“Be Soft”: Irony, Postfeminism, and Masculine Positions in Swedish Sport Betting Commercials

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Abstract
Gambling advertising usually draws heavily on gendered stereotypes, including portrayals of male gamblers as tough and successful. Meanwhile, representations of men in advertising have grown increasingly diverse, with emotional and sexualized men accompanying heroic, muscular portrayals. In this article, both these bodies of research are drawn upon to discuss a series of Swedish sports betting commercials which encourage the viewer to “bet hard” while also “being soft.” The celebration of “softness” is ambiguous but can be seen as referencing gendered, political discussions about men and masculinity. Engaging with hybrid masculinities theory, postfeminism, and discourses about gambling and betting, the article demonstrates that meanings around “softness” are ambiguous, ironic, and serve to normalize gambling by distancing it from discourses about addiction. The commercials represent a shift in gambling advertising, but the linking of men’s politics to gambling also represents a new complexity in narratives about “new,” or “soft,” men.

Keywords
advertising, gambling, postfeminism, Sweden, media, sports, Zlatan Ibrahimović

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Introduction

A man, dressed in army pants, smudged with soot, crawls along the floor in a darkened room full of hanging chains, oil drums, and fires, eventually pointing a shoulder-mounted gun at a giant lion-shaped statue. The statue, exploded, turns out to have enclosed football player Zlatan Ibrahimović, and Ibrahimović and the shot, actor Dragomir Mrsic, start roaring at each other, emulating the lion. As the music intensifies, Ibrahimović looks increasingly apprehensive. “Feels a bit... cheesy? Come on, screw this,” he says, and the two men are transferred to a tea parlor. Looking around and contentedly commenting on how “soft” it is, they sit back, pour each other tea, and offer each other cookies. At last, a logo, a closed fist, and a slogan, “Bethard. Be Soft,” appear.

These scenes are part of a series of Swedish sports betting commercials that make up the campaign Bethard. Be Soft, launched by Swedish sports betting company Bethard (Bethard 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). In this article, I scrutinize discourses around gambling, men, and masculine positions in these commercials in order to discuss developments in consumerist culture, gendered and racial politics, and gambling politics in Sweden and beyond. This includes the imperative to be soft and celebrate softness, evident in the aforementioned scenes, which I argue should be interpreted in relation to gender politics but also as a way of rehabilitating betting and gambling. Research on gambling commercials and gender indicates that stereotypical portrayals of masculinity are common (Deans et al. 2016; Jouhki 2017; Lopez-Gonzalez et al. 2018; Sen and Lou 2016). The assertion that the roaring, oil drums, and fires, all connected to hypermasculine action-movie performances, are “cheesy” makes this commercial stand out, signaling, I suggest, a shift in gambling commercials and a connection to postfeminist representations of men.

Literature Review

Portrayals of Men: Irony and Power

Over the last 60 years, cultural representations of men have become increasingly varied. Heroic, unemotional, and “laddish” portrayals now coexist with caring, emotionally mature, and sexualized ones (Beynon 2002). Media scholars have debated the meanings of these developments, discussing whether softer, more emotional portrayals indicate a substantial shift in gendered power relations, and how to interpret the irony often present in these portrayals. Simply put, are they a way of giving the “same old” gender relations a new and more acceptable surface or is this too pessimist an interpretation? Is the irony a way of escaping critique, or is it an effect of increasingly ambivalent meaning-makeings, characteristic of late modernity (Benwell 2003; Beynon 2002; Gill 2007)?

Similar developments can be discerned in advertising. While often portrayed as actors, subjects, strong, and in control, men are addressed in new ways in contemporary consumerist culture (Frank 2014; Gee 2014; Scheibling and LaFrance 2019).
Indeed, as Susan M. Alexander (2003, 536) argues, while corporations may have an interest in maintaining traditional gender roles to ensure continued consumption of their products, “they also serve as agents of social change by creating new consumer markets,” as epitomized by sexualized male bodies, addressed as in need of fashion and hair-removal products. This tension is captured by Sarah Gee (2014), who discusses widely varying portrayals of David Beckham as a successful football star, heterosexual family man, and metrosexual icon advertising perfume and underwear. Gee interprets this combination of feminine and gay aesthetics with more traditional ones as “flexible masculinity,” and emphasizes that Beckham’s muscular, male body together with a firm image as heterosexual and successful footballer form a kind of capital, which enables his position to be interpreted as flexible rather than effeminate or nonnormative.

Another aspect of this is addressing men and masculine positions with irony and humor (Barber and Bridges 2017; Messner and de Oca 2005; Schroeder and Zwick 2004). Michael A. Messner and Jeffrey Montez de Oca (2005) show that men are humorously portrayed as unheroic losers in alcohol advertising, but the irony ultimately becomes a way of portraying alcohol and “buddies” as young, White men’s only comfort while also depicting women in sexist ways. Kristen Barber and Tristan Bridges (2017) argue that the constructed nature of masculinity itself is being humorously exposed in the advertisements featuring ironic portrayals of hypermasculine men with feminine-coded products that they study. They suggest that this is an example of “hybrid masculinities,” which, according to Bridges and C. J. Pascoe (2014, 246), constitute a “selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and—at times—femininities into privileged men’s gender performances and identities.”

“Hybrid” and “flexible” masculinities indicate changes in portrayals of men, and in men as subjects of and objects to consumerist, capitalist imageries. However, both perspectives tend to end in a negative answer to the question posed earlier, which applies also to the researchers focusing on irony: The seemingly new portrayals of men may indicate changes in consumerist culture, but gendered power relations are changed in style, not substance (see also Messner 2007).

Bethan Benwell (2003) is slightly more open-ended in her discussion about UK men’s lifestyle magazines, where she argues that the magazines oscillate between promoting a heroic and an antiheroic position, using irony and humor directed at heroes, antiheroes, readers, and writers alike. Such multifaceted ironies are present also in the Bethard commercials along with feminist, or at least feminist-inspired, discourses. Especially the celebration of softness must, I suggest, be understood as an example of postfeminism.

Postfeminist men as well as postfeminism more generally has been discussed by Rosalind Gill (2007; 2014; 2016) and others (e.g., Butler 2013; Dow 2006; Hansen-Miller and Gill 2011; O’Neill 2015). These authors argue that contemporary portrayals of men, including advertising, refer to feminism by simultaneously celebrating, undermining, and commodifying it. For instance, the “lad lit” and “lad
flicks” discussed by David Hansen-Miller and Gill (2011) and Gill (2014) contain knowing references to feminist critique as well as humorous objectification of women, a combination which the authors suggest makes the objectification difficult to criticize. In these representations, men and masculine positions are portrayed in what Benwell would probably call an antiheroic fashion; they are clumsy, lost, professional and personal failures, surrounded by women who “have it together” (Gill 2014; Hansen-Miller and Gill 2011). Rachel O’Neill argues that “postfeminism currently represents an acute endeavor for critical masculinity scholarship, precisely because postfeminism effects the erasure of sexual politics” (2015, 115), a statement with which Gill (2014, 200) would probably agree: “Far from mocking or unmasking male power the presentation of ineptitude and confusion seems strategically designed to maintain it, while simultaneously effacing it and claiming that men are the disadvantaged losers in the ‘new’ gender stakes.”

The research about irony cited earlier does not mention postfeminism, but there are important parallels: Ironic commercials can be interpreted as postfeminist humor, explicitly and implicitly making fun of normative masculine positions, thus taking up and using feminist critique as a commercial strategy. Postfeminist representations of men in Sweden, often said to be one of the most gender-equal countries of the world, is a small field (Björklund 2018; Goedecke 2020), and Swedish research about representations of men in advertising is also scarce. Masculine positions associated with emotionality, present fatherhood, and gender equality are celebrated (although seldom realized) goals in Sweden (Gottzén and Jonsson 2012; Klinth 2002) but how such masculine positions are produced, portrayed, celebrated, or critiqued in cultural representations needs further study. In this article, I contribute to these fields of research while also furthering the debate about postfeminism and changes in portrayals of men that has been conducted primarily in US and UK contexts.

Gambling Advertising and Gender

In the 1980s, a process of commercializing gambling took place in Sweden (Svensson 2013, 6). Previously subject to a state monopoly, in 2019 the Swedish gambling market was opened to commercial, licensed, companies. In the years leading up to this, gambling companies registered outside of Sweden had been advertising themselves in media broadcasted from abroad (the commercials studied here are examples of this), which resulted in heated debate about “aggressive” advertising and a promise from the minister of civil affairs, Ardalan Shekarabi, that the issue would be subject to a public inquiry (SVT 2019).

Gambling research has a history of gender-blindness (Mark and Lesieur 1992), but more recent quantitative studies have shown that gambling is gendered: Men gamble more than women, spend more money gambling, and prefer strategic games such as sports or horse betting and poker to chance games, in Sweden and elsewhere (Svensson 2013, 11f, 18). Gambling has often been studied within medical,
psychological, or public health research (Cassidy et al. 2013; McGowan 2004), and is increasingly understood in terms of addiction, that is, within a medical rather than, for instance, a religious discourse, positing gambling as sinful (Edman and Berndt 2016; Walker 1996). I suggest that this shift demonstrates the need for discursive tools when scrutinizing contemporary meanings around gambling (see also Cassidy et al. 2013; McGowan 2004). In this research, quantitative methods have dominated and gender has often been approached as a static variable.

Criticizing this, UK researcher Rebecca Cassidy (2014) argues that gambling and betting take place in gendered arenas, such as betting shops, and are practices where masculine positions may be produced through, for instance, foregrounding mathematics, logics, control, and knowledge about sports or horses rather than luck or chance. This connects to themes central to Western conceptions of masculinity (Lloyd 1993). Following this, it is reasonable to suggest that different forms of gambling have different gendered connotations, even if this needs further scrutiny by gender scholars. While most forms of gambling are arguably connected to risk-taking, sports betting and horse racing are connected to knowledgeability, rationality, and control (Hansson 2004), sports possibly adding an element of masculine embodiment and toughness (Whannel 1999). Contrastingly, poker and casino games are associated with toughness, glamour (Jouhki 2017) and, variously, skill and control.

Swedish research about gender and gambling is still in its infancy (Svensson 2013 is an exception). Qualitative research and research on gambling advertising are similarly scarce and apart from a brief discussion by Philip Lalander (2006), gender is not discussed (ethnographies include Binde 2011; Hansson 2004; gambling advertising is studied by Kroon 2019 and gambling politics by, e.g., Alexius 2017).

Internationally, a small body of research discusses gambling advertising and gender. Researchers from various parts of the world (Australia, Macau, Finland, Spain, and the UK) point to the predominance of men among those addressed as gamblers (and winners) and to stereotypical and sexualized portrayals of women and show that gambling is often framed as an activity undertaken among male friends (Deans et al. 2016; Jouhki 2017; Lopez-Gonzalez et al. 2018; Sen and Lou 2016). For instance, Jukka Jouhki (2017) studies Finnish poker advertisements and shows that they contain “images traditionally associated with masculinity: seriousness, gravity and power or aggression.” He points to dark colors and muscular, tough, athletic, or glamorous men, sometimes surrounded by glamorous, admiring women.

Apart from Jouhki, this research is predominantly conducted and published within public health or addiction studies, and theoretical and methodological tools from gender studies and cultural studies, which I suggest could greatly deepen the analyses, are often absent. This article contributes to gambling advertising research by putting it in dialogue with these fields, including Critical studies of men and masculinities.

Returning to the discussion about changed representations of men in contemporary consumer culture, Jouhki suggests that this has not affected poker
advertisements: “the hegemonic masculinity which is nowadays more flexible and contested in ads than ever... is rather stable, if not stereotypical in poker... the gaming men are rock solid and operate in the ‘masculine mode of exigency and competition’” (Jouhki 2017, 196). Moreover, Cassidy argues that while masculine dominance has been critiqued in sports, entertainment, business, and politics, betting has been dismissed as “trivial, morally ambiguous and inconsequential.” As a result of this lack of critical attention, betting shops have been “able to provide a ‘haven’ for the performance of a particular kind of masculinity” (Cassidy 2014, 187). As is evident already in the opening quote, my material complicates this image by drawing on other discourses, albeit in ironic or ambivalent ways. This article introduces the theme of changing gender politics in gambling advertising, while also deepening the discussion about masculine positions and humor in this field.

Methodology and Material

I studied three commercials (Bethard 2018a; 2018b; 2018c), all produced by Swedish gambling company Bethard, registered on the island of Malta, featuring football player Zlatan Ibrahimović and actor Dragomir Mrsic. Felix Herngren directed the commercials and were aired online as well as on various Swedish television channels in 2018. The three commercials were launched as part one, two, and three on YouTube, and can thus be seen as one commercial consisting of three “episodes.” However, they can also be seen independently or in varying orders.

Having previously been the public face of Bethard, Mrsic was joined by Ibrahimović in March 2018, who became an owner of the company around the same time. This instance of celebrity endorsement can be seen as an attempt of using meanings and status associated with Ibrahimović to promote the company but also change its image (Awasthi and Choraria 2015, 216). This is confirmed by owner Erik Skarp in an interview: “It will be softer and more comical, we take a soft but big step away from the hard stuff you have seen before... We will now try to communicate modern masculine attitudes...of course, this lies close to our hearts, as it is based on equality” (betting.se 2018, my translation). The Bethard commercials were not met with debate or negative attention. Instead, Ibrahimović’s investment in Bethard was discussed extensively in Swedish media, and his promotional role continued; in addition to several very short, impromptu-style videos of Ibrahimović and Mrsic, Ibrahimović continued to present documentary and journalistic content on the Bethard YouTube channel.

I followed researchers who use limited ranges of materials in order to make broader points about cultural representations, subject positions, and gender politics (e.g., Gee 2014; Messner and de Oca 2005; Schroeder and Zwick 2004). I suggest that the Bethard commercials illustrate several tendencies important to gender politics, gambling politics, and gambling advertising. They resemble ironic, distanced portrayals of hypermasculine men while also drawing on postfeminist themes,
rendering them symbolic of larger changes in gender politics and consumer culture in Sweden and in the western world.

I watched the material together and separately, in varying orders. The material consists of visual, audial, and linguistic messages, all of which were seen as contributing to the meaning produced within it. After having performed a denotative reading, I went on to study the connotations of the commercials; themes present within the material were scrutinized and put in dialogue with previous literature and then re-evaluated, leading to the construction of more relevant themes, in a circular process (Gill 2007; Hall 1997). Inspired by previous research (Gee 2014; Gill 2007; Williamson 1978), special attention was directed at the portrayals of the men, their bodies and dress, the settings in which they were portrayed, their interaction, both verbal and nonverbal (with each other, other men, and with women), as well as direct and indirect references to betting and gambling.

Tools from semiotic and discourse analysis have been used to understand the material (Gill 2007; Hall 1997; see also Williamson 1978). The commodity or brand “create[s] structures of meaning” which are “translated into statements about who we are and who we aspire to become” with the advertisement urging us to become that which we are addressed as (Gill 2007, 50). Importantly, we may respond in various ways, even resist the intended meanings and positions offered by the advertisement (Hall 1997). Similar to Benwell (2003, 153ff), I therefore acknowledge several possible readings to give space to the ambivalence within the text.

I used poststructuralist perspectives (Butler 1990; Whitehead 2002) in my approach to gender, men, and masculine positions, and see them as co-constructed with, for instance, raced and classed positions (Crenshaw 1991; Staunæs and Søndergaard 2011). Stephen Whitehead suggests that the notion of “man,” together with “the male body,” can be understood as “the central, possibly most stable, reference point for the masculine subject as it seeks to create and realize its own existence” (2002, 212). Thus, while by no means necessary in order to produce masculine positions, (normative) male bodies are strong signifiers, stabilizing, enabling, and restricting the gendered positions that are produced, without completely controlling them, leaving room for variations, nuances, tensions, and protests.

**Analysis**

I start this section with a description of the commercials, inspired by the denotative reading that was performed at the initial stage of the analysis. I then go on to discuss ironies, postfeminist themes, and gendered politics of gambling in the material.

As described at the outset of the article, the first commercial (Bethard 2018a) portrays Mrsic and Ibrahimović as half-naked, sweaty, and tattooed in a dark, large room, firing guns and roaring, action-movie style, and then at a tea parlor, dressed in brightly colored cozy sweaters and pants. The former part is labelled “cheesy” (lökig), the latter “soft.” As Judith Williamson (1978) notes, meaning is produced in the relationship between various signs, and here, the interplay between the two
venues, the clothing and music, how the men relate to each other (roaring versus talking), along with the slogan (“Bethard. Be Soft”) produces a distinction between “hardness” and “softness.” This interplay recurs in the second commercial (Bethard 2018b), where Ibrahimović and Mrsic sit in a tattoo parlor. While Mrsic is being tattooed on his back, Ibrahimović and Mrsic discuss whether Ibrahimović is going to play for Sweden in the world championship of 2018 (he did not) and the confusing difference between odds and probability (high odds equaling low probability). The dark room and its attributes signal hardness, but when Mrsic reveals his back tattoo it is shown to be an image of dolphins hovering over a turquoise ocean, surrounded by red hearts. “Insanely soft” Mrsic remarks, as Ibrahimović noddingly admires his tattoo.

Contrastingly, the third commercial is set on a light, sunny beach. Mrsic is jogging and runs into Ibrahimović, who is taking a small child for a walk in a stroller. “Oh my God, how cute!” a sweaty Mrsic exclaims, taken by the cuteness of the child. As he bends down, his face is filmed from within the stroller as it were, filling the screen. Ibrahimović explains that it is his neighbor’s child and that taking it for a walk is “soft” and equals “life quality.” Mrsic teasingly suggests that the child looks similar to Ibrahimović, implying that it might in fact be his child, then jogs away. Ibrahimović continues walking with the stroller and as the logo fills the screen, he says: “you got a compliment there. Not bad.”

While the dialogue is in Swedish, the slogan is in English and it is the English word “soft” that is used. While it retains some of the meanings from English, as a loanword it has also taken on new meanings: it means good, nice, laid-back, or taking it easy (Ordguru 2019; Slangopedia 2019). I suggest that “soft” has multiple and shifting meanings throughout the commercials, which will be discussed subsequently.

**Hard and Soft: Ambivalent Ironies**

While meanings of hardness and softness are ambivalent, they are obviously connected to gender. Hardness is an integral part of western, normative constructions of masculinity, built on distancing from femininity, being a “big wheel,” a “sturdy oak,” and aggressive and risk-taking (Brannon 1976, quoted in Kimmel 1997, 229). Meanwhile, “soft” can refer to insufficient masculinity (see, e.g., Bly 1990, 2ff), similar to the feminizing terms in R.W. Connell’s (2005, 79) discussion of how certain ways of being a man are excluded from what she calls hegemonic masculinity. The gendered meanings are by no means unintended; indeed, as mentioned above, the Be Soft campaign represents an attempt to “communicate modern masculine attitudes” (betting.se 2018). Additionally, the two venues displayed in the first commercial are clearly, even stereotypically gendered: While the darkened, industrial room is clearly connected to action-movie, exaggerated masculinity, the tearoom, filled with flowered teapots, textiles, and women among the other guests, is clearly connected with femininity.
Representations of men have changed in many contexts, but Jouhki (2017) suggests that “rock solid” manhood holds its ground in gambling advertising. In stark contrast to this, hardness is dismissed as cheesy, a ridiculous charade, in the Bethard commercials. Compared with Benwell’s (2003) ambiguous irony, simultaneously poking fun at “heroic” and “unheroic” masculinities, magazine writers, readers, and celebrities, the Bethard commercials seem less subtle; it is the hypermasculine action-movie setting, the fires, chains, roaring, guns, and the sooty, bare chests, and military-style painted faces that should not be taken seriously. Correspondingly, the imperative to Be Soft indicates that this is the position from which these stereotypical aspects are mocked, and that softness should be taken seriously.

The ridiculing of hardness is familiar from other contemporary advertising, which “simultaneously celebrate and mock” “intentionally excessive displays of masculinity” (Barber and Bridges 2017, 43). Barber and Bridges suggest that such commercials create distance between White, young men and “hegemonic masculinity” by associating the men with practices or attributes from othered groups, while at the same time reinforcing existing gendered power relations (see also Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Additionally, while such “hybrid masculinities” may entail a sexualizing of men, this is seldom done in disempowering ways (see also Gee 2014). The Bethard commercials have much in common with this: The privileging of softness can be seen as a way of distancing Ibrahimović and Mrsic (as well as the Bethard brand) from stereotypical masculine hardness, and while their bodies are on display, the nakedness is associated with hardness, not sexuality, and then rejected as parodic.

Humor and hybridity are discussed also by Messner, who points to the importance of “the kick-ass muscular heroic male body” (Messner 2007, 469) in US politics and culture. Such bodies are often combined with “situationally expressive moments of empathy, grounded in care for kids” (2007, 469), which however “tends to facilitate and legitimize privileged men’s wielding of power over others” (2007, 477). In the words of the Bethard commercials, Messner argues that while situationally appropriate aspects of softness may be displayed, the hardness associated with both normative masculine positions and the male body always comes first (2007, 475; see also Gee 2014). The hard, muscular body is demonstrated in the action-movie scenes (Bethard 2018a), and the viewer knows that it remains, even when clothed. Using Messner and Gee, it can be argued that the muscular body prevents softness from becoming emasculating. Instead, softness becomes a way of creating distance from hypermasculine heroism, while also legitimizing a seemingly new and changed masculine position (Bridges and Pascoe 2014).

The mocking of hardness is easy to spot, but I suggest that there are also more ambivalent ironies in the Bethard commercials. The “soft” tattoo of dolphins and hearts in episode two (Bethard 2018b) is over-the-top, and when Mrsic comments that he was thinking about tattooing “cute damned rabbits” instead, the scene directs irony at softness. Mrsic’s joke to Ibrahimović in episode three about the child being similar to him draws on discourses of masculine sexual prowess and infidelity rather
than softness (in Sweden, it is well known that Ibrahimović is married and has a family). However, Ibrahimović’s character refuses to respond in a similar fashion, which functions to reinstate easy going softness as opposed to laddish bragging about womanizing. Also, Mrsic’s greeting of the child, emphasized by being filmed from the child’s perspective, marks him as truly enthusiastic rather than ironic. The commercials thus do not completely commit to either softness or hardness (see also Benwell 2003).

This ambivalence makes room for a range of viewer positions, associated with varying gender politics: The viewer may appreciate “hardness” or regard it with apprehension or as laughable. While advertising for grooming products (e.g., Scheibbling and LaFrance 2019) can be seen as attempts to widen men’s practices in a more feminine direction, the Bethard commercials, like Messner and de Oca’s beer commercials, mock masculine practices while also legitimizing aspects of them. This can be seen as a pragmatic strategy to widen the market, connecting the Bethard commercials to international consumerist culture, where companies may hold on to existing gendered patterns or induce social change, all in the interest of creating new markets and turning a profit (Alexander 2003, 536).

**Postfeminist Negotiations**

The mocking and rejection of hardness links the Bethard commercials to wider tendencies in representations of men (Barber and Bridges 2017; Gee 2014; Messner 2007), but as the hybrid masculinity framework suggests, the rejection of hardness seems to work more to legitimize than to radically change current gendered power relations. A way of furthering this analysis is to contextualize it and put it in dialogue with research on postfeminism. Postfeminist representations tend to emphasize individualism, choice, and agency, sending the message that structural problems are of the past, and not the fault of men (Dow 2006; Gill 2014).

Postfeminist representations refer to specific versions of feminism (Gill 2016, 612), which may include contextual, local feminist discourses. In Swedish postfeminist representations, ideologies of Swedish gender equality and discourses about Swedish gender-equal men have been prominent (Björklund 2018; Goedecke 2020). In them, the dual carer-dual earner family, including the need for men to change into engaged, present fathers and husbands, have been emphasized (see also Klinth 2002). In the Bethard commercials, Ibrahimović’s walk with his neighbor’s child and Mrsic’s enthusiasm towards it connects with these postfeminist representations, as the men are portrayed enjoying taking care of children, even those that are not their own. At the same time, the child not being Ibrahimović’s strips him of responsibility and allows him and his time with the child to remain soft and laid-back.

Recent research has pointed to the importance of men’s friendships in formulations of Swedish postfeminism (Goedecke 2020). In the commercials, Ibrahimović and Mrsic interact amiably or through friendly banter, drinking coffee, and going to the tattoo parlor together, unlike in the action movie sequence where they interact...
aggressively and competitively. Significantly, this sequence contains roaring and is devoid of conversation, which is present in the later parts. Conversations have been shown to be central to the idea of emotional, close friendships between Swedish, allegedly gender-equal men (Goedecke 2018). Additionally, research on Swedish postfeminist representations points to an absence of ironic sexism, common in UK and US representations (Gill 2014; Hansen-Miller and Gill 2011; Messner and de Oca 2005). This tallies well with the Bethard commercials. Also typical of postfeminism, the vaguely feminist message is used for commodification: Whether Bethard’s customers are soft or hard, they should still bet hard.

The only women present are the other visitors at the tea-parlor (Bethard 2018a) but they quickly dissolve into the background as the camera zooms in on Ibrahimović and Mrsic. The absence of women in the commercials contribute to an idea that men have an interest in being soft, that is, that softness is a men’s initiative, present even in homosocial groups. The shift from hardness to softness in the first episode symbolizes men changing from an outdated to a “modern masculine attitude” (betting.se 2018), and the homosociality of the commercials renders the feminist critique that has inspired such changes invisible: Men have already changed, on their own accord. As Bonnie J. Dow comments, postfeminist representations of men are “crucial...to promoting the idea that women’s problems are their own responsibility” (2006, 121). Also, the association between softness and laid-backness indicates that such change has not been preceded by struggle, activism, or killjoy activities (Ahmed 2010). In this manner, not only feminism but also feminist methods like activism is rendered redundant and irrelevant: In a fuss-free, laid-back way, men have somehow managed to update their “masculine attitudes.”

Surprisingly, in the light of international examples, such as the Gillette “The best a man can be” campaign from 2019, which resulted in significant online backlash, the commercials did not meet with criticism due to their feminist-inspired content. However, while the Gillette campaign engaged in a number of overt criticisms of men and men’s behavior, the Bethard ones are more circumspect, and do not, I suggest, question men or masculine stereotypes to the same extent. Additionally, men have been addressed as “gender-political subjects” since the 1960s in Sweden (Klinth 2002), rendering connections between men and feminism less controversial, which arguably points to a widely disseminated and normalized Swedish postfeminism (Goedecke 2020).

Another aspect of postfeminism concerns the actors, Mrsic and Ibrahimović, whose (carefully curated) public personas are significant to the interpretative possibilities of the commercials. As Awasthi and Soraria note (2015, 216), celebrity endorsement is a technique which uses the image and status of a celebrity to promote a particular brand—had the commercials featured other people, such as unknown actors or another football player, the meanings produced would have been different. Ibrahimović’s career spans football clubs in several countries, including Spain, France, Italy, and the US, and his public persona as a “guy from the ghetto,” his
outspokenness, and individualist way of presenting himself to the media together with his style of playing football is well known in Sweden and internationally (Sarrimo 2015). Mrsic is a domestic celebrity, who in addition to being a previous Swedish master of TaeKwanDo and an Olympic coach is known for several “hardboiled” roles in both Swedish and US films (Eijde 2019), and for his involvement in a high-profile robbery in the 1990s. Born in Sweden but of Balkan descent, they have images as tough guys, which enables them to celebrate softness without being emasculated (a similar effect as that discussed earlier à propos the hard masculine body).3

According to Christine Sarrimo, Ibrahimović’s journey from being a poor, immigrant boy, gifted on the football field, to an international superstar echoes “both a myth of the alienated male outsider and his road to fame—and a myth of the autonomous Western subject or lone ranger who—against all odds, and due solely to his own merits—succeeds” (2015, 6). The journey from underdog to celebrity evokes individualist and gendered discourses regarding hard work and the masculine body, but also of class and race. According to Sarrimo (2015), this journey is linked to Ibrahimović’s public persona becoming White/r and more respectable. She discusses a Volvo commercial where Ibrahimović hunts, goes ice-bathing, and at last returns home to his waiting wife and children, while also reciting the text of Sweden’s national anthem. In this commercial, not only the national anthem but also Ibrahimović’s wife becomes a strong signifier of him “finally being integrated and assimilated into ‘genuine’ Swedishness. . . The blonde Swedish woman is construed as the ‘wild’ immigrant’s restraining force” (Sarrimo 2015, 10).

Using Sarrimo, it can be argued that the postfeminist, gendered implications of softness are linked to race and nationality, and that the Bethard commercials contribute to a Whitening of Mrsic and Ibrahimović’s public personas. In Sweden, middle-class, White men have been associated with the culturally celebrated values of gender equality: emotionality, being a present and engaged father, and a non-homophobic close friend (Klinth 2002; Goedecke 2018). Meanwhile, immigrant and racialized men have been excluded from such positions and seen as unmodern, traditional, and violent (Gottzén and Jonsson 2012). Whiteness has often been centered also in postfeminist discourses, even if this has been critiqued in more recent work (Butler 2013; Gill 2016). In line with this, the drawing upon “softness” and “modern masculine attitudes” links Mrsic and Ibrahimović to the (supposedly) emotional and responsible Swedish gender-equal man, and render them less hard, Whiter, and “more Swedish” (see Lundström 2007 for a discussion about Whiteness and Swedishness). The initial display of the athletic, “foreign,” male body can also be linked to this, as the actors can be interpreted as aggressive, even primitive, and later polite, civilized, and dressed—adjectives intimately connected to racist and colonialist discourses centering dichotomies like mind/body, human/animal, and rational/emotional and linking them to White and non-White bodies respectively (e.g., Whitehead 2002, 194ff).
However, as noted earlier, the privileging of softness in the commercials is ambivalent. Similarly, Ibrahimović is a contested site, whose popularity and controversiality as a football-player, businessman, and public persona make him hard to categorize. Relatedly, the “Zlatan’s version” of the first commercial, with Bosnian dialogue (Bethard 2018d) works to keep Ibrahimović’s persona in flux. In it, the dialogue at the tea-parlor amounts to Ibrahimović complaining to Mrsic about taking all the milk, and Mrsic telling Ibrahimović to chill out and have a cookie. The language marks both actors as “immigrant,” and thus “less White” (see also Lundström 2007). If softness is interpreted as connected to postfeminism, this indicates that Swedish formulations of postfeminism are being widened beyond the White, Swedish middle class, symbolically welcoming Ibrahimović and Mrsic (this tendency has been pointed to also by Goedecke 2020). On the other hand, “Zlatan’s version” can be seen as a resistance against attempts to “Whiten” Mrsic and Ibrahimović and against connecting softness and “modern masculine attitudes” to Swedishness.

**Bet Soft: The Gendered Politics of Gambling**

The viewer of a mediated message such as a commercial is often required to do “advertising work,” that is, fill in the blanks and make sense of the message(s) in the text (Williamson 1978). The absence of practices, attributes, or effects of gambling, betting, or winning in the material constitutes such a “blank” (see also Kroon 2019). This absence renders the commodity, betting and being a member of the Bethard betting site, vacuous and highly symbolic.

Williamson (1978) suggests that one way of constructing meaning in advertisements is by transferring meanings from commodities that are already meaningful to less known commodities. Gambling may be portrayed as glamorous or profitable (Sen and Lou 2016) or may be associated with entertainment; a natural part of having a good time with friends and family (Deans et al. 2016; McMullan and Miller 2010). Gambling may also be associated with sports, as Emily G. Deans et al. show: Sports betting is portrayed as a natural part of being a sports fan and of watching a game with friends, an association strengthened by celebrity endorsements by sports stars. Meanings of sports, being “socially and culturally valued” (Deans et al. 2016, 2) are transferred to gambling, which helps disassociate it from problem gambling and from medical discourses emphasizing addiction.

Importantly, the Bethard slogan disassociates *betting* hard from *being* hard, positioning that aggressive or daring bets may be placed in a soft and laid-back way. I suggest that this, similar to how sport functions in Deans et al. (2016), disassociates betting with Bethard from compulsive gambling, thus rehabilitating it and rendering it harmless (see also Kroon 2019).

More specifically, I suggest that the emphasis on softness focuses the “hypothetical ‘deficit’, the difference between a pathologized ‘problem gambler’ and an ideal-type ‘recreational’ gambler” that Charles Livingstone and Richard
Woolley (2007, 364) suggest is constructed within ideas about “responsible gambling.” The responsible gambling paradigm seeks to “minimize potential gambling-related harms while maintaining gambling as a recreational activity” (Blaszczynski et al. 2011, 566), and sees gambling in itself as harmless and unproblematic. This discourse is based on a neoliberal notion of individuals, once properly informed, as rational, and emphasizes personal responsibility (see also Alexius 2017). Thus, the vulnerabilities of certain individuals, rather than gambling as a practice or an industry, constitute the problem, which is best addressed through self-help groups or better information. As Livingstone and Woolley note, “[t]he option of making the gambling product safe is not available. What is needed is some fine-tuning of the practices of an errant coterie of imprudent consumers” (2007, 364).

The emphasis on being soft while betting hard in the Bethard commercials resonate with this. Being soft, as opposed to obsessive, renders betting unproblematic and connects it to the “ideal-type ‘recreational’ gambler” (Livingstone and Woolley 2007, 364). Thus, softness (along with the obligatory messages about gambling responsibly) functions as the “fine-tuning” Livingstone and Woolley describe. However, the Bethard company slogan “Winners dare more” indicates that a better must be daring, bold, and risk-taking in order to win, which together with the imperative to Be Soft becomes an untenably contradictory message. “Soft betters” may, one surmises, be able to take this in their stride, but others must tread the fine line between being or betting too soft and not being soft enough, that is, being obsessive or compulsive in relation to gambling. Betting hard while being soft thus becomes a question of control and a balancing act the better, not the industry, is left to deal with.

While male betters are undoubtedly centered and normalized in the commercials, displays like this also render them vulnerable to consumerist and “responsible gambling” discourses. Performing feminist studies on men and gambling (or men in consumerist culture more generally) necessitates highlighting this complexity while also emphasizing that men’s vulnerabilities do not only concern men but may affect others and be related to other structural issues. For instance, international research points to strong links between gambling and IPV against women (intensified whether the gambler is male or female) (Hing et al. 2020). Swedish research points to links between being a CSO (concerned significant other) to a gambler and being subject of violence, a connection found among both male and female CSOs but significantly stronger among women (Svensson et al. 2013). Also, young, immigrant, and working-class men are especially vulnerable to gambling problems in Sweden (Svensson 2013, 10). The urgings to bet soft do not address these or other social problems connected with gambling. Instead, by connecting allegedly reformed postfeminist masculine positions to the idea of the responsible gambler, the commercials serve to individualize and obscure prevalent problems.
Concluding Discussion

In this article, I have discussed three sports betting commercials as arenas where gender politics, masculine positions, and race are negotiated, and connected softness to postfeminism and to ideas about Swedish gender-equal men and “responsible” gamblers.

Returning to the question posed at the outset of the article, about the significance of changed representations of men, I have shown that the depiction of both men and gambling as soft is concomitant with developments in international consumerist culture, where the acceptance of traditional, or “hard” masculine positions is lessening while unjust gendered power relations and relations between different (e.g., racially or classed) groups of men often fail to be questioned. The commercials represent another facet of the Swedish gender-equal man; he is not only an (allegedly) devoted father but also a “soft,” “ideal-type ‘recreational’” gambler. This normalizes and rehabilitates gambling, which, when entered into “softly,” is apparently harmless. Importantly, the emphasis on “soft” betting produces distinctions between gamblers, normalizing some while implying that others are excessive, incomprehensible, and personally responsible.

The widening of postfeminist discourses in stressing Ibrahimović’s “Bosnianness” constitutes a development in Swedish racial and gender politics, but this application of consumerist and postfeminist logics can also be seen as an attempt of widening the market even further. The idea that postfeminist discourses center whiteness while also interpolating people of color has been articulated (Butler 2013), but it has largely been framed as an issue concerning women. My analysis points to the importance of discussing men, race, and nationality in postfeminist consumerist culture.

The article shows the importance of connecting research on men in consumerist culture, including work on “hybrid” or “flexible” masculinities, to postfeminism, but also points to the continued need for further research on gender, masculinity, and gambling in cultural representations, lived experience, and gambling policy, in Sweden and beyond. The incorporation of postfeminist commercial logics in gambling advertising is a development that must be followed closely to prevent further depolitization of both these fields.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Jenny Björklund for her insightful comments on an earlier version of this text, to Jasmina Sargac for help with the translation, and to the two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments, which greatly improved the text.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
**Funding**
The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was funded by Forte, the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare, Grant 2019-00102.

**Notes**
1. The average Swede is assumed to understand enough English for this to be a suitable name of a company and a campaign. The use of English in Swedish commercial, professional, and private life is normalized, although a process of resignification of concepts and phrases, as in this case, often takes place.
2. In Swedish, “soft” is also used as a verb: “softa,” to hang around in a laid-back fashion, and has its own autonym: “osoft” (un-soft), which can be used to describe an unpleasant or high-strung behavior, person, or situation.
3. Compared to Beckham, discussed by Gee (2014), whose public persona includes a more diverse set of gendered connotations, thus being labelled “flexible masculinity” by Gee, Ibrahimović’s public persona is tougher and more masculine, even if it is slightly softened here.
4. Thanks to Jasmina Sargac for help with translating this dialogue.
5. In compliance with gambling regulations in Sweden and elsewhere, the short description of the commercials on youtube.com states that “in no way is this intended to encourage clients to gamble vigorously” (Bethard 2018c). Similar to McMullan and Miller’s (2010) study, where similar statements were placed at the edge of the studied adverts, in illegibly small print, these messages are easily overlooked as they are not prominent within the commercials themselves.

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