Young femininity in Iceland and its discontents

Abstract

Despite Iceland's outstanding performance on global indices measuring gender equality, young women report higher levels of depressive symptoms than young men. This suggests a more complex situation than what appears in public discourse, where Iceland is sometimes referred to as a feminist paradise. This paper attempts to unpack how young women and men define and understand young femininity. The theoretical framework draws on feminist and affect theories. The data was collected between 2012 and 2014 and consists of eighteen semi-structured interviews with young women and men and group interviews with five young women based on co-operative inquiry. The analysis shows that the young women in the study attach negative affects to their feminine practices and feel that their bodies do not measure up to acceptable femininity; their bodies are either too much or not enough. Their feelings of anxiety, insecurity and shame are not irrational as they are confirmed by the young men who are quick to shame female bodies that do not fit a narrow ideal of feminine beauty. Somewhat surprisingly, the widespread image of Iceland as the most equal country in the world does not invite a conversation about the paradoxes women face and thereby diminishes possibilities for young women to place their experiences in particular contexts.

Keywords: Young women, Iceland, femininity, makeup, slut-shaming, body image, radical feminism, postfeminism

Introduction

Femininity has taken a turn in the last 30 years. Sex-appeal of women has become the defining factor of femininity, linking femininity to the hyper sexualisation of women's bodies (Bartky,

1998; Gill, 2007). Furthermore, sexiness is tied to ideas of women's empowerment through discourses of playfulness and above all, free choice (Gill, 2007, 2008). This has been the case in Iceland as elsewhere in the Western world (Gústafsdóttir, 2016; Gústafsdóttir, Matthíasdóttir, & Einarsdóttir, 2010; Gylfadóttir, 1998; Rúdólfsdóttir, 1998).

For the last nine years Iceland has topped the gender gap list published by the World Economic Forum (World Economic Forum, 2017) which bolsters the perception that Iceland has achieved gender equality, establishing an aura of gender equality (Pétursdóttir, 2009). The Global Gender Index focuses on four areas, health, education, economy and politics (World Economic Forum, 2016). Studies have shown a relationship between changing roles for women and increased body dissatisfaction. It is argued that women within cultures where gender equality is rapidly increasing will experience more body dissatisfaction due to more pressure for the perfect body as a backlash against women's advances (Jung & Forbes, 2007; Jung, Forbes, & Lee, 2009). As Wolf (1992) put it; "The more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us (p.10). Iceland presents an interesting case for exploring young femininities because of the constant, visible presence of feminist discourse in the social and political landscape, and because of its status as the most gender equal country in the world.

Icelandic Context

In Iceland, gender equality has been largely institutionalized. Different women's organisations have fought long and hard for changes in different areas and achieved remarkable success, particularly during the 1970s and 1980's (Erlendsdóttir, 1993). For example, women in Iceland went on strike in 1975 and marched to protest the gender pay gap (Rúdólfsdóttir, 2005). In 1976, the first Equal Status Act was issued in parliament (Þorvaldsdóttir, 2011). The Women's Alliance was launched in the 1980's, asserting that the personal is political and fighting for day-care and women's freedom to have an abortion as well as easier access to contraception,

dramatically impacting the Icelandic political landscape (Jónsdóttir, 2007). In 1980 Vigdís Finnbogadóttir was elected the first female president in Iceland (and the world's first democratically elected female president) (Valsson, 2009). More recently, gender quotas for directors of boards were established in 2013 (H. J., 2014) and a three-month non-transferable paternity leave was launched from 2001 – 2003 (Gíslason, 2006, 2007, 2009).

Changes around gender equality have come quite rapidly. For instance, in the early sixties women held only 3% of the seats in parliament and now hold 44%. Similarly, 33% of women were active in the labour market in the early sixties - the figure today is 79%. In the sixties, women were around 12% of those receiving a university degree, whereas the figure now stands at 65% (Gíslason, 2009; Statistics Iceland, 2015). There is, however, a prevailing gender pay gap, and high numbers of women in the labour market are not represented in executive positions (Statistics Iceland, 2017).

Despite positive changes around gender equality, an Icelandic study shows increased anxiety among both girls and boys throughout the period from 1997-2006, but depression has only increased among girls (Sigfusdottir, Asgeirsdottir, Sigurdsson, & Gudjonsson, 2008). Another study shows that body image among Icelandic adolescents, ages 14-15, became more positive in the period 1997-2010, however the body image of girls became more negative with age, as 14 year old girls showed more positive body image than 15 year old girls (Asgeirsdottir, Ingolfsdottir, & Sigfusdottir, 2012). A Nordic study showed that young women, aged 16-19, reported higher levels of depressive symptoms than young men, which correlates with previous studies that show the prevalence of depression twice as high for women as for men (Asgeirsdottir & Sigfusdottir, 2015).

In spite of the advances towards gender equality, many women still perceive that they are more confined in their social roles than men, and feminist initiatives have addressed this. For example, in 2011 Reykjavík hosted its first SlutWalk (Fontaine, 2011; Mendes, 2015). In

July 2013 a large group of radical young women started the rap-group *Reykjavíkurdætur* (Daughters of Reykjavík), using their lyrics to defy patriarchy, slut-shaming and body policing. They are provocative in their appearance, showing hairy armpits, and punk-like makeup and clothing. Their existence influenced the female music scene in Iceland, causing other feminist bands and performers to be noticed (Petzold, 2014).

This discontent among many young women is certainly not new. Young women's banding together on these issues, and their expressions of anger and discontent, is based on the need for further change. This is what Hemmings (2012) identifies as affective dissonance, where the identification of this kind of dissonance can spur a movement or a community, an affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012). The current research contributes to the vibrant field of feminist research on young women's experiences of contemporary femininity ideals, shedding light on how sexualisation and body policing is rendered in a postfeminist sensibility.

Postfeminism, radical feminism and body politics

A postfeminist view of the world asserts that feminism has already achieved its goals, men and women have an equal playing field, and young women are told that they are independent, powerful and can freely choose their own path in life (McRobbie, 2008). Gill (2007) talks about the postfeminist media culture, where feminist ideas are taken into account, revised and cleaned of all politics. Therefore the ideas about independence, freedom and choice, from second wave feminist activism remain, but they exist alongside neoliberal ideas such as self-governance, surveillance and self-discipline. According to Gill, the symptoms of postfeminist media culture include ideas about femininity that are focused on the body (Bartky, 1998; Bordo, 1993; Gill, 2007; Wolf, 1992) instead of qualities such as being gentle and caring as has characterized traditional ideas about femininity (A. Rúdólfsdóttir G., 1997; Stuart & Donaghue, 2012).

The focus on the body intertwines with how porn and sexual imagery have become an integral part of our culture (McNair, 2002) making women's bodies even more central as

women's sexual agency leans towards heteronormative ideas where their sexuality is defined according to its ability to arouse male desire. The focus on young women's bodies is contradictory since there is a fine line between being sexy and desirable and aggravating unwanted attention (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2004). The risk of being slut shamed serves as a double standard where women are judged for alleged sexual behaviour or for dressing provocatively (Mendes, 2015). Skeggs (1997) notion of respectability is relevant to this. Skeggs, (1997) refers to as respectability, which is embodied in moral authority, 'those who are respectable have it, those who are not do not' (Skeggs, 1997, p.3) thereby gluing negative affect onto young women's bodies (Ringrose, 2012). This, according to Griffin, Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley and Mistral (2013), makes femininity a contradictory space almost impossible for young women to inhabit. Evans, Riley and Shankar (2010) refer to these practices as 'technologies of sexiness' where agency is expressed through working on oneself and one's body. They argue, drawing on Judith Butler's work, that this is performative sexiness. Young women's visibility and hierarchical status depends on the extent to which they are pleasing to the eye and sexy. Here the neoliberal feminine subjects (young women) are expressed as freely choosing their level of participation in socially promoted beauty practices (Stuart & Donaghue, 2012). However, the pleasure of femininity is reserved for those who are well groomed, slim, and beautiful (Gill, 2007).

The body practices of women have for a long time been the subject of feminist research. Bordo's (1993) study about eating disorders as well as Bartky's (1998) paper on self-discipline and self-governing women show how women's bodies are integral in our ideas about femininity where thinness is almost a universal criterion in measuring feminine attractiveness (Carey, Donaghue & Broderick, 2011). Expanding on affective theory, Rich (2011) shows how emotions such as disgust against fat bodies are used to circulate affect in order to implement particular techniques of surveillance and monitoring of bodies (Rich, 2011). This is done by

aggravating feelings towards fat female bodies, and associating them with negative affect - making the fat body the object of disgust (Ahmed, 2004).

Riley and Scharff (2013) argue that the female sexualized body is no longer objectified, but has become central to the identity of women because of the constant focus on self-discipline, self-governing and fixing. That is not to say that performing femininity has not always needed a level of governing and discipline, but Gill states that modern femininity is loaded with new paradoxes. The pressure of looking perfect is at its highest historically, but at the same time, women are supposed to be carefree and self-confident (Gill, 2008). While young women's bodies are sexualized they are encouraged to work on themselves to become better versions of themselves. This can be seen clearly in the production of femininity in girls' magazines, where in some pages the cleverness of girls is being celebrated, whereas in other pages, we see instructions about ways to make themselves prettier '(through clothes, makeup, diet) and more attractive to boys' (Jackson, Vares, & Gill, 2013, p.146). At the same time male appraisal of women's bodies has been shown to be highly influential (see for example Braun, 2010; Epperlein & Anderson, 2016; Fahs, 2014) just as Laura Mulvey explained the male gaze, where 'women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact' (Mulvey, 1989, p.19). Young women are systematically being taught to see themselves not only as agents but also as objects of the male gaze. Their worth and potential for happiness are dependent on their ability to be desired by men (Carey et al., 2011).

These conditions of young femininity are what I want to examine in the following sections. How do young Icelandic women and men define and understand femininity, specifically, 'acceptable/desirable' femininity? What is the space available to defy normative ideas within the aura of post feminism and gender equality? For this purpose qualitative data is useful to tease out the feelings young people carry towards ideals of femininity.

Method

This paper is based on semi-structured interviews and co-operative inquiry. The study was conducted in the period from the beginning of 2012 to the end of 2014. While the interviews span over three years, co-operative inquiry began in February 2014 and continued for five months.

The interviews

For this study I interviewed nine women and nine men. The length of the interviews varied from 90-180 minutes, and each person was interviewed once. Snowball sampling was used to reach participants who met the following criteria: aged 18–25, childless, and living in the Reykjavik area. All but one identified as heterosexual. Similarly, all but two were college students; two were working. Everyone was able bodied and all of the participants self-identified as white. The voices of the men are used as a background in this paper, to show how heteronormative ideas affect the performance of femininity – that is, the focus is on the experiences of the women in the study, and the voices of men are used to shed light on the ideal of femininity. Even though personal preferences between men may vary (Epperlein & Anderson, 2016), the societal norms and pressure result in specific expectations from men. The young people where asked questions on gender identities for example: what do you consider to be feminine? Is the body important for young people? Do you like your body? Is the body important in relation to masculinity/femininity?

The participants are a privileged group in many ways and as such cannot be seen as representing all young people in Iceland.[1] Their experiences are, however, a part of the social

[1] White, living in the capital area, able bodied, heterosexual, college students. It proved difficult to reach less privileged young people since my gatekeepers where teachers in upper secondary schools and also the snowball method narrowed the diversity, since participants usually contacted their friends or acquaintance.

reality of their generation and serve as an indicator of how femininity is performed and seen among young people in Iceland.

Co-operative inquiry

Co-operative inquiry is similar to action research and aims to empower the participants by making them co-researchers. Participants enter into the research inquiry alternating between being a co-subject and being co-researcher (Heron, 1996). The groups are preferably homogeneous, for example, of the same gender, because participants need to generate common issues and experiences for discussion (Riley & Scharff, 2013).

Co-operative inquiry (CI) began in February 2014 with six meetings, lasting from three to four hours. We met in a youth house in Reykjavík, a neutral private space. The meetings where audio-recorded for convenience in the analysis phase. The group consisted of five college women and the researcher. For the CI, purposive sampling was used. The gatekeeper, a teacher in one upper secondary school in Reykjavík, mediated a relationship between willing participants and the researcher. The participants all attended the same college, but were unacquainted before the study. Three women from the group were also interviewed at the end of the inquiry period, and counted within both the group and the interviewees.

The CI group shared experiences of practicing femininity in the same culture; however, there was a notable incongruence between the young women and the researcher due to age difference. Even though co-operative inquiry is a good method to diminish power incongruence in research (Reason & Bradbury-Huang, 2013), the perception of the 'expert' has the inherent risk of overriding shared experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As I am 15–17 years older than the participants, I was well aware of my position as perceived expert, and actively held back when discussions arose, so I would not direct the conversations. We managed to build trust within the group, discussing things we had not discussed before, and the participants referred to it as a safe space.

Analysis

A feminist poststructuralist perspective[2] is adopted in this analysis, as a way of trying to understand better the complexities and contradictions that shape our experiences (Gavey, 2011) as discourses are potentially ambiguous. The transcripts were incorporated in to Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software (Hwang, 2008), where the data was analysed using feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (Gavey, 1989), shedding light on power relations where culture's regulatory norms are often reproduced through the performance of gender (Lazar & Kramarae, 2011). In this paper I am particularly focusing on the performance of femininity, the policing of women's bodies, and how young women try to regulate their bodies. The most prominent topics were makeup, the body, and slut shaming.

Results

Makeup

The subject of makeup was not directly initiated in the questionnaire but questions about what they thought was feminine elicited the subject of makeup which was discussed at length both in interviews and in the CI group. The discussion about makeup is divided into five sections: damned if you do; damned if you don't; hiding behind makeup; social privilege and makeup; motive for makeup use.

Damned if you do…

Participants discussed the concept of 'natural beauty'. Guðrún[3] explained that she is 'just natural' and expressed her wish that natural beauty would come into fashion.

> I think it should become fashionable to not use makeup. That everyone would be natural. With frizzle hair and all. You do not need makeup. Foundation compact is okay to hide

[2] Feminist post-structuralism can offer a theoretical basis for analysing the experiences of people in relation to cultural practices, language, and the material conditions of people's lives (Gavey, 1989).This was helpful when analysing the available subject positions of the women.

[3] All the participants were given pseudonyms

> something, but you do not need anything more. I think that should become fashion, that people can just be themselves and not put on a mask. I can't be bothered. People just have to take me the way I am.

Guðrún stresses this at length, repeating she 'can't be bothered'. Her reaction resonates well with the postfeminist paradigm (Gill, 2008), that you are not supposed to care what others think of you. She does however use foundation and straightens her hair, but says that people have to take her the way she is, finding that women, who use too much makeup, by her account, look like they are wearing a mask, which implies they are fake. Ólöf shared her view, saying 'it's awful when women use too much makeup' because she feels as if they are hiding something. This echoed in some of the men's views towards makeup, where Helgi for example stressed:

> This is like… I have seen that some … some women look more like dolls, no joke, more like Barbie dolls with so much makeup.

The question arises, what is too much makeup? Who decides what is appropriate and respectable? In Britain, makeup use can be a class issue: working class women are often talked about as 'Essex girls' or 'chavs' with too much makeup. It is the 'respectable' middle class that defines what is right and what is too much (Skeggs, 1997). In Iceland the word '*skinka*'[4] is used in a similar way as 'Essex girls'. Regardless of the exact definition, in both the English and the Icelandic context, conservative moderation defines the excess.

Some of the women connected the use of makeup to vanity and low self-esteem. Guðrún says:

> When we are getting together, like a group of people, the girls always have on really nice clothes and a lot of makeup. I would maybe just straighten my hair and put on foundation, I can't be bothered to put on eyeliner or mascara or something like that. I just can't be bothered and don't see the point in it. But sometimes, you know when I go to work or just want to look nice … but otherwise I am just natural.

[4] The word literally means ham, as the pork product.

Here Guðrún is expressing her free choice of makeup use, how she only does it when she feels like it. Again stressing how she is actively choosing (Stuart & Donaghue, 2012) and carefree (Gill, 2008). In the subtle criticism towards her female peers when describing how they 'always have on really nice clothes and makeup' she is suggesting that they are focused on making themselves prettier to become more attractive to boys, similar to the message from girls magazines Jackson et al. discussed (2013). At the same time she takes away their free choice by using herself as an opposite example, only straightening her hair and putting on foundation thus distancing herself from her peers, and from the feminine practice of makeup use. Her reason for this seemed to be linked to male attention and respect:

> I had many more guy friends than girlfriends. That's because the girls always you know… heavy makeup and so on. The guys asked me 'aren't you going to put on mascara?' 'aren't you going to put on a mask of makeup?' (said with sarcastic imitation), and I replied 'I can't be bothered'.

She indicated that the boys in her class respected her more for not wearing a 'mask of makeup', remarking that they looked down on the other girls' beauty practices which can also be seen in the Barbie doll comment from Helgi above. This is similar to what is argued by Stuart & Donaghue (2012) that men prefer 'more natural and real woman' (p. 105). Guðrún added that she thought girls and women were not necessarily using makeup for men, but for each other, as they judged each other's appearances. Ester shared similar views and added that most of her friends would never leave the house without makeup. She also speculated, like Guðrún, whether makeup use was due to a lack of self-confidence.

Damned if you don't

Many of the women spoke about pressure in relation to makeup. Ólöf mentioned pressure to use makeup as one aspect of excessive social expectations for women:

> They have to be nice and cool, they have to you know… yes put on makeup for school and do their hair for school and they have to have nice clothes on and just have to think about everything!

She felt that women are under constant observation, checking their hair and clothes even in the gym, instead of actually breaking a sweat and exercising. She describes here how the sexualized female body is now central to young women's identity as Riley and Scharff, (2013) have pointed out. Ólöf said, as Guðrún also noted, that such expectations do not exist for young men: they don't 'have to' do anything. Ólöf used makeup, saying that she was not 'messing with it', that is, defying the expectation, because of social pressure.

In the CI group sessions, Katrín shared that she started wearing makeup when she was eleven because of a skin condition. Kristín started around thirteen; Gerða seldom used makeup, and Þóra used it irregularly. When asked if they go out without makeup, Sveinbjörg and Katrín reported:

> 'Not often no', says Sveinbjörg, 'no' says Katrín, 'maybe just to the gym and something like that' Sveinbjörg nods in agreement.
>
> Researcher: Do people comment about your appearance if you don't have on makeup?
>
> Katrín: Yeah you get comments about looking like you are sick.
>
> Sveinbjörg: (Laughs) yeah and asked if you are tired.

Jóhann, one of the men in the study said about his younger sister in relation to makeup:

> Jóhann: This makeup you know, if they do not use it they get a bit scorned.
>
> Researcher: how so?
>
> Jóhann: Just that to not have any makeup is considered not okay.
>
> Researcher: Yes I see.
>
> Jóhann: Like my sister she is a really strong person, independent and does what she wants, often against the tide… but I would never see her leave the house without a mascara.

The experiences Katrín and Sveinbjörg describe are something Jóhann is aware of through living with his sister, indicating that the normative beauty practices are fairly well known. When asked further about why they think women wear makeup, Sveinbjörg thought that women feel more beautiful with makeup and Katrín explained that she felt more vulnerable without it.

If people feel good about themselves, they feel more secure in their surroundings. Katrín revealed that her reason for putting on makeup was that she felt vulnerable without it—indicating that makeup makes her in some way feel more secure and more comfortable in her skin. Skeggs' (1997) ethnography also found that a feeling of security is linked to the feeling of looking good. Ólöf described a similar experience when she started college. She wore makeup to school for the first months, until she felt safe in her surroundings:

> When I started in [school] then I felt everyone was cool and I had to put more effort in it you know. But then when I got to know my class and felt good around them, then I started not caring if I had makeup or not. You know, everything was new, and I didn't want to look like an idiot.

The young women are not freely choosing when the technologies of sexiness are required from them. The postfeminist message of neoliberalism tells young women to become the 'best versions of themselves' mixed with instructions on how to make themselves prettier according to normative ideas about beauty. Sigrún, who purposefully almost never used makeup and described how she imagined what people thought of her, said, 'I should do more of it [wearing makeup] because I look like a zombie', but then pushed back by saying 'no I don't care what other people think.' Sigrún has very fair skin and hair and this may account for her anxiety. In Iceland, the makeup industry sells white women the idea that they need mascara and eyebrow colour to enhance their appearance. Guðrún and Ólöf, for example, have dark eyelashes and eyebrows, so their appearances fit better into the normative ideal—even when they do not add makeup. Therefore women with see-through lashes and brows are at a disadvantage. Perhaps

those who have this feature or ‘natural beauty’ can afford to say, ‘I think women think too much about their looks,’ like Guðrún declared.

Hiding behind makeup

The women described themselves as not ready to reveal themselves and make themselves vulnerable in the beginning of relationships. Because they are taught that they are prettier with makeup on, and they have an understandable desire to look their best in courtship, they find it safer to put on makeup. With Katrín, vulnerability was not straightforwardly related to attracting male attention, she described wearing a lot of makeup due to acne, hiding and forbidding anyone to take her photo when she was around eleven.

> Katrín: I have to be in a special zone to feel feminine. And then I have to be extremely feminine.
>
> Researcher: How? Do you put on lot of makeup or what?
>
> Katrín: Yes, and always wear dresses and pantyhose. (…) I have just… There is a reason for this extreme use of makeup. When I was around eleven I felt this huge pressure of having to be cute. And when that failed, there was this great disappointment.

She explains her need to feel feminine – but also her struggle with it, as she has to ‘be in a special zone’. She talks about wanting to hide herself, since she felt the pressure of being pretty was unbearable and experienced disappointment and shame when she believed she failed at it. Her view seems to be that feminine equals being beautiful, as she describes her desire to measure up to feminine ideal. She did not think she was pretty, but felt prettier with makeup. This recalls what Sveinbjörg said, that women feel more beautiful with makeup, like Gill (2007) suggests, the pleasure of femininity is reserved for women who are well groomed, slim and beautiful. It seems to be the case that young women fear that they are not good enough, not accepted, and dread the accompanying feelings of rejection and self-hatred.

Social privilege and makeup

Katrin's story reveals a connection between beauty and social privilege. She mentioned that she had never felt pretty enough to be radical:

> I really wanted to take on some activist job or something (…) but I somehow couldn't do it because I felt that I had to be thin and cute first.

In her interview Katrín discusses feeling similarly towards achievements in school; she wanted to get good grades, but to counteract that, she would have to be pretty. For her, being an academic achieving activist, who did not conform to hegemonic beauty standards, meant losing her femininity. She said that cute girls have more freedom to act and defy expectations, and that being beautiful is quite a privilege. She gave the example of the feminist Kathleen Hanna, who became an icon for the Riot Grrrl movement:

> Like Kathleen Hanna, she is an amazing woman and really beautiful.
>
> Researcher: Yes she is very cute.
>
> Katrín: She is … people look up to her and that's why she is this icon for the Riot Grrrl movement. But there are plenty of others you know. She is… I am not saying that she isn't … I do love her, she is great. But she still has this you know, she is not intimidating. And because she is cute, she might have more freedom to… (…) well maybe this is something no one wants to talk about, a kind of a secret.

She discusses the possibility that Hanna got more space to be radical than others, because of her beauty. For Katrín, beauty is such a big part of femininity that a woman has to have it in order to have open doors: she expressed that there were many things she wanted to do in her life, but didn't, because feeling like she was not pretty had a paralysing effect on her.

Katrín's account imply that women have a hard time pursuing their goals and have things their way, unless they meet social expectations of beauty. The 'logic of the patriarchal beauty myth' (Stuart & Donaghue, 2012, p. 118), that women are worth more when complying

with beauty ideals, is very relevant here. Beauty is defined both as being feminine – shape of one's body and face, but also by adjusting one's self by using techniques – wearing the right amount of makeup etc. In that logic, beauty standards are the measurement of human (woman's) worth and it is no wonder that women strive so hard to attain it.

Motive for makeup use

Guðrún and Ólöf discussed at length how the meaning of makeup is determined by its target audience.

> Guðrún; I did not use makeup for the guys. I was just doing it for myself. I just woke up and did what I felt like doing.

They asked, for whom are we making ourselves beautiful? Ourselves or someone else? Ólöf said she '[knew] a lot of girls who felt like they weren't enough. Unless they dress up and put on makeup.' The reasons for makeup use were important factors to them: if they felt that makeup use was on their own terms, then it demonstrated self-confidence and independence. Guðrún states;

> Some girls do not use that much makeup. But when they do, they are just doing it for themselves. That is super important. If you are doing it for yourself not someone else.

This strongly connects to the postfeminist paradigm (Gill, 2008) where everything women do is supposed to be on their own terms which does not allow them to acknowledge social pressures clashing with their 'free choice' as Stuart & Donaghue (2012) put it.

The body

The women's body images varied from being relatively pleased with their bodies to hating them. All of the women described how being thin was the ideal bodily condition (which correlates with other studies, such as Carey et al., 2011). There is a paradox however, in the view that women should not be too skinny: a woman needs to have breasts and a bum. Guðrún

talked about how all fashion models were ‘famished’, and many of the participants thought that models were too thin. In the CI group sessions, the women discussed photos circulating on the Internet, where pictures of curvy women were compared to pictures of thin models with the caption saying ‘real women look like this’, pointing at the curvy ones. The women in the group resented this meme, feeling that it did not remedy body shaming, since one size is no more real than another. Þóra said nonetheless that women want to be thin, but adds;

> Even though most of us strive to be thin, then there is always this talk about ‘real women’ having thighs, curvy bum and breasts.

Similarly Valdís says:

> There is so much focus on being thin. But also to have breasts, and not small breasts. I think most women feel this pressure… to be thin but have breasts.

The idea that women should be thin, but with ‘breasts and a bum’, acknowledges that we live in a culture that values the slim body (Carey et al., 2011; Riley & Scharff, 2013).

Some of the women said that they refrain from going swimming because of their body insecurity. Many of the women also had female friends who refused to go swimming because of body dissatisfaction. In Iceland, people use swimming pools a lot and it is a big part of the culture (Jónsson, 2009). Nevertheless, many of the women have not gone since reaching adolescence. Katrín, for example, had not gone since she was eleven, saying that just the thought of showing everyone how she looks is really troubling to her. Þóra said that she has less difficulty with going swimming when there are only girls present;

> I hadn’t gone for a long time (swimming), but now I’ve been going and just think ‘Fuck it (…) who cares if I have a little fat on the sides (…) and if anyone cares, then fuck them’.

The women talked a lot about the importance of self-confidence in relation to weight. They discussed the notion that a woman should be confident, regardless of how much she weighs. However, a paradox exists here as well, because the women would not accept themselves as

overweight. Nonetheless, they expressed that other women who are overweight should hold their head high and be confident. Guðrún said that she sees 'a lot of elegant women who are really oversized, but just carry their head up high and are really beautiful.' Ólöf described her admiration for the singer Adele, saying, 'she just is who she is and does not care (…) I like how she swims against the tide.' She said Adele did not let her weight interfere with her singing. Ólöf also described her teacher and her boyfriend's mother as really beautiful women with big thighs and hips, saying that they should be happy about how they look, but adding that she herself would not be happy if she looked like them. This might be seen as trying to defy body shaming and fat phobia, but it appears to be unsuccessful, given the women in the study place demands on themselves to be thin and described the ideal form of the female body as thin.

When looking at some of the comments from the men in the study, the women's perceptions make sense. The men claimed that fat female bodies were unacceptable. Helgi said;

> Guys my age you know… they do not look at women who weigh maybe 100 kg. They judge more by appearance.

In this statement, Helgi distances himself from this view, claiming it belongs to others. However, this perspective aligns with views of some of the other men. For example, Steinar has little problem with associating fat female bodies with negative affect;

> I wouldn't say that I find it disgusting. Or… rather, that it annoys me. It annoys me when girls who are not in as good shape as the other girls put on the same type of clothes as the ones who are in a good shape. And you know, it just does not suit them. It looks terrible. That is perhaps what I mean by disgusting. Like when a really fat girl wears a tight pink pants and her bum is this huge (makes gesture with hands) that is not so nice you know. … Maybe I would not say that this girl was disgusting if she would only… would maybe… how do I put it, not dress so prominently you know.

In his account the fat body is the object of disgust (Ahmed, 2004) something people need to monitor (Rich, 2011). This male gaze (Mulvey, 1989) measuring women's bodies telling them

what not to wear, suggests that men are raised to observe and judge women's bodies in heterosexual ways as something that should be pleasing for their eyes (McNair, 2002; Jackson et al.,2013; Carey et al., 2010). Women should dress and look like men want them to, otherwise they should hide their bodies. It is obvious that this gaze affects the women in the study.

Slut-shaming and sex

Slut-shaming is something the women in the group talked a lot about as a part of their reality. In the CI group accounts, women were described as more prone to getting stigmatized than men, and they experienced a lot of policing of sexual behaviour. The men in the study did not discuss slut shaming much, but Jóhann expressed some concerns about certain types of pants;

> … these revealing spandex pants, I do not understand why anyone would wear these types of pants. Why would you want to be so exposed you know… Me being relatively happy with how I look, I would never wear something like that. I just see my younger sister, and how guys talk about her, you know it is a disaster. I do not want someone to look at my sisters like that, so I try not to look at other women like that. And I get frustrated that women behave like this. I think it is irresponsible.

In his concerns for his sisters, claiming that it is irresponsible to dress in a certain way, he slut-shames women for how they dress. Men's concern for women's appearance is something that is familiar to women (Aapola et al., 2004). For example, Gerða (in 2014) said her brother commented on her short shirt and pantyhose, comparing her to their niece, whom Gerður described as '*skinka*'. While in the British context, 'Essex girl' and 'chav' are linked with white working-class femininity and an accompanying lack of sexual restraint (Griffin et al., 2013), in the Icelandic context the term '*skinka*' usually refers to appearance, but also similar to what Griffin et al. (2013) refer to as 'the hyper-sexual feminine', 'characterised by high heels, short skirts, low-cut tops, fake tan, long (…) hair, (…) lots of make-up and buxom slimness' (Griffin et al., 2013, p.186). It is sometimes also associated with slut-shaming, as Gerða described. It is noteworthy that the women interviewed in 2012–13 did not mention slut-shaming *per se*, even

though they spoke about not being sexually promiscuous and noted that women should watch out and not behave or dress like a slut. Later, in post-SlutWalk interviews and the group discussions, the concept of slut-shaming was frequently discussed in a much more critical way as the dissonance and frustration was rising.

A preominant pattern in the CI group was the idea that slut-shaming decreased with age [they are used to being slut-shamed from around 10-11 years old], but that boyfriends were often concerned about how many partners their girlfriend has had. The women in the study positioned men as having more space when it comes to being sexually active and stated that women somehow lose their respectability with too much sexual activity (similar to what is discussed in Griffin et al., 2013).

It was seen as the common mantra that there is a connection between respecting oneself and one's body and having few sexual partners. This mantra runs counter to participant accounts where respecting one's body was not tied to the number of sexual partners a woman has. Þóra thought that discourses of women's sexual liberty contained a large inconsistency:

> You hear that yes of course women can sleep with whomever they like but at the same time as soon as they (men) hear stories, their opinion of the women diminishes.

The women discussed that people act like there is something wrong, even damaged, with women who are 'too' sexually active: like these women are desperate in their search for love. However, when men are promiscuous, they found that people interpret them as popular, and there is no mention of love. Participants were very tired of this double standard, expressing discontent with the current situation. Þóra pointed out how deeply embedded slut-shaming discourse is: she said that even women who enjoy their active sex lives call other women sluts. Þóra also admitted that she herself has sometimes thought 'yes, she really should be careful, that one' [meaning she should watch her reputation] and then realised what she was thinking and revised the thought to 'if she is safe and uses protections then great!'. This shows how the young women's thoughts and behaviour are still shaped by societal slut-shaming discourse,

even though they are trying to change their evaluation and are under influence of the discourse surrounding the SlutWalk.

Discussion

The narrow ideal of feminine beauty is impossible to attain. The young women in the study explain in detail how they are struggling to fit in to this ideal. The postfeminist paradigm invites young women to participate in the capitalist society where the individual/neoliberal subject does everything on her own terms. She uses makeup, trims and tones the body for herself and no one else. This echoed in the stories the young women told. The sexualisation of women's bodies leaves the women in this study torn between binary oppositions: makeup – no makeup, slut – virgin, too thin – too fat. Young Icelandic men and women appear to share similar definitions of desirable femininity as their peers in other Western countries. Femininity is defined by sex-appeal, linking women even stronger to the body. Performance of femininity is therefore a combination of techniques in regard of makeup – sexual behaviour and management of the body.

The supposed space for individual exploration within postfeminist and gender equal rhetoric is narrow. While the gender equal polices do invite young people to perhaps change old ideas, the restrictive definition of acceptable femininity does not invite change. The postfeminist paradigm and the ideal of gender equal Iceland, hides these paradoxes and the fact that they present a no-win situation, so that women constantly feel like they are personally failing to do femininity correctly. In Iceland, gender equality initiatives have quite a long history (Þorvaldsdóttir, 2011), and in recent years radical feminist activism has increased in Iceland. Despite these initiatives, women's bodies and their appearance seems to be a resilient subject in patriarchal system. The sexualised body of young women is not a target of gender equality policies but is left for the young women to solve. This is maybe not surprising, since the Gender

Gap Index does not focus on the sexualization of women or the stereotypic media portrayals of women and men.

The policing of women's bodies is extensive, with both men and women participating in the policing. Some of the women in this study have become aware of this and desire (and try) to defy it by refusing to be influenced and consciously not using makeup or trying not to worry about their body fat when going swimming. They are however, still affected and they worried about these issues while performing against the norm. However, some of the participants report feeling angry and several of the young women, after the CI group meetings began participating in feminist activism. Having reflected, gotten angry, they connected with other young women who shared their experiences, and seemed to be empowered to engage in norm-defying activities. Leading to what Hemmings (2012) calls affective solidarity, as could be seen, for example in young women's engagement with the #freethenipple protests (a global campaign for equality) and other activism in Iceland (Rúdólfsdóttir & Jóhannsdóttir, 2018). Whether this activism will move Iceland closer to gender equality is yet to be seen, but young women seem to have found a way, through activism, to state their dissatisfaction in this space of post-feminist sensibility.

Corrsponding Author

Ásta Jóhannsdóttir

Faculty of Social and Human Sciences,

University of Iceland,

Sæmundargata 1, 101

Reykjavík, Iceland.

Email: : asj13@hi.is

References

References

Aapola, S., Gonick, M., & Harris, A. (2004). *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ahmed, S. (2004). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Asgeirsdottir, B. B., Ingolfsdottir, G., & Sigfusdottir, I. D. (2012). Body image trends among Icelandic adolescents: A cross-sectional national study from 1997 to 2010. *Body Image*, *9*(3), 404–408. doi: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2012.02.002

Asgeirsdottir, B. B., & Sigfusdottir, I. D. (2015). Gender differences in co-occurrence of depressive and anger symptoms among adolescents in five Nordic countries. *Scandinavian Journal of Social Medicine*, *43*(2), 183–189. doi: 10.1177/1403494814561817

Bartky, S. L. (1998). Foucault, femininity, and the modernization of patriarchal power. In Rose Weitz (Ed.), *The politics of women´s bodies. Sexuality, appearance and behavior* (p. 25–45). Oxford, UK ; New York, USA: Oxford University Press.

Bordo, S. (1993). *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body by Susan Bordo*. University of California Press.

Braun, V. (2010). Female genital cosmetic surgery: a critical review of current knowledge and contemporary debates. *Journal of Women's Health (2002)*, *19*(7), 1393–1407. doi: 10.1089/jwh.2009.1728

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Carey, R. N., Donaghue, N., & Broderick, P. (2011). "What you look like is such a big factor": Girls' own reflections about the appearance culture in an all-girls' school. *Feminism & Psychology*, *21*(3), 299–316. doi: 10.1177/0959353510369893

Epperlein, E., & Anderson, I. (2016). Man vs. Vagina - a Foucauldian analysis of men's discourses about the perfect vagina and female genital grooming. *Psychology of Women Section Review*, *18*(1), 5–12.

Erlendsdóttir, S. T. (1993). *Veröld sem ég vil. Saga Kvenréttindafélags Íslands 1907-1992* [World I want. History of the Icelandic Women's Rights Association 1907-1992]. Reykjavík: Kvenréttindafélag Íslands.

Evans, A., Riley, S., & Shankar, A. (2010). Technologies of Sexiness: Theorizing Women's Engagement in the Sexualization of Culture. *Feminism & Psychology*, *20*(1), 114–131. doi: 10.1177/0959353509351854

Fahs, B. (2014). Genital panics: constructing the vagina in women's qualitative narratives about pubic hair, menstrual sex, and vaginal self-image. *Body Image*, *11*(3), 210–218. doi: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2014.03.002

Fontaine, P. (2011). SlutWalk Coming To Reykjavík. Retrieved November 11, 2015, from http://grapevine.is/news/2011/06/10/slutwalk-coming-to-reykjavik/

Gavey, N. (1989). Feminist Poststructuralism and Discourse Analysis. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *13*(4), 459–475. doi: 10.1111/j.1471-6402.1989.tb01014.x

Gavey, N. (2011). Feminist Poststructuralism and Discourse Analysis Revisited. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *35*(1), 183–188. doi: 10.1177/0361684310395916

Gill, R. (2007). Postfeminist media culture Elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *10*(2), 147–166. doi: 10.1177/1367549407075898

Gill, R. (2008). Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising. *Feminism & Psychology*, *18*(1), 35–60. doi: 10.1177/0959353507084950

Gíslason, I. V. (2006). *Fostering Caring Masculinities. Icelandic National Report*. Akureyri: Jafnréttisstofa.

Gíslason, I. V. (2007). *Parental Leave in Iceland Bringing the Fathers in Developments in the Wake of New Legislation in 2000*. Akureyri: Jafnréttisstofa.

Gíslason, I. V. (2009). Gender Changes in Iceland: From Rigid Roles to Negotiations. *Arctic and Antarctic*, (3), 121–149.

Griffin, C., Szmigin, I., Bengry-Howell, A., Hackley, C., & Mistral, W. (2013). Inhabiting the contradictions: Hypersexual femininity and the culture of intoxication among young women in the UK. *Feminism & Psychology*, *23*(2), 184–206. doi: 10.1177/0959353512468860

Gústafsdóttir, G. (2016). *Mediated through the Mainstream: Image(s) of Femininity and Citizenship in Contemporary Iceland 1980-2000, A feminist discourse analysis*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan.

Gústafsdóttir, G., Matthíasdóttir, S., & Einarsdóttir, Þ. (2010). The development of Icelandic womanhood at the turn of two centuries From motherly nature to sex appeal. In Silja Bára Ómarsdóttir (Ed.), *Rannsóknir í félagsvísindum*. Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands. Retrieved from http://skemman.is/stream/get/1946/6729/18368/1/1-9_GudnyGustafs_Sigr.Matthias_%C3%9EorgerdurEinarsd_STJbok.pdf

Gylfadóttir, E. Ý. (1998). Hvernig er hin fullkomna kona? Kynímyndir í auglýsingum og konur sem sjónrænt hráefni [The perfect woman? Gender stereotypes in advertisement and women as visual material]. In Jón Proppé (Ed.), *Flögð og fögur skinn*. Reykjavík: Art.is Books.

Hemmings, C. (2012). Affective solidarity: Feminist reflexivity and political transformation. *Feminist Theory*, *13*(2), 147–161. doi: 10.1177/1464700112442643

Heron, J. (1996). *Cooperative Inquiry: Research into the Human Condition*. London ; Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Incorporated.

H. J. (2014, March 23). The spread of gender quotas for company boards. The Economist explains [Blog post]. Retrieved from http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2014/03/economist-explains-14

Hwang, S. (2008). Utilizing Qualitative Data Analysis Software: A Review of Atlas.ti. *Social Science Computer Review*, *26*(4), 519–527. doi: 10.1177/0894439307312485

Jackson, S., Vares, T., & Gill, R. (2013). “The whole playboy mansion image”: Girls’ fashioning and fashioned selves within a postfeminist culture. *Feminism & Psychology*, *23*(2), 143–162. doi: 10.1177/0959353511433790

Jónsdóttir, K. (2007). *“Hlustaðu á þína innri rödd” Kvennaframboð í Reykjavík og Kvennalisti 1982-1987* ["Listen to your inner voice" Women's run in Reykjavík and the Women's Alliance 1982-1987]. Reykjavík: Sögufélagið.

Jónsson, Ö. D. (2009). *Geothermal living. The culture of public bathing in Reykjavik*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan.

Jung, J., & Forbes, G. B. (2007). Body Dissatisfaction and Disordered Eating among College Women in China, South Korea, and the United States: Contrasting Predictions from Sociocultural and Feminist Theories. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *31*(4), 381–393.

Jung, J., Forbes, G. B., & Lee, Y. (2009). Body Dissatisfaction and Disordered Eating Among Early Adolescents From Korea and the US. *Sex Roles*, *61*(1–2), 42–54. doi: 10.1007/s11199-009-9609-5

Lazar, M. M., & Kramarae, C. (2011). Gender and Power in Discourse. In T. A. van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction* (2 edition, p. 217–240). Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications Ltd.

McNair, B. (2002). *Striptease Culture*. Taylor & Francis Ltd.

Mendes, K. (2015). *SlutWalk: Feminism, Activism and Media*. New York: AIAA.

Mulvey, L. (1989). *Visual and Other Pleasures: Collected Writings* (1989 edition). Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Pétursdóttir, G. M. (2009). *"Within the Socially Desirable Aura of Gender Equality. Icelandic Work Cultures, Gender Relations and Family Responsibility* (University of Iceland). Reykjavík.

Petzold, E. (2014). We Own This Town. Retrieved January 21, 2015, from http://grapevine.is/mag/articles/2014/08/07/we-own-this-town/

Reason, P., & Bradbury-Huang, H. (Eds.). (2013). *The Sage Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry And Practice* (2nd Revised edition edition). London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications Ltd.

Rich, E. (2011). "I see her being obesed!": Public pedagogy, reality media and the obesity crisis. *Health (London, England: 1997)*, *15*(1), 3–21. doi: 10.1177/1363459309358127

Riley, S. C., & Scharff, C. (2013). Feminism versus femininity? Exploring feminist dilemmas through cooperative inquiry research. *Feminism & Psychology*, *23*(2), 207–223. doi: 10.1177/0959353512454615

Ringrose, J. (2012). *Postfeminist Education?: Girls and the Sexual Politics of Schooling*. London ; New York, NY: Routledge.

Rúdólfsdóttir, A., G. (1997). *The construction of femininity in Iceland* (PhD thesis). Department of Social Psychology, London School of Economics and Political Science. University of London.

Rúdólfsdóttir, A., G. (1998). Ljóskudraumar [Blonde dreams]. In J. Proppé (Ed.), *Flögð og fögur skinn*. Reykjavík: Art.is Books.

Rúdólfsdóttir, A. G., & Jóhannsdóttir, Á. (2018). Fuck patriarchy! An analysis of digital mainstream media discussion of the #freethenipple activities in Iceland in March 2015. *Feminism & Psychology*, *28*(1), 133–151. doi: 10.1177/0959353517715876

Rúdólfsdóttir, Annadís, G. (2005). The day the women went on strike. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/oct/18/gender.uk

Sigfusdottir, I. D., Asgeirsdottir, B. B., Sigurdsson, J. F., & Gudjonsson, G. H. (2008). Trends in depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms and visits to healthcare specialists: a national study among Icelandic adolescents. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, *36*(4), 361–368. doi: 10.1177/1403494807088457

Skeggs, B. (2003). *Class, Self, Culture*. London: Routledge.

Skeggs, B. (1997). *Formations of Class & Gender: Becoming Respectable*. London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Statistics Iceland. (2015). [Publications of statistics from Iceland]. Retrieved June 23, 2015, from http://www.statice.is/

Statistics Iceland. (2017). Retrieved May 28, 2017, from http://statice.is/publications/news-archive/social-affairs/key-figures-on-women-and-men/

Stuart, A., & Donaghue, N. (2012). Choosing to conform: The discursive complexities of choice in relation to feminine beauty practices. *Feminism & Psychology*, *22*(1), 98–121. doi: 10.1177/0959353511424362

Tyler, I. (2008). "Chav Mum Chav Scum." *Feminist Media Studies*, *8*(1), 17–34. doi: 10.1080/14680770701824779

Valsson, P. (2009). *Vigdís - Kona verður forseti* [Vigdís - Woman becomes a President]. Reykjavík: JPV. Retrieved from https://www.forlagid.is/baekur/vigdis-%e2%88%92-kona-ver%c3%b0ur-forseti/

Wolf, N. (1992). *The Beauty Myth*. London: Vintage.

World Economic Forum. (2016). *The Global Gender Gap Report 2016*. Retrieved from http://wef.ch/2h3hr0x

World Economic Forum. (2017). *The Global Gender Gap Report 2017*. Retrieved from http://wef.ch/2xE3XA4

Þorvaldsdóttir, Þ. (2011). The Gender-Equal North: Icelandic Images of Femininity and Masculinity. In D. Chartier & S. Isleifsson (Eds.), *Iceland and Images of the North* (p. 405–434). Québec : Iceland: Presses de l'Universite du Quebec.