

# VU Research Portal

## Uncomfortable encounters

van Lisdonk, J.T.A.

2018

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

van Lisdonk, J. T. A. (2018). *Uncomfortable encounters: Dutch same-sex oriented young people's experiences and the relation with gender nonconformity in a heteronormative, tolerant society*. [PhD-Thesis - Research and graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam].

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)

# Chapter 4

## Too Gay and Not Lesbian Enough: Gendered Sexual Scripts in Dutch Gay and Lesbian Public Venues<sup>1</sup>



---

<sup>1</sup>This chapter has been submitted for publication as Van Lisdonk, J., & Nencel, L.S. *Too Gay and Not Lesbian Enough. Gendered Sexual Scripts in Dutch Gay and Lesbian Public Venues.*

**Abstract**

Gay and lesbian public venues facilitate ways for same-sex attracted (SSA) people to meet and connect, but these venues also produce their own normativity. This study, based on 38 in-depth interviews, focused on the challenges experienced by Dutch SSA young people (18-26 years) and we theorized how gender differences make sense. Through analysing gendered sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon 1984, 1986; Wiederman 2005), we identified gender and sexual identity norms present in these venues. At the cultural level, SSA young men experienced a tension between conforming to normative gay appearances and to hegemonic masculinity. Looking 'too gay' was often rejected. In lesbian public venues, lesbian appearances served to 'prove' women's sexual identity; it was important to be 'enough lesbian.' We looked at the interpersonal level, and observed that young men had to get used to the sexualized nature of interactions and being seduced, while lesbian public venues were characterized by subtle erotic communication. Based on Connell's (1992) gender theory and Schippers' (2007) re-worked model about hegemonic masculinity and femininity, we related the specific challenges in expressing sexual identity and gender nonconformity to the fundamentally different positions of gay men and lesbian women in the heteronormative, asymmetrical gender order.

At these parties I went to last year and where everyone around you is lesbian, I found it pretty difficult. I am there with fairly seasoned lesbian girls, you know my age, but who handle this very differently and who indeed do, what I used to do with boys when going out. That's what they do with girls. And for me it is completely unnatural to flirt with a girl and to take that step and if necessary offer them a drink. [...] I sometimes have the idea that I don't belong there. Perhaps that is what I radiate. And when she [straight friend] joins me: 'Well, let's see what there is to do.' Maybe we sit at the bar in a different way than other people. I don't know how to come into contact with them...that is difficult. (Claire, woman, aged 21)

Some scholars have noted that particularly younger generations of same-sex attracted (SSA) people are ambiguous about or uninterested in visiting gay and lesbian public venues (Fobear 2012; Lea, De Wit, & Reynolds 2015; Nash 2013). Accordingly, such places have lost their function in societies with increased normalization of homosexuality and a rise of Internet and location-based social media to meet people (ibid.). Nevertheless, in line with other Dutch, Australian and British studies, our study brings forward that, even in tolerant societies, such venues facilitate important ways for SSA young people to explore their sexual orientation, connect with each other and have a safe space which is free from homophobic hostility (Fobear 2012; Huxley, Clarke, & Halliwell 2014; Lea et al. 2015). Yet, visiting these venues is not always as liberating and positive as may be expected (Fobear 2012; Huxley et al. 2014; Lea et al. 2015; Nash 2013). After all, these venues are also not free from normativity.

In this article we concentrate on the challenges encountered by Dutch SSA people to connect in bars, clubs, and parties oriented to gay men and lesbian women. In these venues, a same-sex orientation is the binding factor between visitors and is expected to be made explicit in meeting with other visitors. A sense of community is created through implicit norms and expectations on appearances, expressing sexual identity, gender expression and how to approach each other. Thus, gay and lesbian public venues produce symbolic gay and lesbian identities with their own norms and expectations. In gay and lesbian venues, identities are shaped in relation to heterosexuality, norms and expectations, and in turn these are constructed vis-à-vis heteronormative society.

We explore these norms and expectations through using the concept of gendered sexual scripts. This study shows that SSA young men and women addressed different challenges in meeting other visitors in these venues, because gendered sexual scripts in gay and lesbian public venues differ from each other. We theorize that these specific challenges can be explained because of a fundamentally different positions of gay men and lesbian women in the heteronormative asymmetrical gender order.

## Gendered sexual scripts

Simon and Gagnon were the first scholars who applied a social scripting approach to human sexuality (Simon & Gagnon 1984, 1986). Scripts can instruct individuals what is appropriate behavior, what is normative and how it should be understood and given meaning (Simon & Gagnon 1986; Wiederman 2005). Through sexual scripts adolescents and young people in particular learn to understand and come to terms with their sexuality (Jackson 1999; Simon & Gagnon 1986). Scripts are learned and communicated by other members who have already adopted them (Wiederman 2005).

The concept sexual script has been well-documented in relation to heterosexuality (e.g., Klinkenberg & Rose 1994; Sanders 2008; Seal & Ehrhardt 2003; Sakaluk et al. 2014; Wiederman 2005). Previous studies have pointed out that heterosexuality informs scripts among same-sex oriented people regarding expressing their sexual and gender identity, friendships, dating, and sexuality (Connell 1992; Dempsey, Hillier, & Harrison 2001; Kimmel 2004b; Klinkenberg & Rose 1994; Plummer 2005). While sexual scripts has contributed significantly to our understanding, it nonetheless says little about the importance of gender in its construction. Hence, recognizing the interrelation between sexuality and gender and the critical role of gender playing in shaping sexual scripts, we prefer to use the term *gendered sexual scripts* (Wiederman 2005).

Gendered sexual scripts are multi-layered, consisting of three levels: the cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic level (Klinkenberg & Rose 1994; Seal & Ehrhardt 2003; Simon & Gagnon 1984, 1986, 2003; Wiederman 2005). In this article we focus primarily on the cultural and interpersonal level, because these levels are most significant in the production of the scripts in gay and lesbian public venues.

The cultural level prescribes what is normative within a culture and provides shared, collective guidelines for appropriate behaviors and emotions in specific roles. Scripts in gay and lesbian public venues concerning appearances function to endorse and communicate a shared identity, which promotes connection between individuals. A same-sex orientation can be manifested and expressed through dress codes and manners (Huxley, Clarke, & Halliwell 2014; Valentine & Skelton, 2003). In subcultures organized around same-sex sexuality, appearances can function to differentiate, resist or distance from conventional mainstream appearances. These appearances can become normative in communities, for example gay masculinity, camp, and hypermasculinity among men (Connell 1992; Taywaditep 2001); and lesbian gender, butch-femme culture, and tommy boys among women<sup>2</sup> (Levitt, Gerrish, & Hiestand 2003; Levitt & Hiestand 2004; Morgan & Wieringa 2007; Rifkin 2002; Taywaditep 2001).

---

<sup>2</sup>Tommy boys live in Indonesia and this identity does not only entail gender expression but also embodies same-sex sexuality.

Since sexual orientation and gender are interrelated in many cultures, including heteronormative societies, non-heterosexual normative appearances are commonly associated with gender nonconformity. In other words, nonconformity to heterosexuality assumes nonconformity to conventional gender expression and this is reflected in stereotypes about gay men and lesbian women (Herek 2002; Whitley 2001).

Interpersonal scripts guide or prescribe shared expectations in interaction with other people in specific situations. In this article, we focus on social and erotic interaction in encounters in the context of gay and lesbian venues. Erotic interaction entails flirting, dating-focused encounters and sexual interaction. Since the lines between social and erotic interaction are not always clear cut, SSA young people who are new to these venues have to learn how to interpret the signals.

Scripted heterosexual erotic interaction is grounded in the notion that masculinity and femininity complement each other and that in heterosexual interaction masculinity and femininity are respectively embodied by men and women. In these scripts, men ought to be proactive, initiate, show overt sexual interest, goal-directed, and sex-centered. Women's role is constructed complementary and is focused on boundary-keeping, being subtle in communication, and being relationship-centered (Dempsey et al. 2001; Klinkenberg & Rose 1994; Sakaluk et al. 2014; Seal & Ehrhardt 2003; Wiederman 2005). Kimmel (2004b) noted that in sexual role behavior many gay men and lesbian women are actually fairly conforming to prescribed heterosexual gender roles of men and women. This finding is supported by Valentine and Skelton's (2003) study in the Midlands (United Kingdom), where they observed gay scenes to be sexualized, while lesbian scenes heavily centred on relationships. Thus, cultural and interpersonal erotic scripts, while particular to gay and lesbian public venues, are grounded in gendered heteronormativity. This will be discussed in further detail below.

### **Heteronormativity and the asymmetrical gender order**

Based on Connell's gender theory we subscribe to the idea that gender nonconformity will be different for gay and lesbian public venues. Connell's (1992) ground-breaking and influential gender theory is based on the notion of multiple masculinities and femininities which are asymmetrically positioned in the societal gender order (Connell 1992; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). While masculinities and femininities exist in plurality, they nonetheless are subordinated and positioned in relation to the singular privileged position of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1992; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Dempsey et al. 2001; Wedgwood 2009). We add to the gender order the concept of hegemonic femininity, offered by Schippers (2007) in her re-worked model, which is particularly relevant for SSA women. Centralizing on the

relationship between masculinity and femininity, 'hegemonic femininity consists of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' (Schippers 2007: p. 94).

Essential is that masculinity is privileged and only available to men, whereas femininity is available to women and men (Connell 1992; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Schippers 2007). Hence, men and women, and therefore gay men and lesbian women, are differently positioned in the heteronormative gender order. Through exploring the challenges addressed by SSA young men and women in gay and lesbian public venues, we theorize how scripts in gay and lesbian public venues are shaped differently based on the different positions of gay men and lesbian women in the heteronormative asymmetrical gender order.

## Methods

In interviews with Dutch SSA young people about their same-sex sexuality, visiting gay and lesbian public venues was a salient topic. The majority (had) wanted to meet and connect to other SSA peers and all of them had experience with going out to gay or lesbian public venues. Their experiences were mostly limited to 'conventional' gay and lesbian public venues. Since there was no space for bisexuality in these venues, we refer to the public venues as gay and lesbian (GL) instead of LGB public venues. References to less conventional spaces like queer, non-binary gender, BDSM, and kink, were rare.

The findings are based on 38 face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews with Dutch SSA young people between 18 and 26 years old held between October 2010 until March 2011. These individuals had been invited for a follow-up interview after their participation in a large-scale survey study (Van Lisdonk & Van Bergen 2010b). We strove for variation in gender, age, geographical residence (region and level of urbanity), and diversity in sexual labeling. All selected participants had disclosed their same-sex sexuality to at least one person. The interviews took an average of 2.15 hours.

The interviews were centered on topics such as same-sex sexuality experiences, sexual identity and labeling, coming out, stigma experiences and relations to heterosexual and SSA peers. The first four participants all brought up their experience with going out in GL public venues and the challenges they faced. Since this appeared to be a salient topic, we decided to add this to the topic list. The participants were asked about their first experience visiting a GL public venue, what they liked and disliked about these venues, and whether they felt welcomed and at home.

All 38 interviews were recorded, verbally transcribed and anonymized. The first 20 transcripts and the logbook of the interviewer were thoroughly examined to identify meta-themes. These were organized into a first version of a codebook. Next, all transcripts were coded in Atlas.Ti (version 6.2). In the process of fine coding, followed by axial coding (to generate subthemes and find patterns), the a priori codebook was further developed by inductive coding (i.e., developing new codes).

In the analyses, the framework of gendered sexual scripts was useful to explore challenges described in connecting to other SSA people in visiting these venues. We present the experiences and the challenges of the SSA young men and women separately.

## Results

### Tension between appearing gay and hegemonic masculinity

Several SSA young men explained that men in gay public venues behaved freer and more enthusiastic than in heterosexual venues. These venues offered a space which allowed for more variations in gender expressions than in mainstream society. Koen mentioned that he feels free at gay parties since he does not feel the need to adhere to a societal norm of 'average': 'In the gay world it might be more accepted to just show that you have both [masculine and feminine] sides.' Erik described how he felt less pressure to behave masculine:

I dare to be more myself and I do not have to take into account that I had to behave very masculine or something like that. Which I fail in anyway. I did not feel pressure to constantly being busy not to draw attention to myself as *homo*. I did not have to think about that, which was really nice.

The SSA young men described gay appearances as exaggerated and/or effeminate in behavior or looks. The 'gay scene' was associated with feminine gay men, though some SSA young men also wanted to stress the existence and diversity of subcultures.

While gay appearances could be liberating, fun, and funny, looking 'too gay' or effeminate (which was conflated) - and particularly flaunting gayness - was looked down upon and critically judged by most of the SSA young men; especially when it appeared intentional or unauthentic. According to Oscar, some young men have many feminine manners and are fluttery, but other young men are continuously playing a kind of role. He disliked this gay role playing in which men show exuberant confidence. Once, he even approached a young man at a gay bar to advise him 'to stop promoting himself in such a cheesy way.'

SSA young men were well aware that in mainstream society, gay appearances were valued lower than heterosexual appearances (Nash 2013). Many of them described themselves and liked the self-image as 'normal' and masculine, even though some of them admitted they were less masculine than most straight men. Speaking about their visits to gay public venues revealed the thin line they walk between liking the free space where men do not have to adhere to hegemonic masculinity, while at the same time gay role playing and behaving 'too gay' was rejected. Those SSA young men who perceived themselves as normal and/or masculine men distanced themselves from gay appearances through expressing their uneasiness being around other men who were 'too gay':

Stephen: Recently, I was at a gay party, the second time, but that was not really a success. There were only these kinds of effeminate types and I did not like that.

Another way to distance oneself from 'being too gay' was to downplay their own expressions of gay appearances in gay public venues describing them as a joke, occasional, or contextual behavior. Niels for example mentioned that he loosened up when there was booze around in such venues, which meant that he felt he was able to be more enthusiastic, exaggerate, less cool, and less masculine than among his heterosexual male friends. While this could be 'in that moment very funny and fun,' he also distanced himself from this gay behavior through expressing that was a fleeting moment, typical for these venues. When he and his gay friend were finished he would say: 'Well, let's stop acting gay now,' and he admitted that he knew very well that he was not 'like that.' Equally, Oscar told that he occasionally exaggerates when he goes out in gay public venues, but he adds that everyone knows that this is clearly a joke. In fact, he stressed that he tries to be himself, which implies masculine. Apparently, cheerfully playing with gay stereotypes is fine and funny in gay public venues, but many SSA young men look down upon gay men who linger in gay role playing or are considered too gay or effeminate.

Thus, in these gay public venues gay appearances are considered fun and are a way to connect to other gay men, yet these appearances are at odds with the scripted societal norm of *hegemonic masculinity*, which many SSA young men also wanted to adhere to. Gay appearances and hegemonic masculinity conflict with each other, since gay appearances are often equated with non-masculine or effeminate expressions and with a loss of status, while hegemonic masculinity is expressed by rejecting gayness and effeminacy in men (Coleman-Fountain 2014; Connell 1992; Eguchi 2009; Plummer 2005).

The rejection or ambiguity of being too gay or flaunting gayness appears to silently support for hegemonic masculinity, through which SSA young men position

themselves higher in the heteronormative gender hierarchy. This ambiguity or rejection about looking too gay, also in gay men's communities and gay public venues, has also been found in other Western countries. Taywaditep (2001) observed anti-effeminacy attitudes in many gay men's communities, Nash (2013) noted pressure to be more 'straight acting' in Toronto's gay village, and Eguchi (2009) described this phenomenon on the website *StraighActing.com* as sissyphobia.

#### **Interaction in gay public venues: Sexually oriented encounters and being seduced**

Compared to mainstream venues, SSA young men who still visited gay public venues found these venues more fun, less confining, exciting, and they experienced a greater sense of freedom and open-mindedness. They liked the kind of social interaction with the other visitors. However, the SSA young men perceived these venues were also known for their superficial contact and explicit sexually oriented approaches. Most of them had to get used to this kind of erotic interaction and being seduced by other (older) men. This hypersexual culture was intimidating for some. Paul remembered the first time he entered a gay bar:

Paul: When I came there for the first time, I felt very welcomed. But I also felt strange, because many older men approached me, saying 'Wow, you are a good looking guy' and that kind of talk. The first time, I responded: 'Well, thank you.' Now I know that they have more intentions than just giving compliments, when they say that. Unfortunately.

I: Have you ever felt that men crossed your boundaries?

Paul: No, not really. Only that they touch you, but nothing else. I always had the luck that they stopped when I asked not to touch me. I am very glad for that.

Frank did not go to gay bars in Amsterdam anymore because 'there are a lot of older people and I don't like that very much. They all look at you and I don't like that.' The straightforward way of seducing was not only typical in gay bars, but was also mentioned about the broader gay community, including gay saunas and Internet dating. Oscar perceived online dating sometimes 'as meat inspections,' which he did not like. 'Those old little men who check your profile and approach you, that kind of things. [...] I still think of it as a strange little world.' Ilan also had to get use to the situation that 'if I chat with men, I know that after two or three lines chances are 95% that it concerns something sexual. It is an art to keep someone off.'

These exemplary descriptions of hypersexual, superficial contact during first encounters in gay public venues and the broader gay community have been found in other Western countries too (Connell 1992; Dewaele 2008; Lea et al. 2015; Valentine & Skelton 2003). Erotic interaction between men focuses on being sexually active and

showing a strong sexual interest (Connell 1992; Dempsey et al. 2001; Klinkenberg & Rose 1994; Wiederman 2005). Scholars have described erotic interactions between men to be more sexually oriented than in heterosexual interactions, because men are expected to initiate, to be direct, and express their sex drive which could accelerate sexual behavior between two men (Klinkenberg & Rose 1994; Plummer 2005).

In this study, Chris appeared to be the only young man who fully embraced this erotic script. He liked the sexual open-mindedness in gay public venues, the goal of having fun with other SSA men, and the space for non-monogamous relationships. Other SSA young men remained uncomfortable with the straightforward and hyper-sexual ways of being seduced and decided to stop visiting these venues. Yet, for them a new problem arose. Leo chose to avoid the 'gay world' because he found it too sexually oriented, but it was difficult for him to find a nice boyfriend in mainstream heterosexual contexts.

To conclude, while gay public venues provided a space to meet and socially interact with other SSA men, the erotic interpersonal script enacted in these spaces made many SSA young men (initially) feel uncomfortable to engage in these venues.

### **Lesbian appearance: Proving to be lesbian**

Similar to gay public venues, there was a lesbian appearance script in lesbian public venues. Several SSA young women consistently described this normative appearance in terms of a particular kind of jeans, a checkered blouse or T-shirt, short hair, and Vans (sneakers). Some of the women described this appearance as masculine or boyish, but they rarely categorized them as butch, tomboy or androgynous.<sup>3</sup> Daphne gives a detailed description of the lesbian look:

There is a specific kind of jeans which is not really baggy, yet not a normal jeans either. It is a bit wider. And then there is a leather belt, brown or white, without a print or so, really simple, but fairly big. And then a T-shirt with short or long sleeves, not a low neckline, just a normal T-shirt and very basic. Or a small print or nothing. And then there is a kind of hair which is not short and not long. I don't know, it is really a golden combination. You're always good.

Contrary to SSA young men's accounts, there was no similar sensitivity about looking 'too lesbian' among SSA young women. While not all of them found the 'lesbian look' appealing or attractive<sup>4</sup>, they did not outwardly criticize these individuals for looking too lesbian. A lesbian appearance did not threaten or devalue these women's or their status.

<sup>3</sup>The SSA young women also did not refer to a lesbian Femme identity or queerness, as has been found elsewhere (Levitt et al. 2003, Morgan & Wieringa 2007; Rifkin 2002).

<sup>4</sup>Although the 'lesbian look' was normative in lesbian public venues, this does not mean that this normative appearance served as an erotic ideal for lesbian women.

Instead, the 'lesbian look' served to easily identify and assess whether other female visitors in these venues are lesbian. Xena addressed how she was surprised about a 'beautiful girl' being lesbian: 'Well, at that party, it crosses my mind like "What is such a girl doing here?" But then it turns out she is lesbian.' A couple of SSA young women who were not immediately 'recognized' or being read as lesbian felt that they were not taken seriously by regular visitors. They received gazes as if they did not belong there or comments such as 'hey hetero, what are you doing here?' (Anke). Joanne found it difficult to connect to other women and felt excluded in these venues, because she apparently did not adhere to the lesbian appearance norms:

I always just have to prove, well not prove, but then they say: 'What are you doing here?' I just fancy women. 'Yeah, really? Really?' [...] You know, people were actually still asking that, even when I came there quite a lot, at the time.

In the cultural script in lesbian public venues, recognizing or 'reading' other women as lesbian based on their appearance was important, since women's same-sex orientation was not taken for granted or self-evident in these venues, yet considered something needed to be expressed. Therefore, communicating a same-sex sexual identity through adhering to lesbian appearance norms distinguishes them from heterosexual women and shows their connection to the lesbian community. Since hegemonic femininity is perceived a marker of heterosexuality (Holland & Harpin 2013), SSA young women who looked conventionally feminine were sometimes mistaken to be heterosexual, and as such not considered interesting to connect with by 'more seasoned lesbian girls' (Claire).

Consequently, feminine looking women in particular mentioned or complained that women in these venues all looked alike and that it was important to look and behave 'lesbian enough' to connect to other SSA women. These appearance norms in lesbian communities and the associated suspicion or unwelcoming reactions to feminine looking women has also been observed by other Western scholars (Fobear 2012; Huxley et al. 2014; Levitt et al. 2003). SSA young women who prefer to look 'feminine' have to negotiate between their desired appearance and conforming to lesbian appearance norms (Clarke & Turner 2007; Huxley et al. 2014).

Several SSA young women decided to adopt to the script on appearance to enhance their credibility as a lesbian woman, even when they felt uncomfortable performing the 'lesbian look':

Daphne: I have tried it, shorter hair, checkered blouse and baggy jeans, but it didn't work. Well somehow, I think it is just because it does not suit me. It is not who I am and then it does not elicit anything. I think you really need to feel it and have to be like that, to make it work.

Elise: When I go out, I like to dress up a bit. And when I was there I got several of these gazes as if I did not belong there. Then I had a period that I dressed a bit differently, because I thought, well it is better because I don't get that fuss. As if I adjusted myself a bit. It is not really normal there to wear a kind of bare top. You rather walk in a T-shirt. That was the kind of vibe. But that was also a bit...when I conformed that didn't feel well. [...] As if I was a kind of hetero or bisexual girl who wanted to have a little look in their world. I don't know, people can be very intense, or just how they look at you.

The inability to conform to the lesbian look and still feel authentic can hinder to feel accepted and comfortable in lesbian public venues. When altering their appearance in these venues did not foster better connection to other women in these venues, a couple of the SSA young women eventually distanced themselves from the lesbian community.

#### **Interaction in lesbian public venues: Cliques and subtle erotic interaction**

Interpersonal interaction in lesbian public venues was scripted differently and led to other challenges than those described by SSA young men. SSA young women found the 'lesbian world' to be small and for many of them it was challenging to meet new women in lesbian public venues. According to Joanna:

The [lesbian bar in a big Dutch city] is of course fairly small and everybody knows each other. At first I liked it, but after a while it drove me crazy. Again meeting the same familiar people. All those women together, that is kind of, that is a scene I do not want to belong to. But you have to be a part of it, otherwise you do not know anyone.

The cliquey group dynamics in which women stand in small groups, all know each other and gossip, feels unwelcoming and discourages new visitors to approach another woman. Anke found that going out was 'a lesbian drama':

I really perceive that there are more cliques and small groups and gossiping when going out. Like if you talk with that person then it means that you also talk to that person, because this one has done it with that one and that one is an ex of another one. And if you once speak to someone then it immediately means that you like that person. While a [straight] man is just more matter of fact. A woman is drama...a lesbian drama. You have to be aware. I have the feeling that I have to be a lot more cautious than with men.

Several SSA young women had difficulty interpreting the communication they had with women. Often it was subtle and remained unclear whether it was meant to be a social or erotic. Is it friendly or flirtatious?

SSA young women who were familiar and comfortable with heterosexual erotic interaction mentioned that they needed to learn how to flirt with women, such as recognizing subtle flirting cues, seducing women, and making a different kind of eye-contact. They found it difficult to interpret women's cues, while it was easy to 'read' and flirt with men. Claire's quote in the beginning of this article showed her difficulties in connecting with other SSA women in comparison to (straight) men. She felt inadequate to connect with 'these fairly seasoned lesbian girls.' Anke expressed her frustration: 'When I started going out, I thought: "Do I have to look at girls now? How does that work?" And instead I seduced a guy, because that was easier.' Other women also felt clumsy or uncomfortable seducing and flirting with women, including Ingeborg:

With men it just comes naturally, you know. You just make a comment, you smile and something will happen. And with women. I think it also depends on what kind of women, but I think a lot of women are more waiting in some way or another. And of course if you both wait, than nothing happens. [...] Well, I am typically a woman in these things. Unfortunately (laughs).

Ingeborg's perception that she is 'typically a woman' refers to her role in heterosexual erotic scripts. Her quote illustrates two aspects in which normative gender role behavior based on heterosexual erotic interpersonal scripts can lead to challenges in erotic interaction between women. First, momentum may disappear if both women do not take initiative. Second, according to the young women who were used to dating men, the game of flirting and seducing was a lot more subtle between women and cues needed to be learned and how to read them.

## Discussion

In Dutch society, homosexuality is in many ways normalized, yet society remains heteronormative. Encountering negative reactions due to a same-sex orientation is not exceptional (Kuyper 2015a). Fobear observed that young lesbian women in the Netherlands are 'caught in the uneasy divide of being beyond having an exclusionary space while at the same time needing a space where they are included fully' (2012: p. 743). According to Fobear, these young lesbian women do not wish for special lesbian places and rather put emphasis on being normal. But having a space to meet people with similar experiences and not having to worry about 'censoring or explaining' still had a purpose to them (2012: p. 742).

In exploring their same-sex orientation, all interviewed SSA young people had visited GL public venues to meet and connect to other SSA peers. Yet as our study demonstrates, not all experiences were positive and challenges were related to gendered sexual scripts present in these venues. Raised in a heteronormative society

and sometimes being familiar with heterosexual scripts, SSA young people faced different gendered sexual scripts in GL public venues. Particularly those SSA young people who were not able or willing to learn and adjust to these scripts on normative appearance or social and erotic interaction, or who had difficulties to celebrate or temporarily emphasize a gay or lesbian identity - as expected in these venues – felt uncomfortable or showed ambiguity toward these GL public venues.

At a cultural level, gendered sexual scripts served to show that individuals belonged to GL public venues, which was manifested by emphasizing one's sexual identity through normative appearances. In gay public venues, SSA young men navigated between expressing gayness - which connects gay men and offers space to play with masculinity - and conforming to hegemonic masculinity - which confirms their status as men and is higher valued in the gender order. Occasionally performing gay could be fun and liberating, but being 'too gay' was rejected by many of them. In lesbian public venues, normative lesbian appearances were constructed in opposition to hegemonic femininity and these gender appearances were not reconcilable. Hegemonic femininity was perceived as a marker of heterosexuality, which in these venues, was met with suspicion. Hence, conventionally feminine looking SSA young women felt a need to demonstrate that they were 'lesbian enough' in order to be accepted in these venues.

At an interpersonal level, which here focused on social and erotic interactions, scripted behavior in first encounters was fairly similar to expected gender role behavior in heterosexual scripts. In GL venues, same-sex erotic interpersonal scripts articulated gender role behavior as men or as women, which has also been observed by Connell (1992) and Kimmel (2004b). Hence, in same-sex erotic encounters, described challenges or difficulties are a consequence of having similar scripted roles for both individuals. Those SSA people who were familiar with heterosexual erotic interaction had to get used to the role behavior and expectations of the same-sex person they met in order to successfully and comfortably erotically interact. Some SSA young men had to get used to the hypersexual nature of interactions and in being seduced, while SSA young women who were familiar with heterosexual dating scripts had to learn to erotically approach other women and how to read subtle cues of seductions.

### **'Too gay,' 'not lesbian enough' and the heteronormative gender order**

The SSA young men and women brought up specific challenges in expressing sexual identity and gender nonconformity. We theorize how these different challenges make sense in relation to how gay men and lesbian women are positioned in the heteronormative asymmetrical gender order. Based on Connell's gender theory (Connell 1992; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005), and re-worked by Schippers (2007), the gender order is grounded in the notions of multiple masculinities and femininities,

the asymmetrical relation between masculinity and femininity, and the privileged position of men and masculinity. 'Masculinity and femininity are hegemonic precisely in the ideological work they do to legitimate and organize what men actually do to dominate women individually or as a group' (Schippers 2007: p. 93). Men and women, and therefore gay men and lesbian women, are differently positioned in the heteronormative gender order. It is precisely this asymmetry, which explains the different challenges related to sexual identity and gender expression in gay and lesbian public venues.

On a theoretical level, we identify two ways in which gay men and lesbian women differ in their positions in the heteronormative gender order. The first difference concerns constructions of *gay* and *lesbian* which symbolize gender nonconformity. The second difference pertains to how SSA young *men* and *women* relate to the dominant position of men in the gender order.

First, based on heteronormativity, the symbolic constructions of both gay men and lesbian women represent gender nonconformity. Yet, the consequence of gender nonconformity for their position in the gender order is majorly different. Gay men are viewed as feminine or subordinately masculine— which establishes an inferior status in the gender order (Connell 1992). In contrast, Schippers described lesbian women symbolically as pariah femininities, which threaten the gender order:

[They] embody and practice these features of hegemonic masculinity, and because this challenges the hegemonic relationship between masculinity and femininity, that these characteristics, when embodied by women, are stigmatized and sanctioned. [...] I propose calling this set of characteristics pariah femininities instead of subordinate femininities because they are deemed, not so much inferior, as contaminating to the relationship between masculinity and femininity' (2007: p. 95).<sup>5</sup>

We conclude that gay men are positioned as inferior in the gender order, while lesbian women contaminate the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity and are considered a threat to the heteronormative gender order.

<sup>5</sup>Schippers further elaborated how pariah femininities become master statuses, such as 'the lesbian' and she recognizes more pariah femininities: 'The possession of any one of these characteristics is assumed to contaminate the individual, so by having the one characteristic, an individual becomes a kind of person – a lesbian, a "slut," a shrew or "cock-teaser," a bitch. Not only do the characteristics become master statuses for women who exhibit or enact them, these women are considered socially undesirable and contaminating to social life more generally. [...] Although pariah femininities are actually the quality content of hegemonic masculinity enacted by women—desire for the feminine object (lesbian), authority (bitch), being physically violent ("badass" girl), taking charge and not being compliant (bitch, but also "cock-teaser" and slut), they are necessarily and compulsively constructed as feminine when enacted by women; they are not masculine' (2007: p. 95).

Second, the gender identities of SSA young *men* and SSA young *women* relate in other ways to the dominant position of men in the gender order. SSA men share with men in the dominant position their gender identity (i.e. being men) and the option for expressing hegemonic masculinity. In the gender order, men and masculinity are defined in terms of their relation and status to other men. This requires emphasizing the shared ideal of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1992). SSA men have the opportunity to alternate between conforming to hegemonic masculinity and conforming to gay appearances. The latter are more prominent and scripted in gay public venues, yet conforming to hegemonic masculinity in these venues is accepted and not considered a threat. Hegemonic masculinity and gay appearances are not similarly valued, yet both are part of the gender order. Since the two masculinities exclude each other, SSA man cannot conform to hegemonic masculinity and gay appearances simultaneously.

In the heteronormative gender order, women's connection to men who endorse hegemonic masculinity is configured through hegemonic femininity, which implies heterosexuality and is expressed through being attractive and sexually desirable for men (Connell 1992; Dempsey et al. 2001; Holland & Harpin 2013; McCarl Nielsen, Walden, & Kunkel 2000; Schippers 2007). Consequently, hegemonic femininity and lesbian identity are irreconcilable because of their mutually exclusive sexual orientations to either men or women. Moreover, they are located differently in the gender order, representing the heteronormative gender order and an alternative order - or pariah femininity (Schippers 2007). In lesbian public venues, a 'lesbian look' and being 'lesbian enough' functions to distinguish oneself from heterosexual women who are not very much welcomed.

While SSA women actually have a common object of sexual or erotic interest as heterosexual men (i.e., other women), Schippers (2007) points out that this should not be interpreted as a shared characteristic. After all, in the heteronormative gender order women as objects of interest are featured as a masculine characteristic, hence only reserved for men.

Thus, gay men can relate to men in the dominant position through their shared status as men and through endorsing hegemonic masculinity, whereas lesbian women relate to men in the dominant position through contaminating (or challenging) the gender order since they per definition do not conform to hegemonic femininity and being sexually available to men. The gendered sexual scripts in gay and lesbian public venues reproduce the different positionality of gay men and lesbian women in the gender order: SSA men have access to hegemonic masculinity – and expressing in conventional masculine ways - and gay appearances (yet not simultaneously), while SSA women are encouraged to conform to lesbian appearances and are more socially sanctioned for

expressing in non-lesbian or feminine ways. In this context, hegemonic femininity is considered gender nonconforming.

The theoretical implication of the different positions of gay men and lesbian women in the heteronormative, asymmetrical gender order was also noticeable in other ways in gay and lesbian public venues. For both the interviewed men and women, men were their point of reference. While some SSA young women explicitly compared erotic interaction with other women to what they were used to in erotic interactions with men in the context of going out, reversed comparisons were not made by SSA young men. Some SSA young men mentioned that they were not used to being seduced in such a direct way in erotic interaction, yet they did not address erotic interactions with women and how they needed to learn new behavior or cues in same-sex erotic interaction, as several SSA young women did.

Another difference encountered was that men's sexual orientation was not questioned and they did not need to affirm their sexual identity in gay public venues, while in lesbian public venues women's sexual orientation was not taken for granted and their sexual identity needed to be proved. SSA young women who looked conventionally feminine sometimes faced suspicious or unwelcoming reactions in these venues for being considered heterosexual. The 'lesbian look' served to demonstrate their sexual identity and could convince other visitors that they belonged there. None of the SSA young men mentioned that they felt pressure to 'prove' their sexual identity in order to be accepted to belong there. This gender difference seems to resonate with the notion that men's sexuality is taken for granted, while women's sexuality is often considered to be more relational and less agentic (Dempsey et al. 2001, Schippers 2007). Hence, women's sexual identity is more often questioned (e.g., are you sure?), not taken seriously (e.g., you have not met the right guy yet), or interpreted in relation to men (e.g., the association of lesbian women as feminists and hating men, while the opposite of gay men hating women doesn't make any sense). Scholars have also observed that women's sexual orientation is more fluid than men's sexual orientation (Diamond 2008).

Responses to bisexuality were different in gay and lesbian public venues. Among SSA young men, bisexuality was not mentioned as a reason to exclude people in gay public venues. Although a man's bisexual orientation may not always be taken seriously by SSA young men (see also chapter 2), what mattered was a shared interest in other men and there were no examples of negative reactions. In lesbian public venues, some bisexual women felt pressure to appear lesbian or hide their bisexuality. Since bisexuality can be associated with being sexually available to men and thus with hegemonic femininity, it can be considered to conflict with being 'really lesbian.'

## Conclusion

Our study demonstrated that SSA young people in the Netherlands, in exploring their same-sex sexuality, are still likely to visit conventional GL public venues. In these venues, young SSA people may feel challenged to meet and connect to other SSA peers, since GL public venues, which are organized in response to heteronormative society, paradoxically produce their own kinds of normativity based on gendered heteronormativity. Through the lens of gendered sexual scripts in gay and lesbian public venues, we conclude that nonconforming to normative gay and lesbian appearances and to conventional gender expression has different meaning for SSA men and SSA women in these venues. Whereas in gay public venues being 'too gay' can be met with rejection or ambiguity, it is important in lesbian public venues to be 'lesbian enough.' Differences should be understood in terms of how SSA men and women relate in other ways to hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity respectively.