

Gucci: Flattening Women Through Patriarchal Heteronormativity

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Approaches to Rhetorical Criticism

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Fall 2017

### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to employ feminist ideological framework and Creative Analytic Practice in evaluating the inferior positionality that women are subjected to through Gucci's 2003 and 2010 advertising campaigns. My paper enters intellectual discourse surrounding fashion photography and contributes toward the discussion by explicating ways women are flattened physically, visually, and metaphorically. Previous analyses have touched on these topics, but there has been lack of precision and gravity in regard to implications. Furthermore, no research has been presented in regard to Gucci's perpetuation of such ideals. Hegemonic masculinity's prevalence is evident, as it pervades every aspect of culture. Though women's fashion photography targets a primarily female audience, patriarchal heteronormativity implicitly and explicitly undermines women's autonomy. The "male gaze," which is evident in all forms of media, is particularly pervasive in women's fashion photography. Conclusions convey that Gucci's portrayal of women gives way to the illusion that the female half of the population is of little worth, to be subordinated by the dominant male population. The message being sent is that women, through physical, visual, and metaphorical means, are solely an image.

### Gucci: Flattening Women Through Patriarchal Heteronormativity

Women have been flattened. They have been flattened physically, visually, and metaphorically at the command of oppression's chief watchdog, otherwise known as fashion photography. Fashion photography presented by such brands as the prestigious and equally idolized Gucci strip women of freedom, identity, and voice. By physically, visually, and metaphorically flattening women, Gucci's 2003 and 2010 advertising campaigns convey the concept of patriarchal heteronormativity. Inaccurately portraying woman's ideal beauty standards, positioning female models in demeaning poses, and obscuring their faces are ways that Gucci denigrates the image of women. What may be perceived as sexual freedom in actuality connotes further oppression and reinforcement of the inferiority of women which has been infused into the minds of all for centuries.

Oppression. The word is an oft-used, yet little comprehended unit of the English language. In an essay entitled by the topic itself, Frye (1983) indicates that the Latin root of this word means "to press" (p. 2). In other words, such a concept may be compared to the process of being flattened. When one becomes oppressed, it is as if they are vanishing. Such pressure at one point requires the utter relinquishment of every last ounce of control.

Gucci is a luxurious designer brand whose consumers are comprised of men, women, and children. Based out of Italy, the brand incorporates a global audience (Tokatli, 2013). As Gucci is considered "the owner of the world's third most valuable fashion brand," it holds great influence (Tokatli, 2013, p. 239). Given the brand's fame and recognition, it is all the more important to note that Gucci's advertising compromises women's autonomous identities by sexually exploiting them and focusing them as the object of male sexual desire. Within an analysis conducted on advertising's effect on the brain, Vesich and Lieberman (2017) found that

“sex sells” (p. 322). For instance, provocative images create a sense of desire for the product, just as they create a sense of desire for sex. Indeed, the sexual exploitation of women in advertising is three times greater than that of men (Vesich & Lieberman, 2017, p. 328). Advertising’s skewed focus upon the female sex promotes unfair representation of women, and it subjects them to inaccurate reputations.

Derogatory advertisements, such as those put forth by Gucci, are noteworthy in that they reinforce internal barriers within women. Kilbourne (2010) released remarkable research in the area of women’s exploitation through advertisements. She notes that, though many would presume the media’s representation of women has improved, portrayal of women as hyper-sexualized inferiors has indeed grown worse with each passing decade (Jhally & Kilbourne, 2010). Females make up 49.6% of the world’s total population (United Nations, 2017). Therefore, as the inferior positionality to which women are subjected seeps into culture, it inherently pervades the lives of nearly half the world population. Due to Gucci’s broad audience, the scope of impact is even greater; not only are 49.6% of the population misled, but so are the other 50.4%. Such images lead individuals to sink in media’s quicksand of misrepresentation. Does Gucci’s oppressive concept of women diminish women’s sense of self-worth, confidence, and ability to achieve and succeed? Do Gucci’s patriarchal heteronormative ideals cause women to “lean back” at the table, while men are continually encouraged to “lean in” (Sandberg & Scovell, 2013, p. 8)? In other words, does the flattened representation of female models in fashion advertising adversely affect and oppress the social construct of women?

In the following pages, I provide a synopsis of the historical and scholarly context pertinent to fashion photography’s perverse effect on women and society. Through feminist ideological criticism and Creative Analytic Practice, I analyzed five images selected from

Gucci's 2003 and 2010 ad campaigns. The following conducted research does not stem from contempt for men or the notion of "man hatred." The point of this research is not to overlook the fact that men are also portrayed negatively through fashion photography. Rather, this study illustrates how women have been disciplined by lies regarding their identity, voice, and performance in the world, through the lens of misleading fashion photography.

Physically, women are implicitly told that, unless they size down, they will never measure up. Visually, female bodies have been flattened to the ground and into walls. Continual domination looms as an ominous dark cloud over the lives of women, as they are subjected to inferiority in a world of patriarchal heteronormativity. Metaphorically, fashion photography and specifically that of Gucci, speaks to half the population that they are solely an image. Yet, women will not appear as flawless as the airbrushed ultra-thin super models who are not small enough. Individuality is replaced with conformity as models must look a certain way and therefore, women who strive to be like these unreal images are inadequate. A supposed notion of vanity replaces that of intelligence, as advertisements create a portentous illusion that women are flattened to nothing more than an image. That women's voices are irrelevant. That appearance is the "be-all and end-all." Powerful platforms such as Gucci hold thousands of women captive, spoon-feeding lies and stripping celebration of independence.

The analyzed Gucci campaigns are merely one sample within a saturated market of derogatory advertisements. The proceeding pages convey a literature context in order to invoke recognition of the injustices which are at work in the media through misrepresentations which individuals are exposed to on a daily basis. The discussion intends to elicit understanding that advertising does indeed affect the brain. What follows lays the ground work for an argument as to why Gucci's oppression of women should be stopped, dead in its tracks.

### **Synthesizing Historical and Scholarly Context**

Prevalence of the familiar phrase and 21<sup>st</sup> century idiom, “doing a Gucci,” led to the appropriation of the brand’s name into popular culture (Tokatli, 2013, p. 239). From Kanye West’s song, “Champions,” to slang terms utilized by young people, this idiom outgrew its roots with the fashion fanatics who originally coined the phrase (Tokatli, 2013). The use of the three words, “doing a Gucci,” conveys the idea of a transformation from bad to good. Today, Gucci is an acclaimed luxurious fashion brand; however, it was on the brink of bankruptcy just over twenty years ago. Destined for destruction, the image of Gucci was revived and dramatically renovated by American fashion designer, Tom Ford, who responded to the exigency. 1994 bred success for the company as Ford, the creative director, “‘breathed life’ into Gucci” and commenced the process of rejuvenating the brand’s image (Tokatli, 2013, p. 239). For this fashion miracle, the brand and designer are forever recognized.

In what follows, I discuss Gucci’s context, leading up to and surrounding the mid to late 1990s and early 2000s. A time governed by recessions and grunge street fashion, these years provide a framework for understanding Ford’s reinvention of Gucci (Crane, 1999). In addition to providing context for said era, I enter discourse surrounding the controversial topic of fashion photography and point out vacancies that are robbed of proper attention. The shadowboxed half of the female population, through explicit subordination in fashion photography, is more than just sexually exploited and subjected to male dominance. That said, to properly attribute Gucci’s contribution to such denigration of women, historical context must be considered.

### **Historicizing Gucci**

As a historically elusive brand catered toward the elite, Gucci faced difficulty in the 1990s, due to multiple factors. Originally founded by Guccio Gucci in 1921, the brand was now

in the hands of his grandson, Maurizio Gucci (Tagliabue, 1995). The 1970s and 1980s brought an unprecedented level of brand globalization and, consequently, the company lost its elusive qualities (Frankel, 2011). Due to Gucci's lack of luster, the family business suffered financially, drawing nigh to bankruptcy as Maurizio lavishly spent money from which the brand could not afford to part (Tagliabue, 1995). Thus, Ford can claim superhero status in light of the miraculous turn-around he influenced due to his promotion from designer to creative director in 1994. Ford had much to overcome, as the industry faced both external and internal circumstances. An economic recession and the overly saturated Gucci image were obstacles looming before the shining success of Ford's career (Frankel, 2011).

While many of its contemporaries found themselves facing cut-backs amidst hard-pressed times, Gucci saw a twelve percent increase in sales under the creative leadership of Ford (Blanthorn, 2004, p. 2). Given the methods Ford implemented in order to change the company image, its subsequent success is significant. As Louis Vuitton Moet Hennessy was Gucci's only rivaling brand, it is worth noting how Ford instigated the turn-around that Gucci illustriously lays claim to today (Blanthorn, 2004).

Facing impending doom of bankruptcy, Ford knew the key to success. In the words of *Harper's Bazaar* fashion features editor, Kristina O'Neill, "Tom Ford understood the international sex appeal of fashion like no one else...he made his customers crave fashion the way they crave sex" (Blanthorn, 2004, p. 1). Gucci was not solely about clothes, but it was about the erotic desire created through advertising. According to Ford himself, "I asked myself what was my Gucci all about? It's about celebrating a playboy, hedonism, luxury, glamour and sex. I've always been in love with all those things" (Blanthorn, 2004, p. 3). The Ford-run Gucci brand identified with the male perspective, indicated by his use of the term, "playboy."

As expressed in London's *The Independent*, Sherwood (2001) says that "Gucci Group [was] the first to understand that fashion industry acclaim doesn't convert into global sales without ruthless marketing" (p. 3). Sick of grunge fashion and envisioning sexy glamor, Ford hired Mario Testino. Testino is a supposed wonder-working photographer whose depictions of women reinforce a hegemonically masculine view of sexuality by emphasizing women's hypersexualized appearance. Though Testino claimed to unravel the true inner being of his subjects, and though he nonetheless found many models to be superficial through and through, he distinctly admitted to his obsession with appearance (Billen, 2002).

Testino wears fake teeth, and explaining a self-proclaimed infatuation with outward looks, he said:

I grew up in a society where beauty is really important. They judge people on their looks in South America. It's amazing because I never actually realized until lately that it all comes from there and I am obsessed with it. (Billen, 2002, p. 3)

Testino's emphasis on physical beauty reinforces his appearance-based creative philosophy. He is a highly sought-after celebrity photographer, in part because he creates unreal, disillusioned photos. For example, Kate Moss claims that Testino accentuated her curves (Billen, 2002). Whether this was accomplished through post processing or camera angles is not specified. However, a statistically significant number of female fashion models appearing in magazines are modified through the use of Photoshop (Conley & Ramsey, 2011, p. 472). Photoshop-created reality of misrepresentation indicates a societal ideology, implying that women's appearance should be measured to unrealistic standards of perfection.

In 2004, Ford and his "dream team" partner, Domenico De Sole, left the company. By this time, the entire creative team had learned the remarkable success of Ford's sexually

exploitive ways, and consequently, the image of Gucci continued with little change (Blanthorn, 2004). The company exemplifies the hyper sexualized vision that he developed and instilled in its being. In 2005, Ford's brief successor was replaced by creative director, Frida Giannini, who was subsequently replaced by Alessandro Michele in 2015 (Frankel, 2011; Zakaria, 2017). Giannini's branding was characterized by a manner of flirtation as opposed to the rape-resembling images put forth by Ford's marketing, with attention paid to "cheekily bared backs and legs rather than desperately exposed cleavage and pelvises" (Armstrong, 2005, p. 2). The female creative director, nonetheless, faced the unchangeable fact that Gucci had been redefined by Ford and continued to bear the image of hyper sexuality (Armstrong, 2005). As such, Gucci's marginalized representation of the female population leads to the following scholarly discussion on the matter of fashion photography.

### **Entering the Scholarly Discourse of Fashion Photography**

Historicizing Gucci provides appropriate framework to understand implications for the brand's negative portrayal of women. I will now discuss two veins of scholarly discourse within the realm of fashion photography as a whole. Though the overt sexual exploitation of women is anything but a nuanced topic of study, scholars recognize the exigency of navigating new pathways within this labyrinth of scholarship. Scholars realize that fashion advertising impacts women in particular (Conley & Ramsey, 2011; Crane, 1999; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010; Ruggerone, 2006; Sultze, 2003). As this influence is not entirely positive, such understanding has spurred further scholarship within a field saturated by avenues of diverse thought. The following pages enter the discourse surrounding implications, as well as practices induced by a patriarchal hegemonic influence over the fashion industry.

**Implications for identity.**

According to Phillips and McQuarrie (2010), an effect on women's identities is correlated with consumption of fashion images, specifically those seen in magazines such as *Vogue*. Women are consequently subjected to the slavery of appearance-based perfection, the master of whom is advertising agencies. For example, Ruggerone (2006) says, "clothes constitute the *self*, and the individual portrayed in a photograph incorporates that *self* and makes it permanent" (p. 356). The moment a photographer's index finger kisses the button and releases the camera's inner mechanisms, a woman is flattened from a 3D living being to a 2D clothes hanger. The circumvented illusion of *self* is further proliferated through Photoshop. *Lucky Magazine* fabricates cover photos through the process of copying and pasting body parts from multiple women into one image (Jahllly & Kilbourne, 2010). Reverenced models are transformed, through a figment of the imagination, into physically impossible standards to which women are held. Though models are fundamentally actors, consumers' differentiation between reality and a curated image is smaller than what constitutes the gap between actuality and television/film fantasy (Ruggerone, 2006). As portentous advertising agencies identify with consumers, a primarily female audience is subjected to images that skew perceptions of reality.

Advertising has come to a place where, even more than clothing, the focal point is a model's body. Fashion photography's refocus began in the late 1970s and has continued to escalate (Ruggerone, 2006). One portrayal exemplified throughout advertising is of women who are unnaturally slender (Crane, 1999; Ruggerone, 2006). In conjunction with Photoshop's illusions, portrayal of anorexic-like models causes women to attempt the emulation of unachievable standards, which are set forth by advertisers whose main purpose is to achieve aesthetic perfection (Ruggerone, 2006). Though Ruggerone (2006) denotes body image

implications for physical oppression of women's standards, the study lacks regard for the internal implications of being physically and metaphorically compressed. Not only are women's body images misaligned with reality, but these lies perpetuate an overall perception of inferiority through flattening of their identities.

Conley and Ramsey (2011) implicitly refer to the concept of flattening, while testing hypotheses put forth by Jean Kilbourne in the acclaimed, *Killing Us Softly* series. One of her hypotheses is that women are portrayed as "taking up less space" (Conley & Ramsey, 2011, p. 472). Through quantitative data collection, this hypothesis as well as the theory that women are depicted in weak, subordinate manners was confirmed (Conley & Ramsey, 2011). Although such claims are accurate, they merely skim the surface of women's oppression and the *flattening* of their identities. Now that identity implications have been covered, a discussion of fashion photography's oppressive origins will be ignited.

### **"Male gaze" and subordination of women.**

The standard of aesthetic perfection, conceived in the minds of fashion photographers and creative directors, is the brainchild of advertising's patriarchal oppression of women. Historically, the field of photography has been dominated by men (Ruggerone, 2006). Such influence leads to the concept of the "male gaze," pertinent to a variety of media platforms. Ruggerone (2006) explains the term in reference to fashion photography as follows: "subjects (usually, but not always, women) are portrayed in ways that are deemed to be attractive to a male spectator, although most of the actual audience is likely to be women" (p. 356). Representing the way that a man stereotypically views a female, fashion photography is ridden with images which depict women in demeaning manners. Not only are models posed in sexually objectifying positions, but they are often made to appear weak and placed in a lower position in reference to

the male who is either pictured or implicitly being allured. Women's depicted inferiority is further accentuated through the common viewing of female models from an upward angle (Ruggerone, 2006). Technical trickery is implemented, deceiving women into viewing themselves from a perspective of patriarchal dominance.

According to Lakoff and Scherr (1984), "modern beauty...is deeply embedded in sexual politics – the woman acting out male fantasies, engaging in purposeful provocation" (p. 106). Females are constantly reminded of their existence only in relation to the male population (Butler, 1999). Fashion's world of photography continues to perpetuate this. "Ritualization of subordination," an idea that was first conceptualized by Goffman (1979), is "lowering oneself physically in some form or other of prostration" (p. 40). The concept articulates the way women are placed in subservient positions to their male counterparts. Goffman's (1979) premise connotes the belittling of women in comparison with men, as women often find themselves outcast to the floor or bed. Though this is a keen observation regarding subordination of women in advertising, Goffman glosses over the gravity of the situation. Throwing children into the same camp as women, the author appropriately acknowledges the infantilizing of women, yet simultaneously makes light of an otherwise serious discourse. Neglecting due diligence to harmful implications, Goffman's argument would have been stronger had he attended to the message being sent. Marginalized representation sends a message of ostracism from equality and suppression due to visual flattening and a patriarchy-imposed inferiority complex.

As the male gaze requires female viewers to identify with the subject in a manner which is not natural, scholars such as Crane (1999) have taken up studies which analyze the reaction of women to these images. Although ultimately inconclusive, this study found that women react with both positive and negative regard to sexually exploitative fashion images displayed before

them. Depending on the demographic of the model, the viewer tends to vary their stance. Women's reactions are reflective of the idea that advertising resolves to create identification with the viewer. One participant within Crane's (1999) study explained that, although magazine fashion editors are typically women, images put forth appear from a male perspective. Since fashion photography's target audience is women, such male identification points to hegemonic masculinity, which pervades every aspect of culture.

In 2001, *The New York Times Magazine* produced a special issue which featured women photographed by women. Quantitatively analyzing the photos, Sultze (2003) hypothesized that these female models would be portrayed in a positive light, but it was not so; additionally, female photographers were attributed less credit than male counterparts would have been given. Results indicated the prevalence of the male gaze, affecting the female artistic eye; furthermore, when doing the same work as men, women are unrecognized. "There seems to be a persistent and recurring message that women who are powerful should not call attention to it—that is, unless the source of their 'power' happens to be physical beauty and attractiveness" (Sultze, 2003, p. 287). By social construction and reinforcement of demeaning female representations, men and women alike have come to believe that women have no substance beyond the surface level.

Through outlining the historical context of Ford's reinvented Gucci and engaging in scholarly discussion of fashion photography, advertising's reiteration of female inferiority has emerged. Females are portrayed in sexually provocative and belittling positions, extreme emphasis is placed on the perfection of the body, and women are displayed in manners that relate them to men as opposed to promoting independence. Although great efforts have been made to explicate the positionality women are subjected to, there is a lack of precision in the language and discussion of harmful implications for this shadowboxed half of the population. Women's

bodies have been physically, visually, and metaphorically flattened in ways that have gone unnoticed. Such depictions further proliferate the image of women as inferior and lead to the perceived notion that they should be attributed no identity other than that of an image. The focus of my study will be to bring adequate light to this marginalized population.

### **Pragmatizing 21<sup>st</sup> Century Gucci**

Five images were analyzed, selected from Gucci's 2003 and 2010 advertising campaigns. The first three images were found in Ford's 2003 campaign, and all three of them picture a male partner who is visibly compressing his female partner. The first image displays a woman's lower body, which is being physically flattened against a wall by her male counterpart. She is draped in a kimono and wearing heels, while self-revealing the visuals underneath her underwear. Gucci's logo is shaved into her pubic hair as the focal point of the photo, while also serving as the object of the male's penetrative gaze. The female model's head is cropped out of the image altogether. The second image depicts a woman who is lying on carpeted ground while being crushed by a man's fully clothed leg and shoe. The point of contact is her pelvis. The woman is clothed in a wood-colored, ruched, bodycon dress, displaying prominent cleavage. Her facial expression is one of seductive desire and pure pleasure. The third image portrays a woman who is also lying on carpeted ground, wearing only a kimono, lacy underwear, and heels, as her male companion is fully clothed in a three piece suit and dress shoes. He is standing above and peering down at her, while she is pulling him closer with her heeled foot.

The fourth and fifth images are from a 2010 campaign, run by Giannini. The fourth image depicts a woman who is lying on the ground in the desert, wearing a tight-fitting grey dress and brown skin-tight boots with approximately six-inches of heel height. Her eyes are closed, and her image is reflected in a gold throne-like metal prop, which a man is sitting on. He

is dressed in a casual suit, peering down at her. The fifth image portrays a woman, poolside, spreading herself over the leg of a man who is looking in the opposite direction. Her eyes are closed and her head is tipped back, obscuring her face, while she holds one leg propped up. She is scantily clad, yet wearing six-inch heels, while he is dressed in white from head to toe.

### **Identifying the Methodologies**

I employed two methods in evaluating the flattening that women are subjected to in these five Gucci images. Foss and Griffin (1992) contend that “scholars of rhetoric...are constantly reminded of the truism that theories provide particular perspectives on the data they organize and present” (p. 330). Theories enact lenses through which scholars view the world. Though never free of bias, drawing from more than one approach ensures an increasingly holistic, well-informed analysis. Rather than restricting my framework to a narrow scope, I broadened my horizons by incorporating two lenses which are pertinent to the explication of my subject. Such methods include feminist ideological criticism, and Creative Analytic Practice (CAP).

The two methods work harmoniously, both emphasizing beliefs and paradigms. Feminist ideological criticism advances the belief that people, “regardless of their identity categories, can experience freedom and safety, complexity and subjectivity, and economic and political parity – experiences associated with being fully human” (Nudd & Whalen, 2016, p. 191). Rather than promoting only gender equality, feminists stand for equality in the areas of race, class, ability, etc. My second method, CAP, utilizes self-reflection in the analysis of a concept. Spencer and Paisley (2013) identify the heart of this method by describing it as “a way to do reflexivity, challenge traditional paradigms, and to come to a new unique understanding of a phenomenon” (p. 706). Consumers of products inevitably perpetuate subversive ideologies implemented through the creation of the artifact, regardless of realization or intention. Rather than following a

scientific method, CAP takes a qualitative route which incorporates emphasis on the audience in a non-traditional, experiential-based manner (Parry & Johnson, 2007).

Now that understanding of the methods is established, key assumptions must also be highlighted. A key assumption of feminist ideological criticism is that hegemonic masculinity remains the standard by which society is measured. Johnson (2014) explains that patriarchy is a societal system into which individuals are born, and no one is exempt from its influence. Rather than pointing fingers at individuals, the system of patriarchy must be evaluated, identifying root causes for patterned issues. Within CAP, a key assumption is that individuals are biased. If all had the same perspective, then rhetorical criticism would not be controversial. There would be no need for criticism, as there would be no difference of opinion. Additionally, it is assumed that critics perpetuate ideologies by their own interactions with the artifact of study and that the critic is allowed freedom and creativity in their evaluation (Parry & Johnson, 2007; Richardson & St Pierre, 2005).

In my analysis, I focused on certain aspects of each method. When viewing my artifact through the lens of feminist ideological criticism, I set my focus to *recording* the ways that gender is enacted rather than programmed. I also employed the act of *revisioning*, as I suggest new ways to promote greater understanding amongst members of society. I paid less attention to the redefining and recovering, as they hold less pertinence to my topic of study. Although I view life through the lens of a materialist feminist, I inspected this artifact through the perspective of a liberal feminist, as this view accurately frames the specific oppression of women that is instigated through the pieces I analyzed. Within my CAP analysis, I took a creative approach in my criticism. I adopted a self-reflexive mentality as I addressed my reaction to the image set forth through Gucci's fashion photography, and also the ways women perpetuate patriarchal

ideals as a population. Though this is not specifically outlined in CAP, I believe women's voices as a whole must be represented. The other CAP step I emphasized is noting an exigency for social change, going hand in hand with the feminist ideological act of revisioning.

Through implementing theories promoted by feminist ideological criticism and CAP, I explicated how Gucci's 2003 and 2010 advertising campaigns acknowledged an exigence through employing patriarchal ideologies which affect all consumers. I applied the lens of a liberal feminist critic as I analyzed the overt oppression of women through Gucci's advertising. I responded to the advertisements and analyzed the ways women as a population react to and bolster the message set forth. The purpose of this study is to reveal ways that women are oppressed, or flattened, through reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity, which has been instilled in society and strengthened by consumers, regardless of intention.

### **Explicating Compressive Content within the Corners of Gucci's Images**

Through perpetuating the ideology of patriarchal heteronormativity, Gucci's 2003 and 2010 campaigns transmit harmful messages to audiences, leading male and female consumers to view women through a lens tainted by hegemonic masculinity. The viewer unintentionally adopts the perspective of the "male gaze," further proliferating ideals set forth by the patriarchal society which individuals are involuntarily born into (Johnson, 2014). Though Kilbourne (2010) puts forth the concept of the vanishing of women, this analysis expounds upon her premise.

Explicitly, women are being flattened, and this concept, as well as repercussions for such representation, must be addressed. No scholarly research has been presented on the way that Gucci's images, specifically, create and perpetuate female inferiority, feeding concepts to viewers in the split second that it takes to internalize the message of a photograph. Thus, the remaining pages of this paper explicate the flattening of women that is seen in Gucci's 2003 and

2010 advertising campaigns. In 2003, Ford held creative directorship, implementing the patriarchal bias which emanates forth from social construction. The main purpose of this study is to analyze the 2003 campaign, expounding upon the ideals, beliefs, and messages being sent through Ford's images. However, analysis of long-term repercussions is also necessary. Importantly, the 2010 campaign will be analyzed to demonstrate a lack of change, even when creative directorship had transferred to the hands of a female. Amidst power changes, Ford's initial response to exigence led to lasting impacts on Gucci's image, further propagating the resounding physical, visual, and metaphorical flattening of women in society. The following pages analyze Gucci's engendering of women's oppression, female perpetuation of their own marginalization, and the exigency for social change.

### **Engendering Women's Oppression**

In this section, I will analyze the demonstrated oppression of women through Gucci's images. The analyzed photos portray physical, visual, and metaphorical flattening of women, which both create and perpetuate women's inferior positionality. I will evaluate the beliefs and ideals perpetuated by Gucci's underlying messages, revealing their harmful effects on women.

#### **Physical flattening of women.**

Beyond the pressure to conform and temptation to compare, there are resounding implications for women being told they must physically flatten themselves. Women's suppression is not solely attributed to idealistic beauty standards and a subsequent lack of self-esteem, as Kilbourne (2010) and Conley and Ramsey (2011) note. Additionally, women's misrepresentation is not only due to the portrayal of vanishing women, as Kilbourne (2010) contends; rather, women's marginalization occurs when they are *flattened*, compressed, and physically oppressed by outside forces. The issue of female oppression is rooted in patriarchal

social construction, premised on the belief that women are inferior. Beauty standards set forth for women are a physical manifestation of hegemonic masculinity's belittlement of the female population. All five analyzed images portray thin female models, confirming Kilbourne's (2010) thesis that fashion photography emphasizes the necessity for women to vanish; however, more specifically, they are flattened by the compression belt that is patriarchal society. Even the concept of women's beauty is oppressive in creative expression and individuality. Women's beauty standards have been compressed to include only one prototype, that of a thin woman who has likely starved herself in order to look the way she does for the photo shoot.

Each of the analyzed images depicts flattened women; however, there are two which present particularly problematic scenarios. The first image portrays a woman who is pinned against the wall, and though she is so thin that her ribs should be showing, her ribs have evidently been airbrushed out of the picture. Although the woman is made to appear extraordinarily thin, the unattractive quality of ultra-thin women – a bony body – is Photoshopped so as to appear perfectly flawless. In the third image, the woman is so thin that she appears androgynous, as she seemingly has no breasts. The defining qualities of a woman's body are stripped away when women are told to starve themselves and become "rail thin."

Aside from the way oppressive beauty standards shed light on society's perception of women, unattainable physical ideals can lead to dependence on others for survival. For example, approximately 0.3% of females are affected by anorexia (Yom-Tov & Boyd, 2014, p. 196). Idealization of thin women is largely correlated with these statistics, and a connection has been made between media consumption and anorexia (Williams, Thomsen, & McCoy, 2003; Yom-Tov & Boyd, 2014). Hospitalization of women due to anorexia and other eating disorders further suppresses them, as they are reliant on doctors and medications in order to recover from

their oppression-induced illness. Though sole responsibility could never be placed on one company, Gucci's perpetuation of unhealthy beauty standards must be held in check.

### **Visual flattening of women.**

Visually, in Gucci's images, women are flattened through the positioning they are subjected to, in comparison with their male counterparts. In image one, the way the woman is pinned against the wall represents the concept that women are compressed by patriarchal heteronormativity. In this instance, the compressor is a man, which falls in line with hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy's grip on society. The representation of her body being pressed against a wall further connotes the concept that women are granted no autonomy. In the second image, a man's foot is literally crushing the model in her crotch area. The visual representation of this image reiterates society's message that women are to be dominated. They are to be submissive, as a man does what he pleases. Though all the other analyzed images obscure the face of the female model, this one does not. The one time her face is turned toward the camera and showing expression, she is exhibiting erotic pleasure for something that is not respectful. She is displaying "pleasure" in literally being crushed, as opposed to being sexually pleased in a respectful manner. In the third image, through inviting her male companion to stand over her by pulling him closer with her foot, the female model is reinforcing her own oppression. Rather than equalizing herself with the man, she is inviting him to dominate her. Such a representation leads the viewer to internalize and accept patriarchal heteronormativity. Proliferation of female submission to male dominance seeps into an already patriarchal society, further denigrating women and perpetuating their unequal status.

**Metaphorical flattening of women.**

Through representations set forth by fashion photography, the reiterated message is that women are solely an image meant for the pleasure of men. Women, who are living, breathing, 3D human beings, are compressed into the four corners of a 2D photograph. They are told that the sum of their identity is constituted by the attractiveness they can transmit through their appearance. Photographs such as those found in Gucci's 2003 and 2010 campaigns argue that a woman's purpose amounts to her ability to please a man sexually. According to the society set forth by fashion photography, little care is given to a woman's wants and needs, as is seen through the domestic abuse which is portrayed through the second photograph – depicting a woman's pelvis being crushed by a man's foot. Women are told that they are for being gazed at, played with, and abused, yet they are not released into autonomy. Women's individual identity is even stripped of them by lack of depth through facial expression, obscuring of facial features, and obstruction of faces altogether.

Image one clearly conveys the idea that women have no identity outside of providing an experience for male erotic pleasure and being a platform intended for the advertisement of patriarchal heteronormative ideals. The model is objectified through the Gucci label being advertised on her body. Not only is her physicality used as material for advertising, but the advertising is done so in an erotic manner, taking advantage of her sexuality. Her own pleasures are foregone, as she becomes solely the object of the man's pleasure...she is a play toy, undressed to the pleasing of the male gaze, while he is fully clothed, providing her no reciprocation for pleasure. Aside from the emphasis placed on an ideal woman's body, her head, the central location of her intelligence, is seen as unfit for display. The metaphorical message

being sent is that women have no thoughts, but only emotional, erotic impulses which are centralized on the desires of a man.

Images set forth by Giannini's creative directorship are less obviously scandalous; however, the underlying message remains consistent. Although less explicitly exploitive, these images are implicitly and metaphorically denigrating toward women. The fourth image displays a woman who is, once again flattened on the ground, yet there are additional problematic elements within the photograph. She is lying next to a sort of gold throne, which her male companion is sitting on. The female model's identity is flattened through two acts. First, she is a target of his male gaze which, once again, perpetuates the idea that women are meant solely for the pleasure of men. Second, her reflection clearly emanates from the very throne which is used to elevate her male admirer. The utilization of reflection in this image reinforces the idea that women amount to nothing more than appearance. The woman's eyes are closed, and though the male wears an expression which indicates individuality, intelligence, and presence of thoughts, her lack of expression implicates an absence of aforementioned qualities. Either submissiveness or lack of knowledge could be read in her face, with no care or regard, respectively, for what is occurring above her.

Similarly, in the fifth image, the female model's head is thrust back, drawing attention to her neck and hair, while obscuring the potentially expressive features of her face. Her eyes are closed, blocking the gateway to individuality. The woman is vying for attention from a man who, in this instance, is looking in the other direction. While other images portrayed a man peering at a woman who is depicted in a submissive stance, this image conveys the idea that when a woman asks for a man's attention, he looks the other way. The transmitted message is that women's lives revolve around striving for the attention of men.

### **Self-Reflexivity and Perpetuation of Patriarchy**

Prevalence of hegemonic masculinity through media and the use of male-dominated language promote the act of unintentionally succumbing to subversive ideals. Becoming informed consumers is imperative, as it leads to awareness of media intake. Women have the power to choose conformity and perpetuation of ideals set forth by patriarchal heteronormativity, or they can become self-reflexive and intentionally fight marginalization.

Because we live in a patriarchal society, external barriers are evident around every corner, and fashion photography is both a symptom and a carrier of the disease. Women's internalization and subsequent response constitutes an example of internal barriers that also hinder societal advancement. Sandberg and Scovell (2013) write as follows:

In addition to the external barriers erected by society, women are hindered by barriers that exist within ourselves. We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in. (p. 8)

By internalizing the external messages sent forth by society, women further reinforce their own unequal status, whether realizing it or not. Imposter syndrome is a concept commonly embraced by women, and it occurs when an individual achieves success, yet feels like a fraud (Sandberg & Scovell, 2013). The sense of being a fraud comes from a belief that the person is not qualified or did not deserve the pleasant outcome that was reaped from hard work. The more that women embody fashion photography's demeaning messages, the more likely they will perceive themselves as a fraud when found to be successful.

Though there have been multiple waves of feminism, this word nonetheless holds weight in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as is evinced by fashion photography's negative female portrayal. According

to Hitt (2010), “[the New Misogyny – also known as the exploitation of women] has permeated popular entertainment, confusing young girls who mistake objectification for empowerment” (p. 1).

1). With digital access to fashion photography and exploitative images, women’s oppression is at the fingertips of all who possess a smartphone. Social media and search engines allow even young women to become disillusioned by a hegemonic discourse which degrades women.

As women accept the oppression induced by consumption of fashion photography, they physically aid the snowball effect of patriarchal domination. Images put forth through advertising feed into the minds of women, as they flip through magazine pages. Fashion editors are primarily women, yet they continually reinforce the patriarchal-driven idea that women are less-than, through editorial and advertising choices they make (Crane, 1999). Giannini herself, though a woman, reinforced the patriarchal heteronormative image put forth by Ford.

Through purchasing Gucci products, women continually give the brand permission to flatten, or oppress, individuals of their sex, both physically and visually. Doing so consequently legitimizes the belief that women are solely an image. By maintaining women’s attention through shopping and bolstering capitalism, advertising agencies subsequently empower the patriarchal society we live in. What once began with 17<sup>th</sup> century women attaining power through control of the purse, has inevitably come back to bite them (Brayfield, 2005). Shopping – once an act of empowerment – has been used to exile women into the slavery of patriarchal society and more specifically, patriarchal heteronormativity exemplified by advertisements. The pressure to conform to beauty standards oppresses women by centralizing attentions elsewhere (Ruggerone, 2006). Women often succumb to the deception that they are solely an appearance until it may come close to reality, and that is when others believe it as well. Rather, a stand must be taken for freedom from oppression. Advocacy for women’s autonomy is necessary.

### **Exigency for Social Change**

Just as there was an exigency which instigated Ford's revision for the image of Gucci, there is urgency to revision the image of women set forth through fashion photography. Underlying messages are sent through the need for women to flatten themselves. Images such as those set forth by Gucci not only show males as authoritative and females as submissive, but they promote domestic violence, by literally crushing women. Proliferation of the concept that women are solely an image is reiterated through the production of images set forth by Gucci. Dehumanization, which occurs through flattening women physically, visually, and metaphorically, affects women's self-concept. The message being sent forth underscores the belief that women's intelligence is of little worth, and that they are valued for nothing more than their body. The transmission of such ideals seeps into every sphere of society.

Through the creation and circulation of Gucci's images, concepts such as women's inferiority in the workplace, are strengthened. Though in 1980, women became equal with men in regard to college graduation statistics, only 25% of senior executives in corporate America are women (Sandberg & Scovell, 2013, p. 5). Such stratified discrepancies indicate an ideology which creates difficulty for women to achieve career success. A pervasive wage gap further perpetuates the power differentials demonstrated in society. According to Sandberg and Scovell (2013), women make 77 cents for every dollar that men earn in the same position (p. 7). Though marked improvement has been seen, Sandberg and Scovell (2013) contend that sufficient change has not occurred.

Perpetuation of female inferiority must be contested in all situations. In order to instigate transformation of fashion photography's dictation and society's implementation, fundamentals must be addressed. For example, specificity of language is essential. To reintroduce a

previously mentioned topic, the phrase, “sex sells,” inaccurately reflects the enormity of advertising’s disservice toward women. Because women are the primary subjects of sexual exploitation as opposed to men, saying “sex sells” is to say that women are equated with sex. Rather than calling a spade a spade, the influence of patriarchal heteronormativity is seen through avoidance of language which would otherwise reveal society’s true colors. When using this phrase, a well-informed speaker knows that the meaning is, “the sexual exploitation of women sells.” Yet, as Butler (1999) contends, we live in a society ruled by the phallogocentric law of language, which promotes hegemonic masculinity and female subservience. Individuals are not always aware of what they speak, implications for such language, or the repercussions yielded by their misuse. Those born into a patriarchal society have difficulty exiting it unless an active hunt for awareness is commenced. Until then, women continue to be a subject of oppression, as unaddressed misuse of language and denigrating fashion images flatten their identity, giving little regard for individual qualities they maintain.

### **Necessitating Women’s Freedom**

The preceding pages contextualized and analyzed Gucci’s engendering of women’s oppression, as well as female perpetuation of patriarchal dominance and reasons for social change. Feminist ideological criticism and CAP were applied, results implicating that change is imperative, because physical, visual, and metaphorical flattening of women is harmful to their identities, as well as society. Though previous studies focused on the overt sexuality and vanishing of women, this study specified the language by utilizing the term, flattening. The pressurized flattening of women, exemplified through Gucci’s 2003 and 2010 campaigns, renders internal barriers in women’s everyday lives. My study points out the gravity of the scope of patriarchal heteronormativity. The system of patriarchy denigrates women beyond surface

level body image implications. Realization of the connection between internal barriers and women's struggle for success in a patriarchal-driven system, leads to an exigency for reinvention. As such, understanding of the rhetorical force of fashion photography and, specifically Gucci's images, is necessary.

Future studies may wish to incorporate intersectionality through explicating the roles of race, class, and ability in fashion photography's denigration of women. Until further research is conducted, women must come to the realization of what is occurring. They must understand that they have a hand in their own oppression. In the interest of women's equality in the workforce and society, every member of humanity must realize that the underlying message sent forth through fashion photography necessitates reinvention.

Compromising positions that women are placed in through male dominance and patriarchal heteronormativity flatten their identities in a physical, visual, and metaphorical manner. Upon societal understanding of the ubiquity and power of fashion photography's rhetoric, patriarchy loses control over women's lives. Awareness is the key to freedom in the hands of women who strive for autonomy, respect, and individuality. Women's realization and push-back against the pressure to conform breaks fashion photography's 24/7 watch over women. Power will continue to be stripped from oppression's chief watchdog, and ultimately, resistance to physical, visual, and metaphorical flattening will prevail.

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