Expressing Through Dance & Fashion
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Researching the market of pole dance fashion

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Date :
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After taking some time apart from AMFI figuring out what it was I actually wanted from life, I kept struggling thinking about the subject of my graduation project. I couldn’t imagine finding a subject interesting enough to write about for a half year, and hopefully also not be bored with afterwards.

It took me one and a half year to come up with the idea of combining my two passions in one single project: Pole dance and Fashion.

For me and many other pole dancers, pole dancing isn’t just a hobby, it becomes a part of your life, of your person. Many pole dancers have their own pole at home, and feel the need to use a random pole when they find one (even on the street). Somehow I got addicted to it, and addicted to the clothes as well. It was an expensive way of living since pole dance wear comes from abroad. After realising many other pole dancers struggle with the same problems I was faced with: placing orders overseas, handling high shipping costs, import duties, having to send a product in return overseas if it didn’t fit. I thought it might be interesting to research possibilities for a pole dance fashion company in the Netherlands. Would there be potential in a Dutch reseller of already existing brands?

During this research I got to believe in such a company more and more and actually decided to found it: Pole Fashion. It has been the most scary thing I’ve ever done, but thanks to the solid research performed for AMFI and due to the help I was able to receive from various teachers, friends and professionals, I am convinced that this will turn out to be a succes.

Researching this specific topic would not have been possible without the help of friends, family and several professionals that took the time to guide me. Especially my coach Sander Schellens helped me repeatedly with new insights, feedback and interesting people I should speak to. His genuine interest in my goal to develop this business made him enthusiastic and also dedicated to help me reach this goal. Furthermore I received help from Ligia Hera, Ricardo de Graaf, Bernadette Schrandt, Galit Ariël, Ellen van Veghel, Lianne Ringoir, Johan den Otter, Marinka Engelen and finally Matthies Ringoir. Ligia Hera give me the proper handles to be able to develop a financial plan. Ricardo de Graaff helped me to develop a company strategy that would mean more than being simply a reseller. Galit Ariël helped with the design elements of the company. Bernadette give me advice how to formulate effective questions for my survey. Ellen van Veghel gave me practical insights in indexation in search engines en how to develop a succesful e-commerce company. Lianne Ringoir gave me textual insights to write a cohesive report. Johan den Otter, a fniancial guru, informed me what to take in account for writing a financial plan and still helps me with all the financial guidance I can use. Marinka Engelen, a beautiful, talented pole dancer. She has been my muse during this entire project. All the pole dance pictures used to make this report more visual are of this amazing young woman. Finally I want to thank Matthies Ringoir, my partner and dear friend, who has supported me during this entire process and helped me realise a dream by founding this company.

I am thankfull to all of these professionals who took time out of their own (busy) lives to guide me and to make this possible.
Allthough it might take decades for the sport pole dancing to lose its controversial connotation and be accepted as the powerful, empowering workout it actually is, the sport is gaining large territory and popularity, and becoming more and more professional as the sport itself is developing. By promoting the sport through international competitions and improving its instructor accreditation system in the past five years the International Pole Dancing Fitness Association has been pushing for pole fitness to be included in the Olympics. Even though the sport still has a long way to go before it has reached that goal, the current developments and growth of the sport indicate it has already made a huge transformation from the club scene history it once originated from.

Following the global increase of health awareness in society, the sportswear industry has been booming for the past few years as well. It has resulted in major leading fashion brands to reevaluate their assortment and add a sportswear collection to be able cater to the needs of the active consumer. As pole dance requires specific abilities of its workout wear that are ultimately not met by these fashion brands or any other sports brand there is an upcoming market to be discovered.

This report shows that the pole dance market, although relatively unknown, is one worth investing in. First, it explains what pole dancing actually is and its origins. Secondly it gives insight in the popularity of pole dance in relation to the current zeitgeist. Third, the pole dance community is evaluated, to understand their motivation, and even addiction to this sport. Finally pole dance wear will be analyzed to get full insight the actual properties pole dancers are looking for in their workout wear. This chapter also indicates how big the market in the Netherlands currently is and its potential growth.

After reading this report you will be convinced that pole dance wear is an underestimated market, yet to be discovered. The pole dance movement has only been active for about ten years and the growth it has already made is tremendous: an average of 56% a year. Additionally, there are no signals indicating it has already reached its peek. Considering the facts that pole dancing is very likely to grow even further the next coming years, and that regular workout wear is simply not what pole dancers require, I would like to conclude by stating this can be called a ‘gap in the market’ and if organized properly this could be a very lucrative business.
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Rationale:
Pole dance (a dance form mainly known for its club scene history) today is a recognized sport and is practiced around the World in 60 countries every day. As can be found on the website of World Pole Dance, an organization thriving to professionalize the sport and use their influence at events to encourage, support and educate safe pole sport fitness. Nowadays pole dance is acknowledged as a full body workout: training flexibility, core strength and conditioning. Pole dance classes are being offered at more and more facilities across the world. Ten years ago you might have needed some extensive research to discover a dance school that offers pole dance classes. Cindy Cooijmans, known throughout the pole dance world as both a pole dance teacher and a respected judge, recently informed me in an interview that there are currently over 110 places solely in the Netherlands offering a pole dance course, even at gyms of several universities. Five years ago the offer stopped at 50. When you search for #pole dance on Instagram, close to 1.8 million results pop up. A popular Facebook Group for pole dancers has over 20,000 members. In comparison with other sports on Facebook it is large group: The biggest football group has 4,526 members, Ballet counts 4,880 members, Soccer 5,979, Tennis 10,016, only Yoga had more members in their largest Facebook group, namely 21,391. Pole dancing appears in music videos, TV shows, and even Madonna was found pole dancing on stage in her last tour (Youtube, 2015). Most recent developments in this sport branch are aimed at making it an Olympic sport, which is why a federation was founded to develop one universal pole dance norm (International Pole Sports Federation, 2015).

Four years ago I was introduced to pole dance for the very first time, which means I am part of the change, but I have also been observing it. In my opinion, pole dancers seem to have a desire to escape a daily routine where you go to work or school, take care of your family, friends and other obligations there might be. Pole dance is an individual sport, where your own developments and accomplishments are celebrated within your pole dance community. Maybe that’s the reason why this form of sport is getting increasingly popular. Living in a world where society demands you to fulfil a certain role (businesswoman, housewife, mom, or student) it is truly fulfilling to do something for yourself, and to be proud of a goal that you reached after months of hard training, not for a company, not for your family or school, but for you. So far, this is just an assumption. To gain proper insight in the motives of pole dancers extensive research is needed.

When I look at my own pole fashion consumer behavior, and at the students I train with, there are three different kinds of product groups that are mainly purchased: sportswear, performance wear and pole dance shoes. Sportswear is the kind of clothing you wear when training. It should allow you to grip the pole with your skin (minimum use of fabrics) but of course also covers and protects your body while practicing. Performance wear is worn when entering competitions and performances. For these occasions (as for any other sport where individual performances are important) it is crucial to wear something suited for a performance, not just your sports outfit. Finally, I discovered pole dance shoes is another field of interest many pole dancers have in common. It isn’t just about any kind of footwear; it evolves around a specific footwear brand: Pleaser. Some dancers wear them for fun, some wear them only for performances, and other dancers do not train without them.

Aim:
There are about 25 existing pole dance brands all over the world (from Australia to the Czech Republic) including the footwear brand, Pleaser. This is not a lot, especially considering the fact that the sport is being practiced in over 60 countries by millions of people every day (World Pole Dance, 2015). Most of these brands are only sold via their own web shop. For Dutch pole dancers this results in high shipment costs and long shipping time, sometimes even additional import taxes. Accessibility and distribution of pole dance fashion around the world is therefore very limited. My aim is to find a way to bring those brands to the Netherlands and make them more accessible to Dutch pole dancers.
My main research is aimed at investigating the possibility to establish a pole dance fashion business in the Netherlands. This report is relevant for anyone interested in entering this new market. My advice will be addressed to entrepreneurs and my final product at the end of this research will be a business plan suitable to convince a bank of providing the necessary liquid assets to make this happen.

**Questions:**
This research aims to answer the following questions:

- What is pole dance?
- Why has popularity of pole dance increased significantly the past 5 years?
- What binds a pole dance community?
- What do pole dancers wear?
  - What properties are important for pole dance wear?
  - What is the current demand of pole dance wear?
  - What is the current offer of pole dance wear?

Answering these questions will lead to help answer the main question: Is there a market for pole dance fashion in the Netherlands?

**Methodology**
Researching literature about pole dancing and the dancers will be a first start. I plan to gain more information about pole dancers using surveys and personal interviews. Triangulation will be applied throughout my entire research thriving to ensure my sources are trustworthy. At the start of my research I will mainly be collecting secondary data to describe where pole dancing actually comes from, how it has evolved through the past decades and also to explain its current growth. Primary data will be necessary to explain its popularity. I am able to research these aspects from my own observations, for example during classes, but also anything I can find on social media platforms like Facebook or Instagram, as well as data retrieved from empirical research like surveys and interviews.

Once I’ve gotten more insight into why pole dancers practice this sport, my research will be continued by applying ethnographic research. By analyzing the surveys I will gain primary data to understand what the norms and values of this subculture are, and what binds them.

Finally, to research the specific needs of pole dancers concerning their outfits, the primary data collected from the survey and interviews will be analyzed, mainly to come to an understanding of their consumer behavior. Concerning the physical properties pole clothing demands, secondary data will be collected as well. This information can be retrieved from existing pole wear brands, as many of them are very informative about their materials and shapes on their websites. This variety of research methods helps me to gain information from various angles to ensure a report with a neutral conclusion that is trustworthy as well as convincing.

**Limitations**
During this research I will be limited in acquiring knowledge on the subject due to the fact that secondary data is almost non-existent. Research will depend mainly on primary data acquired in own research.

**Structure**
- Brief summarized answer to the main question
- Proposal
- Information about pole dancing and its history
- Information about popularity growth in relation to current zeitgeist
- Information about pole dance community
- Information about pole dance fashion in general
- Information about current offer of pole fashion
- Information about current demand of pole dance wear
- Conclusion
What is pole dancing?

History

The history of pole dance dates back to approximately eight hundred years ago, when the Indian sport of mallakhamb was practiced as can be seen in the youtube clip the complete guide of Indian Pole Gymnastics (2010). Mallakhamb means pole gymnastics and this sport was performed on a wooden pole which is wider in diameter than the dancing pole we know nowadays. It was practiced by placing two or more poles twenty feet apart and men would perform “gravity defying tricks” leaping from pole to pole. This sport was performed dominantly by men. This pole sport is still being practiced, and is currently known as Chinese Pole. As written by The Pole Dancing Shop in their article ‘A Brief History Of Pole Dance’ (2011) the main difference between pole dancing as we know it and Chinese pole is the fact that the poles used for Chinese pole are often covered in rubber as performers need to be able to “stick” to the pole. This article also explains that a Western Europe pagan fertility celebration, called the Maypole dance, originated around the same time. There are two versions of it, the most well known was performed around a wooden pole, as dancers twisted ribbons around the pole as they danced. This dance began as a traditional or artistic dance which became popular in Italy and France. According to Historical Harmonies, it was even performed in London theatres by travelling dancing groups as can be read in ‘The origins of the Maypole dance’ (2010), which caused this traditional dance to become known amongst larger audiences. A recreation of the Maypole dance can still be seen on Renaissance fairs.

In the 1920s, traveling circuses and sideshows would utilize the main pole at the center of the tent as a dancing pole. The 1950’s caused for pole dancing to move out of the tent into bars, according to Kelleys’ The S-Factor (2010). Around this time burlesque dance and sensuality became more accepted. The earliest recorded pole dance was in 1968 with a performance by Belle Jangles at Mugwump Strip Club in Oregon (Lloyd, 2007). The 1980’s are responsible for the growing popularity of strip clubs and the pole was incorporated into striptease routines, and GoGo or lap dancing. This started in Canada and then in the United States (The Pole Dancing Shop, 2011). In the 1990s, pole dancing commenced to be taught as an art and used in fitness exercises. Fawnia Dietrich was the one who opened the first exotic dance school in Canada in 1994. Since then, pole dancing classes have become a popular form of recreational and competitive sport.

The first dance studio to offer pole dance classes in the Netherlands was Chalans. This was in 2005 (Chalans, 2013). Since 2005 many other dance studio’s followed. According to Cindy Cooijmans, pole dance teacher and a respected judge, pole dancing is at the moment being offered by approximately 110 different facilities in the Netherlands. Ten of which are Chalans schools, seven of them are of a company called Sportief Paaldansen and the company Pole Fitness has around forty franchise takers. Popularity of pole dance has increased as awareness of the physical and mental benefits have become more known. Many fitness and health websites are claiming pole dance will be the new trend in fitness: “Pole dance is a workout that tones your entire body; it increases core and general body strength by using the body itself as resistance. Furthermore it trains flexibility in your shoulders, back and legs and is training endurance as you are able to stay on the pole for a longer period of time. Therefore pole dance is a very versatile exercise.” (Fitness Tips, 2014).

As the sport evolved, the competitive aspect of pole dancing did too. Worldwide there are many kinds of pole dance competitions and even in the Netherlands various competitions are organized. There are the pole dance battles that are performed in clubs such as the Rouge in Eindhoven (Rouge Eindhoven, 2015), but also other local competitions like Beat Gravity (Sportvision, 2014). As the sport is growing, so are the competitions. There are now Student Championships, Pole Art Championships and even National Championships, which allow you (if performed in top three) to participate in the World Championship of Pole Dance. (NKPaaldansen, 2014). However, the final goal of the pole dance community is to have it recognized officially by being able to participate in the most important kind of competitions: the Olympics (PoleSports, 2015).
Why has popularity of pole dance increased so much in the past five years?

As mentioned earlier, pole dancing in the Netherlands has grown a lot in the past five years. The offer of pole dance classes has increased from 50 in 2010 to 110 in 2015. To be able to explain this growth, and to determine whether it is just a trend or a long-term change it is important to take the current zeitgeist in account. What is happening in our society that is causing the popularity of pole dance to grow?

What defines our current zeitgeist?

When observing social trends in Western society, focusing on the Netherlands, I spotted two aspects that are significant in defining our current zeitgeist: The first is about being healthy, the second about being an individual.

Being healthy is more important nowadays than it has ever been before. This can be seen in the amount of food and lifestyle blogs on the internet, the interest in so-called ‘superfoods’, the intensity of practicing sports, etc. More importantly, it can be measured by looking at consumer behavior and the success of health promoting companies. Bio supermarkets in the Netherlands (Ekoplaza, Marqt, Estafette) have shown significant growth over the past 5 years. Marqt increased their turnover from 10 million to 50 million by expanding from 2 to 10 stores. Ekoplaza went from 3 stores in 2010 to 70 in 2014. Overall the amount of bio supermarkets in the Netherlands grew from 72 to 133 (NRCQ, 2015). At the same time the amount of bio products in regular supermarkets grew as well. In 2014 the turnover of bio products grew with 5%. The turnover of other products grew only 0.3% (Trouw, 2015).

According to Trouw (2015) “Ekoplaza bindt de strijd aan met Marqt”, the modern day consumer is aware of the fact that the food systeem as we knew it is not one that can last. Besides supermarkets also de Tuinen, a Dutch company focusing on (wellness)products, sustainability and service, grew exponentially the last 5 years (GRAYDON (2014)). In 2010 the company had 71 stores across the Netherlands, in 2015 it had broadened to 150. Furthermore de Tuinen has plans to expand with 100 more stores in the next three years (de Tuinen, 2015). According to Colinda Hoegge, director of de Tuinen, their growth can be explained due to the fact that their company formula fits perfectly with the current social trends of being healthy, honest products, and quality of life.

On the other hand companies like Coca-Cola and McDonalds, which used to be the ultimate symbol of freedom and progression are having a hard time making a profit at all. During the year 2015 both McDonalds and Coca-Cola had disappointing sales. For the fourth time in a row McDonalds had to present a decrease in their quarterly numbers: a minus of 7 percent compared to 2013. Coca-Cola had a decrease in sales as well; 17% less compared to 2013 (Trouw, 2015). Both companies are investing in marketing campaigns to make their company look healthier (AGRI-PRESS Benelux, 2015), but the consumer does not seem to believe it anymore. “The trend of wanting to consume healthier is clearly visible”, states Particia Schutte of the Dutch Nutrition Centre (Het Voedingscentrum). The foundation researched the Dutch eating pattern in 2011. “From this research it became clear that both young & older people want to eat less salt, sugar and fat, and are willing to pay more for that.”

Furthermore, when it comes to actively practicing sports; currently nine million people in the Netherlands are actively (more than once a week) participating in any kind of sports. This is an increase of twenty-nine percent compared to 2014 (NOC NSF, 2015). Being healthy by actively practicing sports is getting more important in our lives. Fashion brands like H&M, Bershka, Mango, ONLY, Coolcat and WE are cleverly adding sportswear collection to their portfolio (Fashionunited, 2014). Being active is slowly being integrated in our daily lives, but also in our society. Marije de Vries, sports expert for VROUW magazine, points out developments on Instagram and Facebook, which are slowly being filled with ‘fitspiration’, ‘health bloggers’ and ‘fitgirls’. “This takes form in inspirational quotes and ‘before and after’ pictures of the progress one’s body has made.” Even the ideal female figure is changing from thin and skinny to fit and muscular, with a six-pack as final goal (Vrouw magazine, 2015).
The next aspect that defines our current zeitgeist is about the struggle to define yourself by being an individual within a social community. Dorien Pessers, a Dutch lawyer and columnist for various esteemed newspapers, refers to this “personality cultus” as a desire for authenticity, honesty, recognition of your personal identity and the revolution of the feeling. In her book Big Mother (2013) she comes to the following conclusion: "The emancipated individual has freed itself from the norms that are imposed by the community, faith, tradition or by the state. Instead, the individual is looking for an authentic, personal morality and makes his own moral judgments. In line with this personal morality is the right to self-determination. Every human being has the right to his personal life to your own preference and moral freedom to organize.” What Pessers is pointing out here is a counter movement against the community focused society that used to be leading for decades, also in the Netherlands. Because of the expectations society, faith or tradition has of people, and because these expectations are getting higher and higher, it is getting hard to live up to them. The generation Y, born after 1980, is a generation that is focused on success. The ideal life is one where you are beautiful, in perfect relationship, successful in your career (preferably already at 25 years old) and simply happy. Because this current generation is media aware they get confronted with this ideal image via various channels. If your own life does not look like that it results in disappointments and low self-esteem. In worst case scenario’s they could get a burn out (NU, 2013). Thuisarts.nl (2016) mentions: “Sometimes people expect too much of themselves and it can happen to anybody. Most frequently it happens to young adults, hard workers and people who find it hard to say ‘no’.”

Also Barbara Martens, Founder of Gingerhood Coachmasters, a company helping people with a burn out, says “More and more people are getting a burn out because they can’t live up to their expectations”. CBS reported already in 2012 that 900,000 people in the Netherlands were suffering from burn out related symptoms. For many of them a burn out is a signal, to change the way you are living and prioritize your life again (NOS Nieuwsuur, 2015).

Another example of this counter movement is the growing popularity of yoga and mindfulness. “In our extremely stressful world, how often do we actually take the time to turn everything around us off and just focus on ‘us’. No to-do lists, no work, no kids’ sports, no what do I cook for supper, etc.: it’s just all about me!!” Donna Cotnam, writer for the daily observer, explains the growing popularity of yoga and mindfulness by explaining that it is time to start thinking about your own well-being. Being healthy has to do with both physical and mental well-being. Yoga allows you to turn everything else off and just focus on YOU. Additionally, other sports that allow you to do that have gained in popularity in the last couple of years as well. At the moment the most practiced sports are hiking, running, swimming, yoga and bike sports (NOC NSF, 2015). All of these sports are sports that allow you to focus on your personal achievements, whether it is measured in distances, in speed, in positions and flexibility, or not even measured at all, whatever you did, you did that solely for you. Also, all those sports have in common that they do not necessarily require fancy equipment, or a subscription to a gym. They can be performed in a social activity if you want to, but also by yourself if you feel like being alone.

How does this explain the popularity of pole dance? When taking both of these aspects into consideration it makes sense that pole dancing is gaining popularity. Pole dancing is well known for its health benefits, both mental and physical. You get to celebrate your own achievements once you have accomplished a certain move, but besides that it is also a sport that can be performed both in class (a social environment) or in the comfort of your own home by simply buying a pole yourself. From my survey I discovered that people were tired of attending a gym. The workouts there were boring and gyms were always crowded. They said that they started pole dancing because they were simply curious, it seemed fun, or they were dragged by a friend/family member. Every single one of them kept pole dancing because of the feeling it gave them: the feeling that you just did something you never thought you’d be capable of doing.
What binds the pole dance community?

To understand the pole dance community better and find out what binds them, what makes them a community, I researched what the core aspects of pole dancing mindset are. First I’ve been observing my own pole dance classes and collecting observations of behaviour on Facebook. This helped me to formulate my questions for the survey and research the particular values in literature. I’ve discovered there are four main aspects that all pole dancers seem to acknowledge as important for the sport, although especially sexiness still gets debated on a lot.

Sexiness
Although debated a lot sexiness is an aspect that cannot be ignored when it comes to pole dancing. Before pole dancing was known for its sportive benefits it came down to an erotic dance on a pole. The question whether or not this aspect should be celebrated is still not answered. One pole dancer tries to distance herself from the sexiness part because it could be more difficult for the outside world to accept. Other pole dancers are proud to use their sexiness and femininity in their pole movements and outfits en say it gives their confidence an even bigger boost. From the survey I was able to conclude that even though not every pole dancer considers themselves a sexy pole dancer, sexiness does play an important role, as one respondent mentions: “I think it (sexuality) empowers women. I used to teach beginners and I could literally see their confidence as a woman grow with every class.”

Strength (being Strong)
I’ve noticed that strength is an important part of pole dancing to basically each pole dancer. In this case strength is meant both physically as it is mentally. At first being strong is not considered a goal itself. Once a pole dancers starts seeing definition and realizes how strong he/she actually is, it becomes almost an addiction to get even stronger. This strength is something that makes you proud. It is a power in your body that only few others share with you. This is a topic often shared on memes and motivational. It results in a strong mind too, because you feel good about yourself.

Selfesteem
Confidence is actually needed to train certain moves and to perform on stage barely wearing anything (Whitehead and Kurz, 2009). High selfesteem and increase of confidence are basically the most mentioned advantages of pole dancing in the survey. Being confident about your body is however a contradictory element in the pole dance community. As on the one hand pole dancing is makes you proud of your body because it is capable of, not what it looks like. On the other hand many pole dancers celebrate their weight loss and the transformation their body has made. In both cases however, pole dancers are happy with their figure, which results in high selfesteem.

Support
If there’s one thing that can be said about the pole dance community it is that it is very supportive of their fellow polers. New pole dancers are warmly welcomed and helped by the more experienced ones. When the most basic moves are hard to master it can make you want to quit. The experienced pole dancers are very open about their process and how they weren’t able to do those moves after many attempts. This causes ‘newbies’ to feel comfortable around the advanced pole dancers instead of threatened. Feeling comfortable with your fellow pole dancers is necessary due to the aspect of ‘spotting’. Spotting is basically helping a pole dancer with a certain move and making sure he/she doesn’t end up hurt. Some moves can be quite dangerous to try and having a spotter makes it a little easier. As you can imagine, it is necessary to trust the spotter completely, as that person might be holding you upside down on your waist when you tend to loose grip. This supportive aspect is not only shown during class, it is also a phenomenon on Facebook. Many pole dancers turn to their online pole dancing community for advice or just to share their happiness about an accomplishment. Pole dancers are happy to respond with all their tips and are generous with compliments. Whether it is about the correct shoe size, or how to master a certain move, pole dancers are happy to help.
What binds the pole dance community? How do pole dancers express themselves?

It might be suggestive to put pole dancing in the context of a lifestyle, but whilst orientating on the phenomenon I came across certain behaviour and certain ways of expressing oneself that I didn’t know from any other sports. In a way it seems that pole dancing gets incorporated with the rest of your life, with the things you do and the way you look. There are many examples of pole dancers who became instructors, or opened up a studio, actually most pole dance companies are founded by pole dancers. Besides professionally engaging in the pole dance community, there are others ways to show the outside world that you are part of an active movement that you are proud of. An example is by drawing little pole dancing figures on your nails. While browsing Facebook, Pinterest and Instagram I often came across small paintings of pole dancing figures drawn on pole dancers’ nails. Other noticeable findings I’ve listed below.

Ink
If the nails aren’t permanent enough for you it is also very common to capture your pole dance love on your body forever. On these various social media channels there is a noticeable connection between pole dancers and tattoos. The next step would be to have tattoos about pole dancing, or even a tattoo of you poledancing. I believe this also has to do with the aspect of being proud of your accomplishments of your body and you want to be remembered of that. I’ve been trying to look for other sports where their enthusiasts are engaged this much that they want to have the actual activity tattooed on their body and was only able to find ballet dancers. Of course there are football enthusiasts who have a tattoo, but most often it is not a tattoo of themselves practising the sport, nor of an illustration of a football player. When it is done in another sport most often it is the name of a club or the face of a specific football player they admire, not a general image of the sport itself being practised. To me this shows what pole dancing does to you, how it engages you and becomes part of your life. For these pole dancers it is not merely a hobby, it is a part of their life, forever.

Bruises
Any pole dancer can tell you from experience that pole dancing bruises you. Your body is not used to being pressed against something that tight which causes your body to bruise, frequently. In the pole dance community this is a common phenomenon and those bruises are called “pole kisses”. Instead of feeling hurt, or embarrassed about your body looking all blue, these pole kisses are celebrated. Somehow pole kisses are almost considered like trophies for accomplishing something new. These bruises seem to have a figurative meaning as well. It means something like: “you can handle pain, you are strong and you survived”.

Pleasers
There seems to be a long-term relationship between pole dancers and pleasers. This brand is the leader in sexy footwear for strippers, pole dancers, or even evening wear. The popularity of Pleasers is enormous. This brand is sold in almost 70 countries, they have developed 8 subbrands and their headquarters is a 200,000 square feet building. In 12 years time they developed themselves from an importer and distributor of urban footwear to the enormous specialty footwear powerhouse it is now. According to Anna Frost (a pole dancer and Facebook fan of this brand) “They are so comfy, they look amazing, and they make the best noises when you smash them together. They are the best shoes in the world.” According to the results from the survey, these heels make you feel sexy, make your legs look longer and they are comfortable as they are very light. Some mentioned that the popularity of this brand probably also has to do with the pole dancing heritage in strip clubs. The first pole dance classes were given on high heels. Only later once the sports aspect got more developed, the shoes came off. Nowadays it is not obliged to wear high heels anymore, pole dancers choose to wear high heels themselves. Due to Pleasers and its popularity I’m convinced that sexuality still plays an important part in the pole dancing activity. Pleasers are another method to feel good about yourself, to raise your selfesteem and be happy with what you look like.
Social media
For pole dancers social media is extremely important. As the sport is relatively new it is very unlikely that you physically get to interact with pole dancers on a regular basis, besides within your own studio. Social media made it easier for pole dancers to interact and learn from each other. I’ve been analysing what kind of posts are shared most often, but this also leaded me to the actual reason why social media is so important to pole dancers. From my survey I’ve discovered that there are three main reasons. First of all, trying to find connection; people who understand what you are doing, how proud you are, etc. But also trying to find connection to be able to ask questions. As mentioned before, the pole dance community is a helpful community. All pole dancers know how hard the first invert was, or how it feels to ‘nail a nemesis move’. Social media brings pole dancers together.

Another reason why social media is used frequently is for expressing you’re proud. Besides validation from the pole dance community it also very flattering to have your regular friends be impressed by what you do. Somewhere Facebook is based upon getting acknowledgement from others, having others to like what you do, or what you are capable of. Being able to conquer a certain move feels terrific, but getting appreciation of others and getting likes for it feels even better. Out of the respondents only 16 percent had never posted anything on social media about themselves while pole dancing. Main reason given was that they don’t like to post anything at all actually, they’re on social media passively. Of the respondents who did post something on social media, 60 percent mentioned they felt so good afterwards, and none of them felt less.

Finally, last reason for being active on social media is because all pole dancers are in a way fighting for the acknowledgement of the sport. By sharing your pictures and video’s the word is spread that pole dancing is out there, that it is amazing, and that you can practise it nearby. Every pole dancer is an ambassador of the sport. The more pole dancing is shared, the more publicity it gets, the more chance it will grow as a sport and maybe someday get recognized as an Olympic sport too.

Celebrities
As in most sports the pole dance community has some well known pole dancers that others admire, follow on social media and see as an example. These celebrities mostly have won big championships or are known for a specific move that they came up with. As in other industries these pole dancers have either instruction dvd’s coming out, their own pole dance wear collection, as well as other fan ware like accessories or posters. What distinguishes pole dance celebrities from other famous sports(wo)men, is that pole dancers tour around the world giving workshops to anyone who wants to, and for a reasonable price too. Their workshops are always divided in certain categories, such as beginner, intermediate and advanced pole dancers, so that everyone can join in. Furthermore all over the world pole dance camps are being organized where famous pole dancers come together and each of them gives workshops based on their signature moves. As a pole dancers fan you get to meet these dancers, train with them, eat with them and even party with them. This is a very personale way to interact with your fans and at the same time spreads the love for pole dancing. Furthermore, these pole dancers have become such well known icons, (70% of respondents was able to name famous pole dancers, and almost 90% claims to follow pole dancers on social media), that businesses are now using these celebrities to promote their product. Mighty grip (magnesium used to climb the pole without getting sweaty heands) is promoted by Hanka Venselaar (Dutch multiple pole dance champion), Lisette Krol and Terry Fierce (both UK) are always wearing outfits of the Czech pole wear brand Dragonfly, and the local Yvonne Smink, 2 times Dutch Champion, never has to buy pole dance wear again as she is being sponsored by the Greek brand RAD.

Slowly pole dancers are becoming their own brand and their own business, through the workshops they can promote themself and because they are loved they also get to promote certain products. These pole dancers are trustworthy, personal, believable. That’s why this method is very succesful, and being applied more and more around social media.
What distinguishes pole wear from any kind of sportswear is the fact that pole dancers move and position themselves in various ways that no kind of other sportswear is prepared for. When designing this it is also very important to keep in mind that different kinds of body types should be able to wear it. Most pole wear brands performed extensive research before launching their brand in to the world. This research was focused on two important pillars of fashion technology: Shape and Materials. I’ll explain these aspects in relation to the pole dance requirements, because these two aspects are what distinguishes pole workout wear from any other workout brand available.

**Shape**

Most pole dancers wear a sports bra and a short to their training sessions. (Survey, 2015). The shapes of these items are of upmost importance to guarantee a comfortable workout. First of all, I know from my own experience as a pole dancer that you need to be able to grip to the pole with your skin. It is best if the shorts are indeed really short to allow you to grip the pole with your inside upper leg or even your butt. Holding moves with your armpit or upper body are common as well, which means it is preferred to wear a sleeveless crop top, with least possible fabric, but it still should be able to offer support. Also, for a specific move called: the shoulder mount, it is needed to grip the pole with your shoulder and pull yourself up into an inversion. For these moves it is preferred to have really thin (or even no straps). Furthermore pole dancing clothes should take into account inversions and sideways momentum. This means the outfit should be able to stay in place once you hang upside down, spread your legs or move quickly. Furthermore pole dance wear should be designed to fit all shapes and sizes: “We also focus on specific problem areas and unique issues. For example, many pole dancers have extremely developed lats or they are petite with extremely well developed muscles, or they are full figured.” mentions Trisha Stone (Bad kitty Pole Wear) on their website. The most irritating thing (according to the survey) was: needing to re-arrange your outfit continuously.

**Materials**

The materials used for pole wear need to meet some specific requirements as well. When researching which materials would be suitable it is important to keep in mind how the products will be used; moisture from perspiration affects grip and creates slippage, the fabric should be able to stretch & bounce back really well. Furthermore the placement of seams, the method of sewing, the thread used, the use of elastic, and the stitching techniques are all very important to deliver the right product, that is both supporting but also comfortable to wear.

To be able to offer the proper support it is best if the material is firm and solid, on the other hand it should be thin and soft so it doesn’t limit you in your moves. Because of the perspiration caused by a sweaty workout the fabric can become see-through, of course this shouldn’t happen. Also, the fabric should be able to dry quickly. Garments should be tight, because loose fabric can get in the way of a move or grip.

Besides looking at the way the product will be used, the way it will be cared for is also important to take in regard. The fabric will be washed regularly. This means it should have great colorfastness to washing, and really good shape retention. Durability cannot be compromised so elasticity cannot get less over a certain period of time. Most pole wear brands use lycra for their collection. India Bohanna of Indi Pole Wear explains on her website: “LYCRA® fabrics are colorfast, highly durable, and resistant to salt water, chlorine and UV damage. At the same time the fabric has an exceptionally soft feel, draws away sweat, and won’t lose its shape. LYCRA® is of a higher quality than other stretch fabrics such as spandex or elastane.” The brand Dragonfly also uses lycra, but additionally also uses a top quality micro-polyamide fabric with a “peach-fuzz” finish on the inner side. This material is actually of a higher quality than other stretch fabrics such as spandex or elastane.”
What do pole dancers wear?

To determine the specific needs of the pole dance community in the Netherlands, I was able to use the answers of the survey I’ve conducted. I’ve used only the answers of the Dutch respondents since only these are of value for a Dutch Pole Fashion Business.

First, I was able to conclude that in general all Dutch pole dancers wear a Crop top/sports bra with shorts to their training, often wearing leg warmers, a tank top and sometimes long trousers at the start of their workout, but those are getting off during class. Secondly, I had to determine what kind of sportswear. One sports bra isn’t the same as the other, so what choices do pole dancers make before they purchase their outfit? What do pole dancers find most important of their sportswear? The most given answer to this question was that the clothing they wear must be covering during a move and stay in place (52%). The other most mentioned answers to determine a purchase were comfort (45%), ability to grip (38%), pretty (28%) and flattering/not make you look fat (21%). Knowing the things that are important to pole dancers I’m interested to know where they are purchased. A sports bra can be bought from a pole wear brand, but also from sports brands or lately even fashion brands, that offer sportswear. I’ve learned that the most bought fashion brand for pole dancing is H&M. This brand is ok for purchasing sport bra’s, but not for shorts. The shorts they offer are not short enough, which do not allow you to grip properly. I’ve asked around in my own studio and found out that H&M is mostly bought by new pole dancers because it is accessible and cheap. Once a pole dancer gets more experienced the H&M sports bras aren’t suitable anymore, because they don’t give proper support during inversions. Also, because the shorts are not suitable it is not possible to buy a matching set, which is desirable. Sportswear brands like Nike, Adidas or Puma are technically better suitable for sports bras than H&M, but since the price is often even higher than pole wear majority of pole dancers prefers to buy pole wear brands instead (60%, Survey, 2015). Also, pole dancers cannot buy shorts here meeting their desires.

What is the current demand in the Netherlands?

So, if majority of pole dancers in the Netherlands prefers to buy pole wear brands: which brands are most favorite, and why these brands? I was present at the Dutch Pole Art Championship and learned by talking to all these pole dancers which brands they prefer, how they shop and how they prefer to shop. Luckily, I was able to draw the same conclusion from the answers of the survey. The most bought brands are Bad kitty (USA), Dragonfly (Czech Republic), RAD (Greece) and Mika (USA). Each of these brands has their own USP, therefore I will explain each brand and their popularity separately in the next chapter.

Most Dutch pole dancers buy pole wear via diverse channels. Most often the clothing was purchased via the brands own web shop (65%). This option results in high shipping cost, import duties and a long waiting time. You are limited to the items of this brand and can’t compare with other brands. Furthermore, if you happen to shop the wrong size it is a hazard to send it back and order a new size. The second mentioned option is by purchasing from a web shop selling several brands (50%). The advantage is that you’re able to buy from several brands in one purchase, so you have more options. The disadvantage is that web shops in the Netherlands are limited, so pole dancers still have to order from abroad. All earlier mentioned disadvantages concerning shipping cost, etc. also apply here. Another option to buy pole wear is when your pole dance studio is a reseller (26%). This has advantages for the students, since they are able to see, feel and even fit the product before buying it. Unfortunately, the pole dancers are limited to the options the studio purchases and most studio owners are not eager to start this up since it is a totally different business than giving dance classes. Furthermore their customers are mainly their students, which means their clientele is limited. The final option mentioned is to purchase at expo’s, fairs and championships. Brands or shops can get a stand here and sell their collection. Pole dancers are able to compare and fit the collections. Unfortunately these events are only a few times per year, but still quite some pole dancers use this opportunity to buy something new (19%).
How big is the market?
As mentioned before, there are about 110 pole dance schools in the Netherlands. Each school has approximately 25-30 students (often more). A simple calculation gives an estimate of around 3000 pole dancers in the Netherlands. Since Sportief Paaldansen, a studio with 7 facilities already has over 2000 likes on their Facebook page this might not be a bad estimation. Furthermore I was able to calculate some numbers about the shopping behavior of pole dancers using the answers as given in the survey. The average times a Dutch pole dancer buys pole clothing 3.44 times per year. In a year time they spend around €110,-, which means the average amount of a purchase is around €36,-. If 3000 pole dancers are spending around €110,- a year this results in a market of approximately €330,000,- on a yearly basis. This calculation is not taking into account the fact that pole dancing is a growing sport, which means the demand could increase, as it has been doing for the past 10 years. The amount of pole dancers has increased with an average of 56.61% per year. If this progress would continue this market will be a very wise investment.
BAD KITTY offers Pole Fit, which is considered the first actual pole dancing brand in the world. They founded the company Bad Kitty Exotic Wear in 2009 as a retailer, and started the development of their own brand PoleFit along the way. They are a passionate American brand that is centered around Art, Health, Dance & Sexuality and most of all community. Their website states the following: “We realize that up until the creation of PoleFit®, pole dancers had no choice but to wear underwear, bathing suits, or general sportswear and none of these options catered properly to the sport of pole dancing. PoleFit® was created to meet the needs specific to the pole dance movement and lifestyle.” Bad Kitty offers a variety sport bra’s, shorts, leggings and monokinis. All of these are available in a wide selection of colors. Unique about this brand is that they have their own production facility adjacent to their office. Bad Kitty is the most worn brand in pole dance because it is the most established brand. This brand also has the most wholesale channels around the world and is there for the most accessible of all brands.

RAD POLE WEAR is a pole wear brand located in Greece. Their sportswear is suitable for yoga, pilates, aerial arts, running, swimming, hitting the streets or (as they put it) just laying around the house. This brand is mainly known for its stunning designs. They don’t have a basic collection like Bad Kitty does, they have single pieces and one more noticeable than the other. One design has a new and daring shape, the other has an extraordinary print, and the next design combines both. They offer sport bra’s, shorts, bikini’s, bodysuits, but also tank tops, leggings and even socks. Their production is located in Greece, as is the rest of their company. RAD pole wear really benefits from famous pole dancers supporting and promoting the brand. At the stand at the DPAC this brand was requested the most.
**Dragonfly** is a European brand, located in the Czech Republic. Their goal was “to create a stylish line of premium quality Bikram hot yoga, pole dance and fitness clothing for a reasonable price. Clothing that wouldn’t be just fashionable but also perfect in design and function.” Dragonfly is well known for its good quality materials. The fabric is very comfortable to the touch, has all the abilities required for sportswear such as: quick dry, no see-through and remaining shape and colors after washing. The fabric is very elastic but yet tight, it feels thin, but is very solid. Dragonfly offers sport bra’s, leggings, shorts and tank tops, which are all produced entirely within the European Union. Also, Dragonfly offers a selection of pole shorts for men. At the stand of the DPAC I’ve learned that Pole dancers are really happy with the materials and fine workmanship. Also, the color range of this brand is huge, which makes it ideal for your basic pole wear and easy to match with other printed items from other brands.

**Mika** is a brand that originally started as a yoga brand. But they branched out over the years and recognize their designs and fabric satisfy all workouts. This brand, like Pole Fit, also mentions the importance of movement when being barely dressed. It’s important your outfit stays comfortable and makes you feel confident. As their website says: “Mika aims to produce affordable, fresh, flattering, feminine workout wear for women all over the world. We understand the differences and uniqueness each body has and strive to produce products which will encompass all.” This American based brand offers sports bra’s and shorts, leggings, pants, swimwear, and recently even jewellery. They produce in Peru and Brasil. This brand is also preferred because of the materials and the fact that it has a really good shapes, like Dragonfly. Unfortunately this brand is located in USA and their sales points in Europe are quite limited. Therefore most Dutch pole dancers will be more likely to purchase Dragonfly for their basics.
**What do pole dancers wear?**

**What is the current offer?**

**Webshops**

When researching the feasibility of a pole dance fashion business, of course it is of upmost importance to research which options the current Dutch pole dancer already has to purchase her workout wear. As mentioned earlier the most used options of purchasing pole wear were via the own brands web shop or via a web shop selling various pole wear (brands). As I’m most interested in the feasibility to develop a web shop for pole dance brands in the Netherlands I’ve researched which Web shops are available for Dutch pole dancers.

**PAA LDANSSHOP.NL (NL)**

This web shop caters to the Dutch pole dance community best. They offer four popular pole dance brands: RAD, PoleFit, Dragonfly and Pole Candy, as well as some additional unknown brands and a small selection of costumes. In theory this company could be the main supplier of pole dance clothing in the Netherlands. Their disadvantage lies in the fact that their website looks unprofessional and does not get updated much. They are not actively marketing their web-shop (most recent post on Facebook was on July 28th) and looking at the collection they provide at their web-shop I can assume they are not selling very well. Most of these collections are dated and therefore already on sale at their own brands web-shop but are still full price at this Dutch web-shop. I’ve asked some of my pole friends why they don’t shop there and they all gave the same answer: that their size availability was limited and collection dated.

**DANSFITNESSSHOP.NL (NL)**

This web shop is offering clothing and additional products for a variety of dance styles all together. They offer clothing for fitness workouts, Zumba and pole dance, but like danspahlen.nl they also offer poles, make-up, crashmats and DVDs. They used to sell PoleFit, Mika and Pole Candy Wear, but recently only Pole Candy Wear is offered at their website, the rest is all on sale now. A new development at their website is their partnership with Pleaser (the pole foot wear brand). They offer 4 different styles. This site is great if you would like some printed tank tops or t-shirts to work out in, but not anymore for specialized pole fashion.

**PIXIE.NL (NL)**

This web shop offers dance wear in general, which could be used for pole dancing, but is not specialized in pole dancing. Pixie is their own brand name and they offer leggings, shorts, tank tops, sweat vests, anything. They don’t offer any pole wear brands which is why I don’t consider them an actual provider of pole wear. But they do sponsor a lot of pole related events and are therefore well known in the Dutch pole dance community.
EVERYTHINGPOLEDANCING.COM (UK)
This shop sells anything related to pole dancing. From poles to necklaces with pole dance pendants on them. This website also offers quite a big selection of pole dance wear, and is the biggest supplier of pleasers close to the Netherlands, however, they don’t sell any of the big pole wear brands. Their biggest disadvantage is their lack of good customer service. This web-shop is runned by one woman, and on the internet various complaints about her and her web shop can be found. The experiences of the customers really depend on her personal schedule; when she’s travelling you will probably not get responds on your email, but if she’s at home working it’s possible to receive an order within a day. This is very unpredictable and therefore she has lost many customers.

POLEJUNKIE.CO.UK (UK)
Pole Junkie is a UK based pole wear and accessories webstore selling high quality pole dancing brands from around the world. It is set up by pole dancers selling pole wear that is designed by pole dancers for pole dancers. As they put it; “you really wouldn’t want it any other way!” The founders of this web shop actually came across the same problems I did: paying a lot of money on postage and customs when purchasing your pole garments. They sell 6 pole wear brands: Bad Kitty, RAD, Tikiboo, Post09, Indi and Paradise Chick. They are practically an example of the business I would like to set up in the Netherlands.
After analyzing the pole dance community, especially the one in the Netherlands, for several weeks I can most certainly conclude that there is a market for pole dance fashion in the Netherlands.

The current social trends in Western Europe provide the ideal mindset for pole dancing as a sport to be developed further. Nowadays we want to live a healthier life (het Voedingscentrum 2015), be more active in sports (NOCNSF, 2015), we want to get fit (VrouW Magazine, 2015). H&M, Bershka, Mango and WE are cleverly joining into this movement by adding sportswear collection to their portfolio (FashionUnited, 2014). At the same time we want to realize our own happiness, our own developments, become our own personal identity instead of being something society demands us to be (Pessers 2003) which has only been leading to more stress in our lives, low self-esteem, and resulting in higher numbers of burnouts in the Netherlands ever (NOS.nl, 2015). Pole dancing is well known for its health benefits, both mental and physical. Your self-esteem tends to grow once you are able to do moves you never thought you’d be capable of doing (Fitness Tips, 2014). Furthermore, as the IPSF is determined to make this sport an Olympic sport (International Pole Sports Organization, 2015). This could result in an even bigger acceptance of the sport and most probable also even further growth.

The product pole dance wear emerged as the needs that pole dancing requires of a workout outfit were not met by established sports brands and pole dancers had to rely on their swimwear or even underwear as this was more suitable than anything else available (Bad Kitty, 2015). Pole dance wear in general is made of typical sportswear fabrics with the ability to dry quickly, stretch and offer proper support. The shape of pole dance wear must be covering at all time, but allow you to grip the pole at the same time (Dragonfly, 2015). Because these properties are specific for pole dancing, sports brands that are easy accessible like Nike, Adidas, and even H&M ultimately do not cater to their needs (Survey, 2015).

For this reason most of the pole dance wear purchased by Dutch pole dancers at the moment is bought abroad, since the offer is higher there. Unfortunately for the consumer this means they’re also spending money on high shipping cost, import duties, and there’s the risk of not liking the garments once you actually see it, or the likeliness of ordering the wrong size. Having to send garments back and ordering the correct size is hazardous even when it’s within your own country, it’s even more complicated when you have to send something abroad. Many of the respondents in the survey mentioned this as a reason not to buy specific pole wear brands. This means the accessibility of these brands is too limited. At the Dutch Pole Art Championship I was able to offer these pole dancers the possibility to try the garments on, which doesn’t seem like something special, but for pole dance clothing it really is. Around 80% of the pole dancers who bought something went home with a different size than they originally thought they would need. This supports the earlier made statement that it is very likely the wrong size will be ordered. This also means that a Dutch web shop offering the brands will not completely satisfy the needs of the Dutch pole dance community. The possibility has to be offered to buy your clothing at a physical location, to fit the clothing and to familiarize themselves with the brands. Events like the National Championships, Dutch Pole Art and the Student Championships are an ideal method to realize that. I would therefore strongly recommend being present at such events.

As can be concluded from the survey the pole dance movement has been active for about ten years and there are no signals indicating it has already reached its peek. The growth it has made the last ten years is tremendous: an average of 56% a year. As the pole dance community in the Netherlands is responsible for an average amount of 330,000 euros spend on pole dance clothing on a yearly basis, and considering the fact that pole dancing is very likely to grow even further the next coming years, I would like to conclude by stating this can be called a ‘gap in the market’ and if organized properly this could be a very lucrative business.
Literature


Image courtesy go to: Caroline Demey, Pixcel.FR Don Curry Photography Hotshotz Photography Bad Kitty Pole Wear RAD Pole Wear Dragonfly Mika Yoga Wear