COMMODIFYING CONSCIOUSNESS: A VISUAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION ON NEOLIBERAL MULTICULTURALISM IN ADVERTISING

BY

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Brands are employing neoliberal multicultural strategies to target and depict marginalized communities. These strategies are seen as indicative of positive social change that has been fueled by a growing consciousness among those who desire, and demand, inclusion and authenticity. An industry argument is that “diverse” ads speak to everyone, especially marginalized peoples who are encouraged to consume the brands advertised. The purpose of this study is to first critically and visually analyze an ad featuring Black, Latina and Asian women, and to then facilitate space for perceptions of ads featuring women of their same race via semi-structured interviews. This study operates through a womanist lens and utilizes both critical discourse analysis and visual grammar theory as its theoretical framework. A social semiotic analysis of an Urban Decay Instagram ad revealed communications of neoliberal discourse as well as the inclusion of postfeminist and postracial discourse, which are categorized as co-optations of consciousness. These co-optations in no way substitute for ongoing efforts to dismantle oppressive systems. They in fact serve as subtle reinforcement. Semi-structured interviews among 33 women were conducted, including 11 who self-identified as Black, 11 as Latina and 11 as Asian. Various other identities, including class, nationality and sexuality were captured via an identity questionnaire. A thematic analysis of interview data revealed that participants’ intersecting identities of race and gender contributed to their interpretation of the ads and to their awareness of being (mis)represented, or absent, in advertising. Self-awareness of their identities and mine (as a Black woman researcher) facilitated a safe space for open discussion and
revealed opportunities for organizing around difference. Consideration should be given to the dominant ideologies that are materialized in ads featuring women of color. Though, at times, seen as “authentic,” the ads project the false narrative that we live in a postracial or postfeminist society, and women of color question the intention behind these “new and improved” representations. Unique contributions provided from this study include a highlight of the negotiation of perceived authenticity towards brand influencers and mediated representations of women of color; an engagement with the problematizing of representation via the process of social media reposting—a strategy that contributes to the spread of indistinguishable advertising and enables brands to claim “diversity” and “inclusion” without doing the actual work; and an assessment of how, through appropriation, women of color become accessories to the brand themselves, in a subtle, yet equally powerful form of dehumanization that is replacing the overt stereotypical depictions of the past.

**Key words**: neoliberal multiculturalism, advertising, critical discourse analysis, womanism, visual grammar theory, intersectionality, social semiotics
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CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Neoliberal multiculturalism functions as a commodifier of difference. Consider Nordstrom’s “An Open Mind Is the Best Look” ad (Fig. 1), which seemingly celebrates humanity, our differences and different ways of living and seeing the world.

Figure 1. Nordstrom “An Open Mind Is the Best Look” Ad.

Neoliberalism refers to the current global form of power that is “both an economic rationality that solicits contention and a form of governmentality that cultivates compliance” (Bayat, 2017, p. 20). Within this model of power, social institutions (i.e., universities) operate as business enterprises, collectivist ideals are dismissed and the redistribution of wealth, land and opportunity is never considered (Bayat, 2017). At the same time, and in spite of the repression of the following, neoliberal normativity succeeds in its ability to “incorporate ideals of freedom, the common, caring, sharing
(economy), or hospitality into its logic,” and commercializes, or co-opts, “activism, human rights, civil society, gender equality, sustainable development, and poverty reduction” (Bayat, 2017, p. 23).

Grace Hong (2015) expands this economic-based definition of neoliberalism and further posits it as an

epistemological structure of disavowal, a means of claiming that racial and gendered violences are things of the past. It does so by affirming [emphasis added] certain modes of racialized, gendered, and sexualized life, particularly through invitation into reproductive respectability, so as to disavow its exacerbated production of premature death. (Hong, 2015, p. 7) Affirmation in the context of this study refers to the strategic support of marginalized peoples (i.e., their image or likeness) to promote a brand and support capitalist interests. It is the strategy that Nordstrom relies on in the commercial. Here the struggle for human rights is co-opted and ideals of caring and understanding are incorporated so that viewers can be more favorable to the brand.

Neoliberal multiculturalism then, “in the United States, as it relates to design and other creative output, is a version of global competition squarely defined within a neoliberal economy and a postindustrial, postmodern, multicultural society” (Londoño, 2010, p. 489). It has fostered an environment in which, “cultural and identity politics are desirable insofar as they are also marketable” (Londoño, 2010, p. 489). One example can be seen in Airbnb’s 2018 Super Bowl commercial (Fig. 2). The goal of the ad is to project Airbnb as an inclusive brand, but in actuality it is a mediated attempt to appropriate and transcend difference to feed corporate interest. What it communicates
to us as “consumers” (appropriated humans) is that notions of equality, such as inclusion, can be achieved through material means.

Figure 2. Airbnb 2018 Super Bowl Commercial.

Neoliberal multiculturalism also shows no sign of stopping. Brands and agencies are increasingly adopting multicultural strategies to reach marginalized communities who now have substantial buying power. Black, Asian and Hispanic people in particular have $3.4 trillion in buying power (Diaz, 2018). Historically, these communities have been sporadically represented in advertising and, when depicted, it was through narrow, harmful and stereotypical depictions, such as Sambo, the spitfire Latina and the Dragon Lady (Nelson, 2008; Valdivia, 1998; Kim & Chung, 2005). More positive and pluralistic representations began only when these communities demanded them.

Within the Black community in particular, change first began during the Civil Rights era when “Blacks were unwilling to accept advertisers ignoring their purchasing power or taking it for granted” (Chambers, 2008, p. 120). We exercised our collective power through tactics such as boycotting, and infiltrated the industry to “…present Blacks realistically. After all, [Black advertising professionals] lives showed them that
Blacks were not all one anything. Instead, there was a range of experience in the community that advertisements could and should express” (Chambers, 2008, p. 257). Their demands and strides laid the groundwork for improved representations of other racialized communities.

A cautionary lesson can be learned from business history professor Robert E. Weems (1998) as he chronicles the Black community’s integration into American consumer culture from 1900 through the end of the twentieth century. Increased socioeconomic status driven by greater access to wealth and education, and perceived viability as a consumer market due to Black migration and urbanization, solidified our “role in capitalist America” (Weems, 1998, p. 6). What is not lost are the consequences which came from this assumed position, including the fact that despite materialistic advances and increased spending power, “one would be hard pressed to see where increased African American spending has improved the infrastructure and ambiance of [Black] neighborhoods” (Weems, 1998, p. 6). Integration thus came at the expense of Black-owned institutions and decreased circulation of the dollar within the Black community; two truths that remain evident today.

Our identities as “other” continue to serve as alternative, commercially viable signals for financial gain. And while the proliferation of multicultural advertising is seen by the industry as indicative of positive change, I wonder. How do communities of color interpret this strategy, especially those subject to both racialized and gendered oppression? Do they finally feel included or pandered to? Do they care? Regarding the ads themselves, do they communicate dominant ideologies that reinforce current systems of power? Are representations actually getting any better?
The all too common [insert person of color here] approach to advertising facilitates space for the communication of dominant ideology through misrepresentation and the simulation of equality. My experience in the industry reflects this. Prior to this year, I studied and plotted for five years to become a part of the advertising industry. My ambitions were arguably admirable. I strived to be a part of the industry to increase positive representations of Black people in ads and to dispel the negative stereotypes perpetuated in media. As a Black woman, I was all too familiar with these stereotypical depictions that I believed to be inauthentic and created by someone who did not share my identities.

I once believed that having a career as a brand strategist played to my strengths and would help me make a lot of money, a capitalist’s dream. I would proudly declare myself as a brand and stress the importance of self-branding, realizing now that that too is rooted in capitalist rhetoric. I can no longer settle for a comfortable, complacent future nor for feeling like a walking contradiction. Not while we are being killed and subject to precarity. To affect change, structural change, I must be willing to sacrifice my security for the betterment of community. My community first and foremost includes all Black peoples. This community then extends to other oppressed peoples, namely people of color, then to allies of the struggle for liberation against racism, capitalism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and all the other –isms which govern and maintain our oppression.

But back to my time in the industry. Fresh out of undergrad and in my first 40 hour-per-week job, I found myself disturbed by a graphic designer’s offhand comment that she felt required to include people of color in the ads she developed, and that she would be considered racist if she chose to include white people instead. Her comment
spurred a conversation in my head. **Ignorant enough, yea, but they are too focused on the “what” and not why representation is important. What about the people of color we’re representing? Do they feel included? And if so, does that make them more favorable to our brand?**

For those who do not share the designer’s sentiment, and instead advocate for diverse representation, Diaz (2018, para. 5) argues that “if the strategy is simply to infuse diversity into total market campaigns, brands’ messages will inadvertently ignore the need for culturally nuanced ads, because the thinking goes, diverse ads speak to everyone.” I believe that cultural nuance has been successfully integrated via the absorption of user-generated content (UGC), affording brands the opportunity to claim inclusivity and authenticity without doing the actual work. UGC is defined as published content contributed by users “outside the realm of a profession and professional routines” (Naab & Sehl, 2016, p. 1258). So, **how does this absorption of people, of their “authenticity,” color our awareness of advertising as an agent of oppression?**

I seek to investigate the aforementioned questions through activist and interpretivist research. While previous research has attended to both race (Mcllwain, 2007; van Leeuwen, 2008; Wodak, 2009) and gender (HajiMohammadi, 2011; Lazar, 2007; Lazar, 2014) through the current theoretical framework, few studies examine the intersectionality of non-dominant racialized and gendered peoples (Harrison et. al, 2017; Michelle, 2012), and I did not come across any which studied representations of people of color through Instagram, a visually engaging and digital medium. Also, while critical discourse studies (the framework through which I conduct this study) includes multiple disciplines, such as feminist critical discourse analysis (Lazar, 2007), there are
no studies which are informed by a womanist perspective. It is from my identities as a Black woman that I navigate through this study. They informed the curiosity I had for the felt experiences of Black women and other women of color, and contribute to the dialogue and empathy shared during my conversations with them. They also contribute to a heightened awareness of being cast as “other” and how this othering plays out in mediated environments. This critical perspective aims to provide a valuable approach to our understanding of contemporary neoliberal multicultural advertising strategies.

First, I conduct a social semiotic analysis (van Leeuwen, 2008) of an Urban Decay Instagram ad featuring Black, Latina and Asian women to critically assess neoliberal multicultural strategies within the framework of critical discourse analysis and visual grammar theory. Next, I will report the themes and concepts that emerged from a series of 33 interviews featuring Black, Latina and Asian women to relay their perceptions and responses toward an expanded set of ads, and toward contemporary representations of women of color. Each woman will engage with ads featuring women who share their racial identity, and with the Urban Decay ad that I will analyze. I am most interested in how the intersectionality of their identities, race and gender, inform their interpretations. A discussion of the findings is provided along with a reflection of my experience, contemplation of theoretical and practical implications, review of limitations and a call for future research. The findings, which are rooted in both data and my worldview, serve as the basis for recommendations to members of the industry. Members who, like me, desire change while (at times) assuming the role of walking contradiction. Findings also serve to effect all of us who are subject to advertising’s influence, especially those of us without the critical capacity for discernment. In the next
section I will provide background information to introduce this study by defining advertising and multiculturalism, introducing my critical approach and relevant concepts (i.e. intersectionality), assessing current representations of Black, Latina and Asian women and by stating my research questions. Chapter 2 encompasses the semiotic analysis of the Urban Decay Instagram ad. Chapter 3 is dedicated to introducing, analyzing and discussing the interviews. Chapter 4 provides my final thoughts, including reflections on the research, theoretical and practical implications, limitations, calls for future research and the conclusion.

1.2 DEFINING ADVERTISING

Most contemporary definitions of advertising include key elements, such as paid, identified source, mass media and persuasion (Richards and Curran, 2002; Rodgers and Thorton, 2012). Paid is too limiting as messages can be communicated via owned or earned media (i.e., a branded social media page). Identified source rules out more inconspicuous forms of advertising like brand placement (Dahlen and Rosengren, 2016). Because opportunities for advertising change as new media and technology come available, defining advertising as something facilitated through mass media, or even mediated (think offline methods such as word-of-mouth), is short-sighted. Lastly, the idea that advertising is unique in that it is persuasive is hardly contested. However, like Dahlen and Rosengren (2016, p. 337), I believe “advertisers are becoming increasingly mindful of, and able to target, effects that extend beyond solely persuading someone to take action.” For instance, in response to increasing clutter and skepticism,
brands are often competing, at minimum, just to be noticed or adopted into someone’s consideration set (all of the options one thinks of before making a purchase).

Dahlen and Rosengren (2016, p. 334) propose a working definition of advertising as “brand-initiated communication intent on impacting people” to accommodate new forms of media and new behaviors. Though I agree with most of the authors’ points, I do not believe that advertising is always “brand-initiated.” This assumption negates the current roles we play as, for example, creators of brand messages (i.e., YouTube review vloggers), and as cancel culturalists of brands deemed insensitive or offensive. I also do not believe that advertising needs to be intentional because of the potential that non-brand-initiated communication has to influence. The element of influence, however, is key.

My Conceptual Definition

I conceptually define advertising as the communication of a branded idea, through available channels, with the intent or potential to influence. Yes, it includes the typical television commercial and pop-up banner, and yet the logo on my classmate’s laptop and a company’s branded social media page are ads as well. This broad definition accounts for digital’s disruption, an ever-changing media landscape, content co-creation and an institutional understanding of advertising. More importantly, it highlights the vast reach of advertising. It is ubiquitous and we are subject to it.

Advertising serves to stimulate human interest and builds a propensity to consume. This propensity to consume serves to reinforce and preserve capitalism by encouraging people to be productive, so that we can “keep consuming...to work in order to buy” (Pollay, 1986, p. 25). Consequently, we are bombarded with ideological
messages that intend to influence. These messages uphold, whether directly or by simply not objecting, current oppressive systems of power through dominant discourse.

For example, we have witnessed a recent surge of ad campaigns targeting the female-identifying community via empowerment messaging and the inclusion of feminist rhetoric (Lambiase et al., 2017). Think Barbie’s 2015 “Imagine the Possibilities” campaign, which charged viewers to “see what happens when girls are free to imagine they can be anything” (Mattel, 2019). While on the surface these campaigns appear to challenge sexism and gender norms, it is a form of commodity feminism that “co-opts the most radical ideas of the women’s movements and feminisms and repurposes them for popular audiences in a palatable form of consumption” (Murray, 2017, p. 78). These appropriations of feminist discourse serve to “devalue the meaning of feminist politics, remove the political context, and trivialize feminist social goals” (Murray, 2017, p. 78).

Furthermore, within this postfeminist neoliberal environment, “the focus of ‘empowerment’ [effectively] shifts from the collective to the individual,” and “notions of women’s freedom and choice are [inextricably] linked to the marketplace” (Murray, 2017, p. 79).

Advertising as an Institution

As an institution, advertising is a form of social control, “an instrument comparable to the school and the church [and today, digital media] in the extent of its influence upon society” (Potter, 1954, p. 37). While defining advertising as an “institution of abundance,” historian David M. Potter argues that “in its dynamics [it] has no motivation to seek improvement of the individual or to impart qualities of social usefulness, unless conformity to material values may be so characterized [emphasis
added)” (Potter, 1954, p. 41). Potter was analyzing a period in which radio, newspaper and increasingly television, were situated as primary tools of communication. Today’s media environment has since exacerbated the issue and reach of advertising’s influence.

Communications and media studies scholar Joanna L. Jenkins (2017) argues that indistinguishable advertising is becoming increasingly popular as a consequence to the current converged media environment. In the form of advertorials and advertainment, these intentionally covert strategies serve to diminish consumer choice by being misleading; reproduce inequality by privileging normalized segmented groups; and contribute to gender disparity by “exacerbat[ing] women’s social and economic inequalities” (Jenkins, 2017, p. 115). She further contends that diminished choice is especially detrimental for marginalized communities because civil rights movements, thriving economies, critiques of the media, and alternative media representations have resulted from independent mobilization in opposition to the discriminatory practices and marginalizing efforts of advertisers, who in some cases knowingly promote products that harm and produce campaigns with stereotypical and injurious images. (Jenkins, 2017, p. 115)

These communities are at an inherent disadvantage when subject to indistinguishable advertising as they may “fail to create counterarguments for or to reject ad messaging that they normally would” (Jenkins, 2017, p. 115).

So, how is advertising able to exert such influence? Because it works. Its power, however, does not necessarily come from its ability to sell, but from its ability to “persuade people to buy [things] that they do not need or should not have. [It] shapes
consumers’ desires and makes them feel a yearning for things they do not really need” (Schudson, 1984, p. 9). In the form of “capitalist realism,” brands succeed in “romanticiz[ing] the present or potential of the present,” and in “glorify[ing] the pleasures and freedoms of consumer choice in defense of the virtues of private life and material ambitions” (Schudson, 1984, para. 19).

**Its Current Phase**

Ads also serve as a reflection of dominant culture and constitute “highly manipulated representations of recognizable or institutional scenes from ‘real life’” (Cortese, 2015, p. 12). In *Provocateur: Images of Women and Minorities in Advertising*, Cortese argues that the field of advertising has entered a phase in which to market a brand, advertisers usually have to use a very soft sell--so soft that the product is not the focus and is, in fact, often jettisonable…the major commodity being bought and sold for advertising is the audience, segmented along gender, ethnic, class, and age lines. (Cortese, 2015, p. 10)

This phase was ushered in by ever-increasing clutter and growing skepticism towards advertising. With 60% of branded content being deemed unmeaningful, and 47% of people blocking ads, brands are responding to the folks who believe that “companies and brands should play a role in improving quality of life and well-being” (Garrido, 2018, para. 4; McCue, 2019). We have seen this play out in a barrage of campaigns, including Nike’s “Dream Crazier” campaign, which overtly focuses on women empowerment, rather than the selling of Nike products, and T-Mobile’s “Little Ones” Super Bowl LII spot, which focused on racial equality over the selling of data plans and smart devices (Gallucci, 2019; Slefo, 2018).
Because brands are prioritizing the selling of an experience over the attributes and qualities of the product or service being promoted, it is important to consider how the models in ads are portrayed and why. These people are not necessarily playing a particular person. They instead represent, intentionally, “a social type or a demographic category,” so to “connect specific products in people’s imaginations with a certain demographic groupings or needs or occasions” (Schudson, 1984, para. 5, 10). This is especially so in regards to the inclusion of women of color who remain situated within the margins of society (Lorde, 1984), but are increasingly depicted within the capitalist realism of advertising (Hernandez, 2017). An example can be seen in a 2017 Dove Facebook ad (Fig. 3) that was deemed racist and insensitive.

Figure 3. 2017 Dove Facebook Ad.

Critics read the ad as perpetuating the idea that Black women are unclean or dirty, but after using Dove soap one can be clean and, well, white. Their outrage was grounded in a very real context. As author and scholar Liz Conor explains, there is a “racist history of seeing white skin as clean, and Black skin as something to be cleansed” (Fig. 4); with
whiteness being associated with purity and Blackness being associated with impurity or immorality (Conor, 2017, para. 5).

Figure 4. 1884 Pears’ Soap Ad.

Their (and my) arguments are not far-fetched. The layout of the ad clearly communicates a before and after sequence and historical representation cannot be discounted.

My research was, in part, informed by previous literature which investigated consumer responses to multicultural advertising. One study argues that “sources perceived as similar by their audience are more likely to incite persuasion than sources perceived as dissimilar” (Johnson & Grier, 2015, p. 237) Another, using the elaboration likelihood model and social categorization theory as its theoretical framework, found that Black participants who strongly identified with Black culture were more favorable towards an ad featuring a Black model (Whittler & Spira, 2002). I intend to confront these findings to present the truth as being more nuanced as well as influenced by the
ways in which women of color perceive themselves under our neoliberal capitalist society.

Because advertising is pervasive and systematically supports consumer culture, advertisers are indeed responsible for the ways in which people are portrayed in ads. For example, the conscious decision to use a Black man versus a Vietnamese man, or a thin model versus a plus-size model, has implications for the communities represented. It is imperative to acknowledge that “[e]very advertiser may be under his/her own ideological constraints as well as ideological constraints imposed on them by dominant power relations in society” (Najafian, 2011, p. 3). Whether consciously or subconsciously, we/they contribute to the ways in which dominant ideology and discourse are communicated.

1.3 MULTICULTURALISM – A DOMINANT PERSPECTIVE

Multicultural consumers are defined as “those who claim multiple cultures in their background or those who are part of a growing body of culturally diverse individuals who engage in consumer behavior” (Korzenny, 2008, p. 173). Cultures represented within ads can pertain to various aspects of a person’s identity, such as religion, sexuality or race, and brands “play a role in materializing individual identities” (Kipnis et. al, 2012, p. 1186). Multicultural ads come in many forms and can either depict a specific non-dominant community or feature members of both the dominant and non-dominant group (Kipnis et. al, 2012). Kipnis et. al (2012) discuss an example of a multicultural ad found in Nivea’s “Look Like You Give a Damn” campaign. In one version of the campaign (Fig. 5), a Black man is featured “replacing an un-groomed head with a more
groomed version” (Kipnis et. al, 2012, p. 1191). The tagline, which was different from the one used in a version featuring a white man, read “RE-CIVILIZE YOURSELF,” and was met with public outcry because of its perpetuation of racist Eurocentric ideology (Kipnis et. al, 2012).

![Figure 5. Nivea “Look Like You Give a Damn” Ad.](image)

While many multicultural ads are not blatantly offensive or insensitive, through a critical analysis of multicultural advertising, Kim and Chung (2005, p. 72) argue that multiculturalism succeeds in “evok[ing] artificial images of racial unity and harmony among the various cultural groups of America and celebrates the general openness of ‘color-blind’ Americans to the rich cultural traditions of different racial groups.” What this strategy does is enable advertisers to target and depict marginalized communities while obscuring the exploitative systems that continues to oppress them (Kim & Chung, 2005).
1.4 A CRITICAL APPROACH

So far I have made claims that may be considered egregious or without merit by members within industry or academia who share different epistemologies or worldviews from my own. My research is not for them, but for those of us who empathize with what I regard as truth. This truth understands that though individual campaigns have succeeded in bringing awareness to important issues, such as mental health advocacy and human trafficking, advertising is an inherently problematic institution. It sees that even when conveying positive values in its message, the ultimate aim is favorability towards the brand (via our money or attention), and the so-called values are only a reflection of what is socially prescribed and normalized as positive or acceptable. This truth also realizes that despite the argument for advertising’s role as a facilitator of information regarding the variety of brands we can choose from, in reality we lack real choice. Most often we have no choice in whether we are exposed to an ad or not, and the illusion of choice, or “pseudo-individualization,” often serves to disguise sameness through different product packaging and messaging while “advertising seduces us into believing that differences in packaging reflect differences in essence” (Gendron, 1986, p. 21).

The intent of my social semiotic research is to provide evidence for the truths I understand and see and realize as a consequence to my identities and subsequent position within this society. It is a position that has brewed empathy, curiosity, heightened awareness and a commitment to changing the state of things. The intent of my interview research is to discover emerging truths outside of my own. I will utilize a critical paradigm which enables liberatory activist research and uniquely acknowledges
the perspectives of marginalized communities. More specifically, I draw support from critical discourse analysis (CDA) and visual grammar theory while operating through a womanist lens.

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) uses discourse analysis as the empirical basis for studying “the role of text and talk in creating, maintaining, and legitimating inequality, injustice, and oppression in society” (van Leeuwen, 2015, para. 2). It is a multidisciplinary approach whose aim is to critique hegemonic discourses (i.e., a neoliberal perspective on race) and genres (i.e., the use of language in political speeches) so to “understand, expose, and ultimately challenge social inequality” (Fairclough, 1993; Van Dijk, 2015, p. 466). These discourses and genres are considered forms of social practice, or “socially regulated ways of doing things” that can be communicated in both obvious and subtle ways (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 6; Fairclough, 1993). Djonov and van Leeuwen (2019, p. 566) highlight Fairclough’s (1993) discussion on the marketization of discourse, which powered by neoliberal ideas, blur[s] the boundaries between public and private life, shared and individual responsibility, [while] forms of discourse associated with advertising have infiltrated professional, political and public service institutions, and gradually become the common sense of their everyday world, mixing fact and opinion, information and persuasion, and steering clear of anything that might be regarded as negative or critical.

This continuous process facilitates three aspects of contemporary communication found in advertising discourse:
1. Technologization, or the typically top-down building and imposition of knowledge and norms about what constitutes effective discourse within a given institution;

2. Conversationalization, or the appropriation of communication principles such as those used in informal, personal conversations, for the marketing goals of formerly self-effacing and impersonal official and professional discourse;

3. Increased reliance on the promotional power of semiotic modes other than language (i.e., visual resources) and their multimodal interaction (Djonov & van Leeuwen, 2018, p. 566).

Previous CDA research on advertising has engaged with a variety of hegemonic forces, including race (van Dijk, 1987), class (Callier, 2014) and post-feminism (Lazar, 2014).

The basic tenets of CDA are popularly summarized, as follows, by Fairclough and Wodak (1997) and later restated by Van Dijk (2015, p. 467):

1. CDA addresses social problems
2. Power relations are discursive
3. Discourse constitutes society and culture
4. Discourse does ideological work
5. Discourse is historical
6. The link between text and society is mediated
7. Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory
8. Discourse is a form of social action.

There are several assumptions made within this framework. For one, language is posited as being multifunctional in that it is ideational, interpersonal and textual (Halliday, 1978; Fairclough, 1993). These meanings are explained, respectively, as
being “the representation and signification of the world and experience, the constitution
[of] identities of participants and social and personal relationships between them, and
the distribution of given versus new and foregrounded versus backgrounded
information” (Fairclough, 1993, p. 136). As such, the choices made by communicators
of discourse are “consciously or unconsciously principled, [systematic]
and...ideologically based” (Cervera, et. al, 2006, p. 9).

As alluded to previously, a copywriter’s decision to include or omit specific words
or phrases within an ad is a politicized action, whether they are aware of it or not,
because the decision is a reflection of their worldview, experiences and sense of self.
This is evident when revisiting the Nivea ad (Fig. 5). The copy reads, “RE- CIVILIZE
YOURSELF” for the ad featuring the Black model. Black men’s hairstyles, and natural
hair in general, are subject to scrutiny and respectability politics. While the afro is a
cultural symbol of Black pride, in the context of this ad, Eurocentric beauty standards
are promoted. “Connecting the destruction/removal of the afro with ‘re-civilizing’ evokes
racist discourse by “imply[ing] that African American culture is itself outside of
civilization” (Wright, 2018, para. 6). Not to mention, the implications of the campaign
name, “Look Like You Give a Damn,” which situates masculinity in the gender binary
that “assumes men in general can’t be bothered with appearances” (Wright, 2018, para. 1).

Secondly, discourse is viewed as inherently situated within the context of power
and ideology. More specifically, discourses, along with genres, are considered to be
part of the micro-level of social order while “power, dominance, and inequality between
social groups” are usually associated with a macro-level analysis (Van Dijk, 2015, p.
To illustrate, while a misogynistic ad appearing in GQ magazine would be considered a micro-level interaction, its existence speaks to the reproduction of patriarchy at the macro-level. CDA then serves as a bridge, or connector, between the two levels (Van Dijk, 2015).

A third assumption argues that discourse “is not produced without context and cannot be understood without taking the current and historical context into consideration” (Cervera, et. al, 2006, p. 10). Because discourse is informed by both the past and present, no single valid interpretation of a text exists because it can be interpreted in “different ways by different people, because of their different backgrounds, knowledge, and power positions” (Cervera, et. al, 2006, p. 10).

As mentioned previously, while attention has been given to both race (McIlwain, 2007; van Leeuwen, 2008; Wodak, 2009) and gender (HajiMohammadi, 2011; Lazar, 2007; Lazar, 2014) within critical discourse analysis, there are few studies which examine the intersectionality of the racialized and gendered other (Harrison, et. al, 2017), and I did not come across one informed by a womanist or Black feminist perspective.

**Visual Grammar Theory**

While CDA began as a method for analyzing text or verbal language, it has since expanded to account for visual communication as well. Social semiotics is the study of meaning makers and making and, more specifically, of the “media of dissemination and the modes of communication that people use and develop to represent their understanding of the world and to shape power relations with others” (Bezemerm, 2009, p. 1). Visual grammar theory, which was developed from social semiotic theory, is a
framework that offers “a usable description of major compositional structures which have become established in the course of the history of Western visual semiotics,” and provides an analysis of “how they are used to produce meaning by contemporary image-makers” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 1). It clearly distinguishes between the verbal, which “expresses meaning in linear fashion and over time,” and the visual, which “establishes meaning spatially, in non-linear and instantaneous fashion” (van Leeuwen, 2015, p. 450). Grammar, within this framework, is defined as one of “contemporary visual design in ‘Western’ cultures, an account of the explicit and implicit knowledge and practices around a resource, consisting of the elements and rules underlying a culture-specific form of visual communication” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 3).

Borrowing from Halliday’s (1978) understanding of language as multifunctional, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) developed a social semiotic method for analyzing visual text. The representational meaning (Fig. 6), or ideational function, of an image is categorized as being narrative or conceptual; the interactive meaning (Fig. 7), or interpersonal function, explains the relationships between viewers of the image and the world that is represented within the image; and the compositional meaning (Fig. 8), or textual function, involves the organization of elements within the image (Cervera, et. al, 2006).

Figure 6. Representational Meaning in Images.
Figure 7. Interactive Meaning in Images.

Figure 8. Compositional Meaning in Images.

Regarding the critical approach of visual grammar theory, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 14) argue that “the plain fact of the matter is that neither power nor
its use has disappeared. It has only become more difficult to locate and to trace.” They further contend:

Dominant visual language is now controlled by the global cultural/technological empires of the mass media, which disseminate the examples set by exemplary designers and, through the spread of image banks and computer-imaging technology, exert a ‘normalizing’ rather than explicitly ‘normative’ influence on visual communication across the world. (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 5)

Consequently, new methods for analyzing text and uncovering meaning, such as the ones they introduced, will continue to be a necessary strategy for challenging and resisting dominant discourse.

Through a social semiotic exploration of *Time* magazine ads, Najafian & Ketabi (2011, p. 63) provide evidence of advertising’s ability to use textual and visual signs to “convey persuasive messages under ideological assumptions.” For example, an OMEGA watch ad communicates via text (the headline: James Bond’s Choice) and visual (former James Bond actor as the celebrity endorser). It presents a world in which the watch is reserved for men and the positioning of the actor holds symbolic power over the viewer, communicating superiority as he is representative of an ideal (Najafian & Ketabi, 2011). Their analysis also revealed the effect of signs and colors on the communicative effectiveness of advertising. For example, the use of the colors red and blue in the aforementioned ad to elicit excitement and relaxation served to increase favorable attitudes towards the ad. Their research led them to believe that “social semiotic reference occupies a pivotal point in the relationship between advertising discourse and ideology” (Najafian & Ketabi, 2011, p. 63). Murray (2013) conducted a
A semiotic analysis of Dove’s Campaign For Real Beauty (CFRB) to highlight the ways in which the brand co-opted feminism for its own corporate interests. For example, the phrase “real beauty” is deemed an oppressive ideology because of its association with material consumption and the neoliberal idea of self-improvement. She argues that semiotics is a “useful approach for teasing out denotative and connotative meaning in media texts,” and that “interrogating signs’ oppositional relations is central to examinations of ideological meaning and power” (Murray, 2013, p. 85).

The objective of this framework is to move beyond descriptive analysis and to participate in reshaping the semiotic landscape, which is described as being “brought about by social, cultural and economic factors,” such as the intensification of linguistic and cultural diversity within the boundaries of nation states [and] the weakening of these boundaries within societies, due to multiculturalism, electronic media of communication, technologies of transport and global economic developments. (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 36)

van Leeuwen (2008) extends Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) approach with the introduction of a social semiotic method for assessing the visual, or photographic, representation of others in Western media. According to this method, the visual representation of social actors can be understood by considering both their relationship to the viewer and the ways in which they are depicted (van Leeuwen, 2008). The relationship between social actors and the viewer can be assessed via three dimensions: social distance (distance), social relation (angle) and social interaction (gaze) (Fig. 9); while five strategies are utilized to analyze their depiction: exclusion,
roles, specific and generic, individual and group and categorization (Fig. 10) (van Leeuwen, 2008).

Figure 9. Relationship Between Social Actor(s) and the Viewer.

Figure 10. Depiction of the Social Actor(s).

For her thesis, which was supervised by van Leeuwen, Andreallo (2017) explored the semiotics of digital memes. Through her approach she analyzed “Pretty Girl Ugly Face” Reddit memes and selfies using van Leeuwen’s (2008) method. She argues that the method is especially useful as it “not only allows close analysis of the
images, but it also locates them in relation to traditional photographic representation, thus accentuating the evolution of visual representation within participatory culture” (Andreallo, 2017, p. 15). Her analysis revealed varying relationships among the producer of the meme and selfies, the subject of the images and the viewer. She concluded that while the pretty selfie reflects the stereotype of young women as naturally beautiful, it is “performed, controlled, contained, [and] perfected” (Andreallo, 2017, p. 150). The ugly selfie, on the other hand, represents the antithesis of the other through “corpulence...lack of control...and dominance” (Andreallo, 2017, p. 150).

Gurrieri et. al (2016) analyzed violent representations of women in advertising to interpret the relationship between the women depicted and the viewer. Their analysis revealed the perpetuation of rape culture in advertising discourse as well as the devaluing of women’s right to consent.

What makes this theoretical framework especially relevant for the current research is its assumption of texts as being multimodal. Multimodality is a phenomenon that was introduced as contemporary communication became increasingly multimodal (i.e., using text and video to post onto social media). It posits discourse as something that “can no longer be adequately studied without paying attention to multimodality, whether in the context of conversation, social media, the workplace, or the public sphere” (van Leeuwen, 2015, p. 447). Wong (2016) explored the relationship between social actors and viewers in a political context, namely Barack Obama’s campaigning during the televised 2008 US Democratic National Convention. Her analysis revealed the former president’s use of verbal language, visuals and kinesics to come across as...
personal and amicable—a form of synthetic personalization (Fairclough, 2010)—to garner votes and increase his chances of winning the election (Wong, 2016).

In one other multimodal visual analysis, Fernández and Lirola (2012) explored the journalistic representation of immigrants in Spanish media using CDA and visual grammar theory as their theoretical frameworks. They analyzed eight multimodal texts derived from newspapers (captioned photographs) and gave special attention to the lexical elements, or text, because they believed that “textual components are the ones that, together with the photograph, attract the readers’ attention to the greatest extent” (Fernández and Lirola, 2012, p. 29). My research works through a very visual medium (Instagram), so my analysis will give greater attention to the visual elements of the ads as they are indicative of the ways in which women of color are depicted, and reflect the semiotic software design of Instagram and its emphasis on visuality.

Through these frameworks I take on the responsibility to uncover dominant discourse being communicated through ads featuring women of color so to “help people resist and overcome [its] various forms of power abuse” (Cervera, et. al, 2006, p. 10). I am enabled to do so by conveying “not only the aesthetic and expressive, but also the structured social, political and communicative dimensions” of the ads analyzed and discussed (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p 20).

Womanism

Womanism is “a conceptual framework that captures the history, breadth, continuity and diversity of Black women in pursuit of human solidarity and social justice” (Davis, 2009, p. 1011). The term womanist was first introduced by Alice Walker (1983) and conceptualized as a Black feminist or feminist of color who:
Loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility...and women’s strength. [Is] committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist except, periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist... Traditionally capable...Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.

This positioning was developed as an alternative to mainstream feminism, which had been exclusively white and middle class. It is a pro-humanity framework that is inherently intersectional and calls for liberation from all oppressions. It is also a lens through which I will examine Black, Latina and Asian women’s representations in advertising and the communication of their lived experiences as it uniquely illuminates the ways raced, classed, sexed and gendered advertisers and advertising professionals target raced, classed, sexed and gendered audiences as consumers with raced, classed, sexed and gendered advertising content suggesting seemingly commonplace social scripts and prescriptions for attitudes and behavior. (Jenkins, 2017, p. 110)

Through a womanist ethical framework, Jenkins (2017) examined the branded programming and indistinguishable advertising prevalent in Scandal and Empire, two television shows with a significant Black female audience. She revealed how both shows operate through postracial logic, which suggests that “narratives need not deal with race per se because we are past all that and can turn our attention to issues pertaining to ‘everyone’” (Jenkins, 2017, p. 122). Furthermore, the prevalence of
product placement, branded scripting and licensing deals was deemed contributive to
the exploitation of Black women by privileging only “desirable” audiences,
misrepresenting the complexity of Black womanhood—a direct reflection of the lack of
diversity in the ad industry—and by “embracing inclusion and diversity because it is
profitable to do so” (Jenkins, 2017, p. 112). I will present Instagram ads as yet another
outlet for indistinguishable advertising.

1.5 INTERSECTIONALITY

Race, in short, is a social construct. More specifically, it is “a legal, social, and
cultural invention rather than given in nature, and the knowledge of race and its
deployment are exercises of power expressed in the encounter among groups for
control over resources” (Gray, 2017, p. 161). As a technique of power it
identifies arbitrary differences such as skin color, hair texture, nose and eye
shapes, and thinness of lips as sites of knowledge (classification, hierarchy, and
value) about variations in human intelligence, capacity, creativity, development,
indeed what it means to be human. (Gray, 2017, p. 161; Goldberg, 2009; Wynter,
2003)

Gender is another socially constructed concept that refers to the “behaviors and
characteristics that society delineates as masculine or feminine and typically associates
with one sex but not the other” (Romero and Sears, 2016, p. 448). Queer theory
accurately problematizes the prevalence of a gender binary, “based on cisgender males
and females,” by “opening up space for thinking about gender and sexuality in more
open terms,” and “highlighting performative rather than essentialist readings of gender”
We see it problematized today by gifted South African runner, Caster Semenya, who was forced to undergo a sex verification test to compete and who has been subject to racism, sexism and homophobia because her humanity deviates from the norm.

Intersectionality in this study refers to the intersecting identities of being a racialized and gendered other, woman of color, and how these women are uniquely affected under systems of white supremacy and heteronormative patriarchy (Crenshaw, 1989). Among other identities, such as class, our race and gender identities indicate our distances from power and dominant culture. For example,

- a young, white, middle-class, heterosexual, physically able Western woman might feel oppressed only by gender whereas a poor, Third World, lesbian woman of color could experience oppression from a number of fronts, most of which are unidentifiable at any given moment, thereby making it difficult for her to address her oppression. (Valdivia, 1995, p. 6)

According to Black feminist and sociologist, Patricia Hill Collins, “intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice” (Collins, 2000, p. 18). She is also responsible for our understanding of the matrix of domination—the social organization which explains how intersecting oppressions “originate, develop, and are contained” (Collins, 2000, p. 228). My identities of being Black and woman influenced my curiosity for understanding how women who share my racial identity, and other women of color, think and feel about being represented and depicted in ads. While there is no doubt our experiences as racialized and gendered others are different, our differences (and
similarities) are the creative energies available to us for organizing and building solidarity. It is through my identities that I too am interested in the U.S. matrix of domination, which encompasses “schools, housing, employment, government, and other social institutions [in this context, advertising] that regulate the actual patterns of intersecting oppressions…” (Collins, 2000, p. 228).

It is important to highlight and advocate for current concern with intersectionality as conceptualized by Crenshaw (1989). It is a concern among scholars who “understand the connections between multiple axes of oppression and exclusion, on the understanding that these are not simply ‘additive’ but constitute distinct experiences and subjectivities” (Gill, 2017, p. 78). Singular definitions of “woman,” for example, have been challenged to account for our distinct experiences and subjectivities (Gill, 2017).

Audre Lorde, a self-described Black Lesbian Feminist Warrior Poet Mother (Lorde, 2009), was a formidable activist who confronted issues of racism, sexism, sexuality and mortality in her work. Before Crenshaw’s (1989) coining of the term, Lorde occupied a distinctly intersectional space through which she “brought the perspective of a Black lesbian radicalized within the civil rights movement, the Black power movement, the second wave of the U.S. women’s movement, and the gay and lesbian movement” (Byrd, 2009, p. 12). Illustrating her position (and mine) she writes:

[Difference must be] seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate...Within the interdependence of mutual
(non-dominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge [the erotic] and return with true visions of our future along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged. (Lorde, 1984, p. 111-112)

Lorde’s identities enabled her to see humanity, and the powers which serve to orchestrate our relationships, through a Black radical feminist lens that understood oppression as not being hierarchical, but intersectional.

**Intersectional Depictions**

As an “ubiquitous cultural and economic institution,” advertising has the ability to “[color] our understanding of status arrangements, social boundaries, and power” in its depiction of race and gender (Cortese, 2015, p. ix). As women of color, our marginalization as racialized other and female-identifying is further cemented as brands increasingly use our likeness, our authenticity and our cultures as marketable strategies in pursuit of capitalist gain. This is observed in a McDonald’s ad (Fig. 11) that includes a Black woman and appropriates the cool factor associated with Black culture (Nancarrow, et. al, 2006) to promote their collaboration with hip-hop artist Kyle.
Jenkins (2017) argues that women of color, who do not adhere to dominant gender norms, are especially affected by advertising’s communication of dominant discourse, such as beauty standards and ideals. Its role in communicating these ideals is illustrated by Cortese when he writes:

Advertising merely reflects social values and trends; it does not create them. However, it clearly contributes to gender and ethnic inequality by developing and maintaining an atmosphere in which the marketing of ethnic stereotypes, women’s bodies…and distorted body-image depictions is viewed as valid and acceptable. Perhaps most damaging is the omission of legitimate and more realistic ethnic and gender representations. (Cortese, 2015, p. 203)

Racial and gender stereotypes refer to the inherent belief that certain attributes differentiate people from one another. Zoto and Tsichla (2014) emphasize the
importance of value and research, namely in reference to gender stereotypes, in highlighting the industry’s continued reliance on these stereotypes, and provide recommendations for future approaches. While there is an ongoing industry tradition of portraying female-identifying characters in a way that reinforces heteropatriarchy through hypersexualization, beauty ideals, among others, there has also been the increasingly notable trend of portraying girls and women in more empowering roles, such as the unapologetic feminist or woman who embraces aging (Kemp, 2018). One example is found in Procter & Gamble brand Always’ #LikeAGirl campaign (Fig. 12). Its purported mission is “to encourage girls everywhere to embrace failure as fuel to build confidence & Keep Going #LikeAGirl” (Always, 2019).

![Figure 12. Always #LikeAGirl Ad.](image)

While critical attention has been given to both gender-role (Paek et. al, 2014; Gill, 2008) and race (Foster Davis, 2017; Grier, et. al, 2017; Fu, 2012) depictions in advertising, few studies have engaged with both race and gender through an
intersectional lens (Michelle, 2012). Many instead focus on race or gender only, treating the identities as distinct from one another without further engaging with those who identify as both. This study is among the growing body of research that does. Harrison, et. al (2017) took on this approach by analyzing depictions of multiracial women in popular magazine ads and by conducting depth interviews with both multiracial women and advertising professionals. Through a CDA framework, they found that mixed-race representations communicated beauty standards and racial harmony, excluded multiracial women from social roles and objectified them through exotic and erotic depictions. Interviewed professionals perceived mixed-race representations as having “crossover appeal” while nonprofessionals felt as though “marketers were using mixed-race representations to communicate to a mass audience without offending or alienating their predominantly white consumer base,” and did not perceive the ads as being intended for them (Harrison, et. al, 2017, p. 515). Their investigation also led them to the development of a framework for the systematic analysis of “the sociocultural significance of a wide range of identity coordinates utilized in advertisements and other forms of marketing communications” (Harrison, et. al, 2017, p. 503).

The current study is unique in its critical investigation of racialized and gendered depictions in ads through a womanist lens and through its study of how women of color are represented in ads on Instagram. CDA and visual grammar theory are utilized in a semiotic analysis of a branded multicultural Instagram ad so to uncover the dominant discourse communicated. While it is through a womanist lens that I conduct this entire study, it is especially so in my approach to interviewing women of color. Through a thematic analysis I intend to relay their perceptions of how racialized women are
represented in advertising today. I also seek to empower their voices by confronting
traditional power differences between the researcher and participant, and by including a
participant-led activity within the discussion.

1.6 REPRESENTATIONS IN ADVERTISING

Black women

The buying power of Black consumers is considered to be disproportionately
higher than their population in the United States, and Black consumers are framed as
exerting influence over the consumption of brands through a halo effect that has been
coined the “cool factor” (“Black Impact,” 2017, para. 5). Black women in particular are
framed as being able to “drive product categories and shift culture,” and are positioned
as “the economic engine of the Black community” (“African-American Women,” 2017,
para. 3). Regarding representation today, Black women are most frequently portrayed in
ads through the Strong Black Woman stereotype, which communicates “unrealistic,
unhealthy expectations of achievement and endurance for Black women” (Jenkins,
2017, p. 117). An example can be found in Reebok’s #BeMoreHuman campaign, which
features actress Danai Gurira (Fig. 13). Other stereotypes include the hypersexualized
jezebel or the caretaker mammy, which was most popularly embodied by Quaker Oats
character, Aunt Jemima (Hirshman, 2011).
Jackson (2010) investigated representations of Black women in media and Black women’s responses to them by conducting a study similar to the current study in intent and in its use of multiple methods. Through participatory action research she utilized a mixed methods approach that included a focus group, content analysis, rhetorical analysis and quantitative survey. A workshop facilitated space for participants to communicate their understandings of representations of Black women in media. There was evidence of positive and negative perception as well as instances “when an artist/researcher was empowered as well as disempowered” (Jackson, 2010, p. 78). For example, during a body mapping exercise, participants labelled a Black female body silhouette with both positive and negative terms. Of which, the most popular were confrontational and hypersexual. Her research revealed the impact that mediated visuals have on Black women and participants’ empowered ability to offer counter narratives to these images (Jackson, 2010).

Latinas
The Latina/o community has been targeted by mainstream advertising since the 1980s due to a growing population, expanding popularity of Latin music and the emergence of Spanish-language media, such as Univision (Baez, 2017). Furthermore, the industry’s consistent use of “the traditional large family, the color red, heat metaphors, tropical settings, and salsa music to signify Latina/o identity and culture is an external force that shapes how Latinidad is understood by audiences” (Molina-Guzmán, 2010, p. 3). Because of increasing buying power, Latinas are currently being framed as a viable target audience that has become a “prominent contributor to the educational, economic and cultural wellbeing of not only their own ethnicity, but of American society and the consumer marketplace” (“Latina Power Shift,” 2013, para. 1). Growing representation of Latinas in ads can be attributed to both these instances and to the industry’s preference for “racially and ethnically ambiguous-looking models” (Baez, 2017, p. 235). Consequently, most ads which feature a Latina often incorporate lighter-skinned women who are then subject to depictions as motherly figures or hetero-hypersexualized characters for the male gaze (Baez, 2017; Hirshman, 2011).

A study on the portrayal of women in cigarette magazine ads found that Latinas are disproportionately targeted by less expensive brands, which was discussed as being indicative of advertisers’ assumptions surrounding Latinas’ socioeconomic status (Fernandez et. al, 2005). In Feminists, Feminisms, and Advertising, Baez (2017) discusses the results of a study in which she conducts thirty-five in-depth interviews to interpret the portrayals of Latinas in Latina magazine. She found that although participants were aware of advertising’s commercial intent and the objectification of
women in ads, they considered the portrayal of Latinas in ads to be a “form of visibility belonging to the market, and by extension, the nation” (Baez, 2017, p. 231).

**Asian women**

According to a recent Nielsen report, “the buying power of Asian-American consumers has grown the fastest of all ethnic groups since 2000” (“Asian Americans,” 2018, para. 2). Asian women are framed as “a young, emerging consumer force” and receive the exceptional labelling of being “intercultural,” rather than multicultural, to describe their “deep understanding and affinity for all cultures” (“Asian American Women,” 2017, para. 2). This exceptionalism that is attributed to them is reflective of the model minority stereotype that is placed upon them and perpetuated in advertising and other forms of media (Taylor & Stern, 2013).

Kim and Chung (2005) analyzed three magazine advertising campaigns to critically examine American Orientalism, a political ideology sustained by the notion of “Western/White power as a means to justify and exert its cultural domination over Asia and Asian America” (Kim & Chung, 2005, p. 73). They argue that Asian-American women are racialized and gendered as “other” in advertisements through stereotypes that depict them as exotic, mysterious, hypersexualized and foreign (Kim & Chung, 2005). While engaging with multicultural advertising specifically, they state these strategies “re-package long-standing racial stereotypes in their efforts to promote multicultural, globalized settings” (Kim & Chung, 2005, p. 76).

Li et. al (2008) conducted a content and semiotic analysis of over 600 print ads for skin whitening products found in India, Hong Kong, Japan and Korea. Through their analysis they sought to uncover the extent to which whiteness, Western ideology and
traditional Asian values and beliefs influenced constructions of female beauty found in the ads. Among their findings was the notion of good skin being attributed to white skin and bad skin being attributed to darker skin. Whiteness was revealed to be a source of cultural capital, and white skin was associated with naturalness, or the “natural order of things from which we have departed” (Li et. al, 2008, p. 447). The ads utilized the postfeminist promotional strategy of self-governance by projecting flawless skin as attainable and as being able to be controlled and altered (Li et. al, 2008).

There is a plethora of research, across many disciplines, which investigates and explores the representations of women of color in advertising and other forms of media. Arguably, “representation remains an important theoretical and political component of any strategy that seeks to redress issues of cultural and material inequality” (Valdivia, 1998, p. 393). While these women are increasingly represented in ads due to their integration into consumer culture and perceived viability as consumers, I wonder how they themselves interpret these depictions. I also seek to understand how these “new and improved” representations reflect and diverge from the stereotypical depictions of the past.

1.7 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

I have chosen to conduct a social semiotic analysis, in addition to semi-structured interviews, to understand 1) how dominant discourse is being visually communicated in advertising, 2) how women of color interpret ads in which their racial and gender identities are represented and 3) whether, in this age of information, there is greater consciousness among these women of the ideologies that influence the ways in
which they are represented and depicted. The ads selected are branded Instagram posts. Instagram is a popular and contemporary medium and a form of digital semiotic technology (van Leeuwen, 2015). The following research questions will be investigated:

**Semiotic Analysis**

*RQ1:* How are women of color depicted in contemporary visual ads?

*RQ2:* What dominant discourse is communicated through their depictions?

*RQ3:* How are these women depicted in relationship to the viewer?

**Semi-Structured Interviews**

*RQ4:* How do Black, Latina and Asian women perceive and interpret ads which feature women of their same race?

*RQ5:* In what ways do they identify with the ads?

*RQ6:* Do they consider the ads to be inclusive, persuasive and/or authentic?

*RQ7:* Is there a consciousness of the dominant ideologies which influence representation?
CHAPTER 2: VISUAL ANALYSIS

2.1 SOCIAL SEMIOTICS

Social semiotics is a tool that was devised specifically for use in critical research and is an effective way to extract hidden meaning in visual communication (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004). In an overview of the method, Kress & van Leeuwen (1996, p. 13) state:

Communication requires that participants make their messages maximally understandable in a particular context...[it] takes place in social structures which are inevitably marked by power differences, and this affects how each participant understands the notion of ‘maximal understanding.’

Furthermore, representational meaning is conveyed “by the (abstract or concrete) ‘participants’ (people, places or things) depicted” (van Leeuwen, 2012, p. 10).

As mentioned previously, advertisers play a substantial role in the perpetuation of dominant discourse through the decision-making of including specific models and the depiction of these models in the ad.

In addition to research questions 1 through 3, the following questions will guide my analysis: How are women of color represented in branded Instagram posts? Does their representation speak to any tradition(s) of representing “others” in media? How are they represented in relation to dominant identities? What ideologies inform their depictions?
2.2 DESIGN & ANALYSIS

This study will adopt van Leeuwen’s (2008) social semiotic method for analyzing the representation of social actors. Visual analysis will occur by focusing on how six women are represented in an Urban Decay Instagram ad (Fig. 14). More specifically, the analysis will consider their depiction in relation to the viewer and how they themselves are depicted. These two dimensions of analysis are considered to be “co-present” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 141). An interpretation will help to explain the “particular relations between viewers and the world inside the picture frame” (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004, p. 148). This is especially important as a unique benefit of social semiotics lies in its recognition of viewers as active participants in the meaning making process. The analysis will also provide any evidence of the incorporation of dominant discourse by interpreting the depiction of racialized women.

Stimuli

![Figure 14. Urban Decay Ad.](image-url)
I chose an ad that was disseminated via Instagram for several reasons. Incorporating Instagram as a medium reflects my broad understanding of advertising as the communication of a branded idea, through available channels, with the intent or potential to influence. Also, Instagram is staggeringly popular. As of this year, Instagram has 1 billion monthly users, including 37% of US internet users (Smith, 2019). It is the second most engaged social platform (behind Facebook) and 75% of users are between the ages of 18 and 24, meaning it is a platform which participants are likely to be familiar with (Smith, 2019). Furthermore, 39% of women in the US use the platform along with 43% of Black adults and 38% of Hispanic adults (Pew Research Center, 2018). Unfortunately, there is no demographic data available for Asian Americans or women of color specifically.

Recent changes in Instagram’s corporate structure, including being purchased by Facebook, has “changed Instagram’s initial status of a mere photosharing platform into a business machine that relies on the power of visual communication” (Serafinelli, 2018, p. 101). Instagram currently stands as the highest engaged social media platform for brands (Smith, 2019). To illustrate, there are more than 25 million branded Instagram accounts and 80% of users follow at least one (Smith, 2019). Serafinelli (2018, p. 110) argues that “the uniqueness of using Instagram in online branding is [recognizable] in the use of images for storytelling,” whether they be brand-initiated or instances in which “users share images of their everyday lives in connection with the brand.”

Djonov and van Leeuwen (2017, p. 566) argue that “digital technologies play a fundamental role in facilitating and disseminating promotional discourse” through semiotic software, or “software for meaning making.” Instagram is a powerful,
multimodal form of semiotic software whose “design reflects and promotes the neoliberal values that underpin global corporate culture” (Djonov & van Leeuwen, 2017, p. 567). Like other social media architecture, it “constantly works to increase the degree and intensity of ordinary users’ engagement with the platform,” so to create “more audience for various advertising strategies -- users as consumers, and higher potential for, and precision of, targeted personalised advertising and algorithms -- users as text co-producers,” thereby facilitating wealth accumulation for the companies (KhosraviNik, 2017, p. 583).

I chose this ad in particular because it is synonymous with the visual of “multicultural ad” that pops up in my head, meaning an ad featuring multiple people of various racial backgrounds in close proximity to one another. It also falls within the definition of multicultural ads by featuring both non-dominant and dominant peoples (Kipnis, 2012). I came across it during my ad selection process, which is further discussed in Chapter 3. What is especially interesting is that this the same image that is currently displayed as the primary photo on their “Foundation Finder” site page (Urban Decay, 2019). The photo was produced by the brand for its “Gives Good Face” campaign and the file name of the image reads as “UDGGF_models_1920w.jpg.” The ad itself was posted to the brand’s Instagram account on September 17, 2018 and, as of June 2019, has received over 31,000 engagements (likes).

Findings

According to the brand’s site, Urban Decay is “beauty with an edge™,” and positions itself as a cosmetics brand “created by makeup junkies, for makeup junkies” that is “feminine, dangerous, and fun” (Urban Decay, 2019, n.p.). The irony in its name
is not lost. Urban decay refers to the “the process whereby a previously functioning city, or part of a city, falls into disrepair and decrepitude” (Definitions, 2019, para. 1). Neoliberal policies are consistently employed to address this phenomena. For example, the gentrification of neighborhoods in which “working class and low-income people of color who are being pushed to the city outskirts and beyond” is an increasingly popular tactic “driven by finance capital at multiple scales,” and is a way for the “middle and upper-middle classes to claim cultural control of the city” (Lipman, 2009, p. 14). Typical observations of urban decay include abandoned buildings and impoverished families and yet, here, it is appropriated to sell makeup. This appropriation of language is evident on its “About Us” page:

Our story opens in the mid-'90s, when pink, red and beige enslaved [emphasis added] the prestige beauty market. Flying in the face of this monopoly [emphasis added], Wende Zomnir and her co-conspirators [emphasis added] unleashed a line of lipsticks and nail enamels inspired by seedier [emphasis added] facets of the urban landscape [emphasis added]. The vibe since day one? Beauty with an edge [emphasis added]. (Urban Decay, 2019, para. 1)

In its “Eyeshadow Evolution” site section, highlighting the different packaging of its eyeshadow over the years, you come face-to-face with product names, such as 1997’s “Pothole Collection,” 2000’s “The Manhole,” 2004’s “Vintage Subway Token” and today’s “Revamped Subway Token” (Urban Decay, 2019, n.p.).

van Leeuwen’s (2008) social semiotic method for analyzing the representation of social actors was created for the purpose of analyzing the representation of “‘others’ in a variety of Western Media” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 136). Because I am most
interested in how women of color, as gendered and racialized others, are represented in ads, this method is appropriate for my research. It is also clear and systematic, complementing my experience as a social semiotic researcher.

The six women featured in the Urban Decay ad constitute the dominant elements of the image. A level of abstraction is achieved in the framing via the use of a taupe background. Abstract backgrounds can communicate ideological meaning (Fairclough, 2003; van Leeuwen, 2008), and in this case the use of a taupe background is strategically used to signify sameness and connectedness. When considering the psychology of color, taupe has connotations such as balance, authentic, organic and timeless (CM Bell, 2017). While taupe is typically categorized as a neutral color, as if to be, seemingly, without color, it is not neutral in this context. In its indistinctness, the background accentuates the models’ skin tones and is unobtrusive; unlike the way, for example, a bright blue background would appear.

As mentioned previously, social semiotics is unique in its recognition of viewers as active participants in the meaning making process. When determining how social actors are represented, it is important to consider their depiction in relation to the viewer. Again, the relationship between the image and the viewer can be identified via three dimensions: social distance (distance), social relation (angle) and social interaction (gaze) (van Leeuwen, 2008) (Fig. 9 from Chapter 1).

**Social distance** can be indicated by the camera shot type. Shot types include: close-ups, full shots, extreme long shots and over-the-shoulder shots. The current photo is a medium group shot, which enables the viewer to observe the details of the women’s faces, clothing and other attributes while also noticing the positioning of them close
together as a group. Though the photo is taken at a relatively close distance, there is enough distance between the women and the viewer to indicate a lack of intimacy between them. Typically, makeup brands utilize close-up shots, or beauty photography, to demonstrate their products. Beauty photography often uses “clear lighting to emphasize the makeup, styling, and model’s features,” and “the frame is tightly cropped to emphasize the makeup, hair, or model’s expression” (Jade, 2012, n.p.). In this case, however, the primary focus is not the makeup itself. Rather than highlight the quality of the product being advertised (foundation), the brand gives greater attention to the various skin tones for which the product is potentially applicable. More specifically, including women of different races is used to appeal to viewers of different races. It communicates to this audience that the brand has made space for, and is inclusive of, “everyone.” This decision reflects a positioning strategy to project Urban Decay as a socially inclusive brand and is considered a form of strategic ambiguity (Joseph, 2018).

Social relation refers to the angles from which the photo is taken. The vertical angle, which indicates power difference, refers to whether we see someone from “above, at eye level, or from below,” and the horizontal angle refers to whether we see them “frontally or from the side, or perhaps from somewhere in between” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p.139). This photo is taken at eye-level, which invites the viewer into a relationship in which they, nor the women, hold any symbolic power (i.e., inferior or superior) over the other. What we know from critical discourse studies is that discourse, in this case advertising discourse, is inherently situated within the context of power and ideology. Here, power does not lie with the models nor the viewer. The women appear beautiful, confident and maintain engagement with the viewer through their direct
expressions. As a standalone image, they possess power, but as the visual is in an advertisement for Urban Decay, their power is captured, appropriated and repackaged. The horizontal angle from which a photo is taken indicates symbolic involvement or detachment. The viewer engages with the women face-to-face, so that we are “literally and figuratively ‘confronting’ them” (van Leeuwen, p. 2008, p. 139). We see them and they, simultaneously, see us. This direct involvement is an appeal to capture the viewer’s attention. Detachment, however, is symbolized through the positioning of their bodies, which are positioned in a way that draws greater attention to their faces and enhances visibility of the product.

The social interaction dimension refers to whether the subject looks at the viewer or not. Social interaction also refers to what is more widely understood as gaze, or the relationship of looking (White, 2017). Within media studies, “critical scholarship on the gaze is concerned with how gendered, raced, eroticized, and controlled bodies become visible within media and other texts, and how individuals look at, identify with, and are constructed by visual representations” (White, 2017, p. 75). In this ad the objects of the gaze are the racialized, gendered and sexualized women who directly engage in eye contact with the viewer. This form of engagement represents a symbolic demand; one in which “the people in the picture want something from us” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 141). In this context, they want the viewer to observe their beat faces (well-done makeup), so that the viewer can be enticed to purchase the foundation or take advantage of the brand’s “NEW shade finder” tool.

Regarding eye contact, however, line of sight varies as they are not all positioned on an equal level. For example, the woman farthest to the left, who can be read as...
Asian, Indigenous or racially ambiguous, is positioned at a level lower than the others, and in the foreground, while the white woman in the top right of the image is positioned at the highest level and in the background. The subject of the gaze are people (though the ad specifically targets women) who could potentially consume the brand as well as men. The male gaze is communicated by the way the women are positioned in close proximity to one another, with their bodies touching, and through their inviting, bordering on seductive, glances towards the viewer. Traditionally, “women are depicted in a quite different way from men—not because the feminine is different from the masculine—but because the ‘ideal’ spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him” (Berger, 1972, p. 64).

Through an engagement of gaze we uncover postfeminist discourse. Postfeminism assumes that the “second wave feminist movement eradicated sexism to the extent that it no longer exists, and the problem remains focusing on patriarchy and gender discrimination” (Joseph, 2009, p. 240). Within the context of advertising, neoliberal postfeminist discourse addresses women as “empowered [consumers] and entitled subjects” (Lazar, 2018, p. 378). Likewise, “confidence and agency [is achievable] through commodity consumption; a focus on self-indulgent pleasures; a reclamation of traditional feminine stereotypes; and a move specifically towards the ‘girlification’ of women” (Lazar, 2018, p. 378). Here, the seemingly empowered women in the ad engage with the seemingly as empowered viewer who can then reaffirm their femininity by consuming the brand, whether by purchase of the foundation or use of the shade finder tool. Furthermore, the viewer is made to envy herself as “she is meant to imagine herself transformed by the product into an object of envy for others,” much like
the women who are portrayed in the ad. Thus this ad works to “steal her love of herself as she is, and offer it back to her for the price of the product [or time spent engaging the brand]” (Berger, 1972, p. 134).

These three dimensions (distance, angle, gaze) contribute to the representation of people as “other” via strategies of distanciation, disempowerment and objectivation, respectively. Distanciation, or “representing people as ‘not close to us,’ as ‘strangers’” is not utilized. In fact, the viewer is invited to see themselves in the women and this is communicated via the caption, “Flawless skin your way...we’ve got what you need to get the complexion of your dreams,” and by using women with various racial identities as an appeal to a wider audience. Through this image, disempowerment occurs, as illustrated previously, but not through the image itself. On the contrary, both the viewer and women featured are empowered via their direct involvement with one another and the lack of power difference. Again, however, as an ad, power is taken by the brand in its exploitation of the women featured, and by its ploy to persuade the viewer to engage. Lastly, objectivation refers to “representing people as objects for our scrutiny, rather than as subjects addressing the viewer with their gaze and symbolically engaging with the viewer in this way” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 141). While contrasting arguments can be made, the context in which these women appear (as an advertisement) solidifies their objectivation as objects for the viewer to observe and assess in order to determine whether they desire the product and service being advertised, and as objects for the brand to exploit.

Now that we’ve discussed how the women are represented in relation to the viewer, it is equally important to discuss how they are depicted. Depiction is realized in
terms of exclusion, roles, specific and generic, individual and group and categorization. These five strategies represent the ways in which people are visually represented as “others” (Fig. 10 from Chapter 1).

When reading this image, I observe three Black women (who may or may not also be Afro-Latina), one Asian or Indigenous woman and two white women. It is important to note that those are my readings based on my subjective understanding of race. More importantly, several of the women in this ad can be read as racially ambiguous. Ambiguity is a popular strategy used by advertisers [Fig. 15] to appeal to “‘ethnic’ and ‘mainstream’ audiences simultaneously” (Squires, 2014, p. 103).

Advertising in fact thrives off this “celebration” of difference as advertisers fill magazine spots with carefully blended groups of attractive people of different races, inviting us to consume mix without having to think about what social and political practices would be necessary to make our neighborhood or workplace as diverse as the ads. (Squires, 2014, p. 8)

Figure 15. Ads Featuring Racially Ambiguous Women.
In the fashion industry, women who “could be from anywhere” have become “emblematic of [the] street-cast, cool kid trend” of the past two decades as brands seek to “cultivate a nonconforming, familiar-yet-inaccessible look” (Sengupta, 2018). The appeal of ambiguity is growing so prevalent that white influencers are pretending to be Black women on social media (Alese, 2018; Pellot, 2018).

Race and communications scholar Ralina L. Joseph explores the uses of strategic ambiguity, which is a “postracial twenty-first century iteration of Black feminist resistance” (Joseph, 2018, p. 17). As a form of resistance, it is employed to combat postracial discourse and racism itself. However, when used by those in power (as illustrated in the Urban Decay ad), it is a tool used to “shore up hegemony [and] consolidate their power by ‘appealing to the powerful while placating the marginal just enough to keep them from openly rebelling against the discourse and the system it supports’” (Joseph, 2018, p. 15). The Urban Decay ad communicates postracial discourse through its use of strategic ambiguity and simulation of racial harmony and equality. Postracial discourse assumes that the “civil rights movement effectively eradicated racism to the extent that not only does racism no longer exist, but race itself no longer matters” (Joseph, 2009, p. 239).

While evaluating exclusion, I observe multiple races of women, but not all races are included in this image. Why were South Asian, Southeast Asian or Middle Eastern women not included in this image? Or are they? Why was the decision made to include only women? Why do all of the women featured appear to share similar body types and belong to a similar age group? While attempting to showcase “diversity,” Urban Decay reveals its inadequacy to do so through its narrow depiction of diversity (on the basis of
only some races). The argument can be made that not all identities can be represented in a single image. Regardless, a conscious decision was made to depict specific races of people and a variety of hairstyles at the expense of other identities and attributes that were not deemed as socially acceptable or economically viable (i.e., disabled women). Here we see the narrow depictions of diversity that are utilized in ads. Not only is it exploitative for this brand to use our likeness for the purposes of selling, it also fails to represent us pluralistically, which further cements that its true purpose is not to promote and support inclusivity.

Roles refer to whether those depicted are involved in an action or not. The women featured in this ad are deliberately posed and no movement or action is indicated based on their body positioning. Their bodies are posed in seemingly relaxed positions, communicating casualness. They also communicate what is known as the “feminine touch” in gendered advertisements, which is a form of ritualistic touching (signified by the hands, face or self-touching) that conveys a sense of being “a delicate and precious thing” (Goffman, 1979, p. 31). Their positioning behind and next to each other are representative of “participations of shield,” which communicates overlays of distance and depicts the women as being “on the edge of the [social] situation or otherwise shielded from it physically, when in fact one is quite accessible to those in it” (Goffman, 1979, p. 70). More specifically, this positioning communicates a sense of allure.

Regarding the positioning of the women in relation to one another, it is important to note that despite their closeness and equal visibility of their faces, the White woman with tattoos is the centered and most visible person in the ad. Her tattoos, shaved head,
and centered position signify her as being the most prominent among them. Her tattoos, through their novelty, especially draw the viewer’s attention to her as the focal point. It is also interesting to note the decision to place the woman with the deepest skin tone directly to the right of her. While they both share closely cropped hairstyles, showcase similar facial expressions and their bodies are equally visible, the Black woman is depicted as the antithesis of the woman occupying the center position. She has the deepest skin tone and darkest article of clothing while the White woman has the palest skin tone and lightest article of clothing. The argument can be made that they are similar more than they are different in their depictions, but when the focus of the ad is on skin tone, greater significance is given to the "colors" depicted in this image, and a stark, intentional contrast is observed via their placement next to one another. This is further communicated by them sitting with their backs against each other. They represent the exclusionary and extreme Black/White dichotomy found in dominant culture (Valdivia, 1995).

I argue too that the backgrounded Black women positioned next to each other represent another pairing, and that this is communicated by their similar skin tones but contrasting hairstyles. A third pairing of the two women located on the outermost left and right of the image is also observable. The racially ambiguous, but perhaps Asian or Indigenous, but perhaps not, woman on the outermost left has a similar facial expression to the other women and has a visible tattoo as well, but her body positioning is very different as she appears to be laying down. The white woman on the outermost right is, again, positioned at the highest level of the image while the other woman is
positioned at the lowest. These two women represent normalized depictions of beauty in dominant culture.

Also, while it may appear that the women are depicted specifically, they are in fact depicted as generic social types. van Leeuwen (2008, p. 143) argues that when people are photographed as desirable models of current styles of beauty and attractiveness, their individuality can seem to disappear behind what categorizes them—behind the hairdo, the makeup [emphasis added], the dress, the status accessories.” In the ad, the uniqueness of the individual is lost to the selling of makeup and emphasis given to their beat faces while individual identities are disregarded in an attempt to project inclusivity. This emphasis is communicated by the decision to feature the women in similar articles of clothing and with subtle variety in their makeup applications (i.e., the cerulean eyeshadow and fuchsia lip stain on two of the Black models).

van Leeuwen also argues that physiognomic stereotypes can be created when people are depicted in groups rather than as individuals (van Leeuwen, 2008). This is especially true when, like the women in the ad, the people are posed similarly or performing similar actions. The posing of the women thus communicates that “they’re all the same” and contributes to the generalization of each person not as an individual, but, again, as a social type (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 96). This communication of sameness is problematic because, ironically, the brand is attempting to promote its inclusivity of various skin tones. However, it is not an accurate representation of each woman’s social position in American society. While equality remains an ideal, the reality is that the oppression of women of color is complex, persistent and manifests quite
differently (i.e., wage gap: Barroseo, 2018; maternal mortality rates: Roeder, 2019). The caption also contributes to their typification. From the caption, the viewer receives no indication of who these women are. Their names are not provided and they are not tagged in the post. With phrases such as “Flawless skin your way” and “we’ve got what you need,” Urban Decay instead uses their likeness to promote their foundation product and service while the women serve as accessories themselves.

**Categorization** refers to whether the people are categorized according to cultural characteristics, biological characteristics or some combination of the two. Cultural categorization manifests via connotation and refers to “[standard] attributes commonly used to categorize these groups: items of dress or hairdo, for instance...” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 144). Regarding their connotative meaning, cultural categories “connote the negative or positive values and associations attached to a particular sociocultural group by the sociocultural group for which the representation is in the first place produced” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 144). While mere presence of cultural characteristics is enough, biological categorization refers to “standardized exaggerations of physical features to connote the negative or positive associations which the represented sociocultural group evokes for the sociocultural group for which the representation is primarily produced” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 145). While cultural characteristics are considered “changeable,” biological characteristics are considered inherent to the group being represented. In this ad biological categorization is signified by the skin of the unambiguously Black and white women sitting with their backs against each other as they, again, represent the Black/White dichotomy found in dominant culture. Cultural categorization is signified through the cultural attributes of the Black
women. These are communicated via their various hairstyles: dreads (urban hipster), large afro (rebel) and short-cropped afro (chic). While dreads and afros are politicized hairstyles in American society, they lose their politicization in this context and are instead presented as fashionable hairstyles irrespective of their socio-political history.

2.3 DISCUSSION

As stated in the basic tenets of CDA, discourse is historical. My analysis does not speak to a singular instance of one brand’s decision but an ongoing tradition of representing women of color in advertising. For example, media and communications scholar, Sarah Banet-Weiser, engages the postracial and postfeminist discourse found in Mattel’s 2003 campaign for a doll line, Flavas (2007). She observed the ad’s use of young girls, of various races, playing with dolls characterized by “ambiguous ethnic identities—with ‘neutral’ skin color and vague facial features” (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 201). She described the dolls as distinctly urban due to their clothing and their being packaged in boxes that replicated graffiti walls (Fig. 16).

Figure 16. Mattel Flavas Dolls.
Banet-Weiser is critical of the brand’s decision to include racial signifiers of Black and Latino culture, such as hip-hop and street clothing style, without addressing the racial identities of the dolls. She argues that “race in this context is just a flava, a street style, an individual characteristic, and a commercial product” (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 202). Likewise, “gender identity is constructed in the present ‘postfeminist’ cultural economy as a ‘flava,’ a flexible, celebratory identity category that is presented in all its various manifestations as a kind of product one can buy or try on” (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 202). Mattel was not the first brand to use this strategy. Their Flavas line was created to compete directly with popular Bratz fashion dolls. Latina/o and media studies scholar, Angharad N. Valdivia, describes Bratz as “the poster girls of postfeminism with subtle racial hybridity thrown in for good measure. Like their television and movie sisters [and in this case, advertising sisters] they are independent and have attitude or, rather, brattitude” (Valdivia, 2009, p. 83).

In the above examples, race and gender, like in the Urban Decay ad, are defined by ambiguity (Banet-Weiser, 2007), or what Joseph (2018) has termed, strategic ambiguity. Women of color are represented as accessories to the brand in its mission to be perceived as socially conscious, and as tools to gain favorability from the target audience. They, namely the dark-skinned Black woman, are also represented clearly as “other” via placement in relation to the centered White woman. Postracial and postfeminist discourse is strategically incorporated in an attempt to erase, by ignoring, the politicized racial and gender identities of the women in this ad. Here, discourse does the ideological work of neoliberal multiculturalism by promoting self-interest (in regards to the viewer) and by simulating racial equality and harmony. These instances in which
real demands for change (i.e., inclusivity) and agitations against oppression (i.e.,
feminist praxis) are incorporated into advertising discourse are hereby termed co-
optations of consciousness. Here, calls for empowerment, inclusion and the valuing of
human life are integrated for the sell. This interpretive and explanatory analysis
contributes to the growing understanding of neoliberal multiculturalism as oppressive.
Unpacking the dominant discourse communicated in this ad helps to make it less subtle
and more detrimentally apparent.
CHAPTER 3: INTERVIEWS

3.1 INTERVIEW AS METHOD

Many studies explore “consumer” responses to ads, but are mostly quantitative in nature (Appiah, 2001) and only, again, examine race/ethnicity (Appiah, 2001; Green, 1999) or gender (Orth & Holancova, 2004; Beetles, 2005) rather than both, intersectionally. Employing the interview as method provides the opportunity for me to understand the “lifeworld of the individual, [and] to see the content and pattern of daily experience. The long interview [also] gives us the opportunity to step into the mind of another person to see and experience the world as they do themselves” (McCracken, 1998, p. 9). More specifically, semi-structured interviews involve “a series of predetermined but open-ended questions” that, given its structure, will result in a collaborative effort between me and participants (Given, 2008). The flexibility in structure also allows for the interview to “unfold in a conversational [and informal] matter offering participants the chance to explore the issues they feel important” (Longhurst, 2016, p. 143). Although the discussion guide will be followed for the purposes of answering my research questions, follow-up questions and digressions were influenced and directed by participants.

3.2 RECRUITMENT

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign or, more specifically, Caffé Bene served as the primary site for data collection between November 2018 and June 2019. Participants were recruited primarily through the Charles H. Sandage Department of
Advertising’s Advertising Research Participation System. Those who participated through the research system received extra credit for their participation. A few other participants were recruited through alternative tactics, including flyering at libraries, campus buildings and cultural houses (see Appendix A), as well as announcements during class and organization meetings to garner interest. All participants were eligible for the chance to receive one of two $25 Visa gift cards for their participation.

Inclusion criteria included the following: self-identify as woman, self-identify as Black, Latina, or/and Asian and self-identity as someone born or raised in the United States. The third criteria was included to account for the unique socialization and acculturation processes encountered by people who have lived in the United States for a substantial amount of time (Persell, 1990). To be eligible, those who signed up had to share all three of these identities. As the researcher, I am most interested in the experiences of Black women and decided to expand my interests to Latinas and Asian women to better understand experiences outside of my own as a Black woman. I am having conversations concerning representation and advertising within my social circles, which primarily include Black people. I was curious as to the ways in which the experiences of Latinas and Asian women are similar to those of mine and other Black women in this context as well as the points in which they diverge. I also approached this study with the desire to identify any opportunities for organizing around our differences and similarities as racialized women to build solidarity within and among our communities. Participants were screened for eligibility prior to interviewing via a “Study Preparation” email that also included the following: “Find ads or media images featuring women who share your racial identity. Choose the ad or image that you most identify
with or perceive to be the most authentic. Bring a copy with you to the interview (copy can be printed or displayed on your phone).”

3.3 SAMPLING & DESIGN

A total of 37 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Of which, all involved students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign: 11 self-identified as Black women, 11 self-identified as Latina and 15 self-identified as Asian women. Interviews from four of the Asian women were not included in the analysis because they self-identified as international students and were not born or raised in the U.S. The data collection period was extended from a three-month to eight-month period to account for the surprising trouble in recruiting Black and Latina participants. This roadblock can be explained by the demographic makeup of undergraduate students in the College of Media and Charles H. Sandage Department of Advertising. As of Spring 2019, out of 1,102 College of Media students, 386 self-identify as men and 716 self-identify as women; of this population, 91 self-identify as Asian, 82 as Black and 112 as Hispanic (Illinois Division of Management Information, 2019). Within the Advertising department, 207 self-identify as men and 445 self-identify as women; of this population, 60 self-identify as Asian, 35 as Black and 55 as Hispanic (Illinois Division of Management Information, 2019). Underrepresentation is not unique to this campus. Ashkenas et. al (2017) disclose that Black and Hispanic communities are more underrepresented at top universities than 35 years ago while white and Asian communities continue to be overrepresented.
Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. The interviews were audio recorded and photographs were taken of the image participants brought in, the result of two ranking activities and of the ads participants interpreted as authentic. This study was approved by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Institutional Review Board and covered by Protocol #19282. Prior to interviewing, participants were given an overview of the process, provided written informed consent to participate and provided verbal consent to be recorded. Indirect, numerical identifiers were used to track participants.

During interviewing, a discussion guide (Fig. 17), consisting of four introduction questions, eight questions related to the image they brought in, two ranking procedures involving sorting and identity exercises and three closing questions, was used to facilitate discussion. Follow-up questions varied based on participants' interpretation of the questions and exercises, and their experiences with advertising and digital media. Each participant engaged with ads featuring women with their same racial identity. All participants engaged with the aforementioned Urban Decay ad where multiple racial identities are represented.
Interview Discussion Guide

Objective: The purpose of this discussion is to interpret Black, Latinx, and Asian women’s perceptions of Instagram ads and to identify the ways in which their identities inform their perceptions and understanding of what is being communicated in the ads.

Methodology: 18 to 30 one-on-one depth interviews (6 to 10 involving Black women, 6 to 10 involving Latinx women, and 6 to 10 involving Asian women); approximately 1 hour each

Intro: Thank you for giving me this time. I am conducting this interview to better understand your perception of ads in which your identities are represented. Our discussion will be based on Instagram posts in particular. If you have any questions throughout the discussion, please do not hesitate to ask. Also, I hope that this facilitation will serve as a safe space for you to feel comfortable sharing your ideas and interpretations.

Introduction Questions:

1. What are some examples of ads that you encounter on a daily basis?

2. Describe the ways in which women are depicted in advertising.
   a. Can you think of an example of an ad that you felt was an appropriate representation of women?
   b. Can you think of an example of an ad that you felt was a problematic representation of women?

3. How about ads which feature women who share your racial identity?

4. How are other women of color depicted in advertising?

5. Can you think of an example of an ad featuring [Black/Latinx/Asian] women?
   a. [If misrepresentation or stereotyping is discussed] Elaborate specifically on how this makes you feel.
      i. What would you tell the advertising industry about advertising to women/women of color/[Black/Latinx/Asian] women?
   b. [If discovery or inclusion is positively discussed] Elaborate specifically on how this makes you feel.
      i. Are you more favorable to brands which showcase this type of diversity?

Ad Sorting Procedure:

1. [The participant will be presented with 9 ads] Rank the posts from most appealing to least appealing.

2. [Capture photo of rankings and ask the participant to share their ranking]
   a. What is [appealing/unappealing] about this post?
   b. What are some specific examples that helped you formed your opinion?
   c. What is being communicated through this post (i.e. its intended meaning)?

Figure 17. Interview Discussion Guide.
After the fifth interview, I rearranged the guide so that the participant-led exercise (involving the ad or media image brought in) was incorporated at the end of the Introduction Questions, replacing question 5, instead of towards the end of the interview. I made this change because several participants initiated conversation surrounding the ad or image they chose while discussing representation of women, women who share their racial identity and women of color. This change facilitated
greater engagement and enabled participants to steer the conversation towards representations they identified or disassociated with.

An identity questionnaire (Appendix B) was distributed to each participant at the conclusion of the interview to understand further how they self-identify in regards to race, gender, sexuality, ability and class. A non-statistical post hoc engagement with the questionnaires allowed for greater discernment of participant identity and its potential effect on participant feedback and interpretation. All identifying information for participants has been removed and replaced by numbers. The original aim was to create fictitious pseudonyms which share the same racial or cultural origin as the participant, but after researching the consequences of misnaming and its implications of power (Lahman et. al, 2015), I changed direction. In future research, I will ask participants to choose between consenting to their name being used or providing a pseudonym that they would like to be identified as to further empower them.

3.4 ADVERTISEMENTS

A total of 25 ads were utilized. Each was a branded Instagram post from a variety of industries, including: grocery retail (Walmart, Kroger), fashion (Gucci, Michael Kors), social media (Instagram, YouTube) and cosmetic (Sephora, Urban Decay). Brand selection was influenced by queries into popular brands among participant age and gender demographics (college-aged women) (Lutz & Taylor, 2018; Matousek & Hanbury, 2018). I began with an exhaustive list of brands and industries, including Chipotle and McDonald’s (food), Victoria’s Secret and Forever 21 (apparel) and Nike and Adidas (athletic apparel). I decided to include different industries in the interest of
variety, and two brands within each industry realizing that there could pre-existing beliefs toward certain brands.

It is important to acknowledge that among the different industries are a variety of strategy approaches when it comes to advertising. For example, the communicative aim of a high fashion brand may be to reinforce brand loyalty and awareness, and sell luxury goods, while a social media brand may advertise for the purposes of increasing total users and furthering engagement with the platform. The type of industry can affect the channels a brand chooses, their messaging strategies and targeted audience much in the same way that certain brands (i.e., legacy vs. newcomer) approach advertising. For example, depending on the product, a grocery retail brand like H-E-B is more likely to target a generalized audience with generally applicable messaging versus a cosmetic brand like Fenty Beauty, which is more likely to target younger, female-identifying people with messaging that speaks to this demographic.

I was able to narrow the list down by only including brands which had posts of all three identities (Black woman, Latina and Asian woman). To determine whether a Black, Latina or Asian woman was represented in the ad, I used a similar approach to Harrison et. al (2017) by giving a dominant reading of the image. More specifically, I utilized dominant markers of racial representation, such as skin color, nose structure, lip form, hair color, and hair texture [to] identify individuals who would most likely be viewed as [a Black, Latina or Asian woman] through a dominant reading of their phenotypic traits. (Harrison et. al, 2017, p. 507; Storrs, 1999)

As the authors articulate, “because physical bodies are a collection of cultural and sociopsychological meanings, physical characteristics are inescapable signifiers utilized
for the designation of social group memberships, such as racial categorization” (Harrison et. al, 2007, p. 507; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2008). For greater accuracy, in the ads where the women are identified (19 out of 25), I explored their Instagram profiles to confirm their racial identity.

While I consider these posts to be advertisements (Fig. 18), I looked forward to understanding how participants define advertising within this medium.

![Ad Stimuli](image_url)

Figure 18. Ad Stimuli.
Figure 18 (cont.)
3.5 PARTICIPANT IDENTITIES

The following identities were captured during the interviews and from the post-interview identity questionnaires. Participants are categorized by race.

Table 1. Black Women Participant Identities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Participant Chosen Identity Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Puerto Rican, Middle class, Heterosexual, Sophomore, Social Work major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Black and White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Upper middle class, Living with a mental health condition, Heterosexual, Senior, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Lower-middle class, Heterosexual, Freshmen, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Middle class, Heterosexual, Senior, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Participant Chosen Identity Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Middle class, Heterosexual, Junior, Major unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Black and White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Haitian, Middle class, Heterosexual, Senior, Journalism major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Middle class, Heterosexual, Sophomore, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Middle class, Heterosexual, Freshmen, Psychology major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Lower-middle class, Living with a mental health condition, Bisexual, Graduate, Gender &amp; Women’s Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Middle class, Living with a learning disability and mental health condition, Heterosexual, Senior, Psychology &amp; African-American Studies major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Middle class, Bisexual, Graduate, Psychology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Interview and post-interview identity questionnaire

Table 2. Latina Participant Identities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Participant Chosen Identity Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Latina and Euro American</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Mexican and German, Middle class, Heterosexual, Freshmen, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Latina and Euro American Woman</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Mexican- and Italian-American, Middle class, Heterosexual, Senior, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Latina Woman</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Mexican, Lower-middle class, Heterosexual, Junior, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Latina and South Asian Woman</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Spanish and Indian, Upper-middle class, Living with a mental health condition, Heterosexual, Junior, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Latina Woman</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Mexican, Middle class, Heterosexual, Junior, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Latina Woman</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Mexican/Puerto Rican, Middle class, Heterosexual, Junior, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Latina Woman</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Mexican, Middle class, Heterosexual, Junior, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Latina and White Woman</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Mexican, Lower-middle class, Heterosexual, Sophomore, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Latina Woman</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Mexican-American, Lower-middle class, Heterosexual, Senior, Global Studies major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Latina Woman</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Mexican, Puerto Rican, Ecuadorian, Guatemalan, Middle class, Heterosexual, Freshmen, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Participant Chosen Identity Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Latina Woman</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mexican, Middle class, Heterosexual, Graduate, Media Studies, Latina/o Studies, and Girlhood Studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Interview and post-interview identity questionnaire

Table 3. Asian Women Participant Identities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Participant Chosen Identity Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>East Asian</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Chinese, Middle class, Heterosexual, Freshmen, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Indian, High class, Heterosexual, Senior, Finance major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Southeast Asian</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Filipino, Upper-middle class, Heterosexual, Sophomore, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Pakistani, Lower-middle class, Heterosexual, Junior, Business major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>East Asian</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Chinese, Middle class, Heterosexual, Senior, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>East Asian</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Chinese, Middle class, Heterosexual, Sophomore, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>East Asian</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Cambodian-American, Middle class, Heterosexual, Senior, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Racial and Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race and Ethnicity Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>South Asian and White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Indian and Italian, Middle class, Heterosexual, Senior, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Indian, Middle class, Heterosexual, Senior, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>East Asian</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Filipino-American, Middle class, Heterosexual, Junior, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>East Asian</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Vietnamese, Middle class, Heterosexual, Senior, Advertising major</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Interview and post-interview identity questionnaire

3.6 ANALYSIS

My approach was to group and analyze the interviews by racial category. I did so because although each participant is a woman of color, the issues each woman faces as Black, Latina or/and Asian are complex and different. I do not intend to conflate the racial identities of these women into the one-size-fits-all people/women of color bucket. We learn from author and editorial assistant, Rachelle Hampton, that the term “people of color” is often used to erase or misidentify one’s racial identity and as a buzzword for “performative fauxgressive politeness” (Hampton, 2019). For example, she writes, “using *people of color* when discussing the history of chattel slavery or police brutality flattens the specificities of anti-Black racism in America” (Hampton, 2019).

To analyze each collection of interviews, I began by transcribing them. Next, I organized each of their responses by discussion guide question and highlighted
interesting and insightful quotes along the way. I also organized the ads or media images they brought in. For the ranking exercises, I listed each woman’s ranking and counted which brands were selected in their Top 3 and Bottom 3 (Fig. 19). I also counted which ads were perceived as authentic and which were perceived to be ads (versus a regular Instagram post). To code, I highlighted the positive, negative and neutral responses provided by participants. I also highlighted instances in which participants spoke of change (whether happening or needed). To visualize what was being said and enhance my understanding, I organized responses via a sticky notes exercise.

**Figure 19. Ranking Analysis Example.**
My process allowed for great familiarity with the data, which was a priority of mine as I sought to empower participants’ voices by truly understanding and presenting what was relayed to me. Within each racial category I provide a natural presentation of the findings in which the data is presented in “a sequential order or in an order that represents the flow of the session itself” (Chenail, 1995, p. 7). The voices of the participants take center stage throughout as I provide a descriptive and emic perspective on how they see themselves, and other women of color, represented in advertising today.

3.6.1 Black Women

Who I Spoke With

While each woman self-identifies as Black, two identify as biracial (Black and White) and, of these two, one woman also identifies as Haitian. Another participant also identifies as Puerto Rican. Two of the women identify as bisexual. Within this group, the greatest variety of study disciplines are represented with four advertising majors, one social work major, one journalism major, one psychology major, one woman who double majors in psychology and African-American studies and two graduating seniors who study gender and women’s studies and psychology. The majority identify as middle class, one woman identifies as upper-middle class and two as lower-middle class. Lastly, two women identify as living with a mental health condition and one of them also has a learning disability.

Thoughts on Representation
Regarding the ways in which women are depicted in advertising today, positive attitudes include the belief that more positive representations are being utilized, such as the inclusion of “heavier models (22)” and “women in charge (23).” One woman felt that there has been greater variety in these representations as well:

“I think there’s a lot more ads featuring women in different ways. I’m in an advertising history class. You see ads from back in the day, it’s more so ads featuring women being submissive to men in terms of being domesticated. And then nowadays [it’s] more so women in active, you know, women may be in the workplace, [we’re] doing everything and anything. There’s also some, I guess, maybe sexualized depictions too, obviously, but I think there’s more positive representation than there’s been in the past...now that there’s more of an awareness for women’s rights, feminism and things like that. So now a lot of companies are trying to, you know, be on the right side of history I guess.” (31)

She and others believed that the positive change that has occurred is due to pressure from marginalized communities and greater awareness of social justice issues, which, again, has encouraged companies to be on the “right side of history (31).” There was greater shared understanding, however, of an awareness of narrow depictions and the promotion of unattainable ideals. Women are seen as still being depicted as moms and as objects, namely “tool[s] to sell products (37).”

“When I do watch commercials at home I always see commercials with women being moms, right? So driving the kids to soccer practice...it's either they're kind of shown for their sex appeal and their beauty, or the societal standard of beauty, or they're shown as a single mom and somebody who's caring for others.” (16)
“I feel like we’re being depicted either as mothers or as sexual beings. There is no in between. If you see like a match.com ad for single women. I never see Black women in those types of ads. It's always white women. I don't even actually, since we’re talking about people of color, I don't even see any people of color on those types of things. So it’s like Black women don't want to date.” (35)

Regarding the prevalence of unattainable, or unrealistic, ideals:

“So I do kind of feel like, I don't know, like especially for foundations and things like that. It's kind of weird ‘cause like I feel like a lot of times they choose perfect women...You’re having the perfect woman portray the average woman, which isn't always valuable, you know what I mean? Especially 'cause sometimes you can’t even imagine how the product would look on yourself. And it’s not even [just] skin tones it’s also the body types.” (22)

“I feel like everyone is expected to be perfect. Especially with Instagram models and things like that. They look perfect and they’re always working out and posting pictures of them[elves] in a gym. And that's probably not the case how they lay out their body like that. And I feel like girls are expected to look like that...now everyone wants a big butt, but a really small waist.” (33)

Two women question the intention of brands in their representation of women:

“I feel like women are being presented the same way as they always have, but now companies are just clickbait-y. Like queer baiting or Black baiting or just
Black woman baiting. [Of] course you’re supposed to say you know how I feel, but...I see what you’re doing.” (36)

“Even ones that attempt to be very wholesome or very, ‘buy this water bottle,’ you know, there’s an obvious goal here for me to buy something. And so this woman, whether she’s supposed to appeal to my emotion or whatever, you know, I’m just going to be like, she’s just here to sell me products.” (37)

**How about the ways in which Black women are represented in ads?** The majority of participants believed that we are represented negatively overall, but several women expressed positive or, at least, optimistic attitudes. According to them, Black women are being represented more and in a greater variety of roles outside of, say, “housekeeping (24).”

“I've been seeing a lot of mothers and little Black girls. And what makes me ecstatic is I've been seeing Black families on commercials and it makes me so happy because these Black families are dark-skinned...and then the women and the little girls have natural hair...And then I also have been noticing..the Black women who are coming out with brands, like Fenty, using Black women to promote their brands. That is everything.” (35)

One woman felt as though positive change has come about because of, again, pressure from the community.

“I think that has gotten better too ‘cause they've been getting so much backlash from when they don't try to do anything...Social media has made people's voices more powerful.” (23)
This pressure, however, isn’t being felt, or expressed, industry-wide.

“It seems like the bigger brands are trying to be more diverse, but I still feel like there’s still a lot of negative representations of Black women in media and that’s mostly due to just certain ideologies.” (31)

The majority of attitudes were negative and included shared understanding of Black women as being “hard to [find] (16)” and represented through limited depictions characterized by hypersexualization, colorism and tokenized portrayals.

“Black women are not seen a lot in ads, but it’s more like [for] music videos. But it’s showing half our bodies and stuff like that...I just think it should be more Black women as empowering, which it probably is, but we’re just not seeing much of it, especially on TV and stuff.” (11)

“If I see curly hair, it’s the perfect texture. All the textures are not represented in the media, like 4C. It’s not really, I guess, preferred or anything like that. And then, or if I see Black hair on the TV or in the movies it’s always straight and I’m like, that’s not realistic.” (33)

Regarding tokenized portrayals:

“I mean it’ll be like 12 lighter-shade women and then you have one just with a darker tone. Sometimes I feel like advertisers are only doing it because they know if they don’t do it then they’ll get backlash. So sometimes it just feels like the woman is sticking out instead of more a part of it. It’s almost as if the role wasn’t intended for her, but they’re like, ‘oh yeah, we have to throw a Black woman in.’” (22)
Regarding depictions that are most visible, Black women are seen as being cast as strong, as objects and/or as a monolithic community.

“We’re always depicted as strong. And we are strong, but it’s taken a different way in the media. Like an angry Black woman or something like that. Just like having our power being taken the wrong way.” (33)

“We’re definitely more represented than we were before. It’s an overrepresentation in a way because it’s a monolith that we’re presented as. Like all you see is Beyoncé…all of us aren't Beyoncé…we’re being presented like a trend.” (36)

I was curious to know how the women I interviewed perceived representations of other women of color. While two women believed that Latinas and Asian women are being represented the same as Black women or represented more, there was greater shared understanding of their underrepresentation in the “white man’s world” (16), especially that of Asian women.

“I don’t see any Asian people at all. I rarely see Latinas and I feel like I can't tell, sometimes, if this is a white person or Latina because sometimes they kind of look the same. So I don't know if they are Latina or if they aren't. But either way I don't really see their culture being expressed.” (24)

“With Black Panther coming, the Get Outs and This Is Us...nowadays you see a lot more representation of Black people in a positive way on screen. And a lot of
other races are saying that they’re not being seen themselves in that way too. So there’s a lot of split like that.” (31)

Those who did not consider other women of color to be underrepresented did acknowledge that other women of color are presented in opposition to, or as a divergence from, Black women.

“I feel like other women of color, like with Latinas and Asians are maybe depicted more and I feel like when they’re in the ad it’s kind of like they’re supposed to be there, especially ‘cause a lot of times they will have the lighter skin tones...It’s like the equivalent of throwing in a mixed Black girl into the ad. They’re focusing on one shade range of that culture, you know?” (22)

“The Black woman is being presented as this majestic being, this queen above all, and everybody kind of isn’t. But it’s also in a way that’s highly satirical. The idea of a Black woman is this and the idea of all these other women is something else...it seems like other women of color are being presented in comparison to a Black woman...and their comparison isn’t even talking to Black women, it’s the idea of a Black woman.” (36)

One woman expressed uncertainty due to her lack of exposure to other women of color in ads:

“The same way as Black women, but also I want to be realistic and say, like, I’m not very cognizant of other women of color and I’m not sure if it’s because they’re just not there as often as Black women or because that experience isn’t as central to my life...non-existent would be a good descriptor.” (37)
Seeing Themselves

Each woman brought an ad or media image of a woman, with their same racial identity, who they identified with or perceived to be authentic. This exercise helped to facilitate openness in our conversations and drove engagement. This is how they see themselves through mediated representations of actresses, models, social media influencers and public figures.

(11) “So I had picked her because I just love her. She just seems so down to earth and humbling, and she just shows how like you’re a woman and you’re Black and you just stand up and let your voice be heard...As women period [we] get torn down a lot, especially by

(16) “I remember I’ve never seen a girl who’s...her mom in the commercial is white and her dad is Black...I feel like there are so many examples of Black women dating white men in media and them being portrayed as that...I just don’t feel like it’s authentic at all and it’s not speaking to my

(22) “So I feel like I’ve started to move towards brands who truly represent me and my skin tone and I feel like I’m not just thrown in there...Like Fenty beauty when it first came out...[So] brands that’s like their true identity. Something like Maybelline, it was
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(23)</th>
<th>(24)</th>
<th>(29)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“It kind of popped up quick”</td>
<td>“I chose Yvonne Orji just”</td>
<td>“This campaign is the Aerie”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

men...So I like how she had that strong empowerment like even though I'm a woman, I still have my voice and I can stand up and talk for myself; just as much as a man does.”
lived experience or anyone's lived experience...identifying as Black and identifying as both. It's just sometimes still not accepted and I feel like I don't have a place anywhere. And so that [ad] was just kind of really powerful.”
originally targeted towards white women and they had to kind of change their brand to adapt to women of color asking for products. I don't want to buy a product that somebody had to adapt for me. I prefer to buy it because it's made for me.”
because, you know, Fenty has all the shades... I thought it was good to relate to that... and I'm dark-skinned too, so when other makeup brands try to put Black people shades... it doesn't really go all the way down to where I can wear it comfortably... Usually when they have Black people they get the really light-skinned one and the really dark-skinned one. It's not really like a brown-skinned person.”

because I really like her. She mixes comedy with faith, which I kind of like and why I subscribe...[she’s] very authentic.”

“And the other lady just because I really identify with this photo, you know? Like her outfit, her makeup and everything. And plus I really like her as an actress... she’s kind of classy. If I had an alter ego, it would probably be her.

‘They’re Real,’ so when they basically came forward and they’re like, ‘we’re not going to retouch bodies and we’re gonna start using actual models and have their features just be whatever their features are,’ more authentic. I thought that was really cool. And, I mean, I kind of identify with Yara a little bit only because I feel like she’s such a good role model for younger people even though she’s still young herself. There’s so much positivity about her.”

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"I liked [it] because it showed different women, different powerful women at different points in time too. And then with different backgrounds...a lot of the posts that I was going to show were from when [Serena] left tennis to have her baby and then came back and then that match and how, basically, the ref didn't do the right thing. And it said that she was being overemotional...So I was thinking it was important that they featured her...I think it was "To be honest, I didn't know that much about Issa before Insecure. So now I fell in love with her and everyone's like the 'Mona Issa' now and it was so cool that it's being represented...love that she had braids too because on the covers of magazines, like I said, everyone has straight hair, but she has a protective style...And I feel like through the show, I don't know, I feel like that's who she is too. [She represents] strength. She knows what she "She is Latino, but she has the same skin color as me and she is one of the only people that I ever found on YouTube with the same skin tone. I always have to buy two foundations, two concealers because there's never a shade that matches my skin tone perfectly...She's rich and has over a million subscribers, [but] how can I afford to buy two of the foundations?...it's hard to find affordable products for people like me...you would
something necessary for people to see...It kind of resonated with me just because I understood that struggle, you know what I mean? Acceptance and respect.”

wants, the definition of a boss and just not letting anyone run over her...she’s so humble...and the comedic relief that she has. Not everything is so serious and has to be taken so seriously. ”

think that there would be more people out there to relate to on an individual level, but there’s not. And it gets even slimmer when you’re talking about Black women.”

| (36) | “I have one friend that’s a model and another acquaintance that’s a model...I think that their pictures are very authentic in the way that they represent Blackness. One of them, she’s light-skinned and I’m not even sure if she’s all the way Black, but she has a lot of freckles and… |
| (37) | “So identify with is a hard one for me because there's nobody...when I think about my identity, I don’t separate out. And so I'm a woman. I'm a Black woman. I am bigger, plus size, whatever you want to call it...I don't see that in media…[but] before you even |
that's one of the things that has kind of been a trend as well, which is kind of crazy. But the way her pictures are, they're very her and they don't look like oh, this is just a freckle trend...Then my other friend, she's a dark-skin girl and she's tall and lanky, and she's awkward. If you know her, you could see...she's very authentic in just the way that she presents herself...She is authentically a Black woman.”

finished your question, the first person I think of is the Louisiana Popeye’s woman...I feel bad how much my mom hates her because she’s just a fake character and my thing is, I can’t tell if she’s authentic, but if she is or isn’t, it’s fucking offensive...But authentic, I can’t think of anybody honestly...And I think I defend them too because my mom’s middle class...like why does she have to talk a certain way?”

The majority of women found it relatively easy to think of someone while one woman acknowledged that that person does not exist for her. These were women that they identified with because of their aesthetic (i.e., skin tone, hair) or the values they represented. One woman who found the process challenging had this to say:

“I had to go back and change the search to like ‘makeup ads featuring Black women.’ And then it was really stark differences. Either a really really darker-toned woman or a really really lighter-toned woman...She was literally the closest
I could find to my skin tone...I feel like they’re kind of forgetting that there’s a middle.” (22)

Those who were perceived as authentic had their authenticity attributed to their representation of Black womanhood and level of perceived sincerity. Most women feel that being favorable towards a brand that is representative of authentic Black women or includes women they identify with just depends on context (i.e., which brand it is). While participants saw themselves in these women, brands’ intentions were questioned.

“I mean, I also think that they’re using this campaign to their benefit. Like it is untouched, unaltered images, which is cool, but I think it’s also a little bit of a gimmick as well.” (29)

“Afterwards, reading all the stuff that came from other people and seeing this causes so much controversy [and] backlash from different communities. Um, then you start to kind of question like, okay wait, what is the purpose? Is this good? I don’t know. So I guess there are two sides to it, you know, ‘cause you want to see the good in it.” (16)

Evaluating Appeal

Each woman was presented with the following ads and asked to first rank them from most appealing to least appealing. Afterwards, I probed for the reasoning behind their order and for insight into what was being communicated through each Instagram post.
Considerations for whether a post was deemed appealing or not was influenced by perceived relatability or identification with the women featured, the image’s representation of Blackness and affinity towards the aesthetics of the image. Other considerations included personal interest (i.e., enjoying food) and existing attitudes towards the brand. Rankings were determined by either an approach of evaluating the image, brand and caption, image and caption only or just the image. The ads
considered “most appealing” were the Instagram post and YouTube post with Instagram receiving the ranking eight times and YouTube receiving it six times. Most appealing is defined as being ranked in someone’s Top 3. Instagram was ranked as the #1 appealing post three times and YouTube received a #1 ranking twice. The Instagram post features a photo taken of two young Black women (or girls) during Milan Fashion week. They were admired for their style and exudence of “joy (31)(35)(36).” They were also read as having a good time.

“I just think they’re just having a good time. It feels authentic even though, I mean, no. Yeah, just feels authentic. They just look like two girls just having fun.” (29)

“I love this picture. They look so joyful and they don’t care who’s watching. They’re being unapologetically themselves.” (35)

“These girls are just happy go lucky having fun in the streets of Milan. And I think that this is genuine. The thing I like most about Instagram, you know, I don’t know if this is just me thinking…, but I think Instagram is a really cool place to share genuine moments in life, so this seems really genuine. And these girls are, they’re women of color. It’s like, that’s cool to see, but they’re just dancing and having fun and they are glowing on the Gram.” (16)

One woman read their joy as a form of resistance to current stereotypes of Black women:
“A lot of misconceptions about Black women in particular is that they’re kind of angry and not friendly and [that] there’s this kind of competition that we have with each other. So these kind of ads kind of refute those kinds of claims and make it look like we’re just enjoying life...A lot of ads are depressing, it’s showing the struggle, and I like how it’s kind of just joy.”

The YouTube post was celebrated for being body positive in a media environment that underrepresents plus-size women, and for featuring a woman who was perceived as stylish, “confident (36)” and genuinely happy. The woman featured is @itsmekellieb, creator, writer and speaker who coined the #FatatFashionWeek hashtag.

“"I’m a plus-size woman and for a long time we were not represented in the media at all. So the fact that she's a Black plus-size woman with no hair and she's happy and she's going to New York Fashion Week. Like, yes sis, you made it...You can tell how happy she is in this picture. It takes a lot to be a plus-size woman on the internet.”” (35)

“This one also feels authentic. She looks very happy.” (29)

“I struggle with my own weight issues and my self-confidence in regards to that. And so the biggest thing I’m concerned with is that I can’t, I don’t know how to dress myself well because I feel like I’m overweight and that’s something that is not accepted. And so it’s nice to see people like me or similar to me [that] just look good and are having fun while doing it.” (16)
Ads ranked least appealing (in a participant’s Bottom 3) were Urban Decay and Walmart. Urban Decay received this ranking 10 times with nine #9 rankings and Walmart received this distinction a total of seven times. The Urban Decay post features an unknown model who was read as ambiguous, racially and by gender, and the type of image was considered typical of others ads.

“Urban Decay, suck my dick. I love makeup and I hated it just because I hate her make up so much. It’s so dark. It’s so boring. It’s so blah. And that irritates me because makeup companies, we see the shit when they give Black women the most basic ass looks, but also the companies not having foundation shade...And so using this very light-skinned woman in this one picture bothered the fuck out of me.” (37)

“I just don’t like her makeup. It’s very dark and doesn’t accentuate her at all...they didn’t really blend out her makeup. I don’t feel like this picture shows how beautiful she is.” (35)

“Just didn’t do anything for me. Just like every other ad I see. Like when you have one of those commercial like a beauty thing or, you know, a shampoo company. Reminded me of something like that...she doesn’t really look very unique to me. She kind of looks like a lot of the models that I’ve seen.” (31)

While its strong negative ranking was popularly attributed to the unappealing makeup application, as the researcher I also consider my role in affecting the ranking of this ad. After initially selecting and screenshotting the ads, my thesis advisor helped me
to realize the benefits in sharing and discussing the entire post and not just the brand +
visual. Doing so helped to provide further context to the image and it was interesting to
learn of the level of consideration given to the caption throughout the discussion.
However, I was unable to fully capture this ad because when I returned to the brand’s
page to retrieve the image, it had been deleted. *Gasps in stuff happens.* I chose to
continue with image as I believed in its potential for spurring conversation.

The Walmart post is perceived as uninteresting and considered typical in its
representation of Black women (i.e., not including a brown-skinned woman with natural
hair).

“Boring. It was two medium light-skinned women. Like curls, wigs, that’s a cute
wig. Like, okay cool we got Black people.” (37)

“It’s cute or whatever.” (35)

One woman is unamused by the continued use of attractive models and considers it to
be further evidence of the limited depictions of Black women:

“This one is interesting because these are both generally attractive women. Like they are Black, but they’re generally attractive. So that’s cool and all, but also I see you, right? I see what you’re doing there.” (36)

The Gucci ad was the most polarizing. It was considered most appealing five
times and least appealing four times. While one might initially conclude that this
polarizing effect can be attributed to the brand being within the high fashion category,
and the class implications, it in fact comes down to Gucci’s recent “Blackface” scandal.
In February the brand made available for sale an $890 Black turtleneck sweater with red
lips (Fig. 20) that was met with swift accusations of promoting Blackface imagery (Naim, 2019).

Figure 20. Gucci “Blackface” Sweater.

Members of the Black community responded with a social media-broadcasted cancelling and boycott of the brand. Those who were not fans of the ad cited the recent scandal and brand itself as the primary reason.

“And then the Gucci one I just put at the bottom because of the recent [scandal].”

(29)

“I feel like they look happy. At the same time it looks kind of like…the one girl looks happy, the other girl looks like she’s gonna say something. I think it’s just an interesting ad, but considering that we know they had a lot of controversy, well, maybe that’s why I kind of put it towards the end [just] because I know that maybe they don’t really have the right kind of idea of what should be represented and what shouldn’t be…Brands that you follow, that you like, that you buy are not
who they seem to be. That kind of sucks, but I mean the truth has to come out eventually.” (31)

“I don’t support big name fashion brands. I don’t feel that they support people of color.” (37)

Participants who liked the ad featuring freelance model @mynameiszinz and her aunt, Stephanie Cooke, admired the elements of Black culture represented in the ad, including the Bantu knot hairstyle.

“I aspire to be like this one and I like their style.” (11)

“I like this picture. I love their outfits...See this is what confuses me because they have so much culture in these two women alone. She’s wearing Bantu knots, she’s dark-skinned, she looks happy. There’s so much Black culture in this picture.” (35)

While one woman applauded the brand for its depiction of Black women:

“I really appreciate this Gucci one because it’s different. Like it’s different and I love when Black girls are able to be different in public, out loud.” (36)

Another questioned the brand’s intention:

“I like how they portrayed a woman who embraced her natural hair although I kind of feel like they kind of went out of their way to find a woman like that if that makes sense.” (22)

Regarding the other ads, Michael Kors (5 most appealing vs 3 least appealing)
and Urban Decay 2 (4 most appealing vs 3 least appealing) are considered somewhat polarizing. Participants who favored the Michael Kors ad applauded the inclusion of a woman with a deeper skin tone who “embraced her natural hair (22).” Her inclusion was seen as a resistance to the ideal Black woman aesthetic (i.e., light skin, curly hair texture) that is popular in mediated representations of us. Participants also liked the overall aesthetic of the image, which was described as a cool 70s vibe. Those who considered the ad to be least appealing perceived the woman as a typical model and as unrelatable. Those who found the Urban Decay 2 post appealing applauded its diversity appeal, especially the inclusion of multiple Black women and a variety of skin tones and hairstyles. Those who found it least appealing found it to be heavily edited, “clickbait-y (36)” and as “doing the most (33).”

Identifying “Me”

After the first sorting exercise, I asked each person to participate in a second sorting exercise by ranking the posts from the one they identified with the most to the one they identified with the least. Afterwards, I probed for the reasoning behind their order, and for insight into the perceived values of the women featured and perceived favorability towards the brand. The Instagram post was considered the most identifiable with nine women ranking it in their Top 3 (two as #1). The women (or girls) in this ad were considered relatable because participants could see themselves having a carefree, fun time as well. The image was perceived as being “real (37)” and the people were perceived as “normal (22).”

“This one, again, the joy. I really love how happy they are in this picture. And I like that she’s hyping her friend up and me, I’m the hyper. I would be like this.”
And I just feel like I identify with this because they’re just having fun [and] unapologetically themselves and I’m trying to learn how to be [like] that.” (35)

“Just everyday girls having fun is something I totally identify with. Not too girly. I don’t think that I’m girly at all.” (29)

“I love to dance and have fun and these girls seem like they are just living lives that are fun and full of joy and full of the relationships that matter, you know?” (16)

One woman perceived this type of photo as being different from the norm:

“I chose the candid picture because I feel....on Instagram I feel like everyone's so caught up on having the perfect picture.” (33)

The Urban Decay (nine times) and Urban Decay 2 (seven times) were considered least identifiable. There was shared dis-identification due to a lack of interest in the makeup and the brand itself, but, more prominently, because of its use of typical models and the brand’s representation of women of color.

“The Urban Decay ones they’re just not it for me...I don't really, I don't think that they're that inclusive to be honest, but they're selling it...Yeah, I know that from my experience working [at Sephora].” (29)

“I guess people would say I'm a conventionally attractive person, but that's not what I want to see. I don't see myself that way. So I want to see somebody that
might be a little bit ugly to a couple people, you know? Cause that’s how I feel sometimes.” (36)

One woman felt that they are not representative of real life:

“All the ones that I put at the end were very picture perfect. These photoshoot ones just because that’s not real life to me and those kinds of ads never really appealed to me…very photoshopped and picturesque.” (37)

Regarding the other posts, the Michael Kors and Sephora (5 most identifiable vs 3 least identifiable each) were somewhat polarizing. Participants identified with the woman in the Michael Kors ad because of her natural hair and perceived “fierceness (24).” On the other hand, it was considered least identifiable for her being unnaturally posed. Regarding the Sephora ad, one woman felt that despite the stereotype of mixed women being overrepresented, she identified with her as a biracial woman. On the opposite end, one woman felt as though the woman featured in this ad is representative of the type of women (attractive, light skin, curly hair) that “don’t exist in real life (37);” only on Instagram.

Negotiating Authenticity

The negotiation of authenticity emerged as an important theme during the course of this study. Black women perceived authentic representations as being candid, natural, non-posed and as depictions of everyday people. The Instagram (8) and YouTube (7) ads were considered authentic by the greatest number of participants (8 for Instagram and 7 for YouTube). One woman provides insight into her negotiation of what is authentic and what is not:
“These are like real pictures of these people. You can just tell the difference I guess. And yes. While this was posted by Instagram, [it] looks like this is just a fun photo. I feel like they’re candid in a way and did a really good job of faking it. Whereas these are different. This is very much a fashion photographer posed this woman and took a picture of her and they’re literally in a studio with a backdrop and being yelled at by a photographer.” (16)

Regarding the Instagram post:

“It’s not staged. It just happened to capture two women of color going about their daily lives.” (22)

“Authentic smiles...they’re actually having a good time.” (36)

Regarding the YouTube post:

“Just took a picture of someone walking down the street..this looks like an ordinary person. These [others], you know, look like models, obviously in a professional setting.” (31)

“Just looks like a woman who’s going to New York fashion Week...she’s not a model, she’s an average person.” (22)

While most participants considered these ads to be authentic, one woman failed to consider either of them as such because of the intent behind the photo:

“If any, really only this one. Everyone [else is] posing on purpose. But at the same time, no, not really any of them and it’s because I don’t know how authentic someone can be in front of a camera. Mm, I think people can be authentic in front
of a camera, I don’t want to say that, but it’s obvious that it was like, ‘pose for this.’...There’s an ulterior motive behind all these pictures.” (37)

Defining Advertising

The majority of Black women (8) read all of the posts as ads.

“I think they’re all ads because they’re all promoting something.” (23)

“If it features a product then it’s an ad, and ads try to promote a certain aesthetic and a certain type of message.” (31)

“They’re all selling me something. Whether I want to admit it or not...I use YouTube on the regular and I’m not like let me go to YouTube because of this picture, but I am like let me go to her page and that is her selling me something, i.e., her image...Like I don’t know. I don't know how comfortable I'd feel about that. Like just being an advertisement. I personally, I don't know.” (37)

The Instagram and YouTube posts, which were also perceived as authentic, were most likely to not be considered examples of advertisements:

“I just refuse to believe that that’s an ad....‘cause it’s posted by Instagram. It’s just an Instagram post with their @...I feel like these two don’t really have that much to gain besides like followers. Yeah that could probably get them some money, but I guess that’s what you get for being authentic.” (29)
“This one [YouTube] isn’t like...it screams everything opposite of an advertisement. I don’t..I wouldn’t..I mean it’s about New York Fashion Week, but I would’ve never guessed that just by looking at the post.” (16)

It was especially interesting to experience one woman’s understanding of the Sephora, Instagram and Michael Kors posts as newer and unconventional forms of advertising.

“I’d say the Sephora one [is] a newer type of ad I feel like you see a lot. There’s this just new wave of Instagram sponsorships, so when I look at that, that’s what I think. It’s not the traditional route, but as advertising switches and adapts to social media, I feel like we’re starting to see a lot of brands contacting influencers and have them use their products and advertise them. So it’s not traditional, but you can still see that it’s an ad.” (22)

“Yeah, it’s an ad, but I feel like it’s not in your face...Like with this one I wouldn't even know it's a Michael Kors ad if I didn't see it. I wouldn't have known this one was an ad for Instagram, I would've just thought it was a regular post. With this one [Gucci] it literally just looks like two, you know, richer women in richer outfits. You can't really tell they're ads, you know what I mean?” (22)

So, Now What?

I was curious as to what advice these women had for the industry regarding the representation of Black women, women of color and women in general. The following recommendations (and comments) are offered:

“I think that we need more body types that aren't just curvy. I know a lot of Black women that aren't super curvy, the way that we’re depicted often. And I think that
we need more...I say less colorism. I want to see all of the shades represented, all body types and like from the girliest of girly girls to the tomboy.” (29)

“Number one is probably employ more women of color just in general because that way...a lot of times it's hard because, you know, a lot of the people behind these companies are usually a certain background or male...they're looking more so at, I guess, economic aspects of the brand rather than the actual social backgrounds with brands and cultural aspects of it. Ultimately what every company wants to do is make money. The way they do that can sometimes be conventional and not the proper way to do so.” (31)

“Find the Black women or the women of color that are just chilling. The everyday woman because that's who you're advertising to. You're giving the ones that are coming to you, you're giving them stuff for free...[and] stop putting Black women on things just to try and get a new audience, you know, like give a fuck about us.” (36)

One woman addressed the need for systemic change:

“But that ladder just makes it impossible for women of color to move up. So there are a couple things. I know the 3% conference or something like that happens and...[there's] this new resource for minority students in advertising, but those are small pieces of it...Just kind of like how there are structures within education that disable people of color from moving forward, I think that in advertising the
issue is no different. And so kind of dismantling those systems that oppress people of color to allow them to step into these roles that let them be free.” (16)

Another refused to offer any recommendations at all:

“I don’t want to give recommendations because I don’t support this shit. I don’t want to teach you how to use Black bodies to support your bottom line and support capitalism...I’m good with it being terrible, maybe that’s fucked up.” (37)

3.6.2 Latinas

Who I Spoke With

While each woman self-identifies as Latina, various other racial and ethnic identities are represented as well. Everyone identifies as Mexican; four women identify as biracial or, more specifically, as Mexican and German, Mexican and Italian, Spanish and Indian and Mexican and White; one woman identifies as Mexican/Puerto Rican; and one woman identifies as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Ecuadorian and Guatemalan. All identify as heterosexual and all but two study advertising. One woman is a graduate student. While the majority identify as middle class, one woman identifies as upper-middle class and three as lower-middle class. Lastly, one woman identifies as living with a mental health condition.

Thoughts on Representation

Regarding the ways in which women are depicted in advertising today, positive responses include one belief that more positive representations were being utilized, such as the inclusion of plus-size women although these inclusions were also understood as being “token (17)” representations and, in reality, not inclusive of
“unusually shaped women (27)”. A few expressed indication of change happening in that representations are becoming more diverse, somewhat progressive and shifting towards more powerful imagery. However, these same women expressed an understanding of there still being more work to do.

“So I think it definitely is changing a little because people are starting to become aware that like that's not right. And that's not how a woman should be depicted, but it's still present today.” (5)

“I feel like we're trying to gear it towards more diverse, you know, perceptions of women. But still I see that we're very biased towards who we are showing on the ads...overall I think the industry is getting better, maybe...because I feel like there's always going to have that little kind of stereotype of what a woman should look like. I can be confident in myself, but I'm always gonna feel like I should be a little bit better. A little skinnier...We always have that little pressure on us.” (27)

Regarding the work that needs to be done, women are said to be most represented in typical industries, such as beauty, fashion, health and skincare, and depicted primarily as a perfected ideal, someone to aspire after.

“It's always beauty. It's always this image of kind of semi perfection, and it doesn't have to be physical, but I think in life it just seems like this woman has her life together and, [for] one, it's not like that. It's always a mess and everything...you want to put it out as a nice image obviously to get consumers and stuff like that. But then it's always this, it's not always fully accurate.” (7)
Furthermore, there were overwhelmingly negative attitudes towards the hypersexualization of women in ads today, which was understood as a traditional form of objectification that persists today.

“I think it's still, even though somewhat progressive, it's kind of still sticking to those tropes of women as sexual objects. Like she'll be the one getting cat called or something like that. I don't know, kind of the object of it... It's progressive because I think that's less likely.” (26)

What is especially interesting is one woman's understanding of how sex appeals are being used in ways that slightly differ from the past, but are as equally detrimental:

“So today, I mean, I think there are still so many of the same tropes and the same types of representations in terms of the oversexualization and like body parts, you know, the disembodiment...but I think now they're kind of veiled. So there are images that I think some people would categorize or talk about in a much more progressive way...And now there's much more of the types of images that seem to be empowering or that lead people to think that, you know, we don't really see as many of these tropes anymore. But...I think that for the most part we still continue to see those tropes. It's just that I think maybe they're veiled a little more.” (34)

How about the ways in which Latinas are represented in ads? Each woman shared an understanding of Latinas as being represented in ways that echo the narrow depictions (light or white-skinned, long, straight hair aesthetic) and traditional stereotypes (hypersexualized) that we have grown accustomed to with Sofia Vergara being consistently cited as the prototypical example.
“I think they generally go the sexy route, like the very curvy, long hair. Yeah, just very beautiful. But usually light-skinned Latinas that I've noticed. I'm from Mexico. My mom's pretty light-skinned, but my dad's pretty on the darker skin side, and so the ones that I see in media, and even media in Mexico too, it's still a lighter tone.” (30)

“There's still this whole like sexualization and you see tits everywhere and you see the ass and everything. That's what I saw a lot on google images [and] I was like, this is not helpful whatsoever...and I saw even more in terms of [the] stereotypes of the accent, so that's usually what I see now. I don't know if it has improved. I want to say it has just ‘cause society as a whole is slowly kind of improving. But sometimes it's just hard to visually see that, you know what I mean? I don't constantly see it. It's not something that I, you know, it's not something that is easy to access, I guess. It's just not as popular or something. Not trending as much.” (7)

In addition, Latinas are understood as being typically depicted as mothers and cooks, and within the fashion industry. More notably, depictions are understood as being reserved for celebrities or influencers. Mexican women are considered to be rarely represented and, when depicted, are either grouped under a Hispanic umbrella that is not exactly representative of Mexican culture, or through politically charged depictions which reflect current politics surrounding immigration.

“For me specifically, I'm Mexican, like Latina. I rarely..not often..it's more of a Caribbean considered Latina, like exotic...most of the time I see my type of
“Latina advertisement in politics because the whole presidency campaign and all that. That more negative type deal.” (28)

Yalitza Aparicio, however, was cited as one example of positive change and deviation from the norm:

“I feel like the majority of Latinas being depicted are those who are [a] little more white and not as ethnic. But one thing that I have been seeing lately is one of the Netflix stars, Yalitza. She's [a] more indigenous-looking Mexican woman and I've seen that she's actually been doing campaigns with Mexican companies trying to promote things, but I don't know. It's really interesting because a lot of Mexicans themselves were bashing her for being so famous and being on these ads because they're like, ‘oh, why is she up there?’ You know? ‘She’s so ugly.’

People are not used to seeing those representations of Mexican women.” (27)

This was one woman’s understanding of the Mexican community’s response to Yalitza and it is important to acknowledge that everyone else who discussed her understood her as being celebrated by the community. One woman, however, does provide us with a critical understanding of the patterns of thinking that can give rise to instances of backlash and of her being “blackballed” (26)” throughout Mexican media:

“It’s so deeply societally ingrained or sometimes it feels like there is no solution..I don’t look like Barbie and my entire life I was taught [what] is pretty is Barbie. She is just, she’s fair. She is blonde and she is dressed in trendy clothing...So yeah. Basically that is something that I’m just, I feel like there’s these expectations that are so deeply ingrained in society in the minds of people.” (17)
Other women of color are considered to be represented similarly through stereotypical or narrow depictions as racialized others. Blame is directed towards the lack of diversity within the industry and there continues to be a thread of understanding that Asian women are the least represented while Black women are seen as represented more.

“It is mostly white women in fashion and whatnot. But it’s not just American women. It's different other cultures that are more white skin tone...So I would say it's definitely minimal. It's just enough to make it seem diverse.” (28)

“I think companies are realizing how important it is now to be more inclusive. So they're starting to include more women of color. That's mainly with ads that want to do social good I think, like Dove or P&G. But in terms of how other women are depicted...I feel like sometimes they are depicted incorrectly...I think it just goes back to who works for them because if they don't have anybody working for them that has that experience or has that background, then it's very obvious.” (30)

“And that's what sucks is even you have this team, but this team that's working on this is not diverse to begin with. So it's kind of hard to really justify what's being done and I feel like I do see more ads pertaining to Latin or Black culture whereas Asian culture is not..I feel like it's not represented, that's like the very lowest percentage.” (7)

It was also interesting to uncover a thread of understanding that, for some, they do not encounter depictions of other women of color.
“I think it’s mostly the same. Mainly I don’t really see women of color in the ads on Instagram and stuff. I don’t see it and it’s something that I want to see more, but it’s just not represented for sure.” (30)

“Because I don’t see them it’s a little bit harder...Um, well like I said, I think it is trying to be more progressive. So I think there is more inclusion going on in who they’re kind of putting in ads. I think you see more, I don’t know, diversity instead of just, you know, the typical white families. But I don’t know, ‘cause you see too when brands try and...they make it so obvious that they were just putting in one child of each race and you’re like, ‘okay you’re trying way too hard.’” (26)

Seeing Themselves

Each woman brought an ad or media image of a woman, with their same racial identity, who they identified with or perceived to be authentic. Again, this exercise helped to facilitate openness in our conversations and drove engagement. This is how they see themselves through mediated representations of actresses, models, social media influencers and public figures.
“On social media there’s these two girls that, growing up, I always thought that I kind of look like. Now she’s older, so I don’t look like her as much, but...I think it was just features. Characteristics like brown hair, kinda hazel brown eyes, kind of the same eyebrows. Just features, like, I don’t know her personality, if she’s nice or not, but mostly features...just from all of her Instagram pictures she just seemed nice and sweet and she posted a picture of a philanthropy thing and I’m big on philanthropy and just supporting causes. That’s what I’m big on too and I had shared those ideals as well.”

“This is from Nike’s general Instagram...It kind of is just trying to be like empowerment to women, like, push yourselves, wear dri-fit clothing I guess. I’m also fit myself. I work out all the time and wear a lot of Nike products...When I work out my gym shoes are Nike...I considered her to be representative of myself...[from] 2016, yea I had to scroll because I couldn’t find anyone who looked like me from 2018 and 2017..I was like alright, trying to find a Hispanic woman who is within my age demographic as well. But again, you know, it’s the straight hair, the olive skin. That’s like all I could find.”

“I also found this girl, but I’m not [7]“It was hard to find one that I could resonate with ’cause a lot of them are sexualized you know what I mean?...within [this] they kind of beat down all those little minor walls and that’s something that I felt really fit well with how...it fits well with any type of woman in terms of, like, somebody whistling at you and you knock that down. Like all these little walls that are put up...I appreciate Nike in terms of how they did that in knocking down these stereotypes for women and Latinas in general because there’s very much...in the video you can see it too. There’s this kind of machismo, like the man kind of making fun of the females and stuff. So
entirely sure if she’s Hispanic or not she looks very mixed, but I am a mixed child.”
you see that they knocked that down, like legit too.”

### (17)

“A lot of times cooking and just being in the kitchen is viewed as this feminine thing, but it’s cool because it says: women will empower women, women will take credit for their win, women will be in more companies, women will be president, women will move forward because there’s no going back. So I thought that that was a really cool message to have,

### (25)

This woman identified with Gina Rodriguez and her story. She automatically thought of her when considering an image to bring to the study. She considers herself to be more favorable or “biased” towards brands which Gina endorses. For her, Gina represents empowerment and progression, and she is considered to be authentic. (quote unavailable)

### (26)

“I thought it was bold...That's just never something I see. When you look at the Mexican people, or even just Hispanic people in general besides Selena (RIP). But besides her you don't really see dark women. I come from, I'm Puerto Rican and Mexican, my Mexican family is relatively dark. So you don't really see that in even novelas. It’s pretty
especially in something where it's...this is for a podcast on cooking, which if this is a woman who's running this podcast who's really passionate about cooking, people are probably going to be very quick to put her in a box.”

dominantly light-skinned almost, they look white, Mexicans. So I thought that was really refreshing to see.”

| (27) | “Yeah, my Mexican culture is being represented, but at the same time, I feel kind of a little privileged, I guess you could say, because I am a white-looking Mexican woman...I'm very proud of [Yalitza] and |
| (28) | “She wasn't wearing the typical portrayed makeup for Latinas. Latinas always...are portrayed with heavy makeup and the big curly hair and the big gold earrings. And kind of the overdressed kind of look. And it |
| (30) | “I think she's just been very vocal about being Latina and I think there was one controversy of her not speaking Spanish or something, but even though she doesn't speak the |
everything she’s doing. I think it might be a little authentic, but the way that she was styled, you know like they try to make her seem like a businesswoman when in reality, she was a kindergarten teacher. So maybe if they had the kids in there, like in her classroom using her computer...And they’re basically trying to glow her up and show her to the Mexican consumers. And they’re basically trying to make her look like they try to make her know like they try to make a businesswoman...Seem like a Latina woman...I’ve never seen anything like that. She represents like the complete opposite of a stereotype of a Latina and...I’ve never seen anything like that. She was a citizen of the United States or out there doing stuff as she wants to.”

And I think that’s interesting because now we see a lot of people that are Latinx and they don’t know Spanish, and they don’t know Spanish. I think that roots back to their parents of them wanting to be more Americanized, but I think it’s just more relatable.”
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<td>“Well first it's a mother and her daughter and I'm always with my mom. And just family in general and she's also really young and my mom's young too, and so I think that's something, even though it's a stereotype, it is something that a lot of us grew up with…[Would you consider it to be authentic as well?] I don't know 'cause it's kind of about Christmas and celebrations and they're wearing green and red and have these cute little boxes. But that's not normally how my Hispanic Mexican traditions are. We don't dress up in green and red and stuff, and have a formal dinner. It's really different, it's not the same…I think it mostly represents family and being together during the holidays. I</td>
<td>“I identify with the way that she understands the world and a lot of her objectives and her goals...And I think not just in terms of representation, but also I guess when...thinking of something to work towards, right?...I think a lot of what she communicates is very, very much aligned with what I believe in in terms of social justice [and] calling out these systemic injustices and these inequalities. So that's why not just this image, but who she is as a person really resonates with me. And also in terms of, I guess her, her background. Not just because of the fact that she's Latina, but also that working class element that some people are using as a way</td>
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think that's really important at least in our communities. Like we value that, being close to one another.”

to ridicule her. But that I don't think should be used that way.

Though there were some challenges in finding an ad via online search, and queries resulted in either stereotypical and unrelatable depictions of Latinas, most of the women resorted to or automatically thought of a celebrity or influencer that they already knew. The women they saw themselves in were represented for the most part, through an empowered lens.

“I have different experiences where most people can't say my name, or English was not actually my first language. I'm just different, different like whatever, you know? And I'm also a woman. I'm plus-size as well. So it's like all of these interests, they all intersect and, for me, it's so important to see things in media that are encouraging because it's just not the norm. So on Instagram I follow a lot of different empowering accounts. There’s a lot of these like fiercely Latina or something like that. A lot of plus size, body positive accounts, things like that. It's really important for me.” (17)

This woman in particular also shared how she negotiates her biracial identity (Spanish European and Indian) with her self-identity as Latina. There was shared favorability towards brands which included representations of Latinas participants could identify with or perceived to be authentic:
“I feel like [at] this point in time a lot of brands do need to do what's right because that's the kind of climate we're in. We want people, I mean, we want our brands to show the values that we have ourselves...Because at this point in time, there's so many brands that you can support. It's just not one or the other. So why would I invest my money on a company that doesn't, you know, go towards my values or the values of other people?” (27)

Evaluating Appeal

As mentioned previously, each woman was presented with the following ads and asked to first rank them from most appealing to least appealing. Afterwards, I probed for the reasoning behind their order and for insight into what was being communicated through each Instagram post.

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Considerations for whether a post was deemed appealing or not included: perceived quality of the photo, personal interest (i.e., being a fan of makeup), representation of Latinx culture and the overall aesthetic. Again, rankings were determined by either an approach of evaluating the image, brand and caption, image and caption only or just the image. The posts considered most appealing (Top 3) were the Instagram and Urban Decay 2 posts with each post receiving this ranking six times. Instagram was ranked as the #1 appealing post twice and Urban Decay 2 received this ranking three times. The Instagram post features student Sailor Gonzalez (@conchitaqween) who self-identifies as a “Chicana Role Modelo.” Her aesthetic was considered to be a good representation of Latinx and, more specifically, Chicana/o culture, and she was applauded for her exudence of strength, cultural pride and for her fashion sense.

“*It seems more like my Latin base and it's just really nice and it just seems more authentic to the person itself and it doesn't seem like they tried so much into these pictures. It's their true selves in a way and their natural selves and just still showing their identity.*” (7)
“This one I liked too, and I just liked the overall image and just the caption: 'My culture is very present in my fashion.' I think that's really cool to see. I mean, as long as it's by the person whose culture they're representing. And it's a cool picture too.” (26)

One woman applauded her subversiveness:

“This person talking about her culture being present in her fashion. I think that that's really cool. And I'm trying to see, her necklace says ‘Chingona,’ which that's pretty cool. I think it's really cool when women or like specifically Latinx women do things like that. They take the word that's been used to oppress them and use it themselves and only they're allowed to use it...Chingona is kind of this, it's hard to describe...but it's just kind of to be...if somebody, if a man or if anybody who's not Latinx or Hispanic called me that I would be like....Now, if I call myself a Chingona I'm just like, ‘Yes, I'm here and I'm ready to do business no matter what people think that it makes me look a certain way.”' (17)

The Urban Decay 2 post was considered appealing for its demonstration of diversity; not just with skin tones, but also with the different hairstyles and makeup applications represented.

“It's actually this one that I like the most, mainly because a lot of people are included in this. Also the color schemes that are used are very natural. And I really like natural colors. It's like very simplistic and they aren't wearing too much makeup. And they aren't overdressed. It's just very simple.” (30)
"I just do like that there’s a lot of people represented and I don’t think that there’s anyone really being left out and that’s not something you see really.” (32)

One woman, however, did not buy into the brand’s diversity appeal:

“I feel like this kind of photoshoot has been done a lot of times where it’s women with all different types of colors and they’re all wearing nude so that they can show which skin tone they are. I don’t know, I just feel like it’s very played out and it doesn’t give me that authentic vibe. I’m not going to go towards this foundation because of this group of women being represented here. And I really don’t identify myself with any of the women that are in the post either.” (27)

Ads ranked least appealing (Bottom 3) were Michael Kors, Walmart and Kroger, but less than half of participants provided these rankings. Five women found the Michael Kors ad to be least appealing because of the brand, lack of interest in the image and its typical representation of a thin body type. Four women considered the Walmart ad least appealing, but aside from one woman’s criticism of the oversaturation of makeup posts, there were no strong opinions towards it. The Kroger post was considered least appealing by four women for it being representative of typical product promotion. It is also interesting to note that one woman read the woman in this ad as being a tokenized Asian woman.

What is more interesting to note is the polarized attitudes towards the YouTube (5 most appealing vs 4 least appealing) and Sephora (4 most appealing vs 6 least appealing) posts. YouTube was ranked as the #1 appealing post three times and the #9 least appealing post three times as well. Sephora, on the other hand, received a #1 and #9 once.
The YouTube post features content creator Annie Segarra (@annieelainey) who self-identifies as an activist, disabled, queer and Latinx. The purpose of the post was to recognize creators during Hispanic Heritage Month. Her representation was applauded for being a deviation from normalized representations of Latinas along with her visibility as a disabled person and her being read as genuinely happy.

“I like this one the most because she’s the most natural out of them and she’s actually genuinely happy it seems like. And she's not trying to get anybody's attention with her outfit or anything. It's just kind of [a] picture I would take. And I think it's trying to communicate, well, it says ‘Happy Heritage Month,’ so she's proud to be Hispanic.” (32)

“This one was kind of more personal. Like this is a normal Instagram post. I tend to look at my friend's posts with more sympathy and then, I guess, more personal versus some of these. And the fact that her sweatshirt says ‘Disabled Joy.’ I really liked that. I'm not sure what the meaning is exactly, but I have a brother with a disability so it's a personal connection.” (28)

The least appealing ranking for this post was given due to the perceived quality of the image as being non-professional and low quality:

“This one I thought was cute, but it's just someone in their backyard, like just very casual. So I didn't like it in comparison to a professional photo where it's, I don't know, [a] top brand and, versus, just YouTube.” (6)
The Sephora post featured popular Mexicana influencer @iluvsarahii. A couple of women recognized her and this influenced positive rankings. She was ranked as most appealing due to her aesthetic and perceived beauty.

“I chose this one as my most appealing because I am into makeup and I like the way that it’s executed in the post. And to be honest, I really wasn't thinking about ethnicity. So now that I read the post more I see that it is @iluvsarahii. She's a Mexican influencer and I do think she's very beautiful, but I mean it's not my ideal perception of me, but I did rank it the highest because it was the most aesthetically pleasing to me.” (27)

Her least appealing ranking, however, was provided due to her being perceived as being a typical portrayal of beauty representations and sexualized representations. A couple of women also noted the disconnect they felt between her and themselves because of her closed eyes.

“So I do like makeup posts and I do follow a lot of makeup pages, but it's not something that I want my feed to be filled with. So although they do look really nice, and they do look beautiful, I just think people should promote themselves. And even though it can be used as a tool, we should also appreciate our own beauty and how we are and not how media perceives us.” (32)

“I put this one at the very end because her eyes are closed and she kind of reminds me of one of the Kardashians and I don't really like them, so I was just like, 'I'm going to put her at the end.'” (34)
Regarding the other posts, the Urban Decay post was considered somewhat polarizing (4 most appealing vs 3 least appealing). It was deemed appealing for its portrayal of the quintessential Latina makeup look in its use of oranges, blues and golds. It was disregarded, however, as being another typical representation of beauty and sexualization. The Gucci ad was somewhat polarizing as well (4 most appealing vs 3 least appealing). Several women saw themselves being represented in the Gucci post as they related to the women’s hair type and the familial relationship represented. Others were dismayed by the brand Gucci, its use of racially ambiguous women and its appropriation of traditional Hispanic prints.

Identifying “Me”

Again, I asked each person to rank the posts from the one they identified with the most to the one they identified with the least. The YouTube post was considered the most identifiable with nine women ranking it in their Top 3 (three as #1). The Walmart and Instagram posts were also considered most identifiable with six participants ranking them in their Top 3. Walmart received four #1 rankings and Instagram received two. Annie (YouTube) was perceived as being representative of normality and was described as being “laid back (5),” “casual (7)” and “natural (30).”

“I picked this one because I feel like I take pictures like this, so I can relate to it a little bit. She’s laughing and there’s a lot of green, yellows. Yeah, just the aspect of having a good time in your natural state and not doing too much.” (30)
“For the first one kind of like what I said earlier, it's just a normal teenage girl living life and posting. She's happy. Yeah, I mean, that's kinda like what I do, just as a normal kind of thing.” (28)

“I think I just like the sweater and just being super casual. I think, for me, like I will just put on a Hoodie and pants...Yeah, I think that's mostly just being more laid back on a relaxing day or something like that.” (5)

Women identified with her as they saw themselves in her normality and in the celebration of her Hispanic identity. As one woman describes, she’s “me everyday (25).”

“And again with this, with the girl that is #HispanicHeritageMonth. I am really proud to be Hispanic. It does make me happy that I get to experience things that I do because I am Hispanic. I like this image because, again, I think she looks really natural and she kind of looks like me. So it's not something too out of the box.” (32)

The Walmart post features Robin Torres (@sassandglitter_). She self-identifies as a makeup addict, wrestling coach, gym junkie and real estate student. She was perceived as being “carefree (5)” and also as normal or “more natural (30)” and representative of everyday life.

“I put this one first because I think she's Latina, I'm not sure if she is or isn't, but in terms of her, I don't know, I think I can just relate to a little bit more compared to the other ones. It's more natural...great tone down, not too much going on.” (30)
Women identified with her because they too could see themselves taking and posting a similar photo, and several women identified with her hair type.

“This girl's hair looks like mine...she's really cute and I feel like I would do that with my ice cream as well.” (6)

“When I first saw that she looks just more like [a] carefree post. [A] cute little aesthetic I guess. And, I dunno, I think it's really cute and ice cream, I love ice cream. And I think she's not taking herself too seriously. Like, yeah her makeup looks really good, but it's not such a serious photo. I think I identify with that 'cause I can be serious, but I'm more of a carefree person. I don't want to take life too seriously, you know?” (5)

Sailor (Instagram) was perceived as being proud of her culture and as being relatable in the sense of being “not the model type (26).“ Instagram was also perceived as being socially conscious in its posting of her for Hispanic Heritage Month.

“And then this one I put at the top also just because I really like purchasing things from brands that I think are socially conscious. I always say my idea for the future...like I would love to go be a copywriter for socially conscious brands. I don't want to work for the man, you know?” (17)

“Instagram just didn't say that she was Hispanic, they took a quote directly. That makes it a little more authentic. It shows that Instagram cares what it is she has to say about her heritage.” (28)
Participants most identified with her because she reminded them of their own social circles, including friends, family and upbringing with several noting that they owned similar pieces of jewelry.

“I think I don't really level up to the model type or anything. So these first three [Walmart, YouTube, Instagram], they kind of just seem like, I mean, I could be friends with them or I can pretty much, I don't know, I could have a conversation with them.” (26)

Those who did not quite identify with her saw her exudence of pride as something they aspire after, but are not yet comfortable enough to embody.

“I don't feel like I resonate completely with that cause sometimes I'm still trying to figure out my identity. I'm just trying to connect with being Latina. I'm trying to go with the community and I feel like this is more of...more connection to the community where I feel like I'm not there yet. So even in college I'm still trying to figure out my little community.” (7)

“I feel like she is a good representation of a Latina's image in a way. Like the more, what's it called? Not traditional, but she's very proud of her culture...She's very prideful and stuff and that's something I want to aspire to be too because I feel like I kind of hide, sometimes, my culture. I mean, I'm not always representative of it. And I feel like that has something to do with just living in America and being Mexican-American. It's a little hard to, you know, be either or sometimes.” (27)
The Urban Decay (7 times), Sephora (7 times) and Michael Kors (6 times) were considered least identifiable. The Urban Decay and Sephora posts received a #9 ranking three times, and the Michael Kors post received it once. While there was general interest in makeup, and the Urban Decay and Sephora posts were perceived as nice-looking, the women featured were perceived as an unrelatable ideal, or as one woman puts it, “how I want to look (25),” but not necessarily someone they identify with. They were also perceived as being narrowly defined by their makeup aesthetic.

“Although I do appreciate makeup, I like it, it’s not something I wear everyday, so I can't really relate to it.” (30)

“Yeah. I do like makeup, but I don't think it defines me.” (32)

“These are, again, just like...they're nice, don't get me wrong. I wish I could do makeup too like that. But that's not something important.” (7)

The woman featured in the Michael Kors post, model Joan Smalls, was perceived as being a typical “pretty girl (17)” and as racially ambiguous, making her unrelatable to most.

“The other ones, like they're so ambiguous. You don't know anything about their culture or anything about them.” (26)

“This one I can't really identify with it because she's very, like, ambiguous too and it's just like a girl in [a] t-shirt.” (28)
Regarding the other ads, the Urban Decay 2 post (4 most identifiable vs 3 least identifiable) was somewhat polarizing. It reminded several women of their own friend group or family while others did not see their Latina identity represented in the image:

“And then this one, yeah, same thing...can't really tell. You can tell for some people honestly, but I guess this girl would be the one to be most Latina, all the way on the left and you can't even really tell. It's very ambiguous and it's Urban Decay cosmetics and it's just a bunch of females in nude lingerie and, yeah. I don't know.” (28)

*Negotiating Authenticity*

The negotiation of authenticity remained a consistent theme. Latina participants associated authenticity with normality, citing the posts which were least posed and most indicative of everyday life. Authenticity was also associated with the degree to which Latinx culture was represented accurately. The Instagram (10) and YouTube (10) ads were considered most authentic. Instagram for its genuine representation of Latinx culture. Regarding the depiction of Sailor:

“This one just seems authentic in terms of the culture itself, you know, and it’s like you can see the colors and you can see the outfit and the necklaces. That’s all represented within the Latin culture.” (7)

“Well you can see she’s wearing something that is kind of representative of our culture and that’s something that a lot of people do wear in Mexico. And even her necklace and her choker, they are something that I know a lot of people in my
family have. And even the background, it’s very..just something that..I think I have that pattern at home.” (32)

One woman later rescinds her understanding of Sailor’s depiction as authentic before finally settling on uncertainty:

“I feel like her clothing even is a little bit not that authentic to be honest, you could get this top at Walmart. I would say it would have been more authentic if she were wearing like, I dunno... like [a] design or, you know, traditional clothing of wherever she is from. But then again, why does it have to be that traditional like embroidered? So we’re at that point where it’s kind of like, she is an LA native, but she is also, I’m assuming, Mexican cause she says she’s Chicano. So we’re just at that borderline where we’re like, what is it?” (17)

Annie (YouTube) was perceived as authentic because she was perceived as being a normal person and as someone who appeared genuinely happy.

“I mean it’s Hispanic Heritage Month and so I liked that, you know, they chose...they could have chosen any woman that they thought solidified it, Hispanic Heritage Month, and they could have, you know, easily gotten a small-town celebrity, like an actress or something. And even just a really beautiful woman who was all dressed up looking nice and they chose just, you know, your friend, someone who’s very natural looking like minimal makeup and sweats.” (6)

“This one because she..the authenticity comes from her just being a young girl. She’s...it’s not really, it’s not like, ‘oh look, I’m Latina.’ or look at it like this. I’m
Latina, but I'm not my stereotype. It's her just there, happy, smiling with a natural background.” (28)

“Um, this one I think is really genuine ‘cause she looks so happy and then...disabled joy. Oh! And then it’s like Hispanic Heritage Month, aww. She definitely seems so happy and comfortable in her body and in herself and...just like the smile on her face, it does seem genuine to me.” (5)

What was most interesting is one woman’s unwillingness to adhere to the authentic/inauthentic binary:

“I personally really struggle with kind of trying to define what is authenticity because something's going to be on the outside. So if you're labeling something as authentic, that means that something else is inauthentic...The word authenticity I think is really often used by media as a selling tool like, ‘oh, this authentic representation of Yada Yada,’ or ‘this authentic story of Blah Blah Blah.’...[But], well, that's an authentic experience for some people, but not others...Who’s on the outside? Who was the authenticity narrative leaving out?...instead of saying ‘these are authentic,’ I would say, ‘these remind me more of how I envision myself’ because...not every Latina or every Latina of my age and my sexual orientation, my socioeconomic [background], you know what I mean?” (34)

Defining Advertising

Reading the posts as advertisements varied. Five women considered all of them to be ads albeit more subtle.
“I think they’re all ads. Influencer ad here, high fashion ads for Sephora and Urban Decay. These [Instagram and YouTube] I would consider the least like an ad because it’s more promotional of Hispanic Heritage Month...they’re just promoting a hashtag.” (6)

“It's become so subtle that they're ads, and that's another thing. That's kind of what I learned in class in terms of what social media is doing is it's making all these subtle ads to you and getting celebrities to wear or do this, and all they have to do is really tag the brand and that's it right there. That's just starting to become an advertisement too...It's just so subtle now, but I think that's doing, that's good because I feel like that whole subtleness it's, I don't know, it just makes it more relatable.” (7)

One of the five felt as though the YouTube and Instagram posts were a different form of advertising content.

“I do think that they’re all advertisements. These two [YouTube and Instagram] are not specifically for products which is, that’s the kind of advertising that I’m going into because I feel like neither of these are some super, like don’t scream capitalism, you know?...and obviously the point of a lot of advertisements is you want to increase sales, increase brand’s earnings, things like that. But I really liked these two in the sense that I feel like they’re not..they’re advertisements in the sense that they're there representing ideas.” (17)

Those who did not consider them all to be ads were most likely to point to the YouTube and Instagram posts as examples of non-advertising.
“I mean without looking at the caption...it seems like in every single one of these ads everything is so perfect and these are the ones where it's very clearly not as..just the ones with minor imperfections; not the person just the photography. If I were to look at these two, I wouldn't know what they're advertising here.” (26)

“And this one [Instagram] I don't think it's an ad. It just seems like a picture that anyone would post on Instagram. It doesn't seem like something people spent time taking pictures and trying to strategize what angle would work best.” (30)

One woman considered none of the posts to be ads and had this to say about the ability to be elusive:

“I don't feel like they're trying to persuade you to do anything. I think they're pretty good at just at kind of—not hiding—but just brushing it under. If they're trying to communicate something then I feel like you have to search for it, especially with the Gucci and Michael Kors. I don't know the purpose of those ads other than showing what they're wearing.” (32)

So, Now What?

The following recommendations are offered to the industry regarding the representation of Latinas, women of color and women in general.

“Focus groups. A lot, a lot, lot, lot more focus groups, specifically when it comes to women of color. And then I guess within the focus groups to have a variety..to have diversity like different socioeconomic classes, different sexual orientations, different abilities, physical abilities.” (34)
“I think my advice would be to show Latinas who don’t share [the] same, curvy body type. I feel like we do already have stereotypes of not having good bodies or we’re not considered as sexy as women with, you know, a big butt or a nice little waist and stuff like that. And myself, I feel like I also struggle with fitting into that image that we are being portrayed [as] now. So I would like to see a lot more body representation. We’re not all super short, we’re not all skinny. I don’t know. Just kind of that. And then also I think it's important to have more representation of the different skin tones in Latinos as well. It's just not only white or not all dark-skinned either. I think it would be important to also share more about a Mexican-American experience, especially for in America.” (27)

“I mean, just be more inclusive and get more eyes. Get more perspectives on it. I think a lot of the advertising that might be not inclusive or just wrong is the ones that [don't] have people behind it saying, ‘this is not right. This obviously won't make sense.’ So I think it's just having like-minded individuals who have the same goal, but who also come from a bunch of different backgrounds...I think it would save the industry a lot less explaining, a lot less apologizing if you had more inclusivity in the office.” (26)

Participants offered these recommendations for the sake of themselves and their process of becoming comfortable in who they are, and for the sake of youth who are more susceptible:
“It’s really important for children because for me it breaks my heart, the idea of my niece who is an angel in my eyes having to grow up in a society where anybody tells her that she needs to be something that she’s not.” (17)

3.6.3 Asian Women

Who I Spoke With

While each woman self-identifies as Asian, various ethnic identities are represented as well. Three women identify as Chinese, three as Indian, two as Filipino, one as Pakistani, one as Cambodian, one as Vietnamese and one Indian woman identifies as biracial (Indian and Italian). All identify as heterosexual and all but two study advertising as their undergraduate major. While the majority identify as middle class, one woman identifies as high class, one as upper-middle class and one as lower-middle class.

Thoughts on Representation

Regarding the ways in which women are depicted in advertising today, the greatest number of positive responses was shared among this group of women, including beliefs that representation is more equal than before; that women are increasingly seen as stronger, and as people rather than as vehicles to sell; and that advertisers are becoming less selfish about strictly promoting the brand and selling products.

“I think in general it’s more equal than they were portrayed as before, more than just models. I would say they’re not really being objectified with their bodies. They’re actually out there selling a product or representing a product or
representing a person, and I think that's the biggest difference, that they are being seen as people rather than vehicles to sell them.” (21)

“[Representation] is definitely improving because I think women have more of a say...I feel like for the most part women only promote things that they stand for. So I really respect women who do that instead of just taking every brand deal. So I think it means more if you as a person, your views align with the things that you're promoting.” (9)

One woman believes that, as an industry, advertising has charged itself to be more meaningful:

“I think advertising now is more focused on making an impact and being less selfish...They actually are passionate about making stuff that [is] more meaningful and so they really want to connect with their consumers, their target audiences.” (20)

Dove was cited as a “revolutionary (2)” and “empowering (8)” brand that is leading the charge. Regarding women themselves, they are perceived to be empowered to now have more of a say and “only promote what they stand for (9).” Positive depictions include being represented as moms, businesswomen and “more than just models (21).”

There was general consensus, however, that improvement is still needed. And while there were positive responses, there were equally negative responses towards the representation of women today. Women were perceived as still being representative of fragility, and depicted in ways that sexualize and objectify them. Regarding the objectification of women:
“I feel like women are very used as objects and I know that's kind of how positioning works with ads, but it's more so how this product can help you become a better version of this product. You know? Like the beauty itself is the product not the person.” (15)

Despite considering these representations to be unacceptable in today's society, they are recognized as still being prevalent. Cited depictions include: “moms (4)”, “teachers (8)” and “detox tea (9)” endorsers. It is interesting to note how the depiction of women as mothers is seen as both positive and negative. One woman's negative take on the industry involves viewing advertising not as a change agent, but as being purely capitalistic by integrating more people of color for the wrong intentions. She elaborates:

“More minorities are becoming integrated, but I also think it's because companies and brands know that they have to do it. So it's not really like for the better, it's for the wrong intention...behind the scenes it's all about marketing and promoting products.” (3)

How about the ways in which Asian women are represented in ads? While all of the women were able to expand upon their ideas surrounding the representation of women in general, they found it difficult to discuss, in-depth, the ways in which Asian women are represented because they are believed to not be represented at all or, at best, not nearly enough.

“Well, actually, I think it's hard to say that because I don't see them being represented at all. Even when looking up images for this research prep, I couldn't find any really [with] a simple search...It was super difficult and my mind kind of escaped me. I was thinking, where do I see Asian women in ads? Can I recall
any ad or commercial at all? And so I guess I can see there’s a severe lack of Asian women in ads and if there are they may just be used as someone to represent diversity.” (21)

“I feel like there's not a lot, just in media in general, I feel like they're always the friend and stuff, or just the side character or just to support the main character. They're not really given a story line of their own. And even in movies like, obviously, Crazy Rich Asians. Yeah, it's good representation, but it's also, it's contained...like separate from the media, the main media.” (2)

Seeing an Asian woman in an ad is described as a rarity, and when they are represented, it is most prominently through narrow depictions (as relayed above) and through the use of stereotypes. As a few South Asian women remarked, the brand usually chooses a woman who is East Asian.

“If anything I see like the Eastern Asian, like Chinese and all of that but...” (3)

Stereotypical representations involve traditional portrayals of women who are submissive and have a thin body type; Indian women specifically are said to be typecast within the “smart girl” mold; and none of the depictions place the woman in a main role, and instead limit her to supporting character. Cited depictions include the “nerd (3)” character and “mail order brides (20).” Several women also mention the recent Dolce & Gabbana scandal to illustrate the persistence of problematic representations. Last November, the fashion company released a video featuring an Asian woman to promote an upcoming runway show in Shanghai (Fig. 21). It featured the woman eating a variety of food dishes, including pizza and spaghetti with chopsticks.
Criticism came from the ad’s use of sexual innuendo, a male voice to “mansplain” the woman’s actions and its mocking of Chinese speech (Xu, 2018). It was considered to be blatant disrespect of Chinese culture and resulted in a widespread boycott of the brand, including merchants’ removal of the brand’s products from shelves and online stores (Williams, 2019). One woman was not surprised at all by the ad:

“Designers are known to be racist. They came out with, like, slave sandals last year and that's messed up.” (10)

For one woman, this lack of representation is what inspired her to be a part of the industry:

“Well, I mean here in America there's not really a lot of Asians in advertising. Honestly I wouldn't know how to answer that because there aren't a lot. Like I know ads from Asia, but not American ads... I feel like that's why I'm going into
advertising because I want to break that stigma so hopefully in the future we'll see more Asians.” (4)

Despite feeling underrepresented, the movie Crazy Rich Asians was frequently cited as an example of positive change along with the increasing number of women of color content creators on Instagram and YouTube.

Regarding the representation of other women of color, they too are considered to be underrepresented, but not to the extent that Asian women are. And while women of color are being included more frequently, the intention of the brands are called into question:

“I could feel both ways. I mean they should be incorporating more women of color in their ads, so I will see that I have no problem. But at the same time I see, like, where are you going with that?” (10)

“And sometimes even when I watch commercials, I kinda am skeptical. I always wonder, was that person chosen for their skin color or as who they are? So I'm hoping to see more of it and I'm hoping to actually become more accustomed myself to seeing more people of color on the screen because I still get that feeling of: is there a reason why you did that?” (21)

Stereotypes, such as the crazy Latina, are perceived to still be prevalent while other stereotypes are becoming less identifiable, more subtle. Improvements are noted as being facilitated by digital media, which provide space for women of color content creators:
“I think it's improving and I think that they're more reaching out through digital media. And if, if they're not represented in Hollywood, they're finding other ways. So I really like that.” (9)

Seeing Themselves

Each woman brought an ad or media image of a woman, with their same racial identity, who they identified with or perceived to be authentic. Again, this exercise helped to facilitate openness in our conversations and drove engagement. This how they see (or disassociate) themselves through mediated representations of actresses, models and social media influencers.

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| (2) | "This is a weird one because...for obvious reasons I guess. It's traditional. I feel like there's movies like Breakfast At Tiffany's. That movie is so racist, but it's also, like, a classic."
| (3) | "This is a famous Bollywood actress...I don't think we look that much alike, but closer than other ones...really feminine. A little housewifey...when I think of myself when I'm older, I'm like I...
| (4) | "It's actually from Asia. I tried to look for something here and it's literally a bad example...I like the Kpop group and I guess I identified with it because I also am interested..."
| Everyone loves that movie, but they just skip over everything like that. But it's like, I don't know, just her and the little dress makes me want to barf because it's just the fetishization of Asian women and it's such a big problem. They are so much more likely to be trafficked, like [by] the white man...I mean, there are Asian models, obviously, but it's like with skincare or something like that. It's not, again, they don't really have narratives. They're not interesting characters or anything... [and] this example is gross because it's two women too—not like a man—who should be helping each other out, but she's serving her.” | want to wear a sari and be very domestic, but then at the same time I'm like, no, I don't...So even I'm aware of it, but that doesn't mean...I know some things are just programmed...I guess I chose her for more superficial reasons because we look alike compared to other celebrities...It's hard because there's not a lot of western Indian women that are, like, a good equal balance. I'm not saying I want it to be too whitewashed, but I also don't want it to be very how they think.” | in trying new makeup brands too and I like the way the whole look of the campaign was more, like, girly colors, which I like...Since I know who they are, they also represent empowerment too because recently they got to perform in North Korea, so that was a big step for, you know, the whole thing with North and South Korea. So I guess they're just one of a few girl Kpop groups that actually have both girl and guy fans.” |
“It took me a while… I was like, I can’t find any!... I actually went on the website, it’s a fashion store. I don’t think it’s located in the US, but it’s pretty much for women who are...all brown people who do something different, but still have their heritage. So in this picture, I think it relates to me because I was actually born here, so I still have my ideals and my culture, [but] I’m an American, I was raised here... I feel like if you’re a minority and you don’t see

“You said someone who’s really authentic, so she stands for body positivity, which is cool. She said it was one of the most liked images on Instagram. She’s really beautiful and she kind of exposed herself on Instagram like, ‘You shouldn’t believe every ad you see,’ because she’s obviously a model and this is her job, she’s an advertisement... I also follow a lot of other influencers with my Asian-American background, but theirs is more glamorized.

“I just think the ad is very natural like without getting this model a tan or more Westernized, and the food is very authentic. They are eating at an authentic restaurant... I was trying to look up ads featuring Asian women, but I couldn’t find any so I just looked on YouTube... Yea I know her, she’s one of the biggest Chinese supermodels... I follow her on Instagram, but not any other social media... I just think she’s
<p>| yourself that much or someone like you, um, I don't think [favorability towards brands who represent women of color] matters that much.” | Everything is picture perfect...like snapshots of their perfect life. So hers is more real...I just feel like she [is] really genuine, she’s honest. Honesty, like transparency, is really important with ads.” | honest. |</p>
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<td>&quot;I chose a plus-sized model who is Asian. And do you know the Kardashians? Khloe? She’s one of my faves, but she has Good American [clothing brand]. I feel like we don't see enough plus-size models, specifically Asian women, and I think it's important to show, like, it's possible. If you want to be a model, you can be a model...I follow the Kardashians, so I like to look, and I clicked on Good American and I’m like, ‘oh, she’s pretty.’...It's just her being in that space of being able to be a model.”</td>
<td>&quot;So I kind of just looked at specifically ads with half Asian women, so a lot of celebrity depictions were easiest to find...I couldn’t find the exact model, but Dior does a lot of Russian/Ukrainian. I don’t know why, [but] that's always been the kind of girls I associate with the most even though I’m not...It’s like just because you identify with a certain identity or race, it doesn't mean you have to act that way or the stereotypes that go with it...I have been called the Russian and the French looking girl versus like—I’m Italian and Indian, not that, but that’s often how I am associated.”</td>
<td>&quot;I feel like, generally, she doesn’t try to be the token Indian girl, you know what I mean? She tries to just...her profession is legit...I feel like she represents...I like it. I just like how you can be a normal TV actress, but also be a woman of color...you can be the main actress and I feel like people of color are normally not the main person right now, or it's the best friend or something like that. But she's the star you can be...I trust her”</td>
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<td><strong>(20)</strong></td>
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<td>“To be honest, I had a pretty hard time trying to find [an] ad with an Asian woman, which is kind of sad...these people that choose these kind of people to be in ads, I think they're trying to include them and [show that] America is able to host you. America, they want to have you and we just want you to be able to fit in and be equal to every opportunity white people would have...I want to normalize it. I want this to seamlessly, when I view it, think nothing of it, you know what I mean? I don’t want</td>
<td>“So I went to a predominantly, very predominately white school in a very rural town. So I was typically the only Asian female a lot of times. And I felt like growing up, I was definitely different, kids pointed it out, made comments all the time. The Asian girl, you know? So I felt like I had to do things to make myself the girly girl. So I would rather be the girly girl, like this, who says kind of sweet dumb things like, ‘can we just talk about shoes?’ instead of being the Asian girl ‘cause that</td>
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to think of the decision making behind it. I want to think, ‘oh here’s America’...I have hope for Americans...And I think that I hold advertising in high regards.”

was better, more normalized, right?”

Most women found the process of searching to be challenging and struggled to find an image they could identify with or perceived to be authentic. While one woman resorted to YouTube because an image search revealed only fetishized depictions, others were forced to travel to Asian media markets where they knew they could find an appropriate image. Those who did not find the process challenging experienced ease because they immediately knew who to choose as they follow the women on social media. Women who were perceived to be authentic were described as being genuine and honest. Also, as a consequence of being authentic or identifying with the woman represented, most of the women I spoke with were favorable towards the brand being advertised as well.

“I feel like when you trust an influencer and you follow them for a while, you know who they are as a person, literally. Then you trust what they promote.” (9)

One woman whose favorability was not affected remarked:

“I think, I'm not sure if I've exactly seen an ad that's doing it in a way that I feel is right or that actually connects with me. So maybe just no.” (21)
Evaluating Appeal

As mentioned previously, each woman was presented with the following ads and asked to first rank them from most appealing to least appealing. Afterwards, I probed for the reasoning behind their order and for insight into what was being communicated through each Instagram post.

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While many rankings were influenced by the identities of the women featured and how they were depicted, just as influential were, again, personal interests, perceived quality of the image and existing attitudes towards the brand. For example, those who were interested in makeup and food were inclined to rank the Urban Decay and YouTube posts higher. When evaluating whether a post was appealing or not, half of the participants did not consider the caption at all. Again, the approach was to either strictly focus on the image itself (i.e., quality, aesthetic, women featured) or to evaluate the post holistically by focusing on the image, brand and caption together.

The ads considered most appealing (Top 3) were the Instagram, Urban Decay and Urban Decay 2 posts. Instagram and Urban Decay received this ranking among seven of the women while Urban Decay 2 received this ranking among six of them. The Instagram post was the highest ranked with four women ranking it #1, while Urban Decay received the #1 ranking three times and Urban Decay 2 only once. Pakistani activist Malala Yousafzai was cited as the primary reason for the Instagram ranking. The majority of women recognized her and praised her for her humanitarian efforts:

“I just feel like she is representative of women as a whole, and her strength and her message to women about getting an education...Not only representing her race as identifiable with other girls, but just her mission in life is very empowering in itself. And obviously here in America, we are privileged to have something like that and to work for something as hard as that for something that we take for granted, such as education. I feel like that is a great message.” (15)

One woman appreciated the de-emphasis of beauty that Malala epitomized:
“She’s been through a lot...No superficial beauty or anything like that, which is hard to look past...when you see an attractive person doing something you like it more, you know? (Why do you think that is?) I think that's just how we are raised. I think especially in Western culture, you know, very materialistic and very superficially driven to do things because we have the opportunities to versus other countries.” (3)

Instagram was applauded by one woman for providing the platform:

“So I liked the first one because Instagram posted it and also because it’s the hashtag #dayofthegirl. So it’s actually a meaningful post and it’s spreading the message that we’re just learning about something that maybe most people hadn’t even heard of, like this girl’s story. So that’s why I thought this one was most important. One hundred and thirty million girls can’t go to school. I didn't know that. So I feel like the fact that Instagram posted that and spread awareness is really interesting and that’s great, right?” (9)

The Urban Decay post was described as most appealing due to the aesthetic of the image. And while the makeup application was applauded, greater recognition was given to the fact that it was a brown Hijabi woman being featured; a representation outside of the norm. The woman featured is model @sharifarose_.

“I'm a fan of Urban Decay cosmetics, but I like how they use a woman with a headscarf. And her makeup looks pretty good too, so I like that.” (12)
“That's just kind of empowering. You don't see them that many Hijabi women in media, on ads, especially like showing off her makeup or anything appearance wise. That's why that's there.” (8)

“And I think it's really sad because a lot of women from Middle Eastern countries, they aren't able to express themselves. So I'm happy about that. And then not just that they're expressing themselves, but that's been kind of recognized and validated as beautiful.” (9)

The Urban Decay 2 post was considered appealing for its incorporation of women of different racial identities and its diversity appeal.

“This one I like it 'cause it's diverse. I've always grown up in diverse climates. So I just liked that one.” (2)

“I feel that is a very important thing to represent and feel represented. So that's kind of why I put the Urban Decay...that's why I put it on top. It's just like a very mixed, a variety of women, like different personality/nationality, different race and different cultures as well.” (15)

One woman ranked Urban Decay 2 #1 and Urban Decay #2 for the same reason:

“Since they're both makeup brands, both Urban Decay. From the past [I] know it's been a problem...makeup brands only make certain makeup colors. For white people, like caucasian, they do some darker colors. But I know it always has been a problem in the past trying to find a shade for women of color. So I'm like,
okay. I really like [that] they are having these women promoting their brands and stuff.” (20)

While most of the women applauded the brand’s aim for inclusion, one woman felt skeptical of their approach:

“I would say [#8] because when looking up other ads I think I saw an Estee Lauder or Clinique ad, which showed three women of color, but yet the Black woman was a light-skinned Black woman, the Asian woman was very, almost white, the same complexion as the white woman. While they were trying to portray different races and skin tones, they weren't actually effectively showing the array of the foundation or whatever they were trying to sell...I'm ranking this as eight not because it's bad just ‘cause it is a company with a professional photoshoot maybe kind of pushing a certain idea...I'm still skeptical of seeing Asian women in ads.” (21)

Ads ranked least appealing (Bottom 3) were Sephora and Walmart. Six women ranked the Sephora post as least appealing, three of whom gave it the #9 ranking, with most focusing on the aesthetic of the woman featured, and Walmart received this ranking seven times, four of which were #9. The Sephora post features popular Los Angeles-based influencer, @IreneSarah. Participants did not like her makeup and found her to be a negative representation of women and “feminism (3).”

“I just don't know. I didn't like her makeup...it just represents women kind of weird. Like the makeup and what she's doing...I feel like you see those more in makeup brands, like western makeup brands because, you know, the influencers
that's how they promote their makeup...And I guess it attracts people here. But for me not really because I have a different outlook on makeup and stuff.” (4)

“And for this one it just kinda reminds me of a very posed, basic beauty guru, like sponsored. Like those SugarBearHair care products, everyone does it. So she's very over, overly-Instagrammized, if that's even a word....” (15)

One woman immediately recognized the influencer featured in this post and expressed a strong negative opinion of her:

“I was actually subscribed to her YouTube channel and I unsubscribed because I can't stand this girl. [She represents] sex appeal and all the negative things about feminism. (What do you mean by that specifically?) I don't know, she just, she brings people down...when you're a YouTuber and you're on Instagram, you're going to get hate. That's inevitable, but I think it really shows how you are as a person, how you respond to comments because I guess at the end of the day you're the one that has the bigger [platform] and you saying something mean back to someone that said something shitty is like you're just as worse, just as bad as them.” (3)

Poor image quality was cited as the most popular reason for Walmart's ranking along with not completely understanding the action taking place in the image. Some read the person featured as a young girl rather than a woman.

“I mean just like compared to the first one [Urban Decay], it's just not as good of a picture...she's at a weird angle. It's just the quality of the picture. It looks like it's in a home...I mean I'm sure the vibe is homey, like working out at home and
anyone can do it and stuff and she is happy doing it, but it’s like, yeah, I don’t know.” (2)

“I just thought this picture just wasn't like, like I dunno, I like high quality photos if you're wanting to do an ad, I didn't really read the caption or anything but yeah, maybe if she was looking at the camera so I can get involved.” (9)

I am responsible for choosing this ad and its subsequent quality. Finding an image of an Asian woman on Walmart’s Instagram page proved difficult, and I eventually landed on the screenshot of a video. The produced screenshot was not a high quality image.

Gucci, again, proved polarizing with five women ranking it as most appealing and four as least. It was criticized as a brand and for being representative of a typical “professional (21)” photoshoot:

“The brand itself is just wack.” (8)

“Gucci...um, I don't really care for Gucci. Now that I'm looking at the photo it's actually pretty cool...I don't know. I just, I don't really care for it...I just think it's ugly, or I don't think it's ugly, I just think it's oversaturated.” (3)

One woman simply responded with “the brand itself is just wack (8).” On the other hand, Gucci was considered appealing for its surprising and appropriate representation of Asian women.

“A brand featuring three Asian women is new to me because usually it'll be like one.” (10)
Regarding other ads, Michael Kors (5 most appealing vs 3 least appealing) is considered somewhat polarizing. Recognition of actress and model Yang Mi as a “big Chinese celebrity (10)” influenced positive rankings of the Michael Kors post. Like the Gucci post, however, it was considered representative of a typical advertisement. One woman argued that more subtle promotion was “way better than getting a big name celebrity holding your product (9)” in regards to this ad.

**Identifying “Me”**

Again, I asked each person to rank the posts from the one they identified with the most to the one they identified with the least. The posts featuring Malala (Instagram) and lifestyle content creator @emilydao_ (YouTube) were the most identifiable with six women ranking them in their Top 3. The YouTube post was most popular with four #1 rankings while the Instagram post received two. The depiction of Emily was seen as most similar to a post the women would upload themselves. She was perceived as fun and relatable.

“Yeah that's basically what you see now with how people want to be, the aesthetic and stuff. So I kinda wanted to start doing that too. It gets the most likes, it gets the most followers. Um, I guess I can identify with it because, I don't know. It's not that I'm trying to copy it, just I want to be a part of that aesthetic.” (4)

“I'm like very simple chic and [the] kind of picture that I would have...I liked that she is also in her twenties, so I relate to her in that sense. And she's a creator on the rise. She's a young girl and she's also Asian, so I really liked this.” (9)
“I don’t know who this person is, but I was kinda thinking if I maybe watched her channel, I probably could identify with the same things because she is an Asian woman.” (21)

Participants identified with Malala because of her racial and gender identities, and because of her activism. She was perceived as admirable and as a positive influence.

“I feel like this one [Urban Decay], like you can be pretty and be a woman of color. It’s a big, I think just in general, there’s just like the white standard of beauty. I basically picked these two [Urban Decay and Instagram] because they have similar skin tones to me.” (19)

“For Malala even though I’m not the same race as her, I think that I connect through who she is as a female, and that’s enough of a connection for me to feel something with someone and [I] also like how she’s being representative of a really positive light.” (21)

“I think it’s nice because, again, everything has gotten so oversaturated and there’s so many people trying to promote things I don’t care about. This tea I don’t care about this hair pill or whatever...Stuff like this is more realistic I guess...And then looking at posts that are empowering to women from Southeast Asia—because I think it’s really bad [there]...and they’re not supposed to speak out and that bothers me a lot.” (3)
The Michael Kors (seven times in the Bottom 3) and Sephora (eight times in the Bottom 3) posts were considered least identifiable. The Michael Kors post was read as impersonal and as a typical ad. Yang Mi was perceived to be conservative and unrelatable:

“She seems like the type to be very conservative and traditional, so that's why I didn't identify with this one...I feel like if people in China saw this picture they'd be like, ‘That is amazing.’ Like that's great because it is very traditional and she's all completely covered up, the bag is red that is the color of China, and she's pretty. (I never noticed that thinking about the red and the intentionality behind it). So that's me because I have the background.” (2)

“I look at this, it's like I like her purse but honestly it's just another ad.” (3)

Irene Sarah’s (Sephora) depiction was considered to be least similar to their presentations of self. She is perceived to be superficial, for the male gaze and glamorized. Several participants describe her as being a typical Instagram model and consider her to be reminiscent of the Kardashians.

“This one I can't identify with because I'm not that kind of person I guess. I don't know, I don't even know who she is. I mean I feel like I wouldn't like her. I kind of feel like what I'm going to say is judging a book by its cover, but I feel like she kind of looks like the Kardashians, but a little less ish, I guess. Just by the way she dresses and how she's like.” (4)
“For this, the value, I would say it’s just very superficial because, not just because it’s Sephora, but she’s got her makeup done, she’s got her eyelashes, her hair done, and then her attire. To me it just looks superficial, just beauty. I don’t really see any other values.” (8)

All but one woman changed the order of their ranking from the first exercise to the next. Her rankings remained consistent because her definition of appealing also happened to be based on the posts she most identified with.

“To me that’s what appealing is. Or if there’s some interests that I can coordinate with, I think that appeals to me more. I’m not much of a physical person. Like I don’t care about the physical appearance; as long as I can get along with you as long as I can talk to you or have something in common, I think that's more appealing to me.” (8)

Regarding the other ads, Gucci (three most identifiable vs five least identifiable) and Urban Decay 2 (four vs four) were somewhat polarizing. Participants identified with Gucci’s representation of Asian women and they desired to be like the women featured. Those who disidentified with the post considered it to be impersonal and could not relate to the affluence that was communicated. As previously mentioned, participants identify with the Urban Decay 2 post because it is perceived as reflective of their social circles and friend groups. It was considered least identifiable because several women did not read any of the models as Asian.

Negotiating Authenticity

“Authentic” continues to be associated with everyday life and normality as well as indicative of images that appear to be more candid, natural and casual versus posed
and professionally shot. Authenticity was also associated with the posts which carried a more meaningful message (i.e., #dayofthegirl) and did not appear to be selling anything. The Instagram (10), YouTube (7) and Walmart (6) posts were considered most authentic. Malala (Instagram) is described as a real person and her authenticity is tied to her visibility as a humanitarian and activist. Regarding the depiction of Malala:

“I honestly feel like this is the most authentic because it’s more like telling someone’s story because the other ones, they’re mainly just trying to advertise their products or advertise themselves.” (4)

Emily Dao (YouTube) is seen as being unposed, reflective of everyday life and as “organic (15).” While considering her definition of authentic as being not attempting to sell, one woman questioned her decision to select the YouTube post as authentic:

“I guess it makes me think of her as less authentic because this is how they lure people in by acting cute, innocent. Like, ‘I’m just eating ice cream, just using this curling wand.’ If anything, this is probably even worse than all of these...Well she could be genuine too, but it is very hard to find people that are genuine now. People are always trying to sell something...I feel like this is what brands always try to do, the stereotypical one girl from each race put it in there and, you know, that’s what everyone’s doing now.” (3)

The woman (or girl) in the Walmart post is perceived as authentic for being read as not wearing any makeup and her casual smile. She is described as someone having fun and “not trying (8).” Regarding authentic as normal, everyday life, one woman had this to say about the Walmart post:
“She looks like she’s having fun and then I feel like this is something...if someone were to take a video of me, I would look exactly like this too. Like in the moment doing something.” (12)

It was interesting to learn of one woman’s support of authenticity being used to increase the effectiveness of advertising:

“I think the key to winning the hearts of people and consumers is just not trying hard. I feel like people can see right through that. I think a lot of influencers get crap for that. If they’re just openly promoting everything, every brand deal that they’re handed, but if you’re picky and choosy and choose the ones that you actually care about, and the influencer actually takes time to research the cause and then promote it, then I like that.” (9)

Defining Advertising

The majority of women (8) considered all of the posts to be advertisements, including the two business majors.

“An advertisement is just like putting something out there that you want people to go check out.” (2)

“I would say they are ads because you could advertise stuff in different ways. Some influencers actually take a picture of the product and say, ‘Oh, use my name as a discount,’ you know? But then I guess for more like fashion brands you have to actually have the person wearing it. But even this [Instagram post] is also considered a brand I guess. Not a brand, but like an advertisement because you’re promoting someone’s testimony, right?” (4)
“An ad is anything that involves a product tied to a company. So I would say I would classify them as all ads ‘cause like YouTube, Kroger. Look, it’s Instagram itself.” (12)

“Advertising can be meaningful. It doesn’t need to sell something. It could sell you an idea you know what I mean? Or, a way of thinking, like a mindset, you know? When you see something like this, like advertising, today, it's not about selling something, it's about changing your mindset.” (20)

The Instagram post emerged as the most controversial. Four women perceived it to not be an ad. And while one woman considered them all to be ads, she did explain why she felt the Instagram post was least like one:

“I mean I would say all of them are advertisements because they are getting somewhere, or I mean why else would they post, or why would a company back them up? Because I don’t think companies really do that. They don’t just post something. It’s usually a motive behind it...but I would say this [Instagram post] is probably the least like going for advertising only because it’s more inspirational and I feel like [that’s] what she stands for, and the light that she’s under in this post, it’s not advertising more so, it’s more, it’s getting at a different message. Whereas these are like, ‘Oh, look at my Gucci stuff.’ Like a Sephora, there’s a brand. With this, I don’t think there’s really a brand.” (8)

Like with participants in the other two groups, those who did not consider all of the posts to be ads differentiated the advertising posts as being the ones through which there was
an obvious sell (i.e., Kroger, Michael Kors, Gucci), and the non-ads to be ones through which the purpose is perceived to be the spreading of a message or building awareness (i.e., Instagram, Urban Decay 2).

So, Now What?

The following recommendations are offered to the industry regarding the representation of Asian women, women of color and women in general. For the most part, the charge was for the industry to do better.

“I feel like maybe it all starts with hiring Asian women. I think if brands are wanting to show Asian women as... they should include Asian women in the room to make the decisions so they get input and insight into what it actually could mean. I think a lot of bad and poor ads are just ‘cause the same type of people are in the room together and not cognizant or understanding of how other races may feel about that.” (21)

“For Indian women, just more Indian women and I feel especially with Indian people when they are represented it’s very stereotypical. And I feel like there’s obviously more of, like, less stereotypical with women’s gender roles and Black women and Latina women. There’s more of an awareness around that which is awesome. And [that] needs to continue happening. But then that should also be happening with Indian women. Overall, just be better. Do more, be better, more aware. Have more people in leadership positions that are of color, and women... Having women of color makes the ads authentic.” (19)

One woman was optimistic of the future:
“Sooner or later we’re just, it’s going to become normalized. Hopefully that’s the case. And we get past this. This could apply to many things not just advertising. Sooner or later, in a few years, this conversation, what we’re having now, pinpointing and really dissecting the problem won’t be a problem anymore.” (20)

While another held a more cynical position:

“I don’t really have any recommendations. I just see it as how it is.” (10)

3.7 DISCUSSION

Our conversations reveal that the women of color I interviewed are very much aware of the ways in which they are represented in advertising today.

Theme 1: Not Represented For Who We Are, If At All

RQ4 asks: How do Black, Latina and Asian women perceive and interpret ads which feature women of their same race? Through the lens of racialized and gendered others, they consider how they and those like them are depicted in relation to dominant culture. Among all racial categories, there is celebration of the increase in positive (i.e., empowered roles) representations and in the variety (i.e., more body types) of depictions of women, even though they are not always perceived as fully accurate. At the same time, and in spite of acknowledging the change that is happening, there is greater acknowledgement of the work that needs to be done for more appropriate and pluralistic representation. While women are being seen in more empowered roles, such as leaders, or they are engaging in activities outside of the domestic sphere, they are considered just as likely to be hypersexualized and objectified in a way that is all too familiar. Likewise, representation is primarily limited to the fashion, skincare and beauty
industries, and women are still seen as being used as tools to promote unrealistic ideals. It is interesting to note that there were more positive attitudes towards representation among Asian participants. Several regarded the advertising industry as being responsible for the improvements we have seen though one woman sees it as purely capitalistic. In contrast, other participants recognized that the positive change that has occurred has resulted from pressure from marginalized communities. Among all racial groups arises the questioning of brands’ intentions to now include women and women of color in more appropriate ways. They are more likely to be viewed as being more inclusive because they have to or so to avoid backlash.

Regarding women of their same race, there is shared understanding across racial groups of being othered in media as they are othered in real life. Black women believe that pressure from the community to improve representation is not being felt industry-wide. We are seen as either just there (tokens) or as hard to find. Participants note the persistence of hypersexualized and colorist depictions, and of being cast as the strong Black woman trope, as objects and as a monolith. Likewise, Latina participants see themselves being represented normatively through the inclusion of white or light-skinned models with long hair and curvy body types. They see depictions of mothers, cooks and immigrants while Mexican women rarely see themselves at all. Indigenous Mexican actress and teacher, Yalitza Aparicio, is seen as a positive deviation from the norm. Asian women believe they are grossly underrepresented in advertising and, when they are, it is through narrow depictions (i.e., a supporting character) that rely on stereotypes, such as the nerd or submissive woman, and, again, through the inclusion of white or light-skinned models. For one woman, the lack of representation inspired her
to become a part of the industry. The movie, *Crazy Rich Asians*, and the increase in women of color content creators are cited as examples of somewhat positive change.

Participants see other women of color as being represented similarly as underrepresented and through the use of stereotypes and narrow depictions. There is also shared understanding of Asian women as being the least represented while several women note that they see Black women represented the most. I believe that greater representation of Black women speaks to the Black/White dichotomy as previously discussed in the Visual Analysis chapter. Through the duality of Black and White we have come to a place where “diverse” often means Black as we are packaged as the quintessential other. When I conduct an image search of “diverse ads,” four of the five ads feature Black people (Fig. 22). And yet, we still do not see ourselves.

![Figure 22. “Diverse” Ads.](image)

As women of color, we are not only represented in opposition to whiteness, but also, as one participant noted, in opposition to each other within the limited space given
to othered bodies in media. Lastly, it is interesting to note how several women hesitated
to regard other women of color as being represented or underrepresented because they
do not encounter them. This lack of engagement with communities outside of our own
can be explained by the various media vehicles we attend to (i.e., streaming services
and social media). The accounts we follow on Instagram and ads that are delivered to
us on Hulu are indicative of the filter bubbles we operate in. A filter bubble refers to the
“intellectual isolation that can occur when technology companies use algorithms to feed
users information and content that they will like, based on their interests, location, past
searches, click history, and more” (All Sides, 2019). While much attention has been
given to the political implications of filter bubbles (Flaxman et. al, 2016; Stewart, 2018), I
believe greater attention should be devoted to how they affect interpersonal
communication (offline) and reinforce the racial segregation we see today in
neighborhoods and schools (Archer, 2019; Ellen, 2019).

**Theme 2: Normal and Growing Tired of the “Norm”**

RQ5 asks: In what ways do they identify with the ads? The two sorting exercises
provide the opportunity to explore this question in depth. When evaluating the appeal of
an ad and whether they identified with the women featured, participants considered
relatability, how their race or culture was represented, the overall aesthetic of the image,
personal interests and existing attitudes toward the brand. It was also interesting to
learn their process. Participants, again, varied in whether they evaluated the image
only, image and caption or everything (image, caption and brand). There were several
instances in which a participant was surprised to learn of the brand responsible for the
post. The observation of polarizing posts reveals multiple interpretations of a single ad and provides evidence for what we already know; that we are not monolithic groups.

As mentioned previously, Instagram is a powerful, multimodal form of semiotic software. It is designed in such a way that the image is the most visible feature of a post as users scroll through their feed. Though some of us spend time looking at the image, the user who posted it and the accompanying caption, we are just as likely, or more likely given this dopamine-driven application’s ability to govern our time (Haynes, 2018), to evaluate a post based on the image alone as we uncritically scroll. It is a mediated environment in which we are more susceptible to advertising, namely indistinguishable advertising, and with our defenses down, how are we to discern a post by a friend from a branded one? How are we to protect ourselves from advertising’s influence?

Commonalities emerge among participants in their evaluation of appeal, assessment of identification and negotiation of authenticity. Brands which were considered most appealing among participants (Instagram and Urban Decay 2) also happen to be the brands within the social media and cosmetics industries. They were considered appealing for their depiction of the women featured (relatability and representation of race/culture) and makeup application (personal interest). What is also interesting is that the brand considered least appealing overall (Walmart) is within the grocery retail industry. The high fashion brands (Michael Kors and Gucci) were the most polarizing overall. Arguably, the observed commonalities speak to both existing attitudes towards the brand, industries and perhaps the brands’ understanding of women of color as an audience.
The most identifiable brands overall were Instagram and YouTube, both belonging to the social media industry. These were the ads most likely to be perceived as relatable and as being typical of a post the participants would post themselves. Least identifiable overall were the Urban Decay, Sephora and Michael Kors ads. These ads included women who were perceived as unrelatable and the ads themselves were seen as typical and impersonal. What is most interesting is that the ads which participants identified with the most (Instagram and YouTube) were also perceived to be most authentic. Participants see themselves as the normal, everyday people that are represented in these ads and disassociate from traditional, staged, and professionally shot images. These depictions of women of color are seen as unrealistic and more typical of the norm.

Theme 3: The Paradox of Authenticity

RQ6 asks: Do they consider the ads to be inclusive, persuasive and/or authentic? Well, it depends. Contrary to literature which suggests greater favorability towards ads featuring people of the same race or ethnic identity (Johnson & Grier, 2015; Whittler & Spira, 2002), the truth is more nuanced. Yes, each ad featured a woman of color, but they were not all read as being inclusive of how they see and define themselves. It is clear, however, that ads which are deemed inclusive or appropriately representative of one’s race and/or culture are also seen as authentic and favored by participants. I argue, too, that these ads are persuasive and that this speaks to Jenkins (2017) assessment of indistinguishable advertising.

For participants, authentic means a candid picture that is natural and non-posed. Authenticity is tied to representations of real, everyday people and, again, genuine
representations of race and culture. In contrast, non-authentic ads were ones in which the women appeared posed, photoshopped and as if they were selling something. Previous research supports this finding. A textual analysis of popular magazines revealed three authenticity tropes: “promoting natural, organic products; the celebration of ordinary-looking women and the encouragement of inner-directed self discovery” (Duffy, 2013, p. 132).

The YouTube and Instagram ads, which were considered most authentic, were also least likely to be perceived as ads. The YouTube ads were all forms of UGC as they were reposts from Instagram users. Here, a brand again captures, appropriates and repackages our likeness. As standalone posts, @itsmekellieb, @annieelainey and @emilydao_ possess power, hold autonomy. @annieelainey’s original post (Fig. 23) was a celebration of her perseverance as a disabled person. Reposted through YouTube, yea the image is the same, but we lose her voice and YouTube succeeds in projecting its brand as socially conscious by incorporating the #HispanicHeritageMonth hashtag, which was not the original intent for this post.
Here, we see that through reposting brands are able to capture and repackage our likeness while at the same time being able to strategically position themselves as socially conscious and inclusive. As explained by sociologist, J. Patrick Williams, consumer communities are now systematically utilized to compensate a loss of trust in the virtual market sphere by adding surplus-value to the products (user-generated content). Their non-economic activities provide forms of advertising that the market increasingly depends on. (Williams, 2016, n.p.)

Two of the Instagram ads highlighted important social justice causes, namely female empowerment (#dayofthegirl) and the recognition and celebration of
marginalized communities (#HispanicHeritageMonth). @conchitaqween’s original post (Fig. 24) was created for the purposes of selling her clothing.

![Original @conchitaqween Post](image)

Sure, having her image reposted on Instagram’s page can attract more users to her page and potentially increase orders for her, but what she stands to gain does not compare to the added value Instagram receives from using her. Being in a position in which you gain a little within this system is still a form of capitalistic exploitation. Also, again, #HispanicHeritageMonth was not the original intent of this post. These ads are further examples of what I have termed co-optations of consciousness.

As previously mentioned, indistinguishable advertising diminishes choice, privileges normalized segmented groups and contributes to gender disparity (Jenkins,
Here, authenticity reduces the likelihood that an ad will be perceived for what it is. By being misleading, it decreases the likelihood of our communities’ mobilization against advertising as an oppressive institution that appropriates our likeness for financial gain. It also decreases the likelihood of us realizing the dominant discourse being communicated because we do not attend to the ads with the level of skepticism or critique given to traditional advertising. Even several ads which were not considered authentic were also seen as just Instagram posts and not as ads.

Our conversations reveal how normalized segmented groups are privileged in these instances and narrow representations of inclusivity and diversity are produced and reproduced over and over (i.e., thin body type). Even more damning is the observation of an affinity towards ads that are authentic and preferences toward new forms of advertising as seen through the Instagram posts. Within capitalism, the quest for lifelong self-formation [is challenged] by providing an alternative postmodern interpretation of authenticity; one which amounts to practices of self-expression, experimentation with multiple identities, and in which individuals orient their lives towards selectable and interchangeable commercial lifestyles.

(Lamla, 2016, n.p.)

Lamla (2016, n.p.) goes on to argue that “struggles for authenticity imply struggles for recognition and therefore social reciprocity.” Women of color desire to be represented accurately and authentically, but what happens if we ever come to a point in which we are? Are we content with being completely absorbed into consumer culture? Then what? Are we free? Is the freedom to consume freedom?
Theme 4: Ideal Over Reality

RQ7 asks: Is there a consciousness of the dominant ideologies which influence representation? Since the Urban Decay 2 ad was analyzed for the purposes of uncovering dominant discourse, it is most appropriate for answering this question as it allows for a comparison between my reading of an ad and participants’ readings. From the analysis we learn that postfeminist and postracial discourse is communicated through this ad, and that the representation of these women speaks to a legacy of depicting racialized others in advertising via strategic ambiguity. Over half of participants (16) consider the ad most appealing for its use of multiple Black women, different makeup applications and hairstyles, and for its representation of a variety of races. While several participants praise the diversity appeal, others see through the brand’s attempt to sell inclusion. Dissenting voices found the ad to be typical of current multicultural ads found in media and it was criticized for appearing heavily edited and unrealistic. Two women critiqued the centering of the white woman and several questioned the brand’s intent. Not as many participants identified with the ad. Those who did likened the image to their own circle of friends and communities growing up. I argue that the image represents more of an ideal than a reality. I remember having a diverse group of friends as something to desire or claim growing up, much like saying “I like/listen to all kinds of music,” because it is a way to define yourself as someone who is accepting of everyone. One woman speaks to this:

“It shows that Urban Decay cares about women of all colors and backgrounds. So that's a great message to spread, especially in this generation, so I think brands are starting to catch on.” (9)
There are instances in which participants speak to, inexplicitly, the dominant ideologies which influence this multicultural ad:

“And this one I thought was neat ‘cause in Valdivia’s class we just learned about how typically, in an advertisement, if you’re going to do like multiracial right? It starts with the Black woman and then it fades in skin tone because the last thing advertisers want [you to see] is the white woman. So I thought this was interesting because it’s mixed and the Black lady is on the right side, which is normally not right, but at the same time the white woman is still in the middle. She's still centered.” (28)

“I would say [#8] because when looking up other ads I think I saw an Estee Lauder or Clinique ad, which showed three women of color, but yet the Black woman was a light-skinned Black woman, the Asian woman was very, almost white, the same complexion as the white woman. While they were trying to portray different races and skin tones, they weren't actually effectively showing the array of the foundation or whatever they were trying to sell...I'm ranking this as eight not because it's bad just ‘cause it is a company with a professional photoshoot maybe kind of pushing a certain idea...I'm still skeptical of seeing Asian women in ads.” (21) (previously quoted)

While there is some awareness of the dominant ideologies being pushed and criticism of the brand’s intent, there is greater support for what the image represents, an idealized portrayal of a society in which our differences are celebrated, are visible, and
different representations of beauty exist. One in which women proudly claim “look at me, I’m here (8),” and one in which we “all just come together (11)” and “get along (11).”
CHAPTER 4: FINAL THOUGHTS

4.1 IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

This study combines social semiotics with in-depth interviewing while operating through a womanist lens. It provides evidence for the perpetuation of dominant discourse in contemporary advertising and explores the ways in which women of color are empowered to perceive and negotiate varied representations of themselves through an advertising medium (Instagram). Regarding the semiotic analysis, the ability to unearth dominant discourse in the Urban Decay ad confirms the applicability of van Leeuwen’s (2008) method for contemporary digital advertising. For example, we observe the brand’s use of race as an appeal while, ironically, attempting to communicate a post-racial, or beyond race, ideal. The analysis also reinforces critical discourse analysis as an appropriate tool for investigating discourse and for extracting underlying meaning. Through this approach I have learned a new way of interpreting the representation of others.

There are several practical implications to discuss. For one, the industry (brands, agencies and individuals alike) must take responsibility for the communication of dominant discourse, especially when the decision is made to include women of color. To reiterate Gurrieri et. al (2016, p. 1463), “[the] industry plays a powerful role in shaping and directing the representational practices of advertising in society...this is enacted in subtle and opaque ways that simultaneously work to obscure the power relations at play and maintain the interests of industry.” The reality is that communities of color are oppressed and that advertising is a capitalist institution that exploits their
oppression. Second, as members of marginalized communities, we must exert greater
discernment towards ads which attempt to represent us. We can start by making a
conscious assessment of the ads that we are exposed to, by adopting a broad definition
of advertising and by being aware of the various ads and appeals (i.e., authenticity) that
we encounter on any given day so they may lose their power; especially those which
subtly communicate dominant discourse. I also advocate for the continued cancelling
and boycotting of brands (see Gucci Blackface and Dolce & Gabbana Chopsticks
references in Chapter 3), which are overtly insensitive and disrespectful.

For those of us who are members of marginalized communities and choose to
work within the industry, women of color advise that you include more body types, all
shades, different personas, more women of color and everyday folk. They want to be
listened to, want to see themselves and want to be represented outside of normative
beauty standards. Now, imagine that tireless effort and increased diversity within the
industry actually leads to these desires being realized. What then? Are we content with
being accepted and affirmed in the capitalist realism world of advertising while we still
suffer in real life? That’s false advertising. I can also see how members of the industry
could use this research for the purposes of improving the effectiveness of ads which
target and depict women of color. I would rather you didn’t.

Lastly, through my conversations with other women of color I learned that they
too understand what it is like to be othered in society and media. They realize all too
well that inauthentic, narrow and stereotypical representations of our communities
negatively affect our sense of self and feeling of belonging, and that this is especially
true for our youth. These shared understandings provide opportunities for us to organize
against being devalued. One suggestion I have is to develop media, visual and advertising literacy courses for kids, as well as people of all ages, to better defend ourselves against misrepresentation, overconsumption and unrealistic ideals. These literacy interventions, such as the one implemented by Nelson (2015), have proven effective in, for example, increasing children’s persuasion knowledge.

4.2 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The analysis of the Urban Decay 2 ad can be improved by integrating other approaches, such as that of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), which, by uncovering the representational, interactive and compositional meanings of an image, can provide a more technical analysis. Furthermore, an entire study could be dedicated to the appropriative nature of Urban Decay, its racially coded discourse and the legacy of problematic beauty brands. I see my level of visual literacy as a limitation and believe that I would have benefitted from taking a photography or visual culture course. Also, I find the analysis of only one ad to be a limitation. A semiotic analysis of all of the ads included in this study would have provided greater opportunity to investigate the ways in which participants are aware of the dominant ideologies that are communicated in the ads.

Another limitation involves my selection of the ads, including not having a full post to show the Black women who encountered the Urban Decay ad and the low quality screenshot of the Walmart ad featuring an Asian woman. Also, I would have benefitted from recruiting women who identified as Asian and Latina to confirm my reading of racial identities outside of my own. I intentionally selected ads featuring
women who shared participants’ racial identities because I sought to understand how participants perceived advertisers attempts to depict people “like” them. Again, do they feel finally included, pandered to or even care? However, this too can be seen as a limitation because as complex human beings we are more than our race and gender. A future study could show all 25 ads to each participant for further discussion and engagement.

Regarding the interviews, I see the primary location, a cafe, as a limitation and would have benefitted from a quieter space that was not as crowded. This space could have provided participants with a greater level of comfort. I say this because I remember that several women hesitated as they were sharing their opinions on representation because we were in a public place and other people were seated nearby. Also, regrettably, I was unable to locate the interview recording for participant 25 when it came time for the analysis. Although I took notes throughout the discussion, I am discouraged by not being able to capture her voice, more fully, in this study.

This study is a materialistic analysis of oppression. By focusing on these women’s identities as consumers, no space is provided for the other ways in which their humanity is devalued or even affirmed in other spaces. Also, the majority of participants were advertising students. I view this positively because they are on their way into the industry and I believe we were able to engage an important topic, but I also see this as a limitation because they, arguably, have higher persuasion knowledge. There is also the potential for social desirability bias because those who are seeking a career in the industry have already bought in to or, at least, see advertising as an institution that can be changed from within. It would be interesting to conduct the same study with more
non-advertising students to understand how they define advertising and perceive representation. The majority of participants also self-identified as middle class and thus this study does not provide a voice for working class and poor communities who are disregarded as target audiences by advertisers, further rendering them invisible. Future studies should consider other identities, such as class, age group, sexuality, ability and level of education, as a point of analysis, in addition to race and gender. I am also very interested in how this approach could be utilized for analyzing the representations of men of color, especially Black men, and how they see themselves represented in advertising.

Lastly, I do not see this as a limitation, but I do believe it is important to acknowledge that I am curious as to how I would have interpreted and concluded this research through another lens. As previously mentioned, my identities shape and influence my subjective reality of the world and of people. I do not believe that it is any fault to mine—on the contrary, it is celebrated—and from this position I am appreciative of my double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903). It is my curiosity that wonders how another researcher, with a different worldview than mine, would read the data. Though not seen as a limitation, this observation does lend itself to a future research idea. A future study could incorporate several readings and interpretations of the same ad from multiple researchers in order to investigate the ways in which our subjective realities inform our approaches as researchers.

Semiotics is just one way to analyze images and investigate the signs and symbols that are communicated in media. Visual grammar theory, though developed to investigate visual texts, is based within the school of linguistics. A future study could
take a critical approach that comes out of media studies. For example, Schreiber’s (2017) proposed framework for analyzing visual communication on social media, namely Instagram and Facebook. Within this framework, pictures (visual analysis), practices (content and framing analysis) and platforms (structural analysis) are identified as the dimensions of analysis. Future research could also combine social semiotics with other qualitative analysis methods as well as consider focus groups instead of interviews. My original plan was to conduct focus groups for the simple fact that I hoped participants, through the sharing of experience, would receive healing benefits from their participation, such as feeling less alone and feeling understood by their peers.

An analysis of ads from a different medium, such as Twitter, and an investigation of videos or gifs rather than images would provide greater insight into semiotic software and the multimodality of visual texts. I also wonder if I would benefit from choosing ads which fell within single campaigns, so that there would be a greater level of comparison among the ads shown to each racial group. The set of ads for Gucci were arguably the most similar along with the set of Urban Decay ads.

4.3 CONCLUSION

In our conversations we laughed, shared, agreed and disagreed. I learned of what it means for women of color to feel (mis)represented in advertising and media and of how they negotiate the representations we are subject to. Though they were asked to sort ads which I deemed to be inclusive of women who shared their racial identity, the exercise involving the image they brought in empowered them by providing space to bring their understanding of identity and authenticity to me, and to further educate me.
on the matter. Furthermore, I appreciated the opportunity to exchange ideas and understandings with a group of women that I likely never would have met if it had not been for this study. Let alone meet and discuss this topic as there are no institutions or spaces on campus to facilitate these encounters.

Women of color consider their inclusion to be a measure of their visibility and given respect in society. As in the past, the complexity of our communities continues to be misrepresented and the lack of pluralistic representation communicates to women who do not ascribe to beauty standards or norms that they are less desirable or unattractive; outside of an ideal. The ideal for women of color entails lighter skin, thin or curvy body types, non-kinky hair and a presentation of self that is uncompromised by imperfection. More importantly, being left out communicates to them that they are not accepted by dominant culture. This stands as a reinforcement of their daily lives as members within the margins of society. Most of these women desire to be represented authentically. Authenticity for them entails genuine, everyday portrayals that are atypical of the norm. Today, brands are increasingly successful at packaging authenticity. They are even in a position to do so at no cost or effort to them by utilizing strategies, such as reposting. These “new and improved” representations, along with the empowered representations that are trending, are just as problematic as the stereotypical representations of the past. What is worse, however, is that we are not all giving critical attention to what appears, on the surface level, as an indication of progress.

Qualitative knowledge of the ways in which Black, Latina and Asian women are portrayed in advertising and their perceptions of their portrayal helps to address the issue of how advertising can represent difference without exploiting it or portraying
racialized communities as monoliths or through normative standards. One could argue that it is important to include models of various identities, body types, skin tones, hair textures and facial features. The thinking here is that if brands are going to sell an experience, sell one which is authentic and representative of the lives that marginalized communities live. It makes sense except for the fact that within the context of advertising, the differences that are recognized and “celebrated” are being exploited by a capitalist institution that devalues our humanity. The push for pluralism and authenticity does not substitute for equality.

As seen through analysis of the Urban Decay 2 ad, advertisers have begun to incorporate social justice rhetoric, such as racial equality, to appeal to increasingly conscious communities of people. Beneath the surface, however, lies their true purpose—financial gain and the strengthening of capitalist power. For the community of advertisers with commendable intentions, I too once thought that the system could be changed from within. It cannot. Intentions aside, there is no escaping the dire effects that this institution has on our collective psyche and its devaluation of our humanity. There is no room for negotiation when confronting an institution which profits off of oppression by commodifying difference to maintain systems of power and by co-opting consciousness which detracts from ongoing efforts for liberation. Difference is not something to be exploited. It is a tool for liberation. A force available to us for building solidarity as we prepare for our becoming; for our freedoms.
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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT FLYER

A DISCUSSION ON MULTICULTURALISM IN ADVERTISING

The purpose of this research is to facilitate space for Black, Latinx, and Asian women to interpret ads featuring women who share their racial identity.

SHARE YOUR VOICE

Participate in a 30-45 minute interview +
Be entered to win a $25 Visa gift card

Participation Qualifications:

• Self-identify as woman
• Self-identify as Black or/and Latina
• Born or raised in the US

SIGN UP TODAY

URL is case sensitive

Questions? Email jm19@illinois.edu
APPENDIX B: IDENTITY QUESTIONNAIRE

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your academic class standing?
   - First-year
   - Sophomore
   - Junior
   - Senior
   - Graduate or Professional

2. What is your student residency?
   - In-state student
   - International student
   - Out-of-state student

3. Were you born and/or raised in the United States?
   - Yes
   - No, please explain: ________________________________

4. Race/Ethnicity (Select all that apply):
   - American Indigenous or Alaska Native
   - Black, Afro-Caribbean or African American
   - East Asian or Asian American
   - Latinx or Hispanic American
   - Middle Eastern or Arab American
   - Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   - Non-Hispanic White or Euro American
   - South Asian or Indian American
   - An identity not listed, self-identify _______

5. We realize that the racial/ethnic category you selected encompasses many different nationalities. If you are interested in sharing more, please describe your nationality (i.e., Armenian, Puerto Rican, Vietnamese): _______

6. Gender:
   - Genderqueer or gender nonconforming
   - Man
   - Non-binary
   - Transgender
   - Woman
   - An identity not listed, self-identify _______
7. Sexual Orientation:
   - Asexual
   - Bisexual
   - Gay
   - Heterosexual
   - Lesbian
   - Pansexual
   - Queer
   - Questioning or unsure
   - An identity not listed, self-identify ______

8. Have you been diagnosed with a disability of impairment?
   - Yes
   - No

9. If yes to Question 8, select all that apply. Otherwise continue to the next question.
   - A sensory impairment (vision or hearing)
   - A mobility impairment
   - A learning disability (e.g., ADHD, dyslexia)
   - A mental health disorder
   - A disability or impairment not listed, please specify ______

10. Would you describe your family as:
    - Low Income
    - Lower-middle Income
    - Middle Income
    - Upper-middle Income
    - High Income
    - I prefer not to answer