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### Multi - girl - culture : an ethnography of doing identity

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## Chapter 9

# Influence Spheres

### 9.1 Introduction

Chapter 7 provided an analysis of the different identities and subject-positions the girls embody, and in chapter 8, I discussed how appearance and media are used in the performance of these identities and positions. In this chapter, I investigate under which influences these positions arise. Through performing, a subject cites cultural norms and as such, performatively produces them. A subject thus lives up to certain norms through performance. These norms are constantly dissipated through discourse, and are negotiated with others. Through constant and daily reflection, they are continuously defined and reified. For the girls in this study, three sets of actors were of importance. I call these *influence spheres*. They set and shape identity performance in the classroom, as represented in figure 9.1 (p.185). To elucidate this model, I discuss Nazli's negotiation about boys.

#### *Nazli and boys*

Nazli (Gunningschool) had a developing, tall body. She often acted childishly, making silly jokes and not understanding what was happening with the more mature girls. She was uncomfortable with her curves, and it seemed to me that her body was ahead of her mental development. Nazli, like most girls at the Gunningschool, avoided contact with the boys in class. On several occasions, she told me she was afraid of boys. On other occasions, she claimed boys did not interest her ["boeien me niet"]. Nonetheless, Nazli paid much attention to her appearance,

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and often wore new clothes that ‘touched upon’ the latest fashions (as they were also often wide of the mark). To Nazli it was particularly important to look well-groomed [verzorgd]. She made sure her hair was in good shape, her nails were dirt-free and cut, and her clothes were clean and faultless. She struggled with the dilemma of looking good and not attracting boys’ attention. In this excerpt from my in-depth interview with her, Nazli’s dilemma becomes apparent.

Nazli: Look Betty, for instance, wears a short skirt up to here.

Linda: Halfway up your upper leg?

Nazli: Yes, upper leg, and my mother doesn’t approve of that. My mother says: ‘Yes, boys will look at you and all’. That’s true. Boys do look at Bette that way.

Linda: Would you like to wear that, those clothes?

Nazli: I’m afraid to.

Linda: You’re afraid to?

Nazli: When I was little – know nothing about it – I was afraid to walk outside like that, blouse like that. Then I was really afraid.

(...)

Linda: You said formerly you wore short tops or something. But you can’t remember when you’ve stopped doing that?

Nazli: In 6th form [age 9-10, LD].

Linda: In 6th form? Okay. How do you feel about girls who wear such short sweaters so you can see their belly buttons?

Nazli: Well, I don’t think that’s right at all. I feel they’re doing that for boys. That’s what I think. Some wear really short skirts. Without pantyhose, without nothing, without pants. And I feel they’re doing that for boys. That’s what I think.

Linda: And you’d never do that yourself?

Nazli: Would you?

Linda: I would wear that, yes.

Nazli: Yes?

Linda: Yes.

Nazli: Do you think that’s pretty?

Linda: I think that’s pretty.

Nazli: I think it’s pretty too, but I don’t know [shy all at once], I’m afraid to wear it. [Silence] But you already have a boyfriend? [Interview Nazli, 8 June 2006]

Nazli listened to her mother, who warned her about the male gaze. She saw her mother proven right, because her classmate Betty wore short skirts and received the gaze (although I did not observe this class). Concurrently, Nazli said she was afraid to wear such clothes. She did not say she avoided such dress out of conviction, instead she claimed fear. It remained unclear to me what she feared (boys’ reactions, her mother’s disapproval?), although her statement about the prettiness of such

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clothes again indicated she had no issues with the clothing itself. By way of comparison: several girls rejected revealing clothes because they deemed them vulgar or improper. At the end of the excerpt, Nazli turned the question around: would I wear short skirts or short sweaters? Her final remark is striking and returned to the male gaze: why would I want to dress like that if I already had a boyfriend?



*Figure 9.1: Performance influence spheres*

In the interview, Nazli negotiated her attitude by reflecting on her mother, her peer Betty, and society in the form of an understanding of the male gaze. Nazli thus mentioned the three influence spheres from figure 9.1: family, peers, and society. Her negotiation was situated in an interview context and it was in 'dialogue' with me. Nazli's speech was thus a performance towards me. I had always felt Nazli liked me, as she often sought out my company. When I said I found such clothes pretty, any repudiation on her part might have jeopardised our relationship in Nazli's eyes. This specific negotiation must be understood in the interview context. Different methods of data gathering produce different types of information and provide different types of insight into identity performance, as will become clear as this chapter progresses. The division of these influence spheres into different levels is analytical rather than practical, as they do not exist as separate entities. In this chapter, I focus on these three levels, using examples from both appearance and media articulations. Starting with family, I move to peers and then onto discourses dominant within society at large.

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### 9.2 Family

Media use primarily takes place at home. Appearance functions differently, since girls might get dressed at home, but they dress *for* school (or another setting). In the previous chapter, I argued that girls' use of appearance and media is dependent on their parents' ability and willingness to buy magazines, computers, clothes, accessories et cetera for their daughters. Furthermore, parents restrict access to media for protective reasons. In this section, I discuss family influence on girls' identity performance. Parents and siblings – but also routines and mores in the household – influence girls' use of appearance and media.

For example, Thirza enjoyed 'being different', and she enjoyed calling attention to this. At various points in her interview, during informal conversations I had with her in class, and in the focus groups, she pointed out that she was 'just herself'. When we came to talk about her media use in the interview, she indicated that these questions were not applicable to her. She said she rarely watched television at home: "like only about five minutes a week". She explained:

Thirza: No, but it is, well, many children always watch television, but... television is not for me. So..

Linda: Why do you think other children do that and you don't?

Thirza: Because, you know, I have this square behind [my house] where I go to play a lot. And other children don't. And I, I just entertain myself with other things and also, I was never taught to watch tv. (...) I was taught I could only watch the news or *Klokhuis* and *Sesamestreet*. [Interview Thirza, 19 June 2006]

Her divergent television viewing behaviour is one example of her performance of 'difference'. In the quote, Thirza referred to the common sense notion that playing outside is better than watching television. Thirza instead mentioned she knows 'how to entertain herself', and she opposed peer pressure. Here, Thirza cited an authoritative and dominant notion to enforce her claims about her identity (i.e. her narrative of self). The quote also shows Thirza did not get these ideas out of the blue. Her parents "taught" her not to watch television, save for the 'more acceptable' news and educationally orientated *Klokhuis* and *Sesamestreet*. Thirza's father designed board games in his spare time, and joint family fun was stressed in her family. Thus, Thirza's performance of difference and authenticity was shaped by her upbringing, where television viewing was not favoured.

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Family as an influence sphere works in two ways. First, the size and rules of the household determine media and appearance use. Second, parents and siblings impart norms and knowledge. To elucidate these two forms of family influence on identity performance, I elaborate on them in the following two subsections, in which I provide several examples from the fieldwork, again focusing on media and appearance. Whilst I did not visit any of the girls at home, I did obtain insight into their home situations. I knew where they lived and they talked about their parents and practices at home. In addition, I met several parents at school.

### *Household matters*

The girls in this study had divergent backgrounds, not only in terms of ethnicity and social-economic class. In this subsection, I describe the home situations of two girls: Mickey and Naoul. Mickey comes from a non-religious, broken family, whereas Naoul comes from a large Muslim family. Their examples are by no means representative of the girls in this study, nor do they exemplify a specific type of girl. Instead, the examples illustrate the diverse range of possible home situations in Dutch multicultural society, and they demonstrate how such diversity has different consequences for the girls' use of, and access to popular media and appearance.

*Mickey* (Kantlijn) was born in the Netherlands. Her father is Dutch, and her mother is of mixed descent, with Austrian and Chinese/Surinamese roots. Her mother and father divorced when she was about two years old. Mickey had lived alone with her mother since then and had a strong relationship with her. In the summer of 2006, Mickey moved from a flat in Amsterdam to a terrace house in a small Noord-Holland city, because her mother moved in with a new boyfriend. Mickey still spent every other weekend at her father's place and she thus had two rooms: one at her mother's and one at her father's. Mickey's access to popular media needs to be understood between the two houses. In her room at her father's house, she had a stereo to listen to music on, but at her mother's house she did not. At her mother's flat, the computer was located in the living room, allowing her mother some control over her chat behaviour, but in the new house, Mickey got a computer in her new bedroom. Her mother's place had a television and magazines; at her father's she had access to *The Sims* video game she enjoyed playing. Although her social economic status is best described as lower middle class (her father

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worked in renovation, her mother in ticket sales and her stepfather in demolition), Mickey had access to a range of titles and media. Commuting between two houses diversified her access to popular media.

*Naoul* (Gunningschool) was also born in the Netherlands. Her father migrated to the Netherlands from Morocco when he was twenty-two, and her mother came when she married her father. Both her parents were unemployed. Her father spoke reasonable Dutch, but her mother did not speak it well. Naoul comes from a family of eight, with six sisters (aged 1, 13, 16, 18, 20 and 24 at the time) and one brother (aged 21). They lived together in a small, impoverished upstairs flat, where Naoul shared a room with her 13 and 16-year old sisters. The television set was located in the living room, facilitating parental or sisterly control. Naoul, like most Muslim girls, was not allowed to see 'dirty things', like kissing or nudity. The common solution within the Muslim community is to turn the television to teletext<sup>1</sup> when such scenes are on. Naoul said she applied this rule<sup>2</sup>:

Linda: You said you watch TMF, do you ever see such [dirty] videos?

Naoul: No. Yes. Sometimes. But then I do teletext. [laughs] [Interview Naoul, 30 June 2006]

Naoul's parents only regulated television content. Naoul often played video games like *GTA San Andreas* on one of the households' two computers – one located in her brother's room and one in her father's room. In *GTA San Andreas* the protagonist can pick up prostitutes from the street. The game shows no explicit sexual images, only suggestive moaning and up-and-down movement of the car. When I asked Naoul about the sex in this game, she resolutely said "no", negating this feature of the game. With many brothers and sisters around, computer time was not easily available, which also meant that Naoul could not spend as much time on MSN as girls with fewer brothers and sisters. Conversely, a large family means a large input of popular culture. Naoul read several of the magazines her sisters subscribed to. She was always one of the first to know about a new slang expression, a new song or clothing trend. Her use of and access to popular culture was, in sum, influenced by the size and religion of her family.

### *Family beliefs*

The example of Thirza showed how family mores about television reflected on her, and how this influenced her identity performance. Parents obviously pass on morals, norms, attitudes and values, and hence

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the girls learn what their family considers appropriate media use and appearance. Several girls talked about the vulgarity of porno-chic clothes, always using the word 'ordinair' [vulgar] but only in the context of sexually revealing clothes or overtly sexual behaviour. Caruna told me where she learned this word:

Caruna: There was a girl on the beach that just walked around in a string...

And she was younger than me as well.

Linda: Okay, and what do you think about that?

Caruna: Ieuw!! To say it in one word!

Linda: Ieuw?

Caruna: I thought it was a bit... Like... My mother always says 'vulgar', so yeah, that word. [Interview Caruna, 3 July 2006]

In sections 8.2 and 8.5, I discussed cultural capital. In general, middle-class girls 'inherit' class notions about vulgarity, and reproduce them in their own repertoires. Next to transferring cultural capital, family members influence girls' identity performance through identification and imitation practices.

Most girls shopped with their mothers, although some mentioned fathers, nieces, or sisters. Identification with the person they are shopping with is important. Most girls favoured mothers over fathers, because mothers 'are girls too':

Linda: Who are important in deciding what kind of clothes you buy?

Gülen: Usually my mother. Because I always shop with my mother for clothes and all. My mother also has a taste, because she is a girl too. So she knows how, what girls and all wear. And with my father I can't do it, because he really likes closed clothing. That's why.

Linda: Yes, that it's all really closed?

Gülen: Yeah, not really very closed. But my father doesn't really have the taste of a girl.

Linda: Yes [laughter], and your mother does have a nice taste?

Gülen: Yes, she does.

Linda: You think your mother also wears nice clothes?

Gülen: Yes. [Interview Gülen, 9 June 2007]

'Closed clothing' was discussed in section 7.3. It signifies the opposite of revealing clothing. Gülen's father preferred to see his daughter covered up, but according to Gülen, his taste is that of a man. She favoured her mother's opinion, as she could identify with her more because of their shared gender. Shared gender is not necessarily enough. Another girl repudiated her mother's taste, because – as she said – it was the taste of a woman, not a girl.



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When the girls approved of their mothers' tastes, they appreciated her input and copied her style. Conversely, when the girls did not like their mothers' taste, this caused problems, or the girls decided to go shopping with someone else. At the Kantlijn, several girls had trendy mothers. Girls with hip mothers wore hip(per) clothes as well. Mickey's mother always dressed according to latest trends, and so did Mickey. Sophie's mother worked as a stylist and bag designer, and Sophie had a similar sense of style and creativity. In a conversation about creativity, Sophie remarked she had brightened up her second-hand, old-fashioned bicycle [omafiets] with colourful strings. Because of her mother's job, people sometimes thought it was her mother who had decorated the bike and not her. Sophie considered herself a creative person and she did not like it when this creativity was ascribed to her mother [Field notes Kantlijn, 21 March 2007]. The need for authenticity (chapter 10) made Sophie claim her creativity for herself, although her mother of course had much to do with it. In sum, family influences the girls' ideas about nice and appropriated media and clothing through transferring cultural capital and by offering models to copy or resist.

### 9.3 Peers

Peers form the second set of actors that influence the ways identity positions are produced. Like with family, ideas about what constitutes nice or good media and appearance are constructed through reflection with peers. Furthermore, as most of their daily interactions happen with classmates, these peers constitute the prime audience for identity performance. Identity performances are *negotiations* that are constantly in *process*. The following example of *Charmed* highlights both these elements.

On a rainy November morning, the pupils at the Gunningschool were allowed to come inside before the bell rang. As the pupils entered one by one, they stood by their friends' desks to chat. When Laila entered, she sought out Consolacion, the most popular girl. The girls in Consolacion's clique often fought for her attention, and Laila knew how to get it. 'Consa' – as the girls affectionately shortened her name – 'Consa, did you watch *Charmed* last night?' Consolacion answered affirmatively in slang, 'vet kapot man' [± really wicked man]. Laila and Consolacion entered into a discussion about the episode's plot, whilst some other girls lurked about them. The daily broadcasts of this American teen drama at 7pm were repeats, and had aired before during Friday nights' prime time. Consolacion had already seen all the episodes and knew

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the bigger plot lines. In the episode that Laila and Consolacion discussed, a new character had been introduced. Consolacion subsequently spoiled a major plot line: the newly introduced character, Chris, is from the future and he is actually the son of Piper (one of the main characters). Laila said she did not know this, but after Consolacion repeated it, she had a sudden lapse of memory and said she did know this. Conversations about *Charmed* usually started the day at the Gunningschool. The friendship between Laila and Consolacion evolved into a very close one, with their shared *Charmed*-fandom as the main constitutive force. After school, Laila and Consolacion would head to the library to search for information about the show and to copy pictures. Consolacion's semi-privileged knowledge of popular culture further substantiated her top position in class. By June, most girls in the class listed *Charmed* as their favourite show, and most websites featured at least one picture of the three leading characters.

Talk about *Charmed* is a negotiation between Laila and Consolacion, but also between Consolacion and the rest of the girls. Wanting to be friends with the most popular girl in class, *Charmed* offered an opportunity for the Gunning-girls to be closer to Consolacion. The talk is performative, since talking about *Charmed* is what effectively made the friendship between Laila and Consolacion 'real'. Still, the friend is an identity that needs to be performed continuously. As such, the repetitious acts make up the friendship, not merely a singular act. Furthermore, the example again shows how knowledge of popular culture is an asset. As with family, peers play a major role in disseminating such knowledge. Engaging in peer interaction and observing other's interactions provide access to these codes. To further elucidate the workings of peer interaction, and to underscore process and negotiation as the key to peer influences, I draw from my field notes to describe two (series of) events: the process of placing pictures on the webpages at the Gunningschool, and music lessons at the Kantlijn. Again, these examples provide detailed thick descriptions, rather than functioning as representative cases.

### *Pictures on the webpages*

At the Gunningschool, I made personal webpages with all the pupils. I sat behind the computer with sets of two or three pupils and helped them with the software. Making a webpage was a fun project for all the pupils, and putting pictures on their page was the most fun. The photo

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project took place before the website project, so pupils had the chance to add personal photos. I also photographed each pupil, so s/he had a portrait and could add a further personal touch. Taking portrait photographs was an interesting ordeal. The girls ran back and forth to the mirrors in the toilets, ensuring each hair was in place, and extensively discussing each other's appearance in a positive, validating way. I used a digital camera and the girls (and boys) wanted several shots and a say in which picture would be the chosen one. Again, the girls looked at my shots together, validating how good they looked.

Radia worried about the picture, because her mother had hinted she would not be allowed to have her picture on the website. When it was finally her turn, she checked again with her mother and got turned down. The teacher, Thomas, had already informed me that insecurity and fear existed about possible cyber fraud within the Muslim community. Rumours spread of virtuous girls whose online photos had been photo-manipulated into compromising poses. Influenced by Radia's stress, the rumours and fear quickly proliferated. This fear of cyber manipulation was firmly tied to virtue. The girls worried evil outside manipulators could impair their virtuousness, an anxiety that the Muslim boys in class did not hold. When the websites were ready to have the photos added, all the girls except Consolacion refused to add their portrait, or indeed any other personal photos they had taken in the photo project. Chema had gone to some trouble to get a photo of herself with her best friends. Initially, she had put this on her profile page, but the other girls forced her to remove it.

Because the pupils, as an alternative, made extensive use of pictures that were freely available online, the webpages were visual nonetheless. Everyone knew how to search for images, and everyone used the Google image search function. When one enters 'charmed' in Google and clicks on the first three results, exactly the same pictures appear. Since most girls liked the same artists and the same television show, they thus added similar or identical pictures to their webpages. The pages developed over a few weeks and the girls often came to see what progress their friends were making. When they saw a friend or classmate had the same or similar pictures, they inferred their friend had stolen the idea or even 'their' pictures. This often led to accusations: 'you're copying me'. This accusation shows that originality is important and imitation is unacceptable.

In this process of placing pictures on the webpages, a number of identities were performed on different occasions. First, in their quest

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for a beautiful picture, the girls performed 'femininity' and 'attention to appearance'. Like Nazli, whom I discussed at the beginning of the chapter, the girls valued attention to appearance. It is attention to appearance rather than mediated beauty standards that governed the girls' judgement of appearance (see §7.2 and chapter 10). Second, the girls performed 'the good girl', who attends to and guards her virtuousness. Consolacion performed the non-Muslim. The final webpages are performances of friendship (i.e. liking the same things). These performances are produced through complex peer negotiation on different levels, which supersedes peer pressure. The girls wanted to look their best, and what is 'your best' is a decision made in 'cooperation' with friends. The fear of losing your virtue is a pressure on a different level. It is related to discourses of Islam, gender, and sexuality. In this class, where eleven out of 14 girls were Muslim, such a fear discourse proved effective beyond the borders of religion. The rumours of virtuous girls whose pictures had been manipulated served as a cautionary tale or urban legend (e.g. Brunvand, 1981). Their fear materialised when Radia's mother forbade Radia to put her picture online, causing the girls to self-discipline. Bianca, a non-Muslim outsider, did not fear losing her virtue, but did fear that her photograph might be used in another form of cyber bullying. Betty, whose position in class was fragile at best, did not want to be the only girl with a portrait on the site. Consolacion, at the top of the class hierarchy and non-Muslim, did not fear loss of virtue, and held the steadiest position, which allowed her to go against the mainstream. The similarity of the pictures on the pages reveals another aspect of peer negotiation. The girls strived for authenticity, which needed to be weighed against fitting in and liking the right artists or television shows. The similarity in pictures stems not only from liking the same show (e.g. *Charmed*), but also from using the same search machine and heuristic. Liking the same show is not necessarily subject to the accusation of imitation, but using the same pictures (or: lack of creativity in searching) apparently is.

### *Musical charades*

The Kantlijn participated in the Muziekluisterlessen [Music listening lessons], a project set up by Amsterdam city council. In the build-up to a visit to the Concertgebouw [Amsterdam Concert Hall], an external music teacher (E.) taught music lessons for ten weeks. In practice, the music teacher alternated between popular music and classical music.

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Music lessons always started with a show dance by a group of girls. For instance, Marisol and Odecia once performed a dance to *Las Ketchup Song*<sup>3</sup>, which the music teacher had offered two weeks earlier.

Marisol and Odecia copy all the hand and leg movements from the original dance. Odecia is very self-assured, but Marisol can't help but laugh at times. Marisol is not moving as well as she usually does. Jenna and Maud stand on the side and join in for the chorus. When they're done, the class applauds enthusiastically. As they sit down, Marisol asks Mickey: "that went bad, eh?". Mickey replies: "a little". [Field notes Kantlijn, 6 March 2006]

After the dance, the class needed to sing one or two pop songs. Dutch *Schlager* singer, Corry Konings, had made a Dutch version of the song, and the teacher taught it to the class.

E. plays the song on the class' ghetto blaster. As the music starts, the pupils start to sing along. There is intense eye contact amongst the pupils. I see smiling faces all around (not laughing but friendly, open faces). After the first verse, Odecia starts to sing the original in English-Spanish phonetically. Within seconds (or so it seems), all pupils switched from Dutch to English-Spanish. Soon, most of the pupils (including some boys) are making the hand movements that go with this dance. Everybody is enjoying themselves and teacher E. starts to dance along as well. [Field notes Kantlijn, 20 February 2006]

The teacher would then move to more classical music and started the actual lesson, which again involved singing and dancing. For instance, after a lesson about life at the royal courts in composer Berlioz' nineteenth century France, the pupils had to invent a dance that consisted of greetings.

First, they think up many greetings collectively: taking a bow, high-fiving, making a 'boks' [Dutch slang: pressing fists together]. Then they have to practice in pairs of two. Boys and girls mix, although some sets are homogeneous. The pupils negotiate mostly about the order of the greetings. I marvel at the constant eye contact. One person constantly looks at the other person. Faces are open, friendly; smiling but not laughing. Big eyes. When something goes wrong, the pupils laugh nervously. I notice how they are not copying other duos. After some minutes of practice, each duo has to perform in front of the class. Now, there's even more giggling from the performers. Eye contact remains. After the greetings dance, the pupils need to practice the dance with the self-made ceremonial fans they had practiced before. [Field notes Kantlijn, 20 March 2006]

Music lessons ended with the pupils practising the song that all the participating schools would perform at the final concert. This song was

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about classical music, and it had difficult tone changes and the pupils needed to sing it a-cappella. On one occasion, I counted only seven pupils who actually sang the song, all the others lip-synced.

Music lessons turned out to be musical charades<sup>4</sup>. In just a few minutes, the girls sent round much information through mere looks. The classroom operated simultaneously as a safe haven and a stage. The girls were constantly afraid to lose face or make a fool of themselves. In Marisol and Odecia's dance, Marisol was the more shameful and insecure. She safeguarded herself by laughing, as if to show she was not that serious about the dance anyway. The intense eye contact amongst the girls during singing, functions in a similar way. The girls searched each other for clues: is it acceptable to sing, is it acceptable to dance? Only the more popular pupils, for instance Odecia, could take up the mantle of pioneer. Her example caused others to follow. The third excerpt (practicing the greetings dance) again shows this pattern. Through attentive observation of the other, a girl knew if she could proceed. Through eye contact, the girls mimicked each other and established their accordance. Laughter, again, is a safeguard, but joint laughter also means the mistake made is acceptable and/or forgiven. De Waal (1989: 192) notes how girls' constant laughter about clumsy behaviour or blunders serves to emphasise they are cast in the same mould. For friends, these non-verbal codes are especially important. After her dance, Marisol turned to Mickey, not a close friend, to check if her performance was acceptable. Mickey neither lied nor told the truth, instead answering with the diplomatic 'a little', withholding the release or excuse Marisol was looking for.

The website project at the Gunningschool, and music lessons at the Kantlijn are two very different events, but both show similar patterns of peer influence. Ideas about appropriate behaviour came about through the constant observation of peers and constant reflection with peers. The girls had a sharp eye for observing each other and in reading small changes in behaviour and body language. In chapter 8, I analysed the functions of appearance and media talk. This section showed how such reflective talk is a constant process of negotiation. To stress once more, peer influence supersedes the notion of peer pressure. Peer pressure has been defined as "when young people your own age encourage or urge you to *do* something or to *keep* from doing something else, no matter if you personally want to or not" (Brown, Clasen, & Eicher, 1986: 523, original italics). Peer pressure thus implies that peers compel an

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individual to *adopt* a certain behaviour or attitude in order to be *accepted*. It suggests involuntary action and has been associated with a number of potential problems, and is therefore sometimes termed “the price of group membership” (Clasen & Brown, 1985: 452). I argue that peer influence, however, is a subtler, reflexive process that also allows for non-compliance. In the process of placing pictures on the websites, the girls had to avoid the suspicion of copying behaviour. Imitation or following happened, but this was limited by the girls’ need for authenticity. From a Butlerian perspective, all individuals in society are urged to adopt behaviour and attitudes towards gender, which compel us to act in a certain way. These processes are not always as evident as, for instance, in peer pressure to start smoking, yet they are present nonetheless. The notion of influence rather than pressure allows for an active subject, yet this active subject is not free from discourse (cf. Butler, 1993). Furthermore, the more popular girls (e.g. Consolacion, Odecia) are amongst the few that can pioneer new or deviant behaviours and still be accepted and coveted within the group.

### 9.4 Society

Society is the third actor identified in figure 9.1. Society, of course, is not a one actor; instead society is made up of different actors. Nonetheless, I use this term to refer to the influence of societal debates, fuelled by opinion leaders, on the girls’ identity performances. Dominant societal opinions are disseminated by different media and the girls clearly took notice of these debates and other representations in the media. However, this study does not address the effects of representations, or the workings of media influence on young girls. Instead, in this section I show the ways society reverberates in the girls’ identity performances. Thirza’s statements about television viewing (§9.2) already showed how Thirza listened to the dominant perspective of television as dissipation, and how she performed this perspective in her own identity.

To understand how society influences girls’ opinions and behaviours in relation to appearance and popular media, I suggested two societal issues in the interviews: sexually explicit music videos and violent video game content. Furthermore, as one of the aims of this dissertation was to let girls speak, I wanted to hear their opinions about these debates. An interview makes an excellent opportunity to endow someone with a speaking position, and in the Netherlands at least (as explained in §4.5), the word interview has connotations of being special and worthy.

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The girls' opinions about these two issues show they were aware of these discussions. At the end of this section, I discuss the implications for identity performance.

### *"Deal with it": Sexually explicit music videos*

In chapter 1, I discussed how the Dutch media blamed hip-hop music videos for sexualising society. All the girls (except Gülen) indicated they watched the music channels MTV, TMF and The Box. I asked the girls how they felt about "sex and other dirty things" in music videos. Their responses show they were not only familiar with the issue, but they also knew that the 'proper' response is to reject such videos. The girls used words such as 'weird', 'stupid' and, often, 'bad'. They said you should not watch such videos or should put the television on teletext. However, their opinions varied strongly, as the three examples below show. For instance, Sophie was articulate in her rejection of sexually explicit music videos:

Sophie: (...) you hardly ever see naked men you know, just only women and yeah, I think.. I mean, I don't get sexually aroused from that, but I can imagine men do. No, I personally don't think it's okay. I mean most [artists] just do it for the money or to show 'look how good I am'. You can prove yourself with something different too. I'm not against dancing or dancing in a music video. But so sexist and all, I don't like that.

(...)

Linda: Okay, because some people say it's better to show such videos later. At a later hour?

Sophie: That's nonsense too, I think... er, because it's not just for children, but for older people too. It's never good to see that, even when you're forty. No, I feel they should make it [these videos] less sexist. [Interview Sophie, 27 June 2006]

Sophie, twelve at the time, expressed an opinion held by many a feminist scholar. She rejected these music videos based on inequalities in the portrayal of men and women, and she even used the word 'sexist'. She understood the commercialised nature of the music industry and the idea that 'sex sells'. In contrast, in her response Amisha was obedient to the system of age ratings:

Amisha: Only older people above 18 are allowed to see that, right?

Linda: Yes.

Amisha: Well okay, then it must be bad [Interview Amisha, 9 June 2006]



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Comparably, Bianca followed the media. If the media report such videos are bad, one cannot argue with that:

Linda: Do you ever see such videos?

Bianca: No. No, yes, sometimes I see [inaudible] and then he does something with his hand and then you see something, you know... That you can't see what he does with his hand. Yeah, that. But not really dirty...

(...)

Linda: And how do you feel about young people watching these videos?

Bianca: Yeah, because eh, my mum reads the *Ditjes & Datjes*<sup>5</sup>. (...) They lay in the bathroom all the time. And then when I'm on the toilet, I read. And then they said like, those music videos, when you watch them, they are just like a porno movie. Not that's it's just a video, but really a movie, a piece of a movie. And then I thought, yeah, they're actually kind of right, because such music videos exist.

Linda: But you just said you never see such videos?

Bianca: Yes, but they do exist, because that's what it said, otherwise they wouldn't say such things. [Interview Bianca, 29 June 2006]

Bianca continued to state that pornographic videos should no longer be allowed on air. Although their responses differed, all the girls reproduced the dominant societal rejection of sexually explicit music videos. However, the girls were disinclined to say they themselves should be prohibited from viewing such videos. To avoid prohibition, they used several counter strategies.

One strategy is to claim that such videos indeed have a bad influence, but not on them. *Younger* children should be protected, and they lower the age bar to as young as five years old. This is known as the third person effect (Davison, 1983), Odecia put it well:

Odecia: When I look at myself and at those people on TV not really. Really never! I mean, I would never dress as vulgar as those chickies on TV. I really thought... when my mother brought it up, 'what are you talking about'. I wouldn't think of it, with my tiny brain, to wear such short things. I mean.. I'm not so vulgar. I might be vulgar in other ways, but not that vulgar.

Linda: Okay, so this is about yourself?

Odecia: Maybe those street children, you know, those boys... When they see those gangsters they might think like 'oh maybe I can walk around like that, maybe that's really tough and all'. You know? So maybe they do it, but I for one don't. [Interview Odecia, 27 June 2006]

The third person effect usually applies to others deemed more vulnerable or impressionable, like younger children or the less educated. Odecia stated that "street children" might be more impressionable. Furthermore,

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she feared *boys* might copy the behaviour of artists in sexually explicit videos. This is remarkable, because the societal debate has focused on the negative impact of such videos on girls, exempting boys from the debate. Odecia referred to her mother who feared she might copy sexy female artists. Three girls stated that their mothers say these videos are bad, but immediately added they did not agree with their mothers.

A second way of countering is to say such videos are actually not that bad. This strategy intrigued me, since many of the artists they adored were exactly those artists scrutinised for sexual content (e.g. 50 Cent, The Pussycat Dolls).

- Linda: How do you feel about artists that make such videos?  
Romeysa: Gross! [laughs]  
Linda: Gross. But for instance, do you like The Pussycat Dolls?  
Romeysa: Yes.  
Linda: Because they dress sexily and make sexy movements.  
Romeysa: Yeah, but they don't really make those dirty movies.  
Linda: So what are dirty movies then?  
Romeysa: Just with a lot of sex. [Interview Romeysa, 7 Juli 2006]

To Romeysa, 'dirty movies' involved sex or sex-related acts. Scantly dressed women or sensual movements did not comprise sexually explicit content to her. Other girls reacted similarly: there is never real sex involved, and at the beach people also walk around in bikinis, so why not in music videos?

A third way to counter the negative effects frame is by using a repertoire of choice, both for the viewers and for the artists. This repertoire is discussed in chapter 10, but here I highlight some key phrases from this repertoire in this context:

- "If you don't want to see it, flip the channel. Done. You have a choice to watch it or not" [Consolacion].  
"If people want to watch it, they should watch it" [Esther].  
"It's his or her video, so you can decide yourself what you put in it" [Noa].  
"If they want to do that [walk around in bikinis], let them" [Mette].  
"It's their life" [Naoul].  
"They should see for themselves what they put in their videos" [Jenna].  
"If they think it's nice to do that, they should" [Maud].  
"If they feel it suits their music, then they're allowed to do that" [Nursen].

With the repertoire of choice comes a matter-of-fact attitude. Noa said regulation is futile. If such videos are shown at a later hour, children will stay up to watch them anyway. Consolacion added that the world

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is tough and sex is all around us. When you walk through Amsterdam's city centre, you see the prostitutes in the windows. The best thing is just to learn to deal with that.

### *"We already know everything": Violent video game content*

All but one girl indicated they played video games. Although the favourite title, without a doubt, was *The Sims (2)*, the girls also played online puzzles and platform games, or racing games on Playstation. Three girls indicated they played the controversial *GTA San Andreas*, which has a PEGI age rating of eighteen. The girls were divided about any alleged negative influence of games on underage children. Some feared it might have a bad influence on those younger than themselves (again, a third person effect). Others said it depends on the kind of violence:

Mette: It depends on what you call violence you know. (...) In *GTA* for instance, I do think that's violence, but that in *Age of empires*, I don't think that's violence.

Linda: No? Even though you have to wage war sometimes?

Mette: Yes, you just have to wage war, but you don't see the blood. Yeah, er, I think violence is beating someone up. But violence is also er, yeah, shooting, but I think that's less.

Linda: You feel beating someone up is worse than shooting? Why?

Mette: Because you, if you're being beat up, then after that you're still alive, or you'd have to beat really hard, and , er yeah, you feel more pain I think.

And also, you hear more often that people have been beat up than shot down.

[Interview Mette, 12 June 2006]

*Age of Empires* is one of Mette's favourite games. In this strategy game, the player builds an empire by improving its cities and waging war on other cities. In *GTA San Andreas*, the protagonist engages in hand-to-hand combat and gunfights. Mette's understanding of violence points to a complex understanding, wherein its consequences should be taken into account.

Other girls argued video games have no negative influence at all:

Chemaë: Well, for little ones it is kinda good [to restrict games], because they learn these real violent things. But for bigger children, they already know it so... It's no use.

Linda: And who do you mean then, by bigger children, which age?

Chemaë: Me. They already know what happens with violence. I get you, kill you. So it's no use when you are not allowed to play that. We already know everything. [Interview Chemaë, 29 June 2006]

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The girls' opinions about the games' possible negative impact were different to their ideas about sexually explicit music videos. With games they performed less social desirability, perhaps because there is no consensus about the negative influence of gaming in the way that there is about sexually explicit music videos. Mette made this clear in the interview. She questioned why her parents actually banned *GTA San Andreas*.

Mette: Well there kinda are rules... Well, they never told it, but if I would bring home *GTA* [San Andreas], I don't think I would be allowed to. But I do know it, I played it quite often, but yeah, I won't buy it.

(...)

Linda: Why do you think you won't be allowed [to play it]?

Mette: Well, because you have to shoot and kill all these people and all. Yes, I think, I think it's because they heard all these crazy stories about people who spend all day behind the computer and get weird ideas. But I know perfectly well that that's bad and all. But... Actually I don't know why.

Linda: What do you mean, you don't know why?

Mette: Yeah, they feel I should go outside more often and all, but I already spend so much time outside. [Interview Mette, 12 June 2006]

Mette wondered if her parents were worried about the violent content, or about a lack of physical exercise. Nikken and Jansz (2006: 190, 199) demonstrate how parents also see many positive effects of gaming, and that their beliefs about the effects of television are more developed than their beliefs about the effects of video games.

Societal ideas about appearance and media influence the girls' understandings of appearance and media. The girls knew about the debates, and they could reflect on them in an interview setting, which did not mean that they felt addressed by these discussions. They were aware of the alleged harmful nature of sexually explicit music videos. However, they did not perceive this potential harm as something that applied to them. In their eyes, this discussion could not be about them. Indeed sex, let alone the sexual behaviour depicted in or feared from such videos, was not at all part of their world. Violent video games, on the other hand, were not necessarily seen as harmful. Still, the girls rejected the idea that playing such games would cause them to behave in unacceptable ways. In addition, the idea of copying behaviour from television seemed silly to them. No-one likes to admit to impressionability. Ideas about unconscious influences or false consciousness are difficult to tackle in an interview, especially if the researcher aims to take his/her respondents answers seriously. In their responses to sexually

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explicit music videos, some girls drew from a feminist discourse and others from an Islamic discourse, depending on their own subject-positions. Both lead to the same conclusions, that such videos are improper and both confirm a union between feminism and Islam.

### 9.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I addressed the penultimate sub-question: under which influences do the performed subject-positions occur? I analysed the influences that set and shape identity performances. I stressed that identity performances are always negotiations and always in process. These negotiations are influenced by three groups of actors: family, peers, and society. The size of the family and routines at home, as well as family rules and knowledge, influenced the ways in which the girls could use media and appearance. Peers were a primary site for observation and reflection. Finally, dominant societal opinions resonated in the girls' understandings of appropriate behaviour although most of them did not feel addressed personally.

Identity performances do not occur in a vacuum and the school is not a closed setting. The girls drew from different influence spheres when they cited cultural norms. Differences in family and peers, as well as different access to the dominant societal norms, lead to differences in citation. Furthermore, one's place in the intelligence and popularity hierarchies affects opportunities for performance. For instance, only the more popular girls could pioneer new behaviours, like Odecia who could initiate dancing during music lessons. The data used in this chapter mostly come from the observations and interviews conducted when the girls were still in primary school. Once in secondary school, shifts do occur. For instance, Thirza mentioned she no longer went shopping with her mother but instead went with friends. In secondary school, most parents allowed a computer in the girls' bedrooms, thus facilitating access to the net. Parents granted most girls more freedom, and secondary school implied less influence from parents and more influence from peers. As I argued in chapter 6, in secondary school the need for reflection increases as the changes need to be incorporated in the reflexive project of the self. The new school means new friends and new positions in the hierarchies. These are all thoroughly reflected on, thus further increasing the influence of peers.