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Razors for *all* humans?

A multimodal social semiotic analysis of advertising stereotypes and gender performances

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Bachelor's Thesis



Foreword

After two months of intensive work, our thesis is now finally completed. We would like to thank our supervisor Clara Gustafsson for all the help we got during the process. You gave advice which challenged us and helped us see things from new perspectives.

Thank you for that.

Lastly, we would like to emphasize that our contribution to this thesis has been equal.

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Abstract

Razors for *all* humans?

This paper aimed to investigate how advertising stereotypes can be challenged or reproduced and how gender is performed, in the context of an allegedly non-stereotypical company. In order to investigate this matter, we conducted a multimodal social semiotic analysis of the Swedish company Estring, whose razor blades are communicated to all humans. By analyzing various semiotic resources, the paper presents new knowledge on how visual communication both can challenge and reproduce stereotyped and non-stereotyped portrayals. Furthermore, it contributes with knowledge regarding how visual communication can create challenging performances of gender in advertising. The results suggest that Estring by combining traditional “feminine” and “masculine” connotations, managed to perform inclusive and fluid gender identities which did not define humans in a binary way. In terms of stereotypes, we suggest Estring managed to challenge advertising stereotypes to a certain degree, but in the process of doing so, they also reproduce traditional stereotypes. In summary, this study illustrates the challenges corporations face when striving to position themselves as inclusive and representative of all humans.

Keywords: gender, stereotypes, advertising, Goffman, beauty products, visual communication

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Sammanfattning

Rakhyvlar för *alla* människor?

Syftet med denna studien var att undersöka hur kommunikation som sägs vara icke-stereotypisk framställer genus och utmanar eller reproducerar traditionella stereotyper i reklam. För att studera detta fenomen valdes det svenska företaget Estrid ut, som säger sig kommunicera till alla människor. Genom att studera detta fenomen har studien bidragit med kunskap kring hur visuell kommunikation kan både utmana och reproducera stereotypiska gestaltningar. Den har även bidragit med kunskap kring hur visuell kommunikation kan skapa representativa och utmanande performativa uppträdanden av genus inom reklam. Resultaten indikerade att Estrid, genom att ha kombinerat traditionellt “manliga” och “kvinnliga” konnotationer, lyckades skapa inkluderande och icke-binära representationer av genus. Gällande stereotyper, pekade resultaten på att i strävan efter att utmana traditionella stereotyper har Estrid till viss del lyckats med detta. Men, i processen har även somliga stereotyper reproducerats och uppmuntrats i Estrids kommunikation. Slutligen belyser studien även de utmaningar och problem som väntar de företag som vill positionera sig som socialt inkluderande och representativa av alla människor.

Nyckelord: genus, stereotyper, reklam, Goffman, skönhetsprodukter, visuell kommunikation

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1. Introduction

In this introductory chapter the topic of the thesis is introduced, followed by a presentation of the company which has been studied. Furthermore, the research problem is presented and problematized, and its relevance for the field of strategic communication is also discussed. Lastly, the aim and research questions of this thesis are presented.

1.1 Background

The beauty industry has changed a lot throughout the years due to societal developments which have led to new trends within the beauty segment. Today's market asks for natural ingredients rather than synthetic, and the target audience has changed to not solely include women. With the introduction of new marketing strategies and concepts, ethical issues have also emerged within the beauty industry. McDonald et al. (2022) describe how the beauty industry now distinguishes their branded products as clean and environmentally friendly, which can be seen as debatable. The beauty industry has also started to frequently make use of feminist messages in their advertisements strategies, a strategy commonly referred to as femvertising (Qiao & Wang, 2022). Some argue that these marketing strategies have gained momentum much due to the powers of social media (Qiao & Wang, 2022). Other sources state that the upswing of femvertising is because there exists an increased demand for inclusivity and representation in advertising, especially when it comes to women (Varghese and Kumar, 2020a). In addition to this, the awareness of gender and body stereotyping has become more known to the general public which also has had an impact on the rise of femvertising (Varghese & Kumar, 2020a).

The western society and more specifically the Swedish market can be said to have come a long way in regards to the feminism movement. As a consequence of this, the usage of feminist messages in marketing has greatly increased in these western regions, and there now exists a need for marketers to frame and position their brands as socially aware (Sobande, 2019). However, by using language and visual elements associated with social justice movements, new challenges arise and marketers nowadays are at risk of being accused of “wokeness” and/or woke-branding (Sobande, 2019). This is a strategy where language and visual symbols are associated with social justice movements in order to attract new customers (Sobande, 2019). The author states that the communication is usually not genuine, where the brands do not necessarily actively support the justice movements. For that reason, brands that

include such messages are battling to emphasize their genuinity to not come across as woke. The Swedish brand Estrid is an example of a brand that markets themselves by uplifting societal discourses. By embracing different trends connected to social awareness, such as natural ingredients and feminism and incorporating them in their messages, they are a part of a new group of socially aware brands which faces great challenges when navigating a complex landscape.

1.1.1 Estrid

Estrid was founded in 2019 and has since then offered a subscription service of razors that come in various pastel-colors (Estrid, n.d.). Estrid also sells other products within the beauty segment such as a scrub made out of sugar, moisturizer and shaving gel. Furthermore, all their products are 100% vegan (Estrid, n.d.). Regarding the companys' vision, Dani Montano, Creative lead at Estrid, states that Estrid aims to challenge antiquated ideals related to beauty (Resumé, 2022). Montano says, "We will never tell the consumer who they are or should be, and they should never have to question themselves just because the industry has solidified in old gender norms" (para. 9). Head of brand marketing at Estrid, Caroline Borelius, states that there is notified change within the beauty industry in regards to how gender and identity are portrayed (Resumé, 2022). However, she says that there is still a lot to be done and that Estrid has the ambition to be an inspiration for the industry (Resumé, 2022).

Estrid's vision can be exemplified through a recent campaign they ran on social media named "HUMAN". In the campaign they announced that they have now shifted from a female focus to a human focus, and that they now "are for humans and not genders" (Estrid, 2022a; Estrid, 2022b, picture 4). They go on to make the claim that their products are to be considered as un-gendered (Estrid, 2022b). Thus, Estrid has taken their social justice messages one step further by stating that the products are un-gendered, for all humans, which leads us to this paper's research problem.

1.2 Problem definiton

The research gap this study attempts to address is how allegedly socially aware brands advertise genderless products towards all humans, and if they challenge or reproduce advertising stereotypes and binary gender identities by doing so. Traditionally, advertising makes use of current stereotypes existing in society (McDonald et al., 2021), and research has mainly focused on analyzing these obvious stereotypes (e.g. Eisend, 2010; Kumari & Shivani, 2012). Our study differs from these studies since we investigate if these traditional

stereotyped portrayals still exist even when communication is said to be non-stereotyped. While there has been research on non-stereotyped communication, we find that it has mainly focused on the concept femvertising, i.e. advertising which challenges stereotyped portrayals of women (Åkestam et al., 2017). Furthermore, this research mainly focuses on the effects of femvertising (e.g. Teng et al., 2021; Varghese & Kumar, 2020b) or consumer attitudes and perceptions (e.g. Abitbol & Sternadori, 2020; Hainneville et al., 2022; Lima & Casais, 2021). However, these studies only focus on non-stereotyped portrayals of women and they do not investigate how the visual communication is constructed. Thus, we are expanding the field by investigating communication which challenges stereotyped portrayals of both binary and non-binary persons, as well as how it is constructed. In addition to this, since corporations and marketers strive to reflect the transformations in society in order to be socially conscious, stereotypes in advertising change in order to reflect society (McDonald et al., 2021). Considering the dynamic nature of stereotypes in advertising, we argue that it is always relevant to study how they are expressed in advertising since our society and its norms and values are continuously changing. Lastly, advertising towards LGBTQ+ persons has become increasingly popular, however these gender portrayals and the construction of them are not very well studied yet (Aley & Thomas, 2021; Grau & Zotos, 2016). There is a scarce body of research on portrayals and how they should be constructed in advertising, most notably through the work of Borgersson et al. (2006), Oakenfull et al. (2008) and Oakenfull & Greenlee (2005). However, we argue that this research is not really up to date and thus there is a need to understand how LGBTQ+ persons currently are being portrayed in advertising. We argue that our study attempts to fill the gap by contributing with updated knowledge regarding how LGBTQ+ persons are being portrayed in modern advertising by investigating how non-binary gender identities is performed in Estrid's communication.

Furthermore, Estrid makes for an interesting case since they by making use of allegedly non-stereotyped portrayals in advertising are trying to create an inclusive marketing strategy that appeals to all humans. The paper applies traditional literature on stereotyped portrayals and the performance of gender in order to analyze and uncover the deeper meanings in Estrid's communication. By doing so, the study hopes to contribute with new knowledge and insights regarding how gender is portrayed & stereotypes are challenged and reproduced in alleged non-stereotyped advertising of beauty products.

Furthermore, this paper is situated within the field of strategic communication which was originally defined as "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill

its mission” (Hahllahan et al., 2007, p.3). However, Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft & Werder (2018) have argued that the original definition and concept is too unclear and broad, and that it fails to capture the essence of strategic communication. Instead, the authors argue that strategic communication involves all communication that is necessary for the survival and continued success of an organization (Zerfass et al., 2018). Strategic communication is therefore defined as “the purposeful use of communication by an entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals” (Zerfass et al., 2018, p.487). Our study contributes to new knowledge within the field by investigating how Estrid strategically uses communication in order to engage in ongoing societal conversations about gender and stereotypes in order to increase sales. Furthermore, Falkheimer & Heide (2018) state that one of the main challenges within the field of strategic communication is the role of visual communication and dealing with the digital evolution. Practitioners find visual communication increasingly important, however little operational knowledge exists (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018). By conducting a semiotic analysis of multimodal communication, this paper contributes with operational knowledge regarding how visual communication in a digital environment can be constructed strategically in order to help an organization reach its goals.

1.3 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate how advertising stereotypes are expressed and gender is performed through communication, in the context of an allegedly non-stereotypical company. By investigating this, the study attempts to contribute with new research and knowledge regarding stereotyped and non-stereotyped portrayals, and performances of gender in advertising. The following research questions will be answered in order to fulfill the purpose and aim of this study:

- *How is gender portrayed through multimodal communication of beauty products aimed towards all humans?*
- *How is allegedly non-stereotypical communication of beauty products challenging or reproducing advertising stereotypes?*

2. Previous research

In this chapter, previous research within relevant areas for this paper is presented. It firstly presents previous research on how stereotyped portrayals are constructed. Then, literature on traditional stereotyped portrayals in advertising is presented. Lastly, we present how women have been portrayed in both media and advertising, as well as the relationship between the LGBTQ+ community and advertising.

2.1 The construction of stereotyped portrayals

Stereotyped portrayals of men, women, people of color and other minorities have during recent decades received a lot of attention in both research and practice. In general, this field has focused on investigating the stereotypical nature that characterizes portrayals of gender in advertising and how these portrayals develop throughout the years (e.g. Eisend, 2010; Hatzithomas et al., 2016; Mager & Helgeson, 2011). But there are also other areas of interests within the field, studies have e.g. examined the cultural implications of the usage of stereotypes in advertising as well as the social consequences of it (Grau & Zotos, 2016). Furthermore, in research there exists different conceptualizations and definitions of what a stereotype is and what it is not (Eisend, 2010; Åkestam, 2017). Thus, since this paper seeks to analyze stereotypical portrayals it is crucial to establish and define what a stereotype is, and how they are constructed.

A stereotype in this paper is defined as widely held general beliefs and assumptions regarding a certain social groups', or members of that social group, traits and characteristics (Ellemers, 2018; Stewart et al., 2021). More specifically, this could for example be beliefs regarding gender, ethnicity, social class, nationality or sexual orientation (Durante & Fiske, 2017; Eagleman, 2011; Åkestam, 2017). In general, stereotypes can be said to have four components, independent of each other, namely: trait descriptors (e.g. aggressive, caring); physical characteristics (e.g. body size, skin color); role behaviors (e.g. leader, taking care of children); and occupational status (e.g. CEO, housewife) (Deaux & Lewis, 1984). Stereotypes are constructed through the continuous reproduction of a specific image or story over time, thus a story or image does not have an inherent meaning in itself (Taylor & Stern, 1997). However, these stereotypes do not necessarily have to be true (e.g. not all dutch people are tall), and stereotypical portrayals of social groups generally lead to people exaggerating differences between groups while also underestimating variations with social groups

(Ellemers, 2018). In addition to this, we also view stereotypes as dynamic, which means they change over time so that they mirror the current society's or culture's beliefs and values (Eisend, 2010; McDonald et al., 2021).

2.2 Traditional stereotyped portrayals in advertising

When we consider stereotypes within the context of advertising we see that there exists certain advertising stereotypes, i.e. portrayals specific to an advertising context (Åkestam, 2017). The advertising stereotypes usually portray unrealistic ideals regarding body image, beauty and role behavior, which can lead to negative consequences for certain groups in society in the shape of e.g. reduced self-dignity and disadvantages at work (Eisend, 2019; Grau & Zotos, 2016; Åkestam, 2017). In contrast to this, there also exists non-stereotyped portrayals in modern advertising, i.e. portrayals of persons in a way that does conform to the stereotype for the social group (Taylor & Stern, 1997; Åkestam, 2017). A portrayal is considered to be non-stereotyped when: a person is portrayed in a way that does not conform with the specific culture's general stereotype; a person who is not typically featured in advertising for the certain product is portrayed (Åkestam, 2017).

When it comes to gender stereotypes in advertising, they are grounded in the belief that certain attributes differentiate men and women, and they often relate to physical appearance, role behavior and occupation (Åkestam et al., 2017). Stereotyped portrayals of gender in advertising have been thoroughly studied and a meta-analysis conducted by Eisend (2010) gives us an overview over certain stereotypical portrayals. Women in advertising are in a much higher frequency than men being portrayed as: younger, passive, dependent, product users, existing in a domestic environment (Eisend, 2010). This is strengthened by other studies showing how women's beauty and appearance is also often in focus, i.e. they are being portrayed in more decorative roles and often in a home environment (Grau & Zotos, 2016). Furthermore, they also often are portrayed in roles which are more family oriented, less professional and more demure, which stands in stark contrast to the portrayal of men who are shown as authoritative, professional and independent with little regard to beauty ideals (Grau & Zotos, 2016). In addition to this, advertisements portraying women can be said to be trying to make women identify with what they consume, thus consuming the advertised product can be a way to counteract the feeling of inadequacy that advertising can contribute with (Dyer, 1982). Furthermore, in portrayals of women, usually a part of the body seems to signify the whole person or the woman signifies the commodity being advertised (Dyer, 1982).

Unfortunately a great deal of the research conducted on gender portrayals in advertising assumes a binary definition of gender, defining it in terms of masculine and feminine while failing to include other gender identities (Eisend, 2019). This is problematic since people of other gender identities constitute a large market segment for practitioners and they are increasingly being targeted in ads. Furthermore, stereotyped portrayals of other gender identities can lead to similar negative consequences as have been seen with stereotyped portrayals of women in advertising. This field of research will be presented in section [2.4](#).

2.3 Portrayal of women in media and advertising

In recent decades, researchers within different fields have taken an interest in investigating how women are portrayed in media and advertising. The aim of this section is to provide an overview of how the portrayal of women in advertising has changed throughout the years.

Kumari and Shivani (2012) conducted an extensive review of the academic research on how women are portrayed in advertising. The authors found that it seems to exist an overall consensus in previous research that women are portrayed in advertising as: dependent on men; in need of protection from men; not taking important decisions; homemakers; mainly figuring in home-settings; sex objects (Kumari & Shivani, 2012). When further examining earlier research on the topic, the previous findings seem to be quite accurate. For example, Tuchman (1979) examined how women were portrayed in mass media and concluded that women are portrayed in the home and defined, in terms of men, as sex objects or in the context of the family as mothers or wives.

However, we find that there are studies concluding that new conceptualizations of gender are emerging in our society, even though traditional gender roles still are present (Zayer & Pounders, 2021). As a consequence of this, a small and new subfield of research has emerged which looks into non-stereotyped portrayals in advertising. This simply means a portrayal of a person in a way that does not conform to the stereotype for the social category they belong to (Åkestam, 2017). But, as previously stated, not much research has been conducted, with the exception of a few studies which investigate non-stereotyped portrayals of female body size and image (see e.g. Bian & Wang, 2015; de Lenne et al., 2021; Pearl et al., 2012). One concept that relates to this field of research that first emerged in practice, and later in academia, is femvertising (defined in [3.3.1](#)). The trend can be exemplified through well known examples such as Dove's campaign "Real Beauty" and Pantene's "Not Sorry"

commercial. Both campaigns aimed to promote non-stereotyped portrayals of women but in different ways. Dove's campaign, traditionally seen as the first example of femvertising, attempted to challenge advertising stereotypes regarding women's physical characteristics (i.e. body image), while encouraging women to appreciate themselves no matter how they look (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2020; Åkestam, 2017). Pantene on the other hand aimed to challenge traditional gender roles by showing how authority usually is seen as a negative trait for women (Lima & Casais, 2021). They exemplified this by highlighting how women usually apologize for themselves at work and at home, as well as in other settings (Lima & Casais, 2021). Thus, there seems to exist an emerging field investigating new, non-stereotyped portrayals, of women, even though the research is scarce.

2.4 Advertising and the LGBTQ+ community

In academia, researchers focusing on consumers and marketing started studying non-heterosexuals quite late in comparison to other disciplines (Coffin et al., 2019). And even though the body of research studying LGBTQ+ people within advertising grew quickly, the primary focus has been on middle-class, cisgender, white gay men, while paying little to none attention to the rest of the community (Coffin et al., 2019). Thus, when reviewing the literature it has been challenging to identify research incorporating all of the acronyms of LGBTQ+ in their research.

Some early research within the field seems to have focused on how to reach the LGBTQ+ community without upsetting the mainstream customer. For example, Oakenfull & Greenlee (2005) conducted early research on how marketers could advertise towards gay consumers in mainstream media, which at the time was considered somewhat controversial. The authors, at the time, recommend that advertising at the time should make use of implicit gay and lesbian symbolism and iconography in order to avoid alienating mainstream customers (Oakenfull & Greenlee, 2005). In other words, advertising should try and make use of implicit gay and lesbian subcultural symbolism in order to create a win-win situation where they avoid negative consequences (Oakenfull et al., 2008). Furthermore, these findings have been replicated several times by other studies. For example, Tsai (2010) examined the representation of LGBT people in mainstream television advertising in the United States. Tsai (2010) found that ads depict "gay men as educated, wealthy, fashionable, and upper-middle class; lesbians as conventionally attractive straight women; bisexual women as always having a good time; and transgender women as obsessed with conventional femininity" (para. 40).

Furthermore, Tsai (2010), much like previous researchers, states that advertising seeks to “tame” the LGBT people by making them look and act like heterosexual persons. Turning towards newer research, we find that similar patterns exist even in modern day advertising. Nölke (2018) examined LGBT portrayals in mainstream advertising between 2009 and 2015 and found that even though the number of representations have risen, the representations themselves are still problematic. Portrayals of LGBT couples and families still make use of heteronormative imagery, and “a heteronormative, domesticized version of “gayness” still dominates in advertising” (Nölke, 2018, p.224).

3. Theoretical framework

In this chapter the theoretical framework of the thesis, which serves as our analytical lens, is presented. Firstly, Goffmans' gender display framework is presented. Secondly, literature regarding how gender is constructed and performed is presented, and an introduction to queer theory is provided. Lastly, after a short introduction of feminism, the concept femvertising is introduced.

3.1 Goffmans' gender display framework

Erving Goffman conducted a thorough visual sociological analysis of gender representations in print advertisements, which resulted in a theory commonly referred to among researchers as the gender display framework (Butkowski, 2021; Goffman, 1979). The framework provides us with six different styling-, compositional-, and posing-based codes that are termed "genderisms", and they help illuminate how subtle cues often deprive women of subjectivity, power and agency (Butkowski, 2021; Goffman, 1979).

Goffman's (1979, as cited in Butkowski, 2021; Kuipers et al., 2017; Belknap & Leonard II, 1991) six genderisms are: (1) *relative size* describes the comparative heights of figures in images, here a taller figure entails more power and the differences in size correlate with their social weights. (2) *The feminine touch*, describes how women's hands often stroke or touch objects or bodies, cradling or caressing it often delicately and passively. (3) *Function ranking*, illustrates how models usually are doing different tasks which can give hints regarding both their occupational and situational positions, their assigned functions gives clues about their social importance. (4) *The ritualization of subordination*, describes actions that are classified as deeds of subordination and is usually related to how the models are posing, e.g. lying down. (5) *Licensed withdrawal*, refers to how figures are removed/withdrawn, physically and/or mentally, from the situation which can signal helplessness and dependency on others, e.g. looking away from the camera. (6) *The family* describes the portrayal of nuclear family structures and women as more represented in family groups. Lastly, Kuipers et al. (2017) conclude that it is primarily (2), (4) and (5) which constitute gender-stereotyped portrayals in the form of poses, positions and behaviors. These are therefore the genderisms which we make use of in our analysis, since they uncover stereotyped portrayals and thus are most relevant for answering our research question.

Kuipers et al. (2017), in an attempt to summarize Goffmans' observations, conclude that women often are portrayed as "childlike, submissive, dependent, sexually available and overall less powerful than men" (p.634). Women are for example often portrayed lying down, with the head tilted while also exposing body parts such as the neck implying a submissive position (Goffman, 1979). Men on the other hand are often portrayed as autonomous, powerful, strong and confident, which in a way makes it so that femininity in itself becomes submissive to masculinity (Goffman, 1979). These stereotyped portrayals construct a relationship between male and female, where femininity and the woman is portrayed as inferior to men and masculinity (Grau & Zotos, 2016). This is also reproduced by other researchers who find that in the fashion- and beauty industry, women are being objectified and their body and looks are highlighted, which contributes to the fact that women are subordinate to men (Gemzöe, 2015). In other words, women are portrayed as lesser than men, which then creates a hierarchical relationship between the two binary genders making one inferior to the other.

3.2 The construction and performance of gender

In order to analyze how gender is being portrayed in Estrids' communication we must explore what gender is and how it is constructed. In order to do so, we adopt ideas and arguments from queer theory which complements the aim of this paper since we are assuming that gender portrayals are constructed socially.

First of all, when writing about *gender* it is important to define and distinguish it from the concept *sex*. In this paper we will adopt Judith Butlers sex/gender distinction from the book *Gender Trouble* (1990). *Sex* here is seen as the biological sex which is given at birth to a person, and traditionally it has also been linked to what is seen as feminine and masculine which links to gender construction and identity (Carter, 2011; Gauntlett, 2008). The link between sex and gender identity was something that Butler criticized, instead she advocated that the body (sex) does not determine your gender or identity and it is not something that can be used to predict your desires (Gauntlett, 2008). Thus, by removing the link between sex and gender we instead see that gender is a fluid construction which is separated from one's sex (Carter, 2011). Another important point is that both gender and sex to varying degrees are culturally constructed, which further shows that gender is not an cultural interpretation of one's sex (Carter, 2011). Furthermore, gender is according to Butler a *performative* act, thus our gender identities are constructed through our expressions and

behavior in daily life (Gauntlett, 2008). This also means that certain performances through their reproduction in mass media can be seen as preferable, which then makes the gender categories more “real” (Gauntlett, 2008).

All of the above stated is a part of queer theory, which is an approach to both sexuality as well as identity (Gauntlett, 2008). Queer theory partly has its origins from ideas developed by Michel Foucault, however the first version of it was presented in *Gender Trouble* by Butler (1990; Gauntlett, 2008). A core idea within queer theory is that the binary divisions between masculinity/men and femininity/women are solely socially constructed, and these traditional views is something that ought to be challenged (Gauntlett, 2008). Furthermore, queer is a word which has been ascribed with a wide range of meanings and definitions throughout the years, and Butler’s original idea was that it should not be defined (Rosenberg, 2011). However, for clarity we in this paper use it as an umbrella term for different LGBTQ+ groups, with little attention to the difference between them (Rosenberg, 2011). Furthermore, we also recognize queer as an critical approach to the normative in our society, i.e. a position which opposes what is normal in our society, the heterosexual norm (Rosenberg, 2011). This brings us to the concept *heteronormativity* which is a central part of queer theory (Rosenberg, 2011).

The heteronormativity in society assumes a binary gender division and that heterosexuality is the only “normal” way of life (Rosenberg, 2011). Furthermore, everything that falls outside of this is seen as deviant and wrong, and is punished through various ways such as stereotyping, violence and marginalization (Rosenberg, 2011). Heteronormativity thus creates an environment which forces excluded and marginalized groups to assimilate and adhere to the dominant cultures’ demands, expectations and norms (Rosenberg, 2011). This can be exemplified when turning to queer representation in advertising. Advertisement targeting e.g. homosexual families normally combines seemingly homosexual themes with heterosexual connotations (Borgerson et al., 2006). Thus, ads can be said to be “heterosexualised”, trying to impose heterosexual norms and gender roles in non-heterosexual advertising (Borgerson et al., 2006). However, the heteronormativity can and should be challenged through subversive confusion according to Butler (Gauntlett, 2008). In simple words, through the repetition of seemingly unpredictable and “random” performances of gender, which challenges our expectations about gender, the gender categories can be challenged and ultimately fall apart (Gauntlett, 2008).

By adopting a queer “lens” on our material we seek to find normative and non-normative characteristics in Estrids communication, in order to understand portrayals of

gender & stereotypes. Through critically analyzing normative characteristics, we are also able to identify and map out the non-normative elements present in the advertisements which ultimately leads to conclusions being drawn regarding gender portrayal and stereotypes.

3.2.1 Visual performance of gender through color

An important part of the visual construction and performance of gender is the strategic usage of color in communication. In society, there exists strong associations between gendered stereotypes and different colors which is not to be disregarded since color has both a direct and an associative value (Wigley & Dornelles, 2022). For example, we find clear examples of gender stereotyping of colors both in kids toys (e.g. Auster & Mansbach, 2012), as well as in modern day media (Koller, 2008; Wigley & Dornelles, 2022). Thus, color can be said to function as a distinctive marker of both gender and sexuality, with the most obvious example being the link between pink and femininity and blue and masculinity (Wigley & Dornelles, 2022). Furthermore, since the gendered division of color has become so strong we see that it also influences professions, e.g. blue for the male-dominated police, as well as signifying gay movements through the combination between male and pink (Koller, 2008; Wigley & Dornelles, 2022). Relating it to postfeminism, pink can become a complex symbol since it can both function in a patronizing way and in an empowering way as a marker for feminist identity (Wigley & Dornelles, 2022). Whether the choice of color is conscious or unconscious, it is still clear that it is a performance of identity (Wigley & Dornelles, 2022).

When portraying women in media, colors that are brighter and whiter are more often used in images and as backgrounds, which signify innocence and a more “pure” form of femininity (Wigley & Dornelles, 2022). In general, femininity is connected to light shades of colors, in contrast to the darker “masculine” shades of colors (Jung & Griber, 2019). Thus, female models get associated with lighter form hues, which are traditionally feminine, e.g. white, pink, magenta and erotic colors such as red, whereas male models are linked with cooler, dark and blue hues signifying more authoritative tones and seriousness (Wigley & Dornelles, 2022). Other colors associated with the word feminine are for example pastel green, yellow, purple and light blue (Jung & Griber, 2019). Thus, in a way the use of color is another way to reinforce already existing patriarchal associations of gender (Wigley & Dornelles, 2022). Furthermore, in relation to sexual identity, it has been found that pink acts as marker for the gay subculture, more specifically gay men. While for the whole LGBTQ+ community, the rainbow is commonly used as a signifier (Koller, 2008).

3.3 Commodifying social justice

Before introducing femvertising it is first necessary to touch upon the feminism movement and what it entails, in order to grasp femvertising as a concept. Lena Gemzöe (2015), one of many authors engaged in the feminism discourse, defines the movement in the following way: a feminist can acknowledge that 1) Women are subordinate to men and 2) This constellation needs to change. According to the author, this specific definition is essential for the feminism movement since it frames the movement as an opportunity to learn and it opens up for discussion. It is a definition that focuses on opportunities and positive change, rather than a critical and pessimistic view. However, a more relevant focus for our paper is post-feminism, which is a more critical feministic perspective that can help us uncover problematic feminist messages used in femvertising.

Post-feminism moves away the focus from debates regarding the structures oppressing women and challenges the ideas of the second wave feminists (Brooks, 1997). Instead the focus and responsibility shifted to the individual (Brooks, 1997). Furthermore, post-feminists also concludes that feminism has already “done its job” and that the emancipation of women has reached its pinnacle, thus feminism is not needed (Brooks, 1997), in a way undermining the feminist movement. The postfeminist discourses which take place in advertising sometimes employ a mix of feminist and anti-feminist discourses (Windels et al., 2020). This means that even though advertising making use of postfeminist may seem positive, it can also be seen as simply a new way of regulating women, promoting further inequality (Windels et al., 2020). The usage of postfeminist discourses is highly present in femvertising messages (Windels et al., 2020), which brings us to the next part of this chapter.

3.3.1 Femvertising

The term and theory of femvertising has been around for some time although its significance was socially established and recognized quite recently, namely in 2014 (Åkestam et al., 2017). As it is considered a marketing strategy, the goal remains to stimulate and generate sales. However, Åkestam et al. (2017) explain how femvertising consists of underlying (or obvious for that matter) feminist messages that aims to empower women while also raise awareness towards gender inequality, concentrated on the female gender. Rightfully, the term is linked with marketing, as the feminist messages are used in commercial interests, which is also the origin of the strategy. Åkestam et al. (2017) argue that femvertising saw its use and meaning due to the antiquated female stereotypes that advertisements encouraged. Consequently, the

strategy and theory of femvertising aspires to challenge female stereotypes in ads while simultaneously contributing to the empowerment of women. Ana Maria Lima and Beatriz Casais (2021) point out the increased emotional connection between women and brands that femvertising can contribute with. However, the authors also highlight the importance of advertisements' sincerity regarding feminist messages. This opens up for a critical perspective where advertisements in failed attempts to express honesty regarding feminism (rather than just to drive sales) tend to create corporate hypocrisy (Lima & Casais, 2021).

4. Method

In this chapter the scientific approach of the thesis is presented alongside the methodological approach. Our multimodal social semiotic analysis method is explained theoretically and its practical use is also presented. Furthermore, the collection and selection of empirical data for this study is explained and motivated, and the chosen case study is presented. The chapter ends with methodological reflections.

4.1 Scientific approach

We chose a qualitative approach for this study since we aimed to investigate and understand a phenomenon on a profound level (Stake, 2010). Our study was qualitative since it focused on human perceptions and interpretations of socially constructed concepts. This stands in contrast to a quantitative study that rather aims to test theories and concepts, where numeric data and linear attributes are in focus (Stake, 2010). Furthermore, we chose an abductive approach for our qualitative study, which can be viewed as a combination of a deductive and inductive approach (Eksell & Thelander, 2014). It is partly inductive since our starting point was in the empirical data, partly deductive since we did not disregard theoretical presuppositions (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008). An abductive approach means that we have alternated between theory and empirical data, being open to new ways of categorizing and structuring the empirical data (Eksell & Thelander, 2014). Through alternating between theory and data in our research process we were able to systematically reason our way to meaning and the most plausible explanations to our research questions.

In addition, we chose a social constructivist perspective which aligns with our qualitative method. The social constructivist perspective is arguably synonymous with the field of hermeneutics (Zimmerman, 2015). Zimmerman (2015) points out that social constructivism claims that reality is socially constructed for each individual, which relates with hermeneutics that emphasizes each individual's ability to interpret. Zimmerman (2015) argues that the human ability to interpret is a vital part of hermeneutics and social constructivism which allows us to understand our surroundings. In this sense, society is a subjective matter, much like queer theory that states gender is socially constructed (Gauntlett, 2008). Furthermore, we applied a critical visual perspective, or critical visual method as Rose (2001) defines it. To summarize, this means that each image and visual component were taken

seriously, and that the social conditions and the effects of them were taken into account, and that we admit that subjective eyes interpret these (Rose, 2001).

4.2 Multimodal social semiotic analysis

In order to interpret and analyze our empirical data that we collected we chose to conduct a multimodal analysis, grounded in social semiotics, of Estrid's communication. This section seeks to describe what a multimodal approach is and why we chose it. Furthermore, we also describe what social semiotics is and why it was relevant. Lastly, we discuss and explain how our analysis was conducted in a more practical sense.

A multimodal approach was relevant for our study since media content today is far more complex than before as it makes use of several different affordances at the same time (Rasmussen, 2014). Since our study analyzed social media posts which contain multiple modes, e.g. photographs, videos and text, a multimodal approach was fitting in order to understand how they create meaning together. Furthermore, adapting a semiotic perspective was relevant since Rasmussen (2014) points out that the creation of messages through specific semiotic resources is a part of an organization's strategic communication. The social semiotic theory is built upon four theoretical assumptions which are important to highlight (Wong, 2019). Firstly, the creation of meaning is always multimodal, i.e. coming from a multiplicity of modes, such as images, posture, gaze, color, text and music, each with equal potential to contribute to the meaning-making (Wong, 2019). Secondly, it acknowledges that semiotic resources are used by the sender in a given social context, which implies that the creation of signs is a social process (Wong, 2019). Thirdly, in the creation of signs, the sender chooses the form most appropriate for expressing the meaning they want to convey at a given time in a specific social context, thus the relation between form and meaning is never arbitrary (Wong, 2019; Rasmussen, 2014). Lastly, it is the sender's (i.e. sign-makers) interest which guides the selection of semiotic resources (Wong, 2019).

In our analysis we analyzed different semiotic resources, namely color, image and text, that the sender has chosen to use and how they interacted and created meaning together (Wong 2019; Rasmussen, 2014). Color is an important semiotic resource in this context, since within strategic communication it is an important tool which can be used to convey ideas and build brand identity (Rasmussen, 2014). Furthermore, there are strong associations between color and gender stereotypes within our culture (Wigley & Dornelles, 2022). Thus, in our paper it was important to pay close attention to the choice of color. In addition to this, we

applied Goffman's (1979) gender display framework, more specifically genderism (2) *feminine touch*, (4) *ritualization of subordination*, and (5) *licensed withdrawal*. Goffman's framework allowed us to deepen our knowledge regarding how semiotic resources can convey stereotyped and non-stereotyped portrayals. In the paper, we investigated the denotative and connotative meanings in the posts, which then were connected to our broader theoretical framework and previous research. In this way, we first analyzed the parts in order to be able to say something about the whole. An analysis guide was used when analyzing images in order to ensure credibility in our analysis, it can be found in appendix 1.

4.3 Empirical data

In order to answer this paper's research questions, a case study of the Swedish company Estrid and their digital communication was conducted. The empirical data consisted of images, text and videos retrieved from Estrid's Instagram account (@heystrid). Furthermore, we retrieved information about the portrayed models', e.g. name and gender, from their own Instagram pages. We argue that digital sources were the most relevant ones for our study, much due to the fact that marketing has gone from interruption to engagement (Quesenberry, 2018). In this sense, social media enables the target audience to engage with the organization since these platforms advocate two-way communication. In terms of Instagram, Estrid's account (@heystrid) provided us with plenty of content in the form of pictures, memes and videos and this platform showed great engagement from their target audience.

Regarding our sampling strategy, since we applied a semiotic method there did not exist a need to develop an extremely thorough sampling procedure (Rose, 2001). Instead, content was chosen based on how interesting it was (Rose, 2001), i.e. how appropriate they were for our purpose. Furthermore, by doing so we also acknowledged that the chosen images might not be statistically representative of a larger set of images (Rose, 2001). Instead, a detailed case study of Estrid was conducted, and images were shown as a way of exemplifying analytical points (Rose, 2001). In our case, we firstly collected a large amount of posts, making use of our analysis guide (Appendix 1) in order to determine which posts were interesting for our purpose and which were not. The data collection was performed during April and May 2022, and screenshots of the posts were always saved since posts might be changed. We presented our empirical data in two separate ways. Firstly, we inserted images directly into our analysis since they are representative examples for the analytical

points which we wanted to bring forward. Secondly, more images were provided in the summaries in order to show even more examples of our analytical points.

After collecting and compiling all of our data, we categorized our main analytical findings into two different themes, each one slightly focusing more on one research question. For example, theme 1 is more focused on gender portrayals in contrast to theme 2. For our themes, we chose a large selection of images which represented how models usually pose in Estrids advertising. Furthermore, we chose a video which stood out in Estrids' material since it is not how companies typically advertise beauty products. A meme was also chosen in order to showcase another way which stereotypes can be constructed in advertising. Worth noting is that Estrid uses memes quite extensively on their Instagram which made it natural for us to analyze one. By sorting our analytical findings into themes, we could exemplify and showcase our analytical interpretations of the data and reach an understanding regarding our phenomenon on a deep and sufficient level. The thesis investigated the following two analytical themes:

1. Performing an “ungendered” gender – progressive representations and portrayals
2. Non-stereotypical portrayals in a stereotypical environment

4.4 Methodological reflections

As a qualitative researcher it is important to adopt a reflexive mindset and reflect upon how one conducts research. Boyle & Schmierbach (2020) define reflexivity as the process where the researcher reflects upon their biases, attitudes, and backgrounds and how they might affect the conclusions drawn. Furthermore, reflection is important since adopting a hermeneutic approach means acknowledging that our subjective pre-understandings influenced how we interpreted the material (Åkerström, 2014). Regarding our pre-understandings, we have both conducted previous research where we, with the help of a semiotic analysis method, investigated stereotyped portrayals of women in advertising. Since we have conducted similar research we might have viewed and interpreted the material in a different way than a researcher with another background would have done. We also have an open-minded non-binary approach to gender which influenced how we selected and interpreted the data. This pre-understanding we have as researchers was then influenced by the new meanings and ideas we found in Estrids' material, which ultimately lead to new understandings (Åkerström, 2014). Another important point to be noted is that we both are white, cis-males who analyzed

mainly portrayals of women and LGBTQ+ persons. Thus, one could argue that we were not able to interpret if a gender portrayal would be experienced as ungendered and inclusive by a person who is e.g. non-binary. However, since interpretative research is subjective we did not necessarily view this as problematic. In addition to this, our interpretations and conclusions were grounded in a broad theoretical framework and previous research which increased our credibility. Furthermore, when analyzing we always strived to make as objective interpretations as possible in order to deliver a trustworthy and credible analysis. In the text, images are shown as examples in order to increase the trustworthiness and credibility of our interpretations. Lastly, it could be viewed as problematic that we collected our empirical data based on appropriateness for our study, which could have possibly led to us collecting data which confirms our expected findings and hypotheses that we entered the project with (Rose, 2001). However, as noted earlier a great deal of the empirical data is presented in the text in order to strengthen our analytical points and combat this issue.

5. Analysis

In this section two analytical themes which were identified in our data are presented. The first theme investigated how gender is portrayed and performed throughout Estrids communication. The second theme focused more on stereotyped and non-stereotyped portrayals. Each theme ends with a summary of the most important takeaways which are exemplified through more posts.

5.1 Performing an “ungendered” gender – progressive representations and portrayals

In this section the theme “Performing an “ungendered” gender - progressive representations and portrayals” is presented and analyzed. The theme consists of posts where models are performing the typical Estrid pose. The posts are analyzed in order to investigate how gender is performed.

5.1.1 Beyond binary gender portrayals



Image 1: Retrieved April 27, 2022, from Instagram account @heystrid

Denotation:

This Instagram post was published by Estrid (@heystrid) the 11th of April, 2022, with the caption “A smooth start of the week ☁️”. It features fashion influencer George Tyrone (@tripleminor), who identifies as non-binary genderfluid, they/he. The medium close-up

photograph is taken slightly from below but still directly from the front, which puts the model's face almost at eye level for the viewer. The model is looking directly into the camera, while slightly looking down on the viewer. Furthermore, George is photographed against a pastel blue colored background. Regarding the pose, the model is putting one hand behind the head touching the body and showcasing the armpit. The other hand is put in front of the chest, seen lightly holding a pastel mint green razor with a white head. In addition to this, George is wearing a pastel lilac colored dress with a cleavage, as well as a mint green beret. George also has a beard, denoting masculinity, and a tattoo which reads "We Rise...", however the last word can not be seen. Furthermore, the model wears a large golden ring, a nose ring, lip piercing and black earrings. Lastly, the model is wearing light green eyeshadow, blush, highlighter, lip gloss and light green acrylic nails.

Connotation & general analysis:

By applying Goffmans' (1979) genderisms on the post, we find the following. Starting off with *the feminine touch*, the model is holding only the bottom of the razor in a light grip with the end of their fingers, connoting softness. This is a common way of portraying women in advertising, which stands in contrast to men who usually powerfully and firmly grasp objects signaling power (Goffman, 1979). Tyrone is also seen touching himself with the left hand in a quite soft way, referred to as *self-touching* by Goffman (1979), which goes in line with how women traditionally are portrayed, connoting vulnerability and openness in image 1. However, one could argue that Estrids intention is to expose the armpit in order to show how "smooth", as said in the caption, one might look after using their razor. Even if that is the case, it is hard to overlook that it is a feminine pose which conveys a form of vulnerability.

Analyzing the image with *the ritualization of subordination* there are no obvious signs of subordination or submissiveness. Tyrone is pictured with a slight head tilt, a classic submissive feminine pose (Goffman, 1979), however it is so light that we do not consider it submissive in this case. On the contrary, Tyrone is holding his head high and looking directly at us viewers and even slightly looking down at us. This is traditionally connected to male posing, and can be said to connote superiority and agency in contrast to the powerless and dependent female poses (Goffman, 1979). Thus, we see that Tyrone is actually combining a more feminine touch with a very typical dominant male pose which connotes dominance and almost disdain in this instance. Looking at *licensed withdrawal*, Tyrone connotes a form of assertiveness, showing control and a presentness in the situation. They do this by staring directly in the camera with a present gaze, showing no visible sign of withdrawal. Goffman

(1979) relates this to how males are portrayed in advertising, in contrast to women who are often portrayed as psychologically and physically distant from the world around them. Analyzing the parts as a whole, we find that the depiction of Tyrone can not be placed within Goffmans' (1979) binary stereotypes in advertising since it combines expressions from both feminine and male poses. We consider this a strategic choice of Estrid, since by combining these semiotic resources they are aiming to convey a seemingless "un-gendered" post.

In addition to this, there are additional semiotic resources with connotations that need to be analyzed. Firstly, when examining the colors we see that Tyrone is photographed against a light blue pastel colored background, typical for when portraying women, which connotes both purity and innocence (Wigley & Dornelles, 2022). The background is however blue, typically a masculine color, but since it is a very light shade it is more of a feminine color (Wigley & Dornelles, 2022). When further examining the color choices in the picture, Estrid is strictly making use of lighter hues and pastel colors, e.g. the mint green beret and the lilac colored dress, which arguably connotes femininity. This argument is backed up by both Wigley & Dornelles (2022) and Jung & Griber (2019). Through their strategic choice of colors, we argue that they are trying to create a feminine aesthetic which then in a way would contradict the statement that they are for humans and not only women. If the choices of colors would have been more of a mix between "masculine" and "feminine", the photograph would feel more inclusive of all humans, which Estrid strives for. Lastly, Tyrone is wearing makeup as well as acrylic nails, both which are usually seen on women, which in a way puts beauty and appearance in focus of the image. This is furthermore something we usually see in portrayals of women in advertisements, whereas men are usually shown with little regard to beauty ideals (Grau & Zotos, 2016).

When seen as a whole, Estrid are arguably making use of a non-stereotyped advertising portrayal. The portrayal of Tyrone can not be placed within the binary advertising stereotypes that exist within our culture since it does not conform to one definite binary stereotype. Nor does it try to present Tyrone in a traditional heteronormative way, which ususally is the case when LGBTQ+ persons are portrayed in advertising (Borgersson, 2006; Nölke, 2018; Tsai, 2010). For example, Tyrone does have a beard which is strongly connected to masculinity, however the beard is combined with makeup, something traditionally feminine. However, one could argue it makes use of heterosexual resources, e.g. the dominant gaze, but is used in combination with connotations from both gender binaries which rather makes it seem as a "random" and unpredictable performance of gender (Gauntlett, 2008).

Thus, it can be seen as a non-stereotyped portrayal in accordance with Åkestam (2017), which challenges and questions our expectations and norms regarding gender. In that way, the performance of gender can be seen as an attempt to question the norms within the beauty industry, trying to make it accessible for all humans. If one were to be critical, it could be argued that a majority of the connotations can be linked to femininity, making the portrayal stereotypically female.

5.1.2 The complexity of “ungendered” portrayals



Image 2: Retrieved April 27, 2022, from Instagram account @heystrid

Denotation:

In this Instagram post published by Estrid (@heystrid) on April 19, 2022, and it features model and influencer Aaliyah Ramsey (@aaliyahramseyy), who identifies as non-binary (they/them). It also features the caption “Aaliyah ❤️”. The photograph is taken as a close-up, straight from the front, at the model's eye level, and they are slightly looking down into the camera. Furthermore, the model is photographed against a window with textured glass, a neutral, yet lightly colored, background. Aaliyahs’ poses with the head slightly tilted and with the mouth slightly open, also her right hand is placed behind her head, exposing her unshaved armpit. They are seen holding a pastel pink colored razor between their fingertips, while also wearing a light purple colored top, the former denoting femininity. In addition to this, Aaliyah is wearing light makeup consisting of eye shadow. Their nails are painted black, however the

polish is clearly wearing off. Lastly, Aaliyah wears a couple necklaces, two rings, and has a nose ring as well as a nose piercing.

Connotation & general analysis:

When applying Goffmans' (1979) gender display framework, similar connotations and observations as in 5.1.1 are found, which serve to further exemplify the theme of this section. With regards to *feminine touch* we see that Aaliyah have positioned their hand behind the head, thus touching themselves and exposing the armpit. Goffman (1979) found that this is commonly for women in advertising, connoting sexual openness and availability. In Aaliyahs' case, the pose connotes openness to some degree since through the pose more skin is exposed which could be said to be a sexual invitation which relates to feminine portrayals. However, the photograph is also cropped in a way which removes their body from the chest down, which in a way takes away the focus from their body and appearance. This is more similar to how men are portrayed in advertising, who figure in less decorative roles, which contributes to creating hierarchical and heteronormative society (Grau & Zotos, 2016; Rosenberg, 2011). In addition, they are lightly gripping the razor with the tip of their fingers, which can connote vulnerability and weakness, also commonly feminine ways of posing (Goffman, 1979).

Turning to the *ritualization of subordination*, Aaliyah is slightly looking down upon the viewer, connoting dominance rather than submissiveness in this case (Goffman, 1979). However, this connotation clashes with the head tilt, traditionally signifying submissiveness (Goffman, 1979). In this instance, we argue that the angle of the photo is more prominent and affects the "feel" of the image more than the head tilt, thus the pose becomes dominant and powerful, rather than submissive. Lastly, when looking at *licensed withdrawal* we find that Aaliyah is staring directly into the camera, which connotes presence and that they are in charge of the situation (Goffman, 1979). However, while signaling physical presence there could be argued that there is something about the gaze which slightly connotes detachment from the situation, it is slightly zoned-out. But, we could also view the gaze as mysterious and secretive, since it does not show much emotions. This goes in line with a more masculine portrayal, since women when present in the situation tend to express emotions in a much more extreme way (Goffman, 1979). We argue that the latter interpretation of the gaze is more in line with our interpretation of the image when looking at the whole.

Looking beyond Goffmans' framework there are also other semiotic resources worth analyzing closely. As previously stated, an important tool for performing and portraying

gender is color (Wigley & Dornelles, 2022), thus analyzing how it is used by Estrid is crucial. The colors that are in focus in this photograph is pastel pink as well as a solid light purple, both colors that arguably connote femininity (Koller, 2008; Jung & Griber, 2019). First of all, purple can arguably be linked with the word feminine (Jung & Griber, 2019). Thus it is interesting that Estrid chose this color since it can be said to work against their mission. However, purple can also be related to royalty, power and wealth, and could thus serve as an empowering color in this case. Furthermore, pink holds more complex symbolic associations than purple, since it can be seen as a way of upholding gender stereotypes and norms (Wigley & Dornelles, 2008). One could then argue that Estrid are conforming with our heteronormative society, since if they are for all humans then one would assume they should work to challenge existing oppressive norms and values, i.e. pink and femininity. On the other hand, we can also view pink in the context of post-feminism, where the color can be used as an empowering color in order to break free from the conforming masculine norms (Koller, 2008). So what is the intention behind the usage of such a strongly gendered color paired together with a nonbinary person? It could be that Estrid is trying to challenge existing norms, by reclaiming the color pink and associating with nonbinary persons they might want to show that colors are ungendered. However, their case would have been made clearer had they utilized a mix of colors from across the spectrum, instead of simply traditionally “feminine” ones.

When putting the pieces together and viewing the photograph as a whole, a few conclusions can be drawn. While Estrid to some extent are challenging heteronormative portrayals in advertising, this particular post still utilizes a great deal of stereotypical feminine markers in regards to posing and color choices which can not be dismissed. The fact that they are selling an ungendered product for all humans while portraying it in a feminine way could be said to be somewhat contradictory. However, when viewing all the pieces together we argue that it is, much like in post 1, still a gender portrayal which challenges heteronormativity since the non-normative elements in the picture are dominant in our view. Of course, to some extent it is somewhat heterosexualised, which relates to Borgerson et al. (2006), however it is almost impossible to create a post which is completely ungendered. This is because stereotypes regarding gender portrayals are what is “normal” in our society (Rosenberg, 2011), which makes it hard to ascribe e.g. colors new meanings. It is not something that happens over night. We believe that Estrid are using the resources in a meaningful way, and when viewed in relation to other posts we see that their challenging gender portrayals construct a more inclusive brand.

5.1.3 Challenging gender norms through the use of color



Image 3: Retrieved May 6, 2022, from Instagram account @heystrid

Denotation:

In this Instagram post published by Estrid (@heystrid) on May 2, 2022, influencer and model Pierre-Olivier (@pierreolivier_) is featured in an advertisement. First of all, the picture is taken as a medium-close up, taken slightly from below which makes it so that the model is looking down upon us. Pierre-Olivier is photographed in what seems to be a home environment, standing in front of a white and petrol colored wall. The model has a composed and serious facial expression, while also turning away their head and staring directly into the camera. Furthermore, they are seen holding up one hand while grasping a cream colored, alternatively light gray, razor. Since the model is holding further up on the handle (compare with image 1), it denotes a firmer grip. However, the fist is still open and not clenched. The way the razor is held in front of the face, which is covered by a beard, makes it look like the model is shaving. Lastly, Pierre-Olivier is wearing a bright blue beanie and a blue knitted sweater, both denoting masculinity, as well as a light pastel blue colored puffer jacket.

Connotation and general analysis:

When investigating Goffman's (1979) genderism *feminine touch*, in contrast to image 1 & 2 we see a slightly different type of posing in this image. The model is not touching themselves in any way, which gives the image more masculine characteristics, in line with Goffman's

(1979) framework. The pose is more closed, connoting a form of confidence. Furthermore, when looking at the hand holding the razor, we find that the grip is more firm than in previous images since the model holds further up on the handle, connoting control and power (Goffman, 1979). However, the fist is not clenched and it could be argued that the grip still is somewhat loose, placing it somewhere inbetween what is considered masculine and feminine in advertising. But in comparison to image 2, the grip is considerably firmer. One could argue that Estrid chooses this pose in order to show the variety of uses for their product, i.e. showing that it can also be used to shave your beard with. Especially considering that the razor is held in a way which makes it look like the model is shaving its beard. If viewed like this, we could argue that the pose is a way of connoting inclusiveness, i.e. the razor is for *all* types of body hair, even your beard.

Turning towards the *ritualization of subordination*, we find contrasting connotations of both dominance and submissiveness. The model is seemingly placed above the viewers, looking down upon them, connoting power and dominance, placing the model in a dominant position in relation to the viewer (Goffman, 1979). However, the model is also turning its head away, which leads to the exposure of the neck connoting a feeling of vulnerability. Goffman (1979) calls this posture the head cant, a typical female pose, which he argues functions both as an expression of subordination as well as an acceptance of it. This is a very subtle yet important choice of posture, since it is not what we “typically” expect to see in advertisements. We argue that the head cant in combination with the placement of the model above the viewer makes for a seemingly “ungendered” pose in this case. Lastly, applying the genderism *licensed withdrawal* we find a model connoting presentness in the picture. The model is turning towards us, looking directly at the camera, seemingly present and signifying control of the situation. As noted earlier, these are typically male characteristics in advertising which shows through the posing (Goffman, 1979), further reinforced by the firm grip of the razor which signals the model is anchored in the situation.

When analyzing Estrid’s choice of colors in this image we see that a palette of different shades of blue is the most prominent element, accompanied with the colors of the background and razor. Blue inherits strong symbolic meanings and is heavily linked with masculinity, the use of it can be seen as a way of conforming to traditional gender norms in society (Wigley & Dornelles, 2022). The usage of the color, in its different shades, also connotes seriousness and authority, as well as a form of refusal for changing attitudes and associations regarding gender norms (Wigley & Dornelles, 2022). However, the color which

becomes most prominent is the pastel blue/powder blue color of the jacket, a much softer and lighter shade of blue, connoting more vulnerability and softness instead of authority. This in combination with a lighter background, could arguably be considered more “feminine” hues and portrayals (Wigley & Dornelles, 2022). Regardless of that, it is still interesting to analyze what Estrids intention was with using such a “gendered” color in their visual performance of gender? On one hand, it can be said to reinforce heteronorms in society since the average viewer scrolling through their Instagram feed will most likely not stop and analyze the deeper meanings of the color choice. Instead, it is more likely the picture will simply be regarded as masculine. On the other hand, looking at the color pink (“feminine”) we see that within postfeminist contexts it is used in e.g. ironic ways, in an attempt to link it to independence and other connotations (Koller, 2008; Wigley & Dornelles, 2022). It could be that Estrid in their use of blue is attempting to rewrite the connotations and associations surrounding the color, thus challenging traditional gender portrayals. This could be argued to be the case, since the darker blues are paired with a very light powder blue which inherits more “feminine“ connotations. The combination of normative and non-normative characteristics could be argued to be a more “random” performance of gender in line with Butlers’ concept of subversive confusion (Gauntlett, 2008).

When putting the pieces together and viewing them as a whole, we once again find a visual performance of gender regarded as relatively ungendered, which is hard to put into one certain binary category. Butler (in Gauntlett, 2008) clearly stated that the body does not determine ones gender identity since it is a fluid construction separated from one’s sex. The model's performative act of gender in this picture strives away from the norm, combating heteronormativity by combining various stereotypical binary gender associations, ultimately giving them new meanings through their own identity. We argue that this is for example seen through the strategic use of colors, which aims to challenge traditional associations and symbolic meanings. This an interesting point, since it shows the importance color can play in challenging gender portrayals. Furthermore, in this image we are not aware of the models gender or sexual identity, which impacts the analysis slightly since we are not able to comment specifically on whether it can be said to be a stereotyped portrayal of men, women or LGBTQ+ persons.

5.1.3 Summary of the theme

This section aims to summarize the analytical points which were exemplified through our chosen images, it also presents more images in order to further strengthen our arguments. In

analyzing this theme, we have consciously adopted theories regarding what is “masculine” and “feminine”, e.g. Goffman’s (1979) framework and the work of Grau & Zotos (2016). We argue that by adopting this binary taxonomy in our analysis, we have been able to identify and describe also what lies beyond the binary definition of gender.

Analyzing the images with Goffman’s (1979) genderisms we find that Estrid frequently mixes stereotyped gender characteristics portrayed in advertising. And when viewed as a whole it creates a seemingly inclusive, ungendered visual performance of gender. The combination of a dominant gaze which looks down upon or directly at us, connoting authority and control, with a feminine touch, connoting vulnerability and weakness (Goffman, 1979), is a common theme in the material since it is the most frequent pose used in Estrid’s advertising. The pose can be further exemplified through the pictures below this paragraph, retrieved from Estrid’s Instagram account (@heystrid) during April & May 2022.

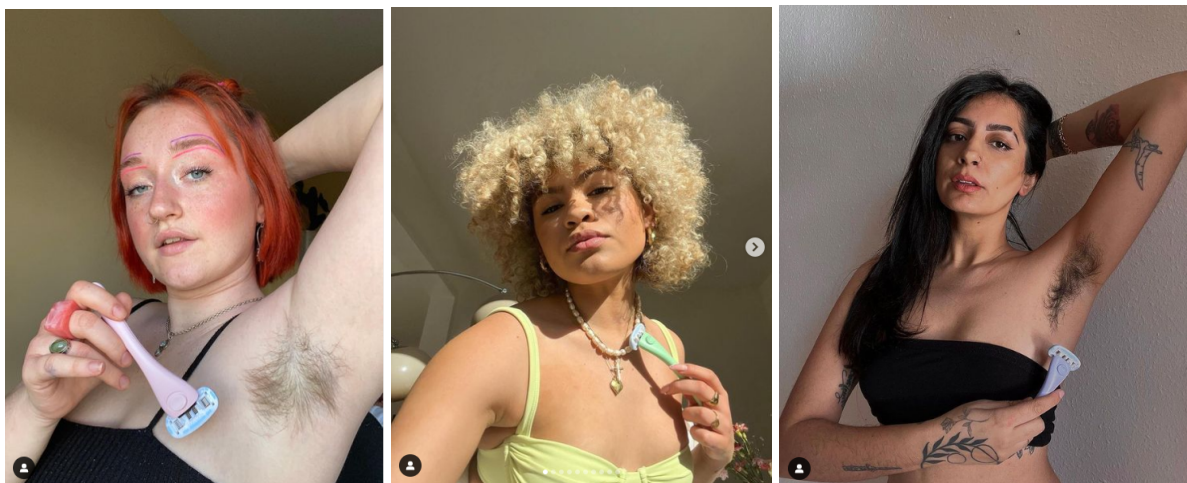


Image 4, 5 & 6

Furthermore, the gender portrayals vary and adopt different characteristics and color choices in order to represent more fluid gender constructions. There are a number of portrayals, which when viewed by the average Instagram user scrolling their feed could be considered “random” performances of gender, which aim to challenge and question the existing gender binary and heteronormativity in society (Gauntlett, 2008). For example, through the mix of a traditional masculine beard with makeup and through Estrids’ strategic use of colors, which challenges our traditional associations with them in regards to “masculine” and “feminine” (see associations in e.g. Jung & Griber, 2019; Wigley & Dornelles, 2022). These “random” performances can further be exemplified through the

images below retrieved from Estrid's Instagram account (@heystrid) during April & May 2022.



Image 7 & 8

In conclusion, Estrid's multimodal communication creates portrayals of gender which challenge preconceived notions regarding gender, as well as the existing heteronormativity in society. By doing so, we argue that Estrid are trying to create inclusive portrayals of gender, which aim to represent a wide variety of humans. However, it should be noted that we in general find more "feminine" characteristics and connotations rather than "masculine" throughout our analysis. We do not necessarily view this as a "problem", since we acknowledge it is not possible to represent or showcase *all* humans. All in all, we suggest Estrid tackles this problem well since when the pieces are viewed as a whole, a progressive and inclusive gender performance is the most prominent portrayal, rather than a feminine one.

5.2 Non-stereotypical portrayals in a stereotypical environment

In this section we present the theme "Non-stereotypical portrayals in a stereotypical environment". Here we analyzed posts that can be argued to both reproduce stereotypes or challenge them. In order to showcase our analytical points, three Instagram posts serve as examples of the theme.

5.2.1 The strive to be representative



Video 1: Retrieved May 3, 2022 from Instagram account @heyestrid

Denotation:

In this Instagram video, influencer Hayley Morris (@hayleymorris3) has constructed a short clip where she is playfully alluding to whether a woman should or needs to shave before a date. In the scene, Morris is playing all displayed characters: Morris herself, her “BRAIN”, her “VAGINA”, her “CLITORIS” and her “BUTT”. The different characters have different settings and clothing. Morris herself is wearing a pair of black pajama pants, a white t-shirt covered by a marine overshirt and has her hair in a ponytail. Morris’ character is sitting on a green couch with two paintings in the background. The “BRAIN”-characters’ hair is worn straight down, while wearing a pair of light blue denim jeans and a green sweater with the print “GOOD ENERGY”. This character is standing in front of a window with its curtains down. The “VAGINA”-character is wearing a beige trenchcoat and a black wig that switches hairstyles in between scenes, and the background is plain white. The “CLITORIS”-character is wearing a brown puffer jacket with the hood covering the hair. The background here consists of a green wall with a centered and oval shaped mirror. The “BUTT”-character is

wearing a pastel-green hoodie with the hood over the head along with a black wig under the hood. This character is holding a bottle with the text “BLEACH”.

In terms of the actual play, Morris gets notified that a man asks her out on a date. The “BRAIN” then reminds Morris that her pubic hair is not shaved, which then leads to the introduction of “VAGINA”. Her wig represents the pubic hair and this character has no verbal lines. The “BRAIN” throughout the play tries to convince Morris that she needs to shave before the date, or else the “BRAIN” will make Morris feel self-conscious. As the “VAGINA” is showing her wig, the “CLITORIS” enters the play and states “He will not be able to find me”. The play continues and Morris says that why should she shave since men do not necessarily need to. The “BRAIN” counters with “that is because men are men”. Morris then goes on to say that she will not shave since “It’s just hair” and the fact that men do not necessarily shave makes the situation unfair. The “BRAIN” keeps arguing that Morris should shave. Ultimately, “VAGINA” enters the play again and shows off a new hairstyle of the wig, representing a trim of the pubic hair. Both the “BRAIN” and Morris find the new style rather acceptable. Finally the “BUTT” enters the play and says “What about me guys?”, holding the bottle of bleach close to the camera.

Connotation and general analysis:

Analyzing Goffman’s (1979) three genderisms, we find that the *feminine touch* can be identifiable in terms of the character “VAGINA”. When seen in the play, this character is posing as innocent and acting according to that. However, other characters are arguably posing more relaxed. Regarding the second genderism, *ritualization of subordination*, there are no visual signs in our meaning that resembles this specific genderism. However, the dialogue between Morris herself and the “BRAIN” could argue for promoting this genderism. In detail, Morris and the “BRAIN” argue whether it is fair or socially just that men do not necessarily need to shave in order to be “presentable”. The “BRAIN” states “Because they are boys”, in a response as to which men do not necessarily have to shave. By discussing this topic, one could argue that it is uplifting the socially constructed norm of women's need to shave, but it also underlines that women could be subordinate to men. In other words, the discussion states that men do not need to care as much as women about their hair in order to be presentable and attractive. In this sense, by uplifting the social constructed injustice of this topic, the consequence could be creating a stereotype of women to be more self-aware of their appearance. This could also find support from the ending scene where the “BUTT” enters and holds a bottle of “BLEACH”. Bleach is not an organic supplement to one's body and hence

contributes to portraying women to be self aware. Even though the bottle of bleach most likely intends to be sarcastic, one could argue that some viewers find it rational. In addition, the bottle of bleach could amplify the antiquated idea of women and their desire and need to be pure, which the feminine touch underlines (Goffman, 1979).

Regarding Goffman's (1979) third genderism, *licensed withdrawal*, the same dialogue between Morris and the "BRAIN" is analyzed. Originally, Goffman (1979) created his genderisms for investigating images which then required us investigators to adjust his framework to moving pictures for this post. Hence, for this post, we rather focus on the mental state that the matter can imply from a licensed withdrawal perspective. Since this genderism per definition refers to women as being adrift, seeking support and protection from men, one could make the case that the aforementioned dialogue implies that women are self conscious and dependent on a man's opinion. The opinion in this case revolves around whether Morris should shave her pubic hair or not. However, the choice she makes is not based on her own desires, she instead decides based on what she believes the man prefers. In this sense, licensed withdrawal could be linked to the dialogue where Morris arguably is making her choice in the best interest of the man.

Furthermore, in relation to our wider theoretical framework and previous research, Åkestam (2017) states that a non-stereotyped portrayal is when a person is portrayed in a way that does not conform with the specific culture's general stereotype. This could be exemplified in the post since Morris herself argues with her "BRAIN" about the significance of shaving (or not shaving), something the "BRAIN" argues to be essential for a woman. However, when examining the choice of influencer and the connotations it creates, Morris has 1.5 million followers. Due to this, Morris, from her followers' perspective, is a successful and professional influencer and hence probably has influence on those following her. With this in mind, Grau and Zotos (2016) states that success and professionalism are usually connected to men in terms of marketing. In this sense, the choice of Morris for this Instagram post could be viewed as a way for Estrid to challenge this norm and stereotype by empowering women's portrayal in advertising. If one were to accept this, this specific post could be linked to femvertising since empowering women in marketing is the main objective for the strategy (Åkestam et.al., 2017).

However, when examining the actual signs within the post rather than the choice of influencer and what the characters signify, one could argue that this post is not challenging the stereotypes of women in advertising. Much like the aforementioned discussion regarding

licensed withdrawal, Morris makes her decision on whether to shave or not based on the man's best interest. Thus, this resembles the arguments that Eisend (2010) makes regarding women being portrayed as passive and dependent. In addition, this post takes place in a domestic environment, which Eisend (2010) argues to be a typical setting for women in advertisements.

When looking at the characters that this post features, we can identify that all of them are linked to the feminine body. Using the feminine body parts, some that could be viewed as explicit (e.g. genitals), could be argued to be a way of normalizing and uplifting the feminine body as something natural, rather than sexualized. This then also could be linked to femvertising (Åkestam et.al., 2017) and postfeminist discourses (Windels et al., 2020). On the other hand, the pursuit of coming across as representative and inclusive can in this case become problematic. By using the feminine body and sarcastically uplifting the debate on shaving in this way, Estrid also to some extent substantiates and reproduces traditional stereotypes concerning women.

5.2.2 The challenges of performing non-stereotyped portrayals



Image 9: Retrieved May 4, 2022, from Instagram account @heystrid

Denotation:

This post features female influencer Kalina Watson-Roberts (@kalinawatsonroberts) and was posted by Estrid (@heystrid) October 30, 2021. This close-up picture consists of

Watson-Roberts holding her see-through pink panties with a flower pattern embroidery. Her beige top exposes her stomach and belly button. The belly button is centered in the picture but the way Watson-Roberts is gripping her underwear makes the genital area the focus of the image. From her genitals to her inner thighs, the model is exposing her pubic hair which can also be identified beneath the belly button. Furthermore, it seems like the model is posing with a domestic environment as the background. With such a close-up angle, it is hard to identify objects in the background except from a pink towel behind Watson-Roberts's left hand. The caption states the following: "repost @kalinawatsonroberts 💜 ' Pubic hair is normal 🙋 Shave or dont shave. But don't shave coz you think its nasty or because your afraid of other people's opinions.'"

Connotation and general analysis:

In terms of the *feminine touch*, this post stands out since this picture has cropped out the face as well as everything below the inner thighs. As far as we can see for this picture, the model's pose does not like other posts remind us of a woman touching herself which would according to Goffman (1979) signify sexual openness and availability. Instead, Watson-Roberts is only touching her clothing, but the fact that this particular clothing is an underwear could argue for the aforementioned sexual openness and availability. Not only is she holding the panties, she has a strong grip which exposes her body contours as well as the pubic hair. In addition and in contrast to post #2, the fact that the picture has its focus on her stomach and genital area, could then be argued to further advocate the feminine touch in terms of sexual openness. We argue that the second genderism, *ritualization of subordination*, can also be analyzed from the choice of angle and how the picture is cropped. For earlier posts, the facial expression would help us indicate and examine this genderism. For this post we must rather investigate how the body can signify or not signify submissiveness. Even though Goffman (1979) admits that the most typical sign of this is for a woman to be lying down on the picture, this picture connotes the quite opposite. However, much like the stereotypical and antiquated so-called men's magazines; by having focus on merely the body and the pose that highlights the genitals, one could argue that the woman serves as a commodity and therefore the picture could be viewed as submissive towards women. Although the intention might be the opposite, namely to normalize the feminine body, the antiquated beliefs of such bold pictures could relate to the ritualization of subordination (Goffman, 1979). Lastly, in terms of Goffman's (1979) genderisms, *licensed withdrawal* is hard to extract from this post since the face is cropped out. For that reason it is difficult to argue for any signs of physical or mental absence.

Regarding our wider theoretical framework and previous research, Windels et al. (2020) discuss how postfeminism in advertising can employ further regulation of women. The authors state that postfeminism in advertising tend to advocate a mix of feminist and anti-feminist messages. Much like the argumentation for Goffman's (1979) ritualization of subordination, the intentions of normalizing the female body could be interpreted differently from the audience. For this reason, the results they intend to create with such posts can be argued to have a reversed effect where the antiquated stereotypes of women in advertising gets repeated. Estrid is arguably stressing to empower the feminine body which once again relates to femvertising (Åkestam et al., 2017). The postfeminism messages in this post is very common to use in the femvertising strategy (Windels et al., 2020).

Looking at the image as a whole and what it signifies, it is of great value to examine the pubic hair. In the attempt of emancipating women and letting go of women's beauty ideals, the pubic hair is likely to represent the view of women as free individuals with their own will. The caption serves as an example of femvertising as this is an attempt to emancipate women from having to shave in order to stay feminine (Åkestam et al., 2017). However, when investigating further, one can argue that hair can be identified around the underwear and can be seen stretching to the belly button. Therefore it is interesting to reflect upon why there is no sign of hair on the model's legs. If the model decides to let her hair grow, why are the signs indicating that she shaved her legs? In this sense, by assuming that the model chose to shave her legs, the caption and the intentions of the post somewhat loses its essence. The post and the messages from Estrid could then be viewed as a bit contradictory which could harm the beauty ideals and stereotypes that Estrid aims to impose.

Lastly, similar to post 4, this picture is arguably shot in a domestic environment. Eisend (2010) argues that such surroundings are more typical for women in advertising rather than men. When putting the pieces together for this post, it is interesting to reflect upon the different portrayals this post stresses. For this instance, Estrid has some elements that could be argued to be in line with stereotyped portrayals within advertising, e.g. the domestic environment, the shaved legs and the emphasis on the genital area. Also, the post could argue to pursue non-stereotypical portrayals with respect to the pubic hair, which not typically has been seen in women's advertising.

5.2.3 Men dealing with “feminine” issues



Image 10: Retrieved May 2, 2022, from Instagram account @heystrid

Denotation:

In this post Estrid has constructed a meme which was published on March 31st 2022. The picture consists of two frames, one that is white and the other dark purple. Within the frames, a man with a mustache can be identified wearing a hairnet. With the close-up angle, the photograph is taken from below, where the model is looking down to the left. The model is also wearing an earring on his left ear. To the left, one can identify an Estrid razor in pink, along with the lips and two eyes originating from iPhone emojis. The background of the model consists of a room with bright yellow painting. A text within the white frame reads: “Me and my razor eyeing up what we’re dealing with after not shaving all winter”. The caption reads: “It’s that time of the year again”.

Connotation and general analysis:

When examining this post, one can tell it stands out from other posts. The so-called “meme” complicates the appliance of Goffman’s (1979) genderisms. To clarify: A meme is an image or video thought to reflect the feelings of a specific audience. For this instance, the viewer can not distinguish with such cropped pictures what the body language may or may not signify. For that reason, analyzing the post from a feminine-touch- and ritualization of subordination

perspective would not be sufficient for this analysis. However, one might argue that the facial expression of the model could be investigated in terms of *licensed withdrawal*. Although the facial expression might mostly connote feelings such as disappointment or regret, the argument could be made that the gaze of the model reminds of licensed withdrawal. The model is looking down and slightly away from the camera which according to Goffman (1979) is uncharacteristic for men in advertising. As earlier stated, men most commonly look directly into the camera which signifies control and presence. In this sense, the argument could be made that the model does not signify presentness. Since the model is a man, the licensed withdrawal analysis would argue for a non-stereotypical portrayal for this post.

Before applying our wider theoretical framework and previous research, discussing what the meme usually signifies is of interest. This is because this meme is usually applied in other contexts, such as humor blogs and similar channels. In those contexts, the meme is used to symbolize disappointment. Though the context of Estrid differs from what the meme usually has been linked with, Estrid still manages to use the meme in a humoristic way. Also, Estrid has maintained the same feeling of disappointment. The choice of purple and white frames for this post could be a conscious decision from Estrid since these colors are associated with femininity (Jung & Griber, 2019). This belief is also applicable for the pink razor. In addition, bright backgrounds, as performed in this post, signify innocence and a more “pure” form of femininity (Wigley & Dornelles, 2022). Knowing this, Estrid has constructed a meme that contains a man but the colors signify femininity. This could then be an attempt to underline that femininity or masculinity does not have to be connected to one's gender. Also, if one were to accept this, the post could be a non-stereotypical portrayal of a man. Another interesting aspect then, in relation to earlier reflections regarding the meme itself, is the fact it has created new connotations. Now, the meme can be viewed from a different perspective with new meanings.

Furthermore, it is interesting to reflect upon the text and what it signifies. Firstly, the text within the actual post can be viewed from a critical standpoint. As stated in Image 9, Estrid encourages people to decide themselves whether to shave or not. However, the text could be argued to be contradictory. The disappointment that the model expresses in combination with the text “Me and my razor eyeing up what we’re dealing with after not shaving all winter” could be viewed as a negative attitude towards hair. This attitude goes in line with the stereotypical view of hair in advertising, namely something to be shaved, for women at least. In this view, this post differs even more from other posts since it advocates

the quite opposite from femvertising (Åkestam et al., 2017). Instead of empowering the body as natural, the post arguably encourages its followers to be self-conscious and to shave. This stereotypical view is what Estrid reportedly is aiming to challenge. As for the caption, we argue that it can be interpreted the same way.

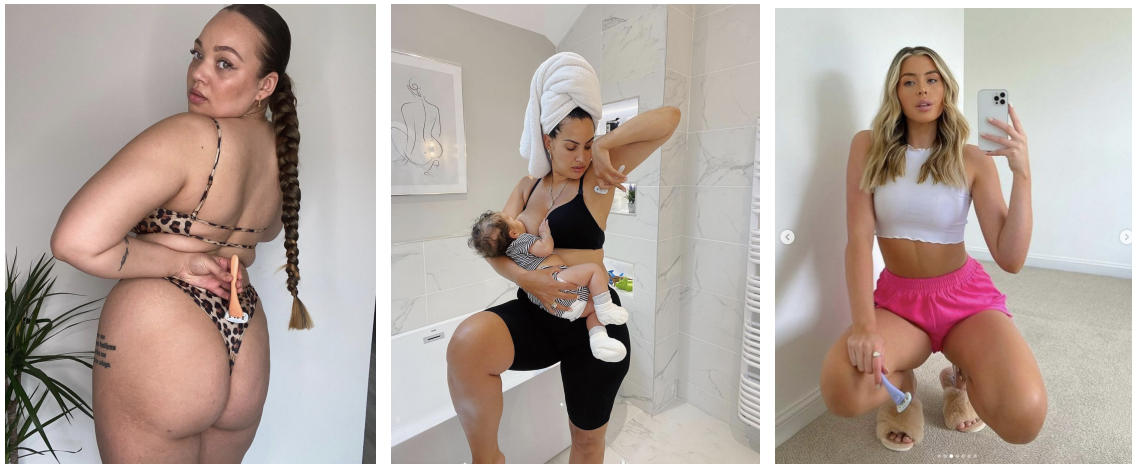
As previously stated, the model is expressing disappointment while looking down at his body. With the text in mind, the disappointment could be related to the hair that has been growing over the winter. One could argue that shaving the body is not typically masculine, not for esthetic purposes at least. For that reason, the post could then signify a man dealing with a typically feminine issue. From one perspective, this could be a way for Estrid to detach shaving stereotypes from a specific gender, shaving your body is for whoever wants to.

5.2.4 Summary of the theme

In summarizing this theme, our key analytic takeaways are presented accompanied with more images that support our arguments. In contrast to our first theme which intended to investigate portrayals of gender, this theme had a greater focus on stereotypes (regarding body and hair), and how such portrayals would impact Estrid's communication.

When summarizing our analysis we suggest, with support from Goffman's (1979) framework, that Estrid in their communication reproduces the antiquated stereotypes regarding the feminine body, while their communication also consists of constant attempts to challenge these. Through Goffman's (1979) framework, we can admit that certain stereotypes are still promoted. For instance, poses that stereotypically are associated with femininity are commonly found throughout the theme. Also, the domestic environment that Eisend (2010) states to be typical for female advertising are commonly found in our Instagram posts as well. However, we also managed to extract signs indicating that Estrid makes use of femvertising through their messages which aim to empower women. Such signs were mostly centered around the feminine body, whether it was e.g. body parts or hair. Different signs eventually conclude that stereotyped- and non-stereotyped portrayals are both found in Estrid's multimodal communication.

We mean that the images below further strengthen our analytical points. Images 11, 12 and 13 were retrieved in May 2022 from Estrid's Instagram account (@heystrid).



Images 11, 12 & 13

These images illustrate how Estrid's communication can both challenge and encourage certain stereotyped portrayals, it depends on from what perspective one analyzes them. For instance, the domestic environment is seen in all three posts (Eisend, 2010). On the contrary, femvertising messages can be identified where the feminine body is in focus as a way of portraying the body as something natural rather than sexualised (Åkestam et al., 2017). Although Goffman's (1979) three genderisms would argue for the opposite. It is also interesting to note that none of the images 11, 12 or 13 showcase any body hair. This could critically be viewed as something contradictory in relation to Estrid's messages about shaving.

In conclusion, our analysis suggests that Estrid's multimodal communication challenges body and hair stereotypes through e.g. femvertising whilst also contributing to the repetition of those. We argue that Estrid purposefully intends to portray themselves as representative and non-stereotypical. To a certain degree, they manage to oppose stereotypes by showcasing different body types as well as non-shaved hair. However, our analysis with regards to Goffman's (1979) framework also presents signs indicating the opposite, where the intentions from Estrid have a reversed effect. This was exemplified through the posts where some signs would signify women to be passive and dependent while other signs pointed out women to be a commodity.

6. Conclusion & Discussion

The following section first presents and discusses our main findings and conclusions from our multimodal social semiotic analysis of Estrid's communication. Secondly, a general discussion concerning our phenomenon and our contributions to the field of strategic communication is presented. Lastly, suggestions for further research within the field are presented.

The purpose of this paper was to investigate how stereotypes and gender portrayals can be constructed through communication, in the context of an allegedly non-stereotypical company, i.e. Estrid. By performing a social semiotic multimodal analysis we were able to identify how stereotyped and non-stereotyped portrayals, and performances of gender were constructed through various semiotic resources in advertising. Thus, we were able to answer both of our research questions, fulfilling the aim of our study and contributing with new knowledge within the field of strategic communication and visual communication.

Based on our findings we are able to draw conclusions regarding how gender is portrayed in Estrid's communication aimed towards all humans. First of all, our findings suggest that Estrid are mixing traditional male and female connotations in their visual performance of gender in an attempt to advertise towards all humans. This conclusion is based upon Goffman's (1979) gender display framework, which made it possible to identify connotations linked to the binary gender identities. Furthermore, we argue that by mixing binary connotations in their multimodal communication they create gender portrayals which challenge our heteronormative society. Even though the majority of semiotic resources connote femininity, they are paired with masculine connotations in such a way that the gender performance still becomes unpredictable and non-normative when viewed as a whole. This is precisely what Butler (1990, in Gauntlett, 2008) refers to as the act of subversive confusion, i.e. seemingly random gender performances, which ultimately can be the end of binary gender categories. As stated previously, Estrid does this by performing fluid gender identities which are not subject to a binary categorization and challenges society's preconceived notions of gender.

Based on our findings in the section "Non-stereotypical portrayals in a stereotypical environment", we were able to draw conclusions regarding how stereotypes are challenged or reproduced in Estrid's multimodal communication. Our findings suggest that Estrid are

challenging traditional stereotyped advertising portrayals, which used to e.g. connect femininity to sexual availability and portray women as commodities (Goffman, 1979). However, in the process of doing so they are also to some extent reproducing certain stereotypes regarding physical characteristics. First of all, our findings show that Estrid challenges stereotyped advertising portrayals by opposing beauty ideals and portraying LGBTQ+ persons in a non heteronormative way. This is for example done by showcasing hair as something human and natural. These portrayals go in line with Åkestam's (2017) definition of a non-stereotyped advertising portrayal because they are not in line with specific advertising stereotypes for our culture which are defined in our theory (e.g. Eisend, 2019; Grau & Zotos, 2016). Secondly, our findings also suggest that in the process of challenging stereotyped portrayals, certain stereotypes are also reproduced. The reproduction of stereotyped portrayals are mainly found when applying Goffman's (1979) gender display framework on the material. The lens of Goffman's (1979) framework allowed us to uncover semiotic resources which create a portrayal of women as passive, dependent, adrift and generally subordinate to men.

We believe that our findings showcase the complexity of strategically communicating in a way which is non-stereotypical and aimed towards all humans. Even though Estrid in a way are challenging stereotypes, we also acknowledge that stereotypes are socially constructed and dynamic. And if stereotypes are viewed in that way, one could always argue that a non-stereotyped portrayal is a stereotyped one since it would depend on who interprets the material. This leaves us with the question if it is even possible to communicate strictly non-stereotypical. Furthermore, stereotypes are deeply rooted in our society and have been reproduced continuously for over a long period of time (Taylor & Stern, 1997). Thus, one could argue that Estrid might reproduce stereotypes unconsciously in their communication since these stereotypes are so deeply rooted in our common beliefs. What makes this even more complex is the fact that Estrid might, consciously or unconsciously, through continuously reproducing certain poses and semiotic resources in their communication, create new stereotypes leading to exclusion in new ways rather than an inclusion of all humans.

The complexity of trying to represent all humans is furthermore exemplified through Estrids' performances of gender. When viewed as a whole, a fluid non binary gender portrayal is identified. However, when viewing the parts separately, a majority of them connote femininity and it could be argued that they in fact are portraying gender in a way which adheres to traditional gender portrayals. This ultimately shows that even though Estrid

manages to represent a great deal of humans in their strategic communication, we suggest that they are not able to represent *all* humans.

Lastly, our research contributes to the field of strategic communication with new knowledge regarding how companies strategically engage in ongoing societal conversations, i.e. gender and stereotypes, in order to drive sales (Zerfass et al., 2018). While doing so, we also contribute to the field by situating our study in the digital environment, where visual communication has been the focal point, something Falkheimer & Heide (2018) state to be a challenge within strategic communication.

In conclusion, our findings suggest that gender is portrayed as non-binary fluid performance throughout Estrid's communication. Furthermore, the results suggest that Estrid manages to both challenge and reproduce stereotyped advertising portrayals through their visual communication. We believe that our findings showcase the complexity modern companies face when trying to be an inclusive brand, aiming to represent all humans. Lastly, we acknowledge that if our study were to be reproduced by other researchers they might arrive at different conclusions since we are conducting interpretive research.

6.1 Suggestions for further research

For future research, it would be relevant to expand this study by investigating the consumers' perceptions of and attitudes towards "ungendered" beauty brands. For this, a qualitative research project making use of interviews would be of interest since it would provide in-depth reasonings of the phenomenon. From a quantitative approach, customers' views could be examined in order to see potential statistical correlations between attitudes and "ungendered" brands. We argue that our study is limited to only exploring from Estrid's point of view and hence a consumer perspective would give new insights to this phenomenon. Another suggestion for further research within the field of strategic communication would be to explore from a branding perspective, where focus would be on brand building activities. Such a perspective could then focus on how to create an ungendered brand, where the study for instance would incorporate theories relating to brand identity, culture and image.

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Appendix 1

This is our analysis guide which we have used to analyze our material with. At certain times not all aspects/criterias are relevant for analyzing the post, if that is the case then that criteria has simply been disregarded.

- 1. Denotation** (color, text, posture, gaze, image, model, product, clothing, color of the room, surroundings etc)
- 2. Connotation** (the associative meanings we draw from the denotations)
 - a. Feminine touch
 - b. Ritualization of subordination
 - c. Licensed withdrawal
 - d. Other meanings interpreted from the connotations
- 3. Connect findings** to broader theoretical framework and previous research