

# Women and body culture - Life stories, advertising experiences and cultural context in women's identity construction processes

Marketing  
Master's thesis  
Petra Kujala  
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### **Purpose of this study**

The purpose of this study is to understand women's identity construction processes in cultural context. The research examines relations between women's life experiences, advertising experiences and identity construction in patriarchal, consumerist and body-centric western society. The study aims to explain how the cultural context and women's life experiences affect women's advertising interpretations and, further, what is the role of these relations between cultural context, life experiences and ad experiences in women's self and identity construction processes.

### **Methodology**

The theoretical framework discusses existing literature relating to patriarchy, consumer and body culture, advertising, identity construction and interpretive social constructionism. The empirical study was conducted in a qualitative manner. Data-collection was conducted through semi-structured phenomenological and life story interviews. Data analysis was conducted through narrative analysis and life story approach by linking relevant parts of interviewees' life stories and ad experiences with cultural context and suggesting their role in identity construction processes.

### **Findings**

The main findings of this study reflect existing literature; women's life stories and advertising experiences are strongly present in self and identity construction processes, body- and appearance related issues having a central role in the formation of self-view and identity. In addition, the presence of cultural context in women's ad experiences and the identity construction is notable.

### **Key words**

Women, life story, advertising experiences, identity construction, western society, patriarchy, consumer culture, body culture

### **Tutkimuksen tarkoitus**

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoitus on ymmärtää naisten identiteetin rakentumista kulttuurisessa kontekstissa. Tutkimus tarkastelee naisten elämäkokemusten, mainonnan tulkinnan ja identiteetin rakentumisen välisiä yhteyksiä ja syy-seuraussuhteita nykypäivän patriarkaalisessa, kulutus- ja vartalokeskeisessä länsimaisessa yhteiskunnassa. Tutkimus pyrkii selittämään, miten ympäröivä kulttuurinen konteksti ja naisten henkilökohtaiset elämäkokemukset vaikuttavat mainonnan tulkintaan, ja edelleen mikä on näiden kulttuurin, elämäkokemusten ja mainonnan tulkintojen välisten suhteiden rooli naisten minäkuvan ja identiteetin rakentumisessa.

### **Metodologia**

Tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys esittelee patriarkaattiin, kulutusyhteiskuntaan, vartalokeskeisyyteen, mainontaan, identiteettiin ja tulkitsevaan sosiaaliseen konstruktionismiin liittyvää aihekirjallisuutta. Empiirinen tutkimus suoritettiin kvalitatiivisesti. Aineistonkeruumenetelmänä käytettiin osittain strukturoituja haastatteluja, ja aineiston analyysi toteutettiin narratiivianalyysin ja elämäntapakerronnan näkökulmasta. Haasta

### **Päälöydökset**

Tutkimuksen päälöydökset heijastavat aihekirjallisuutta; naisten elämäkokemukset ja mainonnan tulkinnat ovat vahvasti läsnä yksilön minäkuvan ja identiteetin rakentumisessa. Erityisesti vartalo- ja ulkonäkökeskeisten seikkojen rooli minäkuvan ja identiteetin muodostuksessa on merkittävä. Lisäksi kulttuurisen kontekstin vaikutus mainonnan tulkintaan ja identiteetin rakentumiseen on vähintäänkin huomattava.

### **Avainsanat**

Naiset, elämäntapakerronta, mainonta, identiteetti, länsimainen yhteiskunta, patriarkaatti, kulutusyhteiskunta, vartalokeskeisyys

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# 1. Introduction

This research examines women's identity construction processes through life stories and advertising experiences. It provides an extensive outlook on contemporary western society, its dominant patriarchal ideology and current prevailing cultural concepts of consumer culture and body culture and examines the consequences of these, as well as individual's personal life events, on individual's ad experiences and identity construction process. This research is broadly based on constructionist ontology, seeking to understand this constructionism from an interpretive viewpoint using narrative as method and methodology. The focus of this research is on cause and effect -relationships between women's life stories, advertisement experiences and identity construction process in a cultural context, contemporary body culture and female portrayal in advertising and their impact on identity construction process being of significant interest.

Body dissatisfaction can be considered as the pandemic of contemporary western society (Grabe et al. 2008; Rudd & Lennon 2001). Even as young as pre-adolescent girls struggle with their appearance; studies have shown that 70 percent of 9-year-old girls in San Francisco are on a diet, and half of the 6-year-old Canadian girls are so aware of their bodies that they are embarrassed to wear swimsuits in public (Harrison & Hefner 2006; Orbach 2005; Spitzer et al. 1999). Ingrassia [1995] argues that 90 percent of white, American adolescent girls are unhappy with their weight and that of these girls more than 60 percent have been on a diet at least once during the ongoing year (Bower 2001). The headlines all over us scream "*This is the kind of man women lust after!*" (www.iltasanomat.fi 2.3.2012), "*Guide to flirtatious makeup*" (Elle Finland 5/2011) and "*Dress up correctly and succeed!*" (Trendi 4/2011) constantly remind us of the importance of our appearance in western world today.

Adolescent girls and young women, like myself are born and raised in the society of body culture; a society that is saturated with bodily representations, sexuality being a pervasive round-the-clock truism and ideal appearance and physique being most valued achievements one can achieve (Clay et al. 2005 [Thompson et al. 1999]; Zimmerman & Dahlberg 2008). The appearance of women has been found to affect their life experiences significantly; overweight women are, for example, more likely to achieve low educational, professional and income levels than slim women, who are physically closer to the current western beauty ideal (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Freedman 2002). Girls and women, then, get to assimilate that achieving the attractive, accepted beauty ideal

depicted in media is a key to power, success, happiness and valued life (Lin & Yeh 2009; Rogers Wood & Petrie 2010; Solomon et al. 2006).

The depiction of women in media and advertising is a widely discussed and broadly studied topic of recent decades (Courtney & Lockeretz 1971; Ferguson et al. 1990; Lin 1998; Lin & Yeh 2009; Plakoyiannaki et al. 2008; Reichert et al. 2007; Zimmerman & Dahlberg 2008). Mass media and advertising have an important role in creating and preserving beauty ideals; approved cultural criteria that individuals desire and compare themselves to (DeBraganza & Hausenblas 2010; Solomon et al. 2006). Especially visual media, such as magazines and television, is considered one of the most aggressive and persistent intensifiers of socio-cultural pressures created through promoting beauty ideals (Groesz et al. 2002; Lavine et al. 1999; Scriven 2007; Stice et al. 1994). The depiction of women in media is often criticized as unrealistic, objectifying and narrow, reinforcing the body culture and the glorifying of “perfectness” (Bower 2001; DeBraganza & Hausenblas 2010; Freedman 2002; Grabe et al. 2008; Joy & Venkatesh 1994; Kim & Lennon 2007; Lin & Yeh 2009). According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) objectification of women has become a permanent part of western culture and the increase of sexualized female images in mass media has been so rapid and pervasive that it is impossible for anyone, anywhere or anytime to avoid them.

Advertising is often accused of reproducing stereotypes about gender, race, sexual orientation and social class and of causing consumer practices harmful to health (Csikszentmihalyi 2000); accused of being unrealistic and impossible to attain, beauty ideals and stereotypes prevalent in society and promoted by the media are found to have a number of psychological and physical negative effects on girls and women, especially (Freedman 2002; Richins 1991). These negative effects relate to issues such as poor self-image, low self-esteem and body image, depression, self-critique, shame and other negative emotions, weight problems, dieting, eating disorders and difficulties in sex life (Bessenoff 2006; Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Grabe et al. 2008; Jales & Majid 2009; Kim & Lennon 2007; Lavine et al. 1999; Lin & Kulik 2002; Plakoyiannaki et al. 2008; Reichert et al. 2007; Scriven 2007; Solomon et al. 2006; Spettigue et al. 2004; Spitzer et al. 1999; Stice et al. 1994). In addition, individual’s self-image, body image, and self-esteem are found to be strongly affected by how closely one’s appearance relates to society’s beauty ideal (Clay et al. 2005; Jalees & Majid 2009; Kim & Lennon 2007; Solomon 2006). Beauty ideals, then, can be suggested to likely affect and shape one’s self-image, body image and self-esteem and thus one’s whole identity (Reaves et al. 2004; Rudd & Lennon 2001).

Despite the accusations towards media and advertising of depicting unrealistic images of women and affecting the health of girls and women in a negative way, the issue is not that simple. Lin and Yeh (2009) emphasize that the concept of beauty always starts within cultures, nations and societies; media can then only influence, not generate, the conception of beauty. Additionally, not all women hold negative attitudes towards female depiction in media or consider it harmful, neither are they equally vulnerable or prone to suffer from the negative psychological and physical effects mentioned above (DeBraganza & Hausenblas 2010; Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Gustafson et al. 2008). Proneness to social comparison - comparing oneself to socially accepted standards, aiming to change oneself to meet those standards and regarding oneself a failure if failing to meet those standards – is considered one of the most significant predictors of suffering from these negative effects of female depiction in advertising (Bessenoff 2006; Clay et al. 2005; Festinger 1954; Jalees & Majid 2009; Lin & Kulik 2002; Stice et al. 2001; Wilcox & Laird 2000). In addition, factors such as individual's age, race, self-awareness and social support have been found to affect advertising experiences and their effects on individuals (Bearman 2006; DeBraganza & Hausenblas 2010; Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Kozar & Damhorst 2009; Stice et al. 2001; Wilcox & Laird 2000).

Advertising experiences and interpretations are found to be heavily influenced by individuals' life experiences, personal characteristics, interests and future goals (Atkinson 1997; Mick & Buhl 1992). Life experiences of individuals can be explored through life stories; narratives of lives told by the individual with his/her own words. These life stories are reflective of a person's life and are found to influence individual's advertising experiences and interpretation, for example. (Atkinson 1997; Bertaux & Kohli 1984; Mick & Buhl 1992)

The alarming body-consciousness and importance of appearance in western society is an issue definitely worth of and, in my opinion *de rigueur*, paying attention to. Since the current beauty ideal is claimed to have serious negative effects on the lives and well-being of girls and women and since media is often accused of being responsible for promoting this ideal, I find it extremely important to take these problems into scrutiny. This research aims at, instead of generalizing the lack of ethics and moral of female portrayal in advertising, understanding and taking the cultural context, individuals' personal life experiences and their life stories and their impacts on ad experiencing and constructing meanings of self, others and the world, when studying ad experiences and women's identity construction processes.

## 1.1. Research objectives and research question

The field of consumer research is continuously studying how products, brands and possessions achieve meaning and how consumers interpret the meaning and apply it to their lives through identity construction (Escalas & Bettman 2000). This research relates to this in studying identity construction through advertising experiences and meanings attached to advertisements. What is in special interest in this study is women's identity construction through advertising that promotes the contemporary body culture.

Thus, the research question in this study is:

***How do women's life stories and the cultural context they live in affect their advertising experiences, and how are these linkages present in women's identity construction processes?***

Additional questions in this research are:

- How do women born in the body culture era experience and interpret advertisements that promote body culture through female and bodily representations?
- How do these advertising experiences connect with women's life experiences?
- How is the cultural context that is western society, visible in women's ad experiences?
- How do women construct their identities and create their sense of self and the world through the connections between the culture they live in, their life stories, and advertising experiences?

This research is qualitative in nature. Instead of examining realistic, objective descriptions of the world or language itself, this research follows Riessman (1993) and interprets *interpretations of the world*. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) suggest that objective reality is non-existent and that things are not known as things *per se* but through their representations. Being constructionist and interpretive in nature, this research represent things about social life and culture through individuals' stories; these stories, then, are the actual objects of this study (Escalas & Bettman 2000; Riessman 1993).

## **1.2. Research structure**

This research can be divided into theoretical and empirical parts. The theoretical part introduces the theoretical framework for this research and discusses existing literature and academic research relevant to this study. The theoretical framework provides background, definitions and relevant information relating to 1) contemporary western society, its dominant patriarchal ideology and the concepts of consumer culture and body culture, 2) advertising, its role in western society and history of female portrayal in advertising, 3) identity construction and the role of advertising in it, and 4) interpretive social constructionism.

The empirical part of the research consists of 1) research design; general methodology, research context, data collection methods, sample choosing and data analysis, 2) main findings of the study, 3) interpretation of the main findings; identity construction based on life story and ad experiences and 4) conclusions, limitations and suggestions for future research. At the end of this research bibliography is provided. As well, advertisements used in the phenomenological ad interview are attached as appendix.

## **1.3. Central definitions**

*Patriarchy*: Dominant ideology of western society which promotes and reinforces men's superiority to women (Archer & Lloyd 2002; Freedman 2002; Thompson 1990).

*Consumer culture*: Western ideology of worshipping goods (Belk 1988); considering consumption as a means to self-improvement and representing the marketplace and its symbols central in consumers' identity construction process (Featherstone 1991; Holt 2002; Lin & Yeh 2009).

*Body culture*: Western ideology of representing the body as the vehicle of pleasure and suggesting that meeting the standards of society's idealized body increases the exchange-value of one's actual body (Featherstone 1991).

*Interpretive social constructionism*: Ideology of individuals constructing knowledge and reality as outcomes of social processes and interactions; interpreting interpretations of the world, that is, individuals' stories (Burr 1995; Escalas & Bettman 2000; Riessman 1993).

## 2. Ideology

In order to understand the importance and relevance of the topic of this research and the cultural context the research is conducted in, it is justifiable to provide background information and discussion of certain aspects of contemporary western society. In this chapter, the concept of ideology is introduced and the dominant ideology of western society, patriarchy, is discussed as well as criticisms towards patriarchy provided.

### 2.1. Definition: Ideology

*“Prior appeals to see the world “as it really is” may in fact be recognized as invitations to view it as those in power do.”*

(Hirschman 1993, p. 552)

A single, comprehensive definition of the term ideology is non-existent; it can be defined in a number of ways and given a number of different meanings (Eagleton 1991). However, one of the most common definitions, the one also used in this study, has to do with promulgating the value and belief system of a dominant social group and legitimating its power and control (Eagleton 1991; Hirschman 1993). According to this definition, ideology is a system of ideas expressing the interests of a certain dominant group in order to secure and maintain its dominant position, thus representing group relations – between men and women, for example - in an illusory form (Thompson 1990). Legitimizing the power of a dominant group can be exercised through promoting and universalizing this group’s beliefs and values and making them appear self-evident, denigrating deviating beliefs and values or screening social reality to make it convenient for the dominant group, also known as mystification (Eagleton 1991; Hirschman 1993).

Ideologies provide plausible justifications for certain social behavior which otherwise might be criticized. Society’s non-dominant groups may gradually come to internalize these justifications and rationalize their inferiority, oppression and suffering as inevitable and deserved. (Eagleton 1991) This internalization of dominant group’s justifications together with mystification of the social reality may lead to false perceptions of the reality among non-dominant groups, also known as false

consciousness, mental colonization or self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Freedman 2002; Orbach 2005).

## **2.2. Patriarchy**

Western society is claimed to be patriarchal; male-dominant and privilege men over women. Patriarchy can, thus, be regarded as the contemporary dominant ideology of western society. (Archer & Lloyd 2002; Freedman 2002) In western countries, patriarchy has been emerged and reinforced from early days on in the form of human origin stories, myths and religious institutions; in these men are, almost without exception, presented as heroes and superior to women, as well as God is referred to as male, “the Father”, and all priests and prophets being male (Freedman 2002).

Patriarchy is accused of creating false consciousness in the society by reinforcing values and beliefs of men’s superiority to women. According to the above definition of dominant ideology, women along with the whole western society can be considered as holding “false consciousness” of the world and be “mentally colonized” of their place in the society by patriarchy. Through fundamentally internalizing the apparent self-evidence of women’s inferiority to men, girls and women may unconsciously start to denigrate and objectify themselves and their appearances as a consequence of culturally presented and promoted male-dominant, patriarchal ideology (Bailey 2002; Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Freedman 2002; Lin & Yeh 2009; Orbach 2005).

Although women have never ruled over men, they have previously had more equal positions than today; according to Freedman (2002) societies have become more complex and less equal at the same time. He refers to Engels [1884] who argues that women’s oppression in contemporary society is a consequence of the settled agriculture followed by complex class and gender relations as well as of private property and class hierarchies. Later the shift from agriculture towards trade and commercial life further stratified societies and increased class hierarchies (Freedman 2002). Patriarchal dominance, then, seems to stem heavily from reproductive and economic origins and capitalism; excluding household from wage work narrowed women’s opportunities to earn wages and led to women’s economic dependency on men. Although women’s domestic work - raising children, cooking and making clothes, for example - has had an enormous impact on the growth of capitalist economies, it has not been equally respected with work outside home. Even after entering the work force outside home women had to struggle between paid work and domestic work, which

further disadvantaged women's place in the labor market. (Freedman 2002) This historical role division of men outside and women within the home has played a major role in the formation and rooting of the contemporary gender role ethics, social norms and patriarchy in general (Lin & Yeh 2009).

As any dominant ideology, patriarchy not only has the power to distort, falsify and mystificate social reality, but also to decide what is ethically acceptable and aesthetically pleasing (Denzin 2001). Freedman (2002) refers to "feminization" of occupations and suggests that patriarchy is the underlying reason for the current wage gap between sexes; when women outnumber men in certain profession areas such as nursing, the wages of the profession decrease instantly. Bailey (2002), again, argues that women's seemingly own, personal opinions and preferences often originate from fundamentally internalized patriarchal beliefs and preferences. The suggestion of patriarchy deciding what is aesthetically pleasing indicates that, the current beauty ideals as well as female portrayal in media and advertising are, at least to some extent, mediated by the patriarchal ideology.

### **2.3. Criticisms towards patriarchy**

Reinforcing male-dominance in western society is strongly criticized by especially various feminist theories and perspectives (Bailey 2002; Denzin & Lincoln 2005). A number of studies throughout recent decades criticize consumer research and science in general for promoting patriarchy and thus being unbalanced and biased (Archer & Lloyd 2002; Arnould & Thompson 2005; Bristor & Fischer 1993; Denzin 2001; Denzin & Lincoln 2005; Hirschman 1993; Joy & Venkatesh 1994; McCracken 1987). Much of this critique relates to the absence of women as a gender and femininity as an ideology in science and knowledge in general (Archer & Lloyd 2002; Dallery 1989; Joy & Venkatesh 1994). Knowledge produced by science is claimed to be inadequate and biased in terms of gender, race and class and accused of focusing mainly on white, middle-class, professional groups of males (Harding 1986; Hirschman 1993). Issues such as taken-for-granted gender assumptions, scientific objectivity, methodology, and gender biases have received notable attention among consumer research critics (Bristor & Fischer 1993; Dallery 1989; Denzin 2001; Joy & Venkatesh 1994; Morgan 1980; Olesen 2005).

Anderson (1983) claims that no science is objective since, “what counts as scientific knowledge is relative to the group that produces the knowledge.” Olesen (2005) agrees with this assumption of socially located knowledge. Criticism is justified through the concept of discourse; objective knowledge is claimed to be nonexistent since knowledge and descriptions of the world are always constructed through language and are then shaped by dominant discourses (Bristor & Fischer 1993; Joy & Venkatesh 1994). These dominant, patriarchal discourses present in language provide inadequate vocabulary for women to fully express themselves and emphasize the likeliness of gender biases (Bristor & Fischer 1993; Freedman 2002; Renegar & Sowards 2003).

It is argued that scientists approach their subjects based on unquestioned, unconscious assumptions and reinforced cultural stereotypes (Joy & Venkatesh 1994; Morgan 1980). One source of these cultural stereotypes is the ideological dualism between masculinity and femininity; the ideologies of separate sexual spheres, evolving since the 1800’s, are criticized by a number of feminists and postmodernists, among others (Archer & Lloyd 2002; Dallery 1989; Freedman 2002; Joy & Venkatesh 1994). Quantitative models, rationality maximization, utility emphasis, objectivity and control over consumers are examples of the use masculine ideology, preferred over feminine dualisms, in science (Joy & Venkatesh 1994; Hirschman 1993), further reinforcing the assumption of science being male-dominant and alienating women from science in general.

Although some theories claim that men and women are fundamentally the same, social environment, language and discourses at the latest shape and differentiate men and women from each other (Bristor & Fischer 1993; Dallery 1989). Gender can thus be considered as a filter through which the social world is experienced (Bristor & Fischer 1993). Women, at least in the past, have had weaker educational opportunities than men, thus been less likely than men to become scientists. Women’s interests are then claimed to be reflected in research less likely than of men. (Archer & Lloyd 2002; Bristor & Fischer 1993) In addition, Bristor and Fischer (1993) suggest that in the contemporary consumer culture, the dualistic gender stereotypes mark the male as “marketer” and female as “consumer”, suggesting that it is men who actually decide what women really want.

Today, little by little, questioning the existence of objectivity or value-free knowledge, adopting narrative discourse into research, and understanding the effects of history, context and gender on knowledge are gradually recognized in various sciences (Denzin 2001; Joy & Venkatesh 1994).

### **3. Culture**

In this chapter two current, interrelating cultural concepts – consumer culture and body culture – of western society are introduced. First, consumer culture is described after which body culture, relating closely to consumer culture, is discussed through the concepts of medicalization and commercialization of the body.

#### **3.1. Consumer culture**

One of the most common definitions of consumption, stemming from classical economics, refers to purchasing of goods and services for their use-value (Du Gay et al. 1997). Denzin (2001), however, argues that consumption is more than just acquisition, use and divestment of goods and services; it is a complex concept in a hegemonic marketplace where power, ideology, gender and social class influence one another by empowering, liberating, stereotyping or otherwise shaping consumers. Arnould and Thompson (2005) emphasize the contextual aspect of consumption and define it as a historically shaped sociocultural practice emerging within ideology-bound marketplaces.

The commercialization of western society and the rise of the consumer culture have emerged from the mid-20th century on. New forms of media started to depict new kinds of standards and forms of appropriate and desired behavior, often associated with hedonist lifestyle and leisure. (Featherstone 1991; Joy & Venkatesh 1994) Providing consumption as a means to personal authenticity and self-improvement are central to consumer culture ideology; individual's freedom to consume is represented as the basic individual freedom in society, and the marketplace and its symbols have become central factors within consumers' identity construction and visual identity consumption processes (Featherstone 1991; Holt 2002; Lin & Yeh 2009). Belk (1988) terms consumer culture "commodity fetishism", consumers worshipping goods and expecting that goods have the power to bring happiness and that ultimate happiness always lies in the next purchases.

Mass media is often criticized of reinforcing consumer culture by channeling and reproducing consumers' thoughts and actions to meet society's dominant patriarchal interests (Hirschman 1993). Advertising, especially, is claimed to be one of the central purveyors of the contemporary consumer culture values (Featherstone 1991). Du Gay et al. (1997) argue that meanings are in advance

defined by mass media such as advertising, and often symbolically encoded into advertisements (Belk 1988; Grayson & Martinec 2004; Holt 2002). Individuals' tastes, preferences and behaviors are thus claimed to be determined beforehand by consumer culture and presented to the public through mass media (Joy & Venkatesh 1994). Needs, then, are defined and produced by the systems of meaning through which consumers make sense of the world and themselves (Belk 1988; Denzin 2001; Du Gay et al. 1993). These meanings readily constructed and over-determined for consumers, "cultural scripts", shape consumers' identities and lifestyle goals conforming the hegemonic postmodern market conditions (Arnould & Thompson 2005; Belk 1988; Du Gay et al. 1993; Grayson & Martinec 2004; Hirschman 1993; Holt 2002). According to Arnould and Thompson (2005), analysis of these symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements may expose the consumer ideology promoted in advertising and reveal how the capitalist cultural production system bombards consumers with certain identity and lifestyle ideals.

Relating to this, Arnould & Thompson (2005) introduce Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), a concept exploring consumer actions, cultural meanings, the marketplace and relationships between them, emphasizing the contextual, experiential, social and cultural aspects of consumption and focusing on commodity consumption and marketing symbols such as images, texts and objects structuring consumer identities (Arnould & Thompson 2005; Belk 1988; Denzin & Lincoln 2005). CCT frames consumers' conceivable actions and thoughts and presents some behaviors and interpretations more likely than others (Holt 1997). Consumer Culture Theory, then, exposes the power and ideology present in discourses, cultural commodities and texts – such as advertising - and reveals the underlying institutional and social structures within consumption practices (Arnould & Thompson 2005; Denzin 2001).

### **3.2. Body culture**

In addition to worshipping goods, worshipping physical appearance is another key consumer trait in the contemporary western consumer culture (Burton et al. 1994). As the democratization of western society increased consumerism and amount of products in the society, bodily images in advertising increased simultaneously, leading to centrality of the body in consumer culture and emergence of body culture (Joy & Venkatesh 1994). Consumer culture represents the body as the vehicle of pleasure and self-expression and suggests that meeting the standards of society's idealized body - presented in and promoted by media - will increase the exchange-value of one's actual body

(Featherstone 1991). Bodily images promoting consumer culture are considered most visible of all commodification objects in current marketing, and the amount of these images is suggested to continuously grow in advertising and popular media (Featherstone 1991; Joy and Venkatesh 1994).

Why have bodies, and especially women's bodies, then, become so central and under scrutiny in contemporary western society and consumer culture? Differences in traditional roles of men and women, perceived usefulness of women's physical attractiveness to gain power and the impact of attractiveness on women's social status (Burton et al. 1994) don't alone explain the pervasiveness of the current body-centric culture. Freedman (2002) argues that two forces, medicalization and commercialization of the body, are responsible for women's bodily authority over men. These two forces are discussed next.

### **3.2.1. Medicalization of the body**

A few centuries back, before 1700's, the ideal body was male body; it was considered more perfectly developed than female body and thus gaining higher status in the society. During the following centuries, however, a number of medical discoveries regarding the human body were made, thoroughly shaping the whole culture and perceiving of the body. (Joy & Venkatesh 1994)

In 1700's medicine developed and evolved in western society (Freedman 2002). Male and female bodies were distinguished as two fundamentally different bodies and the concept of medical body was discovered (Joy & Venkatesh 1994). Medical body occurred in distinction between inner and outer body, inner body relating to health and functioning of the body, outer relating to appearance and control of the body in social space (Featherstone 1991). At that time men were the only ones to be educated, to become medical experts, and to gain expertise and professional authority over women's body in terms of medicine, cure and even sexuality; for example, genital massage and vibrators were used by male experts to invoke female orgasms as a cure, from early days on supporting the patriarchal ideology of men's superiority to women and indicating that only men can - and are to - sexually satisfy a woman (Freedman 2002).

The focus on female body over mind, the reproductive capacity of the female body as well as differentiating and gendering male and female body from a sociological perspective led together to overemphasizing the physical condition of the female body (Freedman 2002; Joy & Venkatesh 1994). Gendering the body follows the gender dualist dichotomies that present masculinity and male body as rational and neutral and femininity and female body as expressive and sexual, servicing male-dominant ideologies and institutions (Joy & Venkatesh 1994). Freedman (2002) suggests that, partly due to these gender dualist dichotomies, women have learned to gain power through seduction and attraction and, additionally, that the internalized belief that women's bodies – instead of minds - were the source of any discontent has led women to overly focus on their physical appearance and shaping of the body.

As consumer culture blossomed from the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century on, inner and outer body gradually integrated. Since then, continuing even today, the body has become a representational tool; the main purpose of taking care of the inner body has become to enhance the appearance of the outer body. (Featherstone 1991; Joy & Venkatesh 1994)

### **3.2.2. Commercialization of the body**

Commercialization and the rise of consumer culture have exerted a powerful influence on the cultural meanings of the female body (Freedman 2002; Joy & Venkatesh 1994). From the beginning of the consumer culture era from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century on, women, body, and particularly the female body, has actively been represented in popular culture and advertising (Bower 2001; Featherstone 1991; Freedman 2002; Grabe et al. 2008; Joy & Venkatesh 1994).

The current economic abundance of western society is often associated with the current body ideal, emphasis of body maintenance and control and the body culture as a whole (Freedman 2002; Joy & Venkatesh 1994). Joy and Venkatesh (1994) refer to Bordo [1990, 1993], according to whom consumer culture and body culture glorify slender body ideal, associated with health and happiness, as a cultural icon and standard by which all women should be judged. Appearance not meeting the socially accepted standards, such as slimness and fitness, is today considered as laziness, lack of self-discipline and even moral failure (Featherstone 1991; Joy & Venkatesh 1994). Accordingly,

Bordo [1990, 1993] argues that in current western society slender body is an equivalent of self-discipline and control of impulse and desire (Joy & Venkatesh 1994). The current beauty ideal thus creates a social hierarchy and competition among women by privileging not only thin, but thin, white, able-bodied women with western physics and figure. Succeeding in this social bodily hierarchy has been proven to affect women's job positions, for example; slim women are found to more likely achieve higher educational, professional and income levels than overweight women (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Freedman 2002). Kim and Lennon (2007), among others, argue that appearance and physical characteristics are one of the most important evaluative criteria of women today. Joy and Venkatesh (1994) add that the person with socially approved aesthetic body is seen as the moral equivalent of a good person - the person who feels good (inner body), looks good (outer body) and, ultimately, *is* good (moral).

Popular media and advertising represent a rather homogenous and "colonized" female body of certain size and shape (Featherstone 1991; Freedman 2002; Joy & Venkatesh 1994); overweight individuals, if at all present in advertising, are often portrayed as glum, downcast or humorous characters (Featherstone 1991). Dallery (1989) adds that the colonization of the female body is exercised by the hegemony of male desire. This depiction of the socially approved, almost impossible-to-attain female ideal pressures women into comparing themselves with those images and controlling their bodies to achieve the idealized standards (Bessenoff 2006; Clay et al. 2005; Featherstone 1991; Freedman 2002; Jalees & Majid 2009; Lin & Kulik 2002). The current female portrayal prefers thin, white, western physics as ideal and is increasingly spreading worldwide over the western borders as well (Freedman 2002). Often accused of being unilateral and unrealistic, the contemporary beauty ideal is considered as a commonly accepted norm and a central requirement for beauty (DeBraganza & Hausenblas 2010; Grabe et al. 2008).

Featherstone (1991) argues that connecting images of beautiful and sexual bodies with hedonism and pleasure emphasizes the importance of appearance and body maintenance through which the accepted appearance and social approval can be attained. Bodily advertising images make individuals overly self-conscious of their appearance, the outer body, and encourage them towards self-improvement through shaping and making effort on their bodies in order to attain society's idealized appearance promoted in media images (Featherstone 1991; Joy & Venkatesh 1994).

The contemporary body culture is strongly criticized particularly among the feminist movements. One of the key issues feminists tackle is the very depiction of women in advertising and popular culture discussed above; many feminist perspectives accuse advertising images of reinforcing inequalities between men and women by depicting women as sexual objects or in an otherwise demeaning way (Dallery 1989; Freedman 2002). What is more, women are claimed to often be depicted not only as desired sexual objects but as central materialized *commodities* of the consumer culture (Freedman 2002; Joy & Venkatesh 1994). Bordo [1990, 1993] criticizes the body culture of emphasizing the “idealness” of the slender, plastic and dieting female body (Joy & Venkatesh 1994). Plasticity, in this context, refers to body culture’s ideology of limitlessly improving and shaping one’s body through exercising, dieting and plastic surgeries to meet socially accepted standards. What needs to be remembered, however, is the vast variety of different feminist perspectives and opinions among them; what other feminist groups consider liberating, such as miniskirts, other consider demeaning. Today feminist movements, indeed, struggle with the redefining of sexuality; they balance between fighting against the demeaning sexualized images of women and simultaneously demanding women the right to enjoy their femininity and sexuality without shame. (Freedman 2002)

The female body has indeed had an essential impact on the growth of the market culture as a whole (Featherstone 1991; Joy and Venkatesh 1994); the common saying “sex sells” seems, then, not to be completely airy-fairy (Reichert & Carpenter 2004). Freedman (2002) adds on that western society’s development from agriculture to commercial capitalism has led not only to increased bodily representations in popular culture but to a sexualization of the western culture as a whole; in addition to bodily representations and beauty ideals, publicly commercialized erotic sexuality functions today as one of the key determinants of one’s self and identity construction processes.

## **4. Advertising**

In this chapter, advertising and its role in western society is introduced. After defining the concept of advertising and its role in society, the existence and presence of body culture and especially women and the female body in advertising is discussed. First, beauty ideals over the past century from 1900's until today are presented and then female depiction in advertising over the past decades, starting from 1960's until today, is discussed in order to understand how the rise of the consumer and body culture are reflective and reinforced in advertising through the changes and development of the portrayal of the female body.

### **4.1. Definition: Advertising**

In western countries society, economy and business are closely associated with culture; culturally shared meanings are often created and shaped in market environment (Moisander & Valtonen 2006). Lin and Kulik (2002) suggest that advertising reflects the contemporary socio-cultural reality of certain society but simultaneously and continuously shapes societal and cultural values. Marketers and advertisers can be considered as cultural gatekeepers, who not only shape their products and services to meet the current expectations of consumers but also create new needs and wants by shaping the expectations of consumers (Lin & Yeh 2009; Moisander & Valtonen 2006). Bordo [1990, 1993] agrees that media images are both representations and reproducers of culture (Joy & Venkatesh 1994).

Strinati [1995] argues that advertising is one of the most visible expressers of culture, in which reality and illusion are difficult to distinguish from one another (Percy & Elliott 2009). Lin and Yeh (2009) suggest that advertisements provide a mix of cultural meanings, societal values and personal dreams to reflect the wants and needs of individuals. Advertising can also be considered as a powerful form of propaganda that controls and shapes one's consciousness and perceptions of oneself, self-image and society and changes individuals' behaviors, attitudes and preferences (Lavine et al. 1999; Lin & Yeh 2009; Percy & Elliott 2009). Advertising can, thus, be considered to have a major role in the formation of culturally and socially accepted norms, such as beauty standards (Lin & Yeh 2009). Buttle [1991] agrees that advertising constructs realities and shapes individuals' attitudes, values and sense of self and, in addition, provides consumers with role

models (Percy & Elliott 2009). It guides consumers with hints of what is “needed” – needed to be feminine or masculine, for example (Lin & Yeh 2009). The cultural context would, according to McCracken (1987), be incomprehensible without these instructions provided by advertising.

Advertising has an important role in consumption and current consumer culture; with a purpose of selling something it converts consumers towards products and services by developing visual associations of signs and symbols to create a positive product images and transferring meanings from culturally constituted world to consumer goods and further to consumers (Lin & Yeh 2009; McCracken 1987; Percy & Elliott 2009). Advertising can, then, be considered as a pervasive communication arena in which human reality is mediated (Mick & Buhl 1992).

Advertising has been criticized of its deceptive nature and of creating unnecessary needs among consumers. Critics accuse advertising of stimulating materialism, exaggerating the requirements of good life and depicting unattainable goals. (Percy and Elliott 2009) Scriven (2007), for example, accuses media in all its forms of creating and maintaining the unrealistic, digitally manipulated beauty ideal. However, Percy and Elliott (2009) emphasize that media alone is not responsible of depicting unattainable life goals, such as unrealistic beauty ideals. Accusations of the distorted, narrowly defined beauty ideal have indeed been pointed not only towards the media but towards fashion magazine publishers, advertising agencies and beauty product producers as well (Rudd & Lennon 2001).

#### **4.2. Body culture in advertising**

As earlier mentioned, female portrayal and physical attractiveness of the female body has actively been presented in advertising and popular culture from the beginning of the consumer culture era in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century on (Featherstone 1991; Freedman 2002; Joy & Venkatesh 1994; Lin & Yeh 2009). Commercialization of western society has truly had a powerful influence on the cultural meanings of the female body; depictions of women in advertising are seen as a direct outgrowth of the modern consumer culture (Freedman 2002; Joy & Venkatesh 1994; Lin & Yeh 2009). Today advertising is claimed to be one of the central purveyors of bodily images promoting the values of contemporary consumer culture and body culture (Featherstone 1991; Joy & Venkatesh 1994). As consumption has become the central concept for satisfying life, it is argued that women in advertising are, as well, often depicted as commodities (Freedman 2002; Joy & Venkatesh 1994).

Media is accused of depicting the current beauty ideal as a luxury worth pursuing and of emphasizing the importance of beauty and appearance in women's lives (Spettigue et al. 2004; Wilcox & Laird 2000). Lin and Yeh (2009) suggest that the depictions of women in advertising rich in social, cultural, psychological and historical meaning are concrete symbols of objectification and representative of male desire.

In order to understand and provide examples of the changes in female depiction in advertising, an outlook of beauty ideals of past decades is presented next. After that, common characteristics of female portrayal in advertising starting from 1960's until today are presented.

#### **4.2.1. Beauty ideals**

Throughout time women all over the world have attempted to achieve the appearance considered beautiful in one's society and culture. Along time, the expectations and approvals of society on what constitutes as beautiful have changed. (Solomon et al. 2006) Before 1900's the long-term female beauty ideal in western societies was voluptuous, buxom and full-figured; around 1920's the ideal shifted towards more slender and boyish figure for the first time (Freedman 2002). Banner [1980] and Grogan [1999] mention flappers, stylish and independent women, as the beauty icons of 1920's (Redmond 2003; Solomon et al. 2006). During 1930's, however, beauty ideals shifted back towards round, soft and curvaceous figure, remaining unchanged all the way to the end of 1950's (Solomon et al. 2006).

The first significantly radical, and, at the moment rather permanent, shift in ideals of beauty in western societies was experienced around 1960's, when previously idealized feminine buxomness and curvaceous figures were replaced by glorifying of extreme slimness (Redmond 2003). Grogan [1999] argues that this idealization of extreme slimness – starvation, even – was at its strongest during 1990's (Redmond 2003), but, has more or less remained as the dominant beauty ideal in western society even today. The contemporary beauty ideal is, however, contradictory, to say the least. Today female figures in media and advertising seem to be extremely slim and low of fat, however simultaneously buxom and voluptuous as well as comprising white, western features while simultaneously having a brown, tanned skin. These dominant features in today's beauty ideals are discussed later on in terms of current female portrayal in advertising.

Bordo [1993] suggests that changes in beauty ideals are explained through changing ideologies and meanings in society and culture (Redmond 2003). In 1800's slimness and thinness were associated with illnesses, weaknesses and diseases such as tuberculosis; roundness and sturdiness were, again, signs of wealth, health and fertility. As western economy gained abundance from the mid-1950's on, the associations turned the other way around; slimness and thinness are now associated with success and self-discipline, whereas roundness is a sign of low morale, lack of self-discipline and failing (Featherstone 1991; Joy & Venkatesh 1994). Joy and Venkatesh (1994) also refer to Bordo [1990, 1993] and argue that, interestingly, the currently idealized slender body is originally associated with male and masculinity, since self-control and self-management – characteristics needed to attain and control the (slim) body – are coded as male within the dual dichotomies of gender characteristics. This embracement of slender body among women can then, on one hand, be considered as liberating women from previous maternal and reproductive demands (curvaceous referring to fertility), but on the other, further promoting patriarchy through male-preferred gender dualism (control, self-management, androgynous body).

#### **4.2.2. Female portrayal in advertising**

Next, female portrayal and common characteristics of the female depiction in advertising during 1960-1990's and from 1990's until today are introduced and discussed.

##### *1960-1990's*

Women's role and status, as well as gender roles, constantly evolve and change in society (Solomon et al. 2006). One of the most powerful turning points relating to gender roles emerged during the 1960's as women began to take part into labor force (Lundstrom & Sciglimpaglia 1977; Solomon et al. 2006; Zimmerman & Dahlberg 2008). Along with this women's movement towards workforce, interest towards studying the depiction of women in advertising as well as attitudes of women towards this female depiction increased significantly in the field of research and science in general (Zimmerman & Dahlberg 2008).

Despite its significance towards the gender role assumptions in society, women's shift to workforce was relatively weakly reflected in advertising (Lundstrom & Schglimpaglia 1977). In fact, at the time of women's labor movement in 1960's and 1970's the depiction of women in certain stereotypical gender roles in advertising actually had just emerged (Beetles & Harris 2005). Most common female stereotypes presented in advertising during 1960's and 1970's were 1) *housewife*, 2) *decorative object*, 3) *sex object* and 4) *dependent on man* (Courtney & Lockeretz 1971; Ferguson et al. 1990; Venkatesan & Losco 1975). Women, then, were portrayed in traditional stereotypical gender roles in advertising, despite their participation into workforce in real life (Courtney & Lockeretz 1971; Lundstrom & Schglimpaglia 1977; Zimmerman & Dahlberg 2008). For example, only 9% of all women portrayed in print ads at 1970 were portrayed in a working role such as clerk or teacher. None of these working roles was a high-profession position. Similarly, only 12% of all working roles in print ads in 1970 were portrayed as depicting women, even though the percentage of women in U.S. workforce in 1970 was in fact 33. (Courtney & Lockeretz 1971) From 1971 to 1972, however, this portrayal of women in working roles in print ads increased from 12% to 21% (Wagner & Banos 1973). It can be that women becoming part of the workforce was reflected in advertising not directly, but unobserved, indirectly. Even though the depiction of women as workforce didn't reflect the reality of 1960-1970 accurately, the depiction of women as sex objects decreased during that time comparing 1961 and 1971 (Venkatesan & Losco 1975). This decrease in sex object portrayal may, then, be an outcome of women's participation to workforce, indirectly reflecting the changes in women's role in society. Despite the decrease of sex object portrayals between 1960's and 1970's, it is, even today, considered one of the most commonly used stereotypes in female portrayal in advertising (Venkatesan & Losco 1975).

In addition to decrease of sex object portrayals of women in advertising, full body shots of women were rare in 1960's and 1970's advertising; female beauty was, then, associated more focused with face than the whole body (Sypeck et al. 2004). From 1980's on, however, full body shots of often scantily dressed female body became a broadly pervaded trend within especially print advertising (Sypeck et al. 2004; Zimmerman & Dahlberg 2008). Lin (1998) found that in 1990's women in advertising were significantly more often depicted as attractive, fit, scantily dressed, sexy and sex object than were men. Many of these attributes examined in Lin's (1998) research, such as clothing, body shape and physical contact, are strongly related to body. This, together with the notion of the increase of scantily dressed women's full body shots in advertising (Sypeck et al. 2004; Zimmerman & Dahlberg 2008) supports the notion that the previously face-centered thought of beauty started to shift towards the full body from 1980's on and reflects, then, the rise of the body

culture. As Redmond (2003) argues, extreme thinness of the female body became a dominant beauty ideal and thus was also vastly reinforced in advertising images especially in 1990's. However, as this characteristic is prevailing even today, it is discussed in more detail in the next section which discusses the current state and common characteristics of female portrayal in advertising.

### 2000-2010's

Some researchers argue that the depiction of women in traditional stereotypical gender roles and professions continues even today (Plakoyiannaki et al. 2008; Reichert et al. 2007). Plakoyiannaki et al. (2008) noticed that of contemporary online advertisements, over 50% portray women as decorative or sex objects and 18% in other traditional roles such as housewife or mother. Solomon et al. (2006), however, argue that traditional stereotype and gender role portrayals in advertising are decreasing and gradually stepping aside. Examples of this shift are *role reversal* and *role switching*; women absorbing roles and professions traditionally associated with men and vice versa (Lundstrom & Sciglimpaglia 1977; Solomon et al. 2006). Some even criticize today's advertising of over-replacing women's traditional working roles; women portrayed in a work setting are nowadays depicted often exclusively in glamorous, successful manager positions instead of providing a variety of working roles of different positions in female media depiction (Solomon et al. 2006).

Three repetitive characteristics in female depiction can be found in today's western advertising; thinness, whiteness and sexiness. These characteristics are discussed next.

From 1980's on, women in media and popular culture have literally narrowed over time. Body mass index (BMI), a measurement of body fat based on height and weight has often been used to study the sizes of women in advertising. BMI 18.5-24.9 is considered normal, lower than 18.5 underweight and lower than 17.5 anorexic. In Playboy-magazines of 1980-1999, for example, 99% of the centerfold girls are underweight (BMI < 18.5), of which 29% are anorexic (BMI < 17.5). Similarly, between 1980 and 1985 *all* (100%) Miss America beauty pageant winners were underweight (BMI <18.5), of which 17% anorexic (BMI < 17.5). (Freedman 2000; Spitzer et al. 1999; Sypeck et al. 2004) This unilateral, biased beauty ideal is, from men's magazines and beauty pageants, widely spread within the mass media and advertising through images of young, beautiful, flawless and increasingly thin models (Bower 2001; DeBraganza & Hausenblas 2010; Fredrickson

& Roberts 1997; Grabe et al. 2008; Jalees & Majid 2009; Kim & Lennon 2007; Lin 1998; Redmond 2003; Trampe et al. 2007). Relating to this narrowing of the female body in media, Nichter and Nichter [1991] note that the ideal body of adolescent girls is described as 170 cm of height, 45 kg of weight, BMI thus being as alarmingly low as 15.6, being significantly anorexic (Clay et al. 2005; Groesz et al. 2002). In addition to the fact that that low BMI is dangerous for one's health, the genetic factors and physiology make attaining such proportions and BMI simply impossible for the majority of girls and women (Groesz et al. 2002; Posavac et al. 2001). Wolf [1991] argues that only one out of 40 000 women, that is 0.0025% of all women on earth, are able to achieve that type of unrealistic "ideal" figure (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997). Despite this media seems to represent women as underweight and anorexic almost without exception (Spitzer et al. 1999).

Digital photo manipulation is believed to strengthen the unrealistic portrayal of women and the distorted beauty ideal in the society (Kim & Lennon 2007; Reaves et al. 2004; Scriven 2007). Although many girls and women are aware of the manipulation of advertising images, the awareness doesn't seem to decrease the anxiety caused by these images; female portrayal seems to carry a number of harmful effects on the lives of girls and women despite knowing that the images aren't real (Reaves et al. 2004; Zimmerman & Dahlberg 2008).

In addition to thinness, the vast majority of women in western society's advertising are white (DeBraganza & Hausenblas 2010; Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Gill 2009; Redmond 2003). In one issue of 2002 *Cosmopolitan* magazines, for example, 99% of ad models are white, 97 ads including only one non-white model. In *Company* magazine issue of the same year the number was 97%; 59 ads including two non-white models. Instead, in an issue of *Bliss* magazine "only" 85% of models are white; 27 ads include non-white models. However, these ads including non-white models are invariably related to school or drug education, not beauty. (Redmond 2003) White color is often associated with pureness and glow and seen as a symbolic meaning to innocence and heavenly; Redmond (2003) argues that in advertising woman is often portrayed as white, light-haired creature in light surroundings and simultaneously as bodily, heavenly, glowing and to some extent transparent. Although whiteness and light are often associated with beauty, desirability and vitality it can also be associated with death; the cleanness, glow and heavenly nature can symbolize sterility and lack of life. (Redmond 2003)

The third characteristic of current female portrayal in advertising is the use of sex, which has continuously been criticized by different groups within past decades (Mittal & Lassar 2000; Reaves et al. 2004; Reichert & Carpenter 2004; Zimmerman & Dahlberg 2008). The trend is apparent, for example, in an increase in sexual objectification of women (Reichert et al. 2007; Soley & Reid 1988; Sypeck et al. 2004). Sexual objectification implies being treated and portrayed as body or body part meant for the use and pleasure of others (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997). As sex is such a dominant feature in today's advertising, current media research has also gotten more focused on depictions of sex instead of traditional gender role portrayals (Beetles & Harris 2005). Mass media and advertising specifically are criticized of being one of the most powerful purveyors of not only beauty ideals, but sexuality in general, in today's western society (Gill 2009; Groesz et al. 2002; Lavine et al. 1999; Scriven 2007; Stice et al. 1994).

Some recent feminist movements argue that women in media are portrayed as independent and confident, consciously expressing their sexual power and self-consciousness and, instead of passive objects meant to serve the male gaze are portrayed as active, desirable subjects who decide to objectify themselves because they have a freedom to do so (Gill 2009; Lin 1998; Lin & Yeh 2009). The sexualized female images are thus seen as enjoying one's own attractiveness and sexuality (Gill 2009). However, Gill (2009) argues that only white, young, thin and attractive women are entitled to this independent, self-conscious sexual power. Additionally, she criticizes the current advertising trend of "hot lesbianism", of that, despite the seeming independency, power and encouragement to "be who you are" in terms of sexual orientation, these "hot lesbians", based on their femininity, attractiveness and beauty are mainly directed to male gaze and are often portrayed in close contact with another woman, either a full opposite (white and black woman) or significantly similar one (twins), further indicating that the depiction of a lesbian woman in advertising is, in fact, based on the lesbian fantasy of a heterosexual male, serving the male, patriarchal purposes.

A rather alarming trend relating to sex in advertising is that sexuality is no longer related only to adult women; from 1970's on, with an excitable pace, femininity and open sexuality have been attached to as young as pre-adolescent girls (Cook & Kaiser 2004). During the turn of the millennium, sexualization of childhood and innocence in advertising exploded and portraying young, adolescent girls as sexually mature women was accompanied with depicting adult women as sexy little girls (Cook & Kaiser 2004; Machia & Lamb 2009). School uniforms, knee socks, pigtails, lollipops and other objects traditionally associated with childhood worn by an openly sexy adult woman is a confusing, boundary-blurring and alarming phenomenon, to say the least.

## 5. Self and identity

This chapter introduces and defines the concepts of self and identity. In order to understand how life experiences and advertising interpretations affect one's self and identity, the processes of self and identity construction are presented and discussed. In addition, the role of media and advertising in self and identity construction processes is taken into consideration.

### 5.1. Self

Due to its complex nature a single, straightforward definition of the concept of self is difficult to provide (Oshana 2010). Elliot and Wattanasuwan (1998) refer to Thompson [1995] who defines self as a symbolic project which the individual actively constructs out of the available symbolic materials in order to gain a coherent understanding of who she/he is. Comello (2009) draws on the work of William James, an American philosopher and psychologist, who defines the self through four constitutive dimensions, that is 1) *material self*, our physical substance such as our bodies, family and possession, 2) *social self*, self-conceptions based on recognition received from others, 3) *spiritual/psychological self*, our subjective being relating to our consciousness and psychological faculties and 4) *pure ego*, the non-empirical self that unifies all other elements of the self and gives us a lasting sense of our personal identity. The self, thus, reflects consciousness, subjective experiences and values and beliefs of an individual (Oshana 2010).

Consumers possess and visualize themselves according to a number of actual selves (Who I am; who I am not) and a variety of imagined, latent possible and ideal selves (Who I want to/hope to/could be; who I don't want/fear to be). These multiple selves are socially shaped, situation-dependent and embedded in social practices; a certain type of self tends to emerge in certain types of social situations. (Comello 2009; Jenkins 1998; Oshana 2010) In theory one can have as many selves as there are different roles and groups one belongs to (Belk 1988; Comello 2009; Elliot & Wattanasuwan 1998; Oshana 2010). The desired and feared possible selves of what one wants or doesn't want to be are the domain of self-concept, concerned with how other people think of oneself, one's potential and future (Markus & Nurius 1986).

According to Belk (1988) in today's materialist consumer culture one is what one has; our possessions are an important part of our sense of self and identity. Moreover, individuals tend to “*regard our possessions as parts of ourselves*” (Belk 1988, p. 139). Consumer goods and meanings attached to them are considered one of the most significant subjects that provide consumers ideas of gender, class, age and lifestyle in a material form and through which individuals construct their ideas of self and the world (McCracken 1987). The concept of extended self is a masculine and western metaphor comprising what is seen as both “me” and “mine” and includes, in addition to personal possessions of external objects, persons, places, group possessions, and what is in great interest within this study, the possession of body parts and organs (Belk 1988). McClelland [1951] and Prelinger [1959] suggest that one's body and body parts are central parts of the extended self; loss of a body part, for example, is comparable to losing one's whole identity and very being (Belk 1988).

## 5.2. Identity

Identity is a function of how individuals see themselves and what meanings they assign to themselves (Oshana 2010). It is a multi-dimensional classification of the human world and individuals' places in it and involves the knowing of who one, and others, is (Jenkins 2008). Oshana (2010) defines identity as the repository of what one absorbs in the world and as a filter through which one's lived experiences are interpreted; it structures how one lives and shapes the way one is categorized and dealt with by others. Identity differs from self in terms of continuity; identity is a continuous concept compared to temporally and substantively changing and evolving multiple selves; identity can thus be regarded as the unifying element of one's multiple selves (Comello 2009).

Identity can be group or role-based, depending on whether identity construction focuses on finding commonality within a group through depersonalization or concentrates on self-verification (Oshana 2010). Hecht (1993) introduces the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) and proposes identity constituting of four layers, 1) *personal identity*, one's self-concept, self-image, self-cognitions and feelings about self, 2) *enacted identity*, identity enacted in social interaction, social behavior and symbols through communication, 3) *relational identity*, defining oneself in terms of others, such as one's partnership, friendship or occupation, and 4) *collective identity*, something held by a group of people that bonds them together.

In the contemporary body culture especially, body is an important source of self and identity construction due to the influence of media images on forming body image and, further, the importance of the formed body image on the self and identity (Botta 1999). Interestingly, Comello (2009) has found that, serious illnesses are prone to cause and lead to identity changes as a consequence of changes (illness) in one's body.

### **5.3. Identity construction**

Contemporary western society is a symbol-rich environment; meanings attached to any situation or object are determined by interpretation of these symbols. These symbolic meanings are further used by consumers when they construct, maintain and express their multiple selves and identities. (Elliot & Wattanasuwan 1998)

Individuals can use both lived experiences and mediated experiences as symbolic resources in their identity construction processes. Lived experiences refer to life events, practical activities and face-to-face encounters in our everyday lives, whereas mediated experiences relate to mass-communication culture and consumption of different media messages, such as advertising. (Thompson 1990) In order to construct the self and identity, individuals draw on mediated (media) experiences and integrate them with their lived personal experiences (Elliot & Wattanasuwan 1998). What we call "the self" is then constituted out of these relations that assume a narrative form (Oshana 2010).

Duffy (2009) discusses Ricoeur's narrative identity theory and argues that it is narratives especially that tend to shape individual's identity. Identity construction process often involves the consumption of products, brands, services and media, and of these, media and advertising consumption especially are considered potent symbolic resources for this narrative identity construction. Symbolic meanings deriving from culture are transferred into advertising symbols, which are then interpreted and used by the individual in order to construct and maintain the self-concept and social world of his/her own. (Elliot & Wattanasuwan 1998; McCracken 1987; Mick & Buhl 1992) As an outcome of individual's interest-driven, experience-related and culturally-situated advertising interpretation, a variety of diverse advertising meanings and attitudes are created (Comello 2009; Elliot & Wattanasuwan 1998; Mick & Buhl 1992).

McAdams (2001) describes identity as an internalized, evolving life story; individuals form their identities by integrating their roles, talents and social involvements into a story of the self that provides the individual unity and purpose in life.

Due to the situation-dependent nature of the self, exposure to particular media messages has been found to increase the likeliness of certain self-view, further influencing certain kind of behavior; a stimulus, such as an ad, makes one's particular self-concept salient, and one's behavior further depends on the effect of the stimulus, ad, on the self-concept (Comello 2009). Even though individuals are free to create any type of meanings and any variety of possible selves, the socio-cultural and historic context, social norms and values and the images and symbols presented in the media are found to have a strong impact on the nature and type of emerging possible selves (Elliot & Wattanasuwan 1998; Markus & Nurius 1986).

Another important relation between self and identity construction and advertising is gender identity congruity. Gender identity relates to the psychological gender traits of masculinity and femininity, and gender identity congruity describes the extent to which correspondence is achieved between the configuration of gender portrayal in ad and the configuration specified by consumer's beliefs. (Feiersen et al. 2009) Orth and Holancova (2004) have found that advertising portrayals congruent with consumer self-schemas tend to generate more positive attitudes than incongruent portrayals. Thus, gender identity congruity is suggested to affect advertising appeals positively when strong, and negatively when weak (Feiersen et al. 2009).

## 6. Interpretive social constructionism

*“The conclusion is unavoidable: we master a concept only by modeling ourselves on others.”*

Larmore & Bowman 2010, p. 31-32

At the core of human existence lies “fundamental mimetism”, tendency to follow the example of others. Conforming to existing cultural conventions and customs surrounding us and aligning ourselves on the practices of others is inevitable in order for individuals to understand themselves and the world. Our thoughts, feelings, desires and fears are thus initially formed based on thoughts, feelings, desires and fears of others as well as are shaped by societies, communities and cultures we live in. (Larmore & Bowman 2010) McCracken (1987) argues that individuals perceive everything through culture and constantly seek meanings around them; he sees consumers as individuals in cultural context engaged in culturally constituted, coded and regulated projects and materials, such as advertisements, and constantly looking for symbolic resources, new ideas and concepts to use in their construction of the self, identity and the world surrounding them.

Social constructionism takes a critical stance towards the conventional ways of understanding the world and knowledge based on objective, unbiased observation of the world. Instead, the world and its concepts are considered historically and culturally relative. This way our understanding and knowledge of the world is not a direct perception of reality; instead, individuals construct knowledge and versions of reality as outcomes of social processes and daily interactions between individuals. (Burr 1995)

This study is based on understanding social constructionism through an interpretive frame and using narrative approach as method and methodology. Thus, what are studied and interpreted in this research are *interpretations of the world*, representing things about social life and culture through individuals’ stories (Escalas & Bettman 2000; Riessman 1993). The concepts of narrative and life story are discussed in more detail in chapter 7.3. *Data Analysis*.

## 7. Research Design

This chapter introduces the research design of this study. As this research takes an interpretive viewpoint on social constructionism and follows Riessman (1993) by aiming to interpret interpretations of the world, the general methodology is then related to these interpretations, that is individuals' stories. People use stories, narratives, to create a sense of self; one's identity is thus configured through this narrative story-telling, forming the basis of one's ethical life (Crossley 2003; Denzin 1989; Duffy 2009; Escalas & Bettman 2000; McAdams 2001; Riessman 1993). As the objects of this study are individuals' stories, narrative approach can be considered as a suitable and effective method and methodology for this type of interpretive research, suggested by Crossley (2003), Escalas and Bettman (2000) and Riessman (1993), among others.

Next the theoretical context of this research is introduced and discussed, after which data collection methods and processes are described as well as research techniques, samples and materials presented and their choosing justified. Data analysis methods used in this research, that is narrative and life story approach, are then introduced and described, as well as the proceeding of data analysis process in practice.

### 7.1. Research Context

According to LeBaron and Bruce [1993] every research is conducted in some sort of context (Shuaib 2012). This environment in and around which research is conducted is called the research context (Shuaib 2012).

This research is conducted in cultural context. Tseng [2007] argues that cultural elements have various different roles in individuals' lives; they form culture-bound syndromes, culturally defined expectations and roles and reinforce certain kinds of cognitive constructs (Yorulmaz & Isik 2011). Hofstede [2001], again, discusses culture through its four cultural dimensions of 1) *uncertainty avoidance*, 2) *power distance*, 3) *individualism/collectivism* and 4) *masculinity/femininity* (Shuaib 2012).

More precisely, the cultural context of this study is contemporary western society. The dominant patriarchal, masculine ideology and current consumption and body cultures of western society provide an interesting research context rich of meanings and signs to be examined, interpreted and understood. As the focus of this study is on women and their identity construction processes through advertising experiences, the comprehensive research context of this research is women and magazine advertising in the contemporary body culture of patriarchal western society.

## **7.2. Data-Collection**

This chapter introduces the data-collection methods, samples and research techniques used in this study. First, interviewing as the data-collection method and the interview approaches of phenomenological interview and life story interview are presented as well as their suitability for this research justified. The interviewees and interview materials, advertisements, are then described as well as justified. Lastly, the process of conducting the interviews in practice is described.

### **7.2.1. Interview approach**

*“If we want to know the unique experience and perspective of an individual, there is no better way to get this than in the person’s own voice.”*

Atkinson, 1997, p.5

Within the field of qualitative research there are numerous data-collection methods and empiric materials to choose from, such as case study, observation and interviewing (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). As above mentioned, interpreting interpretations of the world is at interest of this study. Since these interpretations of the world are present in individuals’ narratives, hearing and interpreting these narratives of individuals, that is stories, will provide useful data for this research. Interviewing enables individuals to share their conceptualization and view of the world through story-telling (Duffy 2009; McAdams 2001). Thus, interviewing is considered as an appropriate research method in this research. Two interviewing approaches, phenomenological interview and life story interview are used in this research and presented next.

### *Phenomenological interview*

Thompson et al. (1990) define phenomenological interview as an interview approach which emphasizes the perspective of the experiencing individual over the cultural setting and finds the transcribed interview, text, as focus of interpretation. They further argue that the course of dialogue is set by the interviewee; rather than being provided with ready questions, the dialogue and interviewer's questions are formed along interviewee's descriptions. Ricoeur [1976] emphasizes the subjective nature of phenomenological interview interpretation - texts are always open to multiple interpretations. Certain interpretations of phenomenological interviews are thus not the only possible interpretations. (Thompson et al. 1990)

Thompson et al. (1990) further suggest that when conducting phenomenological interview, individual's lived experiences must be understood and interpreted through and in relation to his/her life-world; experiences don't always honor standard conceptual boundaries. As will be described in chapters 9. *Interpretation and 10.1. Main findings*, ad experiences exposed during the phenomenological interview did indeed relate to great extent to individual's own personal life experiences.

### *Life story interview*

Life story interview is a qualitative data-collection method based on individuals' narratives about their lives and especially relevant parts of them (Atkinson 1997; Bertaux & Kohli 1984; Mick & Buhl 1992). Life story interview aims at constructing a miniature, yet detailed, autobiography of an individual by letting him/her tell his/her story in own words (Atkinson 1997; Mick & Buhl 1992). Based on the life story interview transcription a flowing narrative, interviewee's life story, is constructed (Atkinson 1997). From the narrative-form life story the interpreter explores the relevant, fundamental life themes and short-term life projects of an individual, based on which further interpretations of individual's behavior can be made (Atkinson 1997; McCracken 1987; Mick & Buhl 1992). What is worth emphasizing is that it is not the life of the interviewee that is interpreted per se, but the ways he/she tells stories about it (Atkinson 1997). More about life story approach is presented in chapter 7.3.2. *Life story approach*.

The combination of phenomenological and life story interviews can be considered as a useful data-collection method, since life story interview provides information not only of individual's life but of its interaction with the world as well (Atkinson 1997). As will be presented in chapters 9. *Interpretations* and 10.1. *Main findings*, stories and narratives individuals tell in these two interview approaches connect and relate to each other in many ways, providing a broad, extensive picture of the worldview and understanding of the identity construction process of an individual.

### **7.2.2. Interviewees**

The interviewees chosen for this research are three women ages of 23, 24 and 32. Interviewing women in their 20's and 30's is in particular interest of this study, since this age group born in the 1980's belongs to the generation born and raised in western body culture society. Supported by the guidelines provided by Atkinson (1997), the choice of these particular interviewees is justified by having a long history with them and considering them dear friends. Discussing with them of their experiences, feelings and other personal issues seem natural and confidential. In addition, all interviewees are interested in the human mind and psychology in general, and are excited to be part of this research. The interviewees can then be considered to take the interviews seriously and reveal their true, genuine experiences and feelings during the interviews.

Choosing exactly three interviewees for this research is partly based on personal consideration, partly on practicalities and partly on the work of Bertaux and Kohli (1984); they argue that the number of life stories used as research data depends on whether generalization of findings or a case study approach is exercised. This research aims neither to "prove" anything nor provide hard facts or generalize findings; instead, understanding the subjective nature of experiencing ads and constructing identities is of interest. In addition, Mick and Buhl (1992) conduct the similar type of study as this one with two interviewees; this provides support for three being an appropriate and sufficient amount of interviewees to be studied.

### 7.2.3. Advertisements

For the phenomenological interview five advertisements promoting body culture were chosen; how individuals experience ads promoting body culture was studied through these ads. The ads were chosen from four magazines: *Anna*, *Trendi*, *Elle*, typical women's magazines, and *Divaani*, décor and furnishing magazine. These magazines can be considered to be targeted to young and middle-aged women, age group all my interviewees belong to.

Advertisements appropriate for this study were searched from the chosen magazines. All ads were to relate to the lives of average women in their 20's and 30's and represent the contemporary body culture. Ads from different product categories such as cosmetics, clothing and lifestyle were chosen in order to provide variance among the ads. Based on these criteria - targeted to women at their 20's and 30's, promoting body culture and representing different product categories - the five following ads were chosen (scanned pictures of ads are attached as an appendix at the end of this research):

#### *Aurinkomatkat*

A couple stands in turquoise water with upper torsos showing and snorkels in their foreheads; the man has a bare chest and the woman wears a bikini top. Their hands are wrapped around each other, and the man holds an octopus in his other hand. The sky is blue and palm trees cover the background. "Here you, for sure, meet new acquaintances. Janne and Raita, Helsinki", the ad says. In the bottom of the ad a list of destinations and prices and the logo of the travel agent Aurinkomatkat is presented, and in the upper corner is written "We cut prices down".

#### *Guess*

A woman with brown, wavy hair and heavy make-up wears a black lace corset, underpants and garter belt and poses one hand in her waist, another in her hair, mouth partly open and gazing straight into the camera. In the right bottom corner there is a picture of a perfume bottle with text: "GUESS SEDUCTIVE. I'm Yours. Discover the new scent of seduction."

### *Dove*

Three women sit by a bath tub wrapped in white towels, holding two pictures of skin, one with text “before” and another with text “more beautiful”. Text “Get a visibly more beautiful skin with our rewarded shower gels” and pictures of the shower gel packages are presented as well.

### *Triumph*

A woman wears grey Triumph shapewear, standing one hand on her neck and another reaching upwards. Her eyes are partly closed and mouth partly open, and her hair covers part of her face. The text says: “SHAPE SENSATION. The ultimate curve creator. Never before was shapewear so smoothly seductive – in seamless design.” The bottom of the ad shows graphic pictures of décolleté, waist, stomach and bum.

### *Gant*

A man sits on a sofa, wearing a dress shirt and khaki trousers. He has brown hair and beard and is sitting beside a fireplace, his eyes directed away from the camera.

## **7.2.4. Conducting the interviews**

The interview process proceeded in two parts; first, life-story interviews were conducted, after which phenomenological ad interviews were conducted. In one case both interview were done in a row at the same day due to schedule difficulties. The interviewees got to choose when and where the interviews were held. All life story and ad interviews proceeded in the same manner with each interviewer and they were all recorded. All interviews started by explaining to interviewees what the interviews are about, for what purpose they are conducted and how they proceed. The interviewees were also told that they will remain anonymous in this research and promised to be able to proofread their life story texts before using them in this research, if they so wanted.

Based on Thompson et al. (1990) the interview dialogue and interviewer's questions should be formed along interviewee's descriptions; both interview types were thus conducted in a semi-structured manner. There was a list of supportive questions in order to keep interviews on the right track. Despite supportive questions, most of the talking was done by the interviewees, and they

were given free speech about the topics and subjects they wanted to talk about and concentrate on. All life story interviews started with a question “Tell me about your childhood” and went along mainly by the interviewees. At times supportive questions such as “How did you feel about your parents’ divorce?” and “So, if you were a good girl as a child, what kind of a teenager were you?” were asked during the interview in order to keep the conversation going and moving on from one life stage to another. However, the interviewees themselves got to choose the emphasis and extent they talked about certain life phases; some concentrated more on childhood, some on present life episodes. The last question asked of all interviewees was “What do you think is the purpose of life?” after which feedback about the interview process was asked.

Phenomenological ad interviews were conducted by showing interviewees each of the five ads, one at a time, in a coincidental order. They were asked to talk about and comment on what comes in their minds about the ads. At times, supportive questions such as “what draws your attention in this ad?” and “why would/wouldn’t you buy this product based on this ad?” were asked in order to get more profound information about interviewees’ advertising experiences. After the interview feedback, comments and feelings about the ad interview were asked as well.

Life story interviews lasted from two to three hours depending on interviewee, and all phenomenological interviews about one hour. Both approaches received positive feedback from the interviewees; life story interviews were considered helpful, even therapeutic, whereas ad interviews and talking about ads in general was considered fun and interesting, to the extent that all interviewees would have liked to continue discussion of more ads than the ones presented in this interview.

After conducting all interviews, interview recordings were transcribed and data analysis process started. The data analysis methods used in this analysis as well as the analyzing process in practice are introduced and discussed next.

### **7.3. Data Analysis**

In this chapter, data analysis approaches used in analyzing and interpreting the above described interviews as well as the data analysis process in practice are described and discussed. First, the data analysis methods of narrative and life story are introduced, after which description of the data analysis process through these approaches in practice is presented.

#### **7.3.1. Narrative approach**

Narrative is an interpretive social constructionist approach which focuses on stories in the process of self-construction (Crossley 2003). It is a process of making or telling a story and represents a shift from system to story (Denzin 1989; Duffy 2009). Narrative understanding of the world is thus strongly related to stories and story-telling (Escalas & Bettman 2000).

Storytelling is a fundamental form of human communication; individuals think, speak and give narrative account of their lives through stories (Atkinson 1997). McAdams (2001) suggests that individuals organize and express themselves and their world to others through story-telling. Stories have played a significant role especially in the past when transmitting life lessons and long-lasting values to next generations depended solely on orally expressed stories. Over time, storytelling has developed into an innate universal pattern, a psychological blueprint, as Atkinson (1997) suggests. The growing interest towards narrative theory has blossomed in the 2000's; today narratives are considered as one of the prime concerns of social sciences (Denzin 1989; Escalas & Bettman 2000; McAdams 2001).

Narrative theory examines temporal orientations in individuals' lives and handles the human sense-making process as the object of study (Denzin 1989). Most important dimensions of narrative are chronology, story having a beginning, middle and end, and causality, consequential story sequences and the presence of goals and relationships between story elements (Atkinson 1997; Bertaux & Kohli 1984; Crossley 2003; Denzin 1989; Duffy 2009; Escalas & Bettman 2000; Riessman 1993). People use narratives to create a sense of self through stories about whom they are, what has happened to them and what they hope will happen (Duffy 2009; Escalas & Bettman 2000; Riessman 1993). Thus, the self itself is a production of narratives and identity is configured and communicated through telling these narrative stories (Crossley 2003; Denzin 1989; Duffy 2009).

Through this individual's story of the self, one's narrative identity, the self comes to terms with society and forms the basis of one's ethical life (Duffy 2009; McAdams 2001).

As earlier mentioned, instead of examining realistic descriptions of the world or language itself, narrative analysis interprets *interpretations of the world* (Riessman 1993). As there is no direct access to individuals' experiences, they can be shared and analyzed only through their representations and stories told about them (Atkinson 1997; Denzin 1989). Stories themselves are, then, the objects of narrative analysis (Escalas & Bettman 2000; Riessman 1993). Narrative analysis requires imagination and human agency and neglects the ideas and search of objective truth and facts. It reveals things about social life and culture through individual's story and is thus well suited for studies of subjectivity and identity. (Riessman 1993)

In addition to making sense of their selves, people use stories to make sense of products and consumption meanings. By analyzing these consumption narratives, such as consumption of advertising, ways that individuals create their sense of self and identity through (advertising) consumption can be better understood. (Escalas & Bettman 2000) Interestingly, it has been found that individuals tend to tell and narrativize particularly experiences that include discrepancies between the actual and ideal self and between the self and the society (Riessman 1993). Assuming that advertising portrays society's approved ideals, such as beauty ideals, interpreting and analyzing narratives and stories individuals tell about themselves and advertising images is highly valuable in order to understand how the self and identity are constructed through advertising experiences.

One way of studying the narrative thought and conduct narrative analysis is life story approach (Bertaux & Kohli 1984; Denzin 1989; Escalas & Bettman). This approach, also used in this study, is presented next.

### **7.3.2. Life-story approach**

Life-story approach is an interpretive research method drawing from different orientations such as hermeneutics, phenomenology and ethno-sociology (Bertaux & Kohli 1984; Denzin 1989). It is a framework based on individuals' narratives about their lives and especially relevant parts of them (Bertaux & Kohli 1984). At the most fundamental level, life story relates to the interval between individual's birth, biographical experiences and death and is organized in terms of biographically

meaningful events in individuals' lives (Denzin 1989; Duffy 2009). How subjects experience and define these events is at the core of interpretive research, as well as the researcher seeing the world as the subject do (Denzin 1989).

Life experiences are affected by culture and cultural conventions individuals absorb either consciously or unconsciously; as such, life stories, as any stories, reflect cultural values, norms and assumptions (Denzin 1989; McAdams 2001). Mick & Buhl (1992) along with Atkinson (1997) stress the subjective aspect of life story; individuals' personal interests and experiences have significant influence on individual's behavior and life patterns, for example on how they experience advertising. Motivations and meanings of individual's life are thus reflected in meanings gained from advertising experiences (Mick & Buhl 1992). These suggestions considering, life story can be considered as an appropriate method in this research and the cultural research context.

Individual's life story contains a number of fundamental life themes and temporary life projects. Life themes are individual's pervasive and largely intact existential concerns that are influenced by individual's sociocultural background and life experiences (Atkinson 1997; Mick & Buhl 1992). The coherence of a life story can often be explained by life themes, as they emphasize individual's important influences and relationships throughout life (Atkinson 1997). Life themes act as anticipators and motivators of individual's behavior and experiences; they can thus be suggested to have a strong influence on the formation of ad experiences, for example (Mick & Buhl 1992).

Life themes are articulated through shorter-term, constantly evolving and changing life projects (Mick & Buhl 1992). Life projects are often selected, implemented, maintained and disposed on the basis of individual's life themes. They are ongoing, continuous and constantly evolving concepts through which individuals construct the self, others and the world. (McCracken 1987; Mick & Buhl 1992) The developing nature of life projects is explained by individuals' drive, necessity and inevitability to change due to issues such as changing circumstances (unemployment, having children), preferences (new hobby) or the life cycle (teenage, retirement) (McCracken 1987). As life themes, life projects as well are considered to affect the formation of text reading and constructing ad meanings and interpretations (Mick & Buhl 1992).

### 7.3.3. Data analysis process

The data analysis process of this research draws on the works of Atkinson (1997), McCracken (1987), Mick and Buhl (1992) and Thompson et al. (1990), among others, using narrative analysis and life story approach as the basis for data analysis.

The data analysis process started with taking life story interviews under scrutiny. All life story interviews were transcribed, and these transcripts were read repeatedly through. After reading the transcriptions through numerous times, notes were made by circling and underlining words, arguments, events, persons and other factors repeatedly appearing in life story, in addition to issues that can otherwise be considered significant for the interviewee, such as strong attitudes towards certain issues and massive life events. These notes were, too, read repeatedly through and then merged into broader category groups. By connecting and linking the words inside each category, fundamental life themes and current life projects of each interviewee were gradually revealed.

Next, after life story interviews were analyzed to a point where life themes and life projects of all interviewees were externalized, phenomenological ad interviews were then taken into analysis. As life story interviews, all ad interviews were, too, transcribed and read repeatedly through. Similarly, notes were made of emergent repetitive wordings, notable opinions and arguments and other relevant issues. Notes of each ad experience were then drawn together and links and similarities among experiences of different ads were made, this way indicating the most important, repeated and significant ad experiences in general.

After all life story interviews and ad interviews were analyzed, links and relations between each interviewee's life story interview and ad interview were made. Reflections of life themes, life projects and other life events were searched in ad experiences, and, as seen in chapter 9. *Interpretation*, a number of these life story – ad experience -links and connections were found. In addition, these links and relations were connected, reflected and explained with self and identity construction theories as well as other theoretical concepts provided in this research and discussed in more detail in chapter 10.1. *Main conclusions*.

## **8. Findings**

In this chapter, findings of the life story interviews and phenomenological ad interviews are summarized. First, life stories and emergent life themes and life projects of each interviewee are presented, after which ad experiences of each interviewee are provided.

### **8.1. Life stories**

Mia's, Siiri's and Tanja's life stories are summarized and presented in this chapter. First Mia's life story and emergent life themes and life projects are presented, following with Siiri's and Tanja's life stories, life themes and life projects.

#### **8.1.1. Life story: Mia**

Mia is a 32-year-old woman from Helsinki, who spent her childhood and teenage years in Salo with her mom and little sister, and occasionally with her dad and his new blended family. Mia describes her childhood as “happy, safe and loving” and being “a social, active and good girl” as a child. Mia always looked after her quiet, introverted little sister and remembers always hoped to have a big brother to “take care of me, too”.

In middle school Mia was bullied and called names such as “apple” and “pear” for her slightly round figure. “I was just round enough to be bullied”, she says. In commercial school, to which Mia applied instead of high school because she “just never had the head for studying”, Mia felt as a third wheel in her group of friends. “It didn't matter whether boys noticed me or if I looked nice; it was all about them”, she says. Later she understood that she was there “just to prop up their self-esteem”. Mia, however, found her current best friend in the last years of commercial school. “She was my saving angel; she told me that I was good enough and that I was beautiful.” After commercial school Mia, encouraged by her step-father, applied for a job in Helsinki. “I never thought I'd get there and would never have applied if it wasn't for my step-father”, she says. Mia moved to Helsinki to work and live with her boyfriend at that time, a Turkish man whom she met on holiday and with whom she got married a few years later. After five years of marriage they divorced, due to “growing apart from each other” and “needing the time to do my own things too”.

Mia is now single and works as an educator in the banking industry. She suffered a burnout a year ago and is now taking the time and effort to focus on herself; who she is, what she wants and what makes her happy. “I guess I’m used to think about what others want and think of others instead of what I really want”, she says. Mia regards moving to Helsinki as an achievement she’s most proud of. She admits that it feels good to show off all the people who didn’t believe in her that she has succeeded and managed in Helsinki, when “others still work at a gas station in the middle of nowhere”. She’s, however, not sure if she’s done the things she’s done for her own sake or to gain others’ acceptance. “I wanted to show to those who didn’t believe in me what I’ve achieved and how good I’m doing”.

Despite being bullied, going through divorce and suffering burnout, Mia considers herself happy and content with her life. “All the events in my life have taught me much about myself and of life in general.” What she worries about are the well-being of her parents and friends, staying motivated in her current work, and whether she’ll find love again; “I don’t want to live alone”, she says. Mia’s goal in life is to “be human to another” and do things that make her happy despite others’ opinions.

In summary, the life story interview suggests that Mia is a positive, energetic woman who appreciates basic values in life such as family, community-feeling, doing good and taking care of others. Being bullied and rejected by her friends during childhood and teenage years and her demanding father have affected her life; however, she now tries to gain her low self-esteem and stop trying to please others and gain others’ approval. Today Mia is in the search for herself and learns to love and appreciate herself as she is. Despite that, Mia still tends to underestimate and belittle herself and is greatly influenced by the opinions of others. Mia’s current life projects relate to 1) *getting to know and respect oneself* and 2) *finding love*. Her fundamental life themes have to do with tensions between 3) *taking care of others vs. taking care of self*, 4) *pleasing others vs. pleasing self* and 5) *believing others vs. believing self*. These life themes are described below in more detail.

### 3) *Taking care of others vs. taking care of self*

Mia has a strong need to nurse and take care of others. From an early age on she has taken care of her little sister and in a way of her mother, as well, her being a single parent. “I am happy when others are happy, I like to do good to them”, Mia says. She works in a position where she can help others and admires the Turkish culture in which “family comes first”. However, hoping to have a

big brother, meeting her current best friend, going through burnout and hoping to find a companion indicate Mia's need to take care of herself and for someone to take care of her.

#### 4) *Pleasing others vs. pleasing self*

What others think of her and being accepted seem to be very important to Mia. Being bullied, moving to new area, feeling like a third wheel and trying to make her father proud have made Mia to never really fit in and thus trying to please others to gain acceptance. "I want everybody to think only positively about me, although I now know it's not healthy or even possible." She considers herself a social and happy person, which has also become a problem for her: "People know me as "the smiling and happy Mia", like I have no right to be sad or angry." Going through burnout may have resulted partly from Mia's urge to please others before herself.

#### 5) *Believing others vs. believing self*

Mia tends to underestimate and belittle herself: "I was never the hottest girl in the school", "I was never really nothing", "I am very bad in maths", "I'm glad I didn't go to army I wouldn't have made it", "My body is what it is" and so on. She's always been insecure and dissatisfied of her appearance; she refers to herself as "a tall child", "big for my age", "never petite", "not a beauty queen" and "never pretty or good enough". She says that the beauty ideals in media make her insecure of her appearance even today. "I should look like that", she says, wondering whether she should shape her body to look like that so that men would notice her.

Mia also relies heavily on opinions of others. What other people say to her have a great influence on how she behaves, acts and thinks of herself. After being bullied Mia sees herself as chubby and fat, and starts to think more positively of herself only after her friend "boosted my self-esteem and told me I'm pretty and good just the way I am". Mia refers to teachers, either supportive or sceptical towards her performance in school, indicating that she gives great value to their opinions. Mia decided to apply for a job in Helsinki only after her step-father said she could do it, and accepted her current position only after her boss convinced her that she'd be apt for it. Mia also thinks greatly of her personal trainer: "It's great to have someone to tell you how good you are and how well you develop; it makes me think like, hey, I'm not that bad after all."

### **8.1.2. Life story: Siiri**

Siiri is a 23-year old woman originally from Savonlinna. She currently lives in Espoo with her boyfriend of three years, but they have decided to break up and move separately in a following weeks' time. Siiri works as a customer servant at a bank branch.

Siiri describes her childhood as “ordinary and good”, having lots of friends. She was a social, active and open child with a temper, and that is how she would describe herself also today. “I loved to play home and I was always the mother”, she says. She had many Barbie dolls but didn't want anyone else to touch them, because she “wanted to nurse and protect them”. Siiri's both parents worked 3-shift jobs when she and her big brother were young. “It would've been nice to sit down and eat together with the whole family, but it wasn't possible because either one of them was always at work”, she says. Siiri's big brother was very protective of her when they were little, but they haven't been in touch since he got severely alcoholic around seven years ago.

In her teenage years Siiri was an active ballet dancer. She considers her puberty being rather easy, but mentions remembering “some traumatic events”. She has been bullied and called fat from her teenage on. “I was tiny and thin when I was young, but in middle school I started to gain weight and, well, here we are”, she says, laughing. Her brother, classmates and ballet teachers have called her fat, in addition to men she has met in night clubs after turning 18. “I don't care about that”, Siiri says, “It's their problem and not mine”. Siiri has, however, suffered from an eating disorder as a teenager and mentions having been on various diets during the past ten years or so.

After high school, at 18, Siiri moved to Helsinki to work in a café. She now works as a customer servant in banking industry. Siiri has thought to become a nurse or a midwife and definitely wants to have a family and many children. She also studies business in an open university of applied sciences to gain education and enhance her chances in work life. “I would love to be an assistant of some firm; deal with every-day issues, answer the phone, handle post, make coffee and so on”, she says. She criticizes the current hype around education, but has noticed that without an education it is difficult to get any job.

What concerns Siiri at the moment are the end of her relationship and her parents' well-being. Her parents go through a lot because of her alcoholic brother, who has attacked her mother, broken into her parents' house and stolen money from them, for example. "Sometimes I just can't take the amount of sorrow what my brother causes", she explains. "He has for long been the main reason for my mood swings and temporary depression." Siiri's boyfriend broke up with her just a few weeks ago, due to their conflicting values and life goals; Siiri is ready to get married, have children and settle down, while her boyfriend wants to focus on work and spend time with his friends. Siiri is sad and depressed about the break up; "I just hate the idea of starting it all over again". Other smaller things she worries about are whether she'll finish her studies and ever get a job she enjoys.

In summary, Siiri is a determinate, tempered woman who says and does what she wants and doesn't feel the need to please others. Siiri claims to have strong self-esteem and be satisfied with her appearance, but seems to be offended by people "doing better than her" education-, work- or appearance-wise. Siiri dreams of getting married, having children and settling down. She handles a lot of sorrow due to her alcoholic brother and break up with her boyfriend and wonders how to move on after the break-up. Siiri describes herself as "ordinary woman who likes ordinary things". Siiri's main life project at the moment is *1) going through break-up*, another, minor being *2) improving her educational background*. Fundamental life themes in Siiri's life have to do with tensions between *3) having a family vs. not having a family* and *4) being content in life vs. not being content in life*. These life themes are described in more detail below.

### *3) Having a family vs. not having a family*

From an early age on Siiri has dreamt of having a family; having children and getting married are her biggest dreams. She loved playing a mother in their plays as a child and felt protective of her Barbie dolls. Siiri's family has been in a sense "broken" for her whole life due to her parents' hectic work hours and her brother's alcoholism. Now her boyfriend has broken up with her because he isn't ready to commit to starting a family. Siiri has dreamt of working in the care industry, to be a nurse or a midwife. She mentions reproduction as one of the meanings of life; "this may sound weird to many but, to me, the reason we are here is to reproduce."

#### *4) Being content in life vs. not being content in life*

Siiri has conflicts between her values in life; she appreciates basic values such as family, home and doing the things one wants to, but still seems to envy people who have higher education, higher salary and better looks than her. In addition, although Siiri says she's content with herself, she is constantly striving to change who she is; she disapproves people who appreciate high education, but still tries to improve her own educational background and convinces to be satisfied with her appearance, but has suffered from an eating disorder and is constantly dieting, for example.

### **8.1.3. Life story: Tanja**

Tanja is a 24-year-old student from Kerava who recently moved to Helsinki with her long-term boyfriend. She studies culture production and works part-time at the banking industry.

Tanja describes her early childhood as “ordinary, happy and safe”, and her being “a social, energetic and extrovert child” always having a lot of friends. She remembers enjoying school, but fifth and sixth grade being extremely challenging for her. She considers experiencing her teens at an early age, starting at the age of 11. At that time her father's alcoholism was at its worst and apparent for Tanja and her little brother for the first time. Tanja had always been a good girl and “teachers' favourite”, but in fifth grade she became “a swearing, middle-finger showing brat who just couldn't shut up”. After her father's condition improved, she began to settle down as well.

Confirmation school is one of the best memories in Tanja's youth. She is grateful for her mother who never forced her into a certain religion; “I was always free to make my own choices, and my mom always supported and accepted me”, she says. In confirmation school Tanja got interested in God and spent a couple of years intensely among church youngsters, from where she met her current boyfriend, as well. “He was such a gentleman and mature for his age; other boys were all macho but he was so down-to-earth and honest”, Tanja says. She thinks that confirmation school has been helpful for her to cope with his father's alcoholism as well as preventing her to start drinking at an early age. “After a couple of years, however, I started to think more with my own brains; it was more like doing what friends did at that time, being all ‘I'm so into God' and stuff like that”, Tanja now looks back those years. She doesn't remember ever struggling with any particular body concerns, but remembers that she “was very skinny and wanted a good grade from

sports, so I don't blame the teacher for being concerned me having an eating disorder which was although a false alarm.”

Last year Tanja's life turned upside down, as lymph cancer was discovered from her neck. The disease has changed many things in Tanja's life; she no longer considers herself immortal and doesn't believe in one's ability to control or affect one's own life. Although treatments are over and cancer is healed, for Tanja nothing is like it used to be; “I feel uncomfortable around my dearest friends and don't really know how to relate to life and living anymore”, she says. Tanja now struggles with moving on after the disease. She is, however, proud of the decision she has already made, to carry on and move on with her life; “I don't want to end up bitter and play the victim my whole life, being 50 years old and still complaining how difficult my life is because I had cancer”. She hopes to someday help other cancer patients by participating to cancer organization activities. Tanja's teenage dreams of fame, luxury, money and being a Hollywood-actress have changed significantly, along cancer, at the latest. Now she appreciates normal, ordinary life surrounded by the loved ones and being able to do the things that please her. She is into biking and yoga and is interested in finding “inner peace and just learn to be quietly alone with myself”. What concerns Tanja the most at the moment is her health; “Will I be well? Will the disease recur? How should I live from now on? Can I have children after the treatments?” A particular concern for her is how to be able to go on living and knowing that anything can happen to you. “Death is a very concrete element of my life nowadays”, she says.

In summary, Tanja is a young woman who appreciates basic values such as well-being, inner peace and being around loved ones. Tanja has taken responsibility from early age on and matured at a rather early age. She now struggles with moving on after cancer; her life strongly revolves around the disease and how to find a new look at life in general. Her life story indicates one major life project, *1) surviving cancer and learning to move on after the disease*. More fundamental life themes include tensions between *2) being responsible vs. being free* and *3) believing in something vs. not believing in anything*, these life themes being discussed in more detail below.

## *2) Being responsible vs. being free*

Tanja separates her childhood into early childhood (“safe and happy”) and later childhood (difficult teenage), indicating that she had to grow up and start taking responsibility and care of her mother and little brother from an early age on. She considers having puberty earlier than the majority and

appreciated her mature boyfriend at the time they met. Having to learn to take care of oneself from an early age on, added with having to deal with cancer on such a young age have made Tanja to take major responsibilities in life. Taking a reasonable view on things is common to Tanja, although her view of life seems to be changing at the moment.

### 3) *Believing in something vs. not believing in anything*

Tanja has been experiencing with religion in her teenage years, although her family wasn't religious. She mentions that as a child, she had the urge to pray in the evening although it wasn't a tradition in her home. However, Tanja wonders whether she believed in God only because her friends did, and is now searching for something special to believe in. Tanja is interested in meditation and yoga, actively thinks about spiritual and religious issues and is in the search for the higher power to believe in. In addition, due to her disease Tanja has been forced to rethink her opinions of life in general; is there anything one can believe or trust in?

## **8.2. Ad experiences**

Next, the main findings of the phenomenological ad interviews are presented; each interviewee's ad experiences are summarized, presenting first Mia's and then Siiri's and Tanja's ad experiences.

### **8.2.1. Ad experiences: Mia**

#### *Aurinkomatkat*

Mia takes a conflicting stance towards the ad. She considers it relaxing and positive, "this is wonderful, like a dream, everyone needs a holiday", but feels annoyed towards the couple in it. "It's annoying; I'd like to go on a couple's vacation, but she has a man and I don't", Mia says. She finds the ad a "dream image"; "It must be wonderful where they are, wherever it is they are", she says. Even though Mia admits to be jealous of the couple in the ad and says, "the ad would be better without the woman", she simultaneously justifies and supports the ad by saying, "well, this is how these travel ads are, and actually it is pretty beautiful".

### *Dove*

The ad receives a positive response from Mia. “These are real, ordinary women; no models, sex, digital manipulation, makeup or anything too polished”, she says. She can identify herself with the women in the ad and says, “Hey, even *I* could be a model”, adding “I mean, in theory”. Mia would buy the Dove shower gel advertised, because “the women look so happy”. Dove ad is Mia’s favorite of the five ads discussed in this interview.

### *Triumph*

“I must admit that I’ve thought about buying this type of shapewear, so that I could look good in dresses”, Mia says. “I’d like to try it, slim my tummy and fool men for a while of how fantastic I look. And when I take the dress of the truth comes out...” she continues. Mia doesn’t find the ad annoying “despite the good-looking model” because “the model only looks that good because of the shapewear and I would look equally good if I had that on”, Mia thinks.

### *Guess*

Mia finds the ad “overly sexy, cheesy and annoying”, and cannot relate to it in any level. “I don’t look like that, I don’t have that body or a lace corset so this perfume isn’t for me”, she says. “I don’t want, or I mean *I obviously can’t* relate to this since I’m not sensual, sexy, I don’t have that kind of sex appeal”, she adds. Mia describes the model “the perfect woman” and says that the ad gets to her nerves. However, she adds, “but, the perfume is called Seductive so maybe the ad just needs to be like this”. Mia wouldn’t buy the perfume based on this ad, because “Guess women are like that and I’m not, a Guess woman, and I don’t want that kind of soul for myself”. She finds this ad her least favorite of the five ads discussed in this interview.

### *Gant*

“Oh, he is wonderful, so manly, relaxed, fresh, safe, casual... I’d like to get under his arm”, Mia says about the male model in the ad. “He is not too sexy, too polished or too handsome, but just right”, she adds. Mia pictures a scene from what’s happening in the picture: “It’s a Saturday afternoon and we have just arrived from brunch, and we’re just sitting and chatting on that comfy sofa and reading a paper, and everything is serene”. “I’d like to be a part of it”, she continues. Mia would consider buying Gant clothes based on the ad, because it “doesn’t try too much”.

### 8.2.2. Ad experiences: Siiri

#### *Aurinkomatkat*

“A young couple is spending their honeymoon on a paradise island”, Siiri comments on the ad. “Everything is wonderful and they are very happy”, she continues. Siiri was recently on a holiday with her now ex-boyfriend and the ad evoke feelings of wanting to “go back there”. However, she wouldn’t buy a holiday based on this ad, as she is “very negative and skeptical towards ads in general”. Although Siiri finds the ad positive, she’d change it: “It should portray a family with children, definitely; a family playing at the beach, children building sand castles, one parent playing with them and the other reading a book on a towel”.

#### *Dove*

Siiri finds the ad annoying; she doesn’t understand why it has been made the way it is. “This tries to convince that a shower gel would make your skin more beautiful and smoother. I don’t believe it, it’s stupid!” Siiri says, aggressively. She is very skeptical towards the ad and wouldn’t buy the shower gel based on it. “I think this is made for older people, who might actually be so stupid that they’d believe this ad”, she says. Siiri talks indifferently of her own skin: “I don’t care if shower gel makes my skin firmer, I don’t care how my skin looks”, she says. She also criticized the word choices used in the ad. “The words are stupid: before, more beautiful. It should be before and after. Stupid word, this ‘more beautiful’ ”, she says.

#### *Triumph*

“I don’t believe in this sort of shapewear – there are no clothes that can hide your curves”, Siiri says. However, she continues, “maybe for one evening, under a dress, it would keep your tummy flat for a while”. Siiri thinks that what the ad is telling is “why be yourself, when you can be something else?” and “whatever you do, don’t be yourself”. She’s annoyed by the model’s “sexy facial expression” and the fact that “she is 20-something, 45-kilos and selling herself and doesn’t even know what she’s put herself into”, continuing “she doesn’t even have boobs or anything to shape!”. She would change the ad to portray before – after –pictures of a 40-something model, because “Triumph is a brand for older women”. Siiri finds this and the following Guess ads her two least favorite ads from the five ads shown in this interview.

### *Guess*

“Why have they chosen that sexy bitch there, I don’t get it”, she wonders. She pictures how the ad is digitally manipulated, how the make-up is done and how the model is asked to do hundreds of sexy facial expressions. “When you wash the makeup off and let her skin breathe, she looks totally different”, she adds. Siiri hates the fact that “every ad is full of sex”. She is annoyed by the model wearing stockings and showing a hint of nipple. “She’s all like ‘I want you, take me now’”, Siiri says, aggressively continuing “this ad is so oncoming that it really gets under my skin”.

### *Gant*

“This is actually one of the few ads I like”, Siiri says. “The man is cosy, relaxed and casual.” Siiri thinks that men and women are portrayed differently in ads: “Men are not portrayed through sex, but as manly and handsome”. She compares Guess and Gant ads: “Guess ad is like, ‘hi, I’m 25-year-old skank full of sex, I’m throwing myself at you guys’, but Gant ad is like, ‘hi, I’m 35-year-old lawyer, I like to dress casually to work, wear a shirt with an open button but not with a bare chest, but a t-shirt under’.” Despite liking the ad, Siiri wouldn’t buy Gant clothes based on this ad since “you can’t really see the clothes from this ad”.

## **8.2.3. Ad experiences: Tanja**

### *Aurinkomatkat*

Tanja’s feelings towards the ad are rather neutral. “It’s nice, but a little bit too mannered, polished”, she says. “There’s this stereotypical, young, good-looking happy couple”, Tanja says, “It seems a little bit too contrived”. Tanja wouldn’t buy a trip based on this ad, because she is “more of a self-directed traveler”; she likes to plan her trip herself.

### *Dove*

Tanja is a fan of the Dove brand. “I love that they use real-size women, it’s so refreshing among all those perfect models and digitally manipulated bodies”, she says, adding, “of course also these women have makeup and their skins are photoshopped, but they look natural”. Tanja pays attention to women in advertising more than she does to men; “probably because I can relate easier to female models”, she says. Tanja would buy the product based on the ad, “if it was produced organically”.

She has started to think more about what products contain and favors organic products. The ad is Tanja's favorite from the five ads shown in this interview.

### *Triumph*

Tanja considers the ad a bit tame. "This wouldn't catch my attention, probably because I have never felt the need to buy this kind of shapewear", she says. Tanja doesn't feel to belong in the ad's target group. "I think young women, who want to feel more secure about themselves, would buy this", she says, adding, "I feel that way sometimes but somehow, I can't relate to this". Tanja thinks the ad appeals to insecurities of women, making women want to look like the model. She pays attention to model's face. "It's somehow annoying they have tried to make it so sexy, like everyone turned into a sex goddess when wearing that". "When thinking about it, it actually is a little bit irritating", Tanja says about sex in advertising in general.

### *Guess*

"It's a very typical perfume ad", Tanja says. She might buy the perfume if she'd want to surprise her boyfriend and feel like the woman in the ad. "I must admit that it's annoying that the product is sold solely on boobs and sex", Tanja says, adding, "but, on the other hand, this is just how these ads are, and the name of the perfume is Seductive". She'd like to advertise perfumes based on its scent, like an ocean or rose, instead of "creating an image of how you'll look when you wear the perfume". Tanja thinks that men would buy perfumes for their girlfriends based on this ad. "Then they'll be disappointed that, oh, you didn't turn out like that", she laughs. She mentions that if she really starts to think about it, she'd like to see the woman before digital manipulation, and admits that "although there's nothing wrong with sex, it's a bit annoying when it's everywhere".

### *Gant*

Tanja doesn't find the ad interesting at all. "I usually skip these kinds of ads instantly", she says. She doesn't look at men in advertising the same way she looks at women, paying attention to their looks and appearances. "If something, I pay attention to the man's shirt, and I get why the ad is as it is, but it just doesn't do really anything to me", Tanja concludes.

## 9. Interpretation

In this chapter the findings of life story interview, that is life events, life themes and life projects, and phenomenological ad interview, that is ad experiences, are interpreted. Relations, connections and linkages between life stories and ad experiences are discussed, as well as their impact on and role in the identity construction process of the three interviewees. First, Mia's life story and ad experience interpretations in terms of identity construction are provided, following with Siiri's and Tanja's identity construction processes.

### 9.1. Identity construction: Mia

Mia's life themes emerging from her life story relate to tensions between *taking care of others vs. self*, *pleasing others vs. self* and *believing others vs. self* and current life projects revolve around *getting to know and respect oneself* and *finding love*. Several connections and linkages between Mia's life story and ad experiences are found; ad exposure and the way Mia experiences each ad has strong linkages to her life themes and life projects.

Comello (2009) argues that the self is a situation-bound concept and that exposure to certain messages increases the likeliness of certain self-views. In addition, McClelland [1951] and Prelinger [1959] emphasize one's body's importance in one's self-view (Belk 1988) with Botta (1999) agreeing that body is a major source of identity in terms of body image's importance on the self and media images' influence on body image construction. All of these arguments are reflected in Mia's case; Mia's exposure to different ads stimulate different self-views and attitudes towards herself, most of these relating to appearance. For example, the Dove ad stimulates a possible self of "a model" ("Even I could be a model"), whereas Guess ad stimulates a self-view of "an inadequate" ("I'm not like her"). Additionally, Aurinkomatkat ad strongly stimulates an actual self of "a single" ("I'd like to go on a couple's vacation but she has a boyfriend and I don't"), whereas Gant ad stimulated an ideal self of "a wife" ("I would like to get under his arm").

Mia tends to compare herself, her appearance and her situation in life strongly to images in ads and construct her identity and sense of self based on this comparison and messages received from ads. Her insecurity about her own body is present, for example, in Triumph ad experience, when she

says “if I had this [shapewear] on, I would look good”, indicating that without the shapewear she doesn’t feel good about herself. Comparing herself to models in ads can, then, be both the reason for and outcome of Mia’s struggle with low body image and poor self-esteem. In addition to comparing herself to ads, Mia seems to read and experience ads as a certain “truth” or “guideline” towards which it is desirable to reach. For example, Mia is interested to buy a vacation from Aurinkomatkat because the ad promised “cut down prices”. She wants to try the Dove shower gel because it seems to make the women in the ad happy. Mia would also buy Triumph shapewear, assuming that she would “look as good as the model” if she wore that shapewear. This experience suggests that, in Mia’s opinion, the model’s body is somehow “better” and “more right” than her own body, and that she should do something - buy the shapewear - in order to reach that “better” body. In addition, Mia feels the pressure to work out and shape her body in order to look like “the perfect woman” in Guess ad, yet she feels relieved when the Dove ad portrays models that look like her – giving Mia “a permission” to look the way she does.

There are a number of interesting contradictions in Mia’s ad experiences especially relating to body comparison and taking ad messages as “truth”. Mia says she doesn’t want to look like the Guess model or “have that kind of soul”, but, she still refers to her as “the perfect woman”, a term she doesn’t use when talking about the Dove ad, her favorite, which presents women she can relate to, which makes her feel good (“like a model”) and which includes happy, real women. In addition, Mia also says she *can’t* look like the Guess model because she doesn’t have the body or the sex appeal for it. It can be, then, suggested that Mia *would like to* look like the Guess model, since the ad “tells” that that is the “right” way to look, feels jealous towards the model in ad and compares herself to her, which makes her feel inferior and inadequate in terms of appearance and sexuality.

Another interesting notion in Mia’s ad experiences is that even though she finds the Triumph ad positive, she feels ashamed of the fact that she’d like to try the shapewear on. “I must *admit* that I’ve thought about buying this...” indicates that Mia considers wearing shapewear as cheating, shameful or superficial. This may even be the actual reason Mia likes the ad and isn’t annoyed by the model; she knows the model is “cheating”, because she looks good only because of the shapewear. Connecting Guess and Triumph ad experiences, it is interesting that Mia says she doesn’t have the body of “the perfect” Guess model and that she doesn’t *want* to look like that or have that kind of soul for herself, but simultaneously, admits secretly hoping to shape her body with Triumph shapewear. This suggestion supports the assumption that Mia considers wearing shapewear as superficial, a type of “soul” she presumably refers the Guess model to have. She

doesn't feel like she can identify with Guess model, but is ashamed of the fact that she'd like to. These contradictions further indicate Mia's dissatisfaction with herself and struggle for respecting herself and her body as she is.

While comparing Mia's Dove, Triumph and Guess ad experiences it is worth noting that although all models in these ads wear underwear or corresponding, Guess ad is the only one Mia finds annoying. Referring to notions presented above, it can be suggested that Mia finds the "normality" of the models in Dove ad and Triumph ad's "cheating effect" of the shapewear as explanation (they are normal-size) and excuse (she wears shapewear) for why the models look the way they do. Guess ad, again, doesn't provide this kind of explanation for how the woman looks so "perfect", resulting in annoyance and frustration in Mia's ad experience.

Mia's tendency to please others and belittle herself - and her opinions - is present in many of her ad experiences. Even if Mia doesn't like an ad or finds it annoying, she justifies and supports it in order to stay polite and avoid conflicts, provocative comments or standing against other's opinions. For example, Mia is annoyed by the couple in Aurinkomatkat ad, however she justifies the ad by saying "this is how the holiday ads are, its actually quite beautiful". Similarly, she dislikes Guess ad but supports it by saying, "well, the perfume's called Seductive so maybe the ad needs to be like this". In addition, Mia belittles herself and her appearance through ad experiences. Mia feels that, according to the Dove ad *even she* could be a model, but, according to her own thoughts, only *in theory*. She seems to struggle with the tension of believing others vs. self; as the Dove ad suggests that Mia could be a model, Mia is not used to believe in herself unless someone else believes in her first. She might need encouragement from other people and peers to believe in herself that even she could be a model, both in theory and practice. In addition, Mia's tendency to please others is present in Triumph ad experiences, as well. Mia mentions men many times when talking about Triumph ad and describes how she would like to "fool men" into thinking that she looks better than she actually does. These notions relate to Mia's willingness to please others – men – and possibly also to her current life project of finding love – a man – through "looking better than she actually does".

Mia's life project of finding love is present in many ad experiences either directly or indirectly. Her experiences of feeling jealousy towards the couple in Aurinkomatkat ad, referring to it as "a dream image" but simultaneously being annoyed about the couple, and admitting that she'd like to go on a couple's vacation have a direct link to her will of finding love. Stating that "it must be wonderful where they are, wherever it is they are" suggests that for Mia, life would be better anywhere with a

man aside. While experiencing Aurinkomatkat ad, Mia identifies herself strongly as “a single”, whereas experiencing the Gant ad she seems hopeful and identifies herself as “a wife”. When experiencing Gant ad Mia imagines herself under the male model’s and pictures in detail what they’ve been doing – together as a couple - earlier that day. This longing for love and finding a companion relates indirectly to Mia’s life theme of taking care of others vs. self. As a nurturing person, Mia would like to have a companion to share things with, who would take care of her and of whom she could take care of. In addition, experiencing the Aurinkomatkat ad and admitting that everyone, even she, needs a holiday every once in a while, is linked to Mia’s life themes of taking care of others vs. self and pleasing others vs. self, indicating that Mia is starting to realize that she needs to take care of herself in order to keep going and avoid burnout from recurring.

## **9.2. Identity construction: Siiri**

Siiri’s life story reveals two fundamental life themes, *having family vs. not having family* and *being content vs. not being content in life*. Her main current life projects relate to mainly *moving on after breakup* and, on a smaller scale, to *improving her educational background*. Even though all life themes and projects are present in Siiri’s ad experiences, some have more visible role in her identity construction process than others.

Siiri has sceptical, suspicious, at times even aggressive attitudes towards advertising and advertisements. This attitude is in sync to her characteristics in general, as Siiri describes herself as outspoken person and expressing her opinions clearly without thinking what others think of her. Siiri’s life theme of being content vs. not being content in life is related and connected to her ad experiences probably most often. She also seems to respond strongly especially to ads portraying women or products promoting female beauty. An interesting notion is that, of the five ads, Gant ad is the one only ad portraying no women or products relating to female beauty, and is the only ad of the five that Siiri likes. Aurinkomatkat ad, with a couple in it, receives a rather neutral response from Siiri, but Dove, Triumph and Guess ads all make her lose her temper.

Although Siiri says to be satisfied with her appearance, she mentions to have been bullied for being “fat”, having suffered from an eating disorder and gone through a number of diets in her life. These life experiences are reflected in Siiri’s ad experiences; she seems to protect herself from the models in ads by taking an aggressive and defensive stand, something she probably has learned to do in real

life as well in order to survive all the bullying and name calling. She refers to models in ads as bitches, skanks and biddies, talks about them in a demeaning manner (“she doesn’t know where she’s put herself into”; “selling herself”; “I’m a skank full of nothing but sex”) and even calls the Dove ad’s word “more beautiful” stupid. Her, apparently seeming, indifference towards her body (“I don’t care how my skin looks”) seems to conflict with her ad experiences; Siiri pays relatively careful attention to female models, guessing the weight of them and criticizing them “wearing stockings and flaunting a nipple”. Based on her ad experiences and taking her life events into account, struggling with appearance seems to have a major role in Siiri’s life, identity construction and her life theme of being content vs. not being content in life - including herself. Siiri’s ad experiences of Triumph ad, “why be yourself, when you can be something else?” and “whatever you do, don’t be yourself”, support this anxiety and difficulty of accepting herself as she is.

Instead of justifying her accusations and negative responses towards ads, Siiri seems to be against them from principle and defend herself from any beauty promoting ads. For example, Siiri rants, anxiously, in detail the things that are done to Guess model in order to make her to look like that; makeup, hair, digital manipulation and so on. Siiri may thus try to both defend her own appearance – why she doesn’t look like the models in ads - and diminish the appearance of the model; she – and no one – can look like that without makeup and digital manipulation. In addition, Siiri says she doesn’t believe in shapewear, but, right afterwards adds that it might keep one’s tummy flat for a while.

In addition to models’ appearances, what Siiri pays attention to is the age of the models. She refers to Triumph and Guess models in an understated manner by calling them “a 20-something skank” and “a 25-year-old bitch throwing herself at guys”, and what she’d like to see is “a 40-something” model in Triumph ad instead of the young model. These notions imply that Siiri finds the young age of the models a threat of some sort. This is a rather surprising notion, since Siiri herself is of the age group “20-somethings” that she speaks in a demeaning manner of. In addition, she describes the male model in Gant ad in a completely different way – even with a different, more polished tone - than female models; “a 35-year-old lawyer”, suggested to be more mature and successful (lawyer). In addition, describing the male model as a lawyer and referring to “alternative business clothing instead of a suit” refer to Siiri’s life theme of being content vs. not being content in life. Although she values simple things such as family, her struggling in terms of appearance, wealth and education are present in almost every ad experience. Describing the only man in the ads as a lawyer,

a prestigious, well-paid and high-educated profession, indicates that Siiri, to some extent, may value the traditional family values of man going to work and woman taking care of the children.

Siiri's hopes of getting married and having children arise instantly in her experiences of Aurinkomatkat ad, relating closely to her life theme of having vs. not having a family; she refers to the couple as honeymooners and pictures a family with children in the ad in detailed manner. Calling the place "paradise island" may suggest that, to Siiri, honeymoon and getting married equals paradise. Siiri's life project of moving on after breakup is evident as well, as Siiri wishes to "go back" to their holiday vacation. In addition, Siiri's first adjectives describing Gant ad was cosy, reflecting to Siiri's dream of starting a family of her own. The life project of moving on after breakup may also have to do with her aggressive reactions to beauty-related ads; fear of not finding a suitable companion, husband and future father for her future children may cause her struggling with her appearance even more than before the breakup. Siiri possibly finds her age peers as a threat to herself and to finding a future partner to start a family with. Similarly, her positive response to the Gant ad portraying a mature, grown-up man, may indicate her dreams of finding a cosy, mature man; an opposite to her immature, outgoing ex-boyfriend.

### **9.3. Identity construction: Tanja**

Life themes gathered from Tanja's life story have to do with tensions between *being responsible vs. being free* and *believing in something vs. not believing in anything*. A major current life project in her life at the moment is *surviving cancer and learning how to live after the disease*. These life themes and life projects are present in Tanja's ad experiences in various, mainly indirect ways, through which she constructs her identity, sense of self and the world.

Tanja seems to take a rather realistic, healthy attitude towards advertising in general. She justifies and argues her opinions on why she likes or doesn't like certain ad, and tends to read ads "with caution", understanding that they are not a reflection of "truth" or "rightness". For example, Tanja likes the Dove ad because it portrays "real-size women", but understands that these women, too, are digitally manipulated and have makeup on. Tanja doesn't seem to feel particularly anxious in experiencing any of the ads.

A number of interesting notions between Tanja's life story and ad experiences can be found. For example, her mature and sound experiencing of ads may be reflective from her life theme of being responsible vs. being free. Tanja has had to take responsibility of her family and herself and experienced teenage at a rather young age, indicating that from an early age on she has learned to behave and think rationally and maturely in order to keep control in her own and family's life. Additionally, Tanja's rather diplomatic, polite descriptions of each ad may refer to her tendency of being used to be "the responsible one", perhaps the reconciler between her mother and alcoholic father, aiming to avoid conflicts or say "the wrong things". Tanja may also keep her opinions neutral in the fear of being labeled as narrow-minded or judgemental and wanting to keep up a liberal, approving and permissive image of herself. Relating to this, she tries to find something positive in every ad; she seems to almost "apologize" for having something negative to say. "If I *really* start to think about it, I must *admit* that it's *a little bit* annoying that everything is sold by sex", she says, emphasizing that she doesn't find sex in advertising annoying if she doesn't really actively think about it. She also feels the need to *admit* – as a sort of disgraceful confession – that she finds sex in ads annoying, supporting the suggestion that Tanja would like to be seen as a liberal and approving instead of conservative and narrow-minded. Also, she only finds it a *little* bit annoying that sex is used in advertising, feeling the need to diminish her annoyance. Additionally she feels the need to defend and downplay her annoyance towards sex in advertising by emphasizing that "there's nothing wrong with sex or sexuality". Lastly, the same way as Mia, Tanja justifies some ads even though disliking them: "The perfume's name is Seductive, so maybe the ad is ok for it", Tanja says about the Guess ad even though she's annoyed about the fact that it's sold "solely on boobs and sex".

Tanja's hope to be "a good person" is present in her ad experiences also in terms of thinking of environmentally-friendly values. For example, Tanja thinks positively of the Dove ad and would buy it, if the product was organically produced. In addition, she prefers to plan her holiday trip herself and sleep in "a 2€ per night hostel" instead of buying a readily packaged trip from Aurinkomatkat. This attitude may indicate Tanja's willingness to "do the right thing" in terms of travelling as well, to plan her trip as ecological as possible. In addition to her tendency to be "the responsible one" and "good person", Tanja's cancer and her current life project of surviving the disease and learning to live after it may affect her current composed view of life and way of prioritizing and evaluating things worth getting anxious for.

Another noteworthy connection between Tanja's ad experiences and life story has to do with appearance. Tanja's attitudes towards female portrayal in advertising are, as towards advertising in general, rather calm and reasonable. Although she finds it a bit annoying that products are often advertised through women and sex, she seems to experience ads as a whole instead of paying attention merely on the portrayed female body. These experiences seem to connect with Tanja's life story of never really suffering from any particular pressures concerning her appearance or body and never being bullied or called names at. She has always been slim, and even says her sports teacher in school has been worried about Tanja having an eating disorder, indicating that the discrepancy between Tanja's body and the beauty ideal is rather small. These notions of never having problems with her appearance and thus not feeling inadequate or inferior compared to female models, consistency between Tanja's body's and ideal body as well as, through cancer and her father's alcoholism, having learned to appreciate other things in life than appearance, such as health together possibly, and likely, affect her attitudes towards female portrayal in advertising.

## 10. Conclusions, limitations and future research

To repeat, this research studies individual's identity construction process through life stories and advertising experiences from an interpretive social constructionist perspective. More precisely, the research question is following:

*How do women's life stories and the cultural context they live in affect their advertising experiences, and how are these linkages present in women's identity construction processes?*

Additional questions relating to this research are:

- How do women born in the body culture era experience and interpret advertisements that promote body culture through female and bodily representations?
- How do these advertising experiences connect with women's life stories?
- How is the cultural context visible in these ad experiences?
- How do women construct their identities and create their sense of self and the world through the connections between the culture they live in, their life stories, and advertising experiences?

In this chapter main findings and final conclusions relating to above mentioned research questions are summarized. Findings and analyses of interviewees' life stories, ad experiences and identity construction processes are interpreted through and reflected towards the theoretical framework and cultural context of this research. Main findings, that is relations and linkages between women's life stories and ad experiences and their effects on identity construction are presented and discussed in the light of and from the perspective of contemporary western society, patriarchy, consumer and body culture and interpretive social constructionism. After discussing the main findings, limitations of this study as well as implications and suggestions for future research relating to the effects of life stories and ad experiences on identity construction are provided.

## 10.1. Main findings

As said, this chapter summarizes the findings and analyses presented in chapters 8. *Findings* and 9. *Interpretations* and connects them with previous literature, theories and research context of this study; patriarchy, consumer culture, body culture and advertising and its role in society and identity construction in general are reflected with regards to the main findings of this study, as well as self and identity construction theories are linked and reflected with regard to these findings.

Even if making generalizations of any kind are neither the purpose of this study nor even possible with such a remarkably small sample size, three, in order to demonstrate the importance and topicality of the theme and topics discussed in this research it is worth pointing out that all interviewees - Mia, Siiri and Tanja - have been observed, examined and commented from early age on because of the way they look. Mia and Siiri have been bullied and called names such as “apple”, “pear” and “fat” from elementary school on and they both feel dissatisfied with their bodies and appearances even today. Tanja, again, was suspected of having an eating disorder in secondary school for being remarkably slim. All these young women and especially their bodies, then, have been under scrutiny of others – and themselves – already well before reaching adulthood. Body culture and centrality of the body in general in current western society, then, seems to some extent touch the lives of these women.

Although most of the main findings of this research are difficult – and unnecessary – to categorize to fit and reflect only certain theories or cultural aspects of western society, in order to keep the discussion structured the findings are presented in four different sections – 1) *Patriarchy in identity construction*, 2) *Body culture in identity construction*, 3) *Female portrayal in identity construction* and 4) *Self and identity theories in identity construction*. The interrelating and intertwining nature of these findings is, however, important to bear in mind in order to understand the effects of both cultural context and personal life experiences on identity construction in a broad sense.

### *1) Patriarchy in identity construction*

The patriarchal dominance in western society is vastly reflective in the research findings and interviewees' identity construction processes. Lin and Yeh (2009) argue that the historical role division of men working outside home and women within home has played a major role in the formation and rooting of the traditional gender roles and patriarchy. In addition, many researchers (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Lin & Yeh 2009; Orbach 2005) argue that, as a consequence of culturally promoted patriarchal ideology, girls and women unconsciously start to denigrate and objectify themselves and their appearances.

Siiri, seems to prefer the traditional gender roles of men and women either consciously or unconsciously; she hopes to get married, have children and take care of them – all traditional roles of women. While experiencing the Gant ad and its male model she uses words such as “lawyer”, “business world” and “black suit”, further indicating that for Siiri, men are the ones to succeed in business life and women, as she herself would like, are to stay home with children. Despite this traditional thinking she is annoyed that men and women are portrayed differently in advertising, female models “always portrayed as sexual and cheap”.

Siiri's different attitudes towards men and women in ads are obvious in her ad experiences; she refers to female models, her peers in a way, in a denigrating and demeaning manner, calling them “young skanks” and “bitches” and referring to them as “throwing themselves at guys” and “not knowing where she's put herself into”. Instead, the male model in Gant ad represents, to Siiri, a mature, successful man, “a 35-year-old lawyer”. This difference in experiencing men and women in advertising may suggest that Siiri has, guided by patriarchy, learned to denigrate and objectify, if not oneself at least other women of her age to some extent. Referring to the only male model portrayed alone as successful (lawyer) and being older (“35-year-old”) than “20-something” and “25-year-old” female models further indicate that Siiri considers men in a way superior to women.

Tanja refers indirectly to Bristor and Fischer's (1993) notions of the dualistic gender stereotypes, men's power to decide what women actually want and other traditional gender roles. She, for example, thinks that men would buy the Guess perfume to their girlfriends, perceiving “man” as “marketer” deciding what “woman”, “consumer” actually wants. In addition, she experiences the Aurinkomatkat ad as the man saving the woman from the octopus he holds in his hand – reflective to rescuing heroes in origin stories and myths suggested by Freedman (2002). Tanja, however, is

skeptical towards this type of gender role stereotyping, and, rather than having internalized it herself, feels annoyed and even rather amused by those stereotypical roles portrayed in media. She doesn't either experience any relatively denigrating or objectifying feelings towards herself or models in ads during her life story and ad experience interviews.

Mia, again, seems to have internalized the objectifying of women and men's superiority to women, reflected in a belief that women want and need to look good and improve their appearances for men's sake; she would like to buy the Triumph shapewear in order to improve her figure and "fool men" of her seemingly "more beautiful" figure and wonders whether she should look like the models in magazines in order to "gain men's attention". More than being concerned about her appearance for her own sake, Mia seems to be more concerned about how men perceive her, indicating men's thoughts, opinions and perceptions being more important than her own or women's.

## 2) *Body culture and identity construction*

The pervasiveness of body culture and the central role of body and appearance in western culture are strongly present in life stories and ad experiences of the interviewees and thus in interpretations and main findings of this research. A lot of discussion and narratives in life story interviews and ad interviews had to do with appearance; either one's own, of ad models or beauty in general. Numerous researches (Lin & Yeh 2009; Rogers Wood & Petrie 2010; Solomon et al. 2006) argue that in contemporary body culture girls and women are prone to assimilate that attractive appearance will automatically lead to power, success and a happy, valued life. Additionally, Featherstone (1991) claims that representing the body as the vehicle of pleasure suggests that meeting the standards of the idealized body presented in the media will increase the exchange-value of one's actual body. All these arguments are strongly reflective in this research.

Mia's ad experiences, for example, suggest that Mia considers having a smoother, firmer, "more beautiful" skin as is says in Dove ad would make her happy. "I would buy this [Dove shower gel] because they [models] look so happy", she says, indicating that, for Mia, models smile and are happy because of the "more beautiful" skin they have achieved through Dove shower gel. In addition, she thinks that having the body of the Triumph model and wearing the shapewear to "look good" would make her more popular among men and, further, happier, regarding that finding love

is Mia's current, major life project. She would, then, want to buy the shapewear to "fool men" of looking like the Triumph model and this way increase the exchange-value of her actual body as well. Guess ad, again, encourages Mia to work out in order to attain the body of "the perfect woman" and thus increase the exchange-value of her actual body by looking more attractive, "perfect".

Tanja's ad experiences, too, relate to the assumption of attractive appearance leading to success and happiness, although her experiences indicate a skeptical viewpoint on the matter. According to her the Triumph ad is trying to convince women that wearing Triumph shapewear would make them "a sex goddess", the powerful and an adored status of "goddess" achieved through meeting the ideal figure portrayed in media. The ad then, to Tanja, reinforces the false illusion of beauty leading to power and success and the assumption of meeting the ideal body standard increasing the exchange-value of one's body, in this case by turning into a goddess. In addition, Tanja finds Aurinkomatkat ad stereotypical because of the "happy, good-looking couple" in it; this further indicates Tanja's negative and sceptical feelings towards media's tendency to equal good looks with happiness. What is interesting is that she would, however, buy the Guess perfume if she wanted to "feel like the model" and surprise her boyfriend. This experience suggests that buying the perfume would make Tanja feel more attractive ("like the model") and this – she being more attractive – would, in her mind, make her boyfriend happy, indirectly indicating the assumption of looking like a model (improved attractiveness) leading to happiness (happy boyfriend) and success (successful relationship).

What is worth noting is that the seeming link between attractiveness, power and success seems to hold up not only among women but among men, as well. Siiri's experience of the Gant ad's male model provides an example of this. She describes the model as "handsome lawyer", automatically connecting good looks (handsome) with success and high-valued power position (lawyer). What is interesting is that, in Siiri's ad experiences, connection between attractiveness and success is present only in this ad portraying a male model. The response is almost opposite when female models are experienced; Siiri seems to connect female attractiveness with degradation ("she doesn't know where she's put herself into") and objectification ("she's throwing herself to men") instead of success, happiness or power.

As Featherstone (1991) and Joy and Venkatesh (1994) suggest, then, body portrayal in advertising indeed seems to make individuals self-conscious of their bodies and encourage them towards self-improvement through shaping their bodies to meet society's idealized appearance. The main purpose of taking care of the inner body, such as working out or eating healthily has, based on this study to some extent, become to enhance the appearance of the outer body, that is getting closer to idealized standard of the female body portrayed in advertising. The above mentioned ad experience examples also relate to consumer culture in a broader sense and to Belk's (1988) metaphor of "commodity fetishism"; ad experiences linking attractiveness with happiness and success reflect the misleading thought of purchase-based happiness; that consuming or buying a product, be it vacation trip, perfume, shower gel or shapewear, would directly or indirectly improve one's happiness and other aspects of life.

According to Freedman (2002) and Richins (1991), beauty ideals and stereotypes prevalent in society and promoted by the media have psychological and physical negative effects, such as poor self-image, low self-esteem and body image, weight problems, depression and shame, self-critique and negative emotions, dieting, eating disorders and difficulties in sex life, on especially adolescent girls and young women (Bessenoff 2006; Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Grabe et al. 2008; Jales & Majid 2009; Kim & Lennon 2007; Lavine et al. 1999; Lin & Kulik 2002; Plakoyiannaki et al. 2008; Reichert et al. 2007; Scriven 2007; Solomon et al. 2006; Spettigue et al. 2004; Spitzer et al. 1999; Stice et al. 1994). Especially Mia's and Siiri's life stories and ad experiences indicate a number of these negative effects; Mia suffers from poor self-image, low self-esteem and negative body image, and Siiri has been dieting throughout her life and suffered from an eating disorder. It needs to be kept in mind, though, that these negative effects may arise from other reasons than beauty ideal portrayals, such as childhood experiences of being bullied and being called names. For example Tanja, who has never been called names or bullied doesn't suffer from these negative effects to the same extent that Mia and Siiri, who both have been bullied. However, Mia mentions that looking at female models in magazine advertising makes her feel inadequate and "not good enough" and that she feels the need to shape her body to look like those models.

Proneness to social comparison - comparing oneself to socially accepted standards, aiming to change oneself to meet those standards and considering oneself a failure if failing to meet those standards – is considered one of the most significant predictors of these negative effects described above (Bessenoff 2006; Clay et al. 2005; Festinger 1954; Jales & Majid 2009; Lin & Kulik 2002; Stice et al. 2001; Wilcox & Laird 2000). Social comparison and its effects on identity construction

and the forming of self-view are strongly reflective in this research, especially in Mia's ad experiences. Mia tends to actively compare herself to female models in advertising. She relates to "real, normal women" in Dove ad, experiencing the ad positively and the ad stimulating a possible self, "a model". "I mean, even *I* could be a model", Mia says about the Dove ad. Instead, comparing herself to Guess ad's model, she responds negatively and anxiously as she feels inadequate and inferior to "the perfect woman", stimulating a negative actual self, "an inadequate". Tanja, again, seems to neither compare herself to models in advertisements nor suffer from above mentioned negative effects. This further supports the suggestion of social comparison, common to Mia but not to Tanja, increasing the likelihood of these negative effects occurring (Bessenoff 2006; Clay et al. 2005; Festinger 1954; Jalees & Majid 2009; Lin & Kulik 2002; Stice et al. 2001; Wilcox & Laird 2000).

Siiri takes a defensive, almost aggressive stand towards any female or beauty promoting advertising, paying close attention to each model's appearance, figure, facial expressions, clothes and so on, even picturing their ages, weights and characteristics. Interestingly, as Riessman (1993) argues, individuals tend to tell and narrativize particularly those experiences that include discrepancies between their actual and ideal self and the self and the society. This argument is vital in order to understand and explain Siiri's aggressive attitudes towards beauty portrayal in advertising images as well as her seeming indifference towards her own body ("I don't care how my skin looks", "I don't care how I look"). Narrativizing especially bodily and beauty-related subjects in advertisements indicate Siiri feeling discrepancy between her actual body and the (ideal) bodies of ad models, even though she doesn't directly compare herself to models and denies feeling dissatisfaction with her appearance or inferiority to models.

Another interesting notion concerning body culture and identity construction is that Mia and Siiri both feel discontent with their bodies and have lower self-esteem and body image than Tanja, who has been slim her whole life and has never suffered from any weight problems. This notion is representative not only to the argument of social comparison's effect on negative effects occurring, but to the argument of individual's self-image, body image and self-esteem being affected by how closely one's appearance relates to society's beauty ideal (Clay et al. 2005; Jalees & Majid 2009; Kim & Lennon 2007; Solomon 2006). As western society promotes thin beauty ideal, Tanja can be considered to be "closer" to that current ideal than Mia and Siiri, at least in these individuals' minds and self-views. Since Tanja has always been slim and suspected of having an eating disorder, she might, be it true or false, feel meeting the standards of ideal thinness rather closely. Instead, sitting

by their actual bodies, Mia and Siiri been bullied and called names such as “apple” and “fat”; in their minds, they may think to be further away from the current thin beauty ideal than Tanja, no matter their actual body sizes. As previous research suggests, beauty ideals then seem to affect and shape individual’s self-image, body image and self-esteem broadly and, thus, individual’s whole identity (Reaves et al. 2004; Rudd & Lennon 2001).

Awareness of digital manipulation of advertising images hasn’t been found to prevent harmful effects of social comparison or advertising images (Reaves et al. 2004; Zimmerman & Dahlberg 2008). This notion is reflective in this research; all interviewees mention and talk about digital photo manipulation in experiencing ads, Guess and Dove ads especially. However, despite being aware of the unrealistic images produced by digital manipulation, Siiri and Mia compare themselves to digitally manipulated female images, leading them towards negative feelings of inferiority and inadequacy. Tanja, although not being offended or feeling inferior to models in ads, would also like to see the Guess model before digital manipulation. She, unlike Mia, however understands that even the “normal” and “real-looking” women in ads are digitally manipulated. Tanja’s experiences could, then, indicate that awareness of digital manipulation of advertising images could possibly act as a preventing factor in comparing oneself to models in advertising resulting to negative effects discussed previously.

### *3) Female portrayal and identity construction*

What comes to female portrayal in advertising, an interesting notion concerning ad experiences of the interviewees is that of the three common characteristics in female depiction in today’s advertising presented earlier - thinness, whiteness and sexiness - whiteness or model’s race doesn’t raise any discussion among interviewees. This lack of discussion about model’s race probably result from the fact that all models portrayed in the ads are western and white, such as are all interviewees. Thinness and sexiness, instead, stimulate a lot of feelings and experiences. Siiri describes the Triumph model as “a 45-kilos skank who doesn’t even have boobs or anything” and Mia and Tanja describe the women in Dove ad as “normal” and “real-size”. Sexiness raises probably the most discussion and ad experiences of these three characteristics.

Many feminist perspectives accuse advertising of reinforcing inequalities between men and women by depicting women as sexual objects or in an otherwise demeaning way (Dallery 1989; Freedman 2002). Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) define sexual objectification as being treated and portrayed as a body or body part for the use and pleasure of others. In this research a lot of ad experiencing relates to the bodies of ad models. “I pay attention to her body” is a common comment when discussing especially Guess, Triumph and Dove ads. Additionally, models’ bodies are examined and discussed in a much more detailed manner than their faces, clothes, or the product advertised. The bodies of the models are described as “slim”, “perfect”, “normal” and “real-size”, and little details, such as showing a hint of nipple and curves of the model’s body, are noticed and mentioned. This, then, indicates that – to some extent - Guess, Triumph and Dove ads can be considered to portray women as sexual objects; bodies and body parts for the use and examination of others. Gill’s (2009) argument to explain the sexualized female images in advertising by the power and enjoyment of one’s own attractiveness and sexuality aren’t representative in this research. None of the interviewees experience sex in advertising as women’s power or willingness to please their selves instead of being portrayed to please others. All interviewees feel annoyed that today many products are promoted with sex and sexy female images especially.

#### *4) Self and Identity theories in identity construction*

This research reflects Thompson’s (1990) and Elliot and Wattanasuwan’s (1998) suggestions on individuals’ use of lived and mediated experiences, that is life stories and media consumption such as advertising experiences, as symbolic resources in the process of identity construction and that individual’s characteristics, interests, life experiences and future goals affect one’s ad experiences and interpretations (Atkinson 1997; Mick & Buhl 1992). For example, Siiri’s life experiences of a “broken” family and her urge to get married and have children are present in her ad experiences through considering a young couple as “honeymooners”; similarly, Mia’s future goal of finding love is present in her ad experiences in picturing herself next to the “cosy” male model in Gant ad.

This research provides understanding for the role of life stories and ad experiences in identity construction and forming of multiple selves. Elliot and Wattanasuwan (1998) refer to Thompson [1995] who considers the self as a symbolic project, which the individual actively constructs out of the available symbolic materials in order to gain a coherent understanding of who she/he is. Because of the situation-bound nature of the self, a certain type of self tends to emerge in certain

social situations (Comello 2009; Jenkins 1998; Oshana 2010). The findings reflect both of these arguments. Mia I probably “the textbook example” of this multiple self construction; she experiences a number of different actual, ideal and possible selves while experiencing different ads. In Mia, Aurinkomatkat stimulates an actual self of “a single”, whereas Gant ad stimulates an ideal self of “a wife”. Additionally, Dove and Triumph ads stimulate positive possible selves of “a model” and “good-looking”, whereas Guess ad stimulates a negative, feared self of “an inadequate”.

Siiri’s and Tanja’s identity construction process through multiple selves isn’t as clear or articulate as Mia’s. Siiri, for example, constructs a feared, negative self of “an inadequate” stimulated by Dove, Triumph and Guess ads. To Siiri, Aurinkomatkat ad stimulates an ideal self of “married”, and Gant ad stimulates an ideal self of “successful”. Tanja’s ad experiences, instead, stimulate a rather strong, permanent self-view that doesn’t change or vary due to different contexts (ads) to the same extent than Mia’s and Siiri’s multiple self construction. Tanja stimulates an actual self-view of “true” with regards to Aurinkomatkat ad and, quite similarly, Dove and Triumph ads stimulate an actual self of “content”. Instead, Guess ad stimulates a possible self of “a temptress”. Gant ad, however, stimulated absolutely no self-views or any other responses in Tanja’s case. All these different multiple selves stimulated by and constructed through different ad contexts are summarized in the table below.

		<b>Ads</b>				
		<b>Aurinko- matkat</b>	<b>Dove</b>	<b>Guess</b>	<b>Triumph</b>	<b>Gant</b>
<b>Interviewees</b>	Mia	<i>Single (A)</i>	<i>Model (I)</i>	<i>Inadequate (N)</i>	<i>Good-looking (P)</i>	<i>Wife (I)</i>
	Siiri	<i>Married (I)</i>	<i>Inadequate (N)</i>	<i>Inadequate (N)</i>	<i>Inadequate (N)</i>	<i>Successful (I)</i>
	Tanja	<i>True (A)</i>	<i>Content (A)</i>	<i>Temptress (P)</i>	<i>Content (A)</i>	-

A= actual self  
 I = ideal self  
 P = possible self  
 N = negative self

Table 1. Situation-bound construction of multiple selves.

McCracken (1987) suggests that consumer goods and meanings attached to them provide consumers ideas of gender, class, age and lifestyle, through which individuals construct their senses of self and the world. Siiri pays attention to models' age and profession, describing their hypothetical ages such as "20-something", "25-year-old", "35-year-old" and "40-something", and profession such as "lawyer". Mia also seems to receive ideas of lifestyle for example from Guess ad, as she doesn't want to have the same kind of "soul" as the model. The Guess ad, then, provides Mia ideas of the model's lifestyle, supposedly relating in Mia's mind to superficiality or shallowness, "souls" unfamiliar and unfavorable to Mia. Siiri, similarly, describes the Guess model as "throwing herself into guys" and "having nothing else but sex in mind", indicating that for her the ad provides ideas of Guess woman's lifestyle of being wanton, loose and dumb in mind.

As McClelland [1951] and Prelinger [1959] suggest, one's body and body parts are reflected as central parts of the construction of the self (Belk 1988) in this research. Mia's and Siiri's ad experiences, together with their life stories, suggest their outer body and appearance having a major role in their self-construction processes. For Tanja, cancer and the surgery related to it play a central role in her view of self and the world. Tanja's situation thus reflects Belk (1988), who suggests that loss of a body part is tantamount to losing one's identity and one's very being; Tanja's current life project of learning to live again after cancer is further representative to this notion.

To conclude, this research presents the subjective nature of experiencing ads and constructing the self and identity in a cultural context. It shows how western society's prevailing functions, such as patriarchy, consumer culture and body culture as well as individual's personal experiences, that is life story, and life themes and projects emerging from that story, all affect individuals' text reading and ad experiencing and, further, self and identity construction processes. The contemporary body culture and its impact on ad experiences and identity construction are of particular interest in this study. The central role of the body in identity construction and life in general is representative throughout this research; although not all interviewees experience ads portraying women or sex roles in a similar way, they all respond to appearance-bound advertising in a way that connects with their previous life experiences. These factors affecting the self and identity construction process are summarized below in *figure 1. Factors affecting self and identity construction in cultural context.*

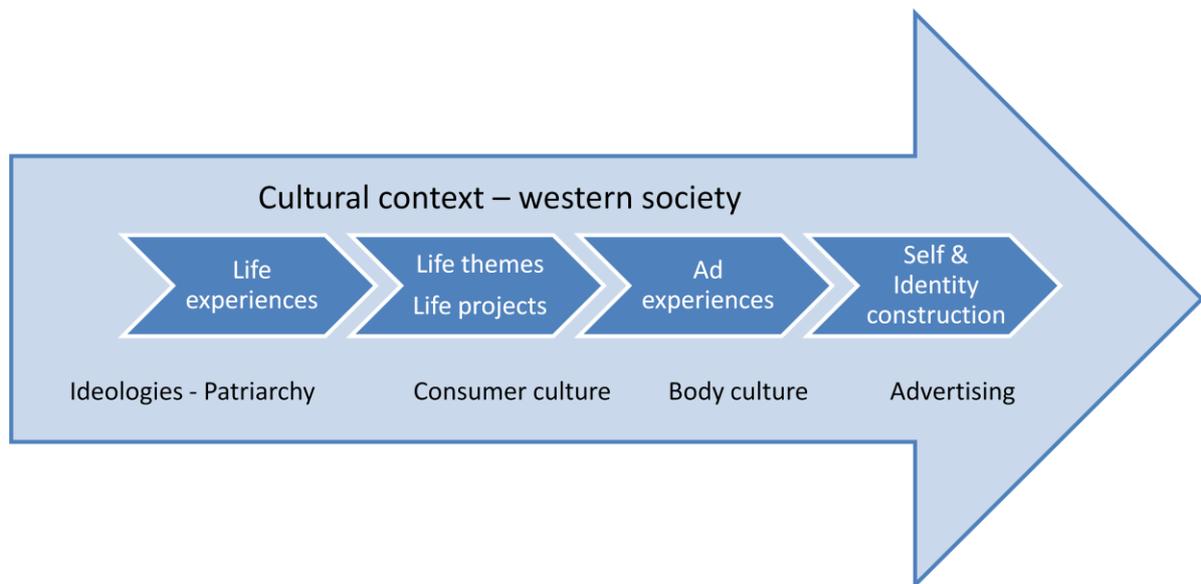


Figure 1. Factors affecting self and identity construction in cultural context.

## 10.2. Limitations and future research

Limitations and implications for future research have to do with choosing of both interviewees and advertisements as material to be discussed during the interviews.

The group of individuals studied in this research is, by its demographic characteristics, rather homogenous. This is an intentional choice for this research, as the aim is to understand how individuals born in the era of body culture and living in the same culture still experience and interpret advertising differently and cannot thus be considered as an actual limitation. In order to broaden the scope of the research and emphasize the meaning of cultural and social context as well as context-bound nature of self-construction it would, however, be interesting to conduct the similar kind of research with different sample groups; studying individuals from different age groups, geographic regions or educational backgrounds, for example, might provide useful and significant information on differences – or similarities – these individuals with different demographic characteristics share in terms of experiencing and interpreting body culture in advertising.

It has been found that exposure to advertisements objectifying women will cause body dissatisfaction among not only women but men as well (Lavine et. al. 1999; Spitzer et al. 1999). For this reason it would be interesting to conduct the research with male interviewees or a mixed-group of men and women. It would be interesting to find out firstly, whether men's life stories and ways of telling stories differ from that of women's; secondly, in which way men experience and interpret advertisements promoting body culture – either through male, female or mixed models; and thirdly, whether men's life experiences influence the way they interpret advertisements portraying body culture and whether and in which way they construct their sense of self through those ads. Differences or similarities in the use of life stories and ad experiences in identity construction processes among men and women could provide insight on either fundamental differences between men and women or as well culturally shaped gender-related differences among sexes.

In addition, the fact that all interviewees of this research are friends of mine might have, despite assumptions, affected the course of interviews and thus the outcomes as well; for example, the interviewees might have skipped and passed by certain relevant, major life events in their life story interviews, as they know I am familiar with their history beforehand. Thus, the narrative being formed might have been different, more detailed, if I wasn't already familiar with interviewees. As well, their responses to advertisements shown in phenomenological interviews may have been biased; as my friends, they might have been ashamed of some feelings and experiences the ads evoke in them and thus tried to hide their true feelings and experiences.

Another characteristics, that can be considered a limitation of some sort in this research is all advertisements focusing on body culture through the literal depiction of the human body; body culture is thus present in ads in a rather direct manner. In addition, all ads portray white model/models of approximately same age group. In order to make the research more multidimensional and to be able to refer more closely to the current beauty ideal, its portrayal in advertising and affect on interviewees' identity construction process, a different set of advertisements could be useful. For example, ads portraying young, old, white, non-white, male, female models portrayed alone, in pairs, in groups and so on as well as in different settings, such as work, home, leisure and so forth, some focusing on face, some on body, body part or scenery, would provide a more varied base for body culture to be experienced and interpreted. Advertisements could also portray the current topical trends in female depiction in advertising, such as sexualization of girls by presenting them as sexy adults or presenting sexy adults as little girls or "hot lesbians", for example.

Relating to body culture experiencing in advertising, an interesting notion of Trampe et al. (2007) is that the negative effects of comparing oneself to others seem to exceed the comparison between human beings; after being exposed to narrow and slim objects such as vases, women have been found to evaluate themselves in a more negative manner than after looking at thick vases. For this reason it would be in great interest to study the effects of contemporary body culture in a broader and more abstract level; referring to Trampe et al. (2007) studying whether the idealization of thinness, for example, has truly gone so far in western society that even narrow items unconsciously pressures individuals towards a slimmer body, is a truly interesting topic of research that could provide more deep insight on the rooting of body culture thinking in western society. Broadening the scale of advertisement types studied by including all sorts of advertisements (male/female only, no human beings at all, text/items only and so on) might be a needed improvement within future research. This way the pervasiveness of body culture could be studied in broader and more abstract terms.

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## 12. Appendices

### Appendix 1. Aurinkomatkat advertisement



**LASKIMME HINTOJA**

"Täällä törmää varmasti uusiin tuttavuuksiin."  
Janne ja Raita, Helsinki

**AURINKOMATKALAISEN MIELIPITEELLÄ ON VÄLIÄ.**

Yli 150 000 vinkin avulla herkuttelijakin löytää lomansa. Anna Aurinkomatalla käyneiden suositella juuri sinulle sopivia lomakohteita osoitteessa [aurinkomatkat.fi](http://aurinkomatkat.fi) tai poimi omasi näistä juuri myyntiin tulleista, entistä edullisemmista ensi kesän matkoista:

Malta 1 vk 11.5. alk. <b>625 €</b>
Cádiz, Espanja 1 vk 28.5. alk. <b>680 €</b>
Limnos, Kreikka 1 vk 20.6. alk. <b>690 € UUTUUS!</b>
Ohrid, Makedonia 1 vk 31.7. alk. <b>650 € UUTUUS!</b>
Dubrovnik, Kroatia 1 vk 13.8. alk. <b>690 €</b>

Varaa matkatoimistostasi, [www.aurinkomatkat.fi](http://www.aurinkomatkat.fi) tai soita **0600 060606**. Puhelun hinta 1,97 €/vastattu puhelu + pvm.

**aurinko matkat**

Suosittellaan lämpim

## Appendix 2. Dove advertisement

Näkyvästi kauniimpi iho palkituilla suihkusaippuillamme.



The advertisement features three women in a bright, white bathroom. Two women are sitting on the edge of a bathtub, and one is lying on the floor. Each woman is holding two square cards side-by-side. The left card is labeled 'ennen' (before) and shows a textured, slightly rough skin surface. The right card is labeled 'kauniimpi' (more beautiful) and shows a smooth, clear skin surface. The women are smiling, suggesting a positive result from using the product.

Unilever

*Dove VisibleCare voidemainen suihkusaippua sisältää eniten NutriumMoisture™ – ainesosia jotka tekevät ihostasi näkyvästi kauniimman jo 7 päivässä.*

**KOKEILE ITSE JA HUOMAA ERO IHOSSASI.**  
dove.com



Three bottles of Dove VisibleCare shower foam are shown at the bottom right. From left to right: Strengthening (green), Renewing (blue), and Softening (light blue). Each bottle has a white cap and a label with the product name and benefits.

Beauty AWARDS 2011

set voivat vaihdella yksilöllisesti

Appendix 3. Guess advertisement



Appendix 4. Triumph advertisement

**Triumph** 

**SHAPE SENSATION**   
THE ULTIMATE CURVE CREATOR

NEVER BEFORE WAS SHAPEWEAR SO SMOOTHLY  
SEDUCTIVE - IN SEAMLESS DESIGN.

Gorgeous décolleté    Slim waist    Flat tummy    Firm bum

Appendix 5. Gant advertisement

