Female empowerment in lingerie advertising

A thematic analysis of the representation of female empowerment in cross-cultural lingerie advertising on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

Representations of femininity and masculinity in advertisements have been argued to influence society's understanding of gender. Stereotypically, women appeared submissive and sexualised in adverts, whereas men appeared confident, present and powerful. The combination of appearing submissive while being sexualised, is found to sexually objectify of women. A growing trend in advertising is the use of female empowerment messaging, termed femvertising. Femvertising seeks to challenge female stereotypes through body positive messaging and rejecting traditional gender roles. In this context, lingerie advertising is controversial as lingerie brands are accused of sexually objectifying women in their advertising while also using empowering messaging to promote their products. The main research question guiding this study was 'How is female empowerment represented in cross-cultural lingerie advertising on Instagram?' To gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, a thematic analysis was conducted on 150 Instagram posts by lingerie brands from China, the Netherlands and the United States. These brands were selected based on female empowerment in their core values, as well as being considered to innovate in their country's lingerie market. The results showed how American brand Savage X Fenty used sexualisation and a diverse representation of beauty to empower their followers. Chinese brand Neiwai focussed on comfort and encouraging their followers to take time for relaxing, essentially to put themselves first. Dutch brand Marlies Dekkers took an open approach by including personal experiences, explicit conversations about sex and encouragement for women to be bold. The study identified two paradoxes. Firstly, the Chinese brand did not sexualise their female models but its posts were considered the most sexually objectifying. In contrast, the American brand included sexualisation in the majority of its post, but was not considered to sexually objectify the female models. Secondly, many references to consumerism were found in the sample, yet the level of commodity feminism was low. To broaden understanding, future studies are needed to explore women's perceptions of these different methods of integrating female empowerment in lingerie advertising.

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1. Introduction

Advertising is considered to play a powerful role in people's construction of reality by both mirroring and shaping social norms and ideologies (Hovland & Wolburg, 2014; Tsai et al., 2021). Likewise, the representation of men and women in advertisements fundamentally affects society's perception of gender roles (Grau & Zotos, 2016). Previous studies have identified the ways in which adverts incorporate female (sexual) objectification, dependence and subordination and how it contrasts with male subjectification, independence and dominance (Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979). However, these findings may have become outdated and no longer characterise current advertisements. As indicated by relevant contemporary sources, there is a growing trend in advertising and marketing campaigns of the use of female empowerment messaging (Drake, 2017; Tsai et al., 2021). Advertising that includes female empowerment, termed *femvertising*, has proven to be an effective strategy for companies to boost consumer engagement and increase sales (Åkestam et al., 2017; Becker-Herby, 2016; Rodríguez Pérez & Gutiérrez, 2017; Windels et al., 2019). Female empowerment in advertising is expressed by challenging gender stereotypes through body positive messages and rejecting traditional gender roles (Cohen et al., 2019; Fasoli et al., 2017; Gill, 2008b; Grau & Zotos, 2016; Attwood, 2011). Femvertising as a marketing technique triggers discussion among scholars, as they express a low level of credibility and identified contradictions related to female empowerment within the advertisements (Fineman, 2019; Taylor et al., 2016; Windels et al., 2019). This appropriation of female empowerment for commercial purposes – which femvertising is accused of – is referred to as commodity feminism (Gill, 2008a). Within femvertising, specifically lingerie advertising is subject to controversy which makes this an interesting study. There is an underlying contradiction as lingerie brands use sexuality as a vehicle for female empowerment to promote their product while they are also criticised for sexually objectifying women and therefore undermining female empowerment. Female empowerment and sexual objectification of women tend to be perceived as opposite, but in the context of lingerie advertising there seems to be a different discourse related to the beliefs on sexual liberation in third-wave Anglophone feminism (Amy-Chinn, 2006; Choi et al., 2016; Duits & Van Zoonen, 2011; Erchull & Liss, 2013; Jantzen et al., 2006; Kadlec, 2017). The question guiding this research is: *How is female empowerment represented in cross-cultural lingerie advertising on Instagram?* In this thesis, lingerie and underwear will refer to bras, briefs, thongs, stockings, suspender belts and body's worn by women. The terms lingerie and underwear will be used interchangeably. To

guide this research, a theoretical framework has been composed which explores the following concepts: Gendered advertising, sexual objectification, femvertising, body positivity, traditional gender roles, commodity feminism and cross-cultural differences. The findings provided the foundation for the research design and consequently the results of the analysis. For this study, a qualitative research method was chosen to support the exploratory nature. Specifically, a thematic content analysis was conducted on 150 Instagram posts by three different lingerie brands namely the American brand Savage X Fenty, the Chinese brand Neiwai and the Dutch brand Marlies Dekkers. Thematic analysis is an iterative, multi-stage process of coding and categorising data into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The three brands were selected as all mention female empowerment is at the core of the business mission (Marlies Dekkers, 2022; Neiwai, 2022; Savage X Fenty, 2022). Additionally, the brands have been argued to disrupt the market they're in, which will be further explained in the methodology section (Hospes, 2006; Lian & Gwynne, 2022; Yang, 2021). After discussing the research design, the results and discussion are explained and lastly, the answer to the research question is given in the conclusion.

1.1 Academic and societal relevance

There are several studies published which have focused on female objectification and the use of the female body in advertising, as well as the different aspects of female empowerment and femvertising (Cohen et al., 2019; Fasoli et al., 2017; Gill, 2008b; Goffman, 1979; Grau & Zotos, 2016; Attwood, 2011). However, there is – to the researcher's knowledge – no research that evaluates how female empowerment is used in lingerie advertising, specifically on Instagram. Lingerie advertisement is a pertinent subject matter in the context of female empowerment and female sexual objectification due to the contradictory claims around lingerie advertisement. (Amy-Chinn, 2006; Choi et al., 2016; Duits & Van Zoonen, 2011; Erchull & Liss, 2013; Jantzen et al., 2006; Kadlec, 2017). The cross-cultural approach of this study is innovative within the field of female empowerment studies. This approach enables the researcher to explore how female empowerment messaging is influenced by culture as well as to gain a deeper understanding of female empowerment by analysing cultural differences (Papayiannis & Anastassiou-Hadjicharalambous, 2011).

Researching how female empowerment is portrayed in lingerie advertising is relevant in a societal sense, because this can provide insights into femvertising for other (lingerie) companies which attempt to integrate a female empowering message into their Instagram

marketing. Additionally, exploring female empowerment content on Instagram is relevant, since social media has a considerable impact on the users' attitudes towards societal developments (Akram & Kumar, 2017). Out of all social media platforms, Instagram is chosen as it is the most used social media app worldwide with over a billion active users (Statista, 2022). Apart from the significant reach and impact of Instagram, the size of the lingerie market also makes this study societally relevant. In 2021, the global female underwear market was estimated to account for roughly 123 billion dollars, which includes bras, knickers, panties, shapewear, lounge wear and sports underwear (Market Research Future, 2021).

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter will first discuss the representation of women in advertising in the past, characterised by a high degree of female submissiveness and traditional gender roles. Thereafter, lingerie advertising will be explored, starting with the notion of sexual objectification and nudity. Subsequently, the traditional contradiction between feminism and female sexual objectification and the contemporary shift to female empowering advertising will be examined. This type of advertising, coined femvertising, is expressed in body positive messaging and the rejection of traditional gender roles to challenge gender stereotypes. The concept of commodity feminism will be considered as femvertising has been accused of inappropriately using feminism for financial gain. Finally, a comparison between China, the Netherlands and the United States is given to explore the cultural similarities and differences in feminism, femvertising and the attitude towards lingerie. In conclusion, this chapter will form the framework for the analysis of female empowerment in lingerie advertising on Instagram.

2.1 Gendered advertising

Scholars have argued how advertisements play a significant role in the constructing society's perception of reality by replicating and altering social standards and ideals (Hovland & Wolburg, 2014; Tsai et al., 2021). Similarly, the portrayal of men and women in adverts is argued to have a significant impact on the production and maintenance of gender ideologies (Goffman, 1979; Grau & Zotos, 2016). In 1979, Canadian sociologist Goffman analysed 500 North American advertisements for a range of products to understand how femininity and masculinity were portrayed. His research identified how women appeared soft, vulnerable, powerless and delicate in adverts, whereas men appeared confident, present and powerful. The feminine adverts typically showed beauty, submissiveness, nurturance, and cooperation, while the masculine adverts conveyed power, athleticism, strength, and competitiveness (Goffman, 1979). Goffman identified six sub concepts within the term gender, namely: relative size, feminine touch, function ranking, the family, ritualization of subordination, and licensed withdrawal (Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979; Kang, 1997). The first concept is *relative size*: Men tend to appear larger or taller than women, which supports male power, authority, and rank over the female in social situations. Secondly, *feminine touch*: Women – evidently more than men – were shown tracing the contours of an object (or themselves), softly holding it, caressing the surface, or "just barely touching" with their hands.

Contrastingly, men were pictured firmly holding or purposefully grasping an object. This indicates the woman is 'fragile' and needs protection from a man. Additionally, when a female model is softly touching intimate body parts (e.g., her crotch area, breasts, mouth) this can be interpreted as the woman sexually inviting or sexually available to a man. Third is *function ranking*: When a man and a woman were pictured in a collaborative activity, the man was typically the task executor, while the woman had a supporting role. In case of 'traditionally feminine tasks' such as cooking and cleaning, the woman had the executive role while the man was uninvolved or presented as foolish and childish. The fourth concept refers to *the family*: women are represented in family groups and as mothers, as supportive roles and inferior to the man who takes the executing role. Fifthly, *ritualization of subordination*: Women tended to be pictured in inferior positions and poses, such as laying, sitting or bending over. Likewise, women were often tilting their head, curving their bodies, leaning onto a man or an object, and bending one knee. Goffman (1979) argued that these inferior positions signalled submission, powerlessness and sexual availability. Finally, *licensed withdrawal*: Women appeared to be physically or mentally removed from the present situation, which enforced the notion that the woman is socially dependent upon a man. The withdrawal could be, for example, signalled by aimlessly staring into the distance, preoccupied by something, or covering her face. Although Goffman's study was published over 40 years ago, several scholars have proved how his theory was still present in adverts over the years (Bell & Milic, 2002; Kang, 1997; Mager & Helgeson, 2010). However, these studies on gender representation in adverts found more support for the individual sub concepts (feminine touch, ritualization of subordination, licensed withdrawal) than to the predominantly relational sub concepts (relative size, function ranking, the family). As a result, later studies have focused primarily on the individual sub-concepts to identify gender-stereotyping in advertisements (Kuipers et al., 2016).

2.2 Lingerie advertising and sexualisation

Although this research will not explore this, it is interesting to note that just the existence of lingerie is already criticised by feminist authors, stating items such as bras and corsets are merely instruments to constrain the female body and to mould it to fit the beauty ideal in a male-dominated society (Bordo, 1995; Jantzen et al., 2006). By contrast, Vigolo and Ugolini (2016) found that lingerie offers women a way of expressing their personality through their style, but also expressing love and interest for a romantic partner. Firstly, putting effort into looking nice for the other, is perceived as a sign of love (Vigolo & Ugolini,

2016). Wearing sexy lingerie also gives women the ability to spark new interest in their body for their partner (Vigolo & Ugolini, 2016). Ever since lingerie advertising emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, it has been controversial and is often criticised for sexually objectifying women (Amy-Chinn, 2006; Jantzen et al., 2006; Kadlec, 2017). Sexual objectification of female bodies is a customary practice within advertising, specifically for hedonic products such as cosmetics, perfume, fashion, and lingerie (Choi et al., 2016; Hatton & Trautner, 2011; Ward, 2016). A common phrase in advertising is 'sex sells', which signified adding sexualisation to adverts increases sales (Moraes et al., 2021). Originally, this method was developed for men, as it was often successful in eliciting positive responses from male consumers (Keller et al., 2020; Moraes et al., 2021). This explains why female models are often nude or scantily clad in male-targeting advertisements (Lundstrom & Sciglimpaglia, 1977). Research found that respondents rate sexual images of the opposite gender more positively than of their gender (Choi et al., 2016; LaTour, 1990). However, men show a more positive attitude towards explicit sexualisation of women in advertising than women do. Female sexualisation can elicit negative responses from female consumers, because the female model is displayed as an object rather than a person (Keller et al., 2020; Moraes et al., 2021).

Objectification takes place when a person is reduced to an object which can be used, focused solely on their physical appearance while ignoring all other characteristics (Ward, 2016). Sexual objectification occurs when the focus is on sexual appearance and appearing available for satisfying the needs and desires of others (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012; Ward, 2016). According to Stankiewicz and Rosselli (2008), depicting women as sexual objects upholds the belief that submissiveness is a desirable trait in women. Exposure to content that sexually objectifies women lowers both men's and women's perception of female abilities, morality, and humanity because it reduces the woman to an object that can be used instead of a person with her own thoughts and ideas (Ward, 2016). It also has a negative impact on a woman's satisfaction with her own body and physical appearance (Ward, 2016). Women that are surrounded by sexually objectifying media tend to perform self-objectification, meaning they see themselves as objects for someone else to 'use' (Hill & Fischer, 2008). As a result, women gravitate to valuing themselves based on their observable appearance rather than on their non-observable competencies (Hill & Fischer, 2008). Subsequently, women monitor their appearance more frequently than men (Ward, 2016).

Sexual objectification and sexualisation are often used as synonymously, but Fasoli et al. (2017) identified the difference between the two concepts: The definition of sexual

objectification implies that the person can be treated as an object owned by another person, which denies them autonomy, makes them powerless and more easily violated. This relates back to Goffman's six sub concepts of female submissiveness, as both sexual objectification of women and female submissiveness present the man has ownership or authority over the woman. Although closely related, sexualisation is a much broader phenomenon than sexual objectification (Fasoli et al., 2017). Sexualisation can be defined as to be aware of sexuality or a portrayal indicating sexual readiness, but that does not necessarily lead to objectifying a person (Fasoli et al., 2017). The nuance lies in the way a person is portrayed and their autonomy. There are several indicators of sexualisation in current advertising, namely the level of nudity, seductive facial expressions, provocative posing, intimately touching oneself, or sexual interaction between models (Matthes and Prieler, 2020; Reichert and Lambiase, 2003). Hatton and Trautner (2011) found that both masculine and feminine representations in media became more sexualized since the 1970s, but female sexualisation occurred more frequently. Matthes and Prieler (2020) analysed 1,755 TV adverts from 13 countries and discovered the degree of nudity is higher for women than for men. In Western Europe, North America, and China, nudity is inseparable from sex and sexuality, and the notion of nudity being indecent and immoral is deeply ingrained (Cover, 2003; Huang & Lowry, 2011; Murphy, n.d.). In Western European and North American cultures, this link stems from the Christian foundations of society (Cover, 2003). In the bible, nakedness is often described negatively and linked to shame or poverty (Cover, 2003; Murphy, n.d.). Similarly, China continues to hold strong traditions which value modesty and rejects nudity arising from 13th century Confucian philosophy (Huang & Lowry, 2011).

Lingerie adverts are often perceived as sexually objectifying women due to a generally high amount of body display (Amy-Chinn, 2006). However, Reichert and Lambiase (2003) argue simply displaying a nude or semi-nude body does not necessarily lead to sexualisation nor to sexual objectification. According to these researchers, nudity in combination with the before-mentioned indicators of sexualisation – seductive facial expressions, provocative posing, intimately touching oneself or sexual interaction between models – leads to a sexual connotation of nudity. The setting in which body display is presented, can also create sexualisation (e.g., bedroom, red velvet couch). This is crucial for lingerie companies, because the effective promotion of their product requires showing and preferably displaying the lingerie on a model (Amy-Chinn, 2006). This also relates to the

renewed feminist discourse. For a long time, feminism[1] and female sexualisation were viewed as contractionary (Choi et al., 2016). The radical 'second wave' of Anglophone feminism in the 1960s proclaimed that every form of sexualisation – part of which is sexually objectifying – of women and girls in media is demeaning, negatively affects women by reenforcing traditional gender roles and leads to their physical sexual exploitation (Duits & Van Zoonen, 2011). To illustrate, "Porn is the theory, rape is the practice" was a radical feminist slogan spread in the 1980s which demonstrates how radical feminists believed sexualisation progresses from bad to worse (Duits & Van Zoonen, 2011). More recent research shows that contemporary feminists may view sexual images of women differently than feminists before (Choi et al., 2016; Erchull & Liss, 2013). Third-wave Anglophone feminism celebrates female sexuality rather than restrict the sexual expression (Choi et al., 2016). Some third-wave feminists argue that enjoying sexiness can be a feminist act (Choi et al., 2016; Duits & Van Zoonen, 2011; Erchull & Liss, 2013). Erchull and Liss (2013) surveyed 326 self-identified heterosexual feminist women and found that most of them did enjoy sexualised attention from men, although less than women who did not identify as feminist. These feminists viewed themselves as powerful, strong, and independent women who were able to feel empowered by the sexualised attention. Conversely, the survey indicated that feminists who enjoy sexualization, also accepted certain traditional gender roles (e.g., an attractive partner for men). Erchull and Liss (2013) explained this contradiction by stating these feminists view themselves as active participants in receiving and enjoying sexualised attention from men, instead of passive 'arm candy'. Choi et al. (2016) conducted a survey among 1298 American men and women and found that feminist consumers had a more positive judgment of sexual adverts than non-feminist consumers. Similarly, Choi et al. (2016) found that the feminists view themselves as strong and powerful which is why they did not feel intimidated or degraded by sexualisation in advertising. To conclude, these studies show how the context in which female sexualisation takes place, matters to how the image is received and how the image is perceived depends on how the woman feels about herself (Choi et al., 2016; Erchull & Liss, 2013).

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[1] Feminism is a social movement that fights for social, political and economic equality among the sexes (Munro, 2013)

2.2 Femvertising

In response to the third-wave Anglophone feminist movement advertisers started to shift towards representing women as confident, powerful, and independent while still embracing traditional feminine traits such as being emotional, soft and nurturing (Lazar, 2009). This form of advertising is commonly referred to as femvertising, a combination of feminism and advertising (Åkestam et al., 2017; Becker-Herby, 2016; Rodríguez Pérez & Gutiérrez, 2017). This female-targeted advertising aims to make women feel empowered by challenging gender stereotypes through promoting body positivity, rejecting traditional gender roles and encouraging female economic agency whilst at the same time selling them a product (Cohen et al., 2019; Grau & Zotos, 2016). Femvertising has become increasingly popular in modern advertising and marketing strategies because incorporating a social movement into marketing campaign allows businesses to gain relevance within society, to increase engagement and to create a positive association between a brand and the social movement (Drake, 2017; Reyes-Menendez et al., 2020; Tsai et al., 2021). A survey among 181 female millennials aged 18 to 34 found that femvertising has a positive impact on their opinion on the advertisement and the brand, as well as their purchase intentions, and emotional connection to the brand (Drake, 2017).

2.2.1 Body positivity femvertising

Body positivity aims to boost women's sense of self-worth by challenging traditional beauty expectations and to encourage acceptance and admiration of diverse bodies and features among women (Cohen et al., 2019). The body positive movement emanates from feminist 'fat acceptance' movement in the 1960s, which was a response to the anti-fat discourse in North America (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015). In recent decades, body positivity grew in online feminist communities and mainly gained and grew its following through social media platform Instagram, with 10.2 million posts tagged with #bodypositivity and 18.1 million posts tagged with #bodypositive (Cohen et al., 2019; Instagram, 2022). Companies recognized the impact of the movement and started to present a more inclusive and positive conceptualization of varying body types into their advertising, for example, by including female models with 'flaws' such as cellulite, stomach rolls, stretch marks, skin blemishes and armpit hair. This deviates from smooth, skinny and hairless bodies which are part of the dominant ideals of feminine beauty in Western Europe and the United States (Cohen et al., 2019). A prominent example of successful body positive femvertising is the ongoing Dove's Real Beauty campaign, which presents women with different body shapes and sizes instead

of solely skinny models. The purpose of the campaign is to help young women develop a positive perception of their physical appearance by showing diverse bodies and to address body shaming issues (Dove, 2021). The campaign has been credited to increase Dove's sales with 1.5 billion dollars and led Dove to win two advertising awards (Taylor et al., 2016; Windels et al., 2019). This success shows that body positive femvertising can be a beneficial advertising strategy for companies. To understand how body positivity is visible in advertising, Cohen et al. (2019) conducted a content analysis of 640 Instagram posts from popular body positive accounts to identify the themes. Their study found six themes on body positive imagery: Appreciation of function and health of the body, appearance acceptance or love, diverse representation of beauty, taking care of the body, inner positivity and protective filtering of information (e.g., pointing out Photoshopping or staging in pictures). Here, the focus on the sexual appearance of women is not focussed, offering a way to view the female body in non-sexual ways. Nonetheless, Cohen et al. (2019) found a high degree of appearance-focused and objectifying themes. Firstly, over a third of the posts emphasised how clothing and make up enhanced female appearance. Additionally, most women in the posts had a non-active pose, by sitting or lying down. Coming back to Goffman's theory (1979), non-active posing reinforces female submissiveness. Finally, a third of the posts featured sexual objectification, by focusing on a specific body part, woman posing in a sexually suggestive manner or the absence of her face (Cohen et al., 2019). The focus on appearance might be intentional though since bigger women have been previously excluded from presenting their bodies in advertising and social media (Cohen et al., 2019).

2.2.2 Challenging gender roles in femvertising

Apart from body and appearance focussed femvertising, femvertising can also target personality characteristics and typical gender activities. Here, femvertising depicts women in advertising in 'stronger' roles rather than weakening or objectifying them to challenge traditional gender roles (Grau & Zotos, 2016). Gill (2008b) found a significant shift in female representation in contemporary advertising with young women often pictured as active and independent (e.g., athletic pose, fierce facial expression). This representation mirrors the changes in society, in which gender inequality is – very slowly – reducing (Grau & Zotos, 2016). Women are increasing their education level and have outnumbered men in the global labour force (Smith & Johnson, 2021). To exemplify, women make up for 62% of the Dutch labour force, 55% of the American labour force and 61% of the Chinese labour force (The World Bank, 2022). Yet, these percentages do not prove equality between the sexes as most

women only hold part time jobs and the wage gap between men and women is still prevalent (Smith & Johnson, 2021). Especially in the Western world, household chores and childcare are slowly becoming more equally distributed among men and women (Smith & Johnson, 2021). These changes are reflected in femvertising, which uses terms such as 'on the go', 'multitasking' and 'girl boss' (Grau & Zotos, 2016). Instead of showing women in traditional places like home and the kitchen, they are shown in business settings (Grau & Zotos, 2016).

2.3 Commodity feminism

While achieving commercial success, femvertising as a marketing technique also triggers discussion and attracts criticism (Fineman, 2019; Taylor et al., 2016). A major concern on femvertising is that brands employ female empowerment only to increase profits, because marketing messages start and finish with consumerism (Pérez & Gutiérrez, 2017; Taylor et al., 2016). Central in the criticism of femvertising is with comparison with commodity feminism, which is the appropriation of female empowerment for commercial purposes (Gill, 2008a; Varghese & Kumar, 2020). Companies attempt to integrate feminism into their marketing messages, even if the promoted product is unrelated to or even contradicts the movement (Luck, 2016). This is especially notable for products such as make-up and personal care products, fashion, and dieting products, which are all appearance products. Companies appropriate feminism as it has the potential to make female consumers feel better about themselves and to make them feel engaged in activism (Luck, 2016). Scholars argue feminism is intrinsically anti-capitalist and commodifying female empowerment essentially diminishes the importance of the movement (Gill, 2008b; Taylor et al., 2016). Lazar (2006) studied how companies commodify feminism in their advertisements and found four themes. Firstly, she coined the term empowered beauty which refers to beauty products that function as 'empowering agents' to help women achieve a beauty ideal (Lazar, 2006). By applying a specific body lotion or make-up, a woman will look better which, in turn, will make her feel empowered according to the advertisements. The second way in which advertising commodifies feminism, is by using the notion of 'knowledge is power' to empower women (Lazar, 2006). Access to education has long been and still is a focus of feminism activists. However, in advertising the knowledge refers to workshops, seminars or coaching sessions to educate women on how to better apply make-up or other appearance-based traits. Thirdly, companies exploit the female strive for power. According to Lazar (2006), brands argue female agentic power can be achieved through physical aestheticization or having the ability to change one's appearance and it is directly tied to consumerism.

Lastly, brands present women with sexual power, but are sexually objectified (2006). Lazar (2006) argues that companies are conveying that the expression of heteronormative feminine sexuality is a way to control men. But instead, the advertising links closer to sexual objectifying women to please men than portraying sexually liberation that can inspire women.

2.4 Cross-cultural similarities and differences

This study focuses on cross-cultural brands to gain a deeper understanding of female empowerment in lingerie advertising and how it is influenced by culture. The brands are founded in China, the Netherlands and the United States. China is a highly collectivist culture where people put the interests of the group before their own (Hofstede, 2021). In contrast, the Netherlands and the United States are highly individualistic (Hofstede, 2021). China and the United States are more masculine countries, which means society is driven by achievement and competition (Hofstede, 2021). Success is measured in the level of jobs and monetary rewards. In masculine societies, leisure and time to relax is not viewed as important. The Netherlands is considered more feminine, as Dutch society values caring for others and quality of life (Hofstede, 2021). Success is determined by being able to do what you like. In general, Dutch people do not admire to stand out from the crowd. The Netherlands is considered a tolerant country towards other religions and the LGBTQ+ community (Savage, 2020). Yet, black, Arabic and other racial minorities still suffer from racism in the Netherlands (Maussen & Bogers, 2010). In the United States, discrimination and racism remain prevalent as homosexual and black people are still perceived as inferior to heterosexual and white people (McKie et al., 2020).

Many studies have shown how Western societies are saturated by sexual representations of women and men (Keller et al., 2020; Matthes and Prieler, 2020; Moraes et al., 2021). These *Western* societies include the United States and the Netherlands. In contrast, several researchers have argued that there is less sexualisation in China and other Eastern cultures compared to Western cultures (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Loughnan et al., 2015; Xiao et al., 2019). As most of the theoretical framework focuses on Anglophone and Western female empowerment and female sexuality, the following subsection will further explore these phenomena in China.

2.4.1 Female empowerment and sexuality in China

Since the 1920s, Communism in China advocated for gender equality as everyone should treat each other as equals (Cunningham, 2021). Though, only slight progress in female empowerment was achieved, especially in the more remote areas of the country (Cunningham, 2021). China's One Child Policy – which certainly violated women's rights – did slightly empower women, as it allowed them to delay motherhood and gave them the possibility to increase their education levels and focus on their career (Guenfoud, 2017; Jieyu, 2020). During this communist era, any sexual reference in books or art was deemed offending and led to punishment for the author (Yuxin et al., 2007). The opening-up and economic reform in China during the 1980s offered moderate sexual liberation (Yuxin et al., 2007). Slowly, academia was allowed to study sexuality in a medical term as this would remain objective and thus politically uncontroversial (Yuxin et al., 2007). At this time, public display of sex-related issues was still a taboo as conservatives believed it would encourage promiscuous behavior. Sex was only socially accepted within marriage but was not supposed to be openly talked about (Yuxin et al., 2007). Academic studies only focused on men, while women were either completely ignored or included as passive objects for male sexual desire (Yuxin et al., 2007). Women were perceived as innocent, emotional, and with less sexual desire than men. As of the 1990s, academia became more inclusive to women and the amount of women's studies rapidly grew (Yuxin et al., 2007). Nevertheless, the conservative Chinese government has a strong hold on what is allowed to be published and sexuality remains a sensitive topic in China (Yu, 2015). This is reflected in the Chinese beauty ideals, which values pale, youthful and delicate. Feminine curves are preferably soft, which contrast with the Western beauty ideals of a full chest and buttocks (Jieyu, 2020).

In the current society, women are formally equal to men, but reality shows Chinese women are often still viewed as inferior to men. Chinese women face age discrimination in their working life, as women are less likely to get hired at 'child-bearing' age but are also obligated to retire five years earlier than men (Guenfoud, 2017). Chinese women are expected to follow traditional feminine responsibilities, like marriage. The growing group of Chinese women above 27 years of age are highly educated, independent and without male partner are frowned upon, and referred to as the 'leftover women' who are too picky or too stubborn (Jieyu, 2020).

3. Methodology

This chapter sets out the research design, the sample, the data collection and the analysis process which was conducted to answer the research question: 'How is female empowerment represented in cross-cultural lingerie advertising on Instagram?' First, an introduction to the three lingerie brands will be provided, as well as the reason for this selection and the resulting data collection. Subsequently, the research design and use of thematic content analysis will be discussed and justified, along with sensitising concepts. The analysis process, which demonstrates how the study was conducted to answer the research question, will be explained.

3.1 Sample

This study aims to provide insight into the portrayal of female empowerment in Instagram posts by lingerie brands Marlies Dekkers, Savage X Fenty and Neiwai. The researcher relied on purpose sampling when choosing these companies, which meant that the brand values needed to be relevant for the study. This form of non-probability sampling allowed the researcher to select the companies based on their usefulness for the study (Babbie, 2014). Specifically, Marlies Dekkers, Savage X Fenty and Neiwai were selected as all state female empowerment at the core of the business mission (Marlies Dekkers, 2022; Neiwai, 2022; Savage X Fenty, 2022). Although empowerment is at the core, the brand identities differ substantially which will be explained below. All three brands are also recognised for innovating the lingerie market in their countries (Hospes, 2006; Lian & Gwynne, 2022; Yang, 2021). A cross-cultural approach is chosen because it allows for comparison among the countries, which broadens the understanding of female empowering messaging (Papayiannis & Anastassiou-Hadjicharalambous, 2011). It also shows how companies and representation is influenced by the cultural context (Papayiannis & Anastassiou-Hadjicharalambous, 2011).

Firstly, Dutch brand Marlies Dekkers was launched in 1993 by founder Marlies Dekkers (Marlies Dekkers, 2022). Dekkers started her company with a government grant she received as reward for her graduation project. Dekkers identifies as a self-made woman and seeks to encourage women to become more independent, empowered and assertive (Dekkers, 2014). Marlies Dekkers is considered to have a big impact on the Dutch and West European lingerie market, due to the progressiveness in sizing, materials and brand identity (Hospes, 2006). In 1993, underwear was something that should not be seen according to Dutch cultural

norms and standing out was not admirable (Hofstede, 2021; Hospes, 2006). But Dekkers added distinctive straps above the cups which were visible above a women's top to accentuate her female curves instead of hiding them. Marlies Dekkers' motto is 'Dare to dream, dare to grow, dare to be', which encompasses the brand's mission to empower women and give them freedom to express themselves (Marlies Dekkers, 2022). Dekkers aims to revolutionise the way women view lingerie by showing them how the right lingerie will help them notice their own beauty. At the time of writing, Marlies Dekkers has an Instagram following of 71.9 thousand and a total of 3085 posts (Marlies Dekkers, n.d.). The engagement rate is 0.38% as each post receives an average of 270 likes and 6 comments (HypeAuditor, 2022a).

Neiwai is a Chinese brand founded in 2012 and its mission is "to make solution wear for modern women" (Neiwai, 2022). Neiwai wants to empower women who wear their lingerie by helping them feel free in body and mind and encouraging them to be themselves and be independent (Neiwai, 2022). The company has received recognition for its feminist narratives and representation of different bodies in its campaigns, which remains an uncommon phenomenon in China (Yang, 2021). Neiwai is the leading company in the Chinese underwear market and was the first in the Chinese market that integrated feminism in their marketing (Daxue Consulting, 2021; Hall, 2021). Neiwai collaborates with other brands to increase their engagement, for example, with a campaign with French beauty company L'Oréal Paris when the brands launched lingerie and make-up in a similar colour palette that compliment Asian skin tones (McCann China, 2022). Neiwai has an Instagram following of 43.4 thousand and 897 posts at the time of writing (NEIWAI, n.d.). Neiwai's posts receive 30 likes and 2 comments on average, resulting in an engagement rate of 0.07% (HypeAuditor, 2022b).

Savage X Fenty is an American brand co-founded in 2018 by famous pop singer Rihanna in collaboration with TechStyle Fashion Group. The brand asserts it wants its customers to feel sexy in the lingerie and to have fun while wearing it, as well as allow customers to express themselves for themselves, instead of somebody else (Savage X Fenty, 2022). This relates to the third-wave Anglophone feminism discourse on 'do it for yourself' (Choi et al., 2016; Duits & Van Zoonen, 2011; Erchull & Liss, 2013). The brand states it has "disrupted the lingerie industry and redefined 'sexy'" (Savage X Fenty, 2022). They aim to empower women and to make them feel comfortable within their bodies. Co-founder Rihanna has been considered as a driving force of equality and inclusivity in the lingerie market (Krause, 2019). The lingerie is primarily created by women for women, but also sells

underwear and intimates for men (Lian & Gwynne, 2022; Savage X Fenty, 2022). At the time of writing, Savage X Fenty has a following of 4.9 million and a total of 891 posts (Savage X Fenty by Rihanna, n.d.). Their posts get an average of 9500 likes and 77 comments, making the engagement rate 0.2% (HypeAuditor, 2022c).

3.2 Data collection

The data consisted of 50 Instagram posts per brand, resulting in a total of 150 posts. Instagram is a mobile social media application that can be freely accessed. 150 posts proved sufficient, as saturation occurred during the analysis process. The units of analysis are posted on the official Instagram accounts: @marliesdekkersofficial, @savagexfenty and @neiwaiofficial. When starting the research, the 50 most recent posts were selected, and no inclusion or exclusion criteria was applied. This decision was made to have a most representative way of understanding how the brands present themselves. However, the brands had varying frequency of posting which meant the Marlies Dekkers' posts would include Valentine's Day but Neiwai and Savage X Fenty did not. As this day proved to be an important day for lingerie brands, the researcher chose purposefully to begin analysing the Instagram posts from February 7th, 2022. This included the promotion leading up to Valentine's Day and the holiday itself for all three brands. To collect a total of 50 posts per brand, Marlies Dekkers' posts were collected up to May 6th, Neiwai's posts up to March 23rd, and Savage X Fenty's posts up to March 15th. All data was posted in 2022, which is why the year is not mentioned after every quote to avoid confusion. Screenshots of all 150 posts were saved to the researcher's personal Google Drive, to ensure the data was accessible during the research. On June 23rd, 2022 – the date of publishing this thesis – the data is still available to access on the Instagram accounts of the three brands. As the brands all have an open account, there are no ethical constraints or privacy issues.

3.3 Research design

A qualitative approach was chosen for this research, as it enabled interpretation of the meanings within the images and texts (Babbie, 2020). Qualitative research is typically used to understand perceptions and for in-depth exploration of reality (Verhoeven, 2019). The qualitative approach is more dynamic than quantitative, as it gives the researcher an opportunity to adjust and re-evaluate the analysis during the process (Verhoeven, 2019). Due to the exploratory nature of this study, this iterative process was the most suitable. Specifically, this qualitative study will be conducted by means of a thematic content analysis.

A thematic analysis focuses on examining and organising research data to identify and interpret key patterns within this data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These patterns or themes capture "something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). By categorising and structuring the found themes, a clear answer to the research question should surface (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis can be inductive or deductive, or a combination of both, meaning the themes can either emerge from the data or be developed based on relevant theories or the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The deductive themes are called sensitising concepts (Babbie, 2020). The researcher searched for and tested themes within the Instagram posts and tried to grasp the underlying message (Burles & Bally, 2018). Thematic analysis was considered most useful here as it provided a solely qualitative, structured, and nuanced account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Furthermore, this method was chosen because it offered a high level of flexibility in the data interpretation and facilitated the process by dividing large data sets into smaller, structured groups (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher herself played an important role in the research process and the analysis process with this qualitative method in terms of her own bias and the reflexivity she performs (Barbour, 2007). To limit bias and to increase validity, a second researcher could have been assigned to perform the same analysis process and the results could be compared with those of the first researcher (Babbie, 2020). Due to time limitations, this was not possible. This study has been conducted and the sample has been analysed in the most impartial and neutral way possible by discussing the findings with Dr. Hermans, the supervisor for this thesis. Reliability is ensured by thoroughly describing all steps taken during the analysis process, so a following researcher can conduct the same research (Babbie, 2020).

3.4 Sensitising concepts

While exploring the literature relevant for lingerie advertising, sexualisation and sexual objectification of women proved to be significant themes. The literature indicated a difference between the two concepts, which will be applied during the analysis process. Sexualisation was operationalised by five indicators: seductive facial expression, provocative pose, intimately touching oneself and sexual interaction between models in visuals and sexual references in captions (Reichert & Lambiase, 2003). Nudity or semi-nudity was only tagged as sexualisation if it was combined with one of these five indicators. A post was tagged as sexually objectifying if a sexualised model appeared passive or submissive. The indicators

developed by Goffman (1979) were used to operationalise passive or submissive, namely relative size, feminine touch, function ranking, the family, ritualization of subordination, and licensed withdrawal. Conversely, a post was tagged as sexually empowering when female sexuality was connoted as powerful, independent and personal. This could be through identifying traditionally masculine characteristics (e.g., athleticism, strength, competitiveness), by directly looking into the camera or by giving the female models a voice (e.g., caption is written by model, model is tagged).

A second aspect in this study was femvertising, the advertising that aims to challenge gender stereotypes. Femvertising was operationalised in two ways. Firstly, by identifying body positive messaging. Yet, this proved to be closely related to sexually empowering messaging, thus body positive was only applied in non-sexualised context. To clarify, a post was tagged as body positive if it included appreciation of function and health of the body, encouragement of accepting or loving appearance, diverse representation of beauty, focus on taking care of the body, promotion of inner positivity or protective filtering of information (Cohen et al., 2019). Secondly, femvertising was operationalised by identifying if the post challenges traditional gender roles, for example, by presenting women as active participants of the business world, or again with traditional masculine characteristics (e.g., powerful, athletic, strong, competitive).

Thirdly, the notion of commodity feminism was tested within the sample. Following Lazar's research (2006), commodity feminism was split between four themes namely empowered beauty, knowledge is power, agentive power and sexual power. These four concepts relate to the earlier mentioned themes, however here the focus is consumerism and appropriation of feminism. A post was tagged as of the four themes in commodity feminism if purchasing the lingerie is said to empower.

3.5 Analysis process

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) iterative, multi-stage process of coding and categorising data, the analysis consisted of four stages. The researcher started with immersion in the data by reading and re-reading the data, while noting down initial ideas. Microsoft Excel was used as a means of organising the data, which proved useful in filtering and organising the data as well as keeping an overview. The researcher generated initial codes related to the research question for all the data while taking the sensitising concepts into account. Therefore, all items related to sexualisation, femvertising and commodity feminism were acknowledged as relevant for the analysis. All the codes were titles which summarised a

group of different recurring words or sentences, so the body positivity theme includes all body positive content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The codes enabled the researcher to organise the dataset since they are more detailed than the themes that initially emerged. From the analysis, 143 open codes occurred in the dataset. During this step, the researcher discovered the magnitude of romantic relationships in the data which was not a sensitising concept nor fully explored in the theoretical framework. This was partly due to the sample being collected around Valentine's Day, which proved to be important for the three companies that were studied. Another significant theme within the data proved to be sustainability, which was added to the themes. The next step was to merge similar or related codes in order to categorise the data and identify initial themes. For example, Marlies Dekkers often explained the way she designed the lingerie, but instead of creating a design process theme, this was added to the entrepreneurial theme. The entrepreneurial theme then became part of the overarching theme on challenging gender roles. The final step was to revise and improve the themes. However, as stated before, the process was iterative. Thus, each stage was repeated until all themes were refined and had clear definitions, while taking the nuances and contradictions within each theme into account. The repetition ensured no relevant data was missed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since most of the Instagram posts sample consisted of a visual and textual part, the process required visual and textual thematic analysis. In contrast to the focus on recurring words and sentences in the textual thematic analysis, the visual analysis focussed on and generated codes for recurring symbols, figures and representations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The visual and textual findings were combined and revised until the themes enabled the researcher to understand how female empowerment is represented by the three lingerie brands on Instagram. The thematic map that defines the themes and how they relate to the dataset can be found in the following chapter which includes results and discussion.

4. Results and discussion

This chapter presents the results of the thematic analysis that has been conducted for this thesis. The results found in the analysis are interpreted and connected to the research question and the literature. The research question aimed to examine how female empowerment is presented by lingerie brands from China, the Netherlands, and the United States. By conducting a thematic analysis, seven themes were found: sexualisation, sexual objectification, romantic relationships, body positivity, challenging traditional gender roles, sustainability and commodity feminism. A summarising table of each theme, the related codes and the meaning can be found in appendix A.

4.1 Sexualisation and sexual objectification

This theme tests the sexualisation and sexual objectification of the posts, by identifying seductive facial expressions, provocative posing, models intimately touching oneself or sexual interaction between models. Savage X Fenty's posts showed a high level of sexualisation, Marlies Dekkers' posts showed a medium level and Neiwai arguably did not integrate any sexualisation. Starting with Neiwai, none of the models have a seductive facial expression or a provocative posing, nor are they intimately touching oneself or sexual interacting with other models. Compared to Savage X Fenty and Marlies Dekkers, Neiwai's lingerie is modest since the bras and briefs cover the majority of the models' breasts and buttocks, leaving a limited amount of nudity on show. For reference, in most of Savage X Fenty's posts the models are wearing push up bras and thongs which reveal parts of the intimate body parts. Most of Neiwai's lingerie appears to be designed in a way that it is not visible under clothing. The lingerie is seamless, neutral coloured, basic and tagged with #MadeToLiveIn, #essentials, #baselayer, #comfort, and #support. Most of the presented bras are more like tops than traditional bras, as the items have a high neckline, no wires and wide straps on the shoulders. However, in order to cover the high neckline and wide straps, the clothing worn over it must have a higher neckline and cover the shoulders. This supports the notion that Chinese women still dress modestly (Jieyu, 2020; Yu, 2015). It is also important to note that the way in which Neiwai present nudity in their posts supports the notion that displaying a nude or semi-nude body does not necessarily lead to sexualisation (Reichert & Lambiase, 2003). According to these researchers, nudity is only sexualised when it is combined with the indicators of sexualisation. Yet, when testing Goffman's three individual sub concepts within the term gender, it can be argued that Neiwai presents women in a

submissive way. Most of the posts show female models softly placing their hands on their body, lightly touching their hair or loosely hugging themselves which is tagged as Goffman's feminine touch (N=35). This feminine touch is argued to present women as fragile and in need of male protection. Touching sexualised areas can be interpreted as sexually availability. Neiwai's models do not touch highly sexualised areas such as the crotch area, breasts or mouth. However, they do touch their hips and neck which are moderately sexualised areas according to Gervais et al. (2012). Models are repeatedly looking away instead of directly into the camera (N=11), which is labelled as licenced withdrawal. Goffman (1979) argued that women appearing physically or mentally removed from this present situation, supports how women are depending on men. Although the context is not considered sexualised, the female models do display ritualisation of subordination. In half of the posts, the head of the model is cut off the image showing only her torso which essentially (sexually) objectifies her body (N=24). Leaving out the models' faces anonymises them. There are two potential explanations for this. Firstly, being sexual is not socially accepted in China so by not showing the face, Neiwai is protecting the model (Yuxin et al., 2007). Secondly, Chinese society focuses on the community rather than the individual (Hofstede, 2021). Models are also shown in inferior positions such as laying or sitting down (N=12), which signals submission, powerlessness and sexual availability according to Goffman (1979). These findings suggest Neiwai does include female sexualisation and sexual objectification in their posts, yet in a concealed manner. It is also crucial to note that women appear passive instead of active participants in receiving and enjoying sexualised attention from men. Neiwai does not mention anything about sexual power or enjoying being sexy in their caption which could provide an indication of owning one's sexuality.
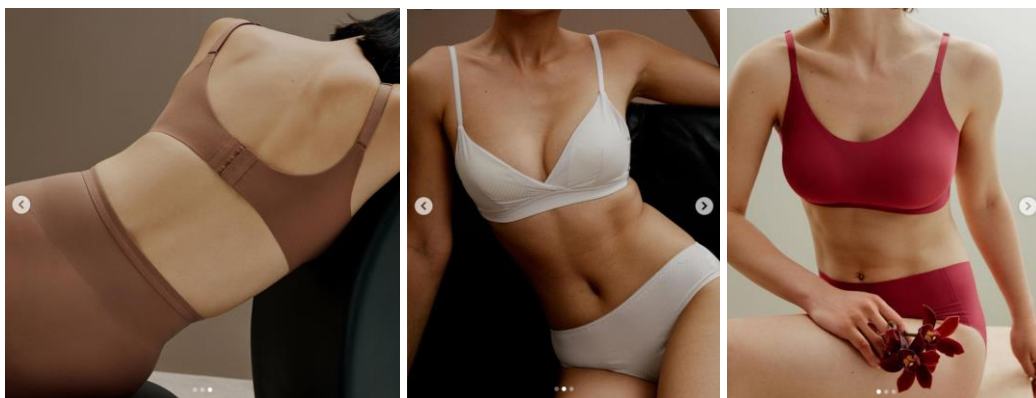

Figure 1, 2 & 3: @neiwaiofficial on February 26th, March 4th and March 9th, 2022

In contrast, Savage X Fenty encouraged their followers to express their sexuality and includes obvious sexualisation in almost all posts (N=44). The Savage X Fenty lingerie also shows a contrast with Neiwai's items. Instead of seamless basics, Savage X Fenty's collection consists of bras and thongs with straps, lace and fishnets. The items are black, red and other bold colours. Apart from lingerie that can be worn under clothing, Savage X Fenty also includes catsuits, fishnet or transparent tightfitting dresses and a leather corset. Overall, the lingerie appears to enhance the body by wearing push up bras or to make the body look sexier (e.g., fishnet dress, thongs, embroidered corsets, leather open bras). Comfort does not seem to be a focus of Savage X Fenty. Savage X Fenty encourages women to "Leave little to the imagination with our "X-Ray Vision" collection" (March 8th) and to "Let 'em know u Savage, Not Sorry w/out sayin' it" (February 20th). This indicates the brand encourages their followers to express their female sexuality. In the sample, Savage X Fenty introduces a new collection under the name Baroque Bondage, which includes bralettes, thongs, stockings, a whip and an apron like piece of lingerie. Bondage is a practice that involves tying up or restraining a partner for sexual pleasure or gratification (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022b). Interestingly, sexual bondage originates form the erotic art in traditional China and Japan. With the rise of Confucianism in China, this practice became forbidden (Ernulf & Innala, 1995; Huang & Lowry, 2011). All lingerie items are see-through, yet there are no nipples or genitalia visible on the models. These areas appear to be concealed through Photoshop, possible since Instagram does not allow nudity (Garcia, 2020). By offering a bondage collection, Savage X Fenty enables their followers to express their sexual desires and that this is not a taboo.

Again, Goffman's three individual sub concepts were tested to determine the level of sexual objectification. Licensed withdrawal was occasionally found in the sample (N=8). But most of the images which include a model looking away are part of a post with two or more images (N=7). In the other images, the model is looking directly into the camera. An example is presented below in figure 4. This combination of a withdrawn and engaged look in the same posts led the researcher to reject the models as submissive.
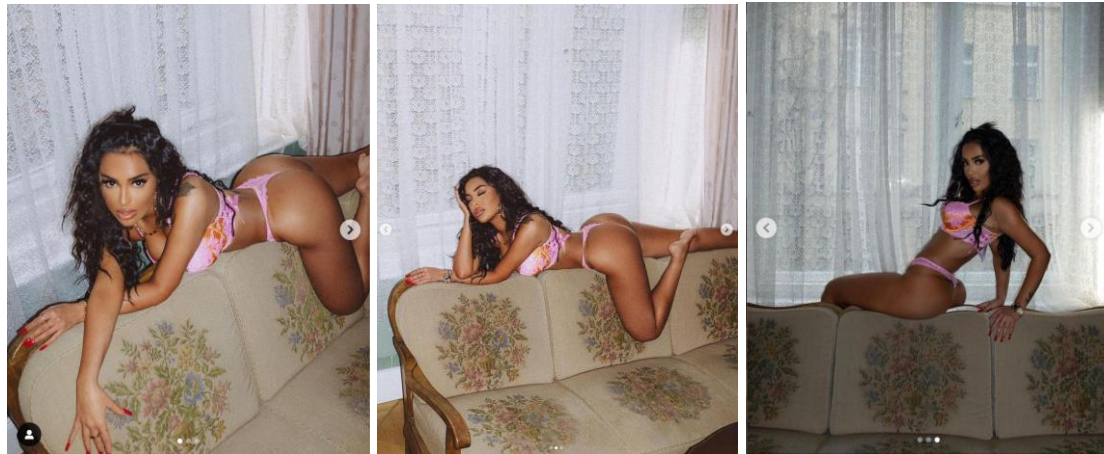
Figure 4: @savagexfenty on February 17th, 2022

Savage X Fenty's models did show feminine touch (N=18). The female models are shown placing their hands softly on bannisters, on a male model or on highly sexualised parts of their body (e.g., breasts, buttocks). Yet again, it is debatable whether the models can be considered submissive. In most of these posts the models have a fierce, seductive facial expression, staring directly into the camera (N=15). This can certainly be labelled as sexualised, but not necessarily as sexual objectification because the model appears as an active participant. According to Erchull and Liss (2013), being an active participant can prove the female model feels empowered by the sexualised attention. Lastly, ritualisation of subordination was tested in the sample. Female models were presented laying down, sitting or bending over (N=12). Here submissiveness and thus sexual objectification is questionable. To illustrate, one post features four women in inferior positions. Yet these women are either fiercely looking into the camera or laughing with each other. The women laughing, implies their attention is on each other instead of soliciting male attention. Furthermore, the four women play in Moulin Rouge the Musical on Broadway[2]. To play in a Broadway musical, it can be assumed that the women are highly talented and confident in their abilities. Together with their facial expression, the women appear powerful, ambitious and active participants of the scene which again led the researcher to reject the models as submissive. Sexual objectification is also limited since all models are tagged, which allows followers to visit their personal Instagram pages. By doing so, the models are presented as an individual instead of anonymous or an object. To conclude, Savage X Fenty shows a high level of sexualisation but a low level of sexual objectification.

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[2] Broadway is a collective of 41 professional theatres located in New York and considered to as the highest commercial level of live theatre in Anglophone countries (Naden, 2011).

Marlies Dekkers presents a different way of sexualisation in their posts as the part of it comes from the captions instead of visuals (N=7). Firstly, the brand encourages women to accentuate the female curves of their body with quotes such as "Dare to put your curves in the spotlight!" (marliesdekkersofficial, May 5th). The brand also integrates cultural and historical stories in their posts. For example:

> I sometimes wonder: how different would our lives have been if, after committing the original sin, only Adam would have been punished? What if Eve would have been allowed to stay and party in paradise, having sex with whomever she pleased? Would women have been freer, more sexually liberated? Would we have more fun? (@marliesdekkersofficial, March 22nd)

This caption refers to the Biblical couple Adam and Eve and shows how Marlies Dekkers rebels against sexual oppression of women. Another caption mentions "What if we loved our vulvas as much, we would applaud each time we looked in the mirror?" after which the story of Inanna is told, the Sumerian goddess of love, sex and political power: "Rejoicing at her wondrous vulva, the young woman Inanna applauded herself" (@marliesdekkersofficial, February 7th). Marlies Dekkers also refers to Quetzal Flower, Aztec goddess of youth, love, sex and beauty:

> She was also the first to commit a sin! Quetzal Flower broke the rules by seducing a celibate priest, but in a juicy reversal of our bible story, she went unpunished while the priest turned into a scorpion (I'm sure it was worth it for him, though)"

Potentially, Marlies Dekkers is making these references to cultural and historical stories to present a different view on sex then presented in Christianity. The captions are explicitly talking about sex and the female body. This is different from Savage X Fenty. Although Savage X Fenty's models provocatively pose and seduce with their facial expression, there are – apart from one post about bondage – no textual references to having sex, intimate female body parts or even the word sex. Marlies Dekker also refers to sexualising yourself for yourself, for example: "Start by looking at yourself the way a lover would: hungry and lustful. Trace your curves with your fingers, feel the softness of your skin. Be shameless, turn yourself on." (@marliesdekkersofficial, February 14th). Apart from the presence of sexual connotation in the captions, sexualisation is also found in the visuals (N=13). Figure 5, 6 and 7 show examples of how Marlies Dekkers integrates sexualisation in their posts. The models have a seductive facial expression and are posing provocatively. None of the posts show models intimately touching oneself or another model. Thus, the level of visual sexualisation is much lower than in Savage X Fenty's posts. Marlies Dekkers' posts were also tested on

sexual objectification through Goffman's three individual sub concepts. Licensed withdrawal (N=6), feminine touch (N=9) and subordination of ritualisation (N=5) were found in the sample. Unlike Savage X Fenty, not all models had a fierce, seductive facial expression or stared directly into the camera, which would limit the submissiveness. Specifically, figure 6 shows a highly sexually objectifying image as the female model is withdrawn while showing her breasts and bending over in an animalistic pose.

Figures 5, 6 & 7: @marliesdekkersofficial on February 20th, March 1st and March 29th, 2022

Lastly, this theme takes two of Goffman's predominantly relational sub concepts into account, namely relative size and function ranking (Goffman, 1979). First Goffman's theme of relative size was tested on the sample, but in none of the 150 posts did men appear larger or taller than women, however only five posts included a man and woman. The Marlies Dekkers sample only includes female models and Neiwai includes one post with a male model, but not in combination with a female model. Savage X Fenty includes eleven posts with one or more men and the five posts with man and woman. Yet, in these five posts the men and women appeared of the same size in both height and body shape. This finding rejects the presence of female submissiveness based on relative size and fits with previous results, which showed that this predominantly relational sub concept is not common anymore (Bell & Milic, 2002; Kang, 1997; Kuipers et al., 2016; Mager & Helgeson, 2010). Similarly, gender stereotypical function ranking was not found in the sample. Again, only five posts included a man and a woman, but they were pictured hugging, kissing or holding each other. There was no male executing or female supporting role noticeable, they were rather equal and loving towards each other. If anything, the woman was executing and the man was supporting. An example of this can be found at Savage X Fenty. Rihanna, the co-founder, is featured seven times. Occasionally, she is accompanied by her boyfriend A$AP Rocky, who is a famous rapper (N=3). The couple is pictured side to side, both looking at the camera or

looking at each other during the opening of a new store. Crucial to note here is that Savage X Fenty is her company, and her boyfriend only appears to join the opening to support her. Rihanna has the executive role, whereas A$AP Rocky takes the supporting role. Romantic relationships proved to play a large role in the Instagram posts, which will be further discussed in the next section.

4.2 Romantic relationships

All three brands include several references to romantic relationships. This indicates a strong connection between lingerie and romantic relationships, which supports the notion of wearing lingerie as an expression of love and interest for a romantic partner (Vigolo & Ugolini, 2016). A romantic relationship is presented as positive, exciting and aspirational. For example, the caption of a post with Rihanna and her boyfriend, simply states 'Goals' under the picture (@savagexfenty, February 15th). This implies their relationship is an example or a desired achievement for others. Furthermore, Savage X Fenty labelled six posts with #BlackLove which show six couples with a black skin. This is culturally significant, as black women in the United States are less likely to be included in empowering messaging then white women (Robinson et al., 2021). The black couples are shown hugging, kissing and holding each other. One of these posts has the following caption: "Look, we know there's just too much goin' on rn & it can be easy to get caught up in doom scrolling. So to close out #BlackHistoryMonth, we're bringing the L-O-V-E! Allow us to introduce you to some of our fave IRL couples who are proving that there ain't no love like #BlackLove." (@savagexfenty, February 26th). Two things that stand out from this caption. Firstly, the focus on black love in celebration of Black History Month. In contrast, neither Marlies Dekkers or Neiwai include any reference to Black History Month in their Instagram posts. Secondly, the emphasis on IRL couples, which is an abbreviation for in real life; Savage X Fenty aims to authentically show black couple. Most of the #BlackLove posts have a caption that introduces the couples, with their names, jobs and beliefs. In all posts, the couples are tagged, and this tag leads to their personal Instagram pages. Altogether, this supports the authenticity of the couples as followers have more insight into their personal life instead of simply an image of two models. Out of the six posts, there are two lesbian couples and one gay couple. It is noteworthy that Savage X Fenty introduces intersectionality. Intersectionality acknowledges that a person cannot always simply be categorised as one social group, since an individual can have characteristics from various social groups (Coleman, 2019). For example, being gay and being black do not exist in isolation from one another but instead are interconnected. This

results in a more complex merge of oppression. As found in the literature on the United States, being black is still viewed as inferior to being white as well as being gay is inferior to being heterosexual (McKie et al., 2020). Yet, Savage X Fenty is showing appreciation in their posts for these black gay couples instead of rejecting them. Additionally, Savage X Fenty is the only brand which also includes homosexual relationships. The brand also features a post in which a man and a transsexual woman share an intimate kiss (@savagexfenty, February 27th). Again, being transsexual is a minority and viewed as inferior to non-transexual men and women (McKie et al., 2020).

The period in which the sample was collected, included Valentine's Day. This annual holiday on February 14th is the day when lovers commonly express their affection towards their significant others with gestures and / or gifts. As lingerie proves to be connected to romantic relationships, it makes sense that a holiday which celebrates romantic relationships provides a considerable marketing opportunity for lingerie brands. Thus, all three brands dedicate several posts to this day. Savage X Fenty branded their Valentine's Day related content with the slogan 'Big Valentine Energy' (N=4), with videos in which the models are styled as punks with rock music in the background. The captions under these videos are "Them: 💝 💐 / Us: ...", which point out how other people give sweet gifts like flowers and chocolates on Valentine's Day, but Savage X Fenty gives something else (e.g., sexy, bold). The other videos have the captions "Rock out w/ ur Savage out this VDay 🤟", "BBE. Bad Bae Energy" and "We don't do that quiet on set 'ish". It illustrates how Savage X Fenty is trying to stay away from the 'lovey-dovey', 'corny' romance ideas traditionally associated with Valentine's Day, and instead create a bold, rockstar feel. Yet, the brand is incorporating relationships into their marketing. In two of the videos the text "Just got a new bae or two? / This collection was made for you". Figure 8, below, shows screenshots of one of these videos. This quote refers to buying lingerie to impress a new lover ('bae'). This is at odds with the brand's core statement, which claims people should wear lingerie for themselves and not to impress others (Savage X Fenty, 2022). Yet, this quote can also be interpreted as tongue-in-cheek towards monogamous relationships as it refers to multiple baes or casual acquaintances instead of serious commitment to one person.

Figure 8: @savagexfenty on February 10th, 2022

Marlies Dekkers takes a different approach to romantic relationships and Valentine's Day, which reflects its different brand identity. The brand introduces a Valentine's quiz on their Instagram (N=4) with the title: 'What would you do for love?". The brand is asking their followers to share their experiences, and to fill in the full quiz at the website. By filling it in, the followers can win a lingerie set – here the brand is using giveaways and competitions as strategy to draw engagement. One of the quiz questions is "For love, would you change your last name?" (@marliesdekkersofficial, February 13th). As Marlies Dekkers' target group is women, the question thus refers to the tradition of the woman taking her husband's name. Feminists argue that taking the husband's name as a form of oppression, stating it refers to the patriarchal idea that a woman becomes possession of the man she marries (Savage, 2020). It also places the man as head of the family – since his wife and their children take his name – which indicates female submissiveness (Goffman, 1979). Nonetheless, it remains a strong cultural norm in Western European countries like the Netherlands, despite strong individualistic and gender aware beliefs (Savage, 2020). In the post, Marlies Dekkers is asking her followers' opinions about this topic which shows the brand is open for debate. Questioning the tradition instead of assuming it, shows how Marlies Dekkers is individualistic and gender aware. The last Valentine's Day related post features a story by Marlies Dekkers herself in which she talks about the "crazy" things she has done for love. She came to a realisation: "why wait for another person to set my rebel heart on fire?" (@marliesdekkers, February 14th). This realisation shifts the focus from love for others to self-love which has been discussed in the previous section.

Neiwai introduces relationships in their posts for Valentine's Day and National Wedding Planning Day. During Valentine's Day, Neiwai places focus on followers gifting Neiwai products to their significant others. The brand states "Gift her briefs she'll love" (@neiwaiofficial, February 8th), "Treat the most important man in your life to luxurious [..] briefs" (@neiwaiofficial, February 12th) and "Little boxes of love [..] are a great choice for V-day" (@neiwaiofficial, February 13th). This appears to refer to heterosexual relationships. Only on Valentine's Day itself, the caption reads "Whether or not you're spending the day with someone special, we hope you'll wrap yourself in the love and comfort you deserve" after which the Valentine's Day sale is introduced (@neiwaiofficial, February 14th). This shows how Neiwai views Valentine's Day as a day to consume, either for yourself or for your partner. Furthermore, Neiwai is the only brand pointing out National Wedding Planning Day in their Instagram posts (N=4). This day was created by an American wedding company, which shows the influence American culture and business has on other countries such as China. Neiwai holds a sale specifically dedicated to National Wedding Planning Day, giving 25% off specific white items from their current collection with the code BRIDE. The brand also states, "Whether you're getting married of simply attending a wedding, our Self Silk underwear sets are great under any formalwear" (@neiwaiofficial, March 5th). This statement does not give another option than attending a wedding or getting married, indicating how marriage is an enviable occurrence for Neiwai's followers. Finally, the caption "Share this post with anyone tying the knot this year so they can save 25% on bridal sets for her & PJs for him!' (@neiwaiofficial, March 6th) demonstrates Neiwai refers to heterosexual marriages. All throughout, a high level of consumerism is noticeable which will be further discussed in the section on commodity feminism.

4.3 Body positive content

As found in the literature, body positive messaging is a common method within femvertising. In this analysis, the body positive theme applies to references to the body in a non-sexualised context. This division is made since all body references in a sexualised context have been discussed in the sexualisation section. A post was tagged as body positive if it included appreciation of function and health of the body, encouragement of accepting or loving appearance, diverse representation of beauty, focus on taking care of the body, promotion of inner positivity or protective filtering of information (Cohen et al., 2019). However, appreciation of function and health of the body and protective filtering of information were not found in the sample. Marlies Dekkers encourages their followers to

accept or love their appearance (N=12) with captions such as "To put the spotlight on your natural beauty, I used graphic straps and circular ornaments for this classic design" (@marliesdekkersofficial, February 20th). The brand also promotes of inner positivity (N=7), like in the following quote which was posted on Valentine's Day:

> Till one day, it hit me: why wait for another person to set my rebel heart on fire? Why not put on those rose-coloured glasses, look in the mirror and fall madly in love with myself? We talk about 'self-love' and 'self-care', but always with some reserve. Whether its shame, modesty or the fear of seeming too full of ourselves; something is holding us back. So, this Valentine's Day, let's go all out! Let's try something completely rebellious: radical self-love … Don't just like yourself, be CRAZY IN LOVE with yourself (@marliesdekkers, February 14th).

This quote shows how Marlies Dekkers encourages women to first focus on themselves, which supports the finding that the brand focuses on women wearing the lingerie for themselves and feeling sexy for themselves. Almost half of the posts were tagged with #selflove (N=22). The promotion of inner positivity is also present in Neiwai's posts (, like the following caption: "Beauty is more than skin deep. NO BODY IS NOBODY 3.0 shows that all women and their perceived imperfections have a unique and beautiful story to share. NEIWAI wants you to know that you are beautiful inside and out" (@neiwaiofficial, March 1st). The saying beauty is more than skin deep is used to emphasize that there is more to a person than appearance. One's personality and character also add to their beauty.

Neiwai encourages their followers to accept or love their appearance (N=12) with captions such as "Every scar tells a story: an obstacle overcome, a lesson learned, a time you grew stronger. Embrace them. Love your scars as you love the rest of yourself – there is beauty in everybody" (@neiwaiofficial, March 23rd). Neiwai also focuses on taking care of the body (N=13) mainly by focusing on how comfortable, breathable and soft on the skin their items are. But also, by encouraging their followers to rest: "No matter how busy life gets, you still need time to relax" (@neiwaiofficial, February 17th). A difference is noticed in the way the brands engage in these subthemes though. Neiwai focuses on the word love, comfort and beauty in captions, in combination with visuals showing imperfections on female bodies and feminine touch. Together this offers a soft, traditionally feminine impression, whereas Marlies Dekkers' presents a bold, more traditionally masculine impression. Marlies Dekkers includes many exclamation marks, words in capital letters and bright colours. The brand also encouraged their followers to not hold back, and how Marlies Dekkers' lingerie or swimwear supports a bolder lifestyle:

> With my designs, I dare you to show your true colours and walk on the wild side. Feel the urge to dance in the desert, rock out in the rain or go for a midnight swim? Go right ahead! With this season's colourful, multifunctional swimwear, you can answer the call in style!

This is interesting as China was found to be masculine society and the Netherlands are feminine (Hofstede, 2021). Yet, these findings show how Neiwai encourages followers to relax whereas Marlies Dekkers tells followers to stand out from the crowd. This shows how female empowerment could be achieved by going against cultural beliefs.

A diverse representation of beauty is mainly found in Savage X Fenty's posts. For example, shown in figure 9 and 10, Savage X Fenty shows two models wearing the same white corset and briefs yet have a very different body size. The model on figure 1 is skinny, whereas the model on figure 2 can be described as fat with roles clearly visible on her hips. The first image has a caption which simply introduces the lingerie, stating the items are "now on the site". The second image is captioned with "Every. Body. should feel like an Xtra VIP."

Figure 9 & 10: @savagexfenty on March 1st, 2022

By showing different body types in the same lingerie, Savage X Fenty shows how they believe both skinny and fat women are beautiful or that size doesn't matter. Including a bigger model also better reflects their American followers, as 58% of the population in The United States is either overweight or obese. Savage X Fenty is also including deaf and disabled followers by posting two videos in which a man presents horoscopes by talking and using sign language, as well as several posts featuring a model who is missing her arm. Overall, Savage X Fenty posts show bigger female models (N=5), black models (N=30), Asian models (N=4), an Indigenous model with face tattoos (N=1) and white models (N=3). Together with the inclusion of gay and transgender models, Savage X Fenty presents the most diversity out of the three brands and uses this to encourage their follower to accept or

love their appearance no matter their size, skin colour or other 'flaws'. However, Savage X Fenty does not include focus on taking care of the body or promotion of inner positivity in their posts. Neiwai only includes Asian models in their posts. Most models are skinny, except for a few models with less toned bodies (N=4). None of the models are as big as the Savage X Fenty's models. Interesting, the less toned bodies are not shown in combination with the face of the model. Marlies Dekkers shows Middle Eastern (N=2), black (N=3) and white (N=7) models. One model has a bigger body size, and she is an influencer, "fellow feminist and body-positive guru" who created a campaign of five posts on the Marlies Dekkers Instagram page. In the caption, she states: "Usually it's hard to find something nice in my size (F cup), but these pieces look super fierce, accentuate the right parts of my body, and offer enough support. I feel amazing!" (@marliesdekkersofficial, April 20th).

4.4 Challenging traditional gender roles

Apart from empowering women through body positive messaging, the three brands also engage in challenging traditional gender roles to empower women. This shows a distinction between appearance-based empowerment and personality-based empowerment. This theme is divided in three subthemes: Women in non-traditional feminine roles, encouragement of traditionally 'masculine' characteristics in women and celebration of traditionally feminine roles.

4.4.1 Women in non-traditional feminine roles

All three brands make references to women as active participants of the business world, which deviates from the traditional role of women as housewives or unambitious (Goffman, 1979). Each brand has an ambitious, successful female brand ambassador. Neiwai hired Chinese singer, songwriter, actress and fashion model Faye Wong as their global person. Wong is a highly ambitious and successful woman, as illustrated by her 13 nominations and wins of prestigious awards like Best Actress, Best Vocal Performance for a Theme Song and Best Song in Asia and Europe (IMDb, 2019). Within the sample, Wong collaborated with Neiwai by designing a loungewear collection. She is visible in one post and three posts show models in the loungewear. Marlies Dekkers and Savage X Fenty are both (co-)founded by women, and they are very present in the posts. Savage X Fenty includes co-founder Rihanna into their posts as Rihanna is present in the visuals (N=6), but not in the captions. Rihanna started her career as a singer in the United States and branched out by becoming a model, songwriter, actress and businesswoman by co-founding two companies,

namely Fenty Beauty and Savage X Fenty (Rihanna Now, 2022). She's sold 30 million albums and 120 million singles worldwide, and has over 50 million monthly listeners on Spotify (Spotify, 2022). A video shows how Rihanna visits a retail store opening in Los Angeles, and is met by a crowd of screaming fans (@savagexfenty, February 22nd). Besides photos of Rihanna visiting the store opening, she is featured once in the Valentine's Day campaign among other models. Savage X Fenty does not mention or show Rihanna being involved in the design process. Where Rihanna is admired from afar in the posts, Dekkers is presented approachable. Marlies Dekkers is named after the founder. Dekkers herself is visible twice in the posts and most captions are written from her perspective (N=44). This becomes clear by the way she writes about her experiences in love, business and travelling (N=4). But mainly through sentences in the captions like "my latest swimwear collection", "I got you" and "I was inspired by [..]". Dekkers is presented as a knowledgeable woman, with great experience in the design process and the fit of bras. Multiple posts feature long texts about the design process of the lingerie items, writing from Dekkers' perspective. For example, by mentioning that "a very special printing technique is used", "The straps need to create perfect symmetry, which means extra accuracy is required in construction" or "The mosaic of colourful pattern was printed digitally to save water and energy". This supports her role as head designer, presenting her as an inspiration. Marlies Dekkers also introduces six Asian partners who make the lingerie (@marliesdekkersofficial, March 6th). Photos of the six women, their names, job title and location are posted with the caption:

> Meet the makers [..] 'Women-owned business' may be a hot topic right now, but from the beginning – over 25 years ago – I had a very clear goal: to make a product for women, by women. A product that would not only empower the women who wore it, but also the women involved in making it. Since then, we have built a number of precious relationships with women all along our supply chain, based on mutual love, respect and empowerment. You know what they say: empowered women empower women... who in turn empower more women!

Here women are taking the non-traditional feminine role of owning business and leading factories, but it also shows a more emotional, traditional feminine approach by mentioning the precious relationships and mutual love between the Asian partners and Marlies Dekkers. It illustrates how taking a traditionally masculine role does not lead necessarily diminish traditional feminine characteristics. The level of transparency given by this post will be further discussed in the section on sustainability.

4.4.2 Encouragement of traditionally 'masculine' characteristics in women

Marlies Dekkers and Savage X Fenty positively mention traditionally 'masculine' characteristics in women (e.g., powerful, athletic, strong, competitive). Marlies Dekkers repeatedly encourages women to be bold and loud instead of submissive and soft, with captions such as "dare to show your true stripes" or "dare to reveal your wild nature". Similarly, Savage X Fenty states "We don't do that quiet on set 'ish" (February 19th) which shows the brand is loud. The post in which a model in lingerie draped over a couch (figure 4) is captioned with "Worst behaviour", which suggests Savage X Fenty does not follow the rules and is thus not submissive. Neiwai does include athleticism by showing models ballet dancing in their active and athleisure collection (N=3). However, ballet dancing is regarded as a feminine activity (Aleksandrovich, 2014). Therefore, Neiwai is not considered to encourage traditionally 'masculine' characteristics in women

4.4.3 Celebration of traditionally feminine roles

Apart from challenging gender roles by presenting women in business or with more traditionally 'masculine' characteristics, the brands also celebrate traditionally feminine roles. Motherhood in particular is highlighted positively in the sample. Neiwai shows women with babies and pregnant bellies in several posts (N=5). An example is figure 11, which is captioned with "Happy International Women's Day! ♡ Though we celebrate the strength and bravery of women around the world every day of the year" (@neiwaiofficial, March 8th). This implies Neiwai views pregnant women as strong and brave.

Figure 11: @neiwaiofficial, March 8th, 2022

The post in which Neiwai introduces the collaboration with Faye Wong is captioned with: "Busy mom, career woman, or an international popstar, this set is exactly what you need to make the most of your limited downtime." Here, it is interesting to note that busy mom is named in the same sentence as career woman and international popstar, suggesting Neiwai believes all three occupations are equal instead of viewing mothers as submissive feminine

and the other two as powerful masculine. This contradicts Goffman's 'traditional role' of women as mothers is submissive or weak (1979). Instead, women appear as strong individuals as mothers rather than solely supportive to others and putting their own needs aside. Savage X Fenty makes limited references to motherhood (N=2) by stating "Cheers to these hot mamas [..] the pair shares their real & raw truth of motherhood" (@savagexfenty, March 1st) and by posting a photo of co-founder Rihanna with her hands around her pregnant belly ((@savagexfenty, February 20th). The caption of the post does not mention anything about the pregnancy though, only stating "One time for the Baddest Girl" since its her birthday. Marlies Dekkers includes a post featuring a mother and daughter in the same pink lingerie (figure 12) and tagged with #motherdaughterlove (@marliesdekkersofficial, March 31st). Additionally, the Spring Summer 2022 collection of Marlies Dekkers is said to be inspired by Mother Earth, which becomes clear by hashtags #inspiredbymotherearth, #motherearth, and #originalbigmomma in combination with hashtags #ss22, #springsummer, and #newcollection. The collection is also introduced in the captions as such, for example "My Mother Earth swimwear collection" (@marliesdekkersofficial, March 11th). Drawing inspiration from something or someone indicates appreciation and admiration. As defined by Cambridge Dictionary (2022a), inspiration is "someone or something that people admire and want to be like".

Figure 12: @marliesdekkersofficial on March 31st, 2022

Marlies Dekkers' references to Mother Earth also introduce the sustainability theme. Marlies Dekkers states "there is definitely a connection between the exploitation of women and the exploitation of Mother Earth [..] This Women's Day, let's celebrate both feminism and the green movement for fighting hand in hand to protect and empower the voiceless." (@marliesdekkersofficial, March 8th).

4.5 Sustainability

An unexpected theme found within the sample was sustainability. Marlies Dekkers' captions refer to sustainability often (N=10) by mentioning the use of recycled yarn and digital printing which is stated to be "The most sustainable way of textile printing" (@marliesdekkersofficial, February 28th). The brand also introduces a collaboration with Join the Pipe, an organisation which works on the redistribution of drinking water in a fairer way (@marliesdekkersofficial, April 12th). Dekkers interviewed founder Geraldo Vallen and designed a limited edition water bottle which is reusable and therefore more eco-friendly the single use plastic water bottles. As stated in the previous section, Marlies Dekkers draws a strong connection between sustainability and Mother Earth. Followers are encouraged to live more sustainably through quotes like "Mother Earth gave us everything, she is even part of us. The water in our cells, the calcium in our bones. Time to give something back!" (@marliesdekkersofficial, April 12th). Marlies Dekkers also presents photos of the factory owners who enable the brand to offer more sustainable solutions: "And when it comes to sustainability, our partners in Asia have played a particularly big role. [..] these women have been able to explore and apply a number of sustainable solutions, from digital printing to recyclable packaging" (@marliesdekkersofficial, March 6th). Significant to note here, is the use of the word partners. By doing so, Marlies Dekkers establishes equality and collaboration between the brand and the factory owner. By giving the women who make the lingerie a face and a name, the production process become much more transparent. Transparency is an important step towards a more sustainable and fair way of doing business (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Additionally, by introducing the Asian partners and the Join the Pipe founder, the brand establishes more personal approach.

Neiwai also makes references to sustainability, by mentioning the environmentally-friendly fabrics they use and through the hashtags #BuyLessBuyBetter, #gogreen, #sustainablefashion, #environment, #recylce, #sustainability and #recycled (N=10). In the lead up to Valentine's Day, Neiwai offers their bras in giftboxes and states: "Little boxes of love 🤎 Barely Zero is a great choice for V-Day AND for the environment. Each bra ships in an easy-to-reuse box made from 100% post-consumer material." (@neiwaiofficial, February 13th). In contrast to Marlies Dekkers and Neiwai, Savage X Fenty did not make any references to sustainability.

4.6 Commodity feminism

A sensitising concept derived from the literature was commodity feminism, which is the appropriation of female empowerment for commercial purposes (Gill, 2008a). Within the data, a high level of references to consumerism were found, since the brands added website links to shop the shown items, put "🖑 Tap to shop" in the caption or by simply introducing a new collection. Although this indicates commercial purposes, this has not be tagged as commodity feminism. Only when Lazar's concepts of empowered beauty, knowledge is power, female power and sexual female power were appropriated for financial gain, was the post tagged as commodity feminism (2006). For example, Savage X Fenty states "A good catsuit can make you feel powerful – especially when it's from the X-Ray Vision collection" (March 8th) which can be categorised as appropriating the female strive for power. Essentially, Savage X Fenty argues power can be achieved through physical aestheticization. Similarly, Marlies Dekkers mentions "With the right lingerie, a woman can conquer the world." (@marliesdekkersofficial, March 17th) which can be labelled as agentic power since it indicates that wearing the right lingerie – in other words, wearing Marlies Dekkers lingerie – allows women to take control over the world. Apart from these two posts, there were no other indications to commodity feminism found in Savage X Fenty's or Marlies Dekkers' posts. At Neiwai, there were two posts found that indicated commodity feminism. Neiwai's post on International Women Day praises women's strength and bravery, but also adds a website link where the lingerie can be shopped. In contrast, Marlies Dekkers and Savage X Fenty do not include any form of consumerism in their posts on activist causes (e.g., Black History Month, International Women's Day, Ukraine war). Furthermore, Neiwai celebrates International Women Day by hosting a sitewide sale with the code '4HER'. These two posts are tagged as commodity feminism, as Neiwai directly links female strive for equality to consumerism.

5. Conclusion

This study was conducted to understand how female empowerment is represented on Instagram advertising by lingerie companies from China, the Netherlands and the United States. Stereotypically, adverts linked beauty, submissiveness, nurturance, and cooperation to femininity, while the masculine adverts conveyed power, athleticism, strength, and competitiveness (Goffman, 1979). According to previous studies, female empowerment in advertising, coined femvertising, is expressed by challenging these gender stereotypes through body positive messages and rejecting traditional gender roles. While companies achieved success with femvertising, they have been accused of appropriation of female empowerment for commercial purposes (Gill, 2008a; Varghese & Kumar, 2020). In particular, lingerie advertising is controversial as lingerie brands are accused of sexually objectifying women in their advertising while also using empowering messaging to promote their products. The three brands selected for this study were American brand Savage X Fenty, Chinese brand Neiwai and Dutch brand Marlies Dekkers. Each brand stated to put female empowerment in their core values and has been considered to disrupt the lingerie marketing they are in. A thematic analysis on 150 Instagram posts was conducted, which is an iterative, multi-stage process of coding and categorising data into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method proved suitable for this study, because it allowed the researcher to gain a structured and nuanced understanding of a large amount of data, while keeping flexibility in the process. The thematic analysis led to seven themes, namely sexualisation, sexual objectification, romantic relationships, body positivity, challenging traditional gender roles, sustainability and commodity feminism. Marlies Dekkers includes sexualisation in the posts, by showing visuals of models with seductive facial expression and poses as well as explicitly discussing sex and female genitalia in the captions. In general, Marlies Dekkers takes a personal approach by writing the captions from the point of view of head designer and founder Marlies Dekkers herself. It appears as if Dekkers encourages women to critically think about societal issues and to share their opinion. The personal approach is supported by introducing the Asian partners who make the lingerie and by interviewing the founder of a collaborating company. Marlies Dekkers focuses on comfort while accentuating the female body when designing their lingerie and gives elaborate description of the design process. Out of the three brands, Marlies Dekkers included sustainability the most, by mentioning sustainable solutions and by giving transparency in the production chain. Interestingly, Marlies Dekkers encourages followers to stand out from the crowd which is not viewed as a preferable trait in

Dutch society (Hofstede, 2021). The opposite is noticed at Chinese brand Neiwai. In Chinese, masculine culture leisure and relax time are not valued highly, yet Neiwai encourages followers to relax and take time for themselves (Hofstede, 2021). This finding showed how female empowerment may be achieved by going against limiting cultural beliefs. Neiwai presents soft, calm images of the female models which comply with traditional femininity. The brand also integrates marriage as an enviable occurrence in a woman's life. Neiwai seems to neglect the existence female sexuality and only focuses on comfort for their lingerie collection. This was expected, since sexuality is still taboo in Chinese society (Yuxin et al., 2007). An unexpected finding of this study was that Chinese brand Neiwai arguably included the highest level of sexual objectification. In contrast, Savage X Fenty shows how sexualisation can be empowering to women by following the beliefs of third-wave Anglophonic feminism that enjoying sexiness can be a feminist act (Choi et al., 2016; Duits & Van Zoonen, 2011; Erchull & Liss, 2013). Savage X Fenty mainly offers lingerie that sexually enhances the female body (e.g., push up bras, thongs, fishnet dresses). Savage X Fenty contradicts itself by promoting to wear lingerie for a partner, while their brand values encourage customers to wear it for themselves and no one else. In general, lingerie proved to be closely related to romantic relationships, as lingerie offers a way for women to show love and affection towards their significant other. As found in the literature, looking sexy for a partner is one of the ways of expressing this love and affection (Vigolo & Ugolini, 2016). Especially around Valentine's Day, did the three brands focus on romantic relationships.

5.1 Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is the limited scope, as only 150 posts by three brands were analysed. Additionally, a second possible limitation might be to collect the data around Valentine's Day, which lead to a big focus on romantic relationships. Another limitation is the Dutch nationality of the researcher, which might have biased the cross-cultural analysis. In the future, interviews could be conducted to analyse how this specific sample of lingerie advertisements are perceived by women and if these women consider them empowering. Given the study limitation of small sample size, future research should explore female empowerment advertising in more lingerie brands. Preferably, lingerie brands from more countries. Another possibility is to explore how other fields integrate female empowerment into advertising (e.g., beauty, fashion, household products), to gain a broader understanding of the phenomenon. Lastly, more research needed to compare female empowerment appeal

across different popular media channels, such as TikTok, YouTube or Netflix, in order to gain a more current understanding.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Thematic map

Themes	Codes	Meaning
Sexualisation	Seductive facial expression, provocative posing, intimately touching oneself or others (Reichert & Lambiase, 2003)	Brand is adding sexual connotation to post
Sexual objectification	Feminine touch, ritualisation of subordination, licensed withdrawal, relative size, function ranking (Goffman, 1979)	Brand is presenting female model in a submissive manner or objectifying her in post
Romantic relationships	Expression of love, partnership, Valentine's Day	Brand is including referencing to romantic relationship in post
Body positivity	Appreciation of function and health of the body, encouragement of accepting or loving appearance, diverse representation of beauty, focus on taking care of the body, promotion of inner positivity, protective filtering of information (Cohen et al., 2019)	Brand is aiming to boost women's sense of self-worth by challenging traditional beauty expectations and presenting diverse bodies and features among women
Challenging traditional gender roles	Masculine / feminine characteristics in women, traditional masculine / feminine roles	Brand challenges traditional gender roles by positively promoting masculinity or femininity expressed by women
Sustainability	Recycled, green, sustainable	Post is focusing on conscious purchasing or sustainable solutions
Commodity feminism	Empowered beauty, knowledge is power, female power, sexual female power (Lazar, 2006)	Post is integrating feminism in post for commercial purposes