



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, ECONOMICS AND LAW

”FUCKABLE”

*The objectification of women in advertising
through a female perspective*



Bachelor Thesis, Marketing
School of Business, Economics and Law
University of Gothenburg
HT 2013

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Bachelor thesis was written during the fall/winter of 2013 at the University of Gothenburg, School of Business, Economics and Law.

About two years ago, I stumbled upon Jean Kilbourne's documentary *Killing us Softly* and even though it sounds cliché, it changed my life. I had at times felt offended and frustrated when viewing ads that in my eyes were sexist, however, I could not really find the words to formulate and explain this frustration. Kilbourne took the thoughts and words right out of my mind and after seeing and hearing her speak so calmly, passionately and eloquently about the subject, I then and there realized that this is what I must also do. I decided that I had to do something, say something, write something and finally speak up. The idea of going to business school and majoring in marketing in order to write a thesis about sexist advertising was formed a couple of minutes after watching the documentary. This thesis has thus been my goal for the past two years, and now, I am finally able to say what I wanted to say for so long.

I want to thank my supervisor Peter Zackariasson not only for supporting me through all of this, but also for always encouraging me to push further and challenge myself even more. Although I was alone in writing this thesis, I always felt that you were behind me, giving me the feedback, constructive criticism and ideas to inspire and keep me going.

Thanks to all of the women who agreed to be a part of the focus groups. Without your openness, insightfulness and your ability to joke, laugh and use sarcasm to illuminate the painful truth, I truly do not know what I would have done or what would have become of this. Hearing your thoughts on the matter has been a privilege, and for that I am truly grateful. You are all strong and independent women, don't ever forget that.

Thanks to my family and friends, who have been there for me, even though I at times have been absent; stuck underneath piles and piles of books always excusing myself with having to write my thesis. I love you all for encouraging and supporting me.

I also want to thank the school for allowing me to be alone in this endeavor and letting me write my own thesis that I dreamed about for so long.

Finally, wherever you are Jean Kilbourne, I humbly and deeply thank you for opening my eyes and speaking up for me and all others who cannot find the words. I will forever keep up this fight as best I can.

Thank you,
Irina Balog

ABSTRACT

Title: "Fuckable": The objectification of women in advertising through a female perspective.

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Language: English

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The subject of this thesis is one that has been researched and discussed for many decades: sexist advertising and the objectification of women. While some still cling to the fact that sex sells and can do so respectfully, others argue that using sex in ads preserve not only the image of women as objects but also promotes pornography, violence and distorted views of society and self. The research objective of this study was to further investigate the phenomenon of sexual content and objectification of women in advertising, gaining further understanding of the intricacies and impacts it has on women and hopefully shed some new light on the matter. By asking how women collectively give meaning to and perceive ads using sexual content and/or objectified women, and where they draw the line, I intended to fulfill the purpose of this thesis.

The method used was of a hermeneutical and qualitative nature; I conducted two focus group discussions with nine women in total, during which they all got the chance to see 89 different ads portraying some form of sexual content. By letting the women discuss the ads freely and openly, I thus gained valuable information to analyze against the pre-existing theories in this field.

This subject has a long history and thus understanding it fully demands a thorough background, therefore the theoretical chapter started off with introducing the power of ads and explaining sexual content. The theoretical framework then included different and also similar arguments and themes which all relate to sexist advertising. Themes such as the Male gaze coined by Mulvey (1999), Naked/Nude by Berger (2008) and Pornography (Kilbourne, 1999; Gill, 2008; Merskin, 2006).

After analyzing and evaluating the empirics against the theoretical framework some old insights were confirmed and new ones developed. I found that using sex in advertising, though having the potential to be very successful for brands, are indeed hurting women in more ways than one. Also, due to the clutter problem of ads being found everywhere, people have a tendency to stretch their moral line further and further due to advertisers being more and more provocative and shocking. In conclusion: the sex used in many ads today is objectifying towards women, promotes violence and helps preserving women as the "other".

Keywords: Sexist advertising, Objectification, Active/Passive, Male gaze, Nude.

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INTRODUCTION

Background and Problem discussion

There is an assumption in the world of advertising that has lived on for many years and is nowadays taken for granted: Sex sells. Sex in advertising has been used time and time again to sell just about everything, and by doing so, contributing to the objectification of women (and in a lesser degree: men) by them being presented through the male gaze (i.e. for male desires) (Kilbourne 1999; Cortese 1999; Merskin 2006). Nowadays, pornography has become mainstream in the form of sex in advertising. In most western societies women are more often than not depicted as attractive decorations or sexual objects, and the sex used in advertising has more to do with pornography than reality (Kilbourne 1999; Merskin 2006; Gill 2008). Nevertheless, Sex does sell at times and there have been many brands positioning themselves with the use of sexual content in their advertising (Reichert 2003). But does the fact that sex is a useful tool to make a brand successful justify the times when the usage of sex crosses the line and verges into the territory of sexism and objectification? And where do women draw the line between ads that are sexy and those that are sexist and objectifying?

September 20th 2013, Sweden's public service broadcaster SVT, made a newscast about demands on punishment for sexist commercials¹. It appeared that swedes make approximately 500 reports every year, of which 45% is for sex discriminatory commercials, yet still the market appears to remain the same. In our western society, we are so used to seeing sex and objectified women in ads everyday, it has become part of our culture (Kilbourne 2003). This phenomenon may be ingrained in us; however, it is not all that positive but can have rather serious impacts in our society and in ourselves.

In Sweden it is not illegal to use sex in advertising in accordance with the Marketing Practices Act, however the Ethics Council of the Business world has, in different cases where commercials have been reported, made a statement. If an advert is sexist or not depends on different factors, for example: that the advert portrays men or women as sex objects, or from an obsolete gender role point of view, or otherwise in a degrading way. They also evaluate the difference between naked and naked and state 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 (Mårtenson 2009). In the 1970's Berger (2008) made a distinction between different forms of nakedness and explained it in the terms *naked* and *nude*:

¹ Newscast on SVT: <http://www.svtplay.se/klipp/1476103/nu-kravs-straff-for-sexistisk-reklam>

“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.” (Berger 2008 p. 48)

In other words: objectification is, in many ways, in the eyes of the beholder who can change a naked person into an object by seeing the nakedness as something more than that. The difference between naked and nude is in many ways abstruse and subtle, how is one to know where to draw the line when it comes to using nakedness or sex in advertising? Is it even possible? Whether an ad is sexist and objectifying or not is in many ways a question of interpretation, but somewhere there might be a visible boundary.

Even though there are indeed brands with products that can be said to have some relations to sex, there are also a large amount of products that have nothing at all to do with sex and still include sexual content. The Swedish blogger Erik Landén worked in the advertising business but got tired of the constant sexism and made a point to illustrate this issue by starting the blog “Sälj grej med tjej”² (“Sell thing with girl”). There he makes a point by posting ads for different kinds of products containing beautiful women, but which in no way have anything to do with the woman itself or even sex for that matter. This phenomenon has also been pointed out by Rutledge Shields (2002) who calls it: “the “least common denominator factor in advertising”: when one can’t think of anything else, use sex to sell it.” (2002, p.19). In other words, sex and women may well sell, but this method is an old and tired one, to say the least.

The fight against sexism in advertising is not a new one, Miller (2005) describes how this phrase stems back from the 1960’s and 70’s, when empowered women were fighting for equality and took a stand on the sexism portrayed in the ads back then. However, this sexism was a lot different from what it is today:

“Sex itself was absent from advertising, but sexism ruled.”...”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.” (Miller 2005, p.114)

Miller (2005) argues that ads are being more controversial with their use of female sexuality and that it almost seems as if ads sometimes want to be provocative and hover on the territory of “poor taste”.

In Kilbourne’s documentary series *Killing Us Softly* (1979, 1987, 1999 and 2010)³ she lectures about how the world of advertising has been objectifying and degrading women for decades in western societies. She initiated her work in the 1960’s and

² Erik Landén’s blog: <http://saljgrejmedtjej.se/>

³ Jean Kilbourne’s homepage: <http://www.jeankilbourne.com/>

was then collecting adverts in order to expose how distorted and fallacious the industry was when it came to the perception of women. Her work clearly shows that there appears to be a significant difference between how men versus women are portrayed in adverts, and that in the most cases it is the woman who becomes an object for the male desire. A similar theory is that of Mulvey who in the 1970's introduced the term "Male gaze". Her starting-point lay on the film industry, but the results were the same:

"In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly." (Mulvey 1999 p. 837)

That men are considered active while women are passive is not a new discovery when it comes to the imagery we use. Berger (2008) described the relationship as such: "*men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at." (2008, p. 41). This statement is as true today as it was 40 years ago, whether it concerns art, film or advertising.

Kilbourne (1999) compares sex in advertising with pornography and argues that there are a lot of similarities between the two phenomenons. Just as in pornography, the main goal is about power and dominance, about disconnection rather than connection. The ways in which female models are posed in advertising along with many of the themes (bondage, sadomasochism) are often borrowed from pornography and it thus dehumanizes and objectifies women (Kilbourne 1999). Young women today should not only be beautiful, but also sexy and know their way around the boudoir (Gill, 2008). Using sex in advertising also charges the products in question with eroticism, which Kilbourne (1999) argues, is doomed to disappoint since they are unable to fulfill our sexual desires and/or emotional needs.

In other words, sex in advertising seems to have negative effects on women and the society as a whole since many researchers argue that it objectifies, dehumanizes and degrades women. However, this is proven to be a very subjective matter, which also changes over time. In regards to this, it is important for this field of research to continually keep finding out what women collectively feel about ads that are objectifying or use sex in order to sell. Without researching and grasping this information one cannot expect there to be changes in the advertising industry or the image of women in society, thus the subject of sexist advertising is just as current today as it was five decades ago.

Research objectives

This subject may have been researched, debated and written about for decades, nevertheless, the objectification of women is still portrayed in ads everywhere. For this thesis I want to understand how women collectively view, perceive and feel about ads using sexual content, in order to contribute to the problem solving.

However, this thesis does not strive to resolve the problem, nor does it intend to find all the right answers. Instead it will attempt to shed some more light on the issue and perhaps attack it from different angles, or at least, from a different geographical standpoint, and thus contribute to this field of research.

The purpose of this study is to, from a female perspective, investigate the intricacies, relationships and impacts of sexy vis-à-vis sexist and objectifying ads with the help of existing theories. It will do so by seeking insight about how some women perceive, react to and finally how they feel about these types of ads.

Research Questions

- How do women collectively give meaning to and perceive ads using sexual content and/or objectified women; where do they draw the line of what is acceptable to portray and what is not?

THEORY

What's the harm in ads anyway?

Most people want to think of themselves as individuals who follow their own paths, make up their own destinies and decide for themselves, however, this is unfortunately not as accurate as we wish to believe. Whether we want to accept it or not, media and advertising do have a great impact on our every day lives; it tells and teaches us how to look, how to act, what to choose. Rutledge Shields (2002) has analyzed and described what part advertising plays in today's society and concluded that ads are one of "the major instigators keeping not only girls and women but the entire culture "body obsessed"." (2002 p.xvi). Years earlier, psychologist Moog (1990) came to similar discoveries and wrote about the search of self many of us face daily, which advertisers are well aware of: "If we can climb into the "real" world offered by advertising, we'll all be confident, competent, successful-free-to-be-us, exceptional but ordinary people in this pressure-cooker world of expectations." (Moog 1990, p.115).

Ads pervade our every day lives, they are everywhere; in magazines and newspapers, on bus stations and the buses themselves, on billboards and buildings, and for the last decades they are scattered all across the internet for the entire world to see. We are all the audience, whether we want to be or not (Rutledge Shields & Heinecken 2002). Furthermore, ads are made to sell, they are not created in order to make the audience, us, happy but indeed the opposite, make us feel like we need or want something. After all, ads are in the "selling business": "If an ad is irritating, insulting, or abrasive enough to cut through the clutter and make an impact on the consumer, psychological sensitivity is irrelevant. Sales spell success." (Moog 1990, p.16). This can, of course, be very problematic since ads do not reflect the reality but rather a fantasy of what might become if we buy the products they sell. Berger (2008) wrote that advertising is built on anxiety and that: "The purpose of publicity is to make the spectator marginally dissatisfied with his present way of life." (2008, p.136). We might not see ourselves as targets, but if the fantasy resonates with what we wish to achieve then we are surely, consciously or unconsciously, measuring up to what is depicted in the ads. Moog (1990) means that this isn't always a bad thing, however, our insecurities can at other times get intensified due to the imagery of the ads and our desires to emulate them. "Advertising sells exciting new definitions of who we are, and all people need to do to buy an identity is to buy the product." (1990, p.89).

The Power of Ads

Jhally (cited in Yanni 1990) claims that the power of symbolism derives from the human need to search for meaning, and thereby claims that the capacity to mediate meaning by conveying relationships between material and symbol is what fuels advertising. Yanni (1990) thus divides the cultural process into three different types of activities: individual, institutional and systemic, and claims that they, combined, make social change extremely difficult and contribute to enforcing the dominant culture. Berger (2008) put it this way: "Publicity is the culture of the consumer society. It propagates through images that society's belief in itself." (2008, p.133).

Since ads, as argued in the beginning of this chapter, pervade our every day lives and thus monopolizing the social images we see, it functions as an all-consuming cultural industry and inhabits a powerful position when it comes to cultural process. In its position it can both undermine and incorporate change: "Since the market is continually changing with the introduction of new commodities and because society is constantly changing, advertising must constantly negotiate/perpetuate new systems of meaning." (Yanni 1990, p.78). Therefore, advertising can simultaneously develop and protect the "public" image, since it always maintains a fluidity of meaning in order to stay "alive", but because advertising is powered by symbols, the process of change is a complex one (Yanni 1990).

Berger (2011) argues that while it is difficult to prove what effects advertising has on an individual level, it is a whole new deal to look at advertising from a social and cultural perspective. He bases his statement on the post hoc, ergo propter hoc argument which simply put means that just because Y follows X does not mean that X was the cause of Y, ergo; just because one person buys a product after seeing a commercial does not mean that he/she bought it because of the commercial. But when looking at a larger amount of people watching the same commercial and buying the same product, one can conclude that the commercial does play a contributing role to the cause (Berger 2011).

Sexual content

Söderlund (2003) coined the term *emotionally loaded marketing* that refers to ads with a loaded content, used 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) argues that the 60's and 70's ads were more word oriented and used rational arguments to underline the pros of the product. One reason for this evolution in the advertising industry can be that the commercial clutter has increased and it is now 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. 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, 2003); one could argue that this is due to the clutter issue and that it works as a means of breaking through the filters and catching the viewers' attention. Nevertheless, 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).

Reichert (2003) argues that sexual content can come in many forms and thus vary; it is in other words, not only nakedness or explicit sex in ads that are actually sexual. He goes on to categorize some of the different types of sexual information and claims that there are distinctive incentives that people both recognize 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 clothes, or verbal and/or written words containing double-entendres or sexually suggestive phrases. Reichert (2003) also points 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 since people find them to be sexually attractive (Reichers 2003).

Different types of sexual information

Reichert (2003) categorized five different types of sexual information that are commonly used in the world of ads. These are: 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 (2003) raises 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 (Reichert, 2003). 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).

Sexual Behavior can be integrated into ads in two different ways, either by using a single model and thus play on the individual behavior, 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, 2003).

When describing what entails Physical Attractiveness, David Buss (1994) argues 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 advertisement often is used by depicting, what is seen as, beautiful models (Reichert, 2003). 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 several studies on the subject that show that attractive models lead to positive effects both for men and women; we all want something nice to look at. Nevertheless, the use of attractive or decorative models is problematic since they send out a very skewed portrayal of actual people. Other studies also show that

negative effects are possible in other areas than are intended or interesting to the advertisers, for instance in the case of young women who compare themselves to the attractive female decorations. This comparison often leads to dissatisfaction with themselves and their appearance since they cannot assert the same physical attractiveness as the decorative models (Söderlund, 2003)

By Sexual Referents, Reichert (2003) refers to “Images and words that subtly refer to sex or that trigger sexual thought” (2003, p. 23), they are in other words not as palpable as portrayals of Nudity or Sexual Behavior. 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, 2003).

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, 2003). However, it is important to note that Sexual Embeds are not scientifically proven to actually work in ads and therefore increase purchase behavior and sales, many researchers and advertising professionals claim it to be a fraud due to mixed results in different studies (Reichert, 2003).

Woman as object

Yanni (1990) argues that the meaning of woman is constructed in a negative way in culture and that advertising plays a big part of said culture. She starts her article with a quote by Sartre which says: "Man is 'mediated' by things to the same extent as things are 'mediated' by man" and explains how this insight would not have worked if the word "man" were to be changed to "woman" since woman inhabits both terms in that equation:

"'Woman' does not work in this equation. 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." (Yanni 1990 p.71).

She argues that there is asymmetry between the social construction of men and women that makes the people-thing relationship different, and since advertising works as a cultural institution and a platform for social communication it thus conveys the meaning of woman and preserves it accordingly. Furthermore, the meaning, which is preserved, stems from an old system, namely: patriarchy, which in its foundation defines woman as an object. It is important to understand how women are categorized as people and objects since it furthers our understanding regarding representation and the powers which advertising holds.

However, it is not reasonable to state that advertising alone is the cause of false images and social conflicts such as sexism without putting it into the context of social meaning. Since we interpret meaning from the institutional contexts, the asymmetrical social relationships existing in this context will of course be reflected in advertisement "since it is an extension of our message system." (Yanni 1990, p.73). The author exemplifies with feminist analysis, which claims that in our culture the man is the standard from which all others are defined, while woman, as the object, is derivative; "By designating woman as the "other", societies usurp women's subjectivity, that is, they make her an object, a thing." (Yanni 1990, p.73). But what does this mean? By quoting Kappeler, Yanni (1990) provides an interpretation of the woman as object by identifying that this process simultaneously turns the man into the subject. Because of this process of objectification and subjectification, the representation of men and women, and how they perceive themselves, is distorted. Yanni (1990) exemplifies yet again with other theories formed by author and art critic Berger (2008) who described and analyzed different themes such as art, nudity and the ways in which both men and women are seen and how they appear. He argued that the social presence of men and women differ; while a man's presence is wrapped in the promise of power and suggests what he can do to or for you, a woman's presence is linked to her own attitude towards herself and insinuates what can or cannot be done to her. In this social sense, being a woman means being kept by men thus splitting herself into two; the surveyor and the surveyed: "A woman must continually watch herself. She

is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself." (Berger 2008, p.40). Yanni (1990) agrees with Berger's (2008) assessments of objectivity, namely that the male is subject and therefore the surveyor who holds all the power and is free to observe and act upon the objects, including women, which make up his world. Women on the other hand are the object and thus the surveyed who's primary function is to make themselves worthy of being surveyed by the man, while she simultaneously is surveying herself as well.

These different meanings of perception can be understood by Berger's (2008) definition of the terms "naked" and "nude"; he made the distinctions that nakedness is a reflection of oneself while nudity is being seen naked but not recognized for oneself; "A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become nude. (The sight of an object stimulates the use of it as an object.) Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display." (Berger 2008, p.48). Thus, nudes can never be naked but are condemned to being in disguise. Yanni (1990) makes a comparison out of this argument and says: "The exposure women receive as the object of representation is comparable to the experience of being nude." (1990, p.73).

Berger (2008) discusses the appearance of women and explains that how a woman appears to others is crucially linked to her success, and most importantly how she appears to a man can determine the way she will be treated since men survey women before treating them. Whatever a woman does is a reflection of how she treats her own emotions, as for men, what they do is simply their own expressions. Simply put: "men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves." (Berger 2008, p.41).

These theories are closely linked to the ones Mulvey (1999) introduced in the 1970's, although her frame of reference was not advertisement but film and moving pictures. She introduced the term "Male gaze" and came to the conclusion:

"In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly." (Mulvey, 1999 p. 837)

Berger (2008) makes similar arguments and comes to the same conclusion over and over again in his analysis, firstly that the viewer or spectator is a man, and secondly that the women depicted in the images are put there in order to satisfy the spectator, i.e. man. Thus the male gaze can be, and is, found everywhere we look:

"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." (Berger 2008, p.58).

Commodities

Yanni (1990) discusses the concept of woman as a commodity and argues that since women are given both material and symbolic value, they therefore share the same characteristics of commodities in the forms of use-value and exchange value. Subsequently women, like commodities, can be changed into money thus perpetuating the economy of sexuality, and since advertising functions as a link between goods and social meaning, it consequently plays a role in this exchange. Using women as commodities in order to sell other products is also a well-known and problematic fact; "We use beautiful women, in various stages of dress and undress, to sell everything from automobiles to new technological gizmos" (Berger 2011, p.94). This exploitation, as Berger (2011) puts it, causes a great sense of anxiety and inadequacy for many women who do not fit in the supermodel norm; "Women are put in a no-win situation. Beauty is associated with youth, and women are made to feel that when they lose their youth, they will lose their beauty." (Berger 2011, p.98).

Unequal objectification

In recent years the usage of man as "object" has turned up more and more assuming that this would balance out the critique of only women being objects, however Yanni (1990) argues that there is a qualitative difference: since the objectified women represent a systemic prejudice, the same cannot be done to, or said about men because it does not alter the structure of representation. Objectifying women concern the whole *gender*, while objectifying a man is only about that singular, individual, man. Using and objectifying male models seems rather the futile attempts of society and advertising trying to contain the critique towards the misrepresentation of women while at the same time maintaining it. She explains: "the experience of woman as object is intensified since our material and symbolic identity has been falsely constructed and conveyed." (Yanni 1990, p.74), this however, cannot be said about men. Kilbourne (1999) also argues this claim and further explains why the objectification of men is not the same as it is for women; "When power is unequal, when one group is oppressed and discriminated against *as a group*, when there is a context of systemic and historical oppression, stereotypes and prejudice have different weight and meaning." (1999, p.279). What she means is that the consequences of objectifying men are not the same as they are for women; Men do not have to live in fear of being raped or hurt by women and their bodies are not on a regular basis judged by or invaded by women.

Sex in Advertising

Since sex has been, and still is, used frequently to sell a vast amount of products (Berger, 2011; Berger, 2008; Söderlund, 2003; Reichert, 2003), the clichéd term “Sex sells” must in fact have some grain of truth in it. “But this sexuality is never free in itself; it is a symbol for something presumed to be larger than it: the good life in which you can buy whatever you want.” (Berger 2008, p.138)

Reichert (2014) claims that using sex in ads is indeed more than just a simple ploy to get the consumers attention. Sex is used in the positioning of a brand to make it more attractive, and it is more often integrated in ads that are selling products or brands that actually have some relevance to sex, such as perfumes, clothes or beauty and personal care products. He argues that there of course are examples of sex in advertising that cross the line and create controversy with their distasteful or degrading ads, however, this is the same as with most things in the world; those who cross the line make it bad for all others who are well within the limits. His argument is therefore that sex must not necessarily be a bad thing since it can in fact sell products in a respectful manner (Reichert 2014).

But what then is the difference between sexy and sexist ads? Lysonski (2005) writes about this conundrum and argues that it all boils down to one question when viewing an ad: “Is it titillating or is it offensive/demeaning?” (2005, p.116). This interpretation is subjective both on a personal and societal level and what was in a gray area yesterday may be undeniably offensive today. The author presents some guidelines which were put forth by Walsh stating that the portrayed sex should not involve violence, should not portray women as being inferior and also that stereotypical depictions also can be considered sexist. However, since there is no clear or collective list with criteria to help determine which category an ad falls in to, Lysonski (2005) concludes that it all depends on the “values, preferences and perceptions of the viewer, and these evolve over time” (2005, p.119). But whether an ad is sexist or not, ads containing sex do in fact hit people at one of their weakest spots: their insecurities about love and self-esteem. They may sell sometimes using this tactic, but they always attract attention and influence people (Moog 1990).

Using sex in advertising does grab attention, Reichert (2014) is not denying it, however he argues that the success rate of those who use sex in their ads is more likely to become long-term if the brand or products in question do in fact have a sex-related brand benefit; “That is, if you buy our product: (1) you’ll be more sexually attractive, (2) you’ll have more or better sex, (3) you’ll just feel sexier for your own sake.” (Reichert 2014, p.110) Names such as Axe and Calvin Klein are two very successful brands that have been positioned as sexual-attractant enhancers. The same goes for Victoria’s Secret that is probably one of the worlds most famous intimates brand. So what is their secret? Well, simply put, it’s Sex:

“as long as people desire to be attractive to others, and as long as people desire romance, intimacy and love, and all the wonderful feelings they involve, advertisers can show how their products help meet those needs and desires. Whether we like it or not, products play a role in society’s intimacy equation.” (Reichert 2014, p.111).

There are of course, counter perspectives and authors who disagree with this line of thought, arguing that these constant depictions of sex builds up the anxiety since; “The pressures to be sexy, stay sexy, and get sexier are enormous.” (Moog 1990, p.145). Others, like Forde (2014), is tired of all the ads using sex and suggests we get rid of the sexual appeal completely; “We’re collectively exhausted with sexual messages intended to persuade us to buy this or that, usually through tired cliché or norm-shocking visuals.” (2014, pp.114-115). She argues that even though sex does at times sell, studies have shown that the use of sex in ads tend to diminish brand recall, especially for men who focus on the sexual parts of the ad rather than the product and/or brand itself, and also that most women do not care for sexual adverts. Moog (1990) also declares this fact by writing about how women can look at sexualized ads and at least remember the brand, while men when faced with the same imagery “can’t remember *anything*—often they can’t even describe what was in the ad, let alone name the products!” (1990, p.149). These types of overtly sexual ads are then not that welcomed by women, and as for men, they help keeping them in the hormonal and curios stages of boyhood (Moog 1990). In fact, Kilbourne (2003) argues that we all seem to be stuck in a state of arrested development:

“surrounded by teenage fantasies of sex and romance, a culture that idealizes the very things that make real intimacy impossible—impulsive gratification, narcissism, distance and disconnection, romanticism, and eternal youth. Sex in advertising is about a constant state of desire and arousal” (2003, p.174).

We 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, Forde (2014) means 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 exclaims. Not only has sex in ads become mundane and boring, but they are also contributing to unhealthy sexual attitudes, body image problems, and of course, the objectification of women (Forde 2014). Kilbourne (2003) also argues that the sexual content in ads help defining what and who is in fact sexy; “We never see eroticized images of older people, imperfect people, people with disabilities. The gods have sex, the rest of us watch” (2003, p. 174). This distorts our concept of reality and our self-images since we can never measure up. Furthermore, Kilbourne (2003) argues that the sex used in ads is not promoting sex but rather trivializing it and making it artificial.

Using sex in advertising also charges the products in question with eroticism, but while Reichert (2014) points out the economical benefits of positioning a brand as

sexually enhancing, Kilbourne (1999) rather states concern because the product is destined to disappoint since it is unable to fulfill our sexual desires and/or emotional needs. Moog (1990) agrees and explains it from a psychological perspective:

“When advertisers link products with sexuality, they lock in with people’s deepest fears of being unlovable; they offer their products and images as the tickets to love, when what they’re really providing are more masks for people to hide behind.” (1990, p146).

Pornography, Violence and Body Cropping

Many researchers argue that pornography has become mainstream due to the amount and type of sex used in ads (Kilbourne, 1999; Gill, 2008; Merskin, 2006). Kilbourne (1999) explains this phenomenon by comparing sex in advertising with pornography and argues that there are a lot of similarities between the two phenomena. Just as in pornography, the main goal is about power and dominance, about disconnection rather than connection. The ways in which female models are posed in advertising along with many of the themes (bondage, sadomasochism) are often borrowed from pornography and it thus dehumanizes and objectifies women (Kilbourne 1999). Young women today should not only be beautiful, but also sexy and know their way around the boudoir (Gill, 2008).

This type of dehumanizing and objectifying sexual content also has other ramifications when the ads start to glorify rape and male violence. Pornographic ads portraying women as the passive submissive ones and encourage men to be dominant and use their force do not go unnoticed. It is often the most dangerous man who is considered to be the sexiest in popular culture and the ads often encourage women to be attracted to these kinds of men, even though, in reality that would be a really bad idea. Furthermore, the ads are also at the same time encouraging boys and men to become these dominant, hostile and indifferent men and that they should never take no for an answer; “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, p.273). Implications like these have significant and alarming repercussions, especially for women who are usually the victims of domestic violence and abuse. There probably aren’t that many men who would be scared of being stuck in an elevator with a strange woman, while this, for a woman, would in fact be a very alarming and potentially dangerous situation. So why are ads showing us these types of scenarios, making them out to be sexy, rather than what they really are: frightening? Kilbourne (1999) exemplifies with an ad showing us a young woman in an elevator with a tight little top (not covering her stomach) and a text saying: “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 the ad, she is literally asking for it, which implies that all women are

asking to be dominated, to be submissive and overpowered by men. It may be true as Reichert (2003) argues that not all ads containing sex cross some form of moral line, however, the vast amount of those that do clearly show that there is a problem:

“All women are vulnerable in a culture in which there is such widespread objectification of women’s bodies, such glorification of disconnection, so much violence against women, and such blaming of the victim. When everything and everyone is sexualized, it is the powerless who are most at risk.” (Kilbourne 1999, p.281)

The world of advertising is full of images that shock us, and even though we want to believe they do not affect us, how could we not? How can one not be affected after seeing ad after ad make women out to be objects and men be violent? Kilbourne (1999) argues that most eventually get numb by seeing these types of images day in and day out, just like we get numb of hearing about all the bad things happening on the news. But even if you tune something out, it doesn’t mean that it isn’t there any more. Even though ads do not cause the violence directly, they do still contribute to the violent climate we live in and the state of terror which most women experience (Kilbourne 1999).

Another form of sexist advertising that further fuels the objectification of, and violence towards women, is body cropping i.e. displaying only parts of a body or a body with chopped off parts (Kilbourne, 1999; Cortese, 1999; Rutledge Shields & Heineken, 2002; Merskin, 2006). “This perpetuates the notion that a woman’s body is not linked to her mind, soul, and emotions” (Cortese 1999, p.31).

It is common to have the models heads cut off, thus displaying only what is most essential: the body. This form of advertising is also reassuring to the viewer who can look at the image without feeling guilty or self-conscious since there is no one looking back (Merskin 2006), also it suggests that the model is brainless. A faceless model would thus 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 always, 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 since turning a person into an object is often the first step towards validating violent behavior 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, p.278). If you dehumanize a woman, turning her into an “it”, it suddenly becomes acceptable to hurt her, since 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).

Defining the Theoretical Framework

In the theory chapter the groundwork has been laid in order to understand the phenomenon of sex and objectification in advertising; what it is, what it can mean and what is problematic with it. The point has been to give the reader an understanding of the subject matter before going deeper into the different themes, which form the theoretical framework. All of the arguments and material presented in the chapter will not be analyzed, for instance the different types of sexual content put forward by Reichert (2003) will only be exemplified visually. These different categories can be important to note in order to understand the different ways in which sex can be used in advertising, however it is not the differences between these, or which one is the most objectifying, which is the research objective and therefore this theory only works as a foundation and not a theme.

The theoretical framework used in order to analyze the empirics is based on the research objective and includes themes such as the male gaze, nakedness/nudity, activeness/passiveness, pornography, violence and body cropping. The arguments put forward by Berger (2008), Mulvey (1999), Kilbourne (1999 & 2003), Cortese (1999) Forde (2014) and Yanni (1990) among others, will be analyzed in correlation with the empirics in order to find the relationships between these and ultimately answer the research questions.

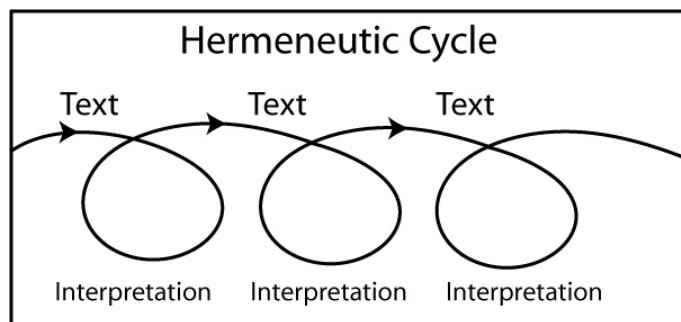
METHOD

Epistemology & Ontology

Epistemology is concerned with issues regarding knowledge and allows us to reflect on how and whether or not the social world can or should be studied. It is assumed that research should be scientific and thus use precise measurement techniques, however, there are those that argue that scientific models cannot be applied to the social world since it requires a more sensitive approach (Bryman 2012). Since ads play a part in the social construction of both men and women (Yanni 1990), it should therefore be studied, even though the research can be said to be very biased since it involves personal views of what is acceptable or not to portray in ads. The approach may not be scientifically objective, however, it is important to find out and understand how women perceive the imagery, ideals and truths that are expected of them through the power of ads.

Ontology is the study of what the world actually is, but since us humans have different perceptions and points of view, it is practically impossible to all agree on a mutual reality. Instead, there are different scientific directions we can relate to such as Positivism and Hermeneutics (Jacobsen 2002). My ontological view as a researcher is hermeneutical, thus this thesis is based on perceptions and thoughts regarding sexy and sexist advertisement. While some might not find any problems with these types of ads, there are viewers that certainly do. These different interpretations are of importance and they clearly show that there are no general or objective laws that rule the way people look at and perceive an ad.

Hermeneutics is based on an interpretive approach meaning that there is no objective reality but that it is rather a question of interpretation; since we create the reality we can also interpret it differently, the opposite would otherwise mean that everyone who saw the same phenomenon would perceive it the same way (Jacobsen 2002). When it comes to understanding the hermeneutic view is based on a paradox; to understand as a whole, one must understand the parts, and to understand the parts, one must understand the whole (Wiedersheim-Paul & Eriksson 2011). This process is otherwise known as the hermeneutic circle (sometimes referred to as cycle or spiral) and is shown in the picture⁴:



⁴ Hermeneutic circle: <http://www.sfu.ca/media-lab/cycle/presentation/design.html>

Methodology

There are different strategies that are said to be suited for different studies but the two most common are called deductive and inductive and they both have their own approaches when it comes to gathering the empirical data. Deductive strategy can be said to work from theory to empirics. This means that the researcher starts by going out and forming expectations of the world and then gathers the empirical data in order to analyze whether the expectations were true or not. The inductive researchers process works the other way around i.e. from empirics to theory by starting with no expectations and gathering all relevant data. This strategy aims to be as open as possible so not to limit the data that can be collected (Jacobsen 2002).

For this study the former strategy, deductive, has been chosen because of its hypothetical nature; since it is built upon expectation one might form different hypothesis before gathering the empirical data. I started this thesis with certain expectations and hypothesis in mind, which were built upon previous and newly formed knowledge on the subject, such as; ads, which portray women as sex objects, are demeaning and therefore women should be offended by them. While gathering the data I continually went back and forth seeing whether the expectations matched up to the empirics.

Quantitative or Qualitative?

There are several differences between quantitative and qualitative research, one of the most commonly known is that the former tends to focus on numbers while the latter is mostly interested in words (Bryman 2012). Since this study aims to seek knowledge about the intricacies, relationships and impacts of sexy vis-à-vis sexist and objectifying ads, while also gaining an understanding about women's perceptions towards these ads, it is therefore clear that a qualitative approach is the best suited one.

Qualitative research can be said to be interpretivist which means it seeks to understand the world through "an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants" (Bryman 2012, p.380). Seeing the world from this point of view means to not generalize, seek neutrality and objectiveness but rather to focus on different understandings and comprehensions, in other words; the world is constructed by people and therefore we must study how these people relate to and see the world, in order to understand it (Jacobsen 2002).

There are different qualitative research methods that can be used to gather the data for this thesis, for instance interviews, ethnography/participant observation and focus groups. I have chosen the latter and will present and explain this choice in the following section.

Focus Groups

As the method I chose to move forward with focus groups in order to collect the acquired data for the analysis. Focus groups, unlike group discussions, often address a specific theme or subject for discussion. What is interesting to see when using focus groups, is how individuals discuss the subject as a group, how they relate (or not) to each other and finally give meaning to the subject based on the interaction of the group (Bryman 2012). This method can therefore be used to study both the content (i.e. thoughts, attitudes, opinions etc.) and also the interaction of the participants (Wibeck 2010).

Since the purpose of this thesis is about how women relate to and perceive ads using sexual content and/or objectified women, and where they draw the line between these types, it is relevant to focus on women as a group. While individual interviews could generate interesting data, the method is not sufficient enough because it does not give room for discussions, only individual statements and thoughts. I want to understand how women collectively give meaning to, and form opinions regarding sex in advertising thus individual interviews are not enough in this sense. With focus groups it is often about individuals who argue against each other and challenge each others points of view; "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, p. 503).

Focus groups are used to study subjects that are difficult or complex to grasp, by discussing the issue in a group the participants have a chance to understand and expand their train of thought (Wibeck 2010). A one on one interview is often designed or made up of a question-answer-question format, which does not lead to any significant discussions. Focus groups on the other hand, are just about that: discussions (Bryman 2012). Without proper discussions on this subject, how are we to find out what the "real" problem is, or more importantly, what the "real" answers are? Since this thesis focuses on a sensitive subject, the focus group method is the most relevant because of its format and possibilities. It has been said to work really well with this kind of subject and it allows the participants to gain more power since the discussions are under their terms (Wibeck 2010).

Collecting data

The process of collecting and processing the material for this study has been a long an ongoing one. I will further explain how and what I have done from the very beginning (finding ads, literature and people) to the end (presenting the data), which is later displayed in the chapters *Theory* and *Empirics*.

Literature search

In order to find and gather all the books and articles that were used in this study, I used the search engine provided by the University library of Gothenburg. I also searched for relevant literature using Google Scholar. The search words I used in both platforms were: Sex, sexy, sexist, sexism, ads, advertising, advertisement, gender, objectification, women, marketing, pornography, commercial, self image, focus groups, method, methodology and media. I searched both in Swedish and English and used the search words in different combinations in order to receive more results.

Before this thesis I had some previous knowledge about some of the authors and their work, names such as Jean Kilbourne (1999 & 2003), Laura Mulvey (1999) and John Berger (2008) were already familiar ones. Others such as Tom Reichert (2003 & 2014), Vicky Rutledge Shields & Dawn Heineken (2002), Denice A. Yanni (1990) and Alan Bryman (2012) were new but proved to be very valuable for this thesis.

Groundwork

Before the focus group discussions I searched the web for ads containing different kinds of products with sexual content. Some products are said to have a more natural relevance to sex, such as fragrances, clothes, beauty and personal care products (Reichert 2014), I therefore started searching ads for specific types of products, mainly: Underwear, Perfume, Jeans and Handbags. I then widened the search in order to find some with other product categories as well and got results for products such as food/snacks, car parts, condoms, digital cameras, shoes etc.

I found more ads than I could possibly use and had to make some decisions about which ones to keep, in the end I decided on 89 of them which were then organized into a slideshow with 60 slides. Many of the ads were very similar, especially when looking at ads for perfume; most of them contain attractive women in similar poses. I thus tried first to choose the ones that stood out the most and then also find some that were very similar in order to create a possibility for comparison and discussion.

This slideshow was the basis of the focus group discussions and all the ads used can be found in the Source reference: Slideshow ads.

All images were found using Google and the search words used in order to find them were: Ads, sex, sexy, sexist, advertisement, perfume, fragrance, jeans, handbag, underwear, women, Calvin Klein, Tom Ford, American Apparel, Gaultier, naked, nude, beauty, beautiful and attractive. I searched both in Swedish and English and used these words in different combinations in order to receive more and different results.

Finding subjects

Since I am employed at an advertising agency in Gothenburg, I asked four of my female colleagues if they were interested in forming a focus group and they all happily agreed. We managed to take a longer lunch and gather on a weekday. I had come to know these women a bit but I could of course not be sure from the beginning what they would say or how they would react in the focus group discussion. I found that since we were all colleagues the environment in which the discussions were held was a fairly comfortable one, and the women could speak openly and freely on the subject at hand.

The other group also consisted of women that I knew but these were gathered from my personal life rather than my working one. I asked five of my female friends, who all, in some way or another, know each other, if they could find the time to participate in my study. Once more, the women were happy to partake and I managed to gather them all on a Saturday.

One can discuss back and forth whether or not knowing the subjects is good or bad in this research, I however have focused on the benefits while also keeping a critical eye on what might become disadvantageous. First of all, since I personally know these women I had the advantage of perceiving whether or not they spoke openly. Even though I could not have known beforehand what they would say, the way things are said are just as important. Wibeck (2010) wrote that a problem with using existing groups could be that the people fall in the usual roles they have outside the focus group, however this can be observed if the moderator has a personal connection with them. I thus used my knowledge about these women in order to observe and achieve the most honest discussions. A critique would be that since they know me, they could say things they thought I wanted to hear, however, again, I know these women and they all have a lot of integrity and can at times be very opinionated; they would not say things just for my sake, but only for their own.

Introducing the groups

For my focus groups I used nine women in total divided into two different groups. The first group consisted of four women who are all co-workers at an ad agency in Gothenburg. The second group was made up of five female friends in their mid twenties who all have different occupations. The first group was chosen in order to have women who are currently working in advertising to discuss the subject, and the second group was chosen to get a “pedestrian” point of view.

Both groups are so called natural groups (Bryman 2012), which appeared to be a suitable choice because of the delicacy of this study. Speaking openly and honestly about sexism and objectification may not come naturally for all women, even if the environment in which you are placed in is all female. Therefore, natural groups seemed like the best approach since I was interested in hearing their true thoughts,

feelings and ideas on the subject. There are also barriers that need to be broken when the group consists of strangers; there is always a chance that some people are more timid than usual and let others take over the discussion, this is not really a problem when dealing with natural groups (Wibeck 2010). However, some other problems can occur with this formation; the participants can avoid certain subjects that are taken for granted in the group, or they can fall into the usual role that they have outside of the focus group environment. These problems can however be avoided if the moderator is aware of them (Wibeck 2010). It was therefore very important for me to be alert and aware both of the woman speaking and of those who were not in order to find hidden gestures, interactions or facial expressions that could suggest something more than what was actually being said. Since I knew the women beforehand, I at least had the advantage of being used to the way they spoke and could more easily spot “inside jokes” or occurrences such as those.

I will now introduce each of the women in short, note that their true names have been replaced with aliases to ensure anonymity.

Focus Group 1		
Name:	Age:	Occupation:
Chloe	31	Project Manager
Beatrice	33	Marketing Assistant
Ana Leigh	34	Art Director
Denise	48	Copywriter

Focus Group 2		
Name:	Age:	Occupation:
Evelyn	26	Photo Assistant/Editor
Fiona	26	Logistics Supervisor
Gabrielle	26	Co-coordinator/Education consultant
Hannah	25	Land Surveying Engineer
Isabel	24	Accounting clerk

Mode of Procedure

At each focus group we gathered in a conference room equipped with a projector and a large white screen. This room was located at my current workplace, which I thankfully got to borrow in order to operate the discussions. However, the conference room was sealed off from everyone else and we therefore had our privacy even though the first one was held on a weekday when the office was open. Since the women in the first focus group were colleagues of mine, I will not present the ad agency because that would jeopardize their anonymity. However, I can say that it is located in Gothenburg.

Both focus groups started out with me thanking all the women for attending and explaining that they would be looking at different kinds of ads in order to discuss them. I did not let the women know beforehand exactly what the focus group discussions were going to be about since I did not want them to come prepared with ideas. I wanted to have their initial and true reactions to all of the images and hear their spontaneous thoughts on the matter. All I told them beforehand was that we would all look at different advertisement images and talk about them.

The focus groups were recorded both with my personal video camera and also my iPhone, just in case. Technical equipment can always fail you and I wanted to ensure that everything would be gathered correctly. I of course asked the participants permissions beforehand and guaranteed them that I was the only one who would view and listen to the recordings in order to transcribe the discussions. None of the women had any problems with being recorded and they kept on ignoring the camera and phone during the whole session.

During both discussions I tried to stay out of them and let the women speak freely, however, I did at some points ask them to explain what they meant, tell me what they thought. At some point when certain images were being debated back and forth I also asked if anyone for instance, thought it crossed a line or if it was still "ok". All in all, the women had no difficulties discussing the images and I felt they spoke openly and honestly.

Both focus groups took almost the same amount of time, little over two hours. During the first group they started out with eating lunch while viewing and discussing the ads, we did not stop for a break and thus at the end of it, the women had grown a little tired; both of discussing and of the images they had been seeing. For the second focus group I had prepared some coffee and buns in order to give the women some form of energy and this time we did have a five minute break, during which time I turned off the equipment and the ads were not discussed.

Transcription

After each focus group discussion I downloaded the recordings to my computer and proceeded to transcribe everything word for word. Since the discussions were held in Swedish I therefore transcribed them in that language, however when using direct quotes in this thesis I have translated them into English using the most suited interpretation of words possible.

I noted all the pauses, laughter, the emphasis on certain words and ways in which something was said, I also noted every time I changed the slide. Sometimes while one woman was speaking another one made a remark, this is displayed by using parenthesis in the first woman's sentence. Thus, everything is shown just as it occurred.

Credibility

Credibility has to do with how believable the findings of a study are. Since there are several possible interpretations of the social world, the ones that are presented in a study must be viewed as credible if they are to be accepted by others (Bryman 2012). In other words, if the study is carried out according to good practices and the findings are accurately presented and also provided for others to view, it can be said to be credible.

In this study, I was able to record and transcribe everything that was said in both focus groups and have presented some of the data in the thesis. As moderator, I was mostly there as an observer and did not actually take part in the discussions, thus my own interpretations or thoughts on the matter were not debated. At times I asked the women questions which all referred to their own ideas and perceptions, but mostly I just let the ads speak for themselves and gave the women a freedom and chance to speak their own minds. There were times when I myself did not agree with some of the interpretations, however, everything that was said has been transcribed. It is, after all, not my place to say what interpretations are right or wrong, my role as a researcher was and has always been to conduct the study according to good practice and reveal everything that I managed to collect.

The empirics of this study will also show that the findings are well aligned with previous theories regarding the matter, thus leaving no good reason to find it unbelievable.

Reliability and validity

In order to characterize a scientific research as good, it must be reliable and valid; the researcher must critically examine and analyze the material (Holme & Solvang 1997). Reliability is often concerned with the possibility of replication, if another researcher can repeat the study and achieve the same results it is said to be very reliable. Much of this has to do with how the researcher has presented the material and the methodology of the study; "if a researcher does not spell out his or her procedures in great detail, replication is impossible." (Bryman 2012, p.47). However, it is mostly the quantitative studies that are connected to the reliability issue since most qualitative studies are in fact not replicable (Bryman 2012). The hermeneutical research method brings about data and knowledge that is partly subjective since it is based on different peoples views and perceptions, and partly it is bound by time and space; if you ask the same person the same question in a different time of his or her life, he/she will most likely give you two different answers (Holme & Solvang 1997).

The validity of a study is dependent on what data is being collected and if it is connected to what is asked in the research questions (Holme & Solvang 1997). It has

to do with the integrity of the conclusions that are the result of the material and analysis, in other words: does the measurement of x really measure the x? There are different types of validity that can be measured, but at the very minimum a study should at least have face validity. This can be established by asking people with experience or expertise to act like judges and determine whether or not the measures used in the study succeed in reflecting the idea that is concerned. (Bryman 2012).

Even though this study is based on a more subjective methodology and gathers subjective data, the goal has always been to ensure that the material is presented in the most objective way possible and then analyzed as such. I have also in this chapter explained in great detail how I have gathered and processed the data in the study, what paths I have chosen to take and why. This way a form of reliability can be achieved even if the study itself is not replicable in the same sense as a quantitative study would be. As for face validity, I along with my supervisor have acted as the judges. Before this study, I have written several academic studies in the qualitative field while Peter Zackariasson is an associate professor in marketing and thus has expertise in this field. We have both discussed which research methods to use and agreed upon the one chosen which therefore gives this study face validity.

Generalization

A critique that often befalls qualitative studies is that they cannot be generalized, that the data, which is gathered from interviews, focus groups or such, cannot be applicable on the entire population. Bryman (2012) means that this is obvious and that such a study is not generalizable in that sense nor that it should be: "Instead, the findings of qualitative research are to generalize to theory rather than to populations." (2012, p. 406). In other words, it is the theoretical conclusion that the qualitative study leads to which is of importance when it comes to generalization. Thus, this study is not meant to generalize the entire female population; not all women interpret ads containing sex and objectification the same way.

Drop-out rate

Since all of the women whom I asked to be a part of this study accepted and also attended, there was no drop-out rate and therefore this will not be discussed.

EMPIRICS

Presenting the material

The Empirics chapter has been divided in headings correlating to the theoretical framework presented in the previous chapter. Some of the ads, which were discussed in the focus groups, will also be included in this chapter in order to represent and exemplify visually so the reader can get a clearer understanding to the women's responses. However, when presenting the empirics of some of the most graphic and sexually blatant ads, these images have not been included due to their offensive nature.

Sexual content

For the focus group discussions a slideshow was made consisting of 60 slides with a total of 89 ads portraying different forms of sexual content such as Physical attractiveness, Sexual Behavior, Nudity and Sexual Referents. Below are some examples of ads used in the slideshow that portray all of these categories:



Woman as object

The first slide contained four ads for underwear (see fig.1) and immediately set the tone for both groups. It started a discussion regarding the objectification of women through the Male gaze, or what Denise called the “eternal question”: are these ads made up this way in order to make women want to identify with them, or are they merely there for the male audience to serve as eye candy? This question was discussed back and forth; while some thought they were mostly intended for men others added that they could in fact be effective (read: successful) if women indeed wanted to identify with them. However, Denise stated that when it is too pornographic, no one wants to identify with it anymore. Fiona contemplated the same issue and said that you could indeed look at them and think, “what if I looked like that?”; except for one of them. It was clear from the beginning in both groups that all the women were bothered by the ad in the top right corner, they all found it to be too over the top and undeniably pornographic.

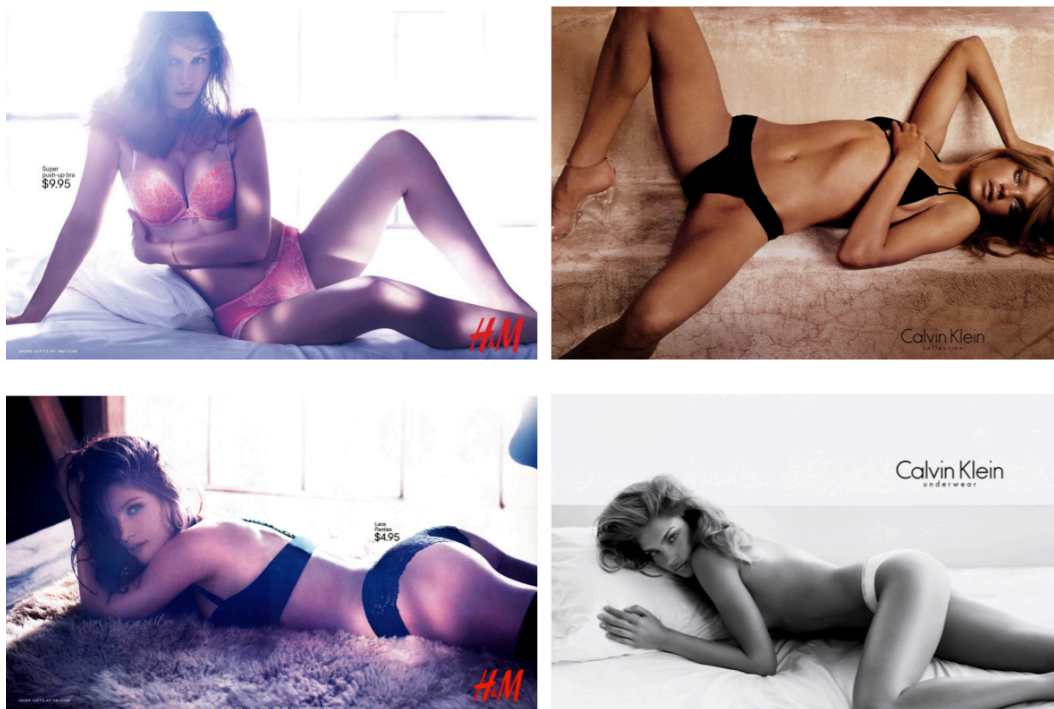


Fig.1 Underwear ads by H&M (left) and Calvin Klein (right)

The women in the second group thought it had too much sex, thus becoming vulgar and pornographic, and while Hannah thought that the other images could be saying: this is how sexy you can be if you wear our clothes, that particular ad did not, it was only pornographic. The women in the first group agreed and said that it was even embarrassing to look at; it was too private, mostly because of the way she is posed with her legs spread wide. Both from a professional and personal point of view they agreed that the ad was too much:

Ana Leigh: I think it feels awful that this decorates our city where I walk with my children, both my daughter and my son, who receive these images of women. Don't think it feels good...

At one point Denise reflected on the situation from a professional point of view and thought that the photographer who gets to shoot these models may be exerting his power over them, as if he thinks that it is so easy to make these women spread their legs, therefore he does it. However, Beatrice points out that there has to be a marketing executive in this instance who says that is has gone too far. But maybe that's how it works Denise argues:

Denise: it feels very much like it is the male eye that has chosen this and directed it.

I asked the women in the first group that if we presumed the images were indeed made for men in order to be pleasing for them, the ads would still have to sell, with that in mind, do any of their significant others buy them these kinds of underwear? All of them responded that No, their men do not buy this to them. Still, they considered the ads to be effective since:

Denise: But it feels like, it should work considering that, it has looked the same...for a pretty long time (All others agree). Otherwise wouldn't they have stopped doing it if it did not sell, I mean?

When looking further, Fiona at last exclaimed that all of the ads actually bothered her in a way:

Fiona: even if you are very used to seeing them, the thought always hits me: "yeah, here we go again".

The other women agreed and started to dissect the ads, now noticing and pointing out details which led them to believe that the ads were not just made for selling underwear, if they were Gabrielle pointed out that the viewer would thus get a front and back image of the underwear. Hannah claimed that no one curves their back like that, while Fiona agreed and interjected that neither does one lie down on a carpet like that. Thus the staging and posing further fuelled their statement that this was in fact about something more than just an ad. Gabrielle declared it was also about an ideal, a certain image of women and how they are supposed to be: sexy. In response to this Hannah wondered why none of the models were smiling, they all just had a "come hither" expression, which would suggest that they were, in her words "fuckable", the other women agreed. Isabel thus asked the age-old question again: Whom are they selling to? She thought that these ads are there to attract men, however, it is not men who usually buy the underwear, and the models bedroom eyes do not attract her as a consumer. They began debating again whereas Fiona explained that maybe they are not meant to attract women in the same way as men, but rather, that they tell women they can be as attractive for men, as the models are.

When asked if they felt offended by the ads, the women replied:

Isabel: Yes a little, it portrays this image of us girls that we are supposed to be sex objects, it's like...

Evelyn: You get a little tired.

Fiona: Yes.

Gabrielle: Exactly, you are used to it (Isabel & Fiona: Yes) so you get like, "yeah yeah"...

(the others agree)

Fiona: Yeah but if I see this I don't instantly think god how offended I feel, but would a guy make a statement about an image, THEN I light up, then I go into a defensive position" ... "if I see it I am so used to it so, I don't react and feel offended at once, maybe the one in the right corner...

They again compared the "pornographic" ad to the others and concluded that out of the four that image would make them react the most if they saw it in a public space.

While still viewing the first slide there were debates in the second focus group regarding the women's passiveness in the ads. Though Hannah meant that all of the women are passive since they are just lying there, Isabel raised the point that the offensive image is not as passive since the model is spreading her legs, which for her meant doing something actively. She compared it to the others and said that they are more passive since they portray some sort of "here I am, come and get me" ploy. Fiona agreed and pointed out that the "pornographic" is rather "here I am, I know what I want". However Hannah still suggested that it is not actually the same form of being active as you find in portrayals of men; men are active in a different way.

The terms active and passive came up several times during both focus groups discussions. The women often responded negatively to the models passiveness and compared it to the men's.

Denise: Cause, such an image, I mean it's that...if you are fed with that your whole life of course you are influenced by it, you think "oh ok, I am supposed to be that passive and cute and...wait for someone to come and get me".

Ana Leigh: And it is probably just as tiresome for men too (Chloe: Mm) like, always be that tough, protective man. Who has the strength to be that, tough man, hard...not everyone wants to be that.

All the women thought that many of the female models in the ads were expressing a "come and get me" look which is riddled with passivity, while the male models were rather active and "ready". They did not feel as if this image is fair to neither gender since it embodies the objectification of women while still adding pressure to men as well, telling them they always have to be able and ready for action.

Gabrielle: Actually I don't think any of this is really good, I mean selling these ideals and telling girls "this is how you should look, this is perfect, this is hot." Or

that the girl is passive and just “Oh please come and get me, I am not going to make the first move”, and that he should like be the active, strong man...

Some of the ads portrayed celebrities (See fig.2), people they have seen and know from the film and music industry. Since those women were already embodying something, some of the ads made the women in the focus groups upset, because the ads did not always reflect the image they had of the celebrities:

Hannah: But that is what makes me sad because, Thurman is in my eyes a strong woman who is active, she fights against the bad guys, and now she just becomes so passive and just lays there and....”come and get me” expression like everyone else, does she ALSO have to do like everyone else does? Couldn’t she have her yellow coverall suit and fight? I don’t like her now (Isabel: Mm), she just files in line and lies down like a victim...I was a little, Damn! Her too!?



Fig.2 Left: Handbag ad featuring actress Uma Thurman. Right: Handbag ad featuring actress Anne Hathaway

Regarding the ad featuring Anne Hathaway, the women in the first group found it odd and ridiculous that she was lying like that on the car:

Denise: She is obviously not capable of driving a car anyway.

In the second group however, Isabel pointed out that of all the women she had seen so far, this was the one she would like to be if she had to chose, because she was the most dressed and also it looked like she herself had worked and made all that money to buy the car and handbags. Regarding this, Hannah immediately asked: But why doesn't she DRIVE her car then? All other agreed with this and continued to argue the opposite of what Isabel thought:

Gabrielle: I felt the opposite, I feel “Hi, I am a desperate housewife with money that, the car that my husband bought, with bags that I bought with my husbands money, I have it so great cause this is the lifestyle I love”, but it does not feel like she has power, it feels like she is inferior...

...

Evelyn: I don't understand why she has to lie like...it looks so incredibly uncomfortable...you can see it's a car but you don't really understand like how...

Fiona: Yes exactly.

Evelyn: She could drive if for instance, but she doesn't she is lying on it...and flaunts a little.

Fiona: Mm.

Gabrielle: The only positive is that, like you said there, she is dressed.

The passiveness that she was exerting was found frustrating for the women, and even Isabel agreed that the body position did not look comfortable.

In some ads the women found the models exerting something more or other than passivity. In a jeans ad (See fig.3) they thought that even though the woman is just sitting there, the way she is sitting is not as passive because she exudes some form of power. Fiona suggested that if it were a man, you wouldn't think twice about it, Isabel agreed and argued that we are not used to seeing women being so relaxed and in control. Hannah still raised an important question: why does she have to look like a criminal in order to be cool? Why does it have to be either or, from one "extreme" to the other? Still, the women thought this ad portrayed the model in a more masculine way, and therefore she was not as passive as in most of the other ads. The women in the first focus group agreed more with what Hannah argued and thought the model was rather extreme, looking all drugged up instead of cool. Even though it looked comfortable sitting like that, they suggested that the angle of the camera made it so one is automatically being drawn in to the woman's "private area".



Fig.3 Jeans ad by Calvin Klein

Both groups discussed what this body position really means. They argued that for a man, sitting with his legs spread like that, would mean being powerful and in control, while for a women it would rather have another meaning:

Ana Leigh: But what does it mean when you spread like that, does it mean that, come, that you are inviting something, or? (Denise: Yes) Cause I have thought about that, that it is ok for men to spread their legs (Denise: Yes then they, they assert themselves) but women aren't aloud to spread like that. (Beatrice & Chloe: No). Cause then it means something else, it means that you are inviting something, or? (Denise: Mm) That's a little...

Denise: It has to do with anatomy! (Everyone laughs)

It was clear in both groups that the general idea is that women should not, according to the norm, be sitting like that because it can suggest something else entirely. Nonetheless, even though her pose was not as passive, the body position still raised a few questions and doubts about the ad.

Another ad that raised a few questions about the active/passiveness of the female models was this underwear ad (see fig.4):



Fig.4 Underwear ad by Björn Borg

Hannah: And here is a person, or a woman, for once active, but what is it that she does then, well she has sex with a plastic thing.

Hannah and Isabel in the second group debated whether the model was in fact active or not and while she appears to be moving around in the picture, Isabel pointed out that by active, she was rather referring to being in control. Actually being physically active does not mean being active, she thought, but the difference between being active and passive was rather whether or not one is there for one's own sake, or for someone else's. Gabrielle however pointed out that the model was being active in a completely different way than a man would be in this instance; she does not assert herself but just enjoys a plastic bag.

All the women had problems with the plastic used in this image and they all had questions of what the use and the meaning of the plastic was. The women in the first group at one point referred to it as being the protective plastic of a Barbie doll, or a body bag. While some of them thought the image itself was rather artistic and visually good looking, they found the model to be an object, not a woman, and also

that she was living in her own world, not aware of anything since she is always closing her eyes.

The passive models were in total, upsetting to all the women, they found that portrayal to be stereotypical and frustrating, and it became even clearer in the ads depicting male models as well (see fig.5):

Hannah: Yeah but it's like that, she is passive (Isabel: Mm) and she is waiting for him and does nothing else than being accessible, he is out on adventure, comes back when he feels like it, screws her then, since she's just sitting and waiting.

Evelyn: Yeah.

Fiona: In her underwear.



Fig.5 Perfume ad by Jean Paul Gaultier

The women in the first group were not as cynical when viewing this ad. They thought that compared to others, the model was not as naked. Nonetheless, they did point out that she was in her underwear, while the man is fully clothed, and this was not entirely acceptable for them.

Many of the ads portrayed different types of nudity, which in some cases were problematic. Isabel pointed out that she herself does not have problems with bare skin; the problem lies in what you do with the image, and how you actually portray the nudity. It became clear that many ads use nudity in order to get attention.

Isabel: ...it is more about displaying a naked girl, and objectifying her, than actually marketing underwear.

Isabel, and all the women for that matter, found it problematic that ads have to use nudity in order to sell things, but since you are so used to other more extreme portrayals, she claimed that you could still accept it. If it weren't for the ads that cross the line, nudity would be more provocative than it is. However when regarding nudity, it was always a subject of discussion.

Evelyn: Yeah but it is still a naked female body and a bag...

Fiona: Mm...obviously that is the only way to sell bags.

Denise: But again you have to force in nudity at every cost

Beatrice: Isn't that why you buy handbags (they start laughing) so you can have it..

Denise: When you're sitting naked.

When the nudity was not necessary for the product it raised questions to why it had to be incorporated in the ad, however, the women suggested that there are different types of nudity. In these ads (see fig.6) the nudity is unnecessary since it does not have anything to do with the product, which in this case is a handbag. However, since the bag covers her up, and since the women did not think she had some kind of "come get me" expression, this nudity was deemed as more ok than for instance other ads where nudity is "acceptable".



Fig.6 Handbag ads by Bvlgari

For underwear ads the nudity is motivated, but Ana Leigh argued that this is not a reason or motivation for the ad being sexy as well: there is a difference between nudity and pornography. Overall, the women expressed a frustration towards ads that used nudity without any motivation for it. This ad (see fig. 7) for instance raised a lot of questions and frustration:

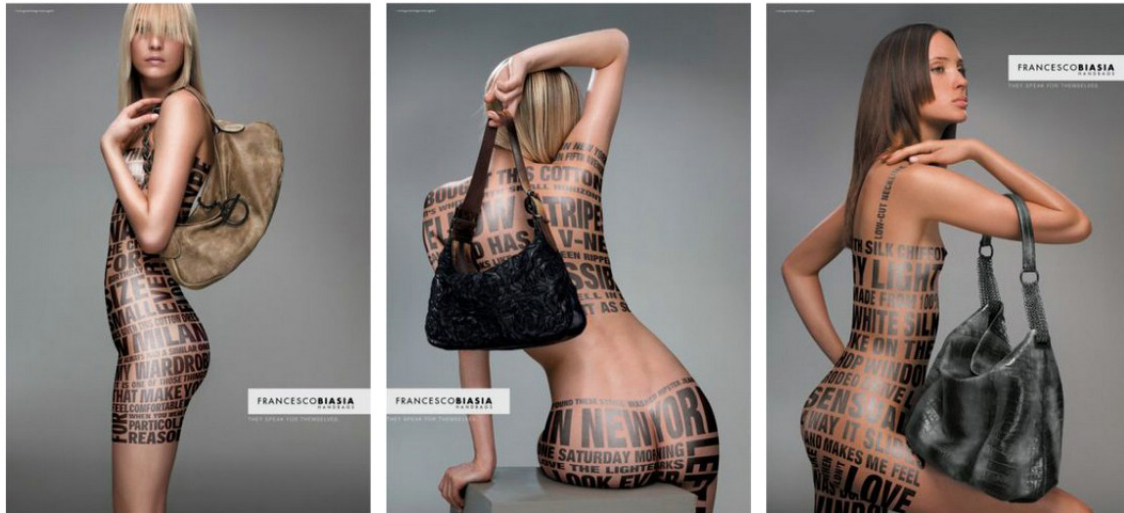


Fig.7 Handbag ads by Francesco Biasia

Denise: No but this is, now they disappoint me here, cause now it is the same old nudity that must be here, without finesse "...” Cause it is, it is tiresome forced nudity again.

Most of the women did not understand why the models had to be nude since one often wants to match their clothes and outfit with the handbag, thus the nudity is utterly confusing. At this point, the women had grown tired of seeing these kinds of ads and thus Hannah frustratingly exclaimed:

Hannah: No but I just get so tired of this...no but really, no, now we are starting to get too...saturated, or what should I say, had this been the first image I do not think that we would think that this was the LEAST bit ok, but you get numbed.

Fiona: Mm.

Gabriella: Mm.

(The others nod and agree)

Hannah: But you do not have the Strength to have that hat on all the time, but NO, this is not ok!

In many of the jeans ads the models were half naked, generally only wearing the jeans:

Fiona: But we can confirm that it is impossible to sell jeans without (Hannah: No), I mean with a top on (Isabel: No), it has to be naked, torso...

However one jeans ad that almost got away with it was Levi’s naked jeans (see fig.8) Even though this basically displays an entire naked female buttock, the women in the second group



Fig.8 Jeans ad by Levi’s

thought it was pretty clever since it has to do with the product. Also they pointed out that the model is just standing normally, the buttocks is not displayed in a sexualized way, and thus they understand the concept with the ad and do not find it offensive. The women in the first group however, thought that the advertisers were trying to be creative, nonetheless they still claimed that you can't really see the jeans model, and it is still very naked and speculative. In other words, they were not convinced.

Two perfume ads (see fig.9), one for men and one for women, raised a discussion regarding the unequal portrayal of the two genders:

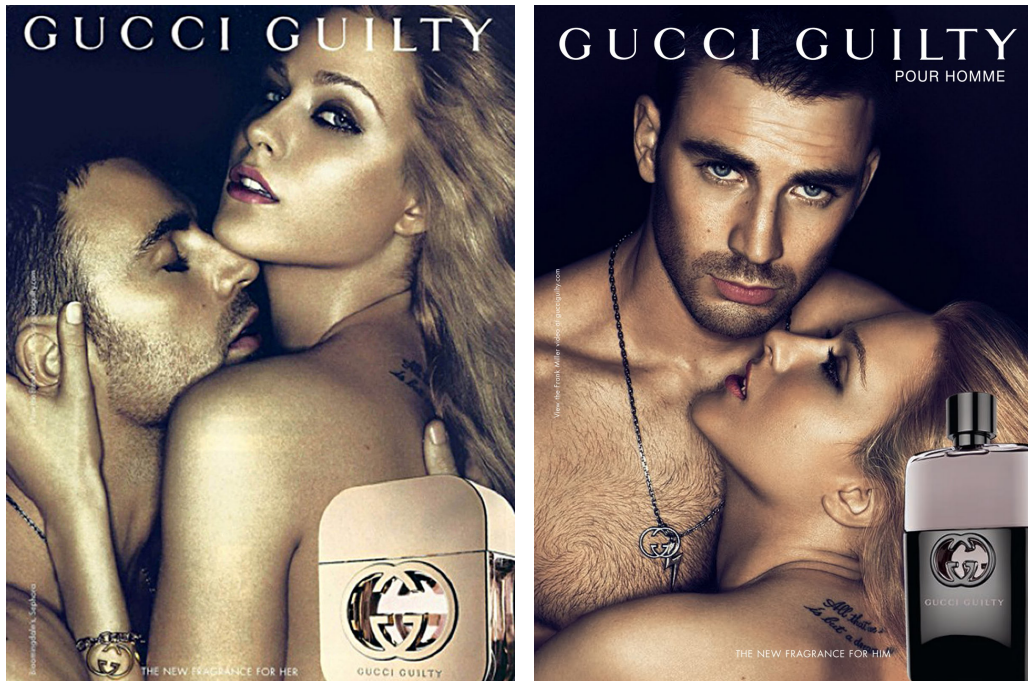


Fig.9 Two perfume ads: The left is for women, the right is for men.

Beatrice: Like the one on the left, he looks like he really desires her (Denise: Mm) her there under looks like, or her to the right, she looks like she is completely submissive of him (Denise: Mm) she really looks like... they show the submissiveness in two different ways.

...

Denise: One can think that it is not really on the same terms.

...

Hannah: It is not equal, cause I would like her to have closed lips on the one on the left in that case...

...

Fiona: Yes and then, she looks more hanging on the right than he does, I mean he still has his arm around her too (Isabel: Mm) on the left.

Isabel: Yeah she on the right looks a little dead.

Fiona: And he doesn't look like he cares that much also him on, the right there.

...

Gabrielle: I mean if you separate the two just, he looks like he might as well be kissing her upwards and like that, but she, she's going down!

When viewing these ads next to each other it gave the women a chance to evaluate and see the differences between how men and women are portrayed. Because of the way the female model is being depicted; passive and dead-like, they all thought that the ad for the men's perfume (on the right) was sexist while the one for women was ok in comparison. None of the women found the male model being degraded or objectified in any of these ads, since he, even in the ad for women's perfume, was not portrayed as being passive or under the female models control; he is always being active or engaging in some way or another.

Pornography, Violence and Body Cropping

The ads depicting violence and pornography were all deemed sexist and objectifying, they made all the women feel frustrated and angry. One of the first ads, which raised these issues, was this underwear ad (see fig. 10):



Fig.10 Underwear ad by Björn Borg

Denise: My most spontaneous feeling is that: "Eew, take this disgusting guy with the tongue and tattoo's away, don't let him Do That To You!"

Even though some of the women in the first group pointed out that the female model might be enjoying this since she seems to have part of her hand in the male models underwear, Denise still thought that this ad suggested some form of degradation on the woman's part. The women in the second group all agreed that this ad crossed the line:

Isabel: Yeah but here you have the whole, gender-stereotype and how you sell things, no matter the product... yeah that, a man is on top, of course, he holds her down, of course.

Fiona: And then the text "Björn Borg says yes to turning the lights off", I mean like (shows thumbs up), almost, if I should stretch it "now we do a little rape here" (Isabel: Mm). I mean, it's not really what they are trying to say here but a little like "We say Go, in the bedroom".

Isabel: Mm.

Hannah: He really is holding down her arm too.

Evelyn: Yeah, exactly.

Isabel: Mm, and pushes her down, and he has all the control... and it, yeah, it plays with the gender roles.

Moderator: Does this cross some line?

Isabel: I think so, everything that even comes near some form of violent context is very wrong.

Denise also pointed out that the male model looks very unsympathetic, almost criminal, and all the women in the second group found him disgusting. All in all, this type of portrayal both of men and women was not appreciated by any of the women:

Gabrielle: Yes, it is too much, it sends out the wrong signals especially to young girls, like "Yeah, this is how you should be and act, and this guys, is how you should be, you should take charge"

Chloe in the first group thought that this imagery was embarrassing since it is too personal and Ana Leigh suggested that it is like pornography, which the women in the second group also pointed out; the problem with the ad was not just the sex itself, but rather the kind of sex it portrayed:

Isabel: Yeah but it's not just sex here (Gabrielle: No) I mean, willing sex from both parts, it's just like, this is the man's sex, and the whole power thing, it provokes me.

Gabrielle: Mm.

Moderator: But would you say, is it sexy?

Gabrielle: Hell no!

Isabel: No.

Evelyn: No.

Fiona: But I think, no, I am disgusted by him (Gabrielle: yes) I feel like, if he would lie like that on me I would think it was very unpleasant, that's the feeling I get.

Hannah: He just looks so brutal (Fiona & Isabel: Mm), hard in those tattoo's, shaved, and butch and...

Fiona: There is no tenderness or such.

Evelyn: But maybe it is more aimed at guys then?

The women also pointed out that the female model could just as well be exchanged for a blow up doll, since they weren't even sure she was alive. Hannah wondered if

the models really need to have sex in the ads in order to show underwear and altogether, the women found this ad very questionable.

Many of the ads for jeans contained similar pornographic and/or violent imagery that again made the women feel uncomfortable and frustrated (see fig.11). The two ads on the left made all the women think of gang rape while the other two were simply being degrading and portraying violence against women:



Fig.11 Four different jeans ads

Beatrice: Here you have a guy who actually is holding down a girl. (Denise: Yes) and she does not look like she is enjoying it.

...

Denise: It's like, he dominates her and exercises almost violence on her.

Ana Leigh: Yeah, does something against her will.

...

Isabel: Well here I only think of a gang rape right away.

...

Gabrielle: This is WRONG I mean it sends out the wrong signals to girls and guys, especially guys... don't think it is Ok.

...

Beatrice: This is definitely sexist.

Denise: Yes.

Beatrice: It's just like...

Denise: Gang bang.

...

Denise: Yeah, this was the worst...I mean it, this is the worst picture I've seen.

Chloe: Yes, really.

Beatrice: Yes.

Moderator: In what way?

Denise: No but it is, they are so incredibly menacing these, (Ana Leigh: Look at the disgusting expressions they have!) yes.

Beatrice: Mm.

Denise: Utterly zero, ice cold, threatful, hard, four against one wrestled down girl.

Ana Leigh: Yes, it is completely horrible.

...

Denise: He holds her hands and she shouts for some reason and he intrudes on her and she has no pants.

Ana Leigh: Yes.

Moderator: Is it sexist because of that?

Everybody: Yes.

None of the women thought that the success rates of these ads or what they are selling justify the images they portray, as Ana Leigh pointed out; just cause you sell doesn't make it Ok. Depicting rape, violence and degradation this way does not make the women want to buy the products, but rather it frustrated, angered and upset them.

Gabrielle: ... I mean I don't like it. That it's girls, in every damn image, I just get so irritated, cause it's like all girls should look like that, number one, and that we should be sex objects and satisfy all the men, and then that we are in these luxurious environments cause it's, it's the only way we will get in there luxurious environments, our bodies! (Hannah: Mm) And I don't like it. And we should always be inferior to men, it, it's really infuriating to see all the time, and this all the time I mean VIOLENT sex, why should it always be violent?! Ok people might like it but, I mean you don't have to make ADS of it, you send out really weird signals.

Hannah: Yeah but why should it be sex at all?

Four of the slides containing in total five ads by Tom Ford and four ads by Suit Supply (see Source reference: Slideshow ads: slides 49, 58 and 60) were found to be the most degrading and objectifying by all the women due to their pornographic and blatantly objectifying nature.

Isabel: Oh GOD!

Gabrielle: What the fff...

Fiona: But Tom Ford isn't he famous for being the most vulgar? I think... yes it is, this is really...

Isabel: It is totally sick and this is for MEN.

Moderator: Yes this is men's perfume.

Evelyn: Yeah right, it's a man's perfume.

Gabrielle: But like this looks like a scene from a PORNO (Isabel: But it is) where the girl has been massaged in oil and...take it away.

Fiona: But it doesn't even look, it IS it, this is porn.

...

Denise: Tom Ford for men?

Ana Leigh: But oh my god!

Beatrice: What, should it smell like it does down there or what's the point in having it put in the crotch?

Ana Leigh: No but eww, this is really horrible.

Chloe: This was taking it too far.

...

Moderator: Ok, so it's pretty obvious that Tom Ford wants to provoke, but the question is rather, is it ok to provoke this way or not?

Isabel: I don't think so, think of all the (Hannah: Children) yes and all the women who actua, we who sit here are probably not the most offended in our private lives, just us individuals here, but I mean think of everyone who actually has their husbands going about, or raping their women at home, I mean how it is still occurring and the woman is SO infringed today that it's, no, I...

Hannah: Awful.

Evelyn: Mm.

...

Denise: ...the girl is just a fuck-puppet who shows up whether appropriate or not.

...

Fiona: All are like, referring to pornography, and it's...

Isabel: And that it's the man who is in control over the woman (Fiona and Hannah: Mm), it's, everything is on his terms so it's not just that it's sexual innuendo's but it's, he is the one in charge, she is there for, I mean for his sake (Fiona: Mm), her needs are nonessential. And it's she who is undressed, it's she who is an object, and in some way that, suit...when it's with suits which are such a, power outfit (Fiona: Mm) it becomes even worse I think, that...he owns her.

The women were all offended and could not understand why the images were so blatantly pornographic and objectifying. Other than being provocative, they did not make the women feel good or even think that someone would like to buy the products in question. The women in the first group for instance, argued that if a man had the perfume in the first ad, he would be ashamed to admit it due to the ad. All of the ads were considered to be sexist without a doubt by all of the women; they provoked, offended and insulted them:

Isabel: ... I just want to do a Game Over on this entire planet and start OVER and just, make so there are some reasonable people.

Hannah: Yes.

Moderator: So, you feel like this is tiresome?

Hannah: Yes.

Evelyn: Yes.

Fiona: Yes.

Isabel: Yes, I get iri, I get insulted, is this like this I as a woman should live up to in some way to satisfy, I mean cause it's not just that you are talking about other people, that is what you should remember (Fiona: Mm), but it is me as a woman, are these the expectations that are asked of me all the damn time?

Evelyn: Mm.

Fiona: But Tom Ford's pictures I feel are the absolute most insulting, if we go through like all of them (Isabel: Yes), they have been insulting and they want to provoke, I mean that is the whole point of the images otherwise they wouldn't have put her ironing his pants while he reads the newspaper, I mean while she does it naked.

In the second group there was also another type of discussion about the provoking ads by Tom Ford. Hannah suggested that since they were so blatantly pornographic and objectifying, maybe they were actually made to be provoking in a way that shows just how demeaning ads can be, i.e. in order to create a debate. However, Isabel pointed out that this (advertising) is not the right forum for that:

Isabel: ...I think, it becomes even more wrong when it is commercial, I mean all these things "yeah but I make it to create a debate", sure but if you do want to create a debate about the woman's position in society for example, do you have to do it at the expense of women?

There were some ads in the slideshow containing body cropping, i.e. body parts that were displayed disconnected from the whole body. The most apparent ones were these below (see fig.9) which were discussed in different ways by the focus groups.



Fig.9 Hand bag ads by Francesco Biasia

The first group thought that these were rather smart and artistic, that they had managed to point out what is wrong with the industry and turned the objectification into satire:

Denise: I rather think that they are saying that there is an absurdity in, in the decorative woman as a decorative element.

Ana Leigh: The right image there is very clear like, when you let the woman be, the woman's legs be a table where you put the bag. It becomes so clearly (Denise: Mm) objectified.

...

Ana Leigh: It is funny, I mean it becomes humor, it does, yeah...but at the same time it is very sad, that it is that way. It's a fact.

The second focus group was not at all impressed by these ads; they all presented a negative view towards them and found them to be macabre. Isabel pointed out that the first two images did not even contain a head, which for her is the one “non-object” of a body, and Gabrielle argued that she did not like them because it clearly showed that they can do whatever they want with the female body; the model cannot protest. Hannah suggested that the model at least is not “fuckable”:

Fiona: Yeah but isn't she? You can have those, legs at home and just, use them whenever you want.

Hannah: Sure if you have foot and leg fetish (Gabrielle laughs), but it isn't, there is no hole.

Isabel: No but it is still just an object, it's not the woman herself who is there, only her body.

Other thoughts and ideas that the women in the second group had while viewing these ads were of serial killer movies and series, which further led them to believe that the woman portrayed in the ads was a victim. They also compared it to animals and suggested that it might as well be a lion's head with the bag over it, instead of a woman's; both are basically treated the same way.

Gabrielle: ...yeah she is, I mean she's dead.

Fiona: Yes.

Isabel: Stuffed.

Hannah: A decoration.

Fiona: Yeah.

Isabel: For others to gaze.

Hannah: Exactly.

ANALYSIS

Woman as object

When viewing an ad with a sexy female model, one can always ask: who is it for? Denise called this the eternal question and it was greatly debated during both focus group discussions in different ways. For one, some argued that the ads, even though they are portraying sexy women, could still be made for women in order to make them want to be as sexy as the models. Denise however pointed out that they seem to be serving the male audience instead:

It feels very much like it is the male eye that has chosen this and directed it.

All these arguments fall in line with the term Male gaze coined by Mulvey (1999) and the relationship a woman has of being surveyor and surveyed which Berger (2008) put forward. When the women saw those ads and survey the models, they do so from a male gaze point of view; comparing themselves to the models and like Fiona said, thinking “What if I looked like that?”. Thus, the models in sexy ads have several functions; they can for one be there serving the male gaze from the male perspective, functioning only as attractive and sexy decorations for men to look at. Or they could also function as being surveyed by women through the male gaze, making the surveying women want to be like the models in order to be pleasing for the male audience. This identification or wanting to be as sexy as the models is thus connected to the male gaze and the surveyor-surveyed relationship women have with themselves and other women, because it makes women strive to be worthy of being surveyed by men. Whichever function, the use of decorative models can be argued to be objectifying no matter the audience, since the models are always surveyed through the male gaze by whoever is viewing them.

The women thought that the ads where the sexy turns into pornographic distorts the process of identifying and comparing oneself to the models since, as Denise pointed out: when it becomes too pornographic one does not want to identify with it anymore. This can suggest that women will only go so far serving the male gaze, but when they feel a line is crossed, for instance when the model is portrayed as merely a sex object, they get disconnected in the surveying process. This falls in line with Kilbourne’s (1999) arguments regarding mainstream pornography since the sex used in many ads are more about objectification and disconnection rather than sex itself. Seeing pornographic ads did not make the women want to connect with them in any way, they instead expressed a frustration and concern:

Ana Leigh: I think it feels awful that this decorates our city where I walk with my children, both my daughter and my son, who receive these images of women. Don’t think it feels good...

Even though all the ads containing sex were not deemed as being pornographic by the women, many of them still depicted attractive models in unnatural poses or clothing and thus bothered the women. Gabrielle declared that the ads are not just ads for selling products but also for selling an ideal:

Gabrielle: Actually I don't think any of this is really good, I mean selling these ideals and telling girls "this is how you should look, this is perfect, this is hot." Or that the girl is passive and just "Oh please come and get me, I am not going to make the first move", and that he should like be the active, strong man...

As Gabrielle pointed out, this ideal concerns both women and men because it shows them what is sexy, and how to be sexy. But why do women have to be sexy and for whom are they supposed to be sexy? All women agreed that this was expected of them as women, and it could be because of what Berger (2008) put forward regarding the ideal spectator who is always assumed to be male. Thus it is for the male spectators benefit that women must look and act certain ways in images; they should be sexy because they are designed to flatter men. This argument can be traced in the women's discussions since they found that many models express a certain "come hither" look with bedroom eyes, and as Hannah poignantly pointed out, they looked "fuckable". Therefore, for the ads portraying sexy models, everything from the setting, poses and facial expressions all lead up to one thing: serving the male spectator.

The women expressed a great deal of frustration viewing all the ads and they concluded that the female models were depicted in a very different way from the male models. As Yanni (1990) wrote, there is an asymmetry between the social constructions of men and women, which can be said to derive from the patriarchy that has founded most western societies. This old system has more or less categorized women as objects, and since ads work as extensions of a culture that simultaneously also further preserves the old systemic meanings and social constructions, it is not that surprising that ads depict women as objects or relate them to sex:

Denise: But it feels like, it should work considering that, it has looked the same...for a pretty long time (All others agree). Otherwise wouldn't they have stopped doing it if it did not sell, I mean?

Sexy ads do seem to sell, otherwise empires like Calvin Klein and Axe would probably as Denise pointed out, stopped using sex in order to sell their products. Nevertheless, selling ads with sexy and objectified women can be very problematic because it keeps the asymmetry between men and women alive, it allows men to always be the subject and spectator, and forces the woman to always be the object, the surveyed. This portrayal did not go unnoticed by any of the women, and it was regarded very negatively.

Furthermore, since ads are a part of the cultural process (Yanni 1990) and thus reflect and preserve the meanings of said culture, the portrayals seen in ads become truths in themselves. Since women are the “other” in patriarchal societies, ads have continued to undermine and depict women this way, preserving the social constructions of the patriarchal society, like Denise points out; looking at ad after ad depicting women in the same passive way does play a part in constructing women. Thus, it becomes a repetitive process and like holding two mirrors against each other culture reflects ads, ads reflect the culture, on and on in a never-ending process. The women were aware of this image of them being the lesser sex, and it really bothered them that this was depicted so often in the ads:

Gabrielle: ... And I don't like it. And we should always be inferior to men, it, it's really infuriating to see all the time...

The women pointed out that things haven't really changed that much; women are still portrayed in this distorted way. As Yanni (1990) argued; since the culture is always changing, so must also advertising change with it, however, even though the culture has changed quite a bit since for example the 60's, it seems that the changes occurring in the ads are not for the better, but almost for the worse; we see more and more use of blatant sex than ever before (Kilbourne 2003). Ads repeatedly and deliberately keep recreating the woman as an object, and now more and more as a sex object, to fuel the satisfaction of the male gaze and simultaneously conserve her in the same manner that she has always been: as a commodity. This argument was enforced by all of the women who time and time again expressed their frustration, concern and anger toward the skewed portrayals of their gender in the ads.

When viewing and analyzing the way in which the female models were being portrayed, other nuances and terms came up during the discussions that only enhances the old patriarchal meanings which women have been constructed in, terms such as nudity and passiveness.

When nudity was involved in the ads it was always a point of discussion. The women in both groups found it to be very tiresome and baffling that nudity “always” had to be incorporated in some way or another:

Denise: But again you have to force in nudity at every cost

It became apparent for the women that you cannot sell handbags or jeans without including nudity, even though being nude has nothing at all to do with the products:

Evelyn: Yeah but it is still a naked female body and a bag...

Fiona: Mm...obviously that is the only way to sell bags.

Beatrice: Isn't that why you buy handbags (they start laughing) so you can have it..

Denise: When you're sitting naked.

This type of nudity is best described by Berger (2008) who made a distinction between being naked and nude, arguing “A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become nude.” (2008, p.48). The women’s thoughts regarding this nudity arguably falls in the nude category, rather than the naked one, since they felt that the female models’ bodies are being displayed bare skinned for no apparent reason other than being nude and thus attracting an audience. This lack of reason frustrated and confused the women, for instance, when buying a handbag they implied that one often wants to match that with clothing, so why then are they selling handbags with naked models? In real life, women do not go around using handbags when they are naked. Also, for products which includes some form of nakedness such as underwear, it was of course more acceptable to show bare skin, however as Ana Leigh pointed out; just because the nudity is motivated does not mean it has to include sex as well.

For the Levi’s Naked Jeans ad (see fig.8 in Empirics), the women in the second group could understand the usage of bare skin and even find it somewhat clever, however the women in the first group argued that the product itself is not really displayed, only the female buttock, and also that the nudity is very speculative. Thus the two groups differed here; while the first group would call this portrayal nude, the second group would fall in the naked category. The reason for this difference is because deciding between naked and nude often lies in the beholders eyes, like Berger (2008) pointed out, the viewer must look at the nude as an object in order for it to become a nude. The women in the second group argued that they were ok with this naked female buttock since it seemed like the model was just standing there, normally, not arching her back or implying anything sexual. However, the first group focused more on the actual display of the buttock; it is still very naked. Therefore, depicting this type of nudity is not always justifiable, even if you are not sexualizing it with poses and such, portraying bare skin is always a matter of discussion and it can be viewed as both naked and nude depending on the viewer.

When Berger (2008) phrased “men act and women appear” (2008, p.41) this argument is not only linked to the ever-looking male gaze but also to the passiveness of a portrayed woman. Even though there were some disputes of what actually can be regarded as being active or passive, the women in both focus groups found that many of the female models in the ads were being passive and just waiting to be “taken”:

Hannah: Yeah but it’s like that, she is passive (Isabel: Mm) and she is waiting for him and does nothing else than being accessible, he is out on adventure, comes back when he feels like it, screws her then, since she’s just sitting and waiting.

This passiveness was viewed negatively by all of the women, they found the portrayals to be offensive: why should the woman always be the one who just sits and waits for a man? Likewise, they argued that this portrayal must also be tiresome for men, since not all men want to be the strong active male lead, always ready willing and able:

Ana Leigh: And it is probably just as tiresome for men too (Chloe: Mm) like, always be that tough, protective man. Who has the strength to be that, tough man, hard...not everyone wants to be that.

Even in the ads where the female models could be regarded as being more active, the activity itself was never quite satisfying for the women but always riddled with questions:

Hannah: And here is a person, or a woman, for once active, but what is it that she does then, well she has sex with a plastic thing.

For instance in the jeans ad (see fig. 3 in Empirics), the women thought that the pose of the model could suggest she was in control thus portraying something other than passiveness, however, they still expressed concern since she looked criminal and/or drugged up. As Hannah wondered: Why does it have to be either or, from one extreme to another? In other words: why can't a woman just be there for herself and be "only" a woman? Berger (2008) found that this paradox is due to the social presence of men and women, something which also Yanni (1990) agreed with by explaining how only men have the privilege of being in a separate category from women and things. Since the male is subject, his presence in images differs greatly from that of a woman, or as the women in the focus groups pointed out; men are active in a different way from women. In both groups they discussed the actual body position of the female model and found that this position for a woman is riddled with questions and doubts, whereas for a man the position would suggest he is powerful and in control and as Fiona said; one would not even think twice about it. Denise jokingly pointed out that it had to do with anatomy; for a woman sitting with her legs spread like that can suggest she is being inviting. The women all agreed that the same body position has different meanings depending on the sex and thus confirming the difference which Berger (2008) and Yanni (1990) argued, between men's and women's social presence.

This difference can also be viewed in the two perfume ads directed towards men and women (see fig. 9 in Empirics). The women found that the submissiveness, which both the female and male models were to portray, was unequal since the male model always seemed to be active and engaging by in one ad kissing the female model upwards and in the other looking assertive and in control. In contrast, the female model was never seen as being in the same kind of control and instead of being as active and engaging as the male model, she was rather looking sexy and submissive, or as Gabrielle pointed out; in the ad for the male perfume, the female model looked like she was going down.

In the ad featuring Uma Thurman (see fig.2 in Empirics) some women expressed a frustration since this was not just any female model but a woman that they have seen before, a woman who they regarded as strong and active but who in this ad was not living up to her image:

Hannah: But that is what makes me sad because, Thurman is in my eyes a strong woman who is active, she fights against the bad guys, and now she just becomes so passive and just lays there and...."come and get me" expression like everyone else, does she ALSO have to do like everyone else does? Couldn't she have her yellow coverall suit and fight? I don't like her now (Isabel: Mm), she just files in line and lies down like a victim...I was a little, Damn! Her too!?

This ad can arguably be even worse than the ones depicting "real" female models since this woman is seen as a role model in other channels as well. As Hannah frustratingly expresses, she as an audience is used to seeing Thurman being in control, powerful and active, a beloved actress who girls can look up to. This image does however not seem to fall in line with what ads want women to be, therefore, when posing for a handbag, Thurman has been depicted just like every other female model: as a passive object. This depiction of celebrities strengthens the objectification of women since they are arguably role models who people look up to or want to imitate and connect to. But when the celebrities also are portrayed as passive models and as Hannah points out; files in line and just lies down like a victim, it is no wonder that this image of women keeps being recreated and lives on.

The same goes for the ad featuring Anne Hathaway, where most of the women found it mindboggling and ridiculous that she was laying passively on top of the car in a very uncomfortable position, instead of actually driving the car. Even though she was fully clothed which was viewed as positive, she was not being active but exuded a sense of inferiority and passiveness.

Denise: She is obviously not capable of driving a car anyway.

An image that again, falls in line with the portrayal of every other female model, and which further fuels the objectification of women and strengthens the male gaze.

Isabel and Hannah argued about what the term active really meant, Isabel's point being that active does not have to mean being physically active but rather being in control. However, when it came to passiveness, they all seemed to agree that this entailed some form of submissiveness and accessibility. It can be argued that since women are often viewed and portrayed as objects, it is reasonable that they thus should be passive as well. Men however do not have this intimate correlation with things; they are individual in a way women are not (Yanni 1990). An argument that was also reflected in both focus group discussions by the women referring to the men being in control, holding all the power and the imagery being on their terms. Men, being the subjects that they are, are thus more likely to be portrayed as active and in control, since they are the ones who hold all the power; they are the norm, something that was both obvious and also infuriating for the women.

At one point Isabel stated that we must remember that ads objectifying women are not just about other people but actually about her as a woman too, and the expectations and ideals that are portrayed are thus demanded of her as well. This

statement falls in line with both Yanni (1990) and Kilbourne (1999) arguing that when objectifying a man, the representation of his gender is not at stake, while as for women, they are viewed upon as an entity. Objectifying one woman is objectifying her gender, unlike men who are seen as individuals and thus are not systemically objectified as women. When the women in the focus groups spoke about the presence of the male models, they were never viewed as just eye candy or objects; their presence was more assertive and powerful. Thus, the portrayals of male models in sexy ads were not deemed to be objectifying and offensive in the same way by the women. As Berger (2008) argued, a man's presence is related to power and suggests what he can do to or for you, while a woman's presence rather says what can or cannot be done to her:

Denise: My most spontaneous feeling is that: "Eew, take this disgusting guy with the tongue and tattoo's away, don't let him Do That To You!"

This difference in the depiction of presence and the meanings linked to each gender creates a vast gap between men and women. Since they are being portrayed, viewed and surveyed from such different perspectives, it is no wonder that men and women are also treated differently outside of the images found in ads, and that they have different expectations upon themselves:

Denise: Cause, such an image, I mean it's that...if you are fed with that your whole life of course you are influenced by it, you think "oh ok, I am supposed to be that passive and cute and...wait for someone to come and get me".

The constant objectification proved to be very tiresome for all the women and while they did not always find the sexy ads to be sexist, they were still bothered by them for being objectifying towards women. In fact, all of the women at some point or another expressed both frustration and exhaustion towards these kinds of ads:

Fiona: even if you are very used to seeing them, the thought always hits me: "yeah, here we go again".

...

Isabel: ...it portrays this image of us girls that we are supposed to be sex objects, it's like...

Evelyn: You get a little tired.

Fiona: Yes.

Like Forde (2014) argued: "We're collectively exhausted with sexual messages intended to persuade us to buy this or that, usually through tired cliché or norm-shocking visuals." (2014, pp.114-115). While the women voiced the same kind of tiredness found in Forde's words, they also at the same time expressed a form of numbness, which led them to deem some ads ok by comparing them to those that were not. This comparison and "approval by default" was found in both groups and it was only Hannah in the second group who finally spoke out and pinpointed the problem by stating that: it is because of the amount of ads portraying women in the

same degrading way which makes them, the audience, saturated; when seeing ad after ad objectifying women one eventually has difficulty discerning the problem with it because it is so very common, it becomes natural:

Hannah: No but I just get so tired of this...no but really, no, now we are starting to get too...saturated, or what should I say, had this been the first image I do not think that we would think that this was the LEAST bit ok, but you get numbed.

Fiona: Mm.

Gabriella: Mm.

(The others nod and agree)

Hannah: But you do not have the Strength to have that hat on all the time, but NO, this is not ok!

Hannah's statement is similar to what Kilbourne (1999) pointed out; we get numb by seeing these portrayals day in and day out. This numbness is almost crucial for the advertising industry, because it allows them to sell everything with sex, and also keep pushing the boundaries and invisible lines of what is sexy and what is sexist; what is ok and what is offensive. When the women had to see ad after ad depicting women as sex objects, the lines got blurred and eventually they were ok with some ads because they were comparing them with others which they thought definitely crossed the line, i.e. applying the "lesser of two evils" principle. Therefore, the numbness that the women felt when viewing the ads, let us call it the clutter-syndrome, is also part of the problem; since the audience gets saturated and starts comparing one offensive ad with another deeming one of them "more" ok, they thus allow the advertising industry to keep being provocative. As Hannah pointed out, if we were to view all ads for themselves, many of them would indeed not be ok at all at the first glance, but because of the clutter-syndrome, we are forced to look at so many ads and thus comparing them in order to find the line, which simultaneously, gets stretched out even farther every time we find an offensive ad to not be "as" offensive as the next one.

Pornography, Violence and Body Cropping

During the focus group discussions, it became clear that it was not always just the use of sex in ads that is was the most offensive, but rather the kind of sex depicted, and how women were portrayed into this type of sex. All of the women were both shocked and offended by many of the ads, but no ads provoked them as much as the ones portraying violence and pornography, they did not find any of this justifiable or ok on any level, as Isabel pointed out: Anything that is even implying violence is wrong.

Beatrice: This is definitely sexist.

Denise: Yes.

Beatrice: It's just like...

Denise: Gang bang.

...

Denise: Tom Ford for men?

Ana Leigh: But oh my god!

Beatrice: What, should it smell like it does down there or what's the point in having it put in the crotch?

Ana Leigh: No but eww, this is really horrible.

Chloe: This was taking it too far.

Also the women thought the male models in these ads often had the same kind of look to them; tough, aggressive, and even criminal looking. It is not unusual for ads making this type of man out to be sexy and something that women should want (Kilbourne 1999), however, this type of man was not appreciated by any of the women in the groups:

Fiona: But I think, no, I am disgusted by him (Gabrielle: yes) I feel like, if he would lie like that on me I would think it was very unpleasant, that's the feeling I get.

Hannah: He just looks so brutal (Fiona & Isabel: Mm), hard in those tattoo's, shaved, and butch and...

...

Denise: No but it is, they are so incredibly menacing these, (Ana Leigh: Look at the disgusting expressions they have!) yes.

Beatrice: Mm.

Denise: Utterly zero, ice cold, threatening, hard, four against one wrestled down girl.

Ana Leigh: Yes, it is completely horrible.

These violent men depicted in the ads would all in reality be a bad idea for a woman to choose, still, they are apparently the most sexy and desirable men according to the ads. This ideal is dangerous both for women and men since it tells women what they should want, and men how they should be:

Gabrielle: Yes, it is too much, it sends out the wrong signals especially to young girls, like "Yeah, this is how you should be and act, and this guys, is how you should be, you should take charge"

Unfortunately, this kind of man who cannot take no for an answer, who is emotionless and violent, just furthers the terror which many women experience. It is also important to remember, as Isabel pointed out, that even if they as individuals were not the most infringed women, there are still so many other women in the world who actually do suffer by being beaten and raped. If women who do not have these problems in life react this way to such ads, imagine what a victim of rape must think when seeing them.

Besides pornography there was also the phenomenon of body cropping (Kilbourne, 1999; Cortese, 1999; Rutledge Shields & Heinecken, 2002; Merskin 2006) which can be linked to the objectification of, and violence towards, women.

Gabrielle: ...yeah she is, I mean she's dead.

Fiona: Yes.

Isabel: Stuffed.

Hannah: A decoration.

Fiona: Yeah.

Isabel: For others to gaze.

Hannah: Exactly.

Kilbourne (1999) argued that hacking apart a woman this way and thus turning her into an object, is often the first step towards violence since it is easier to inflict pain on, or abuse, a thing than a human being. The women in the second group confirmed this argument by stating that the ads were macabre and made them think of serial killers. They even compared the ad with the models head to a lion's head, since the female head with the handbag over it might as well be one of a stuffed animal, a trophy. These thoughts and comparisons are undoubtedly linked to violence and can be very hurtful towards women; when they are depicted as nothing more than body parts hacked apart by a serial killer, or shot dead like wild animals and stuffed, what good could ever come of it? Even though these female body parts were not considered to be "fuckable", they were unquestionably objectifying.

Isabel: No but it is still just an object, it's not the woman herself who is there, only her body.

Regarding the first two images, Isabel also pointed out that the head was missing, and in her mind, the head is the one "non-object" of a body. Even though it is often the head that is missing in these kinds of depictions (Merskin 2006), cutting up and displaying only the head can be even more objectifying since the head is, or was, the most personal and individual thing about a person. However, in one particular ad, they had managed to convert even the head into an object, only good enough to put other objects on. The same goes for the ad with the legs, as Cortese (1999) argues,

when portraying a woman without feet it implies that she is passive and not going anywhere. However in one of the ads a pair of women's legs were turned into a table, implying that even though these legs are, were, made for walking, they are indeed not going anywhere now since tables do not walk, they only stand still:

Ana Leigh: The right image there is very clear like, when you let the woman be, the woman's legs be a table where you put the bag. It becomes so clearly (Denise: Mm) objectified.

The women felt both insulted and frustrated because the image and ideal that the ads were promoting made them feel like the only place women have in the world is being owned by men, being sex objects. Ads can of course not be blamed for all the violence and terror against women, however, they do play a part in promoting this type of climate full of menacing men and submissive female sex objects, making the women even more powerless (Kilborune 1999). Seeing men intruding on women day in and day out may cause numbness eventually, but it does still affect on some level:

Denise: ...the girl is just a fuck-puppet who shows up whether appropriate or not.

...

Chloe: This was taking it too far.

...

Denise: It's like, he dominates her and exercises almost violence on her.

Ana Leigh: Yeah, does something against her will.

...

Gabrielle: ... I mean I don't like it. That it's girls, in every damn image, I just get so irritated, cause it's like all girls should look like that, number one, and that we should be sex objects and satisfy all the men, and then that we are in these luxurious environments cause it's, it's the only way we will get in there luxurious environments, our bodies! (Hannah: Mm) And I don't like it. And we should always be inferior to men, it, it's really infuriating to see all the time...

Promoting this image of women time and time again had negative effects on all of the women, they found it frustrating and infuriating and possibly harmful since they thought that sending out such signals of objectification and violence can affect people. Even if one of these ads may not be the direct cause of a rape, by using the post hoc, ergo propter hoc argument it can be argued that: just because there may be some ads that depict rape does not mean that men go out raping women. However, when more and more ads start promoting rape and violence, these will undoubtedly have some serious ramifications; culture reflects ads, and ads reflect culture. Because of this constant and never-ending reflection, it was not surprising that Isabel towards the end of the discussion said:

Isabel: ... I just want to do a Game Over on this entire planet and start OVER and just, make so there are some reasonable people.

It was not always easy for the women to discern whether the female models were enjoying themselves, they often pointed out that the models might as well be dead. This concern falls in line with what Kilbourne (1999) argued about the implication of these ads saying that women do not really mean “No” when resisting men’s advances. If ads make women out to be simply teasing, to go along with whatever men want, it sends out the wrong signals, something that was pointed out time after time during the discussions:

Gabrielle: This is WRONG I mean it sends out the wrong signals to girls and guys, especially guys... don't think it is Ok.

The female models could indeed not say No and always seemed to be playing along, either consciously or unconsciously to whatever the male models had in mind, something which was utterly provoking for the women:

Isabel: Yeah but it's not just sex here (Gabrielle: No) I mean, willing sex from both parts, it's just like, this is the man's sex, and the whole power thing, it provokes me.

...

Fiona: There is no tenderness or such.

Evelyn: But maybe it is more aimed at guys then?

One could claim, as Hannah suggested at one point, that perhaps ads such as Tom Ford’s which were the most blatantly pornographic and objectifying, are provoking in order to illuminate the incredible differences between the portrayals of the sexes.

Fiona: But Tom Ford's pictures I feel are the absolute most insulting, if we go through like all of them (Isabel: Yes), they have been insulting and they want to provoke, I mean that is the whole point of the images otherwise they wouldn't have put her ironing his pants while he reads the newspaper, I mean while she does it naked.

However, as Isabel argued, do these ads really have to provoke at the expense of women? If one wants to create a societal debate about the gender-asymmetry of the patriarchal society, then maybe advertising is not the right forum, since ads are essentially made for selling, not for debating:

Isabel: ...I think, it becomes even more wrong when it is commercial, I mean all these things “yeah but I make it to create a debate”, sure but if you do want to create a debate about the woman's position in society for example, do you have to do it at the expense of women?

Of course, because of the nature of ads: being a reflection and an extension of our culture, they can work as a powerful debating tool that can create and preserve ideals, meanings and symbols. Thus, they have the power to be eye-opening and as

Hannah meant, provoke in order to cause a debate. Nevertheless, the ads the women were referring to were all deemed to be sexist by all of the women, and it is important to remember that brands such as Tom Ford make a lot of money out of being provocative since, as the expression goes: All publicity is good publicity.

Moderator: Ok, so it's pretty obvious that Tom Ford wants to provoke, but the question is rather, is it ok to provoke this way or not?

Isabel: I don't think so, think of all the (Hannah: Children) yes and all the women who actua, we who sit here are probably not the most offended in our private lives, just us individuals here, but I mean think of everyone who actually has their husbands going about, or raping their women at home, I mean how it is still occurring and the woman is SO infringed today that it's, no, I...

Hannah: Awful.

Evelyn: Mm.

Ads have to sell, otherwise they become obsolete, however, in the end the women did not think that this type of provocation was neither justifiable nor reasonable to depict; all is not fair in the world of advertising:

Gabrielle: ...and this all the time I mean VIOLENT sex, why should it always be violent?! Ok people might like it but, I mean you don't have to make ADS of it...

In conclusion, the women's thoughts were aligned with the theories regarding the integration of pornography in society. However, their discussions also included some form of male gaze as well. Time and time again they pointed out that this depiction of sex is not only pornographic and objectifying towards women, but that it is always the man's sex that is depicted since the male models are always the ones who hold all the power. Some ads did have a lot in common with pornography since they portrayed dominance and female sex objects, but they were simultaneously also linked to the male gaze since the ideal spectator in all cases seemed to be male. None of the women found the ads to be the least bit intriguing or respectful, they only found them to portray one kind of sex: a sex that objectifies, degrades, insults and hurts women. A type of sex that belongs to men, and men only.

Isabel: ... it's the man who is in control over the woman (Fiona and Hannah: Mm), it's, everything is on his terms so it's not just that it's sexual innuendo's but it's, he is the one in charge, she is there for, I mean for his sake (Fiona: Mm), her needs are nonessential. And it's she who is undressed, it's she who is an object, and in some way that, suit...when it's with suits which are such a, power outfit (Fiona: Mm) it becomes even worse I think, that...he owns her.

CONCLUSION

The women in the focus groups expressed frustration, anger and concern during the entire discussions. They found that the majority of the ads using sexual content were very negative since they all enforced women to be the “other”, the inferior sex. Whether using sex in ads sells or not, the success rate of sexualized ads does not justify the way they are objectifying, degrading and insulting women. Due to the clutter-syndrome advertisers seem to have a carte blanche for being as blatant, degrading and dehumanizing as they wish, and the audience is just supposed to accept and stretch their moral line to accommodate this. The women in both groups however were not oblivious but did indeed have a lot to say and argue against these kinds of ads. Even though women can at times get numb and sidetracked from what they actually think is right or wrong, it should not only be up to them to say No. They should not have to get offended just by walking down a street, or feel concerned that their children get exposed to these kinds of ideals.

For the majority of the ads discussed, the women came to the same kinds of conclusions. Even though some of the women were working in the advertising industry, they had similar thoughts and feelings regarding the ads as the ones who were not in the business. This concludes that when viewing those ads, they do so as individual women first, not as advertisers. Almost all of the ads used in this study were found to be offensive and inappropriate in some way or another, even though the women were used to them, they did not find them justifiable or accurate.

The line between sexy and sexist ads may be very fine indeed, even invisible at times, and the interpretation between these a matter of subjectivity which is also constantly changing. However, when hearing and analyzing the women’s thoughts on the matter, it became clear that they drew lines not between sexy and sexist, but instead between what is acceptable and what is not. Their thoughts and discussions show that sexy ads are just as culpable as the sexist ones because the sex used in ads, whether or not it is offensive at first glance, does still fuel the objectification of women. This, because the models are attractive decorations, are exuding a presence which suggest submissiveness. This because the way we see women differs so vastly from the way men are viewed, because women get judged as a gender and not as individuals through these depictions. Because women’s bodies are not their own; they are commodities which can and are used in order to sell other objects, to sell themselves, sell ideals. Bodies that are made up, cut up and presented in such a fashion, they are unrecognizable even to themselves, being nothing more than stuffed trophies placed on display. In conclusion, the women in this study collectively drew several lines: Depicting violent contexts such as rape, murder and hacked up body parts is crossing the line. Portraying women as mere sex objects is crossing the line. Referencing to pornography in any way, shape or form, is crossing the line. Implying that the woman is inferior to man by undressing, inactivating, restraining or displaying her for the pleasure of the male gaze is crossing the line.

DISCUSSION

Ads are in the selling business, no matter the product there is always an audience that willingly or unwillingly looks at ads and buys the products they convey. Thus, when viewing ads depicting sexy women or include some form of sexual content, one can always ask: Who is the ad for, who is supposed to buy the product? This question regarding the male gaze is one of the most important ones because it makes us look more critically at these kinds of images. If man is the norm and the ideal spectator is male, it is only natural that the depictions of women and men are skewed and that the relationship's surrounding them are asymmetrical. However, if men and women were to be portrayed equally, be willingly engaging in a sexual context, then perhaps what Reichert (2003) put forward about the respectful manner in which sex in ads could be used, would indeed be justifiable. That is, sadly, not always the case since many ads seem to be more interested in provoking and degrading rather than respecting. Due to the kind of explicit sex used in many ads, pornography has indeed become mainstream, flaunting in plain sight.

All the women in this study were very negative regarding the female models "come hither" expressions, their submissiveness and the "fuckable" presence they had. This depiction is clearly distorted and offensive towards women, so why are we still seeing it? It could be because of what Reichert (2014) pointed out about people's desires to attract one another, and that advertisers see these needs as a ways to sell products which help meet those needs. However, as Kilbourne (1999) and Moog (1990) argue, linking products to our sexuality is problematic since the products themselves cannot truly fulfill our needs but rather, they become just another layer to hide behind. What ads using sex are really doing is exploiting people's insecurities, distorting and devaluing the self-image since it is only the beautiful, or as Kilbourne (2003) put it, the gods, who have sex in the ads: "Women are put in a no-win situation. Beauty is associated with youth, and women are made to feel that when they lose their youth, they will lose their beauty." (Berger 2011, p.98). The truths, which are depicted in the ads, thus become ideals that women all should obey by, since ads decide what and who is sexy, women are constantly striving towards reaching that ideal sexiness. An endeavor that is bound to remain fruitless since the models depicted in the ads are made to perfection in an unrealistic way and since it is only the young and beautiful who, by the power of ads, are deemed sexy. Naturally, women cannot remain young and beautiful, therefore they are bound to be disappointed and devalued at some point or another.

When using the male gaze for ads directed both towards women and men, it further strengthens the objectification of women, forcing them to survey themselves and consequently making both men and women survey and objectify women. All these processes help strengthen the meaning, symbolism and representation women have in the patriarchal society, which as Yanni (1990) argues is distorted. Since men are the norm, the subject in the social construction in such societies, women have been

labeled as the opposite: objects. Man is hence always spectator, and women's images are only there to serve the spectator. It is thus not surprising that ads depict women as objects since they are, as Yanni (1990) points out, extensions of our message system. Furthermore, the obsession with beauty and sexiness which ads are encouraging every day is also a part of the puzzle: "The pressures to be sexy, stay sexy, and get sexier are enormous." (Moog 1990, p.145). Ads depicting sexy women can therefore arguably always, as pointed out time and time again by both focus groups, be connected to the male gaze, since the reason women are pressured into, and supposed to be sexy is because they have to be pleasing for the male spectator.

Rechert (2003) points out that brands can use sex in order to position themselves as attractive and that this is often more successful for products which are related to sex; perfumes, clothes or beauty and personal care products. But what he fails to explain is what exactly a perfume or a pair of jeans has to do with sex. He exemplifies with successful brands such as Calvin Klein, Axe and Victoria's Secret, but it is never clear how these brands can actually claim to have anything to do with sex itself. Underwear is not used for sex, on the contrary this garment and clothing in general is used to cover up a body – not undress it. Perfume is a scent that may attract the opposite sex, but it is not really incorporated in the act itself. Really, the only products that are truly related to the act of sex are those that are incorporated in it, such as condoms or other prophylactics, sex-enhancing drugs and so on. So why exactly do we need to see sex in an ad for Calvin Klein jeans? Or as Hannah wondered: Why should it be sex at all? Wearing or using their products are more linked to being sexy, however, being sexy and having sex is not the same thing. Like Forde (2014) exclaimed: Enough already! The sex depicted in ads by for instance Calvin Klein is, as Kilbourne (2003) argues, artificial. Everything from the models, expressions, poses and environments, all is part of a great setting used to portray an image of sex that is not entirely accurate or resonating with the actual "real deal". Thus, sex is selling because as a forced audience, we are all susceptible to the idea of the "good life": "But this sexuality is never free in itself; it is a symbol for something presumed to be larger than it: the good life in which you can buy whatever you want." (Berger 2008, p.138) Perhaps the only way sex would stop selling is if the audience suddenly became satisfied with itself. However, it is difficult believing this day will ever come seeing as how the society as a whole seems to be suspended in a constant state of sexual tension and arrested development. But even though we are more or less forced to accept the usage of sex in advertising, must we therefore also accept the blatant objectification of women?

Since ads reflect culture and culture reflect ads, advertisers are in a powerful position; they could in fact recreate women in a positive way. Instead of portraying her as she has always been portrayed, they could slowly but steady help turn her into a subject since the ideals and images ads are selling become truths in themselves. Just as the relationship between women and objects has been created, so can it also be abolished. Instead of provoking at the expense of women, ads have the power to start a debate by showing the opposite; empowered women, active women, women who are there not for the male spectator, but for themselves.

Showing a different side to the coin may even be proven more successful since the term Sex sells is riddled with paradoxes; Advertisers think that sex sells so they use it in order to break through the clutter, however, this is something that so many advertisers do, almost every other ad seems to include some form of sexual content. Therefore, if everyone is doing the same thing, how could using sex break through anything? As stated in the focus group discussions and as pointed out by authors, we are all tired of the constant depictions of sex!

There is a clutter problem with ads; they truly are everywhere, so of course advertiser must do what they can in order to break through and reach their targets: "If an ad is irritating, insulting, or abrasive enough to cut through the clutter and make an impact on the consumer, psychological sensitivity is irrelevant. Sales spell success." (Moog 1990, p.16). However, these attempts at breaking through seem to get more and more provocative; when advertisers feel the need to portray rape in order to sell jeans one can conclude that it has gone too far. The problem is however, that it is not only the advertisers who are at fault. Even though it might be easy to just blame the advertising industry as being a powerful machine brainwashing people that is not really the case. The people seeing the ads are also people who make the ads, everyone is part of the audience, and when we fall prey to the clutter-syndrome, we are all responsible for choosing the lesser of two evils and thus, allowing the "evil" to carry on. Indeed, the audience is also responsible for what they are seeing as the advertisers themselves.

Nevertheless, advertisers are accountable for the images they create, since they have the power of enforcing ideals and culture. If they want to they can justify and motivate just about anything. For instance, when viewing the Levi's Naked Jeans ad (see fig. 8 in Empirics) even though all women did not find this ad to be offensive, it could still be viewed as being nude and thus objectifying, since this nudity has to be incorporated in any way possible even though jeans do not really have any actual connections to nudity. The ad may seem to have a clever connection to the product, but then again, Levi's themselves decided to name that particular jeans "Naked", thus the idea of using nudity was incorporated before the actual ad, and not the other way around. In other words, if one wants to make an ad with a naked female buttock, one can always find a way to justify this. With this in mind, an ad displaying a naked bottom is doing exactly that; displaying it: "Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display." (Berger 2008, p.48). And yet again, this image only promotes the representation of women as objects since their nude bodies are displayed in the most "clever" ways, trying to cover up the fact, that women and their bodies are used to sell just about anything.

Determining objectification, like defining who is nude and who is naked, is partly in the eyes of the beholder. However, since the eyes in question, as already discussed, ideally belong to a man, one can argue that as long as ads portray these unrealistic models, in unnatural poses, with come hither expressions, with barely any clothes on, suspended in passiveness, women will always be viewed as fuckable objects. And nothing more.

REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The research objective of this study was to investigate women's views on ads that objectify women and use sexual content; understanding how women collectively give meaning to and perceive these types of ads and also find out where they draw the line of what is acceptable or not. In this regard, the study has achieved just that. However, since only two focus groups consisting of in total nine women were studied, it is of course not applicable on the entire female population. It is true that not all women perceive things the same way, nevertheless, this subject is very provocative and charged, it can have serious ramifications for women and the society as a whole, and thus, it is important to study women's reactions towards it, even though the findings are not general. All points of view can be helpful for future research on the matter.

Gathering more focus groups, or researching it using other methods such as surveys or interviews could also be very valuable and contributing to this field of research. It would also be very interesting to learn about men's thoughts and reactions on the matter. For grasping the differences of men and women in ads and how these affect people in their daily lives, one could immerse in theories regarding the social construction of men and women, using ethnological approaches for gathering the empirical material. Even studying advertisers and brands such as Calvin Klein and Tom Ford closely could be very fruitful and indeed another step towards solving the problem. Because however one feels about this subject, it is indeed a problem. Otherwise it would not have been researched, debated and fought against for so many decades, and it would not have offended or infuriated the women in this study. Therefore, future research, whatever the method, is truly needed and still highly current if we ever want to see a change in this field.

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