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**GENDER REPRESENTATION IN ADVERTISING: THE CASES OF  
AMERICAN APPAREL AND CALVIN KLEIN**

Course of Communication Practices, Diversity and Inclusion

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# **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1 - LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	<b>6</b>
1.1 Literature review	7
1.1.1 Ideal Beauty Standard	7
1.1.2 Gender stereotypes and Gender Roles	7
1.1.3 Sexualization and Objectification	8
1.2 The Beijing Platform for Action	9
<b>CHAPTER 2 - METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1 Coding System	12
2.2 The Sample	14
2.3 Work division	17
2.3.1 Cultural backgrounds	18
<b>CHAPTER 3 - VISUAL ANALYSIS</b>	<b>19</b>
3.1 First decade: 1990-2000	19
3.1.1 American Apparel	19
3.1.2 Calvin Klein	21
3.2 Second decade: 2000-2010	23
3.2.1 American Apparel	23
3.2.2 Calvin Klein	26
3.3 Third decade: 2010-2020	28
3.3.1 American Apparel	28

3.2.2 Calvin Klein	31
<b>CHAPTER 4 - DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS</b>	<b>34</b>
4.1 Where are we now: 2024	37
4.1.1 American Apparel	38
4.1.2 Calvin Klein	39
4.1.3 Comparison of American Apparel and Calvin Klein advertisement campaigns in 2024	41
<b>CONCLUSIONS</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>WEB RESOURCES</b>	<b>47</b>

## INTRODUCTION

Gender representation is a cultural and social issue that influences how societies perceive and understand gender roles. In particular, gender representation in advertising contributes to said aspect, not only by reflecting social norms but also by reinforcing and perpetuating stereotypes, influencing how individuals see themselves as well as others. Indeed, the visual and linguistic tools used by advertisers often portray men and women in rigid and strict roles, emphasising the traditional idealisation of masculinity and femininity and preserving harmful biases that limit self-expression and diversity.

In recent years, there has been a growing need for a more balanced and non-stereotypical representation of gender in advertising, leading to the rise of gender equality movements, such as those inspired by the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) - adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women (4-15 September 1995, Beijing) - which increasingly call for a critical examination of how the media shape cultural perceptions and narratives.

The Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) is a pivotal document, which defines a comprehensive programme of rules and commitments to promote and support the thorough development of women's rights in order to reach a state of equality with men. The BPfA includes a set of principles for future actions and strategies, proposing a clear agenda for women's empowerment and emphasising the importance of integrating the gender perspective into both national and international policies (Philippine Commission on Women, Beijing Platform for Action).

In 2025, BPfA+30 will take place. This will be an occasion during which the achievements on gender equality following the integration of the Platform, thirty years later, will be discussed. This paper is set within this context, with the aim of taking a critical look at the results achieved so far.

Given the significant influence of advertising on shaping gender perceptions, this research was created with the intention of visually examining the portrayal of women and men in 12 advertising campaigns published by the two fashion brands Calvin Klein and American Apparel's over a three-decade timespan (1990-2020), focusing on how these brands shape gender images and reflect or reinforce societal norms. A simple and short review of the actual marketing campaigns of both brands will also be provided.

The choice to focus on a 30-year period is justified by the authors' desire to assess whether the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 has led to an evolution in the way male and female genders are represented in advertising nowadays.

Through an analysis of selected campaigns, we investigate key issues including gender representation through bodily depiction, the disparities in images crafted for each gender, and the roles of aesthetic inequality and gender-related stereotypes. This study also addresses the broader issues of discrimination, cultural sexualization, and aesthetic biases, aiming to uncover the underlying factors that contribute to gender inequality in high-profile fashion advertising.

Our work will be guided by the objectives outlined in Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action, with a particular focus on Strategic Objective J2:

«Promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media» (BPfA, 1995).

This framework highlights both the purpose and the significance of our research.

Existing literature already highlights the frequent sexualization and objectification of women in advertising, as well as the stereotypical roles and narratives concerning the male depiction; however, this research aims to go deeper and try to identify the existence of positive examples of neutral and non-stereotyped gender representation in advertising and media panorama in general.

The authors' final objective is to propose a set of good practices and examples to promote a critical and responsible approach to analysing and observing marketing campaigns and advertising commercials involving body representation of both men and women, in order to encourage a more aware and gender-sensitive approach.

By analysing Calvin Klein and American Apparel's evolution in terms of body depiction in commercials, the authors of this paper hope to raise awareness among their peers and train future communicators towards a more mindful visual and linguistic approach to gender and body related issues, as well as uprooting stereotypes and biased representations of women and men, in order to promote a more inclusive and neutral future market and media scape.

In particular, it is crucial to provide the motivations for the authors' choice to analyse two fashion brands such as American Apparel and Calvin Klein. Indeed, the two brands were selected for their role in shaping the fashion industry's advertising strategies and their bold, often inflaming and controversial, marketing campaigns. These brands have been at the forefront of using provocative imagery to challenge norms, making them the ideal subjects for studying the evolution of gender representation in the mediascape and advertising.

From the brands' respective web pages, significant statements about their identity emerge:

«[...] Born out of a desire to create meaningful design and premium quality, we've built an icon that stands strong amidst fleeting trends. Our origins are rooted in a philosophy that values the true essence of style, durability, and 100% commitment to quality. [...]

Our journey is a testament to creative excellence and social consciousness. We're not just about creating style, we're about making a difference. [...] So here's to American Apparel®- The icon, the original.

Always here, always true, always lasting forever» (American Apparel, Our Story).

«Calvin Klein is a prominent global fashion brand with a rich history of breaking boundaries.

Established in 1968 in New York, the brand's product design and communication reflect a minimalist and sensual aesthetic that celebrates limitless self-expression.

The Calvin Klein brand is known for its iconic underwear with CK logo waistband and recognisable designer jeans, including the 90s straight. Calvin Klein also delivers designer apparel, shoes and accessories that aim to elevate everyday essentials.

Calvin Klein's inclusive philosophy is further strengthened by its unisex clothing range and inclusive sizing options» (Calvin Klein, Homepage).

By reading these statements, it is quite evident that both brands claim they want to “make a difference” in the fashion and design landscape. However, what exactly does “*making a difference*” mean?

This concept is volatile, empty of meaning.

In the authors' opinion, it is clear and objective that, as both are clothing brands - particularly of underwear - their advertising communications are fertile ground for the growth and spread of gender stereotypes.

But is it really necessary to sexualise and objectify the female and male figure in order to promote clothing? And above all, can such promotion be done from an inclusive perspective, representing people of different age groups, with different bodies and physicalities, belonging to different ethnicities?

We firmly believe in the importance of gender equality and a fair representation of the diversity that characterises today's world. Therefore, this study aims to highlight the injustices still perpetuated in the advertising industry - and also more generally in the mediascape and society itself.

Hence, the question the authors asked themselves, and which will guide the entire research project, is:

*Did the introduction of the Beijing Platform for Action's Strategic Objective J2 in 1995 really lead to a concrete change in gender representation in the media landscape? And, if not, what can be otherwise improved?*

For future generations. For a more equitable, inclusive and conscious world. A world where advertising not only reflects the diversity of society, but also contributes to shaping it positively.



## **CHAPTER 1 - LITERATURE REVIEW**

In the contemporary world that is ruled by capitalist ideologies, companies work towards a common goal, which is making a profit. One of the most relevant channels that has acted as catalyst in the commercialization and promotion of consumer goods is advertising, which is believed to be one of the economic engines of the capitalistic system, as well as a tool used to reproduce meanings, values and cultural models of the consumer society. Almost all industries and brands are now relying on advertisements to promote their products and services, as well as their own image and universe of values and symbols as a brand. While advertising campaigns are proven to bolster profits, one must also take into consideration the cultural resonance of the images and concepts that are being portrayed and promoted, which might end up supporting narratives, ideologies and certain stereotypes that have the power to cause harm to specific societal groups.

In the case of advertisements related to clothing brands, said concerns refer to gender-related issues, especially those regarding body depiction, roles representation as well as sexualization and objectification. Our analysis will be focusing on how the advertisements produced by Calvin Klein and American Apparel's, two American clothing brands, have been reinforcing said perspectives, furthering gender-related stereotypes and biases that are connected to physical appearance, which lead to the victimization and objectification of female models on one hand, and the sexualization of men and of toxic masculinity on the other.

## *1.1 Literature review*

### *1.1.1 Ideal Beauty Standard*

It is established that consumer's values and thinking processes can be influenced by the media. Amongst those values are the ideal body types that are shown in digital spaces. For instance, Heiss (2011) points out that the way beauty is represented will have ramifications when determining what the ideal beauty standard is, whether from a societal point of view or an individual's own reflection on what their body should look like. Furthermore, advertisements can reinforce that the body types shown in these ads such as being blonde, tall, young, and thin is the norm for women (Heiss, 2011). The bombardment with such body types would lead to having the same expectations regarding one's own self. Therefore, women would strive to achieve these unrealistic expectations and to attain what is considered to be a "normal" body, which can lead to developing a negative body image (Heiss, 2011).

When it comes to how men are portrayed in the media, they are often depicted as tall and muscular (Allen & Mulgrew, 2020), as well as clean-shaven. The authors argue that men subjected to these idealized body types are more likely to suffer from body dissatisfaction and dysphoria, as well as feelings of depression. This is due to the fact that men compare their bodies to the idealized ones showcased in the advertisements, leading to the perception that they do not have bodies that are considered desirable by the societies they're part of (Allen & Mulgrew, 2020).

### *1.1.2 Gender stereotypes and Gender Roles*

Gender stereotypes are deeply rooted in today's societies and have the ability to operate on a subconscious level. As discussed above, the media play a crucial role in cementing those roles, a process that is catalysed by advertisements. To further explain,

gender stereotypes are used to showcase women as submissive and weak with men being strong and independent, a stereotypical and biased narrative which is heavily used in today's media (Allam, 2018). This becomes an issue when it becomes clear that such stereotypes and interpretations can have an effect on the opportunities that are given to women. For example, according to Grau and Zotos (2016), these stereotypes can alter one's expectations regarding themselves or their social category which could trump opportunities towards certain groups.

### *1.1.3 Sexualization and Objectification*

It has been established that media are one of the most influential and dominant ways of conveying ideals. With advertisements proliferating in the media, it is important to address how women and men are represented, especially when it comes to the extent to which these models are being sexualized and objectified. It is widely accepted that women are more likely to be portrayed as sexual objects compared to men (Ward, 2003); however, there is also the tendency to objectify men and their bodies (Johnson, McCreary, & Mills, 2007, as cited in Rollero, 2013). As previously mentioned, media have a huge effect on how people perceive themselves and others (Heiss, 2011). When men are subjected to objectified images of themselves, their positive affect decreases (Rollero, 2013). When it comes to women, not only do their positive affect decrease, but so does their sense of attractiveness and self-esteem (Rollero, 2013). Furthermore, advertisements that present women as "sexual objects" can strengthen gender roles among men (Lanis & Covell, 1995). Gender roles are defined as a set of characteristics that are given to an individual based on their perceived gender. These traits are grouped into different classifications, such as *physical features*, *assigned roles* and *positional status* (Eisend, 2019). These traits have both masculine and feminine aspects that are attributed to both genders: the representation of women as "sexual objects" can in fact align with the gender role that women should be submissive.

## *1.2 The Beijing Platform for Action*

The *Beijing Platform for Action* (BPfA) was not just another conference; it was a monumental achievement, bringing together 189 national governments in addition to the gathering of 50,000 women and men activists (Whelan, 2010). This conference was the culmination of work that had started over more than two decades earlier, when the United Nations declared 1975 the “International Year for Women” and then went on to declare 1975-1985 as the first “International Decade for Women” (Kabeer, 2005).

BPfA highlighted 12 key areas that need to be worked on in order to realize gender equality (Kabeer, 2005) and they are as follows:

1. Women and Poverty
2. Education and Training of Women
3. Women and Health
4. Violence Against Women
5. Women and Armed Conflict
6. Women and the Economy
7. Women in Power and Decision-Making
8. Insufficient Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women
9. Human Rights of Women
10. Women and the Media
11. Women and the Environment
12. The girl-child (UN Women, n.d.).

Now, almost 30 years later, it is crucial to look into the current state of the world and the progress that has been made in the attempt to achieve gender equality and equal opportunities for men and women. According to Allotey & Denton (2020), indisputable

advances have been made towards gender equality. Through indicators established to measure progress, many countries report their advancements in addressing the many areas hindering gender equality. However, progress is delicate, and it is important to acknowledge the exclusion of cultural, societal, and political reformations that realize the need to redistribute power across all dimensions of life (Allotey & Denton, 2020).

As discussed in previous segments of the literature review, the media have a huge impact on how people are viewed in their respective societies. Therefore, this project will be focusing on Strategic Objective J2 of the BPFA. The aim is to study how the representation of women and men have progressed throughout the decades in the advertising field, focusing on the progress that has been achieved in realizing said specific objective.

## **CHAPTER 2 - METHODOLOGY**

This is a qualitative study based on the analysis of 12 advertising campaigns from two fashion brands. The research sample will consist of selected ads and campaigns from brands American Apparel and Calvin Klein produced between the years 1990-2000, 2000-2010 and 2010-2020, featuring both women and men. This means that the research sample will be definite and purposive, allowing for the creation of a sample close to being representative.

Based on pre-existing literature, the study will provide an effective perspective on stereotypes about women that can also be extended to the media space. This will give us a solid foundation, allowing us to proceed with identifying and analysing contemporary research - academic articles on the representation of gender through bodily depiction, the disparities in images created for each gender, and the roles of aesthetic inequality and gender-related stereotypes in media spaces. We will also examine how these studies relate to Section J of the Beijing Platform and its integration in current research on gender, representation, and stereotyping in advertising. Therefore, the study will consist in an in-depth analysis of selected advertising campaigns, which have been chosen according to predetermined criteria such as the presence of men/women, year of creation, brand, stereotypes present in the campaign, and indications of areas for improvement.

The study and its results will be then reported in a website, specifically created as a final output, whose link will be provided at the end of the paper (see Conclusions).

## 2.1 Coding System

Using a pre-defined coding system provides a systematic approach to analyse the advertisements through different aspects such as age, gender, stereotypes, physical features and representation of the models as well as the implicit and explicit factors such as symbolism, and clothing. Such an approach leads to a better understanding of how the concepts of *male* and *female* were and still are depicted in advertisements, allowing us to uncover whether the media reinforce said typical gender-related stereotypes and biased narratives.

Combining said coding system with a comparison of the advertisements throughout a three decade span, our analysis will give an insight of the potential changes and developments the industry has undergone over the years, as well as the way in which campaigns such as the ones taken into account reflect the challenges and social norms that were - and still are related to the representation of gender in the media.

Themes	Sub-Themes	Category	Codes	Brief description
Representation of Individuals	Age	Age group of models	Children (1-12) Teens (13-19) Adults (20-50) Elderly (51+)	Captures the demographic focus of the campaign in terms of age.
	Physical Features	Focus on physical appearance and body image	Stereotypical Non-stereotypical	Highlights if the campaign emphasizes stereotypical traits (e.g., sexualized, specific body types) or promotes diverse and realistic depictions.
	Representation	Inclusion of diverse groups	Yes No	Determines if the campaign includes individuals from varied races, abilities, and body types.

Depiction of Roles and Activities	Character Roles	Roles assigned to models	Passive Active	Defines whether models are depicted in passive or active roles, e.g., lying down vs. engaging in purposeful actions.
	Stereotype Presence	Presence of stereotypes	Reinforces stereotypes Challenges stereotypes Neutral	Identifies whether stereotypes are perpetuated or challenged in the campaign.
	Settings	Context of portrayal	Private/Domestic Professional/Public Undefined/Neutral	Identifies the environment where the model is depicted, such as at home, work, or in neutral settings.
	Interaction	Type of interaction (if any)	Collaborative Hierarchical Isolated	Indicates the nature of interaction between models, including power dynamics.
Explicit Content	Clothing	Type of clothing featured	Sexualized Neutral	Analyses whether clothing is designed to sexualize the body or is neutral in appearance.
	Body Language and Expressions	Representation through body language and expressions	Suggestive/Submissive, Empowered/Neutral	Identifies if body language reinforces traditional roles or depicts models as empowered and autonomous.
	Text and Language	Type of accompanying language	Gendered Neutral/Inclusive	Evaluates whether the text reinforces stereotypes or uses inclusive language.
Implicit Content	Symbolism	Use of symbolic elements	Reinforcing stereotypes Challenging stereotypes	Examines implicit symbolism through elements such as colour, props, or setting.



	Implied Messages	Underlying societal norms or themes	Reinforcing traditional roles Subverting norms	Evaluates the deeper meanings or ideologies presented in the advertisement.
Evaluation of Progressiveness	Evolution Across Decades	Comparison of representation trends across time	Improvement Stagnation Regression	Tracks how campaigns change over time in promoting gender-sensitive and inclusive representations.
	Alignment with Gender-Sensitive Goals	Alignment with Strategic Objective J2 of the Beijing Platform	Yes No	Assesses if campaigns adhere to the goal of balanced, non-stereotyped portrayals of women and men.

*Table 2 - Coding system*

## *2.2 The Sample*

The sample presented in the posters below consists of a selection of advertisements produced by Calvin Klein and American Apparel, that, according to the authors of this paper, most evidently showcase the evolution of trends and biases regarding gender representation and body image.

By using said coding system, this research will allow for a systematic analysis of the advertisements by taking into account different aspects, such as age, gender, stereotypes, and physical features, in addition to the implicit and explicit factors, such as symbolism and clothing.

Through these approaches, we found it easier to uncover whether or not the advertisement reinforced the typical stereotypes around male and female models in the advertisement industry through the selected years 1990-2020.



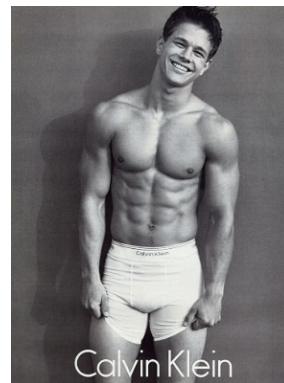
American Apparel - Women  
1995: 'Fresh Funk for Girls'



American Apparel - Men  
1996: 'Who is American Apparel'



Calvin Klein - Women  
1995: 'Underwear' - starring Christie Turlington



Calvin Klein - Men  
1992: 'Underwear' - starring Mark Wahlberg



American Apparel - Women  
2009: 'Safe to say she loves her socks. Meet Lauren Phoenix'



American Apparel - Men  
2009: 'Meet Glen'



Calvin Klein - Women  
2009: 'Body' - starring Eva Mendes and Jamie Dornan



Calvin Klein - Men  
2002: 'Crave Campaign' - starring Travis Fimmel

**Tights.**



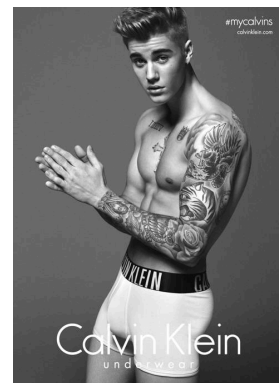
American Apparel - Women  
2012: 'Tights'



American Apparel - Men  
2010: 'Men's Boxer Short'



Calvin Klein - Women  
2015: 'the original sexy' - starring Joan Smalls



Calvin Klein - Men  
2015-2020: '#mycalvins' - starring Justin Bieber

 <p>American Apparel - Women 2024: 'Craft the Culture™'</p>	 <p>American Apparel - Men 2024: 'Craft the Culture™'</p>
 <p>Calvin Klein - Women 2024: 'Calvin Klein Pride'</p>	 <p>Calvin Klein - Men 2024: 'Calvin Klein Underwear Campaign'</p>

### 2.3 Work division

Given their diverse backgrounds, cultures, and genders, the authors decided that each of them would analyse two randomly assigned advertising campaigns. Such an approach provides an analysis from varied perspectives, resulting in a more comprehensive view of the findings. Individual analysis will be based on a set of codes chosen earlier by the group [Tab. 2]. After conducting individual analyses [Tab. 1], we will meet to discuss our findings, observations, and any patterns we'll have identified. Following this exchange, we will be able to collaboratively write a summary of our research and draw meaningful conclusions.

	<b>American Apparel</b>		<b>Calvin Klein</b>	
	women	men	women	men
1990-2000	Zuzia	Marta	Astrid	Dani
2000-2010	Giulia	Gioia	Marta	Zuzia
2010-2020	Dani	Astrid	Gioia	Giulia
+ 2024: monitoring of marketing campaigns published by these companies done by everybody (Zuzia, Gioia, Dani, Astrid, Marta, Giulia)				

*Table 1 - Work division*

### *2.3.1 Cultural backgrounds*

This research will be conducted by six students, from four different countries and cultures. Coming from different parts of the world would give us the opportunity to use our background and understanding of advertisement, resulting in a diverse and subjective interpretation of gender representation in advertising.

## CHAPTER 3 - VISUAL ANALYSIS

### 3.1 First decade: 1990-2000

#### 3.1.1 American Apparel



Fig. 1 - AA (1995), Fresh Funk for Girls

#### *Women representation*

The image [Fig. 1] depicts a young adult woman (20-50 y.o.) in a casual and authentic setting. Her clothing, a crop top, is presented in a natural and non-stereotypical way, nonetheless highlighting her prosperous breasts. The crop top appears practical and seasonally appropriate, avoiding any sexualization of the garment. The focus is on an ordinary person in a typical setting, rather than a glamorous or modelling image. The woman is presented as a recognizable, everyday figure, rather than

someone constructed to meet traditional fashion standards. Based on her features, the woman appears to be white, but this detail does not affect the message of the campaign, as inclusivity does not seem to be the focus.

She is depicted in a passive role, simply posing without any obvious action. The pose is relaxed, devoid of overt signs of submission or power. The image avoids clichés and stereotypical representations. Although the outdoor context is evident, the specific location - whether it is a house, a field or something else - remains indistinct due to the lack of clarity of the background. Since there is only one subject in the frame, there are no interactions with others to analyse.

The title “Fresh Funk for Girls” uses gender-oriented language, but does not carry particularly stereotypical connotations. The woman’s body language and expressions appear to be natural and neutral, in keeping with the objective tone of the text.

The image has no obvious implicit message that reinforces or challenges stereotypes; it takes the form of a direct, artifice-free representation of the subject. Overall, the image seems to convey a message of youth and simplicity, without resorting to explicit stereotypes or revolutionary content.



Fig. 2 - AA (1996), Who is American Apparel?

### *Men representation*

The following advertisement [Fig.2] shows three adult men (20-50 y.o.) and former CEO of American Apparel, Dov Charney. The three models are portrayed in a natural and non-sexualised way, while their physical appearance is neutral, avoiding emphasising stereotypical traits. A lack of inclusivity and diverse groups is evident, which could limit the appeal of the brand to a wider audience.

In terms of roles and activities, the models are presented in passive postures, without engaging in dynamic or purposeful actions. This passivity, combined with the neutral expressions, aligns with the neutral tone of the advertisement. While the representation does not reinforce traditional stereotypes, it does little to challenge or subvert them, leading to a more neutral portrayal. The setting appears to be informal and domestic, perhaps outdoors, while interaction between the models is minimal.

As for the explicit elements, the clothing is simple and neutral - in fact, these are very basic T-shirts. The body language and expressions of the models maintain a neutral tone, reinforcing the utilitarian message of the campaign. The accompanying text is equally neutral and focuses mainly on American Apparel's commercial capabilities, avoiding phrases that reflect gender stereotypes.



From an implicit point of view, the advertisement remains simple, without suggesting strong messages or themes that address or reinforce social norms: the message is focused on the reliability and accessibility of the brand rather than anything broader.

Overall, while this advertising aligns with traditional advertising norms (keeping the focus on the product), it misses the opportunity to take a more inclusive or forward-looking approach.

### 3.1.2 Calvin Klein

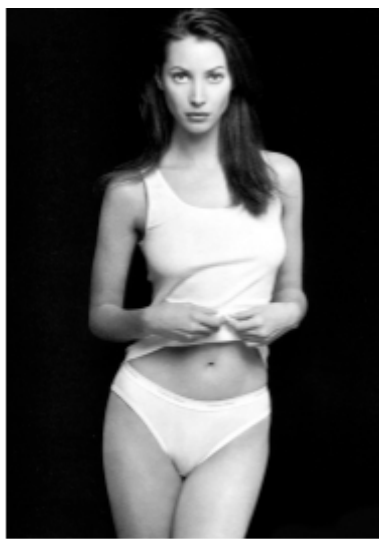


Fig. 3 - CK (1995), Underwear

#### *Women representation*

The poster [Fig. 3] features the American fashion model Christy Turlington. In this Calvin Klein advertisement, the model is portrayed as an adult (20-50 y.o.). *Underwear*, as is the name of this advertisement, was released in 1995. In this case, the representation of the female figure is less prominent than in the other advertisements we will present in this paper.

During the 1990s, the advertisement industry got influenced by the aesthetic of minimalism and simplicity, as can be seen

in this advertisement by Calvin Klein. Turlington (the model) is placed in front of a black canvas wearing simple white underwear and a white crop top. By having a clean and simple background, and by wearing simple clothing, Turlington's feminine figure becomes more visible. The lighting of the advertisement makes her figure more prominent, but without being overly sexual.

Regardless of the pose and the clothing being simple, the brand can't avoid the stereotyped representation of the female figure, which is deeply rooted and connected to the ideas of beauty and femininity. The clothing in this advertisement is simple and relaxed, but it is also



submissive and characterized by some kind of effortless sensuality and elegance, even though her pose is more calm and subtle than it is dramatic and revealing.

Overall, the simplicity and the minimalistic approach in this advertisement is prominent, and still answers the general suggestion of female representation in advertising.

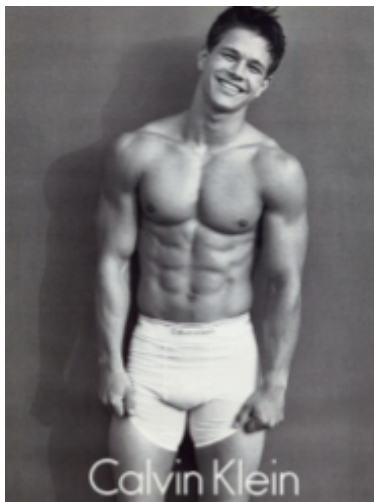


Fig. 4 - CK (1992),  
Underwear

#### *Men representation*

The poster [Fig.4] features actor Mark Wahlberg. At the time of shooting for this poster, Mark was an adult aged between 20 and 50. The model is showcasing the stereotypical body type for men in media, or as coined “the ideal body type”. Mark has a clearly defined and muscular body, a “perfect” white smile and a clean shaven face embodying the idealized body, reinforcing the idea or stereotype that looking this way

is the norm that men should try to achieve. Seeing as Mark is the only person in the advertisement, and more specifically, the only Caucasian man, there is no inclusion of diverse groups. Furthermore, the actor is assigned a passive role as he is seen taking a relaxed pose and smiling.

As for the setting, the advertisement seems to be taking place in a professional studio, as emphasised by the quality of the advertisement. Looking at the ad, there is no type of interaction since Mark is alone and the advertisement is a still image.

Moving on to choice of clothing, it is clear that this advertisement is for underwear, so one would assume that it is a neutral ad that is simply showcasing the product. However, taking a more comprehensive look, it would appear to be more of a sexualized advertisement. To further explain, there is no need to showcase the full body for a boxer ad, and in this case, it was a toned muscular figure. While it is true that the ad is targeted for men, the argument here is that women looking at the advertisement would take a liking to this sexualized aspect,

pushing their male partners to purchase such a product. Hence, this advertisement can be considered sexualized. The only piece of text accompanying the advertisement is the name of the brand, therefore, due to the lack of textual evidence, this advertisement is textually neutral.

It is important to note that this advertisement is considerably old (1992) at a time when stereotypes were accepted socially and the promotion of inclusive representations was absent, and such an advertisement reflected that reality. Therefore, it would be crucial to compare this advertisement to others from different decades moving forward and tracking how campaigns have progressed when it comes to promoting inclusivity.

### 3.2 *Second decade: 2000-2010*

#### 3.2.1 *American Apparel*



Fig. 5 - AA (2009), Safe to say she loves her socks. Meet Luaren Phoenix

#### *Women representation*

The image [Fig. 5] depicts a girl which could be reconducted to the young-adults age group (20-50 y.o.). Specifically, it presents Lauren Phoenix, a porn star. This leads to an evident - and unnecessary - sexualisation of women's bodies: she is completely naked, only wearing American Apparel's socks. Two questions arise: what was the need for the model to be naked in a picture that advertises socks? Does she really have to be in such a submissive and sexualized pose?

The ad perfectly reflects gender and body stereotypes: a sexy blonde white and skinny girl is looking directly into the customer's eyes in a seductive manner and acting completely passive and submissive. In fact, she sits on a couch, remarkably posing for someone. There are also three minor frames on the left - probably selected and taken from one of her videos -, where

Lauren is enacting actual attitudes associated with the sexual act, while laying on a bed. Plus, having her posing in a domestic context, might be a thought choice that the brand made to let the customers feel like they could wear American Apparel products in any context, even very familiar ones.

Another important thing to highlight about the visual context is that it is very minimalistic, enabling us to emphasize the model figure without any distractions. As a matter of fact, the body is situated in the centre of the composition and used as a tool to capture visual attention: the accent on the legs, covered in long striped socks, suggests - again - a subtle reminder of the general sexualisation around which the entire commercial revolves.

Double entendres pervade the commercial, even in its textual part: “Safe to say she loves her socks” suggests an implicit double meaning, connecting the idea of comfort to personal - and sexual - pleasure.

Basing on its content, it seems to be a men-oriented commercial, not only because of the image per se, but also because of the accompanying text: by saying “Meet Lauren Phoenix”, it is assumed that the character is known to the target audience - in the common ideal, men tend to consume more pornographic content than women.

In addition to being a clear example of sexualisation, the image fully reflects the limitations of representations of that period (2000-2010): it shows exclusively a young white woman, without any diversity in terms of ethnicity or gender identity.

What is more, the woman is shown as an object of desire, without an explicit narrative that underlines her individuality and empowerment.

### *Men representation*

The poster [Fig. 6] depicts an adult male aged between 20 and 50. The model is Caucasian, showing a non-stereotypical body type that isn't usually portrayed in the media.



Fig. 6 - AA (2009), Meet Glen

The “ideal” body type is typically a man with a clean and defined face with a muscular body type that is clean shaven. On the other hand, Glen does not have a defined face, nor a muscular build, and is not clean shaved as his is shown to be hairy along with his face, challenging the stereotypical image that men traditionally showcase in advertisements.

Furthermore, the model seems to have a passive role in this poster, where he is seen in a relaxed pose and not having an

active role. The setting of the ad appears to be a private one, as the image seems to be showing a domestic background resembling a house.

Since there is only one subject in the frame, there are no interactions with others to analyse. The poster shows hints of sexualization due to the lack of clothing that the model is wearing, as he appears to be in boxers and wearing an open hoodie showcasing his torso. Furthermore, the sexualization is emphasized by the written description of the ad, where it is implied that the subject loves to “show his other talents”, implying sexual activities.

The body language and the description of the ad appear to be neutral, not furthering neither dominant nor passive representations and narratives; both the setting and the photography are amateur looking, perhaps, giving the impression of being a product casually made by normal everyday people, rather than professional advertisers.

As far as the symbolism and the adherence to the Strategic Objective J2 of the Beijing Platform are concerned, this advertisement by American Apparel does not appear to convey a gender-neutral representation of the male actor. Despite portraying a man with a non-stereotypical body type, in fact, the potentially inclusive and unconventional depiction of the subject is immediately biased by his sexualization and objectification, which is highly

reinforced by the ambiguous and provocative description provided by the poster. By doing so, the advertisement ends up furthering stereotypes regarding gender roles and depiction.

### 3.2.2 Calvin Klein



Fig. 7 - CK (2009), Body

#### *Women representation*

In this Calvin Klein advertisement [Fig. 7] the model portrayed is an adult (20-50 y.o.). In this case, the representation of the female figure is deeply rooted in stereotyped ideals of beauty and femininity. Indeed, the emphasis is strongly on the physical appearance: the topless pose and the tight jeans draw attention to her body rather than to other aspects.

The model is portrayed in a passive role, aligning with the traditional ideal of the woman as an object of aesthetic attraction, which can fascinate the viewer. This reinforcement of stereotypes is also amplified by the body language, evoking sensuality and submission. The setting of the advertisement is neutral and undefined, to ensure that the focus is on the model; therefore, there are no interactions to analyse.

Elements, such as the poor clothing, further support the sexualised tone of the advertisement: the visual message is in fact centred on sensuality. The accompanying text, even if neutral, complements the provocative visual content.

On a symbolic level, the advertisement appeals to traditional gender scripts, implying that sensuality and physical beauty are fundamental to femininity. The absence of diversity in terms of race or body type underlines this limited perspective.

Ultimately, this advertisement does little to align with the progressive or gender-sensitive goals promoted by the Beijing Platform for Action's (1995) strategic objective J2. Rather than challenging social norms or stereotypes, it reinforces them by adhering to a conventional

representation of women.



Fig. 8 - CK (2002), Crave Campaign

### *Men representation*

In the photograph [Fig. 8] used in Calvin Klein's advertising campaign, actor Travis Fimmel is depicted at the age of 23. His physique can be considered stereotypical, with a fit and muscular build that aligns with traditional standards of attractiveness often featured in underwear advertisements. The campaign cannot be deemed representative or inclusive, as it focuses exclusively on the idealized physique of a white man, without accounting for racial, cultural, or body diversity.

The model's posture is passive, as he poses suggestively, looking directly at the camera without engaging in any active movement or interaction. The campaign embraces and even reinforces stereotypes by presenting traditional ideals of male beauty, emphasizing a muscular physique and sexualizing the image. The setting surrounding the model is undefined and neutral, with light visible through a window in the background. The composition is minimalist, directing attention to the model without suggesting a specific context or activity.

There is no interaction depicted in the photograph; the model is portrayed alone in a sexualized manner. The Calvin Klein underwear is designed to accentuate the model's physique, particularly the torso and hip areas. The model's body language and direct gaze exude confidence and attractiveness, aiming to capture attention and promote the product through an aspirational image.

The advertisement reinforces stereotypes through the use of a black-and-white image combined with a sexualized pose, creating a classic but stereotypical message that adheres to traditional norms of male beauty and ideals of masculinity. It implies that such a physique is

desirable and attainable. This campaign cannot be considered progressive, as it adheres to stagnant conventions, relying on similar patterns that have been used in advertising for years, with little evolution in terms of inclusivity or diversity.

The photograph does not align with Strategic Objective J2 of the Beijing Platform, as instead of promoting balanced and inclusive gender representation, it relies on traditional, stereotypical depictions of masculinity that disregard diversity or social balance. To achieve alignment, the campaign would need to present a broader spectrum of masculinity, accounting for diversity in roles, physiques, and contexts.

### 3.3 Third decade: 2010-2020

#### 3.3.1 American Apparel

## Tights.



Fig. 9 - AA (2012), Tights

#### *Women representation*

The advertisement [Fig. 9] showcases a young model (20-50 y.o.). The model appears to have a slender figure with emphasized physical characteristics such as large breasts. These characteristics adhere to the ideal

beauty standard that is assigned to women, which reinforces already existing stereotypes on how women should look. Furthermore, the model appears to be young, which also reinforces the idea that only young women are considered “pretty” and “attractive”, seeing as advertisers mostly choose young women as models. Seeing as the model is a Caucasian physically abled woman, there is no inclusion of diverse groups in this advertisement.

The model is depicted in an active role, engaging in a purposeful pose while stressing her face. The shot appears to have been taken in a domestic setting where the model is

presumably laying on a bed. The model is the only person present in this ad, hence, no interaction is occurring.

When it comes to the content of the advertisement, it appears to be an advertisement for tights, as seen in the image to the right. However, there was no need for the model to be topless to represent the product, further sexualizing her. Furthermore, the model appears to be in a submissive position where the camera angle is placed on top of the model mimicking a sexual position. This is reinforced by the model making a face that is usually present during intercourse. Moreover, there is one word accompanying the advertisement, “Tights”. While this represents the product that is being advertised, this word has a subliminal meaning which refers to a derogatory term referring to how “tight a woman is”. This is strengthened by the sexual position that was mentioned above.

This advertisement relied on using a stereotypical representation of women, while further sexualizing the model as a means to promote a product. It is safe to say that this advertisement shows regression. In addition, it does not align with the Strategic Objective J2 of the Beijing Platform for Action. Women are still viewed as sexual objects along with physical characteristics catering and appealing to men, while keeping in mind that this is an advertisement promoting a product for women. This advertisement further oppresses women, reducing them to mere objects that only exist to charm and allure men.



#### *Men's representation*

“Men's boxer short” [Fig. 10] is an advertisement posted by American Apparel in 2010 starring a young adult aged between 20 and 50. This advertisement depicts, unlike many other advertisements featuring men, a non-stereotypical body type. The model for this advertisement seems, according to the advert, to be the French model named Arnault.

Fig. 10 - AA (2010), Men's Boxer Short



American Apparel is known for its risky ads featuring females, and less for featuring men. However, when they do feature men in their advertisements, they often depict *less masculine men*. By being less masculine, we aren't suggesting that the male models are less of a man than others, but rather that the male models often have the typically non-idealised body. After examining a wide range of advertisements featuring men, we suggest that a typically idealised body is: a young man, with clearly defined muscles, a clean shaved face, and often also white teeth. Compared to the advertisement shown in Figure 4, Arnault does not as described depict the typically idealised body, though he does have a tone of muscle build. The advertisements featuring male models often portrays a more natural and unpolished body, with a hairy face and less clearly defined muscles. Even though this advert remains calm, relaxed, and depicts a non-stereotypical idealised body, the advertisement still shows hints of sexualisation due to the lack of clothing, as the model appears only in boxers. The setting of this advertisement remains calm and relaxed with the model sitting in front of a white canvas, and without too many interactions with other components, to analyse. This is if we look away from the text around the model, where the text seems over all unnecessary. Furthermore, discussing the symbolism of this advert and the adherence to the Strategic Objective J2 of the Beijing Platform, this advertisement does not appear to convey the gender-neutral representation of the male model. At first glance they might seem to convey this objective because of the portrayal of the masculine. Having a stereotypical body, but by sexualising them they end up furthering stereotypes regarding gender roles and depiction.

### 3.2.2 Calvin Klein

#### *Women representation*



Fig. 11 - CK (2015),  
#mycalvins

The Calvin Klein poster from 2015 [Fig. 11] showcases the Puerto Rican model Joan Smalls (20-50 y.o.) and is part of the #mycalvins campaign. The subject appears to have the body of a stereotypical model, it being very lean and evidently showing the features of the muscle mass underneath.

The model is photographed in a standing pose, leaning towards the camera while actively and suggestively staring at it and lowering her underwear. As her body language and facial expression suggest, the subject is intentionally adopting a

seductive approach to the audience, magnetizing the spectator's gaze and focusing all the attention on herself, almost as if the pose wasn't static and the model was about to completely remove the little clothing she's wearing.

Furthermore, the advertisement reinforces the already present stereotypes concerning the sexualized representation of the subject through the payoff positioned in the middle of the poster, quoting "the original sexy".

The context of the portrayal cannot be identified, as the photo appears to have been taken in a photographic set, whose professionalism is proved by the sculpting effects produced by the lighting. As the Puerto Rican model is the only subject present in the poster, her interaction with other actors cannot be analysed.

As far as the symbolism is concerned, the advertisement clearly furthers the stereotypes regarding female body representation and roles expectancy by portraying the model in a seductive attitude towards the audience while only wearing underwear, as well as lowering it and giving hints about what could happen if the photo wasn't static. By doing so, the poster

centralizes all the attention on the action that is being portrayed, and the underlying commercial purpose, i.e. the actual sale of the underwear, is obscured by the suggestive and provocative depiction of the model, her behaviour and attitude.

Despite being a relatively recent advertisement, this Calvin Klein poster starring Joan Smalls does not adhere to the guidelines and goals of the Strategic Objective J2 of the Beijing Platform for Action, precisely due to the severe sexualization of the female model; by doing so, instead of challenging the stereotypical gender representations, the advertisement ends up reinforcing them.



Fig. 12 - CK (2015-2020),  
#mycalvins

### *Men representation*

This Calvin Klein advertisement [Fig. 12] in collaboration with Justin Bieber - a famous pop singer - presents an image of modern masculinity, combining themes of confidence, sensuality and celebrity appeal.

The minimalist aesthetic, with its monochrome palette of blacks and whites, and clean composition, focuses entirely on Bieber's physicality and the product he models - Calvin Klein underwear. The idealized version of masculinity is given by the

merging of different elements on the same subject: the tattoos and the muscular build are accompanied by an intense - seductive, but, at the same time, of superiority - gaze, blending strength with a rebellious edge.

The portrayal heavily relies on eroticism, using the singer's confident and partially nude stance to appeal to a broad audience, addressing both men and women and, therefore, blending admiration and desire. Furthermore, the placement of the Calvin Klein logo on his waistband, accentuated by his posture, ensures brand prominence while linking the product to Bieber's globally recognized persona. This means that the ad speaks prevalently to a younger

demographic, particularly those influenced by Justin Bieber's cultural presence: it appeals to individuals seeking to associate themselves with his modern, edgy and self-assured image.

In addition, this deliberate alignment with his celebrity status positions the underwear as a lifestyle symbol of youth, confidence and modernity.

On the other hand, the focus on his physique mirrors the objectification often observed in female portrayals in media: his body becomes the central product - besides the underwear he's wearing -, aligning with the sexualized branding strategy of Calvin Klein. Regarding that, we could state that the emphasis on physical perfection and celebrity power perfectly exemplifies the broader media trends that often reinforce narrow standards of attractiveness.

The monochrome palette lends the image a timeless and sophisticated feel, consistent with Calvin Klein's branding choices. Plus, the clean and minimalist background emphasizes Bieber's body and the underwear, ensuring brand visibility.

Focusing exclusively on an idealized, homogeneous male body type, the advertisement reflects a lack of inclusivity, failing to represent diversity in terms of ethnicity or body shape.

To sum things up, the advertisement uses a combination of minimalist design, celebrity power and sexualized imagery to create a compelling narrative around masculinity and desirability, aligned with Calvin Klein's branding ethos.

## CHAPTER 4 - DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

This chapter will take into account and discuss the results of our analysis. Which was based on gender representation as a cultural and social issue that influences both how we perceive and understand gender roles in today's society.

The social norms and stereotypes that we can find in our society has become an integrated part of our lives and also in the way we communicate and advertise new ideas and concepts. When it comes to advertising, this is especially clear. Advertising brands all over the world have evolved significantly in the past years, especially after the introduction of the Beijing Platform for Action that we have already discussed.

American Apparel and Calvin Klein - the two advertising brands in this analysis - have both been discussed in the media for campaigns that have perpetuated the social and stereotypical understandings of gender roles and also the sexualization of bodies. Both clothing brands have published and depicted models that are breaking the boundaries and guidelines found in the Beijing Platform for Action. By breaking these boundaries, both American Apparel and Calvin Klein have both underlined and upheld the stereotypes and understandings of how to perceive gender.

Many of the campaigns published by the two brands, especially those posted by American Apparel, have depicted women as sexualized objects, The models are often being positioned in specific ways, along with the lack of clothing, to emphasize their physical attractiveness. This can be seen in several advertisements, i.e. the one from 2009 [Fig. 5] advertising socks, and the one from 2012 [Fig. 9] advertising tights. In the authors' opinion, it is not necessary for models to be naked to advertise a product. However, this trend is also visible in the advertisements posted by Calvin Klein - see Figure 11 from 2015 and Figure 7 from 2009.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed a lack of inclusive and diverse campaigns, featuring models from other and different origins. Indeed, during the research process a predominance of Caucasian models has been found; we only found one exception, which is the model depicted in Figure 9, posing for Calvin Klein. However, it is important to take into account the amount of advertisements searched for this study and that the analysis and discussions are based on this. The representation of diversity, race, ethnicity, gender, and body remains limited, in both the case of American Apparel and Calvin Klein: by over-representing an idealised look, the two brands are upholding the stereotypes and standards of how we perceive beauty.

Models in the selected advertisements being depicted as passive and submissive can be a contributing factor for the ongoing sexualization of men and mostly women in the media. Is there really a need to have a sex worker [Fig. 5] advertising for socks, and, especially, is there a need for including shots from what seems like images from a pornographic film? How does such advertisement even reach the media? Thinking about these questions underline how advertising has been influenced by the male gaze throughout the first decade, and later on by the female gaze as well.

Looking at how the advertisements changed after the introduction of the Beijing Platform for Action also underlines the need for change in how we view gender and sexualization in advertising.

Comparing American Apparel and Calvin Klein evidence can be found showing how American Apparel in the first decades often intentionally sexualized the models, whether this was through how the models were depicted or the provoking and often unnecessary texts found in the advertisements. This can especially be said about the advertisement from 2009 [Fig. 9] where the text reads the following: «*Safe to say she loves her socks*». Compared to American Apparel, however, Calvin Klein had less intentional sexualization of its models.

Looking at the two brands, a difference in how male models are depicted can be found. In fact, male models from American Apparel appear to be less sexualized than the ones modelling for Calvin Klein. This can be seen especially if we compare Figure 4 - an ad from Calvin Klein - and Figure 6 - an ad from American Apparel. In many American Apparel advertisements, we found that the model often had a less predominant stereotyped body; as we already discussed, the “ideal” and stereotyped male body were “typically a man with a clean and defined face with a muscular body type that is clean-shaven”.

Intentionally or unintentionally, both brands are to be considered guilty in upholding stereotypes about the way we view gender and the sexualization of men and women in the media. In both cases, there is also a lack of a meaningful context, as already discussed above. How necessary is it to include the statement «*Safe to say she loves her socks*» to make people buy the socks? Moreover, by the way the models are being depicted, the focus often shifts from the actual product to the models. How much better would a product sell if the model in the advertisement had more clothing compared to the model being partly naked?

Another discussion concerns the empowerment of models. By positioning the models as seen in the advertisements of both brands, sexualized, more often than not there is a lack of empowerment. There's a presence of disempowerment of most of the models in all the advertisements we have analysed, especially if we look at Figures 5, 9, and 11. The way the models are being portrayed or used limits the subject's autonomy and power. As listed above, we could mostly find the presence of disempowerment when it comes to how the brands are depicting women, as sexual objects rather than human beings. However, this can also be seen in how the brands are depicting and positioning the male models. Comparing Figure 10 and Figure 12 shows how, when it comes to advertising, the brands often include models with an idealized and often unattainable body, which is perceived as idealized beauty. By presenting this almost unreachable goal of how an idealized body should look like, a feeling of

disempowerment and stress could arise. It can also be seen that the model in Figure 12 is clearly showing off his muscles while the model in Figure 10, is “just sitting” on his chair, in a more neutral and comfortable position.

In both cases, both American Apparel and Calvin Klein have failed to follow and align themselves to the principles outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action, especially Section J and Strategic Objective J2. Neither one of the brands have managed to «eliminate the gender stereotypes in media and advertisements» (BPfA, 1995): the campaigns included in this research highlight and promote the idea of how the brands have reinforced the stereotypes and sexualisation.

#### *4.1 Where are we now: 2024*

The ads created by American Apparel and Calvin Klein in 2024 reflect the complex dynamics of contemporary social norms that shape how gender is perceived in the media. Despite some progress towards more inclusive representation, many elements of traditional gender patterns remain firmly entrenched in both brands’ advertising strategies. An analysis of their activities this year shows that while discussions of gender roles and stereotypes have gained traction, their practical translation into media content still leaves much to be desired.



#### 4.1.1 American Apparel



Fig. 13 - AA (2024), Craft the Culture™



Fig. 14 - AA (2024), Craft the Culture™

American Apparel's advertising campaigns in 2024 show a strong dissonance in the approach to depicting models and promoting products, as can be seen from two very different campaigns. On the one hand, there is a campaign [Fig. 14] that is characterized by simplicity, lack of sexualization and a more inclusive approach, at least in terms of the physical diversity of the models. This ad presents the models in neutral poses, in everyday contexts, with no explicit insinuations. It is an almost ascetic approach that can be described as "safe". Unfortunately, even in this campaign, the lack of age diversity is apparent, as the models are exclusively young adults, suggesting that older people are still overlooked in the brand's communication.

On the other hand, in the second advertisement [Fig. 13], although the models assume neutral poses, the image also features a naked woman or a female-like doll lying in a clearly suggestive position. This element is not only unrelated to the functionality of the product being promoted, but also reinforces a stereotypical and damaging brand image. Such a representation is intrinsically linked to sexualization, reducing the female body to the role of an object meant only to attract the viewer's attention. Compared to the previous campaign,

which tried to maintain a neutral tone, this ad actively exacerbates problematic gender stereotypes and perpetuates the image of the brand as promoting controversial and unethical role models.

The contrast between the two campaigns reveals an inconsistency in American Apparel's communication strategy. On the one hand, the brand seems to be experimenting with a more inclusive approach that could address the needs of modern audiences, but on the other, it continues to rely on controversial and damaging tactics that replicate traditional, discriminatory patterns.

Both campaigns show that while American Apparel has the potential to introduce more inclusive content, at the same time it is not ready to fully abandon controversial marketing strategies that often attract criticism. For the brand, this means that it needs to be clearer about the values it wants to promote and move away from patterns that are not only unethical but increasingly unacceptable in the eyes of today's consumers.

#### *4.1.2 Calvin Klein*



Fig. 15 - CK (2024), Calvin Klein Pride



Fig. 16 - CK (2024), Calvin Klein Pride

Calvin Klein's 2024 advertising campaigns primarily present a minimalist, elegant

approach, grounded in traditional patterns of aesthetics and physical attractiveness. The brand focuses on images of young models presenting ideal silhouettes, which limits diversity in terms of age, body type or ethnicity. Nevertheless, attempts to break traditional gender norms can be seen in selected campaigns, although such cases are the exception rather than the rule. Two campaigns in which traditional gender roles were reversed are interesting examples. In one ad, the man, Jeremy Allen White [Fig. 16], is depicted in a submissive, passive position, which deviates from the stereotypical image of men as strong and dominant. His body is relaxed, and his position seems to suggest inactivity and emphasizes the introspective gentle side of masculinity. This type of representation can be seen as an attempt to go beyond normative images of men in advertising and open up space for other interpretations of masculinity.

In contrast, in the ad featuring Cara Delevingne [Fig. 15], it is the woman who takes an active, dominant position. Her posture exudes strength and confidence, which contrasts significantly with the traditional image of women in the media, portrayed as passive and submissive. Delevingne's body positioning emphasizes her activity and control, which can be read as an affirmation of feminine strength and autonomy. In the context of this campaign, Calvin Klein seems to be suggesting that femininity need not be limited to an image of delicacy and aesthetic perfection, but can also be equated with dynamism, strength and activity.

Nevertheless, such campaigns remain the exception in the brand's portfolio. The overall nature of Calvin Klein's advertising is still largely based on the sexualisation of models and the perpetuation of stereotypical gender images. In most campaigns, women are portrayed as delicate, sensual and men as strong, dominant, which fits into the traditional pattern of gender representation in the media. While isolated examples, such as campaigns with Jeremy Allen White and Cara Delevingne, show the potential to change the narrative, the brand does not

take consistent action to break normative gender patterns on a wider scale.

#### *4.1.3 Comparison of American Apparel and Calvin Klein advertisement campaigns in 2024*

It is however clear that although neither of the brands has managed to completely eliminate how they stereotype and sexualize their models, both brands have changed the way they do so. American Apparel and Calvin Klein's 2024 advertising campaigns show two different approaches to gender representation in the media, although both fall far short of the goals set out in The Beijing Platform for Action, particularly Strategic Objective J2 (BPfA, 1995). American Apparel presents a striking contrast in its approach, oscillating between neutral, understated content and campaigns that heavily sexualize women, thereby perpetuating harmful stereotypes. Calvin Klein, by contrast, aims to uphold a minimalist and sophisticated aesthetic; however, many of its campaigns still reinforce traditional gender norms through the idealization of physical appearance and the use of subtle sexualisation. Although the brand attempts to break down traditional gender roles in some of its ads, such actions remain the exception and do not change the overall nature of the campaign. Neither brand implements consistent efforts towards a more balanced and inclusive representation of gender, which demonstrates the deep entrenchment of traditional norms in their advertising strategies.

Both brands' campaigns show that the advertising industry still has a long way to go to fulfil The Beijing Platform for Action, but we can cautiously say that it seems to be heading in the right direction.

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the 12 selected advertisements highlighted how cultural and social norms influence gender representation in advertising, with a particular focus on the two clothing brands American Apparel and Calvin Klein.

All the advertisements reflect and reinforce societal norms, often prioritizing the male gaze: female models are frequently depicted in sexualized, passive, or submissive poses, emphasizing physical appearance over individuality or empowerment. American Apparel employs over sexualization, often paired with provocative texts, while Calvin Klein, though less explicit, also perpetuates these trends.

A key finding is the lack of inclusivity and diversity in the brands' campaigns: the predominance of Caucasian models and idealized beauty standards marginalizes broader representations of race, ethnicity, gender, and body types, hindering progress toward dismantling stereotypes and achieving inclusivity as outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action.

As for the 2024 advertising of American Apparel and Calvin Klein, these campaigns approach gender representation in different ways, but still neither of the brands fully realizes the Strategic Objective J2 of the Beijing Platform for Action. While American Apparel is characterized by great inconsistency - on the one hand it presents neutral content, while on the other it actively perpetuates harmful patterns of sexualization of women - Calvin Klein, despite its minimalist aesthetic, reinforces gender stereotypes through idealization of bodies and subtle sexualization in most of its campaigns. Both approaches point to deeply ingrained cultural norms that still dominate advertising strategies.

The advertisements provided by the two brands reflect on a dynamic interplay of the changes in our society and culture. The Beijing Conference has also had its impact on these changes,

while the advertisements have tried to navigate through them. As the years pass and new decades are approaching, we would expect both audiences and brands to be more aware of the need for more inclusive and sensitive gender-related content. However, said gender norms are so deeply interconnected in the media and the culture of advertisement that they keep being reiterated in the advertising agenda, making the whole process of inclusion and awareness-raising extremely long and complex.

As we know, advertising campaigns are often tailored to specific cultural contexts, and what seems stereotypical in one country may not be viewed the same way elsewhere, limiting the generalizability of findings on a global scale.

However, the preconceptions we had at the beginning of the research about the cultural traditions, religions and systems of values from one's country were progressively dismantled by the exchanges among the group members, which provided a more aware analysis and perspective on the phenomena at hand. As a result, our interpretation of the advertisements was not influenced by our different backgrounds and nationalities, at least not to a significant extent.

Furthermore, the brands that have been analyzed throughout this paper - American Apparel and Calvin Klein - are both American ones, which implies having a relevant impact on the global economy of the advertising marketplace. Given the Western nature of the brands taken into account and our familiarity with the American background and culture in general, the authors of this paper did not encounter any cultural obstacles or barriers, nor did our differences in terms of origin and nationality influence our interpretation, which is therefore a neutral one.

Actually, the elements presented above did not prove to be limiting for the realisation of the work, despite what was planned during the design and ideation of the research. On the contrary, a deficit that was indeed found in the course of the analysis was the decision to only

consider static visual products, i.e. posters. In this way, it was not possible to identify any differences in terms of the attitude of the subjects of the advertising campaign. Specifically, it would have been interesting to investigate whether and how gender-related power interactions change depending on the format of the advertising product.

Another inspiring starting point for further research could be given by the choice of interviewing people, seeking their general opinion on brands that sexualise and objectify models in their campaigns. Based on the analysis of what was said in these interviews, it would be interesting to evaluate behavioural patterns of the most mentioned brands, in relation to gender roles and stereotypes.

This could be combined with a more focused approach on Diversity and Inclusion, especially with regard to more recent advertising messages, by looking at how these topics have or have not been integrated into brand communication choices.

In conclusion, this paper sheds light on the deeply rooted dynamics of gender objectification and stereotyping in advertising, revealing both progress and persistent challenges. While societal shifts and cultural dialogues continue to influence brand narratives, the entrenchment of traditional gender norms in advertising remains evident. Moving forward, fostering inclusive and equitable representation in advertising requires a critical evaluation of its visual and cultural codes, as well as the active engagement of both creators and audiences in shaping a more aware and diverse media landscape.

As anticipated in Chapter 2, the findings of this paper have been translated into a visual output in the form of a website, available for consultation at the following link: <https://sites.google.com/view/culture-couture/visual-analysis>

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