

Article

What a Girl Wants, What a Girl Needs: Analyzing Postfeminist Themes in Girls' Magazines

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Abstract

Girls' magazines play an important role in the maintenance of gender perceptions and the creation of gender by young girls. Due to a recent resurgence within public discussion and mediated content of feminist, postfeminist, and antifeminist repertoires, centered on what femininity entails, young girls are growing up in an environment in which conflicting messages are communicated about their gender. To assess, which shared norms and values related to gender are articulated in girl culture and to what extent these post/anti/feminist repertoires are prevalent in the conceptualization of girlhood, it is important to analyze magazines as vehicles of this culture. The current study analyzes if and how contemporary post-feminist thought is articulated in popular girl's magazines. To reach this goal, we conducted a thematic analysis of three popular Dutch teenage girls' magazines (N = 27, from 2018), *Fashionchick*, *Cosmogirl*, and *Girlz*. The results revealed that the magazines incorporate feminist, antifeminist, and as a result, postfeminist discourse in their content. The themes in which these repertoires are articulated are centered around: the body, sex, male–female relationships, female empowerment, and self-reflexivity. The magazines function as a source of gender socialization for teenage girls, where among other gendered messages a large palette of postfeminist themes are part of the magazines' articulation of what it means to be a girl in contemporary society.

Keywords

feminism; gender; girl magazines; postfeminism; The Netherlands

Issue

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1. Introduction

In the past years, though the Women's Marches, pussy-hats, the #MeToo movement, as well as increasing attention on body positivity and fat shaming, it seems that feminism, once again, has a strong position in societal debates. Traditional and social media, in US contexts as well as other national contexts, extensively featured content related to these issues (Starkey, Koerber, Sternadori, & Pitchford, 2019), but as some readers remarked even girl magazines such as *Teen Vogue* have

started to include more political and (feminist) activist content in their magazines (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Girl magazines, in part fueled by economic motivations, have started to feature political and feminist content like never before (Banet-Weiser, 2018). One might find these increases in attention in for example *Teen Vogue's* reporting on the election, #MeToo and the right to abortion, as well as in other national context, such as the Dutch magazine *Linda Meiden* reporting on the fleeing from one's country because of one's sexuality, and *Cosmogirl* reporting on Japanese gender fluidity

(De Wereld Draait Door, 2020; “Waarom er activistische,” 2017).

It seems that Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018, p. 1) has astutely observed that “everywhere you turn, there is an expression of feminism—on a T-shirt, in a movie, in the lyrics of a pop song, in an inspirational Instagram post, in an acceptance speech.” This has led some to conclude that “feminism has a new luminosity....It is clearly having a moment” (Gill, 2017, p. 611). These recent developments have led to public discussions about whether we are currently living in a fourth wave of feminism (Grady, 2018). And while the concept of (unifocal and uniform) feminist waves has been hotly contested (Duits, 2017; Garrison, 2004), as there have “always been many feminisms in the movement, not just one ideology, and there have always been tensions, points, and counter-points. The political, social, and intellectual feminist movements have always been chaotic, multivalenced, and disconcerting,” but as Rampton (2015) argues this is a sign that the movement is still thriving.

The early suffragette movement which originated in the 1850s formed the first wave of feminism. The second wave of feminism refers to the to the feminist movement of the 1960s–1980s, which focused on the ideological control of the patriarchy which controlled women’s bodies and desires to serve its interests (Householder, 2015). Third wave feminism, which originated in the 1990s, challenged second wave’s perceived ‘essentialist’ definitions of gender as well as its over-emphasis on the experiences of upper-middle class white women (Budgeon, 2011). The fourth wave of feminism is connoted with ‘hashtag activism,’ and is seen as focused on creating and strengthening bonds between women (Looft, 2017). The third (and now the fourth) wave of feminism coincided with and was contradicted by the onset of postfeminism, for which a variety of competing and contradictory definitions exist. Postfeminism can be seen, as for example: 1) the period after (the success of) feminism, in which equality for men and women was obtained; 2) a backlash against feminism; 3) a critical evolution of feminism as well as 4) an intertwining of feminist and antifeminist idea(l)s (Gill, 2007a, 2007b). And it seems that while feminism is clearly “having a moment,” postfeminist sensibilities remain a firm fixture in our contemporary media landscape (Gill & Toms, 2019, p. 97). As such, we believe that the current media landscape offers its consumers, complex, conflicting, and competing messages about what it means to be a woman in contemporary society. And while the various issues propagated by these ‘movements’ are often discussed in terms of their impact on adults, as these issues also pervade childhood and adolescence (the time when kids are learning about social norms and their sense of identity) it is equally important to assess the ways in which the young are informed about these topics. In these discussions about feminism, postfeminism, and gendered issues, conflicting perspectives are propagated in various media outlets. As such, young girls are coming of age in a society filled with

contradictory messages about womanhood, femininity, and feminism, which may play a role in the formation of their identity (Basow & Rubin, 1999). This is particularly relevant for this group because adolescence is a phase in which a lot of change occurs (Basow & Rubin, 1999; Van der Mooren, 2001). In their everyday lives, girls are surrounded with subtle—and not so subtle—reminders of what femininity entails. And to guide them into making choices about their identity, adolescent girls consult and confide in family and peers, but also use various media as resources in forming this identity (Van der Mooren, 2001). And while not all mediated discourses on gender are linked to feminism and not all conservative and traditional gender discourse is a backlash against feminism, it is important to disentangle what messages are communicated to girls about their gender and from what vantage point. Since disentangling the palette of anti/post/feminist messages that girls are exposed to will provide insight into how girls are taught to see themselves, their agency, and value in contemporary society.

Within the media consumed by adolescent girls, girls’ magazines have a special position: They are regarded as natural vehicles of socialization for girls, in terms of (hetero)sexual relation(ship)s and appearance-based standards of femininity (Duke & Kreshel, 1998; Firminger, 2006). Teen magazines can be seen as a source of self-socialization for teenagers (Arnett, 1995), as they are filled with content that implicitly and explicitly provides information about, for example, gendered norms and sexual scripts and which addresses them as part of their peer group—intensely important in this stage of socialization (Arnett, 1995). The magazines have a special place within the adolescent media diet since the readers rely on magazines as a “sounding board” and “close confidant” (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004, p. 2). As such, they remain popular among adolescents, with about 6 out of 10 teenagers reading them (Roberts & Foehr, 2004). Additionally, the magazines are easily accessible for girls, both in print and online form, and appeal to girls through their offering of colorful editorials, columns and such, about fashion, lifestyle, and information about everyday life (Farvid & Braun, 2006).

For the past four decades, magazines geared towards women and girls have been analyzed as sites representing specific discourses of femininity (McRobbie, 1982, 1990). These studies have focused on how mediated communication provides girls with stereotypical, narrow and restricting range of role models of femininity centered on the importance of beauty, romance, and fashion (Budgeon & Currie, 1995; Firminger, 2006; Pattee, 2009; Schenkler, Caron, & Halteman, 1998; Willemsen, 1998). The central assumption being that girls are being fed a wealth of information that centers on normative femininity, heteronormativity, and a plethora of other hegemonic ideals to which girls should aspire. While the studies flourished in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and the early 2000s, since then relatively limited research has been conducted on how issues of femininity, as well

as discourses on (post)feminism, are discussed in girls' magazines, which continue to form an important part of contemporary girls' media repertoire and which thereby represent an important source of gender socialization (Edelshain, 2017).

In sum, the importance of studies analyzing what these magazines have to offer their readers, in times marked by a resurgence of feminism as well as the revealed staying powers of postfeminism is rather self-evident. The Dutch context is interesting in that both feminism and postfeminism seem to have a strong position in the media landscape (Duits, 2017; Marseille, n.d.). Additionally, in the Netherlands emancipatory repertoires are generally embraced, the Dutch views on the division of labor and the role of women in society have become more liberal over time, and the Dutch generally score high on gender-related human development indexes (Merens & Hermans, 2009; United Nations Development Program, 2011). However, the Netherlands also has the largest number of women working part-time in Europe, Dutch women still spend twice as much time on caregiving tasks than men, and the Netherlands still highly emphasizes the role of the mother in nurturing children (Cloïn, Keuzenkamp, & Plantenga, 2011; Portegijs, 2008).

It is against this background of change alongside stability in gender-related practices and attitudes, and the prominent position that feminism and postfeminism have in the Dutch media landscape, that the current study aims to update the information we have about the content of girls' magazines. The objective is to create an understanding of how these magazines represent what it means to be a girl in contemporary (Dutch) society to their young readers, in an era where feminism and postfeminism form competing, complex, and intertwined discourses providing girls with a framework for looking at femininity (McRobbie, 2008). Building on the work of Rosalind Gill (2007b, 2017), and her formulation of a postfeminist sensibility (as the intertwining of both feminist and anti-feminist idea[ls] in mediated messages, we will explore the content of girls' magazines to answer the question: In what manner is contemporary (post)feminist thought articulated in popular girl's magazines, in their messages about femininity?

2. Method

2.1. Sample

The data came from nine randomly selected issues of *Fashionchick*, *Girlz*, and *CosmoGirl* (N = 27, from January–December 2018). *Fashionchick* has as a target audience of 12–19 years old and a circulation of 116,800 per issue; *Girlz* has as a target group of 14–19 years old and a circulation of 519,000 per issue; and *Cosmogirl* has a circulation of 814,000 and sees 15–19 years old as its target audience (Kers, 2018a, 2018b; Mediabookers, 2019). As such, these magazines are very similar in con-

tent and scope, they target largely the same demographic and they form the most widely read magazines for this demographic in the Netherlands.

2.2. Procedure

Data from gathered from the magazines, i.e., all the content in all the pages in each separate edition, were analyzed using a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The magazines were scanned completely and uploaded in MAXQDA (Verbi, n.d.), a program for qualitative analysis. The dataset consists of 815 pages from *CosmoGirl*, 512 pages from *Girlz*, and 807 pages from *Fashionchick*. Data were coded inductively into themes through a process of repeated reading, which resulted in the initial identification of a number of themes. Initial themes were reworked and refined, and in relation to the whole data set as the analysis progressed, further sub-themes were coded and identified.

The thematic analysis was informed by the idea of a postfeminist sensibility as proposed by Rosalind Gill (2007b, 2016). She proposed that postfeminism should be seen as a “patterned yet contradictory sensibility connected to other dominant ideologies (such as individualism and neoliberalism),” and to be regarded as “an analytical category, designed to capture empirical regularities in the world” (Gill, 2016, p. 621). As a result, in the latter phases of the analysis, there was a sensitivity to topics that included a focus on one of the “relatively stable features of postfeminism” (Gill, 2007b, p. 149): The notion of femininity as a bodily property; a shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; a dominant make-over paradigm; a resurgence in ideas about natural sexual differences; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis on consumerism and the commodification of difference. These features make up a postfeminist discourse, visible across the postfeminist media landscape, and which reiterates and conflicts, both the feminist and the anti-feminist themes within it.

The results of our analysis, which is grounded in a close-reading of the data, with the postfeminist sensibilities formulated by Gill (2016) as sensitizing concepts, identifies themes which are articulated around the construction of femininity in the girls' magazines, and are connected to this postfeminist discourse in magazines for girls. However, in line with the theoretical background of this study, it is important to state that, since magazines are situated in a broader social, cultural, political, and historical context, this reading is not the only reading possible (e.g., Hall, 1993), there is room for diverse interpretation (Gough-Yates, 2003). In the presentation of results, visualized via thematic maps (Figures 1–5, numbered in parentheses are frequency counts within each of the [sub]categories), each theme is accompanied by illustrative extracts taken from the magazines.

3. Results

The analysis revealed five main themes, embodying the postfeminist discourse surrounding femininity in the magazines analyzed. These themes: the body, sex, male-female relations, female empowerment, and reflexivity will be discussed consecutively. Within these themes, a large array of topics are discussed, such as friendship, money, family, fashion, make-up, school, sex, gossip, and being less self-conscious.

3.1. The Body

The analyzed magazines have a strong focus on discussing girls' and women's bodies (see Figure 1). The discussion of the body varies in two forms, namely in their focus on the shape of the body or the feminine appearance of the body. When discussing the shape of the body, a lot of contradictory messages are represented. On the one hand, a main message is 'a body is a body,' it is purely functional and that there are no prescriptive norms that a body should adhere to: "Big, small, tear shaped or round. No set of breasts is the same, although the underwear brand Third Love does claim that our girlfriends can roughly be divided into nine different categories" (*CosmoGirl*, 2018-4, p. 49).

On the other hand, the magazines often also focus on the perfect body, and that most of the readers should accept that their body will never be perfect and they need to embrace their imperfection: "Everyone is pretty in their own way. You don't have to be a size 34, to be pretty, on the contrary! Curves are gorgeous, something to be proud of" (*Girlz*, 2018-6, p. 7).

A final vision on the body proclaims that body improvement is possible and necessary for everyone. The changes to your body can best be accomplished according to this vision by having a healthy lifestyle, in which you combine regular exercise with healthy food. In its conflicting repertoire, the magazines seem to stress acceptance, shame, and self-improvement of the female body. Femininity is in part striking the right balance in your attitude, a balance between elegant, sexy, cute, and girly features combined with edgier elements. However, too much edginess is never good. When discussing the face as a feature of a feminine appearance, aspects are important and readers are informed what (commercial) make-over solutions they have to employ to become more perfect: From teeth (should be as white as possible), to breath (should be as fresh as possible, via, e.g., sugar-free gum), to lips (should be as full as possible, via e.g., lip-gloss), and cheekbones (should be as angular as possible, via, e.g., certain ways to contour the face), as well as more general comments about good skin and hair. Clothes are also seen as a way to stress femininity, and they present a balancing act in trying to authentically be yourself whilst also adhering to trends: "I always feel the pressure to wear what is hip. But I love costume-like fashion, so I can't follow all trends" (*CosmoGirl*, 2018-1, p. 18).

Additionally, the importance of femininity is coupled with the shape of the body as well, since the magazines stress that it is of the utmost importance that your dress for your figure and that you wear stuff that makes you stand out: "A high waisted short will emphasize your curves (in a good way!) and will make your legs optically seem longer. Perfect denim for summer!" (*Fashionchick*, 2018-4, p. 26).

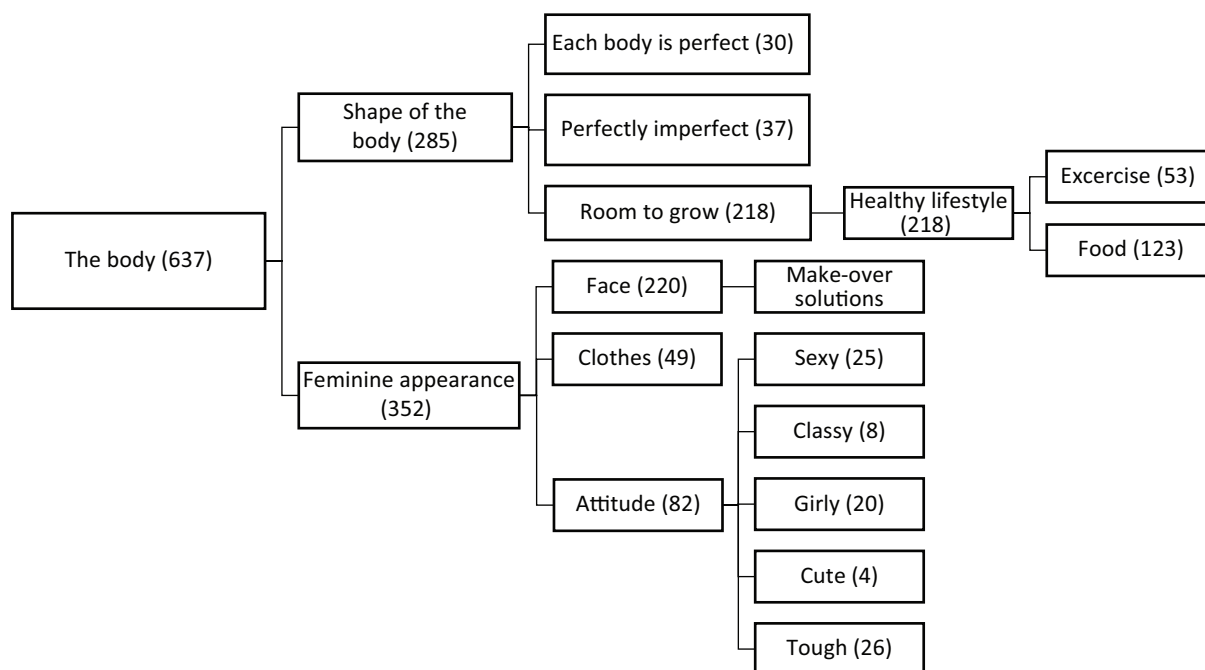


Figure 1. Thematic overview of the body as main theme, and corresponding sub-themes.

Finally, it seems that feminine beauty (through the cultivation of a beautiful body and face) is tied to happiness in the magazines. When someone is pretty, they are represented as happy. Which might lead to the assessment that the body is seen as a mirror to the soul: The more good things one does to the body (i.e., dressing well, exercising), the happier they will be.

3.2. Sex

The magazines devote a lot of time discussing the physicality of sex in terms of what is ‘normal,’ ‘proper’ and how you should do it in technical terms (see Figure 2). Topics that are dealt with are for example masturbation, porn, having an orgasm, and going ‘all the way’ in a relationship. All magazines stress the importance of open communication and a tolerant attitude towards all sexual behaviors.

Magazines represent statements that can be counted as heteronormative as well as non-heteronormative. There is an open discussion about non-hetero sexualities, nevertheless, heterosexuality still remains the norm. This means that romantic partners are always introduced as males, although sometimes there is a caveat stressing that female partners are also an option. This mostly happens by indication of ‘or her,’ in discussing partners, e.g.: How do you know if you like him (or her)?

Sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancies are portrayed as (shameful) problems that should be prevented at all costs. In discussing these topics, the magazine formulates both descriptive norms: “Read about the ins and outs of the morning after pill here” (Girlz, 2018-10, p. 22) and injunctive norms: “Tell him to put on a condom, that way you are sure that you are protected against STD’s” (Girlz, 2018-12, p. 29). The responsibility of having safe sex seems to lie with both par-

ties, although simply through the readership of the magazines the messages are geared towards girls.

Tied with concerns about safe sex are feelings one can have about sex. These are often taken together with the bodily experience of sex: “Sex is about having intimacy together, about sharing feelings and love. Which sexual position you use is not that important” (Girlz, 2018-4, p. 29). Three areas of feelings about sex are discussed: feeling dirty after/about sex (i.e., shame), feelings that deal with tensions surrounding sex (i.e., insecurity), and feelings related to the sexual act (i.e., love, pleasure, and sexiness).

The responsibility for sexual harassment and intimidation is placed squarely at the feet of the perpetrators. Although in one instance a magazine did ponder whether the girl had done something to create this behavior. The solutions presented for individual cases is to talk to someone in authority. The emphasis on this being punishable behavior, with little regard for other possible consequences, once the perpetrator is punished:

What your teacher does, can be considered sexually transgressive behavior and you should file a complaint....If you do not feel comfortable filing an official complaint, then being loud and clear in your disapproval might also work....If not, then do file a complaint immediately, because he is crossing a boundary. (Girlz, 2018-2, p. 27)

3.3. Gendered Perspectives

In the magazines, mainly a female vision is represented on the relations between men and women (see Figure 4). Although there are some sections of the magazines that are devoted to sharing a male perspective on such issues. Within the female vision, on gendered relations, there

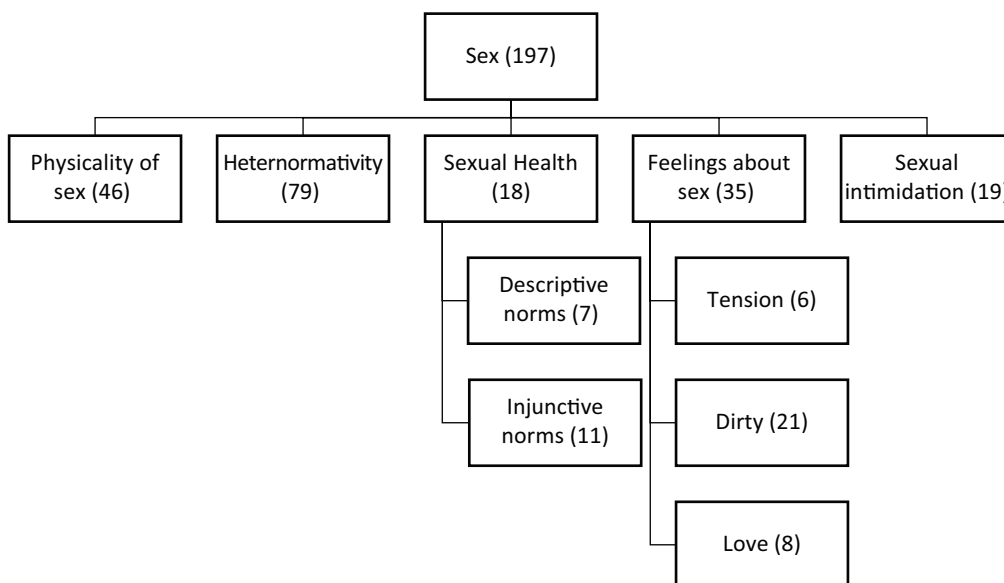


Figure 2. Thematic overview of sex as main theme, and corresponding sub-themes.

are two variations: focusing on the body or focusing on social interaction. When men are presented in the magazines they are objectified, through a predominant focus on his ideal body, thereby firmly establishing a female gaze. The man is referred to as 'boycandy' or a 'hottie,' and the articles rarely start by focusing on his accomplishments or character (see for example Figure 3). On the other hand, when women are the focus of an article, the text does primarily focus on her accomplishments or character. An article could be about a woman who is an actress, or being someone with a huge online following, or someone who fights for women's right. The text might also remark about a woman's pretty appearance, but this

is always secondary to the main message (i.e., "and she is also beautiful").

In the studied content, there was one article about men that did not primarily focus on their body, and this was an item about men whose hobby was make-up. These men are often brand ambassadors for a make-up line, are very proficient in doing make-up, or have their own make-up line. Taken together when regarding female views on women, women are seen as active subjects, while men are portrayed as objects (to be looked at) unless they have more 'feminine' qualities.

Considering female views on social relations between men and women, there is a more equal

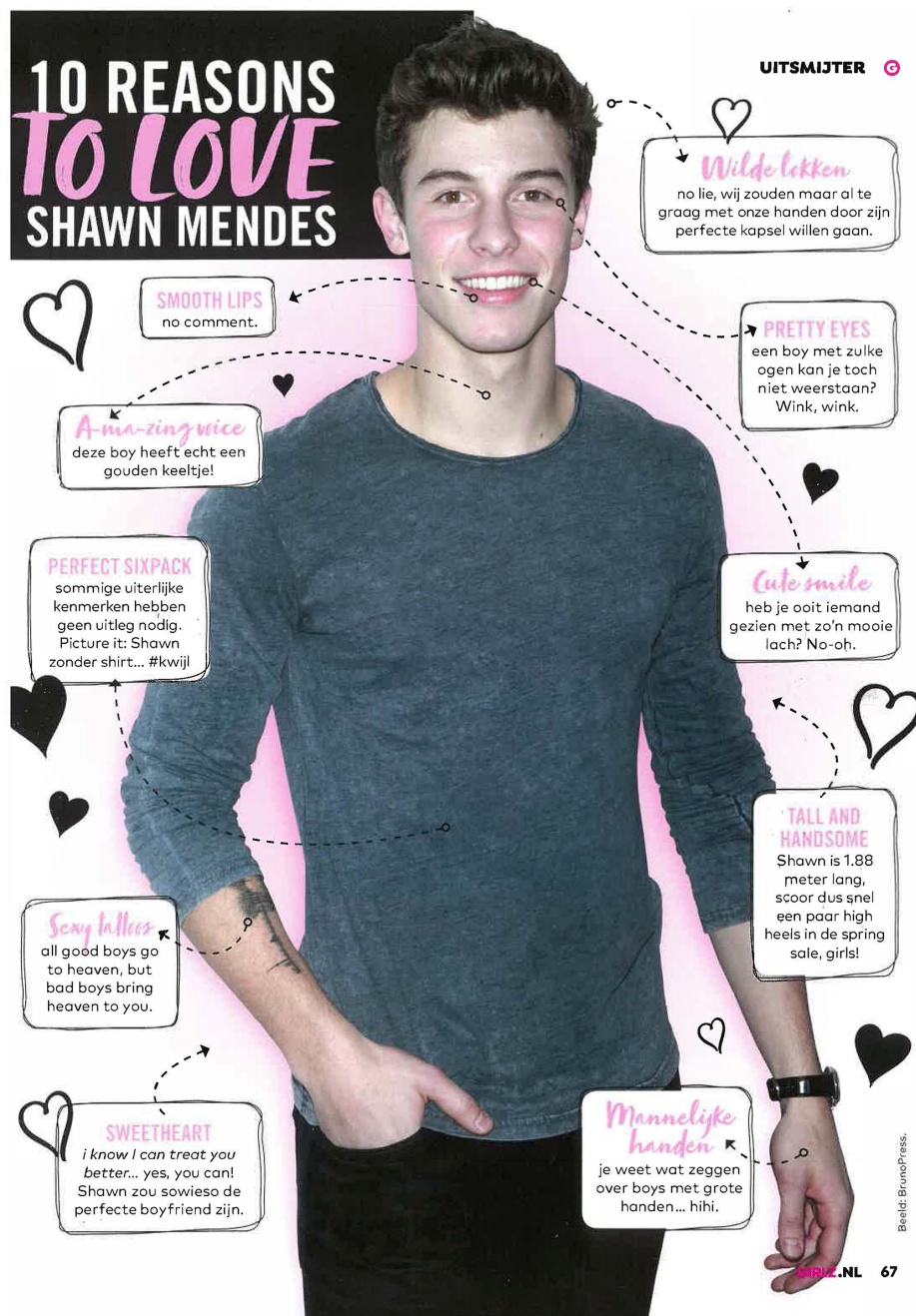


Figure 3. Example of focus on body. Source: *Girlz* (2018-4, p. 67).

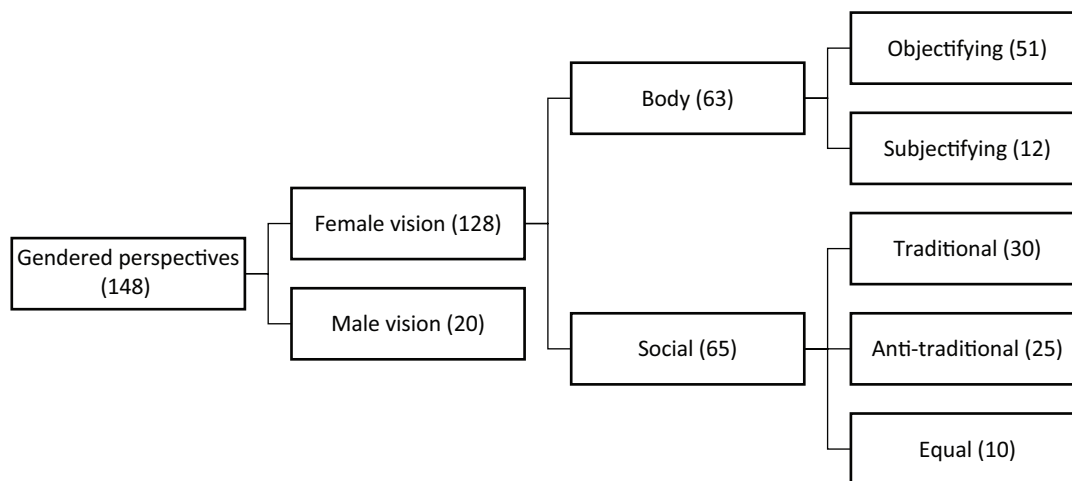


Figure 4. Thematic overview of gendered relations as main theme, and corresponding sub-themes.

approach. Men and women are portrayed similarly, with similar struggles. For example, a magazine stated that men can also be nervous before a date. It is stressed that both men and women should focus on communicating their expectations and feelings clearly: “You might think that if your bond is strong enough, then everything will just work...Well...that just isn’t true...Follow the example of Chuck and Blair, they state what they need and expect from each other” (*CosmoGirl*, 2018-12, p. 72).

However, while the magazines might primarily start from a position of equality, there is also room for more traditional as well as anti-traditional ideas. Women are both encouraged to expect men to take the lead in a relationship (i.e., traditional), as well as to be the ones take the initiative and make the first move (i.e., anti-traditional). Women are still (traditionally) supposed to take care of the emotional side of the relationship, by surprising her partner, keeping her emotions in check (e.g., no discussions when she is angry) and monitoring his emotions (e.g., no booking vacations when he is in a mood).

Even though their presence in the magazines is limited, there are several features in the magazines in which men are asked to give their opinion on a variety of topics related to relations between men and women. These topics are wide-ranging but are mostly focused on relationships and women’s bodies. Contrary to the rest of the magazines content, which makes women into subjects, these features do objectify women. The opinions vary from traditional (“Yes, shaved legs are important”;

Fashionchick, 2018-1, p. 58; “When we go to dinner I will always pick up the check”; *CosmoGirl*, 2018-5, p. 86) to more equal or anti-traditional (“She does not have to shave her legs”; *Fashionchick*, 2018-1, p. 58; “We always split the bill equally”; *CosmoGirl*, 2018-5, p. 86).

3.4. Female Empowerment

In the magazines there is a lot of attention for female empowerment (see Figure 5), much attention is focused on empowering the readers by boosting their self-confidence. This is done by articulating that everyone has their own insecurities and that these are often unnecessary. There is also considerable attention for ‘girlbosses’ and girls who ‘are born to lead,’ both are terms the magazines use to signify strong women. This strength is then founded on four elements, independence, believing in yourself, discipline, and having ambition.

The girls reading the magazines are urged to be independent and to stand on their own two feet. They are urged to make choices that are good for them:

Did the break up with your ex change your life?

Yes, but not in a negative way. I am now able to freely choose me. (*Girlz*, 2018-4, p. 6)

When someone has accomplished something without help from others and by pure determination, grit, and effort, this is highly valued; in order to be independent

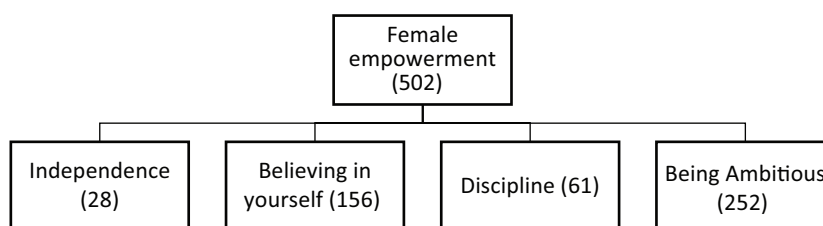


Figure 5. Thematic overview of female empowerment as main theme, and corresponding sub-themes.

and successful, you have to believe in your own qualities. This means that girls should be themselves, they should follow their dreams, be unafraid of following them, unafraid of making mistakes, and not concerned with the opinions of others: “Believing in yourself. If you want to reach your goals, everything is possible. You just have to figure out your way of doing it” (*Girlz*, 2018-2, p. 41).

The third feature which strong, successful, and accomplished women share, according to the magazines, is discipline. By being a disciplined person you will get ahead in life because you are able to make sacrifices. Having discipline is illustrated by working hard and making well-thought-out choices, which lead to sometimes skipping out on ‘fun’ stuff: “What you should be mindful of? Your income. You have a spending problem, which is okay as long as you do always save part of your income each month” (*CosmoGirl*, 2018-1, p. 86).

The final characteristic that women who want to be empowered should have is ambition. To get ahead in life, one should be ambitious, get results, follow your dreams, and keep being busy:

Goal: Be more productive. Expectation: Tomorrow will be my day. Reality: You will stay in bed for far too long, and making the most of the day will fail. Seems familiar? Then your goal is to be more productive this year...to make the most of your days, and these tips will help you get there. (*CosmoGirl*, 2018-1, p. 68)

However, the women who are portrayed as ambitious in the studied magazines, and thus portrayed as role models for girls, are all working in the entertainment industry (e.g., actresses, YouTubers, fashion designers, models, or combinations of these). The magazines thereby offer a very limited view of what it means to be an empowered woman in society. Also, the message seems to be that if you do not live according to these mandates and you are unsuccessful, you only have yourself to blame. The discourse of empowerment is very much focused on the girl readers as individuals, and there is little to no attention given to the structural inequalities in society that might complicate this path for them or to the broader (patriarchal) context that shapes the conditions and choices against which female empowerment should be understood.

3.5. Reflexivity

The final theme stressed in magazines is the focus on reflexivity. The magazines offer tools, such as quizzes and horoscopes, for self-reflexivity, more specifically for reflecting on behavior or looks. These tools either stress one ideal answer and as such propagate one norm. For example, in the quiz “How well do you deal with stress?” all the answers imply that having a right balance between leisure and work is the norm (*Girlz*, 2018-5, p. 21). On the other hand, some tools are more pluriform in their guid-

ance, in that multiple norms are presented. The outcome of the quiz “What TV show do you belong in?” might state that you belong in *Game of Thrones*, *Riverdale*, *Gossip Girl*, or *New Girl*, and all these options are equally good. The norms that are articulated in these quizzes and horoscopes are rearticulated in many forms throughout the magazines, although in these tools for reflexivity they are communicated most straightforwardly.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to gain insight into the manner in which contemporary (post)feminist thought was articulated in Dutch popular girls’ magazines, particularly in their messages about femininity. The girls’ magazines studied dedicate their attention to a plethora of topics, ranging from beauty to hobbies, glamour, romance and relationships, sex, and fashion. This is in line with previous studies which also highlighted these topics as important for girls’ magazines (Budgeon & Currie, 1995; Peirce, 1993; Willemsen, 1998). The topics presented are often problematized in the magazines studied, with the emphasis being placed on the importance of girls being pro-active in fixing their problems. The topics discussed in the magazines studied, are discussed from a traditionally feminist as well as an anti-feminist perspective (cf. postfeminism as articulated by Butler, 2013; Gill, 2007a, 2007b). By the intertwining of these perspectives in the representation of different topics in the magazines studied, we can conclude that postfeminism, has a substantial role in the magazines studied. The themes in which this entanglement is enacted are the body, sex, gendered perspectives, female empowerment, and reflexivity.

Regarding the body, we conclude that the body is represented as a mirror into the soul. The body should be well-cared for and look good, as it is a mirror image of one’s inner life (which in turn should also be well-cared for) and a pathway to feeling happy (with yourself). Looking good has been established as one of the markers success and happiness by previous research (Duke & Kreshel, 1998), and Gill (2007b) has also concluded that (consumerist work on) the body has become the most important site of female identity. One can clearly recognize the influence of neoliberal capitalist culture herein, which leads girls to believe, and wants girls to believe that engaging in commercial and consumptive beauty and makeover culture will lead to self-acceptance, self-confidence, and happiness.

Additionally, the magazines articulate that a beautiful body should not necessarily conform to a strict form. This is in line with the feminist ‘body-positivity movement’; however, even though the singular norm of a beautiful body is rebuked, the norm of a feminine look for the body is still ever-present. The body is not appreciated when it does not highlight its feminine aspects, which reiterates the importance of the body as a site of femininity (Gill, 2007b). To improve the body, a large variety of make-overs form part of the magazines’

content: Make-overs are often tied to particular products, in which the entanglement with consumerism is visible (see also Peixoto-Labre & Walsh-Childers, 2003).

This predominance of the make-over paradigm and its entanglement with consumerism which we found in the girls' magazines studied, is one of the hallmarks of postfeminism as defined by Gill (2007b) and Butler (2013). Previously, feminist scholars (Jackson, Vares, & Gill, 2013; Tasker & Negra, 2007) have emphasized the intertwining of postfeminism with consumer culture, where feminist arguments for women's choice, women's independence, and women's agency have been co-opted in the marketing of material goods to women. Girls are positioned as empowered and lauded for possessing reflexivity, while simultaneously being convinced that buying the right lip scrub, cute high-waisted shorts and push-up bra can be regarded as the expression of empowered choice. Furthermore, similarly to what Banet-Weiser (2018) argued, teenage girls are urged to accept and love their bodies, or at least move towards that love and self-confidence (through use of products), while being continually bombarded with the notion of the 'perfect' female body.

The second theme that reveals a postfeminist sensibility in the girls' magazines studied is sex. Topics that are discussed openly are sexual orientation, sexual desire, masturbation, and various ways of having sex: Topics that are in line with previous research on this theme (Carpenter, 1998; Jackson & Westrupp, 2010).

One of the key features of a postfeminist sensibility as discussed by Gill (2007b), is the predominant focus on men's sexual pleasure and the lesser importance of women's own sexual pleasure. The current study did not find this, and the main message seems to be the normalization of the idea that pleasure should be a central part of sex for both parties involved. This was also concluded by Carpenter (1998), who stated that female sexual desire is starting to have a more prominent position in girls' magazines. This is also in line with the ideas of 'pro-sex feminism' (Glick, 2000), a hallmark of postfeminist thinking, which articulates the idea that all forms of sex should be embraced to enable sexual equality. Nevertheless, pro-sex feminism and the argumentations about how truly empowering and equalizing sex positivity is, are strongly debated within feminist thought (Ivanski & Kohut, 2017).

Also, in line with previous research and part of a postfeminist sensibility, is the finding that the responsibility for safe sex in terms of sexual health and unwanted pregnancies does fall mostly on the shoulders of their female readers (Gill, 2007b; Jackson & Westrupp, 2010). Additionally, the magazines also dedicate time to discussing the feelings that come with sex, like shame, love, and stress. There is limited openness about sexual orientation in the girls' magazines studied, because even though all magazines try to be inclusive in their description of romantic and sexual partners, the default is that this partner is almost always described as male. This is in line with previous work by Carpenter (1998) which

concluded that homosexuality was talked about openly, but the norm was still the heterosexual script. We could argue that, similarly to Jackson and Westrupp (2010), the content in the magazines studied was not heteronormative in and of itself, but the perspective taken by the magazines is predominantly heteronormative. Finally, the topic of sexually transgressive behavior and intimidation is also discussed. The magazines mostly use a formalistic perspective that focuses on the fact that it is unlawful and should be reported, while not recognizing the structural gendered asymmetries that provide the context for these behaviors.

Gendered perspectives on the relationships between men and women also form an important element in the content of the magazines studied. The women portrayed are seen as active subjects, which is in line with the evaluation of Gill (2007b) who remarked that women move from being seen and portrayed as objects to active subjects in media content. The women represented in the magazines studied do refer to women in a subject role, but to men in an object role unless the man in question is highly feminine: Then he is portrayed as a subject. On a social level, the magazines portray contrasting repertoires regarding the relations between men and women. On the one hand, the postfeminist idea that women are responsible for maintaining the romantic relationship (Gill, 2007b) is propagated, but on the other hand the magazines sometimes also stress equal responsibility herein. This complexity is also visible in the predominant norm for women to take on a more traditional and passive role, while simultaneously also being encouraged to be confident, progressive, and entrepreneurial.

The fourth theme that resonates a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007b) in the girls' magazines studied is female empowerment, which is captured in the ideals of being independent, believing in one's own qualities, being ambitious, driven, and disciplined. The importance of these values resonates the postfeminist sensibility that is propagated within this theme (Gill, 2007b). Additionally, when analyzing who is portrayed as empowered in the magazines, and thereby who forms the embodiment of this ideal, we found that all of the role models employed were from the entertainment industry or had a glamorous lifestyle. This limited and narrow career perspective presented for girls in the magazines, as also described by Massoni (2004), has the potential to influence and limit girls' occupational aspirations (Scharrer, 2013)

The final element that resonated the postfeminist sensibility, which to a large extent was patterned in the magazines studied, was the focus on reflexivity. The concept was also articulated by Gill (2007b) as the increasing focus on psychological self-surveillance as part of a postfeminist media culture and Firminger (2006), who argued that finding love is only possible through intense self-regulation and reflexivity. The magazines offer girls various tools that might help them map their inner world, their behavior, and appearance (tools

for self-surveillance; Gill, 2007b). This means that girls are encouraged to be highly self-aware, self-monitoring and self-critical, and are urged to constantly work towards perfecting themselves on all terrains included in the magazines.

All in all, we can conclude that postfeminism as an articulation or entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist idea(l)s, with a perspective steeped in individualism and consumerism, is highly present in contemporary girl magazines. A complex palette of messages is communicated towards girls about what it means to be a girl or woman in contemporary society, which makes their individual processes of negotiating femininity terribly complex.

Although the present study provided a necessary update in the presence of postfeminism in the portrayal of femininity of Dutch girls' magazines, it is not without limitations. The study focused on mapping the themes that are marked by a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007b) in that it intertwined both feminist and anti-feminist ideas in its assessment of the magazines' representation of what it means to be a girl in contemporary (Dutch) society. As a result of the breadth of this study, some topics warrant a closer and more in-depth analysis than was given to them in the current study. For example, the heterosexual perspective and how this explicitly manifests itself in girl magazines (see, for example, Farvid & Braun, 2006), or the degree to which the nature of the representation of career perspectives in the girls' magazines can be counted as gender-stereotyped (see, for example, Peirce, 1993). Additionally, while not part of the current research goals, the specific 'Dutchness' of the postfeminist sensibility in the magazines analyzed did not stand out, although more attention could be given to the country-specific nature of the postfeminist sensibilities to more firmly establish this conclusion, by comparing the magazines with, for example, their US counterparts. This more in-depth analysis of these as well as other themes could be accomplished by performing a critical discourse analysis on both the visual and textual elements of the magazines, while also devoting more time in future analyses to the differentiation of themes between the magazines. Both were not within the scope of the current research but are valuable and necessary pathways to gain a more contextualized and in-depth view of this topic. While this study adds to the understanding of how postfeminism manifests itself in the portrayal of femininity in Dutch girls' magazines, it is by no means comprehensive. For example, a study with a sample that spans more than one year of editions, and more than one national context would offer a more complete picture of how postfeminism is present in the representation of girlhood/femininity in girls' magazines. Additionally, a more intersectional approach must be included in future research to the account for the dimensions of race which, as indicated by previous research as well as the racially diverse populations of the Netherlands, the US, and many other

countries, are likely to come into play in the formulation of these postfeminist sensibilities within such magazines (Crenshaw, 1989; Krijnen, 2020; Redcross & Grimes, 2014). Finally, this study was restricted to print magazine articles; however, more comprehensive analyses in future research could be conducted on their accompanying websites and social media channels.

In conclusion, the current study has provided valuable insight into how feminist and anti-feminist ideas are woven together in the narrative presented by Dutch girl magazines surrounding girlhood and femininity in contemporary society. Nevertheless, future researchers in this area should also focus on how these texts and themes are given meaning by the girls who read them and the degree to which these perspectives are resisted, challenged, or accepted by readers. This would enable us to connect the narratives about the resurgence of feminism and the staying power of postfeminism with every day (mediated) behavior enacted by the girls who are growing up in these times.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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