Balancing Between Traditional Gender Representations:

Lesbian Women's Quest to Create a New Form of Self-Expression

by

Eszter Adrienn Bagyina

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Supervisor: Dr. Éva Fodor

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Abstract

This paper focuses on how lesbian women attempt to create an androgynous mode of self-expression for themselves through negotiating between various forms of body modification practices and the related gendered norms that pressure them into either adhering to or subverting certain normative discourses. Chapter 3 discusses the respondents tattooing practices which reveal that through the reappropriation of the domain of tattooing which was traditionally understood to be a masculine domain they visually express their inner strength through symbols traditionally understood as strength motifs in order to challenge the stereotypical representation of women as weak and passive. Chapter 4 in contrast, discusses three other themes that are either specifically related to tattooing or are more indirectly related to their perception of the ideal woman: body hair removal, other forms of body modification such as body building or plastic surgery and alcohol consumption. The three themes are all connected to each other in the sense that they have been used to regulate women's behaviour and they all have gendered norms to which my participants relate in different ways. The study shows that they adhere to the norm of removing body hair but instead of liking it to femininity they link it to the notion of being human. The respondents also accept normative body shape standards and reject overly muscular or overweight bodies as possible objects of desire. The only area in which they did not seem to have any form of consensus is alcohol consumption in which case some respondents exhibited traditional values while others had more of a post-feminist position on the question.

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Introduction

In the age of Internet Facebook is becoming one of the principal sites for socializing and as such closed and/or secret LGBT+ groups have also appeared which offer socializing spaces for LGBT+ individuals not only locally but also across the nation or even world-wide. In such groups people are discussing desires and expression opinions that reveal how they think about gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, and implicitly reveal how gendered norms might influence them. In order to discuss these norms and influences my research will look at a Hungarian lesbian dating group on Facebook. My primary research question is how do the women in the chosen Facebook group use visual media elements such as pictures and videos to express how they think about women in general, other lesbian women and about themselves as lesbians? An interesting pattern in the images used is that the group members often use images of heavily tattooed women in order to express a variety of emotions and experiences in conjunction with numerous images that contradict popular associations with having many tattoos such as high levels of alcohol consumption, masculinity and promiscuity. In addition they seem to have ambivalent relationships with other modes of body modification which will also be discussed. My argument is that the group members attempt to tread a fine line between normative and hegemonic/dominant masculine and feminine modes of self-presentation in order to forge an authentic lesbian voice for themselves that has hitherto not existed in the form of an androgynous mode of expression.

As the backbone of my theoretical framework I am going to use Judith Butler's performativity theory. *In Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993), Judith Butler considers identity constructions to be performative in the sense that it is not the individual who is the active agent of the various acts by which they perform, but rather that the various discourses that surround us have this agentive power and as such it is the discourses that perform people (Butler 1990, 1993). These discourses include the heterosexist discourse of contemporary media, of whose elements non-heterosexual women use in internalized, subversive or other ways in order to (re)construct their identity as non-heterosexual (Butler, 1990,1993). I will also rely on the

literature of various body modification types such as tattooing, plastic surgery and body building. My main sources in this field are Victoria Pitts' *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (2003) and various works of Viren Swami (2007, 2009, 2013).

The site for my research, which will partially be a media analysis of images and interviewing group members, will be an online dating and community group designed and run by Hungarian lesbians and bisexual women on Facebook. This is a good site for research because, on the one hand, the name of the group does not explicitly reveal the sexual orientation of the group members, because of which many men and people who are curious to see lesbians would otherwise want to join. This makes the available data much more relevant to the research question as the fact that new group members only find out about the group through their friends or acquaintances who are already members ensures that the (past) data is not corrupted by fake profiles created by men. On the other hand, the unique feature of Facebook is that people can simultaneously arrange dates and meetings, share pictures, music, videos, personal problems, questions, and they can express their opinion in the form of 'likes' or comment on the shared media elements and have large multi-participant discussions. This vast quantity of accumulated data – which can be traced back for a long period of time – allows the researcher to not only conduct data analysis of the way group members currently construct and reinforce their sexual orientation but also to gather older data which allows both retrospective analysis and comparative analyses that can reveal changes and trends in the identity construction of members. For the purpose of this research I intend to choose a small number of images shared and submit them to content analysis, while I intend to use discourse analysis on the related data such as Facebook comments and individual interviews.

Chapter 1: Methodology

In this section I will discuss the methods I used for gathering and processing material and for analysing the collected data. I will also reflect on my position as a researcher within the chosen Facebook community, how my subjective opinion and invested interest in tattoos may have influenced my research and what the limitations of my study may be. In relation to both the methodology and the limitations of my study I will elaborate on difficulties in finding interviewees and scheduling interviews with them.

The research aim of this study is to find out in what ways and with what tools do a small group of Hungarian lesbian women who have joined a dating/meeting group on Facebook express their lesbian experiences within the group and how the heavy investment of many group members in tattoo collecting influences their perception of themselves and other women. As the significant majority of my data comes from the Facebook posts and comments of group members my fieldwork was somewhat like a netnographic research although I did not adhere strictly to the methodological framework of this approach (for a full discussion of netnographic methodology see Kozinets, 2010). I actively followed the posting trends of the members between 1 January 2015 and 30 April 2015 with specific focus on the type of pictures they post of themselves, of other women they find attractive or of abstract ideas they find appealing (and which they also happen to visually represent with women in many cases). A positive effect of conducting research on Facebook is that I had access to not only the material they shared during the four months of my observation but I could have gone back as far as February 2013 if I had wanted to. However, due to the fact that group members often change I will attempt to make sense only of the material posted within the given four-month time period, referring to older (or newer) posts only if special

cases. In addition to going through their posts I also conducted interviews with 10 women, three of whom are administrators of the groups, and who either volunteered to participate, or later, when the volunteers were scarce I asked them personally if they would like to participate. The group, which I will refer to by the pseudonym Unicorn group currently has 428 members. However, a great majority of the women are either inactive in the sense that they do not visit the group any more[1], or they are quasi-inactive in the sense that they follow the posts, occasionally express opinions in the form of likes, but rarely in the form of commenting or posting, and there are approximately 30 women – of whom I interviewed 10 – who actively participate in the community life.

1.1. Data collection and related difficulties

During the observation period I used two methods of data collection and collected four types of material. I used the online equivalent of participant observation as I not only collected samples from present and past posts but also posted myself in order to probe for reactions and based on initial suppositions I also used semi-structured interviews. In terms of types of material, I collected images they shared, comments they added to the posts, one video one of the participants shared and the data from the interviews. In terms of interviews, I started with traditional face-to-face interviews with two people at a time as I believed offline interviews to be of more value than online interviews, which is an opinion Bruckman shares (as qtd. in Kozinets, 2010:46). However, it proved difficult to schedule interviews with some of the group members, particularly with those

1 An unfortunate side effect of the inherent nature of Facebook is that many people join groups which they later never follow making the group seem significantly larger than it actually is. While many women participate in the community life online, some of the group members have actually complained that when they attempt to meet in real life not more than 10 of them usually get together.

who did not live in Budapest; therefore, I switched to individual interviews on the one hand, and on the other hand, when I conducted second interviews with the respondents I switched to computer-mediated interviews conducted either via the chat function of Facebook or Skype – both in written format as my respondents did not have microphones. Altogether I conducted 10 face-to-face interviews out of which 2 were with 2 people at a time and 6 individual interviews and 8 online individual follow-up interviews in which I asked additional questions that did not come up during the first round. Unfortunately, during one of the individual face-to-face interviews there were some technical issues and only a third of the interview was recorded and the respondent was not available for further interviews in any form due to family reasons. Another interviewee moved abroad in the meantime and therefore was not available for an online follow up session. Initially I intended to conduct small group interviews of 3-4 people at a time because I assumed that that would recreate the group dynamics as well and I would be able to see the respondents react to one another. However as it was impossible to schedule I opted to having two respondents at a time, out of which one time two of the administrators were grouped in one by accident which prompted a more easy-going interview session, whereas the other group was of two people who did not yet know each other. There were no issues during the interview; however, one of the respondents did give me feedback later, telling me that the other respondent was rather antipathetic to her and she held back on some of her opinions because she did not want to get into arguments she felt to be pointless.

1.2. My position as a researcher and limitations of the study

I joined the Facebook group in question a few months before finally posting about my research intentions. I was mostly an inactive observer, although I occasionally shared my opinion in discussions and eventually wrote a friendly and deliberately blurred public message in the news feed of the group that I would be writing my thesis paper on lesbian sexuality and I would need a few volunteers who would give me interviews and tell me their opinions. This immediately elicited a positive reaction both in the form of higher than usual number of likes as well as supportive comments and ensuring that they would love to participate in such a research or that they were glad that "someone was working with this topic" (Anita, Facebook comment).

Writing about my positionality as a researcher is important in feminist research, because some aspects of my person most likely had an impact on the respondents (Shariff, 2014:4) such as my age (25, which was roughly in the middle of the two extremes that I interviewed as my interviewees ranged between 20 and 36), my gender (cis-woman), my sexual orientation (lesbian – although one the respondents assumed in the first few minutes of our conversation that I was a 'cool' heterosexual person who only joined the group to gather data for her thesis paper which obviously meant that she had not checked my Facebook profile that contains numerous references to my being a lesbian even in the publicly visible sections), the fact that I am a tattoo collector and being considered an insider which automatically earned me a certain level of trust (Shariff, 2014).

I took the majority of my interviewees to a café that I knew was run by two gay men in the city centre – information I disclosed to my interviewees as well in order to ensure them that they can freely talk about anything that comes to their mind as it would be very unlikely that we would encounter homophobic remarks. This seemed to be a good idea as most of them had a very easy-going demeanour and they answered freely and openly to my questions. However, I felt that

the two respondents who were over thirty occasionally had a somewhat patronizing tone as if they considered me somewhat of a beginner in sexuality-related issues. Some of their answers decidedly had a tint of 'I, the experienced older person, will tell you how it's done' attitude. Interestingly none of the respondents questioned my experience and status as a researcher, most likely because I was either on the same level as they were (some respondents had MA degrees) or I had higher education than them (most respondents seemed to have come from the working class). Also the fact that I was myself an out lesbian lead them to assume that they can afford to use a certain type of discourse reserved either for LGBT+ people or for people closely related with the LGBT+ community as they were assured that I would have the appropriate cultural capital to understand them. For instance many participants used casual references to lesbian spaces such as Östrosokk (the monthly lesbian party in Budapest) or to relatively less known lesbian identity labels such as 'lipsticks' and often used reaffirming remarks such as 'well, but you know all about that too'. This sometimes made the interviews a bit more difficult as I had to ask back in order to get them to elaborate on what exactly it is that they are implying and assuming that I would think of it the same way – an act that occasionally threatened my image as a competent insider. Since some stigma for heavily tattooed people still exist, the fact that I have multiple tattoos, some of which may have been visible during interviews, might have influenced the way respondents talked to me about their own tattoos as they may have felt more confident that I would not judge them for example for expressing their desire to have many more tattoos.

As only about a third of the active members were available for interviewing the results of my study will necessarily be limited even within this small group of Hungarian lesbians and even more so regarding the larger Hungarian LGBT+ community. Furthermore, due to time and resource restrictions I could not take the participants age, location, education and class

background into consideration when selecting the interviewees which resulted in a mixed group with their sexual minority status being the only unifying factor. These limitations call for a broader intersectional study in which multiple axes of identity labels and power relations can be taken into consideration.

Chapter 3: Written on the Body: the tattoo collecting practices of lesbian women

"If we are to free ourselves from the dead weight
that has once again been made out of femaleness,
it is not ballots or lobbyists or placards that women will need first;
it is a new way to see" (Wolf, 1990: 19)

Body modification practices have been with humanity in one form or another for thousands of years yet different practices imply different stigmas based on the false myth of normalcy. In the contemporary Western world, body modification practices are on a moving scale where the two poles consist of socially accepted – and to some extent expected – modification practices such as plastic surgery, dieting, mainstream piercing adornments like earrings, cutting one's hair, or body building which all have their gendered norm-values attached to them (Pitts, 2003; Atkinson, 2004; Atkinson, 2002; Schilling, 2003; Fisher,2002); and socially non-accepted, or non-mainstream modification practices such as piercing (any part of the body other than the ear), scaring, branding, implantations and, traditionally a part of this category, tattoos as well (Pitts, 2003; Fisher, 2002; Oksanen and Turtiainen, 2005). Fahs (2011) suggests that "within these body modification practices, sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, and homophobia all appear in full force, as social norms translate into women's everyday routines, expectations, and interactions with their bodies" (Fahs, 2011:452). Out of these isms and phobias the present study is mostly concerned with (hetero)sexism and homophobia surrounding the body practices of the women in the Facebook group.

The practice of tattooing has been an odd one out among the long line of (semi-)permanent modification practices since 1960s which saw the advent of the so-called 'tattoo

renaissance' (Pitts, 2003; Atkinson, 2004; DeMello, 2000). During the tattoo renaissance tattooing underwent major changes and started to be seen as a form of art rather than a means of economic sustenance (Sanders, 2008), where technical and technological developments made increasingly higher quality tattoos available (Swami and Furnham, 2007) because of which it slowly entered mainstream culture by the 1990s (Pitts, 2003; Craighead, 2011:44). However, entering the mainstream of culture did not automatically exclude it from all of the subcultures that had previously appropriated it for themselves such as various working class groups (Pitts, 2003:32), sailors (Wohlrab et al., 2007:87) and soldiers (Swami and Furnham, 2007:343; Santos, 2009:92; Fisher,2002:99); but what is more important tattooing has historically been associated with mental disorder, criminal activity in general and specifically with inmates as well (Atkinson, 2004: 126; Wohlrab et al., 2007:87).

An especially important factor is that all of the above listed occupations or statuses (with the exception of mental illnesses) is traditionally associated with men and the stereotypical representation of masculinity in the modern West. As a result, the act of tattooing is perceived in the Western world as having a "hyper-masculinist image" (Atkinson, 2004:136; Atkinson, 2002) despite the fact that statistics show that around 60% of tattooed individuals nowadays are women (Fisher, 2002:100; Patterson and Schroeder, 2010:256). Certain body parts, designs, or tattoo sizes are still considered masculine and an allegedly feminine tattoo-norm was created to serve as an artificial counterpoint to the male norm (Craighead, 2011:44; Patterson and Schroeder, 2010:255) setting up a binary opposition between the two. Craighead and others note that for women, Western normative beauty ideals dictate "relatively small and discrete tattoos that represent femininity, like flowers, butterflies and fairies" (Craighead, 2011:44) in which definition the word 'discrete' implies easily concealable areas such as "hips, buttocks, or breasts"

(Fisher, 2002:100), all of which are, incidentally, parts of the female body that have been hyper-eroticized at point or another in history. According to Atkinson, tattoos on these body parts "serve to accentuate the 'natural' fleshy curves and sexy contours of the stereotypically female body" (Atkinson, 2004:136). As Atkinson's scare quotes imply, naturalness of often constructed and these representations are of course stereotypical representations of normative, heterosexual femininity to which many women – including many of those participating in my study – are either unwilling or unable to conform.

This tension between masculine and feminine attributes and the potential desire to signal non-heterosexual sexual identities result in a careful policing of the number, size, and content of tattoos as attributes that designate the wearer as belonging either to the mainstream or to the transgressive-subcultural stream of tattoo collectors despite the fact that many of my respondents may not necessarily be consciously aware of the origins of tattooing.

At this point it is important to highlight that my respondents belong to two groups who have a distinctive, non-mainstream, socially sanctioned tradition of body modification practices that deviate from the above outlined stereotypical traditions, which could have an effect on both their perception of tattooing in general and on their own practices as well: on the one hand they are all women whose body modification practices have been the topic of a heated feminist debate which should be taken into account; and, on the other hand, they belong to a subculture of sexual minorities whose modes of self- and sexual expression have historically been defined in terms of a plethora of heteronormative assumptions and are assumed to be based on a heterosexual model such as outlined in sub-chapter 4.2.

3.1. Body project expectations of women, stereotypes and consequences

According to Pitts, "women are expected to undertake a wider array of body projects, be more disciplined in them, spend more time and money on them, and achieve more with them [than men]" (Pitts, 2003:51), which is reflected in the multi-billion dollar beauty industry that mostly promotes and advertises the modification of the female body (with the exception of body building which is still a predominantly male area which will be discussed in subchapter 5.2.). Pitts argues that "women's [mainstream] body projects [i.e. dieting, undergoing cosmetic surgery, going to fitness clubs etc.] must be seen as linked to the enormous economic, social, and political pressures surrounding women's appearance" (Pitts, 2003:51). In contrast, radical feminists, for example MacKinnon and Dworkin, have argued that not only is this true for mainstream projects but also for non-mainstream ones like tattooing and have linked the two to the patriarchal oppression of the female body (Pitts, 2003:52-53). This argument of course depended on the notion that the body was an organic whole which could serve as a source to resist patriarchy if it were unmarked by culture (Pitts, 2003:54). However, seeing that a human body is never unmarked, an alternative conception arose among post-modern feminists who celebrated non-conforming body modification practices as a symbol of women's agency over their bodies. By the 1990s, when most of my respondents were born, "tattoos on the bodies of young feminists [… were beginning to be accepted] as subversions of 'traditional notions of feminine beauty'" (Pitts, 2003:55). Furthermore, Pitts argues that "permanently marking the body is an expression of female power" (Pitts, 2003:56), with which my respondents seem to agree as the analyses in sub-chapters 4.2. – 4.3. will show.

But such transgressive acts necessarily have consequences that can either be interpreted as repercussions or as added benefits, depending on various factors such as the sexual orientation of the people in question or their need for social acceptance. Unfortunately there are relatively few quantitative studies that deal with the larger picture of tattooed women's acceptance in society and the existing studies are mostly confined to a Canadian or North American context (Atkinson, 2002; Atkinson, 2004; Hawkes et al., 2004) with only one European study so far (Swami and Furnham, 2007) but nonetheless, their general outcomes may be useful for the current research. Swami and Furnham (2007) have conducted a quantitative analysis of how people perceive women with varying number (and placement) of tattoos, finding that "women with tattoos were considered less physically attractive, more sexually promiscuous and heavier drinkers in comparison with untattooed women [and that] the strength of these associations became stronger with increasing number of tattoos" (Swami and Furnham, 2007:349). However, as the authors acknowledge, one limitation of their study was that they did not take into consideration the placement of the tattoos (Swami and Furnham, 2007:350) and mixed stereotypically feminine and masculine placements such as hips and arms which might have had an effect on the results. Furthermore, it might have been interesting to know the sexual orientation of the participants (an approximately equal amount of men and women) who rated the images, because for lesbian women it might be considered an added benefit of having tattoos if heterosexual men deemed them less attractive, but might be understood as a repercussion if the same associations are voiced by lesbian women. Nevertheless I found the above results of Swami and Furnham (2007) to be relevant because the analysis in Chapter 5 will demonstrate that my respondents react negatively to body presentations related to two of these stereotypes and negative judgements: unattractiveness (although this variable will be slightly modified in my analysis) and alcohol consumption.

In addition to these findings, the cultural contradiction that Hawkes et al. (2004) point out regarding tattooed women's assessment will be of great importance for my study. The participants in their study assessed tattooed women as "more powerful and less passive than women without tattoos" (Hawkes et al., 2004: 602), which is also supported by the tattoo community as Oksanen and Turtiainen's study on *Tattoo* magazine shows (Oksanen and Turtiainen,2005:119). Hawkes et al's finding is significant in itself as the majority of my respondents have at least one tattoo related to inner strength or power (for a full discussion see subchapter 4.4.) but Hawkes et al.'s point that this assessment can simultaneously be understood as a negative and as a positive evaluation is of much more relevance. Hawkes et al. argue that in mainstream cultures where "passivity and weakness are [the] socially desirable traits for women" (Hawkes et al., 2004:602) this assessment would be a negative one if in relation to women and would only be understood as positive assessment in (sub)cultural groups where "women's strength is idealized" (Hawkes et al., 2004:602) such as feminist groups for instance, or, as my analysis will suggest, in certain lesbian groups. Hawkes et al. also claim that their findings support the notion that women with (large and/or visible) tattoos are understood as flaunting their "freedom from gender norms [i.e. stereotypical or traditional femininity] or as threatening women's traditional [i.e. heterosexual] place in society" (Hawkes et al., 2004: 603) which supports my argument that lesbian women may use those tattooing practices that are traditionally understood as the masculine variation of tattoos as a subversive tactic to express (sexual)identities that do not comply with heteronormative expectations.

3.2. Tattoo collecting subculture of sexual minority groups

Unfortunately the literature on the body modification practices of lesbians is relatively scarce. Currently there is no available data from European contexts, there is only one that marginally deals with lesbians in North America and one in China. Furthermore, the only study that discusses lesbian women in a Western context (Santos, 2009) studies Chicana subculture in East Los Angeles. As such, the study is more interested in the normative value judgements visible at the intersection of race, class and gender than sexuality. There is only one self-identified queer woman in the study who got a rainbow flag on her shin (Santos, 2009:109) but while the practice of having openly 'out' tattoos might be useful it is only so within the specific ethnic subculture of Chicana/os and as such is not useful for my study.

The study that was conducted in China (Liu et al., 2010) discusses the practices of self-identified butch women; however, I find that referring to this study would be impracticable for two reasons: on the one hand, Chinese culture, in which the participants' use of tattoos is embedded, differs significantly from Western cultures because of which the cultural implications of having tattoos for lesbian women would be incompatible. On the other hand, Liu et al. understand butch women purely in terms of masculinity to the point of mimicking being men (Liu et al., 2010:299) and pain (Liu et al., 2010:298-99) of which the former is contradicted by my respondents while the latter never mentioned by any of the participants neither as motivation nor as deterrent and as such, seems to be of little relevance in the Hungarian context.

Finally, Victoria Pitts has a chapter on queer body modification practices in *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (2003); however, it is important to note that her discussion puts more emphasis on radical and less accepted forms of body modification practices

such as unusual piercing, branding, and scarring while tattoos come up relatively rarely in relation to queer practices. Furthermore, Pitts only discusses the practices of queer identified people who are somehow marginalized within the LGBT community as well, such as practitioners of SM (Pitts, 2003:93).

According to Pitts, a queer mode of body modification is the politically charged modification practices of non-heterosexual individuals (Pitts, 2003:91), and is especially prominent among radical groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation (Pitts, 2003). By 1990s, subcultural sexual minority women (such as leatherdykes and practitioners of SM) were celebrating body art as "the radical expansion and reappraisal of the sexual territory" (Pitts, 2003:93). In other words, they claimed specific uses of body art as adequate practices with which to express and celebrate their sexual identities. And while there was potential in these queer groups, especially Queer Nation, to radically challenge the whole concept of labelling and normative doling out of power, they developed their own set of regulatory standards and expectations in terms of normative nationalist behaviour (Sabsay, 2012:607) as well as a radically non-mainstream form of body modification from which my respondents feel alienated for a number of reasons. To quote one of my respondents. "as with most things, the golden middle road is the best" (Ivett, Skype-interview). My argument is that while many sexual minority women, and certainly some of those participating in the study, conform to mainstream normative beauty ideals (either regarding themselves or the type of women they desire) as part of an assimilationist tactic that "insists there are *no* differences between gay and straight bodies" (Pitts, 2003:90, original emphasis); and while many go to extremes in pursuing the alternative, there is a significant subculture within lesbians who, while critical of normative (largely heterosexual) ways of handling one's body, are weary of the alternative as well. As a result, in an attempt to

create their own set of principles (which undoubtedly have the potential to become normative in their turn) my respondents carefully balance which mainstream and non-mainstream body modification practices they accept and to what extent. In this chapter I will discuss how and why my respondents use tattooing for their own purpose, which normative standards they challenge or conform to and how tattooing influences their perception of other women.

Thus, my study fills a gap in the literature on the body modification practices of lesbian women who, while being critical and weary of it, do not radically challenge the socially accepted (hetero)normative value system of the majority society; but are instead influenced by it to some degree and are negotiating their alternative mode of expression within the system.

I characterise the standards by which my respondents are judging tattoos based on the supposition that they are treading a fine line between masculine and feminine forms of expressing sexuality. Among sexual minority people it is especially true of lesbian (and bisexual) women that they need a new way to see – both themselves and the women that they desire as the stereotypical models available through mainstream society are all male-centred or are based on heteronormative assumptions. And while this notion has been challenged on numerous occasions by later theorists (e.g. Monique Wittig) the dominant mode of thinking and talking about lesbian sexuality remains in the realm of heterosexual modes of expression – especially in popular culture and the media.

When I asked my respondents what kind of stereotypical lesbian representations they can think of most of them claimed that the most wide-spread stereotype they know about is that one of the women always takes the man's role in a lesbian relationship – thus, the most well-spread stereotype, according to my respondents, is understanding same-sex relationships in a heteronormative frame.

> Bianka: oh the best question is: which of you is the guy? Well but I tell them, it doesn't work like that. It goes back and forth, she's a girl and I'm a girl too. And then they say but one if them is stronger. But I say no. (Bianka, interview)

Furthermore, when I asked about the kind of self-representations they can think of the first two that came to their minds was either masculine/feminine or butch/femme. While some of them did acknowledge the fact that quite a few new 'categories' had been invented they made fun of it, saying that having so many available types was stupid (Anita, interview), implying that she preferred the binary butch/femme distinction. Although she did reveal that she understood these two types in degrees as she claimed that if a femme lesbian "looks too much like a heterosexual woman I don't like that" (Anita, interview). Thus it seems that some of these heteronormative assumptions had been internalized by some of my respondents.

While women being attracted to and in love with other women is not unique to the early 20th century – the most obvious and well-known counter example being Sappho – the creation of the identity category itself is. Most famous sexologists between the 1890s and 1920s, such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Auguste Forel, Havelock Ellis, and Sigmund Freud to name but a few, wrote on the topic with varying depth and insight but they all shared the heteronormative theoretical starting point that the state of being sexually attracted to women must by definition be a masculine characteristic. In fact, homosexuality at the time was understood to be the result of an inversion of what was understood to be the typical sexual characteristics of men and women. In Krafft-Ebing's words, a gay man's or a lesbian woman's "feeling, thought, will, and the whole character, in cases of the complete development of the anomaly, correspond with the peculiar sexual instinct, but not with the sex which the individual represents anatomically and physiologically" (Krafft-Ebing, 1893:222). Following Krafft-Ebing's lead, Forel also talks about sexual inversion, explicitly stating that lesbians are thought to feel as if they were men: "the

feminine invert likes to dress as a man and feels like a man toward other women" (Forel, 1908:251). With such a uniform medical discourse – that was gaining its ever-increasing authority at the time – readily available at the turn of the century, it is not quite surprising that in contemporary mainstream society the ghost of this notion still lingers in the form of dominant stereotypical assumptions.

In this chapter I argue that the women in the Facebook group I am studying attempt to challenge both hegemonic beauty myths and mainstream assumptions about lesbian experiences which define and limit their self-expression through using the act of tattooing as a recurring motif both in the pictures they post and their own lives as well. My argument is that they are turning to tattooing due to its subversive potential to come up with new ways women can express themselves and their experiences (Craighead, 2011:43; Patterson and Schroeder, 2010:256) but they simultaneously negotiate playing with and rejecting allegedly masculine and feminine forms of expression (Patterson and Schroeder, 2010:260; Atkinson, 2002); as well as challenging or adhering to body projects expected of women (Pitts,2003) due to the very fact that tattooing is traditionally understood as a deeply gendered domain (Craighead, 2011; Atkinson 2002) – a domain they are simultaneously attempting to exploit and subvert.

As Clare Craighead argues, "the tattooed female body can become a site for challenging existing codes of conventional femininity" (Craighead, 2011:44), which might be important for women of all sexual orientations for a number of reasons. One obvious reason might be that they simply find conventional femininity restrictive or incompatible with their personalities but for non-heterosexual women it might also be an important factor that some of them may wish to discourage men from approaching them. Having large tattoos with a design that is typically considered unfeminine has a promising potential for subversion as (heterosexual) women are

generally “expected to opt for relatively small and discrete tattoos that represent femininity, like flowers, butterflies and fairies” (as qtd. in Craighead, 2011: 44). Compared to these expectations it is quite telling that many of the group members have either large tattoos or designs that fall outside the spectrum of what is traditionally understood as 'feminine' (see Images 3-6 below).

However, subversion is an elusive concept that needs some explanation. I found Chris Brickell's essay on subversion (2005), which draws on Butler and Goffman, the most insightful for my purposes. According to Brickell's reading of Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993), subversion “is related, although not necessarily reducible, to a range of other effects, such as parody, displacement, and resignification” (Brickell, 2005:33). As Brickell points out, there is considerable space to play with the concept of subversion as defined by Butler because her conceptualization lacks an explicit relationship between subversion and the above mentioned effects, leading Brickell to question whether parody, displacement, and resignification are the cause of, the effect of, or the means to subversion (Brickell, 2005:34). He also argues that in *Bodies that Matter* Butler allows for some form of agency when she claims that subversion has to do with “working the weaknesses in the norms” (as qtd. in Brickell, 2005:34). He draws on Goffman's concept of “the socially situated, reflexive self” (Brickell, 2005:35) and claims that subversion would necessarily require “negotiation or contestation over definitions of the situation” (Brickell, 2005:35). My primary interest in this MA thesis is this negotiation work that I argue my respondents are deeply invested in through the clash in their tattoo collecting practices and their adherence to the normative regimes of body hair removal and body shape expectations.

3.3. Tattooing as a form of expressing inner values and personality characteristics

Much of the research on tattoo collecting practices sees the act of choosing a pattern and getting a tattoo as a form of expressing and/or strengthening one's identity components in a visible manner despite the large-scale stigmatization of the practice (Atkinson 2004; Fisher, 2002:103; Patterson and Schroeder, 2010:254). Fisher argues that part of the reason why the social stigma has not completely waned yet is because signifying one's identity components via tattooing (with the exception of temporary tattoos) is largely considered a permanent marker which is not supported by the ideology of the capitalist system which depends on continuous change (Fisher, 2002: 102). In this sense, permanent marks of one's sexual identity can be understood as a double threat to normative Western ideologies of the body.

Regarding body modification practices I follow Victoria Pitts' model and take a post-essentialist approach to the body which asserts that "any notion of an essentialist character to the body or the subject is replaced by a sense that both are culturally shaped and socially ordered [… rejecting] the notion that there is an 'essential', proper, ideal body" (Pitts, 2003:26,28). Instead, contemporary Western culture understands the body as an "expression of an individual personality" (Pitts, 2003:31) that can be understood as and through narratives (Pitts,2003:31, Oksanen and Turtianinen, 2005:112). It is because of this point, that I disagree with Pitts assertion based on Bryan S. Turner's work on the body that contemporary tattoos "are not socially 'functional'" (Pitts, 2003:33). She argues that this is so because compared to traditional tribal body modification practices contemporary tattoos are "more superficial, consumerist, playful, and Dionysian" (Pitts, 2003:31). While I do agree with playful and Dionysian, I reject the notion that today's tattoos could be broadly characterised as socially afunctional and superficial. In fact, as the following analysis will show, I argue the tattoos of my respondents are often imbued with a deep psychological and/or emotional depth comparable to traditional tribal meanings. That the

social function of tattoos have significantly changed is indisputable; however, I would argue that the shift from serving social cohesion and social hierarchy (Pitts, 2003:30) to serving the expression of the individual does not render it socially afunctional.

Yet despite the importance of the individual in my argument, I also heed Pitts' warning not to uncritically accept notions of agency that imply that body modifiers are in possession of socially uninfluenced tools of self-expression (Pitts, 2003:34). Many of my respondents who consider body modification, and specifically tattooing, as a form of self-expression implicitly adhere to this notion as well. However, to what extent they understand the social constructedness of this resistance to normative values varies across a number of factors such as age and level of education.

3.4. Tattoos that express (inner) power

When reviewing the literature on why people choose to get tattooed, Wohlrab et al. (2007) distinguished between ten different motives people usually have for getting tattoos of which four are relevant to my respondents: individuality, personal narrative, resistance, and spirituality (Wohlrab, 2007:89). Wohlrab et al. also explicitly claimed that tattoos have been historically used to "signal […] strength" (Wohlrab et al., 2007:87) which is the most commonly recurring motif in my respondents' tattoo narratives. In relation to strength or power I briefly highlighted in subchapter 4.1. that Hawkes et al. (2004) marked two contradictory interpretations of their finding as an important potential research site in understanding tattooing motives which I take as the basis of my analysis. They claimed that women with tattoos are perceived as powerful across all variables in their study which might be interpreted as positive and negative assessment as

well, depending on the cultural norms regarding women in which the assessment is embedded (Hawkes et al., 2004:602). In terms of subversion this would mean that if the powerfulness of tattooed women is understood as negative in the dominant, hegemonic culture, then my respondents' are subverting this dominant image by resignifying it as positive. Seeing that a significant majority of my respondents who have tattoos have at least one tattoo (but occasionally more) that either depict traditional power motifs or alternative motives which they themselves interpret as alternative strength motifs; I would argue that this specific community – if not lesbian communities in general – not only values women's inner strength/power but specifically defines itself in terms of this subverted image. However, quite significantly, their valuation of inner strength comes without any direct reference to femininity unlike many women described in Atkinson's 2002 study (Atkinson, 2002:233).

My respondents' value of inner strength fits into my argument about the subversive potential in women's tattooing because if I understand resignification as a means of subversion (Brickell, 2005) and understand subversion as "the ability to gradually infiltrate hegemonic ways of thinking and to work from within to reform unjust social practices" (Kaag, 2005:48) then my respondents are in the process of resignifying power motifs as androgynous rather than necessarily masculine which would also account for the lack of explicit references to femininity. However, Brickell warns that those "attempting to subvert through parody or resignification may find themselves subject to a 'frame trap' [because of which] repetitions of dominant symbolisms are likely to be interpreted in ways that are congruent with dominant social arrangements" (Brickell, 2005:35-36). This basically means that while my respondents attempt to resignify hegemonic gendered interpretations of power in order to be able to express their experiences as women in a way that differs from the prescribed 'feminine' expectations, they may fall into the

trap of being interpreted as masculine because of the force the dominant interpretations carry with themselves. I would say that my respondents' attempted subversion of certain norms and the internalization of others is a symptom of this struggle for (re)interpretation and their rejection of excessive physical strength (particularly if it is visible in the form of muscular bodies) will complicate how this group of women understand different types of power.

The tattoos in Images 1-5 are all understood by their owners as symbols of inner strength either in the sense that they represent the owner's already existing inner strength or they are used much the same way as ancient cultures or tribes used tattoos in a ritualistic fashion whereby the act of getting the tattoo was understood as the owner's acquisition of additional strength or power to overcome difficulties (Wohlrab et al.,2007).

Image 1: Phoenix tattoo as a symbol of rebirth (personal photo posted on Facebook group)

The phoenix in Image 1 was, for instance, the first tattoo of Ivett, who claimed that she got it when her parents were divorcing to remind her that the collapse of her parents' marriage was "not the end of the world […] and the end of one thing is always the beginning of something new" (Ivett, Skype-interview). When I asked her, she said she had gotten the tattoo because she needed strength at that point in her life. In other words, the tattoo simultaneously represents its owner's attempt to manage emotional pain or stress which is a common motive for getting a tattoo (Atkinson, 2004:137; Wohlrab et al., 2007:88; Fisher, 2002:100) while also employing the tribal ritual of inscribing a source of power on her skin.

In a similar vein, her second tattoo (see Image 2) symbolizes the power of nature, family and belonging which falls neatly into the category of "emotional accounts of social life" (Atkinson, 2004:136). It is interesting that her choice of imagery as well as her explanations are distinct from every one of my other respondents in terms of the nature of power or strength that they desired to depict. Hers is the only set of tattoos that deliberately lack any kind of confrontational element in the sense that her power symbols lack even the potential to harm others or respond to harm in a violent way. She emphasizes the rebirth ability of the phoenix and if one takes a close look, the beak and nails of the phoenix – the only parts which could potentially cause pain – are the least emphasized as opposed to the soft tail feathers which take up a disproportionately large space. Yet this image could hardly be called a soft 'feminine' image which would traditionally be expected of women as the design of the wing feathers employs harder lines and pointed endings giving it a more androgynous look. Her explanation for using an animal that could potentially harm is "the fact that something can destroy doesn't necessarily mean that they will do it" (Ivett, Skype-interview) which is in line with the visual duality of the tattoo: there is power in it but also restraint. In a sense, this tattoo narrative holds more subversive

potential than the rest because the negotiation and resignification process described by Brickell (2005) is more explicit in it: instead of taking the dominant image wholesale and flipping it upside down, there is a combination of stereotypically masculine and feminine traits in it.

Image 2: Tree tattoo as a symbol of natural strength and belonging (personal photo sent via Skype)

As opposed to these images, the other three tattoos that symbolize power or strength have explicit references to violence on multiple levels (see Images 3-5). First, on a visual level, Images 3, 4 and 5 all depict dragons or demons with oversized claws or teeth, emphasizing the physical power of these non-human creatures, even though the symbolic meaning for the owner is centred on inner strength in all three cases. Second, the tattoos in Images 4 and 5 depict violence on a symbolic level as well as the narratives reveal violent stories behind the image.

Furthermore, these tattoos clearly go against normative expectations as they are neither small and discrete nor are they traditionally feminine, much like Craighead's own dragon/bat wings (Craighead, 2011: 46). As Oksanen and Turtianinen (2005) suggested, tattoo narratives

might be useful points of reference when attempting to understand the intentions of the owner. The meaning they attach to it may be significantly different from how other people perceive and decode them, making their body "a battleground of contradictory meanings" (Oksanen and Turtiainen, 2005:112) which is a familiar ground for women whether they have tattoos or not.

Image 3: Shoulder tattoo of a dragon (personal photo sent via Facebook)

Image 4: Thigh tattoo of dragon and Erzsébet Báthory (personal photo)

According to the interviewee the dragon in Image 3 symbolizes power, a traditionally masculine symbol, which is in harmony with the interviewee's choices of clothing which also fall into the stereotypically masculine domain and her choice of sport which is football. The Chinese symbol next to the dragon in Image 3 is said to be the symbol of love and represents for the owner her ability to love which makes for an interesting visual duality of violence and emotion – a duality the respondent expressed in the interview as well. She claimed to love very passionately and the majority of her vocabulary was quite excessive, using words such as 'for ever', and being 'strong' for the partner, or the need to give 'everything'. This narrative seems to reveal less subversion and more internalization of dominant modes of expressing experiences.

As opposed to this, the dragon tattoo in Image 4 is somewhat different. While it also symbolizes power in an abstract sense that tattoo has a more subtle meaning as the dragon rests on the family crest – which has three dragon teeth in it – of an ancient Hungarian aristocratic family, the Báthory's. Erzsébet Báthory, in whose honour the tattoo was made according to the inscription, despite her gruesome legend of having killed some 650 peasant virgins in order to bathe in their blood to stay young and beautiful, may be understood as having positive connotations as an empowering figure and may represent an alternative to conventional femininity. She is remembered by enthusiasts as a strong-willed, independent woman, one of the most powerful aristocrats in 16th-century Hungary, who successfully managed the family estate while her husband lead the campaign against the Turkish invasion, refused to remarry after her husband's death, and despite being a devout protestant practised alternative medicine because of which she was charged with the crime of witchcraft when her show trial commenced (for a thorough analysis of the case in Hungarian, see Lengyel and Várkonyi, 2010).

It is also of some importance that both later quasi-scientific material (starting from the 19th century) as well as fictional adaptations of the legend have added an explicitly lesbian content and sexualized the alleged ritualistic sacrifice of girls, turning it into a game of seduction (cf. the 2004 Canadian movie *Eternal*). And while the sexualization of murders is problematic for a number of reasons Erzsébet Báthory may serve as an important subcultural icon representing an image of dominant, powerful female sexuality. This subversive potential in this meaning is obvious both with and without the alleged lesbian subtext as the former is a contradiction to the dominant feminine model Connell termed "emphasized femininity" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005:831) favoured in patriarchal societies because of its compliant nature (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005:848) while the latter is a modified challenge to supposedly passive, 'feminine' sexuality (cf. sub-chapter 4.2.). However, the subversive nature of this challenge is complicated by the fact that the sexually aggressive image of Erzsébet Báthory fits into the traditional imagery of demonized subversive female sexuality which is epitomized in societies with strong Judeo-Christian roots in the figures of Lilith – Adam's first wife – and succubi – female sex demons in Christian mythology (Guiley, 2009).

A third trend among the tattoo collecting respondents is the depiction of demons either visually (see Image 5) or textually (see Image 6). Both respondents explicitly claimed that that the tattoo signifies the 'demons within'. However, their interpretations are significantly different as Patrícia claimed that they had the image of a monster peeking out from behind their skin tattooed on their rib cage because "there is evil inside everyone, including me […] like jealousy and greed, we just have to know how to control it" (Patrícia, interview). Having a monster tattooed below your heart to remind you of the fact that there is jealousy and greed inside of you again is not representative of conventional femininity as the archetypal image of woman is

always presented as purity made flesh. Patrícia's tattoo represents the need to control the demons which they identified as negative human emotions whereas for Eszter it represents that she is also a fallible human being who can make mistakes. I see these demon tattoos as belonging in the power-tattoo category because both respondents associated them with either the power necessary to overcome these demons or the liberatory power of being allowed human fallacy. Both of these interpretations are important as the former may provide a link to subversive feminine images (such as Erzsébet Báthory mentioned previously or mythic creatures like succubi or Lilith) while the latter is reflective of influential feminine ideals, for instance, from late 19th- and early 20th-century Anglo-Saxon cultures – which arguably had and still have a great impact on much of contemporary Western culture – according to which women, particularly from the middle-class, were expected to conform to a rigidly perfect feminine ideal epitomized (and quite possibly immortalized) in Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the House" (1862). Interestingly enough, Virginia Woolf called this angel a phantom (which in a sense is related to demons) in 1931, describing it as something that needs to be killed (Woolf, 2014) which can be argued to be an aggressive form of control. Thus, this image combines notions (stereo)typically attributed to women in the past, such as perfection and inner demons, and traditionally masculine ways of dealing with issues such as aggression and control – resulting in a potentially androgynous mode of self-expression that again has the potential to subvert binaries that still hold great currency in Western societies.

Image 5: Tattoo on rib-cage representing 'the evil within' (personal photo sent via Facebook)

Patrícia's demon tattoo, however, fits into another trend. As Images 5 and 7 show, there is another trend, similar to what Craighead terms 'monstrous' (Craighead, 2011: 46), of having tattoos made that on a metaphorical level imply that the human body is infused with something non-human, a permanent visual mark of the idea of the post-human (cf. Balsamo, 1996). The owner of the tattoo in Image 7 intended it to be "simple and raw, like me" (Dóri, 24, interview). Oaksanen and Turtiainen suggest that sometimes the very placement of the tattoo becomes important (Oaksanen and Turtiainen, 2005:114) which is the case with Dóri's tattoo placement (left calf) as well. It became a significant element in her tattoo narrative when she told me that it is in connection with her disability and she put the tattoo deliberately on her left leg because she absolutely feels nothing in that leg and claimed that she "put life into [her] leg by getting the tattoo" (Dóri, 24, interview). Post-human theories of cyborgs would understand this tattoo as a manifestation of subverting the binary between natural human and artificiality (Balsamo, 1996:33). When I asked further questions about why she chose the metal infused with human flesh motif she revealed that

she literally has metal in her left thigh bone so she considers the tattoo a "continuation of it" (Dóri, 24, interview) as if she had a robotic leg, making the tattoo a part of herself (Patterson and Schroeder, 2010:255).

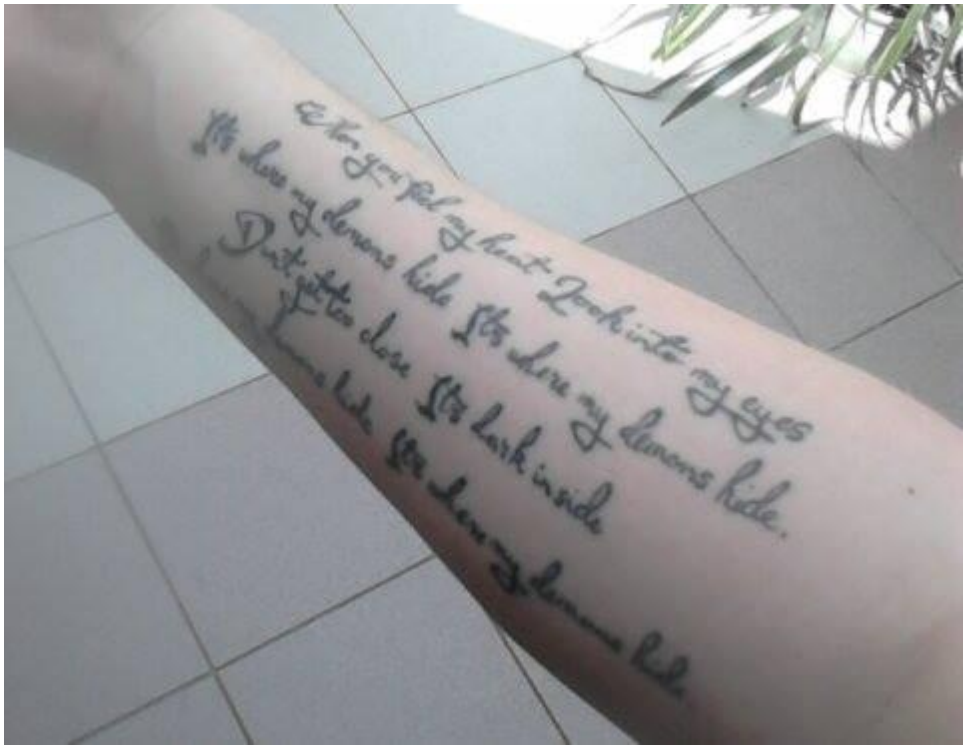

Image 6: Lyrics on arm about demons (personal photo sent via Facebook)

However, she also pointed out that this is a powerful image for her represents the desire to accept her disability, which is further enhanced by the fact that her birth date is inscribed on the robotic leg implying that the 'robotic parts' have always been a part of her body thus naturalizing it. I would argue that with this argument Dóri actually rejected the notion of constructedness afforded by cyborgs (Balsamo, 1996:33-34). Instead, Dóri said she feels that this tattoo represents her acceptance of her physical condition which required a great amount of inner strength. Thus, in this way Dóri's tattoo, while traditionally understood as masculine in its size and visible content, is more similar to Ivett's tattoos (Images 1-2) on a metaphorical level.

Image 7: Calf tattoo of a bio-mechanical leg (personal photo sent via Facebook)

Finally, this dilemma of representing female experiences in ways that are not stereotypically (hetero-) feminine (Charles, 2010) is turned into motion picture in a Ruby Rose video entitled *Break Free* (2014)[2] that was posted in the group. The creator claims in the description that the video is about "gender roles, Trans, and what it is like to have an identity that deviates from the status quo" (Rose, 2014), and while transgender identities seem to have a predominant role in it, I would argue that they also represent gender role issues for lesbian women. Furthermore, some of my respondents have explicitly singled her out as objects of desire when I asked them to provide descriptions of women they are attracted to. Based on Reina Lewis' theory of the lesbian gaze, which claims that gaze is multi-faceted and that the object of the lesbian gaze is either desirable because they find the object aesthetically pleasing or because they identify with it – or sometimes

2 The original video unfortunately had been deleted but an exact copy can be found on the following link, with the exception that the description quoted above is no longer written down for undisclosed reasons: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkRs3qTx06M

both simultaneously (Lewis, 1997:95), the Ruby Rose video becomes an even more exemplary image of alternative self-expression.

The opening scene of the video shows a woman sporting much of the characteristics expected by the stereotypical beauty ideal: long blond hair, large blue eyes, make up, polished nails, a low cut dress revealing the woman's chest and high heels. But within two minutes all of the make-up is washed away revealing a heavily tattooed body. It is also important that the act of washing off the make-up shown to be a long process that needs vigorous scrubbing, which symbolizes not only the fact that women's bodies had been covered up with many layers of cultural expectations – in this case literally represented by the make-up, the bra and the dress – but also that both its application as well as its removal require hard work. This, on the one hand, challenges the alleged naturalness of the feminine ideal (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003:339), and on the other hand, sheds light on the constructedness and performative nature of our gender and self-expression (Butler, 1990, 1993). In other words, once the make-up is washed away and all of the other objects which are used to artificially enhance the female body, like the fake eyelashes are taken off, the body reveals a visual manifestation of alternative practices which have the "potential to resist accepted normative standards within commodity cultures" (Craighead, 2011:44). Furthermore, as men are said to find women more attractive with make-up (Guéguen, 2013) it might also challenge heterosexual notions of attractiveness.

Of course one should not forget the fact that this potential is limited as all practices that somehow alter the supposedly 'natural' state of the body are artificial; and while they have the potential to subvert hegemonic practices (Craighead, 2011:44), they also have the potential to become the new norm. Thus, the most one might expect from such practices is the opportunity to

change and combine them in whatever fashion one desires without the external pressure of having to conform to a certain rigid set of expectations.

All in all, this chapter discussed how my respondents used the practice of tattooing to challenge traditional (heterosexual) norms of femininity. Most importantly, they deemed tattooing as the most acceptable form of body modification – although I am not quite sure whether they understand more culturally accepted and thus naturalized forms such as hair cutting as body modification – and they used it to challenge conventional depictions of women as 'the weaker sex'. They did so though the use of visually depicting various types of emotional strength, representing its broad spectrum women are capable of. And by doing so, they have subverted the traditional 'masculine' and 'feminine' ways of self-expression, creating a symbolically androgynous mode of self-presentation for themselves.

Chapter 4: The (social) norms that bind

As I argued in Chapter 4 many of my respondents challenge the conventional (heterosexual) norms of femininity in a twofold way: first, the very act of indulging in what is deemed excessive tattoo collecting (especially for women) challenges socially accepted body modification practices; and second, by imprinting the visible marks and symbols of their inner strength on their skin for all to see they challenge the myth of allegedly normal (heterosexual) femininity which has historically been based on passivity and weakness (Forel, 1908; Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003; Patterson and Schroeder, 2010). However, in the largely binary thinking of our world if one thoroughly challenges feminine norms, society is quick to label them masculine as the only alternative they know – which is something many of my respondents also visibly challenge by not conforming completely to either (masculine or feminine) extreme of the continuum, taking place instead somewhere in the middle, carving out a symbolically androgynous path for themselves. This forces women to simultaneously police how they see themselves and how they are seen in terms of both 'feminine' and 'masculine' characteristics which results in a complex web of internalized and subverted gender role norms.

However, lesbian women have a case significantly more complex than merely subverting patriarchal notions of femininity and beauty (Atkinson, 2002) – they must also subvert the way sexuality and desire for women can be talked about, which, in a heteronormative male-centric society is only accepted from a male point of view as described sub-chapter 4.2. It is this assumed masculine aspect of active sexuality that lesbians need to challenge and subvert in order to create an authentic way of expressing both what it means to be a lesbian and what kind of women they find desirable. But in addition to avoiding being labelled masculine many also attempt to avoid

being read as heterosexual which would bring them yet another kind of unwanted contact with men. As Monique Witting so eloquently put it in “The Straight Mind" (1980), “lesbians are not women” (Wittig, 1992:32) because woman is defined in relation to man whereas lesbians are not (Wittig, 1992:32) – or rather, in would not be if there were authentic alternatives. Yet these authentic alternatives must either be created from scratch which is not an easy process or from the synthesis of available discourses. As Sarah Riley, a pro-tattoo theorist, pointed out: “people can only make sense of themselves through the discourses that are available in our society, but there are always competing accounts, and while dominant discourses tend to serve the interests of the relatively powerful, their existence produces the points of resistance” (Riley, 2002:542). My suggestion is that for lesbian women, the available discourses are those that are disseminated by the media: the heteronormative discourse of masculine beings desiring feminine beings (and vice versa) and the post-feminist discourses on women's supposed complete emancipation (McRobbie, 2004:255).

One way of creating a new mode of expression is that, while challenging certain aesthetic aspects of 'femininity' as they understand it, they rigidly conform to others such as body hair removal, body shape maintaining regimes – which, (co)incidentally, are also forms of body modification – and policing acceptable levels of alcohol consumption. The first two are relevant because they were the most frequently recurring themes I detected during my observation of the group members' posting trends, while alcohol consumption is important because it is not only a moderately recurring theme but, more importantly, there is a circulating stereotype about heavily tattooed women that they must be heavy drinkers as well (Swami and Furnham, 2007); thus, I understand the group members' ambiguous opinion about alcohol consumption as a symptom of the tension area between being strong independent women who can do as they like and rejecting

the stigma associated with tattooing. In this chapter I will discuss each of these three norms and how my respondents apply them to themselves.

4.1. Body hair removal practices

The literature on body hair and body hair removal practices all agree on the fact that the lack of body hair has become a strongly enforced norm in Western societies for women (Fahs, 2011:453; Riddell et al., 2010:122; Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003:333) although they disagree on the birth of this norm, dating it either around the interwar years (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003:333; Fahs, 2011:453) or post-1960s (Riddell et al., 2010:122). Furthermore, they also seem to agree on the widespread stereotype that both men and (heterosexual) women seem to assume that women with body hair are feminists and/or lesbians (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003:338; Fahs, 2011:452) which will be of importance in my study not only because of the obvious reason that most of my respondents self-identify as lesbians but also because they vehemently protested against this stereotype.

Toerien and Wilkinson (2003) argue that the ideological motive behind creating and enforcing the norm of female hairlessness is the symbolic reinforcement of women's subordination to men by appearing “less than adult” (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003:337) and that one of the strongest arguments with which to persuade women to conform is claiming that it is unhygienic (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003:338; Riddell et al., 2010:128). Explicit references to both can be found for example in Desmond Morris' often quoted book *The Naked Woman* (2005). He writes “throughout their childhood girls enjoy the simplicity of having virtually hairless bodies [which is ruined by puberty because they perceive hair as] 'animalistic' or 'masculine'”

(Morris, 2004:192) and that the removal of pubic hair is preferable because "today, with tight clothing enclosing the pubic region, it is all too easy for a lack of hygiene to lead to a bacterial decay" (Morris, 2004:194). The word animalistic should also be noted because that comes up both in the reactions of my respondents as well as elsewhere in the literature (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003:334).

I found it quite interesting that smoothness, animalistic connotations, and uncleanliness appear frequently in the literature because these are precisely the arguments the overwhelming majority of my respondents have given to justify body hair removal, which would imply that they have bought the normative myth wholesale; however, there are slight changes in their responses as compared to those mentioned in other studies that suggest otherwise. In this sub-chapter, I argue that the women in my study reject one binary labelling – masculinity/femininity – and trade it for two others – cleanliness/dirtiness and human/non-human – in an effort to further blur the boundaries between the two genders and create an androgynous mode of self-presentation that is neither stereotypically 'masculine' nor 'feminine' and which also deviates from heterosexual expectations voiced in the literature.

I posted in the Facebook group a picture of a woman with underarm hair dyed blue in order to provoke reactions from them to which a great number of group members responded vehemently. Interestingly some of my respondents have used either smoothness or animalistic connotations in their responses while some have combined the two:

> Bea: she shouldn't be hairy anywhere
>
> Fanni: we like fresh peaches, I wouldn't want to 'caress' a kitten...
>
> Ági: Dogs are the only hairy things I like to pet (Bea, Fanni, Ági, Facebook comment)

While none of the respondents linked the lack of hair with femaleness or femininity (and there was only one vague reference to men being hairy that I will discuss later) most of them did answer the question (whether they would mind hairy legs or armpits) with at least partial reference to the genital area despite the fact that neither the question nor the visual input mentioned it. Fanni's form of expression is especially interesting in this context as 'fresh peaches' is a commonly used colloquial expression in Hungarian that refers to a shaved vagina. What I find especially interesting in this expression is that the fruit itself is 'hairy' because of which many people wash it before consumption which is not unlike an analogy for shaving one's pubic hair before having sex. I would also point out the fact that the hairless variation of the fruit, called bald peach in Hungarian, is never used as an euphemism for the genital area which would imply that the 'hairy' peach is more convenient as it acknowledges the fact that the naturally existing hair needs to be artificially removed. I emphasize the words naturally and artificially for two reasons: first, because 'fresh peaches' contradicts findings in the literature which suggest that women are expected to "make the state of hairlessness appear 'natural'" (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003:339); and second, because my respondents seem to be making arbitrary choices between which body modifications are acceptable (i.e. naturalized) and which to reject on grounds of making people look artificial (the question of artificiality will be discussed in more detail in sub-chapter 5.2.)

In addition, another particularly curious phenomenon is that none of the respondents replied with their own bodies in mind but rather with the body of a potential partner in mind and what their own feelings would be if they had to touch a hairy body. Curiously even though my respondents reject both (heterosexually) masculine and feminine labels they still react in a way (stereo)typical of mainstream society: more concern is given to the one who has to get in sexual

contact with the hairy body part than the 'owner' of the body part in question (Fahs, 2011:464). Fahs argued that in many of the cases the respondents claimed that "the first comment they received [… was] whether their boyfriends/husbands had approved" (Fahs, 2011:464) or that when people enquired about respondents' body hair was about "how my husband feels" (Fahs, 2011:464). Oddly enough, my respondents seem to have internalized this norm of considering women's hair from the partner's point of view rather than from the point of view of the woman in question, even if that means that they need to take the man's position in the equation. Their taking this position seems to be further reinforced by the fact that none of the respondents commented on their own body hair as if that was already a given fact beyond questioning – which is usually the privileged position of men. Although as the following will show, I would rather argue that my respondents have merely internalized the norm of shaving too much to even consider stopping it themselves.

In line with my alternative is that it seems that for the majority of my respondents body hair is, in fact, not a question of masculinity (or femininity) at all as the literature would suggest (Fahs, 2011:454). Not only do they never associate body hair with masculinity, Patrícia specifically claims that it has become a norm for men to remove body hair as well. Thus my respondents link body hair removal much more to the state of humanity than to masculinity or femininity which I found to be an important difference as compared to previous literature on body hair which claims that "hair plays a role in the division of people into the categories 'women' and 'men'" (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003:335). As I previously suggested, I argue that this implies that my respondents are coming up with a set of androgynous self-presentation norms instead of strictly adhering to either side of the masculine/feminine binary.

This shift away from the masculine/feminine binary is also reinforced by the fact that, as I have mentioned, apart from the animal connotations the most frequently listed reason is cleanliness, thus pushing femininity further down the list of reasons for shaving:

> Evelin: a hairy armpit becomes stinky very fast, and no amount of daub can stop that so down with it [body hair]. My personal opinion is that the best way to do maintenance on the intimate bits is to stylishly shave it (but leave a tiny patch)
>
> Fanni: I even tell my grandma off if her armpit is hairy... because that's a basic thing.... I think these [women] are unkempt (Evelin, Fanni, Facebook comment)

At first glance my respondents are merely reproducing normative social evaluations that women who do not shave are "'dirty' or 'gross'" (as qtd. in Fahs, 2011:454) but Fanni's remark is somewhat different from a linguistic point of view. She not only claimed that those women are dirty but even refused to use a personal pronoun for women she finds unclean, using instead a demonstrative that is applied to animals or objects[3] which links cleanliness and animalistic connotations in her reasoning. However, another difference between mainstream discourses on body hair – which often implies complete body hair removal, although some of the literature discusses partial removal – comes up in Evelin's response who claims that a tiny patch should be left. If one follows the psychoanalytic reasoning found in the literature that the state of hairlessness is linked with passivity and lack of power or dominance (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003:338) then Evelin's suggestion to keep some of the hair signifies a rebellion against the prescribed attribute of powerlessness which is in agreement with what I argued in Chapter 4.

Furthermore, to make yet another connection between tattoos and body hair, it is curious that my respondents are so quick to compare women to animals in a pejorative sense due to their

3 While in Hungarian it is quite common to use both the singular and the plural demonstratives „ez(ek)" and „az(ok)" for people it generally has a pejorative connotation and people tend to be offended if someone uses these words to refer to them.

body hair, making them somewhat monstrous, when some of them were quite comfortable tattooing monsters and other human-non-human combinations on their bodies. And while none of my tattooed respondents explicitly used animal metaphors they did not contest this link either which can be understood as silent agreement. Fahs and Delgado suggest that ideas about body hair are dangerous because "women adopt ideas about idealized femininity without considering the ramifications of those ideologies and accompanying practices" (as qtd. in Fahs 454). A major paradox, however, is that one reason why this particular norm is so strong in mainstream society is because having body hair is associated with the heteronormative fear of either being labelled a feminist or a lesbian (Fahs, 2011:452; Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003:338) which prompts the question: why would my respondents who self-identify as lesbian want to dis-identify with body modification practices that are assumed to signify non-heterosexuality? One possible explanation might be the internalized pressure coming from the majority society to "pass as heterosexual to escape workplace discrimination, violence and negative judgements" (Fahs, 2011:452). However, I would challenge this suggestion because my respondents did not exhibit signs of such internalization and, in fact, felt quite scandalized by the suggestion that lesbians are assumed to be hairy:

> Patrícia: Oh gosh, what complete stupidity
>
> Kinga: Well that's like saying that if someone is a lesbian they must look like dudes...? And even act like them? Pff... I don't even understand
>
> Klári: What a connection... [grinning emoticon] it must be supported by serious statistics (Patrícia, Kinga, Klári, Facebook comment)

The one exception to the pattern in my respondents reactions to body hair is Kinga's remark about lesbians and men. Her seeming link between hairiness and being men is the only instance of my respondents mentioning men even remotely related to being hairy. However, I do not consider

this link to be substantial counter-evidence to my argument because she did not explicitly link body hair with masculinity but instead connected both masculinity and hair with being a lesbian separately. I understand this rather as an exasperated exclamation; and her bringing the connection between lesbianism and masculinity – which is assumed by my respondents to be the most widely spread stereotype about lesbians (cf. sub-chapter 4.2.) – into the conversation about hair is more like a form of resistance to mainstream stereotypes about lesbians than any substantial connection between hair, lesbianism and masculinity. In conjunction with this, Klári's statement implies that there are most likely just as many (or rather just as few) hairy women among lesbians as among heterosexual women which challenges the majority society's assumption about the connection between body hair retention and sexual orientation (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003).

To go back to the heteronormative pressure of passing as straight, while it might have explained body hair removal practices, it would have further complicated the dilemma: why would my respondents reject body hair on these grounds but not tattoos? Turning back to Fahs' claim, the other option is that they might fear being labelled a feminist. Based on previous studies, Fahs argues that heterosexual women fear being labelled a feminist because mainstream media "promotes images of feminists as frightening, unkempt, unfeminine, and 'hateful' of men" (Fahs, 2011:452). While the first three adjectives would apply to sexual minority women just as much as heterosexual women, being hateful of men should not necessarily produce such a strong fear of being labelled such seeing that sexual minority women are not as invested in the interest of men as heterosexual women are. However, another alternative lies in the hands of mainstream media: the promotion of post-feminist discourses that women have been emancipated and as such, there is no need for feminism any more (McRobbie, 2004).

While this seems like a more fruitful interpretation, unfortunately there is no consensus among my respondents regarding the issue of being identified as feminist. When I asked the question 'do you consider yourself a feminist and/or what you think about feminism as a phenomenon' the answers showcased a broad spectrum of opinions regarding feminism:

> Anita: well, feminists are those man-haters who are so loud about women deserving equal rights, right? I think they just have too much time on their hands and they're creating problems for themselves
>
> Dóri: well, before I answer, can you tell me what feminism is exactly, because unfortunately there are some expressions which I am not very knowledgeable about, so I don't really know what this means
>
> Ivett: yes, I consider myself a feminist because I think it is high time that women's equality, which is still patchy, be realized already (Anita, Dóri, Ivett, interview)

This would then mean that neither the heteronormative pressure nor the fear of being identified as feminist theory suggested in the literature bears out completely in the case of my respondents. As a result, I reiterate the suggestion that instead of sticking to already existing models of body hair removal practice justification my respondents are adhering to the norm that body hair needs to be removed but are also in the process of justifying it based on a more androgynous image of humanity rather than based on masculine/feminine ideals.

4.2. Body shape maintaining regimes

In this sub-chapter I want to discuss how my respondents relate to various body shape maintaining or modifying regimes. To be specific, I will discuss their position on a different forms of cosmetic surgery, on body building and conversely, I will also discuss how they dis-identify with the lack of such body modifying practices as well. I argue that they make seemingly

arbitrary choices between which body modification practices to endorse and which to reject based on the socially established illusion of 'naturalness' (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003) because of which it would seem that, unlike in the case of tattooing, they have internalized the normative pressure of body shape ideals.

The literature defines cosmetic surgery as "a subspecialty that is concerned primarily with the maintenance, restoration, or enhancement of an individual's physical appearance through surgical and medical techniques" (Swami et al., 2009:7), which puts cosmetic surgery squarely in the middle of the spectrum of body modification practices. I find it very interesting that my respondents are so unanimously against any form of modification that is understood as surgical – whether that be invasive or not or aesthetic or medical – because they see it as 'fake' while they see tattooing as a form of legitimate body art.

At the beginning of this sub-chapter I claimed that my respondents are making seemingly arbitrary value judgements on which modification practices they consider to be natural and acceptable and which not. For instance, an image that was posted by one of the group members (see Image 8), even though it received some likes, was deemed 'artificial' upon questioning:

> Anita: these girls are ready to burst from the silicon, and their make-up is a bit too drastic too, and the whole thing is completely artificial and they look like transvestites because of this […] I don't fancy common whores like these at all.
>
> Eszter: well this whole picture is completely artificial for me, with the silicon tits and the tattoos seem like they were only made because they look cool which I don't approve of.
>
> Dóri: Well, I can't say much about this picture because I don't like these girls at all and neither the feeling of the picture (Anita, Eszter, Dóri, interview)

It should be noted that the majority of my respondents pointed out silicon breasts, which the literature lists among the most frequent forms of women's body modification (Berer, 2010; Moser, 2011), as artificial and unattractive while tattoos were seen as exactly the opposite despite being just as artificial as any other body modification. One major difference, however, between these modifications is that cosmetic surgery is still largely considered a (heterosexual) feminine domain despite the fact that more and more men choose to surgically modify different body parts (Berer, 2010). However, the suggestion that my respondents are rejecting anything that is stereotypically assumed to be 'hetero-feminine' is problematic because Charles (2010), for example, claims that a part of hetero-femininity is that "within contemporary Western society, [girls] must be suitably thin [...], in order to be considered heterosexually attractive" (Charles, 2010:34). Their seeming rejection of hetero-feminine body modification practices is problematic because this state of thinness as an indicator of sexual attractiveness seems to hold true in the case for my respondents as well; thus, a more nuanced look at exactly what they are rejecting is required.

Image 8: tattooed and otherwise modified women (posted on Facebook by Angelika, 03.02.2015)

Since my respondents pointed out silicone breasts as the most problematic I shall start with the literature on breast implants. There is no clear consensus within the literature on motivation for breast implants (Moser, 2011; Didie et al., 2003). Moser (2011), for instance, suggests that for many women the approval and perceived expectations of significant others is an important motivating factor (Moser, 2011:44) while Didie et al. have come to the conclusion that perceived ideal breast size is more important than general body perceptions (Didie et al., 2003:249). However, an important limitation is that the studies do not take sexual orientation into consideration; thus, for instance we do not receive information on whether the women considering breast implants have male or female partners. However, the study carried out by Didie et al. (2003) contributes valuable insights into the opinion of those women who do not consider having breast implants: the assumption that improving sexual, marital and other personal relationships is a motivating factor for getting breast implants is significantly higher among those

who have not considered breast implants than among those who have (Didie et al., 2009:248). This would suggest that there is a widespread but ungrounded stereotype that women usually get implants to please their significant others (who are usually assumed to be men). My suggestion is that another widespread stereotype, that all heterosexual men prefer larger breasts to smaller ones, which is partially reinforced by statistical data (Swami and Tovée, 2013; Guéguen, 2013), might be one of the reasons behind the rigid rejection of my participants. This also supports my overall argument that my participants are attempting to find ways of self-expression and expression of sexual attraction towards women in a way that is not confined to either the masculine or the feminine. Thus, by rejecting breast-related surgical interventions I argue that they are, in fact, rejecting the expression of (or acknowledgement of) such desire for the female body that is typically read in Western societies as heterosexual (sexist) male desire (Swami and Tovée, 2013:1203).

Yet in contrast with this supposition, the way my respondents speak about the shape of the rest of the female body is interesting because when it comes to thin, shapely bodies they never explicitly express expectations, yet all of the images that they post exhibit current Western ideals (Atkinson, 2002:221; Fahs, 2011; Riddell et al., 2010; Moser, 2011:45). This implies that they have thoroughly internalized the ideal of thin bodies and perceive this ideal as natural and the only way I could indirectly discern much of their expectations was when I confronted them with body shapes that violate these naturalized 'feminine' expectations such as overweight or overly muscular bodies (see Images 9 and 10).

Unlike in the case of tattoos or body hair, some of my respondents have explicitly rejected muscular women on the grounds of being too manly. However, this does not complicate my argument made in Chapter 4 about the expression of strength as all of my respondents with

tattoos have only referred to inner/emotional strength rather than physical. And while this deviation in the previously established pattern seems to undermine the argument about androgynous modes of self-expression, particularly as many people understand women's body building as challenging "the concept of an essentially masculine or essentially feminine body" (Richardson, 2008:291), my suggestion is that this rejection might be a side-effect of the balancing work my respondents are involved in. As I previously argued, my respondents are combining (although not necessarily consciously) stereotypically masculine and feminine characteristics to arrive at an androgynous one and as a result they might perceive (again not necessarily consciously) the combination of traditionally unfeminine tattoos and body building as an overbalance towards the masculine.

Regardless, it must be noted that my respondents have thoroughly rejected the notion that heavily muscled female bodies might be sexually attractive (Richardson, 2008:290):

> Angelika: even if the muscles were more proportionately distributed on her body... not even then... why should we (speaking in only my name of course) we be with women whose bodies even men could be envious of?
>
> Anett: but not worked out in such a stupid way but in a sexy way. So that they're not a walking-talking bundle of muscle but a sexy woman with hot body. Because I think she's a bit disgusting like this...
>
> Ági: She's not feminine, I don't think so either. A woman should be soft, well not like raised pasta, but not like a veiny female terminator either (Angelika, Anett, Ági, Facebook comments)

As Ian described in a somewhat sarcastic tone, women must "shrink [in muscle mass] so that men can continue to claim monopoly on big muscle (and continue to pretend that there's something inherently male about muscle)" (Ian, 2001:73). As the comments testify, my respondents seem to

agree with this alleged inherently male characteristic of physical strength and as a result reject overtly masculine bodies as objects of desire.

Image 9: muscular woman (posted on Facebook group wall by Alexandra 05.04.2015)

It is clear from the responses the picture received that my respondents have a very clear opinion of what is feminine and muscles are most decided not. According to Boyle (2005), this is quite a widespread opinion as in the eyes of most people, "muscularity is invested with the power to metamorphose femininity into masculinity" (Boyle, 2005:138). Thus, unsurprisingly, my respondents are echoing the exact same opinions that body building scholars report to be the stereotypical (and oppressive) norm: that after a certain a certain degree of muscularity there is a negative correlation between muscle mass and perceived femininity (Ian, 2001; Boyle, 2005). However, again, the literature mentions the notion of the monstrous in relation to muscular

bodies (Boyle, 2005:138; Ian, 2001:70). So it would seem that the only type of monstrosity my respondents allow is the metaphorical type that conveys inner strength.

As for women whose body does not match the stereotypical ideal of thinness (Charles, 2010:34) (see Image 10), my respondents were slightly more lenient in their judgements than in the case of muscled women – they mostly complained about the unattractiveness of the chosen underwear and only one respondent directly commented on the women. But the way she expressed her opinion was notably less enthusiastic than during the discussion of thin women.

> Angelika: They really are real women. But what is sexy for whom is not a matter of decision but of personal preferences. We can fight against nature if we want but there's no point to it (Angelika, Facebook comment)

Image 10: non-stereotypically-model type of women ("Valódi nők")

Thus it would seem that although my respondents are coming up with progressive new ways of constructing body images that are less binary in certain respects there are still some norms that hold fast on their imagination.

4.3. Policing alcohol consumption

Another related phenomenon is the aversion some of my respondents expressed in relation to excessive alcohol consumption. As I suggested in the introduction of this chapter, their reaction is not homogeneous which reveals a tension area, as some of my respondents strongly oppose women's excessive drinking while others perceive it as harmless fun. I found it a rather suspicious coincidence that a study recently conducted by Swami and Furnham (2007) found that women with tattoos are perceived by men to be both "more sexually promiscuous and heavier drinkers" (Swami and Furnham, 2007:349) than women without tattoos. Following these results, Guéguen's study (2013) confirmed that there was a higher probability of men approaching tattooed women with sexual intentions (Guéguen, 2013:1522). This is, however, in contrast with the results of previous studies that women with tattoos are also more likely to be considered lesbians (Swami and Furnham, 2007:350; Santos, 2009). There is ample evidence for this paradox both in the literature as well as in the general assumptions of my respondents. In addition to the previously discussed heteronormative assumption that in a same-sex relationship one takes the man's and the other the woman's role (cf. sub-chapter 4.2.) another common myth my respondents have quoted is that men assume they can join lesbians as a third party in a sexual encounter. Upon mentioning pornography, Anita said "because of it, men... every single man... assumes that our greatest desire is to have him as a third" (Anita, interview). Thus it would seem logical on a theoretical level that my respondents would want to disassociate themselves from a tattoo-related images of sexual promiscuity and drinking if both result in men's increasing sexual attention regardless of the women's sexual orientation. However, my respondents have not made

explicit claims to having been associated with heavy drinking on account of their tattoos. The only exception in which case tattooing and alcohol were connected in this group can be seen in Image 12, although it speaks volumes that my respondents only problematized the act of drinking itself rather than the relationship between tattoos and drinking. Therefore, the reasons for their consumption policing attitudes must be found elsewhere.

It seems more likely that my respondents are taking a stance in the debate whether it is appropriate for a woman to drink at all rather than in relation to tattoos. Recent feminist analyses have pointed out the fact that the media has put women's "public drinking and intoxication, in a context of blame, and [...] deems women who drink as 'bad'" (Månsson, 2014:57). Furthermore, recent studies also suggest that the media perceives women who drink excessively in public as "adopting the very worst qualities of 'masculine' behaviour" (Eldridge et al., 2008:324), making alcohol consumption yet another gendered issue (Eldridge et al. 2008; Månsson, 2014). Yet in contrast Månsson (2014) argues that there is an alternative post-feminist discourse on women's drinking that promote "idealistic constructions of femininity that represent women who drink in positive and encouraging ways" (Månsson, 2014:59). The pictures posted by my respondents (see Images 11, 12 and 13) clearly represent both the gendered nature of this debate as well as the tensions regarding the issue within the group. Apart from the fact that the picture provides a positive assessment of women who drink, what is especially noteworthy in Image 11 is that the group members set the ideal of a 'real' woman in contrast not only with the accepted image women as non-drinkers but it is also in contrast with a heterosexual model since the words 'mother' and 'father' clearly bring up the image of a heterosexual couple. However, this image is not only a contradiction of what a woman should be, but also draws on the traditional feminine image of the 'mother' as carer (in this case, the one who cooks) in a classic post-feminist move

(Månsson, 2014:58). This traditional feminine image is reinforced not only through the text accompanying it but also visually since the woman in the image is only preoccupied with cooking despite the fact that drinking is also mentioned, suggesting that even though drinking is permitted her main activity should still be the traditionally feminine one depicting her as the 'housewife' of the 1960s (Törrönen and Juslin, 2011:470). Thus, it might be assumed that some of the group members take a decidedly post-feminist stance in this regard and construct a lesbian image in which drinking is assessed in positive and seemingly gender neutral terms while reinforcing traditional gender norms (Månsson, 2014:58-59).

Image 11: A real woman cooks like her mother but drinks like her father (original post by Rita on Facebook, 12. April 2015)

In contrast with this image (as well as with the one in Image 12), however, is the debate that sprung up between the group members based on the image in Image 12.

> Anna: I'm saddling my horse [… smile emoticon] I don't think we need to take it seriously. The point is that they're not bitches.

> Rita: I agree [with the message of the picture]
>
> Kata: Drinks like a machine...if that's attractive for anyone than they eserve the lady [...] for me an alcoholic or someone who "simply" drinks like a machine is more of a bitch than a refined lady.
>
> Rita: the problem is not with feminine women but with the plaza bitches... those who pretend... and there's more and more of them... and the fashion lesbians etc. (Anna, Rita, Kata, Facebook comments)

Suddenly some of my respondents have connected women's alcohol consumption with women's perceived or real sexual orientation, on the one hand, implicitly severing the link between alcohol consuming feminine women and lesbian sexualities; and with promiscuity on the hand, which resonates with mainstream assumptions about drinking women (Törrönen and Juslin, 2011). In other words, some of my respondents have, in this double move, disassociated drinking, sexual orientation and sexual behaviour from each other; although more so in an exclusive and derogatory way (for certain women) than in an inclusive way that would allow for the positive assessment of all different images. Thus, instead of having some kind of a consensus, my respondents seem to have developed at least three distinct lesbian images which they assess differently: there is the tattooed woman who can drink as much as she wants, the possibly non-tattooed woman who combines her parents assumed traditional traits and drinks amounts comparable to a man, and third, the ideal of the 'lady' (with or without tattoos) was also created who conforms to the stereotypical non-drinker image.

When I asked my interviewees what they thought about men who habitually consume large amounts of alcohol the reactions were similarly mixed. Dóri said that she thinks "a man should also be able to keep their limits" (Dóri, 24, interview) whereas Evelin was of the opinion that it is much more acceptable for a man to drink and be seen drunk than it is for a woman. Thus,

many of my respondents are eliminating the gendered aspect of the question, much the same way as they eliminated it regarding body hair removal practices (cf. sub-chapter 5.1). As a result, I would say that while there is no consensus among my respondents with regard to the positive or negative image of alcohol consumption, many of them are reinforcing their move towards the creation of an androgynous self-expression mode with their opinion on alcohol consumption as well.

But to turn back to one of the ideals created by the group, with regard to the tattooed drinking woman image, the (mis)translation of the originally English meme is of some importance (for the Hungarian version see Image 13 for the English version see Image 14). Whereas the English versions claims that the portrayed woman can drink, the Hungarian versions merely says that they drink, eliminating the modal verb that would convey the possibility of a choice rather than a compulsive act. Clearly the Hungarian image plays more on the stereotype prevalent in mainstream society that tattooed women are "more likely to consume large amounts of alcohol" (Swami et. al., 2007:345) whereas the original only offers a challenge to the stereotype that women are lightweights.

Image 12: Connection between alcohol consumption and tattooed women (original post by Rita on Facebook on 9. April 2015)

Furthermore, it is interesting that once the two versions are contrasted with each other, the English version can be more readily interpreted as heterosexual due to the fact that the woman is portrayed with a man (who happens to be staring at the woman's chest, reinforcing the previously quoted assumptions) and she is wearing stilettos instead of flat shoes like in the Hungarian version. This would mean that the poster, although she might not necessarily have been aware of this stereotype, had reinforced the assumptions discussed in Swami and Furnham (2007) about tattooed women being perceived as promiscuous drinkers and lesbians at the same time.

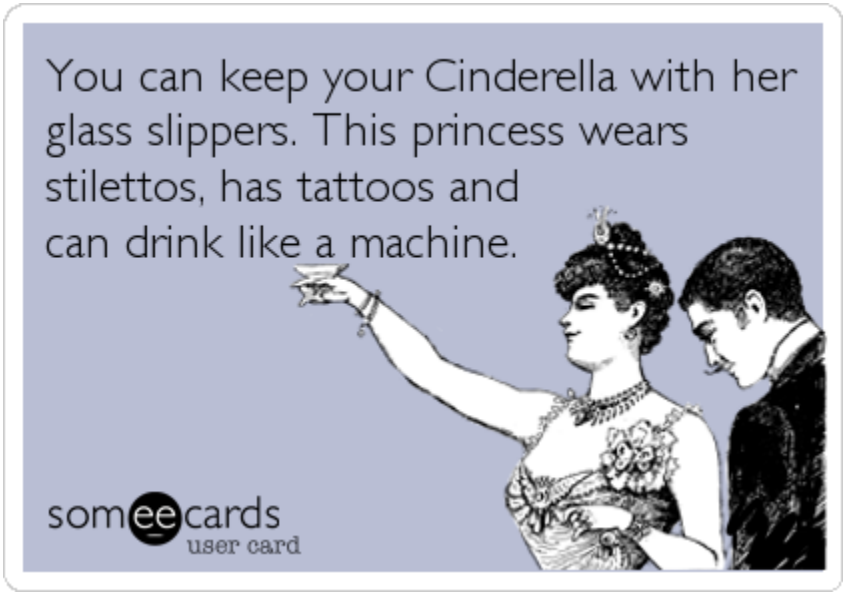

Image 13: Original Picture manipulated by group member (Adrianne2896346)

To sum up, this chapter discussed the gendered controversies that came up during my interviews and observation of the group's posting trends. The analysis revealed that they exhibited views regarding body hair and body shape maintaining practices that are congruent with contemporary heteronormative social values, whereas regarding alcohol consumption they exhibited opinions that are in an unresolved tension with each other, mirroring contemporary debates around women's changing alcohol drinking habits.

Conclusion

I discussed in this thesis paper the ways in which a group of Hungarian lesbian women manage their self-presentation and their presentation of expectations of potential partners in a Facebook group. A major theme, discussed in chapter 4, that came up during the interviews and the observation of the group members' posting trends is that many of them are heavily tattooed and they also often posted images of tattooed women. In addition, three minor themes, discussed in chapter 5, came up, namely: body hair removal practices, other acceptable or not acceptable forms of body modification and policing women's alcohol consumption.

My thesis mainly adds to the existing body of literature on various types of body modification practices, especially tattooing, body building, cosmetic surgery and body hair removal, shedding light on how the gendered nature of the norms associated with these practices either allow for subversive new ways of self-presentation or enforce rigid policing of gender boundaries in this lesbian community. My argument is that since the sexual identity of lesbians is largely understood even in contemporary society in heteronormative terms, that is, most people assume that one of the women in a relationship must by definition be more masculine or manly than the other – who by definition should take the feminine position – my respondents are aiming to find a way to express their sexual identities without having to conform to the masculine-feminine binary and instead attempt to carve out a third path for themselves which is an androgynous way of self-expression that combines desirable elements from both the masculine and the feminine stereotypes.

The literature discusses how gendered norms of tattooing (Pitts, 2003; Atkinson, 2004; Atkinson, 2002; Schilling, 2003; Fisher,2002) result in different expectations for men and women

with women being expected to have tattoos that convey 'femininity' on easily concealable parts of the body (Craighead, 2011) which also happen to be some of the most sexualized parts of the female body (Atkinson, 2004). My respondents, however, have not conformed to this expectation and had tattoos in some of the least easily concealable places such as arms and calves and the most recurring motif was variations of strength. My interpretation is that with the use of the motif of strength they went against stereotypical representations of femininity defined as innate weakness. Thus, I understood their tattoo preferences as an act of subverting gender norms. It is Brickell's (2005) understanding of subversion that mostly informed my argument, leading me to suggest that my respondents were involved in an active and constant negotiation and re-negotiation of gendered norm interpretations in both their tattoo collecting practices as well as the other themes that surfaced during the interviews.

In chapter 5 I discussed how my respondents, despite their subversive tattoo practices, were still under pressure by normative beauty standards such as the expectation to be hairless, not be too muscular and consume moderate amounts of alcohol. My argument is that their strict adherence to these norms is only partially due to peer pressure and partially due to the fact that all of the previously mentioned norms, with the exception of body hair removal, are all directly or indirectly related to socially wide-spread and stereotypical assumptions about tattooing and that it is here that the act of negotiation takes place. To be specific, body hair removal, the only one not directly related to tattooing, is an issue because literature on this question claims that according to recent gendered norms it is only women's body hair that is understood to be dirty and unhygienic (Fahs, 2011; Riddell et al., 2010; Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003) because of which they are expected to remove it; however, my respondents have extended this norm to men as well and they associate the state of hairlessness with non-gendered human characteristics rather than with either

of the genders. Thus, I understand this as yet another act of subversion – the subversion of the gendered nature of body hair removal.

As opposed to this, their policies on body shape and alcohol consumption are more stereotypically gendered, which I interpreted as an act of balancing the reappropriation and resignification of the traditionally masculine tattoo culture in order to arrive at an androgynous mode of self-expression The literature revealed that there are many wide-spread assumptions that women who body build become 'too manly' (Ian, 2001; Boyle, 2005), which my respondent agreed with and, as such, rejected this type of body modification. However, interestingly, they also rejected modification practices that are accepted or sometimes even expected of women such as breast implants or vivid make up. Based on the literature (Moser, 2009; Diddie et al., 2003) I suggested that one reason for rejecting this body ideal could be that there is a partially reinforced assumption that many men desire women with silicon breasts which my respondents have to reasons to reject: they can reject the desire to have silicone implants on the basis that they do not want to be desired by men and they can reject the desire for women with silicone implants because of their quest to differentiate their desire for women from men's desire. Thus, the combination of indulging in the stereotypically masculine culture of tattooing combined with a feminine body shape ideal that is differentiated from heterosexual women can be understood as a form of subversion as well.

As for alcohol consumption, it must be noted that the literature reveals that heavily tattooed women are often assumed to also be heavy drinkers (Swami et al., 2007), a connection that is explicitly made in a picture posted by one of the group members, and in addition to that, it is also a wide-spread assumption that drinking women are understood to be behaving in a 'manly' way (Eldridge et al., 2008; Mansson, 2014). The combination of these two stereotypes, towards

which my respondents expressed agreement, then may serve as grounds for rejection in order to maintain the androgynous mode of self-expression that allows for various subversive combinations of positive characteristics from both masculine and feminine stereotypes in a way that is most suitable for my respondents instead of tolerating the pressure of attempting to conform to the rigid binary of masculine or feminine identities.

A major limitation to my study was the fact that hitherto the literature on the covered issues has only scarcely distinguished between heterosexual and lesbian respondents and even when they did it either seemed that the lesbian respondents were in the study by chance (Santos, 2009; Fahs, 2011) rather than deliberate consideration or were from a culturally different context (Liu et al., 2010). Another limitation was that length restrictions did not allow the consideration of class background and level of education and that the members of the Facebook group are not necessarily representative of the larger Hungarian lesbian community. As such, the study opens up potential future research topics such as the intersection of sexual orientation, various body modification practices and pressures of gendered norms in a larger-scale European and/or North American context.

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