

# Skinny White Bitches

Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising

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### Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising

This is a story about female representations in contemporary advertising. Following up on Rosalind Gill's (2003; 2007; 2008) critical discussions on the shift in contemporary advertising from the *sexual object* to the *sexual subject*, this endeavour is about examining *female sexual agency* through updated versions of the midriff by including feminist consumer responses. The aim is to add to the existing literature as well as to expand our current understanding of the notion *female sexual agency*, and the perspective that has been employed is based on a Poststructuralist Feminist framework.

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

The analysis was divided into four themes: Normativity, Freedom & Choice, Gaze and Claiming Space, all of which deal with different notions surrounding *female sexual agency* in ads. In short, the findings show that feminist consumers interpret and understand *female sexual agency* portrayed in contemporary adverts by considering the normativity, the perceived freedom and choice, the gaze of the model as well as the ability to claim space within the image. The participants drew from various feminist discourses including notions of empowerment, postfeminism and 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminism, as well as from fairy tale discourses, and masculine discourses of violence and physical strength; exposing that power is still gendered.

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

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