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Exploring personal narratives about female genitalia on the Instagram profile *The Vulva Gallery*

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English abstract

As a response to increasing ideals of beauty and a pejorative and insufficient discourse related to the female genitalia and the consequently emerging genital dissatisfaction and labiaplasty procedures, the Instagram profile *The Vulva Gallery* has been created in order to celebrate vulva diversity and ameliorate public discourse and sexual education. The present study aims at investigating online storytelling as a meaning making device by analyzing the personal stories posted on the Instagram profile *The Vulva Gallery* in two steps in order to draw conclusions on the nature of online storytelling and its impact to the individual and cultural construction of the female genitalia. The first discursive narrative analysis of the stories has shown that narrators purposefully configure personal stories as public testimonies in order to forward a social movement, reclaim the vulva discourse and transmit messages about coming to terms with one's genitalia. The second analysis of audience participation has illustrated that the online storytelling is significantly impacted by the commentaries posted under the stories, as these shape content, meaning, and distribution of the original stories.

German abstract

Das Instagram Profil *The Vulva Gallery* wurde als Reaktion auf die sich immer weiter verbreitenden Schönheitsideale und einen abwertenden und mangelhaften Diskurs über die weiblichen Geschlechtsorgane und die daraus resultierende Unzufriedenheit und steigenden Schönheitsoperationen ins Leben gerufen. Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht online Storytelling als sinnstiftendes Element und analysiert die persönlichen Erzählungen, die auf *The Vulva Gallery gepostet werden,* in zwei Schritten, um Rückschlüsse auf die Eigenschaften des online Storytellings einerseits, und dessen Einfluss auf die individuelle und kulturelle Konstruktion der Vulva andererseits, zu ziehen. Die diskursive Narrativanalyse der Geschichten hat ergeben, dass Erzähler*innen ihre Geschichten gezielt als öffentliches Bekenntnis konfigurieren, um damit eine soziale Bewegung zu unterstützen, den Vulva-Diskurs für sich zu erobern und Inhalte bezüglich eines Arrangierens mit den eigenen Geschlechtsteilen zu vermitteln. Die zweite Analyse der Leser*innenbeteiligung hat aufgezeigt, dass online Storytelling maßgeblich durch User-Kommentare beeinflusst wird, da diese den kommunikativen Kontext, sowie den Inhalt, Bedeutung, und Verbreitung der ursprünglichen Geschichte mitgestalten.

1. Introduction

The representation of the female body and implied beauty ideals have long been on feminist agendas. Latest developments like a boom in genital cosmetic surgery procedures such as labiaplasty (*ISAPS* 2018) and an ever-flourishing vaginal hygiene products industry (Jenkins et al. 2018: 697) have drawn attention to beauty ideals concerned with genital appearance and have elicited increased scientific interest in women's perceptions of the female genitals. Results of such investigations show that the natural vulva is perceived as inadequate and in need of beautification (Moran & Lee 2018: 237), as shameful, disgusting and unclean (Jenkins et al. 2018: 698) and that a normal vulva is conceptualized as infantile, pink, with no pubic hair and no protrusion of the labia minora (Sharp, Tiggemann, & Mattiske 2015: 183).

The Vulva Gallery, an online gallery and educational platform on the social networking site (henceforth SNS) Instagram, has made it their mission to "celebrat[e] vulva diversity, aiming to improve sexual health education and opening up conversations about topics that are still being stigmatised" (Atalanta n.d.). In this gallery, Hilde Atlanta, an Amsterdam based illustrator, posts her illustrations of different vulvas based on photos sent to her by women together with either personal stories written by the women themselves, or other Vulva related topics.

Personal narratives are semiotic processes by means of which personal experiences, the self and other, as well as norms and sociocultural meanings are constructed and negotiated. In the storytelling process, subjective and unique composition of personal accounts is as relevant as culturally available narrative patterns and templates. Due to their dramatized nature and inherent strong semiotic potential, stories are often exploited for an ideological construction of reality. Accordingly, being told with for certain communicative purposes, they can be regarded as social practice, as individual accomplishments which are affected by larger storytelling conventions. Online storytelling is thereby further affected by particular affordances the web 2.0, which promotes multilinearity, fragmentation, multimodality and interactivity (Eisenlauer & Hoffmann 2010).

The interest of this investigation is twofold: a first analysis aims at exploring the narrative and discursive configuration of personal stories about female genitalia on the

Instagram profile *The Vulva Gallery*. Such a multi-dimensional approach allows to draw conclusions on the narrators' individual engagement and orientation in and contribution to the larger, cultural vulva-discourse while keeping in mind implications inherent in the narrative form. Secondly, a subsequent analysis of audience participation will allow the examination of the forms and functions which storytelling acquire in the context of social media. The discursive narrative analysis will be particularly interested in semiotic, rhetoric and discursive strategies applied by the narrators and will reveal in how far women use the story form in order to make sense of their experiences, create a social community, subvert and challenge, or reinforce and confirm hegemonic discourse. The analysis of audience participation will subsequently contribute important insights to research on online storytelling, as it will reveal in how far other users are implicated in the process.

After the introduction, the second chapter of the investigation will be devoted to a social constructivist examination of the existing female genital discourse, focusing on a visual and a linguistic perspective, and leading to an illustration of its effect on women's physical and psychological health. These chapters will elaborate on genital ideals, on porn and marketing, on female genital terms and parental labeling as influencing factors.

The third chapter will focus on personal narratives, starting with an attempt to define story by outlining the most important approaches to narrative analysis. Consequently, stories will be explored as meaning making devices, and their impact on hegemonic discourse will be investigated. In a last step, the impact of digital environments on storytelling will be examined.

The fourth chapter will be devoted to the SNS Instagram, focusing on motivations for its use as well as implications and practices of storytelling.

The fifth chapter will consist of the study design, starting by an illustration of objectives and data, followed by an elaboration on the chosen methodology. After shedding light on the research object, the Instagram profile *The Vulva Gallery*, the results of both analyses will be presented separately in chapter six. In a last step, the discussion will illustrate the important contributions of the findings to existing research.

2. The vulva: social constructivism and genital dissatisfaction

Even before a human being leaves the mother's uterus, physicians are able to define whether this being is male of female by examining sonograms. This prenatal sex assignment, which labels this being as 'boy' or 'girl' proceeds over the examination of external genitalia. Hence, this often referred to as biological sex defines our consequent social gender. The question whether these two categories can be regarded as distinct has long occupied feminist scientists (see for example S. de Beauvoir 1988 [1949]; Butler 1986; Webster 2002; Motschenbacher 2009; Fausto-Sterling 2012). Where they agree, however, is that the body is the central location of any consideration to do with gender identification; it is the embodiment of gender. It has thus been the primary interest of many feminist investigations, revealing how we, and women especially, inevitably commit to unattainable beauty ideals and are subjected to the constant scrutiny of their attainment (Moran & Lee 2018: 230).

Latest reports about cosmetic surgery procedures have shown that normative ideals of beauty have 'spread' to the female genitals: The Annual Global Aesthetic Surveys of 2017 and 2018 by The International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (*ISAPS* 2017; *ISAPS* 2018) have demonstrated that ever since 2016, labiaplasty, the surgical altering of the labia and/or clitoral hood (including vaginal rejuvenation), has remained the fastest-growing cosmetic procedure world-wide. From 2015 to 2016, labiaplasty-procedures showed an increase of 45% (*ISAPS* 2017), and in the following year (from 2016 to 2017), the number of procedures still rose by 23%, while the total number of aesthetic procedures decreased by 1% (*ISAPS* 2018). While the total number of 224,846 labiaplasty procedures may seem rather insignificant compared to the 1,677,319 breast augmentations and while they are moreover part of general obsessive trends with regards to beauty ideals, their explosive rise does give particular reason for concern. This alarming development has accordingly led gynecologists in the UK to turn to the press and confirm the trend, declaring that "girls as young as nine are opting to have surgery on their genitals because of body insecurities that stem from social media and pornography" (Young 2017). Of the 200 girls under 18 who underwent labiaplasty from 2015-2016 in the UK, more than 150 were under 15 (Forster 2017). Importantly, these procedures cannot be compared with female genital

mutilation (FGM), which has been declared a human rights violation, but they are, in most cases, purely aesthetic decisions (Forster 2017). These trends suggest that women are increasingly concerned with their genital appearance and sanitation. If we presume that they are a response to sociocultural norms, public discourse revolving around the female genitals deserves a closer look. Accordingly, there has been increasing scientific interest in aesthetic and symbolic representations and perceptions of the female genitals, as well as in women's relationships to their vulvae.

The following subchapters aim at presenting an overview of the results of such investigations. Firstly, the vulvar anatomy will be illustrated so us to pre-empt any linguistic or conceptual misunderstandings. Secondly, the social constructivist perspective on sex and gender, which is the basis of this investigation, will be outlined. The third and fourth section will be devoted to examining the cultural discourse on the female sex organs; firstly, from an aesthetic and symbolic angle, and secondly, from a linguistic point of view. Lastly, effects of this depreciative discourse, which subjects the vulva to strict norms of appearance and negative symbolic value, on women's well-being will be illustrated.

2.1. Vulvar anatomy

Before elaborating on cultural discourse concerned with female genitalia, it is indispensable to clarify any vocabulary concerned with the female anatomy in order to avoid linguistic uncertainty. Besides the evident motivation that "the vulvar anatomy has almost never been described in an honest and realistic way" (Zwang 2011: 82), other aspects which prove the importance of such an illustration will become evident in chapter 2.4. Figure 1 demonstrates the locations and names of the different parts of the female external genitalia (the vulva) in a simplified manner, followed by a list of their definitions. The latter were retrieved from Deliveliotou and Creatsas' "Anatomy of the vulva" (2017: 3–5).

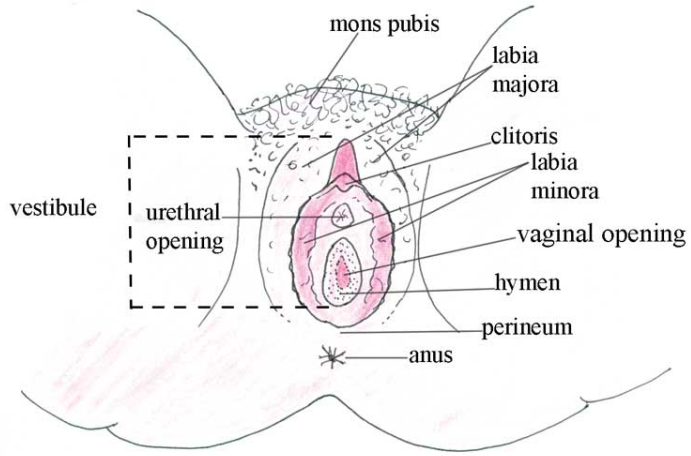

Figure 1 Female external genitalia (vulva)[1]

- Mons pubis (or mons venus): The rounded eminence in front of the pubic bones, consisting of fatty tissue, and being covered by pubic hair from puberty onwards. There is a great variety of hair patterns due to genetic and racial differences.
- Labia majora (or outer lips): The labia majora are a pair of longitudinal dermal folds, which join to form the anterior boundary of the pudendal cleft (the gap between the outer lips). They are approximately 7-8 cm in length and 2-3 cm in width and consist of fatty tissue.
- Labia minora (or inner lips): The labia minora are two thinner dermal folds situated between the labia majora. They consist of dense connective tissue, erectile tissue, and elastic fibers. There is considerable variation in size of the labia minora among adult women.
- Clitoris: The clitoris is a pyramidical, erectile, cavernous body that is 2-3 cm in length, is situated at the superior part of the vestibule. During sexual arousal an increased blood flow causes it to swell. Most of the clitoris is hidden, only the clitoral hood (glans clitoris), which covers and protects the clitoris and consists of spongy erectile tissue with many nerve endings, is visible.
- Vagina: The vagina, or vaginal orifice, is a muscular tube connecting the external genitals with the cervix of the uterus. It is the location for penile penetration as well as the place of passage for the newborn infant.

[1] Source: Open Learn Create. http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=33&extra=thumbnail_idm32770864 (19 April 2019)

- Hymen: The hymen is a thin membrane which is situated at the entrance to the vagina and usually only persists in the form of remnants in sexually active women. Even though it can remain intact after the first sexual intercourse, its presence is traditionally taken to be a sign of virginity.
- Anus: The opening at the end of the alimentary canal which is separated from the vaginal opening by the perineum.
- Urethra: The female urethra is a 3-5 cm long membranous conduit for urine which leads from the bladder to the vestibule. The external urethral orifice is 4-6 mm in diameter and lies beneath the clitoral hood.
- Perineum: The interval between the end of the labia majora and the anus.

Although this enumeration might seem unnecessary to some people, the following chapters will demonstrate the need for the explicit and differentiated illustration of the vulva. Notably, its importance has further revealed itself when starting to research definitions. While initially, the plan was to simply adopt dictionary entries, this venture soon failed, as the definitions where either only defined in a remarkably imprecise manner, or in terms of a penile counterpart. *The Oxford Concise Medical Dictionary*, for example, defines clitoris as "the female counterpart of the penis, which contains erectile tissue but is unconnected with the urethra. Like the penis it becomes erect under conditions of sexual stimulation, to which it is very sensitive" (Martin 2015). Importantly, the penis is also used for urination and semen transportation, so calling the clitoris "the female counterpart of the penis" is quite imprecise and misleading. In *Lexico*, the Oxford online dictionary, it is defined as "small, erectile part of the female genitals at the anterior end of the vulva" (*Lexico* 2019: s.v. *clitoris*), alluding more to the clitoral hood then the clitoris, and failing to account for the fact that it is actually a pyramidic cavernous body. In my subsequent research, I soon stumbled upon Braun and Kitzinger's (Braun & Kitzinger 2001c) study of dictionary entries of women's genitals, where they compared entries for 'clitoris' and 'vagina' with entries for 'penis'. In accordance with my first impression, they found out that female genitals were predominantly defined by their location in the body and in comparison to a penile norm, whereas the penis was defined in terms of its function (Braun & Kitzinger 2001c: 2014). They concluded that these definitions where guided by three assumptions: that female sexuality is passive, that women's genitals are perceived as 'absence', whereas men's

as ‘presence’, and that genitals are used for penetrative, heterosexual sex (Braun & Kitzinger 2001c: 214).

This short excursion into dictionary entries serves as a starting point into a generally problematic discourse revolving around female genitals. The following chapters will demonstrate the significance of such seemingly innocent aspects of genital representation, starting with an explanation of the social constructivist perspective as the basis of such assumptions.

2.2. The socially gendered biological sex[2]

Since Simone de Beauvoir (1988 [1949]: 295) declared that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”, the understanding of gender identities and their embodiment as socially constructed has become a relatively stable assumption. While Beauvoir differentiated between (pure) sex and (socialized) gender, however, contemporary feminists, with Judith Butler leading the way, have argued that there is no such thing as a pure condition prior to culture, but that “’sex’ is always already gendered” (Butler 1986: 39) and holds normative prescriptions which one inevitably aspires towards fulfilling. This fulfillment, according to Butler (Butler 1986: 40) proceeds through the (re)interpretation of cultural norms. Becoming a gender thereby rather is a matter of “doing gender” (Butler 2007: 33), which means for subjects to behave accordingly of what they are expected to be(come). She calls the way by which we necessarily are exposed and respond to socially determined gender identities “performativity” (Butler 2007: XV). Originally, performativity meant the capacity of a speech act to accomplish the action that it announces (Austin 1962). Related to gender identities, performativity means the adoption of hegemonic identities within “daily rituals of corporeal life” (Butler 1986: 48). Subjects know what kind of gender they are supposed to be by growing up in a specific cultural discourse. They adopt speech acts and behaviors ‘appropriate’ for their gender so as to become what they are to be. Thereby, they reproduce normative gender, they “do gender” by acting it out (Butler 2007: 33). Relating this back to Austin’s performativity, this means that the infinite recitation of dominant ideologies produces the ideologies it announces. This then enables gender identities to be linguistically evoked (Motschenbacher 2009: 6). By

[2] An earlier version of this section was used in a previous paper submitted as part of the MA seminar “Digital storytelling in E(LF)” at the University of Vienna

naming (or doing) a gender we constitute it. Consequently, this means that “gender is constructed in the very moment of language use” (Motschenbacher 2009: 6). Looking at language can thus reveal mechanisms of how gender identities are constructed and maintained in everyday life.

The central location of this identity construction, as has been insinuated at the outset, are the genitalia, and by extension the whole body. This is predominantly so because the body represents the “interface of social and personal experiences” (Motschenbacher 2009: 2). Now, even if these social experiences and interactions, which are particularly determined by cultural discourse, are highly influential for the identification as a certain gender, subjects still dispose of a certain agency. They are not, as Butler has often been criticized for, passive and powerless when confronted with hegemonic discourse. Rather, they can still respond to it individually, feel addressed or not and they can lastly challenge it by using their own body to resist or redefine gender norms. Accordingly, transgender studies have redefined performativity as “the connection between gendered embodiment, gendered experience and gender’s discursive force” (Gerdes 2014: 149) in order to highlight the individual’s agency.

The focal interest of this research is the cultural discourse revolving around the biological sex, the female sex organs, which Judith Butler referred to as “always already gendered” (Butler 1986: 39) and which Simone de Beauvoir declared as “mysterious[,] even to the woman herself” (Beauvoir 1988 [1949]: 406). As illustrated above, the gender determining body parts cannot be regarded as purely biological. The very fact that they are the key factor in the process of sex assignment enables them to stand as a metonymy for the dichotomous categories ‘male’ and ‘female’ and burdens them with the implied social and cultural weight. In other words, the sex organs themselves are socially constructed, and they simultaneously constitute the carrier of gender identities according to hegemonic ideologies. The way the female genitals are discursively constructed thus will impact a woman’s identification and consequent performance of her gender. Hence, it is crucial to examine the available cultural discourse, in order to reveal and subvert dominant ideologies. In what follows, the former will firstly be regarded from an aesthetic and symbolic point of view, in order to then be examined from a linguistic one.

2.3. Beauty ideals and the neoliberal problematization of the female genitals

Even though a lot of time has passed since Simone de Beauvoir highlighted the mystery of the female sex organs, today still, women only have very limited access to different manifestations of the female genitals. Generally, the cultural discourse revolving around female sexual organs is characterized by an extreme taboo on the one hand, and an oversexualization on the other. In other words, representations of vulvae oscillate between complete absence and contaminated hyperpresence. Apart from glimpses at family members, there seem to be little occasions to encounter other women's genitalia, which means that women must rely on images available to them in mainstream media, in movies, porn, magazines, and biology books. For centuries now, the female genitalia have encountered a history of censorship. In arts and education especially, female external organs have been made sure to either remain covered, (see for example the famous statue of the Aphrodite of Knidos by Praxiteles), or, when exposed, to only exist as blank surface, with no pudendal cleft (Zwang 2011: 83). When women want to see actual vulvae, they need to resort to other sources, which they will predominantly search for on the Internet, or encounter in advertisements for hygiene products, which address the subject with an economic objective in mind. This limited exposure is problematic, because it entails a shortage of diversity and a problematization of the female genitals, which render the 'natural' vulva abnormal. In the following paragraphs, I will illustrate how, lacking diverse input, women necessarily submit to the resulting narrow aesthetic representations, which will henceforth be referred to as 'designer vulva'. In this process, visual and symbolic resources, such as magazines and free porn, play an important role and have a significant effect on gender identification. Lastly, I will argue that the beauty industry has a profound economical interest in the pathologization of the female body.

2.3.1. Aesthetics of the designer vulva

As has been sufficiently established in feminist research, female bodies are subjected to continuous scrutiny, assessing whether they conform to what Braun and Kitzinger (2001a) call "cultural imperatives". These imperatives contain standards of

normality and beauty, where female bodies are seen as sites of improvement. Accordingly, the natural body requires modification in order to be considered normal; for instance, an aging body does not conform to beauty standards, so in a response to the cultural imperative of the ageless body, women use anti-aging creams, or undergo cosmetic surgery, to attain the alleged normal, young body. Such cultural imperatives are the product of visual and symbolic representations and reproductions of beauty standards. As far as the vulva is concerned, the cultural imperative demands what has been labeled a 'designer vagina' (Braun & Tiefer 2010) in cultural discourse and has been relabeled designer vulva for the sake of this investigation.

This image of the ideal female genitalia, as it is transmitted via porn, biology books, and magazines, is highly restrictive. In these media, the ideal vulva has been portrayed as smooth curve only, with no visible labia minora (Bramwell 2002: 189), or as a "youthful, tight, rounded vulva, with labia majora, enclosing the labia minora and clitoris" (Querna 2008: 62). In addition to the designer vulva being flat with no protrusion beyond the labia majora, the so-called "Barbie look" (Sharp, Tiggemann, & Mattiske 2015: 183) also dictates complete or at least partial pubic hair removal, which, as numerous studies have shown (Sharp, Tiggemann, & Mattiske 2015; Braun, Tricklebank, & Clarke 2013), has become a mainstream practice for women in Western cultures and further promotes a childish ideal.

Even though research suggests that vulvae vary significantly in appearance in terms of labia length, width, color and texture, women who underwent labiaplasty uniformly report that they perceived their genitals as odd or abnormal (Sharp, Tiggemann, & Mattiske 2015: 183), suggesting that these variations are considerably underrepresented. Indeed, the labia minora exhibit individual and unique anatomical forms and pigmentation in every woman, so that no two women will have identical lips. However, these diverse vulvae remain hidden from view.

Zwang argues that the infantile ideal is a result of two factors; first, that it is the only vulva women encounter regularly in real life, either when raising offspring themselves, or during visits to public swimming pools and suchlike. Second, it is the only form in which female genitalia can seem "innocent and unobjectionable" (2011: 85). The sole vulvar model available is thus "a hairless organ comprised of two butt-jointed lips, not very prominent, in the cleft from which nothing much exits except perhaps the vertical tip of the clitoral hood under a 'miniature' pubic mound" (Zwang

2011: 85), which symbolically restores women in a state of obedience, submission and sexual innocence.

2.3.2. Internalization of an ideal

In an attempt to explore the relevant factors for the emergence and maintenance of the designer vulva, Sharp, Tiggemann and Mattiske (2015) have applied the Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson et al. 1999; cited in Sharp, Tiggemann, & Mattiske 2015: 183) to the context of female genitalia. This model has been developed to explain body image concerns and "postulates that beauty ideals are reinforced by three primary sociocultural influences, namely peers, parents, and the media" (Sharp, Tiggemann, & Mattiske 2015: 183). It suggests that represented ideals affect body image either directly or indirectly via internalization of appearance ideals and appearance comparison. The researchers have adapted the model for their purposes and focused on the media (television, Internet, advertisements and pornography), peers (female friends and romantic partners) and relationship quality (relationship satisfaction and sexual confidence) as influencing variables. They have found out that as far as female genitalia are concerned, the most influential factors for the internalizations of beauty ideals are Internet and pornography, since these contain the most explicit representations. Unsurprisingly, the frequency of negative comments by romantic partners, as well as discussions of beauty ideals with girlfriends also fostered genital dissatisfaction and also correlated positively with the consideration of labiaplasty. Lastly, sexual satisfaction and confidence was the most significant trigger for genital satisfaction. Importantly, this study emphasizes the problem of limited exposure, since women only seem to encounter other vulvae in pornography and consequently rely on the images presented there.

2.3.3. Porn as influencing factor

One example of such an influential pornographic resource is the playboy magazine. Examining portrayals between 2007 and 2008, Schick et al. have demonstrated that "an unnatural genital appearance has become normative among centerfold models and other models alike in recent years" (2011: 78). In line with other analysis of the female genital ideal, they found that the vast majority of the analyzed

pictures depicted a vulva with no (61.2%) or at least altered (19.5%) pubic hair with no visible labia minora (82.2%), or the labia minora only visible as a line (15.1%), “resembling [the vulva] of a prepubescent female” (Schick, Rima, & Calabrese 2011: 75). While it may be argued that this form of sexual entertainment has been made obsolete by the readily availability of porn in the Internet, more recent studies mentioned above (Zwang 2011; Jenkins et al. 2018; Moran & Lee 2018) have shown that the genital ideal as distributed in magazine form has persisted until the present and is ubiquitous in freely accessible porn.

The severe problem with media like the playboy magazine, and free porn in particular, is that they are created from a male perspective, with the male orgasm at the center, where women only exist as sex objects for the male pleasure (Vandenbosch & van Oosten 2017: 1018). This implies that (free) porn does not only convey normative aesthetic images of the vulva, but also symbolic ones with serious implications for the understanding of sexuality and sexual intercourse. Free pornography often presents the vagina as “passive receptacle for the penis” (Braun & Wilkinson 2001: 20) and promote a concept of sex where ‘good, real’ intercourse is equated with ‘penetrative’ intercourse, neglecting the fact that women often experience more pleasure in other forms of sexual activities. Such limited definitions of sex also promote the decision for vaginal reconstructive surgery, because only sexual organs which are able to have heterosexual, penetrative intercourse, are regarded as functional, so when that capacity is constrained, women feel the need to mend it (Braun & Wilkinson 2001: 21). Moreover, women in pornography are often subjected to violence and are presented as holes which are just “asking to be humiliated and abused” (Braun & Wilkinson 2001: 24). Research has shown that even if women do not consume porn themselves, they experience sexual objectification when their partner use pornography (Tylka & Kroon Van Diest 2014: 77).

In order for women to acquire a healthier image of sexuality, researchers emphasize the need for female pornographic productions, meaning under their direction and fiscal control (Rees 2013: 270). Unfortunately, although explicit female art performances which claim agency over women’s bodies are uprising, the porn industry remains firmly in male hands. What is more, over the last four decades, popular culture has experienced a certain “pornification” (Rice 2014: 204), which alludes to the sexualization of the female body in mainstream media. While there has

been a debate about whether the sexual revolution of the sixties has liberated female pleasure or enabled and intensified sexualization and the objectification of the female body, most feminist writers agree that “pop culture’s flirt with porn” (Rice 2014: 205) has not brought advancement. Rather, hegemonic portrayals of heteronormative sexual roles are promoted, where men are dominant, women are submissive, and sex is for sale.

Unfortunately, sexual education does not seem to live up to its name, since it does not critically engage with issues of sexuality and consequently cultivate young people in this respect, but rather reinforces problematic notions of sex and desire. Accordingly, sexual education in (in this specific case, Canadian) schools revolves around three major messages as summarized by Rice (2014: 214): (1) sexual risk and responsibility, where girls need to defend themselves against STIs, pregnancy, violation, and being used, (2) suppression of female desire, as any indulgence may lead to one of the dangers listed above and (3), the promotion of heteronormative sexual roles and genders. This emphasis on danger is even more problematic, as it precludes the educational context from being a safe space to empoweringly and positively connote and explore issues of sexuality and sexual experiences. And yet, investigations such as the following underline the importance and benefit of such an instruction: In a longitudinal study accompanying young adults who received literacy education regarding freely accessible Internet porn, Vandenbosch & van Oosten (2017) showed that discussing issues arising in such pornographic formats significantly decreased sexist views by the consumers. Young people were provided with a set of tools to enjoy and critically reflect on content at the same time. Such open discussions enable girls to think, be curious about and formulate their own set of values and to create their own discourses of desire. Again, this study’s result underlines the issue of limited exposure to and unreflective consumption of exclusively male pornographic productions and expresses the need for a removal of taboos and an unagitated thematization of female sexuality from a female perspective in mainstream pornography, as well as in educational contexts.

2.3.4. Marketing as influencing factor

Another area in women's lives where they are confronted with a highly problematic depiction of their body is the advertising world of the beauty industry. Aside from questionable beauty ideals, advertisements promote the image of a pathologized female body, particularly an abnormal, dirty and disgusting vulva. In order to secure their continuous revenue, companies must ensure that women perceive their body as being in need of products which render it beautiful and healthy. Consequently, they depict the female genitals as odorous, unclean and potentially in danger of infection.

As part of the *Women's Health and Vaginal Microbiome Group Initiative* (VOGUE), Jenkins et al. (2018) conducted a study investigating women's motivation for using vaginal hygiene products (including washes, douches, sprays, deodorants, wipes and powders), which consisted of interviews with 49 Canadian women aged between 18-65 who either completed VOGUE surveys before or responded to online ads for the study. In this study, the scientists found that attaining a "clean-and-fresh vagina" (Jenkins et al. 2018: 697) has moved beyond the status of a cultural imperative and has become a subjective physical need for the participants. Just like anti-aging creams, vaginal hygiene products represent a solution to the problem of the alleged abnormal, natural vagina. The study has shown that the marketing strategy firstly exploits and promotes the already internalized idea that vaginas are dirty, smelly, and in dire need of chemical cleansing, by ubiquitously using words such as 'clean', 'fresh' and 'refreshed' in product names and descriptions. Secondly, vaginal cleansing is presented as both desirable and trendy for women (Jenkins et al. 2018: 697) and lastly, companies associate the use of vaginal hygiene product with taking control over one's body, thus they "link their products to concepts of confidence and female empowerment" (Jenkins et al. 2018: 706). Jenkins et al. argue that this marketing is so successful because it draws on the existing and internalized cultural construction of the vagina as unpleasant, unattractive, odorous, shameful and disgusting (Jenkins et al. 2018: 698).

This stereotype emanates from the association of bodily excretions, especially menstruation and vaginal discharge, with filth and impurity (Jenkins et al. 2018: 698). Female bodies are conceptualized as uncontrollably leaky, as opposed to the "contained, dry, and hard bodies of men" (Jenkins et al. 2018: 698). Indeed, Simone de Beauvoir already argued that as a marker of femininity, the social context condemns

menstruation to a malediction, to a sign for alterity and inferiority to the male norm, which is hence met with shame (1988 [1949]: 378). Historically, philosophers and physicians, such as Aristotle, Hippocrates and Galen, though with different explanations, have all arrived at the same conclusion of menstrual blood being a sign of toxicity and impurity (Rice 2014: 227). It is thus not surprising that the period has been nicknamed 'the curse' or 'girl flu'. In her essay *If men could menstruate,* Gloria Steinem illustrates how easy it would be to turn the monthly bleeding into a sign of power, thus revealing the arbitrariness of its social stigma. If it were the other way around and men bled, she argues,

> menstruation would become an enviable, boast-worthy, masculine event. Men would brag about how long and how much. […] Military men, right-wing politicians, and religious fundamentalists would cite menstruation ('men-struation') as proof that only men could serve in the Army ('you have to give blood to take blood'), occupy political office ('can women be aggressive without that steadtfast cycle governed by the planet Mars?'), be priest and ministers ('how could a woman give her blood for our sins?') or rabbis ('without the monthly loss of impurities, women remain unclean'). (Steinem 1978)

Naturally, this is a pointed outline of a hypothetical and exaggerated parallel universe; however, it shows how baseless and yet deliberate negative attributions to the period are, and that women need to question and oppose random justifications of power.

Besides 'suffering' from monthly discharge, historically, vaginas, more so than male genitalia, have been associated with carrying and transmitting STIs, even though both genders are equally involved in spreading diseases (Jenkins et al. 2018: 698), which again is based on the assumption of a pathological, contaminated female body part. In their interviews with women who use vaginal hygiene products, Jenkins et al. found that although the most salient motive was to attain a fresh and clean vagina, participants found it difficult to articulate what 'fresh' and 'clean' meant. This hints to the words merely being an expression of an internalized image, without a clear referent for the actual cleanliness. When trying to describe the opposite, namely what it meant to be 'unclean', women mostly referred to vaginal discharge and odor, and described that using vaginal hygiene products was equal to removing dirt form the body. Hence, being clean in turn means eliminating vaginal discharge, odor, and pubic hair (as these presumably increase odor), phenomena which many participants described as abnormal, even though, medically, they are all part of a natural, healthy vagina (Jenkins et al. 2018: 703).

Recurrent emotions which the participants described in relation to their vaginal hygiene were disgust, humiliation, shame, self-consciousness, and fear of negative social consequences, either within romantic relationships or within society as a whole. When talking about using vaginal hygiene products, the participants mostly used modal verbs expressing obligation (*had to, needed to*), suggesting that vaginal cleansing is perceived more like a duty than a choice. As was mentioned earlier, Jenkins et al. therefore argue that vaginal hygiene is not only a cultural imperative, but that social standards and stereotypes regarding the genital hygiene have been internalized by women to an extent where it has become an actual, subjective physical need. Companies profit from such insecurities and feed the stereotypes so as to increase their sales even more.

However, promoting vaginal hygiene products is highly problematic, not just on a psychological level, where natural, healthy bodily phenomena are pathologized and cause distress, but also on a physiological one, where there are adverse health risks. Research suggests that using douches, sprays, wipes, deodorants, etc. can potentially cause a higher susceptibility to STIs, pelvic inflammatory diseases, HIV infection, bacterial vaginosis, and an increased risk of ovarian cancer (Jenkins et al. 2018: 697). Moreover, vaginal hygiene products generally perturb the vaginal pH, which may negatively affect the growth of healthy bacteria, and alter the vaginal immune barrier (Jenkins et al. 2018: 698).

One concrete example of a cosmetic product which drew from societal beauty standards and promoted an unrealistic and unattainable ideal of a vulva is 'My New Pink Button', a temporary dye which promised to "restore the 'Pink' back to woman's genitals" (Labuski 2015: 20). While the product does not seem to be on the market anymore today, it still illustrates how women are expected to use artificial products to attain an ideal, which, in this case, is a pink vulva. Available in four shades of pink, the product firstly blended into the cultural imperative of the ageless body mentioned above. Although it is a natural process for the vulva to change color with age, it is presented as preferable for women to "restore the 'Pink'", thus recreate the vulva of a young woman. Secondly, by departing from pink as the natural color, which is to be restored, the product "renders anomalous any woman - particularly woman of color - for whom rose-colored labia are not the norm" (Labuski 2015: 20). These marginalized

groups are thus excluded altogether from ever having vulva which would conform to the societal ideal.

Summing up, we can see that women's perceptions of their genitalia are influenced by the media, in particular Internet and porn, and by advertising, which convey extremely narrow, arbitrary and questionable images of the ideal vulva and sexual encounter. It becomes evident that so far, there does not seem to be a prominent entity whose interest it is to promote a healthy image of female genitalia, where the woman, her sexual, physical, and emotional health is in the center.

2.4. Linguistic factors: the derogatory and unspecific use of female genital terms

As has been established in chapter 2.2, apart from visuals, the other essential element for the construction and maintenance of gender is language. As far as the vulva is concerned, labeling practices are the most immediately observable linguistic mechanisms with regards to its construction. Being a private and taboo topic, sex organs generate many euphemistic and dysphemistic slang expressions. Such terms usually draw on shared cultural knowledge and encode specific propositional information as well as some indication of the speaker's attitude towards this information (Gibbs & Nagaoka 1985: 178). Names for female genitalia "would thus be expected to encode ideas about women's bodies, women's place in the world, and women's place in sex" (Braun & Kitzinger 2001b: 146). Evidently, slang is largely spoken and dynamic, which means that the meaning can change over time and move from a euphemistic or derogatory to a comprehensive vocabulary. Nevertheless, examining existing female genital terms will allow to draw conclusions on the cultural understanding of the referent. Surprisingly, research on such naming practices are relatively rare. The following chapter will attempt to gather existing research devoted to female genital terms, focusing firstly on slang terms, secondly on the vagina versus vulva debate and lastly, on labeling practices parents use with their children. This exploration will illustrate how female genital terms are characterized by depreciation and linguistic unspecificity.

2.4.1. Female genital slang

While the seemingly most preferable option is not to address female sex organs at all, terms that do refer to the vulva often carry strong connotations. Feminist investigations in the subject matter have revealed a lexical gap, where female genital terms are divided between three categories: firstly, anatomical terms, such as 'vagina', 'vulva', or 'clitoris', which are by most considered "clinical and impersonal"; secondly, coy or euphemistic terms, such as 'down there', 'privates', or 'crotch', which strengthen the view of the genitals as something mysterious, vague and taboo and thirdly, a realm of derogatory terms, such as 'cunt', 'gash', or 'twat', which "replace the mystery by plain depreciation" (Braun & Kitzinger 2001b: 146). Apart from these options, many people seem to consider this area of the body as unmentionable altogether. A survey conducted by Allan & Burridge (1991: 53) in course of their exploration of taboos on bodily effluvia and body parts, shows that only 7% of respondents (10% men, 5% women) considered the vagina as freely mentionable. While a lot of time has passed since this study was conducted, the reluctance to call the vulva by its name has not, as shows a study on female genital terms conducted ten years later, in 2001, by Braun & Kitzinger (Braun & Kitzinger 2001b). In an attempt to explore currently available male and female genital terms, Braun & Kitzinger (2001b) collected a list of the former by asking participants to name as many genital terms as they knew and also clearly define their meaning. They then examined the terms and the attitudes they convey by means of a content analysis, which yielded significant results.

First of all, the most frequently given term was 'cunt', with a percentage of 82 points. Engaged in a fight for reclamation by sexists and feminists alike and hence extremely emotionally loaded, 'cunt' has been declared as "the 'nigger' of the gender wars" (Rees 2013: 7). Indeed, definitions of the term in the major dictionaries include the adjectives "disparaging and obscene" (*Merriam Webster* 2019: s.v. *cunt*), "vulgar" (*Lexico* 2019: s.v. *cunt*), "offensive" (*Cambridge Dictionary* 2019: s.v. *cunt*), or rude (*Collins* 2019: s.v. *cunt*) in their explanation of the word, sometimes proceeded by the adverb "extremely" (*Mac Millan* 2019: s.v. *cunt*). It seems telling that this highly derogatory genital term, which simultaneously is "the most offensive insult one man could throw at another" (Greer 1999, cited in Rees 2013: 8) is the most frequent name for female sexual organs given by the participants.

In their subsequent content analysis of all the given terms, Braun & Kitzinger classified them according to semantic categories (cf. figure 2). What was most striking across all categories was the “curious imprecision” (Braun & Kitzinger 2001b: 153) in female genital slang. Almost all terms referred to the genital area in general, “without a clear and specific physical referent” (Braun & Kitzinger 2001b: 153), such as the labia, the clitoris, or the vagina. Most importantly, in slang terms, the clitoris seems to be inexistent altogether. McClintock (1999, cited in Braun & Kitzinger 2001b: 154) calls the fact that there is no non-medical way to refer to the clitoris “the blank balance sheet of our society’s concern for women’s pleasure”. When participants were able to define a clear referent, it rarely coincided with those given by others. In only 15 of the terms (30%), at least 75% agreed on a meaning. Per term, an average of 3.9 different meanings were indicated. Especially euphemisms have proven to be “vague to the extreme, with no clear bodily reference point” (Braun & Kitzinger 2001b: 150), which implicitly strengthens the tradition not to talk, or even think, about female genitalia explicitly and in a differentiated manner.

Category	FGTs	MGTs
Euphemism	Bits, down below, downstairs, private parts, middle	Bits, end, extension, member, privates
Nonsense	Chuff, doot, hoo-hoo, tren, wanny	Cham, diddle, dong, slomb, winks
Space	Cave, gap, hole, pit, slot	No terms
Receptacle	Box, disk drive, gism pot, honey pot, spunk bin	Ball bag, happy sack, love sac, nut sac, sac
Abjection	Black cat with a cut throat, meat seat, slit arse, stench trench, tuna waterfall	Chicken neck, custard chucker, lump of meat, one-eyed milkman, purple headed yoghurt thrower
Hair	Beard, brush, fur jaw, hairy, moustache	Monkey, donkey wood, bald-headed monkey, one-eyed woom weasel
Animal	Beaver, cat, monkey, pussy, rat	Bird, lizard, snake, monkey, worm
Money	Penny, thruppeny bit, tuppence, two pence, fur purse	No terms
Personification	Bessy, Fanny, Fiona, Mary, Nan	Dick, John Thomas, Peter, Percy, Willy
Gender Identity	Girl patch, the old gal, old girl, womanhood, womanly bits	Big guy, fella, lad, old man, the guy
Edibility	Beef burger, bean, fish, fudge, pie	Gherkin, meat, pork, sausage, spuds
Danger	Bermuda triangle, black hole, growler, sharpener, squirrel trap	Chisel, harpoon, lethal weapon, sword, weapon
Sex & Pleasure	Fuck hole, gates to heaven, pink pleasure palace, spasm chasm, shagbox	Big red fun bus, joystick, passion tool, sexual wand, veiny bang stick
Plants	Bush, flower, jungle, forest	Twig and berries, wood, woody
Fantasy	Fairy, gremlin, hairy Cyclops, Smurf burger	Purple monster, purple headed monster
Urination	Pee hole, pee-pee, piss flaps, plumbing, wee wee hole	Hose, little fireman’s hose, pee pee, pisser, plumbing

Figure 2 Female and male genital terms: semantic categories and examples (Braun & Kitzinger 2001b: 149)

Content-wise, the slang terms have affirmed some of the shared symbolic knowledge illustrated in the previous chapter. With regards to space, for example,

genital terms mostly referred to material absences, where the female body is construed as a landscape, which raises ideas regarding exploration, colonization, and ownership (Braun & Kitzinger 2001b: 151). Moreover, the fact that the terms only address absences of land solely credits the vulva with providing potential space, rather than with claiming space through her presence. Closely related, the prevalence of descriptions of the vulva as receptacles (e.g.: 'bucket', 'letterbox', 'slot',…) fits into the phallocentric and heteronormative understanding of sexual intercourse as described in the previous chapter.

An abjection category was significantly more evident in female than in male genital terms. The slang terms made reference to dirtiness (e.g.: 'dirt box'), meat (e.g.: 'chopped liver'), vaginal discharge (e.g.: 'the snail trail'), smell (e.g.: 'stench trench'), and wounds (e.g.: 'gash'). These terms correspond to the negative symbolic value attributed to female genitalia as discussed in the chapter above and imply that they are "dirty and smelly, […] leaky and uncontained" (Braun & Kitzinger 2001b: 151).

The frequency of female genital terms referring to hair is striking as opposed to the absolute absence of explicit reference to hair in male genital terms, where it is only evoked indirectly through association to fury animals. Moreover, it contrasts noticeably with the mainstream practice of pubic hair removal. It is interesting to observe that while pubic hair removal has become a norm in Western cultures, verbally, it serves as an associative force (Braun & Kitzinger 2001b: 151).

Female genital terms alluding to money (e.g.: 'tuppence', 'Mrs. Penny', 'fur purse', 'pocket book') either construe the vulva as small amounts, or as objects to be purchased. Male genital terms, on the other hand, imply preciousness and unaffordable value (e.g.: 'crown jewels', 'sexual wand', 'Aladdin's lamp'), and suggest that male genitals "should be retained and cherished, rather than having the transactional status of money" (Braun & Kitzinger 2001b: 152).

Personifications occurred significantly more often for male than female genital terms, which "might derive from the belief that a penis leads a life of its own to a much greater extent than its female counterpart" (Allan & Burridge 1991, cited in Braun & Kitzinger 2001b: 152). Moreover, male genital terms often related to important personages (e.g.: 'bishop', 'general', 'little major'), a concept completely absent in female genital terms.

What was most striking in the danger category was that female genital terms referred to passive or hidden danger of captivation or being sucked into (‘black hole’, ‘Bermuda triangle’, ‘squirrel trap’), whereas male genital terms represented active dangers which evoked war imagery (‘stabbing truncheon’, ‘heat seeking missile’, ‘torpedo’).

Across all categories, this study has proven that female genital terms are highly unspecific on the one hand, and particularly derogatory on the other. It illustrates that slang terms do not equip women with the necessary means to positively talk and think about different parts of their genitalia. On the contrary, they pre-empt the possibility to communicate adequately about genital sensations to partners, family, friends, or doctors (Braun & Kitzinger 2001b: 157).

2.4.2. Parental labeling practices

A more recent study, a web-based survey of 631 US mothers of three- to sex-year-old children, investigating genital labeling with young children (K. Martin et al. 2011) has yielded similar results. While mothers were equally likely to use the anatomical terms ‘vagina’ and ‘penis’ with girls and boys, they were more likely to use playful names, such as ‘pee-pee’ with boys, and euphemisms terms, such as ‘privates’ with girls. The semantic category ‘vague’, containing words like ‘area’, ‘thingy’, ‘down there’, was absent in the list of boy’s genital names. Often, generalizing terms such as ‘bottom’, ’butt’, or ‘booty’ were used as general name for girls’ genitals, whereas for boys they were used alongside ‘penis’ or ‘pee-pee’. Moreover, mothers used anatomically specific vocabulary (such as ‘scrotum’, ‘testicles’) with boys, but not so with girls. Only rarely did they use the word ‘vulva’, and not once the word ‘clitoris’. In addition, mothers commonly used sexualized genital terms (‘coochie’, ‘booty’, ‘hoochie’) with girls. Finally, 6% of mothers even said that they used no word for genitals with their daughters, whereas all mothers of sons had some form of referent (K. Martin et al. 2011: 424). Mislabeling seems to be a ubiquitous phenomenon amongst parents with a long tradition. Accordingly, girls grow up learning that they have a vagina and nothing else, which is “an internal organ difficult to examine in reality”, but not that they have “a vulva that includes the clitoris and the labia” (Lerner 1976), which is a crucial for their consequent psychosexual development. When girls

discover the clitoris as source of sexual pleasure, they discover an organ which is “not acknowledged, labeled, or validated for her by the parents” (Lerner 1976). They do not learn that women have something “on the outside” (Lerner 1976) like the boys, but they are denied the fact that they dispose of sensitive external genitals just the same, which, as psychologist Harriet Lerner argues, contributes to penis envy in so much as it expresses the wish to be acknowledged as “sexually operative and responsive female”. In another article, Lerner referred to these unequal labeling practices as “psychic genital mutilation” (Lerner 1991, cited in Braun & Kitzinger 2001b) to underline the significance of genital naming and the pathogenic consequences it can have. Then as now, it seems that girls grow up verbally ill-equipped to resist the generally negative public discourse around female genitalia. Lacking the linguistic differentiation, they might not acquire a conceptual map of their genitalia which would allow them to explore and appreciate it. Rather, sexualizing and vague labeling practices may introduce them to their role as sexualized objects and pave the way for the internalization of stereotypes which define the vulva as taboo, as shameful and disgusting.

2.4.3. Vagina vs. Vulva

Another relatively young concern where this linguistic imprecision becomes strikingly clear is the apparent interchangeability of the terms vulva and vagina. Even though, as has been established in chapter 2.1, medically, the two terms stand in a hierarchical relationship - as for example do hand and finger - vagina has come to stand for the whole. While descriptionist linguists might argue for the dynamic evolvement of language and against a prescriptive measure to impose a ‘correct’ meaning, the seemingly innocent substitution of one term by the other does have serious consequences. Essentially, in this case, it is not about enforcing a specific rule just for the sake of it, but about revealing possible reasons for the linguistic absorption of one term by another, and consequently about linguistically acknowledging the fact that the female genitals consist of different parts.

While there is still much need for detailed research regarding this metonymic substitution, it seems significant that internal and external aspects of the female genitalia are so easily substitutable. Particularly in the surgical context, it seems instrumental to precisely label body parts which will be affected by a procedure. And

yet, Dr. David Matlock, for example, self-proclaimed “pioneer” in the field of “designer vagina”- creation, does not seem to deem the distinction important, arguably for marketing reasons. One of his provided procedures, the “Designer Laser Vaginoplasty” (vaginoplasty being the surgical (re)construction of the vagina) comprises “the aesthetic vulvar procedures” (Matlock 2019), including labiaplasty, vaginal rejuvenation, altering of the mons pubis, or a complete lift of the vulvar structures alike. Although the example might also be interpreted as proof for the two terms having developed to synonyms, in this specific anatomical context, it actually does make a significant difference whether you alter parts of the vulva, or the vagina.

As will be illustrated in the next chapter, the linguistic differentiation of the different parts of the genitalia is crucial to female health. The persistent and ubiquitous substitution of the word ‘vagina’ for ‘vulva’, on the other hand, “impair[s] a girl’s capacity to develop an accurate and differentiated ‘map’ of her […] genitals’” (Lerner 2005: 28, cited in Labuski 2015: 8). If ‘vagina’ covers the whole genital area, what do you call the muscular tube it medically denotes? If anatomical proximity justifies the absorption of one term by the other, why do we not call our fingers hands? Surprisingly, there is not much scientific research to be found on the debate, which, at present, is thus left in the hands of pop cultural feminism. There, it seems that every factual statement declaring that “it should go without saying that the vagina is not the vulva and that each one is only part of the complete female genitalia” (Frueh 2003: 138) is met with a response such as the following blog entry entitled “I don’t care about your stupid vulva, it’s all vagina to me” (West 2012). In her article, self-proclaimed feminist West argues that while in an anatomical context specificity would naturally be important, in her context of “general-interest, humorous lady-blog”, it did not matter what she called it, since “every single reader knows exactly what the fuck [she means], in context, when [she] say[s] ‘vagina’”. And yet, in Braun & Kitzinger’s study on female genital terms, participants were uncertain about what vagina and vulva actually were, even though they were provided with a labeled anatomical drawing (Braun & Kitzinger 2001b: 155), indicating that it does not seem to be as evident as the blogger suggests.

A possible explanation for the predominantly uncontradicted expansion of the meaning of the term vagina is provided by Ash (1980b, cited in Braun & Kitzinger 2001b: 155), who has identified the vulva as a “psycholinguistic problem”, where the vulva is seen as a “nothing organ”, without any interest or notable function. The vagina

as receptacle for the male organ, on the other hand, does fulfill an important function and seems to deserve preservation, which is why one simply came to stand for the other. This explanation indicates that the substitution is not innocent at all, but the result of a general devalorization of and disinterest in the female genitalia.

As these elaborations on linguistic issues illustrate, similarly to symbolic and visual depictions, verbal representations of the vulva are divided between complete absorption and concealment through euphemisms and pejorative or sexualized labeling. The taboo nature of the female sex organs results in their silencing on the one hand, and on the generation of slang terms on the other. These slang terms are highly unspecific and derogatory, which reflects the cultural discourse as illustrated in chapter 2.3. Thus, aside from visual input limited to mainstream porn, women also gravely lack a positive or even neutral verbal input which would equip them with the necessary means to positively associate with their sexual organs.

2.5. Effects on physical and psychological health

The previous chapters have shown that the visual, symbolic and verbal input women get regarding their genitalia is characterized by unspecificity, sexualization and objectification, as well as strong negative implications, such as shame or disgust. The following chapter will illustrate the consequences of such an input on female psychological, physical and sexual wellbeing, and will show in how far it is harmed by beauty ideals, a lack of language, symbolic violence, the lack of a clean space as well as the dominating heteronormative and phallocentric views on sexuality.

As has been mentioned previously, women necessarily submit to cultural imperatives which dictate their commitment to attain a culturally acceptable body. This commitment, however, does leave its marks. According to the objectification theory by Fredrickson and Robert (1997), the continuous physical inspection and evaluation by others, and, as a consequence, by themselves, causes women to adopt an observer's perspective on their bodies. They begin to perceive themselves as a collection of parts which is intended to be used by others. This disassociation from their bodies and the concomitant self-objectification can lead to serious health-issues, such as eating disorders or depression.

Research has shown that as far as cultural imperatives and ideals of beauty of the vulva are concerned, they directly or indirectly impact women's sexual well-being, their sexual safety, and their sexual satisfaction (Schick et al. 2010: 395). Even if in this case, the concerned body parts are only seen by an intimate circle of chosen individuals, the mere awareness of existing beauty standards is enough to cause anxiety (Moran & Lee 2018: 230). Once "neoliberal concepts of the body as a project" (Petersen 1997, cited in Moran & Lee 2018: 230) are internalized, women submit to the constant maintenance of different parts of their bodies. In this respect, the combination of patriarchal neoliberalism and the free-choice determination of post-feminism is hazardous. While the former defines and values women in terms of their physical appearance, the latter denies external influences on decisions and hence precludes the identification and criticism of an inherently sexist cultural requirement (Moran & Lee 2018: 230). If it is made into an entirely independent decision to attend to one's body, the industry profiting from such practices is released of their responsibility. It is thus important to scrutinize and reveal mechanisms which promote cultural imperatives of beauty.

As far as female genitals are concerned, existing beauty ideals are promoted by the ubiquitous stereotypical depictions of the designer vulva in mainstream media, and the increasing popularity of labiaplasty procedures. The exposure to these beauty standards results in women being increasingly dissatisfied with their genital appearance. This dissatisfaction in turn leads to genital image self-consciousness during sexual encounter, which means that women are concerned with how their bodies appear to their partner during sex. The cognitive preoccupation with their appearance hinders them from enjoying the physical sensation, and hence directly affects sexual esteem and sexual satisfaction. Importantly, higher levels of sexual esteem have also been related to higher levels of sexual health and satisfaction (Schick et al. 2010: 395). Conversely, the negative self-evaluation as a sexual being decreases the motivation to avoid risky sex, which may lead to a greater exposure to STIs and a greater likelihood of infection (Schick et al. 2010: 400). Thus, the promotion of unrealistic and unattainable ideals of beauty of the vulva can be dangerous for women's health, since the consequent self-consciousness directly affects sexual esteem, satisfaction, the motivation to engage in risky sex and hence the likelihood to get infected with STIs.

However, it is not only unattainable aesthetic ideals which influences women's wellbeing, but also a lack of precise and positive language denoting their 'private parts'. The linguistic unspecificity characteristic of female genital terms has serious implications for women's psychological and physiological health, as well as for the general knowledge about the female sex. It might be a possible explanation for the fact that many people still seem to believe that urine is passed through the vagina (Braun & Kitzinger 2001b: 154). Moreover, if girls do not learn vocabulary to refer to the different parts of their genitals, how will they become able to express, or even think about, any sensations and their localizations? Whether they feel pleasure or pain, lacking the vocabulary to localize such sensations will make it difficult for them to describe them to sexual partners, peers, or doctors. It will also make it hard for them "to explore the range of sensations possible in different locations" (Braun & Kitzinger 2001b: 155), thus affecting the understanding and appreciation of their sexuality. Braun and Kitzinger (2001b: 155-157) emphasize the implications of the unspecific genital terms as follows:

> a language that does not enable women to talk about the different parts of the genitalia, or to conceptualize the genitalia as constructed of various parts, might perpetuate the absence of women's genitalia from their conceptualized body. […] Th[is] lack of precision, and the failure to name the specific parts […] in slang implies a corresponding lack of interest in, or attention to, the details of those genitalia, their functions and sensations. The absence of linguistic differentiation suggests an absence of conceptual differentiation: It invokes (hetero)sexual encounters predicated upon female genitalia as simply a hole to be filled.

The accurate labelling of genitalia is essential, especially with regards to genital pain and sexual pleasure, even more so because the vulva is a taboo area. Other than with other body parts, like feet, young girls and women are unlikely to just point at a specific part of their vulva to indicate where it hurts. Firstly, it is possible that they have never had a closer look at the area themselves and can differentiate and localize different parts. Secondly, even if they have, genitalia are expected to remain hidden, so women will probably not readily expose their 'private parts' and seek advice by peers or parents.

In fact, 40% of women with vulvar pain do not seek treatment (Labuski 2015: 23). The lack of language "significantly compromises the access that a symptomatic woman can gain to effective or expert treatment. The three words she needs to say –

‘My vulva hurts’ – have likely never before passed her lips, nor those of her friends and acquaintances” (Labuski 2015: 23–24). Christine Labuski, a former clinician, accompanied women suffering from vulvodynia, which is chronic vulvar pain without any definable cause, in their quests to tackle the respective “dis-eases” (Labuski 2015: 15) medically and psychologically. While Labuski delineates possible medical causes and symptoms and acknowledges their legitimacy, she argues for vulvodynia being more a cultural condition than a physiological one (Labuski 2015: 14). While the symptoms, such as not being able to sit, to wear tight clothes, to engage in sexual contact, or to be psychologically preoccupied may be a medical condition, the fact that patients are restricted in their possibilities to act upon the pain because they lack the sufficient vocabulary to describe their symptoms and the body parts that are in pain, makes it a cultural one.

Another possible cause of dis-eased genitalia are dirty jokes and other forms of symbolic violence. Vulvae and their bodily functions are disparaged ubiquitously, as in the following, seemingly innocent examples: Why do women have orgasms? – Just another reason to moan, really; or What’s another name for vagina? – The box a penis comes in. Now, these instances may be dismissed as harmless, silly lines, but given their omnipresence, and embedded in the generally depreciating cultural discourse, they can have a significant impact on genital dis-eases. Being constantly confronted with such crude, misogynistic and degrading jokes, sarcasms, or other forms of symbolic violence, female bodies might respond protectively and shamefully. As Labuksi’s research has shown, the reaction to this “genital baggage” can turn out psychosomatically, in the form of actual, physical discomfort (Labuski 2015: 32). The constant threat of sexual violence, for instance, can induce concrete signs of illness. There have been many cases where women have displayed symptoms of rape trauma, such as hypervigilance, avoidance, and a state of numbness, even though they have never experienced sexual violence themselves (Labuski 2015: 27). The fact that they have grown up surrounded by discourses of devaluation and sexual threat, where their genitalia has consistently been insulted and maltreated, has created this physical reality. Hence, the symbolic violence related to female genitalia and sexuality can operate as a sort of infection, and thus not only have psychological, but also physiological effects.

A further factor which is significant to women's health is the missing of a clean space for a vulva. Rather, it is drawn between complete absence and oversexualized hyperpresence (Labuski 2015: 29; Braun & Wilkinson 2001). The first space, the no-space, is rooted in Freud's psychoanalysis, which was informed by Aristotle and Galen's theorization of the woman as 'lack', and defines the female genitalia in negative terms, as lack of a penis (Braun & Wilkinson 2001: 19). This physical absence has been translated into a conceptual absence, where the vulva is generally linguistically and physically concealed, 'naturally' hidden, mysterious, and secret (Braun & Wilkinson 2001: 20). The vulva is frequently rather defined by what it is not, than what it is, and it is generally excluded from public discussion and representation. For example, Michigan state legislators Lisa Brown and Barbara Byrum were ousted from the legislative chambers for using the word 'vagina' in a debate about abortion, and thereby "disrupting the decorum of the House" (White 2018: 125), and Japanese artist Megumi Igarashi alias Rokudenashiko was arrested on obscenity charges for distributing data for 3D prints of her vulva (Labuski 2015: 17).

This verbal and representational erasure of the vulva in public space seems to have been transformed to the private space as well, which can be observed in the reluctance to address the vulva explicitly and to resort to euphemistic or derogatory slang terms. Consequently, women have shown to disassociate from their genitals, they do not seem to recognize it as their own and are reluctant to touch or examine their vulva (Labuski 2015: 29; Braun & Wilkinson 2001: 26). The second, contaminated space, is characterized by the "hyperpresence of pain, pornographic amplification, and felt excess" (Labuski 2015: 29). In this corrupted space, the female genitals are confronted with aesthetic ideals and violence, they are sexualized, and they exist to serve others. The effect of this space is manifest in felt shame and disgust, and in beauty maintenance, in labiaplasty and bikini waxes; short, in the removal of the felt excess. With these two sides, women are commuting on a spectrum between two unacceptable alternatives of ignorance and distaste: one where they do not have a vulva, and one where their vulva is tarnished. On the question whether women can find a space somewhere in between these extremes, Labuski (2015: 17) remains skeptical:

> I'm not convinced that a woman in the contemporary United States can escape the mediated and pernicious "blob" (de Zengotita 2005) of discursive contamination that I call genital dis-ease; indeed, if there is a clean or

> unpolluted cultural space in which the labia and vulva can take up residence, I remain unhappily unaware of its existence.

As a study (a thematic discourse analysis of written responses to open-ended questions by 94 Australian women) on genital appearance dissatisfaction by Moran and Lee (2018) shows, this assumption seems to be correct. While participants stated they were aware of the narrow, sexualized and negative social construction of the female genitals, they still reported that they could not escape the dominant discourses and felt considerable dissatisfaction and anxiety (Moran & Lee 2018: 237). Aside from the psychological reactions to the unsatisfying choice between hyperpresence and no-space described in Moran and Lee's study, there can also be physiological consequences. Accordingly, the vulvae which Labuski's research was invested in developed vulvodynia (Labuski 2015: 30). They responded with redness, itching, and pain to the discursive erasure on the one hand, and the imposed excess on the other. Whether it is physical pain or psychological anxiety, these reactions suggest that the available spaces for vulvae are unhealthy and inacceptable.

However, the heavily tabooed vulva discourse is not only characterized by a commonsensical "lexical and visual absence, disparagement, and inconsequence" (Labuski 2015: 32), but also by a fixation on heteronormative concerns. Accordingly, the female genitals are first and foremostly conceived as reproductive organs and a penetrable receptacle for the penis. This phallocentric perception of the female genitals can be subsumed under the term "compliant vulva" (Labuski 2015: 16) and has serious implications for the definition of what counts as sexually normal and its consequences for the female sexuality. On the one hand, this compliant vulva is rooted in the previously discussed sexualization and objectification of the female body, where it is only intended to be observed and used by others (in this case: male sex partners). On the other hand, this concept stems from definitions of 'normal' sexuality, which defines healthy, pleasurable sex as penetrative sex. This narrow model of sexuality has two serious consequences for women: firstly, a vulva which does not 'work', meaning which is not willing or able to perform penetrative intercourse due to pain or sexual preferences, will not be considered as sexually normal. Thus, non cis-gender individuals are a priori abnormal and cis gender women are likely to engage in penetrative intercourse even if they are severely in pain, in order to deliver as a sexual partner (Labuski 2015: 16). Secondly, considering that female orgasms are highly

variable and require different types of stimulation, only engaging in 'normal', penetrative sex may leave them chronically anorgasmic (Wallen & Lloyd 2011: 280). Thus, in order for women to be able to explore their sexual desire and corporal potential for sexual satisfaction, the labial, clitoral, perineal and pelvic floor anatomy needs to be included as a relevant factor to a normal sexuality (Labuski 2015: 6). Or as Labuski (2015: 6) puts it, it needs a rhetoric of "what her vulva needs" instead of "what his penis expects" in order to enable women to be physically, emotionally and sexually healthy and balanced.

Notably, physicians often seem to sustain such an exclusionary discourse by limiting the clinical dialogue to the capacity of the vulva to fulfil its heteronormative tasks (Braun & Wilkinson 2001: 27). Consequently, a space for women to discuss her external, nonreproductive genitalia is precluded (Labuski 2015: 24). Although a medical encounter should ideally be a space for women to be able to talk plainly about her concerns, many women have found it difficult to move beyond cultural boundaries (Labuski 2015: 24). This means that they stick to a script where their vagina cannot fulfil its penetrative function anymore when seeking medical treatment and remain ignorant with regards to their remaining external genitalia.

Moreover, some gynecologists do not only seem to foster heteronormative agendas through focusing on the female reproductive task, but they might also act as accomplice to the promotion of problematic beauty ideals. This is the case when doctors perform aesthetically informed surgical reductions without exhaustively discussing possible negative side-effects (Labuski 2015: 22). Activist Leonore Tiefer (2010, cited in Labuski 2015: 22) has called this practice "retail medicine", where clinical dialogues rather resemble fashion consulting, and the operating table becomes the spa treatment which you leave with the vulva you never knew you needed.

Now, it has been sufficiently illustrated that existing discourses about and representations of the vulva can have serious effects on women's sexual, psychological and physiological wellbeing. If the cause of the discomfort is cultural, and not medical, the remedy will not be found in surgical procedures or sanitation products. Rather, the answer lies in "breaking the taboo of secrecy and shame […] by talking (seriously) about [the female genitalia]" (Braun & Wilkinson 2001: 27). The only way to combat the growing dissatisfaction and anxiety with female genitalia is to display a natural and diverse range of colors, shapes, ages, and sizes, and to seriously

challenge negative and derogatory discourses by providing positive alternatives (Schick et al. 2010: 402; Schick, Rima, & Calabrese 2011: 81; Moran & Lee 2018: 237–38; Jenkins et al. 2018: 707). Accordingly, women need to become aware of the existing variety in genital appearance in order to defy their alleged deviation from the norm, and to broaden their conceptualization of the ideal. Moreover, the negative framing of women's genitals needs to be completely overthrown by firstly breaking the silence, and by secondly celebrating their beauty and capacities.

3. Personal narratives

It is an undisputed fact that stories, or narratives, terms that will be used synonymously in this thesis, shape and are shaped by our immediate experience. Since what has become to be known as the narrative turn, personal narratives have been understood as an entry point into individual and collective identity (Bamberg 2007: 3). In the process of storytelling, we construct the self and the other, as well as norms and the meaning of our lived experiences; and that not only on the individual, but also on the social level. The scientific interest lies in the subjective and unique composition of personal accounts in the case of the former, and in the narrative patterns and templates available in different cultures communities in the latter. In both capacities, personal narratives have been of focal interest to many different disciplines, from anthropology, psychology, communication, cultural studies, history, law, medicine, sociology, and (socio)linguistics (Bamberg 2007: 1). However, where the different narrative theories diverge, is the definition of what a narrative is, and what is minimally has to contain in order to be considered one. As De Fina and Georgakopoulou pointedly formulate, the study of narrative "tends to be a minefield of multiple and at times competing perspectives in a wide array of humanities and social science fields" (2012: 1). Hence, all scientific investigations start their inquiry with a chapter trying to scope narrative, as does this one. In the subsequent chapters, a social-interactional approach to narrative will be argued for. Firstly, the theoretical development of narrative studies will be outlined in order to arrive at a definition of stories. Then, the significance of narrative practice will be elaborated on; firstly, for meaning making more generally, and secondly, for social change in particular. Lastly, I will discuss the impact of computer-mediated communication on storytelling.

3.1. Scoping narrative: from Labov to narrative as social practice

In order to arrive at a definition of narrative, I will outline the development of narrative theory in linguistics, basing myself upon the four most influential theoretical frameworks: the study on the structure of narrative (Labov & Waletzky 1967), the multidimensional approach on narrative (Ochs & Capps 2001), the small stories research (Georgakopoulou 2007a) and the closely related understanding of narrative as social practice (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2008b, 2015).

The influential Labovian model on narrative structure has become the canonical paradigm in narrative analysis. It set itself apart from story grammars which were only interested in the propositional content of stories and failed to account for the subjective, emotive and constructive potential of the story teller (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos 1997: 59). The Labovian story resulted from research interviews on 'danger of death' experiences and describes the telling of personal experience of non-shared events in the past. According to this definition, a narrative consists of at least two clauses which are temporally ordered. A fully-fledged narrative further consists of five parts: orientation, complicating action, resolution, coda, and evaluation. The last part indicates the teller's attitudes and emotions towards the related events. While originally, evaluation was described as separate part, Labov later revised this assumption and suggested that evaluation occurs across all parts (see Georgakopoulou & Goutsos 1997: 60). This structural approach to narrative has been widely accepted and has consequently been taken up by all different kinds of disciplines, as it provides analytical tools for scrutinizing personal narratives as a place where identity, the self and the other, are constructed and negotiated. Moreover, it has profoundly promoted the role of the teller. However, it has later been criticized for its very limited and strict definition of the linguistic components of a narrative, which have to be "independent clauses in indicative mood with verbs in preterite, historical present, or past progressive" (Dayter 2015: 20). As many researchers (see for example Bamberg 2007; Georgakopoulou 2013; Ochs & Capps 2001) have later pointed out, this narrow definition excludes a gamut of stories told in everyday situations from systematic analysis.

Another major point of criticism of the Labovian analysis is that is rests upon the communicative event of a research interview. The latter, as Labov later pointed out

himself, is characterized by “a degree of decontextualization”, and it “exhibit[s] a generality that is not to be expected from narratives that subserve an argumentative point in a highly interactive and competitive conversation” (Labov 1997: 397, cited after De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012: 115). Rather, it represents an asymmetrical and impersonal communicative situation, and is hence not representative of storytelling as it occurs naturally in daily life. Unlike ordinary listeners, the prototypical interviewer is “attentive, interested and responsive” (Labov 1997: 397, cited in De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012: 115), will avoid any disruption or challenges in the storytelling process and will not provide their own experiences, attitudes and emotions in return. The prototypical interviewee, on the other side, “tells the story to attentive ears, fills in the gaps, and creates the missing frames of mutual reference” (Georgakopoulou 2007a: 33). In the Labovian analysis, the interviewer, as the audience, is entirely neglected, and the interviewee is perceived as sole producer of meaning. In the light of interactional conceptualizations of communication, however, the audience and the general communicative context significantly shape the kinds of stories that are told and can thus not be excluded from a narrative analysis.

Ochs & Capps (2001) were among the most influential voices to point out that the prototypical, canonical story could not sustain in a socio-interactional understanding of communication. Their solution was the formulation of a new set of criteria for the analysis of narratives: “Rather than identifying a set of distinctive features that always characterize narrative, we stipulate dimensions that will be always relevant to a narrative, even if not elaborately manifest” (Ochs & Capps 2001: 19). These dimensions (Ochs & Capps 2001: 20) contain

- Tellership (one active teller – multiple active co tellers)
- Tellability (high – low)
- Embeddedness (detached – embedded)
- Linearity (closed temporal and causal order – open temporal and causal order)
- Moral stance (certain, constant – uncertain, fluid)

Ochs & Capps convincingly argue that narrative inquiry has persistently privileged the default prototype on one end of the continuum with the following qualities: “one active teller, highly tellable account, relatively detached from surrounding talk and activity, linear temporal and causal organization, and certain, constant moral stance” (Ochs & Capps 2001: 20). This narrow definition, however, excludes “less polished, less

coherent narratives that pervade ordinary social encounters and are a hallmark of human condition" (Ochs & Capps 2001: 57). The researchers thus argue that the inclusion of such non-canonical stories in scientific inquiries is instrumental for understanding narratives. They are hence part of a second, competing strand of narrative analysis, which defines narrative not in structural terms, but as talk-in-interaction. According to this understanding, narrative is "emergent, a joint venture and the outcome of negotiation by interlocutors" (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2008a: 381). Rooted in conversation analysis, the definition of narrative as talk-in-interaction underlines the importance of audience, preceding and following talk and action, and that narratives are generally not detachable from the talk in which they occur (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2008a: 381).

While conversation analysis and the definition of narratives as talk-in-interaction is an important step towards a fully-fledged understanding of narratives, it nevertheless places the analysis on the local level of interaction, and fails to account for "articulations between the micro- and the macro-levels of social interaction and relationships" (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2008a: 382). In an attempt to bridge these two traditions of structural and interactional narrative analysis, and to subsequently take the analysis one step further, Bamberg (2007) and Georgakopoulou (2007b) coined the term 'small story'. While it can be understood literally, as many of the stories in question are short in length, it is meant more on a metaphorical level, as "an antidote formulation to a longstanding tradition of big stories (cf. "grand narratives", Lyotard 1984)" (Georgakopoulou 2007a).

Since small stories research departs from the assumption that the closed set of definitional criteria is what disqualifies Labovian analysis as pertinent instrument of analysis, it finds itself in the paradoxical situation of having to define narrative quite openly, though not too openly so as to avoid an anything-goes approach. Consequently, Georgakopoulou takes an intermediate position, where she defines prototypical criteria as important but not essential (Georgakopoulou 2007a: 37). She further understands 'small stories' as an umbrella term for the "fleeting moments of narrative orientation" which include "a gamut of under-represented narrative activities, such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, but also allusions to tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell" (Georgakopoulou 2007b: 146). Her focus is moreover less on the content of the stories,

and more on their functions in specific social events, on the communicative how and its contexts.

With this approach, Georgakopoulou has paved the way for understanding narratives as social practice. By examining small stories' structural and interactional features in light of their cultural context in her study of female adolescents in a small town in Greece (Georgakopoulou 2007a), Georgakopoulou sheds light on the social function of narratives and shows that interactional features are bound to the different situational contexts in which they occur. She argues for a shift from "what does narrative tell us about constructions of self" to "how do we do self (and other) in narrative genres in a variety of sites of engagement?" (Georgakopoulou 2007b: 151). Contrary to the paradigmatic understanding of storytelling purpose as 'doing self', it has become evident that "tellers perform numerous social actions […] and do rhetorical work through stories: they put forth arguments, challenge their interlocutors' views and generally attune their stories to various local, interpersonal purposes" (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2008a: 381–82). Now, these aspects have already played a role for studies of narrative as talk-in-interaction, especially with regards to the sequential orientation to preceding and succeeding talk. However, they have led De Fina and Georgakopoulou (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2008a) to argue that this view is necessary, but not sufficient for regarding narrative from a social interactional perspective. Rather, they propose to analyze narratives as practice, with regards to their role on larger-scale processes, such as "the sanction of modes of knowledge accumulation and transmission, the exclusion and inclusion of social groups, the enactment of institutional routines, the perpetration of social roles, etc." (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2008a: 382).

Regarding narrative as social, semiotic and communicative practice underlines the fact that it is a contextualized activity. Basing herself on Wenger's ([1998] 2001: 47) definition of (social) practice, De Fina argues that narrative activity is "doing, but not just doing in and of itself. It is doing in a historical context that gives structure and meaning to what we do" and includes "tools, procedures, and social roles but also explicit and implicit knowledge about rules, assumptions, and world views" (cited in De Fina 2018: 44). This definition of practice on the one hand underlines the importance of participants' communicative work, and points at narrative as concrete discursive activity, where narrators actively use specific tools and strategies to achieve

communicative and social objects. On the other, it also reveals the necessity to look at the concrete social or symbolic practice, in which the telling is embedded, “as the place of articulation of phenomena that may find their explanation beyond it” (De Fina 2018: 44). Hence, narrative can be regarded as performative social practice, where it serves individuals as “reflexive tool for examining dominant cultural meanings, drawing attention to the culture’s systems of signification and expressions” (Thornborrow & Coates 2005: 10). Looking back at the previous approaches to narrative, we can see that the practice-oriented approach combines and consequently expands the different traditions by firstly looking at concrete discursive strategies (cf. Labov), secondly locating them in their interactional context (cf. Ochs & Capps), and thirdly embedding them in a socio-cultural context.

Importantly, in this perspective, it is counter-productive to depart from a pre-defined understanding of narratives, because the socio-interactional approach is interested in the different shapes and generic forms they take in different contexts and in the communicative activity they fulfill. The concern is not of a classificatory nature, where content or structural composition are to be defined out of context (as in the Labovian analysis). Rather, the aim is to detect the different narrative genres which emerge in different (micro and macro) contexts, and subsequently identify the specific functions they fulfill within them (De Fina 2018: 44). This aspect is of particular importance with regards to digital storytelling, where openness is instrumental to detecting and understanding emerging narrative formats and new ways of sharing personal stories.

Finally, I return to the initial objective of this section, namely defining narrative, which has proven to be a challenging undertaking. Following De Fina & Georgakopoulou (2012: 117), stories will henceforth be understood as “discourse engagements that engender specific social moments and integrally connect with what gets done on particular occasions and in particular setting”. In this respect, prototypical textual criteria will be considered but are not regarded as essential to the definition as story.

3.2. Creating realities, shaping discourse, storytelling as activism

As has been illustrated in the introductory paragraph of this third section, the narrative turn has engendered two strands of narrative inquiry: one with the subject at the center, and one with the community. The subject-centered approach is interested in the way individuals compose stories in order to make sense of their experience: they evaluate and structure singular events causally and chronologically, and thereby "impose order on an otherwise chaotic scenario of life and experience" (Bamberg 2007: 2). The second view of narrative assumes that individuals have recourse to pre-existing templates "that carry social, cultural, and communal currency" (Bamberg 2007: 3). Narratives are thereby understood as recurrent plot lines, which are transmitted from generation to generation in order to guide community members in terms of communal norms and values. Within this strand, scientific inquiries are interested in social sense-making strategies and principles which are fulfilled in the process of storytelling.

Even if the focus of the two views on narratives are different, they both understand the act of storytelling as a social practice, and the teller as active agent in the construction of social reality. Moreover, they assume that narratives are "constitutive of ways of thinking, feeling, and acting at the level of individual choices" (Bamberg 2007: 3). Bruner puts it more acutely, claiming that a "narrative […] is able to shape our immediate experience, even to influence deeply our conceptions of what is real, what must be real" (Bruner 2010: 45). Due to this semiotic potential, storytelling is exploited not only on the individual, but also on the institutional, political and legal level. Indeed, Bruner further argues, "cultures rely upon narrative conventions to maintain their coherence and to shape their members to their requirements. […] Narrative genres provide a powerful means whereby cultures pass on their norms to successive generations." (Bruner 2010: 45). In this respect, narrative inevitably orients us towards issues of power, agency, and social change, which will be the subject of discussion in the following paragraphs. The topic will be introduced by elaborating on theories of power and discourse, basing the argumentation on Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. Consequently, a link will be drawn to storytelling, and the dangers and potentials of narratives with regards to hegemonic ideologies will be illustrated. Lastly, two examples where stories are used as instrument of social change will be presented and the individual's benefit in the process will be commented on.

Questions of power, ideology and discourse inevitably begin with Michael Foucault. His investigations into the relationships between power, knowledge and discourse have been incomparably influential and have revealed important mechanisms as far as the modes of exercise of power in social life are concerned (cf. De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012: 126). Specifically, Foucault emphasizes that knowledge is created and expressed through language in discourse, which, in turn, exercises power by determining what can be spoken about, how it can be spoken about, and by whom. In other words, "knowledge is circulated and sanctioned through discursive practices that are themselves both the product and the tool of power mechanisms" (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012: 127). Importantly, this notion entails that power is not something that is held by a person or institution, but something that is practiced, and in that can be challenged by discourse participants, as long as they dispose of the necessary resources to partake.

Another important contribution to current concepts of power is Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social capital. In his understanding, power does not have to be material, but can be of symbolical nature, as far as it concerns the production and reception of meaning (cf. De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012: 127). In this respect, power is maintained through the constant reproduction of well-established norms and values. When the latter are internalized, the maintenance of power appears as natural course of action. In order to change power hierarchies, individuals need to acquire symbolic capital, which denotes "a capital of honor and prestige" (Bourdieu 1977: 179, cited in De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012: 128), meaning "an influence that comes from their being perceived as worthy of recognition" (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012: 128). To this end, storytelling is a powerful means, as it is involved in the negotiation of what is tellable in a culture and what is not, and thus "play[s] an important part in constructing life histories, group identities and practices, as well as social ideologies" (Thornborrow & Coates 2005: 11). It can be used to confirm existing norms and values on the one hand, and to challenge and resist them on the other.

Investigations into the relationship between storytelling and power align with the approaches presented above in as much as they perceive power not as an abstract force imposed from above, but as something that is constantly negotiated within discursive and communicative interaction. Importantly, in order to be able to participate in such a negotiation by means of storytelling, individuals or institutions must firstly

have control over the necessary linguistic and interactional resources appropriate for the respective context, and secondly dispose of the necessary authority to tell their story, meaning they need to legitimate their right to tell it, as well as its credibility (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012: 125).

Studies between the links of power and storytelling have revealed that its semiotic potential is often exploited in order to exclude, discriminate, or abuse. This is the case when narrative frames and motifs are created and promoted in hegemonic discourse in order to construct experience in a way that prevents different voices from being heard. This is of particular importance in public institutional or legal settings, when participants have an unequal status (see for example asylum seeker's interviews as discussed in De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012: 120). On the other hand, Bruner argues, a "narrative also provides us with the means of going beyond the culturally ordinary. […] In their very nature, [stories] inevitably throw their weight in support of or against what is culturally taken for granted, however subtly" (Bruner 2010: 46). Indeed, Bruner argued elsewhere that what makes a story tellable, is exactly the departure from the way we expect things to be (Bruner 1991: 11, cited in Thornborrow & Coates 2005: 11) and the telling of a story thus lends itself to challenge ideologically biased versions of reality. Individuals thus make use of storytelling in order to promote their version of reality, for themselves and for others.

In this capacity as sense-making devices, narratives are of particular importance for individuals who face a rupture of continuity in their lives, as for example caused by illnesses. Cancer patients, for instance, have displayed a particular urge to narrate their story in order to cope with their new situation (Page 2012: 49). The linearity and causality inherent in narrative structures requires individuals to select and order their experiences in a way that makes the actual life experience appear just as logical, ordered and coherent (Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin 2007: 5). This apparent coherence has proven to function as therapeutic means of healing the ruptured life experience which positively influences the narrator's physical and mental well-being (Pennebaker 2000, cited in Page 2012: 49). As Bamberg et al. pointedly formulate,

> Narrative functions as the glue that enables human life to transcend the natural incoherence and discontinuity of the unruly everyday (and the unruly body – see Punday, 2003) by imposing a point of origin and an orientation towards closure, and thereby structuring the otherwise meaningless into a meaningful life" (Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin 2007: 5)

As this quote suggests, the experienced discontinuity is not only triggered by punctual events as drastic as fatal maladies, but also by the general inability to identify as a 'healthy' person, to comply with or to perform social roles. Accordingly, individuals make use of narratives in order to display biographies which diverge from the norm in order to firstly navigate their own position in society, and to secondly serve as guidance for people who may be in a similar situation. Examples for such discursive practices would be coming-out stories (Wong 2009; Jones 2015), religious conversion stories (Harding 2000), Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) stories (Cain 1991, Swora 2001), or stories fashioning the migrant self in course of the dreamers movement in the United States (De Fina 2018). In these narratives, the objective is not merely an individual, but first and foremostly a social one. While the individuals naturally construct and represent their identity within their stories, they also notably shape ideological versions of reality at the same time. Indeed, "it is through narrating ourselves, through constructing the self through narrative, that we construct our culture" (Brockmeier & Carbaugh 2001: 16, cited in Thornborrow & Coates 2005).

Accordingly, in his textual analysis of 48 coming-out stories circulated in print and electronic media, Wong has illustrated that they rather constitute public testimonies than personal stories and serve as a vehicle for social change (Wong 2009: 26). Narrators do not only report their personal experiences, but they also tend to speak on behalf of the gay community as a whole and consequently significantly contribute to the shaping of the gay imagery. Wong has shown that the emergence of the extremely popular coming-out stories as a genre is at the same time the result of and instrument for social change. They have been prompted by socioeconomic factors like the emergence of the gay and lesbian movement, a wider acceptance of same-sex desire in mainstream society, the recognition of gay people as an economic target market, and lastly the advent of the internet (Wong 2009: 26). Subsequently, the stories push social change in as far as they have given a voice to a previously silenced community, have expanded the audience via the internet to people who might not be in touch with the gay community otherwise, have offered encouragement and guidance to people in similar situation, and lastly, have provided a language to talk about one' experience and which sheds a positive light on the otherwise negatively connoted situation. Moreover, the stories have a clear sociopolitical function, i.e. to lead those who are still closeted out of hiding and join the narrators in their movement, and to

consequently create and expand a group of like-minded people. In sum, they are an "important vehicle for the dissemination of cultural beliefs central to the gay imaginary. As such, they are vital to the construction of an imagined community that is built upon same-sex desire" (Wong 2009: 29).

In this respect, narratives have been used to raise awareness, create consensus, and solidify internal cohesion around all kinds of social and spontaneous political movements. De Fina (2018) has shown that such kinds of stories are not only circulated by individuals but are likewise elicited by campaigns and social movements as means of persuasion strategy. In her analysis of 15 Youtube videos by migrants posted on the Dreamers movement's *United We Dream* website, De Fina illustrates how narratives are used as tool of political activism in order to firstly elicit empathy, secondly raise awareness for the situation of undocumented citizens, and lastly present the narrator and their family as desirable citizens (De Fina 2018: 50). Indeed, Fairclough (1989, cited in De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012: 141) has argued that discourse practices are instrumental to the creation of consensus. Storytelling, in particular, holds special ideological power due to its dramatized nature (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012: 141). A quite recent example for such political activism via storytelling is the Austrian women's movements campaign *Frauenvolksbegehren 2.0*, where the initiators communicated each of the nine main demands via a personal story, see for example "Forderung Macht teilen" (*Frauenvolksbegehren 2.0* 2018). These social movements mentioned above illustrate how stories are used in order to provide authority, credibility and attention to groups and individuals, and to disseminate specific versions of social reality with the ultimate objective of sociopolitical change.

For the individual, the possibility to share their story, to tell it in their own words, gives them control and authority over their experience, and by extension allows them to reflect or challenge ideologically biased versions of reality. Hence, when individuals report their understanding of lived reality and embark on the balancing act between asserting autonomy and conforming to cultural norms (which is the case in any case of storytelling, see De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012: 149), they claim agency with regards to their experience. When homosexual people, for instance, make their coming-out the subject of discussion, they claim their right to define issues of homosexuality. The internet, and social media in particular, play an important part in issues of accessing and controlling narratives, and by extension social processes.

While it provides any individual who has internet access with the opportunity to share their story with a large audience, the discursive environment of the Web 2.0 also has important implications for the communicative event.

3.3. CMC & digital storytelling – the importance of co-construction & audience

As has been extensively discussed in chapter 3, narrative inquiries need to take into account the communicative contexts in which the storytelling occurs and consider potential implications for the involved micro und macro processes. With regards to digital storytelling, this means considering how the Web 2.0 shapes the narrative action on the producing as well as on the receiving end. After a brief overview of the development of narrative inquiries in computer-mediated communication, I will attempt to outline the main characteristics essential to digital storytelling and focus more closely on the importance of audience participation.

Given the immense influence of digital technology on our lives, it is not surprising that there has been an explosive interest in computer-mediated communication (henceforth CMC) across all kinds of disciplines. With storytelling being among the most common forms of human interaction, it was not long before CMC attracted the attention of narrative analysts. In the late 1990s, narrative inquiries began scrutinizing online narratives with regards to their formal composition, a period which Androutsopoulos (2006: 420) entitled 'first wave' of CMC. Researchers were particularly interested in medium-specific textual features and genres, and the ways in which they differed from their face-to-face interactional counterparts. They focused for example on e-mails, chat-room conversations and investigated general characteristics of internet language as well as some sociolinguistic aspects, such as age or gender, however almost always from a structural and taxonomic perspective and in comparison to face-to-face communication (De Fina 2016: 475).

With the Web 2.0 came a shift in scientific attention towards user-centered approaches. O'Reilly (2004, cited in Herring 2013: 2) coined the term Web 2.0 within an entrepreneurial context, designating a new era of online interaction on websites which called for a new business strategy including viral and interactive marketing. Owing to technological developments which allowed for more interaction and creative production, Herring later redefined the term as "web-based platforms that emerged as

popular in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and that incorporate user-generated content and social interaction, often alongside or in response to structures or (multimedia) contend provided by the sites themselves" (Herring 2013: 4). The advent of SNSs has extinguished the distinction between amateur and professional forms of self-expression while at the same time promoting creativity through the enhanced possibility of combining different semiotic systems (Georgakopoulou 2013: 701). Consequently, SNS have elicited an abundance of personal stories, from status updates on Facebook to extensive biographies on weblogs and 'retweets' on Twitter, which made evident the heterogeneity and hybridity of shared stories online. In line with more recent definitions of narrative as practice, this evident variability of online stories made researchers reject the previously assumed homogeneity of CMC discourse and turned their interest away from a description of genres towards a focus on users and practices (De Fina 2016: 475).

This new approach entails a thorough scrutiny of storytelling in context on the one hand, and particular attention to participant norms and frameworks and the role of specific media affordances which characterize different environments on the other (De Fina 2016: 476). Affordances, according to Hutchby (2001: 444, cited in Shane-Simpson et al. 2018: 276), are "functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object" and have bridged the gap between "technological determinism" and "media blindness" (Georgakopoulou 2013: 699). Although socio-interactional studies of narratives in CMC are still in their infancy, numerous investigations prove a clear trend towards user-oriented approaches, such as analysis of email interactions of diasporic Greek in London (Georgakopoulou 2004), of Facebook updates and Celebrity narratives on Twitter (Page 2012), of shared stories on Facebook, Youtube and Wikipedia (Page 2018), of coming-out narratives (Jones 2015; Wong 2009), of narratives in travel blogs (Eisenlauer & Hoffmann 2010), of storytelling and audience reactions in social media (De Fina 2016), and so forth.

As established at the outset, these storytelling practices are highly variable and depend on the media used to share the story, the platform in which it is embedded, as well as the audience that access and use such media (De Fina 2016: 477). Accordingly, it is hard to make generalizations for social media stories. Nonetheless, in an attempt to coherently describe the heterogenous social media context, Page

(2012: 8) has formulated five characteristics, which profoundly impact narrative practices, i.e.: they are (1) collaborative, in that they encourage collective production and reception; they are (2) dialogic, in as far as they promote interactive participation; they are (3) emergent, in the sense that they allow for asynchronous, episodic, unilinear, fragmented and spatially divided production and reception and emphasize the process rather than the product of storytelling; they are (4) personalized, in that they tailor and contextualize the emerging content to the individual user as well as provide the opportunity to upload original content; and they are (5) contextually rich, in the sense that the characteristics mentioned above contribute to a dynamic, layered and complex social media context.

Interestingly, the different examples of investigations in social media contexts mentioned above arrive at similar conclusions, despite their different foci. Hoffmann and Eisenlauer (2010), for example, identify four features of online narratives, namely multilinearity, fragmentation, multimodality and interactivity. Compared to Page, they thus likewise emphasize that narratives are emergent (multilinear and fragmented), personalized (multimodal), and collaborative and dialogic (interactive). While a rich context is not explicitly listed as characteristic, it could be argued that it is implied in the dynamic relationship between the other four features. In her analysis of shared stories, Page (Page 2018: 18–23) furthermore identifies co-tellership, distributed linearity, intertextual embeddedness and an assumption of shared attitudes as relevant factors. While the first two features are again new names for the familiar characteristics of collaborative, dialogic and emergent stories, intertextual embeddedness and an assumption of shared attitudes seem to be a new and particular feature of shared stories. Finally, Georgakopoulou arrives at a similar conclusion in her overview on narrative analysis and CMC, stating that stories are increasingly recognized as "fragmented, distributed, co-constructed, and intertextually linked" (2013: 708), thus corresponding to all but one of Page's characteristics, i.e. personalization. While the latter is not explicitly emphasized by Georgakopoulou, a related argument can be found in her overview, where she draws particular attention to the fact that stories are semiotically flexible. This means that they can be shared, transposed in new contexts, and thus recontextualize and reconfigure certain meanings (Georgakopoulou 2013: 702). While she does not emphasize the individual, the argument resonates with Page's suggestion of personalized, recontextualized and tailored stories. Different

from Page, Georgakopoulou further elaborates on macro processes and underlines the emancipatory power of storytelling, which in SNS is "taken to new heights with the possibilities that the media offer for the co-production and the wide distribution of stories" (Georgakopoulou 2013: 701). As these studies illustrate, although they might have different ultimate research interests and foci, the conclusions they draw on online stories are quite similar and integrate smoothly in Page's general social media characteristics. It seems that, while the researchers may name and group the characteristics of social media narrative practices differently, they agree on their quality to a large extent.

Of particular importance for this investigation is De Fina's (2016) study on the impact of audience reactions on storytelling. Basing herself on the theoretical constructs of framing and participation frameworks, De Fina developed a coding system which represents the first systematic approach to user comment analysis and consequently to the impact of audience reactions to the storytelling process. As has been previously established, storytelling on social media is characterized by its openness to users' participation, particularly through the use of the commentary features, attending to which allows for a better understanding of the reception and manipulation of stories in digital environments (De Fina 2018: 478). Participants can shape the telling for example by confirming or contesting content-related propositions and meanings (e.g. the story's tellability), sharing their attitudes, making a remark about the telling itself, demand more information, opening up an entirely new storyline, or distributing the story in other contexts, thus shape its continuation. Goodwin (1986, cited in De Fina 2016: 478) was the first to systematically analyze audience participation in storytelling and based himself on Goffman's (1981, cited in De Fina 2016: 478) theory of participation frameworks, illustrating that stories are inevitably joint ventures, being told by someone to someone. This means that personal narratives are necessarily told by a certain teller who has a specific audience in mind, in online as well as offline contexts. Goffman draws attention to the significance of different production and reception formats, and thus proposed different categories for each process: the speaker can be decomposed into the roles of the 'animator', who utters the word, the 'author', who produces the text, and the 'principal', who takes responsibility for the content (1981, cited in De Fina 2016: 478). The audience, on the other hand, can be divided into addressed and unaddressed recipients, and into the

ways in which they make their presence felt (e.g. through a 'like', through sharing the story, or through a comment). These roles strongly depend on the frames available to the audience, which is why De Fina bases herself upon Young's (1987, cited in De Fina 2016: 479) framework on storytelling analysis, who distinguishes taleworld (events to which the narrative alludes) and storyrealm (the manner of telling), a distinction also known as story versus discourse. De Fina expands this framework by 'outside world' and 'second story' (see figure 3) and finally arrives at the following codes for analyzing the user comments' frame focus (De Fina 2016: 482):

Frame focus of comments	Subfocus
Storyrealm	Comment on participants
	Comment on tellability
	Comment on aspects of the activity at hand
	Meta-comment
	Comment on the teller as a teller
	Comment on the co-teller
Taleworld	Comment on some other aspect of the story world
	Comment on the character
	Comment on action
Outside world	Unrelated comment
	Comment on a character as a person in the world
	Loosely related comment
	Comment on the teller as a person in the world
Second story	Initiation of second story
	Comment on the action of the second story

Figure 3 Frame focus on comments. (De Fina 2016: 482)

Besides the comments' main content, De Fina suggests the following categories for attending to their analysis:

(1) Thread to which the comment belonged: attends to the number of interactional and single-comment threads
(2) Participant name: attends to the number of participants in the respective threads
(3) Interactional dynamics: attends to the relation to other comments within each thread to give insights into the extent and nature of engagement with other users
(4) Frame focus of the comment: attends to the main content, see figure 3
(5) Medium: attends to media used by participants (text, text and video, text and photo, text and GIF, photo only, video only)
(6) Tone: attends the overall tone of the message

With this coding system, De Fina is the first to offer a systematic analysis of user comments which consequently allows insights into the impact of audience reactions to

the storytelling process. Her analysis showed that participants engaged more with the storytelling world than with the taleworld, and that comments proved to be considerably reflexive (De Fina 2016: 493). According to her, this suggests that in online storytelling, the content of the stories loses attraction while other aspects, such as ways of telling, gain prominence (De Fina 2016: 493). Given the shortage of systematic comment analysis with regards to storytelling, it will be interesting to see in the future whether these insights are observable across different SNS and storytelling contexts.

In any case, the previous paragraphs clearly illustrate that CMC has a significant impact on storytelling, as online environments are highly interactive, dynamic, and hyperlinked. The resulting heterogeneity and flexibility of digital stories proves the need for a user and practice-oriented approach, with the medium and the participants' objectives, social roles and relationships in mind, rather than a structural taxonomic one. This line of inquiry corresponds to the general development towards a socio-interactional view on stories in narrative studies.

4. Instagram – sharing personal stories

As was extensively discussed in the previous chapter, a socio-interactional approach to narrative requires attending to the contexts in which the stories occur. Since in the case of this investigation the concerned context is the SNS Instagram, it is necessary to examine the platform more closely. The following paragraphs will present the SNS and examine motivations for its use as well as their implications, focusing particularly on the site's appearance-based set-up and its consequences for beauty ideals, acts of self-disclosure, and artivist projects.

The SNS Instagram was founded in 2010 exclusively as photo-sharing platform (Bernárdez-Rodal, Padilla-Castillo, & Sosa-Sánchez 2019: 28). Originally, the platform only allowed the upload of photos, however it soon added the 'caption'-feature and encouraged users to add a description below the photos, in the forms of text and hashtags. In 2012, Facebook acquired Instagram for one billion dollars, and since May 2013, it is possible to post on both sites simultaneously. Since then, Instagram has been the fastest growing SNS. Since 2016, the number of worldwide users has doubled to one billion active users in 2018 (Clement 2019). While in the US, Facebook and YouTube continue to be the most popular social media platforms over all age groups, Instagram and Snapchat are overwhelmingly used by 18-29-year-olds (67%

and 62%), and even more so by 18-24-year-olds (75% and 73%) (Perrin & Anderson 2019). Moreover, Instagram is the most favored SNS among women (Bernárdez-Rodal, Padilla-Castillo, & Sosa-Sánchez 2019: 27). Instagram's "astronomical and unprecedented" (Bernárdez-Rodal, Padilla-Castillo, & Sosa-Sánchez 2019: 27) growth is certainly partly due to the medium specific affordances: being an image-based platform, the SNS is set up like a personal photo album and is thus ideally suited for the documentation and surveillance of everyday experience. Indeed, a study by Shane-Simpson et al. (2018: 284) has shown that users who prefer Instagram over Twitter and Facebook identified visual imagery as reason for their preference. Moreover, influencers (users with a high number of followers) have recognized Instagram as the best platform to engage audiences (Morrison 2016), which is likely due to the fact that images, more so than text, can generate feelings of closeness, enhanced intimacy and participation in the lives of others (Pittman; Reich 2016, cited in Shane-Simpson et al. 2018: 278).

Accordingly, Sheldon & Bryant (2016) have described four main motivations for using Instagram, namely (1) surveillance/knowledge about others, (2) documentation, (3) coolness, and (4) creativity. In comparison to other SNS such as Facebook, Instagram is less about relational identity, and more about personal identity (Sheldon & Bryant 2016: 90). For example, users do not 'friend' other users like it is in Facebook, but they can only 'follow' each other. Moreover, although Instagram has a 'direct messaging' feature, the platform's set-up generally encourages a one-to-many communication, which engenders more self-presentation than relationship-building. Correspondingly, users who prefer Instagram over Facebook also show higher levels of self-disclosure, but lower levels of bonding social capital (Shane-Simpson et al. 2018: 283).

With the two prior motivations being surveillance and documentation, the users confirm the basic structure and intent of the mobile phone application. While there is now a web version, it is still impossible to upload new pictures there, which suggests that operators wish to leave the focus on smartphone-usage which is characterized by spontaneity and immediacy. In the app, users can observe their 'feed', search for specific users or hashtags, view their own profile, or of course create postings. The personalized feed consists of the images (plus captions) of the followed accounts, as well as 'stories', which are photos or videos of maximum 10 seconds displayed in a

little bar on top of the site for 24 hours and which are deleted afterwards. Instagram probably added this feature (just like Facebook and WhatsApp) in response to the unpredicted success of Snapchat, a SNS which was built upon the idea of deleting content after 24 hours. User's own profile consists of a 'bio' (short for biography), which is a little space for 150 characters of text above their pictures, as well as the collection of all posted images. The focus on the phone application as well as the story-feature promote spontaneous, real-time content, which encourages users to firstly document their everyday experiences, and secondly follow those of other users. The image format further encourages the posting of mundane events, since they are more easily and meaningfully shared in the form of a photo (e.g. of a mouth-watering Pizza) than in textual form (e.g. 'Today I had excellent Pizza'). The other two motivations, coolness and creativity, are probably related to the app's popularity on the one hand, since coolness can be regarded as being trendy among peers, and to the visual opportunities on the other. Firstly, Instagram offers filters to edit photos and thus allows to give them an artsy, high-quality, professional touch. Secondly, users put a lot of creative effort in the images they post in order to generate as many 'likes' as possible, since these are a form of social recognition and provide validation.

A notable implication of Instagram being an image-based platform is that appearance plays an extremely important role. Just like older media such as the TV or magazines, especially appearance-focused social media have been shown to promote unattainable beauty ideals and to significantly affect body image concerns (Cohen et al. 2019: 1548). Following the idea that users carefully and consciously curate images and present themselves in a way that is socially favorable, their content will most likely adhere to current ideals, such as the thin ideal, the curvy ideal, or the fit ideal (Cohen et al. 2019: 1548). Being constantly exposed to such a stream of visual ideals, which come disguised as spontaneous depictions of real-life, leads to significant body image concerns, including increased negative mood, body dissatisfaction, self-objectification and disordered eating (Cohen et al. 2019: 1548).

However, unlike traditional media, SNSs equip users with increased agency in terms of content reception (which users they follow), as well as content production. In the matter of beauty ideals, the fact that content is user-generated has allowed the emergence of a body-positivity trend as a form of resistance against unrealistic and unattainable ideals. This trend describes the representation of the body in all its

different shapes, sizes, colors, and manifestations and has made visible aspects of the body which normally remain hidden, such as stretch marks, belly rolls, cellulite or blemished skin (Cohen et al. 2019: 1548). Users tag their images with hashtags such as #bodypositive, #bodypositivity, or #bopo. Since Cohen et al. researched the numbers of posts with these hashtags on Instagram approximately one year ago, they have almost doubled. In the List below, the first number indicates the current number of posts (2019), while the number in the brackets refers to the search in June 2018 (Cohen et al. 2019: 1548).

- #bodypositive: 10,220,207 (6,064,245 in June 2018)
- #bodypositivity 3,327,923 (1,880,753 in June 2018)
- #bopo 952,984 (671,063 in June 2018)

The explosive rise of body-positive posts on Instagram suggests that there is not only a need for representing marginalized bodies, but also for consuming them. In fact, the pop-cultural emergence of the #bopo-phenomenon coincides with a theoretical shift away from the negative impact of beauty ideals, towards the presumably positive impact of body appreciation. The latter is defined as “appreciating the features, functionality, and health of the body rather than focusing solely on its appearance” (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow 2015b, cited in Cohen et al. 2019: 1548) and indeed, research has shown that exposure to body-appreciation content can have psychological and physical health benefits: A positive body image positively correlates with emotional, social and psychological well-being, a conscious diet, physical activity as well as a certain resistance against negative impacts of media exposure (Andrew et al. 2016; Tylka and Wood-Baralow 2015, cited in Cohen et al. 2019: 1549). Particularly, viewing body positive content on Instagram may not only improve body satisfaction and body appreciation, but also positive mood, a factor which has not been considered in previous research (Cohen et al. 2019: 1559). However, viewing body positive images does not prevent self-objectification. It seems that any emphasis on the body causes people to compare and focus on their own appearance. Nevertheless, other than unattainable beauty ideals, body positive content elicited positive judgements on people’s own beauty, which indicates a broader definition of the concept allowing for a variety of appearances and attributes (Cohen et al. 2019: 1560). Importantly, these studies demonstrate that it is important to provide women with networks of respect and body-appreciation and with broader conceptualizations of

normality and beauty in order for them to internalize them, to reduce their vulnerability to body dissatisfaction and to foster a positive body image on their own (Cohen et al. 2019: 1549).

The example of #bodypositive content has shown how user generated content allows to give voice to typically marginalized groups, and thus functions as a sort of social activism. Other SNS, particularly Facebook and Twitter, have been researched in detail with regards to their empowering and activist capacities. Given its appearance-based focus, Instagram may have been neglected with regards to its political, discursive and empowering potential. However, examples like the one mentioned above prove that images can serve as an important vehicle to take discursive, empowering action. Indeed, Instagram has been proven to be the prime SNS for transmitting what has been formerly known as 'action art' and is today referred to by the term 'artivism' (Bernárdez-Rodal, Padilla-Castillo, & Sosa-Sánchez 2019: 23–24). This concept does not only involve the product of protest art in the form of an image or video, but also its dissemination and transformation via social media. The latter have transformed the event of action art in terms of delocalization, the dissolution of national, commercial, and space-time boundaries and audience engagement, which is characterized by participation and information transmission (Bernárdez-Rodal, Padilla-Castillo, & Sosa-Sánchez 2019: 26). In this artform, the focus is not on the product, but on the social intent of the creators and its reception by the audience, which depends strongly on their reproduction and interpretation. In any case, artivism mostly has an educational, critical and combative character, and its idea is to turn civil society into an agent of political change (Bernárdez-Rodal, Padilla-Castillo, & Sosa-Sánchez 2019: 26). Research has shown that artivism is mostly practiced by young people, who, besides being experts in digital communication, use social media for their protest and "have generated a highly specialized rhetorical language in this type of demonstration that they already perceive as intertextual and thematically transversal" (Bernárdez-Rodal, Padilla-Castillo, & Sosa-Sánchez 2019: 26). *The Vulva Gallery* can be considered as an artivist project, and its structure and reception are an ideal example for a participatory and engaged audience. The artist paints vulvas and only in collaboration with her user's personal stories does her art acquire all its meaning potential and discursive power.

A last important insight gained by examining reasons for social media preferences is the portrayal of higher levels of self-disclosure in the case of Instagram users. According to the saying ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’, users make use of the medium to express negative emotions and experiences, which might otherwise be hard to put into words. While other SNS such as Facebook are governed by a ‘positivity bias’ that deems personal expressions of negative emotions inappropriate and engenders a high risk of negative responses and social rejection, Instagram is widely used to engage in storytelling about sensitive experiences (Andalibi, Ozturk, & Forte 2017: 1485). Again, the reason for this discrepancy seems to lie in the media affordances: psychologists suggest that challenging emotions and experiences can more easily be expressed visually than verbally (Andalibi, Ozturk, & Forte 2017: 1486). In a study of sensitive disclosures on Instagram, Andalibi, Ozturk and Forte examined postings with the hashtag #depression in order to investigate the kinds of sensitive disclosures that are shared, as well as the reactions they elicited, and found considerable evidence of social support, a sense of community and beneficial effects on the disclosers. They defined sensitive disclosures as the “sharing of negative emotions, stigmatized experiences, or those that make people feel vulnerable” (Andalibi, Ozturk, & Forte 2017: 1486) and were particularly interested in the role of imagery. They found out that the combination of images and storytelling seems to elicit the most positive response, as it resulted in the most encouraging comments, expression of solidarity, and promotion of healthy choices (Andalibi, Ozturk, & Forte 2017: 1485). Importantly, self-disclosure here is understood as intentional method of regulating interaction rather than designating any form of communication, such as clothes, or laughing at a joke (Jourard; Joinson, cited in Andalibi, Ozturk, & Forte 2017: 1486).

Attempting to explain why people disclose things about themselves, Rimé (2009, cited in Andalibi, Ozturk, & Forte 2017: 1487) argues that the social sharing of emotion and difficult experiences is a matter of meaning making, in which people make sense of their experiences by engaging in cognitive work and social exchange. Particularly in the storytelling process, people need to communicate their distress in a shared language and thus can express themselves candidly and solidify their identities, which in turn will likely lead to social support or the finding of similar others (Andalibi, Ozturk, & Forte 2017: 1496). Indeed, Andalabi, Ozturk and Forte’s study has shown

that Instagrammers self-disclose predominantly to legitimize their experiences, not necessarily to receive actual, tangible support in the form of information or goods. Importantly, medium specific affordances, in this case the flexibility with regards to the user-name which promotes anonymity (Instagram does not impose a real-name policy) and the lack of nonverbal cues encourages self-disclosing practices. As far as responses are concerned, the researchers underline the need for what Goffman entitled "sympathetic others" (1986, cited in Andalibi, Ozturk, & Forte 2017: 1487); those understanding our feelings because they share the same social stigma or have had similar experiences and will hence be able to transmit to each other that they are essentially normal, "in spite of appearances and in spite of his own self-doubt" (1986, cited in Andalibi, Ozturk, & Forte 2017: 1487).

5. Study design

5.1. Objectives and data

The objective of this investigation is twofold; firstly, it is interested in the discursive construction of personal narratives about female genitalia and its implications for the larger, cultural discourse. Secondly, it aims at identifying the forms the praxis of storytelling takes on Instagram. Accordingly, the following research questions will be guiding the analysis:

1. What kinds of stories are shared?
2. Which aim do narrators presumably pursue in the sharing of their story?
3. How are the stories discursively constructed on the micro level?
4. What are recurrent roles and plots?
5. What do the stories tell us about the macro level of the vulva discourse?
6. In how far does the linguistic construction of the vulva reproduce or depart from the mainstream discourse?
7. Which female genital terms are used?
8. In how far is the educational mission proclaimed by *TVG* taken up by the users?
9. What is the relationship between author, animator and principal (cf. chapter 3.3) and what role does it play for the storytelling?
10. What role does audience participation play for the evolvement of the stories?

In order to answer these questions, the investigation involves two analyses: the first one consists of a discursive narrative analysis, which attends to the individual stories on the one hand, and to the whole text by means of a corpus analysis on the other. These steps will give insights into the specific narrative and linguistic construction of the female genitalia and they will be explained in more detail in the next chapter. The second analysis will examine audience participation and consequently their role in the storytelling process.

In the first step, the investigation takes as data the most recent 50 personal narratives shared on the Instagram profile *the.vulva.gallery* (henceforth *TVG*), with July 12th, 2019 being the reference day. Since the account is updated daily, there will be newer posts by the time of finalization. This profile, which will be presented in more detail in chapter 5.3, is operated by Hilde Atalanta, an Amsterdam-based artist, and is used as platform for three kinds of posts: firstly, Atalanta's illustrations of vulvas with genitalia-related information in the caption. Secondly, posts celebrating the community and the site's success or advertising the artist's merchandise (a book, postcards, a card-game, paintings, bags, pins…) and thirdly, individual portraits of vulvas which Atalanta paints from photos sent to her, with personal stories of the vulva-owners in the caption. These stories are the research object of this investigation, and can clearly be distinguished from other posts by the quotation marks and the consistent phrase: "This is a vulva portrait of a lovely person, together with the words she wanted to share with you ✨" (*TVG*) in front of or after every story. The postings vary in length, with the shortest counting 50 and the longest 295 words. At this point of the analysis, the hashtags in the captions, which can be found below every story, will be excluded when they are not part of the personal story (which is clearly demarcated from the rest of the post by quotation marks), because they are not generated by the authors of the stories, but by Hilde Atalanta. However, they will be considered briefly in the second analysis. Notably, there is no way of ascertaining that the stories are not altered in any way by the operator of the site, since she has not yet responded to an inquiry concerning this matter. While this does not affect the analysis, it needs to be kept in mind, especially when making assumptions about speaker roles or linguistic choices.

In a second step, the first 50 comments displayed under the most recent 15 posts will be analyzed in order to draw conclusions on the storytelling process on

Instagram. In some cases, there were less than 50 comments available, which is why the initial plan to look at 10 posts was extended to 15, which results in a total number of 569 analyzed comments.

5.2. Methodology

Two perspectives are at the heart of this investigation: firstly, that narrative is a social practice where narrators actively and purposefully construct and share their experience. Secondly, that social media affordances significantly shape the storytelling process and potentially equip users with enhanced emancipatory and discursive power. The interlacement of these two perspectives results in the multi-dimensional research interest presented above, which in turn calls for a multi-dimensional approach to analysis: firstly, a discursive narrative analysis will attend to the personal stories, and secondly, an analysis of audience reactions will examine the comments posted below the stories by other users. Both analytical steps will be briefly explained below.

5.2.1. Doing discursive narrative analysis

The approach to narrative analysis taken in this investigation is largely influenced by De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2012), who, as the subtitle of their monography *Analyzing narrative* says, examine personal stories within *Discourse and sociolinguistic perspectives*. However, the terminology was taken from Sutherland, Breen and Lewis (2013), who conducted a "discursive narrative analysis" of online autobiographical accounts of self-injury, since they emphasize the multi-dimensional analytical objective, asserting equal weight to both discursive and narrative elements. They highlight the importance of combining both analytical tools in order to correspond to claims resulting from a practice-oriented approach to narrative.

Very often, building on a canonical understanding of narrative, narrative inquiries only examine the temporal and sequential ordering of events (Sutherland, Breen, & Lewis 2013: 12). However, if we understand narrative as situated, interactive and communicative practice (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012: 124), then the organization and construction of such narrative texts can be regarded as discursive accomplishments (Sutherland, Breen, & Lewis 2013: 12). Accordingly, aspects such as sequentially, causality and temporality are not regarded as prerequisite for narrative

inquiries, where they are treated as resource for understanding experiences, but they are rather viewed as storytellers' situated concerns, resources, and accomplishments. Assuming that narrators employ specific discursive strategies to accomplish specific social outcomes, it is indispensable to pay close attention to *how* stories are told; hence, to analyze these micro-details of language use, while on the other hand not losing sight of these details being part of a larger construct, namely a story. Evidently, limiting the analysis to discursive mechanisms would neglect the fact that these "can build on, refer to, and inform greater narrative developments" (Sutherland, Breen, & Lewis 2013: 12). Hence, focusing solely on narrative structure fails to account for it being the narrators' situated accomplishments, whereas only examining discursive strategies disregards the impact of storytelling conventions on the former. This is why the combination of both approaches, the discursive and the narrative, promises to bear the most fruits with regards to the specific research interest of this paper.

Accordingly, a discursive narrative analysis allows to approach the data from two angles: the narrative interest will focus on the types of stories which are shared on *TVG*, more specifically their structure, purpose, recurrent plots and roles, and their significance on the individual, as well as the broader cultural level. Subsequently, a discourse analysis will allow to investigate the strategic self-presentations and discursive mechanisms which narrators employ in the construction of their stories, presumably with the pursuit of a specific social goal in mind. Moreover, it permits the examination of the discourse on female genital terms as it is conducted within this specific online community.

To this end, a corpus-based analysis will be included in this first discursive analysis in order to "identify the typical distributional patterns that occur across [all] texts" (Biber, Connor, & Upton 2007: 2). Such an approach attends to the particular linguistic construction of vulvas employed across all Instagram stories, rather than considering every story individually (Biber, Connor, & Upton 2007: 2). Importantly, as Biber, Connor and Upton (2007: 3) argue, a corpus-based study can go beyond the quantitative measures at the word-and-their-collocates-level and consider "general patterns of discourse organization that are used to construct texts" within the context of their production and reception (Biber, Connor, & Upton 2007: 3). Thus, they can be employed as part of a discourse analysis which examines communicative social practices and underlying ideological assumptions (Biber, Connor, & Upton 2007: 6).

Accordingly, this analytical step will attend to both the quantitative measure of linguistic items as well as the patterns of discourse organization while keeping in mind their communicative context. The corpus-based step of the discourse analysis will thus examine genital terms and verbs and adjectives employed alongside the former, as well as other communicative strategies contributing to the linguistic construction of the vulva, such as rhetorical devices, emoticons, or particular moves.

In order to ascertain a systematic analysis, I conducted iterative open coding to develop a codebook. According to my research interest, the codes were developed on the discursive construction of (1) the content and (2) the components of the stories, as well as (3) the general representation of female genitalia. The codes were then classified into categories, which were again organized and finally revealed three main findings, which will be discussed in chapter 6. The list of codes can be consulted in the appendix.

5.2.2. Analyzing participation frameworks in online storytelling

The second analysis is informed by the fact that CMC contexts shape storytelling practices and is accordingly interested in the shapes these practices acquire on Instagram, focusing particularly on speaker roles and audience reactions. The analysis of audience reactions is based on De Fina's coding system presented in chapter 3.3, although it has been adapted and significantly trimmed due to the limited scope of this investigation:

Interactional dynamics

This category aims at revealing the comments' relation to the initial story or to other comment threads in order to find out in how far participants engage with each other

a. New comment thread
b. New community question
c. Answer to previous question
d. Answer to previous comment

Frame focus of the comment

This category focuses on the main topic of each comment. De Fina's four foci were altered by adding 'Tag', which refers to the tagging of another user without any other comment, and by omitting 'Outside world', which did not occur during this analysis. When comments alluded to more than one frame, they were coded according to the one which appeared to be the main focus of the message.

a. Storyrealm
b. Taleworld
c. Tag
d. Second story

Tone

Lastly, this category aimed at determining the overall tone of the message, with the following sub-categories. Again, since tone is not always clear-cut, the coding relied on cues such as emoticons, clear expressions of advice/praise/critique/regret or metaphorical language use. Coding tone was particularly important to determine the kind of social atmosphere in which narrators shared their stories.

a. Educational
b. Supportive/appreciative
c. Neutral
d. Amicable
e. Regretful
f. Ironic
g. Critical

5.3. Research object: The Vulva Gallery – personal narratives on female genitals

In light of the socio-interactional approach to storytelling taken in this investigation, personal stories cannot be regarded as isolated texts, but as social practice within their communicative context. This context is firstly determined by the SNS Instagram, and secondly by the profile *The Vulva Gallery* (Instagram: *the.vulva.gallery*), which serves as platform for the personal stories. Importantly, the term story does not refer to the Instagram 'stories' (photos/videos at the top of the site

which are deleted after 24 hours), but to personal narratives posted within the profile. Instagram, as was outlined in the previous chapter, is characterized by social action concerned with self-presentation and self-disclosure. Moreover, the fact that it is a visual-based SNS makes it the prime location for art(ivist) projects. It is thus not surprising that Hilde Atalanta chose it as platform for her online gallery. Based in Amsterdam, the illustrator launched the profile in 2016, as a response to the alarming increase in labiaplasty procedures (*TVG*, 9. October 2016). The first posts where dedicated to personal illustrations of vulvas depicting a wide range of sizes, shapes, colors, accompanied by phrases such as “All vulvas are beautiful 💛” (*TVG,* 18. August 2016) or “Love your vulva, because all vulvas are beautiful just the way they are 💛✨” (e.g. *TVG*, 19. August 2016). Moreover, Atalanta takes a clear metalinguistic position, stating her reason for calling the female genitalia ‘vulva’ from the outset, and repeating it regularly in posts until the present day:

> So, why 'vulva' and not 'vagina'? The reason I use the word 'vulva' instead of 'vagina', is that the external part of the female genitals is called vulva (the vagina is the internal part of the female genitals). So why reduce the female genitals just to it's [sic] birth canal, instead of seeing it as a lot more than that? Vulva is a beautiful word, so let's use it and love it. • Love your vulva, because all vulvas are beautiful just the way they are 💛✨ (*TVG,* 19. August 2016)

With time, Atalanta’s posts become longer and contain more information on all sorts of different aspects concerned with the vulva: menstruation, medical conditions (e.g. vulvodynia, vitiligo, HPV), pubic hair, labia length, labiaplasty, etc. Moreover, a lot of posts contain advice and resemble pep talks, such as the following examples:

> This is a normal vulva. Half of all vulva-owning individuals on earth have inner labia that are longer than their outer labia. That's 1.75 billion individuals with beautiful vulvas similar to this one. 🐱 Often, one of the inner labia is longer than the other one, because human beings aren't symmetrical. Never let anyone tell you that your vulva looks ‚weird‘, because you’re as normal as anyone else. Please respect each other’s bodies, and learn to see the beauty in diversity. Because diversity is exactly what makes people so interesting. ✨ Love your vulva, because all vulvas are beautiful just the way they are 💛✨ (*TVG*, 20. November 2016)

> Just like with beards, sometimes in pubic hair there are bald spots where hair doesn't grow. This can make beautiful patterns appear, but also: the skin is super soft on these spots! Never be ashamed of your pubic hair and the way it grows. It's your skin, it's your body, and it's beautiful the way it is. Embrace and love your bald spots! And love your vulva, because all vulvas are beautiful just the way they are 💛✨ (*TVG*, 21. November 2016)

> Never let anyone tell you that your vulva doesn't look beautiful. No vulva is weird, or gross or nasty – because all vulvas are fantastic! Love your vulva, because all vulvas are beautiful just the way they are 💛✨ (*TVG*, 23. November 2016)

These posts illustrate that Atalanta does not just perceive Instagram as a platform for portraying her art, but that she uses it as a vehicle for spreading her messages regarding problematic body ideals and a derogatory vulva-discourse. Three months after her first post, Atalanta launched a website, which would from then on accompany the Instagram profile, and where she accordingly clearly states the mission she pursues with the gallery:

> We've somehow gotten the idea that there's something wrong with us, but there isn't. To prove this, I started *The Vulva Gallery* in 2016. *The Vulva Gallery* is an online gallery and educational platform celebrating vulva diversity, aiming to improve sexual health education and opening up conversation about topics that are still being stigmatised. Since 2016, together with a rapidly growing community of over 350,000 followers, I've been working on improving this stigmatised image of the vulva. […] With *The Vulva Gallery* I aim to raise awareness […], to inspire and empower individuals by sharing personal stories, and to provide information on anatomy and sexual health (Atalanta n.d.)

She explicitly positions her gallery as alternative to the "distorted image of the 'perfect' vulva, presented as 'normal'" (Atalanta n.d.) in popular media and with this offers her audience a clear line of argumentation for making sense of their own experiences. With the launch of her website, Atalanta also enters into a new step in her project, namely the sharing of "empowering stories and contributions" (*TVG*, 30. November 2016) on the website. This move was very likely a response to the numerous stories she received as private messages on the one hand, and as posts below her illustrations and information on the other. She began to approach users who shared their stories by asking them publicly whether she could release their words under the story section on her website. The reaction was extremely positive; addressed users replied that they "would be honored" (*TVG,* 8. December 2016), and others volunteered as well. Eventually, on January 21st, 2017, Atalanta took it one step further and dedicated a post to calling for stories:

✨ Share your story and empower others ✨Personal stories are powerful, they inspire and give insight. Hearing about struggles others had with their bodies, and how they coped with those struggles, can be very comforting and supportive. And vice versa: your experiences and personal growth can, however small it may seem, be of tremendous help to others who struggle with similar issues or insecurities. If you have an empowering experience or story of personal growth to share (vulva-related of course; about how you overcame your insecurities for example) you can send it to me by clicking the 'contact' button. You can find the most empowering stories on my website, under "Stories" (thevulvagallery.com/stories) • This page will grow with your contributions. Of course, all messages will be treated in confidence, and they will only be shared anonymously and with your permission • Love yourself - and love your vulva, because all vulvas are beautiful just the way they are! 💛✨ (*TVG*, 21. January 2017)

This invitation to share personal stories, which was repeated verbatim on February 19th and May 13th, 2017, is important for the analysis, as it encourages a specific type of story, namely one that revolves around personal growth. However, Atalanta later refrains from more instructions on what the stories should contain and it is unlikely that all newer users browse two years back to find this initial invitation. Nevertheless, the first stories which were shared were definitely shaped by this incentive and might themselves have served as templates for following disclosures. While initially, the stories were only published on the website alongside her illustrations, Atalanta began posting them on Instagram on May 16th, 2017, and, coinciding with increasing demands for personalized vulva portraits, began to combine these portraits with the corresponding personal story from July 30th, 2017 onwards. Since then, these posts have been alternating with the established format which combines illustrations and educational information. Today (24 July 2019), *the.vulva.gallery* counts 373,000 followers and has shared 1,167 posts. Figure 4 serves as an example to illustrate what the story-postings look like. Henceforth, parts of the stories will not be presented in form of a screenshot, but in textual form.

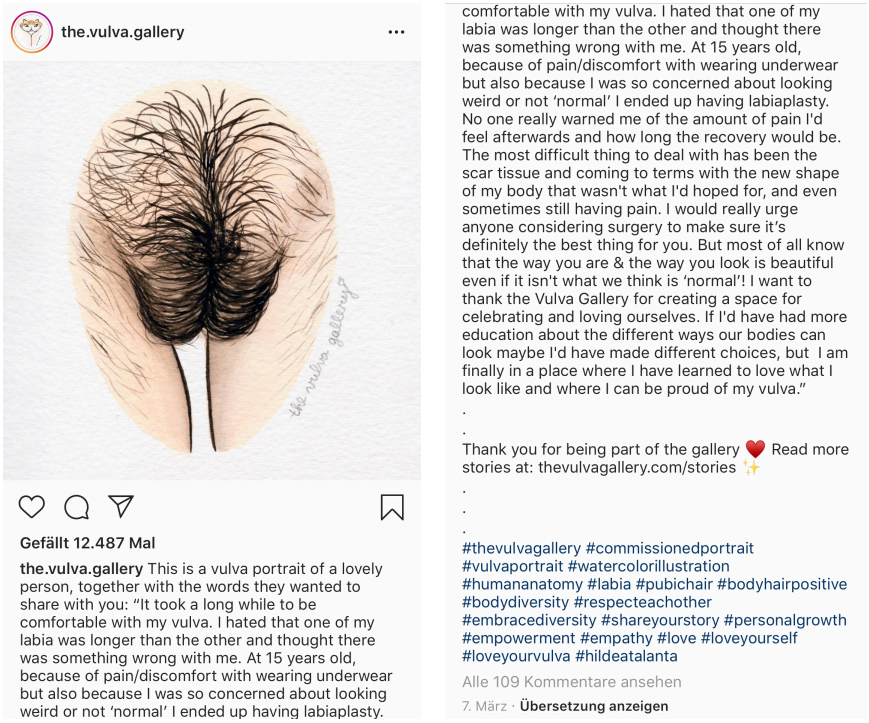

Figure 4 Screenshot of a personal story on TVG

6. Results

This chapter will be devoted to presenting and discussing the results of the study described above. Firstly, it will elaborate on the findings of the discursive narrative analysis. Secondly, the results of the analysis of audience participation will be presented and lastly, all the findings will be discussed with respect to their contribution to the existing research.

6.1. Analysis 1: Personal stories about female genitalia

The detailed discursive narrative analysis of personal stories shared on *TVG* resulted in three main findings; firstly, the narratives rather constitute carefully worded public testimonies as part of a social movement than mere personal accounts of individual experience. Secondly, there is a prototypical storyline where narrators move from a state of discomfort to a state of comfort through the mastering of self-love, which constitutes an important message for the social movement. Thirdly, the personal stories are characterized by a reclamation of the vulva discourse, where the female genitalia are purposefully and pointedly portrayed in a remarkably positive light.

6.1.1. Public testimonies as part of social movement

As was just established, the first significant aspect of these stories is that they are not simply individual accounts of personal experience with genitalia, but rather public testimonies, where narrators act as mouthpieces for a social movement in which they lend their stories to a cause and embed them within the community created on *TVG.* Such an assumption derives from the stories' particular discursive strategies and accomplishments, which entail the promotion of mission statements, the creation of a community and internal cohesion, the illustration of the need for social change, and the application of rhetorical devices to appeal to reader's emotions.

The first relevant aspect which led to such a conclusion could be found in the stories' argumentative lines and the inferred reasons for sharing, which are illustrated in figure 5.

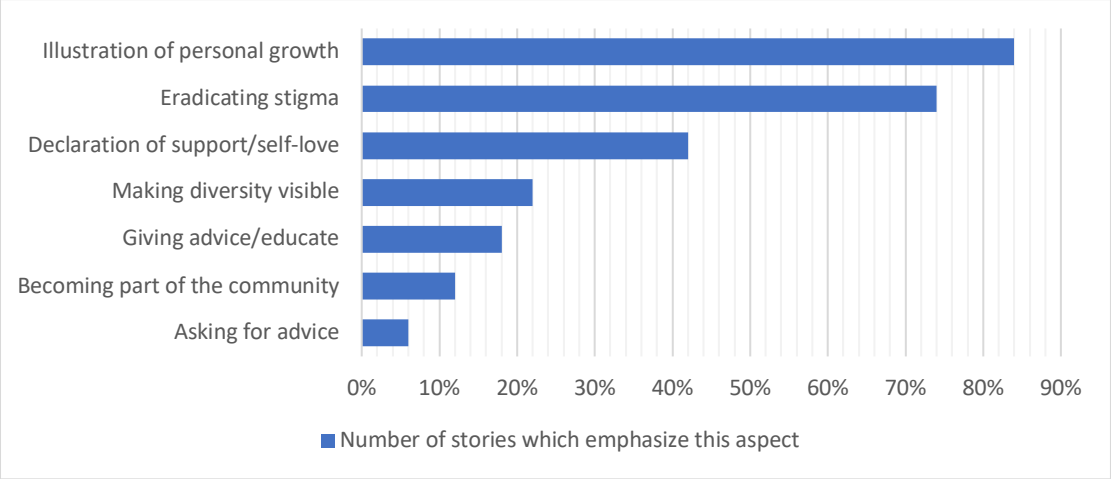

Figure 5 Argumentative lines/Reasons for sharing

These reasons clearly correspond to *TVG's* mission, and they were either expressed explicitly, such as example (1), which was coded as 'making diversity visible', or inferred from the argumentative lines, such as example (2), which was coded as 'eradicating stigma'.

(1) I'm sending this picture of my vulva and feeling scared and vulnerable, but knowing that girls, teenagers and women need to start exposing themselves to every type of vulva there is, so that they know that their vulvas are valid and acceptable.
(2) The idea that longer or larger vulvas are less beautiful is so damaging and this project really is so important.

In most cases, narrators followed more than one line of reasoning. The general underlying argumentative line of 84% of the stories represented an illustration of personal development and growth, an observation which will be examined more closely in the subsequent chapter. A significant majority of the stories (74%) focused

on the importance of eradicating stigma, which concerns beauty ideals, distorted concepts of normality, and silencing or the topic's taboo nature, respectively, as for example illustrated in (3).

(3) The main problem about all this, is that I didn't talk about it for years. I grew up in the 'accept your problem, don't annoy anyone with it and learn to live with it'-mentality. If I had had the courage to talk about it in the beginning, the healing process wouldn't have been so long and so hard. So, don't accept your problem, talk to someone about it and don't learn to live with it. It doesn't work. Long live all vulvas!

Almost half of the stories further either declared their support for the project or their self-love, in order to illustrate the importance and success of the site's intention. The argumentative line in example (4), for instance, illustrates how by loving herself the narrator managed to overcome self-doubt and foster a positive relationship to her genitalia:

(4) I've always been self conscious [sic] about the length of my labia and how my vulva looked. But as I grew up and started practicing self love [sic], I've come to love her and everything unique about her. She's mine, she's unique, she is strong, and she is well taken care of. That's all that matters.

Moreover, 22% highlighted the need to make diversity visible as well as their willingness to engage in this project, as was illustrated in example (1). 18% shared their stories in order to educate/give advice, 12% to become part of the community, and lastly, 6% participated in order to ask a community question. What is important, while not surprising, in this respect, is that motivations for sharing largely corresponded to the gallery's agenda, which, as mentioned previously, consists in the celebration of diversity, sexual health education and the breaking of taboos (Atalanta n.d.). The examination of argumentative lines thus reveals that all stories are attached to the social movement started by *TVG* in two respects; firstly, by the obvious fact that they self-disclose on the platform rather than on personal sites, and secondly, by confirming and reinforcing the project's mission statement through the stories' reasoning.

However, narrators do not only participate in the movement through the content and thought patterns of their stories, but especially also through rhetorical mechanisms, which create a community outside of the taleworld. Out of the 50 stories, 34 contained at least one of the following four strategies which expressed commitment to the social movement and the emerging social group: emphasis on the community,

direct address of Atalanta/*TVG*, direct address of readers, or use of the personal pronouns *we* or *us*.

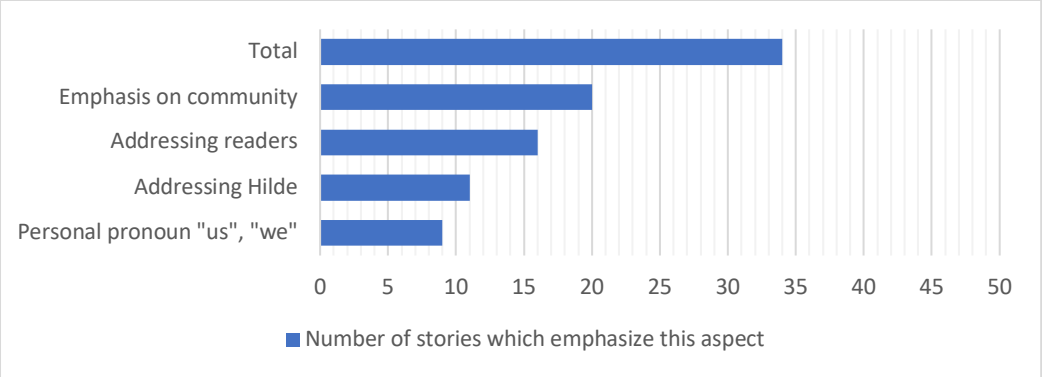

Figure 6: Aspects which promote the creation of a community

Figure 6 shows the quantitative distribution of these four strategies across all 50 stories. In 16 cases, narrators employed more than one mechanism, while the other 18 relied on one of them. The most frequently occurring strategy is concerned with highlighting the importance of and benefit from the online gallery and the resulting community, as in examples (5) and (6). As examples (7) and (8) illustrate, some narrators take it one step further and explicitly emphasize the significance of belonging to it.

(5) In any case, I am very happy that this gallery exists – it is nice to read the stories of others and, by reading the experiences of others learning to love my own vulva bit by bit.

(6) The Vulva Gallery provided yet another valuable internet resource that helped me change my relationship with my vulva, begin to unlearn the fallacy that there is such a thing as a 'normal' body, and just as that podcast did in middle school – feel less alone.

(7) The Vulva Gallery is a beautiful thing and I am glad to be part of it.

(8) It is so amazing to be part of a community in [sic] which empowers anyone with a vulva to support each other in showing off, being proud of, and loving our vulvas as they deserve.

A further impactful strategy used by the narrators which turns their personal stories into public testimonies is the direct address of readers, which was employed in 16 stories, predominantly through the use of imperatives, in order to give advice, or even to incite action, as the examples (9) and (10) show, or else through the personal pronoun *you*.

(9) […] Two years ago I went to the doctor thinking I had a scar on my vulva. The doctor didn't think it was a scar and send [sic] me to the gynaecologist. She told me it was a VIN, short for vulvaire intra-epitheliale neoplasia. […] Turns out that some types of

VIN can actually turn into vulva cancer ant it had to be removed right away. […] When I tell this story to other women no one has ever heard of VIN before so I think it's an important story to share. Always do selfexamination [sic] and go to the doctor if you see something is different than normal.

(10) This is what I want to pass on: Be proud of yourself, look for people who love you for who you are and don't allow anyone else to tell you who you should be.

These extracts show that the stories are told in order to convey specific messages to readers who also have a vulva. Narrators turn from the taleworld to the storyrealm in order to underline their stories tellability on the one hand, and what they intend to transmit on the other. By moving from the first-person pronoun *I* to the second-person imperative or pronoun *you*, these women clarify why their stories are of significance for other readers and what the latter should take away for themselves. In example (9), the switch from narrated to narrative event can also be observed by the tense switch from past to present simple. Consequently, the women use their story (taleworld) in order to influence social reality, which they accomplish by a switch to the storyrealm, and they hence become social agents for the vulva gallery's mission, rather than merely being storytellers.

Another strategy which directly links the stories to the sites' social mission is the direct address of its creator, Hilde Atalanta. In 11 stories, narrators underscored the significance of Atalanta's work, or directly thanked her for her efforts, such as in the example below:

(11) Thank you, Hilde, for creating a platform of discussion, and thank you to everyone who is participating for eradicating stigmas.

By linking their personal stories to Atalanta or her gallery, narrators clearly connect their experiences to her social mission and consequently become agents of this movement themselves.

Finally, 9 of the narrators directly identified as part of a larger collective, which they expressed by using the first-person plural pronouns *we*, or *us*:

(12) We allow the media and the world around us, that is still dominated by gender stereotypes, to put pressure and shame on us for not looking like someone else imagines us to be.

(13) Thank you for helping us to love us as we are.

(14) Lately, a beloved friend reminded me that bodies come in all sizes and shapes, and they are modulated by life events. We have to learn to accept every part of it, even if it's not always easy.

Importantly, this grammatical feature allows narrators to no longer only speak for themselves, but on behalf of all women, or even of all humans. The change in footing

in (14) particularly illustrates the switch from an individual to a collective perspective; it shows how narrators move from subjective experience to generalizations about what having a vulva entails, which lends substance to their assertions, reinforces internal cohesion of the social collective and helps to create consensus around the movement.

Aside from direct address and community emphasis, women applied several other persuasive strategies, which will be listed below, in order to turn the personal stories into instruments for a collective fight.

Firstly, one useful strategy for the creation of a community and for solidifying internal cohesion is to pinpoint a common enemy. Accordingly, 'society', a term which comprises aspects ranging from media (porn, art, sex-ed books), mainstream discourse, or romantic partners to religion, was depicted as the culpable for the current situation in 29 stories (see example (15)).

(15) I've never really liked or even felt comfortable with my vulva. Since I was a kid and started learning about vulvas and penises, I always noticed that the vulvas portrayed in my Sex Ed books never looked like mine. I felt like a freak. Throughout my life, I'd never really seen vulvas like mine in porn, art, etc., and to top it off, I had men telling me my lips were large and weird, which obviously didn't help.

Another important point to be made is that women use their stories in order to illustrate the need for social change. However, they do not only represent the need for, but they even explicitly call for action, a move which is typical of persuasive speeches. Examples (16) and (17) show how narrators incite action by using imperatives or modal verbs expressing obligation:

(16) We need to fight back against these forces.
(17) We are all human beings, let's stop pretending that we're not.

Narrators further employed the following rhetorical devices in order to appeal to readers' emotions and consequently convince them of the movement's agenda: figurative language use (18), exclamation (19) & (20), slogans (20), pleas (21), loaded words (22), and the sharing of worldly wisdom (23).

(18) I built a wall around my heart and bit by bit lost the love for my body.
(19) I love myself! And of course, I love my vulva!
(20) Long live all vulvas!
(21) Knowing oneself is the best way to gain confidence and share the pride of one's differences. Don't be shy, watch yourself. You will be pleasantly surprised.
(22) Feeling different and like a freak, I grew up being ashamed of and confused by my extended labia and pubic hair. Anyone who saw my vulva said they had never seen one like it which made me feel like there was something wrong with me.

(23) The best way to become more self-confident starts with realizing how different human beings are and that this is actually pretty exciting. There is not just 'one way' you must look like. All of us are beautiful in their own way.

All these aspects illustrate that women did not merely share personal stories, but that they employed several techniques to advance *TVG*'s social agenda, and thus they became agents, and their stories instruments of social change. The abundance of rhetorical devices used in the stories almost turns them into stretches of persuasive speeches, which is why it can be argued that they need to be regarded more like public testimonies than individual accounts of personal experience. As such, the narratives convey particular messages to the reader, which will be examined in more detail in the following sections.

6.1.2. Transitions from state of discomfort to state of comfort, which proceed over the acquisition or practice of self-love

An analysis of the types of stories shared on *TVG* revealed the four cases illustrated in figure 7. Contrary to the argumentative lines analyzed previously, this examination was not interested in the reasonings and motivations occurring in the narratives, but in the specific kinds of stories that were posted in terms of narrative pattern.

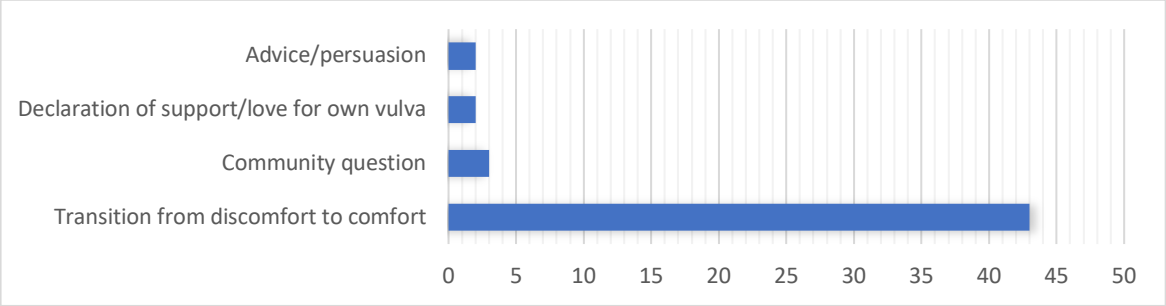

Figure 7 Types of stories shared on TVG

Figure 7 shows that there is little variation in the types of narratives shared on *TVG.* Two stories represented pieces of advice, or forms of persuasive discourse, which did not, or only secondarily, include personal accounts. Two other narratives consisted of declarations of self-love, or of support of the gallery, respectively; again, without mentioning personal experiences beyond the expression of affection. In three cases, narrators turned to the community and shared some aspects of their personal experience only in order to give background knowledge for the question which they subsequently address to the other followers. Lastly, the vast majority of the stories

shared on *TVG* (43 out of 50) consist of a storyline which moves from a state of discomfort to a state of comfort. Keeping in mind the attachment to the social movement and inherent involvement of the readers, this prototypical narrative pattern transmits certain messages to the readers: Firstly, the state of discomfort is predominantly a psychological condition, which is inflicted by different sociological factors and engenders certain behavioral and conceptual characteristics. Secondly, in order to overcome the inherent hardships and sorrows, individuals need to learn self-love, which is described as a long, partly ongoing and difficult process. Lastly, having acquired self-love, or being about to do so, individuals enter into a state of comfort, which can be summarized as psychological and sexual well-being. Narrators underscore the need to commit to such a transformation by opposing a preoccupied, unhealthy and unhappy pre-self-love self to a confident, healthy and happy post-self-love self.

State of discomfort

In 7 of the 43 cases, the discomfort which the narrators described was of a physical nature, and mostly concerned medical conditions, such as vaginismus or cervicitis, but also pain due to long inner labia, for example during cycling. Only in one of those seven cases did medical treatment lead to a state of comfort, meaning that the remaining six narrators also experienced psychological distress before and after eventual treatment, which leads to a total number of 42 stories which highlighted some form of psychological or cognitive discomfort.

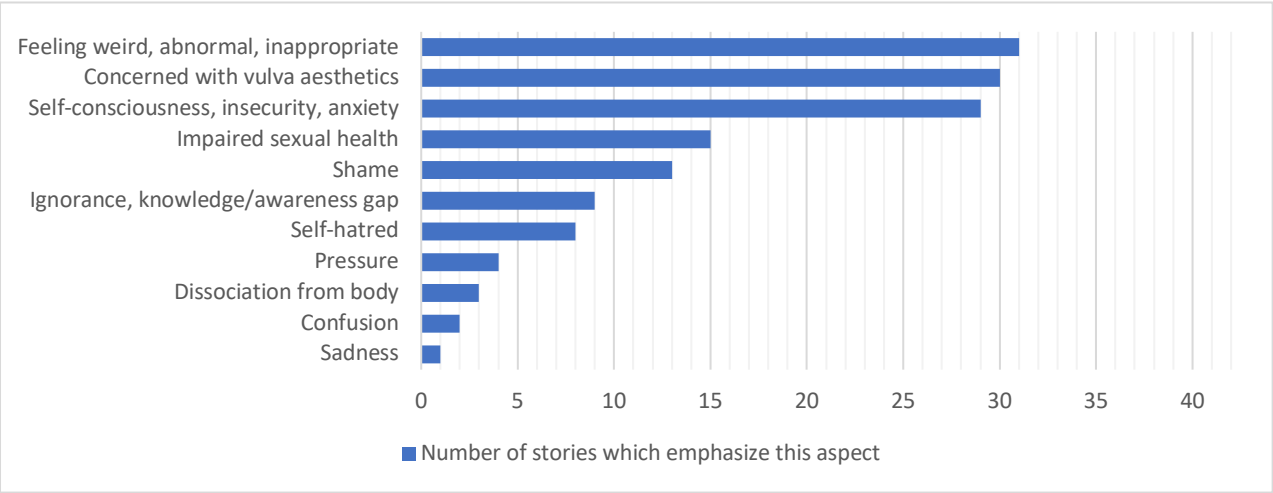

Figure 8 Indicators of psychological discomfort

Figure 8 illustrates the different indicators which pointed to the narrators' impeded mental wellbeing and their quantitative distribution across all stories. 31 storytellers emphasized that they felt inappropriate or abnormal, which was in most of the cases tied to standards of beauty and behavioral norms. Closely related is the second most frequent indicator for psychological discomfort, the fact that 30 narrators were concerned with vulva aesthetics. Although storytellers did rarely describe what the aesthetic ideal looked like, they seemed to have a fairly certain idea of what it did not look like. Many women described long inner labia and pubic hair as *weird* or not *match[ing] what [they] had been made to feel was the norm*, such as the following example, for which the first three codes apply:

(24) I remember first feeling self conscious [sic] about how prominent my lips were when I first encountered images of other women's vulvas, especially in porn. They just didn't look like mine, which had more prominent labia that stuck out, with one slightly larger than the other. They were the vulvas that I grew to associate with what was pretty, accepted, and sexy.

Other aesthetic concerns relate to stretch marks, color, large outer labia or transformations caused by gaining weight or giving birth. However, beauty standards were not the only aspect which unsettled narrators. Social stigma related to smell and sexuality were other factors which made women feel inappropriate or weird, as the following example[3]:

(25) I've always been a very sexual person and used to take a peak [sic] at porn magazines that were stashed at my or my friends' houses, when I was younger. Although I liked this experience, this caused me to be very self-conscious of my inner labia, because they were much longer than those of the women featured in the magazines or videos. Friends used to say that longer inner labia were caused because these women hat too much sex and were 'stretched out'. When I was 21, I was diagnosed with HSV-2 after my very first was dishonest with me and passed the virus to me. This experience made me further hate my body, my sexuality, and especially my vagina and vulva. I felt as though I looked weird and was diseased.

This extract illustrates that long inner labia are not only unfavorable due to beauty standards, but also because they are attached to the depreciative myth of stretched-out labia which pathologizes sexually active women. However, not only women who departed from the sexual object position allocated to them felt abnormal, but also narrators who did not fit the social category of a heterosexual cis-woman (see example (32)). Aside from feeling inappropriate, 29 women emphasized experiencing self-

[3] Aside from concern with vulva aesthetics, this example was attributed to the following codes: self-consciousness/insecurity/anxiety, self-hatred, feeling weird/abnormal/inappropriate, and impaired sexual health

consciousness, insecurity or even anxiety. 15 narrators further reported impeded sexual health, either in the form of sexual abuse or risky sexual behavior, or, to the contrary, of total sexual abstinence during their period of psychological discomfort. Another recurrent issue which was highlighted by 13 narrators was shame, as illustrated by the following extract:

(26) Society has never encouraged us to observe ourselves carefully, with tenderness and respect. Until recently, I never had the curiosity to open my legs and discover my vulva. I have always felt some shame and embarrassment, even though I was alone with myself, alone with my body.

9 narrators further indicated a knowledge or awareness gap as impeding their wellbeing. In most of the cases, this awareness gap was related to sexual education, as for example in the following narrative:

(27) I have a vulva type that is typically shown in sexual health education images. Therefore the shape of my vulva was never something I really thought of. However because I didn't really think about it, I also didn't know what I could do. I didn't know women could masturbate until I was around 20 – I thought it was just a guy thing. When I found out, I spent a summer in my bedroom getting to know my body and what feels good. This gave me a certain confidence in myself, my body, and in my vulva – she's perfect as she is. […]

This example shows that not knowing that women could masturbate hindered the women from exploring her body and what gave her sexual pleasure. Furthermore, in 8 extreme cases, psychological distress was amplified to the point of self-hatred, sometimes even with the threat of self-harm. Lastly, some narrators also emphasized experiencing pressure, dissociation from their bodies, confusion and sadness.

When narrators reflected upon who or what inflicted the psychological distress on them, they arrived at quite similar conclusions, although with different prime foci.

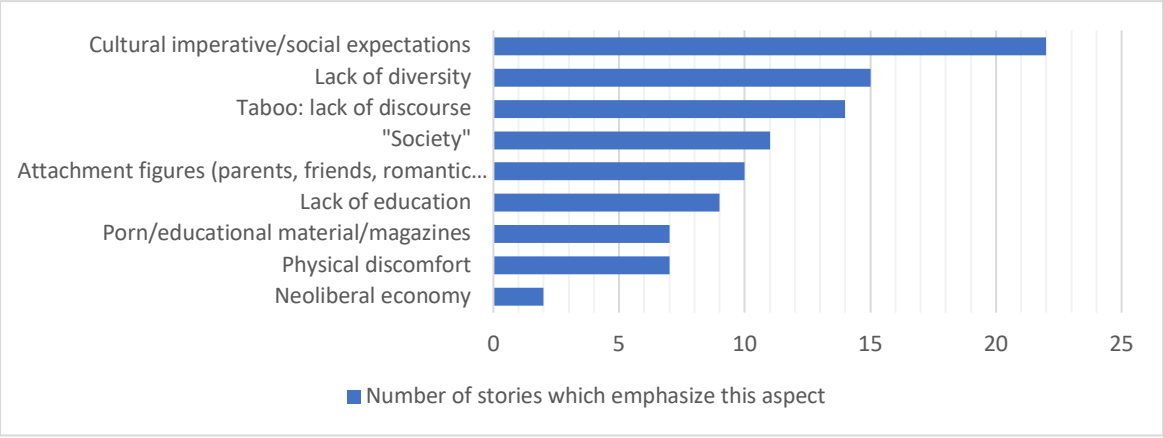

Figure 9 Causes for narrators' discomfort

Figure 9 illustrates the causes which storytellers indicated with regards to their distress. First of all, it needs to be pointed out that 34 women mentioned at least one of the issues listed above, while 28 of them related to two or more. The most prominent influencing factor which was emphasized 22 times were cultural imperatives or social expectations, mostly concerning standards of beauty. Secondly, women pointed out that they do not encounter many different shapes and sizes of vulvas throughout their everyday life, and that this lack of diversity has severely distorted their image of what a 'natural' or 'normal' vulva looks like, as the following narrator illustrates:

> (28) I have always felt self-conscious and somewhat embarrassed about my vulva, mainly the inner labia as they're longer and darker than what's deemed as 'normal' and 'sexy' in society. The media, especially mainstream porn, completely distorted my brain into thinking I had a disgusting body and that I wasn't good enough for anyone, it made me believe I was unattractive, undesirable and worthless. I understand now that it can serve as a platform for leading innocent people into thinking the same stuff I do, for the eventual gain of profit. I have never really let anyone see or touch my body because of how much I've been made to hate it. […]

Just like this narrator, 6 others explicitly named media as damaging influence, ranging from porn over magazines to educational material. Furthermore, (28) is one of the two stories which identified economic profit as reason for which female bodies are pathologized. Moreover, 11 stories furthermore singled out *society* as harmful influence, sometimes accentuated by a personification, without explaining what that means concretely, as we can also see in (29).

> (29) I have struggled with how [my vulva] looks throughout my whole adult life and although I have never had any negative feedback from partners, society's comments really altered how I feel about my vulva. The idea that longer or larger vulvas are less beautiful is so damaging and this project is so important.

The taboo surrounding female genitalia which engenders a lack of discourse was criticized by 14 women; for instance, a woman who was suffering from vaginismus highlighted that it was not talking about her problem which prolonged the healing process significantly (see example (3)). Another woman who had labiaplasty condemned the insufficient medical discourse which she was subjected to before her surgery (see figure 4). Another very impactful factor expressed by the narrators was the intimate social circle comprising friends, parents, as well as romantic partners. The former were merely described as passive influence, for example for starting the practice of pubic hair removal, while the latter two groups of people were reported as immensely disparaging forces (see (30) and (31)).

(30) I had my first boyfriend at 16 years old. I was incredibly insecure about my body at the time, so naturally I was very nervous when I first got intimate with him. The first comment he gave when he saw my vulva was: "Oh, it looks so weird. Nothing like the ones in porn". He didn't like touching my 'weird looking vulva', and so touching me was kept to the bare minimum. He was disappointed that I looked the way I did, and with that he had unknowingly crushed me... For years, I was so ashamed of my 'weird looking' vulva that I was insecure and very held back towards sex and intimacy. […]

(31) Feeling different and like a freak, I grew up being ashamed of and confused by my extended labia and pubic hair. Anyone who saw my vulva said they had never seen one like it which made me feel like there was something wrong with me. From a young age, my mother told me I could get a labiaplasty when I grew up, which conveyed to me that my natural state was wrong. The lack of education and discussion about these topics has made learning about how to take care of myself difficult, and turned a very natural topic of discussion into taboo. […]

Furthermore, 9 women blamed insufficient or partial sexual education as reasons for their psychological discomfort, since it led to them either remaining ignorant as to their role as sexual subject, or else believing that their departure from the represented heteronormative role made them abnormal. Lastly, 7 women indicated that the physical discomfort they experienced, for example pain due to long inner labia or medical conditions such as vaginismus, caused their emotional distress. However, again, this was more due to social stigma attached to such conditions rather than to the actual physical discomfort they experienced.

In this state of discomfort, women described a version of themselves which they later overcame (or wish to overcome in the future) through the mastering of self-love. This pre-self-love self was described by the characteristics illustrated in figure 10.

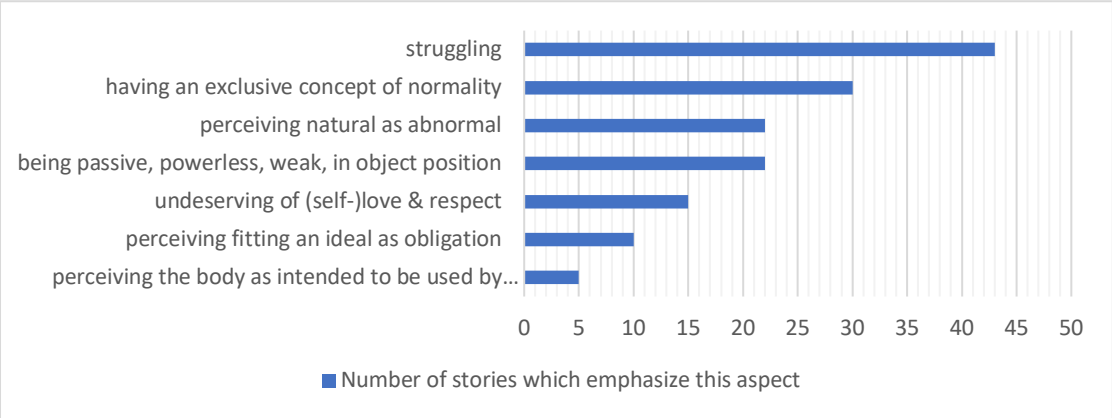

Figure 10 Characteristics of the pre-self-love self

Firstly, all women reporting of some form of psychological distress were struggling in one way or another, which was discussed in detail previously when elaborating on the

forms of discomfort (see figure 8). Furthermore, a large majority of the women reported that they disposed of an exclusive concept of normality before learning self-love. This means that they believed that the default option of female genitals is the one represented in mainstream media (small inner labia, pink, no pubic hair), rather than a range of shapes and sizes. Everything diverging from this ideal does not deserve the attribute 'normal'. Consequently, in most of the cases this concept excluded the narrators' own vulvae from acquiring a normality-status, which in turn led to their belief of being abnormal, as previously elaborated.

Another recurrent feature of the pre-self-love self, which is also closely related to concepts of normality, is the perception that natural equals abnormal, as for instance illustrated in example (31). This issue was expressed in 22 stories and underlines a conceptualization of the female body where it essentially requires maintenance to escape the natural state and to consequently be considered as normal.

22 narrators further described themselves as passive, powerless, weak, and in an object position during their period of discomfort. In many cases this character trait was transmitted quite subtly via semantic roles (cf. Yule 2010: 116), where storytellers found themselves in patient, recipient or experiencer rather than agent roles, as well as via passive constructions and sentential object positions. Example (32) illustrates such iconic representations of the powerless self very well:

(32) Hello! I am a transgender man, and here's a bit of my story. I had no concept of gender as a child, or any idea that it was possible to change. I was just a kid when puberty happened and I felt obligated to try as hard as I could to be the Perfect Girl™ that everybody expected of me. No matter how good I looked, I was humiliated and devastated that I felt so wrong, that I had failed. I was victim to sexual abuse first as a small child, then as a teen and young adult. I never felt as though my body was my own. I didn't have memories of the childhood abuse, but over time it became a subconscious belief that my body was just a commodity to be consumed. During sex, body dysphoria doubled to the point of dissociation. Sex never felt like a choice, and the more it happened, the more dissociated I became. It took a long time, but three years ago, I finally accepted myself as an individual who deserves love and respect. I started Hormone Replacement Therapy and my medical and social transition. Now, I'm reclaiming my body for myself and learning to love myself, vulva, and all.

As we can see, before learning to love himself, the narrator of this story was constrained by social norms and helpless against such forces, which he expresses through passive constructions (*I was humiliated and devastated*), semantic roles on the lower end of the agency continuum (*I felt obligated, I felt so wrong* – experiencer, *puberty happened*, [*sex*] *happened*, - recipient), and object positions (*that everybody*

expected of me). Interestingly, after the decisive moment where the narrator started to accept himself as he is, he clearly occupies an agent role in subject position (*I started, I'm reclaiming*). The transformation of the self, which will be elaborated on in the subsequent section, is thus also iconically represented through semantic roles and sentential positions. As far as the pre-self-love self is concerned, passive constructions or object positions can be found in several other stories as well, as the following examples illustrate:

(33) we are so often made to feel ashamed

(34) Society has never encouraged us to observe ourselves carefully

(35) nothing was really said about my vulva.

Besides passivity and powerlessness, the narrator of (32) expresses the three other recurrent character traits observable in pre-self-love selves: he has an understanding of himself as undeserving of love and respect (as did 14 other storytellers), perceives fitting the ideal as obligation (as did 9 others) and has an understanding of his body as object which is intended to be used by others (as did 4 others). This story also very clearly illustrates that in order to overcome this unfortunate state and enter a state of comfort, it is indispensable to consciously decide for such a transition, which consists of a mental process related to self-love and respect.

Transitional process

All of the 43 stories which contained a transition from a state of discomfort to a state of comfort emphasized that the transitional period necessarily involved a mental process, rather than a physical one. While in 8 stories[4], the transition to a state of ease and well-being entailed some sort of physical treatment, or at least its consideration, it was the singular key to success only once. In this particular narrative, a woman underwent labiaplasty after having experienced excessive pain due to long inner labia. Importantly, this woman also emphasized her cognitive effort before surgery, since she refused cutting the unaffected labia as well so that they would match after the procedure, explaining:

(36) […] I remembered The Vulva Gallery and I said no. The other side never caused me problems and I like its natural curves. I don't care that my labia don't match today. It gives my vulva personality! I am just happy to be healthy.

[4] This number deviates from the 7 cases of physical discomfort mentioned above, since it includes the Hormone Replacement Therapy mentioned in example (32), which is not a response to physical discomfort (pain, itching, diseases…) but rather to psychological discrepancy between biological and experienced gender.

Accordingly, even if in this one case, achieving wellbeing was dependent on incision, it is clear that some cognitive process was involved in the woman's decision and consequent state of comfort. As far as the other seven mentions of physical cure are concerned, 4 of them are related to medical treatment of gender transformations or of diseases, and the remaining three are related to labiaplasty. Of these three narrators, two have considered or are considering labiaplasty for aesthetic reasons due to insecurities and one narrator unsuccessfully underwent surgery for the same reasons (see figure 4). Importantly, this woman underlines insufficient medical discourse as well as her regret to not have acquired self-love early enough to prevent a surgical intervention.

As far as the psychological transition is concerned, storytellers emphasized its processual nature and the considerable required effort. In other words, achieving wellbeing is not presented as a one-time event, but as an ongoing process, at whose end awaits the goal of self-love and respect. This processual nature is expressed by one (or more) of the following means: (1) emphasizing the long duration or the required hard work of learning self-love, (2) employing present continuous or present simple tense, (3) using the journey metaphor for the learning of self-love, or (4) underlining the uncompletedness of the mission.

21 stories highlighted the long duration of coming to terms with one's body, mostly by using a *it took a long time*-structure, as in (32), or else by adding adverbs which indicate a great amount of time, such as *for several years*, or *since I was a child.* 20 stories further emphasized that coming to terms is an ongoing process. Narrators either employed present simple tense to express the continuous repetition of self-love practices, such as (37), or they used present continuous tense to highlight the current progression of activities concerned with self-love, such as (38). Closely related is the aspect of considerate effort which it takes or took the narrators in order to reach a state of comfort, see for instance (39). The focus on hard work further highlights the understanding of coming to terms as a process, rather than singular event.

(37) Someone once told me that every vulva is a snowflake, so I got a tattoo of a snowflake on my collar bone to remind me every time I get naked that I'm a snowflake.
(38) I'm still working on it, but today, I'm proud to say I love my vulva.
(39) My self-hatred is getting less and less. I work hard on myself and meanwhile have a more loving look towards myself. Luckily I find my vulva very pretty today.

Many narrators furthermore used the journey metaphor for referring to their learning of self-love and respect, such as (40).

(40) I don't love my vulva, but it's a part of me and I accept that, and therefore I embrace it anyway. Although I feel a disconnect to it, it is beautiful nonetheless. I'm on a journey of self-love and acceptance.

Just like a journey, at the end of coming to terms with one's body lies a destination, which is self-love and respect. Also, similarly to traveling, learning to love oneself is not always a smooth ride and might require overcoming some obstacles on the way. Lastly, travelling can be an exhausting process, and it takes time and dedication to complete a journey, just as it is the case with acquiring self-acceptance and self-love.

Finally, the processual and ongoing nature is expressed through emphasizing that the quest to self-love is not yet completed, as (41) shows.

(41) There are so many beautiful vulvas in The Vulva Gallery, so I'm slowly starting to accept my own. But I have a long way to go.

Importantly, 39 stories focused on self-love as something that can be learned, acquired, and also lost. Apart from this strong consensus, storytellers had different ideas about what characterized self-love. Figure 11 shows the different aspects which were highlighted in the individual experiences.

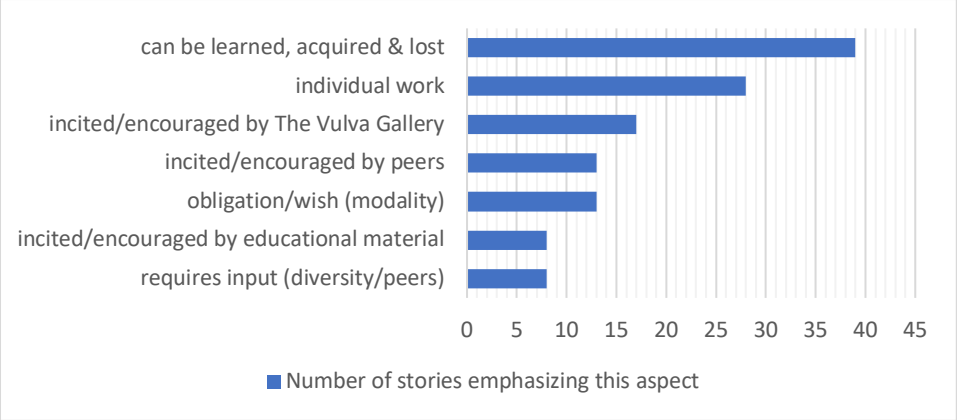

Figure 11 Characteristics of self-love, respect, and acceptance

28 narrators focused on the fact that learning self-love is something that requires their own effort and engagement. Even if getting started might have involved some help, in the end acquiring self-love was presented as individual work, as something which nobody else could do for them. On the contrary, 8 women insisted that in order to learn self-love, external input, such as being exposed to visual diversity, educational material, or a supportive intimate circle, was inevitably required, regardless of their own

effort. Accordingly, they claimed that it is something which cannot be accomplished individually, but which needs a collective effort. Interestingly, 17 women further emphasized the eye-opening impact *TVG* had on their quest towards self-love. They were positively affected either by the diversity displayed on the platform, by its positive and informative content, or by seeing their own vulva painted. Moreover, 13 storytellers reported that they embarked on their self-love project after having been encouraged by their close environment, who were mostly romantic partners. Similarly, 8 stories indicated educational material as incentive. A last interesting observation was that 13 women depicted self-love as an obligation, or at least as a very strong desire. This idea was conveyed either through verbs expressing modality (*have to, need to*), as in (42), or else by the use of imperatives (see for example (10), (16) or (17)).

(42) I thought about bleaching it too, but I didn't do it, because I know I need to be thankful for my body, and accept it and love it as it is.

Although the number of stories explicitly emphasizing the compulsory nature of self-love is comparatively small (30%), I would argue that this is the general idea conveyed by the large majority of the narratives, since, as was argued previously, self-love is a requirement for escaping states of discomfort and cultural norms.

Considering that coming to terms with one's body, meaning learning self-love, is portrayed as long process, the stories indicated different steps and factors which are required for or included in its course. These are illustrated in figure 12.

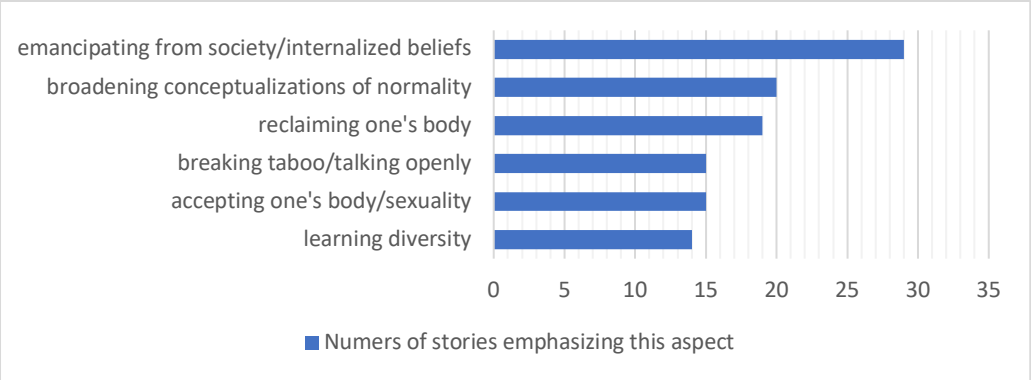

Figure 12 Steps involved in the mastering of self-love

In order to reach their goal of self-love, 29 narrators reported that they first needed to emancipate themselves from beliefs which they had internalized after growing up in a specific discourse and society. This implied disregarding what others might think as well as changing what one thinks oneself, see for example (43).

(43) I am discovering myself as a bisexual, assuming that I can love a woman or a man, feeling free and being able to enjoy my vulva in company without prejudice. Your project has helped me to love my vulva as it is, to enjoy it without shame and without taboo.

Another important step, which was emphasized 20 times and is closely related to an emancipation from social norms, is the broadening of exclusive conceptualizations of normality. Women highlighted that in order to love themselves, they needed to understand first that normal does not mean corresponding to an ideal, but simply being the way you are born, as the following story of a mother illustrates well:

(44) I always had a good relationship with my vulva until I started sharing it with others. Words cannot describe the feelings of disgust and shame I had. I always thought I had a 'fat vulva' - I would hide it with loose clothes otherwise I was convinced people would think I had a penis. My labia were so long that they got tangled and my partners would struggle to get through. My hair was always thick and rough which often caused chafing. I ignored my vulva, always, unless I was gritting my teeth through the embarrassing moments when my abnormal body would betray me. Moments I was supposed to be enjoying. That was until I had a daughter. She was born with very unique labia. Upon the hospitals regular inspection after birth her labia were noted as deformed! My question was "deformed compared to what?" Her body still functions perfectly, she is not in pain or suffering. She is perfect just the ways she is. I'm determined that she will know that we are all unique. That different is not deformed. I'm sharing my vulva with you, it's hiding under a generous mons pubis, robust protective pubic hair, covered in scars and blood. I'm not gritting my teeth anymore.

Moreover, for 19 women, reaching self-love was dependent on reclaiming their bodies, which is again closely related to an emancipation from social pressure. This aspect was mostly expressed by the possessive pronoun *mine* when narrators referred to their vulvas, but also by the verb *reclaim*, as in (32), or by switching to a semantic agent role, which was discussed previously. In 15 cases, talking openly and breaking the taboo surrounding female genitalia was involved in the quest to self-love (see for instance (3)). 15 further narrators highlighted that they needed to accept their bodies or their sexuality in order to reach their goal and lastly, for 14 women it was crucial to become aware of the existing diversity. Only after having undergone one (or several) of the steps portrayed above, narrators could eventually arrive at a state of comfort.

State of comfort

In all of the stories, the state of comfort is determined by self-love, self-respect, self-confidence and/or self-acceptance. While this is the ultimate goal across all narratives, 8 narrators disclose that although they would like to be there or are on their way, they *are not there yet*. In any case, having undergone or undergoing the transitional process

of learning self-love, narrators describe their state of comfort as being determined by the transformation from the previously illustrated pre-self-love self to a post-self-love self. This new self stands in complete contrast to the self before coming to terms with oneself and disposes of certain character traits, which are illustrated in figure 13.

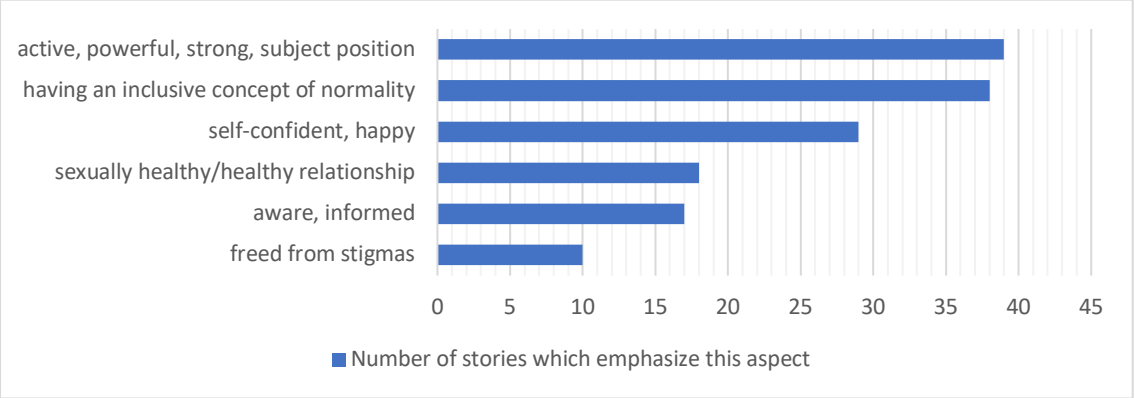

Figure 13 Characteristics of the post-self-love self

Most importantly, contrary to the weak and passive former self, the post-self-love is active, courageous, and strong and finds itself in a powerful position, which was emphasized 39 times. As was illustrated in (32), this transformation is often iconically illustrated by changing from passive semantic roles and sentential object positions to an agent role in subject position. Moreover, as was briefly mentioned before, narrators strongly emphasize the reclamation of and the right over their bodies, which further underscores their agency, as (4) as well as the following examples illustrate:

(45) This gallery, sexually [sic] education podcasts, and other forms of online educational media have helped me learn that there are many shapes and sizes of vulvas. They have given me the knowledge to talk about these subjects with friends confidently and I no longer allow people to shame me.

(46) Now I know that there is only one person I have to please, and that is me.

Evidently, storytellers insist on their right over their bodies, which they exert by reclaiming them for themselves, which again goes hand in hand with not molding it or thinking of it with regards to someone else's preferences. Consequently, they find themselves in a considerably more powerful position with increased agency.

Another important feature which the new self disposes of is an inclusive conceptualization of normality. Contrary to the previous understanding of normal meaning corresponding to a normative ideal, the new perception defines normal as natural. Accordingly, 38[5] narrators expressed their appreciation of diversity (see (23)),

[5] This number deviates from the 20 stories focusing on broadening conceptualizations of normality mentioned above, because then it was a prerequisite for transforming into the post-self-love self, while now it is a result.

focused on functional rather than appearance-based body image (see (44)) or explicitly commented on concepts of normality:

(47) I've always had an issue with my vulva not looking 'normal'. I saw vulvas in porn and I did not look like that. It took me a long time to realize that it's more common NOT to look like that.

Importantly, we can also see here the narrator questions the legitimacy of such concepts by using quotation marks as meta-linguistic tool, a strategy which was employed by a large majority of storytellers.

Other quite prominent features of the post-self-love self are self-confidence and happiness and general. The positive self-image is often a result of the new conceptualization of normality, since now, the own body is included, as examples (36) and (48) illustrate

(48) Ever since I was young, I have been aware and interested in my vulva. As I grew into my teenage years I was self conscious about the way that I looked but with some love and compassion from my best friend, I learned to love my vagina and my vulva for the way it was. I started doing piercings at a young age and at 16, I decided to get a Christina piercing. I now am in love with the way my vulva looks, and the piercing just accentuates it. I couldn't be happier with my vulva now. It just took self love.

18 storytellers further indicated that the post-self-love self is sexually healthy, or in a healthy relationship, which is assumed to include the former. As was mentioned before, impaired sexual health was part of the discomfort, which, as the emphasis on sexual health illustrates, they then managed to overcome. In this respect, sexual health did not only mean having safe, pleasurable and sufficient sexual encounters, but also caring more about it:

(49) I also spent quite a long time on struggling with cervicitis which made me feel like I was under a lot of pressure. Eventually, I made it through. I'm gonna take care of my vulva and protect it for good.

It seems that the woman's behavior before coming to terms with her vulva included incautious intercourse, since it led to her infection with cervicitis. Her promise to *take care of my vulva and protect it for good* however suggests that from now on, safer sex will be of importance to her.

Furthermore, contrary to the ignorant pre-self-love self the post-self-love self is aware and well-informed, which was emphasized by 17 narrators. This concerns knowledge regarding their own bodies and sexual preferences, genitalia-related health

However, one does not exclude the other, which means that 18 stories emphasized on only changing their view of normality after learning self-love, while 20 already did so before.

issues, as well as social norms and pressure. As illustrated previously, in many cases it was the learning of certain information which induced the transition to self-love in the first place (see for example (45)).

10 storytellers moreover underlined that contrary to the old self who was strongly affected by social norms and stigma, the new self is liberated from such negative influence. Becoming aware of standards of beauty, shaming and devalorization of female genitalia has helped these women to emancipate from such perceptions. On the other hand, the 8 women who have not yet managed to reach the goal of self-love insist that being aware of social stigma has not sufficed for overcoming it. It thus seems that the mere knowledge of social norms and their arbitrariness is not enough for their rejection.

Finally, the state of comfort is also largely determined by a change in perception of female genitalia in general, which represents the last main finding of this analysis.

6.1.3. Reclamation of a positive vulva discourse

The following section will elaborate on the results of the corpus-based analysis and shed light on the linguistic construction of the vulva on *TVG*. Generally, the following example aims to illustrate that women move from regarding the female genitalia as '*something down there'* to seeing it a beautiful body part, which they express through linguistic means.

(50) Me and my vulva lived together for over thirty years, but I had to become a mom to really get to know her. Since I gave birth, I started not only to reconnect with myself and overcome personal traumata but also to feel like a complete woman. In my twenties, I never touched that 'something down there'. I've never even looked at myself. It was something that existed but had no place in my life. Since two years or so, my life has completely changed. I look at myself, I touch myself, I enjoy myself. My sex life has totally changed because I accept myself and I am able to let go of my sorrows and fears. In the past, I tried to change the look of my vulva. I hated my pubic hair and tried waxing, shaving, sugaring... But nothing worked for me. That wasn't me. Now I even love my pubic hair. I realized that it was all only in my head. I was very insecure and thought that a hairy vulva is ugly. That pubic hair is filthy and has to be eliminated. I wanted to please my partner. Now I know that there is only one person I have to please, and that is me.

Here, we can see very well that the woman is aware of the problem of calling the vulva *'something down there'* which she expresses through the meta-linguistic tool of quotation marks. She counteracts this linguistic avoidance strategy of the euphemism by firstly calling the vulva by its name, secondly by empowering it through a strong personification (*me and my vulva lived together*) and thirdly by opposing the prior

avoidance strategy to a very explicit and impactful repetition: *I look at myself, I touch myself, I enjoy myself.* She further deconstructs perceptions of pubic hair as *ugly* and *filthy* as arbitrary, learned attributions which need to be overcome and finally arrives at a state where she *love[s]* all parts of her vulva. The example here serves as a bridge to the last main finding, namely the reclamation of the vulva discourse.

Before the sharing of their stories, women were confronted by a certain discourse, which impacted their own relationship to their genitalia. In their narrative, however, they consciously decide on the linguistic context surrounding the topic, and thus claim and shape the related discourse. This consciousness is firstly expressed through metalinguistic devices such as the quotation marks mentioned above, and secondly in one case through an explicit metalinguistic side comment, namely *(yes, I have even given her a pronoun now!).* In other cases, the deliberate linguistic choices become evident in their sharp contrast to the language employed in mainstream discourse. Consequently, the women provide other readers with a distinctively positive language to address the topic of female genitalia. The strategies through which they express the newly acquired positive perception of the female genitalia are listed below and illustrated in further detail in the following section.

1. Metaphor
2. Personification
3. Litote
4. Slogans/Popcultural reference
5. Impactful adjectives
6. Impactful verbs
7. Differentiated Female Genital Terms
8. Appreciative emoticons
9. Impactful evaluative clauses
10. Increasing visibility through decoration
11. Deconstruction of old 'normal' & celebration of diversity
12. Deconstruction of stigmatized topics
13. Depicting vulvas as pride/blessing

Figure 14 Strategies determining a positive discourse

As far as the employed metaphors are concerned, they connect vulvas to the realms of singularity (51), art (52), undiscovered treasures (53), (54) and life's entrance passage (55).

(51) *Every vulva is a snowflake*
(52) *Each vulva is a beautiful and unique artwork*
(53) Now I know how my heart and vulva, two secret gardens, are related and sacred
(54) I would love to dedicate this post to women of size and the beauty of 'the hidden treasure' they still have
(55) Vulvas are our first […] gateway into this world

A very prominent subcategory of metaphors in the stories, personification, is of particular importance to the vulva image. One fifth of all the narrators either used the personal pronouns *she* and *her* to refer to their vulvas or employed verbs which are usually reserved for humans alongside their genitalia in subject position, such as *tell*, *kiss back, live*, or *treat* (see for example (50) or (56)). In all cases, personification underlines the vulva's importance, strength, and relevance.

Other rhetorical devices, which were used less often but are not less effective, are litotes, such as example (56), or alliterations, such as (57).

(56) *She really isn't as bad as I thought*
(57) *My current partner, who I met during this time of reclaiming my pussy power, has also been an unforgettable part in my ability to love myself again.*

A further very impactful strategy is the use of slogans or pop-cultural reference to ameliorate the vulva's reputation, such as examples (58) – (60).

(58) Long live all vulvas!
(59) 'Cause you know, I love my vulva 3000
(60) Our strengths lie in our differences

Example (59) alludes to a phrase from the extremely successful movie, *The Avengers – Endgame*, which aired this year and is already the most watched movie of all times ("All Time Worldwide Box Office Grosses" 2019). In the movie, a father puts his child to bed, saying "I love you 3000", which it repeats back to him later in the story. Accordingly, reappropriating the phrase to the situation of a story about female genitalia expresses deep affection for the woman's vulva and adds a certain playfulness to the narrative's mood.

As far as adjectives describing the vulva are concerned, they allude to seven main semantic fields, i.e. (1) beauty (*beautiful, wonderful, sexy, gorgeous, pretty*), (2) charm (*chubby, fluffy, cute*), (3) strength (*fierce, strong, powerful*), (4) ownership (*mine*), (5) singularity (*special, unique, perfect, fabulous, awesome, different*), (6) sufficiency (*valid, acceptable, perfect*) and (7) sensuality (*sensual, loving, worthy,*

sensitive, sacred). Importantly, positively connoted adjectives do not only refer to the vulva as a whole, but sometimes also describe distinctive parts, such *protective pubic hair*, or the *generous mons pubis*. Evidently, these characteristics are accorded to the genitalia after the process of learning self-love and stand in sharp contrast to the adjectives employed when referring to the vulva or its parts before coming to terms (e.g. *weird*, *filthy, ugly, 'normal'*).

Regarding the transitive verbs which are used with the vulva in object position (verbs with the vulva in subject position have been briefly addressed above), they can be categorized according to three main actions, i.e. (1) appreciation (*love, accept, adore, embrace, celebrate, appreciate, be proud of*), (2) interaction (*engage, touch, look at, smell, please, get to know, discover, enjoy*) and (3) protection (*take care of, protect*). Again, the verbs used after coming to terms sharply oppose to the ones used before (cf. semantic roles, passive constructions and object positions discussed before), because they underline the women's agency, their active discovery and engagement with and their affection for their genitalia.

Moreover, a very important aspect for the vulva discourse of the platform are the female genital terms employed by the narrators. Unsurprisingly, all but two stories, which did not refer to the external genitalia at all, referred to the female genitals by the word *vulva.* Three narrators further used the words *crotch*, *lady parts*, or *genitals,* respectively, to denote the external female genitalia. Five stories mentioned the *vagina* but always referring to the muscular tube, rather than using it as a synonym for vulva. Otherwise, narrators differentiated between particular parts of the vulva only when these were important to their story. The *inner* and *outer labia* were most frequently named (14 times), and always in connection to their perceived exceeding length and consequent insecurity. *Pubic hair*, which was also called *vulva hair* or *bush*, was also mentioned quite often (10 times) and was regarded as excess before learning self-love. Other parts were less prominent and include the *clitoral hood*/*clit* (mentioned 3 times), *mons pubis/pubic mound* (mentioned 2 times) and, although not being part of the vulva, *anus* (mentioned once).

Another means by which seven women expressed their affection towards their vulvae were emoticons. Five of these comprise hearts, one a sunflower, and one a smiley; hence, they all communicate positive emotions. While they do not seem to play

an extremely significant role for the stories, they are the primary medium used in the comments, which will be discussed in the subsequent chapter.

An aspect which is of particular importance for the transmission of a certain morale are evaluative clauses. In these parts of the story, narrators establish its tellability and significance, which, at the same time, contains messages for the broader cultural level (Ochs and Capps 2001: 34). The following stories, which have already been quoted in parts, are now given in full length in order to illustrate this point.

(61) ***Feeling different and like a freak**, I grew up being ashamed of and confused by my extended labia and pubic hair. Anyone who saw my vulva said they had never seen one like it which made me feel **like there was something wrong with me.** From a young age, my mother told me I could get a labiaplasty when I grew up, **which conveyed to me that my natural state was wrong.** I recently met someone who loves my labia and taught me that some people actually prefer longer labia to shorter ones. This gallery, sexually education podcasts, and other forms of online educational media have helped me learn that there are many shapes and sizes of vulvas. They have given me the knowledge to talk about these subjects with friends confidently **and I no longer allow people to shame me. Let's keep it up! Thank you, Hilde, for creating a platform of discussion, and thank you to everyone who is participating for eradicating stigmas**.*

As the parts in bold show, this narrator uses embedded evaluation (correlatives, comparatives, explicatives, futures (cf. also (44)), imperatives) as well as external evaluation (stopping the story to address Atalanta and the readers to underline the importance of the diffusion of stories like hers) to illustrate the meaning and significance of her story. Devices used by other storytellers include intensifiers (47), quotations of words addressed to other characters of the stories (44), and modals (62).

*(62) Lately, a beloved friend reminded me that bodies come in all sizes and shapes, and they are modulated by life events. We **have to learn to accept every single part of it, even if it's not always easy**. I'm still working on it, but today, I'm proud to say I love my vulva. Society has never encouraged us to observe ourselves carefully, with tenderness and respect. Until recently, I never had the curiosity to open my legs and discover my vulva. I have always felt some shame and embarrassment, even though I was alone with myself, alone with my body. **I feel this shouldn't be normal. The Vulva Gallery book is a wonderful tool to break this taboo. Knowing oneself is the best way to gain confidence and share the pride of one's differences. Don't be shy, watch yourself. You will be pleasantly surprised.***

This story is a very clear example of a narrator who explicitly refers to the macro-level, since she regards her issues as results of her socialization, followed by the evaluation that *this shouldn't be normal.* In the rest of the coda, the narrator then also proposes a solution for problems like hers and encourages others to follow her lead. Hence, we can see that narrators make use of evaluation on the one hand in order to legitimate their issues and problems, often with reference to problematic socialization. On the

other, they offer new perspectives through the final evaluation of narrative. In relation to the discourse about female genitalia, storytellers thus provide a language to make sense of unpleasant experiences as well as to step out of a passive into an active position, where women can reconsider their beliefs and emancipate themselves from social ideals and stigma.

Another recurrent valorization of female genitalia consists in their intentional increased visibility and visualization, firstly in the form of decoration through piercings and secondly in the form of appreciation through having its portrait painted. Four women report having gotten a VCH piercing *to celebrate [themselves] and [their] lady parts*. Another woman states she *love[s] the VCH piercing which adorns [her] clitoral hood and [she] love[s] the pubic hair that [she] ha[s]; each just makes [her] feel so feminine and beautiful.* Apparently, the decoration of their genitalia is an expression of their acquired self-love and appreciation for their vulvas. Similarly, the act of having their vulvas painted, which all the narrators committed to, was highlighted by some as emancipatory and positioning statement (cf. (63), (64)). Thereby, they locate vulva-images not in a sexual or pathological context, but in an appreciative one.

(63) *I realized how fabulous she is, how well she's treated me my whole life and I got her portrait painted immediately to memorialize her and her perfection forever.*
(64) *I love having my vulva portrait painted, just as another way to express that I love who I am, I love myself, and I love my vulva!*

Content-wise, the stories shape discourse around female genitalia significantly by deconstructing mainstream conceptualizations of normality. According to the women, such an understanding implies that *large lips* or *extended labia, a darker color, pubic hair*, or *changing bodies* due to age or pregnancy are *weird* and *abnormal*. The storytellers strongly oppose such perceptions and underline how *damaging* they are. They firstly express their rejection and the concepts' arbitrariness by employing quotation marks as metalinguistic strategy alongside words like *normal*, *traditional* or in the following example:

(65) *There is not just 'one way' you must look like. All of us are beautiful in their own way.*

Secondly, they abandon practices like pubic hair trimming and self-doubt and lastly, they present their new perception of normal, i.e. meaning *natural*, *as we are, changing,* or, as in the previous example, highlighting and appreciating signs of changing bodies, such as *stretch marks*:

(66) *After I gave birth, I realized I had taken for granted what my vulva looked like before. I had no idea it would change so much (who knew stretch marks on the pubic mound was actually a thing!?). When I found The Vulva Gallery, I was glad to see so much diversity! I am trying to re-learn how to love my vulva and its new type of normal. It's different to how it was before, because I brought a child into this world.*

This example illustrates well that the celebration of diversity is attached to conceptualizations of normality and as such is one of the major concerns in women's stories. Interestingly, the new version of normal hence seems to imply potentially *different*. Accordingly, as was mentioned before, women recurrently emphasize their vulvas particularity and uniqueness and that *there are many shapes and sizes of vulvas* or that *bodies come in all sizes and shapes*. The diversity thus is not only perceivable in the different painted portraits of the vulvas, but also explicitly expressed and celebrated in the discourse led by the vulva owning narrators.

Another important contribution to the vulva discourse is the deconstruction of social stigma and the breaking of taboos. In the context of *TVG*, narrators report issues related to genitalia, sexuality and genital health in a quite unagitated, unsexualized, and constructive manner. The topics discussed include STIs, other health related issues, pubic hair elimination, anxiety, smell, (homo/inter)sexuality, (trans)gender, infertility, behavior during sexual encounters and lastly, menstruation, which is treated in a remarkably positive light, as show (67) and (68)

(67) *My vulva is the part of my body that I love most: looking at it, touching it, smelling its scent at every stage of my cycle makes me feel very happy and good about myself.*
(68) *I adore every menstruation, every daily discharge, and everything I use to take care of my vulva.*

The topics mentioned above are not only subject of stories, but also of self-disclosures in questions addressed to the online community (henceforth community question), which means that storytellers deem *TVG* a platform to constructively thematize and seek advice about elsewhere stigmatized topics. Again, the narrators thereby provide a language to discuss genital issues in a positive, respectful and constructive way.

Moreover, many narrators describe having a vulva as a *blessing* and highlight their own *pride* with regards to their genitalia. Notably, pride does not only regard the mere fact of disposing of a vulva (69), but also their particular appearance (70), as the following examples illustrate:

(69) *Vulvas are our first soft, nurturing, creative, powerful, mystical, beautiful gateway into this world and owning one is something to be proud of. I am now full of self love and admiration for my vulva.*

(70) *I was 20 years old when I got my VCH piercing, and I cried tears of happiness when it was done. Never had I ever seen my vulva look so cute, pretty and fierce at the same time! For the first time ever I felt confident and proud of her appearance!*

Again, narrators provide a new meaningful and appreciative language to address vulvas by expressing their pride about having one.

6.2. Analysis 2: Online storytelling

The second analysis is interested in the forms storytelling practices acquire on Instagram, as far as the participatory frameworks are concerned. Firstly, this examination consisted of an investigation of the speaker roles according to Goffman (1981, cited in De Fina 2016: 478), who differentiates between animator, principal and author, and secondly, audience participation was analyzed with the adapted version of De Fina's coding system presented previously.

6.2.1. Speaker roles

Speaker roles are particularly interesting and of importance in the context of the vulva gallery. *TVG*, i.e. as far as we know Hilde Atalanta, takes the role of the animator, since she makes the texts publicly available and thus acts as their speaker. As the official owner of the Instagram account, she further functions as the texts' principal, since as such she firstly takes responsibility for the contents of the texts, and secondly is often directly addressed/represented in the stories herself. Moreover, she adds some text and hashtags before and after the stories, so she embeds them immediately in content which is unquestionably hers. Importantly, the hashtags play a significant role for the distribution of the stories, since their content and quantity decide on how many viewers who are not already followers of *TVG* might stumble across the stories. Nevertheless, Atalanta shares the principal function with the women, since it is primarily their thoughts and positions which are reported. Lastly, as their original producers, the women are the authors of the stories. However, apart from a few exceptions who reveal their (online) identity in the comments, they remain anonymous, which limits their authority with regards to potential reinterpretations or renegotiations (e.g. questions, contests, or repostings) of the story's content. As the analysis of the comments will show, this task is often taken up by *TVG*, which enhances their authority with regards to the principal role. Accordingly, being the stories' animator and main

principal, Atalanta occupies a significant role with regards to speaker roles, particularly considering the stories' diffusion and especially because the authors remain anonymous and are thus prevented from taking further steps in the storytelling process.

6.2.2. Audience participation

These further steps depend on the participation of the audience and the ways in which they engage in the process. As was previously explained, the analysis of audience participation is focused on (1) interactional dynamics to determine in how far users engage with each other or the original story, (2) the comments' frame focus so as to examine whether users relate more to the telling or the ways of telling and (3) tone, in order to establish the kind of atmosphere in which narrators decide to self-disclose.

(1) Interactional dynamics

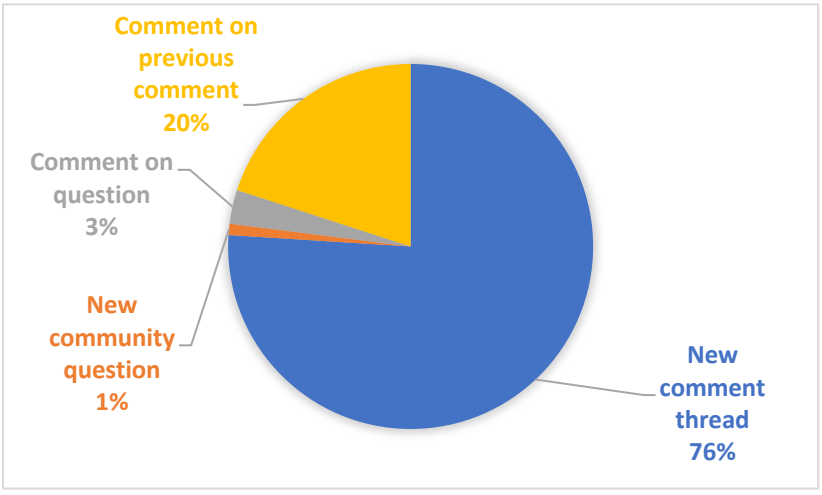

Figure 15 Interactional dynamics

Figure 15 indicates the percentage distribution of interactional dynamics across all 569 comments. With 76%, the large majority of comments consisted of new comment threads, which means that users predominantly reacted to the original story, rather than to comments or questions by other members of the audience. Only 4 comments (1%) were new community questions, which however received 16 answer (3%), meaning that more than one comment was invested in answering the issue raised by the original thread. Lastly, 20% of the comments (115 in absolute numbers) consisted of replies to previous comments. Accordingly, in most cases participation rested upon

a singular contribution referring to the original story. Nevertheless, with almost one fourth (23%) of the comments engaging with other audience members through answering their question or commenting on their contribution, there is still considerable interaction going on.

(2) Frame focus of the comments

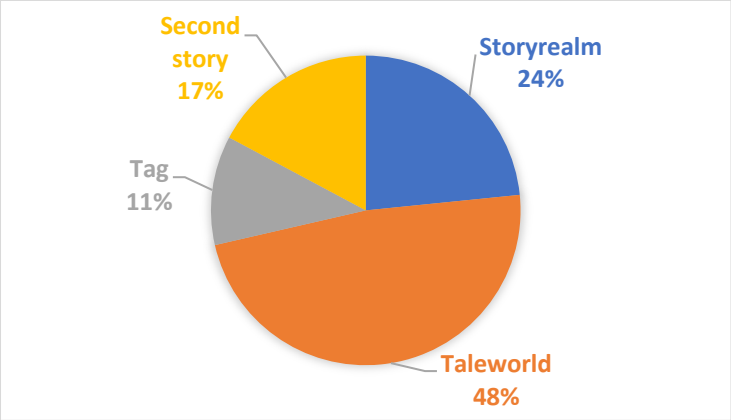

Figure 16 Frame focus of the comments

Figure 16 illustrates the percentage distribution of the comments' main topical focus across all contributions. First of all, it is important to underline that many comments only consisted of emoticons (mostly hearts, celebrations, clapping hands or thumbs up) which were obviously difficult to categorize. Given that they seemed to express support and appreciation towards the story or its characters, they were interpreted as belonging to the taleworld. However, one might also read them as commenting on for example the storyteller's bravery regardless of the stories' content, which would make them part of the storyrealm. As the broken heart in example (71) illustrates, however, the comment seems to be more concerned with the actions of the story, rather than their telling, which is why taleworld was opted for. The fire in example (73) was interpreted as conveying to the narrator that she/her vulva is desirable, thus again referring to the character and aspects evoked in the story (the narrator felt undesirable and ugly). The emoticons used in *TVG* expressed either appreciation, encouragement, compassion or support, as the examples below illustrate, I would thus argue that it is legitimate to interpret them as a reaction on the taleworld, rather than the storyrealm.

(71) 🙂🙂💔
(72) 👌😍❤️
(73) ❤️🔥
(74) 💥💥💥🙌

Other comments on the taleworld were related to specific actions reported in the stories (75, 76, 77), or its character (78, 79, 80), as the following examples illustrate:

(75) I would argue that the removal of pubic hair is not loving your vulva without prejudice.
(76) I'd like to know which podcasts she listened to. Is it possible in any way to find out? 🌸 @the.vulva.gallery
(77) Aww 😢 I'm sad to hear you felt like a freak, and that your mother implied you are abnormal. I think your vulva looks gorgeous and thank you for a beautiful story.
(78) So happy that you have grown to love it. She is unique and beautiful.
(79) 💕Stay brave, strong and true
(80) You're beautiful darling xox

As we can see, with the exception of (75), all comments were extremely encouraging and positive. One story was particularly interesting, since the narrator used the words *traditional* to refer to her vulva and asked for advice on how to *surrender* in the context of sexual intercourse, which elicited a lot of critical meta-comments on the linguistic choices (which are thus part of storyrealm). Faced with a large amount of negative responses, the narrator later added quotation marks to *'traditional'* as well as the explanation *Surrender meaning allowing myself to feel pleasure with that person.* Although this did not please all criticizers, other responses emphasized the actual question of the story, and focused on giving advice on actions of the taleworld:

(81) People are getting mad about the word "surrender" even though you're missing the point. Instead of getting bad at the person for thinking they have to surrender themselves, why not realise that they've probably been fed that term through media etc. Actually right to help them out with that mindset instead of attacking them and the owner of the page. Gosh. My reply would be, try not to focus on the aspect of "surrendering" I think FULLY RELAXING as in kind of "surrendering your apprehensions" takes A VERY LONG TIME. Nor is it something you HAVE TO DO. But if it's something you WANT TO DO for YOURSELF. Then for sure. Just note fully relaxing would imply you're with someone who knows you as well as you know yourself thus being your true self around. I would also like to say if you're so stressed you aren't feeling pleasure you either need to give it time and discuss with the person and if it persists you may not be with the right person (especially if you feel like you can't talk about it with the person, that would also be an indicator.) trust and openness is so important but I'm also not going to act like it is easy to come by or happens immediately. Love from a fellow restlessly worried person x
(82) Never "surrender" yourself as if it is something you have to do or as if it's forced. Do what comes naturally. If you don't feel comfortable for whatever reason you need to work on it personally or even together but do it before the bedroom. Learn to be comfortable and be yourself, trust as much as you can and allow yourself to be or feel vulnerable. I hope that was helpful ❤️
(83) How bout instead of surrendering you take control. First by yourself. Figure out what you like with a partner you know and trust: you yourself. Then try it with a partner 🙌
(84) You don't have to surrender your body to anyone!

(85) Just always be yourself and once the partner is someone you trust and he/she/they trusts you, it's sooo easy to let go. You just feel safe with your partner and this is when you know it.

(86) Well, obviously it isn't "sooo easy" for this vulva's owner, or else she probably wouldn't have popped the question!

This story now leads us to the storyrealm, where many reactions consisted of meta-comments, in this case on the idea of surrendering or on the linguistic choices (see 87-89).

(87) Why should women have to feel vulnerable or surrender or submit during sex? It sounds very one sided. And is reminiscent of rape culture in my opinion. Why not take charge or enjoy pleasure mutually? We're not female cats in heat waiting to be mounted by a tom! 🤦🏻‍♀️

(88) The only time I heard about some sort of stereo type for vaginas is on this page. I'm really bothered by it. There is no such thing as a 'traditional vulva'? Vulvas like this are not more represented in porn than any other kind? It really bothers me, because the constant mentioning of how women compare their looks to some absolutely bs made up standard, contradicts immensely with the goal I thought this page has (goal: spreading awareness and encourage self love).

(89) SEMANTICS people! Chill tf out about the word "surrender"! She CLEARLY states what her definition is.

This narrative is a very good example of how the audience affects the storytelling process even when the narrators remain anonymous, since after the critical comments on *surrendering*, the narrator changed her story by adding information. Moreover, the content of the story, in terms of its meaning and social implications, is reinterpreted, reshaped and continued in the comments. Other meta-comments were related to meanings of certain words, where users asked for clarifications, for example about the gender when it is preceded by the word *trans,* as in *transmen*:

(90) See it is an adjective, then you will have an easier time to understand

Otherwise, the great majority of comments focusing on the storyrealm were concerned with the stories' tellability, or on its teller, as the following examples illustrate:

(91) Wow 😢this was so beautiful to read and understand things from a different perspective.

(92) I looooove this beautiful message! One of the most touching that I've read on this page ❄️💙

(93) Thank you so much for sharing your story and empowering others to feel less alonr.

(94) 💜thank you for sharing your story with us brave soul 🙏💜👍🙌

A last significant part of storyrealm comments emphasized the valuable and important work of Hilde Atalanta, or *TVG* respectively, as (provider of a) platform for such stories, as well as on the discourse led within it:

(95) Hilde is wonderful, as her work, her book ... All bodies are unique, are beautiful, it is necessary to educate humans to respect all differences. Bravo Hilde. This drawing, this person, everything is splendid.😘💋💋

(96) What a brilliant account 💕

(97) This entire conversation is so wonderful and kind. Thank you all for educating and being open to learning without anger or harshness. I wish all conversations could be this understanding and compassionate ❤️👏🏻

As example (95) illustrates, in her function of artist and site operator, Atalanta is almost regarded as a co-teller, which means that the communicative context of the story significantly affects its reception. Likewise, the importance and value of this context is underlined in (97).

As far as tags are concerned, in most cases, they only consist of the hyperlinked mentioning of another user, which is achieved by putting @ in front of their user name (e.g. @the.vulva.gallery), in order to make them aware of the sites' existence or a particular story/portrait. Sometimes they were succeeded by an emoticon. They are of interest because tagging another person means sharing the story with them, which involves the taggers in the storytelling process. When *TVG* was tagged, it was mostly because users asked for specific information, which they more often than not received, meaning that Atalanta is quite active in the comment section.

Finally, a considerable amount of comments concerned second stories, which means that users reacted to the original narrative by sharing one of their own. Interestingly, they were not only posted as new comment thread, but often emerged within an interaction of two or more users which began with a question, a justification, or a piece of advice.

(98) Over time I never really thought of my body as mine. Living a sheltered life and not being able to dress how I want to dress or cut my hair, seriously gave me more body issues, mental health issues, gender issues and sexuality issues. I finally realized that I'm agender/non-binary but only attracted to women which I guess you can say I'm a lesbian because I have an assigned female at birth body. I just want to appear androgynous but I can't due to how my body looks so very female

(99) I have never related to a story so much! My mother's words effected me so much. I now identity as a transgender man but still occasionally have doubts that all my dysphoria is due to my mother's view of my vulva

(100) I'd like to comment to the speaker that I suffered from the exact same for years, decades even - and I can't say it's fully in my past. For me it was a combination of insecurity about how I look (not a typical "beautiful" woman) and insecurity about my ability to please my partner. It was pointed out to me that those are fancy ways of saying I was focused on myself. We usually think of narcissists when we think of people stuck on themselves — in reality it doesn't matter if our self-thoughts are

accepting or critical. When I'm thinking about myself I can't put attention on us, or my partner. I can't experience the moment if I'm criticizing it at the same time. Finally I haven't made the best choices in partners, if each of them was critical of me during the day, I protected myself with the presumption they were being critical of me during sex, too. Now, I think about a partner as someone willing to share their body with me — rather than someone who wants something from me. While I don't have any advice I hope that sharing my story gives you some new ways to approach your own situation. Be kind to yourself because criticism is a self-realizing loop.

(101) I have an extended labia as well, and my mom made me ashamed of it.

(102) Thank you so much. I feel like I could have written this post, especially about feeling like it was my job to be Extra Girl, especially when it came to being sexually available and desirable (it never occurred to me I could ever say no, and I femmed it up all the time). Now that I've grown and recognized that preverbal trauma just like the OP, I can reclaim my body and have a relationship with it instead of it being a tool to please other people. And that also includes a lot of non-binary gender expression as it turns out. Thank you again for helping me feel not alone!

These examples illustrate that the openness and self-disclosure of the original narrators helped other users to talk about and make sense of their own experiences and underlines the impact such a platform can have for other individuals. Even though 17% might not seem so much in relation to other comments at the first sight, 98 new personal stories are a considerable amount, given the sensitivity of the topics; particularly because the users in the comments do not post anonymously, but they reveal their online identity.

(3) Tone

Lastly, an examination of tone yielded important insights in the communicative context in which individuals shared their sensitive stories. Figure 17 illustrates the percentage distribution of the dominant tone across all comments.

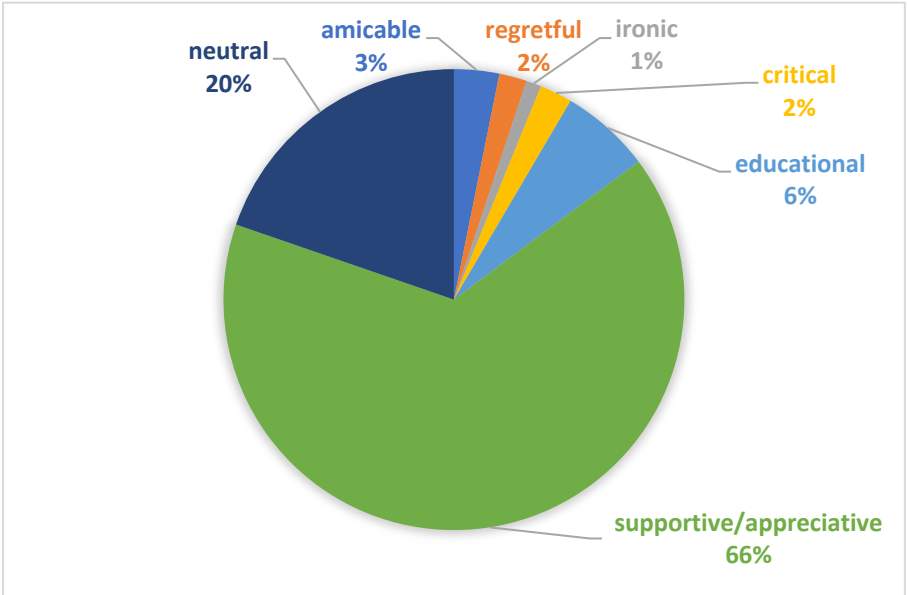

Figure 17 Tone of the comments

As the figure illustrates, the majority of the comments were supportive or appreciative in tone (see for example (91)-(97)). The tagging of other users was coded as neutral if there were no emoticons suggesting another interpretation. Regretful tone only occurred 11 times, and was always in relation to personal experience, as example (103) illustrates.

(103) dude you are so lucky i would kill for this vulva :(i hate mine and i'm still trying to learn to love it

Similarly, critical tone was only perceivable 6 times, 5 of which concerned the surrender-story presented above (see e.g. (88)). Educational tone mostly concerned medical information; however, 12 out of 63 educational comments were also posted in reaction to the surrender-story, where users debated about the meaning and employment of the word *surrender* and its implications for equal sexual intercourse. Accordingly, comments with instructional tone were also concerned with giving advice, e.g. (82), or with lecturing fellow users, e.g. (104). Importantly, in most cases, instructions were not patronizing, but quite polite and respectful.

(104) I barely ever stray into the comments on this page. The owner and creator goes very far to be inclusive about who can have a vulva and everyone goes straight to saying "her". Please be mindful that transmen and non-binary people can have vulvas too ❤️

As was mentioned before, the coding of the comments' tone engendered a certain level of subjectivity, since it is not always exclusive or clear-cut, and the line between appreciative and amicable, or neutral and educational can be quite blurry. However, what definitely emerges is that only 2% of the comments were critical, and another 3% contained some form of negativity, and 95% of the comments were either neutral or positive. Accordingly, narrators shared their stories with a highly supportive audience, where they arguably do not need to fear negative social consequences, as long as they are mindful with their choice of vocabulary and keep potential struggles of other individuals in mind.

A final quite interesting observation is that of the 15 examined stories, two authors gave up their anonymity and revealed their online identity in the comment section (see (105)).

(105) Hey! That's me 😌💕 Thank you @the.vulva.gallery for painting this for me!

Atalanta replied to this posting affirmatively, which is why it can be assumed that the user is telling the truth and is thus the story's real author. Since only the first 50

comments were analyzed, it is possible that more narrators came forward in the remaining contributions.

6.3. Discussion

The present study aimed at exploring the narrative and discursive features of the personal stories about female genitalia shared on Instagram in light of their cultural context. The discursive strategies employed in the stories showed that these were configured to function as public testimonies rather than merely constituting recounts of personal experience. As such, they transmitted certain messages to the reader, the main ones concerning the significance of learning self-love, of broadening conceptualizations of normality and of emancipating from a problematic mainstream discourse. These messages emerged predominantly in how the stories are structured, which revealed a prototypical storyline where narrators moved from a state of discomfort to a state of comfort via the mastering of self-love. Lastly, the discursive construction of the vulva in the stories contrasts sharply with mainstream discourse, as in the narratives, the vulva discourse is characterized by an empowering, constructive and appreciating rhetoric which provides readers with a language to address genital issues positively. As far as the storytelling process is concerned, the analysis has shown that it is significantly impacted by the communicative context; firstly, by the chosen platform and the inherent co-construction with the operator of the profile, Hilde Atalanta, who functions as animator and main principal for the stories while the women are primarily their authors. Secondly, it is further affected by the audience participation, which are highly implicated in the continuation, negotiation, reinterpretation and diffusion of the narratives. Thirdly, the platform has proven to be instrumental for the contents of the stories as it firstly promotes a certain language to address genital issues, it secondly encourages a positive, appreciative, and supportive atmosphere and lastly, it elicits a specific kind of story, namely one that revolves around personal growth.

These findings contribute to the existing research in five important ways. Firstly, they constitute further evidence for the assumption that a sexualized and depreciative vulva discourse has a harmful effect on women's health (cf. Braun & Kitzinger 2001b;

Braun & Wilkinson 2001; Braun, Tricklebank, & Clarke 2013; Braun & Kitzinger 2001a; Labuski 2015; Jenkins et al. 2018; Moran & Lee 2018). In their stories, women described some form of psychological distress related to their genitalia (e.g. self-consciousness, feeling weird or inappropriate, shame, etc., see figure 8), which was caused by outside factors (e.g. cultural imperatives, limited exposure, a lack of discourse, the close environment, etc., see figure 9). According to the storytellers, the result of such negative (or insufficient) influences is a conceptualization of the natural body as abnormal and a generally exclusive understanding of what counts as normal (cf. Jenkins et al. 2018: 703). The narrators particularly condemn the lack of diversity in porn and educational material and describe the resulting ideal vulva as pink, not having long inner labia, and not being covered by pubic hair, an image which corresponds to the beauty ideal described in the literature (Schick, Rima, & Calabrese 2011: 75; Moran & Lee 2018: 230). Being confronted with this alleged norm, many women who do not conform to such an image either suffer from a feeling of inappropriacy, or else they partake in the removal of what Labuski labelled "felt excess" (Labuski 2015: 25), in the practice of pubic hair removal, as well as (the consideration of) labiaplasty. Importantly, the results further reinforce Labuski's assumption of genital dis-eases rather being cultural than physiological conditions (Labuski 2015: 14). While seven women reported having experienced physical distress for which there is some form of remedy, medical treatment alone never led to a state of comfort. In all cases, women had to engage in a psychological healing process as well, where they had to emancipate themselves from social stigma or reconsider their conceptualization of normality in order to get better; accordingly, genital diseases always have a cultural dimension. One of these dimensions concerns the taboo nature of genitalia. In accordance with prior research (cf. Braun & Wilkinson 2001: 20; Rees 2013: 270), narrators emphasized that they have never been encouraged to discover their genitalia or their sexuality but have learned to ignore what is 'down there' and to put their male partner's pleasure at the center.

Secondly, the results contribute new insights in support of research which has suggested a positive effect of visual diversity and positive body image. As numerous studies on genital dissatisfaction have suggested, the only remedy against genital image concerns is exposure to diversity and a positive discourse (Schick et al. 2010: 402; Schick, Rima, & Calabrese 2011: 81; Moran & Lee 2018: 237–38; Jenkins et al.

2018: 707). Indeed, the present findings confirm this assumption in so far, as the narrators report that their transformation to a state of psychological and sexual wellbeing, where they felt confident, powerful and happy, predominantly depended on them learning that their internalized ideals of beauty were arbitrary. Consequently, the transition required the acquisition of self-love, which again depended on an emancipation from societal ideals and a broadening of conceptualizations of normality, amongst others (cf. figure 12). Many narrators stated that this process was prompted by *TVG*, educational material, or else personal willpower. In any case, the diversity displayed in *TVG* and the encouraging discourse has at least prompted the narrators to get their vulvas painted and share their experiences, which represents a conscious and constructive engagement with their genitalia. Moreover, the large majority of narrators describe inclusive concepts of normality in their state of comfort, which promotes the idea that when being provided with networks of respect and body-appreciation, women internalize inclusive and positive body images and consequently become more satisfied with their own (Cohen et al. 2019: 1549). Interestingly, inclusive concepts of normality, body positivity and self-love were particularly strong desires across all stories, to the point where they were presented as obligation in some cases. It could thus be argued that these aspects may constitute newly emerging cultural imperatives.

Thirdly, the analysis illustrates how women consciously design their stories in order to firstly make sense of their experience for themselves, and secondly to forward a social movement. In accordance with research emphasizing the semiotic potential of storytelling (Bamberg 2007; Bruner 2010), this analysis has shown that women render their genital experience meaningful by ordering events chronologically and causally. By applying certain argumentative lines (see figure 5), narrators arrive at an explanation for their experiences and emotions which gives them significance and legitimacy. For example, many women linked present distress with past exposure to cultural imperatives and ideals of beauty, and consequently were able to make sense of and tackle their unease. Accordingly, the results also provide evidence for the healing functions of narrative (Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin 2007: 5), since it is through the structuring of their experiences, through the definition of a point of origin and a path to closure, that narrators can at least mentally conceptualize, or else actually arrive at, a state of psychological and sexual well-being. In this respect, the

finding of similar (Andalibi, Ozturk, & Forte 2017: 1496) or sympathetic others (1986, cited in Andalibi, Ozturk, & Forte 2017: 1487) seems to be of particular importance for the self-disclosures on *TVG.* A considerable number of narrators and commentators highlight the importance of the empowering community emerging within the profile (cf. figure 6) and many storytellers emphasize that it was the reading of other stories which has encouraged them to post one on their own. Accordingly, through the sharing of their stories, women also achieve a legitimatization of their experiences through the social support in the form of presence of and reaction by sympathetic others, which assures them that they are essentially normal.

However, narrators do not only meaningfully structure their experience for their personal gain, but as the discursive configuration of their stories has shown, they also aim at forwarding a social movement. The analysis has revealed that the stories do not only function as personal recounts of experience with genitalia, but predominantly as public testimonies, where the narrators act as mouthpieces for a social movement which aims at ameliorating public discourse and sexual education, breaking taboos, eradicating social stigma and at celebrating vulva diversity (cf. figure 5). In their stories, women promote *TVG*'s mission statement, the empowering community emerging within it, and they explicitly call for social change, amongst others by using rhetorical devices to appeal to the reader's emotions (cf. chapter 6.1). As has been mentioned previously, the argumentative lines put forth by the women thereby largely correspond with Atalanta's mission statement (Atalanta n.d.), which suggests that *TVG* (including Atalanta as well as all the users posting on the site) has designed "recurrent plot lines" (Bamberg 2007: 3) which in a community pursue the particular goal of guiding community members in terms of communal norms and values.

Interestingly, the results of this investigation resemble closely to the ones yielded in De Fina's (2018) analysis of personal stories posted on YouTube as part of the Dreamer's campaign as well as Wong's (2009) analysis of coming out stories. In both cases, the stories functioned as public testimonies and had clear sociopolitical goals. In the first case, the stories aimed at eliciting empathy, raising consciousness about the situation of undocumented citizens and at presenting the narrators as desirable citizens (De Fina 2018: 50). In the second case, the stories aimed at offering guidance to people in a similar situation on the one hand, as well as presenting such experiences to people who are not concerned by them on the other (Wong 2009: 26).

Wong further argued that coming out stories have given voice to a previously silenced community, they offer encouragement to closeted people and they provide a language to talk about the process of coming out (Wong 2009: 26). Compared to the coming to terms story posted on *TVG*, women do not represent a silenced community, but the vulva can be regarded as a silenced topic, and the respective stories thus exhibit strong similarities. Apart from both types of stories being public testimonies and vehicles of social change, they also transmit a similar message to the readers, namely that coming out/coming to terms entails a transformation of the self which is a long and strenuous process. Moreover, in both stories the narrators speak on behalf of their community (gay people/people having a vulva), they shape the gay imagery/vulva imagery and the surrounding discourse, and they thereby have a determining influence on what is thinkable with regards to the respective topics. Moreover, the emergence and wide distribution of both types of stories is strongly affected by technology and a change in awareness: while the coming out stories were prompted by the advent of the Internet and the wider acceptance of same-sex desire, (Wong 2009: 26), the coming to terms story were enabled by the affordances of the SNS Instagram and a general body-positivity trend. These strong similarities provide further evidence for the argument that the dramatized nature of storytelling is often exploited for the advancement of social movements, since it allows to promote ideologically shaped versions of reality (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012: 141). Just like De Fina's and Wong's storytellers, the women posting on *TVG* lend their personal stories to a cause in order to raise awareness, create consensus, and elicit social change, in this case with regards to the treatment of female genitalia.

Fourthly, contrary to the lack of a clean space for the vulva in mainstream society (Labuski 2015: 25; Braun & Wilkinson 2001: 2001), *TVG* provides such a space, which women consequently occupy in order to actively shape the existing discourse by firstly exposing the problematic current discourse, and by secondly offering an alternative one. According to the social mission of *TVG* and of the embedded narratives, women aim at bringing to light the unfortunate situation which vulva-owners face in their everyday life. They particularly emphasize the hazardous influence of cultural imperatives/ideals of beauty and social expectations, the lack of diversity and taboo, the social stigma surrounding female sexuality and STIs, the lack of or inappropriate sexual education, problematic representations of the vulva and

sexuality in porn and educational media, and lastly of a neoliberal economy which pathologizes the female body. By explicitly designating and describing these influences, narrators expose aspects of women's everyday life as harmful which otherwise might pass as normal and harmless. Notably, the enumeration of different harmful influences by narrators corresponds with previous research about the causes for genital dissatisfaction (Braun & Wilkinson 2001; Braun & Kitzinger 2001b; Schick, Rima, & Calabrese 2011; Jenkins et al. 2018; Moran & Lee 2018).

After having uncovered the problematic existing discourse, narrators challenge it by offering a positive alternative. The results have shown that women on *TVG* consciously differentiate between the different parts of their vulvas, they use particularly positive vocabulary alongside their genitalia as well as empowering metaphors, personifications, slogans and pop-cultural references. Moreover, narrators deconstruct mainstream conceptualizations of normality by promoting an inclusive concept and they combat social stigma and taboo by addressing genital issues in a quite unagitated and unsexualized manner (cf. figure 14). Consequently, they create a space for the vulva which is neither conceptual absence (Braun & Wilkinson 2001: 20) nor sexualized hyperpresence (Labuski 2015: 29), but devoted to vulva celebration, body positivity and productive discussion about health issues. The consistent distinction between different parts of the vulva is of particular interest in this respect, especially compared to the curious imprecision existent in mainstream discourse (Labuski 2015: 8; Braun & Kitzinger 2001b).

Importantly, this safe space and the emerging discourse is significantly shaped and enabled by *TVG* and its operator. As has been established in chapter 5.3, Hilde Atalanta has substantially predetermined what can be said about the female genitalia and how it can be spoken about. Firstly, she continuously promotes vulva diversity and celebration, terminological specificity, and inclusive concepts of normality and sexual education. Moreover, she condemns depreciative vulva discourse, exposes negative social influences, and raises awareness for medical conditions. Lastly, Atalanta has invited her users to share stories which revolve around personal growth and which aim at empowering other individuals, and has thus proposed a particular plot pattern, which was evidently taken up by the narrators. Accordingly, by offering linguistic input as well as a platform for self-disclosure, Atalanta has equipped her followers with the necessary linguistic and interactional resources for the participation in the negotiation

of power, authority and credibility in discourse (cf. Foucault 1972 and Bourdieu 1986, cited in De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012: 125), as far as the female genitalia are concerned. By occupying the safe space in *TVG* and claiming the right over their stories about their vulvas, narrators thus significantly exercise agency and shape the concerned discourse.

The fifth and last contribution to existing research concerns online storytelling. The results of this investigation illustrate the need to approach online narratives from a socio-interactional, rather than a taxonomic point of view, since the communicative context, particularly platform and audience participation, significantly influence the process of storytelling as well as the narrative itself. In this respect, the investigation has also proven the benefits of a discursive narrative analysis, since this approach has allowed to account for story components being narrative accomplishments rather than their prerequisite. Thereby, basing argumentation on the analysis of discursive strategies, assumptions could be made about the specific and purposeful configuration of the stories by their narrators.

As has been argued previously, narrators do not merely share personal stories as means of identity negotiation and recapitulation of past events, which is the focus of Labovian narrative analysis (Labov 1972, cited in De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012: 27), but they perform numerous social actions, such as putting forth arguments, challenging 'society's' views, or attuning their stories to particular situative concerns, namely the promotion of a social movement (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2008a: 381–82). As the preceding chapters have illustrated, *TVG* as communicative context has strongly influenced the storytelling process as well as the narratives itself by promoting certain linguistic input and narrative patterns. Likewise, the particular affordances of Instagram significantly impact the narrative practice. Firstly, the anonymity facilitated by the fact that Instagram does not require full names, and finally ascertained by Atalanta's art project has on the one hand eliminated possible negative social consequences for the narrators and has engendered particular speaker roles on the other (Goffman 1981, cited in De Fina 2016: 478). As discussed earlier, *TVG* acts as the story's animator and principal, whereas the women predominantly act as authors of the stories. Consequently, the communicative context has increased *TVG*'s and decreased the original author's authority over the subsequent continuation,

explanation, or negotiation of the stories, which is why it can be argued that the stories are to some extent co-constructed with Hilde Atalanta.

Moreover, as the results on audience participation have revealed, other users influence the storytelling process in so far, as they comment on the narratives' how and what, they ask for clarifications, and they significantly contribute to the stories' distribution by sharing it with other users through tagging. Interestingly, contrary to De Fina's analysis of comments posted under a newspaper story about famous people, which revealed that comments were predominantly concerned with the storyrealm and were highly reflexive, this analysis has shown that users focused more on the taleworld and mostly represented new threads. This is probably due to the very different and more sensitive taleworld in the case of *TVG* as well as the large amount of comments which only consisted of emoticons.

Furthermore, the analysis of the comments has highlighted that narrators told their stories to highly attentive and supportive ears, and consequently did not have to fear negative social judgement. In accordance with Andalibi, Ozturk & Forte's (2017: 1487) analysis of self-disclosures on Instagram, the results have shown that sensitive personal stories shared on *TVG* have elicited encouragement, expressions of solidarity as well as the promotion of healthy choices. Hence, the investigation has contributed important insights to research on online storytelling, as it has shown in how far audience and communicative context participate in the storytelling as well as the meaning making process.

Lastly, the analysis has lent weight to research arguing for a socio-cultural approach to narrative, since such a definition has allowed to account for all kinds of stories shared on *TVG*, including prototypical stories as well as stories about ongoing events, about future or hypothetical events, about shared (known) events, or allusions to tellings (Georgakopoulou 2007b: 146). Moreover, as has extensively been argued, such a definition allows to account for the influence of the context (including media affordances, social roles and relationship), and their sociocultural objectives.

To conclude, the present findings evidently are to be considered in the light of several limitations. First, as has been mentioned previously, it could not be ascertained that the stories were not altered in any way by the profile's operator, Hilde Atalanta. While this would not change the outcomes of the analysis, since the stories available to the Instagram community would remain the same, it would certainly undermine

assumptions made about narrators' deliberate and purposeful configuration of the stories. However, in a short correspondence with Atalanta, the artist has highlighted her very high ethical standards, which is why it can be assumed she would not change the stories for her personal mission's benefit. Moreover, while the coding of the commentaries proceeded most meticulously, it nevertheless engendered a certain subjectivity, because frame focus and tone were not always clear-cut, and especially emoticons proved difficult to categorize. Lastly, given the scope of this investigation, audience participation had to be treated somewhat superficially, as a more profound examination would have largely exceeded the limitations of this paper. Accordingly, it would be interesting in the future to analyze commentaries more in-depth and with regards to their propositional contents, particularly the second stories and audience interaction.

7. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates novel findings regarding the contributions of online storytelling to the individual and cultural construction of the female genitalia on the SNS Instagram. Specifically, the results show that narrators purposefully configure personal narratives as public testimonies in order to elicit social change and consequently transmit important messages about coming to terms with one's genitalia. These messages particularly concern the significance of acquiring self-love, of reconceptualizing normality, of rejecting cultural imperatives, as well as the inherent transformation from a troubled pre-self-love self to a confident and emancipated post-self-love self. Based on the results of the present study, women further challenge the hegemonic vulva-discourse by exposing it as derogatory, insufficient, and arbitrary, and by opposing it to a positive, appreciating, and empowering way to address female genitalia. The analysis of audience participation further sheds light on online storytelling practices and illustrates how the communicative context, particularly other users' commentary, influence content, meaning, and evolution of the original narratives. Specifically, the findings illustrate how audience and platform participate in setting an appreciative and constructive atmosphere, in negotiating propositional content and in distributing original as well as new stories. The investigation has

moreover provided further evidence for the pertinence of approaching online narratives as a social practice, rather than from a taxonomic point of view, as it allows to account for the stories being communicative accomplishments in particular contexts and with specific purposes in mind.

As has been mentioned in the discussion, the limitations of my study concern a lacking insight into Atalanta's editing practices, an unfortunate but inevitable amount of subjectivity with regards to the coding process, as well as a certain superficiality in the analysis of audience participation due to the scope of the thesis. This last part of the analysis opens up a whole field of new aspects, particularly as far as the comments' propositional contents and natures of interaction and engagement are concerned, which would accordingly be quite interesting to analyze more profoundly in the future.

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Appendix

Codes and numeric distribution – Analysis 1

Reasons for sharing stories:	**Number of stories**
Declaration of support/self-love	21
Eradicating stigma	37
Participate in making diversity visible	11
Giving advice/educate	9
Becoming part of community	6
Illustration of personal growth	42
Asking for advice	3
Promoting a community	34
Direct address	16
Addressing Hilde	11
"Us", "We"	9
Community	20

Types of stories	**Number of stories**
Advice/persuasion	2
Declaration of support/love for own vulva	2
Community question	3
Transition from discomfort to comfort	43

STATE OF DISCOMFORT	**Number of stories**
Physical	7
Psychological	42
Concerned with vulva aesthetics	31
Self-consciousness/insecurity/anxiety	29
Self-hatred	8
Shame	14
Dissociation from body	3
Ignorance/knowledge/awareness gap	9
Feeling weird/abnormal/inappropriate	32
Confusion	2
Sadness	1
Impaired sexual health	15
Pressure	5
Pre-self-love self	

Passive, powerless, weak, object position	22
Exclusive concept of normality	30
Fitting ideal = obligation	10
Struggling	43
Natural = abnormal	22
Body = intended to be used by others	5
Undeserving of (self-)love & respect	15
State inflicted by	
"Society"	11
Cultural imperative/social expectations	22
Intimate social circle (parents, friends, romantic partners)	10
Lack of education	9
Taboo: lack of discourse	14
Lack of diversity	15
Neoliberal economy	2
Physical discomfort	7
Porn/educational material/magazines	7

Transition	**Number of stories**
Physical	8
Labiaplasty (considered)	2
Labiaplasty successful	1
Labiaplasty unsuccessful	1
Physical treatment	4
Psychological: mental process	43
Hard work	16
Long duration	21
Ongoing	19
Tool & Goal = self-love	
Can be learned, acquired & lost	39
Obligation/wish (modality)	13
Requires input (diversity/environment)	8
Incited/encouraged by their close environment	13
Individual work	28
Incited/encouraged by educational material	8
The Vulva Gallery	17
Proceeds over	

Reclamation of own body	19
Emancipation from society/internalized beliefs	29
Broadening conceptualizations of normality	20
Accepting one's body/sexuality	15
Learning diversity	14
Breaking taboo, talking openly	15

STATE OF COMFORT	**Number of stories**
Physical (no pain) = comfort	1
Treatment does NOT lead to comfort	8
Psychological	43
Self-love/-respect/-acceptance/-confidence	43
Post self-love self	
Active, powerful, strong, subject position	39
Self-confident, happy	29
Inclusive concept of normality	38
Aware, informed	17
Sexually healthy/leading a healthy relationship	18
Freed from stigmas	10
NOT THERE YET	8

RECLAMATION OF VULVA DISCOURSE	**Number of stories**
Metaphor	5
Personification	10
Litote	1
Slogans/Popcultural reference	8
Adjectives	
beautiful	14
sensual	1
chubby, fluffy,	1
wonderful	3
different (+)	5
special	1
unique	7
gorgeous	2
pretty	2
cute	2
fierce	1
valid, acceptable	1

perfect	3
fabulous	1
strong, powerful	3
awesome	1
sexy	3
mine	2
loving; worthy; sensitive; sacred	2
Verbs	
love	28
engage	1
touch	3
enjoy	2
look at	3
smell	1
take care of	4
accept	10
protect	1
adore	2
embrace	2
celebrate	2
please	1
get to know	2
discover	1
show off	1
appreciate	1
FGTs	
Labia (inner /outer)	14
pubic hair/vulva hair/bush	10
crotch	1
vagina	5
clit/clitoral hood	3
lady parts	1
(anus)	1
genitals	1
mons pubis	1
decoration	4
deconstruction of 'old' normal	26
pride/blessing	9
thematize stigmatized topics	26
diversity	16
emoticons	5

Codes – Analysis 2

Revealing identity
Interactional dynamics
New comment thread
New community question
Comment on question
Comment on previous comment
FRAME FOCUS
Storyrealm
Taleworld
Tag
Second story
Outside world
TONE
educational
supportive/appreciative
neutral
amicable
regretful
ironic