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# Sexualised advertising and the production of space in the city

Emma Arnold

*While the prevalence of advertising in urban space has been broadly critiqued, how the diverse forms of the new media landscape produce affect and space in the city is not well understood. Exploring outdoor advertising that contains sexualised representations of women, this paper considers how certain images produce space and may potentially impact women's experience of the city. Sexualised and hypersexualised depictions of women in advertising are problematic for many reasons. This is because advertising is not only concerned with selling goods and services but because it also has an ideological function, contributing to the reproduction of inequalities including the potential subjugation of women. This paper goes further to suggest that these types of images contribute to a fluid production of sexualised space when situated in the city, exacerbated at night when many advertisements become illuminated in backlit or digital displays. These effects compound the invisible walls of the city that already influence women's navigations, mobilities, and rights to the city. Reflecting on and analysing select photographs taken in Norway, this paper offers a provocative exploration of the spatial and temporal effects of sexualised outdoor advertising.*

Keywords **advertising, affect, gender, photography, psychogeography, sexualised space**

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**B**ella Hadid stares intensely ahead. Contoured in thick black and blue lines, her eyes cut through darkness like the glaring headlights of an approaching car. Her image is featured in an advertisement for Dior that is locked in a Clear Channel illuminated display. Backlit, the advertisement brightens its surroundings, reflecting and doubling in the thick vitrine of a bus shelter on Blindernveien in Oslo (see [Figure 1](#)). Overhead streetlamps do not shine with the same voracity and instead sink yellow into the indigo sky like bloated stars. The model grasps each end of a tube of mascara between thumb and forefingers, held just at chin level. How you read the image depends on your positionality. Whether the tube of mascara might appear phallic, the gaze and exposed skin arousing or empowering, both or neither, is a matter of interpretation.

Sexualised imagery surrounds us (see [Figure 2](#)). Displays of women's bodies are 'violently attractive' (Lefebvre 2014, 56), found everywhere, and are more frequently transgressing from private into public space. Urban theorist Henri Lefebvre wrote in 1957 that there is a seeming brutality to the pervasive sexual imagery that makes use of the female form, writing that there is little sensual or erotic about these everyday displays. Instead, 'this sexuality is depressing, this eroticism is weary and wearying, mechanical' (Lefebvre 2014, 56). Baudrillard echoes this, writing that displays of sexuality and eroticism in consumer culture are 'excessive and that there is meaning in the excessiveness' (Baudrillard 1998, 144). While Lefebvre described these images entering the everyday as a sort of transgression, Kalms (2014) writes that the presence of hypersexualised images in the city is moving beyond the transgressive and towards the routine. Whether transgressive or routine, these displays of women's bodies and sexuality are increasingly common in urban space and it is a presence whose effects warrant serious contemplation.

An array of new technologies and media are habitually incorporated into the design of cities, bringing advertising images in novel forms into public space. Outdoor advertising is prominently displayed in highly trafficked



**Figure 1:** Bella Hadid in an advertisement for Dior on Blindernveien, Oslo (2017). Photo: Emma Arnold.



**Figure 2:** Heteronormative imagery in an Abercrombie & Fitch window display advertisement showing a woman straddling a man, the two holding an intense gaze, Oslo (2017). Photo: Emma Arnold.

public spaces: pasted on walls, contained in sleek street furniture, bright and colourful in digital displays, leaked onto streets from storefront windows in commercial areas, affixed high on exteriors of buildings, on, in, and around all manner of public transportation infrastructure. The outdoor media landscape is representative of shifts to more entrepreneurial styles of urban governance (Iveson 2012), in which highly profitable agreements with municipalities have allowed advertising in a wide variety of forms to permeate everyday spaces. These new structures are justified by municipalities as they generate income that funds public infrastructure like bus shelters and bike sharing stations. These structures are typically found on street level, occupying space on sidewalks, and their designs are augmented to include space for advertising.

While outdoor advertisements are diverse, one striking commonality is that many contain the images of women, their bodies at times only tenuously linked to the product or service marketed. Images of women's bodies have a long history in advertising though it was not until the 1970s and 1980s during the peak of second-wave feminism that serious critiques and analyses of the effects of these advertisements emerged (Blloshmi 2013). It is not just the idealised representations of women's bodies that are an issue. Such depictions in advertising and popular culture have well-established negative impacts on women's sense of self and body. Sexualised images of women in advertising are harmful in other ways. Women in various states of undress and in sexually suggestive poses, intimating everything from masturbation to fellatio, reinforce dominant and mainstream ideas of heteronormative sexuality; ideas that keep women in subordinate positions and for male consumption (Blloshmi 2013). The location of these images in the city present a whole new set of problems (Kalms 2014; Rosewarne 2005), for outdoor advertising is not easily avoided in everyday spaces. Advertising images that may be understood as being for the 'male gaze'—images that objectify women in ways suggesting their visual presence is for the pleasure and benefit of the heterosexual male viewer—may unintentionally reinforce the gendered public/private divide that has

historically affected women's presence and mobilities in the city. The extent to which advertising affects space has been overlooked according to Cronin (2006a), who suggests that advertising in the city impacts how space is understood and experienced, establishing 'commodity rhythms' that link up the rhythms of our daily navigations with those of commerce and commodity. Kern suggests that the depiction of certain types of women's bodies—young, thin, white, able-bodied, middle-class—in outdoor condominium advertisements helps reproduce the city 'as a commodity, as available twenty-four/seven for pleasure, and as waiting to be possessed and consumed' (Kern 2010, 220).

Though outdoor advertising in the city very often contains depictions of women, their bodies featuring far more frequently than those of men (Rosewarne 2005), little attention has been paid to how these displays might affect the metabolism of the city. Exploring photographs taken during psychogeographic walks in Norway between 2015 and 2019, this paper considers how these images produce space. The most significant contribution of this paper is its explorations of temporal shifts. Images that may be read as 'postfeminist' during the day may shift in meaning when viewed at night and may instead be understood as images that objectify and commodify women's bodies. Through photographic analysis, this work suggests that it is not just space of encounter that matters but also the time and conditions of viewing, something that literature on outdoor advertising has not significantly explored. This paper contributes to discussions on sexualised imagery in the city (see Harper & Faccioli 2000; Hubbard 2005; Kalms 2014, 2017; Rosewarne 2005, 2007), to emerging literatures on the urban geographies of advertising (see Cronin 2006, 2011; Dekeyser 2018; Iveson 2012; Kern 2010), and adds a gender dimension to debates on light and lighting in the night time city (see Bille & Sørensen 2007; Ebbensgaard 2015; Edensor 2015a; Pink & Sumartojo 2018; Sumartojo et al. 2016; Sumartojo & Pink 2018). This paper begins with a discussion of sexualised advertising, referencing previous public debates in Norway. This leads into a discussion of the gendered city, followed by a discussion on photography of outdoor advertising in the city and analysis of select images.

## Women's bodies in outdoor advertising

Detrimental effects of sexist advertisements have been written about widely (Baudrillard 1998; Blloshmi 2013; Goffman 1976; Kilbourne 2000; Mager & Helgeson 2011), largely because advertisements are recognised as having ideological functions that serve to both reflect and produce social meaning (Blloshmi 2013). Advertisements have been recognised as reinforcing attitudes that position women as subordinate to men and perpetuating idealised notions of 'beauty, sexuality, motherhood, and domesticity' (Blloshmi 2013, 6). The portrayal of women's sexuality in advertisements tends to be positioned within a heterosexual framework, in which women's exhibitions of their sexuality is often done through the eyes of men (Blloshmi 2013). Sociologist Erving Goffman is one of the earliest researchers to offer a detailed analysis of the gendered nature of advertising, with particular attention to representations of women. Written in the 1970s, Goffman's semiotic analysis of advertisements

examined the posturing and positioning of women's and men's bodies, finding that women's bodies were frequently presented in ways implying submissiveness and subordination (Goffman 1976; Harper 2012; Harper & Faccioli 2000). Goffman (1976) suggests that advertisers are not, however, creating this subordination and sexualisation of women. Advertisers are, after all, also members of society (Kilbourne 2000). Rather, advertisements reflect back to us a 'hyper-ritualisation' of 'idealised representations' of inequalities that already exist (Goffman 1976). In a more recent content analysis of American print magazines, Mager and Helgeson discover that 'women are still shown as dependent on men and are used *increasingly* as sexual objects in ads' (Mager & Helgeson 2011, 248, author's emphasis).

Public figures in Norway have acknowledged that the representation of women in outdoor advertising is a growing concern. Marthe Hammer—a political leader for the *Sosialistisk Venstreparti* (Socialist Left Party)—is quoted in the Norwegian newspaper *Klassekampen* as saying that such advertisements promote unrealistic body and beauty ideals. She argues that youth are most susceptible to these images as they are exposed to outdoor advertisements daily on their journeys to and from school (Smedsrud 2015). The municipality of Trondheim, a small city on the northwest coast of Norway, has banned outdoor advertising containing images of 'bikini models'. The impetus behind this ban is to remove images that may contribute to 'body pressure'; stating that 'pictures of unnaturally thin models do not belong in the public sphere' (Lystad and Karlsen 2016). Norwegian law prohibits marketing that might be exploitative or derogatory towards one gender or that may interfere with gender equality (Markedsføringsloven [Marketing Act] §2 2009). There have been a number of public debates on images in outdoor advertising thought to contravene the law and the values of Norwegian society. While many of these debates have focused on 'body pressure' as discussed above, a 1993 debate over images of model Anna Nicole Smith in outdoor advertisements for H&M in Oslo revolved around issues of road safety. The public was concerned that the images of the model in lingerie would be a distraction to men driving, potentially causing traffic accidents. Similar concerns were raised in 2011 with the controversial advertisement for Reebok picturing model Triana Iglesias naked except for a pair of sneakers (Jørstad & Johansen 2011). Her pose is sexually inviting and suggestive: hands pressed against a wall with hips and buttocks pushed outward while in the background an athletic rope hangs and gathers at her feet, raising connotations of bondage and sadomasochism. The advertisement, which received criticism from the Red Youth political party, was found downtown on the exterior of the Oslo City shopping mall on a twenty-five square metre digital display (Jenssen & Vestre Haram 2011). The model's response to the criticism was 'God, I hope I don't cause any accidents' (Hindhamar 2011). That these debates centred on images being distracting to men is itself revealing about whose gaze these images are intended for and the heteronormative nature of the discourse surrounding them.

Advertisements are meant to be noticed and causing shock is a common way to attract attention and business. A controversial outdoor advertisement for a dating website in Oslo is a notable example. The advertisement was for a 'sugar dating' website with the goal of matching 'sugar daddies' (rich older men) with

'sugar babies' (younger women); a growing dating trend that some have referred to as a form of 'grey zone prostitution' (Damløv 2014). The advertisement depicted the partial portrait of a white woman shown only from chin to breast, fingers pulling at the strap of her red lingerie, her breasts pushed together and cleavage exposed. 'Hey students! o., in student loan? Date a sugar daddy' reads the text; the words 'sugar daddy' printed in a gold, glittering font. The design is evocative of glossy flyers for strip clubs, places where sex may be sold, and the graphic design of pornography websites. The advertising was deemed illegal for specifically targeting students who may be in vulnerable financial situations and for promoting unequal power dynamics between women and men. The implication that men are financially and professionally more successful than women breaches the gender equality clause in the Norwegian Marketing Law (Jerijervi 2017; Sivertsen 2017; Aldridge 2017). This example demonstrates how advertisers are appropriating postfeminism in their tactics. In positioning women as active participants in their objectification, advertisers can and are using postfeminism as a way to perpetuate sexist advertising (see Duffy, Hancock, and Tyler 2017; Gill 2016). The advertisement was affixed to a structure attached to the back of a car, meaning that this advertisement moved through the city with no static location while also circumventing more official regulatory channels for outdoor advertising. Examining these public debates offers insight into some of the issues that arise with the presence of gendered and sexualised advertising in the city. While these public debates address the spatial context to some degree, they focus more upon the content of images rather than their spatiality. The following section situates the discussion within the context of the gendered city, arguing that the gender disparity of the city should be additionally considered, that this gendered space compounds and influences the meanings and affect of these images. Though brief, the discussion reflects on methodology and offers some context as to why the city—and the city at night in particular—is a problematic setting for these images.

## Invisible walls of the city

The persistent binary categorisation of women versus men is 'one of the key barriers to more nuanced narratives' within urban planning scholarship and discussions on gender and right to the city (Beebeejaun 2017). While gender is not binary, it has historically been spatially produced in a binary fashion (see Uteng & Cresswell 2008). This longstanding gendering of space is often referred to as the public/private divide: public space of the city considered the realm of men and the private space of the home the domain of women (see Fenster 2005; Hubbard 2005). Gender binary distinctions—women/men and masculine/feminine—are used throughout this paper to simplify the discussion. Gender is, of course, far more complex and fluid than these binary distinctions confer, and the complexities and nuances of gender and sexuality are important to bear in mind. The connections between embodiment and affect<sup>1</sup> are also worthy of note. Affective experience in the city is highly individual and contingent on the body. Difference is known to impact one's affective experience of the city, as articulated broadly in this paper through the lens of gender, specifically women.

Within this broad category of individuals identifying as women, there are other identities and embodiments that influence and shape urban experience. Disability, race, transgender identity, and sexual orientation influence and compound affective experience as well; and do so differently in diverse spaces and geographic contexts.

Public space is considered by some to be a site of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Lombard 2013), referring to the persistent dominance of men and the view that masculine traits are superior to feminine and marginalised masculine traits (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Women and men consequently use the city differently and adopt different rhythms and strategies for moving in the city at different times of the day (Dunckel Graglia 2016; Uteng & Cresswell 2008; Valentine 1989, 1990). Mobilities may be mediated by infrastructure, but are most significantly affected by invisible barriers such as fear. This fear that women experience in the city has been a dominant theme in feminist urban research (see Bondi & Rose 2003; Brands et al. 2015; Dunckel Graglia 2013, 2016; England & Simon 2010; Pain 2001; Valentine 1989, 1990). Fear is understood to affect how people move through and experience the city, influencing mental maps and everyday navigations. These mental maps evolve over a lifetime of experience and influence daily movements and decisions, and temporal shifts in these navigations are widely recognised (England & Simon 2010). Fear may intensify as women’s bodies become additionally sexualised in the city at night (Nicholls 2017). This spatial gendered context is important to consider when discussing advertising in the city and as it relates to the methods used in this study and my positionality as a woman.

The photographs analysed in this study were taken during the course of psychogeographic *dérives* in Oslo<sup>2</sup> as part of a broader study exploring the aesthetic politics of graffiti and street art (see Arnold 2019a, 2019b). The *dérive* is one of the most commonly borrowed urban experiments of the Situationists (Smith 2010) and is a form of aesthetic political walking that involves getting intentionally lost in the city (see Arnold 2019a for a deeper discussion of this methodology when paired with photography). Psychogeography is experiential and necessitates attuning one’s psychology to the surrounding space. While my research is concerned with urban aesthetic politics, my emotions at times became foregrounded through walking the city, especially at night. The fear of crime at night is an embodied experience that comprises a diversity of emotions including ‘unease, discomfort, anxiety, apprehension, and panic’ and memory and past experience are known to influence these feelings (Nicholls 2017, 441). Those who have experimented with the *dérive* as a methodology for studying the city have highlighted the gendered aspects of the method and the importance of considering the body that is doing the walking (see Bridger 2013; Murali 2016). Heddon and Turner (2012, 228) write, with reference to Doreen Massey, that the city is relational and thus cannot be understood in the static way of the Situationists for our identities as women navigating the city are ‘reflected back’ to us as we explore it. Walking the city at night, the fear I felt erected ‘invisible walls’ and influenced which spaces I chose to explore. Avoiding certain spaces, my movements frequently synced with corridors of commerce, in part because these well-lit spaces provide some reassurance and sense of safety. These are also the spaces where advertising



is most prominent, and so my experiments with psychogeographic walking at night led inadvertently to increased encounters with outdoor advertising. Images of advertising draw in the viewer, distracting and taking precedence over other images one might encounter, particularly at night. It is my own experimentations with methodology that gave me cause to reflect deeply on affect, the feelings of fear that impact movement, increased encounters with advertising, and the symbolic invisible walls these experiences create.

## Photography and the sexualised city

One of the first photographs I took of advertising is on the western side of Oslo in Briskeby. Amongst nineteenth century buildings, I see a woman standing tall and triumphant. She wears a yellow strapless bikini, posing confidently with hands on her hips, towering over the pavement. She is slender, toned, and bronzed, and encased in the protective plastics of an advertising column (see [Figure 3](#)). As I move through the city, I encounter many comparable images and an unexpected pattern emerges, one that I notice repeats, shifts, and moves through the city just as I do. A similarly bronzed woman reclines on a tanning bed, back arched and head tilted upward on the exterior of a tram. Another laughs in her underwear, larger than life and looming over the sidewalk of a residential neighbourhood in Oslo. Outside of a salon in Uranienborg, a woman's lower half is seen in an advertisement for a Brazilian wax: presumably freshly depilated, she wears only a pair of shiny red stiletto heels, her red lace thong underwear pulled down just below her knees which are pushed together. Though the image is sexual, the woman is abstract, de-personified as her face and most of her body are not in the frame. Two other women pose sensuously on the exterior of a building housing a cosmetics shop. In this image, the closeness and tilt of the women's heads—closed eyes and partially opened mouths—insinuate what might be taking place *hors-scène* (see [Figure 4](#)). These representations of women appear throughout the city of Oslo, often simultaneously displayed and repeated in different formats during advertising campaigns. Images appear both in static structures such as the advertising pillar in [Figure 3](#) and move through the network of the city when affixed to the outside of trams and buses. Images become mercurial whether in a fixed position or mobile. They do not exist in a static space. The surrounding city moves, breathes, changes. While the image printed on a piece of paper may not change per se, the structure within which it is displayed reacts with the movement of light, people, objects, weather and the structures that contain these images contribute to and enhance the affective possibilities of otherwise 'fixed' images. The following section considers how these interactions may then produce space through these interactions with geography.

### Producing sexualised space

The city is a space in which society is produced and reproduced (Lefebvre 1991). How urban space is socially produced has been a primary preoccupation of geographers. The production of space is frequently connected to processes of exclusion and the reproduction of inequalities, including those relating to



**Figure 3:** Column in Briskeby containing an advertisement for tanning salon Brun og Blid, Oslo (2015). Photo: Emma Arnold.

ability, class, gender, race, and sexuality (Kitchin 1998). The production of sexualised space is frequently written about in connection to sexuality and/or sex work. Hubbard and Sanders (2003) write on the production of space through sex work, which produces space with generally distinct boundaries. Red-light districts become spaces in which sex is commodified and through which heterosexuality struggles ‘to maintain its dominance through spatial processes’ (Hubbard & Sanders 2003, 87). Though advertising similarly exerts heterosexual dominance through its catering to the ‘male gaze’, it differs in the way that it produces a sexualised space as it is a normalised presence and without such



**Figure 4:** A woman with a pram reflected in an advertisement outside cosmetics shop Fredrik & Louisa, Oslo (2016). Photo: Emma Arnold.

rigid spatial boundaries. Many studies on the sexual production of space have also focused on 'examining how sexuality has been used as a marker for the (re)production of landscapes of exclusion' (Kitchin 2002, 2006). Kitchin (2002) explores how discursive and material practices contribute to the production of non-heterosexual space. This production of space is enabled through explicit and implicit signifiers (Kitchin 1998). Examples of explicit signifiers include overt visuals like political murals or gang graffiti and implicit signifiers include the design of space and architecture (Kitchin 1998). Bodies may act as both explicit and implicit signifiers, producing space through the physical and gestural. Images of bodies may similarly act as such signifiers that lead to the production of space. Lefebvre writes that space in the city may become sexualised or in his words 'eroticised' and uses the night time city as an example of an eroticised space. Lefebvre argues that this production of eroticised space occurs in part through signs and spectacles (Lefebvre 1991, 310).

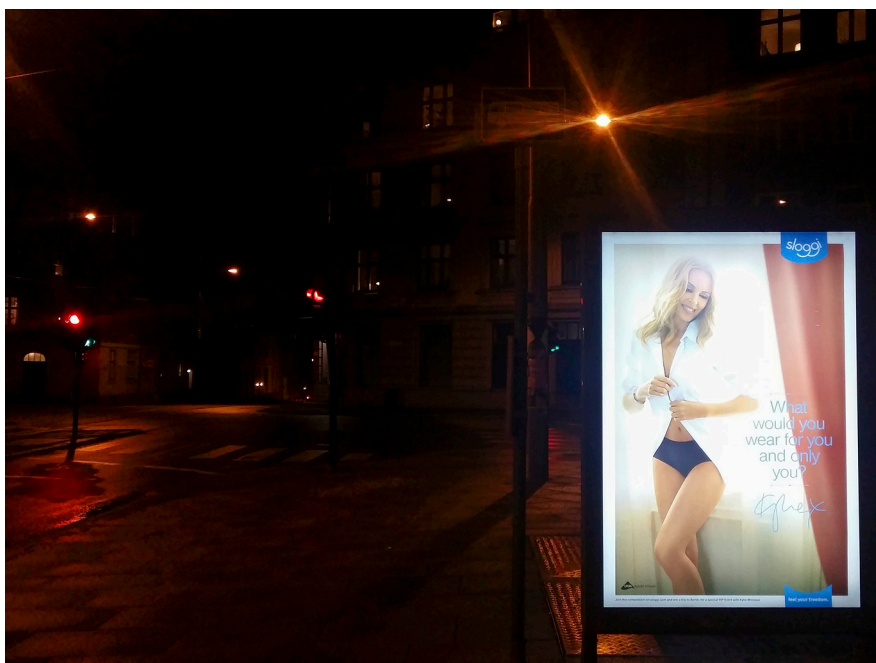
Recent studies on the urban night have begun to explore how darkness, light, and illumination produce affect in the city (see Ebbensgaard 2015; Edensor 2015a, 2015b; Pink & Sumartojo 2018; Sumartojo & Pink 2018; van Liempt et al. 2015). The city at night is illusory, sensory, and atmospheric, a time when spaces are transformed (Edensor 2015a). Light does not produce atmosphere and affect without the contrast of the dark. The urban night is not only characterised then by a mere absence of light but also by the presence of electric light (Edensor 2015a), atmospheric qualities, and by shifts in behaviours and activities. It is a place for leisure, pleasure, the covert, and the illicit (Edensor 2015a; Hubbard & Colosi 2015; van Liempt et al. 2015). Light influences what we see 'inflecting visible colours and informing our sense of the shape of space' (Edensor 2015b, 331). Light is an important part of 'shaping the perception and experience of our surroundings, the people and things in them and our sense of ourselves as spatially and socially located' (Sumartojo & Pink 2018, 360). Describing the affective qualities of light in the city at night, Ebbensgaard (2015, 116) recounts how light 'attunes the body emotionally, as relational intensities produced in meetings between bodies and artefacts'. Ebbensgaard continues that 'affective experiences, emotions, and feelings are accumulated over time and spatially bound, seducing our bodies and inducing certain moods' (Ebbensgaard 2015, 116). This connection that Ebbensgaard (2015) makes between light and affective and emotional experience in the city at night is precisely what many feminist urban scholars writing on women's fear have previously described.

### **The temporal shift**

During the day, one might not notice advertising, but these spaces gain prominence at night when many structures become illuminated, eclipsing other features of the landscape and often brimming with light far brighter than that of overhead street lamps<sup>3</sup> (recall Figure 1). During my experiments with walking at night and taking photographs, the prevalence of outdoor advertisements became difficult to ignore. Two photographs of the same underwear advertisement at different times of the day demonstrate this well (see Figures 5 and 6). In an advertisement for underwear by Sloggi at a municipal bike-sharing stand, a voyeuristic image of a woman getting dressed/undressed is depicted. The tagline asks 'What would you wear for you and only you?' but her averted eyes



**Figure 5:** Advertisement for underwear by Sloggi during the day at Adamstuen, Oslo (2016). Photo: Emma Arnold.



**Figure 6:** Advertisement for underwear by Sloggi during the night at Adamstuen, Oslo (2016). Photo: Emma Arnold.

and coquettish smile intimate that someone is watching her in this state. The shirt she is buttoning/unbuttoning very closely resembles a man's shirt and the image conjures a post-sex scene, playing on the popular culture trope of a woman slipping into a male partner's shirt after a sexual encounter. More than the male gaze, this image could be considered to elicit what is referred to in cinema as the 'scopophilic gaze', intending to arouse and incite desire (Baum 2008; Mulvey 1999). A postfeminist interpretation of this advertisement might

advocate that women buy underwear for themselves and not for men's benefit, as has generally been the case (Amy-Chinn 2006). Yet the expression, the men's style dress shirt, and body-language highly suggest a male heterosexual presence and gaze. Amy-Chinn (2006) writes that underwear advertisements are often problematic because advertising the products in question often necessitates the depiction of women undressed. The

'link between *déshabille*ment and sexual activity makes it easy to claim that any such representations inherently position women as sex objects—particularly if one subscribes to a “traditional” view of the dynamics of sexual relationships that sees men as active and women as passive'. (Amy-Chinn 2006, 156)

Though this interpretation is rendered through a heterosexual lens, the woman in the image is nonetheless positioned as a sexual object whether she is in charge of that positioning or not and regardless of whose desire is elicited.

While the content of the advertising—the image of a sexually positioned woman in her underwear—may be vexing during the day (see Figure 5), the image is far more striking at night in low ambient light (see Figure 6). The image in this advertisement changes in meaning and significance with the temporal shift between day and night, enhanced by the fact that this image is backlit and when taking into consideration pre-existing gendered divisions of the city at night. While the image could be viewed as having a postfeminist message during the day, such a reading becomes more difficult at night. This is particularly so given that women's presence in the city at night has often been for the sexual consumption of men, something which the image at night might expressly evoke.

It is not only fashion and beauty companies that use sexualised imagery and messages. Coca-Cola celebrated 100 years of the design of its iconic glass bottle with an advertising campaign featuring various vintage and contemporary celebrities whom the bottle has 'kissed'. Pop singer Rita Ora is featured in one of these advertisements at Majorstuen in western Oslo (see Figure 7). The posing of the photograph—Rita's parted red lips wrapped around the opening of the tapered bottle, the manner in which she holds it with one hand, together with her sideways glance and dishevelled hair—is highly sexually suggestive. In this example, it is an overtly pornographic aesthetic—something generally reserved for private consumption—breaching the public sphere. In an analysis of a similar Coca-Cola advertisement, Rosewarne (2005, 72) suggests that these depictions elicit our familiarity with pornographic imagery. She characterises a similar image as a reference to fellatio that draws 'on our knowledge of the content of pornography'. When combined with the public outdoor setting, such imagery amounts to a 'mainstreaming of pornography into the public arena' (Rosewarne 2005, 72). While the version of the advertisement is cropped in Figure 7, not too far away the full photograph is found repeated around the exterior of a convenience store. In the more complete image, the pornographic aesthetic is coupled with violent sexual overtones: ripped fishnet sleeves, shirt torn in several places, including above one of her breasts revealing what appears to be trickles of blood.

Bodily tropes (or ritualised positions as Goffman (1976) refers to them) are frequently repeated in advertising photography of women for the fashion industry and otherwise (see Figure 8). These include vacant expressions, parted



**Figure 7:** Coca-Cola advertisement in Majorstuen, Oslo (2016). Photo: Emma Arnold.

lips or mouth slightly agape, delicate touches and fingers hovering lightly over bare skin, tilted heads, lifted exposed shoulders, raised or pushed together knees, arched backs, and all manner of positioning which reference sexual body language, subtly and explicitly. The seductive walker is another fashion photography cliché. Women in advertisements are frequently positioned in motion and as women move past, they mirror this movement (see [Figures 9](#) and [10](#)). Disembodied images where women's faces are obscured are also recurrent and significant as they very directly reduce the female body to an object without identity or agency. This is achieved by cropping women's heads and faces and by focusing on bare skin and specific features like lips, breasts, legs, and so on.



**Figure 8:** Sunset and fashion tropes like parted lips, raised shoulders, and light touches in Bjørvika, Oslo (2017). Photo: Emma Arnold.



**Figure 9:** Model walking in an illuminated image at the corner window of H&M on Bogstadveien, Oslo (2017). Photo: Emma Arnold.

It is not only advertisements contained in street furniture that may produce affect and space. Storefront displays in commercial areas may also do so. These may be advertising images, but may also be the frequently faceless forms of storefront mannequins, which literally turn the body into an object clothed or arranged in ways that may be read as sexual. While the images of naked women's bodies may not be permissible, unclothed or scantily dressed mannequins with more ambiguous anatomical features are tolerated and less certainly regulated (see [Figure 11](#)). Storefront windows are also increasingly adding



**Figure 10:** Women in bikinis and summer fashion in an advertisement for H&M at a bike-sharing stand, Oslo (2017). Photo: Emma Arnold.



**Figure 11:** Nude 'female' mannequins in a brightly lit store window posed with a sign announcing a sale on men and women's clothing, Oslo (2017). Photo: Emma Arnold.

digital advertising into their displays that look out onto the street, mirroring the infrastructure of the outdoor media landscape inside though directed outward.

While postfeminist and queer readings importantly open up space for alternative interpretations, the lineage of these images must also be taken into consideration. They belong to a long history of representations of women in advertising and it is difficult to consider them completely apart from that tradition. Their spatial context too narrows their meanings: the location or geography of these images matter, for their entwined spatial and temporal context affects how they may be read. The degree to which an image may be perceived as sexual is of course highly dependent on the viewer, deeply personal, connected to one's culture, gender, sexuality, turn-ons and offs, and to how they relate to images. If we read these images within a normative cis-gender heterosexual framing, we may understand these images of women as existing specifically to titillate men (even when products advertised are directed toward women). These images may conversely be read in a postfeminist way with these images being empowering rather than being subordinate displays of heteronormative sexuality. While both these readings are possible, the connection of these images to urban space arguably makes them more difficult to read in a postfeminist way as women are still comparatively less safe and more fearful in the city. So, it is their spatial and temporal context in the persistently gendered city that keeps these images locked into certain heteronormative meanings, at least at night time and at least at this present moment.

The affective potentials of sexualised outdoor advertising go beyond the semiotics of the image and also involve aspects of light, contrast of dark, and the spatial context of the city at night which is already considered exclusionary toward women. While advertisements may act as signs and signifiers to produce sexualised space, it is their affect together with the affect of space that may engender that space exclusionary. The surrounding darkness may give rise



to illusions as the frame of backlit advertisements recede or fade from view and women's bodies may seem floating or suspended as advertising structures become amorphous and melt into surrounding space. This production of space may be additionally fluid and nebulous. This is partly because advertising is often affixed to mobile structures, such as buses and trams, but also because single images that may produce affect and sexual space in one location are not happening in isolation. Advertising campaigns mean that images are repeated throughout the media landscape of the city (often immediately adjacent to each other), and not just within one city but far beyond the city's boundaries in multiple cities simultaneously.

## Conclusions

Outdoor advertising is a normalised, increasing presence in many cities. While the prevalence of advertising in urban space has been broadly critiqued, how the diverse forms of the new media landscape produce affect and space in the city is not well understood. Tensions around outdoor advertising are layered and touch on material and affective qualities of advertising structures, politics and governance of urban space, and the content of advertisements. Critiques of these new urban landscapes focus on different aspects, including commodification of the city and infringements on the democratic use of space (see Cronin 2006; Dekeyser 2018; Iveson 2012). Building upon earlier empirical research such as Goffman's and inspired by theoretical concepts from Lefebvre, this paper demonstrates that the meeting between space and content is one of the most problematic and understudied aspects of outdoor advertising. Using psychogeographic and photographic methods, this paper explores outdoor advertising that contains sexualised representations of women and considers how certain images produce space and may potentially impact women's experiences, mobilities, and rights to the city.

Sexualised images in outdoor advertising are problematic for many reasons, but perhaps most importantly because they are in everyday spaces. The content of images is worrying for the ways in which it commodifies and objectifies women's bodies, promotes unrealistic and often unhealthy body images, and for the body shaming it may inflict on girls and women. While these images may be problematic in their own right, it is the meeting of form, space, and content of outdoor advertising that is most disconcerting. It is in this convergence that sexualised space is produced. Images may contribute not just to a routine sexualising of space but to a 'hypersexualising' of space through which billboards and digital media contribute to normalising and mainstreaming 'porno-chic' and enable sexual transgressions from private to public space (Kalms 2014, 2017). The introduction of sexual imagery and content in the city is not new but it is intensifying. Hubbard and Colosi (2015) argue that British cities have become increasingly sexualised, mirroring the growing abundance of sexual content online; evidenced by the presence of strip clubs, sex shops, and various other forms of sexual entertainment, all which contribute to preserving the city at night as a space for men. Highly sexualised images in outdoor advertising create a 'men's gallery' of the city and represent a serious public policy concern

according to Rosewarne (2005). Advertising is meant to be visible. It is not situated out of sight nor is it located in marginalised spaces as is the case with sex work in red-light districts, which has been shown to produce sexualised space with more discernible borders (see Hubbard & Sanders 2003). Outdoor advertising does not have rigid spatial boundaries and is instead fluid and ephemeral in its production of space. Advertisements are not fixed but in flux as advertising campaigns change frequently and may additionally be mobile, contributing to this fluid production of sexualised space in the city. Illuminated advertising on digital displays and those in backlit structures enhance this production of sexualised space at night. While the sexual nature of the city is known to change at night and the spatial aspects of sexualised advertising have been addressed by scholars, there has been little study on the temporal aspects of these images and how their meanings and impact shift at night.

As advertising works frequently on subconscious levels (Kilbourne 2000), how might the subconscious of the city be affected? And how might these images produce affect? Meanings of images are not fixed but are rather 'produced in the time of vision' (Cronin 2000, 106). Multiple meanings may then be produced in the multiplicities of viewings and meanings may subsequently vary between individuals, between genders, between generations, and even between different viewings by the same person. It is important then to consider the 'temporalities of self in moments of vision and the multidimensional connections of difference' including gender, race, and sexuality (Cronin 2000, 106). Reflecting upon these intersections and the contrasts and contradictions between the women represented in outdoor advertisements and the women sharing and moving through the same space is critical to understanding how gendered exclusion through the production of sexualised space occurs. The illumination of advertising may disrupt positive atmospheric qualities of the night. They may also contribute to the production of their own atmospheres, glowing at public transportation stops in the night time city even long after the last bus or tram or train has passed. While the women of advertising are static and protected, real women of the city navigate these spaces differently depending on the time of day. Invisible walls emerge in the city as darkness sets in, impeding passage and safe access for women into certain spaces; a common occurrence in cities that is potentially exacerbated by the sexualised and illuminated images of outdoor advertising. Invisible walls, like the metaphorical glass ceiling, may impede mobility of women in subtle yet precarious ways. They are the abstract barriers that mediate movement and mobility, influence affect and experience in the city, manifest in and become part of the urban subconscious. Deeper reflection on how lucrative public-private partnerships may help fund infrastructure at the expense of the wellbeing of citizens is needed. Policy must be more reflexive, taking into account the gendered divisions of the city, or its invisible walls, together with the content and affective qualities of advertising at different times of the day.

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## Notes

- 1 Affect refers to an *a priori* state, indicating that an emotional reaction is elicited without specifically denoting what that emotion might be (Young 2014).
- 2 The selected images shared in this paper represent trends observed in Oslo between 2015 and 2019. The photographs used as examples in this paper are mostly taken in the western side and central parts of Oslo, in: Bislett, Fagerborg, Majorstuen, Sentrum, Ullevål, and Uranienborg. Photographs are, however, representative of other parts of the city as campaigns found in street furniture are repeated and spatially distributed throughout the entire metropolitan area via the public transportation network and bike-sharing infrastructure, whose services cover a large extent of the city.
- 3 Given Oslo's northern latitude, there is considerable darkness during the long winter months. The sun rises much later and night falls earlier so that daily commutes may be experienced entirely in darkness.

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