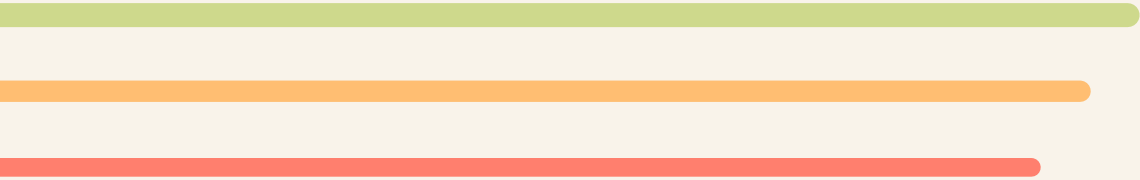# Fight the system: Love yourself!

## Stand up to a world that profits from your insecurities

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# ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to explore the negative impact of stereotypical and non-inclusive representation in advertising on teenager's sense of identity and worth. We live in a society of consumerism, constantly surrounded by publicity which now targets children just as aggressively as adults. The photoshopped people portrayed in advertising do not accurately represent the population and often promote an unattainable ideal meant to make people feel inadequate in order to coax them into buying more. It is no surprise that children and teenagers have a hard time finding their identity in a system that wants to profit from their insecurities, and where they are constantly being told that their worth lies in their capacity to consume.

Through workshops and online interactions, the project aims to give teenagers the tools they need to protect themselves against harmful beauty ideals and restrictive norms promoted by advertising. It also explores ways for them to retake control over their culture, with a focus on activism and rebellion against an antagonizing system. The whole project is an invitation to resist consumerism by not falling for toxic marketing strategies, and working on loving oneself as an act of resistance, to not let anyone capitalize on our insecurities. This thesis is divided in three parts, background, process and outcome, and relates every phase of the project over the course of one semester.

Keywords: Child culture design, co-design, culture jamming, advertising, norm critic, activism

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# BACKGROUND

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# LITERARY REVIEW

## Representation in Advertising: Impact on teenagers' sense of identity and worth

*"Advertising Design, in persuading people to buy things they don't need, with money they don't have, in order to impress people who don't care, is probably the phoniest field in existence today."*

Victor Papanek (1971)

## 1. Introduction

The Western world has from the early twentieth-century been ruled by Neoliberalism, a capitalistic ideology that creates and thrives on an epidemic of loneliness and emotional isolation (Monbiot, 2014), to be compensated with material goods offering a false sense of belonging to a community. Consumerism, as our promoted way of life, has created an unattainable ideal of "the good life", instructing us daily on how we should look, act, and what we should own in order to be happy. It is deeply anchored in our societal values and reflected everywhere around us: in advertising, television, social media, etc. The stereotypes we are fed do not represent most of the population but still dictates what our society sees as acceptable or not, often dividing people and triggering discrimination (based on race, gender, sexuality, body type, appearance, age, disability, etc.).

In this essay I will talk about the rise of consumerism and how it shaped our advertising system. We will see how it is a completely unsustainable way of life as well as a system designed to make its population unhappy for profit, which is especially harmful to children and teenagers. I will then talk more in depths about today's youth, known as Generation Z, and their relationship to consumerism and advertising. We will see how their general concerns, and therefore consumer habits differ from that of their predecessors, making today's advertising in need of an update, especially from an ethical perspective. Finally, I will talk about design activism and how we as designers have the power to shape society, which comes with a moral duty to generate alternatives and solutions promoting positive social change. The studies reviewed in this essay work towards the argument for my design project which aims to explore the following questions: How can design be used to mitigate the negative effects of consumerism on teenagers' sense of identity and worth? How could it be used to empower teenagers in their identity search instead?

## 2.1. Neoliberalism and the rise of Consumerism

In 2007, activists Annie Leonard, Louis Fox, and Jonah Sachs started a project called "The Story of Stuff", aimed at understanding and explaining how we ended up in this system of mass consumption. In their most well-known video named after the project, they explain that this system was designed by economist Victor Lebow after World War 2, in an effort to restart the economy. In 1955, he famously said "Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption… we need things consumed, burned up, replaced and discarded at an ever-accelerating rate". This has of course had a disastrous impact on the planet, with mass-production using up our natural resources at an alarming rate, with no satisfactory means to dispose of all the waste created by this constant buying and throwing away lifestyle.

Professor of Psychology Sandra L. Calvert (2008) claims on the other hand that the rise of consumerism started as early as the 1920s, helped by the emergence of television in the US, with advertisers devising a new strategy to exploit people's insecurities in order to coax them into buying more. This strategy is still present in our advertising today, often showing us an unrealistic body ideal to compare ourselves with, inducing feelings of inadequacy. In 2014, the American lingerie company *Victoria's Secret* released their campaign "The Perfect "Body"" (See exhibit 1), which showed ten very thin, young, almost exclusively white women in underwear. This kind of publicity perpetuates toxic stereotypes and unrealistic norms that don't represent the population accurately. Advertising and marketing have evolved and adapted over the years and are now even more manipulative than they used to be, hiding subliminal messages everywhere: in movies, games, social media, even using memes and other popular medium of internet culture to reach out to younger audiences.



Exhibit 1: Victoria's Secret's campaign "The perfect "body"", 2014.

## 2.2. Consumerism's effects on Child Culture

In this societal system, our worth is determined by our capacity to consume, and children are not exempt. They are now exposed to the same number of ads as adults, and they are conditioned from an early age into being consumers. This has strong negative consequences on their sense of identity and worth, even "usurping play" and depriving them of a "full childhood" by getting them one step closer to the adult world (Hill, 2011). Brands now pretend to sell an identity with their product, fighting for the attention of children and teenagers, telling them they will be happy and "cool" if they buy their products. In the midst of all these interjections and incentives to consume, children and teenagers have a hard time finding out who they are. They grow up constantly comparing themselves to the "perfect" gendered ideal they see in the media and in their toys (for instance dolls and action figures), which tells them they should look and act in a certain way in order to be happy and fit in.

Being exposed to unhealthy body ideals at a young age creates a lot of emotional distress as well as health issues, which can lead to more serious consequences like depression, eating disorders, self-hate, self-harm and suicide, the rates of which have increased drastically these past 50 years (Hill, 2011). Not only does this ideal impact children's own self-esteem, it shapes their esteem of others, inviting bullying of those that don't fit the norm (for instance by being overweight). I believe there is a need for a shift of representation in children's culture in order to promote self-love and acceptance rather than competitiveness and individualism. Inclusive representation has the power to normalize things and make children and teenagers feel normal and accepted for who they are.

## 3.1. A brand new Generation

Today's youth, Generation Z, are the first to be born in the digital era, which has both positive and negative sides. On the bright side, they have access to unlimited information around the world from a young age, making them by many accounts the most politically and socially engaged generation thus far, expressing a clear will to change things for the better (Merriman, 2015). On the negative side, this is also the age of fake news, with an overload of unchecked facts circulating, dividing people and making change slow. Another big issue which has emerged following the popularisation of social media is the frequent use of filters, showing a fake glamorous reality that also plays a big part in the creation and maintenance of insecurities in teenagers (McDavid, 2020, "The Social Dilemma", 37.45min). A new mental health condition named "Snapchat dysmorphia" has been observed to drive more and more teenagers to plastic surgery, wanting to emulate their snapchat filters (Ritschel, 2018).

The rise of social media has also created a new platform for advertising, an easy way for ads to become an integrated part of teenager's everyday lives. In his documentary "The Social Dilemma", Jeff Orlowski shows us that the reason social media platforms are free is because the users become themselves the product. Our every actions are observed, collected, analysed and sold to advertisers, which allows them to easily identify and act upon our insecurities, making us buy more. Instagram and other picture-based platforms usually display a certain "ideal" body type, often shown in alternation with ads for weight loss (see exhibit 2) or

for "fixing" any body complexes the user might have (see exhibit 3). Luckily, lots of body positivity activists, like Anjana dev (see exhibits 4 and 5) have started to spread a counter movement on social media, promoting diversity, normalizing diverse body features and opposing the idea of a beauty ideal existing in the first place. The popularisation of body positivity reflects once more the need of the younger generations for progressive change.



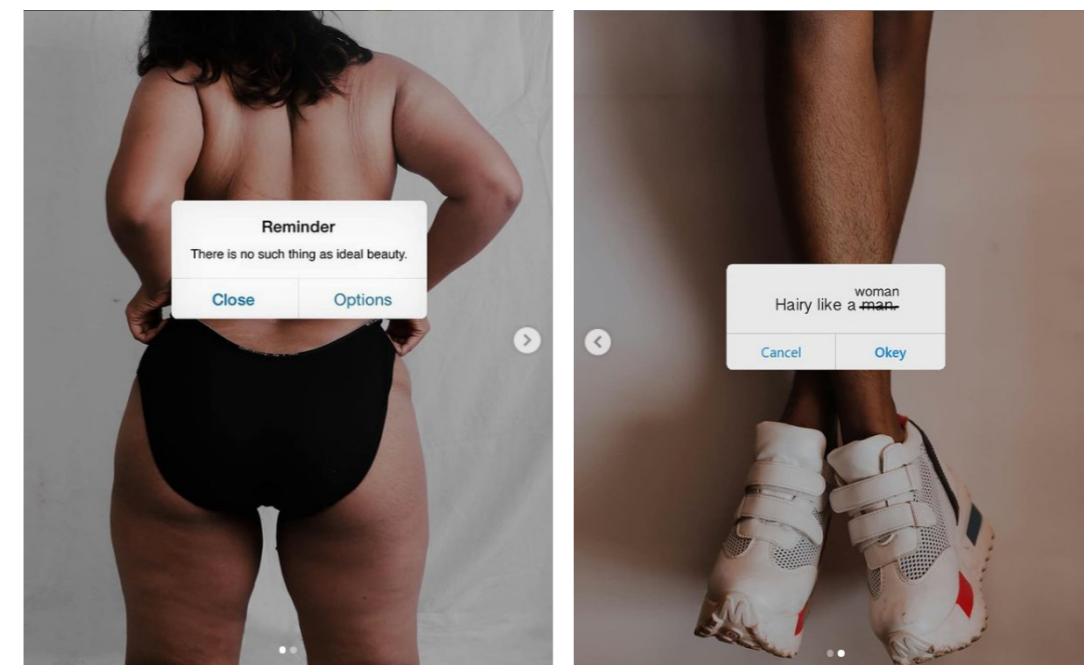Exhibit 2 and 3: Ads found on Facebook and Instagram (2021).



Exhibit 4 and 5: Photograph by activist Anjana dev, posted on her Instagram (2019).

## 3.2 Gen Z as consumers

With this generation caring more and more about the future and the planet, it seems only logical that they would become more mindful consumers than their predecessors (Merriman, 2015). Transparency seems to be an important trait for brands to have in order to attract customer loyalty from generation Z (Eleftheriou-Smith, 2012). Money is power and many now want to know what that power will be used for. This has of course led to a lot of greenwashing or what is now called "woke washing", with companies pretending to be more environment friendly or socially-aware than they really are in order to attract more customers. Luckily, information travels very fast, especially amongst teenagers, which means that if a brand is caught being dishonest, they may very well end up being "boycotted" or even "cancelled", in accordance with the growing popularity of cancel culture, which rarely offers a second chance.

On top of that, generation Z seems to care a lot about social equality, which has also led some brands to start using diverse and inclusive representation in their advertising, for instance the famous store *Target* in the USA, using the picture of a little boy in a wheelchair to promote clothing in 2020. Another example would be the brand *Dove*, with their project "#Beautybias", in which they speak of normally taboo elements of the female body like weight, hair, age, menopause etc. Swedish brand Monki also released their campaign "#nofilter beauties" (see exhibit 6), in 2017, where no photos where retouched in photoshop. In short, where Generation Z is concerned, customer loyalty is often given to brands that prove themselves to be human-centred, progressive and open-minded, as well as showing genuine care for the environment.



Exhibit 6: Monki's campaign "#nofilter beauties" (2017).

## 4.1 The power of Design

Design has the power to shift norms and define our societal values, which means that we as designers have a moral duty to adapt our practice to advance social matters (Scalin & Taute, 2012). Sustainability and socially conscious design are the future, and that includes advertising, which is in dire need of an update to match the needs of the planet and the new generations of consumers. We can use the power of design to shift the toxic norm and create a more human-centred advertising system.

In her article "Design as Activism: To resist or to generate?", Professor Ann Thorpe (2014) explains that design activism should be about offering better alternative to what already exists, instead of only focusing on the problem and "resisting" it. Raising awareness and inducing critical thinking towards the media and its toxic norms is a great start, but real change needs to be initiated from within our advertising system to stop exploiting people's insecurities. Advertising and marketing strategies need to keep up with their time and give the new generations what they want, and that is better ethics and promises from brands to use their power and money for the good of the planet and our society.

## 4.2 Designing for social change

What can design do to induce critical thinking and bring about change? Hacktivism is a practice where "hacking" meets "activism", and is about altering elements of mainstream culture in order to make a statement. A famous example of hacktivism had a group of people in 1993 call themselves the "Barbie Liberation Organization", in reaction to Mattel selling a talking Barbie doll saying things like "Math is hard". In order to denounce gender stereotypes, The BLO bought talking Barbie and GI-Joe dolls and hacked them to exchange their voice boxes, before putting them back in the stores, just before Christmas. When children received their dolls, Barbies were growling "Vengeance is mine", while G.I-joes where all chippy about planning their dream wedding. The BLO even left instructions in the boxes on how to continue hacking the toys, so that other people could be part of the movement.

Another sub-genre of Hacktivism would be Culture jamming, a practice consisting in twisting mainstream media on its head (see exhibit 7 and 8), using humour and shock to denounce and reveal the inner workings of consumerism. (Pickerel, Jorgensen & Bennett, 2002). Culture jamming, Guerrilla Art (see exhibit 9) and many other design activist practices are generally used to raise awareness around diverse societal and environmental issues. A successful example of culture Jamming that presented a better alternative is the "Pink loves Consent" project (see exhibit 10). In order to denounce rape culture, a feminist activist group called FORCE created a fake website pretending to be the lingerie retailer Victoria's Secret, where they changed the text on their underwear to put the accent on consent, for instance replacing "Sure thing!" on a pair of panties with "Ask first". The project worked on opening a dialogue because people had been showed a better alternative and questioned why this wasn't a reality. This serves to show that culture jamming can be used both to resist and to generate better alternatives to problematic cultures and norms. It can also be considered an empowering tool for protest and taking change into ones own hands.

Exhibit 7: The jam of a Coca-Cola ad, pointing out the hypocrisy of the brand (2012).



Exhibit 9: Guerilla art, or the physical hacking of public space, used here to denounce the pollution of our oceans (Vancouver, 2012).



Exhibit 8: A cover girl parody denouncing animal testing (2012).



Exhibit 10: The culture jam of Victoria's Secret by activist group FORCE (2012).

**Conclusion**

        Advertising needs to evolve, not only on a moral level but to be in harmony with its time and the new wave of conscious consumers that has arisen. It needs to adapt to a new generation that cares more than ever about making positive change in the world. We need more brands to take a stand in matters of diversity and inclusivity, which is what my project will try to encourage by pointing out the unethicality of marketing strategies which rely on exploiting our youth's insecurities.

        If enough teenagers are made aware of these techniques, and given the tools to mitigate their negative effect on their identity and self-esteem, they might eventually bring about real change in the advertising system. By learning to recognize these toxic patterns early, they might also grow up happier and more confident, work more efficiently towards a sustainable future, as well as pass those values on to the next generations.

# DESIGN QUESTIONS

- What **tools** could design offer teenagers to **protect themselves** against the **harmful norms** promoted by **advertising**?

- How could design be used to **promote diversity** and **empower teenagers** in their **identity search**?

# METHOD DESCRIPTION

*"Don't hate the Media. Be the Media."*
Otto Von Busch (2008)

## 1. Research: Mapping the field

I started this project by getting a better understanding of my topic from different angles, as well as situating the issue within child culture and design. I looked at different design practices and found my way towards Hacktivism, where I got inspired by many great projects (see literary review). Although, something that I felt was missing from these practices was a focus on children and teenagers' perspectives. What I observed was that culture jamming, for instance, was a much more "adult" and cynical type of protest art, without any obvious space or invitation for youth participation.

Another form of modern activism related to norms and beauty ideals was of course the body positivity movement, which is the spreading of positive messages about accepting and loving our bodies as they are. Body positive activists work on normalizing all body types and body features that we usually don't see in the media and advertising, and are strongly opposing bullying and discrimination of any kind. They are especially present on social media, where they act as a counter movement to the unrealistic beauty standards promoted on those platforms, enhanced by filters and unregulated heavily photoshopped ads.

## 2. Connection: Stakeholders

For the next phase, I defined who should be a part of the project. Teenagers, as my target group, were of course a priority. By then I had done a lot of research to understand generation Z better, especially in contrast with other generations, both on a personal level but also as consumers. My next step was to get in contact with some of them by creating an online survey called "The impact of media representation on teenagers' sense of identity" (link p.61), and spreading it on social media in groups frequented by youth. The aim of the survey was to get a better understanding of teenagers' levels of awareness when it comes to consumerism and the harmful strategies used by advertisers. I also wanted a general sense of what they would like to see in advertising instead and got some very interesting answers that I will share in the "process" part of this thesis (see Interaction p.21). After that, I got in contact with an Art & Media teacher at the Schillerska High school in Gothenburg and planned a couple workshops with her students.

Another stakeholder I wanted to get in contact with to complete my research was a design bureau focused on visual communication. I wanted to know what brands asked them to do in order to attract customers when designing ads, as well as their thoughts on inclusive representation and the promotion of diversity

through advertising. The interview results (see Interaction p.20) worked towards highlighting more generational differences, as the opinions shared by the designers on inclusivity stood in direct contrast to the answers I got from teenagers in my survey, and later during our co-design sessions. This will be analysed further in the next part of the thesis.

## 3. Interaction: Culture Jamming

What do teenagers see as problematic in today's advertising? What would they like to see represented instead? Those where the two main questions for my first co-design session with a High school class consisting of 21 students aged 17 to 19. In order to get answers, I designed a workshop centred around Culture Jamming, which is the art of editing/reinventing existing objects or elements of media in order to make a point. Most specifically, a culture jam is the graphic "hacking" of mainstream media, with a special focus on advertising, and is often used to denounce consumerism and the hypocrisy of certain brands. There are two main ways to jam an ad, and I asked the students to do both: first by highlighting what they saw as problematic with the ads I provided them (resisting), and second by recreating positive and empowering versions of them (generative activism). I also divided the students in groups of four, asked them to answer the aforementioned survey, then spend 15min in each group discussing their thoughts on the issue of consumerism and representation in advertising.

The workshop took place digitally, with regard to the ongoing Covid19 pandemic. This worked really well for this first co-design session, since it meant sensitive topics about insecurities induced by advertising could be discussed with the students from the comfort and safety of their homes. There was also no need for them to show their survey answers or creative process to anyone else in the class, and they all had access to their own computers, internet and preferred editing programs. Of course, this form of interaction implies privilege, and can be excluding to any child without access to these resources. Overall, I think the setting allowed for a more relaxed and less stressful workshop, although I would have liked the chance to connect with the students in real life as well.

## 4. Making: Generative activism & Representation hacks

Supported by the result from the survey, the interview and the workshop, I then went onto my materialization phase. My aim after that first session was to create a model for ethical advertising, to lift and convey the voices of today's youth by showing the world what they wanted, as the next wave of consumers. Through a campaign, I wanted to tell a story of a more accepting world where ethical, socially aware advertising was the norm. My hope was that this would point out the flaws of our current system, while also presenting a better alternative that focused on empowerment rather than inducing feelings of inadequacy. In order to achieve this, my ethical ad campaign needed to promote diversity, but in a different way than just through inclusive representation, which is already being done by an increasing number of brands.

I started looking for ways to "hack" the idea of representation, searching for ways to highlight the fact that we are all different and should be celebrated for it, but without actually having to represent anyone. "Ads without people" was a

notion that came up both in the survey and during the culture jamming workshop with the students, and it became a big part of my process. I went through several stages of exploration looking for the right format and tone for the campaign, with the underlying questions: How can I best point out the absurdity of our current advertising system? How can I also communicate a message of hope that supports teenagers in their identity search? How do I want my audience to interact with my campaign? What should the outcome be on a short- and long-term scale?

## 5. Adapting: Finding the essence

In this final phase of the project, I had to find my way back to the core, making hard decisions and letting go of some aspects of my ideas. It is a method I often find myself using in my design process, experimenting and trying out as many ideas as possible, then reining it back in to a more realistic and effective level. I ended up changing my project description to something simpler and decided to only focus on raising awareness through a campaign, while inviting teenagers to offer better alternatives to today's advertising through culture jamming, thus giving them more agency.

With my final project idea in hand, I organized one more workshop with the students, where I focused on getting direct feedback from them through another survey, pertaining to practical questions about the format and content of the project. I also had them try a different type of workshop, asking them to recreate ad parodies using images of Barbie dolls, but sadly it appeared less inspiring than the last co-design session. In this case, doing it digitally worked against us, as it would probably have been more interesting to recreate sceneries using real dolls and physical materials, as well as working in groups. Overall, the feedback I got from the students was very positive and gave me the last confirmation I needed to actually produce the campaign. I also started an online platform where I could interact with teenagers and invite them to take up culture jamming and be a part of the project. This is where I finally took the step from researching design activism to actually becoming a design activist myself.

# PROCESS

Interaction
Materializations
Conclusions

# INTERACTION

## 1. Interview result

In order to better understand the advertising industry and their marketing strategies, I held an interview with three designers from a Swedish design bureau focused on visual communication. Here is a summary/translation of the questions I asked them, followed by their answers, which I will come back to in this chapter's conclusion:

**What is unethical advertising to you?**
In Sweden we haven't seen that many problematic ads in recent years, but you can usually recognize for instance German publicity, where they still use a lot of stereotypes, especially when it comes to gender roles.
Then there is also advertising on the internet, where there are barely any regulations. These ads are not allowed on TV or in magazines so they have to use other less regulated channels.

**Have you ever been asked to work on a project that felt unethical?**
We have been asked to work on ads for an online casino, as well as designing an ad for telephone loans but refused. Mostly, we see ads being problematic for their content and not the representation they use.

**How do you go about choosing models for your work?**
The important thing is choosing someone that will best represent the brand. Generally we try to pick someone that doesn't stand out too much but expresses the right emotion and energy to match the product, without taking over the focus. Which is why making a big deal out of being inclusive usually takes the attention away from what is advertised. Although, when it comes to body types, we would rather turn down a model that is too thin than too fat. We even had a client that made us redo a whole campaign because he thought the models we chose where "too ugly".

**How do you relate to stereotypes versus diversity when it comes to representation in your work?**
Diversity is not our bigger concern, but we do try to avoid stereotypes as much as possible. We try to not do "Americanised" advertising (or German) where everyone is supposed to be so dramatically good-looking and unrealistic. We do have some thoughts about being inclusive in our work, but mostly it is about representing both men and women, diverse ethnicities, variations in age, etc. The difficult thing with diverse representation is that it can often feel forced and unauthentic. We worked on a booklet for a university and our client had a very specific list of who should be represented; two black people, one Asian, three women, two men… In the end it just felt like mechanically filling a quota instead of choosing models that had the right energy for the project. Still, diverse representation feels more natural today than it did in the past.

## 2. Survey results

The online survey aimed at teenagers received 22 answers, 16 of which came from the students I worked directly with, and 5 from unknown sources. As such, the results are limited to a small group of teenagers, and are not representative of a whole demographic. During my workshop, I asked the students to answer the questions individually, then discuss them in groups. Here are a few results from the survey as well as what came up in discussions:

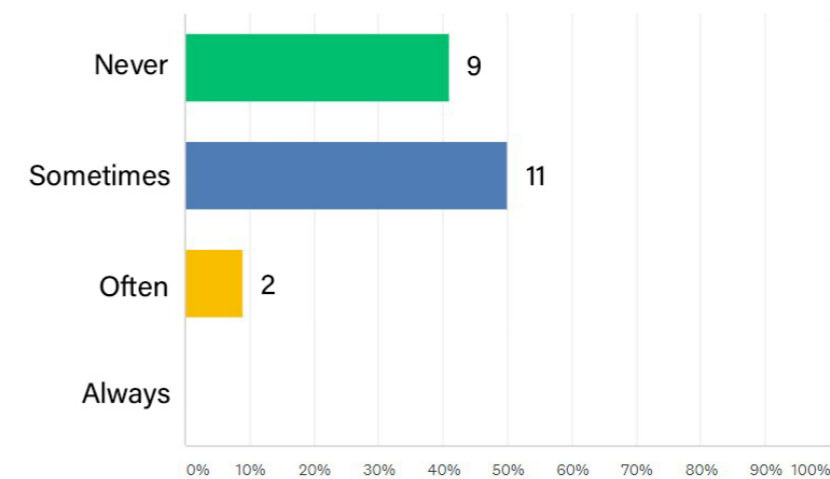### In which context do you notice publicity the most?
Svarade: 19   Hoppade över: 3
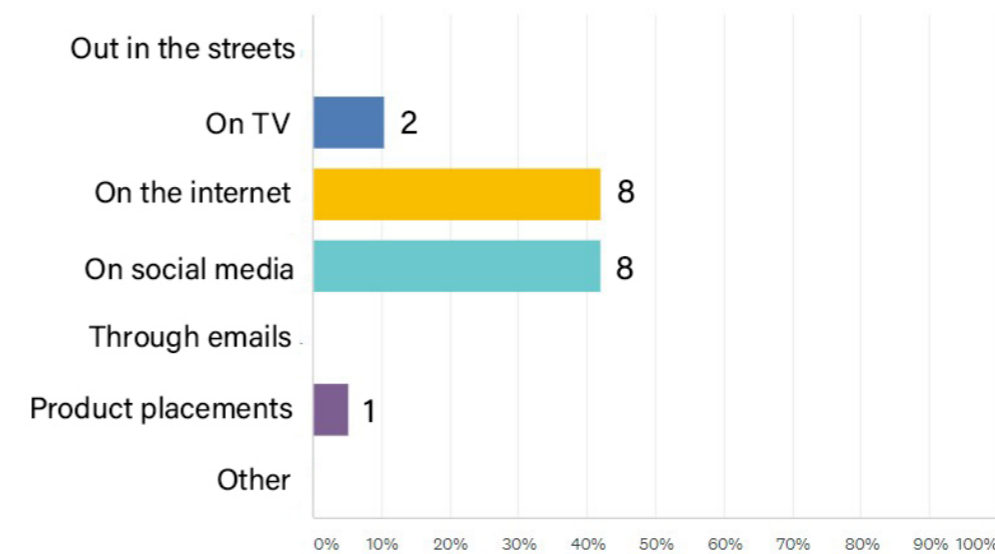


Here was an early confirmation that the ads teenagers are exposed to the most are the unregulated ones on the internet and on social media.

### How often do you feel like you can identify with people you see in advertising?
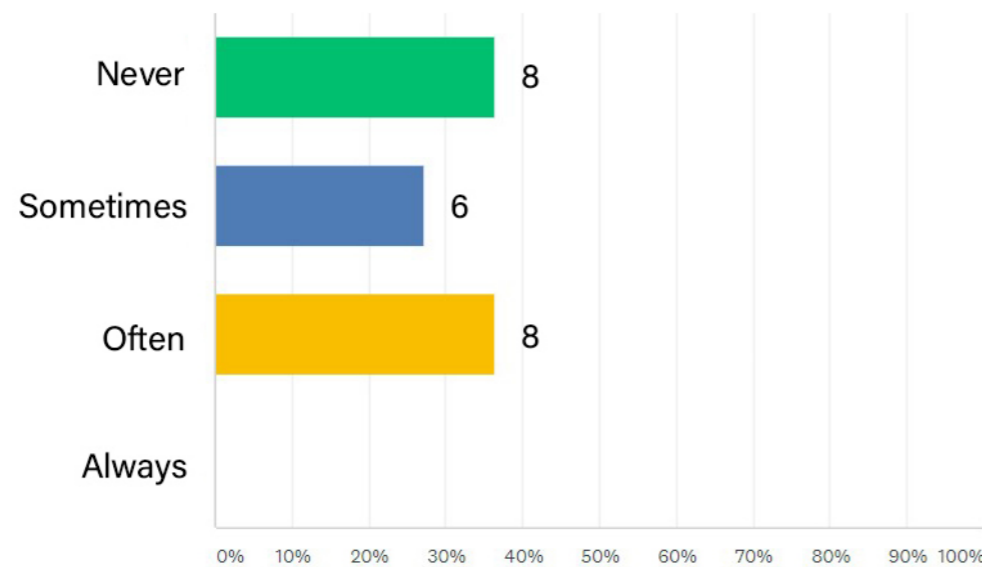Svarade: 22   Hoppade över: 0



One white student said they had never thought about it, while a student of colour responded that they never really felt they had any media figure to identify with, growing up in Sweden.

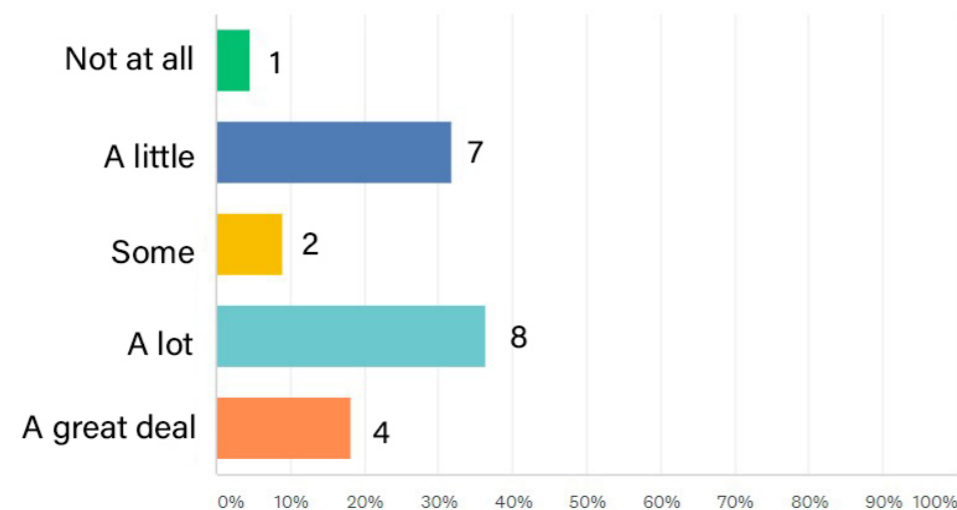## How often do you wish you looked more like people in advertising?

Svarade: 22    Hoppade över: 0

| | |
|---|---|
| Never | 8 |
| Sometimes | 6 |
| Often | 8 |
| Always | |

0%  10%  20%  30%  40%  50%  60%  70%  80%  90%  100%

Quite an interesting split on this question. In discussion it appeared that many had complexes when comparing themselves to the beauty norms in advertising, while others really didn't identify with mainstream beauty standards and were striving towards being different, or "alternative".

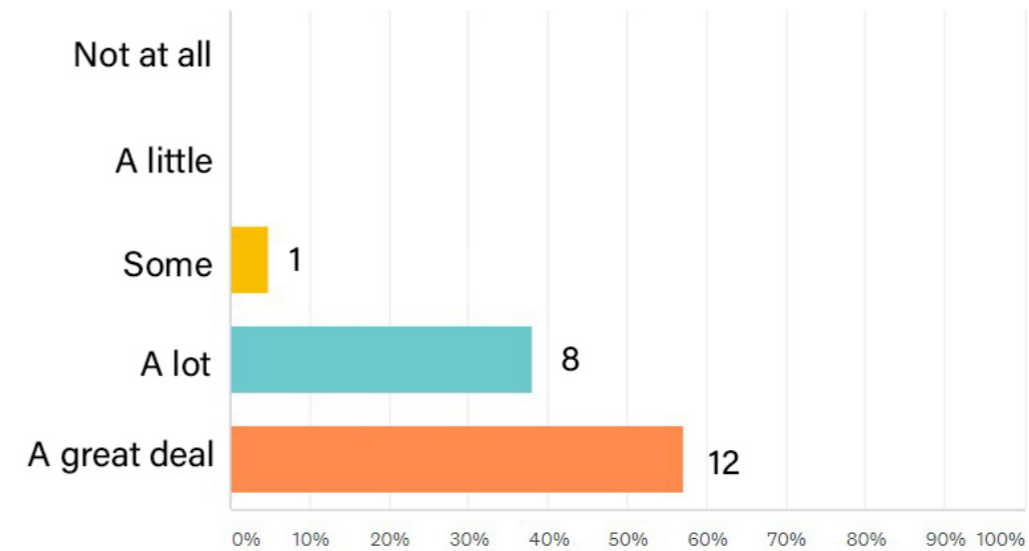## How much do you think your self-esteem is impacted by the beauty ideals you see in advertising?

Svarade: 22    Hoppade över: 0

| | |
|---|---|
| Not at all | 1 |
| A little | 7 |
| Some | 2 |
| A lot | 8 |
| A great deal | 4 |

0%  10%  20%  30%  40%  50%  60%  70%  80%  90%  100%

A lot of the students hadn't considered this question at all before, and were generally not aware of the marketing strategies we discussed. However, once they thought about it, they came up with a lot of problematic examples tied to representation in advertising and got rather outraged about how it made them feel.

## How important do you think it is with inclusive representation in advertising?

Svarade: 21    Hoppade över: 1

| | |
|---|---|
| Not at all | |
| A little | |
| Some | 1 |
| A lot | 8 |
| A great deal | 12 |

0%  10%  20%  30%  40%  50%  60%  70%  80%  90%  100%

I was glad to find such level of engagement within this high school class (as well as from the few extra people having answered the survey). Generally, what came out of the workshop was that they were surrounded by ads constantly, especially online, but only payed attention to them when they were surprisingly progressive and inclusive. When I asked them if they could recall ads that made them feel good, they cited Monki's #nofilter beauties (see literary review p.10) as well as Åhlens genderbending campaign "Break the dress code", both of which are famous Swedish clothing brands.

Finally, here are some of the answers given to the last, open question of the survey:

### What do you think would boost your self-esteem if you saw it in advertising?

- More body types and skin tones
- Big noses, body hair, acne and disabilities
- Less super well-trained models
- A person of colour who isn't white passing
- Transsexual and genderqueer people of different body types (not just small, androgynous & white)
- Things that people think of as "ugly" or unnatractive
- Normalized inclusive representation, without making a big deal of it
- Show that it's okay that we're all different
- That there is no body ideal.
- Something else than people

### 3. Workshop 1: 14/01/2021

Now let's move on to my first workshop centred around the practice of culture Jamming. I provided the teens with a lot of diverse problematic ads I had found, both on social media and from actual campaigns done by famous brands. I also encouraged them to find their own ads to work on. I then tasked them to alter them by either pointing out what they found problematic, or by remaking/fixing the ads to make them into something they would react positively to.

This workshop was both about finding out more about teenager's relationship to advertising, as well as make them aware of the ways many ads are designed to make them feel insecure, by creating a restricted mold that everyone is expected to try to fit into through consumption. I wanted to test the efficiency of culture jamming as a tool for empowerment, a way for teenagers to take culture back into their own hands and have a say in "the adult world", that too often dismisses them. There is real power in saying "no", especially to societal structures and norms that are hurtful. I also wanted to ask them how they would do it instead, to give them agency, as well as a chance to take control over the type of media and advertising they would like to see in the world.

**Results**

First are a few of examples where the students used irony to point out the absurdity and unrealistic beauty and body standards in campaigns by Victoria's Secret. Here you can see the original ads followed by their culture jams:



Original image by Victoria's Secret, Facebook (2015).



Culture jamming done by a student.



Original ad, "The perfect "body"" by Victoria's Secret (2014).



Culture jamming done by a student.
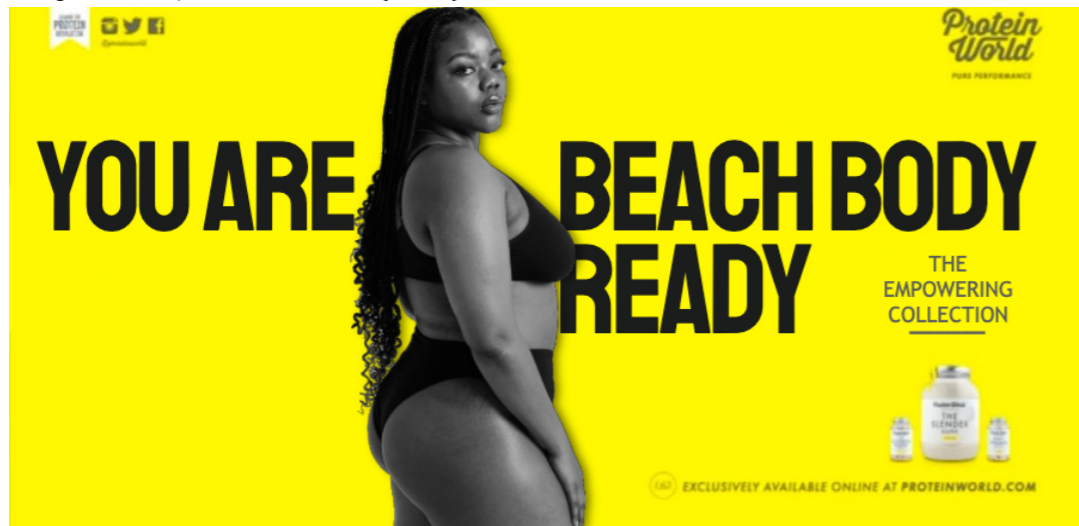


Culture jamming done by a student.

Here, on the other hand, the students chose to recreate the ads in order to make them empowering and body-positive, adding a lot of diversity and inclusivity. This goes to show the type of advertising that they would react positively to, ads that would make them feel seen and validated rather than alienate them.



A recreation of Victoria's secret "The perfect "body"".



Original ad by Protein world (2015).



Culture jamming done by a student.

Something the students and I talked about a lot was the "before & after" trope, and how some body types were valued above others. On the second image, a student swapped the before and after pictures, specifying that going from a skinny to a curvy body is just as fine as the other way around.
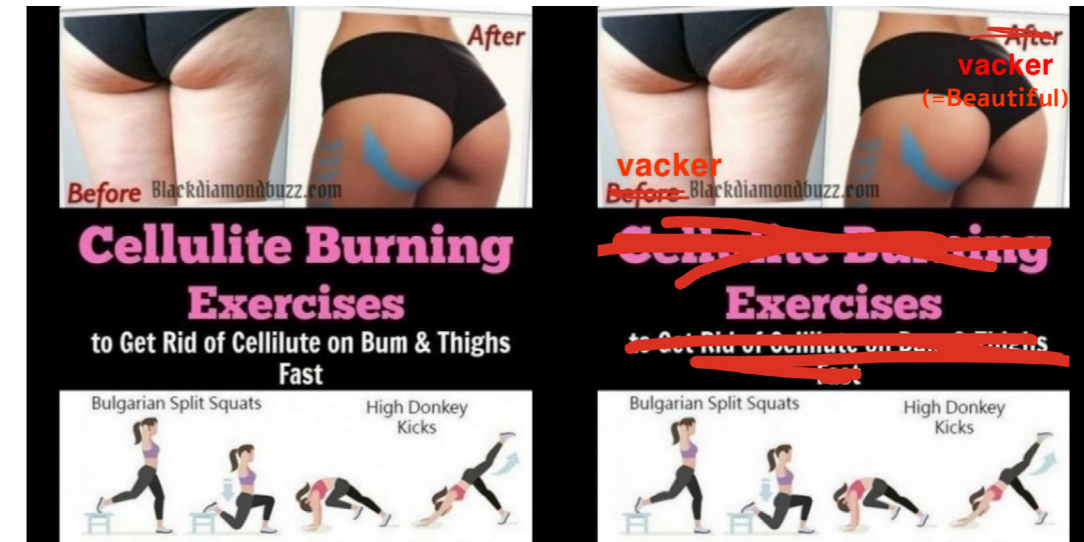


Original ad, Instagram (2020).                Culture jamming done by a student.



Recreation of an ad by a student.

Here are some culture jams about being subjected to body shaming and bullying from an early age and how it can lead to serious consequences like eating disorders.

Then we have these two controversial ads by Nivea and Dove, which led us to discussions about white-normativity in the media and advertising.
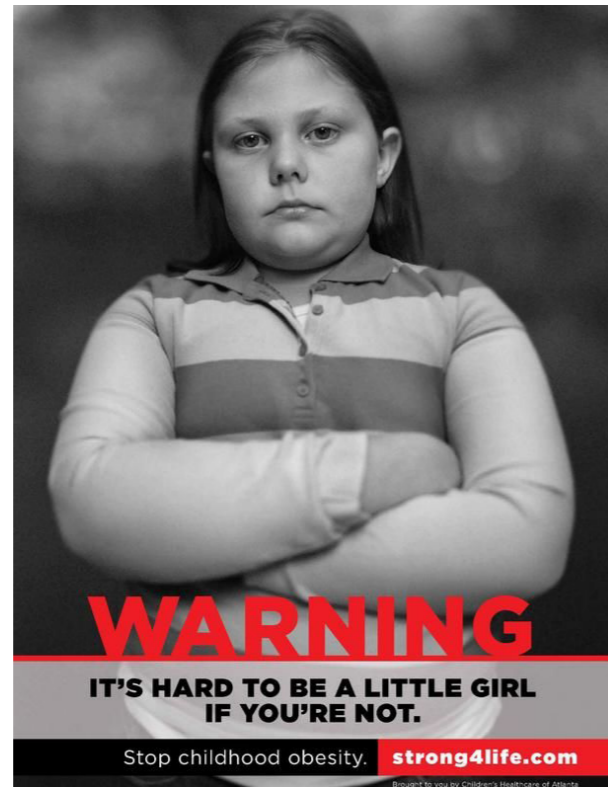


Original campaign by strong4life (2014).



Original ad by Nivea (2017.)

Culture jamming done by a student.



Original ad by Dove (2017).



Culture jamming done by a student.

Culture jamming done by a student.
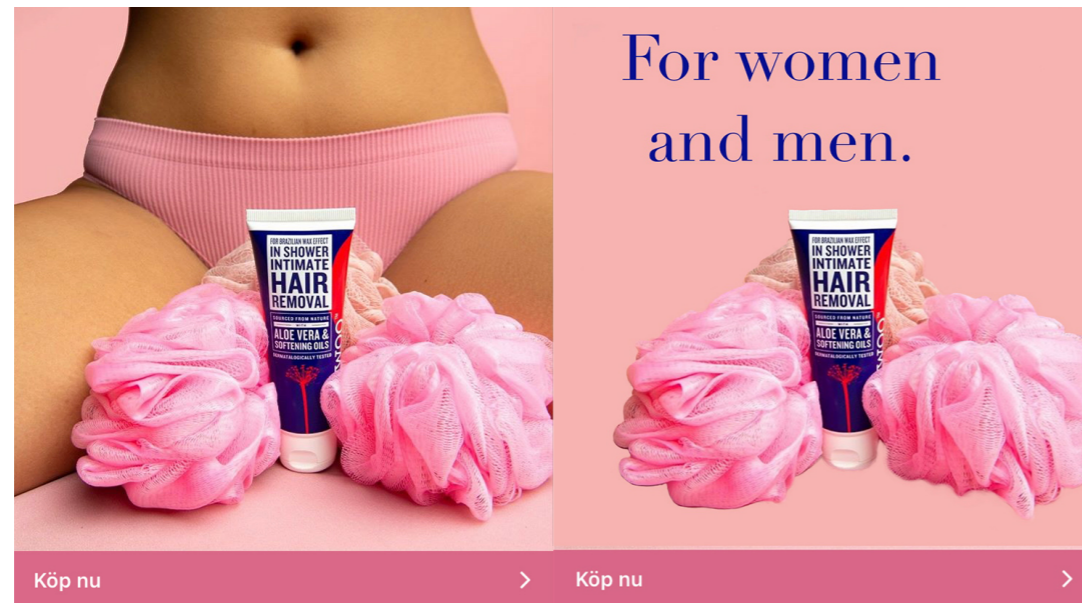


Culture jamming done by a student.

And finally, here are some images done on the theme of body hair, with the second image suggesting the removal of people from ads to make them gender inclusive, as well as get rid of body norms.



Original image (2016).

Culture jamming done by a student.



Original ad, Instagram (2020).

Culture jamming done by a student.

## 4. Conclusions for the project

What stood out the most from my interactions with teenagers during the workshop, group discussions, and in the online survey, was that they wanted advertising to promote diversity, to celebrate the fact that we are all different and that there is no actual "norm". When comparing my interactions with the teenagers and with the design bureau (who did not do ads targeted at youth specifically), you could clearly see different generations and mindsets at work. During the interview, the designers said that making a big deal out of being inclusive could draw away attention from the advertised product, which makes sense when the ads are targeting older, possibly less progressive generations. Teenagers today however, seem to be longing for a world that looks more like them, a world that is less "perfect" and uniform, and is rather more human and diverse. It seems many teenagers today would react much better to ads that show a wide array of real, non-photoshopped people, a theory that is supported by the fact that those where the kind of ads they could actually remember when asked to name positive examples.

The second thing that inspired me from the interactions with the teens was the notion of having ads without people altogether. This became one of the key elements to build my campaign upon, and helped define my goals for the project. I decided to work on creating a model for socially aware advertising, which I found to be a major preoccupation for my target group. Inspired by the co-design results, I entered the materialization phase of the project, where I explored different formats and tones for the campaign, as well as possibilities for interaction.

# MATERIALIZATIONS

### 1. Ads without people

In my first phase of materializations, I experimented with the idea of having ads without people, using that absence to promote genderless, norm free advertising. I thought making a campaign centered around this notion would show a way for ads to be more inclusive, while raising awareness around the flaws of our current system.

### Materialization 1

In this first materialization, I tried to take it down to the basic, practical function of the tool advertised. Wouldn't it be more useful to know how thick, or how long hair a razor can handle? That way no need to indicate what gender one must be in order to use it, nor which body part needs shaving, nor how it should look once you're done with it. Just a simple tool to be used by anyone however they wish. The only categories that razors could be divided into are face and body, without any gender assumption or body norms.





### Materialization 2

In this case, I wanted to address the fact that band-aids are still predominantly made for light skin tones. You can easily find colourful and patterned ones for children, but darker shades are rather uncommon. This is the type of product that doesn't need people whatsoever. There is no need to show what a "normal person using a band aid" looks like, as everybody bleeds. This image was thought as both an example for what a progressive ad could contain, and as a poster raising awareness around white-normativity in advertising a well as in the advertised products.

## 2. The form follows the function

In my second phase, I wanted to experiment with different ways to attract attention in the streets, as well as initiate some form of interaction with an audience. I worked with paper in 3D to try create a stronger effect for my campaign.

**Materialization 1**

I started trying to induce some form of playfulness by giving the public a place within the poster, using mirrors to make a point about the non-inclusivity of representation in advertising. Here I experimented with a sarcastic and absurd tone, using humour to talk about a serious issue. I thought it would be a nice touch for people to take home a bit of paper saying #killthenorm, as a positive reminder that the current norms seen in the media are restrictive and uniform. This materialization actually made it into the final campaign and was put out in the streets of Gothenburg during the last month of the project, the QR-code leading to an online platform where the project was developed further.







**Materialization 2**

I then moved on to experiment with agamographs, which are 3D posters showing two images depending on which angle they are viewed from. I enjoyed the format because of its possibility for expressing contrasts, to show a duality. In this case, it was a fun way to experiment with the controversial "before & after" trope. Here the "before" would be stereotypical, reductive advertising strategies, and the "after" a suggestion on how it could be done instead, once again, without people. I thought making a whole campaign out of agamographs would be a fun way to attract attention in the streets, something to stand out amidst all the other images we are saturated with on a daily basis. I also liked the idea of an interaction where people would need to have a literal shift of perspective to see both sides of the poster.

Still, it ended up being too complex and unclear, not to mention the sheer amount of work it would have taken to make all of those 3D posters, only to be able to have them up one week at the time (as per Gothenburg's poster a laws). This led me to the final stage of my materializations.

### 3. Raising awareness with parodies

During my last materialization phase, I abandoned the idea of trying to offer a model for ethical advertising, and instead focused on creating an awareness campaign. To do this, I experimented with recreating parodies of problematic advertising tropes using Barbie dolls, and adding some culture jamming on top of that. I used the workshop results done by teenagers, as well as the topics we discussed to choose the different themes for my posters. Among those where the dangers of diet culture, the gender taboo surrounding body hair, the non-inclusivity of transgender people in period product commercials, as well as the general taboo surrounding periods.

I also decided that there would be a digital counterpart to the campaign in the form of social media accounts, where I would be able to talk more in detail about the different problems raised by the campaign, making the posters an invitation to find out more online.
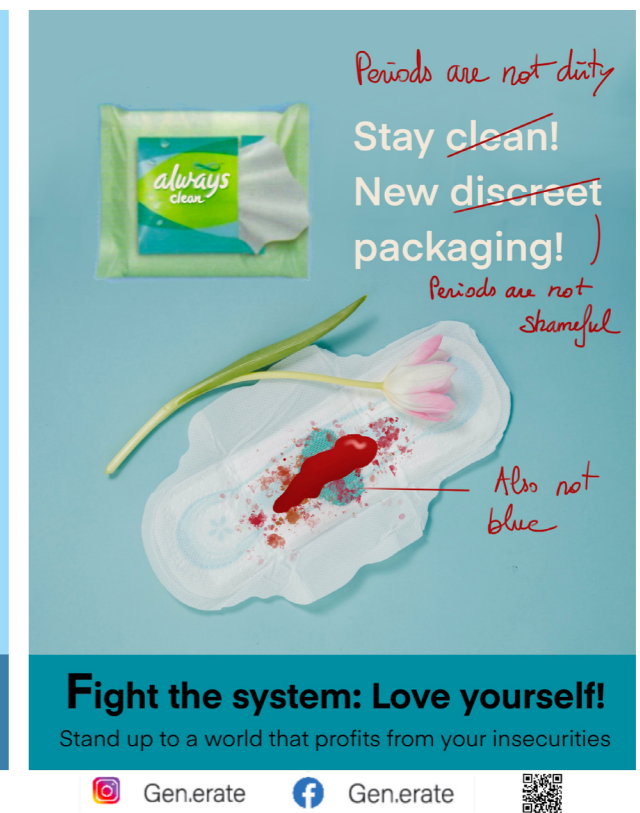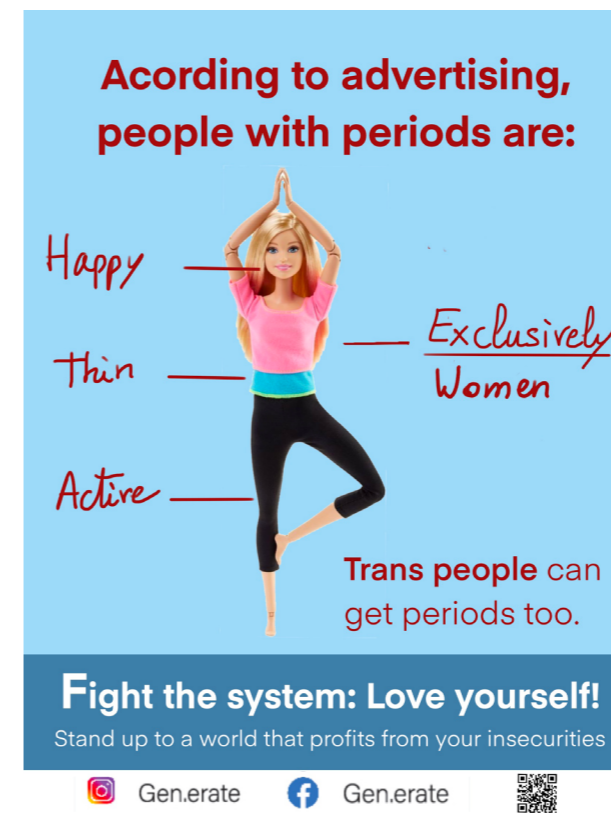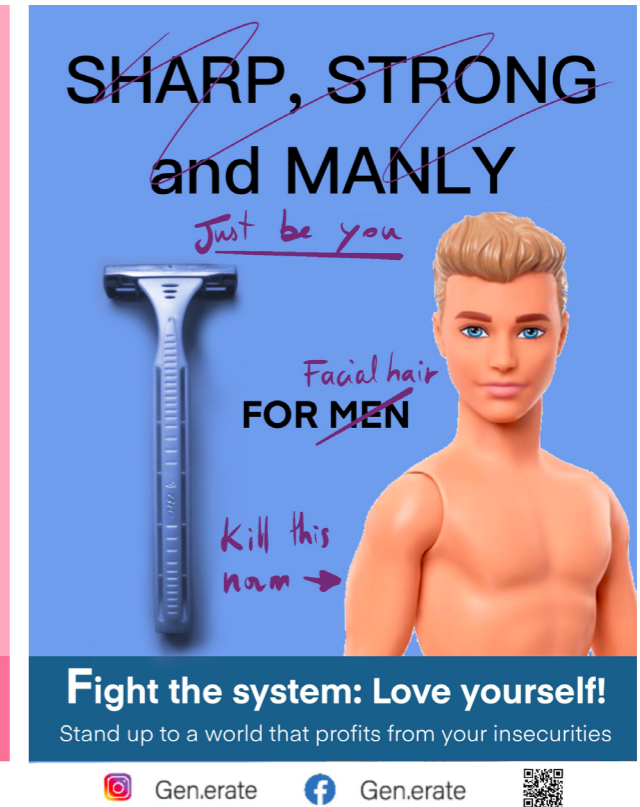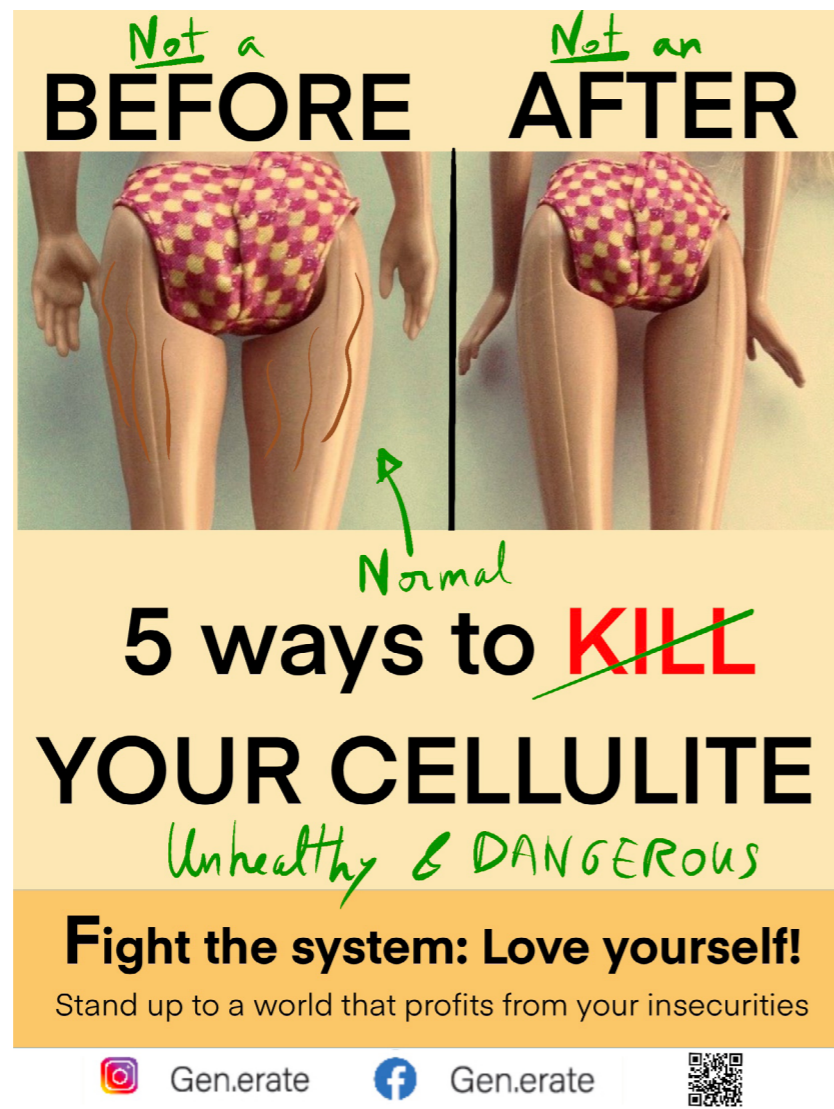
# CONCLUSIONS

## 1. A new brief:

**What is the project?**
An street campaign linked to an Instagram account and a culture jamming toolbox.

**What does it say?**
It raises awareness around harmful advertising strategies, while inviting teenagers to take up activism themselves.

**How does it say it?**
The project is divided in three parts:
   • A public teaser in the form of posters put out regularly in the streets, with a QR-code leading to an Instagram account.
   • An account where digital versions of the posters are posted, followed by videos in which the issues brought up are discussed more in depths.
   • An online space for teenagers to voice their opinions and participate in the project, with a link to a toolbox to get started with culture jamming.

**What does it aim to do?**
         The aim is to make as many teenagers as possible aware of how our advertising system capitalizes on their insecurities, while also inviting them to do something about it. Culture jamming is presented as a tool for protest, with the hope of instigating real change within the industry on the long term.

## 2. Final choices

**Why Barbie?**
         Barbie has been used a lot before in various art projects, and while it is not the most original choice, it ended up being the only logical option for me. I slowed myself down a lot during my process because I couldn't figure out how to talk about toxic body and gender norms without actually having to represent them. Working on the ideas of ads without people just didn't feel like enough in the end, it was hard making posters that stood out, let alone do a whole campaign on the concept. In the end, Barbie and Ken dolls are universally recognized as being representations of western beauty ideals, and that made it a lot easier for me to keep the posters simple, with as little text as possible, since the dolls already carried an understanding with them.
         It was also an opportunity for me to do some Hacktivism, by twisting elements of mainstream media on their head, while also giving a nod to the Barbie Liberation Organisation, which inspired me from the start. I decided to use barbies to talk not only about gender, but also about beauty norms, and just like them,

I used the project to encourage other to become activists themselves, leaving instructions just like they did. In my case, it was about passing on the practice of culture jamming to take back control over advertising.

**Why Instagram?**
         I needed an online platform where I could have some sort of digital exhibition, as a long-term outcome that would last longer than my posters in the streets. Instagram is, at the moment, the second most popular social media app amongst teenagers. It is also the best suited to upload posts as "chapters", combining images, videos and text, while also giving an overview of all the content. I thought it was an obvious choice to reach out to teenagers, as the format allows for people to follow the account without having to commit to anything, and can enjoy the posts when they come out, or scroll down to the specific topics which interests them.
         Another reason I chose Instagram is because it is riddled with unhealthy beauty and body norms, both in its content and in its ads. Teenagers agreed that it was one of the online space where the ads where the worst, always suggesting new body parts which needed fixing, along with some miracle cure for weight-loss, intertwined with recommended videos about plastic surgery transformations and photoshopped Instagram models. Many body positivity activists have taken to Instagram as a platform, in order to create a counter movement. I decided to join them, as well as encourage teenagers to follow these other accounts, in order to slowly replace unrealistic beauty standards with more positivity and acceptance.

## 3. Final workshop - 13/04/2021
         Before getting started on the actual project, I held one more workshop with the same high school class I had previously met. This session was much shorter than the first one and my focus was to get feedback from the students on my new project idea. I gave them one more survey to answer, in which they confirmed that they thought Barbie dolls and Instagram were the right choices, and that they liked the idea for the project. I also asked them if there were any specific topic they wanted me to talk about on the account, and took their answer with me into the final phase of the project.
         I also asked them to try to recreate parodies of ads using images of Barbie dolls, but as mentioned in the method description, the digital setting as well as the tight time limit imposed on the student made the workshop rather unsuccessful as not many ended up sending me their creations. I did however get their consent to post their work on the project's Instagram account, from both workshops, and some even asked me to tag them on their culture jams.

# OUTCOME

Invitation
Intention
Reception

## INVITATION

### 1. The Campaign

Inspired and supported by the results from my co-design sessions, I created a series of ad parodies. Each poster takes up one problematic trope found in advertising, using irony to reveal the hypocrisy behind these marketing strategies. Together they form an awareness campaign, whose goal is to tell people about the unethicality of our current advertising system, as well as invite teenagers to adopt a critical eye towards the media. I kept a special focus on inducing empowerment when it comes to body and gender issues, but was of course mindful of other social issues in my process.

I put the posters out in the streets of Gothenburg twice a week, drawing attention to the project and giving it visibility. The format was the same every time, starting with "Part x" at the top, followed by a title, with the name of the project on the bottom half indicating that each poster was part of something bigger. The idea was then to keep the parodies to a "less is more" aesthetic, making the posters an invitation to find out more online, following the QR-code at the bottom or looking up the Instagram account manually. Each QR-code lead to that specific poster's related online post, where I further developed the raised issue in short videos.

Putting the posters up was sometimes a challenge, as lots of new posters usually covered mine pretty quickly, as well as people systematically stealing the mirrored plastic I had on my "Have you seen" materializations. I did however see quite a few other activist posters and stickers that were put up in the same spots, which made my campaign feel right at home. My hope was for people to see these ad parodies and relate to them, feeling acknowledged for a moment, hopefully making them curious about the whole project. I hope some found it at least entertaining to watch new "chapters" pop up every week.
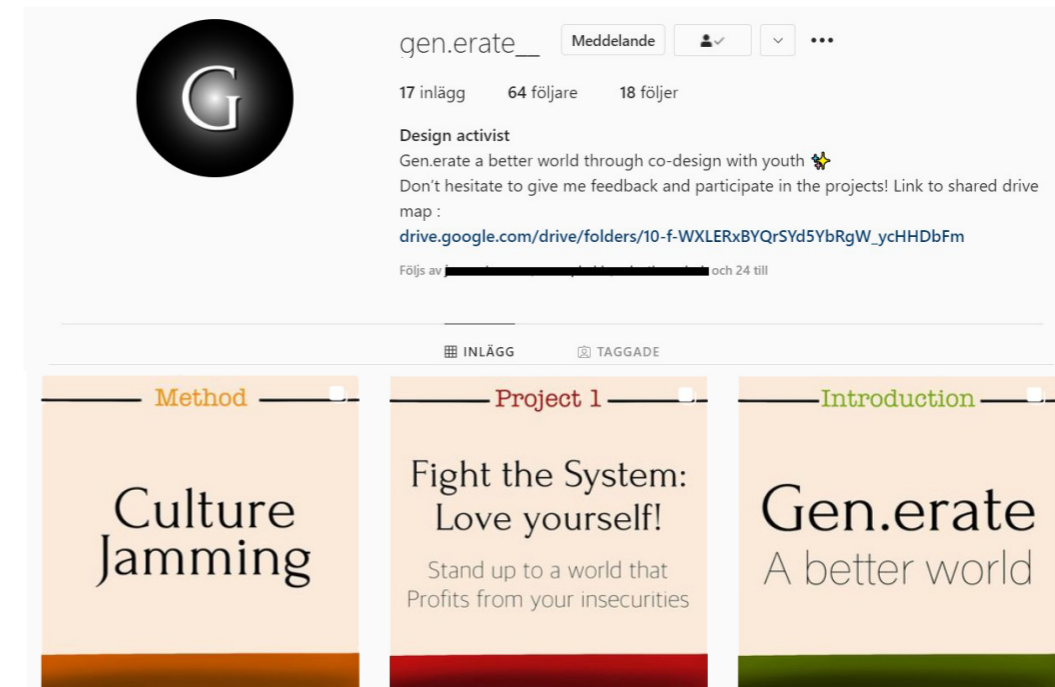
problematic ads and Barbie doll photos on which to experiment. My hope is that some will want to do it and that the others will at least take the habit of trying to see beyond what ads are saying. The account's purpose is both to raise awareness and to offer culture jamming up as a tool and a method for youth to train their minds to see advertising in a new light and ward off its negative effects.



The account profile with its three introduction posts.
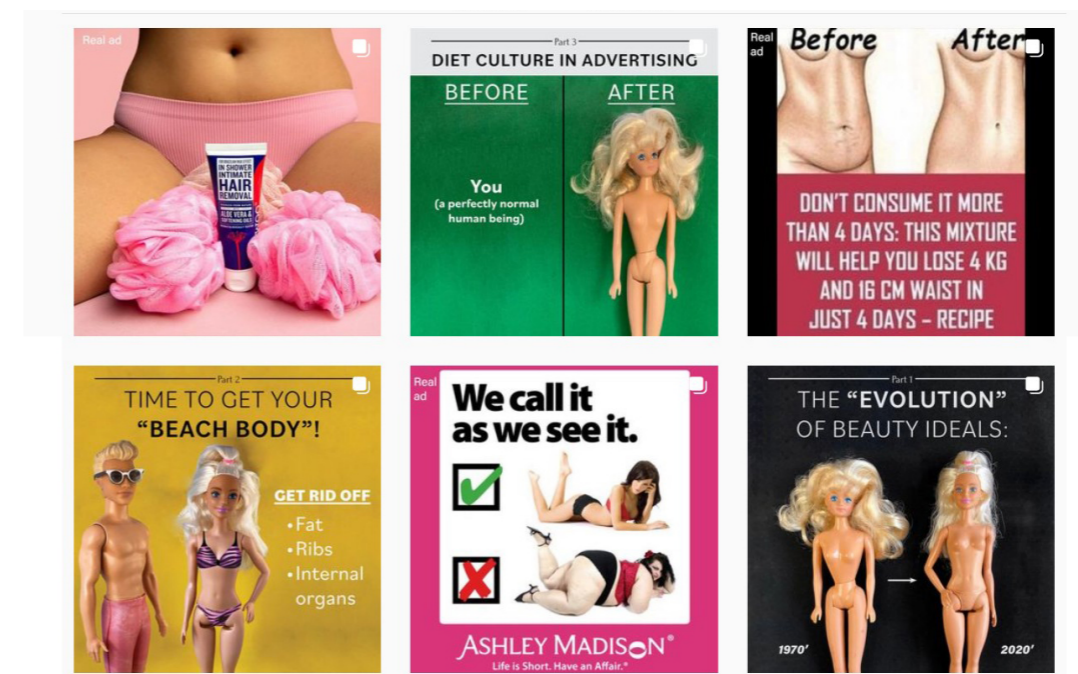
## 2. The account

I called the Instagram account "Gen.erate", as a nod to generative activism, with "gen" being short for generations, and "erate" being an unusual word to describe "striving towards excellence". The idea was to create an online space whose purpose was to bring to life a better world through intergenerational co-design. I created three introduction posts, the first to explain why I created the account in the first place, the second to introduce my current project, also called "project nr.1", and a third to explain more in detail what culture jamming is. The account is meant to be a platform for interaction, where teenagers can both give me feedback on my projects, as well as send in their own creations to be posted. It is meant to be a safe space where they can feel heard and be taken seriously, with my promise to them as a designer to always take their opinion into consideration, and to influence every future project I'll work on in a progressive and human-centred way.

The account also serves as a long-term digital exhibition for my campaign, where each poster can be found preceded by the workshop results which inspired that particular topic. The online space aims to be a source of information, as well as an invitation for the followers to take up activism themselves, in the form of culture jamming. In the profile section can be found a link to a digital toolbox containing



An example of how the campaign is enterwined with workshop results done by teenagers (poblematic ads followed by their culture jamming).

### 3. Aesthetics & tone

The posters I put out in the streets, printed on regular A4 sheets, were meant to be rather rough, and "made at home" looking. I made that choice because the whole project is a critique of the false, photoshopped "perfection" promoted by advertising, and I wanted my campaign to stand in contrast to that. When people think of activism, they do not think of design, or rather, they do not see a clear link between the two practices. I think that "design" can be something that many people don't really understand or relate to, as it is a word that can be associated with money and even feel elitist. I wanted to create a campaign that felt less intimidating, more sincere and heart-felt. An aesthetic in the spirit of fanzine culture, something done out of passion and not for profit.

I think more and more people, especially among youth, relate to the "Do it yourself" culture, where everyone can be made to feel creative and competent, by following simple instructions. That is something that I wanted the account to promote, by showing simple ways to create parodies or do culture jamming, and inviting others to do the same, something facilitated by the linked toolbox containing images to experiment on. It is also in phase with the recent internet phenomenon "Meme culture", where anyone can create a funny or political image, using existing photos and drawings. That is what my posters are meant to say: you can do it too, and here are some images, tools, and inspiration to get you started.

When it comes to the tone, the campaign uses sarcasm to point out the absurdity and hypocrisy of some advertising tropes. The videos on the other hand, are about encouraging self-love and acceptance. Looking at modern examples of memes done by Gen Z teenagers, one can easily spot a red thread of self-deprecating, nihilist humour, with many jokes being about the end of the world and/or about being dead inside already. There is an increase in absurd jokes, deformed images and misspelled words, which to me seems to reflect a desire to get away from all the polished, seemingly perfect superficiality of the world.

### 4. Message

In each post, the ad parody serves as introduction to one-minute long videos (usually two per topic), where I talk about how these marketing techniques are meant to affect us and what they should be promoting instead. The issues raised are linked to the promotion of beauty ideals, and brings up the different challenges faced by men and women, as well as the non-inclusivity of many genders in advertising. I also offer advice on how to deal with these unrealistic expectations, sometimes adding a bit of personal experience to make it more relatable, like trying to lose weight or dealing with makeup and body hair as a woman and feminist. The general idea is to make teenagers feel seen and acknowledged, regardless of what choices they make, and support them in their identity search.

I made sure to end each video on a message of hope, not only pointing out the flaws of our societal system, but also relating what progress has been made in recent years and how we can all continue in these efforts. In each post, I also recommend other activist's accounts and projects to follow, in order to build up a defense line against the indoctrination of toxic norms on social media. Following are the campaign posters in their online formats, completed by a shortened version of each video's message.
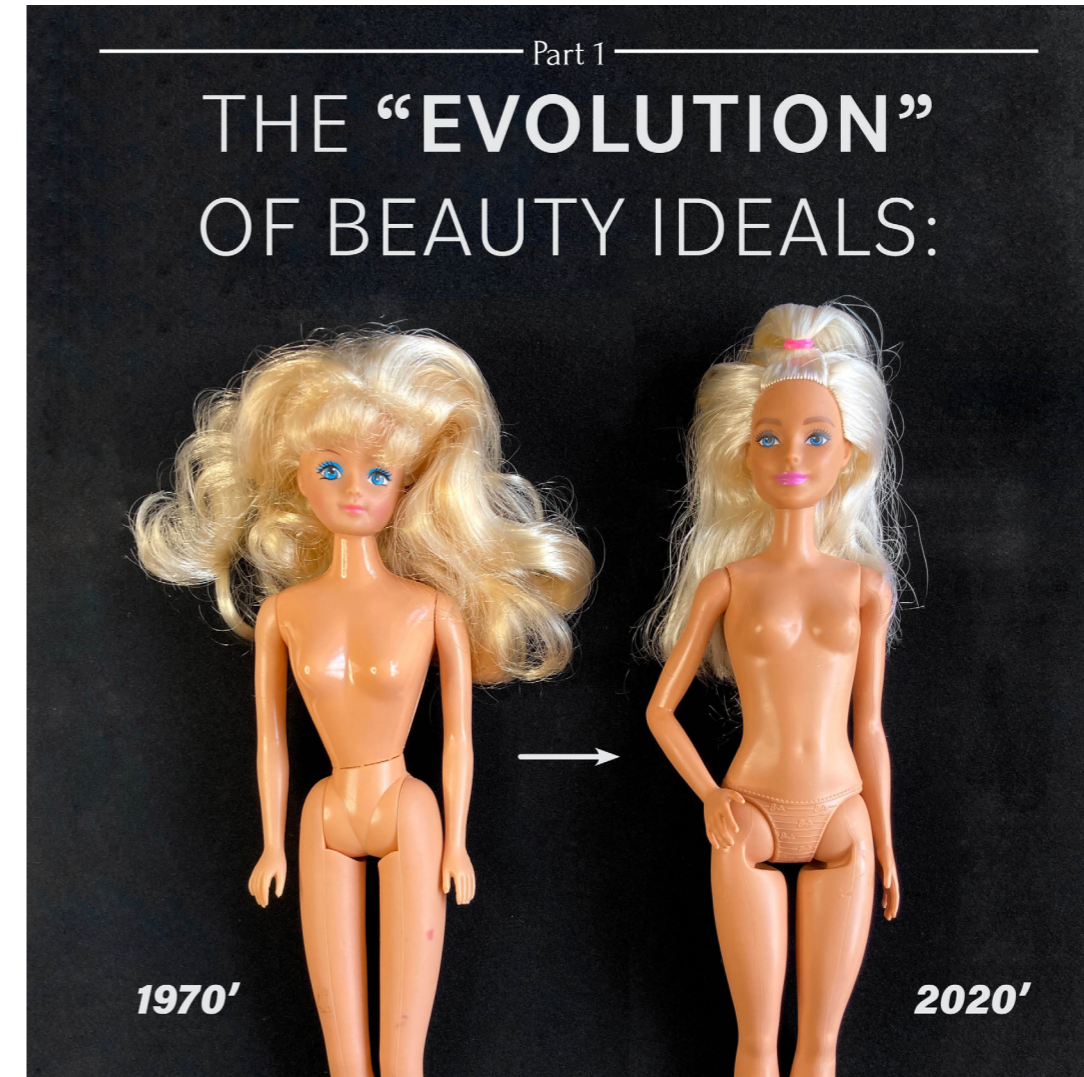


**Part 1: Beauty ideals**

Beauty ideals are something that have evolved and changed throughout history. Today, the media defines and upholds our current standards, which are then reflected in advertising. These ideals are based on a binary gender system where one's supposed to be either a feminine woman or a masculine man, usually. On the positive side, we are already shifting the beauty norms, little by little, with the spreading of movements like body positivity. Some brands are picking up on that, and whether it is honest or just marketing, the truth is that it has the potential to do a lot of good things.

The result of representing body types and features that are normally looked down upon is that it normalizes it, slowly but surely. And that means that children will start growing up with a much more positive view of bodies and much more inclusive and diverse beauty norms. Barbie for instance has actually evolved a lot these past years, despite what I'm using it for here, and has now many dolls with different skin tones and styles. Some have no hair, display visible skin conditions, or are in wheelchairs, and there are even a few with different body types.

**Part 2: Weight**

　　We live in a society that is obsessed with weight, and where fat is often being presented as something shameful that we need to get rid of at any cost. Body positivity is gaining popularity, but we all know that it is really hard to learn to love our bodies when we've been conditioned our whole lives to never feel good enough. My point is that it is okay to still want to look a certain way, as it is really hard to unlearn a lifetime of being exposed to certain beauty ideals.

　　I have always felt too fat and at the same time, I've felt like a traitor to body positivity whenever I've tried to lose weight. So I know it is a lot harder than it sounds, but just do what feels right for you. If it is to work on accepting yourself as you are, that's amazing. If you feel that you want to work on changing your body somehow, that is also fine, just try to do it in a way that's safe. In any case, we all need to continue to normalize all types of bodies and spread positivity, not just for us, but so that the next generations can grow up without being conditioned the way we have been, so that they can love themselves from the start.

**Part 3: Diet Culture**

　　Diet culture is something that is very present in advertising. It is especially found on social media, where the ads appear in-between the platform's usual content, for instance Instagram models and photoshopped celebrities upholding the same beauty norms. So you'll end up seeing a thread of seemingly "perfect" people, followed by ads offering you super easy ways to look like them, while also telling you that everything about your body is wrong.

　　Obviously, this is extremely harmful and it does brainwash us in a way. Advertising is becoming more and more insidious and it is really hard nowadays to enjoy anything online without having to watch a couple of ads in the process. So as you see, everything around us, and especially online, is working towards reinforcing this idea that we aren't good enough and that we need to try to look a certain way, which is why those ads can be tempting. But please, stay away from them. There is no miracle way to get a certain body type, and what we are typically shown as "the ideal body" isn't common at all and should not be the norm.

**Part 4: Shaving (two parts)**

Body hair is typically an issue where there is a clear double moral that has to do with gender. Shaving ads for instance, are very different depending on whether they are meant for men or women. For men, there is usually more of an "epic" feeling, definitely a traditional view on masculinity. Shaving ads for women will typically show you long white legs that are always already shaved beforehand, which doesn't give any indication of how efficient the razor actually is. The fact that no body hair is shown on women in advertising, not even to demonstrate how to get rid of said hair, really shows that it is still widely not accepted for women to have hairy legs or hairy bodies in general. And here it is very easy to see both the beauty and gender norms at work, because these ads not only tell you what gender you should be to use a certain razor, they also tell you where you should shave and how you should look afterwards.

This type of product could easily be made genderless. Actually, you could remove people entirely from this type of ad, as well as many others, and get rid of that beauty norm too. One way to sell them could be to advertise one type of razor for the face, and one for the body. No need to attach it to a gender or promote outdated ideas of who should or should not shave where. People of any gender can make their own personal choice to shave any part of their body, or not. We should stop promoting a binary gender norm where women need to shave every hair on their bodies while men aren't allowed to shave off body hair at all because it is considered feminine. Once again, let people make their own choices. And if you identify as a woman and feel that you want to shave some of your body parts, that doesn't make you less of a feminist. You decide what works for you and let others do the same.

## Part 5: The beauty industry

The beauty industry has long worked on associating feminine beauty with makeup. They will for instance use photoshopped images of famous stars in luxurious backgrounds to sell a lipstick or a perfume, insinuating that buying that product will help you look like them, be as successful as them. Makeup is something that has been defined as exclusively feminine in modern history, and as such, women have been expected to wear it regularly, while men have been bullied or worse for doing the same. Today, some brands are trying to be more socially aware and break those codes by using models that aren't cis-women to sell makeup, which is a good step forward.

Of course, there is still a lot of discrimination going around, and anyone breaking the gender codes can be subjected to a lot of aggressivity. But despite all that hate, we can still see more and more people daring to express their own personal style, choosing to wear or not wear makeup regardless of gender expectations, which is amazing. I personally love makeup, glitter and alternative clothing, and that doesn't make me, or anyone else superficial. Just as choosing not to wear makeup doesn't make you lazy or unprofessional if you identify as a woman. Express yourself however you see fit, and be safe out there.

## Part 6: The period taboo

Let's talk about how women aren't allowed to be human beings and how periods especially don't fit this smooth perfect image that society wants to have of us. Everything that has to do with normal bodily functions is strongly discouraged for women to show or express. That is because women are overly objectified in the media and their bodies are meant to be attractive to the male gaze, but not serve any actual bodily functions, which would shatter the "sex object" mold.

Women not being considered human beings has some very serious consequences beyond those taboos, for instance when it comes to our health. Problems that only people with vaginas experience have never been taken seriously and have therefore not been researched a lot. That means there are still a lot of rather common health issues, like for instance endometriosis, vaginismus, or all the possible side effects to contraceptives, that almost no one knows or cares about. This misinformation is harmful, and we all need to do our best to normalize the fact that women are people with bodily functions, among which are periods, which are perfectly natural and nothing to be ashamed of.

**Part 6: Cisnormativity in advertising**

For those who may not know, being cisgender is the opposite of being transgender, which means you identify with the gender you were assigned at birth. An example of cisnormativity in advertising would be ads for period products, which usually represent cis-women and do not include transgender or non-binary people who may also have periods. These ads could be a great opportunity to represent and normalize other gender identities.

What we see in the media and in advertising unconsciously shapes what we think of as "normal". This is why inclusive representation is so important, to show the world that what most people think of as the norm is far from representing the majority. Advertising has an incredible power of normalization, and it is about time it used it to promote real diversity, to actually show that there are so many different types of people out there, with different gender identities, sexualities, and much, much more. We need to make sure that children grow up knowing that there isn't just one right way to be and express oneself, so that no one else needs to feel like a misfit, or be bullied for being "different".

**Part 8: White normativity in advertising**

Everyone needs role models, especially when growing up. We all need people that look and act like us to relate to, so that we can feel "normal". It is not only important for each individual to recognize themselves in the media, it also influences our view of others. Advertising creates prejudice and induces bullying and discrimination against those that are either under-represented or caricatured, which is a problem that extends far beyond that of beauty ideals.

White normativity is the assumption that being white is the norm. Not only does it mean people of color are often underrepresented in advertising, it also means that when they are, it can be for the purpose of reaffirming whiteness as being the ideal to strive for. Some ad have for instance associated whiteness with purity (see p.29), and even though the company responsible had to apologize and retract the campaign, that doesn't mean that the damage wasn't done. Still, we do have the power to protest against that kind of content, and if we all try to act upon the discriminatory norms that we encounter, we can work together towards a better, more inclusive future.

# INTENTION

What **tools** could design offer teenagers to **protect themselves** against the **harmful norms** promoted by **advertising**?

### 1. Culture Jamming

A important aim of the project is to draw attention to the practice of culture jamming as a way to oppose consumerism. I believe it is both a method and a tool that could help teenagers protect themselves against harmful marketing strategies. It also aligns with the rebellious theme of the project, reflected in the name "fight the system: Love yourself", with the invitation to "stand up to a world that profits from your insecurities". It is about hacking and taking back control of harmful societal tropes and norms promoted by advertising, a way for teenagers to express their discontent with "the adult world" which too often dismisses them. Instead of creating a model for ethical advertising as I first planned, I am letting teenagers "fix" advertising themselves through culture jamming, with my role being that of a facilitator. I believe the workshops were a big part of the project, and I hope to be able to continue with them, so that more teenagers can be introduced to the practice and be given agency to retake control of their culture, to change a world they feel doesn't acknowledge them.

The account, with both the campaign and the workshop results, serves as a model and inspiration on how to start looking at advertising with a critical eye, and hopefully get started with culture jamming. Each poster takes up one issue or marketing trope to look out for, and the workshop results show a variety of ways to hack an ad. They are also a representation of teenagers taking back control and showing the world how they would do advertising, given the chance. During the workshop, they were given the power to say "no", as well as a chance to do better. I believe culture jamming is an empowering tool which could give teenagers a new space and voice within the shaping of society. Think of what could happen if youth everywhere started "fixing" the world and spreading their versions of how they would like things to be. If enough of them started to speak out against this system and resist our advertising system by spreading better versions, then surely, it would slowly bring about real change.

### 2. A call to activism

This project for me was about exploring the power and reach of design activism. What I found was a way to design for activism, specifically youth activism. I believe co-activism could also be called a tool facilitated by design. My role as a designer has been to create a frame for others to learn, train and be inspired into becoming activists themselves. At the very least, I hope to have turned the teenagers I've reached into norm-critics. I believe the project has in a way redefined co-design, since it wasn't so much about working on something together as it was about spreading a method, an invitation for others to take part in the process. It is the kind of project which is expected to become more collaborative as it grows.

The account also invites people to create change for themselves, following the same patterns that can be found within the "do it yourself" culture. It is all about making a statement about the power of the people in the face of unjust societal systems. It is especially about telling the new generations that they can do anything, that they can be the change they wish to see in the world. Finally, it is a way to reassure them that they aren't alone in seeking these changes, and that together we are strong.

How could design be used to **promote diversity** and **empower teenagers** in their **identity search**?

### 3. Raise awareness

The second main goal of the project is to raise awareness, to highlight harmful marketing strategies in order to help teenagers recognize and protect themselves against them. The project is meant to promote diversity and support teenagers in their identity search by ironically mocking the things that make them feel like they don't fit in. The campaign aims to shift the blame and spread the message: "Your body is not wrong for not looking like the ones shown to you in advertising, advertising is wrong to show you these unrealistic body-norms and expect you to try to emulate them". It is about inducing a shift of perspective and inviting teenagers to be kinder to themselves and realize that the reason they feel inadequate is because our system is designed to make them feel that way.

The online format of the campaign makes it easy to spread and is more accessible and inviting to teenagers, as it is familiar ground for most of them. As opposed to a documentary for instance, having a campaign on instagram with one image followed by two short videos is probably better adapted to the shrinking attention span induced by the digital era. It is also a much smaller commitment to make, with topics divided into "chapters", making it easy to find and learn about a specific issue in two minutes or less.

### 4. Offer hope

From what I have observed, a lot of gen Z teenagers feel like misfits, in a world that's in turmoil. During my group discussions with the students, I asked them all a simple question: How do you imagine the future? This was not directly tied to my topic, but I did want to get a better understanding of my target group and their relationship to the world around them. Unsurprisingly, most of their answers came from a place of hopelessness, with many explaining how broken they felt the world was and how they didn't think it would stand as it is much longer. Some students were optimistic and appeared rather unconcerned, but the majority seemed very anxious about issues like climate change, social inequalities or nuclear weapons, just to cite a few. Even though most of these issues are far beyond the scope of my project, I did want it to offer some comfort, as well as a sense of retaking just a little bit of control through culture jamming.

Teenagers today give me hope for the future, and I want to give that back to them anyway that I can. It is amazing to see young people care so much about equality and inclusivity. I think a lot of teenagers are feeling that the world just isn't changing fast enough when it comes to making them feel seen and acknowledged, and there are still so many toxic structures and norms that are really hurtful. We are generally not taught to love ourselves but are instead expected to change in order to fit into a pretty narrow and restrictive mold. All of my Instagram posts were directly inspired by personal topics raised by teenagers, and aimed to reassure them that they were free to make their own choices in regards to their bodies. The post about cosmetics was created after a mother told me that her 14 year old daughter was struggling with her appearance, wanting to use makeup but worrying about being called superficial. The posts about white-normativity and cis-normativity also came from teenagers' personal experiences with discrimination. In the long term, I hope that the project stays with them and that they get into activism by working on loving themselves despite consumerism playing on their insecurities. I hope they then work on spreading love and acceptance forward, making the world a better place little by little.

# RECEPTION

## 1. Promoting the project

In order to reach as many people as possible, I shared the project in various circles. I put the posters out in the streets of Gothenburg weekly, specifically near high schools and youth frequented areas. I also shared the account on diverse social media platforms, in groups frequented by teenagers. Later in the project, with the help of film student Sandra Foss, I created a five minute long introduction video which I then spread online again. The high school teacher I had been working with this semester gave me access to a Facebook group reserved for Swedish high school art teachers, where I uploaded the video and invited them to share it with their class. I also asked my friends and a few activist networks to share them, as well as the high school students I had been working with.

## 2. In the streets

As far as I could tell, the physical campaign out in the streets didn't attract a lot of attention to the project. Every once in a while, new followers would drop in randomly into the account and might have been led there by the posters, but mostly people came in bigger groups when I shared the project online. In the latest survey I gave my students, pertaining to the content and format of the project, most said they were unsure if they would dare scan a QR-code, as they were generally distrustful of them. I believe a lot of people don't trust any type of media they encounter in the streets anymore, as advertisers are getting more and more insidious and creative, making many ads seem innocuous at first.

## 3. Online

I shared the project online on two occasions, first with a short description and a few pictures, and second by spreading the introduction video. Both times attracted lots of positive responses, the posts were liked, commented and shared, and a lot of people ended up subscribing to the account. The current number of followers on the project's Instagram account is 64, and if I managed to have some extent of positive influence on that many people, I consider the project a success. I have posted a total of 18 posts, one of which got censored by instagram because of the white supremacist imagery used by the students in one of their culture jams (see p.29). What didn't work very well on the other hand was the toolbox and invitations to participate in the project. I got a few comments on some of my posts, mostly expressing positive reactions to the content, and one private message from a teen sending me a Barbie parody, which I then posted with the rest of the workshop results. Overall, I didn't get a lot of interaction on Instagram, but as long as the posts were seen by many people, the account still served a good purpose.

When it comes to the introduction video I shared on Facebook, it attracted the attention of a woman working for both RFSU and GUTS (a meeting place for young women and transgender people between the age of 13 to 20, focusing

on spreading knowledge and inducing empowerment). She saw the video and contacted me regarding workshops with teenagers taking place later this summer, which I am hoping to be a part of. We have a meeting scheduled soon, and I hope to be able to get closer to and work with both organizations, as they would offer great possibilities for interactions with teens. It would be a great way to take the project further and make the account grow. I also sent the video to activist network MakeEqual, and haven't yet received an answer on their part.

### Direct Feedback

Finally, I received direct feedback from several sources. First and foremost, I had great returns from the teenagers I worked with. What most of them said was that they really liked the project and were thankful to have learned about these issues, which they hadn't been aware of prior to our first workshop. It is also what many wrote anonymously in the surveys, even asking for specific issues to be brought up on the account. They also seemed to really enjoy our culture jamming workshop. As mentioned before, all of my posts stemmed from interactions with teenagers or in one case, with a parent. I truly hope to have had a greater impact on the lives of those 21 students, which I felt a great connection with. Many of my friends have also said that they've learned a lot from following the account and that they now view advertising in a completely different light, and I hope to get a chance to spread this forward through more workshops and collaborations in the future.

# CONCLUSION

# CONCLUSION

*"We live in an age where everyone is a designer,*
*and the future of civilization is our common design project."*
David Berman (2012)

**What now?**

The premise for my thesis is that advertising needs to become more ethical, inclusive and human-centred, for the sake of future generations and the world we will leave behind us. We need to stop promoting toxic norms for profit and listen to the voices of the young, which will soon take over. The idea explored throughout my project is that we can't change our advertising system overnight but we can teach teenagers to look at it with a critical eye and recognize the harmful patterns that are used. The goal is to raise awareness and let them spread the information forward, so that they can do better when it is their turn. The account serves as a way to both distribute and gather information, in order to facilitate intergenerational interactions.

This project has been through a lot of twists and turns, and I am happy with where it ended up. The account has only existed for about 6 weeks and still has a lot of room to grow, especially if I get the support and resources from other activist networks and organizations. I feel I have created the premise for something good, and it only needs a nudge to get bigger, hopefully through more workshops with teenagers. I have now talked about every issue I was asked to bring up by teenagers on the account, and have at least one more post planned on this project, which will be about "woke-washing" done by famous brands, in parallel with pride month. After that, I will wait until my next workshop opportunity, as I would prefer the posts to continue being directly inspired by youth. The account is still open for more co-design projects in the future, and I look forward to working with more teenagers, as I hopefully get a chance to become an educator at RFSU.

# PROJECT LINKS

Introduction video: https://youtu.be/zn0n9TqccbA

Survey : https://sv.surveymonkey.com/r/KYFKK56

Instagram account:  gen.erate__
 https://www.instagram.com/gen.erate__/

QR-code leading to the account:

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