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# Prettiest in Pink? Dutch Teenage Girls and Femininity

Leah Allen  
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**Prettiest in Pink?**  
**Dutch Teenage Girls and Femininity**

Allen, Leah

Academic Director: Connors, Kevin  
Advisor: Sudeep Dasgupta

School: Saint Michael's College  
Major: English

Europe, Netherlands, Amsterdam

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
The Netherlands: International Perspectives on Sexuality & Gender  
SIT Study Abroad, Spring 2012

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## Abstract

This report is the result of a month-long qualitative examination of the various attitudes held by Dutch teenage girls on feminine behavior and presentation. Background research included examining work written about Dutch women and Dutch teen girl culture, as well as analyzing two Dutch teen magazines, *Meiden* and *Girlz*. I interviewed five Dutch girls from the ages of 13 to 17 about the acceptability and prevalence of femininity and “girliness” among them and their peers. I concluded that these Dutch girls believe that it is most acceptable for a girl to act in a certain way based on her gender: not too girly and not too masculine. My subjects also expressed dissatisfaction with the current role for adult women in the Netherlands. I also found among my subjects that they commonly labeled girls in general as gossipy and bitchy and were likely to put them down for certain feminine behaviors. This led me to discuss the concept of internalized misogyny as it related to my subjects’ attitudes towards girls in general.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone at De Borcht for making me feel welcome and comfortable. A special thank you to Tiny who always especially sweet and kept me up-to-date with club activities and volunteer opportunities.

To the girls with whom I conducted English lessons, it was wonderful getting to know you and working through our language barrier. And of course, this project could not have been done without the girls who let me take time out of their busy lives to be interviewed. Thank you so much!

Additionally, this paper would also have been a complete mess if not for the guidance and suggestions of Kevin Connors, Yvette Kopijn, and Hannie van Herk. You pushed me to think more closely about what I *really* wanted to know in my research. You also helped me realize my biases and encouraged me to step back and have an open mind.

To my advisor, Sudeep Dasgupta, thank you for scrutinizing every word of this paper through its drafts. Your attention to detail and language is one that I envy. You have been a help through the last busy days of this project.

And of course, to my host mom, Anne de Vrede, for providing me with food and a place to sleep this semester, and for not getting mad at me for waking you up at 6 am because I was still working on this paper.

Thank you all so much!

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## INTRODUCTION

During my month-long study, I sought to answer this question: Do Dutch teenage girls view feminine behavior among their female peers in a negative or positive way? The focus of this paper is to discuss the ways in which Dutch teenage girls frame their own femininity in relation to others, particularly their peers. In my report, I use the term “femininity” to refer to behavior and physical presentation commonly associated with girls and women in a culture. I will address topics such as anti-femininity and internalized misogyny among Dutch girls, along with the societal pressures on them to fit into a certain mold of girlhood. These pressures will also relate to messages in the media that target teenage girls, particularly in magazines. The concept of beauty will be addressed, especially framed around how girls view themselves and others in regards to their appearance and body. I will also provide a background on women in the Netherlands, focusing on jobs and daily life. I will reflect upon how these broader gender roles may affect younger adolescent women.

I will address theories relating to the spectrum of gender behavior, such as the fluidity of masculinity and femininity. These will especially be useful when discussing the girls’ responses regarding the modes of expressing femininity. I will discuss the idea of gender as a performance since I am focusing on the differences in behavior between the sexes. In an even broader way, I will focus on the socialization of gender as something that is taught and learned by everyone. In addition to this, I will mention the gender binary, which refers to the set rules of behavior assigned to males and females

specifically. My theoretical position in this paper is that there is no natural reason for men and women to behave and think in these specifically prescribed ways. In this paper I hope to show that having rules based on gender can be harmful and confusing for adolescents and all people.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Before doing my interviews, I read through research done that was relevant to my topic. I found two studies about the influence of the media and magazines on teenagers. One study was titled “Competing Femininities: the Construction of Teen Femininities in Magazine Adverts.” This study highlights the conflicting messages that girls, especially teenagers, receive regarding femininity in the media. The author studied a variety of advertisements in popular teenage girl magazines and what they were selling and how. These products included perfumes, tampons, beauty products, and products related to entertainment. The author mentions how media emphasizes the importance of independence for teen girls, but that is done so through advertising and a focus on consumerism. The advertisements encourage teenage girls to be themselves and to make their own decisions, but by buying their products that often focus on changing a girl’s appearance to be deemed acceptable. Among all these messages, there is also the social idea that feminine interests are less important than masculine. This leads to anti-femininity in general culture, but an emphasis on beauty and consumerism in media and advertisements. The author shows how these messages can be confusing for teenage girls



who are just trying to figure out where they stand in regards to their gender.<sup>1</sup> I found this study important throughout my own research because I wished to discuss the effects of the media on the girls I interviewed.

A study was conducted of Dutch teen magazines and their messages regarding sexuality. They studied issues of three Dutch teen girl magazines and analyzed articles based on the treatment of sex as a pleasurable or dangerous activity in relation to boys or girls. With this study, it was found that sex is seen as a normal part of adolescence for both genders. It is treated as more of a pleasurable activity with less of a focus on its dangers. However, it is seen as more pleasurable for boys than for girls, and “when it comes to the negative aspects of adolescent sexuality, girls seem to be much more affected than boys.” The study also compared Dutch and American magazines in terms of messages about sexuality. The authors found that while US magazines reference sexuality in general more frequently, it is primarily focused on masculine sexuality. However, in the Netherlands, female and male sexuality is equally referenced. The authors found that the Dutch magazines had a more open view of sexuality as something normal for teenage girls that did not focus as much on the negative aspects as the US magazines did. The study found that sexual desire is found more in Dutch magazines whereas sexual danger is found more in US magazines.<sup>2</sup> This is relevant to my studies because I think sexuality is a big part of the lives of teenage girls and it is necessary to understand the environment

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<sup>1</sup> Cann, Victoria. “Competing Femininities: the Construction of Teen Femininities in Magazine Adverts.”

Net Know Volume 5, Issue 1. February 2012. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Joshi, Suchi P., Jochen Peter, and Patti M. Valkenburg. “Scripts of Sexual Desire and Danger in US and Dutch Teen Girl Magazines: A Cross-National Content Analysis.” Springer Open Choice. 14 February 2012. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3062029/>

regarding sex that Dutch girls have grown up in. I also find it interesting that sexuality is referred to equally between boys and girls because it suggests that female sexuality is treated as just as important to male sexuality. However, the disparity regarding danger and pleasure is also significant.

An important part of teenage years for girls is their relationship with the body. Another study I read focuses on the ways in which Dutch teenage boys and girls eat and the effect it has on their body image. The author studied the different relations to food among boys and girls and how peer pressure may affect what and how much they consume. She also brought up factors such as health and body image that influence this behavior. The study uncovered that the ideal among girls is thinness, and sometimes girls go to extremes to try to achieve it. She also found that Dutch girls find that beauty is important. One Dutch girl even said “I think the media is pushing us more and more towards the American situation” regarding the ideal body type of super slim. I think this report was fascinating and definitely cleared up some questions I had about Dutch girls and their relation to the media and their own bodies. Puberty is arguably the time when these issues matter the most, so this information is essential when dealing with my subjects and their views.<sup>3</sup>

Another study that I looked into for relevant information regarding my project was about the intersection between sexism and homophobia. This study, called “Sexual Orientation, Gender Role Expression, and Stereotyping: The Intersection Between Sexism and Sexual Prejudice (Homophobia)” provided me with useful information since

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<sup>3</sup> Ochoa, Ana Maria H., “Eating Patterns and their Relationship with Body Image among Dutch Teenagers.” August 2005. <<http://amma.socsci.uva.nl/theses/ochoa%20hoyos.pdf>>

I was interested in seeing if the girls I interviewed expressed any anti-femininity toward other girls. The authors discuss the link between homophobia and negative feelings toward activity that goes beyond prescribed gender role behavior. They looked to see if homosexuality is seen as offensive in itself, or if the fluidity of one's gender presentation brings out more negativity in others. This brings up many points like how likely one is to stereotype another as being homosexual when they do not conform to traditional gender roles. Homophobia is then rooted in sexism because it is seen as unfavorable when a man acts like a woman. This is related to my intended study because I wish to highlight how it may be harmful to think of gender as such a strict dichotomy. I am also interested in how acting very feminine is not acceptable for men or women. If gender was seen more fluidly, then it may not be as problematic to see a man acting in a feminine way and assumptions about his sexuality would not be as quickly made. I had hoped this article would highlight the differences between masculine women and feminine men and how they are perceived. However, it was still helpful with its explanation of ways in which men and women are still expected to follow certain rules regarding their gender.<sup>4</sup>

With these three studies, I was able to look at three themes of sexuality, body image, and homosexuality. I found that Dutch girls do care about their appearance and body image, and that some of this is influenced by the media. Also, through another media study, I learned that sexuality of Dutch girls can be discussed openly and equal to boys' sexuality. And finally, through the lens of homosexuality, I discovered many

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<sup>4</sup> Rees, Amanda M., Carol Doyle, and Jennifer Meisch. "Sexual Orientation, Gender Role Expression, and Stereotyping: The Intersection Between Sexism and Sexual Prejudice (Homophobia)." *VISTAS* 2006. <<http://counselingoutfitters.com/Rees.htm>>

interesting points about the disapproval of feminine behavior in men by society. This relates to what I am studying since I will be discussing the disapproval of feminine behavior in women by their peers and society in general.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

My paper will be formed around some broad theories relating to gender. I will explain my background in gender theory, which refers to the concept of seeing gender as a social construction. I will also address the gender binary, which is the idea that gender behavior is split into two categories of male and female. After explaining these concepts, I will discuss gender as it relates to teenagers, since they are my subjects for this report.

### **I. Gender Theory**

Gender is a way to categorize humans that includes behavior associated with their sex. Humanity is divided between male and female based on their genitalia. They are then given a role in society that aligns with their sex. This role and presentation of their sex is considered their gender. Sex refers to the body and the biological differences between men and women, however gender is more complex. Gender is the way in which sex is lived in terms of social behavior. There is a great difference between being born female and acting like a woman. But *how* does a woman act and why is this behavior directly associated with her gender?

Along with gender, the terms “masculinity” and “femininity” are often mentioned in my paper. The simplest way to describe them would be as stereotypes relating to sex. Femininity is associated with the thoughts and behaviors of women, and masculinity is associated with the thoughts and behaviors of men. These associations are considered

natural, but blurring of gender roles occurs throughout the world and even within cultures. Not every woman acts in a way that can be classified as “feminine” and not every man acts “masculine.” This in itself breaks down the aforementioned definitions of these gendered categories.

People throughout history and the world have taken issue with dividing humanity based on sex. Martine Rothblatt says that “uniting humanity on the level of sex will be more momentous than any other social revolution.” She calls the division by sexes “the most long-standing and rigidly enforced of all social stereotypes.” Rothblatt also sees a problem with classifying behavior into masculinity and femininity. She says, “Applying the characteristics of some members of a group to an entire group [is a] counterproductive stereotype. . . Unless a characteristic defines a group—that is, applies to all members of a group—we are just talking about generalizations and mental stereotypes, not scientific reality.” The problem is that these generalizations are taken very seriously, as seen by my interviewees’ attitudes toward proper feminine behavior.

Gender roles and expectations are forced onto children before they are even born. Parents often want to know the sex of their child as soon as possible so that all their friends and family can buy all the blue or pink clothing and toys that they can find. This is true even in the Netherlands, as I have seen merchandise for newborns categorized into blue and pink with banners bearing the Dutch equivalent of “It’s a Boy” and “It’s a Girl.” This behavior may seem harmless, but in fact it is just the beginning of giving significance to the gender of an individual.

Theoretically, there is very little about a person’s sexual biology that should relate to the socially constructed gender differences. Every culture has its own idea of how a

woman or a man is supposed to act, and yet gender differences seem so natural. On one hand, of course there are differences between men and women. Biologically, we can point out primary and secondary sex characteristics as differences between males and females. But socially, it would be impossible to cover every difference. The social determinants of gender are far more significant, especially when it comes to thoughts and behavior.

## **II. Gender Binary**

The gender binary describes the divisions between man and woman, along with behavior relating to this dichotomy. When referencing the binary, one is usually emphasizing how strictly people adhere to stereotypical roles based on their gender. A less strict binary would mean that men and women are freer to act in a way that would normally be associated with the other gender without fear of judgment or rejection from society. Breaking down the binary would mean blending the acceptability of all sorts of behavior for all people no matter their sex or gender. For some theorists, even when people act outside of the binary, it is always presented in relation to masculinity and femininity which still shows the importance of the binary.

For example, Judith Butler speaks of gender regulations and discusses the problems with having a gender “norm.” She says, “To assume that gender always and exclusively means the matrix of the ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ is precisely to miss the critical point that the production of that coherent binary is contingent, that it comes at a cost, and that those permutations of gender which do not fit the binary are as much a part

of gender as its most normative instance.”<sup>5</sup> Here she is saying that even in the cases where individuals move *beyond* the prescribed gender behaviors, they are still judged in their relation to the binary itself. A man whose interests go beyond what may be considered the norm for masculine behavior cannot escape the comparisons to that norm. The binary of man versus woman is inescapable even when one tries to erase the line between them. Butler also makes the important point that any variation from these normative gender roles is still a part of gender, since a non-feminine girl is still a girl. This broadens and confuses what it means to be feminine and to be a girl.

Even when the sources for these gender stereotypes are understood or can at least be traced back into history, they still do not accurately portray “women” or “men” if there is any such thing as a true woman or man. For example, Michele Barrett references Griselda Pollack who argues, “We should not be content to view the cultural representation of gender as ‘images of women,’” to which Barrett adds, “She rejects this approach because it cannot explain why it should be that the inversion or reversal of accepted imagery simply does not succeed.”<sup>6</sup> Thus excuses of gender stereotypes or norms are not enough to explain their prevalence among society. They do not explain why gender plays such an important role in one’s identity.

Problems often arise for those who do not ascribe to the norm of their gender. It often becomes an issue in most societies if a man partakes in “female” activities and vice versa. Cases like these come up all the time, which shows the flaws of having a binary at all. By restricting behavior between two groups like this, it is limiting the actions,

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<sup>5</sup> Butler, Judith. “Undoing Gender” chapter 2, p. 42

<sup>6</sup> Barrett, Michele. “Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender” p. 92

interests, and thoughts of everyone in and out of the binary. Even if people are aware of the binary and the social construction of gender, they cannot simply stop doing their gender. It has been a part of them since their first days on earth. Although it is easy to see how harmful it is to keep upholding the gender regulations, the concept of gender cannot simply be thrown away. Too much is already known about its rules and divisions that it would be impossible to live life in a post-gendered way. Some people struggle to find their identities outside of gender, but the idea of the binary will always be present, as Butler said. However, blurring the lines will be beneficial for generations to come who also find flaws within the discourse surrounding gender.

### **III. Teenagers and Gender Identity**

The importance of gender is not lost on adolescents. According to Carrie Paechter in the book, *Being Boys, Being Girls*, children from a young age take in all kinds of information regarding the deeper meaning of male and female. Paechter says, “As they grow older, they use this [information] to construct their understanding of themselves, learning from the central members of . . . their immediate family, how men and women, boys and girls behave and relate to one another.” For adolescents and teenagers, she says that they are “positioned ambivalently between being and becoming” regarding masculinity and femininity. By this she means that they are not yet fully considered women or men, and they are often hesitant to immerse themselves in the gendered behavior they see associated with adulthood.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Paechter, Carrie F. *Being Boys, Being Girls: Learning Masculinities and Femininities*. Maidenhead: Open UP, 2007.



According to Paechter, identity is an extremely important part of adolescence and teenage years. Teenagers struggle to find out what kind of person they are, especially in relation to others. This is also seen in the way in which they struggle to find their identity in terms of their gender. Adolescents may begin to see their futures as shaped around their gender. While teenagers may know what is expected of them as part of their gender, they still think in terms of the kind of person they *will* be, as opposed to who they currently are. In a way, teenagers try to put off making these decisions of their future, and thus try to rebel against the gender role that is prescribed to them. They are aware of the role that their gender prescribes to them but they are hesitant about fully accepting it.

## **METHODOLOGY**

I conducted opinion interviews with girls between the ages of thirteen and seventeen in Amsterdam. Two of the girls were thirteen, one fourteen, one sixteen, and one seventeen. Four of the girls were from Amsterdam, and one was from Friesland. I asked about their views on femininity and how they see their gender playing a role in their lives. I also asked them about gender roles in general, and how they can see differences within the sexes in the Netherlands. I had an interview guide with a list of several questions to keep me focused. I conducted four interviews, since one interview was with the two thirteen-year-old girls because they struggled with their English. With my five subjects, I acquired permission from them and their guardians to conduct the interviews. From the information I have gathered, I found various attitudes toward feminine behavior among these young women along with evidence of the gender binary as it affects their daily lives.

I conducted my research using subjects from Club De Borcht, an after-school homework club in Amsterdam. De Borcht is a group in Amsterdam founded by Opus Dei members that works with young and teenage girls in a variety of ways. Opus Dei is a conservative Catholic institution that emphasizes the importance of lay-people in the Church. The adult women who live there are all members of Opus Dei, so they are very devout Catholics. But for the girls, religion is not addressed unless they seek it out specifically. Despite the religious foundations of De Borcht, the girls in the club have a range of religions and devotion. Although I will not focus on the religious views of the girls I interviewed in this paper, it is still necessary to explain the religious setting in which I interacted with them. Some of these girls may not personally identify with any religion very strongly, but this context makes my conclusions limited.

My conclusions were also limited by my sample size since I was only able to speak to five girls. Also, four of the girls were from Amsterdam and one, Paula, was from Friesland. This means that their views cannot be representative of the whole country. I also discovered after I had completed my interviews that two of my subjects, Katrina and Anna, were sisters. This means that their views may have some similarities because of their family life. However I think it is still interesting to include them both because the age difference makes for some strong variation in their responses. But I will be very explicit in saying that although my outside sources refer to Dutch girls as a whole, my own research cannot reflect the same.

Another problem in my interviews was that I was too timid to bring up homosexuality. After listening back to my interviews, I found many moments where I could have brought it up, but something inside me at the time said it was not relevant to

such young girls. That is completely the opposite of how I really feel, but I suppose that in action, I did not take advantage of the opportunity to include it. I think that since I had started with interviewing the youngest girls who seemed to assume the heterosexuality of all girls, I took their lead and did not change my approach to the older girls in this regard. It is something I do regret not including, especially because I feel strongly that not talking about homosexuality only makes it more taboo. This can be seen in the subjects' responses regarding gender roles, dating, and girls' appearances. Although I do think it is noteworthy that the girls did not mention homosexuality either, I still should have included it in my interviews.

I also come with my own biases as I am from the United States, so there is an American context with my own views on gender and how it is seen in my country. So inevitably, I sometimes unintentionally compared the Netherlands to the United States and I may have looked for patterns where there may not have been any. I also come with my own gender biases, since I was unable to avoid being socialized in regards to my gender and the importance of this identity as a whole. This also caused me to make assumptions in coming into my interviews that the girls would be similar to what I am used to seeing in the United States. I also had my own Dutch stereotypes to deal with, such as my view of the Netherlands as a very progressive place. These have impacted my writing and the way I dealt with my research.

My first interview was with Katrina and Thalita, both thirteen years old, although Katrina clarified by saying she was "almost fourteen." I interviewed them together so they could help each other by translating or explaining when one of them had trouble with her English. My second interview was with a very quiet fourteen-year-old girl

named Julia who became more talkative as she got more comfortable. I also interviewed seventeen-year-old Anna. My final interview was with sixteen-year-old Paula from Friesland whom I knew because she occasionally visited De Borcht. All of my interviews were around thirty minutes long and they were all conducted in a private room at Club De Borcht.

I asked the girls a variety of questions relating to girlhood and femininity as it affected them and as they saw it in their community. The interviews often tended toward subjects like appearance and differences between adolescent girls and boys. The subjects were very willing to say what they did and did not like about typical girl behavior. They all discussed their views toward fashion and makeup and the image that certain girls present when they look a particular way. I found this especially intriguing because I am very interested in the impact of beauty standards on adolescent girls, and I wanted to see how this played out in the Netherlands. Throughout my interviews, I saw how they viewed a girl's ethnic background as an explanation for certain behavior. I also noted how they seemed to emphasize the importance of a girl having just the right amount of femininity—not too much and not too little. I will address these topics more specifically later.

## **BODY IMAGE AND THE MEDIA**

During teenage years and adolescence, girls become conscious of their bodies in comparison to others. Sometimes this can result in negative self-esteem and placing the blame on the body for all sorts of problems. Even in the Netherlands, girls are sent messages about living up to a standard of beauty, usually an American or “Hollywood”

image. This can result in eating disorders and other problems relating to sexuality, such as feeling undesirable. According to a Dutch study of 1188 girls in 2004, 80% of girls ages 13-18 had been dieting. About 50% of them were dieting in an “unhealthy way” as claimed by the researchers. They found this to be a source of concern regarding the eating patterns of teenaged girls.<sup>8</sup>

A study on Dutch teen girls’ eating patterns and body images claims that “In the Netherlands girls want to be admired, important and beautiful and this can be achieved by e.g. becoming a model. It is way to have status and even power.”<sup>9</sup> A Dutch girl calls the figures of models and pop stars “impossible bodies” that are meant to be admired and imitated by Dutch girls. However, this study found that Dutch girls did not want to “have an ‘ideal’ body to attract men,” but the majority of them still wished to change their bodies. This can be partly explained by the multitude of messages they receive about how to modify or alter their appearances.

To get a glimpse of what kind of messages are sent to teenage girls through the media, I picked up two different magazines targeted toward that demographic. One magazine was called *Meiden*, and the other, *Girlz*. To my surprise, both of the magazines came with a special gift: a pink beaded bracelet from *Girlz*, and a “magic” cover stick makeup pencil from *Meiden*. Apparently the magazines thought girls would appreciate something to enhance their appearance. This was very amusing to me since I was able to get a straightforward message about the intents of the magazines before even opening them. I will state before going into detail about the magazines that they do not represent

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<sup>8</sup> Ochoa, Ana Maria H., “Eating Patterns and their Relationship with Body Image among Dutch Teenagers.” August 2005.  
<<http://amma.socsci.uva.nl/theses/ochoa%20hoyos.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> See footnote 8

all girl culture and popular opinion. The magazines were written by adults based on what they believed would appeal to girls. Therefore, although it is helpful in delving deeper into the setting of Dutch girl culture, it cannot possibly be a true representation of their lives and values. However, seeing as these magazines do sell and they *are* popular, it is important to note that Dutch teenage girls are reading them.

Both magazines were full of images of celebrities, such as Miley Cyrus and Miranda Cosgrove. This shows the culture of celebrity worship and idolization. These young women were presented as role models that the readers should aspire to be like. For example, there was an article in *Girlz* about how to dress like Emma Roberts, who was described as “mega mooi” (beautiful) on the cover of *Meiden*. There were many sections of *Meiden* dedicated to fashion and appearance, emphasizing the importance of a girl looking her best. *Meiden* had an article about how to get a body like Beyoncé. There was also a section about how to look just like a model. This gives girls unrealistic expectations regarding their appearance. If magazines encourage simple changes to look like celebrities, then girls could lose confidence in the way they look. *Meiden* also included a short comic about what to do on a first date and an article about getting boys to like you. This encourages heterosexuality among girls without any mentioning of the possibility of homosexuality.

*Girlz* was very similar to *Meiden* in terms of content. There was more variation with articles about art and books, but there was still a strong focus on appearance. An article called “De Schaar in Je Haar” (or “Scissors in Your Hair”) gave hair inspiration by detailing celebrities who changed their hairstyles radically. Another article reviewed different makeup products. Many articles discussed fashion and accessories, citing the

most popular styles of the moment. However, there were also interviews with celebrities about a range of subjects, and advice columns also dealt with more personal problems that were not just related to boys or looking one's best. This magazine had lengthier articles with fewer pictures than *Meiden*, but it was still very heavy with makeup and clothing and stressing the importance of beauty. Like *Meiden*, *Girlz* also had many images and interviews with celebrities, giving something for Dutch girls to aspire to be like.

From what I have gathered from my small exposure to Dutch teen magazines, I can deduce that clothes, appearance, and boys should be important to Dutch teenage girls. Celebrities are used as an example and a model for how girls should look and act. Obviously these magazines are for a certain purpose, and these three focuses may be exactly the reason that girls buy them. However these values are still seen throughout my observations and interactions with real Dutch girls throughout my time spent with them.

In my interviews, I found many different answers regarding body image. Katrina said she knew some "really skinny" girls who think that they are fat. However, she said this was only for attention. Thalita also said that there are girls "who are fat who don't want to show their bodies because they're ashamed." According to Katrina, "Girls care horribly if they're skinny." They both said that being skinny was very important to girls, and not so much for boys. Thalita even said that girls think that if they are pretty and skinny, then they will have a lot of friends and boys will like them. It is important to note that this was said by the youngest of my interviewees, so they were already very aware of the importance of girls having a certain body type.

Julia specifically mentioned the media's influence on the body image of girls. She said, "I think on TV, they see girls with beautiful hair and beautiful skin and I think they think 'I want to be like her and her hair is always perfect,' but I think that they become unconfident because of that. Not always, but some girls." She said that some girls knew that a lot of time and effort went into making a woman look beautiful in a magazine or on television, but it still makes an impact on how they see themselves. She also said that she reads magazines like Cosmo Girl for tips "so [she] can look pretty."

Anna also said that she thinks some girls care about the messages in the media, including herself. She said, "You want to look good, and when you see someone that's like almost perfect then you're just like 'Aww I want to look like that too.'" About her friends, Anna said that during break in school, they check online sites about celebrities and they all talk about how they want their clothes and bodies. Paula also said that it is easy to ignore individual messages about beauty, such as in commercials and advertisements, but since they are seen everywhere, they obviously make some kind of impression. When it came to more specific body image problems, none of my interviewees could say they knew anyone with an eating disorder. Julia qualified her friend's body hate: "I know a girl. She thinks she's not very beautiful, but it's not that she hates herself. She just doesn't like her body." I think this is a significant qualification, because it shows that the body is not the only factor in a girl's happiness.

### **KEEPING UP APPEARANCES**

Beyond just the body, a girl's appearance was also a very important subject to my interviewees. The thirteen-year-olds were quick to share their opinions:



Thalita: “There are girls in our class that use makeup, and it’s pretty ugly, I think.”

Katrina: “They don’t know how to use it right.”

This kind of mockery for girls who attempted to look good but failed came up other times in my conversations. Thalita even stood up to give an impression of the manner in which some girls in her class walked. She pushed out her chest and rear end with her arm bent as if she was carrying a purse. She walked with her nose in the air and swayed her hips from side to side. I assumed this must have been a somewhat accurate portrayal of some girls because Katrina erupted in laughter as Thalita was performing.

Another thing Thalita and Katrina found offensive was when other girls wear clothing that is apparently too tight for them. This, they claimed, was mostly “Alloctonen,” or girls who are not ethnically Dutch. As Thalita said, “They are from places like Morocco and the parents are born there and the children are born here.” However, they said Dutch girls sometimes wore the same kind of tight clothing and revealing shirts. “Some girls,” Thalita said, “their shirts are so low that their boobs fall out.” This conversation immediately led to a discussion of young sexual practices, as Katrina said that there was a girl in their class who was pregnant. I found it interesting how they made the link so quickly between appearance and sex, even at such a young age. Katrina then said, “The girl who is pregnant in our school, I don’t think that her mom said, ‘Oh don’t have sex, don’t wear those clothes.’ I think that her mom does not care about her.” This shows how Katrina sees a clear connection between appearance and sexual activity: if someone does not watch out for a girl’s clothing, then it can lead to things like pregnancy.

This attitude toward their peers being over-sexual became even clearer. In regards to dating and sex, Thalita said “Some girls it’s really extreme—not only in our school but in other schools. They’re really into guys and they try and pretend to be sexy, to seem really high or something when they are really low.” I found this statement puzzling at first. She had claimed that girls her age act and dress sexy in order to give a good impression, but in reality they are “low”, or less respectable.

Despite their apparent disapproval of such behavior, the girls still acknowledged that looking attractive was important. I asked if it would be important for girls to try and look their best if they are older, around 17 years old, I suggested. Thalita replied quickly: “Well, if you want a boyfriend, yes. If you don’t want a boyfriend or nothing and you don’t care about anything, then you can wear normal things.” She said as if it were the obvious response. Katrina also said that caring about your appearance when you are older is important because then you have to look nice for a job and for money.

Seventeen-year-old Anna also had a lot to say on the various appearances of girls her age. She commented that girls’ fashion could range from very revealing to very covered up. She also mentioned that even Muslim girls who wear the veil can also wear otherwise revealing clothing, which she found puzzling. She personally did not enjoy the more revealing clothing that she said some Dutch girls wear.

Anna: “I don’t wear, like, shorts that go up to here where you can almost see your underwear. And also I don’t like if somebody wears something really open. I think that the really Dutch girls, if it’s summer, they wear really short things. And I’m not like that, I wouldn’t wear that.”

Anna also said that she even knew some “really, really girly-girly girls” who have even skipped school to style their hair. However, she felt that she was in the middle of the spectrum on appearance, since some girls cared far more than her and others cared far less. She said, “You have girls that are wearing really short things and you know, I think, ‘Why are you wearing that?’ It’s really like underwear. And you have girls, like Muslim girls here who cover everything up.” Anna said that there was a large variety of how Dutch girls expressed themselves through their appearance.

Julia also said that she thought sometimes, in her opinion, excessive focus on appearance made girls “think that they are ugly without makeup and they need it all the time.” Paula also said similarly that “girls who wear makeup all the time are just making up for bad things about themselves.” Paula seemed to express some disapproval with girls who cared a lot about how they looked, although she also shared that she was interested in fashion. For her, these two were different because fashion was for herself, and it was not just a way to impress people like she thought other girls were trying to do.

When I asked my interviewees why they thought girls cared about their appearances, they had mixed responses. Katrina said, “Girls do that just for boys. They want the boys to be in love with them. But if you want a boy to be in love with you, then you don’t have to have makeup and the boy will love you for yourself.” This was interesting because it seemed like she thought girls who looked good would only be loved for their appearances. However, Julia said she thought that girls try to look good for themselves *and* for boys. Julia said that sometimes taking extra time on her appearance makes her feel good, and she is not just doing it to impress boys. According to sixteen-year-old Paula, “Girls can look nice for themselves, but sometimes when they try too

hard and you can tell, then I think it's for boys." The girls I interviewed seemed to have both positive and negative opinions on their female peers caring about how they look. Two of the girls, Anna and Julia, said they wear makeup fairly regularly, and yet they too said it was problematic for girls to become too obsessed with how they look. All five of the girls also agreed that it was important for a woman to look her best for a job interview or something similar. They seemed to be aware that looking a certain way sent a message about the kind of person a girl or a woman is.

## **WOMEN IN THE NETHERLANDS**

To view the responses and attitudes of my interviewees in a proper setting, it is important to discuss the broader situation of women in the Netherlands. From an outside feminist perspective, the role of women in the Netherlands is a very complicated issue. On one hand, Dutch women rank very high in terms of happiness and well-being in comparison to other countries. But a very high percentage of Dutch women only work part-time and do not wish to change this. Around 75 percent of Dutch women are employed part-time according to a 2011 study.<sup>10</sup> They are typically the home-makers who take care of children. They have free time to participate in various activities and clubs. As an outsider, I was very surprised to see this in a country I had thought of as very "progressive." However, it is not necessarily a problem; it is just noteworthy especially in relationship to studying teenage girls.

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<sup>10</sup> Ward, Claire. "How Dutch Women Got to Be the Happiest in the World." *Macleans.ca*. 19 Aug. 2011.

Web. 10 Apr. 2012. <<http://www2.macleans.ca/2011/08/19/the-feminismhappiness-axis/>>.

Many other laws and rights regarding women are quite progressive. For example, they have many reproductive rights and high rates of political participation.<sup>11</sup> However, 25 percent of Dutch women do not even make enough money to be considered financially independent. The pay gap between genders is one of the highest in Europe because of so many women working part time. As opposed to this gap causing an outrage over gender inequality, Dutch women actually try harder to protect their right to work part-time. An article in Slate Magazine regarding women's part-time work states that a law was passed in 2000 "mandating that women have the right to cut back hours at their jobs without repercussions from employers."<sup>12</sup>

Many non-Dutch western feminists view this as shocking that Dutch women do not seek employment equality. The book, *Dutch Women Don't Get Depressed*, states that compared to women in other Western countries, Dutch women consistently rank low in terms of representation in top business and governmental positions.<sup>13</sup> However, this comparison between happiness and lack of leadership roles may not be as troubling as it sounds. Marie Louise Van Haeren, a 52-year-old Dutch woman, says, "Dutch women do not aspire to top positions because they do not want to encourage the values of the business models of today's world. It is a silent resistance movement... Women protect

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<sup>11</sup> Olien, Jessica. "Women in the Netherlands Work Less, Have Lesser Titles and a Big Gender Pay Gap, and They Love It." *Slate Magazine*. 15 Nov. 2010.

<[http://www.slate.com/articles/double\\_x/doublex/2010/11/going\\_dutch.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2010/11/going_dutch.html)>.

<sup>12</sup> Olien, Jessica. "Women in the Netherlands Work Less, Have Lesser Titles and a Big Gender Pay Gap, and They Love It." *Slate Magazine*. 15 Nov. 2010.

<[http://www.slate.com/articles/double\\_x/doublex/2010/11/going\\_dutch.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2010/11/going_dutch.html)>.

<sup>13</sup> De Bruin, Ellen. *Dutch Women Don't Get Depressed: Hoe Komen Die Vrouwen Zo Stoer?* Amsterdam: Contact, 2007.

the possibility that one day we'll wake up to realize that life is not all about acquiring more material wealth, power, status."<sup>14</sup>

It is very important to realize that this is the setting in which the Dutch teenagers I interviewed are living. It is very possible that their futures will be much like the average Dutch woman today. However, it is also possible that certain movements will take place that will encourage more changes in careers for women as time goes by. It is also necessary to realize what this means for gender roles outside of the workplace and the home. If these divisions between men and women are so significant in adulthood, then there must also be other significant differences in girls and boys from childhood through their teenage years.

When I mentioned the roles of adult women in the Netherlands, Anna had the most passionate response. This was probably due to the fact that she was the oldest girl I interviewed, so "adulthood" was closest for her. I asked her what the thought of the large amount of women who work part-time in the Netherlands, and she responded very strongly.

Anna: "No, I'll never do that. . . I worked *so* hard for my school and all that. I'm not going to work part time, no. I will put my kid in daycare or something like that or I'll bring it to my grandmother. I really want to work. Only if my man, you know, maybe if we put a schedule or something like that. But no, I don't think it's fair if I stay home the whole time all day and he works. I finished my school too, I worked hard too. I'm not going to work part-time. Full time."

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<sup>14</sup> Ward, Claire. "How Dutch Women Got to Be the Happiest in the World." *Macleans.ca*. 19 Aug. 2011. Web. 10 Apr. 2012. <<http://www2.macleans.ca/2011/08/19/the-feminismhappiness-axis/>>.

Anna had mentioned to me several times that she was currently in VWO, the highest level of classes for secondary school in the Netherlands. She was working very hard and struggling with learning English vocabulary words that even I did not know. I think that to her, the idea of throwing away her education for a part-time job was appalling.

I asked her if girls her age held similar views, and yet again she highlighted the variance among cultures in Amsterdam. She noted that it was very popular among Muslim girls her age to plan to stay at home with their children. Anna expressed disbelief at this, saying “Why are you going to school? It’s hard and you have to learn a lot and you have to work hard and you can’t always do really fun things. Why are you doing VWO if you will stay home with the kids?” She also said of the Muslim girls her age that they want to have children by age 20 or 21. Anna was again shocked by this, saying that VWO schooling would not be complete until she is around age 26, so the Muslim girls would not even be able to finish school. She cited her parents as possible reasons behind her strong feelings about school and being independent. She said, “My mother had me when she was 20 and she’s really like ‘No, Anna, have kids when you’re 30 or 35. Enjoy your life.’” Also in regards to her parents and their relationship, Anna said that they always dealt with housework and cooking equally. She said this was a strong influence on her and she would not like the dynamic where the ‘mother does everything in the house and the father just works and then lies down on the couch.’”

The younger girls did not have such strong reactions to my question about Dutch women. Julia said she could only speak for her parents’ dynamic, but her mother was unable to work, so it was not representative of all the Netherlands. She did not see my question as personally related to her and her future, so she did not comment on how

Dutch women and employment might affect her. Paula also said that she thought that women who worked full-time and had children were “not being fair to the kids.” But she, like Anna, wanted to see her schooling pay off later on. She suggested that when the child is old enough, then the mother can work.

Thalita and Katrina said that most women do stay home with the children, but Thalita also mentioned that there are also single parents. About situations where both parents are working, she said, “I feel really sad for the child because they don’t have brother or sister and they’re really lonely and don’t have much time with their parents. That’s not nice, I think.” Katrina also agreed, saying “I think it’s good that women can stay home so that the child won’t be alone.” But Thalita then clarified her former statement by saying, “I think also that the woman needs to be able to work because it’s not fair for the woman to only be at home.” They did not seem to have a solution for women who wanted to balance the need to stay home with the need to be at work.

With this subject on women and the Netherlands, there are many different ways to address the views presented by the girls I interviewed. Although Anna is critiquing Muslim girls for their future plans to stay at home, the other girls see caring about the family in this way as understandable. Also, I previously mentioned how Anna found a variation within how girls dress, with the Muslim girls as the most covered. These comments could be related to generally feelings of Islamophobia or xenophobia and not just linked to negative feelings toward a different kind of female behavior. Of course in all studies, intersectionality will play a role in how research can be analyzed.

## **ANTI-FEMININITY AND GIRL HATE**



Throughout my interviews, I noticed a pattern of shaming girls who tried too hard to behave or look a certain way that represented them as females. This can be considered excessive femininity, although I am the one making a connection between such things—tight or revealing clothes, makeup, interest in shopping, etc.—as feminine, and the girls themselves merely associated it with other girls and not with the word “femininity.” As I have previously discussed, girls who care too much about how they look are considered vain and searching for attention. Also, when I asked my subjects to tell me what activities were predominantly feminine or practiced by girls, all five of them first suggested shopping. Paula and Katrina then used this to say that girls were very superficial.

Interviewees often categorized all girls together to link them to what they considered bad or undesirable behavior. For instance, each of the girls I spoke to explicitly referred to girls as bitchy or gossipy or both. They also tended to compare girls to boys, with focus on boys’ good qualities when it came to friendship. Anna said, “When was younger in my other class I had many boys who are, like, funny and the girls were just more really like gossipy and I didn’t like that that much, so I was more with boys. It was really fun.” She also added, “I think sometimes I think boys are funnier because they don’t really gossip as much as girls do.” Fourteen-year-old Julia also jumped at the opportunity to talk about her friends, saying that she had just gotten into a fight with her girl friends and much preferred hanging out with guys. Of the girls, she said, “They talk about each other to each other and gossip and all that stuff. They sometimes forgot me or just things like that. I think girls are sometimes very... bitchy to each other and boys are just relaxed.” She claimed she could “just hang out” with the boys without worrying about them talking about her behind her back.

This attitude toward “bitchy” girls was present when discussing identity and “normalness” as a teenager. Thalita tried to explain the difference between boys and girls in groups. She said that boys are not so quick to judge someone in their group who does not share the same interests as them. She said the boys might tease their friend for being different, but with girls, “they are really more bitchy.” Girls, in her opinion, were more likely to disapprove if their friends were behaving in a way that made them stand out from others. Paula also said that “Girls are sometimes too stuck-up and they only care about boys and clothes. I don’t like that.” This pattern of putting down girls in general came from girls themselves, which made me sense some of their internal misogyny.

This kind of attitude toward girls only does more harm if it is believed by girls themselves. These Dutch girls are only supporting anti-feminine and anti-women messages. By believing that all girls are bitches, the girls seem to exclude themselves from these broad generalizations. However, it is unfair for them to think of all girls as being a certain way when there are obviously many exceptions. In regards to the anti-femininity they presented when talking badly about girls who dressed and walked a certain way, they are just “reinforcing the idea that to be feminine and a woman is wrong, that women who want to be taken seriously need to be more masculine” according to one blogger about anti-femininity among girls.<sup>15</sup> This idea of “femmephobia,” as anti-femininity is often coined in feminist circles, may be a backlash of approaching equality. With women gaining many rights, it becomes easy for them to look back on how things *once were* regarding gender inequality. This can lead to girls rejecting stereotypical feminine behavior and activities because of their relation to gender inequality. When a

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<sup>15</sup> "Get Your Anti-Femininity Out of My Feminism." 7 Mar. 2011. Web. 15 Apr. 2012.

<[http://meloukhia.net/2011/03/get\\_your\\_antifemininity\\_out\\_of\\_my\\_feminism.html](http://meloukhia.net/2011/03/get_your_antifemininity_out_of_my_feminism.html)>.

culture views feminine behavior as bad or less than men's, it impacts more than just women, and it can be harmful to a man who does not uphold the standards of "manliness" either. The girls I interviewed probably do not think that their way of thinking is problematic, which may be the most problematic of all.

### **HOW GIRLY IS TOO GIRLY?**

My conversations and interviews with the Dutch teenage girls were very eye-opening. A common theme within the interviews was the importance of acting with just the right amount of girlish presentation. As Julia said, it is important that a girl "cares about her appearance, but she also likes sports and hanging out with guys." Julia said of herself: "I'm girly too. I like shopping and stuff. But I love sports and yeah just hanging out with boys." She thought this kind of middle ground between girly and tomboyish was the perfect place for a girl to be. Paula said, "I think sometimes it's confusing because girls are supposed to look pretty and like certain things but then people don't take you as seriously." This emphasizes the underlying misogyny behind avoiding feminine behavior since it is associated with women.

The girls I interviewed also gave a range of answers on what kind of girl they thought boys were most interested in. Anna was not certain, but she still offered her opinion: "I think boys really like girly-girly girls, with you know, like big boobs and butts, and that kind of stuff. I don't know. You have also boys that really like boyish girls, but I don't know." She also said she thought boys liked it when girls wore shirts

that were low cut and open so that boys can see their cleavage. According to Katrina, boys want girls with nice hair and wear tops that are low-cut. Thalita said they like girls who care how they dress. However, both said that boys would not like it if a girl only wanted to do “girly” things all the time, which they explained as shopping and watching romantic movies. Julia said, “Yeah I think boys love girly, but tomboys too. I think it has to be not too girly. A little bit tomboyish too, yes.” This seemed to be a theme throughout my interviews, that it was best for a girl to act not too girly and not too tomboyish.

This attitude also applied to friends as well. Anna said that she preferred a mix of girly and tomboyish girl friends. She said she had one friend who plays football and is really “like a boy” which she said was great. Anna said, “I don’t have to have only girly-girly friends to go with them to do stuff. It’s fun with her too, you know. I don’t play football or something, but you know, it’s fun. I think it’s better to have all kinds of people around you and not only just the girly-girly friends.” Paula also said that sometimes if she wanted to talk to a friend about fashion, she liked having girlier friends, but less girly girls were fun to play sports with and joke around with. According to the girls I interviewed, femininity was acceptable as long as it was not performed too strongly. The most desirable behavior for a girl was to act somewhere between a “girly girl” and a “tomboy.”

## **CONCLUSION**

To answer my primary question, I can say that Dutch teenage girls are caught between the pull to act more masculine and the pull to act more feminine. These are, of course, variable norms since there is no absolute definition of masculinity and femininity.

But from my research, I gathered that excessively superficial and sexualized appearance and gossipy interaction were understood to the girls as unacceptable femininity. They see this performance of femininity in a negative way, but femininity itself as not as much of a problem. But yes, acting and appearing feminine is important to them, but it is only acceptable up to a certain point. At this point, girls are called out for “trying too hard” and being representative of other negative female qualities. By hating on each other, girls are inadvertently encouraging negative stereotypes of themselves. This kind of girl hate only encourages others that these qualities of bitchy and gossipy are directly associated with all girls, when that is just not the case. However, the girls I interviewed are also open to changing standards of gender, as is seen in their views regarding the roles of Dutch women. This suggests that there is a possibility of blurring certain gender lines more in the future, which could work as a possible solution for misogynistic behavior in girls.

The girls I interviewed receive mixed messages from their peers and the media about how being a tomboy is desirable and that girly things are frivolous and silly. But there is also an overwhelming importance placed on taking care of one’s appearance and acting in a certain feminine way. The girls I interviewed feel the need to fit exactly in the middle of a femininity scale so as to be more accepted. Girls are encouraged to engage in more masculine activities and interests; however, they are also judged if they do not represent the female ideal of beauty. But according to them, girls should not care too much about their appearance, because it will make them seem vain and desiring attention. This obviously impacts the way these girls view other girls and women. The girls I

interviewed find the current adult role for women in the Netherlands restricting as it limits their potential, especially in the work place.

I was looking for the views of teenage girls on femininity, but I found so many other interesting things that could be further researched. For example, I think whole studies could be done based on what my subjects said about femininity and race among teenage girls. Another idea would be to compare teenage girls' attitudes toward femininity with the United States. Also it could be beneficial to study feminine representation in Dutch media more closely. I think it would also be extremely interesting to do a study on young women (18-25) and their views on women's part-time work in the Netherlands related to their personal career plans. Also, I think focusing entirely on misogyny among women of any ages would be another possible study. There are so many different ways this research project has inspired my interests, causing me to learn so much more about the group that I researched and the Netherlands as a whole.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **Interview questions**

- What are some things that generally only girls like?
- How would you define “girliness”?
- What do you think are some things that can be considered “girly”?
- Do girls your age wear makeup?
- At your age, how much do you think girls care about how they look?
- Why do you think they care? (Boys? Self-esteem?)
- Do you think that guys would prefer it if a girl was more girly or more like a tomboy? (*I only used these terms—girly and tomboy—after interviewees did.*)
- How important do you think it is for you to try and look your best?
- How much do you think guys your age care about how they look?

- If a boy doesn't like boyish things and a girl doesn't like girly things, then is that a problem?
- In your opinion, does it matter if a girl acts girly or not?
- At your age, do you know of any girls who are having problems with how they see their body?
- Do you know of anyone suffering from an eating disorder?
- Do you or other girls your age read any magazines like Meiden, Girlz, and Cosmo Girl?
- What kind of messages do you and girls your age get from the media about how important it is to look or act?
- Do you think that girls care about the messages in the media about how to look?
- Do you hang out more with guys or girls?
- In the Netherlands, what I found out is that women are mostly the ones who work part time and stay at home with their children. Do you have any thoughts on this?