of men to access their privileges. Consequently, women are compelled to suppress their own desires and cater to male needs, perpetuating a cycle of gendered expectations within heterosexual interactions. This dynamic, as Butler (1990, 22) suggests, constructs "culturally intelligible"³ heterosexual relationships (Kim et al. 2007). As part of the heteronormative script, sexual scripts are also generally understood as gendered (Dienberg et al. 2022; Klein et al. 2019; Wiederman 2005). As one of the most prominent feminist scholars in analysing the construction of gender, Judith Butler emphasizes the compulsory and naturalized nature of heterosexuality in regulating gender as a binary relation, perpetuating masculine-feminine dichotomies through heterosexual desire (Butler 1990, 30). Thus, heteronormativity assumes binary gender identities and associated expected behaviours. Men are expected to show dominant behaviour, strong need for orgasms, high sexual desire, and assertiveness, while women are typically expected to show passive and submissive behaviour, do not need orgasms, have low sexual desire, and need to please their male partners (Dienberg et al. 2022; Sakaluk et al. 2014; Wiederman 2005). As such, emphasis is placed on the concept of gender difference. Butler (1990, 23) explains this concept as asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine', where characteristics typically associated with femininity are attributed to females, and those associated with masculinity are attributed to males. However, according to Butler's analysis, gendered behaviours, appearances, and experiences are not predetermined or natural but rather constructed and *performed* through political frameworks (Butler 1990, 1993). Through repetitive acts, gender is constructed and reinforced, giving the impression of being 'natural' or 'real' (Butler 1990). Butler's analysis is relevant to my thesis because it emphasizes that gender roles are not fixed or natural, aligning with my participants' deviation from conventional gender norms. Since my participants disrupt the gender stereotype that men typically have higher sexual desire, Butler's analysis is further substantiated in my research, providing a theoretical foundation for understanding and contextualizing their experiences.

³ Butler argues that what makes us intelligible as persons is "becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility" (1990, 22). This entails aligning one's expression of gender with prevailing social expectations, which often involve congruence between biological sex, culturally prescribed gender roles, and accepted sexual behaviours and desires according to dominant cultural norms.

Additionally, these different gendered ‘rules’ of sexual behaviour may result in the *sexual double standard (SDS)*. SDS highlights that there is differential judgment of men and women for the same sexual behaviours. Women are often subject to harsher judgment and encounter greater societal disapproval, while male desire is affirmed and female desire regulated within societal norms (Endendijk, Van Baar, and Deković 2020; Klein et al. 2019). The study by Endendijk, Van Baar, and Deković (2020) revealed that sexually active men are praised as ‘studs’ while sexually active women are frequently stigmatized as ‘sluts’. This heightened risk of reputational harm underscores the notion that engaging in sexuality poses a considerable risk for young women (Jackson and Cram 2003), reflecting the enduring societal challenges and biases surrounding female sexual expression. In the context of my thesis, emphasizing these hegemonic gender roles is important. Given that my participants challenge the assigned sexual behaviours linked to their gender roles, chances are they navigate sexual scripts differently, and/or use a different sexual script than the gendered, heteronormative one. In addition, given my interest in how participants reconcile their desires with societal expectations that traditionally emphasize male pleasure, it is important to consider the *sexual double standard*, as defying gender norms may subject participants to heightened societal negativity.

2.1.1.1 The Coital Imperative

At the core of these gendered and heteronormative scripts lies the definition of sex. A feminist perspective conceptualizes sex as intimate physical contact aimed at pleasure, encompassing diverse forms of erotic stimulation, as emphasized by pioneering researchers like Shere Hite (1976) and echoed by contemporary feminist scholars like Emily Nagoski (2018). However, this perspective contrasts with the dominant understanding of what constitutes sex (Bierly 2021). In mainstream discourse, sex is often equated with penile-vaginal intercourse (PVI), or coitus. In fact, PVI is the only act that almost everyone agrees counts as ‘real sex’ (Laan and Van Lunsen 2023). This prevailing *coital imperative* (which prioritizes PVI as the pinnacle of sexual activity), but also the mere definition of the word ‘sex’ as penetration, limits opportunities for WSM to experience sexual pleasure (Laan et al. 2021). While PVI reliably leads to orgasm and pleasure for men, the same cannot be said for women (Mintz 2018). Women predominantly achieve orgasm and pleasure through clitoral stimulation, via manual or oral sex (Laan et al. 2021; Mintz 2018). Yet, manual or oral sex are less commonly practiced in WSM sex (Bierly 2021), and neither are typically regarded as the ultimate goal of a sexual encounter.

Moreover, they are often relegated to the status of foreplay preceding PVI, perpetuating a hierarchical sexual script that prioritizes penetration over other forms of sexual gratification (Mintz 2018). As Mintz (2018) aptly states: “The word foreplay implies that this sexual pleasure is not in itself important, but rather an exercise men need to go through to get us [women] ready for intercourse.” (25). By categorizing all sexual activities other than PVI as ‘foreplay,’ the prevailing script suggests their inferiority to penetration. Consequently, the term foreplay not only perpetuates heteronormativity, by marginalizing the validity of queer sexual encounters, but also upholds patriarchal structures that privilege male pleasure. The mainstream definition of sex thus reflects a view that, according to feminist analyses, is rooted in patriarchal, androcentric, and heteronormative norms, perpetuated by predominant sexual scripts (Dienberg et al. 2022; Harvey, Jones, and Copulsky 2023; Laan and Van Lunsen 2023, 39; Thomé 2023; Wiederman 2005; Willis et al. 2018). For my thesis, it is important to explore how participants experience sexual activities beyond PVI. Examining engagement and experiences with different sexual activities aims to uncover nuanced insights into their sexual pleasure.

2.2 (Female) Sexual Pleasure and Desire: Evolutionary Perspectives versus the Pleasure Theory

Evolutionary psychologists approach the differences in sex drive between men and women through the lens of evolutionary biology and ancestral reproductive strategies.⁴ They often argue that due to differences in biological investment in reproduction, men and women have evolved distinct sexual desires. According to this perspective, men possess a biological impulse, usually called libido, that drives their sexual desires more intensely compared to women. Freud (1953) was the first who conceptualized this, arguing that sexual desire is of internal origin, as a drive which is awakened ‘spontaneously’ through deprivation. This ‘natural drive’ is then fully linked by Freud to ‘the male individual’ where he states: “...if we were able to give a more definite connotation to the concepts of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, it would even be possible to maintain that libido is invariably and necessarily of a masculine nature.” (Freud 1953, 219). In addition, evolutionary psychologists consider pleasure less important for women than for men,

⁴ Often based on the so-called *Parental Investment Theory* of evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers from 1972. This theory states that procreation is the ultimate goal of sex. However, the theory is questioned by feminist psychologists and sexologists because after all, why should the clitoris exist, which is the only organ that has no other function than to give women pleasure? (Laan and Van Lunsen 2023, 22)

a perspective reinforced by a prevailing idea that women have greater challenges in achieving orgasm (Buss 1986, 2021; Pinker 2016; Wilson and Daly 1996, 1998). Furthermore, the dominant belief coming from -without exception male- evolutionary biologists that female orgasm is related to reproduction is entirely motivated by their androcentric perspective on sexuality and reproduction, as claimed by Lloyd (2005). This particular belief stemming from evolutionary biologists that female orgasm increases the likelihood of fertilization during coitus has been proven false (Laan and Van Lunsen 2023, 22). Thereby, more and more research proves that the assumptions underlying evolutionary psychologists' perspectives are wrong⁵ (Fine, Joel, and Rippon 2019; Laan and Van Lunsen 2023; Nagosky 2018; Rubin et al. 2019; Thomé 2023; Pham 2016; Willis et al. 2018). While my thesis includes the evolutionary perspective to acknowledge its historical influence on discussions about sexual desire differences between men and women, it is equally important to critically evaluate its assumptions and limitations. Particularly, as my participants defy traditional frameworks by being women with higher sexual desire than their male partners, it is essential to recognize the need for alternative frameworks that challenge this traditional gendered approach. This sets the stage for the discussion of the *Pleasure Theory* which my thesis aligns with, emphasizing sexual pleasure as the central driving force behind human sexuality.

Abramson and Pinkerton's *Pleasure Theory*, introduced in 2002, challenges the conventional notion that sex primarily serves reproductive purposes, suggesting instead that sexual pleasure is the primary driving force behind human sexuality. According to Abramson and Pinkerton, sexual pleasure can be defined as "those positively valued feelings induced by sexual stimuli" (2002, 8). Contrary to evolutionary psychologists, their *Pleasure Theory* suggests that reproduction is merely a secondary outcome of the enjoyment derived from sexual activity. Whereas evolutionary psychologists assume women have a naturally weak desire for sex, *Pleasure Theory* suggests that equal enjoyment of WSM sex by both men and women would lead to an equal inclination for sexual activity (Abramson and Pinkerton 2002). Research by Rubin et al. (2019) supports the *Pleasure Theory*, indicating that WSM who prioritize their own sexual pleasure and expect more opportunities for sexual pleasure are more likely to desire sexual activity. Feminist sexologists Ellen Laan and Rik van Lunsen (2023) further challenge traditional views on sexual desire. They argue against the evolutionary psychologists' claims of inherent gender differences in sexual desire, contending that desire for sex is primarily driven

⁵ Proven scientifically, summarized in *incentive motivation models* (Laan and Van Lunsen 2023, 41)

by past pleasurable experiences. Laan and Van Lunsen emphasize the importance of accumulated pleasurable moments in cultivating sexual desire, suggesting that sexual desire is not biologically determined but rather a response to stimuli and anticipation of pleasure, aligning with the *Pleasure Theory*. By conducting exhaustive research on sexual desire, Laan and Van Lunsen were able to dispel the myth that men naturally exhibit higher sexual desire than women, no evidence was found from men's anatomy or biology indicating naturally higher desire (Laan and Van Lunsen 2023, 41). As such, their research undermines the androcentric bias inherent in the prevailing sexual script, which prioritizes male pleasure. According to Laan and Van Lunsen, when women appear to have lower sexual desire than men, it is because sex is less pleasurable for them due to the androcentric sexual script. This understanding is important for my thesis, as this makes it reasonable to assume that my participants, experience higher levels of sexual desire than their male partners, also experience higher levels of sexual pleasure, thereby not conforming to the androcentric sexual script but prioritizing their own pleasure.

2.2.1 Oppressed Pleasure and Desire

Throughout history, discussions of female sexuality have largely ignored or misunderstood the clitoris. Even though the centrality of the clitoris to female orgasms was well-known at the beginning of the 20th century, it was Freud again who perpetuated a myth that continues to pose challenges today (Mintz 2018). In Freud's own words, he stated that upon reaching puberty, "the clitoris should ... hand over its sensitivity, and ... its importance, to the vagina." (Freud 1953, 220). Freud's assertion that mature women should transition their sexual sensitivity from the clitoris to the vagina stigmatized women reliant on clitoral stimulation, labelling them as psychologically immature (Freud 1953, 221; Laan et al. 2021). In 1970, radical feminist activist Anne Koedt in her book 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm', challenged this orgasm myth. She argued that vaginal orgasm was prioritized only because it directly enhances male pleasure (Koedt 1970, 54-55). Contrary to Freud's beliefs, as indicated by the early findings of Shere Hite's report in 1970, pleasure derived from clitoral stimulation is way more prevalent among women than that resulting from penetration.

Societal norms and expectations further complicate women's experiences with sexual pleasure. According to Gagnon and Simon (1973), within the predominant sexual script, "females in our society are not encouraged to be sexual and, indeed, it is possible that they are

strongly discouraged from being sexual.” (59). Indeed, research shows that cis-women’s sexual pleasure is often subordinated to that of cis-men, reflecting the power imbalances inherent in traditional sexual scripts (Laan et al. 2021). It was already in 1929, that Virginia Woolf in ‘A Room of One’s Own’ argued that women’s lack of passion, self-denigration, and self-sacrifice exist in patriarchal societies to elevate men to a position of superiority, to reflect man at “twice its natural size”. (Woolf 1929, 30). When examining Woolf’s arguments through the framework of the sexual script, it becomes evident that traditional sexual practices, particularly PVI, prioritize male pleasure by providing the necessary stimulation for men to climax. This focus on male satisfaction often comes at the expense of women’s sexual fulfilment, reinforcing existing power dynamics and privileging male experiences over female ones (Stiriz 2008). Contemporary sex surveys further underscore Woolf’s observations, revealing that many young women are motivated by a desire to protect their (male) partners’ egos and uphold societal expectations of femininity (Mintz 2018, 13-14). Such ‘sexual flattery’ reinforces the perception of men’s power and privilege as legitimate, further reinforcing their elevated status and superiority in society (Stiriz 2008; Woolf 1929). Similar to Woolf, Audre Lorde in her work ‘Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power’ (1984), elucidates how society suppresses women’s eroticism to maintain male power structures. Lorde identifies the erotic as “a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling.” (53). According to Lorde, ‘the erotic’ holds a great deal of power and can spur individuals to pursue political change⁶. However, Lorde argues that society suppresses the erotic to make women feel shameful and inferior as it is “fashioned within the context of male models of power” (53). In other words, embracing the erotic can empower women, but, out of fear of the strength that women can derive from embracing their sexuality and utilizing this power to their advantage, this eroticism is suppressed (Lorde 1984). Both Woolf’s and Lorde’s analyses underscore women’s ongoing struggle against patriarchal norms. Their insights, combined with contemporary research findings, illuminate the challenges women face in reclaiming their sexual agency and prioritizing their pleasure in a society that often dismisses or suppresses their desires.

⁶ Lorde outlines two main ways this happens: First, through understanding individual identity and needs within a movement, enabling coherent political goals that embrace rather than suppress diversity. Second, through shared experiences of creation and sensation, whether through sexual intimacy, artistic expression or activism, eroticism cultivates personal bonds and mitigates the divisive impact of oppression (Lorde 1984).

2.3 The Orgasm Pleasure Gap

The *gendered, heteronormative sexual script* outlined above has significant implications for WSM's sexual pleasure. Research indicates a substantial disparity in orgasm rates between men and women. Particularly during PVI without clitoral stimulation only 30% of women usually-always experience orgasms, compared to approximately 90% of men (Frederick et al. 2018). As early as 1982, sexologist Gerda de Bruijn was the first to identify and name the gap between cis-men and cis-women when it comes to experiencing orgasms during WSM contact. It was only in 2005 that scholars introduced the term *orgasm gap* into scientific literature (Wade, Kremer, and Brown 2005). This term encapsulates the observed difference in orgasm rates, showing that men tend to achieve orgasms more consistently than women during female-male sex.

In my thesis, emphasis is on the *pleasure gap*, rather than the more commonly discussed concept of *the orgasm gap*. The reason for this is twofold. First, the emphasis on orgasms as the ultimate sexual pleasure reflects the influence of cis-heteronormative perspectives. In female-male sexual encounters, PVI often takes centre stage, relegating other sexual activities, like oral sex, to secondary roles. These activities are commonly labelled as foreplay or optional extras, framing them as mere precursors to 'real' sex. This sexual script pressures women to conform to a timeframe geared towards male pleasure, potentially leading women to fake orgasms to uphold their partner's ego. Hence, this overlooks women's experiences with sexual pleasure (Andrejek, Fetner, and Heath 2022). Second, it is recognized that individuals may achieve orgasm without experiencing corresponding pleasure (Laan and Van Lunsen 2023). This can either be during consensual activities, where the orgasm was experienced as less pleasurable than usual, but certainly also in non-consensual activities, where orgasm is reached through fear and/or strong genital stimulation (Laan and Van Lunsen 2023, 90). Obviously, these latter orgasm experiences are not perceived as pleasurable, making it clear that experiencing orgasm does not equate to the pleasure experienced by a person during sex.

Following the *Pleasure Theory*, when women consistently experience minimal pleasure during sexual activities, their desire for further engagement diminishes. This is exacerbated by the prevailing sexual script, which prioritizes male pleasure, leading WSM to expect little pleasure from sexual encounters. Consequently, this perpetuates the existing *pleasure gap*, contributing to a cycle of reduced motivation for sexual interaction among many women (Conley 2011; Conley et al. 2014). According to Abramson and Pinkerton (2002), the existing *pleasure gap* does not represent an inherent lack of sexual desire in women, as the traditional

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sexual script assumes, but rather highlights a “severe neglect of female erotic potential” (122). To reiterate, it is pleasure (not orgasm) that is intricately linked to desire, where pleasurable sexual experiences lead to an heightened desire (Abramson and Pinkerton 2002; Rubin et al. 2019; Laan and Van Lunsen 2023), making it even more relevant for my thesis.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Design

In exploring how cisgender women in relationships with men, experiencing higher sexual desire, navigate sexual scripts, I employed a qualitative approach. I conducted five interviews, each lasting about an hour. To obtain participants, I used convenience sampling by sharing a recruitment message through LinkedIn and various WhatsApp groups. In addition, I actively encouraged recipients to forward the message to individuals who met the criteria for participation, thus also using the snowball method.

As my research question deals with subjective experiences, interviews are most useful as they offer an in-depth exploration of participants' thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011). Therefore, I utilize the method of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Before the interview process started, I prepared a predefined set of questions. During the interviews, I would first ask participants' understanding of sex, sexual pleasure and what messages (scripts) they grew up with regarding sex, sexual pleasure, and related gender roles. Then the questions turned to what influence these messages from society have (had) on them, their sexual experiences and relationships. Subsequently, the focus shifted towards personal encounters with sexual experiences and desires, including any influence on their self-image. Unlike structured interviews, semi-structured interviews allow for follow-up questions to explore and clarify the interviewee's answers. Moreover, it ensured flexibility to capture any overlooked aspects that might emerge during the interviews. Subsequently, I transcribed the interviews, safeguarding anonymity through pseudonyms. Employing NVivo, I systematically coded the data to identify overarching themes and patterns. Themes such as societal influences on sex, challenging gender roles, and experiences of sexual pleasure emerged, aligning with my research sub-questions. All interviews were conducted in Dutch, meaning that all quotes in this thesis have been translated by me. Acknowledging the complexities of translation, particularly in conveying nuanced experiences, I approached this process with care, striving to ensure that participants' narratives were accurately portrayed and comprehended in alignment with their intended meaning, as emphasized by feminist researchers (Hesse-Biber 2014, 415-516).

In terms of obtaining informed consent, I decided to gain consent orally from my participants. I found this to be most conducive to creating a relaxed and conversational atmosphere in my research, aligning with my goal of establishing a sense of collaboration and trust with the participants. Before commencing the interview, I provided participants with a

short explanation of my research, assured them of anonymity by using pseudonyms⁷, and reiterated their right to not have to answer questions and withdraw from the conversation at any time. Subsequently, I sought permission to record the interview. At the start of each recording, participants give their consent to participate in this research.

While semi-structured interviews provided valuable data on how my participants navigate sexual scripts, it is important to acknowledge the method's inherent limitations. Given the intimate nature of discussions about sex, participants may have been hesitant to fully disclose their thoughts and experiences. Throughout the interviews, I noticed instances where participants hesitated to express themselves freely regarding certain aspects of their sex lives. Interestingly, this hesitance did not necessarily stem from shame or embarrassment, but rather from uncertainty regarding the appropriate level of detail to share, expressing concerns about divulging "too much information". Despite efforts to create a supportive environment, some information may have been withheld, posing a potential limitation of the interview technique. Furthermore, power dynamics between myself and participants could have influenced their comfort levels in sharing openly (O'Reilly 2012, 112). To mitigate this, I aimed to establish rapport, initiating the interviews with casual conversation to break the ice and build rapport before delving into the main topics of discussion. I also anticipated offering my participants the flexibility to select the interview location where they felt most comfortable. However, due to various circumstances, the majority of interviews ended up being conducted online. Although this sometimes brought up challenges regarding body language and some difficulties with audio, all participants indicated they felt most comfortable in their own homes. My approach was intended to foster a sense of collaboration in which I aimed for the interviews to be more of a conversation rather than a 'formal meeting', as advocated by Hesse-Biber (2014, 31). By framing the interaction as a conversation, I sought to create an environment where participants felt empowered to engage openly and authentically. This generally worked out well. Participants expressed to appreciate the conversational nature of the interviews, expressing themselves with greater ease and openness.

⁷ Hence, note that the names mentioned in the empirical chapters are pseudonyms, not the actual names of participants.

3.1.1 Population Sample

Informed by Judith Butler's interrogation of the category of 'women' in feminist discourse, I approach the selection of my research population with critical reflection. Butler challenges the notion of a universalized 'women' category, arguing that it can obscure the diverse experiences and identities of individuals across dimensions such as age, class, race, nationality, religion, and sexuality (Butler 1990). Butler's insights prompted me to reflect on the implications of using this category, recognizing that it may overlook individuals' diverse experiences and identities across dimensions. In line with Butler, who argues for a nuanced understanding that recognizes the complexities and intersections of identity, rather than simplifying them into a singular, normative construct, I thus attempt to meet these challenges in the following part by trying to be as specific as possible.

My participants are cisgender women aged 25 to 35, holding Dutch nationality and lifelong residency in the Netherlands. The selection of cisgender women stems from their statistically lower likelihood of orgasm and overall sexual pleasure compared to individuals of other genders and sexual orientations (Frederick et al. 2018). By focusing on women with higher sexual desire than their male partners, contradicting stereotypical gender norms (Wiederman 2005), I sought to understand their navigation of sexual scripts. The age range of 25 to 35 was chosen because it is characterized by a greater likelihood of having accumulated some sexual experience, allowing participants to articulate their preferences. Besides, it is in this group that the perceived orgasm gap is greatest (Frederick et al. 2018; 3Vraagt 2024). The criterion of relationship duration of two or more years stems from studies that show a decrease in sexual desire in women after two years (Mark and Lasslo 2018). Once the infatuation phase is over most couples fall back on the messages they were given, the androcentric sexual script, not conducive to female pleasure (Laan and Van Lunsen 2023). Because this is not the case with my participants, I am curious about how they navigate this script, going against 'the norm'. The Dutch nationality and place of residence in the Netherlands were chosen based on the principles of sexual script theory, positing that individuals' sexuality is influenced by societal and cultural messages. Therefore, I assume that individuals from this group have been exposed to similar sexual scripts throughout their lives. However, I approach this selection with an *intersectional* lens, acknowledging the insights of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). For my thesis, this means acknowledging that while all my participants share the common experience of growing up in the Netherlands and holding the Dutch nationality, variations may exist in, for example, cultural backgrounds and religion. This may affect the sexual scripts they have received and thus also

how they navigate their sexual scripts. While being conscious of potential differences in upbringing, traditions, and religious beliefs there is a common thread of shared societal norms and values, received in daily life, at school, and through media. The overarching circumstance of living and always having lived in the Netherlands remains a unifying factor, particularly in shaping individuals' sexual scripts. Nevertheless, by applying the intersectional lens throughout my thesis, I will address any differences that may arise and are of importance regarding how my participants navigate the sexual script.

3.2 Subjectivity, Reflexivity, and Positionality

In this thesis, I uphold fundamental ethical principles such as avoiding harm to participants, obtaining informed consent, safeguarding their privacy, and not deceiving them (Bryman 2012, 136). Moreover, as a feminist researcher, I prioritize the critical examination of my own subjectivity, self-reflexivity, and own positionality, acknowledging the complexities inherent in the researcher-participant relationship within the context of feminist research.

This thesis, rooted in a feminist perspective, asserts Donna Haraway's notion (1988) that knowledge is inherently situated. I aim to challenge the idea of research objectivity. Following Haraway (1988), I want to problematize the notion that research can be 'objective'. Haraway (1988) critiques the belief that 'objective' research is neutral, unbiased and free of power dynamics, highlighting how it often reflects the perspective of the white heterosexual male. As a result, objectivity inherently prioritizes a specific subjectivity while deeming all other perspectives invalid. Haraway, instead of adhering to conventional scientific objectivity, advocates for a 'feminist objectivity' grounded in *situated knowledges*. In her perspective, knowledge is always situated in a specific limited time and location and does not allow for 'whole truths'. In alignment with Haraway (1988), my research is not aimed at generating absolute knowledge 'as it comes from nowhere', but rather is positioned in a specific time and location. As I write this from the Netherlands, situated in the global North, my perspective reflects this particular context and cultural background. Therefore, it may not necessarily apply to other contexts or locations. Important in this is also that I recognize my own positionality in this process and am aware that every piece of knowledge I produce is mediated by my own situated position. I am a white, Dutch, middle-class, highly-educated, cisgender woman. These aspects of my identity influence how I perceive and interpret the data collected, as well as how I engage with the research process overall. Explicitly acknowledging my position, I chose to

write from the first-person 'I' perspective.

As the primary objective of my research, I aim to explicitly state that my goal is not to generalize the experiences of my participants. Instead, I seek to recognize and shed light on participants' navigations of sexual scripts and the intricate dynamics of desire and pleasure.

As an academic feminist scholar, adopting a self-reflexive approach is central. The complexities of qualitative research demand heightened awareness of my own subjectivity as a researcher. Pillow (2003, 176) captures this emphasis on researcher's subjectivity, highlighting the importance of understanding how aspects such as my identity, personal history, self-perception, and emotions influence both data collection and analysis. Pillow (2003, 178) defines reflexivity as an ongoing self-awareness during the research process, aimed at unveiling the construction of knowledge within research to produce more accurate analyses. Throughout the research, I engaged in self-reflection, acknowledging the potential impact of my own background, biases, emotions, and experiences. Maintaining a reflective notebook, I recorded insights into how my predispositions might colour the research process. For instance, I sometimes noticed that I projected assumptions onto participants, prompting me to exercise heightened awareness in subsequent interviews. Additionally, during the last (online) interview, I felt sick which affected my ability to fully engage with the participant. Reflecting on this, I realized I missed opportunities to delve deeper into crucial topics and important aspects were left unexplored. Recognizing these oversights, I proactively addressed the situation by arranging a follow-up call with the participant to cover the missed questions. Fortunately, the participant agreed to the additional conversation. All in all, I managed each interaction with a genuine curiosity and respect for the perspectives of others. It is worth noting, however, that it was somewhat easier to manage biases in this context because there were no major points of disagreement between myself and the participants.

Chapter 4: Empirical Chapter – Received Sexual Scripts

In this empirical chapter, I delve into an examination of the sexual scripts that are ingrained within the experiences of my participants. To better comprehend how women who have sex with men (WSM), possessing a higher sexual desire than their male partner, negotiate these scripts, it is important to dissect the scripts they have internalized over time, and how this might affect the way they engage in their sexual relationship with their partner. In doing so, it is important to gain an understanding of how sex is defined, both by my participants themselves as well as the definition that my participants ascribe to how society defines sex. The first part of this chapter explores the societal definition of sex in the way my participants received. Additionally, I look at how this intersects with and comes to influence my participants' perceptions of sex. After this, I discuss the various gender roles that my participants have received from society related to sex and pivot to an analysis of the specific sexual scripts embraced by my participants.

4.1 The Understanding of Sex

What constitutes sex according to my participants and how does their definition of sex differ from the messages they have received about sex from society? Throughout the interviews, on the question of how my participants thought society defines sex, it became apparent that all of them received messages from society regarding sex that predominantly revolved around penile-vaginal intercourse (PVI):

"[...] I think societally, if you were to ask for a definition, it would be, penetration. I think that's considered sex. So: man-woman; penetrative sex. I think that's the societal definition of sex." (Lieke, 25)

"I'd say penetration sex. Penis in vagina." (Laura, 29)

"Before I was sexually active, I also did have a very heteronormative perspective of sex, so just, yeah, penetration. But now I find that if you say sex is penetration, then that's kind of, you're leaving out a whole group." (Denise, 27)

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“What you get from society is really only penis-in-vagina sex. Yes. And I think there’s a lot more than that, but that is basically the only thing that is highlighted. In movies and series, but also in porn, for example. [...] In the beginning of my sexual life, I also thought that to be deflowered, for example, is penis in vagina, and so that’s what needs to happen”. (Anna, 28)

“I’d say penetration. Even though that’s very fucked up and I know it’s not the only way you can have sex, but that’s what you are taught from a young age.” (Maaike, 28)

Examining my participants’ perspectives on sex reveals a close alignment with the heteronormative sexual script. As outlined in the literature, heteronormativity characterizes the privileging and validation of heterosexuality as the societal norm (Rich 1980). Adrienne Rich (1980) coined the concept of *compulsory heterosexuality*, positing that heterosexuality is not just a preference but rather a societal expectation enforced and maintained through various social, cultural, and institutional mechanisms. Heterosexuality is regarded as the standard, leading to its normalization and naturalization. From a young age, individuals are socialized into heteronormative beliefs and expectations regarding sexuality. This socialization process often leads individuals to internalize and perpetuate heteronormative ideals, further reinforcing its dominance within society (Pham 2016). This also affects the sexual script (Kim et al. 2007). Within this heteronormative script, the *coital imperative*, which prioritizes PVI as the most important sexual activity, is deeply ingrained. Within their narratives and representations of sex, all participants echo a similar sentiment that the societal definition of sex revolves around penetration, specifically PVI. For example, Lieke’s assertion of “man-woman; penetrative sex” reflects the ingrained heteronormative understanding of sex. This heteronormative lens through which sex is shaped by society constructs a binary understanding of sexual activity centred around a man and a woman, particularly a penis and a vagina (Dienberg et al. 2022). Anna’s acknowledgement that she initially equated being “deflowered” with PVI, underscores the power of the heteronormative sexual script in shaping individual perceptions of sex (Harvey, Jones, and Copulsky 2023).

During the interviews, I asked whether this societal view of sex corresponds with participants’ own understanding of sex. Asking this question is important, as it sheds light on participants’ perspectives on sex and the possible impact on how they navigate their sexual

experiences. From their responses, it is evident that participants perceive sex as encompassing more than just penetrative intercourse. For example, Anna said:

“I consider something sex as anything that involves a certain desire and lust. So that can be masturbation, or oral sex, or penis in vagina can also be sex of course. But yes, all those variations I think. Maybe even fantasizing as well...” (Anna, 28)

Lieke explained :

“[...] for me, it has more of a feel to it, it's more about a setting, or a vibe, rather than a specific characteristic that it has to meet.” (Lieke, 25)

Analysing Anna and Lieke's perspectives through a feminist lens, particularly drawing from Hite (1976) and Nagoski (2018), reveals a broadening understanding of sex compared to the traditional, heteronormative one. Hite and Nagoski conceptualize sex as intimate physical contact for pleasure, encompassing various forms of physical, verbal, or visual erotic stimulations, intended to arouse and share pleasure. Participants' perspectives on sex align with this understanding of sex as encompassing a broad spectrum of intimate interactions. Anna's view of sex includes not only penetrative intercourse but also masturbation, oral sex, and even fantasizing. This expansive definition reflects a departure from traditional notions of sex centred solely around PVI, instead embracing a more inclusive and diverse understanding of what sex can be. Lieke's explanation reinforces this by emphasizing the subjective and contextual nature of sex. By describing sex as more about a “setting” or “vibe” rather than rigidly defined characteristics, Lieke challenges the notion of sex as a narrowly prescribed act. Both perspectives resonate with the definition that feminist sexologists Van Lunsen and Laan propose: “Sex is any act, any behaviour, intended to experience sexually arousing feelings and the pleasant physical sensations associated with them. So whether or not something is sex depends more on the intention, than what actually happens.” (Van Lunsen and Laan 2017, 27). Their feminist understanding of sex highlights the subjective nature of the concept. This conceptualization of sex as something subjective is further highlighted by Laura and Maaïke, stating:

“Actually, I think the definition of sex is different for everyone. So, whether something is considered sex is different for each person.” (Laura, 29)

“I think sex is really just how you see it yourself, and when you experience pleasure with your partner, then that is sex.” (Maaike, 28)

Reflecting its subjective nature, a feminist lens underscores the variability in sex, as contrasted with the patriarchal notion of sex, limited to penetration. As becomes clear, my participants' viewpoints resonate with the more feminist understanding of sex. This observation is important because despite upbringing within heteronormative contexts, participants redefine sex beyond mere penetration. This suggests an active re-evaluation of societal norms, potentially diminishing heteronormative influences regarding sex.

4.2 Gender Roles within the Sexual Script

It appears that participants have primarily learned about sex from a heteronormative perspective. Consequently, they have been exposed to a limited, binary, and heteronormative understanding of sexual practices. It is important to delve deeper into the underlying nature of these heteronormative scripts, to see what exactly their characteristics are. Participants pointed out:

“I am aware of a kind of norm that I should be more reserved, and that I expect a man to take more of the lead, to take more initiative. [...] For a woman I would then rather attribute the roles of expectant, submissive, yes benevolent or something, I don't agree with that, but I do feel that that is more how women are viewed from society.” (Laura, 29)

“Well, the classic image you get is that of ‘man penetrates, woman is receiver/participant’. That's the most negative image you get. I've never necessarily seen that as negative, but I think that's what you get. [...] And maybe some more of a kind of dominant role from the man, and the woman who then goes along with it, undergoes it.” (Maaike, 28)

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These responses exemplify the construction of a binary distinction regarding expected behaviours for men and women during sexual encounters. Moreover, they reflect the gendered nature of heteronormative scripts, aligning with Butler's (1990) argument that societal notions of heterosexuality uphold a binary understanding of gender, wherein masculinity and femininity are constructed as opposing qualities, attributed to men and women. Lieke further emphasizes this perspective, stating:

"[...] I think the message you receive is that men are the persons who chase sex and that women are the persons who indulge in sex." (Lieke, 25)

As such, Laura, Maaïke, and Lieke highlight the gender binary through a dynamic of dominance and submission that is intertwined with perceptions of masculinity and femininity. This reinforces traditional gender roles, echoed by participants, where masculinity is associated with traits such as dominant behaviour and assertiveness, while femininity is linked to notions of behavioural restraint, passivity, and submission (Wiederman 2005).

Furthermore, participants indicated that they received opposing gendered messages about sexual desire specifically. Freud (1953) conceptualized sexual desire as an internal drive, linking it to masculine nature and the evolutionary imperative for males to seek multiple partners. His perspective suggests that men possess a biological impulse, or *libido*, that drives their sexual desires more intensely compared to women. Denise and Laura talk about this in the following quotes:

"[...] men always feel like sex and women don't, women always have headaches blah blah blah." (Denise, 27)

"I also always had this view of 'men always want sex'." (Laura, 29)

Denise's and Laura's statements reflect societal assumptions rooted in Freud's perspective perpetuating the traditional sexual script (Gagnon and Simon 1984). Both quotes reflect Freud's conceptualization of sexual desire as inherently masculine, reinforcing the notion that men are biologically predisposed to constant sexual desire. This view is upheld by many contemporary researchers influenced by Freud, who regard sexual desire as internally driven and

spontaneously awakened through deprivation (Laan et al. 2021). Although recent studies challenge the notion of men consistently having high levels of sexual desire, a significant portion of surveys utilized in research still assume sexual desire to be an inherent and unchanging trait, often perceived as stronger in men than in women (Laan et al. 2021). Consequently, Freud's legacy continues to uphold gendered sexual norms and reinforce male sexual entitlement and dominance (Gagnon and Simon 1984; Laan et al. 2021).

4.3 Conclusion

It appears that my participants have received gendered and heteronormative sexual scripts throughout their lives. Participants emphasized their upbringing within a heteronormative framework, where sex was predominantly equated with PVI. However, their own definitions of sex extend beyond this *coital imperative*, emphasizing the subjective understanding of sex varying among individuals. The heteronormative sexual script received by participants reveals a binary division in gender roles, assigning contrasting and hierarchical sexual behaviours to men and women. Additionally, participants underscore the historical influence of the evolutionary perspective on differences in sexual desire for women and men. Despite essentially deviating from these stereotypical gender norms by having a higher sexual desire than their male partner, the influence of the sexual script remains palpable in participants' experiences. It is noteworthy that my participants did not mention any religious, racial, class, or ethnic factors influencing their sexual scripts. This underscores the importance of acknowledging the context-specific nature of the knowledge presented, as it reflects a *situated*, localized understanding of sexuality within the Dutch context (Haraway 1988). In the third empirical chapter, I delve further into how these scripts shape participants' experiences. First, since it has hopefully become clear that sexual desire has to do with sexual pleasure rather than being naturally predetermined (*Pleasure Theory*), I now dive into the understanding of sexual pleasure according to my participants and their experience with this.

Chapter 5: Empirical Chapter – Sexual Pleasure

Examining how women with greater sexual desire than their male partners navigate sexual scripts requires delving into their perceptions of sexual pleasure. Given my thesis follows the *Pleasure Theory*, participants probably experience heightened sexual desire due to experiencing more pleasure in their sexual encounters. Therefore, this empirical chapter not only explores their conceptualization of sexual pleasure but also delves into their lived experiences of it.

5.1 The Understanding of Sexual Pleasure

Throughout the interviews, when asked about participants' understanding of sexual pleasure, it became evident that participants perceive sexual pleasure as a multifaceted experience, encompassing both individual and shared enjoyment. For instance, Anna emphasizes the importance of mutual pleasure and engagement in sexual activity, sharing:

“That you can get pleasure out of the sex you have. That you don't do it for another person, nor just for yourself, but that you really do it with each other.” (Anna, 28)

Anna emphasizes that sexual pleasure is not solely about one's own gratification or fulfilling the desires of a partner, but rather about a shared experience of enjoyment and connection between partners. In addition, Laura states:

“That both partners have an enjoyable experience. Yes. That they have a pleasant experience and can look back on that as that it was pleasurable.” (Laura, 29)

For Laura, sexual pleasure is characterized by the shared experience of pleasure and the ability to think back on the experience positively. This suggests a focus on the relational aspect of pleasure, where satisfaction comes from the mutual pleasure of both partners. Both Anna and Laura emphasize the importance of shared pleasure. In doing so, they challenge and disrupt the traditional androcentric sexual script, which tends to prioritize male pleasure and overlook female pleasure. The hegemonic understanding of sex as PVI perpetuates the narrative that male pleasure is paramount, disregarding the fact that 95 percent of women require clitoral

stimulation to reach orgasm and experience maximum pleasure (Mintz 2018, 196-198). By narrowly defining sex as PVI, women's experiences of pleasure are often marginalized, reinforcing a narrative centred solely on men's pleasure. Denise's statement provides further depth to the analysis of sexual pleasure, emphasizing the importance of personal enjoyment and self-directed pleasure in sexual encounters. She states:

“Well that you're doing it and that you think: 'I like this'. And that you really like it for yourself, rather than like it for the other person.” (Denise, 27)

Here, Denise articulates that sexual pleasure should be derived from an intrinsic enjoyment of the shared experience, rather than as a means of pleasing someone else. Similarly, Maaïke states:

“That I'm having fun. That is really very important to me. Maybe also precisely because I am a woman, and sex is often less pleasurable for a woman, yes, I am aware of that, and fortunately so is my partner. So yes, sexual pleasure for me means that I experience it as super fun and enjoy it, and also that I can stand up for that.” (Maaïke, 28)

In the context of the traditional sexual script, which positions sexual activity primarily for the benefit of men, Denise and Maaïke's perspectives challenge this narrative. By asserting that one should enjoy sex for oneself rather than solely to satisfy the desires of a (male) partner, they subvert the idea that women's pleasure is secondary to men's pleasure. Broader reflections reveal that in many contemporary societies, women's sexual pleasure remains subordinate to that of men. Traditional and religious cultures often view women's sexual pleasure as dangerous or irrelevant compared to men's (Hall 2019), possibly due to its perceived lack of direct relevance to reproduction (Laan et al. 2021). Denise and Maaïke's assertions serve as a poignant reminder of the need to challenge these entrenched norms. Instead, they advocate for a more autonomous and self-affirming approach to sexual pleasure, prioritizing their own enjoyment and satisfaction.

5.2 The Experience of Sexual Pleasure

Examining my participants' experiences of sexual pleasure, it becomes evident that they each derive a considerable amount of pleasure from their sexual experiences. When asked whether they would describe their sex life as pleasurable, their unanimous response of a resounding 'yes' was particularly noteworthy to me. For instance, Laura and Anna stated:

"I just really enjoy my sex very much." (Laura, 29)

"Yes, I do find my sex really very pleasurable yes." (Anna, 28)

Indicating the general trend that emerged from the interviews, Laura and Anna's enthusiastic endorsements of their sexual pleasure diverge from dominant patterns documented in research on the pleasure gap and gendered experiences with sexual pleasure (Frederick et al. 2017; Pham 2016). While existing literature suggests that women derive less pleasure from sex with men compared to men themselves, simply because they tend to experience substantially worse sex than men do (Conley and Klein 2022; Frederick et al. 2018), my interviews revealed no disparity in participants' overall expression of pleasure within their sexual experiences. This observation holds particular interest in the context of my thesis using *Pleasure Theory* as a foundational framework. Abramson and Pinkerton's *Pleasure Theory* (2002) posits that sexual pleasure serves as the primary motivator for human sexual drives. They state that to cultivate sexual desire, one must be able to rely on the accumulation of pleasurable experiences. Building on this theory, participants' reports of having highly pleasurable sex indicates that their sexual desire is driven by the pursuit of enjoyment and satisfaction. Some participants explicitly mentioned this:

"I think if I didn't have pleasurable sex then I wouldn't feel like it either. Or when it's a roll of the dice every time of 'would I cum this time', then I would feel much less like it. That may sound silly but, when it's pleasurable, then maybe logically you feel like it more?" (Laura, 29)

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“I do think that if you’re having fun, you’re more likely to enjoy doing it again.”

(Denise, 27)

“I really enjoy my sex and I think that if that’s the case, you also want to do it more often.” (Lieke, 25)

Laan and Van Lunsen (2023), building on the *Pleasure Theory*, state: “Pleasant sexual experiences are the most important prerequisite for the subsequent times to be able to feel like sex again.” (33). In other words, sexual pleasure plays a crucial role in generating desire because it enriches one’s memory with pleasurable moments. Therefore, participants’ mention of experiencing pleasure and enjoying their sex, leading to wanting to engage in it more, simultaneously with their higher sexual desire than their male partners (against the norm), suggests indeed an interconnection between these two factors. The discrepancy between participants’ experiences and the broader literature stating that WSM generally experience less pleasure from sex, made me wonder how my participants structured their sex. Given their reported high levels of sexual pleasure, it is plausible to consider that they may not conform to the androcentric, heteronormative sexual script. Therefore, I was interested in exploring the factors contributing to their pleasure. From the interviews, it has become evident that none of my participants adhere strictly to the conventional *coital imperative* (Laan et al. 2021). Participants’ openness to a diversity of sexual activities suggests a departure from the *coital imperative* and challenges Freud’s *vaginal orgasm* myth, indicating that it is this precisely this diversity that enhances their pleasure. For example, Denise points out:

“I think there are really super many people who only have PVI sex, and then that the man has finished, and then it is done. Yeah, and then, then I think women do experience less pleasure. [...] Myself and my partner really do vary in that. We have by no means always penetrative sex, and precisely that variation makes it really fun I think. [...] No, penetration is not something that happens standardly with us.”

(Denise, 27)

Denise highlights the limitations of strictly adhering to penetrative sex and emphasizes the importance of sexual variation for enhancing pleasure. Her perspective shows how deviating

from the androcentric focus on the *coital imperative* enhances her enjoyment and pleasure in sexual experiences. Lieke supports this view, stating:

“It’s just very important for us that we both like it, as in, when he cums through penetration then it’s obvious that he then, for example, continues with hand-jobs or do something else to make me cum. But I also don’t have the idea that our sex is focused on penetration. That doesn’t always have to be there, we vary in that too.”
(Lieke, 25)

Lieke’s perspective echoes Denise’s sentiment, providing further insight into the significance of sexual variation in enhancing pleasure for women in sexual experiences. Lieke emphasizes the importance of mutual satisfaction and indicates that penetrative sex is not the sole focus of their sexual encounters. Instead, she highlights the diversity of their sexual activities, emphasizing that her sex life does not revolve solely around penetration. Together Denise and Lieke underscore the limitations of an androcentric focus on penetrative sex and emphasize the importance of sexual variation for women’s sexual pleasure. Their perspectives echo findings that women predominantly achieve pleasure through clitoral stimulation, often sidelined in female-male sexual encounters (Laan et al. 2021). Instead they suggest prioritizing mutual satisfaction and embracing sexual diversity. This aligns with critiques of the hierarchical sexual script that marginalizes non-penetrative activities as mere foreplay, perpetuating heteronormativity and patriarchal structures privileging male pleasure (Mintz 2018).

5.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, participants articulate a multifaceted understanding of sexual pleasure, emphasizing the importance of mutual enjoyment and shared experiences. Anna, Laura, Lieke, Denise, and Maaïke collectively challenge conventional norms surrounding sexual pleasure, often prioritizing male pleasure over female satisfaction. Instead, participants emphasize the importance of mutual pleasure and agency in sexual encounters. Furthermore, despite existing literature suggesting a pleasure gap between women and men, the unanimous affirmation of pleasure in participants’ sex lives indicates otherwise for them. Although the traditional sexual script predominantly focuses on male pleasure (Rubin et al. 2019), leading to a huge *pleasure*

gap (Conley 2011; Conley et al. 2014), participants seem to diverge from this. Their accounts reveal a break from the hegemonic *coital imperative*, embracing sexual diversity and prioritizing mutual satisfaction. By disclosing high levels of sexual pleasure, participants appear to be consistent with the *Pleasure Theory*, indicating that their sexual pleasure is a central driving force in their sexual encounters (Abramson and Pinkerton 2002). This suggests that their higher sexual desire compared to their male partners may stem from prioritizing their own pleasure. Overall, participants' perspectives emphasize the importance of moving away from an exclusively male-centred focus on penetrative sex, highlighting how sexual variation enhances enjoyment and pleasure, particularly for women.

Chapter 6: Empirical Chapter - The Influence of the Sexual Script

In this chapter I delve into participants' navigation of the sexual script they have been brought up with. Even though participants in some way go against the sexual script that states that men always feel more like sex than women, escaping it entirely proves nearly impossible due to its deep integration into cultural and social contexts (Gagnon and Simon 1986). The first empirical chapter revealed participants' upbringing within heteronormative sexual scripts, where PVI is deemed the norm. Despite indicating broader perspectives on sex, this traditional view is what they have been brought up with. Moreover, gendered roles within the script have surfaced, portraying men as assertive hunters and women as passive followers. In this chapter, I explore the impact and influence of these messages on participants' self-perception and sexual relationships and discuss how participants reconcile their desires with societal expectations that prioritize male pleasure, rooted in the sexual script.

6.1 The Influence of the Sexual Script on Self-Image

Based on the interviews, a common trend emerged regarding the influence of the sexual script on participants' experiences and perceptions of their own sexuality. Participants express feelings of shame, restraint, and hesitation when it comes to openly discussing their sexual desires and experiences. For example, Denise and Maaïke pointed out:

“I think that, as a woman, you’re a little restrained with how much sex you want and what kind of sex you want, because you don’t want people to think you’re too slutty, yeah. Even though, that doesn’t make any sense of course.” (Denise, 27)

“Sometimes I do feel a little ashamed of my higher sexual desire. I wouldn’t share it so quickly. [...] I think that’s different for men, for them it’s a tougher thing to say I think in general.” (Maaïke, 28)

Denise and Maaïke both highlight the internalized shame stemming from societal perceptions surrounding female sexuality and the gendered nature of sexual scripts. Denise's reflection highlights the societal pressure placed on women to conform to certain norms regarding sexual expression. She articulates a sense of restraint in openly discussing her sexual desires, fearing

the judgment and stigma associated with being perceived as “too slutty”. Similarly, Maaïke admits feeling ashamed of her higher sexual desire, indicating a reluctance to openly express her sexual needs and preferences. Their experiences align with the sexual script’s expectation for women to limit their sexual desire and refrain from openly discussing sexual pleasure (Sakaluk et al. 2014). Similarly, Lieke, Laura, and Anna shared:

“For men it is very cool to say, that they have a lot of sex, and whatever [...] and basically as a woman, that’s kind of harder I think to say that you feel like having sex more than your (male) partner.” (Lieke, 25)

“Yes, I think people did call me, not to my face, but, a slut. [...] Yes I did feel that there were opinions on that yes. [...] and for men it was different, for men it was always like ‘well done, nice’.” (Laura, 29)

“I don’t shout from the rooftops “I would actually like to have more sex,” that’s not nice, that’s not something you shout very proudly to people or anything like that. While I think that the other way around, for the man, that would be very normal.” (Anna, 28)

These quotations underscore the distinct expectations and judgments placed upon men and women regarding their sexual behaviour, indicative of the influence of the *Sexual Double Standard* (SDS) (Endendijk, Van Baar, and Deković 2020). According to SDS, men are societally rewarded for exhibiting sexually agentic behaviours, such as dominance and assertiveness, while women are praised for adhering to communal behaviours, characterized by submissiveness and passivity. Any deviation from these expected gender roles can lead to societal backlash, as seen in Lieke’s observation on the societal acceptance of male sexual desire compared to female desire, and Laura and Denise’s experiences of being labelled a ‘slut’. Denise and Maaïke’s feelings of shame and restraint regarding their sexual desires underscore the internalized stigma that many women experience due to societal expectations and perceptions (Klein et al. 2019). This fear of societal judgment associated with female sexuality may constrain women’s sexual autonomy and hinder their ability to challenge or deviate from traditional feminine sexual norms (Jackson and Cram 2003) (discussed in paragraph 6.2).

Furthermore, the sexual script's influence on participants' self-image is evident in gendered expectations about sexual desire. According to the sexual script, men always desire sex, while women do not (Dienberg et al. 2022; Sakaluk et al. 2014; Wiederman 2005). However, because in my thesis traditional roles are reversed, with the woman having a higher sexual desire than the man, when participants' (male) partners deviate from these expectations, participants seem to internalize these discrepancies as personal failures, leading to insecurities and feelings of rejection. For example, Anna and Laura stated:

“I did get very much into my head with the message of ‘men always feels like it,’ and then when he didn’t, I really thought that it was because of me, so I related that very much to myself and became very insecure.” (Anna, 28)

“Because you have the expectation that men always want sex, I also had some doubts and started thinking things like ‘does he find me attractive’, ‘is there something between us that is not going well’.” (Laura, 29)

These examples show how sexual scripts create certain expectations for ‘appropriate’ sexual behaviour, which can have negative effects on individuals’ self-esteem. Similarly, Maaïke and Denise stated:

“I felt very much that I was the problem, even though my boyfriend all the time said: ‘that’s not it’, ‘it’s not because of that,’ but I found that very hard to let go of. I just felt that I wasn’t desirable then. That it was my fault really.” (Maaïke, 28)

“In the beginning I did find that irritating and it also made me a little insecure. Because then I thought ‘hello, why not?’ [...] because if a man doesn’t want to have sex with you, while you really want to have sex with that man, then you start to doubt a bit: ‘does he like me, does he think I’m beautiful, attractive’, that sort of things.” (Denise, 27)

Participants' experiences reveal a striking alignment with research on gendered sexual scripts by Wiederman (2005). Wiederman states: "If a man does not express significant sexual interest, doubts may arise regarding his masculinity and sexual potency, leading the woman to question her own desirability. If he doesn't express relatively strong sexual interest early on, there may be doubts as to his masculinity, sexual potency, and virility. She may question her sexual desirability. After all, men are supposed to be easily sexually aroused, so what does it say about her if he apparently is not?" (499). This resonates with the experiences shared by Anna, Laura, Maaïke, and Denise, who express feelings of insecurity about their own desirability and attractiveness when their partners do not conform to the expected patterns of constant male sexual desire. Their quotations demonstrate the historical influence of Freud's *libido* concept on participants' contemporary perceptions of sexuality. As such it becomes clear that the sexual script not only affects how participants view themselves but also shapes their interpretation of their partners' behaviour, thereby affecting how they judge themselves within the context of their relationships.

6.2 The Influence of the Sexual Script on Sexual Relationships

Kim et al. (2007) identified and named the prevailing sexual script in Western societies as the 'heterosexual script', with oppositional yet complementary gender roles for women and men. One key element of this script is the expectation that women prioritize fulfilling the sexual needs of their male partners rather than their own pleasure (Kim et al. 2007, 147-148). Essentially, this script expects women to diminish their own sexual desires and be primarily responsible for satisfying the sexual desires of their male partners. This is something that emerged from the interviews. Lieke and Maaïke mentioned:

"Yes I don't agree with that, but I do feel that that's more how women are looked at from society, that the woman has sex to please the man." (Lieke, 25)

"Yes I do feel that that is expected of you, that as a woman you are expected to please your partner, the man that is, yes. And also that that often happens during sex, that it is all about his pleasure and that when he has finished it is finished, yes I have experienced that with previous partners." (Maaïke, 28)

Lieke and Maaïke's acknowledgements reflect the societal expectation placed on women, highlighting how women are often perceived as existing solely to satisfy men sexually. Their quotations are enriched by the insights of Virginia Woolf (1929), who argued that women's self-denigration and self-sacrifice serve to elevate men's status in patriarchal societies. Woolf's observations contextualize the power dynamics inherent in traditional sexual practices which often prioritize male pleasure. This lens provides a deeper understanding of Lieke and Maaïke's experiences, where societal expectations compel them to prioritize their partner's pleasure to maintain their sense of superiority. Similarly, Denise and Laura pointed out:

"I did always feel that I needed to be more pleasing as a woman yes." (Anna, 28)

"I sometimes used to have the idea that I had to have sex to please my partner. That I didn't necessarily want sex but that I thought he wanted it, and therefore did it. Not that I really didn't want it then or did it against my will, but I did it then mainly for him." (Laura, 29)

"For example, with 'doggy style' that you don't always indicate immediately that you are in pain [...] I also want to give him something nice or something." (Denise, 27)

These examples illustrate how the gendered, heterosexual sexual script outlines sexual roles for women that centre on prioritizing their (male) partners' needs over their own needs (Wiederman 2005). Particularly Denise's comment about enduring pain during sex, such as in the "doggy style" position, illustrates the pressure on women to prioritize their (male) partner's pleasure over their own comfort. Her willingness to endure pain to "give him something nice" echoes the theme of 'sexual flattery,' as described in the literature (Stiritz 2008). This behaviour reflects a desire to protect her partner's ego and uphold societal expectations of femininity (Mintz 2018) even at the expense of her own comfort and satisfaction. This sentiment is echoed by Maaïke, who shared how she experiences arousal from the idea of being desired by her partner rather than from her own desires. She said:

“What I read the other day, is that women sometimes experience arousal from the idea that the other person finds them arousing, rather than finding the other person arousing, and I can relate to that. So actually not even finding the other person arousing, but the idea that the other person finds you arousing, so then you might start doing all the things that the other person likes, instead of what you really like yourself.” (Maaike, 28)

When I asked what she specifically meant by this, Maaike explained:

“Well, for example deep in your throat or doggy style or something like that. I think I sometimes do those things because I know my partner finds that arousing and likes it when I do that. And then that can get me aroused. But then I actually get aroused by the fact that he finds me arousing, and I kind of behave accordingly...” (Maaike, 28)

Maaike describes here how she sometimes engages in sexual acts that she knows her partner finds arousing, to fulfil his desires and maintain his perception of her desirability even if they may not align with her own preferences. Following Woolf, this behaviour that participants expressed during the interviews, exists in patriarchal societies to reflect man as “twice its natural size” (Woolf 1929, 30). Overall, the quotes underscore the pressure on women to their sex within the constraints of patriarchal norms, prioritizing their male partners’ desires over their own satisfaction. They underscore Woolf’s critique of the power dynamics inherent in traditional gender roles, where women are relegated to subordinate positions to elevate men to positions of superiority.

In addition, participants seem to be affected by the sexual script in their sexual relationship due to their experiences with higher sexual desire than their male partners. The sexual script expects women to limit their sexual desire and not to talk about sexual pleasure (Sakaluk et al. 2014). Affected by this, participants express sometimes feeling compelled to suppress or diminish this desire as it conflicts with gendered societal expectations of women. Maaike, for instance, shared:

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“So that does influence how I act, that I’ve also become more wait-and-see, like, well, then I’ll come up with the initiative a little less often. [...] Yeah, and that’s because, well, I don’t want to force anything first of all, but also kind of because I feel like it’s not my role or something.” (Maaïke, 28)

Maaïke’s statement suggests that she feels constrained by societal expectations of how women should behave sexually. She expresses how her higher sexual desire has led her to adopt a more reserved approach in her sexual interactions with her partner, feeling that it is not her role to do so. Similarly, Anna expresses difficulty in asserting her own desire for sex, attributing it to the belief that it is more socially acceptable for men to demand sex than it is for women:

“Yes I do find that difficult sometimes, because I hold back more often when I actually do want sex, and I think that is only normal, I can’t force him of course, but I do think it might have been different if I was a man, yes, I could have demanded it more or something, and then I think the woman would have just gone along with it in that case. But now I do have the feeling that this is what is expected of me, that I suppress that feeling.” (Anna, 28)

Related to Anna’s quote, Laura adds another layer to the analysis, emphasizing the societal pressures and gendered dynamics that contribute to women’s suppression of their sexual desires. She acknowledges feeling compelled to suppress her own desires due to societal messages dictating that women should have less sexual desire than men. She states:

“Yes, I do feel that, because you get these messages anyway that women should have less sexual desire than men, that I do suppress it a little bit because of that. [...] Because of this (male-female) dynamic, it is sometimes more difficult to put my needs first, so to speak. [...] “Well maybe if I had been a man I would have felt more entitled to claim something.” (Laura, 29)

All three perspectives of Maaïke, Anna, and Laura, align with the broader societal norms identified by Gagnon and Simon (1973), which expects women to be passive recipients of male

sexual advances rather than active participants in their own sexual experiences. Their reluctance to assert their own sexual desires can be understood in the context of Audre Lorde's concept of 'the erotic as power'. Lorde argues that society suppresses women's eroticism to maintain traditional power structures, which inhibit women from embracing their sexual autonomy (Lorde 1984). Lorde (1984) writes: "We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings" (57). Participants' statements aligns with Lorde's assertion, as they express a reluctance to assert themselves sexually, feeling as though it is not their role. All three examples resonate with Audre Lorde's perspective on the suppression of women's erotic within patriarchal societies. Laura's perception that she would feel more entitled to claim her sexual desires if she were a man, reflects Lorde's assertion that the erotic is "fashioned within the context of male models of power" (Lorde 1984, 53). Moreover, Maaïke, Anna, and Laura's struggle to assert their sexual desires within the confines of societal, gendered expectations aligns with Butler's notion of a 'culturally intelligible' person (Butler 1990). Following Butler, Maaïke, Anna and Laura have become 'intelligible' as persons by conforming to prevailing social expectations regarding gender roles and behaviours. Although they would like sex more often, they suppress this feeling according to the socially anticipated gender role. Their experiences exemplify how individuals internalize and *perform* (Butler 1990) gender roles within female-male sexual relationships, contributing to the construction and reinforcement of the prevailing sexual script (Kim et al. 2007).

6.3 Reconciling Sexual Desires with Societal Expectations

The preceding section offers insights into how participants navigate the influences of the sexual script, revealing a tendency to prioritize their male partners' pleasure over their own desires and needs. Participants express to suppress their heightened sexual desires, perceiving them as incongruent with societal expectations of femininity. Despite these influences, participants consistently report experiencing great pleasure from their sexual encounters, as described in *Chapter 5*. This paradoxical situation suggests a complex relationship between adherence to societal sexual norms and individual sexual satisfaction. This dichotomy raises questions about how participants reconcile their sexual desires with societal expectations. One noteworthy aspect is the fact that despite the societal expectation dictated by the sexual script that men should always initiate sexual activity (Sakaluk et al. 2014; Wiederman 2005), participants expressed a conscious preference for this arrangement. All participants acknowledge that, due

to their higher sexual desire, they could theoretically initiate sex themselves and indeed did so at the outset of their relationships. However, they soon discovered that this approach often resulted in their partner having to decline frequently, creating discomfort for both. Consequently, participants opt to let their partners take the lead, ensuring that their partners in the mood, because, as the participants gigglingly note, they themselves are always open to sexual activity anyway. For instance, Lieke and Maaïke said:

“The only thing is that he actually always starts. Because I have the idea, it’s not nice to be rejected, so if I start, and he doesn’t feel like it, I find that unpleasant, so then I never actually start, because if he starts then at least I know he feels like it, and then usually I feel like it too. So then I think ‘you know, you start it, then it’s fun for both of us’.” (Lieke, 25)

“Well, in the beginning I actually always started, because I was in the mood more often than he was, but yes, then I got told no quite often, and that just wasn’t fun for either of us, so now I just let him start, at least then I know he’s in the mood, because yes, I’m always up for it myself [giggles].” (Maaïke, 28)

Despite the traditional notion that men should always be the initiators, these narratives highlight how participants consciously adjust their behaviour to align with their own and their partners’ preferences, demonstrating agency within the constraints of societal expectations.

Participants further indicate consciously arranging their sex in a way they like, for instance through utilization of toys, exploration of new sexual activities, but also other additives to enhance their own sexual pleasure during sex with their partner. When asked how they make their sex lives so enjoyable despite the androcentric script, participants said:

“For example, with sex toys that you can use together, so that I find penetration more pleasurable then because you have stimulation of your clitoris, and he finds that nice too, but he also knows that I find that especially very nice and pleasuring.” (Lieke, 25)

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“I think also because we both give each other oral sex, yes, or for example sometimes we have sex with [...], vaginal sex, and that you then give the one oral sex and also a little [...], and that that is very nice.” (Denise, 27)

“By trying new things. Oh and what I also think is helping is that I do claim my time. As in, I often want to go on longer, and for example, reaching orgasm sometimes takes longer for me than for him, and then I indicate that I am not ready yet. And that makes it nice for me. But also by trying new things, staying imaginative or something like that.” (Anna, 28)

These quotations further exemplify Audre Lorde’s (1984) concept of the erotic as a source of power and liberation, particularly in the context of women reclaiming their sexuality and pleasure. By prioritizing their pleasure and exploring their desires, participants defy the oppressive forces that seek to suppress and devalue women’s sexuality (Lorde 1984, 53). Instead of conforming to societal expectations, they embrace the fullness of their erotic experiences, recognizing them as valid and powerful expressions of their selves. In addition, all participants mentioned the importance of communication for the enjoyment of their sex lives. Laura explained:

“Yes communication. Talk, talk, talk. Even if it is sometimes difficult or uncomfortable, that is really very important. To be able to say what you want, what you like, where your needs lie. Yes, we had to practice that too, but now it helps us both a lot with our pleasure.” (Laura, 28)

“Talking. Communication. That is so important. You really have to express yourself and be able to indicate what you want, and that is very difficult because you have grown up with an idea of what you should want (as a woman), but I think as soon as you get over that, you can really enjoy sex and if you can also indicate that to your partner, then it is just great.” (Maaïke, 28)

Laura and Maaïke's emphasis on communication highlights its vital role in navigating sexual pleasure amidst societal expectations, echoed by all participants. This importance of communication resonates deeply with the insights from queer sexual experiences. Unlike cis-heterosexual dynamics, where default norms dictate behaviour, queer individuals approach sexual interactions differently due to the absence of predefined templates for 'traditional' sex and gender-based roles (Laan and Van Lunsen 2023; Mintz 2018; Orenstein 2016). This absence fosters greater communication, negotiation, and exploration. Studies confirm that increased communication in queer relations correlates with enhanced sexual satisfaction (Frederick et al. 2017), and a much smaller orgasm- and pleasure gap compared to male-female sex (Frederick et al. 2017; Mintz 2018; Laan and Van Lunsen 2023). Laura and Maaïke's acknowledgement of the difficulty and discomfort associated with challenging gender roles underscores the pervasive influence of societal norms on individual sexual experiences. However, by practicing communication and expressing themselves authentically, they enhance their sexual pleasure and satisfaction. The insights from queer sexual experiences underscore the transformative power of communication in reshaping sexual dynamics and challenging societal norms. By prioritizing open dialogue and negotiation, queer individuals pave the way for more fulfilling and egalitarian sexual relationships. Participants' emphasis on communication echoes the broader significance of fostering communication in all sexual encounters, transcending the constraints of gender-based roles and expectations (Butler 1990) to promote mutual pleasure.

6.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the interviews underscore the profound impact of the sexual script on participants' experiences and perceptions of their sexuality within their relationships. It came out that participants both experience an influence of the sexual script on their self-image as well as on their sexual relationships. Participants express feelings of shame, restraint, and insecurity when it comes to openly discussing their sexual desires and experiences. This reluctance stems from societal norms and expectations surrounding female sexuality, which prioritize modesty and submissiveness, and show the presence of the *sexual double standard*. Furthermore, the influence of the sexual script on participants' relationships has emerged through expressed feelings of prioritizing their (male) partners' needs over their own. Participants seem to navigate the influences of the sexual script by pleasing their male partners and suppressing their heightened sexual desires to align with societal expectations of femininity, echoing patriarchal

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influences. Despite these pressures, participants express experiencing great pleasure from their sexual encounters, revealing a paradoxical relationship between adherence to societal norms and individual sexual fulfilment. Their responses show agency in adapting their behaviour to their own preferences and those of their partners, demonstrating a nuanced negotiation within the constraints of societal expectations. Additionally, participants demonstrate an embrace of their sexuality and desires, challenging societal norms that seek to limit their sexual agency. They consciously arrange their sexual experiences to prioritize their own pleasure, defying the oppressive forces of the sexual script. By prioritizing communication, participants foster more fulfilling and egalitarian sexual relationships, challenging gender-based roles and expectations to promote mutual pleasure.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

With this thesis, I sought to explore how cisgender women in a sexual relationship with a man (WSM), experiencing higher levels of sexual desire than their male partners, navigate sexual scripts amidst the discourse of the orgasm- and pleasure gap (*main research question*). In order to answer this question, I employed a qualitative research method, consisting of five in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with Dutch cisgender women aged 25 to 35. Based on the findings of this research, it can be concluded that WSM navigate sexual scripts in varied ways in their sexual relationships. To understand how WSM navigate these sexual scripts, I give an answer to the formulated sub-research questions of: a) How do WSM describe and interpret the prevailing sexual scripts? b) How do WSM describe and experience sexual pleasure? c) How do sexual scripts influence the experiences of WSM? In addressing the first sub-question, it can be concluded that participants generally perceive the sexual script as heteronormative. One common example of this heteronormative script is the coital imperative, the notion that sex is understood as something that involves penetration between a man and a woman. Participants highlighted their understanding of the sexual script within this heteronormative framework, where sex was predominantly equated with penile-vaginal intercourse (PVI). In addition, these ingrained heteronormative sexual scripts appear to be highly gendered. Participants describe how men and women are taught distinct and often opposing sexual scripts, with men expected to take on dominant roles and women expected to take on submissive roles. This gendered nature of heteronormative scripts illustrates how heteronormativity reinforces a binary understanding of gender, where masculinity and femininity are construed as opposites within a hierarchical framework. Consequently, binaries such as masculinity/femininity become intertwined with notions of dominance/submissiveness, resulting in different societal expectations for sexual behaviour for women and men. Furthermore, it is evident that participants perceive the sexual script through a gendered lens, encountering conflicting messages about sexual desire. These conflicting narratives reinforce the traditional notion that men inherently possess higher sexual desires compared to women, perpetuating the gendered dynamics within the sexual script.

The second sub-question focused on sexual pleasure. By examining how women with higher sexual desire than their male partners navigate the gendered and heteronormative sexual script, it was imperative to understand their perceptions and experiences of sexual pleasure. Rooted in Pleasure Theory, with this thesis I aimed to unravel the dynamics surrounding pleasure in participants' sexual encounters. Based on the conversations, it can be concluded that

participants have a nuanced understanding of sexual pleasure, emphasizing the importance of mutual pleasure and shared, joyful, experiences. In doing so, participants advocate for a shift away from prioritizing male pleasure over female pleasure. Moreover, in examining participants experience with sexual pleasure, it can be concluded that participants derive a great amount of pleasure from their sexual experiences. Contrary to prevailing literature suggesting a pleasure gap between men and women, participants expressed high levels of pleasure, indicating a divergence from dominant patterns. Their affirmation of sexual pleasure challenge male-centric sexual scripts. Participants accounts reveal a departure from traditional expectations by not adhering to the coital imperative, but embracing sexual diversity. This suggests that participants prioritize their own pleasure as a central aspect of sexual encounters.

For the third sub-question, I asked participants about the influence of the gendered and heteronormative sexual script on their sexual experiences. The findings reveal a twofold answer: the gendered and heteronormative sexual script impacts both participants' self-image as well as their sexual relationships. Participants experience internalized shame, restraint, and hesitation when it comes to openly discussing their sexual desires and experiences. Such reluctance is rooted in binary, societal notions of femininity and masculinity that emphasize specific behaviours that are commonly linked to notions of submissiveness and dominance, highlighting the presence of the sexual double standard. Moreover, the influence of the gendered and heteronormative sexual script extends to participants' relationships, as evidenced by their inclination to prioritize their (male) partners' needs over their own. Participants navigate these influences by striving to please their partners while often suppressing their own heightened sexual desires to conform to societal expectations of femininity. This dynamic perpetuates traditional gender roles and reinforces patriarchal power dynamics. However, amidst these challenges, participants demonstrate agency and resilience in their efforts to navigate and negotiate their sexual experiences. Participants consistently report deriving immense pleasure from their sexual encounters, revealing a paradoxical relationship between adherence to societal norms and individual sexual pleasure. Through the conversations it has been made clear that participants demonstrate agency in adapting their behaviour to align with their own preferences and those of their partners, demonstrating a nuanced negotiation within the confines of societal expectations. Furthermore, participants exhibit an embrace of their sexuality and desires, challenging societal norms that seek to constrain their sexual agency. They consciously structure their sexual experiences to prioritize their own pleasure, defying the oppressive forces of the sexual script. It can thereby be concluded that participants conform less

to the gendered and heteronormative sexual script. By emphasizing communication, participants cultivate more fulfilling and equitable sexual relationships, challenging gender-based roles and expectations to foster mutual pleasure. This underscores the resilience and agency of individuals in navigating and reshaping their sexual experiences within the framework of societal norms.

All in all, with my thesis I have tried to shed light on how cis-gender women in a sexual relationships with a man, who experience higher levels of sexual desire than their male partners, navigate sexual scripts amidst the discourse of the orgasm- and pleasure gap. From their stories, it appears that, against the norm from the gendered and heteronormative sexual script, these women expect more opportunities for sexual pleasure based on their experiences or by prioritizing their own sexual pleasure over that of their male partners. This suggests that when WSM expect more opportunities for sexual pleasure based on earlier experiences or when they prioritize their own sexual pleasure (at least as much as that of their male partner), they are more likely to desire sexual activity. This may occur by a gradual breakdown of gendered and heteronormative sexual scripts, allowing for a more equitable and egalitarian division of pleasure within female-male sexual encounters.

7.1 Limitations and Future Research

It is important to recognize that the findings of this research are specific to the research context and sample group, and should not be generalized to all WSM with higher sexual desire than their male partners, whether in the Netherlands or elsewhere. For example, my participants predominantly represented white, secular, educated, able-bodied, and middle-class individuals. Therefore, I suggest further research to be conducted exploring the complex intersections between WSM populations and other identities like race, religion, ethnicity, and ability. Additionally, my use of convenience sampling may have resulted in a sample group of people already interested in the topic of sex. This strategy possibly resulted in a sample bias, potentially excluding others less inclined to discuss these topics or who do not feel as comfortable. This illustrates how the findings of this research cannot be generalized to all WSM with higher sexual desire, but rather are situated in a specific location, time, and group of people. Furthermore, I want to emphasize the complexities involved in gender and sexuality research. Gender and sexuality are multifaceted topics that resist easy categorization and simplification. However, although it was not my intention to reproduce binaries in this study, I acknowledge the presence

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of traditional dichotomies like femininity/masculinity and submissive/dominant. I have used these constructs not to perpetuate them, but rather to critically examine their implications. Overall, I hope to have created an in-depth understanding of the intricate nature of sexual desire within the framework of societal norms and elucidate the interplay between partners when traditional expectations are contested and women's sexual pleasure takes a central role. By embracing *the erotic* as well as the lessons from queer sexual dynamics, I believe that we can move towards Mintz's vision of "a new world of pleasure and orgasm equality" (2018, 186-187). In this (utopian) paradigm, we would assign equal value to women's and men's pathways to sexual pleasure, and our language would reflect this. Rather than being an alternative word to a singular act (intercourse), guaranteed to lead to orgasm for just one group of individuals (heterosexual men), "sex" would be synonymously with consensual shared sexual pleasure and orgasm. This focus on pleasure and equality would then permeate our culture.

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