

Objectification and Sensibility: A Critical Look at Sexism as Subtext in Postfeminist Advertising

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Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of sex in advertising to understand the relationship between objectification of gender, sex, sexuality and representations of femininity through advertising subtexts, processes and discourses. Literature shows the usage of sexism in advertising and marketing veers in extreme scopes between blatant explicitness and stylish subtlety, depending on the cultural contexts and norms of the target market. Using qualitative case examples, advertising campaigns highlight objectification of sexual desires as an antithesis of postfeminist thought. Rhetorical analysis was performed on advertisement samples, building from postfeminist perspectives in marketing theories. Examples of visual rhetoric in beer, feminine product commercials and social cause campaigns are discussed. Findings demonstrate cultural expressions of postfeminist sensibility adapted for specific femininity contexts. Overall, sexism subtexts are shown to be a continued challenge in developing persuasive advertising rhetoric for the postfeminist era. Non-translatibility and cultural adaptations to consumer segments suggests that the use of sex to visually communicate marketing information to an increasingly diverse marketplace face much social pressure today than in the past. Femininity themes in postfeminist advertising could be more effectively portrayed through subtle techniques such as irony and sarcasm, and in more inclusive, diverse, pragmatic and respectful femininity representations.

Keywords: sexism, sexuality, objectification, postfeminist, irony, sarcasm

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to understand how sex appeal stimulates audience's interest and curiosity in advertising communication and persuasion. The aim of research is to understand how society's powerful awareness of recurrent themes related to sex, sexism, female stereotypes, objectification and sexuality can be effective in visual communication for positive and negative aims.

Sex has been employed in arguably excessive and debauched amounts since the earliest days of advertising. Along with sister disciplines marketing and public relations, new advertising communication and marketing persuasion methods are commonly perceived to wilfully step over bounds of morality and ethics, to manipulate target audiences' opinions in favour of brands (Blair et al., 2006; Plakoyiannaki, 2008). The use of sexualised or erotic imagery is shown in many media and culture research, Western biased studies, in particular, to be a significant cognitive and emotional technique in communicating with the market, distinguished from psychological stimulus-response pathway in gaining consumer attention (Reichert & Lambaise, 2012).

Although sex functions primarily to trigger audiences' interest and curiosity and can result in strong feelings about advertisement and improve brand recall, at the same time, this approach may backfire if advertisers ignore broader social acceptance based on taste, morality and diverse values such as gender self-esteem (Bleidorn et al., 2016; Sparke, 2010).

Research in this paper will attempt a qualitative visual rhetorical analysis to examine several key issues:

- *How sex symbolism and physical, female objectification is perceived through the visual rhetoric of advertising;*
- *The negative effects of sexism in commercials;*

- *How sexuality subtexts are applied using sarcasm and irony for social communication in the postfeminist era.*

2. Literature Review

Over several decades of developing feminist and postfeminist movements, a tangible shift has occurred among scholars, within the framing methodologies of critical feminist response to gendered media, and in marketing and consumer research on aspects of visual culture considered relevant in the contemporary social and cultural contexts (Reichert & Lambiase, 2003; Catterall et al., 2000; Biloshmi, 2013). Theories capture lively perspectives which show various issues in sexism portrayal in the marketplace. Scholars such as Dahl et al. (2008) explore the conceptual relationships between advertised messages and consumers' behavioural responses; their research shows the fairly elusive nature of sexuality in identifying relational roles based on cultural factors.

Sex in media grabs the viewer's attention, as it is human nature to be interested and curious about sex. For instance, in *Utopian Images and Narratives in Advertising*, psychologist Margaret Salyer (2012) proposes the views of Carl G. Jung's archetype theory that society's unconscious typified imageries of perfect living conditions provide the idealist framework for why sexualised symbols continue to bombard and seduce our minds, through the tons of advertisements designed to motivate consumption.

To frame its sociological context, sex when presented in media form such as advertisements, is an embodiment of *cultural capital*: it is identifiable, valuable, objectified and socially constructed, although conflicting theoretical positions seek to understand how different patterning of postfeminist portrayals in discourse affects social power (Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008; Reichert et al., 2001; Gill, 2007). This form of capital, as French political theorist and film producer Guy Debord articulated in his treatise, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1994), comes from the result of that spectatorship, the consumption of imageries, of mediums and technologies, of social relations that have become mediated by visual and appearance, within the accumulated subtexts of class, race and exploitation of the weak and poor.

This is modern media's role in presenting us with our "false reality", media culture theorist Dan Laughey (2007, p. 153) explains; reality, nonetheless. Whether in animated movies, fairy-tales, fitness marketing, teen literature, executive fashion, postfeminist adaptations of cultural and creative works, including media and online social marketing and advertising, have translated feminism into conscious gender discourses (Gill, 2007; Gill et al., 2016; Schemmer, 2014; Siegel, 2007; Thomas-Jones, 2006).

The line of research mentioned here leads us on to hypothetical research questions that will be further taken up for critical discussion in this paper:

- *If advertising enables viewers/audiences to engage powerfully through spectating, and as a result, forms social opinions about sexuality, gender and identity discourse, what aspects of advertising convey postfeminist sensibilities in the cultural contexts?*
- *Could cultural perceptions of sex advertising challenge postfeminist sensibility?*

It may seem apparent even to non-researching communities, that for as long as it continues to dominate cultural discourse, sex will be a valuable element employed to sell products and services from basic household appliances to fashion and fantasy lifestyles, simply because visually, sex is a dynamic, tangible object, whether the elements are presented in the form of visual imageries, signs, tropes or textual signifiers that knowingly display stereotypes, privileged gender power, self-mockery, humour, cynicism or irony (Biloshmi, 2013; Gill, 2007).

Rutgers University's late marketing professor Dr Barbara B. Stern, a feminist critique on the forefront of marketing research in the past half century, applied rhetorical and literary narratives to enhance branding communication modelling.

In the *Journal of Advertising* (1999) Stern notes that during the earlier periods of gender research, images of women portrayed stereotypes such as weak intelligence, submissiveness and inferiority, due to universal norms that found their way in male-dominant cultures in presenting "appropriate" ways of looking at, depicting, and perceiving women. Even more recently, researchers such as University of California, Davis psychology professor Wiebke Bleidorn et al. (2016) the cultural differences in studied demographics show that gender and age may influence self-esteem biases.

Feminist theories frame the approach of sex in advertising as veering towards pornography; it reduces, objectifies and de-emphasises human contact and individuality (Stern, 1991).

In exploring the issue of postfeminist advertising, female equality, personification and empowerment are eminent

themes discussed by leading visual branding authors (Delbaere et al., 2014; McQuarrie & Phillips, 2008), who claim that various para-social attachments precede Western societies' notions of who a female is, based on *rhetorical narratives*, or 'told stories', frequently repeated using visual and textual metaphors in commercials. These rhetorical elements help businesses embed the same, unchanging narratives through overt, sexualised brand advertisements. Reichert and Lambiase (2003), viewing the *Sex Sells* truism from socio-political perspectives, review various aspects of gender research by examining the effects of sexuality portrayals and controversies invoking media ethics and persuasion on psychological behaviours and attitudes towards what sex is. These concepts are being challenged by other researchers. For instance, consumer psychologist Dr Cathrine Jansson-Boyd of Anglia Ruskin University (2017) in a blog article cites *International Journal of Advertising* longitudinal research from 1969-2017 that finds sexual appeal does not play any significant role in enhancing brand nor generate purchase.

Classically, *semiotics*, the scientific study of the signs of meaningful objectification, provides a body of evidence of media culture practices whereby women continue to face discrimination from their sexuality: being disallowed the privilege of emotional assurance and celebration of advancements in sexuality discourse. They are fed instead, stereotyping, sexualised symbolisms and classically conditioning towards sexual pleasures and sexual function (Bettany & Woodruff-Burton, 2008). One needn't look further than late American industrial designer Raymond Loewy's "aggressively female", classic Coca Cola bottle design from 1955 (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Classic Coca Cola Bottle

The study of semiotics is part of the tradition of *structuralism*, where the question revolves around whether the emphasis on the structure or construction of narratives result in ignoring or suppressing authentic signals indicating cognition, behaviours and cultural experiences. It was initially proposed by philosopher Jacques Derrida (Derrida & Stiegler, 2002).

One branch of structuralism is the psychology and interpretation of media and visual aesthetics (such as advertisements and films). Researchers in this field attempt to study and observe media as a regime of meanings that are combined, embedded, mediated, viewed (spectated) in creating power relationships and cultural attitudes, and how these are normalised through discourse, including analysing the signs, systems, rules for elements of language and visuality.

Take, as an example, the use of homosexuality themes in advertising. Marketers need to always carefully consider the effects of homosexual portrayal across the LGBT spectrum of gender and sexuality. Barbara Stern (1999; 2004; 2013) and other scholars over the decades of postmodern thought scholarship, propose that current critical analysis must identify and interpret various forms of representational narratives through thick data transcription [such as ethnographic analysis], including *textual* [attributes], *structure* [construction] and *assumptions* or principle benchmarks taken to challenge the audience's beliefs or presumptions. In this regard, the validity of homosexual behaviours becomes objective knowledge about this consumer segment when narratives such as gay theme advertisements are seen or perceived to be a part of recurrent, normalised, mainstream culture of a given society.

Sarah A. Adham (2012) in her dissertation applies semiotic analysis to further examine visual representations in the specific cultural context of Middle Eastern society, and the linguistic function of Arabic female images. She argues that, similar with linguistic expressions, narratives in visual and conceptual representations are perceived by her society as relevant in attaching femininity labels to women, whether they are perceived as part of political, sexual, social or aspirational frameworks.

2.1 Gender in 21st-Century Postfeminist Marketing

If postfeminist ideologies of symbolic female empowerment have apparently been successfully addressed and cleverly adapted into social frameworks of lifestyle branding, marketing and consumption, why does gender sexism still predominate advertising practices through visuals locally and around the world (Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver, 2006)? Furthermore, what does the translatability of “empowered female” inform society about this “new sensibility”? In addressing contrarian hypotheses such as these, the pattern of sexism as a visual subtext continues to be intensely debated, and this raises the question if this has compromised advertising as a form of free speech.

Creative processes assign meaning to advertising persuasion, but audiences’ interpretation is determined by often contradictory, undeveloped or ambiguous levels of understanding; hence, aspects of media perceived as sexist or stereotypical depend on contextual variances e.g. age, gender, education, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds (Lazar, 2007; Grafton-Small & Linstead, 1989). Additionally, controversial topics such as nudity in consumer media are perceived as an increasingly acceptable cultural phenomenon, and studies of Asian consumers prove nude models play a role in impacting how female and male representations are perceived, and their influence on brand recall (Huang & Lowry, 2012).

Industry studies found women frequently portrayed in advertising to appeal to *both* men and women. Trend research produced by New York advertising agency J. Walter Thompson (JWT) in a collaborative research with the Geena Davis Institute on *Gender in Media* (2017) found that objectification continues in American media today. In a sample of 33 categories of product advertising, women who wear sexually revealing clothing compared to men, appeared in the ratio of six to one, in the monitoring period between 2006 and 2016, suggesting that target audiences may favour advertisements with female sexual appeal. Other gender researchers demonstrate the stagnant tide of change in addressing perceptions of women as merely an “aesthetic centrepiece” in commercials that motivate audience engagement or trigger purchase. Lazar (2007) argues that “power femininity” is just a convenient audience engagement tool among advertisers, regardless of how women visualise their ideal of the female identity.

Another aesthetic question arising in conventional male-dominant advertising narratives is the spectatorship of the consumed product (Taskiran & Yilmaz, 2015). Warrington and Gourgova (2006) of Purdue University, for instance, jointly explore typologies of idealised American male images through the manner which men, as with women, compare themselves to desired social ideals found in advertising imageries. Cultural historian Annette Kuhn from Queen Mary University of London (cited in Laughey, 2007, p. 105) studied the two ways in which consumption pleasures are classed as passive or active, depending on gender, and found a distinct differentiation between the ‘owner’, the ‘buyer’ and the ‘user’ of goods, and one relevant case example to be cited here would be in commercials for beer advertising.

2.2 Beer Commercials and Sexism

Western beer commercials of the last century clearly point to the existence of deeply erotic, popular, and still-remarkably relevant metaphors of “women as beers”, objects to be enjoyed with friends, on the same level as a beer, making the universal appeal of sex seem the lowest common denominator of audience engagement with the message (Jones & Reid, 2009). However, it appears that lifestyle changes and social awareness of gender equality have diversified this discourse to include beer consumers of various gender orientations (Hicks, in Reichert & Lambiase, 2012, pp. 229-246) and behavioural [drinking] practices (Atkinson et al., 2012). Research also offers evidence suggesting that Western media viewing audiences, including youth, may not be given sufficient opportunities to engage in more respectful portrayals of women in beer commercials, due to less rigorously regulated advertising codes of practice and media institutional policies (Jernigan & Ross, 2010).

Critical feminist Anne Meredith Sugar’s (2016) research suggests that female sexualisation and objectification had been the backbone of alcohol advertising for nearly a century. This had been unavoidable as commercial strategies of mass-marketing took precedence, which, ironically, contributed to the growth of craft beer in North America. Western media outlets in their bid for advertising revenues, continue its perfunctory role in allowing airtime and space for sexualised beer commercials, consequently they bear responsibility for the formation of such attitudes towards women’s bodies, albeit wholly or dismembered into legs, breasts or thighs, reinforcing objectification.

What role do men play in fostering these experiences in the development of postfeminist perceptions? Male consumer segments are likely to take credit for their communication behaviours and overt discriminatory acts, whether the bias is conscious or otherwise (Stein, 2017).

Many advertisements targeted at men continue to use thematic variants of sexism playing on gender stereotypes. Gender studies professor Steve Craig from The University of North Texas writes in *Men, Masculinity and The Media* (1992) that women, as objects of sexual gratification, appear in stereotypical forms and roles as “fantasies come true” and rewards for men who choose the right product.

Men are also sexualised in dominant roles when portrayed as confident, independent, intelligent, and rebellious. Muscularity and athleticism are socially accepted signals found via commercials which represent the idealised imagery of power and supremacy, designed for emotional and psychosocial responses among male consumers aspiring for similar attributes; consequently, it grows the desire or aim for similar traits and qualities (Warrington & Gourgova, 2006).

This is further supported by evidence from feminist studies of media culture which find the scope of women representations in media being limited to their traditional, nurturing roles: mothers, housewives, secretaries or nurses; rather less occasionally enacted in career or business roles, work settings or leadership positions (Gill et al., 2016).

Despite these compelling arguments that semiotics are distinguishing concepts in the study of power and the politics of representation, it is valid to assume that cultural constructs of meanings are politically determined, i.e. narratives are assumed to represent specific meanings “of something by someone, to someone” (cited in Stern, 2004). Catterall et al. (2000) further acknowledged that marketing research had not equitably, prominently or sufficiently profiled past women who have contributed to marketing practice as much as men have.

Even creative industries are not spared media’s editorial criticism of sexism: *The Guardian*, for instance, reported that pay gap parity for female recruits into advertising firms being still atrociously lopsided, seen particularly among those in leadership and senior executive roles at international agencies, with disparity figures ranging from 25% (Grey) to 45% (JWT), alongside other debased, discriminatory and injurious forms of female abuse in a male-dominated workplace (Cooke, 2019).

3. Methodology

How are postfeminist advertising approaches reconfigured and adapted to cultural contexts? One useful technique using qualitative cultural frameworks to analyse and understand the form, composition and meaning of visual imageries in persuading audiences, is based on the principles of *visual rhetoric*. To understand how objectification is applied or embedded in advertising through the function of sexual appeals, several examples of advertisements targeting female consumers will be analysed, in considering the following line of inquiry:

- How postfeminist advertising subtexts, processes and discourses are perceived, reproduced and contested from cultural contexts?
- What aspects of postfeminist sensibility in advertising may be perceived as anti-feminist and challenged by audiences?
- How are postfeminist advertising approaches adapted to cultural contexts?
- How cultural adaptation inform about translatability of postfeminist sensibility?

Visual Structure		RICHNESS		
		Less	—————→	More
		Connection (A is associated with B)	Similarity (A is like B)	Opposition (A is not like B)
C O M P L E X I T Y	Less	Juxtaposition (Two side-by-images)		
		Fusion (Two combined images)		
	More	Replacement (Image present points to an image absent image)		

Diagram 1. Phillips & McQuarrie (2004) Typology of Visual Rhetoric

To discover how sexual appeals are structured within visual imagery subtext in the context of meaning creation

through objectification of females, rhetorical narrative deconstruction will be the method of analysis. According to Phillips and McQuarrie (2004), visual structure and verbal anchoring operate in our cognitive processes to connect meaning of advertising metaphors through *juxtaposition* (simple cognitive operation), *fusion* (rich cognitive operation), to *replacement* (highly complex cognitive operation). Using the framework (Diagram 1), the aim of analysis is to present evidence that advertisements visually designed to elicit, evoke and arouse emotions in audiences of specific cultures use meaningful assumptions, texts and structural elements. Postfeminist sensibility demonstrates the necessity of certain cultural adaptations when the advertising approach is ineffective to override potential offense and backlash controversies and challenged by other audiences. A critical analysis of the translability of sexualised visual rhetoric and sexuality portrayal in advertising is then presented in the discussion section that follows.

4. Analysis and Interpretation of Case Study

Capri Shoes' *Sexy Stiletto*s print advertisement (Figure 2) shows a visual metaphor of the *Fusion* typology, apparently depicting a woman's anatomy at first glance. It takes hardly a minute before the brain reaches the eventual conclusion of its actual object: a sexy, stylish, yet subtle, imagery of a stiletto heel. Fusion of creative suggestive nuances, sans female model, appears to personify women's feminine form without gratuitous sexual tones, hence embedding a richer emotional representation of femininity, thus effectively attributing a charming, sensual and sophisticated rhetoric into the product's brand personality.

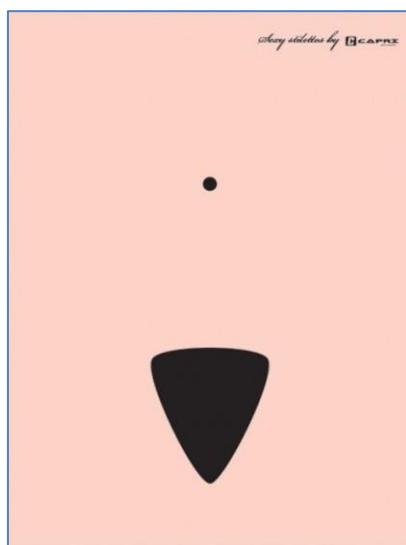


Figure 2. *Sexy Stiletto*s by Capri Shoes

In contrast, visual metaphors could be negatively perceived if sexual suggestiveness is juxtaposed inappropriately in message representation (Jansson-Boyd, 2017). American Apparel, the clothing retailer which has provoked regular controversies with its past series of advertisements, is an example. *The Tights* (Figure 3) communicates the product's true purpose, which is wearable yet feminine comfort, but through overt *juxtaposition*, the model's act of revealing her private area may also suggest to some viewers the product's ability to perform other functions, such as tightening of the hymen.



Figure 3. *Tights* by American Apparel (2015)

While the female organ per se was blocked out with a white banner to avoid accusations of objectification, the crassness of the image creates direct offensiveness that require neither explanations nor justification of aesthetics in the postfeminist era where issues such as pornography have become mainstream social concerns (The Guardian, 2015).



Figures 4. Tom Ford for Men

Further on the hyper-sexism paradigm, the 2006 print advertising for *Tom Ford for Men* male fragrance delivered explicit images of a fragrance bottle juxtaposed as a play object wedged between breasts, covering naked female genitalia (Figure 4), overtly suggesting that applying the fragrance enhances a user's masculinity and dominance, while identifying the male need for erotic arousal to be fulfilled through objectifying women. The semiotic visual offence that objectified the female model's parts was achieved through *juxtaposing* standards of perfection (tanned, waxed and blemish-free skin, ruby red nails, slim fingers and open lip pout) accentuates the product's immediacy and signified unapologetic right "to sell sex" for those who have "knowing" tastes (Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008). Despite complaints to the UK *Advertising Standards Authority* (ASA), accusations of masked degradation through such blinding "male gaze" adverts were nevertheless deflected by the company, claiming that the specific segment of culture magazine readers were unlikely to be offended, while its merit was considered a "stylistic", glamorous tribute to image-making, which the ASA eventually acceded to (Allwood, 2015).



Figure 5. A non-profit disability awareness campaign

The use of female imageries to evoke sexuality innuendos and draw viewers' attention before delivering a serious message, are increasingly observed in the postfeminist context. An example is Belgian handless model Tanja Kiewitz, featured in a poster wearing only her inner garment, recreating an image by WonderBra model, Eva Herzigova. The visual was created for CAP48, a non-profit disability awareness group. Tanja (Figure 5, left) demurely gazes back at her audience, as the French copy-lines echo the original for the bra advert (Figure 5, right): "Look me in the eyes ... I said the eyes". As the verbal anchor right below the image, CAP48 uses the meaningful *juxtaposition* of the disability and sexuality discourse in an intelligent brew of visual and message, seeking audience's empathy through the dark irony of sexualised metaphor (Figure 4). At the same time, the pitch is a lucid example of the *replacement* typology of repetitive but dissimilar textual effect, producing the intended campaign outcomes when it resulted in a 10% increase in donations towards the organisation from the precedent year's fundraising (Huffington Post, 2017).

5. Discussion of the Findings

Misunderstanding of female sexual imagery in advertising arise when less educated audiences cannot differentiate between explicitly sexist ads, ironic sexuality, and more appropriate ways to view or present cultural imagery of women (Blloshmi, 2013). Hence, visual practitioners must consider that not every social segment have the skills and knowledge to be able to critically and maturely analyse what they see, a lack of experience of which compromises judgments between knowing what's right and what is clearly ironic, myopic or unethical (Blair, 2006). By contrast, self-expressions, self-definitions and self-presentations are important in post-feminism studies and design must add these scopes to unleash a range of gender discourse, recognising the authentic symbols of social groups that women aspire to belong to.

Clearly, from the array of advertisement cases in this analysis, it may be contended that society is showing increasingly sophisticated ability to verbalise, react to, and desire, symbolisms that are congruent with their character, using it to express internal attributes.

As rhetorical analysis shows, due to its capability for instant attention and reaction, sex continues to be valuable component of visual communication. Future researchers are urged to conduct empirical studies on small or larger scale of sample consumers, using cultural perceptions to evaluate the hypothetical effectiveness of advertising guidelines for socially responsible and ethical gender representation in commercials albeit for cognitive, psychological or emotional effects (Schroeder & Borgerson, 1998).

5.1 From Objects to Subjects

Harper and Tiggemann (2007) argue that objectification has become a complex social research area, due to links to the cognitive, behavioural and psychological development of women. And, despite empowerment discourse permeating across more Westernised or open cultures, the disparate, inaccurate and biased portrayal of sexuality in media continue to be deeply associated with female social issues of self-esteem, depression and other forms of psychosocial disorders (Bleidorn et al., 2016).

Undeniably, female market sectors such as fashion, cosmetics, beauty care and diet management must present visual advertising with predominantly attractive and confident women-targeted content to thrive.

Sexiness is embodied through models who are usually young and skinnier than most of the population, while sexualised narratives of how to dress and behave in suggestive manners, showing the prevalence of assumptions as verbal anchoring of the symbol of idealised physical attractiveness from which sexual appeal or value derives. Conversely, the same imageries could provoke guilt and shame in those who fail to achieve the ideal.

While sex may offer symptomatic solutions to ensure marketing success with thematic messages, incorrect assumptions about consumers' attitudes towards sex could create a boomerang effect, resulting in backlash and rejection of the acts of bodily objectification, specifically among women consumers (Dahl et al., 2008; Jansson-Boyd, 2017; Reichert et al., 2001).

Consequently, sexualised imagery limit the possibilities to invest in feminist ideals of equality within marketing practice, if all advertisers aim for is the amusing use of sexual appeals to create identification with, empathy, or sympathy for, the advertiser or product [object] at the expense of meaning [subject] and what a female being really is, someone with unique personalities, intelligence and abilities.

5.2 Translatability in Sex Advertising: Recent Development

Today, sex isn't perceived as the taboo subject that it once was: it plays a key role to provoke abundant discussions and coverage in media programmes such as talk shows and sitcoms, producing fiery debates in the marketing industry, among critiques and scholars of media and culture studies, and is crucial in fostering postfeminist sensibility.

These provocations point to the fact that educated, sophisticated audiences and consumer segments are increasingly capable of social consciousness towards sexuality as a power discourse, postfeminist consumer segments have attained a more sophisticated and developed level of confidence by providing various narratives about sex representations in advertising. Some of these are observable across cultural segments in different societies around the world.

What not shown on regular media and digital telecasts during the first and second waves of feminism, are now up for viewer evaluation on every channel, every hour. Audience's awareness towards advertising naturally accelerates the process of information exchange and persuasion, while lowering the level of social resistance (Albakry & Daimin, 2014). Erectile dysfunction advertisements, for instance, have crept into social domains of Malaysian society (The Star Malaysia, 2013), with commercial publicity campaigns increasingly celebrated and

perceived pertinent to the new sexual revolution, although universally, female sexual dysfunction issues have not quite taken off as media headlines (Hill & McKie, 2008). At the same time, the promulgation of sexism through advertising continues to be criticised in advancing societies such as China (Einhorn & Chen, 2018). Postfeminists would thus argue that the use of explicit sexual imageries in advertising are no longer viewed as provocative as they become commonplace commodities globally (Bleidorn et al., 2016; Blloshmi, 2013; Catterall et al., 2000). The rise in levels of cultural resistance and subversion of sexism in the new media context, counter its intended goal or effect.

5.3 Advertising for Social Change

Among noteworthy trends in culture studies have been online advertising, marketing and development of the e-commerce industry, which is increasingly skewed to represent and reflect individuals' personalities and predominant cultural stereotypes of men and women (Plakoyiannaki et al., 2008). Current electronic and digital advertising and promotion of brand personalities such as influencers via word-of-mouth, social media and social networks offer paradigmatic choices to both genders that treads the fine line between sexy and sexist (Blloshmi, 2013).

For social change marketing to evoke emotional attachments effectively in a postfeminist era of sexual transparency and gender relations, researchers indicate that consumers' attitudes, values and beliefs take precedence to produce advertising behavioural response, i.e. purchase intention, leading to brand connections, engagement evaluation and action (Taskiran & Yilmaz, 2015). Furthermore, Bleidorn et al. (2016), Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver (2006), Catterall et al. (2000), Reichert and Lambiase (2001; 2012), and other scholars of marketing communication reviewing the changes of sexual appeals over decades, note that cognitive and behavioural-linked models of sex portrayals in social marketing campaigns such as heterosexual attractiveness, parody, double entendre and nudity have evolved based and built on specific cultural and social change contexts.

As argued earlier in the paper, consumer marketing research shows that specific imageries and textual attributes found in advertising that represent the ideals of sexuality, are invariably linked to cultural characteristics (Reichert & Lambiase 2001). In its highly-touted viral advertising cum social experiment, the *Campaign for Real Beauty* (2004) Unilever brand Dove avoided the use of thin stereotypes, instead featuring normal weight ranges among underwear-clad models, in hope that female customers will identify with the projected images of innate or natural beauty (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty 2004

According to Dove brand owner Unilever (2005), the use of women of various ages, shapes, skin colours and sizes is designed to “provoke discussion and debate about today's typecast beauty images”. The campaign's decade-long success attests to the overwhelming global support towards Dove's commitment to show realistic, attainable images of beauty, and [through] challenging today's stereotypical view of beauty and inspiring them to take [greater] care of themselves” (Unilever, 2005). Sexuality is implied in Dove online campaign advertisements through female figures representing what appears to be a message which denigrates airbrushing techniques in celebrating “anti-perfect” body types and appearances.

While intended to avoid female objectification, the portrayal also triggers an acute sense of being “taken in”, with women being placed on a performance stage, lining up to be viewed for societal evaluation, rather than actually “feeling different about themselves” (Bahadur, 2017). The spectating viewers cannot help but see the ironic narrative embedded into a commercial message whose goal is meant to urge awareness and identification of a consumer brand via visual self-presentation. This viral campaign highlights the inadvertent problem with the

translatability of sexualised visual narratives in the media: *the constantly evolving social definitions for feminine beauty, taste and decency* through a range of cultural norms deemed appropriate and fair representation of the female sex.

5.4 Sexy Sarcasms as Subtext

With heightened gender consciousness, abundant instances of backlash movements in Western and Asian marketing practice could be found today (Huang & Lowry, 2012). Sexist advertising, once used to manipulate in favour of brands, no longer have resonance, but has transforming into a new paradigm involving rich, more complex and arguably more intelligence-provoking rhetorical subtexts of sarcasm, mockery and irony.

On comedy video website *Funny or Die* (2013), French actress and singing celebrity Marion Cotillard performed in a viral video introducing a ‘product’ called *Forehead Tittaes* (2010), sticking false miniature breasts on her forehead as a bid for women to be respected in the workplace (Figure 7). Using meme humour, the message delivered is by attracting the male gaze from their bosoms to the forehead area, closer to the eyes.



Figure 7. *Funny or Die* (2010) *Forehead Tittaes*

Along with other female career role-players, Cotillard *substitutes* (replaces) her forehead with falsies, imploring that contact with men is hampered by objectification, “unless they can meet you in the eyes”, thus emphasising the use of appropriate non-verbal communication to denote earned respect between the genders (Rense, 2016).

The sarcasm derives from the *juxtaposition* of the female sexual organ to the associated message, intelligence. This video aims to foster open discussions of sexism in male-dominated environment on issues objectification, enabling both genders to acknowledge discriminatory practices stemming from sexist attitudes.



Figure 8. *Keep Britain Tidy* (2005)

Another viewpoint on femininity marketing is the currency of values held by women at the place and time the media elements is available for investigation and critical analysis. Women from certain traditional societies of Asia may not interpret sexual persuasion from predominantly Western cultural views, while others would simply view this perspective, ironically, as the return of a “patriarchal gaze” (Adham, 2012). The non-translatability of advertising rhetoric is exemplified in the case of the posters and beer mats created for *Keep Britain Tidy* by anti-litter campaigner ENCAMS, an environmental advocacy institution (BBC, 2005; Campaign Live, 2005). The use of sexualised imageries symbolised by the models in compromising positions urges the viewer to pick up their thrash after indulging in sex acts (Figure 8). Weaving sexualised themes perceived as tongue-in-cheek, tacky or risqué easily falls into a stereotypical cultural norm, but the question today is how pervasive sexism affects society’s cultural and social norms towards gender relations in the longer term (Dahl, 2008).

6. Conclusion

Visual rhetoric analysis of sexism in advertising in this paper finds that while an array of new subtexts revolves around sexuality themes in marketing imageries, postfeminist advertising approaches today are reflective of a more inclusive and balanced cultural attitudes and values about sex (Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver, 2006; JWT, 2017). While the overuse of sexual elements had resulted in negative portrayals of sexuality in past advertising,

it suggests that themes of sexuality have matured in today's visual culture, personifying sexuality through sarcasm and irony in visual metaphors (Blloshmi, 2013).

In selling sexuality and avoiding sexism, postfeminist research point to a greater diversity of opinions towards femininity portrayal, although by all accounts of literature and case studies, this paper concludes that there are unresolved issues behind creative visual practices, and a lack of clear breakthrough solutions in how future advertising intends to resolve the conflict between using sex for functional communication, and overtly selling it to audiences viewing them with 'knowing' irony. *Sex Sells* is today diversely repositioned into subtexts of irony and sarcasm to avoid offence rather than intentional objectification (Blair et al., 2006; Harper & Tiggemann, 2007; Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008).

To conclude, this paper posits that postfeminist advocacy of social change through sex advertising is both an opportunity to critique institutionalised gender positions, and to highlight ways where gender imbalance can be addressed through marketing disciplines. Broadly, research findings signify that feminist aesthetics should not be treated as mere solutions to advertising problems, but with diverse female portfolios intertwined into new ways of thinking and seeing. From case study analysis presented here, the conclusions drawn suggest that the integration of sexual stimuli and appeals are *not always translatable as breakthrough femininity discourse for marketing of brands, nor are always necessary in creating interest and desire in advertising persuasion*.

While some feminists and media researchers have already got the debate rolling on whether sex in advertising should be eliminated in the new century, modern approaches using the services of educational public advertising campaigns may still regard sex as an ally in improving social awareness of sexuality, reproductive education, female treatment in society and the workplace, and etc., due to its simplicity and direct ability to make loud statements (Blloshmi, 2013; Stern, 1999). In future research, more critical examination of the semiotics of male gaze, and the variable operant conditions of sex as visual stimuli in marketing fields enable deeper research understanding of the rationales and insights of how much, how often and why global and local audiences engage with sex imageries.

Visual communication rhetoric could also provide alternate typologies of visuals that appeal, and the range of gender-related stimuli which affects the way media and marketing practices work in communicating to consumers. In this regard, it stands to reason that consumers must be given engagement platforms on media in order to voice their stance and to enjoin advertisers into respectful, valuable and progressive social narratives which benefit all social segments and sustains advertisers' brand image and reputation in the long run.

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Diagram 1: 'Typology of Visual Rhetoric' in B.J. Phillips and E.F. McQuarrie (2004) Beyond Visual Metaphor: A New Typology of Visual Rhetoric in Advertising, in *Marketing Theory*, 4(1/2), pp.113-136.

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