Commercialized feminism and its role in millennial feminists' identity construction

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Abstract

This thesis explores the ways in which millennial feminist's identity construction is structured by the ongoing commercialization of feminist meanings such as empowerment, self-efficacy and independence. By drawing on theories within consumer culture theory, the movement of feminist meanings is examined. Symbolic consumption, theories of the self as well the theoretical body of consumer resistance are adapted to allow for an understanding for the ways in which commodified feminism becomes incorporated into the individual life world.

This study is based on six in-depth interviews with millennial German feminists. Through hermeneutic phenomenology, cultural meanings of femininity, masculinity and feminism are identified. Furthermore, the discursive way by which these meanings are incorporated into the marketplace by cultural intermediaries is examined. Additionally, the way the feminist consumers relate to these communicative linkages is examined resulting in the identification of an ambivalence between distrust and hope. Particular emphasis is given to the phenomena of pink tax, a gender-based form of price discrimination, and femvertising, an advertising trend involving feminism. Moreover, the incorporation of feminist meanings into advertising straps those meanings off their context. The analysis proceeds to investigate the ways in which the individual informants translate the meanings of femininity and feminism into their own life. This is mediated by their individual life contexts and their personal idea of feminism. By juxtaposing different ideologies, the informants arrive at their individual consumption meanings, which are often localized and highly contextual. Finally, the way in which cultural meanings shape lived consumption experiences is investigated with the regard to the meanings of commodified feminism. In this way, the inquiry results in the conclusion that feminist consumption meanings are a product of creative interpretation and individualized remodeling. The discussion further illuminates the diffusion of ideological meaning into society through the marketplace, resulting at the conclusion that the formation of a mainstream feminism has occurred. Furthermore, the commercialization of feminist meanings as a means of consumer voice is discussed.

Through this research, lived consumption meanings and market produced meanings of feminism are explored, expanding the field of consumer culture theory by adding to the discourse on sign domination & sign experimentation.

Keywords: commodity feminism, brand activism, consumer resistance, femvertising, pink tax, identity, consumer culture, consumer research

1 Table of Contents

1 Introduction

Commodified feminism is a contemporary phenomenon that has become widespread. Gender equality was one of the main social causes backed by brands in 2015 (Ames, 2015), and mainstream media have started to concern themselves more with topics on the verge of the market and feminism like pink tax, the price premium that women are often charged for every day goods or equality in the workplace. With celebrity feminists like Beyoncé and luxury t-shirts claiming "We should all be feminists", it seems that feminism and consumer life have become intertwined. Furthermore, a marketing trend called *femvertising*, the use of feminism in advertising, has taken over the marketing of beauty and fashion brands (Baurmann, 2017). Critique from the feminist sphere (Gill, 2007a) regarding the stereotypical use of gender in advertisement may have led some advertisers to shift from the long tradition of using gender stereotypes within campaigns (Grau & Zotos, 2016), toward the incorporation of feminist values and meanings (Goldman, 1992). Such adverts embrace women that are empowered, independent, equal and strong (Goldman, 1992). According to Goldman, this emptied feminism of its political value and transformed it into a commodity in the market that is more a question of style than politics, leading to the term commodity feminism. Feminism in advertising becomes a sign value that can be purchased through buying a product. This would turn the political movement into a lifestyle for individuals (Goldman, 1992). Goldman was joint in his perspective by many other writers and researchers (Lazar, 2014; McRobbie, 2009) who see this mainstream feminism as faux, and believe that it harms the political movement and benefits the corporations using it (D. Murray, 2013). On the other side, there are writers who hold a more benevolent view, conceptualizing femvertising as an easily accessible feminism (Hains, 2014) or a means of voice of the feminist movement (Scott, 1994). Certainly, this is a question of perspective and likely the solutions is an ambivalent one as Banet-Weiser suggests (Banet-Weiser, 2004).

Especially millennial feminists have been criticized to be marketplace feminists, using feminism merely as an accessible, attractive identity (Bianco 2016). But where are all these consuming millennial feminists? According to YouGov (2016a), 46% of Germans agree that equality between men and women has been accomplished in Germany. Even though most Germans do not agree that gender equality already exists, and many would like to see this changing, only 14 % would refer to themselves as feminists (YouGov, 2016b). This study takes an outset to view this group under the microscope and to understand the tensions and challenges this group encounters while pursuing their feminist identity.

Theoretically, feminist ideology can be seen as opposed to a dominant ideology of patriarchy within marketing texts. Fischer & Bristor (1994) used a poststructuralist lens to identify parallels between the male/female relationship and the marketer/consumer relationship. In this way, the authors suggest confronting the notion of power and to challenge the masculine behavior of brands toward consumers. In this way, consumer research literature suggests tensions between feminist ideology and contemporary market practice. This includes advertising, which has also been addressed by Stern (1993), but also the types of products and services provided and other components of the marketer/consumer interaction, such as the pricing. In many fields, products are marketed as gendered variants, making it easily recognizable which one is meant for male and which one for female consumers. At the same time, the female versions of these products are often sold at a higher price (der Heiden & Wersig, 2018). While the femvertising trend can serve as an example of appropriation of the marketplace and feminist values, the pink tax can be conceptualized as an economic discrimination (Duesterhaus, Grauerholz, Weichsel, & Guittar, 2011).

While femvertising appropriates feminist meanings and values for the commercial use, the pink tax debate is an example of feminists aiming to reclaim power in the marketplace. These points of convergence of feminism and the marketplace can provide an insightful handle to investigate relationships of structure and agency within feminist consumer's interpretation of cultural meaning in consumption and construction of feminist identity through consumption.

1.1   Problem statement

This chapter provides the reader with a clear understanding of the problem that should be examined within this thesis.

Millennial feminists have been criticized to be marketplace feminists, using feminism merely as an accessible, attractive identity (Bianco 2016). Furthermore, Lazar (2009) criticizes contemporary post-feminism for fostering a femininity that is based on an entitlement to consume and in this way provides a problematic vision of gender equality. Post-feminism has been argued to be more about exploring different lifestyle options and pleasures, often through consumption, than engaging in social activism (Braithwaite, 2002). The commercialization of feminism can be viewed as a way of appropriation of feminist meaning to the marketplace. At the same time, the nature of marketer-consumer relationships has been criticized as a gendered relationship, characterized by masculine ideology (Stern, 1993). In this way millennial feminist consumers navigate the marketplace as an environment of ambivalence and competing meanings. However, it is yet to be examined how the

countervailing cultural meanings of feminism opposed to traditional gender conceptualizations influence and structure the identity construction of millennial feminist consumers and which meanings they draw from the commodification of feminism.

This thesis therefore seeks to understand how millennial feminists use consumption in their individual identity construction and which role the commodification of feminism takes in this identity construction.

1.2   Research question

How do millennial feminists use consumption in their individual identity construction and which role does the commodification of feminism take in this identity construction?

Sub-questions:

1. What are the cultural meanings of feminism, masculinity and femininity?
    i. How can they be described from a feminist's perspective?
    ii. Which meanings can be identified within advertisements and other institutions of the marketplace?
2. What is the nature of the relationship between contemporary feminism and institutions of the market such as advertising and producers through the eyes of a young feminist?
    i. Which, if any, narratives can be drawn from the use of feminism in advertising?
    ii. Which, if any, narratives can be drawn from the pink tax debate?
3. Which role can be assigned to the millennial feminist's use of consumption and anti-consumption in their identity project of being and becoming a feminist?
4. How do cultural meanings of feminism shape the lived consumption experiences of millennial feminists?
    i. Which cultural meanings underlie significant consumption experiences of millennial feminists?
    ii. How does the commodification of feminism impact these meanings?

While the research question 1 concerns itself with the socio-cultural level of cultural meanings, the questions 2 explores the relationship of the institutions of the market and feminist ideas through the eyes of a feminist on a meso level. Research question 3 explores the relationship between identity and consumption, while question 4 aims at understanding the overall relationship from a lived experience standpoint. By answering these four questions, a picture of the way in which feminist's use consumption for their identity construction under the consideration of commodified feminism can

be drawn. These sub-questions structure the analysis in chapter 4 and also delimit the way in which the research question will be answered. Research questions 1-3 will be answered at the end of the findings section, while research question 4 will be discussed more thoroughly in the discussion. The discussion further proceeds to address the topic of commercialization and market responsiveness as a means of voice which is a topic that emerged throughout the inquiry. Finally, the discussion provides limitations to this thesis.

1.3   Positioning

This paper places itself in the tradition of consumer culture theory (CCT), which refers to a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). CCT views the various meanings and the multiple and often overlapping cultural groups within the frame of today's world that is shaped by globalization and capitalism. This stream of research strives to link individual level meanings to cultural processes and structure, situating these relationships within historical and marketplace contexts (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), therefore making it especially suitable to this thesis. The theoretical background is spanning over the fields of marketplace culture theory and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies & consumer interpretive strategies. The underlying theories of this field encompass theories on the nature of consumption, on consumer identity construction and even reach into the field of consumer resistance. These theories will be enabling to understand the nature of feminist identity and how it is constructed and maintained in the marketplace by individual consumers. Furthermore, it will aid the understanding of consumption as an identity spending activity. The tensions that may emerge in the process of constructing a feminist identity in the postmodern marketplace can be further explained through the theoretical frameworks of individual consumer resistance.

1.4   Contribution

This thesis contributes to research on consumer culture theory in the way that it provides an account of the ways in which a commodified or commercialized ideology takes a role in the identity construction of individuals holding this ideology. Entertaining an ideology that is originally opposing dominant ideology can lead them to be caught in a dilemma between their value and belief system and their need for self-actualization and identity expression. On the one hand, they oppose many values associated with the society, on the other hand they live in it and are socialized by it. The commodification of feminism into institutions of the market represents a critical stage at which

feminist individuals may find themselves full of ambivalence and with the need to differentiate themselves. In this way, this thesis advances insight on the structuring influence of commodified ideology on consumer's identity construction in the marketplace, therefore adding to the theoretical streams of marketplace culture theory and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies. Specifically, this thesis aims to expand the theoretical discourse on sign domination & sign experimentation by exploring lived consumption meanings and market produced meanings of feminism.

1.5   Delimitations

This thesis aims to examine the relationship of young feminist's identity construction and the marketplace. This relationship is manifold and can have multiple, interrelated aspects. It must be acknowledged that this thesis may not result in a comprehensive inventory of all aspects, but rather illuminates the ones that have become evident throughout the investigation.

The approach of viewing two phenomena that arose within this relationship (pink-tax and femvertising) should help to understand complementary forces. However, many other phenomena may be influencing the relationship between the feminist consumer and the marketplace but cannot be addressed thoroughly in this thesis.

The interpretation of meanings is situated within the context of the informants. This approach can be fruitful, because this thesis conceptualizes the individual ideology as an aspect of individual identity. To ensure focus of the analysis, this thesis does not aim to answer questions regarding aspects of collective ideologies in detail or address the collective identity of millennial feminists.

Furthermore, the consumer-centered outset of this study delimits the analysis of the relationship the marketplace institutions entertain toward the consumer segment of feminists. This aspect will only be investigated through the perception of individual consumers, not through the eyes of corporate institutions.

1.6   Ontology & epistemology

To set a frame for the approach of this research, ontology and epistemology of this work should be lined out. Certain assumptions about what reality is and what the relationship between the researcher and reality needs to be lined out to delineate the research. These sets of assumption allow to define the research paradigm under which this thesis falls.

Ontological assumptions describe the nature of reality (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). The ontological assumptions of this thesis are that there is not one reality, but possibly many, socially and culturally

constructed ones. In this way, reality is multiple and relative (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988), thus determining the ontology of this thesis to be nonpositivist. These multiple realities form through the different, multiple systems of meanings individuals are exposed to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In their entirety, the ontological assumptions are aligned with the notion of postmodernism described by Firat and Venkatesh (1995). Postmodernism provides a particularly good lens to examine the research question as it concerns itself with the reverse of modern conditions, including a wide range of topics such as the construction of the subject, the symbolic role of consumption and the cultural signification of fragmentation (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). These topics also appear to be central for this research.

Epistemological assumptions describe the relationship between the researcher and the reality or how this reality is captured (Carson, Gilmore, Perry, & Gronhaug, 2001). By the relative nature of reality, knowledge obtained within this reality will always be socially constructed (Carson et al., 2001) and product of individual perceptions (Hirschman, 1985, Berger and Luckman, 1967 as cited in Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). In this way, multiple realities exist at the same time for different individuals. These can be paradox and contradicting (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Through hermeneutic reasoning, understanding of the reality can be generated, however, this understanding will remain local and particular to a certain context (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

Summing up all these assumptions, this thesis falls under the interpretivist paradigm, which will be the basis for the choice of methodology in chapter 3.

1.7   A short introduction to post-feminism

To aid the untangling of the research question presented, an introduction into post-feminism and phenomena of feminism in the marketplace should serve as an introduction to the background of this research. Post-feminism can be seen as a frame of reference for the location of contemporary feminist streams within millennial women (Robinson, 2008). Referring to post-feminism, this thesis speaks of forms of feminism in today's western word, that assumes that women deserve equal rights as men in all aspects of life, but inequality still persists. Post-feminism is a feminism that has been a subject of investigation in advertising research as well as in the broader consumer research field (Gill, 2007; Lazar, 2009, 2014; McRobbie, 2009; Thompson & Tian, 2008) . In this way it is crucial to this inquiry to provide a broad pre-understanding of this political stream.

While post-feminism is a contested and also important form of feminism, according to Rosalind Gill (2007), it can be a comprehensive way to understand today's multiplicity of feminist streams.

It is signified by viewing femininity as a bodily property, putting the possession of a *sexy body* as an ultimate source of femininity and female identity & power. This centrality of the bodily property of femininity puts female bodies object scrutinized and subject to rigorous judgement. Self-surveillance including self-monitoring and disciple intensify according to Gill through self-help discourses, magazine advice to women. Within this intensification there is a large focus on the psychological aspects and an internalization of the so-called *male gaze*, the notion of viewing women as sexual objects responsible for the pleasure of the male viewer. Furthermore, women no longer solely take on a role of a sexualized object, but also become sexual subjects, choosing to present themselves as sex objects for their own pleasure. In doing so, they use the internalized male gaze to act out heterosexual male fantasies. A general sexualization of culture provides the context to these developments, according to Gill (2007). As an example, in entertainment, all women are available to be coded sexual. In this sense, a porn star is judged for their sex appeal as well as female scientists, politicians or athletes. Furthermore, magazines aiming at men are usually portraying women as responsible for protection against STDs and contraception. In this sense, women become monitors of sexual and emotional relationships. This sexualization does not only concern women, but also girls (Gill, 2007). Additionally, Rosalind Gill observes a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment. According to her, the individualism that women embrace to please and express themselves through fashion, cosmetics and plastic surgeries often falls short of focusing on the commercial pressure that is exerted on women. She argues that all the similar ways in which women choose to express themselves may not really be a product of subjective, free choice, but rather of commercial forces. Altogether, the 1990s have seen a re-emphasis of differences between men and women in terms of genetic, bodily and psychological differences according to Gill (2007). This implies a need for men to be more masculine, distancing themselves from feminine traits, and simultaneously a need for women to be more feminine and sexy. These differences enable a (re-)eroticization of culture that has previously been lost through the pressure of feminist discourses in the earlier decades. Gill concludes that post-feminism has a paradox nature to it, as it combines feminist and anti-feminist ideas. While it celebrates women's subjectivity, agency and will to be autonomous and independent, it also incorporates a view on feminists that is punitive and repressive of women's desires and selves (Gill, 2007). As an example, the sexual liberation of women as a sexual subject is rooted in the internalization of the male gaze instead of a sense of independence.

While I previously provided an introduction oriented around Rosalind McGills views on post-feminism, I would now like to provide other views to try to draft not a conclusive, but multi-faceted picture of the perspectives on post-feminism.

Shelley Budgeon (2001) distinguishes between two views on post-feminism. It can be understood as anti-feminist, in the way that it rests on the notion that gender equality has already been achieved. In this way, post-feminists may refuse to see the structural inequality that women may encounter in their life and rather re-frame it as an individual failure, as a problem of individual significance. Post-feminism then rather concerns itself with exploring lifestyles through consumption rather than with social activism (Braithwaite, 2002). The second way to understand post-feminism is as a subsequent stage of feminism. According to Budgeon, this perspective can be more productive as it does not signify an end to feminism but only conceptualizes it as part of a larger transformation. It may not be a form of depoliticization of feminism but more a shift toward other forms of expression (Budgeon, 2001). In this way, post-feminism resembles the feminism in today's world, including all current streams with all their contradictions. Within this frame and due to these contradicitions, analyses should aim to start within individual experiences (Budgeon, 2001). Each individual can find their own feminism in a collection of emotional and personal meanings. Albeit this emphasis on individuality, there is also a countervailing element concerning itself with the public expression of feminism through public policy and demonstrations. According to Braithwaite (2002), third wave feminists explore the contradictions that lie within the individual lifestyle actualizations within today's culture. Consumer culture is seen as a locus of empowerment rather than misogyny (Banet-Weiser, 2004). In this way, the re-interpretation and production of meaning can be seen as a key site of analysis within third wave feminism (Gillis, Howie, & Munford, 2007).

Regardless of how to see the two views on post-feminism, both incorporate consumption and production of cultural practices and meanings as central to the stream. In this way, post-feminism with all its contradictions and tensions offers a meaningful entry point to explore the role of consumption for individual ideological identities.

1.8   Outlook

Following this introduction, this thesis is going to explore the theoretical foundations of symbolic consumption and the movement of meaning as well as identity in consumer research. Furthermore, some theoretical insights into consumer resistance will be supplemented. After having discussed these theoretical fields with regard to the problem at hand, the methodology of hermeneutic

phenomenology and the research methods will be introduced. Consecutively, the findings of this study will be presented, addressing cultural meanings, discourse, individual consumers consumption meanings and the way meanings influence consumption experiences. At the end of the findings, the four sub-questions underlying this inquiry will be answered. The discussion proceeds to illuminate sub-question 4 further and discussing the results in the light of the theories presented. Additionally, the question of market responsiveness and commodified ideologies as a means of voice of the consumer will be discussed. After limitations to this study are introduced, the final conclusion will be made and implications for the practice of marketing will be given.

2   Theoretical foundations

This chapter is going to introduce the theoretical framework of this thesis which both serves as a theoretical background to the research problem as well as a basis for the interpretation of the findings.

The theoretical foundation of this thesis is based on the CCT (Consumer culture theory/theoretics) premise that consumer choices and practices are essential to defining a sense of identity. Viewed differently, the environment attaches meaning to consumer goods which people use to express their own value and meanings and to show their sense of identity. While the core conceptualization will be within McCracken's theory of the movement of meaning (McCracken, 1986) and further additions to the understanding of the movement of meaning, this theoretical foundation will be supplemented by an understanding of the concept of the self in consumer behavior and an emphasis on the mediating role of consumer agency in the form of resistance. By combining these concepts, it will be possible to understand the phenomenon of feminist consumption patterns on multiple levels of analysis, including the micro level of lived experience, the meso level of consumption practice and the macro level viewing the feminist consumer situated in the systemic frame. This can lead to insights regarding macro level structure of the marketplace feminism that has been observed versus the meso and micro level of consumer practice and lived experience. Tensions, conflicts as well as integration can be examined. Furthermore, the dialectic between the producerly action of the feminist consumer and the marketing activities will be explained by drawing on consumer culture advances.

2.1   Symbolic consumption

This chapter seeks to introduce the symbolic aspect of consumption and identify how the sign value or meaning of good becomes localized and ultimately is transferred to the consumer. Consumption usually describes a person-object relationship. Such relationships have been subject to sociological inquiry, especially to considerations by Thorstein Veblen (2010). He describes how members of certain social classes live these relationships, and how these relationships in fact are not bilateral, but person-thing-person, serving a communicative role of demonstrating status, group belonging and value (Veblen, 2010).

Understanding how things can carry such meanings regarding social class and even serve as a communicator toward others, can help understanding the consumption experience, practice and cultural meaning of young feminists. The way in which they may use consumption to become, be and distance themselves from ideologist positions will be crucial to understanding how their feminism structures their consumption and how the appropriation of feminist values in the marketplace can be

interpreted from their position. How the person-thing-person relationship works and how meaning can be installed within goods has also been of concern in anthropology. Anthropologists have argued that possessions are of paramount importance for all humankind in holding and producing cultural meanings (Belk, 1988; Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; McCracken, 1986). Understanding how things such as goods can carry meaning for individuals and how in this way, individuals can use goods in a symbolic way to express, substantiate and reproduce meanings can help understand the question, which role consumption plays in the negotiation of feminist identity. The way in which goods hold and produce meaning and how this meaning comes to substantiate in goods is essential for identity relevant consumption.

The strand of literature on the symbolic character of consumer goods and their contained meanings can be traced back to Levy (1959). According to him, consumers in the modern marketplace do not only consume for the things a product can do, but also for the symbolic value and meaning it holds. Goods can carry meanings of status, of age, of gender and many more. But how does this meaning come to be located in the consumer good? Where does it come from and where does it go? And how does this relate to the individual consumer?

Grant McCracken (1986) proposed a theoretical model to explain the relationships between the cultural environment, consumer goods and consumers (McCracken, 1986). This model of the movement of meaning has been cited many times and has been used as a framework for analysis in this thesis. According to McCracken, the cultural meaning that is carried by goods is flowing between locations in the world (McCracken, 1986). Traditionally, meaning flows from the culturally constituted world onto the consumer good and then onto the individual (s. Figure 1).

The meaning through which culture constitutes the world can be characterized in two concepts, cultural categories and cultural principles. Cultural categories are the fundamental coordinates that humans use to divide up the phenomenal world such as categories of time, space nature, and person. McCracken describes cultural categories as "the conceptual grid of a culturally constituted world" (McCracken, 1986, p. 73). Within the category of person e.g. can be categories like man, woman, different occupations, statuses, sexual orientations and many more. These categories are constantly adapted and re-established by human practice. Individuals "play out" distinctions so that the world they have in their mind is consistent with the world they see. This process is constantly in flux and this way, the members of a culture constantly engage in the constitution of the world they live in (McCracken 1986).

Objects provide a visible, tangible form of cultural meaning that would otherwise be fugitive. The cultural meaning that organizes the world becomes visible through goods. In fact, goods even provide a concreteness of cultural meaning to the individual, and can that way be performative (Austin 1963, Tambiah 1977; as cited in McCracken 1986). As an example, the category of occupation can be encoded in different sub-categories by a set of material goods.

Cultural principles serve as assumptions to order different cultural categories regarding their value, further to distinguish them and to interrelate them (McCracken, 1986). Through cultural principles within consumer goods, a value hierarchy between men and women can be manifested. Cultural principles are equally substantiated by goods as cultural categories (McCracken, 1986).

The world of consumer goods, according to McCracken, substantiates categories and principles and enters the socially constituted world as "object and objectification" at the same time (McCracken, 1986, p. 74). McCracken even goes so far to call goods the creations and creators of the culturally constituted world.

One way in which meaning can flow from the culturally constituted world toward the consumer good is through advertising. Advertising can serve to give meaning to the product. This is described by McCracken as a carefully orchestrated process of encoding of cultural meaning into a sequence of voice and picture, which is then decoded by the consumer. The meanings of goods can be changed and new goods can always enter. The viewer/reader/consumer takes an active part in this process, as it is crucial that his decoding of the cultural meaning matches the marketer's intended meaning. Advertising, in McCracken's view can be seen as a "lexicon of current cultural meanings" (McCracken, 1986, p. 76). It comprises the present state and stock of cultural meaning that exists in consumer goods.

It is left to the viewer/reader to notice the transfer of meaningful properties. To this extent, the viewer, or the individual consumer, is an essential participant in the transfer, as (Williamson, 1978)) notes.

A second means of meaning movement from culturally constituted world toward good is described by McCracken as the fashion system. The fashion system differs from advertising in the way that no conscious effort is put toward the meaning transfer as by the advertising agency. In the fashion system, there are multiple sources of meaning, making the process more complex. Sources of meaning can be magazines, newspaper and media presenting goods in a new context. Furthermore, opinion leaders help refine and shape existing meanings, resulting in a renewal of meaning of goods. Most

importantly for this thesis, is the third source of meaning. There is always a systematic, radical reform of cultural meanings produced by the fashion system in western societies due to the nature of these societies. Western societies are constantly deliberately in transformation as changes resulting from social forces are accepted and encouraged. In these societies, innovative groups at the margin of society run this reform of meaning (McCracken 1986). These groups reinvent meaning in a more innovative, stark way than the opinion leaders mentioned before. This redefinition can take the shape of a violation of cultural categories. The redefined categories and cultural principles then enter the cultural mainstream.

In the case of the fashions system, the newly created meaning is transferred through two categories of gatekeepers or agents. Product designers form the first category, while the second one is comprised of fashion journalists and social observers such as journalists of new societal developments. These two groups work together in a meaning transfer machinery. Journalists review new developments such as aesthetic, social and cultural shifts, while product designers convert those into possibly tangible, new market offers. At the end of the process, it is again the active part of the consumer who has to understand the meaning of the new object. In the case of the fashion system, it is necessary that the consumer has the same knowledge about newly adapted meanings that the designer has. This is made possible through the work of the journalist, who makes this information available to the consumer. In this way, the journalist or social observer carries a significant and crucial role at two points during the meaning transfer process. Once, when making new meaning available to the designer, and secondly, when making the same meaning available to the recipient (McCracken, 1986).

Consumers may consciously take notice of cultural meanings and attempt to manipulate these. Just as often, however, individual consumers fail to recognize the cultural meaning of a good until they lose this meaning with the product (McCracken, 1986).

To address the movement of meaning from the cultural good toward the consumer, ritual comes into play. It provides an "opportunity to affirm, evoke, assign, or revise the conventional symbols and meanings of the cultural order" (McCracken, 1986, p. 78). In this way, ritual also offers a means of manipulation of cultural meaning. McCracken described four types of rituals that serve the purpose of transferring meaning from good to individual: exchange, possession, grooming, and divestment rituals.

In this way, the movement of meaning model by McCracken can be seen as a structuralist account of the way in which meaning flows down to the consumer, leaving consumers in a position in which

they can only slightly manipulate these meanings. On the other hand, consumers who are part of the innovative groups at the margins of society are part of the fashion system. By violating cultural principles, they have a passive influence on the movement of meaning, which is always mediated by the cultural agents of the fashion system.
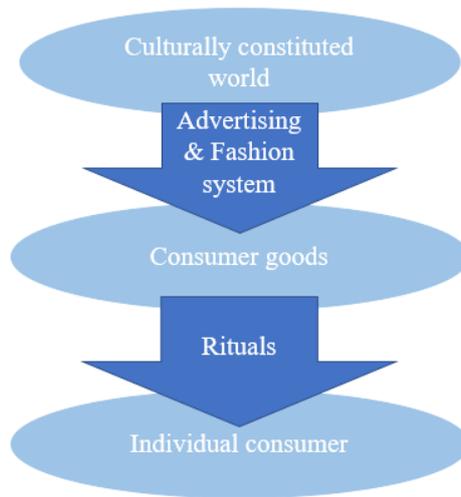
Figure 1: Adaption of Movement of Meaning (own production) based on McCracken, 1986 p. 72

2.1.1 Cultural domination vs. cultural experimentation

McCracken's model of meaning transfer has received great appreciation and use in consumer culture research (Fournier, 1998; Holt, 1995; Schouten, 1991; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995)). However, it has also been suggested that the model may need to be more dynamic and consumer centered than originally conceptualized. Thompson and Haytko (1997) argue that consumers "combine, adapt and juxtapose" (p. 15) fashion meanings to fit the circumstances of their everyday lives. The researchers propose a dialogical relationship between consumers and the cultural system of countervailing meanings. In this way, consumers may not just be the agents of reception in the last instance during the meaning transfer of good to consumer, but also serve an active role in relation to the fashion system. McCracken reserves this kind of direct influence only for certain countercultural groups, such as punks that produce meaning that is reviewed by the cultural agents of the fashion system. However, the influence of the broad public of consumers on the fashion system is very limited according to McCracken, and ultimately the cultural meaning is passed down toward the consumer in his model.

By viewing the consumers as a socially situated interpreter, individual interpretations are accounted for more thoroughly. The customer takes agency in the interpretation of the meanings that the

advertisements offer. This interpretation can be much different from the intended meaning. McCracken accounts for such phenomena, however, he explains this only through knowledge asymmetries regarding the meanings underlying the advertisements (McCracken, 1986). In this way, the conceptualization by Thompson and Haytko (1997) broadens the understanding of meaning creation from the consumer side.

Thompson and Haytko (1997) furthermore describe the relationship between macro-societal structure, cultural meanings & individual level interpretations as transformational in both directions (s. Figure 2) . In this way, cultural meanings localized in goods can inspire macro-societal changes. In this way, the commercial approach to cultural meanings could be re-conceptualized as an indirect means of voice of the consumer.

The consumers do not only actively re-create meanings within consumer goods, they also differentiate within their consumption behaviors and label some behaviors as autonomous choices, while others are labelled as problematic, or as a sign of social conformity. The participants used conventional clothing to sustain their sense of autonomy, but also, and at the same time, to adopt a critical stance toward consumer culture. What in one person's life context can be a sign of conformity, can be a sign of resistance for another individual in a different context.

Such differences come to live because individuals reword and renegotiate fashion meanings in terms of individual knowledge and value systems. Contrasting McCracken, meanings in goods are not simply accepted or rejected on the basis of their fit with cultural norms and conventional associations. The process of renegotiation is structured by consumers' desire to use fashion discourses for the construction of their self-identities. This sense of identity is often even more shaped by the groups and social ideas that they feel impelled to resist than by those they feel close to (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). As a result of the described dynamics, "consumers can create a localized understanding whose whole differs from the sum of its constituent cultural associations" (Thompson & Haytko, 1997, p. 38)
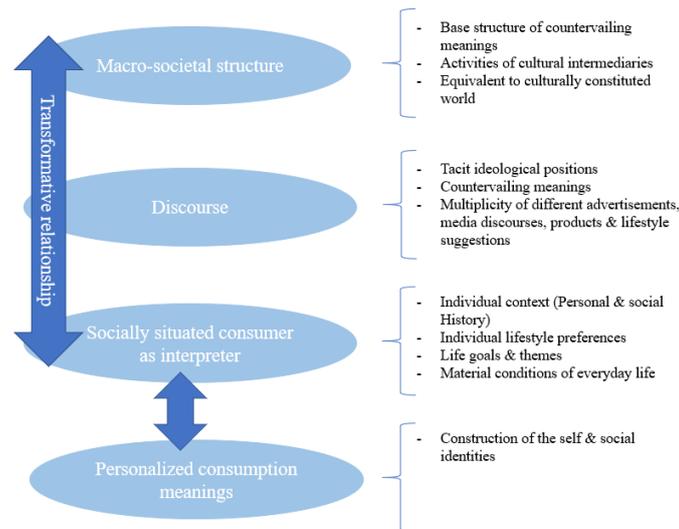
Figure 2: Adaptation of dialogic model of consumers' appropriation of countervailing cultural meanings (Thompson & Haytko, 1997)

J. Murray (2002), further suggests that the dialectical interplay between the two perspectives of symbolic sign experimentation and sign domination should be revisited. These two perspectives correspond to the questions of consumer agency and structure provided by the culturally constituted world, questions about the nature of the relationship of the two elements.

The model by Thompson & Haytko provides a basis for the analysis in this thesis, as it accounts well for the presence of contradicting, countervailing meanings. Such countervailing meanings are also proposed to structure the cultural context of the feminist consumer group viewed in this thesis. Originally the model has been conceptualized as a model of fashion discourse, but the authors argue that it might as well be applicable for other intertextual discourses like the gender discourse (Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

2.2   Identity in consumer culture

When discussing the symbolic meanings of consumption, the way in which consumers choose the meanings they want to associate themselves with, must be considered. The self-concept of the consumer can be seen as structuring an individual's life in many aspects, including the choice of products, services and stores (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1987). Understanding what identity or the self is and how it is conceptualized in different strands of literature will help understand the relationship of feminist consumption and feminist identity. Furthermore, it will be essential to explain meaning re-interpretation and re-creation.

The self-concept in consumer behavior has been described as "the cognitive and affective understanding of who and what we are" (Schouten 1991, p. 413). Though multiple conceptualizations in psychology and consumer research as well as other fields exist (Sirgy, 1982), this thesis will concern itself mainly with the self as multiple selves. The self can be seen as a "multifaceted entity composed of a variety of selves" (Patrick, Macinnis, & Folkes, 2002, p. 270). These facets can be positive or negative, can possess different temporal orientations and descriptive and normative characteristics (Ibid.). This fragmented conceptualization of the self is well aligned with postmodern ontological assumptions (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). As this thesis concerns itself with the identity relevant consumption regarding a certain identity aspect, feminist identity, which may be in contradiction with other identities consumers find themselves identifying with, it will be fruitful to view the self in its multiplicity. This way, tensions and compromises between different facets of the self can be illuminated and solutions to such tensions can be analyzed.

An individual's self-concept describes the "totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object" (Rosenberg, 1979, p. 7). In this way, the self also has a dimension that seeks to enhance, the self-concept in certain ways. This sought for enhanced version could be seen as the desired, ideal self, opposed to the actual self (e.g., (Belch, 1978; Belch & Landon, 1977; Dolich, 1969). While the actual self could otherwise be described as the expressive self, the one that can be grasped by outsiders, the ideal self, represents an idealized, desired version - the self that the individual would like to be. In an effort to reach the desired version of the self, consumers may hold a sense of incompleteness that drives them to create themselves through and with consumption (Schouten, 1991).

2.2.1   The extended self

Oneself does not necessarily only refer to a psychological construct that is limited to our brains. In fact, the self does extend much further, and can be found in the parts of our body, in our body as a whole, and it does not stop there. The self extends outside the boundaries of our bodies into the world (Belk, 1988). In this line of argumentation, our identity does not only have a central influence on the objects and activities we choose to consume, these possessions even become part of our extended self. Furthermore, those extensions of the self serve to express group belonging. And on an oppositely directed note, items that are part of group identities may become part of the extended self through the identification of the individual with the group in question (Ahuvia, 2005). These advances touch upon the observation that consumers use consumption to form and transform their selves. Individuals seek to express themselves through possessions and use material possessions to attain happiness, remind

themselves of experiences and accomplishments that lie in the past and use them for many other self-related purposes. On one hand, the collection of the things we have tells us where we come from, but it can also be meaningful to where we seek to go (Belk, 1988). We use possessions to attain a desired self, and we use them to a avoid feared and undesired selves (Arnould & Thompson, 2007; Belk, 1988; Patrick et al., 2002). Especially the things that we are most attached to are most relevant to defining ourselves now, and what we wish for in our future (Mehta & Belk, 1991).

2.2.1.1 *The question of selfness – degrees of self*

In 2005, Ahuvia addresses Belk's premise that there is a core self and an extended self. Belk describes the relationship between the different elements that can be part of a self as a ranking going down from the core to the less "self" components. According to Ahuvia, this metaphor can mislead to suggest that there is a true self, that is more genuine to the person. Ahuvia stresses that items can not only express the self, but also transform it. This had also been acknowledged by Belk, though he focused more on the expressive function. Ahuvia claims that the self should not be divided in such a way, as the 'real' self is constantly in change and there is no self that can be ontologically before the other components of the self (Ahuvia, 2005). The solution could be to speak about "degrees of selfness" (Ahuvia, 2005, p. 182). Belk (2013) later agrees that especially with the rise of many digital personas, the core self becomes rather a belief than a fact.

2.2.2 Approaching a sense of self

Furthermore, Ahuvia stresses the importance of the person-thing-person relationship described by Belk. Consumption is social in nature, as products are often used for the performance of social roles, especially for the performance of new social roles (Solomon, 1983).

Today, in the modern western societies, due to individualization, consumers may consider themselves unrestricted by social rules and obligations. They experience freedom in choice of unique identity projects, albeit they are still deeply influenced by environmental social and cultural influences. These influences have been completely internalized so that they no longer question them (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1994). Lacking more traditional references for identity, contemporary individuals turn toward the marketplace and try to find their identity in the world of consumer goods (Cova, 1997). By reworking, transforming and reinterpreting symbolic meanings encoded into goods through advertising and the fashion system, they take on meanings into their extended self to reach identity and lifestyle goals (Arnould & Thompson, 2005); (McCracken, 1986).

This co-constitutive way in which consumers attain a coherent sense of self can be referred to as identity projects (Belk, 1988; McCracken, 1986). Through identity projects, consumers become identity seekers and makers, producers of identity within the cultural frame (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Mick and Buhl (1992) use the term life projects to refer to such temporary, in flux identity concerns. McCracken describes these as the development, refinement and disposal of cultural concepts from different culturally pre-structured alternatives. The individual then goes on to perform and enact those concepts and cultural ideas (McCracken, 1987). Identity or life projects are therefore meaningfully interconnected with the extended self (Belk, 1988). In fact, through the engagement in these projects, individuals attain the self that they desire. This can not only be said for the world of goods in an isolated way. As a matter of fact, consumers use also text such as adverts as symbolic resources used to gather new ideas and better versions of old ideas that can support attaining and advancing identity projects (McCracken, 1987). Even though consumers take an active role in pursuing identity projects and behave largely goal directed, this does not mean that they are fully aware concretely of what they are seeking out (Arnould & Price, 1993).

Furthermore, the active role of consumers within their identity projects is being questioned by the relationship of those projects and the structuring influence of the marketplace. It could be argued that the market has a structuring influence in the way that it offers only a certain range of consumer positions that consumers can choose for themselves. Through these positions, individuals enact and personalize cultural blueprints to so that their identities are aligned with the conditions of today's consumer-driven global economy (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

2.2.2.1 Obstacles on the way to the self

Often, these projects can be encountering complications such as conflict, internal contradictions and ambivalence ((Mick & Fournier, 1998; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Thompson, 1996). For this reason, individuals may opt for "coping strategies, compensatory mechanisms and juxtapositions of seemingly antithetical meanings and ideals" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 871).

Arising *identity conflicts* usually are constituted by questions of group belonging which are reframed toward questions of identity(Ahuvia, 2005). Ahuvia describes that consumers deal with such conflicts in three different ways: "demarcating," "compromising," and "synthesizing" solutions (Ahuvia, 2005, p. 181). These solutions will be important to understanding the consumption phenomena underlying this thesis.

Demarcating: When dealing with competing identities, a demarcating solution will endorse one of the competing identities and reject the latter.

Compromising: The competing identities are solved by choosing a half-way in between solution.

Synthesizing: This solution will be more attractive than the compromise of the two identities. It can be achieved by synthesis of both identities or by introducing a completely new one.

2.2.3 Talking and thinking about identity and group belonging

The way in which individuals express and reflect on their sense of self has been described by Mittal (2006) as deep and continuous. According to his research, consumers constantly construct and play out a story about themselves and who they are striving to become (Mittal, 2006; J. Murray, 2002). In these self-narratives, consumers play out their identities as a performance with products as props in the enactment of personalized version of cultural scripts (Murray, 2002). For this reason, identity is often inquired in consumer research as a narrative. When individuals give an account of themselves, these stories are not fully possession of the self, but rather possessions of the social interaction that this story emerged from (Gergen & Gergen, 1988).

However, it is in the culturally and social conditioned nature of human thinking to think in narratives opposed to a series of un-connected events and actions, drawing meaning and goal-directedness from our experiences (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Different narratives can result from the same set of events (Czarniawska, 2004). The narrative that individuals decide for when talking about themselves thus is depending on many contextual aspects. The reflections on narrative by Czarniawska can also inform our view on the goal directed dimension of human identity. According to her, the most important aspect of our lives is the constant reformulation of our life goal. Our self-narratives explain our affiliations with groups and individual people as well as the rejection of others. Within the narrative, the role of each group or individual becomes salient (Ahuvia, 2005).

In this way, narratives can serve as a way to understand the identity construction of feminist consumers through their affiliation with groups, rejection of other groups and the goals they may try to achieve.

2.3 Consumer resistance

As suggested before, consumer resistance may play a role in the relationships of young feminists toward the marketplace and their consumption behavior. Feminists may find themselves exposed to consumption meanings and identities in the market that do not correspond to their own sense of self.

When experiencing this, they may resource toward resistance. Resistance describes an oppositional response to a practice of dominance within the marketplace. A practice of dominance can take the shape of "commercial pressure, influence, strategies, logic or discourses that are perceived, by the consumer/person, as dissonant and antagonistic to their beliefs" (Lee, Roux, Cherrier, & Cova, 2011, p. 1681). While A. Hirschman (1970) originally described acts of individual resistance as complaining behavior, negative word-of-mouth or exit, this thesis conceptualizes resistance in a much broader way. Apart from resisting the dominance of the market through anti-consumption, which has been described as an activity of rejecting, restricting, and reclaiming goods or practices of acquisition, use and dispossession (Lee et al., 2011), the consumers may employ more elaborate, shrouded ways to evade the market. By purposively consuming products from one retail channel to oppose another channel or by appropriating consumer commodities within new contexts (Kates & Belk, 2001). In this way, resistance can take many shapes and forms and may at times seem ungraspable (Kozinets, Handelman, and Lee (2010). While it can be expressed in many different ways, the mode in which it is expressed can be collective or individual. Some of the actions are aiming at leveraging the given dynamics of the market, such as boycotts aiming to use the vote in the marketplace and consumer-led creation of alternative providers. More fruitful in the frame of this thesis will be the investigation of individual manifestations of resistance. Individual modes of resistance such as individual boycotts can be viewed as acts of expressions of individuality & moral self-realization (Kozinets & Handelman, 1998). These modes of resistance can be a means of challenging traditional cultural meanings (Dobscha & Ozanne, 2001), and help consumers emancipate to escape the marketplace (Kozinets, 2002).

2.3.1 Can resistant consumers evade the market?

Within these studies Izberk-Bilgin (2010) identifies two distinct perspectives on the nature of consumer resistance within marketing: liberatory consumer resistance and market-bound consumer resistance.

While researchers holding the liberatory perspective hold the view that consumers can eventually evade the market by becoming "reflexively-defiant" (Ozanne & J. Murray, 1995), identifying unquestioned assumptions and challenging the existing structures. Ozanne & Murray (1995) describe that consumers may be able to break free from marketing forces such as imposed cultural codes by changing their sign value and meaning to signify their opposition to establishment values. Such consumers would need to create or find a social space outside the marketplace, as proposed by Firat and Venkatesh (1995). Albeit the occurrence of consumers who become code-conscious and manage

to live a life mostly outside the market, this perspective holds the assumption that consumers are willing to take physical and social shortcomings to escape the market.

The market-bound perspective advocates agency of the consumer in resisting the market in subtle but creative and producerly ways and acknowledges the importance of consumption for social relationships and group belonging, even though the skillful consumer as a challenger of the status quo can never ultimately escape the market (Holt, 2002; Izberk-Bilgin, 2010). The main reason for the inevitability of the market in the market-bound perspective lies within the need of the (resistant) consumer for differentiation and self-actualization through consumption. First, Holt argues that even though resistant consumers may change the sign value and meaning of cultural codes, the new codes can easily be appropriated by marketers and be made available to the larger public. Authors from this this line of research suggest that the resistant groups seek to differentiate themselves socially from other non-resistant consumers, ultimately binding even the resistant consumers to the dominance of the market (Izberk-Bilgin, 2010). By trying to differentiate from the mainstream that is inspired largely by market-produced identities, the resistant consumer ultimately takes an opposite position related to the dominant market identities. As a consequence, resistant consumers will find themselves having to change meanings as soon as they have been adopted by the mainstream in order to remain oppositional (Holt, 2002). Kozinets and Handelman (2004) describe that some resistant consumers may even see other consumers as adversaries. Holt (2002) also observes his informants to embed their resistant identities within consumer culture instead of outside it. However, it should also be understood that resistant consumers may be confronted with boundaries of the market that prevent them to fully evade the market (Kozinets, 2002). Holt (2002) proposes that the cultural authority perspective employed in consumer resistance is no longer applicable to the current postmodern paradigm. In his line of argumentation, non-conformist, resistant consumers even serve grist to the mill of marketing. To him, what is termed consumer resistance can be seen as a form of *market-sanctioned cultural experimentation* – a means by which the market rejuvenates itself through innovative firms that work in concert with countercultural movements (Holt, 2002).

The concern of the market-bound perspective with individual resistant identities and subtle acts of every day resistance through taking part in the marketplace makes it particularly relevant to this thesis. The way in which resistant consumers seek to differentiate themselves from dominant ideologies through subtle acts of resistance within consumption takes an important role in answering the research question. Furthermore, viewing the research topic in the light of the interplay of market dynamics and the resistant consumer as a self-actualizing and expressive being within consumer

culture can provide further insights into the relationship of a commercialized feminism and the identity construction of feminists.

2.3.2   A typology of consumer resistance

Holt (2002) identified two ways of resistance to consumer culture within the literature: Reflexive resistance and creative resistance.

Regarding reflexive resistance, reflexiveness refers to the reflexively defiant nature of consumers who emancipate themselves from the system of consumer culture as mentioned with regard to the liberatory perspective of consumer resistance. Such consumers are empowered to reflect on marketing activities and uses this capability to defy the code of meaning in their consumption (Ozanne & J. Murray, 1995). According to Murray and Ozanne, this skill to disentangle the marketer's artifice from the use value of the product can enable consumers to overcome the market imposed codes.

The second type of resistance referred to by Holt (2002) is creative resistance. Through resistance, consumers are eroding marketer's control as a cultural engineer. This works through micro-emancipatory acts decentering "market determined subjectivity" leading to more and more fragmentation (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995, p. 255). This market diversification may imply a less totalitarian market in which companies are no longer in control of orchestrating consumers through marketing (Holt, 2002). Firat and Venkatesh argue that consumers seek out social spaces in which they produce their own culture and cultural meaning, apart from that the categories the market provides for them. Identities can be reworked instead of just received pre-suggested from the market machinery. Consumers pursue a non-committed lifestyle in which the self and culture can be produced through consumption centrally (Holt, 2002).

Understanding which shapes the resistance of feminist consumers can take may help to understand how the relationship between the market produced meanings of feminism and the individual consumption meanings substantiates.

3   Methodology: Hermeneutic phenomenology

This chapter will inform the reader of the methodology at hand. An inductive approach has been chosen, using micro-level data to explore macro level constructs. This approach allows the research to be able to explore in depth qualitative insights to uncover the meaning construction and re-interpretation within feminist identity construction. It does not allow for the measurement of relationships but instead informs the central issues of meaning and meaning construction within these relationships, the qualitative nature of these relationships. The inductive approach will never be representative for a population, albeit it serves to discover themes and topics for future research (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2006).

On the grounds of the interpretivist ontological and epistemological premises of this work, an approach of hermeneutic phenomenology was chosen. This allows to study a phenomenon under the hermeneutic looking-glass. Hermeneutics are able to answer research questions that ask "how cultural notions are shaping specific kinds of experiences and actions" (Belk, Fischer, & Kozinets, 2012, p. 22). This applies well to the research question presented as it is asking how the cultural notion of feminism is shaping young feminists identity-relevant consumption experiences. Phenomenology has been chosen because it corresponds with the informant's lived experience being at the center of this thesis.

To describe the approach of hermeneutic phenomenology in more depth, the characteristics of hermeneutics should first be outlined: The term hermeneutics describes the way and interpretation of *understanding*. This understanding is held as being linguistic in nature (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). Additionally, hermeneutic philosophy investigates the way in which the subject-object dichotomy may be bridged by an interpreter, who reads this dichotomy employing not solely but sufficiently, his pre-understanding (Arnold & Fischer, 1994).

The specific method applied in this research has been inspired by previous studies on identity in consumer research (Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994). Furthermore, it has been constructed along McCracken's "The long interview" guide to in-depth interviews and includes the photoelicitation technique of autodriving.

3.1 Autodriving

The technique of autodriving belongs to the projective techniques and was described in a thorough review by Heisley and Levy (1991). When autodriving, participants are presented with audio- or visual content which they then comment on what they see. The term described that the participants are urged to comment on their own behaviors in the recordings, or to comment on the reason why they chose certain content (Heisley & Levy, 1991).

The use of autodriving offers advantages in terms of giving the consumer increased voice and authority in the interpretation of consumption events (Sherry, 1990). It can bring aspects and objects of research to the foreground that would have otherwise been neglected by the researcher (McCracken, 1988). Furthermore, it may provide a "perspective of action", by putting the interviewee in an effort of making his/her understanding meaningful to an outsider (Gould et al. 1974; Snow and Anderson 1987; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Furthermore, it can help to create a distance between the informant their own view on everyday live (McCracken 1988). The interviewees are then able to see themselves and their experiences from a new, unfamiliar perspective (McCracken 1988). However, it should also be noted that this technique can be rather obtrusive (McCracken, 1988) as the stimulus used can either be completely chosen by the researcher or at least the frame of stimuli that are chosen by the participant is given by the researcher.

Within this research, autodriving has been used to understand the ways in which feminist consumers encounter commercialized feminism in their every day lives, as well as to understand their relation toward the phenomena of femvertising and the pink tax.

3.1.1 Choice of femvertising examples

To evoke the topic of femvertising, to contemporary advertisements were selected. These two advertisements can both be ascribed to the femvertising category, but are using feminist meanings in different ways.. This was chosen to cover a small variety of different ways in which femvertising can work. Both advertisements were by the razor brand Gillette (Gillette & Venus Gillette). While one of the adverts (Venus) is a typical representative of postfeminist meaning in advertising, the other advertisement incorporated feminist ideology in an unconventional way (Gillette). The choice was made for these advertisements as they represent as category of products that are often associated with gender stereotypical advertisements but also represent something the informants would assumingly

be familiar with. Furthermore, the razor category is one that is most debated within the pink tax discourse, allowing for a discussion of the two phenomena within one type of consumer good. A short description and interpretation of the advertisements can be found in Appendix 1.

3.1.2 Choice of pink tax examples

The pink tax examples used to evoke the conversation on gender based price discrimination have been collected from different online shops. They featured the product categories of cosmetic & hygiene products, toys and price lists from a hairdresser salon and a dry cleaning shop. The assorted examples of pink tax can be found in Appendix 2. To encourage the association with the femvertising adverts, one pink tax example of a Gillette product was included. All product categories featured have been identified to often be sold at a price premium for women in Germany (der Heiden & Wersig, 2018).

3.2 Data collection

This chapter describes the process of data collection including the selection of participants, the interview procedure and considerations regarding the interviews.

3.2.1 Selection of participants

The participants were selected based on the following criteria. The first criterion for the selection was the combination of a demographic membership to the group of millennials (individuals born between the years 1980 and 2000), and a positive interest and knowledge of feminism. In order to be able to inform the solution of the research question, it was necessary that they identify as feminist or "of feminist opinion". This formulation has been introduced, as preliminary immersion into feminist literature has led to the insight that many millennials do not like to identify and name themselves feminist due to an aversion toward the term.

Another criterion was the ability to speak and reflect over one's own feminism and consumption experiences. This criterion has been evaluated after a short phone call with potential informants. During this phone call, the purpose of the study way explained to them and they were shortly asked how they think about the topics of the research. All of the potential informants who had done the phone call were invited to the interviews, as they all had some top of mind associations toward the topic that seemed of sufficient depth to qualify this criterion.

Furthermore, a variety of feminist perspectives was sought for. In this way, variety in life circumstances and educational backgrounds were striven for.

The participants were recruited in two ways: Some informants were recruited from a net of acquaintances. The second means of recruitment was the use of social media groups of local feminist interest and through a notice board at the University of Mannheim and surrounding cafes. The recruitment was stopped when I felt that there was repetition in the themes discovered and sufficient descriptions had been generated to answer the research questions.

3.2.2   The interviews

The interviews followed a semi-structured approach using an interview guide consisting of different themes with corresponding questions. The interview guide served as a reminder for the interviewer and was not adhered to strictly. Much more, questions were asked in a spontaneous manner and the course of conversation was often determined by the informant. In order to increase the richness of the methodology and to reinforce data understanding, the interviews were supplemented with immersion in the phenomenon studied, factual data on the participants and observational information on lifestyle indicators captured during the interviews that took place mostly in their homes. The data of this study was collected within a 3 month frame of time between February 2019 and March 2019. The interview length ranged between 1:06 h and 2:30 h. My aim was to elicit a range of feminist perspectives.

The preparation, conduction and analysis followed largely the protocol of "the four-step method of inquiry" described by McCracken (1988). The interviews were held using an interview guide that has been constructed around the main issues of analysis and cultural categories that have been identified through literature review. For example, questions regarding objects that may carry feminist meaning have been informed by the notion of movement of meaning through goods. The interviews were structured so that simple opening questions regarding the participant's background were followed up to move into a sequence of "grand-tour" questions.

During the interviews, questions covered the interviewees' life histories briefly, and more broadly their relationship to feminism and incidences in which they think feminism shapes their consumption experiences. Questions were held broad and open ended, as advised by Giorgi (Giorgi, 1997). Furthermore, questions were sought to use language the individual interviewee

would be familiar with as advised by Benner (1996). Aligned with the hermeneutic nature of the research, questions have been asked in different manners and spontaneously throughout the interviews to allow for rich understanding. Furthermore, issues that seemed important to the informant and relevant to the inquiry were addressed more thoroughly in a spontaneous manner.

While some questions merely asked for the participants narrative recollection of certain experiences and events, the second part of the interview was dedicated to questions prompted by the photoelicitation technique of autodriving. These auto-driving sequences used both materials produced by the participants on significant consumption activities connected to feminism as well as screenshots gathered by the researcher on the topic of pink-tax and some contemporary advertisements to prompt the topic of femvertising. The full interview guide including prompts and photoelicitation materials can be found in Appendices 1-4. Autodriving materials created by the informants can be found attached to the verbatim transcripts created by the researcher in Appendix 6. The transcription only excludes minor word repetitions or minor search for words.

3.2.3 Analysis of interviews

The analysis of the text required an iterative process between individual transcripts and emerging understanding of the entire set of data as a whole, as advised by Thompson (1997). Still during data collection, the individual interviews were read thoroughly, and intriguing passages and topics were highlighted. This reading process also helped to inform points to put special attention on in the following interviews. To help getting an overview of the different topics and themes persistent in the text, coding, the process of "reducing data into meaningful segments and assigning names for the segments" (Creswell, 2018, p. 148) was used. Once a small number of interviews has been conducted, the interviews were coded individually and then codes that emerged in different cases were clustered. These clustered codes served as an overview of the topics that occurred in the whole of the interviews. These codes where then organized using hierarchies to enhance the understanding of relationships within the codes. After this, the level of interpretation went back to the individual interview unit, trying to identify what was significant in each individual interview but could not be captured within the clustered codes. The relationship of those special instances and stories told by the informants and the emergent codes and themes has been considered in a dialectic procedure going back and forth between the levels of interpretation (Spiggle, 1994). After a first assortment of significant observations, combining observations that seemed aligned with my theoretical

considerations as well as surprising findings, it was time to relate the emerging themes with the theoretical framework of the thesis. This relation of themes with theory afforded both an expansion of the theoretical framework as well as a reduction of some of the theories to more meaningful ones in practice. The process of adapting theories to the stories told by the informants resembled a process of creative adaption (Thompson, 1997), in which different possible narratives and interpretations where held up against each other. Within this phase of adapting theories, more common storylines and theoretical similarities across narratives became evident. These common storylines later inspired the categorization of two types of feminist identity construction within the informants. Once this typology was identified, the entire text was read again, seeing whether the categorization could live up to the original texts. Later on, theories from the theoretical foundations of the thesis were linked to the wider cultural context of the text. This process of moving from single cases toward the whole text and back was iterated until a thick and deep understanding of the text emerged.

3.3 Quality of method and findings

The choice of method was both determined by the research paradigm I am operating in as well as by its' ability to answer the research question. The first-person descriptions the in-depth interviews offer can generally be considered to provide sufficient insight into the informant's construction of feminist identity. Furthermore, the addition of artifacts prepared by the informants helped further getting insight into the ways in which they relate to advertising, companies and other institutions of the marketplace.

With regard to the execution of the method, some initial problems had to be overcome to arrive at the findings obtained. Throughout the first interviews, many of the informants became uncomfortable by having to define what feminism is for themselves. Even though I reassured them, that it only depends on their idea of feminism, this vague approach seemed to unsettle them. I changed the approach by trying to address the question what feminism means to them earlier in the interview than beforehand.

Furthermore, the amount of photoelicitation prompts for the pink tax seemed to overwhelm some respondees, resulting in them only commenting very briefly on each single item. I proceeded to reduce the number shown to the informants and also started showing them one after the other, trying to determine which ones would be interesting within the course of the conversation.

Reflecting on the interviews, me being a single researcher certainly had an impact on the result. I aimed at not asking any directive questions and avoiding the question why, but even though I succeeded to change my natural way of asking most of the time, some questions may have been seemingly suggestive to the informants.

The phenomenological and hermeneutical procedures employed in this study have been designed in a way to fulfill the evaluative criteria of the interpretive paradigm. Criteria for an interpretive inquiry should be different from those used for a positivist, quantitative approach (McCracken, 1988). E. Hirschman (1986) lines out that for humanistic inquiry such as marketing research credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are demanded. The assessment of the quality of the presented method according to these four criteria should be able to ensure a fair assessment of the data collection and interpretation, analogously to the means of external validity, reliability, and objectivity in positivist science (E. Hirschman, 1986; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To fulfill the criterion of credibility of the method chosen, the picture of the multiple realities that is drawn needs to be adequate to the original constructors of the reality. This implies that one way of finding out whether an interpretation is credible is to ask the informants of the study about it. With regard to the credibility of the method presented, the depiction of the informants and their identity construction is based on the verbatim transcript of the interviews. The researcher used interpretation not to change the meaning of the picture constructed, but to make meaning more visible. Furthermore, each informant received a protocol of the first analyses of their interview to conduct a member check, verifying the credibility of the analysis. There were little to no disagreements with the interpretation. The small adjustments that had to be made in the analysis of one of the informants were adjusted to allow for a rather credible account of lived experience constructed.

Secondly, the criterion of transferability should be assessed. This criterion can be seen as analogous to the criterion of external validity in positivist approaches. Though no external validity or generalizability can be achieved with interpretive approaches, transferability is a measure of quality of such a method. It concerns itself with the transferability of one manifestation of a phenomenon to another manifestation, while at the same time recognizing the uniqueness of social contexts (E. Hirschman, 1986). According to Hirschman, the transferability of an interpretation can only be assessed "by comparing it with interpretations constructed in other contexts" (Hirschman, 1986, p. 245). Even though such a comparison could not be established for this study as this can only be done post hoc, as it is not known how other researchers will apply the findings on feminist identity

construction in the future. To achieve transferability to a certain degree, information regarding the setting of the study, the participants and the context have been given. Participants have been attempted to be chosen from different life circumstances to increase overall transferability of the results. Furthermore, it can be said that it has been reported that identity is viewed in a more interrelated, interpersonal way in other cultural spheres than the western cultures (Wong & Hogg, 2012), leading to limited transferability of the findings to other cultures. Furthermore, due to a lack of male informants, the findings are limited to female consumers.

The criterion of dependability addresses the degree to which the findings depend on the researcher as a human research instrument. In a study as it is presented, dependability will always be rather high. The notion of *fusion of horizons* in the hermeneutic inquiry as well as the fact that the thesis was written by only one researcher lead to this high dependability. The interpretive approach demands for the interaction of the researcher with the text, and as every human is different, findings will always come out rather dependable on the researcher. However, to moderate the degree of dependability, it has been aimed to choose those interpretations that could be visible and comprehendible for other interpreters (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). However, it needs to be stated that the hermeneutic approach employed allows and asks for a pre-understanding of the cultural categories and phenomenon observed to reach a deep and rich understanding through the analysis. This pre-understanding has been reflected upon before the conduction of the interviews to identify the researcher's own cultural principles and categories and can be found in Appendix 5. They have not been brackteted, but have been used as resources in the *fusion of horizons*.

Confirmability implies that the findings generated by the interpreter are supportable from the data, that the interpreter presents a logical set of conclusions based on reasoning and that it is nonprejudiced and nonjudgemental with respect to the rendering of the observed reality (E. Hirschman, 1986). The confirmability of the findings that will be presented can be supported by the use of interview excerpts as a basis of interpretation in the analysis.

4   Findings

Using the structure Thompson & Haytko's dialogic model, the analysis of the interviews will be structured around the elements of macro-societal structure, cultural discourses (esp. the feminism discourse) & the individual level of the consumer as an interpreter with personalized consumption meanings. Each element of the dialogical process of meaning interpretation will be visited and discussed thoroughly, allowing to draw a picture of the relationships between individual life world of the feminists interviewed and the macro socio-cultural structure they are located in. Figure 3 indicates the way the different research questions are going to be addressed within the findings.
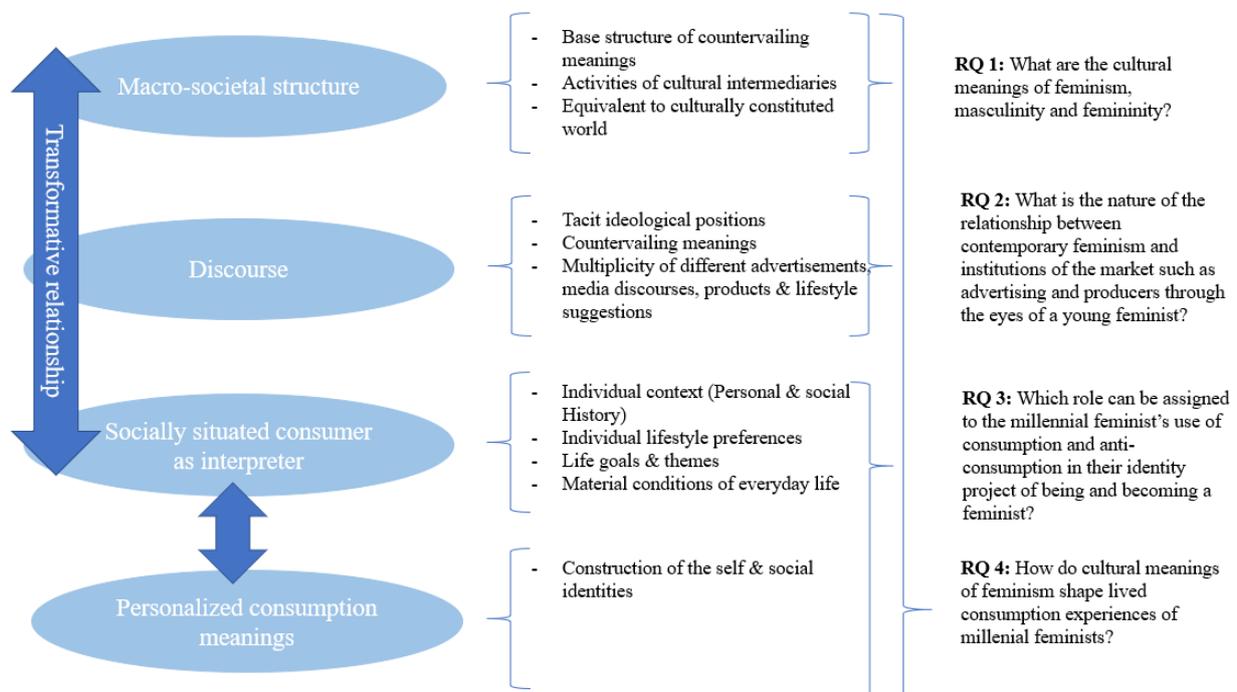
Figure 3: Overview of the analytical framework

4.1   Macro-societal structure & activities of cultural intermediaries: What are the cultural meanings of feminism, masculinity and femininity?

The macro societal structure represents the base structure of countervailing meanings that can be found in the informants' environment, including the activities of cultural intermediaries, such as marketers and advertisers.

The base structure of countervailing meanings regarding this inquiry on feminism can be described by looking into the cultural meanings that are implicit to the informant's descriptions. Cultural

meanings are kept alive by the people who reproduce them. In this way, the informants implicit descriptions serve as a resource for cultural meanings (Thompson et al., 1994). Furthermore, the activities of cultural intermediaries (music, television, cinematic programming, news, artistic goods and fashion etc.) are viewed as communicative linkages of the macro-societal structure toward the consumer (Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

In this thesis, the activities of cultural intermediaries by Thompson & Haytko should not only be represented by advertisements and text, but also in a material way. All means of marketing could add to the gender discourse within the marketplace, including the product itself, the place where it is purchased, the price at which it is sold and the promotion. In this way, all of these elements can be subject of consideration.

The goal of this part of the analysis is to understand what it means to be female, what it means to be male, and what it means to be a feminist in the cultural context the informants live in. Consecutively, the way these meanings of the base structure are communicatively linked by advertising and offerings of the market will be considered. It is not the intention of this section to produce a full and complete overview of the different countervailing meanings and tacit ideologies which are conveyed by the cultural intermediaries. Instead, examples are used to break open the ways in which cultural meanings diffuse and are remodeled within the discourse.

4.1.1 The meaning of femininity: physical weakness, undesirable character traits, orderliness, beauty and object of male desire

Cultural meaning of being a girl

„I never wanted to be a typical girl. In my eyes it was something bad. I don't know, because girls have always been bitches for me. And I have to say, women today unfortunately are also bitches. Not all of them, don't get me wrong." - Ellen

Ellen describes, how being female is connected with undesirable character traits. Later on in the interview, Ellen describes an incident in which she is made fun of for her tidy and neat handwriting as being a girls-handwriting. Girls in her cultural context therefore are orderly, detail-oriented and bitchy.

Girlhood is also signified by disability to be part of certain social activities such as playing soccer. This sport is seen as a boy's domain and when girls engage in these sports, they frequently encounter opposition. Ellen describes her desire to take part in a soccer tournament and that she could only participate by proving her soccer skill through a fake membership in a soccer club. For boys in turn, it was set as self-evident that they had skill in playing soccer.

Cecilia describes:

„In P.E. class a boy said to me: 'You girls always spoil every occasion. With you, one cannot even play proper soccer. Because you don't even know how.' And this sound really banal, but it really made me angry."- Cecilia

Girlhood therefore is signified by situations of social exclusion in physical activities, implying that femininity means being weak and non-athletic.

Cultural meaning of being a woman

Moving on in life, other negative meanings can be associated with womanhood:

„Through this (dancing classes) I have learned that it can be something good. Being female can also be good and not… You can dance sexy, and it can be cheap or it can be classy. And for me, to understand that this is possible and to be comfortable doing so… I believe it helped me, to say ok. It is ok to be a woman…" - Ellen

Being a woman for her also has some kind of stigma that she had to accept. She describes how she had to find out for herself that dancing sexy as a woman does not have to be "cheap". Implicitly, Ellen indicates that usually women dancing in a sexy way do so cheaply and this is undesirable. By this, the worth of a sexual woman is clearly defined as low. The underlying cultural principle degrades sexually available women and gives higher status to more shrouded, "classy" ways of sexual availability.

The female body

The female body has a specific controversy to it. It is viewed as delicate and worth protecting. Furthermore, the ideal, typical female body is one with full breasts, but a flat stomach. It is clean and well-groomed.

Being sexually available is even read into women wearing revealing clothing during summer.

„It was summer and there were some customers. And of course, it was hot and of course one wears less clothes – to put it like that. And one girl came in and was wearing a cropped top. Which I would also wear. And my female colleague said "If someone walks around like this, they don't need to be surprised when something happens" Cecilia

The remark by Cecilia's colleague has two cultural implications: Female bodies are viewed as sexual and should be covered. Seeing a female body in public is not always wished for. They are object to the *male gaze*. Cecilia's colleague also implies a danger to become a victim of sexual assault. By revealing her body, the girl would evoke sexual assault and it would be her fault. This misogyny clearly outlines the way in which the female body is objectified and at the same time made responsible for sexual assault. Clearly, for Cecilia's colleague being female comes with the responsibility to protect the own body.

Beth describes something similar regarding her body. She seeks to protect it by clothing and has a rule for herself regarding the length of her skirt. No matter how much she likes a piece of clothing, if it is too revealing, she will not buy it. Once, she experienced a situation in which she was shamed for wearing a low neckline.

"When partying I have worn less and I don't have such a big chest and as a girl, you get some comments."
Interviewer: "Do you remember the comment or the situation?"
"I should put away my "board". That evening, I was pretty devastated…"- Beth

This incident shows that the female body can be part of public interest and discussion, and a female body that does not have all the female features becomes an object of ridicule.

Cecilia also describes a situation in which even as a girl she was object to shaming for a more revealing t-shirt she was wearing. The objectification and association of the female body with something sexual that has to be covered up and protected to not evoke the wrong responses and seduce men therefore also applies to the body of girls. It does not depend on the sexual features, but on the femininity of the body itself.

The importance of beauty

In the same way in which the female body can be object to public discussion, so are the standards by which the female body is evaluated. Beauty is important to femininity and to a great degree

determines the status and value of a woman. No matter which status a woman takes, she can still be rated based on her looks (Gill, 2007; Gill, Porfido, & Ryan-Flood, 2009). The importance of beauty showed throughout the interview in all informant's descriptions. The term beauty ideal fell in most of the conversations, implying that there is one ideal way to look to be beautiful. The descriptions imply that it is part of the ideal to be thin, but also have female curves. Furthermore, beauty and taking care of beauty is not only associated with certain appearances, but also with other characteristics. Dana implies that someone who is well-groomed and has a great skin seems professional and well organized. Such a person has "everything under control".

On the other hand, a countervailing meaning of beauty as individuality and non-conformity with beauty standards can be identified by the tacit belief that beauty can have many shapes. This has been addressed by Cecilia:

"Women do look different and not all of them are skinny. Maybe a woman who has a bit more weight on would also be nice. Because she can be as beautiful as anyone else." - Cecilia

Overall, the cultural meaning of femininity that becomes evident in the text is structured by physical weakness, undesirable character traits, beauty and the responsibility to live up to certain beauty standards as well as the responsibility to protect the body from sexual threats. There are only few countervailing meanings that conceptualize as beauty as something less standardized. Overall, being feminine through the descriptions in the text seems like something not very desirable.

4.1.1.1   Meanings of femininity through cultural intermediaries: dependence, victimization, object to the male gaze opposed to empowerment, self-efficacy and individuality paired with traditional beauty

Within the discourse on femininity, female beauty and the female body many tacit meanings and underlying ideological positions could be observed, both in the area of advertising as well as entertainment and the world of goods.

Dependence on men

Dana found a movie she saw within the weeks before the interview quite significant to her feminist beliefs. The movie "Isn't it romantic" was making fun of the usual romantic comedy, that is associated as a feminine genre. In this way Dana describes the plot as follows:

"She thought the whole time she had to love a man, but then she understood: The key is to love herself. And then she returned back to her normal life. That was the key why she came out of it (the parallel universe) again. Altogether, I found it quite a fun idea and the film was quite funny. But in the end, it all came back to her coming together with the guy in her real life *laughs*. So it was yet as in a romantic comedy, that she had a happy ending and in the end, it was all about having a boyfriend. So the film in the end was not really consequent enough for me."

Dana describes how she finds it an important feminist value to understand that a woman does not need a man to be happy or to be acknowledged. In this way, the movie to her presented a positive example of the picture of a woman drawn in the media, even though the film failed ultimately by being inconsequent. The topic of a female dependence on a male has also been outlined by some remarks by Ellen. She brought some PR photography featuring a prize winner with two women next to him. This artifact much more presents women as dependent on men, "trying to make advances toward him".

In the discourse therefore countervailing meanings can be found regarding the need of a woman to be dependent on a male.

Being a victim

The vulnerability of the female body described when considering cultural intermediaries within the macro-societal structure can be observed in Dana's reflection of literature and TV.

„It makes me so angry! Now I notice it, as I am talking about it. On TV, especially in crime series, which I really like to watch every now and then, or used to watch it is often like this: The woman is the victim, who gets sexually assaulted or beaten or anything. And for a time, I had the feeling, because it happens in every film that I watched or in every series… I got the feeling that everywhere… and at some point, I was sitting at the movies thinking one day: Are you crazy?! Are there even women who don't get killed?!"

Dana describes that it is a common narrative within many different forms of media, especially in the crime genre to depict women as victims.

"It seems like violence against women is just shown … I don't know, how often it happens in real life – hopefully not as often as it is shown! But it is often shown, like it is completely normal entertainment and that is what annoys me; In my opinion it seems like the topic violence against women is something

normal – something that you have to count on and should. It annoys me, that it feels like they normalize it"

In her view, it even is something that seems normal through the depiction and the media and women should count on it to happen. This is particularly significant to Dana, as it opposes her ideology of being independent as a woman.

Fiona also refers to this cultural meaning but acts different toward it. Instead of completely rejecting it, she consumes her way through it: She always carries a whistle on her key chain to be able to draw attention on her in case of an emergency. Such products are not rare in Fiona's friend group, as she describes all the different safety measures she and her girlfriends take to keep safe. They go through enormous measures to protect their bodies from males.

All these descriptions lead to the conclusion that the feminine gender is prone to be a victim and that the female body is something to keep protected.

Using the female body to sell

Multiple examples of advertisements that use the female body to sell products to male consumers have been brought into the interview by the informants. One example seemed particularly illustrative and should serve as an example on how advertising reproduces the cultural meanings of the macro-societal structure:

One of the pictures that Cecilia brought to the interview was an in-store advertisement for Beef Jerky (Appendix 6.3). A cardboard female body was used as a shelf for the meat product. Under the layers of jerky, the cardboard body seemed to be nude. In this way, the consumer could undress the body by purchasing the meat product. Cecilia referred to it as "selling meat with meat". This shows a strong cultural principle by which the male can readily consume the female body, even in public.

Emphasis on beauty and beauty standards

The importance of beauty is also stressed by cultural intermediaries. Beth and Ellen both brought examples from women's magazines. Within these, there is a multiplicity of tips and advice regarding how to manage flaws in one's beauty.

On the other hand, Cecilia brought a screenshot of the film "Dumplin" (Appendix 6.4) to the interview. In this film, a girl who does not correspond the traditional beauty ideal competes within beauty pageants and manages to redefine beauty within the film. Through such a film, the meanings

of beauty are juxtaposed and a countervailing meaning of being beautiful from within is introduced into the discourse.

Countervailing meanings in femvertising: empowerment, self-efficacy and individuality accompanied by traditional beauty standards

The advert "My Skin, My Way" described in Appendix 1 comprises different, countervailing meanings of the category female.

"I believe, that there you could feel the power and enjoyment of life of the women and also the "My Skin, My Way". And I think this is simply the whole… that you are responsible for yourself. You can decide for yourself…. Will you shave – where do you want to shave?" - Beth

Empowerment, independence and self-efficacy as well as individuality are emphasized. However, Fiona also emphasizes that the protagonists within the advert still maintain a certain level of traditional beauty standard and groomed their body in a traditional way.

"Yes, you can choose how you want to wear your skin – and then you see women, who shave all the time. There is no woman who does not shave. Off course, because the advert is for razors. But it shows… all skinny women, beautiful smooth legs. It shows quite precisely how you have to be. " - Fiona

In this way, the advert includes both a countervailing meaning of the independent woman combined with the traditional beauty standards.

4.1.2 The meaning of masculinity: careless handsomeness, fertility and celebrated sexuality, athleticism opposed to being a caring provider

Masculinity is in many ways viewed as the opposite of femininity. While femininity is characterized through beauty and bodily characteristics, a male concern and interest in beauty is perceived by the informants as a curiosity.

Amanda describes the idea of a man shopping in a popular drugstore as a shameful situation for him. He would try to spend as little time as possible there, not to be mistaken as unmasculine. Beth mentions that her boyfriend is a total exception, as he concerns himself with his looks and even needs more time in the bathroom than her. The perspective that her boyfriend is an exception, re-emphasizes the prevailing meaning of masculinity as careless handsomeness.

Amanda also describes a blazer as a masculine piece of clothing. It is associated with the working world, a male domain. This male domain has also been mentioned by Dana who describes, that she feels as if she is being challenged to proof her competence and professionalism at work even more than her male colleagues. In this way, the positive feature of competence is associated with the category male.

Furthermore, Amanda uses her former flat mate to describe a somewhat prototypical male:

"He was very determined and athletic; he put a lot of emphasis in his looks, so that he would be looking buff – to conform to the masculine ideal. And he had typically male traits, which are somehow expected from men and also expressed by them, also the way that he had multiple affairs at the same time." – Amanda

In this way, sexual promiscuity and the ability to have relationships with multiple women is a positive trait within the cultural category of masculine. Furthermore, the male body ideally is well trained.

Apart from this classical masculine picture, Beth also describes that she finds it strange how her supervisor treats male colleagues:

*"When a male calls in the morning and says that he must stay at home because the child is sick and the wife won't stay home. Then out of the office in the back you hear how men have become wimps and things like that *laughs*." – Beth*

To Beth, the rather traditional perspective of her supervisor toward masculinity becomes a source of humor, as for her this is rather obscurely old-fashioned. This presents a countervailing meaning of the man as a caring father opposed to the working man, but at the same time also shows how the traditional masculine meaning is persisting.

To summarize, the meaning of masculinity is structured by different notions such as careless handsomeness, fertility and athleticism. Furthermore, while femininity implies the need to protect one's body from sexual takeovers, masculinity can be embraced by being sexually active. A caring counterpart to the man as a working provider has been identified.

Meanings of masculinity through cultural intermediaries: strength, clearness, seriousness , determination and rationality opposed to obligation to perform and emotion

This section is going to concern itself with the meanings of the cultural category male in the marketplace. Amanda brought a descriptive example that shows how a drugstore chain produces the meaning of being male.

The drugstore chain *dm* has recently developed a shelf with only male products (Appendix 6.1). The surroundings of the shelf are in black color, and the word for his is spelt in German with a z. Equivalent would be "Hiz". According to Amanda, the z in the name can be considered as a sign of sharpness, while the color black is prevalent, indicating masculinity. All these elements help to overcome the notion that beauty is connotated with female delicacy and a rather contradictory term to masculinity. It seems like the marketers are trying to overcome this barrier, by demarcating the masculine meanings of strength, absoluteness, clearness, seriousness and defense.

The femvertising advert "We Believe: The best men can be" presents an example in which the traditional meanings of being male are questioned and countervailing meanings are introduced through the cultural intermediaries.

„I think it is nice to see something like this within mainstream – to see which gender roles also men have to fulfill. For me, the film is about how men perform in a way in the public."- Dana

Dana's reflections shed a different light on the meaning of being male. Instead of having all the freedom, they might also have to perform certain roles and be tied to certain ideals.

„That it is important for men to be… yes, to be emotional to be nice with one another and not to pretend to stand above everything and "Boys will be boys" and such things" - Cecilia
Cecilia's remarks line out how the cultural intermediaries manage to introduce a countervailing meaning of being male. According to her, men do not have to be always determined and rational, but can be emotional.

4.1.3   The meaning of feminist: undesirability, seriousness, men hatred, critical

The meaning of the cultural category feminist should be lined out in this section. The conception of feminists as a cultural category should be lined out here as it plays a major role for the identity construction of young feminists.

Many of the informants mentioned that they had some negative preconceptions toward the name feminist. They have often heard the word feminist in a cliché way:

"Feminists rarely have sex. Rarely with men to say the least. They are not desired by men, and this is the reason why they are feminists – as a reaction to their undesirability. They are spoilsports. Off course this sometimes applies, but… Well, what else is there? They are boyish – have male features"
- Amanda

This description by Amanda is very significant for the way in which being a feminist in some cultural context is viewed as not being a proper woman. In being a feminist, the passive female role is abandoned and a more active role is taken.

Feminists are not only not feminine, but also undesirable for men. They are jaundiced from this undesirability and do not like other people having fun – they become spoilsports. This notion further lines out the way in which "real" women are dependent on men and their desire and do play along the male desires.

Amanda was also asked by her friends whether she will now that she has become a feminist "twist the words in our mouths".

Cecilia and Dana were also negatively referred to as "Alice Schwarzer". Interestingly, both of the informants did not know exactly what Alice Schwarzer's feminism is about, but it seemed to them like something very radical and probably "men hatred". Dana further refers to a friend who believes feminism is over the top and hysterical. In this way, feminists are not only losing their feminine qualities, but also possible negative qualities of females (being hysterical, being overly emotional) are emphasized.

Altogether, the cultural meaning that has been described by the informants has is even more negative than that of being a woman. It is important to understand however, that these meanings have been extracted from the way that the informants perceive their surroundings. This does not represent their opinion, and to them, in fact, feminism also carries positive meanings. Otherwise, they would certainly not aim at pursuing a feminist identity.

Positive meanings of feminism that can be found within the text are meanings of liberty, emancipation, empowerment and unconventionality. These meanings are aligned with the description of post-feminism in chapter 1. A sense of positive stubbornness is described by Cecilia:

"When someone asks me – what, are you feminist? I say yes of course! And then I feel obstinate! Because if you don't like it, it's your problem." - Cecilia

Consequently, feminism is connected to claiming independence off other people's (and men's) opinions and standing in for oneself.

The meanings of being a feminist discovered are largely negatively connotated, featuring being masculine, being undesirable or men hatred. However, also positive meanings of emancipation, determination and unconventionality emerge.

4.1.3.1 Meanings of feminism through cultural intermediaries: embracing the female body, de-sexualization, liberation & empowerment

Not only do cultural intermediaries present countervailing and conflicting meanings of femininity and masculinity, they also provide products that have feminism attached to them. Such products have been mentioned by many of the informants and a few of them should be reviewed in this chapter.

On the one hand, there is a multitude of statement T-shirts and fashion that is offered:

"Those are some t-shirts that you can see often in fashion. That you have those T-shirts with statements (…). And I believe those are really just some statements which you can use to carry this outside" - Beth

"I think there are many clothes these days saying "Yay, Feminism! Bla, Feminist, bla, bla, bla. Which I somehow like… Or there are also, I don't know in this Monki-Store, they have funny socks with boobs on them." - Cecilia

Cecilia and Beth have regularly encountered clothing with feminist statements or feminist motives. These motives often use female body parts that are usually sexualized such as the female chest and the uterus. By overtly printing those sexualized motives on fashion clothing, the female body can be embraced resulting in a stance of empowerment and liberation, given the cultural frame of the victimization and sexualization of the female body. In the next section, it should be explored how the informants reflect on these commercialized feminist offers.

4.1.4 Overview of identified meanings and their communicative linkage in the marketplace

Table 1: The cultural meaning of femininity and the way it is communicated in the marketplace

Femininity		
Macro-societal structure	**Traditional marketplace meanings**	**Countervailing meanings inspired by feminism**
weakness	victimization	empowerment
beauty	normative beauty	individuality
shamefulness	n/a	liberation
object to male desire and sexuality	dependence on men	independence, self efficacy

Table 2: The cultural meaning of masculinity and the way it is communicated in the marketplace

Maculinity		
Macro-societal structure	**Traditional marketplace meanings**	**Countervailing meanings inspired by feminism**
handsomeness	carelessness	emphasis on being well groomed
Celebrated sexual subject	not covered in findings	critique to sexual behaviors
success	determination, rationality	emotional, caring
athleticism	strength	freedom to be weak

Table 1 and table 2 indicate the identified meanings of the two genders and the way that they have been applied in the marketplace traditionally. The third column of each table indicates the way in which countervailing meanings inspired by feminism have found way into the marketplace. While the informants still are confronted with negative associations such as being undesirable, boyish and radical, elements of feminist ideology have readily been incorporated into the communicative linkage between macro-societal structure and the consumers. This, speaking in terms of McCracken's movement of meaning model implies that the cultural intermediaries possess a highly mediating role in the way in which meanings from ideological groups find way into the world of goods. Furthermore, the use of feminist elements in advertising implies that some principles and meanings of feminism have already found way into the culturally constituted world, given that "advertising serves as a lexicon of current cultural meanings" (McCracken, 1986, p. 76). In the light of Thompson & Haytko's work however, this is not necessarily the case, as the structure between the diffused meanings and institutional structure is discursive and dependent on various stakeholder and institutional interests (Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

This overview should not serve as a complete assessment of meaning, but rather as an overview of the elements that have been identified so far. The meanings within the macro-societal structure have been determined by analyzing the underlying meanings of statements that the informants made about the way other people think and what they find to be significant about these topics. The marketplace interpretations of these meanings are obtained by identifying themes within the femvertising

examples and within the experiences that the informants have with gender and feminism in the marketplace.

4.2   Discourse: What is the nature of the relationship between contemporary feminism and institutions of the market such as advertising and producers through the eyes of a young feminist?

This section aims to answer research question 2. By visiting the way that millennial feminists talk about femvertising and pink tax, this section seeks to provide an understanding of the way the commodification of feminism is viewed in the eyes of the informants. Consumers are exposed to countervailing meanings such as feminist empowerment and oppressive patriarchal elements. Within this ambivalence of the cultural discourse, the informants manage to construct and legitimate their own version of being feminist. These custom feminisms are able to thrive from the ambivalence they are exposed to. In a "complex interpretive dance" (Thompson & Haytko, 1997, p. 37), they manage to take on different perspectives on their behaviors and are enabled to resist pressures of conformity with available ideologies. How the informants manage to perform this dance and which implications this has on the way they perceive the relationship of feminism and the institutions of the market will be the concern of this chapter.

4.2.1   Hope for allyship, distrust toward the intent to sell & disagreement with the interpretation

Across the group of informants, the way that they reflections and discourse along the topic of femvertising can be described as ambivalent.

The informants employed different perspectives on the advertisements introduced during the interview. By juxtaposing different positions, they try to locate their own opinion relative to the views of others. Dana for example, juxtaposes opinions of other feminists to her own opinion:

"Somewhere I read that some did not like it and I think there were also some, who said, that it is instrumentalized to sell things and that the topic is too important. I however think, if it is about this, that you change something in society, then you should not consider yourself too good to use mass media… even if it is somehow instrumentalized, to still spread it."- Dana

The question whether it can be good for feminism as a movement that it is being commercialized by corporations seemed important to most informants. To her, advertising can be a means of voice in the fight against patriarchy. Even though most of them initially have an impulse to reject such advertisements, the more the informants talk about it, the more benevolent they become towards them.

"For me, the question is: Did they do it, because they think it's right or because they want to sell. (...) Because you can be sure that you will also get negative critiques with something like that, I get the impression, that they do it to affect something positive. In any case, I hope so. I am a little bit… I am always split, because I try to view both…" - Cecilia

Cecilia overtly shows the ambivalence that she is perceiving towards femvertising. She is full of hope that the company truly mean to cause change through their advert, but at the same time she has doubt that they do so. Intriguingly, for her the company either produces the advert to effect societal change or to sell the product. These two options seem to be incompatible to her, indicating that the pursuit to sell a product is directly eliminating the possibility of good will. This finding seems to be well aligned with the findings by Abitbol and Sternadori (2016), who observed that consumers more regularly rejected femvertisements when the product was shown within the advertisement.

The incompatibility described by Cecilia does not seem to be problematic for some other informants. Amanda for example describes the message of one of the adverts (Gillette) like this:

„For me the message is: Buy Gillette razors. But also that this toxic masculine ideal no longer serves in a modern society. And that it is important how we behave, also how men behave, and that they can be solidary and allies within the fight against sexism."- Amanda

In this way, to Amanda Gillette succeeds with this ad to unite the pursuits of advertising and promoting a cause. To her, through turning against men signifying the patriarchy, the company succeeded in getting her acknowledgement.

"When this annoys so many men, then this must be good! But still, I think, especially through the music and the cuts and all of this, they try to get at people's emotions."

On the one hand, Amanda's statement implies that the turn against a common adversary can help to soothe reservations the feminists interviewed hold against companies and advertising. This touches upon the idea of advertising as a means of voice and companies as allies, albeit Amanda adds to her remarks that her general resentment against advertising persists, signifying distrust.

Apart from the general notions of hope and distrust a third theme of disagreement with the way in which feminist meaning is encoded by advertising.

The informants criticize how adverts promote independence and individuality, but at the same time only superficially reinterprets traditional beauty standards.

"If the liberation of women only applies to skinny, hip women with tattoos who are skinny and beautiful, then this is not liberation. That's how I see it."- Amanda

Even though the advert seems to make an attempt at presenting a diverse group of young women, fostering individuality, it did not successfully incorporate the feminist meaning of a detachment from beauty standards. In this way, Amanda criticizes the lack of a truly emancipatory, liberating quality of the femvertisement.

„Maybe, this would have empowered me if I was for example 15 and saw this ad instead of the ads that I actually saw with 15. They were different. With that violet scent and flowers, butterflied and women wrapped in silk. It is progress, of course. Ok, I think it's better, and it could have a positive impact on young, easily influenced teenies. I don't see it black and white, but for me personally it is ingratiating. As a feminist, I feel made fun off."

Amanda explains how she finds the re-interpretation of beauty standards within the advertisement ingratiating. As a feminist, she feels made fun off, because it only superficially in a distorted way incorporated her ideology. On the other hand, she thinks a more naïve person would be empowered by it, implying that the advert may not have an empowering effect on her as a feminist, but on the broader public and that the individual ideological position plays into the perception of the advert.

"Constantly they shave and anyways, hairs are not ok for a woman. And then they are such supercool, cool, liberated people, who are walking around with a skateboard. They do convey an attitude to life. Yes… "My Skin, My Way". I think, that is simply not true. When they show, that every woman has to shave… It is not my way, it is the way of Gillette." - Fiona

In this way, Fiona identifies a pre-packaged identity that is proposed by Gillette, including fashion and lifestyle choices. This lifestyle is rejected by Fiona, as she does not find the claims relatable to her individual life reality. Amanda mocks this approach by Gillette:

"Have a look, here we are all such emancipated, independent, strong women and you can be anything you want. You can be liberated with the product."

To her it is truly an example for a female role that can be utilized by capitalism:

"It should not be such a Feelgood-Feminism. In capitalism, there is this feminist stream: The independent, strong woman, who makes her own money and buys her own product. Off course, this is great for capitalism!"

In this way, Amanda's anti-capitalist ideology frames her to see the feelgood persona that is described in the Venus ad as an exploited person.

To conclude, the informants seem to express a generalized skepticism toward producers of consumer goods and the medium of advertising. Ambivalently, at the same time hope seems to persist that companies are indeed becoming allies for societal change. It can be concluded that hope and distrust structure the way in which feminists relate to the femvertising activities of companies. Furthermore, the way in which feminist meaning is encoded into advertising is often rejected, especially if it clashes with the individual feminism. Interpretations further are dependent on ideological positions held by the informants.

4.2.2 A play on perspectives: Feminist's reflections on pink tax and the offering of gendered product variants – Injustice in the market and being a deviation from the norm

Apart from the pink tax, most of the informants found the fact that gendered product variants can be found at all matter of concern that should be discussed. In this way, the play on perspectives that the informants employ will be examined not only regarding the pink tax, but also the gendered product variants.

"Why do we have to label something male or female? This is already where the problem starts. Because it adds to the way in which we MUST assign ourselves within the binary system. We have no choice. When we buy a product and like it, then we must live with the fact that we are labelled male or female."- Amanda

Amanda's criticism toward gendered product variants shows in an illustrative way, how the pre-determined identities the market can provide often truly cause conflict between individuals who do not seem to find a sense of self in them. The binary gender system may not apply to all consumers, causing tensions and possible resistance toward the market and forming the need within consumers to differentiate themselves outside those boundaries.

"We received pink (in the shop) and now suddenly everything else is for boys and this is for girls. Before, it was all for kids. Through the color pink, everything else is now for boys." – Cecilia

Cecilia also sees a problem within the offer of gendered alternatives, even if they are not explicitly labelled as being a female or male variant. Her description can be interpreted in a way that makes girls stand out, becoming a special case. As she describes, having pink clothing at her clothes store

led to having everything else look like it is for boys. This can make the female stand out as a deviation from a norm, as she described when looking at some of the pink tax examples:

"It even says here: Bobby car classic. And here: bobby car rockstar girl. It says again, this one is for girls. The boy cannot have it. The red one is the normal one and the pink one is the deviation" – Cecilia

Now that the significance of gendered variants has been discussed, the informant's perspectives on the pink tax itself should be examined. Altogether, it can be said that they perceive it as an injustice, but at the same time try to explain it cognitively.

"If I pay more for the same product only because I am a woman, I do not think it is sound. If it qualitatively makes a difference, or the production then it's ok. Viewed from my consumer standpoint. When I market my product, then I would do the same, most likely. To economically make the best out of it." – Ellen

Ellen interestingly juxtaposes multiple perspectives and facets of her identity against one another. She describes her beliefs as a consumer differently than the way she would act as a company. This play with perspectives helps her to juxtapose competing interests and at the same time illustratively shows her view on capitalism. To her, it is a legitimate action to market something at the highest possible price.

„The idea of the company is: Women just pay more attention on it. And they must buy these products! I mean, the idea, that one is shaved everywhere, uses make up, has perfectly styled hair and whatever, is still present and that is why companies can make more money there." – Cecilia

Cecilia clearly identifies the beauty standards that determine a higher demand for beauty in women. In her understanding, the beauty meaning of being feminine does not only determine the availability of a lot of different product variants, but also has an impact on the price at which it is sold.

The feminist consumers employ various perspectives to explain the occurrence of pink tax and different product variants to themselves. Generally, the informants see the pink tax as an injustice due to market dynamics. Interestingly, the informants often interpret female product variants for children as a devaluation and being a deviation, while female products for adults were readily accepted due to the different requirements women would have in beauty and care. This implies a resentment toward

the reproduction of gender norms toward children, while adults should be able to purchase feminine product variants to be able to self-actualize their feminine identities. Furthermore, they view themselves as having to buy female products because of the differences in the skin of women and the different fragrances in male beauty products. This emphasis of bodily differences can be attributed to the post-feminism described by Gill (2007). Only rarely the informants mentioned that there is no objective difference. All informants employed market logics to explain the injustice of the pink tax. In this way the feminist consumers mainly blame the dynamics of the market.

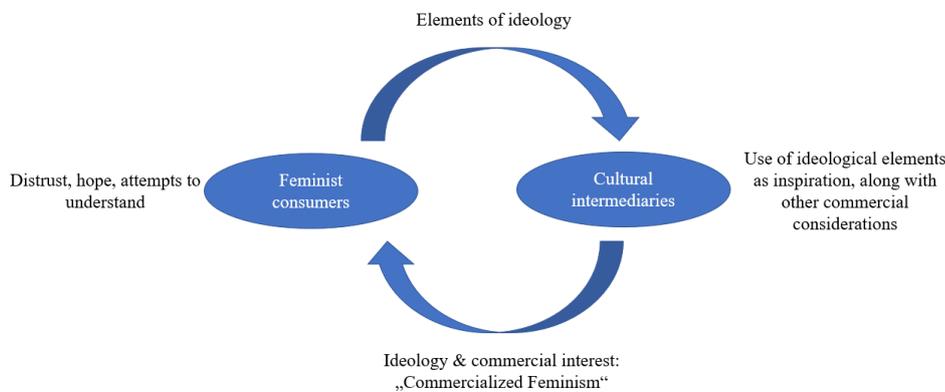### 4.2.3 Overview of individual perceptions of the gender discourse

Figure 4: Overview of perceptions of the gender discourse

The feminist consumers relate to the commercialized feminism that they are presented with, with an ambivalence of hope & distrust and a disagreement with the interpretation of feminist meaning. While they are hopeful that the commercial spread of feminist meanings can evoke change within the broader public, they also express distrust in the "true intentions" of companies using feminist themes for products or adverts. They often find the meanings altered so that they almost seem like mocking their feminism to them. This applied especially to the "My skin, my way" advertisement. With regard to the pink tax phenomenon that was investigated in this section, the informants do perceive an injustice, but rarely employ coping mechanisms toward it. However, they do not usually blame the companies for imposing pink tax on them, but rather resort to advanced attempts to understand companies through the dynamics of the market and the need of companies to survive.

This section serves to understand how the meanings within the commercialization of feminism translate and diffuse into the individual life world through individualized consumption meanings.

The findings that help to answer research question 3 regarding the use of consumption and anti-consumption in being and becoming a feminist. This is done by investigating the ways in which the feminist women employ consumption in relation to their individual identity projects of being and becoming a feminist. Furthermore, it will be investigated how feminists use goods that overtly have feminist meaning attached to them to express their feminism to themselves and others.

4.3.1   Feared and desired selves

To understand the usage of gender discourse for their identity construction, first feared and desired identities within the informants will be examined. These relate to the individual feminism by demarcating the way they perceive feminism and how they use consumption to avoid feared and approach desired selves.

Feared self: dependent home-maker mother

Dana works in consulting and married a year ago. She lives with her husband Blake and likes to discuss feminist topics with him. The financial independence of women and ability to pursue a meaningful career is especially important to her. When thinking about the future, she feels that having children will be the "next step" for her and her husband. Dana describes that having worked in consulting for a couple of years, she has now looked out for a more settled job which allows her to focus more on her private life. This evokes her to reflect over the most common approach in her friend group:

"Then there is a wedding, there are children and then the wife only works part-time or not at all and has to primarily care for the child and it is somehow these questions, that I am thinking about.. how it is going to be for us (…). This somehow is the trap for women and I am afraid of it."- Dana

Dana is afraid of going down this pre-made path. Being a stay-at-home mother without a career is a trap to her, because it leaves women dependent on the husband:

"It is a trap, because due to the fact that biologically you are the one who has to give birth and carry the child… Only because of this, you cannot have a great career or make a lot of money. Because you will have to take the job of raising the children. This leads to a dependency on the man and on other people, the state, whatever… If you are not able to be financially on the right track."- Dana

To avoid falling into this trap, Dana has discussed these topics with her husband many times so that she is now quite sure, that he won't expect her to take most care of the child. However, she still sees that society expects it from her. To Dana, having children should be a planned pursuit.

Interestingly, this feared self can be avoided through feminism for Dana. When Dana is asked for an item, that symbolizes feminism for her, she chooses the contraceptive pill.

„For me it is feminist that I can have control in my own life – in this case over my reproductive organs. It is all about control and determination and freedom – just like feminism for me." – Dana

Later, Dana also explains that the contraceptive pill helped her overcome period pains that made her unable to visit school for a few days every month.

Therefore, Dana extracts meanings of control over the female body and independence out of the feminist discourse – and finds these meanings in the contraceptive pill. This helps her avoiding her feared self of being dependent on a man due to an unwanted, badly timed pregnancy.

Feared self: The typical girl

"But what I remember, is that I had very tidy handwriting. And my brother said: Oh, what a girl writing! I don't know, this was in the beginning, when I learned how to write. And after this I was writing pretty badly. On purpose! Because I said, No, I don't want to be a typical girl. Because… In my eyes, this was something bad. I don't know, but girls always used to be bitches to me. In fact, women are still bitches today. Off course not all of them, don't get me wrong!"- Ellen

What Ellen describes is an early incident of being shamed as a girl by her older brother. This incident seems to be representative for many ways in which she was brought to the belief that being a girl and being feminine is nothing desirable. Ellen a describes her feminism to be somewhat structured by the notion of trying not to be a typical girl.

Ellen later describes, that one of the more important things for her is not to be a "Tussi" – a German term referred to hyperfeminine women who put a lot of emphasis on their looks and may not be very intellectual. The term is solely used in a negative way.

"I have always tried to resist being a Tussi. And this is… Well, today I no longer resist it. Because, I am simply not a Tussi."

Ellen avoids being a "Tussi" by avoiding wearing feminine clothing such as dresses and skirts. In this way, Ellen's feared self of being a typical girl can be observed in her fashion choices.

Desired self: Embracing femininity

Intriguingly, Amanda and Ellen use the same cultural category of being a "Tussi" and act differently upon it. Both of the informants see it as a negatively connoted term. As a response to it, Ellen rejects this term and tries to consume in a way that moves her away from this identity. For Amanda however, this is not a feared, but a desired identity. She likes being hyperfeminine and embraces it, no matter, what others may think about it.

"I get my nails done – properly nice and long. Some would say I am a "Tussi". But I like being a "Tussi". For me, there is no contradiction to feminism. For example, I also let my armpit hair grow completely this winter. Many would see a contradiction in this as well, but in my picture of feminism there are no taboos or contradictions in this way. You can be ANYTHING, do ANYTHING – except for being a Nazi or be in the AfD *laughs*"- Amanda, 27

Amanda explains that to her, freedom is actually what feminism should be about and in this way, there should be no negative evaluation of hyperfeminine appearance. Furthermore, feminism even implies for her the freedom to do anything and combine aspects that may be contradicting in other's eyes to ultimately display her freedom.

The notion of being a typical girl or "Tussi" really shows that the individual consumers form their own meaning around cultural categories and use the feminist discourse in different ways. While for Ellen, Feminism is about not fitting into the stereotypical feminine role, Amanda interprets feminism to have the freedom to also take on feminine appearances. In this way, Amanda seems to show some elements of creative resistance by changing the sign value of long nails. To her, they are now representative of her freedom to be a woman instead of a sign of oppressive beauty standards.

Desired self: Becoming a decent human being through intersectionality

Cecilia describes that she thinks her feminism, as it is today, is not yet enough. She uttered her wishes to learn more about different aspects, especially regarding intersectionality. *"To become a decent human being"* she wants to learn more and read more about topics regarding minorities that she has

not thought about before. In this way, for Cecilia, her feminist identity is a constant work in progress with goal directed behavior toward "decency".

To pursue this goal, she consumes a lot of YouTube videos by feminist influencers. She looks up to these and enjoys listening to new viewpoints. In this way, Cecilia can be described as a consumer who listens to the discourse more actively than other consumers. She revisits her views constantly and questions them to truly possess feminism through knowledge.

Desired self: Being an independent woman who can reach her goals in work and consumption

Ellen and Dana both pursue the goal of being a successful businesswoman. To them, financial independence and a career are a very central part to their feminist beliefs. Ellen has recently started working in a start-up with her boyfriend. For her one of the most feminist things she owns is her shelf of self-development books. She reads in them a lot and finds them empowering. From the discourse and meanings regarding feminism, Ellen mostly soaked up aspects of independence and strength. She wants to prove that she is as good in business as her male colleagues. The self-development literature helps her pursue this goal. In the future, Ellen would like to purchase a "real men-car" that reflects status and power. This further outlines Ellen's desire to keep up with men, and the way in which she defines feminism as the possibility for women to do things otherwise associated with masculinity.

Conclusion

To sum up, young feminists use a range of different consumption activities to achieve their individual identity goals. These identity goals are diverse and can be contradicting. Consumption activities relevant to feminism are not always marketed as such. In fact, more often the feminist quality of these consumption activities lies in the eye of the beholder. Many of the consumption activities would be interpreted differently by another informant of the group. This underlines the specificity of meaning interpretation to the individual context.

4.3.2 Consuming feminism

The ways in which cultural intermediaries attach feminist meaning to goods have been explored in the previous sections of the analysis. Now, the lived feminist experience of consuming such goods will be reviewed. This section seeks to answer in how far commercialized feminism can serve as an extension to the feminist identity the different informants hold.

The field of fashion is a very identity relevant field for young feminists. Fashion is both used to signal the feminist identity toward outsiders as well as to demarcate it to oneself, reminding of and

confirming the identity (McCarthy, 1984). Clothing distinguishes the individual from others, helps to express an individual sense of being, indicates group identity and belonging to a group (Belk, 1988).

When expressing feminism through consumption, the informants face a twofold challenge. On one hand, the overt expression of feminist values exposes them to somewhat hostile reactions from anti-feminists. In fact, expressing feminism through fashion has been described by one informant almost like a "coming out":

"It [the t-shirt] demanded me to be brave to walk like this in the public, because I was afraid that people would ask me about it. And then I would stand there and have to explain myself and why I am a feminist, which I do not like to do. Actually, I hate it. (…). This was for me an act of emancipation."
– Amanda, 27

This aspect has to do with the social signaling function consumption serves (Bennett & Chakravarti, 2009). Consumers do not only consume in accordance to their identity, but also to signal and project their identity toward others. Furthermore, the t-shirt serves a way to be feminist and emancipate herself. The t-shirt mentioned by Amanda even takes on an almost active role – wearing the t-shirt demands something from her. By wearing the t-shirt, she has to grow into her new identity, being a feminist and saying it out loud, similar as described by McCracken (2008).

The second challenging aspect is constituted by the introspective dimension to the challenges of labelling oneself as a feminist. Much of Amanda's worries mentioned before are due to her own hypotheses of how others would react to her overt expression of feminism. These worries constitute in the uncertainty whether her feminism, lives up to outsiders expectations. She describes that in her "feminist bubble", she often encounters something that she calls a "contest, who is the smartest, the most educated, the wokest". This contest that she observes within her community sometimes restricts her from taking part in discussions. To become more qualified to take part, she actively has to seek out public feminist's opinions. This sense of striving for knowledge has also been described by Cecilia, when she describes that her feminism should become more intersectional. Cecilia's concern with knowledge about the ideology she chooses also reflects in her claim that she would not wear symbols that she does not understand, like a Frieda Kahlo T-Shirt she encountered (Appendix 6.3). The awareness of feminism as a work in progress and competitiveness within feminism makes it hard for Amanda's "Feminist killjoy" t-shirt to serve an expressive purpose over time. While the T-shirts with its passive message was significant and valuable for Amanda at the time, she now refrains from

wearing it for multiple reasons and thinks about purchasing a piece of clothing with "less obvious, less bold" messages. Her feminism is in flux, and so is the expression of her feminism.

The theme of feminism as a quality that one attains through education or knowledge is not present in all of the informants. Especially Ellen and Beth seem to have a different approach to this. Beth expresses feminism overtly and is more laissez-faire with the statements she chooses to display. For Beth, the term "Girlpower" is "a cool statement, that everybody should think more about". When confronted with a negative comment on her "Girlpower"-Hoodie by her supervisor at work, she does not think more of it and readily adapts by not wearing it anymore. Different to Amanda, she also does not fear any critical remarks regarding the meaning of the term.

The way in which feminism in fashion is consumed therefore is highly individual and seems to somehow reflect the way the consumer views feminism. This may have to do with the importance of feminism to the individual. Belk suggested that some things are closer extensions of the self than others (Belk, 1988). Probably, feminism is being truly possessed by Amanda who described a full transformation into being in a feminist. Therefore, her feminist identity demands a more detailed reflection than Beth's feminist identity. Beth does not consider feminism as a transformation one undergoes, but more as a general movement.

Conclusion

To practice being and becoming feminist, some of the informants resort to consumer goods, namely fashion, that are explicitly demarcated as feminist. While for some of the informants the endeavor of labeling oneself as feminist must be carefully considered, for others, the significance of wearing a feminist slogan is not that high. Furthermore, labelling oneself as feminist can be an act of lived feminism (e.g. emancipation) but also just a more general, opportunistic association to a cause.

4.4   Culture to consumer: How do cultural meanings of feminism shape lived consumption
       experiences of millennial feminists?

This chapter aims at understanding the way in which meanings of feminism shape the lived experiences of millennial feminists. By employing the notion of conflicting or competing identities (Ahuvia, 2005), the analysis is enabled to provide an understanding of the way in which feminist consumers navigate through situations of contradiction. The way in which identity conflicts between the feminist identity and other identities are dissolved through consumption can provide an understanding of the way in which feminism shapes the consumption experiences in a highly

contextual and individual way. Furthermore, the individual interpretations of feminist ideology are visited, aiming to broaden the understanding of resistance within lived consumption experiences.

4.4.1   Competing identities and solutions

While pursuing identity goals, the informants encounter situations in which their feminist identities contradict and compete other desired identities. These situations and the way the informants find solutions to these conflicts offer further insight into the way in which feminism shapes individual consumption experiences.

The solidary feminist vs. the material girl

Amanda wants to be fashionable and reshape her wardrobe on a regular basis. She loves to look feminine, to shop and to get her nails done. At the same time, she does not want to re-enforce suppression of marginalized groups such as women in third world countries. These competing identities become salient in her considerations of getting her nails done and also in her considerations of consuming fast fashion.

*"In the beginning I was somewhat uncomfortable. Especially because I concern myself a lot with racism-critique, *whispers* I had the feeling this is weird when so many white women go and let their feet be done by Asian looking women. It was.. absolutely bizarre. I imagined, how it would be, if it was reversed. That would be totally bizarre."- Amanda*

Amanda describes how her desired identity of being a well-groomed, hyperfeminine woman and her desired identity of being a feminist compete with each other. This becomes salient in choices of where to get her nails done and which fashion to buy. Amanda seeks out a synthesizing solution that allows her to integrate both identities (Ahuvia, 2005). Instead of endorsing one and rejecting the other, she synthesizes a new identity that allows her to pursue both identities.

In the case of the nail salon, Amanda describes her thought process like this:

"And now I think that people also need to stop patronizing. These people… If I just go with the assumption that they do not live a self-ordered life and that they don't like to do this and that they do not have a fun job…. Or that they have a terrible life because they work in a nail salon… Who am I? That is totally paternalistic and from above. I see it like this: This is a business. I go there and pay money to receive a service and that is it and everyone is happy!"

Amanda creatively uses liberative elements of feminism to tell herself not to patronize the Asian workers at the nail salon. In a creative manner, she manages to combine her feminist intention to worry about the Asian women at the salon with a rather pragmatic appeal to the way a marketplace works in her eyes. The influence of feminist ideas in this way is not as structuring as may have been assumed. They are much more juxtaposed to opposing ideologies (Thompson & Haytko, 1997) to arrive at the solution of synthesizing both streams of thinking. Something similar happens, when she reflects on her fast fashion purchases at Primark, which is associated with poor labor conditions that mainly concern women:

"They really have very beautiful fashion and it is available to all levels of society. A family living on welfare can afford a few pieces a month at Primark. And this is the difference to H&M and C&A, where I am thinking, the working conditions are probably not going to be a lot different, but at Primark people from Hartz-IV-Families can afford it and can choose from a HUGE assortment and dress themselves individually, and self-actualize themselves. And I find that self-actualization is something that every human deserves and not just some Yuppies who order fair trade fashion at Armed angels. They can easily say something, but I think if you criticize Primark… this is something very classicist in my opinion - because you don't see that there are people who can't afford it."

Amanda solidarizes herself with a marginalized group in German society, families who live off public welfare. She uses anti-hierarchical elements from feminism to rationalize her need for self-actualization and consumption of fast fashion. In this way, she does no longer think about the conditions of the production, but instead thinks about the consumer group she can associate herself with through the purchase. Because Primark makes consumption possible for the poorest, she wants to support it.

This works especially well, because it also helps to distance herself from "yuppies who order fairtrade fashion". To Amanda, it is more pressing to distance herself from established yuppie-culture than to pursue ethical consumption. The way in which Amanda re-conceptualizes Primark for herself can be seen as a micro-emancipatory act that decenters the market determined meanings as described by Holt (2002). Amanda is still aware of the culturally shared meaning of Primark, albeit she has constructed her own meaning around it.

"I don't think that it is the crème de la crème, what I am doing. But to be honest: I believe that there is no ethical consumption, not ethically correct, flawless consumption in capitalism (…)."

To further cope with the guilt of not consuming ethically, Amanda claims that it would be impossible for her to really consume ethically in capitalism. The impossibility of an ethically flawless consumption leads her to the conclusion not to make ethics a part of her purchase considerations at all.

"If you try to consume ethically within capitalism then… you will never make it. It is simply impossible. Alone through your birth in a western country.. until you have the consciousness with 16, 17 to think about it, you have already committed so many sins – you will never get out of it!"- Amanda

In this way, Amanda finds a way to protect and confirm her identity as a feminist with ideals on how women should be treated, but also to purchase fast fashion at the same time. Therefore, her ideological claims help her to find a synthetizing solution that keeps her feminist, solidary identity but enables her to keep up with the newest fashion trends at low cost. Amanda manages to attribute the responsibility to her environment (capitalism) and because she reframes her consumption to an act of solidarity toward marginalized groups. Because Primark caters to families depending on welfare, she can be ethical through supporting Primark. In this case, feminism causes a conflict for Amanda that she manages to solve through the re-contextualization of feminist meanings.

The feminist as a critique of beauty standards vs. the professional career woman

Dana describes a competition between two desired identities: She wants to be a successful professional working woman, but she does not want to participate in the extended grooming that is associated with being a woman in business. These grooming requirements are a resonance of the importance of being beautiful to be feminine. Dana describes, that in her working situation as a consultant, it seems to be even more important for women to be well groomed than for men. This perception fits well with the formerly outlined importance of beauty within the feminine category. Make-up serves for Dana as requisite to perform her identity as an organized career woman. She describes how she finds it necessary to use it at work.

„Especially as a consultant, it is on a higher level because you are expensive. (…) You have to show that you are competent, and you have everything under control – including yourself. And this is something, that you can transport by looking well-groomed."

In this way, her feminist identity and her professional identity are competing. At work, she has to wear make-up to project her professional value as a consultant toward the customer and also to be put together and seem organized. In her private life, she does not wear make-up and she is convinced that

make-up is in contradiction to her feminism, due to the way in which it attaches high value to a woman's beauty. Dana resolves this situation by wearing make-up on workdays only. This way, she can perform her role as a consultant at work but stick to her values on the weekends. This limits her self-actualization during workdays but is a compromise that she is willing to take. The purchase of make-up to her is "like buying toothpaste", an every-day item which makes it typical to be compromised upon (Ahuvia, 2005).

The feminist as a critical consumer vs. the fan girl

Cecilia describes a situation in which she experienced a true desire to be able to shake off her feminist identity and just enjoy products for their characteristics, without thinking about who made them and how they were made. This desire arose when she found out that one of her favorite artists had been accused of sexually taking advantage of his fans.

"When all this came out, it was a real shitstorm and I also said ok, he never apologized for what happened. He never understood what he did. He always tried to talk himself out of all this. And like that I said ok, from such an artist, who does this kind of stuff... I cannot support this! Of course, in this case it was easier to do so, because I know this is a single artist. He produced everything and recorded it himself. It was easy to say, I delete the album from Spotify. And I also had a physical CD that I threw out. It is hard to say... It really makes me mad." - Cecilia

This presents an example for a demarcating solution, in which Cecilia decides for one of the two competing identities. Facing the conflict, she pursued her feminist identity and reconsidered her fandom toward the artist. However, this solution leaves her dissatisfied:

"To be honest, I really listened to one song once again. It happened some time from now. Because I thought, oh this was so good, this song was so good. I have.. It has brought back some memories, because listening to it was for me back in the day... Well it is not even that long ago... But it was really important to me, because of the lyrics. But when I listened to it, I felt shame. Because.. Now you support him again indirectly... I believe, this is the disadvantage of feminism: I like it, but sometimes... Sometimes I wish I could completely disregard the author and just enjoy the product. Also, with things that I would like to buy, just to be able to disregard the company and just have the product." -Cecilia

Cecilia was tempted again to listen to the music because of what it meant to her personally. But because of the personalized meaning that was now attached to the song, she could not fully enjoy it

and eventually felt shameful about it. To her, feminism also includes boycotting companies and artists who do not share her values. She thrives to be consequent with it and feels ashamed when she gives in to her desires. To her, the production process and what is behind it really becomes attached to the good. In this way, Cecilia seems to express notions of the reflexively-defiant consumer describes by Ozanne & Murray (1995), who seeks to avoid market imposed meanings. She cannot get rid of her feminist identity, even though she would sometimes like to. She has a desire to only consider the finished product, without everything that may be attached to it. Therefore, her reflexivity leaves her unsatisfied, with a desire to be able to lose this quality.

Conclusion

Feminists find themselves in situations of identity conflict between feminist meanings they feel compelled to associate themselves with and the other identities provided by the market. Such market provided identities often do not correspond with the multi-facetted aspects of their selves. Furthermore, their feminism leads them to question assumptions about everyday life. While Cecilia's way of thinking can be seen as reflexively-defiant in the way in which she aims to look behind the production process and tries to set out her consumption regarding it, Amanda's consumption can be viewed as creatively resistant in this example. All of them find solutions to either demarcate the feminist identity or solutions that allow them to keep their feminist identity and consider other identities at the same time. Interestingly, the demarcating solution Cecilia employs leaves her ultimately unsatisfied, regretting the consequent nature of their feminist identity or wishing for societal change. Therefore, feminist meanings structure the way in which the individuals solve identity conflicts in concert with opposing meanings. This aligns with the way that Thompson & Haytko describe personalized consumption meanings to be derived "from a network of countervailing discourses" (p. 35). Furthermore, individually the different consumers express a high degree of agency in the individual interpretation of meanings in the market.

4.4.2 Custom feminisms: From extreme toward moderate

To thoroughly understand the way in which feminist meaning seem to diffuse through society and find entry into individual consumption experiences, the different conceptualizations the informants hold and the way these correspond to the commercialized feminist meanings identified in chapter 5.1 should be discussed here. These can help to assess the extent to which commercialized meanings found entrance into the individual life world.

These custom-feminisms are result of the individual life history of each informant, paired with material and social influences. Altogether, each informant forms their own, personalized type of feminism. It is important to consider that these feminisms are only an interpretation from the narratives and can change shape and expression as the informants grow.

They can occur spontaneously or consciously and out of an interplay of personal fears and desires. Fiona demarcates her position like this:

"I also asked you, are you looking for extreme feminists? Because I would not refer to myself like that, because I am simply not that type. I am not that harsh protester and stuff like that." – Fiona

In this way, her moderate, less activist feminism is a conscious choice, and she later uses a friend of hers' to explain, why she does not want to be like her. While Fiona holds feminist opinions, it is important to her to remain somewhat balanced and to be able to lead her life in a similar way as she did before she became aware of feminism. Other informants, such as Amanda, Cecilia and Dana would conceptualize their turn toward feminism as transformational ("I woke up out of the matrix", "in my feminist career", Amanda) and eye-opening ("It was a complete eye opener", Dana; "It helped me to see things differently", Cecilia). It changed many aspects of their lives, including the people they would be friends with, the media they consume and the way they relate to men. On the other end of the spectrum Beth and Ellen see feminism more as a general zeitgeist that most women will be part of almost automatically. Table 4 illustrates the individual feminisms and the way the informants express them. They informants can be aligned on a spectrum from extreme to moderate, and also can be differentiated by referring to themselves a feminist without any restriction or referring to themselves as feminist but only while adding some restrictions and demarcation to this referral.

Table 3: Overview of informants and their individual feminisms

Extreme	↔		Moderate		
Amanda	Cecilia	Dana	Fiona	Ellen	Beth
"In my idea of feminism there are no contradiction or taboos (...). You can be ANYTHING (...)"	Feminism as a way to *become "a decent human being"*. To Cecilia feminism is something that she works on and learns more about every day.	Feminism as independence and reclaiming control	Feminism as body-positivity and way to overcome sexual harassment	Feminism as a way to distance herself from feminine traits	Feminism as a "general movement"
Feminist without restriction			Feminist with restriction		

While the informants who are more extreme on the spectrum define their feminism more through referral to structural problems, the more moderate ones present a feminism that operates within a society that is at large free of gender discriminations. The second group of informants tends to attribute perceived injustice rather to the own behavioral patterns of women than to a structural imbalance. These ideas about feminism can very much be aligned with the notions of post-feminism illuminated by Gill (2007).

Intriguingly, the more the informants can be viewed as extreme, the more identity conflicts and competing identities became salient within the interviews. These informants were also more critical and resistant toward femvertising approaches. This may have to do with a clash of the way in which the cultural intermediaries re-interpreted feminism to fit the market and their individual notions of feminism. Such an opposition does not seem to concern the more moderate feminists. The implications of this in terms of the diffusion of meaning within consumer culture will be further discussed in the discussion.

Conclusion

To conclude, the different informants can be viewed on a spectrum from extreme toward moderate depending on the transformative nature of their feminism. Furthermore, identity conflicts and tensions and resistance toward the marketplace and commercialized meanings of feminism were more frequently described by these individuals.

4.5 Summary of findings

This section summarizes the findings discussed throughout the analysis. At the same time, it answers the four sub-questions to the research, enabling me to arrive at a final conclusion after the discussion of the findings.

With regard to RQ1, both traditional and countervailing meanings of femininity, masculinity and being a feminist have been identified through the informants' descriptions. An overview of these can be found in Table 1 and Table 2. While traditional meanings of femininity and masculinity are being contested by countervailing meanings associated with feminism in the marketplace, traditional meanings of gender in the marketplace persist. Even though feminist meanings such as embracing the female body, de-sexualization, liberation & empowerment have become a commodity that is readily used in the marketplace, the cultural meaning of actually being a feminist is negatively connotated (undesirability, seriousness, men hatred, critical).

Chapter 5.2 was dedicated to answering RQ2: Feminist consumers view the appropriation of feminist meanings in advertising with ambivalence. On one hand they have hope that the advertisements could serve as a means of voice in their fight against patriarchy, with companies as allies for social change. On the other hand, they are full of distrust toward this commercial medium and companies themselves. Feminist meanings in advertising seem stripped off their original intention, and possibly used for the wrong cause. The pink tax phenomenon is viewed as an injustice. This injustice is not solely related to company pricing politics, but to higher economical dynamics resembled by capitalism or the market itself.

Addressing RQ3 regarding the ways in which millennial feminists use consumption for their identity project of being an becoming a feminist, it can be concluded that the use of consumption presents a high degree of agency in the individual identity construction. This can be supported by the postmodern notion of individualization. Millennial feminists use a range of different consumption activities to achieve their individually themed identity goals. These identity goals are diverse and can be contradicting. Consumption activities relevant to feminism are not always marketed as such. In fact, more often the feminist quality of these consumption activities within the individual interpretation of the activity, underlining agency and the importance of the individual context. When millennial feminists resort to consuming goods demarcated as feminist, the way they do so may be structured by the way they view feminism themselves. While some carefully consider the symbols,

they want to associate themselves with, others do so more freely. To some, it can be a means of emancipation while for others it can be viewed more as a spontaneous association to a cause.

With regard to RQ4, feminism seems to largely impact individual consumers consumption experiences by structuring identity conflicts and fostering elements of reflexively-defiant as well as creative resistance. Aspects of the consumers' feminist identities can be observed to compete with other identities. When confronted with this, they pursue different kinds of solutions and employ feminist meanings to argue for their behaviors. The way in which these solutions are constructed expresses a high degree of agency over individual consumption meanings and a creative application of feminist meanings.

To understand certain differences within the informants' narratives and their ways of relating to the marketplace, their custom-feminisms have been visited. Different feminist ideas were aligned on a spectrum from extreme to moderate, indicating the extent to which they find their feminism transformative and also the extent to which they seem to reject dominant meanings of femininity and masculinity. This way of viewing the different informants and its implications for the question of the role of commercialized meanings for individual consumption experiences will be discussed further in the discussion to answer RQ4.ii.

5   Discussion

This chapter seeks to address topics that have been touched upon within the findings but require further discussion and to relate the findings obtained to other existent literature. First, I am going to extend the discussion of the custom feminisms visited in chapter 5. By relating these to literature from the field of identity and consumer resistance, RQ4 can conclusively be answered. Secondly, I will discuss the question of commercialized feminism as a means of voice, adding to the understanding of the role of cultural intermediaries for the diffusion of feminist meanings, which helps to answer research question 2. Finally, I am going to address the limitations of my study.

5.1   Custom feminist identities: What is the role of commodified feminism for individual consumers consumption experiences?

This section aims to illuminate the implications of the custom feminisms visited in chapter 5.4 further. As mentioned before, some of the feminist consumers interviewed have been more resistant and critical toward commercialized meanings of feminism than others. Apart from that, traditional meanings of gender cause them to find themselves facing conflicting and competing identities, while other informants readily integrate feminist meanings with traditional meanings of gender. Because these consumers also presented to view feminism in a different way, namely as a life-changing transformation, I proceeded to align the different informants on a spectrum from extreme to moderate. This section will illuminate how these different characteristics arise in a group that seemingly shares many aspects of identity.

One explanation may lie in the kind of feminism the informants practice. Their entry into feminism has been transformative to them, and they have changed many aspects of their life since becoming a feminist. The feminist beliefs could be argued to be truly possessed by them, with a high degree of selfness (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988). By truly identifying with feminism, they differentiate themselves from the broader public. They consume feminist media, like to support feminist groups and truly find themselves embedded within feminist culture. Speaking in terms of McCracken (McCracken, 1986), this group of informants can be seen as representatives of the radical groups at the margin of society, whose innovative ways of changing sign values find way into the world of goods through advertising and the fashion system. The feminist identities the second group expresses, do not take such a central place in their self-concept. They have not changed their social environment due to their feminism, and they are not going to do so in the near future. They do not feel the need to

differentiate from the broad public in the same way. These and many more differences may just be caused by personal differences and preferences, but they may as well be due to the way the informants have come to be feminists. It could be argued, that the more moderate informants are not in fact much different from the broad public, but rather members of the broad public who have come to be feminists through the commercialization of feminism. This would explain in many ways, why the rather moderate feminists are less inclined to experience conflict between their feminist identity and other desired identities. Their feminist identity would be inspired by commercialized meanings, reducing friction between their individual feminism and the marketplace feminism. In this way, the feminism expressed by Beth and Ellen can easily be combined and co-exist with the commercialized meanings of the marketplace, as they themselves have incorporated meanings of independence, while still holding on to certain gender stereotypes and displaying elements of internalized misogyny. In this way, RQ4 is conclusively answered. Commercialized feminism therefore takes the role of producing a new group of feminists that does not face the same type of identity conflicts the more extreme feminists face. For those, the commercialized feminist meanings are the prevailing meanings of feminism.

This *mainstream feminism* practiced by some of the informants may have larger scale implications. As suggested by Holt (2002), a resistive ideology becoming mainstream may cause the more radical or extreme feminist to try to differentiate themselves from those mainstream feminists. A mainstream feminist wearing feminist symbols is on one hand "better than nothing", but may also cause the more radical feminists to rework new ways of signaling their identity. One of these new ways may be displayed by the hyperfemininity Amanda is striving for. While to the mainstream she may seem like a typical, unemancipated girl who loves to shop, her "feminist bubble" understands that she does it to celebrate femininity. Ultimately, these considerations could imply that Holt's conceptualization of market-bound resistance holds up to the findings in this context.

These considerations have implications on the light in which the findings can be viewed. While the members of the radical group face conflicting identities and tensions toward the marketplace, these tensions are much weaker for the *mainstream feminists*. Furthermore, they can offer useful insight in the way in which ideology spreads through society and on the role of the marketplace in this diffusion of ideology. Feminist meanings do spread and diffuse through the marketplace, even though only an assortment of them are applied by cultural intermediaries. This further emphasizes the role of cultural intermediaries or agents as a gatekeeper (McCracken, 1986).

5.2 Commercialization as a form of voice or as a form of domination

This section of the discussion reflects on the finding regarding the meanings of gender and feminism and the way they are incorporated by cultural intermediaries such as advertisers and marketers. Discussing the question whether the advertising system or the cultural intermediaries can be seen as a means of voice for the feminist consumers can help to extend the understanding of the findings regarding RQ2 as well as extend the theoretical field on the movement of meaning.

Within the discourse around commodity feminism, there are scholars who propose that the commercialization of feminism could work as a means of voice for the feminist movement (Scott, 1994). Another view is introduced by Banet-Weiser (2004) evaluating the disrupting power of feminist elements in a children's tv program. According to her, while it is limited by its commercial shaping, it is still powerful. In the consumer research field Thompson and Haytko (1997) discuss market responsiveness as a means by which consumers can effect large changes in the society. In the same line of argumentation, Holt (2002) argues that through the adaption of resistive meanings in the marketplace, the market naturally rejuvenates and caters to consumers' needs. Murray (2002) disagrees with this perspective and argues that through the translation from localized consumer meaning to an advertising, the meaning is removed from its context and transforms the distinctive character of originally resistive meanings. He much more conceptualizes market responsiveness as a form of domination. I do not agree with the term domination in this case, albeit my findings play into this line of argumentation. The meanings of feminism in the text have been identified as distorted or "applied the wrong way" in advertising. I am led to the belief that the way the cultural intermediaries incorporate countervailing meanings into their products truly limits the way in which consumers can ultimately have a means of voice through market responsiveness. Due to the multiplicity of stakeholders and interests that cultural intermediaries are catering for, contradictions such as launching a femvertising campaign while selling products at a price premium for women arise. In the need to serve commercial interests, cultural intermediaries are ultimately underlying the dynamics of the market, restricting their ability to become the ally many of the informants hope for. The meanings of feminism and a new femininity are decontextualized in many advertisements so that it remains unclear whether they can succeed in promoting true empowerment or just a market-bound, commodified version of empowerment. It could be argued that within this market-bound empowerment, dependence on men and victimization of women can be overcome due to its ability to serve commercial interest. With women becoming more independent and self-confident, they may generate higher incomes to spend in consumption. However, the ideal of a skinny woman with long

hair can be argued as beneficial to an industry that provides everything that is needed to achieve this desired self. Hence, such ideals are not truly overcome but reproduced. In this way, companies and the empowerment they provide can be described as market-bound, ultimately limited by commercial interest. The responsiveness of the market therefore cannot ultimately be termed as a means of voice, because through the translation into commercial terms, a lot of the context of the feminist cause is lost.

5.3   Limitations

The limitations of this thesis will be addressed by first reflecting on the way the choice of theories may have determined the outcome of this inquiry and secondly by leaving some general limitations.

The impact of the choice of theories

The process of this inquiry and the choice of theories in the beginning of the process certainly has been impactful to the outcome of this study.

For example, the choice of viewing feminism as an aspect of the self and in terms of individual identity implies already a high degree of agency regarding the definition of meanings of feminism. By using Belk's extended self in this context (1988), especially combined with the goal directed dimensions of the self by Ahuvia (2005), the framework might have an inclination to produce such findings. On the other hand, the use of McCracken's movement of meaning model can be viewed as counterbalancing such intentions, resulting in a fairly balanced theoretical approach.

Furthermore, viewing feminists as a resistant group could be argued as not reflecting the contemporary cultural environment. With the commodification of feminism dating back to the 80s (Goldman, 1992), how can feminism still be oppositional? While other scholars like Dobscha and Ozanne (2001) argued for feminists as an oppositional group in 2001, today this may be harder to justify. However, I would argue that it depends on which feminism is meant. While there may be streams and individuals to which this term does not apply, generally resistance did add an additional perspective to the framework of this thesis.

General limitations

In the frame of general limitations, I would like to address the high degree of contextuality of the findings presented. As an example, the findings regarding the meanings of gender are in no way conclusive, but solely those that have been identified within the text.

Moreover, the approach of spotlighting two marketplace phenomena, femvertising and the pink tax can be argued as being an approach that is too obtrusive and leading to an overestimation of the importance of these phenomena to millennial feminists. An even more open approach to the research could have resulted in a different outcome, possibly highlighting other marketplace phenomena.

6 Conclusion

This thesis took an outset in the question which role consumption takes for millennial feminists' identity construction under the consideration of commercialized feminism. By application of a theoretical framework based on CCT literature and a phenomenological study, the role of commercial meanings for the identity construction of millennial feminist women in Germany was investigated.

How do millennial feminists use consumption in their individual identity construction and which role does the commodification of feminism take in this identity construction?

While consumption takes an important role for identity construction, especially in approaching desired selves, individual consumption meanings and the way in which they aid identity construction are ultimately a product of creative interpretation and individualized remodeling. While interpreting and remodeling common cultural meanings into their individual consumption behaviors, feminist consumers constantly juxtapose different countervailing ideologies. Through this interpretive activity they acquire a coherent sense of self. This creative process of interpretation can lead to contradictive outcomes and decontextualization of the original meanings. It further enables consumers to construct feminist identity through a multitude of consumer goods, without necessarily resorting to specifically demarcated products.

While some feminists present high agency in how they define their own feminism and review and re-invent symbols for feminism they want to associate themselves with, other more moderate feminists tend to take on meanings of commercialized feminism such as individuality, self-efficacy and empowerment freely. These differences can be assigned to the individual ideological and life context and implies the formation of a mainstream feminism, which is easy to access trough the marketplace and offers a feminist identity that can easily be combined with other marketplace meanings.

6.1 Marketing implications

The findings presented have implications with regard to the marketing and communication practices. Two aspects should be outlined:

The first aspect is going to address the topic of femvertising and related approaches to cause-marketing. When considering the attachment of feminist meanings or other oppositional meanings to a good, this can only be part of a temporary marketing activity or for a marketing activity applied to a rather small consumer segment. As described by Murray (2002), if such activities are based on distinction from other groups, the meanings will lose their sign value as soon as they have become

popular in the mainstream. Additionally, this study illuminated a general skepticism or distrust toward advertisements. To convince feminist consumers of the authenticity of a cause-marketing activity, it may be a possible strategy to combine such campaigns with additional corporate social responsibility activities.

The second aspect addresses the product categories feminist meaning and symbols can be attached to. Apart from fashion & beauty, artworks, books, and even the contraceptive pill have been shown to be associated with feminist meaning in the individual context. These meanings, when held as positive and desirable and substantial in other contexts, could offer opportunity for marketing activities in new categories.

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