One size fits most? – Visual Representation of Women in Brandy Melville's Instagram Images

Emilia Mansikka

MA Thesis

English, Language Specialist Path

School of Languages and Translation Studies

Faculty of Humanities

University of Turku

April 2019

Turun yliopiston laatujärjestelmän mukaisesti tämän julkaisun alkuperäisyys on tarkastettu Turnitin OriginalityCheck -järjestelmällä.

UNIVERSITY OF TURKU

School of Languages and Translation Studies / Faculty of Humanities

MANSIKKA, EMILIA: One size fits most? – Visual Representation of Women in Brandy Melville's Instagram Images

MA Thesis, 73 pp., appendices 1 pp + Finnish Summary
English, Language Specialist Path
April 2019

- - - -

Table of Contents

Lists of tables, figures, and abbreviations

1 Introduction 1

2 Brandy Melville 4

3 Visual Culture in the Digital Age 10

3.1 INSTAGRAM 10
3.2 VISUAL CULTURE, IMAGE AND MEANING 13
3.3 PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGES AND ADVERTISING 20
3.4 FEMINIST APPROACH 24
3.5 EARLIER RESEARCH 26

4 Theoretical Framework 29

4.1 CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS 29
4.2 VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF SOCIAL ACTORS 32

5 Materials and Methods 36

5.1 RESEARCH MATERIAL 36
5.2 RESEARCH METHODS 36
5.2.1 Content Analysis 36
5.2.2 Variables and Values 40

6 Analysis 44

6.1 PHYSICAL APPEARANCE 45
6.2 PRODUCT AND CAPTION 49
6.3 BRANDY GIRL AND THE VIEWER 51
6.4 BACKGROUND AND MALE REPRESENTATIONS 55

7 Discussion 57

7.1 IMAGES OF EXCLUSION 58
7.2 THE VIEWER'S PERSPECTIVE 60
7.3 INSIGHTS ABOUT INSTAGRAM 62
7.4 EVALUATION OF THE STUDY 64

8 Conclusion 65

9 References 68

Appendix 1: Nine-point Scale by Thompson and Grey 1995

List of Tables

Table 1. Variables and values.

Table 2. Number of females.

Table 3. Comparison of single and group representations.

Table 4. Types of captions in all images and the visibility of the product display in single images in relation to the captions.

Table 5. Portrayal of body in all images, group images and single images.

Table 6. Vertical angle in all images, group images and single images.

Table 7. Facial expressions in all images, group images and single images.

List of Figures

Figure 1. Brandy Girls portrayed in Brandy Melville's Instagram profile (@brandymelvilleusa).

Figure 2. Screen capture of the brand's Instagram feed (@brandymelvilleusa).

Figure 3. Display at a Brandy Melville store in Toronto (Urback 2012).

Figure 4. Types of tagging on Instagram (@brandymelvilleusa).

Figure 5. Twitter post as a critique towards Brandy Melville (@girlphuk on Twitter).

Figure 6. Snapshot-styled Instagram photos by American Apparel and Brandy Melville (@americanapparelusa and @brandymelvilleusa).

Figure 7. Representation and Viewer Network (van Leeuwen 2008: 141).

Figures 8 & 9. Illustrations of non-white representations (@brandymelvilleusa).

Figures 10, 11 & 12. Illustrations of bodies coded as size 2, 3 and 4, respectively (@brandymelvilleusa).

Figures 13 & 14. Illustrations of hair color and length (@brandymelvilleusa).

Figures 15 & 16. Illustrations of very revealing and unrevealing representation (@brandymelvilleusa).

Figure 17. Image with a distinctive caption (@brandymelvilleusa).

Figures 18 & 19. Illustrations of high angles (@brandymelvilleusa).

Figures 20 & 21. Illustrations of serious and smiling facial expressions (@brandymelvilleusa).

Figures 22, 23 & 24. Illustrations of rear angle (@brandymelvilleusa).

Figures 25, 26 & 27. Illustrations of direction of the gaze (@brandymelvilleusa).

Figures 28 & 29. Illustrations of a Californian background (@brandymelvilleusa).

Figures 30 & 31. Illustrations of male representations (@brandymelvilleusa).

List of Abbreviations

CDA - Critical Discourse Analysis

1 Introduction

> *"If images seem to just show "what is," we need to show that they may not always be quite so. If images seem to just allude to things and never "say them explicitly," we need to make these allusions explicit."* *Theo van Leeuwen 2008: 137*

We are surrounded by the visual. During the digital age, the amount of visual information has exploded, and expanded from newspapers, magazines and television to all over the internet and social media. It has even been said that we are nowadays living in a visual culture. But does that mean we have become more visually literate? Do we understand what we are seeing? We may recognize that images are powerful in grabbing our attention, eliciting a variety of emotions and even changing the way we see the world. Sometimes we are aware of these effects, but very often images affect us subconsciously. Without noticing, what is repeatedly shown in the media easily becomes the unquestioned norm. Social media has further complicated our understanding of media and the visual by blurring the boundaries of public and personal content shared online. On popular photo-sharing platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, the posts by various brands and public figures are seamlessly merged with those of friends and family on our endless feeds, making it challenging to notice the persuasive aims of advertising images. However, if images have the power to influence the way we think and behave, we should begin to take them seriously and make an effort to become aware of their influence. That is why researching the visual in an important step towards raising our awareness and enhancing our visual literacy and also to which the current study aims to contribute.

A norm that has begun to be questioned over the years is the visual portrayal of female body. Especially the way women are represented in advertisements and marketing images has raised criticism, and one might say the female imagery has become more diverse over time. In recent years, phenomena such as body positivity movement and discourses endorsing female empowerment have provided fresh perspectives on the discussion. Yet, we are still daily faced with images maintaining the Western construction of an unrealistic thin ideal female body. Furthermore, digitalization has brought us new social media platforms such as Instagram, but do the new media provide new ways of representing women? As our identities, self-conceptions as well as how we view other people are shaped and influence by the representations produced in the media (see e.g. Hall 1997: 4, Niblock 2001: 295) it remains relevant to examine the present-day gendered visual representations.

The aim of the current study is to make the visual allusions explicit and examine the social media representations of women by a teen retail brand Brandy Melville and investigate how they contribute to today's media representation of women. What makes Brandy Melville an interesting subject to study is that the company does not rely on traditional advertising, but the brand image is constructed exclusively through online platforms, and the fame is largely due to the company's effective use of social media. The brand's primary medium is Instagram, where the official, USA-based account @brandymelvilleusa currently has more than 3.8 million followers (March 2019). Most of the images feature young, slender, longhaired models, so-called Brandy Girls, who are displaying the outfits which emanate an easygoing Californian lifestyle. In addition to the brand's innovative social media strategy, Brandy Melville stands out from the crowd with a distinctive *one size fits most* policy, which aims to make the shopping easier because all the pieces come in one size. However, most of the one-sized clothes equal to size small – a size which does not fit most – which makes the brand's slogan quite controversial. The sizing policy has raised discussion and concern in the media and over the internet on topics such as fat shaming, discrimination and young girls' self-esteem. Criticism has also been targeted at the Instagram images, because instead of "diverse California girls" which the company claims to be looking for, the Brandy Girls seem to be almost without exception "long-haired and overwhelmingly white" as well as "very, very thin" (Rubin 2014; Bradley 2014).

Figure 1. Brandy Girls portrayed in Brandy Melville's Instagram profile (@brandymelvilleusa).

In this study, I will examine the visual representations of Brandy Girls depicted on the brand's official Instagram site @brandymelvilleusa. Instagram was chosen as the source for the research

material, because it is the main platform for the brand's marketing and image building and it is where the brand has become known and gained active followers. Even though the topic is related to marketing, the research approach is discourse analytical, as the focus is on how meaning is constructed in the images. From this point of view, the main objective of the thesis is to examine **what kind of female representation does Brandy Melville construct through its visual marketing.** The research question is guided by three sub-questions:

a) How are the Brandy Girls represented in relation to their physical appearance?
b) How are the Brandy Girls represented in relation to the viewer?
c) What kinds of meanings do the backgrounds, captions and possible male representations convey in relation to the Brandy Girls?

The aim of these elaborate sub-questions is to point to the larger context and, thus, to indicate what kind of brand image Brandy Melville is constructing through its visual representations and what kind of messages are conveyed through the imagery. The first sub-question focuses on the depicted physical features of the represented Brandy Girls, while the second sub-question seeks to examine the relationship between the represented Brandy Girl and the viewer, focusing especially on distance, gaze and angle. The third sub-question evaluates how the backgrounds, captions and possible male representations contribute to the meanings of the images. The questions also aim to help evaluate the accuracy of the criticism pointed towards the brand, specifically concerning the lack of diversity of the Brandy Girls. I will approach the questions from critical discourse analytical perspective in order to examine Brandy Melville's position as an influential teen retail brand and the larger socio-cultural influence of the images. In order to answer the research questions, I will analyze the images systematically by making use of social actor theory developed by Theo van Leeuwen, and especially its adapted version for analyzing visual representations of people, i.e. visual social actors. In this study, the visual social actors under scrutiny are the representations of the depicted Brandy Girls. As a research method, the study employs content analysis, which allows the systematic analysis of the data while combining quantitative and qualitative approaches.

As digitalization has increased the amount and perhaps also the relevance of visual information, it is crucial to deepen our knowledge on what is communicated through images and how they influence our thinking and behavior. Visual literacy is especially important with advertising images, which are intended to persuade the viewer, and even more essential in social media platforms, where brand images merge with the images of our personal contacts. Despite the established position, which Instagram has gained as a popular social media platform, it has not yet been studied extensively, not to mention Instagram's use for marketing purposes, which makes the research topic very timely and

relevant. In addition, Brandy Melville's non-conventional marketing strategy and their effective use of Instagram makes the brand a very intriguing and meaningful subject for the study.

In chapter 2, I will provide background information about Brandy Melville, including the brand's main policies, marketing strategies and related research. Next, chapter 3 covers relevant topics related to visual culture in the current digital age, beginning with providing background information on Instagram in section 3.1. Section 3.2 aim to elaborate on what is meant by visual culture and how meaning is constructed in images, while section 3.3 discusses the role of photographic images in advertising. Section 3.4 introduces the feminist approach to visual advertising and finally in section 3.5 the topic is connected to related earlier research. Next, in chapter 4, I will set the theoretical framework for the thesis by introducing Critical Discourse Analysis (4.1) and Visual Social Actor Theory by van Leeuwen (4.2). Before moving on to the actual analysis, I will introduce the research material in section 5.1 and methods in section 5.2. The analysis in chapter 6 is followed by discussion of the results (chapter 7) and a conclusion (chapter 8).

2 Brandy Melville

In the recent years, the Californian lifestyle-inspired retail company Brandy Melville has become increasingly popular among American teenagers. Even though the brand may seem all-American with its USA-graphics, the recurring color palette of red, white and blue, and the occasional American flag as a backdrop, Brandy Melville actually has its origins in Italy. The company was founded in the early 1990s by father and son, Silvio and Stephan Marsan (Marsh 2014). In 2009, the company's new executive Jessy Longo brought the business overseas to the US, where the company opened its first store in Westwood area in Los Angeles (Rubin 2014). Since then, the business has expanded quite rapidly and significantly. Nowadays Brandy Melville has some 30 stores in the United States, most of which are located in California, nine stores in Canada, nearly 40 stores all around Europe, and very recently the brand has even expanded to Asia, opening altogether three stores in Singapore and Bangkok (Brandy Melville 2017). However, although the increase in the number of stores has been significant and the company slowly continues to spread across the country, Brandy Melville's store presence in total is still rather small, when compared to other similar retailers. For example, in 2016 Zara had more than 60 stores and American Apparel sold at nearly 130 locations nationwide (The Fashion Law 2016). Yet, in 2014 retail analysts estimated that the annual sales of Brandy Melville were "in the range of $125 million and growing from 20 percent to 25 percent each year", clearly indicating the brand's success also via its thriving e-commerce site (Marsh 2014). On Piper Jaffray's semiannual "Tacking Stock with Teens" report of

fall 2014 surveying teenagers' spending habits, Brandy Melville was ranked as the most up-trending brand by American teenagers (Piper Jaffray 2014). What highlights Brandy Melville's rapid rise to success is that the company was still absent from the previous surveys' top lists, i.e. the company seems to have made its major breakthrough over just a few months in 2014. Furthermore, on the 2015 report Brandy Melville was listed as one of the most preferred online shopping brands by teens (Piper Jaffray 2015).

Brandy Melville has taken a significantly different path from its competitors in teen fashion industry. For example, unlike most teen clothing brands with their showy store exterior, Brandy stores feature only discreet signage. The most prominent difference, however, is that the brand does not invest any money in advertising but relies solely on social media. Brandy Melville has reached its target audience immensely well especially due to their strong, yet very approachable Instagram presence. In fact, in 2014 Bloomberg described Brandy Melville as "Instagram's first retail success" and in 2017 Financial Times wrote about Brandy Melville's success as "rise of the Instabrand" (Marsh 2014, Ellison 2017). The brand's official, US-based account @brandymelvilleusa currently has more than 3.8 million followers (February 2019). The brand's Instagram feed looks as following:

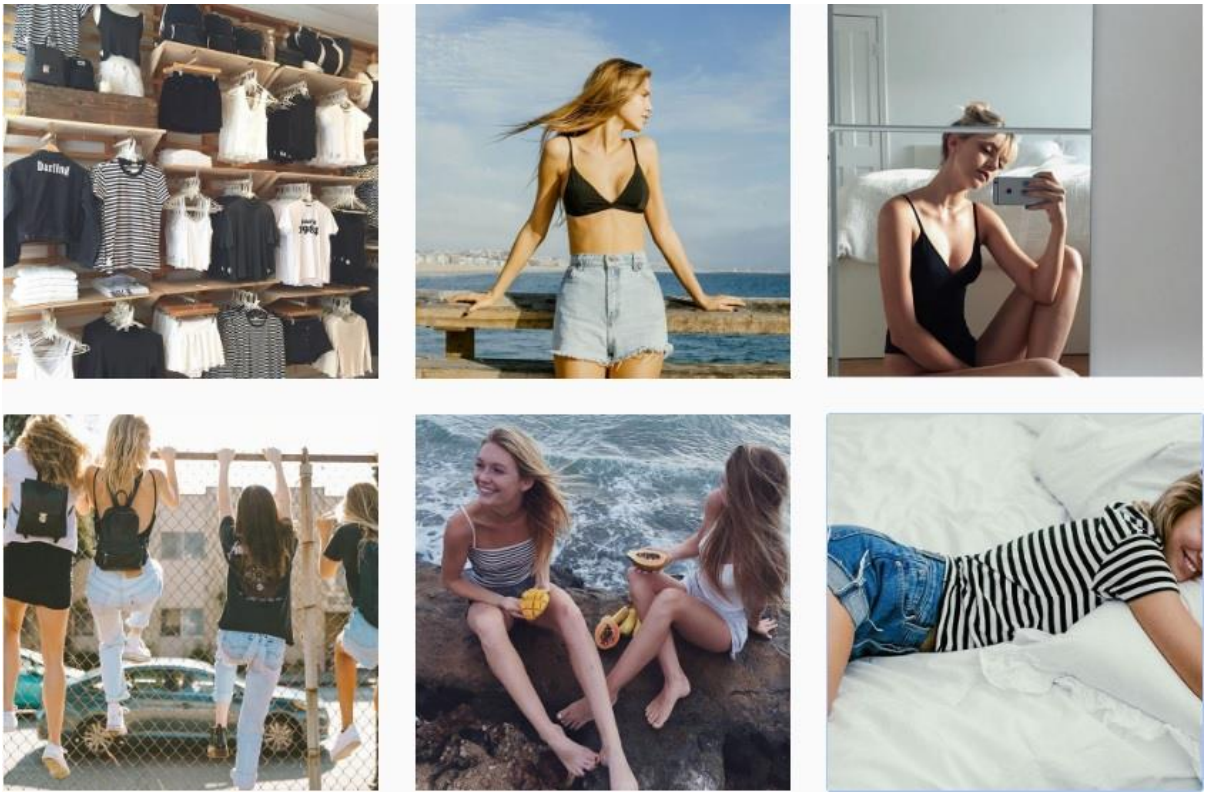


Figure 2. Screen capture of the brand's Instagram feed (@brandymelvilleusa).

As can be seen, images on the feed portray young, slender and usually longhaired girls hanging out at a beach or a more urban location and having fun with friends or by themselves. Brandy Girls, as they have been called in various online articles, are wearing crop tops, oversized sweaters, ripped jeans and denim shorts and the photos seem to emanate effortlessness and a laidback lifestyle. In general, the brand's clothing line is quite simple and casual, with a limited color palette and a few simple prints, stripes and floral patterns, thus proving customers "an opportunity to define their own look" (Marsh 2014). Among the photos of the Brandy Girls, the feed is supplemented with occasional photos of the store interior. According to Rubin (2014), the brand's involvement with Instagram also reaches the inside of the physical stores, which appear as if they were Instagram filtered themselves. The visualization of an easy-going, free-spirited lifestyle, which Brandy Melville depicts on Instagram, seems to attract the followers, as each photo tends to reach approximately 90 000 likes and tens or even hundreds of comments.

Becoming a successful name in the teen retail industry and on Instagram, Brandy Melville has naturally gained some media attention. The brand's success is strongly linked to their Instagram presence, which has raised the question of what is the key to the brand's popularity on social media. The answer is undoubtedly complex, but it is safe to say that the aspirational models play an important role. For example, Ellison (2017) calls Brandy Melville as the "ultimate teen girl-gang brand: sporty, wholesome and impossibly long-haired". Similar descriptions of the girls echo in other texts: Bhasin (2014) describes the typical Brandy Girl as "young, white, skinny and long-legged", Rubin (2014) as a "California cool girl, very young and very thin" as well as "long-haired and overwhelmingly white" and, according to Bradley (2014), the brand's Instagram features "white girls with long, blonde hair", who are without exception "very, very thin". These descriptions, along with the photos themselves, suggest that the Brandy Girls are a very specific, exclusive group of girls with certain type of traits and physical features. As discussed below, this lack of diversity of the models is something that has yielded discussion and criticism. Due to the discussion, one of my aims in this study is to examine the representations of the Brandy Girls in order to clarify whether the brand's female image actually is as homogenous as mentioned.

Despite what the Instagram profile @brandymelvilleusa presents, not much is known about Brandy Melville in public. However, privacy and silence actually seem to be the brand's carefully selected promotional strategies. The brand's US-based e-commerce site at brandymelvilleusa.com carries little information about the corporate origins, values or aims. Articles related to Brandy Melville state how the brand evades from answering any, even repeated contact inquiries (see Bhasin 2014, Rubin 2014) and appears extremely media-silent, or "notoriously tight-lipped about its business" as

Marsh (2014) states it. Even after a thorough search, only two cases of public interviews with the company executives over the past eight years were found. In addition, an interview for Racked (Rubin 2014), labelled descriptively as "Inside the Secretive World of Brandy Melville", has been the source of information for many related articles. In the interview, at the time 16-year-old Kjerstin Skorge, who still models for Brandy Melville, elucidated the brand strategies. According to her, Brandy Melville has an exceptional product research department, which consists of approximately 20 teenage girls, who share their perspectives and ideas about the clothing to the company. Thus, the company has firsthand knowledge on their target audience's opinions and preferences and is then able to respond to their needs and desires. Many girls from the department also appear on the Instagram photos, along with some professionals from modeling agencies. Skorge explained how the photo process takes place: "For the Instagram, the marketing team will send us out with clothes and have us take pictures with a photographer and then they'll decide what to post" (ibid.). Whether or not this is the whole truth of the Instagram photos, the images surely carry a sense of snapshot-like authenticity, which is part of the visual appeal of the imagery. This photographic style called *snapshot aesthetics* will be further discussed in section 3.5.

However, Brandy Melville is not only known as a brand which "has nailed marketing to its target customer" with "a brilliant Instagram account", as Business Insider praised the company on its list of companies that are "revolutionizing retail" (Schlossberg 2016). Brandy Melville is also known for its controversial *one-size-fits-most* policy: majority of the clothing only comes in one size. Most pieces are tagged with 'one size', 'XS' or 'small', with an exception of selected bottoms, which come in a few different sizes. According to VanSlette & Waymer (2016: 126), small or one size on Brandy clothing equals sizes 0 or 2, which means that technically it does not fit most, or even many. In fact, according to the most recent study aiming to determine average clothing sizes, Christel and Dunn (2016) found out that the average American woman wears sizes 16 to 18. Thus, Brandy Melville's *one size fits most* seems to be far from accurate.

The sizing policy has obviously been perceived as controversial and there have been arguments for and against. For some, single sizing makes the shopping more convenient, but for others it endorses strong negative exclusivity. In the media, Brandy Melville has been accused of things such as fat shaming, discrimination and lowering young girls' self-esteem. For example, Sampath (2013) accused the brand for fueling body dysmorphia by propagating their ideal body type and embarrassing women of different sizes by claiming "most" women to be petite. At this point, one might consider Brandy Melville is just like any other clothing company that portrays skinny

models, but Bhasin (2014) points out that even "[t]hough the fashion world has long fetishized skinniness, and some labels cater to even slimmer profiles, few have taken size exclusivity this far."

Figure 3. Display at a Brandy Melville store in Toronto (Urback 2012).

Another example of the criticism is Lani Renaldo's open letter to Brandy Melville published on Huffington Post where she wrote how she, on one hand, adores their clothing and even wishes to model for Brandy Melville one day but, on the other hand, accuses the brand for making "girls with chests and curves feel like minorities and outcasts" due to the sizing policy and, furthermore, questions why "all the models look the same, despite the company stating that they look for, "diverse, California girls"" (Renaldo 2014, punctuation as in the original). Renaldo's letter conveying her mixed feelings seems like an apt example of how Brandy Melville's strategy affects its target audience. As the brand caters only to a certain group of people by offering their items only in small size, a large group of consumers are excluded and rejected. However, as VanSlette & Waymer (2016: 134) state on their research focused specifically on Brandy Melville's brand promotion strategy, the desire to affiliate with the brand can actually be triggered and become stronger after rejection:

> Thus, when our ideal self-concept is related to an aspirational brand (or in this case an aspirational brand by proxy of aspirational models), and we experience rejection from a brand representative without mentally preparing ourselves for rejection, we are likely to admire the brand even more and become even more desperate to affiliate with the brand after experiencing rejection. (VanSlette & Waymer 2016: 134)

Furthermore, VanSlette & Waymer (2016: 122, 133) refer in their study to brand consumption and social identity theory, which argues how people use brands as means of *expressing* themselves and *presenting* themselves. Thus, by consuming Brandy Melville products and presenting them on social media by sharing and tagging the photos, the consumers, mostly teenage girls, are identifying themselves as part of the highly exclusive group of Brandy Girls. To clarify their point, VanSlette & Waymer (2016: 133) use a metaphor and compare Brandy Melville's brand promotion strategy to a traditional country club "where members value the status they achieve from claiming membership to an exclusive club, and others aspire to one day join the club". This "Country Club Approach to Brand Promotion" encapsulates how the brand combines the strategies of *exclusivity* by their one-size-fits-most clothing and *aspiration* through the use of aspirational models on Instagram (2016: 124). And the brand's strategies seem to work, since despite the controversial sizing policy and the accusations and criticism toward Brandy Melville, the brand keeps succeeding, growing and gaining more followers.

Despite the brand's media-silence, the company executive Jessy Longo has, in fact, once responded to the criticism in public. In an interview with USA Today in 2014, Longo claimed to understand the fact that the brand cannot satisfy everyone due to their one size fits most clothing but pointed out that the brand also sells bags and other accessories which are not limited to a certain body size and, thus, the brand actually offers products for everyone (Mills 2014). Longo stated that, above all, Brandy Melville seeks to meet the consumers' needs and do its best, while ignoring the "political stuff": "We aren't focused on branding a certain model or branding one race and we don't seek out a certain type of look" (ibid.). With this statement, Longo seems to dispute all the criticism concerning the diversity of the models, even though as mentioned above, it seems that the brand is definitely branding a certain type of look and quite obviously also a certain race. Hence, the criticism and response to the criticism provide an interesting ground for the research. From this starting point, I will investigate the Instagram images in order to evaluate the diversity of Brandy Girls and seek to examine what kind of female representation is construed through the imagery. Furthermore, as Brandy Melville has a very limited amount of textual information about the brand publicly available, the Instagram images, which carry mostly visual information, could be considered as the most informative source of the brand's image and values.

3 Visual Culture in the Digital Age

Before moving on to the empirical section of the study I will introduce the cultural and theoretical background. The following sections focus on visual culture in the current digital age and aim to provide relevant concepts for visual analysis. First, I will present the background and functionality of Instagram as photo-sharing a platform and also elaborate on how Brandy Melville makes use of the platform in brand marketing. Next, I will elaborate on what is meant by visual culture and how meaning is constructed in images. Furthermore, I will discuss the role and interpretation of photographic images in advertising as well as present a feminist approach to visual advertising. Related earlier research will also be addressed.

3.1 Instagram

Instagram is known as an incredibly popular mobile service for photo-sharing, video-sharing and social networking, founded by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger. The initial version of the mobile app was launched in 2010 and the service has been growing and becoming more and more global ever since. In the last two years, the number of active monthly users has doubled from 400 million to a current over 800 million, and over 500 million of these users are active on daily basis (Instagram Blog 2017a). 80% of the users come from outside of the United States (Instagram Blog 2016). It is especially due to the simplicity of the service that "Instagram has become the home for visual storytelling for everyone from celebrities, newsrooms and brands, to teens, musicians and anyone with a creative passion." (Instagram 2015) In April 2012, Instagram was acquired by Facebook.

Initially, what made the application distinct from others was the polaroid-like, square shape of the photos, instead of the 4:3 ratio that most mobile device cameras produce. Another prominent feature of Instagram is the possibility to choose a filter from a wide range of options and apply it on the image. In addition, the application supports the use of hashtags and geotags (or alternatively naming the location), as well as tagging users either directly on the photos or in the caption/comment section. An example of the use of all these can be seen in the Brandy Melville USA's image in figure 4, where *The Grove* marks for the location of the image, the portrayed model Scarlett Leithold's (who is one of the most frequently appearing models on the @brandymelvilleusa photos) username *scarlettleithold* is tagged on the image and the caption includes the hashtag #brandyusa:

Figure 4. Types of tagging on Instagram (@brandymelvilleusa).

Instagram is constantly upgrading its functions and nowadays it possible for users to upload videos and photos of any aspect ratio as well as multiple photos in one post as a "carousel", i.e. in a slideshow-like manner. Furthermore, the application has become even more networked, as the content uploaded to Instagram can be further shared to other services, such as Facebook, Twitter and Flickr. On August 2016 Instagram introduced Instagram stories as a new feature. The story allows users to share photos and videos, which disappear after 24 hours. According to the Instagram blog, more than 250 million stories are shared every day, which substantiates the app's popularity and activity (Instagram Blog 2017b). One of the newest upgrades allows users to follow hashtags, when earlier it was only possible to follow users and search for photos tagged with a certain hashtag (Instagram Blog 2017c).

Over the years, Instagram has started to pay more attention to the needs of brands and advertisers instead of only those of private users. Since 2013 Instagram has offered brands tools for reaching their audience better, and sponsored ads have gradually merged into private users' photo feeds (Instagram for Business 2015). For example, the carousel photos were first introduced as carousel ads as a tool for brands for their marketing purposes (ibid.). In addition to the mobile application, Instagram also functions as a web version which in its simplicity seems to be "mimicking the look

and feel of Instagram's mobile apps" (Newman 2013). However, the website lacks many features that are present in the actual mobile application and, for example, it is not possible to upload new content through the web version. This obviously brings challenges especially to brands who utilize Instagram. In 2014, Delo (2014) criticized Instagram for making it fairly difficult for brands to update their photo feeds, as the company has not launched "any publishing-application-program interfaces". This means that even the biggest brands ought to use mobile devices to post photos and the posting procedure cannot be scheduled in advance. However, in 2017 Instagram launched a major upgrade on its mobile website, enhancing its functionality and adding prominent features such as photo sharing possibility (Constine 2017). Thus, photo sharing is now possible on mobile browsers, but the company still has not officially launched this upgrade to the desktop version. Even though uploading content through the website (accessed from computer) is not allowed by Instagram nor does it support any third party applications which would enable this process, it has become easier to work around it since the photo sharing via website has been made possible in practice.

Even though it is important to acknowledge that brands have the opportunity to publish photos specifically for advertising purposes, this study focuses only on the photos which are posted on @brandymelvilleusa Instagram feed. Furthermore, there is no documentary that Brandy Melville would utilize these marketing tools, such as sponsored ads, on Instagram, but according to the sources mentioned above, the brand relies solely on the public photo feed. Recently, Brandy Melville has also taken the Instagram stories as part of their repertoire. There is a very consistent posting schedule for @brandymelvilleusa; a new photo (or sometimes a video or a carousel photo) is posted almost daily and nowadays also the Instagram story is updated on daily basis. However, there is no reliable information on how the social media posting process takes place or who are responsible for it.

The brand's involvement with Instagram seems to be present on many levels. According to VanSlette & Waymer (2016: 128), who have studied Brandy Melville's marketing strategies, Brandy Melville stores only hire employees who fit the brand image, i.e. who look like potential Brandy Girls that could model for the brand's Instagram. In addition, Brandy Melville even recruits through Instagram and has a separate account @brandymodelsusa for discovering their up and coming models. However, some Brandy Girls have been discovered directly through their personal Instagram accounts where they had posted photos with Brandy Melville clothing and additionally tagged the brand in the photo (ibid.). The promoting process then functions both ways; the girls promote Brandy Melville by appearing in the @brandymelvilleusa photos, and the brand promotes

the girls by tagging their personal Instagram accounts in the photos. Many of the models have gained large following on Instagram only due to their affiliation with Brandy Melville while others have already been Instagram-famous before the collaboration (ibid).

According to Instagram demographic statistics reported by Omnicore (Aslam 2017), almost 60% of internet users aged 18-29 use Instagram, and 68% of the Instagram users are female. Also, on the same Piper Jaffray (2014) report in which Brandy Melville was ranked as the most up-trending brand, Instagram was ranked as the most important social network for teenagers. This is arguably one of the reasons why Brandy Melville has been so successful with its social media strategy, as the brands target audience consists of teenage girls and young women, the group most actively involved with Instagram. The social media success has further been explained by VanSlette & Waymer (2016: 132), who argue in their case study how Brandy Melville's effective social media management has led the brand to achieve positive goals (defined by Allagui and Breslow 2016) such as "to increase brand awareness, improve the brand's reputation, increase sales, generate conversion, facilitate brand positioning, and maintain continued brand sustenance." Thus, the brand's exceptionally effective use of Instagram makes Brandy Melville a very interesting subject for the current study.

3.2 Visual Culture, Image and Meaning

Our increasingly visual and visualized everyday life is nowadays often referred to as visual culture. However, the term visual culture also refers to a field of study of its own, which has rather newly developed in the need of deeper analysis and understanding of the visual and various aspects it encompasses. According to Mirzoeff (1998: 3) the academic field of visual culture is "concerned with visual events in which information, meaning or pleasure is sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology". He further clarifies the meaning of visual technology as "any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil painting to television and the Internet" (ibid.). From another point of view, Jones (2010: 2) has described visual culture as "a model of critical thinking about the world of images saturating the contemporary life". In addition, the term highlights the growing interest towards the significance of the visual both in and outside of the academic circles (Mirzoeff 1999: 116), which was also one of the key motives for designing the current study.

Thus, the current study is closely associated with the interdisciplinary field of visual culture, which often overlaps with or combines aspects of cultural studies, media studies, philosophy, anthropology and film studies, to name a few. According to Pajaczkowska (2001: 2), the field

attempts to fade the disciplinary boundaries by allowing the pooling of methods and concepts of these traditional fields of research. She encapsulates this by declaring how "the juxtaposition of questions from a range of academic disciplines has multiplied the avenues of enquiry into the meaning of imagery in our culture and in everyday life" (ibid). The current study follows this mode of thinking, as it would be impossible to study the visual communication of a brand from a "pure" discourse analytic perspective, in isolation from the fields of marketing, media and cultural studies. In addition, social media is a still rather new, complex and far from exhaustively studied sphere and, thus, differs from traditional media as a context, which is where the pooled terms and methods of visual culture become helpful. Later, in section 3.4 I will introduce the feminist approaches to visual culture and media studies, which together provide relevant insights to the current topic.

Despite the increasing interest towards the visual in academia, professionals of the field still struggle with defining what an image actually is. According to Mitchell (1994: 13), the challenge derives from the fact that individual features of an image seem to lack fixed relation to one another. Instead, it seems that every image consists of numerous different components, and furthermore, their combination can be interpreted in multiple ways depending on the viewer and the context. Pajaczkowska (2001: 1-2) points out how much more is known about verbal language, including its structure and social effects, in comparison to visual language. Furthermore, Schroeder (2002: 11) argues that living in a visual culture does not mean that we understand what we are seeing. Hence, there is demand for further research and deeper understanding not only about the internal structure of images but also about their communicative nature. The current study aims to contribute to filling this research gap.

One of the key questions within the field of visual culture, and of great interest of the current study, is how images construct, convey and produce meanings. In order to analyze this, the most essential concepts related to meaning making and visual research need to be introduced and defined. First, as the discussion rolls around visual culture, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by culture. In his book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall (1997: 2) defines *culture* as "a process, a set of practices" concerned with how meaning is produced and exchanged by the members of a society and describes the process as "giving and taking of meaning". In other words, culture is about how a group people make sense of the world in largely similar ways and share meanings. Thus, interpreting an image is not only subjective, but the interpretation is always affected by how people within the culture collectively make sense of their surroundings. Hall (1997: 3) emphasizes that it is the people, the members within a culture, who give meaning to objects, events and people, which in themselves seldom carry one fixed meaning.

Meanings are produced all the time: in every social interaction, in the media, when we consume, how we express ourselves, etc. (Hall 1997: 3-4). Furthermore, these meanings structure the way we behave, they regulate our practices, and set norms and conventions for social life (Rose 2012: 2, Hall 1997: 4). The impact of the larger cultural context, then, should be taken into account when analyzing the meanings of images which take place within that context.

Another central concept, closely related to culture, is that of *representation*. For the purpose of the study, I will here limit the discussion to visual representations. In short, an image is a representation; it represents something or someone (Seppänen 2005: 77). Especially photographic images are thought to re-present something that was there in front of the camera, providing a copy of that reality. However, the concept of representation refers not only to the image, but further to the process of interpreting the image, i.e. making sense of it (Seppänen 2005: 84). Schroeder (2002: 26) defines representation as "meaning production through language systems". That is, language, including visual language, is essential in the construction of meaning, "since an object's or idea's meaning is shaped by the very process of representing it by the way of language or images" (ibid.). Rossi (2015: 77) concludes that representation is what links meaning, language and culture together. Furthermore, Hall (1997: 1) explains how language is able to construct meanings because it functions as a representational system:

> In language, we use signs and symbols – whether they are sounds, written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, even objects – to stand for or represent to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings. Language is one of the 'media' through which thoughts, ideas and feelings are represented in a culture. Representation through language is therefore central to the processes by which meaning is produced.
>
> (Hall 1997: 1)

Thus, meanings are produced through language and we make sense of them in larger cultural context. In fact, this applies to both word and image; meanings are always historically and culturally specific. It may be clear when it comes to verbal language, whereas the meanings of visual language are more often assumed to be straightforward and universally understood, when they in fact are not (Kress & van Leeuwen 2008: 4). An example of how an image can be understood differently from alternative cultural point of views can be found on Brandy Melville's Instagram account. In October 2015 @brandymelvilleusa posted a photo of two Caucasian girls wearing a sugar skull make-up, a traditional symbol of the Mexican Día de los Muertos holiday. Whereas the followers from a non-Mexican culture maybe saw the photo as innocent and a cute idea for Halloween make-up, some Mexican followers perceived it as offending cultural appropriation. The photo yielded thousands of furious comments asking Brandy Melville to delete it

and the discussion even extended to other social media platforms, as can be seen from the Twitter post in Figure 5. Remaining faithful to the company's strategy, Brandy Melville did not respond to any accusations nor did it delete the image.

Figure 5. Twitter post as a critique towards Brandy Melville (@girlphuk on Twitter).

The example indicates the importance of cultural context and our personal understanding and background in interpreting meaningful representations. As Hall's encoding – decoding model suggests, the sender's encoded message may differ from the receiver's decoded message, i.e. the message may not be received according to the sender's intention (Hall 1973: 94). Furthermore, it is important to point out that meanings are prone to change over time. History guides our interpretation and has influence on what is nowadays considered as the "natural" way of interpreting images (Seppä 2012: 13).

It could be concluded that representation is a useful established concept in that it enables us to discuss images and tie their meanings as part of interaction, culture and sign systems (Seppänen 2005: 85-86). Seppänen (2005: 82) points out that, even though he agrees that images produce meanings and feelings which cannot be translated into verbal language, spoken or written language

are the only ways for us to explain images and their meanings. Even though the visual world may seem as if it requires no interpretations, in order to find out what kinds of shared meanings images carry and in what kinds of contexts meanings take place, mere looking is not enough but extensive verbal analysis is needed (Schroeder 2002: 39). The importance of analyzing images, meanings and representations stems from the fact that representations are constructed within culture, but the process also functions the other way: the surrounding culture is constructed by representations. Schroeder (2002: 64) emphasizes the power of cultural representation: "Every representation of identity –man, woman, African, European, consumer –has the potential to construct the way society represents those categories. Representations are part of the lived experience; they construct reality." Visual and cultural representations, then, affect our thinking and behavior, as was already mentioned above. That is why it is important to critically ask *whose* representation is in question, because the prevalent cultural discourse "consistently misrepresents as much as it represents" (ibid.). Subsequently, the current study is interested specifically in how Brandy Melville represents the world and the Brandy Girls and further questions how their representations affect the surrounding culture.

In order to further discuss and analyze visual representations in the current study, I will introduce a few relevant semiotic concepts. Semiotics, the study of signs and their meanings, was first developed for analyzing verbal language, but it has already for decades been applied to visual studies as well (Seppä 2012: 128). Semiotic concepts become helpful as semiotic analysis on visual material is always interested in representation and seeks to answer to what the images represent and how (ibid.). Charles S. Peirce, one of the first developers of semiotic understanding, established a three-dimensional typology of how signs may represent their referents: iconic, indexical and symbolic (Hoopes 1991). First, an *icon* is something that resembles the referent. For example, a photograph is iconic, because it depicts its object. Thus, a photograph of a Brandy Girl is an iconic sign of that specific Brandy Girl model. Second, an *index* means a direct, inherent connection between the signifier and the signified. Indexical sign is something that is in fact caused by the object and there is a physical connection (Messaris 1997: viii). As an example, facial expressions are indexical signs of emotions. For example, a smile usually signifies happiness or joy. However, the most relevant indexical sign in the current study is the photographic image itself, which functions as documentary proof of Brandy Girls having been there in front of the camera in the portrayed location wearing the Brandy Melville outfits, and so on. I will return to indexicality of advertising in the next section. Third, a *symbol* refers to the conventionalized, arbitrary relation between the two parts of a sign. For example, all words are symbolic. Symbolic signs in particular

are based on the cultural and social codes developed by people. For instance, the American flag occurring occasionally in Brandy Melville's imagery itself serves as a symbol of patriotism and includes symbolic details such as the 50 stars representing the states. It should be pointed out that these three types of signs are not separate from each other, but a sign can include iconic, indexical and symbolic features.

Another semiotic viewpoint is provided by Roland Barthes, one of the most influential contributors in the study of photographs, who wrote on his essay *The Photographic Message* (1961) that the meaning of an image consists of two levels: the *denotative* and the *connotative* level. Denotation refers to the basic, common-sense meaning, which can be recognized and understood from the image rather universally. In linguistics, denotation refers to the literal meaning of a word. For example, a photograph depicting a beach is recognized to be a beach from culture to culture (given that there is a concept of beach in that culture). Connotation, then, refers to the additional, culturally constructed associated meaning and interpretation. Thus, beach is recognized as a beach, but it might further be associated with, say, vacation, freedom and enjoyment. However, depending on other features of the image, the connotations may shift to loneliness, sorrow or fear if the focus is on the never-ending sea or the beach is depicted on a rainy day. In his text, Barthes (1961) emphasizes the clear distinction between the different levels; denotation is the mechanic copy of the object, whereas connotation adds a personal dimension. According to Fiske (1990: 86, emphasis as in the original), "[d]enotation is *what* is photographed; connotation is *how* it is photographed". However, as connotations are subjective, they often function subconsciously and may then falsely be perceived as the image's denotative meanings. Furthermore, due to subjective connotations, the interpretation of the photo always depends on the viewer's 'knowledge' and background (Barthes 1961: 28). One purpose of semiotic analysis is to help identify and distinguish denotative and connotative meanings from each other.

The final relevant point is Barthes' idea of the linguistic message of an image, which he sees as separate from but yet fully co-operative with the visual structure of the image. Barthes (1964: 38-41) distinguishes two functions of the linguistic message. The most frequent function is *anchoring.* As images are polysemic, by the function of anchoring, linguistic aspects guide the interpretation and help in choosing the "right" type of reading by excluding other types of readings, i.e. anchoring the relevant meaning. This is especially frequent in advertising images and press photographs, and thus also the expected function in the current data. The other function, found especially on movies and television series, is called *relay*, which refers to the complementary relation of text and image. The overall linguistic message, however, may not be as simply interpreted as it may first seem,

because it also functions on denotative and connotative levels. The denotative level expresses something that opens up to everyone who is competent in that language, whereas the connotative level evokes certain cultural associations in the reader. In terms of the current study, the linguistic message refers to the caption of the image, anything linguistic that may be embedded in the photos (a print on a t-shirt or the Hollywood-sign on the background), as well as all linguistic information the Instagram app itself provides around the image (when was the image published and by which user). In addition, the amount of likes and comments, as well as the content of the comments may arguably add to or change the meaning of the image. However, due to the scope of this study, the analysis of the linguistic level is limited to the information provided by Brandy Melville, i.e. to the captions of the images, while also taking into consideration the possible tagged users and locations in the images.

Seppä (2012: 152) offers an interesting point of view related to semiotics and Instagram. According to her, in visual communication, which aspires to reach a large global audience and be universally understood, the complexity of the codes is sometimes consciously restricted. From a semiotic perspective, the success of the globally popular visual platforms is, in part, due to their semantic poverty (ibid.). She mentions Facebook and YouTube as examples of successful visual platforms, which have taken advantage of semantic simplicity. However, the argument seems to fit Instagram in particular, which is especially known for its simplicity.

Even though the current study is not explicitly semiotic, the above introduced concepts function as useful tools for visual analysis and discussion. In addition, it is beneficial to comprehend the established concepts of semiotics as van Leeuwen's theory also draws on them, especially on the work of Barthes. Finally, semiotic understanding is useful in that it connects meanings to larger cultural context, as Moxey (1994: 61) argues:

> [S]emiotics makes us aware that the cultural values with which we make sense of the world are a tissue of conventions that have been handed down from generation to generation by the members of the culture of which we are a part. It reminds us that there is nothing "natural" about our values; they are social constructs that not only vary enormously in the course of time but differ radically from culture to culture.
>
> (Moxey 1994: 61)

Thus, semiotics enables us to perceive how these cultural and social constructions form and construe. I will now move on to discuss the specific kind of imagery, namely photographic images in advertising, which has an especially strong influence on what is considered natural.

3.3 Photographic Images and Advertising

The study of the visual has originally had its interest in fine art and art history, but the scope has later broadened to all kinds of imagery, including popular culture and images of everyday life. For the interest of this study, I will focus here on photographic images in particular, as the research data consists of digital photographs published on a social media platform. In addition, in order to understand the aspect of marketing in the Brandy Melville photos, I will focus on the use of photographic images in advertising.

What researchers and professionals of the visual agree on is that there is something particularly powerful and compelling in images per se. For example, images might give us the sense of knowing people we have never met and places we have never been to (Schroeder 2008: 5). Considering the difference between word and image, according to van Leeuwen (2008: 136), it is often thought that words provide facts and explanations, whereas images deliver ideological angles and interpretations. However, images do not always function explicitly, but they do this subtly by suggestion and connotation. This is especially true in advertising, where images "give us the dreams of glamour or fulfillment, or the allusions to forbidden pleasures and gratifications; the words give us the information we need (if any), the specifications of the product, the addresses where we might buy it, the price", as van Leeuwen (2008:136) states. According to Hietala (1993: 10-11), the power of the image is undoubtedly related to the image's resemblance to our natural visual perception of how we see the world and how we perceive "reality". For example, images are limited to certain frames, similarly as our visual perception is always limited to a specific area at a time. We are used to receiving a huge amount of our daily information through our vision and we often process and make sense of this information automatically and subconsciously. Thus, interpreting images and their meanings might not be as simple as we often assume. What is usually forgotten is that when we look at an image, the gaze is not only ours, but that someone has already "seen" the image for us (Hietala 1993: 12). The composition has been organized and the perspective selected for us, according to the sender's purposes, but since we are not necessarily paying attention to this, the persuasive purposes might be left unnoticed (Hietala 1993: 12, Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 131). This holds especially true with photographs, which seem to present and reflect reality, even though photography is always a process of selection; it involves cropping, editing, circulation, etc. (Schroeder 2008: 27, 53). Thus, as representations, photographs convey as much information about the photographer, the process, and the technology, as they do about the object they depict (McCauley 1997: 63). Schroeder (2002: 45) argues how photographs "often appear as if they just are, merely visual records of what has happened, how people appear, or where events took place.

This quality is one of the most complicated and powerful properties of photography; it often acts like a transparent window on society." This quality is also one of the main reasons why it is important to examine photographs in order to enhance visual literacy.

According to Seppänen (2005: 15), the imagery of the visual culture is always also political imagery. Every advertising image is produced within society and it is always associated with certain meanings by excluding some other meanings (Seppänen 2005: 15). That is, every time something or someone is re-presented, certain aspects of the object are highlighted, whereas other aspects are diminished (Johnson 2008: 73). This is a feature associated with power. According to Schroeder (2002: 39), the discourses created by and within advertising construct a world culturally and socially. Subsequently, these cultural and social constructions "disguise and suppress inequalities, irrationalities, and contradictions" and finally the perspective of advertisements becomes the normative perspective to the world, even though it is profoundly ideological (ibid.). According to Seppä (2012: 159-160), each culturally meaningful visual representation can be seen as ideological, because it invites the viewer to participate its way of representing the world. Again this is especially true with visual advertising, which subtly aims to guide the audience's thoughts and actions to a certain direction. Another function of advertisements, pointed out by Schroeder (2002: 30), is that they are intertextual, i.e. that they refer to other cultural texts, such as other advertisements. Advertising draws on existing symbolic referent systems, but simultaneously creates its own (Schroeder 2002: 29). Thus, advertising itself functions as a representational system, which both reflects and creates norms for social life and produces meaning also "outside the realm of the advertised product or service" (Schroeder 2002: 26-27). That is, advertising functions as a source of prevalent cultural meanings of the time, as well as reflection of the cultural hegemony.

Schroeder (2002: 27) calls photography as "arguably the most pervasive form of communication in the world", which is one of the reasons for its vast usage in advertising. Today's marketing revolves around imagery, especially photography, and consumption is about consuming visions of desirable life (Schroeder 2002: 43). Brandy Melville provides its imagery especially for teenagers, who are perhaps under the most pressure in the world of advertising. Johnson (2008: 64) highlights the large impact of advertising on teenagers, who are surrounded by a myriad of images representing not only products but also lifestyles. Thus, advertising images offer "recipes for living" and circulate ideological and cultural codes suggesting "how to look and smell to how to hang and be cool to whom to be seen with and what technology devices to use in the various venues of teen activity" (ibid). By taking interest in the image and representations provided by Brandy Melville, the current study aims to further consider the impact of these in the larger cultural context.

In his book *Visual Persuasion: The Role of Images in Advertising*, Paul Messaris (1997) seeks to find out how visual images contribute to persuasive communication. He approaches the question by identifying underlying features of visual images which make them distinct from other modes of communication (Messaris 1997: vii-viii). According to him, there are three characteristic features of persuasive images: *iconicity*, *indexicality* and *lack of an explicit propositional syntax* (Messaris 1997: xxi). By analyzing these three characteristics of images, we can also find the three main functions that images may have in advertising. First, images "can elicit emotions by simulating the appearance of a real person or object", second, "they can serve as photographic proof that something really did happen" and third, "they can establish an implicit link between the thing that is being sold and some other image(s)" (Messaris 1997: vii).

A property which most clearly distinguishes images from verbal and other modes of communication is *iconicity* (Messaris 1997: 3), as was already brought up in section 3.2. By iconicity, photographic images in advertising can produce a visual simulation of reality (Messaris 1997: xxii). Furthermore, Messaris (1997: 4) identifies two types of roles the "real-world visual cues" usually play in advertisements: drawing attention to the advertisement and eliciting certain emotions and attitudes in the viewer. An example of the former would be an image in which a character looks directly at the viewer. According to Messaris (ibid.), the effectiveness is based on our tendency in real life to answer to a gaze with a gaze. An example of the latter would be a political image in which the character is represented from a low angle. The aim of this positioning is to create a feeling of respect towards the object by making the association of looking up to someone (ibid.). The selection of camera angle and other properties, such as distance, will be further discussed in the section 4.2 which addresses van Leeuwen's Visual Social Actor Theory.

The second feature *indexicality*, also introduced in section 3.2., plays an important role in visual persuasion, when a photographic image serves as documentary proof of the advertised product or service (Messaris 1997: xvi). The indexical property of photographic images is the reason why photography is typically considered more trustworthy than words or handmade images (Messaris 1997: xxii). That has to do with our tendency to have a solid trust in our own eyes. For example, an advertisement depicting a famous actor using a certain product provides the viewer evidence of the actor actually being there in front of the camera with the product. Similarly, Figure 4 above serves as evidence of the Instagram-famous model Scarlett Leithold actually posing for the camera with Brandy Melville clothing in a Brandy Melville store. Of course today's technology enables all kind of extreme manipulation, which makes the status of indexicality increasingly problematic (Messaris 1997: xvii). However, it is safe to say that for most photographic advertisement images at least

some level of indexicality is still present, even though the documentary value of photographic images in advertising may not be considered as high as earlier, as the audience has become more aware of the manipulation and editing processes.

The third distinctive property of visual images is *lack of explicit syntax*. Thus, unlike verbal communication, visual communication cannot syntactically express logical propositions such as causal claims (Messaris 1997: xviii). In other words, images, unlike verbal statements, are rarely thought to carry explicit truth value, i.e. it cannot be said whether they are true or false (Schroeder 2008: 4). The open-ended quality and a degree of deniability in visual argumentation, then, allow advertisers to convey messages which they would not necessarily want to express in words (Messaris 1997: xxii).

According to van Leeuwen (2008), the prevalent idea in contemporary popular culture encourages a reading in which "meanings seemingly emanate from the depicted objects themselves rather from an act of signification. They are seemingly read into the images by the viewer, rather than being encoded into the image by the producer." This kind of reading means that visual claims can more easily be denied or dismissed compared to verbal ones and, for example, visual racism might be more challenging to be noticed and, furthermore, judged. In his work, van Leeuwen aims to demonstrate that the cues in visual communication can be made explicit, which is one of the reasons I have chosen to apply his theory of visual social actors in the current study.

While Messaris makes arguments about visual persuasion, it should be noted one of the main characteristics of persuasive communication on is considered to be its unwantedness (Messaris 1997: 5). As the data of the current study does not consist of traditional advertising images, but images of a retail brand on social media platform, it cannot be treated as unwanted communication in the traditional sense. The images are only posted on the brand's own Instagram site and are, thus, directed to those who *choose* to follow them on Instagram or who happen to come across their Instagram feed or a single image. According to Harjunen (2014: 8), this represents a new type of marketing on social media, where the idea is that the unprompted consumer should be the one approaching the brand, instead of the more traditional marketing style, which relies on the unwanted communication with interruption and repetition. This new approach highlights and demands high quality of the content which actually interests the consumer and furthermore invites the consumer to interact with the brand. However, this makes the persuasive intentions of advertising subtler. Nowadays, we are quite aware of the persuasive intentions of traditional advertising, but the new social media platforms, such as Instagram, blur the boundaries of what is considered as advertising and persuasive communication. Instagram as context differs from more traditional contexts of

advertising images, say on magazines, newspapers and websites, which is why the persuasive communication happening through Instagram requires more attention.

3.4 Feminist Approach

As the focus of the study is on the visual portrayal of women by Brandy Melville via Instagram, I would like to link the research to the fields of feminist visual culture and feminist media studies, which take interest in how visual texts and various media products and discourses construct gendered identities, respectively. In relation to feminist visual culture, Jones (2010: 2) states that it has for long been acknowledged that "visuality is one of the key modes by which gender is culturally inscribed in Western culture". Furthermore, arguably the most influential medium reflecting and (re)producing visual gendered identities is advertising. van Zoonen (1994: 67) states that the feminist movement has named advertising as one the most disturbing cultural products of society, especially due to its reinforcement of the objectification of women, the thin ideal and power asymmetry between genders. She goes on to point out that, in addition to gender, the other key constituent of feminist theories is power (van Zoonen 1994: 4). Rather than viewing society dichotomously divided into groups which either have power or do not, feminist theorists aim to grasp the complexity of the relations of subordination and to question how the "collective identities, such as gender or ethnicity, are being constituted" (ibid.). Thus, in the current study, feminist theory aptly supports the critical discourse analytical approach, whose aim is to unfold the power relations conveyed through language and representations (see chapter 4). Both approaches provide tools for analyzing how power relations are manifested in Brandy Melville's visual advertising by their female representations. Furthermore, I share the goal of feminist research in aiming to point out the dominant structures which "bind gender and sexuality to visual representation in such limited, repetitive and stereotypic ways" (Pajaczkowska 2001: 4).

In feminist media studies, the representation of the female body has been under scrutiny. It is important to point out that the social construction of the ideal body is always historical and subject to change, as in Western societies, where the idealized female body has transformed over time from a plump shape to an hourglass figure and from extreme slenderness to a muscular, yet very slender body type (Wykes and Gunter 2005: 36-37). Unsurprisingly, the media which, on one hand, reflects ideals of the culture and, on the other hand, constructs and maintains the ideals has been accused for the growth of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction among women. It is not only claimed that media misrepresent female bodies, but that they also direct women to modify their bodies in order to fit the impossible ideals (Wykes and Gunter 2005: 206). As was discussed earlier, Brandy

Melville has also very strongly been accused of such action. Wykes and Gunter explain how the thin ideal has formed in the media:

> The thin message is neither singular nor sudden. Nor is it merely a modern mass media construction. Rather, the mass media reinforce and reproduce thinness within a whole history of cultural constructions of femininity which make it acceptable to audience and so sellable to advertisers. The long history of representation made the post-World War Two shift to slender beauty acceptable because it fitted into a long history of imagery wherein women were the objects of male desire and used to being presented as men would like them to be. (Wykes and Gunter 2005: 207)

Even though Brandy Melville's social media marketing might appear as innovative due to the platform, the Instagram content and utilizing gender representations in advertising is far from a modern idea. In fact, the use of gender as the focal point of advertising is obviously extensive and thought to stem from the specific kind of signifying power that gender appears to carry (van Zoonen 1994: 67). Unlike any other social resource, gender is packed with culturally established meanings of myths and values in a very condensed form, which is ideal for the needs of advertising (van Zoonen 1994: 68). Thus, even though the main goal of marketing is to sell, it also functions as a norm-setter in society by drastically shaping our identities and concepts of self and others. Surrounding media discourses play a major role in the construction of the idea of what it is like to be a man or a woman: "The body may be material but it is the mind that interprets that corporeality and makes meaningful its contours, appearances and sensations and it does so through the language of the cultural community within which the body is situated" (Wykes and Gunter 2005: 58).

The objectification of women in visual imagery has been a central issue in feminist visual culture. It leads us to another essential concept within the study of the visual, namely *gaze*. To gaze is something more than to just look at; it implies a psychological relationship and power structure between the gazer and the object of the gaze (Schroeder 2002: 58). What makes it an intriguing concept is its function of connecting the internal world of the image with the external world of the spectator. According to Berger (1972: 9), "[w]e never look just at one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves." Gaze has been discussed and written about from various perspectives over the last decades, and one of the most influential texts related to the subject is feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's (1975) *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, which presented the idea of male gaze. Male gaze refers to the (heterosexual) male perspective from which a film or other text is depicted, and which simultaneously produces representations of women as the passive object, thus creating power asymmetry between genders. Already earlier, John Berger (1972: 47) wrote in *Ways of seeing* about the difference between how men and women are

portrayed: “Men act and women appear. Men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves”. Rose (2012: 13) explains how Berger’s fundamental recognition of how women are represented does not only help us understand the “representation of femininity, but its construction of masculinity too.” More recently, the term female gaze was coined as a response and is nowadays used to refer to the female perspective, whether it is the question of a female spectator, producer, filmmaker, photographer, etc. In the current study, the interest lays in how the inherent perspective of the images fits the gaze of the target audience which mainly consists of teenage girls and young women, i.e. how Brandy Melville positions the addressed viewer of the image.

Moreover, Schroeder (2002: 59) points out the importance of noticing our own gaze, i.e. we should become aware of ourselves as spectators and “see ourselves as we gaze”. This seems particularly important for a researcher, when aiming to remain objective. My aim as a researcher is to remain aware of my subjective knowledge and personal background which have an inevitable impact on the interpretation and to observe the data from as objective point of view as possible.

3.5 Earlier Research

Lastly, before moving on to introducing the theoretical framework of the thesis, I would like to connect the current study to some related previous research. First, there has been myriad of extensive research on the potentially negative impact of media on body image, self-conception and body dissatisfaction especially on women. In a comprehensive meta-analysis of over 70 studies conducted between 1975 and 2007 focusing on the connection between women’s body image and media usage, Grabe et al. (2008) demonstrated that the results support the notion that women’s exposure to media imagery representing the thin-ideal body is negatively related to their body image concerns which results in bodily dissatisfaction. To highlight the significance of the topic, many studies have linked the impact of the very often unattainable media imagery of women to a variety of problems in women’s mental and physical health, including depression, low self-esteem and eating disorders (Neumark-Sztianer et al. 2006, Paxton et al. 2006). A lot of research has focused on the role of traditional media in shaping the ideal female body (e.g. D’Allesandro & Chitty 2011, Groesz et al. 2001), but more recently the role of social media has started to gain attention in academia and for instance Perloff (2014) has raised the question of how young adults’ body image is impacted by social media. As an example of the negative consequences of digitalization, the rise of various social media platforms in the early 21st century yielded the idea of *thinspiration*, or thin inspiration, and created a whole online culture around pro-anorectic visual and

textual content (Drenten & Gurrieri 2018: 49, see Balter-Reitz & Keller 2005). All this highlights the responsibility of Brandy Melville as an authority, which produces female representations for marketing purposes targeted to teenagers and young women.

Moreover, the representations and roles of women in advertising have been under scrutiny for decades. As advertising often functions through meanings of gender and sexuality, it has been a convenient subject especially for feminist research (Rossi 2003: 17). The history of female representation has been rather limited, as Schroeder and Borgerson (1998: 169) summarize: "Women have been consistently represented in a passive, negative light in the history of art as well as advertising. The convention of the nude, one of the most prevalent forms in Western art history, has been appropriated by advertising to sell most everything." However, the more recent research on advertising indicates the rise of more diverse representations of women, instead of the traditional depiction of women as passive objects. For instance, Gill (2008) argues in her study for the shift in female sexual agency and the emergence of new characteristic female constructions such as the 'actively desiring midriff', the 'powerful vengeful woman' and the 'hot lesbian' in contemporary advertising campaigns. This can be seen to reflect the newly-emerged women's empowerment discourse currently observable in areas of Western culture.

Another example of portraying women in an unconventional manner can be found on the retail brand American Apparel's marketing imagery, as Littler and Moor (2008: 716) describe American Apparel's marketing images as "documentary-style footage, with photographs that have the look of being captured by mobile phone or disposable cameras", which is stylistically far from the conventionally very polished, professional, high-quality fashion photography. This is a style which can also be recognized in Brandy Melville's Instagram photos. Examples of the photographic style can be seen below in Figure 6, in which the image by American Apparel on the left is of low quality and with an amateur-like framing and the image by Brandy Melville is overexposed.

Figure 6. Snapshot-styled Instagram photos by American Apparel and Brandy Melville (@americanapparelusa and @brandymelvilleusa).

In fact, the phenomenon appears to be a rather widely used strategy in contemporary marketing. Schroeder (2008: 8-13) wrote in 2008 about the increasing use of snapshot-like images in marketing of various fields, images where the portrayed models are "out of focus, eyes closed, poorly framed". According to him, companies such as IKEA, Apple, Coca-Cola and Volkswagen have used snapshot-like imagery in their Internet, print and television advertisements, and he has coined the term *snapshot aesthetics* to refer to the style (Schroeder 2008: 9-10).

From a feminist point of view, another interesting issue is the so-called 'doing and undoing of gender' of American Apparel's advertising imagery (Littler and Moor 2008: 716). The undoing is partly performed by the snapshot-style footage depicting women with some cellulite and shiny skin, thus, attempting to 'undo' the typical image of the perfectly airbrushed beauty. In addition, Littler and Moor (ibid.) suggest the brand is attempting to 'undo' the image of female sexual powerlessness and to manifest sexual openness, by viewing the women 'playing around' *aware* of the camera, i.e. gazing at the viewer. Littler and Moor (2008: 713) describe how the brand's imagery of mainly females, even though the company also sells menswear, has references to soft porn and is "clearly meant to promote a sexually liberated, insistently cosmopolitan, and relatively diverse image of its young workers". Hence, at the same time, the brand seems to be 'redoing' traditional images of female. Considering the larger context of contemporary popular culture, it remains an interesting debate whether the kind of imagery can ultimately be understood as

empowering women and constructing a modern image of a sexually liberated woman, or only ostensibly empowering, while in the meantime reconstructing the traditional image of a woman as a sexual object.

4 Theoretical Framework

Before moving on to the analytical section of the thesis, I will set the theoretical framework for the research. The study locates in the field of critical discourse analysis, and I will begin by introducing its main principles. Furthermore, I will complement the theoretical background by introducing the visual application of van Leeuwen's Social Actor Theory, which draws on critical discourse analysis, provides tools for analysis and serves as the key framework for the current study.

4.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

As was presented above, representations function in two ways: they reflect the surrounding culture but also construct it. Furthermore, discourses are where representations take place; they provide us a variety of ways of representing the world and have the power to shape our ideas of reality. In other words, discourses are the larger entities which construct meanings, and hence under scrutiny in discourse analysis, as Fairclough (1992: 3-4) summarizes: "[D]ifferent discourses constitute key entities (be they 'mental illness', 'citizenship' or 'literacy) in different ways, and position people in different ways as social subjects (e.g. as doctors or patients), and it is these social effects of discourse that are focused upon in discourse analysis." Even though the term may be understood differently in various fields and disciplines, in critical discourse analysis the concept is often referred to something like the "larger discursive unit of text" which functions as the basic unit of communication (Wodak 2001: 2). Blommaert (2005: 2-3) defines discourse as any form of meaningful, symbolic human behavior which is connected with cultural, social and historical contexts. Moreover, in his view, "discourse is what transforms our environment into a socially and culturally meaningful one" (Blommaert 2005: 4). Thus, discourse, representation and meaning are closely intertwined.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an approach that has its interest in language, power and ideology. More specifically, CDA studies how power relations are manifested, maintained and reproduced in language use and offers a way to examine discourses and representations critically (Wodak 2001: 2). According to Fairclough (1992: 9), *critical* here stands for revealing hidden connections and causes. The emergence of CDA dates back into the early 1990s and among the most significant contributors to the field are Ruth Wodak, Norman Fairclough and Teun van Dijk.

In addition, Theo van Leeuwen has contributed to discovering the "communicative potential of visual devices", as Wodak (2001: 8) states, and pioneered in examining non-linguistic texts and meaning of images from a critical discourse analytical perspective. Therefore, I find his theory on visual social actors (introduced in section 4.2.) as a highly potential approach for seeking answers to the research questions of the current study.

In short, CDA aims to critically examine and uncover the existing power relations and social inequalities expressed and constructed in discourse (Wodak 2001: 2). However, CDA is not an explicit set of methods or an established theoretical approach but rather a shared perspective of doing discourse analysis, as van Dijk clarifies (2001: 96). This has been seen both as an advantage and a target of criticism of CDA. On the advantageous side is that it can – and should – be combined with various approaches of humanities and social sciences. Hence, CDA is especially compatible with the field of (feminist) visual culture within which the current study also locates itself. What they have in common is that both approaches view language as a reconstructive power and understand that meaning is always dynamic and takes place in relation to certain historical and cultural contexts. This is an essential point because what is emphasized in critical discourse analysis, in comparison to other approaches of discourse analysis, is that texts or discourses ought not to be examined in isolation, but always in relation to the larger socio-cultural context. This means that also the current analysis covers not only the visual data, but also its relation to the social world around it.

Examining how discourse and society influence each other, Fairclough has developed a three-dimensional framework for CDA, which views discourse simultaneously as text, discourse practice and sociocultural practice. By discourse practice he refers to text production and text interpretation processes, and according to him, sociocultural practice covers all different levels from the immediate situation in which the discursive product takes place to larger societal context (Fairclough 1995: 97). Even though Fairclough (1992: 4) uses the terms text and discourse to refer to either written or spoken pieces of language, he also expresses his approval of the notions' extension to other symbolic forms, like visual images as in the current study.

According to Fairclough (2010: 235), CDA usually has its starting point on a specific prevalent social problem. In this sense, as van Dijk (2001: 96) explains, CDA distinguishes itself from many other disciplines in that it explicitly defines its sociopolitical position by taking a stance to support the oppressed group and is in this sense openly biased. This overt positioning is another issue which the field has been criticized about. However, without taking a stance and having an opinion of the topic at hand, it would be challenging to conduct critical discourse analysis which aims for

constructive criticism on the subject. Obviously, pre-determined interpretations of the subject should be avoided. Overall, CDA has been criticized by academics such as Widdowson and O'Halloran, who "have raised fundamental questions about CDA's epistemological and ontological foundations, and about its methods of textual description and analysis" (Poole 2010: 138). However, despite the criticism and controversy around the field, CDA has managed to establish solid foundations in the academia (ibid.)

In the current study, the social issue under scrutiny is the powerful position of the brand over the viewers and consumers. Especially when examining the visual marketing of a clothing brand directed to teenagers, the question of power relations becomes essential. Brandy Melville as an aspirational brand positions itself as an authority which has the power to define what kinds of representations are desired, acceptable and simply shown in their media coverage (and what are not). The importance of the question is supported by van Dijk's (2008: 9) view on power, as he associates social power with control of one group over others and further highlights how in society only few have the freedom, authority and privilege to express themselves and, consequently, control the discourse. Furthermore, those in control of the discourse also have control over people's mind and indirectly over people's action (ibid.), which is why the influential power of visual representations should not be underrated. Even when the viewer is aware of the commercial purpose of the Brandy Melville image and understands it as something else than a portrayal of reality and authenticity, the representation still has influence in the bigger picture – in contributing to the construction of how women ought to appear in our culture.

When discussing power, it is important to point out that power relations are dynamic. Foucault emphasizes that power relations are present in all human relations and these relations are prone to change, even within a single instance of interaction (Foucault et al. 1997: 291-293). Therefore, also the brand and people behind it are involved in dynamic power relations of their own. By producing its marketing imagery and female representations Brandy Melville constitutes the surrounding culture but is simultaneously influenced by other social actors and practices in that culture. As mentioned, representations do not take place in a vacuum. Moreover, social media platforms as a rather newly emerged phenomena can also be seen as a playground in which power relations are negotiated and redefined in a new way and may change even faster. One of the main goals of CDA is to uncover the hidden ideologies and unequal power relations existing in discourse. In this way CDA also aims to improve the situation for more equal power relations in communication as well as in society (Fairclough 2010:10-11). van Dijk (2001: 96) reminds us that in order to reach these

goals and obtain reliable results, the analysis ought to apply systematic research methods, which is why I chose to study the subject by means of content analysis, introduced below in section 5.2.1.

4.2 Visual Representation of Social Actors

In this section I will introduce van Leeuwen's theory of social actors and especially its application to visual material and visual representations. The theory is built upon several linguistic, sociologic and anthropologic approaches, namely Bernstein's concept of recontextualization, Foucault's theory of discourse, Halliday's systemic-functional linguistics and Martin's theory of activity sequences (van Leeuwen 2008: 3). By social actors van Leeuwen (2008: 23) refers to the participants of any social action taking place in certain discourse. As mentioned already in the introduction, in his analysis of the visual, van Leeuwen (2008: 137) is concerned with making the messages of images explicit. In his work on visual social actors, van Leeuwen (2008: 137) has focused on visual racism and insisted on reckoning images as part of racist discourse. Even though verbally represented cultural, racist or sexist stereotypes in the media are nowadays rather rare and strongly confronted, the more subtle visual stereotypes are still being reinforced in the media without confrontation. However, it seems that the surrounding visual culture and new media slowly raise our interest towards the visual and also enhance our skills in visual literacy. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 3) state in their work *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* their belief in that visual communication will become increasingly essential in public domains of communication, instead of only that of specialists. In addition, they believe that the value of visual literacy will increase in the future and it will even "begin to be a matter of survival, especially in the workplace" (ibid.).

For analyzing visually represented people, van Leeuwen suggests two questions to be asked: "How are people depicted?" and "How are the depicted people related to the viewer?" (van Leeuwen 2008: 137). The research questions of the current study follow a similar idea. As my aim is to examine how the Brandy girls are depicted in the photos, and how are they related to the viewer, van Leeuwen's framework seems relevant for the study in that it provides tools for answering the research question. van Leeuwen (2008: 141-142) stresses that the two questions are by no means alternative, but that both dimensions are always present.

The first question of van Leeuwen's framework seeks to answer how people are depicted in certain imagery. In order to answer this, van Leeuwen (2008: 141-148) suggests five different aspects to examine: the choices related to *exclusion*, *categorization* and *roles* of the depicted participants, as well as depicting people *generically* or *specifically*, and either as *individuals* or *as groups*. For the purpose of this study, I will focus on the issue of exclusion. One of the main concerns of the study

is to examine the allegedly stereotypical portrayal of Brandy Girls as skinny, blond, longhaired white girls, which provides a motive to analyze the exclusion of other types of representations.

In his text, van Leeuwen (2008: 142) highlights the constant possibility of *exclusion*, i.e. "the possibility of not including specific people or kinds of people in representations of the groups (institutions, societies, nations, etc.) in which they live and work, and to which they therefore belong". According to van Leeuwen (ibid.), the lack of acknowledging the presence of some people or some kinds of people is a "symbolic form of social exclusion". Thus, it is an aspect to be taken seriously. Considering the critique Brandy Melville has faced concerning the lack of versatility of the models, the aspect of exclusion is extremely essential to examine. Their alleged portrayal of California girls seems to be rather one-sided, when compared to the real-life diversity of young women living in California. In addition, as @brandymelvilleusa's target group does not limit itself to California, but to all of the United States it becomes clear that the brand excludes certain kinds of people with varying ethnic backgrounds, skin colors, and body shapes who actually belong to the scene the brand portrays in its images.

The second question in van Leeuwen's theory concerns the relation between the depicted people and the audience. In order to answer this question, van Leeuwen (2008: 138-142) distinguishes three dimensions: the *social distance*, the *social relation* and the *social interaction* between the represented people and the viewer. It is pointed out that in all of these dimensions, the relation to the depicted people is always symbolic and does not depend on "the actual relations between us and those people, or those kinds of people" (van Leeuwen 2008: 138). As Messaris (1997) has covered the same dimensions and their symbolic values, I will also discuss his viewpoints on the matter.

The first dimension, *social distance*, is thought to communicate our interpersonal relationships and to function similarly in photos and in real life (van Leeuwen 2008: 138). That is, usually we are (physically or mentally) close to our loved ones and keep more distance to strangers. In images, distance symbolizes similar relations: a close-up of a person makes us feel like she is "one of us", whereas a person depicted from far away gives the impression of her being a stranger. The closer the depicted person is, the easier it is to perceive her individual characteristics and consider her "as though" a friend and as someone to identify with (ibid.). Messaris (1997: 27-29) shares van Leeuwen's view of the perception of symbolic interpersonal distance depicted in images. He further points out to television studies, which have actually shown how tighter close-ups and shorter distances to the screen increase the spectator's attention and involvement (e.g. Lombard 1995). However, Messaris (1997: 29) highlights two reasons why all advertisement images are not close-ups, even if they would best grab our attention: close-ups may leave out relevant information and, if

too close, they may seem hostile. However, for the current data, the latter aspect is most likely absent. In the current study then, the represented distance in the photos allows us to examine whether the Brandy girls are portrayed as people to identify with, or more as "others". Since the object of the study is a clothing brand, the expected result would be a large emphasis on attention-getting close-ups which highlight the pieces of clothing.

The second dimension, *social relation*, refers to the angle from which are made to see the depicted person (van Leeuwen 2008: 139). It includes both vertical and horizontal angles, which symbolically have to do with power and involvement. Vertical angle provides us three options: we may see the person at eye level, from above or from below. According to van Leeuwen (ibid.), to look at someone from above symbolizes the viewer's higher position, as if having power over the depicted person. Vice versa, looking at someone from below signifies that the depicted person has symbolic power over the viewer. Being at the same eyelevel is associated with equal power position. Messaris (1997: 38) notes that in commercial advertisements, low angles are still rather uncommon. However, the power position may be expressed in other ways; especially in clothing advertisements, it is often done with the facial expression (ibid.). Frequent practice on high fashion images is that the models are looking down on the viewer, which expresses the superiority of the model. According to Messaris (1997: 38-39), the level of contemptuousness is associated with the price level of the advertised products: "the higher the fashion, the more sullen the expression". The use of high angles (looking down on the depicted person) in advertisements is more common and usually associated with the object's weakness and related to cute animals and children (Messaris 1997: 40). However, the same strategy is used in advertisements portraying women. These images, in which women pose in a child-like and submissive manner, are usually directed to men (Messaris 1997: 41). The facial expressions of the portrayed Brandy Girls are also examined as part of the analysis.

The horizontal angle is related to whether the person is depicted frontally, sideways or from the back. According to van Leeuwen (2008: 139), the choice of horizontal angle gives the viewer the impression of feeling either involved or detached. However, he emphasizes how the meaning constructed with the choice of a certain horizontal angle may vary depending on the context and on the other elements of the photo (ibid.). He associates the frontal angle with being "face to face" with people in real life. The sideline position is associated with doing the same thing, but depending on the context, it might simultaneously be "ignoring each other" or "experiencing something together" (ibid.). According to Messaris (1997: 24) the rear view implies the real world expression of exclusion and turning away. However, as a typical convention in travel advertisements, it also

invites the viewer to join the depicted person's view, and to "turn away from society" (Messaris 1997: 26). Thus, in the current study, analyzing the vertical and horizontal angles enables me to evaluate the power relations between the represented Brandy girls and the viewer, as well as whether or not the photos work towards making the viewer feel involved.

The third dimension, *social interaction*, is related to the gaze of the representation, i.e. whether the depicted people look at the viewer or not. According to van Leeuwen (2008: 140), if they do not look at us, it is as if they are "offered to our gaze as a spectacle for our dispassionate scrutiny" and we are made to observe them as we would observe people who are not aware of us or our gaze. On the contrary, by looking directly at the viewer, the depicted people give an impression of interaction; they are aware of us and addressing us directly as if they demand something from us. What it is that they are demanding is signified by other features of the photo, e.g. the vertical and horizontal angle and facial expression. As mentioned above, Messaris (1997: 21) considers direct eye contact in advertisements as a typical attention-getting device. He adds that especially in political images, direct gaze might also be an attempt to seem trustworthy (Messaris 1997: 23). For the current study, it is especially interesting to see whether the viewers are only made to observe the Brandy Girls from outside or also to engage in some sort of interaction with them, i.e. whether there is a contact or not.

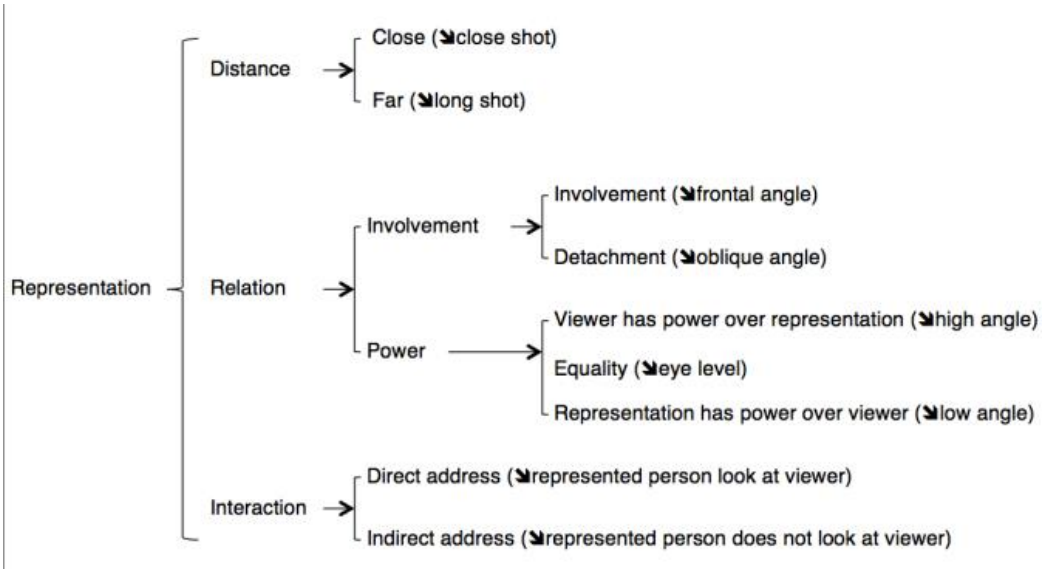


Figure 7. Representation and Viewer Network (van Leeuwen 2008: 141).

The three dimensions – distance, angle and the gaze – are shown in Figure 7 above. It is important to notice that all of these factors are present in every photograph, i.e. it is impossible to portray a person without making choices concerning all three dimensions (van Leeuwen 2008: 141).

Furthermore, it is these various choices presented above which will be the central points of analysis of the current study, whose material and methods will be presented next.

5 Materials and Methods

The aim of this section is to explicitly describe how the study was conducted. I will introduce the material used in the analysis as well as the methods applied to the material. I will begin by describing the research data, its collection and the limitations as well as argue for the choices concerning the material. Next, I will move on to explicating the research methods and their application to the material.

5.1 Research Material

The material for the research consisted of images from the @brandymelvilleusa Instagram feed. For the research, a sample of 200 photos was gathered by selecting blocks of 20 consecutive photos every three weeks, working backwards from the end of February 2016. This was done in order to ensure that the sample reliably represents a large number of images published over a longer period of time as Brandy Melville posts on Instagram on a daily basis. As the focus was on the representation of the Brandy Girls, only photos with one or more people were included. Thus, photos of in-store clothing and accessory displays, which occasionally appear on the feed, were excluded from the analysis. In addition, even though the Instagram stories, carousel photos and video material published on @brandymelvilleusa would provide an even more thorough image of the brand's visual communication, the scope of this study was limited in the individually posted photos. Also the more traditional photo collages which include two or more photos in one were excluded from the analysis, because they might have distorted the analysis and the results. Even though the analysis was primarily visual, the captions were also included in the analysis, as they contribute in constructing the meaning of the image. The captions included text, hashtags and/or emoticons.

5.2 Research Methods

In the following I will introduce the research methods. First, I will discuss content analysis as a research method and how the analysis was successfully realized. Second, I will introduce the chosen variables and their values.

5.2.1 Content Analysis

The data was systematically analyzed by means of content analysis, which is a method that has been used widely across disciplines such as sociology, history, linguistics and political studies over the

decades (Hakala 2003:14). For some time, it has also been applied to studies on marketing, advertising and communication. What makes content analysis such a widely used technique has in part to do with the fact that the content to be analyzed can be anything from verbal to audio-visual. Subsequently, the method's applicability to visual material was one of the reasons why it was chosen as the research method for the current study. In addition, as the aim of the study was to cover a large sample of images over a longer period of time, instead of examining individual images and representations, content analysis was found a particularly helpful method due to its applicability for large-scale material. Fiske (1990: 136) has even claimed that the larger the sample, the more accurate the content analysis. However, it should be noted that a massive amount of data does not necessarily correlate with finding significant results (Seppänen 2005: 151). On the other hand, Seppänen (2005: 144) points out that even though content analysis is usually targeted at a large amount of data, it does not exclude the analysis of singular representations. On the contrary, it enables the scrutiny of how singular representations make meaning as part of larger data.

Content analysis is shortly defined as a "research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context" (Krippendorff 1980: 21). Bell (2001:13) defines content analysis in his article "Content Analysis of Visual Images" as an objective and empirical procedure which makes use of explicitly defined categories for quantifying, in this case, visual data. The categorization in content analysis is realized by variables and their values, which for the current study are specified in section 5.2.2. According to Seppä (2012: 216), the aim of content analysis is to indicate the frequency of certain chosen elements (variables) in a strictly defined material. In addition, the interest often lies on the variation and combination the elements as well as on the patterns which occur in the data. Similarly, in the current study the interest lies on the occurrence of individual elements as well as on their combinations and frequently occurring patterns. In addition, it is important to note that the absence of a certain type of element or pattern may also be significant.

In everyday life, we make generalizations based on our perception of what we have seen and heard, for instance that "in advertising images, men are represented as more active than women" or "Brandy Melville represents only blond girls in their visual marketing imagery". According to Bell (2001: 10), "making generalizations about the relative frequencies of visual representations of particular classes of people, actions, roles, situations or events" already involves quantification and classification of data, which could thus be considered as content analysis. However, in order to evaluate the truthfulness of the claims objectively and accurately in the scholarly sense, a systematic content analysis of the selected material is needed. In other words, content analysis aims

to provide verifiable evidence to support (or to refute) such generalized arguments. Thus, content analysis was found as a useful method for addressing the disputed diversity of the represented models and for answering the research questions, which is the most essential criteria for choosing a methodology (Rose 2012: 1).

Next, I will elaborate on how the current analysis was conducted by following the six steps of content analysis provided by Seppä (2012: 216-229). The six steps are stated in the following:

1. Formulating the research questions
2. Defining the material
3. Defining the context
4. Defining the variables
5. Coding the data
6. Analyzing the findings

The *first step* was to formulate the research questions and hypotheses, which for the current study are laid out in the Introduction. The main research question aimed to find out what kind of female representation is constructed by Brandy Melville's visual marketing on Instagram. The *second step* was to define and collect the research material. The description of the material and its selection for the current study is provided in section 5.1 above. The material's suitability was tested before conducting the actual analysis, which led to limiting the data to include only singular images depicting one or more people. According to Seppä (2012: 221), the number of variables should always be suited to the amount of the material. For the current study, a set of 200 images was estimated to provide a valid sample for analyzing the 15 variables reliably. The *third step* was the definition of the context, which has largely been laid in the earlier sections of the thesis. To sum up, the theoretical starting point for the study was critical discourse analysis, connecting the topic to fields of visual culture, feminist studies and marketing. As the source material was derived from Instagram, the qualities specific to social media as a context were taken into account. Considering the larger socio-cultural context, the research was viewed from the perspective of modern Western culture.

The *fourth step* was to define the variables for the analysis. Seppä (2012: 233) highlights the importance of this phase of the process, because it strongly defines the concrete matters in the images to which the attention is paid. All the measurable elements in the image, which could be substituted with another element, are called variables. The replaceable, optional elements of a specific variable are the values of that variable. For instance, one variable in the current study was the number of females in an image, which constituted three values: one, two, or more females. It

should be ensured that the values belong to a same class and are thus substitutable with each other (Bell 2001: 16). It is also important that the independent variables or values should not overlap with each other but be "mutually exclusive and exhaustive" (Bell 2001:16). This means that all the possible values should be provided as options (such as values *one*, *two* and *more than two* females which cover all the possible cases) and also that all the independent variables should measure different features (for instance in the current study, there is no need for a variable which measures *distance* as the variable *portrayal of body* provides the needed information). In addition, in order to ensure the consistency, the variables and values ought to be defined as unambiguously as possible (Bell 2001: 17). Altogether 15 variables were chosen to be analyzed in the current study. The defined variables and their values are presented in detail in the following section 5.2.2.

The *fifth step* refers to the actual analysis, i.e. coding the data. In the current study, each of the 200 images was systematically and comprehensively coded by selecting one value for each variable. The coding was conducted with UAM ImageTool 2.2, which enabled the annotation of an image corpus. The program also enabled the coding both for the whole image and for a selected segment in an image, which made it possible to analyze variables regarding both the whole image and the individual representations of the Brandy Girls. First, in order to ensure the functionality of the chosen variables, a trial study containing 30 images was conducted prior the actual analysis. Bell (2001: 21) emphasizes the criterion of reliability in content analysis by which he refers to the "degree of consistency shown by one or more coders in classifying content according to defined values on specific variables". Thus, the trial study was also conducted in order to measure the *intra-coder reliability*, as the current study only employed one coder (Bell 2001: 22). Thus, to ensure the reliability of the analysis, a set of 30 images was first annotated for all variables. A week later the procedure was repeated without referring to the previous annotations, and the results of the two sets were correlated in order to ensure the consistency in classification during the actual analysis.

The *final step* covered the interpretation of the results. The most basic results report the frequency of each value on a variable. As mentioned above, it is not only the frequencies of the individual variables which make the results, but also the correlations between variables, frequently occurring patterns as well as possible non-occurrences of values. Seppä (2012: 277) points out that at this phase, content analysis often provides information which looks quantitative, but is already partly qualitative. The results of the current study are presented in chapter 6 below and further discussed in chapter 7.

Ideally, the current study would have included examination of the correlations between the different variables, such as investigating the direction of the representation's gaze in relation to the angle of

the image, or the exposure of skin in relation to her facial expression, in order to discover the most frequently occurring combinations in the images and to provide a comprehensive insight of the visually represented females. However, due to the restricted functions of the UAM Image tool, discovered only after the annotation process and during retrieving the results, the research design had to be altered in order to unreliable results. The developer of the program was also contacted during the process and his reply confirmed that it was impossible to carry out the analysis as intended. After inquiries, it was clarified that the only reliable correlation results were those drawn from images which depicted only one female, and this was decided to be utilized in the analysis. Thus, the correlation results presented in chapter 6 below only apply to images representing one female. Furthermore, the program enabled the comparison of the Brandy Girls represented alone (single representations, n=127) and Brandy Girls represented in group images (group representations, n= 176). In other words, it was possible to examine how the single representations differ from the ones depicted in an image portraying two or more female representations.

As a method, content analysis combines quantitative and qualitative elements and is usually supported with qualitative theories and methods in order to interpret the imagery and the findings in a qualitative manner (Bell 2001: 27; Seppä 2012: 213). In the current study, the analysis is supported by critical discourse analytical, semiotic and feminist approaches. Also, already the selection of variables and their values is based on decisions which ought to be argued qualitatively. Furthermore, Bell (2001: 17) distinguishes 'subjective' variables (such as age or race in visual material) from measurable variables (such as size or duration), pointing to elements which require subjective and hence qualitative judgement. Moreover, Hakala (2003: 15) states that the quantitative part of content analysis aims to examine denotations, whereas the qualitative part enables the examination of connotations which provide the deeper meanings. She concludes: "Content analysis allows us to treat qualitative data in quantitative terms, thus helping ground the analysis of images in rigorous, systematic classification rather than individual interpretations" (Hakala 2003: 15). Thus, in the current study, the results were presented quantitatively by expressing the distributions of the values realized by numbers and percentages, which were further interpreted and discussed qualitatively utilizing the semiotic concepts and van Leeuwen's concepts for analyzing visual social actors. Examining statistical significance was not considered relevant in the current study, whose emphasis was heavily on the qualitative side.

5.2.2 Variables and Values

The selection of the variables for the current study was based on van Leeuwen's theory, on the critique pointed towards Brandy Melville as well as on the preliminary examination of the data. The

aim was to select the most relevant variables and values which would help answering the research questions. The fifteen variables and their values chosen to be examined are presented in the following Table 1, where the variables can be seen on the left and their values in the right column:

Variables	*Values*
1. Number of females	*One, Two, More*
2. Gender	*Female, Male and female*
3. Race	*White, Non-white*
4. Body size	*1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9*
5. Hair color	*Blond, Light Brown, Dark brown, Black, Other*
6. Hair length	*Short, Shoulder, Below shoulder, Below chest, Very Long, Unable to determine*
7. Exposure of skin	*Unrevealing, Slightly revealing, Revealing, Very revealing*
8. Product display	*Clear, Unclear*
9. Facial expression	*Smiling, Serious, Playful, Other, Unable to determine*
10. Portrayal of body	*Full body long shot, Full body close shot, Upper body, Midriff, Lower body, Head*
11. Horizontal angle	*Facing the camera, Sideways, Away from the camera*
12. Vertical angle	*High angle, Eye-level, Low angle*
13. Direction of gaze	*Looking at the viewer, Not looking at the viewer*
14. Background	*Outdoors: Urban, Nature, Beach, Plain, Other*
	Indoors: Studio, Store, Bedroom, Plain, Other
15. Caption	*#brandyusa, #brandyusa+garment, Other*

Table 1. Variables and values.

What should be noted is that the variables always refer to the representations on the images, not on the features of reality (see Bell 2001: 16). This is at times referred to as analyzing the 'manifest content' (ibid.). In the current study it means that it was the representations of the models which were under scrutiny, not the actual models. This is because the image only provides information of the representation, i.e. how the person appears in the image and not how she is in real life. For example, a model might in reality have a black hair, but in the image appears as brown (e.g. due to editing or lighting). Thus, the depicted person in the photo is classified as having a brown hair, because that is what the representation implies. This means that the same model may appear in multiple photos and her characteristics might be classified differently in each photo, without it being a flaw in the classification.

Some of the variables were rather straightforward, whereas others were more complex. In order to maintain the transparency of the research, the variables and their values are explained here in more detail. First, the images were coded by the *number of females* (Variable 1) in the image, with values one, two, or more than two females. As the focus of the study was on the Brandy Girls, it was

decided that the variable concerned the represented females only, instead of the overall number of represented people in the image. Subsequently, as the imagery also included occasional male representations, the data was coded for *gender* (2), including values of female, and male and female, as these two were the only occurring options. That is, there were no images representing males only. In addition, due to the interest of the study, the variables related to physical features were only coded for the female representations. Furthermore, people represented clearly in the background of the image were not quantified or coded. The few borderline cases were solved by testing the coding to these represented characters, yet in all cases their visibility appeared to be insufficient for reliable coding.

Next, four variables were related to physical appearance of the representations. The first of these, *race* (3) was coded for two different values, namely white and non-white. This dichotomy was chosen due to the dominance of the white Caucasian representations and the term non-white was chosen to describe all the other racial representations in contrast. Being aware of the complex nature of the concepts of race and ethnicity there was need for extreme carefulness with defining and coding the variable. The coding was conducted by observing features such as skin color, hair color and facial features. However, there occurred some problematic cases in the data in which all of these features were not clearly visible. In these cases, the coding was based on whatever features were observable. Next variable, *body size* (4) was coded by using the nine-point scale by Thompson and Grey (1995, see Appendix 1), which enabled the classification of bodies to nine different sizes. On the pictorial scale, 1 referred to the smallest size (extremely thin) and 9 to the largest size (extremely obese). The scale has been used earlier for example in a content analysis study by Neuendorf et al. (2009: 753), which examined the representations of women in James Bond movies and the change in those representations over time.

Next, each female character's *hair color* (5) was coded either as blond, light brown, dark brown, black or other. The *length of hair* (6) was coded gradually either as short, shoulder length, below shoulder, below chest, very long or unable to determine. The value short referred to cases in which the character's hair was shorter than shoulder length, whereas very long referred to hair which reached the waist or was even longer. In images in which the hair was on a bun or framed out of sight, the value unable to determine was chosen.

The next two variables were related to clothing. The variable *exposure of skin* (7) was coded for four values. Unrevealing referred to cases in which the body was mainly covered. If either stomach, back, thighs or chest was revealed, the value slightly revealing was chosen. If many of these mentioned body parts were uncovered, the value revealing was chosen. Finally, the value very

revealing referred to cases in which the represented character was wearing lingerie or a bathing suit. The next variable, *product display* (8), aimed to examine whether or not the outfit, the piece of clothing or the accessory by Brandy Melville was clearly displayed in the photo. It also aimed to grasp whether the focus of the image was on the product or on something else. The product was considered to be clearly displayed (value clear) if there was at least one product in the photo which was on the focus and visible without obstruction. Furthermore, the garment or other product was considered not to be displayed clearly (value unclear), if the focus of the image was clearly on something else and the product was not clearly shown.

The next variable, *facial expression* (9), was divided into five values. The value happy/smiling applied whenever the character was smiling or laughing, whereas serious applied when the character was not smiling or looking happy. Playful referred to cases in which the character was somehow acting silly, such as grinning or sticking her tongue out. Other referred to cases which did not fit to the previous categories, and unable to determine included all the cases in which the character's face was not visible in the image. The *portrayal of body* (10), which has to do with the framing of the image and distance to the viewer, was divided into six values. Long shot of full body referred to the depiction of the whole body from far and close shot of full body referred to depiction of full body, or at least from ankles to the head, so that the depicted person filled the image which made the image a close shot. All the cases in which the body was portrayed from above ankles to the head were coded as upper body. Photos which were framed to portray only the middle part of the body were coded as midriff. Lower body referred to portrayal of body from neck downwards and headshots were coded as head. Essentially, the aim of this variable was not only to provide information on how the body was portrayed but also about the distance and intimacy of the characters in relation to the viewer.

The next variables referred to the two angles of the photo. The *horizontal angle* (11) was divided into three values and was coded according to whether the character was portrayed frontally, from the side or from the back. The variable allowed the in-between cases, since the person might not be represented directly from the back or front, but the photos were coded to the value which was the closest to the representation. The *vertical angle* (12) referred to the angle of the whole photo, and the values varied from eye-level to high angle from above to low angle from below. The vertical angle did not allow actual in-between cases, since representations which were not on the eye-level were either depicted from above or from below. The variable *gaze* (13) only had two values: either the character was looking at the camera or she was not.

The next variable was related to the *background* (14) of the image, i.e. the place of the photoshoot. The variable was first divided in to two values: outdoors and indoors. Both of these values were further divided to five sub-values. The outdoor value urban referred to a place with characteristics related to city life, beach referred to a location with sand and water, and nature to a natural place other than the beach. The indoor value store referred to the inside of a Brandy Melville store, whereas studio referred to a background with photoshoot studio equipment such as mirrors and Brandy Melville signs. The third value for indoors was bedroom, which referred to a background with a bed. In addition, both outdoor and indoor values had categories for plain background and other background. Plain referred to a blank or textured wall and all the cases which did not fit the previous categories was coded as other.

The last variable was the *caption* (15), which consisted of three values. The first one included images captioned merely with #brandyusa. The second was for cases with #brandyusa and the name(s) of the garment(s), and the third category included all the other cases. The values for both the background and the caption were chosen after an initial exploration of the data which indicated that the chosen values were ones occurring regularly. For the number of females, gender, background and caption the coding unit is the whole photo, whereas for the rest of the variables the unit is a segment of the photo, i.e. each female character occurring in the photo.

6 Analysis

A total of 303 female representations occur in the data, which consists of 200 images. That is, for the variables *number of females*, *gender*, *background* and *caption*, in which the coding unit is the whole image, n=200, and for the rest of the variables, in which the coding unit is the represented female, n=303. In this section, the term 'represented female' or 'representation' always refers to a Brandy Girl, unless elaborated otherwise, and these terms are used interchangeably. In the following, the presentation of the results is expressed quantitatively by providing the distribution of the values both by occurrence and percentage, and qualitatively by describing and interpreting the findings. Moreover, the results are complemented with tables and illustrative images drawn from the data. After examining the number of females (Variable 1), the results related to the physical features of the Brandy Girl representations (Variables 3-7) are presented, followed by examination of the depiction of the product (Variable 8) and caption (Variable 15). Next, the analysis covers the features of the interpersonal relationship between the viewer and the represented Brandy Girl (Variables 9-13). Finally, the depiction of the background (Variable 14) and the occurrence of male representations (Variable 2) are discussed.

First, it is relevant to provide information of the number and distribution of the represented Brandy Girls (Variable 1). Their occurrence in the images is as follows: 127 images portray one female character, 57 portray two females, and 16 portray more than two females (from three to seven). That is, in the research sample there occur 127, 114 and 62 representations of females, respectively. The numbers are illustrated in Table 2 below.

Number of Females	Images	%	Representations	%
One	127	63.5	127	41.9
Two	57	28.5	114	37.6
More	16	8.0	62	20.5
	200	100	303	100

Table 2. Number of females.

In addition, the results include comparisons of the representations occurring alone (addressed as 'single') and in images with two or more females (addressed as 'groups'). When comparing the representations occurring alone versus in groups, it should be taken into account that the number of representations differ in these two cases: in single images there occur 127 Brandy Girls and in group images the number of Brandy Girls is 176.

	Images	%	Representations	%
Single	127	63.5	127	41.9
Group	73	36.5	176	58.1
	200	100	303	100

Table 3. Comparison of single and group representations.

Furthermore, the results are complemented with a few relevant findings based on the combinations of variables. For instance, the vertical angle and the direction of the gaze are discussed in relation to each other. However, due to the limitations of the ImageTool these results are always based on the 127 images depicting one female (single) only, as was explained in the method section 5.2.1. To sum up, in the analysis the basic results of all variables are complemented with the relevant correlations occurring in single representations and the comparisons of variables between single and group images.

6.1 Physical Appearance

The first physical feature to be discussed is race (Variable 3). When examining the racial representations in the imagery, the results indicate that 95% of the representations are white, and the

remaining 5% non-white. That is, only 15 out of 303 Brandy Girls racially represent something else than Caucasians, which implies a clear instance of symbolic exclusion. Further examination of how this minority is represented indicates that the non-white representations are mainly represented as objects, i.e. offered to the viewers to be gazed at. This can be seen in that even though there are cases in which the non-white Brandy Girl is facing towards the viewer as a symbol of involvement, only three of them are looking at the camera, i.e. expressing some sort of interaction with the viewer. Examining the number of representations in relation to race, the results show that the non-white Brandy Girls are viewed both alone and accompanied by others: alone or with a boyfriend character, accompanied by one or two white Brandy Girls (see Figure 9) and on one occasion both of the two represented Brandy Girls are non-white (see Figures 8). Non-white representations are fully excluded from group images of more than three people. However, the occasional portrayal of a non-white Brandy Girl as a main (only) female character of the image perhaps aims to compensate the otherwise subordinated position of the minority.

Considering the analysis, it should be noted that even though the referred values were labelled as white and non-white, the annotation was not only based on the skin color. For example, in Figure 9, the Brandy Girl in the middle is coded as non-white, even though her skin is actually rather fair. In fact, in a majority of the cases, the non-white representations were identified by other means, such as hair, instead of the color of their skin. To conclude, the predominant occurrence of white representations contrasted with the low percentage of non-white representations clearly indicates an instance of racial exclusion. By representing mainly white Brandy Girls Brandy Melville symbolically excludes a large group of its possible consumers.

Figures 8 & 9 (from left to right)**.** Illustrations of non-white representations (@brandymelvilleusa).

Next, one of the most criticized features of the Brandy Girls is their size. Examining the body size (Variable 4) was done by comparing the visual representations to the nine-point scale, in which 1 refers to extremely thin and 9 to extremely obese (see Appendix 1). Categorizing the depicted bodies required a detailed scrutiny and appeared slightly challenging due to the fine-grained scale and the diversity of the portrayals. However, the results indicate that every represented Brandy Girl is located closer to the beginning of scale and coded either as size two, three or four. According to the analysis, the majority (223 cases, 73.6%) of the representations equals size three (see Figure 11), size four (see Figure 12) fits to 49 cases (16.2%) and size two (see Figure 10) to 31 cases (10.2%). There are no occurrences of sizes one and from five to nine. Thus, all the cases represent a body size which is below average, i.e. thin, petite or even anorectic. This result indicates another evident instance of symbolic social exclusion and supports the claim of the brand's narrow and distorted image of female body. In the light of the brand's slogan *one size fits most*, the portrayal of only small bodies is considered highly controversial and even discriminatory.

Figures 10, 11 & 12. Illustrations of bodies coded as size 2, 3 and 4, respectively (@brandymelvilleusa).

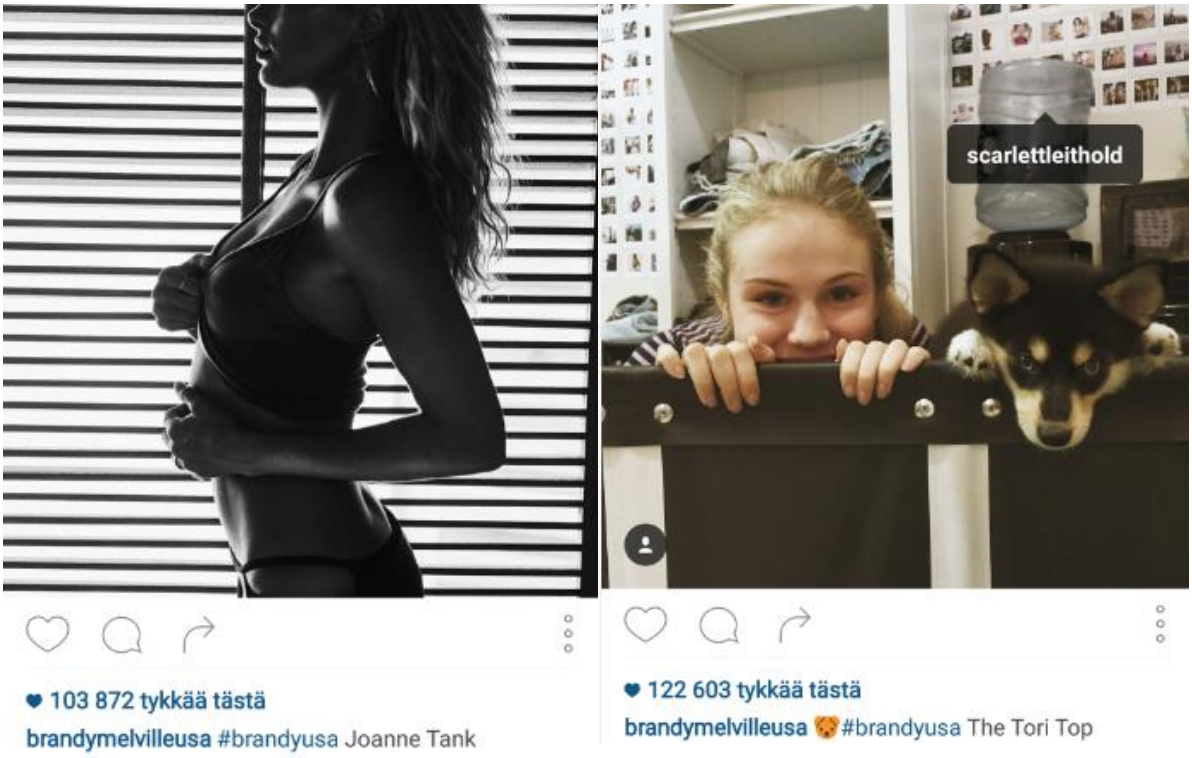
Aligned with the earlier observations and claims, a majority of the Brandy Girls have either blond (31.7%) or light brown (31%) hair (Variable 5). 27.7% have a dark brown hair, and 4% are black-haired. 5.6% represents some other color, including red or multicolored hair, and cases in which the hair is framed out of the image, or the image is monochrome (altogether seven images in the data are black-and-white, see Figure 15). Dark-haired Brandy Girls seem to appear more often in group representations (31.8%) than in single representations (22.1%), which implies that darker hair is not the preferred representation for Brandy Melville (see e.g. Figures 10 and 12 in comparison to Figure 14).

Figures 13 & 14. Illustrations of hair color and length (@brandymelvilleusa).

Similarly, the results indicate the high frequency of long hair (Variable 6). The hair reaches below chest in 35.6% and below shoulder in 30.7% of the cases. In addition, 10.9% of the Brandy Girls have a shoulder-length hair, 8.9% have a very long hair (see Figure 13), and only 2% have short hair. Thus, in three out of four (75.2%) of the cases the hair reaches at least below shoulder, which indicates that the preferred representation of Brandy Girl is embodied by long hair. In 36 cases (11.9%), the length of hair cannot be determined due to framing or the hairdo (see Figure 16). However, in many cases the impression of long hair is present even though it is not actually visible in the image. For example, if the hair is tied on a bun, the length cannot be determined specifically, even though this implies that the hair is long enough to be worn this way. Another example is seen in the Figure 16 below, in which the model's hair is tied out of sight in this particular image, but the viewer who is familiar with the @brandymelvilleusa and its models (who are always tagged and verified by their usernames) might have seen other images which emphasize her long blond hair. This illustrates the complexity of visual analysis and the challenges in annotation.

Analyzing the exposure of skin (Variable 7), the results indicate that nearly half of all representations (46.5%) are depicted as unrevealing (see Figure 16). Subsequently, 42.2% are depicted as slightly revealing. Only 9.9% of the cases indicate revealing clothing, and 1.3% (4 cases) are considered very revealing (see Figure 15). Even though the revealing or very revealing portrayal is slightly more frequent in single representation images (16.5%) than in group images (7.4%), the exposing images are in clear minority. Here it should be pointed out that defining the technical values for this specific variable was somewhat challenging as the phenomenon is highly gradual. Hence, the value named *slightly revealing* might be misleading as the representation of the

Brandy Girl might appear as more than only slightly revealing when, for example, her stomach exposed, such as in Figure 11. This should be taken into account when discussing the results.



Figures 15 & 16. Illustrations of very revealing and unrevealing representation (@brandymelvilleusa).

However, it is safe to say that the results indicate the presence of two extremes: Brandy Girls whose skin is carefully covered and Brandy Girls in revealing underwear. Thus, on one hand, Brandy Melville seems to avoid the traditional type of advertising which functions by objectifying women and highlighting their sexuality, and on the other hand, the brand promotes images which subtly or more obviously reveal the female body. An example of the subtle portrayal is seen in Figures 18 and 19, in which the outfits cover the arms but reveal the back or stomach. The significant contrast between Figures 15 and 16 shows how the brand portrays the Brandy Girls both as sexually desirable women as well as adorable, even child-like girls.

6.2 Product and Caption

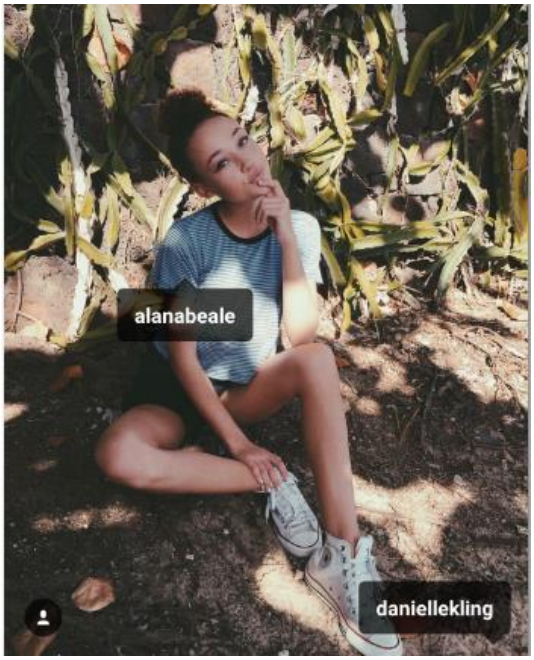
Examining the product display (Variable 8) in the data, the results indicate that in 218 cases (72%), the products are clearly displayed, and in 85 cases (28%) the product display is not clear due to distance, posture or other obstruction (see Figure 16). It is reasonable to link the depiction of the product with the caption of the image (Variable 15). Nearly all of the images (98%) are tagged with #brandyusa in the caption. By using the hashtag Brandy Melville makes it easier for all Instagram

users to find their images while simultaneously the consumers are also able to use the hashtag to link their own images to the brand. In this way using the hashtag also functions as building a community. In 37% (74 images) of the cases the caption is just #brandyusa, but the majority of the images (106 cases, 53%) are captioned with #brandyusa and the name of the depicted garment or product. In many cases in which the product is not clearly depicted, the caption provides the name of the product (like The Tori Top in Figure 16), which in Barthes' terms could be understood as anchoring, or in other words, guiding the viewer towards the intended meaning of the sender. In photos depicting one female, there are 86 cases in which the product is clearly displayed in the image, and 41 cases in which the product is not on focus or somehow obstructed. Of the 41 cases, 53.7% were captioned with #brandyusa and the name of the garment or product, indicating that the aim of the caption is to anchor the meaning of the image to the product, even though the image itself might highlight another kind of meaning. For example, in Figures 15 and 16 above the tops mentioned in the captions are barely visible in the images. In Figure 15, the focus is on the Brandy Girl's silhouette and very exposed body. In Figure 16, the focus turns to the puppy and the background, and the product is almost completely out of sight. This kind of usage of the caption seems to be a frequently occurring pattern by which the brand "justifies" the shift of focus to something else, such as the background location or the portrayed activity. By mentioning the garment which is barely visible in the image the brand probably also aims to raise the consumers' interest and persuade them to look for more information of the product.

Caption	All	%	Product clear	%	Product not clear	%
#brandyusa	74	37.00	28	32.56	13	31.71
#brandyusa + Product	106	53.00	46	53.49	22	53.66
Other	20	10.00	12	13.95	6	14.63
	200	100.00	86	100.00	41	100.00

Table 4. Types of captions in all images and the visibility of the product display in single images in relation to the captions.

Of all images, 20 cases (10%) are captioned in some other distinctive way. These include captions with emoticons, additional hashtags, announcements of opening new locations and model castings (see Figure 17) as well as images with no caption. However, a majority of these still include the #brandyusa. The fact that captions with additional information occur so seldom is perfectly aligned with the brand's media silence strategy.



brandymelvilleusa #brandyusa OPEN MODEL CASTING THIS SATURDAY! Join us at our Santa Monica location from 10am -2pm for our open casting! Must be 16 or older with an ID.
1413 3rd Street Promenade Santa Monica
See you there!

Figure 17. Image with a distinctive caption (@brandymelvilleusa).

6.3 Brandy Girl and the Viewer

Next, I will move on to examine the interpersonal relationship between the represented Brandy Girl and the viewer. The portrayal of body (Variable 10) here refers to the distance from which the Brandy Girls are portrayed. The analysis shows that a majority of the images are close shots, which implies the symbolic closeness and intimacy of the Brandy Girls to the viewer (see Figure 21). That is, due to the close distance the Brandy Girls are perceived as familiar, friend-like and easy to identify with. Most often, in 52.2% of the cases, the images represent the upper body. Close shots of full body occur 63 times (20.8% of all representations). The least frequent cases are the midriff shot (2.6%), the head shot (2.3%) and the lower body shot (1.7%), which are all considered close shots. The high frequency of close shots was an expected result as they are convenient in presenting the product as well as known to be powerful in grabbing the viewer's attention.

Approximately a fifth of all representations (20.5%) are long shots (see Figure 19), in which the distance gives the impression of Brandy Girls being also mentally more distant, stranger-like and not as easily identified with. Two main reasons can be identified for the use of long shots. A majority of the long shots depicted an outdoor background, which suggests that the landscape is the reason for the chosen distance. Another specific reason for long shots is the depiction of the bigger groups of Brandy Girls, since it would not be possible to execute the group images form closer distance.

Portrayal of body	All	%	Group	%	Single	%
Long shot	62	20.5	43	24.4	19	15.0
Full body close	63	20.8	37	21.0	26	20.5
Upper body	158	53.2	89	50.6	69	54.3
Midriff	8	2.6	4	2.3	4	3.2
Lower body	5	1.7	2	1.1	3	2.4
Head	7	2.3	1	0.6	6	4.7
	303	100	176	100	127	100

Table 5. Portrayal of body in all images, group images and single images.

Close shots seem to be more frequent in the single representations: only 15% are long shots, in comparison to the 24.9% of group representations. Thus, the individually represented Brandy Girls are brought closer to the viewer, making them easier to identify with than the Brandy Girls in groups. However, this is also a "natural" result of portraying multiple people, as was mentioned above.

The photographic vertical angle (Variable 12) provides information of the symbolic power relations. In a clear majority of the cases (82.2%), the camera angle is at the eye level, indicating equal power position between the viewer and the Brandy Girl. In 37 cases (12.2%) the view is from above, and in 17 cases (5.6%) the representation is depicted from below. Thus, cases implying the Brandy Girl having power over the viewer are rather uncommon, whereas images implying the viewer's power over the Brandy Girl(s) are more frequent, but still in clear minority. However, both high and low angles seem to be more common when depicting single representations in comparison to groups. A majority of the images depicted from below represent single Brandy Girls.

Figures 18 & 19. Illustrations of high angle (@brandymelvilleusa).

Furthermore, the direction of the representation's gaze also plays a role in defining the power relations. When examining the single representations shot from above, only two of the represented Brandy Girls are looking at the viewer, while 16 are looking away. Thus, in addition to the viewer having power over the representation, the representations are also portrayed as unaware of the viewer's gaze, strengthening the viewer's powerful position.

Angle	All	%	Group	%	Single	%
High	37	12.2	18	10.2	19	14.9
Eye level	249	82.2	154	87.5	95	74.8
Low	17	5.6	4	2.3	13	10.2
	303	100	176	100	127	100

Table 6. Vertical angle in all images, group images and single images.

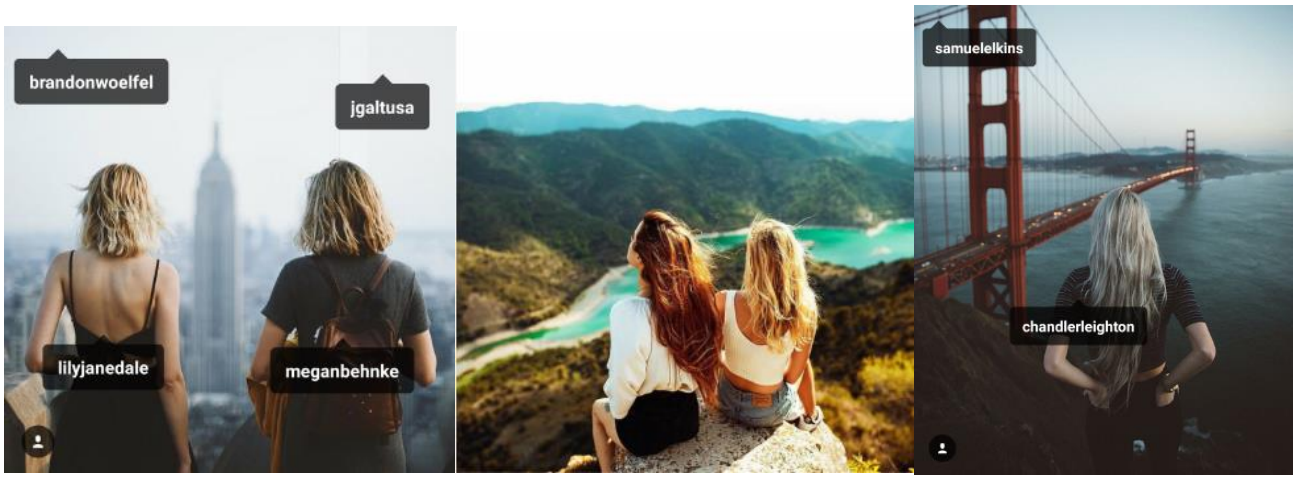
Another way to express interaction is by facial expression (Variable 9). The represented expressions vary, but in a majority (43.6%) of the cases, the Brandy Girl is depicted as happy or smiling. Furthermore, 20.5% of the cases imply a serious and 7.3% a playful facial expression. In 4.6% of the cases the expression is other than one of the aforementioned three choices. In 73 cases (24.1%) the facial expression cannot be determined, i.e. there is no facial representation for example due to a rear angle (see Figure 18). When comparing the facial expressions of Brandy Girls portrayed alone and those in a group, the analysis shows a clear difference: only 29.1% of the single representations are smiling, while in group images the number is 54.9%. Moreover, the number of Brandy Girls looking serious in single images rises to 32.3%, when in group images only 12.1% are depicted as serious. Hence, the group images seem to emphasize joyful friendship, while Brandy Girls represented alone appear more serious, cool and aspirational (see Figures 21 and 20).

Figures 20 & 21. Illustrations of serious and smiling facial expressions (@brandymelvilleusa).

Facial expression	All	%	Group	%	Single	%
Happy	132	43.6	95	53	37	29.1
Serious	62	20.5	21	11.9	41	32.3
Playful	22	7.3	18	10.2	4	3.2
Other	14	4.6	4	2.3	10	7.9
Unable to determine	73	24.1	38	21.6	35	27.6
	303	100	176	100	127	100

Table 7. Facial expressions in all images, group images and single images.

Next, the horizontal angle (Variable 11) expresses the degree of symbolic involvement of the viewer. Most Brandy Girls are represented frontally (57.1%), which .implies that the viewer is mostly made to feel involved (see Figure 20). In addition, 26.1% of all representations are viewed sideways and 16.8% are positioned in a rear view. However, more than half (56.9%) of the frontally represented singles are looking away from the viewer, which further implies that the Brandy Girls are nonetheless not engaging in the interpersonal relationship. Moreover, the composition familiar from travel advertisements, i.e. portraying people from the back admiring a beautiful view, is also present in the Brandy Melville's imagery: the viewer in invited to share the depicted Brandy Girl's view (see Figures 22, 23 and 24). The admired landscape in the data most often depicts either nature or an urban location (such as a view with the Empire State Building in Figure 22). The composition is usually viewed from above and looking down on the women who are not aware of the camera provides an especially powerful position for the viewer to examine both the view and the depicted people.

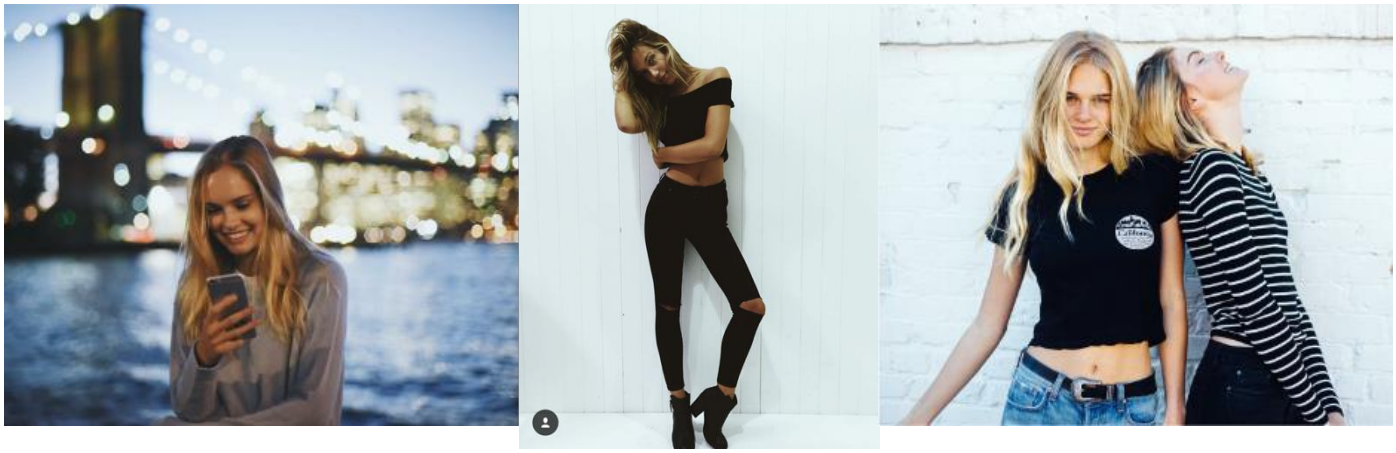


Figures 22, 23 & 24. Illustrations of rear angle (@brandymelvilleusa).

This aforementioned composition most often depicts two people, but there are also images which depict one person with a view (see Figure 24). In some cases depicted from the back, the viewer is invited to follow the represented Brandy Girl rather than join to share the view. However, the

images portrayed from the back also include the aspect of rejection, as the person has turned her back to the viewer (see Figure 28).

The direction of the gaze of the Brandy Girls (Variable 13) suggests the level of their symbolic engagement. In 70 cases (23.1%) the Brandy Girl is looking at the camera (see Figure 26), whereas in 233 cases (76.9%) the coding indicates not looking at the camera (see Figure 25). There were three cases in which the represented Brandy Girl was wearing sunglasses, but since she was facing straight to the camera, the case was coded as looking at the camera. Other cases with sunglasses were coded as not looking at the camera. The results indicate that in a clear majority of the cases, the represented Brandy Girls do not engage with the viewer but rather they are offered to our gaze. One interesting pattern is found on images portraying two Brandy Girls of which the other is looking straight to the camera and the other is looking away (see Figure 27), indicating the awareness of the viewer at least by one of them. This pattern occurs in 10 cases. In addition, one image portraying a couple also follows this composition: the Brandy Girl is gazing the viewer, while the man is admiringly looking at the girl (see Figure 30).

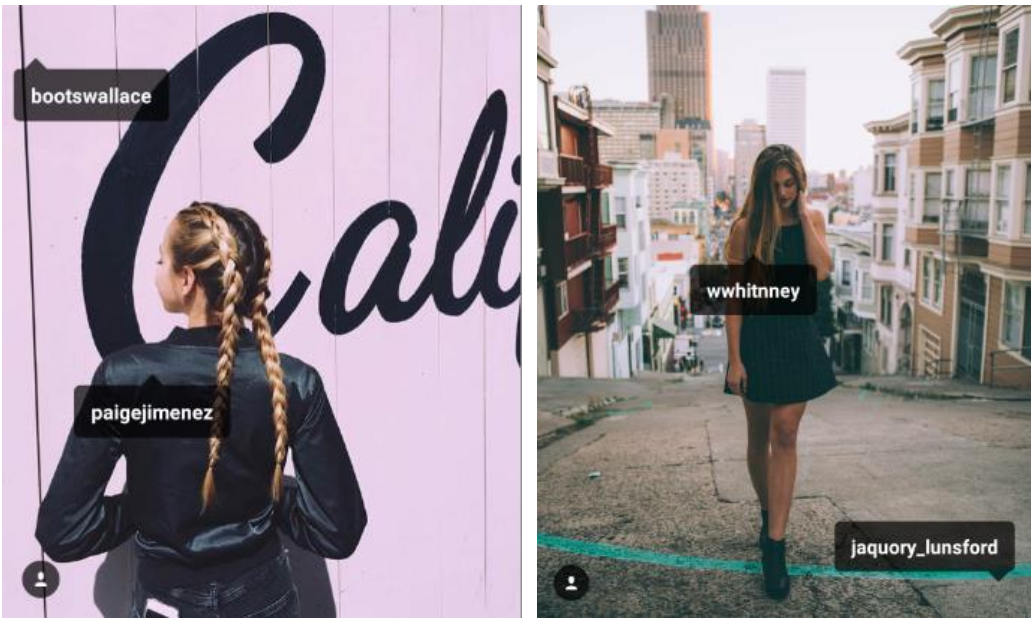


Figures 25, 26 & 27. Illustrations of direction of the gaze (@brandymelvilleusa).

6.4 Background and Male Representations

Examining the background (Variable 14) shows that 72% of the images portray an outdoor background and only 28% an indoor view. Nearly one fourth of all the images (23%) are located in an urban background. The second most common background is nature with 15%, followed by other outdoor location 13.5%. The rest of the values occur as follows: beach 11%, other indoor location 10%, plain outdoor background 9.5%, plain indoor background 6%, studio 4.5%, bedroom 4.5% and Brandy Melville store 3%. The brand is strongly connected to California through its imagery. Some backgrounds link the image to California explicitly with signage (see Figure 28), while other images function less directly by portraying the Hollywood sign (see Figure 18), the Golden Gate

Bridge (see Figure 24) or the known steep street view of San Francisco in the background (see Figure 29). Thus, Brandy Melville takes advantage of the positive connotations linked to California by the signifying use of known locations and monuments accompanied by beaches and urban views which emanate the Californian lifestyle. In addition, some individual images portray New York, London and Hawaii, and in a few cases the location is highlighted in the caption, for example by captioning the image with HI referring to Hawaii or tagging it with #newyork. The power of indexicality of the images becomes clear in examining the backgrounds, as for example Figure 22 depicting the Empire State Building in the background implies that Brandy Melville has actually had a photoshoot in that specific location in the New York City.



Figures 28 & 29. Illustrations of a Californian background (@brandymelvilleusa).

Of the 200 images 190 images portray only females, whereas the remaining ten images also include male representations. Of these ten images, seven portray a couple (see Figure 30), and two images portray groups of friends including both men and women. In one distinct image the represented female is accompanied by theatrical male characters rather than regular male figures (see Figure 31). It should be noted that Brandy Melville does not sell menswear, which indicates that the represented males are in the images for complementary reasons, i.e. mostly represented as boyfriends or friends, illustrating Brandy Girls as desirable and their life as fun, easy-going and something to be aspired.

Figures 30 & 31. Illustrations of male representations (@brandymelvilleusa).

7 Discussion

The main objective of the study was to examine the visual representations of Brandy Girls, and more specifically seek to answer to what kind of female representation does Brandy Melville construct through its visual marketing on Instagram. The analysis was guided by the following three sub-questions: How are the Brandy Girls represented in relation to their physical appearance? How are the Brandy Girls represented in relation to the viewer? What kinds of meanings do the backgrounds, captions and possible male representations convey in relation to the Brandy Girls? The results provided in the previous chapter are elaborated on in the following sections in relation to their impact on the broader social and cultural context. I will discuss and interpret the findings in the light of the theoretical framework and earlier research as well as suggest explanations for the results.

First, section 7.1 discusses the physical appearance of the Brandy Girls and focuses on the instances of exclusion. Section 7.2 provides interpretation of the relationship between the represented Brandy Girl and the viewer and discusses especially how the viewer is positioned to view the represented females. Section 7.3. covers the issues that emerged during the analysis which are especially linked to Instagram as a platform. Finally, section 7.4 provides an evaluation of the study. The answers for the research questions are discussed throughout the sections and summarized in the conclusion in chapter 8.

7.1 Images of Exclusion

According to the results, the visual female representation constructed by Brandy Melville is extremely limited; a clear majority of the representations are very thin, white-skinned young women with long blond or light brown hair. Thus, the conducted content analysis indicates that the visual representation of the Brandy Girls quite accurately follows the suggested descriptions of "California cool girl, very young and very thin", "young, white, skinny and long-legged", "long-haired and overwhelmingly white", "very, very thin" and a group of "white girls with long, blonde hair" presented in the media (Bhasin 2014, Rubin 2014, Bradley 2014). Without claiming this specific kind of representation to be problematic per se, the lack of diverse representations by an influential brand is not completely unproblematic. In van Leeuwen's terms, the findings clearly indicate Brandy Melville's endorsement of symbolic social exclusion by "not including specific people or kinds of people in representations of the groups (institutions, societies, nations, etc.) in which they live and work, and to which they therefore belong" (van Leeuwen 2008: 142). By choosing to represent body sizes limited to small or even petite, Brandy Melville symbolically excludes all other body types and sizes. Similarly, by depicting white females as the dominant racial representation, Brandy Melville symbolically excludes other racial representations, and by doing so provides a chance to identify with the represented Brandy Girls for only a limited group of people who happen to fit the ideal.

In addition to the finding that all the portrayed bodies fall into the category of small and below average, the two smallest sizes on the nine-point scale are considered anorectic, indicating that 10% of the Brandy Girls represent anorectic bodies. Thus, it is evident that Brandy Melville is promoting the thin ideal in its imagery and taking it to the extreme by supporting the portrayal of skinny bodies on the boundaries of healthiness. Taking into account the earlier research which supports the claim that media representations have an impact on women's body dissatisfaction and, furthermore, on eating disorders and other health issues (Grabe et al. 2008, Neumark-Sztianer et al. 2006; Paxton et al. 2006), the excessive promotion of the thin female body by Brandy Melville seems irresponsible. What makes the finding even more disturbing is that the brand mainly targets young, teenaged girls, while simultaneously claiming how their *one size fits most*. As Johnson (2008: 64) states, advertising imagery has the power to impact and target especially teenagers who are under constant pressure to fit in. VanSlette & Waymer (2016: 134), who examined Brandy Melville's promotion strategies, pointed out in their case study how the exclusion might actually trigger one's desire and need to affiliate with the brand. Furthermore, in Brandy Melville's case, where the brand seems very unwilling to respond to any criticism and make changes to its policies accordingly, it is the

rejected young consumer who is left with the responsibility and need to make the decision; whether to quell one's desire to buy the one-sized clothes and shop elsewhere, or to start making changes in one's body in order to fit the limited-sized clothing in order to become part of the exclusive group. Thus, the brand's social exclusion is not only present on the symbolic level in the marketing images, but by its sizing policy Brandy Melville actually excludes and even discriminates a large group of people in reality.

What I consider as the most significant finding in relation to the non-white representations is their minimal occurrence, even though non-white representations exist in the data and there is variation in how the racial minority is represented. The limited racial representation does not indicate that non-white people could not wear Brandy Melville's clothing but representing almost exclusively white females carries certain ideology. As representations construct reality (see e.g. Schroeder 2002: 64), Brandy Melville is constructing an image of a California girl who is white, skinny, and has preferably quite long blond or brown hair. Representational exclusion, which has been rather common within the marketing of retail industry but has recently started to be criticized, tells a solid message: we do not acknowledge your presence unless you fit our ideal representation. In Brandy Melville's visually produced reality, women with bigger bodies do not exist and women of African-American, Latin, Asian or other racial background are in very subordinate position, and this is the message it conveys to the teenaged Instagram users and consumers.

The lack of explicit syntax in images in comparison to verbal language is clearly utilized in Brandy Melville's communication. By stating in words how their clothing fits most people and yet visually only representing thin and petite bodies, Brandy Melville uses visuality to convey a message it does not want to express explicitly by words. That is, it appears to be politically more correct and safer to endorse the exclusion of other than thin bodies by visual means rather than by words. The company executive Longo has further proved the point by refuting the claim that the brand would be promoting a certain look or race in an interview by Mills (2014). Consequently, the contradiction between the brand's verbal and visual representation is remarkable, which highlights the case as an example in which visual literacy becomes essential.

Even though the study focused on the imagery of Brandy Melville, it is obvious that it is not the only brand promoting the thin and white ideal. As Rossi (2015: 82-83) reminds us, there is a constant battle in society of what kinds of actors, words and images are allowed represent something or someone. Brands in influential positions and as authorities often lead these battles which results in a situation where "dominant structures stabilize conventions and naturalize them, that is, the effects of power and ideology in the production of meaning are obscured and acquire

stable and natural forms: they are taken as 'given'." (Wodak 2001:3) That is, dominant visual representation of the white thin female has become the widely established norm and by reproducing these images the brands reinforce the idea of what is considered natural, attractive and aspirational. This unequal power position is what CDA aims to tackle. The goal of CDA is to point out this kind of social inequality expressed through discourse and, furthermore, to improve the situation. Based on the current study, influential brands are encouraged to question their strong promotion of only one kind of female body, as it comes with large social consequences. Even if the produced representations were a result of subconscious choices rather than carefully calculated selection, the messages still build upon these choices. The cultural products further constitute larger discourses which mediate the ideology of the made choices.

7.2 The Viewer's Perspective

Another interesting issue in the study is the way Brandy Melville positions the viewer of the images, i.e. what kind of gaze is present. As was discussed earlier, someone has always seen the image for us, meaning that the perspective has been chosen beforehand, even though it may seem natural to us (Hietala 1993: 12, Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 131). That is, the perspective is inscribed in the image already without the actual viewer. Thus, all three interpersonal dimensions – distance, angle and gaze – are provided for the viewer in every image. As Brandy Melville is mainly consumed by teenage girls and young women, it is reasonable to think that the Instagram imagery is also directed to young females. Thus, also the pre-determined perspective of the image ought to be scrutinized from the point of view of the target audience.

The findings concerning the relationship between the Brandy Girls and the viewer suggest that a majority of the Brandy Girls are portrayed in close shots, indicating the impression of mental closeness to the viewer. In other words, the depicted females are mainly portrayed as "one of us", friend-like characters who are easy to identify with. The appearance is further supported by the eye-level angle and frontal position, which are the most typically occurring angles and place the viewer at the same level and, thus, at equal position with the Brandy Girl.

However, even though these three variables create a mental image of a Brandy Girl as easily approachable and close to the viewer, the direction of the gaze brings another level in the appearance. In over 75% of the cases, the represented Brandy Girl is not looking at the camera and, thus, not contacting the viewer. This indicates that the represented Brandy Girls are mainly offered to be gazed, i.e. the viewer is placed to observe the female who is not aware of the viewer's gaze. Thus, even though a majority of the represented Brandy Girls are viewed frontally with the option

to face the viewer directly, the feeling of involvement decreases when more than half of the girls are simultaneously looking away from the viewer. Messaris (1997: 21) highlights direct eye contact as a powerful attention-getting device, which is why it is an interesting finding that Brandy Melville chooses not to address the viewers by direct eye contact. However, even though the Brandy Girls are mainly provided as objects to be observed, the positioning simultaneously gives the impression of them being out of the viewer's reach and highlights the exclusiveness of the brand.

In addition, even though van Leeuwen (2008: 140) considers eye contact as an indication of awareness of the camera, I would argue that it is not the only indication, but that the portrayed action might also indicate awareness. For example, in Figure 9, the three girls are not looking at the camera, but definitely posing as they are playing around with the candy canes, which strongly indicates their awareness of the camera. This means that even when the represented Brandy Girls do not acknowledge the viewer by direct eye contact, the posing implies the awareness, i.e. the Brandy Girl is performing for the viewer.

Another issue related to the interactional dimension is the represented Brandy Girl's facial expression. While overall a majority of the Brandy Girls appear happy and smiling, the results show a difference in single and group representations: only less than third of the Brandy Girls portrayed alone are smiling, while over a half of the Brandy Girls appearing together or in a bigger group depict a smiley expression. Perhaps surprisingly, the single Brandy Girls express more frequently a serious face than a happy one. This indicates that the Brandy Girls portrayed with one or more friends emanate happiness and again highlight the image of the Brandy Girl as friendly and easily approachable, while the Brandy Girls portrayed alone give the impression of a cool girl who does not have to smile all the time to be admired and aspired.

Thus, on one hand, the viewer is placed to view Brandy Girls as potential friends, due to distance and angle, but on the other hand, the Brandy Girls are represented as distant and aspirational, due to gaze and facial expression. This visual representation supports the brand's marketing strategy of building a community in which everyone is ostensibly invited even though not everyone can be part of due to the sizing policy.

The Instagram users viewing the images are invited to identify both with the Brandy Girls and with the implicit viewer. Messaris (1997: 44) points out how some advertisements employ the male perspective even though the ad is targeted to women and the heterosexual male gaze seems to be present also in Brandy Melville's imagery even though they are mainly addressed to teenage girls. The male gaze is strongly present when the Brandy Girl is depicted playing around in exposing

outfit while indicating her awareness of the camera (see Figure 26) and confirms Berger's (1972: 47) notion of how "women watch themselves being looked at".

As the results related to skin exposure indicate, almost half of the representations' outfits are unrevealing and do not highlight their sexuality, but rather their girlishness, while the imagery also includes revealing seductive portrayals. Thus, the Brandy girl is depicted to be both: often an innocent girl with puppies and cotton candy having fun with friends, but simultaneously a desirable woman. This is not to say that male gaze is only related to the degree of skin exposure, but the what the representation is wearing definitely plays a role. To conclude, even though the perspective has been chosen for us, we still gaze the image from our own background and prior knowledge, which might affect our interpretation of the images and whether they are perceived as modern empowering images or traditional images reproducing the male gaze.

Finally, I would like to pay attention to van Leeuwen's (2008: 139) illustration of the higher position which in real life might be actualized by the person standing on a stage, pulpit or balcony, and how the visual depiction symbolically follows this positioning. In my opinion, this view ought to be challenged. For example, nowadays it is common for professors to give lectures in an auditorium, where the students are actually looking down on the authority. In addition, in the current era of social media images taken from the high angle, especially in selfies, are thought to provide the most appealing result. In these cases, the "sender" of the photo deliberately chooses to place herself in a position in which the viewer symbolically has the power over her, which yields new questions to the discussion of the symbolic depiction of power. Thus, as was seen in the analysis, it is not the vertical angle alone which determines the symbolic power positions, but for example gaze and facial expression also affect the impression.

7.3 Insights about Instagram

In this study, a few issues seemed to be connected especially to Instagram as the medium for Brandy Melville's images. First, snapshot aesthetics mentioned earlier in section 3.5. seems to be a prevalent style in Brandy Melville's marketing and especially suitable for the purposes of marketing on Instagram. The style appears evident especially in the images in which the marketed product is not clearly displayed (see Figure 16). In addition, among the data there appear images which are, for example, oddly framed, such as Figure 11. While it may seem illogical to use marketing images which do not highlight the product but leaves it in a minor role, there are in fact multiple reasons for employing snapshot-like images.

First, the photographic images appear more informal and authentic, as if they were "taken almost by chance" and even "beyond the artificially constructed world of typical advertising photography" (Schroeder 2008: 10). Consequently, the aim of this visual strategy is to make the whole brand appear as authentic. Furthermore, the aim is to establish a solid connection with the consumers, who might more easily associate themselves with the "natural" models as the "realistic" photo implies how the product and the brand might suit the viewers' casual lifestyle (ibid.). This is an important notion, as authenticity is held as an essential component of consumer interaction with brands. For Brandy Melville, the feeling of authenticity is further developed by tagging the usernames of the models into the marketing images, which enables the Instagram users to connect the represented females to real, authentic human beings, who also occasionally promote Brandy Melville in their personal Instagram accounts.

Second, Schroeder (2008: 12) argues that snapshot aesthetics helps the brand draw an "up-to-date, hip, and cool" image of the product, as the photographic style creates a mental image of capturing a moment right "here and now" due to the impression of the photograph's careless composition, rushed capture and thus natural, un-posed appearance of the model. Even though the Brandy Girls occasionally traditionally pose for the camera, the un-posed appearance seems to be even more frequent in the data. Finally, this type of marketing photography clearly blurs the line between professional strategic marketing and amateur, everyday photography (ibid.). Arguably, this may make the Instagram marketing even more effective, when the promotional images appear right next to those of friends and family. Thus, portraying the Brandy Girls as friend-like, approachable and as if having a personal relationship with the viewer suits the Instagram environment and simultaneously diminishes the sense of persuasiveness of the marketing images.

Next, as discussed in relation to the backgrounds of the images, indexicality plays an important role in Brandy Melville's imagery. Providing photographic proof of the location or any other feature adds the feeling of authenticity. The tagging function on Instagram allows the users to highlight or support the indexical aspect of the images. By tagging a person or the location, the viewer is provided with a link to the depicted Instagram user's profile or to a map which aids to locating the depicted place. Brandy Melville barely uses the geotag for location, but almost without exception tags the depicted models and often also the photographers of the images by their usernames. For example, one image among the data portrays Vanessa Hudgens, a popular American singer and actress, and tagging her username to the image provides viewers additional proof that it is in fact the celebrity herself who is modelling for Brandy Melville. This is a function which clearly differentiates social media from traditional media as a platform for advertising and, for instance,

enables the efficient two-way marketing where Brandy Melville tags and promotes the models, while the models tag Brandy Melville to images on their personal accounts and promote the brand. Additionally, when tagging the very frequently occurring models, the brand may assume that the viewer is already familiar with her features which need not to be highlighted in every image. For instance, the Instagram user might be aware of Scarlett Leithold's signature feature long blond hair, even though it is not visible in all images such as in Figure 16.

However, in addition to today's technology which allows all kinds of visual manipulation and in this way lowers the documentary value of photographic images, the tagging function might also be misused, either accidentally or on purpose. As an illustration of the identifying power of tagging, in Figure 24 the model represented from the back could be any petite blond girl, but by the tag she is identified as Chandler Leighton. Without claiming that Brandy Melville is misusing the function of tagging, I want to point out the complexity of its usage and how it may affect the interpretation. Hence, also further research on the feature and its functions especially in the field of marketing is considered relevant.

Finally, Instagram provides new perspectives on the contextuality of the images. Like all representations and discourses, images are always culturally produced, i.e. situated in time and space (Wodak 2001:3). As a mobile application Instagram widens the socio-cultural context in which the image is interpreted. Social media makes the context of interpretation more varied and globalized than ever, as potentially anyone regardless of their location, age or other elements defining their background has access to Brandy Melville's Instagram imagery. This apparently also causes new challenges to brand marketers responsible for the production process indicating another topic requiring more research in the current digital age.

7.4 Evaluation of the Study

As has been discussed throughout the thesis, interpretation of visual images is always guided by the spectator's age, gender, cultural and ethnic background, prior knowledge and experience of the world and thus, it is very unlikely that different people would perceive the material in exactly the same way. This obviously also concerns the researcher, which is why the fact was kept in mind throughout the analysis in order to reach a required level of objectivity. In fact, full objectivity can never be reached as especially in qualitative research the interpretation is always somewhat subjective. However, in order to ensure transparency and to allow just evaluation of the research process, each phase of the study was explained, and choices were argued throughout the thesis. Typical for a study leaning on critical discourse analysis, the starting point was already somewhat

political as the aim was to examine the influential position of Brandy Melville as an authority over the audience. However, despite the explicit sociopolitical positioning, which meant approaching the problem of unequal power relations expressed in Brandy Melville's marketing imagery from a critical and feminist point of view, the data was examined transparently and systematically in order to avoid pre-determined interpretations. To point out a limitation of the critical discourse analytical study, due to the limited scope of the study, the processes of production and consumption of Brandy Melville's imagery were only covered to some extent.

Evaluating the suitability of content analysis as a research method for the current study implied both strengths and limitations. Overall, content analysis enabled the systematic examination of large amounts of data and was fruitful in making sense of the wide material providing reliable results on the frequencies of the visual elements under scrutiny. However, defining some of the subjective variables and their mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories proved slightly challenging, as was mentioned when discussing the results related to the exposure of skin, as the scale for the features requiring subjective judgement in reality is often highly gradual. Also, content analysis as a method did not allow the reliable scrutiny of the roles in which the Brandy Girls were depicted, which would have been another possible topic of interest in answering how the Brandy Girls were represented in the imagery. Thus, in order to gain more perspective on the data and the findings, I would suggest examining the material with additional qualitative methods. Furthermore, due to the constraints of the UAM ImageTool, it was not possible to carry out the research according to the original design which aimed at examining the correlations and frequencies of elements occurring together and, thus, providing even deeper insights on Brandy Melville's visual representations. Hence, I would suggest there is a niche for a new kind of visual annotation program, which ought to serve the growing field of visual culture and meet the needs of up-to-date visual analysis. In the following chapter, I will provide a brief conclusion of the study.

8 Conclusion

In the thesis I examined how the popular teen retail brand Brandy Melville contributes to today's media representation of women. With the brand's marketing taking place primarily on social media and especially on Instagram, the study examined the visual representations of women occurring in the brand's Instagram imagery. In addition to the innovative use of social media, the brand's controversial *one size fits most* policy provided an interesting starting point for the study. The data consisted of 200 images published on Brandy Melville's USA-based Instagram profile @brandymelvilleusa and examined the brand's 303 female representations referred to as Brandy

Girls. The study employed content analysis as the main research method providing both quantitative and qualitative information of the data. The annotation process included 15 variables and was conducted by UAM ImageTool 2.2, a program designed specifically for annotation of visual material.

The theoretical framework was built upon Theo van Leeuwen's theory of visual representation of social actors which enabled the examination of the visually depicted people. The study was located in the field of Critical Discourse Analysis which provided a framework for analyzing the images and their meanings in a broader socio-cultural context as well as discussing the possible implications of such imagery. The basis for the study was the powerful position of Brandy Melville as an influential brand over its mainly teenaged audience. As a critical discourse analysis, the study aimed to examine these unequal power relations and social inequalities expressed by the representational choices in the visual discourse of Brandy Melville. In addition, the study was connected to the fields of feminist media studies and (feminist) visual culture while making use of semiotic concepts.

The results indicated that the female representation produced by Brandy Melville is fairly one-sided and stereotypical. Majority of the representations were portrayed as thin, white-skinned young women with long blond or light brown hair. Among the main findings were the complete exclusion of non-skinny representations and almost complete exclusion of non-white representations, which implies that Brandy Melville reproduces traditional images of female body by promoting the thin and white ideal in its Instagram imagery. Examining the relation between the represented Brandy Girls and the viewer, it was shown that the Brandy Girls appear as potential friends, identifiable and in equal position with the viewer, but on the other hand also unengaged and unreachable. This two-dimensional visual representation aligns with the brand's strategy of building a community in which everyone is ostensibly invited even though large amount of people are excluded from due to the brand's sizing policy.

In general, the viewer was positioned to examine the Brandy Girls rather than to interact with them. Furthermore, the results indicated two kinds of opposite female representations. First, the Brandy Girls portrayed alone were represented as serious and unwilling to engage with the viewer, while the girls in group images were depicted mostly happy, friendly and approachable. Second, the imagery depicted Brandy Girls, on one hand, as joyful young girls with extremely covered clothing, and on the other hand, as sexually desired women with revealing outfits. Additionally, the brand seemed to utilize the positive connotations of California in the backgrounds of the images portrayed either explicitly or more implicitly and those of male representations who were mainly portrayed as

friends or boyfriends of the Brandy Girls. Majority of the images were captioned with #brandyusa arguably in order to enhance the image's visibility on Instagram as well as create a sense of community between the consumers. Moreover, Brandy Melville creates an authentic-looking image of the Brandy Girls by utilizing snapshot-styled photography which seems to diminish the sense of the persuasive purposes of the images as they blend in to the Instagram environment.

Considering the broader implications, the study raised questions of Brandy Melville's responsibility for targeting its marketing to teenage girls and simultaneously supporting the thin ideal as well as overrepresenting the white females. Even though Instagram as the platform for visual marketing is new and modern, the brand continues to reproduce the traditional stereotyped female representations. As an influential brand and authority Brandy Melville has the power to define what kinds of representations are covered in the media and to shape the viewers' understanding of what is considered a desired and acceptable way of being a woman. However, Brandy Melville is arguably far from the only clothing brand reproducing and maintaining the visual representation of the ideal unrealistic female body. Thus, the findings do not only suggest the problematic nature of Brandy Melville's visual communication, but they are also connected to a larger phenomenon in the prevalent popular culture producing gendered ideals of beauty. Hence, it is important to examine the smaller pieces which constitute the larger discourses and cultures. To conclude, the study encourages influential brands to consider the social impact of their representational choices as well as calls for more research on the subject, especially in relation to visual marketing on Instagram. Furthermore, as meanings and representations repeated in the media are often taken as given and easily mistaken as "natural" (Wodak 2001:3, Seppä 2012: 13), we ought to enhance our understanding of the visual. Especially in the era of widespread social media the importance of visual literacy has become increasingly essential.

9 References

Primary sources

Instagram. “Brandy Melville”.

https://www.instagram.com/brandymelvilleusa/ (Accessed February 28, 2016)

Secondary sources

Allagui, Ilhem, and Harris Breslow. 2016. “Social Media for Public Relations: Lessons from Four Effective Cases.” *Public Relations Review* 42, no. 1: 20-30. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.12.001 (Accessed November 2, 2018)

Aslam, Salman. “Instagram by the Numbers: Stats, Demographics & Fun Facts.” Omnicore. https://www.omnicoreagency.com/instagram-statistics/ (Accessed February 12, 2018)

Balter-Reitz, Susan. and Susan Keller. 2005. “Censoring Thinspiration: The Debate over Pro-anorexic Web Sites.” *Free Speech Yearbook*, 42, no. 1: 79–90. https://doi.org/10.1080/08997225.2005.10556320 (Accessed February 14, 2019)

Barthes, Roland. 1961. “The Photographic Message.” In *Image – Music –Text* by Roland Barthes, 15-31. London: Fontana.

Barthes, Roland. 1964. “Rhetoric of the Image.” In *Image – Music –Text* by Roland Barthes, 32-51. London: Fontana.

Barthes, Roland. 1977. *Image – Music –Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana.

Bell, Philip. 2001. ”Content analysis of visual images”. In *The Handbook of Visual Analysis,* edited by Theo van Leeuwen, and Carey Jewitt, 10-34. London: Sage.

Berger, John. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Bhasin, Kim. “Teens love Brandy Melville, a fashion brand that sells only one tiny size.” Huffington Post. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/14/brandy-melville_n_5978626.html (Accessed October 27, 2017)

Blommaert, Jan. 2005 *Discourse: A Critical Introduction.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bradley Laura. “The very popular store that only sells clothes for skinny girls.” Slate. https://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2014/10/16/brandy_melville_only_sells_clothes_for_skinny_girls.html (Accessed October 21, 2017)

Brandy Melville. “Locations.” Brandy Melville USA. https://www.brandymelvilleusa.com/locations (Accessed October 27, 2017)

Carson, Fiona, and Pajaczkowska, Claire, eds. 2001. *Feminist Visual Culture.* New York: Routledge.

Christel, Deborah A., and Susan C. Dunn. 2017. "Average American women's clothing size: comparing National Health and Nutritional Examination Surveys (1988–2010) to ASTM International Misses & Women's Plus Size clothing". *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education,* 10, no. 2: 129-136. https://doi.org/10.1080/17543266.2016.1214291 (Accessed November 21, 2018)

Constine, Josh. "Instagram launches mobile web sharing to pursue global growth." TechCrunch. https://techcrunch.com/2017/05/08/instagram-mobile-web/ (Accessed February 12, 2017)

D'Alessandro, Steven, and Bill Chitty. 2011. "Real or Relevant Beauty? Body Shape and Endorser Effects on Brand Attitude and Body Image." *Psychology & Marketing*, 28, no. 8: 843–878.

Delo, Cotton. "Why it's hard to be a brand on Instagram." Advertising Age. https://adage.com/article/digital/hard-a-brand-instagram/292607/ (Accessed February 12, 2017)

Drenten, Jenna, and Lauren Gurrieri. 2018. "Crossing The #Bikinibridge. Exploring the Role of Social Media in Propagating Body Image Trends." In *The Dark Side of Social Media: A Consumer Psychology Perspective*, edited by Angeline Close Scheinbaum. 49-70. London: Routledge.

Ellison, Jo. "Brandy Melville and the Rise of the Instabrand." Financial Times. https://www.ft.com/content/9979e39e-08a1-11e7-97d1-5e720a26771b (Accessed January 11, 2018)

Fairclough, Norman. 1992. *Discourse and Social Change.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Fairclough, Norman. 1995. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language.* Harlow: Longman Group Limited.

Fashion Law. "Brandy Melville: The Controversial Brand that Sells Exactly What Millennials Want." The Fashion Law. https://www.thefashionlaw.com/home/brandy-melville-the-controversial-brand-selling-exactly-what-millennials-want (Accessed October 27, 2017)

Fiske, John. 1990. *Introduction to Communication Studies*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Foucault, Michel, Paul Rabinow, and Robert Hurley. 1997. *Essential works of Foucault, 1954-1984. Vol 1, Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth.* New York: New Press.

Gill, Rosalind. 2008. "Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising." *Feminism & Psychology* 18, no. 1: 35-60. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353507084950 (Accessed February 14, 2019)

Grabe, Shelly, L. Monique Ward, and Janet Shibley Hyde. 2008. "The Role of the Media in Body Image Concerns Among Women: A Meta-analysis of Experimental and Correlational Studies." *Psychological Bulletin* 134, no. 3: 460–476. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.134.3.460 (Accessed February 13, 2019)

Groesz, Liza M., Michael P. Levine, and Sarah K. Murnen. 2002. "The Effect of Experimental Presentation of Thin Media Images on Body Satisfaction: A Meta-analytic Review." *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 31, no. 1: 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.10005 (Accessed February 15, 2019)

Hakala, Ulla. 2003. *Quantitative and Qualitative Methods of Analysing Advertising: Content Analysis and Semiotics.* Turku: Turun Kauppakorkeakoulu.

Hall, Stuart, ed. 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices.* London: Sage.

Hall, Stuart. 1973. Encoding/Decoding. In *Culture, Media, Language*, edited by Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Love, and Paul Willis. 128–38. London: Routledge.

Harjunen, Kaisa. 2014. "Kuvallinen markkinointiviestintä sosiaalisessa mediassa. Semioottinen analyysi." MA Thesis, University of Tampere.

Hietala, Veijo. 1993. *Kuvien todellisuus. Johdatusta kuvallisen kulttuurin ymmärtämiseen ja tulkintaan*. Helsinki: Kirjastopalvelu Oy.

Hoopes, James, ed. 1991. *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic by Charles Sanders Peirce*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Instagram. "American Apparel". https://www.instagram.com/americanapparel/ (Accessed September 21, 2018)

Instagram 2015. "About us." http://instagram.com/about/us/ (Accessed November 11, 2017)

Instagram Blog. 2016. "Instagram Today: 500 Million Windows to the World" http://blog.instagram.com/post/146255204757/160621-news (Accessed November 12, 2017)

Instagram Blog. 2017a. "Strengthening Our Commitment to Safety and Kindness for 800 Million." http://instagram.tumblr.com/post/165759350412/170926-news (Accessed January 12, 2018)

Instagram Blog. 2017b. "Celebrating One Year of Instagram Stories." http://instagram.tumblr.com/post/163728483085/170802-storiesbirthday (Accessed January 12, 2018)

Instagram Blog. 2017c. "Now You Can Follow Hashtags on Instagram." http://instagram.tumblr.com/post/168469353642/171212-follow-hashtags (Accessed January 12, 2018)

Instagram for Business. 2015. A new way for brands to tell stories on Instagram." http:// blog.business.instagram.com/post/112707530471/carousel-ads (Accessed November 16, 2017)

Johnson, Fern L. 2008. *Imaging in Advertising.* New York: Routledge.

Jones, Amelia, ed. 2010. *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.

Kress, Gunther, and Theo van Leeuwen. 2006. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design.* 2nd ed. Abingdon: Routledge

Krippendorff, Klaus. 1980. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology.* London: Sage.

Littler, J. and Moor, L. 2008. "Fourth Worlds and Neo-Fordism: American Apparel and the Cultural Economy of Consumer Anxiety." *Cultural Studies* 22, no. 5: 700-723. (Accessed February 15, 2018. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09502380802245977

Lombard, Matthew. 1995. “Direct Responses to People on the Screen: Television and Personal Space.” *Communication Research* 22: 288-324.

Marsh, Lisa. “Brandy Melville: Instagram’s First Retail Success.” Bloomberg Businessweek. https://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2014-12-11/brandy-melville-instagram-s-first-retail-success (Accessed October 14, 2016)

McCauley, Elizabeth A. 1997. Photography. In *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*, edited by Sylvan Barnet. 61-71. New York: Longman.

Messaris, Paul. 1997. *Visual Persuasion. The Role of Images in Advertising*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Mills, Madison. “Brandy Melville: One Size Doesn’t Always Fit Most”. USA Today College. https://www.college.usatoday.com/2014/04/04/brandy-melville-one-size-doesnt-always-fit-most/ (Accessed 27 October 27, 2017)

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. 1998. *The Visual Culture Reader*. London: Routledge.

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. 1999. *An Introduction to Visual Culture.* London: Routledge.

Mitchell, W. J. T. 1994. *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Moxey, Keith. 1994. *The Practice of Theory: Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Mulvey, Laura. 1975. ”Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Amelia Jones. 57-65. New York: Routledge.

Neuendorf, Kimberly A., Thomas D. Gore, Amy Dalessandro, Patricie Janstova, Sharon Snyder-Suhy. 2009. “Shaken and Stirred: A Content Analysis of Women’s Portrayal in James Bond Films.” *Sex Roles* 62: 747-761.

Neumark-Sztianer, Dianne, Susan J. Paxton, Peter J. Hannan, Jess Haines, and Mary Story. 2006. “Does Body Satisfaction Matter? Five-Year Longitudinal Associations Between Body Satisfaction and Health Behaviors in Adolescent Females and Males.” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 39, no. 2: 244–251.

Paxton, Susan J., Dianne Neumark-Sztianer, and Peter J. Hannan. 2006. “Body Dissatisfaction Prospectively Predicts Depressive Mood and Low Self-Esteem in Adolescent Girls and Boys.” *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology* 35, no. 4: 539–549.

Newman, Jared. “Instagram’s web feed keeps it clean, keeps it simple.” Time. techland.time.com/2013/02/07/instagrams-web-feed-keeps-it-clean-keeps-it-simple/#ixzz2L7fai7np (Accessed November 16, 2016)

Niblock, Sarah. 2001. Advertising. In *Feminist Visual Culture,* edited by Fiona Carson and Claire Pajaczkowska. 295-307. New York: Routledge.

Pajaczkowska, Claire. 2001. “Issues in Feminist Visual Culture.” In *Feminist Visual Culture* edited by Fiona Carson and Claire Pajaczkowska, 1-21. New York: Routledge.

Perloff, Richard. 2014. “Social Media Effects on Young Women’s Body Image Concerns: Theoretical Perspectives and an Agenda for Research.” *Sex Roles* 71, no. 11: 363–377.

Piper Jaffray & Co. 2014. “Taking Stock with Teens – Fall 2014.” https://www.piperjaffray.com/3col.aspx?id=3268 (Accessed March 4, 2017)

Piper Jaffray & Co. 2015. “Taking Stock with Teens – Spring 2015.” http://www.piperjaffray.com/2col.aspx?id=3444 (Accessed March 4, 2017)

Poole Brian 2010. “Commitment and Criticality: Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis Evaluated.” *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 20, 2: 137-155.

Renaldo, Lani. “An Open Letter to Brandy Melville.” Huffington Post. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/lani-renaldo/brandy-melville-clothes_b_4994923.html (Accessed November 1, 2017)

Rose, Gillian. 2012. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. London: Sage.

Rossi Leena-Maija. 2003. *Heterotehdas. Televisiomainonta sukupuolituotantona.* Helsinki: Gaudeamus.

Rossi, Leena-Maija. 2015. *Muuttuva sukupuoli. Seksuaalisuuden, luokan ja värin politiikkaa.* Helsinki: Gaudeamus.

Rubin, Julia. “Smells Like Teen Spirit: Inside the Secretive World of Brandy Melville”. Racked. https://www.racked.com/2014/9/24/7575693/brandy-melville (Accessed October 27, 2017)

Sampath, Rini. “Brandy Melville Fuels Body Dysmorphia”. Daily Trojan. https://dailytrojan.com/2013/09/04/brandy-melville-fuels-body-dysmorphia/ (Accessed March 12, 2019)

Schlossberg, Mallory. “33 Companies that Are Revolutionizing Retail”. Business Insider. https://www.businessinsider.com/33-companies-that-are-revolutionizing-retail-2015-12?r=US&IR=T&IR=T/#zara-has-the-best-business-model-in-apparel-1 (Accessed October 27, 2017)

Schroeder, Jonathan E. 2002. *Visual Consumption*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Schroeder, Jonathan E. 2008. “Visual Analysis of Images in Brand Culture.” In *Go Figure: New Directions in Advertising Rhetoric* edited by Edward F. McQuarrie and Barbara J. Phillips, 277-296. Armonk: M. E. Sharpe.

Schroeder, Jonathan E. and Janet L. Borgerson. 1998. “Marketing Images of Gender: A Visual Analysis, Consumption” *Markets & Culture* 2, no. 2: 161-201. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10253866.1998.9670315 (Accessed February 10, 2019)

Seppä, Anita. 2012. *Kuvien tulkinta*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.

Seppänen, Janne. 2005. *Visuaalinen kulttuuri.* Tampere: Vastapaino.

Thompson, Marjorie A., and James Grey. 1995. Development and Validation of a New Body-Image Assessment Scale. Journal of Personality Assessment 64 (2), 258-269.

Twitter. Post by @girlphuk. https://twitter.com/alexia__mich/status/649821267470581760 (Accessed March 2, 2016)

Urback Robyn. “Brandy Melville”. BlogTO. https://www.blogto.com/fashion/brandy-melville-toronto/ (Accessed March 26, 2019)

van Dijk, Teun A. 2001. ”Multidisciplinary CDA: A Plea for Diversity”. In *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* edited by Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer. 95-119. London: SAGE Publications.

van Dijk, Teun A. 2008. *Discourse and power.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

van Leeuwen, Theo. 2008. *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Analysis.* Oxford Scholarship Online.

van Zoonen, Liesbet. 1994. *Feminist media studies*. London: Sage.

VanSlette, Sarah, and Damion Waymer. 2016. “Exclusive and aspirational: Teen retailer Brandy Melville uses the country club approach to brand promotion.” *Case Studies in Strategic Communication* 5: 117-139. http://cssc.uscannenberg.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/v5art7.pdf (Accessed November 1, 2018)

Wodak, Ruth. 2001. ”What CDA is about - a summary of its history, important concepts and its developments”. In *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* edited by Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer. 1-13. London: SAGE Publications.

Wykes, Maggie & Barrie Gunter. 2005. *The Media & Body Image. If Looks Could Kill*. London: Sage Publications.

Appendix 1.

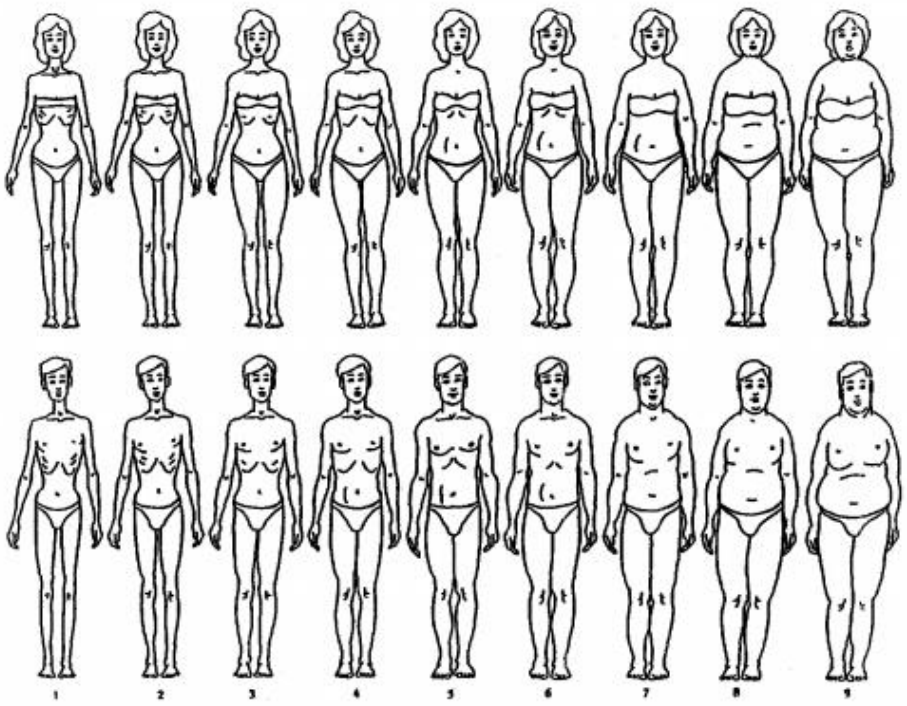


FIGURE 1 Contour Drawing Rating Scale.

Finnish summary

Pro gradu -tutkielmani tarkastelee amerikkalaisnuorten suosioon nousseen Brandy Melville-vaatemerkin Instagram-kuvastoa sekä erityisesti sen luomaa naiskuvaa. Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on selvittää, millaisen visuaalisen naisrepresentaation Brandy Melville luo kuvillaan ja näin ollen arvioida, millaista naiskäsitystä brändi on osaltaan luomassa laajemmassa kulttuurisessa kontekstissa. Kriittisen diskurssianalyysin avulla tutkimus liittyy osaksi mediassa esiintyvien naisrepresentaatioiden tutkimuksen jatkumoa liittäen aiheen erityisesti feministiseen mediatutkimukseen sekä visuaalisen kulttuurin tutkimukseen. Tutkimuksen laajempana lähtökohtana on kiinnittää huomiota meitä jatkuvasti ympäröivään visuaaliseen kulttuuriin ja painottaa visuaalisen lukutaidon tärkeyttä digitalisoituneessa nyky-yhteiskunnassa. Tutkimuskysymykseen pyritään vastaamaan seuraavien lisäkysymysten avulla: Millä tavoin naiset on esitetty heidän fyysisten ominaisuuksiensa perusteella? Millä tavoin naiset on esitetty suhteessa katsojaan? Millaisia merkityksiä kuvien taustat, kuvatekstit ja mahdolliset miesrepresentaatiot luovat suhteessa kuvattuihin naisiin?

Pääasiassa Yhdysvalloissa vaikuttava italialaislähtöinen vaatemerkki Brandy Melville erottuu kilpailijoistaan kahdella tavalla, jotka tekevät siitä erityisen kiinnostavan tutkimuskohteen. Ensinnäkin se luottaa markkinoinnissaan täysin sosiaaliseen mediaan (Marsh 2014), ja toisekseen brändi myy lähes pelkästään yhden koon vaatteita. Brandy Melvillen pääasiallisena markkinointikanavana toimii Instagram, jossa sen kuvasto koostuu pitkälti kauniista, nuorista, pitkähiuksisista Brandy-tytöistä. Brandy Melville onkin kohdannut mediassa kritiikkiä yksipuoliseen naiskuvaan liittyen mallien ollessa lähes poikkeuksetta hyvin laihoja sekä vaaleahiuksisia ja -ihoisia (esim. Bhasin 2014, Bradley 2014). Kritiikki on kohdistunut myös brändin yhden koon käytäntöön erityisesti, kun tuotteita markkinoidaan sloganilla *yksi koko sopii useimmille* vaatteiden ollessa pääasiassa hyvin pientä kokoa. Brandy Melvilleä on syytetty muun muassa syrjinnästä sekä negatiivisesta vaikutuksesta nuorten itsetuntoon. Pysyen uskollisena mediahiljaisuudelleen yhtiö ei kuitenkaan ole vastannut kritiikkiin tai tehnyt muutoksia käytäntöihinsä. Tutkiessaan Brandy Melvillen suuren ihmisjoukon ulkopuolelleen sulkevaa markkinointistrategiaa VanSlette ja Waymer (2016: 134) pohtivat, kuinka brändin tuottama torjutuksi tulemisen kokemus saattaa jopa vahvistaa henkilön halua kuulua Brandy-tyttöjen eksklusiiviseen ryhmään.

Tutkielmassa käsitellään visuaalista kulttuuria erityisesti meitä ympäröivässä digitaalisessa maailmassa. *Visuaalisella kulttuurilla* viitataan paitsi kuvalliseen kulttuuriin myös visuaalisuutta

tutkivaan tieteenalaan, johon tutkimukseni myös osaltaan lukeutuu. Tutkimuksen keskeisimpiin käsitteisiin kuuluu *representaatio*, jolla on tärkeä rooli merkitysten muodostamisessa ja välittämisessä yhteiskunnassa ja kulttuurissa. Schroederin (2002: 26) mukaan representaatio viittaa merkityksen tuottamiseen kielellisten systeemien kautta ja käsitteellä viitataan paitsi yksittäiseen esitykseen, kuten kuvaan, myös koko ajatuksen esittämisen ja tulkitsemisen prosessiin. Representaatioiden tuottaminen ja tulkinta ovat aina kulttuurisidonnaisia, mikä on erittäin keskeinen huomio myös tässä tutkimuksessa ja aineiston tulkinnassa. Representaatioiden tutkimusta pidetään varsin oleellisena, sillä ne luovat todellisuutta ja vaikuttavat käsityksiimme muista ja itsestämme.

Semioottisista käsitteistä tutkimuksen kannalta keskeisimpiä ovat *denotaatio* ja *konnotaatio*, joilla viitataan kuvantutkimuksessa kuvien suoranaiseen sisältöön sekä niiden tuottamiin mielikuviin, sekä erityisesti valokuviin liittyvä *indeksikaalisuus*, jolla viitataan valokuvien dokumentaarisuuteen eli siihen, kuinka ne ovat taltiointeja kameran edessä olleista asioista. Aineistossa kuvateksteihin rajoittuvaa vähäistä lingvististä osuutta tarkastellaan erityisesti Barthesin (2002: 26) *ankkuroinnin* (anchoring) käsitteen avulla, joka viittaa ilmiöön, jossa teksti ohjaa kuvan tulkintaa ”oikeaan” suuntaan ja ikään kuin ankkuroi kuvan merkityksen.

Yleisesti ottaen valokuvia saatetaan pitää todellisuuden toisintoina, vaikka tosiasiassa kuva, samoin kuin mikä tahansa teksti, on valintojen summa. Kuvantulkinnassa saattaa helposti unohtua, että kuva on ikään kuin nähty jo edeltä ja esimerkiksi perspektiivi on valittu valmiiksi katsojaa varten. Henkilöitä kuvattaessa *katse* on keskeisessä roolissa, ja käsitteellä viitataan kuvan edeltä määrättyyn näkökulmaan. Erityisesti mainoskuvastossa on pitkään ollut vallalla tapa esittää naiset passiivisina katseen kohteina ja nimenomaan miehen perspektiivistä, johon feministinen elokuvateoreetikko Laura Mulvey (1975) viittaa termillään mieskatse. Naisten esittäminen visuaalisen mainonnan kautta on ollut keskeisenä aiheena feministisessä mediatutkimuksessa ja aihetta on tarkasteltu kriittisesti erityisesti sen vaikutusten valossa. Aiemmat aiheeseen liittyvät tutkimukset ovat vahvistaneet mediassa esitettyjen epärealististen naiskehojen vaikutuksen naisten omaan negatiiviseen kehonkuvaan ja tyytymättömyyteen omaan vartaloon liittyen (Grabe et al. 2008). Lisäksi laihuutta ihannoivalla mediakuvastolla on tiettävästi vaikutusta naisten henkisiin ja fyysisiin terveysongelmiin, kuten masennukseen ja syömishäiriöihin (Neumark-Sztianer et al. 2006; Paxton et al. 2006).

Tutkimus sijoittuu kriittisen diskurssianalyysin piiriin, joka on kiinnostunut erityisesti kielen, ideologian ja vallan välisistä suhteista. Tarkemmin ottaen kriittinen diskurssianalyysi tutkii, miten valtasuhteita ilmennetään, luodaan ja ylläpidetään teksteissä ja diskursseissa sekä tarjoaa tapoja tutkia tätä ilmiötä kriittisesti ottaen aina huomioon laajemman sosiaalisen kontekstin. Alan

pioneereihin kuuluvat Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak sekä Teun A. van Dijk. Theo van Leeuwenia pidetään erityisesti visuaalisen kommunikaation tutkimuksen edelläkävijänä. Kriittiselle diskurssianalyysille tyypilliseen tapaan tutkimus lähtee liikkeelle vallitsevasta sosiaalisesta epäkohdasta, jolla tässä viitataan vaikutusvaltaisen brändin luomaan yksipuoliseen naiskuvaan ja sen aiheuttamiin erityisesti nuoriin kohdistuviin vaikutuksiin. van Dijk (2008: 9) kuvaa, kuinka yhteiskunnassa vain harvoilla on vapaus ja mahdollisuus ilmaista itseään julkisesti ja näin ollen hallita vallitsevaa diskurssia ja sitä kautta vaikuttaa myös ihmisten ajatuksiin ja toimintaan. Menestyksekkäänä vaatebrändinä ja auktoriteettina Brandy Melvillellä on valta päättää, millaisia naisrepresentaatioita ja naisen malleja se tarjoaa kuluttajilleen, mikä luo kiinnostavan lähtökohdan valtasuhteita tarkastelevalle kriittiselle diskurssianalyysille.

Tutkimuksen teoreettisena viitekehyksenä on Theo van Leeuwenin (2008) diskurssianalyyttinen visuaalisten sosiaalisten toimijoiden representoinnin malli (kts. taulukko 1), jota täydennetään Paul Messariksen (1997) visuaaliseen mainontaan liittyvillä samansuuntaisilla näkemyksillä. Sosiaalisilla toimijoilla van Leeuwen viittaa mihin tahansa sosiaaliseen toimintaan liittyviin osallistujiin tietyssä diskurssissa (van Leeuwen 2008: 23). Mallissa kuvattuja toimijoita lähestytään kahdella kysymyksellä: kuinka ihmiset on kuvattu ja kuinka kuvatut ihmiset on liitetty katsojaan? Tutkimuksen kannalta keskeisin ensimmäiseen kysymykseen liittyvä ilmiö on symbolinen *ekskluusio*, jolla viitataan tietynlaisten representaatioiden puuttumiseen ympäristössä, johon ne todellisuudessa kuuluisivat. Brandy Melvillen tapauksessa sosiaalinen ekskluusio näyttää kohdistuvan erityisesti erikokoisiin ja -värisiin naisvartaloihin, mikä tarkoittaa, että esittämällä pääasiassa hoikkia, valkoihoisia naisia Brandy Melville tunnustaa vain heidän olemassaolonsa jättäen muut ulkopuolelle.

Tarkastellessaan katsojan ja kuvattujen henkilöiden välistä suhdetta van Leeuwen erittelee kolme symbolista ulottuvuutta: katsojan ja esitetyn henkilön väliset *sosiaalinen välimatka*, *sosiaalinen yhteys* ja *sosiaalinen vuorovaikutus*. On huomionarvoista, että nämä kaikki kolme ulottuvuutta ja niihin liittyvät valinnat ovat aina läsnä ihmistä kuvattaessa. Sosiaalisella välimatkalla viitataan kuvattuun etäisyyteen ja sen ajatellaan toimivan kuvissa samalla tavoin kuin todellisuudessa. Näin ollen lähikuvissa esiintyvät ihmiset luovat mielikuvan läheisestä ihmissuhteesta, tuttuudesta ja helposti lähestyttävyydestä, kun taas kauempaa kuvatut ihmiset tuntuvat helpommin vierailta ja etäisiltä. Mainonnassa lähikuvia käytetään erityisesti kiinnittämään kuluttajien huomiota (Messaris 1997: 27-29). Toinen ulottuvuus, sosiaalinen yhteys, viittaa kuvan vertikaaliseen ja horisontaaliseen kuvakulmaan, josta katsoja on asetettu tarkastelemaan kuvattua henkilöä. Kulmat ilmentävät sekä katsojan ja kuvatun henkilön välisiä valtasuhteita sekä osallisuutta. Henkilö voidaan kuvata joko

tasa-arvoisessa asemassa suoraan katseen tasolta, ylhäältäpäin, jolloin katsoja ikään kuin tarkastelee henkilöä korkeasta valta-asemasta nähden tai alhaaltapäin, jolloin kuvatulla henkilöllä on symbolisesti korkeampi valta-asema. Horisontaalisella kulmalla viitataan kuvatun henkilön asettumissuuntaan eli onko hänet kuvattu edestäpäin, takaapäin tai jotakin siltä väliltä. Yleisesti ottaen henkilön asettuminen kohti kameraa symboloi osallisuutta ja kohtaamista, kun taas takaapäin kuvattu henkilö saattaa symboloida joko katsojan hylkäämistä tai toisaalta mahdollistaa katsojan nähdä saman, mitä kuvattu henkilö näkee. Kaikkien ulottuvuuksien merkitykset ovat riippuvaisia kontekstista.

Kolmas ulottuvuus eli sosiaalinen vuorovaikutus realisoituu kuvissa kuvatun henkilön katseen kautta. Kuvien henkilöt voivat joko katsoa kameraan, jolloin he ikään kuin luovat kontaktin meihin ja osoittavat tiedostavansa meidän katseemme, tai olla katsomatta kameraan, jolloin kuvatut henkilöt asetetaan tarkastelumme kohteeksi ilman, että he ovat tietoisia katseestamme. Näin ollen myös kuvatun katseen suunta vaikuttaa katsojan ja kuvatun henkilön väliseen valtasuhteeseen. Suora katsekontakti mainoskuvissa on Messariksen (1997: 21) mukaan hyvin tyypillinen tapa pyrkiä kiinnittämään kuluttajan huomio.

Tutkimuksen aineisto koostuu 200 kuvasta, jotka kerättiin brändin yhdysvaltalaisesta @brandymelvilleusa -Instagram-profiilista. Aineistossa esiintyy yhteensä 303 naista, joihin viitataan tutkimuksessa Brandy-tyttöinä. Jotta aineisto ei rajoittuisi ajallisesti tiettyyn hetkeen, kuvat kerättiin kahdenkymmenen peräkkäisen kuvan ryhminä kolmen viikoin välein jättämällä pois mahdolliset videot, kollaasit ja kuvat, joissa ei esiintynyt ihmisiä. Tutkimusmenetelmäksi valikoitui laajan media-aineiston käsittelyyn soveltuva sisällönanalyysi, jossa yhdistyvät sekä laadullinen että määrällinen tutkimus ja jonka pääperiaate on ennalta valittujen muuttujien systemaattinen tarkastelu. Sisällönanalyysi koostui 15 eri muuttujasta ja niiden arvoista, joiden on aina tarkoitus olla mahdollisimman kattavia ja samalla toisensa poissulkevia tuottaakseen mahdollisimman luotettavaa tutkimustietoa. Osa muuttujista liittyi esitettyjen naisten ulkoisiin piirteisiin, kuten ihon- ja hiustenväriin, osa taas kuvan asetelmaan ja katsojan asemointiin, kuten kuvakulmaan ja etäisyyteen. Lisäksi muuttujiin lukeutuivat kuvan tausta, kuvateksti ja mahdolliset miesrepresentaatiot. Materiaalin annotointi tapahtui erityisesti visuaalisen materiaalin kategorisointiin tarkoitetun UAM ImageTool 2.2:n avulla.

Analyysi osoittaa, että Brandy Melvillen Instagramissa luoma naiskuva on pääasiassa hyvin yksipuolinen ja stereotyyppinen. Esitetyt naiset eli Brandy-tytöt ovat useimmiten hoikkia, valkoisia, pitkähiuksisia ja vaaleanruskea- tai vaaleahiuksisia. Analyysin perusteella aineistosta voitiin havaita kaksi selkeää symbolisen sosiaalisen ekskluusion tapausta liittyen sekä kuvattujen Brandy-tyttöjen

vartaloiden kokoon että ihonväriin ja etnisyyteen. Vartaloiden koon tarkastelu osoittaa, että kaikki naiset ovat kooltaan keskiarvoa hoikempia ja osa jopa anorektisia, mikä viittaa siihen, että kuvastossaan Brandy Melville sulkee symbolisesti ulos kaikki muunkokoiset ja -tyyppiset vartalot eikä tunnusta näiden olemassaoloa. Lisäksi ainoastaan 5% kuvatuista naisista on ei-valkoisia, mikä asettaa kyseisen vähemmistön marginaaliseen rooliin brändin kuvastossa. Valkoihoisuus on siis selkeästi vallitseva representaatio Brandy Melvillen luomassa visuaalisessa maailmassa. Näillä valinnoilla brändi viestii teini-ikäisille seuraajilleen, millaiset naiset ovat sen mukaan hyväksyttyjä ja ihailtavia.

Katsojan aseman tarkastelu osoittaa, että suurin osa kuvatuista Brandy-tytöistä on esitetty katsojalle ikään kuin helposti lähestyttävän ystävän roolissa, läheisenä, yhdenvertaisena ja usein myös iloisena. Useimmiten naiset kuitenkin katsovat poispäin katsojasta, mikä viittaa siihen, että katsoja asetetaan enemmänkin tarkastelemaan naisrepresentaatioita kuin olemaan vuorovaikutuksessa heidän kanssaan. Koska suoraa katsekontaktia pidetään mainonnassa vaikuttavana keinona herättää huomiota, onkin mielenkiintoista, että Brandy Melville valitsee olla hyödyntämättä tätä keinoa suurimmassa osassa tapauksia. Lisäksi tulokset osoittavat, että vaikka suurin osa naisista on kuvattu iloisena, yksittäin esitetyillä naisilla on selkeästi useammin vakavat ilmeet, mikä tekee heistä vaikeammin lähestyttäviä. Brandy-tytöt esitetään siis toisaalta ystävällisinä, mutta samalla myös saavuttamattomina, mikä jälleen viittaa brändin ekslusiivisuuteen ja sen luomaan yhteisöön, johon kaikki ovat näennäisesti tervetulleita, mutta johon moni eivät kuitenkaan voi kuulua.

Lisäksi analyysi osoittaa, että Brandy-tytöt esitetään toisaalta hyvin tyttömäisinä ja toisaalta taas naisellisina. Tämä tulee esille erityisesti tarkastellessa vaatteiden paljastavuutta kuvissa, minkä perusteella voidaan myös puhua perinteisesti vallalla olevan mieskatseen läsnäolosta. Katsojaa eli brändin Instagram-seuraajaa kutsutaan samaistumaan sekä Brandy-tyttöihin että ennalta asemoidun katsojan rooliin. Kuvien taustaan ja satunnaisiin miesrepresentaatioihin liittyen Brandy Melville hyödyntää kuvastossaan erityisesti Kaliforniaan sekä poikaystäviin liittyviä positiivisia mielikuvia.

Brandy Melville hyödyntää Instagram-kuvastossaan niin kutsuttua *snapshot-estetiikkaa* (Schroeder 2008), joka viittaa tyyliin, jossa kuvat saattavat olla esimerkiksi epäkonventionaalisesti rajattuja tai tarkennettuja. Käyttämällä amatöörimäiseltä ja sattumanvaraisilta vaikuttavia otoksia markkinoinnissaan brändi luo kuvaa autenttisuudesta, cooliudesta ja reaaliaikaisuudesta, jotka ovat erityisesti Instagram-sisältöön sopivia ominaisuuksia ja joiden avulla mainoskuvat sulautuvat helposti tavallisten käyttäjien luomiin sisältöihin ja niiden tarkoitusperät saattavat jäädä huomaamatta. Instagramin ominaisuudet, kuten käyttäjien merkitseminen kuviin, tarjoavat

brändeille uudenlaisia mahdollisuuksia ja todennäköisesti myös haasteita, minkä vuoksi alustaa tulisi tutkia perusteellisemmin erityisesti visuaalisen markkinoinnin näkökulmasta.

Vaikka tutkimus kohdistui vain yhteen vaatemerkkiin, on selvää, ettei Brandy Melville ole ainoa brändi, joka luo ja ylläpitää markkinoinnillaan stereotyyppistä, epärealistista ja kapeaa naiskuvaa. Koska yksittäiset representaatiot luovat diskursseja, jotka taas vaikuttavat laajemmin yhteiskunnassa ja kulttuurissa vallalla oleviin käsityksiin, on kuitenkin perusteltua tutkia näitä pieniä, kokonaisuuteen vaikuttavia osia. Mediassa kerta toisensa jälkeen toistuvat, usein vahingollisetkin representaatiot muuttuvat helposti kyseenalaistamattomiksi normeiksi, minkä vuoksi tutkimuksessa halutaan korostaa visuaalisen lukutaidon tärkeyttä.