

Skinny White Bitches

Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising

Irina Balog



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET
HANDELSHÖGSKOLAN

For my family: Ida, Arpad and Anna

Dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, PhD.,
in Business Administration

Department of Business Administration, School of Business, Economics and Law
at University of Gothenburg, 4 September 2020

Department of Business Administration
School of Business, Economics and Law
University of Gothenburg
PO Box 610
405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden

www.fek.handels.gu.se

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GUPEA: <http://hdl.handle.net/2077/64085>

Printed in Sweden by
Repro Lorensberg, Gothenburg 2020

ABSTRACT

This is a story about female representations in contemporary advertising. Following up on Rosalind Gill's (2003; 2007; 2008) critical discussions on the shift in contemporary advertising from the *sexual object* to the *sexual subject*, this endeavour is about examining *female sexual agency* through updated versions of the midriff by including feminist consumer responses. The aim is to add to the existing literature as well as to expand our current understanding of the notion *female sexual agency*, and the perspective that has been employed is based on a Poststructuralist Feminist framework. This perspective draws on the ideas of discourse, language and subjectivity in order to understand the power structures that dominate and hinder women in order to pinpoint different prospects and strategies for changing the status quo.

The empirical material, consisting of 20 interviews with a total of 38 women divided into 9 focus groups and 11 individual interviews, was analysed using a discourse analysis as put forth by Carla Willig (2013). The critical questions were: how do feminist consumers understand and discuss *female sexual agency* portrayed in contemporary adverts? Do they experience the midriff as having any agency, power, choice and/or other such notions that are enfolded within the *female sexual agency* discourse? And lastly, what are the discourses that may be derived from the consumers' interpretations?

The analysis was divided into four chapters that all focus on one specific theme which arose during the interviews; Normativity, Freedom & Choice, Gaze and Claiming Space, all of which deal with different notions surrounding *female sexual agency* in ads. In short, the answers to the research questions are that feminist consumers interpret and understand *female sexual agency* portrayed in contemporary adverts by considering the normativity, the perceived freedom and choice, the gaze of the model as well as the ability to claim space within the image. The midriff figure, her agency and power, is then based on these four themes and how each viewer interprets their existence in any given image. When it comes to the wider discourses, the participants drew from various feminist discourses including notions of empowerment, postfeminism and second and third wave feminism, as well as from fairy tale discourses, and masculine discourses of violence and physical strength; exposing that power is still viewed as gendered.

Lastly, a model called the *Female Sexual Agency Spiral*, was developed based on the results, which, in a poststructuralist spirit, showcases that meanings are perpetually shifting and never static, that there always exists both ambiguity and tension, that dichotomies such as feminine vs. masculine need to be re-thought, and that there indeed is no general truth regarding *female sexual agency*.

Keywords: *Female sexual agency, Advertising, Feminist theory, Empowerment, Midriff, Sexual Subjectification, Normativity, Claiming space, Male gaze, Discourse*

EPIPHANY AND GRATITUDE

It was almost ten years ago now since I happened upon a video on YouTube that would forever change my life. This video was a clip from Jean Kilbourne's documentary series *Killing us Softly*, and in the video, I saw Jean giving a brilliant lecture on the skewed, sexist, pornographic and often violent ways that women were, and are still, portrayed in advertising. I could feel it boiling and bubbling inside of me, a spark was lit. A spark that since has become a roaring, blazing fire. I knew from the moment the video was over that this is what I want to dedicate my life to. I knew that, even though I at the time had recently finished a bachelor degree in film studies, I had to go back to Uni and begin researching this topic within Marketing; and so I did. Jean, wherever you are, I will forever be thankful for your dedication and work, for without it, I would not be where I am today and this book would have never been written.

After I finished my second bachelor in Marketing with my study on Sexist Advertising, my then and current supervisor, Peter Zackariasson asked me, or rather prompted me, to pursue a doctorate position and keep researching this topic that I was clearly still passionate about. Peter, I can't thank you enough for believing in me, supporting me and pushing me all these years; you are one of the main reasons this book exists. From the endless bottom of my heart, Thank you.

Lena Hansson, my secondary supervisor, I am so glad and thankful that you have been a part of this journey with me. For all your positive, thoughtful and valuable support, feedback and push, I greatly and truly Thank you.

Andy Prothero, as my opponent at the final internal seminar, I am forever grateful for your precious and on-point thoughts and feedback. Your encouragement gave me the final push and inspiration to see this through as best as I possibly could. Forever and always, Thank you kindly.

To the faculty at Handels, especially in the department of Business Administration, thank you for the chance and opportunity of a lifetime, particularly Stefan Sjögren, Lena Mossberg, Johan Hagberg, Ulla Eriksson-Zetterquist, Cecilia Solér, Kajsa Lundh and Emma Fröjd – Thank you all for your help and support. Additionally, I also want to thank all of you who made my trip to Grez-sur-Loing in 2019 possible. Thank you so much for giving me the privilege of spending 7 of the best weeks of my life surrounded by the woods, lakes and old ruins, allowing me to recharge my batteries and experience significant epiphanies pertaining to my thesis.

To my colleagues and fellow PhD students both at Handels and abroad who I've had the pleasure of meeting during this journey, in particular (but not limited to!) Hanna Borgblad, Anna Grzelec, Robin Bankel, Misty Rawls, Ileyha Dagalp, Anuja Pradhan, Varala Maraj, Jonathan David, Sarah Strange, Hannu Tikkanen, Denny Way, Karen Scott, Carly Drake, Veronica Kadomsky, Abigail Jean, Marian Makkar, Lez Ecima Trujillo Torres, Insa Wemheuer, Christian Eichert and many

more; Thank you for all the writing bubbles, theoretical as well as absurd discussions, all the laughter, all the inside jokes (*Daniels, you know who you are!*), for all the ugly-dances, drinks and dinners, all the comradeships and support. Seriously, Thank you PhD peeps.

A special thanks also to all the faculty and brilliant academics at various universities around the world who I've had the honour of meeting, who have provided me with their thoughts and feedback at various courses and conferences; Lauren Gurrieri, Pauline Maclaran, Wendy Hein, Ann-Marie Kennedy, Olga Kravets, Susan Dobscha, Jenna Drenten, Shelagh Ferguson and so many many more. The world needs your hard work and insights, Thank you.

I cannot even begin to thank all of my lovely participants enough for agreeing to be interviewed, for sharing your thoughts, feelings, frustration and imagination. Thank you forever and more, for all your invaluable words, insights, as well as your laughter and sincerity. You are all my muses, Thank you.

To my dear and lovely friends who have supported and cheered me on during these past five years, thank you so darn much. To name a few: Linda Svensson, Charlotte Nystrand, Jonatan Thomasson, Camilla Tornberg, Madeleine Andersson, Ruth Mussie, Shadi Shafiee, Elina Kronkvist, Victoria Carlsson, Anders Lagerfors, Tobias Jobring, Kristoffer Örnefeldt, Madeleine Larsson, Luke Goodwin, Patrik Forsell, Mike Stoen, Lotta Notfjäll, Sam Keshavarzi, Amanda Milstam, Klara Ekdahl Warane, Claes Jelinek, David Orebäck, Robert Månsby, Jonna Svensson, Kristina Berndtsson, and all of you who I've regrettably missed, Thank you so much for your precious friendships, pep talks and encouragements.

Last, but definitely not least, to my family: My mom Ida, dad Arpad and sister Anna, where would I be without you? Without my mom's willpower, ambition and never-ending encouragement, without my dad's practical sense, weird yet hilarious humour and constant support, without my sister's bravery, inspirational self-esteem and sisterly bond, I would be completely and utterly lost.

Thank you always, I love you more than anything.

Sincerely,
Irina Balog

Gothenburg
May 2020

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Preface

Let me tell you a story.

As many stories go, this one is full of intrigue, sex, violence, power, money, degradation, humanity, and perhaps, even hope. It is a story about a category of people who have been cast aside as “less than”, who have been objectified, misrepresented and exploited for the pleasure of others. This particular category of people is generally called *women*, and even though they make up approximately half of the world’s population, they are still referred to, still depicted as, a minority, a second sex citizen. This may seem very strange, but as the story unfolds, it will seem less so.

The category of *women* is an interesting category of people to regard, seeing as they have, for so long, been kept out of the spotlights that matter, while at the same time being put on display for hungry eyes to gaze and gawk at. To many, they are a mystery. When they show their emotions, they are being hysterical. When they are assertive, they are bitches. When they menstruate, they are disgusting. When they cry rape, they clearly asked for it, cause we all know that “no” doesn’t always mean No. Especially not when lace panties are involved.¹ Their teeny tiny brains are not capable of logics, math or science of any sort, only shoe-shopping and make-up. They do not belong out in the “real world”; it’s too dangerous, thus better to keep them at home where nothing can go wrong.

Yet still, this particular category of people has throughout history been asking, fighting, bitching and moaning, for their freedom, to be liberated, to have their agency and rule over their own bodies themselves. How silly of them.

Dear reader, if you have not picked up on the sarcasm and frustration yet, you might want to brace yourself. This is going to be a bumpy ride.

Prologue

Once upon a time there was an advertisement with the words: “*I take what I want in #mycalvins*” printed on it. These words sounded rather empowering at first glance: taking control of one’s own life, feeling confident in one’s clothes. But alas, these words were also accompanied by an image. This image illustrated a young Caucasian woman, with long flowing bright hair, sitting on a bed with her legs spread, wearing only jeans and a bra, leaning forward while squeezing her rather large breasts together with one arm and *seemingly* taking a selfie i.e. the ad photo itself, with the other. A question thus arose in the mind of your humble narrator: Does this inspire a real sense of (em)power(ment) and agency?

This particular ad by Calvin Klein was part of a larger international campaign that could be seen in, among other places, subway stations in Stockholm, Sweden in the summer of 2016 (see image 1. below), and it was just one of many similar ads that seemed to portray the same kind of idea: *Women plus sex equals empowerment*. This equation though, is not as simple as it may look. The notion of women’s sexual power has according to David Machin and Joanna Thornborrow (2006, 174), been coupled with a “western consumerist lifestyle ideology by placing it within a fictional lifestyle space with an emphasis on display and performance”. Thus, they claimed that the agency being represented by women having and actively pursuing their sexual desires is not necessarily compatible with the “real world” but instead can be signified through consumer choices and products. For instance, a pair of Calvin Klein jeans. Therefore, according to the authors, women’s issues of freedom and choices are interconnected with the signifiers of sexuality and lifestyle, but they are not connected with the socio-political realities of their lives: “If women are primarily represented as acting on the world, around the world, through their sexuality, then ultimately this is disempowerment, not freedom” (Machin and Thornborrow 2006, 174).

Following up on Rosalind Gill’s (2003; 2007; 2008) critical discussions on the trend in contemporary advertising that targets female consumers by promoting products using a discourse of empowerment (or *power femininity* as

Michelle Lazar (2006) addressed it) and *female sexual agency*, this doctoral thesis, or story as it will henceforth be called, is about examining *female sexual agency* through updated versions of the midriff (the midriff figure as described by Gill (2008) is a young, attractive and sexually active woman who is always up for it, more on the midriff later on in this story) by including feminist consumer responses. Thus, *female sexual agency* as a discourse mediated through advertising is at the core of this story. The ads that have been selected for examination belong to the (post)feminist era; a discourse where advertisers have learned and incorporated the feminist signs of the time, such as integrating features of liberal social changes in their ads and adapting feminist critique towards sexism (Lazar 2006).



Image 1: Calvin Klein ad on a subway station in Stockholm, Sweden.
Photo borrowed from Reklamera's Facebook group.

In this postfeminist era, it certainly does seem as if women may be empowered by everything they do, as an article in the satirical news journal *The Onion* (2003) so poignantly claimed: "From what she eats for breakfast to the way she cleans her home, today's woman lives in a state of near-constant empowerment"² Advertising sure would like female consumers to believe that they may be empowered simply by purchasing the advertised products (*because*

we're worth it ladies!). In fact, as Gill (2008, 36) claimed, such advertising has basically become standard within postfeminist societies where “women are invited to purchase everything from bras to coffee as signs of their power and independence (from men).” However, if everything women do is empowering, is anything empowering anymore? Does the word not eventually lose its meaning amidst these trivial usages? Regardless of the vast incorporation of empowerment as a selling point, the focus here lies on a specific usage and type of empowerment found within contemporary advertising: *female sexual agency*.

The advertised notion of *female sexual agency* and idea that women may gain power through their sexuality involves certain assumptions that should be questioned. For instance, it implies an idea that sexuality may provide agency for women and thus in some sense also empowerment; as far as having agency requires empowerment at some level. What it does not imply is any critical objections towards the use of sexuality for purposes other than sex. In other words, exploiting one’s sexuality to gain power, agency, empowerment or any such notion that various forms of feminism revolves around, is unchallenged and seemingly without any consequences in these types of ads; as if any woman may simply use her sexuality to gain something without any repercussions what so ever. This idea also assumes that sexual power is “freely available” for all women to enact or consume, as if they inertly had an “on-switch” for unleashing their female sexual agential powers. The latter has already been questioned by Gill (2003, 2007) who pointed out that such ads exclude women who do not fit the ideal beauty standards found in this “sexy power discourse”, i.e. women who are bigger, older, disabled or in some way outside of the idealised norm.

Related to the pornification of culture as addressed by Pauline MacLaran (2015), the sexualisation of commodities has been brought forth by, among others, Gill (2003; 2008) who argued that a shift has occurred in advertising: Instead of the passive *sex objects* of the past, what has become more and more popular in contemporary advertising is the *sex subject*. Thus, the phenomenon of *female sexual agency* is part of a shift away from *sexual objectification* to *sexual subjectification*, with knowing subjects who “freely” choose to objectify themselves. Gill (2008, 53) concluded: “To enable a full assessment of the meaning of this shift, research with female viewers/audiences is necessary to ascertain the kind of sense that different women make of these various depictions.” Thus, there are missing links here, or gaps, between these “updated” versions of female representation in advertising, and how they are received, understood and interpreted by the consumers that they are intended for. Therefore, in this story we shall seek to examine *female sexual agency* sported by the midriff figure in contemporary advertisements by including feminist consumer responses to such ads. The responses shall then be analysed using a discourse analysis as put forth by Carla Willig (2013), in order to provide answers to the critical questions: how do feminist consumers understand and discuss *female sexual agency* portrayed in

contemporary adverts? Do they experience the midriff as having any agency, power, choice and/or other such notions that are enfolded within the *female sexual agency* discourse? And lastly, what are the discourses that may be derived from the consumers' interpretations? These are significant questions if we are to further understand the shift that has occurred in advertising these past years. The sexually active midriff of contemporary advertising may be a "new and improved" update of the *sex object*, but the interesting point to discern through the above questions is how this type of female representation is assessed in a feminist context, and what such assessments may say about the current advertising climate in relation to feminism and gender equality.

Before we begin, let's take a step back and ask: why would anyone want to tell a story about *female sexual agency* in contemporary advertising in the first place? What could possibly be so fascinating, so problematic, so intriguing with this topic? Let's put it this way: in a world where women are still, in general, perceived and treated as subordinate to men, where the gender pay gap is still over a 100 years away from being closed³, where the term *rape culture* is used to describe the toxic and threatening reality that many women live in, where images of women are still being used in sexualising ways in order to sell and make money. Well, frankly, that is not a sustainable, safe, nor particularly fair world to live in as a woman. Sexism and inequality can of course not be summed up and pinned down to a single problem with a simple solution. Sexism is an institution. It resides within norms, within structures, within our minds. It cannot be fixed easily. So how should one then go about tackling it? Perhaps, by focusing on one problem at a time. By starting to dig where one stands, in hope that others will pick up their shovels too.

As a critical marketing academic, my focus has, since starting my second bachelor 7 years ago, been on advertising and its use (*or rather, misuse*) of women, and the negative effects this may have on society as a whole. Advertising, as will be described and argued later on in this story, is not just about the art of selling; it can function as a tool for incorporating social change, as well as be viewed as an indicator of the social climate in which it is publicised. Its influence is vast, yet, oftentimes, forgotten or disregarded. Even today when strangers ask me what this story is about - and I tell them, approximately half respond with: "Yeah, but you know sex sells so what can you do?" Well, first of all, dear stranger, thank you for explaining to me that "sex sells", I had no idea! Second of all, when you get down from your high horse of certainties about things you most likely do not have a clue about and start smelling the social constructions at work, you might find that things are not always as easy as they may appear, nor as permanent or inherently "true" as you may think. There are constantly forces at work underneath the pretty façade.

I would argue, that if one wants to find out how a certain group of people are perceived within any given society (where advertising exists, of course), one

may simply look at the advertising images displayed in the public sphere. “Advertisers give us these images and create much of what we know about the world. This is particularly evident in terms of the gender roles and power relations they construct” (Warlaumont 1993, 26). Thus, when ads like the CK one above are plastered in our subway stations, we may get an idea, an inkling, as to how far we’ve actually come in the journey, the fight, towards equality. Some may say we have come a long way. I say, not good enough. The road left for us to walk is far, filled with rubble and potholes that trip up our feet, dust that diminishes our view, uncertainty, criticism, *mansplaining*, resistance, harassment, patronisation, silencing and even death threats.

This story by no means seeks to tell the one and only universal truth about female representations in advertising (*spoiler: there is none*). What it does intend to do is critically examining a phenomenon (*female sexual agency*) within a pervasive institution (advertising) by incorporating the ideological context (feminism) which the phenomenon is borrowing from, in order to broaden the understanding about the phenomenon, ascertain some possible implications this may have on society and contribute to the existing research within its field (gender advertising). Furthermore, the style in which it will do so is, as you may have gathered, not very typically academic. Rest assured, this story is based on years of research, containing philosophy, theory, method and empirical material. But instead of going along the traditional academic route, this dissertation is framed as a story. Because the road to equality is a journey, a quest. Because in order to understand *female sexual agency* in contemporary advertising, one must first understand feminism and advertising, one must follow the breadcrumbs along the path that has led up to this specific point in this specific time and place. It is framed as a story because stories are important to us, because we tell each other and ourselves stories every day. Because storytelling allows for a more colourful usage of language, which, arguably, is helpful when dealing with tough and frustrating societal issues. This is a story that is intended to provoke, to question, to be critical, and even though it is told by an *angry feminist*, it is by no means a personal story; it is not a story about me, your humble narrator, but it is a story about the world in which I reside.

Now dear reader, before we dive further into the main plot of the story, we must first have a look at some of the events that preceded it. *Female sexual agency* in contemporary advertising cannot be properly understood and analysed without first being contextualised historically, ideologically and socially. In a poststructuralist spirit, in order to understand the phenomenon of *female sexual agency* in contemporary advertising, we must also understand the systems of knowledge that have created it. Therefore, the first two chapters of this story will provide a thorough background into the two main “pillars” that have shaped it: Feminism and Advertising.

Buckle up.

CHAPTER I

Feminism, or: When women thought they could have it all

The waves of feminism

For all intents and purposes, it began with a wave: *the first wave of feminism*. This wave marked the beginning of the end of patriarchy; or at least, that was the main idea. Beginning in the 1850's, groups of women (called *Suffragettes*) gathered, plotted, disrupted and were basically pissing people off left and right in order to gain liberation and equal civil rights. The Suffragettes often organised themselves in department stores, seeing as these were socially acceptable places for women to be in without male surveillance and escort. During this time, marketing was seen as a positive tool able to assist in spreading their propaganda and gaining publicity for their movement (Scott 2005), however, as we shall see later on, the relationship between marketing and feminism would drastically change in the decades to come.

In the late 1800's and throughout the 1900's, the Suffragette movement started to bear fruit around the globe; The Isle of Man gave property-owning women the right to vote in 1881. In 1893 New Zealand (then known as the British Colony of New Zealand) granted women voting rights. In Sweden women were allowed to vote in 1919, in Britain 1918 certain women with certain qualifications could vote, before, 10 years later they received full voting rights. In the US women received voting rights in 1920, however different states had different regulations and thus in many cases the rights were restricted. In Romania, partial voting rights were gained for women in 1929, these were then extended in 1939, and lastly in 1946, full equal voting rights were granted. 1931 for Spain; 1932 for Brazil; 1944 for France; 1947 for China; 1954 for Ghana; 1960 for Bahamas; 1965 for Guatemala; 1971 for Bangladesh; 1976 for Portugal (without restrictions); 1984 for Liechtenstein; 1990 for Samoa; 1994 for South Africa (if you want to include women of all races, which we do); 1997 for Qatar; 2003 for Oman; 2006 for United Arab Emirates (although, restrictions still apply for women and men)⁴. Needless to say, voting was just one of the first steps and what followed in the second wave of the feminist movement was, obviously, more bitching and moaning.

During the 1960-80s, women became greatly inspired by feminist and anti-marketing works such as *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan (1963) and *The Female Eunuch* by Germaine Greer (1970). These texts critiqued and argued that women's bodies and desires were being manipulated to serve the patriarchal market, "especially in relation to advertising images and confining women to (subservient) domestic roles as wives and mothers" (Maclaran 2015, 1733). Due to their relentlessness (*nag, nag, nag*), the advertising industry did begin to change, ever so slowly, from the passive portrayal of women and update the depictions with more "modern" ones (*much, much more on this later...*).

What followed during the third wave in the 1990's was the blossoming of multiple feminisms and the recognition of gender, race, ethnicity, class, ability and other systems of oppression. With Judith Butler paving the way with *Gender Trouble* (1990), this poststructuralist gender theory put forth ideas regarding gender being performative; seeking to explain the relationship between the materiality of the body and discourse, as well as emphasising the instability of the binary categories of *women* and *men*, arguing instead for the fluidity of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, other notions also arose during the third wave, which was said to be embracing sexuality and viewing sex as power (Zimmerman and Dahlberg 2008).

During this time, new marketing opportunities were discovered much thanks to the feminist movement opening up for a cultural turn proclaiming identity politics and questioning the binary understanding of *women* and *men*: "Identities became bought and sold in a marketplace that increasingly promoted the 'pink pound' and female empowerment alongside a plethora of other lifestyle masculinities and femininities" (Maclaran 2015, 1733). However, the feminist project began to waver when postfeminism, that is, the idea that women, more specifically western women, had succeeded in getting all the choices that men had, and thus "won the battle" of injustice and inequality, took hold in popular culture (Munford and Waters 2014). Regardless, in recent years there has been talk about a fourth wave (Maclaran 2015), one that combines the second and the third wave with young activists using the power of the Internet to create campaigns and blogs for spreading their messages and seeking change. Some examples:

- *No more page 3*: A campaign against the notorious topless female photo on page 3 of British tabloid newspaper *The Sun*.⁵
- *The Representation Project*: A non-profit organisation bent on battling gender stereotypes in media.⁶
- *Anonsrådet*: What started as a Facebook group but which has developed into a grassroots movement, fighting sexist content on social media.⁷

The fourth wave feminists are also eager to point out the normalisation of sex in popular culture (especially within industries such as music and fashion, as well as on social media). What has been called *the pornification of culture* (Maclaran 2015,

1735-1736) illustrates how everything now is seemingly connected to sex and that the porn industry has trickled and seeped into our everyday lives:

For young people (but especially girls), there is a huge pressure to create and maintain erotic capital” ...”And, as if all the years of feminism had never happened, the Playboy bunny has made a nostalgic comeback, even appearing on a range of children’s stationery and children’s bedding.

Needless to say, these four waves of feminism may illustrate historically the focal point of certain feminists, however, it is important to note that feminism is not a single philosophy (Catterall, Maclaran & Stevens 2000). Indeed, one might instead speak of *feminisms* seeing as feminists may categorise and position themselves very differently, some examples including: *radical feminism* (e.g. Shulamith Firestone 1970; Atkinson, 2000/[1969]), *Marxist feminism* (e.g. Margaret Benston 1969; Peggy Morton 1970), *intersectional feminism* (e.g. bell hooks 1982; Kimberlé Crenshaw 1989), *liberal feminism* (e.g. Betty Friedan 1963; Naomi Wolf 1991), *poststructuralist (or postmodernist) feminism* (e.g. Judith Butler 1990; Mary Joe Frug 1992). However, what they all agree on is the fact that the category of *women* have, due to their sex, been dealt a bad hand and thus suffered various social injustices. Included in feminism is thus social criticism and action, which makes feminism a politics:

It is a politics directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in society. These power relations structure all areas of life, the family, education and welfare, the worlds of work and politics, culture and leisure. They determine who does what for whom, what we are and what we might become. (Weedon 1997, 1)

Catterall et al. (2000, 3) claimed that due to the socio-political origins of feminism, the relationship with theory and philosophy has been uneasy, with some feminists even being anti-theory: “The more feminists have engaged in social criticism, the more they have identified the inadequacies of mainstream philosophy and epistemology and developed new thought in these areas.” According to Julie Ozanne and Barbara Stern (1993), feminist research usually goes beyond merely describing, explaining or understanding a phenomenon by instead incorporating the aims of social criticism and change. Thus, feminist researchers have criticised and exposed knowledge as being gendered, seeking to redress this imbalance “by offering alternative theories and methods of creating knowledge. This involves a complete rethink of the very basis of disciplinary knowledge and, in particular, its ‘male’ perspective and gender-blindness” (Catterall et al. 2000, 4).

Seeing as how *male* has been privileged over *female* throughout both time and culture, a significant and supported reason for this may be found in philosophy; namely, how philosophers (originally male) dichotomised female and male. Going back to Plato and through to Hegel, Descartes, Marx and others, philosophers have found it useful when explaining and analysing the human condition to make use of dualisms or dichotomous categories such as reason/emotion, public/private, human/nature, mind/body and of course male/female. However, according to feminist thought, these dichotomies always privileges one of each pair over the other, and they are thought of in such a way that the latter of the two is defined in relation to the former as its opposite, and thus also its inferior: "In this way female has come to be defined by what male is not (an incomplete man) and has become associated with other linked inferior terms: emotion, body, object and so on" (Catterall et al. 2000, 4). Furthermore, even though these dichotomies have been culturally and socially created, they are often mistaken and justified as being biological or "natural".

Going back to knowledge then, feminists thus argue that seeing as male values have been privileged, these are then reflected in knowledge and knowledge production; as the dominant worldview in Academia has been traditionally male, it thus stands to reason that this gendering of knowledge is something worth exposing, discussing and rethinking. Feminist philosophy has therefore been influential within the world of Academia, highlighting and analysing this gendered sphere that which previously was assumed as "neutral".

The Self, Subjectivity and Agency

As we have seen, women have throughout history been defined as the opposite of men, or as Simone de Beauvoir (1949) claimed as the "Other". To be in such a position is to be a non-subject, a non-agent, and it is thus not surprising that women's selfhood has been diminished, belittled, cast aside and even denied in societies through customary practices, stereotypes, institutions and laws. In Western philosophy the paradigm of the self has been derived from the experiences of a primarily white, heterosexual and economically advantaged male. Individuals who have resided in this category have thus exercised economic, social and political power and dominance in various institutions such as the media, art and literature as well as academia. Feminists have therefore questioned this status quo and pointed out the self as not merely a metaphysical issue but also its social, ethical, political and epistemological overlapping. As such, the self has in feminist philosophy been approached in three main ways, by: critiquing the dominant western notions of the self, reclaiming female identities and lastly reconceptualising the self as being both a multi-layered and intersectional experience as well as a dynamic and relational individual bound by social norms and unconscious desires.

The prevailing notion in Western philosophy is that of the self as a rational, autonomous agent free to choose and act on its own accord. Within this perception

are also two slightly different views: the utilitarian *homo economicus* who with reason ranks its desires in order to discern how to maximise satisfaction, and the Kantian ethical subject who by reason wants to transcend cultural norms and unearth absolute moral truth. However, both these views minimise the ethical and personal importance of interpersonal relationships and circumstances that are not chosen. They also obscure friendship, family, love and community and instead emphasise a modern dualism that splits the social sphere into agents and their dependents. These notions of the self thus completely disregard the multitude and even fragmented foundations of social identity composed at intersections such as race, gender, class, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, ability and so on. Additionally, the complexity of the inner “world” filled with fears, hopes, dreams, desires and fantasies are also rejected. The rational self then is seemingly a subject immune to bias, ambivalence, violence, obsession, hatred and discrimination. Seeing as these notions separate the individual from biological and social forces, as well as social relationships, this decontextualized individualism as well as the perception of reason from other capabilities have led many feminist philosophers to seek alternative perspectives of the self. Feminists argue that the capacities of rationality and free choice, valuable as they are, do not function in a vacuum: there are other forces such as socio-economic, biosocial etc. that organise the multifaceted self. This acknowledgement is not about devaluing the self, but rather to emphasise and revalue its dependency and question the supposedly “free agency” of this self which tacitly relates to a male archetype.

Despite alternative narratives, it is the ones that strengthen men’s claims to superiority that have dominated on a global, cultural and historical scale. Take for instance the ancient narrative of Genesis where it was told that Eve had been created from Adam’s rib. Such notions of women being derivative from men have, like a red serpent-like thread, been tying and connecting the fabric of our misogynist heritage and existence, and therefore it cannot be undone simply by promoting equal rights for women. Seeing as the very notions of the self are gendered; mind and reason being coded as masculine, body and emotion as feminine (Irigaray 1985a; Lloyd 1992), by recognising the self with the rational mind therefore means to masculinise the self. By this logic, feminine selves are necessarily deficient, although not entirely devoid of rational will, they only resemble men and thus imitate and approximate a masculine archetype.

In Anglo-European and American law (up until well into the 19th century), the cancellation of women’s selfhood was once overtly codified by forcing a woman’s personhood to be absorbed by her husband when they married (McDonagh 1996). The wife was from then on deprived of her bodily rights; rape within marriage was previously not recognised as a crime, nor was beating your wife. Her property became his, he had control over her earnings, she had no right to vote, she was not allowed to write contracts in her name. A name that was not

even her own seeing as she had to assume her husband's surname which symbolised the denial of her own identity:

There are other ways women have been made to disappear. There is the business of naming. In some cultures women keep their names, but in most their children take the father's name, and in the English-speaking world until very recently, married women were addressed by their husbands' names, prefaced by *Mrs.* You stopped, for example, being Charlotte Brontë and became Mrs. Arthur Nicholls. Names erased a woman's genealogy and even her existence. (Solnit 2014, 66-67)

Even though it is no longer legally required for a woman to give up her maiden name in marriage, many women still do obey to this old misogynist custom and therefore preserve a gesture of self-renunciation. So thick is the web that has been spun.

Understandably, time and laws have changed, but nevertheless recent legal rulings still reflect the old-fashioned denial of women's selfhood. For instance, there are still cases where courts have forced pregnant women to undergo invasive medical procedures for the sake of the baby they are carrying (Bordo 1993); as a pregnant woman, selflessness is still her legal status. This selflessness also remains a stereotypical female trait seeing as women who are self-assertive, confident, who take a step outside of their confining norms, who are mothers but are not magnanimously devoted to their children, are more likely to be perceived and condemned as selfish (Sparks 2015). Furthermore, while currently writing this sentence, several abortion bans have flourished in the USA. In the state of Alabama, where the most restrictive law has been passed, the ban will take effect in November of 2019, thus making abortion illegal in essentially all cases (including cases of incest and rape!)⁸. Clearly, even in 2019, in modern societies, women's bodies are still not considered their own.

The gendered conceptions of the self are problematic to say the least, and they contribute to the stigmatisation of the feminine and the valorisation of the masculine. Take for instance everyday insults with feminine connotations being flung towards boys and men such as "throwing like a girl", "being a pussy", getting one's "panties in a twist" and so on and so forth. For boys and men to behave in any way that is coded as feminine and thus "like a girl" is an insult, and they are instead encourage to "be a man". While for girls and women, being boyish or incorporate male traits is rather a compliment and doing something unfeminine is commented as a surprise because "*for a girl*, you sure are good at that".

Feminists challenge the self as immune to social influences seeing as individuals are born and grow up into social environments, not in a void. These environments then, are drenched with norms and prejudice and even though

cultural norms may value tolerance and equality, they nevertheless still communicate messages through for instance stereotypes about the subordinated social groups and their inferiority. Therefore, individuals will be coloured by these deeply ingrained notions, and even though people in general may consider themselves fair and objective, they may still systemically discriminate others who are in some way different from themselves and their social groups (Piper 1990; Young 1990). Consequently, feminists want to reconceptualise the self by: for one, understanding the self as a radically heterogeneous and socially situated being, and secondly as a moral subject, the self should not be reduced to merely the capacity of reason.

Feminist thinkers such as Lucy Irigaray have challenged the patriarchal notion of *homo economicus* by highlighting the mother-child dyad: as an independent utilitarian self, *homo economicus* is conceived as sufficient unto itself, a conception that completely disregards the fact that the self was born and raised by others, as if it had just materialised into this world on its own with a little basic starter kit to get it going. In this perception, mothers and caregivers are completely disregarded (Irigaray 1985a; Code 1987; Kittay 1999; Willett 2001; LaChance Adams and Lundquist 2012). This denial of feminine caregiving supports the illusion of independence, which in turn supports the voluntarism of the *homo economicus*. Both biology and time are seemingly suspended for such a self, seeing as the self's powers never deteriorate, nor are these selves dependent or vulnerable to anything. Instead the *homo economicus* organises his desires in order to achieve fulfilment, he is the "man with a plan". Such a conception of a self-chosen plan is however not only related to class (specifically middle and upper-class) but it is also gendered (Addelson 1994; Walker 1999).

Further feminist critique is the failure to account for internalised oppressions and processes of overcoming them: for (many) women, lowering one's ambitions and aspirations and embracing gender-compliant goals is an everyday reality (Irigaray 1985a; Bartky 1990; Cudd 2006). Such practices are argued as being the internalisation of patriarchal values and goals; in this way women may unconsciously contribute to their own oppression. These internalised oppressions, after getting embedded in the psyche, condition the desires, which in turn are to be satisfied. This then leads to a never-ending collaboration of oppression, seeing as, paradoxically, the more a woman fulfils those desires, the worse off she may become (Irigaray 1985b; Babbitt 1993).

Thus, much of the feminist critique towards the self is positioned around an argument against rationality alone being essential, that the ideal self is indeed not as coherent, transparent or independent as the *homo economicus* or Kantian ethical subject may want us to believe. Many feminist philosophers have instead sought to develop other accounts of the self as relational and dynamic. There have been different traditions within European and Anglo-American feminist thought that have been influential, one of which is the poststructuralist perspective that

this story employs. The approach of this perspective is that in order to understand something, like an ad for example, we must not just study the ad itself but also the systems of knowledge that have produced the ad. Seeing as how cultural concepts change over time, in poststructuralist thought it is sought to understand how people presently understand those concepts. Take for instance Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* (1989) where he examined the evolving meaning of madness, this work thus being both a historical observation as well as an examination of cultural attitudes regarding the concept of madness. Furthermore, in regards to subjectification, i.e. the construction of the subject, Foucault (1976a, 1979) argued that this is the effect of power and disciplines (much more on his ideas regarding disciplinary power will follow). Therefore, self-transformation is also possible.

Looking at one of the poststructuralist thinkers, Julia Kristeva (1984) posited that the self is a subject of articulation: a speaker who is able to use "I". However, seeing as discourse is bifurcated, speakers are never in complete control of what they say. Language has two dimensions: the symbolic and the semiotic. The first corresponds to consciousness and control and is characterised by linear logic and referential signs. The second corresponds to the unconscious, which is unruly and fuelled by passion, characterised by intonations, figurative language and rhythms. According to Kristeva (1984, 93), all discourse contains and combines elements of both these dimensions; meaning may only be produced when the symbolic meets the semiotic: "Because the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system he [or she, or they] produces can be either 'exclusively' semiotic or 'exclusively' symbolic, and it is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both." Therefore, language and all comprehensible utterances require and rely on both the semiotic, seeing as without it language would be existentially meaningless, and the symbolic, without which language would merely be gibberish. Furthermore, seeing as the semiotic is culturally coded as feminine, and the symbolic is culturally coded as masculine, thus means that discourse is never purely one or the other; both are indispensable to any speaking subject. Consequently then, it is not possible for any individual, regardless of their assigned gender, to be a purely feminine or masculine self; in every self there are feminine and masculine discursive modalities that integrate.

Because of the semiotic being present in our utterances, we cannot express our thoughts in a straightforward language, i.e. what we say may always carry several meanings and may be interpreted in more ways than one. According to Kristeva (1987), the repressed and unconscious is expressed by the semiotic, and therefore what is systemically repressed by society gives us clues as to what is oppressive about it and thus what must be changed within it. The semiotic has a significant ethical potential, and being linked to the feminine, Kristeva thus recognised that a feminine ethical approach was required. She presented her theory on the self as a subject-in-process; seeing as there always exists semiotic

disruptions that destabilise the self, the subject, being responsive to these, is never fixed but always heterogeneous and unstable.

However, other poststructuralist thinkers such as Butler have criticised Kristeva for not being subversive enough and accusing her of maintaining the notion that, deriving from our biological nature, we have an emotionally attached interior identity. Such critique may be harsh and possibly a bit too judgemental due to the ambiguities that exist in Kristeva's texts, however we will not go into that debate at this point. If we instead draw our attention to Butler (1990), she claimed that questions such as "who am I?" or "what am I like?" are merely illusions seeing as her view of the self is that of an unstable discursive node. Her theory of the sexed/gendered identity as being performative, a corporeal style based on imitation and reiterated enactments of pervasive norms will be examined in more detail further on. However, in regards to the self and subjectivity, Butler (1997, 2) argued that subjects may occupy different and often also conflicting positions due to the process of subjectivity taking place within a sphere of competing discourses: "Subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency." Drawing from Foucault, she wrote that power not only imposes itself on a subject but is also shaping it, thus we are dependent upon power for our existence:

"Subjection" signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject. Whether by interpellation, in Althusser's sense, or by discursive productivity, in Foucault's, the subject is initiated through a primary submission to power. (Butler 1997, 2)

By describing Althusser's theory of subject-becoming as concurrent mastery submission, Butler (1997) further puts emphasis on the ambivalence between this paradoxical simultaneity. Extending this notion to gender, doing gender and the practice of the mastery submission is according to Butler (1997) related to what she calls the heterosexual matrix and the enactments of comprehensible femininities and masculinities that are established by the matrix.

When it comes to the notion of *agency*, i.e. to what extent an individual has freedom of choice, there are opposing views of subjectivity at the core of such discussions. Since the Enlightenment, the most persistent view is the humanist one, which sees subjects as independent and rational, having their own interests, being consistent, and of course, free to act on their own accord. On the opposing side of this view lies the poststructural idea of agency that challenges the humanist view by assuming that all human relations are always bound by both freedom and constraint: "I am sometimes asked: 'But if power is everywhere, then there is no freedom.' I answer that if there are relations of power in every social field, this is because there is freedom everywhere" (Foucault 1984/1997, 292). In the

poststructuralist view, the notion of conventional liberation is not possible, instead new power relations and discursive hegemonies are made possible by liberations. Furthermore, poststructuralism discards the idea of unconstrained agency as “free choice” seeing as rebelling against norms and agency are only achievable within the boundaries of discursive possibilities. These in turn are decided based on the process of subjectification and the subject positions that are made available through this process; a process which is also perceived as being ruled by intelligibility, signification, desire and confirmation. As Butler (1990, 145) claimed: “There is no self that is prior to the convergence or who maintains “integrity” prior to its entrance into this conflicted cultural field. There is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very ‘taking up’ is enabled by the tool lying there.” Thus, depending on our subject positions, we are “allowed” a certain space and certain “tools” seeing as we can interpret certain aspects of subjectivity – those that call to us via social signification – with more ease than others that do not resonate through recognition (Munt 1998). Therefore, for a female subject it is easier, more logical and rational, to make choices that match feminine ideals, the same being true regarding male subjects and their choices aligning with masculine ideals.

In poststructuralist thought, agency is not understood in the traditional models of socialisation; children are not merely empty receptacles waiting to be filled with sex/gender roles by society:

It is not that we are filled with roles and stereotypes of passive femininity so that we become what society has set out for us. Rather, I am suggesting that femininity and masculinity are fictions linked to fantasies deeply embedded in the social world which can take on the status of fact when inscribed in the powerful practices, like schooling, through which we are regulated. (Walkerdine 1990, xiii)

It is important for poststructuralist thought to understand why individuals may perceive their situation in certain ways and how they make choices between all the conflicting interests they face. Thus, agency and choice in this perspective, take place in a sphere of contradictory, fragmented and competing subjectivities. And even though these are all calling to us, there are some that are simply more available and recognisable to us than others.

Gender

As has already been pointed out, feminist thought acknowledges gender as a social construct different to that of biological sex. Gender is dependent upon the social expectations, or norms, of what a *woman* and *man* should be. These expectations are then transferred to individuals by others and by being expressed in cultural artefacts and institutions (Stone 2007). Norms specify the behaviours as feminine

or masculine, and are enforced by institutions and people by employing punishments and rewards. For instance, if a boy is expected to be assertive and strong, he will be punished or be given negative feedback if he was to behave in a way that is understood as weak, and thus not expected of him. Within feminist philosophy, distinctions between gender, sex and sexuality are also made, with claims such as: a person being female or male does not necessarily mean that they must act in a feminine or masculine way, or be sexually attracted to their opposite sex (Stone 2007).

Butler (1990) was the one who developed the idea that femininity and masculinity exists in various forms and that each is attached to certain social institutions and roles. She claimed that regulatory practices govern gender, and thus what make us gendered are the practices that we engage in. A practice can in this case be any social activity, be it playing a game or standing in line at the grocery store, and according to Butler (1990) we are both encouraged and constrained to partake in various practices due to norms, which are socially instituted and maintained. Therefore, we are regulated by these practices and by doing certain conventional activities we become gendered. Furthermore, these practices are not practiced in a conscious or reflexive manner, rather they are bodily habits; by talking, walking, doing things in specific ways, dressing in a certain manner or styling oneself in a particular way, we become feminine or masculine. According to Butler (1990) gender is not something one *has* but rather something that one *does*. However, even though it is these engagements in the specific practices that gender us, it is not possible to simply stop engaging and instead do things entirely differently due to the constraining social norms that exist, which are upheld by other people as well as institutions. These norms then are constantly compelling us to partake in certain practices that relate to one gender, and we therefore see ourselves as feminine or masculine by continual participation. In other words: "Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (Butler 1990, 411). If gender is performative, it means that the way we identify ourselves as women and men, is not a stable identity, as Butler (1988, 519) wrote: "it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through stylized repetition of acts." Furthermore, gender may in this sense not be understood as a role, but instead as an act, and thus genders cannot be true neither false. However, Butler (1988, 528) argued that gender is made to conform to a standard of truth and falsity that first of all contradicts its own performative fluidity, and also aids a social policy of controlling and regulating gender; if one performs one's gender wrong it leads to punishment, "and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all." Although societies may differ in their norms of femininity and masculinity, almost all share an expectation of females to be, what is perceived as, feminine and males to be, what is perceived as, masculine. Individuals should not only behave according to the set of norms

applicable to their gender, but also identify and see themselves as that specific gender (Stone 2007).

One of the starting points in Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity, is the claim that Simone de Beauvoir made regarding gender being an identity founded in time through stylised repetition of acts and the stylisation of the body, thus it should be understood as the "mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler 1988, 519). Butler (1988) argued that when de Beauvoir claimed that *woman* is not a natural fact but rather a historical idea, she was emphasising a distinction between sex and gender: sex being a biological factuality and gender being the cultural interpretation of it. Therefore, being a female does not have a meaning, but being a woman means compelling the body to correspond to the historical idea of *woman* and becoming a cultural sign, "to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project" (Butler 1988, 522). She questioned the notion of certain gendered behaviours being natural and instead demonstrated that these learned behaviours that we associate with femininity and masculinity are in fact acts, or performances, that are enforced by normative heterosexuality (Butler 1988). Moreover, Butler (1988) questioned the range to which one may assume that an individual can constitute her- or himself and asked to what degree our performances are determined for us through language and convention. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990) ultimately concluded that gender is performative: meaning that there is no identity behind the acts that are assumed to express gender; instead these acts form an illusion of a stable gender identity. Moreover, Butler (1990) argued that there is no solid or universal gender, seeing as the manifestation of "being" a gender is a result of culturally influenced acts. The genders of woman and man are therefore, according to Butler (1990, 136) dependent upon the repetition of acts, and thus remain open for interpretation:

If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity.

Apart for Beauvoir, some of Butler's (1988; 1990) other inspirations came from psychoanalysis (e.g. Lacan), phenomenology (e.g. Merleau-Ponty, Mead), speech-act theory (e.g. Searle), and structural anthropology (e.g. Levi- Strauss, Turner), all of which investigate how social reality is constantly produced and not an absolute. Deriving from anthropologist Victor Turner, Butler (1988) explained how gender is an act seeing as, according to Turner, social action necessitates a performance that is repeated: "This repetition is at once a reenactment and

reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation” (Butler 1988, 526). In relation to gender, Butler (1988) argued that although there are individual bodies that act, the action also becomes instantly public. However, as a public action, gender is neither a radical choice made by individuals, nor is it imposed upon the individual; the body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, she claimed; “but neither do embodied selves pre-exist the cultural conventions which essentially signify bodies. Actors are always already on the stage, within the terms of the performance” (Butler 1988, 526). Continuing on the metaphor of a stage, Butler (1988) argued that the acts that one performs are in a way acts that have already been going on even before entering the stage, gender thus being a rehearsed act but which also necessitates individuals to act and reproduce gender in order for it to become reality. However, unlike the acting that proceeds on a stage, she claimed that one cannot adopt a stable subjectivity that performs diverse gender roles, but instead, the actual act of performing gender is what establishes who we are. Therefore, the identity itself is a kind of illusion that is created by the performances we make retroactively, and the illusion is according to Butler (1988) both compelling and also an object of belief. This belief in differences between genders, in stable identities, is then compelled by taboos and social sanctions. Thus, our beliefs in “natural” behaviour is rather a result of both indirect and apparent pressures.

According to Butler (1988, 522) gender does not exist as an objective or natural thing, instead gender reality is only real to the extent that it is performed, also, as a social construction, gender is not tied to material bodily facts, making it open for both question and change:

Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all.

By this, Butler (1988) meant that the body becomes its gender through performances; these performances are modified, transformed and consolidated through time. However, she also argued that one is not just one's body, although one does one's own body, albeit differently from one's contemporaries as well as those who came before and those who come after. What is important to remember is that all the different performances one does, are artificial conventions of reality, and by enacting, performing, those conventions, we make them appear natural, necessary and real. However, they are still artificial. But even though they are artificial, the performance of gender norms still has real consequences, this also includes the formation of our own sense of subjectivity, which itself is also constructed. One may think that their subjectivity is the basis of their actions,

however Butler (1988) claimed that one's sense of independence and subjectivity is rather something that is retroactively constructed; created through the performances of social convention. Gender is thus understood as a "corporeal style, an 'act'" (Butler 1988, 521), and this style is ideological, it has a history existing beyond the person who performs the conventions, and it is without any connections to fundamental truths about the physical body.

As a consequence, gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self,' whether that 'self' is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act,' broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority (Butler 1988, 528).

Lastly, by viewing gender as separated from the biological sex, and acknowledging gender as a social construct defined by norms, feminist philosophers had a way in which to describe and discuss what they saw in societies: how *women* are rendered subservient, expected to act submissively and therefore becoming subordinate to *men* in many ways (Stone 2007). Yet, what the concept of gender does not explain is *why*: Why is it that in almost all societies gender roles have a patriarchal substance? In trying to explain this prevalence of feminine subordination, there is one concept that is recurring throughout various feminist thoughts, which in this story is highlighted as the most significant: *Power*.

Power

When talking about feminism and power, one is perhaps instantly drawn to Foucault, seeing as his theory of power has been a great inspiration and starting point for many feminist works (e.g. Bartky 1990; Diamond & Quinby 1988; Sawicki 1991). Foucault (1976a) argued that power, in modern societies, is less visible than before as well as spread across a variety of institutions such as: schools, factories, hospitals and prisons. In each of these, there are particular power strategies that are developed and exercised for specific purposes, which are then copied from one institution to the next. The main strategies that Foucault (1979) discerned were:

- 1) Hierarchical observation: Taking prison as an example, the spaces and buildings that make up a prison are arranged in such a way so as to allow an uninterrupted monitoring of the inmates. These, in turn, know that they are constantly being observed, thus they start to monitor themselves and become their own jailor.
- 2) Normalising judgement: individuals in different contexts (for instance prisoners, factory workers, schoolchildren) are always measured against the norms for good behaviours, and if they deviate from these, they will be punished.

- 3) Examinations: individuals are ranked against each other through examinations, for instance in schools and job interviews.

He further argued that the form of power being used in these three strategies is *disciplinary*: a form of power that cultivates individuals (be they schoolchildren, prisoners or what have you) to observe and regulate themselves and thus learn to be responsible. The aim of this disciplinary power is to increase the usefulness of the body, thus invading the body and seeking to regulate it:

A 'political anatomy', which was also a 'mechanics of power', was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus, discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies. (Foucault 1979, 138)

Creating these *docile* bodies means that ceaseless coercion must be present and aimed at the body: its space, time and movements. Take for instance a soldier with its rifle and all the precise movements and gestures that are demanded at drill, or a student in a classroom being required to sit at her or his desk in a certain way (feet down, head straight etc.), not being allowed to leave the desk. This type of exact and firm control would not be possible to uphold without constant surveillance. Foucault was inspired by Bentham's *Panopticon*: the model prison design, which captured the very essence of the modern and disciplinary society. This prison had a circular design; in the middle a tower where a guard was monitoring, and at the periphery a structure with cells, each of which housed two windows; one towards the tower in the middle and one towards the outside so as to create backlighting effects. In each cell would be a prisoner, alone with no way to communicate with fellow inmates. Each inmate would be constantly visible from the tower, but would not be able to see the guard themselves. This would in turn "induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 1979, 201), in other words: All inmates become their own jailors seeing as "the mere possibility of being monitored, even in the absence of any guard, creates internalized habitual modes of action, the epitome of the power of Foucault's all-seeing omnipresent eye to control masses of people" (Kedzior and Allen 2016, 1897). According to Foucault, the design and effects of the Panopticon resonates throughout society, seeing as prisons and other institutions such as schools, hospitals and factories all resemble each other.

Moreover, power exists in all relations as a form of productive energy flowing in various directions, implicating all:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it does not only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (Foucault 1980, 119).

Being a relational force infusing society as a whole, power constructs hierarchy and social organisation by imposing discipline, by creating discourse, by shaping subjectivities, thus power is seen as being both repressive and productive at the same time (Foucault 1980).

Furthermore, Foucault (1976b) claimed that: Power exists in all social relationships, though it works in different ways: for example, the power between inmate and jailor is different from the one between doctor and patient, though there is still a form of power present in each of the cases. Power does not come from “above” but rather from “below”: it is not the state that imposes power but instead power is derived from all social relationships and institutions. Power also brings about knowledge: for instance, the exercise of power within examinations generates knowledge that would not have come to be if it were not for the power relationships which brings it about and provides meaning. Furthermore, power is relational: it is dependent on the position that an individual holds in a certain relationship, which in turn only exists as long as it is maintained by all involved in it. Thus, there is never anyone who completely lacks power, even those who are subservient in a relationship have at least the power to play along and maintain the relationship. Power provokes resistance: because of the relational aspect above, those who are subservient may always potentially resist the power relationship. Therefore, various forms of resistance frequently arise in certain relationships and institutions. Lastly, power is both positive and productive: although power in modern societies does limit certain options, it never completely prevents people from acting and making choices. While some or many options may be cut off, others are made possible by the relationships. Furthermore, Foucault claimed that this modern form of power also provides people with the capacity to make responsible choices, seeing as the disciplinary aspect of this power creates self-regulation and thus allows for thinking responsibly about how to act and perhaps even acting in resistance towards the power that holds them.

Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation

and a centralization of knowledge; the play of signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies. We are much less Greeks than we believe. We are neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism. " (Foucault 2004, 78-79)

Feminist theorists have, according to Alison Stone (2007), used Foucault's notion of power described above, in order to study gender relations and how these have developed in modern societies, concluding that: Women are dominated by men who hold different forms of power over them, all of which are effects based on the particular sets of gender norms that have developed in various social institutions. Seeing as a male doctor may have a particular form of power over a female patient, this power is still different from the one he may have over a female nurse, or a female wife. Thus, there is not one but many different reasons as to why masculine power exists in different forms in different institutional situations. These different forms of masculine power are also strengthened and influenced by each other, thus when they have begun to appear they often develop common features and become alike: creating a general social pattern of masculine power. Furthermore, men often do not need to wield authority or control over women seeing as they are kept subjugated by the institutions. For instance, in the case of advertising and the beauty industry, the images that are used establish certain norms about how women should look in order to be attractive. It thus becomes difficult to avoid measuring and regulating oneself against these norms and therefore the advertising images have disciplinary power, creating self-regulating and self-punishing women. In turn, Sandra Lee Bartky (1990) argued that masculine power is reinforced by this seeing as women become more constricted than men, for instance in the way they move, their posture or their eating habits. Additionally, as long as women keep participating in upholding the masculine power, it will not cease to exist. In relation to the advertising and beauty example, by internalising, becoming concerned and preoccupied about their appearance, women (either consciously or inadvertently) keep reproducing masculine power. And lastly, women may always resist: there is always a possibility for local struggles against certain forms of masculine power.

Furthermore, Bartky (1990, 65) criticised Foucault for treating the body as one, and thus not accounting for the different bodily experiences of women and men, as if they had the same interactions and relations with modern institutions:

Where is the account of the disciplinary practices that engender the “docile bodies” of women, bodies more docile than the bodies of men? Women, like men, are subject to many of the same disciplinary practices Foucault describes. But he is blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine. To overlook the forms of subjection that engender the feminine body is to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed. Hence, even though a liberatory note is sounded in Foucault’s critique of power, his analysis as a whole reproduces that sexism which is endemic throughout Western political theory.

With inspiration from Butler, Bartky (1990) claimed that femininity is not something one is born with but rather something one achieves. She also went on to examine the disciplinary practices that produce a feminine body, focussing on three distinct practice categories: practices that strive to create a body of a specific size and configuration; practices that bring forth certain gestures, movements and postures from the body; and practices that are directed toward displaying the body as an adorned surface.

Disciplinary practices imposed on women

Bartky (1990) argued how the style of the female figure differs based on culture and time. At the time of her writing (and still in many ways today) the fashion then was that of a slim, narrow-hipped, small-breasted woman, but seeing as this figure is more like that of a pre or newly pubescent girl (or even a young boy), actual women must therefore work hard to achieve such dimensions, including dieting. We are all, surely, familiar with the copywriting on Women’s magazines and their incessant articles regarding various diets, it is also perhaps no surprise that women more frequently than men visit diet doctors, or that they made up approximately 90% of the people attending Weight Watchers and Overeaters Anonymous (Millman 1980).

Dieting disciplines the body’s hungers: Appetite must be monitored at all times and governed by an iron will. Since the innocent need of the organism for food will not be denied, the body becomes one’s enemy, an alien being bent on thwarting the disciplinary project. (Bartky 1990, 66).

Indeed, today Anorexia nervosa is what hysteria was back in the days, a cultural obsession that is so widespread it has reached epidemic proportions (Bordo 1985-86). Susan Bordo (1998, 215) argued that preoccupations with dieting, fat and slenderness are one of the most “normalizing” strategies that we have: “ensuring

the production of self-monitoring and self-disciplining 'docile bodies,' sensitive to any departure from social norms, and habituated to self-improvement and transformation in the service of those norms."

Another form of discipline is exercise. Now this is of course practiced by both sexes, however according to Bartky (1990), due to women's widespread obsession with diets and their weight, it may be so that women are working out in a different spirit and with a different goal in mind than their male counterparts. For instance, there are classes specifically designed for women, such as M. J. Saffon's 12 facial exercises that promise to smooth foreheads, erase frown lines and banish crow's feet. Other exercises aimed particularly at women are those that build breasts, eliminate cellulite or simply are "spot-reducing", which includes dozens of exercises aimed at "problem areas". However, "The very idea of "spot-reducing" is both scientifically unsound and cruel, for it raises expectations in women that can never be realized: The pattern in which fat is deposited or removed is known to be genetically determined" (Bartky 1990, 67). Still, women are expected to undergo such cruelties and strive towards bodily perfection on a daily basis, it is no wonder that such disciplinary constraint thus leads to self-surveillance or *habitual body monitoring*:

What is habitual body monitoring? The men in the audience, this might be news to you. It is not news to the women in the audience. We think about the positioning of our legs, the positioning of our hair, where the light is falling, who's looking at us, who's not looking at us. In fact, in the five minutes that I've been giving this talk, on average, the women in this audience have engaged in habitual body monitoring 10 times. That is every 30 seconds. (Caroline Heldman on Ted Talk)

Arguably, by frequently engaging in habitual body monitoring, both the time, energy and cognitive functioning is wasted on a never-ending vanity project that women must always practice, instead of being put to better use (*such as studying, learning, improving new skills, or you know, crushing the patriarchy*).

Bartky (1990) further argues that women are to a much greater extent than men, restricted when it comes to movement and lived spatiality. According to Iris Marion Young (1980), woman's space is an enclosure that positions and confines her and makes her reluctant to move beyond it. This is revealed in the constricted postures and the general way of movement, an unwillingness to stretch, reach or extend the body (for example in sports or physical tasks). On the opposing side we find the *loose woman*, violating the norms and defined so not merely in her morals but in the easy way she moves and speaks.

The German photographer Marianne Wex (1979) illustrated in a photography series including over 2000 shots, many of them candid shots taken

on the streets, how feminine and masculine body postures were so very different. While the women in the shots often tried making themselves smaller, harmless and taking up less space, pressing legs together and holding arms and hands close to the body, the men did the opposite: expanding into the available space, both legs and arms flung apart from their bodies. Surely, today we are all familiar with the term *Manspreading*; “a neologism used to refer to men who sit with their legs in a wide v-shape filling two or three single seats on public transport” (Jane 2017, 459). According to Emma Jane (2017, 460), feminists have campaigned on social media since around 2012, targeting *manspreading* seeing as they believe it to be not merely bad etiquette but more importantly:

a blatant example of the sorts of ‘everyday’ sexism suffered by women as a result of men’s inflated sense of entitlement. As such, manspreading is framed as a powerful – yet also ridiculous – symbol of what is argued to be men’s tendency to take up more than their fair share of literal and metaphorical social space.

Thus, it is fair to say that things have perhaps not changed that much since Wex’s photography series, the difference may be that today we are a bit more aware of the various ways in which women take up less space, while men claim more of it.

Furthermore, even the way we move our bodies around in the space have been conditioned differently; while walking, a woman may hold her arms close to her body and if she wears high heeled shoes “her body is thrown forward and off-balance: The struggle to walk under these conditions shortens her stride still more” (Bartky 1990, 68). A man’s stride is longer, has more rhythm and appears freer with arms swinging apart from the body. But it’s not just the bodies and their movements that differ greatly, even the feminine faces have been disciplined and trained to express deference.

Under male scrutiny, women will avert their eyes or cast them downward; the female gaze is trained to abandon its claim to the sovereign status of seer. The “nice” girl learns to avoid the bold and unfettered staring of the “loose” woman who looks at whatever and whomever she pleases. Women are trained to smile more than men, too. (Bartky 1990, 68).

Even in smiles, women give more than they receive: in a smile elicitation study it was found that the rate of smile return was 67% for men while 93% for women (Henley 1977). In fact, many typical jobs that women do require graciousness, deference and smiling, showing that one is ready to serve. Perhaps not surprising then that touching is also unevenly divided seeing as men touch women more often

and on more parts of their bodies than do women towards men; for some women, these unwanted, unsolicited hands on their bodies are a routine occurrence (Henley 1977).

Bartky (1990, 68) claimed that constriction, grace as well as a “certain eroticism restrained by modesty” must be exhibited in the feminine movements, postures and gestures. To attain all of this is, needless to say, rather challenging: to walk in a confined fashion, at the same time remember to slightly roll the hips provocatively (*but not too much of course!*), stomach in, chest out, shoulders back, and perish the thought if one would ever have to bend over wearing a low-cut short dress! It is no wonder then that in women’s fashion magazines, there have from time to time been instructions for how to get in and out of cars in a proper manner (Bartky 1990). (*Can we please just spend a couple of seconds really digesting this information, and also imagining men’s magazines having similar instructions in them. That would, of course, never happen, because it does not matter how men get themselves in and out of cars. They just do.*)

Women’s bodies are also ornamented surfaces, and this practice requires a lot of discipline too: applying the right make-up, choosing the right outfit with the right accessories. Not to mention the skin: “A woman’s skin must be soft, supple, hairless and smooth; ideally it should betray no sign of wear, experience, age or deep thought” (Bartky 1990, 69). Women must remove their hair from basically every part of their body, except the head. When talking about skin care, one may also include avoiding certain facial expressions (*don’t frown ladies!*) along with the application of various lotions and potions such as moisturizers, hand creams, make-up removers, night creams, toners, sun screens, eye creams, facial masks and so on and so never-ending forth. Skin care may also involve various devices such as backbrushes, humidifiers, blackhead removers, facial steamers, pumice stones etc. In fact, good skin-care requires a great and specialised knowledge, having to be aware of what do to and apply depending on what activities one has done, and in exactly which conditions. Such habits then also require a great investment of time, time that could of course be spent on other things (*remember that thing we were supposed to crush?*). While a man can get away with basic hygiene, for a woman, this is rarely enough: “The “art” of make-up is the art of disguise, but this presupposes that a woman’s face, unpainted, is defective” (Bartky 1990, 71). Bartky (1990) argued that advertising (especially relating to beauty) often has the strategy of making women feel deficient, and if this was not enough, all the media images we are constantly exposed to with perfect, flawless female bodies, no doubt makes women feel like they cannot measure up. Basically, it’s a “set-up” she claimed, seeing as the bodily transformation required of a woman, the extensive and radical measures that must be taken, will undoubtedly to some degree lead to failure. That then adds shame into the mix: “she ought to take better care of herself” (Bartky 1990, 72).

If disciplinary power within modern institutions functions as in the Panopticon, then arguably when it comes to the category of *women*, they are residing within two layers of the panoptic design simultaneously: a *Societal Panopticon* that men are also bound by, and another one, let's call it the *Patriarchal Panopticon*:

In the regime of institutionalized heterosexuality woman must make herself "object and prey" for the man: It is for him that these eyes are limpid pools, this cheek baby-smooth. In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: They stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgement. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other. We are often told that "women dress for other women." There is some truth in this: Who but someone engaged in a project similar to my own can appreciate the panache with which I bring it off? But women know for whom this game is played: They know that a pretty young woman is likelier to become a flight attendant than a plain one and that a well-preserved older woman has a better chance of holding onto her husband than one who has "let herself go." (Bartky 1990, 72)

Now dear reader, we are getting closer to the focal point of this story. As already told, the category of "women" has throughout societies, through norms, through various disciplinary power relations, been placed in the position of the object, the submissive, non-male. We shall explore this position further by diving deeper into a particular institution that, in many ways, governs the image of "women" – *Advertising*.

CHAPTER II

Advertising, or: Shock me shock me shock me into submission

Advertising

Advertisements saturate our social lives
(Goldman 1992, 1)

Advertising has functioned as a lighthouse, guiding consumers towards products they need, or indeed didn't even know they needed, since the mass production took off and all kinds of products flooded the market. Advertising was thus required to help consumers make sense of all the choices that became available to them, as well as create needs for the various choices (Pardun 2014). Advertising has been said to be both a great vehicle for improving modern civilisation, as well as a dubious method for making people spend money they don't have on things that aren't necessary. Indeed, the pros and cons of advertising have been discussed since it emerged, "at the very least, advertising can provide important information about products. The controversy tends to be when the advertising moves beyond information" (Pardun 2014, 2).

As part of the consumption and culture, advertising communicates values, norms and beliefs in a society with artificial imagery (Lysonski and Pollay 1990; Warlaumont 1993; Kilbourne 1999). Therefore, ads not only sell the products they are created for, but they also sell different ideals and concepts, they sell the image of what is "normal", of who one should be and how one should look and act: "How we should look, who we should look at, and who is sexually desirable are all messages delivered by the media" (Merskin 2014, 72). We participate every day in decoding the images and messages directed at us, but because this reading is so routine, the social assumptions entrenched in ads are often taken for granted. Thus, advertising is usually not recognised as a sphere of ideology. However:

Every day that we routinely participate in the social grammar of advertising, we engage in a process of replicating the domain assumptions

of commodity hegemony. These domain assumptions are important because they condition and delimit the field of discourse within which our public and private conversations take place. (Goldman 1992, 2).

Disguised as “choices”, advertising is a part of a system that sells us the idea of being “free” to choose between different things based on our personal tastes (Williamson 1988). But seeing as ads permeate our everyday life, we are all consumers of ads whether we want to or not (Rutledge Shields & Heinecken 2002), and the “choices” that exist have been pre-packaged for us. Furthermore, being in the “selling business”, ads are not necessarily created in order to make consumers happy, but arguably the opposite: advertising plays a large part in constructing consumer desire through fantasy (Shankar, Whittaker and Fitchett 2006). Whereas biological needs may be fulfilled, desire is insatiable, therefore the desire that advertising helps spawn is arguably built upon anxiety: “The purpose of publicity is to make the spectator marginally dissatisfied with his [*or her, or their*] present way of life” (Berger 1972/2008, 136). If the fantasy depicted in the ads resonates with what we wish to achieve, we are thus on a conscious or unconscious level measuring up to the depictions. This is not necessarily always negative, however, at times our insecurities may be intensified due to our desire of emulating the depictions in the ads. “Advertising sells exciting new definitions of who we are, and all people need to do to buy an identity is to buy the product” (Moog 1990, 89).

Furthermore, much of the debates revolving around advertising have been based on two questions: Is advertising simply a mirror reflecting the society? Or, is it an agent of change? As a mirror, advertising would thus not be to blame for all the problems that bad advertising may bring about; it’s the consumer’s own fault that they keep looking at the ads and buying the products. However, as an agent of change advertising may change our conceptions and views on products and our purchasing habits. While the simple answer would be: advertising is both, as Carol Pardun (2014) argued, it is more interesting to choose a side and stick to it. In this story, advertising is not a simple harmless character that only does what it’s told by holding up a mirror. In this story, as an agent of change, advertising plays the antagonist.

Advertising is built upon symbolism, which derives its power from the human need to search for meaning (Jhally 1990). Therefore, what fuels advertising is the capacity to mediate meaning by transferring relationships between symbol and material. Seeing as ads have basically monopolised the social images we see daily, they thus function as an all-consuming cultural industry: “Publicity is the culture of the consumer society. It propagates through images that society’s belief in itself” (Berger 1972/2008, 133). By inhabiting this powerful position in the cultural process, ads can both undermine and incorporate change. Denice Yanni (1990) explained the cultural process by dividing it into three

activities: systemic, institutional and individual, which combined enforce the dominant culture and make social change very difficult. However, the market is continuously changing, and therefore advertising must also endlessly negotiate and perpetuate new meaning systems: advertising can concurrently develop and protect the “public” image because of its meaning fluidity, but because of its symbolism, change is a complex process (Yanni 1990).

In spite of the intrinsic system of advertising that wallpapers our public and even private spaces, people like to believe that advertising does not affect them personally, only others (a theory called third-person effect) and that they are uniquely resistant towards them (Berger 2015). Although it might be impossible to confirm what effect a particular ad has on a given individual, it is evident that advertising as a social and cultural phenomenon does have a collective impact and thus affects people at large: “at a macro level, when we look at collective behavior, it seems that advertising does have power” (Berger 2015, 14). Ads are prevalent, and the effects are accumulative, elusive and mainly unconscious (Kilbourne 1999). It is however the illusion of being resistant towards it, that makes advertising such a remarkable form of ideology and allows it such power without much hesitation: “the most effective kind of propaganda is that which is not recognized as propaganda. Because we think advertising is silly and trivial, we are less on guard, less critical, than we might otherwise be” (Kilbourne 1999, 27).

The Boy’s Club

Although the hit TV series *Mad Men* was a fictional depiction of a prestigious American advertising agency in the 1960’s, the portrayal of the blatantly male dominated and sexist culture is eerily true-to-life; the advertising industry was and still is a boy’s club. Even though women make over 80% of all purchasing decisions across all sectors, many still feel that advertisers do not understand them (Coffee, 2014), even expressing that they feel “alienated” by advertising (Hanan, 2016). This may not come as a surprise seeing as men are the ones dominating the creative departments and thus the creative output: female creative directors are a small minority within the industry, making up approximately 11% in 2016, almost triple what it was merely eight years earlier; 3,6% in 2008 (Hanan, 2016).

Furthermore, the sexism and discrimination of women in the advertising industry is not merely based on representation, but also on the way that they are treated when they do make it into the boy’s club⁹:

Advertising is far from the only industry that has struggled with issues of sexist behavior and gender bias through the years. But in interviews with more than a dozen women, mostly executives, who work in advertising,

many said they found it hard to believe how much their particular business still remained a white man's world (Ember, 2016).

After the #MeToo movement hit Sweden, over 2000 women working in the agency world united to form a manifest called #Sistabriefen ("the last brief"). Hundreds of stories about discrimination and sexual misconduct and abuse were gathered from the women signing the manifest¹⁰ in order to illuminate the sexist environment and urge both clients and agencies to take responsibility and begin working towards gender equality in the industry. As a response to this, the "Agency code" (Byråkoden) was created by representatives from agencies around the Gothenburg region with nine goals, all with the purpose of striving towards a more gender equal, open and transparent working environment. In late 2018, 72 agencies signed the code as well as YRGO (a vocational school) and the organisations CreativeMornings, Jane Gbg and Ung Media.¹¹

Hopefully, these steps will prove to be significant for the industry, at least in Sweden. However, it will most likely take a lot of time, effort and in some cases, a complete change of personality and perspective, in order to erase the ingrained misogynist culture of the boy's club, in order for stories, as the one below, to become a thing of the past, rather than "business as usual":

A hand on the thigh during a client meeting, right where the skirt ends. Another client who chooses to ask me out via my job e-mail. A boss who insists I take my ideas through him, because the rest of the team listens better to men. Another who thinks that I should lessen my assertiveness, seeing as women with opinions are not received positively in the industry. But the last drop is when a colleague, the same night as a business party, rapes me. (a testimony from one of the women signing under #Sistabriefen, translated from Swedish)¹²

A brief overview

In order to better understand the background of *female sexual agency* in contemporary advertising and the position of this study in the research, a brief historical overview is appropriate.

In the 70's much of the talk was regarding the gendered and stereotypical portrayals; Alice Courtney and Sarah Lockeretz's (1971) study setting the scene and inspiring those to come using content analysis in order to pinpoint different gender roles and stereotypes used in advertising, followed some years later by Erving Goffman's (1979) visual analysis of print advertisements in his acclaimed work *Gender Advertisements*, not to forget Laura Mulvey's (1975) coining of the *Male gaze* and her as well as John Berger's (1972/2008) discussion regarding the female and the male representations in ads, art and film. Also, in 1979 Jean

Kilbourne made her first documentary that laid the foundation for the *Killing us softly* series, where she used various ads to show how skewed the images of women and men are in the media. What followed this “era” was decades of research dedicated towards stereotypes, gender roles and portrayals of women vs. men, not to mention the use of sex increasing in the ads and thus the start of research dedicated towards sex and sexism in advertising and the viewers’ responses towards it (to name a few: Belch, Holgerson, Belch and Koppman (1982), Soley and Kurzbard (1986), Reese, Whipple, and Courtney (1987), Lysonski, and Pollay (1990), Boddewyn (1991), Stern (1991), Walsh (1994), Kilbourne (1999), Reichert (2002, 2012, 2014), Nudd (2005), Miller (2005), Lysonski (2005), Merskin 2006), LaTour and Henthorne, (2012), Forde (2014) and many more.). While some concluded that the type of sex used in ads is not favourable for anyone, others argued that sex can be used in a non-demeaning manner, however what all seem to be more or less agreed upon is the notion that ads are a very powerful and prevalent medium that affect consumers and the society in which they reside.

Sexist and Gender Stereotypical Advertising

For a long time now, examining stereotypical portrayals of gender in advertising has been on the feminist agenda:

Ads constitute their audiences by using themes and images from the world beyond advertising; they assume we will understand allusions to particular lifestyles, concerns and aspirations, be drawn into the world of the brand promoted in the ad, and make connections between ourselves and the product. Although ads are designed to promote goods and services, they deal in social identities and relationships and thus gender is inevitably inscribed in them. (O’Donohoe 2000, 81)

The portrayals may have altered since the debates began in the 60’s: it was more common before that sexism in ads was related to stereotypical gender portrayals, while for the past decades it is also including different uses of sex and objectification (Miller 2005). However, the issue persists: “The “sexploitation” of women and their bodies continues to be a problem in advertising, even though feminist media critics have complained about the problem” (Berger 2015, 16). Furthermore, the sexual content in ads has also been said to have increased over the years as well (Söderlund 2003; Reichert 2012).

Seeing as the meaning of woman has been and is constructed in a negative way in culture, of which advertising plays an important role, Yanni (1990, 71) argued that there is an asymmetry between the social construction of women and men, making the people-thing relationship different: “Man, alone, has the

privileged position of remaining in a separate category. By virtue of our position in society, women enter into the people-thing relationship differently than do men.” Because advertising is a platform for social communication and functions as a cultural institution, the meaning of woman is thus transferred and preserved accordingly. This meaning, stemming from patriarchy, defines woman as an object, which is an important categorisation to understand as it may further the understanding of the representational powers which advertising holds. Meaning is then interpreted from the institutional context and therefore the asymmetrical social relationships found in this context are reflected in advertising, because this medium is “an extension of our message system” (Yanni 1990, 73).

Also, advertising uses stereotypes to convey their messages in the easiest, fastest way possible in order to capture their audience, but these stereotypes are arguably often demeaning and limiting (Marcellus 2014). Due to the troublesome nature of stereotypes, the European Parliament voted 504-110 in 2008 for adopting a non-binding report intended to persuade the advertising industry to stop “sexual stereotyping”. According to the committee report, the concern is that stereotypes in advertising can “strait-jacket women, men, girls and boys by restricting individuals to predetermined and artificial roles that are often degrading, humiliating and dumbed-down for both sexes” (Carjaval 2008).¹³

However, not understanding what stereotypes are might impede the understanding of the problem with stereotypes. Initially, the word comes from early printing; having to produce the same image over and over again, but looking the word up in a dictionary today might instead define stereotypes as “oversimplified ideas” (*Oxford English Dictionary*) or as something that is “unchangeable”, “always the same” (*Svenska Akademiens ordlista*). Lippman claimed that stereotypes are “pictures in our heads” and that:

The subtlest and most pervasive of all influences are those which create and maintain the repertory of stereotypes. We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And those preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception. (Lippmann 1922, 84).

Thus, most of us are likely to have certain images in our heads regarding what a woman or a man is, how a woman or a man looks, and what a woman or a man does, or does not do. When viewing adverts, there is little doubt as to how many oversimplified ideas are constantly being used, or how ads often seem to be the same, unchanged.

Gaze

The concept of gaze, i.e. the act of looking, has been argued to create power dynamics (Mulvey 1975; Foucault 1979, 1980, 1978/1990; Young 1980; Bordo

1993, 2000), where the looker possesses the subject of the look (Krassas, Blauwkamp and Wesselink 2003), i.e. control is exercised by sheer observation through the formation of subject/object power relations. This concept has been developed by, amongst others, Mulvey (1975) as a patriarchal *male gaze* produced by cinematic codes, Foucault (1979) as the overseeing or supervising gaze, as well as by Young (1980) as the self-referential gaze in feminine bodily existence.

When examining acquired feminine spatiality, Young (1980) found that the gaze was the most significant source of a distinguishing tension between being a subject or an object; consequently, affecting how women perceived space and moved their bodies. She claimed that *self-consciousness* or *self-reference* is involved in the relation that a woman has to her own body; attention being directed *towards* her body, rather than the act that is to be accomplished *through* her body.

Foucault (1979), in his examination of the 19th century carceral system that was built upon ceaseless surveillance, emphasised the point that it was the inmates themselves who were to interiorise this surveying gaze, thus enabling an efficient and non-violent way of controlling them. This was then related to modern society in general and notions of inspection, surveillance and application of norms.

There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he [*or she, or they*] is his [*or her, or their*] own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself [*or herself, or themselves*]. (Foucault 1980, 155)

According to Foucault (1988), we exercise power in relation to ourselves, which he conceptualised as *technologies of the self*, and these in turn are in part shaped through a gaze. The gaze may exert control through observation due to an established subject/object power relation, and the main notion here is thus that the object in the relationship incorporates the objectifying gaze in order to survey itself. Seeing as this gaze has been defined as patriarchal and male (Mulvey 1975; Young 1980), women are therefore positioned, as well as being positioned by themselves, as objects to be gazed upon and controlled.

Male Gaze

In Goffman's (1979) work *Gender Advertisements*, gender representations in advertising were examined and the author provided a visual treatise regarding the different portrayals of women and men, sex roles in advertising and the essential messages regarding the sexual roles proposed by feminine and masculine pictures in advertising. Hundreds of ads were studied so as to unearth overall patterns in the stereotypical representation of gender. These were then divided into six different categories: relative size, feminine touch, function ranking, the family,

ritualization of subordination and licensed withdrawal. All of these categories in some ways or others suggest a male superiority and a female subservience, be it because of the size of the models, their actions or their facial and bodily portrayals. Female models, he found, were most often portrayed as vulnerable, soft, powerless and even child-like, while male models were present, confident and ready for action. All of these different types of poses are neither biological nor are they natural traits, but rather they are constructions of femininity and masculinity, they have to do with what a culture defines as feminine and masculine. As an example, Goffman (1979) pointed out that homosexual men are more likely portrayed as women, i.e. in the same type of poses, therefore it has nothing to do with the actual male physique but rather to do with the spectator; both portrayals of women and of homosexual men are directed towards a male viewer.

In Berger's (1972/2008) book *Ways of seeing*, seven essays are presented that describe and analyse different themes such as nudity, art and the various ways that women and men are depicted and viewed in advertisements and oil paintings. Berger (1972/2008) claimed that not only the depictions of women and men were different but also their social presence: man's presence suggests the promise of power and implies what he can *do to and for you*, while a woman's presence is connected to her own attitude regarding herself, implying instead what can or cannot be *done to her*. Therefore, he argued, as a woman one is kept by men, thus dividing oneself into the surveyor and the surveyed: "A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself" (Berger 1972/2008, 40). In other words, women are surveyed by men while simultaneously surveying themselves (the Patriarchal Panopticon, as described earlier). Furthermore, the appearance of a woman is also crucially linked to her success and the way she appears before a man may thus determine the way she will be treated seeing as she is surveyed before she is treated. Everything that women do are consequently reflections of their own treatments of their own emotions, on the other hand, what men do are merely their own expressions. Berger (1972/2008, 41) sums this up as follows: "*men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between women and men but also the relation of women to themselves."

What both Berger (1972/2008) formulated and Goffman (1979) concluded in the 70's is closely related to the term *male gaze* coined by Mulvey (1975) in her film theory in the same era. The male gaze is according to Mulvey (1975), referring to the sexual imbalance that the world is divided into, where the pleasure of looking is split between the active male and the passive female. Here the female figure is portrayed to fit into the fantasy of the male gaze, or in other words, women are depicted for male desires:

In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle" ... "she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. (Mulvey 1975, 4-5)

Even though Mulvey (1975) was in the field of film, her theories are closely related to, and applicable on advertising seeing as both have to do with the visual representations of women and men. Mulvey (1975, 5) suggested that women are divided into a similar surveyor-surveyed relationship that Berger (1972/2008) proposed, thus functioning on two levels: "as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen". This can be compared to a sexist ad portraying both a female and male model, where the female model is there as the erotic object for the male model, but also for the male spectator looking at the ad. Thus, according to the male gaze, the way men look at women defines their value, women then evaluate themselves as how they believe men will evaluate them: "Both sexes are encouraged to see women as objects, and anything else is unnatural in this system of mutually reinforcing stereotypes" (Marcellus 2014, 126).

Furthermore, Mulvey (1975) argued that due to the ruling ideology and psychical structures the male figure cannot be objectified seeing as he is the active one, he controls the fantasy and makes things happen, he is the one that the ideal spectator identifies with. The female figure on the other hand is the spectacle, or as Berger (1972/2008, 58) put it:

the essential way of seeing women, the essential use to which their images are put, has not changed. Women are depicted in a quite different way from men – not because the feminine is different from the masculine – but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him.

Although all three authors theorised in somewhat different domains, they came to the same conclusions regarding the way women and men are represented, be that on the movie screen, in art paintings, or in every day ads; men are the norm, the ideal and the active spectator, women are the passive ones who appear in order to please the male gaze.

Due to the ideal spectator being assumed male, women are thus depicted differently than men: they are routinely represented as submissive, inactive, and always available and ready to be looked at. Again, the male gaze is about whose

perspective is used in the creation of images and suggests that presentation, being about power, is motivated by the desire to control.

Clutter and Desensitisation

The types of portrayals found in advertising are arguably very problematic, especially concerning female representations, and unfortunately there are also other aspects to consider which may add a layer of complexity and furthering the problem: “In consumer cultures, it seems fair to say that just about everyone is advertising, which creates a major problem – clutter” (Berger 2015, 6). Clutter is the vast amount of advertisements that we are exposed to on a daily basis, which has been said to lead to information saturation/overload as well as paralysis and desensitisation (Kilbourne 1999; Rumbo 2002; Berger 2015). Arguably, clutter is not a problem facing advertisers only, but rather, it is a problem that all of us living in a consumer culture are faced with. Seeing as advertising is cluttering basically every inch of the public space (and also in our homes via magazines, television, computers etc.), one could say that the consumption of ads has never been higher; ads are everywhere and we are all the audience (Rutledge Shields and Heinecken 2002). This advertising clutter thus poses another dimension to the problem of female representation in advertising seeing as it gives advertisers a motivation, a reason, to be even more daring, even more provocative, even more overt in their portrayals (LaTour and Henthorne 1994; Kilbourne 1999; Söderlund 2003; Dahl, Sengupta and Vohs 2009; Reichert 2012). How else are they supposed to cut through all the clutter and grab the consumers’ attention? While ads may be competing with each other for the spotlight, this kerfuffle is problematic because it seems that the more spectacle, the more pizzazz and provocation the advertisers use, the more numbed the consumers’ get and thus the less effect it has (Brooke 2003); a phenomenon in this context called desensitisation (Kilbourne 1999; Rumbo 2002; Brooke 2003; Tehseem and Riaz 2015).

Desensitisation, similar to habituation, signifies an adaptation process that involves different stimuli of increasing repugnance, which reduces the emotional response (Ashforth and Kreiner 2002). Though some may have issues with the primitive method of Pavlovian conditioning, evidence suggests that humans follow the same patterns as animals, thus: “it seems highly unlikely that under the conditions under which pornographic and violent materials are shown these should have no effect on the viewer whatsoever” (Eysenck and Nias 1997, 261). By constant exposure to for instance violent or pornographic stimuli (such as ads), one would eventually become desensitised and thus no longer aroused or upset by witnessing it. Seeing as the world of advertising is full of images that are shocking, titillating, violent, offensive, sexually explicit and so on, the overexposure has led to the claim of desensitised viewers. “High levels of exposure can lead to message overload and consumer desensitization” (Okigbo, Martin and Amienyi 2005, 314). We as consumers and viewers of ads have become so used to

depictions of blatant sex that advertisers keep crossing the boundaries in order to get our attention and thus breaking through all that clutter (Kilbourne 2003). However, Kathy Roberts Forde (2014) meant that while the use of sex in some cases may shock, they nevertheless all turn to boredom after the surprise wears off. Enough already, she exclaimed. Not only has sex in ads become mundane and boring, but it is also contributing to unhealthy sexual attitudes, body image problems, and of course, the objectification of women (Forde 2014).

Kilbourne (1999) similarly argued that we become numb after numerous displays of sexist portrayals and Joseph Rumbo (2002) discussed the information saturation, particularly advertising clutter, as something the viewers must cope with using ad avoidance strategies in an effort to not get overwhelmed. Being desensitised could thus also be viewed as a form of coping mechanism; instead of feeling anxious and distraught, one gets numb and “shuts down”. Collin Brooke (2003, 133) argued that the more “spectacle” the viewers are exposed to, the less effect it has and the more technologically refined the ads become, the less impressive are the ones that do not push the boundaries: “Our mediascape fills with advertising at an unprecedented rate, and we are increasingly desensitized to the messages marketed at us.” The issue with desensitisation is thus highly linked to that of clutter, as the viewing of a single advertisement would most likely not be able to change or challenge one’s beliefs and values. However, seeing as how today’s media is full of sexual appeals, innuendos, and half-truths about sex, it is the cumulative effect which is concerning (Ziegler 2007).

In Stephanie Crase-Moritz’s (2002) study relating to the desensitisation of sexually loaded ads, she found that a number of participants, when given the choice, responded that they felt “nothing” towards an ad. This had, according to the author, to do with the fact that they were so used to such images it no longer offended them, leading to the conclusion that the participants were desensitised towards that type of imagery: “We as a people have become desensitized to negative images or provocative advertising.’...’by responding “nothing” we are giving permission to advertisers to continue to try and shock us with inappropriate images” (Crase-Moritz 2002, 140–41).

Consumers are increasingly used to sexually loaded ads, but thinking that these do not matter, or even have an impact in any way on individuals or society as a whole, because one feels “nothing” about them, could have dire consequences: it has for instance been argued that objectifying women in ads may lead to desensitisation towards real violence perpetrated against them (Kilbourne 1999; Tehseem and Riaz 2015), seeing as objectifying a person is usually the first step towards justifying violence towards that same person (Kilbourne 1999). Even though advertisements cannot be said to cause violence directly, Kilbourne (1999, 281) claimed that violent imagery and objectification might nevertheless contribute to the violence and state of terror many women experience: “All women are vulnerable in a culture in which there is such widespread

objectification of women's bodies"...and such blaming of the victim. When everything and everyone is sexualized, it is the powerless who are most at risk."

Sex Sex Sex

There is an assumption in the world of advertising that has been ingrained for many years and is more or less taken for granted: *Sex sells*. Sex in advertising has been used as a provocative, attention-grabbing strategy (Dahl, Sengupta and Vohs 2009) to sell just about anything (Merskin 2014) and consequently, contributed to the objectification of women (also men in a lesser degree) (Kilbourne 1999). In fact, Debra Merskin (2014, 79) claimed that: "No form of communication is more associated with sex than advertising"..."it is probably the most accessible, visible, and widespread manipulation of this biological function to get our attention to sell products and services."

Magnus Söderlund (2003) coined the term *emotionally loaded marketing*, referring to ads with a loaded content that sets out to place the viewer in a positive (or negative) emotional state of being. Compared to a few decades ago, it is clear that this emotional state nowadays is more frequently caused by images rather than words. Söderlund (2003) argued that the 60's and 70's ads were more word oriented and used rational arguments to underline the pros of the product. Some of the reasons for this evolution in the advertising industry can be for instance that there are more people, with more leisure and money to spend (Levy, 1959) as well as the commercial clutter having increased and it now being possible to reach consumers by many different means. Due to this expanding freeway of channels, one can say that the consumers have created filters for themselves in order to cope with the clutter and advertisers must therefore find ways to break through these filters if they want to reach them. As Sidney Levy (1959, 117) put it:

As behavior in the market place is increasingly elaborated, it also becomes increasingly symbolic. This idea needs some examination, because it means that sellers of goods are engaged, whether willfully or not, in selling symbols, as well as practical merchandise. It means that marketing managers must attend to more than the relatively superficial facts with which they usually concern themselves when they do not think of their goods as having symbolic significance.

Being emotionally affected by ads is not a new phenomenon, what has changed is the depictions that are found in the ads, especially the ones of women and sex. The sexual content in ads has increased over the years (Söderlund, 2003; Reichert, 2002), it is clear that both female and male models show more skin than before and that the couples in ads are more often depicted doing sexually related activities (Söderlund, 2003).

According to Tom Reichert (2002), sexual content can come in many forms, thus it is not only nakedness or explicit sex in ads that are actually sexual. He categorised some of the different types of sexual information and claimed that there are distinctive incentives that people both recognise and also consider to exist in the realms of Sex. An example is advertisement with sexual appeal, which contains sexual information within the context of the ad. This sexual information can come in many forms, for instance images with attractive models in revealing clothing, or verbal and/or written words containing double-entendres or sexually suggestive phrases. Reichert (2002) also pointed out that in most cases, both forms, i.e. the verbal and non-verbal sexual information, can be found and are used to create a sexually loaded ad.

There are ads that leave no doubt about their sexual meaning, for instance those that use blatant nudity or portray models engaged in explicit sex, however, there are also ads that are more subtle in their sexually loaded information. Using innuendos, play on words or suggestions that could be misinterpreted are some examples. Nevertheless, when using attractive models in ads there is always a subtle hint of sexual information seeing as people find them to be sexually attractive (Reichert 2002).

Reichert (2002) categorised five different types of sexual information that are commonly used in the world of ads: Nudity, Sexual Behavior, Physical Attractiveness, Sexual Referents and Sexual Embeds. To begin with, Nudity is more or less one of the most obvious types and it is a fundamental source for sexual information. However, the term Nudity does not mean that models are completely without garments. Nudity has, in this context, many levels like for instance “suggestive dress” which can be portrayed with an open blouse i.e. suggesting some form of nudity. Models wearing bikinis or underwear would most likely fall in the category “partially revealing“. Thus Nudity comes in many varieties and can range from insinuations to explicitness. A significant point that Reichert (2002) raised when it comes to Nudity, is that it is very rare to see mainstream ads depicting complete Nudity, instead, they more often than not use different techniques or environments which hide parts of the body, for instance shower/tub scenes or images of the models naked back. The use of nudity in ads has been shown to have some different impacts on the male versus female viewers. Men seem to be more susceptible to nudity or scantily clad models than women are; the more skin that is shown, the more excited the male viewers are, this however is not true for women (Söderlund, 2003).

The second category, Sexual Behaviour, can be integrated into ads in two different ways, either by using a single model and thus play on the individual behaviour, or by using two or more models and therefore compose the interpersonal interaction. In the first case, behaving sexually means that the model is making eye contact, flirting with the viewer and/or moving in a provocative way, thus communicating a sexual interest. The models' poses (i.e.

placement/movement of body) and facial expressions are therefore essential for this type of sexual information. When using two or more models and therefore an interpersonal interaction, the ads can portray various degrees of sexual contact: from simple displays of affection (e.g. holding hands) to voyeurism and depicted intercourse (e.g. implied sex) (Reichert, 2002).

When describing what entails Physical Attractiveness, David Buss (1992) argued that it is a central attribute for selecting a mate; it thus plays a big part in our sexual interests and desires. Therefore, Physical Attraction is another type of sexual information, which in advertising often is used by depicting, what is seen as, beautiful models (Reichert, 2002). Using an attractive model in ads is not uncommon, however, the role they play is not one of actual information but rather of décor in order to catch the viewers' attention (Söderlund, 2003). There have been studies indicating that sexual appeals can increase the viewers' attention, thus making the ads stand out among the clutter (e.g. Dudley, 1999; Reichert, Heckler, and Jackson, 2001). Nevertheless, the use of attractive or decorative models is problematic seeing as they send out a very skewed portrayal of actual people. Additionally, there are studies that have shown that ads with sexual appeals are considered offensive and/or unethical by consumers (LaTour and Henthorne, 1994; Walsh, 1994; Tai, 1999). Other negative side effects may also be that the young women who compare themselves to the attractive female decorations may lead to dissatisfaction with themselves and their appearance seeing as they cannot assert the same physical attractiveness as the decorative models (Söderlund, 2003).

Sexual Referents then can be: "Images and words that subtly refer to sex or that trigger sexual thought" (Reichert 2002, 23). These are in other words not as palpable as portrayals of Nudity or Sexual Behaviour. Sexual Referents can be allusions or innuendos, either visual or verbal, which are used in order to achieve thoughts of the sexual nature. Thus, this type of sexual information does not actually take place in the ad itself but rather in the mind of the viewer. Sexual Referents in ads work as triggers and are therefore dependent on the viewer to interpret the advertisers' message in the right way, hence; it is in the eyes of the beholder (Reichert, 2002).

Lastly, Sexual Embeds in advertising are often referred to as subliminal. Just like Sexual Referents, the Sexual Embeds are referents of sex, the only difference is that they are to be perceived subconsciously. Some examples include the use of the word "sex", or sexual symbolism for instance objects that are shaped in the form of genitalia or made to look like sexual acts. These subliminal messages can be integrated images and are not meant to be detected. Instead they stimulate, in our unconscious minds, sexual arousal and motivation (Reichert, 2002). However, it is important to note that Sexual Embeds are not scientifically proven to actually work in ads and therefore increase purchase behaviour and sales, many

researchers and advertising professionals claim it to be a fraud due to mixed results in different studies (Reichert, 2002).

In Sweden the use of sex in advertising is not prohibited according to the Marketing Practices Act, however the Ethics Council of the Business world has, in some cases where commercials have been reported, made a statement. If an advert is sexist or not depends on different factors, for example: portraying women or men as mere sex objects, gender stereotypes, or otherwise degrading depictions. They also evaluate the difference between naked and nude, stating that there is a conscious nudity, which does not automatically make an advert discriminating: if the nakedness is motivated, i.e. relates to the product, it does not necessarily mean that it is objectifying (Mårtensson 2009). Berger (1972/2008, 48) made a distinction between different forms of nakedness and explained it in the terms *naked* and *nude*:

To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude"..."Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display.

In other words: objectification is, in many ways, in the eyes of the beholder who may change a naked person into an object by seeing the nakedness as something more or other than simply nakedness. The difference between naked and nude is in many ways abstruse and subtle; nevertheless, the overwhelming usage of naked female bodies in advertising is arguably often verging into the nude category due to the sexualising nature of the portrayals.

Using sex in advertising also charges the products in question with eroticism, which Kilbourne (1999) claimed, is doomed to disappoint seeing as they are unable to fulfil our sexual desires and/or emotional needs. Thus, sex in advertising is a form of sex that degrades, objectifies and distorts, a type of sex that portrays women in a stylised manner which is pleasing to and desirable for (heterosexual) men (Warlaumont 1993; Lazier-Smith 1989; Kilbourne 1999; Cortese 1999; Merskin 2006; Gill 2008). In other words: these depictions rely heavily on the male gaze.

Certainly bodies are beautiful and celebrating them is the stuff of great works of art. Private displays of a body to a lover is an intimate act. But the public display in media of the body as *parts*, that is, objectification, does little to celebrate individuality, autonomy, or healthy learning about relationships. (Merskin 2014, 72)

Although sex may be relevant for certain brands and products that employ sexual content in their adverts, there is also a massive amount of those that have nothing at all to do with sex, but still make use of it in ads. As a case in point, Erik Landén started the blog “Sälj grej med tjej”¹⁴ (“Sell thing with girl”) where he posted various ads that depict attractive and most often sexualised women, for products that really do not have anything to do with neither sex nor the woman. This method of “selling” has been pointed out by Vickie Rutledge Shields and Dawn Heineken (2002, 19) as the: ““least common denominator factor in advertising”: when one can’t think of anything else, use sex to sell it.”

Furthermore, Sut Jhally (1989) argued that there are parts of sexuality that are related to objectification, in that regard individual ads are not false. However, because advertising is an institution that basically clutters the entire public sphere, he referred to this as a “system of images”, and it is this system that becomes false due to the totality and cumulative effect of advertising images: “All (or at least many) messages are about gender and sexuality. It seems that for women it is the only thing that is important about them” (Jhally 1989). He claimed that the falsity arises from the message system and the institutional context, rather than the individual ads, and although a little objectification is fine, what becomes dangerous and wrong is too much of it; “that is when one is viewed as nothing other than an object” (Jhally 1989).

Pornification and Violence

Researchers have argued that pornography has become mainstream (Kilbourne, 1999; Merskin, 2006; Gill, 2008; Maclaran 2015). Within advertising, this type of hyper sexualized display, or “Porno chic” (McNair 2002), is taken for granted in many, if not most, western societies. By comparing sex in advertising with pornography, Kilbourne (1999) explained and argued that there are many similarities between the two. As in pornography, the main goal is about power and dominance, about disconnection rather than connection. The depictions of female models in advertising, along with many of the themes (bondage, sadomasochism) are often borrowed from pornography, thus dehumanising and objectifying women (Kilbourne 1999). In a paper in *The Guardian*, Janice Turner (2005) even went so far as to claim that porn has “come true”:

Once porn and real human sexuality were distinguishable. Not even porn's biggest advocates would suggest a porn flick depicted reality, that women were gagging for sex 24/7 and would drop their clothes and submit to rough, anonymous sex at the slightest invitation. But as porn has seeped into mainstream culture, the line has blurred. To speak to men's magazine editors, it is clear they believe that somehow in recent years, porn has come true. The sexually liberated modern woman turns out to resemble -

what do you know! - the pneumatic, take-me-now-big-boy fuck-puppet of male fantasy after all.

However, it is not merely more sexualized imagery that is commonplace, but also more graphic and gratuitous representations of violence that have increased during the past decades (Carter and Weaver 2003). When ads start to glorify rape and male violence, certainly then these dehumanising and objectifying sexual depictions have other consequences. In popular culture, it is most often the dangerous “bad guy” who is considered to be the sexiest and the ads thus encourage women to be attracted to these kinds of men. However, in reality, that would most likely not be a very good idea. Pornographic and violent ads that portray women as passive and submissive while encouraging men to be dominant and use their force to get their way do not go unnoticed; “Ad after ad implies that girls and women don’t really mean “no” when they say it, that women are only teasing when they resist men’s advances” (Kilbourne 1999, 273). Such implications have substantial and terrifying ramifications, especially for women who are frequently the victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. How many men can say that they are scared of getting stuck in an elevator with a strange woman? Most likely, not that many. However, this situation could, for a woman, be rather alarming and potentially dangerous.

In an interactive exercise, Jackson Katz, who has lectured in hundreds of college campuses in the US about men’s violence against women, asked college women and men the same question, receiving frighteningly different responses:

I draw a line down the middle of a chalkboard, sketching a male symbol on one side and a female symbol on the other. Then I ask just the men: “What steps do you guys take, on a daily basis, to prevent yourselves from being sexually assaulted?” At first there is a kind of awkward silence as the men try to figure out if they’ve been asked a trick question. The silence gives way to a smattering of nervous laughter. Occasionally a young guy will raise his hand and say, “I stay out of prison.” This is typically followed by another moment of laughter, before someone finally raises his hand and soberly states, “Nothing. I don’t think about it.” Then I ask the women the same question. “What steps do you take on a daily basis to prevent yourselves from being sexually assaulted?” Women throughout the audience immediately start raising their hands. As the men sit in stunned silence, the women recount safety precautions they take as part of their daily routine. (Katz 2006, preface)

In the table below, the answers stated in his book *The Macho Paradox* (Katz 2006) have been assembled:

Men	Women
Nothing. I don't think about it	Hold my keys as a potential weapon.
	Look in the back seat of the car before getting in.
	Carry a cell phone.
	Don't go jogging at night.
	Lock all the windows when I sleep, even on hot summer nights.
	Be careful not to drink too much.
	Don't put my drink down and come back to it; make sure I see it being poured.
	Own a big dog.
	Carry Mace or pepper spray.
	Have an unlisted phone number.
	Have a man's voice on my answering machine.
	Park in well-lit areas.
	Don't use parking garages.
	Don't get on elevators with only one man, or with a group of men.
	Vary my route home from work.
	Watch what I wear.
	Don't use highway rest areas.
	Use a home alarm system.
	Don't wear headphones when jogging.
	Avoid forests or wooded areas, even in the daytime.
	Don't take a first-floor apartment.
	Go out in groups.
	Own a firearm.
	Meet men on first dates in public places.
	Make sure to have a car or cab fare.
	Don't make eye contact with men on the street.
	Make assertive eye contact with men on the street.

Table 1: Overview of all the answers from Katz's book The Macho Paradox

Looking at the answers, it becomes quite clear that there are many situations and environments where women do not feel safe. The question is then, why are we seeing ads that make these types of situations look sexy, rather than what they really are: frightening and potentially dangerous? Kilbourne (1999) exemplified with an ad depicting a young woman in an elevator with a tight little crop top and the copy: "PUSH MY BUTTONS: I'm looking for a man who can totally floor me..." What woman in her right mind would behave that way and say those things? In

this ad, she is literally asking for it, which implies that women in general are asking to be dominated, to be submissive and sexually overpowered by men. An idea that keeps perpetuating the rape culture we live in, forcing women to take all of the measurements above, and more, in order to stay safe – while not making men questioning their own actions, but just encouraging them to take what they want, when they want.

Another significant insight that can be said to mix the objectifying nature of pornography with violence is “body cropping” (Kilbourne, 1999; Cortese, 1999; Rutledge Shields & Heineken, 2002; Merskin, 2006): a mode of representation where women’s bodies have been chopped up, fragmented and visually dissected so as to showcase only certain aspects of the body, for instance the lips, legs, eyes, breasts or whatever it may be; “This perpetuates the notion that a woman’s body is not linked to her mind, soul, and emotions” (Cortese 1999, 31). It is common to have the models’ heads cut off, therefore displaying only what is most essential: the body. This form of display is also reassuring to the viewer who may look at the ad without feeling guilty or self-conscious seeing as there is no one looking back at them (Merskin 2006). A faceless model would suggest a “bland” person with no personality or individuality, and when portraying a woman without feet in an ad, it implies she cannot go anywhere and thus she is, as usual, passive and submissive (Cortese 1999). When cutting up a female body and displaying only certain parts of her, she ceases to be a real person and is instead turned into an object (Kilbourne, 1999; Cortese, 1999). This action is not only objectifying, but it can also lead to violence seeing as turning a person into an object is often the first step towards validating violent behaviour against someone; “It is very difficult, perhaps impossible, to be violent to someone we think of as an equal, someone we have empathy with, but it is very easy to abuse a thing” (Kilbourne 1999, 278). If you dehumanize a woman, turning her into an “it”, the notion of hurting “it” suddenly becomes acceptable seeing as she is not a real person any more. This kind of dehumanization is also much more frequent for women (Cortese 1999); “Women’s bodies are dismembered in ads, hacked apart, just one part of the body is focused upon, which of course is the most dehumanizing thing you can do to someone.” (Kilbourne, *Killing us Softly 4*, 2010). Furthermore, body cropping also reflects the notion of women’s bodies being presented as merely “a composite of problems, each requiring a product-solution. The effect is to deny women’s humanity, to present them not as whole people but as fetishized, dismembered ‘bits’, as objects” (Gill 2007, no page number).

As told earlier, when the fight against sexism in advertising began, about half a century ago, the form of sexism that was fought against looked quite differently from what it does today; Michele Miller (2005, 114) argued that even though sex itself was absent, sexism was prevalent: “Now, some 40 years later, there’s a resurgence of the term ‘sexism’, but with a slightly different definition. Today’s sexism is more closely aligned with *sexist*, and the implications of *sexuality*

in advertising and the media.” When Kilbourne began her fight against sexist portrayals in the 60’s, she was adamant to expose how distorted and fallacious the industry was when it came to the perception of women. In her documentary series *Killing Us Softly* (1979, 1987, 1999 and 2010)¹⁵ as well as her books, she lectures and shows how the world of advertising has been degrading women for decades, how it clearly makes distinctions between women and men, often resulting in the woman becoming an object for male desire. However, as has been said and hinted so far, the portrayals in ads have indeed been updated, to some extent, and it is this updated version of female representation in ads that is at the core of this story.

Now dear reader, the scene has been set and in the next chapter of this story we shall get to know the notion of *female sexual agency*, and see how the ideology of Feminism has inspired and influenced the institution of Advertising – or perhaps rather, how Advertising has appropriated Feminism for marketing purposes. (*After all, it’s all about the money like Meja sang, dum dum duh dee dum dum...*)

CHAPTER III

Female Sexual Agency, or: Damned if you do, damned if you don't

As stated in the beginning, before delving into the main plot, we must first grasp feminism and advertising. Thus, the previous two chapters form the background of this story, providing an understanding as well as theoretical points of departure that have shaped and inspired *female sexual agency* in contemporary advertising. In this chapter, the phenomenon will be presented in detail by going through discussions and theories regarding *sexual agency*, *empowerment*, *sexual capital*, *choice feminism*, *postfeminism* and the midriff in advertising as well as *normativity*; all of which have been chosen as forming the theoretical bases pertaining to *female sexual agency* in contemporary advertising seeing as this phenomenon, arguably, cannot properly be analysed or understood without them. Later on in this story, it's these theories and concepts that will provide most of the tools for the analyses.

Sexual Agency

In Michelle Fine's (1988) ground-breaking paper on sexuality and schooling, she argued that sex education as well as school-based health clinics (in the US) were not doing enough to develop adolescents' (especially females') sexual subjectivity and responsibility. Fine (1988, 30) pinpointed the prevailing discourses of female sexuality within public schools and came to the conclusion that what was missing was a discourse of female desire:

One finds unacknowledged social ambivalence about female sexuality which ideologically separates the female sexual agent, or subject, from her counterpart, the female sexual victim. The adolescent woman of the 1980s is constructed as the latter. Educated primarily as the potential victim of male sexuality, she represents no subject in her own right.

Two of the prevailing discourses that Fine (1988) discussed were: sexuality as violence and sexuality as victimisation. The first is arguably the most conservative,

equating adolescent heterosexuality with violence, which thus led (and perhaps still does) conservative advocates to want to remove sex education completely from schools and instead put the responsibility of establishing appropriate behaviours on the family. Such sex-negative ideas assume that being silent regarding sexuality and the decrease in sexual activity have a causal relationship. However, in their study, William Fisher, Donn Byrne and Leonard White (1983) showed that decreasing sexual activity does not occur with silence but instead a decrease in responsible contraception can be correlated to such sex-negative attitudes. The second discourse then teaches young women of their vulnerability towards possible male predators, and in order to not be a victim they are taught to defend themselves against pregnancy, disease and “being used”, they are taught of the social and emotional risks of having sex, they are taught of practicing abstinence and “saying no”. “The language” ... “represents females as the actual and potential victims of male desire” ... “the discourses of violence and victimisation both portray males as potential predators and females as victims” (Fine 1988, 32).

Furthermore, Fine (1988) claimed that these discourses have three problematic assumptions:

- 1) They place female subjectivity outside of the conversation, thus neglecting a female desire to engage in sex.
- 2) They present female victimisation as based on unmarried heterosexual involvement instead of being inherent in various gender, race or class structures.
- 3) Lastly, the messages that these discourses support are traditional heterosexual arrangements; thus, by avoiding premarital sex women may avoid to be victimised. The irony is not lost here: women must protect themselves from being victimised by men, by coupling with a man, therefore paradoxically teaching women to fear the same people who will ultimately be their protectors.

Fine (1988, 33) claimed that the missing discourse, that of desire, was but a whisper within American public schools:

The naming of desire, pleasure, or sexual entitlement, particularly for females, barely exists in the formal agenda of public schooling on sexuality. When spoken, it is tagged with reminders of “consequences” – emotional, physical, moral, reproductive, and/or financial.

Such a discourse, if endorsed, would instead allow adolescents to explore for themselves what they like and don't, based on their needs, experiences and their own limits. Females would within such a discourse not be kept in a receptive position but instead be posed as “subjects of sexuality, initiators as well as negotiators” (Fine 1988, 33).

In contrast to the US context that Fine (1988) wrote about, sex education

in Sweden appears quite differently: it is recommended by the Commission on Sex Education to teach students to gain knowledge in order to be equipped for experiencing their sex lives as sources of happiness and fellowship. It is further suggested in the teachers' handbook that both the students who have early sexual relations as well as those who choose to wait should be accepted and understood (Brown 1983). Such a discourse can still occur within the US public school context, however according to Fine (1988, 34) there is religious and political resistance that make it much more difficult for a sex educator to fully allow for and foster discussions of sexual subjectivities in their classrooms: "Within public school classrooms, it seems that female desire may indeed be addressed when educators act subversively. But in the typical sex education classroom, silence, and therefore distortion, surrounds female desire."

Referencing Luce Irigaray (1980) and Hélène Cixous (1981), who argued that seeing as the dominant language and views are male, the female voice, body and sexuality thus become inaudible, and female pleasure and desire can thus only be expressed through the already male paved path, Fine (1988, 34) claimed that the sexual constriction only allows girls one decision "to say yes or no – to a question not necessarily their own."

Regardless of the curriculum at schools, Fine (1988, 35) showed through her conversations with adolescent females that the discourse of desire does exist in their experiences:

the young women talked freely about fears and, in the same breath, asked about passions. Their struggle to untangle issues of gender, power, and sexuality underscores the fact that, for them, notions of sexual negotiation cannot be separated from sacrifice and nurturance.

Stating that they rarely reflect on sexuality as simple but that their senses of sexuality are also informed by culture, religion, violence, passion, authority, peers, body, rebellion, the past and the future as well as racial and gender relations of power, Fine (1988) argued that these young women assume a dualistic consciousness of anxiety and worry mixed with the excitement of actual or anticipated sexuality. Seeing as there are far too few spaces for adolescent females to explore their own sexual subjectivities, what they do face are instead many perilous places where they can or may be exploited: "Whether in a classroom, on the street, at work, or at home, the adolescent female's sexuality is negotiated by, for, and despite the young woman herself" (Fine 1988, 35). In the conversations she had, it became clear that from the perspective of a female adolescent, sexual desire and victimisation are coexisting, and their comments on gender relations were attached to their views of sexuality.

Subsequent studies have also shown how young (heterosexual) women are more concerned with making themselves desirable instead of expressing their

own desires, noting that their engagements in sexual activities seem to be more based on external pressures (from men or friends) instead of their own internal needs and wants (Tolman 2002). Others have also argued for female heterosexuality to be constructed from *within masculinity*; for instance, claiming that women have a “male-in-the-head”, representing the “surveillance power of this male dominated and institutionalized heterosexuality” (Holland, Ramozanoglu, Sharpe & Thomson 1998, 11). These ideas correlate with the Patriarchal Panopticon, as Bartky (1990, 72) argued: “a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women”. This male-in-the-head then, according to Holland et al. (1998), prevents women from fully enjoying sexual experiences, making them feel responsible for male sexual arousal. The authors also conceptualised power as fluid, ever changing, constantly negotiated and recreated, not something that some people just happen to “have”. Both women and men may exercise and resist power, however in their book, women are presented as being both victims of male power as well as being in cahoots with male power (Holland et al. 1998).

Nevertheless, there are also those who have sought to find the spaces where female sexual desires are expressed: Sue Jackson (2005) argued that in magazine problem pages for instance, young women do speak of pleasure and desire, however these voices still struggle to be heard. Anita Harris (2005) found that blogs, fanzines and websites might function as liminal spaces where women may create their own meanings regarding desire.

The gendered sexual norms surrounding girl’s and women’s sexuality have created dilemmas that are difficult, if not entirely unreasonable, to navigate: women should be sexually responsive to their boyfriends/partners, but also be sexually responsible, they should be desirable, but not desiring (Tolman 2002; Gavey 2005), they should to some degree arouse men, but will subsequently be called a tease if not also satisfying male desires: “Whether divided into binaries or rated along a continuum, women’s sexuality is framed in terms of their responses to men’s sexual drive, which is presumed to be incessant, urgent, and irrepressible” (Bay-Cheng 2015, 281). However, even though these limiting and limited views still persist, Laina Bay-Cheng (2015) argued that the normative field that surrounds gender roles and sexuality is shifting, with studies showing for instance that: sexual relationships among youths are diversifying (Claxton and van Dulmen 2013), young women’s attitudes regarding sexuality is becoming more liberal (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009), gender differences regarding sexual behaviours and attitudes are seemingly shrinking (Petersen and Hyde 2010). Moreover, such shifts of loosening sexual morals are also evident when looking at the overtly sexual and sexualised portrayals of girls and women (for instance in advertising); though some are still conforming to the traditional representation of a woman’s body as a passive object, these depictions are now also joined by those that seemingly want to display female sexual appetite and power, including both

celebrities and non-celebrities alike; women are, unapologetically, more commanding of sexual attention, pursuing sexual fun as well as demanding pleasure: “it is clear that girls’ sexual agency, whether authentic or pantomimed, and whether an unequivocal sign of progress or a double-edged sword, is no longer construed as merely reactive to male overtures” (Bay-Cheng 2015). Due to this shift, this new popular discourse of girls and women as unabashedly initiating, desiring and pleasure-seeking, Bay-Cheng (2015) argued that the traditional view and measuring of women’s sexuality through the Virgin-Slut Continuum should be updated to accommodate for the emergence of sexual agency. Furthermore, Bay-Cheng (2015, 279-280) claimed that this shift has occurred due to the influence that neoliberalism has had on the construction of women’s sexuality:

Surveying empirical findings and cultural discourse, I see convincing evidence that at least in the U.S., young women’s sexuality is now measured – whether by specific individuals, in the rhetoric of popular media, or from the broader perspective of the generalized other – not only in moralist terms of abstinence and promiscuity, but also in neoliberal ones related to individual agency and personal responsibility.

She proposed to add an intersecting *Agency Line* that marks women’s supposed sexual agency with the Virgin-Slut Continuum, which marks the supposed sexual activity. These two distinct lines thus creates a new multidimensional matrix with four separate quadrants (see figure 1):

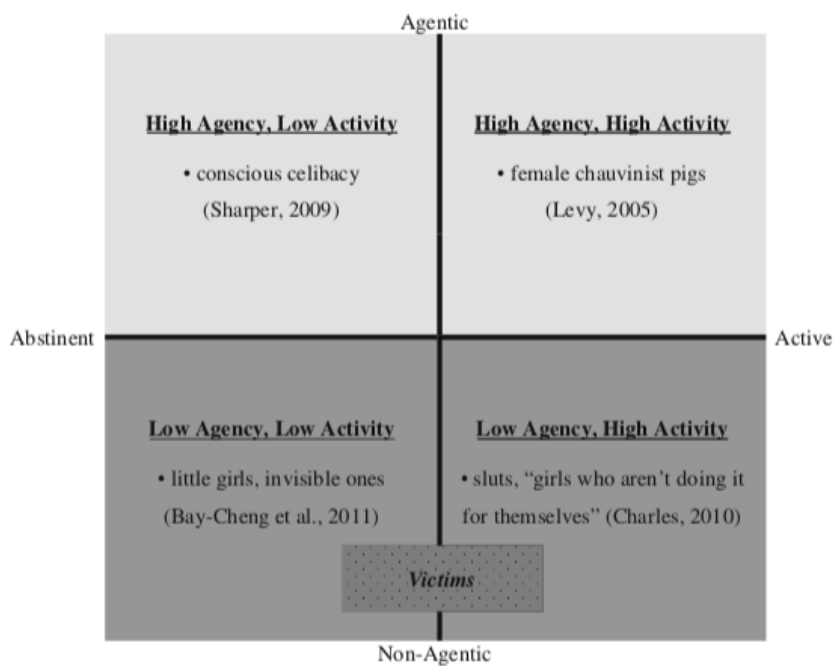


Figure 1: Virgin-Slut Continuum x Agency Line (borrowed from Bay-Cheng 2015).

As can be seen, the two lower quadrants are also marked as “victims” due to the low agency, thus relating to the discourse of victimisation (Fine 1988). In the upper two quadrants, the high agency marks a sense of control and whether the sexual activity is low or high, this is viewed as an active, agential choice. Additionally, it should be noted that the midriff (Gill 2008) also belongs in the upper right quadrant along with Ariel Levy’s (2005) *female chauvinist pigs*.

Bay-Cheng (2015) argued that neoliberalism not only affirms agency, but indeed it demands it, and as has been indicated by previous research, she claimed that sexual agency as constructed through neoliberal terms, is key to discerning what is accepted sexual behaviour (i.e. such that appears to be self-determined and freely chosen) and that which is condemned and/or pitied (i.e. such that appears to be the result from ineptitude, irresponsibility and/or weakness). Furthermore, simply adding agency as a layer on top of the existing Virgin-Slut Continuum would not be enough seeing as this does not account for all the different combinations that may exist: sexual agency may be ascribed to girls who are both pursuing sexual activity, as well as those who abstain from it. Bay-Cheng (2015, 282) therefore argued that sexual agency, as a new dimension, operates to assess girls’ sexuality:

No longer simply divided between the virgins or sluts or marked along a single continuum founded on their alleged sexual behavior, girls are now also evaluated according to the degree of control they proclaim, or are perceived, to exert over their sexual behavior.

Additionally, Bay-Cheng (2015) claimed that rather than being an affirmative celebration of agency, the ideology of neoliberalism is the hegemonic institution of agency, and its versions of freedom may not be as liberating as they might appear. Freedom, in neoliberal terms, is not about challenging authority or nonconformity, instead she claimed that what it offers is a kind of liability waiver: allowing people to do as they wish, but at their own peril. Even though agency has emerged as an evaluative dimension, thus opening up for new choices for young women’s sexuality, new dilemmas are also created: girls may be allowed to get off the Virgin-Slut continuum, but they must now instead be in constant control, in accordance with neoliberal views. Bay-Cheng (2015) claimed that the façade of personal freedom created by neoliberalism shields the never-ending strategizing and the self-surveillance that girls and women must keep up with in order to stay above the Agency Line. She argued that, instead of fostering empowerment, the neoliberal form of sexual agency is more prone to foster blame: young women are still held accountable for their sexual behaviour, even in cases of violation or social and material injustices and conditions. But seeing as their oppression is concealed, the sex-negative experiences that girls may have are instead seen as manifestations of their own personal shortfalls.

The Agency Line may introduce substantive changes and a new multidimensionality to contemporary constructions of girls' sexuality. But the addition of this new metric has not dislodged gendered moralism, nor has it abolished the measurement of girls' social worth according to their sexual conduct. Young women continue to be confined within a prescribed normative space, now divided and disempowered even further by the neoliberal pretense of sexual agency. (Bay-Cheng 2015, 291).

Empowerment

Seeing as how the concept of *empowerment*, and perhaps more specifically *sexual empowerment*, is imperative for the topic of *female sexual agency*, it should thus be explained and elaborated. Whilst empowerment is commonly implied as an important concept for feminism, the definition is varying and, in some ways, conflicting; theorists and authors seem to use the concept to describe a variety of ideas including state of being as well as actions. One of the most disagreed upon notions is whether empowerment is objective and external, or subjective and internal (Peterson 2010). Being linked to the concept of power, the internal psychological power can be interpreted as *power-to* while external power, i.e. power and control over resources is *power-over* (Yoder and Kahn 1992; Riger 1993). However, there is no consensus regarding which of these versions empowerment is or should be coupled with.

If considering the internal notion, Marc Zimmerman (1995) argued that the individual level of empowerment includes feelings of control and efficacy, as well as participatory behaviour, thus related to an internal perception of power that he emphasised as being central to the concept. On the other hand, Stephanie Riger (1993) claimed that empowerment cannot only be viewed as individual subjectivity and an individual's own sense of power, self-esteem or achievement. Instead, it must be considered in terms of *power-over*. Arguably though, seeing as sexual empowerment is also interconnected with the ability to arouse others, it could in a sense be said that this is a form of *power-over*.

Sharon Lamb (2010) discussed the concept of empowerment and questioned whether feeling and being empowered are the same and whether it is enough to feel empowered, or if this notion must also be connected to autonomy and power in other realms. She claimed that: "Feeling emboldened sexually is not the same as empowered. And if a girl feels empowered, because she has the power to attract attention and admiration via her sexuality, that may be a kind of power of sorts, but it's narrow" (Lamb 2010, 301).

Furthermore, Riger's (1993, 282) argument was that in trying to encourage empowerment through subjective feelings of power can "create the illusion of power without affecting the actual distribution of power". This notion though,

does not make as much sense when discussing sexual empowerment such as it may do in contexts where resources may be quantified (such as government representations). For sexual empowerment, the “resources” are perhaps not possible to objectively measure or see how they would be distributed throughout a society or in relationships (Peterson 2010).

Zoë Peterson (2010, 308) claimed that in the context of adolescent girls’ sexuality, the disagreement between subjective perception and objective external control is similar and present, however the internal sense of empowerment is also closely linked to sexual desire and pleasure: “feeling entitled to and able to experience sexual pleasure and desire in a culture that restricts girls’ sexuality is seen as an expression of empowerment.” On the other hand, Lamb (2010) claimed that many of the contemporary images of young women who are in charge of their sexuality stem from pornography, thus reproducing the notions of female exploitation, victimisation, oppression and the male gaze. Also, the images are marketed towards younger girls, showing them what they may aspire to:

...a teen girl can feel empowered by choosing to lap dance, strip tease, strut it, flash it, flaunt it, and give it away, always in charge though because she’s an autonomous agent who is having fun. In addition, because she’s choosing, and because it’s fun and even pleasurable, voyeurs are not exploiters; they’re admirers. (Lamb 2010, 301).

Thus, in this instance, an individual girls’ sense of sexual empowerment may reproduce certain institutional and cultural limitations in the broader sense of female sexuality, even though on the individual level, they may be or feel very empowering. However, Peterson (2010) argued that merely dismissing an individual girls’ perceptions and experiences of sexual empowerment, no matter the influence, as being misconceived or “false” would be invalidating and thus work in opposition to empowerment and its goals: “If we tell girls that they cannot even trust their own perceptions of enjoyable and empowered sexuality, then they are left with no compass to point the way toward healthier sexuality” (2010, 308-309). On the other hand, Nicola Gavey (2012, 722) argued for sexual empowerment as being too flexible and conceptually flabby to be useful in these debates:

A persistent dilemma seems to be how to regard and respond to articulations of empowerment as an individual state of being when it arises in relation to cultural norms and practices that have problematic implications for girls and women collectively.

Instead, she claimed that the lens should be shifted to looking at the cultural conditions of possibility for girl's sexuality, embodiment and relationships rather than focusing on if particular acts or individuals are empowered. By abandoning *empowerment* as the umbrella term for all the positive and active dimensions of girls' choices, actions and so on, and not conflating desire, pleasure, satisfaction and enjoyment with *empowerment*, Gavey (2012) posited that this notion can be reserved for other processes that indeed may promote enriching opportunities for women and girls in general. "Feminism, as a change oriented theory and practice, cannot be limited to privileging individual expressions of contentment above the collective interests of women and the political drive for equality" (Gavey 2012, 720). Furthermore, Gavey (2012) argued that in order for feminism to make a sustainable difference, it must of course be willing to listen to a variety of voices, values and views, However, it must at the same time hold on to the challenge of a politics of change. Thus arguably, individual empowerment should not be left unquestioned, especially not when it is opposed to the promotion of empowerment for all, or many women. As Nina Åkestam argued (2018), feminism is not about making women feel good for the moment but rather it is about changing society so that your gender does not determine how you may feel in the long run.

It is not at all strange that the one who lessens their wrinkles with fillers or exercises for a body that better resembles the societies beauty ideals feels better. That women are judged by their looks, and that beautiful women get advantages, is one of patriarchy's lynchpins. The better feeling is thus not a result of more freedom, but that the person has appended oneself. That is why the action is not feminist, even if the person who does it calls itself feminist. It does not mean that the person doing it may not call themselves feminists. It also does not mean that the person cannot do a bunch of other feminist acts in their lives. It means that an act must be put in a greater context in order to assess what it leads to. It also means that personal wellbeing is never a good measure of how the structures in a society in general look. (Åkestam 2018, 36 – translated from Swedish).

Thus, the definition of empowerment and sexual empowerment is divided in opposing notions, however, to untangle these different views we might want to take a few steps back.

Originally, empowerment was formulated and theorised as consisting of three distinct, yet inseparable, components (see Rappaport 1987; Lee 2001):

- The intrapersonal: meaning self-efficacy

- The interpersonal: meaning the coming together of others and collaboratively analysing imbalances and power blocks in a critical manner
- The behavioural: acting towards eliminating the identified imbalances and blocks

Empowerment was thus articulated as an on-going iterative process that necessitated all of the above components, not as an individual state of being or achievement. However, since its formulation and perhaps especially in the last decades, the term empowerment has become superficial and reduced mainly to the first component, the individual sense of empowerment. As such, the other two collaborative and action-oriented components have become eclipsed and empowerment has therefore become depoliticised:

When stripped of critical consciousness and social action to correct system injustices, empowerment is quickly distorted into a self-improvement discourse that instructs individuals: to identify themselves, rather than surrounding social conditions, as the problem to be fixed”...”and to compete against others rather than join with them. (Bay-Cheng 2012, 714).

Empowerment, as originally thought of, aims to transform the social environment, rather than the individuals residing in it, in order to uphold the rights, enable well-being and meet the needs of said individuals. As such, empowerment necessitates an intersectional and comprehensive perspective of social problems, including social, material, political as well as economical circumstances, which all shape the choices and behaviours of individuals. Bay-Cheng (2012, 714) claimed that “empowerment is not forged in solitude”, instead it’s the provocative and heterogeneous relationships based on different experiences, perspectives and objectives that may lead to productive collaborations and ultimately fuel an individuals’ sense of competence and confidence.

When it comes to sexual empowerment, Bay-Cheng (2012) argued that sexuality should be kept in the social context and that sexual resources are not the only ones pertaining to sexual life and relationships. Instead, the list of obstructions to sexual agency should also include other contextual factors such as: material circumstances, the home environment, professional and academic opportunities as well as the various structural biases that may be opposing the individual. All these factors do play a part in affecting the sexual choices that a girl or woman may make (including whether or not she even has any choice): “Private acts are never wholly private; intimate choices are always profoundly social” (Fine and McClelland 2006, 304). For those that lack independence or resources, sexuality may become a way of access (Bay-Cheng 2010), although arguably, that may also be occurring even for those with more than enough resources. However,

due to the unequal division of resources between the sexes (for instance wage-gaps), women are in a greater sense disadvantaged than men, which then “also reduce women’s leverage in negotiations with a sexual partner on whom she may depend for necessities like money, food, housing, or even transportation to a job.” (Bay-Cheng 2012, 716).

Even though there are initiatives and programs that aim to boost girls’ agency and providing them with the tools and skills required in order to speak up and say what they want, Bay-Cheng (2012) argued that such programs also make certain assumptions that should be disputed. First of all, it assumes that girls already know what it is that they want, second, that what they want is a singular thing, and third, that the girls are put at risk merely based on their own inadequacies because they have not learned how to protect themselves or to be assertive enough. However, these assumptions are not only naïve but also harmful as they further put the sole responsibility of their sexuality and well-being on the girls themselves, completely overlooking the social context. As an adolescent girl in an interview pointed out: “I mean, if that were the case, that a guy would believe ‘no’ then there wouldn’t be those rapes that you hear about. There wouldn’t be all that stuff. Obviously ‘no’ doesn’t mean ‘no’ to guys” (Bay-Cheng et al. 2011, 1183). The problem is thus not that girls and women do not know how to say “No”, or that they shouldn’t still be encouraged to do so, but rather, that their “No’s” must also be backed up with social and material capital in order to make people listen and accept their “No’s”. Hence, sexual empowerment necessitates more than just self-efficacy.

In this story, empowerment as a concept is understood based on its original formulation, as an action-oriented endeavour towards social justice, not as an individual project that may be completely detached from the rest of society.

Sexual capital and commodity

Although in Pierre Bourdieu’s theory regarding *cultural capital*, he did not explicitly mention the notion of *sexual capital*, this has been raised by others (e.g. Chancer 1998; Caputi 2003; Martin and George 2006), thus allowing for discussions regarding the prevailing coupling of youth and physical beauty with that of sexual power. Arguably, the ideas of beauty are culturally constructed and thus not innate perceptions, they may therefore change over time and also be strategically undermined (Schwaiger 2009). One’s sexual capital may be very constricted according to a specific cultures’ ideals of sex and beauty. In the western world the heteronormative ideals are (still) very much focused on a slim, young, beautiful woman with light skin. Therefore (the few) women who fit into this narrow categorisation may experience a higher sexual capital than others, but that capital is nevertheless fleeting: getting older is a natural fact and after a certain age sexual capital will automatically be lost, as long as the dominating ideal is to be young: “If sexiness, if attractiveness, if vibrancy of life itself becomes

associated mostly or only with the bodies of younger people in a given society, then “winners” in this case eventually all become “losers”” (Chancer 1998, 122).

Lynn Chancer (1998, 117-118) argued that physical beauty, or looks, becomes valuable in three interrelating ways when viewed as a phenomenon: as a commodity (Marx); “looks can be taken to signify a valued possession; it is a commodity, a characteristic or “thing” that one either personally does or does not “have”, according to a given society’s criteria of value”, as a form of capital (Bourdieu): “clearly capital of the bodily kind, which is most relevant to beauty and looks, can be increasingly *worked at* and *worked for*: looks are not merely ascribed but more and more frequently *achieved*.”, and as both, simultaneously capitalised and commodified. Furthermore, she also focused on the use of a woman as status for men and claimed that masculine power, when achieved, included not only prestige and money but also access to “beautiful” women’s bodies: “a reward especially to be expected for those possessing what Connell dubs “hegemonic masculinity”” (Chancer 1998, 115). In this sense, women may possess sexual capital, however it is used by men as a symbolic capital of power and thus for women this is defined through non-sovereign terms: “women are forced into constituting a major form of capital: what we might call here “sexual capital”” (Chancer 1998, 261). And because she sees this system as a focal point of sexism, sexual capital is thus viewed as a disempowering resource, rather than an empowering one. Drawing on Chancer, Bernadette Barton (2002, 600) wrote: “With the sexual and the sexist as “closely intertwined” as they are in our culture, it is difficult to assess what is truly freeing and what is subtly undermining of women’s long-term health and happiness.” Therefore, what an individual may find liberating can in the same sense be generative and suggestive of heteronormative and institutionalised gender constraints. Thus, sexual empowerment in the short term, is not necessarily empowering in the long run (Barton 2002).

Moreover, when only focusing on sexuality as a form of capital for women, the overall structural inequalities that exist remain unchallenged, as if gendered power was merely enacted through sexuality, which of course, is not the case.

But even more than simply leaving other aspects of sexism undiscussed, the focus on sexuality may also undermine the possibility of enacting systemic change. The psychological investment in the equation of sexual emancipation with feminism too easily allows for the idea that substantial change is already occurring. (Wilkins 2004, 347).

Yet, this form of empowerment, of gaining liberation, may be psychologically benefitting some individuals seeing as how it allows for identification as gender progressive, as well as offering sexual gains. By interpreting a transformed sexuality, subverting the dominant notions of the sexually passive female as

essentially feminist may thus give individuals a notion of moral superiority and a justification for their own lifestyles based on moral and political grounds (Wilkins 2004).

Regardless, sexual capital, much like the concept of empowerment itself, must be contextualised as argued in the previous section. Thus, sexual capital is in this story critically regarded as a fleeting and unsustainable notion which perhaps may seem to benefit certain individuals, yet, in the grander scheme of social structures still functions within the disciplinary Patriarchal Panopticon: as long as being “sexy” is as narrowly defined as it still is, and as long as being “sexy” is perceived as a girl or woman’s’ most important resource, this form of capital cannot be said to be empowering in the fullest sense of the term.

Choice feminism

The term *Choice feminism* was coined by Linda Hirshman (2005) to name a pervasive belief in the United States that women are free to make whatever choice they wish thanks to the liberating women’s movement. However, the rise of choice feminism coincided with the swift expansion of consumer choices beginning in the 1980s (Zeisler 2016). Drawing on a feminist discourse in order to sell products is not a new idea and at its core is the notion that female consumers may be empowered by the consumer choices they make. Focus is however not on what those choices are, but on the choice itself: that women *have the right to choose*.

The view that today all choices are feminist can be invoked to support decisions to wear lipstick and high heels, to participate in *Girls Gone Wild!*, to sleep with men, to enjoy pornography, to not have children, to hire a maid, or to adopt a gendered division of labor. (Ferguson 2010, 247)

Seeing as consumption has always been associated with status, the use of consumption as a means of liberation for women has been present in advertising for decades, and the success of this has centred on the effective coupling of power and status with that of liberation. Instead of merely being consumer goods, exercise regimens, beauty products and so on became liberating achievements as narcissism and elitism merged to become appealing enough to forget all about the political, and focus solely on the personal (Douglas 1994). “The representations of choice in a time of tacit postfeminism translated neatly into what could be called “empowertising” – an advertising tactic of lightly invoking feminism in acts of exclusively independent consuming” (Zeisler 2016, 19). Andi Zeisler (2016) further explored *Empowertising*, starting off with the notion of empowerment and exemplifying this with a satirical article called ‘Women Now Empowered by Everything a Woman Does’ published in 2003 in *The Onion*. This explained how empowerment comes in the most trivial and mundane forms; buying shoes or cereal are just as empowering as protesting for equality (*obviously?*). The shoe-

reference was further explored by Gill (2008, 37):

Stiletto heels, long imbued with sexual meanings, have acquired a particular symbolic potency in this postfeminist moment. The fact that they are difficult to walk in, even painful, adds to this by drawing attention to the valuing of sexual attractiveness over and above freedom of movement.

By taking the Wonderbra as an example, Zeisler (2016) argued how this product, though sold since the 1960s, had a huge increase in sales after the infamous billboards in 1994 featuring Eva Herzigova. This was not merely because of the tongue-in-check copy (“Hello Boys”), but also due to the fact that feminism was taken into account with the logic of “awareness”: “This would *seem* sexist if we didn’t know better, but we do know better, and because women *know* we know better, this is, in fact, empowering” (Zeisler 2016, 20). This form of rhetoric and reflexive approach that advertisers learned to adopt is arguably efficient seeing as it allows them to “disarm viewer resistance to a male gaze carrying meanings of submissiveness or subordination” (Goldman, Heath and Smith 1991, 349). In their analysis of ads from the magazine *Mademoiselle*, Goldman et al. (1991) noted that many ads used feminist signifiers in order to adjust the presence and meaning of the male gaze (what Goldman (1992) later called *commodity feminism*). However, although the portrayals have altered due to their appropriations of feminism, Stephanie O’Donohoe (2000, 82) claimed: “we are still encouraged to play the card of our appearance, enhancing the one dealt by nature through the constant purchase and use of commodities.”

Seeing as Herzigova and millions of consumers chose to wear the Wonderbra and therefore, arguably, exhibiting sexual agency, how could that not be claimed as feminist according to that logic? Well, as Zeisler (2016) continued to argue: even though Herzigova herself claimed in an interview that her campaign empowered women, she at the same time told stories of how she was continuously being asked out by Hollywood Execs when trying to shift from modelling to acting. Thus, the empowering notion of the Wonderbra campaign seemingly did nothing to challenge the habitual act of sexualising women.

Empowertising, Zeisler (2016) further argued, builds upon the idea that any choice a self-declared feminist makes, is a feminist choice, and at its core is the ego: always emphasising on the individual. Countless advertising messages have been and are, about encouraging women to consider consumption as a personal step towards equality, instead of simply being consumer choices with no political agenda. Furthermore, advertising to women is pitched to solve problems, even such that the women themselves were not aware of until the ads shamed and/or alerted them about it.

However, in 2014 a new phenomenon entered the stage: *Femvertising*. Finally, ads that did not make women feel horrible about themselves were starting to get traction, such as Always' campaign "like a girl". Yet, as Zeisler (2016, 28) claimed, it is still important to remember that advertisements main purpose is not to reflect the nuances of social movements:

Empowertising and femvertising are both ways to talk about the business of selling to women without conflating examples of that business with actual feminism. They're a gateway toward learning more about specific issues that impact women and girls; maybe they're a way to discover alternatives to mainstream products. But celebrating the ads themselves simply celebrates advertisers' skill at co-opting women's movements and selling them back to us – and then rewards us for buying in.

Similarly, Åkestam (2018) wrote about feminism in the fashion industry, referring to the many companies that have seemingly been competing with each other for who can produce the most t-shirts with feminist slogans. However, this *T-shirt feminism* is not actual feminism: "On the contrary it is a chance for institutions, companies and individuals to be perceived as modern without having to question the ruling system" (Åkestam 2018, 33-34 – translated from Swedish). She claimed that *T-shirt feminism* is evidence that as long as one calls oneself a feminist, one may avoid follow-up questions regarding one's actual actions towards equality, while on the other hand, the one that does question and problematise instead gets accused of being a killjoy. Just because one is for equality, does not necessarily mean one is feminist; being for equality may mean many different things such as thinking that equality sounds great in theory, but not believing that it can actually be done in practice, or that one would like to see equality, but would rather have someone else making it happen (Åkestam 2018).

However, according to Claire Snyder-Hall (2010), *choice feminism* is not about passing judgement on women's choices, whatever they may be, but rather giving them the freedom to choose for themselves, and in accordance with the third-wave feminist approach, respecting self-determination and pluralism: "While critics of *choice feminism* rightly problematize some of the term's implications, the concept itself entails a commitment to three important principles essential to feminism—pluralism, self-determination, and nonjudgmentalness." (Snyder-Hall 2010, 256). The third-wave approach is based on assumptions regarding women not sharing the same experiences, a common gender identity and that they also interpret similar experiences in different ways, thus recognising that women in different subject positions also have different perspectives. Furthermore, Snyder-Hall (2010) argued that in order to understand issues of sexuality, they must be contextualised within the feminist movement where

tensions between, sometimes, opposing principles of sexual liberation versus gender equality have long been debated. Nevertheless, Gill (2008, 42) maintained that by emphasising upon choice, one might thus circumvent the important yet difficult issues regarding how the socially constructed beauty ideals are internalised: “A crucial aspect of both the obsessional preoccupation with the body and the shift from objectification to sexual subjectification is that this is framed in advertising through a discourse of playfulness, freedom and, above all, choice.”

According to Lori Jo Marso (2006, 114), “the demands of femininity”, i.e. the socially constructed sexual desires and internalised beliefs regarding gender roles and identities, is something that women must constantly manage and deal with: “what women are taught to desire also denies them their freedom. The very substance of what makes a woman feminine is what holds her in bondage.” Thus, even women embracing feminism may find their attempts of fighting for equality to be blocked by the gender norms forced upon them, as well as their own feminine attractions to things that support patriarchy. Moreover, Snyder-Hall (2010) argued that one cannot simply look at only the final choice made seeing as that does not necessarily say anything about the possible struggle to balance competing priorities, such as sexual pleasure and gender equality, which took place. Also, calling all the decisions that women make choices is conflating seeing as many of these decisions may be based on economic necessities, religious beliefs and so on. Lastly, she claimed that the rhetoric of “choice” means shifting the focus away from the societal structures and cultural traditions and on to the individual choice-maker. However, feminism being in essence about the transformation of patriarchal cultures and societies means that feminism requires the options available for women to be expanded in order for them to be truly self-determining, but by using the rhetoric of “choice”, one obscures this point entirely. “Women should not have to choose between work and motherhood, respect and sexual pleasure” (Snyder-Hall 2010, 256).

Furthermore, Åkestam (2018) argued that feminism is not something that one is, but rather something that one does; as a movement, feminism demands that we take action towards equality, and not just by wearing a t-shirt saying “Radical Feminist”. After all, feminism, the movement, is more important than feminist, the individual, though we often seem to forget this.

To reach something so radically different from all the societies we know of today demands action, rather than definitions of individuals. That loads of people call themselves feminists does nothing for equality, if they through their actions are not also trying to change the world. (Åkestam 2018, 35-36 – translated from Swedish)

Choice feminism may also be linked to what Åkestam (2018) discussed as the quest to get more people to call themselves feminists. However, if everyone is a feminist then everything is feminist, and thus the bar has been greatly lowered for what can actually be considered a feminist act. In the feminist debate there have recently been defences for basically all kinds of choices: from dieting to surgical procedures to being economically dependent of men with the motivation that it makes the person who is doing it feel good. If that person also happens to be a woman then the act is automatically feminist. According to Åkestam (2018, 36 – translated from Swedish) this is wrongly thought because feminism “is not all women’s collective opinions, but an ideology with theoretical basis”. Therefore, *choice feminism* should not be conflated with actual feminist acts – all choices that women make are not automatically feminist. This story seeks to decouple the feminist individual from the feminist movement and place the focus on the latter.

If we want to see patriarchy fall in our lifetime we all need to do considerably more, and that is where we should start ransacking ourselves. It is not enough to shout slogans while at the same time staying comfortably within the norms and gender roles that have been set up for us. We have to stretch the lines with our thoughts and our actions. The important question is not if someone is a feminist, or a good feminist, but what each of us can do here and now, today, that makes the world more equal. (Åkestam 2018, 38-39 – translated from Swedish).

Postfeminist advertising and Sexual Agency

The F word, speaking of course of Feminism, has become more and more popularised and utilised in advertising in the past decades, however as Lazar (2006) claimed, it is important to note that the relationship between advertising and feminism is not clear-cut; ads in this discourse are seldom progressive in a genuine sense and they instead use feminist assumptions as commercial strategies.

Postfeminist features have been acknowledged in popular culture and media, especially in the western context, but also globally (Lazar 2006). Germaine Greer (1999) demonstrated how, even though the women’s rights movement has indeed developed and women have gained more ground, a discrimination and exploitation of women still perseveres in many basic areas of life and society (politics, marketing, sex, to name a few). Myra Macdonald (1995) wrote about various representations, or rather myths as she referred to them, of women that have circulated in print and visual media in the 20th century. O’Donohoe (2000, 82) discussed how advertisers have attempted to use feminism for their own gain, ultimately turning it into merely a style or attitude that may be communicated through consumption, claiming that: “One example of advertisers’ attempts to

appropriate feminism is the trend towards presenting the female body, and female sexuality, as not simply the object of the male gaze, but as a site for women's own pleasure and empowerment." In a similar manner, Mary Talbot (2005, 168) rather cynically, but to the exquisite point, claimed that: "Liberal feminism in the marketplace has both provided a justification for self-indulgence ('Because I'm worth it') and transformed a politics into a lifestyle accessory." While Judith Williamson (2003) discussed retro-sexist imagery as she called it, in contemporary advertising, arguing that this type of sexism both operates freely within the present style, while also suggesting that power relations are exclusively related to the bedroom, and not to the social or political spheres of life. Indeed, the sexism portrayed in contemporary ads seem to have gained fuel from the good old days before feminism became popular, but instead of embracing the feminist spirits of the 60's and 70's, it seems to do the opposite;

rather than embodying sexual liberation, today's fetishistic imagery provides a language for expressing both sexism and, perhaps, the pain and rage of a sex war which at heart is about social, not sexual power. These ubiquitous images translate the social as sexual: showing gender power struggles nakedly in every sense. (Williamson 2003, no page number)

Gill (2003) in a similar way addressed the popularisation of highly sexualising commodities such as clothes with sexy and objectifying slogans plastered all over them (*has anyone missed the t-shirts with prints such as "porn star" on them, or sweatpants with the words "juicy" written on the back?*), and questioned how young women not only want to *pay* for such clothes but indeed *choose* to present themselves in that way when merely decades ago, women fought for the rights to *not* be objectified and reduced to sex objects. These "updated" representations of women's bodies are, she claimed, clearly a response to feminism and thus potentially more harmful than their predecessors.

In the context of consumption and marketing, the feminist movement has thus seemingly had a setback in recent decades, which undoubtedly also influences other social and political spheres in society (consider for instance the many recent debates on *rape culture* that have blossomed all over the world). However, Gill (2003) argued that it may perhaps not be that simple, that a backlash is merely one way of looking at it while another paints a different picture: the construction of a new femininity which is arranged around sexual agency, a shift away from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification with active, desiring and knowing subjects choosing freely to objectify themselves seeing as it suits their "liberated" interests.

Gill (2007) further claimed that the ad that perhaps best captured the tipping point, the start of this shift, was the famous 1994 Wonderbra ad for Playtex

by Trevor Beattie. In this ad, the model Eva Herzigova is displayed wearing only a Wonderbra, gazing down smilingly at it, with the caption "Hello Boys". This humorous yet objectifying representation placed Herzigova not only as an object for male desire, but also as a subject, actively using and playing on her sexual power. Furthermore, Robert Goldman (1992) argued that during this time, the early 90s, advertising was faced with three different challenges: first off, the increase of "sign fatigue" (or desensitization), secondly the increase of "viewer scepticism", especially concerning the younger viewers who at this point were more media-savvy consumers than the previous generations and the first ones to grow up with PC's, cell phones and such. This made advertising adapt to their knowing and scepticism of ads, and begin producing ads that made fun of the themselves and their status as ads (*irony, anyone?*). Third and lastly, ads also needed to begin addressing the feminist critiques that had been raised for decades. Goldman (1992) claimed that the response to these critiques was to develop "commodity feminism" i.e. the simultaneous incorporation of feminism's cultural power and critique as well as the domesticising of it. Commodity feminism may look different in different ads, but the idea of these ads is to appease the anger and frustration women feel and place advertising as an ally, just as disgruntled as women are. For instance, ads incorporating gender reversal, or revenge, or ads that seem to want a reconciliation between the conservative view of femininity and the feminist goals of liberation such as independence, financial autonomy and career.

These suggestively new female representations that have bloomed since the Wonderbra ad, thus mark a significant shift within advertising's portrayals of women. But how is this shift to be understood? Is it empowering that women are displayed as active subjects in regards to their own sexuality? Is this perhaps the way to equality, is this shift to be interpreted positively and celebrated? Some concerns have been raised, including Gill (2003, 2007) who argued that there are certain issues that need be addressed regarding this shift. First, the exclusions: *obviously*, not all women are "allowed" to be constructed as having sexual agency; older, bigger, and women who do not quite fit the "beauty norms" are still very much excluded from this heteronormative "sexy power discourse" portrayed:

Others excluded from the empowering, pleasurable address of midriff advertising are older women, disabled women, fat women and any woman who is unable to live up to the increasingly narrow standards of female beauty and sex appeal that are normatively required. These women are never accorded sexual subjecthood. The figure of the 'unattractive' woman who seeks a sexual partner remains one of the most vilified in popular culture. (Gill 2007, no page number).

Second, the things that are rendered invisible; for instance, psychic terrors of not being admired and gaining validation based on appearance, as well as “the fear of “losing one’s looks”...”and there is a very real physical terror which may accompany presentation of self as an object of desire – the fear of rape and violence by misogynist males” (Goldman 1992, 123). Lastly, the notion of pleasing oneself and choosing freely, which does not account for the fact that the way women are “choosing freely” to objectify themselves is unnervingly similar to the way they have *already* been objectified for decades through the male gaze i.e. slim, young, hairless etc. Thus, she instead posited that this new sexually active woman means a shift away from the external male gaze and into the self-policing narcissistic gaze, which arguably also means that the objectification and exploitation is deeper seeing as it has become internalised;

This representational practice offers women the promise of power by becoming an object of desire. It endows women with the status of active subjecthood so that they can then 'choose' to become sex objects because this suits their 'liberated' interests. In this way, sexual subjectification can be presented not as something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects. One of the most disturbing aspects of this profound shift is that it makes critique much more difficult. (Gill 2003, no page number).

This shift was also discussed and pinpointed by Machin and Thornborrow (2006), who presented three shifts in total, that have occurred in magazines, ads etc. which can allow for an understanding of why the discourses of sex as power and freedom, have become the core values when portraying women. The first shift they called “Sex as Dangerous”, and this included notions of sex as something taboo and threatening which therefore was used so as to challenge conservative ideals. The second shift, “Sex as Non-Domestic”, began with a revolutionary revamp of women’s magazines in the 60’s when women’s sexuality started to be included as well. For the third shift called “Sex as Choice and Lifestyle”, Machin and Thornborrow (2006) wrote about the increase of discourses of choice and lifestyle, and that the discourses of sex as power must be understood through these discourses seeing as in modern societies, how we act is not something pre-defined anymore; our behaviour is no longer prescribed to traditions, but to lifestyle choices: “This is a new way of expressing identity, created by marketing experts in the 1970s” (Machin and Thornborrow 2006, 176).

By using contemporary examples of ads, Gill (2008) examined and proposed how agency and empowerment should be understood, concluding that *female sexual agency* may actually be just another technology of regulation and discipline. Machin and Thornborrow (2006, 174) similarly claimed when

exploring the international magazines *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* that “sex is used as the primary index of power and freedom for women.” Indeed, the only shift that seems to not have occurred between the *sex object* and the *sexual subject* is the “sex” part; being sexy seems to still be very much the aim, the role, and the essence of female representations. Women may be free to buy whatever shoes or cereal they like, but are they free of having to be sexy? As an addition to Anne Cronin’s “compulsory individuality” (2000), Gill (2008) argued that “compulsory (sexual) agency” might be added as a necessary feature of postfeminist, neoliberal subjectivity. Indeed, the “choice” that is implied in such ads, is arguably a more advanced form of oppression: “Not only are women objectified (as they were before), but through sexual subjectification in midriff advertising they must also now understand their own objectification as pleasurable and self-chosen” (Gill 2008, 45). Thus, instead of being understood as sex objects, which are *done to*, these sexual subjects freely “choose” to *become* sex objects, thus they are *doing it* by their own accord. However, even though Gill (2008) argued that this difference makes critique more difficult seeing as the mode of power has shifted from external oppression to internal discipline and regulation, it could still be criticised seeing as the “outcome” is the same; whether it is done to them or by them, they are still *sex objects*:

When we’re thinking about sex objects, we’re thinking about the object-subject dichotomy; subjects act, objects are acted upon. So even if you become the perfect object, the perfect sex object, you are perfectly subordinate because that position will always be acted on. So there is not power in being a sex object when you think about it logically. (Caroline Heldman on TedTalk)

This discourse of choice and *female sexual agency* has also been dubbed (hetero)sex-positive postfeminism by Sarah Projansky (2001, 80), who argued that in celebrating the male gaze, it only further cements heterosexuality within postfeminism as depicted in media: “Advertising, in particular, contributes to this version of postfeminism, celebrating women’s ‘equality’ and their access to ‘choice’ (feminism)”. Advertising has arguably sought to connect femininity to feminism as a way of making them substitutable (Projansky 2001), thus turning feminism into a comfortable style instead of a “radical” ideology, or in other words: “real” feminism has been replaced with Marketplace feminism (Zeisler 2016) and Choice feminism (Hirshman 2005) in the commercialised setting that ads reside in.

Midriff

The midriff, which is the part of the body from the bottom of the rib cage down to the top of the pubis bone, has according to Gill (2007) been the site of erotic

interest for a long time, especially in many non-Western societies. However, in the western world, the midriff and its rise in popularity may be traced back to the late 80s and the pierced belly button of Madonna which at that time was featured in dance routines as erotic display. During the 90s, the popularity of the midriff was central to women's fashion with crop tops and low jeans (take for instance Britney Spears, the Spice Girls and other famous belly buttons that us, born in the 80s, grew up with). Pierced navels were common, as was the "whale-back", a term for an exposed G-string on the lower back, not to forget all the various elaborate tattoos that often also decorated this part of the body at the time. In fact, this style was so widespread that the "midriffs" had become a general term that advertisers employed (Quart 2003). Gill (2007) claimed that midriffs could be understood in relation to "a sensibility characterised by a specific constellation of attitudes towards the body, sexual expression and gender relations." This style, although obviously sexualised, is different from the traditional sexual objectification which the previous generation of feminists fought against.

The midriff, as a young, heterosexual, active and attractive woman, knows what she wants and is always in the mood for sex. Unlike her passive predecessor, the *sex object*, she is deliberately acting on her sexual powers, taunting, tantalising. This sexually assertive woman provided a new construction of femininity (Macdonald 1995) and according to Gill (2007, 2008) there are four themes that are central to midriff advertising: (1) The shift from sexual objectification to subjectification: Instead of the deep-seated representations of women as *sex objects* through the assumed and omnipresent male gaze, the midriffs are active subjects, choosing freely to objectify themselves seeing as they are "liberated" and free to do so. (2) Emphasis on the body: in midriff advertising the female body is central and functions as the main source of capital that must be controlled and well kept; possessing a sexy body is a key source of identity, much more important than any other attributes or skills that a woman might have. (3) Emphasis on empowerment: this theme is not solely related to the midriff but is part of a larger shift where women have been promised confidence through buying this or that product, usually with inspiring slogans such as "Because you're worth it", "Discover the power of femininity" or "Empower your eyes" – all of which use a feminist discourse to offer up a special kind of power; sexual power. However, this form of empowerment is always coupled with an attractive young body and thus the power on offer here is the ability to attract males and perhaps even become the envy of females. In other words, this is what Lazar (2006) noted as *power femininity*, and it signifies a postfeminist notion of women having achieved equality and need not struggle any more. (4) Distinct discourse of agency and choice: arguably this theme is related to all others seeing as how the shift towards subjectification, the sexy body preoccupation as well as notions of being empowered by buying a Wonder bra for instance, are all framed as choices that women are free to make. Moreover, Gill (2007) noted that the agentic capacities

of the midriffs are not only confined to their aesthetic focus and physical beauty, but their power is directly linked to consumerism; “the notions of choice and autonomy as they are articulated within advertising are systematically eradicating any space within which we might think about ourselves as social beings. In short, any notion of cultural or political influence is disavowed.” Instead, within midriff advertising, the individualism presented is one in which women are completely autonomous agents who are no longer bound by any gender inequalities, power imbalances, no glass ceilings and no victim blaming.

The pendulum swing from a view of power as something both obvious and overbearing which acted upon entirely docile subjects, towards a notion of women as completely free agents who just ‘please themselves’ does not serve feminist or cultural understandings well. It cannot account for why the look that young women seek to achieve is so similar: if it were the outcome of everyone's individual, idiosyncratic preferences, surely there would be greater diversity, rather than growing homogeneity organised around a slim, toned, hairless body. (Gill 2007, no page number)

As discussed earlier under the headline *Choice Feminism*, the notion of choice is not only a significant theme in midriff advertising but according to Gill (2007) it has become a “postfeminist mantra” with different ideas of women pleasing themselves, doing various things such as getting breast implants, injecting their faces and bodies with various chemicals, posing for men’s magazines etc., for themselves. Even though some women of course do choose these things, it is still important to keep in mind that such choices and decisions are not made within vacuums or within social structures and conditions that they have created themselves; “to account for such decisions using only a discourse of free choice is to oversimplify both in terms of analysis and political response. We need urgently to complicate our understandings of choice and agency in this context” (Gill 2007, no page number).

Furthermore, Gill (2008, 42) claimed that: “Women are presented as not seeking men’s approval but as pleasing themselves, and, in doing so, they ‘just happen’ to win men’s admiration.”. This paradoxical notion suggests that there indeed is no difference between what women want, or what men want of them. However, as Dee Amy-Chinn (2006) argued, the liberation discourse of postfeminism that allows women to use their sexual powers do not hold well against extensive research showing that heterosexual discourses are yet to challenge any assumptions regarding male privilege. Even though there are not necessarily contradictions between what women or men want in (hetero)sexual relations, the assumption that they want the same things and have identical desires are questionable (Gill 2008). Additionally, what women may want, what

their sexual desires may be, are not actually in focus within midriff advertising. Rather, the practice of sexual subjectification, being both a very specific and exclusionary practice, is also disregarding sexual pleasure which itself is irrelevant within these ads; "it is the power of sexual attractiveness that is important. Indeed, the two are frequently and deliberately confused in midriff advertising" (Gill 2007).

Furthermore, another significant change to point out in midriff advertising is the erasure of violence (Goldman 1992) in such ads. While the passive sex object had to deal with groups of men hovering over her, having her body chopped up into separate pieces, being bound, gagged and basically treated as an object in every possible sense of the word, the midriff does not seem to be portrayed in such hostile and violent situations. Gill (2007) exemplified with an ad where a young woman wearing only a bra, is on the street raising her hands so as to hail for a cab, and the caption read: "I bet I can get a cab on New Years Eve 1999". Gill (2007) argued that, as usual, the exposed breasts functioned in order to grab the attention of males, however, such a representation completely disregards any possibility of the actual violence that a woman may experience when being scantily clad, out alone late at night, not to mention being in the midst of several men who, presumably (being New Year's Eve and all), have been drinking heavily. However, just because the violence is omitted from such ads, does not mean it has disappeared from reality:

the depiction of heterosexual relations as playful, and women as having as much - if not more - power as men in negotiating them is at odds with the picture presented in most research, as well as in statistics which depict extraordinarily sobering picture of the levels of violence by men against women. (Gill 2007, no page number).

Instead, it seems that within midriff advertising, the potential danger and violence that may exist is simply disregarded and exchanged for a laissez-faire attitude and fun approach, because what is the worst that can happen? Well, according to midriff advertising, absolutely nothing. Such ads would have people believe that women may go out half naked at night and not be harassed by a plethora of men, that they indeed are free to do whatever they want, look however they want, and not even be blamed if something bad ever were to happen; which, again, it never would in this fantasy of feminism and gender equality. Hence, while the sex object and graphic ads that came before seemed to glorify violence, the midriff ads seem to do the opposite by simply removing any and all notion of it. However, both of these approaches are problematic and potentially harmful. As we know, women are still time and time again questioned and blamed when they are raped; "what did you wear?", "how much did you drink?", "why didn't you scream?"¹⁶ – are still

seen as valid questions to ask rape victims in court, therefore implying that the victims (in most cases women) are responsible for getting raped, rather than the rapists (in most cases men) being responsible for raping them. But then again, rape is not even possible in the world of midriff advertising, seeing as midriffs are always up for sex.

Normativity

While the shift discussed above has spawned critiques, it should also be viewed from a more encouraging stance. In order to do so, we may want to look at Butler's ideas on gender being performative: a cultural fiction including various gender-specific norms and how they are broadly and practically enacted in the construction of a gendered subject. Through enculturation these performances become naturalised, therefore preserving the heteronormativity, however, there are possibilities for bodily resistance against such norms. Butler (1990, 1993) claimed that by reiterating the governing norms they may be maintained, thus subversion may be possible by working the weakness in the norm, i.e. reiterating imperfectly in order to gradually dissolve it.

Moreover, these ideas may be combined with those of Shannon Sullivan (2000) who claimed that habits inscribe the embodied self-in-the-world as various forms of conduct. Habit is what structures and constitutes bodily existence, and the gendered habits are then constructed by cultural norms and conventions, thus they distinguish the bodily conduct. Habits are also productive in that practicing them may allow for agency, self- as well as cultural transformation. In a sense, both Butler (1993) and Sullivan (2000) argued that norms or habits require reiteration, and that they can be performed, ever so slightly, in different ways so as to gradually lead to transformation in the grander scheme of cultural norms. Additionally, norms are idealised versions of themselves, thus perfect reiterations are impossible and every enactment is flawed. The ways in which we embody our culture and its norms is also what reconfigures it, and by ever so slightly re-tracing our steps of enactment we thus also alter them through these habitual engagements. In other words: "the subject is conceived as subject(ed) to cultural norms that are in turn subjected to individual variations in their performance by bodies, bodies who are aged, gendered, classed, and differentially valued according to these norms" (Schwaiger 2009, 277).

By portraying women in ads in ways that in some sense vary from the heteronormative and habitual ways that they are displayed, this could in turn lead to more significant transformations in time. By visually enacting an agency, one that for the *sex object* was not present, the midriff of contemporary advertising may very well be a significant, or imperfect enough, variation of the norm/habit of female portrayals. However, whether or not this imperfection is interpreted as

indeed a variation of the heteronormative hegemony and therefore as a small step towards gender equality, will be examined.

Dear reader, as we have seen, there are several important concepts, notions and theories to consider when examining the phenomenon of *female sexual agency* in contemporary advertising. In the next chapter of this story, we shall see how this examination was done, which goggles and tools were used for this exploration, and what that may entail.

CHAPTER IV

Methodology, or: How to frame a story

During the fall/winter of 2016-2017, 38 Swedish women, all categorising themselves as various types of feminists, participated in a study about female portrayals in ads. This part of the story will describe under what circumstances, and how the study was conducted.

Have some perspective

“Man is defined as a human being and woman as a female – whenever she behaves as a human being she is said to imitate the male.”
(Simone de Beauvoir)

As has been put forth, this story is based on a Poststructuralist Feminist framework. Based on this perspective, meaning is constituted through language, and meanings can therefore also vary between languages, as well as discourses within a language. Thus, the notion of individual subjectivity is not something fixed or stable, but rather “contradictory and open to constitution or reconstitution, through discourse, each time we think or speak” (Bristor and Fischer 1993, 521). Furthermore, this perspective draws on the ideas of discourse, language and subjectivity in order to understand the power structures that dominate and hinder women in order to pinpoint different prospects and strategies for changing the status quo, as Julia Bristor and Eileen Fischer (1993, 522) argued:

The method for identifying opportunities and strategies for change relies on historical analysis of discourses that structure institutions and modes of thought, deconstructing binary oppositions (such as “feminine” vs. “masculine” or “self” vs. “other”) in language, and seeking to recognize the power hierarchies supported by particular discourses.

Furthermore, the notion of agency adopted here is according to a poststructural view not seen as unconstrained; there is no “free choice” seeing as we are always within the boundaries of discursive possibilities. Subjectivity and knowledge are understood as endlessly negotiated constructs that are infused by discourse, and gender as well as language are seen as performative; gender being performative in the sense that it is not a reflection of inner female or male foundations but instead stylised and repeated bodily acts (Butler 1990) and language being performative through its function of constructing reality (Foucault 1972).

There have been several studies exploring consumer perceptions of ads without any or much acknowledgement of ideology (e.g. Orth and Holancova 2004; Fisher and Dubé 2005; Dahl et al. 2009; Chang and Tseng 2013; Huhmann and Limbu 2016; Kyrousi, Panigyrakis and Panopoulos 2016), thus alluding to assumptions that advertising images can and should be studied in an ideological vacuum. However, seeing as how advertising is a tool of ideology, such assumptions should be contested. This is one of the points raised in this endeavour by focusing specifically on the ideology of feminism. Nevertheless, there have of course also been marketing scholars who have argued for and employed feminist perspectives as well such as Bristor and Fischer (1993), Elizabeth Hirschman (1993), Linda Scott (2005).

As all stories go, this one is of course not completely unbiased and in no way seeks to be generalising or definite. While contributing to research regarding female representation in advertising, this contribution is limited based on context, theoretical perspectives and methods chosen. One could say that this story resides within a transformative paradigm, which is said to focus on injustices based on race, gender, sexual orientation and so on, as well as linking social and political action to these injustices (Creswell 2013). Female representation in advertising is an important social issue and the purpose of choosing this plot lies not only on the fact that I, your humble narrator, find it highly fascinating, extremely important, but also and principally, that it springs from a desire to disrupt the status quo. Although some claim that we as researchers and storytellers should be objective and not place values on our work, I maintain, and will argue further on, that this is impossible to truly do, and as Heather Douglas (2004, 460) wrote, there are different types of objectivity, some of which would not fit this story at all:

Sometimes a value-neutral position is unacceptable. For example, if racist or sexist values are at one end of the value continuum, value-neutrality would not be a good idea. We have good moral reasons for not accepting racist or sexist values, and thus other values should not be balanced against them.

Furthermore, according to poststructuralist feminist thought, “objective knowledge of reality is impossible” seeing as “all knowledge derived through experience is socially constructed by historically, socially and politically shaped discourses”, and “knowledge claims tend to empower some and disadvantage others because they are shaped by dominant discourses” (Bristor and Fischer 1993, 524). Within this perspective, particular attention is paid to how prevalent gender-related language forms what we see as objective knowledge, and “knowing” is itself problematised as a male-coded sphere of action (Flax 1990). Thus, this story is by no means objective, nor does it seek to be objective seeing as this is an impossibility. Instead, it seeks to explore, challenge and hopefully provide some opportunities for change.

Feminist epistemology

As put forth in the first chapter, the dominant perspective of knowledge and knowledge creation has been criticised by feminist philosophers due to its gender-blindness and androcentrism. Feminist epistemologies instead point out the ways in which gender does and should influence notions of knowledge, knowing subjects and the practices of justification and examination. By identifying how dominant views and practices of knowledge acquisition, attribution as well as justification has disadvantaged women (and other groups) in systematic ways, for instance by: not allowing them epistemic authority, creating theories of women as inferior to men or such that render women’s interest, activities and gendered power relations as obscure, excluding them from examination, and belittling feminine modes of knowledge and cognitive styles, feminist epistemologies aim to transform such views and practices so that they may instead serve the interest of said groups (Anderson 2011).

Feminist epistemologies are typically drawn from various, and often more than one, traditions, such as: postmodernism, naturalistic epistemologies, pragmatism, feminist science studies, cultural studies of science, Marxist feminism, object relation theory etc. All of these will not be covered here but those that have inspired and influenced this story will, in short, be presented.

Starting off with Continental feminist epistemologies (e.g. Grosz 1994; Alcoff 1996), these put emphasis on the ways that epistemic norms, practices and products, such as knowledge, are produced by and constitutive of various power relations. As such, these are not neutral, which does not necessarily mean that they are false, but simply that power relations are involved in all knowledge products and practices: “The ideal of neutrality, assumed to be essential to good knowledge practices, is, in fact, itself a political construction” (Janack 2004, no page number). It is necessary then that the re-construction of epistemic value terms must also recognise the epistemic practices and political nature of epistemology itself. In Continental feminist epistemology gender is highlighted as a layer of power relations, and an important aspect that has been introduced and developed within this tradition is that of the “lived body”.

Within the Feminist naturalised epistemologies (e.g. Nelson 1990; Antony and Witt 1993; Potter 1995), the thought of knowers being located within “epistemic spaces” has been developed and as such knowledge is claimed to be better understood on a community model, rather than an individual one. Naturalism as an approach to epistemology in this case is defined as focusing on casual accounts of knowledge (i.e. including social, historical as well as political factors), and central to feminist naturalism is to emphasise how knowledge may be enabled by these various factors.

The emphasis within Feminist cultural studies of science is placed on the non-relativistic epistemological commitments, placing special importance on the usage of modified versions of normative concepts as for instance “evidence” and “objectivity”. These modifications must thus be made so as to not commit the concepts to representational theories of mind and truth, but instead, as for instance Donna Haraway (1988) argued, focusing on situated knowledges. The emphasis in her work was on science, as a form of rule-governed storytelling, with the purpose of getting to the truth, which according to her notion is that reality is being produced by human material practices. In this notion then, the “facts” of scientific inquiry are rather “artifacts”, meaning that they are bound up with various processes of human production.

Lastly, within Feminist Science studies, feminist theorists have argued that values are constantly present: whether in the construction of theories, justifications or evaluations of evidence (Longino 1990; Nelson 1990; Harding 1991). Hence, feminist science studies have found it to be necessary to recognise the ways in which values take part in the scientific process, in order to develop an epistemology that is less gender biased. By focussing on developing epistemologies that allow for critical evaluation of the often shared and invisible values, such approaches thus highlight that what makes science good is not necessarily being value-free. Instead, good science is that which can critically evaluate the values and assumptions that run through the scientific process: “Good science is a science that can develop mechanisms for critically evaluating, not only the results of inquiry, but also the ways in which those results depend upon a raft of value-laden and theory-laden assumptions and facts” (Janack 2004, no page number).

Although there are different types and traditions of feminist epistemologies, one of the central concepts is that of a situated knower and thus the situated knowledge that reveals the subjects’ specific perspective. The interest here lies in how gender situates the knowing subject; knowers are thought of as being situated in specific relations to what is known, how it is known and to other knowers. Thus, we may understand something differently, depending on the specific relations in which we stand to it. Some examples of situated knowledge:

- *Embodiment*: people may experience the world through their bodies, which are comprised differently and located in various spaces and times.

- People see and understand things in relations to their *attitudes, emotions, interests and values*. Also, their *background beliefs* and *worldviews* may alter their interpretations and understandings of things.
- A person may have *first-person knowledge* regarding their own bodily and mental states, which can generate knowledge, while another person may have *third-person knowledge* by interpreting the external symptoms or gaining the testimony of the first person.
- *Know-how*: by having different skills, people may understand things differently.
- People have different *cognitive styles* of investigation and representation.
- *Personal knowledge of others* may be based on the relationship to them and such knowledge is often tacit, intuitive and incompletely articulated. Seeing as people behave differently towards different people, and those people also interpret behaviours differently, what people know of each other depends on these different relationships that they have.

All these examples affect knowledge in many and different ways, for instance: affecting the access to information for the knower, affecting the attitudes, standpoints of justification, authority of claiming beliefs and offering them to others, as well as affecting the assessment of what claims that are significant (Anderson 2011).

In feminist epistemology a knowers' social location (consisting of their ascribed social identity such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation etc., and their social roles and relationships for instance profession, political party membership etc.) is taken into consideration seeing as this affects what and how it knows. For instance, based on ascribed social identities, people may inhabit certain roles that allow them specific duties, interests, goals and powers as well as subject them to specific norms that suggest various emotions, habits and skills that are thought as appropriate to those roles.

If we now turn our attention to the participants of this study (who will be presented in more detail later on), the questions of a) why choosing only to include female participants, and b) why choosing to include only feminist female participants, may be answered by looking at Feminist standpoint epistemology. This highlights how marginalised groups (socially, politically etc.) reside within a position of epistemic privilege regarding social structures. Seeing as those that exist outside of the dominant groups must learn not only how to get along within the dominant society, but also within their own world, they thus have an "outsider" perspective: as "outsiders", the marginalised group has epistemic privileges that allow them to see social structures and problems differently than the dominant group (Harding 1986; 1991), which in some cases may not even see any problems at all. Hence, seeing as the focus in this story is on *women*, and how this marginalised group within society is represented in advertising through *female sexual agency*, the choice of interviewing only women was because they are

the ones who are able to use their "outsider" perspective when viewing and discussing the ads. Furthermore, seeing as the phenomenon of *female sexual agency* in advertising has been inspired, described and interpreted from a feminist perspective, it thus stands to reason that the consumers who would most critically view such ads would be those that are also aware of the ideological context and representational cues within the ads. The ideological context of this story is a feminist one as already stated, and this context binds the story from the theoretical point of departure, through the phenomenon (or problem) to the method and empirical material and analysis. Thus, these participants were chosen due to their unique perspective and ability to critically examine and discuss the selected ads, seeing as they belonged to not only the marginalised group of women, but also to the more narrow "outsider" group of feminist women.

Nevertheless, it is also important to note that one must not be a member of a marginalised group in order to be able to start the thought out from a certain standpoint. Also, being a woman does not *automatically* mean that one occupies feminist standpoint: this is achieved by critically engaging in thoughts regarding personal experiences and the relationships to social and political structures. Therefore, the interviews were not just set to include only feminist women, but also to be critically examining the chosen ads and allowing as well as encouraging the participants to draw from their personal experiences in order to make their claims, statements and arguments.

Lastly, in accordance with feminist epistemologies, all of the participants in the study are considered to be situated knowers, and the material that has been gathered from the interviews is thus situated knowledge: this story is not about uncovering or discovering a universal truth, but about examining and analysing possible discourses and discursive constructions that may be interpreted from this particular group of situated knowers. As your humble narrator, I am also very much aware of my own influence and power position: I am the one who has chosen the phenomenon to study, the participants, the theories, methods and analytical tools, I am the one who has analysed and interpreted the material, thus all the "artefacts" in this study have been produced through various processes that have gone through me. It is therefore impossible to detach myself completely from this story, seeing as it would have been a different story, if told by a different narrator. I am aware that my own feminist values may have influenced the various choices that have been made. However, this story does not seek to be value free or neutral. As a feminist endeavour, which is based on an action-oriented and "radical" ideology, this story is enmeshed with feminist values (not just my own, but overall) and as such it strives to be provocative, it strives to be critical, and it strives to be challenging. Basically, this is not merely a story; it is a call to action.

The Swedish Context

This story takes place in a specific social context, namely, the Swedish (feminist) context. Sweden, with the world's first (self-proclaimed) feminist government (*at*

the time of writing this), has been and still is very much involved with gender equality strategies and goals such as gender equal division of power and influence, economic gender equality, gender equal education and health as well as other related issues.¹⁷ Women in Sweden first gained the right to vote in 1919, and several laws have been passed since that further strengthened women's rights such as free abortion, illegalised rape within marriage and the illegalisation to buy sex.¹⁸ Another recent example that reflects Sweden's gender equal mentality is the pronoun "hen" (instead of "hon" = her and "han" = him), which was introduced as being gender neutral and added to the Swedish Academic Glossary in 2015. Thus, feminism and gender equality in Sweden is not a new or extremely radical perspective but rather something that has been present within the social threads for decades. However, that is not to say that Sweden is entirely gender equal, but it gives an indication about how Sweden may be different from other western contexts where feminism may not be as adopted or accepted within the government or the society.

Advertising

Advertising in Sweden is a self-regulatory mechanism with the foundation RO¹⁹ ("Reklamombudsmannen") examining ads and commercials that the public may find gender discriminatory (or unethical in some other way). As an individual consumer, one has the possibility of reporting ads and commercials to RO who in turn make decisions whether or not to "condemn" or "clear" the advert in question. However, it is ultimately the producers' responsibility of removing the ad or ignoring the decision of RO. Regardless, ads that do get condemned may receive much critique from the public and in the press. Furthermore, the advertising visible in the public sphere may vary significantly: from small local businesses to large international corporations, thus the imagery that swedes are exposed to daily may be produced in contexts that differ from the Swedish one.

It should also be noted that some of the ads from Calvin Klein used in this study that were displayed in Sweden were reported to RO and "condemned", this however was done after the interviews had been conducted and therefore the outcome of RO's decision did not influence the participants.

Choosing this context

The choice of setting the story in the Swedish context was based on the many feminist debates that have been flourishing in the country during the past years, as well as due to the advertising climate that exists: although there is undoubtedly a clutter problem in Sweden just as in other Western countries, perhaps due to RO and the culture, blatantly sexist ads in public spaces are not as common as they perhaps are in the US for instance (as far as I have seen with my own two eyes). This is not to say that sexist ads do not exist in the day-to-day Swedish climate, however, consumers are seemingly more aware of this issue and many ads do get reported (and condemned) every year to and by RO.

Exploring *female sexual agency*, with its feminist connotations, in contemporary advertising within a Swedish context using feminist participants is a good starting point seeing as how these individuals are arguably aware of various feminist codes and critiques. They may thus provide significant readings of this postfeminist occurrence that are lodged within an ideologically progressive social mentality. In turn, this may tell us something about feminist portrayals in practice. It is therefore significant to study this particular concept, within this particular context, with these particular participants.

Discourse

According to Foucault (1972) discourse is a way of speaking and it constitutes a network of guidelines that determine what is meaningful; a performative process able to construct reality rather than simply reflecting an objective world or being constituted by it. Thus, non-verbal objects and acts such as gestures may also be discursive by being made meaningful within a discourse. As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985, 108) explained:

The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought, or with that realism/idealism opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of 'natural phenomena' or 'expressions of the wrath of God', depends upon the structuring of a discursive field.

Both discourse and knowledge are, in Foucault's (1972) view, inextricably linked to power, which, as already discussed in the first chapter, is disciplinary, productive and pervasively flowing in all human relations. Furthermore, Bristor and Fischer (1993, 521) described discourse as the "historical, social and political aspect of language and hence of subjectivity." In regards to subjectivity, this is understood as a dialectical process of subjectification: a continuous idea where subjects are not simply created through discourse but also subjected to it; "an individual's subjectivity is not viewed as fixed or coherent" (Bristor and Fischer 1993, 521). Discourse may produce subject-positions i.e. whom may speak from a certain place, which are structured into discursive formations created through discursive practices: many discourses may be competing and operating within the same milieu and are created through historical and cultural sets of rules for structuring knowledge. This perspective thus offers paths of examining concepts such as agency, choice and power. It problematises issues instead of simply accepting things as "natural", therefore offering possibilities for questioning normativity, as well as providing consideration to discourse and language as

constructing meaning. Furthermore, certain discourses support certain social structures, thus the prevailing power structures depend on which of the discourses that are dominant (Bristor and Fischer 1993).

Moreover, language is viewed as not merely describing or reflecting but rather performing something. As Foucault claimed: "People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does" (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982, 187). One of the principles of postmodernism that Mary Joe Frug (1992) identified was that the human experience is inescapably located within language. Thus, power may be exercised through language by shaping and restricting our reality, not just via coercion. Seeing as language always allows for re-interpretation, it therefore also becomes possible to resist the shaping and restriction.

The second principle was that sex is part of a system of meaning, something produced by language and thus not natural or entirely definable:

Because sex differences are semiotic - that is, constituted by a system of signs that we produce and interpret - each of us inescapably produces herself within the gender meaning system, although the meaning of gender is indeterminate or undecidable. (Frug 1992, 1046)

Similarly, Butler (1993, 2) takes on the position that there is nothing, not even biology, that is left as extra-discursive; no aspect of the human experience is free from discursive norms and thus, sex is "one of the norms by which the 'one' becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility." By rejecting sexual difference as biological or natural, it thus becomes open to new interpretations and therefore, while still constraining, it may never fully determine what we may or may not do with it.

In this story, the main purpose is about looking at the different ways in which agency, choice and power are discursively constructed in ads, as well as discerning the discourses related to these constructions. By incorporating discourse analysis, the focus is on what language does do.

Discourse Analysis

A discourse analysis put forth by Willig (2013) was selected for analysing the material seeing as this was deemed as not only very useful for this type of material but also making it possible to open up new dimensions for analysis. This particular method consists of six different stages that were followed:

The first stage called *Discursive constructions*, focusses on how discursive objects are constructed through language. For instance, if our focus is on "power", this would be our discursive object and the first step would be to highlight all instances in the text where "power" is referenced (both explicitly and implicitly) and identifying the different ways in which it is constructed.

After identifying all instances that contribute to the construction of the discursive object in focus, we look at the *Discourses* and thus on the differences between the constructions. The aim of this second stage is to pinpoint the different discursive constructions within wider discourses.

The third stage, *Action orientation*, includes a closer examination of the contexts that the constructed objects reside in. Here the focus is on the implications of the constructions; what is gained by constructing for instance “power” in a certain way, at a certain point in the text? What is the function of the construction and how does it relate to other constructions in the text?

The fourth stage is concerned with *Positioning*, and the subject positions: “a location for persons within the structure of rights and duties for those who use that repertoire” (Davies and Harré 1999, 35), that are offered by the constructions. Because discourses construct both objects and subjects, they thus make certain positions available that speakers may assign to others or take up themselves. In this story, we are mainly concerned with the subject positions that the speakers i.e. the participants, have assigned to the models in the ads.

In the fifth stage the relationship between discourse and *practice* is in focus, exploring the opportunities for action based on the discursive constructions and subject positions within them; “By constructing particular versions of the world, and by positioning subjects within them in particular ways, discourses limit what can be said and done” (Willig 2013, 387-88).

The last stage of analysis is about exploring the link between *Subjectivity* and discourse. Seeing as certain ways of being and seeing are made available through discourses, they thus make up both social and psychological realities. As the most speculative stage of analysis, the focus here is on what *can* be thought, felt and experienced from different subject positions. Again, this stage will also only be applied to the models of the ads that have been assigned various subject positions by the participants.

It should also be noted here that even though the interviews and discussions revolved around how the participants viewed the models, it is not the models per se, i.e. the models as actual individuals, who are the main focus point in the analysis or in this story. Rather, the focus is on how these models have been represented as women in advertising; how their female sexuality is represented. Thus, any and all references to the models are about the way they have been represented.

Material

In order to have time to discuss each individual ad, as well as not to “overload” the participants with too many images, eight different ads were chosen for the study based on what they seemingly wanted to portray; a very brief visual analysis was conducted first where the body position, facial expression, state of undress and also textual elements were regarded and assessed as wanting or trying to convey some form of *female (sexual) agency*. While the majority of the ads (5) involved a,

more or less explicit, sexual expression, some ads (3) were also chosen where a sense of sex/sexuality was not explicitly portrayed, in order to provide some possibilities for comparison.

Four of the ads were from one of Calvin Klein's (CK) recent campaigns (#mycalvins), one was from American Apparel, one from Diane von Furstenberg and two from an Under Armour campaign (I will what I want).

When I began this study the CK campaign was flourishing (both internationally and in Sweden) and I thus decided to use several images seeing as I found them to be a great starting point for analysis. I had during that time also come across the Under Armour ads seeing as I had been doing some research on femvertising and found the ads when reading an online article regarding this topic. As for the American Apparel ad, I had wanted to use something from this brand because in a previous study I had used some of American Apparel's ads that were created before the controversial CEO and founder Dov Charney was fired²⁰, all of which were unanimously interpreted as being sexist and using the girls in the images as mere sex objects by the participants I had at the time. Therefore, I was eager to see if I could find any newer ads that could be interpreted more as "sexual subject" rather than "sexual object" now that Dov was no longer in charge. When I saw the "Made In Bangladesh" ad, I was intrigued and decided to include it in this study. Lastly, I happened upon the Diane von Furstenberg ad much like the Under Armour ads: found it featured on the web pertaining to a story regarding female empowerment.

Below, all the taglines plus a visual description of the images are provided, as well as the ads themselves:

- 1) CK: "I take what I want in #mycalvins" – as already described in the beginning, this ad featured a young, Caucasian model with long blonde hair (partly covering her bosom), wearing jeans and a bra, sitting on a bed and leaning forward, one arm placed downward against the bed, causing her large breasts to squeeze together, and the other held up as if taking a *selfie*. Her chin is raised up and she is looking downward towards the camera, mouth slightly open. See ad below (image 2):



Image 2: Calvin Klein ad featuring Anna Ewers, photographed by Tyrone Lebon

- 2) CK: "I arouse in #mycalvins" – this ad featured a young, dark skinned model with buzz cut hair, wearing jeans and a bra with CK underwear showing from under the jeans, standing up with her arms raised; one holding onto the other, her body is extended and she is seemingly stretching and at the same time leaning her shoulder back while pressing her breast/ribcage outward. Her mouth is slightly open and she is looking down towards the camera. See ad below (image 3):

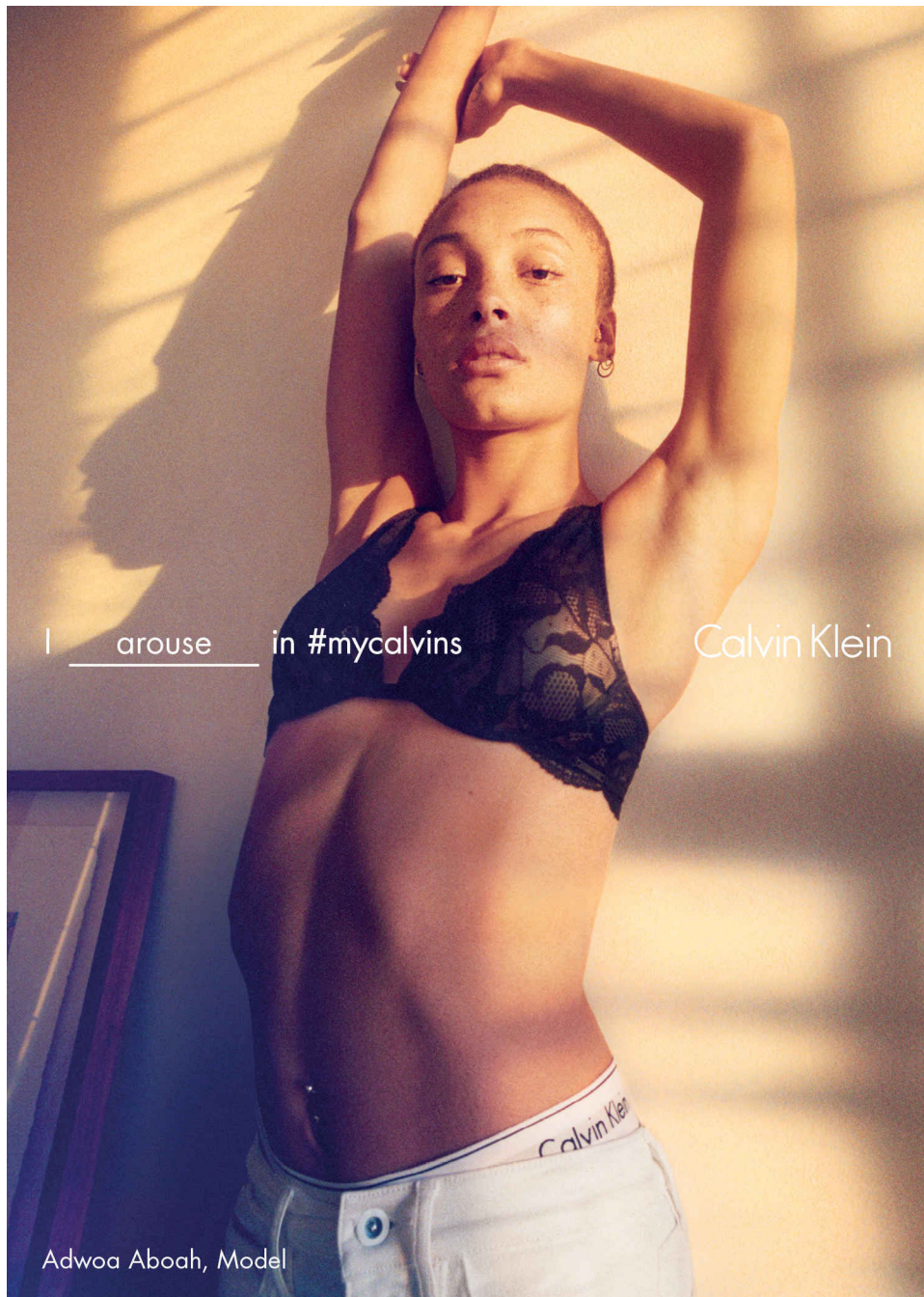


Image 3: Calvin Klein ad featuring Adwoa Aboah, photographed by Tyrone Lebon

- 3) CK: "I am powerful #mycalvins" – this ad featured Kendall Jenner who is standing with the back against the camera, wearing only CK underwear (what looks like somewhat “sporty” underwear), her back is slightly hunched, her arms straight down, her head turned toward the camera, looking over her shoulder into it, her mouth is covered by her shoulder. See ad below (image 4):



Image 4: Calvin Klein ad featuring Kendall Jenner, photographed by David Sims

- 4) CK: "I am free #mycalvins" – at first glance, this ad features a young Caucasian model wearing only jeans, standing against some wall curving her body, with one hand covering her bare breasts and the other raised behind her head which is turned towards the camera. However, after further inspection it is clear that this image has been rotated and in reality, she is actually lying down, arching her back away from, what looks like some sort of stone/concrete floor, with the orange skyline in the background, i.e. she is somewhere outside. See ad below (image 5):

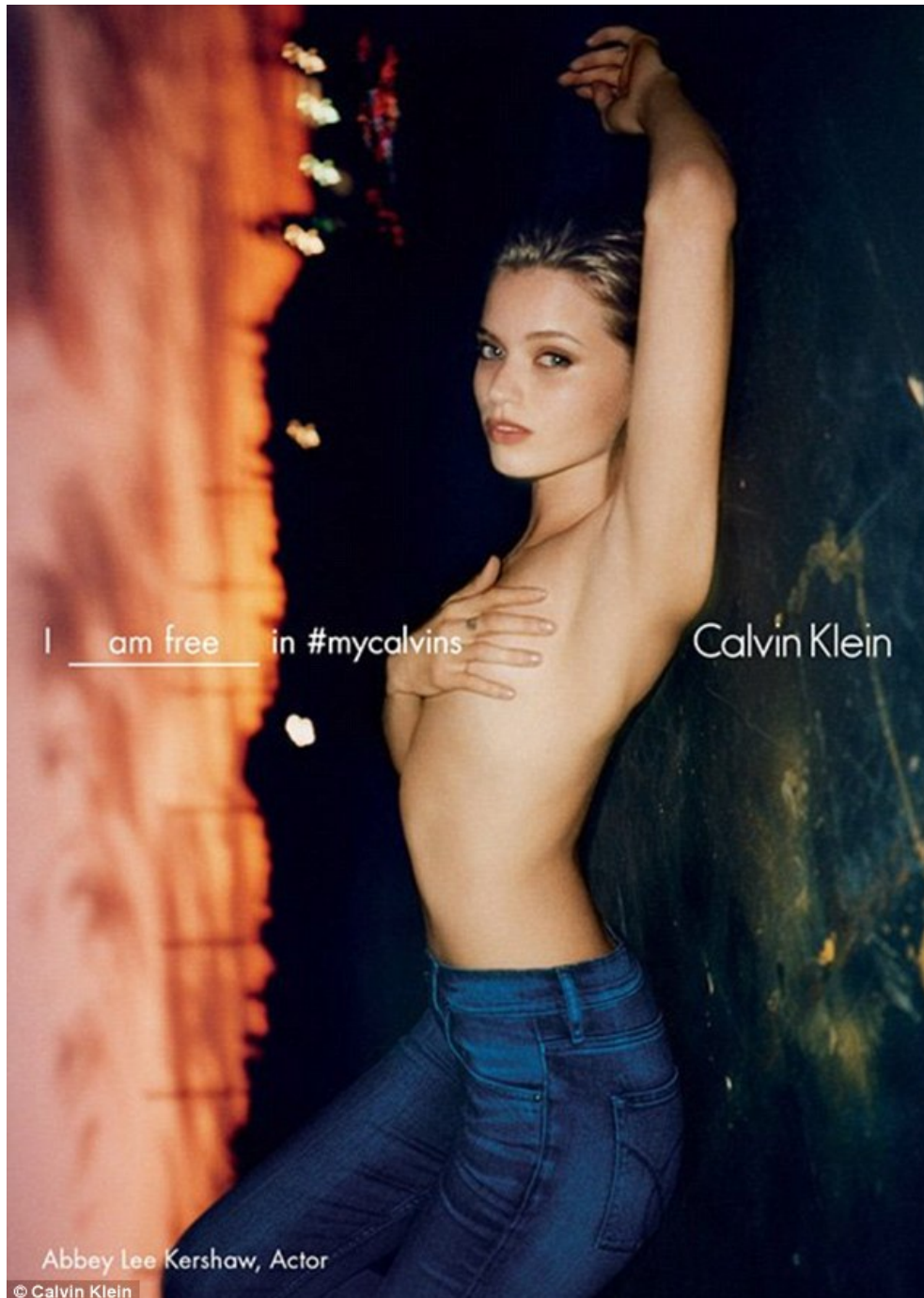


Image 5: Calvin Klein ad featuring Abbey Lee Kershaw, photographed by Tyrone Lebon

- 5) American Apparel: "Made in Bangladesh" – this ad portrays a half-naked model with olive skin, long dark wavy hair, wearing only jeans (which are partially unbuttoned) and thus exposing her (rather large) breasts (however these are partially covered by the tagline). She appears to just be standing straight and looking into the camera. See ad below (image 6):



Image 6: American Apparel ad featuring Maks, creative director Iris Alonzo

- 6) Diane von Furstenberg: "Self Taught" + "Self made" – this ad contains a two-page spread portraying a very colourful pattern on the left side with the first tagline, and a Caucasian model wearing a colourful dress (the same as the pattern) on the right side with the second tagline. The model is seemingly sitting on some form of table or such, gazing (rather angrily) straight into the camera, her arms down at her sides, her legs crossed. See ad below (image 7):

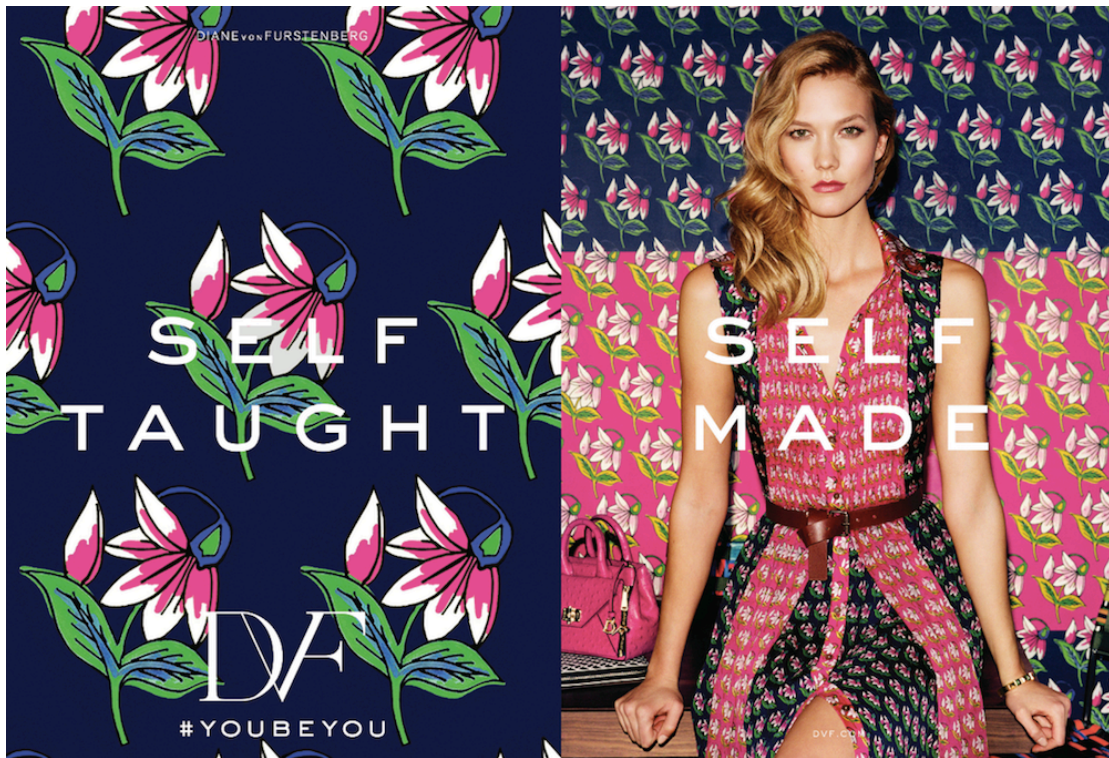


Image 7: Diane von Furstenberg ad featuring Karlie Kloss, photographed by Angelo Pennetta

- 7) Under Armour: "I Will What I Want" – The first Under Armour ad featured Gisele Bündchen standing up, slightly leaning on one side, wearing what looks like sports apparel, seemingly also wearing something on her hands (possibly boxing gloves) which are held down. Her hair is in a braid lying against her shoulder, her mouth slightly open and her gaze straight into the camera. On the left side of her, in light grey letters it says: "I will be praised. I will be judged." and on the right side with black letters: "I will not be distracted." See ad below (image 8):



Image 8: Under Armour ad featuring Gisele Bündchen, campaign developed by *Droga5*

- 8) Under Armour: "I Will What I Want" – The second Under Armour ad from the same campaign featured famous ballerina Misty Copeland who is standing up, but in a rather asymmetrical pose with her stomach and hips curved (possibly she is standing on her toes?), hands are held down, she is wearing sports apparel, her shoulder-length curly hair looks a bit wet and is hanging loosely on her shoulders, she has her mouth closed and is looking straight into the camera. On the left side of her in grey letters it says: "I will be labeled. I will be dismissed", and on the right side with black letters: "I will not be unsupported." See ad below (image 9):

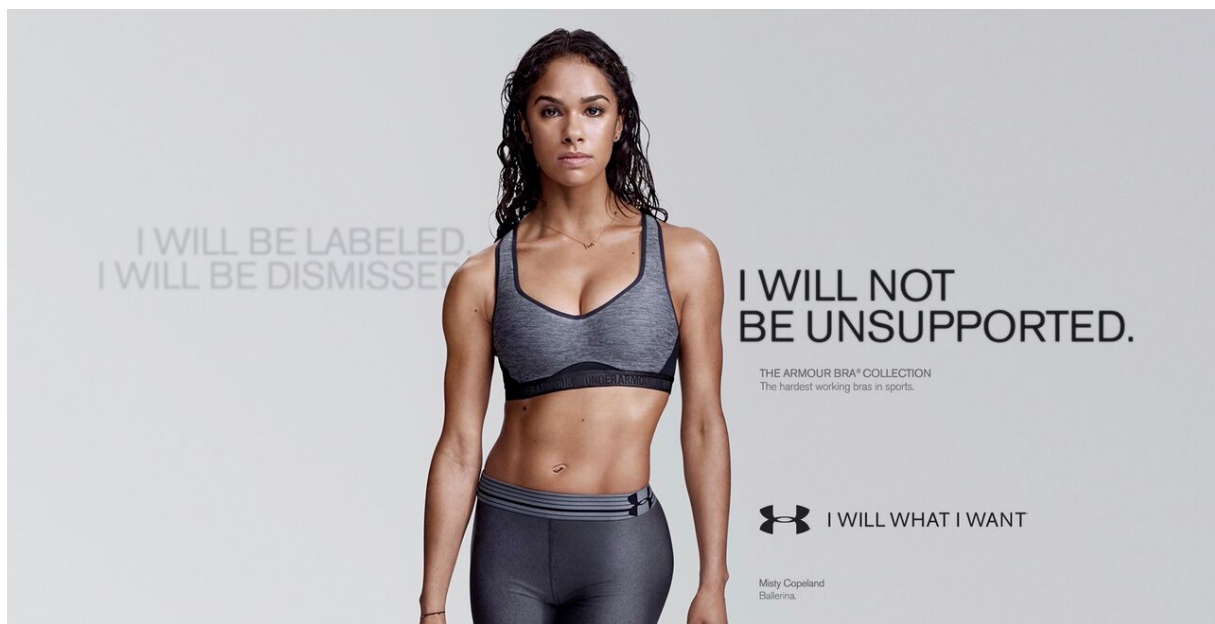


Image 9: Under Armour ad featuring Misty Copeland, campaign developed by *Droga5*

The advertisements chosen for this study all had a textual element accompanying the (most often half-naked) models: texts that arguably have been created with feminist discourses in mind, intended to draw the audience in. One of the conclusions that Amy-Chinn (2006) made in her examination of postfeminist underwear ads is that *text* is crucial for positioning a brand in an appealing way to women; showing them that buying the product would be on their terms and not merely a justification of their desire for male approval. Simply displaying half naked women in underwear without any "empowering" textual elements is not new but rather indistinguishable from the images of half-naked women found in men's magazines. The texts in the chosen ads gave the participants a possible way of reading and interpreting them, however as will be shown, they did not always agree with the relationships between image and texts presented; the ads did not always seem to "say" what the advertisers may have intended. Nevertheless, these advertisements were understood to, at least attempt, to convey some form of *female (sexual) agency*.

Participants and procedure

During the fall/winter of 2016-2017, individual semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews were conducted with a total of 38 women who called themselves feminists, ranging between the ages of 18-35. The participants were recruited via a closed feminist Facebook group, and before the interviews they were asked if they would prefer individual or focus group interviews so as to allow them to choose themselves what mode they were more comfortable with. Based on their answers, they were divided as such: 11 individual interviews and 27 divided into nine focus groups with three participants in each group, thus 20 separate interviews in total. This division was based on their age, so as to allow for a more neutral and equal starting point (for instance, a participant of 18 might in some instances have had a more difficult time expressing oneself in a group with a 34 and 35-year-old). The reason for doing 20 separate interviews with 38 participants was simply that I wanted to include as many participants as possible in order to have a rich empirical material to work with. By the 16-17th interview most of what was said was basically the same as in previous interviews, and by the 19-20th interview, I could not detect any new themes or viewpoints and therefore concluded that theoretical saturation had been achieved and that the material was enough to base the analysis on.

Consent was given by all participants in written form prior to the interviews, and all received identical information regarding the study and their rights as interviewees: that they may, at any time, drop out; that they may provide whatever answers they feel like sharing; that they are not forced to say anything they do not wish to, and that all of them will remain anonymous and assigned aliases. They were also asked to define in what ways they saw themselves as feminists and all of their answers, aliases and ages have been summarised in the tables 1 and 2 (see below). However, an important distinction to make here is that the focus in this study is on *discourse*, not on the *individuals*, thus all statements are viewed as language pieces deriving meaning from “microsocial exchanges embedded within broad patterns of cultural life” (Gergen 1994, 52). Thus, it is not the intention to correlate the demographical background of the participants with the statements but instead to relate the larger patterns of thinking and speaking, which flow in the cultural context in which they were created.

At the beginning of each interview I held a small introduction where I first of all thanked them for agreeing to participate, underlining that they were welcome to say whatever they felt like saying, that there were no right or wrong answers or specific expectations from my part, as well as explaining how the interview would be conducted: that I would show them different images, one by one, and that they were to tell what they thought about them and why. During the process I also asked them semi-structured questions based on what they had said and in all of the interviews various notions of power, agency, norms, freedom, choice and sexuality arose, which received particular attention.

According to Willig (2013, 383), selecting suitable texts for the discourse analysis should be informed by the research question: "If, however, we want to find out how ordinary people construct meaning in relation to a particular topic"..."we can work with transcripts of semi-structured interviews or focus group discussions alone." In this case, seeing as the questions are about how feminist consumers understand *female sexual agency* in contemporary ads, the two chosen methods are thus arguably suitable for this type of analysis and they were both adopted so as to complement each other.

Focus groups are, as David Silverman (2013) claimed, about individuals who are engaged in a conversation, thus it is about discussing a subject. The focus group participants all debated against as well as with each other and thus challenged each other's perspectives; "This process of arguing means that the researcher may stand a chance of ending up with more realistic accounts on what people think, because they are forced to think about and possibly revise their views" (Bryman 2012, 503). The focus group method has been said to be particularly useful when researching topics that might be complex or problematic to grasp. By putting the topic up for discussion among a group of individuals it thus allows them to have a chance of understanding and expanding on their own thoughts and beliefs (Wibeck 2010). This was noticeable time and again in most groups when individuals first began with a claim and later on revised it based on the other participants' arguments. Although there were some mildly heated discussions at times in some of the groups, the tone was always kept at a respectful level and even when the participants did not agree with each other, they simply agreed to disagree. However, in most instances, the participants did come to an agreement, and many times the discussions were not just interesting and insightful, but darn right humorous with witticisms and lots of laughter; it was quite evident that a rapport between the participants was established early on in most of the focus groups which thus made them feel comfortable enough to joke and have fun, while also being frustrated and upset by the images they saw and the topic of discussion. Seeing as this research is about a somewhat sensitive subject, the focus group method was deemed relevant because of its layout and opportunities; it gave the participants a "safe space" to let out some steam with fellow minded people, and seeing as focus group discussions occur more under the participants terms, they are thus designed so as to shift and reduce unequal power relations between participants and researchers (Wilkinson 1999; Tadajewski 2016). As a moderator, my role was to moderate, at times ask questions and if need be, move the discussions along.

I chose to use focus groups for this endeavour because they allowed me to see how different individuals debated the chosen subject as a group, how they related to each other, or didn't, and most importantly, how they gave meaning to the subject based on the interaction of the group (Bryman 2012).

Overview: Focus Group Participants			
Alias	Age	Interview	Form of Feminism
Chelsea	24	Focus group 1	Liberal/intersectional feminist
Daria	21	Focus group 1	Sex-negative radical feminist
Parker	22	Focus group 1	Intersectional feminist
Cassidy	31	Focus group 2	Intersectional feminist
Debbie	28	Focus group 2	No particular “feminist-label”
Hayden	32	Focus group 2	No particular “feminist-label”
Bailey	26	Focus group 3	Communist feminist
Florence	30	Focus group 3	Radical/socialist feminist
Margot	30	Focus group 3	No particular “feminist-label”
Calla	33	Focus group 4	“Everyday feminist”
Lais	34	Focus group 4	No particular “feminist-label”
Odessa	31	Focus group 4	Radical feminist
Aida	28	Focus group 5	Intersectional feminist
Billie	25	Focus group 5	Intersectional feminist
Madison	27	Focus group 5	No particular “feminist-label”
Fay	33	Focus group 6	Liberal feminist
Kylie	27	Focus group 6	Intersectional feminist
Naima	27	Focus group 6	No particular “feminist-label”
Dawn	28	Focus group 7	Queer & intersectional feminist
Elba	24	Focus group 7	Liberal feminist
Riley	29	Focus group 7	Social-liberal feminist
Leah	22	Focus group 8	Intersectional feminist
Nelle	22	Focus group 8	Intersectional feminist
Skye	24	Focus group 8	Socialist/intersectional feminist
Haley	23	Focus group 9	Queer & intersectional feminist
Jaime	18	Focus group 9	Radical and liberal feminist
Olive	24	Focus group 9	Queer feminist

Table 2: Overview of Focus Group Participants

Using focus groups are said to be beneficial when you want to examine the content (for instance thoughts, attitudes, opinions etc.) and also the interaction of the participants (Wibeck 2010). Viewed from a social constructionist perspective, the focus of analysis is on the constructions and negotiations of the participants, the discourses and “the ways in which social inequalities are produced and perpetuated through talk” (Wilkinson 1999, 237). Ultimately, the focus groups

proved to be a very rewarding method for this subject, not only based on the valuable material that I ended up with, but also because of how it affected the participants; all of them left the discussions with smiles, thanking me as well as each other for the interesting and fun conversations they've had.

As for the semi-structured interviews, this method allowed me to hear how individuals tackled this topic "on their own" rather than with a group of others; arguably seeing or looking at ads is something that each individual does on their own, and it is perhaps not as common to discuss ads with others as it is to process/think about them internally. Thus, the individual interviews gave the participants more space for their own words and thoughts, even though these at times, also oscillated back and forth. Overall, the individual interviews were by far easier to organise in terms of finding suitable dates and times, however these also required a bit more planning and preparation from my part; I had to think about the agenda and possible questions to ask and also consider how to build the rapport with the interviewee so as to make them feel comfortable enough to speak their minds in my presence alone. This type of interviewing is very reliant on the rapport between the participant and the researcher seeing as it incorporates features of both formal interviews, such as the fixed roles, time frame etc., and informal conversations such as the type of questions and the focus on experience and narrative. Due to this, the rapport can be fairly easy to establish, however it may also just as easily be disrupted: for instance, if problems with the recording device arise or such, reminding the participant that they are being interviewed (Willig 2013). I therefore made sure to use not just one recording device, but two for each of the interviews, just to make sure I never had to fiddle with any of them, should one start making a fuss and stop working.

Overview: Individual interview Participants			
Alias	Age	Interview	Form of Feminism
Abigail	22	Individual	Intersectional feminist
Blair	24	Individual	No particular "feminist-label"
Gabrielle	32	Individual	Left-liberal feminist
Jael	32	Individual	Intersectional feminist
McKenzie	23	Individual	No particular "feminist-label"
Nora	31	Individual	No particular "feminist-label"
Penelope	25	Individual	Intersectional feminist
Rae	35	Individual	No particular "feminist-label"
Sabra	29	Individual	Radical and queer feminist
Silas	32	Individual	Left-wing feminist
Tyler	19	Individual	Intersectional feminist

Table 3: Overview of Individual interview Participants

The questions were asked in such a way so as to encourage the participant to talk openly, but it is important to note that the researcher and their research question is what drives the interview. Although there is a need for balance between allowing the participant to talk freely and at the same time keeping the interview “on track”, I never interrupted a participant from going on a bit of a “rant”, seeing as I was for one curious to see where they were going with it, and second, I made sure that there were no time constraints from my part, therefore I never had to hurry the interview along. Arguably, by letting the participants speak their minds and going a bit “off track” at times, I established a sense of rapport and made them feel comfortable talking freely about whatever they felt like.

During the semi-structured interviews, I also made sure to repeat some of the comments made by the participants, as well as applying them to further questions. This then allowed me to double check that I had understood their comments, as well as demonstrating to the participant that they were being listened to (Willig 2013). Additionally, playing ignorant or naïve as a researcher also allows for more detailed accounts from the participants and encourages them to explicitly express things that might otherwise be implicit. It is also helpful to ask the participants to elaborate and develop their comments or statements, encouraging them to give examples or illustrate what they mean; strategies that I used time and time again during all the interviews. In general, most participants were able to speak openly and explain their train of thought, however there were times when I had to “pry” a bit in order to get them to formulate their thoughts and explain their points. Some participants found it very easy to talk by themselves without much input from me, while for others, I had to ask more questions in order to manage to get their words out. While some participants felt a bit frustrated at times for not being able to explain exactly how or why they felt or thought as they did, I always made sure to encourage them and let them know that there were no right or wrong, or even silly or dumb answers or thoughts, and that their formulations did not have to be perfectly uttered in order to be valuable. By the end of it, all of them seemed pleased and again thanked me for having participated in an interesting and fun interview.

Of course, there are not only benefits to using focus groups and semi-structured individual interviews; such methods are arguably based on gathering “manufactured” data (Silverman 2013). Thus, the question to be asked is: what kind of knowledge may be gathered from using these methods? Can I really be certain that the participants said what they actually thought, or if they just said what they felt comfortable saying out loud in that synthetic setting? This can never be fully known, however in accordance with feminist epistemologies, the knowledge gathered from such interviews is situated knowledge, thus it is arisen based on the situated knowers (the participants) in that specific context. Usually in regards to qualitative analysis, the material is taken at “face value” (Willig 2013). Therefore, one may speculate back and forth whether or not the

participants did say all that they wanted to say regarding each ad, however, we can only analyse and interpret what was *actually* said. Focus is thus on what was spoken out loud and the various discourses that may be interpreted, how different discursive objects were constructed and what in turn that may mean in terms of subject positions and actions.

Based on James Spradley's (1979) guide for formulating different types of interview questions, the type of questions mostly used throughout all focus groups and semi-structured interviews were *evaluative* questions: questions about the participants' feelings towards the advertisements. Such types of questions can be either vague, for instance: "How do you feel about this advert?" Or they can be more specific, e.g. "Do you find this advert to be sexualising?" However, in the different types of interviews, descriptive, structural and contrast questions were also used to some extent and what was important throughout all interviews was ensuring that the questions felt relevant and meaningful to the participants.

The individual interviews ranged from 1-2 hours and the focus group discussions were about 2-3 hours long. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and analysed following the six stages of discourse analysis provided by Willig (2013), they were also conducted in Swedish and the quotes that have been used in the analysis have been translated to English. The material was repeatedly read and annotated, with particular focus on the notion of *female sexual agency*. Therefore, terms, concepts and metaphors related to this such as power, sex/sexual/sexualising, agency, choice, free/freedom, and various gender norms were chosen as discursive objects, and all explicit and implicit references to these were methodically pinpointed. The reason for examining these discursive objects stemmed from a theoretical point of departure; as was argued by Gill (2008), empirical studies are required in order to understand the meaning of the shift in advertising. Furthermore, based on the readings of the material, the analysis was allocated into four themes: *Normativity, Freedom and Choice, Gaze and Claiming Space*. For each theme at least two of the ads were chosen for analysis based on the responses they received and each ad was analysed using different quotes from the material. However, it is by no means implied that the themes are disconnected from one another, rather they are all interrelated and significant for understanding *female sexual agency*.

Moreover, in accordance with the six stages of analysis, the discursive objects were located within wider discourses, it was also considered how they all were spoken in relation to each other, as well as how they were positioned within the discourses. This in turn was also explored in terms of subjectivity, i.e. what could be experienced and felt from the various subject positions that the models in the ads were placed in (by the participants).

This particular method was chosen because it allows for an analysis that focuses on discourse both at a micro and macro level by looking at specific

discursive constructs and relating them to wider discourses. It also examines how potential positions and actions are both limited and freed up by discourse. However, utilising this type of discourse analysis is only one potential way of interpreting this material, reflexivity is thus imperative and as a researcher I acknowledge my role in this endeavour and am aware of the limitations of the interpretations made.

Lastly, it should be noted that many of the selected quotes or extracts are quite long; this is due to the fact that I find the empirical material to be the most valuable part of the story, and I wanted to make sure the participants' words, without which the analysis would not be possible, received their rightful space in the story. I wanted to make sure that you, dear reader, got the chance to get immersed in these discussions, and hopefully, by the end of this story, you will also see the value of including all these different voices and giving them enough space to be heard.

CHAPTER V

Normativity, or: Skinny white bitches

Dear reader, we have finally arrived at the first chapter of analysis in this story, which will cover the theme of *Normativity*. This theme includes various notions of gender norms, having a “norm-body” or a normative appearance, all of which were brought up by the participants, particularly while viewing the CK ads “I take what I want in my calvins” and “I arouse in my calvins”. The quotes that have been selected for analysis all include different notions and constructions of normativity; thus, they are meant to be complimentary, and together they form a more comprehensive construction and understanding of the relationship between normativity and *female sexual agency*.

The participants criticised, scrutinised and discussed the ads in various ways, and different instances of *Normativity* were brought up both explicitly and implicitly in the interviews. Indeed, it seemed as if the normative or non-normative appearance of the models were prerequisites for having or not having power, agency or control. But alas, we are getting ahead of ourselves; let’s begin with looking at eight quotes from the material and examining *female sexual agency* in relation to *Normativity*.

Skinny White Bitches

When Silas was viewing the CK “I take what I want” ad, she began reflecting about *Selfies* and Stina Wolter²¹, which in turn arose a discussion on breaking norms:

Silas: That (referring to Stina Wolter’s selfies on Instagram) is a celebration of the female body, it is amusing and fun and that’s how one should do, or no that sounds wrong, one should not, one should do what one wants but, it is, she takes power, in a different way, she takes power over how we see the female body by posting such images and videos of herself, and her body is not one of those, what we have seen in these

images, then we get a bigger selection of how a female body may look... and when I post an image on Instagram with my, okay this is a bit difficult because I am a skinny white bitch but I don't know, my, my cellulite or something, then I take power, because I in some way, I do not post that filtered beautiful image of myself in front of Sacré Coeur, no, I post an image of my cellulite butt or whatever I have, then it becomes, then we take power, and it is not, no one gives it to us, but we take it, and it hurts to take it, one gets judgments and mean comments and things like that.

Moderator: ok, do you mean that if one deviates from the ideal or norm and would post such images it would be something else than if one looks like her and takes these types of images?

Silas: Yes, yes but also, now I sound like I do not allow those skinny white bitches to post Instagram pictures with filters, and that is not the case, they can do whatever they want, but it is not as let's say norm-breaking and it is not as much an exercise of power, I mean, it is super-easy for me to post a picture of a skinny white body, yeah it doesn't get much backlash, whereas to really make our understanding of the body greater, then we take power, because then we take power away from Calvin Klein to tell us how we should look.

The discursive object in focus in this quote is *power*, which in relation to *female sexual agency* is constructed as something one can *take*, i.e. an action that an active agent may perform. However, doing so *hurts*, i.e. power does not come easy; it comes at a price. Power is therefore a difficult action to take, but not an impossible one. Taking that power means breaking norms relating to the female body and appearance, thus opening up for wider possibilities and actions for female bodies. Power is thus constructed as being interconnected with norms, and in this case, power means breaking norms, not abiding to them.

The ruling ideal for women being “skinny white bitches” and presenting oneself within this narrow space is not “an exercise of power”, seeing as this practice is “super-easy” (for those who reside within this ideal). The only possibility for exercising power is thus taking it by breaking the norms in some way, which is possible to do even if one resides within the ruling ideal: as a “skinny white bitch” one may present oneself in a new light, for instance taking a photo with cellulite or in other norm-breaking ways. This coincides with Åkestams' (2018) argument for stretching the lines in order to take actual feminist actions, thus simply presenting oneself within the ruling beauty norms cannot be said to be a feminist act, according to Åkestam (2018), but rather the opposite: further fuelling and maintaining the dominant ideals. These constructions of power can

therefore be related to wider feminist discourses that encourage women to go against the normative male gaze and reinvent femininity and sexuality. However, breaking norms and thus exercising power is, as already claimed, not an easy task to do seeing as norms are enforced and socially instituted (Butler 1990; Stone 2007), and those that do break them may receive social punishments (e.g. “judgements”, “mean comments”, “backlash”).

Furthermore, let us also break down the “skinny white bitch” reference. “Skinny”, in this instance, may be connected to the disciplinary practice of dieting as argued by Bartky (1990); women must monitor their appetite and hunger in order to maintain the normative slim (or skinny) body ideal. “White” is still the idealised and normative skin tone in the fashion and beauty industry. Lastly “bitch” can be viewed as a derogatory term for women, but if we instead put it through the neoliberal lens put forth by Bay-Cheng (2015) this term may instead be coupled with the sexual agency of the midriff (Gill 2008); women may be called bitches simply for being assertive. Thus, the “skinny white bitch” draws from the contemporary discourse of *female sexual agency*. This term (in a colourful way) defines the very normative and idealised version of the midriff in contemporary advertising, which paradoxically while trying to convey an initiating and desiring active subject, still fails to exercise power. The sexual agency on display here still resides within the Patriarchal Panopticon; it is a *disciplined* sexual agency.

Additionally, these constructions were produced by referencing Stina Wolter’s selfies on Instagram, as an example of how power may be exercised, as opposed to the CK ad in question where it was supposed to look like the model was taking a selfie but failing to exercise that same power. Thus, even though the CK image and Stina Wolter’s images reside within different contexts: one being an advertisement displayed in a public space, the other being a private image displayed on the persons’ own Instagram feed, they were both treated equally as images and representations of women. In a sense then, the model in the CK ad was arguably as responsible for that ad image as Stina Wolter is responsible for her own selfies; again, through neoliberal terms (Bay-Cheng 2015) as the model in the ad, the woman must be in constant control. Regardless of the big fashion corporation behind the ad, the model has the agency and responsibility over her own image. Thus, in terms of the subject position, the model in the ad arguably has (sexual) agency, however this does not necessitate or even imply power; as an active agent the model may (in theory) display herself however she wants, but when she chooses to do so within the ruling “skinny white bitch” ideal, she therefore does not exercise any power because she is not challenging the status quo but instead willingly chooses to remain within the narrow and familiar confines of the Patriarchal Panopticon. This is not a feminist act, as Åkestam (2018) would argue, but it is an *act* nonetheless. The subject position on offer here is, unlike within the discourses of violence and victimisation (Fine 1988), that of a responsible social actor who may choose freely how to represent oneself, and in

this case, choosing to be represented as a “skinny white bitch”, has chosen to abide by the rules instead of breaking them which would have meant opening up for other possible subject positions. However, seeing as the model is still an agent, there are possibilities for action; resistance against norms is always possible (Butler 1990, 1993) and resistance against various power relations, such as the Patriarchal Panopticon is also always possible (Foucault 1976b). Of course, this is a still image, so the possibilities of resistance are not applicable to this particular ad, however, they are applicable to the future ads that the model may be a part of (or even the future ads created by CK).

When it comes to the last and most speculative stage of analysis, subjectivity, we can only guess what the subjective experiences are based on the above constructions. If power is something one can take by breaking norms, such a construction would arguably, as Silas claimed “hurt”, and it may therefore produce feelings of fear, doubt, nervousness, insecurity and perhaps even shame for the backlash that may come. However ultimately, this may also lead to feelings of strength and pride and self-efficacy over having dared to go against the grain. On the other hand, not exercising that power but choosing to remain within the ideal may produce feelings of being liked, accepted, attractive and feeling good about oneself. However, such feelings are not necessarily all that positive when put into the grander scheme and context of feminism. As Åkestam (2018, 36) argued:

It is not at all strange that the one who lessens their wrinkles with fillers or exercises for a body that better resembles the societies beauty ideals feels better. That women are judged by their looks, and that beautiful women get advantages, is one of patriarchy’s lynchpins.

Lastly, if one was to deviate from the norm and thus exercising power, that would also mean taking power away from brands and advertisers such as CK, and therefore expanding our understanding of the (female) body. However, such deviations require reiteration in order to transform cultural norms (Butler 1993; Sullivan 2000). Just as the “skinny white bitch” norm is and has been repeatedly utilised in adverts for decades, so must also cellulite or other “imperfections” be utilised and reiterated in ads for a substantial change to take place.

Conditioning

Viewing the same ad, Rae had some similar thoughts regarding normativity being a condition for the ad:

Rae: I think it becomes like one of those things that they try selling Calvin Klein clothes on the premise that one is like free and like “Breaking the

law”, but they don’t really because it is still about the same things one sells it on. She would not have been able to do this image if she had been, like they had not done this ad-series if they had a regular, I don’t know how old this girl is but, if they’d taken a normal slightly over-weight, pimpled 17-year old that had been sitting in the same pose with ill-fitting Calvin Klein bra and straggly oily hair like, do you understand? It is still the condition for this being a fun exciting ad, it’s that it is a bit home-made, a little dirty background, but it is still an extremely coiffed hot girl, and I mean that it becomes very conditioned and in some ways pretty false. And this makes the power one first thinks of: “oh how nice that she is not just lying down in a fucking boat,” becomes like, not really clear.

Normativity is scrutinised and argued as a condition for the existence of this image; if the model would have a non-normative appearance of beauty this ad and the image CK are trying to convey would not have worked. Even though CK may want to imply “breaking laws”, nothing here is broken or challenged but rather fixed and precise: *conditioned*. These conditions then lead to the power that may be sensed in the first instance, to prove false and unclear. Power is thus here implied as being constructed as something norm-breaking, again relating to the wider feminist discourse of challenging the Patriarchal Panopticon. Power is not abiding by the norms and being conditioned to look a certain way.

Being an “extremely coiffed hot girl”, thus residing within the idealised norm for women and also playing to that idealisation may at first glance seem to make the viewer think that there is something challenging: “the premise that one is like free and like “breaking the law””, going on in this image, but instead this very idealisation is conditioning and “still about the same things one sells it on” (implying the old mantra of “sex sells”).

However, as opposed to Silas, Rae here did not seem to imply that the model had the same responsibility over the ad but rather that CK, as the producer of the image, bears the responsibility over how they choose to sell their clothes: “they had not done this ad-series if they had a regular”...“normal slightly over-weight, pimpled 17-year old...”. Thus, the model in this ad is barely viewed as an active agent. The only agential “activity” seems to be the fact that she is sitting on the bed in that manner instead of just “lying down in a fucking boat”, i.e. the act of sitting up instead of lying down gives her a little sense of agency, but not much.

Furthermore, the term “free” is an interesting one here: according to Rae, CK was trying to invoke a sense of freedom with this ad, meaning that they wanted it to look as if the model was a free agent in the image, choosing herself to be displayed in this way, and consequently thus also having power. However, due to the normativity of the model, that freedom becomes a falseness seeing as it is her

normativity that conditions the ad to appear as being free, when in fact, paradoxically, that same normativity is what constrains her and strips her of her freedom. Again, this relates to Åkestam's (2018) claims as discussed in the previous quote: Freedom does not mean abiding by the patriarchal norms.

Seeing as the model in the image is barely an active agent, the subject positions on offer here are thus quite slim: the only reason for her being in this image in the first place is because of her looks, she is therefore more of a sexual object of male desire, rather than a free sexual subject. She may be able to actively sit up in a bed instead of lying down on it; however, she is not free and does not have power in the fullest sense of the terms to get out of said bed and put a shirt on. As such, this position is more closely related to the discourse of victimisation (Fine 1988), rather than being a socially responsible actor. CK is the one who governs her image, not herself, she is merely the object they have chosen to use in order to sell their products. Being in such a position then does not allow for much action, she is confined to remain within the position of sexual object until, or if, she resists it.

Based on these constructions then, we can speculate that what may subjectively be felt is a sense of compliancy, and therefore acceptance. As stated in the previous section, residing within the idealised norms may lead to feeling good and attractive, however such feelings, being narrowed down to only the individual level, unfortunately does not do much for feminism in the long run.

Never Disconnected

In focus group 3 when viewing the same ad, the participants quickly came to the agreement that the model was objectifying herself, instead of objectifying what it was that she wanted to take. This then led to a discussion regarding objectification and whether or not it means the same thing to do it to oneself, or to have it done by someone else:

Bailey: it's like, nothing in this is disconnected from the rest of society, it's not as if...it's never the case that someone objectifies themselves for *their own sake*, or like, you cannot talk that way because you are *never disconnected from the rest of society*, so even if she sits and takes a bunch of...I think like if one, one objectifies oneself very much in one's life, like taking a lot of images of one's breasts or does a lot to be attractive in men's eyes or such, it can never be that, everything one does is for one's own sake, but everything one does is *related* to the society we live in, this is the way it is, the pressure one has as a woman is something that affects, you can never say that "no but this is, it just so *happens* to be that everything I

do is within the ruling norms and I feel great about it”, but rather there is a pressure that affects what one does...

Margot: but then one can probably also feel good doing it (Bailey: yeah), but it is like always in relation to the rest of the world.

Here, the discursive object of *objectification* is directly related to society and the hegemony established within said society, which in turn is limited and specified as well as put pressure on and affect women. In this quote, doing things that reside within the ruling norms such as trying to look attractive in men’s eyes, i.e. abiding to the male gaze is seemingly because of the pressures and not something done entirely “for their own sake”. Such constructions may be related to wider (second wave) feminist discourses that include criticism against advertising manipulating and using female bodies for patriarchal gains. Furthermore, Bailey’s claim that one can never say “it just so happens that everything I do is within the ruling norms” also relates to the midriff discourse, particularly the 4th theme of agency and choice where Gill (2008, 42) argued that: “Women are presented as not seeking men’s approval but as pleasing themselves, and, in doing so, they ‘just happen’ to win men’s admiration.” Again, in this instance, nothing may “just happen” and be disconnected from everything else, but rather everything must be contextualised. Even though women may “feel good doing it”, it must always be considered within the context of the “rest of the world”. In this construction then, it may also be interpreted that sexual objectification is done according to the ruling norms, therefore suggesting non-normative representations are not objectifying in the same sense. The sexual subjectification of the midriff suggested by Gill (2008) is in this instance still referred to as an objectification of oneself and the “agency” within the notion of *female sexual agency*, is questioned; can sexually objectifying oneself within the ruling norms be considered an act of agency when it has to be put into relation with the rest of society? Arguably, it is still an act to take “a lot of images of one’s breasts” or making oneself “attractive in men’s eyes”, however, such acts are here constructed as being objectifying in relation to the ruling norms. Therefore, they are not in resistance to the power structures and disciplines imposed, but instead they abide to the Patriarchal Panopticon; thus, these may not be considered feminist acts (Åkestam 2018).

These constructions of objectification then position the model as an agent that chooses to objectify herself within the ruling norms, and as such she may “seem” free and happy in her choice, however, that choice is not entirely her own seeing as she has been affected by the pressures and norms within society. Such a position then becomes more restrained than the sexual subject (Gill 2008) may want to appear, it is a position that is confined to the Patriarchal Panopticon, and as such, all “choices” that are available to make must thus abide to the ruling ideals and norms. In other words, she may objectify herself however much she wants,

but she is “condemned” to keep up with that objectification and not stray away from it: unless she (finally) resists it by breaking the norms.

Within such a position, as an agent that objectifies oneself in this way, one may again feel admired and good about oneself, as put forth in the two previous sections. Such feelings should however, always strive to be contextualised, if they are ever to be considered feminist.

Raisin chick

Chelsea, Daria and Parker from focus group 1 were likewise, quite critical due to the normativity of the model:

Daria: Cause now one knows that it may not be what, how she had represented herself perhaps, but that it is someone else, perhaps a man, that has represented her this way, I think (Parker: mm).

Moderator: But if she had represented herself this way?

Daria: Well I am not one of those who believes in empowerment of one’s own body to be used this way, like patriarchal norms to empower oneself like displaying oneself nude and like in a sexy way, eh, so, but it still would have been different for me, I get more negative towards a business than if it had been herself.

Chelsea: Eh, I have like, somewhere, a deep sigh inside regarding Calvin Klein, cause it’s like “I take what I want” but it doesn’t feel like it, it’s the same shit different name like all of their other campaigns. Yeah like it’s a super-sexualised chick, tall, skinny looks like every other “raisin chick”, it’s not like it challenges anything, had she taken the image, like, for me “I take what I want” would have been better represented if it had been something that at all was norm-breaking, but, this girl is as normative as one can get in this context, it’s skinny, it’s relatively large breasts, it’s like slightly visible ribs... I’ve seen it before, a million times or so.

Although this image is designed to look (or at least suggest) as if the model is taking the image herself in the form of a *selfie*, Daria’s first thought was that this representation was in fact not the way the model would represent herself, but rather that it is a man who has chosen to represent her in this way (*amusingly enough, the photographer behind this ad image is in fact a man, go figure*). Thus, from the very beginning this is constructed as being an ad based on an external male gaze rather than the model’s own internal and self-choosing gaze. Although Daria did not seem to be a third wave feminist who believes in using sex as a means of power (Zimmerman and Dahlberg 2008), she still made an important

distinction between a business portraying a woman in this way, and a woman portraying herself in this way; the former making her more negatively inclined than the latter.

Moreover, due to how norm-abiding the model is, the implied power that the textual element was referring to (taking what one wants) does not make sense according to Chelsea: “cause it’s like “I take what I want” but it doesn’t feel like it, it’s the same shit different name like all of their other campaigns.” Taking what one wants is here constructed as something norm-breaking, something challenging, something different and perhaps even unexpected; “I’ve seen it before, a million times or so.” Because this “raisin-chick” in the image is “as normative as it gets”, the possible actions and subject-positions offered are slim and the power is void.

Furthermore, sexual agency does not seem to be implied, even though the model is “super-sexualised”, this is seen as just another trait or premise that falls under the normative category, thus the model is perceived to be a sex object rather than a sex subject. If we again speculate how it may feel to be in this position that the participants have constructed, we may come to the conclusion that such a position feels rather restrained and powerless, but at the same time, by being a perfect *docile body*, feelings of acceptance and admiration are also possible.

Did you want something?

When Cassidy, Hayden and Debbie from focus group 2 saw the CK ad: “I arouse in #mycalvins”, the discussion took a different turn and the group displayed more positive feelings and thoughts towards the ad:

Cassidy: Yeah but this girl I think still exudes...much more power and much less “Hey come and take advantage of me”

Hayden: Yeah.

Moderator: Why?

Cassidy: A combination of how her body looks...she is both muscular and the way she has, the underpants is that typical way that guys use to have, more, showing Calvin Klein boxers like...and her gaze...and just, it feels much more like “aah stretching myself a bit and I am confident and I am fucking hot”, and if, and this also feels much more justifiable that this is an underwear ad because you can actually see the underwear.

“...”

Hayden: And she, she is, like...(in a cocky tone with her chin up:) “Did you want something?”

“...”

Cassidy: I think that the other (*referring to the previous CK ad, "I take what I want"*), if she would have clothes on...then you would have interpreted the image much more...but it became so incredibly sexualised...(Hayden: mm exactly)...this one exudes sex as well, but more on her terms.

Moderator: Ok, how do you mean?

Cassidy: Yeah that it is she who decides...while the other one felt like, it, it was more like "come and decide over me".

Debbie: mm.

In this instance, due to the model's non-normative muscular body and appearance, the way she wears her underpants as well as a certain cocky expression or look, this focus group interpreted more power into this ad than the previous one ("I take what I want"). *Power*, as the discursive object, is thus again constructed as being something norm-breaking, rather than norm-abiding. Additionally, power is seemingly also gendered seeing as she is wearing her underpants in that "typical way that guys use to have", thus implying that for women, being "atypically feminine" and instead more masculine, results in gaining more power. Furthermore, the sexualisation is "on her terms" due to her non-normative appearance, in other words she is a sexual subject who decides over her own body and sexuality. Thus, according to these constructions this ad conveys a form of sexual agency that this particular group has responded positively to. Being in this subject position allows the model more power, control as well as confidence ("I am confident and I am fucking hot", "Did you want something?"); she doesn't let anyone decide over her. As such, these constructions do not relate to the discourses of victimisation or violence (Fine 1988) seeing as she does not exude the same kind of "Hey come and take advantage of me", or "come and decide over me"-vibes as the other ad did. Instead, this relates to the wider discourse of third wave feminism, i.e. viewing sex as power (Zimmerman and Dahlberg 2008).

In this position, the model has the right to her own body; she is a subject not an object for others. However, this position is only made possible due to her non-normative appearance, therefore, it is a condition based on how she looks, what she wears and what she expresses through her body and gaze. In this discourse of sexual agency based on non-normativity, the possibilities for actions are wider than those discussed in the previous three quotes regarding the "I take what I want" ad. Seeing as this model not only has been ascribed sexual agency but also power, she is freer to decide over her body and sexuality; she is a responsible actor who may choose and articulate her own desires. In this instance then, she is the one "doing", not the one "being done to".

If we again speculate what may subjectively be felt and thought within such a position that these constructions make up, it would arguably be feelings of confidence, pride, strength and self-efficacy; according to these constructions one

could even say that she is feeling sexually empowered. However, as Bay-Cheng (2012) argued, sexuality should be contextualised and as such, it could be argued that a woman who is displaying an atypically feminine appearance, having a more muscular body, wearing her clothes in more masculine ways, having a buzz-cut hairstyle and being dark-skinned, could also be “punished” and “judged” within a society where women are idealised for incorporating or having opposed appearances. However, by choosing to go against and challenging societal norms of beauty, this could be said to be a more feminist act (Åkestam 2018) seeing as it broadens our perspective and views of female bodies and beauty.

Less Feminine

The importance of normativity was again brought up by Abigail when she saw the same ad:

Abigail: really cool...if I think it's good, or, I don't know what to think..."I arouse", what does "arouse" mean? (*Moderator explaining the word in Swedish*)

Abigail: oh, no then I do not like it.

Moderator: no? Ok..?

Abigail: well she is cool cause she, eh, she, it's like an image from below, that's like power, eh, and it's cool cause it is not a white person, and buzz-cut hair it looks like she has, or they have, eh, but underwear ads I think more spontaneously are very difficult to make good, so this one I think is better than many others.

Moderator: ok, why do you think that?

Abigail: no but it is difficult because, well underwear is really something that one wears every day, but in ads it is portrayed as something that should please someone else, eh, and it's always like sexy people who are in them and people in sexy poses that are in the ads and most often those people, if they are women, then they are submissive, but this, she seems to have the power herself, so that is why I like it more.

Moderator: what, in what way do you mean?

Abigail: no but like not, like it looks like she wants, for example arouse, otherwise I could just as well think that she was standing and just taking selfies or something for herself or just stood and stretched...but now she stands in like a cool, eh, yeah, I like it more, I think it was a cool image after all.

Moderator: ok, so you felt that she had power in this image?

Abigail: yeah exactly, she is the one in charge, then I think like, the text could have been removed, but I think it was a cool image, like I had...yeah but I like it.

Moderator: ok, but in what way do you mean that she has power? Is it just because it is taken from below, or cause she was not white or had a shaved head or?

Abigail: well it did a lot because she has such a cool hairdo, eh, that does a lot, cause then it's not like this, like most often, oh god how should I think, eh, no but I don't know (laughs) but I think the hairdo does a lot, had she had long flowing hair it would have felt like it was more to please the one who looks at it.

Moderator: why do you think that?

Abigail: cause it feels more feminine, I think, and this feels less feminine, and then it feels like she has more power... (sighing) how horrible, yeah...

Moderator: so she has more power cause she is not as feminine, you mean?

Abigail: yeah I think that is why I interpret it more as powerful at first glance, and the pose is cool, and not like, pushing out the hips and the breast a lot but it's just, yeah she stands there...and it seems to be in some kind of home environment in morning sunlight, it feels like, something that one can identify with more.

Power is at first constructed as relating to the perspective of the image; seeing as the shot is taken from below, we are “looking up” towards the model and it thus becomes a power position. Immediately after, Abigail mentions the non-normative features of the model, her skin tone and hair. The first construction may relate to the typical and normative way that women are usually portrayed; as found in Goffman's (1979, 40) visual analysis where he claimed that women most often were portrayed in more submissive poses (like lying down in beds, on floors etc.), while on the other hand “holding the body erect and the head high is stereotypically a mark of unashamedness, superiority and disdain.” This thus implies that the ad being shot from below, as well as the models body position is a non-normative way of portraying women. The other constructions relating to the models' appearance again relate to normativity, and as such non-normative features mean more power than normative ones. Abigail further discussed underwear ads and pointed out that women are usually portrayed as sexy and submissive, thus this ad was more positive seeing as it went in another direction (except for the tagline using the word “arouse”). Even though underwear are mundane pieces of clothing that we use every day, in advertising they all of a sudden are something else; an article of clothing meant to “please someone else”.

This indicated that underwear (due to advertising), and specifically women's underwear is constructed as sexual pieces of clothing, therefore making it difficult for underwear ads to not be sexualising. At first, it seemed that Abigail did not interpret the ad as being sexualised, however upon learning about the word "arouse" and based on its sexual connotations, she became less positive than she was at first glance. Thus, arguably, the image itself without the copy did not convey a *female sexual agency*, but rather just agency: "she is the one in charge". However, due to the sexual implicitness of the ad copy used, it may be argued that CK wanted to include a sense of *female sexual agency*, even though this respondent preferred the image without the copy "the text could have been removed" and thus did not want to interpret the ad as intended. Just as in the example of underwear being everyday articles of clothing, it could be discussed why advertising must take something and turn it into something else; even though the model is not interpreted as being explicitly sexy, they nevertheless must make sure to include the element of sex and therefore do it in the copy instead.

Furthermore, power was towards the end also constructed as being gendered: "this feels less feminine, and then it feels like she has more power". Even though Abigail herself was a bit appalled by uttering those words, it was clear that due to the model's non-normative, and specifically less feminine appearance, she radiated more power in this ad. Simply by not having "long flowing hair", which is interpreted as a very feminine feature, the model gained more power. Ironically enough, relating this to the story of Samson who lost all his power after losing his long flowing hair, for a woman, it seems to have the opposite effect. What a difference some hair makes!

On the one hand, constructing power as being related to norms and therefore by breaking norms also gaining power could be related to wider feminist discourses of going against patriarchal norms and reinventing femininity and sexuality. On the other hand, constructing power as being gendered and marking masculine features as more powerful than feminine, relates to the prevailing and normative discourse of gender and the dichotomous relationship established by philosophers long ago between men and women. These different constructions then mean that power is riddled with norms, and that, unfortunately, normative femininity is still seen as less than normative masculinity.

In the subject position that the model has been placed in based on the above constructions, i.e. one of being non-normative and thus being powerful, it could be argued that senses of control, pride and self-efficacy may be felt. However, as a non-normative model, one could also argue that feelings of being an underdog or an outsider may also be felt from this position.

Sexual Power

This next quote comes from an individual interview with Penelope, who had just seen the "I take what I want" ad, and was now viewing the "I arouse" ad. Needless

to say, she, much like the other participants, interpreted this ad differently than the first one:

Penelope: Eh, yeah, well my spontaneous feeling is different compared to the other image.

Moderator: why?

Penelope: yeah that is what I am trying to figure out...it is probably a lot because of the way she stands, that she looks proud in another way, that she like unfurls her body while in the other image she was sitting more I don't know, pressing her breasts together, eh, yeah it's like another pride in this image and then also like, she does not have that classic feminine clothes, she looks for instance to be wearing more masculine underwear, I don't know if that contributes too that it is more masculine attributes that make me think that she radiates more power than the other.

Moderator: ok so you feel that this woman has some form of power?

Penelope: mm more than the other anyway, and then like I can see it's from the same company and I do not like that I am contradicting myself but if I only think of the image then she does exude more power than the last one.

Moderator: ok and that is because, do you think that there are some other masculine attributes?

Penelope: but I think it has a lot to do with that, and perhaps just that she is not like, classically feminine in that way, like she has, she has short hair, and she gets to like, but she has, she is posing in a more powerful way, and I think that has to do with it.

Moderator: what do you think of the text in the image?

Penelope: "I arouse in my" yeah (laughs), I didn't think about that actually when I first saw it...yeah, it feels a bit shabby, cause then it feels like she, again is just there in order to make a man excited instead of her just being able to exist for herself, like without having to be an object for someone else.

Moderator: do you feel that, does she become sexualised because of the text then?

Penelope: mm definitely.

Moderator: ok...so with the whole context then, do you still feel that she has some form of power?

Penelope: it would be her body position then and the way she is posing, that is radiating some form of power, but then I still think that it is the same thing that, that it like, it's an advertising image that has been created by men, that it is men deciding how she should stand, but just in the pose I do think she is radiating a sort of power.

Moderator: what type of power, if you could describe it?

Penelope: mm well yeah...it's like an, a...difficult question, I have to think a bit...like, she, she is radiating a form of power like, that she, she looks confident and she looks like she owns the room in another way than the last one did, eh, I don't know how I would define the type of power, if it is a sexual power she has perhaps.

Moderator: ok, do you feel like this image is relating to sex you mean?

Penelope: mm yes I absolutely think so, and it has a lot to do with the text.

Moderator: ok, so some form of sexual power (Penelope: mm), what do you think about that type of power?

Penelope: well it, it is really difficult with that sort of power cause I think that, in a perfect world then one would as a woman not have to lean back on that type of power, and I personally feel that it like, that I have been in situations where the only power I have that I can play on is that I have a sexual power, and that, I am powerless in like all other contexts but just that one has, something that still can influence men, and yeah, I don't know, I wish one didn't have to use that power.

Moderator: why do you wish that?

Penelope: because I think that, that, it makes you in the end think of yourself as only an object instead of seeing all the other qualities you have, I think.

Moderator: ok, how do you feel, like, do you value sexual power as much as other forms of power?

Penelope: no I would not say that I do, I think, ehm, no...no I do not cause sexual power is something very like, it is not something lasting at all, it disappears with age and stuff, so it definitely feels like a power that is not sustainable in the same way other forms of power are.

In this quote, power is again constructed as something norm-breaking and gendered; seeing as the model does not have "classic feminine clothes" but instead is "wearing more masculine underwear" the participant interpreted more power

in this image than the previous one (I take what I want). However, the initial sense of power becomes questioned after reading the text in the image “I arouse in #mycalvins” seeing as it then is interpreted as if the model cannot just “exist for herself” but instead is there “in order to make a man excited” and thus becoming an “object for someone else”. The power that the model exudes through her posture is then constructed as a sexual form of power due to the textual element; this power includes confidence and a sense of “owning the room”. This power is also seemingly gendered and reserved for women seeing as they may “lean back on that type of power”, and it may allow them to “influence men”. Such constructions may be linked to the third wave feminist discourse that views sex as power for women (Zimmerman and Dahlberg 2008). Yet, this form of power is not always desirable seeing as it ultimately makes one “think of yourself as only an object” and similar to Chancer (1998) regarding sexual capital, this form of power “disappears with age and stuff” according to Penelope, and is therefore “not sustainable in the same way other forms of power are”. Sexual power is thus constructed as a fleeting form of power, reserved for women that they may use (when/if they are young and beautiful) in order to influence men. Such constructions may be linked to wider feminist discourses related to the Patriarchal Panopticon where women must abide by the ruling norms of beauty and sexuality (e.g. Bartky 1990; Åkestam 2018).

This position of being a sexually (em)powered agent, allows the model more control and confidence over herself, yet she is at the same time restrained to her sexuality and must thus be desirable in someone else’s eyes; as soon as that desire dissipates, so does the power. Needless to say, those eyes are male and therefore the prevailing disciplinary power of the male gaze is ever present and ultimately determines what she can or cannot do: “it is the same thing that, that it like, it’s an advertising image that has been created by men, that it is men deciding how she should stand, but just in the pose I do think she is radiating a sort of power.” Therefore, it can be argued that while this model does reside within the Patriarchal Panopticon, just like the previous one, she seemingly still has more power and agency within that limited space due to her non-normative features.

Social influence, anyone?

When Riley, Elba and Dawn from focus group 7 looked at the “I arouse” ad by CK, they had a long discussion about the sexualising impact of the copy:

Riley: she looked pretty cool too, actually, but sure this one alludes perhaps a little more to sex than the other (*referring to the Under Armour ad featuring Giselle*) if one was to compare.

Elba: I think foremost that it is the text that makes the image more, like in this case, sexual, “I arouse” (Riley: Oh I didn’t even read it!), the image itself, it could absolutely be interpreted in a different way if one hadn’t

read the text, like you said it is really cool, it is a good picture, it is taken from below, it looks powerful in some way, and then just “aah I arouse in my calvins” aah, then ok, now you know what they wanted out of that image, like...

Riley: yeah, no I missed that.

Elba: yeah, no, so I think absolutely it is more sexualising.

Riley: yeah with the text absolutely now when you mention it but if I just look at the woman like just like that I can think like, yeah she was cool, she didn't look like a typical feminine, with like long flowing curly hair, like but it was, she looked slightly androgynous with her short shaved.

Elba: exactly, yeah the image itself is good, it really just becomes the text that changes it.

Dawn: cause one selects a woman with short hair, then one gets away with being more sexy, like, yeah...perhaps a little like that.

Riley: yeah absolutely.

Dawn: almost showing the nipples too, but she is still androgynous.

Elba: yeah one can wonder what would have happened if they had thrown someone or like had someone with longer hair because it also is interpreted as sexier, so you have a point there.

“...”

Riley: then I actually think it is problematic with the text, like now that I have noticed it and this, this thing with power, to say that she is powerful by adding the text “I arouse”, like it is the typical, the most usual power and the only power one ascribes to women, sexual power, and that becomes darned problematic like that women do not have any power anywhere else but they have power over men's sexuality and like, it gets really wrong when it says “I arouse”, so there, so no, yeah sure then she does have power, a sexual power, and that power doesn't really mean anything to her.

Dawn: it depends on who her partner is or how her partner looks or like, “image number two”

Riley: yeah but absolutely, but when one thinks like social influence versus sexual power then one would perhaps rather have social influence like men have more often than women, but yeah like I think that if I would remove the text and look at her like I did from the start, cause I did not notice the text then, then I thought she looked like she had power, like she

was stretching her body and her head was like lifted upward and she looked cocky and I liked that, so I thought it looked like she had power there if I just remove the text, but with the text I do not think it gets, like, yeah, sexual power is also a form of power but I still think that it is not a power that I would want to be ascribed like the only power as a woman, speaking for myself.

Right from the get-go the model in this ad was interpreted as being sexual; Riley compared it to the previous ad they had just seen which was an Under Armour ad, while Elba immediately noticed the copy “I arouse” and thus deduced it’s sexual undertones from there. However, in-between the sex appeal the participants also found this image to be good and the model to be looking cool, androgynous, not typically feminine and in some way powerful. It was also implied that due to the model’s non-normative features, CK could “get away” with the sexual appeal; as if choosing a woman with shaved hair was a strategic choice in order to allow them to sexualise her; “almost showing the nipples too, but she is still androgynous.” They also briefly speculated what this image would have looked like, and how they would have interpreted it if the model had had long hair, which is normatively seen as sexier. Thus, a woman’s sex appeal is constructed to, among other things, be related to her hair and having long hair is seen as sexier than having short or in this case shaved hair.

Moreover, the participant’s ascribed the model with a sexual power due to the copy and all of the features mentioned above, however, this form of power was also said to be the most typical, or the only, power that is ascribed to women; “yeah sure then she does have power, a sexual power, and that power doesn’t really mean anything to her.” This sexual power was in turn constructed as a useless form of power, especially when put into a wider context: “when one thinks like social influence versus sexual power then one would perhaps rather have social influence like men have more often than women”. Sexual power does not seem to imply any form of social influence or other forms of power; it is merely a form of power that allows certain women to attract certain men.

In such a position, having sexual power could open up for certain actions and possibilities, especially if one resides within the third wave feminist spectrum, that position would be rather positive seeing as it may allow the model to use her sexuality to gain power and get her way. However, based on the participant’s discussion, they did not interpret this position as being particularly positive or open to possibilities seeing as this form of power was said to basically mean nothing; i.e. even though this model may have a sexual power, this will not help her in the grander scheme of society, the way having social influence would. Therefore, if we speculate about the feelings that can be felt in this position, based on the participant’s constructions, the feelings are not just happy and carefree; as

a person with non-normative features and a sexual power, she may feel liked and admired by some, but may also experience judgements and harshness by others who want her to be contained within the societal norms.

Conclusion

In this chapter *female sexual agency* was examined through the theme of *Normativity* including discursive objects such as *power* and *objectification*. In all quotes, societal norms of femininity, beauty and sexuality were both implicitly and explicitly related to power and it was argued and interpreted that the more norm-abiding one is as a woman the less power one seems to have, while the more norm-breaking agents may exude and inhabit some form of power; sexual power.

Interestingly, throughout the various constructions, it became quite clear that the model in the first CK ad was viewed as normatively feminine and beautiful and because of that she was immediately placed within the Patriarchal Panopticon. However, the second model that displayed non-normative and less feminine features was perceived as more powerful. While the first model never was seen as masculine in any way, the second one in several instances was claimed to have masculine features of sorts. Therefore, it stands to reason that power is (still) constructed as being gendered and masculinity inherently means more power than femininity. As Morrissey sang, “is it really so strange?” – Arguably, it is not. As we have seen in the first chapter of this story, by excluding women from the main plots and always using men as the heroes, the norm, by discursively turning women into second sex citizens, by constructing dualisms and pitting femininity against masculinity, coupling the latter with power and the former with submissiveness, it is not strange at all that women, even feminist women, still make these associations and constructions. Discourses and language do, after all, help shape our reality, and seeing as these constructions of gender and power have been cemented into our societies for ages and ages, we still have a long way to go before we can decouple them.

These constructions are, needless to say, limiting the subject positions of women seeing as it thus means that for a woman being feminine will detract from her power, while cutting her hair and wearing men’s clothes will add to it. But why should women have to act and look more like men to gain power?

Furthermore, it is also not at all strange that girls and women may feel good about themselves when they objectify themselves: as females, this is what patriarchy has conditioned them to do and feel (Åkestam 2018). The rewards for abiding by the rules, for being sexy in accordance with the male gaze, are those nice and fuzzy feelings of admiration. However, if we are ever to change the narrow ideals and norms, such temptations must be resisted, challenged and reinvented. As discussed in this chapter, it is possible to *take* power by challenging the norms, and even though that taking hurts, the reward may be worth it if it leads to change.

However, this is not to say that women should not be able to be sexy, but rather that the choice of making oneself attractive and sexy should be a carefully deliberated and active choice, not merely a normative and conformist act that one never reflects upon. Seeing as we all do reside within a social context, it may never be truly possible to claim that what we do is really for ourselves, that if we objectify ourselves, we are doing it for our own sake and not because of someone or something else. Such claims are not possible to make, however, by at least reflecting upon them, by carefully considering the different choices that exist for us, at any given time, and the different ways in which we can represent ourselves, we may thus stand a chance of expanding the rules of the games we play.

Nevertheless, it is not enough for individuals to expand these rules, seeing as how advertising and media is an important part of culture, affecting people consciously and subconsciously, it is therefore significant for this industry to also expand the representations of people. If women were depicted in more ways than sexy, if beauty was not so narrowly defined, it would thus become easier for people to make different choices without the fear of shaming and backlash.

Lastly, the sexual power that was constructed for the model in the “I arouse” ad is also a significant form of power to dissect. When the participants interpreted a sexual power, that implied that the model was in control, that the sexualisation was on her terms, thus alluding to a sexual subject rather than an object. In such a position, there are more choices than for the sex object seeing as she is the one doing, rather than being done to. However, the only participants that seemed to interpret this form of power without critique were Cassidy, Hayden and Debbie from focus group 2. Other participants such as Abigail and Penelope as well as Elba, Dawn and Riley from focus group 7 were more critically inclined towards this form of power. For starters, Abigail argued that the text should be removed altogether seeing as the sexual connotation in the copy seemed to make the ad worse, while Penelope claimed that sexual power is not as sustainable as other forms of power. In focus group 7, Riley argued that if one were to choose between sexual power and social influence, the latter would be preferable seeing as sexual power is the only form of power ascribed to women, which becomes “darned problematic”. Although it may be seen as an improvement from being a sex object, the sexual subject is unfortunately still too closely linked to its predecessor: sexiness being, in both cases, the ultimate attribute of a woman. However, seeing as the model in the “I arouse” ad was seen as non-normative and unfeminine, but still being able to be sexy, it may also be claimed that this type of portrayal is a step forward towards expanding societal views and norms of attractiveness and beauty. Therefore, on the one hand the “I arouse” ad is a positive step in the right direction, yet still, the step would have been bigger and more inspiring if the copy did not have sexual connotations, and the model was able to, within that context, exude an agency that was not relating to sex.

CHAPTER VI

Freedom & Choice, or: Let my boobies go

In this second chapter of analysis, we shall focus on the theme of *Freedom & Choice*, which is especially related to feminist discourses of empowerment and choice feminism. It may prove significant to find what links and interpretations feminists make, perhaps allowing to unearth some more insight into current feminist discourses.

The three ads that have been used as representative for this theme are CK's "I am free in my Calvins", American Apparels' "Made in Bangladesh" and Under Armour's ad featuring Giselle Bündchen, all of which received particularly interesting discussions and interpretations relating to *Freedom and Choice*. Again, the quotes that have been selected for analysis are complementary as they all add to the construction and thus provide a more solid understanding of the relationship between the theme of *Freedom & Choice* and *female sexual agency*.

I have no Choice

When the participants in focus group 2 saw the "I am free" ad, they were quite concerned for the model and felt that the ad gave them bad vibes:

Cassidy: shit, she looks like she could be a child prostitute, for starters, she looks really young!

Debbie: yeah she looks very little.

Hayden: where is Calvin, I wonder?

Debbie: yeah where is...?

Cassidy: the jeans.

Debbie: she's free from calvin (laughs)

Hayden: "I am free from my calvins"

Cassidy: eh, no, but she looks like a child with too much make-up on (Debbie: mm), like, yeah now we again get this like...the little, like this...this

image does not feel like it is for women but rather for men...it's not like the girl who wants to buy those jeans I feel, that will like see this image and be like "ooh", but it's for men to be like "ooh, I like Calvin Klein cause they have hot young girls".

Debbie: yeah, what am I supposed to buy?

Cassidy: her! (laughs)

Debbie: yeah... I also think that this, I don't think she looks like..."I am free in my Calvins", I do not think she looks free.

Moderator: why not?

Debbie: because it feels, she's, like, it feels like she has pressed herself against a wall, uhm, and makes herself very available, but I don't get what that orange thing in front of the wall is, like is she in a crack or like what, she looks very, uhm, cornered as if, "I have no choice, if I want to survive I have to do this", that's what I think.

Hayden: I think like, that...first of all she is pretty... I mean the gaze is like pretty sexy and such (Debbie: mm), but, it's also that she looks super young and that she is super skinny and, makes herself even skinnier by, actually lying down arching her back, cause if you turn the image then she is lying down. (Cassidy: mm!) (Debbie: ahaa!) she is not standing up.

Cassidy: it's like a skyline.

Debbie: ahaa! (laughs)

Cassidy: and then if it (the photo) were landscape it would have looked worse.

Hayden: exactly, cause now it's like, some form of, eh, power position, but when you actually turn the image like it was from the start, then it just looks like she is lying down naked and, thrown away somewhere. (Cassidy: mm).

Debbie: She is lying down on the ground, I can see that now... really cold...no wonder her back is arching, she doesn't want to lie down.

Hayden: no exactly, as little body contact as possible.

Debbie: yeah, bad vibes from this one.

Cassidy: yeah, really bad vibes! I definitely do not think she is signalling any power.

Debbie: no no.

Moderator: freedom?

Debbie: no.

Cassidy: no, captivity!

Debbie: mm.

Hayden: I could agree a little with freedom, cause I am like, uhm...it's really nice having as little clothes as possible (laughs) but not outdoors lying down on some like stone...and not like...had it been me, I would not have covered my breasts, THEN it would be freedom.

Debbie: yeah, yeah exactly, had she not covered her breasts and just shown like, her body, then it would have been a more "freeing" image (Cassidy: mm).

The participants all agreed that the model in the ad does not have any freedom to choose the position she is in; freedom and choice are thus constructed as being intertwined and dependent upon each other. Another important aspect in the construction is the perceived age of the model; the participants thought she looked very young, thus implying that youth and maturity are also connected to freedom and choice. Furthermore, the ad itself is perceived to be directed towards men thus positioning the model as eye-candy for the male gaze and consequently turning her into an object for sale: "Debbie: yeah, what am I supposed to buy? Cassidy: her!"

At first, before they all realised the image had been turned, Debbie claimed that the model did not appear to be free seeing as "it feels like she has pressed herself against a wall, uhm, and makes herself very available"...she looks very, uhm, cornered as if, "I have no choice, if I want to survive I have to do this"", thus implying a perceived threat and constructing freedom and choice as something that should not be coerced. Furthermore, being "cornered" also means that freedom is constructed based on the available bodily movements and that it should be possible to move freely in the space in order to be free, i.e. being cornered and therefore not able to move freely in the surrounding space means not having freedom.

When Hayden later points out that the image has in fact been turned, it gets even "worse" seeing as having the model standing up is at least "some form of, eh, power position, but when you actually turn the image like it was from the start, then it just looks like she is lying down naked and, thrown away somewhere." This further diminishes her freedom and choice, turning her into an object that may simply be "thrown away" by others. In this instance then, the female in the ad is seemingly viewed as a victim being coerced to subjugate herself, she is not a free agent owning her own body or sexuality. As for *female sexual agency*, the model is arguably more of an object for the male gaze than a sexual subject: "it's for men to be like "ooh, I like Calvin Klein cause they have hot young girls"." The subject position is therefore narrow, with limited power and very few options: the model is referred to as a child prostitute, a captive, and someone who has to do/position

themselves in this way if they want to survive, something that has been “thrown away somewhere”. Such discussions relate to the discourses of violence and victimisation as described by Fine (1988). Although there are always possible choices to make as Foucault claimed (1976b); the model does have at least the power to choose to “play along”. However, it could also be argued that a person under threat, someone who thinks “I have no choice, if I want to survive I have to do this” does not really have other choices than to play along seeing as the other “choice” could be fatal. Is the choice between “playing along” and risking death really a choice, or is it perhaps rather an instinct; doing whatever it takes to stay alive? As Bartky (1990) claimed, an important aspect that is missing in Foucault’s discussion on disciplinary power is gender and the fact that female bodies are, or have been created to be, more docile than men’s bodies. In this instance then, the model is a captive within the Patriarchal Panopticon, and she is forced to remain there and be pleasing to the male eye, or else she will be punished.

Furthermore, the possibility of freedom discussed at the end of the quote is connected to nakedness. Seeing as the model is half-naked, yet covering up her bare breasts, the respondents felt that this was not in congruence with actual freedom, which would have been to not cover up oneself but displaying the body as is, i.e. to be naked. Interestingly then, in this instance the “choice” of covering herself up only decreases her freedom, due to the fact that the primary choice of posing/positioning was interpreted as not being her own. Such discussions could be linked to the naked vs. nude argument put forth by Berger (1972/2008), as well as the “free the nipple” movement. In this instance then, the model becomes more of a nude on display for others, than a free naked subject.

From this subject position that these constructions imply, as a captive, as not being free to choose but having to subjugate oneself in order to survive, it could be speculated that what one feels is fright, loss of control, perhaps even anxiety and powerlessness.

Like a bag of nuts

Rae had a similar feeling when she saw the ad and immediately thought of it as a bit troublesome:

Rae: yes. “I’m free...” yeah here it, here it feels a bit troublesome again.

Moderator: what does?

Rae: no but that she is so fucking skinny...I don’t know, but it is supposed to be lying down right? Or is it supposed to be like this, is she standing against a wall or is she lying down with the horizon behind her?

Moderator: what do you think?

Rae: I think that she actually is lying down but then they have turned the image so it’s not too much like she is just lying down...you have the sky

there behind. I don't know...no but I do not think that she has like a lot of power I'm sorry to say I don't think she looks that free.

Moderator: why not?

Rae: because she is posing a lot and lying down on some concrete and I get this image of like home-made...I don't know, like that...I don't know it feel like a flirtation with some kind of "street girl", I don't get the vibe that she is free and nice and running around topless at a fun party, I think that is the idea that she is so wild and crazy and just wearing a little pair of pants and nothing else, but it doesn't feel like that...and if she is standing up it becomes marginally better than if she is lying down looking sideways...she does not feel so free.

Moderator: why do you think they have turned the image?

Rae: I think they have turned it because it gets too uncomfortable when she is lying down cause then it becomes like a form of...first you take this picture and then you get raped kind of a vibe...yeah I think that it becomes too much if she lies down so that is why they have turned the image, cause if she stands up it's supposed to be like this wild and crazy "I do what I want I run around without a bra" but if she is lying down then it gets like I said, just lying down like a bag of nuts, and you just look at the nuts.

Freedom was here constructed as relating to power and being free to be wild and crazy and do whatever one wants. However, due to the model's body position: lying down on what appears to be some kind of stone/concrete outdoors, the freedom that this ad wanted to convey with its message of "being free in ones Calvins", did not get across. Instead the interpretation included vibes of prostitution and rape. Rae immediately saw that the image had been turned upward (portrait rather than landscape) and in that angle it should then appear as if she is free "if she stands up it's supposed to be like this wild and crazy "I do what I want I run around without a bra"". However, seeing as the model is actually lying down it becomes less free and less powerful, she becomes an object: "just lying down like a bag of nuts". Needless to say, a "bag of nuts" in this instance is not a position of freedom and choice; a bag of nuts has been placed there by others and is therefore an object, not a subject.

Consequently, the position of the model is again one of very few options and a lot of restraints; even though she is seemingly supposed to appear as having sexual agency and freedom, that all disappears due to the positioning and we are thus left with a passive sex object for the viewers to gaze at: "and you just look at the nuts." Furthermore, similar to the previous quote there is also a sense of violence and threat here: "first you take this picture and then you get raped".

Again, these constructions may be related to the discourses of victimisation and violence (Fine 1988) and in this position the model cannot be said to be a freely choosing agent but someone who has been coerced, who is controlled by others. Similar to the above constructions, this position is very limited and with few choices; the model is an object that others have placed there, and that others may control however they want. Arguably, if we again speculate based on the constructions that have been provided here, being in such a position would feel horrible, frightening and dehumanising.

Deepest wish

The participants in focus group 3 were also quite sceptical and critical towards the ad:

Margot: oh calvin klein...

Bailey: (laughs) I think like all these images are like, I don't, for the male eye.

Moderator: how do you mean?

Bailey: yeah but that they all should stand and look sexy and, but this, had it been in another way then maybe she would have looked, but that she doesn't have a shirt on for instance, it is a question that many women fight that one should be able to walk around topless and so on, but this is something else, here she stands and curves her body and watches with a horny look into the camera and like it is not the same thing, this is to make someone aroused by seeing her.

Margot: she is lying down in the image...

Bailey: yeah right she is lying, she is even lying down...who lies like that? (laughs) yeah, I think like directly that it's a male photographer that is like doing an "art project" with naked ladies.

Florence: she does not look that free...

Moderator: why not?

Florence: because she, also like, has a lot of contact with the photographer or camera, in a willing way, she kind of seeks approval that doesn't, or, my interpretation is that it is not her deepest wish to stretch out cause it is nice, but for someone else.

Bailey: she would have looked more free if she hadn't curved like that and didn't have her hand over, cause it's still, it would have been more freedom to like stretch out and just lie and be topless...now it feels like she has to cover herself for someone, it does not feel that freeing.

To begin with, this ad is interpreted as abiding by the male gaze, that the model should just “stand and look sexy” in order “to make someone aroused by seeing her”. This later relates to the construction of freedom as not having to subjugate oneself, or having to cover oneself up for someone else. Being free is thus constructed as doing something for oneself “cause it is nice”, not seeking approval from the outside. Although Bailey argued that being able to walk around shirtless as a woman is something that many women fight for, this ad however does not convey that fight: “this is something else”. She is then not considered free because she is lying down without a shirt while at the same time curving her body with a horny look towards the camera, and also having to cover her breasts thus not even being able to be fully topless and “free”; “it would have been more freedom to like stretch out and just lie and be topless...now it feels like she has to cover herself for someone, it does not feel that freeing.” This again relates to the nude vs. naked (Berger 1972/2008) debate and “free the nipple” movement, and she is arguably more of a nude on display than a naked subject.

However, contrary to the other two quotes, the sense of violence and threat was not as palpable in this construction. Instead, it was paradoxically construed that the model on the one hand was not free, that it was not “her deepest wish” to lie like that, while on the other hand she was seemingly making eye-contact with the photographer “in a willing way” and seeking his (cause of course, it was interpreted that the photographer was male) approval. Thus, the model, even though being in a limited position lying down like that and not being entirely free, did still seem to have some form of choice in the matter seeing as she was not under any immediate threat. This construction also meant that the model had a form of sexual capital, however when it comes to *female sexual agency*, the “agency” part is questionable seeing as “this is to make someone aroused by seeing her.” Thus, ultimately, even though she may “choose” to curve her body, look horny into the camera etc. by seeking approval and by subjugating herself for the male gaze, she is arguably then not really a free agent; she is just another model residing within the Patriarchal Panopticon, being sexy because that is what she, as a woman, has been conditioned to be.

This position may also be related to the discourse of victimisation (Fine 1988) seeing as these constructions turns her into an object that someone is basically deciding over, rather than a freely choosing subject. Being in such a position may again feel, if we speculate, rather powerless and with limited control over the situation.

Bound by diet

Daria, Parker and Chelsea also found the “I am free” ad problematic, especially concerning the figure of the model:

Daria: my spontaneous thought is that I understand what they are trying to get across but I do not think they succeed.

Moderator: what is it that they are trying to get across?

Daria: yeah but it says like "I am free" and like with the background it looks like she is like at some place and is about to, I don't know, party or have fun or lie down and cuddle on the ground cause it looks very comfy (*sarcastically*) no but, I don't know, but I understand what they are trying to get across but I really do not think they manage to because she does not look free in that position...like it is very stiff and a weird image.

Parker: mm.

Daria: it does not feel that freeing, it would have been one thing if she had hung out on a bed with her arm down and looked like, scruffy or something, but this is not that free, or if she had been running around or something, jumping and been happy, that feels free, but, yeah, no.

Chelsea: no like that curve of the back does not look that free and comfy, at all.

Daria: but perhaps, CK likes to place them in weird and uncomfortable positions...

Chelsea: but ok, if one was to be like that, like as a woman somewhere, this need to use a bra for instance, in that way, she is free from having a bra.

Parker: yeah, but not free enough, or, she still has to cover her nipples (Chelsea: mm), I don't know, but it get so weird...she is also very, like, she is probably not free from having to go on a diet in order to maintain this job, I don't know, it is so weird with images like these, one, thinks about...it's, it is so very few who are allowed to be displayed in this way (Chelsea: mm) like, I don't know, it is difficult to get passed that when you look at it because, it is like, yeah a really skinny young white girl, super hot, like in her face and like (Daria: styled), yeah but styled and make-up and the light, it gets so weird putting this against the message that they are trying to put into all of their images, it is perhaps why they have failed.

Daria: yeah.

Moderator: so you do not think that the message in the copy and the image go together in some way?

Parker: it is, like it is still because one knows, like one knows this is an ad campaign, I don't know if this had been a, someone out taking pictures of themselves or I don't know, it could have looked like this, surely, but just

that one is tired of seeing it in advertising, and one is tired of being fed with this message that one knows is just for, in order to sell a product which also just creates a lot of anxiety and eating disorders and so on for everyone being fed with this all the time, it is difficult to just look at the image without thinking about that.

Chelsea: well I do not think that this reflects freedom, anywhere, at all, it's like, what does it take to maintain that figure that the girl has (Daria: mm), well first off you must have the right genetics, and then second most of them have some form of eating disorder...

Parker: mm but if one, if one would picture this pose in this image with a body that was not a model norm.

Daria: yeah that would make a huge difference.

Parker: yeah, right?

Daria: yeah, it would, but it is still an uncomfortable pose.

Parker: yeah it absolutely is, but yeah, I don't know.

Chelsea: yeah but I agree with if it had been a person who was not norm thin and looked like that model then, it would absolutely make a big difference, but...well it had made all the difference, there one would also, in some way, what to say, fought against the norm regarding beauty (Daria: mm), and so on, but, when it is this teeny tiny super thin type of person that one sees over and over and over and over then it is not new or fresh or free or anything, cause they have dismissed 99.7% of the human population, cause they have the wrong genetics, from the start.

Parker: mm.

The tagline "I am free in #mycalvins" was according to these participants not successful or in concordance with the actual image. The positioning of the model was viewed as being uncomfortable, weird and therefore not free: "that curve of the back does not look that free and comfy, at all.", "CK likes to place them in weird and uncomfortable positions". This thus alludes to body positions being related to freedom, and arguably, ones that are uncomfortable and weird do not signify freedom.

Moreover, Chelsea stated that the model was at least free from having a bra, but as Parker immediately disputed, that was still not entirely freeing seeing as she still had to cover her nipples. Again, this relates to the free the nipple movement, as well as being nude versus naked (Berger 1972/2008). Most importantly though, in this discussion, was the model's extremely slim figure: "she is probably not free from having to go on a diet in order to maintain this job". As

Bordo (1998) argued, dieting and being slender is one of the most normalising strategies for self-monitoring and self-disciplining "docile bodies". Thus, the constructions therefore led to the model not being free in her Calvins after all, seeing as she is bound by diet (and perhaps eating disorders), bound by the weird position CK has placed her in (i.e. not one that she has chosen to place herself in) and bound by having to cover up her breasts, even though it is most likely CK who removed her top, or not even offered her one. Freedom would mean not having to discipline one's body to such extreme lengths, not having to force the body into certain positions that are uncomfortable, and not having to cover up oneself, if one truly wanted to be naked.

This position again is very limiting and ruled by the male gaze. She is not a free agent but an object that CK has chosen to display in this way. However, resistance is possible and she could choose to stop dieting, not lie down however CK wants and refuse to pose half-naked or refuse to cover up her breasts – however, such choices could arguably mean that she would not have been displayed in this ad at all. Thus, in this small little advertising universe in which this model resides, for her to be in this ad, she must abide by the rules set up by CK. Rules that are connected to the Patriarchal Panopticon. Such a position is arguably, neither a very pleasant one, nor a very open, flexible or empowering one either. If we speculate based on the constructions provided and this position that the participants have placed the model in, we can assume that what can be felt is powerlessness, most likely also hunger, and perhaps even a fear of not being accepted if one does not abide by the rules that have been set up.

Can I get a price check on this girl?

When viewing the "Made in Bangladesh" ad, Abigail had some mixed feelings and thoughts about it due to the text and the way the model was displayed:

Abigail: this is so American Apparel (sighs) no but this is really disgusting.

Moderator: why?

Abigail: yeah well, what do they want? Do they mean that she is made in Bangladesh then or the pants? Like this is so fucking disgusting like made in Bangladesh that is what it says on all those clothes that they are made there and you know that it is really fucking terrible working environments, eh...so it feels first of all what do they want to say with it, I guess it's an ad, but it definitely feels like a porn thing.

Moderator: why?

Abigail: well, yeah...no but it feels like, but it's probably because one relates nakedness with porn, cause it's the only time you see, like breasts are only something sexy, ehm...but if you look at it like if one is to analyse

or think outside of the box it might as well have been an intersectional campaign...where one was to shed light on something...cause she is standing rather neutrally, she is just standing there, she is not standing in some kind of sexy pose, or inviting pose...so that feels nice...ehm, but it is a bit difficult, I mean I don't understand what they want with this picture, at all.

Moderator: what do you think of the model in the picture?

Abigail: yeah she is really cool, she looks like she has chosen to stand there, "this is my body, you're welcome"

Moderator: even if it is an advertisement?

Abigail: well when you look at it as an advertisement you know that that is not at all the case, cause then they again use nakedness in order to sell things, but if this had been for another purpose like an Instagram picture or I don't know some kind of activist picture it would have been really cool.

Moderator: but for the purpose that it is now, that is, for advertising?

Abigail: no then it is not cool.

Moderator: why not?

Abigail: because it's like, I do not understand what they want to sell at all, and like, what the hell...it feels like they want to sell her, "here is my girl, who is made in Bangladesh", eh...and then a price tag on it, it feels really disgusting.

In the first instance this respondent felt disgusted by the ad due to the copywriting "Made in Bangladesh" which refers to a discourse within the textile industry and clothing production specifically linked to "fast fashion" which is riddled with conceptions of poor working environments and cheap labour. As the copy here is referring to the model, it thus has double meaning which in turn also objectifies the model as if she were the same as the jeans that she is wearing (barely visible in the ad though): "it feels like they want to sell her, "here is my girl, who is made in Bangladesh"".

The ad was further interpreted as having links to pornography, seeing as nakedness is so often used in porn. Again, the nude versus naked debate Berger (1972/2008) put forth is applicable, and in this instance, it seems that both concepts could be interpreted in the picture itself, however it depends on the purpose of the picture. Seeing as the model is standing in a rather neutral pose, not trying to be sexy, she was constructed as "cool", as if she was freely putting her body up for display and thus being naked: "this is my body, you're welcome". If this had been a picture on Instagram or for some feminist activism, the choice

would have been her own. However, in the context of advertising, that choice disappears: “cause then they again use nakedness in order to sell things” – this nakedness thus becomes nudity instead. As a nude, choice and freedom is in the hands of the producer, rather than the subject (or object) on display.

Female sexual agency is paradoxically constructed here seeing as the model on the one hand is posed and constructed as not being or trying to be sexy, but at the same time undressed with exposed bare breasts, which “are only something sexy”, for an advertising purpose, which thus relates to pornography and objectification. The juxtaposition of that specific copywriting placed upon the model’s naked breasts thus turns her into an object for sale, and if she is the one they are selling, there is no real agency in her position. Such a position then, would again probably feel rather dehumanising, and not all that “freeing”.

Here I am, tada!

Focus group 4 had a rather long discussion about the American Apparel ad to begin with seeing as they did not know what the ad was for. Thus, they started fantasising and making up various stories about the model, who she was and why she was just standing half-naked in the picture:

Lais: no but, like I don’t know, the pose, it doesn’t feel so, she stands there like, just stands there and barely smiles and just shows her body, albeit a pretty body, but yeah, not so, why show, why is she pulling down the pants and showing the tummy? Is it that she has done abdominoplasty too or what? No but it’s, the whole pose just feels, “study this body”, not, there is not so much, ehm...there is not so much content in her but instead it’s just “yeah look at this body it is made in Bangladesh”.

Odessa: I think like this is, or I don’t understand the image, but like, just by judging her facial expression she looks like, she looks pretty happy, like she doesn’t smile but she still looks fairly, this is like nice and as if it’s a friend who has photographed her and like “can I take a picture of you when you’re standing there” and it should be this artsy and a little sexy photo, like, yeah photo course in high school sexy picture (they laugh), I don’t know, a picture like, but, one cannot really, or, I do not understand the purpose of the picture...

Calla: I think she almost looks mostly, she is the one who looks most relaxed and natural.

Lais: it doesn’t feel like a model image (Calla: no), like classic, cause she does not, she does not have that empty insipid expression that

advertisements always have if it's something more feminine, she, she has like, yeah she has a gaze that meets your own when you look at it.

Calla: and it's not that gaze that is supposed to get you in bed or be horny or scared or, yeah.

Lais: mm, she feels more proud too (Calla: yeah), like it's "look what I've done, I've been to Bangladesh and gotten a breast enlargement" (Calla laughs)

Odessa: she feels neutral, "here I stand and am being photographed"

Calla: yeah, as if she has just forgotten to wear clothes and like "woops!"

Lais: "Woops they got rained away"

Calla (laughing): yeah! "I usually look like this, it's cool"

Lais: yeah maybe she does.

Calla: yeah maybe she is comfortable I don't know.

Lais: she looks very comfortable anyway, she does not feel so objectified in the image, but the text feels very strange, her gaze radiates more strength and more presence than the earlier images but, but the text is very strange, I would have expected like yeah "made in Bangladesh" and a bunch of test tubes and a doctors coat on her that would have felt more like "yeah cool, what is she going to do?" This just becomes weird.

Moderator: ok but you said that she does not feel like an object like the others, is she a subject in the image then, does she have agency over herself?

Lais: it feels like it, it feels much more that this is her choice to show her breasts, it feels like more of a pride in her gaze, she is present, she is not present to make someone else aroused, ehm, and like lure someone's sexual energy, there is, even if the breasts are in focus in the image it does not feel like it's someone else's sexual energy in the image when I look at it, it feels like it could be, something, it could be a coverage photo cause there is nothing seducing in the image, but a very strange coverage photo with that text on top.

Moderator: you said that it didn't feel like it was something sexual, do you mean that she is not sexualised in the image?

Lais: not, like not expressively, but then I mean, breasts, breasts become sexualised, that's why people go crazy when one is nursing in a café or something but I don't think, I do not get that experience from her, like she is not experiencing it as something sexual, that's what it feels like for me.

“ ... ”

Lais: yeah but she feels more like, it's difficult to say from the image what she has done, like what it is that gets her in this image, but it does not feel as sexualised, but rather like she is experiencing, not experiencing it as sexualised even though she is standing there showing her breasts, like, it's about what she radiates, she does not radiate any sexual energy but it's like a pride that she is pretty comfortable in like where she stands in her bare breasts, she is not hiding from anything.

Calla: it feels like in the other images they have received a lot of directives from the photographer or from the outside, like, “look behind, look over your shoulder, hold up, blend into the wallpaper” (they laugh) but here she is just standing and has not received that much directive but just “here I am, tada!”

Odessa: yeah and also, if she had had, like it is the nakedness that feels like, that it is apparent that one should look at her body and I don't think one should look at it from a medical purpose but that it's supposed to be selling, and then the question is if it's supposed to be sexy or not, I don't know, but if she had clothes on she would, it could have been any photo at all, like just, “we shall see your face so we recognise you, this is an ID photo for work” or like it could have been anything, like she is not trying to, cause her gaze is not seductive in that way..

To begin with, before the respondents knew what the ad was for, the interpretations were rather positive. The model was seemingly radiating a sense of pride and comfort, she looked like she was standing there, rather neutrally, not trying to be sexy, and choosing herself to show off her body (for whatever reason). Compared to the rest of the images that the group had viewed up to that point, she was the one exuding the most natural, neutral look, as if she had not gotten as much directives as the other models “but just “here I am, tada!””. In that position, which was interpreted as more free and powerful, the options available were endless: she could have been anything, and whatever that was it would have been her own choice: “it feels like if you look at her you feel her gaze saying that she is like, it does not say that she has done something she regrets or something for someone else, regardless she is happy with the choice, that she is the one happy with the choice.” Drawing from third wave and choice feminism, from this position, what could be felt from the respondents was a sense of inspiration: “she feels more proud too, like it's “look what I've done, I've been to Bangladesh and

gotten a breast enlargement””, but also some confusion: ”I do not understand the purpose of the picture...”.

We shall now see what happened later on in the interview, when they learned what the ad was for:

Moderator: but do you think, this is an advertisement, does it matter what the ad is for?

Odessa: yes.

Calla: yes.

Lais: yes, yes and no, it feels like if they perhaps sell, like plastic surgery, and plastic surgery can be like can have different purposes, if one feels bad then plastic surgery is typical but it does not fix the inside, but then one can be unhappy with a specific thing for oneself not for, like pleasing someone else “yeah come on can you enlarge your breasts for me” like it matters whose initiative it is too.

Moderator: I can tell you that this is not an ad for plastic surgery.

Lais: no, but it feels like it could have been, it feels like if you look at her you feel her gaze saying that she is like, it does not say that she has done something she regrets or something for someone else, regardless she is happy with the choice, that she is the one happy with the choice.

Calla: but I also think that it matters greatly if they are doing an ad for a moped built in Bangladesh and then they have her as an image, then it becomes very weird!

Lais: sell thing with girl!

Calla: so, then she becomes a very weird object, like then it just becomes no, so yeah it absolutely matters what it is an ad for.

(Moderator explaining who is behind the ad and what it is for: American apparel, clothing)

Lais: and then somewhere the interpretation gets changed when one knows that it was not plastic surgery she was selling, it can be like this, yeah but it would have been a nice coverage story behind it if she had bought plastic surgery herself or whatever but that she at least was there and wanted to show others that one can do...but then we don’t know...but that she is supposed to sell clothes, but where are the clothes? Like, it becomes that one interprets even less power because she, yeah, there is no, the merchandise is not in the picture at all but...

Calla: and she just becomes...

Lais: it gets interpreted for what one sells.

Calla: she just becomes a woman from Bangladesh like it just becomes an exotification of her, nothing, nothing else.

After having learned the producer behind the ad and the purpose of it, the interpretation took a turn to the negative and the model was instead constructed as having less power: “she is supposed to sell clothes, but where are the clothes? Like, it becomes that one interprets even less power because she, yeah, there is no, the merchandise is not in the picture at all...”, and in the end she becomes “an exotification” of a woman from Bangladesh, and nothing else. Therefore, the purpose of an advertisement may alter interpretations and it thus matters greatly what a specific image is used for when we interpret it. Similar to Abigail’s response, this being an advertisement for women’s clothing here constructs the image and the position of the model as less than a freely choosing subject, and more of an object on display.

The inspiration that could be felt at the beginning of the discussion quickly dissipated, and the participants seemed to be more frustrated and negatively inclined towards the image by the end of the discussion. If we speculate, the position that this model has been placed in based on these last constructions, is one of powerlessness, of victimisation (Fine 1988), of an “exotified” object, which arguably would not feel particularly good, even though one may be accepted and liked for not resisting the boundaries that others have set up.

I don’t want to be here

Nelle, Leah and Skye were fairly appalled by the American Apparel ad from first glance seeing as they found it to be very sexualising:

Nelle: Oh God, for fuck sake...this is just so sexualised! Like, is this not American Apparel? I think so, but yeah, I don’t know what to say...

Leah: no but I think it feels like a very strong sexualisation of, like the whole thing with the clothing industry and everyone knows there are textile factories in Bangladesh where especially women and children are working for basically nothing and under really bad conditions, and it feels like a huge sexualisation of something that is very horrible...mostly cause it says “Made in Bangladesh”.

Skye: yeah what is it that they refer to as made in Bangladesh? The pants that she is barely wearing, or her, or just her breasts, or like? I don’t know...I think it was a very strange image.

Nelle: no it is really difficult to understand what the purpose it, it is probably just to get attention.

Skye: I think she looks a bit pained...like her expression is "I don't want to be here" (Leah: mm)

Nelle: yeah exactly, that she, like half smiles but in her gaze she does not look that satisfied, yeah like, like said before, I draw strong connections to the social problems with the industry in Bangladesh and poverty and such, I get very confused by the image, I do not understand what it is supposed to be good for.

Leah: I also started to think about the placement of the text, again I think about how people stand and she just stands very straight, if she did not have that expression but instead did something, like she does not stand hunched or anything, but then it could simply be an image with a person who does not wear a shirt, but that they have placed the text so that the nipples are strategically hidden, that makes it feel like it is more sexualised because just this, that a bit of the nipple is shown, like usually I think, sure she also has very normative breasts, but if one would show naked breasts, it does not have to be nakedness that feels sexualised, but I rather think that it feels more sexualised when it's normative and the nipples are kind of hidden, cause it alludes to the nipple being forbidden.

Nelle: really, I agree.

Skye: me too.

To begin with, all of the participants agreed that the image was sexualising which was constructed as something negative especially due to the copy "Made in Bangladesh" which they associated with clothing factories and minimum wage workers. Furthermore, the model was referred to looking "pained" and unsatisfied, as if she was not there of her own accord: "I don't want to be here", thus constructing her as a victim without freedom or choice, an object forced to be displayed. The sexualisation is thus again based on the male gaze and not on her own female desires (Fine 1988).

Additionally, they also discussed the nipples being partly hidden which paradoxically made it more sexualising than if they had been fully displayed. This is due to the connotations of the nipples being "forbidden", and therefore alluding to the free the nipple movement as well as Berger's (1972/2008) discussions regarding nude versus naked. In this instance, the model is nude, not naked, seeing as she is for one, not the one choosing to display her naked body herself, and second, not being able to display her whole body as is but instead getting parts of it, the "forbidden parts", covered up. Also, as Leah argued, seeing as the breasts are "normative", referring, most likely to them being quite big and perky (which

we all know is the only type of breasts that can be sexy, no one wants to see small, droopy breasts. Right?), that also added to the sexualisation.

Due to these constructions, the model is in a subject position that is limited; she is not a freely choosing agent, happily displaying her naked body for all to see but rather being forced or cajoled into something she is not happy with. She becomes a nude, an object on display, ruled by the male gaze. Arguably, being in such a position would feel rather depressing and hopeless, as if one was trapped inside an invisible box without knowing where the lock is.

Expiration date

Riley, Dawn and Elba from focus group 7 were also not that impressed with this ad when they saw it:

Riley: she looks like a product.

Dawn: yeah exactly, like "expiration date" ...

Elba: it really is just about her in this image, that she is the one made in Bangladesh and nothing else.

Dawn: and they are not selling her, she is not, like we cannot buy her so it's one of those "do not think about the product, think about this girl, we do not have any purpose with this image we just want to portray a beautiful girl from Bangladesh"

Moderator: did you feel that she had any form of power in the image?

Riley: I do not think so because I think it becomes as if she is owned by someone else when they write made in Bangladesh and like just show, have her body, it is like her body is made for selling there and like, if they would have cared at all about her and wanted to represent her why would she be half-naked?

Dawn: no and it's like when you talk about cars and other things, "made in", the little stamp like on the back, it feels like that.

Riley: no but it really feels like she gets stamped like a product so no, I do not think she has any power whatsoever there.

Moderator: is she sexualised in the image?

Elba: I think so.

Riley: yes, and seeing as it's an ad for jeans and one can perhaps only see 5% of the jeans then, they just want her nakedness...then again she does not have that typical sexy look or like in the face the gaze but it is obviously a needless amount of nudity or like, to sell a pair of jeans that are barely visible so of course she becomes sexualised.

Dawn: but just being able to be so sexy and relaxed, like she does not look like she is putting on airs, still some form of, nice skin and nice breasts, that makes, like her body is objectified and it becomes sexualising because you do not know anything about her, the product, and you only see her naked body and she, yeah...

Riley: yeah and the hands a bit in the waistband and, yeah, they are open the jeans too and like if they wanted to show the jeans they could have just buttoned them so you can see how they fit her, but yeah, no I think...

Dawn: it is perhaps better than if she had stood and covered her breasts like she did not want to show them, now she is still comfortable with being naked in some way, but it is a very small power in that.

Because of the copy, these participants instantly deemed the model in the image to be a product. As such, she was not free or able to choose but instead owned by someone else and therefore powerless: "it is like her body is made for selling". Instead, it is the ones behind the ad that hold all the power, being able to choose to display her any way they want, even if there is no point to it: "do not think about the product, think about this girl, we do not have any purpose with this image we just want to portray a beautiful girl from Bangladesh". Furthermore, the producers of the ad were also seemingly deemed as menacing, or uncaring: "if they would have cared at all about her and wanted to represent her why would she be half-naked?", i.e. not having her best interests in mind, but just their own. Seeing as this is an ad for clothes, as the participants understood from the start, they also claimed that the only point to this image is to have the model being naked: "one can perhaps only see 5% of the jeans then, they just want her nakedness". However, because of the constructions of the model being a product, an object, she is of course not naked but instead she is nude (Berger 1972/2008). This objectification was seen as sexualising, and even though they did not think the model had a particularly sexy look in the image, or "putting on airs", it still became sexualising because of the juxtapositions of the actual product not being displayed and her nudity being the main purpose and focus, instead of the jeans.

Furthermore, Riley also pointed out that the jeans were a bit open and "if they wanted to show the jeans they could have just buttoned them so you can see how they fit her" - again this very much constructs her as having no agency whatsoever seeing as "they" are the ones in complete control being able to display her, she is not even able to button her own jeans but that is referred to as something "they" could have done. Basically, the model is just a mannequin. Being in such a subject position means that one's choices are very limited, one does not have control over the situation, nor the choices or abilities to do

something about it. As a product, an object, one is barely a self. One's body is not one's own but instead ruled by others.

Arguably, this is a horrible position to be in, and as a woman, especially one from a third world country such as Bangladesh, perhaps, it is also a far too familiar one. What can be felt from such a position is, speculatively, feelings of fear, of enslavement, of anxiety and oppression.

I don't care

This last quote comes from an individual interview with Tyler, who was viewing the Under Armour ad featuring Giselle Bündchen and it was chosen in order to showcase a different perspective and understanding of *freedom and choice*:

Tyler: mm...this felt a little better.

Moderator: why?

Tyler: cause she feels like she, she is confident and focused on herself and her own if you look based on these texts around the image, that people will judge her but she will not be distracted by it but instead she will do her thing.

Moderator: did you feel that that is what she exudes?

Tyler: yes, I think she does exude that in the image.

Moderator: in what way?

Tyler: she looks like she doesn't really care it's not like a standard pose with like pouty lips in that way, she has her mouth slightly open and looks into the camera and stands very casually, I think.

Moderator: ok, do you feel that she has any power in the image?

Tyler: mm, what I feel spontaneously is that she, she like does not care what others think about her and then she gets power because she does her own thing, but that is probably exactly what Under Armour wants me to think and feel too, and in that way they have succeeded.

Moderator: so unlike the last one where you felt that they didn't really succeed, you feel that they do that here?

Tyler: yes I think so.

Moderator: why do you think that is?

Tyler: just because she looks relaxed like she doesn't care, and together with the texts it becomes as if the image of her and the texts are collaborating well and they like, speak with each other, instead of like the texts before with Calvin Klein which perhaps spoke against each other.

Moderator: ok, do you feel that she is sexualised in the image?

Tyler: no, that, my first thought is no, this feels more self-chosen but it probably depends on it not being sexually challenging in some way.

Moderator: even though a lot of skin is shown here as well?

Tyler: yeah no but it feels like it's not, it's not breasts or butt that's in focus as it was before, but it is still skin of course, but it feels better.

Moderator: ok, so you felt that the texts and the image go well together (Tyler: mm), and that they combined make her, make it look like she has power (Tyler: yes), of sorts, what kind of power if you were to describe it?

Tyler: power to be herself and realise herself based on what she wants regardless of what others think or would judge her for.

In this quote, freedom and choice is not bound up with sexuality, but rather disconnected from it: "this feels more self-chosen but it probably depends on it not being sexually challenging in some way." Here, the way the model has been represented is constructed as a free agent, not caring what others may or may not think of her, she has not been placed into a strained pose or subjugated to play only on her looks and sexuality, but rather, she is just standing looking straight at the camera: "she looks like she doesn't really care it's not like a standard pose with like pouty lips in that way, she has her mouth slightly open and looks into the camera and stands very casually." These aspects thus lead to agency being constructed as something that is not sexualised, strained or coerced, but instead something self-chosen and casual. However, in one instance it also became clear that Tyler was aware of the brand/producers behind the ad and their role in the constructions:

...what I feel spontaneously is that she, she like does not care what others think about her and then she gets power because she does her own thing, but that is probably exactly what Under Armour wants me to think and feel too, and in that way they have succeeded.

Thus, even while being aware of the context of the ad and that the brand behind it probably had an agenda, it seems as if this agenda was still accepted and that it did not take away from the model's agency. This can be due to the fact that the model was not sexualised seeing as "it's not breasts or butt that's in focus", but instead focus is seemingly on the model herself, as a self-choosing agent.

Seeing as these constructions of agency are not linked to sexuality, the concept of *female sexual agency* is thus not valid here but instead one might speak of a *female agency*. This also means that the wider discourses discerned here are not linked to Fine's (1988) discourse of female desire, but instead to a wider feminist discourse of female self-power and actualisation; on the surface one may

even call it empowerment, however I would refrain from doing so seeing as it does not check the necessary and original formulation of empowerment which also includes social justice. Regardless, the subject position that these constructions have placed the model in is one with endless possibilities: as an agent, not caring what others think means that the world is her oyster and she has the “power to be herself and realise herself based on what she wants regardless of what others think or would judge her for.” Arguably, such a position would feel rather freeing and wonderful. We should all be so lucky.

Conclusion

The theme of *Freedom and Choice* is a fascinating one when it comes to *female sexual agency*, seeing as it is riddled with paradoxes: on the one hand the models in these ads should convey a sense of freedom by being displayed half-naked, while on the other hand they are not even *allowed* to actually *be naked*. While wanting to convey a sense of *freedom and choice*, the first two ads seem to fail because they do not manage to take the idea all the way through. In both these ads the breasts, which arguably are still parts of the female body that are sexualised in our culture (whether we want them to be or not) are covered either by the models’ hands or the copywriting. Indeed, as was pointed out by some of the participants, it would have been more freeing had the breasts been displayed as is, uncovered. The discussions pertaining to the nudity of the models were related to the “free the nipple” movement which is about re-constructing the female breasts and especially nipples to become something natural and normal rather than something that is only sexualised and thus must be covered up so as to not be vulgar or offensive. As well as Berger’s (1972/2008) nude versus naked debate, where he claimed that there is a difference between being nude or being naked, the former meaning a naked body that is objectified and put on display, while the latter is merely a naked body. Arguably, it is quite difficult, if not completely impossible to display naked bodies in advertising without turning them into nudes, seeing as advertising is about selling something, and by selling something with the use of a naked body, it means putting that body on display, thus objectifying it.

Furthermore, as Rae claimed, the CK model was supposed to appear wild and crazy, running around without a bra on, but seeing as they shot her lying down and then turned the image, it just became a strangely forced idea that did not get across. All the participants sooner or later noticed that the image had been turned, and when they did, the interpretations only got more critical and negative. One does wonder: why would CK not just take the picture with the model standing up, why having her lie down on some concrete floor and then turn the image? (*I guess, as most things, hindsight is 20/20*).

Furthermore, the model in the CK ad, due to her appearance (how young the participants thought she looked, and how thin) and her position (lying down), the discourses of violence and victimisation (Fine 1988) could be discerned, and

she was time and time again constructed as some form of victim, being coerced to do something she did not really want to do. From such a position, it never became possible for her to be free or choose for herself, she was always seen as being subjugated, having to do certain things in order to survive. It becomes rather sad and ironic then, that this ad had the text “I am free”, when all the interpretations and constructions condemned the model as being everything but free. This was the ad that had the biggest discrepancy between the image and copy according to the responses.

The American Apparel ad on the other hand, received more mixed interpretations, mostly due to the fact that many participants at first did not understand what the ad was for or who/what the copywriting “Made in Bangladesh” was referring to. Even though this ad eventually was condemned as being an exotification, as selling her instead of the clothes she barely had on, the model herself was also interpreted as being the most neutral of all, of seemingly not being coerced or directed to stand in a certain way, or look into the camera in the typically horny or lustful way that female models often do. Just literally standing straight, looking casually into the camera, constructed her as having more agency and power in some cases, but unfortunately, that became muddled and eventually lost due to her being topless in an ad for selling clothes, when indeed, there was no good reason for it.

In addition, the Under Armour advert featuring Giselle showcased that freedom and choice was constructed as something un-related to sexuality and instead connected to not giving a damn what others think. This would entail that having agency means also having the confidence to stand tall and be oneself, regardless of external peer pressures; something that for many, if not most, is easier said than done. In this case, it did not matter that the model was standing half-naked clad in only sports-underwear, the amount of skin shown does not automatically sexualise a woman but it matters greatly how that woman is represented, which in this case, was in a more casual rather than sexual way.

Lastly, it also became rather clear during the discussions, that context matters greatly, and in the context of advertising, *Freedom & Choice* are for the most part constructed as being based on the brands, producers and the purpose behind the images, rather than the models in them; at least in the cases where freedom and choice was related to the sexuality of the model. Even though the models in CK’s “I am free” and American Apparel’s “Made in Bangladesh” ads should appear as if they are free and choosing to stand/lie down half-naked in the ads, this is merely a mirage, a fantasy, an idea that did not really come across for these participants.

CHAPTER VII

Gaze, or: Looking at me, looking at you

As has been put forth, the objectifying male gaze has been pervasive in advertising portrayals of women. Seeing as men are believed to be the norm, and therefore the ideal spectators, women are thus valued based on how they appear, how desirable they are for a man. The concept of gaze, the act of looking, is significant in discussions about power, agency and subjectivity, and in this story, the gaze of the models and their facial expressions was time and time again brought up by the participants. However, in Gill's (2008) examination of midriff advertising, the aspect of the models' gaze is missing. Therefore, in this chapter we shall focus on the gaze, the eyes, the facial expressions of the models, and examine how these have been interpreted by the participants; how *female sexual agency*, and thus notions of power, agency and subjectivity are constructed based on the gaze. We shall do this by looking at the ads "I am powerful in #mycalvins" by CK, "Self taught Self made" by Diane von Furstenberg and Under Armour's ad featuring Misty Copeland.

The quotes chosen for analysis in this chapter all include various constructions pertaining to the gaze and facial expression of the models, and all combined thus form a better grasp of how this theme may be related to and significant for how *female sexual agency* is perceived and understood.

I want you

When McKenzie viewed CK's "I am powerful in #mycalvins", she found that the eyes said one thing and the text another, determining that the equation of sex = power was not true:

McKenzie: mm, eh, well, I don't know, the face, no but, I really just think that this image says sex.

Moderator: ok, in what way?

McKenzie: just the body position and the eyes, eh, I think that Calvin Klein often has very sexist ads, it's very much just looks, eh, but like the image

itself is nice I guess but there is something with it that I can't put my finger on that makes me not like it...I don't really know how to explain it.

Moderator: you can try however you'd like, you do not have to think about it being very logical or good really.

McKenzie: no but it clearly shows that she is way too skinny for her own good, I think that shows very much in, especially her arms, it's like just bone, then you can see that it is very retouched and the shadows have been placed in the exact right places, and, yeah but that it is supposed to be sexy.

Moderator: do you feel that she is sexualised in the picture?

McKenzie: yes, I think so.

Moderator: what makes you think that?

McKenzie: just the body position, eh, the curve of the back, you can see that she, at the same time that she is leaning the elbows forward she is pressing her breasts and butt out so she is curving her back, it feels like it's more, yeah highlighting her good parts so to speak.

Moderator: what did you think about the face?

McKenzie: eh, the eyes are just "I want you"

Moderator: is that what they radiate you mean?

McKenzie: yeah, but I don't think she wants, really.

Moderator: how do you mean?

McKenzie: but just the gaze, I don't know, it feels like the photographer just said "eat up with the eyes" like...

Moderator: what do you think about the text in the picture?

McKenzie: "I am powerful in my calvin" eh, no I don't think, she is not.

Moderator: ok.

McKenzie: she is just sexualised.

Moderator: ok, so you do not experience her having power in the image?

McKenzie: because it is so very strained, they have told her exactly how to stand and look and I think, for me that is not power.

In the first instance, the ad is interpreted as being sexy (selling on sex), the model is sexualised and positioned so as to "highlighting her good parts", and the image has been retouched in order to be "just right". At first, power is not even conveyed to McKenzie until she reads the text "I am powerful in #mycalvin", which thus makes her take a stand and decide that no, the model is in fact not powerful "she is just sexualised". McKenzie argued that because it looks like the model has been told how to stand and look, making it feel "very strained", that does not entail

power. Power is thus constructed as something that would have been more self-chosen, less conditioned and most important, less sexualised. In this instance then, because this ad so highly conveys sex according to McKenzie, there is no possibility of power. It could thus be stated that these constructions are opposed to the third wave feminist discourse of “sex as power” seeing as, in this case, sex does not equal power at all, rather it detracts from it. Such constructions are then related to more “conservative” feminist views (such as second wave feminism) where sex and power should not mix, and therefore the notion of *female sexual agency* are basically impossible seeing as the model is a sex object and not a freely choosing sexually subjectifying agent.

Furthermore, the comment regarding the models’ weight: “it clearly shows that she is way too skinny for her own good”, again relates to the disciplinary power of dieting (Bartky 1990) imposed on women, thus alluding to this model being stuck in the Patriarchal Panopticon and making choices within it that clearly are damaging for her, yet still, she does not resist but abides by the rules.

When it comes to the gaze, McKenzie claimed that although the model’s eyes seem to radiate a desire of “I want you”, that desire is interpreted as false and having instead been coerced by the photographer. Therefore, the model does not even have power over her own gaze, but that too is controlled by someone else; as if she has surrendered her gaze to the Patriarchal Panopticon. As the male gaze dictates, women are not just surveyed by men but must also survey themselves; in this instance, the model has been instructed to gaze at the ideal male spectator as if she wants him, to seduce him: “but I don’t think she wants, really” – therefore, her own desire, what she really wants, is insignificant, as long as she plays the part of the object of male desire. Thus, the missing discourse of female desire as argued by Fine (1988) is indeed still missing here as well, even though it was perhaps intended to be perceived. This then leads to the power again being constructed from within a male gaze and conditioning the female model to look, act and position herself in a very specified way, turning her more into a prop or even victim (Fine 1988) rather than an agent.

Such a position is limiting, with few choices on offer, and arguably what could be felt from it (*other than hunger*) could be feelings of being restrained, of not being able to move, look or choose freely. However, it could also be claimed that one would experience feelings of attractiveness seeing as such constructions play well into the hands of the male gaze, perhaps feeling accepted and even complacent is possible in this instance. Yet, as Åkestam (2018) argued, feeling good is no surprise when behaving in a way that patriarchy has conditioned women to behave, but such feelings are not necessarily attached to agency, or even power in this case; they are just the results of having appended oneself.

Nightcap gaze

Rae interpreted the ad in a similar way, sensing very little power and very much sex and submission due to the models’ gaze:

Rae: mm... well here it is a bit like, "I am powerful" and she stands slouchy and looks over her shoulder. I do not like this that much...

Moderator: ok, why not?

Rae: no but this is what I mean with lying like a bag, like she is just showing submissiveness in her entire body language... a little slouchy and looking dreamily over her shoulder, no, like it, the copy I do not think works with the image at all.

Moderator: ok.

Rae: she does not even keep her head up.

Moderator: you don't feel she is "powerful" (*referring to the copy*)?

Rae: no I feel like she is powerless or she does not feel powerful at all...but you don't know that, I don't know maybe she feels very powerful, but the image or, the signal I get is not powerful, but rather submissive and also very sexualised.

Moderator: ok, it is also sexualised?

Rae: yes, very.

Moderator: why?

Rae: because she is looking a bit with like "bed veiled eyes" and like "Hello I am here" and she is also, then again, looking at you...it is funny that I say that all are sexualised no matter where they look but...this feels like it is very like..."nightcap gaze" one would say in olden-time Swedish, and that in combination with her standing in an underwear ad naked it sends some kind of signal."..."and foremost it becomes a bit funny with the "I am powerful" and then she feels very powerless like...then it feels like I think she has very little power so the combination becomes difficult.

From the beginning, Rae interpreted submissiveness due to the model's body language and gaze: "a little slouchy and looking dreamily over her shoulder", also claiming that: "she does not even keep her head up". This then constructed power as being able to stand straight and keep one's head high, with a firmer or at least neutral and not "dreamy" gaze. Furthermore, the gaze became significant again in the sexualisation of the ad due to the model's "bed veiled eyes" and "nightcap gaze". Arguably, the gaze of the model thus expressed a sexual invite and a sort of availability: "Hello I am here". As midriff advertising (Gill 2008) suggests, this type of woman is always up for sex. However, as interpreted by Rae, being sexualised in this manner does not convey a sense of power. Instead, these constructions are

related to the male gaze; through the submissiveness in the body language as well as the sexual tone in her gaze, it suggests that she is there to be pleasing for a male spectator. Such a position is interpreted as not being powerful, thus, sex = power in this case is again false and therefore these constructions are more closely related to second wave feminist discourses rather than third wave.

While third wave as well as choice feminist discourses may be focussing more on empowerment through (choosing to) using one's sexuality to gain power, in this instance Rae's interpretations are basically the opposite: "maybe she feels very powerful, but the image or, the signal I get is not powerful, but rather submissive and also very sexualised." Although the model may feel powerful here, due to the construction of power not being linked to sex, feelings of self-efficacy are simply not enough for Rae to interpret power. As discussed in the third chapter, empowerment is not simply an individual project of gaining power, but rather about social justice. Thus, the constructions of power may here be linked to the original formulations of empowerment. Furthermore, as discussed by Åkestam (2018), even though the model may feel powerful, the act itself (standing slouchy with a "nightcap gaze") is not a feminist act, but rather it plays straight into the hands of the Patriarchal Panopticon.

As for the subject position, it could again be speculated and argued that the model would feel attractive and accepted by obeying to the male gaze, however in this position there are few and limited options; she is bound to remain a sex object lest she goes against the "rules of the game".

Sex in the morning

Nelle, Skye and Leah in focus group 8 interpreted the ad in a similar way, sensing very little power and very much sex and submission:

Nelle: The first thing I think of are the other ads by CK, they feel very sexualised and I think this one does too, cause, she has this sensual gaze, and it, and I think it has a lot to do with the light as well, that it is supposed to be sensual...but then, it would have been more sensual if she had showed more butt and breasts so in that way it gets less, but she also stands a bit hunched which shows a little submissiveness too, I imagine.

Skye: I think the image and the text are contradicting each other, or like, it says "I am powerful" and I do not think at all that she exudes any power in that pose, with the back against, and a bit like hunched and does not dare to show her whole face and, yeah but it feels like she is hiding a bit from the viewer.

Leah: Yeah I agree, really I do not have much to add, yeah but she, the text and the image are contradictory, she looks, it feels like it plays a lot on sex,

and she really does not look like she has power, the way she is standing hunched, again I think a lot about how people stand all the time, it is like not a way that one would stand naturally, that one would “yeah these are really comfy underwear, look how comfy I can stand” but it, she stands like that so it looks sexy, and then I thought, someone mentioned the light, it looks like it is supposed to be like bedroom light in the morning, a bit like, the image is selling an idea of sex in the morning with a person who has CK underwear, and is very submissive.

“...”

Nelle: then I also thought a bit about, this contrast regarding the signals she sends and what it says in the text, she does not give me any signals that she is powerful, so then I also wonder how one as a viewer of this ad reacts to it and how one then starts to look at what is power, is it sex then, or? Do you understand what I mean? Cause I barely know myself (laughs), but it gets very contradictory.

Moderator: ok, that is interesting, do you think that it would be a sexual power that she would allude to, or?

Nelle: but she does not show that she has sexual power either, so, it is just very confusing that it says that she is powerful.

Leah: yeah, cause I think that, just because, if one thinks of sex and that she is standing with the back against, that it feels like she, she just has to turn her head and then it is like...it is not like she is just standing straight looking at the person looking at her (Nelle: exactly), and that that person in that way would have to be accountable for, or I do not really know how to explain, but that she has the back against, I more get the sense that they just want to make it sexual, that yeah but no one will question it, as opposed to like if she would have stood and looked straight...I don't really know why it would make a difference whether she stands forwards or with the back against, but it feels like it would be different.

From the start, the participants found this ad and the model to be sexualised and submissive mainly due to three aspects: her gaze, her body position and the lighting in the image. First off, her gaze was interpreted as “sensual”, thus again alluding to the idea of the model trying to be alluring and pleasing for a male spectator, i.e. the presence of a male gaze can be found. Later on, it was also claimed that she “does not dare to show her whole face”, which suggests a

submissiveness. As Bartky (1990, 68) argued, feminine faces have been disciplined to express deference:

Under male scrutiny, women will avert their eyes or cast them downward; the female gaze is trained to abandon its claim to the sovereign status of seer. The “nice” girl learns to avoid the bold and unfettered staring of the “loose” woman who looks at whatever and whomever she pleases.

While on the one hand, this model is not averting her eyes but looking at the viewer, she is doing so over her shoulder thus hiding parts of her face, specifically her mouth. Arguably then, she cannot “speak”, but may only communicate with her eyes, which in turn are sensual: while her eyes may say “yes”, her mouth cannot even utter “no”, seeing as it is concealed. But then again, as midriff advertising (Gill 2008) suggests, this sexually active woman is always up for sex, so she would never say “no”, making her the ideal sex puppet of any man who wishes to dominate her.

The second aspect, her body position, is “hunched” and she has her back against the viewer, which in turn shows submissiveness. This then constructs power as standing up straight, facing forward, in a sense, claiming the space rather than averting from it and making oneself “smaller”. This relates to Wex’s (1979) photography series, indicating how feminine body postures are about making oneself smaller, harmless and taking up less space than masculine bodies (more on this in the next chapter). Furthermore, Leah also claimed that the way the model stands is not really how one would naturally stand but instead: “she stands like that so it looks sexy”, thus again indicating how women’s bodies have been disciplined.

The third aspect which is the light was from the beginning described as being “sensual” and: “it looks like it is supposed to be like bedroom light in the morning, a bit like, the image is selling an idea of sex in the morning with a person who has CK underwear, and is very submissive.” Thus, the light also adds to the submissiveness and the sexualisation of the model, which then also detracts power. In that lighting, the model becomes someone that the ideal spectator may sexually fantasise about, again leading to a construction of a male gaze. All of these three aspects then construct sexuality and submissiveness as not being powerful, relating more to the discourses of violence and victimisation (Fine 1988) rather than female desire.

Furthermore, at the end of the discussion, Nelle brings up an interesting point “then I also wonder how one as a viewer of this ad reacts to it and how one then starts to look at what is power, is it sex then, or?” However, sexual power is not interpreted in this ad, the participants claimed that she is powerless and thus not the sexual subject as midriff advertising wants to convey. Because of the first two aspects, that the model is gazing at the viewer over her shoulder with her back

against, rather than “just standing straight looking at the person looking at her”, thus holding the viewer “accountable”, she becomes more of a sex object. In that position, her possibilities and options are limited; she is bound up in the Patriarchal Panopticon, forced to use her gaze in order to seduce the male spectator, whether she wants to or not. Arguably, in such a position that the model has been placed in due to the above constructions, we may speculate that feelings of fright and coercion may be felt, of not being able to move freely in the space, not being able to speak up, as well as a sense of being expected to play a certain role: to be sensual and seductive.

Piss off

When the participants in focus group 3 viewed the ad, they reacted in a different way, interpreting less sex and more power:

Bailey: I don't think she is standing in a particularly sexy way either, just that, I don't know but it looks more natural, even though it doesn't look completely natural but I mean she stands in a way that people can stand, like people don't walk around and curve their bodies all the time or press out their breasts, but this is, I think “yeah but take a cool picture of me”, then I think one can look like this.

Florence: and then I think that some, when you look at the girls who are MMA fighters or boxers, some have that, “kick your ass” pose, like “don't hit on me at the bar I am drinking with my friends”, like over the shoulder “piss off”.

Bailey: mm, this I think was more, yeah, but then all ads are like in this way objectifying women but of those that we have seen so far I think this is the best cause she looks very strong and confident and yeah...I like it the most.

Margot: mm I agree with you, but it is still that she is like, staged by someone else, but yeah...

Bailey: she doesn't look as inviting, like, if someone looks at me like that I am not thinking “oh what a nice person she probably wants me to go over there and talk to her”, cause the other images have felt like they are for someone else and like, someone else's gaze, that they should look nice for someone else and I do not get that feeling from this picture, it does not look like she is trying to be sexy for someone else.

Margot: mm, like she just came from the gym...

Florence: I think that it might have to do with her standing in the shadow, in some way it feels more uninviting.

Bailey: yeah a little like that, and usually one should take pictures, when one wants to market something like a pair of panties from the back then they most often don't stand like that, and same thing always when it's women and scantily clad women in ads then you should emphasise certain things, you should emphasise the breasts or butt or legs or something and it doesn't feel like, there is nothing special that, I don't think that they objectify a special body part on her but it is more "this is the underwear", more like, relevant.

"..."

Margot: it looks like it works well, like good support in the bra...it plays more on "we sell underwear" than "we show an image to get sex"

Moderator: so you do not think she is sexualised in this image?

Bailey: well there aren't a lot of women that go and train with make-up on, but it's not really the same way, I mean, one would not have shown just her body otherwise cause it's still a woman that is considered attractive within the norms of today, otherwise if they didn't want to sexualise they could have chosen whoever if it had been only about the underwear, so it's also cause they want to sell a, one will be like her if they have that underwear...and so they choose an attractive girl...

Florence: I don't think that I think this is particularly sexualised, still think there is a difference between not being fully clothed and sexualised, don't think she, for me it does not feel like she is making herself like, pleasing, but she stands there in her underwear and like that is what she is selling, not herself.

"..."

Bailey: but I think this is difficult like, one cannot put it outside of context either, I mean this is a famous person it's not any random model but it is a person people have associations to and who is sexualised in most of the contexts that she is part of, I think it is difficult, they have chosen her for a reason.

Florence: I have no idea who she is.

Bailey: Kim Kardashians' little sister...it's a famous person anyway, and I think it's difficult to look at the image without thinking about it...but like, if one should try and detach that and just look at the image then she does look less sexualised anyway.

Moderator: and that adds something, something else?

Bailey: yeah I think that you see the underwear more, when it's not a lot of other, cause so often when you see ads you only see a girl who is lying down and curving and like it becomes that you only think about that and get a lot of associations to the fashion industry and all of that, eh, I think that one can react simply cause it's not such an image and also that you can see the underwear clearly and yeah, I associate more positive to this image than the others.

Contrary to McKenzie and focus group 8's interpretations, the participants in focus group 3 did not interpret as much sex in this ad, but instead it was perceived that the model looked more "natural" in her positioning: "even though it doesn't look completely natural but I mean she stands in a way that people can stand". Furthermore, Florence also thought that the model reminded her of MMA fighters who exude a certain expression: "like over the shoulder "piss off". Bailey seemed to agree as well that the model looked strong and confident. Thus, power was here coupled with a sense of strength and violence (MMA fighter) as well as confidence and being able to stand, more or less, naturally. Therefore, power was again not coupled with sex, seeing as the model was not interpreted as being sexualised, but rather it had to do with self-efficacy, bodily strength and (perceived) confidence.

Additionally, even though Margot claimed that the model was still "staged by someone else", thus referring to her perhaps not having agency, Bailey argued that "the other images have felt like they are for someone else and like, someone else's gaze, that they should look nice for someone else and I do not get that feeling from this picture, it does not look like she is trying to be sexy for someone else." Therefore, in this construction the model has agency seeing as she is the one in control, she is not being inviting and available ("if someone looks at me like that I am not thinking "oh what a nice person she probably wants me to go over there and talk to her"). Florence further claimed that perhaps this sense was related to her standing in the shadow: "in some way it feels more uninviting." Thus, the environment and lighting also play an important part when interpreting and constructing notions of power and agency. Another important aspect that Bailey touched upon is the objectification and specifically the body cropping style of objectification that has been (and still is) popular when depicting female models: "always when it's women and scantily clad women in ads then you should emphasise certain things, you should emphasise the breasts or butt or legs or something and it doesn't feel like, there is nothing special that, I don't think that they objectify a special body part on her". In this instance, seeing as the participants have not interpreted any objectification in this ad, this further adds to her power and agency; she is not a sex object.

As for female sexual agency, it could be argued that this is present even though the model was not interpreted as being sexualised in the first instance. However, later on in the discussion it becomes clear that the model is still, of course, a very attractive woman “otherwise if they didn’t want to sexualise they could have chosen whoever if it had been only about the underwear”. Thus, as Bailey claimed, this ad, as has been brought up in previous chapters, is still conditioned in a way: it would not have been the same had they used a different, less normatively attractive model. However, as Florence argued, being sexualised is still something different than being half naked: “for me it does not feel like she is making herself like, pleasing, but she stands there in her underwear and like that is what she is selling, not herself.” Nevertheless, context is always significant, and as such Bailey’s last note on the fact that the model is a famous person (Kendall Jenner) who is also “sexualised in most of the contexts that she is part of”, makes it difficult to interpret this ad without also adding the associations one has with the model. But seeing as Florence did not know who she was, she did not have such associations and it was thus easier for her to interpret less sex into the ad. As for Bailey, she concluded that: “if one should try and detach that and just look at the image then she does look less sexualised anyway.” Again, seeing as there is no sense of objectification or male gaze, the model is not interpreted as being sexualised: being sexualised is thus constructed as being submissive and pleasing for someone else (men), and it includes notions of objectification.

In this subject position that the participants have placed the model, it would arguably feel quite freeing and powerful; to be able to stand up for oneself and with just a gaze tell people to “piss off” when one does not want to be confronted or bothered.

Just walk away

Lastly, when Gabrielle saw the “I am powerful in #mycalvins” ad, she found that both sex and power were present in the image:

Gabrielle: she looks like she has power, but at the same time, if you look at her face, she has this alluring sexy gaze, so she has, like, she can attract men...so in some way, I think that she, it feels like she has a lot of sexual power, just because she looks like the norm and that she can attract men and get them to do as she wants.

Moderator: ok, do you feel that she is sexualised?

Gabrielle: a little, just because she, the way she is hunching and looking over her shoulder, but then again she has her back against so she does not feel as exposed and objectified.

Moderator: ok, how come you feel that she has sexual power?

Gabrielle: I think it is the gaze, you cannot see her mouth here but she has another roughness in her gaze, she looks more tough.

Moderator: ok, so it is the gaze that decides whether or not it is sexual power?

Gabrielle: I think the gaze does a lot...but she also looks like, if she wouldn't get what she wanted it looks like she would just leave, it has to do with her body language, she has the back against so she could just walk away.

Moderator: what do you feel about the text in this image?

Gabrielle: I think this one fits the best so far.

Moderator: ok, why?

Gabrielle: because I feel that she has more power because of her body language and facial expression, it looks like she has confidence and power over the situation.

Moderator: ok, but it is a sexual power?

Gabrielle: yeah, I would say so, but it has to do with her standing in her underwear, she looks very sexy.

Contrary to the other three interpretations, Gabrielle found that this model exuded a sexual power. This form power was constructed based on the "alluring sexy gaze" of the model, her normative appearance, having the ability to attract men and making them "do as she wants". Seeing as the gaze had more roughness, making the model look more tough, it led to Gabrielle interpreting the model as having both confidence and power over the situation: "if she wouldn't get what she wanted it looks like she would just leave". Furthermore, due to the body position, having her back against the viewer, this also meant that she was not perceived as "exposed and objectified", therefore also allowing the model more power and agency seeing as "she has her back against so she could just walk away." Thus, power is here implied to be incorporated in a body position that is unrestrained, i.e. having the ability to "just walk away" means that the model is not under any immediate threat but in a position to move as she wishes. Power therefore is constructed in the bodily space and ability for movement. (However, it should perhaps also be pointed out that the model is standing with her body facing a wall, so if she were to walk away, she would have to go sideways. Arguably, by having her back against the viewer, Gabrielle's interpretation suggests that it is easier to walk away when facing a different direction, even though that does not entail walking forwards.)

Contrary to the discourse of violence and victimisation (Fine 1988), this model was not perceived by Gabrielle as being neither a victim nor under any violent threat; instead, due to her sexual power she had control over the situation

and if it wouldn't satisfy her, she could just leave. This therefore implies a discourse of female desire and sexual power (relating to a discourse of third wave feminism), being able to make the rules and decide what one wants, what feels good or is right for oneself. However, there are certain things that could still be questioned in this construction: firstly, the model is still wrapped up in a fairly normative sphere which arguably is still residing within the Patriarchal Panopticon, seeing as the model, as Gabrielle expressed, "looks like the norm", i.e. she is attractive based on the stereotypical image of female beauty. Therefore, as raised by Gill (2003), the exclusions of women who do not fit into the ideal beauty norms are still a relevant concern here. Secondly, although Gabrielle claimed that the model could just leave if she did not get what she wanted in this situation, it is still not very clear what, in fact, it is that she wants. Based on the construction, she would arguably be looking for a male "partner" of sorts, seeing as she has the sexual power to "attract men", however, as Gill (2008, 42) argued: "Women are presented as not seeking men's approval but as pleasing themselves, and, in doing so, they 'just happen' to win men's admiration." Seeing as we cannot determine what it is that she wants, or if she indeed even wants a man at all, the discourse of female desire that is implied is still quite iffy.

Based on Gabrielle's interpretations and the constructions of the model's sexual power, this ad then showcases a very typical midriff, a sexual subject who uses her sexual powers to attract men; but then again, of course, attracting them using the same spiel as her "sex object" predecessor was made to use: the sexy, alluring gaze. However, it is also important to note that Gabrielle did not interpret the model as being highly sexualised (not particularly objectified or exposed), only a little, plus while she was norm-abiding (looking like the norm) she also diverted from it by having a roughness in the gaze, looking more tough. Thus, the factors that provide the model the sexual power seem to be related to the non-normative features that Gabrielle interpreted.

If we look at this subject position, as a sexual subject, in control and having power over the situation, being able to allure, attract and walk away when or if needed, one could argue that this is a rather nice position to be in. Without feeling threatened, cornered or having to subjugate oneself, this position would allow a sexual bodily freedom, being able to choose one's sexual partner and deciding over one's body, albeit a body that is rendered as being only sexual. The only time in which this position is in power is when sex is involved; there is nothing in the above construction that suggests that the model would have any other form of power than sexual. Therefore, this subject position can also be argued to be rather limiting: the model is only a sexual subject, her thoughts, feelings, attributes, hopes and dreams that have nothing to do with sex, are irrelevant.

American Ninja Warrior

Moving on to the Under Armour ad featuring Misty Copeland, this received quite a positive response from Jael:

Jael: mm...I like that, I think she exudes a lot of power, and foremost because it says she is a ballerina too, ballerinas are something very like traditionally feminine and sweet and pink and fluffy like, and she looks all but sweet and fluffy and pink, but she really looks, she looks more like she is an American ninja warrior, so it's, there I think absolutely that she, she exudes a lot of power and self-esteem and then I like the text as well, like "I will be put down", but then "I will not be unsupported" and that, that refers to the sports-bra but it is still very much meaning to it like, that you are not alone even if you take crap.

Moderator: but what is it specifically about her in the image that makes you think she exudes power?

Jael: her gaze, and then that she is not cute I think it is very important that as women you do not have to be this pretty princess but she looks more like an athlete which is unfeminine, she has abs, unfeminine, cause it's only men that should be well-trained, we should just be pretty, and that it, it become a very like atypical femininity, even though you clearly see she is a woman it becomes, she looks more like she, she is like this elite athlete in an ad for some kind of competition or something rather than the sports-bra but it's like, it's not just sitting in the gym flashing the eye-lashes, I think it's, it is a very good ad in that sense, and that she exudes a lot like "I am wearing this because I am using it", it feels active.

In this ad, power was immediately interpreted and constructed as being related to the models' occupation as a ballerina yet not displaying a stereotypically ballerina-like appearance: "traditionally feminine and sweet and pink and fluffy". Power has to do with self-esteem and how one expresses oneself, which here was as an "American ninja warrior", thus referring to power as having physical fighting skills and thus being strong. The power of the model was also specifically linked to her gaze and "that she is not cute". Furthermore, Jael claimed that it is "very important that as women you do not have to be this pretty princess but she looks more like an athlete which is unfeminine, she has abs, unfeminine" therefore constructing power as having to do with gender norms and by not abiding to being a stereotypically feminine woman means one is perceived as more powerful.

Additionally, the "pretty princess" comment is related to fairy tale discourses where the princess is always (or at least usually) someone who is just sitting in a tower, castle or somewhere against her will, waiting for the brave prince to come and rescue her. The princess is thus a passive object lying in wait

while the prince is the active subject, having to travel for miles and slay dragons and whatnot. He is the hero, while she is his prize. Needless to say, the princess position is not riddled with power, and in this ad the model was interpreted as basically the opposite of a princess; as an elite athlete she is in control of herself, she is wearing the sports-bra because she is using it, and being active in it; she does not wait for or need any prince to come and rescue her, indeed it could be argued that she is the hero, or heroine in this case. Furthermore, seeing as power is here related to being atypically feminine, it also relates to normativity as discussed in the first chapter: power and gender norms are very much interrelated in this ad, and it is because the model is less feminine that she is interpreted as being more powerful. Thus, this relates to a stereotypically masculine discourse of power as having to do with physical strength, with fighting, being a warrior, a hero etc.

Another significant aspect in the construction of power here is that there is no sex involved; she is perceived as powerful not based on her sexuality, as Jael claimed, she is not “just sitting in the gym flashing the eye-lashes”, i.e. her gaze does not convey a sexual allure, it is not intended to attract men, or anyone for that matter. Therefore, the notion of *female sexual agency* is arguably not implied in this ad seeing as the model cannot be said to be a midriff, but is rather something entirely different: she is a powerful subject, without the use of her sexuality.

Being in such a subject position allows her more options and possibilities, she is not restrained like many of the other models, not having to subjugate herself or abide by someone else’s rules. From such a position, we can speculate that feelings of confidence, of self-efficacy and pride would be possible and probable. In this instance then, based on these constructions, this model thus displays a female agency that does not relate to or is not dependent upon her sexuality; she has power because of what she expresses which is not being sexy, but instead being confident and atypically feminine.

I will get there

The participants in focus group 5 also liked the Under Armour ad and found it to convey a sense of power:

Aida: this I like very much, here I think the text is spot on, I think, like this woman is, she could be like, a picture of her could be like, power, cause she is the first Afro-American ballerina to be accepted at the New York ballet, yeah, she is famous anyway, and she is like powerful, also that she has a bit, like she has, she looks strong, and here the copy is much better than it’s, “this is what it is, in my life I will be rejected but I will at least have good support for my breasts when I train”, so this ad, there is a point that she

does not have clothes on and just stands in like, it makes sense, and she just looks tough...

Madison: yeah, I can agree with like what we talked about, athletes, people who build their bodies for what they practice, then I think her face exudes more, like the body position, it looks stronger, there is more power in the face, this face I don't think looks bland but it looks very determined like, "yeah, no I will not be unsupported", like the message is more clear in her face and in the image, yeah it is more strength, also physical, she looks so very determined like she is goal oriented, focused, like "I will get there" in some way.

Whereas several participants felt that many of the ads and the copywriting in them were a mismatch (especially concerning the CK ads), the image and the text in this ad were described as "spot on". The participants in focus group 5 responded very positively to this ad due to this fact, as well as the model Misty Copeland; being a "real" athlete (i.e. not merely modelling athletic wear) and famous for what she does (ballet), looking tough, strong and having "more power in the face". Power was here thus constructed as relating to not just the body position but also the facial expression, which in this case was expressed as "very determined". The participants found that there was a point to this ad, i.e. she was wearing sports apparel because she does sports and the copywriting is also referring to her practicing her sport and requiring good support when she does so. All of these elements meant that "the message is more clear in her face and in the image", and all pointed towards her looking strong, determined, goal oriented and focused – making her an agent with self-power.

Furthermore, this image was not described as sexy or sexualising, thus these constructions cannot really be connected to *female sexual agency*, but rather *female agency*, or perhaps, just agency. Seeing as she is an agent, a subject by her own accord, not having to rely on her appearance or sex appeal, this subject position is basically the most unrestrained of all that we have seen so far. Her freedom, her choices, her selfhood was not something described as ruled by others, but instead she was basically, similar to the homo economicus, the woman with a plan: "I will get there".

If we again speculate based on these constructions and the subject position Misty has been placed in, what can be felt here is a sense of power, achievement, self-realisation, determination and freedom to do and to choose for oneself. This position is, contrary to many of the others we have seen so far, not bound by the Patriarchal Panopticon, and she is able to reach her goal without having to subordinate herself or play on her sex appeal.

I will crush, I will own

Debbie, Hayden and Cassidy from focus group 2 also responded quite positively to the Misty Copeland ad:

Debbie: I like that it's a sports' bra and it says "I will not be unsupported" (laughs), I like it, I like the image.

Moderator: why?

Debbie: but she is also strong, and confident, like not just a bodily strength but I think when you look at the face you see she is confident and determined it's like she has a, she just: "I will crush, I will own", is what I think when I look at her face, like if I ignore the rest.

"..."

Hayden: I also think at the same time she looks very un-ballerina like (laughs).

Cassidy: mm, too strong, especially.

Hayden: yeah but exactly.

Cassidy: on the other hand, I think it feels like she has power anyway, but a lot (*referring to the text*) is like cluttered and one does not really get it if you do not read everything, and it is so fucking much text to get in order to understand the whole message, but, this is not a victim anyway. (the others: no).

Moderator: why not?

Cassidy: it is her gaze, like, it is, it dominates the image, cause when you look at the body it gets, yeah how weird she stands, just, ugh, but it is still her, her facial expression is still stronger than the cluttered text.

Again, this group interpreted strength in this image, and it was not merely pertaining to her physical strength but to her facial expression: "when you look at the face you see she is confident and determined it's like she has a, she just: "I will crush, I will own", is what I think when I look at her face". This strong gaze determines her agency and "dominates the image", thus power is again constructed as being related to gaze. Furthermore, her appearance and gaze also made the participants feel like Misty looked "un-ballerina like"; stereotypically ballerinas are perhaps not visualised as very strong, determined and with a dominating gaze, however this non-conformist representation was proven positive based on the group's reactions and interpretations.

Furthermore, the text was also briefly discussed, and whereas other participants enjoyed the copywriting, Cassidy found it to be too much and too

cluttered: “it is so fucking much text to get in order to understand the whole message”. However, luckily, Misty’s gaze managed to break through all that cluttered text, and therefore it was interpreted that: “this is not a victim anyway”. As opposed to so many of the other models in the ads that were selected, the discourse of victimisation (Fine 1988) was not present here; instead what all the constructions lead up to are an active and strong agent in charge of her own self.

This construction then, being an own agent, opens up a whole world of possibilities and actions; actions that for other subject position are not possible. As an agent, she is thus, more or less, free to be and choose for herself, she is not a victim, she can take care of herself.

Hips don’t lie

In focus group 4, there was a lot of laughter as well as consensus regarding the strength of Misty in the ad:

Odessa: yeah she is determined, like, she is on her way towards one like, she is threatening, she is strong, she is, yeah.

Calla: exactly, she is focused forwards, she, mm.

Lais: she has an unusually strong gaze for an ad and a woman, but then it is a bit sad with the hips (Calla laughs: it’s those damned hips!), like the hips are eh, they have removed the bedroom gaze but, but, yeah no the hips must still be feminine, “we have to give them something!” (Odessa: yeah), it, it, why, is it because, if, yeah, someone, whatnot, wife, girlfriend or whatever, I do not know the purpose of this but I think that there is some kind of mismatch between the different parts of the image and the text, she feels absolutely stronger if one looks at the top, like everything above the waist, wow power, and the gaze is present and strong, but, what happened to the rest?

Moderator: did you experience her having any power in the image?

Odessa: yes.

Lais: mm.

Calla: mm

Moderator: ok and why is that?

Lais: it is the gaze, and that, so to speak, the pose from the waist and upward for me, she is muscular, she is standing with the arms straight, she is not trying to, I don’t know what one could have done to be seductive in that pose, but she is not doing anything like that, she is not holding her hands like like, “tichi” or anything, yeah she is not hiding behind her hands

she does not have her hands in front of her, there are many varieties of how she could have looked less powerful but here she is allowed to like have shoulders and strong arms and like, a strong menacing gaze, just, "I have, I have a goal and I will, I will reach that goal...I might have to waddle forward because of hip problems" (Calla laughs)

Moderator: what do you others think?

Calla: yeah I absolutely think that she has a confidence in her, like, straight forward, shoulders back, proud, eh, then she is a dancer so she can like, she knows her poses, so, that's nice (laughs).

Odessa: yeah but it's that she, she exudes power and gets like, her aim and, and, the gaze and that it isn't so, eh, yeah but except the hips there, nothing about her exudes that she wants to satisfy someone else, except for that little swing of the hip, and I think that if she had straight hips, what would it have been then, would she have a nicer face, it feels like she couldn't have just stood straight but they were forced to do something like, but I absolutely think that she exudes power and self-confidence and drive and strength and, it seems to be a good bra as well, it looks a bit, armour like, edgy, like, grr, hard, aah!

Again, it was interpreted from the start that Misty exuded determination and strength, she was even said to be "threatening" and forward focusing; all these add to her agency and power. Lais also noted that: "she has an unusually strong gaze for an ad and a woman", thus, for starters, this ad is non-normative and the way it represents women, Misty in this case, is also non-normative. Secondly, the gaze was again seen as an important factor that determines her power.

However, the discussion then took another turn when the participants started focussing on Misty's hips; "they have removed the bedroom gaze but, but, yeah no the hips must still be feminine, "we have to give them something!"". The participants, rather jokingly, questioned why Misty's hips had to be askew, seeing as this seemed to detract something from her strength and instead add to her sexuality. While the top part of her body was merely suggesting power; "everything above the waist, wow power, and the gaze is present and strong", the bottom half was "a mismatch". Even though they agreed that she did not look or do anything seductive in the top part of the ad, it seemed as if the hips had the opposite effect: "except the hips there, nothing about her exudes that she wants to satisfy someone else, except for that little swing of the hip". Thus, standing with the hip out in this manner was interpreted as being seductive, which in turn detracted from her agency and power, which therefore means that this group did not agree with third wave notions of sex = power, but rather the opposite.

Furthermore, in regards to the agency and power interpreted based on the various constructions, there was one important notion that should be further examined: “there are many varieties of how she could have looked less powerful but here she is allowed to like have shoulders and strong arms and like, a strong menacing gaze” – at first glance, this seems to construct Misty as being an agent with strength and self-power, however, the reference to Misty “being allowed to” opens up for another discussion and interpretation. On the one hand, it can be said that there is still someone else calling the shots and deciding whether or not to “allow” Misty agency and power. On the other hand, can we ever be said to be free agents by ourselves, or are we always waiting to be “allowed” this and that? This notion is important as it pertains to the advertising industry and the fact that the power of representation is in the hands of the brands and ad agencies, rather than the model’s alone. It is also related to the poststructural view of always being bound by both freedom and constraint (Foucault 1984/1997). Thus, even though Misty is a strong and free agent in this ad, she is still constrained within the ad itself and the ruling system (advertising industry) of said ad.

Within such a subject position, we can speculate that feelings of freedom, determination and self-efficacy may be felt, as well as some feelings of restraint. But regardless of the constraints she may have within this ad, one can quite safely assume that she is neither a victim nor a sex object.

I know my stuff

If we now turn our attention to Diane von Furstenberg’s ad “Self taught – Self made”, the participants in focus group six found the gaze of the model to be quite important when interpreting the power and control she was exerting.

Kylie: I think this shows more power, I think that her, her gaze shows very, like, it feels like, she has control, or I don’t know, I think the eyes and everything, I don’t know, I think it looks like she feels good.

Fay: I like it very much, cause I was thinking that it was nice cause I do not see anything sexual in this, just “self taught self made”, this is someone who knows their stuff, so I liked that with the text too and that she just sits there and looks awesome, not like, not just to look nice and sexy but more, look a bit bossy.

Naima: yeah really, really, she looks very decisive and controlled, and I feel that exudes power, and overall, she looks a bit downward, not much but like she has decided.

Moderator: ok, it seems that you all think that this exudes, that she has some form of power in this image (all: mm), and why do you think that is?

Fay: for me it is mostly, the angle, just like straight forward, slightly under perhaps, and just like, fairly hard expression, not corrected, just like bang on (laughs).

Naima: mm like upright, shoulders are also, she looks strong in some way (Fay: yeah) and yeah, exactly.

Moderator: do you feel that she is sexualised in the image?

Naima: no

Fay: no I do not think so.

Kylie: I don't know, I cannot help that the leg just has to, like it has to be something when it's women, it can't just be, like a button has to be, I don't know, but I think it doesn't have to be, but yeah, I still think it is good.

To begin with, the gaze was again brought up as an important aspect pertaining to power: "her gaze shows very, like, it feels like, she has control". Furthermore, because Fay did not interpret anything sexual in the ad, she was positive towards the copy and argued: "this is someone who knows their stuff". However, she also claimed that the model "just sits there and looks awesome not just to look nice and sexy but more, look a bit bossy", thus alluding to a passivity as well as a focus on appearance, which as we already know, are very normatively typical aspects when it comes to women and how they are represented in ads. One can thus wonder, what stuff it is that the model knows, and what sort of boss would she be, when she is just sitting there, looking awesome, doing nothing? There is of course a big difference between "looking bossy" and actually being a boss. Although the participants in this group seemed to all agree that the model looked "decisive" and "controlled" with a "fairly hard expression", which all led to them interpreting her as having power, her passivity was however never questioned. In this case, looking the part was basically as good as being the part.

Furthermore, her body position and the angle of the photo was also claimed as pertaining to her power seeing as she was sitting "upright" with a "straight forward, slightly under perhaps" angle. When we have been fed so many images of women lying down, in uncomfortable positions, with the angle from above, it is perhaps not surprising that an image like this then becomes a breath of fresh air. For these participants the producers of the ad have arguably succeeded in selling an idea of agency and power with their feminist-inspired copy. Yet still, as Kylie claimed towards the end, there was still something, some slight hint of sexualisation that they just had to include with the leg being slightly out. However, because of all the constructions of agency and power, she still thought the ad was good. Thus, regarding to *female sexual agency*, arguably this group did not focus or interpret her as a sexual subject, playing on her looks to

arouse men, but rather an agent with some form of self-power, perhaps a business woman who “knows her stuff” and is able to “look bossy”.

At first glance, the subject position on offer based on the participants’ constructions is one of agency and power and therefore one that does not feel as constrained as many of the others we have seen. However, if we dig a little deeper, we may find that this position, however powerful it may look, is still bound by a preoccupation with body and appearance, with looking the part. She may be free from having to be a sex object, which of course is an improvement, however, she is not free from having to look “awesome”.

Conclusion

As we have seen in this chapter, the gaze and facial expressions of the models in the ads may play an important part in deducing and assessing the power and agency they may, or may not have. Based on the constructions in all of the above discussions, it seemed as if the gaze could be used in at least two different ways; one of surrendering one’s gaze to the Patriarchal Panopticon, and one of owning one’s own gaze. The former meant that the model’s gazes and facial expressions were used, or rather coerced, so as to play on their sexuality and arouse men:

McKenzie: eh, the eyes are just “I want you”

Moderator: is that what they radiate you mean?

McKenzie: yeah, but I don’t think she wants, really.

As McKenzie claimed, although the models’ eyes in CK’s “I am powerful in #mycalvins” were alluring, she interpreted the gaze as being coerced by the, assumingly male, photographer therefore the model was surrendering her gaze for the purpose of this ad. Similarly, Rae also interpreted the gaze of this model to be seductive and alluring in a way that did not convey agency or power. In fact, in all but one instance where this models’ gaze was interpreted as being seductive, alluring or in any way sexually appealing according to the male gaze, there was also no power or agency involved but rather the opposite. The only participant that interpreted the gaze as sexy and the model as also having power (sexual power) was Gabrielle who claimed that

Moderator: ok, how come you feel that she has sexual power?

Gabrielle: I think it is the gaze, you cannot see her mouth here but she has another roughness in her gaze, she looks more tough.

Thus, it could be argued that the reason Gabrielle interpreted the gaze as providing the model with power had to do with the model not exuding the same sense of subjugation as so many other ads do, but instead that she found some form of roughness and toughness there, which is a non-normative feature for a

female model. Therefore, the concept of normativity again plays a significant role here in determining the sexual power of this model.

On the other hand, when the participant's interpreted the gazes and facial expressions to say something other than "sex", such as determination, "piss off", domination and such, they also always ascribed more power and agency to the models because they were then not bound by the Patriarchal Panopticon, by having to subjugate themselves, be seductive or such for someone else, but they could instead own their own gazes. Furthermore, in these instances where the gazes were interpreted as powerful, the constructions also alluded to being gendered: power was time and time again constructed from within a masculine discourse of violence and physical strength. Models who exuded typically masculine traits such as having muscles, looking determined, being assertive etc. were viewed as being more powerful than those that displayed stereotypically feminine features. Thus, the concept of power is still in many ways gendered, and the gaze then also becomes gendered seeing as having a seductive gaze is seen as feminine while having a determined gaze is seen as masculine and non-normative or unusual for women: "she has an unusually strong gaze for an ad and a woman". If we look a bit closer at the various constructions we can find several examples pertaining to the violence aspect, such as: "ninja-warrior", "kick your ass", "MMA fighter", having a "strong menacing gaze" etc., hence, these would suggest that having physical strength also alludes to having power-over and therefore agency. This discourse is arguably male seeing as it was most often referred to as being contrary to typically feminine discourses:

Moderator: but what is it specifically about her in the image that makes you think she exudes power?

Jael: her gaze, and then that she is not cute I think it is very important that as women you do not have to be this pretty princess but she looks more like an athlete which is unfeminine, she has abs, unfeminine, cause it's only men that should be well-trained, we should just be pretty, and that it, it become a very like atypical femininity, even though you clearly see she is a woman...

The "pretty princess" notion is not merely connected to a feminine discourse but of course also to fairy tale discourses which arguably, most often have quite normative and strict views on gender; i.e. a princess most often sits around and just waits for prince charming to come to her rescue and do all the "physical labour" of slaying dragons etc.

When we look at the gazes that were interpreted as being surrendered to the Patriarchal Panopticon, this notion is not that surprising seeing as women's gazes have, according to Bartky (1990, 68), been disciplined in a certain way:

Under male scrutiny, women will avert their eyes or cast them downward; the female gaze is trained to abandon its claim to the sovereign status of seer. The “nice” girl learns to avoid the bold and unfettered staring of the “loose” woman who looks at whatever and whomever she pleases. Women are trained to smile more than men, too. (Bartky 1990, 68).

Arguably, there were no ads in this story that featured the “nice” girl who averts her gaze, but instead, a new or updated version of the “loose” woman could be discerned; a “loose” woman who has been disciplined to not only return the male spectators’ gaze, but also meet his gaze with a seducing and alluring one, designed in order to make him feel like he is in charge, like she wants him, whether or not she actually does. It is designed, as Mulvey (1975) argued, in order to flatter the male spectator. Thus, even though this version of the “loose” woman does not avert her eyes but faces the spectators, her eyes and gaze are still not her own seeing as it is shaped and influenced by the male spectators. This surrendering gaze that was discerned in this chapter, thus again confirms the existence of the male gaze, as well as Foucault’s (1988) notion of *technologies of the self*, which he claimed are partly shaped through a gaze. This gaze, that may exert control by monitoring and observing, this objectifying gaze that the object in the relationship incorporates in order to survey itself, is still interpreted as male. Even though the “nice” girl with the averting eyes is not found here, her “loose” successor is still being disciplined to convey her gaze in such a way so as to position herself in relation to and obey the Patriarchal Panopticon.

However, we could also discern another successor here, another “loose” woman who is not bound by the Patriarchal Panopticon in the same sense, but who instead owns her own gaze, regardless of the sex of the spectator, or perhaps, in spite of the male spectator. One that not just returns the gaze, but who firmly, with great determination, can exude a sense of power that transcends her sexuality, her womanhood, and turns her into a subject, instead of an object. One that does not respond to the male gaze with longing, seduction, or acceptance but instead, with promises of threat and violence radiates:

- I am my own person, don’t mess with me...

CHAPTER VIII

Claiming space, or: DU MÅSTE FLYTTA PÅ DIG!²²

The notion of *agency* and *power* as bound up with claiming space, standing out and being visible, should be explored seeing as it was brought up time and time again during the interviews and focus group discussions. As illustrated by Wex's (1979) photography series, the women in the shots often made themselves smaller, thus taking up less space; however, a thorough analysis of this occurrence in Gill's (2008) discussion regarding *female sexual agency* and midriff advertising is lacking. Therefore, the theme of this chapter is *Claiming space*, and it will explore how such notions relate to and construct *agency* as well as *power*, therefore adding to our current understanding of *female sexual agency* in contemporary advertising.

The ads that arose most of the discussions around claiming space were Diane von Furstenberg's ad "Self taught – Self made", CK's ads "I arouse" and "I am powerful", thus these have been selected for analysis. The quotes that have been used all include different constructions of both *agency* and *power* as: claiming space, taking up more space, standing out, not blending in or being a wallflower, making oneself bigger rather than smaller, stretching rather than crouching, as well as being present and in control.

Wallflower

When Lais, Odessa and Calla from focus group 4 were viewing the Diane von Furstenberg ad, they had rather imaginative and critical interpretations of it:

Lais: I don't understand.

Odessa: no, me neither, also that, she looks like...like the second after someone says "you are so cute when you are angry!" (Calla laughing: yeah), I don't know if it is like, but eh, no I do not understand the text either, like has it something to do with the pattern, that she, I don't know.

Lais: yeah maybe she has designed the pattern herself, it can be, like women are objectified not only in advertisements but also in coverage photos, this could be a coverage photo to a fashion magazine like, and it's someone who like makes their own patterns and they get on like designer runways and blah blah blah, perhaps still, yeah, what kind of image is it even, "self taught self made", like yeah maybe she has learned to design patterns and, whether it's painted or embroidered or what the heck it is, it does not feel like she is an agent in the image so it is in some way contradictory in my eyes, even if one thinks that like if one imagines a story behind the headline it does not feel like she is the agent that the image shows.

Moderator: why not?

Calla: well I, just spontaneously, could barely see her at first, it was like so much pattern and so much colour it was so much other stuff that she became like, she was not allowed to claim space, so she became like part of the wallpaper with all the rest surrounding, if I had just leafed through a magazine I would barely have thought that there was a woman in the picture (Lais laughs: mm), like I would've just been: "Aah, colour! Ah!"

Lais: then it is like, like it is very good camouflage if one wants to be a wallflower, and then with that expression it's that classic empty look that fashion images have, so, like I don't know, there is no content, and I think it is extremely annoying...no I do not understand what they are trying to say with the image.

Calla: no I don't get it either.

Odessa: nope.

Lais: Self taught self made to blend into the wallpaper.

Calla: and then "you be you!", well...

Lais: even though you are blending in.

Calla laughing: yeah exactly, even though it doesn't show!

Odessa: yeah because her expression is like trying to play to some sort of, yeah but that she is like angry and horny, then it should look like "you were looking at that other girl, when you get home I will like, have angry sex with you", or I don't know, like this weird, that is what I think when I see it, I don't understand at all what it is supposed to do.

Lais: perhaps it is for her to blend into the wallpaper, so she can spy on her husband or wife or whatever "I saw what you did, you didn't see me but I

saw you, aaah!" (everyone laughs), but I, I can think of like sick varieties of what this can be like saying, but I still think it's kind of meaningless really, eh, it's a woman with that classic empty gaze, angry slash horny, it's like that's what it is supposed to portray and be like no, no own agent, she doesn't do anything she just looks pretty and blends into the background, it, no, no power at all.

Calla: and it feels like they were a bit desperate and trying to get this "youbeyou self taught self made" cause it should be a bit like "Go Go!" (they all laugh).

Lais: yeah but it, it doesn't feel like, it doesn't feel like these images, or the one who has created these ads or whatever they are, it doesn't feel like they have any contact at all with confident women, but instead they try to appeal to insecure women who want to be pleasing, and then they throw some label to show "youbeyou, self taught self made, you are something, although we want to package you to be like everyone else" (sighs), I, yeah, there is no space to be strong and to be oneself but one should fit into the mould.

Moderator: ok, so there is no one who feels like she has some form of power in the image?

Odessa: No.

Calla: No

(they laugh)

Odessa: Almost the least of all.

Lais: And like, yeah maybe even so, just because like the way she is sitting back and like a secretary waiting for the boss to help himself, like I don't know, there really is no...there is no strength at all in the image.

Calla: No.

Odessa: No and if I think of the three images we have seen I think that they are, that what they say is "look willing", like, in slightly different ways...like, "be like this, buy this, you will become this if you buy this" I think you can see that even on TV, on the news like the ones reading the news, even if they are extremely competent and have a fantastic view of the world and what is happening in it with all the news, it is still that they, they have like slightly wet lips and some panting in the voice and that, that it's this that one should look a bit willing and excited no matter what one does as a woman, one cannot just get to read the news and ask politicians

questions in live broadcast but one must also do it like, stand a bit askew with the hip and have the mouth a bit open or like throw the hair a bit, or else, or else, or else it's not ok, or else one does not get to be seen, one has to be a bit sexy too.

Lais: and not too old

Odessa: No no, god no!

Lais: There are no women over 25 (Calla laughs)

Moderator: but did you feel that she was sexualised in this image?

Odessa and Calla: mm.

Lais: Sex object, like I can see it, like these what are they called, never mind I don't even have to choose cause there are so many TV series that play on these powerful men in suits and the women who are secretaries or some other service role and, and like, yeah, agree to, indirectly in some way, to be petted on the butt or like be addressed to like some kind of childish naïve or, whatever it is, and that the competence that they actually have is nothing one discusses at all, that is what this refers to for me, the classic secretary role.

Calla: she also has, or I thought that she has very very passive positioning with the hands, cause the hands are so very passive, they just hang there, she is not like, she is just sitting there, like really "I am just waiting for someone else to come and take care of me"

Lais: mm

Odessa: Exactly, I think she has just jumped up there and is waiting to be taken.

Calla: mm yes she is very, exactly no power just a passivity, just a, like, waiting for...

In this quote, the discursive object is *agency* and it was claimed early on that the model did not feel like the agent in the ad due to the fact that she was barely visible at first seeing as the colourful pattern on the first page as well as in her dress high-jacked the focus from the participants; "she was not allowed to claim space, so she became like part of the wallpaper". Thus, having agency is constructed as being able, or allowed, to claim space, not just be a part of the surroundings. The copywriting in the ad was thus confusing to the participants seeing as "self taught self made" and "youbeyou" became contradictory:

Lais: Self taught self made to blend into the wallpaper.

Calla: and then “you be you!”, well...

Lais: even though you are blending in.

Calla laughing: yeah exactly, even though it doesn't show!

Being an agent in this construction is thus not the same as being a wallflower, it is not about blending in but rather standing out, claiming space and being visible. Also, seeing as the model was interpreted as having no agency, it also meant that she had no power: “no own agent, she doesn't do anything she just looks pretty and blends into the background, it, no, no power at all.” Agency is thus constructed as having power, as not being a passive pretty object that just blends in but someone who has the capacity to stand out and be active.

Furthermore, the model's facial expression was also scrutinised and interpreted as a “classic empty gaze, angry slash horny” and they concocted some imaginative stories of what was going on in the ad: “you were looking at that other girl, when you get home I will like, have angry sex with you”, further constructing the model as having no real agency but rather being a male fantasy's wet dream. The participants further critiqued the producers of the ad, claiming that they are unaware of actual confident women and instead target insecure women in order to sell them a false sense of empowerment: “they try to appeal to insecure women who want to be pleasing, and then they throw some label to show “youbeyou, self taught self made, you are something, although we want to package you to be like everyone else” (sighs), I, yeah, there is no space to be strong and to be oneself but one should fit into the mould”, “what they say is “look willing”, like, in slightly different ways...like, “be like this, buy this, you will become this if you buy this”.” Such discourses of empowerment, is as has been discussed in chapter three quite common especially in postfeminist advertising; “Liberal feminism in the marketplace has both provided a justification for self-indulgence (‘Because I'm worth it’) and transformed a politics into a lifestyle accessory.” (Talbot 2005, 168). By appropriating feminism in their advertising, companies may thus sell their products to women while appearing as the “good guys”, however, as Zeisler (2016, 28) argued: “celebrating the ads themselves simply celebrates advertisers' skill at co-opting women's movements and selling them back to us – and then rewards us for buying in.”

Later on in the discussion, some other interesting and colourful stories arose from the participant's interpretations: “the way she is sitting back and like a secretary waiting for the boss to help himself”, “I am just waiting for someone else to come and take care of me”, “I think she has just jumped up there and is waiting to be taken.” These constructions of “waiting” may be related to the wider discourse of fairy tales where the princess is locked up in a tower somewhere, just waiting for the prince to come and sweep her off her feet. They are related to the ingrained notion of female passivity and helplessness, needing a man to come and

take care of everything, and of course, therefore also helping himself to whatever he wants seeing as he's been so noble and brave to come to the rescue.

In this ad then, the model was not constructed as an agent whatsoever but instead she was seen as a passive sex object with no initiative, no personality, merely blending in, being pleasing and waiting for a man to take her away. These constructions scream out male gaze, and in the position that the participants have placed the model, the choices are few and limited; essentially, she may only sit there waiting. Arguably, that must feel quite boring as well as frustrating; not being able to claim space, being oneself or doing anything for oneself but having to wait for others to sort it all out.

Part of the pattern

Nelle, Leah and Skye from focus group 8 had some similar thoughts about the ad:

Nelle: what a mess! You can barely see what it says! (laughter)

Leah: I was thinking, or I managed to see that it says "Self taught self made", and she is just sitting there looking at the viewer, it's not like she does anything, or such, so I am just wondering what it is that they want to allude to that she has learned herself and then done herself? I think the text becomes like, it feels like the text is just something that sounds good when one says it or reads it, but not reflecting about what it means.

Nelle: yeah really, cause you see that she looks very confident in her gaze, but then it's like she knows something that we don't, and she doesn't say what...

Skye: yeah I think, I got very few thoughts about this ad, it's like, ok...

Nelle: then I think her dress has the same pattern as the wall, and that makes her not stand out that much, so I think it would have been a bigger contrast if she hadn't blended into the wall as much as she does now... I think it becomes rather contradictory, that she is part of the pattern.

Leah: I don't know, I get very distracted by the pattern and the words, it's difficult, she looks, I don't know, she has the same pattern, as has been said...and I don't know, it's more or less the same as what is usual for pictures of women in general, one cannot waive that one resides in a world where women do not usually get to look powerful in pictures, so I get like, my first thought is that if we do not know whether or not she has power or not, then she probably doesn't because if it is a picture of a woman with power, then it usually stands out.

These participants also found a discrepancy between the text in the ad and the image seeing as: "she is just sitting there looking at the viewer, it's not like she does anything", thus it was not clear what it was that she had taught herself to do, but instead the copy was merely there to sound good, not necessarily meaning anything. However, Nelle claimed that there was confidence in her gaze, that perhaps the model knew something the viewer did not, thus alluding to her having some form of agency, even though it was perhaps not all that clear. However, seeing as the dress has the same pattern as the "wall" on the first page, it was interpreted as contradictory because it looked like "she is part of the pattern", therefore blending in. Agency therefore again being constructed as something that stands out rather than blending in.

Furthermore, on the question of power, Leah came to the conclusion that if it is ambiguous whether or not a woman in an image has power, she probably doesn't see it as: "because if it is a picture of a woman with power, then it usually stands out." This then constructs power as something that is unambiguous, something that is clearly visible; at least when it comes to how women are portrayed. And in this case, the model was portrayed as "more or less the same as what is usual for pictures of women in general", in other words as appealing to a male gaze, as being under the disciplinary power of the Patriarchal Panopticon. Another interesting aspect of the non-existent, or at the very least, unclear, agency in this ad, and ads in general, was the comment: "one cannot waive that one resides in a world where women do not usually get to look powerful in pictures", the buzzwords in this sentence being "get to" thus alluding to the fact that the model does not have agency seeing as it is others (producers of the ad) who decide whether or not she "gets to" look powerful or not. Paradoxically then, if the producers did allow the model to look powerful, would that then really be power or simply a mirage of power? Regardless, these constructions may be related to the discourses found in postfeminist advertising as well as femvertising and empowertising; ads that have slogans with feminist connotations to make them sound good, but not actually "reflecting about what it means". The subject position on offer here as not having enough agency or power to stand out would be limiting and arguably feel quite frustrating and restrained.

Making oneself bigger

In focus group 5, when Aida, Billie and Madison saw the "I arouse in #mycalvins" ad, they not only interpreted less normativity, but also more space claiming:

Aida: I think this exudes more control than the previous (*which was the "I take what I want" ad*), maybe it's also, the text, but here it is also that the body language is a bit like she, takes more space, like she is taking a breath, like, I don't know she feels stronger and not at all passive, and here the gaze is more, eh, more like she has control, ehm...yeah and then it, I don't

know it's the details too like the contrast between the edge of the boxers and the lace bra that becomes in some way, sexy in a different way, like, she does what she wants (laughs), that she does not have matching panties and bra but, that she like, she does like she wants and has more control, and feels strong, and then the text too that she is aware of what she is doing, like she knows exactly what she is doing, that she gives someone a feeling by looking this way, like...I think.

Billie: I also think, or I can imagine, I interpret it similar to Aida's interpretation and, ehm, it feels like they have gone away from this typical female norm like, yeah but that she has boxers on and it looks like, she is standing in a way that is not really typical for female models, I think that it feels more like a way, perhaps, that more male models would stand, like that one is not trying to make oneself look smaller but rather making oneself a bit bigger than one is, I can think that this makes one interpret her, more, more powerful in the societal context that we have today.

Madison: I will say the boring thing that I also agree (laughs), like about what you have said, but like that she looks a bit like "don't mess with me" like "here I am", like "you cannot, you can try but you will not get to me cause I am like in, I have control over myself" and, I think it exudes strength, then I don't know if I get, I think mainly the face, but she does look very strong, so I think that helps the image, at least in my eyes, and that she, like there is so much strength in it and this that one just throws the arms up like this it's a bit like a power gesture, like "I am a bit nonchalant...I, I know what I want" like that, this exudes much more, I think more, self confidence in some way and she looks like she is taking the image more for herself than for others, like if, I don't know if we should compare this to the other image but, if I think about how I saw the other, cause the other was like "sure I can get what I want" but here it's like "I can take what I want", here it's like "I take what I want and I am just here" like, I think there's a difference there.

Aida: it, I think that the previous image was more, like if you look just like the gaze and also how they use their sexuality, cause both are like meant to be like sexy but they are that in two different ways, this one is more, like on her terms, I feel, while the other was more like classic like, I don't know, Billie said that it was more like, it deviates from the classic beauty norm like that she has short hair and not so much like it's not just breasts in your

face like, but she also looks considerably stronger, both mentally and physically.

Billie: I agree with that and in some way I think like this, that Madison said right, that the other image could be interpreted like she was holding the camera herself and here it is more like another person is taking the photo of her, but in some way I still interpret this image as more confident like she has more power and control, but it is a bit fascinating why I do that.

Madison: mm.

(This was followed by a discussion regarding the copy in this and the previous ad, eventually concluding:)

Billie: for me I do not think that it is so much the matter of the copy, or I, I do not really agree with the meanings of the copy, however, the body language, I think both are sexualised but in the second image (*I arouse*) it is more about taking for oneself and claiming space than the first image (*I take what I want*), I think, and I, for me that symbolises a sexuality that is more in control.

In this quote we can find elements from all four themes that together construct the model as having *female sexual agency*. From the start, she was described as taking up more space due to her body language: "but here it is also that the body language is a bit like she, takes more space, like she is taking a breath", in this instance "taking a breath" i.e. filling your lungs with air means expanding the body which thus leads to taking up more space. Then her gaze is also described as being in more control, and the details in the ad such as the mis-matching underwear could be interpreted as her be free and self-choosing: " she does what she wants", and lastly normativity and space claiming is again found when Billie uttered:

"...it feels like they have gone away from this typical female norm like, yeah but that she has boxers on and it looks like, she is standing in a way that is not really typical for female models, I think that it feels more like a way, perhaps, that more male models would stand, like that one is not trying to make oneself look smaller but rather making oneself a bit bigger than one is, I can think that this makes one interpret her, more, more powerful in the societal context that we have today."

Thus, here it become clearer that all of these themes together are a part of the construction of a perceived *female sexual agency*. Meaning that agency, power, control and such notions related to this concept are based not just on one aspect

but on several, having to do with the appearance of the model, her perceived freedom and choices in the situation, her space claiming ability as well as her gaze. *Female sexual agency* is here understood as “sexy in a different way”, i.e. being sexy without necessarily playing into the specific hands of the male gaze: “and she looks like she is taking the image more for herself than for others”, thus she is not a sexual object on display but a sexual subject in it for herself, her sexuality is on her own terms which makes her in control and in power.

The participants also made clear distinctions between this CK ad and the previous they had seen which was the “I take what I want ad”, and concluded that both ads were different in the sexuality that was portrayed:

“...like if you look just like the gaze and also how they use their sexuality, cause both are like meant to be like sexy but they are that in two different ways, this one is more, like on her terms, I feel, while the other was more like classic like, I don’t know, Billie said that it was more like, it deviates from the classic beauty norm like that she has short hair and not so much like it’s not just breasts in your face like, but she also looks considerably stronger, both mentally and physically.”

Thus, while the “I take what I want” ad was seen as being less in control, more normative and appealing to a male gaze, this ad was seen as the opposite, deviating from the norm and the male gaze. And lastly, the space claiming which seemed to be the most important aspect for this group, led to the conclusion that “I think both are sexualised but in the second image (*I arouse*) it is more about taking for oneself and claiming space than the first image (*I take what I want*), I think, and I, for me that symbolises a sexuality that is more in control.” Therefore, claiming space is a significant notion in the construction of *female sexual agency* because it provides the agent with more control and power.

Furthermore, notions of threat and violence could also be discerned: “but like that she looks a bit like “don’t mess with me” like “here I am”, like “you cannot, you can try but you will not get to me cause I am like in, I have control over myself”, leading to the power and control that was interpreted also having to do with being able to defend oneself, perhaps having the physical strength to ward off those that may want to come too close without permission. Such notions may again be connected with wider masculine discourses thus suggesting a gendered notion of power and control.

Based on all of these constructions, the subject position that the model is placed in is one of a female sexual agent, a sexual subject, in control of her own sexuality and her body, being free to take for herself what she wants, being able to move freely and claim space, and owning her own gaze. Such a position would, if we speculate a bit, probably feel quite liberating and nice. However, let’s not forget

that it is still her sexuality that is in focus here, not her personality, her dreams, or even her desires; which we do not know much about, really. Her sexuality, while being her own, does not suggest more than just that, and therefore being in such a position may also feel a bit restrained seeing as she is always and foremost a *sexual agent*.

Stretch out and wait

When Hayden, Cassidy and Debbie from focus group 2 viewed CK's "I am powerful" ad, they did not really see or understand the "power" aspect, but what they saw was submissiveness:

Hayden: I don't think she is a power-woman in this.

Moderator: why not?

Hayden: cause her gaze exudes, eh...some form of shyness.

Debbie: mm.

Hayden: ehm, and if she had stood with her back straight and the arms forward instead of back, and up with the chin, it would have been a completely other thing, but now she looks more like...oe, ehm...trying to be seducing and it is not the same thing as being powerful, not in this image anyway.

Cassidy: yeah I really actually think that her body posture...could have been powerful, but it's the thing with the head like, that it is bent down (Debbie: mm), ehm, like, like some sort of servant or like, one of those, like I get the image in my head of like Chinese people who are bowing and thanking, plus the gaze is like submissive-deluxe...not like in a way that like "I am submissive cause I have control over the situation" but because "I am submissive cause I am scared" and...she feels more taken advantage of...it is a little like she is bowing and the gaze, like a...but she is trying to look a bit...no, it just feels...like she is sold.

Hayden: I think that she is rather like, eh...yeah but like a set, set gaze and...but, but with the seducing, cause if she is that seducing with her gaze it becomes like, counterproductive together with the positioning of the body, it is really weird.

Cassidy: but it feels like cliché seducing (Hayden: yeah), like this...but, this is the way to look seducing and then you just get, no...it doesn't feel real.

Hayden: and it very much feels as if they have...placed her right arm a bit back so that the chest sticks out, but what the hell, I do not need to know how it looks from the front really, I know that's what it is, that it is the back

that one should see (Cassidy: mm), in some way, so if they had stretched her up and like showed more of the back I would be like, more...strength in the body posture, I would have bought it more than like this.

...

Debbie: it like, cause it can be like even if you are seducing or like submissive you can still see a lot through the eyes and the facial expression but I think it collapses, it, she, she looks more uncomfortable I think...even, like more perhaps cause, the body posture is so...it is like crouched but had it been more stretched and like you say like if they hade turned it out so you see the back better cause it, I think that is what they want to get at, they want to show the back cause it is the cool part of this bra, like the model of this bra.

Cassidy: but that is like what the thing is that I was talking about that I actually like the position if you remove the head cause I think that she does have a strong back still (Debbie: mm) but that she does not, it looks like she is making herself weak, even if she is really strong.

Moderator: in what way is she making herself weak?

Cassidy: but by bending down the head like that, in a submissive way that is not her being in control over the situation but...just weakness...lack of self-confidence or self-esteem...

Similar to the previous quote, this one also contains several of the themes that combined tell an interesting story about submissiveness. For starters, the participants argued and discussed that the gaze of the model exuded a form of shyness and seduction and was “submissive-deluxe”, thus inferring yet again that gaze is significant when assessing agency and power. Furthermore, the theme of claiming space was noticeable when the participants began talking about the way the model was standing in this ad, her body posture as well as the position of her head:

Hayden: ... if she had stood with her back straight and the arms forward instead of back, and up with the chin, it would have been a completely other thing.

...

Cassidy:...it looks like she is making herself weak, even if she is really strong.

Moderator: in what way is she making herself weak?

Cassidy: but by bending down the head like that, in a submissive way that is not her being in control over the situation but...just weakness...lack of self-confidence or self-esteem...

Thus, standing crouched and with the head bent does not construct one as having agency but rather the opposite. Such a position is arguably not about claiming space but rather taking up less space and making oneself smaller than one is, as well as making oneself weaker as Cassidy pointed out. These constructions are clearly linked to what Wex (1979) found in her photography series, and may also be linked to Fine's (1988) discourses of victimisations and violence seeing as:

...not like in a way that like "I am submissive cause I have control over the situation" but because "I am submissive cause I am scared" and...she feels more taken advantage of...it is a little like she is bowing and the gaze, like a...but she is trying to look a bit...no, it just feels...like she is sold.

Putting oneself in a submissive position because one is frightened and not in control means not having agency, thus it is not part of the space-claiming construct. Additionally, being "sold" can be linked to discourses of objectification, as if the model is merely a product bought and sold to and fro. As an object, a product, one does not have agency or power, and the possibilities of such a subject position would be limiting; how much can one do when being scared and subjugated? Arguably, this position that these constructions have placed the model in would feel quite limiting and restrained, not to mention emotionally and psychologically terrifying and troubling.

A little taller, a little bigger

Lastly, a short little excerpt from focus group 1 viewing CK's "I arouse" ad, showcasing yet again what a difference some space makes:

Chelsea: I think it is a little, it is mostly due to the text in the other image ("I take what I want") and the text in this image, then it would have felt more reasonable if they had switched the texts, cause this image I think is more, exudes more some form of "what I want" just a bit because the focus is, a bit, it is further down on her, they have taken the image a bit from below so she seems a little taller, a little bigger, and has still the arms out like, taking up space in the image, so therefore the text becomes so bizarre in this context I think, just like, what?

Here, we may again gather that claiming space, in the form of taking up the actual space surrounding one's body as well as being represented as taller and bigger than one is, is a positive aspect that adds to the model's agency. According to Chelsea, this model exuded more of "what she wanted", than the model in the "I take what I want ad", thus it would have been more relevant to switch the texts around. This thus means that the "I arouse" copy, with its sexual connotations, was not seen as fitting for this particular ad. Claiming space or taking up space with one's body does not seem to be related to one's sexuality, or whether or not one can arouse others. This subject position, of being able to take up space would yield more possibilities and freedom of movement. It may also be somewhat related to Fine's (1988) discourse of female desire seeing as it exuded "what she wanted"; however, exactly what it was that she wanted, was not made clear. Regardless, such a position that these constructions position the model in, could arguably feel quite liberating and nice.

Conclusion

It is perhaps more obvious to think of agency as being related to freedom, choice, self-confidence, control and such notions, however, considering it from the notion of space is significant if we want to better understand all the various aspects that make up or take away from one's agency. To be able to freely move within a space means perhaps without a doubt, that one has freedom and agency, and while most of us walk around in the public space thinking that we are free to do so, many of us probably did get a bit of an eye-opener when the term *manspreading* (Jane 2017) caught wind. Although this notion, or rather this fact, that men take up more of the available social space than women has been a reality for, well let's just say forever, it is also in many ways so intrinsic and normalised in our societies that many of us have become blind to it. Thus, to examine space claiming in relation to *female sexual agency* and how women are portrayed in advertising, is crucial and as has been showed, is part of the construction of agency. In the cases where the participants found the models to take up more space in the image, to be taller, bigger, to stretch out their bodies, hold their heads high and claim their spaces, that automatically constructed the models as having more agency than those that crouched, made themselves smaller and bent down their heads. Doing so only implied submissiveness, insecurity, even fright.

However, space claiming was not always about what one did with one's own body but also about how well one was able to stand out among the surroundings. As in the case of Diane von Furstenburg's ad, the model, being surrounded by a bright pattern that took away all the focus, was deemed as a wallflower; someone who is there but not visible. This form of invisibility is also related to claiming space, seeing as one is not able to claim anything, much less space, if one is invisible. Thus, to be able to stand out and being noticed is also a form of space claiming that may yield agency.

Leah: ...one cannot waive that one resides in a world where women do not usually get to look powerful in pictures, so I get like, my first thought is that if we do not know whether or not she has power or not, then she probably doesn't because if it is a picture of a woman with power, then it usually stands out.

Regarding the constructions of agency and power as standing out and being unambiguous, as Leah pointed out, such thoughts are similar to Occam's razor, which states that the simplest explanation is the most probable. Thus, a fairly reasonable rule of thumb to consider when viewing ads of women is that: when in doubt over the power or agency that any given female model may or may not display in an ad, it is likely that there is none seeing as this is the norm for women in ads; they are more likely to be portrayed as passive, as pleasing, as objects for the male gaze. When a woman is portrayed as powerful, she is likely to stand out seeing as this requires her to claim her space and being noticed. Also, because we are so used to and have been conditioned to seeing women as objects in ads, as passive non-agents who are there for someone else, we are thus also more likely to take notice when this is not the case.

Furthermore, as with some of the other themes, it seemed as if the space claiming ability of the model also allowed for more sexuality without it necessarily leading to objectification; when the models exuded agency in their gaze and/or non-normative appearance as well as claiming space in different ways, then the sexuality was deemed more in their terms, as if they were more in control than when their body positions were crouched or perceived as smaller. Thus, having *female sexual agency* means also being able to claim the space in which to express that sexuality; rather than being confined in a space and forced to subjugate oneself, which only means one is a sex object. These constructions and findings are of significance if the advertising industry wishes to fully and truly convey *female sexual agency*, or female agency: without having the proper space and freedom to claim that space, female representations are not and cannot convey a real sense of agency.

CHAPTER IX

Conclusion, or: What she said

It can be argued that one of the starting points to this endeavour was Gill's (2007, 2008) theoretical work on the midriff. By the end of her 2008 paper, she remarked that research with female viewers is required in order to assess the meaning of the shift from sexual object to sexual subject, and as such, my first contribution with this story is the empirical material that I have gathered. I strived to not only gather as much material as was necessary to be able to conduct the analysis, but also to ensure that the participants were given the space they deserved to be heard. As you have read in each analysis chapter, the quotes I have used are often quite long, sometimes even pages of discussions are included. Seeing as the focal point in the discourse analysis is the words, the language, I therefore deemed it significant to not cut or shorten the quotes more than necessary, and make sure that not just the words but the context could be understood in each extract. Furthermore, the title of this story, *Skinny White Bitches*, also comes from a direct quote spoken by one of the participants (Silas); even though this story was written by me, your humble narrator, it is the words uttered by the participants that are, and should be, at the centre of attention.

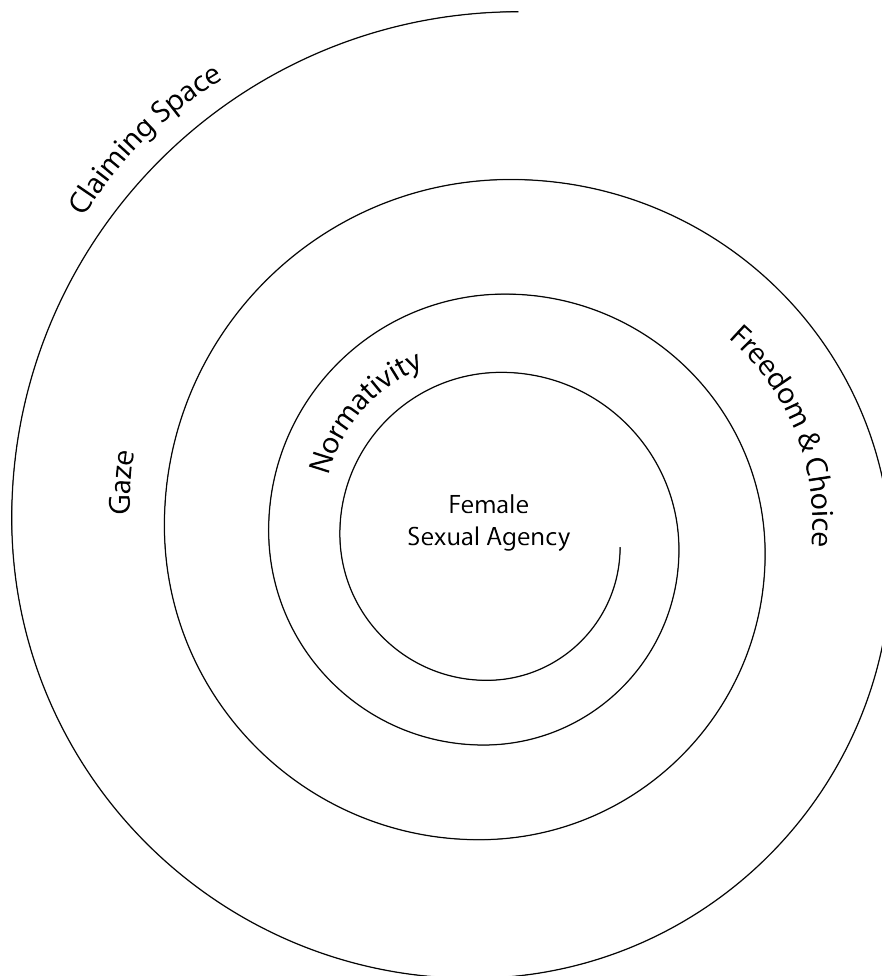
As Gill prompted, the empirical contribution in this story showcases different senses that female viewers make of various depictions of *female sexual agency*, and through the analysis I have managed to structure these into different themes; some that correlate and align with the ones that Gill (2008) offered, and others that are new. My second contribution is thus based on the themes that were unearthed through the discourse analysis. This contribution is both a development and continuation to Gill's (2007, 2008) assessment and analysis of the midriff, as well as to Bay-Cheng's *Agency Line* (2015). As has been argued, the midriff provides a new form of femininity (Macdonald 1995) and the four central themes of midriff (Gill 2007, 2008) advertising were: 1) shift from objectification to subjectification, 2) Emphasis on the body, 3) Emphasis on empowerment and 4) Distinct discourse of Agency and choice. The last theme is thus related to the

Agency Line, which Bay-Cheng (2015, 282) claimed should be added as an intersecting line to the Virgin-Slut continuum, due to neoliberalism's demand of agency:

No longer simply divided between the virgins or sluts or marked along a single continuum founded on their alleged sexual behavior, girls are now also evaluated according to the degree of control they proclaim, or are perceived, to exert over their sexual behavior.

However, as can be seen in this story, when looking at advertising images of women, both those sporting sexually active women (midriffs) and those that are not, there are more themes and notions surrounding, constructing and assessing *female sexual agency* than those mentioned above. Below, I have added the themes that arose in this story into a model that I call *The Female Sexual Agency Spiral*:

THE FEMALE SEXUAL AGENCY SPIRAL



This spiral includes all the themes in this story; *Normativity, Freedom & Choice, Gaze* and *Claiming Space*, which all, in different ways, were constructed as significant when assessing the sexual agency of the women in the advertisements used. The reason I have chosen to illustrate the themes in a spiral is because this shape consists of a curve that simultaneously winds around a point while also moving away from it, i.e. while all these themes are interconnected with *female sexual agency*, none of them are absolute or ever reach the core of this notion, they merely wind endlessly around it seeing as they are all based on each persons' own interpretation of them. In a poststructuralist spirit, this spiral showcases that meanings are perpetually shifting and never static, that there always exists both ambiguity and tension, and that there indeed is no universal truth regarding *female sexual agency*; we can never truly reach the "core of the matter" because it doesn't exist, and even if it did, we are forever bound to merely wind around it, while also moving away from it.

However, even though we can never really reach the core, what we can do is discuss what is on the periphery, which in this case are the various themes. As the analysis shows, what constructs a sexualised woman in ads as a sexual agent, are several notions and attributes. When the participants found the model to look very normatively beautiful, that usually meant they also looked like they had less agency due to upholding the norms of the Patriarchal Panopticon. When they perceived the model to stretch out and extend her body in some way, thus claiming the space around her, it led to a sense of agency. When the models were deemed as without choice and bound to subjugate themselves, this again led to a construction of less agency, and when their gazes were determined and in control, they again were granted more agency.

Furthermore, it should also be noted that in the majority of the instances where the model was perceived as highly sexualised and also very norm abiding, this automatically seemed to construct her with less agency and not much/no freedom or choice in the context. For instance, as with CK's "I am free" ad; here it did not matter that the model was stretching her arm up/out, thus in some sense claiming space, seeing as she was interpreted as a sex object due to her high sexuality and high normativity. This then tells us that there are some themes (or attributes) that weigh more than others; normativity being the attribute with the most weight, thus the one that has been placed closest to the core in the spiral. In the cases where the models were interpreted as having sexual agency or power, there were always some non-normative features included in the interpretations.

When I first began illustrating this model, I fell into what I would like to call the dichotomy-trap; just like the old philosophers I placed the various themes and their opposites on either side of a scale, i.e. Non-Normativity vs. Normativity, Owning the gaze vs. Surrendering the Gaze and so on, thus inadvertently pitting one against the other and therefore concluding that the first of each pair signified Agency while the latter signified Victimhood. But the crux with this dichotomy-

trap is that the world is not black and white, and there is no person who is *either* an agent *or* a victim; we are all always both to various degrees and based on various contexts. By the end of my analysis, I realised that these dichotomous pairs had created much tension and frustration for the participants who oftentimes had difficulty expressing their thoughts and feelings due to the constraint that dichotomies place upon us. I also realised that such dichotomous pairing was exactly what we need to get away from, that normativity is not necessarily always something to be construed as negative and leading to victimhood. That femininity is not always something considered weak or less powerful than masculinity. Even though these notions have been construed as dichotomies, they are not each other's opposites but rather different shades that when combined in different ways may form different colours. Thus, my second contribution, while adding to both Gill's (2008) assessment and analysis of the midriff, as well as to Bay-Cheng's *Agency Line* (2015), is also a critical response to them in the sense that they both also have "fallen into" the dichotomy-trap. Gill (2008) wrote about the sexual subject versus sexual object, but these notions, I would argue, should not be conceived as opposites seeing as the so called "shift" or lines between them are indeed so blurry at times that they cannot be told apart; the interpretations are very much based on the specific contexts as well as the perspectives of the viewers. For instance, in the case of the "I take what I want" ad and the notion of *Selfies*, it was discussed in several interviews that the agency that specific model may or may not have in such an image is truly dependent on the context: seeing as it was an ad, most of the agency goes to the creators behind the ad, but had she been just any woman on Instagram posting a selfie, the agency would be accredited more to herself. If we then turn our attention to Bay-Cheng (2015) and her *Agency Line* (see matrix on p. 59), this again is first of all built on a very dichotomous, but also sexist, notion of the *Slut* versus the *Virgin*, and then it further adds another dichotomous pair of *Agentic* versus *Non-Agentic*, with the latter also being labelled as "Victims". Even though I appreciate the usefulness of this matrix, I also cringe seeing as the mere structure and design of it may lead one to believe that people, and in this case women, can, and should, be divided neatly into these four quadrants. It also arguably conveys a sense that context does not matter, that at any given place and time and circumstance, these four quadrants are enough to describe *female sexual agency*. However, as the analysis shows, the participants were time and time again not only aware of, but also questioned and changed their minds depending on the context. For instance, in the case of the American Apparel ad, which received some of the most ambiguous discussions, there were some that were positive towards that portrayal and found a sense of *female sexual agency* at first glance, however, when being informed of the producers of the ad and the purpose of it (advertising clothes), they completely changed their minds and the once perceived agency became washed away. Thus, there is a clear oscillation that happens, or may happen, when first impressions

and expectations meet and clash with actual context and purpose. In some cases, some participants also had a hard time discussing the images before they learned what they were for, because they argued that it is completely based on the context, thus feeling that their first impressions were not valid or useful to even utter.

Seeing as agency is never unconstrained according to poststructuralist thought, it is thus foolish to discard context as this plays a major role in the interpretation and understanding of agency. As Butler (1990, 145) claimed: "There is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very 'taking up' is enabled by the tool lying there." Within the sphere of advertising images, the very notions of agency, power, freedom & choice, normativity and so on, are only possible because of the boundaries and discursive possibilities that exist within the ads. That the model in CK's "I arouse ad" was viewed as less normative and more powerful by the participants, is because of the narrow boundaries of female portrayals that have been constructed by advertising, as well as due to the discursive possibilities that now arise when they (CK) choose to include models that go against their previously set norms.

The questions that I set out to answer at the beginning of this journey were: how do feminist consumers understand and discuss *female sexual agency* portrayed in contemporary adverts? Do they experience the midriff as having any agency, power, choice and/or other such notions that are enfolded within the *female sexual agency* discourse? And lastly, what are the discourses that may be derived from the consumers' interpretations? In short, the answers are that feminist consumers interpret and understand *female sexual agency* portrayed in contemporary adverts by considering the normativity, the perceived freedom and choice, the gaze of the model as well as the ability to claim space within the image. The midriff figure, her agency and power is then based on these four themes and how each viewer interprets their existence in any given image. When it comes to the wider discourses, the participants drew from various feminist discourses including notions of empowerment, postfeminism and second and third wave feminism, as well as from fairy tale discourses, and masculine discourses of violence and physical strength. It was also clear that in many ways, power is still viewed as gendered; inhabiting or displaying normatively male attributes or appearances were automatically assigned as more powerful than feminine ones.

Abigail: ...cause it feels more feminine, I think, and this feels less feminine, and then it feels like she has more power... (sighing) how horrible, yeah...

Therefore, even in a feminist context it is clear that the old dichotomies that philosophers thought up so long ago, are still very much present and influence the way we today perceive male and female, power and powerlessness, subject and object. Such notions are the reason why this story and all stories like it, are significant, and why more such stories, theories, models and ideas are required. If

we never learn to get away from the feminine *versus* masculine, virgin *versus* slut, or agent *versus* victim dichotomies, how do we ever think that equality is achievable? What we need are new labels and models that re-define and re-structure, without necessarily playing favourites and creating opposites when they indeed should not be divided but rather combined; because we, as humans, all require and embody both femininity **and** masculinity; one cannot exist without the other. To paraphrase Foucault, without freedom there is no power, and without power there is no freedom, both are therefore arguably required and both take part in constructing one another.

The *Female Sexual Agency Spiral*, may be used in future endeavours to unearth interpretations and constructions pertaining to *female sexual agency*, not just in advertisements, but in female portrayals in general. This model forms another understanding of *female sexual agency*: what it may be, and how it may be interpreted and understood. Furthermore, it also critiques and prompts for new ways of explaining and understanding *female sexual agency* (as well as other feminist notions), as something that is continually negotiated, full of ambiguity and tensions, and most importantly, something that moves away from dichotomies and instead is an organic and endless search for new interpretations, notions and descriptions to help further our understanding.

As such, the *Female Sexual Agency Spiral* is the second and main contribution in this story. The other contributions are the discussions to follow, which are theoretical as well as pop-cultural.

CHAPTER X

Discussion, or: Docile little ragdolls don't say No

At this point, I could have neatly wrapped it all up and finished this story. However, we are not done just yet. As the notion of *female sexual agency* is so fascinating and ever-evolving, and seeing as this affects us not only through the advertising images we are fed with, but also throughout media and culture in general, I decided to also discuss this topic through a pop-cultural lens. This is because *female sexual agency*, and notions surrounding it, may also be found in for instance TV series, and I find it relevant to make these connections so as to perhaps inspire others to dive further into the rabbit hole. Now before you ask, let me address the question: "Why all the pop-culture references?", by arguing that popular culture is not merely a fun fiction that we partake in after work, school or in-between whatever it is we have in our busy schedules each day, but rather, popular culture is, as should already be apparent by the name, part of our culture, and therefore also part of shaping our social realities. Luckily for me, Barbara Czarniawska (2013, 11) already, and eloquently made the same argument:

Mass culture fulfills the same functions as high culture - on a larger scale. It does so not only in the sense that it reaches "the people", but also in the sense that it popularizes high culture. It renders story plots from Greek dramas, Shakespeare, and the Bible simple and familiar. It perpetuates and modernizes myths, sagas, and folktales."..."Popular culture propagates the ideas of its times, but also represents the practices, just as the high culture does."..."popular culture not only transmits ideas and furnishes descriptions, but also actively teaches practices and provides templates for interpretation of the world. In short, the mirroring and the projection, the expression and the construction, the imitation and the creation are never separated.

As such, I have incorporated popular culture throughout this discussion in order to emphasise and underscore the various points that I'd like to make. By comparing and referencing various ads and quotes from this story with several different TV series, I would like to show how all are significant in the construction and maintenance of who we are, and more specifically in terms of who women are perceived to be.

Dennis: *Think about it. She's out in the middle of nowhere with some dude she barely knows. She looks around her, what does she see? Nothing but open ocean. "Oh, there's nowhere for me to run, what am I gonna do, say no?"*

Mac: *Okay...that seems really dark though.*

Dennis: *No, no, it's not dark. You're misunderstanding me, bro.*

Mac: *I think I am.*

Dennis: *Yeah, you are. 'Cause if the girl said no, then the answer obviously is no. The thing is that she's not gonna say no, she'd never say no...because of the implication.*

Mac: *Now, you said that word "implication" a couple of times. What implication?*

Dennis: *The implication that things might go wrong for her if she refuses to sleep with me. Now, not that things are gonna go wrong for her, but she's thinking that they will.²³*

As a certain sociopath in pop-culture, Dennis Reynolds from *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* maintained; the "implication", whatever that may be, is arguably crucial when we are trying to read into a certain situation. In this story, there were some ads that implied similarly dark and twisted situations, such as in the case of CK's "I am free" ad:

Debbie: because it feels, she's, like, it feels like she has pressed herself against a wall, uhm, and makes herself very available, but I don't get what that orange thing in front of the wall is, like is she in a crack or like what, she looks very, uhm, cornered as if, "I have no choice, if I want to survive I have to do this", that's what I think.

The participants in this story, both individually and in groups, in many ways seemed to read the ads based on what they implied, both through image and text. These implications were thus crucial for their understanding and assessment of the ads, and as such the ads were discussed and interpreted in many ways because of what the participants thought they implied. In some cases, they implied a passiveness, in others a form of powerfulness, some ads gave them "bad vibes" like in the example above, while others provided a more inspiring feeling. The implications led the participants to sometimes make up colourful (*and hilarious!*) stories regarding the ads, imagining what was about to happen in the images, what the models were saying, feeling or thinking. Thus, all the different implications

that the participants picked up on were crucial for the resulting constructions, and therefore significant to consider and note.

Moreover, as Foucault (1979) argued, power is not as visible in today's modern societies, however, that does not mean that various power strategies and structures are not constantly present. If we for instance have a look at the three strategies for upholding power that he presented, these can be related to the advertising industry as well. Starting with the first strategy, hierarchal observation, Foucault (1979) argued, with prison as the example, that spaces and buildings were arranged in such a way so as to always allow for monitoring, thus eventually leading to the constantly observed prisoners to start monitoring themselves. The way our modern societies are built, the way advertising is designed, as has been brought forth in the third chapter of this story, is that advertisements are literally everywhere, cluttering every inch of our lives. Each ad thus functions as a form of "jailor" and we, the audience, the "prisoners", eventually learn by seeing these ads each and every day, to compare ourselves to the people in the ads, and thus start monitoring ourselves according to the advertised "standard" or norm. This constant monitoring thus leads to people, and in this case women, getting stuck in the Patriarchal Panopticon and develop the "panoptical male connoisseur" (Bartky 1990), or as Holland et al. (1998) put it: "the male-in-the-head", thus trying our best to measure up to the flawless depictions; which, as we already know, is an impossibility.

The second strategy, normalising judgment, is again visible in advertisements through their use of gender stereotypical portrayals: the norms for women and men are repeated in ads, just like they are repeated throughout the culture, and the ones of us that deviate from the norms may receive punishment in the form of bullying, isolation, harassment, persecution, and in some places even imprisonment and death (for example there are countries that criminalise LGBT people²⁴).

Lastly, the third strategy that Foucault (1979) called examination, was about ranking; how individuals are ranked against each other through examinations. We can of course use the same examples that he used here as well (schools, job interviews) but I would also like to add another form of examination in the mix, and that is: Social media popularity. This story has not focused on social media, and I do not intend to shift the focus there either, however, the use of social media platforms such as Instagram did come up during the interviews, especially in the discussions regarding the CK "I take what I want" ad. This ad could be interpreted as the model taking a *selfie*, which is a popular type of post on Instagram. However, taking *selfies* and posting them on Instagram also comes with a lot of examination: how many likes one gets, how many positive or negative comments are all a modern day form of examinations where people rank and judge each other. As we saw in the interview with Silas, a *selfie* as the one in the "I take what I want" ad, is according to her not so much a form of deviation from the

norm, but rather upholding the norm; i.e. this *selfie* is a good example of how all three strategies have been implemented. However, by taking *selfies* the way that Stina Wolter does on her Instagram account, as Silas pointed out, which completely go against the female beauty norm, is a form of taking power and thus resisting the strategies. Yet, this form of taking power is, through the different forms of strategies offered by Foucault (1979), also thus subjected to punishment and judgment:

Silas: ...then we take power, and it is not, no one gives it to us, but we take it, and it hurts to take it, one gets judgments and mean comments and things like that.

The three strategies Foucault (1979) presented were forms of *disciplinary* power, used for creating *docile* bodies, and arguably the way advertising is designed, this system functions as exactly that: a *disciplinary* form of power used to create *docile* bodies; bodies that monitor and regulate themselves in accordance with the advertised ideals and norms. Furthermore, as Foucault (1980) claimed, the reason why this form of power works so well, is because it does not feel like it weighs us down but rather it is productive, inducing pleasure and forming knowledge. When women regulate themselves according to the advertised ideals, when they focus on looking as good as the models in the ads, they can experience pleasure in the fact that they will, for instance, not receive negative comments on their *selfies* on Instagram. But as Åkestam (2018, 36) claimed:

It is not at all strange that the one who lessens their wrinkles with fillers or exercises for a body that better resembles the societies beauty ideals feels better. That women are judged by their looks, and that beautiful women get advantages, is one of patriarchy's lynchpins. The better feeling is thus not a result of more freedom, but that the person has appended oneself.

Therefore, by monitoring and regulating themselves in accordance with the Patriarchal Panopticon, women do not always notice the repression present in the ads or in their actions, but instead experience the relief of not getting any backlash, of being liked and accepted, of being the perfect *docile body* that they are "supposed" to be.

However, being the perfect *docile body* does, of course, not entail also having more power and agency over oneself, but rather less. As we have seen in this story, the ads that portrayed models that the participants deemed as submissive, whether it be due to their normative appearance, their lack of space claiming, their submissive gaze or their perceived lack of freedom and choice,

were also constructed as not being in control over the situation, not having as much power or agency, but simply being put there by someone else, for someone else, like docile little ragdolls. And everyone knows, a ragdoll is an object to be played with, not a subject. Thus, the deeply rooted notions in western societies of women being the “other” (de Beauvoir, 1949), of being the object opposite of the subject men, is still ingrained and visible, even though not always obvious.

Moreover, the equation of sex = power which the third wave feminism embraces, was not particularly embraced by the participants of this study. That does not necessarily mean that this equation is false, however: it is one thing for a woman to dress however provocatively she wants and use her sexuality to express herself, but it is another thing for advertising and media to perpetuate this notion as the one universal truth pertaining to all women, and to capitalise on feminism and female sexuality in order to sell products. Thus sex = power is not a notion that may be applicable regardless of context. In many instances, the participants in this story were sceptical and critical towards the ad, simply because it was an ad created by a brand rather than being for instance a selfie that the model posted herself on her own Instagram feed. There is thus a very big and important difference between brands and individuals when it comes to female representation: the former being part of a powerful institution with the means and power to alter and influence perceptions at a societal scale, and the latter being a tiny part of that institution, yet without the same means and societal power. Therefore, we must not forget that what a woman posts on for instance her Instagram account and what CK posts on theirs, cannot be and should not be analysed or discussed as if it was one and the same thing. Thus, the one with most power (i.e. the brand and the ad image) is the one that should arguably be more scrutinised and dissected; which this story has entailed to do.

Furthermore, during the interview with Jael after she had looked at the Misty Copeland ad, there were certain significant points that arose regarding sex and power:

Moderator: do you think, would it have made a difference if she had been sexualised, do you think you might have interpreted her differently? Had she had as much power then for example?

Jael: I do not think so cause, I think it is so annoying that we (*referring to women*) should be “porny” all the time and like we only have power by exercising it sexually, like that we deny someone sex for instance, that is the only power that women have, and I think it is really ridiculous, cause if I deny someone sex then I do not get sex either, which sucks, so it is like the worst power-thing ever...also it (*referring to sex*) is an interaction, like it is not something that someone should exercise over someone else but something you do with each other cause you think it’s nice”...”and like, it’s

always like, if a man does something stupid or something it becomes this standing joke “yeah now you won’t get laid in six months, ha-ha”, so like that is the power we have cause we have control over, like as women, and, and it is one of those classic things that we rule over and it is fine if a woman says no, then it is a no and then you won’t get laid, that is obvious, but it becomes like, as if it is a weapon that we have in a relationship and that is like the way that we get revenge on someone and that emphasises the classic, like that men want to get laid all the time and they have these urges that we do not, as if we do not have any sexuality but our sexuality is only there to please the man’s needs and therefore we can just choose to turn it off, so that, then it becomes like our sexuality is only turned on when they need it so if we choose that “no, then I will not turn it on”, then he does not get laid, and then we have deprived him something and it is not as if we are depriving ourselves, cause we never want, we just turn it on cause they want, we only exist as some kind of container in order to satisfy what they need, so it, in that way it feels like sex is the only power we have, cause the men are the providers and the men are the head of the family and blah blah blah, and, my best friend and I we always use to say, when people are like “yeah now you won’t get laid” to our men, we say “why would I say no to it? Then I DO NOT GET LAID!” cause then I deprive myself of my sexuality, plus that it is just such an ugly trick to turn sex into some kind of power-thing, cause it is just like, rape is like a power-thing, it is not really about sex, ehm, and then it becomes just as wrong to abuse sex the other way around, or well not just as wrong cause you do not violate someone, but do you get what I mean? It is like not something that should be used for the purpose of power at all, but it’s like an intimate relation between two people who want it, so turning it into something that can be used as a means of power is just so very sick.

Indeed, as Jael pointed out, we are quite used to seeing sex being used as a means of power for women to “get what they want” in popular culture; the female seductress, the femme fatale, the midriff, these are all more or less well-known within advertising, film and media in general. I can probably namedrop 50 different TV series that have used this idea in at least one episode, but I will restrain myself and only mention one, which I find to be a good example of showcasing the complexity, the absurdist as well as the ridiculousness of this notion.

In the episode “Who wants it more”²⁵ of *That 70’s show*, the young lovebirds Donna and Eric have been dating for a while and are sleeping with each other on a regular basis. However, during a schoolwork assignment they get into an argument:

Eric: *I think we need to clear our heads with a nice study break.*

Donna: *Eric, knock it off. I’m not in the mood for a stupid study break.*

Eric: *What? Why? Because I disagree with you?*

Donna: *It has nothing to do with that.*

Eric: *Really, Donna? Because up until now, we were going at it like rabbits who had just gotten out of prison.*

Donna: *Well, that’s over.*

Eric: *Wait. So what are you saying? You’re gonna hold out on me until I agree with you? Because that’s not gonna work, Donna.*

Donna: *First of all, I’m not holding out on you. And second of all, if I did, it would so work.*

Eric: *Okay, well, you know what? I think that is what you’re doing. So try this dress on for size! I’m cutting you off! Yeah!*

Donna: *Is that supposed to be a threat?*

Eric: *Supposed to be. Yeah.*

Donna: *Okay. If you wanna do this, we’ll do this. But you’re gonna cave, and I’m gonna laugh. Yeah!*

The rest of the episode shows how both Donna and Eric are sexually frustrated for not getting to have sex with each other, both trying desperately to arouse the other in order to “win”. There is also a split-screen scene where Donna and Eric confine in their friends Jackie and Hyde, showcasing how denying sex is affecting both of them:

Donna: *I’m holding out on Eric.*

Jackie: *Donna, that’s great!*

Jackie: *So, how long has it been?*

Donna: *Three of the longest days of my life. Maybe I should just cave.*

Jackie: *No! When he caves, you own him.*

Donna: *I think I want it more than Eric.*

Jackie: *Eww. Why?*

Jackie: *Donna, sex is how we control men. If they ever find out we want it too we’ll never get jewellery again.*

Eric: *I’m holding out on Donna.*

Hyde: *Forman, that’s hysterical.*

Hyde: *So, how long has it been?*

Eric: *Three of the longest days of my life. Maybe I should just cave.*

Hyde: *No! If you cave, she owns you.*

Eric: *Yeah, but there’s no way she wants it as bad as I do.*

Hyde: *Can you blame her?*

Hyde: *Forman, sex is how women control men. Secretly, I believe they like it as much as we do.*

Eric: *Oh. You and your crazy conspiracies.*

This quote demonstrates not only Donna and Eric's sexual frustration, but also highlights the notion of sex being the only source of power for women, that they may "use" in order to, as Jackie put it, "control men and get Jewellery". It seems that sex for women is then merely a means to an end, a form of quid pro quo, a "you scratch my back and I'll have sex with you" sort of thing. Female pleasure and sexuality is however nowhere to be found within this notion, but should be concealed so as to uphold the power. As Hyde put it: "Secretly I believe they like it as much as we do", yet this is dismissed as a "crazy conspiracy".

In the end, they both "cave in" and get what they want. Thus, this episode, in a quite fun and amusing way shows not only how ridiculous it is to use sex as a means of power, but also how skewed the notion is that only women are capable of denying their partner, and also most importantly, that this denial in no way affects them but only the men that are denied it, which is of course not true. As Jael pointed out, by refusing sex to your partner just because they did something you do not approve of (even though you still want to have sex), means that you are also denying the pleasure for yourself. And as women, we have for long been taught to deny ourselves our sexuality – that is why the discourse of female desire (Fine 1988) is still so rare to find not just in ads but in popular culture in general. A woman's sexuality is, in a lot of ways, still attached to her abstaining from sex, not partaking in and enjoying it. With this in mind, it should then surely be a welcoming sight to see midriff's in advertising flaunting their stuff and using their sexuality in order to "get what they want", right? Well, no. Unfortunately, it is not that simple.

In regards to CK's "I arouse" ad which in general received quite positive reactions from the participants, constructing the model in many ways as being in control, having power and agency, it should also be discussed and dissected a bit. What can we say about this power that has been constructed, over and over again in the interviews and focus groups? As the copy suggests, the model arouses others, thus she is using her sexuality to affect someone else, and as Aida pointed out, it seems like she is exuding a sense of "you can look but you can't touch". Thus, while on the one hand the model is using her sexuality to arouse others, she is at the same time also denying them, thus creating sexual frustration, and it is, in many ways, because of this that she obtains her power. Alas, what does she get out of this? How does this benefit her? Does she simply derive pleasure from seeing others being affected by her sexuality, without actually having to partake in any sexual acts herself? It is a conundrum. Why should women be taught to arouse others, instead of being taught how they can explore and understand what arouses and pleases them? While on the surface I would agree that this ad is a positive step towards portraying *female sexual agency*, however, by digging a bit deeper, one may come to realise that the step is indeed not as big as one might think. While she is arguably not confined within the discourses of violence and victimisation (Fine 1988) she is at the same time not really a part of the discourse of female desire (Fine 1988) either, seeing as her own desires are not conveyed. This is instead, another discourse altogether; let's call it the "Sex as means of Power without self-

actualisation" discourse – a discourse that is conveyed time and time again in advertising with the use of midriffs. A discourse that, on the surface may want to convey a sense of *female sexual agency*, but at its core is lacking in focussing on actual female desires. This discourse is still in many ways thus linked to the Patriarchal Panopticon, seeing as it is more focussed on how a woman may arouse others (i.e. men), even though under her own terms, instead of focussing on herself and her own desires and pleasures. It seems in this discourse that she derives pleasure based on the fact that she has the power to arouse others; that pleasure is however all too familiar when it comes to how women are perceived and taught in society. Women *should* be pleasing to and for men, that is what the male gaze dictates, thus for a woman to gain pleasure in doing just that, in arousing men without getting anything else in return other than knowing that she has succeeded in arousing them, well, what else is new then? How is this really different from how it has "always" been? Whether the female representations in this story were found to be submissive or to have some form of sexual power, it seems that both constructions can be and are related to a male sexuality and desire, rather than a female one.

While the notion of using sex as a means of power to deny someone else is arguably a skewed idea of what sex is and what it "should" be used for, the notion of always being "up for it" as the midriff suggests, is at the other end of the spectrum, and as such, is equally perplexing. Again, I would like to discuss this notion of the midriff "always being up for sex" by exploring some pop culture:

In the episode "Dead Things"²⁶ of the cult TV series *Buffy the Vampire slayer*, there is a quote I find significant and relatable to this notion. To put it into context: this episode revolves around three guys; Warren, Jonathan and Andrew who have banded together, calling themselves "The Trio", to take over Sunnydale where the series is set. These guys are "nerds", using magic and various gadgets for their schemes, and in this particular episode they concoct a mind control/enslavement device. When the device is finished, Warren, the leader of the gang, utters: "Now, with this baby, we can make any woman we desire our willing sex slave." Warren decides to use this device on his ex-girlfriend Katarina (*who by the way broke up with him because she found out about his sex robot girlfriend that he had built. Yeah, he's a real catch...*). When Katarina is first exposed to the device, she is under its spell and calls Warren and the others her "Master", but she eventually snaps out of it and yells at them, informing them that having sex with a woman against her will is actually rape. And that is the significant aspect I wanted to pinpoint in the quote: being a "willing sex slave" is a contradictory statement, an oxymoron, seeing as "willing" and "slave" are opposites; How can a person be willing, if their will has been taken away? Arguably, if one is willing, one is not a slave, and vice versa. However, this idea of having a "willing sex slave" seems to be perfectly logical, every man's fantasy, not only in fictional Sunnydale, but also in advertisements and media in general. The midriff figure in contemporary advertising, being sexually

active, attractive and always up for sex is thus the ideal “willing sex slave” that is perpetuated throughout popular culture. But is she really willing? Is she really real? No. She is a concoction, made up by the advertising industry, media and popular culture, and sold to us in a nice and neat format that we can consume daily, without having to question the logics behind her. I can claim, without hesitation, that there is no woman, nor man, nor human of any kind on this entire planet that is **always** up for sex. This idea is merely a sick, twisted fantasy that is rooted in misogynist pornography and misogynist structures in general.

The problem with these two notions; denying sex and always being up for it, is that both of them completely disregard the actual sexuality and desires of the person in the centre of it (in this case, women). As with the Virgin-Slut continuum (Bay-Cheng 2015), women are still portrayed as either denying men their pleasure (being a tease, virgin, uptight, prude etc.), or “giving it away” to anyone who wants it (being a slut, whore, skank etc.). It seems that finding a balance where women are in charge of their own desires, pleasures and sexuality, regardless of how that affects men, is nearly impossible to convey in ads. But why is this then? Why is it so difficult to create a more balanced and equal representation of women in advertising? Well, one of the reasons may be linked to the advertising industry itself. As has been discussed, the male gaze is present in most of the ads that have been used in this story. Seeing as the ads are produced by an institution that is still a boy’s club, it is no wonder that they are created in such a sense so as to reproduce the dominant gaze. As some of the participants noted, it seemed to them as if the photographers or creators behind most of the ads were men; “I think like directly that it’s a male photographer...” (Bailey), and unsurprisingly most of the photographers/creators behind these ads were in fact men. But regardless of their gender, the fact that they are all part of a male dominated industry, is the important aspect to consider here. As long as advertising agencies are still being run similar to “Mad Men”, the changes in the output, in the ads, that are necessary in order to reach some form of equality will most likely be very difficult to achieve – we cannot expect a sexist industry to have an un-sexist output. Of course, not all agencies are boy’s clubs, however, too many are.

Moreover, while some advertising agencies have tried to create more equal and feminist advertising these last few years, I would argue that using terms such as Empowertising and Femvertising is counterproductive: Advertising as an institution, as it is currently structured and functions, is not, nor has it ever been, feminist. Therefore, such terms may instead be confusing the issue, seeing as they imply that there is some sort of feminism incorporated in certain ads. However, this is rather a false feminism, a non-feminism, or basically, like a wolf in sheep’s clothing, it is capitalism in feminist-attire. Thus, arguably, it would perhaps be more productive and accurate to discuss such ads as inspiring, rather than empowering. Inspiring advertising, or *Inspiritising* is not feminist, however, it may in some cases lead to individuals being inspired and therefore being interested to

learn about actual feminism. This could be, one can hope, an outcome of such ads. However, these types of ads are never empowering or feminist in and of themselves.

Furthermore, feeling empowered and being empowered are two different things; arguably a lipstick that looks good on you and makes you feel nice when you walk down the street is and can never be as empowering as you, and your fellow people, also being in control of your own beings, having rights to your bodies and your choices in life. This story, as has been stated in chapter three, would like to emphasise and go back to the original formulation of empowerment (see Rappaport 1987; Lee 2001), which included three components that were not meant to be separated:

- The intrapersonal: meaning self-efficacy
- The interpersonal: meaning the coming together of others and collaboratively analysing imbalances and power blocks in a critical manner
- The behavioural: acting towards eliminating the identified imbalances and blocks

Although advertising as the system it is today, cannot really be said to be empowering, especially not when considering the ads that it daily spews out with the same old skewed notions of gender, but does that mean that advertising can never be empowering? Seeing as the original point and idea of empowerment was to change the social environment in which various individuals reside, could advertising, as a pervasive tool that clutters said society, then not be used for working towards empowerment? At the end of the interview with Silas, I asked if marketing/advertising could ever be empowering, this is the response I got:

Silas: can marketing be empowering...no...no, no, empowering is...what is empowering, to have role models that look like oneself, that one can relate to is empowering, to get the same and as much praise for things that one does as one's peers that may have a different sex is empowering, to focus on, on what one can and how one is instead of how one looks is empowering, cause when I, when I focus on how I look, then, then the judgement is based on someone else, but if I instead focus on what I can and how I am then the judgement is more on myself, then I take the power, then I take the power over how I feel, then I take the power over how I walk through life.

Moderator: so, do you feel that, is it because marketing focuses on looks then that is the reason it cannot be empowering?

Silas: yes, I am not seen as an individual but I am seen as, like you have to fit into that mould which is white and thin and 18, or 16, but not more, potato potato you know, and then, like the mould is so small, but when you

focus on what you can then the mould becomes incredibly larger, you can be a kickass astrophysicist or a professor in business administration or a Michelin star chef or the best kindergarten person that ever existed that all the kids love, then there are so many possibilities, whereas everything that focuses on looks is so restrained.

Advertising, as the oftentimes visual tool it is, is of course about looks. Not just how the people in the ads look, but also how the things and places look. But then again: must advertising even be empowering, at all? The short answer is no. However, if we ever do want to reach some form of gender equality in our societies, advertising must change; it must, in the least, not act as a hindrance towards equality. As this story has showed, the majority of the ads used are just that: hindrances. They hinder gender equality due to their portrayal of women which is still very much focused on sex and looks, on the male gaze, on making oneself as a woman, a docile little sex ragdoll. *Female sexual agency*, as was portrayed in the chosen ads, thus still position women as being primarily sexualised beings that exist in order to be pleasing for men. Sexual power, although a form of power, is perhaps, as some participants suggested, the most pointless form of power. It is indeed a cry and shame that women still are, whether willingly or unwillingly, bestowed with sexual power as basically their only source of power. And for ads to use and emphasise this form of power, as a way for women to be powerful, is not just demeaning, it is downright harmful. These types of portrayals are neither empowering, nor do they help feminism or gender equality in general.

So then, why not try to transform advertising into a system that can be empowering? Let us not forget that: “empowerment is not forged in solitude” (Bay-Cheng, 2012, 714), just as ads are not forged or seen and interpreted in solitude. Advertising is, in our societies, too big a tool to not use for good; to squander the responsibility and possibilities that exist with using this tool, is foolish. If we truly did not believe in the effect and power that advertising has, billions and billions of euros, pounds, dollars, SEK and all other currencies would not be spent on creating ad after ad after ad.

Arguably, in order to overcome the oftentimes sexist and stereotypical representations of women in advertising, a radical change must occur. However, *female sexual agency* sported by the midriff in contemporary advertising is not a radical shift, it is merely the other side of the same coin. Radical would be if the majority of fashion ads all of a sudden began portraying women of all shades, shapes and sizes, without calling it femvertising, empowertising or patting themselves on the back because they are so “woke” and all for female empowerment and equality. Radical would be to stop capitalising on women’s self-doubt. Radical would be to cut down on, let’s say, at least half of all the

advertising created and displayed, so as to allow some much-needed breathing room from all the clutter. Radical would be to stop portraying people in ads altogether, and simply displaying only the product itself, thus allowing consumers to fill in the gaps and use their imagination. Radical would be to rethink advertising altogether and create something else, something new, that does not shame people for being flawed, that does not suggestively force people into specific and restraining moulds, that does not make people believe they are less worth when they realise they cannot possibly fit into said moulds. For gender equality to be possible, advertising must change radically, and we must change with it.

Epilogue

Once upon a time there was an advertisement with the words: “*I take what I want in #mycalvins*” printed on it. This ad became the starting point of a five-year quest with the mission to investigate the notion of *female sexual agency* in contemporary advertising. The journey was long and rough, with high points, detours, struggles and aha-moments, and eventually it led to a story: this story. The story of my dissertation.

One could say that there are many stories within this story, seeing as adverts all tell their own story. In-between all the constructions, there were also narratives to be unearthed, and all the various interpretations made by the participants are stories too; stories of women who have been subjugated by others, who fear rape and assault. Stories of strong independent women who dare to be themselves. Stories of insecure women who just want to be liked, to be loved. Stories about women who spend so much time on their appearance, thinking nothing else matters. Stories of women who want to be provocative, who want to take ownership of their bodies. Stories of women who fit within the beauty norm, and those that don't. All these stories may be just stories; however, they are all true. They are true in the sense that these ads inspire women to create them, to aspire to them, to fear them, to ridicule them, to be shaped by them. Whether we like it or not, ads all tell us a story, and even though many get jumbled up in the sea of advertising clutter that we reside in, they do, at one level or another, stick to us. They leave their mark. Ads affect us so much more than we think; they seep into our everyday lives, private spheres, deepest thoughts and desires. We cannot escape them, and we cannot ignore them.

When I picked up the shovel, all those years ago, and started digging into ads and female portrayals, I knew it would be difficult, frustrating, infuriating and inspiring. I have become more aware of my surroundings, which unfortunately also has caused me to become more cynical, and more of the angry feminist that I am today. How could I not be? How can anyone who wants to see gender equality become reality not be angry when we each day hear about another setback? When

people who are outspokenly and blatantly sexist and racist are voted president? When the world as we know it is still built around men while women are merely an afterthought²⁷? When institutions that influence and shape our societies such as the advertising industry, and even Academia, are still boy's clubs?

I remember when I just started out as a Ph.D. student and was travelling abroad to my first self-chosen Ph.D. course/seminar in marketing²⁸. During the first day, a male professor held a presentation about Ricoeur and at one point he showed us a slide filled with famous philosophers that had inspired or were in some way or another connected to Ricoeur. All the faces staring back at me were white and male. Each and every single one of them. As I sat there, staring at the slide, I could not help thinking: where are the women? Luckily for me, I got the chance to ask him that myself when at the end of that first day we had a round table discussion and I was seated at his table. I asked him point blank why he had not included a single female philosopher in his presentation, such as for instance Simone de Beauvoir? What I got in response was, as I like to call it, an array of generic-non-reply-excuses; "I am not that familiar with her work" (*well, how about reading up on her then?*), "there were not that many female philosophers at the time" (*untrue!*), "In France Simone de Beauvoir was not that "popular"" (*sure, but at the time we were not in France, and according to the presentation Ricoeur was not particularly popular in France either...*), "At the time the university was very misogynist" (*obviously, but that still does not explain why you as a professor in 2016 insist on keeping it that way...*), and so on and so forth. Eventually, the other male professor at the table chimed in to try and salvage the situation by saying: "That was still not that long ago, and surely in a hundred years it will look different and more women will be included in the seminar then." Arguably, this is also not true, because things will not look different in a hundred years, not unless we **make** them different. If we keep excluding women and maintaining the boy's clubs, women will never be able to fully partake in the discourse. This incident has stayed with me all these years, and I have witnessed my fair share of gender discriminations, of biases and blatant sexism not just in the advertising field that I have studied, but also in the marketing academy in which I have conducted my studies. Although I myself have not researched the latter, others have, and I would here like to share some extracts from the lovely, yet heart-breaking "I poem" called *Death by a million cuts* that Andrea Prothero presented during the GENMAC conference in Dallas, October 2018, that is based on hers and Pierre McDonagh's findings from their investigation on gender inequality in the marketing academy:

I try to speak up, I say try with care as it is not always easy,
it is death by a million cuts, show anybody a single cut and they will
rightly say that I am exaggerating

...

I have to be superwoman so that I can be in a position where I am not
regarded as less than a man

...

I think being read as female has never had positive impact on my career,
I have called it out and gotten into trouble

...

I feel that I am often related to as a woman rather than a colleague

...

I have seen other female academics get good publications but then it
being insinuated that it was only because they slept with their supervisor

...

I did the work, they took the credit

...

A fellow male doctoral student said to me “that’s a nice necklace, it really
sets off your tits, and you have amazing tits”

...

I was more than once advised against wearing girly clothes and colours
so as to be taken seriously

...

This needs to change but I don’t know how it can as long as we still live in
a patriarchal world.

(Prothero, 2018)

Now, you may think dear reader that I am talking about different and separate things, surely ads are not the cause of sexism and inequality within the marketing academy? Well no, that is not really what I am saying, however, my point is not far from it: sexism, the boy’s clubs, the Patriarchal Panopticon, the male gaze, the male-in-the-head, the gender inequalities all around us, they are all connected, they are all part of the same system; *patriarchy*. This system then, has been ingrained in our institutions, in our societal fabric, in **everything**. Consider this: if the marketing academy is maintaining the boy’s club and teaching young students mainly about white male philosophers, and the advertising agencies have a majority of male creatives who come up with and produce the ads, and the ads portray women and females as only having sexual power, or basically no power, and the consumers, students and all people living in those societies get taught and exposed to these teachings and visual representations, well, then how do we really think that gender equality is ever possible to achieve? Spoiler alert: it is not.

Sexism begets sexism, just as hate produces hate. It is a vicious cycle that will go on and on, unless, or until, we break it.

In conclusion: Yes, I am angry, I am livid, I am hurt and I am sad. Because the changes I have witnessed these past years are just not good enough. I want more; I need more. So now, I reckon that it is time for more people to pick up their shovels too.

For those that come after me, I leave you these questions, these quests: How is the notion of *female sexual agency* understood and constructed by people who do not identify as feminists, as well as those that identify as male; are there more or other themes to be unearthed there? How can the advertising industry work in order to become a helping hand for gender equality? How is the notion of *female sexual agency* understood and constructed in other contexts and cultures where feminism is not as widespread? And lastly, but most importantly: What effective measures and steps can we all take in order to change the boy's clubs and ensure that women are included, accepted, and treated as equals?

Start digging.

The End

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Notes

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- ¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/15/world/europe/ireland-underwear-rape-case-protest.html> 2018-11-19 kl.11:22
- ² "Women Now Empowered By Everything a Woman Does", 021903, in *The Onion*: <https://www.theonion.com/women-now-empowered-by-everything-a-woman-does-1819566746> - Accessed: 2019-02-14
- ³ Global Gender Gap Report 2018, Key Findings: <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2018/key-findings/> 2019-02-14
- ⁴ Timeline for women's right to vote: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage - Accessed: 2018-11-26
- ⁵ No more page 3 campaign site: <https://nomorepage3.wordpress.com/>
- ⁶ The Representation Project: <http://therepresentationproject.org/>
- ⁷ Annonseradet: <https://annonsradet.org/>
- ⁸ "The rising wave of abortion restrictions in America", 180519, in *CNN*: <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/05/18/us/abortion-laws-states/index.html> - Accessed: 2019-05-23
- ⁹ I myself have also worked in this industry for almost a decade, and can vouch for the daily sexism and gender discrimination that I have experienced myself, as well as seen happen to other female co-workers.
- ¹⁰ <https://www.guldvagenpriset.se/sistabriefen#sistabriefen-samling> - Accessed: 2019-05-27
- ¹¹ <https://www.resume.se/nyheter/artiklar/2018/11/28/goteborgsbyraer-sager-ifran--72-undertecknar-uppforandekod-for-byrabranschen/> 2019-05-27
- ¹² One of the many horrific statements that emerged from #sistabriefen, can be found here: <https://www.guldvagenpriset.se/sistabriefen#sistabriefen-samling> - Accessed: 2019-05-27
- ¹³ Unfortunately no recent information has been found regarding the non-binding report.
- ¹⁴ Erik Landén's blog: <http://saljgrejmedtjej.se/>
- ¹⁵ Jean Kilbourne's website: <http://www.jeankilbourne.com/>
- ¹⁶ 6 saker en våldtagen kvinna kan få höra i rättssalen ("6 questions a raped woman may hear in the court of law"): <https://kit.se/2015/11/12/21211/6-saker-en-valdtagen-kvinna-kan-fa-hora-i-rattssalen/>
- ¹⁷ <http://www.government.se/government-policy/a-feminist-government/>
- ¹⁸ <http://www.metro.se/artikel/h%C3%A4r-%C3%A4r-8-feministiska-framsteg-i-sveriges-historia-xr>
- ¹⁹ <https://www.reklamombudsmannen.org/>

²⁰ Article about Dov Charney's firing: <https://nypost.com/2014/06/19/american-apparel-likely-up-for-sale-as-ceo-is-ousted/>

²¹ Stina Wolter is a famous Swedish artist, singer and writer known for taking norm-breaking Selfies and posting on Instagram

²² Referencing a song by Swedish pop singer Alina Devecerski, "Du måste flytta på dig!" translates as "You have to move over!".

²³ Quote from "The Gang Buys a Boat", third episode of the sixth season of It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia, originally broadcast September 30th, 2010. Written by Rob McElhenney, Glenn Howerton and Charlie Day, directed by Randall Einhorn.

²⁴ Map of countries that criminalise LGBT people: https://www.humandignitytrust.org/lgbt-the-law/map-of-criminalisation/?type_filter=crim_lgbt, site accessed 2019-09-30

²⁵ "Who Wants It More?" is the 11th episode in the third season of That '70s Show. It aired on January 10, 2001 and was written by Joshua Sternin & Jeffrey Ventimilia, and directed by David Trainer

²⁶ "Dead Things" was written by Steven S. DeKnight and directed by James A. Contner and is the 13th episode of the sixth season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. It was originally broadcast on February 5th, 2002.

²⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/feb/23/truth-world-built-for-men-car-crashes> - site accessed 2019-10-21

²⁸ A little tidbit to this story: later during that Ph.D. seminar the professor in question asked another professor, Pauline Maclaran (who by the way did an amazing presentation on Judith Butler) why we need feminism. Pauline's answer was epic: "it's because of men like you". That was the highlight of the whole seminar. Thank you again Pauline, truly, thank you.