



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Multi - girl - culture : an ethnography of doing identity

Duits, L.

Publication date
2008

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Duits, L. (2008). *Multi - girl - culture : an ethnography of doing identity*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam]. Vossiuspers - Amsterdam University Press.

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.



Chapter 8

Performance Practices

8.1 Introduction

The previous chapter showed the wide variety of subject-positions the girls performed. In this chapter, I investigate *how* the girls brought about these positions. This chapter describes the process of citation, filling the empirical gap in Butler's theory. I defined citation as appealing to norms or conventions associated with subject-positions. I thus focus on performance practices: acts involving style, which performatively constitute subject-positions. The chapter focuses on three practices central to style. Section 8.2 analyses the girls' appearances. Section 8.3 focuses on the girls' use of media in the classroom¹. Media use at home is transferred to other settings, such as school, through talk about media. Section 8.4 addresses media talk. As mentioned in chapter 7, the girls could not freely choose between subject-positions. Not all performance practices are equally available and accessible to the girls. In section 8.5, I discuss which limitations constrain girls' use of appearance and media.

8.2 Appearance

During my observations, I diligently kept track of each girl's appearance: what clothing, colours, jewellery, shoes et cetera was she wearing? How often did she change? Everybody came to school dressed, but not everybody dressed the same. Furthermore, not everybody regarded dress equally important. Some girls claimed not to care much about how they looked; others paid much attention to their appearance, and even sometimes changed clothes during lunch breaks. Aliye

Chapter 8

(Gunningschool) often changed her outfits during lunch. For instance, on November 8, I observed Aliye was wearing 'lilac tight trousers, pink woollen sweater with black and white stripes, low-heeled black leather boots, and loose hair'. In the afternoon, I noticed she had changed shoes into the then fashionable *mukluks*, a type of boot. A glance at my other observations showed that her classmate Betty had, for the first time, also worn *mukluks* that morning. Aliye usually changed her hairstyle during lunch break, so she would come to school in the morning with a ponytail, and in the afternoon with braided hair.

In the following five subsections, I first describe dress at the Gunning-school and the Kantlijn respectively. Rather than providing individual portraits, these sections provide a general idea of the girls' dress styles. I clustered the girls into similar styles, based on my observations of their appearances. They are my reduction of difference into roughly the same styles, meaning that the girls themselves did not cluster their classmates this way (as they did not distinguish any groups based on appearance in class, other than boys and girls). Because these style clusters are school-specific, I describe the schools separately². After dress, I devote a subsection to bodies at the two schools. The concluding paragraphs of these three subsections address changes, both during the 8th form, and between primary and secondary school. After these descriptions, I analyse the functions and consequences of this performance practice.

Ghetto fabulous and boy clothes: dress at the Gunningschool

At the Gunningschool, most girls did not have large wardrobes, yet nearly all the girls changed outfits each day. The general dress style was basic. Jeans were the most common piece of clothing amongst the girls, usually combined with a solid (non-patterned) sweater, a (zipper) cardigan, or T-shirt. Black, pink and light blue were the most common colours. Some girls (Aliye, Beyhan, Betty, Chemaë, Nazli and Radia) dressed in a more sophisticated manner, sometimes wearing skirts or coloured pants. They had different pairs of shoes and some of them wore *mukluks*. They experimented with different hairstyles, and with accessories like shawls and gold jewellery. Nazli, Radia and Betty sometimes dressed in tracksuits, appropriating the 'ghetto fabulous' style popularised by actress/singer Jennifer Lopez. These were also the girls who dressed in a style they coded as the most feminine. Although some of these girls wore skirts, only Betty wore skirts above the knee. Most girls wore loose-fitting clothes; only Aliye, Betty and Consolacion sometimes wore tight T-shirts.

Performance practices

Another group (Amisha, Consolacion, Naoul and Romeysa) dressed in a more or less androgynous style, meaning dress that both girls and boys wore: a T-shirt, jeans and trainers (Nike, Puma or non-brand). However, only Amisha characterised her style as such, saying she sometimes wore “boy clothes”. To her, typical girl clothes were skirts, fancy shoes with heels, jewellery and makeup. The other three stated they dressed like girls (see also §7.2). The remainder of the girls also mainly wore jeans and plain shirts; however, they cited femininity more, through wearing, for instance, boots with heels (worn over their trousers) and gold jewellery.

Most girls wore the same clothes all year round, meaning that they did not dress differently in summer, even though the weather was particularly hot in June and July. In winter, a few girls occasionally came to school without a coat, claiming they could not find it. When I met with them during the first year of secondary school, all the girls had new outfits. Furthermore, some girls’ dress style had changed. For instance, Naoul and Gülen dressed more stylishly than the year before. Amisha had been the only girl with a headscarf in the 8th form. She stopped wearing her scarf half way through the year, and did not recommence the next year. Dilara and Nazli had started to wear a headscarf over the summer. Both had ‘practised’ with the scarf, for instance when visiting the mosque. Other girls had considered wearing the scarf, but decided to wait to see what their friends did. In chapter 10, I discuss the girls’ understandings of the headscarf.

Girlly-girls and preppies: dress at the Kantlijn

In comparison to the Gunning-girls, the girls at the Kantlijn had larger wardrobes. They invariably changed outfits each day, albeit sometimes a minor change (e.g. different sweater). Again, some girls changed outfits during lunch breaks. Noa was an exception, as she wore her denim skirt, black tights and black cardigan almost as a uniform. At the Kantlijn, jeans were also the most common piece of clothing. The girls combined jeans with zipper cardigans or hooded sweaters. Sweaters and T-shirts often had multiple colours and contained prints, like floral prints or text. Furthermore, these girls wore non-jeans, like coloured pants and short denim skirts, more often. Several girls dressed somewhat alike.

First, one group of girls dressed very girlishly. Vanessa, Roos and Caruna often wore dresses and skirts, and they almost exclusively wore pink. They carefully attended to their appearance. For instance, one day Vanessa was dressed in white pants, a white and pink zipper cardigan from Nike, white and pink Nike trainers. She wore pink socks, and had pink earrings and nails.

Chapter 8

Comparably, a second group of girls also dressed femininely, but not as abundantly as the other group. They sometimes wore short skirts, blouses and blazers. They too used many accessories, like wristbands, earrings and shawls. Their clothes had many colours, which they carefully coordinated.

A third cluster of girls wore a type of outfit I would classify as trendy. Although their clothes were not essentially different from the majority, and were thus predominantly casual, they had the 'right' kind of fitted jeans, the 'right' kind of shoes, the 'right' kind of hooded sweater or zipper cardigan. The girls singled Mickey out in the interviews as the trendiest, but classmates Madelief, Maud, Marisol, Odecia, Sophie and Thirza shared her sense of style. These were also the girls at the centre of the friendship cliques (see §5.5). Maud, Marisol, Sophie and Thirza most often wore designer clothes, such as Converse and O'Neill shoes and clothes from Only and Esprit.

Finally, Mette and Esther dressed as tomboys. They wore shell-suit trousers and shorts, and football jerseys from Ajax or the Dutch national team. They only wore trainers (Nike and Puma respectively). When not in football jerseys, they wore hooded cardigans and stayed within the sporty style. Priscilla dressed differently from all the girls. She wore revealing clothes, like low-cut tops and low-cut pants. As her body was more mature, her outfits also had something to reveal. Her classmates disapproved of her clothes, and they often asked her "cover up".

During the warm summer, clothes literally came off. In June and July, all the girls dressed in short dresses, skirts, and shorts. They wore tank tops and T-shirts, and shoes were exchanged for flip-flops. Some girls wore shirts and tops that revealed their bellies. In secondary school, like the Gunning-girls, all the Kantlijn-girls had new outfits. Again, the dress' style of some girls had changed slightly. The girls who wore designer clothes in the 8th form had evolved into proper 'preppies' [kakkers] (see §7.5). Mette's dress changed in secondary school from that of the less outspoken tomboy into more casual, although she still wore an Ajax scarf in the focus group.

Not quite there yet: bodies

These subsections offer a general description of appearance, and should therefore also include skin colour. Turkish or Moroccan descent does not imply one has dark(er) skin or dark hair. Figure 8.1 shows sample cheek skin colours, which I cut from photographs of the Gunning-girls.

Performance practices

The first three come from photos of the lightest skinned girls, the last three of the darkest, showing (even in black and white) the great variety in colour.



Figure 8.1: Skin colours

Beyhan and Aliye had Turkish parents and brownish blond hair; Radia and Chemaë had Moroccan parents and golden blond and brownish blond hair respectively. All the other Gunning-girls had brown or black hair. It was the combination of fair skin and blond hair that made some girls conspicuous to their classmates (e.g. fair skin and dark hair was not considered problematic). Three girls at the Kantlijn had darker skin: Caruna (Surinamese-Dutch descent) had a light-brown skin with brown hair; Jenna (English-Ghanese descent) had a brown skin and frizzy black hair; and Odecia (Surinamese-French descent) had brown skin and black hair. Such descriptions are problematic. Priscilla, for instance, also had light-brown skin, but it remained unclear if this was the result of a sun-tan or racial origin.

At both schools, long hair was the prevailing standard. All the Gunning-girls had long hair, whereas at the Kantlijn this varied. At the Gunningschool, only Aliye, Consolacion and Bianca sometimes wore their hair loose. At the Kantlijn, the girls wore their hair in a variety of ways, often changing the style during school hours. Brunettes dominated both classes. In the 8th form at the Gunningschool, makeup was a rare sight. Some girls 'secretly' experimented with mascara. As the girls kept a close eye on each other and noticed the slightest changes, they loudly announced it when someone wore mascara. Such remarks embarrassed the girl in question. Makeup was more common at the Kantlijn. Several girls always wore mascara to school, and several girls experimented with other makeup such as eye shadow and lipstick. During special occasions, like the day the school photographer came or a birthday party, more girls than usual wore makeup. Amisha and Bianca from the Gunningschool both wore glasses; at the Kantlijn Maud often removed her glasses out of vanity. Four girls wore braces, which they all did not mind. Odecia (Kantlijn) used to have external braces but at the time of research, she no longer had to wear those to school.

During the year, several Gunning-girls developed breasts and curves, which they tried to hide, especially when changing for physical education. When they took off their trousers, their backs faced the wall. When

Chapter 8

changing tops, they turned around and faced the wall, or they put on their gym shirt on over their T-shirt and then removed the latter through the former. Several girls were a bit overweight, which they also tried to hide. A common view in class was a girl getting up out of her chair, pulling up her pants and pulling down her shirt. Only Priscilla had a curvaceous body in the 8th form at the Kantlijn, all the others had pre-pubescent bodies, with little or no breasts and hips. Priscilla was the biggest girl in this class, and except for some baby fat all the girls were slim. In secondary school, most girls had grown taller and curvier. Makeup had become acceptable and most girls wore it during the focus groups. Some girls seemed even more body-conscious; for instance, Laila was, all of a sudden, afraid to have her picture taken when I visited her at her new school. It was only after several shots that she agreed on the picture, and I was not to show it to anyone else.

Performativity of appearance

Now that I have provided a general idea of the different appearances at the two schools, we can turn to the meanings of these appearances in general. An item of clothing or a performance practice in itself has no meaning. For instance, wearing boots over or under trousers has no inherent meaning. To some this practice points to vulgarity, to others it is a mere matter of taste. The practice can only be meaningful when it is understood which norms are cited. Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of cultural capital, field and habitus are particularly helpful here. Recall Mette's knowledge about how to wear your backpack (§6.5). This knowledge is a form of capital that determines whether or not you can cite the right norms. In return, this citation determines your place in the popularity hierarchy.

In the girls' talk about appearance, both in the form of remarks observed in class and in dialogue with me in the interviews, they reflected upon appropriate appearances, and thus established meanings. The Muslim girls avoided sexy clothing, and some of them commented on the inappropriateness of Betty's clothes. For Consolacion, this norm amongst her Muslim friends was a reason to adjust her dress:

Consolacion: Yes, here you just need to adapt. Like with the world, you just need to adapt to the world. If you don't like it, you're out of luck. [Interview Consolacion, 8 June 2006]

Consolacion thus chooses not to cite sexiness. Comparably, several pupils at the Kantlijn commented on Priscilla's clothes, which they found too revealing and very vulgar. This is also connected to Priscilla's larger body:

Performance practices

Sophie: There's a difference between Priscilla and Madelief. Well, first the size. Madelief for instance also wears really short crop tops very often and all, but those aren't crop tops, she just buys her clothes too small actually. In itself I don't find that very beautiful. Priscilla also has it often, but I think with... Yes, I don't know. I don't find it pretty with either of them. But yeah, 'course there's a difference, with Madelief at least you can see a bit of a tight tummy, and with Priscilla a bit of blub. [Interview Sophie, 27 June 2006]

Sophie comments on how both Priscilla and Madelief use crop tops in an unacceptable way: by wearing shirts that are too small, or by showing blubbery flesh. Sophie found crop tops vulgar, and judged people who wore them in the same way.

Different types and manners of appearance constitute different subject-positions. Clothing and appearance³ are mainly practices in identity performance, although they are also performative in friendship. In addition, the 'plain' or 'casual' preferences of these girls are indicative of their quest for normalcy (see chapter 10). However, appearance is not always performative. For instance, braces and glasses were not much remarked upon.

Gender is performed by either more or fewer feminine appearance practices. Wearing pink is a way of identifying with the girly-girl position. The dominance of long hair at the Gunningschool performatively constituted the notion that girls have long hair and boys have short hair, a notion the girls constantly reproduced in the interviews when talking about typical features of boys and girls. Mette and Esther, but also Amisha, Consolacion, Naoul and Romeysa, performed a tomboy position with their 'boy clothes'. Mette and Esther brought about the tomboy by dressing in football jerseys. Since these are usually associated with men, wearing such jerseys cites masculinity. The other girls constituted the tomboy by dressing in gender ambiguous clothes, which then, by definition, become non-feminine clothes.

The plain and decent dress of many Gunning-girls performed the virtuous subject, as did the practice of wearing one's hair tied in a ponytail instead of loose. The virtuous subject is connected to religion and ethnicity. Headscarves likewise constitute the Muslim girl. The use of porno-chic items at the Kantlijn was instrumental in the performance of the sexual subject and the mature subject, but only at some points and by few girls. A top that reveals the belly and shoulders is sometimes just a breezy top, especially when worn by a girl without curves. The combination with other performance practices thus counts.

Chapter 8

Class positions are also produced through appearance. For instance, the ghetto fabulous look cites American ghettos with their hip-hop and street culture. Gold jewellery functions similarly. The 'correctness' (or trendiness), and the amount of clothes, perform middle-class positions. Class positions and non-trendy positions are often performed involuntarily, as the access to the cited meanings depends on one's knowledge (or capital) of them (see §8.5).

These connections between appearance and subject-positions might appear to be common sense, yet I explicitly make these connections to show the performativity of apparently obvious and innocent everyday practices. I now turn to the second central performance practices: media.

8.3 Use or lose: Girls using media

Media provided ample opportunities for identity performance. In order to qualify as a performance practice in the classroom, a medium must meet three requirements. First, it actually needs to be used in class. Second, it needs to have some relevance to the girls in the classroom as well, and some media are more relevant to them than others. Some girls understood popular media mostly as a means of passing time, and not something that is highly meaningful all the time (see also Hermes, 1995). In appendix VIII, I investigate the relevance of popular media from different methodological perspectives. My assessment of relevance stems from this investigation. Third, the medium needs to be used as a form of distinction. Table 1 summarises these three requirements for the different popular media I observed in class, in order of relevance.

Medium	Usage in class	Relevance	Distinctive
Television and film	Talked about	High	Yes
Popular music	Talked about	High	Yes
	Used in class	High	Yes
Video games	Talked about	Medium	Yes
Books	Used in class	Medium	Yes
MSN	Talked about	Low	Depends
	Used in class	Low	No
Magazines	No	Low	Yes
Newspapers	No	Low	No

Table 8.1: Popular media usage by the girls in the study

This list is an exhaustive enumeration⁴ (cf. Bakker & Scholten, 2003). High relevance means that the medium was significant to the girls. 'Distinctive'

Performance practices

refers to the medium's opportunities for distinction. Thus, the girls talked about television, television was a relevant medium to them and such talk allows distinction. Conversely, magazines were not used in class, and although magazine titles are distinctive, the girls ascribed low relevance to them. This section focuses on media use, the second section on media talk.

Media were often used in class. An eye-catching performance practice is dancing to music. The Kantlijn-girls often practiced a dance at home and then performed this for their classmates. At the Gunning-school, dancing to pop music only occurred on one occasion. Instead of the traditional musical, the pupils at the Gunningschool bade farewell to teachers and pupils by staging a practiced dance to the other forms. The girls chose *Buttons*, a song by the then popular girl group The Pussycat Dolls. Ten girls participated; only Amisha, Bianca, Dilara and Gülen did not become involved (Amisha and Bianca were not invited to join; Dilara and Gülen did not enjoy such attention). The girls practised in the small gymnasium without Thomas' supervision, but I observed most of their rehearsals.

Practice is a constant struggle over who is allowed to speak and who is allowed to show the moves, particularly between Consolacion [leader of the popular girls] and Aliye. Aliye seems to be the most experienced dancer, and she tells me she has taken some street dance lessons. The girls copy all the sensual and sexually provocative moves, from opening and crossing legs to running their hands over their breasts. The dancing is shy, awkward and unfinished. [Field notes Kantlijn, 6 July 2006]

After several rehearsals, the girls showed the dance to their classmates and later went round other classes.

As well as dancing to pop music, the Kantlijn-pupils often played their own CDs that they had usually mixed and compiled at home on the stereo or computer. The music ranged from the latest top-40 hits to pop classics (e.g. *California Love* by Tupac feat. Dr. Dre was a favourite at the Kantlijn). At the Gunningschool, listening to music in class was only allowed during special holidays, like after the Easter breakfast. In addition, at both schools, pupils carried MP3-players. Clearly, MP3-players are a direct continuation of personal media such as the Walkman. As Du Gay et al. (1997: 114) remark, the Walkman takes "private listening to the public domain". The school is a social domain, and although they sometimes listened by themselves, the pupils never aimed to isolate themselves. Instead, MP3-players were often turned into social devices by sharing earplugs with a friend. When actual music was absent

Chapter 8

or impossible, girls often sang popular tunes together. For instance, during lunchtime, we usually went to a playground close to the Kantlijn's temporary building. On the way over there, friends would often walk arm in arm, singing a pop song. On one occasion, while on the bus after visiting a museum, Jenna and Noa alternated between songs like *My humps*⁵ by the Black Eyed Peas, and a nursery rhyme from a clapping game that they had played earlier.

Books, as discussed in chapter 7, were an ever-present medium in class. Finally, MSN was often mentioned in both classes, for instance by asking who was online yesterday or by exchanging new email addresses. In addition, the Kantlijn's pupils re-appropriated Instant Messaging in class in a form of communication they called 'playing MSN'. Each group of tables posted a paper on the wall with their email addresses listed. On this paper, one notified others that s/he was 'online'. Actual messaging consisted of passing on a notebook after each 'posted' sentence. In secondary school, opportunities for using media had changed, but this had no radical effect on media use in class (see chapter 6).

Performativity of media use

Dancing and listening to popular music allowed the girls to experience different subject-positions, such as the sexual subject. Such practice is performative: through dancing like a sexual subject, one takes up this position and performatively brings it about (Baker, 2004). The girls' dance to *Buttons* shows how they 'rehearsed' sexuality. Although they paid attention to the decency of their clothes, the girls embraced practicing a flirtatious gaze. Sexuality was often shunned at the Muslim-dominated Gunningschool. However, sexuality is abundant in popular music, and the girls recognised it less in music than in, for instance, kissing on television. Such play is performative, because through practising and acting, the act produces itself, makes itself true.

Since everyone read books in class, the act of reading itself does not allow anyone to distinguish herself. However, different titles point to different subject-positions. Pupils kept their books in their drawers, but also often on top of their desks, as an ostentation of what they were reading – in other words as a performance. Books play a role in the performance of the horse-crazy girl and the mature subject. For instance, as mentioned in chapter 7, girls with 'boyfriends' had titles like *Vrijen* [Making out] on their desks, even though they had not yet engaged in such activities.

MSN also provides many opportunities for distinction. It allows one

Performance practices

to choose an email address and a nickname. The email addresses often point towards an identity, for instance in using 'footballer girl' or 'mocro' (Dutch street slang for Moroccan). The nicknames (which are displayed in the programme) were changed continuously and usually consisted of a number of emoticons with a message like 'the Kantlijn rules!!!' or 'Friday I'll go swimming'. These elements, however, did not play a role in class as such. The MSN game was not distinctive and hence I do not consider it a performance practice. Likewise, De Kloet et al. (2005) argue that distinction is possible through different MP3-players, with Apple's iPod in particular lending an air of authenticity to its owner. I did not observe such differentiation between brands in either of the schools.

8.4 Everybody's talkin' about it? Girls' media talk

As one part of the class is off to handicrafts, the other half has free time and can do a drawing. Maud, Mette, Thijs and Max are discussing the song *Stupid girls* by Pink. They are discussing different parts of the song: they dislike the rapping ('it's stupid'), but they enjoy the chorus ('I like that'). [Field notes Kantlijn, 11 April 2006]

This short observation of a group of pupils is indicative of media talk in the classroom. Between educational chores, they had 'free time'. Luck gave them a task, but the atmosphere was relaxed and talking was allowed. Whilst they were drawing, they engaged in casual conversation. Their topic of choice was close to their world: a new song by a popular female singer. As they moved through the conversation, they covered different aspects of the song and put a judgement on them. This talk allowed them to align themselves, regardless of the lyrical content.

Media talk involved television programmes, movies, television commercials, popular music, games, and, to a small extent, MSN. Television and movie talk included discussing the plot of a show, movie or commercial, or discussing the behaviour of characters in soaps, dramas and reality series. *Charmed* was an absolute favourite to discuss at the Gunningschool. In the autumn of 2005, the show aired daily at 7pm and was followed at 8pm by *Sex and the City*. I was surprised to learn that the Muslim girls watched this show, and discussed it in class.

Aliye, Radia and Laila are discussing last night's TV. Aliye says she doesn't like *Sex and the City*. It had sex scenes yesterday. Radia pulls a dirty face and says 'ieuwh!' Laila hadn't seen last night's episode, but added that there's a lot of kissing in the show, which she finds "dirty". Now Radia and Aliye simultaneously go 'ieuwh!' [Field notes Gunningschool, 8 November 2006]

Chapter 8

At the Kantlijn, the favourite show to discuss was the daily soap *Goede tijden, slechte tijden* [Good times, bad times]. I also observed some discussions of commercials. Again, the girls discussed the plot of the commercials, and it should be noted that the advertised products hardly ever entered the discussion. Talk about the behaviour of characters on television is comparable to normal gossip. Sophie watched the reality show *America's next top model* and constantly discussed the contestants' behaviour. In one episode, the contestants got makeovers. A beauty pageant queen was forced to cut her long hair into a Mia Farrow short cut. The girl cried hysterically and ended up leaving the programme. Sophie found the crying silly, and, in addition, could not understand how someone could put one's hair over one's career.

Music talk consisted of talking about all aspects of new songs and videos, and talking about the artists' behaviour or careers. In talking about celebrities, the girls appropriated certain aspects of the artist, while rejecting others. For instance, in discussing Christina Aguilera's *Dirrrty* video, Mette stated she liked the dance moves. Odecia interjected she found the video 'dirty'. Mette adjusted her opinion, but stated the moves are 'cool' nonetheless.

Game talk means going through lists of game titles ('do you know this game x?' – 'It is cool'), talking about their experiences in *The Sims (2)*, and discussing tips and tricks. I only observed game talk at the Kantlijn and never at the Gunningschool. Finally, talking about MSN means talking about who was online. MSN talk is a performance practice, but since it does not concern mediated characters or personas, I do not consider it to be media talk.

Performativity of media talk

Media talk involves formulating norms and standards, both for the girls themselves and for others. As I have argued elsewhere in relation to girls' talk about celebrities (Duits & Van Romondt Vis, 2006), media talk is part of the reflexive project of self. In this (re)negotiation of identity, girls carefully judge the appearance and behaviour of others (including celebrities) to establish what is appropriate. This might include identification with the celebrity, but difference or non-liking incites a similar practice. It is not imitation, but rather it offers a legitimisation of (their own) behaviour. Likewise, Sophie did not identify with the crying top model, yet she talked about it in class and made a judgment that is both

Performance practices

relevant and applicable to the girls' daily lives: crying over a haircut is silly, and a career is more important than long hair. Thus, through talking about *America's next top model* Sophie defined appropriate behaviour. Media talk facilitates the construction of norms (e.g. what constitutes male and female behaviour), and these norms can then be cited through performance practices.

Media talk is also a performance practice. In their conversation, Mette tentatively associated herself with Aguilera and cited her coolness. Odecia disassociated herself from Aguilera, therefore also from Mette. There is some reconciliation, but the conversation is distinctive for both Mette and Odecia. Likewise, discussing certain genres and titles is a form of citing the connotations of those genres and titles. Much media talk actively produced femininity: discussing soaps (traditionally coded as feminine), romantic comedies ('chick flicks') and *The Sims* (a girl game, Vosmeer, 2007). Some girls still watched the cartoon networks Jetix and Nickelodeon, yet shows from these networks were rarely discussed. Instead, more 'mature' American television dramas (e.g. *Lost*, *Desperate housewives*), MTV and soap operas were preferred conversation topics. Media talk about such titles allows these girls to cite maturity and thus perform the mature subject. Media talk, then, often functions as social talk (part of the reflexive project), but this type of talk is also constitutive in identity performance.

8.5 Conditions for the use of performance practices

Not all girls can enter these performance practices in similar ways. I have already mentioned Bourdieu's (1984) notion of cultural capital, which he links theoretically to financial capital. Financial attainability is the first condition for appearance and media practices. Second, appearance practices depend on a variety of availabilities connected to the body: gender, ethnicity and body shape. Likewise, access to popular media depends on availability at home, which is not just a matter of finances, but also of parental restriction. Third, certain skills are needed before one can have access to these performance practices. In this section, I discuss these three conditions. A fourth condition has to do with the context or setting in which identity performance takes place. At school, certain rules apply, and girls were not free to do what they pleased. The school context as a limit for identity performance has been discussed in section 5.7.

Chapter 8

Financial attainability

Access to appearance and popular media depends on the financial situation of parents. None of the girls received a clothing allowance [kleedgeld] in the 8th form, although this changed as the girls made the transition to secondary school. Parents paid for clothes and this endowed them with some control over what the girls wore, although the girls also borrowed each other's clothes. Similarly, access to popular media is largely related, albeit not restricted, to the home. At age twelve, the home situation dominates other spheres. However, girls can also access popular media at friends' houses, at school or at the library.

The girls of the Gunningschool read fewer magazines, played fewer computer games, and did not go to the movies as frequently as the girls from the Kantlijn. Instead of being due to ethnic differences, this was related to differences in financial backgrounds. Bianca, the only autochthonous Dutch girl at the Gunningschool often complained to me about her parents' financial status:

I sit down with Bianca during the lunch break. She talks to me about the magazine *W.I.T.C.H.*. She explains it is about five teenage girls who battle in a fantasy world. The fantasy world is mixed with a real world, which takes place at school. She says she is "completely addicted" to it. It is like a club as well. There is a television series too. Bianca wants to join the club and get all the "stuff" from it. There's a game too! There was a contest where you had to phone in to win this game. She nagged and nagged her mother, but her mother said calling was too expensive. She tells me her mother was afraid she would quickly tire of it, but Bianca assures me she would not. [Fieldnotes Gunningschool, 21 November 2005]

Bianca was the outsider at the Gunningschool and she was bullied most of the time. *W.I.T.C.H.* is a comic book series where a fantasy battle world substitutes the battles of secondary school: a perfect fantasy outlet for a bullied girl. To embody that fantasy position, Bianca aimed to submerge herself in the full range of merchandise surrounding this series, but her parents' financial background (mother unemployed, father working in construction) impeded her access. The phone contest provided a possibility to obtain the video game for the price of a phone call (or so it seemed to Bianca), yet her mother disallowed this too.

The average income of the parents at the Gunningschool was lower than at the Kantlijn. The schools did not provide official data about parental income, but macro data (cf. O+S, 2006) shows that average incomes in the Gunningschool neighbourhood were significantly lower than in that of the Kantlijn. Furthermore, in my observations I learned

Performance practices

that two thirds of the pupils at the Gunningschool got financial compensation for their school contribution. Nonetheless, all the girls had at least one television and one computer in their homes. Not all pupils of the Gunningschool had an internet connection at home. Several girls announced they were to get a new computer with internet access next year. Amsterdam Social Services supplies lower income families with an internet-connected computer when children go to secondary school. Access to MSN is thus also limited by internet access, and hence was not available to all. The availability of a medium in a house does not guarantee vacancy of the medium, as the example of Naoul's large family in the next chapter will show.

Differences in parental financial circumstances have more effect on clothes than on media use. Televisions and computers are purchased less frequently than sweaters and trousers. It does not matter much for media talk in the classroom if a show was watched on a big flat screen TV. The differences in the financial circumstances between the Gunning-girls and the Kantlijn-girls showed more clearly in wardrobe size. The availability of certain items of clothing depends on parents' financial means and their willingness to spend their income on their daughters' clothing. Shopping with one's mother avows her with an influence, but sometimes mothers need the financial stick with which to assert this power. Esther took her mother along "only ... for the money":

- Linda: And when you buy new clothes, who is important in the decision?
Esther: Me.
Linda: Yes. And your mother?
Esther: Well, I only take her along for the money.
Linda: Yes, she doesn't have a say in it? And does she agree with what you want?
Esther: Yes, sometimes, but sometimes really not.
Linda: Can you give an example?
Esther: With this jersey.
Linda: She didn't approve? How come not, what's wrong with it?
Esther: Too expensive or something, and then she thinks it's ugly and that it will get ugly real quickly.
Linda: This is an orange KNVB [Royal Netherlands Football Association] jersey. Is it Nike?
Esther: Yes, with the Dutch flag. And a football. But it's just a jersey. Yes, but she didn't like this.
Linda: It had 'the Netherlands' on the back and she found that...?
Esther: Stupid. Then she said I'd just as well buy a regular national team jersey and of course I wasn't about to do that. [Interview Esther, 12 June 2006]

Chapter 8

Esther had her heart set on an official football jersey from the Nike brand. Such official merchandise is often twice the price of a “regular national team jersey” and her mother clearly did not want to spend that much. Instead, she argued it was too expensive. She added, in a cunning manoeuvre used by many mothers, that ‘the jersey would wear out quickly’. This was to no avail. As Esther said, triumphantly wearing the coveted jersey, she was not about to give in to her mother’s pleas. Esther’s jersey functioned as a practice in the performance of a tomboy, but also in the performance of a middle-class subject. Esther and her mother were not the only ones who knew the price of an official Nike jersey, and her (in this case: male) classmates easily and eagerly read such conventions.

Esther won the battle, but other girls are not as persuasive, or their parents simply lack the means to lose such battles. Bianca, likewise, did not understand why her parents thwarted her clothing desires.

Linda: And when you go to buy new clothes, who is important then?

Bianca: My parents, because they have the money. Because I bought these trousers for 30 euros and my mother actually found that too expensive. But yeah, I thought, what can you do, because you can’t get them any cheaper I think. And then, yeah because, they have kind of nice trousers but they’re really 40, 30... Yes, said my mother, ‘ask for clothes for your birthday’. But I thought, yeah what good is that, I’d rather have something for my birthday I hardly ever get. Because clothes you can buy just like that you know, but something for your birthday, I want something special for my birthday, something you don’t get every day. Not food or something, those kinds of things. Nor clothes, nor shoes. [Interview Bianca, 29 June 2006]

Over and again, Bianca is frustrated and fails to sympathise with her parents. Bianca stands alone in such frustration, as the other girls were more understanding of their parents’ reluctance to buy ‘expensive’ clothes. Katia, for instance, described the clothes she liked:

Katia: Well, that it’s kind of loose, that it fits comfortably. Not too expensive, because then you’re really stiff like ‘don’t ruin it’. I always get white things dirty really quick. [Interview Katia, 19 June 2006]

Katia disciplined herself, and she used – almost defensively – being comfortable as an argument.

Expensive clothing can be seen as showing off. The girls avoided any semblance of being poor, yet decadence or bragging was to be shunned at all times. On one occasion in class, Marisol and Maud discussed whether they followed fashion.

Performance practices

Marisol says “no, only when I like it”. Maud says: “we invent our own fashion”. I ask them if designer brands matter, they answer no, although sometimes the others make fun of Zeeman [a textile discounter chain]. Maud thinks Zeeman is nothing to be ashamed of, she says it’s perfectly normal to buy towels or underwear there. But you should not buy your entire wardrobe there. She usually buys shoes and coats at brand stores, but according to her, those last longer. She’s referring not so much to better quality, but to a longer period in which you wear them. [Fieldnotes Kantlijn, 25 April 2006]

Such a discussion is part of the reflexive project. Marisol and Maud legitimatised an investment in brand clothing, because they used such items over a longer period. Shoes and coats last longer, but are also amongst the most visible items. The girls had one coat for summer and one for winter, thus a coat was worn every day. In their reflexive discourse, they performatively made Zeeman a lower ranked store, fine for buying underwear and towels, but not to buy *observable* pieces of clothing. Although they scorned the idea of making fun of Zeeman, they still placed Zeeman outside normalcy.

Body limitations

Bodies put limitations on the positions we can perform, and performance theory explicitly acknowledges how bodies are always-already inscribed. Sex dictates a specific gender identification, and any divergence from this is scrutinised by society. However, the position of tomboy was widely accepted at the Kantlijn. Although Mette and Esther were sometimes mistaken for boys, they mentioned they never experienced problems with their tomboy identities. In chapter 7, I argued that tomboys should be understood as a different attachment to a female gender, not as an attachment to a male gender. At the Gunningschool, gender relations were more rigidly enforced.

During recess, I talk with Betty and Bianca. Betty tells a story about school football, where there was a girl that looked like a boy. They (their team) went up to the referee to have him check. Betty thinks it’s stupid to want to look like a boy: “you have to be happy with what you are”. [Field notes Gunningschool, 13 July 2006]

As stated, only Amisha designated her tomboy style as boy-clothes, and the other girls objected to this notion.

Chapter 8

Like gender on sex, ethnicity is inscribed on bodies through racial elements embedded in the ethnicity discourse (Essed, 1986). As I discussed in chapter 5, at the Gunningschool, pupils were encouraged to identify with their ethnic backgrounds, because teachers continuously reminded the pupils they were 'Turkish' or 'Moroccan'. The pupils understood ethnicity as something you *are*, not something you feel (see §7.3). Not all the girls performed ethnicity, and for some of them ethnic identification with one's body was easier than for others. For instance, Beyhan did not like her white skin and light hair. She wanted to appear less Dutch and more Turkish, and she thought that if she were darker – browner – she would be more Turkish.

A third way in which bodily features en/disable certain identifications is through bodily size. The size and shapes of one's body cause certain positions to be more obvious than others (cf. Young, 1992). The girly-girls of the Kantlijn were also the smallest girls in class. Conversely, Priscilla was the biggest girl at the Kantlijn, both in terms of body weight and body development. She had B-cup breasts and large hips, whereas the other girls had small or no breasts and hips. Priscilla performed the sexual subject and showed off her body. In addition, due to her unstable home situation and her frequent absences from school, she performed a delinquent position, upon which her classmates both marvelled and frowned. To her, the position of tomboy or girly girl would have been more difficult to embody. Comparably, Dilara was the biggest girl at the Gunningschool in terms of height and weight. As she had had to repeat a year, she was also a year older than her classmates were. Dilara was always visibly uncomfortable with her size and avoided drawing attention to herself in every way. She only wore loose-fitting, black clothes, small earrings, and her hair in a ponytail. She spoke softly, and usually held her arms in front of her torso, hiding her stomach and chest. She constantly adjusted her clothing, pulling her cardigan over her buttocks. This movement was so automated – incorporated in her every move – she was never conscious of it. However, the act of hiding her buttocks invariably drew my attention to them. To her, the sexual subject-position was not available, and faced with no alternatives, she tried to make herself and her body disappear.

Gender and ethnicity cannot be chosen, and discourse avows identification with the 'appropriate' gender or ethnicity. As such, there is no element of choice. The girls believed one did have (and rather should have) control over body weight. They made themselves and others re-

Performance practices

sponsible for fat bodies. Dilara and Priscilla were both criticised for their bodies, albeit not always openly.

Parental restrictions

As well as financial limitations, parents also regulate their offspring's use of popular media⁶. Access to movies and television was limited in several ways. First, bedtime obstructs access to certain content. The typical bedtime for the girls in primary school was 21.30hrs, although some did not go to bed until eleven o'clock. Only five girls indicated they were permitted to watch anything they wanted. For the Muslim girls, restrictions mostly involved sexually explicit television content. Other parents followed the age recommendations, or they forbade frightening content (e.g. horror movies). Parents did not necessarily need to forbid such content, because some girls disciplined themselves. They did not watch scary movies anyway, precisely because there were too scary. Unlike television, parents did not regulate music listening behaviour. Furthermore, despite alarming news reports about MSN bullying and child molesters operating through the medium (see De Haan, Van 't Hof, & Van Elst, 2006), parents did not regulate MSN behaviour. When I asked the girls in the interviews if their parents had ever discussed webcam or MSN use with them, only two girls said yes. Other girls replied with answers like "no, my mother doesn't interfere with it" [Nazli] or "no, they're okay with it" [Chema]. Furthermore, according to the girls, parents hardly ever regulated gaming behaviour, and the only parents that restricted gaming were the parents of white girls. Several girls indicated their parents prohibited games with sexual or violent content. Although Muslim parents regulated sexual television content, they did not restrict sexually explicit game content.

I never heard of any clothing restrictions. As most girls shopped with (one of) their parents, control probably took place before purchase. Furthermore, most girls did not express a need for controversial clothing. Maybe struggles about appearance between children and parents occur at a later age in puberty.

Skills

In order to employ these performance practices, girls need skills. Understanding popular culture requires cognitive, language and cultural skills that not all girls equally possess. To elucidate, one morning Nazli

Chapter 8

came to school with a new belt. It was a white belt with big black letters written all around that spelled 'SEXX GIRL NEW YOK', probably a misspelling of the English 'sexy girl New York'. Laila joked about it, calling Nazli 'sexy girl' all morning. Nazli was clearly not amused, which suggests she had been unaware of the literal meaning of these words. A semiotic observer might interpret the text on the belt (the sign) as a performance of a porno-chic identity (the signified). However, as I argued in chapter 3, clothing codes cannot be read without some indication of the intentionality of message. After this day, Nazli never wore the belt again. She clearly did not mean to perform a 'sexy girl'; she (and her parents) merely had limited access to "the symbolic wares of ... society" (Davis, 1992: 9); in this case: the language skills to decode 'SEXX GIRL NEW YOK'. Likewise, the girls favoured American popular music and although they had a basic understanding of English, not all girls understood everything. For instance, Odecia remarked *Changes* by rapper Tupac Shakur is her favourite song and she listened to it every night. According to her, the message of the song is not to give up. She explained that 'change' refers to the need to persevere. If we take Wikipedia as indicative of the preferred meaning, the most obvious themes of the song are racism, police brutality, and drugs and gang violence (Wikipedia, 2007). It seemed to me Odecia did not misread the lyrics, but simply lacked the necessary language skills to understand this English song.

To understand the content of popular media, cognitive skills are needed. As we also sometimes watched a movie in class, I noticed that not all pupils could do the 'cognitive work' required (Johnson, 2005). Those with lower standardised test scores could not comprehend all the plot lines and easily tired of the movie, even though *The Incredibles* or *Loenatik de Moevie* are aimed at the younger children's market. For them, this lack of skills limited their ability to talk about and use popular media.

Worries about the digital divide (i.e. differences between the information haves and the information have-nots) often involve women, lower-income classes and ethnic minorities. Despite such worries, all the girls possessed the necessary skills to use MSN and the internet. Van Dijk (2003: 15) distinguishes three types of computer skills. Operational skills refer to the ability to use computer programmes; informational skills refer to the ability to search, select and process information; and strategic skills refer to the ability to use ICT to better one's position. The girls in this study possessed all three types of skills, and even girls with low CITO scores were internet-savvy. However, this mostly means they used MSN, and it is unlikely they will re-programme this software.

Performance practices

Finally, access to performance practices is privileged for those with high cultural capital. Knowing the fashionable styles, brands and manners of dress provide status and enables the citation of trendiness in order to perform the trendy girl. The girls valued those with much knowledge about popular culture (see the discussion of the knowing subject, §7.5). Having an older brother or sister, or a subscription to a magazine, might provide easier access to this privileged knowledge. Furthermore, such knowledge comes about through endless reflection (what is cool, what is in), both amongst peers and in media content (e.g. magazines, MTV). Conversely, failing to know these conventions guarantees ridicule from your classmates. For instance, Nazli once combined her tracksuit with cowboy boots, and was teased all day about the inappropriateness of this combination. What counts as cultural capital, depends on the field. In these school settings, popular culture is privileged over high culture. A similar ethnographic study amongst PhD students would show a different, privileged knowledge.

8.6 Conclusion

I investigated how girls use the performance practices of clothing, the body and media in their performance of subject-positions. I argued that appearance and media themselves are not performative, but that the girls did use these practices to cite conventions (for instance about gender and class) and to perform different subject-positions. I provided a detailed description of appearance, media use and media talk, and discussed the consequences in terms of performativity. By dressing in a certain way, the girls cited known conventions and distinguished themselves from others. Through media talk, the girls reflected on, but also cited different subject-positions, making these their own. Furthermore, through media use the girls cited artists or conventions attached to genres. In such performances, the girls were able to identify with subject-positions, whilst at the same time these positions were performatively produced. For instance, dancing sexily is a rehearsal of the sexual subject, but the rehearsal at the same time produces this position and makes it real. Talking about a show on MTV cited maturity, and performatively installed the idea of MTV as a teenage medium. The girls performed up to those positions set in the reflexive project, and their performances too were under the constant scrutiny of reflexivity.



Chapter 8

I also argued that the use of popular media depends on financial attainability, bodily availability, media availability at home, and various skills. Identity performance is not a voluntary project wherein one can be whom one chooses. Furthermore, it is the amalgamation of practices that makes the identity performance effective. Certain aspects of identity are amenable, whilst others are set. Yet, even the more amenable aspects involve the citation of norms, and changing these norms is beyond the scope of the individual. Identity performance occurs in exchange and negotiation with others, like family and friends, and it does not occur in isolation from society. In the next chapter, I discuss the influence of others on identity performance.