

## DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

### Postfeminist wedding cultures temporality, materiality and embodiment

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**Postfeminist Wedding Cultures:  
Temporality, Materiality and Embodiment**

**By**

**Francien Loura Broekhuizen**

**PhD**

**April 2018**

**Revised August 2019**



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*A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the University's  
requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy*



## **Certificate of Ethical Approval**

Applicant:

Francien Broekhuizen

Project Title:

The Narcissistic Bride in Post Feminist Times

This is to certify that the above named applicant has completed the Coventry University Ethical Approval process and their project has been confirmed and approved as Medium Risk

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28 March 2013

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<sup>1</sup> Available via <<http://www.planyourperfectwedding.com/>> [accessed on 03.02.2018]

<sup>2</sup> Available via <<https://www.thepperfectwedding.nl/>> [accessed on 03.02.2018]



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# Declaration of Previous Publications

Some parts of this thesis have been published previously, although this publication concerned another data set, some of the ideas for these thesis are part of this publication.

Broekhuizen, F. and Evans, A. (2016) 'Pain, Pleasure and Bridal Beauty: Mapping Postfeminist Bridal Perfection'. *Journal of Gender Studies* 25 (3), 225-248.

A draft version of this publication is attached in Appendix 10.

# Abstract

This thesis analyses the location of wedding cultures within a postfeminist sensibility, focusing on the way brides construct their wedding planning and bridal experience in online spaces, for example, the Dutch online wedding forum [www.trouwforum.nl](http://www.trouwforum.nl) [trans: [www.weddingforum.nl](http://www.weddingforum.nl)], as well as in interviews with brides I have met online and through snowball sampling. Connecting wedding cultures with postfeminist sensibility allows me to contribute an analysis of retraditionalisation. I do this by focusing on the location of happiness within popular wedding culture that present the wedding as the happiest day of your life. Connecting happiness with retraditionalisation enables me to research how the wedding day has maintained its central location, in societies where the blueprints of how to live well are fading. This thesis establishes the connection between happiness, postfeminism and retraditionalisation via the notion of the perfect (McRobbie 2015). The perfect provides a postfeminist idea of the fantasy of the good life focusing on perfect bodies, homes and happy families, which are obtained via intense body work and consumer practices. Using the perfect in relation to wedding cultures is fruitful, due to the way popular culture presents the wedding as an ultimate moment of postfeminist perfection.

To research contemporary postfeminist wedding cultures as a moment of happiness and perfection through discourses of retraditionalisation, I propose a feminist conceptual framework. This framework is born out of my position in the research as both the researcher and a bride-to-be. With the framework, I have been able to further decentralise the position of the researcher by moving the attention to the research assemblage. The framework I propose is based on feminist theorists, such as Ringrose and Coleman (2013), picking up the work of Deleuze and Guattari.

Employing this framework not only to frame my position as a researcher but also to think about my data, I have been able to distil three analytic themes: temporality, materiality and embodiment. Via these themes, I have analysed how the brides make sense of the wedding planning and recount their experience as a bride. I have also been able to outline how the affective textures on the forum shape the forum discussion, creating repeating rhythmic movements across time. The first analytical theme, temporality, analyses how notions of always on-ness reconnect the abstract time of to-do lists back into the body. For the second theme, I connect the material objects of the wedding with the promise of happiness that create a glue within the bridal community. In doing so, I have framed the materiality of the objects as lively (Bennett 2010), moving the agency outside of the human into the assemblage. The last chapter focuses on the embodied experience of being a bride, and on the connection of the wedding dress with the bridal body. The analysis of these three themes

enabled me to research the location of happiness within wedding cultures and how this has shaped the notion of perfection and the bride as the ultimate orchestrator of the wedding event.

# Chapter 1.

## Introduction: Happiness and Wedding Cultures

### 1.1. Introduction

*“You have been dead until now. Were you aware of that? You are dead right now.”* These are lines spoken in the film *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009). According to the film’s voiceover, who takes up the combined roles of narrator and wedding planner, life does not begin until the day of the wedding. Until you are married, you might as well consider yourself lifeless.

The wedding has long been thought of as the happiest day in a woman’s life, and socially marks a transitional moment, from ‘single’ to ‘married’. However, this thesis is about how the connection between the wedding and happiness has been deepened and transformed in the context of the changing significance of married life, shifts in gender relations, the heightening importance of consumer culture and self-branding, and a matrimonial turn in popular culture, which could be defined as postfeminist. In this thesis, I explore how a postfeminist retraditionalisation of wedding cultures has shaped expectations of happiness and living a ‘normal’ life. **Accordingly, the thesis attempts to answer the following questions: 1) what is the connection between contemporary wedding cultures and postfeminism, and how is this connection shaped by gender? 2) what is the role of happiness and perfection in the bride’s expectations of the contemporary wedding and the spaces in which the contemporary wedding exists? And, 3) how does retraditionalisation shape the formation of this contemporary wedding culture? To address these questions, this thesis is** located largely in the Dutch context, although necessarily not limited to the Dutch context given the interconnectedness of digital culture. Thus, my thesis includes an assemblage of data and materials: chick-lit wedding films, Pinterest boards, wedding magazines, celebrity weddings, a Dutch wedding forum and a series of interviews conducted with Dutch brides and brides-to-be. However, in this introduction, I take the opportunity to introduce my location in this culture, as someone who, through the processes of this project, has herself transitioned from single to married, and from married to mother. My position has necessarily shaped the whole thesis, and although I do not use myself as the research object, I would suggest my location is an important element of the project itself.

Following my discussion of my research narrative (and by extension, my life narrative), I then introduce the main conceptual foundations and structure of the thesis. I provide an overview of the

topic of happiness, and how it has been used in this thesis. I finish my introduction with a summary of the main components of this thesis.

## **1.2. The Spark**

My subject position provided the main starting point for this project. My interest in researching weddings first emerged when I was at the wedding of a good friend in 2012. Looking around, I saw all the guests looking their best and excited about the day. When the bride and the groom arrived in a classic red car from the 1970s, everyone was ecstatic. All attention went to the bride: her dress, her hairstyle and her makeup. Throughout the day, I wondered why weddings had become so connected to feelings of joy and excitement. However, as I was quite close to the bride, I was also aware of the stress and anxieties that went into the organisation of her big day. This combination of feelings motivated me to write a PhD proposal which was accepted so that at the beginning of 2013 I was able to start my research.

Before I started my research into contemporary wedding cultures and bridal experiences, my then-partner proposed during the Christmas holidays 2012. I do not think that I would have been able to conduct the research the way I had, had it not been for my status as a bride-to-be. My planning and preparation of the wedding meant that my status of bride-to-be helped me gain access to the Dutch wedding forum, [www.trouwforum.nl](http://www.trouwforum.nl) [trans: [www.weddingforum.nl](http://www.weddingforum.nl)], which formed the basis of my data collection. But more than this: it also shaped my investment in the topic and the methodological assumptions presented in this thesis.



Illustration 1: Details of my wedding, where I used silver and brown as the wedding theme combined with the finger print heart that could be considered our logo

In terms of my wedding planning, I had uninitiated on all the possibilities of the wedding. The idea of wedding themes, DIY weddings, outdoor weddings and barn weddings, were completely new to me. Although I<sup>3</sup> was reluctant at first, wanting a simple wedding that would not cost too much money, over time I too ended up moving with these ‘new’ ideas. I designed a wedding logo and used brown recycled paper with silver as my wedding theme. I engaged in DIY and crafts, producing my wedding invitations, save-the-date cards and seating arrangements (see illustration 1).

Throughout the process of wedding planning and becoming bridal, my feelings towards wedding dresses gradually shifted. Initially, I hoped to get married in a dark coloured dress, preferably short. As you can see on the photos of myself as a bride, this did not happen (see illustration 2). Due to my petite body shape, it was quite hard to find a wedding dress that would fit, and although I was told that dresses could always be made smaller, I was not comfortable with altering the dress. I, therefore,

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<sup>3</sup> I deliberately discuss the wedding preparations in the first person, to highlight that these are my ideas and recounted experiences rather than those of my husband.

chose to have my wedding dress custom-made in Rotterdam in the Netherlands. You would think that this provided me with a great opportunity to get an extravagant, coloured and short dress. However, the designer talked me out of this idea within minutes. He complimented me on my petite body shape, but also said that if I wanted to be recognised as the bride and not be seen as just another guest I should wear all white. This is how I ended up with a long, white, traditional wedding dress with a long trail and veil. And... I loved it!



Illustration 2: Myself as bride and my wedding dress

Whilst collecting the data, but especially during the data analysis, I found that my journey of bride-to-be, to bride, to married woman was also reflected in the stories the brides told each other online and to me during the interviews. The similarities between the accounts of the brides and my biography did not stop here. Although the question what happens after the wedding is not of direct importance in this project, it did shape the research data. Especially on the forum, the idea of starting a family after the wedding was discussed broadly, and assumed, amongst the brides. The forum facilitated this in that it also hosted a space to talk about pregnancy and young children.

Throughout the research project, my life narrative followed a similar path. At the end of 2015, my daughter was born and, as I write up and complete the thesis, I am pregnant with my second daughter. This narrative of the happy family and living happily-ever-after turned out to be important in the data, and has therefore shaped my analysis, but it has also shaped my researcher subjectivity. To emphasise the connection between the bride's and my own subject position, I reflect on my experiences throughout the analysis sections. This messy position as a researcher has shaped my



methodological framework, where I propose a conceptual feminist framework to rethink the position of the researcher as the orchestrator of the project.

To further frame the experience of being a bride in postfeminist wedding cultures, I draw on the concept of happiness. Throughout the thesis, I focus on the connection between happiness and idealised images of the good life and postfeminist perfection. In the below, I give a broader account of the concept of happiness, paying attention to the origin of the word in both English and Dutch, its historical context as well as its connection to consumer culture. This provides the backdrop for the way happiness is discussed throughout this work.

### **1.3. Happiness**

A central component of this project is to analyse how the promise of happiness still holds such a strong connection with the wedding, despite its changing position in contemporary societies. Historically, happiness was perceived as a gift from the gods, and therefore linked to fate, positioning it outside the influence of humans (McMahon 2004, Miller 2015). This is reflected in the etymology of the word ‘happiness’. McMahon (2004), discussed how the English word happiness comes from the early Middle English word *happ*, which means chance or fortune. Happiness is therefore something that happens to the world. The Dutch word for happiness, *gelukkig*, has a similar meaning, coming from the West Germanic word *gelücke*, which means *toeval*, *lot* or *voordeel* (Van Wijk 1916). Translated, all these words are linked with destiny, change and advantage, hinting towards the uncontrollable character of happiness.

Happiness, in a historical context, has therefore not been perceived as a general human right, nor was it seen as all good. The Ancient Greeks saw happiness as a virtue of mankind, a sense of morality of how to live a good life. This did not mean that living a happy life meant that your life was void of misery and pain. From the Ancient Greek perspective, happiness also included pain, but this pain could be carried through virtue and morally righteous life (McMahon 2004). In the Christian tradition, happiness was granted by God and located in the afterlife, meaning happiness had no place in earthly life. It was the Christian tradition that started to see happiness as an all-encompassing perfection, suggesting that ‘in that final happiness *every* human desire will be fulfilled’ (McMahon 2004: 11).

Despite the different views on happiness between, for example, the Greek tradition and the Christian tradition, it was not until the enlightenment that the happiness was viewed as available to all humans (Miller 2015). The enlightenment was marked by a renewed interest in science and human knowledge, positioning the rational human at the centre of the universe rather than the gods. A good example is the influential work from Descartes, *Over de Methode* [trans: *Discourse of the Method*]

(2006), where he positioned his thinking mind as the only certainty about the world. Thus, the enlightenment saw people as acting on their worlds, and this, in turn, shaped notions of happiness (McMahon 2007).

During the Western Industrial Revolution and its growing consumption of material goods, the pursuit of happiness became part of consumer culture and was therefore constructed as accessible to everyone, both kings and peasants. Especially after the Second World War, there arose an interest in happiness economies, where happiness was measured as part of pleasure, satisfaction and/or welfare. The Dutch *National Geographic*, for example, recently published an article on research on 'happy countries' where the level of happiness was measured alongside socio-economic criteria. The article stated that welfare and the possibility to reach the necessities of life, such as food, medication and water, are important factors to increase happiness (Buettner 2017). However, the way happiness is measured also privileges consumption and national wealth. Measuring happiness via economic terms such as welfare and consumer needs positions happiness within discourses of economic logic. The connection between the economy and happiness means that happiness also becomes attached to the rhetoric of growth and expansion, as good economic times are measured in these terms rather than in absolute measurement.

However, with the growing amount of material objects, the pursuit of happiness via consumption is no longer solely based on buying as many objects as possible, but is produced through less tangible and more fleeting notions of happiness (Miller 2015). Banet-Weiser (2012) has outlined how marketing evolved after the Second World War. She stated that adverts shortly after the war emphasised the characteristics of the objects. This evolved at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century towards a focus on feelings and building a relationship with the customers. Fadina and Hockley also argued that magical talismans and religious artefacts were once the carriers of happiness and a hopeful future; today these are replaced by everyday consumer objects (2015: 2). Contemporary advertisement therefore sells a dreamlike future of hope and happiness, affecting how consumers *feel* about themselves and their position in the world.

It is this connection between consumer culture and the happiness promise that guides my research into contemporary wedding cultures. As like many spaces of our personal lives, the wedding has turned into a site of consumption. Many research projects have already outlined the connection between consumer culture and the wedding (Boden 2003, Otnes and Pleck 2003, Ingraham 2009, 2016). However, less research has outlined how this context is connected to the happiness promise. As happiness and the wedding are culturally intertwined, this connection needs to be outlined further.

In this project on happiness and wedding cultures, I am not interested in what the happiness promise within wedding cultures *is*. I am rather interested in what it *does*. Here I follow Ahmed (2010), who stated that happiness is performative and shapes our understanding of ourselves, our place in the world, as well as the social structures around us. I also agree with McMahon (2007) who stated that happiness is a fleeting and intangible concept, so that although the sentiment of ‘living happily ever after’ seems self-explanatory, its meaning is complex and connected to cultural discourses of how to live well. In this thesis, I understand the happiness promise of the wedding as inextricably linked to a postfeminist sensibility. Below I introduce the concept of a postfeminist sensibility in wedding cultures, through an outline of the chapters of this thesis.

#### **1.4. Postfeminist Wedding Cultures: The Structure**

Above I have started to outline the argument of this thesis by connecting wedding cultures with the popular belief that the wedding day is the happiest day of your life. I have also provided a short overview of the writings on happiness and how happiness is now deemed something that humans are themselves responsible for, as well as a general human right, making happiness (or the dream) available for everyone through consumer logic.

Following on from this, the next chapter, *Chapter 2: Wedding Cultures*, introduces how I understand the context of contemporary wedding cultures by discussing the connection between the wedding and postfeminism. I understand postfeminism a complex and contradictory set of discourses, often held together through consumption and the retraditionalisation of gender roles. Firstly, I do this by taking the reader through the film *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009). I use this film as an example of the way popular culture represents weddings through postfeminist discourses of bodily perfection, as well as a women-only space. Throughout my thesis, I return occasionally to this film as a hook to think about my data. Subsequently, I provide an overview of contemporary wedding cultures, paying attention to feminist critiques of the wedding and how the position of the wedding has changed from a mandatory life event to a moment of choice. I also discuss this changed position of the wedding in relation to broader social and cultural changes where the blueprints of the society are fading, making individuals more responsible for their life narratives. I connect these changes in the context of the growing importance of consumer cultures and their location in contemporary wedding cultures.

The chapter shows how these changes have interacted with a postfeminist sensibility. Here, I draw heavily on Gill and McRobbie, who provided pivotal groundwork for understanding postfeminism. I also discuss the renewed interest in feminism in popular culture, as well as its difference from previous movements, by outlining the focus on individualism. This brings me to

neoliberalism and how these discourses are deeply ingrained in a postfeminist sensibility. I do this by following Gill (2008a) who stated that a postfeminist sensibility is a gendered form of neoliberalism, for example through its focus on discourses of self-improvement and re-invention. I then move on to discuss the notion of perfection, based on McRobbie (2015), as well as the connection of ‘the perfect’ with wedding cultures. I use this as a conceptual space to further outline the idea of the good life and the happiness promise. Taken together, these concepts form the basis of my exploration of retraditionalisation and how this discourse is fuelled by the happiness promise, romanticising traditional gendered lifestyle choices. I conclude my discussion of wedding cultures by exploring how bridal narratives of branding reflect these ways of understanding the world, for example in the thematically styled wedding that is open for judgement and feedback from its audience, or consumers.

In *Chapter 3: Method and Methodology* I begin by providing an overview of the context of my research – Dutch wedding cultures. This section aims to make non-Dutch audiences aware of the customs and traditions which shaped the data I collected. In general, the Dutch traditions follow the Anglo-American ones, but also differ at points. I then move on to outline my methodological framework where I propose a conceptual feminist framework to account for the position of the researcher, as part of the assemblage. As suggested above, my bridal position during the research has shaped how I have engaged with the research and my interaction with the participants, and I develop this account here. Subsequently, I give a detailed overview of the field, by reflecting on my time on the Dutch wedding forum [www.trouwforum.nl](http://www.trouwforum.nl) [trans: [www.weddingforum.nl](http://www.weddingforum.nl)] and my experience of the interviews. In the last section of this chapter, I provide an insight into how I have analysed the data, as well as a short discussion on my analytical themes. In terms of the traditional structure of a thesis, however, I have chosen to limit the discussion here, instead of providing a more detailed introduction of each theme at the beginning of each corresponding chapter.

The first analytical theme is temporality. *Chapter 4: Temporality* focuses on the data gathered on the forum, especially the Trouwen 2015 topic [trans: Wedding 2015] and during the interviews. My analytical framework understands temporality as a way of becoming in the social and cultural world. **By analysing the discourses of branding and creative labour I show how the wedding organisation is presented. Here, I focus on retraditionalisation and how bridal perfection is rooted in a new set of skills that demands the bride brand the wedding via a work ethos. Throughout the chapter, I show** how the temporal rhythms have shaped the forum. Subsequently, I analyse how the wedding as a rite of passage into the future has changed in a context where older, more ridged blueprints for how to live are fading. I then provide an overview of the bridal use of to-do lists and how these lists privilege some bridal subjects above others. Finally, I discuss the relationship between time, temporality and

the perfect. Here I argue that the hope of reaching bridal perfection is not an ultimate goal but is a hopeful dream, an aspiration, which is never supposed to materialise.

By contrast to the ephemeral notion of temporality, it was clear from the data that material objects were central to the wedding. In *Chapter 5: Materiality* I use Ahmed's (2010) work on happiness to analyse the material objects in the wedding assemblage. The chapter draws on both the interviews and the forum data, focusing especially on the topic Do It Yourself-Projectjes [trans: Do It Yourself-Projects]. In this chapter, I draw on the notion of happiness and how it works to cement classic notions of bridal perfection at the centre of the postfeminist wedding imaginary. I start the chapter analysing how happiness connects to certain objects, whilst others are deemed as inappropriate. I then provide an overview of the bridal DIY activities, connecting it to the promise of happiness and its location within the bridal community. Here, I use retraditionalisation to make sense of crafting and DIY and its location in highly styled postfeminist wedding cultures. I analyse these DIY projects as a form of consumption, but I also consider an alternative analysis, discussing DIY and craft as lively matter, enabling me to discuss how agency works in the interactions with the bride's hands and the crafted objects. I use Luckman's (2015) 'enchantment', which enables me to think about the material practices of the DIY process as encompassing immaterial affect. The focus on the wedding objects also permits me to explore one of the key objects: the wedding dress. My discussion around the dress' materiality is developed further in the next chapter: *Chapter 6: Embodiment*.

In my final analysis chapter, I analyse how the brides construct their wedding as an embodied event. In this chapter, I understand the bridal body as connected with culture, moving against earlier feminist writers such as Wolf (1990) who suggested that an authentic body was located outside culture. Instead, I draw on Budgeon (2003) and Coleman (2008a), who framed the body as intertwined with culture, so that bodies become through culture. Equally, these bodies shape their cultural location, creating a constant stream of interaction. Throughout the chapter, I use the dress and its connection with the body as a central element, since the dress is pivotal in framing the bridal subject position. By analysing the postfeminist sensibility of the data, I show how the brides make sense of the experience of wearing the dress and how this experience is connected with perfection and traditional notions of female beauty. Ahmed's (2010) happiness and Berlant's (2011) aspirational normalcy enable me to analyse the bridal moment as both a moment to 'fit in' and a moment of estrangement from one's own body. In this chapter, I first show how the brides account for finding the wedding dress as an embodied event, where the body becomes a site of knowledge creation. Subsequently, I used enchantment to make sense of the bridal transformation within a specific temporal and spatial location. I then moved on to outline how the dressed bridal body demands the

bride renegotiate their space in the world using normalcy (Berlant 2011). In the final section of this chapter, I move away from the dress, focusing on the embodied experience of the being the bride, as not something that is purely out of the ordinary but also embraces the normality of everyday life.

My thesis concludes that the promise of happiness has provided contemporary postfeminist wedding cultures with its affective tonality, through discourses of retraditionalisation and perfection. This space produces postfeminist bridal subjects, who are required to constantly work on themselves and the wedding via the cultural position of the bride as the main orchestrator of the event as well as the bride at the centre of attention. This further blurs leisure and labour, **by demanding brides to pick up an entirely new aptitude in the wedding organisation. Through processes of retraditionalisation, this has reinstalled heteronormative ideals where the bride becomes the creator of the happy house and family. The bridal engagement with the wedding and the classic rituals such as being given away by ones' father are also framed through discourses of retraditionalisation and postfeminism, positioning choice at the centre of contemporary wedding cultures. This movement has reinstalled the wedding and the idealised image of bridal happiness and perfection back into patriarchy, whilst at the same time complicating a critique.**

Alongside the analysis of the bride as the entrepreneur of her wedding, my focus on the intertwined relationship of both human and non-human elements, such as the dress and the DIY objects, enables me to open up the space for stories that disrupt the neoliberal discourses of control and individualism. **The notion of power is therefore further distributed across the assemblage, moving away from a sole focus on the human towards a more holistic approach that includes the body, the human, as well as lively matter. In concrete terms this means that although much of the bridal discussions presented the bride as the orchestrator, this orchestration was enchanted (Luckman 2015), leading to surprising and unexpected results located within a specific temporal and spatial moment. This means that the organisation of the wedding day was not the pure orchestration of the brides, but was the unexpected and surprising results of all the elements of the wedding assemblage.**

## Chapter 2.

# Wedding Cultures: Postfeminism, Retraditionalisation and Happiness

### 2.1. Introduction

This chapter contextualises my research on wedding cultures by positioning it in the context of a postfeminist sensibility. To do so, I analyse the film *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009), as an example of postfeminist wedding cultures. By drawing on Winch (2012), I focus on the representation of idealised images of bridal perfection and how these images shape popular wedding narratives. Subsequently, to contextualise the current wedding landscape, I give an overview of the literature on wedding cultures. In this section, I also touch on previous literature about marriage. However, since this project is about the wedding itself, so the overview of marriage is brief, serving to highlight how the changing position of marriage has affected wedding cultures. This overview is followed by a detailed account of postfeminism in relation to weddings, drawing on Rosalind Gill and Angela McRobbie as important thinkers of a postfeminist sensibility. In the last part of this chapter, I deepen my exploration of a postfeminist sensibility in relation to weddings by outlining retraditionalisation and the promise of happiness. The literature review aims to add to the existing literature on a postfeminist sensibility by deepening the link between postfeminism and retraditionalisation in the context of weddings, and I argue that this space is essential to push forward our understanding of postfeminist sensibility.

### 2.2. Brides, Wedding and the Media

This section provides an analysis of the film *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009), which shows how weddings are presented as a woman's concern, and how the value of the bride and the wedding is linked to the body. Before I move on with the analysis, I give a short overview of the film's narrative and characters.

The film portrays two best friends, Liv and Emma, who have dreamt about a June wedding at The Plaza, New York, since they were little girls. When they both get engaged around the same time, they manage to secure a date in June at The Plaza. Unfortunately, the wedding planner's secretary makes a mistake and books both weddings on the same day. So, rather than being each other's maid of honour and source of support, they become rivals. During the film, Liv and Emma

sabotage each other's wedding preparations. For example, Emma changes Liv's hair dyeing colour, so Liv's beautiful blond hair is turned blue. Equally, Liv swaps Emma's tan spray, so that rather than being nicely tanned, Emma turns orange. At the end of the film, during their weddings, the audience witnesses the climax of the tension, as Liv and Emma literally fight with each other in the aisle. The fight ends when Emma says she cannot do this anymore, and it is clear that Liv feels the same. After they stop fighting, they look at each other and we, the viewers, know that the fighting between them has stopped and that they are friends again. From an analytical point of view, the camera moves to their male partners who seem puzzled by the sudden renewed friendship. This reaffirms the differences between men and women, which is mirrored in popular culture by for example the classic book *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (Gray 1992). The representation also fits into a long history on women's identity that frames them as whimsical and impossible to understand because they are driven by their emotions (see for example Showalter 1985, Blackman 2004, Ringrose 2006). The voiceover presents the friendship between the two women as an ultimate bond that lasts a lifetime.

The film starts by portraying Liv and Emma's shared history and their shared desire for the June wedding at The Plaza. The Plaza is culturally coded<sup>4</sup> as a grand wedding location, so that a wedding at this venue underscores the social and economic success of the couple. The film frames the desire for a white wedding as a childhood dream that girls ought to aspire to. Researchers such as Boden (2001, 2003), Bambacas (2002), Engstorm (2003, 2008) and Ingraham (2009, 2016) all argued that popular wedding media, such as films, invites girls and women to participate in the desire of heterosexual romance. In this narrative, the bride is presented as the ultimate orchestrator of an event that is all about her. The central location of the self is mirrored in contemporary consumer cultures where the self is put in the centre of attention, rather than the gods, our family or social circle (see for example Rose 1991 and Bauman 2000). This is expressed in the media's representation of the perfect wedding via hedonistic practices and good planning. The bride's centrality in *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009) is underscored when Emma talks to her maid of honour, Deb. Minutes before the wedding ceremony, Emma finds her voice to speak up against her bridesmaid, who has been mean to her throughout the film. Emma claims her bridal 'rightful' space at the centre of attention, by stating that:

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<sup>4</sup> The costs for a wedding at The Plaza in New York for a Saturday evening start at \$375/person with a minimum of 200 guests. Packages for Friday and Sunday start at \$350/per person with a minimum of 150 guests. Via < <https://www.herecomestheguide.com/new-york/wedding-venues/the-plaza-hotel> > [accessed on 02.03.2018].



*'I have been dealing with versions of you my whole life and I'm going to tell you that thing that I should've told myself a long time ago. Sometimes it's about me, okay, not all the time, but every once in a while it's my time, like today. Now if you're not okay with that feel free to go, but if you stay, you've got to do your job, which means smiling and talking about my bridal beauty ... Can you do that?'*

Another way the film portrays the bride's central location is the focus on the work each bride does for the wedding. The film shows the brides booking the venue, discussing the music, looking for flower arrangements, whilst their partners are rarely portrayed as engaging with the organisation. The partner's detachment is framed as though an inability to engage by constructing them with a lack of knowledge on wedding customs, such as not understanding the importance of the save the date card. The lack of the groom's involvement reinforces the women's central location (Bambacas 2002: 195).

Alongside the attention on the bride within the wedding planning, the film highlights the importance of female friendship. The importance of female friendship is mirrored across the girlfriend flick genre, which includes films such as *In Her Shoes* (Hanson 2005) and *Sex and the City* (King 2008, 2010). Winch's analysis of these films identifies how they 'depict female friendship's priority in intimate culture, celebrating supportive and loving relationships over heterosexual romance' (2012: 69). Winch's (2012) analysis does not stop here. She argued that this first interpretation misses some of the deeper implications of the genre. Winch (2012) suggests these films represent friendship as a space where women are encouraged to partake in extensive beautifying and hedonistic practices as well as the need to pursue heterosexual love. Winch (2012) made her argument by paying attention to the way friendship is presented through shopping and beauty. Both activities are framed through discourses of intimacy between women that set them apart from men as they 'affirm the more traditional femininities' and enable these practices to become a 'spatial gesture which essentialises femininity' (2012: 72).

In *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009) the audience witness one shopping trip between the two friends before the wedding planner's mistake disrupts their plans. During this scene, Liv and Emma are looking for wedding dresses and Liv finds her dress. The scene presents Emma as helpful and supportive underscoring their intimate relationship. After the break up between Liv and Emma, Liv's new maid of honour is a male friend. The film's narrative depicts her male friend as unable to support Liv, as he does not say the right things to make Liv feel better. Bambacas (2002) also explored how the rituals surrounding the wedding encourage woman-to-woman support. An example is the tradition for the bride to throw her bouquet to her single female friends and family members. This act

symbolises the passing on of good fortune in terms of heterosexual romantic love. Throwing the bouquet can be read as a female-to-female encouragement to embark or move forward on the path of heterosexual romance, which reaffirms the position of the wedding as desirable (Bambacas 2002, Ingraham 2009).

The connection between female friendship and heterosexual romantic love as the ultimate social bound is also evident in *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009). At the end of the film, Liv and Emma fight on the aisle and, when they stop, they embrace their friendship again. In the aftermath, Emma breaks her engagement with her fiancée, as their relationship has been strained throughout the film. Ultimately, Emma is the one who walks Liv down the aisle. The act reaffirms that, although woman's friendship is important, it ultimately seeks a 'higher' aim as the woman-to-woman friendship should not stand on its own but should ultimately foster heterosexual love. By walking Liv down the aisle, Emma does her duty as a female friend as she moved her friend further on the path of heterosexual love. The woman-to-woman responsibility to foster heterosexual commitment is further underlined when Liv tries to encourage Emma to start dating her brother, whose romantic feeling for Emma were dormant during the film's narrative.

Another aspect of the film is the location of the body as a site of value. During the film, Liv and Emma's attempts to sabotage each other's wedding preparations focus heavily on beauty work. The voiceover, who is the same person as the wedding planner, constructs these beauty practices as necessary, since brides should look their very best on their wedding day. In the film, she phrases this as follows "*The final week before the wedding is do-or-die. I expect my brides to be flawless. Perfect hair, skin, nails, everything*". From a historical perspective, the female body is essential to a woman's identity and social status (see for example Price and Shildrick's (1999) edited collection on a range of different accounts on the connection between femininity and the body). Through a more contemporary lens, Gill (2008b) argued that the body is still central to woman's identity. This idea of femininity as bodily property has been taken up by others, such as Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2006), Lazar (2009) and (2011), Tsaousi (2017). The film's emphasis on the female body and the labour (e.g. spray tanning, dying your hair, dieting etc.) that goes into the production of bridal perfection frames the body as the source of a successful bridal image.

Liv and Emma's attempts to sabotage each other's bridal beauty are framed through discourses of the 'right' and 'wrong' ways to engage in beautifying practices. The interference in each other's preparations circle around an excess that highlights the risk of failing in feminine performance. Skeggs (1997) examined how a 'good' femininity hides the labour to ensure that the feminine performance comes across as natural, whilst a failed performance underlines the labour

through excess. This is essential in the construction of class differences between working and middle-class femininity (Skeggs 1997). Though the film's female characters are coded as middle to upper-middle class, the narrative circles around the risk of losing social status and respectability due to 'wrong choices' and 'poor consumer practices' (see Gonick 2006 for an account of the girl-at-risk). An example is Emma's attempt to get Liv to gain weight so she would no longer fit her wedding dress. Emma does this by sending Liv cake, chocolate and sweets, as she knows that Liv is a sweet tooth. Liv thinks the gifts come from her fiancée and she eats them happily. Where dieting and healthy food are framed as technologies of control, weight gain and unhealthy food are presented as excessive and out of control (Cairns and Johnston 2015). The spray tan swap that gives Emma an orange skin tone deems her performance unnatural, as it emphasises the labour that went into the process as well as the poorly performed consumption of beautifying products.

The analysis of *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009) above shows how the representation of the wedding and its organisation is framed through discourses of working on the body and as a women-only-space. This constructs the wedding as a site where the differences between the sexes are essentialised, rather than a space to unite man and woman. The film's analysis also indicates that the role of the female friend is complicated and contradictory. On the one hand, female friendship is presented as supportive and essential for future happiness, on the other hand, mean and whimsical, as Liv and Emma ruin each other's preparations (see also, for example, Ringrose 2006, 2012).

### **2.3. Contemporary Wedding Cultures**

*Bride Wars* (Winick 2009) provides a good backdrop from which to engage with a reading of wedding literature. The account I present here focuses on feminist critiques of modern white weddings and the wedding's connection with the centrality of the individual in modern societies. According to Bezner (2002: 2), the modern wedding tradition in Western societies gained traction after World War II, when Western middle classes gained more consumer power that enabled them to indulge in 'white wedding' ceremonies. These ceremonies have a 'white wedding gown for the bride, a church ceremony and an outward indication on expense at the reception' (Engstorm 2008: 61).

Traditionally the wedding was an event that provided the couple with 'legal and social legitimacy for adult life as a sexual and parental couple' (Carter and Duncan 2017: 5). To complicate this, researchers such as Brook (2002: 48) and Jeffereys (2004) argued that marriage generally favoured the man's interests, for example accepting the husband's name by the wife. Ingraham (2009: 109) examined this in connection to Christianity and how the church functions as a space to affirm

the patriarchal order. In another example, Ingraham (2009: 109) discussed the act of giving the bride away in marriage by her father. Both traditions symbolise women's position as the property of men.

Under the influence of second-wave feminism, these rituals were critiqued, emphasising how marriage serves male interests as it fosters the exploitations of women's domestic labour and financial dependency on men, and men's (hetero)sexual rights (Delphy and Leonard 1992, Jeffreys 2004). This critique was fuelled by a larger body of work that addressed women's subordinated position in the society. One of the early pieces was *The Second Sex* by De Beauvoir (1997) where she argued that women are always put in the position of the Other, while men are understood as the Self. The distinction placed women in an identity category that was inessential and incomplete. To understand women's location, De Beauvoir (1997) argued that women are not born woman, but become woman, as the society teaches them to take up subordinated roles, such as a mother or wife. These roles position her as the other, as they are always understood in relation to men e.g. the husband or the father. Following on from this, Pateman (1988) argued that the position of women was similar to that of a slave as she had to serve her master/husband for the rest of her life. She also stated that, like slaves, who were given a different name, women also change their name after the wedding. These arguments show that women's position as the other is underscored in wedding rituals and marriage.

Building on the wedding's uneven power relations, Friedan (1965) stated that labour in the house is idealised and romanticised. At the same time, women were forced to see marriage and housekeeping as the only viable career option, which rejected paid labour outside the nuclear family (Friedan 1965). Women's labour outside the house would endanger the idealised image of the happy housewife and the husband as breadwinner.

Where the critiques in the 1970s and 1980s focused on the oppression of women, the discussion in the 1990s altered as it emphasized women's agency. Wolf (1993) argued that feminism needs to change to speak to a new generation of women. She (1993) meant that women should not be seen as subordinated by men, but as able to speak their minds and claim their social position. Wolf started her book *Fire with Fire* that 'women have become the political ruling class' (1993: xiv), given the growing visibility of women in public space, while throughout the book Wolf (1993) deemed the battle between the sexes as over. This reflects a broader cultural change and understood heterosexual love and marriage as a safe space where both partners were equal. The formation of modern sexuality assumes 'mutual freedom, symmetry and autonomy' (1993: 60) between both partners, so that the 'freedom in the sexual sphere was one of the most significant transformations that occurred in the twentieth century' (Illouz 2012: 61). This led to a more fluid understanding of relationships that privileged 'choice', based on the equal position of the sexes.

Despite the changing views on weddings, from understanding it as a form of oppression to an option and choice, wedding rates were declining under the influence of feminism and gay rights activism combined with a declining influence of the church in the 1960s and 1970s onwards. In the Netherlands, wedding rates peaked in the 1970s with 9.5 weddings per 1000 citizens<sup>5</sup>. This dropped to 5.5 per 1000 citizens in 2000 to 3.8 per 1000 in 2016<sup>6</sup>. The same trend is visible in England and Wales. In 1972 wedding rates peaked at 480,285 and went down to 240,854 in 2013. However, statistical data in England and Wales shows that the wedding rates for first time marriages have increased since the 2000s<sup>7</sup>. The decline of wedding rates also takes place in a context of increasing divorce rates. In the Netherlands, the divorce rates in the 1950s to 1970s have been fairly stable and varied between 2.2 and 3.2 divorces per 1000 citizens. In the 1980s this number rapidly grew to 7.5 per 1000 citizen up to 10.1 in 2015. In percentage this means that 40.1% of the weddings end up in a divorce. The divorce rates in the United Kingdom shows a similar trend.

The above feminist critique focused on the gendered dimension of the wedding and its problematic implications as part of a patriarchal society. Alongside the critique of gender, however, other intersections have been discussed in the literature, especially race and class. In Leonard's (2018) work, for example, she argued that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century weddings still serve as a catalyst through which social and economic inequalities are regulated. Leonard (2018) made her claim by first discussing one of the historical functions of the wedding, connecting affluent families to secure their social and economic position. She argued that this is still valid, although the mechanisms have changed. Where historically the involvement of both families was essential, in contemporary societies the choice for one's life partner is made through romanticised notions of love and finding 'the one' (Illouz 2012).

Leonard (2018) complicated these discourses of choice when she argued that 'marital patterns have substantial economic, social and political implications' (2018: 15). She made her claim by outlining that most people marry within similar demographics, and consequently raise more advantaged children who also are more likely to connect with more advantaged people, repeating this pattern over generations (Leonard 2018: 15). To sustain this claim, Leonard drew on Bourdieu who described marriage as 'one element in the entire system of biological, cultural, and social reproduction

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<sup>5</sup> Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek available from <<http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/publication/?VW=T&DM=SLNL&PA=37772ned&D1=0-4&D2=0,10,20,30,40,50,60-1&HD=120104-1412&HDR=G1&STB=T>> [accessed on 14 January 2018].

<sup>6</sup> Idem.

<sup>7</sup> Office for National Statistics available from <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/bulletins/marriagesinenglandandwalesprovisional/2014>> [accessed on 03 March 2017]

by which every group endeavours to pass on to the next generation the full measure of power and privilege it has itself inherited' (2002: 549). Leonard (2018) continued by pointing out that delayed marriage, non-marital births, and divorce are more likely to affect those who do not have the power of social and economic privilege. As part of this, Leonard (2018) discussed the tensions on the marriage market for women of colour, due to changes in education and future job possibilities, leading to a delay of marriage. Here, she referred to the growing number of women of colour with college degrees compared to the stagnation amongst men. The tension in the marriage market highlights that those inhabiting less secure social locations are limited in their possibilities for love, complicating the romanticised idea that love 'just happens'.

Skeggs' (1994) ethnographic research on young working class women found similar restrictions in the experience of 'love' and 'finding the one'. One of Skeggs' participants emphasised her need to get married and her limited possibilities to be 'stropy' within relationships, due to her low wage as a nurse (Skeggs 1994: 80). This brings the constraining social and economic position of disadvantaged women to the forefront, affecting not only if someone can get married, but also the ground on which the marriage takes place. The aforementioned figures on marriage and divorce should therefore be understood in a broader social and economic context, where marriage and marital life seems more attainable to those in more secure social positions, which is strengthened by the location of consumer culture in the wedding imaginary favouring women (and couples more broadly) with generous disposable incomes.

Having provided a short overview of feminist critiques on marriage, the changed popularity of the wedding, and the raced and classed implications, I now move my discussion to the changed wedding rituals under influence of consumer cultures, which themselves are often addressed to the white, middle class consumer. Ingraham (2016) has argued that consumerism is one of the most essential elements of the wedding, which is sold to women from a very young age through for example fairy tales and Barbie dolls. The connection between consumerism and girlhood is also visible in *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009) where Liv and Emma not only pretend play to marry each other, but also play with Barbie's that are dressed as brides. The central location of consumer objects is also picked up by Otnes and Pleck (2003) who framed the experience of doing wedding shopping as a magical moment, comparing it to Christmas shopping. The feelings that are part of the consumption process are also discussed by Thomas and Peters (2011), who argued that emotions are a key element in the consumption of the wedding dress.

Boden pushed this further and claimed that consumption can no longer be understood 'as *in* the wedding, but the consumption *of* the wedding' (2003: 1 emphasis in the original). Rituals around,

for example, the family have lost their meaning in favour of consumer practices and the neoliberal project of the self. To support her claim, Boden (2003) drew on Giddens (1991) who argued that, in the context of consumerism, we are all responsible for our identity. Consumption, therefore, does not only guide how the wedding is formed (e.g. the decoration of the reception), but also how the bride *feels* about herself and the wedding. For Boden (2003), the moment the bride puts on the wedding dress is a moment of transformation that brings together the fantasy of the wedding, as the best day of your life, with consumption, locating it at the heart of the bridal experience. Engstorm's (2008) analysis of *The Knot*<sup>8</sup>, also stated that putting on the wedding dress is a moment of transformation. The transformation narrative is central to consumer cultures. A good example is the body of research on make-over television such as *What Not to Wear* (TLC 2003-2013) and *Fashion Police* (E! 2010-2017). Researchers, such as McRobbie (2004) and Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008), have argued how these shows scrutinise a classed female body through public shaming and financial incentives, to ensure that they become respectable subjects enjoying the hedonistic possibilities of consumer societies.

An essential element of the consumerism of the wedding day is not only the transformation of the bridal body, but also the ability to organise a distinct wedding. Creating a unique event is risky as the bride must ensure that the wedding cannot be read as out of place and at risk of immorality. Carter and Duncan (2017) examined how individualism demands couples to create a wedding narrative that underscores their individual taste and success, whilst staying close to traditional etiquettes of the white wedding, such as exchanging vows, signing a document and exchanging a kiss. The importance of these rituals is so ingrained in wedding tradition that even a seemingly complete rejection of the wedding embraces these acts. An example is the media coverage of Sophie Tanner's marriage to herself, in Bristol, UK in 2016<sup>9</sup>. During the 'ceremony' she 'exchanged' vows with herself, signed a document and even kissed herself at the end of the ceremony. To create uniqueness within wedding format, Carter and Duncan (2017) discussed how their participants framed the originality of the wedding through consumer choices such as celebrating the outdoor wedding in a barn or on a farm. Engstorm (2003, 2008) came to a similar conclusion after her reading of wedding texts, such as *The Knot*, where the couple's distinct taste is produced by selecting extravagant venues such as a museum or a country house. The desire to create a unique wedding is mirrored on online

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<sup>8</sup> Engstorm (2008) discussed *The Knot* as a bridal media company that included the wedding website [www.theknot.com](http://www.theknot.com), *The Knot Magazine*, a series of books such as *The Knot Book of Wedding Gowns* (no date) and the reality television programme *Real Weddings from the Knot* (2003 – present).

<sup>9</sup> Daily Mail available from <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-3623511/Why-t-wedding-without-partner-Bonkers-bride-37-reveals-married-hit-stigma-single.html>> [accessed on 05 January 2018].

platforms such as Pinterest, where brides (and grooms) can find inspiration for having a forest wedding, barn wedding or a ‘shabby chic’ wedding (see illustration 3). Some materials have been removed from this thesis due to Third Party Copyright. Pages where material has been removed are clearly marked in the electronic version. The unabridged version of the thesis can be viewed at the Lanchester Library, Coventry University

Illustration 3: Pinterest example of an outdoor wedding, barn wedding and forest wedding

The organisation of the original wedding is presented as the affair of the bride, where the bride is required to exhibit a whole new set of skills, such as styling the wedding via consumer logic rather than through religious discourses of faith and obedience (Leonard 2018). This is mirrored in *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009) as well as in contemporary wedding literature. Boden (2001) referred to this image as the ‘superbride’ (n.p.), who is presented as both the organiser of the wedding and the ‘emotional childish fantasiser’ (n.p.). The image of the ‘superbride’ is mirrored *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009) where Liv and Emma are the managers of the project. Thus, although both Liv and Emma went to a wedding planner to organise the wedding, the film does not present the wedding planner in an active role when it comes to the organisation. The wedding planner is merely the narrator of the film. Additionally, the management of the wedding also frames Liv and Emma as deeply emotionally involved, and prepared to put a life-long friendship on the line for the perfect wedding. Smit’s (2016) reading of weddings in South-African popular culture also presents the bride as the main orchestrator of the event. Engstorm (2008) elaborated this when she pointed to the different bridal roles as firstly the orchestrator of the event, and secondly as the object of the event, where her body and beauty is the object of scrutiny and admiration. This brings me to the next section where I provide an overview of postfeminism as a central concept to make sense of the wedding.



#### 2.4. Postfeminism and Wedding Cultures

My analysis of *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009) above outlined the wedding's location in consumer practices and the perfect bridal body at the centre of the wedding spectacle. Subsequently, I provided a reading of wedding cultures that showed how, despite the feminist critique, the wedding still holds an important place in society. In the following, I understand the consumer rhetoric and the central location of the bridal body as connected to a postfeminist sensibility.

My view of a postfeminist sensibility is in line with Gill's (2007). She argued that postfeminism should be conceived of as a *sensibility*, which means that postfeminism should be understood as a set of contradicting discourses that shape the way gender is represented across spaces, so it can become an object of analysis rather than an identity category or era. Gill (2007) examined how gender is portrayed across a range of media outlets, for example, advertisement, journalism and films, which enabled her to outline the characteristics of a postfeminist sensibility. These characteristics are:

*'the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance; monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis on consumerism and the commodification of difference.'*

(Gill 2007: 149).

Although Gill's (2007) characteristics of a postfeminist sensibility focus on representations of women in the media, feminist scholars have picked up Gill's work to make sense women's lived experience (see for example Evans et al. 2010, Lamb 2010, Ringrose 2013, Scharff 2016). That others have applied Gill's work to women's lived experience is important for this research, since I use the characteristics of a postfeminist sensibility to make sense of the bride's lived experience in contemporary wedding cultures.

One highly significant observation of a postfeminist sensibility has been that it presents a pro-marriage sentiment in which women are free to enjoy their wedding as they are no longer in danger of oppression by their husband (McRobbie 2009, Heise 2012). The renewed enthusiasm of a pro-marriage culture links directly with a postfeminist sensibility as it connects classic feminine ideals such as finding a husband and achieving female beauty with feminist concerns of agency and empowerment (McRobbie 2009, Heise 2012). Thus, popular media, such as *Bride Wars* (Winick

2009) use second-wave feminist concepts of agency, choice and empowerment and combines this with a femininity whose emphasis is on the body, beauty and consumption (Gill 2007, McRobbie 2009).

Nash (2013) drew on Gill (2007) and McRobbie (2009) to examine the connection between postfeminism and pregnant bridal bodies. Historically, the pregnant bridal body was represented as an object of shame and sin and therefore unworthy for the public eye. Contemporary pregnant bridal bodies, on the other hand, are put on display. Whilst at first glance this might disturb classic expectations of good femininity, Nash (2013) concluded that the heightened visibility of the pregnant bride only buys into discourses of femininity and bridal perfection. Pregnant bridal bodies, just like non-pregnant bridal bodies, are represented through consumer rhetoric of transformation and perfection that presents brides as sexy and able to enjoy and feel proud about their beauty and bodily curves. Displaying the pregnant bridal body is presented as done for the bride's pleasure, nonetheless, this representation is framed through the patriarchal ideal of the female body (see Gill 2008b for an account on the patriarchal ideal of the female body in the Wonder Bra advert).

The contradictions that mark a postfeminist sensibility are not limited to representations of the female body and sexuality, but extend to popular representation of heterosexual romance. Negra researched this by using the 'enchantment effect' (2009: 6), which is the moment the heroine meets Prince Charming who unlocks her from her current state. This current state is often a work-related issue, so that once she has found 'Mr Right' she can choose romance as an alternative route in the troubled 'real world' of female achievement (Negra 2009: 14). This shows how, within a postfeminist sensibility, romanticism and heterosexuality work to connect pre-feminist and feminist ideals, with on the one hand the *choice* for a career, but also the *option* to drop out as soon as a better alternative (i.e. Prince Charming) becomes available. An example is Kinsella's novel *The Undomestic Goddess* (2005). In this novel, the protagonist Samantha works as a young lawyer who lives for her work. However, when she makes a massive mistake at work she flees her office to work as a maid in the countryside. Here she finds Prince Charming and never returns to her work-focused life. The 'enchantment effect' also presents all women as identifying with girlhood dreams of Prince Charming and white weddings. This is evident in *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009) where, in the beginning, Liv and Emma are little girls who pretend-play to marry each other, while the voice-over states that we are all secretly little girls inside. This invites the audience to think about themselves as women who, deep down, are still girls who dream about white weddings, positioning every woman as a future bride. However, in the contemporary context, there are other issues shaping wedding cultures. Below, I document this by outlining the resurging interest in feminism.

#### **2.4.1. Feminism and a Postfeminist Sensibility**

As I stated above, one of the characteristics of a postfeminist sensibility is its connection with feminism. As outlined, pro-marriage cultures deem it safe for women to embark on heterosexual and romantic relationships, as there is no longer the fear of being subordinated by men (McRobbie 2009). In the above, I have explained how this sentiment is part of a broader movement in the 1990s where women were no longer deemed as passive victims of the patriarchal order, but as able to fight back due to the achievements of second-wave feminism (e.g. sexual freedom and the possibility to have a career). This has led to the popular belief that women no longer need feminism. Despite this claim, the critique of feminism is not an outright refusal of feminist discourses, but buys into the feminist rhetoric by using notions such as empowerment, freedom and agency.

McRobbie (2009) has explored this phenomenon as a ‘double disarticulation’ of feminism (2009: 26). Along similar lines, Gill (2007) has stated how a postfeminist sensibility complicates feminist critique on sexist images or behaviour by addressing the critique as lacking humour. This is enlarged by the often self-confident, savvy and ‘funny’ representations of women in popular media, for example, the Wonder Bra advert. These adverts are easy to read as humorous, rather than as harassment. This mechanism makes it hard critique, and enables a postfeminist sensibility to endure.

However, in recent years, we have witnessed a renewed interest in feminism, a ‘popular feminism’ (Banet-Weiser 2015a, 2018). Popular feminism, although often complex and contradictory, is broadly available in popular culture and can be seen on, for example, social media and in woman’s magazines, and includes a range of celebrities who now openly identify as feminist. Examples of popular feminism in social media are hashtags such as #girlboss and #nomakeupselfie that enable women to discuss feminist issues such as beauty, empowerment and employment (Banet-Weiser 2015a). These hashtags allow women to part-take in feminist movements, but often without addressing the issues at stake in feminist history, in terms of class, race and sexuality (Banet-Weiser 2015a). Another form of feminist activism that is enabled by digital platforms is creating public visibility of harassment. Hashtags such as #BeenRapedNeverReported<sup>10</sup> enable women to discuss online their experiences of harassment and rape. Platforms to speak about these experiences make it possible to break the silence of the victims (Keller, Mendes and Ringrose 2016: 12). The possibility to speak up is a form of protest and enables women to seek comfort and support, and breaks the silence of the victims (Keller, Mendes and Ringrose 2016).

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<sup>10</sup> Similar things have been happening with #metoo.

Another space where popular feminism is visible is in celebrity cultures, where female celebrities feel comfortable to identify as feminist (Hamad and Taylor 2015). A well-known example is Emma Watson's HeforShe campaign and presentation for the UN in 2014. The campaign invites 'people around the world to stand together to create a bond, visible force for gender equality... They know it's not a woman's issue it's a human rights issue'<sup>11</sup>. The campaign presents feminist ideas as kind and unified by highlighting, for example, the global bond between people. Popular feminism presents feminism not as a woman's concerns, but one for the whole of humanity, so that feminism becomes 'safe' and cannot be read as 'anti-man' (Keller and Ringrose 2015). This is emphasised by the role of prominent male feminists such as John Legend and Joseph Gordon-Levitt.

Popular feminism is also present in woman's magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour*. These magazines present feminism alongside fashion discourses of do's and don'ts so that feminism can be taken up and put down easily via accessible consumer practices (Banet-Weiser 2015a, 2018). This fosters the representation of feminism as a consumer and lifestyle choice, locating it strongly in the neoliberal landscape (Keller and Ringrose 2015: 132). Gill's research on woman's magazines also concludes that the feminism in these magazines has a one size fits all format that constructs a feminist identity as 'stylish, defiant, funny, beautiful, confident, and it 'champions' women' (2016: 625).

This savvy, self-conscious and consumption orientated identity category locates feminism in a postfeminist sensibility, so that contemporary feminism cannot be read as a simple revival of earlier feminist movements. Nonetheless, popular feminism needs to be taken seriously as a way to understand feminist movements in contemporary Western societies, as, like earlier feminist movements, popular feminism is connected with a resurgence of misogyny. This is evident in the location of rape culture in the broader cultural landscape as well as the growing importance of pro-male activism (Banet-Weiser 2018). To understand contemporary popular feminism, Rottenberg (2014) mapped how liberal terms from previous feminist movements such as equality, freedom and opportunity are displaced to create a feminist identity that is deeply individualised. This individualised form of feminism hinders critique on broader cultural structures that position women in a less advantage social position than men (Rottenberg 2014). For example, issues regarding work, childcare and housekeeping are deemed as a personal responsibility where women need to learn how to deal with the tasks effectively, rather than questioning the broader social structure that positions women as solely or mainly responsible for these tasks. This development also complicates the current

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<sup>11</sup> Mission Statement for HeforShe Campaign available from <<http://www.heforshe.org/en/our-mission>> [accessed on 14 January 2018].

movement of emerging (digital) spaces where women can address experiences of harassment in contemporary lad cultures (see for example Phipps (2018) for an account), as the solution for sexual harassment is presented through discourses of individualism and personal responsibility.

#### **2.4.2. Neoliberalism and a Postfeminist Sensibility**

To further understand a postfeminist sensibility, I now outline its connection with neoliberalism. According to Ong, neoliberalism is a new mode of political practice that reshapes the ‘relationships between governing and the governed, power and knowledge, and sovereignty and territoriality’ (2006: 3). In practical terms, this means that neoliberalism has led to an extension of the market that is based on the logic of freedom and competition (Peck and Tickell 2002, Harvey 2005, Ong 2006,). These discourses of freedom have led to a rolling back of state-intervention, as this would harm free trade and the mechanism of supply and demand (Peck and Tickell 2002). The focus on freedom does not mean that the neoliberal government embraces a laissez-fair approach. Rather, neoliberal politics interfere into the marketisation by fostering, maintaining and creating market spaces (Burchell 1996). Neoliberal politics are not just part of the economic climate or government, but move to all spheres of life, so that neoliberalism should not be seen as a top-down force that inscribes its beliefs into the social world, but as a governmentality that ‘produces subjects, forms citizenship and behaviour, and a new organisation of the social’ (Brown 2003: 37, Larner 2003, Foucault 2008). Or as Harvey puts it;

*‘Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects of the ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many interpret, live in, and understand the world.’*

(2007: 3)

This means that neoliberalism has fundamentally changed the way we think about the world. The effect of neoliberalism as a global mode of governmentality does not mean that it works the same in each space. Ong (2006) examined how the exact workings of neoliberalism change depending on the culture, location, and history of specific discourses. Peck and Tickell (2002) also discussed the transformative and adaptive capacities of neoliberalism as it bends the local discourses to morph into neoliberal thinking.

As identified above, neoliberalism has shaped the way we think about ourselves, as it encourages us to think about ourselves as entrepreneurs of our lives, rather than guided by the gods

or destiny (McNay 2009). This view makes it possible to think about the self as a site of improvement, or as Rose puts it ‘one becomes a subject for oneself’ (1991: 240). Seeing the self as a subject of improvement is fostered by an illusion of autonomy so that our success or failure becomes our responsibility (Rose 1991, Davies 2005, McNay 2009). Beck (1992) framed this as ‘choice biographies’ where we can create a self through the ‘right’ consumer practices (see Harris 2004 for a gendered reading). This idea is heavily critiqued, as it wipes out all the differences based the intersections of, for example, gender, race, class, ability and sexuality (see for example Atkinson 2007, Brannen and Nilson 2007). Despite this critique, Beck’s (1992) work is useful to capture the neoliberal discourses that represent all citizens with equal possibilities. The focus on equal opportunities is in line with discourses shaping the neoliberal market such as encouraging free markets and minimal state interference. This exemplifies how market discourses move to other spheres of life, such as the formation of the subject. Read (2009) has explored the connection between Foucault’s (2008) Homo-Economicus and the neoliberal ideal. Based on Foucault, who stated that we have moved from citizens of exchange to citizens of competition (2008: 226), Read (2009) argued that neoliberal subjects are encouraged to think about themselves as in constant competition with others.

Alongside competition with others, neoliberal entrepreneurial subjects are encouraged to compete with the self. Petersen and O’Flynn (2007) outlined this in relation to the Duke of Edinburgh’s award scheme in the UK. The competition in the scheme is not presented as a competition with others, as this is deemed as unsophisticated. Rather, the scheme is presented as a space for self-improvement where the ultimate goal is not the gold, but to exceed your own expectations and possibilities. Scharff (2016) made a similar argument in her research on female, classically trained musicians. Scharff (2016) discussed how her participants were trying to withdraw from the idea of competition with others by rejecting the very competitive climate as it was deemed as damaging the creativity in the field. However, rejecting competition was not a movement away from the neoliberal ideal, as it created competition with the self through discourses of increasing quality and creativity by pushing one’s boundaries. According to Scharff (2016) competing with the self creates the neoliberal subject *par excellence*, as it completely internalises neoliberal discourses of self-control and regulation. Other cultural spaces where competition with the self is paramount is self-tracking cultures, where subjects are encouraged to track their health and lifestyle, further instilling the self-optimising subject into the society (Lupton 2016). Closely linked to self-tracking cultures are beauty apps. These beauty apps intensify beauty surveillance by fully internalising the scrutinising gaze (see Elias and Gill 2017 for an account).

Having provided an overview of neoliberalism and examined the connection between neoliberalism and the subject as a self-governing enterprise, I move on to outline the link with postfeminism. Researchers like Harris (2004), Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008), McRobbie (2009) and Gill and Scharff (2011) have argued that (young) women are the ideal subject within the neoliberal rhetoric. Harris examined how young women are ‘imagined [...] as the best able to handle today’s socioeconomic change’ (2004: 2) as they can pick the fruits from the feminist movements. These historical movements gave women the right to go to school as well as access to birth prevention techniques. Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) stressed the connection with class in their research on British make-over television and the transformation paradigm of contemporary neoliberal societies. They analysed how working class women fail to live up to expectations of endless possibilities and consumption of the female body. Working class women’s lack of transformation constructs them as a site of abjection and in desperate need for regulation.

More specifically connected to wedding cultures is Leonard’s (2018) reading of bridal and wedding related reality programmes. In this work, Leonard (2018) analyses neoliberal discourses that present the perfect wedding as broadly attainable as long as one is willing to work hard for it. To understand the workings of the neoliberal ideal, Leonard (2018) focussed on the reality show *Bridezilla*<sup>12</sup> (2004-2013 and 2018-present) where the main message was that in order to have a perfect wedding, the brides have to control their emotional outbursts and excessive desires through appropriate levels of self-regulation, favouring more feminine qualities such as grace, elegance and serenity. The brides who were unable to meet these requirements were often coded as from working class backgrounds, and were thus represented as unworthy of a tasteful and lavish wedding.

The body as a site of endless possibilities and consumer practices provides valuable input to my research. *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009) underlines this by turning both Liv and Emma into perfectly styled brides in a classic white wedding gown on an extravagant and elegantly decorated wedding venue.

Gill and Scharff provided a broader interpretation of the connection between neoliberalism and postfeminism by outlining three features: the focus on the individual; autonomy and choice; and self-management and self-disciplining (2011: 7). Their argument is in line with Gill’s earlier claim that neoliberalism is ‘always already gendered’ (2008a: 443), as it is women rather than men who are encouraged ‘to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their body and present all

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<sup>12</sup> Initially the series covered mainly affluent brides, but later years centred on brides with a limited financial means and cultural capital.

their actions as freely chosen' (443). Below I outline how these three characteristics are ingrained in wedding cultures, showing the connection with postfeminism, neoliberalism and the wedding.

The first aspect is the centrality of the individual, which is mirrored in contemporary wedding cultures that presents the wedding as *your* day. This is in contrast to the wedding's historical connotation where the festivities were not designed to honour the bride and groom, but to honour both families (Cherlin 2009). In *Bride Wars*, (Winick 2009) this is captured by Emma's mum when she sees Emma as a bride for the first time.

*Emma's mum: 'Oh my God is that my dress?'*

*Emma nods*

*Emma's mum laughs out loud*

*Emma, asks softly: 'Are you happy?'*

*Emma's mum: 'I am happy if you are happy! Sweetheart, you could get married in a brown paper bag, I wouldn't care. This is your day!'*

Such sentiments shift the attention from the family and tradition to the individual. Emma needs to make her own decisions, such as the choice for her dress, rather than following traditions and expectations. This constructs Emma's life narrative as freely chosen and independent<sup>13</sup>.

Secondly, Gill and Scharff outlined the similarities between the neoliberal subject as 'autonomous, calculating and self-regulating' (2011: 7) and the ideal postfeminist subject as 'active, freely choosing and self-reinventing' (2011: 7). *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009) draws heavily on the discourses of autonomy as it presents the whole wedding as a moment of choice, rather than building on social expectations that frame the wedding as essential to living together as a couple (McRobbie 2009, Heaphy et al. 2013, Carter and Duncan 2017). Through discourses of autonomy and choice, the film presents a bridal subjectivity that is rooted in self-reinvention through consumption. An example is the moment Liv tries on a designer dress by Vera Wang<sup>14</sup>, which transforms her into a beautiful bridal image. This moment of transformation links into the make-over paradigm that constructs the female body as a site of endless possibilities in neoliberal consumer cultures (see for example Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) on makeover television).

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<sup>13</sup> For an account on the complexity of the idea 'I am happy if you are', see Ahmed (2010).

<sup>14</sup> The costs of a Vera Wang wedding dress range from £5000 to £15000 (McGowran no date) available via <<https://bridalmusings.com/2015/01/how-much-does-a-wedding-dress-cost-the-couture-edition/>> [accessed on 14 January 2018]



The third aspect is how a postfeminist sensibility addresses women in terms of self-management (Gill and Scharff 2011). This idea is mirrored in the popular expectations that encourage brides to work on themselves to create an image of perfection, positioning the body as the prime capital of a woman's (or bridal) identity (Gill 2008b: 42). This is exemplified in the *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009) narrative and Liv's purchase of the Vera Wang dress. During the Vera Wang scene, the shop assistant comments on Liv's weight and instructs her '[to] be very careful about any pre-wedding gain. You don't alter a Vera to fit you, you alter yourself to fit Vera'. This phrase is repeated during the film and underlines Liv's weight gain and subsequently weight loss, turning Liv's body, and not the dress, into an object of change through discourses of self-discipline.

Discourses of self-management and self-discipline shape postfeminist wedding cultures. Wedding websites and blogs focus on goods and services to help brides reach perfection. The neoliberal rhetoric presents these perfect bodies within the bride's reach as long as she is willing to work on herself through intensive beauty work and consumer practices (see for example Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2006, McRobbie 2009, Jackson et al 2012 for an account on beauty work and consumption). However, being beautiful is not only about working on one's physical appearance. More recently Gill and Elias (2014) have argued that beauty practices are also about changing psychic life. They researched this shift by analysing 'Love Your Body' (LYB) discourses. The Dove Campaign Real Beauty Sketches<sup>15</sup>, for example, shows young women talking about their looks while a forensic artist draws their faces based on their description. The forensic drawing is constructed as more beautiful than the women imagined themselves to be. This gives out the message that women are more beautiful than they think, so that being really beautiful means that you also have to feel good about yourself. As a result, women are not only encouraged to work on their physical looks, but should also work on their mind by loving their bodies. Gill and Elias critiqued these discourses by pointing towards the way governmentality has been extended beyond controlling the physical appearance, to include the mind and psychological well-being, so that it is no longer enough 'to work on and discipline the body, but in today's society the beautiful body must be accompanied by a beautiful mind' (2014: 185). This discourse also has historical pretence, for example, the L'Oréal's slogan 'you're worth it' originates from 1973<sup>16</sup> and was relaunch at the beginning of the

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<sup>15</sup> Dove Campaign Real Beauty Sketches available via <<https://youtu.be/litXW91UauE>> [accessed on 23.03.2018]

<sup>16</sup> See the L'Oréal campaign for hair colouring products available via <[https://youtu.be/6\\_GvlikmZzc](https://youtu.be/6_GvlikmZzc)> [accessed on 20.04.2018]

2000s<sup>17</sup>. The transformation of both the body and mind as part of women's beauty work is also visible in contemporary wedding cultures, where brides are encouraged to feel good about their bridal bodies so that their happy feelings on their big day will make them 'shine'. The Dutch wedding platform *The Perfect Wedding*, for example, provides brides with the assumption that: "*Of course you want to shine on your wedding day*"<sup>18</sup>. They do this via proposing a three-months-long step-by-step guide, which includes intense body work, to 'ensure' that brides feel confident enough to embody such a shine.

Building on discourses that connect working on the body and mind, Wood (2017) applied Gill and Elias' arguments on beauty work to discourses around a good and healthy (hetero)sexual life. Wood (2017) argued that women are encouraged to work on their bodies through consumer practices and aesthetic labour to please their (male) partners and *themselves*. The labour, however, does not stop here. Women also need to feel good about their bodies, so that they are freed 'from anxiety and able to enjoy sex' (Wood 2017: 318). Working on the body and mind is packaged under the illusion that it is done to please women to make them feel better about their bodies and sex lives, rather than for her (male) partner. Having unpacked the connection between postfeminism and neoliberalism, I now move on to discuss the location of perfection and happiness within a postfeminist wedding context as both notions are central in popular wedding cultures.

## 2.5. Happiness and Wedding Cultures

In 2009 McRobbie argued that weddings have had a revival of late, as women are presented as having won the right to marry without the danger to be oppressed by their husbands. **Along similar lines Leonard has argued that the decreasing wedding numbers and increasing divorce rates do not mean interest in the wedding has fallen; the wedding still holds a strong position in the symbolic imaginary (2018: 4).** This revival does not mean that we witness a return of wedding cultures from before the 1970s, as contemporary weddings are framed through postfeminist notions of choice, agency and empowerment (see for example McRobbie 2009, Heise 2012, Smit 2016). Wedding cultures are therefore not merely a backlash, but a place where older and newer discourses around weddings and gender are transfigured into a renewed understanding of the wedding as a place of happiness and perfection. Below I outline the connection with happiness and perfection further by first addressing McRobbie's (2015) writing on the perfect and its connection with wedding cultures. Subsequently, I

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<sup>17</sup> See for example G. Mulgan critique on the slogan, available via <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/jun/12/becauseyoureworthit>> [accessed on 23.03.2018]

<sup>18</sup> Available via <<https://www.thepperfectwedding.nl/artikelen/2449/natural-beauty-voorbereidingen-grote-dag>>

examine the good life and the promise of happiness via Ahmed (2010) and Berlant (2011). I connect this with retraditionalisation, to frame the revival of wedding cultures as a space where heterosexual romantic love is celebrated through notions of nostalgia.

### **2.5.1. Bridal Perfection and a Postfeminist Sensibility**

To reach perfection, brides engage in activities ranging from intense aesthetic labour and consumer practices to emotional labour to 'feel good'. To frame the bride's need to engage with self-improvement, I examine 'the perfect' and how it shapes contemporary gendered expectations. McRobbie referred to the perfect as a 'heightened form of self-regulation based on an aspiration to some idea of the 'good life''. She framed this idea of the good life as a female fantasy (2015: 9). This turns the perfect into a form of self-discipline and governmentality regarding how women can present themselves. According to McRobbie (2015), the notion of the perfect informs women's need to constantly improve looks, whilst upholding a highflying career and a loving and stable home. While doing this, women are encouraged to compete with others through sharing images of homes, perfectly styled nails, adorable children, and so on via online platforms. Together, these actions of self-discipline and governmentality create the female fantasy of the good life, as a hyper-stylised place of perfection. As above in the discussion of neoliberalism, such forms of competition are also directed inwards, where the perfect encourages women to compete with themselves. Inner competition is presented as a constant flow of self-scrutiny that judges the female performance at the home, at work and with the family (McRobbie 2015).

McRobbie (2015) argued that future research needed to understand how the image of the perfect works in contemporary gendered cultural spaces. I argue that wedding culture is a suitable space for exploring the mechanisms of the perfect, as weddings are presented through the rhetoric of perfection. In popular culture, the wedding and the perfect are connected on a semantic level that presents the wedding in terms of perfection such as the popular UK magazine and online platform *Perfect Wedding* (illustration 4) and the Dutch online platform *The Perfect Wedding* (illustration 5). The connection between the perfect and the wedding is also part of South-African popular culture. Smit's (2016) research on weddings and postfeminism analysed the South African television programme *Our Perfect Wedding* (2013 – present) and discussed how a lavish and stylish wedding became available for broader parts of the public. This fosters the formation of postfeminist identities amongst a growing black, middle class segment of the population in South Africa. The connection between the wedding and perfection is not only visible in names or titles, but also in the way brides are addressed through discourses of hedonistic pleasure, styling, fashion and makeup. For example,

the tagline of hitched.co.uk is: ‘planning the perfect wedding: How hitched.co.uk can help’. The Dutch platform [www.theperfectwedding.nl](http://www.theperfectwedding.nl) also frames the inspiration for the photoshoot as well as the search for ‘super fancy bridal accessories’ via perfection (illustration 6)



Illustration 4: Screenshot website<sup>19</sup> and cover image *Perfect Wedding*, UK

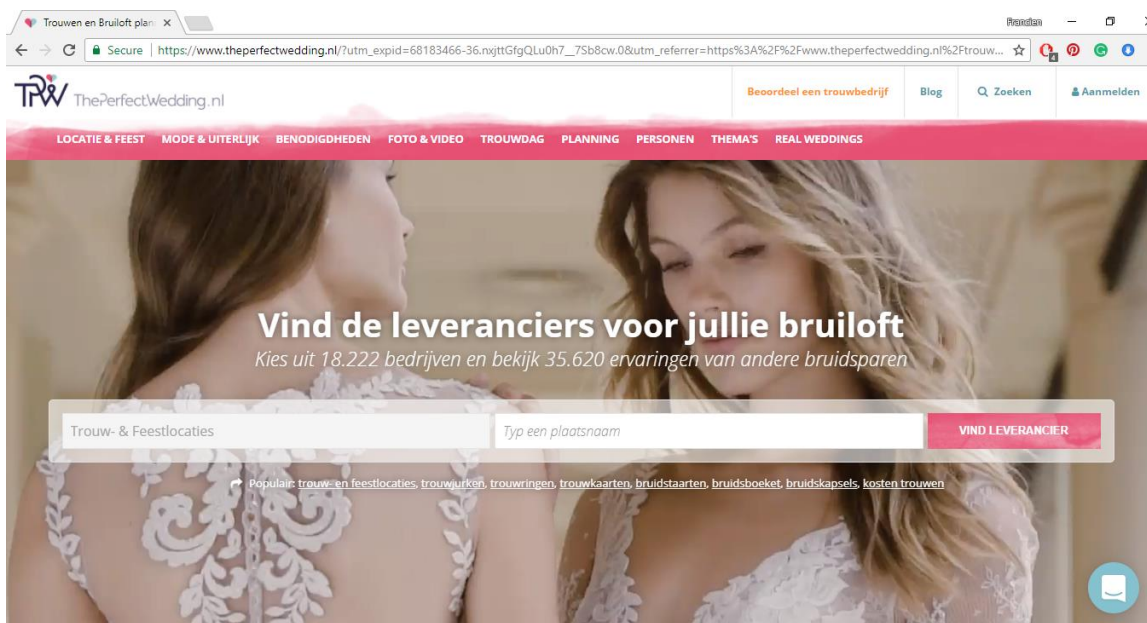
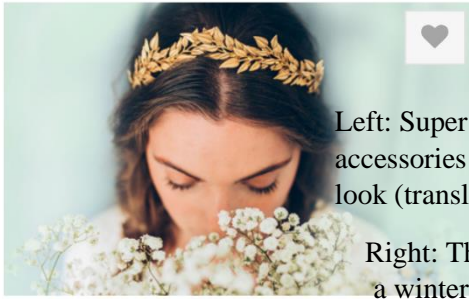


Illustration 5: Screenshot website *The Perfect Wedding*<sup>20</sup>, NL

<sup>19</sup> Available via <<http://www.planyourperfectwedding.com/>> [accessed on 03.02.2018]

<sup>20</sup> Available via <<https://www.theperfectwedding.nl/>> [accessed on 03.02.2018]



Left: Super fancy bridal accessories for the perfect bridal look (translation)



Right: The perfect inspiration for a winter bridal look (translation)

**Super fancy bruidsaccessoires voor de perfecte bridal look**

Bruidsaccessoires maken je outfit af. Wat is er allemaal te krijgen? Wat past bij elkaar? Hoe combineer je ze? Inspiratie!

**Styled Shoot | Romantische bridal inspiratie**

De perfect inspiratie voor een winterse bridal look!

Illustration 6: Bridal Perfection on the Dutch platform *The Perfect Wedding*

The semantic connection between perfection and the wedding is deepened by the symbolic meaning of bridal perfection which is presented through the proper white body. The images below from the covers of the UK magazine *Perfect Wedding* (illustration 7) and the Dutch wedding magazine *Bruiden Bruidegom* [trans: Bride and Groom] (illustration 8) depict almost identical brides with long (often blond) hair, slender bodies and white wedding dresses that locates perfection in proximity of white, slim, abled-bodied women.



Illustration 7: Covers *Perfect Wedding*, (2012-2016)



Illustration 8: Covers *Bruid en Bruidegom* [trans: Bride and Groom]

The combination of white wedding dresses and racial whiteness locates the white women at the centre of the wedding imaginary, marginalising black, brown and other non-white bodies away from the image of postfeminist bridal perfection. In her exploration of the perfect, McRobbie (2015) argued that the image of female perfection functions as a mechanism to reinstall gendered ideals of (white) female beauty and domestic perfection into society. Both Smit (2016) and Leonard (2018) have also discussed the centrality of white middle class women in connection to wedding imaginary. Leonard (2018) has done this by outlining how the dream of living happily ever after is more likely to be obtained by white, middle class women with enough economic power. Smit (2016) also focused on the dream of upward mobility by discussing the aspirational possibilities for South African women of colour to partake in the consumption that surrounds postfeminist wedding cultures. The whiteness of the bridal bodies on the covers of the aforementioned magazines also links into imperialist notions of idealised femininity which are produced through (sexually) respectable white docile bodies, whilst her coloured counterparts are located in binary opposite as wild, uncontrolled and connected to nature and animal life (Durham 2012). This is enlarged by the centrality of whiteness in the wedding and bridal costume as a whole, presenting bridal perfection as a white-women-only affair.

In Western societies, the white, long wedding dress started to gain status when Queen Victoria wore a white gown when she married Prince Albert in 1840. The popularity of the white dress increased in the 1950s when it became fashionable to wear white amongst young middle class, first-time ‘virginal’ brides. However, it was not until the 1980s that the white dress became common use for all social classes and types of brides (Leeds-Hurwitz 2002, Carter and Duncan 2017). The white wedding dress kept its popularity, and although it is now common for most brides to wear white, it still represents the virginity and innocence, linking it to a sense of morality (White 2015).

The whiteness of the dress and bridal body constructs the clean and proper (bridal) female body that is coded as obedient and docile (Grosz 1994: 192). This bodily representation connects the white bridal performance with the ideal image of good femininity that unquestionably accepts her position in the patriarchal order.

### **2.5.2. The Good Life and the Promise of Happiness**

In her writing on the perfect, McRobbie (2015) argued that it is shaped by the good life, which she discussed through postfeminist notions of heterosexual romantic love, the home and consumption. A similar argument was made by Berlant (2011), who framed the good life as our collective investment in hope for a better future through the dream of upward mobility, hedonistic consumer practices, self-development, heterofamiliarity and a satisfactory workplace (2011: 2-3). According to Berlant (2011), the good life is never obtained and will always be out of reach. Nonetheless, this does not strip the good life of its importance. The affective powers of the fantasmatic image of the good life provide us with the 'affective rhythm of survival' (Berlant 2011: 11). Although both writings are similar, McRobbie (2015) outlined a specific postfeminist notion of the perfect, making it more applicable for contemporary wedding cultures. This is evident in the way wedding cultures present perfection not only through (heterosexual) romantic love, but also via self-development and consumption which fuel the dream of the perfect bridal body.

The fantasmatic image of the good life is not an image of greatness and extravagance, but one of normalcy. Berlant discussed this as a desire to feel normal, which means having a life that does not require constant intervention and affirmation (2011: 170). Normalcy is a desire to blend in and become part of the infrastructure of the social world (Coleman and Moreno Figueroa 2010). The desire to blend in, however, must always be read as out of reach, and it is these same structures that become inherently violent and discriminating through structural inequality.

To further explore the good life, I move on to examine happiness. To do so, I first outline the difference between the good life and the promise of happiness in this project. Based on Berlant (2011) and McRobbie (2015), I take the good life as a set of dreams that build a better future (Berlant 2011: 2-3). Whereas my understanding of happiness draws on Ahmed (2010), who argued that the promise of happiness works as an affective force that structures our social and cultural space. The promise of happiness clings onto objects, spaces and dreams, so that these things become associated with happiness and the feeling of happiness. Attachment to these objects brings the hope that a happy life, a good life will follow as long as we stay close to these objects (Ahmed 2010, Berlant 2011). For

Berlant (2011), our attachment to these objects and these promises are cruel, as no matter how many happy objects we accumulate, the good life will always be beyond our reach.

To understand this, I discuss Ahmed's (2010) analysis of the family and the home as a location of happiness. Ahmed discussed 'the family as a happy object, as being what good feelings are directed towards, as well as providing a shared horizon of experience' (2010: 21). The family works as a collective that makes sure that we desire right to belong to the happy space of the family (Ahmed 2010). The push towards this collective desire of how to live well is instilled in every aspect of the house, ranging from the walls, the furniture and all the objects within the house (Ahmed 2010: 45-46). Desiring a house, a sofa, a vase, a photo frame, and so on, creates proximity to these happy objects in the hope that happiness will follow. The family is, therefore, embroidered with feelings of happiness and functions as a dream of the good life and a better future. Below I connect happiness and the good life with retraditionalisation. To do so, I first provide an overview of retraditionalisation.

### **2.5.3. The Joys of Retraditionalisation**

Probyn (1990) suggested that retraditionalisation works to neutralise the home as the most logic choice for women by discussing TV-series such as *Roseanne* (1988-1997)<sup>21</sup>, *LA Law* (1986-1994), and *Thirtysomething* (1987-1991). These shows represented women as having the ability to go to work, but eventually, the desire for a husband and children was more important. Constructing the desire to stay at home with the family as a choice is pivotal, as choice is what makes the retraditionalisation of gender norms different from traditional gender roles (Probyn 1993). The notion of choice means that the same action is *perceived* differently, so that the attention moves to the 'affective implications of the image of choice' and how it structures our lives (Probyn 1993: 283, my emphasis).

Hollows (2003) drew on Probyn's theorisation of choice and how it alters the *feelings* of an experience. Hollows (2003) did this by researching celebrity Nigella Lawson's media persona as a feminist, as well as cooking, food, and lifestyle expert. Nigella's success circles around her ability to locate cooking in a postfeminist sensibility. Nigella presented cooking as a personal indulgence, to have fun and release stress, rather than to please others. Hollows' (2003) analysis of Nigella's success discussed how the *feeling of choice* is played out. Hollows argued that being a feminist and domestic goddess are constructed as two oppositional identity categories, but that these two different categories can be picked up at different moments: there are moments you want to *feel* like a feminist and at other

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<sup>21</sup> The series returned again in March 2018



times you *feel* like a domestic goddess (2003: 197). It is this experience of the choice to be a domestic goddess that gives the image of Nigella such a strong affective power (Hollows 2003).

To think in more detail about the experience to move between different feminine subject positions (e.g. the home and work), I look at Dilley et al.'s (2015) work on women's narratives of wearing high-heels. The researchers argued that wearing high heels transformed the women in their study and enabled them to perform different versions of their gendered self. An example is how wearing high heels feels different from flat sneaker as it creates a different display of the female body, e.g. sporty versus sophisticated. The authors concluded that the temporal aspect of performing emphasised femininity as a project is uneven and disturbed, rather than linear and goal-orientated (Dilley et al. 2015: 5). Wearing high heels can, therefore, be read as a temporal moment of choice, as the women 'choose' to wear high heels during different occasions to make them *feel* feminine.

To further explore retraditionalisation, I move to Adkins (1999), who linked retraditionalisation with the growing importance of neoliberal individualism and detraditionalisation. Adkins (1999) framed detraditionalisation, or liquid modernity, as the decreasing importance of older social structures such as marriage and the church (see Bauman 2000 for an account of what he terms liquid modernity). In the modern era, these social structures are replaced by a growing interest in the individual. For Adkins (1999) the process of detraditionalisation and individualism also generates a so-called retraditionalisation. This process should not be understood as a revival of the past, rather 'tradition must be understood in terms of a process [...] that is produced and co-constructed with the modern'<sup>22</sup> (Adkins 1999: 123-124). Therefore, past activities will never return in the same format, but are always altered through contemporary discourses. In this case, it means that the combination of individualism and detraditionalisation has resulted in the retraditionalisation of the social sphere and labour market as 'it is men rather than women who are achieving individualised working status and are able to create new labour market resources as part of the process' (Adkins 1999: 129). The new divisions of labour do not provide women with the same chances as they are excluded from 'reflexive occupations and an intensification of the appropriation of family labour' (Adkins 1999: 129). In practical terms, this means that women are responsible for the labour in the house so that men are free to work on their career. In the workplace this means that women work with women, whilst being managed by men.

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<sup>22</sup> My view on retraditionalisation does not aim to frame tradition as an authentic ritual from the past, but acknowledges that all traditions are part of the social movements and processes of civilization (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992). Given the context of wedding cultures with retraditionalisation I focus specifically here on a feminist-orientated body of work that explores the location of patriarchy in this process.

McRobbie (2009) furthered Adkins' (1999) argument by stating that retraditionalisation is not the outcome of the gendered divide of labour markets, but that it is deeply rooted in patriarchy. Or as McRobbie framed it 'I would like to take Adkin's... critique... further, and suggest that what she pinpoints as one of its outcomes, that is re-traditionalisation, is, in fact, a feature of resurgent patriarchalism' (2009: 46). Retraditionalisation, therefore, functions as a mechanism to ensure that the changing discourses of individualism do not create a movement away from the patriarchal order, but that the new ideals uphold the gender divide. McRobbie outlined how a rhetoric of choice and freedom do not create different female subjectivities, but positions women close to the house through discourses of choice rather than a social obligation (2009: 47).

To understand retraditionalisation as a way to secure the patriarchal order I connect it to happiness and the good life. Negra (2009) analysed how, in films and TV-series, the image of the happy housewife and heterosexual love represents a fantasy of perfection and male protection through the discourse of nostalgia. Again, the aspect of choice is pivotal in these representations, as the home is not presented as the only option for heroine. The good life and the promise of happiness that are presented in these series, via the image of the happy housewife and the loving family, work hand in hand with discourses of retraditionalisation. The option of staying at home and looking after the family as part of the happiness promise turns the home into such a powerful affective image that the choice to stay at home feels good as it is connected with the collective desire of how to live well.

To move this argument to wedding cultures, this means that discourses of retraditionalisation enable brides to think about the wedding preparation as a freely chosen moment to indulge in classic feminine bridal performance because they *enjoy* it. Brook stated that weddings in films, as well as in people's lives, are still a source of gendered pleasure, giving 'great comfort, nourishment, support and satisfaction' (2015: 156)<sup>23</sup>. She also located these feelings in romantic discourses and argued that this does not make the *feeling* of the experience less real. Read through a Foucauldian lens, Cooper outlined how feminists have focused on the productive properties of power, to understand how it creates 'knowledges, subjects and bodies' (1994: 438). This perception acknowledges that power should not only be perceived as negative, but also as positive. This links back to the promise of happiness in relation to heterosexual love, the family and wedding and how these patriarchal spaces *feel* good for women.

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<sup>23</sup> See for example Radway (1984) and Ang (1985) for an overview on female audiences and the pleasure that is gained for reading or watching romance.

To develop her argument, Brook (2015) examined affective ties of ‘happily-ever-after’ in romantic comedies and fairy tales and the inevitable literal or symbolic wedding. To do this Brook (2015) drew on Mizejewski (2010), who claimed that in the 1930s when there was a decline of wedding rates and a spike of divorce rates, the public interest in romantic comedies suddenly rose. The romantic comedies depicted idealised images of romantic heterosexual love. Brook (2015) linked Mizejewski’s (2010) observation with contemporary societies where wedding rates are dropping and divorce rates are increasing. Yet, nevertheless, weddings still hold a central location in popular culture, which is evident in for example the number of wedding related films and TV-series such as *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009), *Toscaanse Bruiloft* (Nijenhuis 2014) [Trans: Toscana Wedding] and *Say Yes to the Dress* (2007 – present).

I use this discussion to shed more light on Gill and Herdieckerhoff (2006), who questioned the continued centrality of heterosexual romance in popular culture. They compared the popularity of chick-lit novels with demographic changes, such as household diversity, that indicate a decline of classic heterosexual life. Gill and Herdieckerhoff (2006) analysed whether the new romantic genre of chick-lit was able to reflect these changes. Through a close reading of chick-lit novels between 1997 and 2004, they concluded that the representation of the heroine was quite different compared to more classic romantic stories, in that she is financially independent, sexually experienced and confident, and working outside of the house. Nonetheless, heterosexual romance was still presented as the ideal form of living, whilst being single was constructed as pathologic and deeply undesirable. I argue that it is exactly the changes in household diversity that maintains the central location of heterosexual romantic love in the chick-lit genre, as heterosexual romantic love is an element of the good life and is still infused by the promise of happiness. Linking this back to my account on retraditionalisation, I conclude that when it comes to romance and happiness, retraditionalisation works to re-instil patriarchal ideals of happiness at the centre of our society.

#### **2.5.4. Happy Bridal Branding**

Above, I discussed the connection between retraditionalisation and the happiness promise of the wedding. This section analyses how happiness is presented in the branding of the wedding through discourses of perfection. Winch and Webster argued that the production of a unique wedding is not merely a case of consumption, but also draws on discourses of brand management to persuade brides ‘to not only theme their wedding, but also to strategically manage their wedding’ (2012: 51) to create a distinct personal branded narrative. Drawing on Lury (2004) and Braun (2007), Winch and Webster (2012) examined brands as the mediator of the relationship between consumer and producer. In

contemporary consumer culture, the value of brands is coproduced with consumers, for example, the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty<sup>24</sup>, where consumers are encouraged to participate in the campaign on self-esteem and beauty. Consumer-led culture also shapes contemporary wedding cultures, as brides are encouraged to work with brands to strategically brand their bridal appearance (Winch and Webster 2012: 58). The branding of the wedding was also discussed by Leonard (2018). She discussed the wedding, but equally the strategies of finding a husband and running a household, via discourses of branding. She pointed out that discourses of branding, together with professionalism ‘that stress principles of competition, hard work and personal responsibility’ (Leonard 2018: 66), create a wedding market that favours white middle class women as it is exactly those discourses that create contemporary good middle class selfhood. This produces a bridal industry where the process of becoming a bride has become a labour space for ‘respectability and deservingness’, favouring middle and upper class women (Leonard 2018: 67).

An example is Real Wedding Stories on wedding forums. These stories showcase the wedding of non-celebrity brides who send their photographs and wedding story to a website and/or magazine in the hope for publication. Examples of these spaces are online platforms such as [www.planyourperfectwedding.com](http://www.planyourperfectwedding.com) and [www.bruidenbruidegom.nl](http://www.bruidenbruidegom.nl). The images below show a Real Wedding Story from [www.youandyourwedding.co.uk](http://www.youandyourwedding.co.uk) (illustration 9).

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Illustration 9: ‘A literary lovefest in Northamphshire’

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<sup>24</sup> See <<https://www.dove.com/uk/stories/campaigns.html#>> for an example of the Dove Campaign for Real beauty [accessed on 04.04.2018]

‘The literary lovefest in Northamphshire’ tells ‘their [the couple’s] love story with hundreds of books and DIY details’<sup>25</sup>. The photos show a perfectly styled universe where love and friendship are celebrated through an engagement with the right objects, brands and styling practices that all underscore the couple’s distinctive branded narrative and perfection. The construction of this branded narrative is aided by listing the key brands used to create the wedding.

To understand personal branding, I link it with the neoliberal landscape where the self is understood as an enterprise that is in constant need of improvement and change (McNay 2009). Seeing the self as an enterprise connects it with economic discourses. Banet-Weiser (2012) examined how discourses of branding moved to all locations of the social sphere, including those spaces that were previously understood as authentic and untouched by capitalist thinking, such as the self, religion, creativity and politics. For my project, I am mainly interested in the way branding affects the self. Banet-Weiser (2012) analysed young women’s use of online platforms, such as YouTube and Facebook, to build their identity through discourses of branding. The production of online identity does not have to use branding discourses consciously, as the infrastructure of these spaces means that the online performance is always understood through the rhetoric of branding, such as evaluation, ranking and judgement. The online performances of these young women were constructed through postfeminist discourses as these platforms enabled young women to construct an identity through notions such as empowerment, (tech-)savviness, independence and sexual confidence (Banet-Weiser 2012). Likewise, the performance of the bridal brand online is mirrored in Real Wedding Stories that are featured above.

In these stories, the bride is put at the centre of the narrative and is presented as the ultimate orchestrator of the event (see Boden 2003 and Engstorm 2008 for an account on the bridal role in the wedding). Visitors to these websites are encouraged to judge the wedding performance through discourses of branding such as evaluation and ranking (Banet-Weiser 2012). The wedding experience is presented through a clearly defined and carefully planned narrative. Similarly, Winch and Webster (2012) argued that celebrities are an example of the branded wedding narrative. An example is Serena William’s marriage with Reddit-founder Alexis Ohanian in 2017 that was themed as Beauty and the Beast, which Vogue discussed as ‘French ball-themed, Beauty and the Beast-style décor, complete

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<sup>25</sup> You and Your Wedding (2014) available via <<http://www.youandyourwedding.co.uk/real-weddings/spring/real-wedding-pictures-a-literary-love-fest-in-northamptonshire/20251.html>> [accessed on 07 May 2015]

with a gold arch of flowers at the end of the aisle, long tables covered in lamé fabric ... and a first spin on the dance floor to ‘Tale as Old as Time.’’<sup>26</sup>

To link this back to Banet-Weiser’s (2012) claim that online platforms are used by women to create their branded identity, I suggest that the wedding needs to be understood along similar lines. This does not only work for weddings that are publicly displayed on platforms, but for all the weddings. The contemporary wedding moves between the digital and the non-digital space, for example through sharing the day on Facebook and Instagram. The success of the bridal performance is based on branding discourses that require a clear narrative that makes the wedding brand recognisable for its ‘customers/consumers’ (Lury 2004, Floor and Van Raaij 2010, Winch and Webster 2012). The thematic wedding enables the bride to create a coherent narrative that helps her to position the wedding as ‘different’, to make it recognisable for and from others. The audience, both those attending the wedding and those who witness the wedding via social media, are encouraged to judge and evaluate the wedding image via for example the like button on Facebook. The relationship that is thus created between the couple and its audience is an indicator for the couple’s success and social status (see Gandini [2016] for an extensive account on personal branding and reputation).

The connection of the self and emotional life rituals means that consumption and capitalism should not be understood as spaces devoid of emotions, but as spaces that are connected to it. Illouz argued that consumption and capitalism gave rise to the homo sentimentalis or emotional capitalism which she defined as

*‘a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other, thus producing [...] sweeping movements in which affect is made an essential aspect of economic behaviour and in which emotional life [...] follows the logic of economic relations and exchange’* (2007: 5)

Connecting emotional and economic discourses moves the self and emotions out of the private sphere into the public space and locates emotions as the main form of communication in contemporary capitalist cultures (Illouz 2007: 36). Based on Illouz (2007), I debunk Ingraham’s claim that ‘social relations at stake [in the wedding ceremony] – love, community, commitment, and family – come to be viewed as secondary to the production of the wedding spectacle’ (2016: 42). Instead, I argue that

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<sup>26</sup> Vogue (2017) available via <<https://www.vogue.com/article/serena-williams-wedding-new-orleans>> [accessed on 15 January 2018].

the consumer practices foster the emotive fabrics of the wedding day and connect the wedding consumption with feelings of love, romance and commitment. Following Banet-Weiser (2012) I do not believe we can view these sensations as separate from brand cultures, but rather need to understand them as integrated. In this thesis, I point towards how the feelings of happiness are part of the wedding and bridal image, and state that the wedding's happiness promise fuels the affective textures of the wedding brand.

## **2.6. Conclusion**

I started this chapter by providing a reading of *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009) to explore the key points of a postfeminist sensibility in relation to wedding cultures. Postfeminist discourses present the wedding as a site of women's agency and empowerment that deems women as freed from patriarchal oppression to enjoy the wedding (McRobbie 2009, Heise 2012, Smit 2016). I also connected the wedding with brand cultures as the performance of a postfeminist bridal subject draws heavily on branding discourses that portray brides as the ultimate orchestrator of a unique and distinctive event that is all about her. The wedding spectacle puts bridal performance at the centre of the attention and invites others to openly discuss the bridal success through brand rhetoric of evaluation, ranking and judgment (Banet-Weiser 2012, Winch and Webster 2012, Leonard 2018).

I have combined existing literature on wedding cultures and postfeminism with retraditionalisation, the good life and the happiness promise. This enabled me to further theorise retraditionalisation and how it functions within a postfeminist sensibility. I argue that retraditionalisation gains its affective powers through postfeminist discourses of choice. However, it is not only choice that makes traditional gender roles *feel good*, but also the proximity of the wedding and heterofamilial life to the happiness promise. The affective fabrics of these spaces as the hope for a future good life are increased in modern societies where the wedding's practical significance has decreased, but its symbolic status has increased – becoming a marker of postfeminist success and perfection. The process of retraditionalisation does not represent the home as only the marker of postfeminist success, but in the ability to choose between the home and a career at different temporal moments. Both spaces are represented through discourses of perfection, so that maintaining and creating a perfect home and career are the ultimate goal of a postfeminist perfect (McRobbie 2015). I argue that this goal creates a different temporal experience of working on the perfect bridal subjects. The contradicting expectations women face demands that they switch between the expectations of the family and work sphere, which creates a temporal flow that is disrupted and uneven. Based on this literature, this thesis aims to further unpack the following questions, through an empirical approach

that includes the voices of women. These questions are: 1) what is the connection between contemporary wedding cultures and postfeminism, and how is this connection shaped by gender? 2) What is the role of happiness and perfection in the bride's expectations of the contemporary wedding and the spaces in which the contemporary wedding exists? And, 3) how does retraditionalisation shape the formation of this contemporary wedding culture? In the next chapter, I outline my methodological framework that enables me to address these questions, and delineates the research process and my involvement in the research.



# Chapter 3.

## Method and Methodology: Assemblages, Messiness and Affect

### 3.1. Introduction

Where the previous chapter outlined the context of my research project by connecting wedding cultures with a postfeminist sensibility, this chapter provides the methodological framework. In this chapter, I frame my research field through ‘becoming’ and ‘the assemblage’. I then propose a conceptual feminist framework to make sense of digital ethnography and the researcher’s position within the field. This conceptual feminist framework draws on affect, distributed agency and rhythm to make sense of the movements of the research field. The methodological underpinning of this project draws on Deleuze and Guattari’s work, however, I specifically use feminist thinkers<sup>27</sup> who have employed Deleuze and Guattari to make sense of women’s lived experience in contemporary society (e.g. Coleman and Ringrose 2013). These writers used Deleuze and Guattari to enable complexity, movement and chaos in researching social life. Subsequently, I discuss my methods of data collection, which consisted of a more than 2 year-long digital ethnographic research project that was mainly focused on the Dutch wedding forum [www.trouwforum.nl](http://www.trouwforum.nl) [trans: [www.weddingforum.nl](http://www.weddingforum.nl)]. To supplement this data set I did a series of 18 interviews with brides I met online. Before I discuss my methodology and methods in detail, I start with a detailed account of the research context, Dutch wedding cultures. This sheds light on Dutch wedding traditions for readers who are unfamiliar with the Dutch context of this project.

### 3.2. Dutch Wedding Context

Dutch wedding cultures are part of a wider Western wedding tradition that is historically based on Christian traditions. Ingraham (2009) discussed how, for example, the act of accepting the husband’s name is a Christian tradition that positions the church as a site of patriarchal oppression. In the Dutch wedding context, this tradition changed radically in the 1970s. Women no longer changed their name through marriage. Women (or men) are only allowed to *use* their spouses’ name in daily life, but the official name (e.g. your name in the passport) does not change. This is a stark difference with the

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<sup>27</sup> For her book, *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed (2017) has made the choice to only draw from female thinkers. Although my research does not go as far as Ahmed (2017), my choice to draw from feminist thinkers in relation to the work of Deleuze and Guattari is a conscious decision to connect my work with a feminist inspired research trajectory.

custom in the UK where women do change their official name after marriage. Another change that happened around the same time was the abolishment of the title ‘Mejuffrouw’ [trans: Miss]. All women above the age of 18 are addressed as ‘Mevrouw’ [trans: Mrs], and girls and young women below that age are addressed by their first name followed by their surname. This change means that, like men, the title for women in public is not affected by her marital status.

Despite these differences, the broader Western tradition to wear a ‘classic’ white wedding gown is still popular in the Netherlands. An exception is brides from a strict orthodox Christian background who are not allowed to marry in white. The orthodox Christian tradition has a strong focus on the sins people commit during their life, and as the colour white represents innocence, wearing white on the wedding day is seen as inappropriate. Therefore, these brides usually wear dark coloured dresses such as purple, blue, red or grey. Though this tradition is not common in the Netherlands, one of the brides I have interviewed was from this background. I also grew up in an area where this tradition is quite normal, so my views on wedding dresses are shaped through this lens. I, therefore, do not see dark coloured wedding dresses as a form of rebellion against the white wedding dress (as may be the case elsewhere) but as part of a strict Christian tradition.

The Christian origin of wedding traditions in the Netherlands is also evident in the location of the church<sup>28</sup>. This is exemplified by the royal weddings the Netherlands has seen in the early 2000s, which all took place in a Christian Protestant church. The most important wedding was that between Prince Willem-Alexander and Maxima (now King Willem-Alexander and Queen Maxima) in 2002, in the Nieuwe Kerk [New Church] in Amsterdam. The centrality of the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam in relation to the Dutch royal traditions means the wedding had to take place in this church, and also meant that Maxima, who was Roman Catholic, could not marry in a church that fitted with her faith.

Despite the traditional custom of marrying in the church, all weddings must be held in front of the law to make them legal. This means that a wedding that is solely held at a religious institution is not legally valid. The so-called *burgelijk huwelijk* [civil marriage] must happen before the church (or other religious) wedding. In practical terms, this means that couples that chose to get married in a church (or another religious place) have two wedding ceremonies. Six out of the fifteen brides I interviewed also had a church wedding.

Another difference between Dutch and Anglo-American wedding ceremonies is the tradition of bridesmaids. Where Anglo-American weddings usually have two or more bridesmaids in (almost)

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<sup>28</sup> Carter and Duncan (2017) mentioned that the church wedding is still important but often more based on tradition than on religion.

identical dresses, as well as a best man, this is a custom that is not widely used in the Netherlands. When looking at Dutch celebrity weddings, bridesmaids are relatively rare. The recent 2016 wedding between Patty Brard, TV-personality and singer, and Antoine van de Vijver, architect, which was live broadcasted on television via SBS6, had several flower girls, but no bridesmaids (see illustration 10).

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#### Illustration 10: Wedding Patty Brard and Antione van der Vijver

This brings me to the custom of flower girls or page boys [trans: bruidsmisje or bruidsjongen], which is more common in the Netherlands. These children are usually quite young and are often family of the bride and groom, for example, their children or their niece(s)/nephew(s).

Another difference between Dutch and Anglo-American weddings is the moment the bride meets the groom. Where during Anglo-American weddings the bride and groom meet when they are at the altar and understand meeting each other before the ceremony as bad luck, in the Netherlands the bride and groom meet in the morning, usually at the house where the bride grew up. This tradition is fostered by the size of the country, which makes it possible to travel to the bride's house in a couple of hours. Traditionally, the groom picks up the bride from her parent's house where she is still living. However, as many couples co-habit before their wedding, the practicality of the tradition has changed, which means that the bride often goes back to her parent's house the evening before the wedding or early in the morning. The bridal ritual of getting dressed usually takes place at her parent's house.

A tradition that is typical for the Dutch wedding is that of the master of ceremony [trans: ceremoniemeester]. The function usually (but not always) involves a couple that is close to the bride and groom. The exact content of the duties differs, depending on the couples' wishes. The function

of the master of ceremony is similar to that of a wedding planner, however, the honour of being asked to plan a wedding is more in line with that of the maid of honour or the best man.

Having explored the traditions of Dutch wedding cultures that form the context of my research project, I now move to the methodological framework. This framework uses ‘becoming’ and the ‘assemblage’ to make sense of the research field. Subsequently, I propose a conceptual feminist framework for digital ethnography via the notions affect, rhythm and agency. These notions enabled me to complicate my position as a researcher, by rejecting the idea that the researcher is the orchestrator of the project, towards an understanding of the researcher as an equal part of the elements in the research assemblage.

### **3.3. Methodological Framework**

*‘A line of becoming is not defined by points it connects ... on the contrary,  
it passes between points, it comes through the middle’*

(Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 293)

Where the theoretical framework of my research mainly draws from a Foucauldian perspective, my methodological framework leans more towards a Deleuzian orientation. In the below, I provide a short outline of the way these different frameworks interact and why I believe combining Deleuze and Foucault can produce fruitful and innovative approaches to the research process.

Foucault was interested in the formation of the subject in interaction with social, cultural, political, historical and economic discourses. According to Foucault, these power structures should be understood as *productive*, constituting forces that create ‘truth, knowledge and ultimately the subject’ (Tamboukou 2013: 90). Or in Foucault’s words, power can ‘determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject’ (Foucault 1988: 18). However, Foucault’s understanding is that subjects are not merely dumb victims of social and cultural power relations. Rather, he explored how subjects become in interaction with the available discourses. This means that subjects can interact with different sets of discourses, which create different subject positions. This is theorised as ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault 1988). Building on Foucault’s work, Butler has stated that it is precisely the ongoing constitution of the subject that provides agency, so that ‘the subject is neither a ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain signifying process’ (1992: 13). A concrete example of this can be found in a woman’s choice to wear high heels or flat sneakers or move between both options, to a produce

different feminine subject position at different moments in time, even while the choice to wear shoes of some form is a social necessity (Dilley et al. 2015).

Concerning wedding cultures, we can see how consumer discourses are now centrally located, pushing away religious ideologies, even while they sometimes incorporate them. Consumer discourses provide brides and grooms with new possibilities. For example, couples now no longer have to get married in a church (or any other religious institution) but can ‘choose’ to have their wedding ceremony on an almost endless list of possible destinations, such as in a barn, a hot air balloon, or underwater in the surrounding of an exotic island. All these possibilities provide couples with options to produce a sense of authenticity, uniqueness and individuality speaking against traditional representations of the wedding. Nonetheless, all these options link back to consumer logics within neoliberal societies, and all require a certain financial capacity to engage in such ‘choice’.

Much of the literature on wedding cultures in the twenty-first century focuses on discourses of consumption and working on the self within neoliberal societies. These research projects draw on a Foucauldian understanding of the subject, by focussing on the way the social and cultural configurations shape the subject and how subjects use these configurations to produce their sense of self. Examples, as discussed in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, are Otnes and Pleck (2003) and Boden (2003), who focus on the centrality of consumption in the organisation and lived experience of the wedding. More recently, Smit (2016), has explored how discourses of consumption play out in South-African bridal reality TV. Smit (2016) discussed how ideologies of upwards mobility, taste and choice mark the bridal fantasy of perfection, rooting Black South-African bridal subjects deeply within postfeminist logic. Leonard (2018) equally connected the wedding imaginary with postfeminist notions of choice and working on the self through hedonistic pleasure. Additionally, Leonard (2018) outlined the affective layer that marks the bridal investment in the self, via for example notions of true love, finding the one and staying close to yourself.

In light of these Foucauldian-inspired accounts of postfeminist wedding cultures, this thesis also brings a Deleuzian approach to contemporary wedding cultures. I now move on to outline the location of a more Deleuzian inspired approach to my research process, and more specifically my motivation to combine both thinkers, despite the differences between them. Here I take the standpoint that Deleuze’s (and Guattari’s) work is not as different from Foucault’s as is often suggested.

Morar et al (2014) have outlined how both Deleuze and Foucault were interested in providing a non-theological idea of history. Equally, they shared an interest in activism. The work of both thinkers also aimed to rethink and reorganise structuralist concepts of organisation, moving away from top-down views to a more dispersed concept of power (Peter and Taglietti 2019). However, the

methods and concepts they used were quite different. Foucault, for example, used the notion of biopower to discuss and criticise political control over life itself, whilst Deleuze used societies of control, referring to post-disciplinary forms of control (Morar et al. 2004). Their mutual interest in similar topics and political questions is mirrored in their interaction, where they spoke and wrote about each other's work in positive terms and highlighted their work as complementary (Deleuze and Foucault 1977)<sup>29</sup>.

My motivation to combine a Foucauldian approach with the work of Deleuze is to provide more space for affect, emotions, materiality and the (material) body in the analysis of my data and my methodological account of the research process. Thus, I maintain that, although there are tensions – indeed, there are tensions within their own works, as their ideas changed and developed over time – I see these primarily as complimentary. Braidotti (1991) has argued that both Foucault and Deleuze have opened up the possibilities to add the body and the material to philosophical and political discussions, as ideas ‘exist in an in-between space caught in a network of material and symbolic conditions ... between theory and practice, and never in any one of these poles’ (Braidotti 1991: 126). However, in recent years it has been the work of Deleuze that has been picked up by feminist researchers to account for the messiness of everyday life, with a focus on affect and the material conditions. It is this body of work my research taps into, and aims to add to contemporary discussions on postfeminist wedding cultures.

The quote at the top of my methodological framework underscores the ontological view of my research project. Where classic research literature deemed a research project as a clear and linear narrative, my experience of the research was messy, chaotic and fluid. To account for this, I draw on a Deleuze and Guattarian framework, especially how their work has been picked up in feminist research. A good example is the edited collection from Coleman and Ringrose (2013) as it puts Deleuze (and Guattari's) work into action in relation to social issues. As part of this collection, Renold and Mellor used Deleuze and Guattari to develop a multi-sensory ethnographic research approach to map gendered bodies in a nursery setting (2013: 23). This framework is based on materiality, becoming and multiplicity, and enabled the researchers to analyse the experiences of participants whose discursive skills are low and whose movements seem to be without ‘social order’ (Renold and Mellor 2013: 23). Another example is Dyke (2013) who used Deleuze's ‘event’ to rethink the

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<sup>29</sup> During their lives Foucault and Deleuze had disagreement about their standpoint. In 1977 this escalated when Deleuze wrote a critique where he stated his differences with Foucault regarding desire. Shortly after reading this Foucault never spoke with Deleuze again. After Foucault's death, Deleuze wrote a book after Foucault's work and started lecturing about his ideas again (Peters and Taglietti 2019).

categorisation of the anorexic body. Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'the event' enabled Dyke to think about the elements of an event as 'relational and multiply connected to other concepts' (2013: 147). Although I propose a different methodological framework than Renold and Mellor (2013) and Dyke (2013), it is exactly this aspect of messiness and connectivity that lies at the basis of my methodology. To make sense of the movements in my research project, I use extracts from my research diary.

During my research, I kept a diary to make notes of the research progress, ideas that popped up, but mainly about my experiences of doing the research. It was only at the beginning that the diary had a technical function, for example, I wrote down the wedding blogs and forums I found and how popular they were. The diary also included a short list with translations of important wedding vocabulary, such as trail, veil and bow, as well as some designer names such as Pronovias and Lady Bird. After this initial procedure, I mainly used the research diary as a reflexive tool (see Janesick (1999) for a discussion on reflexivity and the research diary). In the diary, I discussed how I felt about my location in the online community in terms of doubt, frustration, joy and laughter. With this in mind, I discuss below how I use becoming and the assemblage to make sense of my research field, wedding cultures.

### **3.3.1. The Wedding Assemblage: Always Becoming**

To theorise the research field as a space of movement and constant change, I draw on becoming and the assemblage. I start with becoming as this captures the constant movements in the field that were essential to my research project. To understand Deleuze's becoming, I first have to explain difference, as difference breaks down the categories that define how we think about the world. Through Deleuze's difference, categories are no longer imagined in terms of sameness and difference, but *only* through differences (Stagoll 2005, Grosz 2005). A concrete example is the categories 'man' and 'woman'. From a perspective that focuses on both sameness and difference, man is the stable category at the centre of the world. Everything that is similar to this category is put under it – all men, whilst everything that is different is located away from it, all women (Grosz 2005). Deleuze provided a different view by shifting the focus from what *is*, to what *becomes* (Colebrook 2002). A focus on becoming unsettles the stable categories and emphasises the differences between things, therefore 'difference is not reducible to things insofar as it is the process that produces things' (Grosz 2005: 6). This means that difference is not how we define things, e.g. a woman is a woman, because she is not a man, rather difference is how we become. We are constantly moving, changing, and morphing through becoming so we can never be put in a category as both the object and the category will never

be the same. Becoming, therefore, positively affirms difference as it enables a constant process of transformation (Braidotti 1994).

To think about the possibilities of becoming, Deleuze and Guattari (2013) discussed becoming-woman as the ultimate site and starting point of becoming. They focused on the possibilities of woman as an open identity category, rather than the order, norm, and law that is presented through the image of man: the 'dead heart of the system' (Braidotti 2002: 49). In thinking through the concept of becoming-woman, Braidotti (2002) does not refer to empirical men and women, but to a symbolic image of man and woman, where the image of man presents all that is, and connects everything to this order and ideal. The connection to the order hinders free movements, so that to allow for change we need to move away from the stable image of man towards an open identity category – the image of becoming-woman.

This image of becoming-woman is not based on specific characteristics and visions, but is open to any form of becoming as it is not yet claimed and therefore outside of the system of law and order (Colebrook 2002, Braidotti 2002). So we will 'no longer think about a world that *is* ... but a world of difference and becoming, with no point of that difference being privileged over the other' (Colebrook 2002: 140 emphasis in original). This means that the image of becoming-woman is a space of constant possibilities and openness. Although, I do believe that this image is useful to think about the source of becoming, as all becoming needs to move through becoming-woman (Braidotti 2002). In my research, I am not focused on this void of meaning that is the source of becoming, but on the *process* of becoming as a metaphor for the movements in my research field.

To illustrate becoming, Deleuze and Guattari (2013) used the wasp and orchid as a metaphor. They explored how both species are connected in the way they imitate the other in a constant process of transformation, including the way they both supplement each other. Deleuze and Guattari (2013) discussed this as the orchid becoming-wasp and the wasp becoming-orchid; 'the orchid does not reproduce the tracing of the wasp; it forms a map with the wasp' (2013: 12). The process of becoming-orchid and becoming-wasp highlights how both species are connected in a constant process of creating something new. It is the metaphor of the wasp-orchid-becoming as a connection of something new that is essential for my research project. I see all the research elements such as researcher, topic, wedding forum, interview methods, wedding objects, as connected. Together they produce something new out of their interaction that occurred during the research process.

To further conceptualise becoming, I discuss the molar and the molecular, as these notions enabled me to think about the power movements and changes both at the level of the macro and the micro. The molar is the dominant ideas and movements in any given society: the regimes of power.



The molecular, on the other, hand are ‘the little cracks’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2013: 189) or ‘imperceptible ruptures’ in the social order (Coleman and Ringrose 2013: 5). For Deleuze and Guattari (1984 and 2013) the interaction of both flows makes becoming possible, as the molecular constantly disrupts the formation of stable categories as part of the molar. These changes result in constant shifts to create new possibilities and changes (Deleuze and Guattari 2013). The constant stream of changes that create a flow of becoming is theorised through deterritorialisation. Deterritorialisation is ‘a coming undone’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1984: 233), as it changes the power relations to open up for new possibilities. The deterritorialisation then is reclaimed again by other molar structures so that it is reterritorialises again (Parr 2005).

Based on the literature review we can see how deterritorialisation and reterritorialization work in the changes of the social position of the wedding. Where historically the wedding was essential for a young couple to be able to live together as adults, have a sex life and start a family, this view has more recently been deterritorialised under the influence of feminist movement, gay rights activism and the changing position of the church. These flows in the assemblage critiqued the position of the wedding and its location in the patriarchal structure. The 21<sup>st</sup> century then reterritorialises the wedding again, and as I have shown this reterritorialisation (or retraditionalisation) is deeply indebted to a postfeminist sensibility (see for example McRobbie 2009, Heise 2012, Smit 2016).

To think about a ‘space’ where all these changes take place, I draw on a second Deleuzian notion in my methodological framework: the assemblage. The assemblage is characterised as a system of connections based on heterogeneity, with the connection between these points being flat and in a non-hierarchical order (Deleuze and Guattari 2013: 8). Bennett (2010) also drew from Deleuze and Guattari’s theorisation of the assemblage. For Bennett, the assemblage is an ad hoc combination of different elements which are unevenly distributed as some elements ‘are more heavily trafficked than others, and so the power is not equally distributed across the surface’ (2010: 24). This, however, does not mean that one of the elements is the head of the assemblage that guides us to other elements, but all the different elements generate movement and change in the assemblage so that the assemblage can be accessed at any point. An assemblage is, therefore, never ‘a solid block, but an open-ended collective’ (Bennett 2010: 24). Bennett (2010) used electricity networks as a working example of the assemblage, as electricity moves across the grid and in some places the flows of electricity are more intense than in others. However, the electricity can move freely between the grid and it does not have a ‘headquarters’ that guides the movement of electricity through the grid.

Connecting assemblage with becoming enables me to think about the different research elements as a flat and non-hierarchical network of becoming. This means that I do not see myself as the organiser at the head of the research project, but merely as one element that is heavily trafficked. It is the interaction between me and all the other elements that resulted in this thesis.

I am aware of the problematic implications of research as a site of multiplicities that is marked by flatness and non-hierarchical connection (Deleuze and Guattari 2013: 8). It removes issues of privilege from the discussion, as privilege creates a hierarchical order within a flat space. As a feminist researcher, I have to account for the privileged position I am speaking from. I am a white, middle class woman in a heterosexual relationship and I am also the author of the research. This gives me a great deal of power over the research output and the way I represent the brides who voluntarily took part in my research. Although my position as a researcher was just one of the many elements in the assemblage, and other elements such as the work of other academics in the field, the feedback I received on drafts, and so forth, are all part of my becoming, ultimately the project is mine. It is my name printed on the cover, and it is written and performed in a society that (still) values the Enlightenment notions of authorship, originality and individual property. It is, however, not the aim of this research to debunk these assumptions. Rather, I take the available space to think about my research as fluid, moving and constantly becoming via the conceptual feminist framework I outline below.

### **3.3.2. Affect, Rhythm and Agency**

In the above, I have theorised my research field based on becoming and the assemblage. As became apparent in the previous section, this research draws on movement and fluidity to understand both the researcher's location within the field and postfeminist wedding cultures. Before I move on to outline my conceptual feminist framework, I first locate my research within the broader history of feminist research and feminist methodologies. Here, it is not my intention to provide a full description of feminist methodology, but to outline its history and to locate this project within the broader feminist literature.

I start this context by providing a short overview of the Enlightenment period and how this has shaped feminist thought. The Enlightenment is marked by modernist and humanist beliefs<sup>30</sup> that

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<sup>30</sup> I am aware of the complicated and rather extensive literature around these terms, but following Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) I only focus on the aspects that are of direct relevance for feminist methodology: 'we merely pull out some factors in approaches to claiming knowledge of social life that have subsequently both influenced feminist methodology and became a focus for feminist resistance' (2002: p. 29).

assume reason provides the path to human freedom and autonomy, creating the human project of progress and liberty (Lather 1991, Peters 1996, St Pierre 2000). This grand narrative is universal and is supposed to capture all social life and transgresses historical and geographical boundaries. It uncritically took men as the primary object of knowledge and assumed the existence of a rational and unified self. The Enlightenment also depicted reason and science as the provider of objective, stable, reliable and universal foundations for knowledge (Foucault 1973: p. xi, St. Pierre 2000). Drawing on historically constructed binaries, the Enlightenment understood the power of reason as a male construct, positioning women away from reason, along with other binary constructs (e.g. mind/body, thought/feeling) (Harding 1987, Haraway 1988). The idea that the voice of science is masculine and that history is written from a male perspective has been of paramount importance to feminists interested in creating new knowledge, who have tried to outline that the voice of reason is not neutral, but androcentric (Harding 1987).

Despite the feminist critique of Enlightenment thinking, two concepts emerging from such thought have been bedrocks of feminism: humanism and modernism. Much of the feminist project<sup>31</sup> relies on a metanarrative of patriarchy rendering all aspects of life as affected by male dominance over women. It also depicts subjects as free agents of will and choice that can provide the potential to end domination and open up the road for emancipation and equality. Such notions are rooted in the belief that a stable homogenous category of ‘woman’ exists (Butler 1990). It was exactly this belief that sparked a significant debate within feminist politics, in which many questioned the assumptions of ‘women’ as a stable category and argued that this wipes out differences between women based on class, race, ethnicity, religious, abilities and so forth (Crenshaw 1990, Nash 2008). An example of this debate can be found in bell hooks’ (2000) writing:

‘white women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women’s reality is true to the lived experience of women as a collective group. Nor are they aware of the extent to which their perspectives reflect race and class biases ... Racism abounds in the writings of white feminists, reinforcing white supremacy and negating the possibility that women will bond politically across ethnic and racial boundaries’ (hooks 2000: 3).

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<sup>31</sup> This is an overgeneralisation, however, since there are many different forms of feminism, leading many to prefer the term ‘feminisms’ (Kemp & Squires 1997).

The critique of the stable category of women, and the implication that its primary subject was the white, middle class, heterosexual woman, demanded that feminism search for new possibilities to account for the diversity of women's experiences.

This critique was part of a broader debate that is discussed under a variety of terms, such as postmodernism, poststructuralism as well as the crisis of representation. It is not my aim to give a detailed account of these movements and their differences, rather I swiftly touch upon the way it affected feminist thinking and social inquiry.

Poststructuralism arose out of, and through the critique of, the Enlightenment, humanism and structuralism, to understand the theoretical motivations of these constructs as well as to understand what they excluded and foreclosed (Butler 1992, St. Pierre and Pillow 1999). It did this by questioning the difference between the subject and the object, the neutrality of language, the belief in progress and the existence of metanarrative (Lather 1991 and 1993, Butler 1992, St. Pierre and Pillow 1999). In understanding the creation of knowledge or truth, or more specifically the act of doing research (since research is the production of knowledge), this means that the attention shifted from 'representing things in themselves to representing the web of' meaning creation in social relation, as the fixed categories of life were no longer deemed an absolute truth (Lather 1993: 675)

For feminist researchers, this had a massive impact as poststructuralism shook the foundations of feminist politics by questioning the social realities of patriarchy, oppression and emancipation (Lather 1991 and 1993, Petersen 2014). In response to this Hartsock summarised her concern as follows: 'why is it that just at the moment that so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood become problematic' (1990: 163). Via Foucault, poststructuralism encourages women to ask a different question, moving away from the idea that power is possessed by a person or group, and moving towards an understanding of power as diffused, shaping men and women into different subject positions. This view has been used to shape the development of a feminist standpoint theory that rethinks central issues within feminist politics, including the idea that feminist research should pay attention to the differences between women in their different social and cultural locations.

Feminist standpoint arose as a significant area of debate to connect women's lived experiences with knowledge (Hill Collins 1986, Pheonix 2006). It also arose as an answer to 'the greasy pole'. In Haraway (1991) discussion of the greasy pole, she argued that all feminist research that aimed to provide an account of women's life was slipping between, on the one hand, the desire to produce absolute truth, and, on the other, a depiction of truth as fully socially constructed and

located within a particular situation. The problem of the first approach is that it relies on a connection between knowledge and what can be seen in the outside reality (Haraway 1991: 193). For feminists, this standpoint is problematic as it assumes objectivity of knowledge which they already contested as impossible due to its androcentric heritage. The second approach is equally problematic, as the connection between knowledge, the knower and any external reality is erased, so that no generally valid knowledge can be produced (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002: 64-65).

To tackle this problem, feminist standpoint<sup>32</sup> does not aim to research the connection between knowledge and reality, but the connection between knowledge and power, to highlight how theory and politics are intertwined (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). Haraway (1988) critiqued the god's eye view or impartial knowledge when she outlined how technology creates the illusion to see and observe as if one is outside society. Here she referred to images of outer space that come to us as beautifully coloured, creating the impression that we have transcended the human body and its limitations. This does not only disconnect knowledge from a specific location but also from our bodies. Haraway called this infinite view 'an illusion, a god trick' (1988: 582). Against this impartial view, she argued that we need to address the embodied locations from which knowledge is produced, or as she puts it '[w]e need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meanings and bodies' (Haraway 1988: 580). Bringing attention to our embodied and partial location allows us to negotiate the greasy pole by connecting knowledge to a specific location. As part of this, Haraway (1988), but also for example hooks (2000), Hill Collins (1986) Hartsock (1983b) and Harding (1987), argued that feminist standpoint makes it possible to research subordinated social locations and bringing to the fore different experiences and problems. Hartsock (1983b) linked this to Marxist theory, and argued that women can provide a different view of the patriarchal system in the same way that workers can provide a different view on capitalism.

Standpoint theory is not without significant problems. As part of the hope to research less advantaged social positions, Haraway (1988) warned researchers not to romanticise inequality, or claim to see from a position of less power. Feminist standpoint theory risk that an 'all knowing' (white and middle class) feminist researcher creates knowledge and speaks for (and about) less advantaged women and their cultural and social location (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). Another problem from feminist standpoint theory is that it takes experience as the basepoint of knowledge, meaning

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<sup>32</sup> I am aware that this is only one of the many proposed feminist standpoint theories (see for example Nancy Hartsock 1983a and 1983b, Smith 1974 and 1988) who all have slightly different implications and philosophical backgrounds, however this is not the space for diving into the difference between these theories, but rather to give an overview of the development of feminist theory.

that experience is understood as the ultimate medium to make sense of social life (Skeggs 1995). This would reinforce what feminism already aimed to abandon, namely the idea of an ultimate truth, which is no longer found in an external reality, but through experience (Skeggs 1995). Instead, experience should be theorised as never fully authentic, but constructed through the discourses of its social location (McNay 1999b).

The influence of poststructuralism on feminist work also has consequences for my research and how I frame 'bride' and 'woman'. Here, I follow Butler's (1992: 15-16) view that despite the difficulties in defining the category of 'woman', this does not reduce its political possibilities. It is a word that is fractured and fluid, but is necessary to remain in the realms of intelligibility. In relation to my research project, this means that I do not aim to produce a clear-cut definition of the bride or woman within a postfeminist wedding landscape. The categories of bride and woman are used, but only because we need a language to articulate them. In this thesis, I trace how these subject positions are constantly being produced and reproduced within contemporary postfeminist wedding cultures. This means that I take the knowledge that is produced within this thesis as partial and situated, based on my subject positions, as well as through the scope of this research which focuses on white, predominantly middle class, Dutch, young and first-time brides. Also, I do not take myself as an all-knowing agent, but as part of the research assemblage, being shaped and reshaped by my experiences around my wedding and the research itself.

However, although my research is loosely inspired by feminist standpoint, as it subscribes to what Haraway called 'situated and embodied knowledge' (1988: 583), it does come from an understanding of research and the subject as more fluid, where will, choice and agency are not confined to the subject but move freely within the research assemblage. I do this by drawing on affect, rhythm and agency. Affect enabled me to theorise the movements in the assemblage and how they created the affective textures that produced my research process, so for example how affect has shaped my feeling of belonging to the forum community. I also discuss the difference between affect and emotions and how I needed this to make sense of my research diary entries. Subsequently, I move on to distributed agency, which enabled me to rethink my position as a researcher. In this section I propose that the researcher's agency to reflect on their position in the research needs to be pushed further to account for an agency that is not rooted in the individual, but as free-floating between the different elements of the assemblage. Lastly, I focus on rhythms. Rhythm allowed me to pay attention to the movements in the research field and created a connection between the different research elements as the rhythmic tune resonates between them. Although I discuss affect, distributed agency and rhythm separately, they are connected. For example, rhythm enabled me to frame the flows that

distributed the agency through the network, such as the algorithms. Affect then made it possible for me to think about how entering and being part of these rhythms created different affective textures during different points of the research process. I turn to each of these ideas below.

### *Affect*

One of the elements of the assemblage is the constant flow of becoming. To understand this flow of becoming I move to the first element of my feminist conceptual framework: affect. Deleuze and Guattari (2013) theorised affect by emphasising the connection between language, art and the everyday life. From their perspective, language and representation enable us to make sense of everyday life without questioning what happens. Thus, language simplifies our lives by creating generalisations, for example, my white wedding was expensive, so all white weddings must be really expensive. This mechanism stops the process of becoming as the category 'white wedding' becomes fixed and stable (Colebrook 2002: 16-17). According to Deleuze and Guattari (2013), it is the task of arts to break down these stable categories by pushing beyond the realm of representation. Art should enable us to rethink our perspective on the world, for example, an art project that subverts the meaning and social implications of the wedding. When art does this, the stable categories of language and how we understand the world, for example, white weddings are expensive, are disconnected. This would provide art with the power to leave you speechless, as it is from this moment of speechlessness that new possibilities emerge as the connection between white weddings and expense are broken. This means that the value of art is not located in the content of the piece, but in its affect, 'the sensible force or style through which it produces content' (Colebrook 2002: 24).

Affect has become a relatively popular concept in the humanities and social sciences, and this interest is broadly discussed as the 'turn to affect' (Clough and Halley 2007, Clough 2007, Papoulias and Callard 2010, Wetherell 2012). However, this turn to affect is not homogenous, but includes a wide range of ideas on 'affect' (see Seigworth and Gregg 2010, for a discussion on the different turns to affect). Researchers across the field of affect studies have picked up affect in a variety of ways and have discussed how it can be understood as a force, an emotion, a movement, a sensation, and intensity, or something beyond emotions (see for example Gregg and Seigworth 2010, Wetherell 2012, Blackman 2012, Paasonen et al. 2015, Massumi 2002, 2015). Paasonen et al. stated that 'each of these turns extends the theoretical investigations to the embodied, the sensory, and the lively in ways that question the anthropocentrism of earlier intellection inquiry' (2015: 4).

An example of some of the work using affect is Stewart's (2007) that focused on the everyday life and how it is felt and experienced. For her affect is part of our everyday lives, shaping its

sensations, intensities and textures. Stewart's (2007) explanation is quite different from that of Deleuze and Guattari as they positioned affect outside of the everyday and in the realm of art. Stewart (2007) is not the only one who used affect to make sense of everyday experiences. Jensen and Ringrose (2014) used affect to make sense of the online discussions on the reality television programme *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* (2010-2015). Jensen and Ringrose used a psychosocial approach to explore the 'transmissions and flows of 'affect'' (2014: 5). This enabled Jensen and Ringrose to rethink the media effect model, proposing a model of relational affect that focuses on the connection between 'subjectivities, affective communities and assemblages of networked meaning' (2014: 5). The meaning of a text is therefore not fixed, but produced in an affective interaction between different elements. A similar approach is taken in Cho's (2015) use of affect, who focused on its relation to becoming, using affect to make sense of the structure of Tumblr. According to Cho (2015), the structure should be understood as affective as the structure becomes through the affective connections between the posts and links, rather than on the connections in terms of content.

To think about the ways affect has structured my research, I discuss this in relation to my affective connection with the wedding space. Although the content of the forum did not change significantly through my time online, my affective connection with the space did. Where my presence was first marked by feelings of insecurity and anxiety, I moved to a more confident relationship with the forum community as the time moved on. My research diary entries move from narrating a fear of not knowing enough, to me providing advice on the forum about making save-the-date cards and finding ways to save money. This change is also evident in entries where I described my feelings of being online. Where earlier posts mainly talked about feelings of uneasiness of going online, later entries discussed my presence in much more positive terms, such as looking forward to discussions, longing for updates, proud of knowing the answer to a tricky question, and the compulsion at times when I kept checking for updates, sometimes late into the evening. These diary entries show how my affective connection with the forum was part of the textures of the everyday research process.

The research projects I discussed above, including my own, are merely a snippet of the many projects that have used affect, and they demonstrate that Deleuze and Guattari's (2013) concept of affect has been taken up differently across the field of media and social studies. My understanding of affect is not solely guided by Deleuze and Guattari's interpretation, but also how affect is picked up by others to make sense of people's lived experience and their engagement with the media. This is evident in the overview of my research diary entries, where I see affect as part of the textures of the research process. My view on affect also highlights that my research is not located in art, but in the extraordinary everyday experience of the wedding. Therefore, a broader application of affect is more



appropriate for my research. I do borrow from Deleuze and Guattari's (2013) idea that affect is not about a focus on the object, but about the sensing forces that produce the content. For the diary entries, this means that the focus is not on the forum itself, but on the *forces* that shaped my presence on the forum and the kind of posts I published. The emphasis on forces moves our attention away from language towards the embodied, visceral and sensing experience of life (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, Paasonen et al 2015: 4). This turns the body into a site of knowledge production that questions Enlightenment discourses that sees the mind as the sole site of knowledge production (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, Blackman 2012). When reading back the initial diary entries, I can sense my discomfort at that time, even up until the point that I would rather not read some parts of my research diary, as reading it now reawakens that discomfort.

The focus on the body means that affect is often discussed as beyond emotions, as affect refers to the bodily sensation that goes beyond language, whilst emotions are associated with the cognitive, conscious and the discursive (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, Massumi 2002 and 2015). However, discussing affect as beyond language and emotions discredits much valuable empirical research that is (mostly) undertaken via language (Knudsen and Stage 2015, Paasonen et al. 2015: 15). I believe, however, that these empirical discussions provide us with an idea of how the textures, intensities and movements of our lives are formed through affect and how this shapes the way we understand ourselves (see for example Stewart 2007). When looking at my research diary, it is this combination of affect and emotions that makes them understandable and researchable, as although I can say I feel awkward reading some entries, it is hard to communicate these feeling without using language. Removing ourselves from language and denying an interest in representation makes it hard to understand affect in relation to the power relations that shape our society (Tyler et al. 2008). Others have argued that a focus on affect as purely embodied reaffirms the boundaries between the mind and the body, doing nothing more than swinging the focus from purely the mind to purely the body (see for Wetherell 2012 for a discussion on the risk to privilege the body over the mind).

Kolvraa's (2015) explanation about the connection between affect and emotions enabled me to give a concrete solution for this critique. Kolvraa (2015) discussed affect as the movement that discourse creates, whereas emotions are how affect is translated differently between different bodies and situations. This positions emotions in the realm of representation and politics, but keeps the connection with affect intact. Kolvraa (2015) used far-right politics as an example. He argued that hate speech causes the audience to be affected and moved by the speech, however, the emotions that are experienced differ per individual, ranging from anger to disbelief to enthusiasm, relief and adoration. Looking at my research diary I translate the affective textures of the research practice

differently depending on the moments, by discussing them in terms of awkwardness, anxiousness, pride and longing.

### *Distributing Agency*

Having discussed the affective textures of my research practice on the forum, I move on to discuss my position as a researcher and as part of the non-hierarchical research assemblage. To theorise this, I propose a methodological use of distributed agency. Ringrose and Coleman (2013) and Renold and Ringrose (2017) already used distributed agency to rethink how, for example, posting sexy selfies online is not merely a way to express one's sexual agency, but how the agency is distributed across the network through the act of tagging. The agency is therefore no longer owned by a subject and contained within her body, but part of a wider network where it moves between bodies. Thinking about agency as distributed through a network enabled me to relocate the researcher's agency within the assemblage whilst performing ethnographic research.

In the classic ethnography, the researcher is understood as the all-knowing orchestrator through notions of distance, objectivity, and control (see Lather 1991 for a full account and feminist critique). As discussed earlier in this chapter, feminist thinkers in the 1980s challenged this idea, often complicating it through feminist standpoint theory. These theories often presented agency beyond the human (e.g. Haraway, 1988). But the uptake in sociological research has been limited to humanist concepts that suggest that the researcher reflects on their subjectivity, so that the researcher emerges as more conscious and agentic point-of-view than the context's other agents (see Pillow 2003 for a thorough critique). Instead, I suggest that standpoint theory needs to move its attention away from the researcher towards the research assemblage, so that the agency is not a character of the researcher, but floating through the assemblage.

The metaphor of research as an assemblage means that concepts that have been significant in feminist research (e.g. agency, free will, desire, and other ontologically humanist constructs) are not 'interior' – located in the body – but instead move through the assemblage, "...just like weapons' (Deleuze and Guattari 2013: 400)... branching, reversing flows, coalescing and rupturing' (Fox and Alldred 2013: 5). Agency, therefore, is not located in one element of the structure, for example, the researcher, but moves through the assemblage, not owned by any of the individual parts.

Constant movements and the connections between 'researcher-participants-context' mark my research on postfeminist wedding cultures. The interaction was intensified by my subject position as

a bride throughout the research<sup>33</sup>. This position of bride-to-be, bride, married woman and wedding researcher were ever-pervasive during the research process and in the organisation of the wedding, even in seemingly meaningless movements, for example, observations realised on trains and in shops, posted or tweeted in a moment. Movement was also evident in the spaces between different technologies, where for instance discussions around the hiring of the venue took place during ‘research time’ at the university computer or late at night on the sofa via my smartphone. These movements established and re-established connections between different wedding spaces, its visitors, and myself. None of these moments or connections was ever simply ‘owned’ by me. When I entered or ‘plugged into’ the field of wedding cultures, new connections between the elements were formed (and re-formed) that together created a research field that was non-static and always in movement (Coleman and Ringrose 2013, Jackson and Mazzei 2012: 1).

A concrete example of this has been my interaction with the online platform Pinterest. This is a space where members create Pinboards with Pins or pictures of things they like, or want to remember. Pinterest boards are a working example of an assemblage (Good 2012). Algorithms create flows on Pinterest based on the clicks of all participants in this space. When I started using Pinterest for both my research and my wedding, the wave of algorithms provided me with a range of photos that guided my clicking behaviour within the space. My clicks, which were directed towards weddings, were part of the flow of Pins that enabled me to find more and more (and more!) wedding images. Through my clicks, I was absorbed by the flow of images that was guided by the algorithms of the site, which were based on the clicks of unknown fingers before and after me. I also added my behaviour to the stream of clicks, moving with the stream, against it, adding to it, and altering it.

My focus on wedding dresses during my initial search on the platform threw up wedding dresses: in this moment, the agentic flow was (more or less) *experienced* as one-directional (if shaped by the available images within the assemblage). However, a different search - say for wedding flowers - takes time, working through the field, albeit without knowing how the field and algorithms worked, to steadily fuse the stream of wedding flowers into the stream of wedding dresses. At the end of my 2 year-long ethnography, my Pinterest board<sup>34</sup> had turned into an eclectic mix of pictures that were

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<sup>33</sup> As outlined in the introduction, I do account for my position in the research as both a researcher and as a bride-to-be. In the second part of my methodology chapter, I also discuss how this position affected my presence in the online space. Although, I am aware of the research field of auto-ethnography (see for example Ellis and Bochner 2000 and Ellis 2004 for an account of auto-ethnographic research), I do not propose an auto-ethnographic method for this study as my experiences as a bride-to-be are not the object of my research, but merely inform and shape my research practice and my relationship with the brides, for example, the brides gave me advice for my wedding during the interviews.

<sup>34</sup> My Pinterest board is available via <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/broekhuf/wedding-inspiration/>.

not the sole result of a conscious and knowing engagement with the online space. Instead, these boards came to be through ‘plugging into’ the Pinterest assemblage, formed and reformed constantly by different elements - flesh (the human finger clicking on the mouse/screen), robotic (the mathematic rhythms), and matter (the hardware of the computer that makes it possible to engage with the space in the first place). The production of the field and the knowledge that is produced in this field can, therefore, not simply be understood through the reflexive practice of the agentic researcher, but is also produced through, for example, the algorithms that form the research assemblage.

### *Rhythm*

The algorithms that shaped my movements through Pins and Pinterest boards were not the only rhythms that shaped my research. The assemblage is always in movement and never a solid block (Bennett 2010: 24). To make sense of these movements I have used rhythms. For McCormack (2002) rhythms animate the space with movement and connect the space with the bodies and other elements within the space. To make his example concrete, he discussed how in sports we become one with the space, the ball, the audience and the game and how this guides our bodily movements through the space. Rhythm enabled me to shift the attention from the event and towards the movements that form the event, and how these movements resonate between the different elements: how the rhythms create my research process.

For Henriques et al. (2014), rhythms can be used as a methodological tool for making sense of the patterns, structures and configurations of events or phenomena. These rhythms are cyclical movements that structure the experience or the phenomena (Lefebvre 2013). To analyse rhythms, Lefebvre argued that we first need to become aware of the rhythms, as though rhythms are part of all of us and connect us to the world, this does not mean that the rhythm ‘enters into the known’ (2013: 86). This means that although rhythms shape our lives, we are not always aware of the way rhythms form our daily lives, as it feels so normal for us to be in these rhythmic flows. So, to research these flows, we have to step out of them. For me, the reflexive practice of the research diary helped me to become aware of the rhythms that shaped my research process, and time gave me the distance to see them as rhythms, rather than merely flowing with them. When looking at the discussions on the forum, especially the Trouwen 2015 topic [trans: Wedding 2015], it was only when I read through the whole topic again, a year after I had left the space, that I was able to see how the rhythmic movements of time altered the discussions from a longing to the wedding, anxiety of the planning, to excitement about the upcoming day. Henriques et al. (2014) also claimed that rhythms work as an organising structure that manages subjects collectively by creating rhythmic flow in time and space.

Affirmation to these rhythms is carried out via ‘an affective charge, conveying meaning as feeling and tone, rather than logic or information’ (Henriques et al. 2014: 4). This means that moving with rhythms *feels* good, rather than that we have made a conscious decision to do so. These rhythms, however, are always disruptive and never work completely smoothly (Henriques et al. 2014: 5). In similar vein McCormack (2002) argued that rhythms are open-ended, shaping the movements within a space without exact repetitions. Looking at how the rhythmic flows of the forum affected the brides’ experiences, it was clear that a similar feeling resonated across the forum, connecting the different bridal bodies. Of course, these rhythms that connected the individuals with the social were not fully closed, as the brides also discussed how relaxed and secure they felt about their wedding amidst feelings of stress and anxiety.

Moving this theoretical understanding of rhythms to wedding cultures, we can see how certain elements are repeating throughout the wedding like a beat. In *Chapter 2: Wedding Cultures*, I referred to Engstorm (2003, 2008) and her discussion on central wedding rituals such as signing documents, exchanging vows and kissing the bride. These elements also reoccur in the seemingly controversial ceremonies like Sophie Tanner, who wed herself in 2016. The wedding ceremony that was aired via different media showed how Sophie signed wedding documents, promised to love herself and look after herself in good and bad times and she even ‘kissed’ herself in an ‘embrace’. A Google or Pinterest search for weddings also throws up predictable habits in the representations of wedding imagery, for example of the heterosexual, happy, white, middle-class couple. These rhythms, however, are not closed but open up for new beats, for example, in the UK and elsewhere, the legalisation of lesbian and gay marriages. However, these beats are folded into the rhythmic pattern, for example in the way that they end up absorbing gay marriage into the rhythm of heteronormativity.

Rhythms are not only useful to think about the changes and presence in my research field, but also allowed me to think about my research practice. Below I discuss an extract from my research diary.

*“What I actually planned to do this afternoon, namely making the PowerPoint of my conference article next week, simply didn’t happen! Instead, I literally spend 3 hours on Pinterest looking for wedding dresses :0! The reason I went on to Pinterest was actually very noble, I needed some nice and beautiful photos of weddings for my conference article presentation, but when I got online I found a really, really nice dress of Rosa Clara (...) I actually still needed to find some photos of wedding dresses I like and I really liked this one.*

*\*\*\* So what happened next was that I spend the rest of the afternoon clicking like an idiot on the World Wide Web, first only Pinterest, but before I knew it I was everywhere, looking for dresses. There were sooo many nice and beautiful dresses that I hardly could find the patience to click on one photo at the time. And before I knew it the hours past and I had a whole folder filled with saved images of dresses. Good thing is that I now have some ideas for my dress, bad thing is that I only have one photo for my conference presentation yet - the photo that lured me into this as the opening's photo. Good thing is that I was not the only one loving this photo as it already has more than a 100 repins now :D"*

*(Research diary 25-07-2014)*

The extract narrates my experience of movement and temporality within wedding cultures, where the rhythm of dead clock time is lost to the pleasures of the click. The experience of online rhythmic movements was felt as smooth and endless via the hyperlink structures, as I followed the different traces of wedding dresses. Lefebvre (2013) argued that people become immersed in rhythms to the extent that it takes us over and we become unaware of the way they guide our actions. The movements between the spaces were never disrupted by clear changes or anchor points in time; rather the movement ran for an unknown number of hours to an unknown number of spaces. The experience of time seemed flat and undisturbed, creating engagement with the space that is deeply affective and connected (Thrift 2007). Moreover, while my research practice has been partly prescribed by the structures of the internet, its pathways and roots are unlikely to be repeated in the same way. The structures of the internet are formed by other users clicking and following the content, as well as the infrastructure and interfaces of these websites. All these elements have created the rhythm and guide the experience of the moment, so that the social rhythms and the individual are connected (Lefebvre 2013).

The research diary extract shows that my research practice was enacted through the rhythms of online engagement, which took over the research process. My attention moved away from the original research-related and goal-oriented project, so that my plans of making a PowerPoint presentation for a conference ended up being an afternoon spent on looking for wedding dresses and bridal images.

Below, I analyse this extract via what I call a form of 'feminine distraction'. This term enabled me to link the rhythmic flows of the research with gender politics. This extract gives the space to frame this experience as a form of distraction where my engagement with the wedding dress images became more important than the serious academic endeavour of conference paper writing.

However, I challenge this: to discount the bodily experiences of the female researcher servers to reinforce masculinist notions of academia and trivialises feminine experience. The notion of attention and the ruling of the mind over the body are important features of rationality in modern thought (Braidotti 2006, Thrift 2007). Historically, the capacity for attention and the ruling powers of the mind was linked to male bourgeoisie, whereas bodily led responses, suggestibility and distraction were more associated with women, children and working class (Blackman 2012). Distraction and inattention (we could add here intuition, see Coleman 2008b) are understood as less valuable ways of engaging in research, in contrast to the knowing mind that can direct its attention accordingly. Instead, I argue that all research practice is a rhythmic movement where our attention shifts and moves between the different elements of the assemblage. The kinds of flows one follows are framed through gendered discourses that deem the flow of one rhythm as paying attention and being focused, whilst the flow of another rhythm is understood as a distraction.

The above has demonstrated how rhythm makes it possible to understand how vibrations move between bodies, spaces and phenomena, creating a connection between these elements, e.g. the research, the wedding, the infrastructure of the space, my body (McCormack 2002, Thrift 2007). It means not prioritizing the position of the researcher or their experience at the expense of the field, but instead demonstrates the distributed, permeable and chaotic scene of research. A more holistic methodology means an immersion with the field that enables the researcher to become one with the field. This connection happens via the affective connection between the subject and its environment, so that the researcher becomes imbedded in the rhythms of the research space.

This approach enabled me to think about the research context as a rhythmic and temporal connection that engenders affective bodily experience. In my research diary, I make discursively knowable my frustration at broken links, the subjective effects of engaging with the online forum community, including belonging, rejection, and desire, and the embodied moments of online interaction: even in the mundanity of the tired eyes and an aching back, or in the multitasking between different devices and tasks as on and offline worlds become one (Hine 2015, Pink et al. 2015).

My discussion on affect, distributed agency and rhythm provide me with a conceptual framework to think about my digital ethnography through a feminist lens, and complicated my voice as a feminist researcher. In the below, I move on to discuss the more practical implication of my research by outlining my data collection: digital ethnography and interviews. I also use this space to reflect more on my research practice and location in the bridal community.

### 3.4. Digital Ethnography

To research how the brides made sense of themselves in contemporary postfeminist wedding cultures, I have used digital ethnography as one of my two methods of data collection. Before I move on with an outline of digital ethnography, I first discuss my choice<sup>35</sup> to do an ethnographic research project. It is not my aim to provide a full and comprehensive definition of ethnography as its long and diverse history means that the term is used differently across and within the fields of sociology, geography, anthropology etc. (Skeggs 1999, O'Reilly 2004, Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, Pink et al. 2015). Instead, I consider how ethnography informed my research.

Within the field of ethnography there is some debate on whether it is a method or a methodology. Hammersley (1990) discussed ethnography as a method for small scale research projects that use informal observations in a single and everyday location. Researchers such as Skeggs (1994), O'Reilly (2004) and Duits (2008) are more drawn towards ethnography as a methodology. They frame ethnography as a way to gain an understanding of the world the participants live in and how they are constrained and fostered in their being in the world. Along similar lines, Willis and Trondman (2000) argued that ethnography is concerned with how social structures are lived, reproduced and challenged. For these authors, the methodology of ethnography includes methods such as making field notes, doing participants observations and conducting interviews. These methods enable the researcher to collect the data to make sense of the space.

Looking at the different definitions of ethnography as a method and as a methodology, my research fits more with the methodological description, as my research is focused on the bridal lived experience in contemporary postfeminist wedding cultures. My methodological framework, however, does take a less humanist approach to the ethnographic practice as it complicates the notions of the researcher as the conscious and knowing orchestrator of the research<sup>36</sup>. Nonetheless, this thesis has framed digital ethnography as a method of data collection, as the distinction between ethnography as a method and ethnography as methodology fades when all our actions are logged. For example, your phone can provide a detailed log of your whereabouts in the past days, weeks, months and even years. To link this to my research, Pinterest was both part of my practice of being in the space and learning

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<sup>35</sup> I am aware of my previous discussion on choice and how I locate the orchestration of the research design in the wedding assemblage, rather than solely with me as the researcher. However, as I performed this research in society that is (still) rooted in Enlightenment discourses such as choice and agency of the subject, I cannot fully escape these terminologies.

<sup>36</sup> This is not to say the ethnographic research has never taken an anti-humanist approach. For example, Lather and St. Pierre (2013) already discussed that the researcher can never be understood as the fully conscious and agentic orchestrator of the research.



about wedding cultures, as well as a space to collect my data as I kept putting pins on my Pinboard whilst I moved through the space. The same could be said for the forum, as the interface already logged all my posts and conversations. The wedding blogs I followed were collected in my bookmarks, so I could remember the blogs I followed. I also bookmarked specific pages that caught my attention, which can be considered as a method to collect my data. The only method that was separate from the space was my research diary, where I reflected on my presence in the field. I, therefore, feel uncomfortable to position ethnography as either a method or a methodology, as in my practice it was a hybrid combination of both. I now move my discussion to the specifics of digital ethnography.

Since the 1990s, research on and of digital space has gained more interest, which led to digital and online research being widely recognized as a method of conducting research. As online forms of social interaction grew, so too have ways of exploring these social interactions through methods which seek to understand people's sense making of digital cultures (Murthy 2008).

Contemporary thinking about digital research has complicated these distinctions between on and offline since it has become apparent that the digital was not such a separate space after all. Pink et al. (2015) argued that digital media use shapes our connection with life and relationships in couples and families. The digital devices in the home have become points of connection between family members when, for example, family members play games or watch films together. Facebook also created a clear link between what we do offline and how we share it with others. Van Dijck (2013) and Duffy (2015, 2016) examined how the online performance of our professional selves online is an important element of our professional identity, linking how we present ourselves online with what we do for a living. Another example is Scolere and Humphreys (2016) who considered how designers use Pinterest as a platform to share and exchange ideas, but also to create and maintain their professional online persona. The digital is therefore not a separate space, but an intrinsic part of our everyday life.

Linking this to my research project, I emphasise that the 'offline' wedding organisation was endlessly connected with the online when brides looked for information about venues, inspiration for wedding dresses and decoration as well as discussing their progress and anxieties with other brides on the forum. The view that online and offline life cannot be seen as two distinct locations also means that my choice to use digital ethnography is not to research *digital* wedding cultures as both spaces are completely intertwined. My choice to enter wedding cultures via the digital was because I needed an entry point into the assemblage. The hyperlink structure of the internet and the wedding forum was

a good start as it enabled me to move my attention in different directions by following the links and the different topics and ideas the brides discussed.

An important text in this regard has been Hine's (2000) *Virtual Ethnography* as well as her work from 2015, *Ethnography for the Internet*, whose exploration of the hyperlinked structures of the internet demonstrates how the infrastructure of the internet allows participants and researchers to move between spaces. She also argued that the internet is embedded into every fabric of our lives and can no longer be seen as a separate space (Hine 2015). Her work from 2000 showed the new shape of research in this context. Where traditional ethnographic practice was about the borders of the 'research field', contemporary online methods are more about tracing constantly shifting boundaries of an interconnected and networked field (see also Marres 2012 on the redistribution of methods). Based on this idea, I underscore that the boundaries I have created in this thesis are artificial to create a narratable story about the way my research has taken shape. By contrast, the 'real' practice included an endless amount of spaces (see appendix 7 for a list of spaces I visited regularly during my research or a part of it).

The digital space does not only create links with other digital spaces, but is also able to produce affective fabrics that connect the online context with the offline space. Dobson (2015) for example researched the affective textures of 'pain memes', where young women flashcards to indicate a lack of self-esteem, calling on others to love themselves. These confession videos translate bodily sensations of insecurity to the digital space where they call on other bodies to change the way people feel about themselves and negotiate their position in the world. I build on this idea by mapping the affective rhythms within the (digital) wedding space, as they are not limited to the online space, but reach out and spread throughout the wedding assemblage. For example, the emotional discussions on beautiful wedding dresses translate into affective embodied experiences when the dress is wrapped onto the body during fitting sessions. Having outlined the theoretical considerations of doing a digitally informed ethnographic research, I now move on to discuss the wedding forum, which was a central location in my ethnographic practice.

### **3.4.1. The Wedding Forum**

"I have made a username for [www.trouwforum.nl](http://www.trouwforum.nl) - Bruid\_op\_onderzoek is born!"

(Research diary, May 2013)

Having examined digital ethnography in my research project, I now provide more information on my online data collection which consisted of a 2-year long (28 months) digital ethnography that started in February/March 2013 and mainly focused on [www.trouwforum.nl](http://www.trouwforum.nl) [trans: [www.weddingforum.nl](http://www.weddingforum.nl)]. The data I gathered from the forum gave me an insight into the way brides organised their wedding and how this organisation was discussed with others. The data from the forum therefore mainly focused on the time before the wedding. I found the forum by typing ‘trouw forum’ [trans: wedding forum] in my Google search. The forum was one of the first hits alongside the forum from the Dutch website *The Perfect Wedding*. Unfortunately, shortly after I started my research the forum on *The Perfect Wedding* was made inactive in February 2013, which highlights the fluidity of online spaces. Another forum was hosted on [www.wijtrouwen.nl](http://www.wijtrouwen.nl) [trans: [www.wearegettingmarried.nl](http://www.wearegettingmarried.nl)], but at the time I started looking for suitable online spaces this location was not very active. I now move on to discuss the interface of the forum.

Unlike many other forums, such as those on [www.youandyourwedding.co.uk](http://www.youandyourwedding.co.uk) and [www.confetti.co.uk](http://www.confetti.co.uk), a larger wedding company did not own [trouwforum.nl](http://www.trouwforum.nl). This gave the space a distinct character, as there were no adverts on the site. The forum was run by a group of volunteering admins who were strict regarding the advisement of products and services. The forum rules that were posted in 2009 deemed this as the first rule: “*no advertisement, this is spam*”. The admins, but also the community, wanted brides to be able to use the site as a space where they could find information and first-hand experiences about the wedding preparations. This became very clear in the discussion amongst the members that led to the forum rules that were published in 2009. Dolgelukkig, for example, framed her view on adverts on the forum as the following:

*Dolgelukkig 12.11.2008*

*As a member, I thought I shall express my views as well. From the beginning, I thought it was quite bizarre that a photographer, who was not planning a wedding, was also part of the forum. Also, this member never posted anything, apart from photos. This annoyed me, and I'll explain why. I did not come here, because I was looking for a photographer: I came here because I wanted to hear opinions from other members, for example about their photographer. I think this is a stark difference.*

This view was repeated regularly throughout the 2008 discussion and remained central on the forum. As part of this sentiment against advertisement, the brides made sure that their posts were not seen as spam or as an advertisement. For example, when brides gave each other advice they always made

clear that they spoke from their own experience. If there could be any doubt that they could have an interest they stated clearly that they either were not involved and if they were involved they said that if someone was interested they can send a personal message. Something similar is visible in Plopje's post

*Plopje 25.09.2014*

*Absolutely loved the dress I have bought, they were really helpful and the result is stunning [...] In case you'd want to know more about my dress or something, you can always drop email, as advertising is forbidden on this site, so I won't do that.*

This discussion is based on polarising discourses that frame the personal and the private as authentic, whilst marketing and capitalism are deemed as unreal and even a danger for the authentic self.

The layout of the site was simple, possibly because of the lack of financial resources to build a stylish interface.

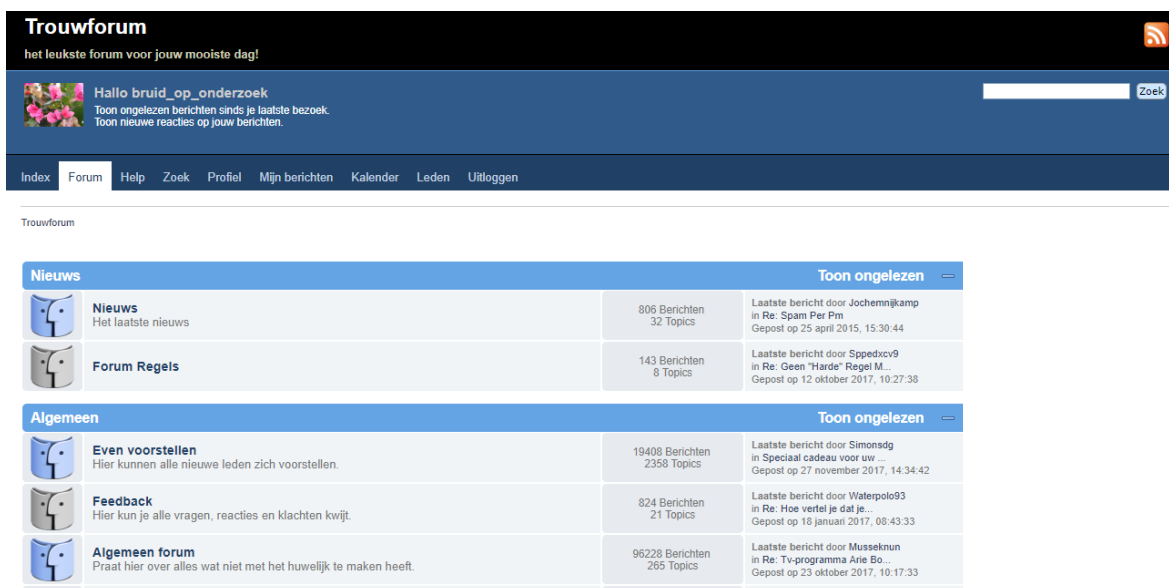


Illustration 11: Screenshot of the lay-out of the forum

The categories on the form were 'Nieuws' [trans: News], 'Algemeen' [trans: General], 'Alles over trouwen' [trans: Everything about weddings], and 'Kinderen' [trans: Children]. These categories covered a range of topics, including what to have for dinner, advice on wedding photography, showing your wedding DIY projects, trying to conceive etc. Each wedding year also had its topic, so

that all the brides who were planning a wedding for 2014 or 2015 could discuss their progress together. These topics were popular and almost created a mini-forum within the bigger forum. Brides who were planning a wedding in a different year rarely interrupted the discussions on other years, even when other members were reading these topics, which was evident in the knowledge the brides displayed about the wedding organisation of other members. Other popular forum topics were ‘show your dress’ or ‘retell your wedding day’. In these topics, brides from all different years exchanged their experiences and ideas.

When I entered the forum in 2013 the site had approximately 1200 members. The website did not list how many were active. The number of active members during specific moments in time ranged from 20 to 30 and the speed of new posts was around 5 new posts per half an hour. Around lunchtime, dinnertime and during the night or early in the morning these numbers were lower. The forum did have a specific topic for night users. The rationale the brides gave for this was that there were so many members suffering from broken nights due to crying children, feeding, night shifts, pregnancy, and sleepless brides.

As mentioned before, the wedding forum was not my only research location, but crisscrossed around a variety of digital wedding spaces (see appendix 7). Apart from the forum, I also amassed an eclectic collection of more than 500 images on my Pinterest board and I have been reading through a wide variety of wedding blogs such as [www.greenshoeswedding.com](http://www.greenshoeswedding.com), [www.rockmywedding.co.uk](http://www.rockmywedding.co.uk), [www.confetti.co.uk](http://www.confetti.co.uk) and [www.rocknrollbride.com](http://www.rocknrollbride.com). I have also been a regular visitor of magazine websites such as [www.youandyourwedding.co.uk](http://www.youandyourwedding.co.uk) and [www.bruidenbruidegom.nl](http://www.bruidenbruidegom.nl) [trans: [www.brideandgroom.nl](http://www.brideandgroom.nl)], as well as a reader of the physical magazines. The immersion in these spaces allowed me to familiarise with hegemonic wedding discourses at the time. It was here that I discovered DIY and barn weddings, which were trending during the entire time of my research. However, other wedding discourses were quite fluid, for example, I saw the wedding dress trend with a hint of a 1920s-style come and go.

Having provided a more technical overview of the website, I now move on outlining how it felt to be in the space. Initially, the research began with the websites [www.trouwforum.nl](http://www.trouwforum.nl) and [www.youandyourwedding.co.uk](http://www.youandyourwedding.co.uk), but I kept feeling uncomfortable in the UK-based space. My wedding experience was based on Dutch traditions and I was organising a wedding in the Netherlands. This meant that I was looking for Dutch venues, catering, budget tips, wedding dress shops etc. Discussing everything in a UK-context felt out of place compared to my personal wedding experience.

Gaining access to an online space is generally a matter of slowly becoming familiar with the space (Hine 2000, Ferreday 2009, Pink et al. 2015). I started this process by ‘listening in’ to the conversation, rather than actively participating. I have deliberately chosen the term listening, rather than lurking due to the negative connotations of the latter. These negative connotations originate from research on internet communities in the 1990s where the focus was on participation, as the internet was supposed to give a voice to people in seemingly open and free spaces (Crawford 2009). In their analysis of online newsgroups, Kollock and Smith (1996) framed lurking as a form of ‘participation’ that is merely based on taking information from the group without giving anything back. Another aspect of lurking is that active participants might feel spied on and that their privacy is being misused by covered others (Murthy 2008, Hine 2000, Garcia et al. 2009). Although I understand this view, I do not feel that it captures the experience of inactive membership in online communities. Crawford (2009) outlined how listening in online spaces occurs through reading and watching images for longer periods, which generates a sense of intimacy and connection. Ferreday (2009) also claimed that reading is an intimate and affective practice that fosters proximity between the text and its reader. She did this by discussing the bodily proximity of a reader with the text. My research practice felt more closely aligned with the latter projects.

When I first started to engage with the forum, I loved listening to their conversations and learning more about the people. Apart from wedding related issues, the brides discussed daily practices such as cooking, shopping, comments on celebrities and the news. Whilst sitting in my office to get through the first stages of my research, listening to their voices and discussions felt good and helped me to fight feelings of loneliness and isolation. For me, this initial stage was much more than gaining a technical and practical understanding of the space, but formed the foundation of my future sense of belonging in the space.

The intimacy I felt before I ‘actually’ entered the spaces as an active member in May 2013 meant that I felt quite nervous to ask permission to enter. A rejection would not only cause issues for my research, but it would also feel like a rejection from a space that I started to feel comfortable with. To gain access, I emailed the site’s moderator, Ellen, and introduced myself as a bride-to-be who researched wedding cultures (see appendix 8). I explained that I would use my wedding experience in my research, but that I also wanted to learn about the wedding experience of others, which was why I wanted to join the community. Ellen’s initial response was not negative per se, but made me nervous as she did not permit me to talk to the brides. She said that I could open a specific topic where I could share my research and questions. For me, this seemed more like a questionnaire, rather than becoming part of a space to experience the affective textures of the network. So, I sent Ellen another

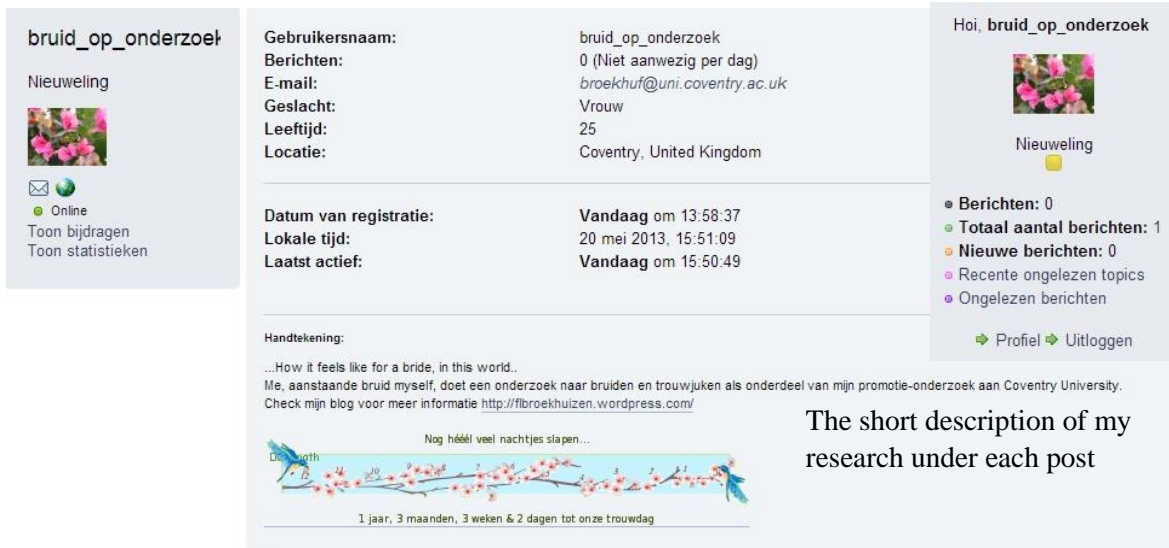
message where I explained my desire to participate on the forum. Below I have inserted an extract from the email.

*‘Thanks for your quick response. The research I am working on at the moment actually makes it necessary that I actively participate on the forum. I do not have a list of questions or something similar, but it is about my participation on the forum so I can experience what it is to be part of the forum and to become part of the wedding discussions the brides have about their wedding. And as I am going to get married as well, I would also like to share my wedding on the forum. It is a so called ‘lived research’ where it is about the daily lives of people and how we interact with each other and how we experience this’.*

Ellen responded that she had discussed it with the other administrators and that I had the permission to enter the forum. However, I had to make clear to the other members that I was also researching wedding cultures. I appreciated Ellen’s comment and I already planned to do this, as the forum was a very tight-knit community where women shared intimate life stories, not only about weddings but also about severe illnesses and estrangement from parents and close family. To make my position clear I chose the nickname ‘bruid\_op\_onderzoek’ [trans: bride\_on\_investigation]. I also had a very short overview of my research in my signature as well as a link to my project’s website. On the website<sup>37</sup>, I explained my research in greater detail and outlined the research ethics, which included anonymity for all the brides and their partners. As the data is partly found online, it is generally hard to guarantee anonymity as you can Google the quotes. However, all the original quotes were in Dutch, which would make it harder to gain access to the ‘original’ Dutch discussion. I have also altered the forum nicknames in my final thesis.

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<sup>37</sup> The website is available via [flbroekhuizen.wordpress.com](http://flbroekhuizen.wordpress.com)



The short description of my research under each post

Illustration 12: Screenshot of my profile on the forum

When I entered the forum, I started at the bottom of the social structure – I was a ‘newbie’. The image below is a screenshot from one of my earlier posts and it gives an idea of the way status was presented on the forum.

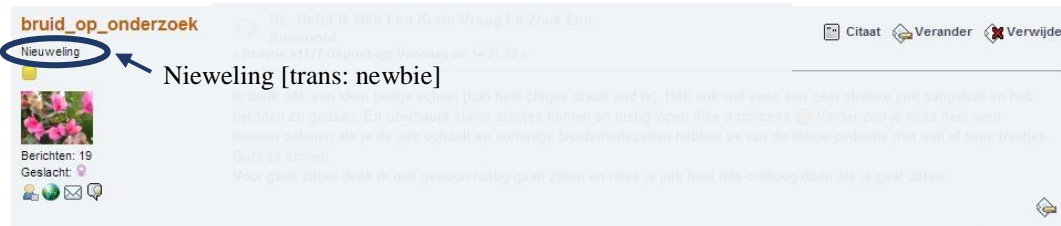


Illustration 13: Screenshot of my ‘newbie’ status, example of the way online status is visualised

The block on the left-hand side showed the poster’s identity, with their nickname at the top (i.e. bruid\_op\_onderzoek), and below the status of the poster ‘Nieuweling’ [trans: newbie]. The number of posts was displayed below the avatar, in my casem at the time of this screengrab, this was 19. When you had made 50 posts you would become ‘Junior’; the third block was with 250 posts and gave you the name ‘Volwaardig Lid’ [trans: Full Member]; the fourth (500 posts) was ‘Senior’ and the last and fifth block (1000 posts) was ‘Held’ [trans: Hero].

Despite my knowledge and attachment to the forum, in the early stages of the research I felt conscious of my status as a Nieuweling. I was careful with asking questions that highlighted my



newbie status as I already felt out of place in my dual position as researcher and bride. Pedersen and Smithson's (2010) research on the parenting community *Mumsnet* looked at the hierarchies and how they reinforced and reproduced power relations on the forum. They outlined that newbies and more established members seem to be quite separated on the forum and that newbies have to work on their status to become accepted and trusted. The more established members have the authority to accept or reject others in the community.

Looking at *trouwforum.nl*, similar power struggles emerged, as the community had a group of very loyal 'Held-members' [trans: Hero-members] who would not just share their wedding experiences but also discussed their private life in a broader sense. This group of women regularly met up, celebrated Sinterklaas (Dutch children's feast in December) and organised post swaps (exchanging gifts via the post). These meetings and swaps were discussed on the forum, but were rarely attended by new members or members who posted less often. Though there was no visible restriction in participating, I experienced a more covert boundary. All the women in these swaps had a Held-status and seemed to know each other quite well, while I had a mere *Nieuweling* [trans: newbie] or Junior-status and was not that familiar with most of the women in that group. These group meetings and gift swaps worked to reproduce the status of the Held-members at the centre of the forum and, for me, this group felt like a group I should aspire to. However, I never felt rejected within the bridal community based on my newbie status. The forum had quite a lot of new members who wanted to discuss their future weddings, which was celebrated by the other members. By the time I finished my data collection and prepared to leave the field I was a *Volwaardig Lid* [trans: Full Member].

In the above I provided an overview of my experience of becoming a forum member and how this journey affected me, leading to feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, but I also laughed with the brides, was happy for them, and felt reassured when my DIY save-the-date cards were received positively on the forum. I now move on to the interviews and how the data gathered from the interviews are different from the materials gathered on the forum.

### **3.5. Interviews**

Alongside the data I gathered from the digital ethnography, I did a series of interviews, as this provided me with a different set of data. Where the data on the forum mainly focused on the interaction and support between the forum members, the interviews provided the brides with a space for a one-to-one reflection on the wedding and their bridal self. Interviews are a classic method to provide participants with a space for reflection, where new meanings are created in the connection

between context, interviewee and interviewer (Mason 2002, Gerson and Horowitz 2002, Kvale 2006 and 2009). Mazzei pushed this idea further by linking it to a Deleuze-Guattarian ontology when she argued that interview data cannot be viewed as the voice from a ‘unique, essentialist subject’, but needs to be understood as an ‘enactment among researcher-data-participants-theory-analysis’ (2013: 732). This explanation fits with my methodological framework where I deem my decisions as a researcher as a result of the affective textures within the assemblage. Mazzei (2013) allowed me to frame the interviews through a comparable lens. Similarly, Taguchi (2012) argued that we should not see the interview as the reflexive outcome of one interviewee, but as an ongoing process between bodies and context. In my research, this means that I see the interview data as the result of the affective textures between the interviewee and myself as well as the research and wedding assemblage.

I conducted a series of 18 interviews with 15 brides, which took place in the spring/summer of 2014, apart from the interviews with Eva (summer 2013) and Elisa (autumn 2014). I interviewed all the brides after the wedding, which provided a different angle to the forum data as this focused on the time before the wedding. In addition to these 15 interviews after the wedding, I interviewed Feline, Mara and Femke, both before and after their wedding. The interviews lasted between one and two hours. I received ethical approval from the University. All participants gave informed consent and the names of the participants and their husbands, as well as other identifiable information, were anonymised.

All the brides were white and Dutch, apart from Hannah. Hannah was born in the Netherlands but her family was originally from Indonesia. As I met ten of the brides via the wedding forum, which is a national space, the interview sample did not focus on a specific region. I did not ask the brides to identify with a specific social class, because discussions on class are taboo in the Netherlands as it is supposed to be a class-free society (see Van Eijk 2013 for a discussion on the position of class in the Dutch society). Based on my cultural knowledge, I frame the participants as upper working class to middle class.

I contacted the brides via a personal message where I proposed to interview via Skype, but I gave them the option to choose another method. Three brides chose to do the interviews via email and two brides invited me to their home. Proposing Skype interviews as the main form of data collection fits with the research design that started as a digital ethnography. Researchers have argued that interviewing people via modes that fit with research design is beneficial, and interviewees are often used to this medium and the context (see for example Crichton and Kinash 2003, Hanna 2012, Deakin and Wakefield 2014).

I met ten of the brides via trouwforum.nl. Initially, I planned to solely rely on the forum. However, as the research progressed, snowball sampling turned out to be a convenient way to reach participants. During the interviews, the participants talked about friends who were getting married and whether I was interested in interviewing them too. At first, I was worried that the data would differ from that of the brides I met online, as I thought the brides would discuss the forum during the interview. This was not the case, and even when I asked about the forum the response was brief. So, I decided it would be good to respond with enthusiasm to the brides' initiative to ask their friends. For me, this also highlighted the bride's engagement with the research. It also turned out to be hard to find a date for the interviews, despite the initial positive response when I contacted the brides via the forum. So, although snowball sampling is linked to research on minority groups (Browne, 2005), it became a useful method and it reflects my philosophy that research is a messy process that does not develop along straight lines.

To understand the demographics of my interview participants, as well as the forum's demographic, I now move to a discussion on intersectionality and how this relates to feminist research and politics and more specifically how this has shaped my research on postfeminist wedding cultures.

Crenshaw (1989), but also for example Brah and Pheonix (2004), McCall (2005), Pheonix (2006) and have discussed intersectionality as central to feminist politics and research to understand how social structures affect the subject. They connect intersectionality with feminist discussions in the 1970s and 1980s around womanhood as an unstable and heterogeneous category, rather than a stable, homogenous category that links all women together into a general notion of 'sisterhood'. Intersectionality is based on the belief that 'no social category operates in isolation from the other social categories', enabling researchers to focus on the connection between these social groups and how it affects peoples' lived experience (Pheonix 2006: 22). As such, McCall has described intersectionality as research that embraces and highlights the 'relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations' (2005: 1771). These connections are framed as pivotal for understanding a subject's lived experiences in social life. Although feminist politics have highlighted issues around the idea that experiences should be framed as the starting point for understanding women's life, as this risks framing experiences alongside (purely) authentic line, the introduction of intersectionality, equally, underscored that 'experience itself could not become a redundant category', but remains 'at the heart of the way we make sense of the world symbolically and narratively' (Brah and Pheonix 2004: 82).

Within research on wedding cultures, gender has been a central focus (see for example Boden 2002, Jeffreys 2004, Ingraham 2009, 2016). As discussed in *Chapter 2*, this research has been

influenced by second-wave feminist concerns emphasising the unequal gendered dimension of the wedding as part of patriarchal structures. These research projects, generally, do not pay close attention to the way the wedding has affected women differently depending on the social position they inhabit based on for example class and race.

The focus on intersectionality has, however, changed somewhat more recently. Smit's (2016) approach is more focus on the intersectionality of different social categories, by including race in her analysis of wedding perfection. Smit (2016) explored how South-African brides, or more broadly couples, were the central focus of the reality television programme *Our Perfect Wedding* (Mzansi Magic 2011 - present). The programme highlighted the social mobility of the couples by underscoring their access to the wedding imaginary via consumer practices, locating wedding and bridal perfection within the reach of otherwise racialized and excluded couples of colour.

The centrality of white, middle class women within the wedding imaginary has also been central to Leopard (2018), in her research on the changing position of the wife within North-American popular culture. She argued that marital status is rooted within a classist and racist history, and traced this historically to when weddings served to connect socially and economically advantaged families, turning weddings into the regulator of social and economic differences. She moved on to argue that this history is still visible in contemporary societies, where economically disadvantaged groups have to delay marriage as a result of a lack of job security, whilst their more affluent counterparts are able to tie the knot due to their social position of relative social security and entitlement. When looking at the representations of the wedding, it evidently favours white, middle class representations of bridal perfection, whilst working class brides or those who are not white are ridiculed and turned into a spectacle, such as in *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* (Channel 4 2010-2015) and *Bridezillas* (WE tv 2004-2013 and 2018-present). (See *Chapter 2* for a more detailed discussion on wedding cultures in relation to class and race).

It is this centrality of white, middle class bridal perfection that I take as the focal point of my research project. In this project, I aim to animate McRobbie's (2015) notion of the perfect in connection with postfeminism, the happiness promise and retraditionalisation. To understand the affective powers of the perfect, and how this shapes the material, temporal and bridal embodied dimensions of the wedding, it is this white, middle class imaginary that needs to be scrutinised first. Only then can we research, for example, how racialized and classed others are affected by the perfect, how they are excluded from it, and how their actions in relation to the perfect deterritorialise and reterritorialise the bridal image. An example could be how the globalizing of postfeminist discourses of perfection and the trend of the white western wedding dress has affected the location of red as a

central colour in Chinese wedding costumes. However, in this research, and this thesis, the demographic focus of this project (and many of the media examples) focuses on Dutch, white, middle class women. The findings therefore only speak to a rather narrow demographic and do not apply to a broader category of women or brides.

No.	Name	Age	Year Wedding	Connection	Interview Medium	Object
1.	Ilse	26	2013	Forum	Face to Face	No Object
2.	Femke	28	2014	Forum	Email	Ring
3.	Anne	24	2014	Forum	Skype	Ring
4.	Vera	27	2013	Snowball	Skype	No Object
5.	Esther	27	2013	Forum	Skype	Ring
6.	Floortje	32	2012	Snowball	Face to Face	No Object
7.	Eva	30	2011	Forum	Email (2013)	No Object
8.	Feline	23	2014	Forum	Skype	Ring
9.	Mara	27	2014	Forum	Skype	Ring
10.	Nina	29	2013	Snowball	Skype	No Object
11.	Fenna	28	2014	Forum	Skype	Video Wedding
12.	Hannah	30	2013	Snowball	Skype	Ring
13.	Sara	28	2014	Forum	Skype	No Object
14.	Tessa	25	2012	Forum	Skype	Bouquet
15.	Elisa	28	2014	Snowball	Email (2015)	Photo Collage

Table 1: Overview Participants Interviews

For the Skype and face-to-face interviews, I used a list with themes to guide the interview (see appendix 5). The interview themes focused on the bride's experiences and feelings around the wedding day and its organisation. With all the brides I discussed their favourite moment of the day, and in all the interviews the purchase of the wedding dress was discussed in detail. I started most of the interviews by asking how they met their partner and how they got engaged. From here, the discussion flowed easily towards the organisation and the wedding itself. This does not mean that the narratives had a clear linear order, as often the brides moved between the experiences of the day, back

towards the organisation, and then to the vibe after the wedding. For example, Sara connected the experience of finding the venue with her feelings on the day itself and how family members discussed her wedding afterwards. For Sara, it was the “*wow feeling*” of the venue that shaped her story rather than a linear retelling of the process. It was the affective textures that pushed Sara’s narrative forward. In contrast, the email-interviews were more static than face-to-face or Skype interviews, as they followed the order of the questions I put in the email (see appendix 6). The interview questions here were based on the themes and questions I had written for face-to-face or Skype interviews.

To engage with the affective textures of the wedding, I asked the brides to bring objects to the interview. I was not specific about the nature of the object, as long as the object represented (some aspects of) the wedding. The wedding photos had an important place in this and can be seen as another set of objects that were part of the interview process. The brides often had their wedding album open during the interview and talked about the photos. Other brides showed me their enlarged photos, which they had displayed in their homes.

Objects in interviews are understood as a way to guide and shape the interview and to make sure that the interviewee stays close to the topic (Hodder 1998). Wilton (2008) argued that when objects are not used in the ‘right’ way they can direct the interview in the ‘wrong’ direction, but when done ‘properly’ it enables the researcher to reach deeper layers of meaning creation. For me, identifying deeper levels of meaning was not my motivation when including objects and photographs in the interview process. As outlined above, I do not see the interview as a space where meaning can be found, but as a space of meaning creation via the affective textures in the assemblage. Wilton’s (2008) theorisation of the object’s location in the interview process also positions the subjects at the centre of the process, whilst my methodological framework moves the attention away from the subject to the assemblage. The objects therefore also gain a sense of agentic power to shape the meaning creation in the research, as objects affect the way subjects think about themselves, about others and how they relate to the world (Brown 2004). Nordstorm (2013) has linked this stream of thought with a Deleuzian framework, which enabled her to rethink the boundaries between object and subject. For Nordstorm (2013) there were no strict boundaries between the object and the subject, but they were in a constant relationship, where they interacted with each other. This porous relationship enabled her to move away from the subject-centred approach to a ‘space in which subject and objects produce knowledge’ (Nordstorm 2013: 238). The objects were, therefore, part of the affective textures in the research assemblage that shape, guide and morph the interviews on wedding cultures. Having outlined the interviews and the location of the objects in the interviews, below I reflect on the methods I have used.

### **3.5.1. Reflecting on the Method**

In this section, I discuss what it felt like to engage with the methods of data collection I have used, namely Skype and email-interviews, as well as face-to-face interviews. As the majority of the data was collected via digital tools, I focus on these methods and what they enabled me to do. Subsequently, I discuss the translation process, as all the interviews were conducted in Dutch and had to be translated into English to make them accessible for English speaking audiences.

#### *Reflecting on the Interviews*

As mentioned above, the interviews mainly happened via Skype (ten interviews) and email (three interviews). Below, I outline how these methods are discussed in the literature. Skype is a free software programme that was launched in 2003 and enables synchronous face-to-face conversations via the internet. In the past 13 years, Skype has been used within research settings to provide an alternative way of interviewing, changing and expanding interview methods within the toolbox of qualitative research (Deakin and Wakefield 2014, Janghorban et al. 2014). The growing interest in Skype as an interview method is the possibility for synchronous communication, which is framed as an advantage compared to asynchronous interviewing (e.g. email-interviews) as the interview flow is deemed as more ‘natural’ (O’Connor et al. 2008).

Despite the growing interest in Skype, the face-to-face interview is still perceived as the gold standard. For example, Seitz’s (2016) article on Skype in qualitative research argued that more subtle bodily cues in face-to-face interviews get lost through the mediation of Skype. This view deems it the researchers’ responsibility to read the interviewee’s emotions on their bodies as a way to make sense of the participant’s feelings and lived experience, positioning the researcher as able to assign suitable emotions to the participant, rather than believing the interviewee’s interpretations of their emotions (McCoyd and Kerson 2006). Seitz (2016) also referred to the ability to look someone in the eyes in a ‘real’ life setting, which she framed as impossible in a digitally mediated context. This is presented as resulting in a lack of intimacy, trust and connection between the researcher and the researched. In relation the email-interviews, similar arguments are presented in the literature suggesting the absence of physical proximity hinders the interviewer, stopping them from picking up subtle signs of the interviewee and resulting in an inability to read the interviewees emotions (see for example Bampton and Cowton 2002, O’Connor et al. 2008). For my research, I want to side with another line of thought that does frame mediated research methods with the ability to create and convey emotions and intimate connection.

McCoyed and Kerson (2006) is a good example. Their research focused on women's accounts of terminating a desired pregnancy due to the fatal illness of the unborn child. In their research, most of the interviews were conducted via email, and these email conversations showed a great depth of emotions and reflection. McCoyed and Kerson (2006) highlighted that these women were already familiar with trusting their emotions to digital paper as part of their online support group so that this experience might have fostered their ease in answering the interview questions. Examples such as these show that we need to understand interview methods in relation to the research project. Having outlined that intimacy is not limited to face-to-face interviews, I now discuss how intimacy played out in my research. I do this by discussing one email interview, Eva, and one Skype interview, Hannah.

The e-mail interview I had with Eva started as a discussion on the differences between Dutch and English weddings, as her husband was English. As the conversation developed, she also revealed the personal pressures she felt to organise her wedding in a particular way. The interview process was quite informal and scattered, switching from personal messages, to emails, back to personal messages. Understanding these messages as not meaningful or lacking emotion would not do justice to the conversation we had. Eva told me how she cried her eyes out after the wedding because of the pressure she had felt during the day. The tone of the messages also felt emotional, matching with how I got to know her on the forum and in off-forum conversations. I remember Eva's writing style to be very unique, which enabled me to recognise her on other forums.

By contrast, the interview with Hannah was experienced as quite demanding, partly due to the poor internet connection. I, therefore, had to listen carefully to her story, trying to filter out all the noises. This heightened level of attention to her voice created an intimacy that was deeper than any of the other interviews. During the other interviews, I could permit myself a vague moment of absence and loss of concentration. However, this was impossible during this interview. I reflect on this experience in my research diary:

*I went downstairs, to sit next to the router hoping the internet connection would improve. It did not! ... I moved as close to my laptop as possible whilst sitting on the cold, stone floor of my mum's basement, trying to catch every sound and letter uttered by Hannah. ... I am exhausted, stiff and my bum is damp of the cold, stone basement floor I have been sitting on for almost an hour.'*

Research diary, Summer/Autumn 2014



This extract indicated that despite the problems with the technique, there was a sense of connection and uniqueness in this interview. My body was moved towards the screen, creating literal proximity between myself and the interview. The hour spent on the basement floor gave the interview a unique character, making me remember this interview more vividly than any of the others. Purely understanding the interview with Hannah as a failure due to the poor internet connection would not be sufficient to capture the experience and what it created, namely a space of intimacy. With these two examples, I have outlined how intimacy and emotions have shaped my interviews whilst using digital methods, highlighting how both emails and Skype interviews allowed for its unique way of creating a connection between the interviewer and the interviewee. I now move on to reflect on the translation of the data I collected in Dutch.

### *Reflection on the Translation*

All the participants were Dutch-speaking brides. This meant that throughout my research I had to translate from English to Dutch (e.g. the Participant Information Leaflet) and from Dutch to English (the interviews). I am not a trained translator. However, through the translation process I aimed to capture the meaning and intentions of the interviews as truthfully as possible (see Temple and Young 2004 for a discussion on the epistemological implication of translation). I do not believe that there is one 'true' and 'best' translation, as all forms of talk are socially constructed. Approaching translation in this way fits with my general methodological framework that rejects an essentialist worldview.

The practical implication of the translation process meant that I moved back and forth between the 'original' spoken text and the translated written text numerous times. The first translation was a 'rough' version that happened when I listened to the Dutch text and translated it straightaway from Dutch to English. At this point I did not pay much attention to differences in grammar, coping with metaphors, or exploring semantic and sociolinguistic nuances (see Helmich et al. 2017 for a discussion on these issues when translating from Dutch to English). I did, however, make notes when I struggled with the translation. In these notes, I wrote the translated English text followed by the 'original' Dutch text between [...]. During the analysis, I read the English text, whilst listening to the Dutch audio at the same time. By connecting the spoken and the written language, my knowledge of transcripts deepened as, in my mind, the English and the Dutch text folded into each other. Again, I made marks where I had to take another look at the translation, but this time I focused on the aspects that were most relevant for my analysis. For example, I left the introduction and end phase of the interview (mostly) untouched, as in these sections there was not much 'useful' information presented.

In the next stage of the analysis I cut out the English extracts that seemed most useful (see the image that captured this process) and I scrutinised the translation in these extracts.

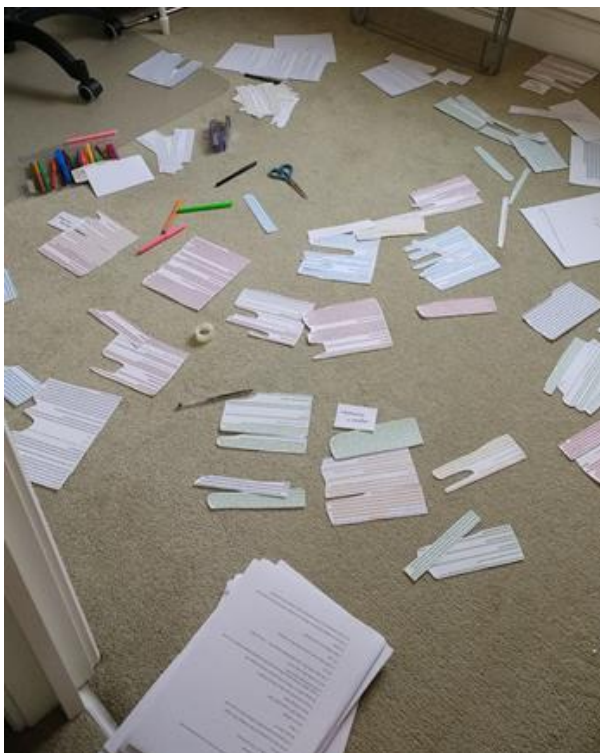


Illustration 14: Image of the cutting process during the analysis and translation

The translation of the forum was a much shorter process, as I only translated the extracts that went into the final thesis. Translating the whole forum would have been extremely time-consuming and would not have increased the quality of my final thesis.

After I selected the extracts from both the interviews and the forums, I rewrote the translation so that the grammar and flow of the text were more in line with the English language. I then looked more closely at the words and how I could translate this to capture not only the technical but also the conceptual meaning (Helmich et al. 2017). Halai (2007) discussed this in relation to the different cultures that languages belong to, so that the process of translation is also about making a text available for another culture. A translated text should, therefore, be read as a careful reflection of the ‘original’ text, but not the same text. One of the hurdles was to translate words that are typical for Dutch wedding culture, for example, ‘ondertrouw’, which is the moment the bride and groom ask legal permission for their wedding. This is mandatory and needs to happen at least two weeks before the wedding. I also struggled to translate self-invented words the brides used to capture their feeling.

An example is ‘breekmomentje’, used to discuss the moment one of the brides felt overwhelmed by the wedding organisation. What is different about this word is that word ends with -tje. This is generally used to discuss things that are small or insignificant, however, it is also used to semantically alter the impact of a word. By adding -tje to a word to capture the moment the bride felt overwhelmed by the wedding preparation did something - it allowed the bride to not look too stressed about the situation.

Concerning the overarching aims of the project, a particular translation issue between Dutch and English arose in the word ‘happy’. The English word ‘happy’ is a more general term than the Dutch literal translation ‘geluk’. ‘Geluk’ is a feeling that cannot be attached to one specific moment or event, but is fleetingly present, for example ‘I am happy’, which is translated as ‘ik ben gelukkig’. However, the wedding, which in the English language can be discussed as ‘the happiest day of my life’, cannot be translated with the ‘geluk’ in Dutch. In Dutch you would say ‘de mooiste dag van mijn leven’. Here ‘mooiste’ refers to the specific event that is understood as a magnificent and happy moment. The word ‘mooiste’ is not the only word that can be translated into ‘happy’. Other words that I have translated as happy are ‘blij’, ‘gezellig’ and ‘fijn’. These words all have a positive meaning and can be, depending on the context, translated as ‘happy’. In the extracts, when the brides use the word happy/happiness, I have put the Dutch word between [...], to help me understand what it was they were saying. However, the difference in language when it comes to the word ‘happy’ does not hinder my exploration of happiness in contemporary postfeminist wedding cultures, as I am exploring the affective textures of the wedding assemblage and how they generate different emotions in the brides. Though the emotions might be discussed through different words, the affective textures that are generated through the happiness promise are the same.

### **3.6. Temporality, Embodiment and Materiality**

In the above, I have outlined my methodological framework that takes my research as an assemblage where all the elements are in a constant process of becoming. To understand how the flow and movements in the assemblage shape my research and my position, I have discussed affect, distributed agency and rhythm. Subsequently, I have outlined my methods of data collection: digital ethnography and interviews. This section outlines the analysis and how I came to my three research themes: temporality, materiality and embodiment. These themes mirror the three chapters of my analysis section. At the beginning of each analysis chapter I give a detailed account of the theme and how it links to affect, distributed agency and rhythm.

As with all research, my research project was messy and the analysis was no exception (see Law 2004 for a discussion on research as messy). Despite the messiness of the process, the format of the thesis demanded me to produce a seemingly coherent narrative that captures both the process and the results along neat and structured lines. Nonetheless, the field that presented itself to me was fluid, moving and multiple. Or as Law (2004: 2) put it '[i]f the world is complex and messy, then at least some of the time we have to give up on simplicities'. Koro-Ljungberg and Mazzei (2012) also urged for complexity in research to do justice to the complexity of social life, but they also acknowledge the difficulty to do so. I, therefore, do not claim that this thesis is a perfect example of representing complexity of social life, but as an attempt to open the analysis up for different voices and multiple stories, whereby 'all narratives tell one story in place of another story' (Cixious and Calle-Gruber 1997 cited in Mazzei and Jackson 2012: 750).

To create this level of complexity I slowly moved away from the practice of coding, as this has the tendency to treat the participant's voice as 'the truest, most authentic data' (St. Pierre 2009: 221) that reflects the participants voice as though she 'knows who she is, says what she means and means what she says' (MacLure 2009: 104). In coding practices, researchers look for specific words and ideas to cluster them together. In this practice, the words and ideas are removed from their context in which they are produced. Instead of coding, I use 'plugging in to' the research data that has been discussed by Mazzei and Jackson (2012) and Taguchi (2012) to make sense of their data. By plugging-in to my data analysis, this means I did not read the participants' voice as standing on their own, but always in relation to the research and wedding assemblage that has shaped their stories. I, therefore, read the interviews and the forum data in dialogue with my broader ethnographic practise, which included Pinterest, magazine, blogs and wedding website. I was able to this because I immersed myself into this space for more than 2 years and I have lived through the experience of bride-to-be and bride. This strongly located the analysis in the research and wedding assemblage. In practical terms, this meant that the analysis was not a clean analysis of my interview data and digital ethnography, but also includes my bridal experience as well as popular texts to highlight how these different data sets inform each other.

The more than 2 year-long engagement in the research field meant that I became deeply embedded in the space. The intimate connection between the field and myself also shaped the analysis, which was fuelled through intuition rather than via clear scientific codes and categories. Koro-Ljungberg and Mazzei (2012) argued that a focus on intuition rather than a sterile scientific approach 'build[s] on growth, unforeseeable novelty and may extend beyond one's capacities, materials, and holdings' (729). Coleman (2008b) also discussed intuition in research, and she linked

this with intimacy. Intimacy with research is necessary to grasp the constant movement of the research space (Coleman 2008b: 119). The researcher, therefore, must come close to the process and this proximity means that the movement of the research is not so much measured, but intuitively felt.

Due to my proximity to the field as both an ethnographic researcher and a bride-to-be/bride/wife, the rhythmic movements of the field also resonated in my body. This does not mean that I take my bridal experience as a starting point, rather I underline that the analytical themes were part of the whole wedding assemblage, which does not exclude me as the researcher. It was through my proximity in the field that I felt how different temporal intensities shaped my wedding experience, via the to-do lists I made and the pressure I experienced to get it done ‘on time’. I discussed these feelings in detail with the brides on the forum and it was this affective connection between the forum and my experience that shaped this theme. It was also my intimate connection with wedding cultures that enabled me to not only read how brides discussed their DIY practices, but how I also, for example, felt tired and annoyed after I cut over 150 paper flags for my wedding invitations. The positive comments of the brides I received when I posted the invitations online felt good because I knew that some of them went through a similarly tiring DIY process. In the same vein, I experienced the feeling of the wedding dress being wrapped onto my body. This moment was largely discussed within the community, but it was only through my experience that I was able to ‘plug into’ these narratives on a more embodied level. It was these affective moments that mark both my research as well as my bridal experience, which enabled me to think about the data as more than scientific codes and categories, but as embodied and affective rhythms that shape the field. Below, I discuss each theme in more detail.

The first chapter of my analysis is temporality, **where I outline how discourses of professionalism play out in the creation of the perfect wedding within a postfeminist landscape. I do this by** discussing how wedding planning in popular media is presented as a linear process. However, this narrative is complicated when looking at the lived experience of the brides. **Drawing on retraditionalisation, I have been able to outline how contemporary brides are required to draw from a whole new set of skills, such as efficiency and effectivity.** I also discuss how affective textures such as stress and anxiety shaped the wedding organisation. I also argue that the wedding planning was not purely about reaching the perfect bridal image, but how this image functions as a hope for a better and more beautiful future.

The second theme is materiality. In this chapter, I **draw on Ahmed’s (2010) work around happiness to research** the location of wedding objects in the bridal experience **and how this is connected with discourses of ideal femininity and heteronormativity. Via retraditionalisation and**

postfeminism, I analyse the styling and presentation of the wedding day. I then move on to use the notion of enchantment (Luckman 2015) to analyse the bridal DIY practices. In doing so, I outline how the DIY practices were not merely shaped by the brides, but how this was complicated by the agentic powers of the materials. In the last section, I connect this theoretical framework with the wedding dress.

The last chapter of the analysis is the embodiment chapter. In this chapter, I carry on researching the location of happiness, perfection and postfeminism within the wedding organisation. I do this by taking the bridal body as a site of knowledge creation and how the body is affected by the expectations of the bridal subject. Here, I focus on the way the brides made sense of their bridal self via the wedding dress and how the dress altered their sense of space and being in the world. In the last section, I move away from the wedding dress to address how the brides discussed the wedding day as an embodied experience.

To represent these themes, I had to make choices regarding the data I was going to use. To transform my data set into a researchable amount of data, I had to make some artificial cuts. Hine (2000) highlighted the need to guard the boundaries of the research field in online ethnographies as the hyperlinked structure and the internet's capacity to function as an archive creates vast amounts of data. I therefore do not provide an active analysis of my Pinterest boards, the magazines I have collected, and the blogs I read. Instead I focus on the forum, and even this space alone held a vast quantity of forum data that forced me to narrow down the overall data set into smaller data sets that would best represent the research. Therefore, this thesis mainly focuses on the topics 'Trouwen 2015' [trans: Wedding 2015], 'DIY topic' (including the posts that cover my time online) and 'Getrouwd! Topic' [trans: Married! Topic]. The reason I included these topics is that I have been most active on the first two topics, while the latter topic provides a detailed account of the bridal experience of the wedding day itself. During my time online, I enjoyed reading these posts and, based on the popularity of the topics, I argue that the other forum members shared this experience.

In the analysis chapters, this means that the *Temporality* chapter mainly deals with the data on the Trouwen 2015 topic [trans: Wedding 2015], as this topic gave a detailed account of the experience of planning the wedding. *Materiality* is a combination of interview data and the forum's 'DIY topic'. The *Embodiment* chapter mainly focuses on interview data, including some data from the forum topic Getrouwd! [trans: Married!]. Although the Trouwen 2015-topic [trans: Wedding 2015] also included discussions about the body in relation to the bridal transformation, the interviews provided the brides with more space to reflect on their bodies in relation to their bridal experiences. The next chapter is the first part of the analysis and discusses temporality.

# Chapter 4

## Temporality

*Margot: 04.03.2013*

*Well I think I have it on paper until the details... It still seems to be a lot, but I have been working on quite a few things already. The most work will be the invitations, aprons and the photobooth props... And I can leave the bits that are in italics if the time is pressing.*

### *To do list DIY*

- *Invitations Envelope Writing*
- *Invitations direction*
- *Invitations invitation*
- *Invitations RSVP*
- *Invitations Programme/timeline*
- *Invitations Tents/overnight stays*
- *Invitations Putting together*
- *Finishing Photo booth props (sawing and painting)*
- *Guestbook*
- *Direction signs (at the venue, with daddy)*
- *Kilimanjaro board*
- *Photo booth sign*
- *Painting chalk board*
- *Bouquet hanger (something old, new, borrowed, blue)*
- *Coffee filter flowers (lunch)*
- *Pink net flowers*
- *Signs 'bride' and 'groom' for on the table*
- *Wooden blocks LOVE*
- *Candle cans*
- *Toiletries basket (deo, hairspray, mints, comb, lip balm, cotton buds, tampons, mouth spray, tooth picks)*
- *Photo line (selecting photos and printing)*
- *Cakes (two days in advance)*
- *Car decoration wedding car*
- *Direction signs on the road (with daddy)*
- *Decorating last bottles*
- *Chair decoration for the family (ceremony)*
- *Cake stand (with daddy)*
- *Cutting quilt for guest book*

#### 4.1. Introduction

*'If sausages once dropped from the sky in this imaginary land for people racked with famine to eat their fill, then the modern dream of the temporal paradise is full of the magic formula 'if only I had time for...''*  
(Nowotny 1994: 6)

I start with Nowotny's quote as it captures the experience of the wedding planning, not only for the brides partaking in my research, but also my experience of the organisation, which was marked by feelings of stress and hurriedness. These feelings were fed by the growing number of activities the bride (and the groom) needed to engage with to create a space of happiness and success. To cope with these expectations, brides used time management techniques such as to-do lists. A good example is Margot's list, cited above. Sharing these lists underscored the importance of time and planning in relation to the wedding, presenting the wedding as a space that needed to be managed, rather than merely a space of fun and happiness. Hoffman (2009) argued that feelings of stress and time pressure were initially part of work-related spheres, but have now moved to leisure spaces and the home. The movement from work to leisure spaces affected the temporal experience of public and private life, making it no longer essentially different. It is the connection between leisure and work that forms the basis for this chapter, as although the wedding is part of the private sphere, it is shaped by work related discourses such as of efficiency and effectivity.

By drawing on leisure and work, as well as efficiency and effectivity, this chapter aims to add to the literature how postfeminism is connected with professionalism. By focussing on the digital structures of the wedding assemblage, this expands on how professionalism goes hand in hand with notions of perfection, creating deeply affective textures that resonate between bridal bodies and the wedding assemblage as a whole. The chapter explores how the dream of the perfect wedding does not so much function as an endpoint of the wedding organisation, but how it works as a hopeful future that shapes the organisation and the process as a whole. In doing so, this chapter speaks to the question of the role of happiness and perfection in the bride's expectations of the contemporary wedding and the (temporal) spaces in which the contemporary wedding exists.

Before I start the analysis, I first give an overview of how I understand time and temporality, and how these notions have informed my analysis. Subsequently, I move through the different aspects of the analysis. The analysis does not aim to provide a clearcut narrative of the temporal engagement of the brides with the wedding planning, so I do not outline what the brides did at which point during the wedding organisation. Rather, the chapter disrupts the narrative by rethinking the forward pushing narrative of planning into the future. The chapter first outlines how the rhythms of the forum shaped the bridal narratives, and how the brides themselves are shaped by broader cultural rhythms. Subsequently, I rethink the wedding as a moment of transition and how this classic view is reshaped in contemporary societies



where the blueprints of how to live well are fading. Subsequently, I move on to the to-do lists and how the bridal discussions enabled me to relocate the abstract time of the to-do lists back to the bridal bodies. The last section of the chapter rethinks the forward pushing narrative of the to-do list, by complicating the seemingly logical connection between the present and the future.

To frame the bridal engagement with the wedding planning, I focus on both the interview and forum data, especially the Trouwen 2015-topic [trans: Wedding 2015- topic]. Although both sets of data provide an account of the way the brides make sense of the wedding experience, the forum data mainly focuses on accounting for the time before the wedding, whilst the interviews<sup>38</sup> took place after the wedding, which enabled the brides to construct a different narrative of their wedding experience.

## **4.2. Time and Temporality**

To understand how time and temporality have shaped the bride's experience of the wedding planning, this section outlines the chapter's theoretical framework. Iparraguirre framed time as the 'phenomenon of becoming', whilst temporality is the 'apprehension of becoming' in the social and cultural context (2016: 614). So, the changes that happen are a form of time, but people can only know, understand, and sense these changes through their cultural and social context: their temporal engagement with the world. I take this view as the starting point of this chapter, as it focuses on the affective, embodied and spatial experience of time (temporality) in relation to the wedding organisation. The emphasis of this chapter is, therefore, more on temporality than on time. Nonetheless, I use the word 'time' in my writing, but this always implies a connection to the cultural and social context that gives the sensation of time meaning.

The popular and scientific interest in time should also be read in relation to the social and cultural context of how time is perceived. Hoffman (2009), for example, discussed the growing popularity of digital time, where time becomes measurable at the level of nanoseconds. She linked the popularity of digital time with the social preoccupation of time and our desire to control and understand it. Another, more scientific, view on time is seen in research around our biological clock and how it shapes our bodily processes of waking up and sleeping, as well as our metabolism (Hoffman 2009). Again, the focus on our biological clock is part of the social context where the ability to use time efficiently is a prevailing discourse. An example of the interest in time in relation to efficiency and health is the 2017 Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine. The Prize was awarded to American scientists who researched the connection between our biological clock and our sleep habits and body functions<sup>39</sup>.

Rhythms enable us to make sense of people's temporal engagement with the world. According to Iparraguirre (2016), rhythms organise social life, through repeating rituals and movements that make the

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<sup>38</sup> I also conducted three interviews before the wedding, however, these interviews are not included in this chapter.

<sup>39</sup> Gallagher, J. (Oct 2017) available via <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-41468229>> [accessed on: 03.04.2018]

social world understandable and predictable. Lefebvre (2013) also drew on rhythms to make sense of social life by focusing on the cyclical and repeating nature of them. Essential in Lefebvre's (2013) view is the recognition that rhythms do not necessarily cut out the possibility of change, as every rhythm is slightly different than those before and after. For example, the continuous popularity of the white wedding is affected by changes in fashion. During my research, I saw an increased interest in wedding dresses with 1960s style, which later was replaced with wedding dresses that were inspired by the 1920s.

Adam's (2004) has provided an overview of how time is understood theoretically, by focusing on thinkers such as Durkheim and Marx. Durkheim was one of the modern thinkers that discussed time in relation to the social context (Nowotny 1994). Unlike his predecessors, such as Kant and Hegel, whose discussion on time was more abstract, Durkheim was interested in the way time shaped social life (Nowotny 1994). Durkheim focused on religion and how religious practices and rituals, or religious rhythms, shape the way humans perceive social life (Adam 2004). For Durkheim, the calendar was an important religious invention to form the cyclical movements of time and anchor it via returning religious events, such as the Sunday church services and Christmas (Nowotny 1994, Adam 2004). Frameworks to track time, such as the calendar, provided societies with a reference system to organise events and social actions and shaped our temporal and rhythmic experience with space (Adam 2004: 48). Alongside Durkheim, Adam discussed Marx as another thinker who moved away from the abstract view on time, thinking of time as part of the social 'and the creation of institutional practices and traditions' (2004: 37). Although Marx did not discuss time explicitly, time was essential to account for the added value that was created outside of the use value of objects. Use value is based on the specific qualities of objects, such as the needs and requirements of that moment. Exchange value, on the other hand, is decontextualised and based on the quantity of labour time realised in them. To account for the time that went into production, time had to be decontextualised to be translated into monetary value, so that people got paid for the time spent on production regardless of the context.

As Marx's analysis indicated, in the industrialised space, clock time became an essential framework to measure both time and value, as clock time was the same for everyone in every location. Postone (1993) discussed this as abstract time, which is independent of its context and therefore always the same. Concrete time, on the other hand, depends on its context. For example, up until the 14<sup>th</sup> century the length of an hour depended on the season, so summer hours were longer than winter hours. Clock time, or abstract time, enabled us to gain a sense of control and ownership over the world, as naming time creates patterns of repetition so people can plan and anticipate future movements. This was pivotal in industrial societies where production and profit depended on the available time to produce and sell goods. Planning the production process became an essential element to guarantee future supply and profit, which no longer depended on the seasons, but on planning, strategy and future anticipation (Postone 1993). It was not only the production

processes that were controlled, but also people's lives, via, for example, the bell that signalled the end of the working shift or a lecture hour. The central location of clock time to mark the beginning and the end of the working day led to the '9 – 5' work rhythm that marked post-war Western societies.

Nowotny's (1994: 50) discussion of the extended present further theorised planning and strategy in capitalist societies. Nowotny (1994) framed the extended present by looking at the way the future was understood. Before industrialisation, the future was a mystical land where everything and nothing could happen. However, through discourses of planning and strategy, the future became part of the present. In contemporary societies, the future is understood as the place people can control from the present, so that the future is pulled into the now, and the present is extended into the future.

Planning and control do not merely apply to the organisation of production but also affect the formation of subjects in neoliberal societies. As discussed in the literature review, neoliberal societies represent subjects as able to become whoever they want to be as long as they are willing to work on the self through intense consumer and bodily practices (Featherstone 1987, Bauman 2000). These labour practices are directed towards an idealised notion of the self that might or might not be attained in the future. In their research on women's beauty narratives, Coleman and Figueroa (2010) argued that beauty is never experienced in the present, but is located either in the past or in the future. When looking at the way beauty is projected into the future, the women in their study presented their aspirations of beauty in either the past or the future, for example, through future-oriented dieting or plastic surgery, and never in the now. Beauty was presented in the future as a hope for something better. This is different from the extended present outlined by Nowotny (1994), where present and future are connected via planning and strategy in the present.

Understood through Berlant's (2011) 'cruel optimism', I further complicate the forward pushing narrative of Nowotny's (1994) extended present. Berlant (2011) discussed cruel optimism as the promise for a better future that will never arrive. The cruel nature of this better future lies in its unattainability as it will never move into the present. Nonetheless, people feel attached to this hopeful future as it guides their actions in the now so that people would feel lost and without a goal, if they would give up the belief in this better (but cruel) future.

Berlant's (2011) understanding of the connection between the present and the future is different from Nowotny's (1994) extended present. For Nowotny (1994), the future can be shaped via our work and planning practices in the present, so that present time seeps into the future, creating a closer connection between the present and the ideal future. For Berlant, the forward movement of time is halted, which she discussed as an 'impasse' (2011: 4). Normally, an impasse is used to express the inability to move forward. Berlant's take on the impasse is different, as she framed the impasse as 'a stretch of time' (2011: 4) where we are affected by the world, but we are never fully able to grasp it. This is significantly different from the

modern view of time that represents us as being able to understand and control time via clocks, calendars and planning techniques, which foster efficient and effective use of time.

Despite these alternative views on our temporal engagement with the world, the idea that people can influence the future by good work in the present is an intrinsic part of our society. An essential element of this is our ability to use time well via time-management techniques to enable us to plan our lives efficiently and effectively. Hoffman (2009) narrated her life experiences, moving from Poland, to England, to the United States, and how time felt during different points of her life, living in different geographic locations. One of her observations was that in neoliberal societies the pressure of time, to control time and to use it well, increased as discourses of improvement, planning and control affected both the personal and the public space.

Southerton's (2003) research on the experience of feeling harried and stressed in family settings, also indicated that time pressure is central to people's experience of personal life. Southerton discussed these feelings via 'hot spots', which he framed as condensed temporal moments where a series of activities and demands come together (2003: 19). The research indicated that the temporal experience of the private sphere (i.e. home life) is no longer distinctively different from work and public space, or, as Hoffman put it, 'temporal discomfort was first just work-related, but is now also part of the private sphere' (2009: 11).

This fading difference between the temporal pace between the public and the private is further blurred by the demand to be fully available and devoted to one's job. Researchers such as Gregg (2010), White (2015) and Duffy (2015) analysed how digital and mobile networks made it possible to extend the office into the home, where flexible work fostered an assumption that workers are always available. Gregg (2010), for example, explored how the need to check emails moved far beyond the office walls and affected the time workers spent at home with their families. Gill and Pratt (2008) discussed the integration of work into our social life via autonomous Marxist theory by outlining how work moved beyond the factory gate, by focusing on immaterial labour in the creative industries. Here, they focused on the idea of enjoying your work, exceeding your boundaries as well as self-expression and self-actualisation.

The division between public and private life blurred further through discourses of productivity seeping into one's private life. Mackenzie (2008) and Gregg (2015) both discussed the Getting Things Done movement (GTD-movement) that encourages people to think about life as a series of projects that need to be handled to increase efficiency and effectivity. The planning of a wedding becomes one of the many projects in life, which can range from setting up a career and buying a house to smaller projects such as cleaning the garage or painting a cupboard. Essential to the GTD-movement is the idea that all actions can and should be framed as projects that can be put into smaller projects and sub-projects. Cutting all life activities into smaller projects or tasks constructs them as manageable in shorter timeframes, for example, weeks or days, removing contextual and social differences from the discussion. A micro task of your career

project might be reshaping your online CV; a smaller project for the wedding organisation is, for example, DIY activities for the decorations. Creating smaller projects as part of the entire wedding planning does not consider that a DIY wedding is significantly harder on a tight budget and a tight timeframe than with the help of a wedding planner and a generous budget, regardless of your ability to create sub-projects. Although the GTD-movement originally focused on office life, its influence has moved into other aspects of life. People in all spheres of life are encouraged to use time more efficiently and effectively, in an era that is marked by a temporality of rush and haste (Southerton 2003, Virillio and Bratton 2006, Gregg 2015). I therefore also draw on a body of work that researched our work life balance and how our working life is more integrated into our private life. I use this to analyse the way work-related discourses invaded the seeming leisure space of wedding organisation: what I suggest is an extension of ‘loving what you do’ (Duffy and Hund 2015).

As I have outlined, I draw on a variety of theories that enabled me to make sense of the temporal experience of brides with the wedding organisation. Some of these theories contradict each other, for example, Nowotny’s (1994) extended present and Coleman and Figueroa’s (2010) research on women’s beauty narratives where ideal images of beauty are firmly pushed away from the present into a hopeful future. This means that this chapter is not going to present a neat narrative of the brides’ organisation of the wedding, where the wedding is simply presented as a forward pushing life narrative. Rather, I analyse how a variety of temporal movements have shaped the bridal experience of the wedding planning. Some elements, therefore, underscore the idea of the wedding as a future-orientated event, whilst others complicate this idea. As discussed earlier, the social world is messy and chaotic and to make sense of this it is essential to step away from a clean and singular narrative, towards stories that account for the diversity of life.

### **4.3. Flows of time**

Having discussed how I understand time and temporality, I now apply this framework to my data set. This section focuses on the forum as a whole and the topic Trouwen 2015 [trans: Wedding 2015] and how the temporal rhythms shaped the affective textures of the forum. I first connect rhythm with the forum on a simple level, as each year a new wedding topic was opened for the next year. This act provided the forum with continuity to allow new brides to enter the rhythms of the forum by starting a discussion on a new series of weddings. These kinds of rhythmic movements are cyclical, like the twelve hours of the clock face (Lefebvre 2013: 96). The returning nature of the movements does not imply a simple repetition of historical events but keeps the space open for becoming and change, or as Lefebvre suggested, ‘[t]he dawn is always new’ (2013: 97). So, although each topic moves through an expected pattern of actions, such as finding venues and dresses, discussing hairstyles, looking for wedding inspiration, the exact movements of these

rhythms differed. For example, the Trouwen 2014-topic [trans: Wedding 2014], had a much stronger focus on DIY than the Trouwen 2015-topic [trans: Wedding 2015], demonstrating that these rhythms shift over time.

Next to cyclical movement are the linear movements, which create almost identical and similar events, for example, the ‘ticks [or bangs] of the hammer’ (Lefebvre 2013: 97). Linking this to the forum, the essential elements that mark the wedding ritual are repeated endlessly on the forum. Discussions on the wedding dress, the venue and sending invitations are repeated back to 2008/2009 when the forum started to gain popularity. These ticks of the hammer, or anchors of the wedding rituals, shape the rhythmic movements of the yearly topics, where the earlier discussions focus on finding the venue, looking for a dress and so forth, whilst later discussions centred on hairstyle, makeup, flower arrangements and table decorations. The formations of these rhythmic movements also build towards the centrality of the spring/summer wedding, as most weddings happened between April and September. The cyclical movements of the seasons fused with other wedding rhythms to form a temporality on the forum that centralises around a specific temporal moment in the year.

The cyclical nature of rhythms is intrinsically connected with the linear (Lefebvre 2013). Although the analyst needs to separate the two to make sense of the event, ultimately ‘the analyst that separated them must join them back together because they are in perpetual interaction and are even relative to one and other’ (Lefebvre 2013: 97). In the remainder of the analysis, I no longer make a distinction between cyclical or linear rhythms that animated the forums movements. Instead, I discuss how the rhythmic movements on the forum created different affective textures through time. Lefebvre (2013: 95) argued that to analyse rhythm, we must have lived through the rhythms, but we also need a distance from them to grasp their consequences. One way that enabled me to do this was when I read through the entire Trouwen 2015-topic [trans: Wedding 2015] in less than a week. I did this in the summer of 2017 when I was no longer part of the wedding community and went back to my data to deepen my analysis after a year-long maternity leave. As I was no longer immersed in the forum discussions, I was able to grasp the rhythms on an analytical level, which was impossible when I was in the middle of the research. Below, I discuss the changes on the forum and the affective textures it created.

The beginning (spring/early summer 2014) of the Trouwen 2015-topic [trans: Wedding 2015] was marked by longing and anticipation of what was to come. An example was the post from BrintjeBeer88: *“It’s so nice, everyone is pinning stuff down now. It is getting real, right, haha!”* (May 2014). Moving to the autumn and winter, the affective textures on the topic changed, from excitement to anxiety and nervousness about the time that was left and the aspects that still needed to be organised. A good example was RocktheBoat, who felt overwhelmed by the organisation that still needed to be done: *“Do you also have those moments that you are completely overwhelmed by all the things so you just don’t know how to*

*handle it all?*” (September 2014). This post did not stand on its own, but reflected a general feeling in the community, which was supported by the number of comments the post received<sup>40</sup>. Moving towards the spring/summer 2015, the feeling on the forum changed again, but this time the atmosphere was relaxed and filled with excitement about everything that was coming. All the significant things were arranged, such as venue, dress and catering, leaving only the decorations and the details, for example arranging the flowers and looking for a hairstyle. This highlights how the rhythmic ticks of the hammer, or the wedding elements, fostered different affective textures at different temporal moments. The excitement for the upcoming weddings was also felt on the forum. Tantetje81’s post stated this clearly *“it’s so exciting! The first brides are already married and for me it’s three months away!”* (March 2015). After planning the wedding for more than a year, the attention shifted from looking forward to and planning the event, to the final moment when all the efforts of the last couple of months came together during the wedding event.

Reading the posts highlighted the forum’s flux throughout time, altering the affective textures at different temporal moments. The rhythms animated the forum space and connected the individual bridal feelings of excitement and anxiety with the affective textures on the forum (McCormack 2002). Although people collectively participate in similar rhythms, everyone goes through them individually (Lefebvre 2013). Therefore, despite the shared rhythms that move the forums discussions, the responses to these rhythms were felt by each bridal body individually and (likely) differently. When I was reading back through the entire topic, I felt these rhythms vibrate again in my body, as a sort of reminiscence of the time I spent on the forum whilst discussing and doing the wedding preparations. These feelings, however, were different from the time I was absorbed in the experience. Williams (1977) discussed how the feelings that structure texts and our interaction with them are linked to a specific moment, which means that the emotional responses to a text can never be reproduced at a different temporal and spatial location.

Above I have discussed how the broader rhythms of the topic are mirrored in the bride’s posts. Taking this forward, I analyse the rhythmic connection between the individual and social by looking at how Mathilde\_90’s wedding organisation was shaped by the yearly rhythms of Christmas, recurring birthday parties, as well as the modern working rhythms that concentrated leisure time at the weekends and evenings.

When Mathilde\_90 started the wedding organisation she wanted to finish as much as she could as soon as possible, due to her six-week walk to Santiago de Compostella. She hoped that after her journey she would feel more comfortable about the wedding preparations, although the anxiety of not getting it done on time persisted through the entire planning, and peaked in the autumn/winter. The post below refers to one of the instances she felt overwhelmed by the preparations:

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<sup>40</sup> Within less than a day ten members had responded to her post, which is a lot based on the active members within the topic – approximately 40, however, this number was changing throughout time.

### **Extract 1**

*Mathilde\_90 05.09.2014*

*Yesterday I was completely done with the wedding and everything around it! Everyone keeps saying oh you still have 9 months to arrange everything, and I really can't stand that. In November and December everything will be quiet, and during Christmas time everything will lay still and I will be working a lot during those months so that leave 7 months. That still sounds like a lot, but as we both have a full-time job it's just not a lot! We have a group of friends of like 30 people and most of their birthdays will be in January, February and March, so the weekends we have we could use for the wedding are all planned with other things.*

Mathilde\_90's post framed the nine months that were left to organise the wedding as a condensed temporal space due to other responsibilities. Below I argue that these condensed temporal spaces created 'hot spots' that did not merely affect the time of the hot spot when different activities came together in one moment (Southerton 2003). The 'hot spot' also moved out of its temporal location, as Mathilde\_90 accounted for feelings of stress and anxiety when the hot spot was not really there, but was merely assumed to arrive (Southerton 2003).

Feelings of time are influenced by the social temporality that creates pulses and tempo in our temporal experiences (Iparraguirra 2016). This was mirrored in Mathilde\_90's post where she discussed the rhythms that structured her social life (requiring birthday parties, Christmas time) and how they shaped her temporal experience of the wedding planning. These pulses and tempos that shaped the nine months turned these months into a fluctuating rise and fall of rhythmic moments, such as busy birthday months and calm and quiet Christmas time.

Although most of Mathilde\_90's narrative constructed the flow of time as fast moving, this tempo was disturbed by the downtime in November and December: "*during Christmas time everything will lay still*". The changed temporal movement around Christmas is a cyclical movement that affects how people feel, live and work. Both McCormack (2002) and Lefebvre (2013) stated that cyclical repetition feels natural and has no clear beginning and end, however, the repeating cycles do not always feel the same. For Mathilde\_90, this Christmas time was still a downtime. However, her experience would be different than that of previous years, as her wedding preparations were part of it. Our temporal engagement with the social world is therefore not the result of one or two neat rhythms that move to a specific endpoint, but a result of the intertwining rhythms that connect the personal with a variety of social and cultural levels (Lefebvre 2013). These rhythms create a flow of becoming that is disrupted and fragmented through time, so that our temporal experience is often plural, for example, when the downtime around Christmas is also experienced



as stressful. The interaction of these different rhythms created hot spots in Mathilde\_90's experience of the time, but as evident in her post, the anxiety of the hot spots does not stay in that temporal location but moves out of it so that it is experienced weeks or months before the hot spot takes place.

#### **4.4. The Wedding: Moving to the Future**

The previous section outlined the connection between individual and social rhythms and how these rhythms shape the affective textures of the wedding planning. I now move on to a discussion of the wedding as a moment of transition. Where the previous section focused on the complexity between different rhythmic movements, this section focuses on one movement, namely the wedding as a forward pushing life narrative, which is complicated by the changing position of the wedding as a lifestyle choice.

Traditionally, the wedding rituals marked a woman's transition from a single and unmarried woman to a married woman (Friese 2001). Once married, a woman was able to begin her adult life by living together with her partner and starting her own family (Carter and Duncan 2017). The wedding ritual thus enabled people to extend themselves into the future, creating a forward projected life narrative that made the future concrete (Adam 2004). Going back to the example at the beginning of this thesis, in *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009) Liv and Emma's anticipation of their wedding day began when they were girls. Within the film's narrative, the wedding ritual made their future lives concrete and enabled them to produce a life narrative that extended their sense of self into the future. However, as discussed in the literature review, the cultural position of the wedding is changing from a mandatory ritual to secure one's social and economic status, to a lifestyle choice that marks the bride's (or couple's) individual success and happiness. Again, this is exemplified in *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009) in terms of consumption and extravagance. The wedding thus loses its significance as a ritual of transition that marks the different life stages. Instead, the wedding is framed as devoid from the forward pushing rhythm that connected childhood with adult life. To illustrate this, I use an extract from the interview with Floortje. Before her wedding, Floortje was already living together with her husband, with whom she had two sons before they got married.

##### **Extract 2**

*Floortje: How was our day? Yeah, really nice, I thought it was really nice uhm we, uhm, one of the reasons, you know, we didn't do it for financial, how shall I put this, everything was arranged on paper already, we really did it for the party. ... We, we, I really do not have to say that I love you, look you know, that that, that is something we have, we we just know that about each other, but uhm well yeah, [name husband] father passed away and well we had some things that crossed our paths, we both did, that you say like, at some point it is just time to throw a party, yeah, sometimes it's also a moment to enjoy life and to celebrate something and yeah uhm and I thought our*

*relationship was something to celebrate and uhm the being married, well yeah, it really doesn't change anything, as you really don't wake up differently the next day.*

In extract 2, Floortje broke the traditional constructs of the wedding in two ways. First, she released the wedding from its traditional ties to secure her social and economic position by stating that she did not do it for financial reasons, nor any legal consequences (Brook 2002). Second, Floortje rejected the newer romantic notion of the wedding, as a moment to secure the love and faithfulness of one's partner, which she underscored by stating that "*you really don't wake up differently the next day*". Instead, Floortje framed the wedding through a desire to "*enjoy life and to celebrate something*". This removed the wedding from life's forward pushing narrative to a moment to celebrate life in general. The reason for the wedding was therefore not a desire to move on, although there was a sense of moving away from death, but a point where different life rhythms come together, such as their relationship and the passing of her father-in-law. Nonetheless, the traditional wedding rhetoric of the new beginning was still embedded in the narrative, as for Floortje, the wedding was still a new beginning as it changed the mood from the experiences of someone dying to some more joyful celebration of life.

Bauman (2000) discussed the erosion of the blueprints of our society, providing individuals with a renewed space to shape their lives through discourses of choice. Looking at Floortje's extract, the wedding was framed as a moment of choice, where she deemed the wedding as unnecessary as everything that would legally happen via marriage was already in place. Floortje, therefore, framed the wedding as just a party they wanted to give. This alters the classic ritual of the wedding as the beginning of one's adult life, towards the wedding as a choice that can be taken at any point of life. The smooth temporal running life narrative where big events such as the wedding mark specific life changes become a jagged experience where changes and their connected milestones happen in a different order based on the perception of individual choices and preferences (Bauman 2000, Hoffman 2009).

Nonetheless, the wedding as a forward pushing life event remained an important discourse on the forum, as well as in the interviews. In this section, I connect these narratives with retraditionalisation and postfeminism, where traditional gender roles are reimagined through discourses of choice (Probyn 1993, Hollows 2003). These practices ensure that gender roles and ideals are reconnected with the patriarchal system (McRobbie 2009).

The forum encouraged brides to connect with the community via a forward pushing life rhythm where the wedding was the first step towards a family life, so that the first baby would follow 'naturally' after the wedding. Although the forum did not convey strict rules, the rhythms encouraged the brides to move from the wedding topics to discussions of trying to conceive and the (future) family. It was only through my extensive presence on the forum that I felt how the wedding community was supportive of

children as a logical and desirable step after the wedding. When I started on the forum, I felt uncomfortable about the discussions of motherhood and trying to conceive, and I was not the only one. In June 2013, I was involved in a discussion around this on the Trouwen 2014-topic [trans: Wedding 2014]. I was careful in expressing my opinion but made clear that I would only talk about wedding related activities. My motivation was only partly inspired by my research topic, but also based on my personal preferences, as I feared some people were excluded because of the baby talk on the forum. When time moved on, the comments in the topic started to change and I could see that more and more women on the Trouwen 2013 and later the Trouwen 2014 and 2015-topic were discussing children. I saw Margot and BusyBee move to the children topics, and they slowly became part of the core members of the forum. The women with the Held-status [trans: Hero-status], who were the most loyal posters on the forum, all went through the life rhythms of weddings, pregnancy and motherhood. To connect with their discussions, you had to have children as their discussions mainly focused on these experiences, which excluded members with alternative life narratives to become part of the core forum group. The public performance of bridal perfection in combination with a stable and loving family life located the group strongly in discourses of retraditionalisation and postfeminist perfection (McRobbie 2015). The affective textures that position the group at the centre of the community encouraged other members to follow their leads and become part of their group.

The family as a desirable life narrative is part of retraditionalisation, in a context where access to contraception and delayed motherhood have become a normative part of discussions around women's bodies (McRobbie 2013). This retraditionalisation also shaped the narratives of the brides during the interviews. This was represented, for example, in the act of a father giving his daughter away in marriage. In *Chapter 2: Wedding Cultures* I discussed the connection of this act with patriarchy. However, in my analysis, I follow Thwaites (2017) argument who researched women's motivation to accept their husband's name after marriage. She argued that issues around gender oppression were rarely discussed by her participants, instead, they stated that the choice to take their husband's name was a gesture of love and commitment. Following Hollows' (2003) discussion on choice, it is evident that the experience of choice alters the affective engagement with the practice of name changing that enabled the brides to reframe the act as a positive affirmation of their love.

All the brides I interviewed were given away by their father. On the forum, this was also discussed regularly, as well as ways to ask your father to give you away. These discussions helped to position the act of being given away as a conscious choice, rather than an expectation. I discuss this further via the email-interview I had with Feline. The below extract comes from the email-interview. When I asked her what the most beautiful part of her wedding was she wrote about the moment her father gave her away.

### **Extract 3**

*Feline: Ai... yes, the father-daughter moment was beautiful. He saw me for the first time, got an amazing smile on his face and also some small tears in his eyes. You really feel you are given away and that your dad trusts [trans: toevertrouwd] you to a different man. I thought it was really good [trans: fijn] that my dad gave me away. You know that he accepts your (future) husband and it really adds something extra. Dad's little girl is really grown up now ;-)*

Feline romanticised the experience of being given away and seen by her dad as grown up and ready to embark on the next stage of her life with her “(future) husband”. In her narrative, Feline did not show any awareness of the possibly oppressive meaning of being given away, but simply framed it as “beautiful” and “really good”. She did this by relying on tropes of ideal femininity such as a desire for protection by men. In the extract, this was done via the Dutch word ‘toevertrouwd’ which is a fatherly term and has an air of protection and paternalism. Feeling secure and safe in her father’s trust gave Feline a “really good” feeling. Feline’s narrative is framed through discourses of retraditionalism that are marked through choice whilst romanticising the ‘traditional, and passive role within the domestic sphere’ (Hollow 2003, Petersen 2012: 53). In her retelling of this moment, Feline positioned herself in a more passive position as she approved of her father’s act of giving her away and being entrusted to someone else. Feline’s discussion enabled me to analyse how the affective textures of the romantic allure of a postfeminist sensibility *feel* good. This feeling good of being given away through discourses of choice does not question the broader patriarchal structures that informed the choice, leaving it not only in-tact and uncriticised but also making the feminist critique discursively unavailable as it would spoil the fun of the moment (see for example Ahmed 2010 on the feminist killjoy).

To further analyse how retraditionalisation fuelled the bridal narratives, I move to the interview I had with Esther. She presented the wedding as an essential element of her life narrative that relocated the wedding as a forward pushing rhythm. The extract comes from the end of the interview when I asked Esther why she wanted to get married.

### **Extract 4**

*Esther: yeah, I just think it is, it is still something special, it is still something you promise each other for life and uhm and well that's also how I feel about it. I do not feel like, as otherwise I won't have done it, as otherwise, I don't think you, if you start with the idea well yeah we will see how long it will be nice, then I am like, well, it's maybe better to live together, you know, but then, but then I don't think you should do it. Uhm, so I think it's really beautiful and you can also see it at other weddings that it is just something really special yeah.*

Esther constructed the wedding as “*something special*”, with the wedding connecting her present life with the future. Esther compared the wedding with co-habitation, which for her did not involve the same future commitment. Adam (2004) discussed how working on the future is an intrinsic part of human life that enables us to make sense of our temporal location in the world and to think about ourselves as not merely fleeting and ephemeral. However, the wedding, as a ritual to secure the future, is changing, which is exemplified in the growing divorce rates in Western countries. This complicates Esther’s story, as the wedding’s function to connect the future with the present is no longer taken for granted. In my literature review, I argued that it is exactly the decreasing reliability of the wedding as a ritual of transition to secure future life that fuels the affective textures of the forward pushing narrative of the wedding. As our future lives are increasingly lacking a secure rhythmic structure of how to live well, the retraditionalisation of the wedding provides us with rhythmic security where past, present and future are connected. The retraditionalisation of the wedding is, therefore, more than a revival of classic customs such as being given away by your father or changing your name, nor is it simply an embrace of previous restrictions where women are no longer in danger of being oppressed by their male counterparts.

The forward pushing life narrative of the wedding is embedded in discourses of choice that enable brides to reframe the wedding as a moment of transition in multiple ways. For example, Floortje (extract 2) presented the wedding as a moment to leave behind negative experiences and to change the mood after her father-in-law passed away. For Esther (extract 4), it is the trust in the future that makes the wedding special. The wedding therefore not only holds its affective powerful place through its connection with the heterofamilial good life but enables us to extend our sense of self into the future so that the present becomes less fleeting. I now move on to discuss the wedding planning and how this is done through discourses of control.

#### **4.5. To-do lists and the Affective Bodily Connections**

*‘The clock, we can state quite categorically, changed the meaning of time’*

*(Adam 2004: 113)*

As outlined in the theoretical framework of this chapter, abstract time such as the clock and the calendar enable us to control and plan time, as the sea of movements that shape our world become understandable and manageable through name-giving. This act also creates control over people and spaces, for example, the timetabling of trains that shapes the way people can move between geographical locations (Postone 1993, Adam 2004). This section analyses how discourses of abstract time, planning and control frame the

wedding organisation and labour that goes into the bridal project. I do this by firstly looking at media representations of wedding planning. Although these media representations had different formats, for example, using icons, or tick-lists, the route to the perfect wedding was the same across the different mediated planning boards and presented the wedding organisation as a neatly organised 12-months journey.

The images below come from the Dutch wedding magazine *Bruid en Bruidegom* [trans: Bride and Groom] and my wedding planning/research board on Pinterest. These images are three examples of the wide variety of planning boards and advice literature that is available on wedding planning. The example from *Bruid en Bruidegom* [trans: Bride and Groom] (illustration 15) is a list that is printed in all of their wedding magazines between 4-2012 and 2-2014. Though the layout of the lists changed per issue, the content is (almost) identical.



Illustration 15: *Bruid en Bruidegom* [trans: Bride and Groom] issue no. 2 – 2014 March May

Some materials have been removed from this thesis due to Third Party Copyright. Pages where material has been removed are clearly marked in the electronic version. The unabridged version of the thesis can be viewed at the Lanchester Library, Coventry University

#### Illustration 16: Wedding Planning Boards via Pinterest

The images (illustration 15 and 16) above show a perfectly ordered linear wedding organisation, by presenting the future as under control, achieved by dividing future time into neatly organised boxes. This act removes wedding organisation from its context, creating a sense of time that is abstract so that all wedding preparations can be standardised (Postone 1993, Adam 2004). The generalisation is not only visible in the way time is constructed, but also in the work that should be done. For example, there seemed to be an agreement that the venue and photographer should be arranged a year in advance; the dress was supposed to be ordered nine to six months in advance. The time spent on the wedding organisation became an impersonal and disembodied activity that did not pay attention to the *feelings* of the wedding organisation and how the pressure of the ultimate deadline, the wedding, affected the planning. This represents the wedding organisation through discourses of empty time, with its origin in industrialisation, so that time becomes homogenous, measurable and purely quantitative (Adam 2004).

The representation of wedding planning as empty time did not consider that time feels different at different stages of the organisation, for example, how during the autumn and winter I experienced the forum accounts as stressful (typically around nine to six months before the bride's weddings). The future that is presented on the planning boards is framed as attainable for everyone, as long as one follows the right steps,

which connects these wedding boards with neoliberal discourses of equality and choice. It, therefore, removes any social and cultural differences from the representation, as it does not consider a longer wedding organisation where financial resources were an issue, and sometimes made assumptions about the brides' ability to hire someone to do the planning. I, therefore, argue that these planning boards function as a neoliberal mechanism of control, so that abstract time of calendars and clocks does not merely control the population by signalling the end of the workday, but also reinforces notions of good citizenship where people build their own biographies by following the right steps (Harris 2004). The planning boards constructed the organisation of the perfect wedding as a matter of doing the tasks on the lists, and ticking them off.

To understand how abstract and empty time shaped the bridal discussions of to-do lists, I draw on the GTD-literature, as wedding planning tools heavily draw on techniques that represent the wedding organisation as in need of control and efficiency. The data I cover in this section firstly focuses on the interviews I had with Sara and Feline. Subsequently, I analyse the forum posts. The data from the interviews was slightly different than that from the forums, as the interviews took place after the wedding, whilst the forum records moments before the wedding.

The extract below comes from the interview with Sara when she recounted her joy in the wedding organisation. Subsequently, I asked how she organised this day and what kind of image she had in mind for the wedding:

#### **Extract 5**

*Sara: Yes, I am someone who likes to have things under control and I actually also like to organise things. So I am uhm, uhm, yeah just, uhm, yes, how did I do it. At a certain point we went, I think just about uhm, yeah I was proposed 18 months before the wedding. [...] we decided to keep it quiet [...] . So we have kept it quiet for about 6 months I think and then we have, it was approximately a year before the wedding that we have told everyone. And we have literally, we almost said like okay, then we are now going to do something every month. You know, it doesn't matter what, but uhm in this way we actually cut the whole thing into little pieces. Because also here, I thought like this makes that I can enjoy it to the maximum and and uhm, then nothing needs to be done in a rush or anything. And also that I could line everything up and make a plan of how we want it be, and uhm and how do [name husband] and I want it to be.*

*Francien: Yes.*



*Sara: So, actually that was all really nice, but because of that I could make everything as I wanted it to be, you could say. [...] Many people say like, oh you can easily do it like that in about six months' time. And then I am like yeah, that is possible, but whether it is nice to do it like that, is another question. I have massively enjoyed this as well. [...] I just had a year long, I just sat on a cloud and just enjoying it all.*

In this extract, Sara constructed her story as a desire to keep things under control, connected to her love for organising. This links to Mackenzie (2008) and Gregg's (2015) claims that doing things efficiently and with a good organisation gives us a good feeling as it helps to create a sense that our lives are under control. This exemplifies how neoliberal discourses of 'properly' organising your life and taking control are internalised. That is, the wedding organisation becomes a form of governmentality that is no longer prescribed by the outside world, but deeply internalised (see for example Scharff 2016 for an account on the internalisation of neoliberal discourses of control). The technique Sara used to gain control over the wedding organisation was by compartmentalising the time that was left and the activities that needed to be done. Similar to the wedding boards, she divided the wedding organisation into 12 months where each month was devoted to a set list of actions. Mackenzie (2008) discussed compartmentalising to foster efficiency and effectivity as an essential element of the GTD-movement, as it cuts bigger projects into smaller chunks that can be handled in smaller time frames. This technique decontextualizes the work and presents any project along similar lines of compartmentalisation. In this case, the wedding is turned into a 12-month project to divide the workload.

Sara's account of the organisation was framed as a process of fun and joy. At the end of the extract, she described the planning as something she massively enjoyed for the whole year: *"I just sat on a cloud and just enjoying it all"*. This narrative represents the temporal flow of the organisation as a smooth and undisturbed path that wiped out any tensions and anxieties along the way. Research on contemporary labour practices shows a similar tendency. Duffy (2017) discussed how labour is framed through discourses of love, fun and a narrative of finding your calling. These discourses overlook the actual labour that goes into keeping up, for example, a fashion blog, turning it into a practice where you 'love what you do'. Although Duffy's (2017) work focused on labour practices, I argue that these discourses also apply to the wedding organisation due to the blurring division between leisure and labour spaces. Linking fun and joy with the wedding organisation fits well with the cultural location of the wedding as the ultimate moment of happiness in a woman's life (Ahmed 2010: 41). However, this does not mean that all brides retold their wedding organisation as an easily flowing stream of joy and fun. I turn to this below.

In the email-interview with Feline, she discussed how she hoped the organisation would be finished the day before the wedding, so she would have a calm and quiet day. The hope for downtime before the

wedding was broadly expressed on the forum too. Nonetheless, for many brides the day before the wedding was marked with last-minute preparations. To deal with this, stressed brides used to-do lists to generate an overview of the tasks. In the extract below Feline discussed her experience:

**Extract 6**

*Feline: The day before the wedding I was pretty stressed. There were so many things that needed to be done! Eventually, my mother-in-law made me make a list of things that still needed to be done. [...] That really made a difference. Even when I was in bed and I almost slept... I still had to email the lady from the wedding cake to make sure she didn't forget our wedding day. Within 5 minutes I was calmed down and she assured me that everything would be fine. So eventually, I could sleep peacefully, haha.*

Feline wrote that she “*was pretty stressed*” the day before the wedding, as many “*so many things... needed to be done*”. The coming together of the final temporal and spatial moment in the wedding organisation created a ‘hot spot’, which Feline accounted for as making her worried about the time due to the density of practices (Southerton 2003: 19). To handle the pressure of the ‘hot spot’ Feline discussed how her mother-in-law made her a to-do list to help Feline cope with the stress. This underscores the woman-to-woman space of the wedding which I discussed in *Chapter 2: Wedding Cultures*. Rather than going to her partner for help, Feline’s mother-in-law helped her to cope with the stress by making her a to-do list. These to-do lists are a form of self-management where individuals are encouraged to critically assess their abilities to work efficiently and effectively. Mackenzie (2008) and Gregg (2015) also argued that the popularity of GTD-techniques such as to-do lists are based on the idea that they make you *feel* better. Making to-do lists is therefore not just about efficiency and effectivity, but also about feeling good and living well.

Feline framed part of her anxiety in the concern for the person responsible for the cake. Southerton (2003) stated that delegating tasks decreases your workload, however, it does not help you to *feel* more in control. The labour that goes into coordinating and checking up on others is often experienced as stressful as it is marked by feelings of uncertainty (Southerton 2003). So too in the data, feelings of stress were not so much the result of the amount of work, but how much a sense of control was exercised over the activities.

Based on Feline’s account of the stress she experienced the day before the wedding, I have argued that managing stress is not so much about planning, but about *feeling* in control, which centralises the emotions in GTD-techniques. Managing emotions and feelings about ourselves is mirrored in our broader cultural context, which does not merely focus on disciplining our actions, but how we *feel* about ourselves and the world. Above we witness the centrality of emotions in techniques of planning and control.

The focus on inner well-being is also evident in elements of a postfeminist sensibility<sup>41</sup>, so that looking good is not just a result of working on your physical appearance, but also a matter of loving yourself (Elias, Gill and Scharff 2017). Gill and Elias (2014) referred to this as ‘Love Your Body’ discourses, whilst Banet-Weiser’s (2015b) discussion on confidence focused on girls’ empowerment in relation to international development, creating a girlhood that is produced through discourses of consumption and neoliberal entrepreneurship. This body of work focuses on feeling good with yourself, rather than discussing the increasing demands on young women and girls. I argue that to-do lists should be understood along similar lines, as it moves our attention away from the demands and the growing numbers of responsibilities to feeling good and in control of these activities. The empty and abstract time that is presented in the to-do lists is therefore relocated into the body. This is the result of the ability of to-do lists to not only change how people think about tasks, but also to affect how they feel about themselves.

To analyse the bridal discussion about to-do lists further, I turn to the forum data. The below extract comes from a forum discussion about the stress of the wedding organisation. The discussion started when RocktheBoat stated that she felt overwhelmed by the wedding planning. Maartje, extract 7, replied to this post, and offered RocktheBoat and the other members advice of how to handle the wedding organisation via a list.

#### **Extract 7**

*Reply: Maartje 3.11.2014*

*@ RocktheBoat; What helps me really well, is that I write down all my ideas for the wedding. As a standard, I have a notebook in my handbag and if I think of someone who isn’t on the guest list yet, I write it down immediately (we have a pretty extended guest list, so it’s not an excessive luxury [trans: overbodige luxe]). I do the same with all the other things, if I see something nice for the wedding, write it down! Every now and then, I’ll get my notebook and I write it all down on my laptop with all the other things. It helps me to stay ‘calm’. Though, I also have different days, haha. You just want to do it right! That’s how I feel about it.*

As with Feline (extract 6), Maartje outlined the benefits of the to-do list in terms of how it made her feel, “*it helps me to stay ‘calm’*”, mirroring my previous argument that to-do lists did not merely shape how the brides perceived the tasks at hand but reconnected abstract time management techniques with their bodies. As evidenced by Maartje’s post, I understand the to-do list as not only a technique that affected the bride’s

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<sup>41</sup> The beginning of the 2000s already saw a focus on our inner well-being in L’Oréal’s slogan ‘Because you’re worth it’. See for example G. Mulgan critique on the slogan, available via <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/jun/12/becauseyoureworthit>> [accessed on 23.03.2018]. See also Riley, Evans and Robson (2018) on the complexity of the renewed interest in feeling-good discourses.

feelings about the wedding planning, but also as a disciplinary tool that demanded that the brides worked on the wedding planning constantly.

Maartje's post underscored how constant self-surveillance was maintained through the to-do list. I suggest that a parallel can be seen here between labour practices in a more labour-orientated environment and labour in the leisure space. Duffy (2015) discussed how creative industries demand their workers to be always available, always on, and how switching off is deemed as risky, as the moment you switch off could cost you an important career move. In the wedding organisation, this sentiment meant that the best ideas or the best deals could happen the moment you are not working on your wedding. For Maartje, this could translate in forgetting to invite certain people to her wedding because she did not jot them down on her list. Constant self-improvement is also visible in a postfeminist landscape, demanding that women constantly improve their physical appearance (see the edited collection on beauty politics in neoliberal societies by Elias, Gill and Scharff 2017). The continuous surveillance of one's physical looks is understood as essential to reach feminine perfection. Moving this argument to wedding cultures, reaching perfection can only be obtained via constant surveillance and work. These discourses pushed the brides to be always on their toes, to find the best deals and write down the best ideas. This enabled me to connect the wedding with a postfeminist sensibility on yet another level: time management and organisation as an always on-ness and a constant awareness of the wedding ideal.

The prevalence of time management techniques as the only viable way to deal with stress and increasing demands of always on-ness was also evident on the forum when RocktheBoat posted that the demand to fully orchestrate the wedding took its toll on her and the only solution was time management techniques. There was no mention of down-sizing the amount of work, nor any reference to romantic discourses that it does not matter how the wedding looks as long as you and your partner love each other.

However, although the to-do list acted as a form of self-surveillance, it also became a means of surveillance for others as soon as the lists became public on the forum. During the wedding organisation, the brides shared lists. An example was at the beginning of the chapter: Margot's (Hero-status) extensive to-do list for all her DIY projects. In the same period, Ragdoll (Junior-status) also shared her to-do lists of her DIY projects, which led to an extensive exchange of DIY to-do lists. During this period, it became obvious that Margot's online performance constructed her as doing a better job at keeping up with her workload than Ragdoll. This helped to position Margot's wedding and bridal performance as successful and central within the wedding community. On the Trouwen 2015-topic [trans: Wedding 2015] the brides also shared their to-do lists, as well as lists of what they already accomplished. An example is a post from BruintjeBeer88:

### **Extract 8**

*BruintjeBeer88 26.10.2014*

*Done: dress, council, church, venue afternoon tea, dinner, we have an idea for the invitation, my parents give me jewellery for my graduation.*

*To do: suit (in January due to the autumn/winter collection), rings, decoration, hairdresser, makeup artist, script, H2B is still in doubt about his witnesses, so, therefore, we haven't applied for our wedding yet [trans: ondertrouw]*

*What do you think? A bit on schedule or not?*

I understand sharing these to-do lists as a form of confession that dictates how the wedding organisation should be done. For Foucault (1978), confession culture has moved out of the sphere of religion into every aspect of life, ranging from justice, education, the family and medical spheres. To confess is to speak the 'truth' about yourself, to show your 'true' self to others, and to open this up for criticism and judgement (Foucault 1978: 59). According to Foucault, confession has become so natural to humans that people are unaware of the policing powers of the way they think about themselves and relate to the world, to the point at which 'Western man [sic] has become a confessing animal' (1978: 59). Confession culture and the ethos of the GTD-movement are connected, as efficiency and effectivity are reinforced by making your progress publicly available for scrutiny (Gregg 2015). The policing powers of confession are two-fold as it sets the standards of how to live well for others: for example, in Margot's quick movement through her extensive to-do list. It also encourages a sense of self-criticism. In the discussion of to-do lists, this was mainly directed towards one's own planning and organisation skills. Unlike Margot, who never asked the community for planning advice, in extract 8 BruintjeBeer88 explicitly asked the brides to give their opinion on her progress. Asking for advice was both a reassurance of her progress, as well as a push to keep moving. The bridal community responded positively to BruintjeBeer88, as her progress was understood as being in line with that of the other brides. Displaying BruintjeBeer's progress was therefore not merely a form of self-reflection, but also a check within the community that the others were on track.

Most of the bridal confessions about the progress made were discussed in positive and reaffirming terms. Nonetheless, the community was strict in making sure that everyone kept 'on track', so that brides who lagged behind needed closer scrutiny, creating an ideal bridal subject that was constantly aware of the wedding progress and planning. An example was the posts from Venice about the process of her wedding, to which Sabrina's commented:

### **Extract 9**

*Venice 16.01.2015*

*Oeh, when I read your stories here, I think we are lagging quite far behind all of you. We still need to make the invitations, we still need to order the thank you-presents, and also we haven't made concrete arrangements with the photographer, videographer and DJ yet. I keep thinking we still have time enough (still 3.5 months, so that should be fine... But if I read this, I think I really need to get going....)*

*Reply: Sabrina 16.01.2015*

*Oh Venice, you really need to hurry, you really don't have that much time left*

### **Extract 10**

*Venice 18.01.2015*

*It really made me nervous, so this weekend I worked myself through a massive to-do list. The invitations are designed and ordered, I have gathered some information about the bouquet, and also some other small things we hadn't ordered yet. We will get there :D*

Through comparing herself with the progress the brides shared on the forum, Venice felt she lagged behind in the organisation, and Sabrina confirmed this. The bridal community were the guardians for good wedding preparations, where practices such as to-do lists, always on-ness and constant scrutiny were celebrated. Good bridal subjectivity was framed through postfeminist discourses that demanded the brides constantly worked on the self and aspired to and for perfection (McRobbie 2015). Not living up to these expectations puts the bridal body at risk and in need of regulation and control. Winch (2012) argued that woman-to-woman friendship encourages heterosexual love, shopping, and appropriate feminine practices such as beauty work. In all-women communities such as the wedding forum, I suggest these friendships also shape the women's temporal engagement with wedding practices. Woman-to-woman friendship therefore not only encourages, for example, beautifying practices and decoration skills, but also presents them via strict temporal lines of good planning and always on-ness. This leads to increasing awareness of time and growing discomfort with the temporal engagement with the world. By referring back to the posts, Sabrina's comment, as well as the forum discussions as a whole, Venice rearticulated her temporal experience of the wedding planning: from "*still enough time*" to feeling nervous that she might not have enough time left. The focus on time turned the wedding organisation into a competitive sphere, where not only the style of the wedding was scrutinised, but also the temporal engagement with the wedding organisation. The focus on the bride's temporal engagement also functioned to increase the gender gap, positioning women's organisational skills as essentially different from that of men. The following series of posts illustrate this:

### **Extract 11**

*RozeRoos 16.01.2015*

*I think it's really a man thing, thinking they have still time enough ;) I also have one of those [trans: hier nog zo eentje]*

### **Extract 12**

*Sabrina 16.01.2015*

*Haha, you're so right! Yesterday I made it very clear that I don't want to be organising everything like a crazy idiot in the last three weeks. Everything needs to be done by then. Then I got the questions, but why do you want that then? We still have time enough right? Typical man behaviour.... Pfffff, when I explain to him I also actually want to enjoy our day quite relaxed, he understood it, I think....*

### **Extract 13**

*RocktheBoat 16.01.2015*

*Unfortunately here also a man who thinks that everything can be easily arranged last moment. Since August I tell him every two weeks that we need to ask our witnesses and that we need the copies of their ID's to apply for our wedding [trans: ondertrouw] on January 26. And then he responds quite agitated yeeaaaahhh, I got that by now, I will arrange it well on time. And now the date to apply for the wedding is getting closer, and mister here still needs to ask his second witness and he also needs to 'just' [trans: even] ask for their ID's. While I arranged everything for my witnesses two months before and I also contacted the council to double-check for the 101<sup>st</sup> time if everything is okay and in order.*

*🟢  
🤔 And then I have to – whilst I'm still busy with my final project and I have enough on my plate – keep asking him whether he arranged everything or not. As otherwise he just forgets. And unfortunately, the organisation of the wedding car is exactly the same story.*

*And then he keeps complaining that I'm a control freak and I want to arrange too much ...*

This forum discussion presented the way women engaged with the wedding planning as essentially different from the men's involvement, via statements such as “I also have one of those” (extract 11), or “typical man behaviour” (extract 12). These statements present the men's participation alongside typical masculine discourses of being laid back and not worried. At the same time, these notions were represented by the brides as unhelpful. The brides discussed their bridal engagement alongside postfeminist discourses that

constructed them as in control, and the main organisers of the event. These contradicting discourses of men being laid back and women being in control foster the gendered gap between the bride's and the groom's wedding planning.

The presentation of the essential differences between men and women located the women strongly within feminine discourses. These discourses embodied the danger of being seen as out of control, as historically femininity is constructed through discourses of irrationality (Shildrick and Price 1999: 3). RocktheBoat (extract 13) showed an awareness of the danger she was in of being seen as a “*control freak*” by her husband. Gonick (2006) discussed how neoliberal femininity is represented alongside two seemingly contradicting lines, with, on the one hand, the women who are in control of their lives, and, on the other, the women who are unable to make the most of the renewed space women take in the society. Gonick (2006) argued that these two representations should not be understood as different, but as intertwined, where the ‘failed’ female subject always functions as a warning for the ‘successful’ feminine subject that she is always in danger of losing her grip of the successes that she has obtained. The brides’ engagement with the wedding planning is framed through discourses of always on-ness and constant scrutiny. These discourses deepen the difference between how the groom and the bride were understood in their involvement in the process, which further identified the wedding and its organisation as ‘woman’s business’.

#### **4.6. Time and Affect**

In the previous section, I have outlined the affective textures of the to-do lists, as well as their location within a postfeminist sensibility, creating an ideal bridal subject through discourses of always on-ness. This section aims to complicate the forward pushing narrative of do-lists. I analyse how the wedding planning was not always about the future, but also located out of time and in the present. Below, I complicate discourses of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ planning by looking at a forum discussion about the ‘right’ time to buy the wedding dress. The purchase was typically presented as a ‘must-do’ between nine and six months before the wedding, so getting the dress after the six-month timeframe was understood as ‘late’. In the discussion below, however, Esmeralda complicated these timeframes in the advice she gave Vera about the purchase of the dress.

##### **Extract 14**

*Vera 05.04.2014*

*When do you think it's the right moment to go and look for wedding dresses? I'm a little bit in doubt about that, at the moment it's still more than a year ahead and who says that the new collection isn't much nicer?*



Reply: Esmeralda 05.04.2014

*You often hear that you should really go dress shopping around 8 to 6 months ahead, because of the long delivery time. If I'm right, the new collection usually arrives around October. For us May-brides, that is exactly the right period. But if you really can't wait you can look around sooner, of course. When you've found THE dress, it's just THE dress, whether it's the old or the new collection.*

Vera expressed anxiety about the right moment to look for the dress. Esmeralda responded in a way that initially aligned with wedding advice boards that framed the ideal purchase at least six months before the wedding. As I have already argued, these boards present time and the activities via homogenised clusters that do not consider the affective bridal engagement with the wedding organisation (Nowotny 1994, Adam 2004). Instead, the perfect future wedding is presented as a logical outcome that follows once you have followed all the steps.

The posts, however, complicated this clear-cut representation of the future as it questioned whether the dress purchase of nine to six months before the wedding would lead to the perfect wedding day and dress. To analyse the uncertain connection between the present and the future, I draw on Berlant's (2011) impasse. The impasse enabled me to think about time as beyond our understanding, complicating the modern belief that life can be planned to guarantee a better future (e.g. planning to have the perfect wedding dress in the future by buying it on time). Looking at the extract, the journey towards the perfect wedding dress cannot be obtained via a simple step-by-step guide. Vera doubted whether the most beautiful dress would be in this wedding dress collection or the next. Buying a wedding dress around nine to six months before the wedding did not give any guarantee about the perfection of the dress, as any previous or next collection might be better than the current one.

The movement of time, therefore, did not push towards a better future, as perhaps the chance of finding the best wedding dress already passed, locating perfection not in the future but in the past, namely the older collections. This possibility made it uncertain whether the perfect wedding was within reach or not, as there was no clear future moment that guaranteed Vera's dream of a beautiful wedding dress would come true. Instead, the perfect dress was positioned either in the past, the older collection, or as timeless, so that finding the perfect wedding dress can happen at any point. Framing the possibility of finding the dress as timeless happened at the end of the post, when Esmeralda rejected a longing for a better collection or moment in time: "*THE dress*" was timeless. She did this by stating that once you have found "*THE dress*", it did not matter if it comes from the newer or older collection. Finding and looking for the dress became ahistorical, deeming everything that came before the dress (older collection) or after the dress (newer collection) irrelevant. This positions the search for the wedding dress outside any schemes of

planning, and therefore outside the forward pushing narrative of the to-do lists and planning boards. Good bridal planning skills therefore also needed to embrace uncertainty by intuitively experiencing the ultimate moment to find “*THE dress*”.

Having rethought the clear-cut connection between past, present and future in wedding planning, I now analyse the affective connections between the bridal bodies and the wedding planning by exploring how feelings of stress alter the forward pushing narrative. To do so, I look at the forum and how the brides used it as a space to discuss the stress and doubts they experienced during the organisation. The post comes from RocktheBoat when she discussed her ‘breekmomentje’ [trans: break moment], which was the moment she broke under the pressure of the wedding organisation. This breekmomentje took place at a time when many other brides experienced similar feelings of stress and anxiety.

### **Extract 15**

*RocktheBoat 03.11.2014*

*I have a little break moment [trans: breekmomentje]... Do you also have those moments that you are completely overwhelmed by all the things so you just don't know how to handle it all? At the moment there are happening so many things here, both with the wedding and with other things (pressure and stress around my final project [trans: afstuderen], many family things etc.) and I just have the feeling I can't cope with it at the moment, like it's all going too quick for me. Is there any chance any of you have any tips to make it easier?*

RocktheBoat's post discussed a moment when she lost control over the wedding organisation and wanted “*tips to make it easier?*” Researching the present is hard (if not impossible), as we never know when the present begins and ends (Berlant 2011: 4). Nonetheless, I read this post as a reflection of an affective moment in the present, as RocktheBoat framed her feelings as in that moment.

Berlant (2011) argued that our interaction with the present first comes to us via our feelings and emotions at that specific temporal moment. The ‘present is [therefore] perceived, first, affectively’ (Berlant 2011: 4). For example, the moment someone scares you, you first experience this moment as an intense affective response where your heart rate increases and your hands start shaking. As soon as you realise that nothing is the matter, you calm down. Berlant discussed the present as a ‘mediated affect’ as it is through our affective engagement with the world we experience the present (2011: 4). The experience of the present is constantly changing and it is only after the event that we can make sense of the experience by orchestrating it. The present then turns into a ‘collective event or an epoch on which we can look back’ (Berlant 2011: 4). It is only when the experience of the moment fades away that the experience becomes an object, so that it becomes fairly stable and can be discussed and analysed. Williams (1977) also discussed

how affective textures are connected to a specific moment in time, so that the same affective responses cannot be relived outside that moment.

I use Berlant's (2011) discussion of the present as affectively known to us to make sense of RocktheBoat's break moment<sup>42</sup> (extract 15). For RocktheBoat the break moment in the wedding organisation consisted of many things that came together, which deeply affected her. This translated into feeling overwhelmed and broken. The emotional account of her experience on the forum resonates with contemporary confessional cultures as a way for the subject to become recognised as an authentic subject in our culture (Foucault 1978). I argue that RocktheBoat's post is not yet an object, but a mediated affect that is first and foremost felt and sensed. RocktheBoat discussed her feeling in the post and indicated why it happened, but her post did not feel like a clearly and neatly organised story where she reflected on the event, rather it was saturated by her emotional experience of that moment. RocktheBoat gained a sense of recognition from the other forum members through the high volume of posts that acknowledged her feelings. Below I have reproduced some of these posts. None of these posts reflected the experience of the moment like RocktheBoat's post, but are fairly stable narratives that have become objects of experience.

#### **Extract 16**

*Reply: MissChaos 03.11.2014*

*@breekmoment: I really recognise this!!! Every so often I really have those moments I'm completely done with it.... And at other moments I really like to be looking around for stuff [trans: weer heerlijk aan het zoeken].*

#### **Extract 17**

*Reply: BruintjeBeer88*

*@breekmomet: here some recognition too! Sometimes I feel like there is still soooooo much I need to do, and later I'm like oh well I've actually done quite a lot of things really. So well, my feelings are swinging back and forth. There are also things I don't have to arrange: no cake, no transport.*

In her post, RocktheBoat (extract 15) asked for advice from the other brides on how to cope with the amount of work and stress she experienced during the wedding preparations. Reading through the posts, none of the brides provided RocktheBoat with advice, but merely reaffirmed her feelings by stating that they had

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<sup>42</sup> I am aware that RocktheBoat discursively accounts for her affective experience, however, the post gives the impression that for RocktheBoat the experience is not yet an epoch or event to look back on, as she seems to still try to come to terms to what is happening to her.

felt the same. This gives the impression that feeling overwhelmed was deemed a normal part of the wedding preparations. Although the brides uniformly agreed with RocktheBoat's experience of being overwhelmed by the preparations, their narratives were different. Where RocktheBoat's narrative was a mediated affect circling around her account of feeling unable to "*cope with it at the moment*", MissChoas (extract 16) and BruintjeBeer88 (extract 17) reaffirmed this feeling, but they did not discuss a *moment* they felt overwhelmed as well. Their account focused on general engagement with the wedding planning as both a lot of work as well as something they enjoyed. Their experience of the wedding planning is therefore presented as an object of reflection, as they discussed the event as a whole and have orchestrated it via different feelings. For example, BruintjeBeer88 discussed her experience of the wedding planning on a broader scale when she stated that her feelings moved back and forth. The different nature of the responses was fostered by the different temporal moments of the bridal replies, as they are no longer in the affective moment of feeling overwhelmed and stressed by the wedding organisation. The temporal difference they experienced enabled them to analyse their feelings and locate their feelings in relation to the wedding preparations as a whole.

To summarise the previous section, I have complicated the forward pushing narrative of planning boards via Berlant's (2011) impasse, which disrupts our ability to plan our lives, as we are never fully aligned with the movements of time and society. In the below, I further suggest that the ideal wedding as the endpoint of the bridal organisation functions as a *potential* of bridal beauty and perfection. Framing the wedding organisation as a potential opens up ways to think about it as an aspirational, open future, rather than as the previously defined project of perfection that needs to be obtained. I argue that obtaining the wedding ideal was not what pushed the wedding planning forwards, but it was the hope and possibility of becoming beautiful.

Esmeralda's dieting story provided a good example of hope in the bridal accounts. Esmeralda started planning her wedding in 2012, but did not marry until 2015. I spent a lot of time with her on the Trouwen 2015-topics where she was one of the most loyal posters. Part of this extensive wedding planning was a dieting regime. Esmeralda hoped to lose 45 kilos before her wedding day, which would mean that she would be able to fit in a wedding dress size 38/40 (UK size 10/12). When she looked back on her planning in October 2014 she stated: "*You have much more time to orientate properly and you can plan exactly how you want it to be. ... And of course not unimportant I had a nice long time to work on my weight. 🤔*". This post located the dieting regime as a central element of the wedding preparations.

During her time on the forum, Esmeralda had a ticker as part of her profile, which was displayed under each post. Tickers were used regularly on the forum as many brides had a ticker to count down the time before the wedding, and some brides had a ticker to keep track on their dieting goals.

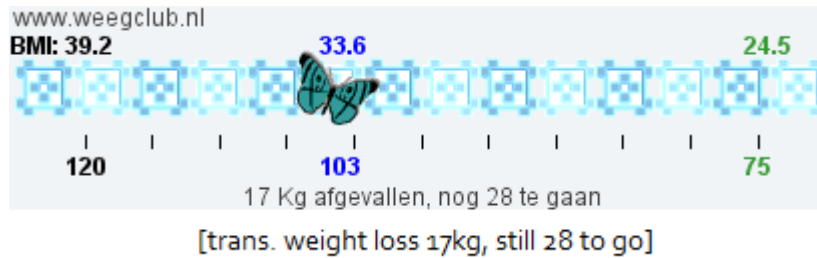


Illustration 15: Esmeralda's Ticker

The ticker linearly presented Esmeralda's dieting activities, with a clear beginning and endpoint. The distance between beginning and endpoint were evenly divided into bands that did not consider how the dieting felt or was experienced at different temporal moments. The diet was represented along the same line as the industrial clock, removing it from the spatial and embodied location (Adam 2004).

Coleman (2010) has researched dieting regimes and how they represent the present/future relationship in linear ways. Drawing on Nowotny's (1994) extended present, Coleman (2010) suggested that dieting rhetoric pulls the future into the present via planning and organisation, so that the future body can be shaped in the now. At the same time, the forward movement of time was kept intact, as despite the desire to influence the future from the present, the future was still kept at a distance, so that the ideal weight was still beyond reach. Coleman (2010) rethought the way dieting is framed as a predetermined process where the agency of women is heavily constrained by the forward pushing model of the dieting regime. She did this by looking at the WeightWatchers website, and how the interface of the website enabled women to think about their dieting activities along diverse temporal lines, so that the process of dieting was not just future-oriented, but hopeful, which enabled the website to present dieting as enabling and potential (Coleman 2010: 280).

The static and one-directional character of the ticker used on the forum did not allow for the same level of complexity as the interface of the WeightWatchers website. To frame Esmeralda's dieting story as enabling and with potential, I turn to Esmeralda's discussions on the forum. Esmeralda's dieting activities were connected with the wedding planning and her bridal becoming, especially the purchase of the dress. This was evident in the way Esmeralda linked the anticipation for her wedding dress purchase with her diet. For example:

**Extract 18**

17.02.2014

*I also can't wait before I can go dress shopping. I already know exactly what I want, but I need to have some patience. I'm in the middle of a diet and I have another 23 kilos to go.*

This post can be read as the moment where dieting limited Esmeralda's self-expression, preventing her from dress shopping. In September 2014 (extract 19), however, Esmeralda did decide to look for her wedding dress, although she had not reached her ultimate dieting goal. During the first fit, she found her wedding dress and ordered it in her size, a size 44 [UK size 18]:

**Extract 19**

22.09.2014

*I have ordered my dress in a size 44, but at the moment this size is way too loose, but a 42 is actually way too tight 😞. This actually should have been a motivation to really get going now and to make sure I can really fit in a size 42, but at the moment it just doesn't really go that quick.*

What is clear in these posts are the fluctuations in control over the dieting project. This was mirrored in the wavering focus on her diet in her other posts. As time went on, she no longer linked her diet to her wedding and her dress, nor did she talk about her diet and her butterfly ticker stopped moving towards her end goal. Rather than framing this halted dieting practice as a failed diet, I understand this by positioning it within the idealisation of bridal beauty. This bridal beauty gains its affective powers from its promise and not so much from its lived reality. Such cruel optimism is an attachment to a hope for a better future that will never arrive (Berlant, 2011). For Esmeralda, the better future was that she would become the slim bride. However, the image never materialised, since contemporary discourses of postfeminist perfection are unattainable. Similarly, Coleman and Moreno Figuerroa (2010) stated that beauty is always experienced away from the present, firmly located in the past and/or in the future.

For both Berlant (2011) and Coleman and Moreno Figuerroa (2010), hope is not just a negative and futile investment in a dream that will never come to be, but provides us with a reason to keep going and to make sense of the world around us. In Coleman and Moreno Figuerroa's (2010) research on women's and girls' perception of their past and future beauty, this future self was never presented in concrete terms, for example, highlighting specific actions to gain that future image of beauty. Rather, the future was presented as a space where it will be better and where everything that is wrong with the body will disappear (Coleman and Moreno Figuerroa 2010: 367-368).

I argue that, for Esmeralda, her perfect bridal self, a slim size 38, was never meant to materialise, but functioned as an ideal hope that orientated her towards the future. This was aspirational normalcy (Berlant 2011: 170), where being beautiful was not about being extraordinary, but being 'normal' and able to blend in with the world. The bridal beauty was therefore not understood as reaching perfection, but instead was a beauty that does not have to be defended (Berlant 2011: 170). I have already explored this in

relation to bridal beauty when I argued that becoming a beautiful bride was understood by brides as feeling comfortable with your looks, set against a cultural expectation of bridal becomings (Broekhuizen and Evans 2016, see appendix 10). I suggest that, for Esmeralda, this would not necessarily have meant reaching the end of her ticker, but losing some weight to feel better about herself. The dieting project was therefore not about reaching the ultimate end goal, but also about the possibility of becoming slim and beautiful in the future.

#### **4.7. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have analysed the brides' wedding planning via temporality, whilst drawing on my conceptual framework of postfeminist perfection, happiness and retraditionalisation. I first talked through the rhythmic movements on the forum and how this shaped the forum's affective textures. Subsequently, I discussed the individual retelling of the rhythms that shaped the wedding organisation. This enabled me to research how social rhythms affect individual rhythms. Via Southerton's (2003) 'hot spots', I argued that concentrations of tasks and time not only give a sense of stress and hurry at the moment itself, but also how these 'hot spots' seep out of one specific moment to cause stress when 'hot spots' are anticipated. I moved on to outline how the wedding as a forward pushing life narrative is disrupted in neoliberal times where individuals are increasingly responsible for the formation of their life biography. Subsequently, I discussed the planning boards in popular media that presented the wedding organisation via notions of abstract time, fostering neoliberal discourses of equality and working on the self. I moved on to research how to-do lists, as a GTD-technique of time management, were picked up by the brides. These techniques fostered a sense of efficiency and effectivity, and I argued that it is the feeling of being in control that made these to-do lists so attractive for the brides. This relocates abstract time back into the bridal body. I moved on to connect time management techniques with postfeminist discourses, arguing that these techniques create an ideal bridal subject of always on-ness, blurring the lines between the public and the private. Subsequently, I showed how the forward pushing narrative of the wedding planning is complicated via an affective engagement with elements of the wedding organisation, for example, when to purchase the wedding dress. On the forum, finding 'The Dress' was not merely presented as something that needed to be done at a specific moment, namely six months before the event, but was also presented via a sense of being outside of time, so that the perfect wedding dress was located at any point of time, even in the past. Lastly, I discussed how the ideal image of bridal beauty, which was presented as the ultimate end goal, did not have to be brought into the present, as it was the hopeful possibility of bridal beauty that fuelled the affective bridal engagement with the image.

To connect the empirical analysis of this chapter with my overarching framework, I now draw out what this chapter means in terms of happiness and retraditionalisation via the notion of the perfect

(McRobbie 2015). Adding to contemporary writings on postfeminism and the connection with neoliberal discourses of efficiency, effectivity and self-regulation, this chapter has outlined how these discourses are set to work in relation to the wedding planning. The prevalence of professionalised discourses within such personal experience as the wedding has highlighted the continued breakdown of the difference between the public and the private. This also links with my conceptual framework of retraditionalisation, highlighting how the role of the bride (and its future orientation towards the wife) has become more central in the public space, not only through the location of the work ethos in the preparation of the wedding but also through the growing visibility of the wedding, such as in wedding media and online discussions forums.

However, this chapter has pushed this claim further by looking at ways to complicate these current findings and discussions. I have done this by connecting postfeminism and retraditionalisation with literature around happiness, perfection and affect studies. This has enabled me to complicate the forward pushing narrative of planning and perfection, by bringing to the fore the affective and hopeful dimension of the wedding dream. As I have suggested, one part of this argument is that the excitement, stress, anticipation and pressure of the wedding planning is not contained to the bridal body itself, but flows within the affective structures of the wedding planning assemblage. Here, I have mainly referred to the wedding forum, but I have also touched upon the broader cultural and social expectations of what it means to be a bride and (young) women in contemporary postfeminist societies. The second part of the argument involves the anticipation and organisation towards the perfect wedding. Here I claim that the dream of the perfect wedding and its planning does not simply follow the meritocratic and neoliberal logic of getting what you want via hard work and consumer practice. This would make the wedding dream a closed, static and one-directional destination. Instead, I claim that the perfect wedding does not function as an endpoint, but as an affective affirmation that shapes the engagement with the wedding itself, as well as the preparations as a whole. This makes it possible to focus on the affective textures that the perfect wedding creates across the whole wedding assemblage, so that, for example, the ‘not so slim and perfect body’ of Esmeralda does not have to be viewed through notions of ‘failure’ but as a possibility.

In the next chapter, Materiality, I move away from the less tactile part of the wedding, temporality, to the material objects of the wedding. I focus on the promise of happiness and how this promise has shaped the material organisation of the wedding. I also use the notions enchantment to rethink the connection between the brides and the wedding objects.



# Chapter 5.

## Materiality

*Deborah89: My biggest [DIY] project was making 1000 crane birds*

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Illustration 18: Image crane birds project Deborah89

*Trouwen2013: I think having your own wedding logo is super romantic*

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Illustration 19: The wedding logo Margot printed on the aprons<sup>43</sup>

### 5.1. Introduction

This chapter analyses the location of objects in the wedding assemblage and how these objects are linked to the promise of happiness. A significant part of the analysis focused on the bridal DIY activities that were discussed on the forum, especially the topic Do It Yourself-Projectjes [trans: Do It Yourself-Projects]. In this topic the brides shared their DIY projects and sought advice and encouragement for their work. The images above (illustration 18 and 19) came from the forum and relate to the DIY activities the brides shared. The first image was posted by Deborah89, showing her DIY project on the day of the wedding. Before the wedding, Deborah89 folded 1000 origami crane birds. The forum members were kept up-to-date by

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<sup>43</sup> Removed names couple to ensure anonymity

counting the creation of the 1000 birds, as Deborah89 regularly posted how many birds she had folded and the total number of birds. Occasionally, she posted photos of the birds. The birds were used to decorate the venue and were included in some of the wedding photography. The second image is part of Margot's DIY wedding and depicts the logo she used for her wedding. Trouwen2013 commented on the image by stating that she thought the wedding logo was "*super romantic*". I return to the connection between branding and DIY in this chapter when I analyse how DIY practices and discourses of branding are used to create a distinct and recognisable wedding.

Thus, this chapter taps into broader research in the field by linking materialism, in the form of DIY projects, but also later the physical object of the wedding dress, in terms of retraditionalisation. In doing so, this chapter aims to add to contemporary postfeminist research on perfection by analysing the bridal narratives on creating a perfectly styled universe. The location of the happy objects is central here, and, through Ahmed's (2010) work on happiness, I research how retraditionalisation shape the formation of contemporary wedding culture. In addition, this chapter adds to analyses of the more-than-human, by bringing to the front the intra-acting mechanisms of DIY and the agentic powers of the materials within the wedding assemblage. This, I argue, works to complicate neoliberal notions of human agency, planning and perfection.

Before I start the analysis of the DIY activities, I take a closer look at the way the brides discussed wedding objects. In doing so, I analysed which objects were deemed as happy wedding objects and which objects were seen as inappropriate carriers of the happiness promise. I do this by focusing on the interviews. Subsequently, I move on to discuss the bridal DIY projects and their connection to the promise of happiness. Here, I not only focus on the objects themselves, but also on the way the DIY objects and crafting practices functioned as identity projects that acted as the glue connecting the bride to the bridal community. Lastly, I move to the interviews again when I focus on Ilse's discussion of having a custom-made wedding dress. This section analyses how the wedding dress was produced out of different sets of materials and how the different elements affected Ilse and her bridal transformation. Throughout the chapter, I mainly draw on the work of Sara Ahmed (2010) and her writing regarding the promise of happiness, so before moving on with the analysis of the data I outline the theoretical framework of this chapter.

## **5.2. Materiality, DIY and Enchantment**

This section provides the theoretical framework for this chapter, which focuses on the promise of happiness and how this promise gets stuck to objects. Ahmed discussed how objects become 'sticky' and laden with the promise of happiness (2010: 44). The happiness that is attached to the object does not reside in the object - it does not contain happiness. Rather, the happiness that gets stuck onto objects 'is a matter of how things make an impression' (Ahmed 2010: 44). Ahmed already discussed impressions in 2004, when she

analysed how coming into contact with objects, such as the moment you accidentally hit a table, leaves an impression on people: it leaves a mark. I discuss this in more detail in *Chapter 6: Embodiment*. However, to provide a brief overview here, the impression that marks a person is a result of the affective textures of the object, for example, the impression that makes you feel good or bad. These feelings are not mutually exclusive, but often include both positive and negative feelings. The impression of feeling good and/or feeling bad is what follows after the object, so that proximity to these objects is supposed to affect you positively and/or negatively. For example, looking at my wedding dress makes me feel good as I had a great day. Equally, my wedding dress holds negative feelings as I do not know whether I will fit it again following two pregnancies. This connects with Ahmed where she stated that ‘objects become saturated with affect as sites of personal and social tension’ (2010: 44). Social expectations of ideal femininity as slender become attached to the dress and therefore function as a site of anxieties about the body.

The wedding dress is linked to ideals of classic bridal beauty and heterosexual romantic love. The discourse of bridal beauty gives me both good and bad feelings, as I felt very beautiful on that day but not fitting the dress anymore would mean I am not as slender as I was, which does contain negative feelings despite the knowledge that a body changes through time especially after a pregnancy and given my feminist identifications (see Riley and Scharff 2013 for a detailed discussion on the contradictions of feminism and femininity). Objects, therefore, get their meanings inscribed in relation to their cultural context and the stories that are told about them. The cultural location of the wedding dress has already turned it into a happy object due to its proximity to notions of the good life in, for example, fairy tales, romantic novels and in contemporary chick-flick and chick-lit. The inscription of these meanings is not neutral nor fixed, but takes place through ‘material and symbolic struggles’ (Skeggs 2004: 5), which constitutes those objects that become more valuable and respected than others. In these processes of struggle, cultural spaces are important elements in the way objects gain their symbolic value. The wedding dress, therefore, has a more significant location in the wedding’s happiness promise in comparison to the groom’s suit, which is also part of a range of other contexts and narratives. This value is not fully fixed, as objects can travel across different spaces and gain a different meaning. However, the possibilities of changing the symbolic value are not endless. For example, the value of the white wedding changed from a colour for the royal and rich when Queen Victoria first introduced it, to a colour that was only suitable for first time (virgin) brides, to the standard wedding dress colour for brides from all walks of life (in particular cultural contexts).

The promise objects carry is therefore never fully positive or negative, so that despite a shared orientation towards objects as being good, they can still generate conflicting feelings. In the data analysis, the focus was mainly on the positive effects of the objects that were shared, due to the cultural discourses that surround the wedding (e.g. ‘the happiest day of your life’). This also highlights the political nature of the feelings that accumulate around the objects, as these were carriers of our social ideas of what we should

aspire to and what we should keep at bay. In this case, the belief that the wedding is, or should be, the happiest day is what fuelled the data and the bridal narratives.

The social and cultural value that is part of the happy objects also affects how we are supposed to orientate ourselves towards happy objects. Throughout our lives, we learn to like happy objects and seek their proximity. We also learn to dislike objects that guide us away from the happiness promise (Ahmed 2010). This means that taste, and a desire for the right objects is a political act that creates a moral economy based on those who desire the right objects and those who desire the wrong objects.

In her writing, Ahmed (2010) paid close attention to the way these political layers of the happiness promise create desired objects and subject positions. Ahmed (2010) is interested in the way subjects are othered and pushed away from the centre. For example, she discussed via a series of films how queer subjects are pushed away from the narrative of kinship and the passing through of objects throughout generations (e.g. through inheritance). Ahmed (2010) discussed how emotionally valuable objects moved away from queer partners, to the 'rightful' family who was to inherit all the objects from the deceased loved one. What Ahmed (2010) did not discuss is how the promise of happiness works to reinforce the position of the centre. This chapter is particularly focused on this aspect, as it analyses how happy objects work to create a shared orientation towards the good life and heterosexual romantic love within a group of heterosexual women. I analyse how the women constructed a story that focused around this vision of the good life, and a hope that the good life will follow as long as one is in its proximity.

Some of the stories the brides told were connected to clearly defined wedding objects, such as the wedding dress, the bouquet or the ring. However, some of these stories were connected to more mundane objects such as chairs, balloons, garlands and pieces of fabric. When looking at the stories told about everyday objects, many of those stories are lost because they are not deemed worthy enough to share with the world. Mackley and Karpovich's (2012) work documented people's narratives about personal and mundane objects, giving people a space to talk about the importance of these objects. The stories their participants told indicated that people harbour affective ties with these seemingly unimportant objects, such as a wooden rolling pin, pen stand, and a small toy house. The affective textures these objects hold turned them into 'talkative objects' (Mackley and Karpovich 2012: 127). This means that these objects generate many stories and associations, because of the emotional value objects carry. When mapping what makes an object more talkative than another, it is often precisely the personal connection that generates the story.

Miller (2008) also explored this when he looked at the lives of ordinary people living in London and the material objects they hold close in their homes. As a guideline for his research, Miller (2008) used the idea that there is a strong relationship between people and objects, which is not random but in harmony. This enabled Miller to think about the streets of London not as an arbitrary collection of things, but as 'harmony, order and balance' (2008: 5).

In my research, an important aspect of the orientation towards the good life via happy objects was the production of DIY objects. To frame this process, I move on to discuss some literature regarding DIY practices and how it is linked with ideas surrounding femininity, art and craft, as well as the divide between the public and the private. Historically, DIY practices and crafts were linked to the home and the feminine sphere. Examples of these kinds of practices are embroidering, knitting and crochet. The location of these crafts inside the house means the labour that goes into the production of these artefacts was out of sight (Parker 2010). The invisibility of female labour is a recurring aspect in feminist discussions. For example, Friedan (1965) argued that housekeeping and looking after the family are not deemed as work, as it is done through love for the family.

To understand the DIY practices of the brides, I locate my discussion in research that questions the confined feminine spaces of the house and the private as the appropriate space to engage with crafting. An example is the 'Wombs of Washington', where knitted wombs were left at the Supreme Court of Washington (Pentney 2008). Activities like this are often referred to as craftivism, and bring to the forefront the political and public elements of crafting, or in this case knitivism as it specifically concerns the act of knitting, making the labour that goes into the production visible (Pentney 2008). Another example that has pushed craft into the public sphere is the Stich 'n' Bitch movement. This is a global online and local community of crafters that brought knitters and stitchers together in cafes and hotels via their connection to online Stich 'n' Bitch groups (Minahan and Cox 2007, Harris 2010). Although the brides on the forum did not actively discuss a desire to move the female labour of DIY outside the confined space of the house, their online discussions, as well as the publicity on national wedding media (see for example Margot's wedding, discussed later in the chapter), did create visibility of their craft labour and moved it out of the house. The connection between crafting and online spaces, therefore, alters the representation of contemporary craft compared to more traditional predecessors. The connection between online spaces and crafting is a reoccurring aspect of research into the social and cultural location of contemporary craft.

One of the elements of Minahan and Cox's (2007) research into Stich 'n' Bitch was the connection between online communities and crafting, where they argued that crafting and online spaces are deeply connected. Their argument that crafting and digital spaces are connected is not new; Wajcman (2004) already argued that knitting patterns and computer coding are very similar (knit/purl versus zero/one). The connection between craft and technology is also fostered by the possibilities online spaces provide to share work with others and to gain advice. This also moves crafting outside the space of the house into the public sphere (Gauntlett 2011). This element is essential for locating the bridal DIY discussions on the forum. Above I have outlined craft as a feminist concern. I now discuss the difference between craft and arts.

Gauntlett (2011) argued that craft is deemed as less valuable, political and transformative than arts, as craft is rooted in the body, the everyday and the practical elements of making, whilst arts enables the

maker to transcend aspects of making by thinking about the practice and adding layers of critique and politics thought to their work. To think about the difference between art and craft, Dormer (1994, in Gauntlett 2011: 23) discussed this as ‘the separation of ‘having ideas’ from ‘making objects’’. Here, having ideas is linked to art, whilst making objects is linked to craft. This distinction underlines the gendered (and classed) dimensions of craft compared to art, by positioning craft in the domain of femininity (and the working class) (Minahan and Cox 2007, Parker 2010). Through the work of John Ruskin and William Morris, Gauntlett provided a critique of this by stating that both art and craft are the outcome of creativity (2011: 25). Through this critique Gauntlett (2011), argued that the distinction between craft and art needs to be rethought, so that it does not privilege classed and gendered forms of creativity, above the creativity of the everyday life.

To further frame the bridal DIY activities, I use the term craft culture or ‘fabriculture’. Bratich and Brush referred to this as ‘a whole range of practices usually defined as the ‘domestic arts’: knitting, crocheting, scrapbooking, quilting, embroidery, sewing, doll-making’ (2011: 234). Based on the activities the forum members discussed, I add some new forms of crafting to this list, such as designing and crafting invitations and making bouquets. Most of the brides engaged in a range of different craft practices throughout their wedding preparation. Many of these were put on platforms like Pinterest, and this enabled me to include digitally inspired crafting alongside purely offline located practices. Combining different forms of crafting, such as making bouquets and designing wedding invitations is in line with Starr Johnson and Wilson’s (2005) research on women and handcrafting. They also saw that the women in their research mostly engaged in multiple forms of crafting and developed their skills via an array of crafting activities.

To analyse the bridal DIY practices, I use Luckman (2015) whose work enables me to not solely focus on the maker, but to include the agentic powers of the *materials* in the craft process. The object is not just a result of the maker’s hands but comes out of the enchanted connection between the maker and the materials. To frame enchantment, Luckman (2015: 75) drew from Bennett (2001, 2010), who perceived enchantment as a feeling of being connected: first, a part of humans who *feel* enchanted, and; second, the agency of the things that produce effects in humans and in bodies (Bennett 2010: pxii). Bennett also discussed enchantment as a surprise that takes place during an ‘encounter with something that one did not expect’ (2001: 104). The surprising encounter is not merely a result of meetings with other humans, but can also flow out of our connection with the material world. For Bennett (2010), objects hold a level of agency over our lives and the world. This means that it is not only humans but also non-humans that can be understood as agentic in the process of crafting. Matter itself should, therefore, be seen as lively, so that the difference between subjects and objects is minimised (Bennett 2010: 13). This view, to assign agency not only to the human maker but also to the material objects (e.g. of dresses, flip-flops, rings and corsets) fits with my methodological framework that redistributes the agency of the researcher into the assemblage.

Analysing the bridal craft practices draws from the same methodological standpoint, so that I can think about the crafting process as more than the result of the human mind, but as an interplay between lively hands and lively materials. I now start analysing the location of objects in the bridal narratives and how some objects were able to catch the promise of happiness, whilst others were kept at a distance. Connecting Ahmed's (2010) writing on happiness with wedding cultures enabled me to bring concrete consequences to the interplay of happiness and materiality.

### **5.3. More than just objects**

This section analyses the location of objects in the brides retelling of their wedding experiences. The analysis mainly focuses on the connection of wedding objects with the promise of happiness. This section uses the data from the interviews with Sara, Anne, Mara and Esther. I start with the Skype interview I had with Sara and the importance of the wedding related objects in her account of the wedding experience.

For all the interviews, I asked the brides to bring an object that reminded them of their wedding. I started the interview with Sara by asking which objects she had chosen, however, Sara stated that she did not bring an object as *"there was not really one... I'm not really into objects"*. She also assured me that if there was anything I wanted to see, she would show me as everything was in her house. So, rather than having one object to represent her wedding experience, the interview led us through the house while Sara gave me a tour through different wedding objects: the dictionary that served as the guestbook, the bouquet she loved at first but thought was unpractical on the day itself, the enlarged wedding photos in the hallway, the photo album, the memory chest her husband received from his parents containing all kinds of objects from his youth, and her memory chest that she made after the wedding. The memory chest itself contained all kinds of objects that reminded her of the day.

I draw on Miller (2003) to understand the conflicting narrative Sara constructed around the wedding objects, namely stating their unimportance, whilst at the same time keeping them close to her in the home. He argued that we often do not 'see' the objects in our lives, because they are so ingrained in how we think about ourselves. Concerning Sara's extract, this means that, for her, the wedding objects were such a part of her life that she was unable to 'see' them. For Miller (2003) it is this taken-for-granted nature of objects that makes them so powerful. As discussed above, Ahmed (2010) argued that objects are not neutral things in our lives, but carry a promise in the way their affective textures can leave an impression on us. For Sara's wedding objects, the happiness of the day circles around these objects. The good feelings of these objects were not merely Sara's personal wedding experience, but also the social and cultural meaning of the wedding, so that Sara's objects were laden with the promise of the wedding as the marker of a good life through heterosexual romantic love. The invisibility of the happy wedding objects makes it even harder to contest their social and cultural meaning, as Sara was not consciously aware of the importance of the objects

in her life, let alone their political dimension of centralising normative heterosexual behaviour and desire (Miller 2003: 5).

To further analyse the location of objects in the wedding organisation, I move to the below extract from the interview I had with Sara. The extract gives a detailed retelling of Sara's memory of the first time she saw the venue. She framed this experience via the objects that filled the space, creating a vivid image of what the space looked and felt like.

#### **Extract 20**

*Sara: Well, from the dunes we already saw it - this is going to be the one, this is it [a beach house]. And then we walked down and they were really playing some sort of lounge music and you could sit in some sort of director chairs, you know, those, those a bit those folding chairs, with those fabric at the backs ... and they had those lovely lounge sofas and just the atmosphere, and also just how the building looked like, well straight away it just felt like, this is it. End of the story.*

Despite the key location of objects like the dress, rings and bouquets as a happy wedding object, Sara's narrative indicates that the promise of happiness can also stick onto seemingly insignificant objects such as chairs, sofas and lounge music. Sara accounted for the experience of her wedding via those simple objects by using them to create a good atmosphere and a feeling of "this is it". Sara's narrative the objects became part of the stories she told about the wedding day, so that the promise of the perfect wedding day got stuck on the chairs, sofas and lounge music (Ahmed 2010). Mundane objects, therefore, became a materialisation of what the good life should look like. In Sara's overarching narrative, this good life also focused on heterosexual love and feminine perfection. But, through Sara's interview, we see how this did not stay limited to objects such as the wedding dress, but moved also to chairs, sofas and music.

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Illustration 20: Mood boards for wedding themes and styling via Pinterest



The location of mundane happy objects in the wedding organisation is mirrored in contemporary wedding media, such as Pinterest boards. Creating and orchestrating a perfectly styled wedding, where love and friendship are celebrated, does not only include a stylish wedding dress and suit, but also a variety of objects that are selected based on their colour and thematic associations. The images above come from my Pinterest boards, and show three mood boards that serve to inspire brides to create a highly styled wedding. Though all three mood boards show wedding dresses, they also display a wide variety of objects: the wedding cake, a bike, bottles, flip-flops, ribbons, chairs, and candles. This connects with Sara's account in extract 20 of the venue and her emphasis on the chairs, sofas and music as elements that construct the atmosphere and style of the venue. It was, therefore, the entire combination of wedding objects that, together, built the wedding experience and stylised universe which functioned as a space where the happiness promise circulated and was reinforced.

Above I argued that a range of objects can carry the happiness promise of the wedding. However, Mara's interview complicates this, in that some objects were deemed appropriate happy wedding objects whilst others were not. The interview took place before the wedding, and the interview stood out due to Mara's retelling of the organisation as something she reluctantly engaged with.

#### **Extract 21**

*Mara: I also have, as at the beginning with the wedding planner when she asked me what I wanted, do you want, do you want uhm a violist at the door of the town hall, do you want flowers on the table, do you want a luxurious tableware [trans: feestelijk opdekking], do you want balloons, do you want garlands [slingers], do you want uhm - I said 'no' to everything, I said no, no, no, no. I was like, we can have a docking station for an MP3 player rather than a violist you know (laughs a bit). But well then people got annoyed that I said 'no' too often, as I had to make it all nice and lovely, to have a wonderful day, not only for me, but also for [name husband]. So then they said that I should do a course 'How to enjoy my wedding' (laughs a bit) Well yeah, those people really brought me back to earth a lot and well then I just said 'yes' to everything, so from now on I say 'yes' to almost everything.*

At the beginning of the chapter, I outlined how objects become laden with the promise of happiness due to their location in the social world. Being close to these objects should bring you in proximity to the good life. However, to get closer to the good life we need to learn how to regulate our desires, so that we learn to desire the 'right' things (Ahmed 2010: 37). Mara discussed how, during the wedding organisation, the MP3 player was not deemed an appropriate object: it was understood as inferior, according to her friends and family who saw a violist as more appropriate. The right object, as a bringer of the good life, was,

therefore, the violist and not the MP3 player. Though the MP3 player generally carried the promise of the good life (for example, at the time of the interview the Apple adverts of the iPod were popular), the MP3 player was not deemed as an appropriate happy object for a wedding. Other objects that Mara discussed were balloons, tableware and garlands, which she presented as necessary elements of “*a lovely and wonderful day*”. What made the balloons, tableware, violist and garlands appropriate objects of desire was their firm location within the wedding assemblage through their inclusion in numerous online images and wedding experiences. Their cultural proximity to the wedding’s happiness promise made sure that these objects were already laden with the promise before they entered Mara’s wedding. The MP3 player, on the other hand, did not have this location in the wedding assemblage - just yet - and was therefore deemed as inappropriate and out of place.

For Mara’s MP3 player to become a happiness object, like Sara’s chairs, sofas and lounge music in extract 20, it needs to catch the promise through its proximity to other objects that are already part of the wedding assemblage (e.g. balloons and ribbons). Happiness promises are contagious, so an intimate relationship with the promise enables happiness to move and spread across different spaces and on to different objects (Ahmed 2010). However, the spread of happiness can only occur when part of the promise is already there, as without an initial happiness source nothing can catch the spark of the promise. This ensures that the promise of happiness maintains its location in certain spaces, while other spaces are kept at a safe distance.

Mara’s discussion of organising her ‘happy’ wedding day did not stay limited to desiring the right happy objects, but also touched upon Mara’s attitude and how she was held responsible for the happiness of the wedding. Mara recounted having been urged by her friends and family to welcome the happy wedding objects into her wedding so she would have “*a lovely day*”, not only for her but also for her husband. This meant that Mara was responsible for her husband’s joy in the wedding. This discourse regarding gender, happiness and heterosexual love is widely available in popular culture. For example, Gill (2009) researched how woman’s magazines position women as responsible for a good working relationship with their (male) partner. Gill (2009) also pointed towards women’s emotional labour to make their relationship ‘work’, and to make one’s partner happy, for example being attentive to your partners’ feelings and emotions, even if he does not utter them explicitly.

The emotional labour Mara was asked to engage with was to *enjoy* the organisation of the wedding. Mara presented this as having been made explicit, albeit jokingly, by the advice of her family/friends to do a course on “*How to enjoy my wedding*”. In the retelling of the organisation, this positioned Mara as forced to work not only on the organisation of the wedding, but also to do it with a smile. The pressure on women to be happy, to smile and to happily work in the house and for the family, has historically been a pivotal element of feminist critique on the cultural location of femininity. Friedan (1965), for example, criticized

the idealised images that all women should be happily looking after their house, husband and family. She articulated women's difficulty of keeping up the appearance of being happy, calling it 'the problem that has no name'. Ahmed (2007/2008) also highlighted how the fantasy of the happy housewife erases all the signs of labour, because all the work that is done is justified because you love it, rather than as something that needs to be done.

In Mara's case, this meant that organising the wedding and passing happiness to her husband in doing so had to be something she enjoyed, rather than a massive investment of time, money and energy. What made Mara's story valuable to the research was that, on the one hand, she made these unevenly distributed expectations visible, while, on the other hand, she accepted and moved with them. At the end of the extract, for example, she defined the comments of her friends and family as having "*really brought me back to earth a lot*". This statement rendered her critique of the wedding out of place. Rejecting her feelings of discomfort put things back to order and where they should be, "*back down to earth*".

Having discussed the location of different objects in the wedding organisation, as well as their proximity to the happiness promise, I move on to discuss the stylised organisation of these objects to create a branded bridal moment that connects the different happy objects with a branded version of the good life. I do this via the interview I had with Anne before the wedding, where she discussed the process of styling the wedding in detail. The extract captures one of the instances where we discussed the styling. In this extract, Anne's discussion focused specifically on the theme.

## **Extract 22**

*Francien: [...] [Y]ou were also talking about the theme, the minty green and pastel pink, I understand?*

*Anne: Yeah, a bit, a bit salmon-like pink.*

*Francien: And uhm how are you going to let those colours come back? [...]*

*Anne: Yeah, for sure in the flowers, the bouquet, I want some salmon pinkish roses and stuff and uhm ... yeah, we haven't figured it out completely but also some of the decorations, with the balloons in those colours to be sure and uhm yeah, on the cars you know and then we want a ribbon and on the mirrors we want to use tulle with a ribbon also in those colours and we will also use that salmon pinkish colour in the corsages. [...] Uhm, for the photoshoot we already made one thing, at the [name shop] you can buy those carton letters and we have our names. And we painted his name minty green and my name, we have painted it salmon pink and that will be a bit the accents and we will use them for the love-photoshoot and that was also an idea I got from Pinterest (laughs a bit) [...] Yeah, they had put them on the beach and they were sitting behind it and uhm well it looked really nice and then I was like, oh that's really nice for us as well.*

Anne constructed the organisation of the wedding as a carefully planned event where all the elements needed to speak to each other. Anne's narrative mirrors the wedding universe that is depicted on Pinterest images earlier in this section (illustration 20). These images show a wedding that is carefully composed in terms of colour and thematic associations. In this section, I link Anne's discussion to branding so that the wedding should be understood as a branded moment.

As outlined in *Chapter 2: Wedding Cultures*, Winch and Webster (2012) discussed the wedding as a branded narrative, where discourses about brand management enable the bride to create a sense of consistency and recognisability. This was mirrored in Anne's narrative, where she constructed a wish to create a themed wedding via a series of objects, such as ribbons, balloons, flowers and painted carton letters. The thematic unity of the wedding did not stay limited to the day itself, as Anne discussed how she used the thematic coloured letters during the love-photoshoot<sup>44</sup>. Through the salmon pink/minty green theme colours, Anne was able to create a recurring narrative throughout her wedding that linked all the elements to create a synchronised whole. Additionally, by including the theme colours in the love-photoshoot (and the wedding invitation), the narrative extended beyond the day, creating a sense of continuity that enhanced the recognisability of the wedding. Based on my previous discussion on happy wedding objects that together build the highly styled wedding universe, I argue that, through discourses of branding, the happiness promise is enforced, connecting the bride and the wedding objects into a branded narrative that is strengthened by its visibility and recognisability, both on the wedding day and before/beyond it. The connection of branding and advertising within the promise of happiness further cements the branded promise of the wedding.

In their discussion, Winch and Webster (2012) created a link between the 'ordinary' bride and the celebrity bride, where the celebrity bride functions as an example of creating a stylised, branded bridal self. With this analysis, as well as my discussion of Real Wedding Stories in *Chapter 2: Wedding Cultures*, I have been able to deepen Winch and Webster's (2012) work by exploring the connection between discourses of branding and wedding related objects. I have argued that organising happy wedding objects through branding enables a stronger bridal narrative of the happy life. Also, I have reached beyond the bridal retelling by incorporating digital platforms, such as Pinterest, which shows that apart from celebrity brides, these online spaces were used as a source of inspiration. To frame the connection between different elements of bridal branding I use the assemblage. This enables me to think about the connection between the bridal narratives of lived experience, wedding objects, Real Wedding Stories, Pinterest boards, celebrity brides etc., as a messy and mutually affecting network. The brides are therefore no passive objects that are influenced by the wedding media, but equal parts of the network where they can feed back to the

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<sup>44</sup> A love-photoshoot is a photoshoot that takes place before the wedding, the photos are often used for the wedding invitations.

movements, for example by uploading their wedding materials as a source of inspiration for others. This is exemplified in forum member Margot's wedding, whose styled wedding personified contemporary wedding discourses of style and perfection. Her visibility in Dutch wedding media meant that her wedding also functioned as a source of inspiration for other brides.

In the above, I have analysed how the promise of happiness got attached to a range of objects and how the orchestration of these objects turned the wedding into a continuous branded narrative, where the happiness promise materialises. In the last part of this section, I analyse Esther's story, who brought her wedding ring to the interview, as the object that reminded her most of the wedding. Like the wedding dress, the wedding ring is a central happy object in wedding cultures, which is mirrored in the fact that five out of the fifteen brides I have interviewed chose their ring as their most significant object<sup>45</sup>. My reason for focusing on Esther's story is because she designed the ring herself and had it made by a close friend of her and her husband. Below I analyse how this element has deepened her connection with the ring as a happy object.

### **Extract 23**

*Esther: It's really a simple ring. It's white gold with three little diamonds in it. And [name husband] has the same one, only then without the little diamonds. [...] But yeah, no, for me that's the uhm, yeah, it's it's really part of it, it's really standard but I do think it's really beautiful, yeah, you wear, I think it's an incredibly beautiful ring, I wear it with joy and uhm yeah, the (male) friend<sup>46</sup> of [name husband], or from us, well not <inaudible> he made the ring, you know it's just nice, you know and uhm yeah, so yeah, that's the object then [...] and I carry it with me all day, yeah I think it's just beautiful. Yeah.*

*Francien: Yeah. I also think it's nice that someone you know have made it, actually.*

*Esther: Yeah, well he's done it more often. We also have friendship rings, and he also made those and uhm yeah, you know yeah, that that someone you know is doing that, you know, that you then yourself, yeah, I think that's beautiful, that you really become part of it. [...] Yeah, it's not all very exciting but it's nicer than that you, that he just does it, and that you just go to the jewellery store and you just pick one. Or well that's how I feel about it.*

*Francien: Yeah, so you also really helped with the design of it?*

*Esther: Yeah, yeah, we designed it ourselves and uhm, I really like to have square uhm uhm gems, or at least no round gems and uhm I really preferred a white gold ring, not yellow gold and uhm*

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<sup>45</sup> The brides' motives to take the wedding ring to the interviews can be interpreted in two ways. As firstly, it could relate to the importance of the ring for their wedding experience. However, their motives could also have been more practical, as they keep the ring with them all the time.

<sup>46</sup> In Dutch, there is a different word for a male friend [trans: vriend] and a female friend [trans: vriendin]

*actually really simple, you know also with the eye on, you just want, uhm, well wear it 80 years, well maybe that's really long, but, at least 60 uhm, so yeah, you know then then and also that it's just smooth on the side to make sure you do not get stuck somewhere really easily or something so that you can really always wear it and uhm I really liked to have stones in it and [name husband] he just has a plain one.*

Although Esther described the ring as a simple object, her story about it reflected a strong connection between her and the ring, which she called “*really beautiful*” and “*incredibly beautiful*”. Although Esther reinforced the beauty of the ring twice, the rest of the story gave the impression that the connection with the ring was about more than beauty. For Esther, the object was so special that she wanted to wear it every day, for the next sixty to eighty years: the rest of her life. I argue that it was the connection between the object, the subject and the everyday that made the wedding ring such a valuable object.

Esther framed the ring as timeless: she can see herself wearing it for the rest of her life, making it almost an integrated part of her body. Her narrative of designing it fuels the connection Esther felt with the ring. She framed the connection between her and the ring as rooted in the choices she made in the designing process, making sure it would fit and become an extension of her body. In *Chapter 6: Embodiment*, I discuss the connection of objects with the body in more detail when I focus on the bridal narratives of wearing the wedding dress. In the following chapter, I also discuss Entwistle’s (2000) work on clothes and how clothes function as an extension of our bodies so that our bodies are one with the clothes we wear. This is also evident in Esther’s retelling of the ring. The ring, therefore, became almost invisible and taken-for-granted, so that not only the object itself was instilled into Esther’s life, but also what it stands for, namely the promise of a good life via heterosexual love and commitment (Miller 2003).

Apart from the integrated connection with her body, the ring also became a ‘talkative object’ due to Esther’s engagement with designing and making the ring (Mackley and Karpovich, 2012). In Esther’s narrative, the seamless connection between her and the ring was visible in the way she framed the design as smooth, to make sure it did not hinder her on a daily basis. In times of mass production, there is a growing interest in homemade objects that carry a sense of authenticity with them, through the touch and the time the maker commits to making the object (White 2015). Esther constructed the experience of having someone making the object for her as better than picking it up in-store. To reinforce her preference for a handmade designed and crafted ring, she stated that you “*really become a part of it*”. This underscored the almost ultimate harmony between the subject and object, and even attempts to break through our humanist ideals that we are clearly defined subjects who end and begin at their skin (Haraway 1988, Miller 2008, Blackman 2012). The emotive powers of the wedding ring blended into the subject and their everyday life

in such a way that the boundaries between the different elements became blurred. In the next section, I go into more depth in the process of making objects as part of the wedding organisation.

#### **5.4. Do it Yourself - Radically Dull and Creatively Old-Fashioned**

This section focuses on the crafts the brides undertook for their wedding day. In recent years crafting has regained its position in society as something cool and fun, rather than as a dull, old-fashioned and tedious form of labour (Luckman 2015). The revival of craft should not be understood as a resurgence of past times, but as a desire to relive a past that never was. Historically, crafting and needlework was an essential, labour-intensive and low valued part of girls' and women's lives, whereas crafting in today's Western societies is a form of leisure that encourages large spending on exclusive yarns, papers, tools and workshops (Minahan and Wolfram Cox 2007, Luckman 2015).

The crafting practices in this section need to be read in this light: a form of leisured labour. Throughout this section, I analyse how crafting as leisure can be understood as an affective carrier of the happiness promise that shaped the bridal subjectivity, and worked as a glue on the bridal forum.

In the analysis of the bridal DIY topic, I mostly use the discussion on the forum, as this space enabled the brides to share their work and build a community through sharing. Before analysing the position of crafting on the forum, I turn to an extract from the interview with Nina. This interview provides a good example of a critique of DIY practices, namely the distinction between art and craft. Gauntlett (2011) argued that art is connected to creativity as it is a form of thinking about something anew. Also, creativity is seen as an act of making that is connected with crafting. Therefore, art and craft should be seen as connected and supplementing each other. In the extract, Nina retold her story of making the handbag.

#### **Extract 24**

*Nina: And what I thought was really amazing, was the little bag. Yeah bags, well bags, they are completely out of fashion and it is ridiculous, and uhm well finding one is completely impossible and they didn't have any nice ones at all. They only had those, those, with those, like those round things with a string to pull it close at the top, you know those things. <inaudible> Well yeah, it's really ridiculous to have such a bag, but I just really liked it. So uhm well, I have made it myself. I will also get that one for you [waiting] [...] The uhm small metal hoop, I got that from [name online trading platform] [...] and uhm, I attached the bag to it and I made that from a piece of fabric from the dress. So uhm, well this is really my own now – you could say. [...] and uhm when you look carefully you can see all these little small beadles.*

Above, Nina talked about the handbag and wedding fashion. She constructed having a handbag as “*completely out of fashion and ridiculous*”. Despite this, Nina framed those bags as “*really amazing*” and something she just “*really liked*”. So, she decided to make a bag herself as the choice of bags was limited, due to the bag’s unfashionable status. Through the act of crafting, Nina was able to slightly change the fashionable bridal look to come up with something ‘new’ and ‘different’. The act of changing the fashionable bridal look moved against the idea of crafting as merely a repetition of the same actions over and over again, for example, the mimicry of embroidery, or sewing as the mere act of refabricating pre-existing designs via their patterns. Nina’s narrative indicated that her craft project was a combination of creativity; making something new, designing a bridal bag with nothing more than a small metal hoop, and making the bag by hand out of a piece of fabric from her wedding dress. Later in the interview, Nina stated that she embroidered the beads on the handbag herself, which was tedious and time-consuming.

I argue that through discourses of creativity in the crafting of the handbag, Nina’s talk brought together the act of making, inventing and rethinking, which enabled her to disrupt the contemporary fashionable bridal look. Bringing back the Deleuzian term of deterritorialisation, I argue that crafting deterritorialised the image of the bride by giving her a handbag. Although the act was on a small scale, only her wedding, and a small change, just adding an unfashionable accessory, this does not mean that the act was without consequences as it highlights that the image of bridal beauty does have some space for difference and change.

These patterns of change and invention were also evident on the DIY topic on the forum. My data sample covers the time between January 2013 and January 2015, and the main focus of the analysis is on the data that spans from January 2013 till September 2013. During this time the topic was particularly busy as Margot, Ragdoll, Indian Queen, Ellen25 and several others were working on the DIY details for their wedding. Out of all the active members, Margot was by far the most active and admired DIY practitioner. Margot’s so-called ‘DIY wedding’ also featured on several Dutch wedding media outlets (see illustration 21), which underscored the success of the wedding outside the forum and the circle of friends and family invited to the wedding. Therefore, a significant amount of data that was collected related to Margot’s DIY activities.



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Illustration 21: Images of Margot's wedding on the Dutch wedding website [www.bruidenbruidegom.nl](http://www.bruidenbruidegom.nl)<sup>47</sup>

The first post was an extract by Margot where she shared a photo of her finished DIY projects, including photography of her wedding bouquet. Margot's post was followed by numerous responses. The responses from the other brides mainly focused on Margot's bouquet, and expressed a desire to make a similar bouquet.

### **Extract 25**

*Margot 21.01.2013*

*[...] and my biggest pride... my wedding bouquet*

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Illustration 22: Image of Margot's bridal bouquet

### **Extract 26**

*Reply: Deborah89 21.01.2013*

*That all looks really good, Margot! I think your wedding bouquet is absolutely stunning, you can be really proud of that.*

*I would also like to make my own wedding bouquet, and I wondered how you made your wedding bouquet. It's so beautiful ☺*

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<sup>47</sup> Available via <http://www.bruidenbruidegom.nl/real-life-wedding/show/> accessed on 02.08.2017]

**Extract 27**

Reply: Medallion 21.01.2013

*Margot, really nice all those things!*

*Your wedding bouquet is absolutely gorgeous, how did you make it?*

**Extract 28**

Reply: StormyWinds 21.01.2013

*Margot, I'm in love with your bouquet!!!!*

*I have also made my own wedding bouquet, but I am just not satisfied with it and I do not know how to get it right. Could you please send me a PM as well where you explain how you made yours? Then I am going to try to make it as you did. I will just make it with foam roses then, but I really like the laced bottom of the bouquet, that is absolutely beautiful.*

**Extract 29**

Reply: Margot 22.01.2013

*Thanks a lot for all your sweet compliments. I am also really happy [trans: blij] with the results, especially the bouquet.*

*Who would all like a crafting manual [trans: werkbeschrijving], hihi...? I will try to make one, and I will send a PM to everyone who would like to have one.*

The replies of the brides were positive and showed an emotional response to Margot's bouquet e.g. "*I'm in love with your bouquet*" (extract 28). Feelings of love towards objects are central to our contemporary consumer society. Illouz (2007) for example argued that the intertwining of the public and the private sphere creates a space where emotional and economic relationships connect. As examples of these spaces she discussed internet dating websites and self-help literature to show that discourses such as efficiency and effectivity that were originally part of the language of economic exchange have now also seeped into emotional relationships such as dating and finding 'the one'. Similarly, discourses that were initially reserved for the private sphere, such as love, are now part of the economic space so that we have come to love our cars and shoes, or wedding bouquets (Russo 2010). This highlights how emotive discourses are ingrained in the way we make sense of objects and our relationships with them.

This brings me back to what I have been discussing throughout this chapter, which is the promise of happiness and how it gets stuck onto objects, so that some objects are seen as the bringers of the good life (Ahmed 2010). I use the promise of happiness to make sense of the position of Margot's bouquet on the forum, as, like the wedding dress, the sofas, lounge music and the wedding ring, Margot's bouquet held

affective textures that were saturated by the promise of happiness and bridal perfection. The bouquet came to stand for a good life via heterosexual romantic love. The good life follows after the objects, so that those who are near to the object might get ‘infected’ by it (Ahmed 2010).

Ferreday (2009) analysed the sense of community and belonging in online spaces. For the bridal forum, it was a shared orientation of the wedding day as the bringer of the good life that created a sense of communal belonging. However, to maintain the connection with the fantasy of the happiness promise, the differences between the members should be erased. Both Cox (2008) and Stallabras (2009), for example, have argued that comments on Flickr are predominantly positive, with negative comments being erased from the photographs. Gauntlett (2011) discussed the act of sharing craft and work ideas as an essential part of contemporary craft and its movement to online spaces, as according to him the possibility to share connects the members and crafters to the online space. In similar vein, Tumblr users are encouraged to “*say something nice*” when leaving a comment on a post. For the promise of happiness and heterosexual romantic love to maintain happiness on the forum, all the members had to ‘subscribe’ to this fantasy. This was done not solely through sharing the end product of the crafting, such as Margot’s bouquets, but also by stimulating the members to engage in similar forms of crafting.

The bridal comments indicated that both the practice of sharing the objects, such as the finished wedding bouquet, as well as the desire to make DIY objects, glued the community. The brides praised Margot’s craft practices and were looking for ways to engage with the same practices. They did this by asking Margot about crafting the bouquet, which positioned Margot as an expert in the online community (Ferreday 2009). I argue that the valued location of Margot’s wedding bouquet as the ultimate achievement of bridal DIY perfection turned it (almost) into a Platonic icon of the perfectly home-made bouquet. This status meant that other bouquets were measured against Margot’s, such as StormyWind’s bouquet (extract 28). StormyWind discussed her bouquet crafting when she confessed to not knowing “*how to get it right*”. Subsequently, StormyWind asked Margot for the work description, which StormyWind constructed as the basis for her bouquet – that is, she wanted to make her bouquet just like Margot’s. By stating that she did not know “*how to get it right*”, and then expressing the desire to make it like Margot’s, StormyWind connected the right bouquet and the right way of crafting it with Margot’s bouquet. The other requests for work descriptions underlined Margot’s bouquet and crafting as the right way. Despite the ambition, none of the brides was able to reproduce Margot’s position on the forum or generate similar visibility in wedding media.

Having discussed community building around shared objects and crafting practices, this section analyses the individual level of crafting. Again, the posts below are responses to Margot’s DIY project - this time, the invitations. Below I have posted some comments the project received as well as some of Margot’s replies to the comments.

### **Extract 30**

Reply: Wedding2013 04.04.2013

*It all looks really beautiful again Margot, you will get such an original wedding with so many personal elements. Did you design the invitations yourself as well?*

Reply - Margot 04.04.2013

*Yes, we have made and designed the invitations by ourselves... That was a lot of work...*

*Quite a few hours went into making those things, but we receive a lot of nice responses, so that made it all worthwhile I think.*

### **Extract 31**

Reply: Mupke80 05.04.2013

*What creativity, these are the things that make your wedding very personal! For your guests, the party will start as soon as they open the envelope of the invitation. That promises to be a Big Day...*

The above posts focused on the time that went into making the objects, as well as their distinct character and the value they produced. Here, the value was not the monetary value it represented per se, but also the moral value that created respectable forms of femininity, embodied by someone who had the capital to know what was beautiful and worthy (Skeggs 1997, 2004). In this section, I analyse how the meaning or social value of the objects were transformed through the time that went into them. In *Chapter 4: Temporality* I already focused on time, but, in this section, I connect it with materiality.

Luckman argued that ‘the bespoke object has become Othered, different and desirable’ (2015: 69) constructing mass-produced industrialised objects as inauthentic as they are cut off from the hands of their makers. This connection reunites the workers’ sense of self with the objects they are producing, which makes crafting such a valuable leisure activity (Gauntlett 2011). However, I do not imply that crafting is fully un-alienated, as it is still rooted in consumer societies that are marked by mass production and consumption, for example buying exclusively produced yarn, paper and tools for craft projects. Nonetheless, crafting is an important element of people’s identities, for example, Starr Johnson and Wilson (2005) discussed how needlework and handcrafting were pivotal to the crafter’s identity and the way their friends and family thought about them as a person. The connection between the crafting and identity can be linked back to the neoliberal project of the self, where citizens are encouraged to work on the self through the right consumer practises (Giddens 1991, Harris 2004). This was also reflected on the forum, where the crafters were recognised as DIY brides by the crafts they were producing and sharing on the forum. Again, I refer to Margot, who was a known crafter within the community and her position was read through her activities as a crafter. In the above comment (extract 30), where she mentioned the comments of others on

her DIY project, she framed their compliments as important as it was through their recognition that her investment became worthwhile. So, it was not only Margot's social circle (forum members and friends and family<sup>48</sup>) who saw Margot as a crafter: Margot also presented herself as a crafter. Being recognised for her time and labour was presented as a valuable social bond. Crafting, therefore, was framed as a strong marker of her sense of self.

In the posts, the brides mentioned the originality and the personal layer of Margot's wedding as a result of the crafted objects. As stated in *Chapter 2: Wedding Cultures*, the wedding has become a marker of the bride's (and groom's) individual success and taste, where practices of branding are used to position one's wedding as distinctively different and original from others. The bridal DIY practices can, therefore, be understood as a movement against the cold, mass-produced objects that have filled the wedding through its focus on consumer practices. DIY practices can be understood as a 'rejection of the glossy, highly produced, celebrity orientated mainstream of popular culture, and its replacement with a knowingly non-glossy, often messily produced alternative which is much less bothered about physical beauty' (Gauntlett 2011: 53). However, these same bridal DIY practices still embraced this glossy, highly styled and celebrity orientated orchestration. As the photographs from Margot's wedding highlight, her DIY was deeply stylised and carefully crafted, which provided her with an almost celebrity status within the online bridal community and outside of it (via her presence in Dutch wedding media), relocating her DIY wedding firmly in consumer logic.

Having analysed the location of craft in the formation of the bridal subjectivity in relation to discourses of authenticity and individualism, I move on to analyse the practice of crafting, and here I focus on the process and how the end-project comes to be. To understand this, I link the practice of crafting with our sense of self, so that it was not merely the end product that marked the crafter's identity, but also the process. Via Ruskin and Morris, Gauntlett (2011) argued that it is the joy of *doing* crafts that makes it so appealing. To further understand the connection between the maker and the object, I analyse the post from GraceKelly, which she posted after she had finished the corset to wear with her wedding dress.

### **Extract 32**

*GraceKelly 07.07.2013*

*Finally, I have finished my corset. 🙌*

*I am surprised how well it turned out at the end.*

*I actually had the plan to wear it under my wedding dress, but I am not sure whether this is actually going to happen, as it is not really a flat, little thing. But it was really nice to make it. 😊*

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<sup>48</sup> The recognition by the friends and family is assumed by Margot, I have not had any interaction with any of her family members to confirm this.

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### Illustration 23: Forum images from GraceKelly's corset

The photos show a carefully crafted corset with great attention to detail, for example in the way the lace runs slightly over the bodice on both sides of the corset. Despite the careful crafting, GraceKelly framed the result as different from what she expected it to be, "*as it's not really a flat thing*". She discussed the different result as the reason she might not be able to wear it under her dress. Instead of being disappointed about the corset, GraceKelly's post is framed through positive notions and celebrated the joy of having made it, so that the making became more important than the product itself.

The focus on the process brings us to the affective and enchanting movements that are rooted in the act of crafting. I use Luckman's (2015) discussion of enchantment to analyse GraceKelly's post. In her post, GraceKelly framed the result of the corset as a "*surprise*": she did not expect it to look the way it did, despite the hours she spent on making the corset. During the process, her hands morphed and shaped the materials. However, in the interaction between her hands and the materials, it was not only her hands that did something. The materiality of the corset also shaped the process and the end product so that it ended up thicker than anticipated. I argue that this process is an enchanted connection between the maker and the material. The result of this process was not merely a corset, but also a *feeling*, the feeling of surprise as a result of something she did not expect to happen, as well as a positive feeling which GraceKelly captured in the 🙌 and 😊 emoticon (extract 32). Something similar is visible in the post below from Margot.

### **Extract 33**

*Margot 24.01.2013*

*That's a pity Ladybird... that's really a shame. But maybe it won't be as bad when you see the result... I have also thought during a project... 'this is going to be an absolute disaster', but then the end result is still very nice.*

Margot responded to Ladybird's post where she discussed her anxiety about her DIY project, as halfway through the project seemed to be going "*wrong*". Margot's response reshaped Ladybird's narrated experience of it going wrong by pointing to the surprising results of her crafts. Margot's post framed the craft process and completion as something unexpected: something that seemed like an "*absolute disaster*" somewhere halfway, can still become "*very nice*". One way of reading this would be that the crafters are unskilled in what they are doing. However, I do not believe that this captures the experience of the crafting, as neither Margot (extract 33) nor GraceKelly (extract 32) represented their projects as failed. On the contrary, both indicated that their projects were successful. I, therefore, argue that DIY objects come to be through the enchanted connection between the maker and the materials themselves, in such a way that the maker does not hold full power over what the objects can become. This also demands a rethinking of a postfeminist ideal and the bridal desire to craft glossy and hyper-styled DIY projects. The point that their projects should be glossy is still valid. However, the aspect of styling needs to be rethought, as the way the objects become depends on the enchanted connection between the maker and the objects. The value of the object, therefore, lies not so much in the glossiness of the object, but in the connection between the maker and the object. Doing it 'right' is to be enchanted by the connection of your hands with the materials, producing something unexpectedly beautiful.

For Luckman (2015) the connection between the maker and the craft during an affective moment in the assemblage is what makes the objects unique. Thinking about uniqueness as rooted in the *process* rather than in the *objects*, dramatically changes the discussions about originality and art. From Luckman's (2015) perspective, craft projects, such as the corset, are unique because the process is unique, so that the fact that there is a whole range of variations of GraceKelly's (extract 32) corset out there is irrelevant for the value and the worth of this particular corset. A one-of-a-kind work of art is therefore as unique as a handcrafted corset, because both were produced through an enchanted connection between agentic material matter and the crafter's hands.

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Illustration 22: Forum images Ellen25's DIY project

Having discussed Margot (extract 33) and GraceKelly's (extract 32) enchanted connection with their DIY projects, I move on to the posts Ellen25 put on the forum. Like Margot, Ellen25 also had a DIY wedding and spent a significant amount of time crafting her wedding objects (see images above). Ellen25 also shared her projects on the forum, but the narrative that surrounded her projects was quite different from Margot's. Where Margot's posts mainly focused on the end products and how she worked through a massive to do list (see *Chapter 4: Temporality*), there was little writing about the process of making the objects. Ellen25, on the other hand, used the forum to frame the frustrations and doubts she experienced during the crafting. The different style of presenting themselves on the forum enabled Margot to become the perfectly styled (micro) celebrity DIY bride, as she removed her doubts and frustration with the labour process from the forum. Ellen25 never reached that status, because the way she constructed her stories highlighted the labour and the emotions that went into the production of living up to the fantasy of being a perfectly styled DIY bride. This was evident in the post below where Ellen25 recounted her experience of making the welcome sign (see the photograph of the final sign above)

**Extract 34**

*Ellen25 12.07.2013*

*My first DIY project, Sign with Welcome. Phew, I don't have a printer, so I traced the letters from my screen [...] Then I drew them onto the wood, but that was a bit askew, so I thought that if I straighten it a bit whilst doing the painting it will all be fine at the end. I was so into the painting that I traced the lines exactly as I had drawn them onto the wood, so now it's a bit askew. I am*



*quite onto the details, so this isn't really how I want it. I will go to the market tomorrow to get some lace and ribbons, and if I still don't like it once I have decorated it I will have to start all over again. Do you recognise this? Or are you satisfied more easily? I see so many beautiful things on the forum.*

### **Extract 35**

*Ellen25 15.07.2013 (extract post)*

*Last night I woke up and I thought 'Sign', so now I am remaking the sign - in peace*

Ellen25 narrated her experience of making the welcome sign as an emotional process. The sign and its materials did something to Ellen25, up until the point that she constructed her sleep as having been disrupted as a result of making the welcome sign. Ellen25 also retold an experience that seemed to be familiar to the experience of being in a flow. Csikszentmihalyi discussed flow as 'characterised by a complete absorption in what one does' (2014: 89). Being in the flow is therefore about being completely involved in the moment and the task at hand. Csikszentmihalyi (1992) also discussed this complete absorption in the present as a moment you feel connected and at home with the world, as there are no obstacles and no resistance. Ahmed (2010) critiqued the notion of flow and its connection to positive psychology. In her discussion, Ahmed focused on the politics of being in the flow, as flow favours certain subjects and ways of being, so that for some 'bodies' it is easier to get into a flow as their social position is less prone to judgement, obstacles and resistance (2010: 12). Locating this discussion of the possibilities to get into a flow with my research, I believe that generally the brides on the forum should be read as embodying a subject position that is broadly accepted and framed as a 'good choice'. The DIY practices the brides engaged with involved the classic representations of women and crafting in and around the house and about working towards good heterosexual monogamous relationships.

According to Luckman, being in flow is a familiar experience in crafting and indicates a perfect balance of skill and challenge that 'demonstrates a complex assemblage of hand and mind' (2015: 83). I link the experience of flow with Blackman's (2012: 124) discussion on automatism and how it requires a different form of attention, where it is not so much about the conscious subject, but about a moment when the body, the mind and the environment connect in (almost) automatic movements and actions. This is quite different from Csikszentmihalyi's (2014) discussion, who discussed flow as an ultimate moment of a conscious connection with the environment. However, as I outlined before, I do not see the human as the conscious mind ruling its environment but as connected with the human and objects (non-human) around them. Therefore, being in flow is being fully absorbed in the movements of the assemblage, freed from the obstacles that make us aware of the differences between the elements in the assemblage.

I use this idea of flow to analyse Ellen25's post (extract 34 and 35). Ellen25 presented the crafting process as deeply immersive, and this was visible in, for example, her retelling of the experience of changing the way she put the letters on the wood. She discussed this moment as so immersive that she forgot about the changes she wanted to make. Rather than reading this moment as an instance of failure, I read it as an instance of flow. In this flow, Ellen25 was fully immersed in the assemblage, connecting her body with the materials becoming unaware of discourses of perfection and just letting her hands, the paints and the letters create the sign. It was only in the moment that she broke out of this flow that she reconnected with the cultural expectations, which meant that she deemed her project as a failure.

Linking this back to my previous statement about the enchanted connection as the ideal way of producing the 'right' kind of glossy DIY projects, Ellen25's narrative highlighted that this enchanted connection can indeed lead to a combination of the 'right' and the 'wrong' results. This did not mean that the enchanted connection itself was right or wrong, as I argue that this moment focused on the process rather than the end product. This process was an affective moment that was pre-discursive and cannot be done in the 'right' or 'wrong' way, as it concerns a full alignment of all the elements in the assemblage. However, at the moment the enchanted connection was broken, the attention moved towards the end product, which was judged based on the social and cultural norms of beauty and perfection. This meant that Ellen25's end product was deemed a failure, even though the process was an affective moment that cannot be deemed 'good' or 'bad'.

### **5.5. The dress**

The last section of this chapter focuses on the wedding dress, but specifically on the making of the wedding dress. Where the discussion of DIY above emphasised the brides doing the labour, this section takes on a different view on female labour, such as clothes making, by outlining the connection of the garment with the one who will wear it, rather than the person who was making it. The focal point of this section is one object, the dress, rather on a range of objects, as in the rest of the chapter. I use Berlant's 'objects of desire' (2011: 93) to frame the aspirational powers of the wedding dress. What is important for Berlant is that the people who aspire to 'objects of desire' – whether the content of the promise is a happy one or not - need the constant presence of these objects, as it generates some sort of 'continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world' (2011: 24). This sense of being in the world and what it means to keep on living is strongly connected to normative notions of the good life, which is constructed alongside notions of upward mobility, hedonistic pleasure and heterosexual life (Berlant 2011). Berlant's (2011) objects of desire are therefore also connected with politics of how to live your life well.

As discussed in *Chapter 2: Wedding Cultures*, the wedding dress is often normatively presented as the ultimate fantasy in a woman's life, which starts in childhood. The interviews also contained multiple references to the fantasy of the (perfect) wedding dress, which I discuss in more detail via the interview with Ilse.

**Extract 36**

*Ilse: Yeah. I always had the idea that I wanted something with tulle. There are three layers of tulle<sup>49</sup> [in my wedding dress]. And under it there is grey and then, as you say, you get the silver effect. And here it just runs over.*

In extract 36, Ilse constructed her desire for a wedding dress with tulle as something she “*always wanted*”. She gave the impression that the tulle dress had always been part of her life narrative, but only materialised around her wedding day. Locating the tulle dress as a continuous ideal image of a (wedding) dress located it as an important element in Ilse's life. Looking forward to the ideal wedding dress can be read as part of the fantasy of heterosexual love. The tulle dress became a symbol of the happiness promise that can be gained through heterosexual love. It was therefore not the object she desired that kept her in place, but the promise it contained (Berlant 2006).

To further understand the cultural importance of the wedding dress as a symbol of a good future life, I use the images below (illustration 25). I have pinned these images on my Pinterest board and they visualise how a continuous longing for the wedding is rooted deeply into our society and how it connects female subjectivity with heterosexual love. The images portrayed girls at a distance from a wedding dress while they are looking up to it. The distance presents the path they still need to ‘walk’ before they can reach that image of the bridal perfection. The upward-looking gaze represents a higher ideal to which they ought to aspire. At the same time, the dress is almost within an arm's length, which gives the illusion that the promise of happiness is there for them when they are ready for it. The tiny white dress they are wearing can be read as a substitute for the ‘real’ promise that is just beyond their grasp.

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<sup>49</sup> Tulle is soft, fine silk, cotton, or nylon material like net, used for making veils and dresses.

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#### Illustration 25: Pinterest images of flower girls and the wedding dress

Having positioned the wedding dress as part of the happiness promise, I now outline the process of finding the dress and the characteristics of the dress that were deemed essential to make a dress 'real'. I stay with Ilse's interview, who had her dress custom-made. To understand the motives behind the custom-made wedding dress, it is necessary to know that Ilse was from an orthodox Protestant background, which deems a white dress inappropriate due to its connotations with innocence, as in this tradition no human is innocent and without sin. Brides, therefore, marry in a coloured dress. As most wedding dresses are white, brides like Ilse often get their wedding dress custom-made.

Another key aspect of the interview is that it took place at her home. During the interview, a range of objects were brought into the living room, where the interview took place. While Ilse told me about the details surrounding the wedding and the dress making, she touched, felt and investigated the objects with her hands and encouraged me to do the same. She let me feel the texture of the tulle, she let me carry the dress so I could experience its weight, she gave me the tiara to touch and try on, she showed me the envelope with the fabrics she kept hidden from her husband during the wedding organisation. This tactile element shaped the course and the experience of the interview and the following extracts need to be read as part of the interview's tactile dimension.

#### **Extract 37**

*Ilse: Yeah. Yeah. It's always quite uhm, finding the dress of your dreams, that's uhm [...] I have been to [name and location shop] and there they make all their dresses custom made. So you have, they have a modern hall to try wedding dresses on, but you can just say what you want [...] so uhm like uhm the skirt of one dress and the jacket of another, yeah yeah. It's quite, I never doubted actually, I did doubt about the colour for a while. I actually had a different colour in mind, some soft pink, that was what I wanted, but it didn't fit me at all. It looked really sweet, it got really uhm,*

*it gave you a bit of a lollypop idea (laughs a bit) [...] Yeah, yeah, it made it really, and in my face the colour just didn't match. So then you really need to change your ideas a bit, like oh, but what do I want now. And uhm, yeah, it's really a process. [...] you really see the development of such a dress. As the first time you have, uhm, really you wear only a bit of it, you're really only wearing a part of it and uhm yeah, then things are added to it and then the flowers were added to it and then the pearls and yeah. Yeah, it's a really beautiful process. Also, uhm the, really, the anticipation [trans: voorpret] ... at least, I thought it was a very precious moment. [...]. Yeah. Yeah, and when you see it growing then...*

Ilse started the narrative of the dress making by connecting her journey with the social belief that wedding dresses fill the dreams of girls and women – *“finding the dress of your dreams”*. As discussed before, it was not only the dream tulle wedding dress, but also the materialisation of the happiness promise of romantic love. Miller (2003) discussed how immaterial cultural and social beliefs need an anchor in the material world to survive and to become understandable. To make his claim Miller (2003) referred to religion and the need to anchor immaterial beliefs, such as God and our immortal soul, in material objects such as the church and the Bible. For the immaterial and fleeting happiness promise to hold on to our lives, it needs to be cemented intangible objects which we can relate to and keep close in our day-to-day lives.

To link Miller's (2003) discussion to the wedding dress, Ilse's account of the dress was presented as a process where her (childhood) immaterial longing for bridal perfection and happiness was materialised in the form of a tulle gown. Capturing her dream for heterosexual happiness was not a straightforward process, where her dream can be caught in a tulle dress as if her fantasy can be printed. Instead, the process was messy, as some things worked out well, for example, her desire to have a tulle wedding dress, while other things were harder to establish, such as the colour. Ilse framed her choice for finding a colour as complicated. For example, she discussed her initial desire to have a pink coloured dress, however, Ilse (extract 37) constructed this colour as unsuitable, as it looked *“really sweet”* and *“gave you a bit of a lolly pop idea”*. Constructing the colour pink as *too* sweet fits with heteronormative ideas of respectable feminine beauty. Although girlish characteristics, such as hairlessness and soft skin, are central to female beauty representations, the distinction between womanhood and girlhood should be clear (Egan 2013). The girlish soft pink colour crossed this boundary so that it positioned Ilse as girlish, rather than a young woman ready to start her adult life.

Ilse's retelling of her experience of finding the colour was not only constructed through cultural coded ideals of feminine beauty, but was also influenced by the effects of the colour against her skin. To understand the interaction between the bridal bodies, their wedding ideals and the dress' fabric, I return to Luckman (2015) and the enchanted connection between human and material. Where the discussion

regarding enchantment initially focused on the hands of the maker, I shift the attention to the whole body and how the material of the dress effects it. For Ilse, the interaction between her skin tone and the dress' pink colour did not create the desired effect, as it made her look like a "lollypop". The dialogue between the elements did something; it created an unexpected effect, which in this case was perceived as negative. As discussed before, the enchanted connection creates an affect, which is essential for the process of making (Luckman 2015). This means that the enchanted moment is not politically laden, but an affective moment that moves the subject. The way the subject is moved and how this is discursively articulated, however, is politically laden. For Ilse, this meant that the interaction between her skin tone and the colour was deemed inappropriate as it was not in line with hegemonic expectations of bridal beauty.

When Ilse discussed her feelings about the dress making, she ended by referring to it as something that grows. Referring to the dress making as something that grows suggests that the wedding dress is more than a passive object, but a vibrant and changing assemblage of materials that has the 'curious ability... to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle' (Bennett 2010: 6). This underlines the point where I outlined how the dress and its materials have the potential to shape the process of making the dress. To understand the dress' shaping abilities as a vibrant assemblage of materials, I move to the next extract where Ilse did not talk about the wedding gown as a whole, but about its different elements.

### **Extract 38**

*Ilse: I thought the first time you could say, after it, it got really exciting [...] As you chose the dress with all kinds of pieces of fabric and then yeah, then yeah. I thought the first time it was really scary. I really thought like, oh dear, what have I done. Oh here, here you can see all different kinds of lace piled up and here you can see the grey fabric and the brown fabric and here you can see me holding all different kinds of tulle in my hand. You are wearing a dress and then you think like, well I think this is beautiful, and this should be like this and that should be like this and then as you say with all those different kinds of fabric. I really had, really often during the evening I was busy thinking like, oh this should be like this, would it look like this and this and that. [...] Yeah, yeah, yeah. They gave me all the different kinds of fabric. So they gave me an envelope, and I looked at it again, and again and then I was like, it should be different, and I was like, I really have to call them now and. Well the first time I tried it on, I thought like it really is okay, as when I came in, the dress hung there already. They made it all ready for me and I thought like, aaah. [...] So that was actually the only really exciting moment when I tried it on for the first time – in this shape. And uhm, yeah, these questions alone already, how this would look like, these three layers of tulle. And uhm, yeah, how will it look like, that grey and uhm, how will it fall.*

In extract 38, Ilse's construction of the dress making was messy, with Ilse moving between different moments in the process and her experiences of these. The messiness of her narrative made it hard to translate, and some of the messiness got lost in the transcription and translation in favour of readability. In appendix 9, I have put the extended version of the extract, which is also the earliest version of the translation and has a minimum amount of editing, but is harder to follow and the grammar does not run smoothly. To analyse the extract, I have listened again to the Dutch spoken text to ensure that the analysis is true to the narrative of the interview.

The messiness of this part of the interview fits with the process of dress making that was presented via a collection of different fabrics (lace and tulle) in different colours (grey and brown) that were piled up. The photographs Ilse showed me of this moment were taken in a low-lit room with loads of different materials and colours scattered across different tables. Out of these different elements, Ilse and the dress-maker created a dress. In the extract, Ilse stated that she thought that the dress-maker was going to make a beautiful dress, but nonetheless, she went back to the process again and again by looking at a selection of the fabrics she kept in her house. These moments of doubt are affective, recounting how Ilse kept returning to the elements of the dress that kept pulling her into the process of dress making. As a result of these encounters with the fabrics, Ilse presented her engagement with the process as deeply involved.

In extract 38, Ilse constructed the selection of fabrics as the triggers of the affective textures that pulled her into the dress making process. Although these pieces of fabric were never used in the dress, their involvement in the interview was to symbolise the dress and its process. So, even a fraction of all the materials was presented as able to create a hold on Ilse and affect multiple evenings in the running up to the wedding. The fabrics' affective textures were strong because they were part of the assemblage that fuelled the experience and the dress-making. Once the connection was made between Ilse and the fabrics, Ilse was connected with the entire dress making process. It is this assemblage that made the process an emotional experience.

Ilse's account of doubt over what the dress would look like once all the elements were put together was presented as one of the most anxious parts of the journey – *“these questions alone already, how this would look like, these three layers of tulle. And uhm, yeah, how will it look like, that grey and uhm, how will it fall”* (extract 38). Doubts and uncertainty about the end product made sense in relation to earlier comments about the growth of the wedding dress. Both instances gave a sense of agency to the materiality of the dress, so that the outcome was not a process that was fully controlled by the hands of the maker. Locating the result away from a human agency moved it into the assemblage where all different parts influence each other, and where none was more powerful than the other. The different elements were not presented in ‘a fixed order of parts, for the order is always being reworked in accordance to a certain ‘freedom of choice’ exercised by its actants’ (Bennett 2010: 97). So, the material elements of the dress

shaped the process of the dress-making. This can be linked to the DIY section of this chapter, when I argued that the materials of the object influence how the objects become.

As stated at the beginning of this section, during Ilse's interview the wedding related objects were present in the room. Their presence became more significant through the tactile engagement I had with the objects. Ilse let me feel the tulle, and I could feel that the fabric seemed to have a bit of a will of its own. It was not extremely soft and pliable, but almost felt rough. When I crushed the fabric into a ball and let it go, it did not wrinkle, but sprung back until the last fold slowly disappeared, to leave the fabric in the same condition as I found it. My hands were unable to change the look of the fabric. This tactile experience I had with the fabric underscores my argument regarding the agency of the fabric.

I now move to the last part of Ilse's interview where she discussed the dress after the wedding. I pay attention to the immaterial value of the dress and the vibrant nature of its materiality once it is shaped into its 'final' form.

### **Extract 39**

*Ilse: [The dress is] in the sleeping room [now]. It's still hanging on the door of the wardrobe, I still can't put it away (laughs). [...] I just like to enjoy it a little longer. [...] You cannot really wear it anymore (laughs) There was a hoop under it, but I returned it, as I hired that one, so when you wear it now, it falls differently. So uhm yeah, it was only for one day that you really uhm well could wear it (laughs a bit). Yeah, but it's a beautiful memory. [...] I have tried it on once more, yeah. But yeah, uhm well, uhm... Yeah, it lost its purpose. It was really nice to wear it for a while again and to feel it again and to feel like yeah, that's how it felt. Yeah, it's mostly the memory that is part of it now... Yeah, but that's okay. [...] It doesn't work like that. (laughs) Yes, that really how it feels. It was also a bit like, shall I just put it off again, we'll have seen it again.*

*Francien: No, you cannot really do something with it anymore, as you might also fear that it catches stains, or something.*

*Ilse: Yes, yes, it's like well you have seen it, let's make another photo, but yeah I will have to put it off now. Yeah, I also think that the tiara is also really (whispers something).*

In the previous sections, I have focused on the material agency of DIY practices or in the dress making process. What is essential in Bennett's writing (2010) is that a human agent does not control vibrant matter and cannot turn it into a 'final' object or state. Based on the extract above, I argue that the moment the dress was finished did not mean that the dress would never change. The dress would always be part of an assemblage where elements interacted with each other and created change, no matter how subtle.



Here we can think about something as simple as the changing smell of my wedding dress after it was stored in my closet for over two years. Or my mother-in-law's wedding dress that changed its colours in the almost 40 years after the wedding. Ilse's wedding dress also changed after the wedding. She framed this as due to the fact that she did not have the hoop anymore, which caused her dress to fall differently. This was a clear reason for the dress not being the same, but Ilse also stated that it had lost its purpose, which seemed to have changed the object of the dress as a whole. Wearing the dress on a normal day would not bring back the same dress like the one that was worn on the wedding day. The dress had changed again, and would keep changing as time progressed.

As Ilse explained in extract 39, she kept the dress close to her, hanging on the door of her closet in the bedroom. This also enabled Ilse to maintain the narrative she built around her wedding dress like a dream she had always had, like one she had lived, and as one that was later the carrier of the memory of the dream into the future, so that the proximity of the object provided her with a means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world (Berlant 2011: 24). It was the memory that gave the dress its value, whereby 'objects store and possess, take in and breathe out the emotions with which they have been associated' (Miller 2008: 38).

Focusing on the importance of the immaterial promise of the wedding dress, I do not claim that the happiness promise is a fixed element that has been transformed into the wedding dress. I argue that the material wedding dress is produced through a messy enchanted interaction between the different elements. This means the happiness promise attached to the dress is not easily caught either, as happiness is 'so elusive, so intangible' (McMahon 2007: xi) that we are never able to pin it down. The intangible character of happiness has been present throughout this chapter, by its lack of concrete frames of reference. None of the brides spoke about the happiness promise in concrete ways, the only aspect of the happiness promise that was explicit was its location in heterosexual romantic love.

## **5.6. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have analysed the location of happy objects in the bridal retelling of the wedding day. I have focused on the central location of happy objects to give the postfeminist wedding its distinctive, highly styled look. By styling the wedding, a range of different and seemingly mundane objects were able to stick to the happiness promise, as long as their looks, style and colour created a stylised wedding through discourses of branding. This meant that objects such as bottles, flip flops, chairs, sofas and lounge music were able to become happy wedding objects, whilst the MP3 player was unable to catch the promise as it was not part of a styled and carefully orchestrated romanticised universe.

Subsequently, I have analysed how the promise of happiness worked as a glue on the forum to orientate the brides towards the good life. The good life that was presented on the forum was also highly

stylised. Through sharing, the brides were encouraged to aspire to a deeply styled wedding, which created differences between the forum members in terms of perfection and desirability. By analysing the shared orientation on the forum, I argued that these highly styled and praised wedding projects aimed to create a sense of authenticity and trueness to underscore the taste of the bride (or couple). However, these discourses of authenticity also relocated the wedding back into consumer culture by using authenticity and trueness for branding purposes.

Alongside the connection between DIY and branding, I have discussed the relationship between the maker and their objects as a way to complicate discourses of creation and stylisation. Although the forum posts represented a carefully orchestrated universe, they also indicated an element of surprise when it came to crafting. Despite careful planning, the materials in the DIY projects often altered the outcomes and the crafting processes. To understand this, I have used Luckman's (2015) term 'enchantment' to argue that the enchanted connection between the materials and the hand of the maker should be understood as an affective moment. This moment cannot be done 'right' or 'wrong'. The outcome, however, is located in politics as it can be deemed as both 'positive' and 'negative'. This positive or negative response to the outcome is never fully positive nor negative, but always changing as a result of struggle. This enabled me to analyse the bridal projects via discourses of postfeminist success, where highly styled and glamorous outcomes were praised above more crafty-looking objects.

Enchantment also enabled me to analyse Ilse's dress making process and how the dress' materials, and Ilse's body, produced an unexpected outcome. Although the outcome was first discussed as undesirable (e.g. the pink wedding dress), the end result was deemed positive. I have argued that the affective connection with the dress making did not merely involve a connection with the whole dress, but could be set in motion via a sample of the dress' fabrics. These fabrics then tapped into the assemblage, connecting Ilse's body with the dress making. I have argued how the process of dress making, as well as the DIY activities, were the result of the interaction between all the different elements of the assemblage, so that we will never know how the dress or object becomes, nor will there ever be a final version of the dress or object, as time always alters the formation of the elements in the assemblage.

This chapter therefore contributes to discussions of postfeminism, happiness, retraditionalisation and the perfect. The chapter speaks to a larger body of work that explores how happiness and notions of the good life are ingrained into even the most mundane objects. Rather than focussing on how notions of happiness and the good life exclude people from participation, I have outlined how it works to cement the centre and create a shared orientation toward postfeminist perfection. This focus enabled me to research how retraditionalisation and postfeminism, as well as neoliberal discourses such as professionalism, branding and style, encouraged the brides to re-engage with seemingly classic female labour such as crafting. My analysis showed that when crafting entered the postfeminist space, it became laden with

aesthetic demands of gloss and style as markers of idealised forms of bridal perfection, reshaping earlier writings that located DIY away industrialised smooth and perfectly polished objects.

Throughout my thesis, I have looked for ways to complicate the notion of the agentic bridal orchestrator and to shake up a simple, clear and clean analysis of bridal becomings within contemporary postfeminist wedding spaces. In looking at materiality and by drawing on Bennett (2010) and Luckman (2015), I have focused on something more than human within the wedding assemblage. I did this by providing space for the agentic powers of the materials, and more specifically within the DIY activities and the making of the wedding dress. The bridal accounts gave space to focus on the enchanted connection between the maker and the objects, so that the becoming of the final object was not merely produced by the brides or dress-maker but a connection of all the different elements in the assemblage. Linking this moment of enchantment with the notion of the perfect opens up possibilities to think about perfection as part of a wider assemblage of both human and non-human agents, rather than the sole domain of neoliberal postfeminist ideals. My analytical focus made it possible to move the attention away from merely the endpoint of the process and towards the process itself and the changes and possibilities that emerge there, so that a (potentially) never worn homemade corset can still be framed as a space of movement and possibilities, rather than simply a failure and missed opportunity.

In the next chapter, Embodiment, I deepen my exploration of the connection of bodies with objects when I analyse the decision-making process of dress shopping. I also explore how the brides recounted the experience of wearing the dress, and how this changed their sense of their body and location in the world. I end the chapter by moving away from the dress to discuss how the wedding day is experienced on a bodily level.

# Chapter 6.

## Embodiment

*Ilse: And I, he really thought it was beautiful as well, but I also think that that's also purely because you're standing there and you feel confidence and you feel happy in it.*

*Miauw: 25.06.2014*

*It was really the day of my dreams. I'm still emotional when I look back at it. All the sweet words, beautiful moments and amazing people who were there.*

*Indian Queen 08.06.2014*

*We were absolutely exhausted! Shattered... I now know why people don't have sex on their wedding night... it's just inhuman!*

### 6.1. Introduction

The three extracts above come from the interviews (Ilse) and the forum data (Miauw and Indian Queen), and capture the connection between the body and the wedding day. The above extracts indicate the bodily affect of the wedding day: they discussed the wedding as a moment of happiness, exhaustion and as generally being emotional. In this chapter, I discuss the connection of the wedding with the body by analysing how the brides recounted how the wedding, and especially the wedding dress, felt.

To think about these emotional movements, I analyse how the brides discussed the connection between their body and the wedding dress, **enabling me to explore postfeminist bridal perfection as a gendered construct and as something that is recounted as** both a feeling of being out of the ordinary as well as staying in line with what is culturally expected and desired. To understand this, I draw from Ahmed's (2004, 2010) and Berlant's (2011: 170) discussion of 'aspirational normalcy'. I connect this with discussions around class and respectable femininity to frame the desire to be normal as a political status, **positioning retraditional notions of bridal perfection at the centre of the postfeminist imaginary** (Skeggs 1997). **I move on to argue that this image of perfection is not solid but can shift through the unexpected interaction of the body with the dress.** I continue my analysis of the promise of happiness and how desires for the 'good life' as a gendered bodily experience shape the wedding: how it feels to desire well, **a traditional white wedding**, and to share an orientation towards the good life (Ahmed 2010). **This chapter aims to add to postfeminist research by taking the body as a site of knowledge creation to examine how feminine perfection is rooted in the bridal body. Via Berlant (2011), I aim to complicate this bodily response**

to the wedding dress and the subject position of the bride by researching how feminine perfection requires a renegotiation of space and connection between the body and the self.

The data I use for this chapter mainly focuses on the interviews, but I have also incorporated some forum data which comes from the topic Getrouwd! [trans: Married!]. The posts in this topic were often lengthy (an average of two A4-sheets) compared to other posts that were usually no more than a couple of sentences. The stories also had the form of a monologue, where the recently married bride shared her stories and photographs. Other members responded with wishes of luck, exclamations of how beautiful the day was and positive comments on the photographs. The married bride rarely responded to these comments, and if she posted a response it was usually limited to a ‘thank you for your lovely responses and wishes’.

Before I move on with the analysis, I first provide the theoretical framework of this chapter, where I explain how I understand embodiment. Here I look at the location of the body within feminist theory and writings about fashion in relation to idealised forms of femininity. I also discuss the connection of the body with class and how bodily sensations affect how we feel about the world and our location in it.

## **6.2. The Body, Embodiment and Feminist Theory**

The body has always been important for our understandings of femininity. The body holds a central place in feminist theory (see for example Davis 1982, Irigaray 1985, hooks 1990, De Beauvoir 1997). Historically, the body was framed as the basic distinction between man and woman so that womanhood was located strongly within the body, whilst manhood was connected with the mind (Grosz 1994). This is exemplified in connecting a woman’s mental well-being with her body. Shildrick and Price stated in their edited collection *Feminist Theory and the Body* that this is ‘how femininity itself becomes marked by the notion of an inevitable irrationality’ (1999: 3). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, feminists started to critique the focus on the body as the source of differences between the sexes, towards a focus on culture. This new angle made it possible to think about the characteristics of femininity as not predetermined by birth or the body, but through the cultural environments (De Beauvoir 1997). The attention to culture led to a focus on representation and the location of femininity in the patriarchal structure that creates damaging images of women (Bray and Colebrook 1998, Shildrick and Price 1999). One result of the focus on representation has been the construction of the ideal female body as the outcome of ‘masculine representational logic’ (Bray and Colebrook 1998: 35). The perfect female body as the result of man’s fantasies has been important for feminist critiques on the beauty industry that deemed the industry harmful for woman’s well-being (Felski 2006).

A well-known example is Naomi Wolf’s *Beauty Myth* (1990). Wolf’s (1990) work makes sense of the beauty industry as part of a patriarchal society and how it has a far-reaching impact on women’s lives. Wolf (1990) argued that despite the greater freedom women enjoy through work and financial recourses,

the pressure from the beauty industry to look good has moved into every aspect of women's lives. Wolf (1990) framed her critique by arguing that the dominant image of the beauty industry that is unattainable for most women. These unrealistic images urge women to engage in dieting regimes, plastic surgery treatments and other bodywork to live up to unattainable and inauthentic beauty ideals that have 'robbed women from their autonomy' to make their own beauty choices (Bray and Colebrook 1998: 38).

In her critique, Wolf (1990) assumed that there is a space outside the media, where women can make 'true', 'autonomous' and 'authentic' choices about physical appearance. This assumption originates from Wolf's (1990) ontological assumption that a woman's body is essentially different and separate from the media, creating a binary opposition of subject/object, body/image and representation/materiality. This assumption is carried more broadly in feminist writings (Bray and Colebrook 1998) as evidenced in, for example, the work of Bordo (1993) and Jeffreys (2005). Bordo (1993) has compared the corset with the bondage of slavery to highlight how women's bodies are constraint by beauty ideals, in both a psychological way, such as appearance as a marker of women's success, as well as in a literal sense, such as not being able to move freely. For Bordo, women 'suffer from the whims and bodily tyrannies of fashion' (1993: 198) without a choice to not engage with these fashion ideals. Jeffreys' (2005) book has a greater focus on the beauty industry, but her argument is similar to that of Bordo's (1993). Jeffreys (2005) discussed how the practices and images of the beauty industry are harmful to women and a source that underpins the differences between the sexes.

Despite the value of this work to bring the harmful, oppressive and painful aspects of the beauty and fashion industry to the forefront (Felski 2006), the idea that there is an authentic body outside of media influence has been critiqued (see for example Budgeon 2003, Coleman 2008a). This critique sees the body and culture as connected, so that bodies and how bodies become are not perceived as outside culture, rather bodies are connected with the world that they are part of. The body is, therefore, a cultural phenomenon (McNay 1999a). I take this standpoint as the basis for this chapter. This means that I understand the bridal body as part of the wedding culture it inhabits. Discourses of bridal perfection shape the way brides make sense of their bridal body. The connection between culture and bodies positions the body as an important anchor in the way we understand and experience the world (Merleau-Ponty 1962).

Linking this back to wedding cultures and the wedding dress, Entwistle (2000) captured the dress' central location in the wedding experience when she connected human bodies with dressed bodies, highlighting the importance of clothing in making sense of our place in the world. The wedding dress is an essential part of understanding the cultural position of the bride. The dress as a key element of the wedding is mirrored in both the interviews and forum data as in both spaces it received a lot of attention. The wedding dress is also a cultural sign that gives the bride her social status during the day, as clothing is a way to present the self in a social setting (Boulwood and Jerrad 2000). For example, the bride's social status on

the day can be seen in the way the wearing of white by other female guests is deemed as inappropriate and an insult to the bride. Also, clothes in general shape the way we understand and experience ourselves in the world (Boulton and Jerrad 2000, Entwistle 2000, Grimstad Klep and Rysst 2017). For the bridal embodied experience, it is the wedding dress that forms this experience. The bridal body, and understanding what it means to be a bride, is endlessly connected to the cultures and rituals of the wedding, and the wedding dress is a central component of that.

The (prior) body, therefore, can only be understood through its lived location in the world. To frame the connection between body and culture I move to Budgeon (2003), who outlined the connection between body and culture as a continuous interaction. For Budgeon (2003), the body is not an object that is simply shaped and morphed by the culture, as this view would mean that culture is just stamped on the body in a singular and homogenous way. *A quick flick through wedding magazines could lead to the conclusion that all bridal bodies look the same: white Western origin, long white wedding gowns, slim bodies and long hair, locating middle to upper class white women at the centre of the wedding imaginary (Leonard 2018). Despite the value of this observation, I am interested in the complexity of the experience of being a bride located close to hegemonic understandings of bridal perfection.* To capture this complexity Budgeon moved away from the body as an object, to the body as an event (2003: 36). The metaphor of the event makes it possible to think about the body as in a ‘process of becoming – as multiplicities that are never just found but are made and remade’ (Budgeon 2003: 50). Moving this idea to my research on wedding culture, this enables me to do justice to the complexity of the bridal body. Linking this to my experience as a bride, my bridal body is also in line with hegemonic representations of bridal beauty, and I enjoyed being a bride. Equally, finding the dress, having it made, and wearing it on the day was a mixture of pleasant and negative experiences. The first time I went for a dress fitting, I burst into tears after I tried on three dress. I felt like a ridiculous meringue, unable to move in a dress that was about five times bigger than my usual size. Positioning the body as an object in contrast to the body as an event, brought attention to the constantly changing nature of the body.

Alongside Budgeon’s (2003) account of the body as an event, I discuss Coleman’s (2008a, 2009) becoming of bodies, as she discussed more explicitly the connection between (media) images and culture. Stepping away from the effect model, Coleman (2008a) theorised how bodies and images should not be understood separately but as connected, so that we learn to know, understand and experience our bodies in interaction with images. To do this, Coleman (2008a) drew on Deleuze’s becoming which she framed as a process, an inter-connectivity and a relationality. Coleman (2008a) therefore discussed the interaction between bodies and idealised images of (female) bodies as messy and fluid. This ‘constitutive relationality’ suggests that bodies and images should be understood as intertwined, so we cannot say that images or bodies exist before their connection with other images and bodies (Coleman 2008a: 164). An essential

element of Coleman's (2008a) work is that connection surpasses dualisms, so that we no longer speak of an object or subject, but about constantly transforming relations. Coleman's (2008a) suggestion turns Wolf's (1990) idea, that there is an authentic unblemished female body outside the field of representation, on its head as there is no space outside the connection between images and bodies.

For her research, Coleman (2008a) did a series of interviews with girls where they discussed their ideas and feelings about images of themselves and from the media. Via these discussions, the girls' accounts showed how their feelings about their images were not stable but changed over time. Based on this observation, Coleman stated that the images create a 'particular affect', such as feeling great or feeling bad, which highlights the relationship with the images (2008a: 169). Coleman moved on to argue that the images did not capture the girls' bodies, but that these photographs and their affective responses produced particular knowledges, understandings and experience of their bodies (2008a: 170).

In my research project, the brides also referred to their bridal images. Their discussions highlighted that the affective connection with these images was not stable, but produced knowledge and a particular experience of the body. Tessa, for example, described how the fact that she was not wearing glasses yet when she got married created a space between her body now, and her bridal body back then. Coleman (2008a) discussed spatiality and temporality in relation to the images in her research project, so that the knowledge produced in connection with the image is bound to a specific time and moment. The image is therefore never reducible to the image itself, but always captures the context as well as the work and labour that went into the production of the image. For Coleman (2008a), this includes the labour that went into the idealised images of women in the media, and for my research, this connects the images of the wedding with the day itself and the organisation that went into producing the day. Although this chapter does not specifically focus on the connection with the bridal images, the interviews took place and were shaped via the photographs (and the objects) the brides used to tell their story.

Connecting the body with the culture also makes it possible to analyse how constructs, such as class, shape the hegemonic image of female ideal beauty. Skeggs (1997, 2001) has explored how respectable middle class female bodies are constructed around a careful balance between, on the one hand, a beauty that looks sophisticated and in line with the hegemonic ideal of feminine beauty, with, on the other hand, a need to present this styled feminine image as natural. A failure to present female beauty as naturally beautiful risks excess. Working class female beauty is often framed as being out-of-control, emphasising the labour of beauty. It is exactly the labour of a produced femininity that creates a distance with the sign of femininity, as female beauty should come 'naturally' and not as a consequence of intense labour practices (Skeggs 1997, 2001). Jensen and Ringrose (2014) have also discussed how discourses of working class excessive femininity present the bridal performances of the Gypsy Brides in *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* (2010-2015) as out of control. The dresses these brides wear, as well as their accessories and beautifying



practices, are understood by the audiences of *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* (2010-2015) as extreme in terms of colour, accessories and style, highlighting the labour that goes into the bridal performance. In similar vein Leonard (2018) analysed how *Bridezilla* (2004-2013 and 2018-present) located a stylised, perfect wedding day away from working class identities, as they were deemed unable to control their emotions and desires in favour of respectable feminine performances alongside discourses of hard work and self-control.

Discourses around style and respectability shape both the social and the psychic. To understand how taste and style become part of our embodied experience of being in the world I draw on Ahmed (2010). According to Ahmed (2010), we learn to desire what tastes good and what is good taste via our bodily connection to the world. This bodily orientation towards taste makes it appear natural and authentic rather than the result of cultural and social expectations. Taste is, therefore ‘a very specific bodily orientation that is shaped by what already is decided to be good or higher taste’ (Ahmed 2010: 33). The connection between good taste and the body creates a moral economy that is based on affective differentiation between bodies of good taste and bodies of poor taste. Linking this back to *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* (2010-2015), these bridal bodies are understood as a cultural example of bodies of poor taste. To become bodies of good taste, our bodies need to learn what to desire and what to feel repulsed by. My theme of embodiment is, therefore, about affect as a bodily orientation towards objects and the world around us, for example, the wedding dress. The capacity to be affected could be understood as universal and a-political. However, in my approach to affect, the way these feelings are discursively addressed, for example, to talk about the body feeling good, is political (Kolvraa 2015).

Ahmed (2010) linked taste not only to class, but also to our orientation towards the good and happy life. In this chapter, I also use aspirational normalcy as a desire to understand how to live a good life. Berlant discussed ‘aspirational normalcy’ as ‘the desire to feel normal, as a ground of a dependable life, a life that does not have to keep being reinvented’ (2011: 170). She used ‘aspirational normalcy’ to make sense of upward mobility and economic insecurity in films such as *Rosetta* (Dardenne 1999). Living the good life, or more precisely desiring a good life, does not mean to live a life that is amazing and thrilling from beginning to end. Rather, the good life is a life that is normal and does not need to be defended, but blends in with the stream of expectations of how to live well. This links back to research discussed above in terms of *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* (2010-2015) and *Bridezilla* (2004-2013 and 2018-present), where the bride’s social position constantly demands they defend their lives and the choices they make move against what is expected of bridal beauty (Jensen and Ringrose 2014, Leonard 2018).

The body as an event and as a form of becoming enabled me to pay attention to the complexity of the bridal body, as not something that is purely beautiful or oppressed by beauty standards of postfeminist wedding cultures, but as a constant mixture of feelings and attachments. Focusing on the messiness and complexity of the bridal body does justice to the embodied experience the brides discussed in their

narratives. Below I start the analysis by discussing the diverse ways the brides talked about their experience of being a bride.

### **6.3. Finding the Dress - an Embodied Experience**

*'Fashion's aspirational role is to provide a means of creating an approximation to the ideal'*

(Boulton and Jerrard 2000: 302)

Boulton and Jerrard's (2000) suggested that fashion is the desire to reach an ideal. The social pressure on brides to look their best is made concrete through fashion discourses that locate the dress at the centre of the ideal bridal body. Below, I analyse how brides negotiated their engagement with the wedding dress as the marker of bridal beauty. I focus on the interviews with Mara, Floortje and Tessa and how they accounted for the search for their dresses as both a rational and affective embodied process. I frame this search as an aspirational process where the brides were looking for a way to create proximity to the bridal ideal (Berlant 2011). The narrative of this search was a combination of neoliberal discourses of working on the body, as well as an affective connection between the brides and the wedding dresses. The brides discussed how they 'organised' their search via check-lists of what the wedding dresses should look like. This neat narrative was disrupted by an affective bodily connection with the ideal wedding dress.

In this section, I start with Mara's interview, who mainly drew on neoliberal discourses of working on the body as she framed her knowledge of what was deemed as beautiful and as lacking. I then move to Floortje, who framed the search for the dress as a more embodied process, to the analysis of Tessa's account whose bodily responses to the wedding dresses disrupted her ideal image of bridal perfection. This section is an extension of *Chapter 4: Temporality*, as it complicates the neoliberal process of working on the body by incorporating the affective bodily response of the brides with the wedding dress. This enables me to include the body as a site of knowledge creation.

As stated, I start with Mara who I interviewed before and after her wedding. This section focuses on the interview before her wedding, given how it framed the complexity of a bridal transformation. Mara started her interview stating that she did not want to get married, but she did it because her husband-to-be wanted to. During the interview, it became clear that Mara's reluctance to get married was complicated, as on the one hand, she rejected the image of bridal beauty, whilst on the other hand, she feared missing out on something beautifully romantic.

The first extract comes from early in the interview when I asked Mara about her wedding dress. This was a standard topic during all the interviews and always generated an extensive retelling of the

experience of finding, buying and wearing the dress. However, Mara's story was different from most of the other brides. When I asked about the process of finding the dress, she started:

**Extract 40**

*Mara: No, I got a list of demands from [name of her fiancée] when I went for the dress [...] [as] I have no clue about fashion, I really won't know what uhm, how it should look like (laughs a bit) [...] And well yeah, I searched on the internet for dresses I liked, and I had put some photos next to each other, pages full of photos and then I showed them to [name of her fiancée] and [name of her fiancée] added a plus or a min next to them, so I had some ideas about where I had to pay attention to, but I was not allowed to have a short dress, it had to be till the ground, it had to be white, I was not allowed to have a colour or a flower, nor a bow, and well that were the aims and well I had to work with them (laughs a bit). [...] Yeah, I think I have done a good job, I really think that he will like it. Yeah. So yeah, eventually it will be really, I think it is a wedding dress.*

Mara framed the search for her wedding dress as something she did for her husband-to-be so that the result of the search – the wedding dress – would live up to his expectations. Mara's focus on how her husband-to-be wanted her to look can be read as a result of the patriarchal system (see for example Bordo 1993 and Jeffreys 2005 on the harms women face because of the patriarchal beauty and fashion industry). Although this is a valuable way to make sense of the extract, it does not do justice to what was happening here and throughout Mara's interview. During the interview, Mara did not give me the impression she purely engaged in the wedding to please her partner. Rather she seemed to be negotiating between her idea that weddings were 'stupid' and the fear of missing out on 'something special'.

To understand this complexity, I move the attention to the beginning of extract 40 where she claimed that "*I have no clue about fashion, I really won't know what uhm, how it should look like*". She constructed herself as unknowledgeable about fashion, and, rather, trusted that her husband-to-be did. By stating that she had "*no clue about fashion*", Mara located herself outside the ideal image of femininity, as good femininity is linked with knowledge on fashion and outer appearances. Fashion is strongly connoted as a space for women and only in recent years have men been permitted to enter the domain without being in danger of being defined as feminine or queer (see for example Edwards 1997 on the connection between masculinity, fashion and consumer culture). However, by looking for fashionable bridal images and trusting her husband-to-be's judgement, Mara ensured that her bridal images still remained located within the space of feminine bridal success, whilst making sure she rebelled against the idea of bridal beauty<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> Mara's interview has a strong focus on gender differences in relation to the wedding, another space where this comes up is in her discussion of being given away in marriage by her dad.

To further frame Mara's account of her lack of fashion, I move to Ahmed (2010) who argued that throughout life our bodies learn to desire well, so that we feel drawn to certain objects, but feel repulsed about others. By stating that she lacked a sense of fashion, Mara positioned herself as unknowledgeable as to the ways fashion can help her reach 'the ideal'. Her body, in that sense, was framed as unable to feel drawn to the right wedding dresses. To make up for this lack of a bodily orientation, Mara used the tick-list. This technique is part of neoliberal discourses that present the body as a project to be worked on. Giddens' (1991) and Beck (1992), for example, understood the body as a project of the reflexive self or choice biography in modernity. For Giddens (1991), the body can be altered through the right consumer practices and bodywork. In this view, the mind and the body are separate entities where the mind rules over the body and can alter the (bridal) body as it pleases, so the body becomes an object for 'human management and reconfigurations' (Budgeon 2003: 37).

I am aware of the problems in Giddens' (1991) and Beck's (1992) work, for example, the body and mind dualism and the way they neglect social differences in terms of class, race and gender (see for example Atkinson 2007, Brannen and Nilson 2007 for a critique). Nonetheless, the concept of working on the self is elementary to contemporary neoliberal societies, where consumers are encouraged to transform their lives via the right consumer practices.

Based on her husband-to-be's pluses (+) and minuses (-) next to the images of dresses, Mara built a list she used as a guideline to manoeuvre through the possible wedding gowns. The tick list presented the search for the dress via qualitative and measurable quantities, whilst including the elements that marked a good bridal performance such as a long, white wedding gown with not too many details and accessories. Thinking about the perfect dress through a list of key characteristics does not take into account how the dress felt when it was wrapped around the body, but presented it as a rational process, positioning the ideal bridal body within everyone's reach – even within the reach of someone who has no clue about fashion. In popular media, such as Pinterest, this idea is mirrored in style guides (see illustration 26 and 27) that match body shape with dress styles or fail-proof guides for wedding dress shopping. Following these guides should enable all brides to find their perfect wedding gown, wiping out differences in terms of class, race and religion.

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Illustration 27: Wedding Dress Shopping Guide via [www.brides.com](http://www.brides.com) [accessed on 27.09.2017]

Illustration 26: Wedding Gown and Body Shape Advice Board (extract) via Pinterest

In this section, I have analysed the complexity of Mara's story (extract 40) with, on the one hand, her desire to reach an image of bridal perfection, whilst rejecting this image on the other hand. By presenting the search for the dress via her husband-to-be's ticks, she was able to alienate herself from the process by foregrounding her lack of fashion knowledge and therefore her inability to know what is beautiful. At the same time, these tick-lists enabled Mara to live up to the expectations of bridal beauty. This was in stark contrast to the other narratives, where the brides discussed their search via their affective bodily engagement with the dress, rather than rejecting an embodied orientation. Via the interview I had with Floortje, I analyse how she presented her choice for a simple and smooth wedding gown as naturally occurring to her by focusing on her bodily responses to the dress.

I interviewed Floortje at her house and, as with other interviews, there was an explosion of talk the moment I asked Floortje about the dress. Floortje's account described how much she enjoyed the search for her dress and to have her friends and female family with her.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> The extract is a heavily trimmed down version of her response to ensure a focus on the dress, rather than on the interaction with her family and friends. Although the interaction was a valuable aspect of the interview, this part of the analysis is focused on the connection between Floortje and the dress.

#### **Extract 41**

*Floortje: And you know they [the dresses] all have folds [trans: vouwen] and lifts and uhm, folds [trans: plooiën] and well, I didn't like that at all. So it ended up being a completely smooth dress. And uhm I wanted a waterfall neck and an open back, like that, and I didn't want a very broad one. [...]*

*Yeah, and after a while you can cross things off. Like this is what I really don't like and this. And for me I really didn't want a halter, as I really don't have any breasts [...] yeah and I have broad shoulders, so that were all kinds of things I didn't want. And I didn't want a skirt with all those folds, I think that's, I have a colleague and she is completely in folds [trans: plooiën] and lift ups [trans: ophalingen] and it looked amazing on her, but when I was wearing something like that it was like – yo, there is farmer Pien going! So that, you know, you have to have a feeling with it and every wedding is on itself really beautiful, but you just have your own taste. [...] So I wanted a smooth one, so that was like, out of the hundred wedding dresses, they have one five smooth ones. [...] So yeah, eventually you end up with a very small selection. I had a very classic one, and I thought that was super.*

In the interview, Floortje accounted for her discovery that she liked smooth dresses that were “*very classic*”, rather than dresses that had many folds and lift ups. Floortje’s reference to the smooth and classic dress can be read as a discursive reference to her social location in terms of class and respectable femininity. In the analysis of Floortje’s extract, I argue that Floortje’s extensive dress fitting sessions created an embodied connection with these dresses that privileged a middle-class sense of feminine beauty. The embodied connection with the dresses enabled Floortje to present her choice and taste for the wedding dress as natural, as it was her feeling with it that enabled her to make the decision.

At the beginning of the chapter, I discussed the production of respectable femininity, where beauty is naturally occurring rather than the outcome of extensive labour practices (Skeggs 1997, 2001). I use this idea to make sense of Floortje’s preference for a classic dress. Floortje discussed the classic dress, in comparison to her colleague’s dress which she described as “*completely in folds and lift ups*”. I frame this reference to the folds and lift ups as excessive and unfashionable. I do this via Floortje’s discussion of the risk of being deemed as unfashionable by stating that she looked like “*farmer Pien*” (extract 41). This is not an official Dutch phrase, but both the name Pien and the profession, a farmer, highlight the lack of elegance and sophistication. The classic and smooth wedding dress, on the other hand, can be read as a desire to secure proximity to the sign of female beauty. The proximity to feminine elegance is done through beauty that is seemingly simple and natural.

Having discussed the dress with many folds and lift ups, Floortje continued to construct her choice for the classic and smooth dress as a bodily orientation – “*you have to have a feeling with it*” (extract 41). With this statement, Floortje presented her consumer choice as not a rational decision-making process, but instead an emotionally and bodily informed decision. This makes sense in relation to the way taste can be understood as a bodily orientation which is politically and culturally coded, so that through life our bodies learn how to desire well (Ahmed 2010). This narrative is mirrored in consumer rhetoric, where consumption and branding rely on intangible qualities of the products that are bodily felt, rather than rationally discussed (see for example Miller’s (2015) discussion on happiness and contemporary advertisement).

By focusing on her emotions and her embodied orientation towards the dress, Floortje presented her choice for the dress as natural. Ahmed (2004) has discussed how in popular culture emotions are deemed as private, personal and authentic, removing the political, cultural and social aspect of the experience. Floortje’s reference towards emotions enabled her to present her choice as authentic and coming from somewhere deep inside her. This underlines Floortje’s proximity to the sign of female beauty, as it was framed as natural to her. This naturalisation of the process locates Floortje’s story deeper in the politics of class, gender and style, as our emotions and understanding of what is beautiful are part of the political landscape we inhabit.

Floortje’s construction of style and taste was framed through neoliberal discourses of the individual, creating a narrative that is seemingly open for other styles and preferences by presenting it as their taste. During the interview, Floortje constructed this narrative by stating that “*every wedding is on itself really beautiful, but you just have your own taste*” (extract 41). Floortje’s moral judgement was constructed via discourses that present everyone as having equal chances of enacting a classy and beautiful bridal performance. By stating that “*every wedding is beautiful, because of your own taste*”, she kept a focus on the individual. However, at the same time, Floortje presented the smooth and classic wedding dress as more sophisticated than the wedding dress with lots of accessories. Floortje made this moral distinction by stating that she looked like “*farmer Pien*”. Her orientation towards the classic gown was naturalised by presenting it as an authentic and embodied response to the dress: it was *just* her taste, and it felt good.

The focus on what felt good was evident in all the interviews and the data on the forum. For example, Ilse stated: “*you really let your emotions guide you, it is very emotional*”. In the extract below, the affective connection with the dress also guided Tessa’s dress search. Tessa got married in a dress that was short at the front and long at the back, which was different than the wedding dress she initially had in mind.

#### **Extract 42**

*Tessa: (laughs a bit) Dear, dear. No, it was uhm, I really had an image in my head of such a really traditional wedding dress and uhm yeah a bit wide at the bottom and uhm a bit slender at the top. So I tried on a dress like that in the shop and I was like, well if this is it!*

*Francien: Then you can keep it, I'll take my pyjamas then.*

*Tessa: Yes, exactly, oh dear, oh dear. I really thought it was very old-fashioned [trans: truttig]. And uhm, then uhm, then I think I tried on about fifteen dresses or something and then at some point halfway she [the saleswoman] came with this one. And then just short, and I thought short, I'm not going to wear a short dress, that's just weird isn't it?! But it fitted really nicely and very well and everyone just said like, you suddenly shine in this dress. So that uhm. And then uhm I tried on a few others and uhm I believe one with a grey ribbon or I don't know what and something with loads of lace and with loads of pearls, but uhm no. This, this, this was the dress or something. It was really strange, as I really had to decide I liked it.*

*Francien: What do you mean with that you had to decide that you liked this dress?*

*Tessa: Well it fitted really comfortably, but rationally speaking (laughs) I just had in my mind that I just had just a long – I would wear such a traditional wedding dress, and that that was just not something I liked and then I just thought 'no, this looks much better'. This is all, you could say that I just had to decide it, yeah, it just felt really well.*

*Francien: You, mean, that that, you, you had that idea about how you would look as a bride that you just had to let that go?*

*Tessa: Yes, I had to let that go yeah. I had been thinking about it for twenty years (laughs) and then it just wasn't it. (laughs) And it's another one. And it just fitted really nicely and well. And actually the dress was strapless, but I actually thought that that was a bit boring, so we added an extra collar to it. So we dressed it up differently than how it was officially, but uhm, yeah, it was it [trans: het was m wel]*

The kind of dress Tessa discussed during the interview, a bit wide at the bottom and a bit slender on the top, is a dress that popular wedding media describe as a ball gown dress. As evident in the descriptions (illustration 28), the dress was presented as a princess dress or classic fairy tale dress. The fairy tale image of the ball gown is supported in cultural scripts from Disney's Cinderella to the classic style wedding gown exemplified in Liv's wedding dress in *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009).



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Illustration 28: Ball Gown Dress description, extract from wedding dress guides on Pinterest

Tessa (extract 42) accounted for how she expected herself to feel drawn to the dominant cultural and iconic image of the ball gown dress style. The affective orientation towards this dress was not the actual dress itself, but the image of the dress she had in her head, so that the affective connection with the object was formed before the actual interaction. This affective orientation is different to Ahmed's (2010) discussion about feelings and objects. Ahmed outlined that when happy objects are passed around, the good feeling is expected to follow or the 'feelings lag behind the objects that are assumed to contain them' (2010: 44). For Tessa's ball gown dress style, the feeling or the expectation of the wedding travelled ahead of the actual interaction. When the dress was eventually wrapped around her body, she recounted the bodily sensation she expected as not having happened, rather she spoke of a sense of disappointment: "*well, is this it?*" Instead of a positive affective connection with a ball gown dress, Tessa described her positive and surprising bodily response to a different dress style, long at the back and short at the front. To describe this affective moment, she used terms such as "*really nicely and very well*" and "*it just felt really well*". Tessa recounted the response of her female relatives when she tried on the other dress as making her "*suddenly shine*". Tessa's retelling of the experience disrupted the idea that desired bridal appearance could be planned, by either following the tick-list or bridal style guides. For Tessa, the outcome was unexpected and demanded she let go of a bridal image she had for "*twenty years*". So, rather than following what is expected to be beautiful, the ball gown style, the bridal image turned out to be flexible, opening up and deterritorialising

the possibilities of her bridal ideal. Although the changed ideal still fits within the paradigm of hegemonic bridal beauty, it disrupted the image of a long wedding gown by giving space to a dress that was neither long nor short. This highlights the unpredictable nature of the affective powers within an assemblage, so that the potential of bodies cannot be known in advance, for example Tessa's bridal look was the result of an expected affective response to an alternatively styled wedding dress (Budgeon 2003, Coleman 2008a and 2009, Coffey 2013: 7).

#### **6.4. The Dress and the Body**

In the previous section, I have analysed the search for the wedding dress via the embodied orientation to the dress, or the rejection thereof. The bridal narratives enabled me to connect their accounts with the image of bridal perfection on different levels, such as politics of working on the body, class and classic bridal beauty. I now move on to analyse the connection between the materiality of the dress and the flesh of the lived body, as the dress and the body are intrinsically connected. Entwistle discussed this connection by stating that 'we 'normally' experience dress as alive and 'fleshy': once removed from the body, dress lacks fullness and seems strange, almost alien' (2000: 326). To understand the dress, we need to think about it in relation to the body that wears it. In this section, I take the body as a site of knowing and knowledge creation (Springgay 2011). With this shift to the body, I do not intend to privilege the body over the mind. I merely include the body as a site of knowledge production and decision-making, rather than focusing solely on the mind. Via the email-interview I had with Femke, I analyse how Femke's experience of the dress changed when she tried it on and how it affected her decision making.

##### **Extract 43**

*Femke: The dress: I went to the Love and Marriage Fair [ENG] with my mother and mother-in-law. We already saw a couple of dresses there and one was my wedding dress. When I saw this dress on the doll, I thought it was a very beautiful dress straight away, so I made an appointment with the shop in Rosmalen [city in the South of the Netherlands] where they sold the dress. I went to try on some dresses together with my mum, mother-in-law, grandma and a friend [trans: vriendin]. I thought it was amazing to try on many different dresses and to see how everything looked like. You really feel very special then, also when you see the responses of the people who are with you and it is all really about you. I have tried on about seven different dresses, but eventually I have chosen the first one (the one I saw on the fair). With this one I had the "WOW" feeling just straight away and also the people who were with me. For the other dresses I tried on, that was less the case so my choice was on the first dress.*

Femke's retelling of the first encounter with the dress was an embodied experience that moved from looking to a visceral engagement with the garment. The retelling of the event fits discourses of 'love at first sight' and how this first look creates an emotional connection on the beholder of the look (Illouz 2007). Her retelling of first seeing the dress was presented as an intense experience, and trying on the dress deepened her connection to it.

By trying on the dress, it was wrapped directly onto Femke's body creating a close connection between the wearer and the dress. In our interaction with the world, it is our skin that gives us the idea that our bodies are separate from the space outside. However, it is also through the skin that we engage with the world and experience our presence in relation to other objects. For example, Ahmed (2000: 10) described the instance when you hit your toe against a table. This moment can be read as an impression that leaves a trace on the skin and produces a response from the subject – "ouch". For Ahmed 'it is through such painful encounters with other objects [...] that *surfaces are felt as being there*' (2000: 10, emphasis in original). In 2004, Ahmed used this example again to discuss that things and objects leave an impression on us. The impression can be a trace on the skin, for example, a bruise, but it also leaves an impression in the sense that it affects our emotions. When you hit the table your face scrunches up in agony and pain. Thinking about traces that are formed in our interaction with the world enables 'us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very affect of one surface upon another, an affect that leaves its marks and its trace' (Ahmed 2004: 6). Unlike tables, clothes have a more constant connection to the skin, so that even without the breathable body, the dress will always hold the traces of the bodies that wear them or have worn them. This is deepened by the customs around the wedding dress compared to 'normal' clothing, where the wedding dress is altered to exactly fit the bridal body. The dress is altered to become a second skin so that the connection between dress and bodies are always connected (Entwistle 2000).

I suggest that when the dress is wrapped onto the body, the surfaces of the body and the dress connect, creating an affect in the bridal body, which is translated into emotions, "*the WOW feeling*" (extract 43). This moment, or wow feeling, goes deeper than merely the look. Although Femke said she felt moved by the dress through looking, "*I thought it was beautiful straight away*" (extract 43), the affect the dress had when it was wrapped on her body was retold as more intense. For Femke, wrapping the wedding dress onto her body created an affect that left an impression. Linking touch with wrapping the gown onto the body, Femke's body, and that of the other brides, overflowed into the dress, breaking down the boundaries that separated the bridal body with the bridal dress, creating a deeply affective connection between the two.

Looking at Femke's account, the experience of trying on and wearing the wedding dress was something out of the ordinary, established through the connection between the skin and the dress, but was also enabled by the approval of others. For the dress fitting, Femke took significant others with her. Taking people with you to go dress shopping was an important element in the bridal narratives. Generally, the

people who went dress shopping was an all-women group, which created an all-women atmosphere with a focus on beauty and appearance (Winch 2012).

In Winch's (2012) discussion of homosociality, she argued that girlfriend flicks and other female-female genres foster an understanding of women-only spaces that encourages women to engage in beautifying practices and to aspire heterosexual romantic love and motherhood. These spaces mix encouragement with regimes of surveillance and judgement (see for example Ringrose's (2006) reading of the media attention to the image of the mean girl). This account is reflected in the discussions in my data of finding the dress. Dress fitting sessions functioned as a space where heterosexual romantic love was fostered, as were regimes of perfection through fashion and beauty discourses. Exploring how brides retold the lived experience of this moment demonstrates how it *feels* to be part of these spaces.

In line with Winch's (2012) observations, the dress fitting was a moment where Femke's (extract 43) bridal appearances became the centre of the attention and were praised in positive and affirming terms. The praise she received relocated hegemonic feminine beauty ideals at the centre of the wedding, as it was Femke's confirmation to the hegemonic bridal image of a long white wedding gown that was celebrated and encouraged. For Femke, the experience of being cheered and recognised for her appearance was retold positively "*You really feel very special then, also when you see the responses of the people who are with you and it is all really about you*" (extract 43). Her description indicated how confirming to the hegemonic expectations of beauty *feels* good, especially when it is recognised by others. The patriarchal symbolic system that informs our understanding of feminine beauty is therefore not solely maintained through the desires of the groom or other men, but also through woman-to-woman surveillance that polices what counts as good and bad forms of beauty (Skeggs 2001, Winch 2013). Ringrose (2013) argued that these forms of surveillance are mainly marked through 'bitchiness'. However, we can see here how the wedding and its preparations provided a space for woman-to-woman surveillance that was experienced as positive – "*making you feel very special*". This *feeling good* functioned as a mechanism to conform to the popular image of bridal beauty, rather than its potential to highlight questions of the political dimension of our feelings.

## **6.5. Embodying the Bride**

Above, I explored the connection between the bridal body and the dress during the dress search. I discussed how the dress left an impression on Femke's body that generates an affective sensation, "*the WOW feeling*" (extract 43). To develop Femke's extract, I move on to analyse the location of important others in creating the feeling of being special, and how feeling good has political consequences of affirming hegemonic bridal perfection. In this section, I analyse the location of beauty work and the dress in the brand transformation.

When I started my research, I expected a lot of talk around beauty and beautifying practices, in the same way as I expected the dress to be central in the narratives. Interestingly, beauty talk was not pivotal, either during the interviews or on the forum. On the forum, the beauty talk stayed limited to references towards the need to book hairdressers and make-up artists and some image sharing of hairstyles or makeup ideas. However, none of these discussions provided much insight into why brides wanted a hairdresser or makeup artist, or what styles were deemed as beautiful and appropriate and why. In the interviews, I always asked about the beauty work, however the answers were short and technical such as summing up the order of the beauty practices (Esther: “*I first did my hair and then my makeup*”) or the time the hairdresser arrived (Tessa: “*the hairdresser arrived at 7.30am so I had to get up around 6.30am*”). The absence of beauty talk is a finding on its own, as it highlights the demand of postfeminist cultures to present female beauty as naturally present and making sure that all the signs of labour are effaced (Negra 2009). Removing beauty talk from their narratives also hints towards the normalisation of beauty work as part of being a woman and a bride.

However, beauty practices were discussed in relation to the bridal transformation. These discussions did not provide much detail of what happened, but it located doing one’s hair and makeup as part of the larger transformation process alongside putting on the wedding dress. Below, I discuss an extract that comes from the interview with Sara. In this part of the interview, she talked me through the morning of her wedding.

#### **Extract 44**

*Sara: Well they have, uhm, they really did my hair and makeup first and then after a while uhm, uhm, and then I was finished [trans: was ik af], but then I was like, I can now get into my dress, but he won’t be here yet [...] And then after a while [...] [a]nd it was my mother-in-law who helped me with it [...] And uhm, well she helped me [...] we went to get me dressed, and uhm, actually that went really well. [...] Yeah, and then suddenly you’re the bride. And then you’re suddenly completely... wow*

*Francien: How was that?*

*Sara: Yeah, really great, but mostly really because [...] on the day it’s your smile and that you’re shining and that you’re so happy [trans: blij], so, that’s just completely different than when you’re walking around in a shop, you could say.*

*Francien: Yes.*

*Sara: And yeah you know, everyone says like, oh you look amazing, you’re so beautiful and and uhm yeah, but also so genuine. And that’s just really amazing.*

In the interview, Sara presented beauty practices as essential in turning herself into a bride on the morning of her wedding. Sara talked about these practices as something that “*finished*” her and when she got dressed into her gown she “*suddenly was the bride*”, “*suddenly complete*” (extract 44). I suggest that framing the narrative in this way makes less visible the actual labour that goes into the process. It also presented the moment of transforming into a bride as an almost enchanted moment. I discussed the term enchantment in *Chapter 5: Materiality* as a moment when different elements, both human and non-human (e.g. the wedding dress) connect and create an unexpected affect. Using the term enchantment enables me to highlight the unexpected element that shaped Sara’s narrative. By stating that it “*suddenly*” happened, she gave the impression that the bridal transformation came with unexpected outcomes. This is somewhat striking, as it was based on a year of planning, preparation and organisation that Sara had put into the wedding.

To understand the element of surprise as an enchanted moment, I focus the attention to the point where everything comes together in terms of the bridal transformation, such as the wedding gown, the hairstyle and the makeup. In the organisation process, all these elements are chosen with a complete picture in mind. However, each element is organised separately. For example, brides often explained to me that when they trialled their wedding hairstyle, they never wore the wedding dress. I argue that the coming together of these different elements created an enchanted moment where the sum of all the separate elements generated an enchanted and unexpected affect. So that, although Sara planned each different aspect in great detail, the way the different elements would interact with each other was unknown. Sara described this moment as “*suddenly you’re the bride*” and “*suddenly you’re complete*”. The enchanted moment can thus be understood as creating an affective moment, where all the different elements interact with each other and it is through the interaction that meaning and an understanding of the world is formed. The feeling of happiness and perfection was thus rooted in a specific spatial and temporal moment and cannot be relived outside of that.

## **6.6. The Dressed Bridal Body**

*‘all human bodies are dressed bodies’*

(Entwistle 2000: 323)

Below, I analyse how brides recounted their experience of wearing the dress. Many brides talked about this experience during the interview. Their narratives were never simple and straightforward, but were always messy, ranging between comfort, pleasure, frustration and nerves. This was mirrored in my own experience of wearing the wedding dress, which was both a fantastic experience as well as alien and at times annoying and painful. Although I liked my long veil and trail, it often got in my way when I tried to manoeuvre

myself between the guests, chairs and tables as every time I took a step back, I stood on the veil and trail. Also, the deep open back and V-neck of my dress meant that I had to use body tape to stick the dress on my body. At the end of the day, this tape had left burn marks on my collarbone, which hurt.

To start the analysis, I look at the interview with Esther. Esther's dress was the ball gown style, which is a dress that is slender at the top and wide at the bottom. Typically, these dresses are worn with a hoop under the skirt to ensure that the layers of tulle and fabric fall properly and wide around the bridal body. In the extract, Esther discussed her experience of wearing the dress.

#### **Extract 45**

*Esther: Uhm, in the beginning, you really have to get used to it, it's really, you really have a real thing, you're wearing a real thing also, it's not really heavy, but it's really a thing, a colossus [trans: gevaarte] you could say. It is not that you can easily run away or something, but at some point you will get used to it, it's maybe odd but after a few hours you will be like, oh well that's fine it's okay like this, you have been to the toilet and then uhm, yeah, then then you really get used to it. And during the evening I could lift it, or at least the train, you have to, well, but well eventually that went lose as well, so it was not tightened really well, but that at least you can lift the train quite a lot, so you cannot, so people won't be standing on it during the evening as it is a bit more chaotic then. And during the evening, I also just lifted it so I just wore it in one hand, then you are just a bit more flexible and you have just a little bit more and the train is up already. [...] Also because you're well, I had such a such a, ... what is the name again, such a hoop, you know that made it all a bit wider than when it would be just falling down uhm so yeah. [...] It was just with sitting and standing and then with kneeling [in the church] that you are like, oh yes, I have to pay a little bit more attention. And the dancing, as with that I told [name of her husband] about a hundred times that he cannot come to close as then he will be standing on the dress.*

In extract 45, Esther retold her experience of wearing the dress. The visceral connection of the clothes with our bodies is an important aspect of the way we make sense of clothes and dressed bodies (Grimstad Klep and Rysst 2017). I have already discussed the visceral connection between the skin and the dress when I analysed Femke's recounting the first time she tried on the dress as the "WOW-feeling" (extract 43). However, Femke's narrative did not provide any details on the experience of wearing the dress for a longer time.

The visceral connection of our clothes with our bodies is often characterised by a lack of awareness for the clothes, so that they are no longer alien materials wrapped onto our warm and breathing flesh, but that the clothes become a second skin – warm and only known in connection with the bodies wearing the

clothes. Clothes, therefore, becomes an extension of the body, where the boundaries of the self and the clothes bleed into each other (Entwistle 2000, Boulton and Jerrad 2000). The connection between clothes and the body is so strong that we feel more out of place in our naked body than in our dressed body. Clothes enable us to negotiate our position in the world, so that it is not just our bodies that negotiate our understanding of the world, but our dressed bodies (Merleau-Ponty 1962). In this light, Entwistle (2000) argued that clothes are not only an extension of our bodies, but also of our souls.

In this process, we are often completely unaware of the clothes we are wearing. However, Esther's extract (number 45) is saturated by an awareness of the dress and how it altered her space in the world by taking up more space. Esther needed to renegotiate her proximity to others, as people would stand on her dress during the evening. This negotiation made Esther aware of her skin, her dress, and her boundaries that marked her place in the world. For example, she talked about the experience of kneeling in the church, which was no longer an instinctive movement of her muscles, but became an act she had to consciously think about. Another act Esther discussed was the mundane act of going to the toilet. Whilst wearing the dress, this again was no longer a repetition of the same act over years, but was altered and complicated by the way the dress extended the body. Relearning these skills and renegotiating the new restrictions of her dressed body enabled Esther to feel more at ease again with her body. Although the dress was not considered a second skin, Esther's body and the dress were interacting with each other to become a unity that enabled Esther to renegotiate her space in the world, for example, not taking up too much space during the evening by lifting her dress.

Normally, the connection with the space we inhabit is something we are unaware of, and being unaware of such space is usually considered normal, part of blending in. In Berlant's discussion of aspirational normalcy, she described it as a 'desire to feel normal ... as a ground of a dependable life, a life that does not have to keep being reinvented' (2011: 170). Connecting this to the wedding dress, the dress enabled the brides to carry the social and cultural symbol of the (white) bride, which allowed her to be seen as a beautiful bride (see Boulton and Jerrad 2000 for an account of fashion as needing to constantly change within narrow parameters). I suggest this can be read as a form of aspirational normalcy (Berlant 2011: 170). Rather than desiring breath-taking and astonishing beauty, the brides looked for ways to be recognised as the bride, so that their role as a bride becomes taken-for-granted and does not have to be reinvented or defended.

Esther's experience of wearing the dress did enable her to blend in as the bride. Equally though, the connection of the wedding gown with the bridal body turned the bridal body into a space of reinvention. In our normal clothes, routines such as kneeling, going to the toilet and keeping a proper distance to others are acts that do not need thought or reinvented. However, when wearing the wedding dress, these simple acts became moments of thought to renegotiate the bodily boundaries and possibilities. For Esther, other



people stepping on her dress made her aware of how the dress extended her body beyond its normal boundaries (see Tyler 2003 on a reflection on embodying the pregnant body as extending the body's normal boundaries). Becoming aware of the extending boundaries broke the feeling of normalcy. This made the bridal body out of the ordinary and created a moment the body/dress connection became visible.

During the interviews, the experience of wearing the dress was central to making sense of the bridal experience. I stick with this idea for a bit longer to analyse Ilse's recounting of the experience. Ilse's dress style could also be labelled as the ball gown style as her dress was quite voluptuous, with a hoop to keep the layers of tulle in place. In extract 46, Ilse narrated her experience about her dress and the car they rented for the wedding. The car they drove was a Citroen 2CV, and in the Netherlands, it has the nickname 'ugly duckling'. This is quite a small car, and Ilse framed her experiences of getting into the car in terms of worry and anxiety.

#### **Extract 46**

*Ilse: Uhm (drinking her tea) I thought that was really exciting [trans: spannend], as that car, he had chosen it, and I didn't want to say that I had sooo much tulle, but I was really nervous whether I would be able to get into the car! (laughs) We went to pick up the car and I was really ooohhh, how am I ever going to get in? You know, a hoop is really round, and yeah you can bend it a little, but I was like, oh my maybe I just can't get in! I was really nervous about that!*

*Francien: But it all went fine?*

*Ilse: I thought I really have to let it go, all brides manage to get into the car, so it just must be possible (laughs). As here, this is the first photo after he came to pick me up, and see, you can really see that I feel a bit nervous about it and whether it would fit or not. (...) (turning pages) (...) Here you can see me, I just managed to fold myself into the car, completely, with the tulle everywhere, and in all directions and uhm. And then I really felt, I sit in the car, it fits!*

*Francien: And they can close the door!*

*Ilse: Yeah. There also are, they call those 'Ducklings' sometimes clothes killers, as there're, with the with the, where the handle falls in the lock uhm, there is a little hook.*

*Francien: You really need to be careful nothing gets stuck there.*

*Ilse: Yeah, and I thought you know I have those, if the hook gets stuck in it, you will just tear it really easily. So I was quite nervous about it. So every time we got in and out the car Harm had to help (laughs a bit) Yeah, yeah.*

Ilse's retelling of her fear of not fitting in the car can be read in line with a feminist critique on fashion, beauty and femininity, where patriarchal beauty ideals limit women's ability to freely move (Bordo 1993,

Jeffreys 2005). Both Ilse (extract 46) and Esther's (extract 45) accounts can be analysed through this lens, as the wedding dress complicated their movements. At the start of this section, I also mentioned my own experience with the dress, and how the long veil and trail complicated my movements throughout the day. Despite the usefulness of this critique, it fails to account for the different ways that women engage with beautifying practices. Normative bridal beauty is still a central marker of the bridal success, so that the bridal identity is connected to her appearance and ability to 'look good'. However, amongst others, Wood (2017) has complicated the idea that beauty and fashion are oppressive by outlining that women can take up technologies of sexiness and beauty in different ways, so that there is a space for difference and negotiation within the patriarchal order.

In addition to what can be done within dominant frameworks, I would like to draw attention to how the body feels. Ilse's retelling of getting into the car as an affective account of the event drew attention to her nervousness. Although in Ilse's story, these nerves about to not fitting in the car were literal, I move the literal to the symbolic meanings around 'not fitting in' with the discourses of good and respectable femininity. Good femininity is coded as petite, docile and not taking up too much space. When Ilse spoke of the possibilities of not fitting into the car, she was also at risk of not fitting ideal images of bridal and feminine perfection of smallness. She would no longer be petite and docile, fitting into even the tiniest spaces, but she would have drawn attention to herself, which would have framed her bridal body as big and taking up too much space. This would have had the danger of deeming her bridal body as excessive and out of control – too big to fit (in the car). The always-lurking risk of being out of control is an intrinsic aspect of neoliberal femininity (Gonick 2006). Ilse's nerves were, therefore, more than just a negotiation of the literal space, as it was also a renegotiation of her space in the social order. Fitting in (the car) without drawing attention to her altered bodily boundaries enabled Ilse to maintain an image of ideal femininity, as although her bridal body took up more space, it did not take up too much space.

Whereas Ilse's (extract 46) narrative focused around the anxiety of not fitting in, Floortje's (extract 47) story was quite different. Floortje wore a white, long and smooth dress that was slender at the top and fell loosely down her hips. The white long gown meant that Floortje's bridal look was in line with the ideal image of bridal beauty. However, Floortje's story also showed a level of resistance towards the bridal ideal in the way she made the dress her own.

#### **Extract 47**

*Floortje: Yeah, and it was like that, it was really good [trans: heerlijk!] And I my wedding dress on for five minutes and then I tore it [trans: trok ik er een haal in] from front to back (laughs a bit).*

*Francien: (laughs a bit) Serious?! With your nails or something?*

*Floortje: No, on the table. At that time we had a wooden table and I grab a cup of coffee and I just got stuck behind such a thingy, well, zzzzzz \*making noise\*. [...] And I just had, after five minutes, a tear in it, really from front to back, really just like this rrrriitzzz \*making a noise\*. [...] Yeah, but that's always with those wedding dresses, it is those doll fabrics, if you know what I mean. [...] I mean you really have to sit down like this, as otherwise.*

*[Discussion of what happened between the incident with the table and recounting the experiences on the venue]*

*Yeah, mine was also completely, it was too black to mention. As well it rained a bit there, in the [name wedding venue], and well there they have those sand paths and uhm well yeah, it's only for one day. That was also something I realised, I only have to wear it for one day.*

*Francien: And after that you can*

*Floortje: Yeah, do you know, afterwards, [...] and uhm well fine, so after a while I just walked around with the train trailing over the ground, well you could make soup with it, really. But well, anyway.*

*Francien: But, how was it to wear the dress? Was it, did it fit well, or did you feel the whole day like.*

*Floortje: No, it fitted well, oh no not at all, as actually it was (talking to the children). And uhm, no, as actually it fitted well, because I had an open back, it was only this bit that was a bit tighter, but well it was a bit too big, it didn't fit completely \*making a noise\*. So, I felt it was very relaxing, I had uhm, well yeah, the top was well, I just had straps over my back, as it was quite open, it fitted really well, nice, I felt happy in it [trans: ik voelde me er goed in].*

Floortje's extract (number 47) both accepts and rejects idealised images of bridal perfection. She accepted the bridal perfection through hedonistic pleasure by buying a brand new long white wedding gown, which she knew would only be worn once. However, in her talk, Floortje negotiated her bridal body in different terms than Ilse (extract 46) and Esther (extract 45). Ilse and Esther's narratives were marked by uneasiness, as the dress demanded them to renegotiate space. Floortje's (extract 47) account of wearing the dress, on the other hand, was done through a rhetoric of feeling relaxed and happy in the dress<sup>52</sup>. For Floortje, the dress and bridal body did not require a renegotiation of space and boundaries, which enabled her to feel more at ease in her dress. Therefore, the dress was understood as comfortably wrapped around her body (Entwistle 2000). For Floortje, the comfort of the dress was increased by the dress' open back, recounting

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<sup>52</sup> Floortje's dress style was much easier to wear than Ilse's and Esther's, as it had not as much fabric and it did not have a hoop. The different material conditions fostered different experiences.

it as allowing the dress to become more comfortable and less tight, reframing the sexy connotation of the open back.

Floortje's account of finding the dress comfortable was deepened by the way she retold her movements in the world and how that affected her dress. Whilst Ilse (extract 46) expressed fear of damaging her dress, Floortje discussed in detail and with laughter how she damaged the dress only five minutes after she had put it on. She also talked about the sand paths and rain that made her dress dirty. The marks, both the sand and rain, created traces of her interaction with the world. These traces highlighted the boundaries of her dressed bridal body and the impressions that are left on the fabric (Ahmed 2004). They disrupted the ideal white bride as a beautiful docile body as an object of looking, by bringing attention to activity, movement, dirt, and rebellion (see White 2015 for an account of the Trash the Dress photoshoot).

Floortje's retelling of the stains left on the dress could be understood as a rejection of the bridal ideal. This rejection was also evident when she referred to the wedding dresses as made of "*doll fabric*", which required the bridal expectations "*to sit down like this*" (extract 47) – where she placed herself as unable or unwilling to conform to these standards. Floortje did not make any references to feminism; nonetheless, her critique can be seen as a feminist-informed response to bridal beauty. When I read through Floortje's story of how she stained and tore the dress, it felt as if she wanted to make a statement about her desire to move freely in a wedding dress clad body. However, these desires also make sense in relation to a postfeminist sensibility that demands women's beauty is naturally occurring whilst focusing on activity, movement and freedom (Negra 2009). In Floortje's talk of walking around the venue, despite rain and mud, she embodies postfeminist beauty as fun and natural.

## **6.7. Being Out of the Ordinary, Loved and Normal**

In terms of the brides' bodily experiences, a further story that was important on the forum were accounts of the experience of being the bride on the day. To understand these accounts, I pay attention to the movements between being normal, being out of the ordinary and being seen by loved ones. I argue that it is the combination of these three ways of recounting the wedding that is essential to the wedding experience as something special and deeply emotional. In the analysis of the three extracts below, I take the emotional experience of the wedding day as an embodied experience in and of itself. At the beginning of the chapter, I stated that it is through our body that we understand the world and our location in it (Merleau-Ponty 1962). I start this section by analysing an extract from Miss Farm, whose wedding account was vivid and lively and focused on the experience of being out of the ordinary. Below she narrated the moment of when she left the church and went to the venue in a coach with a horse.

### **Extract 48**

*Miss Farm 04.09.2014*

*After the service, we left the church together. We had to wait in the consistory and then we could leave the church. Everyone was standing in a line [trans: haag] blowing bubbles that looked so beautiful and fun [trans: uitgelaten]! In the meanwhile, the coach had arrived. [...] Then we spent about more than an hour in the coach in our way to the venue for the dinner and later the reception. But really that was amazing! The coach driver was nice and we had a lovely chat! Everyone who went passed us horned, and people were putting their windows down to wish us luck and make little jokes, people on the bike congratulated us! So nice!*

Miss Farm's story was a moment that transcended normal life, from the life where she was just one of the many to a moment where she was in the limelight and out of the ordinary. People looked at her and her husband, waved at them and wished them luck.

One possible interpretation of this way of recounting the wedding would be to see it reflecting a celebrity discourse. Being a celebrity was once only linked to a selected group of people. However, nowadays, celebrity culture has moved from this elitist circle to the more mundane (Senft 2008, Turner 2014). The contemporary media landscape has enabled people to become a celebrity by sharing (parts of) their lives. Being a celebrity is, therefore, more of a continuum that enables people to see and be seen outside the intimate circle of friends and family (Marwick and boyd 2011).

I use this framework to make sense of Miss Farm's (extract 48) account of the experience of the coach drive towards the venue. Sitting in the coach created a moment of high public visibility, which enabled the public to engage in her wedding celebrations. The feeling of being seen and recognised by strangers created a sense of being out of the ordinary, which I compare with celebrity discourses of public availability. The importance of being recognised by others in the role as a bride, or bride-to-be was also evident in Femke's (extract 43) narrative of the dress fitting, where the exclamations of beauty made her feel important and special. In contrast to Femke's (extract 43) story, for Miss Farm (extract 48), the recognition and luck wishes came from strangers.

To further understand the image of public visibility in relation to celebrity studies, I connect Miss Farm's narrative with images in Dutch popular media. As discussed before, the rhetoric of heterosexual romance and cinematic descriptions shaped the bridal narratives on the *Getrouw!*-topic [trans: Married!-topic], linking the personal experience of romantic life with hegemonic representations of finding 'The One'. The image of driving in the coach and waving to the public whilst accepting their wishes is mirrored in popular media. In representations of Dutch royal weddings, the image of the Golden Coach that carries the royal family through Amsterdam during special occasions is a central image of the Dutch royal history.

Also, in fairy tales, such as Cinderella, the royal coach carrying the freshly married prince and princess away from the venue is characteristic of romantic love. Although Miss Farm did not explicitly link her discussions to these images, I argue that these images of romantic love fuel the way the narratives were constructed and shared on the forum as emotionally laden accounts of the wedding day, so that popular representations of romantic love and once-in-a-lifetime experience became part of the experience of the everyday extraordinary life of the wedding day. This experience was lived through the body.

Having discussed the moment of feeling out of the ordinary as an embodied event when driving in a coach through the Dutch landscape, I now move to Esther's interview. In the extract, she discussed the moment she first saw her guests and they started to sing a song for her. For Esther, this was a deeply emotional moment. Across the other interviews, but also on *Getrouwd!*-topic [trans: *Married!*-topic], the interaction the brides experienced with her guests was often retold as emotionally significant, connecting the experience with the body.

#### **Extract 49**

*Esther: I think the arrival was really special, that the guests see you for the first, but you also see them for the first time and everyone is just, everyone looks really nice [trans: paasbest] you could say, you see everyone [...] That are just, I always say that, they are your people, and well that's just the group of people where you feel happy and comfortable [trans: fijn] and uhm and that is just really beautiful.*

*[...]*

*Yeah, well yeah, I think it's really nice, I already uhm, well, looking back on it it's not really a good idea, as I was just really emotional, you know I really had to cry. It's just that you're already quite nervous and then you just come in and then all your guests are there and they all sing a song, really beautiful and I was just like oh, I shouldn't have done this, I was really fighting my tears there, I thought it was all really beautiful, but looking back on it, I thought like I won't do this again, as well it's just too much (laughs a bit) so yeah, yeah, but I had that before, I already said that I thought that would be really nice, so they took it from that, so yeah. And in the talks about it you just mention it and then they come with things you think are nice as well, you could say.*

*Francien: Yeah, but why did you get moved by it?*

*Esther: ... Uhm, [...], in the morning I was just, you're just quite, at least I was quite nervous, in the morning, and well during the photoshoot I wasn't anymore, but then you really come in for the first time and then you just see all the people you love and you're going to marry and and then they sing a song for you and it's just everything is added up that makes it emotional.*

In the extract, Esther called the guests at the wedding “*your people*”, and she discussed how she felt “*fijn*” in their company. This Dutch word can be translated as happy and comfortable, but it does not fully cover the meaning. It can be described as a moment of coming home, being accepted and being understood. Esther’s experience was therefore quite different from the one Miss Farm described, which was presented as a moment out of the ordinary. The connection Esther felt with her guests, especially when they sang the song, was framed through deeply emotional rhetoric “*I was really fighting my tears there*”. When thinking about affect, the connection of affect with our bodies and what it makes our bodies do is essential for understanding the capacities of affect – it is about the visceral perception (Massumi 2015). This means that experiences are felt on an embodied level, it moves our muscles, increases our heart rate and makes us fight our tears. Retelling the story through these emotional tropes turned the moment into a key affective moment that shaped the story of the wedding experience as a whole.

Esther feeling “*fijn*” was positive and referred to the shared orientation of her and her guests towards the promise of happiness and heterosexual love. The people who were invited to the wedding were seen as supportive of her choice to get married. This idea is captured in the wedding ritual where the guests are asked if anyone objects to the marriage. The support of family and friends for the marriage functions as a reassurance that the life choice is deemed as appropriate. Happiness and its promise are understood as sociable, as the affective powers of the promise are fuelled by its connection with others. Ahmed (2010) discussed this through the phrase, ‘I am happy when you are happy’. This connects the happiness of one person with that of someone else. Therefore, the happiness promise needs to be understood through its location around bodies (and objects) and how sharing the same orientation towards happiness enlarges the power of the happiness promise into society (Ahmed 2010).

The previous extracts explored the key moments on the wedding day and, although quite differently, both moments were emotionally intense. The idea that the wedding is an emotional rollercoaster was a recurring narrative that structured accounts of the wedding day. However, it was not only ‘extreme’ feelings that shaped the wedding, but also the moments of calm and relaxation. To understand this, I draw again on Berlant’s aspirational normalcy (2011: 170). In relation to the wedding dress and the body, the experience of the wedding day was a combination of a desire to ‘feel special’ (e.g. the wedding dress or taking a carriage to your next venue), but also a desire to feel normal: to blend in with the cultural expectations so that your life does not require reinvention. It was this feeling of normality that marked the extract from Tessa’s interview.

### **Extract 50**

*Francien: Yeah, and uhm, what was, when you're looking back, do you have a moment where you think like this was actually the most beautiful moment? [...]*

*Tessa: I just think the relaxing moments, drinking with each other and just that you're with your day guests and evening guests that you're sitting nicely [trans: lekker] and relaxed, and yeah just, just together talking, just actually the same what you're doing on a Saturday night. It is just, well, it's well, everyone looks so nice, and everyone is doing nice and their best. And also during the night, during the party, all those people who are there for you. And that, well yeah, I think most relaxing moments are also the best moments I think.*

*Francien: So the non-official moment?*

*Tessa: Yeah, actually it is, I think. [...] (laughs a bit) It sounds a bit uhm. As well the service in the church is really special, and I also think that is just part of the whole thing. And we had really beautiful music and we had a band, so that was all as we wanted it to be. But it are still the moments you feel a bit nervous about.*

*Francien: Yeah... As then really something happens or something?*

*Tessa: (laughs a bit) Yes, exactly. That are really, but that are really the central moments. Then you also hear that you are in the limelight, and when you are sitting relaxed with everyone that is just different.*

Unlike the story from Miss Farm (extract 48) and Esther (extract 49), Tessa's extract (number 50) did not solely focus on the key elements of the wedding day, such as the church. For Tessa, the day's most pivotal moment was when she was relaxing with her guests as she would have done on any other Saturday night. It was the ordinariness of the moment that made it special, "*relaxed, and yeah just, just together talking, just actually the same what you're doing on a Saturday night*" (extract 50). This was enlarged by the presence of her guests, underscoring that normalcy can be understood as a need to fit in, to be seen and to be recognised (Berlant 2011: 170). The moment when this recognition became normal, as if it was any other Saturday, meant, for Tessa, that she had security in the social world she inhabited. This did not mean that Tessa's narrative was the endpoint of what it meant to be a bride. Rather, it was through the movements between being out of the ordinary, being moved and being loved by her guests, on a day that otherwise could have been like any other weekend, which gave the happiness of the wedding day its feel. The feeling of happiness resonated in the body as both a climactic moment when you are cheered at by the world, a moment you feel deeply moved by the shared hope in happiness by your loved ones and the moment these emotions slow down, underscoring your comfortable position towards the right orientation of the good life.



## 6.8. Conclusion

In this chapter, I analysed how the brides retell their experience of being a bride as an embodied event, turning the body into a site where the emotions and feelings of the wedding day accumulate. The wedding dress and the connection of the bridal body with the dress were essential in the bridal accounts of their embodied experience of being the bride. **The brides constructed their image of bridal perfection through discourses of retraditionalisation and postfeminist perfection, by embracing the image of, for example, a white long wedding gown, which is discussed through consumer logic and choice.** Culturally, the wedding dress is a central sign of the bridal image, which explains the importance of the dress in the bridal narratives. Although neoliberal rhetoric of finding the perfect dress via tick lists and style guides were present in the bridal stories, the main element of becoming the bride was the result of an affective and embodied connection between the (gendered) bridal body and the wedding dress. The connection of ‘the right’ dress with the bridal body was generally discussed in positive and affective terms, such as it made me “*suddenly shine*” (extract 42) or it gave me the “*WOW feeling*” (extract 43). The chapter also analysed how these affective responses to the dress worked to naturalise certain forms of feminine bridal beauty above others in terms of taste (Skeggs 1997, Ahmed 2010). Nonetheless, I argued that within this limiting space of feeling good about a dress, there is also space for surprise and change that enables different forms of bridal beauty, such as alternative dress lengths that disrupt the idea image of the long wedding gown. Although the change is small, it does indicate that a good taste and a desire to live well can follow slightly different paths, **opening up a small window of change in the image of postfeminist bridal perfection.**

This chapter has also used Berlant’s ‘aspirational normalcy’ (2011: 170) to make sense of the bridal narratives **and how postfeminist perfection is constructed.** I used normalcy to analyse the central location of the dress, as a sign of bridal beauty that secures the bridal body’s social status on the day. However, the different shape of the dress also required the brides to rethink the way they inhabited space and were able to move. The connection of the dress with the bridal body is therefore distinctively different from that of normal clothes. Where normal clothes reassure our place in the world and enable us to move freely, the wedding dress drastically alters this. The combination of feeling at ease with the situation, whilst at the same time being drawn out of your social circle, was also central to the bridal retelling of the day and how the happiness promise of the wedding day resonated in the bridal body. **Postfeminist bridal perfection should, therefore, be understood as a delicate balance between blending in with cultural expectations of beauty and the ‘good life’ as well as a moment of uneasiness where our place in the world demands renegotiation.** I argued that the bridal experience is a constant flow of feeling out of the ordinary, being seen by important others, as well as relaxing as if it was any other day. It is the movements between these different experiences that mark both the retelling of the lived experience of the wedding day, as well as the narratives of the dress and the connection with the body.

Moving to the end of the analysis section, I now outline how the conceptual framework of postfeminism, happiness, retraditionalisation and the perfect were set into motion in this chapter. In this chapter, I have taken the bridal body as a site of knowledge creation to explore the affective layers of being the bride during the wedding day. This chapter resonates with postfeminist research on women's beauty and beautifying practices by incorporating affect to outline how it feels to embody a bridal subject. I have been able to add to these discussions by highlighting how the bridal body learns to desire well by preferring to live up to a classic image of bridal perfection, connecting bodies to the centre, which further fixes hegemonic understandings of bridal perfection. This can be seen as a counterpart to Ahmed's (2010) and others work on happiness as a mechanism of exclusion.

In contrast to providing a clear-cut narrative of how retraditional images of long, white wedding gowns feed the contemporary imaginary of the ideal bride, I have complicated this via Berlant's (2011) aspirational normalcy. Using this term, I have analysed how the image of bridal perfection demands brides to renegotiate their bodily location in the world. This means that although it can be said that the brides in this project generally subscribed to postfeminist ideals of bridal perfection, this did not always create a sense of belonging, but instead was articulated as having felt out of place. I argue that it is this distinctive character of the wedding as a moment of perfection, as well as a moment of being out of the ordinary, that can shed new lights on what it means to engage with the dream of postfeminist beauty and perfection as always convoluted and partial.

# Chapter 7.

## Conclusion: Tying the Knot

### 7.1. Introduction

This thesis has asked 1) what is the connection between contemporary wedding cultures and postfeminism, and how is this connection shaped by gender? 2) what is the role of happiness and perfection in the bride's expectations of the contemporary wedding and the spaces in which the contemporary wedding exists? And, 3) how does retraditionalisation shape the formation of this contemporary wedding culture? In addressing these questions, I have argued that the wedding is an essential site where we can gain a deeper understanding of retraditionalisation within the formation of contemporary postfeminist subjects through hyperstylised discourses of perfection. Researching postfeminist perfection through affect, rhythms and distributed agency has enabled me to complicate the neoliberal project of working on the self, highlighting the messy and interactive connection of bodies and objects, such as the wedding dress. In this conclusion, I now turn to the main themes that this work has developed, and suggest future directions for research around the wedding, retraditionalisation, postfeminism and good life happiness projects.

### 7.2. Summarising Thesis

I began this thesis by discussing my subject position, not as a researcher, but as a bride. Throughout my PhD, this position evolved from bride-to-be, bride, to married woman. Using my location in the wedding, I shared my experiences with the brides on the forum and how it informed the interviews I had with the brides. For example, I asked them for advice and tips, and they, in turn, asked me about my wedding. This made it possible for the interviews to become more conversational, rather than a question-answer dialogue. Equally important as I come to the end of this process, my subject position has evolved further along the lines of hegemonic femininity. Shortly after the wedding in 2015, I became pregnant with my first child. By the end of my research, I was pregnant with my second. The movement from bride-to-be, to the bride, to motherhood was a preferred life narrative within the bridal community, positioning me as one of them. It is this position of inhabiting a similar subject position as my research participants that has inspired my research and has informed my methodological framework, where I rethink the position of the researcher as the orchestrator of the project.

A prime example of the relationship between postfeminism and wedding cultures is the film *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009). I use this film to introduce the main elements of a postfeminist sensibility. *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009) represents the wedding as a woman's-only affair, tying idealised notions of feminine bridal

performance to the discourses of a hyperstylised body and consumer logic to create the perfect ambience in an extravagant location, for example at The Plaza in New York. Having used *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009) as a concrete media example to outline postfeminist wedding cultures, I discuss in more detail the characteristics of the postfeminist sensibility. I did this by drawing on Gill and McRobbie. One of their arguments was the continuous and pervasive importance of the body in contemporary feminine subjectivities. The focus on the bridal body in popular wedding culture, such as in *Bride Wars* (Winick 2009), turned it into an essential element for my research.

Another element of a postfeminist sentiment is the conflicting discourses of, on the one hand, a reliance on the language of second wave feminist terms such as freedom and empowerment, with, on the other hand, a romanticisation of marriage, the house and the family. McRobbie (2009) argued that women are now presented as having won the right to marry, as if they are no longer in danger of being oppressed by their male counterparts. These two conflicting discourses have shaped my research and my focus on retraditionalisation. In *Chapter 2: Wedding Cultures*, I argued that an analysis of contemporary wedding cultures is essential to gain a better understanding of the location of retraditionalisation and postfeminism, as these two notions collide in this space. My examination of retraditionalisation outlined the importance of having the *feeling of choice*, between, for example, a career or becoming a stay-at-home mother. This experience of choice aided in making traditional female spaces, such as the house and the family, more romantic and desirable, presenting the house as an escape from the real world of working life (Negra 2009). I moved on to connect the romanticisation of the house and the family with the promise of happiness, and how the house and the family are still deemed as locations of happiness and the good life (Ahmed 2010, Berlant 2011). This continuous attraction of the family and the house as a happy space takes place in a society where the central location of the family is crumbling down under the influence of increasing divorce rates, growing single households etc. Based on these observations, I have stated that it is exactly this changed position of the family and house that has provided the wedding with such strong affective textures. The popular image of the wedding, for example in chick flicks and fairy tales, provides a dream (or aspiration) that makes life seem worth living (Berlant 2011). This affective image of living happily-ever-after is combined with a feminist dream that the dangers of marriage are eliminated. In this dream, marriage is no longer presented as the only viable option for women, nor is marriage constructed as a site of patriarchal oppression, so that women can ‘freely’ embrace the romantic image of the white wedding.

My research has identified a paucity in the literature on how a postfeminist retraditionalisation works and is understood by people. In identifying a methodological framework to address this gap, I have used Deleuze and Guattari, but more specifically how their work has been taken up or interpreted by feminist academics such as Colebrook (2002), Braidotti (2002) and Ringrose and Coleman (2013). I believe that these feminist thinkers have already shaped Deleuze and Guattari’s work to make it applicable for my

field of studies, especially Ringrose and Coleman (2013) due to their research interest on women's and girls' lived experiences. Based on these writings, I have proposed a conceptual feminist framework via distributed agency, rhythm and affect. This framework enabled me to further complicate the position of the researcher within the (digital) ethnographic research context. Although this research project is certainly not the first to look for a framework to rethink the researcher's position, I believe that what I propose here enables other feminist researchers to conceptualise their position in relation to the other research elements in the field. The three elements of distributed agency, rhythm and affect enabled me to conceptualise my position as a researcher, as well as the research field, from different angles. Distributed agency allowed me to think about my agency as a researcher as no longer the orchestrator of the project, but as one of the many actants within the assemblage. Affect allowed me to outline how the different affective textures of the research field shaped me and the other elements in the field, such as feeling moved by what I read online. Rhythms made it possible to think about the movement between these affective textures, such as the algorithms that shaped the online space.

My methodology also inspired the analysis of the three analytical concepts: temporality, materiality and embodiment. For example, in analysing temporality, affect has enabled me to understand the to-do list, arguably a decontextualised and disembodied technique, back to the bridal bodies by emphasising how it *feels* to engage in lists and task management. Affect has also been a central element of understanding materiality, connecting the brides' hands with the DIY objects they were making. To make sense of embodiment, I used affect to frame the bridal accounts of the dress as an embodied and affective decision, rather than based on 'logic' or mere tick-lists.

Throughout the thesis, the notion of distributed agency has allowed me to rethink the connection between objects and subjects, so that subjects, or humans, are no longer deemed as shaping the lifeless world of objects. Rather I have looked for ways to account for the agentic powers of objects and materials in the way the wedding was formed. Meanwhile, the methodological focus on rhythms in the online space, such as the forum, enabled me to understand how the affective textures of anxiety and anticipation shaped the forum, creating rhythmic movements that were repeated across the forum throughout the years. Below I outline the findings of each analytical concept **and how it connects to the conceptual framework of my research: postfeminism, happiness, retraditionalisation and the perfect. I start below with a summary of temporality.**

The argument that flows through the temporality chapter works to **connect postfeminist perfection with neoliberal discourses of professionalism, efficiency and effectivity in the wedding organisation, which is presented in terms of perfection. These neoliberal discourses of good citizenship and personal responsibility created an affective network that moved between the bridal bodies, shaping how they shared the wedding planning online with each other.**

Based on this idea, the chapter has firstly researched how media outlets constructed the organisation of the perfect wedding via to-do lists as a practice that turned it into a linear, disembodied and decontextualised process. **To relocate the wedding organisation into the bridal body whilst considering postfeminist notions of professionalism**, I have presented two arguments **in the temporality chapter**. The first argument reimagines the organisation of the wedding as a linear project into a messy process that demands the brides always be on, but at the same time to be open to surprises that emerge along the way (Berlant 2011). For example, in this thesis, the idea of ‘The One’ wedding dress was presented in a way that disconnects ‘The One’ from a linear engagement with the wedding organisation. Instead, ‘The One’ dress could be found at any point in time, even in the past. Finding ‘The One’ dress was therefore presented as an affective and surprising experience that cannot be planned.

This affective connection is part of my second line of argument, where I have analysed the bridal engagement with the to-do lists. Focusing on the bridal narratives enabled me to show how it is the *feeling* of efficiency and effectivity that makes to-do lists so attractive. Connecting this to the postfeminist wedding landscape that privileges bridal subjects who constantly work on their wedding preparations, the focus on feeling in control as a positive experience cements the always-on bride in the centre, as it makes her *feel good*. The emphasis on feeling good makes it harder to question mechanisms that demand women constantly work to improve their wedding preparations. **These postfeminist discourses of professionalism have reshaped the classic image of the bride as based in the house and the personal space, by connecting successful bridal subjectivity with a work ethos of efficiency and effectivity, breaking down the public and private divide.**

Alongside researching to-do lists in the wedding assemblage, I have analysed the location of hope and aspiration within the wedding organisation and how this complicates the forward pushing narrative of the wedding organisation towards a fixed end-goal: the perfect wedding. Via one of the online dieting stories, I have argued that ultimate wedding perfection does not have to come true, but can function as a dream. This enabled me to read Esmeralda’s dieting story not as failed but as a moment when the notion of perfection opened up slightly to provide space for a more voluptuous bridal body. I, therefore, argue that perfection can be open up slightly, as long as it does not move too far away from hegemonic understandings of bridal beauty and perfection, as Esmeralda was still a white, middle class bride with long hair, who was abled bodied and wore a long white wedding gown.

The second analytical theme was materiality, **throughout the chapter I have focussed on the location of happiness, cementing the postfeminist ideal of bridal perfection into the wedding assemblage**. I then moved on to complicate the neoliberal narrative of the bride as the ultimate orchestrator of the event by providing the space for something more than human. To summarise the findings in more detail I outline the two-folded argument that runs through this chapter. First, I have analysed the location of happy objects that

mark the wedding. This enabled me to state that the perfect wedding is orchestrated via a range of objects, including the wedding dress, flip flops, candles, etc., which together fuel the happiness promise of the wedding. The happiness promise is reinforced by connecting these objects via branded discourses that turned the wedding into a hyperstylised universe, underscoring the bride's (couple's) success and love.

The happiness promise that attached to wedding objects was also part of the **retraditionalisation of the bridal DIY practices and objects the brides shared on the forum**. Although sharing craft outside the home is often discussed as a feminist act to relocate female labour outside of the private sphere, I argued that the bridal activities instil idealised traditional feminine subjectivity into the centre via the crafts they share. The DIY activities reconnect with the idealised images of the home and heterosexual life via the popular narrative of the wedding as the happiest day of your life. Nonetheless, these DIY activities cannot be read as a simple revival of passed times, as the brides on the forum engaged with these practices through discourses of choice, whilst the online space enabled them to move their labour outside the house. This is in stark contrast to historical accounts of women's handy work that was a duty taking place in the house.

The second argument that has shaped the materiality chapter was the connection between the maker and the materiality of the crafts the women were producing. Via Luckman (2015) and Bennett (2010) I have discussed the enchanted connection between the maker and the objects. This view provided a sense of agency to the material objects, **disrupting the ideal of human agency**, so that the brides were no longer presented as the ultimate orchestrator of the wedding but whose efforts and possibilities were shaped by the characteristics of the material objects, such as the tough structure of the tulle. I argued that the enchanted connection between objects and makers should be viewed as an affective moment that in itself cannot be deemed as a failure or a success. The outcome of the enchanted connection is, however, judged through postfeminist notions of perfection and styling. This means that the glossy, professionally styled outcomes are privileged above objects that look crafted and handmade. The focus on the agentic powers of the material objects enabled me to rethink the idea of postfeminist perfection, where brides are presented as in full control over their actions.

The last analytical theme was embodiment, **where I take the gendered body as a site of knowledge creation to understand how postfeminist bridal perfection is rooted in the body. At the same time, the focus on the body enabled me to complicate the idea of the feminist project of bridal perfection, as a focus on the body moved the attention away from the bride as the orchestrator of the event towards something more than human to complicate the neoliberal narrative of control and accountability**. The argument that has shaped this chapter therefore further develops the discussion in the materiality chapter on enchantment and the connection between the bridal hands and the materials of the DIY objects.

**Throughout the chapter, I have explored how the** process of finding the 'right' wedding dress demonstrates the connection of the bridal body with the dress. This viewpoint enabled me to **shift attention**

from the mind towards the body. Thinking about the body as an agentic element in the process of dress fitting further complicated the idea of the postfeminist subject as being in control, allowing other agentic elements to affect the process. In doing so, I have analysed how the focus on the body is a space where hegemonic discourses of respectability are reinstalled, such as class. However, I also showed that there is space for changes in this image, even though they are small on scale and impact. Alongside the focus on the body, enchantment enabled me to present the bridal transformation as rooted in a specific temporal and spatial location, turning the moment of becoming a bride into a moment of surprise where all the elements work together in unexpected ways. This enabled me to disrupt the neoliberal paradigm by providing a space for something more than human, as it is was all the separate wedding elements, as well as the temporal moment of the wedding day, that created the enchanted moment of bridal becoming, rather than merely the bride's planning.

The final section of the chapter on embodiment analyses the location of the dressed bridal body as an essential carrier of the experience of being a bride. Throughout the entire data set, the wedding dress was an essential element, and accounts of wearing the dress shaped what it meant to be a bride. The connection of the bridal body and the wedding dress was constructed through normalcy, and a desire to blend in with retraditional ideals of bridal beauty and perfection e.g. long white wedding gown (Berlant 2011). I have argued, however, that aspiring to and living up to the ideals of a normal life is more complicated. The retraditional ideals of the white dress, as well as the brides' social and cultural location, enabled the brides to be seen as a 'real' bride. At the same time, the dress generated a sense of estrangement between the bride and the social world, as the out of the ordinary shape and size of the dress demanded the brides rethink and renegotiate their place in the world. Simple acts such as going to the toilet became conscious acts, where the new shape of the body demanded the bride to relearn the act. This analysis highlighted how the image of the perfect bride is a delicate balance between a retraditional postfeminist project of perfection and a moment that demands a constant renegotiation of the bride with her body and her location in the social and cultural space.

### **7.3. Moving the Field**

This thesis combined a Foucauldian-inspired theoretical framework with a more Deleuzian-orientated framework to understand the field. It is this combination that enabled me to not only research the connection between postfeminism, happiness, the perfect and retraditionalisation in relation to wedding cultures, but it has also enabled me to rethink the power structures. The wedding related literature and most of the studies of a postfeminist sensibility that this research draws from relies on a Foucauldian framework with a strong focus on the neoliberal project of working on the self. Despite its relevance in framing the wedding and the bridal subject as a consumer project, this approach does not provide space to understand the effects of other



elements within the wedding assemblage. By drawing on a Deleuzian framework, I have been able to complicate this narrative by providing space for the agency of objects and the body as a site of knowledge creation. Through the concept of affect, I have researched how objects, including the gendered body, influence and shape the bridal project of perfection. This provided some space to rethink the neoliberal narrative of the agentic human by distributing the agency across the assemblage. One of the areas of this thesis where such an approach has been vital has been in the discussion of 'the perfect'.

The notion of 'perfection' is important, shaping the powerful affective hold of the contemporary retraditionalisation of wedding cultures. The scope of my research has enabled me to add to our understanding of postfeminist perfection in a concrete space, enabling me to contribute to McRobbie's (2015) call for more research on the lived workings of discourses of perfection within postfeminism. In my research, the perfect fuels the happiness promise of the wedding. In doing so, I have shown how popular wedding literature presents the perfect as within everyone's reach, as long as one is willing to work on it through consumer practices. These neoliberal narratives were also present in the bridal discussions; but, I have also been able to find alternative discourses on the perfect by focusing on the connection between subjects and objects. The enchanted connection, for example, abled me to think about the project of wedding planning as more than a neoliberal project of working on the self, by paying attention to the unexpected and affective connection of the bridal bodies with the lively material world. Apart from working on the body and the wedding, the brides discussed moments of surprise and flow when all the different elements of the wedding interacted with each other in unexpected ways. Although the outcome of these moments still sits within the realms of perfection, I argued that the affective moment of being in the enchanted connection cannot be judged as right or wrong. This enabled me to complicate the position of the bride as the orchestrator of the perfect wedding, by bringing into focus the agentic powers of material objects.

McRobbie's (2015) notion of the perfect also provided me with an understanding of a gendered fantasy of the good life, which I have linked to the work of Ahmed (2010) and Berlant (2011) and have applied in the hegemonic location of the wedding. Both Ahmed (2010) and Berlant (2011) have a stronger focus on the promise of happiness and the good life outside the centre, analysing how some subject positions are excluded from the hope of happiness and a good and respectable life. Although both pieces are useful to understand how happiness and the good life work as a mechanism of exclusion, I believe that a focus on their workings as a glue to reinforce the centre contributes to a broader understanding of the function of happiness and the good life within society as a whole. In this research, I have used both terms to analyse the bridal accounts of what it means to organise a wedding and to be a bride. I believe that the wedding is an ideal site in which to engage with such locations, due to our cultural understandings of the wedding as the 'happiest day of your life'. Throughout the thesis I have connected the promise of happiness with

retraditionalisation, analysing how the home and position of the bride create affective textures that fuel women's relocation back into spaces that have been traditionally understood as oppressive.

Having outlined how the thesis contributes to work on notions of the perfect, I now move on to discuss how this thesis has addressed a gap in postfeminist literature, by further outlining the position of retraditionalisation, using wedding cultures as its cultural space. I argue that, by exploring this, my thesis has been able to contribute to research on a postfeminist sensibility. Little research has yet outlined what retraditionalisation is and what it does in terms of the affective landscape that frames women's choices towards the home and the family. Although Probyn (1990) and Hollows (2003) have focused on aspects of choice, they have not fully outlined the connection with idealised images of the good and happy life, which I believe are essential to understand how retraditionalisation works and what it enables. In my research I have therefore connected retraditionalisation with the happiness promise and the good life, enabling me to analyse the affective textures these promises create. I have outlined how traditional lifestyle choices are connected with the promise of happiness via a range of objects and practises that create a recognisable branded bridal narrative, including being given away by your father, privileging a traditional life trajectory from bride to motherhood, DIY practices, as well as an idealisation of classic bridal beauty. Through discourses of choice and consumer logic, these objects and practices come to represent something of the 'good life'. They further romanticise retraditionalisation, for example in Margot's DIY wedding. Actions that have the possibility to disturb the traditional feminine spaces and actions, such as DIY, are relocated back into the feminine sphere, connecting them to the happiness promise of the house, or, conversely, aligning with self-branding, efficiency and celebrity.

My contribution to writings on retraditionalisation in relation to postfeminism brings me to another contribution, namely that on weddings and marriage and its connection to patriarchy. Research on the connection between retraditionalisation, postfeminism and romanticised and happy spaces such as weddings have received less attention, but are essential, as they provide a space to understand how traditional notions of gendered inequality are felt and become highly desirable, as well as privileged (Leonard 2018), life choices. Earlier writings (for example, Brook 2002 and Jeffreys 2004) have highlighted the troubled location of the wedding and marriage within a patriarchal society as it positions women as disadvantaged compared to their male counterparts. The postfeminist rhetoric deems these concerns as dated, as women are presented as freed from male oppression (McRobbie, 2009). My research adds to research on wedding cultures by connecting patriarchy with postfeminism, retraditionalisation and happiness. I argue that the representation of the wedding and, for example, the bride's decision to accept her husband's name (Thwaites 2017), or being given away by her father, are constructed as deeply romanticised happy moments of choice that cements patriarchy into postfeminist wedding cultures, whilst complicating the critique. In my research, I have focused on the way these romanticised moments of

happiness and perfection created affective textures that make wedding culture *feel good*. This focus changed the scope of earlier research, which was more directed to the restricting effects of power rather than the feelings it produces.

Contemporary postfeminist wedding cultures do not only fix patriarchy into the centre, but also advocates heteronormativity as a desired lifestyle. Building on Leonard's (2018) claim that brides need a new set of skills to organise the perfect wedding, such as producing a highly styled branded universe, I argue that these activities work to reinstall classic gendered roles. Through discourses of professionalism, women are kept at the centre of the wedding organisation, instilling their claim as the producers of the happy home and the happy family, whilst men are kept at a safe distance. It is, therefore, the bride that is responsible for moving the work related skills, for example, efficiency and effectivity, to the house. This underscores how retraditionalisation works to relocate originally male dominated discourses, such as professionalism, into the home, whilst reconnecting women back into their role as producer of the perfect home and family.

#### **7.4. Future Research**

Above I have provided a summary of this thesis and its contributions to the field. I now outline how I see this research project developing in the future. Throughout my research, the role and function of motherhood in relation to postfeminism, retraditionalisation and happiness were always very present, due to the narrative of motherhood as a logical choice after the wedding. I expect that discourses of retraditionalisation deeply shape how we understand motherhood as part of the normative life narrative. It would be a valuable contribution to research this in more detail, especially in terms of how the promise of happiness is played out in these spaces. Connected to this, there is a growing interest in the 'choice' of women to leave paid labour spaces in favour of the house (Orgad 2016, 2017). Already drawing on Berlant (2011), such research has begun to discuss feelings of invisibility, lack of confidence as well as experiences of being silenced (Orgad 2016). The theoretical framework in terms of retraditionalisation and happiness could provide a useful take on these accounts of motherhood in the context of a postfeminist sensibility.

Another route for future research would be exploring a more diverse group of women. This research project has relied on material collected with Dutch, largely white, middle class, heterosexual women. This has been important because it focuses on women who are constructed as part of the centre of our society, creating an understanding of how the happiness promise and the good life work in this location. However, including different demographic groups into the research makes it possible to understand how the combination of retraditionalisation and happiness intersect and are worked out in different social locations, and would allow more discussion of how this reproduces inequalities. A broader demographic in terms of class, race, ethnicity, ability and age, might also include the way gender structures the experiences of men

and how constructs of masculinity shape the possible narratives of the wedding. Throughout the interviews, it became clear that some partners were also quite involved in the process, especially the styling of their wedding appearance. My presence in diverse online spaces also indicated that the groom's appearance was important. Contemporary research on masculinity shows how men's social location is also shaped by a postfeminist sensibility. Therefore, research on men as part of the wedding would be a good starting point to learn about retraditionalisation and the formation of masculine subject positions.

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# Appendix 1.

## Ethics Form



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# Appendix 2.

## Informed Consent Form

# Bewustheidsverklaring

### Paraferen a.u.b

1. Hierbij bevestig ik dat ik de informatie over de deelname aan dit onderzoek heb gelezen en begrepen en dat ik de mogelijkheid heb gehad om vragen te stellen.

2. Ik heb begrepen dat mijn deelname vrijwillig is en dat ik me op ieder tijdstip voor het interview kan terugtrekken zonder dat ik daarvoor een reden hoef op te geven.

3. Ik heb begrepen dat de informatie die ik voor dit onderzoek verstrek vertrouwelijk behandeld wordt.

4. Ik heb begrepen dat ik bovendien het recht heb om van gedachten te veranderen over mijn deelname aan dit onderzoek (binnen drie weken) nadat ik aan de studie heb deelgenomen.

5. Ik stem ermee in dat het Skype interview wordt opgenomen en ik heb begrepen dat alleen de onderzoeker (Francien Broekhuizen) en twee docenten van de Media Department van Coventry University toegang zullen hebben tot de opnamen (ruwe data).

6. Ik stem ermee in dat geanonimiseerde quotes uit het interview gebruikt mogen worden in het onderzoeksproject.

O Ik breng liever **geen** materiaal in tijdens het interview dat gerelateerd is aan mijn bruiloft, bijvoorbeeld een foto, ketting, geurtje, stukje stof, tekening, schilderij.

Ik stem in om deel te nemen aan dit onderzoeksproject.

Vul hieronder je naam in, je handtekening en de datum en stuur dit terug naar de onderzoeker. Je hoeft je geen zorgen te maken over de getuige, maar als je wilt mag je je partner vragen of hij/zij de getuige wilt zijn.

Naam participant: Sandra van Holland

Handtekening participant: .....

Datum: .....

Naam van getuige:.....

Handtekening van getuige:.....

Datum:.....

....

Naam onderzoeker: Francien Broekhuizen

Handtekening onderzoeker:

Datum: 28-07-2014

# Informed Consent Form [Translation]

**Please initial**

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

3. I understand that all the information I provide will be treated in confidence.

4. I understand that I also have the right to change my mind about participating in the study for a short period after the study has concluded (within three weeks).

5. I agree that the Skype session will be recorded and I understand that only the researcher (Francien Broekhuizen) and two members of staff from the Media Department of Coventry University will have access to the recording (the raw data).

6. I agree that anonymised quotes of the interview can be used as part of the research project.

I prefer not to bring some material related to my wedding experience, for example photo, necklace, fragrance, fabric, drawing, painting)

I agree to take part in this research study.

Name of participant: .....

Signature of participant: .....

Date: .....

Name of witness:

.....

Signature of witness:

.....

Date:.....

.....

Name of Researcher:.....

Signature of researcher: .....

Date:.....

## Appendix 3.

### Participant Information Leaflet – Interviews

# Deelnemersinformatie Interviewsessie “Brides and Wedding Culture”

In dit document vind je alle informatie over mijn onderzoeksproject “Brides and Wedding Culture” aan Coventry University in Engeland. Dit project is onderdeel van mijn PhD-onderzoek, ook wel promotieonderzoek genoemd. Deze informatie is vooral bedoeld voor bruiden die betrokken zijn of willen zijn bij de interviews die onderdeel zijn van dit onderzoek. Dit document vertelt je wat het onderzoek inhoudt, wat er van je verwacht wordt en welke rechten je hebt. Aan het eind van het document heb ik een stukje geschreven over wie ik ben en waarom ik dit onderzoek doe.

## **Het onderzoeksproject**

### **Wat is de titel van het project?**

De titel van het project is “Brides and Wedding Culture”.

### **Wat is het doel van het project?**

Het doel van het project is te onderzoeken hoe toekomstige bruiden en bruiden die al zijn getrouwd hun bruiloft beleven. Hierbij ben ik vooral geïnteresseerd in welke ideeën, gedachten, gevoelens en verwachtingen bruiden hebben over hun toekomstige bruiloft of hoe ze er op terugkijken. Omdat ik zelf ook ga trouwen zal ik mijn eigen ideeën over onze bruiloft ook bij het onderzoek betrekken.

### **Waarom ben je benaderd?**

Ik heb je voor dit onderzoek benaderd omdat ik op zoek ben naar aanstaande bruiden of al getrouwde bruiden, die mij meer willen vertellen over hun (aankomende) bruiloft en hun ervaringen. Hoewel ik door de planning van mijn eigen bruiloft ondertussen ook wel wat weet over hoe het is om te gaan trouwen zou toch graag van andere bruiden willen horen hoe zij het hebben ervaren. Op deze manier hoop ik een beter en vollediger beeld te krijgen van hoe het nu eigenlijk is om te trouwen en hoe bruiden terugkijken op hun bruiloft.



### **Wat wordt er van je verwacht?**

Het interview waarvoor je bent uitgenodigd zal gaan over de manier waarop jij je bruiloft hebt beleefd als je al getrouwd bent of over de manier waarop je naar je bruiloft toeleeft als je nog gaat trouwen. Ik ben geïnteresseerd in jouw verhaal, jouw gedachten en jouw ideeën; er zijn dus geen foute of goede antwoorden. Het gaat volledig om jou, jouw bruiloft en alles wat met die dag te maken heeft.

Om het interview concreet te maken zou ik het fijn vinden als je wat mee zou kunnen nemen dat voor jou belangrijk is voor de bruiloft. Wat je meeneemt mag van alles zijn, zoals de ketting die je droeg, een foto die je erg mooi vindt, een staaltje stof van je bruidsduk, een geurtje, iets wat je hebt gemaakt of iets wat je wilt gaan maken. Het mag letterlijk alles zijn en als het te groot of te zwaar is mag je er ook een foto of een tekening van maken, misschien ben je bijvoorbeeld wel ten huwelijk gevraagd op de Eiffeltoren en wil je die graag meenemen. In dat geval is het misschien handiger een foto of een tekening mee te nemen of bijvoorbeeld een mini Eiffeltoren

Het interview zal plaatsvinden in 2014 via Skype. Het onderzoek vindt namelijk voor een groot deel online plaats en om dat element ook in de rest van het onderzoek terug te laten komen heb ik ervoor gekozen de interviews via Skype te doen.

### **Moet je meedoen aan het interview?**

Nee, dat hoeft niet. Ik vind het belangrijk dat de bruiden die deelnemen aan het interview het leuk vinden om mij wat te vertellen over hoe ze naar hun bruiloft toelevden of hoe ze er op terugkijken. Je deelname is dus volledige vrijwillig. Bovendien kun je je terugtrekken op ieder moment voor of tijdens het interview en binnen drie weken na het interview. Als je je terug wilt trekken kun je mij een e-mail sturen met daarin je naam en je wens niet meer mee te doen aan het interview. Je hoeft hiervoor geen reden op te geven en je wens wordt altijd ingewilligd (mits binnen de drie weken na het interview). Als je je terugtrekt uit het interview zal ik alle informatie en gegevens vernietigen die jij mij hebt verstrekt.

### **Wat zijn de mogelijke nadelen en risico's van dit onderzoek?**

Er zitten geen serieuze nadelen of risico's aan het deelnemen aan dit onderzoek.

### **Wat zijn de mogelijke voordelen aan het deelnemen aan dit onderzoek?**

Aan de deelname aan dit onderzoek zijn geen grote voordelen verbonden zoals een betaling. Het is voor mij belangrijk dat je graag deel wilt nemen aan dit onderzoek en dat je het leuk vindt om met mij over je

bruiloft te praten. Je deelname aan het onderzoek stel ik enorm op prijs en als je het leuk vindt om meer over het onderzoek te horen of resultaten te krijgen dan ben ik zeer bereid je die te geven.

### **Zal de informatie die ik verstrek anoniem blijven?**

Ja, alle informatie die je geeft tijdens het interview zal worden geanonimiseerd. De mensen die toegang hebben tot de uitgetypte interviews zijn: mijn twee begeleiders van Coventry University (Adrienne Evans en Shaun Hides) en ikzelf. De ruwe data zullen worden opgeslagen op mijn computer en deze zullen worden vernietigd na afloop van het onderzoek. Dit zal waarschijnlijk in de winter van 2016 zijn.

### **Wat wordt er gedaan met de resultaten van het onderzoek?**

Het onderzoek is onderdeel van mijn promotieonderzoek aan Coventry University en zal uiteindelijk resulteren in een eindrapport en een mondeling examen waar ik het onderzoek moet verdedigen. Omdat van een promotieonderzoek wordt verwacht dat het een bijdrage levert aan de universiteit en het academisch veld zal ik ook proberen delen ervan te publiceren in academische journals, zoals het Journal of Gender Studies. Daarnaast hoop ik delen van het onderzoek te publiceren tijdens conferenties.

### **Wie organiseert en financiert het onderzoek**

Het onderzoek is onderdeel van mijn PhD-onderzoek aan Coventry University en wordt door mij georganiseerd. Het onderzoek wordt gefinancierd door Coventry University.

### **Wie heeft dit onderzoek vooraf bekeken?**

Het onderzoek is vooraf bekeken door Coventry University en goedgekeurd. Een onderdeel daarvan was een procedure naar de ethiek in het onderzoek om ervoor te zorgen dat de privacy van de deelnemers wordt gegarandeerd.

### **Wie ben ik en waarom doe ik dit onderzoek?**

Voordat ik met dit project begon heb ik mijn Master 'Applied Communication' (toegepaste communicatie) gedaan aan dezelfde universiteit en voor mijn scriptie heb ik een onderzoek uitgevoerd over min of meer hetzelfde onderwerp, namelijk over bruiden en hoe ze hun bruiloft hebben beleefd. Om dit onderzoek te doen heb ik vijf interviews afgenomen met dames die onlangs waren getrouwd. Ik vond het geweldig dat ik deze interviews kon en mocht doen en dat de dames mij zoveel vertelden.

In het voorjaar van 2015 hoop ik zelf ook in het huwelijksbootje te stappen. We wilden het eerste in 2014 doen maar door alle drukte rondom werk en studie leek het ons beter het nog even uit te stellen. We gaan trouwen in een klein kasteeltje in de omgeving van waar ik ben opgegroeid.

# Participants Information Interview Series “Brides and Wedding Culture” [Translation]

This leaflet contains all the information about my research project “Brides and Wedding Culture” which is part of my PhD research at Coventry University, UK. This information is mainly of relevance for the brides who are going or are willing to take part in the interview series that are part of my research project. This includes information on what is expected from you and what your rights are as an interviewee, as well as information about me, the researcher, and why I am doing this research.

## **The research project**

### **What is the title of this project?**

The title of this project is “Brides and Wedding Culture”.

### **What is the aim of the project?**

The aim of the project is to explore how future brides and brides who are married already experience(d) their wedding. I am mainly interested in which ideas, thoughts, feelings and expectations you have about your wedding, or how you look back on your wedding. And because I am going to marry myself as well, part of the research will also include my experiences about my own wedding planning.

### **Why are you approached?**

I have approached you because you are active in one of the bridal communities on which I am active as well. During my online engagement with the community I already ‘met’ you and I have approached you now because I am looking for future brides or brides who are married already, who are willing to tell me more about their (upcoming) wedding and their experiences. In the meantime I am collecting a great deal of wedding experiences myself, but I still would like to hear about the experiences of other brides. By asking other (future) brides about their experiences I hope to get a better idea about how it feels to marry nowadays and how brides look back on their wedding day.

### **What is expected from you?**

The interview you are invited for will be about the way you have experienced your wedding day (if you are already married) or about the way you are experiencing the build-up to this day and how you are planning it (if you are going to marry). I am interested in your story, your thought, and your ideas;

therefore there are no right or wrong answers during the interview. It is all about you, your wedding and everything that is part of that day.

In order to give the interview a focal point, it would be nice if you could bring something to the interview that is important for you as part of your wedding. What you will bring to the interview could be all sorts of things, for example a necklace you were wearing, a photo you really like, a piece of fabric your dress is made of, a fragrance, something you have made or a description of something you want to make. It literally may be anything; if the item is too big or too heavy you can take a photo of it or make a drawing. For example, you have been proposed to on the Eiffel tower, you might want to bring a photo or a mini Eiffel tower if you have one.

The interview will take place in the autumn/winter of 2013/2014 via Skype. The reason why I have chosen to do it via Skype is because it fits within the broader picture of the research. The research mainly takes place in an online environment and in order to take this element into other aspects of the research I have chosen to do the interviews via Skype.

**Do you have to take part in the interview?**

No, you don't have to. I think it is important that the brides who take part in the interview series want to tell me about how they experience their wedding planning or how they look back at their wedding. Your participation is therefore fully voluntary. You can withdraw from the interview at any stage before or during the interview or within three weeks after the interview took place. If you want to withdraw from the interview after our discussion, you can send me an email with your name and your wish to withdraw your data. You do not have to give any reason for withdrawing from the research and I will always honour your wish to withdraw (as long as it is within the three week after the interview). If you withdraw from the interview I will destroy all the information you have given to me.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part in the interview?**

There are no significant risks or disadvantages of taking part in this study.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part in this research?**

There are no significant benefits attached to taking part in this research such as compensation. It is important to me that you want to take part in the research, and that you enjoy discussing your wedding day. Your participation in this research is highly appreciated and when you are interested in hearing more

about the research or when you want to receive some of the results I will be more than willing to provide them to you.

**Will the information I supply be kept anonymous?**

Yes, all the information you will give during the interview will be made anonymous in order to minimize the chance you could be recognised in the final report. The people who will have access to the transcribed interviews are: me and my two supervisors from Coventry University (Adrienne Evans and Stefan Herbrechter), although they will not know your real identity as I will alter your name immediately. The raw data will be stored on my computer and shall be destroyed at the end of this research. This will probably be during the winter of 2016.

**What will happen to the results of this research?**

This research is part of my PhD studies at Coventry University and will eventually result in a thesis and an oral exam where I have to defend my research. As this concerns a PhD research, the research has to add value to the university and the academic field, and therefore I shall also try to publish parts of the research in academic journals, like the Journal of Gender Studies. Furthermore I hope to present elements of the research on academic conferences. I might also refer to the interviews on my blog (<http://flbroekhuizen.wordpress.com/>), but when I do so I will make sure that all information is made anonymous.

**Who is organising and funding the research?**

The research is part of my PhD-research at Coventry University and is organised by me. The research is funded by Coventry University.

**Who has reviewed the study?**

The study has been through the University Peer Review Process and has been approved. A part of this is a process regarding the ethics of this study in order to make sure that the privacy of all the participants is guaranteed.

**Who am I and why am I doing this research?**

Before I started this project I did my Masters at the same university. For my dissertation, I did research about a similar topic, namely the way brides experienced their wedding. For this research I did five interviews with women who had recently been married. I thought it was amazing to do these interviews and that these women were willing to tell about their weddings and about their experiences. For PhD-

research I am doing a similar, but much more in depth research and in an online environment, focusing on both the Netherlands and the UK and more on the online environments.

I also hope to marry myself in the autumn of 2014. We first planned to marry in the summer of that year, but because of our studies and work we thought it would be better to postpone it a few more months. We hope to marry in the town hall that is at the other side of the road of the house where I grew up. I have seen so many brides and grooms marring there that I think it is amazing to marry there myself too. We hope to do the rest of the ceremony in a little castle in the same area.

# Appendix 4.

## Participant Information – Ethnography

### Deelnemersinformatie “Brides and Wedding Culture”

#### **Onderzoek naar “Brides and Wedding Culture”**

In deze folder vind je meer informatie over het onderzoek waar ik momenteel aan werk. Hier vind je informatie over het onderwerp van mijn onderzoek, de manier waarop ik mijn data verzamel en waarom ik social media zoals forums gebruik als onderzoeksmethode. Daarnaast zal ik je meer vertellen over mezelf.

#### **Wie ben ik?**

Momenteel ben ik een PhD-student aan Coventry University in Engeland en mijn PhD-onderzoek (ook wel promotieonderzoek genoemd) gaat over bruiden en bruiloften in zowel Nederland als het Verenigd Koninkrijk. Het onderwerp van mijn masterscriptie ging over hetzelfde onderwerp waarvoor ik in de zomer van 2012 verschillende Nederlandse bruiden heb geïnterviewd. Ik vond het erg leuk met deze vrouwen over hun bruiloft te praten en ik voelde me vereerd dat zij mij deelgenoot hebben gemaakt van hun bruiloft. Omdat ik mijn masteronderzoek naar bruiden en bruiloften met zoveel plezier heb gedaan heb ik hetzelfde onderwerp gekozen voor mijn PhD-onderzoek.

Wat leuk is om te vermelden is dat ik niet alleen een onderzoek doe over bruiloften, maar dat ik zelf ook ga trouwen. Terwijl ik druk bezig was met schrijven van mijn Master scriptie, had mijn vriend het plan opgevat om te gaan trouwen en zo kwam het dat we ons rond Kerst 2012 verloofd hebben. We zijn van plan om in de herfst van 2014 te trouwen in een kasteel in Nederland.

#### **Wat is het onderwerp van mijn onderzoek?**

Voor mijn onderzoek ga ik me verdiepen in hoe bruiden hun bruiloft in de 21<sup>ste</sup> eeuw beleven en vormgeven. Een bruiloft wordt vaak gezien als de belangrijkste dag van je leven, maar hoe willen bruiden eigenlijk dat deze eruit ziet en hoe kijken bruiden na de bruiloft terug op de grote dag? Omdat we vandaag de dag zoveel met internet doen heb ik er voor gekozen mijn onderzoek op internet te doen. Bruiden praten tenslotte niet meer alleen met hun ‘real life’ vrienden over hun bruiloft, maar ook met ‘vreemden’ op het world wide web die dezelfde ervaringen hebben als zij.

### **Waarom zit ik op een forum?**

De dataverzameling voor mijn onderzoek bestaat uit twee delen, namelijk een onderzoek op forums en interviews met bruiden die ik op deze forums heb ontmoet. Voor het eerste deel van mijn onderzoek ga ik opzoek naar forums voor bruiden waar ik als actief lid zal meepraten over mijn eigen bruiloft. Ook zal ik onderzoeken wat andere bruiden over hun bruiloft vertellen en over de manier waarop ze het hebben georganiseerd. Hierbij hoop ik te ontdekken wat bruiden vandaag de dag interesseert en hoe het is om je bruiloft online met andere bruiden te bespreken.

Nadat ik een tijdje op de forums actief ben geweest, zal ik leden van het forum benaderen met de vraag of ze het leuk zouden vinden mij meer over hun bruiloft te vertellen. Voor deze interviews vind ik het belangrijk dat de bruiden het leuk vinden om met mij over hun bruiloft te praten. Door naast forumdiscussies ook interviews toe te voegen aan mijn dataverzameling hoop ik een beter beeld te krijgen van hoe bruiden hun bruiloft beleven en wat voor een rol de bruidscommunity hierin heeft.

### **Online Research Disclaimer**

1. Het doel van dit onderzoek is te bekijken hoe bruiden praten over hun bruiloft in een online setting.
2. Dit onderzoek is een onderdeel van het PhD onderzoek van Francien Broekhuizen. Het PhD onderzoek is gestart in februari 2013 en zal worden afgerond in de winter van 2016. Het onderzoek is gefinancierd door de 'School of Art and Design van Coventry University, United Kingdom. De resultaten van dit onderzoek zullen worden opgeschreven in een eindverslag. Als de uitkomsten van het onderzoek bijdragen aan het academisch veld dan zullen de resultaten worden gepubliceerd in een academisch magazine en/of gepresenteerd op conferenties.
3. Het onderzoek heeft geen enkele link met commerciële of politieke instellingen. Noch zal Francien Broekhuizen geld of andere compensaties ontvangen die het risico dragen de uitkomsten van het onderzoek te veranderen.
4. Alle informatie die zal worden verzameld tijdens het onderzoek zal vertrouwelijk worden behandeld. De enige mensen die toegang zullen hebben tot de ruwe data ben ik als onderzoek en mijn twee begeleiders van Coventry University, Dr. A. Evans en Dr. S. Herbrechter. Op <http://www.coventry.ac.uk/media> kun je meer informatie vinden over de afdeling Media van de School of Art and Design, Coventry University.



5. De nicknames, websitenames, quotes of citaten die gebruikt zullen worden in het eindverslag of in iedere andere publicatie zullen worden aangepast om zo anonimiteit van de betrokken te garanderen.
6. Tijdens de interactie van de onderzoeken op de forums zal Francien Broekhuizen haar identiteit als onderzoeker kenbaar maken aan andere leden van de website. Zij zal ook duidelijk maken waar aanvullende informatie op het onderzoek te vinden is.
7. Iedere deelnemer van de online community's kan de onderzoeker vragen zijn of haar uitingen niet te gebruiken voor het onderzoek 'Brides and Wedding Culture'.

# Participant Information Leaflet “Brides and Wedding Culture” [Translation]

## **Research on Brides and Wedding Culture**

This leaflet will inform you about the research I am working on at the moment. It tells you more about the topic and the way I collect my data. But first I will give you some information about who I am.

## **Who am I?**

I am a research student at Coventry University and my research is about brides, wedding culture and social media. I already did my MA dissertation looking at the topic of brides and wedding dresses and I really enjoyed it. I talked with different brides from the Netherlands (I am Dutch) about their wedding and I thought it was amazing that those women wanted to share their experience of their wedding day with me. So I wanted to move on with this topic for doing my PhD.

A funny thing is that after all my talk about weddings, my boyfriend got the hint and he proposed me two days before Christmas 2012. We hope to marry in autumn 2014 in a little castle in the Netherlands.

## **What is the topic of my research?**

The topic of my PhD research is about how brides experience their wedding day in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The wedding day is often seen as the ‘most important day of your life’, but how do brides want this day to look like and how do brides look back at this day? And because the internet has such an impact on the way we live our lives nowadays I decided to do the research mainly through the internet.

## **How am I going to collect my data?**

The data collection method for my research is both an engagement in online bridal communities and an interview series with the brides who I have met online. For the first part of my research I will go to online bridal communities where I will be an active member talking about my own wedding experiences. At the same time I will look how other brides experience their wedding day and its organisation.

After I have spent some time on the bridal community I will ask some members whether they are interested in discussing their wedding day with me. For this interview it is important that the bride enjoys discussing her wedding. By combining these two methods I hope to find out what interests brides nowadays and how it feels to discuss your wedding with other brides in an online context.

### **Online Research Disclaimer**

1. The purpose of this research is to explore how brides talk about their wedding day in an online setting.
2. This research is part of the PhD Research of Francien Broekhuizen. The PhD research has started in February 2013 and shall finish in the winter of 2016. The research is funded by the School of Art and Design at Coventry University. The outcomes of this research shall be written up in a final report. When the outcomes of the research will contribute to the academic field, the results shall be published in an academic journal or presented at conferences.
3. The research does not have any links to commercial or political organisations. Nor shall Francien Broekhuizen receive any financial or other compensation for her research that will embody the risk of altering the outcomes.
4. All the information that will be collected for this research shall be treated as confidential. The only people who will have access to the collection of the raw data are as a researcher and my two supervisors Dr. A. Evans and Dr. S. Herbrechter. See <http://www.coventry.ac.uk/media> for more information on the department.
5. The nicknames, website names, quotes or citations that will be used in the final report or in other publication shall be altered in order to guarantee anonymity.
6. During the researchers engagement in online discussions Francien Broekhuizen will make her position as a researcher clear to the other members of the website. She shall also make known where additional information on the research can be found.
7. Any member of the online communities can ask the researcher not to use any of their statements for the research on 'Brides and Wedding Culture'.

# Appendix 5.

## Interview Themes

For the interviews I aim to let the course of the interview be decided by the interviewee as much as possible, therefore I will not use a structured questionnaire. For the course of the interview I will use the objects the brides brought to the interview as guideline and allow the interviewees to use those objects as a starting point of their story. The objects are chosen by the brides because of their value in relation to their wedding. If the bride did not bring an object to the interview I will ask them to name an object of their interest or use objects that are seen generally as valuable in the wedding experience, for example the wedding dress, the wedding ring, shoes, or the bouquet. The selection of these objects came out of the pilot interview series I did as part of my MA in the summer 2012.

General topics I expect to be covered during the interview are:

- The bride's relation to her wedding dress and other 'loved objects';
- The bride's experiences of the wedding day (when she is married);
- The bride's expectations of the wedding day (when she is planning her wedding);
- The bride's relation to the wedding photos, the experience of making the photos and the search for a photographer;
- The bride's experiences and relations with the online bridal community;
- The bride's experiences of the organization of the wedding;
- The bride's experience of her bridal beauty and bodily performance;
- The bride's experiences /feelings in relation to other important people on the wedding;
- The bride's feelings around love, relationships and the family life.

# Appendix 6.

## Email-Interview Questions

### **Interview Questions before the Wedding**

1. Could you please shortly introduce yourself first and how you have met?
2. Could you describe how do organisation of your wedding is going/went? Were there any things that didn't go smoothly? And in general, how do you feel about the organisation of the wedding?
3. If you're thinking about the day, what would be the most amazing thing to happen and why?
4. How was the dress shopping? How did you prepare?
5. Could you describe the dress for me and why is it this dress?
6. If you could write a letter/card to yourself as a bride, what would you write?
7. Have you done some DIY projects for the wedding? If so, how did you feel about doing it?
8. If you think about your wedding, what kind of feeling do you have with it? And what kind of atmosphere do you hope the wedding will have?
9. What makes your wedding unique?
10. Why would you like to marry?
11. Is there something you would like to tell about the organisation, your wedding and/or your ideas about yourself as a bride?

## Interview Questions after the Wedding

1. If we would have done this interview through Skype I would have asked you to take something to the interview – an object that is important in relation to your wedding. What would have been the object of your choice? There are no restrictions to the object of your choice, it might be everything: from your wedding dress, to your bouquet or the car or an embroidered handkerchief.
2. How was the day before your wedding? Were you really nervous? And how did you prepare for the last things?
3. In your story about your wedding you write that at the beginning of the day, when you can your husband (then still H2B) is not together yet, you had to think about him a lot. Could you tell me a bit more about that? Did you miss him? Or did you want to know his ideas about something? Or was it something completely different?
4. Your father gave you away, how was that? And why did you chose the some ‘I loved her first’?
5. How was it to say your own wedding vows in the presence of all your family and friends?
6. Before the wedding you have done a lot of work at the venue (the farm of her parents-in-law) and you also made some things yourself. How was it so see everything in motion on your wedding day?
7. Wat was the most special moment of the day for you and what made this moment so special? (You may also chose more than one moment if that is easier)
8. How did feel about being the bride and being in the middle of the attention? How did you think about that when you look back at the photos?
9. What did you do with the wedding dress after the wedding?
10. How does it feel to look back at this special day? And how were the days shortly after the wedding? Was it a pink cloud? Or did you have a hard time getting back to your normal routine?
11. Do you have a golden set of advice for me as bride to be?
12. Is there something else you would like to share about your wedding?

## Interview Questions Elisa

1. Could you first tell me a little bit about yourself? Who you are, what kind of work you're doing and how you and your partner have met each other?
2. If we did this interview through Skype I would have asked you to bring an object to the interview that symbolises your wedding. This can be anything, as long as it reminds you of your wedding: from your wedding dress till a key ring with the Eifel tower as he proposed to you in Paris.
3. How did the wedding preparations go? What did you like about it and why? Where there also things you didn't like doing? And how did the cooperation with your husband go?
4. If you look back on your wedding, what was for you the most special moment of the day and why? (If you cannot decide you can also chose a few different moments)
5. How did it feel to be bride? And how did you feel to see yourself as a bride? And if you look to your own photos as a bride, how do you feel about them?
6. On the day of your wedding had a bridal boudoir session in the morning. Where did you get this idea from? And why did you want to do this?
7. How did you prepare for the bridal boudoir session? You can think of the things you have bought for the photo session, beautiful photos you've looked for as inspiration. Or maybe you had an extra suntan or some extra lessons at the gym?
8. How did you feel about doing the bridal boudoir session? Was there anyone with you to help you during the session for example a very good friend?
9. Did your husband know you were going to do a bridal boudoir session and what did he think about it? And what did he thing of the photos? How did you give him the photos?
10. What did you think of the photos when you saw them for the first time? How did you feel when your husband saw the photos for the first time? And what did you do with the photos? Where are they now?
11. I will marry on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March and I will also have a bridal boudoir session that day. Do you have any advice for me, for both the wedding day and the bridal boudoir session?
12. Is there something you would like to tell me about your wedding day or the bridal boudoir photo session?

# Appendix 7.

## List of research space

### **Online spaces**

[www.trouwforum.nl](http://www.trouwforum.nl)

[www.bruidenbruidegom.nl](http://www.bruidenbruidegom.nl)

[www.thepperfectwedding.nl](http://www.thepperfectwedding.nl)

[www.theknot.com](http://www.theknot.com)

[www.youandyourwedding.co.uk](http://www.youandyourwedding.co.uk)

[www.planyourperfectwedding.com](http://www.planyourperfectwedding.com)

[www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com)

[www.boho-weddings.com](http://www.boho-weddings.com)

[www.rockmywedding.co.uk](http://www.rockmywedding.co.uk)

[greenweddingshoes.com](http://greenweddingshoes.com)

[www.stylemepretty.com](http://www.stylemepretty.com)

[whimsicalwonderlandweddings.com](http://whimsicalwonderlandweddings.com)

[www.brides.com](http://www.brides.com)

[www.confetti.co.uk](http://www.confetti.co.uk)

[www.rocknrollbride.com](http://www.rocknrollbride.com)

[www.bridesmagazine.co.uk](http://www.bridesmagazine.co.uk)

### **Magazines**

Bruid en Bruidegom

Perfect Wedding

Brides



## Appendix 8.

Correspondence Moderator [www.trouwforum.nl](http://www.trouwforum.nl)

Content removed on data protection grounds

Content removed on data protection grounds

Content removed on data protection grounds

Content removed on data protection grounds

Content removed on data protection grounds

# Appendix 9.

## Full and less edited extract Ilse

Content removed on data protection grounds

# Appendix 10.

## Draft Article: Pain, Pleasure and Bridal Beauty: Mapping Postfeminist Bridal Perfection

### **Pain, pleasure and bridal beauty: Mapping postfeminist bridal perfection**

#### **Abstract**

Despite renewed media attention on the wedding, and the emphasis that this pays to bridal performance, feminist analysis of wedding culture has only made a few inroads. Accounts are needed that understand women's experience of the wedding day, the narrative of becoming the bride, and the way this takes place against a backdrop of postfeminist ambivalence, where traditional wedding practices are re-fashioned through discourses of (consumer) choice and empowerment. In this article, we draw on qualitative data collected with five married women from the Netherlands, who spoke to us about their wedding day and their experience of being/becoming brides. We show how retraditionalisation shapes a new romanticisation of wedding day storytelling, constructed through transformation and the experience of beauty. In analysing these narratives, we show how postfeminist bridal perfection comes to anchor the subjective and affective power of 'the wedding' in contemporary culture.

**Keywords: postfeminism, retraditionalisation, beauty, wedding culture, brides**

#### **Wedding culture as postfeminist sentiment**

Contemporary wedding culture is marked by an emphasis on consumer practices and a heightened visibility in popular culture. This visibility includes films like *Bride Wars* (2009), *Love, Wedding, Marriage* (2011), *27 Dresses* (2008), *The Vow* (2012) and *The Five-Year Engagement* (2012), and docu-soaps/reality TV including *Don't Tell the Bride* (2007) and *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* (2011). In the Netherlands, the film *Toscaanse Bruiloft* (Trans: Tuscan Wedding) premiered in 2014, and many UK-based docu-soaps/reality TV series are aired during primetime on Dutch television. In celebrity culture,

representations of weddings have also been dominant. The most recent and culturally significant of these was the marriage of Kate Middleton and Prince William in 2011, which was broadcast globally and watched by an estimated 24.5 million<sup>i</sup>. In 2005 the celebrity wedding of football player Rafeal van der Vaart and Sylvie Meis was broadcasted live on Dutch television and watched by 1.5 million<sup>ii</sup>. In 2010 the wedding preparation and the wedding ceremony between football player Wesley Sneijder and Yolande Cabeau van Kasbergen was also widely discussed by Dutch media. The visibility of these highly mediated weddings has complicated the boundaries between public and private ceremonies; during the weddings, both media outlets and members of the public gather to watch the bride and groom, and in the age of digital media, their wedding day can be photographed on new mobile media and transmitted around the world. Such weddings function as a globally marketed spectacle that puts the bridal bodily performance under high surveillance and scrutiny (Winch and Webster, 2012).

In this article we argue that the heightened visibility of wedding culture allows for an increase in brides' bodily scrutiny and beauty practices that could be defined as postfeminist. For gender researchers, 'postfeminism' has been a core analytic for understanding contemporary articulations of gender identity (Gill, 2007a). In this article we take 'postfeminist sentiment' to be defined through key characteristics. These include a strengthening of discourses of essential gender difference and an emphasis on notions of free choice in consumer practices (Gill, 2007a; McRobbie, 2009). A further component of 'postfeminist sentiment' has been a renewed cultural emphasis on the body. A mediated discourse of contemporary gender locates women's identity in her bodily appearance - in accordance with valued and homogenised constructs of slim, toned, white, appropriately middle-class, femininity. Combining neoliberal values and a re-articulation of older understandings of femininity, the wedding is placed firmly within the postfeminist rhetoric, with brides no longer understanding themselves as passive objects, waiting to get married, but as 'active agents using the white wedding as occasion to act out choice, autonomy and power' (Heise, 2012, n.p).



In previous research, wedding culture as a consumer practice has been identified as maintaining heterosexual and patriarchal relations between women and men (Brook, 2002; Boden, 2003; Otnes and Pleck, 2003; Ingraham, 2008). However, with the restructuring of gender relations in late-modern, Westernized countries, we might expect this relationship to have changed. Shaped largely by the impacts of gay rights and feminist movements since the 1950s, wedding rates in Western countries have been falling (Brook, 2002). In the Netherlands weddings peaked in the 1970s at 9.5 per 1000 citizens. In 2012 this number dropped to 4.2 per 1000 citizens (CBS). The same trend is visible in England and Wales where the number of weddings peaked in 1972 at 480,285<sup>iii</sup> and declined to 247,890 in 2011. The decline of weddings has taken place in the context of high divorce rates, a decreased significance of the church, and women's increase in wage-earning capacity and delayed motherhood, signalling more independence. In this context, accounts assume that a democratization of sexual and erotic life would make available new familial structures outside heteronormative frameworks (e.g. Weeks, 1998; Bauman, 2003). However, in line with postfeminist sentiment, these new practices of freedom and choice come to be aligned with neoliberal consumer rhetoric that re-deploys obligation, institution and compulsion and repackages them as the part of the free market of marriage, which still orients to 'good' and economically productive citizenship (Illouz, 2012; Nash, 2013). With the decline of traditional wedding values, 'consumer-led culture has rushed to this gap to connect the pursuit of wedding perfection with the need to consume' (Winch and Webster, 2012, p.51).

This often means that 'the wedding day' is still understood as a route to happiness, despite – or because of – notions of freedom (Love, 2008; Ahmed, 2010). The re-alignment of the wedding as a 'happiness event' that one chooses to engage with goes hand in hand with its economic costs<sup>iv</sup>, the proliferation of wedding goods and services, and demonstration of classy, appropriately middle-class bridal consumption, such that all aspects of the wedding become marketable (Winch and Webster, 2012). Alongside the consumer-oriented discourse of the wedding day, a resurgence of postfeminist romance and retraditionalism of gender roles pervade accounts of the image of the perfect bride, the perfect white wedding day, and the

perfect (male) partner (Boden, 2003; Otnes and Pleck, 2003; Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006). This retraditionalisation of gender takes place in a variety of cultural spaces, for example in the popularity of kitsch and retro household items, the return of home cooking and baking (e.g. *The Great British Bake Off*, see Hollows, 2003), and a nostalgia for ‘chivalry’ or 1950’s ‘glamour’ (e.g. neo-burlesque). However, the cultural space of the wedding is arguably the ideal location from which discourses of retraditionalisation through romance play out (McRobbie, 2009; Negra, 2009). What makes these new notions of romance different from previous ones is that contemporary bridal perfection is understood as process of change, self-improvement and surveillance through the neoliberal rhetoric of consumer-empowerment and agency that turns everyone in the writers of their own life biography (Harris, 2004; Winch and Webster, 2012).

Market values have also inflected the bridal identity, who, in a range of media discourse and matrimonial advice literatures, is expected to understand herself through the language of consumption, competition and constant self-improvement (Gill, 2007a; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008; Phipps, 2014). For example, in *Bride Wars* (2009), Emma (Anne Hathaway) and Olivia’s (Kate Hudson) life-long friendship is threatened when the two women chose the same wedding venue and wedding date. As the friendship between the women breaks down, acts of sabotage and competitive ‘mean girl’ aggression all focus on appearance related concerns (e.g. switching hair dye, mailing fattening foods). In such examples, the intense intimacies of female friendship are shot through with new forms of surveillance that replace old-fashioned traditionalism and emphasise appearance-related consumption (Ringrose, 2013; Winch, 2013).

This retraditionalisation is not just limited to media representations. A wealth of bridal forums, blogs, Pinterest boards and online discussion spaces have developed, allowing ‘everyday’ women to share their wedding, becoming the new experts, entrepreneurs and advisors on the practices required for the perfect wedding and bridal appearance. Concurrently, this context has provided the space for micro-celebrity brides, who are understood within these communities as having the right skills and expertise to produce a ‘unique’ and ‘authentic’ wedding day experience. For example, Dutch bride Lizzy is a well-regarded

within the online community, spending a year planning and hand-crafting her wedding day accessories (complete with wedding day logo, see Winch and Webster, 2012 for discussion of wedding branding). Featured on [www.theperfectwedding.nl](http://www.theperfectwedding.nl), Lizzy is commended for having crafted the whole wedding: ‘invitations to thank-you-notes, decorations, carpet, corsages, bouquet and more: all invented and made by Lizzy herself. Truly a unique and personal wedding!’ Emphasis is placed on ‘doing it your way’, so long as individualism is in keeping with cultural expectations (i.e. none of the items made by Lizzy are out-of-place at a wedding: the wedding dress was white, there was a homemade wedding cake etc.). As with Winch and Webster’s (2012) analysis of celebrity and designer brands as a marker of exclusivity and uniqueness, bridal identity is positioned towards retraditionalisation through perfection, appearance, consumption and authenticity: and for the online micro-celebrity bride, the wedding day becomes a further mechanism for consumption through remaining highly visible, shared online between other brides, and demonstrative of one’s ability to perform bridal identity.

However, research on how women take up postfeminist sentiment and make it their own is only beginning to document the pleasures and pains of postfeminist sentiment (see Author B, 2010, 2013, 2014; Jackson, Vares and Gill, 2013; Ringrose, 2013). Further, little work explores women’s sense making of postfeminist wedding culture; indeed, ‘[t]here is very little scholarship on women’s experience of wearing a wedding dress’ (Nash, 2013, p.596), or, we would argue, on the retelling of the wedding day itself. While marriage is constituted a site of important critique for early feminists, interest in the wedding and marriage seems to have waned (Brook, 2002). In this article, we draw on data collected with five brides in the Netherlands to build on previous research. Below we discuss the methods used to collect and make sense of the women’s discussions of their wedding day. In the analysis we pay special attention to how the image of postfeminist bridal identity opens up affective ways of thinking about appearance, respectability, feminine capital, romanticism and the body in the stories of the brides.

## **Methods**

This article draws on a sample of five in-depth interviews with white, heterosexual women: Ann (24), Gemma (28), Joyce (24), Naomi (36) and Rose (27), who could be defined as broadly middle-class on the basis of lifestyle and occupation (e.g. business owner, teacher, and health related careers). All women identified as Christian, and of Hervormd denomination. The data form part of a larger project on bridal experience in the Netherlands in the context of a postfeminist sentiment that reinforces traditional gender norms and at the same time presents these as the bride's individual 'choice'. Further data collected in this project includes online methods (e.g. Skype interviews), digital ethnographic techniques that map different online bridal practices (Hine, 2000), and the experiences of the first author (through fieldnotes and research diaries), who is currently engaged. The additional data is beyond the focus of this article, and we acknowledge that the sample is small; however, we are working within a qualitative framework that draws on social constructionist methodologies. We are less concerned with generalising our findings, or of proving them true or repeatable. Our quality criteria come from a methodological perspective where 'we know that the phenomena we study are messy, complicated, uncertain, and soft' (Bochner, 2000, p.267). What we are interested in is the meanings these women attached to their wedding, given the context described above.

These five women were recruited on the basis of their willingness to take part, and this was judged in the context of the wider research as more important than the time between the moment of the interview and their wedding. The interviews took place in the summer of 2012, were conducted with the women in their homes and lasted between 1.5 and 2.5 hours. There was no formal interview schedule. The women were instead asked to bring objects with them to the interview such as photographs, keep-sakes and items of clothing, which evoked memories of their wedding day. The objects that the women shared with us also had a prominent place in their everyday life: photos, dried wedding bouquets and wedding dresses were put on display in the living room or bedroom. Other objects that carried value included a pair of glasses, fragrances and jewellery. This style of interviewing was chosen because of its ability to elicit memory and

feeling, and because of our own recognition of the personal significance of wedding day objects, which meant that people were likely to be prompted more by their own objects than by the researcher's questions (Harper, 2002). Much work has been done on the ability of images and objects to trigger, elicit and evoke narratives, memories and storytelling (Harper, 2002; Harrison, 2002; Bell, 2013). For example, Mitchell (2011) cites her previous research (Weber and Mitchell, 2004) where the 'dress story' is provoked by the item of clothing that acts as an explicit prompt for storytelling and memory work. By drawing on these elicitation techniques, it meant that during the interviews the emphasis was taken off the researcher, and meant that we didn't enforce an agenda-led interview schedule. Instead the objects women had with them allowed discussion to emerge naturally between interviewee, interviewer and the photos/objects present, based on the women's own emotional investment, memories and feelings (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000).

During the interviews, these techniques proved highly successful. Interview data was heavily saturated in emotional rhetoric, and the first author's reflections on the interview context highlighted the deep emotional connection between the interviewee and interviewer. As Ezzy (2010) suggests, such embodied connections can be rewarding for both interviewee and interviewer – and indeed the interviewees spoke during and after the discussion of the pleasures of sharing their wedding experience with the first author, even when they had initially been concerned that they would not have enough to say.

All interviews took place in Dutch, which was the first language of both the participants and the first author. All the interviews were conducted, transcribed and translated by the first author. Attempts were made to maintain the meaning of Dutch words as closely as possible, and where necessary the original Dutch word was kept in the transcript alongside their English translation. The project received ethical approval from our University. Full details of the project were provided to all participants, and consent was gain for each interview. All names used here are pseudonyms.

Once audio-recordings were transcribed and translated, our analysis involved a multi-modal approach. We immersed ourselves in the data through a close reading and re-reading of each transcript, paying attention to themes and repetitions, and exploring these for their relevance within individual interview data: for example, cross-referencing with the first author's research diary, fieldnotes and feelings during those points. As we read through the data, themes also began to emerge across the transcripts. Given the methods that we used to elicit the data and an explicit reference to a past event (the wedding day), it was unsurprising that there was an 'autobiographical impulse' in how the women spoke (Polkinghorne, 1991, 1995; Johnstone, 2001) in the same way that discussions of, for example, divorce or coming-out stories necessitate a temporal 'looking back' (see Plummer, 1995; Riessman, 2002). We therefore drew on narrative analytic methods to interpret the data: but note that the object of analysis was not in the storytelling per se. Instead we were interested how narratives were used to construct coherent stories about the self in the context of postfeminist contradiction, where postfeminism asks brides to make sense of traditional wedding practices as the outcome of individual choice and self-improvement (Heise, 2012; Nash, 2013).

The second analytic method that informed our interpretation of the data was discourse analysis, as a way of understanding the historical and contingent nature of the women's narratives, and where, in the formation of the self, '[a]uto/biographical narratives are...theorized as a discursive regime wherein the female self is being constituted through procedures of objectification – wherein she is categorized, distributed and manipulated – and procedures of subjectification – ways she actively turns herself into a subject' (Tamboukou, 2013, p.93). Below we treat the data as discourse, in the sense that we identified coherent sets of meaning that were analysed as culturally and historically contingent on marital discourses, and that bridal identity became a technology of the self that created subject and objects in the women's talk (see Author B, 2010, 2014). Alongside this, we also drew on methods of analysis emerging in beauty research that pays attention to the way that such discursive self-formation troubles top-down theories of power evident in beauty practices, and which instead focuses its interpretative lenses at the feeling and

temporality of beauty, and its related emotive constructs of, for example, happiness, contentedness, and love (e.g. Colebrook, 2006; Moreno Figueroa, 2013).

In the analysis below, we draw on these methods to interpret narratives of bridal becomings. We begin with filmic accounts of the ‘perfect day’, where women drew on mediated storytelling to define wedding success. We show how this narrative was carefully managed through the bride’s relationship to her wedding dress, where excess (in either taste or embodiment) needed to be managed to achieve ‘normal’ bridal beauty. We also draw attention to the physically painful wedding dress story, as an example where appropriately postfeminist excess was normalised so long as bridal beauty was achieved. We conclude this article by suggesting bridal identity is mediated through emotive discourses of postfeminist sentiment that retraditionalise gender power.

**“I will just start with a nice story, immediately”**

The women who were interviewed for this study were keen to tell their story of their wedding – as indicated by Naomi (36) who began her interview with the promise of “a nice story”. Within the retelling the women deeply engaged with the allure of bridal perfection that is evident within representations of weddings in popular media (Heise, 2012). In the following extract, for example, it becomes evident how Joyce engages with the construct of bridal perfection:

***Extract 1***

Joyce: Yes, I had it [the wedding dress] on, I thought. Yes, and then your makeup your hair. I already tried my hair-style for the day, and that was fine. And then, after a little while you become like, well now it’s time I think. And then, I wasn’t finished completely, because I didn’t wear my jacket yet and then I saw the car [with her fiancée] coming already. And then you go to the door, you know, and then you wait till the doorbell rings. (laughs a bit) And

then you open the door. And then, and, you know, that's a bit funny, you can see it on the DVD as well, you open the door and then you think, oooh!(...)And then for a little while you're overwhelmed by all those beautiful things. And then you think, oh yes.(...)And suddenly, you're in the centre, because the photo camera and and video and and the neighbours are standing there and saying like 'oh you're so beautiful and nice'. And then for a little while it goes like 'ohw'. It makes you a bit shy.

Int.: (laughs). But you got used to it?

Joyce: Yes, after a while you, yes, because alongside the road everyone waves to you and oh yes, actually it's, everyone is nice to you. You're really the bride you know.

(Joyce, aged 24, married in 2009)

In the extract above Joyce described the process of becoming the bride in a cinematic narrative of happiness, through which her self-concept transforms alongside the acquisition of objects and beautifying practices (the make-up, the hair, the jacket, the car) (Coleman and Moreno Figueroa, 2010). This bridal becoming was deeply rooted within overarching political and social structures of postfeminist sentiment and the female (or bridal) body, understood as in need of constant change and improvement through the right consumer practices (e.g. Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008). Joyce's beauty work was also rooted within romantic discourses that inform the allure of the perfect bride and wedding day (until you really become the bride) (Boden, 2003; Otnes and Pleck, 2003). Self-transformation and retraditionalisation, as two components at the heart of postfeminist sensibility, re-asserts the normative expectations of heterosexual feminine wedding fantasy. By Joyce's retelling of her wedding day in this highly romanticised way, Joyce engages in what Heise (2012) terms 'bridal fictions', where 'the postfeminist bride unapologetically embraces romance as central part of her life and relationship' (n.p.), even while the groom is absented from the story (Winch, 2013).



The location of the wedding within romanticism was also mirrored in the way Joyce narrated her experience through the temporal and anticipatory aspects of emotive and romantic storytelling (Polkinghorne, 1991; Illouz, 2012). In the beginning of the extract she articulated her beautifying practices in a procedural way (the dress on, then the makeup, then the hair). One significant moment of transformation came through opening the door: an act that within the story transforms the world - “for a little while you’re overwhelmed by all those beautiful things”. This moment not only transformed the way Joyce experienced her bridal becoming, but also the form of the story. The story gradually builds emotion, figuratively captured by Joyce inability to express herself in words: when Joyce spoke of the opening the door, the experience is presented through vocalisations, “ooh!”.

### **Postfeminism and the wedding dress**

Within postfeminist media representation, the ‘good’ wedding is understood as a site of women’s ultimate success (Negra, 2009). In becoming this successful bridal self, the wedding dress is a key element: in particular the practice of finding and wearing the ‘perfect’ wedding dress. For example, in Friese’s (2001) interviews with brides-to-be in bridal stores, trying and choosing the dress represented the first step to becoming the bride and recognising one’s changed social status as future bride. The value of the dress and the story of finding the dress were also important in our interviews. This included evaluating other dresses, for example:

#### **Extract 2**

Ann: I wanted a tranquil, stylish dress, with nice details. I didn’t want a busy one, with here a flower, there other things, that simply doesn’t suit me.(...)I know that some people. You know a little while ago there was someone and I heard she had a wedding dress of Meri Borsato. I was like, she was a bit robust and uhm, her bodice, and she had all sort of things on it and she had frills on it and she, then she had such a dress, uhm skirt and then I thought

it's quite nice to have a bit of a wider skirt, a little bit wider than I had, but man, I thought this was a whorish dress. Yeah, and her (boobs) came half out of the dress and it was like, boy oh boy, "I'm going to marry once so I'm going to pull out all the stops", you could say. I thought it was really too much and usually she never wears those kind of things. This was what I would call pulling on a funfair attraction. No, I really thought it was inappropriate. I think you should wear a dress that fits who you are. Like people who never wear 'nude' and then they suddenly go totally 'nude' than I think like, yeah, why now?(...) Later I heard that it was a very expensive dress of Meri Borsato. Well, I said, I cannot see that it was so. Is that what they call expensive?

(Ann, aged 24, married in 2010)

In the extract above, Ann discussed what she wanted – the “tranquil, stylish dress with nice details” by marking it through difference. The ‘right’ wedding dress was neither the excessive dress, nor one that did not reflect “who you are”. The ‘right’ wedding dress therefore served to demarcate the borders of acceptable, respectable bridal beauty. The ‘bad’ bride, was deemed to have engaged in inappropriate consumption, by choosing the designer dress made by Meri Borsato, and therefore had financial capital, but did not have the right cultural or body capital to wear the dress appropriately (Skeggs, 1997; Rafferty, 2011). In the above extract, the other bride’s visibility was thus hyper-visible because of its failure to fit these categories. Her “robust” body was discursively placed against a bodice with too many frills, and the dress is marked as excessive: the ‘bad’ bride’s body was retold as spilling out of her dress, and “whorish”, and so sat in contrast to both historic and contemporary expectations of bridal perfection (see Jensen and Ringrose, 2014 for an analysis of bridal excess in relation to class). This means that even the ‘appropriate’ designer dress was dismissed: Ann calls into question the financial capital contained in the symbol of the designer dress - “Is that what they call expensive?” - implying that the dress looked cheap, regardless of its actual cost.

The powerful construct of the “inappropriate” dress makes sense when considering the historical discourses of brides and weddings: the bride symbolised virginity, purity, modesty and morality (Ingraham, 2008). Equally, the notion that body reflects inner self is not new: since Victorian times, feminine bodily appearance has mattered. For example, respectable womanhood was located within upper and middle-classes who were represented through appearance in terms of luxurious display, glamour and desirability, while their working class counterparts were seen as aggressive, excessively sexual and masculine (Poovey, 1984; Illouz, 2012). In Ann’s talk, she drew on this discourse of body and self in stating that the dress should not only ‘fit’, but also be one that “fits who you are”. What was different in the above was that the bad dress was made sense of as a deliberate choice of the bride: Ann imagined the bride thinking, ““I’m going to marry once so I’m going to pull out all the stops””. This meant that feminine body and cultural capital throughout Ann’s talk was constructed as a choice, achievable through the right application of the right consumer goods – hiding the privileged categories of class, race, gender and sexuality (Gill, 2007a; Jensen and Ringrose, 2014)

Alongside this demarcation of the bad wedding dress, other women discussed the promise of the ‘good’ dress. The following two extracts come from the interview with Naomi whose story was rooted in an understanding of her own body as positioned away from normative notions of feminine beauty. She was therefore required to carefully negotiate bridal beauty and identity, which produced a lot of anxiety in her talk.

### **Extract 3**

Naomi: ... But despite that I never had a dream like that, about what my wedding dress had to look like for example, that’s something women seem to have, I didn’t have that at all. But I thought, if I ever marry I want something, something which I think is very beautiful, something I really like. So anyway, so when we, when I really had to go shopping for a wedding dress, I thought it was terrible already(...)I’m just big and I always think people

with, with, people who are and big and wearing a wedding dress, they are like, like balloons or something and \*making a noise\* and fat and even fatter and. And of course Marc [her husband] is quite, yeah, how shall I put it, uhm, slender(...)I thought that would look terrible, he's so slender and then I'm such a big elephant and then we will be standing next to each other and I thought, that won't work at all. (...) Eventually it was about nine month before the wedding and I thought well, I need to go [to the bridal shop]... But when we came there I acted very stupid to that saleswoman, like. Then she says, what do you like? I said to her, I don't like anything. I just said that. I really like nothing. Yes, I like things for size 34 [UK 6]. I think that's quite beautiful.

(Naomi, aged 36, married 2009)

Throughout Naomi's narrative, she centred on the search for her wedding dress and the expectation to become the successful bride (what she called the 'real bride'). Naomi's talk about her body included a disclaimer: that she did not have 'a dream' about bridal beauty, but this is followed by the suggestion that she wanted something beautiful, and that her own body marked her out as not fitting cultural expectations of such beauty. But more than this, it was Naomi's body next to her husband's that she identified retrospectively as having caused her body anxiety, who was defined, cautiously, as "slender" while Naomi described herself as a "balloon" and a "big elephant". The experience of the embodied self was shaped in comparison to others (Skeggs, 1997). We read this talk then as a desire for normalcy: for a wedding that didn't stand out as excessive, but as 'a desire to feel normal and to feel normalcy as a ground for a dependable life that does not have to keep being reinvented' (Berlant, 2007, p. 281). Naomi's 'real bride' and lack of 'a dream' in this context was thus suggestive of a 'normal bride': an expectation, as Coleman and Moreno Figueroa (2010, p.369) note, that is also evident in research on cosmetic surgery and other beauty practices. We explore this further in Naomi's relationship to her wedding dress below.

#### **Extract 4**

Naomi: ...I really feel like, yeah, that was my dress, yeah, it's really my dress(...)Yeah, and it was like, yeah, fortunately it [the wedding dress] existed, or something.(...)But it really is a part of my story, you could say, a bit, a bit, it had to be, no, it must be the right one. And right doesn't mean it had to be the most beautiful dress that is ever been made, no it had to be right so that I felt comfortable in it: then it was the right one. Do you know what I mean?

Int.: Yes, I understand you completely.

Naomi: So, it wasn't that I thought like oh, and now everyone will faint because it's so beautiful, that was not the intention, I just wanted to have a beautiful fabric, I wanted a beautiful, you know, I really wanted a beautiful dress but I had to feel comfortable about it. And of course Marc had to think it was a beautiful dress.

(Naomi, aged 36, married 2009)

Naomi concluded her wedding story, where her having found 'the one' completed the stability of successful bridal narrative: the right wedding dress that, as she constructed throughout her interview, allowed her to become the 'real bride'. Naomi's description of the dress used traditional romantic repertoires that are usually preserved for constructs of the ideal partner, or in postfeminist chick lit, 'Mr. Right': for example "fortunately it [the wedding dress] existed" and "it had to be the right one" (see Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006; Negra, 2009). In the context of individualistic 'liquid love', where traditional notions of heterosexual romance have been challenged by changes in gender relations, Naomi's talk made consumerism a romantic relationship to the self, blurring the boundaries between self, wedding story and the dress (Weeks, 1998; Bauman, 2003; Boden, 2003; Illouz, 2012). Moreover, this complex relationship to the dress had to be carefully negotiated given Naomi's constructs of bodily anxiety relative to her groom. Postfeminist bridal becoming in Naomi's story was represented as a desire to be normatively beautiful, so that it's not "the most beautiful dress that is ever been made".

‘Normalcy’ is not to suggest that there was little emotional or financial investment in the dress (Boden, 2003): indeed, as has been noted of ‘natural’ beauty regimes or the ‘girl next door’ look, these involve as much work and investment as others, so that all beauty practices are understood as involving work (Author B, 2013; Riley and Scharff, 2013). But as we suggest above, postfeminist bridal beauty cannot become excessive: to do so would risk slipping over into inappropriate, overly sexual and hyper-visible femininity (McRobbie, 2009; Jensen and Ringrose, 2014). Instead ‘normalcy’ becomes, in Naomi’s story, difficult to achieve, transformative, unique (‘the one’) and full of anxiety (see Bauman, 2003; Berlant, 2012). And as we show in the final part of our analysis, the desire to be normatively beautiful can also be ‘appropriately excessive’ in other ways: namely, through a physical investment.

### **Pain, humour, and fun**

Much contemporary feminist literature around beauty and beautifying practices focus on understanding beauty as part of a patriarchal society that makes women weaker and more vulnerable (e.g. Wolf, 1991; Jeffreys, 2005). It is important to keep these overarching structures in mind. However, rather than focusing upon the moralising question of whether a woman’s (or bride’s) engagement with beauty is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, we would like to focus on the meanings of engaging with the sometimes physically painful bridal beauty practices. For example:

#### **Extract 5**

Rose: ...On the day I had, when we came home in the morning, and I took off my corset and I had just exactly on the bones of my hips and at the back on, on my buttocks, there really were grazes and here (pointing to her hips) it were really two little wounds, as your whole corset, and yeah, the dress just weights 22 kilos.

Int.: 22 kilos?

Rose: With your skirt and your hoops and the corset, when you are wearing everything.

Int.: Blimey, I didn't think that would be that heavy.

Rose: Yeah, and that, that's really not just, when I lifted it up the hanger, and that was okay, but then I had to go outside too, then I had put it over my arm and that, that you won't hold that for metres. No, it's really very heavy.

Int.: Wow, I didn't think about that, that it would be that heavy.

Rose: But this, this body is completely hard. There are stiffeners in that whole thing, well and there is so much weight and fabric in and uhm metal and uhm plastic. That it's just, my dress, the body, you can just put it down and it will stand(...)It won't collapse or something. And it doesn't fit nice at all, so that's no reason for doing it. (Laughs a bit) And then they say, then they say, yeah, during the whole I have to be able to do uhn, yeah, did you want to say move, as that's just impossible. (Laughs a bit) But you really don't care about it.

Int.: As you just wanted to have such a dress?

Rose: Yes, you just want, you just want to be beautiful.

(Rose, aged 27, married 2010).

Fun, humour and irony have become part of postfeminist sentiment, and have been cited as the main technique of media representations in positing feminism as outmoded – the knowing wink making it difficult for feminist analysts to adequately critique sexism and misogyny (Gill, 2007a; McRobbie, 2009). Equally, practices associated with weddings have been noted for sculpting, shaping and regulating the female body, for example through extreme dieting (Prichard and Tiggermann, 2008, 2014; Winch and Websert, 2012; Nash, 2013, although we would point out that only Gemma spoke of dieting). However, as we have argued, these critiques are valuable, but they miss the pleasures that make this humour and irony possible.

In the context of retraditionalisation, the pain and discomfort of the wedding dress are re-written as something that Rose frames as agentially allowing her to achieve bridal beauty. Rose and the interviewer

(first author) *enjoyed* sharing the story of Rose's painful dress. And like battle scars, the bruises and grazes that Rose reconstructed, by pointing to parts of her body, demonstrate the pride that become associated with wearing the painful dress, and of her commitment to becoming the perfect bride. As other feminist analysts of beauty culture have pointed out, power works in ways that do not simply orient to domination, as there are feelings of power associated with acquiring the skills and practices, and withstanding the pain, of beauty (Bartky, 1990; Felksi, 2006). The dress became Rose's way of achieving an attachment to beauty – so that her choice and the “just want[ing] to be beautiful”, coupled with the pleasures of recounting her ordeal, becomes both self-evident, obligatory, and a matter of achievement.

## **Discussion**

Postfeminist sentiment, understood broadly as a set of discourses that shapes contemporary femininity through notions of consumer choice and freedom, have come to inflect cultural constructs of the wedding day. This postfeminist sentiment redeploys gender essentialism, binds feminine success to the body, and, in the context of dramatic shifts in gender relations, acts to retraditionalise historically gendered practices as a matter of free will (Gill, 2007a). This retraditionalisation is evident in romance novels (Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006), home bakery (Hollows, 2003) and the wedding (Negra, 2009; Heise, 2012; Nash, 2013). In this context, the wedding may be an important site to explore postfeminist sentiment, given the financial expense and expanding consumer culture surrounding a practice that is traditionally a ritualised ceremony and religious passage (Ingraham, 2008), and that has in the past been the focus of heavy critiqued by feminist analysts for maintaining gender power asymmetries (Brook, 2002).

However, much research on postfeminist sentiment has focused on the way this discourse of contemporary gender relations is mediated, while a smaller body of work has attempted to unpack what sense making are enabled by these constructs in people's negotiations of gender identity (e.g. Author B, 2010, 2013; Jackson, Vares and Gill, 2013; Ringrose, 2013). In this article, we have attempted to add to



the literature on wedding culture by exploring the narratives of five women from the Netherlands, who spoke to us about their wedding day and their experiences of being brides. In our discussion, we want to develop two themes within our analysis that we feel are important for understanding retraditionalisation, and which could be useful in future research on understanding the pleasures (above simply providing critique) of the wedding and its retraditionalisation (see Gill, 2007b for an account of ‘critical respect’). These themes are: successful ‘perfect’ bridal storytelling, alongside a bodily regulation that oriented to normalcy.

Throughout our interviews, the women reflected back on their wedding day as a success story, according to narratives that explored their embodiment of a particular bridal beauty: a graceful, easy-going beauty that, as Naomi’s extracts suggest, can actually be difficult to achieve, and as Rose demonstrates, can be painful. The contradictions contained in the story where easy-going, natural, ‘normative’ expectations for bridal beauty require work are made sense of through the narrative retelling: as something overcome, which then orients towards success. Stories are retold through the tropes of media narratives of the wedding (fairytales, romance novels, wedding genre movies). Drawing on these tropes made the bridal experience central, which was itself reconfirmed through the mediation of the wedding: Joyce, for example, suggests that the ‘magic’ moment of her wedding could be seen in the DVD (through which she can lay claim to witnessing the moment of her transformation) and the cameras and videos that act as props that confirm her place at the centre of the story.

Along with Heise (2012), we see such storytelling as ‘bridal fictions’: techniques to tell the successful bridal story, in ways that mark it as knowing, self-determined and agentic. In a postfeminist context, the successful feminine subject achieves bridal beauty through agentially working on the self. Combined with a broader cultural notion of marriage as the endpoint of love and romance - a discourse only becoming dominant in the recent history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but one that still greatly structures self-worth (Ingraham, 2008; Illouz, 2012) - these bridal fictions represent a means to understanding the self as

successful, and in doing so represent one of the few moments where women can narrate a ‘self-made’ happiness.

Of course, ‘postfeminist promises’ of freedom, choice and agency are tempered by the heterosexual expectations of wedding day bliss and a cultural obligation to get married, which is ideologically supported by a burgeoning consumer culture (Winch and Webster, 2012). The wedding day may be understood as the bride’s ‘special day’, but this special day is still tightly structured through the attendant limits placed on agency through consumerism (e.g. the tiered wedding cake, the white dress, the wedding gifts, no matter how ‘unique’, are still anticipated consumer practices). What is pleasurable in this? We see the pleasures that bind women to bridal identity as sitting alongside the broader obligations of wedding culture, where becoming the ‘successful’ bridal self in our data cumulated in a narrative that carefully regulated appearance, respectability, feminine capital and romanticism. Collectively the bride’s narratives spoke of a tightrope of ‘excess’ that managed the normative expectation of the slim, middle class successful bride, and normalised, even make pleasurable, bridal beauty practices that were retold as causing pain. This regulation of the body, however, was understood by the brides as a means to transform the self into the ‘good’ bride: a productive identity discourse in the wider context of a postfeminist sentiment that emphasises successful bodily performance as a way to become a ‘good’ feminine subject. Wedding culture’s retraditionalisation is thus located in the way it made our past-brides feel: a powerful postfeminist dream of success, achievement and happiness, which aligned female identity back to feminine beauty and historically patriarchal practices (i.e. weddings) as a testament of self-worth and the future ‘good life’.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-13248642>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.assepoesterfeestkleding.nl/trouwen-en-feesten/trouwen/celebrities/sylvie-meis-en-rafael-van-der-vaart.php>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/vsob1/marriages-in-england-and-wales--provisional-/2009/marriages-summary.html>

<sup>iv</sup> According to the market research agency 'The Wedding Report', the costs of weddings in the USA dropped from \$18,231 in 2008 to \$16,903 in 2009, but was largely compensated when the average spending rose to more than \$20,000 in 2010 up to \$27,000 in 2012. The average spending in the UK in 2013 was just over £20,000. In the Netherlands a wedding ceremony costs between the €15,000 to €16,000 and ceremonies of more than €25,000 are not uncommon. The average costs in Belgium are a little higher, at €17,534