

**Don't Sweat It, Be Bold:**  
**Neoliberal Discourses in Progressive Advertising Campaigns**

*by:*

Lisa Verberne

Taal- en cultuurstudies

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*advisor:*

Laura Candidatu

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## 0. Abstract

Media that aim to empower marginalised communities are gaining popularity in popular culture, especially in advertising. Leftist scholars have noted that these texts often combine discourses from feminist and queer activism with neoliberal values, manifested in discourses that are called neoliberal feminism, popular feminism and homonormativity. Using these three discourses as analytical concepts, I investigate two progressive advertising campaigns that are part of a larger trend of empowering media: ALL STRENGTH, NO SWEAT by deodorant brand Secret and Levi's PRIDE: 2018. I examine how the two campaigns make use of progressive values used in feminist and queer activist discourses and compare them. To do this, I perform a Foucauldian discourse analysis. Because discourse is a way of representing a certain version of reality, I pay special attention to other interpretations of reality that were hidden in the campaigns. The analysis is structured around three key themes: the construction of social inequality, the subjects who are (not) represented and the presence of the brands and their products in the advertisements.

I argue that the two campaigns are remarkably similar in their representation of queer and feminist issues and subjects because they both incorporate neoliberal discourses. In the Levi's campaign, this manifests as a homonormative discourse, while Secret mirrors popular and neoliberal feminist discourses. Both campaigns make visible subjects who, despite obstacles, have succeeded in their respective work fields. Social inequality is thus represented as a personal problem that an individual is capable of overcoming if they have internalised neoliberal values of responsibility, consumerism and entrepreneurialism. In other words, the campaigns perpetuate the idea that individual responsibility is a sufficient solution to structural issues of queerphobia and sexism. This way, the advertisements dismiss the structural and intersectional nature of many issues, placing the onus of empowerment on individuals. Moreover, they encourage the viewer to become responsible neoliberal workers and citizens, presenting queer people and/or women with a new set of norms rather than liberating them from social constraints. All in all, the brands offer the viewer a simplified and palatable portrayal of inequality that is insufficient to critique structural socio-economic issues. The seemingly progressive narrative of the campaigns is very useful for the brands, however. By making these advertisements, they associate their products with the empowerment of marginalised communities. In summary, the thesis aims to show that the campaigns ultimately do not liberate marginalised communities but further neoliberal agendas and serve the progressive reputations of the brands.

## 1. Introduction: A Market for Empowerment

The thesis examines the way two advertising campaigns – ALL STRENGTH, NO SWEAT by deodorant brand Secret and Levi’s PRIDE: 2018 (Secret 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d, 2020e, 2020f; Levi’s 2018a, 2018b) – incorporate progressive values borrowed from queer activist and feminist discourses. The two advertisements are part of a larger trend. In the last decade, feminism has had a big revival and the fight for LGBTQ+<sup>1</sup> rights (mostly concerning equal marriage) in the United States (US) has advanced a great amount. Advertising agencies responded to this social shift by creating advertisements featuring progressive messages about women and LGBTQ+ people (Hunt 2017, 25; Nölke 2018, 232). Some brands even started specialising in these socially engaged advertising campaigns. Secret’s parent company, Procter & Gamble, has perfected the genre of “femvertisements”: advertisements with pro-female messages that would empower women. The success of some of the early progressive commercials has started a trend of progressive advertisements targeting marginalised groups (Banet-Weiser 2018, 10). Women and queer people are notable targets for this new kind of advertising, as exemplified by Secret’s and Levi’s’ campaigns respectively.

Two interrelated factors can be identified that led to the rising popularity of this type of progressive advertising in the US. Firstly, during the 1990s, marketing agencies reconsidered women and the LGBTQ+ community as promising market segments. Women were becoming more financially independent and had considerable influence over a household’s purchasing decisions (Hunt 2017, 23). Similarly, the LGBTQ+ community was targeted in a phenomenon described as “rainbow capitalism” (Falco and Gandhi 2019, 104). Brands were convinced that queer people were fashionable, brand-loyal and in possession of a high disposable income (Gluckman and Reed 2008, 305; Um 2012, 134–35; Peñaloza 2008, 312, 325–26). This profile, however, was based on small sub-sections of mostly gay, white, middle-class men and left out other LGBTQ+ people who were not doing well financially.

Secondly, as a result of neoliberal policies from the 1980s on, social inequality increased while the US government no longer saw solving inequalities as their responsibility. Consequently, businesses took over these social tasks from the government under the name of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Duggan 2012, 12; Sadler and Lloyd 2009, 3; Shamir

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<sup>1</sup> LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and others. In the thesis, “LGBTQ+” is used interchangeably with “queer people” and refers to all sexual and gender minorities.

2004, 670).<sup>2</sup> From the beginning, girls have been one of the most important targets of CSR because they were considered the citizens and workers (and consumers) of the future (Harris 2003, 17; Banet-Weiser 2018, 46–47). Most corporations focus on the confidence issues girls and young women face because their lack of self-confidence would make it difficult for them to fulfil their potential (Harris 2003, 31–32). The queer community is another popular object of corporations’ altruism, especially during American Pride Month in June. By marketing to LGBTQ+ people and representing them in their advertising, corporations can affirm and validate queer identities, both to straight and cisgender<sup>3</sup> audiences, and to queer audiences themselves (Nölke 2018, 227; Peñaloza 2008, 330–31). These two overlapping phenomena, increased CSR and marketing targeting queer people and/or women, led to the emergence of the campaigns central to the thesis. These advertisements are part of a larger “market for empowerment” (Banet-Weiser 2018, 47) which ranges from media to self-help products to cosmetics.

The market for empowerment has been researched extensively by critical leftist researchers from different disciplines (for examples, see Drucker 2015; Goldman, Heath, and Smith 1991; Power 2009; Fraser 2013). These authors have analysed the tensions between feminism and queer activism, which are often anti-capitalist (Duggan 2012, xvii), and private companies, which are firmly embedded in capitalism. Authors such as cultural analyst Lisa Duggan (2012) and feminist scholars Catherine Rottenberg (2014) and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) have noted that corporations fuse individualist neoliberal values with their progressive messages to solve this conflict.

The thesis investigates the relationship between the two campaigns, neoliberalism and progressive discourses. It aims to answer the following question: *how do private US brands use the issues and strategies discussed in feminism and queer activism in the advertising campaigns ALL STRENGTH, NO SWEAT by Secret and Levi’s PRIDE: 2018 campaign, and what are the differences and similarities between the two discourses?* Most literature focusses solely on femvertising or on media targeting queer people; the thesis will add to this by comparing the two discourses. In order to do this, I first examine the way the campaigns represent feminist

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<sup>2</sup> Although businesses often do have good intentions, CSR can also serve private interests: it appeals to shareholders and investors and can prevent enforceable state regulation (Shamir 2004, 677–78, 680). Moreover, it can improve a brand’s reputation and sales (Hunt 2017, 9; SheKnows Media 2014) or divert attention away from other problems (this is called “pinkwashing,” a term coined by writer Sarah Schulman (2011) to describe Israel’s self-promotion as a pro-gay state in order to distract from their occupation of Palestine).

<sup>3</sup> Not-transgender.

and queer issues and the solutions they offer. Second, I analyse the people who are represented. Last, I investigate the way the brand and their products are present in the campaigns.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Neoliberalism and Progressive Discourses**

In order to answer the research question, I first introduce the theoretical framework of the thesis. I draw on economics, cultural theory, media studies and gender studies to create a critical and interdisciplinary overview of the relationship between neoliberalism and progressive movements. First, I define the concept of neoliberalism and review critical scholarship from economists and political scientists to demonstrate how neoliberal policies have increased social inequality in the US. Then I discuss how, paradoxically, queer and feminist discourses have been appropriated by neoliberal ideology. I also discuss three specific manifestations of progressive values in neoliberal discourses: neoliberal feminism, popular feminism and homonormativity. These three concepts will be central in showing how the campaigns I analyse are shaped by neoliberal values.

### *A Critical Perspective on Neoliberalism*

Neoliberalism is an economic ideology about the role of the state in a capitalist economy (Thorsen 2010, 204).<sup>4</sup> It originated in the 1980s in the United Kingdom and the US, led by prime minister Margaret Thatcher and president Ronald Reagan (Kotz and McDonough 2010, 96). Following these areas, most of the world adopted lighter versions of neoliberalist policies (Hall 2011, 708; Flew 2014, 55), often pressured or coerced by American imperialist forces (Harvey 2006, 145). Like liberalism, neoliberal ideology distinguishes between a public sphere (the state, politics, law and order) and a private sphere (family, social life, enterprise). In this perspective, the state should only interfere in the public sphere in order to protect individual freedom (Duggan 2012, 4). In liberal ideology, some domains are seen as exempt from capitalism and market logics while proponents of the most extreme forms of neoliberalism envision a world without a public sphere. In their perspective, free enterprise will always be more efficient than the state in providing goods and services (Kotz and McDonough 2010; Hyde 2016, 20). Therefore, all domains of life should be privatised, unleashing full, unregulated capitalism and eradicating the public sphere.

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<sup>4</sup> Neoliberalism is not considered a full political ideology, as it does not include ideas about the way formal politics should be organised.

Neoliberal policies revolve around three different themes: liberalisation, stabilisation and privatisation (Kotz and McDonough 2010, 94–95). Liberalisation refers to the deregulation of the economy.<sup>5</sup> Stabilisation policies focus on reducing taxes for corporations and limiting government spending. Privatisation means that areas of life are transferred from the public sphere – which is the responsibility of the state – to the private sphere, reducing the public sphere (Duggan 2012, 12). Important social utilities and services are then opened up to market forces (Harvey 2006, 153). Cultural theorist Lisa Duggan describes the effect of privatisation as “responsibilisation”: an individualising process in which individual subjects are made responsible for their own welfare (Duggan 2012, 14; Long 2018, 11).

Neoliberal policies were thought to liberate individuals and corporations from the interference of the state and make them free to fulfil their potential and maximise profits (Duggan 2012, 10). In reality, however, neoliberalism exposed US citizens to “some of the worst traits of that ‘satanic mill’ which capital, left to itself, inevitably creates” (Harvey 2015, 35). Sociologist Allen Hyde (2016) has linked the increase of neoliberal policies in the US to, among other problems, rising wealth and income inequality (17) and the growing power of corporations over labour (18). Political scientist Peter Drucker argues that in essence, neoliberal policies in the US have concentrated wealth in corporate circles by exploiting the working class (that consists disproportionately of people of colour, queer people, disabled people and women) (Drucker 2015, 260; Harvey 2006, 156). This social inequality, however, is not seen as a shortcoming of neoliberalism, but as a result of people’s individual, moral failures to become responsible, self-reliant subjects (Thorsen 2010, 204). Social inequality is deemed necessary to incite people to become responsibilised and climb up the social ladder, since inequalities are seen as merely obstacles to be overcome by individual efforts (Harvey 2006, 152; Duggan 2012, 14).

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<sup>5</sup> Some authors would argue, however, that in a neoliberal society, the state does not actually limit its intervention, but rather “redirects it in ways that benefit capital” (Kotz and McDonough 2010, 95) rather than public interests. This is done by, for instance, busting unions and promoting competition (for a more detailed discussion of this argument, see Wolfson 2010).



*Strange Bedfellows: Neoliberalism and Progressive Social Movements*

Despite its considerable shortcomings, neoliberal ideology has been able to appropriate leftist discourses. Drucker (2015) and Duggan (2012) argue that initial leftist interventions on capitalism mostly focussed on identity politics, based on the affirmation of cultural differences and identities (Duggan 2012, xv–xvi; Drucker 2015, 300). This way, they neglected political economy which focusses on the redistribution of wealth and power. In other words, they turned away from what feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser (1995) calls a collectivist “redistribution” to a more individualist “recognition politics” (74). The shift towards individualism ultimately left the left unable to resist the appropriation of its movements by proponents of neoliberalism who “wanted nothing more than to repress all memory of social egalitarianism” (Duggan 2012, 5). Paradoxically, then, leftist movements were appropriated by the economic ideology that had escalated the social inequalities the left aimed at solving.

In the analysis, I will use three analytical concepts that describe how progressive values are appropriated in neoliberal discourses: neoliberal feminism, popular feminism and homonormativity. Firstly, neoliberal feminism, as described by feminist scholar Catherine Rottenberg (2018), has emerged as a solution to a central problem in neoliberalism (16-17): on the one hand, a neoliberal economy is “greedy for women’s labour ... and enthusiastic for the spending power of women’s earnings” (Pocock 2003, 8).<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, neoliberalism also depends on reproductive work to maintain and reproduce human capital (Rottenberg 2018, 16). Neoliberal feminism solves this tension by creating feminist subjects who are ambitious in their career and, at the same time, take pride in having a family (consisting of a husband and children) and doing care work (McRobbie 2015, 12; Rottenberg 2018, 429). This new feminist ideal of “having it all” – a professional career, personal fulfilment and a feminine appearance – is what sociologist Angela McRobbie (2015) calls “the perfect” (4). Although the perfect imposes a (hetero)normative set of goals on women, many women see these objectives as self-directed and feminist. In this way, neoliberal feminism creates subjects who have internalised neoliberal values, becoming responsible, self-regulating subjects.

Rottenberg (2014) describes how in neoliberal feminist discourses gender inequality is understood as the exclusion of women in the public sphere (426). Including more women in corporate and political leadership, then, would solve gender inequality (Rottenberg 2014, 426; Power 2009, 6) even if it leaves “the nature and number of those jobs [unchanged]” (Fraser

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<sup>6</sup> Especially since work has become more “precarious and communication-based, as women’s jobs tended to be in the past” (Power 2009, 20).

1995, 89; Manne 2010, 147). This is what historian Joan Scott calls an “add women and stir” kind of feminism “in which the presence of women is sufficient to call feminism into being” (Banet-Weiser 2018). According to Rottenberg (2014), the root of this public inequality is seen as women’s lack of ambition and confidence (424). A woman can overcome these personal defects by entrepreneurialism, consumption and believing in herself (422). Once she has empowered herself, there is nothing stopping her from competing on the labour market and becoming a #GirlBoss. Rather than advocating for structural changes, neoliberal feminism makes individual women responsible for overcoming gender inequality, mirroring neoliberalism’s responsabilisation and individualisation processes.

Popular feminism is the second analytical concept. Feminist scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) argues that popular feminism is the manifestation of a new feminist wave in popular culture (1). It shares neoliberal feminism’s goal of inclusion of women in the public sphere and provides a strategy to achieve it (12, 17). Popular feminism aims to make successful women and feminism visible in popular culture, mostly on digital platforms and in products. Visibility would then encourage women to aspire to do the same. Banet-Weiser calls this strategy “visibility politics” (24). The idea that once a woman is determined to emulate other women’s successes she will succeed herself, is clearly inspired by the neoliberal notion that success depends entirely on one’s self-esteem and work ethic (19, 23). Moreover, popular feminism commodifies feminism, convincing people that consuming feminist-branded items and media is a form of feminist politics (17).<sup>7</sup> Popular feminism is very attractive for brands because they share its goals of visibility and consumerism.

Lastly, homonormativity is a term coined by cultural theorist Lisa Duggan (2012) to describe a type of LGBTQ+ politics that emerged out of neoliberalism (50). Unlike queer radicalism, “[homonormativity] is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them” (50). It refers to the way some queer people, mostly gay men and lesbians, adopt heteronormative institutions and lifestyles, such as marriage, participation in the public sphere, monogamy and having children. This form of assimilation Duggan calls “gay normalcy” and is used to downplay differences between gay and straight people in order to advance homonormative interests (50). Consequently,

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<sup>7</sup> Some feminist authors see femvertising and popular feminism as a new form of “commodity feminism” (Varghese and Kumar 2020, 8), a term coined by anthropologists and sociologists Robert Goldman, Deborah Heath and Sharon L. Smith (1991) in the 1980s to describe feminism’s transformation into a consumerist lifestyle (see for example Zeisler 2016).

proponents of homonormative politics often exclude non-lesbian and non-gay members of the community in their politics because they are considered too “radical” or “weird” (Drucker 2015, 286). Their political agenda is moderate and, like popular and neoliberal feminism, is focused on inclusion in the public sphere. In this perspective, gay rights can be advanced by contesting legal discrimination and by including gay and lesbian people in institutions and corporations. The latter strategy Duggan (2012) describes as a “trickle down vision of equality” (54) in which queer representation in positions of power is thought to better the position of all queer people (Drucker 2015, 284–85).

There are two important similarities between these three neoliberal discourses. First, sexism and queerphobia are conceptualised as issues that are unrelated to other forms of oppression. Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) calls this approach a “single-axis framework” (139) that disavows the “intersectional” (140) nature of oppression. Moreover, the three discourses are all inherently exclusive because they focus on financial success as an ideal, while a capitalist society makes it impossible for everyone to make it to the top (Siddiqui 2018, 40). The three discourses, then, actually move forward neoliberal interests which are antithetical to social equality.

As I will argue in the analysis, the two advertising campaigns are both examples of the synthesis between neoliberal ideology and feminist and queer activist discourses. Using the three analytical concepts, I will argue that both campaigns, while seemingly progressive, actually promote neoliberal values of individualism, personal responsibility and consumerism. Thereby, the campaigns conceal structural problems and advance neoliberal agendas, rather than emancipating women and queer people. Before I move on to the analysis itself, however, I first discuss the methodological approach.

### **3. Methodology: Discourse Analysis**

This chapter addresses the methods I use for the analysis of the two campaigns. The methodological approach of the thesis relies on discourse analysis. Thus, I first explain what discourse analysis is and why it is useful for the analysis. I also elaborate on my choice for the research objects. Then I reflect on my personal relationship with the research object and discuss the limitations of the study.

In the analysis I pay attention to visual elements, editing, music and speech. I use discourse analysis to analyse these elements, drawing from philosopher Michel Foucault's works on the topic, as described by media scholar Stuart Hall (1992, 1997). According to Hall (1992), Foucault conceptualises discourse as "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – i.e. a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about a topic" in a particular sociohistorical context (207). A discourse, then, is the way a certain topic is represented in all sorts of expressions of language. According to discourse theorists, discourse does not reflect reality, but rather represents or "[establishes] one version of the world in the face of competing versions" (Gill 2000, 176). This is where the question of power comes in. According to Foucault, discourse is always embedded in power structures because it can represent certain knowledges as truth or common sense while dismissing or making invisible other knowledges (Hall 1997, 49). Moreover, discourse also includes ideas on which subjects are acceptable or unacceptable, hierarchising them according to the norms embedded in the discourse (Hall 1997, 55). Discourse analysis, then, can be used to examine how certain topics are represented, what versions of reality are hidden and what subjects are represented.

Discourse analysis is suitable for my analysis for several reasons. First, any expression of language is considered a "text" worthy of analysing in discourse analyses, including written text, conversations and videos. The wide range of uses means that it can be applied to the campaigns, which are multimedia. Moreover, discourse analysis allows me to critically examine how inequality is represented and problematise the people, perspectives and problems the campaigns conceal. Last, I use discourse analysis to analyse the kind of subjects the brands put forward as representative of their discourse.

For the analysis, I will transcribe the spoken text from the videos and describe the visuals in each shot. Using the descriptions and transcriptions, the content will be interpreted and coded. This way, I can analyse how three main themes are represented: social inequality; the brands and their products and the subjects. To refine my interpretation of the last theme, I will

also research the ambassadors of the campaigns online to find out how they describe themselves, so as to avoid mislabelling them.

The research object for the analysis consists of the two aforementioned campaigns: ALL STRENGTH, NO SWEAT by Secret and Levi's PRIDE: 2018. Each campaign includes multiple commercials found on YouTube and a press release (Levi's published its press release on its own website, Secret published it on Businesswire). The campaigns were chosen because they have clear, progressive messages that either evoke feminism or LGBTQ+ social movements by making explicit references to topics such as Pride, the empowerment of girls and women and by addressing specific problems and obstacles that women and queer people face. Moreover, the commercials were made for social media. Consequently, they are longer than advertisements broadcasted on television and more suitable for a thorough analysis.

### *Reflexivity and Limitations*

In this final section, I want to reflect on my own relationship with my research object and the limitations of the study to ensure that I acknowledge what feminist scientist Donna Haraway (1988) calls "situated knowledges" (581). Haraway argues that researchers are never neutral, disembodied observers. They always come to their research objects from a certain positionality in the world. Consequently, a researcher should always acknowledge the fact that the knowledges they create are situated within a certain social-historical context and are therefore partial (585). Following Haraway's advice, I discuss the partiality of the analysis and my personal relationship with the research topic.

First, the thesis focusses on the US as a geographical context. Consequently, the results of my analysis need to be understood in the American socio-economic context and will not necessarily be applicable to other contexts. Moreover, the scope of the thesis is very small, the findings of my analyses will not be representative for all American commercials with a similar activist approach.

Second, my relationship with my research topic is personal because I belong to the intended target audience of the commercials I analyse. I realise that even though these commercials address me, my experiences are not representative of all women and queer people. As discussed in the methodology, I will pay special attention to identity differences and their intersections, as well as the people who are made invisible.

#### **4. Analysis: Individualism, Success and Consumerism**

In the analysis I will examine the three identified themes for each campaign. First, I analyse what reality of social inequality the campaigns construct. I discuss whether the brands' representations reflect homonormative and popular and neoliberal feminist ideas of inequalities as individual predicaments in the public sphere. Second, I address the people who are represented in terms of class, gender, physical ability, race and ethnicity. Moreover, I analyse if the ambassadors represent the perfect and gay normalcy. Since consumerism is an important aspect of the three neoliberal progressive discourses, I conclude each analysis by investigating the way the advertised brands and their products are incorporated into the campaigns' progressive discourses.

##### *Secret's ALL STRENGTH, NO SWEAT*

The first campaign, ALL STRENGTH, NO SWEAT, champions women's capacity to achieve whatever they want without breaking a sweat. It focusses on a group of successful women: singer Jessie Reyez, actress Camila Mendes, ex-basketball player and NBA executive Swin Cash, YouTuber and mother Shenae Grimes-Beech and fitness influencer Ainsley Rodriguez. The campaign consists of videos and a press release. The main video (Secret 2020f) shows all of the campaign's ambassadors engaged in activities related to their achievements. There are also four so-called "Strength Stories" (Secret 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d) – videos where the ambassadors individually talk about personal issues they faced – and a written press release (Secret 2020e) describing the ambassadors and Secret's motivations behind the campaign.

In the analysis, I aim to show that the Secret campaign converges with popular and neoliberal feminist discourses. First, I demonstrate how the campaign, like popular and neoliberal feminism, is focussed on the inclusion of women in the public sphere. Then, I argue that sexism is presented as an individual obstacle that can be surmounted by everyone, obscuring intersectional differences between women and structural issues. Next, I discuss the diversity of the ambassadors in terms of different identities and femininities. In the concluding section I demonstrate how consumption of Secret products is branded as a feminist act.

*“All Strength, No Sweat”: Meritocracy, Individualism and Capacity in the Strength Stories*

In popular and neoliberal feminist discourses, feminism is understood as the effort to include women in public positions of leadership. Secret’s videos focus on the same objective, which is why the ambassadors were all chosen for their success in male-dominated careers, such as business, music and sports. Each woman is introduced with her name and job title as her most important identifiers and is shown engaged in activities related to her occupation. In their individual “Strength Stories,” the women get the opportunity to talk about challenges they have struggled with in their occupations. Cash, for instance, tells the viewer how men underestimate her competence in basketball and Reyez describes how she was sexually assaulted by a music producer.

Although the Strength Stories present clear external pressures that limit women’s access to and advancement in the public sphere, they offer individual solutions to these problems. Banet-Weiser (2018) describes this recurring narrative in femvertisements as one of injury and capacity: first, the narrative focusses on the ways sexism has harmed women (injury) only to shift to celebrating their individual ability to overcome these challenges (capacity) (46). Rodriguez, for instance, started journaling and worked on a healthier lifestyle and Cash believed in her own worth and competence. Even Reyez’ story of sexual assault – arguably the most severe example of external pressures women face in their entry into the public sphere – gets twisted into an individual ordeal: she describes how she told the producer “no” and continued to set clear boundaries for other people in her life. This individualist dimension is also emphasised by the way each woman gets her own segment in the main video and her own supplemental video, creating the impression that she achieved her goals on the basis of personal effort and competence. The injury/capacity narrative mirrors the neoliberal ideal of individual responsibility because it celebrates women’s individual capacity to triumph in the face of sexism. Moreover, it perpetuates the neoliberal feminist illusion that the feminist project – at least in the West – is almost finished: the only challenge left is to encourage women to reap the benefits (Rottenberg 2018, 70–71).

It is evident that the main video is meant to inspire the viewer by its inspirational and “sentimentally earnest” (Banet-Weiser 2018, 46) tone. The Secret website, for instance, describes the background song of the main video, a song by Reyez, as a “rallying cry” and an “anthem” that is meant to “[challenge] women everywhere to be all strength, no sweat.” Moreover, the videos address the viewer directly with different inspiring mottos and song lyrics, such as “don’t sweat raising the bar” and “we can do it.” I argue that the inspiring tone is

evident of a popular feminist politics of visibility: the political strategy of making successful women visible in order to inspire other women to do the same.

The narrative of injury/capacity combined with the inspiring tone creates the illusion that anyone can defeat sexism and become successful if they take up responsibility for their own well-being. This individualist and meritocratic sentiment, however, ignores the fact that inequalities are inherent to a neoliberal and capitalist society (Siddiqui 2018, 40) and disavows the intersectional nature of inequality. The fact that many poor women and/or women of colour lack the cultural and financial capital that is needed in order to succeed is ignored. Instead, their failure to climb the social ladder is seen as a personal defect (Harris 2003, 25–27). Although the Secret website underlines the fact that they have a “diverse celebrity line-up” by naming the ethnicities of some of their ambassadors, intersections with class and race are only addressed by Cash. In her Strength Story, she states that she sees her female relatives as role models because they escaped poverty and that, as a woman of colour, she wants to be a role model herself. Although class and racial inequalities are avowed in her story, the narrative quickly turns around to the all too familiar injury/capacity narrative where individuals, in this case Cash and her family members, were able to overcome marginalisations by hard work. Consequently, I argue, the campaign lacks a comprehensive analysis of structural and intersectional issues, clearly reflecting focus of modern feminism on an identity-based politics of recognition: the campaign affirms and celebrates the individual identities and qualities of women but does not focus on structural and socio-economic injustices as was typical of pre-1980s redistribution politics.

### *Intersectional Invisibility*

Seeing as the campaign presents the ambassadors as roles models, it is important to examine who are represented in the campaign. Therefore, I will discuss the variety of the women in terms of age, class, race/ethnicity and physical ability. Firstly, the website mentions the ethnicity of two of the non-white ambassadors: Reyez is described as a “Canadian/Colombian singer” and Mendes is labelled a “Brazilian-American actress.” Interestingly, Rodriguez, who is Cuban-American, and Cash, who is black, are not labelled in their ethnicity and race.<sup>8</sup> The women represent a wide variety of ethnicities and races, although there are no women of Asian descent. Moreover, the focus on financial success in the campaign limits the group to relatively high-class, young and middle-aged working women. Lastly, none of the women have a visible

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<sup>8</sup> It is possible that this was their own preference, rather than a choice made by Secret.



disability. In fact, Banet-Weiser argues that femvertisements often focus on physical activities as “the route to empowerment” (2018, 52–53). The Secret videos conform to this by showing the women playing sports, working out and jumping on stage, demonstrating their physical fitness and ability. Overall, then, Secret does not present a very wide variety of role models.

*The Perfect, Femininity and Motherhood*

Next, I want to discuss two aspects of femininity that are included in the neoliberal feminist ideal of the perfect: motherhood and beauty. Firstly, Rottenberg (2018) describes how in neoliberal feminism, a perfect balance between work and family is at the centre of feminist success (27-28). This ideal is embodied by Grimes-Beech, who is shown mostly in her home making videos and taking care of her baby while the song’s tempo slows down to emphasise her gentleness. Grimes-Beech serves as an example of a neoliberal feminist subject who is able to balance her responsibilities as a mother and a professional YouTuber.

Besides motherhood, the perfect’s ideal of femininity and beauty through the consumption of products (McRobbie 2015, 7) is present as well. In the video, Secret places a lot of emphasis on having a feminine appearance and being well-groomed, as it relates to their products. This is reflected in the shots where the thin, conventionally beautiful and feminine ambassadors look at themselves in the mirror when applying Secret deodorant on their shaved armpits. The focus on beauty is epitomised in Mendes’ segment, which mostly shows the actress posing and twirling in slow-motion glamour shots in a full-length gown, rather than showing her engaged in activities related to her job. Likewise, the slogan for YouTuber Grimes-Beech, “don’t sweat going #nofilter,” is unironically juxtaposed with a close-up of her face in full makeup. Thus, while at first glance the main advertisement centres around the women’s professional successes, I argue that the video also spends a lot of time incorporating ideals of beauty, consumption and motherhood in its feminist message. Next, I will conclude the analysis of Secret’s campaign and reflect on the way the brand is embedded in the message of the campaign.

*Conclusion: “Empowering and Strong” Deodorant*

All things considered, I conclude that the Secret campaign borrows many strategies from neoliberal and popular feminism. Gender inequality is characterised as relating to the public sphere, which is why only successful women are represented. The ambassadors are presented as role models because they have surpassed individual instances of sexism. This narrative, combined with a lack of real diversity, sidesteps a discussion of intersectionality and structural

problems. Moreover, the campaigns reinforce the perfect and traditional femininity as feminist norms. The effect of these strategies is a neoliberal discourse of responsabilisation, individualism and consumerism.

By showcasing these ambassadors “have it all,” Secret presents their products as a way for their viewer to become empowered and achieve the perfect. Mendes even equates the consumption of Secret deodorant to empowerment because “deodorant isn’t something women necessarily talk about” while Secret turns it into “something that is empowering and strong.” As is common in popular feminism, Secret commodifies female empowerment, turning consumption of their products into a form of feminist power.

### *Levi’s PRIDE: 2018*

Like Secret, Levi’s has chosen a group of ambassadors to represent their 2018 PRIDE campaign: artist and activist iO Tillet-Wright, chef Melissa King, podcast host Arbie Mosley, artist and entrepreneur Rocco Kayiatos, artist and drag queen Juanita MORE!, model TJ and their girlfriend, shop owner Nicole Stark. The campaign consists of a few different materials. There is the main video (Levi’s 2018b), which shows the ambassadors undertaking everyday activities – walking outside, going to the market or riding a motorbike – while sporting fashion from Levi’s standard and Pride collections.<sup>9</sup> At the end of the video, every person finishes the sentence “I am...” with a phrase of their choosing. Then there is the press release in which six supplemental videos are embedded (Levi’s 2018a). The supplemental videos each feature one ambassador, rehashing footage of them from the main video complemented with some extra clips. The videos often highlight details of the Levi’s items – labels, stitching patterns or pockets – rather than the person wearing it, demanding that the viewer pays attention to the products too.

This section will follow a structure similar to the analysis of Secret’s campaign. First, I address the campaign’s focus on individual achievements in the public sphere and how this precludes a discussion of intersectional and larger problems. Second, I argue that this focus also perpetuates the belief in a (prospective) “post-gay” era. Then I discuss the campaign’s limited diversity. I conclude by examining how Levi’s associates itself with the progressive message of the campaign.

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<sup>9</sup> All net proceeds of sold Pride items went to two LGBTQ+-related charities.

*“Be Proud, Be Bold, Be Yourself”: Individualism in Queer Success Stories*

Similar to Secret, the Levi’s campaign focusses on the inclusion of queer people in the public sphere as a solution to inequality, as reflected in their choice to represent successful entrepreneurs. This way, the brand shows a commitment to a homonormative trickle-down strategy, where inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in public positions of power are thought to improve queer people’s social standing. To achieve inclusion, Levi’s aims to inspire the viewer with the aspirational stories of the ambassadors and its Pride motto “be proud, be bold, be yourself.” This strategy is very similar to the politics of visibility used in popular feminism.

In the videos, the ambassadors tell stories of the ways in which they learned to live up to the Pride motto. These stories often take on a form similar to Banet-Weiser’s injury/capacity narrative, although the problems are not always explicitly linked to queerphobia. King states that different challenges in their career made them a stronger person and asserts that “it just comes down to, like, your passion and how much you really believe in yourself,” mirroring a neoliberal commitment to dedication and hard work. Juanita MORE! describes how she became an inspired artist once she started doing drag. Like the Secret video, all ambassadors are filmed separately – except for TJ and Stark, who form a couple – stressing their individual achievements. The individualism in the editing, combined with the stories of defeating personal obstacles creates a narrative of responsabilisation in which each ambassador has taken up responsibility for their own well-being. Consequently, I argue, the ambassadors are presented as homonormative role models: they encountered problems in their entry into the public sphere, but managed to overcome them and become self-responsible, successful entrepreneurs.

Similar to the Secret videos, the focus on individualism and responsabilisation in the Levi’s campaign obscures discussion of issues that are intersectional or unsurmountable by individual efforts. These issues are only addressed in the supplemental videos, rather than in the main video (that will most likely garner more attention). Kayiatos, for instance, discusses the importance of trans representation in the media and Juanita MORE! stresses the importance of listening to the stories of drag queens in rural areas. Even then, the ambassadors’ speech is heavily edited by Levi’s, giving each person only a few sentences to discuss very serious problems. Moreover, other than the implicit mention of class in Juanita MORE!’s story, the speakers mostly focus on queer issues without relating them to other forms of oppression. King, for instance, is an anti-racist activist who, according to the website’s description of her, “hopes to give a bigger voice to Asian-American members of the LGBTQ+ community” but the only thing she says about this topic is “it doesn’t matter what your colour is or your sexual orientation.” Similar to my argument in the analysis of Secret’s campaigns, I argue that Levi’s

main goal is to affirm and validate the power of queer individuals, rather than address structural politico-economic problems. This focus reflects the larger trend of recognition politics in queer and feminist activism.

*A Post-gay Era: From Struggle Stories to Gay Normalcy*

Another aspect of the campaign that is worth highlighting is the focus on the recent gains in LGBTQ+ rights. I argue that this focus, combined with the lack of substantial discussion on systemic and intersectional queer issues, creates the impression that the need for contemporary queer activism is (almost) over. TJ, for instance, describes how they are grateful to live right now, because “people in the LGBTQ+ community that were back in the 50s or the 60s ... didn’t have the things that [they] have.” Similarly, Mosley stresses that the older generation has created “a world where [he] can feel comfortable to be [himself].”

The approach to queer issues as almost over mirrors a homonormative discourse of a “post-gay” era that is prevalent in the boardrooms of many LGBTQ+-related media outlets (Ng 2013, 272). Queer media scholar Eve Ng (2013) describes that editors in these companies often assume that homophobia in the US has been nearly eradicated, making queer-specific content soon to be obsolete (273). Instead, these outlets shift from struggle stories, which highlight structural oppression, to optimistic stories about gays and lesbians as successful citizens and fashionable consumers. Ng argues that post-gay discourses are homonormative in nature because they present a limited definition of queer emancipation: assimilation, or gay normalcy. This narrow conceptualisation of equality makes it possible for Levi’s to hail the successes of a small group of successful ambassadors as proof of a (near) post-gay era. In this way, the campaign glosses over the structural inequalities that less privileged sub-groups of the community still face today. Although it is important to pay tribute to the hard work of the people who came before us, I argue that the campaign’s homonormative post-gay discourse privileges queer people who have achieved gay normalcy and makes other queer issues invisible.

*Limited Diversity and Urban, Middle-class Queerness*

Because Levi’s presents their ambassadors as role models, it is important to analyse who they have chosen as representative of their ideals. Therefore, I discuss how different social identities are represented in the Levi’s campaign. First, the group of ambassadors in Levi’s campaign represent a wide variety of both sexual and gender identities. Similarly, the ambassadors show a range of different gender presentations. Second, the ambassadors are diverse in terms of races and ethnicities. Because the ethnicities and races of the ambassadors were not mentioned in

the campaigns, I researched them online. I found that Juanita MORE! is Mexican-American, King is Asian-American and Mosley is black. By representing queer people with a diverse range of queer identities and presentations, ethnicities and races, the Levi's campaign contests homonormativity. Proponents of homonormative politics emphasise the "normalcy" of queer people in order to win the sympathies of cisgender and straight people and advance the gay political agenda. In this perspective, queer people who adhere to gender norms, are cisgender, gay or lesbian (as opposed to, for instance, bisexual) and white are privileged over people who are "more distanced from and threatening to the mainstream" (Peñaloza 2008, 332; Nölke 2018, 245; Ng 2013, 261; Drucker 2015, 243). Levi's, however, does not give into this limited ideal of what queer people should be and look like.

Contrary to the diversity in terms of ethnicity, race and queerness, the ambassadors present a very limited picture of queer people in terms of class, age, physical ability and place of residence. Like the Secret campaign, all ambassadors are able-bodied young or middle-aged adults and seem to be middle-class entrepreneurs. Moreover, all the ambassadors are based in San Francisco, the "gay capital" of the US (and home of Levi's). This focus on urban middle-class stories is consistent with homonormativity's emphasis on a consumerist lifestyle and entrepreneurialism. By only representing thriving, middle-class queer people in big cities, the campaign reinforces the stereotype that lower-class people and/or people from rural areas are more likely to be bigoted (Ng 2013, 271) and makes working-class and/or rural queer people invisible.

#### *Conclusion: Queer Success through Consumption*

In conclusion, the discourse in the Levi's campaign mirrors homonormative values to a great extent. I argue that the campaign presents the viewer with aspirational role models who have found success in the public sphere. In this way, the campaign lacks a critique of intersectionality and structural problems. Instead, it offers a narrative of personal responsibility and a prospective post-gay era. However, the campaign does divert from homonormativity in its representation of people from different races, ethnicities and queer identities.

This easily digestible homonormative politics that centres individualism, personal responsibility and consumption is a perfect fit for the Levi's advertisements. The ambassadors double as models of Levi's fashion and homonormative ideals, associating Levi's with the palatable messages of success, individualism, diversity and progressiveness. I argue that Levi's presents consumption of their items as a way to live up to their homonormative role models. Like Secret, Levi's links consumerism to the empowerment of a marginalised group.

*Comparison: Striking Similarities*

It has become clear that the campaigns show a lot of similarities in their incorporation of progressive discourses in their neoliberal narratives of empowerment. In Secret's advertisements, this manifests in neoliberal and popular feminist discourses and in the Levi's campaign these values reveal themselves as homonormative discourses. I will now briefly summarise the most important similarities.

Both campaigns focus mostly on inequality in the public sphere, specifically in careers, and oppression is represented as exclusion from this domain. Queerphobia and sexism would subsequently be solved if more women and queer people would be put in positions of power. This proposed solution is reflected in each campaign's choice to represent only successful entrepreneurs. By representing women and/or queer people who have overcome hurdles and are doing well (according to a very limited set of standards) and adopting an inspirational tone, the brands hope to inspire their viewers to strive to the same successes. These strategies, politics of visibility and trickle-down politics, are characteristic of neoliberal and popular feminist and homonormative discourses.

I argue that this narrative of meritocracy and responsabilisation has three effects. First, both campaigns disavow problems that are harder to solve, but still persist. The campaigns universalise the experiences of middle- and upper-class entrepreneurs, leaving no room for discussion of issues that cannot be overcome by personal efforts and intersect with other forms of oppression. Second, it perpetuates the idea that the US is (nearly) a post-gay and post-feminist society. The only thing left to do, is to stimulate queer people and/or women to pick themselves up by their bootstraps and become responsible and successful citizens. Secret encourages women not to sweat taking opportunities and Levi's wants queer people to be themselves and bold. Third, it presents norms for female and queer viewers in the forms of the perfect and gay normalcy. These norms are inherently exclusive as not everyone will be able to or even wants to reach them.

By using these palatable progressive messages and representing successful women and queer people, the brands effectively associate consumption of their products with empowerment and emancipation. I argue, however, that the way the brands conceptualise sexism and queerphobia and the solutions they offer, are not sufficient to address structural problems and burden the oppressed, rather than the oppressors.

## 5. Conclusion: Resurrecting Redistribution Politics

The thesis set out to answer the following question: *how do private US brands use the issues and strategies discussed in feminism and queer activism in the advertising campaigns ALL STRENGTH, NO SWEAT by Secret and Levi's PRIDE: 2018 campaign, and what are the differences and similarities between the two discourses?* To structure the analyses, I divided them into three themes: the representation of queer and feminist issues, the subjects who are (not) represented and the integration of the brands in the advertisements' messages.

Because neoliberalism is a central concept in academic debates surrounding similar advertisements and media, I started the thesis by laying a theoretical groundwork centred on critical perspectives on neoliberalism. I explained how neoliberalism, since its emergence in the 1980s, has increased social inequality in the US. Then I explained how neoliberal ideology has appropriated leftist feminist and queer discourses, creating discourses that are described as neoliberal feminism, popular feminism and homonormativity. In order to answer the research question, I used discourse analysis. Borrowing from Foucault's conceptualisation of discourse, I described discourse as a way of representing a certain version of reality while obscuring other versions. I transcribed and visually described all the materials and coded them on the basis of the three themes. In the analysis I have argued that the two campaigns liberally borrow from neoliberal feminist, popular feminist and homonormative discourses. While seemingly progressive, both narratives centre neoliberal values of consumerism, individualism and personal responsibility. By representing individuals who have overcome their problems through personal efforts, the campaigns perpetuate the neoliberal narrative that anyone can make it to the top by becoming self-responsible, confident and entrepreneurial subjects. Consequently, the campaigns hide the reality of structural and intersectional social problems that cannot be defeated by individuals. For the brands this narrative is fitting, however, because it allows them to associate consumption of their products with the empowerment of marginalised communities.

The thesis only examined two advertisements but showed extensive similarities between them. Therefore, it would be interesting to examine the fusion between neoliberalism and leftist values in, for instance, progressive media focussing on racial or disability justice. This way, we can examine if the presence of neoliberal values in progressive-seeming media is a larger trend. In any case, it is crucial that we prevent further appropriation of progressive values by neoliberal ideology. To do this, it is important that we reconcile recognition politics with redistribution politics. Currently, we are "stuck in the vicious circles of mutually reinforcing cultural and economic subordination" (Fraser 1995, 92) because we have neglected political

economy for too long. Focussing on both issues, then, will allow us to resist the co-optation of leftist ideologies by neoliberalism.



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