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Title

Problematizing the postfeminist gaze: A critical exploration of young women's readings of gendered power relations in advertising

Abstract

This article explores young women's engagements with gendered power relations embedded in advertising. Drawing on four case studies, we demonstrate how their readings of gendered ads are informed by postfeminist discourse, which, for all its contradictions, presents gender inequality as a thing of the past. Specifically, we illustrate and theorize the problematic workings of a postfeminist gaze directed at both models in ads and young women as readers of ads, with judgements shaped by postfeminist ideals and blind spots concerning intersections of gender, class, and race. We contribute to macromarketing scholarship by (1) illustrating how, in the context of gendered ads and young American women, gendered power relations and a postfeminist sensibility are both *produced by* and *productive of* gendered readers; and (2) highlighting the insidious nature and limitations of this sensibility informing young women's lived experiences, engagements with media culture, and position in society.

Keywords

Gender, women, postfeminism, gaze, advertising, intersectionality

Introduction

Macromarketers have long been interested in how marketing and consumption-related activities at the individual or firm level occur within and derive meaning from larger systems (Saatcioglu and Corus 2019). Accordingly, gender research within this discipline tends to focus on how gender is produced and reproduced over time (Brace-Govan 2010; Minowa, Maclaran, and Stevens 2019; Yazdanparast et al. 2018) and how depictions of gender reflect and shape societal values (Gurrieri, Brace-Govan, and Cherrier, 2016; Minowa, Maclaran, and Stevens 2014). Less research has explored how meanings of gender are shaped by the interplay of wider socio-historical discourses, market systems, and consumers' lived experiences. In particular, there remains a need to unpack "the critical connection to consumer voices, resistance, realities, and multiple intersecting flows of power" (Steinfield et al. 2019, p. 406).

In this paper, we make use of gendered advertising, by which we refer to displays, expressions, and stereotypes that characterize persons as sex-class members and reflect fundamental features of the social structure (Goffman 1976, p. 8), to explore how young American women engage with gendered power relations embedded in these texts. By doing so, we examine the relationship between cultural narratives of gender and power and market systems at the level of experience and interpretation, which works to sustain the power of men and the subordination of women (Connell 1995). As a privileged discourse through and about objects, advertising is a site of intersection between economic and cultural spheres, and between consumers and institutional forces (Leiss et al. 2018). It has long reached deeply into our most serious concerns, drawing upon, amplifying, reframing, and circulating themes and ideas within society and culture (Borgerson and Schroeder 2002).

Privileging women's voices and situating these within their socially instituted contexts (Moisander, Valtonen, and Hirsto 2009), this research responds to a longstanding chasm between analyses of how structures inscribe women in gendered power relations and how women relate to these structures. In so doing, we draw on postfeminism, theorized as a sensibility that involves a (double) entanglement with feminism, simultaneously taking it into account and fiercely repudiating it (McRobbie 2009, p.12). Circulating within cultural discourses and consumer culture, postfeminism interpellates women as choosing to be empowered and autonomous subjects through consumption, body management, self-surveillance, self-discipline, and emotional labor (Gill 2007). Our theoretical framework emerged from asking: 1) how do women engage with discourses around gendered power relations in their readings of advertisements; and 2) what is the significance of these engagements for women, marketing, and society more generally? We contribute to the goals of this special issue by building on Riley, Evans, and Mackiewicz's (2016) conception of the postfeminist gaze, illustrating how it is directed both internally and externally, informs young women's readings of ads and themselves as readers, and risks engendering complacency around gender inequality, and intersects with other kinds of marginalization.

This article begins by tracing the trajectory of gendered advertisements and gendered readers of advertisements. Next, we elaborate on postfeminism as our key theoretical framework before delineating our sociocultural context and methodological approach. We then present four idiographic case studies followed by a cross-case analysis where we demonstrate how a postfeminist positioning manifests in young women's readings of gendered advertisements. We conclude by discussing the societal implications of these findings and suggesting avenues for future macromarketing research.

Literature Review

Gendered Advertisements

Historically, advertisements portrayed a clear gender dichotomy, depicting women as passive, eroticized, and vulnerable objects and men as dominant, powerful, active subjects (Goffman 1976). In recent decades, however, advertising has shifted towards other representations of masculinity and femininity, some challenging traditional gender binaries (Stevens and Ostberg 2012; Zayer, McGrath, and Castro-González 2020). Beginning in the 1990s, advertisers began marketing female empowerment by portraying women as autonomous and empowered subjects, not constrained by inequalities or power imbalances, but as embodying active, confident, and autoerotic sexualities for themselves (Gill 2008). Today, there exist many variations of the empowered female subject in popular culture, including the young, heterosexual, desiring *midriff*, always “up for” sex; the *vengeful woman* determined to punish her (ex)partner for his transgressions; the *femme fatale*, who uses her sexual attractiveness not only to feel empowered, but to exert power over men; the *hot lesbian* kissing or touching other women while embodying the norms of heterofeminine attractiveness; the *career woman* blending conventional feminine codes with individual empowerment in the workplace; and the *housewife* reclaiming domesticated femininity and pursuing a life of leisure and luxury (Gill 2008, 2009; Minowa, Maclaran, and Stevens 2019; Munford and Waters 2014). Recently, advertising portrayals have begun to incorporate a wider range of intersectional imagery, incorporating diversity across multiple dimensions at once, e.g. gender, size, age, physical ability, sexual orientation, and race (Crenshaw 1991; Gopaldas and DeRoy 2015). Paradoxically, such representations of diversity have been charged with reinforcing mainstream, heteronormative beauty standards, epitomized by exoticized

Black, Brown, or Asian models who otherwise conform to dominant ideals of White beauty standards (Harrison et al. 2017).

The positions afforded to men in contemporary advertising have also broadened and men are increasingly subject to physical violence, denigration, and sexual objectification (Baron 2006; Gill 2009). Historically, campaigns featuring male models in sexual or decorative roles, elsewhere referred to as “beefcakes” (Jones, Stanaland, and Gelb 1998), were characterized as products of a gay male aesthetic (Bordo 1999) or accused of simply transposing men for women in quintessential heterosexual appeals, as Schauer (2005) suggests in relation to pornography targeting women. Contemporary ads sexualizing male bodies are believed to encourage multiple gazes, granting women “permission” to look, desire, and laugh (Gulas, McKeage, and Weinberger 2010). Indeed, because such depictions threaten the established gender hierarchy, sexualized men often feature in humorous or ironic contexts (Gill 2009). However, as Scharrer et al. (2006, p. 220) argue, this tactic may actually “reinforce traditional gender roles by making a character’s venture into counter-stereotypical roles seem absurd or ridiculous.”

Gendered Readers

Advertisements, Stern (1993) argued, should be studied as gender-specific, that is, as either androcentric (male-centered) or gynocentric (female-centered). O’Donohoe (2000) suggests, however, that classifying ads in this way is not entirely straightforward, as individuals are both active and inscribed readers of advertising texts. Instead, she posits that while ads may suggest preferred readings, readers draw from ancillary discourses and personal experience when making sense of an ad. Stern (2000) subsequently proposed four models of reader response: *dominance* suggests a refusal to engage with a text, reading the contents of one’s own mind rather than the

text itself; *submission* involves the reader accepting the text uncritically; *interaction* occurs when the reader and the text enter into a dialogue, signifying a balance between dominance and submission, and *resistance* occurs when, through cultivated awareness, a female reader refuses to read an androcentric text as it was (allegedly) intended. Stern (2000) goes on to suggest that while male readers typically dominate both androcentric and gynocentric texts, female readers are more likely to interact with gynocentric advertising texts and submit to androcentric ones. Subsequent research has attended to the cultural discourses that interpellate readers as particular kinds of gendered subjects, highlighting how women may engage in oppositional readings of ads by shifting among multiple, diverse, and at times paradoxical interpretive positions informed by socio-historic discourses (Kates and Shaw-Garlock 1999). More recently, Zayer, McGrath, and Castro-González (2020) identified different strategies men use in legitimizing and delegitimizing gender ideals in advertising that both reiterate and challenge institutionalized gender norms produced within dominant power structures. Collectively, this research provides insight into how consumers – within the parameters of cultural and commercial discourses – act as arbitrators of meaning.

Central to understanding the gendered, power-laden relationship readers establish with texts is the concept of the gaze. To gaze implies more than the act of looking – it constitutes an institutional practice “enabled by symbolic power that is not held by any one individual, but which may structure individual looking” (Riley, Evans, and Mackiewicz 2016, p. 108). Much work on the gaze stems from Mulvey’s (1975) research within film studies, where she describes the male gaze as an assertion of sexual power and pleasure when looking at female bodies. Subsequent work has highlighted how popular culture, including ads, are instruments of and invoke the male gaze, “producing limited representations of women, the good life, and sexual fantasy from a male point

of view” (Schroeder and Zwick 2004, p. 30). The notion of a female gaze, in comparison, has received limited attention. Some prior research has theorized a female gaze as one in which women are expected to either over-identify with female characters via a process of idealization, or take up the male gaze in a form of masquerade to view themselves as “gazed upon” (Doane 1982; Gamman and Mashment 1988; Mulvey 1975). In studying women’s interactions with other women, Riley, Evans, and Mackiewicz (2016) introduce the notion of a “postfeminist gaze” which involves “an oscillating dynamic between subject and object: women are scrutinized by a viewer (a subject) who, in her scrutiny, also has to scrutinize herself (as an object)” (p. 108). Further, although some have surmised that exposure to feminist theory may encourage reflexive resistance to hegemonic texts (Murray 2015; Stern 2000), more research is needed to understand how reflexivity may at once promote and preclude gendered ad meanings.

Theoretical Framework

Postfeminism

In the context of this study, postfeminism is conceptualized as a distinct sensibility that embraces pervasive neoliberal tenets of personal empowerment, sexual agency, pleasure, and emancipation (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009). Postfeminism is not a set of static beliefs; rather, it is an assemblage of ever-changing, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory discourses which work to subtly undermine women’s position in society (Gill and Scharff 2011). This occurs through processes of “re-signification” and “reterritorialization,” by which feminist discourses are taken into account, emptied of their political significance, and used to “install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasize that [feminism] is no longer needed” and equality has been achieved (McRobbie 2009, p. 12).

Extant scholarship, particularly within feminist media studies, has investigated the materialization of postfeminism in media culture, highlighting its presence and influence within cultural discourses (Gill 2007). Herein, women and girls are interpellated as *choosing* to be empowered and autonomous subjects through consumption, body management, self-surveillance, self-discipline, and emotional labor (Gill 2007). Those deviating from heteronormative standards of beauty are represented in different ways and with different meanings (Gill 2008, 2009; Gopaldas and DeRoy 2015). By and large, conceptualizations of postfeminism have tended to ignore Black, Brown, and Asian women, though discourses of postfeminism are undeniably raced (Springer 2007). Black and Brown women, for example, are not afforded the same active and empowering sexuality as White women, but are closely associated with nature, authenticity, soul, and notions of primitive culture (Gill 2009; Lutz and Collins 1993). Black femininity in particular, is rooted in “strongblackwomen” discourses that attribute to Black women a compulsive, emasculating independence that they are expected to mobilize for the benefit of others (e.g. family, community), negating their own pleasures or desires (Springer 2007). Postfeminist representations of lesbianism often feature lipstick (feminine) lesbians rather than butch (masculine) lesbians, and are typically photographed in pairs, appealing to the male fantasy that often plays out in porn aimed at straight men (Gill 2009; Mikkonen 2010). Working-class women tend to be excluded entirely, since they are not seen as upholding respectable femininity as a standard by which to aspire to (Skeggs 1997, p. 3). This is in direct contrast to working-class men whose laboring status reaffirms a hegemonic masculinity premised on the embodiment of toughness and physical strength, which, once eroticized, becomes subject to the gaze (Baron 2006). In this vein, postfeminism has also rearticulated representations of men and masculinity as “vulnerable” and/or “in crisis,” having been wounded by feminism (Gill 2009).

Although media representations, including advertisements, constantly mutate (Gill 2017), they nonetheless denote various (gendered, racial, sexual, and classed) power relations which underpin the emergence of consumer subjectivities, or ways of understanding oneself (Gill 2008; Riley, Evans, and Mackiewicz 2016). This is significant given the power of representational practices to naturalize and sustain inequalities (Borgerson and Schroeder 2002). Further, insofar as power is believed to operate *through* the construction of subjects, rather than via top-down imposition (Foucault 1977), postfeminism has hatched new technologies-of-self that women employ in their physical, psychic, and sexual lives to become knowable and normative subjects (Rome and Lambert 2020).

Methodology

Sociocultural Context

The current study adopts a recent historical lens to interrogate a posteriori values and contextualization of meaning in relation to gender and postfeminist discourses. This, Dholakia (2012, p. 222) argues, is especially important for macromarketing and critical research which “needs to refer to historical maps even as it charts pathways to new emancipatory and transformational futures.” Specifically, data generation was conducted in the United States at the beginning of 2014, just a few years prior to the election of Donald Trump, the Women’s March, and the MeToo movement. In many ways, 2014 was a watershed year for women: hashtag campaigns like #YesAllWomen and #BeenRapedNeverReported began to take off, raising the collective awareness of misogyny and violence against women; men were invited to join the discourse as active partners following Emma Watson’s kickoff of the United Nation’s “HeForShe” campaign; and Beyoncé famously performed at the MTV video music awards with the word

“FEMINIST” lit up behind her (Banet-Weiser 2018). The cultural and social movements of 2014, then, can be seen as a catalyst for shifting gender roles, heralding a new generation of women who feel empowered “simply because they live in a society where women presumably can now do anything they wish” (Liss and Erchull 2010, p. 86).

Methods

This paper draws on a wider study examining women’s sexual narratives and their engagements with media culture, gender, and sex. Employing a context-attentive epistemology (Askegaard and Linnet 2011), we explore how young women navigate, negotiate, and shape discourses around gendered power relations in their readings of advertisements. Multiple depth interviews were conducted by the first author with 14 participants aged 20-31 over a period of five months (January – May). Key criteria for inclusion was that participants *themselves* identified as young American women. At the time of data generation, the first author was also a young (mid-20s) American woman, which was beneficial in establishing rapport. Participants were initially recruited through the first author’s personal network and subsequently through word-of-mouth (snowballing) efforts. The sample was diverse in terms of socio-economic status, background, education, and sexual orientation, although it comprised mainly White, heterosexual participants (see Table 1).

[Table 1 about here]

Each participant was interviewed two or three times (with each interview lasting between 1.5 – 2.5 hours) at locations of their choosing (cafés, campus, home, etc.). First interviews focused on the women’s engagements with gendered advertisements. Beginning with grand tour questions (McCracken 1988), participants were asked about their general perceptions of gender and sex in

advertising and to interpret any advertisements they could recall in relation to these themes. Consistent with prior research (Kates and Shaw-Garlock 1999), participants then flipped through a magazine (choosing from a selection of issues, e.g., *Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *InStyle*, and *Details*), commenting on the ads as though they were reading them with a friend. Finally, they were asked to reflect on a common set of 18 ads selected by the researchers based on themes raised by previous analyses of gendered advertising content, including various portrayals of gender stereotypes, power relations, violence, intersectional representations, and sex appeal (Beetles and Harris 2005; Reichert 2002). Consistent with prior advertising research (Elliott and Elliott 2005; Mikkonen 2010), this core set functioned as visual elicitation material, evoking discussions and interpretations across similar stimuli that rendered more straightforward comparisons. Of these, five advertisements (see Appendix) are highlighted in this paper to illuminate shared responses to different portrayals, themes, and intersectional representations around gendered power relations. Figures A1 and A2 feature White and Black midriffs, respectively. The ad for Juicy Couture (Figure A1) – portrays a White model gazing directly at the viewer with her mouth slightly agape, superimposed onto a backdrop with a blue sky and palm trees. The ad for Seven Jeans (Figure A2) is in black and white and features a Black model posing topless, wearing white jeans, a confident stance, and serious expression. The ad for Liquid Pluwr (Figure A3) features a White male (“beefcake”) model and has working-class (blue-collar) connotations. The ad for Dolce and Gabbana (Figure A4) – referred to in the text as Dolce and Gabbana I – portrays a “self-determined seductress” consistent with representations of femme fatale figures (Minowa, Maclaran, and Stevens 2019, p. 1); although the female model largely conforms to heteronormative beauty standards, the references to Byzantinism may hint at a foreign (exotic) aesthetic. She is also surrounded by six men of indeterminate ethnic origin. None of the

men look directly at her, but rather at the viewer or each other, possibly signaling the ad's adherence to a gay window strategy wherein advertisers target both hetero and homosexual audiences (Tsai 2012). The second ad for Dolce and Gabbana (Figure A5) – referred to in the text as Dolce and Gabbana II – depicts a man pinning a woman to the ground by her wrist while four other men watch and has been lambasted for glamorizing and legitimizing gang rape (Gurrieri, Brace-Govan, and Cherrier 2016). All the models in this ad appear White. Unlike the other ads featured here, this was not part of a recent or current campaign at the time of the fieldwork, but was included as a way of facilitating discussions around gender violence and the embedded power implications. Its notoriety offered an additional frame used in the mediation of meaning.

Subsequent interviews focused on the women's broader narratives in relation to gender, sex, relationships, love, and friendship. Although participants generally adopted a binary view of their biological sex and gender, often conflating the two, they were more reflexive in these later discussions.

In total, 30 interviews were conducted, involving 52 hours of recorded dialogue, and over 1,060 single-spaced pages of text. Each interview was transcribed and analyzed using the hermeneutic part-to-whole approach, which involved an iterative process of interpretation and reinterpretation to develop a sense of the whole (Arnold and Fischer 1994). Analysis involved two distinct but interrelated phases. Phase one comprised idiographic interpretation, treating each participant as an individual case. Because participants were interviewed on two distinct issues, two separate narratives were generated by the researchers before one overarching narrative was written. Adhering to a critical feminist methodology (Bristor and Fischer 1993), these narratives situated women's voices and experiences within their socially instituted contexts (Moisander, Valtonen, and Hirsto 2009). Conceptualizing consumer narratives not as recollections, but as performances

in which various cultural discourses are simultaneously enacted and silenced, allowed for a robust cultural analysis of the structural and ideological conditions that are at once culturally constructed and constituting (Moisander, Valtonen, and Hirsto 2009). By conceptualizing narratives as performances and interviews as collaborative, it was understood that meanings were negotiated and co-produced by the researcher, elicitation materials, and participant(s). This is important when considering the interviewer's position as both a researcher and a "peer," which may have rendered some interpretations, assessments, and discourses more readily available than others. However, co-authors who were not "peers" formed an interpretive group, offering some balance and distance in interpretations.

The second, more abstract phase identified themes and common storylines across the cases to facilitate a holistic understanding. Postfeminism, for example, emerged organically as a salient macro-level discourse through which the participants interpreted gendered advertisements and their broader narratives, regardless of their stated orientation toward feminism. Much phenomenologically-based hermeneutical research stops here in order to ensure the findings remain rooted in individual's first-hand experiences. This analysis, however, followed calls to consider the "context of context" and move beyond mere descriptions of individuated and decontextualized experiences, by questioning what "appears" to whom and why (Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Borgerson and Schroeder 2002). To achieve this, previously identified themes were re-interpreted against the backdrop of postfeminism, linking these themes to a wider cultural context. This approach facilitated macro systemic and social theoretical conclusions concerning how participants' advertising interpretations shape and are shaped by discourses around gendered power relations.

Findings

Below, we present four idiographic case studies centered around five gendered advertisements (see Figures A1–A5). Consistent with previous research presenting in-depth case studies (Lambert 2018), these four women were selected because of contrasts in how they crafted their identity projects: of the fourteen participants, Chelsea and Lauren express the strongest allegiances to traditional gender roles, whereas Ivy and Aaliyah self-identify as feminists, although there were considerable differences in their understanding of this term. While the themes presented below reflect broader patterns emerging across the study, they are offered as evidence of the *existence* of phenomena without making claims about their *incidence* in the wider population (McQuarrie and McIntyre 1988). Following the case studies, we present a cross-case analysis where we build on Riley, Evans, and Mackiewicz’s (2016) conception of the postfeminist gaze to illustrate how it informs young women’s engagement with ads.

Idiographic Case Studies

Ivy

Twenty-two-year-old Ivy grew up in a large family in a small town. Raised primarily by her “*conservative religious*” mother in a mid-southern state, it was not until she finished high school that she began distancing herself from the church and developed an explicit feminist consciousness. During a two-year internship, Ivy began encountering people from different backgrounds, cultures, and religions:

I think it really just fueled my association with being a feminist. I didn’t realize that until I left [home]. And it’s been really overwhelming coz ... I have felt that. I have felt people treating me differently because I’m a woman, or questioning me, or associating certain names to me because I am this or that.

Although Ivy refers to “*people treating me differently because I’m a woman,*” her relatively recent identity as a feminist tends to be expressed in critiques of gendered stereotypes, social structures, and traditions, rather than accounts of personal experience. This is evidenced most prominently in her readings of ads like the one for Liquid Plumer (Figure A3), which, in her mind, exacerbates gender stereotypes:

I’m really not attracted to the typical male plumber. ... just like, men solve the problems. Maybe I get too politicized in all these things, but it’s like the handyman, like he’ll fix the problems, he’ll fix the plumbing. I do it too sometimes ... like when you think of having like an exterminator come over if you have a bug problem or if you need a plumber, you automatically start registering ‘he’s’ in your brain. Not necessarily that that’s an awful thing, I just... I try to reject those types of typical like scenarios. ... And I’m just not super attracted to like buff muscle.

Ivy appears to treat this ad as a test of her feminist credentials, requiring her to connect the personal and the political. Wary of being drawn into lazy gender stereotypes, she rejects this ad for promoting a dated and clichéd representation of masculinity, and perhaps by implication, a sense of femininity as passive. In this way, she appears to be reflexively and conscientiously resisting the intended meanings of a text she considers androcentric (Stern 2000). At the same time, however, she qualifies her critique, noting that she may “*get too politicized in all these things,*” and that associating certain roles with men is “[*n*]ot necessarily... *an awful thing.*” This suggests a degree of reflexive doubt (Thomas, Pyle, Handelman 2019) about the intensity of her identification as a feminist. Furthermore, stating that she is “*not really attracted to the typical male plumber*” or “*super attracted to like buff muscle*” suggests that Ivy’s identification as a feminist does not entail a refusal of portrayals which objectify or sexualize men. Overall, her discussion of this ad encapsulates how (post)feminism involves multiple, competing, and sometimes contradictory discourses, not least when interpreting ads.

Alongside Ivy's concerns about being treated differently as a women, she demonstrates a desire to "check her privilege" (Freeman 2013), particularly with respect to race. This is evidenced most prominently in her readings of the two midriffs – the Black model for Seven Jeans (Figure A2) and the White model for Juicy Couture (Figure A1). With respect to the former, Ivy appreciates the ad for what she sees as its validation of otherness, and seeks to validate her own judgement of the model's semi-nudity as empowered:

I love this one. When I view this, I think of like an element of confidence with her and her body and her body language. And like, I don't look at this and [think] that's so risqué or that's too um, like scantily portrayed. I like it. I think this one's awesome.

Here, despite the model's nudity and averted gaze, Ivy praises her confidence whilst arguing that the image is not sexualized. Her interpretation of the model as not "*risqué*" or "*too scantily portrayed*," despite being topless seems to resonate with postcolonial notions of an indigenous "nude dark-skinned woman" whose skin color – though it is not mentioned – outweighs the sexual evocations (Lutz and Collins 1993, p. 172). In contrast, Ivy engages in a more critical reading of the Juicy Couture ad, pointing out its dehumanizing qualities ("*is that a Barbie doll or is that a human being?*"). Thus, while Ivy readily critiques the quintessential sexualized White midriff, often featured in advertising campaigns, she does not do the same for the Black midriff, instead affording her a sense of empowerment ("*confidence*"), consistent with postfeminist "strongblackwomen" representations (Springer 2007).

Elsewhere, for Ivy, the notion of female empowerment seems to be, at least in part, predicated on men's approval and/or desire, as is illustrated in her reading of the Dolce and Gabbana I ad (Figure A4). Bypassing much of the ad's complexity and intersections of race and sexuality, Ivy offers a relatively uncomplicated reading that aligns well with her view of "*confident*" midriffs:

It's like there's a confidence in [this] ... in terms of like a more dominant sex. Obviously [the] woman [is] the more dominant one... It's like the men are flocked to [this] woman ... [It's] just untraditional, that's why I find like more value in [it].

Here, Ivy imagines an empowered female subject and highlights the productive role men play in validating this sense of empowerment. Specifically, she performs her feminism by finding “*value*” in the ad’s “*untraditional*” imagery, illustrating the tendency of postfeminism to co-opt feminist discourses in ways which satisfy young peoples’ desires for uniqueness (Springer 2007). In this ad, Ivy views “*[the] woman [as] the more dominant one;*” however, this is based on a postfeminist script that privileges the model’s seductive power (“*It’s like the men are flocked to [this] woman*”), rather than her refusal to subject herself to the male gaze. In this way, the male gaze is desired in ways that “do not altogether displace earlier valuations and double standards” (Gill 2009, p. 743). The predicating of female dominance, even partly, on a woman’s desirability (to men) reflects an internalized male gaze (Gill 2008) or rather, a parallel set of male and postfeminist gazes (Riley, Evans, and Mackiewicz 2016, p. 109), compromising Ivy’s ability to resist the ad’s androcentric theme. Similar difficulties are apparent in her reading of the Dolce and Gabbana II ad (Figure A5):

This one is very interesting to me. I’m more on the like offensive lines. ... I don’t necessarily know what they’re trying to convey through this image, but it’s just like, the body language is what stands out, like is almost eerie to me. It’s just like being held down kind of thing. This one doesn’t settle well with me. ... I just don’t like that whole dominance role portrayed in this, like I can have you, kind of thing. And maybe that’s not what they intentionally meant by it, but that’s the unintended consequence.

Ivy had dissected this ad in university and so her interpretation seems to reflect a degree of socialization into particular academic feminist perspectives (Sowards and Renegar 2004). However, given her previous encounter with the ad and her own “personal is political” stance, Ivy’s reading of it is surprisingly circumspect, particularly relative to her interpretation of the Liquid Plumr ad. Her language is hesitant and indirect, and while she expresses unease at “*the whole dominance thing*” and sees herself as “*on the offensive lines,*” she also expresses uncertainty

(“*I don’t necessarily know what they’re trying to convey*”), and gives the advertiser the benefit of the doubt (“*maybe that’s not what they intentionally meant by it*”). In this case, the political does not translate easily into the personal.

Ivy’s account highlights her proclivity to exercise surveillance over herself as a feminist engaging with ads, as well as the models portrayed in them. Enacting her feminist identity, she sometimes questions and other times validates her own judgements of the models. She worries about being overly critical in her interpretations, resonating with postfeminism’s “taming” of feminism to render it “more docile, less threatening” (Dean 2010, p. 394). Ivy tends to base her critiques on a popularized (post)feminist discourse that is often contradictory and poorly equipped to address intersectionality or power in relation to gender displays (McRobbie 2009). Thus, while she confidently discounts some imagery that she feels objectifies (White) women, her feminist critique does not extend to other ads depicting women as objects of the male gaze or potential male violence, or to ads where gender roles are overlaid with stereotypes such as those concerning race.

Aaliyah

Born and raised by a single mother in the outskirts of a large city on the West Coast, twenty-one-year-old Aaliyah’s feminist praxis is largely premised on her lived experiences as a young Black woman:

It’s very important for me not to feel inferior ... There are times when he’ll [boyfriend] say things without really meaning to. So, for example, he’ll be like, ‘oh that guy’s a sissy.’ And I’m like, well, I’m a sister and that’s where sissy comes from, like what do you mean is he a sissy? Is he a sister? Is a sister a bad thing? ... For him they’re just words, but for me as a woman they’re not just words, they are things that bring me down all the time.

A consistent theme in Aaliyah’s narrative is her sense of ads resonating deeply with various aspects of her own narrative. In the case of the Liquid Plumr ad (Figure A3), for example, she incorporates

the appeal that the “*working man*” or “*everyday kind of dude*” holds for her, and the pleasure she takes in a romantic relationship stable enough to have developed into “*habit*.”

It’s also the idea of like a working man, which I’ve always been turned on by. ... There’s just something about this guy being like an everyday kind of dude where he just goes to work and he does his thing and he might come home and like do his hobby or read a book or I don’t know. But there’s habit here that I like.

In this reading, Aaliyah interacts with the ad in a way that reinforces traditional gender power dynamics, where the sexualized man is not objectified or victimized, but rather interpreted as a figure of authority and productivity (Gill 2009; Schroeder and Zwick 2004). The idea of an “everyday” man with a stable work and home life is something Aaliyah seems to value in men. This may, in part, reflect the absence she felt in relation to her own father. It also seems to resonate with her aspiration to have a stable partner and/or family that would counter prevailing discourses of the stereotypical “broken” Black family, particularly at a time when postfeminist media culture, and numerous studies and news reports tell Black women that this may be out of their reach (Chatman 2015, p. 935).

Aaliyah’s self-proclaimed feminist identity helps her legitimize her lived experiences, which she recognizes may set her apart from “*the norm*.”

Because I don’t fit in with the norm, I’m automatically labeled as not normal, as the rebel. And it’s like, why can’t I be what’s normal, you know? Why can’t I be accepted?

That this remains a struggle is palpable in her engagement with the Dolce and Gabbana I ad (Figure A4). Here, the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and power that underscore her own narrative are highlighted:

I feel like I’ve been in this situation before. ... like when I’ve been approached by a guy that’s just like you know, dropped like a really awful one-liner, or, you know, like was just staring at me, and I’m like, do I have something on my face? Is something wrong with me? Is it because I’m Black? ... And, you know, I don’t think I’m that pretty where people have to like gape at me ... it makes me feel uncomfortable.

This ad – particularly the male attention implied – incites an “*uncomfortable*” feeling in Aaliyah as she recalls instances where she was made to feel like “*something is wrong with [her]*” because people were “*just staring*” or “*gap[ing]*.” In what seems like a departure from postfeminist discourse, Aaliyah does not see the inclusion of six men as validating the model’s desirability, but rather an insinuation that she is being dominated and consumed like a “*piece of meat*” (Gurrieri, Brace-Govan, and Cherrier 2016). At the same time, Aaliyah appears to relate to the model’s position as the racialized “*Other*,” who is presented as both an exotic yet familiar object of attraction (Harrison, Thomas, and Cross 2017). For Aaliyah, being in such a position provokes feelings of insecurity and confusion about why she might be receiving attention (“*I don’t think I’m that pretty*”), attributing this to her racial identity (“*is it because I’m Black?*”). This may reflect an internalization of postfeminist conceptions of race and gender that presume those who do not adhere to dominant beauty ideals face being mocked or overlooked as if they are invisible (Riley, Evans, and Mackiewicz 2016).

Other times, Aaliyah draws more explicitly from a postfeminist discourse, as is the case in her readings of the two midriff ads. Aaliyah is positive yet undecided about the Black midriff in the Seven Jeans ad (Figure A2):

[O]vercoming skin is such a big deal, and for this woman to kind of bare it to the world, I think that’s hot. And while she’s not even doing anything that’s super sexual besides be shirtless here, I don’t even know that you can consider that being sexual, I think this is sexy because she is proud.

For Aaliyah, who incorporates intersectionality and inclusivity into her personal feminist praxes, the model in the Seven Jeans ad is celebrated as a powerful, political symbol of Black feminism who is “*sexy because she is proud*,” yet, at the same time, is “*not even doing anything super sexual besides being shirtless*.” Similar status is not afforded to the White midriff in the Juicy Couture ad (Figure A1), however:

I don't know... there's just something about it that kind of turns me off... I feel like she's showing off her body in a way that's confident, you know. I guess maybe it's just the pink of the – like what she's wearing, maybe that's what it is. If she was like wearing a bikini maybe it'd be really, like way sexier or something.

Notable in her reading is the suggestion that while she appreciates the White midriff's "*showing off her body in a way that's confident*," she is too covered-up to be sexy. This suggests a body-insecurity that is off-putting for Aaliyah and considered toxic in postfeminist culture (Gill and Orgad 2015). Indeed, her account of expressing body confidence among her boyfriend and his friends echoes Gill's (2003) account of postfeminist subjectification:

I'm that girl that like, [boyfriend] has friends over all the time and I'll walk around in my underwear like just to go to the kitchen or something. And if his friends look, they look... I feel like I shouldn't have to cover up myself.

Thus, body- and sex-positivity appear to be rooted in Aaliyah's feminist identity, making it difficult to critique potentially objectifying ads, not least the Dolce and Gabbana II ad (Figure A5). Like Ivy, Aaliyah, connects this viewing of the ad to her earlier classroom encounter with it, and recalls some of her teacher's critique:

I've seen this one before actually. Yeah, and I felt like it's really rapey. Ugh... I just remember [former teacher] talking about like, how unusual this [is]... where this woman was placed in this ad and the way these men are around her in a way that may not be so positive. And how this company was selling rape in a weird way and contributing to rape culture ... I dunno, like if I saw this before seeing that, I'd be like, this is kinda weird, but you know, I wouldn't pick up on the rapeyness if I didn't know any better.

Aaliyah explicitly refers to the "*rapeyness*" of the ad and expresses some revulsion towards it ("*ugh*"). However, the qualifications and hesitations in Aaliyah's account of this ad are notable. It could be argued that she is struggling to recall what she was taught about it rather than engaging with it in her own terms. Her admission that she "*wouldn't pick up on the rapeyness if [she] didn't know any better*" is a striking element in an otherwise resistant reading (Stern 2000), but less so in the context of postfeminism as a tame or contradictory sensibility (Dean 2010; Gill 2007, 2008).

Aaliyah, like Ivy, identifies as a feminist, but when engaging with these ads, she seems less concerned with policing this identity than using the ads to examine her lived experiences as a young Black woman who privileges sex- and body-positivity. Perhaps because of her own experiences around racial discrimination, Aaliyah identifies potential instances of disempowerment more than the other women in this study, even if her critique of the Dolce and Gabbana II ad is relatively tame and filtered through the lens of academic knowledge. At the same time, as a young Black woman unaccustomed to being seen as “*pretty*” or “*normal*,” she seems to internalize rather than explicitly challenge the disempowerment she sees in ads. For Aaliyah, then, displays of gendered power in advertising seem to amplify postfeminist proclivities towards self-blame and sexual agency (McRobbie 2009).

Chelsea

Twenty-four-year-old Chelsea seems the epitome of a modern-day Southern housewife, an identity she has carefully cultivated and refined, particularly over two years of married life. Growing up wealthy, Chelsea has had many opportunities. Recently graduating with a Master’s degree in business, she describes herself as a “*stay-at-home-mom-without-the-kid-right-now*.” Having lived in the South all of her life, she views herself as the quintessential “Southern Belle,” striving to live in accordance with traditionally gendered roles:

I’m really into like men and women roles. So, I like for the man to be the man and the woman to be the woman. ... I think the man does like the handy work around the house. I think he is the sole provider of income. I mean if you have a flat tire, he’s the one you call, just things like that. I mean, just the typical like Southern man roles. ... I think that women should take care of the child, they should clean the house, do the cooking, laundry. I mean, typical.

This adherence is perhaps most explicit in her reading of the Dolce and Gabbana II ad (Figure A5). Completely bypassing the controversy surrounding it, Chelsea instead identifies several “*sexy*” cues, reminding us that the whole is indeed more than the sum of parts:

This one is sexy because they're oiled up for one. And he's on top of her and she's in like a sexy bustier or I don't know what, like thrusting. Yeah, it doesn't get much sexier than that. I mean, looks like they're gonna do it any second. ... I do think it's sexy. I think she makes it sexy with like the thrust pose that she's in.

Chelsea finds this ad exciting, perhaps because she ignores the four men standing by and reads it as a couple on the verge of having “*thrusting*” sex. Consistent with Gill’s (2003) notion of postfeminist subjectification, Chelsea emphasizes the woman’s “*sexy bustier*,” and the “*thrust pose that she’s in*,” this woman, in Gill’s (2003) words, is evidently “up for it.” At the same time, the man exerts control by being “*on top of her*,” which seems to chime with Chelsea’s identification as a Southern housewife who wants “*the man to be the man*.”

In a related vein, Chelsea valorizes stereotypical indices of heteronormative femininity, often highlighting women’s physical attributes (“*I have a thing about being skinny, I think skinny is always better no matter what*”) and underpinning the postfeminist tenet that a “*sexy*” (i.e. “*skinny*”) body is a women’s key source of identity (Gill 2007). Thus, she praises the model in the Juicy Couture ad (Figure A1), who – despite issues of inauthenticity – represents a postfeminist ideal to which she can aspire:

This is over-the-top and not realistic. ... [B]ut she is sexy coz of her legs ... I like her long legs.

Zayer, McGrath, and Castro-González (2020) find that perceptions of inauthenticity contribute to the delegitimation of stereotypical ideals. For Chelsea, however, despite the ad’s inauthenticity, gender stereotypes are not delegitimized. Rather, they are reinforced and internalized through a judgmental gaze (Riley, Evans, and Mackiewicz 2016), through which objectification is exacerbated by reorienting the focus from the person to a specific body part(s) (Gurrieri, Brace-Govan, and Cherrier 2016), such as “long legs.”

Chelsea interprets the Black midriff in the Seven Jeans ad (Figure A2) in a way which differs markedly not only from her interpretation of the White midriff ad, but also from those of Ivy and Aaliyah. While they engage imaginatively with the personality of the model, Chelsea's interpretations seem to undermine the model's personhood. She expresses some ambivalence about the sexiness of the ad, but for her, the model's skin color and body shape appear to invite a degree of objectification, reducing her to an aesthetic effect:

I like this one because it's all about the jeans. I mean that's the only thing to focus on. ... I do like that she is Black with the white jeans, I think it stands out more, but her herself doesn't make it sexy I wouldn't say. ... I think any model that was darker skinned would look good in that and it would be sexy. ... But actually, I think the Seven ad would look better if they had a smaller model on it. ... maybe more toned in the legs or something, like I feel like this could look better. Like the jeans don't look the best on her.

Chelsea's reading of this ad seems to suggest that on one level, darker skinned models may be interchangeable in making white jeans "*stand out*" and look "*sexy*." However, equating skinniness with sexiness, in line with postfeminist discourses of beauty, she judges the model's body as failing to meet her own standards of heterosexy attractiveness.

Further processes of othering and objectification are evidenced in Chelsea's reading of the Dolce and Gabbana I ad (Figure A4) and its portrayal of an eroticized "other:"

I didn't think this was sexy at all. The men are attractive, I don't think she's attractive. I don't know, it looks Middle Eastern or something.... I don't like that one. No, I think that's strange.

Unsettled by the ad's culturally ambiguous and potentially queer imagery, Chelsea largely dominates it (Stern 2000) by invoking heterosexual sentiments ("*the men are attractive*") that align with her conservative values and postfeminist discourses which idealize heterosexual relations (Gill and Scharff 2011). Further, her dismissal of an ad that "*looks Middle Eastern or something*" suggests an aversion to an exotic "other" who deviates from the conventional postfeminist figure

(Borgerson and Schoreder 2002), perhaps capturing some of the xenophobic sentiments that were beginning to emerge at that time (Banet-Weiser 2018).

Similarly, in pursuing a “degree of voyeuristic detachment” (Patterson and Elliott 2010, p. 238), Chelsea dismisses images that appear to threaten her sense of distinction between social groups, such as the blue-collar “beefcake” featured in the Liquid Plumr ad (Figure A3):

[Laughing] I mean it’s just awkward. Like a plumber would not look like that. That’s what they’re getting at. It’s just unrealistic. ... I mean, he’s cute. His pants are fitting kind of strangely right now [laughing]. But I mean, he’s good looking, but that’s not realistic, he’s just kind of awkward I think.

Chelsea’s evaluation of the ad as lacking authenticity suggests some interaction between class and gender expectations for her insofar as she expects men in this blue-collar occupation to be rugged rather than “*cute*” or “*good-looking*.” Consistent with prior findings that women respond to sexualized male models with laughter, embarrassment, guilt, or disinterest (Eck 2003), this reading seems to reinforce rather than challenge gender and class stereotypes.

Chelsea, then, does not identify as a feminist, but instead presents herself as upholding conservative values around traditional gender roles. In line with this, she tends to scrutinize models and her interpretations of ads for their ability to conform to traditional discourses of femininity and masculinity. In so doing, Chelsea draws on postfeminism in order to make judgements in anticipation of how women’s bodies or body parts may be used or consumed by others (Riley, Evans, and Mackiewicz 2016, p. 95). In particular, she views conventional (White) femininity as an embodied asset, and validates postfeminist notions of heterosexiness and women’s right to express and use their sexuality (Gill and Scharff 2011). The subtleties of a self-policing gaze manifest more clearly when she resists or discounts imagery that seems to threaten her “traditional” values by validating otherness in terms of class, sexuality, or race.

Lauren

The first author met twenty-two-year-old Lauren through Ivy. Lauren and Ivy are friends, although Lauren notes that they “*don’t agree on a lot of things.*” Like Ivy, Lauren grew up in a big family in a small (Southern) town. Unlike Ivy, however, Lauren’s family is not particularly religious; this is something Lauren came to on her own after entering university. She recalls:

I partied a lot in high school and I was really wild in high school. Then I came up here and was kind of wild freshman year and then just kind of got sick of it. I was like, I’m not happy doing this I started going to church and met like all these girls that day. And I had like prayed about getting friends – like real friends and not just people that I partied with.

For the past two years, Lauren has strengthened her identity as a Christian, adopting what could be described as an egalitarian-but-traditional frame for understanding gender relations that is particularly common among Evangelical Christians who believe that equality is appropriate in spheres of life like education and employment, but not necessarily in others, such as within the family and household (Gallagher 2004). For example, while stating her autonomy in relation to employment (“*I can get a job to support myself*”), she nonetheless desires a traditional relationship in the home and “*being treated like really feminine.*” This fractured positioning comes across in many of Lauren’s readings of ads that – in line with the gender regime of postfeminism – re-imagine and in some cases re-eroticize discourses of gender difference and associated power relations (Gill 2007). For example, Lauren’s reading of the Liquid Plumber ad (Figure A3) valorizes her adherence to traditional gendered roles, taking note of the model’s laborer position. Specifically, Lauren is drawn to its brand of “*sexy*” masculinity associated with strength and physical labor:

I [like] the fact that you can see the plumber’s arms, his muscles, and that he’s doing something like manly. The Liquid Plumber [is] just a little bit more masculine, more sexy... he’s like working hard.

Lauren's reading reflects an almost nostalgic revival of traditional masculinity marked by manual labor and a muscular body (Baron 2006). Yet, despite her focus on his body, she does not objectify him for her own sexual pleasure, but, like Aaliyah, imbues him with a sense of agency and personhood ("*he's like working hard*"). In this reading, the man's body is important in signifying his activity, authority, and productivity (Schroeder and Zwick 2004). This interpretation preserves traditional notions of masculinity that – due to the perceived threat posed by feminism – are constantly in need of validation (Gill 2009). Women's bodies, in contrast, are regarded as central to their identity, as evidenced in Lauren's reading of the White midriff in the Juicy Couture ad (Figure A1):

She's just kind of like being sexy on her own and it's like all about her... it makes her legs look really long and sexy, and um, her butt's kind of out and her back is arched and she has her arms up, and so just the whole pose.

Drawing on a postfeminist script, Lauren rationalizes cues concerning female objectification by imagining the woman's performance as something she does for herself ("*it's like all about her*") rather than (strictly) for men (Amy-Chinn 2006). Furthermore, her comments on how the pose is constructed to convey sexiness highlights how the postfeminist gaze is predicated on "women's ability to understand the work that goes into female beauty practices" (Riley, Evans, and Mackiewicz 2016, p. 105).

If Lauren re-imagines gender difference and associated power relations in the previous two ads, she re-eroticizes them in her reading of the Dolce and Gabbana I ad (Figure A4):

I like this one, cause she's like the center of attention and no one's like grabbing at her, they're just all looking and just near her. ... it's like they find her sexy in a way, like maybe her power is sexy to them. Um, and she's like getting confidence from that. So, she's just like, kind of ignoring them a little bit coz she like knows.

In suggesting that "*maybe her power is sexy to them,*" she illustrates how feminist discourses around power – once conceived as "unfeminine" (Scharff 2012) – have become co-opted under

postfeminism as a way to seduce men. Her assertion that the female model is “*kind of ignoring them [men] a little bit coz she like knows*” echoes the common postfeminist trope that women should *knowingly* and *deliberately* play with their sexual power (Gill 2009), reinforcing how women remain the seductresses facing the male gaze.

Lauren’s gaze, however, is changed when faced with intersectional and more ambiguous ad imagery. For example, whereas she attributes sexual agency to the models in the Juicy Couture and Dolce and Gabbana I ads, this subjectivity is not afforded to the Black midriff featured in the Seven Jeans ad (Figure A2):

She’s topless, and so it’s obvious that they’re trying to show the pants. Whereas if she had a shirt on, first of all, it wouldn’t get your attention because she would just look normal.

In this case, Lauren adopts a detached interpretation, highlighting the potentially adverse marketing implications of using nudity as an attention-getting tactic, whilst disregarding the model and her personhood entirely. Such a reading could indicate an aversion to the objectifying nature of the ad, a departure from postfeminist discourse; despite the model’s ostensibly confident body language, she is, in fact, topless, looking away from the camera, and thus inviting the viewer to gaze at her in a subject position similar to what Gurrieri, Brace-Govan, and Cherrier (2016) identified as “the tease.” However, other comments have indicated Lauren’s readiness to scrutinize women in terms of specific body parts. Furthermore, her assertion that the Black model “*would just look normal*” if she had a shirt on may have less to do with objectification and more to do with seeing the Black woman as an asexual, undesiring, or undesirable “body left devoid of its full humanity” corresponding with postfeminist conceptions of Black women (Harrison, Thomas, and Cross 2017, p. 516).

Lauren similarly struggles with the representation of sexual agency in the Dolce and Gabbana II ad (Figure A5), which she describes in relatively uncertain terms:

This one I would say is probably like the most demeaning, maybe? ... Maybe like something's happening that she doesn't necessarily like want. And so not that he's like raping her cause obviously they're like wearing clothes and he's like not doing anything to her except holding her hands down. ... And so maybe, like I would see this and say, I don't want to be in her position.

Lauren questions whether "*something's happening that she doesn't necessarily like want,*" with her empathy for the woman in the ad possibly relating to an unwanted sexual experience she recounts in the course of the interviews. In this way, Lauren's first-hand experience with unequal gendered power relations seems to counteract the postfeminist discourse that perpetuates them. Nonetheless, she remains hesitant to characterize the scene in the ad as rape or assault, since "*they're like wearing clothes*" and "*not like doing anything to her except holding her hands down,*" perhaps because to suggest otherwise would highlight the model's – and by extension her own – lack of agency, resiliency, and strength, qualities that are essential to a postfeminist subjectivity.

Like Chelsea, then, Lauren does not identify as a feminist, and tends to valorize traditional discourses of gender difference and power relations. However, her engagement with ads reveal less of an inclination to "perform" as a traditional woman (Moisander, Valtonen, and Hirsto 2009) than her penchant to read from personal experience and imbue most of the models – as well as herself – with a postfeminist sense of agency. Like Aaliyah, some of Lauren's experiences bring her to the brink of reflexive feminist critique, that is, nonetheless, characterized by a degree of hesitancy. However, rather than turn her gaze from the models to herself as Aaliyah tends to do, Lauren tends to project herself into the ads, imagining the (White) models' lives, intentions, and experiences and attributing sexual agency to the models. Notably, there is no sense of the Black midriff's agency, indicating a potential blind spot with regard to the attribution of sexual agency in postfeminist discourse.

Cross-Case Analysis

More than two decades ago, Kates and Shaw-Garlock (1999, p. 47) theorized “a socially and historically positioned subject-consumer who can construct webs of meaning ... by shifting among different interpretive positions ... and by understanding text and self in relation to various discourses.” Our cross-case analysis reinforces the variability and complexity of young women’s engagements with gendered ads, as they shift between various interpretive frames and subject positions, such as feminist, racialized “Other,” or Southern housewife, for example. Regardless of these shifting positions, or their personal self-identification as (non)feminists, we suggest participants’ engagements with a range of gendered ads are underpinned by an overarching postfeminist discourse.

Specifically, building on the work of Riley, Evans, and Mackiewicz (2016), we argue that such ads evoke a postfeminist gaze. While these authors conceptualize a postfeminist gaze operating through women’s interpersonal relationships (i.e. women looking at other women), our findings suggest that gendered ads function as conduits through which cultural expectations around gender structure women’s looking in particular ways. Thus, we articulate our understanding of the postfeminist gaze as one in which women scrutinize models in ads as well as themselves, drawing on postfeminist ideals for both judgements.

In their engagements with gendered ads, we find the young women *scrutinize models* as objects to be looked at and/or as subjects with agendas of their own. This scrutiny allows them to present themselves and their experiences – at least in their interview performances – in certain ways, such as feminist, feminine, or empowered (Moisander, Valtonen, and Hirsto 2009). For example, Chelsea finds the Dolce and Gabbana II ad depicting gender violence sexually exciting; she imagines a woman knowingly and deliberately playing with her sexual power in a way that

allows “the man to be the man,” which sits well with her identification as a Southern housewife championing traditional gender roles.

Furthermore, we find that the young women also *scrutinize themselves* by turning the postfeminist gaze back on themselves; this involves policing themselves as gendered readers of ads (e.g., Ivy wondering whether she gets “too politicized” in her interpretations), or having read an ad, using it as a lens to question how their own gendered experiences and subjectivities measure up to postfeminist ideals of femininity, empowerment, and sexual agency (e.g. Aaliyah using the Dolce & Gabbana I ad to recall occasions when men staring at her highlighted her sense of otherness).

Thus, the postfeminist gaze evoked by gendered ads differs from other conceptions of gaze in that it is directed outward (women scrutinizing others), but also inward (women scrutinizing themselves). It is not, therefore, simply the inverse or muted form of the male gaze (Amy-Chinn 2006; Gill 2009), but rather functions as a technology-of-the-self resulting in the subjectification of women (Gill 2003). This suggests that existing power relations and anachronistic patriarchal ideals of postfeminism are both *produced by* and *productive of* gendered readers and therefore effectively evade reflexive resistance. This is highlighted in instances where ad interpretations appear to reflect more of what readers *know* through experience rather than what they *believe they believe*. For instance, both Lauren and Aaliyah mention experiencing unwanted sexual attention from men, yet struggle to challenge hegemonic postfeminist conceptions of gender and race that underpin the disciplining gaze they adopt towards themselves.

Although the young women are not averse to commenting on the sexual appeal of men in ads, men seem less the object of a postfeminist gaze than a device for deflecting the gaze back onto women. This is evidenced, for example, in Ivy and Lauren’s readings of the Dolce and

Gabbana I ad, whereby men seem to confer a female subject's status, sexuality, and femininity: *"It's like the men are flocked to [this] woman"* (Ivy); *"maybe her power is sexy to them [men]. ... she's like getting confidence from that"* (Lauren). Other times, men are perceived as authoritative subjects defined by their occupational role (*"a working man"* – Aaliyah) from which women scrutinize and judge themselves, as was the case in Ivy's response to the Liquid Plumr ad: *"I try to reject those types of typical like scenarios."* Women, therefore, remain at the center of the gaze, "strategically subjected to analysis, calculation and control" (Winch 2015, p. 233).

Looking across the data, there are multiple examples demonstrating how engaging with gendered ads through the lens of postfeminism produces blind spots related to various structural inequalities intersecting with gendered power relations. The Black midriff in the Seven Jeans ad, for example, is celebrated by Ivy and Aaliyah as a powerful symbol of feminism, whereas the White midriff in the Juicy Couture ad is denounced for promoting a gendered stereotype (Ivy) and lacking sex-appeal (Aaliyah). The contrasts between these interpretations shed light on the privileging of cultural codes and signifiers among those self-identifying as feminists, whereby Black women are co-opted to represent the autonomous and empowered feminist icon – reified and objectified – in ways that keeps white privilege intact (Borgerson and Schroeder 2002). Harrison, Thomas, and Cross (2017) argue that it is precisely the "otherness" and ambiguity of a Black or multiracial female – representing racial segregation, harmony, diversity, or some combination thereof – that confers on the model a sense of empowerment and on the ad an aura of political correctness, which though negotiated, nonetheless enables readers to overlook overt and covert forms of sexualization and objectification in the context of intersectional representations. This aligns with postfeminist discourses that interpellate Black women as existing for the benefit and consumption of others (Borgerson and Schroeder 2002; Springer 2007) and indicates a

complacency with respect to gender inequality particularly when juxtaposed with other forms of marginalization.

Discussion

A recent report released by the United Nations (2020) reveals that nearly 90% of all people – that is, women as well as men – are prejudiced against women. Thus, despite significant advancements heralding gender equality and women’s empowerment, harmful stereotypes and beliefs are still pervasive. This research explores the ways in which young women engage with gender discourses and gendered power relations in their readings of advertisements. Reflecting on four case studies, we broaden understandings and problematize the workings of a postfeminist gaze (Riley, Evans, and Mackiewicz 2016), whereby women scrutinize themselves engaging with ads, as well as the models portrayed in the ads, with their judgements steeped in a postfeminist sensibility which despite its multiple, often contradictory strands, ultimately obfuscates and denies gender inequality. This implies that both the models and readers of ads are subject to a disciplinary gaze, which does *not* disrupt established gender and power dynamics (Murray 2015) but instead acts as a regulatory force, governing the production and consumption of tame gendered subjects (Dean, 2010). This, we argue, undermines women’s position in society by deflecting readers’ attention away from structural critiques of media culture and gender inequality, and exhorting them instead “to make sense of their individual biographies in terms of discourses of freedom, autonomy and choice – no matter how constrained their lives may actually be” (Gill and Sharff 2011, p. 6). This manifests both in the women’s readings of ads, but also in the ways they judge and police themselves as readers.

Particularly problematic is the issue that young women today may feel empowered without being attentive to structural – particularly intersectional – inequalities insidiously embedded in postfeminist discourse (Liss and Erchull 2010; Riley, Evans, and Mackiewicz 2016). In this study, young women seem to lack the vocabulary and, in some cases, struggle to identify, let alone challenge important inequalities. This is not to suggest the women in this study are not critical of individual ads or elements of ads. Rather, the problem lies in critical evaluation premised on a postfeminist ethos given its tendency to mask gender, class, racial, and sexual inequalities and power relations (McRobbie 2009). Thus, while exposure to feminism may well facilitate reflexive resistance to hegemonic texts (Murray 2015; Stern 2000), we find that this resistance is thwarted by a critical gaze which often polices one's own feminist and/or feminine identity. Further, even though women's lived experiences around unequal power relations and discrimination seem to inform their engagements with ads, the demands placed upon postfeminist subjects to feel empowered reduce the potential of these experiences to pose any real challenge. This ability of postfeminism to incorporate subversive readings under the guise of a female empowerment ethos, therefore limits the power consumers have to redress unequal power relations as well as gender and racial stereotypes. In conceptualizing the postfeminist gaze as an apparatus through which disciplinary powers are mobilized, these findings highlight the dangers associated with a postfeminist sensibility that informs media culture, as well as women's lived experiences and engagements with ads.

Conclusion

Our study shows how young American women adopt, internalize, negotiate, and mobilize postfeminism's conceptions of gender and sexuality, including its limited engagement with race

and class, when interpreting gendered ads. By relating macro forces to individual experience, we show how the postfeminist gaze, which positions women as viewers who scrutinize both themselves and others, is mediated by patriarchal discourses that call upon women to comply with oppressive cultural ideals through a process of subjectification (Gill 2003). Building from critical gender research that tends to focus on advertising rhetoric and the role of marketers (Brace-Govan 2010; Gurrieri, Previte, and Brace-Govan 2012), we explore the postfeminist discourses underpinning both gendered advertising images and women's interpretation of these.

We highlight how gendered power relations and stereotypes are not embedded in marketing discourse alone, but emerge from interactions between individuals, texts, and contexts. Thus, while recognizing the importance of consumer agency, including feminist conscious-raising efforts (Sowards and Renegar 2004), and the need for greater industry awareness around the role of marketing (Borgerson and Schroeder 2002; Gurrieri, Brace-Govan, and Cherrier 2016), we argue that increased attention must be paid to the broader societal discourses which underpin and circulate between the two. In foregrounding postfeminism as a discursive resource that structures the cultural realities of women's lived experiences, including the ways they view and relate to themselves as well as others, we elucidate the insidious workings of gendered power relations and shed light on how individual consumers, organizations, and market systems derive meaning (Saatcioglu and Corus 2019).

Moving forward, we urge future research to build on these findings to interrogate the workings and intersections of gendered power relations holistically, that is, across micro, meso, and macro levels (Steinfeld et al. 2019). In particular, we urge researchers to investigate the limitations and blind spots of a postfeminist sensibility, particularly with regard to race and class. Such research is especially pertinent given the sociopolitical shifts following movements such as

Black Lives Matter and MeToo, which may have altered the landscape consumers currently inhabit. Although none of the women in this study engaged in an overt critique of postfeminism, this warrants renewed attention in light of recent developments. Finally, our findings are specific to a particular historical, social, and cultural setting. Explorations in other sociocultural settings are warranted, but we also argue that macromarketing research would benefit from adopting a recent historical lens to better elucidate how the past serves as a resource for the present.

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Table 1. Participant profiles.

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Occupation	Education	Sexuality	Relationship status
Ivy	22	White	Student/ part-time at fast-food chain	Third year university student	Heterosexual	In a relationship
Lucy	23	Asian	Artist/ waitress	High school	Heterosexual	In a relationship
Natasha	26	White	Art preparator	Bachelor's degree	Heterosexual	Married
Madison	22	White	Student	Fourth year university student	Heterosexual	Single
Aaliyah	21	Black	Student/ part-time at fast-food chain	Third year university student	Heterosexual (with self-proclaimed queer tendencies)	In a relationship
Kris	25	Asian	Bartender	High school and some previous college experience	Homosexual	Single
Nikki	31	White	Bank teller	High school; takes some classes at the community college	Homosexual	Divorced; currently in a relationship
Audrey	28	White	Doctoral student	Master's degree; working towards her PhD	Heterosexual	Single
Chelsea	24	White	Stay-at-home-wife	Master's degree	Heterosexual	Married
Lauren	22	White	Student/ part-time at department store	Fourth year university student	Heterosexual	Single
Angela	26	White	Receptionist	Highschool and some previous college experience	Heterosexual	Engaged
Khloe	20	White	Student/ waitress	Third year university student	Heterosexual	In a long-distance relationship
Mia	25	White	Works for a Christian faith-based charity	Bachelor's degree	Heterosexual	Single
Krista	24	White	Waitress	Bachelor's degree	Heterosexual	Single

Appendix



Figure A1. Ad for Juicy Couture



Figure A2. Ad for Seven Jeans

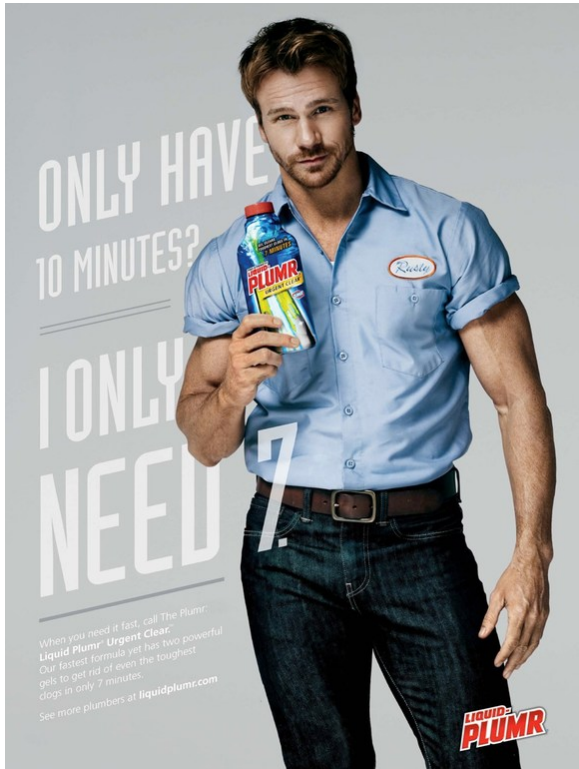


Figure A3. Ad for Liquid Plumbur



Figure A4. Ad for Dolce and Gabbana (I)



Figure A5. Ad for Dolce and Gabbana (II)