‘You can never do right’

A qualitative research on sexual norms and double standards among emerging adults

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the gendered sexual norms employed by emerging adults (18-25) and the role these norms play in their sexual identity. 5 focus groups and 3 duo-interviews were conducted, and in total 28 respondents were interviewed of whom 21 were female and 7 were male. An interdisciplinary approach was used by exploring sociological notions of sexualisation and Bauman's (2003) theory of liquid love in the psychological context of emerging adulthood, drawing on gender theory to explain how sexual norms and double standards are socially constructed. A grounded theory approach was used to explore themes regarding (gendered) sexual norms and double standards. Results showed that emerging adults' sexual identities are under constant scrutiny through judgements by others or self-judgement. Furthermore, emerging adults are confronted with multiple double standards and conflicting messages regarding sexual norms. Although sexual norms proved to be gendered, this research shows that the current emphasis on the victimisation of women should be nuanced, since both men and women are confronted with double standards and conflicting messages regarding sex. This study demonstrates that emerging adults engage in acts to resist gender stereotypes. Hence, regarding their sexual identity, emerging adults are neither fully empowered nor passive subjects.

“Is it not so that when everything is said about the matters most important to human life, the most important things remain unsaid?”

Zygmunt Bauman

Foreword

Here it is, my thesis. Five months ago I would not have imagined the amount of energy and emotion I put into this project. This thesis has a high personal value for me, in spite of, or maybe even despite the fact that I never thought it would have. The fact that I spent almost an hour on writing this foreword says it all.

First of all I would like to thank Yatun Sastramidjaja for always being there at any time, for any problem or issue. Yatun, thank you for having faith in me. Secondly I would like to thank Ottilie Kranenburg, for reading my thesis and providing me with relevant feedback. I would like to thank my friends and family. Special thanks go to Fleur Ydema.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my respondents, for being so open about a topic that is so sensitive and personal. I enjoyed every minute of the interviews, and learned a lot from them. Enjoy reading!

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1. Introduction

In today's society, sex and sexuality have become evermore-present aspects of the world around us. Sex is visible in advertisings, television, movies, magazines, music and more. Television programmes with open displays of or discussions on sex and nudity seem to have become normalised. According to many scholars we have entered an era of 'sexualisation'; an era characterised by a preoccupation with sex through an increased visibility and presence of sex, a shift to more permissive attitudes towards all kinds of sexual behaviour and experience, an interest in scandals, controversies and panics surrounding sex and an alleged breakdown of rules and regulations regarding sex (Attwood, 2006; Renold & Ringrose, 2011).

This 'sexualisation' of society has specific implications for young people, as sex is increasingly linked to youth (Plummer, 1995 cited in Attwood, 2006). In popular discourses today's youth are often portrayed as being sexually liberated. In an online article about generation Y, Morris (2014) states: "Ideas of whom one can sleep with and how, and what that means in terms of one's sexual identity, have never been more fluid. The possibilities have never been so undefined". This liberal account of modern sexuality operates in a more general discourse of individualisation in which people are decreasingly bound to traditional institutions and increasingly expected to make their own decisions and choose their own way of life (Schnabel, 2004).

Despite these positive stories emphasising the new sexual possibilities in today's society, sex is the regular focus of moral panics. In both popular discourses and scientific literature, much attention has been given to double standards (see for example Bergman, 2013), about the 'objectification' of women (Renold & Ringrose, 2011) and about the emerging 'rape culture' and 'hook-up culture' among young adults (Arnold, 2012; Bradshaw, 2010; Garcia & Reiber, 2008). These moral panics surrounding sexuality are inextricably linked to issues of gender. Moral panics mainly focus on (young) females, and in both scientific as well as popular discourses girls are being victimised (Renold & Ringrose, 2011). A good example of this is the Dutch documentary 'Sletvrees' (Slutfear) by Sunny Bergman, in which she points to double standards and the hypocrite way people often talk and act concerning sex and sexuality.

These concerns are not unfounded. Research has shown that strongly gendered sexual stereotypes persist, and that the double standard in sex still prevails among young adults (Martin, 1996, cited in Crawford and Popp, 2003; Kreager & Staff, 2009). Young people are confronted with multiple double messages and double standards with regard to sex. While boys are generally praised for having sexual contacts, girls are

condemned or penalised for similar behaviours. At the same time, girls are expected to be good-looking and sexy, but they are in constant jeopardy of being called a 'slut' (Crawford & Popp, 2003).

As a young person and a student, I have experienced many of these contemporary sexual norms myself. My first intentions for this thesis were to explore gender stereotypes concerning work, households and sexuality. Soon however, I came to the conclusion that this subject needed to be specified further. After experiencing a break up I entered a period in which I became highly aware of the sexual norms with which young people are confronted. When I read a research conducted by Sylvia Holla about sexual behaviour of teenagers (Buijs, Geesink & Holla, 2014), I realised that sexual practices are more gendered than is often presumed. As biological determinism becomes evermore popular (Swaab, 2010; Verhoeven, 2014), sexuality is often explained in terms of biology, genetics and evolution.

This thesis is both a reaction to this biological determinism, as well as an exploration of the extent to which sexual norms influence the lives of emerging adults. What role do gendered sexual norms play in the lives and identities of emerging adults? This study will explore the role of gendered sexual norms in the sexual identity construction of emerging adults (18-25) by conducting focus groups and duo interviews. Before stating the problem definition and research questions, a theoretical framework with relevant concepts and theories regarding sexuality, sexual norms and sexual identity will be provided.

A reflective and iterative way of working played a significant role in the entire research process regarding this thesis and in the actual written product. After encountering many challenges, it was only in the end that I recognised that this thesis is based on a grounded theory process. For the reader of this thesis it is important to realise this beforehand. Large parts of the theoretical framework, the operationalisation of central concepts and the methods section were rewritten after the interviews were conducted.

2. Theoretical framework

Perceptions of sex and sexualities have substantially differed throughout history (Laqueur, 1990). Today there are still major differences in sexual paradigms within different disciplines. This theoretical framework will serve to explore the different perceptions on sex, sexuality and sexual identity in time and from different disciplinary perspectives. Sociological, psychological and gender theorist perspectives and their interrelatedness and common ground will be explored. Following a grounded theory approach, these theories should not be seen as a background to the study subject, but as an integral part of this study by using them to point to linkages between conditions, actions and consequences (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

In the first section, an evolutionary perspective on sex and sexuality will be briefly discussed and contrasted with social constructivist theories on sex and gender. By drawing on gender theorist Judith Butler (1990), it will be argued that sex and gender are social constructs. Moreover, this section serves to briefly explain Butler's notion of 'performativity'. The second section will give insight into sexual norms and to what extent sexual norms are gendered. Furthermore it will elaborate on contemporary sexual norms, elaborating on themes like sexualisation, Bauman's (2003) notion of 'liquid love', the hook-up culture and double standards. The third section will give a brief explanation of sexual identity and in what ways it interrelates with contemporary sexual norms and sociological theories on sexualisation described in section two. The fourth section serves to explore Arnett's (2007) psychological notion of 'emerging adulthood' and its connection with sexuality. The last section explains how this study is built on an interdisciplinary framework, by integrating concepts and theories from gender theory, sociology and psychology.

2.1 The social construction of sex and gender

According to Claude Lévi-Strauss (cited in Bauman, 2003, p. 38), 'the meeting of the sexes is the ground on which nature and culture first met; it is by the same token the starting point, the origin of all culture'. However, in popular discourses accounts of the cultural nature of sexuality is often ignored, reducing sexuality to a purely biological drive influenced only by genes and hormones (see for example Swaab, 2010; Verhoeven, 2014). Taking into account the influence of evolutionary perspectives on public

discourses about sexuality it is important to give a brief explanation of these perspectives. Hence, this section will briefly explain evolutionary perspectives on sexuality, to continue with the contrasting belief that notions of sex and sexuality are socially constructed; a belief fundamental to this thesis.

Darwin's concept of 'survival of the fittest' opened up possibilities to analyse sexual roles in an evolutionary perspective. In *The descent of man, and selection in relation to sex* (1871) Darwin notes the male's eagerness and more developed sexual character, in contrast to the female's coyness and passive sexual attitude. Following his statements, an extensive tradition of evolutionary research on sex roles arose, which still prevails today. According to Oliver and Shibley Hyde (1993) there are two ways in which sociobiologists have explained the existence of differences in sexual behaviour between men and women. One way to explain these differences is the relative affluence of sperm and scarceness of eggs. From an evolutionary point of view it is logical for men to be promiscuous but for women to be choosy about whom to allow to fertilise her scarce eggs. Another way to explain sexual difference is through the 'parental investment theory' (Trivers, 1972). Since women spend 9 months being pregnant, they thus invest much more time and energy in raising offspring than men. Therefore, women have more reasons to want to ensure their offspring's viability, but also to be choosy when picking a mate (Trivers, 1972).

However, while it is questionable if these theories are correct (Knight, 2002), the very premise on which these theories are built (males are promiscuous and females are coy) does not seem to hold. There are numerous examples of species in which females are promiscuous (Birkhead & Moller, 1998). Moreover, evolutionary accounts of differences in sexual behaviour fail to explain developmental changes with regard to sexual behaviour that occur during aging (Oliver & Shibley Hyde, 1993). Furthermore, an historical analysis of sexuality shows that in the past, notions of male promiscuity and female coyness did not exist (Laqueur, 1990).

In contrast to what one might expect, notions of women as passive and a-sexual beings are relatively new. From the ancient past, women - in contrast to men - were seen as sexual beings (Laqueur, 1990). According to Laqueur (1990) the 'commonplace of much contemporary psychology - that men want sex while women want relationships' is exactly the opposite of pre-enlightenment notions that 'equated friendship with men and fleshliness with women' (p. 3, 4). During the enlightenment, a time of scientific revolutions, understandings of sexuality changed radically. As Laqueur (1990) points out, the discovery that an orgasm is irrelevant to conception led to the notion of female passivity and passionlessness. The fact that different sexual stereotypes

and norms have existed throughout history illustrates that they are socially constructed.

For many people, sex and its associated gender is the most natural thing in their life. It is mostly when people do not conform to gender binaries or gender norms that the constructed nature of sex and gender shows. Butler (1990) uses examples of so-called deviant cases to illustrate that sex and gender are constructed. According to her, sex can never be defined as a binary because there are many people who do not fall within normal categories of men and women. Butler poses the question:
is sex just anatomical or is it hormonal, chromosomal, psychological or genetical? And even if we would know of which components sex is made up, the question would still be: what counts as feminine, and what counts as masculine (Butler, 1990)?

The existence of intersex people perfectly illustrates that sex and gender are socially constructed concepts. Intersex people, people that cannot be identified as male or female because of deviant genitals, gonads or chromosomes, show that the binary categorisation of sex is not inclusive and therefore not relevant. Butler states that "the strange, the incoherent, that which falls "outside," gives us a way of understanding the taken-for-granted world of sexual categorization as a constructed one, indeed, as one that might well be constructed differently" (Butler, 1990, p. 140). Therefore, Butler argues that there is no behaviour that is inherently 'male' or 'female', because these categories do not even exist. Gender roles, or 'beliefs, behaviours and attitudes that a society considers appropriate to men and women' (Zucker, 2001, cited in Martinez et. al, 2010) are thus social constructs.

According to Butler, the social constructions of sex and gender are manifested through gender roles. Using the term 'performativity', she argues that people 'perform' certain gender roles both produced by and reinforcing dominant norms in society. Butler states that gender roles are not innate, and rather than gender being something we *are* she sees gender as something we *do* (Lloyd, 1999). However, Butler stresses that performativity is not a theatrical act, but the recitation and the repetition of acts that constitute gender identity. This means that we acquire our gender identity in a social context, as a subtle process of socialisation that starts from the moment we are born. Performativity is therefore not about deliberately choosing a gender identity. We learn how to become a 'woman' or 'man' long before we identify ourselves with a certain gender.

Gender norms are present in many areas, including sexuality. Gender norms influence our sexual identity (Arnold, 2010), and many sexual norms are highly gendered (Crawford and Popp, 2003). In the following section, an exploration of sexual norms and the extent to which those norms are gendered will be presented.

2.2 Sexual norms in an individualised society

Norms can be defined as 'guidelines that people follow in their relations with one another; they are shared standards of desirable behaviour' (Sherwin & Corbett, 1985, p. 258). Drawing on this definition of norms, sexual norms can be seen as shared standards of desirable *sexual* behaviour. Sexual norms are often highly gendered, which means that norms often differ for men and women. This leads to double standards; similar behaviour is judged differently for men and women. According to Kreager and Staff (2009), gender-specific norms with regard to sex control the appropriate number of sex partners, under which circumstances it is accepted to engage in sexual activity and the appropriate motives for sexual activity for men and women.

Sexual norms have differed in different time periods. As mentioned in the previous section, notions of women as passive and a-sexual are relatively new (Lacqueur, 1990). The enlightenment radically changed ancient preconceptions of sex and love, as did the relatively recent sexual revolution in the second half of the twentieth century (Lacqueur, 1990; Crawford and Popp, 2003). Nowadays, processes of individualisation seem to be changing our perception of the world, and the way we want to live our lives (Schnabel, 2004). Traditional institutions like family, marriage and religion are gradually breaking down and people are expected to make their own decisions and be agents of their own lives (Schnabel, 2004). This 'individualisation' has important effects for sexual paradigms, understandings of sexuality and their role in the contemporary society. This section will serve to explore contemporary sexual paradigms and their associated sexual norms, highlighting the themes sexualisation, hook up culture and double standards.

2.3.1 Sexualisation

The media often convey the message that the current generation Y is the most sexually liberated generation that has existed (Morris, 2014). There is a widespread belief that modern conceptions of sexuality are breaking down and that we have entered an era of 'sexualisation' (Attwood, 2006). This sexualisation implies a preoccupation with sex in all domains of society. Attwood (2006) describes this sexualisation as 'a contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities; the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; the emergence of new forms of sexual experience; the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations

designed to keep the obscene at bay; our fondness for scandals, controversies and panics around sex' (p. 78). These discourses of sex are frequently centred on youths (Plummer, 1995 cited in Attwood, 2006).

Sexualisation is a debated term, with little clarity as to what the term actually means. According to Buijs, Geesink and Holla (2014), in many cases the term is used in a negative context and with regard to moral panics. Hence, it is not surprising that there are many critics of the sexualisation discourse. In a critical analysis of the sexualisation discourse, Renold and Ringrose (2011) argue that this discourse focuses either on negative concepts like protectionism, victimisation and objectification, neglects girls' agency, rights and pleasures, and confirms existing sexual binaries, or focuses on positive concepts like sexual pleasure and sexual empowerment. According to Renold and Ringrose, current debates obscure 'the messy realities of lived sexual subjectivities and how girls may be positioned in these ways simultaneously' (ibid, p. 392). Following Renold and Ringrose (2011), it should be the objective of researchers to overcome the current problems in the sexualisation discourse and to prevent oversimplification.

Whether implicitly or explicitly, sex is increasingly visible in advertisements, magazines, movies, music, on television and in many other areas. As stated before, this discourse concerning the so-called sexualisation has often taken the form of moral panics, such as panicky discourses concerning the 'pornographication' of society (McNair, 1996, cited in Attwood, 2006). Moreover, both media and scholars have pointed to the allegedly emerging 'hook-up culture' in which young people engage in physical intimacy without expectations of a serious relationship (Arnold, 2010; Morris, 2014). The documentary *Sletvrees* mentioned in the introduction illustrates many of the aforementioned concerns and moral panics. As pointed out by Renold and Ringrose (2011), the preoccupation with the harmful and negative effects of sexualisation is problematic, but this does not mean that concerns regarding sexuality should be ignored. Despite the sexual revolution from the 1970's that permitted a move to more permissive sexual standards, in today's society people are still subject to restrictive norms and double standards (Crawford and Popp, 2003). Like the sexualisation discourse, Bauman's (2003) notion of liquid love describes the changing nature of human bonds. The next section will serve to explain this notion.

2.3.2 Liquid love

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that we are living in times of 'liquid modernity'. Our world has changed to a 'fluid world of globalization, deregulation and individualization' (Bauman, 2002, p. 19). In this world, long lasting structures are increasingly undermined, and all social constructions rely on a sense of 'rootlessness' (Lee, 2005). In this context of liquid modernity, Bauman introduces the notion of 'liquid love' (2003). According to Bauman, human relationships that were once solidified through institutions like marriage have become fluid. People increasingly lack durable bonds, and instead 'shop' for love and desire, turning love and sex into commodities.

According to Bauman (2003), self-definition and self-assertion are now central to human relationships, impeding the formation of lasting commitments. As Bauman states: 'In lasting commitments, liquid modern reason spies out oppression; in durable engagement, it sees incapacitating dependency. That reason denies rights to binding and bonds, spatial or temporal.' (p. 47). According to Bauman, this lack of permanent bonds causes the modern individual to be stuck with conflicting desires. On the one hand one must look for bonds with others and on the other hand one should keep these bonds loose. This leads to a permanent state of insecurity. The individual that has too much freedom starts looking for love and security, but the individual trapped in tightening relationships longs for freedom. In this way we can never be truly satisfied.

Sex and love, like other commodities, are seen as investments which might or might not be repaid. As Attwood (2006) explains, "While we may acquire a sense of our own power as we browse for love, we are also uneasily aware that, for others, we are sexual commodities, stocks and shares, and that we may not retain our value for them for very long." In this way, the relationships we engage in are without real bonds. Many forms of sexual experience fit within this context; the one-night stand, pornography, sex toys, commercial sex, cybersex and 'hooking up' (Attwood, 2006).

2.3.3 Hook up culture

A 'hook up' is defined as "a sexual encounter which may or may not include sexual intercourse, usually occurring between people who are strangers or brief acquaintances" (Paul, McManus & Hayes, 2000, p. 76). According to Bradshaw (2010),

'hooking up' has replaced dating on college campuses in the United States. Studies have found that there is a consensus on the script for a typical hook up:

> "Two people, usually strangers or casual friends, meet at a party or bar where they have been drinking alcoholic beverages; indicate their interest in one another through flirting, eye contact, or dancing; and engage in sexual behaviors ranging from kissing to sexual intercourse, with no commitment to a future relationship (Paul and Hayes, 2002, cited in Bradshaw)."

According to Bradshaw (2010), hooking up is a more egalitarian practice than traditional dating. Whereas traditional dating is a 'highly patriarchal affair' in which the man takes on an active and the woman a reactive role, hooking up is a practice free from many of the gendered norms present in traditional dating (p. 662). While only 29% of women and 16% of men in the United States state that both men and women can initiate a date, (Laner & Ventrone, 2000) 60% of college students believe that either a man or a woman can initiate a hook up (Paul & Hayes, 2002).

However, hook ups can still be gendered practices. Paul and Hayes (2002) reported that women often had feelings of regret and shame after engaging in a hook up, in contrast to men who rarely reported feelings of regret and shame after a hook up. Bradshaw (2010) attributes this to the prevailing double standard concerning sexual activity, which implies that women are condemned and men are praised for frequent sexual activity. Moreover, according to Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) hook-ups and relationships are characterised by a male dominance on college campuses: with regard to hook-ups men are the actors, women the reactors. Many other articles support this assumption. Bradshaw (2010) emphasises that in most sexual relationships women have the least gains in relation to men. Moreover, Bradshaw states that with regard to sex and sexuality, men are mostly the agent and women only have the right to veto. This assumption characterises most sexualisation discourses, which mainly emphasise male dominance and female suppression.

2.3.4 Gendered sexual norms and double standards

Sexual norms have traditionally been gendered, implying that different sexual norms have existed for men and women. According to Crawford and Popp (2003), women are traditionally stigmatised for engaging in sexual activity outside marriage, while men are

encouraged for this behaviour. Reiss (1967, cited in Crawford and Popp, 2003), one of the first scholars to analyse double standards, hypothesised that sex roles would become more egalitarian and double standards would be decreasing. On the basis of evidence from his own research and on the basis of societal changes such as changing sex roles in labour, liberalisation in general, advances in health care leading to less risk of pregnancy and STD's and the breakdown of institutions such as the family, Reiss predicted that society would become more sexually liberated.

Crawford and Popp (2003) took this prediction as the basis of a systematic analysis of existing research on double standards, to analyse whether and to what extent double standards still prevail today. Their systematic analysis has shown that strongly gendered sexual stereotypes persist, and that double standards in sex still prevail among young adults (Crawford and Popp, 2003; Martin, 1996, cited in Crawford and Popp, 2003; Kreager & Staff, 2009). While it seems that the orthodox double standard about sexual activity outside marriage is decreasing, contemporary double standards have emerged that fit into the changing context of contemporary society. Crawford and Popp (2003) argue that 'the declining importance of the orthodox double standard has made way for double standards that are subtler but perhaps equally effective as a means of social control' (p. 23).

According to Crawford and Popp (2003), research has shown that double standards are multidimensional constructs, concerning multiple aspects of sexual behaviour. Double standards may be related to the amount of sexual partners, the context of the sexual encounter (e.g. within a relationship, date or one-night stand), the nature of the sexual encounter (casual or with emotional attachment), the age of the person engaging in the sexual encounter and many other dimensions. Contemporary double standards may not concern sexual activity outside marriage but sexual permissiveness in general. While boys are generally praised for having many sexual contacts, girls are condemned or penalised for similar behaviours. At the same time, girls are expected to be good-looking and sexy, but they are in constant jeopardy for being called a 'slut' (Crawford & Popp, 2003).

Comparing various studies concerned with double standards within different cultures, Crawford and Popp (2003) concluded that double standards are local constructions, differing across ethnic and cultural groups. However, a study by Ward and Taylor (1994, cited in Crawford and Popp, 2003) on double standards amongst minority cultures (Vietnamese, Portuguese, African American, White, Haitian, and Hispanic) showed that a focus on the negative consequences for women is a shared characteristic of double standards. Moreover, double standards are not only local

constructs, they are also individual constructs. Martin (1996, cited in Crawford and Popp, 2003) found that girls described enumerable fine lines when morally judging sexual behaviour. Hence, double standards are not static constructs, but highly contextualised, individually as well as locally.

2.4 Sexual identity

Until recently, literature about 'heterosexual identity development', as Worthington, Savoy, Dillon and Vernaglia (2002) name it, was almost non-existent. Nearly all literature on sexual identity addressed homosexual identity development, mainly focusing on sexual orientation (Worthington et al., 2002). Based on the few existing articles Worthington et al. (2002) proposed a new model of heterosexual identity development. They define heterosexual identity development as: 'the process by which people with a heterosexual sexual orientation identity (i.e., heterosexually identified individuals) identify with and express numerous aspects of their sexuality' (p. 497). They explicitly discriminate between 'sexual orientation identity' and 'sexual identity', two terms that are often used interchangeably. In contrast to sexual orientation identity, which Worthington et al. define as 'one's acceptance and recognition of sexual orientation', sexual identity is the 'comprehensive process involving self-definition more broadly as a sexual being' (p. 497). Even for those who are not sexually active, sexual identity plays an important role in the overall identity of young people (Arnold, 2010).

Worthington et al. (2002) stress the importance of including aspects of sexual identity beyond sexual orientation. They argue that sexual identity is multidimensional, with identity processes possibly overlapping; sexual orientation, sexual needs and values, preferences for sexual activities, partner characteristics and modes of sexual expression (p. 501). According to Arnold (2010), sexual identity can be influenced by biological and cultural factors, social context and religious orientation, systems of homonegativity, heterosexual privilege and socially constituted gender norms.

In the existing literature, most attention has been given to negative influences of gender norms on sexual identity, mainly focusing on young women as victims (Crawford and Popp, 2003; Katz & Farrow, 2000; Knuth-Bouracée, 2008, cited in Arnold, 2012). Katz and Farrow (2002) describe how double standards for women -who have to look sexy but at the same time resist their own sexual needs - can lead to negative sexual identities. A negative sexual identity implies viewing one's sexuality in terms of 'embarrassment or inhibition' (Katz & Farrow, 2002, p. 782). According to Katz and

Farrow, women's self-standards are 'characterized by an ambivalence about sexual morality' (p. 801). Women feel compelled to take on a passive sexual role but at the same time please their sexual partner. Women are portrayed as being at risk of internalising normative standards as self-standards which may cause low self-esteem and the loss of sexual autonomy (Katz & Farrow, 2003).

In the context of individualisation as explained at the beginning of this chapter, sexuality is seen as an important aspect of personal development and fulfilment (Attwood, 2006). Furthermore, sex is increasingly linked to youth (Plummer, 1995, cited in Attwood, 2006). It is therefore probable that sexual identities are of increasing importance to young people, and this makes it important to analyse the alleged influence of gendered sexual norms. A newly emerging life phase for young people, coined by Arnett (2007) as 'emerging adulthood' constitutes an interesting context from which to analyse sexual identity. In the next section 'emerging adulthood' and its link with sexual identity is explored.

2.5 Emerging adulthood

As stated before, in today's modern world traditional institutions such as marriage, parenthood and religion are breaking down. This has important implications for young people. A new life phase is emerging for people who have left childhood with its associated supervision and dependence, but who have not yet entered adult life. Arnett (2007) introduced the term 'emerging adulthood' for this newly emerging life phase in industrialised countries. He describes this phase as a period in which young people (aged 18-25) are not bound to parental supervision, but at the same time are not yet experiencing the responsibilities of adulthood.

According to Arnett (2007), old paradigms of youth should be rejected, since traditional normative patterns of marrying, parenting, and getting a full-time job around the age of 20 are disappearing in industrialised countries. Arnett proposes five features that characterise emerging adulthood: identity explorations, instability, self-focused, feeling in-between and possibilities. These features characterise emerging adults in multiple domains of their lives, including sexuality and relationships. Arnett states that nowadays most emerging adults do not settle into long-term adult roles, but are 'trying out different experiences and gradually making their way toward enduring choices in love and work' (Arnett, 2007, p. 69).

Arnold (2010) argues that emerging adulthood matches with the current 'hook-

up' culture in college environments. He compares the typical college experience with what Erikson (1968, cited in Arnold, 2012) termed a 'psychological moratorium'; a time characterised by an absence of parental demands and adult responsibilities. This creates a perfect environment for sexual experimentation and identity construction. Combined with physical maturation and social role transitions this makes sexual identity exploration a normative part of emerging adulthood (Arnold, 2010). As today's youth increasingly experience a time period without the presence of both patronising adults and serious responsibilities, they encounter favourable circumstances for the identity exploration and self-definition associated with sexual identity (Arnett, 2007). According to Mannheim (cited in Ester, Vinken & Diepstraten, 2008) beliefs and attitudes acquired between the age of 15 and 25 are often maintained during adulthood, hence the sexual values and beliefs that emerging adults acquire are often adopted for life.

2.6 Interdisciplinarity

In this theoretical framework, theories and concepts from different scientific disciplines were presented that are integral to this study. As highlighted already throughout this chapter, concepts from different disciplines that were discussed are often related and sometimes overlap. It is therefore a logical consequence and inevitable that this study is interdisciplinary. This section will provide an insight into the interdisciplinary approach fundamental to this thesis.

Gender theory is fundamental to this study as it is used to describe how sex and gender, and therefore gendered sexual norms, are social constructs. However, norms and the people that endorse them are always embedded in a specific context, and for this reason both should be analysed within this specific context. The contexts analysed in this thesis are the sociological context of liquid love (Bauman, 2003) and the psychological context of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2007).

'Individualisation' seems to be the common ground of many of the theories used in this thesis: theories of sexualisation, Bauman's (2003) liquid love and Arnett's emerging adulthood (2007). These theories seem to be based on many of the same fundaments: the breaking down of institutions, the insecurities of contemporary society, the frailty of contemporary life, an emphasis on the individual (and on self expression, self assertion, self development, etc.). Furthermore, the theories and concepts explored both complement and supplement each other. The notion of emerging adulthood provides a suitable context for the pursuit of liquid love, and the 'hook up culture' is

inevitably facilitated by the contexts of sexualisation, liquid love and emerging adulthood. Moreover, the theories influence each other reciprocally. Sexualisation and its associated emphasis on commodification of sex cause an increasing pursuit of love, and vice versa.

This study therefore uses an interdisciplinary approach by analysing how gendered sexual norms may act on sexual identity in a context of the sociological notion of liquid love (Bauman, 2003) and the psychological notion of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2007). It is this interdisciplinary approach that makes this study particularly relevant; none of the existing studies have approached the relation between sexual norms and sexual identity by using gender theory, sociology and psychology together and in an integrated manner.

3. Problem definition and research questions

3.1 Introduction

As described in the theoretical framework, discourses of modern sexuality hold many paradoxes. Emerging adults are often portrayed as being the most sexually liberated compared to other generations. According to some scholars the current era is one of 'sexualisation' in which old paradigms and rules, regulations and categories are being broken down (Attwood, 2006). At the same time, moral panics with regard to sexuality and gender provide evidence that emerging adults are caught up in strict gender norms and that double standards play a role in emerging adults' sexual lives and identities, albeit in highly contextualised and fluid forms and thus more subtle (Martin, 1996, cited in Crawford and Popp, 2003; Kreager & Staff, 2009, Thompson, 1995, cited in Crawford and Popp).

Taking into account that the development of a sexual identity plays an important role in the development of the overall identity of young people (Arnold, 2012), the question arises how gendered sexual norms influence the identity construction of emerging adults. Especially in an individualising world, in which sexuality is seen as an important aspect of one's personal development and fulfilment (Plummer, 1995 cited in Attwood, 2006), it is important to explore the role of sexual gender norms on the sexual identity construction of emerging adults. According to Mannheim (cited in Ester, Vinken & Diepstraten, 2008) beliefs and attitudes acquired between the age of 15 and 25 are often maintained during adulthood, and are therefore an important predictor of future attitudes.

Little research has focused on exploring gendered sexual norms and double standards including their effects on (sexual) identity (for exceptions see Crawford and Popp, 2003). Most of the research that does address sexual norms and their influence on sexual identity has failed to take into account the influence of gendered sexual norms on men's identities and on the 'target's' identity'; the identity of the person targeted with sexual norms (Crawford and Popp, 2003). It is not only interesting to see what sexual norms youth employ, but also how their own sexual identity is influenced by sexual norms and double standards. Furthermore, most research is founded on the premise that men often have more agency regarding sexual behaviour than women (Bradshaw, 2010). This research will attempt to reject a priori expectations about agency, and instead rely on the respondent's own perception of agency. Feelings of empowerment and suppression will both be taken into account, filling the gap in the existing literature in which suppression is mainly emphasised. This research will explore sexual gender-

norms employed by young women and men and the role these norms play in their identity construction.

3.2 Research questions

Generation Y is said to be sexually liberated, but seems to be simultaneously confronted with strict gender norms and double standards with regard to sexual behaviour. What is the role of these gendered sexual norms in the sexual identities of emerging adults? How do these norms shape their values, needs and practices regarding sex? Is generation Y really sexually liberated, or are they constrained by gendered sexual norms? To answer the previous questions, the following question will be the primary focus of this research: **What is the role of gendered sexual norms in the sexual identity of emerging adults?**

This research will explore gendered sexual norms and double standards among emerging adults, and the way these norms play a role in their sexual identity. The focus on *gendered* sexual norms implies that this study will explore to what extent norms differ for men and women. Are sexual norms different for women and for men, and how do young people perceive these gendered sexual norms to play a role in their sexual identities? Furthermore, this research will highlight deviancy from the norms, and the associated consequences. As sexual norms are increasingly contextualised, deviancy will only show when people do not conform to those fluid norms. According to Crawford and Popp (2006), differential evaluations of men's and women's behaviour with regard to sex have important effects on the lives of young women. This research will try to explore if this is the case and to what extent, for both men and women as there is no reason to assume that men are not influenced by sexual norms. Central to this research will be a focus on double standards, moral judgements and deviance from the norms. A constructionist approach will be maintained by focusing on the ways sexual norms are constructed and how young people take up, negotiate and resist these norms in their identity construction. To answer the main question, the following sub-questions will be examined:

1. What gendered sexual norms are present in the sexual practices and discourses of emerging adults?

This question serves to explore the sexual norms employed by or present in the sexual practices and discourses of emerging adults within the context of one-night stands, dating and relationships. Furthermore, it is aimed to find out to what extent these norms

are gendered. Answers to this sub question can possibly nuance the emphasis on male dominance and female suppression in the existing literature, as it is expected that men as well as women experience both agency and suppression with regard to sexual norms.

2. How do emerging adults morally judge gendered sexual behaviour?

This sub question serves to analyse how respondents morally judge their own sexual behaviours, how they judge other people's sexual behaviours, and how this affects their sexual identities. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, sexual norms are still pervasive among emerging adults but in a subtle way, only surfacing when people do not conform to norms. What are the 'fine lines' that construct double standards among emerging adults (Thompson, 1995, cited in Crawford and Popp, 2003)? Expectations are that these fine lines are contextually negotiated and that double standards are common in the accounts of young adults; sexual behaviour will be morally judged differently for men and women (Martin, 1996, cited in Crawford and Popp, 2003; Kreager & Staff, 2009, Thompson, 1995 cited in Crawford and Popp; Bradshaw, 2010).

3. What are the consequences of deviance from sexual gender norms?

Deviance is inherent to social norms. This sub question will consider what happens when young adults do not conform to sexual norms. This question focuses on the consequences of deviance for both the respondent him- or herself as well as the consequences for peers. How imperative are sexual norms to emerging adults?

The previous sub questions will give an insight into what gendered sexual norms are present in emerging adults' discourses, how and to what extent they employ these norms and the consequences of these norms. These insights can be used to analyse the role of gendered sexual norms in the sexual identities of emerging adults. In this study Arnett's (2007) term emerging adulthood will be used to refer to people between the age of 18 and 30, instead of Arnett's definition of emerging adults as people between the age of 18 and 25. Two people that were interviewed are above the age of 25, but the term emerging adulthood is still used for theoretical purposes. The two people above 25 match Arnett's (2007) description of emerging adulthood and thus there is no reason to exclude them from this study.

3.3 Scientific and societal relevance

As indicated above, young adults are confronted with multiple messages and double standards concerning sex and sexuality. At the same time, sexual identity plays an important role in the development of the overall identity of young people (Arnold,

2012). In the context of an individualising world, sexuality is seen as an important aspect of personal development and fulfilment (Plummer, 1995). Since it is known that norms and double standards can have important effects on the sexual identity of women, it is of societal importance to explore what these effects are in a changing sexual environment. Moral panics about sex concerning emerging adults are problematic, as they might obscure real practices and hence marginalise disadvantaged groups and preclude open discussions. Since stereotypes and gender norms and associated moral panics are continually present in popular discourses, it is important to gain insight into the way young adults themselves think about gender norms and double standards.

Some studies have centred on sexual norms of double standards and their effects on sexual identity (Katz & Farrow, 2000; Durham, 1998; Lips, 1981; Safilios-Rothschild, 1977; last three cited in Crawford and Popp, 2003), but they have persistently failed to take into account men's as well as 'target's perceptions' (Crawford and Popp, 2003). This 'target's perception' means the perception of the person targeted with sexual norms and double standards. Studies have mainly focused on how norms are socially constructed but failed to take into account how people perceive the influence of these norms on their sexual identity. Moreover, the studies mentioned previously have either consistently ignored the role of agency and empowerment or focused solely on empowerment and pleasure (Renold & Ringrose, 2011). The current study will try to highlight all of these aspects in order to fill the mentioned gaps in the existing literature. Lastly, the interdisciplinary approach of this research leads to a better understanding of the complex subject of this study. Sociological and psychological contextualisation can contribute to new empirical insights that might be overlooked by more theoretical gender theory studies.

The current study is concerned with emerging adults (18-25) for several reasons. Firstly, because discourses of sexual freedom but also moral panics regarding sex are often about generation Y, of which young people between the age of 18 and 25 form a big proportion. Furthermore, young people between 18 and 25 are in a phase of 'emerging adulthood'; the core period of identity exploration and self-definition (Arnett, 2004). Beliefs and attitudes that are acquired in this particular life phase often maintain during adulthood (Mannheim, cited in Ester, Vinken & Diepstraten, 2008).

4. Methods

Before continuing to describe the methodological aspects of this study, it is important to note that the research process fundamental to this thesis was highly inductive and iterative. The initial plan for this thesis was to analyse gender stereotypes regarding labour, household and sexuality, but this focus proved to be too broad. At a rather late stage of the prescribed time period for his thesis project, around seven weeks before the deadline, the focus of this thesis was specified to gender norms regarding sexuality. At this point two focus groups discussions had been carried out already. These focus groups led to the conclusion that further specification of the topic was needed, and provided signs that sexual norms were a pertinent topic among emerging adults. The focus of this thesis was thus changed in an iterative way.

It is for this reason that the order of the research process as prescribed by Algemene Sociale Wetenschappen (ASW) guidelines was not strictly followed; after writing the problem definition the interviews were conducted first and on the basis of results from these interviews, large parts of the initial introduction, theoretical framework and methods chapter were rewritten. Without being aware of it, the strategy of this thesis came to be a grounded theory approach; mainly inductive and highly iterative. This implies that data collection, data analysis and theory are closely related (Bryman, 2008; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). On the basis of the themes that emerged from the interviews, relevant theories were selected for the theoretical framework, a new operationalisation of central concepts was made and the methods chapter was rewritten to make it suitable to the current approach of this thesis.

4.1 Research strategy

The purpose of this research is to gain insight into the way gendered sexual norms play a role in the sexual identities of male and female emerging adults. The fundamental premise of this thesis is that sexual norms and double standards are socially constructed. This research is focused on how respondents themselves construct sexual norms and double standards. The ontology on which this research is based is therefore constructivist, drawing on the premise that social phenomena are socially constructed (Bryman, 2008). Based on a review of both experimental and interpretive studies on sexual double standards, Crawford and Popp (2003) argue that interpretive and qualitative designs might be more suitable for uncovering double standards than

experimental designs. While quantitative methods can abstract behaviour from its social context, qualitative methods are suitable for analysing multidimensional constructs that differ according to the specific context (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Since social norms are expected to be highly contextualised (Thompson, 1995, cited in Crawford and Popp, 2003), this study employs an interpretive epistemology and a qualitative research design.

The epistemology is interpretive, as the goal of this study is not to measure an absolute truth, but to expose the subjective meaning of a social phenomenon (Bryman, 2008). According to an interpretive epistemology the world cannot be observed objectively, because the researcher is part of the observed world him- or herself. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the research process of this thesis was primarily inductive. After writing a problem definition, the researcher immediately started with conducting the interviews. At that point, only small parts of the theoretical framework as it appears now were written. However, as a researcher it is almost not possible to carry out research without a priori knowledge or expectations, hence deductive processes played a role as well.

4.2 Research design, research methods and instruments

The research design used in this study is a case study; an intensive analysis of a specific case (Bryman, 2008). Respondents' accounts of sexuality in the current study will not be directly representative for accounts of emerging adults in general, but will be specific to the respondents' context. This context is characterised by Dutch, mostly highly educated emerging adults all living in urban areas. Taking into account that sexual norms are always highly bound to context, a case study can be considered the best design for analysing sexual norms.

To answer the main question of this study five focus groups and three duo-interviews were conducted with Dutch emerging adults between 18 and 30. Three focus groups consisted of female respondents, one focus group consisted of male respondents and one focus group consisted of respondents of both sexes. Of the three duo interviews, one consisted of female respondents, one of male respondents and one of both sexes. Focus groups and duo-interviews were chosen as a method because they are able to expose the dynamics of the construction of sexual norms. In a discussion with peers, sexual norms may be more likely to come to the surface. In a research on the impact of

focus group methods in a study of adolescent sexual health, Hyde, Howlett, Brady and Drennan (2005, p.1) advocate that focus groups can be "highly revealing in attempting to understand the normative rules embedded in the culture from which participants are drawn".

Following a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) an initial discussion guide was developed that was reviewed and adapted during the research, to make sure that relevant themes were discussed. If topics seemed persistently irrelevant to the respondents they were discarded from the discussion guide. Likewise, new topics that emerged during the discussions were added to the discussion guide. However, the discussion guide was never leading in the discussions. The order of discussing certain topics and the emphasis on certain topics was always guided by respondents' narratives. The final interview guide can be found in appendix I.

4.3 Data analysis

All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were analysed in the software programme MAXQDA. Results were analysed by using a grounded theory approach in which themes emerge from the participants' perspectives (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Analysis was closely related with data collection, since analysis already occurred during the data collection. The researcher used open coding to look for themes that emerged from the interviews. Events, actions and interactions that were exposed during interviews were compared with others for similarities and differences. In this way, categories were formed (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). These categories were kept in mind by the interviewer during new interviews. Axial coding was used to look for relations between themes that emerged. Selective coding was used to identify one core category. A scheme with the open codes and the associated indicators, and a coding scheme with related open, axial and selective codes can be found as an appendix (see appendices II and III).

4.4 Research positionality

Within feminist anthropology, there is a longstanding tradition of self-reflexivity. Many feminist researchers believe that a text "cannot exist independently of the subjective conditions through which it is constructed" (Nencel, 2014). Drawing on this premise, this section will elaborate on the positionality of the researcher of this study. As a

feminist I think that this thesis cannot be read without bearing my positionality in mind.

As I am an emerging adult myself, I am part of the population studied in this thesis. My experiences and thoughts throughout the research process have become an inextricable part of this study. During the research process I had many casual conversations with peers: with my friends, fellow students or vague acquaintances. I spoke with them during parties, lunch breaks, over dinner and in many other situations. Moreover, I overheard other people's conversations in private and public contexts. In a course about youth and health that I took I both observed and participated in discussions about sex and sexuality during multiple lectures. All of these encounters, discussions and observations influenced my role as a researcher and hence this research.

Furthermore, my own experiences regarding the topic influenced this research. They indirectly influenced the way I conducted focus groups, the way I interpreted data, and ultimately this whole thesis. My own concerns about sexual norms played an important part in this. After having been in a relationship for a long time, not being aware of sexual norms that influenced me, I experienced a period of increased awareness of and an urge to expose sexual norms. This awareness was partly caused by my environment. I experienced people telling me that, despite my break up being sad, 'it would be good for me to be single and enjoy life as a single'. Moral judgements about my own situation made me think about how sexual norms influence my own life. Respondents' stories often stayed in my head for a long time, reflecting about my own perceptions and thoughts on it. These reflections undoubtedly were of significant importance to this thesis.

4.5 Operationalisation

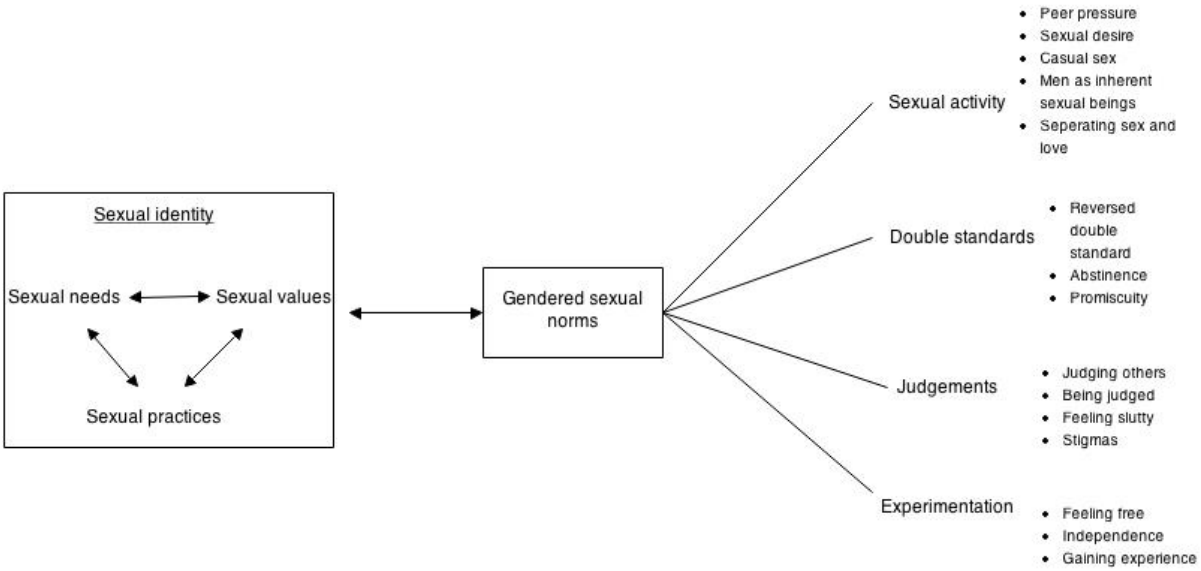
Norms can be defined as 'guidelines that people follow in their relations with one another; they are shared standards of desirable behaviour' (Sherwin & Corbett, 1985, p. 258). The central concept of this study, gendered sexual norms can therefore be defined as shared standards of desirable behaviour for men and women concerning sex and sexuality. Sexual norms are contextualised constructs, and therefore vary in different situations (Thompson, 1995, cited in Crawford and Popp, 2003). Hence, the initial plan of this study was to analyse gendered sexual norms in different situations in which sexual encounters may play a role: 'hooking up' or 'one night stands', 'dating', and 'relationships'. However, these concepts seemed to be of little relevance for respondents

when talking about sexual norms. Because sexual norms proved to be flexible and differed even within contexts like a one night stand or relationship, these contexts were proven to be less relevant. Rather, the relevant issues regarding sexual norms raised by the emerging adults in this study proved to be thematic.

Since the operationalisation (as could be seen in the figure below) was made after conducting the interviews, the themes that arose from the interviews were used as dimensions, and the specific topics or narratives served as indicators. Overarching themes that arose during the interviews were: sexual activity, judgements, double standards and experimentation. With regard to sexual activity, the following topics were mentioned: peer pressure, sexual desire, men as inherent sexual beings, casual sex, separating sex and love. With regard to double standards, the following topics were mentioned: the reversed double standard, (condemnation or appraisal of) abstinence and promiscuity. With regard to judgements, the following topics were mentioned: being judged, judging others, feeling slutty and stigmas. Concerning experimentation, the following topics were mentioned: feeling free, independence and gaining experience.

The second central concept of this study is sexual identity. Worthington et al. (2002) define heterosexual sexual identity development as "the individual and social processes by which heterosexually identified persons acknowledge and define their sexual needs, values, sexual orientation and preferences for sexual activities, modes of sexual expression, and characteristics of sexual partners" (p. 510). The operationalisation of 'sexual identity' in this study is based on the latter definition. On the basis of themes emerging from the interviews, three dimensions of sexual identity were operationalised; sexual needs, sexual values and sexual practices. It should be noted that those three dimensions are not static but interrelated and overlapping. As combined dimensions they form an important part of emerging adults' sexual identity, and therefore they cannot be isolated. The goal of this study is to analyse the role that gendered sexual norms play with regard to sexual identity and the interrelated dimensions that make up this concept, and this leads to an operationalisation as can be seen in figure 1.

Figure 1



4.6 Respondents

As stated before this research is focused on a broadened definition of emerging adults, implying people between the age of 18 and 30 (Arnett, 2007). Respondents were sampled via convenience sampling. This means that respondents were sampled on the basis of availability and convenience (Bryman, 2008). Respondents were sampled via the researcher's personal network. The aim was to sample approximately the same amount of male and female respondents, but due to the overrepresentation of women in the researcher's network and due to the fact that male emerging adults seemed less eager to participate, the final sample consisted of 28 respondents of whom 21 female and 7 male.

The interviewer knew most of the respondents in advance of the interview, a few were unknown and a few were friends. The fact that in all the interviews the researcher knew at least one respondent gave the advantage that a good rapport was quickly established and respondents seemed to be open and honest about the topic. To create a safe and comfortable environment to talk about sexual norms, a personal and sensitive topic, focus groups and duo-interviews consisted of emerging adults who are friends or housemates. It must be noted that conducting focus groups with friendship groups has disadvantages. According to Hyde et. al (2005, p.1) the clustering of like-minded individuals 'can affect the dominant views being expressed within specific groups'. Therefore, views expressed within the focus groups should be analysed with caution (also see the discussion).

4.7 Ethics

Answering the problem definition presented earlier might bring several ethical problems. Firstly, social norms are often deeply rooted. From their early youth, people are being socialised and confronted with certain beliefs, hence these beliefs might feel as if they are an integral part of their identity (Robeyns, 2007; cited in Robeyns, 2011). Laurens Buijs (NTR, 2014) particularly warns that respondents in research on gender roles might give socially desirable answers. However, Hyde et al. (2005) point to the way in which focus groups give respondents the possibility to "challenge one another on how aspects of their sub-culture are represented within the focus group" (p. 1).

Secondly, interpreting and writing down the results from this research should be done with great care. Gender is a controversial topic, and it should be prevented at all times that stereotypes are reified. Furthermore, it is of great importance that respondents are not negatively influenced due to participation to this research, especially with a particularly sensitive topic like sexuality. Therefore, all results were handled anonymously. Names used in this thesis are pseudonyms, and personal details (e.g. sorority names, company names) were removed from the transcripts. Furthermore, respondents were informed about the subject of the research prior to the interviews, and permission was asked to record the interview. At the end of each interview, to establish reciprocity, the respondents were asked if they had any questions for the interviewer.

5. Results

5.1 Research process

As stated in the methods chapter, the initial plan of this study was to carry out six focus groups with emerging adults between 18 and 25; two male focus groups, two female focus groups, and two mixed-sex focus groups. The term emerging adulthood was broadened to include people aged between 18 and 30. Ultimately, two female focus groups were conducted, one male focus groups, one mixed-sex focus group, a female duo interview, a male duo interview and a mixed-sex duo interview, all lasting between forty-five minutes and an hour. Duo interviews were conducted instead of focus groups because of the difficulties related to the organisation of focus groups (see the discussion). Besides the data from these focus groups and interviews, parts of one additional female focus group discussion about general gender stereotypes was used. This focus group was held before the topic of this study was specified to sexual norms and stereotypes, but it did address stereotypes in sexuality, dating and relationships. Only the relevant part of this interview, about ten minutes, were transcribed and used in this study.

In total 28 emerging adults were interviewed, of which 21 female and 7 male, aged between 19 and 30. Two of the participants were aged above 25 and thus did not belong to the prior set target group (18-25), because their age was not known before the start of the interview. The proportion of male respondents was low because male emerging adults seemed less eager to participate in the study. Most of the respondents were students (except for Sofie, Michael, Bob and Jasper) involved in various degrees in the social sciences, economics or the medical sphere. They all live in urban areas (mostly Amsterdam and Utrecht, but also Groningen and Apeldoorn).

Two female focus groups were carried out. One female focus group (FF1) consisted of five housemates living in Utrecht; Bo (21), Tessa (23), Sophie (23), Karlijn (22) and Rianne (22). They are all members of a sorority except for Bo. Moreover, they were all single except for Bo, who has been in a relationship for four years. The other female focus group (FF2) consisted of six housemates and one of their friends living in Amsterdam; Lauren (22), Noa (20), Anne (21), Hannah (22), Daphne (21), Lisa (19) and Emma (21). The girls in this focus group were all very enthusiastic and this led to a somewhat chaotic but fruitful interview with keen discussions from time to time. The girls are all members of a sorority. One of them is in a relationship. One male focus

group (MF) consisted of two housemates and one friend who have known each other since primary school; Ivo (22), Michael (22) and Coen (23). Coen and Michael are in a relationship. Ivo is a member of a fraternity.

The male duo interview (MD) consisted of two friends and housemates; Bob (30) and Jasper (26) who work fulltime at the same company, Bob planning to go travelling and Jasper to start a master next year. The mixed focus group (MXF) consisted of one male and two female respondents; Marc (20), Nikki (22) and Laura (21). Marc and Laura are housemates, and Nikki is Marc's sister. Nikki is member of a sorority in Groningen. The female duo interview (FD) consisted of housemates Sarah (22) and Manouk (22), who are both single.

The mixed duo interview (MXD) consisted of Sofie (22) and her friend Tom (23). Compared to the other interviews, Tom and Sofie were highly reflective about their statements. This reflection might be the product of their personalities but also their feminist perspectives and interest in gender studies. Tom is in a relationship and Sofie is single. The additional focus group (FF3) of which only a small fragment was used consisted of four respondents: friends Rosanne (21) and Judith (22), and Amy (21) and Maartje (20) both of whom did not know each other and had no relations whatsoever to the other interviewees.

The interviews were arranged through Facebook or by phone and took place in a place of the respondents' choice. Ultimately all interviews were conducted in the homes of one of the respondents except for FF3, which was conducted in a private interview room at the University of Amsterdam. These personal spaces provided a safe, quiet and comfortable environment suitable for talking about such a personal and sensitive topic as sexuality. All names used are pseudonyms.

In order to break the ice and provide a swift introduction to the research topic, all interviews were started off by asking respondents to name the different types of relationships they knew. The topic list that was used during the interviews was originally designed to spur discussion about various sexual norms within these specific contexts mentioned by respondents. However, during the interviews it appeared that this contextual distinction seemed of little relevance to most male respondents. In general, males, as opposed to females, did not explicitly name certain contexts and situations. While female respondents used terms like '*kwarrel*' (*kwaliteitsscharrel* or quality date) , '*prela*' (pre-relation), '*scharrelen*' (long-term dating, generally without attachment) and '*daten*' (dating), male respondents generally talked about 'being with someone', only using the terms 'one-night stand' and 'relationship'. Furthermore, most of the respondents' narratives, both male and female, were not placed in a particular

context like one-night stand, date or relationship. For these reasons, and in order to do justice to the themes that emerged from the interviews, the results are categorised according to topics that seemed most important, in which different types of relationships play a role but are not central. Transcripts of the interview can be found in appendix IIII.

5.2.1 "We all want to have sex"

> "In the end we are all students. And we all want to have sex…" (Nikki, 22, MXF)

When analysing the sexual norms that emerging adults employ, it became clear that respondents' narratives were almost all based on the premise of sexual activity. Although easily taken for granted, it seems that among emerging adults the norm to be sexually active is strict and pervasive. The norm of sexual activity was specifically exposed by stories about peers that are *not* sexually active. In a female focus group (FF1) a story was told about a guy from the fraternity who is still a virgin. Everybody in the sorority knows about his virginity, and if he has sex for the first time a big party will be thrown in honour of this. According to the story, the boy is a virgin because he only wants to have sex if he is emotionally involved with a girl. The respondents emphasised that they do not believe this story and that it cannot be true. Tessa assured the interviewer and the others that there must be more behind this story; there must be something wrong with this boy. Within the fraternity there are rumours that he is gay or that he has a small penis.

As these expressions show, the norm of sexual activity is often articulated and reinforced, yet throughout the interviews it was hardly ever explicitly recognised by respondents. However, Sarah did express, somewhat frustrated, that 'the sex question', the question if you had sex after a one-night stand or date, is always asked. Sarah talked about a recent situation in which she was confronted with this question:

> "Well I have to say that I am dating a little with a guy, and we had three dates, it's all very nice, we just kissed. And then, then you get a lot of questions from almost everybody, well everybody, why did you *not* have sex?" (Sarah, 22, FD)

People whom Sarah told about her dates all reacted with disbelief and were puzzled about the fact that she has not yet had sex with her date. Like Sarah, Bob also mentioned

experiencing this pressure to be sexually active and to be 'playing'. Bob specifically came across this pressure when he broke up with his girlfriend after a nine-and-a-half-year relationship:

> "And then we had split up a week ago or something, or two weeks or something. Like [his friends asked him]: 'have you met nice girls already, and are you playing already and everything'. Whereas I'm not that type. I'm not a player. … And still it is expected in one way or another. It's just, well…" (Bob, 30, MD)

After breaking up with his girlfriend, Bob was immediately troubled with questions about whether he was already sexually active and involved with girls, while he did not really feel the need for that. These stories demonstrate that the norm of being sexually active is subtly present in emerging adults' narratives. However, the norm is also explicitly employed, in the form of games and bets about who is most or least sexually active. Nikki explains that in her sorority it is common practice to count '*panda punten*' (panda points). The system of '*panda punten*' works by counting for how long a period a person has not had sex. A 'panda point' is given for every specific time period (which has been agreed on beforehand) in which participants do not have sex. The person with most 'panda points' is titled 'the panda'. Nikki says that generally one point is given for every month a person does not have sex. Sometimes points are actually counted, but in the case of Nikki and her housemates it is decided more or less unsystematically who is the panda, by monitoring which person did not have sex for the longest period of time.

The pressure to have sex is felt both by people who are single, as well as by people who are in a relationship. Tom recounted that he has always felt a fierce pressure to be sexually active. Sofie strongly recognised this pressure as well, but specified that she specifically feels this pressure within a relationship. She said:

> "Especially in a relationship, I always think oh god we only have sex once a week that is really not enough, we should have sex every day. That is really strong. That is why I am quite happy that I am not in a relationship at the moment, because now I don't have that." (Sofie, 22, MXD)

This statement demonstrates that the norm to be sexually active is not only employed for singles, but also within relationships. Furthermore, Sofie's story shows that this norm is not always seen as an external pressure but can also be an internalised pressure. When asked if she thinks her previous partners induced this pressure, she responded by saying that this pressure comes 'from within' - she thinks that this

pressure is not directly imposed by others, but by herself. It can be inferred that Sofie has internalised this pressure from external sources such as peers (Katz & Farrow, 2003), as she later mentions that she often compares herself with friends.

Hence, it can be concluded that among emerging adults there is a pervasive norm to be sexually active. Stories about emerging adults that are not sexually active are rare in respondents' narratives, and in the rare cases that they are mentioned, they are rejected or rationalised by giving alternative explanations such as suspected homosexuality. Additionally, it was established that the norm to be sexually active is present among singles as well as among emerging adults in relationships.

5.2.2 "They just want to bang everybody"

An interesting, although not surprising finding highlighted by the focus group discussions, is that the norm to be sexually active is highly gendered. Being sexually active is generally seen as inherent to being male. With relatively few exceptions (Bo, Marc, Sofie, Tom, Bob and Jasper), both male and female respondents constantly emphasised that men are always in for sex and that they will never reject it. As Emma put it:

> "They [men] just want to bang everybody." (Emma, 21, FF2)

In both female focus groups, similar statements were abundant. Furthermore, the respondents in these focus groups as well as the respondents in the male focus group unanimously agreed on the fact that guys have more sex, are quicker to initiate sexual encounters and are less critical about their sex partners than girls. According to Hannah, guys do not really care. Manouk and Sarah expressed similar opinions. Manouk said that she would never just have sex with a '*gedrocht*' (monster) because she feels like having sex. When asked if boys would do this according to her, she answered:

> "M: Their threshold is just way lower. Because they have a higher libido and especially if they are drunk, *dan hebben ze alleen maar schijt* [then they are like fuck it]. And with boys it is all about image. About their friends, like 'I had sex with that person and I almost fucked this person'. But what is *almost* fucked? It is nothing but still they tell that nine out of ten times. With girls it is not about that, they don't brag about that cause…

> S: No because then it's just like 'how was he, was he nice'…
>
> M: And if somebody has not had sex for months then that is not something negative, and with men it is like '*je staat al zo lang droog* [you've been standing dry for so long already, meaning: you have not had sex for such a long time]'. They really have the feeling that they should perform I think. I think it is also about that, that they feel pressured." (Manouk, 22 and Sarah, 22 , FD)

Manouk and Sarah explicitly mentioned the peer pressure to be sexually active that male emerging adults experience. They say that in contrast to men, girls do not pressure each other. Stories about bragging and boys being under pressure were also mentioned in other focus groups. In the male focus group this pressure was not mentioned. However, the boys (from MF) did emphasise that men will never turn down an opportunity to have sex. In one of the focus groups, a conversation arose about people who do not have sex with someone else straight away because they want to get to know the other person first. The male respondents mentioned that some girls, if they really like a boy, want to wait to have sex . However, according to Michael, boys would never wait:

> "I don't know any man who would say 'no sorry I but I first want to get to know you'. I know for sure that every man would fully agree to have sex, but not every woman would agree right away." (Michael, 22, MF)

Lisa and Emma (FF2) made similar statements . Hence, in all focus groups men were continually portrayed as inherently sexual beings, with only some exceptions. For example, Marc (MXF) said that he and his friends are never specifically looking for sex, but rather for love and attachment. If they are not in a relationship their goal is to find a 'nice girl you can trust', and their final goal is starting a relationship. The respondents in the male focus group indicate that there are multiple motivations to engage in a one-night stand, naming pleasure and lust, but also having fun and '*gezelligheid*' (having a nice and cosy time). Ivo indicated that a one-night stand is only a one-night stand in retrospect, because you never know if it 'can become something', namely a relationship. In two female focus groups (FF1 and FF2) the respondents did not express these motivations and expectations for men. According to most girls in these focus groups, men are only after sex.

As illustrated above, apart from a few exceptions, men are generally portrayed as inherently sexual beings. This does not mean however that women are portrayed as

passive, a-sexual beings. Respondents recognised that both men and women have sexual needs. Bo (FF1) and Coen (MF) even emphasised that women have the need for and are looking for casual sex in the same way men are. Nikki (MXF) stated that despite the double standard, women are increasingly engaging in casual sex. The interviews conveyed the impression that casual sex is accepted for women to a certain extent. When asked if one-nights stands are accepted, Nikki answered:

> "Yes. In my house at least people are very open about it. And it is not a problem at all if a woman has a one-night stand." (Nikki, 23, MXF)

Despite Nikki's statement, it seems that this acceptance of casual sex is still a gendered process, as will be further illustrated in the next section.

To conclude, respondents' narratives in this section show that the norm to be sexually active is highly gendered. Men are seen as inherently sexual beings that have sex more often, are regarded as quicker to initiate sexual encounters and are purported to be less critical about their sex partner than girls. According to most female respondents, especially in FF1, FF2 and FD, the main goal of a one-night stand for men is just to have sex, while these girls emphasised that they themselves hook up for multiple reasons, for example pleasure, intimacy and '*gezelligheid*'. Male respondents however indicate that hooking up is not just about having sex, but also about having fun and '*gezelligheid*'. These wrong perceptions by the female respondents of men's motivations for one night stands indicate that they employ stereotypes.

5.2.3 Separating sex and love

Although casual sex for women is increasingly accepted, the extent to which this sex is genuinely 'casual' is still questionable. Several female respondents said that they do not believe that women can have sex without emotional attachment. According to Laura and Nikki (MXF) casual sex for women might be an act of resisting or challenging stereotypes. Laura said that she thinks that women who have casual sex merely want to prove that they can separate love and sex just like men do. In a similar statement, Nikki stated that girls from her sorority try their best to act 'boyish' about their sexual behaviour.

These statements, amongst many others, show that casual sex for women is portrayed in gendered ways. Manouk spoke about a situation in which she wanted her

sex partner to leave early in the morning and did not feel emotionally attached to him. In this instance she said that she felt real 'manly'. Nikki talked about a particularly sexually active former housemate:

> "And well, an old housemate of mine was quite sexually active. Her name is Merel, and she was always called *Merel Kerel* [Merel the Dude]. But that was not necessarily because she was banging everybody, but that was also because she was, well, she was just very relaxed about everything. She was just all, well, just manly." (Nikki, 23, MXF)

This anecdote shows that being relaxed or nonchalant about sex is generally seen as a male characteristic. Almost all respondents associated nonchalance and the separation of love and sex with men. When asked about the different expectations men and women have about sex, Manouk (FD) said that men see 'sex as sex and love as love'. In contrast, women are expected to have an emotional attachment to their sex partner.

Thus, although having casual sex seems to be increasingly accepted for female emerging adults, this acceptance is not always undisputed. Some respondents stated that they think women engage in casual sex to 'prove' that they can separate love and sex, while in fact they cannot. Girls are believed to be emotionally involved if they have sex, and boys are seen to be separating love and sex. Furthermore, if women do separate love and sex this is referred to as 'boyish' or 'manly', and this behaviour is thus still portrayed in gendered manners.

5.2.4 Double standards regarding sexual activity

> "Everybody constantly has a judgement. I always have a judgement myself as well." (Manouk, 22, FD)

For many respondents, judging others or being judged themselves is a substantial part of the sexual discourse they are involved in. All of the respondents seemed well aware of the existence of double standards surrounding sexual behaviour. The double standard that 'men are cool and women are sluts' if they are promiscuous is well known among the respondents, and they all acknowledge that this double standard is still employed in contemporary society. However, the double standards that are present in their own discourses differ from well-known double standards like the aforementioned. Through

the focus groups and duo interviews many double standards were exposed, sometimes contradicting other double standards.

Although being sexually active is a pervasive norm amongst the emerging adults interviewed, promiscuity is seen as undesirable. A double standard concerning sexual activity was exposed in most of the interviews; emerging adults are expected to be sexually active, but having a lot of different sexual partners is often condemned. The acceptance or disapproval of promiscuity proved to be highly contextual, varying in different situations and for different persons. Almost all of the respondents acknowledged that having a lot of sexual contacts is not desirable. A variation of reasons was given for this, sometimes differing for boys and for girls. Ivo mentioned that he finds a girl that has had less sexual partners 'classier'. In contrast, he does not find men classier if they had less sexual partners. Bo mentioned that she thinks being promiscuous 'does not fit' women and thus she finds it 'less charming' if a woman has many sexual partners. The other girls in the focus group (FF1) agreed with this. In the other female focus group a similar argument was heard for boys, with the respondents explaining that they find boys who have a lot of sexual partners unattractive:

> "E: But I just find for example David not attractive anymore because he takes [has sex with] everybody he can.
>
> N: There are guys that, like, hook up with so many girls that I think: 'you are so unattractive right now, even though you are so cute and handsome and good at singing and whatever, I don't want you'." (Emma, 21 and Noa, 20, FF2)

Rianne was less subtle and called promiscuous boys '*afgelebberde tosti's*' [licked toasties]. Sarah articulated that 'she would really melt' if a boy did not want to have sex right away, because then she would know that he is not just after sex. At the same time, Daphne said that she felt rejected once when a boy did not take the initiative to have sex. The situation confused her, making her wonder if something was wrong with her or if something was wrong with him. Furthermore, Manouk mentioned that she likes a man to 'take the lead'. Hence, guys are confronted with a conflicting message; if a guy waits with initiating sex he may gain respect, but it may also induce feelings that 'something is wrong with him' or that he is gay.

Some of the respondents employed a 'reversed double standard'; boys that refrain from having casual sex gain respect, and girls that do have (a lot of) casual sex are 'cool'. Sofie stated that a lot of people praise men that do not have casual sex, and she

acknowledged that this counts for herself as well. Especially because of the prejudice that men have sex more often, she likes it if men behave the opposite way. However, with regard to girls she stated:

> "S: But I do think indeed that I value somebody higher if he has had less one-night stands. But not with girls I think. I actually never thought about this, but I think with girls I think 'oh nice that they do this'.
>
> T: Yes, I think is it quite cool if girls do that.
>
> S: Yes, especially because it is not expected. Because it is not supposed to be that way. " (Sofie, 22 and Tom, 23, MXD).

Similarly, Nikki, Tessa, Selma and Noa stated that they find it 'cool', 'cute' or '*tof*' (praiseworthy) if a girl has a lot of sexual partners and talks about this openly. In this way, girls are confronted with a conflicting message too; on the one hand it is 'not charming' to have a lot of sexual partners but on the other hand it is cool and praiseworthy.

This section shows that there are many double standards present in emerging adults' sexual discourses. A double standard concerning sexual activity was exposed in most of the interviews: emerging adults are expected to be sexually active, but having a lot of sexual contacts is condemned in a lot of situations. This condemnation applies, for example, to people who have sex with three or more people in one week, people who have sex with different people in the same city, people who have sex with friends of somebody they also had sex with, people who 'take everybody they can,' and more situations. Abstinence is often praised, but this is also highly contextualised. Female respondents indicated that they respect a boy who does not initiate sex right away, but in some narratives abstinence is a source of insecurity for girls or a reason for gossip. Hence, boys are confronted with a conflicting message; if they wait with initiating sex they may gain respect, but it may also induce feelings that 'something is wrong with him' or that he is gay. Girls are confronted with a similar double standard: they are 'cool' if they engage in casual sex or if they are able to 'play' men, but at the same time they are found 'less charming' and less 'classy'.

5.2.5 Sluts, players and 'being easy'

When asked about words like 'slut', 'whore', or 'player', it became clear that respondents do not often explicitly use these words in their sexual discourse. Some respondents mentioned that they do use these words, but they do so in an ironic manner and in a 'friendly' context; they seemed to have re-appropriated these words and use them frequently. Tessa illustrated this when explaining when she uses the word slut:

> "But if I come home here I can also say: hey *sletje* [slut]. Then I don't say it because you are one." (Tessa, 23, FF1)

Some respondents who do not use these words mentioned that the word 'slut' is out-dated, and some mentioned that they used it in high school but they have outgrown the word. However, respondents used the terms slut and player conceptually, to name and judge deviant behaviour. Exploring what the concept 'slut' means to respondents proved to be a helpful way to analyse how they both morally judge others and how they morally judge themselves.

Being a slut was usually not associated with having a lot of sex or with having many different sexual partners, but with a person's performance. In the mixed focus group being a slut was defined as 'being an open goal': searching for attention, making it easy for another person to 'score' them. In a female focus group (FF1), while talking about a girl who 'did anal' during a one-night stand, Bo expressed that she thinks this girl is 'quite easy'. Although some respondents, when asked, answered that a man can be a slut as well, it seems that the description of a slut as an open goal is usually reserved for girls. When talking about whether men can be sluts, respondents sometimes referred to the term 'player', but they often emphasised that they found this term less negative than the word 'slut'. Moreover, according to the respondents being a player is not the same as being a slut. According to Marc (MXF) a player is someone who 'wins a girls over with his charm, has sex with her and then dumps her'. In the vernacular of the respondents, a slut is an 'open goal', whereas a player is someone who 'tries to hit as many goals as possible'. Clearly, in this metaphor 'players' are seen as the agents, and 'sluts' are regarded as passive recipients.

When talking about 'sluts', 'whores' and 'players', it appeared that in their discourses, respondents try to negotiate current stereotypes. When asked if a woman can be a player, Marc talked about a situation two of his friends experienced:

> "But there are also women who are players. Because me and my friends, we thought that that didn't exist, but there are women who just want to go to bed with a muscular man. Because I have two quite muscular friends and they've both experienced that, that they thought 'huh, are the roles suddenly reversed?'. Because you expect that only men are players. But you can see that it can be the other way around. Cause then you have a women who just, well, in fact what a player does, who is sweet, and then you think she wants a relationship, have sex, or maybe she is just interested in you, and in the end it seems that you just have sex a few times and then she says 'bye, I'm off again'." (Marc, 20, MXF)

As a response to Marc's story, Nikki mentioned that she thinks it is cool that this girl is a player, and that she respects a female player more than a slut. This is consistent with the statement in the mixed focus group that the word player is less negative than the word slut, and with the portrayal of a player as the agent and a slut as passive recipient. Laura indicated that, in contrast to Marc and Nikki, she would never call this girl a player. She stated that it is more common for men to 'play' women, and that it is not common for women to 'play' men.

This section mainly analyses the words 'slut' and 'player'. Most respondents indicate that they do not use these words except in ironic manners. However, in the interviews respondents used the words conceptually. Being a slut is generally not associated with having many sexual contacts or having a lot of sex, but rather with behaviour. In one of the focus groups the metaphor of an 'open goal' was used to explain the meaning of a slut. In general, being a player was evaluated as being less negative than being a slut. Being a player was defined as a man who 'wins a girls over with his charm, has sex with her and then dumps her'.

5.2.6 Being judged and feeling slutty

Although respondents indicated that they generally feel empowered to do what they want sex-wise, and feel free to talk about their sexual behaviour in most contexts, 'being judged' and 'feeling slutty' was a relevant topic for most of the female respondents. In one female focus group (FF2) most of the girls said they 'don't care' if they are being called a slut if they know that it is not true. As Anne illustrates:

> "It is how you feel about yourself, not how others think about you." (Anne, 21, FF2)

Feeling slutty is weightier than being called a slut. Feeling slutty proved to be a highly contextualised construct; it is not tied to specific circumstances or situations. Feeling slutty often occurred when the girls had sex with different people in a short amount of time. Lauren recalls a situation in which she felt quite slutty:

> "Well last year I had [sex], with Marko, then it was that Monday, and then the Monday after in the same house [with someone else]. That was literally the same day, but then a week later." (Lauren, 22, FF2)

However, when she continues it became clear that having sex with two people in one week is not inherently slutty, but that feeling slutty is dependent on other people's knowledge about the act or situation. Lauren also talked about a situation in which she did not really feel slutty:

> "But I had once, last year when I made out with three guys in one week, but that was just in three different cities, well, that is just…" (Lauren, 22, FF2)

The fact that the making-out occurred in different cities made Lauren feel less slutty about herself. In the mixed focus group, Nikki shared a comparable narrative about feeling slutty:

> "And I think it is maybe with friends. So that you are aware, that if you went with a boy that you should watch out that you don't go with a friend of his. Cause then you are quickly labeled a slut. But imagine you have been with this guy one week, and a week later you're in a different city, and you don't know anybody there, then you can go with another boy more easily, then you are thinking about it less than [if you are not in a different city]…" (Nikki, 23, MXF)

Feeling slutty thus seems to be dependent on other people's judgements, and cannot be seen outside of this context. Furthermore, feeling slutty seems to be dependent on the extent to which the girls regret their sexual behaviour. When asked when they feel slutty Lisa answers:

> "If you did things that you do not really approve of". (Lisa, 19, FF2)

The other girls agreed that they feel slutty whenever they 'regret' something they did,

when they did something that was 'not really necessary'. This regret is characterised by feelings like: 'why did I do this?' and 'did I really have to do this?'. Moreover, feeling slutty is dependent on how a sex partner behaves after having sex. If a guy is not interested after making out or having sex this can induce feelings of sluttiness. According to Lauren, in this way 'men make sluts out of women'.

In sum, girls generally say that they don't care about what other people think or if they are called slutty, but 'feeling slutty' yourself is a significant topic. This feeling of sluttiness seems to be a highly contextualised construct, depending on the setting and timing of other sexual encounters before or after the encounter that induced the feeling of sluttiness, on the extent to which girls regret behaviour and on the behaviour of their sexual partner afterwards. A sexual encounter is therefore never inherently slutty, this depends on the context in which it occurred.

5.2.7 Experimenting now, relationship later

> "… you have to have tasted several things before you know what you want. That's how I see it." (Coen, 23, MF)

Themes that arose in some of the interviews (MF, MD) were experimenting and 'feeling free' as a single. Especially in the male duo interview 'feeling free' to 'do whatever we want' was a recurring theme. Bob and Jasper live together with four housemates, of whom three are single, and they enjoy doing things together 'impulsively' and 'without considering other people'. When talking about their past relationships Bob and Jasper conveyed that they sometimes felt restricted. Jasper mentions that during a past relationship he saw his friends less often, and Bob mentions that he felt bad about staying at his football club to have a beer with his friends. Bob stated that he thinks it is '*chill*' (nice) to know that if he wants to have a drink with Jasper his girlfriend is not 'breathing down his neck like: "are you leaving already?". During Bob's relationship that lasted nine and a half years, he sometimes felt like he was missing out. Jasper indicated that if he was going to have a relationship, he would be looking for one in which he could do everything he wanted:

> "I'm not really looking for a relationship, but I do notice that I miss it at times. That I think, it is pretty nice. But that at this moment I'm especially looking for someone with whom I can do everything I want, but that it is just added to (sic) my life. That

> is just sort of an addition to your life, and not, not that it becomes part of your life." (Jasper, 26, MD)

When asked about their future, Bob and Jasper both indicated that they see their future with a partner, but they do not feel the pressure to start a relationship within the coming years. Although when visiting his family Bob regularly gets remarks like '…when are you bringing a nice girl along?', he does not worry about starting a relationship:

> "No, I don't see myself being alone in ten years' time. Definitely not. That moment will come sooner or later. But I definitely do not feel the pressure to do it within two, three years. No. It will happen sooner or later. And when that is, whether it is in five years or ten years, I'll see it then." (Bob, 30, MD)

While Jasper and Bob do not feel any pressure to be in a relationship, they notice that their female peers might experience this pressure, because their 'biological clock is ticking'. Ivo (MF) also mentioned this difference between men and women. According to him it is much more preferable to be single at the age of thirty to forty as a man than as a woman, because a woman 'has to have children'.

Another theme that arose during the focus groups was the need to 'experiment' before starting a serious relationship. When Michael talked about his '*lang leve de lol*' ('long live fun', equivalent of YOLO, 'you only live once') attitude before his current relationship, Coen answered:

> "Yes I would find it horrible if you meet someone at the age of twenty or eighteen or twenty-one and then, well you never know how it goes, but I think that it is gonna cause some problems in your relationship if you are twenty years ahead, that you are going to search for something. That you are going to search for something because then you don't know yet if what you have together is what you want to have if you want to marry later. So you have to have tasted several things before you know what you want. That's how I see it." (Coen, 23, MF)

Ivo and Michael (MF) agreed with Coen, and Jasper (MD) expressed a similar opinion.

To conclude, 'feeling free' and 'experimenting' are recurring themes in some of the focus group interviews (MD, MF). Jasper and Bob emphasised that they feel free to do whatever they want as a single, and if they are going to be in a relationship again they want to keep this feeling. According to Jasper, his relationship should be an 'addition' to his life, and should not 'take over' his life. Moreover, 'experimenting' is seen as an

important phase that is necessary to experience when you are young in order to avoid 'problems' later on during your marriage or a serious relationship. Although Bob and Jasper do not feel a pressure to be in a relationship, they do not envision their future being on their own.

5.2.7 Walking tightropes

As illustrated in the previous sections many double standards are present in the sexual discourses of emerging adults. Moral judgement of the other or the self is not dependent on static norms but on highly flexible and contextualised norms. Two situations that look similar might be subject to very different moral judgements depending on their context. Hence, the lines for moral judgement are often very thin. For some respondents this leads to insecurities, and the feeling that one has to continuously 'defend oneself'. Manouk brings up this issue when she realises that she and Sarah are being judged for opposite behaviour. While Sarah was confronted with negative reactions when she did not have sex with her date, Manouk was confronted with negative reactions because she was going to have a sex-date. They both felt that they had to defend themselves against those negative reactions:

> "I: But what do you think about that, that you always have to defend yourself?
> S: Annoying.
> M: Yeah that is quite annoying.
>
> S: Because you can never do right. Actually. I only think about it now this question is asked and we are actually both in the contrasting situations, I only realise, cause I don't really have it if somebody asks it or anything, but you have to continuously defend yourself and I find that annoying. Look, if I go to bed with someone, then that is my own decision. And if you [pointing to Manouk] don't go to bed with someone, because you just want to date and first you want to see him ten times, then that's your own decision. But everybody constantly has a judgment about something. Whereas it is my body, and if I want to have sex with somebody can't I just do that?" (Sarah, 22 and Manouk, 22, FD)

The focus group discussions and duo interviews clearly demonstrated that as an emerging adult one's behaviour is always scrutinised, whether it is just being discussed or also being judged. Tom (MD) points out that '*scharrelen*' is accompanied with 'over-

analysing' of the situation: 'How was it? Do you like him? Don't you like him? What didn't you like?'. Whether they are sexually active or not (as seen from the earlier illustrated discussions about cases of non-sexually active emerging adults), emerging adults seem to be always embedded in a constant negotiation and discussion of their and other people's sexual behaviour.

6. Conclusion

Now that the different themes emerging from the focus group discussions and duo interviews have been analysed, an answer can be formulated to the main question of this study: **What is the role of gendered sexual norms in the sexual identity of emerging adults?** In order to answer this question, four sub questions will be answered first.

The first sub question of this study is: *What gendered sexual norms are present in the sexual practices and discourses of emerging adults?* Firstly, an important finding in this study is that sexual norms and double standards prove to be flexible and highly contextualised. Sexual behaviours that seem similar to an outside observer might be judged very differently by emerging adults. This seems to depend on what happened before or after the sexual behaviour, on people's own or their sex partner's motivations, on the timing, setting, the sexual partner's expectations, etc. This finding is consistent with Thompson's (1995, cited in Crawford and Popp, 2003) finding that moral judgements and double standards are contextually negotiated and made up of 'innumerable fine lines'. Theories about the sexualisation of society have indicated that rules, categories and regulations regarding sex are breaking down (Attwood, 2006; Renold & Ringrose, 2011). This study supplements this theory by highlighting that rules and regulations regarding sex are not simply breaking down but are becoming fluid and more contextualised and therefore become a source of more insecurity, and require more negotiation.

Secondly, this study shows that there is a pervasive norm amongst emerging adults to be sexually active. This norm is implicitly as well as explicitly present in emerging adults' discourses. It is implicitly present through such statements as 'we all want sex' and through accounts of emerging adults who are not sexually active, which were not believed or explained away by giving alternative explanations such as suspected homosexuality. It is explicitly present through '*panda punten'* and other games concerning sexual activity. Furthermore, the norm to be sexually active proves to be highly gendered. Sexual activity was mostly associated with being male, and it was often emphasised that men are always in for sex, although exceptions were also present. However, this does not mean that women are seen as a-sexual passive beings. The discourses of respondents showed that sexual activity for women is becoming more accepted, and is sometimes even praised, contrasting with traditional norms through which women were stigmatised for any sexual activity outside traditional marriage (Crawford and Popp, 2003). The acceptance of sexual activity and the engagement in

casual sex by women, however, seems to be gendered. Some respondents believed that if women engage in casual sex they do so to 'prove' that they can separate love and sex, while according to these respondents this is impossible for women. Moreover, women engaging in casual sex or women that were 'relaxed' or nonchalant about sex were portrayed in gendered ways. An interesting illustration of this is the story about Merel, who is very sexually active and 'relaxed' about sex, and whose nickname consequently is '*Merel kerel*' [Merel the dude].

Thirdly, a recurring theme in the interviews was 'experimenting' and 'feeling free'. Respondents indicated that they value independence and self-assertion, and hence a relationship should be an 'addition' to their life, not 'taking over' their lives. Conflicting feelings between being in a relationship or being single and 'doing whatever you want' were sometimes present in respondents' narratives. Whether actively or inactively, respondents were generally looking for or considering serious relationships, but they also expressed a fear of commitment at this age and a fear of loosing independence. These accounts are consistent with Bauman's notion of liquid love. This notion, characterised by 'shopping for love' and loosely tied bonds seems to be even more significant in the phase of 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett, 2004). Experimenting is seen as a necessary activity to engage in when you are young in order to avoid 'problems' later on in life and in serious relationships. However, although experimenting is seen as necessary and normative, ending in a relationship later on in life still seems to be the final goal.

The second sub question of this study is: *How do emerging adults morally judge gendered sexual behaviour?* In the accounts of emerging adults many double standards and conflicting messages surfaced. An overarching finding regarding those double standards and conflicting messages is their flexibility and their contextualised nature; how and if moral judgement takes place is highly dependent on contextual factors. This is consistent with Thompson's (1995) statement that double standards are less absolute and more contextually negotiated than in the past. In line with existing literature, the results show that sexual behaviour is morally judged differently for men and women (Martin, 1996; Thompson, 1995, cited in Crawford and Popp, 2003; Kreager & Staff, 2009). The double standard in which boys are praised and girls are condemned for having many sexual partners was well known among respondents, and they recognised that this double standard is still present in society. However, this study also found double standards that conflicted with the latter, as well as double standards that were not specifically gendered but seemed to be targeting both boys and girls. Furthermore, acts of resisting stereotypes were present in respondents' narratives, showing that

norms are not simply taken up but also negotiated and resisted. The victimisation of women that is often present in the existing literature (Renold & Ringrose, 2011) therefore needs to be nuanced, as both genders are subject to double standards and conflicting messages, and as emerging adults are not pure victims but also actively resist current norms.

Having a lot of sexual contacts was often condemned, both for men and women. For women, being promiscuous was seen as 'less charming' or 'less classy', and for men being promiscuous was seen as 'unattractive'. One respondent called a promiscuous man an '*afgelebberde tosti*' [licked toastie]. Taking into account the pervasive norm to be sexually active, emerging adults are thus confronted with a conflicting message regarding sexual activity: emerging adults are expected to be sexually active, but having a lot of sexual contacts is often condemned. Female respondents indicate that they respect a boy who does not initiate sex immediately, but sometimes the absence of initiative is also a source of insecurity for girls or a reason for gossip. Boys are thus confronted with a conflicting message; if they wait with taking the initiative to have sex they may gain respect, but it may also cause gossiping that 'something is wrong with him' or that he is homosexual. Girls are confronted with a similar conflicting message: they are 'cool' if they engage in casual sex but are simultaneously found 'less charming' and less 'classy'. However, promiscuity is not condemned in all situations. Some of the respondents employed a 'reversed double standard'; they condemned men who had many one-night stands and they praised girls who had a lot of one-night stands. This 'reversed double standard' seemed to be an act of resisting current stereotypes.

The third sub question is: *What are the consequences of deviance from sexual gender norms?* Judging others and being judged with regard to sexual behaviour proved to be a relevant theme for many of the respondents. Emerging adults that do not conform to sexual norms are in danger of being the subject of judgements and condemnation. Sometimes, however, deviance from sexual gender norms seems to incite respect or positive judgements, as is the case for women according to the 'reversed double standard'. Most respondents indicate that they do not use words like 'slut' or 'player' to morally judge sexual behaviour. Consequences of deviance from gender norms are rarely manifested as direct and explicit judgements, but rather as internalised self-judgements.

However, exploring terms like 'slut', 'player' and 'being easy' conceptually proved to be useful in order to explore moral judgement behaviour of emerging adults. In general, being a slut is not inherently associated with having many sexual contacts but rather with sexual behaviour. In one of the focus groups, being a slut was described

as being an 'open goal'. Being a player was defined as a man who 'wins a girls over with his charm, has sex with her and then dumps her'. In general, being a player was evaluated less negatively than being a slut.

Although the topics 'judging others' and 'being judged' were mentioned regularly by female respondents, judging oneself seemed to have more impact. Female respondents indicated that they do not feel affected if somebody calls them a slut. It is of much bigger importance if respondents *themselves* think they are slutty. 'Feeling slutty' proved to be a significant concept for self-judgement. Feeling slutty is not a static construct but depends on the context: the setting and timing of other sexual encounters before or after the encounter that induced the feeling of sluttiness, the extent to which girls regret their behaviour, and the behaviour of their sexual partner afterwards. As feeling slutty heavily depends on the context of sexual behaviours, sexual encounters are never inherently slutty. These findings conflict with Martin's (1996) findings about the word slut. According to Martin female respondents "take the distinction of slut to heart and fear it." Furthermore, she argues that "Regardless of its particular contextual meaning, the word slut holds a lot of power. Being called a slut or a ho — or feeling like one — is to feel degraded and dirty" (p. 86-87). However, respondents in this study were not troubled when being called a slut by others, but only when feeling slutty themselves.

Now that the sub questions central to this study have been answered, an answer can be formulated to the main question: **What is the role of gendered sexual norms in the sexual identity of emerging adults?** This study showed that emerging adults are balancing on thin lines. With regard to their sexual needs, sexual values and sexual practices they are under constant scrutiny. Emerging adults are confronted with multiple double standards and conflicting messages regarding their sexual identities. They are encouraged to be sexually active, but in many situations promiscuity leads to judgements, whether by others or through self-judgement. Furthermore, emerging adults are torn between being in a secure relationship and the desire they feel to be independent and free. Hence, they engage in an on-going negotiation of their sexual identities, whether through discussion or judgements of their sexual identities. However, emerging adults do not simply take up gendered sexual norms; they negotiate and resist these norms through sexual practices and discourses. Although contexts of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004) and liquid love (Bauman, 2003) seem to play an important role in their sexual identities, they are neither fully empowered nor passive subjects in negotiating the tightropes of their sexual identities.

6.1. Discussion

The findings of this interdisciplinary study served to explore how, in the context of a sexualising world (Attwood, 2006) in which liquid love seems to be increasingly pursued (Bauman, 2003), emerging adults' (Arnett, 2007) sexual identities are altered by gendered sexual norms. The grounded theory approach of this study led to a useful insight into the themes that seem relevant among emerging adults regarding sexual norms. Furthermore, the interdisciplinary approach provided a relevant addition to the public and academic concerns that are present in contemporary sexual discourses. This study shows that the victimisation of girls that is often present in sexual discourses (Renold & Ringrose, 2011), can be nuanced, since both male and female emerging adults are confronted with conflicting messages and double standards but they negotiate and resist these messages and standards as well.

Regardless of the relevance of this study, multiple shortcomings should be noted. Firstly, the findings of this research should be treated with caution. Sexuality is a sensitive topic, and gender norms are sometimes hard to expose. As mentioned before, sexual norms are often deeply rooted and therefore it could well be that some sexual norms that are relevant to respondents were not exposed. Moreover, the use of friendship groups within focus groups and duo interviews could cause a bias in the results, as it could well be that only certain dominant views are being expressed. Secondly, despite the efforts to expose and deconstruct the norm to be sexually active, this study may contribute to reify the notion of emerging adults as being inherently sexually active. Nearly all respondents reified the norm to be sexually active, and no efforts were made to search for non-sexually active emerging adults to participate in focus groups or duo interviews. Hence, research on non-sexually active emerging adults and the way they are influenced by sexual norms is highly needed.

Furthermore, the underrepresentation of male respondents is a significant shortcoming. A particular goal of this study was to overcome shortcomings of the contemporary sexualisation debate by rejecting its emphasis on young girls. However, this study failed to interview enough males to explore their narratives in depth. The lack of male respondents was due to difficulties with sampling respondents. In the beginning of the research process, two focus groups had to be cancelled because too many respondents cancelled last minute. Many of the emerging adults that were asked to participate in a focus group were busy with school or work and therefore could not participate. Because they were easier to organise, duo interviews were also conducted in the research. Boys seemed even less eager to participate, and are therefore

underrepresented.

6.2 Reflection

During the entire research process, I encountered many challenges regarding how to present my thesis as a reflection of the research process I went through. I tried to write the 'perfect thesis', which reads as a logical report of the entire research process as it is prescribed by ASW guidelines. This confronted me with multiple struggles, and only at the end of the research process I discovered that the highly iterative process that is at the centre of this study did not fit the a priori blueprint I had in mind. Instead of 'concealing' struggles, I ultimately used the iterative process I went through as an outline for this thesis. I realised that reflection about the research process should be a part of this thesis. This gave me the freedom to write a thesis that displays the processes I went through during the research.

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Appendix 1 – Interview guide

-Bedanken en verwelkomen.
-Mezelf voorstellen.
-<u>Uitleg onderzoek:</u> Ik onderzoek de seksuele normen van jongeren, en hoe die verschillen voor mannen en vrouwen. Uitleg anonimiteit, vragen om toestemming opname.

Introductie
-Kunnen jullie jezelf even kort voorstellen?
-Hebben jullie op dit moment een relatie?
-Wat voor verschillende vormen van daten en relaties kennen jullie allemaal?
(one-night stand, daten, scharrelen, friends with benefits, relatie)
-Wat zien jullie veel om je heen?
-Wat is het verschil?
-Zijn jongeren hier veel mee bezig?
-Kennen jullie ook jongeren die hier helemaal niet mee bezig zijn?
-Aan wat voor verwachtingen moet je als jongere voldoen?
-Voel je je wel eens onder druk staan?

One-night stands
-Wat is voor jou de definitie van een one night stand?
-Wat is het doel van een one-night stand? Wat is een geslaagde one-night stand?
(seks, gezelligheid, nieuwe mensen leren kennen)
-Wat zijn je verwachtingen achteraf bij een one night stand?
-Wil je achteraf nog contact?
-Heb je wel eens gehad dat degene waar je mee was andere verwachtingen had?
-Hoe wordt tegen one-night stands aangekeken?
-Kan je openlijk praten over one-night stands? Worden one-night stands geaccepteerd?
-Is het normaal voor studenten om one-night stands te hebben?
-Wanneer wordt het gedrag abnormaal?

-Daten/scharrelen
-Wat is voor jou de definitie van daten? En van scharrelen?
-Wat is het doel van daten/scharrelen?
-Is er een verschil tussen scharrelen en daten?
-Wat voor verwachtingen heb je van een date/scharrel?
-Wanneer wordt een one-night stand een scharrel?
-Wat is het verschil tussen mannen en vrouwen in daten?

-Relaties
-Zien jullie veel relaties om je heen?
-Hoe wordt er aangekeken tegen mensen die lang een relatie hebben?
-Hoe kijk je aan tegen mensen die lang een relatie hebben?
-Wat is het verschil tussen man en vrouw in relaties?
-Wat is het verschil tussen man en vrouw met betrekking tot seks in relaties?
-Hebben mannen meer zin in seks?
-Wat voor moeilijkheden zijn jullie wel eens tegengekomen in een relatie?
-Waar zoek jij naar in een relatie?
-Hoe zien jullie de toekomst voor je qua relatie? Trouwen?

Afwijking van de norm
-Noemen jullie wel eens iemand een slet?
-Wat is de definitie van een slet?
-Is slet een woord voor mannen of vrouwen?
-Wanneer is een vrouw een slet?
-Wanneer is een man een slet?
-Noemen jullie wel eens iemand een player?
-Kan een man ook uit zijn op liefde en romantiek?
-Hoe vind je het als een jongen/meisje waar jij mee gaat heel veel one-night stands heeft gehad?
-Kan een vrouw ook uit zijn op seks?

-Afsluiting interview, nogmaals bedanken voor deelname.

-Heeft er nog iemand vragen aan mij?

Appendix II – Coding scheme

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective code
Peer pressure;	(Gendered) norm to be sexually active	Emerging adults' sexual identity being under constant scrutiny
Men as inherent sexual beings,		
Casual sex		
Separating sex and love		
Reversed double standards	Double standards	
Abstinence		
Promiscuity		
Being judged	Judgements	
Judging others		
Feeling slutty		
Stigmas		
Feeling free	Experimentation	
Independence		
Gaining experience		

Open codes	Events, actions and interactions
Peer pressure	-The 'sex question' -'Panda punten' -Bets and games -Bragging about sex -Pressuring someone after relationship -Non sexually active people
Men as inherent sexual beings	-Being manly -Sexual desire -Masturbation
Casual sex	-Acceptance -Motivations
Separating sex and love	-Being choosy -Motivations one night stands men -Motivations one night stands women -Emotional involvement -Intimacy -'Have a good night'
Reversed double standard	-Promiscuity cool for girls -Abstinence praiseworthy for men -Promiscuity not charming for girls -Abstinence
Abstinence	-Abstinence 'classy' -Abstinence 'praiseworthy' -Insecurities -'Something is wrong' -Gossip -Homosexuality
Promiscuity	-Cool for girls -Not charming for girls
Being judged	-Sex with your ex -Defending yourself
Judging others	-STD's -Unattractiveness
Feeling slutty	-Regret -Not necessary -Context of feeling slutty
Stigmas	-Slut -Whore -Being low -Player
Feeling free	-Drinking beer with friends -Doing whatever you want
Independence	-Relationship as an 'addition', not taking over life
Gaining experience	-Avoiding problems -Learning