




The Face of Nonbinary Beauty Communication on Instagram: A Content Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Gender is a feature of beauty marketing, used in marketing segmentation and communication images, where binary images are predominant. Recently, the social identity of gender has become increasingly nuanced as a more complex set of identities, including genderqueer and nonbinary, influences marketing communications. As part of cultural expression, advertising reflects and impacts how consumers perceive themselves and others, with Generation Z consumers increasingly rejecting gender labels and stereotypes. Consequently, our study involves the visual meaning making of 222 Instagram images of beauty brands' marketing communications with models other than "female" in traditional Western society's conceptualization of gender. The findings reveal a group of models who are not female; while most of these images are genderqueer, a group that may be considered agender is evident. Both groups have distinctive although differing characteristics, suggesting the development of new stereotypes. This study contributes to understanding the changing representations of models: While beauty brands primarily use female models, the increased use of genderqueer and agender models can attract alternative target markets. It also highlights advertising's place in cultural expressions that both reflect and impact how consumers perceive themselves and others.

In marketing communications, advertising portrays men and women in ways that reflect culture (Alharbi and Boling 2022), societal identity, and perceptions of individual identity (Schroeder and Borgerson 1998). Yet how gender is represented in advertising is shifting (Tsai, Shata, and Tian 2021), reflecting changes taking place within society, rather than creating these changes (Eisend 2010). Traditionally depicted as binary, present-day concepts, including androgynous, genderqueer, gender-fluid, and nonbinary, suggest a more complex set of gender identities (Richards et al. 2016). Advertising's role in engaging with conversations around issues of multiculturalism and inclusion is also changing. At first, multiculturalism and diversity in advertising involved educating others. Today it is more about communication and eliciting people's thoughts and feelings to get feedback. With the use of digital and social media, such feedback happens almost immediately (Lin et al. 2021).

Gender is a primary segmentation variable in the delineation of target audiences and the development of marketing strategy (De Meulenaer et al. 2018; Matthes, Prieler, and Adam 2016; Milner and Higgs 2004). Advertising often uses gender roles to promote products and brands—something which can positively affect brand evaluations and sales (Eisend 2019a; Matthes, Prieler, and Adam 2016). To cover the multiple sexual and gender representations, Boyd et al. (2020,

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1315) use the term *sexuo-gendered* to represent a more inclusive and contemporary understanding of where gender and sexuality coalesce. Nölke (2018) question the benefit of basing target marketing on sexual orientation, as advertisers' understandings may be constructed within stereotypical assumptions that exclude the range of sexuo-gendered identities. Boyd et al. (2020) suggest that mainstream representation of sexuo-gendered identities may advance the acceptance of gender and sexuality fluidity (Grau and Zotos 2016).

The individual's identification with a social group—in this case, gender—is a key premise of social identity theory (Maldonado, Tansuhaj, and Muehling 2003, 4). Social identity is “that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel 1981, 225). “Social identity is, therefore, a subsystem of the self-concept that monitors and construes social stimuli and provides a basis for regulating behavior” (Maldonado, Tansuhaj, and Muehling 2003, 4). Advertising is part of the cultural expressions that reflect and impact how consumers perceive themselves and others (Lorenzen, Grieve, and Thomas 2004; Palan 2001; Rutledge Shields and Heineken 2002; Steele, Spencer, and Aronson 2002). Disregarding the effects of gender-stereotyped advertising across the population limits appreciation of current-day society and how advertisers can take a more responsible part in it (Åkestam et al. 2021).

This article analyzes the portrayal of gender via a look at nonbinary models and their visual representations in advertising. We focus on the way contemporary images express conceptions of gender-fluid identity and base the study on several arguments. First, gender portrayals reinforce stereotypes (Gangadharbatla and Khedekar 2021), especially ones based on the binary view. This is manifested in a lack of research on nonbinary gender identity. Gender portrayals in advertising can create or reinforce unwanted stereotypes (Eisend 2010, 2019b; Verhellen, Dens, and De Pelsmacker 2016; Yan and Hyman 2021), negatively impacting consumers' self-esteem (e.g., Dens, De Pelsmacker, and Janssens 2009) and leading to unacceptable effects in society (Eisend 2019a; Matthes, Prieler, and Adam 2016). The issues of advertising and gender present numerous research issues within marketing that concern academics and practitioners (Åkestam 2018; Åkestam, Rosengren, and Dahlen 2017a). While nonstereotypical representations (e.g., women acting in typically male roles, men acting in typically female roles) have been used in advertising to reflect various gender identities, these representations still involve a binary gender definition which, according to Boyd et al. (2020), restrict diverse identity construction and fluidity. There is a lack of research on nonbinary gender identity (Matsuno and Budge 2017) and the effects of advertising in a larger societal context (Eisend 2010; Åkestam, Rosengren, and Dahlen 2017a). The number of individuals who identify outside of the gender binary is likely to increase over time (James et al. 2016).

Next, the study addresses the growing number of consumers who experiment with fluidity. Gender identities can be approached as performances that create and reinforce certain norms and behaviors (Seregina 2019), and such gender performance always depends on its collective negotiation within its social context (Butler 2004). The face is one of the richest and most powerful tools in social communication; from the face, observers can make swift inferences about the individual's identity, gender, and sex, among other aspects (Jack and Schyns 2015). This calls for more research on how new, inclusive gender identities, beyond binary gender, are represented in contemporary advertising and market communications in a broad sense (including user-generated content in social media). One important avenue for the study of representations of gender identities is the visual analysis of advertising artifacts (print ads, video commercials, pictures and videos on social media, and the like).

Conversations surrounding gender are sweeping the world as the “voices and lived experiences of people are being heard and shared at unprecedented rates” (Zayer, McGrath, and Castro-González 2019, 238). At present, the conversation concerning the concept of gender is becoming more nuanced in many societies, and prominent advertising researchers, such as Eisend (2019a), stress that the concept of gender in advertising research should follow (Åkestam et al. 2021). Although marketing provides a social commentary on how identity should be constructed (Grau and Zotos

2016), it does not address the growing numbers of consumers who experiment with gender fluidity and are nonbinary (Nölke 2018). Despite retailers and marketers recognizing the financial opportunities in attracting sexuo-gendered consumers (Holz Ivory 2019), to avoid negative responses from heterosexual consumers, even lesbian and gay marketing imagery has remained outside of mainstream advertising (Gong 2020; Holz Ivory 2019). Although heteronormative imagery may appeal to mainstream consumers, the use of such imagery continues to relegate sexuo-gendered identities to the edges of society (Boyd et al. 2020).

Third, image-based media such as Instagram are at the forefront of this change; thus, we focus in this article on Instagram. Due to the Internet and social media, makeup has moved from the privacy of the dressing room to social media platforms (Stewart 2017), with advertising campaigns running across multiple media platforms and in various formats. Consequently, the power has shifted from the advertiser to the consumer, and old definitions of advertising are no longer sufficient (Laurie, Mortimer, and Beard 2019). Dahlén and Rosengren (2016, 339) define advertising as “brand-initiated communication intent on impacting people”; in a more recent study, Laurie, Mortimer, and Beard (2019) suggest that millennials view all communications as advertising.

Finally, the beauty and fashion industries have taken the lead in including nonbinary models in their marketing communications—for example, cosmetics brand CoverGirl used James Charles as its first-ever “Cover Boy” and brand ambassador (BBC 2016); and Jaden Smith appeared in a skirt for a Louis Vuitton fashion ad (Friedman 2016), making this a pertinent context for the study.

This study uses a social semiotic analysis to explore beauty brands’ use of nonbinary models in their Instagram communications. Images of models adorned with makeup are analyzed to answer the following questions:

1. What is the representational meaning of the set of images?
2. Who are the “actors” displayed in the images, and how are they represented as a part of a broader “whole”?
3. Are stereotypes emerging within the nonbinary representations?

This article contributes to marketing research by focusing on how beauty brands are becoming more inclusive in portrayals of gender in their marketing communications (Sweney 2016; Åkestam, Rosengren, and Dahlen 2017b), thereby generating a win-win situation for brands and their target audiences (Dahlén and Rosengren 2016; Rosengren, Dahlén, and Modig 2013; Åkestam, Rosengren, and Dahlen 2017a). A further contribution this research makes is the identification of potential new stereotypes among images classified outside of the binary genders, answering a call to extend research in this way (Eisend 2019a). This article also contributes by identifying the characteristics of the inclusive images used by beauty product companies.

This article starts by introducing social identity theory, followed by the nature of gender, an exploration of the expression of gender identities in the beauty industry, and an overview of social semiotic theory. Details of methodology are discussed, after which the findings of the analyzed images are presented and implications for practice are discussed. The article concludes with limitations and future research.

Social identity theory

Social identity theory suggests that individuals derive their social identity from the groups to which they belong (Scheepers and Ellemers 2019). A gender group identity is an example of a social identity in which individuals see themselves as members of a gender group. Such an identity can be activated through exposure to ads that match the brand with members of an individual’s gender group (Maldonado, Tansuhaj, and Muehling 2003). As a result, membership in a gender group provides an important foundation for self-definition (Deaux et al. 1995).

Considering the premise that identification is believed to influence attitudes and behavior (Scheepers and Ellemers 2019), ads which activate identification with the individual's gender group will cause a more favorable impact on future judgments regarding ads than those which do not activate such identity (Maldonado, Tansuhaj, and Muehling 2003).

Another prominent metaphor within sociology for the development of self-conception is the “looking-glass self,” which posits that self-concept is formed partly by how individuals see themselves and partly by the reactions of others (Jones 2015). The feedback received from the reflection of others' estimated judgments invokes a decision as to whom that individual “is” at that point and allows the individual to use products to make minor adjustments to optimize the quality of the image communicated to others (Solomon 1983). Jones (2015) suggests that digital media can function as a mediated mirror, with social media sites such as Instagram providing the space for producers to share their self-representations and others to post their judgments via comments, likes, and shares. In this space, both the reflection and others' judgment are chronicled.

Several researchers have highlighted the role of beauty-related consumption in the construction of self-identity and self-concept enhancement (Askegaard, Gertsen, and Langer 2002; Domzal and Kernan 1993; El Jurdi and Smith 2018; Schouten 1991). In the pursuit and consumption of beauty, social comparison and categorization are motivated by the search for an authentic self (El Jurdi and Smith 2018).

Schroeder and Borgerson (2015, 1726) posit that representations, including media images, “make identities available to consumers as raw materials for identity construction.” Furthermore, marketing communications provide a position from which the consciously aware consumer can select to consume specific symbolic meaning concerning desires and motivations. Marketing images do not simply reflect identities or provide substance for the open-ended construction of identity; they also perform iterative gestures. Within the domain of marketing communication, the iterative conventionality of images contributes to the construction of ideal categories—such as, for example, male and female identities. Finally, each iteration plays the role of re-creating and maintaining the illusion of natural categories of identity rather than offering unique identities that individual consumers can construct, through narrating, imagining, or consumption processes.

Gender

Gender is an essential aspect of how individuals define themselves and how others define them (Seregina 2019). A common misconception in Western societies is that gender and sex have the same meaning, resulting in the terms often being used interchangeably (Hall and de Sousa Araújo 2019). Biological sex refers to a person's membership in a distinct category based on reproductive organs and hormones (Kimmel and Gordon 2018; Marinucci 2010; Matsuno and Budge 2017), whereas gender includes characteristics and traits that are usually considered masculine or feminine based on social and cultural norms and stereotypes (Matsuno and Budge 2017). However, several authors consider gender a dynamic social relation that is continually created and re-created in daily interactions (e.g., Kimmel and Gordon 2018; Seregina 2019).

A social constructionist approach suggests that gender and identity are a fluid combination of traits and characteristics constructed through individuals' interactions with other members of society (Kimmel and Gordon 2018), thus operating throughout the social structure, from the level of how individuals view themselves to the cultural norms and expectations that shape their interactions with others (Budgeon 2014; Seregina 2019; Steensma et al. 2013).

Gender identity is a personal, internal experience and refers to the gender with which the individual identifies, while gender expression consists of actions, clothing, hairstyles, and demeanor through which society assigns value and meaning (Kimmel and Gordon 2018; Matsuno and

Budge 2017; Steensma et al. 2013). Furthermore, gender varies from culture to culture, and definitions may differ within any one country over time.

Previous research has examined how genders are portrayed in advertising in a variety of media (Furnham and Lay 2019; Furnham and Skae 1997) and associated with various product categories, including beauty and fashion items (e.g., Conley and Ramsey 2011; Fowler and Carlson 2015; Lindner 2004; Moeran 2010). Research has also examined the cultural nature of gender portrayals in advertising images in different countries (Chu, Lee, and Kim 2016), with research outside of the binary categories lacking (Eisend 2019a).

Nonbinary gender

Currently, gender as a concept is changing from a binary male/female categorization to an arrangement of identities that include transgender, intersex, and genderqueer (Chetkovich 2019; Richards et al. 2016). In poststructuralist transgender theory, the traditional gender definition is dissolved and different, nonbinary alternatives are suggested, such as intersexed, transsexual (in transition), and androgynes (Monro 2005; Tissier-Desbordes and Visconti 2019). Similar arguments are put forward by queer theorists (Butler 1990; Chanter 2006) when criticizing heteronormal definitions of gender and viewing gender as multidimensional (Fontanella, Maretti, and Sarra 2014).

Nonbinary identity groups include individuals whose gender falls somewhere between or outside of the binary male/female identity, or individuals who can experience being a man or woman at separate times (Matsuno and Budge 2017; Richards et al. 2016), as well as describing people who experience both male and female at various times, or those who do not experience or want to have a gender identity at all (Monro 2019). Some individuals may identify mostly as male or female, with facets of the “other” gender, but they may also define as genderqueer when neither a male nor female identity fits (Richards et al. 2016). Laura Jacobs’s representation of genderqueer is “being provocative around gender norms to highlight the gender stereotypes of our culture” (Retta 2019).

There are multiple terms for individuals who identify as nonbinary, and the vocabulary used to describe these trans, genderqueer, and gender-nonconforming identities changes relatively quickly. Over the past decade, a new initialism has evolved: the LGBTQIA+. What used to be loosely termed the “gay community” has expanded beyond lesbian (L), gay (G), and bisexual (B) to include those who identify as queer (Q) and those questioning (Q) their gender and sexuality, as well as those who are transsexual (T), intersex (I), and asexual (A), with the plus symbol (+) illustrating that there are many other sexual and gender identities (Boyd et al. 2020).

Furthermore, it is important to point out that different people may understand and apply the terminology in diverse ways (Chetkovich 2019; Spencer-Hall and Gutt 2020). Transgender is commonly used as an umbrella term to refer to individuals whose gender identity is different from their assigned sex at birth. Lefevor et al. (2019) use genderqueer as an umbrella term for identities that are neither distinctly male nor female in the traditional conceptualization of gender in Western society.

According to Bettany et al. (2010), advertising continues to present a picture of a world divided by cultural gender roles, where articles are still exploring gender within the binary divide. Furthermore, while prior research into advertising effects has compared stereotypes versus nonstereotypes, the different degrees and categories of stereotypicality have been overlooked (Eisend 2019a). Peñaloza (1994) challenged the efficacy of the male and female binary categories and raised three gender problems: the limitations of a binary treatment of gender, the bias inherent in the masculine subject position, and the relative absence of individual agency. Many studies involve gender roles (e.g., inequalities between men and women, feminist research, and debates around men, masculinity, and male inequalities) and thus remain stuck in the gender binary, supporting the view of Eisend (2019a) regarding the inclusion of diversity within advertising.

Expression of gender identities in the beauty industry

According to Jones and Kramer (2016), body modification with paints and other colorants is a prevailing human behavior. Research has shown that significant benefits amass to those who are attractive, leading to the public spending vast amounts on appearance-enhancing products (Bloch and Richins 1992). Western women perform most of the self-decoration, especially with the use of facial cosmetics (Global Insight 2007), resulting in a global cosmetics industry worth billions of dollars and a market value that is projected to be in the neighborhood of US\$758.4 billion by 2025 (Biron 2019; Shahbandeh 2019).

A social psychology perspective suggests that individuals wearing makeup carry out a staged function in the presentation of themselves to others (McCabe, de Waal Malefyt, and Fabri 2020). Wearing makeup is a performance using certain expressions and socially entrenched routines that inform a socially defined category of what is considered beautiful (Goffman 1976). Most of the research into women's use of makeup comes from social psychology and focuses on makeup as a form of impression management (Goffman 1967, 2012)—that is, to appear more attractive and desirable (Batres et al. 2019; Huguët, Croizet, and Richetin 2004; Komulainen and Hjort 2017); to give the perception of health and confidence (Nash et al. 2006; Russell et al. 2019); to enhance facial features (Etcoff et al. 2011); to enhance skin homogeneity, facial contrast, and facial feature size (Russell et al. 2019); or to appear more sociable and assertive to others (Korichi and Pelle-de-Queral 2008).

Some argue that makeup is used as camouflage by insecure women or as a means of seduction by those who are more sociable (Korichi and Pelle-de-Queral 2008), yet looking good coincides with feeling good (McCabe, de Waal Malefyt, and Fabri 2020). Thus, makeup consumption relates mostly to the meaning of self-perception and understanding of who people are and who they wish to be (Komulainen and Hjort 2017).

A Mintel report (Caron 2019) suggests that male and gender-neutral cosmetics have been growing in popularity in recent years. Furthermore, despite makeup still being categorized by gender in Western societies, masculine stereotypes are being challenged and brands are slowly starting to adopt a more gender-neutral mindset. Based on the findings, men no longer prioritize the need to look manly when buying grooming products. The report concludes that although marketing makeup products through traditional masculine aesthetic territories can be perceived by many consumers as incompatible, brands can reduce this perception by adopting a gender-neutral positioning, making the category more approachable and relevant by normalizing its usage “for all.” Fashion and appearance are the principal means by which men's visible gender identities are established as not only different from women but also different from other men (Edwards 2016). The primary motivations for personal care consumption in males are to look attractive, gain social value, express social status, reach social expectations, and impress others (Ho et al. 2020).

To evolve the mainstream conception of beauty and make the cosmetics category more accessible to people so they can express themselves authentically, marketers will have to adopt a more gender-neutral positioning (Caron 2019). Consumers are moving away from traditional gender stereotypes and expressions (Khanom 2021). Increasingly, newer brands (e.g., Panacea, Jecca Blac, Milk Makeup, Glossier) are entering the category with gender fluidity already built into their product lines (Carefoot 2020).

Generation Z (born 1995 to about 2010) (Chaney, Touzani, and Ben Slimane 2017) is driving innovation in beauty, from product categories to marketing, as well as more fundamental ways of thinking about beauty. Definitions of inclusivity have also broadened, spanning race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, body size, and ability. Gen Z shoppers view brands as complementary to who they are with issues around diversity, inclusivity, sustainability, transparency, and trustworthiness core to their identity (Biondi 2021); notably, 69 percent of shoppers who fall into Gen Z prefer to buy from brands that support diversity (Ceron 2021).

Niche brands such as Milk Makeup and Fluide paved the way for cosmetics for all through expressive looks. Today, brands should conquer the white space of gender-neutral products to appeal to men who wish to use makeup for subtle enhancement and self-confidence more than self-expression. Chanel Boy and Givenchy Mister are makeup lines that target men through their names with gender-neutral products. Instead of just adapting their existing feminine makeup ranges to men, brands can create innovative functional formats and highlight the clear benefits that can appeal to all consumers wanting to achieve a natural look, regardless of gender (Caron 2019).

Research by Francis and Hoefel (2018) suggests that Gen Z individuals do not necessarily define themselves through one stereotype but instead may experiment with different ways of shaping their identities over time. Seven out of 10 respondents indicated the importance of defending causes related to identity. Gen Z individuals are interested in human rights issues—for example, matters related to race and ethnicity—and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues. Generation Y participants, too, not only were aware of transgenderism but also were eager to embrace diverse identity constructions and move beyond discrimination for this cohort (Boyd et al. 2020; McIntyre 2018; Nölke 2018; Testa et al. 2012).

Social semiotic theory

Semiotics involves the science of communication and sign systems and considers the ways people understand phenomena and organize them mentally, as well as the subsequent ways in which they create means of communicating their understanding to others (Moriarty 1996). Aiello (2020) posits that semiotics is both a theory and a methodology that can be applied to an assortment of texts, including, for example, paintings, films, and websites. The purpose of a semiotic analysis is to “make the hidden structures, underlying cultural codes, and dominant meanings of such text both visible and intelligible” (368).

Social semiotics considers all sign making as having been developed to perform specific actions (Van Leeuwen 2005, 285). It considers language a system of various possible choices that can be made depending on what the producers of signs want to achieve within the constraints of given modes, media, and contexts (Ledin and Machin 2018). Van Leeuwen (2005, 285) defines semiotic resources as “physiological and technological means for meaning-making such as the actions, materials and artifacts used for communicative purposes.” For example, in the context of this study, the kind of identity individuals may want to communicate will depend on their choice of social media and color cosmetics to do so. Point of view is a resource that can be used—even inadvertently—by the producers of beauty communications in ways that affirm binary gender identities. Meaning potentials facilitated in which point of view is deployed in the text can be narrowed down to a limited number of reading options. Such meanings are not intrinsic in the visual resources deployed in imagery but “need to be activated by the producers and viewers of images” (Jewitt and Oyama 2001, 135). Both producers and viewers of images actively use semiotic resources as cognitive resources to make sense of visual messages (Jewitt and Oyama 2001).

The focus of a social semiotic approach to visual analysis is how given visual resources can be deployed within and across texts to generate a range of meaning potentials to achieve specific ends (Aiello 2020). Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (2006) visual semiotic theory is a widely recognized theoretical framework for studying images (Bell and Milic 2002; Bezemer and Jewitt 2010; Ly and Jung 2015; Yang and Zhang 2014). Their framework considers three metafunctions, namely representational, interactive, and compositional meaning. Representational meaning relates to the image’s overall story, in this case, actors presenting themselves with color cosmetics to enhance or change their appearance. The image’s interactive meaning is found in the relationship to the viewer, whereas the compositional meaning relates to the layout of the image.

Materials and methods

Visual analysis of images

We live in a digital electronic world, where images are designed to “capture eyeballs and build brand names, create mindshare and design successful products and services” (Schroeder 2002, 3). As gender identities can be approached as performances that bring into being and reinforce certain norms and behaviors (Seregina 2019), a visual analysis seems appropriate. Advertising has always been a visual communication, and this is further accentuated in such social media platforms as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, which are important arenas for social change. In visual communication, the meaning reflects the viewer’s and producer’s cultural and sociopolitical attitudes and beliefs. Like all semiotic (i.e., relating to signs and symbols) modes, the visual must serve several communication requirements to function like a system of communication (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996, 2006).

Image selection

As a first step, several weeks were spent searching the Internet for images based on the main search terms that emanated from the literature review, namely, *gender-free*, *nonbinary*, *androgynous*, and *gender-fluid*. The search turned up a wide assortment of images linked to a range of media (e.g., Pinterest, Facebook, Google, blogs). For the sake of coherence (Ging and Garvey 2018), search criteria were narrowed down to three variables: (1) color cosmetic/makeup brands, (2) nonbinary, and (3) Instagram. Skin care as a criterion was eliminated, as the models used in skin care brand communications are mainly male and female and would defeat the purpose of the study.

To select the brands for the analysis, an Internet search was conducted with the search terms “cosmetic/makeup brands” and “nonbinary.” The search delivered several brands as well as online beauty destinations. For consistency, websites for *Elle*, ABC News, *Glamour* magazine, and Hyperbae were used to compile a list of brands with a focus on nonbinary gender for inclusion in the sample. Two brands that appeared on all of these sites (Fluide and Jecca Blac), two brands that appeared in the search results (Milk Makeup and Fenty Beauty), and mainstream brand CoverGirl were included in the sample. Finally, the search turned to the brands’ official Instagram accounts to capture images.

Instagram was selected due to its popularity worldwide, with more than 1 billion users and 25 million businesses using the platform (Hall and de Sousa Araújo 2019; Newberry 2019). Users perceive Instagram as a social medium that is up to date and immediate, providing information quickly (Voorveld et al. 2018). The strong presence of social media influencers has also impacted users (Clement 2019). The platform’s primary focus on images instead of text is what sets Instagram apart from other social media forums (Lee et al. 2015; Sheldon and Bryant 2016), resulting in beauty brands making inroads on the platform.

The images included professional images as well as reposts of user-generated images. This fits in with the trend where consumers are increasingly sharing in the creation of advertising content, with their contributions atypical of the commercial format (Rosengren 2016; Rosengren and Dahlén 2015). Colliander and Marder (2018) found that photos with a snapshot aesthetic produced greater brand attitudes and intentions to recommend to others. In line with the strong influence of communal norms in a social media forum for mostly user-generated content, many fashion brands are using a more amateur aesthetic when engaging consumers on social media (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Kozinets et al. 2010).

Data collection

For further consistency, images were collected from brand posts during two periods: January to August 2019 (Period 1, or P1) and January to August 2021 (Period 2, or P2). A total of 6,334

posts were considered, of which 2,798 contained images of single models, 1,780 contained images of products, and 1,756 contained other content, such as text or videos. Screenshots were captured directly from Instagram (Cherian et al. 2018) and inserted into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. As this is a visual analysis, Instagram's hashtag and follower features were not included; however, the models' handles were used to identify and remove duplications.

Coding

The following three metafunctions were operationalized to fit the purpose of this study (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006; Van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001):

Representational metafunction

The first coding category considers what the image depicts and deals with the “actor” (model) in terms of gender and age. As the aim of the research was to explore the presentation of genders other than female, the gender category is based on whether the model is (1) female/not female and (2) male, genderqueer, or other. We selected *genderqueer* as a label for models where facets of the other gender are visible. The term *genderqueer* is relevant for the context of the study, as fashion and lifestyle magazine *Vogue* places queer makeup artists in the beauty industry (Greenwood 2020). Monro (2005, 13) defines genderqueer as “any type of trans-identity that is not always male or female,” and participants in a study by Stachowiak (2017) documented how being genderqueer involves simultaneously embracing their feminine and masculine characteristics and their biological sex. Finally, Kolker, Taylor, and Galupo (2020) suggestion that the term *queer* has no precise definition and therefore provides individuals with a way to escape sexuo-gendered identity labels.

Beauty images of models who are distinctly female in the traditional conceptualization of gender were not included for further analysis. The genderqueer category includes models where facets of the other gender are visible and thus cannot be “reliably coded as having either a male or female body” (Dembroff 2020; Lefevor et al. 2019). “Other” encompasses any gender identity that does not fit within the male or genderqueer categories, and where there are no attributes to suggest either male or female (Butler 2018; Matsuno and Budge 2017).

Interactive metafunction

The second category considers the interaction between the viewer and producer of the image participants. Two factors were considered: social distance and behavior.

Social distance. Social distance relates to social relations and the distance individuals keep from one another (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001). In a close personal distance, the other person is within reach of touch and thus is likely to be an intimate relationship; far social distance extends from a point beyond an easy touching distance (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006).

Behavior. How does the model interact with the viewer? This can take the form of demand (the model looks directly at the viewer) or offer (no direct eye contact). Demand can be with direct eye contact and a smile (demand-affiliation), looking down at the viewer, no smile (demand-submission), or looking up at the viewer smiling (demand-seduction) (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006).

Compositional metafunction

The compositional metafunction involves how the representational and interactive metafunctions hold together in a meaningful whole (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996). Meaning comprises four interrelated systems—namely, information value (placement of the model in different zones of

the image); salience (some elements are presented as more important than others); framing (the use of frame lines to separate elements or bind them together); and modality (the greater the congruence between what is seen in an image and what can be seen with the naked eye, the higher the modality of that image) (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001). Due to the nature of the images in the sample (models without background), only modality was documented.

Coding procedure

At first, three coders (the lead author was involved in both coding processes) inspected and divided the images of single models into two groups: distinctly female as per the traditional concept of gender (2,440) and “not female” (359). In line with the aim of the research to explore the representation of gender fluidity in beauty marketing communications, the “not female” images were then screened in terms of the criteria (e.g., no duplications and full face must be visible), after which 222 images made up the final sample. To guide the analysis, a coding sheet with instructions and examples was created to guide the analysis of a subsample of 20 images. If an image could not be coded appropriately into any of the existing categories, or something notable emerged, a new category was added in an iterative process (Vassallo et al. 2018). Throughout several conversations, the coders fine-tuned the coding framework (see Figure 1) and then independently analyzed and coded the images. There was no need for any further categories. A second round of coding to accommodate the data collected during Period 2 followed a similar process.

Coding reliability

For the gender and visual modality categories, Krippendorff’s alpha (α) test was used to estimate intercoder reliability (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007) for each of the two periods: (1) gender ($\alpha = 0.8907/0.8250$), (2) visual modality ($\alpha = 0.8742/0.8995$), (3) social distance ($\alpha = .9829/.8141$), (4) behavior ($\alpha = .8096/.8141$) and (5) age ($\alpha = .6555/.8369$). A Krippendorff’s alpha of .80 is generally regarded as the norm for a good reliability test, with a minimum of .67 or even .60.

Results

Representational metafunction

Gender and age

Based on the sample of 2,798 images for Periods 1 and 2, female models still dominate with the representation of not-female models at only 12.8 percent. The percentage of models in Fenty Beauty, Fluide, and Milk Makeup posts who are not female increased in Period 2. However, there were significantly fewer not-female models in CoverGirl’s and Jecca Blac’s posts for the same period (see Table 1).

Next, the images were analyzed for representations of gender. Of the 222 images, 44.6 percent were documented as genderqueer, 32.4 percent male, and 23 percent other. The genderqueer group is dominated by models who identify as male with clearly visible female traits (more than 90 percent of the images in the group), whereas a smaller proportion (just below 10 percent) were female with clearly visible male traits. The findings show that gender identities other than female are appearing in color cosmetic brand communications. Therefore, Etcoff et al.’s (2011, 2) statement—that cosmetics are “morally neutral agents of beauty enhancement” and consumers are free to choose whether to use such products—may apply to *all* consumers, irrespective of gender.

As makeup is involved in image management, assessing the models’ ages was the most challenging of the categories and required much discussion. Most models (96 percent) were coded

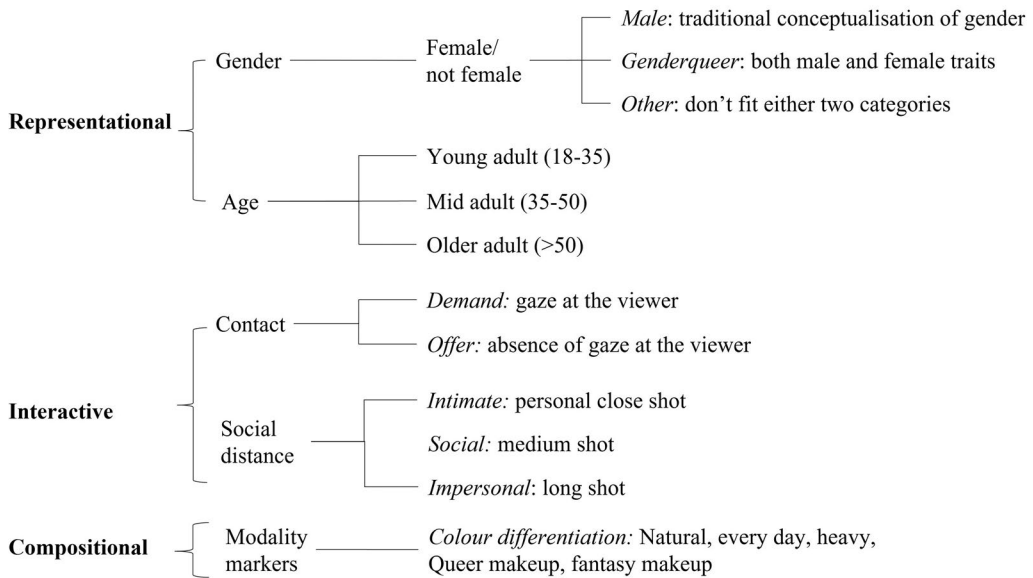


Figure 1. Coding framework.

Table 1. Instagram sampling.

Brand	Period	Total Posts with Single Model	Model Gender			Final Sample: Other Models
			Female	Other	% Other	
CoverGirl	1	216	191	25	11.6	6
	2	161	160	1	0.6	1
Fenty Beauty	1	518	501	17	3.3	10
	2	280	248	32	11.4	12
Fluide	1	360	241	119	33.1	79
	2	96	41	55	57.3	34
Jecca Blac	1	137	93	44	32.1	33
	2	131	115	16	12.2	10
Milk Makeup	1	517	493	24	4.6	22
	2	382	357	25	6.5	15
Total periods	1	1,748	1,519	229	13.1	150
	2	1,050	921	129	12.3	72
Total		2,798	2,440	358	12.8	222

as young adults (ages 18 to 35), a finding which concurs with Lefevor et al. (2019), insofar as nonbinary gender identities being most common among younger adults.

Interactive metafunction

Social distance

As expected in the advertising of makeup, two-thirds (64.0 percent) of the images were close personal, with the head and shoulders visible; and almost one-third (27 percent) were intimate, as if the model could be touched and smelled (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). A minority of the images (9 percent) comprised shots of the model only from the waist up.

Behavior

Most of the models (76.1 percent) established contact through a demanding gaze, even if only on an imaginary level (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006) (see Table 2). With most of these models demanding submission, this finding may suggest they invite the viewer to relate by way of a

Table 2. Behavior.

Behavior (<i>n</i> = 222)	Male			Genderqueer			Other		
	P1	P2	Total	P1	P2	Total	P1	P2	Total
Offer/ideal	6	6	12	21	3	24	7	3	10
Demand									
Affiliation	9	5	14	5	2	7	0	1	1
Submission	20	22	42	52	12	64	23	15	38
Seduction	1	0	1	2	0	2	0	0	0
Subtotal			57			73			39
None of the above	1	2	3	2	0	2	1	1	2
Total	37	35	72	82	17	99	31	20	51

cold stare. Fewer models invite the viewer to enter a relation of social affinity with a smile (demand affiliation), and even fewer ask to be desired through demand-seduction (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006).

With the offer feature, the lack of eye contact results in less engagement between the model and the viewer. Less than one-quarter (20.7 percent) of the models addressed the viewer indirectly by way of an offer: The viewer becomes an invisible onlooker and the models become items of information and contemplation (Harrison 2003; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006).

Compositional metafunction

The visuals in the sample represent models as though they are real. In terms of visual modality, judgments are social and depend on what the social group targeted with the communication considers real (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). Individuals who wear makeup are perceived as being more attractive, and the effort involved in decorating the face with cosmetics yields tangible benefits for the wearer (Jones, Porcheron, and Russell 2018). Regarding the use of color in cosmetics, 79 percent of genderqueer models, 47 percent of other models, and 37.5 percent of male models displayed heavy or fantasy makeup with vibrant colors. Almost two-thirds of male models (62.5 percent), 53 percent of other models, and 21 percent of genderqueer models exhibited softer and more natural colors of everyday and natural-looking makeup (See Table 3).

The difference between the genderqueer, male, and other groups in the use of heavy makeup (39.4 percent, 22.2 percent, and 11.8 percent, respectively) indicates a more careful use of makeup in the male and other groups. The genderqueer group involves creative ways to create a more feminine look (Hall and de Sousa Araújo 2019) and allows individuals to explore their gender identity by using products associated with the “normative idea” of being a woman (Rocha-Rodrigues 2016, 34).

To influence the visual perception of facial stimuli, women use color cosmetics to highlight individual features, particularly the eyes and mouth (McCabe, de Waal Malefyt, and Fabri 2020; Tanaka 2016). Cosmetics are said to increase the contrast between the eyes, the lips, and the rest of the face—precisely the manipulation capable of making the face appear more feminine (Russell 2009) and attractive (Jones and Kramer 2016; Kościński 2012). A difference is observed between the genderqueer and other models, with a less flamboyant and expressive portrayal on display in the latter group.

Table 3. Visual modality.

Visual Modality (<i>n</i> = 222)	Male			Genderqueer			Other		
	P1	P2	Total	P1	P2	Total	P1	P2	Total
Natural makeup	14	11	25	2	0	2	7	3	10
Everyday makeup	10	10	20	18	1	19	8	9	17
Heavy makeup	7	9	16	31	8	39	3	3	6
Fantasy makeup	6	5	11	31	8	39	13	5	18
Total	37	35	72	82	17	99	31	20	51

The use of salient features in the images is particularly present for genderqueer models, with their excessive use of makeup, heavily accentuated lips, and lots of jewelry, thus calling attention to their “play” with binary gender identities. Similarly, the other models use less salient features to emphasize that the models appear beyond binary gender identities. As Goffman (1976) notes, “Gender . . . lays down more, perhaps, than class or other social divisions an understanding of what our ultimate nature ought to be and how and where this nature ought to be exhibited” (8), which leads to the assumption that genders other than female may be exhibiting their nature by using color cosmetics.

Discussion

The assessment involves the visual meaning making of advertising stimuli, and the aim is to come up with more inclusive categories that can be used by marketers when engaging consumers.

Representational meaning of the set of images

Beauty brands still tend to use models who are female in gender, and identifiably so, which is to be expected given their major target market. Yet the inclusion of gender-neutral products and models has contributed to the development of this industry (Biron 2019). Models analyzed in this study were predominantly categorized as young, which is in line with both the increased acceptance of nonbinary definitions among younger audiences (Yang 2018) and the predominance of nonbinary identities in this age group (Lefevor et al. 2019). The drag queen effect was also identified, with the genderqueer models reflecting queer makeup, including highly accentuated physical features and jewelry, consistent with findings by Hall and de Sousa Araújo (2019).

The actors as part of a broader “whole”

Within the sample of 222 images used to attain the goal of the research, two gender categories that transcend the traditional binary view of gender were identified, namely, genderqueer and other (see Figure 2). The genderqueer category is the largest part of the sample, present in 45 percent of the images. Using male models who exhibit female traits (constituting more than 90 percent of the genderqueer group) can fulfill numerous functions in advertising, as it suggests the possibility of new gender combinations while simultaneously “deconstructing stereotypical encoded assumptions of everyday norms” (Rocha-Rodrigues 2016, 42). A further function played by the genderqueer and the other categories is to gain further elaboration and enhance recall (Callister et al., 2022). Breaking with traditional gender views can be effective in this respect.

Are stereotypes emerging?

The categorization process is crucial in stereotype formation and may lead to the development of stereotype content based on perceived intergroup differences—either real or perceived (Brown and Turner 2002). Stereotypes are based on or rely on categories of people; thus, categories have the potential to assign meaning to the development of understanding (McGarty 2002). In this study, the categorization of stimuli in the sample was based on the degree to which the differences in gender among the stimuli were perceived as less than the differences between that of any of the groups and the other stimuli. Therefore, this categorization leads to the emphasis on perceived differences between the groups and on perceived similarities within the groups. The stimuli in the sample were categorized based on gender and other categories cued by distinctive category labels (Brown and Turner 2002). As both these categories are not present in current-day mainstream beauty, the following question arises: Are these new stereotypes?



Figure 2. Gender categories: Female, genderqueer, male, and agender.

According to McGarty, Yzerbyt, and Spears (2002), stereotypes are (a) aids to help the perceiver make sense of a situation; (b) devices to reduce effort on the part of the perceiver; and (c) shared group beliefs. Stereotypes, according to McGarty, Yzerbyt, and Spears (2002), form when actual differences between groups are detected and become accentuated or magnified. Such stereotypes form to provide a useful fit with reality rather than an exact match with reality and, in particular, to allow people to interact with other people. Most accounts of stereotype formation agree that stereotypes are initially based on insight into differences among groups, even though this insight may not always reflect real differences (Brown and Turner 2002).

In the genderqueer group, the assessment was based on a combination of the knowledge acquired through research of the literature, the labels that exist in the public domain, and the perceived sameness of the genderqueer models in the sample. Consequently, it can be assumed that the genderqueer group appears to be a stereotype and not merely a “stereotype depiction” (McGarty 2002). Based on McGarty, Yzerbyt, and Spears’s (2002) principles, this study’s analysis reveals recognizable, separable categories in which relevant similarities and differences can be detected. As such, these categories may serve as energy-saving devices. The review of the literature suggests that members of the genderqueer group engage in processes of differentiation to make their group different from other groups and thus share group beliefs.

Furthermore, the analysis suggests that another category may be forming. The other group stands out in the sample, with no clear markers of binary gender (male or female). Although the other category represents only 23 percent of the sample, it points to alternatives to the binary view of gender, lending credence to the use of alternative definitions of gender in advertising (Monro 2019). The other images cannot be classified as male or female and are not simply a combination of both (as in the genderqueer category). The genderqueer images stay partly within the binary view of the two genders but dissolve the strict boundary between the two. The other category is different because it moves beyond the binary view. There is something with the other models that makes them difficult to classify in binary terms. This category opens the door for a possible “third” gender, labeled here as *agender*.

The label *agender* was deliberately chosen based on the definition “relating to or being a person who has an internal sense of being neither male nor female nor some combination of male and female” (Merriam-Webster.com 2021). This definition has a much richer meaning than *androgynous*, which means “genderless” or “unisex.” Images in this group cannot be described using the female and male categories as they have no obvious female or male characteristics. The models appear to have no gender; as this is consistent with how the term *agender* has been used in the literature, it seems appropriate to describe these models accordingly (Devor 2007; Hearn 1994; Nicolazzo 2015).

Having established that there is a third alternative gender—agender—in the sample, the discussion now moves to the specific characteristics of the images in this category and how the agender actors differ from genderqueer actors. Genderqueer models signal belonging to both male and female genders. For the male models, this is shown in the excessive and expressive use of

female attributes (queer makeup, accentuated lips, eyes, and eyebrows), with traditional male attributes also clearly visible (e.g., facial hair). In contrast, agender models signal that they do not belong to the traditional genders, which would explain the more restrictive display of traditional female and male attributes. If companies want to signal that they are using a model who is not female, male, or a mix of the two, it is a good idea to avoid clear markers of stereotypical female or male identities.

The genderqueer and agender models differ in terms of the composition of the images. Based on Kress and Van Leeuwen's (1996) framework, several differences are identified. It was argued previously that genderqueer models, in contrast to agender models, remain within the binary gender identities, although they move between the two. The use of salient features (e.g., makeup, earrings, facial hair) creates a disconnect between the elements portraying a male identity and those portraying a female identity. Nevertheless, the identification of the two gender identities is straightforward, creating what Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) refer to as a linear reading path in the image. The images with agender models differ as they move beyond the binary dichotomy and use fewer salient features. Compared to the images with genderqueer models, the agender model images are connected in the sense of being more realistic and down to earth. The fact that the models are difficult to classify in binary terms makes the reading of the images less straightforward, creating a nonlinear reading path. Table 4 below summarizes the differences.

Do these results signify the emergence of new stereotypical ways of depicting gender—in this case, in an agender and genderqueer way? The differences between genderqueer and agender models also partially support the idea that these two groups are represented in stereotypical ways. The large group in the sample that is male genderqueer draws on a rich tradition of men dressing as women, and this study's analysis shows that these models make more excessive use of queer makeup, while also showing clear male characteristics like facial hair and masculine body stature. The drag queen is a useful metaphor for the stereotypical way of depicting the mix of females and males in the genderqueer group. Exaggeratedly, the models use traits from the other gender, which creates a certain "style" in the sample of genderqueer models.

In contrast, agender models are less expressive and more neutral, use more moderate makeup and jewelry, and present less-accentuated lips. The stereotypical aspects are less obvious, but it can be argued that the avoidance of binary gendered traits is a distinguishing mark, thereby functioning as a stereotype. Therefore, a strategy is to depict the agender models by stripping them of all female and male characteristics.

Implications for practice

Pressure to become more active in addressing societal challenges

Generation Y and Z consumers are concerned about social justice (Lin et al. 2021), and younger consumers who accept sexuo-gendered identities (Boyd et al. 2020; Gong 2020) may favor marketing that challenges social narratives by offering destabilizing gender/sexual identities to create new binary constructs (Boyd et al. 2020; Nölke 2018). Boyd et al. (2020) study further social identity theory by demonstrating consumer preferences for marketing that is representative of an inclusive ideology, diverse, and nondiscriminatory. In Generation Y focus groups, participants expressed their frustration at brands' use of superficial messaging. Brands are at the leading edge of social movements (Lin et al. 2021) and should therefore become more active.

Table 4. Differences in models.

Genderqueer Models	Agender Models
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximum salient features • Within the binary dichotomy • Disconnected (ironic) • Linear reading path (from male to female) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimum salient features • Beyond the binary dichotomy • Connected (realistic) • Nonlinear reading path (no clear reference point)

Opportunity for creative engagement behavior

Behavior such as participating in brand-related activities is an essential component of being engaged (Brodie et al. 2011; Hollebeek, Srivastava, and Chen 2019; Maslowska, Malthouse, and Collinger 2016). As per the findings, consumers often interact with makeup brands through user-generated content, thereby providing these brands with an opportunity to engage with customers through experience (Baumöl, Hollebeek, and Jung 2016; Brodie et al. 2013). Customers add value to the brand through their contributions (Pansari and Kumar 2017).

Furthermore, the use of fantasy makeup by 30.6 percent of the models in the sample presents an opportunity for brands to engage with consumers in creative experiences. Fantasy makeup is about standing out and is any look designed to help to create an experience. Brands can harness the edginess of sexuo-gendered identifications, both in imagery and in product development, to express progressive brand values (Quach, Jebarajakirthy, and Thaichon 2017; Rosenbaum, Russell-Bennett, and Drennan 2015; Rosenbaum, Russell, and Russell-Bennett 2017).

Faced with a dilemma

As conceptualizations of gender fragment (Schofield and Schmidt 2005) (i.e., to include gender-neutral and nonbinary identities, among others), marketers are faced with the usual dilemma of either retaining a narrower homogenized approach or embracing a growing multiplicity of commodification off opportunities (e.g., via hypersegmentation strategies). Amid the spectrum of gender identities, four stereotypes emerged from the analysis. These stereotypes provide marketers with the opportunity of appealing to gender-fluid individuals across the spectrum. The stereotypes can be viewed as four concentric circles all overlapping. The overlap means that the female and male groups will appeal to trans female/male individuals respectively, just as genderqueer and agender groups will appeal to consumers who do not identify with the gender binary.

Research concerning the influence of advertising on consumers to (re)negotiate gender in their daily lives (Zayer, McGrath, and Castro-González 2019) suggests that advertisers must explore more modern, nonstereotyped gender portrayals in their advertising (Åkestam et al. 2021). Finally, although choices for marketers would appear to be fraught with risk (Boyd et al. 2020), there is also a risk in continuing to alienate sexuo-gendered identities (Schofield and Schmidt 2005). Addressing diverse sexuo-gender identities can provide brands with a distinctive advantage (Boyd et al. 2020), and embracing diversity in gender and perceived sexual orientation may appeal to a more diverse customer base (Quach, Jebarajakirthy, and Thaichon 2017).

Limitations and future research

This study is not without its limitations. First, while widely utilized, the use of content analysis as a method in advertising research can be questioned (Schroeder and Borgerson 1998). This study takes an externalist approach and considers the factors external to the models (Dembroff 2020), and the images and visual cues alone can never reveal the individual's preferred identity. "Images show us a world but not the world" (Leppert 1997, 3). The coders' background knowledge and theories may also have influenced and constrained the process of categorization (Brown and Turner 2002). Furthermore, the selection of and focus on beauty brands—and that these may not be viewed as mainstream—may have restricted the generalizability of the findings.

Prior research has neglected consumers outside of the gender binary (Eisend 2019a) and, based on the increase in social visibility of nonbinary gender identities (Yeadon-Lee 2016), an analysis of gender imagery in the beauty industry provides useful information for future research

in other industries concerning the use of nonbinary representations in marketing communications. In addition, investigation into customer perceptions and perceptual changes of brands and their marketing communications using nonbinary models would be beneficial. Moreover, further exploration of the agender stereotype will contribute to the gender discourse. Investigation into the use of user-generated images in beauty communications provides another avenue for exploration. Finally, as gender is central in advertising and marketing communications (Schroeder and Zwick 2004), future research should develop an overarching framework for stereotype-prone portrayals in advertising and explore the responsibility of advertisers who use stereotype portrayals.

Notes on contributor

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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