Individual freedom and choice are highly valued in the Netherlands. In Dutch sexual health policies, choice is manifest in the emphasis on autonomy and the right to choose (in Dutch: *zelfbeschikking and keuzevrijheid*). Although this focus on choice promotes the value of individual freedom and sexual and reproductive rights, it also requires actors to be in control and responsible at all times. While studying the life stories young people in the Netherlands told me about their sexual experiences, I found that free choice was a problematic concept. Young people were navigating multiple desires, expectations and social norms, and combining different social identities. Moreover, the paradigm of individual responsibility obscured social structures and gendered inequalities that limited their choices. Running into trouble, for example an unintended pregnancy or sexual coercion, easily led to self-blame and feelings of guilt. This raised the question how we can rethink sexual agency beyond autonomy and include the social navigation of sexuality in our approach to young people.

In this thesis I analyse four different case studies of young people's navigation of sexuality. Based on these findings I propose a multicomponent model of sexual agency, connected to different aspects of the social context. Furthermore, I developed a model for comprehensive sexuality education, which broadens the scope of sexuality education beyond lessons in individual decision-making to developing their sexual selves by acknowledging their connectedness to others and learning to navigate different normative worlds. This thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of young people's negotiation of sexual agency, to the reduction of social judgement and stigma, and to the development of subsequent sexuality education.
Navigating a bumpy road
Marianne Cense
Navigating a bumpy road
Young people’s negotiation of sexual agency in a normative landscape

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