

’Unfounded bitchy nagging performed by fools’  
Discourse analysis of Varusteleka's advertising

Bachelor's Thesis  
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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Varusteleka on suomalainen armeijajalijäämään ja ulkoiluvarusteisiin erikoistunut yritys, joka on tunnettu omalaatuisesta markkinointityylistään. Varustelekan mainonta on saanut sekä positiivista että negatiivista palautetta, ja myös viranomaiset ovat kommentoineet yrityksen toimintaa.</p> <p>Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena oli analysoida diskurssianalyysin keinoin kolmea tapausta, joissa eri tahot ovat kyseenalaiset Varustelekan mainonnan eettisyyden ja hyvän tavan mukaisuuden. Tutkimuksessa selvitettiin alkuperäisten mainosten kyseenalaistettua sisältöä, sekä yrityksen ja sitä kritisoivien tahojen välistä julkista vuorovaikutusta. Analyysissä hyödynnettiin kriittisen diskurssianalyysin lähestymistapaa ja mainonnan diskurssiin keskittyntä tutkimusta</p> <p>Analyyisin tuloksina todettiin, että aineiston mainontasisältö sisälsi satiirisia ja/tai humoristisia viittauksia aihepiireihin, jotka perinteisessä tuotemainonnassa ovat vältettyjä. Tapauksia seuranneissa julkisissa vuorovaikutustilanteissa Varusteleka esiintyi määräysvaltaisella asenteella, haastaen hallitsevat mainontaan ja markkinointia säätelevät viranomaiset ja heidän asenteensa.</p>	
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## 1 Introduction

Varusteleka is an army and outdoor store located in Helsinki. Founded in 2003, it was single-handedly operated by its founder, Valtteri Lindholm, until 2006 when Lindholm hired Varusteleka's first employee, Henri Nyström, who later became the chief executive officer of Varusteleka. As of today, the company employs over 40 people and is the largest company of its kind in Finland and the second largest in Europe, with a revenue of over 7 million euros in 2013. (Typpö 2015)

The present study aims to analyze three events in which Varusteleka's language usage in their advertising has caused critical responses from authorities and individuals, and to determine the reasons why these exact occasions out of all the company's advertisements, product descriptions and social media posts were criticized and lifted to larger publicity. We are especially interested in what kind of language and imagery are used and what kind of social context they were used in. We will also take a look on the public dialogue that followed these events to gain a broader image on Varusteleka's methods of operation when it comes to advertising, marketing and public relations.

As our data consist of product descriptions, advertisements and public announcements, we will be analyzing them by using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). These particular fields of study will be presented in more detail in the background section. As advertising discourse in general and shock advertising in particular, has been studied before, we are expanding on the knowledge by focusing on Varusteleka and these particular events. Varusteleka has made its mark in Finnish public mind, even people who do not buy anything from their webstore still do know of them and their style of advertising (Tikkanen 2015).

We argue that Varusteleka's way of advertising and marketing is changing the way people think about advertisements and companies in general, although the impact might be limited. By challenging conventional ways of viewing the world and going against certain norms, they are creating a new image of a different type of enterprise with the use of particular discourses present in their public announcements and advertising.

## 2 Background

In this section, we will present background information of the present study and further elaborate on previous research done on CDA and advertising. First, we will discuss our position as researchers and our relationship with Varustelega. We will also present the company's background as we find it important for the reader to know more about the company's origins and background in order to fully understand the context of the events that our data consists of. Then we will briefly look at the role of online advertising before moving to discuss previous research done on advertising and discourse of advertising. Finally, we will discuss CDA and key terminology related to it.

### 2.1 Researchers' position

For research-ethical purposes, we want to elaborate the position from which we originally chose the topic of this study. Both of us have been customers of Varustelega and have followed them on Facebook. Thus, we both had already knowledge of the events that made our data and had our own opinions of them. However, we have not done this research for the purpose of defending or attacking any of the involved parties, but rather to objectively examine the events to the best of our ability. That being said, it is still noteworthy that the results of this study are still our own interpretation.

### 2.2 Background on Varustelega

Between 2003 and 2016, Varustelega has grown from selling military surplus items from a storage of an apartment building to a 3,000 m<sup>2</sup> premises including a storage and a walk-in store in Helsinki. Primarily Varustelega functions as an online store. During its years in action, the company has expanded its supply from military surplus to outdoor equipment, its own brand of items and even beer, though the latest only from the walk-in store. Lindholm, who has titled himself "lord" (*valtias* in Finnish), has stated that Varustelega's mission is not to make excessive amounts of money, but to "be an example of not following rigid formulas of trade and doing things in your own way, in a way that really makes you feel proud of yourself". (Lindholm n.d.)

Varustelega certainly does things in their own way. The company is especially known of its ways of

advertising, marketing and public relations. Advertisements and product descriptions contain jokes and humor, often times in a manner that is not deemed appropriate by all viewers. This dark humour has gained a lot of praise, but also raised criticism.

Before the company was founded, marketing was done on an online discussion board, and during its early years there was no paid marketing at all. Nowadays Varusteleka focuses its marketing to online platforms. Lindholm considers Varusteleka's own website their most important marketing channel, stating that all other marketing for an online store is not even worth considering if the website itself is not presentable. (Mattila 2014)

### 2.3 Role of online advertising

Online advertising has grown as a marketing media as the Internet grows more available and portable. In 2012, European online advertising market had an annual value of 24.3 milliard euros, 11.5% higher than the same value in 2011. (Fennah, 2013) In the United States, the revenues for online advertising in 2012 totaled 36.6 milliard dollars, with an increase of 15% from the 2011 revenues. (PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, 2013)

### 2.4 Previous research on analysing advertisements

Advertising is a subject that has been studied extensively. For example, Mohamed and Saleh (2014) analyzed two advertisements by qualitative methods, concentrating on the content and discourse of advertising. Ferreira and Heberle (2013) studied an advertisement via methods of multimodal discourse analysis, questioning how well people are aware of the messages behind problem-solution type of advertisements. Kubacka (2012) studied shock advertising and draws a comparison between it and stereotypical advertising.

Cook (2001:10) argues that besides the promotion of goods and services, advertisement may have other functions, such as amuse, inform, misinform, worry and warm. Furthermore, it is not only the substance or medium of an advertisement that matters, but also its social meaning, which may undermine or enhance the intention of an advertisement. (Cook, 2001: 33) As Kubacka (2012:3-4)

explains, the main purpose of advertising is spreading awareness of a product to the potential consumer, which does not necessarily mean that the targeted person goes on and buys the product. A product advertisement is not only spreading information about the product to the public, but also a tool to advertise the company that sells the product, thus building a market brand image.

## 2.5 Critical Discourse Analysis

CDA is a form of discourse analysis which has been studied and used quite widely (e.g. Fairclough 2003, 2012, Foucault 1972, 1984, van Dijk 1997, 2001, van Leeuwen 1993) and its main focus lies in not just describing discourse structures, but also in explaining them via terms of social interaction and structure (van Dijk 2001). As van Dijk (2001:353) points out, CDA is not unified in its theoretical framework and there are many types of CDA and these different approaches differ from each other in how much focus is put on social issues versus cognitive issues, as further explained by Fairclough (2012:19). However, the general aims of CDA and the common perspective are shared through the field. These include, for example, the notions that CDA addresses social problems, discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory and that discourse is a form of social action. Thus, CDA puts focus on relations between discourses and different social elements, such as power relations, social identities and ideologies, for example. (Fairclough 2012:9-20)

Fairclough (2003:3) states that discourse analysis is not merely textual analysis, albeit it is an essential part of it, but focuses also on what Fairclough calls 'orders of discourse'. Fairclough describes an order of discourse as 'a network of social practices in its language aspects' and its elements consist of discourses, genres and styles, thus, discourse analysis incorporates interdiscursive analysis. Other key terms related to Fairclough's approach are social structures, social practices and social events. While social structures are more abstract entities that define a set of possibilities, a language for example, the relationship between structural potential and what actually occurs, i.e. the relationship between social structures and social events, is a more complex notion. As Fairclough (2003:23) explains, there are intermediated organizational entities between the abstract structure and the actual occurrence or event that Fairclough calls 'social practices'. These social practices can be described as controlled selection of structural possibilities whilst excluding others, which then can be maintained overtime in a particular area social life, e.g. the practice of classroom teaching.

Another key aspect in Fairclough's approach is the adoption of relational approach on text analysis. As Fairclough (2003:35–38) explains, the analysis concerns with several different levels and the relations between these levels, such as social structures, social practices, social events for example. There are external relations of texts, which mean, for example, the relations between a text and another text, which can be written by other people, and how elements of these are intertextually incorporated from one to the other. As the other text might be written by other people, one has to also look into the way how these others are given voice in the analysed text. The second relation type is internal relations, which has to do with semantic, grammatical, lexical and phonological relations, e.g. what word choices have been made or what grammatical structures and why these and not others. Fairclough adds that there is also a level of discourse, in which the relations between genres, discourses and styles, i.e. the orders of discourse, are analysed. This level acts as a link between the internal and external relations of the text.

For the purpose of this study CDA will be used to analyse the dialogue between Varusteleka and the other parties involved in the data cases. In order to find answers to our second research question, we find that CDA is the most useful method.

### **3 Data and methods**

In this section, we will first present our research questions after which we will describe our data and the purpose we selected these specific cases. Lastly, we shall discuss the methods of analysis used in this study.

#### **3.1 Research questions**

Varusteleka is regarded as a company that uses provocative and colorful language and imagery in their advertising and public relations. (Typpö, 2015) On several occasions individuals and organisations have taken offense from Varusteleka's methods of operation. In often cases Varusteleka has responded to these reactions publicly in social media, gaining support from their fans and followers on social media. Varusteleka has built up an identity within the company that encourages a very different style of



marketing compared to more traditional enterprises, which is evident in their product descriptions, advertisements and public announcements. Based on this, our hypothesis is that in instances we have selected as our data, the company has used language or other content in a way that usually might be seen as inappropriate in correlation with the context the piece of data occurred in. In order to discover what sort of language use is behind these incidents, our purpose is to find answers to the following questions:

1. What kind of content used by Varusteleka has led the company to situations where its morals and ethics have been questioned in the media and/or by individuals or organisations
2. What kind of attitudes and ideologies are apparent in responses Varusteleka has given in situations where its moral and ethics have been questioned in the media and/or by individuals or organisations

### 3.2 Data

Our data have been collected from online sources, which include the Varusteleka web store page, Varusteleka's Facebook page and public reports from the Finnish Council of Ethics in Advertising (FCE). We have chosen two product descriptions from the Varusteleka web store page that were commented on by the FCE and the reports made by the FCE for our analysis. In addition, we will also include responses made by Varusteleka for the FCE into our analysis, since the company made the correspondence between the two institutions public in their social media outlets. We will also analyse a t-shirt advertisement made by Varusteleka and the subsequent chain of interactions between Varusteleka and the Swedish Women's Lobby during their Reklamera-campaign against gender discrimination.

In 2013, The Finnish Council of Ethics in Advertising (FCE) reviewed Varusteleka's product "JNA Genocide Beret". FCE found the product and the way it was presented and described as unethical. A public reply was made by Lindholm, but Varusteleka received a complaint from FCE in October 2013. Lindholm made another public statement in March 2015, following a second complaint on the case from FCE in April. FCE also had another product from Varusteleka under review in 2013, but they found the product to be in accordance with the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) regulations

and no complaint was left.

Varusteleka has also received similar criticism in Sweden. After the company's expansion to Swedish markets, one of their Swedish advertisements was targeted by a feminist campaign that deemed it sexist and inappropriate. Varusteleka answered publicly on the campaign's Facebook page, gaining over three times more likes than the original post.

The possible data have been narrowed down to these specific items because of the subsequent public chains of interaction on social media in these occasions. With this we aim to reliably represent Varusteleka's colourful and even provocative way of advertising, marketing and public relations. These cases have also increased public knowledge of the company and build up Varusteleka's reputation as a company that does its marketing in its own way, distinguishing them from others.

### 3.3 Methods of analysis

For the purpose of this study, we have chosen to use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as our method of analysis. Our study is a qualitative study. CDA is an appropriate tool for our study as most of our data consist of written communications between Varusteleka and other organisations as well as product descriptions. As our aim is not only to study what kind of discourse has caused these specific incidents, but also to discover ideologies and attitudes behind the discourse, we found CDA the right background tool on which we can build our study.

Since our data consists of product descriptions that we consider as advertisements, we will use Cook (2001) to further analyse the discourse falling under the definition of advertising. We use the definition 'a notice or announcement in public medium promoting product, service or event or publicizing a job vacancy' for defining advertising. (Oxford Dictionaries) Besides the actual hard-sell advertisement we will consider product descriptions on Varusteleka's web store as advertising, as their primary function is to promote the products in question. The most prominent aspects of discourse of advertising we will be looking at are the social aspects to pinpoint features of Varusteleka's advertising that make it stand out in the modern society. In addition we will use a study on the effects of shock advertising by Pope, Voges and Brown (2004) to further examine the shock advertising properties of Varusteleka's

advertising and public relations.

In this study we will try to identify different discourses used in our data pieces mentioned above. Fairclough defines a discourse being “a particular way of representing some part of the (physical, social, psychological) world - there are alternative and often competing discourses, associated with different groups of people in different social positions.” (Fairclough 2003:17) This means identifying main themes, i.e. the main parts of the (social) world represented in the texts and also identifying the points of view from which these themes are represented.

## 4 Analysis

In this section, we will analyse the three data events. First, we will look at the JNA genocide beret case, then the Wife-beater t-shirt case and finally the Swedish advertisement case.

### 4.1 JNA genocide beret

Varusteleka sold a beret type used by the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA) and possibly other parties during the Yugoslav Wars in 1991-2001. The Yugoslav Wars were a series of ethnic conflicts in the area of former Yugoslavia. Numerous war crimes, including massacres, ethnic cleansings, crimes against humanity and genocide were committed during the conflicts. Varusteleka named the beret “JNA Genocide beret, unissued” in their catalogue and sold them for 7,99 € until they ran out of stock. (“JNA kansanmurhabaretti” n.d.)

The genocide beret page in Varusteleka’s online store contains title, price, size selection, product description and three images. The images are situated in the upper-right corner of the product page. The uppermost and the largest image is a screen capture from a YouTube video “Serbia Strong translation (god is a serb)”, where an accordion player is seen wearing a beret of the same type. The product description contains a link to the original video, which is believed to be filmed sometime between 1991 and 1996, glamourising the first Bosnian president of Republika Srpska, Radovan Karadžić, and urging the people to be strong for their country. Later on the video has been parodied on several occasions and has become an Internet meme known as *Serbia strong* or *Remove kebab*. Cook (2001:33) argues that

beside the substance or the medium utilized by the advertisement, also its social meaning matters. The popularity of the video is not referenced and a visitor unaware of the Internet meme in question would not understand the full social connotation of the pixelated screen capture as the main image for the beret without further investigation.

Even though we consider product descriptions in online store catalogues advertisements due to their primary purpose to persuade people to buy the presented product(s), a product description has to contain more than a regular advertisement. Traditionally advertisements have no need to describe precise qualities (Cook, 2001: 108) but product descriptions in an online store have to function in a way that the potential customer gets as much of the information he or she would get when shopping at the actual walk-in store as possible, including size and quality of the product(s). Varustelevä, primarily selling military surplus, often also describes the historical background of their products. The genocide beret product description reads as follows:

*When committing a genocide one has to look professional. This can be achieved, for example, by wearing a beret. The ones like these have been worn by various villains during the row in the Balkans so much that it makes your stomach twist. Unissued.*

*The traditional Balkan “wear a beret in any weather” war/murder doctrine means that this floppy hat too is pleasant olive green for the particular reason that a lurking, well dressed genocider would be more difficult to spot before it is too late. It is horrible, do not blame us for it.*

*Comes in sizes according to an interesting 1-2-3-system. Size in centimeters at the end. A notable thing about these is that the size can be tightened for a centimeter or two with the laces.*

*Most of these are made in Serbia. Some of them, though, have been made in the 2000’s, but why stop manufacturing when there will surely be a need for these later on, as the relations to neighboring countries are shifting almost as rapidly and treacherously as the Finnish legislation nowadays.*

*We copied the product image blatantly and without giving a fuck about copyright protection from Serbs from this video. Yes, it is the same beret. Catchy song, reminds me of Vöyrin marssi!*

(“JNA kansanmurhabaretti” n.d.) (Translated from Finnish by TP and JM)

The product description links the beret to the ethnic cleansings in the Yugoslav Wars in several places. The very first sentence of the description absurdly states that one has to look professional when committing a genocide, as if genociding was a general profession. The long-standing ethnic and political instabilities in the Balkans are also mentioned and compared to the Finnish legislative system. Furthermore, a comparison is made between the Serbian song in the video the product image is from and Vöyrin marssi, a nationalist march song of the White Guard, a volunteer militia that fought on the side of the standing Finnish government during the Finnish Civil War. Varusteleka's approach to advertising surplus items linked to unethical historical events is to face the fact of the said events with dark humor. References to the war crimes are situated throughout the text, mostly in absurdly familiar and unprofessional choice of words (villains, row in the Balkans, war/murder doctrine), violating norms of traditional contemporary advertising. As Cook (2001:141) notes, outrageously illogical ads can become amusing and memorable.

However, the product description was considered offensive by consumers and was reported to the FCE, which filed a complaint against Varusteleka. FCE bases its judgment on International Chamber of Commerce's general provisions of advertising and marketing communication practices. In their statement, FCE writes that

*Finnish Council of Ethics in Advertising states that the beret is advertised on the advertisers own web page in such a way that the centre of the advertisement is the reference to a genocide. The advertisement directly refers to the ethnic cleansings in the Balkans, which are crimes against humanity. Such advertising that utilizes references to genocide is not decent.*

*With the aforementioned reasons, FCE views that the advertisement is against articles 1, 2 and 4 of ICC's general provisions of advertising and marketing communication practices. Hence the advertisement does not meet the standards of decency.*

(Finnish Council of Ethics in Advertising [FCE] 2013a) (Translated from Finnish by TP and JM)

As can be seen from FCE's statement on the issue, the main reason for the complaint is the alleged indecency of the advertisement, stemming from the mentions to a genocide. FCE deems the very referencing to a genocide unethical without commenting anything about the manner in which the

reference is made, thus taking very authoritative stance towards Varustelevka in their statement. As the parts of the ICC articles that they base their reasoning on are extremely vague and general in nature, merely stating that advertising and marketing should be decent and respect human dignity (International Chamber of Commerce [ICC] 2011), the actual issue of what is ethical and what is decent is left unclear and arguably is determined by a community itself. Within different social practices, for example the practice of teaching in a classroom, there are certain set of norms, but those norms change from time to time and are not universal but rather confined to different language communities or social practices.

In their public response to the FCE complaint, Varustelevka discuss the issue of vagueness mentioned above:

*[...]In Varustelevka's view, there is nothing wrong with the product description and telling about the historical background of the product by using dark humour is very healthy. Varustelevka's website is known for its different style and no one is forced to read them.*

*It is noteworthy that Varustelevka sells mainly second-hand military surplus. In this case of the berets, it was not about Varustelevka having produced the hat seen in the video and starting to make money on the Yugoslav Wars[...] Most of Varustelevka's products have been originally made at least indirectly to contribute to killing people, but luckily most of them are from countries where the killing of people is conducted in a clean way and in accordance to all the rules of killing people, which does not leave that many hard feelings between the parties and the act is not considered bad by anyone. In the case of JNA berets it was otherwise.*

*In the product description it is strongly hinted that citizens of the former Yugoslavia, and Serbs in particular, have participated in a genocide and waged war in an unusually cruel manner, and also that there is a possibility for such an event to happen again. This most likely bothers Serbian nationalists, but it hardly is indecent, since the common consensus seems to be that genocides happened during the Yugoslav Wars and lots of war crimes as well[...]*

*In the view of Varustelevka, if dark humour gets one to laugh, for example, in a commercially produced television show, on the whole it would be two-faced to claim that this could not be utilized in selling of physical products. And we do not do this only for the money, but because of a media of our kind has a reader base, our greetings to the printed press.*

*From Varustelevka's viewpoint, nations have some sort of a responsibility for their*

*actions, and based on this nations can be criticised without committing incitement to ethnic or racial hatred. Varustelesa describes the products as well as their history truthfully.[...]*

(Lindholm 2013a) (Translated from Finnish by TP and JM)

In Varustelesa's response to FCE, there is clear criticism towards someone dictating what is decent and what is not. Varustelesa challenges the comment of FCE by drawing attention to the fact that the products they sell, i.e. military surplus, are in fact made for the purpose of killing or at least connected to killing in some way and ridicules the idea that sometimes killing is justified when at other times it is not. This is one of the identifiable main themes in the response, others being, just to name a few, humour and advertising, freedom of speech and business of selling.

When FCE in their comment refer to the ICC regulations, they draw upon a discourse at a high level of abstraction that one might name the discourse of decency. By doing so, FCE presupposes that there is a common knowledge and understanding of what can be seen as a decent behaviour, particularly in the field of advertising. However, as Fairclough (2003:57) mentions, this type of implicitness and assumption is more an ideological issue and has to do with exercising social power, domination and hegemony. FCE uses its status as an authority to state what is decent and what is indecent, which is then challenged by Varustelesa in their response. FCE links references to genocides with indecency and unethical behaviour, without giving any further reasoning for this in their first comment.

Varustelesa denies the indecency of their product description and base their claim on reporting about historical facts and the use of dark humour. Dark humour is defined as "Comedy, satire, etc., that presents tragic, distressing, or morbid situations in humorous terms." (Oxford Dictionaries). In their response, Varustelesa validate their arguments with referencing what they call "common consensus", i.e. the historically documented facts, that during Yugoslav Wars there was a genocide with Serbian soldiers being a participant in it and that these soldiers wore the beret that they are selling. These people are described as "villains" and "lurking, well dressed genociders" and the actual event is described as "horrible". Thus, one can argue that the tone of the text is disapproving of genocide, as it is linked semantically with aforementioned words. FCE, however, saw the text as an attempt to make profit on the suffering of the victims of the genocide, as they wrote in their second comment:

*[...]The council considers that Varustelega Ltd's conduct can be seen as degrading to human dignity. This kind of marketing is unethical, even though it would be lightened with the use of humour. In addition, marketing with references to a genocide can be seen as trying to profit from (human) suffering.*

(FCE 2015) (Translated from Finnish by TP and JM)

In their second comment, FCE condemns any type of referencing to a genocide in marketing, thus elaborating on the critique made by Varustelega on their previous comment. However, it is notable that in their comment, FCE states that Varustelega's conduct "can be seen" as unethical, instead of a definite statement that it "is" unethical. FCE does not elaborate on who it is that can see the style of marketing used by Varustelega as unethical. FCE refers to the ICC regulations and states that according to article 4, advertising has to respect human dignity. They also mention that "marketing has to be decent, honest, truthful and in accordance with law." (FCE 2015) In their second response, Varustelega denies the accusations made by FCE:

*[...]The council does not really clearly state the reason why calling a beret, which was used during a genocide, a genocide beret is unethical. [...] one must assume that the vague remarks of the comment are some sort of common truths, and the reason for the verdict is merely the fact that the council just decided that this was unethical and they do not need to elaborate on their verdicts, because of their authority status and other reasons.*

*[...] To avoid getting ridiculed, the council of ethics ought to at least mention that the references to a genocide when describing the particular product are appropriate, and thus from that angle the advertisement is in accordance with the ICC regulations. Varustelega's advertisements are also in accordance with Finnish law, so that should not be a concern either.*

*What is left is the need of the council to moralize dark humour. The council has a huge responsibility in this, as the border between artistic and commercial content is obscured online and Varustelega in particular is a front runner in combining styles used traditionally in different forms of art with commercial content in a way, which appeals to people and it works. Restricting the use of humour only for the reason that someone will surely be offended by it, or that the council members themselves are just pissed off by the advertisement, is not reason enough[...]*

(Lindholm 2015a) (Translated from Finnish by TP and JM)



Varusteleka compares its style of advertising to different forms of art and argues that it is doing something new, hence old definitions and rules cannot be applied directly to this “new” kind of advertising. Thus, Varusteleka is arguably changing the social practice of advertising to suit their unique position by applying the social structure of language in a way that is not conventionally used in advertising. Behind their language use is the unique situation that they are selling products which at times have a dubious background, which they then wish to present in their product descriptions by using dark humour. Varusteleka’s style of advertising differs also from conventional advertising as it utilizes a more informal language in their product descriptions and public announcements, such as curse words and slang words.

Varusteleka also names its website as a “media”, rather than just a “product catalogue”. According to them, their website is read more because of the entertainment value of the product description rather than people actually looking to buy their products. This is one of the arguments they use to defend their style of marketing, as they do not work like a traditional company that advertises in newspapers or on television.

Varusteleka, in their second response, also take a very authoritative stance in the issue and declare themselves as experts on the matter. This is evident from the way they outright condemn the comments made by FCE as wrong and argue that their advertisement is in accordance with ICC regulations. This is directly related to the vagueness of the ICC rules as key issues such as what is decent and what is ethical is left to be decided by local communities, which ultimately has lead into a situation where Varusteleka and FCE are in disagreement.

#### 4.2 Wife-beater

Varusteleka sells sleeveless shirts, using their pejorative nickname “wife-beater” as product names for the shirts in their website. While the nickname is more commonly used in English when referring to sleeveless shirts, in Finnish the term “vaimonhakkaaja” is used more rarely. Valtteri Lindholm gives reasons for choosing the name for the product:

*Translating wife-beater as a joke was not invented by us, and it tells a lot that humour was not the first thing in mind when naming the product, but we thought that the word was very descriptive of this particular shirt.*

(Lindholm 2013b) (Translated from Finnish by TP and JM)

Lindholm gave no reason why the name “vaimonhakkaaja” is a descriptive name, but mentions that there are other types of sleeveless shirts as well, such as “goottihinttaripaita” (faggoth shirt), highlighting that other curiously named shirt products exist. (Lindholm 2013b) Unlike in the case of the genocide beret, the namesake of the product is not elaborated in the product description.

*Sleeveless shirt in fashion color of every summer: black.*

*Mil-Tec wife-beater shirts are actually quite well designed; they don't sag, neckline isn't large enough to expose your nipples and shirt hem is just long enough for tucking it in your pants, but it doesn't look bad outside either. 100% Cotton. Product is new, manufacturer Mil-Tec.*

(“Mil-Tec vaimonhakkaajapaita” n.d.) (Translated from Finnish by TP and JM)

The product description contains elements traditionally uncommon in advertisement. Instead of highlighting positive features, the description mostly presents features that are not negative; they don't sag, expose your nipples or look bad outside your pants. The beginning impression also interestingly states that the shirts are “actually quite well designed”, as if their decent quality comes as a surprise. Changing the sentence to “Mil-Tec wife-beater shirts are extremely well designed” would have conveyed more positive image of the product. However, Lindholm has stated that right in the early days of Varusteleka he decided that the product descriptions are done thoroughly and honestly, so that no aspect of the products would be left unclear. (Lindholm n.d.) The description of the wife-beater shirts thus reflects the opinions of the writer of the description. Varusteleka's advertising and marketing seems to follow Grice's four maxims of co-operative principle; to be true, relevant and as brief or long as necessary, whereas Lakoff's politeness principle of avoiding imposing and making the addressee feel good and to give him or her options in not followed in such degree. (Grice 1975 and Lakoff 1973, as cited by Cook 2001: 153) Cook (2001: 154-155) argues that even though these conversational principles cannot easily be implemented in the genre of advertising, strong restrictions have grown into the genre alongside it.

The choice of name for the product type was criticized by Ritva Karinsalo, managing director of the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters. In an interview, when asked if selling wife-beaters is questionable, Karinsalo answered

*Yes, absolutely. There has been so much sadness and grief as of late with familicides and the Hyvinkää incident and people are marching for nonviolence. This is very poor humor, if this was made as a joke. Coming from a company that sells products, it is utterly tasteless. For numerous women, domestic violence is tragic everyday life. I also don't understand why they want to portray men like this.*

(Vihavainen 2012) (Translated from Finnish by TP and JM)

When asked if humor on domestic violence is acceptable in any context, Karinsalo answered

*No. Domestic violence is violation of human rights. It is no joke.*

(Vihavainen 2012) (Translated from Finnish by TP and JM)

In October 2013, FCE contacted Varusteleka and informed them of a request to investigate the ethics of selling wife-beater shirts. Varusteleka posted the letter on their Facebook page, where the original request to FCE was highlighted:

*Varusteleka Ltd. advertises wife-beater shirts.*

*The advertisement is not decent, because it provokes to violence. Even though the English name for the said shirt is wife-beater, between the lines Varusteleka still provokes to violence, because they also sell shirts that say "Remove before fight".*

<http://www.varusteleka.fi/fi/product/mil-tec-vaimonhakkajaajapaita-musta/19580>

*Even if this was done in the so-called causerie style, violence is a thing that **SHOULD NEVER BE JOKED ABOUT IN ANY MANNER.***

*I demand order and discipline! Varusteleva must stop joking about violence! If it doesn't stop, I'll consider reporting them to the police for stirring up violence.*

(Varusteleva 2013) (Translated from Finnish by TP and JM)

Lindholm then left a statement to FCE, also posting a link to it in Varusteleva's Facebook page. In the beginning of the statement, Lindholm responds to the original investigation request:

*An unnamed little troll has complained to the Finnish Council of Epics in Advertising that Varusteleva's advertising is indecent.*

*[...] Maker of the complaint claims that Varusteleva stirs up violence. The maker of the complaint acknowledges the possibility of humor but also says that violence is a thing that is not to be joked about in any manner ever. This claim is not justified.*

*The maker of the complaint is wrong and also a stupid, bad person.*

(Lindholm 2013b) (Translated from Finnish by TP and JM)

Lindholm takes a very authoritative position over the maker of the original complaint and also goes on to insult the person calling him/her "stupid" and "bad". The person is also referred as "unnamed little troll" (*nimeämätön peikonpoikanen* in Finnish). The latter term can be an indirect reference to Internet trolls, as the word "peikko" in Finnish is usually used to refer to a mythological creature and "trolli" would be more often used to refer to a person trolling on the Internet. The choice of words here clearly indicates the negative attitude of Varusteleva towards the person who originally complained about the t-shirt. The reference to trolls indicates doubt about the true intention behind the original complaint and hints that the person made the request to FCE just to cause harm to Varusteleva. FCE is also referred as the "Council of Epics" (*eepinen neuvosto*) and not "Council of Ethics" (*ettinen neuvosto*) in the text. The playful alteration of the name displays demeaning attitude towards the need for this type of regulation.

Compared to the Varusteleva's responses made during the Genocide beret, the attitude behind the response made for FCE considering the indecency of the wife-beater shirt product name is arguably more hostile. One can assume that the way in which the original complaint was made has contributed to

this change in attitude, as it clearly has been interpreted as an “act of trolling” by Varusteleka and not as a serious complaint. This point is further elaborated in the way how Lindholm comments on the reaction of Ritva Karinsalo and the fact that FCE has decided to review this case:

*The comedic value of the name Wife-beater shirt is certainly increased by the media attention it recently received and the comments made by the managing director of the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters. Even perhaps by the fact that the Finnish Council of Epics in Advertising has considered this to be something to be reviewed.*

(Lindholm 2013b) (Translated from Finnish by TP and JM)

From this excerpt one can deduce that Lindholm considers the whole event to be ridiculous and does not even see any reason for the FCE review. He claims the name Wife-beater shirt has a comedic value and the fact that people have been offended by it adds to the humour.

As in the Genocide beret case, so in this response of Varusteleka to FCE, there is a discourse of new versus old. Lindholm argues that the way in which Varusteleka practices its marketing is something that the conventional rules and regulations do not directly apply to. He also claims that advertising should not be seen differently from other content, for example television programmes, and that different ways of presenting, which are allowed in other content, should not be considered prohibited in advertising, referring to the use of (dark) humour.

*As a philosophical question of moral standards the need to restrict the use of humour is certainly, in its way, an interesting one and an important one as well - so important that I personally defend free use of humour to a great extent and the main reason for why the shirts still have that name in Varusteleka (website), is the unfounded bitchy nagging performed by fools.[...]*

*[...] The way of thinking that some things are less allowed in advertising than in (other) content is outdated and overall originates from the assumption that advertising and (other) content are totally separate from one and other. This might seemingly be the case with television programmes and newspapers, even though in these cases as well you have to be somewhat mentally retarded, if you do not spot marketing money visible in the “content”. Varusteleka’s*

*website is a prime example of seemingly commercial communication, which is actually artistic content.*

(Lindholm 2013b) (Translated from Finnish by TP and JM)

This same discourse is linked with the way how Lindholm keeps presenting Varusteleka as a “front runner” or a “prime example” of this new way of advertising that mainly focuses to Internet platforms and social media and is also done from the unique starting position of Varusteleka. By doing so, Lindholm is creating an image of himself and his company as experts and in contrast tries to convince the reader that FCE or other critics are not as well informed on the subject as he is.

In the FCE statement (FCE 2013b) found the advertisement to be in accordance with the ICC regulations. FCE argues that even though the name refers to domestic violence, the advertisement cannot be seen as indecent when looking at the bigger picture. FCE also notes that the name is a direct translation from the English term used for this type of shirt.

#### 4.3 Swedish t-shirt advertisement

In March 2015 Varusteleka opened a Swedish version of their online store and started to advertise their products to Swedish audiences. Less than two weeks after announcing the Swedish store, Facebook banned one of their advertisements, which had a woman wearing an olive green Bundeswehr t-shirt and pouring water on her breasts from a green field canteen while biting her lip and provocatively looking at the camera. Text on the picture translates to “Psst... Delivery costs only 59 SEK”. The advertisement is accompanied by a message “Finland’s largest has now come to Sweden!”. The message is ambiguous as it can convey the fact that Varusteleka is the biggest military surplus store in Finland but it can also be a reference to the size of the woman’s breasts. Clicking the advertisement took the viewer to Varusteleka’s Swedish online store. Facebook banned the advertisement as it violates Facebook’s ad guidelines by unnecessarily focusing on the woman’s breasts. Varusteleka then posted a screen capture of Facebook’s notification about the ban on their own Facebook page, including the following writing.

*The boob advertisement hadn’t been hanging around in Sweden for long before the Swedes had pushed the “I find this offensive” - button and Facebook gave a ban. SO YEAH WE WERE*

*JUST WONDERING IF THIS TELLS SOMETHING ABOUT THOSE PEOPLE WHAT HUH*

(Varusteleva 2015) (Translated from Finnish by TP and JM)

Only eight days after having the advertisement banned from Facebook, the Swedish Women's Lobby reported a Varusteleva advertisement using the same picture to promote the t-shirt used by the woman in the picture to the Swedish Advertising Ombudsman (RO), an organisation that receives complaints about advertisements and assesses if they follow the ICC regulations, working in a manner similar to the FCE in Finland. On their Reklamera-campaign's Facebook site, Swedish Women's Lobby posted an update about the t-shirt advertisement:

*To sell army clothing by objectifying women does not seem original. We now report Varusteleva to the RO for this gender-discriminative advertisement. In our report we wrote this among other things:*

*“The woman in the picture has been reduced to a mere sex object by making her gratuitously pour water over her own breasts and look at the camera in a provocative way. To sexualize a woman in this way for marketing purposes is gender-discriminative and offensive for women in public.”*

*Would you like for them to get away with such a sexist advertisement? Please make yourself heard to Varusteleva and make them reconsider their marketing strategy.*

(Reklamera 2015) (Translated from Swedish by SR\*)

Less than an hour later Varusteleva commented on the post, starting with a sentence “This shit is hilarious”, taking a very offensive and authoritative stance by considering the whole affair ridiculous. In the comment they agreed that the point of the ad is to be sexually suggestive, but consider basic human urges as positive things. As of April 2016, the comment has gained over three times the amount of likes than the original post. Another post was made by Varusteleva a few moments after their first comment, simply stating “Also, tits or GTFO”, referencing an Internet meme that suggests that there are no women on the Internet and is a request for a proof of the alleged womanhood. The meme, when taken literally, is highly offensive against feminist movements and women in general. The latter comment has also gained twice as many likes as the original post. (Reklamera 2015)

\*We would like to thank our friend and colleague Sanna Riuttanen for helping us translating the Swedish texts.

Only a few hours after Reklamera's Facebook post, Varustelega posted a picture to their Facebook page in which a man was pouring water on his chest wearing the same t-shirt and looking at the camera in a similar way as the woman had done in the original advertisement. The picture was accompanied with a text "*So that there would be balance in the world*". One can assume that the reason for posting this picture as a response to the Swedish Women's Lobby was that Varustelega wanted to imply that no complaint would have been made, if the original picture had featured a man instead of a woman. Generally a man pouring water on his chest is not associated with being highly sexual, whereas a woman pouring water on her breasts might be commonly seen that way.

RO found the advertisement to be gender-discriminative and thus not in accordance with the ICC regulations. In their statement, RO based its reasoning on the facts that the picture was cropped just beneath the breasts of the woman and that she was pouring water on them, further noting that these elements had nothing to do with advertising the product itself. (Swedish Advertising Ombudsman n.d.) Apparently, Varustelega had not commented the advertisement to RO in any way as they wrote in their statement that "*The advertiser has received an opportunity to make a statement but has not done so*", but Varustelega did respond to the actual statement in English. In their response, Varustelega (Lindholm 2015b) agrees with RO that the advertisement is not in accordance with the ICC regulations, but states that "*the ICC regulations are at fault*".

Varustelega argues that sex and sexuality should be allowed in advertising, if it is subtle:

*We think that sexuality is a normal thing and, properly harnessed, can be used in marketing context. It has to be muted down, as we do believe that outright pornography and it's (sic) wide availability has negative effects on human sexuality. Sex is the point in our ad, but it's still just subtly suggestive, and definitely not pornographic, or even nearly so. It is okay to use this much sexuality in advertising.*

(Lindholm 2015b)

As can be seen from the excerpt above, Varustelega clearly defines what is "okay to use" in advertising in an authoritative way. They deem this to be acceptable, but Varustelega also notes that the ICC regulations are clear in this matter, thus suggesting that the decision for this type of advertising was not



done out of ignorance but indeed on purpose. Varustelega goes on to criticise the rules and statement as a whole and questions the reasoning behind them:

*These kind [sic] of statements would be wonderful in showing that there is real actual thought behind the rulings and reasons in these strict, non-negotiable prohibitions. As it is, the statement was very much like statements banning women to vote some 100 years ago: it has been agreed that this is not a good thing, and many consider it to be offensive to their core values, so no need for further reasoning.*

(Lindholm 2015b)

Varustelega links this type of regulation to banning women from voting and argues that the reasoning behind these two is fundamentally the same. This can be linked to the same *old versus new* discourse that has been evident throughout all the three events discussed in this study. By this comparison, Varustelega attempts to convince the reader to agree with them that this type of regulation is not modern and it should be revised to apply to modern marketing platforms and strategies.

At the end of their response, Varustelega addresses RO directly:

*Since your statement did not give us any real data on why we should change our way of advertising, and since we're not doing anything illegal either, we will ignore it.*

(Lindholm 2015b)

Stating that they shall not change their actions based on this statement and that it will be completely ignored, Varustelega follows what its founder Lindholm has stated as the mission of the company: not to follow rigid rules and do things in their own manner. (Lindholm n.d.) This is a good indication of the ways in which Varustelega tries to change the field (or the social practice) of advertising to their own liking by making these events as well as the chains of communications public and presenting them in their own words and from their perspective.

## 5 Discussion

Having examined the individual events, we will now discuss their relations to one another and our research questions. The goals of this thesis were to answer what kind of content used by Varusteleka has raised moral and ethical questions about the company and its methods of operation in the data events and what kind of attitudes and ideologies Varusteleka conveys in handling them. All of the analysed events had to do with Varusteleka being accused of advertising or marketing that is against the regulations of marketing. With the cases of the genocide beret and the wife-beater t-shirt the alleged violations occurred with indecent written mentions and references to topics that are considered taboos in hard-sell advertising, as is evident by the reactions they received. The Swedish t-shirt advertisement was accused of being gender-discriminative because of the cropping of the picture and the provocative pose of the female model. In each case the official judgment was based on the ICC's general provisions of advertising and marketing, either by FCE or RO.

The provocative nature of the advertisements was well known to the advertiser and done on purpose (Typpö 2015). Tests conducted for a study by Pope, Voges and Brown (2004:78) showed results of a provocative ad being received more favorably than a nonprovocative ad. Cook (2001:33) argues that besides the ad and the situation it appears in, the interaction between them can also form a meaning that may affect the advertiser's intentions positively or negatively. This third meaning may derive from the contrasts between the world of the ad and the surrounding world. Particularly in the cases of wife-beater t-shirt and the Swedish t-shirt advertisement the contrast is visible as they were connected to contemporary events or standing social issues. The effect this had to Varusteleka's intentions has been partly enhancing as the debates have brought the company more popularity but also undermining, particularly in the case of their advertisement being banned in Facebook.

While the content of these advertisements were provocative and controversial, they are not exceptional in Varusteleka's spectrum of advertising and marketing. For example, a bayonet used by JNA in the Yugoslav wars is advertised as "JNA M70/AKM Genocide bayonet, surplus" and described as possibly being "the darkest possible instrument to exercise everything that is unethical and wrong" and "left a bit dull on purpose, so that there is some point in using it." There are also mentions of the bayonet being handy in removing ring fingers and gold teeth. ("JNA M70/AKM kansanmurhapistin" n.d.) It is

noteworthy that an item that has been semantically connected to a genocide in a similar way as the beret that received complaint from FCE, has not been reviewed by FCE. One can argue that this is connected to the discourse of decency mentioned in the analysis and its high level of abstraction. What is seen as decent and what is not is an abstract notion and varies between individuals and groups of people. This can be seen from the fact that no requests have been made to FCE regarding the genocide bayonet, as was the case with the genocide beret. If there would be a common understanding in agreement with FCE that this type of advertisement is indecent and unethical, one can assume that the JNA Genocide bayonet would have been reported to FCE by the public. Since it has similar types of references to the Yugoslav wars as the Genocide beret, it is probable that a review from FCE would result in another complaint.

Varusteleka made their replies to the events public, either by posting a link to them in their Facebook page or by directly responding to the Facebook page of makers of the complaint. Their approach in the replies has been defensive, taking an authoritative stance over the issue while still keeping their humoristic and satirical style of writing. As Fairclough (2003:26-28) explains, texts demonstrate multifunctionality in the way of action, representation and identification. In Varusteleka's responses, they represent relations, for example, between what is decent and what is not when stating that "It is okay to use this much sexuality in advertising." (Lindholm 2015b) They also perform action in the same sentence, i.e. they are implying a social relation; informing someone else (RO in this case) what is okay in advertising. Identification can be found in the sentence in the form of a judgement, as Fairclough (2003:27) points out. The two main arguments of Varusteleka in the cases of alleged indecency are that the use of humour should not be regulated this strictly in marketing context and that their controversial advertising is confined to a platform that is visible only for those who choose to access it. They also appeal to freedom of speech and require strong, scientific evidence of negative effects of black humor to restrict their style of advertising and marketing.

Varusteleka's approach to the complaints about the Swedish t-shirt advertisement remained authoritative and humoristic, but was also more aggressive and reasoning, as, unlike with the cases with FCE, they agreed that their advertisement is not according the ICC regulations but considered the regulations to be outdated. Even though a certain anti-bureaucratic discourse can be observed in all of the examined events from Varusteleka's point of view, it is most notable and clear in the response made to RO.

To summarize the findings of this thesis, we found that in the three examined events the content used by Varusteleka contained either satirical references to topics or imagery that are generally avoided in conventional hard-sell advertising. In replying to the complaints and reactions Varusteleka has demonstrated an authoritative stance by structuring their responses in a way that presents them as experts of the platform and style of their advertising and the authorities as representatives of outdated views on marketing. When referring to their opposition, they have used demeaning and/or satirical language. By doing this, they have challenged the regulations and the dominant conception of what is allowed in advertising and marketing and aimed to convince the general public to their side.

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